

Siege Watch

First Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas
in Syria February 2016



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The Syria Institute (TSI)

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Photo cover

Child chopping a door for wood in the Southern Damascus Suburbs, January 2015. (Source: Dimashqi Lens)

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Acronyms

AOG	Armed opposition group
GoS	Government of Syria
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	UN Security Council

Executive Summary

This report is the first in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute. The Siege Watch project aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria’s besieged communities. New data gathered by Siege Watch shows that there are well over 1,000,000 Syrians under siege in locations in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. The scope and severity of sieges across Syria continues to grow despite United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), all of which call for unobstructed humanitarian access. The deliberate starvation of civilians is also a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore a war crime.

The scale of the crisis of besieged areas in Syria is far worse than the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) has acknowledged. As of December 2015 they reported that only 393,700 people were trapped under siege in Syria, more than half of whom were besieged by ISIS in Deir Ezzor. Data gathered through Siege Watch’s extensive network of reporting contacts in besieged areas shows that this characterization does not accurately reflect the situation on the ground. The Syrian government and its allies are by far the biggest perpetrators of sieges against Syrian civilians. Out of nearly 50 besieged communities identified, only two – the towns of Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib province – are besieged by armed opposition groups (AOGs). A third area – a group of neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor city – is besieged by both ISIS and the Syrian government.

UN OCHA’s reporting on humanitarian issues in Syria is important because it is used in the UN Secretary-General’s monthly reports to the UNSC, thereby framing the international community’s understanding of the situation on the ground and, by extension, shaping the urgency and nature

"In order to break the siege, you need to first break the silence surrounding it."

- A former resident of Yarmouk

(Source: Mamoon Alabbasi, "Breaking the silence' on Syria's besieged Yarmouk camp," Middle East Eye, 13 Feb. 2015.)

of its response. Since this reporting does not acknowledge dozens of besieged communities and dramatically underestimates the number of people living under siege, many remain unaware of the extent of the crisis and the international response has been muted as a result. This was clearly demonstrated in January 2016 when the besieged town of Madaya made international news after photos of its severely emaciated inhabitants began to circulate online. Madaya had not been designated as besieged by UN OCHA, and the Secretary-General's monthly reports to the UNSC made no mention of the dire humanitarian circumstances there.

Baseline data collected by the Siege Watch project from more than 30 besieged communities across Syria indicates that government-besieged communities all share a number of common characteristics:

Deprivation – Besieged areas generally lack electricity and running water, and there is limited (if any) access to food, fuel, and medical care. As a result, people face an elevated risk of death from infectious diseases, chronic conditions, injuries, and hypothermia. In the most severely besieged areas, people are at risk of dying from malnutrition.

Violence – Besieged areas that are not under ceasefire agreements (and some that are), are targeted with violent attacks by the Syrian government and its allies. In addition to conventional weapons, there have been confirmed uses of internationally banned weapons including landmines, cluster munitions, and chemical weapons. Civilian locations such as medical centers, markets, and schools are frequently targeted.

Extortion and Economic Disruption – Economies in the besieged areas depend on smuggling, bribery, and local production, and are marked by extreme price volatility and high levels of unemployment. The Syrian government profits off of the sieges by allowing a few pro-government traders to sell goods through the checkpoints at tremendously inflated prices, then taking a cut of the profits. These extortive practices have drained besieged areas of their remaining financial resources.

Displacement – All of the besieged communities in Syria have seen significant population movement, both in terms of displacement of original residents and in influxes of internally displaced persons fleeing from other areas under besieged communities.

Local Control – Local governance structures known as Local Councils can be found in almost all of the government-besieged areas as well as the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor. Most of these communities also contain AOGs, which defend the areas against incursion by pro-government forces, launch offensive attacks against the Syrian

military and its allies, and coordinate with the Local Councils to varying degrees.

Recruitment – Both Syrian government forces and extremists compete to recruit men and boys from besieged communities using threats, blackmail, fear, propaganda, and indoctrination.

Adjustment – Creative survival tactics such as rooftop gardening, burning plastic to extract oil derivatives, and the local production of some basic medical supplies have become more common over time, and people have begun to acclimatize to a more primitive lifestyle.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The information collected from besieged areas indicates clear problems with the response of the international community:

- ◆ There is continued underreporting of the siege crisis in Syria in the Secretary-General's monthly reports to the UNSC. Decisions to add or remove communities from the besieged list are made inconsistently and presented without explanation, creating a distorted and inaccurate view of the situation on the ground.
- ◆ Wealth extraction from the besieged areas through extortive and predatory trading practices has become a key feature of areas under long-term siege by the Syrian government. While these practices may prolong the decline of the humanitarian situation in the besieged areas, they do not change the end result. Such circumstances should not lead UN OCHA to determine that an area is not under siege as doing so creates a clear loophole for the besieging party to avoid the official designation.
- ◆ Local ceasefires in besieged communities in Syria have frequently failed to bring an end to the sieges. Even in cases where violent attacks cease, humanitarian access is generally minimal, movement restrictions remain, and living conditions do not improve – and sometimes worsen – following ceasefire implementation. UN participation in these agreements, particularly in assisting with forced population transfers, appears to have validated the Syrian government's strategy of besieging civilians in order to subjugate or depopulate an area.
- ◆ The UN agency practice of sending aid convoy requests to the Syrian government and abiding by its determination (or lack thereof) to approve or deny aid has turned this international aid into a tool of war controlled by the most powerful party.

In sum, current UN practices regarding besieged area designation and reporting, forced local ceasefires, and aid delivery may validate and inadvertently encourage the expansion of the Syrian government's "surrender or starve" strategy. In light of the continued deterioration of conditions and the expanded use of sieges against civilians in Syria, the UN must seriously consider whether its response thus far has in fact exacerbated the crisis, and should



Rooftop garden in Yalda.

immediately begin exploring alternative approaches. Ending the sieges of civilian areas should be a high-priority confidence-building measure for the international community if it ever hopes to broker peace in Syria. ♦

1. Introduction

The Siege Watch project – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute – aims to provide the international community with accurate, up-to-date information on Syria’s besieged communities, where civilians are trapped in inhumane circumstances with little help from the outside world. New Siege Watch data shows that there are now well over 1,000,000 Syrians suffering under siege in locations in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. This number has increased over the past three years and without international action to break, de-escalate, or seek criminal accountability for the sieges being waged against civilians in Syria, it will continue to grow. The need for a solution is more critical than ever.

Siege Watch monitors Syria’s besieged areas using data collected on an ongoing basis from an extensive network of reporting contacts on the ground. Information on besieged communities is published in the interactive map on the Siege Watch website (www.siegewatch.org) and through in-depth quarterly reports.¹ Active monitoring for the project began in late 2015.

Information coming out of Syria has been notoriously difficult to verify and vulnerable to distortion by interested parties. Even purportedly neutral actors have at times allowed political and security considerations to take precedence over reality, and crafted their reporting accordingly. After five years of deepening conflict, it is clear that this departure from neutrality has become part of the problem. To combat this trend, PAX and The Syria Institute have approached the Siege Watch project with a philosophy of transparency and detailed explanation. The data presented in this

¹ Note that the situation in several of the besieged areas of Syria was changing quickly as of time of writing. Visit www.siegewatch.org for the most up-to-date data on specific communities.

report is subject to the same reporting challenges present in all conflict zones and is inescapably flawed, but data gaps and unclear information will be labeled as such both in the report and on the website. We welcome questions, comments, concerns, verification by outside sources, and comparison to similar data collected by other organizations.

Background

Despite several United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access in Syria,² the Syrian government – and in a few cases Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and armed opposition groups (AOGs) – continue to besiege communities across the country. Many of these areas have been cut off from the outside world since 2013 when the government began to employ sieges systematically against contested areas that it no longer controlled. This siege strategy has created a man-made humanitarian disaster with more than a million victims. Because the sieges are physically contained, many people in the outside world are unaware of the extent of the crisis, and the international response has been muted.

The March 2015 Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) report “Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege,” demonstrated that the situation is far worse than UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) – whose monthly reporting on humanitarian access issues in Syria is used in the UN Secretary-General’s monthly reports to the UNSC – has acknowledged.³ This reporting plays an important role in framing the international community’s understanding of the situation on the ground and by extension, in shaping the urgency and nature of its response. UN OCHA does not acknowledge dozens of besieged communities in Syria and its reporting dramatically underestimates the number of people living under siege.

In addition to violating UNSC Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), the deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore a war crime.

Project Design

DEFINITION AND SELECTION

UN OCHA defines a besieged area as follows: “For the purposes of the Syrian conflict, a ‘besieged area’ is an area surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter, and civilians, the sick and wounded cannot regularly exit the area.”⁴ This same definition is used by the Siege Watch project and all of the communities described in this report meet or exceed this standard.

The project designates three tiers of siege intensity, using a classification scheme proposed by

² UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

³ Syrian American Medical Society, “Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege,” March 2015, https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/images/PDFs/Slow%20Death_Syria%20Under%20Siege.pdf.

⁴ UN OCHA, “2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic,” November 2014.

SAMS in its March 2015 'Slow Death' report.⁵ While communities in all of these tiers fall under the UN OCHA definition of besieged above, the classification system is a useful tool to further describe the variations between the sieges and draw attention to the areas where civilians are in the most immediate need. The designations range from Tier 1 (highest intensity) to Tier 3 (lowest intensity):

- ◆ *Tier 1* – This is the highest level of siege, where very little is able to enter through smuggling or bribery, the UN can negotiate few if any aid deliveries, and supplies that do enter are insufficient for the population. Residents are at high risk of malnutrition/dehydration and denial of medical care. The area is frequently attacked by besieging forces.

- ◆ *Tier 2* – This is the moderate level of siege, where small amounts of supplies can usually be smuggled in through bribery and purchased on the black market for inflated prices. Vehicle deliveries cannot enter but residents may have access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate few if any aid deliveries and assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at some risk of malnutrition/dehydration and high risk of denial of medical care. The areas are regularly attacked by besieging forces.

- ◆ *Tier 3* – This is the lowest level of siege, where supplies still must be smuggled in but are done so with regularity and the population has consistent access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate some aid deliveries, but assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at low risk of malnutrition/dehydration and moderate risk of denial of medical care. The areas are occasionally attacked by besieging forces.

Siege Watch identifies an additional category of “Watchlist” locations that are at high risk of becoming under long-term siege. This category includes: communities that are under Partial Siege, where many of the conditions of a siege are met but a limited number of un-blockaded access points may be usable at least part of the time; newly besieged communities that have been blockaded for six months or less; and communities where a siege has recently ended. Communities newly under siege are added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist”, and will be considered for inclusion on the besieged list after they have been blockaded for a period of six months. Similarly, communities where a truce has brought an end to the siege will remain on the “Watchlist” for a probationary period of six months to ensure that the situation does not regress back to siege.

DATA COLLECTION

Information on each besieged community is gathered on a continuing basis from Siege Watch’s reporting contacts on the ground. In many cases these reporters are affiliated with Local Councils, which often already have processes in place to document the conditions of the siege. In instances where a Local Council contact could not be identified, contacts affiliated with an alternative local civil authority such as a medical office or citizen journalists reporting network,

⁵ Syrian American Medical Society, “Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege.”

has been used instead. In several communities, particularly the more remote rural areas where remaining populations are low and communications are difficult, no reporting partner could be identified. These cases are duly noted in the interactive map. All reporting sources are voluntary participants in this project, and none have been paid for the information that they submit.

The Siege Watch data collection process for each besieged community consists of initial data collection using a baseline survey, followed by additional rounds of data collection on a bi-monthly or as-needed basis using a shorter follow-up survey. The 15 question Arabic-language baseline survey includes questions about: the onset of the siege, aid deliveries, availability and prices of basic goods, access status, population, armed attacks, local civil and military control, siege-related deaths, and changes over time. All survey questions are unstructured to allow respondents the latitude to describe the sieges as they understand them, without having to conform to a strict pre-determined framework. If question responses are unclear or incomplete, sources are contacted with follow-up questions to clarify.

The first round of Siege Watch surveys were collected in November 2015 from respondents in 30 besieged communities across Syria. Since then, several additional communities have been added to the project's collection efforts.

CHALLENGES

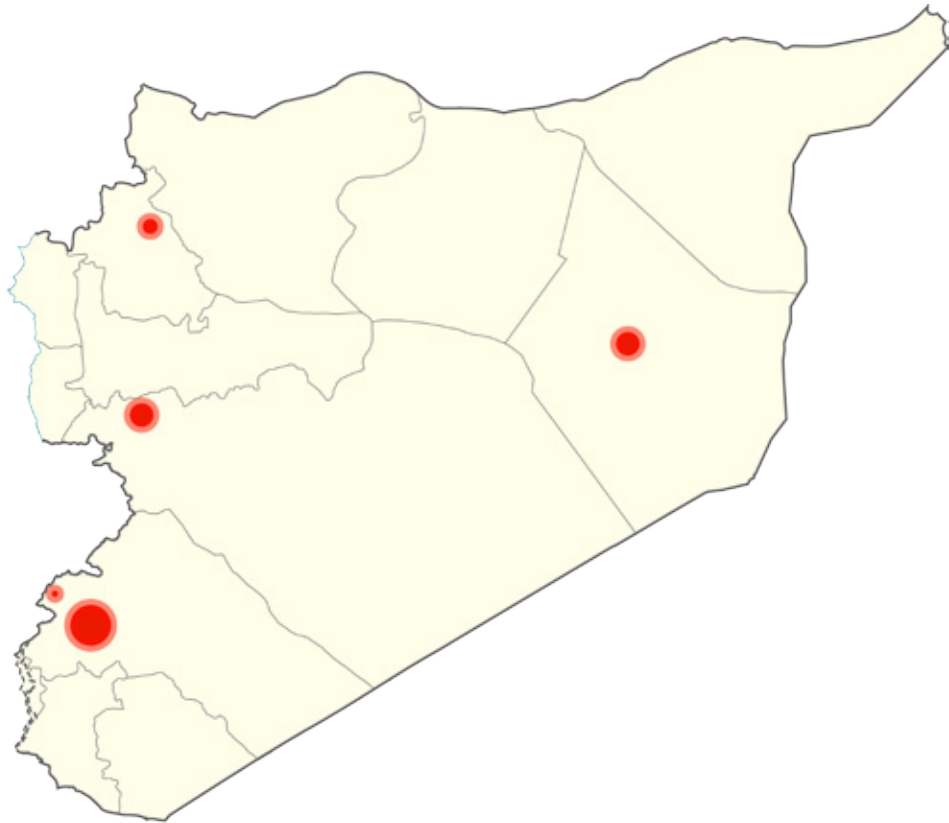
The difficult, dangerous, and fluid circumstances on the ground in the besieged areas of Syria present many challenges for the ongoing Siege Watch data collection efforts. Poor internet access, lack of electricity, bombings and other safety-related issues, and shifting priorities among reporting contacts who are struggling to survive necessitates continuous maintenance and expansion of the reporting network. For example out of the initial 30 Siege Watch respondents: one was wounded in an airstrike, and at least 11 had to pause reporting after their homes were destroyed by airstrikes or drop out of the project completely due to the declining security situation. This violence and instability in the besieged areas has increased in recent months due to the Russian bombing campaign and the approach of UN-mediated international negotiations. ♦

2. Besieged community overview

The Syrian government and its allies are responsible for the majority of sieges against civilian populations. Out of almost 50 Syrian communities currently under siege, only two – the adjacent Shia-majority towns of Fuaa and Rēfraya in İdlib province – are besieged by AOGs . A third area – the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city – is being besieged by İSİS on one side and the Syrian government on the other. The Syrian government’s “starve or surrender” strategy of enacting long-term sieges of populated areas began in late 2012 and came fully into effect in 2013. Since then it has been employed systematically across the country as a method of collective punishment.

Data collected by Siege Watch indicates that government-besieged communities all share a number of common characteristics:

- ◆ *Deprivation* – Civilians in the besieged areas struggle to survive. Electricity and running water are usually cut off, and there is limited (if any) access to food, fuel, and medical care. In many of these areas, civilians have died from malnutrition due to the severity with which the blockades are enforced. In all of these areas, civilians with diseases, chronic conditions, and injuries have died as a result of the lack of access to medical care. Other recorded causes of siege-related deaths include hypothermia due to the lack of heating oil in the winter, and poisoning after eating something toxic while scavenging for food. Poor sanitation conditions in the besieged areas have resulted in frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases.
- ◆ *Violence* – Most of these besieged areas are targeted with violent attacks by the Syrian armed forces and its allies. In addition to sniping and the use of explosive



Country-level map of besieged areas in Syria.



"Kneel or starve", signed by the soldiers of Assad.



A child injured in an airstrike in the besieged Eastern Ghouta suburb of Ein Tarma, October 2015.

weapons with wide area effects in populated areas, there have also been confirmed uses of internationally banned weapons such as landmines, cluster munitions, and chemical weapons. Eleven of the besieged neighborhoods in the Damascus suburbs were targeted by the Syrian government in the August 21, 2013, sarin gas attacks that killed upwards of 1,400 people. The Syrian military, and now Russia, have attacked indisputably civilian targets such as medical centers, markets, and schools in the besieged areas, killing thousands of civilians.

- ◆ *Extortion and Economic Disruption* – The pre-war economies in all of the government-besieged areas have collapsed. They have been replaced with siege economies that depend on smuggling, bribery, and local production; and because they are nearly-closed economic systems they experience extreme price volatility. Unemployment levels in besieged areas are high, reaching 100% in some of the worst Tier 1 communities such as Jobar. The Syrian government profits off of the sieges by allowing a few pro-government traders to sell goods – sometimes expired – through the checkpoints at tremendously inflated prices and taking a cut of the profits. Sometimes civilians can pay extremely high bribes to government forces or smugglers to escape the besieged areas, although both methods entail tremendous personal risk. These extortive practices have drained the areas under long-term siege of their financial resources. Small cash infusions from humanitarian organizations and friends/family abroad save many besieged civilians from complete ruin, but continue to feed into these predatory economic systems. In some areas, resource hoarding by armed groups has further exacerbated the price volatility and inflation.

- ◆ *Displacement* – All of the besieged communities in Syria have seen significant population movement. In most of these areas the populations have decreased notably from their pre-war levels, but a few communities such as Misraba in Eastern Ghouta, have actually experienced a net population increase as a result of massive influxes of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from frontline areas.

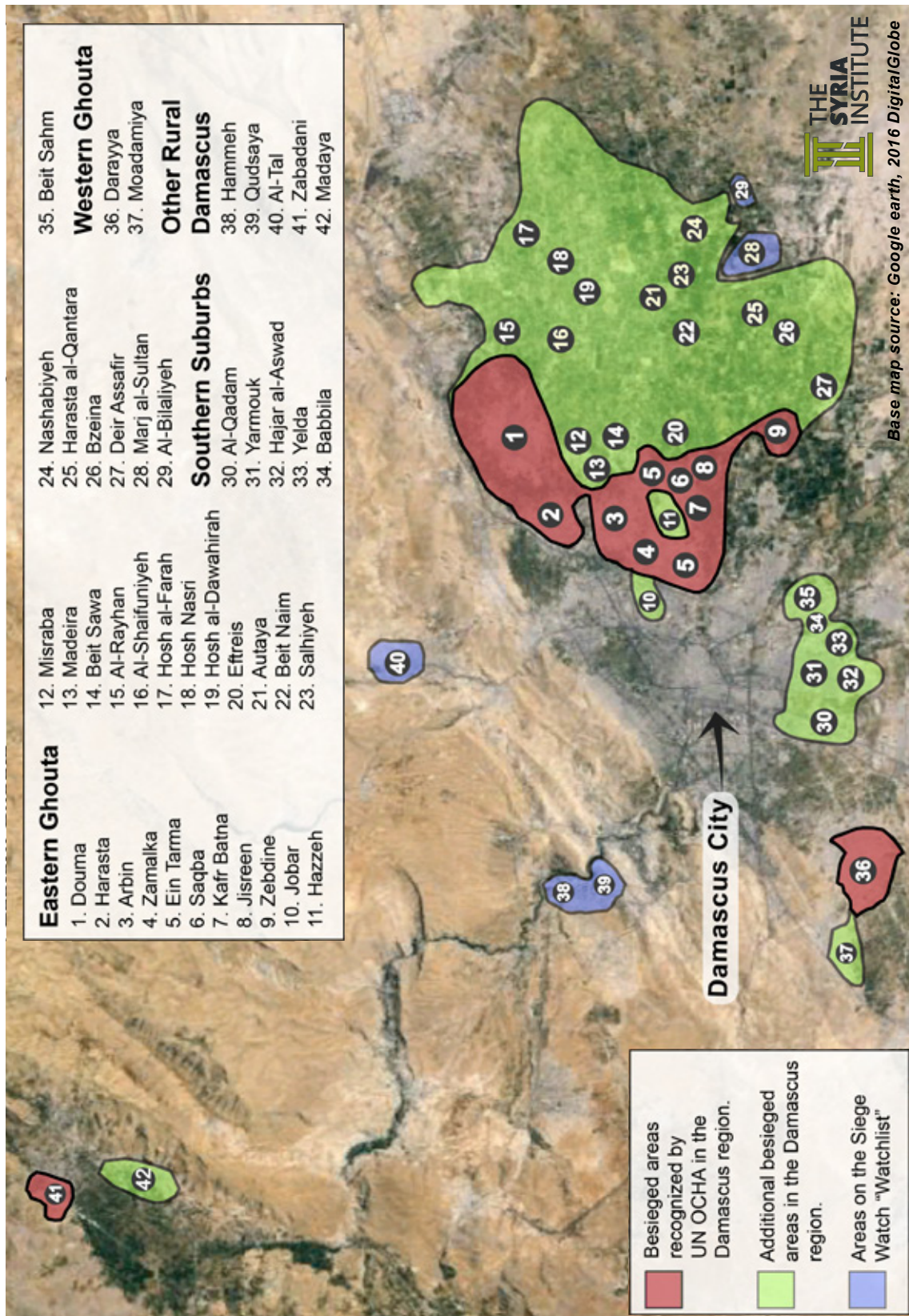
- ◆ *Local governance* – Local Councils are organic local governance structures that appeared early in the conflict in communities from which the Syrian government had withdrawn. They can be found in almost all of the government-besieged areas and the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor, which are technically under government control but in practice it does not support. The Local Council fulfill as many of the duties of civic governance as possible under the difficult circumstances presented by the sieges. The exact structure of Local Councils varies by community.

- ◆ *Armed groups* – Most of these communities also contain AOGs, which defend the the areas against incursion by pro-government forces, launch offensive attacks against the Syrian military and its allies, and coordinate with the Local Councils to varying degrees. Many Siege Watch survey respondents noted that AOGs were present only around the periphery of their communities, and a few respondents from towns in the interior of the Eastern Ghouta said that AOGs were not active in their areas at all. Two communities – Deir Assafir and Ein Tarma – mentioned the presence of a local civil police force unaffiliated with the AOGs, although this was not a specific question on the survey.

- ◆ *Recruitment* – Both Syrian government forces and extremists compete to recruit recruit men and boys from besieged communities using threats, blackmail, fear, propaganda, and indoctrination. High unemployment, lack of access to education, and feelings of hopelessness make people living under siege vulnerable to these predatory recruitment tactics. Siege Watch network respondents used words such as “marginalized,” “voiceless,” and “abandoned” to describe local sentiment.

- ◆ *Adjustment* – One notable trend that came out of the Siege Watch survey responses from areas that have been under multi-year sieges (in Damascus and Homs) is that of adjustment to their new realities under siege. Creative survival tactics such as rooftop gardening, burning plastic to extract oil derivatives, and the local production of some basic medical supplies have become more common over time, and people have begun to acclimatize to a more primitive lifestyle. For example, local farming methods and markets have slowly adjusted to the lack of modern mechanization as more people have taken up farming and have learned to manually water and transport crops, helping lower costs and increase supplies compared to the initial few years of siege.

Other aspects, such as siege duration and severity, vary significantly across the besieged areas and will be described in more detail on the next pages.



Besieged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus.



Charging cell phones in the besieged areas of Damascus, April 2014.

Damascus

Damascus governorate is home to Damascus city, Syria's capital and the seat of power of the Assad government. The Syrian military and its allies still control most of the city itself, but large swathes of the surrounding suburbs and countryside – collectively known as the Ghouta region – have been under opposition control for years. The majority of all besieged communities in Syria can be found in the Damascus countryside and are besieged by the Syrian military and its allies.

There are three primary siege cordons around Damascus city: Eastern Ghouta to the east, the Southern Suburbs to the south, and Western Ghouta (Darayya and Moadamiya) to the southwest. A handful of towns in the mountainous northwestern part of Rural Damascus governorate came under siege by the Syrian government and Hezbollah in 2015, completing the current Damascus siege archipelago.

EASTERN GHOUTA

Background

The suburbs and agricultural countryside to the east of Damascus city are collectively known as Eastern Ghouta. Eastern Ghouta is under one large siege cordon that contains dozens of opposition-controlled communities. Government forces are only present on the boundaries of this area, where they enforce the siege by controlling the surrounding towns, roads, military bases, and checkpoints.

Table 01.

Eastern Ghouta Besieged Communities - Population

Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Jobar	1	GoS	225
Arbin	2	GoS	35,000
Zamalka	2	GoS	11,500
Beit Sawa	2	GoS	9,250
Eftreis	2	GoS	
Ein Tarma	2	GoS	6,500
Hamouriya	2	GoS	23,500
HazzeH	2	GoS	7,500
Jisreen	2	GoS	10,000
Kafr Batna	2	GoS	11,000
Saqba	2	GoS	15,000
Deir Assafir	2	GoS	7,500
Zebdine	2	GoS	1,000
Douma	1	GoS	200,000
Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	GoS	
Hosh al-Fara	2	GoS	
Hosh Nasri	2	GoS	
Al-Rayhan	2	GoS	
Al-Shaifuniya	2	GoS	
Harasta	2	GoS	11,000
Madeira	2	GoS	2,500
Misraba	2	GoS	27,000
Autaya	2	GoS	
Beit Naim	2	GoS	
Bzeina	2	GoS	
Harasta al-Qantara	2	GoS	
Nashabiyeh	2	GoS	40,000
Nouleh	2	GoS	
Al-Salhiyeh	2	GoS	

*Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.



Government-controlled Mt. Qasioun looms over Damascus.

Components of the siege of Eastern Ghouta began in late 2012 with the insertion of barriers to regulate the movement of people and supplies into and out of the area. Over time restrictions increased until the remaining crossings were closed in mid-2013 during a major government military offensive, leaving Eastern Ghouta completely besieged. The siege cordon used to stretch all the way to Otaybeh in the east and Damascus International Airport in the south, but over time the boundaries of the siege have shifted inward as the Syrian military and its allies have recaptured peripheral towns. While ground combat only occurs along the perimeter of the siege, much of Eastern Ghouta can be reached with artillery and surface-to-surface missiles from government military positions on Mt. Qasioun, which overlooks the city of Damascus. All besieged communities have also been targeted in airstrikes and barrel bomb attacks.

“Even if the food prices were very low, still people do not have enough money to buy it.”

- Sami F., Eastern Ghouta



Over 100 were killed and over 200 wounded in an airstrike on Douma's main market. August 2015.

Current Conditions

There are few internal AOG checkpoints within opposition-controlled Eastern Ghouta and people can generally move relatively freely within the siege cordon. Movement is only constrained by safety concerns – some routes are prone to targeting by government airstrikes and shelling – and the lack of transportation options. Due to the scarcity of fuel for vehicles, people travel primarily by foot, bicycle, or animal. Local Councils or AOGs will sometimes close inter-community routes for safety reasons during attacks. This is particularly true for the community of Douma, where Jaysh al-Islam – the strongest AOG in the Damascus area – is headquartered. Douma has been a conflict “hotspot” and conditions there have often been worse than other besieged areas of Eastern Ghouta.

Since the siege began, very few international aid shipments have reached Eastern Ghouta. Approximately seven aid shipments have been allowed to reach Douma up until July 2015, but none have been permitted since. No other UN aid has directly reached the other communities of besieged Eastern Ghouta with the exception of a small amount of polio vaccines. Humanitarian NGOs send support in the form of monetary donations and humanitarian relief projects, but due to the siege access restrictions, this support is extremely limited compared to the level of need.

The military checkpoint near al-Wafideen Camp is the only remaining access point to Eastern Ghouta and movement across it is highly restricted by the Syrian government. Some pro-government traders have been allowed to operate across the checkpoint by paying a cut of the profits to government forces, and selling goods to people in the besieged areas at very exaggerated prices that most cannot afford. One Siege Watch respondent noted that the road leading up to al-Wafideen is nicknamed “the blood-tinged food road,” because people



Ali Bizzan died of malnutrition due to the siege in Deir Assafir, April 2014.

approaching are often shot by government snipers. This system has, over time, drained the area of any remaining wealth and failed to provide sufficient food for the population. Since the system is semi-closed, there is extreme price instability. Resource hoarding by AOGs and even NGO-supported hospitals contributes to these high and unstable prices.

While much of the population in Eastern Ghouta has become dependent on local farming for survival, the volume and variety of crops that are being produced is still insufficient for the population, since modern mechanized farming methods to water and harvest crops are unavailable and new seeds must be smuggled in. Some of the main crops being produced include wheat, barley, broad beans, and peas. The communities closest to Damascus are more urban areas with little arable land, so there is an uneven distribution of locally produced food within besieged Eastern Ghouta. Humanitarian conditions deteriorate in the winter when little locally produced food is available and prices increase. Due to the lack of oil people have turned to wood for heating and cooking, leading to significant deforestation.

In 2015, prices and living conditions in much of besieged Eastern Ghouta appear to have stabilized in comparison to previous years. This can be attributed primarily to the adjustment and normalization of new economic patterns such as the government-approved extortive trading practices at al-Wafideen Camp checkpoint and the expansion and formalization of smuggling tunnels.

Tunnels connecting Eastern Ghouta to the Barzeh neighborhood – which has had a relatively successful truce in place with the Syrian government since January 2014 – were first built and used by AOGs to transport weapons, arms, and fighters. While AOGs still retain control of the tunnels and use them for these purposes, in the past year they have increasingly made tunnels



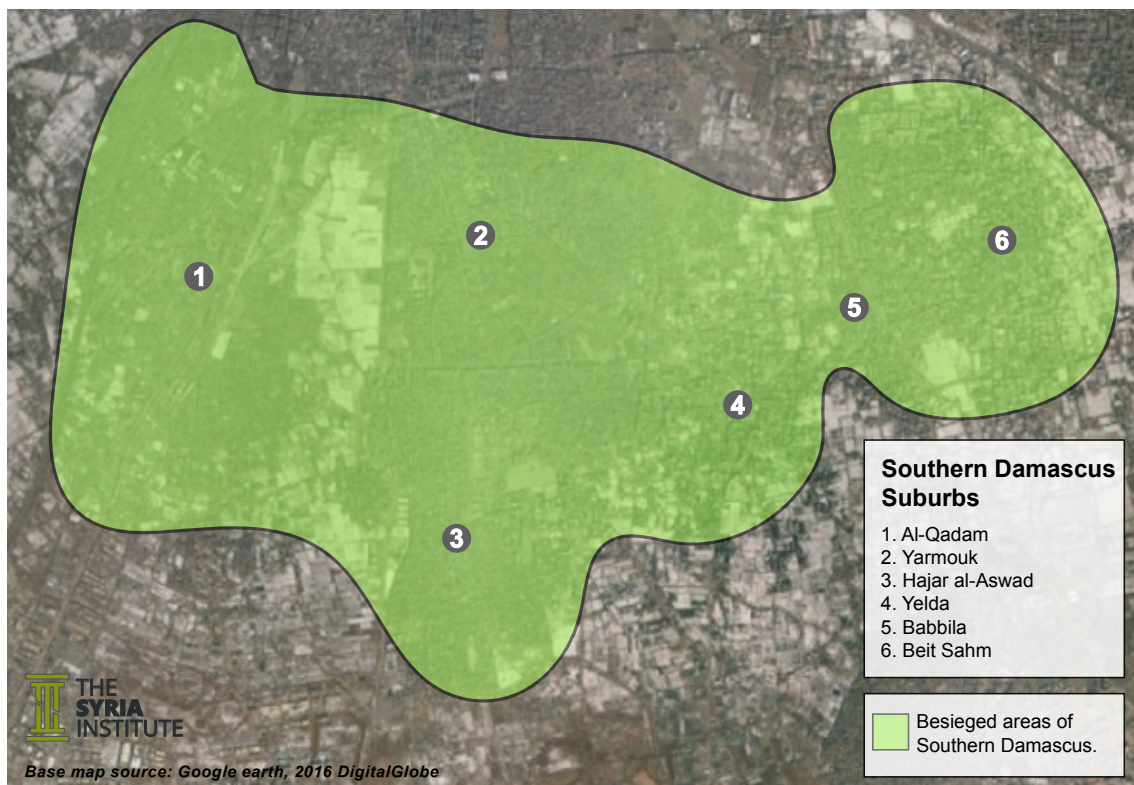
A smuggling tunnel in Darayya, West Ghouta, April 2015.

available for civilian purposes such as the evacuation of people in need of urgent medical care, and the smuggling of greater volumes of food for sale at market. Several Siege Watch respondents noted that the recent smuggling increases were significant enough to create competition between the AOGs and the pro-government traders at the al-Wafideen Camp checkpoint, driving down the prices of basic goods in late 2015, although they still remained several times higher than prices in Damascus city.

Jobar – The primary exception to the freedom of movement within the siege cordon is the ancient neighborhood of Jobar, which is technically part of Damascus city proper. Jobar is adjacent to the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Ein Tarma and Zamalka and can be accessed by very dangerous paths across the Damascus ring road. Jobar has been called the “Gateway to Eastern Ghouta,” because it provides smuggling routes from Damascus into the besieged countryside and gives AOGs a key location to launch mortar attacks deep into the government-controlled neighborhoods of the city. Jobar has been a hotly contested frontline throughout the war and has been largely destroyed as a result. It is subjected to daily ground battles, artillery bombings, and airstrikes and has been targeted a number of times with chemical weapons. Still, there are approximately 45 civilian families (180-225 people) who remain in the neighborhood despite the destruction. They have never been reached with humanitarian assistance and are not counted as besieged by UN OCHA.

SOUTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS

The besieged southern suburbs of Damascus include Babbila, Beit Sahm, Yelda, Hajar al-Aswad, as well as Yarmouk and Al-Qadam, which are technically part of Damascus city proper. Like Eastern Ghouta, the southern suburbs have been under siege by the Syrian military and affiliated



Map of besieged areas of Southern Damascus Suburbs.

militias since mid-2013. A string of additional rebel-held towns to the south of these communities were retaken by the pro-government forces in the fall of 2013, cementing the siege of the southern suburbs. With the exception of Yarmouk, none of these areas has ever been designated as besieged by UN OCHA.

Table 02.

Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities
– Population

Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	GoS + ISIS	3,500
Babbila	3	GoS	10,500
Beit Sahn	3	GoS	11,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	GoS + AOGs	8,000
Yarmouk	1	GoS + Palestinian faction	12,000
Yelda	3	GoS + ISIS	15,000

*Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.



A child searches for water in the besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs. May 2015.

Though the besieged southern suburbs cover a relatively small geographic area, they face a complicated web of challenges. To their south lies the town of Sayyida Zeinab, which is home to an important Shia religious site. Government-affiliated Hezbollah and Iranian forces have been headquartered near the shrine since 2012. They play an important role in recruiting and training foreign Shia militia fighters to fight with the Syrian military, using the rallying cry of “Defending Sayyida Zeinab Shrine.” One of the southern suburbs, Yarmouk, is a Palestinian refugee “camp,” and is partially controlled by Palestinian militias. Finally, the southern suburbs are also home to the only ISIS contingent in the Damascus city area. These ISIS fighters, along with a Jabhat al-Nusra contingent and other AOGs, were pushed north during the government’s Fall 2013 advance and have since been concentrated in the besieged southern suburbs.

As a result of the high concentration of competing armed actors, the southern suburbs area has been a hotbed of sectarian tensions and a veritable labyrinth of competing agendas. For residents, movement between the suburbs can be sporadic, with various armed groups maintaining different internal checkpoints. Most of the Siege Watch survey responses in these areas described their community as being besieged both by the Syrian military and an armed group (either ISIS, Palestinian militias, or another AOG). This complexity extends even to UN agencies trying to reach the area with humanitarian aid: UNWRA – the UN agency tasked with providing services to Palestinians – is responsible for Yarmouk, while the rest of the besieged suburbs fall under the mandate of UN OCHA and other agencies.



A child in Yarmouk looks at the street where they used to live, October 2015.

Yarmouk – Although UNWRA was able to reach Yarmouk with sporadic aid shipments until early 2015, the neighborhood has suffered greatly. As of November 2015, approximately 182 of its civilians had died of siege-related causes, one of the highest numbers in any besieged area. In April 2015, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra stormed Yarmouk, taking control of the neighborhood and displacing many residents to surrounding besieged communities. ISIS has since withdrawn, but UNWRA aid deliveries have not resumed and are instead being distributed in nearby suburbs for the camp residents who were displaced. UN OCHA removed Yarmouk from its besieged list shortly after the camp was attacked in April, despite acknowledging in subsequent reporting that thousands remain trapped in Yarmouk and cannot be reached with aid.⁶ The neighborhood continues to be subjected to violent attacks by the Syrian military and is in dire need of medical supplies and trained medical personnel.

“The Syrian government considers all the people as terrorists”

- Youssef B., Eastern Ghouta

⁶ UN Security Council, S/2015/561, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014),” 23 July 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/561.



Lining up for Babbila checkpoint, the only way out, January 2015.

Al-Qadam, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm – Four of the communities in the besieged southern suburbs: al-Qadam, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm, reached local ceasefire agreements with the Syrian government in 2014. These agreements have led to greater access for humanitarian aid with ICRC/SARC shipments arriving approximately every two months. Still, civilians face movement restrictions. In order to exit the communities under truce, people must register with the Syrian government and wait – sometimes indefinitely – for approval to use the Babbila checkpoint, which is occasionally closed without warning. Many are too afraid of being arrested or forcibly recruited by the Syrian government to attempt this process. Movement can be additionally restricted by fighting between ISIS and other AOGs and the subsequent closing of internal checkpoints. Basic services including electricity and water remain disconnected and local farming and bribery are still in use. Although government-led attacks on the ceasefire communities have ceased, there are intermittent breaches by Shia militias, which shell Yelda almost monthly.

Hajar al-Aswad – Hajar al-Aswad does not have a truce with the government, and remains cut off from international aid. The suburb is subject to frequent attacks by the pro-government forces and occasional attacks by AOGs due to the presence of ISIS in the area. While smuggling from nearby ceasefire neighborhoods helps bring some goods into Hajar al-Aswad, the humanitarian situation remains poor. Humanitarian NGOs that work in other besieged areas are often afraid to work in Hajar al-Aswad due to the ISIS contingent there. Although 23 siege-related deaths due to malnutrition, hypothermia, or lack of medical care had been recorded in Hajar al-Aswad as of January 2015, UN OCHA has never included the area on its list of besieged locations.⁷

⁷ Syrian American Medical Society, "Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege."



Children scavenging for bread crumbs to add to their 'water soup' in Hajar al-Aswad, March 2014.

WESTERN GHOUTA

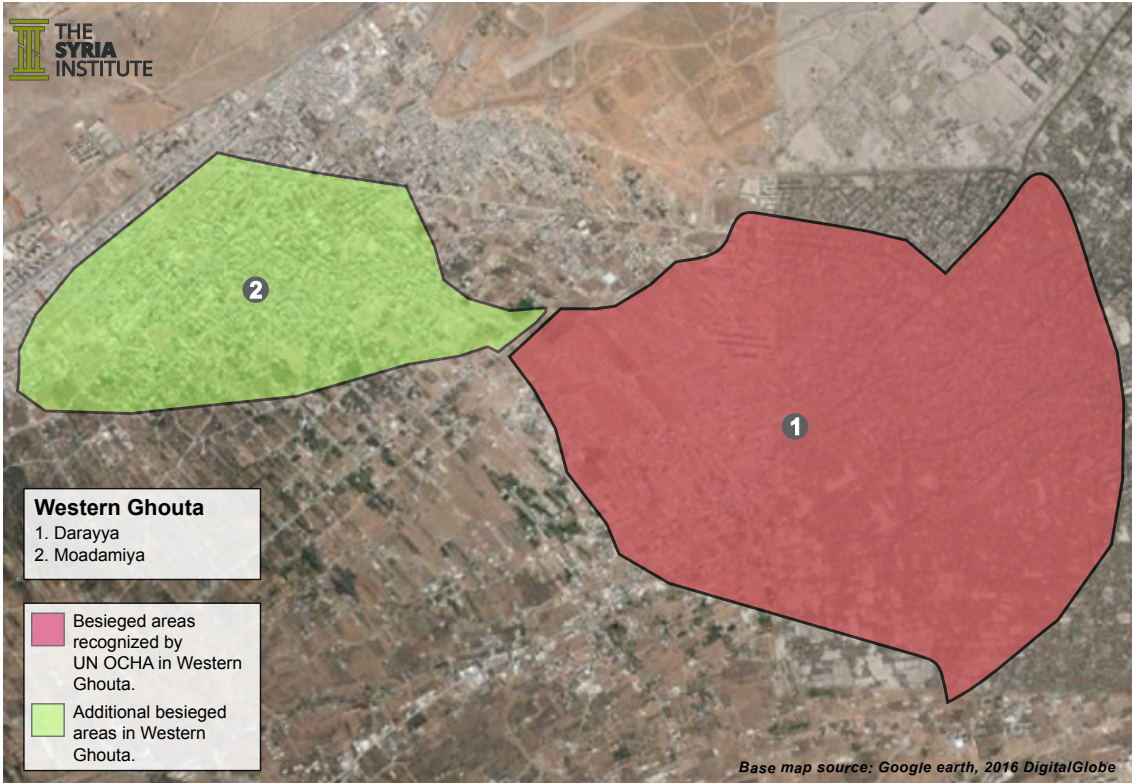
Darayya and Moadamiya are small cities on the southwestern edge of the Damascus suburbs in the Western Ghouta region. People in these areas took up peaceful protests against the Syrian government early in the conflict, and both came under siege by government forces in late 2012. They are adjacent both to one another and to the Mazzeh military airbase. Both communities are easily reached by artillery regiments situated on mountains overlooking Moadamiya to the northwest and are frequently targeted.

Table 03.

Western Ghouta Besieged Communities – Population

Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Darayya	1	GoS	12,000
Moadamiya al-Sham	1	GoS	44,000

*Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.



Map of besieged areas of Western Ghouta.

Darayya – The siege of Darayya began in November 2012 with the insertion of checkpoints on access points around the city. This move followed a massacre of around 700 people including women and children by Syrian military forces on August 25, 2012, which prompted much of the area’s population to flee. The Darayya population today has shrunk to a fraction of its estimated 250,000 pre-war population. Darayya has been under one of the longest continuous sieges in the country and has never been reached with international humanitarian aid. The area has been without electricity and running water for over three years.

Smuggling and local production have been the primary sources of food for residents of Darayya. Smuggling from al-Qadam – the southern suburb area nearest to Darayya – has largely ceased since al-Qadam’s truce with the Syrian government in 2014. Darayya has relied on food smuggled in from Moadamiya, which has fared slightly better than Darayya due to its attempts to maintain truces with the government. Few medical supplies have reached Darayya over the past three years and the city is in dire need. Darayya is heavily contested and continues to be targeted by an extremely high number of barrel bombs. Approximately 3,500 barrel bombs hit Darayya in 2015, with numbers increasing throughout the year: 749 in October, 820 in November, and 853 in December.⁸

Though travel between Darayya and Moadamiya has been dangerous due to frequent barrel bombing and artillery targeting of the Moadamiya-Darayya road, it was still possible until early January 2016 when an offensive by the Syrian military was able to physically cut this route, isolating Moadamiya and Darayya from one another.

⁸ Local Council of Daraya City Facebook page, 1 Jan. 2016,

<https://www.facebook.com/daraya.council/photos/pb.300477163480192.-2207520000.1452836061.452904721570768>.



Barrel bombs dropped from a government helicopter hit Darayya. November, 2015.

Moadamiya – Like Darayya, Moadamiya has been completely besieged since late 2012. A truce with the Syrian government signed in late 2013 led to a slight easing of access restrictions but failed to break the siege or allow for regular entry of humanitarian supplies. One UN aid delivery was allowed into Moadamiya in July 2014 that contained food, some materials, and basic medical supplies. Several other attempts to ship medical supplies into Moadamiya have failed. The biggest benefit that Moadamiya gained from the truce is that some civilians, including government workers and students, were at times allowed to exit Moadamiya via the only remaining accessible checkpoint during the daytime. An estimated 10% of the 44,000 still trapped in the city were allowed to leave and return in this manner, but were not allowed to bring supplies in with them when they returned. Throughout the period when the truce nominally remained in place it was serially violated by the Syrian government, which continued to target Moadamiya with shelling and barrel bombs. Electricity and running water were never restored.

In November 2014 UN OCHA removed Moadamiya from its list of besieged locations despite the fact that tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped inside and no further aid has been allowed to enter. By early 2015 all semblances of the truce were completely broken and the only remaining checkpoint was closed. In August 2015 access restrictions reached new heights when the Syrian military built a four-meter high earthen barrier at the Moadamiya checkpoint, physically sealing off the road. By early 2016 Moadamiya was again reporting deaths due to severe malnutrition reminiscent of the early period of the siege on the city.

Despite these developments, the UN OCHA reporting has not re-added Moadamiya to its list of besieged locations as of December 2015.



Two infants that have died of malnutrition in Moadamiya this year, on January 10 and January 14, 2016.

OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS

In the northwestern portion of Rural Damascus governorate, a number of communities including Madaya, Zabadani, al-Tal, Qudsayya, and al-Hameh, came under siege by the Syrian military and Hezbollah in July 2015. These areas were just reaching the six-month mark set as criteria for transfer from the Siege Watch “Watchlist” to the besieged list as of January 2016. Siege Watch is currently expanding its network of reporting contacts into these communities. Information will be added to the interactive map on the Siege Watch website as soon as it becomes available and will be detailed in the next quarterly Siege Watch report. An additional location, the Khan al-Sheih Palestinian refugee “camp” in southwest Rural Damascus governorate, is under partial siege and remains on the “Watchlist.”

“We die silently every day”

- Abu Anas, Eastern Ghouta

A brief description of the situation in these areas based on outside sources is as follows:

Al-Tal, Hammeh, and Qudsayya – Despite existing truces, these communities came under siege by the Syrian military in July 2015. Estimates suggest that there are 600,000 people or more trapped inside, many of them previously displaced from besieged Eastern Ghouta communities.⁹ Hammeh and Qudsayya reached a new reconciliation agreement with the Syrian government at the end of August 2015, although the current situation in these areas is unclear.¹⁰ Even if the truces remain in place and violence does not resume, there may still be restrictions preventing citizens from exiting the area and aid from entering that would require keeping these communities on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” or adding them to the besieged list. UN OCHA’s reporting indicates that as of November 2015, the truce agreement in Qudsayya was still under discussion and there had been limited humanitarian access.¹¹ Reports suggest that no agreement has been reached in Al-Tal, which is overcrowded with IDPs and remains completely besieged.¹²

Zabadani – UN OCHA first recognized the siege of Zabadani by government-affiliated Hezbollah forces in its November 2015 report, concurrently with the rebel sieges of pro-government Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib governorate.¹³ UN OCHA indicates that there are 500 people trapped in Zabadani and that the area was reached in October 2015 with one humanitarian aid shipment.¹⁴ Most of the

9 Medecins Sans Frontieres, “Syria: Half a million more people under siege as intense bombing in Damascus region results in one of the bloodiest months since conflict began,” 11 Sept. 2015, <http://www.msf.org/article/syria-half-million-more-people-under-siege-intense-bombing-damascus-region-results-one>.

10 Syria Direct, “News update 9-1-15,” 1 Sept. 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/news/syria-direct-news-update-9-1-15/>.

11 UN Security Council, S/2015/862, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014),” 11 Nov. 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/862.

12 Ammar Hamou and Dan Wilkofsky, “‘City of a Million Displaced’ enters sixth month of siege despite truce,” Syria Direct, 15 Dec. 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%9Ccity-of-a-million-displaced%E2%80%9D-enters-sixth-month-of-siege-despite-truce/>.

13 UN Security Council, S/2015/862, (Nov. 2015).

14 UN Security Council, S/2015/962, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2191 (2014),” 11 Dec. 2015, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2015/962.

original residents of Zabadani were displaced, only to again come under siege in nearby Madaya and the adjacent area of Baqeen.¹⁵ A series of negotiations have seen Zabadani and the towns of Fuaa and Kefraya leveraged against one another as bargaining chips. Despite several evacuations that have taken place under these negotiations, all three areas remain besieged.¹⁶

Madaya – Like Zabadani, Madaya and the adjacent area of Baqeen have been besieged by Hezbollah forces since July 2015. There are an estimated 40,000 people trapped in Madaya (it is unclear whether this figure includes Baqeen), and despite the disastrous conditions in the town, as of January 2016 it had not yet been designated as besieged by UN OCHA. According to the UN OCHA reporting, Madaya was reached in October 2015 with a shipment of humanitarian aid at the same time as Zabadani. After disturbing photos of starving civilians surfaced, an international outcry led to pressure for quick negotiations and aid was allowed to reach the area in January 2016 in return for simultaneous aid shipments to Fuaa and Kefraya. As of time of writing Madaya remained besieged.

Khan al-Sheih – Khan al-Sheih is a Palestinian refugee “camp” in southwest Rural Damascus governorate. Access restrictions started in March 2013 and increased in February 2014. The town is classified as partially besieged because only one entrance to the town is currently operational and it is controlled by the Syrian military. Generally only women and old men are allowed through. UNRWA aid has not reached the camp directly, but a shipment reached nearby Sahnaya in April 2014, where residents could walk to pick up supplies. The area is shelled almost daily by the Syrian government and occasionally hit with barrel bombs. Similar to fully besieged areas, most goods in Khan al-Sheih are obtained through smuggling and bribery. The remaining open road out of Khan al-Sheih is a muddy path to the nearby town of al-Zakiya.

“The region is moving towards
complete collapse”

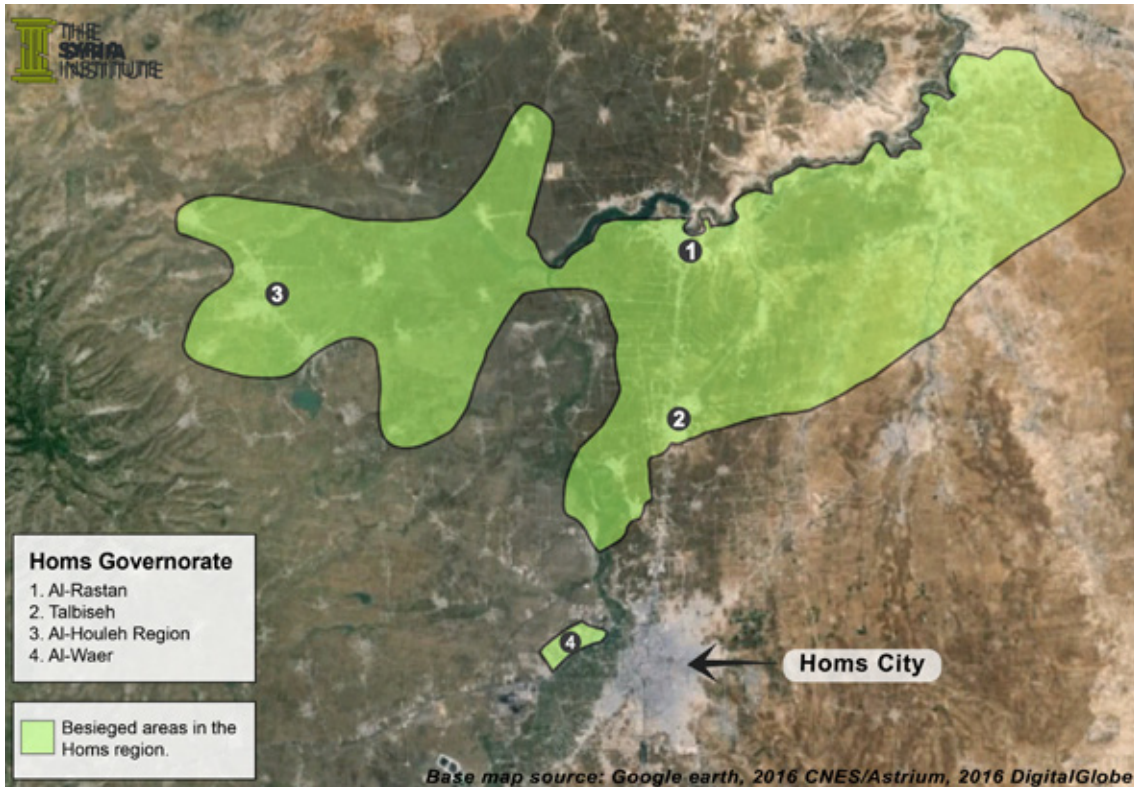
- Bassel S., Eastern Ghouta

Homs

There are a number of besieged communities in northern Homs governorate, all of which are opposition-controlled areas that have been blockaded by the Syrian government and its allies for multiple years. None of the besieged Homs communities has ever been designated as such by UN OCHA.

¹⁵ Mustafa al-Haj, “Syrian regime displaces Zabadani residents,” Al Monitor, 15 Sept. 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/syria-zabadani-madaya-regime-hezbollah-displacement-refugees.html#>

¹⁶ BBC News, “Syria war: Zabadani rebels evacuated in besieged villages deal,” 28 Dec. 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35188344>; Shiawaves English YouTube video, “Syria Shia families’ evacuation from Kefraya and Fuaa begins,” 30 Dec. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFdl-nHUd3A>.



Map of besieged areas of Homs Governorate.

Table 04.

Homs Governorate Besieged Communities – Population

Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Waer	3	GoS	125,000
Al-Houleh Region +	3	GoS	75,000
Al-Rastan +	3	GoS	105,000
Talbiseh +	3	GoS	60,000

*Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.

NORTHERN HOMS PROVINCE

Background

There are two primary siege cordons in northern Homs governorate. The first contains the city of al-Rastan and the large town of Talbiseh along with their respective surrounding countryside areas. Al-Rastan and Talbiseh both lie on the major M-5 highway between the government-controlled cities of Homs and Hamah and are connected under the same siege cordon.

Talbiseh and its surroundings had a pre-war population of around 45,000 people. The town has suffered attrition but overall its population has grown to 60,000 with an influx of approximately 30,000 IDPs, primarily from the Old City of Homs. Al-Rastan and its surroundings have a current population of approximately 105,000 people. Despite the fact that al-Rastan also hosts many IDPs, its current population is still down by about 20,000 from its pre-war population.

To the west of al-Rastan and Talbiseh lies a second besieged area, known as the al-Houleh region. The two large siege cordons are partially connected: residents of al-Houleh can reach the al-Rastan/Talbiseh area through a narrow bridge of unblocked land, but the passage is sandwiched by pro-government villages to the north and south, making it dangerous to attempt.

Al-Houleh is an agricultural plain spotted with smaller towns and villages, of which Kafr Laha, Taldou, and Tel Dhahab are the largest. The besieged portion of al-Houleh also includes the villages of Talah and Akrab in southern Hama governorate. The siege of al-Houleh began following the infamous Houleh massacre in May 2012, while the al-Rastan/Talbiseh areas came under siege the following November.

Current Conditions

With their large agricultural countryside areas the besieged areas of northern Homs governorate share some similar characteristics with Eastern Ghouta. People trapped under these sieges can move around within the wider cordon, but cannot easily leave the area. Smuggling, bribery, and agriculture are the main methods of procuring supplies. Some pro-government traders are allowed to bring in small amounts of food, which they sell at highly inflated prices that most cannot afford. Since the system is semi-closed, there is significant price volatility. People have turned to wood for heating and cooking, leading to significant deforestation.

The sieges in northern Homs differ from those of the Damascus countryside in how they are maintained. In Homs, the besieged areas are primarily Sunni-majority towns and villages that are surrounded by pro-government majority-Alawite villages. While there are formal military installations and checkpoints surrounding the area, especially on the main roads, large portions of the siege cordons are actually enforced by local pro-government militias in the surrounding towns. Due to this unique arrangement, sectarian tensions in the area are very high. All of the Siege Watch reporting sources in northern Homs made note of this fact, with one directly stating that he feared a sectarian massacre.

Due to the particular layout and enforcement of the besieged areas of northern Homs, the sieges are not as severe as elsewhere. Residents have reported access to a wider variety of food than in Eastern Ghouta, and there have been few siege-related deaths. Those that have been recorded were due to hypothermia or untreated medical conditions, with only a small portion from malnutrition. One or two international aid deliveries have reached the besieged areas of northern Homs per year since the sieges began. Over time the state of the medical sector in these areas has declined notably, as medical supplies are more difficult to bring in than food. There is currently a critical lack of some essential medications and medical specialists, particularly surgeons.

For the al-Houleh region, supplies are smuggled in from the al-Rastan area on dirt paths using animals, tractors, or motorcycles. Since this route passes close by pro-government villages, people attempting to smuggle in supplies are often killed. Just two days before the baseline survey was submitted by the Siege Watch al-Houleh area contact in November,



People smuggle supplies into al-Houleh region at night.

six people were killed in an ambush from militiamen based in Kafr Nan village while trying to smuggle in supplies. As of time of writing the area was facing an unprecedented offensive by pro-government forces to gain territory and close all remaining smuggling routes, placing the residents at higher risk of starvation.

The residents of the al-Houleh region are targeted intermittently with artillery and small arms fire from the surrounding villages and checkpoints. In the al-Rastan/Talbiseh areas the conflict is generally “hotter,” due to their strategic location along the M-5 highway. Here, there are daily artillery shellings and airstrikes by Syrian and Russian forces, as well as ground offensives by pro-government forces. There have been no attempts at truce negotiations in any of these locations.

AL-WAER

The al-Waer neighborhood, also known as “New Homs,” is a modern planned outer suburb on the city of Homs located to the northwest of the city center. Built in the mid-1980s, al-Waer was a relatively affluent residential neighborhood that also contained some government complexes. Partial access restrictions were imposed on the neighborhood by the Syrian government beginning in October 2013. After a ceasefire agreement for the Old City of Homs was reached in May 2014, al-Waer – which received more than 14,000 families displaced from the Old City – became the last rebel-held district of Homs city.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, ceasefire negotiations for al-Waer broke down and a government crackdown turned the partial siege into a complete siege.

¹⁹ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Sieges and Ceasefires in Syria’s Civil War,” SWP Comments, May 2015,

https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C26_ows.pdf

Al-Waer is surrounded by approximately 21 pro-government military points that enforce movement restrictions and regularly shell the area. To the north and east, Syrian military forces are in control, and man the single checkpoint through which approved government employees and some students can still pass. The southern and western borders of al-Waer are patrolled by al-Ridha Shia militia, which is the core of the 'Syrian Hezbollah,' formed by Lebanese Hezbollah in early 2014.²⁰ Al-Waer has received some international aid shipments since the siege began though they have been infrequent and in insufficient quantities for the population.

In December 2015 a multi-stage truce agreement for al-Waer was reached between AOGs and government forces. As of the time of writing the agreement appeared to be intact and had entered its second phase, despite a number of reported violations.²¹ Some fighters have been evacuated and some aid has reached the area. Al-Waer will remain on the Siege Watch besieged list until the final phase of the truce agreement is completed, at which time it will be moved to the "Watchlist" for a period of six months. Please see the Siege Watch website for the most up-to-date information on al-Waer.

Deir Ezzor

Background

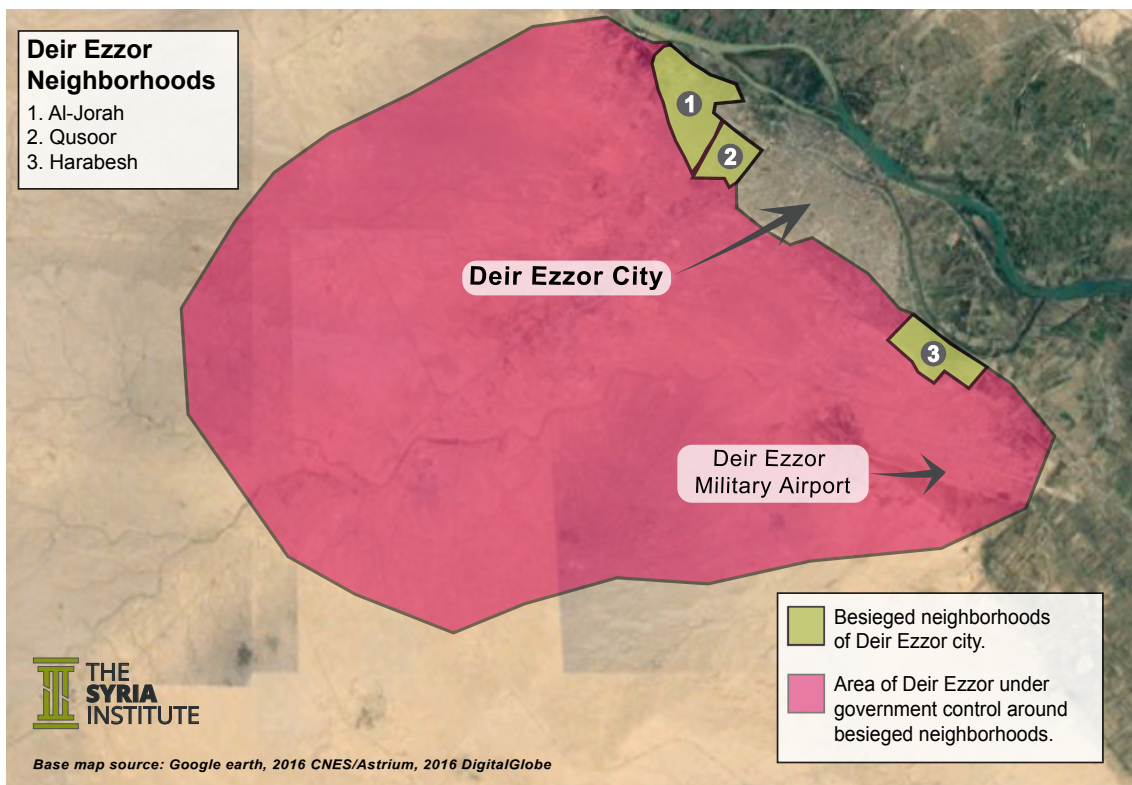
Deir Ezzor city is the capital of Deir Ezzor governorate, in the eastern part of Syria near the country's border with Iraq. Deir Ezzor is a tribal area and most of the province is sparsely inhabited desert. The Syrian government ceded or lost control of much of the governorate by 2012, maintaining control only of a few neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor city and some pockets of desert terrain and the military airport on the western side of the Euphrates River. The administration of populated parts of the region was scattered between local tribal authorities, rebel groups, and Jabhat al-Nusra until mid-2014, when ISIS routed them in a successful military offensive, gaining control of the area's valuable oil resources.

For the residents of Deir Ezzor city, the results have been disastrous. In January 2015, ISIS cut off access to the city via the al-Siyasiyah Bridge. Citizens stuck in ISIS-controlled neighborhoods have been forced to submit to harsh conditions similar to those imposed in ar-Raqqa, and citizens left in government-controlled neighborhoods are trapped under siege. These neighborhoods are al-Jorah, Qusoor, and Harabesh. A fourth neighborhood, al-Bughaliyeh, was captured by ISIS on January 16, 2016. At the beginning of the siege, the people could exit the besieged neighborhoods but could not re-enter them, and supplies were not allowed in. This caused the population to drop from approximately 315,000 civilians in January 2015 to around 200,00 today. The flow of civilians out of the besieged neighborhoods ceased in September 2015, when government forces began blocking exit routes and demanding high bribes from people who wanted to leave. The government-controlled portion of Deir Ezzor extends beyond the boundaries of the besieged neighborhoods.

The siege situation in Deir Ezzor is unique from the situation in other besieged areas in several important aspects: it is the only area besieged by ISIS, and it is the only besieged

²⁰ Al-hadath News, 15 May 2014, <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/121957>

²¹ Osama Abu Zeid and Orion Wilcox, "Truce moves forward in Waer amidst hopes that 'hunger will not return,'" Syria Direct, 14 Jan. 2016, <http://syriadirect.org/news/truce-moves-forward-in-waer-amidst-hopes-that-%E2%80%98hunger-will-not-return-to-waer%E2%80%99/>.



Map of besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city.

Table 05.

Deir Ezzor City Besieged Communities – Population

Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Deir ez-Zor (besieged neighborhoods)	2	GoS + ISIS	200,000

area with a functioning airport. Since the siege of Deir Ezzor began, the Syrian government has not used the military airport for the evacuation of vulnerable citizens, nor has it allowed international agencies to fly in significant quantities of humanitarian aid. Instead, a disturbing scenario has developed in which the government has blocked international aid and extorted the trapped population, draining people of their resources even faster and more directly than in other besieged areas of the country. While the UN OCHA reporting describes Deir Ezzor as being besieged by ISIS, residents living there feel that they are besieged by both ISIS and the Syrian military. The Syrian government's actions towards the besieged neighborhoods support this claim.

Current Conditions

The main access point to Deir Ezzor city is the military airport, which remains under government control. Syrian armed forces use the airport to resupply government troops and employees with

food and ammunition, but do not bring in supplies for the besieged population. Like in besieged areas of Homs and Rural Damascus, the Syrian military allows some pro-government merchants to sell goods in the besieged areas at exorbitant prices – up to 1,500% markup – and takes a cut of the profits. The food that enters in this way could support an estimated 25% of the trapped population, but most cannot afford to buy it.

The besieged neighborhoods are targeted several times a week with bombs and mortars by ISIS forces. While UN reporting indicates that planned aid airlifts are on hold due to the security situation, the Syrian government continues to fly people and supplies into Deir Ezzor military airport via helicopter, and Russia airdropped several packets of aid in January 2015.²²

Electricity to the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor has been cut off by the Syrian government since March 25, 2015. There are troubling reports that the Syrian military has issued threats to besieged families that it will not return electricity unless their fathers/husbands join the military. There is also an arrest campaign in place to force young men to fight with the Syrian forces. Water is provided to some of the neighborhoods every other day, while parts of Al-Jorah neighborhood receive non-potable water sometimes once a week. There are two hospitals in the besieged neighborhoods but they are extremely low on both medical supplies and medical staff. As of November 2015, there had been approximately 21 deaths due to the siege: eight of these were due to malnutrition/dehydration, and the remainder due to lack of medical care for illnesses. More than half were from the Al-Jorah neighborhood.

According to the Siege Watch reporting, there have been a few shipments of Red Crescent food aid delivered through the Deir Ezzor military airport since the start of the siege, but they have not been widely distributed to most of the trapped civilians. The first aid shipment arrived in April 2015 and was distributed a month later, but only to a small IDP population. The local Red Crescent branch announced that another shipment arrived in August 2015, but residents report that it was never distributed. A third shipment arrived in November 2015. Of this, approximately 1,000 food baskets were distributed to the general population, and an additional undisclosed number were distributed to government employees.²³ This contradicts an ICRC claim that it has sent around 162 tons of food and medical aid to support more than 180,000 people in Deir Ezzor city.²⁴ The large discrepancy between what ICRC claims they are sending and what locals report is actually being distributed raises the possibility that international humanitarian aid to Deir Ezzor is being misappropriated by the Syrian government to support its own forces.

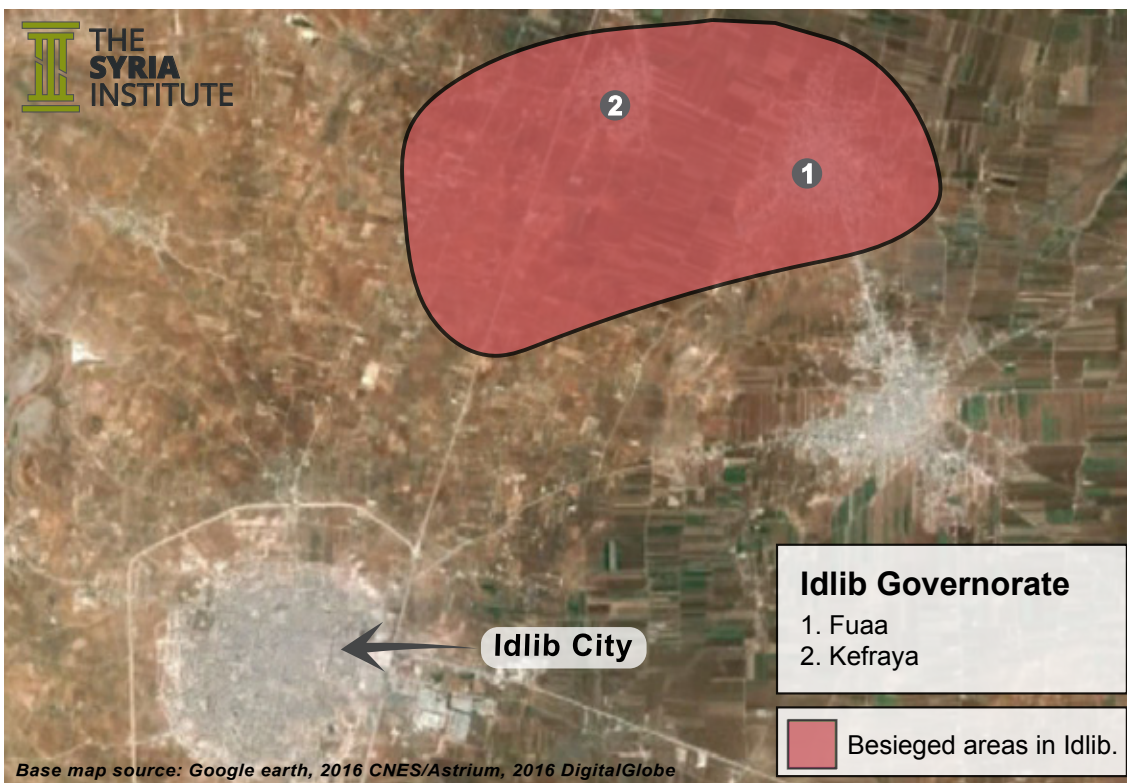
Idlib

Fuaa and Kefraya are pro-government Shia enclaves that became stranded behind enemy lines when AOGs took control of most of Idlib governorate and Idlib city in late March 2015. Prior to that the communities were connected to government-controlled Idlib city.²⁵ Siege Watch is working to expand its network of reporting contacts into these communities. Any information

23 JFLDZ, "A statement issued by Justice for Life Observatory in response to what was issued by ICRC," 15 Dec. 2015, <http://jfldz.org/?p=2601>.

24 ICRC Facebook page, 15 Dec. 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/ICRCsy/photos/a.1429508843970899.1073741830.1420380518217065/1652568461664935>.

25 @deSyracuse Open Street Map, "Syria civil war (15 March 2015)," http://umap.openstreetmap.fr/fr/map/desyrcuse-syria-civil-war-15-mar-ch-2015_32331#12/35.9452/36.6525



Map of besieged areas of Idlib Governorate.

gathered will be added to the interactive map on the Siege Watch website as soon as it becomes available, and will be detailed in the next quarterly Siege Watch report.

A brief description of the situation in Fuaa and Kefraya based on reporting by outside sources is as follows:

The current situation in Fuaa and Kefraya bears striking similarities to the scenario played out in the formerly besieged pro-government enclaves of Nubl and Zahraa in Aleppo province. These sieges appear to be of a relatively low-intensity. Videos and photos show evidence of intermittent airdrops of supplies and arms from the Syrian government.²⁶ Accordingly, while civilians have been prevented from leaving the towns, there have been no reported deaths from starvation or denial of medical care. A series of negotiations have Fuaa and Kefraya and the Hezbollah-besieged community of Zabadani leveraged against one another as bargaining chips. Despite several evacuations that have taken place under these negotiations, ultimately the towns remain besieged.²⁷ After disturbing photos of starving civilians surfaced from Madaya, an international outcry led to pressure for quick negotiations, and aid was allowed to reach the area in January 2016 in return for simultaneous aid shipments to Fuaa and Kefraya.²⁸ ♦

26 @IvanSidorenko1 Twitter post "Arrival of some Aid to the towns," 14, Sept. 2015, <https://twitter.com/ivansidorenko1/status/643507407507836928>; Step News Agency YouTube video of airdrops, 2 Sept. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v01dhUhfBs>.

27 EA WorldView, "Syria Daily, August 29: Ceasefire in Zabadani and Regime's Idlib Enclaves Break Down," 29 Aug. 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/08/syria-daily-ceasefire-in-zabadani-and-regimes-idlib-enclaves-delayed-over-evacuation-of-wounded/>; Shiawaves English YouTube video, "Syria Shia families' evacuation from Kefraya and Fuaa begins," 30 Dec. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFdI-nHUd3A>.

28 UN Security Council, S/2015/962, (Dec. 2015).

3. Conclusions and recommendations

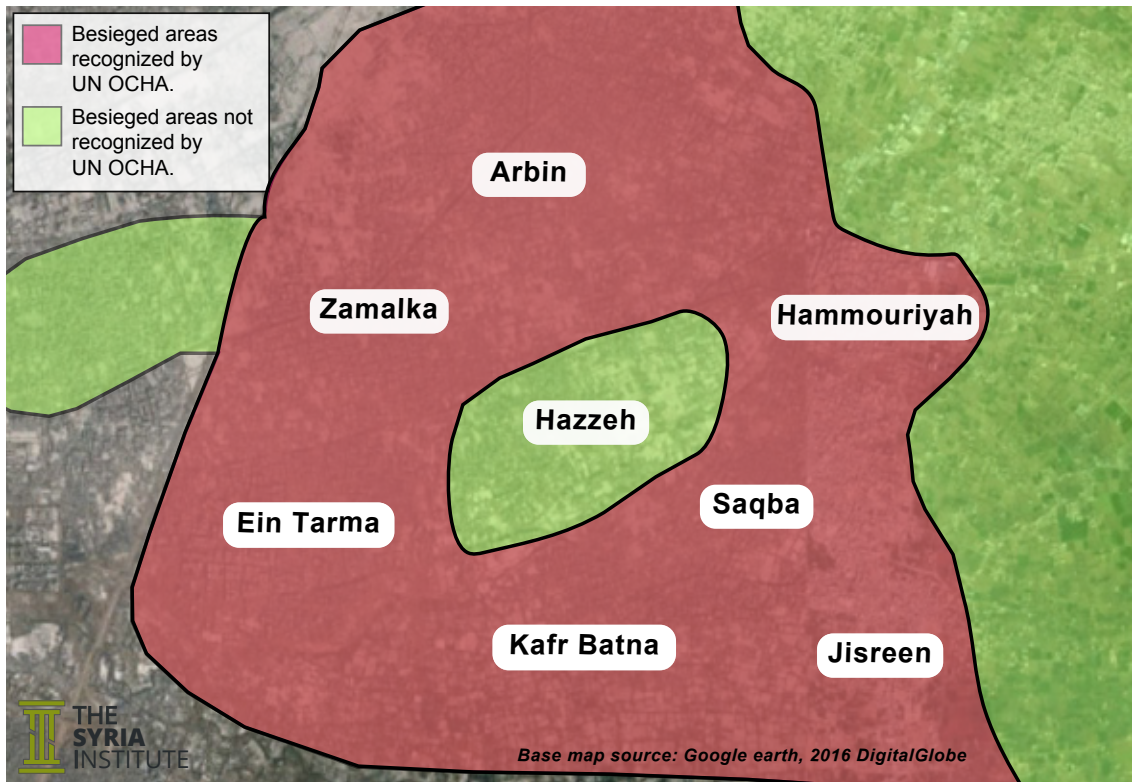
This Siege Watch report – the first in a quarterly series compiling the information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas of Syria – paints the picture of a crisis in Syria that has been steadily growing over the years. The information collected from besieged areas indicates clear problems with the response of the international community.

Reporting Issues

There is continued underreporting of the siege crisis in Syria in the Secretary-General's monthly reports to the UNSC. Decisions to add or remove communities from the besieged list are made inconsistently and presented without explanation, creating a distorted and inaccurate view of the situation on the ground. The removal of Yarmouk from the UN OCHA besieged list despite the fact that 12,000 people remained trapped and inaccessible is one example of such a case.

Some communities are inexplicably listed as besieged while others in the same situation are not. For example, an Eastern Ghouta community called Saqba is considered besieged by the UN, while the neighboring community of Hazzeh – which falls within the same siege cordon, faces the same circumstances, and to which residents can freely move – is not. As of November 2015 when the long-besieged communities of Jisreen, Ein Tarma, and Kafr Batna appeared on the UN OCHA besieged list for the first time, Hazzeh was completely surrounded by besieged communities but remained inexplicably unlisted. There are dozens of additional inconsistencies in the UN OCHA's reporting of sieges in Syria that do not correspond to the situation on the ground.

The failure of UN OCHA to include many besieged areas in its reporting can be costly, as demonstrated by the current crisis in Madaya. Madaya began to make international news



Map of Hazzeh in Eastern Ghouta, which is not listed as besieged by UN OCHA.

"O you civilized world, we are in 2015 and still in this world a leader that kills his people, and uses all kinds of bombing and killing and destruction to conquer his people. O world if you can't stop the killer from killing his victim, then we do not live in a civilized world, but we live in a forest."

- Sami F., Eastern Ghouta

headlines in December 2015 after a group of activists circulated photos of severely emaciated people trapped in the town. This public attention pressured the UN to respond by quickly negotiating aid deliveries, which began arriving in early January 2016. These deliveries came too late for the more than 30 people who had reportedly already starved to death and at least five who have died since.²⁹ Madaya had not been designated as besieged by UN OCHA prior to January 2016, and the UN Secretary-General's reports made no mention of the dire humanitarian circumstances developing there.

Economic Components of Siege

From the Siege Watch data it is clear that as the strategy of besieging civilian populations has matured, the Syrian government has increasingly used the besieged areas as an economic crutch, and wealth extraction has become a key component of the government's sieges. When a small number of traders in partnership with the Syrian government are allowed to sell a small amount of foodstuffs in the besieged areas at extremely inflated prices, it prolongs and slows the decline of the humanitarian situation in the besieged areas, but it does not change the end result. Such circumstances should not lead UN OCHA to determine that an area is not under siege as doing so creates a clear loophole for the besieging party to avoid the official designation. It also may validate this strategy and encourage its use elsewhere.

In the case of the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor, this extraction scheme by the Syrian government is in place even though UN OCHA considers these areas to be government-controlled. People are being denied humanitarian aid by the Syrian government and simultaneously drained of their wealth. Additionally, the possibility that food aid intended for besieged civilians in Deir Ezzor city is not reaching its intended civilian targets and is instead being misappropriated by a warring party warrants immediate investigation.

Local Ceasefires

Local ceasefires in besieged communities in Syria have frequently failed to bring an end to the sieges. Even in cases where violent attacks cease, humanitarian access is generally minimal and civilians are may still be unable to move freely in and out of the area. Polling data from besieged areas that have implemented ceasefire agreements indicates that living conditions did not improve, and in some cases even worsened, following the ceasefire implementation.³⁰ In the UN OCHA reporting it seems that local ceasefires have inaccurately been equated with the end of sieges, as in the case of Moadamiya.

The UN-assisted population transfers have arisen as a problematic component of some local ceasefire agreements. These transfers can give the appearance of demographic re-engineering.³¹ In most cases where this has occurred – for example in the Old City of Homs – civilians have not been allowed to return to their homes despite government promises. Even more concerning is the fact that population transfers imposed as part of local ceasefire agreements have proven ineffective at promoting long-term de-escalation. Instead, a pattern of siege-negotiate-transfer-

29 UN OCHA, "Flash Update -#2 - Madaya/Bqine - 17 January 2016," <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/node/118134>.

30 Omran Center for Strategic Studies, "Cease Fire Agreements in Syria and their Effectiveness: A Public Opinion Poll," 30 Sept. 2014, https://www.omrandirasat.org/sites/default/files/cease%20fire%20poll%20analysis_0.pdf

31 Nicholas Blanford, "Syrian talks with rebels stumble on 'sectarian cleansing' allegations," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 Aug. 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0807/Syrian-talks-with-rebels-stumble-on-sectarian-cleansing-allegations>.



A child from besieged Jobar in newly besieged Hameh. July 2015.

siege has emerged in the Syrian government's strategy: people from the Old City of Homs were transferred to Al-Waer, which was itself then besieged; people from Zabadani were displaced to Madaya, which was then besieged; and people forcibly displaced from Eastern Ghouta were moved to Qudsayya, which was then besieged .

Despite several violations, the truce agreement reached in the Damascus neighborhood of Barzeh and Qaboun in January 2014 is generally recognized as the most successful example to date. Due to the neighborhood's strategic location adjacent to key government buildings and the highway, local AOGs could exploit vulnerabilities of the Syrian government and the balance of power was more even than in other besieged locations. This location also made it more difficult for the Syrian military to completely surround Barzeh and launch major assaults the way that it has elsewhere.³² As a result, local AOGs were able to limit the negotiation terms to their priorities of cessation of violence and release of prisoners, and the siege has been de-escalated without forced populations transfers and AOGs still retain control of the neighborhood.³³ In other areas where truces have failed, the terms of the agreements have more closely resembled surrender than ceasefire.³⁴

32 Integrity, "Research Summary Report: Local Truces in Syria," June 2014,

<http://daleel-madani.org/sites/default/files/External%20Paper%20-%20Local%20truces%20in%20Syria-English.pdf>.

33 PAX, "SYRIA ALERT XIII, Forced ceasefires: The case of Barzeh and Qaboun," 20 June 2014, www.paxforpeace.nl/media/files/syria-alert-xiii-2014-6-19-final.pdf.

34 Dr. Rim Turkmani, Prof. Mary Kaldor, Wisam Elhamwi, Joan Ayo, and Dr. Nael Hariri, "Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria," London School of Economics, Oct. 2014,

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/pdfs/Home-Grown-Peace-in-Syria-report-final.pdf>.

While the evacuation of people in need of immediate medical care can be a necessary step to save lives, the return and safety of these people should always be guaranteed. The UN should reconsider participating in any other type of population transfer. In light of the examples given, the transfer of populations as a capitulation to forcibly imposed truce terms may be validating the government's strategy of besieging civilians in order to subjugate or depopulate an area and inadvertently encouraging the continued expansion of this strategy over time. The case of Barzeh and Qaboun suggests that population transfers are not necessarily part of a successful ceasefire, and that local ceasefire agreements are more successful when they reflect de-escalation rather than domination between the Syrian military and AOGs.

Aid Delivery

Since monthly UN reporting on the humanitarian situation in Syria began in early 2014, it is clear that the problem of besieged areas has grown but humanitarian access has not improved. The UN agency practice of sending aid convoy requests to the Syrian government and abiding by its determination (or lack thereof), has turned international humanitarian aid into a tool of war controlled by the most powerful party. This is particularly troubling since the Syrian government is the primary perpetrator of sieges against civilians and the only party to employ the siege strategy systematically over an extended period of time.

In sum

Current UN practices regarding besieged area designation and reporting, forced local ceasefires, and aid delivery may validate and inadvertently encourage the expansion of the Syrian government's "surrender or starve" strategy. In light of the continued deterioration of conditions and the expanded use of sieges against civilians in Syria, the UN must seriously question whether its response thus far has actually exacerbated the crisis, and should immediately begin exploring alternative approaches. Data gathered by the Siege Watch projects suggests that distorted UN reporting, an emphasis on forced local ceasefires, and continued acquiescence to the Syrian government's denial of aid may have actually exacerbated the crisis. The UN should immediately begin exploring alternative approaches.

Acknowledging the extent of the sieges in Syria and increasing international awareness of the situation is an important first step towards bringing an end to these ongoing war crimes. The sieges in Syria not only repudiate international humanitarian law and undermine UNSC resolutions; they are also inflaming sectarian tensions, sparking reprisals, and destroying communities. Ending the sieges of civilian areas should be a high-priority confidence-building measure for the international community if it ever hopes to broker peace in Syria. ♦



A child in Douma cuts wood, the only way to heat or cook. March 2015.



In besieged areas bicycles have become a primary mode of transportation since there is little fuel for motorized vehicles. Darayya, January 2016.

4. Annex I population data

Table 06.

Table of Siege Watch Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged By	Est. Current Population	Notes
Damascus	Jobar	1	Gos	225	See 5
	Al-Qadam	3	Gos + ISIS	3,500	
	Yarmouk	1	Gos + Palestinian faction	12,000	
Rural	Arbin	2	Gos	35,000	
Damascus	Zamalka	2	Gos	11,500	
	Beit Sawa	2	Gos	9,250	See 5
	Eftreis	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Ein Tarma	2	Gos	6,500	
	Hamouriya	2	Gos	23,500	See 5
	Hazzeh	2	Gos	7,500	
	Jisreen	2	Gos	10,000	See 2, 3
	Kafr Batna	2	Gos	11,000	
	Saqba	2	Gos	15,000	See 2, 3
	Deir Assafir	2	Gos	7,500	See 5
	Zebdine	2	Gos	1,000	See 5
	Babbila	3	Gos	10,500	
	Beit Sahn	3	Gos	11,000	

Table 06. (continued)

Table of Siege Watch Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Beseiged By	Est. Current Population	Notes
Rural	Yelda	3	Gos + ISIS	15,000	
Damascus	Douma	1	Gos	200,000	
(continued)	Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Hosh al-Fara	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Hosh Nasri	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Al-Rayhan	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Al-Shaifuniya	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Harasta	2	Gos	11,000	See 2, 3
	Madeira	2	Gos	2,500	See 2, 3
	Misraba	2	Gos	27,000	
	Autaya	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Beit Naim	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Bzeina	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Harasta al-Qantara	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Nashabiyeh	2	Gos	40,000	See 4
	Nouleh	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Al-Salhiyah	2	Gos		See 1, 2
	Darayya	1	Gos	12,000	
	Moadamiya al-Sham	1	Gos	44,000	
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Gos + AOGs	8,000	
	Zabadani	1	Gos + Hezbollah		See 2
	Madaya + Baqeen	1	Gos + Hezbollah		See 2
Deir ez-Zor	Deir ez-Zor	2	Gos + ISIS		
Homs	Al-Waer	3	Gos	200,000	
	Al-Houleh Region	3	Gos	125,000	See 4
	Al-Rastan	3	Gos	75,000	See 4
	Talbiseh	3	Gos	105,000	See 4
Idlib	Fuaa	3	AOGs	60,000	See 2
	Kafraya	3	AOGs		See 2
			Total	1,099,475	

*Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.

Besieged Table Numbered Notes

- 1 Rural area, low population (<5,000)
- 2 No Siege Watch population data available
- 3 SAMS population estimate from 2015 "Slow Death" report
- 4 Population statistic includes surrounding countryside
- 5 Population reported as # of families, estimated 5 people per family

Official administrative location names from “Syria P-code and Place Name Gazetteer,” compiled by UN OCHA and published in 22 May 2013. This Gazetteer designates administrative boundaries down to the Community level in Damascus. Besieged areas do not always align perfectly with official administrative areas. ♦

Table 07.

Table of Current Siege Watch “Watchlist” Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by
Rural	Al-Bilaliyeh	Watchlist	Gos
Damascus	Marj al-Sultan	Watchlist	Gos
	Qudsaya	Watchlist	Gos
	Hameh	Watchlist	Gos
	Khan al-Sheih	Watchlist	Gos
	Al-Tal	Watchlist	Gos

*Note: Orange name indicate besieged location not recognized by UN OCHA as of December 2015.



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