

Break the Siege

# Siege Watch

Second Quarterly Report on besieged areas in Syria May 2016

Help the children

انتظار المساعدات  
We are the humanitarian and we were promised

يا موقوفوا الصلوات  
You can stop the shelling  
You can break the siege



THE SYRIA INSTITUTE



Peace. Are you in?

# Siege Watch

Second Quarterly Report on besieged areas in Syria May 2016

## **Colophon**

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## **About PAX**

PAX works with committed citizens and partners to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence, and to build just peace. PAX operates independently of political interests.

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## **About TSI**

The Syria Institute (TSI) is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan think tank based in Washington, DC. TSI was founded in 2015 in response to a recognition that today, almost six years into the Syrian conflict, information and understanding gaps continue to hinder effective policymaking and drive public reaction to the unfolding crisis. Our aim is to address these gaps by empowering decision-makers and advancing the public's understanding of the situation in Syria by producing timely, high quality, accessible, data-driven research, analysis, and policy options. To learn more visit [www.syriainstitute.org](http://www.syriainstitute.org) or contact TSI at [info@syriainstitute.org](mailto:info@syriainstitute.org).

Photo cover: Women and children spell out 'SOS' during a protest in Daraya on 9 March 2016,  
(Source: courtesy of Local Council of Daraya City)

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# Acronyms

This report was prepared by The Syria Institute with support from the PAX team. It would not have been possible without the assistance and support of the Siege Watch reporting network of contacts. Special thanks to the Justice for Life Observatory in Deir Ezzor ([jfldz.org](http://jfldz.org)) for assistance in gathering data on Deir Ezzor, and to Mazen Mash for continued assistance in contact outreach. Photographers who contributed are affiliated with Rastan Local council, Homs Media Center and other contacts of Siege Watch.

AOG	Armed opposition group
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
HTF	Humanitarian Task Force
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	UN Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	UN Security Council
UNSG	UN Secretary-General
WFP	World Food Program

# Executive Summary

This report is the second in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria’s besieged communities. Data collected during the past quarter from an extensive network of contacts across besieged areas in Syria shows that the situation remains bleak for the estimated 1,015,275 people trapped in 46 besieged communities, despite an increased international focus on besieged areas.

The first quarterly Siege Watch report, published in February 2016, found that there were over a million Syrians in 46 besieged communities, far more than the 393,700 in 15 communities reported in the January 2016 Report of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) to the United Nations Security Council UNSC on the humanitarian situation in Syria.<sup>1</sup> There were significant military and political developments during the Siege Watch reporting period between February and the first week of May 2016, which impacted conditions in the besieged areas. Notably, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) created a Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) to focus on increasing access, and a Ceasefire Taskforce to monitor a nationwide “Cessation of Hostilities” (CoH) that came into effect in late February. Despite some progress made by these taskforces, particularly early in the reporting period, no sieges were lifted during the past quarter and conditions in many besieged communities declined. Several additional communities were added to the Siege Watch

“Watchlist,” and are at serious risk of becoming fully besieged. The Syrian military and its allies remain responsible for the majority of existing sieges, as well as the threats to all “Watchlist” areas, which contain an estimated 1.4 million people.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

The past quarter witnessed a significant rise in aid deliveries to besieged areas, but they have been inconsistent, insufficient, and unbalanced due to continuing access restrictions, limiting their effectiveness. Even in communities like Moadamiya and Madaya, which received multiple aid deliveries during the reporting period, siege-related deaths continued to be reported. Deir Ezzor stands out as the only besieged area that has experienced a significant improvement in humanitarian conditions as a result of international efforts shepherded by the ISSG. Since April, World Food Program (WFP) airdrops to Deir Ezzor have been frequent and unimpeded. Despite a recent ISSG announcement that it will direct the WFP to airdrop humanitarian aid to all besieged areas that still cannot be reached as of June 1, it is unlikely that the level of aid access reached in Deir Ezzor can be approached or sustained in other besieged areas, where the Syrian government continues to deny access.

The official besieged designations as determined by UN OCHA and transmitted by the UNSG in mandated monthly reports to the Security Council, continue to dramatically underestimate the number of besieged locations and the size of the population living under siege. Although the official figures rose to an estimated 517,700 people in 18 designated communities by the May 2016 UNSG report,<sup>2</sup> they still leave half a million people in approximately 28 communities unaccounted for. All of these additional areas meet the UN’s own criteria for the besieged designation. The high-profile work of the ISSG’s HTF has brought more international attention than ever before to the plight of the 18 officially designated besieged communities, making it more important than ever for the UNSG and ISSG to make every effort to accurately reflect the situation on the ground, independent of political considerations. All of the unacknowledged besieged communities are located in Homs and Rural Damascus governorates and all are besieged by the Syrian military and its allies. As Madaya demonstrated in the winter of 2015-2016 when dozens of people starved to death, if besieged areas are not accurately designated and prioritized, the alarm bells may not go off in time to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

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. The sieges in Syria not only repudiate international humanitarian law and undermine UNSC resolutions; they also inflame sectarian tensions, spark reprisals, and destroy communities in the process. During the past quarter, the continuing sieges have proven to be a barrier to the Intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva, as their very existence demonstrates a lack of commitment to ending the war through political means.

It is clear that convoy counting is not the answer to the crisis of Syria’s sieges, and the ISSG and

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council, S/2016/60, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 21 January 2016, <http://undocs.org/S/2016/60>.

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council, S/2016/460, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 19 May 2016, <http://undocs.org/S/2016/460>.

the UN must not make the mistake of conflating increased aid delivery approvals with a solution to the problem. Focus must remain on lifting the sieges and ensuring the unrestricted movement of civilians. UN OCHA and other relevant agencies should immediately reassess the situation in areas where sufficient evidence of siege exists, and should base their decisions on objective criteria, independent of any political considerations. Finally, donors who support UN agency efforts in Syria should demand transparency on the assessment process of the besieged area designations by OCHA. It is essential that OCHA's assessment, which informs the Security Council and the ISSG, is led by the facts on the ground and the needs of the people in besieged communities. Explanations should be provided when areas are moved to or from the list of besieged communities. ♦

## NOTE

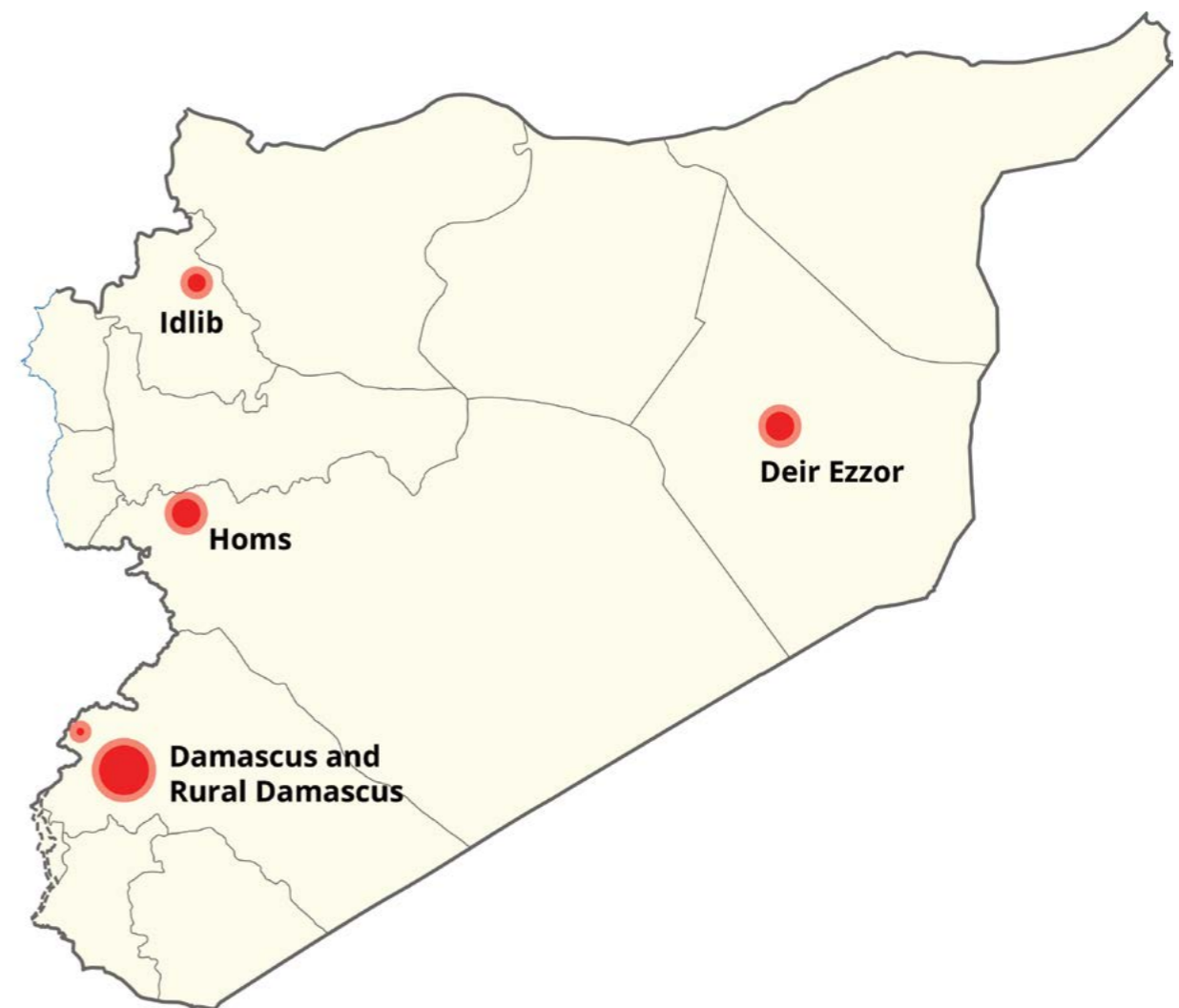
Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period ended after the first week of May 2016. There have been significant developments impacting many of the besieged areas in the intervening period. Please check [siegewatch.org](http://siegewatch.org) for the most recent available updates.

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# 1. Introduction

This report is the second in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria’s besieged communities. Data collected during the past quarter indicates that there are still more than 1,000,000 Syrians suffering under siege in locations in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. More than 1,400,000 additional people live in areas on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” which face siege-like conditions and are at risk of becoming completely besieged.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access,<sup>3</sup> and the creation of the International Syria Support Group’s (ISSG) Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) in February 2016,<sup>4</sup> 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 Syria. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), and by extension the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) and UNSC, still has not recognized a significant percentage of the besieged population. This failure to acknowledge the reality on the ground is problematic, because their reporting plays an important role in framing the international community’s understanding of the situation, which shapes the urgency and nature of its response. Without international action to break, de-escalate, or seek criminal accountability for the sieges being waged against civilians in Syria, these numbers will continue to grow.



Map 1. Country-level map of besieged areas in Syria.

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

4 UN, “Note to Correspondents: Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” 11 February 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=4369>.

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 ([siegewatch.org](http://siegewatch.org)), on the Twitter feed (@siegewatch), and through in-depth quarterly reports.<sup>5</sup>

This report focuses primarily on developments during the past quarter from February through the first week of May 2016. Additional updates since then will be included when available. For a more detailed background of the project and additional background information on the specific besieged areas, refer to the first Siege Watch report published in February 2016.

## Project Outline

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."<sup>6</sup> 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 Siege Watch project designates three tiers of siege intensity, using a classification scheme proposed by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) in its March 2015 'Slow Death' report.<sup>7</sup> While all three tiers meet the UN OCHA criteria for besieged, and the tiers help further describe the variations in conditions in different area, drawing attention to the besieged communities 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 at 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 at moderate risk of denial of medical care. The areas are occasionally attacked by besieging forces.

The primary condition that demonstrates that an area is besieged is when it is surrounded by armed actors who restrict the movement of goods and people into and out of the area. A siege is an intentional tactic meant to deprive a populated area of the essentials needed for life. Other factors such as the level of violence, the delivery of aid convoys, and the availability of smuggling routes can change the intensity of the siege (the tier level) but do not impact whether an area is designated besieged under the Siege Watch system. For example, in Deir Ezzor, aid delivery has become frequent and regular as a result of the WFP airdrops, but the neighborhoods are still surrounded by ISIS forces who prevent the delivery of supplies by ground routes, and civilian movement is still restricted by both ISIS and the Syrian military. Accordingly Deir Ezzor is still considered besieged, but has been reclassified as Tier 3 to reflect the improved humanitarian conditions.

Siege Watch identifies an additional category of "Watchlist" locations that are at high risk of becoming under 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 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 first 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 complete siege. Discretion may be used in waiving this six-month requirement should rapid developments on the ground necessitate it. For more details on the data collection process, please see the February Siege Watch report.

## Challenges

The difficult, dangerous, and fluid circumstances on the ground in the besieged areas of Syria continued to present challenges for the Siege Watch project during the reporting period. Poor internet access, lack of electricity, bombings and other safety-related issues, and shifting priorities among reporting contacts all impacted the type and amount of information gathered. Rapid developments in some areas often outpaced data collection efforts. Where updated information was unavailable, it is noted in the report.

While the Siege Watch tier system can be a useful tool to help stakeholders better understand the conditions in besieged communities and the variations between them, the circumstances in each area are unique, and do not always fit neatly into a classification. A number of areas currently on the Siege Watch "Watchlist" face some conditions of complete siege, and the decision to leave them on the "Watchlist" was not clear-cut. For example, in Khan al-Sheih, which is surrounded by

<sup>5</sup> Note: the situation in several of the besieged areas of Syria was changing quickly as of time of writing. Visit [www.siegewatch.org](http://www.siegewatch.org) for the most up-to-date data on specific communities.

<sup>6</sup> UN OCHA, "2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," November 2014.

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



pro-government forces and has had only one passable access road for years, humanitarian aid cannot be delivered directly to the community. Instead residents must make a dangerous trip to a nearby town to collect UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) assistance. Men between the ages of 16 and 45 generally do not attempt this journey for fear of being arrested by Syrian government forces, and the women, children, and elderly civilians who travel on the road are sometimes killed by snipers. Facing some movement restrictions and some supply restrictions, the situation in Khan al-Sheih and other “Watchlist” areas blurs the distinction between besieged and not besieged.

In these cases of considerable uncertainty, the Siege Watch project has erred on the side of caution and kept these cases in question on the “Watchlist,” but will continue to monitor developments and reevaluate their status on an ongoing basis.

## General Developments

There have been many developments in Syria since the first Siege Watch quarterly report was released in February 2016. Russia and the U.S., as co-chairs of ISSG, undertook intensive diplomatic efforts to improve situations on the ground in order to smooth the way for Intra-Syrian talks in Geneva. After a spike in violence, a nationwide Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) came into effect on February 27. The CoH initially led to a dramatic drop in violence across the country, which gradually eroded throughout March and April as violations increased. By May the CoH had entirely broken down in many areas, with violence levels nearing the pre-CoH norm and active offensives being led by government and opposition forces across the country. In addition to the CoH, the ISSG created a Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) to focus on improving humanitarian access, and as a result there was a significant increase in humanitarian aid convoy deliveries to besieged areas starting in March, although access has generally remained impeded. The convoys that have been approved and implemented have not reached all of the besieged communities and in most cases have failed to bring in sufficient quantities of food aid. The majority of medical aid continues to be removed from convoys.

No sieges were lifted during the past quarter. Furthermore, conditions in several communities on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” have deteriorated and are approaching fully besieged. Khan al-Shieh will be added to the besieged list if access is not restored shortly, and the Rural Damascus villages of Al-Hameh, Qudsaya, and Al-Tal are borderline cases that face siege-like conditions. A renewed pro-government offensive threatens to sever the only remaining access route to Eastern Aleppo.

The situation in several besieged areas including Darayya, and communities in the southern sector of Eastern Ghouta worsened significantly during the report period, while other areas saw improvements. The most dramatic improvement in humanitarian conditions took place in the government-controlled neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor as a result of the frequent and regular supply airdrops run by the World Food Program (WFP). The southern Damascus suburbs, which include the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee “camp” and surrounding neighborhoods, have also experienced improving conditions as access restrictions for both people and goods were loosened. Madaya and Zabadani were pulled back from the brink of mass starvation by UN aid deliveries but are still critically besieged and siege-related deaths were still reported even after convoys reached the areas. The towns of Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib, which are besieged by AOGs, are part of a “Four Towns Agreement,” and receive supplies and medical evacuations at the same times as Madaya and Zabadani.

As of the end of December 2015, UN OCHA had designated 15 locations as besieged in its monthly reporting. Starting in January 2016, Yarmouk, Moadamiya, and Madaya were added to this official list, bringing the number of officially recognized besieged communities to 18, where it has remained ever since. The rationale for the timing of these additions is unclear, but they do not appear to have been driven by any changes to access or encirclement on the ground. According to Siege Watch data, there are approximately 28 besieged communities in Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus governorates that are still not recognized by UN OCHA. ♦



al-Qantara as well as several rural villages – deteriorated throughout the reporting period as a result of a pro-government offensive to isolate the area, and these towns may merit elevation to Tier 1 status in the near future.

While the population of Eastern Ghouta as a whole has not changed, there has been internal displacement between the besieged communities as a result of ongoing fighting, particularly in the southern sector. Siege Watch was only able to gather updated population figures for a portion of the communities impacted by this displacement, so in order to avoid artificially impacting the overall Eastern Ghouta population estimate of 418,475, Siege Watch has not made any changes to individual community estimates since the February report. Notable displacements are known to have occurred from Douma, and the southern sector towns and southern villages of the Al-Marj area (Nashabiyeh, Harasta al-Qantara, Bzeina, etc.). Interior and northern communities including Autaya, Hamouriya, Jisreen, Zamalka, Misraba, Madeira, and Ein Tarma reported receiving some of these displaced people. None of the besieged host communities have the necessary infrastructure or services to support this newest wave of IDPs.

As a result of the continued access restrictions, the humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta has declined overall, with some minor improvements in the price and availability of goods being reversed or offset by other detrimental developments. The ISSG focus on humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas has had a negligible impact on the besieged region. Five of the 10 UN OCHA-designated communities in Eastern Ghouta received aid shipments during the reporting period: Ein Tarma, Hamouriya, Jisreen, Kafr Batna, and Saqba. No other besieged community in Eastern Ghouta received humanitarian aid (with the exception of a small amount of vaccines to several communities) during this time. The amount of food in the convoys that were sent to the five towns was insufficient to meet the needs of just the targeted communities for a month, and had no impact on humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta as a whole. Medical supplies had been removed.

## NOTE

Since the end of the reporting period, one additional community in Eastern Ghouta, Harasta, was reached by convoy carrying UN humanitarian assistance.<sup>9</sup>

While some communities have experienced decreased violence levels since the start of the CoH in late February, others have not. The southern sector of Eastern Ghouta has experienced an increase in violence as pro-government forces continue to launch attacks and regain territory; this situation is described in further detail below. There have been significant CoH violations reported against other communities outside of this offensive.

## NOTE

Since the most recent Siege Watch surveys were collected, unusually intense and prolonged AOG infighting has been reported in Eastern Ghouta, centered in the communities of Misraba and Madeira.<sup>10</sup> It is likely that this AOG violence has negatively impacted the humanitarian situation in those communities and led to new internal displacement.

Smuggling and bribery remain the primary methods for people to attain the basics needed to survive, and the government-affiliated traders approved to operate at Al-Wafideen checkpoint continue to profit. Although prices in Eastern Ghouta stabilized slightly following the CoH agreement, they are still volatile and remain significantly higher than prices in government-controlled parts of Damascus. Among the factors driving prices downwards, Siege Watch respondents listed increased smuggling, leading to a greater availability of some goods and more competition among traders. Among the factors driving prices upwards, respondents noted the impact of currency inflation of the Syrian Pound (SYP), which is currently in turmoil. There was also a spike in prices reported in late March, when the government temporarily reinstated the siege of the Barzeh neighborhood, which has had a relatively successful truce in place with the government since January 2014. When the Barzeh-Damascus Road was reopened a little over a week later, the prices in Eastern Ghouta decreased again. This incident illustrates the extent to which Eastern Ghouta communities are dependent on smuggling via tunnels connected to Barzeh. The complete closure of Barzeh access by the Syrian military also demonstrated that the neighborhood remains vulnerable despite remaining relatively accessible since 2014, and has been added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” as a result.

The medical sector in Eastern Ghouta is still poor, with insufficient staff, facilities, and supplies. As reported in February, serious medical cases are sometimes still evacuated via tunnel to Barzeh for better treatment, although some are unable to avail themselves of this option for fear of being arrested by the Syrian government. Vaccines and dialysis supplies were the most frequently reported top priority medical needs among Eastern Ghouta respondents.

**The Southern Sector of Eastern Ghouta** – Despite a pause in attacks on these areas by the Syrian government at the start of the CoH in February, violations started shortly thereafter and continued throughout the reporting period as the Syrian military and Hezbollah forces continued an offensive to gain territory in the area. The government gains as of the start of May 2016 are reflected in the updated map. On March 31, the community of Deir Assafir experienced its most violent day of the entire war when the Syrian air force launched a series of more than 15 airstrikes on the town. Targets included a school, a civil defense center, and the only remaining medical center in the area, all of which were taken out of service. Nearly 40 people, including 13 children, were killed in those attacks. If the southern sector – which includes the main towns of Deir Assafir, Zebdine, Bzeina, and Harasta al-Qantara and smaller villages like Bala – is completely isolated, it will become more vulnerable to the negative impacts of siege and the roughly 12,000 people living

<sup>9</sup> Firas al-Khateeb, “Convoy with UNHCR aid reaches besieged Syrian farm town,” UNHCR, 20 May 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/573ec29d4.html>.

<sup>10</sup> “East Ghouta infighting over, for now: ‘People are tired of both sides,’” SYRIA: Direct, 10 May 2016, <http://syriadirect.org>.

there will be at higher risk of harm. Only one of the towns within this besieged area is designated by the UN OCHA/ISSG reporting.

By the beginning of May 2016, as many as half of the remaining residents of the southern sector had fled to other parts of Eastern Ghouta due to the government offensive and the number is expected to dwindle further as intensive attacks are ongoing. This internal displacement between the besieged communities clearly demonstrates that it is the entire opposition-controlled area of Eastern Ghouta, and not just the 10 towns designated by UN OCHA, that are actually besieged.

### NOTE

Near the end of May 2016, after the Siege Watch reporting period, this offensive by pro-government forces succeeded in capturing the entire southern sector of Eastern Ghouta, including the towns of Deir Assafir, Zebdine, Bzeina, and Harasta al-Qantara. Reports suggest that all 12,000 remaining residents fled northwards into other besieged towns of Eastern Ghouta.



A Douma Civil Defense team films an airstrike targeting a mosque while responding to an earlier bombing on 03 March 2016

**Douma** - The contested city of Douma has also continued to be targeted by airstrikes, shelling, and ground assaults by the Syrian armed forces. It has been denied humanitarian aid since the Munich Agreement. The last aid convoy to reach Douma was on February 13, prior to the Munich Agreement and the restart of the Intra-Syrian Geneva talks. Since then, some vaccines have been allowed entry, but nothing else. Douma is in great need of medical supplies, particularly dialysis treatments and vaccines. Like many other besieged areas, respondents in Douma noted that baby milk was very difficult to find.

**Jobar** - Jobar has also been attacked regularly by the Syrian government since the CoH came into effect. A major attack took place on March 28 in which government forces tried to gain territory and take control of Jobar in a concerted ground offensive from multiple axes.

## SOUTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS

**Table 2:**  
Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Government + AOGs	3,500
Babbila	3	Syrian Government	11,000
Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Government	11,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Government + ISIS	8,000
Yarmouk	1	Syrian Government + Palestinian faction	8,000
Yelda	3	Syrian Government + AOGs	16,500

Yarmouk is the only community in the southern Damascus suburbs that was designated by UN OCHA as of April 2016. See Annex I for a complete list. Data valid as of early May 2016.

### Snapshot:

General improvement of conditions. No change in besieged designations or tier levels. Small decrease in estimated population during the past quarter as a result of population redistribution and improved movement.

### Details:

The southern Damascus suburbs remained besieged during the reporting period but saw notable improvements in humanitarian conditions. The area remains completely surrounded by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias, and the besieged neighborhoods themselves are still controlled by a patchwork of armed groups. An ISIS contingent remains in control of Hajar al-Aswad as well as parts of Yarmouk Camp and neighboring Tadamon (of which only a portion falls into the siege cordon), and Jabhat al-Nusra maintains a small presence in parts of Yarmouk. At least five notable AOGs and a handful of smaller groups are also present in the besieged southern suburbs. Population estimates in several of the communities have been adjusted slightly, resulting in a net decrease from 60,000 to 58,000.

The flow of goods into the area appeared to become more regularized through the two functioning checkpoints at Babbila and Al-Qadam. The government now allows the entry of basic supplies such as grain with a 20% tariff. While this does artificially inflate prices, they are still not as steep as in other besieged areas. Hajar al-Aswad, which does not have a local ceasefire agreement with the government and is more isolated due to its control by ISIS, has benefitted indirectly from the increased supplies in the southern suburbs, with other AOGs allowing the entry of some aid across internal checkpoints. Still, the conditions in Hajar al-Aswad remain poor compared to most of the other nearby neighborhoods.

As a result of the improved security and humanitarian access, nearly 2,600 people reportedly returned to Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and Yarmouk during the first quarter of 2016. Many civilians are now able to pass through the government-controlled checkpoints to exit and enter the southern suburbs, but men between the ages of 16 and 45 are still restricted due to the high

potential for arrest by the Syrian government.

Humanitarian aid access to the southern suburbs is still inconsistent, highlighting the area's continued vulnerability. On February 13, 2016, UNRWA was able to distribute food in the Yelda neighborhood for the first time in eight months. Civilians from surrounding neighborhoods including Yarmouk travelled to Yelda to pick up the aid. Due to internal access restrictions enforced by armed groups, Yarmouk residents faced greater difficulty than other areas in retrieving the aid, and in returning to their neighborhood with medical supplies. After six weeks of access to Yelda, the deliveries were again disrupted, this time by security concerns due to fighting between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>11</sup>

The besieged areas of the southern suburbs have been notably free of attack by pro-government forces over the past quarter. There have been some internal clashes, particularly between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. At the beginning of 2016 there was a negotiation in the works between the Syrian government and ISIS, to remove the ISIS contingent from the southern suburbs and transport them to ISIS-controlled areas of Al-Raqqa. The negotiation reached the stage at which buses were sent to the area to transport the militants out. For an unknown reason the transfer was not complete and the ISIS contingent remains in the southern suburbs. On April 2, this group stormed Yarmouk in an attempt to defeat the Jabhat al-Nusra battalion there.

**Yarmouk** – The Yarmouk Palestinian refugee “camp” remains inaccessible to UNRWA, which distributes aid to displaced Yarmouk residents who are able to reach the adjacent suburb of Yelda. The last time Yarmouk was directly accessed with humanitarian aid was March 2015.<sup>12</sup> In January 2016, UN OCHA re-listed Yarmouk as besieged. It had been on the besieged list until April 2015, when the estimate for the total population of the besieged areas in Syria provided in the UNSG’s monthly report to the Security Council was lowered by 18,000 – the estimated population of Yarmouk at that time.<sup>13</sup> Aid and civilian movement restrictions remained in place throughout the time period that Yarmouk was not officially recognized as besieged, and humanitarian conditions remained poor. The rationale for removing and then re-adding Yarmouk to the besieged list remains unclear.

The recent improvements in conditions in the besieged southern suburbs of Damascus are encouraging, although troubling aspects of siege still remain in force. The complexity of control and access in the area, which involve the Syrian government and a number of armed groups, require additional care when it comes to removing besieged classifications. If conditions continue to improve, particularly those concerning civilian movement, it is possible that moving forward, some or all of the southern suburbs may qualify for removal from the besieged list.

11 UNRWA, “UNRWA Expresses Concern Over the Situation in Yarmouk,” 14 April 2016, <http://www.unrwa.org>.

12 UNRWA, “Syria Humanitarian Snapshot, July – September, 2015,” <http://www.unrwa.org>.

13 UN Security Council, S/2015/368, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014),

2165 (2014), and 2191 (2014),” 22 May 2015, <http://undocs.org/S/2015/368>.

## WESTERN GHOUTA

**Table 3:**  
Western Ghouta Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Darayya	1	Syrian Government	8,300
Moadamiyet al-Sham	1	Syrian Government	45,000

Note: Data valid as of early May 2016

### Snapshot:

General decline of conditions in Darayya. No change in besieged designation or tier levels. Slight changes to net estimated population as a result of re-distribution between the suburbs, and estimate refinement.

### Details:

Darayya and Moadamiya in the Western Ghouta countryside of Rural Damascus remained besieged by pro-government forces during the reporting period. While humanitarian conditions remained unchanged in Moadamiya, which received some international assistance during the past quarter, they worsened in Darayya. There was some reported population movement between Darayya and Moadamiya before the link between them was completely severed by pro-government forces in January, and the Siege Watch population estimates have been adjusted accordingly. Though the combined population of the two towns has not changed since the February report, the total Siege Watch estimate has been lowered slightly due to receipt of a refined estimate from local contacts. The previous combined total of Darayya and Moadamiya was 56,000, the new estimate is 53,300.

**Darayya** – The already grim situation in besieged Darayya deteriorated further during the past quarter despite the increased international focus on the area during the Intra-Syrian Geneva negotiations. As described in the February Siege Watch report, Darayya lost its last smuggling artery in January 2016 when an offensive by pro-government forces took control of the road connecting it to besieged Moadamiya. Since January, many commodities that were previously hard to find such as baby milk, oil, and flour, have become completely unavailable, and the cost of remaining items has skyrocketed. For example, during the Siege Watch baseline data collection efforts in late 2015, a kg of sugar cost approximately 1,500 SYP. In March of 2016 the same kg of sugar cost 10,000-12,000 SYP.

Prior to January some safe drinking water could be obtained from nearby Moadamiya. Currently, Darayya residents have no access to safe drinking water, and as a result they are experiencing a rise in disease. The status of the medical sector in Darayya is catastrophic, and a number of civilians have died after being unable to access medical care. No population movement is currently possible into or out of Darayya, and the area has received no humanitarian assistance. The violence in Darayya decreased notably since the start of the nationwide CoH in late February. Although violations have been reported sporadically throughout the reporting period, the security situation has improved dramatically when compared to the previous period, in which Darayya



A girl protests in Daraya after the first attempted aid convoy since 2012 was blocked by the Syrian military in May 2016.

was hit with an unprecedented onslaught of barrel bombs. There is growing concern that this may change moving forward. On May 12, 2016, a humanitarian aid convoy was dispatched to Darayya in what would have been the area's first international assistance since 2012. The convoy, which contained medical assistance and school supplies but no food, was stopped at the government checkpoint and Syrian military forces attempted to remove the medical supplies. After approximately six hours the convoy turned back without reaching Darayya. Immediately afterwards, the Syrian military launched a mortar attack on the area where civilians in Darayya had gathered to await the aid delivery, killing two and wounding five.<sup>14</sup> Two days later the Syrian air force flew reconnaissance missions over Darayya and residents report a repositioning of pro-government forces surrounding the town, in addition to further shelling. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation closely.

**Moadamiya** – Moadamiya remained completely besieged by government forces and associated militias during the reporting period. Though the community saw a burst of aid activity following the Munich Agreement in early February and the start of the CoH, this access was short-lived, and nothing has reached Moadamiya since the very beginning of March. The one remaining crossing remains heavily monitored, with movement restricted for all but university students, who are not allowed to bring supplies back with them upon reentry. Prices of available basic goods have risen slightly. The level of violence has been low, with few violations reported since the CoH came into effect in February.

<sup>14</sup> Facebook post by The Syria Institute, 12 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/syriainstitute/posts/1183684138342695>.

In January 2016, UN OCHA re-listed Moadamiya as besieged after removing it from their previous list in November 2014.

#### OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS

**Table 4:**  
Other Rural Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Madaya/Baqeen	1	Syrian Government + Hezbollah	40,000
Zabadani	1	Syrian Government + Hezbollah	1,000

Note: Data valid as of early May 2016.

#### Snapshot:

Madaya and Zabadani have been added to the Siege Watch besieged list as Tier 1 intensity sieges. Several other communities remain on the Siege Watch "Watchlist".

#### Details:

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 when the first quarterly report was being finalized. Since then Siege Watch has expanded its network of reporting contacts into these communities and added Madaya and Zabdani to the besieged list. Al-Tal, Qudsayya, and Al-Hameh face siege-like conditions and are under consideration for the besieged list, but currently remain on the project's "Watchlist." The Khan al-Sheih Palestinian refugee "camp" in southwest Rural Damascus governorate similarly remained on the "Watchlist" as of the end of the reporting period, but recent developments could soon trigger its designation as completely besieged if access is not improved.

**Madaya and Zabadani** – Madaya and Zabadani are critically besieged by Hezbollah forces, with the support of some Syrian military units. The Baqeen area, which is essentially an outlying suburb of Madaya, is considered as part of Madaya for reporting purposes. The combined population of the two areas is estimated at 41,000, with the majority living in Madaya. Only a few civilians remain in Zabadani. In January 2016, the humanitarian situation in Madaya and Zabadani was so severe due to the intensity of the siege restrictions that starvation was widespread and there were approximately 76 documented cases of siege-related deaths as of February 1. The communities had been frequently attacked by pro-government forces, although the levels of violence fell significantly during the reporting period. Residents still lack access to clean water and electricity, and the medical sector remains devastated. The last medical doctor in Zabadani was killed in April.<sup>15</sup> Smuggling and bribery are still much more limited than in many other besieged areas, and a

<sup>15</sup> Doctors Without Borders, "Syria: Despite Ceasefire, "Catalog of Horror" Continues in Besieged Areas," 07 April 2016, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org>.



Mohamad Shabaan hours before he died of malnutrition in Madaya on 02 April 2016. Requests to evacuate him were denied.

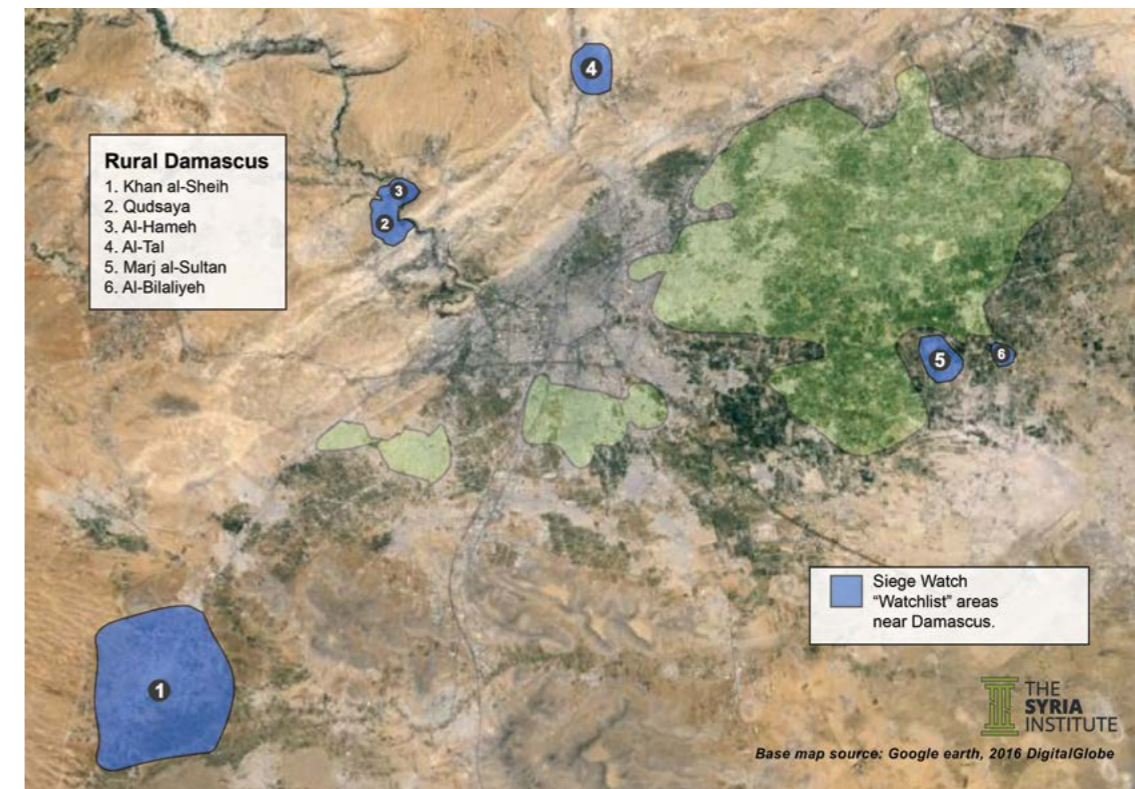
number of basic goods are still unavailable.

As a result of international aid deliveries and some medical evacuations, reached as part of the “Four Towns Agreement” that sees reciprocal deliveries and evacuations for government-controlled Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib, Madaya and Zabadani received a number of humanitarian aid shipments during the reporting period. There were some abnormalities reported with the aid deliveries, including the removal of certain products from food baskets prior to distribution. Still, these efforts have pulled the towns back from the edge of complete collapse, and by March 2016 the number of siege-related deaths had dropped significantly. Despite these deliveries, humanitarian conditions remain precarious and malnutrition is widespread. Siege Watch contacts reported that on April 2, a youth named Mohamad Shabaan, and on April 11 a 65-year old man named Abdallah al-Darsani both died as a result of malnutrition. Calcium and protein deficiencies are still prevalent in Madaya. Fuel remains largely unavailable, and civilians must burn wooden furniture and other household items to make fire for cooking.

In early May concerns grew of a potential breakdown of the “Four Towns Agreement,” due to recent attacks by AOGs against Fuaa and Kefraya. Media reports suggest that Zabadani – where few civilians remain – was indeed bombed in retaliation.<sup>16</sup>

In January 2016, UN OCHA listed Madaya as besieged for the first time, although Zabadani had

<sup>16</sup> Waleed Khaled a-Noufal and Maria Nelson, “Bombings, recriminations in a series of towns tied by one ceasefire: ‘People are afraid the agreement will break down,’” SYRIA:Direct, 11 May 2016, <http://syriadirect.org>



Map 3. “Watchlist” areas in Rural Damascus. Data valid as of early May 2016.

been listed since November 2015.

**Al-Tal, Al-Hameh, and Qudsaya** – The communities of Al-Tal, Al-Hameh, and Qudsaya are located in the Rural Damascus countryside, in the mountainous area to the north and west of Damascus city. They became encircled by pro-government forces in July 2015, and currently face some siege-like conditions. The combined estimated population of all three communities is upwards of 1 million people, many of whom are internally displaced persons (IDPs) previously uprooted from other besieged communities in the Damascus area. Although baseline Siege Watch data was collected from all three areas during the reporting period, certain aspects of the access conditions remain unclear, and as a result no decisions were made during the reporting period to move these areas off of the “Watchlist” and onto the besieged list. Siege Watch will update this status as appropriate when additional data is collected.

**Khan al-Sheih** – Khan al-Sheih is a Palestinian refugee “camp” in southwest Rural Damascus governorate. The town has been partially besieged by Syrian government forces for more than two years, with a dangerous rural farm road to the nearby town of Al-Zakiya serving as the sole lifeline for thousands of remaining residents. While women and children can attempt this journey despite the potential for sniper fire, for men it is much more risky as they fear being arrested by the Syrian government. Since limited supplies have entered fairly regularly through this route, Khan al-Sheih has been on the Siege Watch “Watchlist”. This is not a reflection on the humanitarian conditions in Khan al-Sheih, which have been and continue to be poor.

During the past quarter, there has been little change in the situation in Khan al-Sheih. The area continued to be subjected to shelling and barrel bombs by Syrian government forces despite

the announcement of the nationwide CoH in February. Residents continue to flee due to the violence and lack of resources, leading to a slow but steady depletion of the population. High prices of the limited goods available rose further due to the Syrian currency crisis.

As the situation remained fairly unchanged in Khan al-Sheih during the reporting period it currently remains on the “Watchlist”, but due to recent developments it may be moved to the besieged list in the near future. Reports suggest that as of May 7 the road to Zakia had become completely impassable and the town was targeted with intensive aerial and ground bombardments by Syrian armed forces.<sup>17</sup> If camp access is not restored shortly it will trigger a humanitarian crisis as the already depleted supplies of food and medicine run out. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation closely.

## Homs

**Table 5:**  
Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Waer	2	Syrian Government	100,000
Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Government	83,000
Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Government	105,000
Talbiseh	3	Syrian Government	64,000

\*Note: These besieged locations were not recognized by UN OCHA as of April 2016.

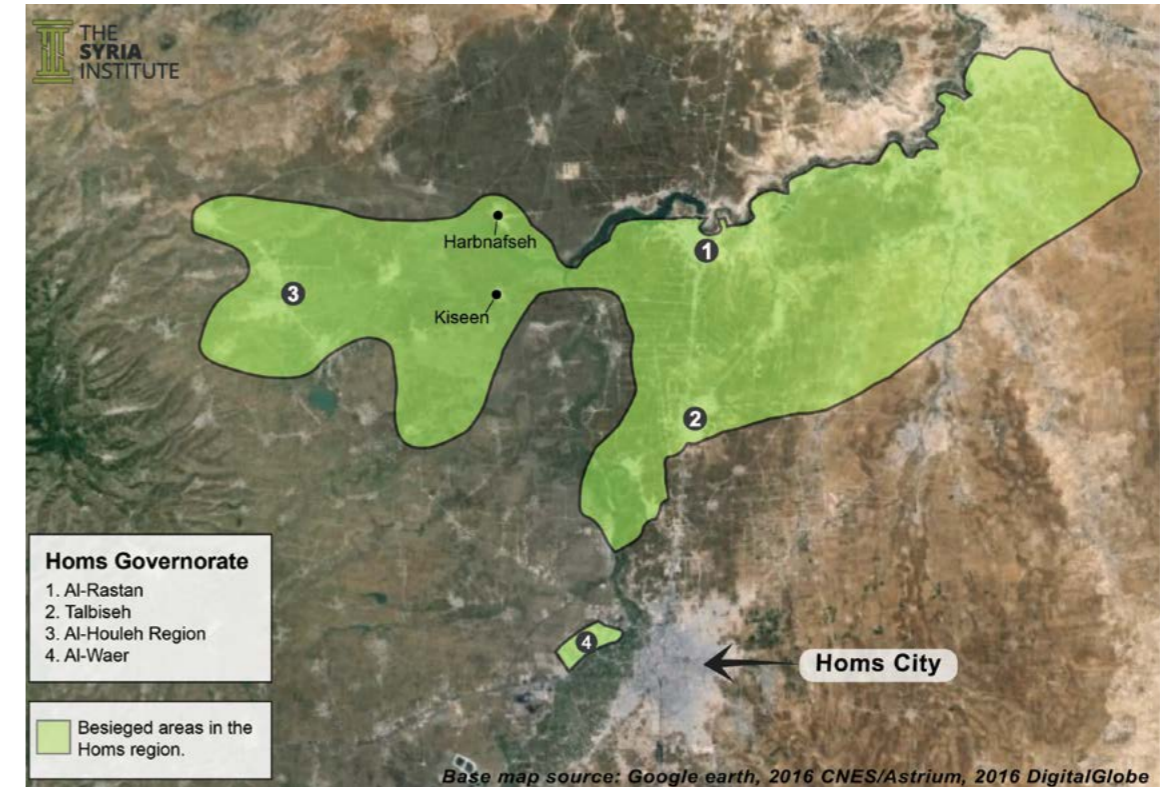
### Snapshot:

Deteriorating conditions led to upgrading of siege tier in Al-Waer. Changes made to total estimated population of Hom's besieged areas due to displacement and estimate refinement.

### Details:

All of the sieges in Hom's governorate remained in place during the reporting period, and none of them have been recognized by UN OCHA. These sieges are enforced by the Syrian armed forces and pro-government militias (including Afghan, Iraqi, and Lebanese forces) situated in surrounding villages. Conditions in the Hom's besieged communities were unstable throughout the past quarter. A promising local truce process that had been improving conditions in Al-Waer fell apart and the situation reverted to complete siege. In the northern countryside areas, conditions worsened as a result of an offensive by pro-government forces, but appeared to have stabilized back to their prior siege conditions by early May. The total population of the besieged areas

<sup>17</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “Thousands of children trapped in Palestinian refugee camp bombed by Syrian government,” The Independent, 13 May 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/>.



Map 4. Hom's Governorate Besieged Communities. Note: Data valid as of early May 2016.

of Hom's governorate was estimated at 365,000 in February. Population shifts and estimate refinements place the new total at 352,000.

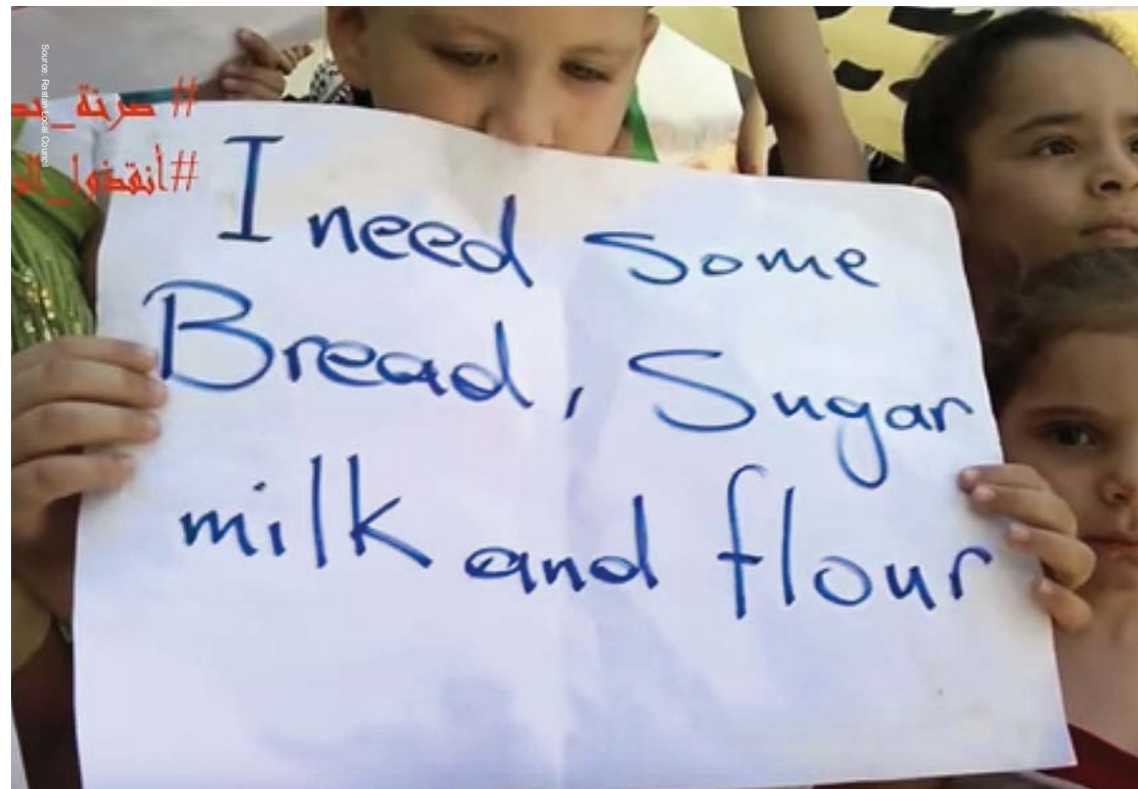
### NORTHERN HOMS GOVERNORATE

Prior to the nationwide cessation of hostilities on February 27, a major offensive by the Syrian armed forces, supported by pro-government militias and Russian airstrikes, sought to cut off smuggling routes in the porous northern border of the Al-Houleh besieged area. This offensive was aimed to capture Harbnafseh in southern Hama and move towards Kiseen, which is the point that separates Al-Houleh from Al-Rastan. Since the nationwide CoH came into effect, the offensive died down without severing this link and although ceasefire violations continued throughout the reporting period, the worsening humanitarian conditions appeared to stabilize.

**Al-Rastan** – In Al-Rastan, humanitarian conditions worsened somewhat during the reporting period. Prices rose, and many items that were once possible to find are now missing entirely. The lack of medical supplies, vaccines, and baby milk are of particular concern, and at one point the needs became so severe that the Local Council issued a public distress call due to the lack of bread. Despite the humanitarian aid shipments being sent to many other besieged communities starting in February, aid did not reach the Al-Rastan area until the very end of April, and prices remained high during most of the reporting period. The area has been subjected to a number of ceasefire violations by the Syrian government.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Reuters, “Syria Ramps Up Airstrikes In Rebel-Held Hom's,” 15 April 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.com/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/).





Children in Rastan call for access to basic necessities, 01 March 2016.

**Talbiseh** – Talbiseh and the surrounding countryside remain besieged by the Syrian armed forces and pro-government militias. Despite the humanitarian aid shipments being sent to many other besieged communities starting in February, aid did not reach the Talbiseh area until the very end of April and prices remained high during most of the reporting period. The population has remained relatively stable. There have been many reported violations of the nationwide CoH by the Syrian government, including barrel bombs,<sup>19</sup> airstrikes,<sup>20</sup> and shelling. The Siege Watch estimate was increased from 60,000 to 64,000 due to receipt of a refined statistic provided from local council relief office figures.

**Al-Houleh** – The Al-Houleh region remains besieged by the Syrian armed forces and loyalist militias situated in surrounding villages. The situation in Al-Houleh has been volatile during the last quarter. For a time, the humanitarian situation in the Al-Houleh area worsened significantly due to an offensive by pro-government forces backed by Russian airstrikes that appeared to be aimed at tightening the siege. The attacks targeted the town of Harbnafsa in southern Hama, which is near smuggling routes into the besieged area, and also Kiseen in Homs, which is on the sole path that still connects the Al-Houleh siege to the Al-Rastan siege. Though the attacks reportedly stopped for several weeks after the start of the ISSG-brokered CoH, the calm did not last and violations began shortly thereafter. On April 17, the Syrian air force launched a week of deadly airstrikes targeting Kiseen and the Al-Houleh region. During the period of intensifying

19 Etilaf, "Rights Group: 800 Syrians Killed by Regime Forces in March Despite Truce," 02 April 2016, <http://en.etilaf.org>.

20 YouTube video from motasem homs, "Talbiseh air strike by Syrian warplanes targeting the center of the city's neighborhoods," 29 April 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWHW\\_vvFW-I&](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWHW_vvFW-I&).



A boy scavenging in a make-shift dump in Houleh in February 2016.

siege, prices for most goods rose and some critical items such as baby formula became unavailable. Malnourished mothers needing supplemental nutrition for their children – there are approximately 2,400 children under the age of one in Al-Houleh – turned to alternatives such as cow or sheep milk, which led to medical complications such as intestinal conditions.

Several thousand people from the villages of Harbnafsa, Deir al-Fardis, and Talaf were displaced into the Al-Houleh region during the offensive, raising the current Siege Watch population estimate to 83,000, although this may fall slightly as people are able to return to their homes. The area has faced additional internal displacement as people moved away from the frontlines, although this has not impacted the overall population estimates.

By early May the pro-government offensive had paused, without having severed the link between Al-Houleh and the Al-Rastan besieged areas. Additionally, partial power has been restored in Al-Houleh following mediated negotiations that resulted in the Syrian government repairing the Zara Power Plant, which feeds both government and opposition controlled areas, and had been taken offline at the start of the year in a Russian airstrike. As the situation appears to be stabilizing to its 2015 status quo, the Siege Watch Tier level for Al-Houleh will not be raised at the present time.

The status of the medical sector in Al-Houleh remains poor, with medical centers hindered by the lack of electricity, water, and medical supplies. Three children in need of medical care were reportedly evacuated by the SARC during the reporting period, but at the same time approximately five women seeking medical treatment outside of the besieged areas were arrested at a government checkpoint near Taksis. There were some deaths due to chronic illnesses, although no details were available. The area received one convoy of humanitarian aid during the reporting period, which was

delivered in two installments in late March.

### AL-WAER

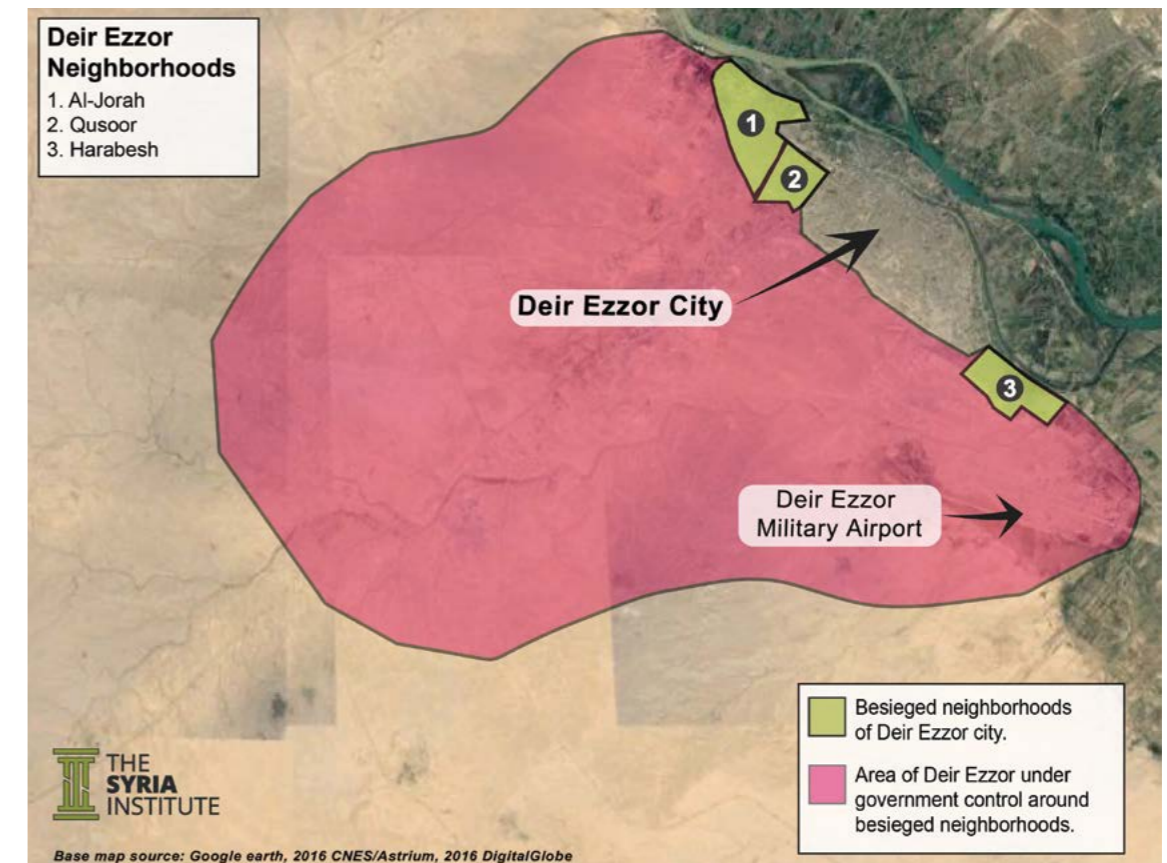
The humanitarian situation in Al-Waer worsened during the reporting period, and its Siege Watch tier level has accordingly been elevated to Tier 2. The Siege Watch population estimate for Al-Waer has been revised downward from 125,000 to 100,000. A small portion of this change is due to the fact that some people managed to leave the neighborhood in the first few months of 2016 during the ceasefire negotiation process, but the bulk of it is a result of a revised estimate from local contacts.

In late 2015 and early 2016, the Al-Waer neighborhood appeared to be on the path to a de-escalation of the siege as it was implementing a multi-stage local ceasefire agreement with the Syrian government. During that time there were some UN-facilitated evacuations of fighters and their families, the restoration of some movement across government-controlled checkpoints, and the delivery of some humanitarian aid in January and February. This detente broke down over the issue of the release of detainees, and a complete siege was reinstated when government forces shut down the checkpoints on March 10, 2016. Since then, no humanitarian aid has been allowed into Al-Waer, and pro-government government forces have targeted the neighborhood with intermittent mortar and artillery shelling.

The current intensity of the siege of Al-Waer is actually higher than before local negotiations began in December 2015, and residents are running out of basic supplies. By mid-April, the food and medicine shortages were so severe that the Homs Provincial Council wrote an open distress letter to the UN, fearing an impending humanitarian disaster.<sup>21</sup> Malnutrition cases and related medical complications are on the rise. Al-Waer is an urban area, completely surrounded by the besieging forces. This layout puts it at a much higher risk of being pushed to the brink of complete humanitarian disaster than a large rural besieged area with greater access to smuggling routes and arable land. As of the time of writing, there were already at least two reports of people dying when they were unable to access medical treatment.

Some serious environmental health problems are exacerbating health concerns in Al-Waer. More than 350,000 m<sup>3</sup> of waste has accumulated, as the siege has prevented waste removal for nearly three years. Additionally, government forces have dammed up the Orontes River near Al-Waer to create swamps. These swamps have led to a serious increase in mosquitos, which are spreading diseases such as Leishmaniasis in the besieged neighborhood. Siege Watch will continue to monitor the situation closely.

## Deir Ezzor



Map 5. Besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city Area surrounded by ISIS. Government/ISIS control line approximate.

**Table 6:**  
Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Deir Ezzor (besieged neighborhoods)	3	Syrian Government + ISIS	80,000

Note: Data valid as of early May 2016

### Snapshot:

Improved conditions led to downgrading of siege Tier to level 3. Population estimate lowered due to changes in boundaries of the besieged area.

### Details:

Since the first Siege Watch report in February, the situation in the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor has evolved significantly as additional territory has been captured by ISIS from

<sup>21</sup> Kuluna Shuraka, "Homs Governorate Council issues an urgent call for help to save Al-Waer," 19 April 2016, <http://all4syria.info>.

Syrian government forces. Accordingly, the besieged population estimate has been lowered from 200,000 to 80,000. Humanitarian conditions have improved significantly as a result of the now frequent humanitarian airdrops run by the World Food Program (WFP), and the siege tier level has been changed from 2, to the lowest intensity Tier of 3 as a result.

At the end of 2015 there were four Deir Ezzor neighborhoods under siege, with an estimated population of approximately 200,000 people. In January 2016 the Al-Bughaliyeh neighborhood was captured by ISIS. The population estimate in the first Siege Watch quarterly report in February did not include a revised figure to account for this change, as none was yet available. At the end of April 2016, ISIS also captured the government-controlled portion of the Al-Sinaa neighborhood (adjacent to the Al-Harabesh). In May, Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, indicated that the UN OCHA figure would be lowered to 110,000 after a new assessment had been completed.<sup>22</sup> This new figure is higher than the newest estimate collected by Siege Watch, which is 70,000-90,000. This range is based on information provided to the local Siege Watch contact by the Deir Ezzor SARC branch.

After a failed attempted airdrop of supplies to Deir Ezzor in late February 2016, the WFP completed its first successful airdrop on April 10. Since then it has continued to drop aid and supplies to the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor with regularity, and by May 5, the WFP had completed approximately 23 airdrops.<sup>23</sup> Each delivery helps decrease the high market prices of goods. Additionally, residents report fewer abnormalities in the distribution of supplies dropped by the WFP than in previous aid deliveries. In previous aid deliveries – which were attempted sporadically throughout 2015 and in March 2016 by the ICRC/SARC in coordination with Russia – residents reported problems with the actual distribution of supplies, indicating that little actually reached civilians. Instead much of this aid was distributed to Syrian military officials and pro-government merchants, who sold it at inflated prices in local markets. While incidents like these are still happening, and a portion of the humanitarian aid is still being diverted to the benefit of the Syrian military and affiliated merchants (a WFP aid basket currently sells for the equivalent of \$60 in the markets), much of the current aid is actually reaching the civilians in need. It is not clear whether this is because of a decrease in the level of aid diversion, or whether the increase in the total volume of aid means that while the same level of aid is being diverted by the government, there is now enough remaining to provide for the population as well. Continuing reports of abnormalities, including the registration of Syrian military personnel as civilians on SARC distribution lists, should be investigated by the WFP and international donors.

As a result of these continuing aid airdrops and the increase in aid reaching civilians, the risk of death from starvation in Deir Ezzor has become minimal.

Access restrictions for movement into and out of the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor has not improved since the first Siege Watch quarterly report, and reporting contacts still consider themselves besieged by both ISIS and the Syrian government. The rationale for this assertion is summarized clearly in the following article quote: “Both IS and the regime are preventing



A girl in Deir Ezzor scrapes cooking oil off the ground after the failed WFP airdrop on February 24, 2016

civilians from entering or exiting the areas under their control. While IS interrogates, harasses and confiscates the documents of whoever wants to leave the city, the Syrian government asks those who want to leave, be it by land or by air, for security approvals from intelligence authorities.”<sup>24</sup> Civilians can still escape via government helicopter to Qamishli if they are able to afford the bribe of 300,000-500,000 SYP or even higher. Pro-government traders continue to monopolize markets and inflate prices.

Government forcible conscription drives have intensified since the military lost control of the Al-Bughaliya neighborhood, and have gone so far as to storm Al-Furat University and arrest students during their exams.<sup>25</sup> As a result, many students have reportedly dropped out of their schools in 2016 for fear of being arrested by the Syrian armed forces and being forced to fight on the frontlines.

The status of the medical sector remains poor, but has not changed significantly during the reporting period. Civilians in the besieged areas still do not have electricity, and – with the exception of a five day shut off due to ISIS sniping near the water facility – water availability has not changed. The nationwide CoH, which led to decreased levels of violence for much of the reporting period in other besieged areas, did not impact Deir Ezzor since ISIS was not included in the agreement. Citizens continue to be endangered by ISIS shelling on the besieged neighborhoods, and government shelling on the adjacent ISIS-controlled neighborhoods.

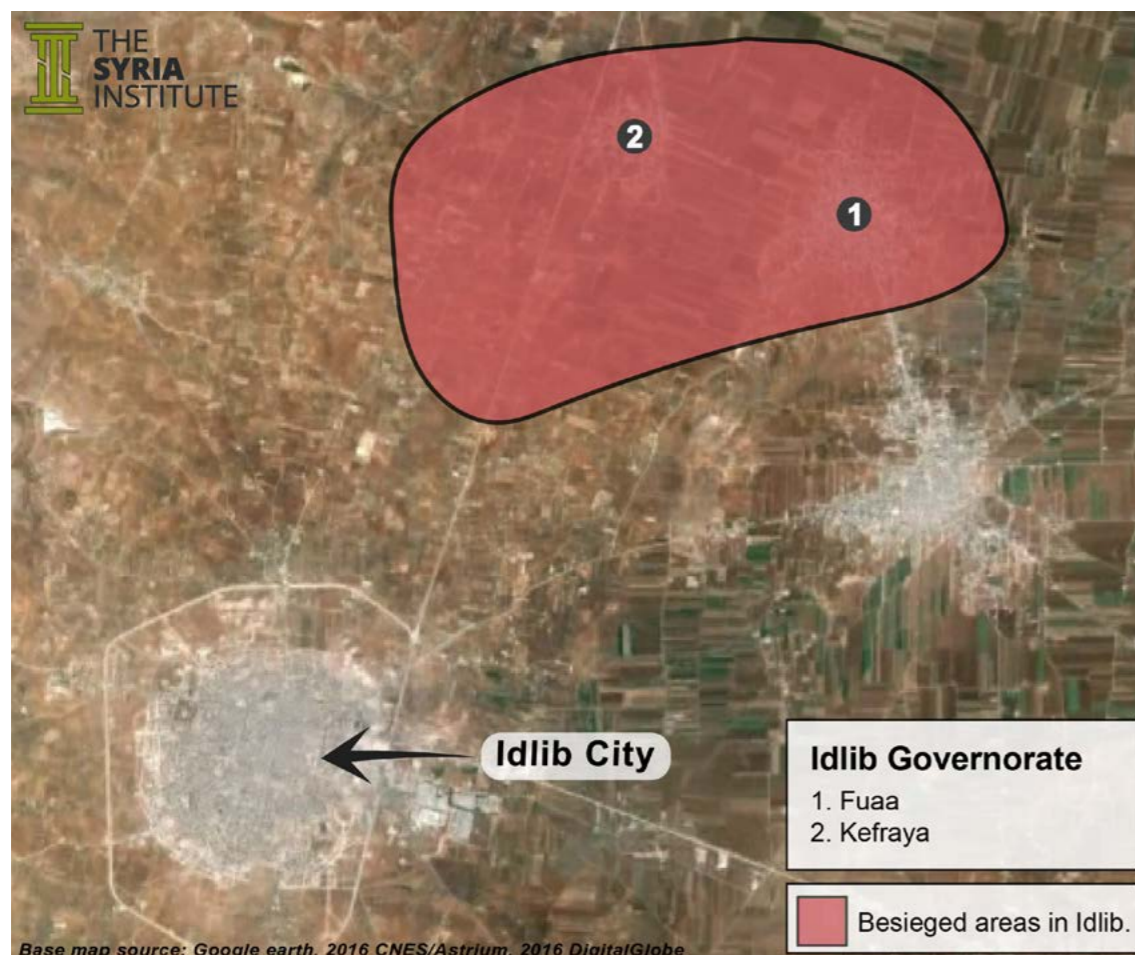
<sup>22</sup> UN Dept. of Public Information “Transcript of Stakeout by Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria,” 04 May 2016, [http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear\\_en%29%29EC8316BCC00CEDC1257FA90052A061?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29%29EC8316BCC00CEDC1257FA90052A061?OpenDocument)

<sup>23</sup> UN OCHA, “Syria Crisis Bi-Weekly Situation Report No. 04 (as of 6 May 2016),” <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Syria%20Biweekly%20Sitrep%204.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Justice for Life Observatory in Deir Ezzor, “After Madaya, Deir ez-Zor now faces humanitarian catastrophe,” 08 May 2016, <http://jfldz.org>.

<sup>25</sup> Justice for Life Observatory in Deir Ezzor, “420 Days of Siege Laid on Deir Ezzor,” 07 April 2016, <http://jfldz.org>.

## Idlib



Map 6. Idlib Besieged Communities Note: Data valid as of early May 2016

**Table 7:**  
Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	AOGs	12,500

Note: Data valid as of early May 2016

### Snapshot:

No change in besieged designation, tier level, or population during the reporting period.

### Details:

**Fuaa and Kefraya** – The pro-government towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remain besieged by Syrian opposition groups and Jabhat al-Nusra throughout the previous quarter. Siege Watch was unable to expand its network of reporting contacts into these communities during the reporting period, and therefore unable to gather independent data or population estimates.

Fuaa and Kefraya are part of the “Four Towns Agreement,” in which they receive reciprocal aid deliveries and evacuations along with opposition-controlled Madaya and Zabadani. As a result, Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib received a number of humanitarian aid shipments during the reporting period, and hundreds of UN-mediated evacuations took place. In early May concerns grew of a potential breakdown of the “Four Towns Agreement,” due to recent attacks by AOGs against Fuaa and Kefraya.<sup>26</sup>

## Aleppo

**Eastern Aleppo City** – The opposition-controlled eastern portion of Aleppo City is partially besieged by pro-government forces, and is at serious risk of becoming completely besieged, which could trap approximately 300,000 people. The only remaining supply route into the area is the Castello Road, which is at acute risk of being closed off with the nearly total breakdown of the CoH in Aleppo by late April. Fears have escalated since the Syrian air force bombing of Al Quds hospital in Eastern Aleppo killed at least 50 people, including the area’s last pediatrician and several other medical staff.<sup>27</sup> Eastern Aleppo was added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” in February 2016 and will be closely monitored moving forward. ♦

<sup>26</sup> Waleed Khaled a-Noufal and Maria Nelson, “Bombings, recriminations in a series of towns tied by one ceasefire: ‘People are afraid the agreement will break down,’” SYRIA:Direct, 11 May 2016, <http://syriadirect.org>.

<sup>27</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, “Aleppo hospital death toll mounts to 55, people trapped have to ‘stay and die,’” 03 May 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aleppo-hospital-death-toll-mounts-55-people-trapped-have-stay-and-die>.

# 3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this Siege Watch report – the second in a quarterly series compiling the information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas of Syria – indicate that despite increased international efforts to reach besieged areas in Syria, the situation remains bleak for the estimated 1,015,275 people trapped in at least 46 communities.

Of these more than one million:

- ◆ 85% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 37 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 14% of the besieged Syrians in approximately seven communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups. In Deir Ezzor the siege is primarily enforced by ISIS, while the Syrian government imposes further access restrictions from the inside. In the southern Damascus suburbs (Al-Qadam, Babbila, Beit Sahm, Hajar al-Aswad, Yarmouk, and Yelda), the primary siege is imposed by the Syrian government but ISIS and several other armed groups impose further access restrictions inside the siege.
- ◆ 1% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups (AOGs), including Jabhat al-Nusra, in Idlib governorate.

An additional 1.4 million people in the Siege Watch “Watchlist” areas face harsh conditions and are at high risk of becoming completely besieged. All of these “Watchlist” communities are threatened with complete siege by the Syrian government and its allies. 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.

Despite the increased focus on besieged areas during the past quarter, not a single siege was lifted and more areas are at imminent risk of becoming besieged. Even though the past quarter witnessed a significant rise in aid deliveries to besieged areas, most saw a negligible – if any – positive impact. At the same time, distrust and disillusionment continue to rise. It is clear that convoy counting is not the answer to the crisis of Syria’s sieges.

The most recent UNSG monthly report to the Security Council, covering the period from April 1 – 30, 2016, recognized only 18 besieged areas in Syria.<sup>28</sup> The high profile work of the ISSG’s HTF has brought more attention than ever before to the plight of these 18 besieged communities, and attempts to reach them with aid convoys are now regularly reported in the international press. This increased attention makes it more important than ever for the UNSG and ISSG to make every effort to accurately reflect the situation on the ground, independent of political considerations. The Siege Watch project has identified at least 46 communities with over one million residents that are currently under siege in Syria, in stark contrast to the UN figures.

Jan Egeland, Senior Adviser to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, summarized the three criteria they use to determine that an area is besieged as follows: “full military encirclement, no humanitarian access, and no movement for the civilian population, in or out of the area.”<sup>29</sup> Many of the 18 communities officially recognized as besieged do not reflect these three criteria, nor are they consistent with the reality on the ground. PAX and TSI, through the Siege Watch project, were unable to determine why many communities in rural Damascus and in the Homs governorate have not been recognized in the UNSG’s monthly reports on the UNSC. In besieged Eastern Ghouta, there is not a clear physical factor distinguishing the 10 designated communities from the their neighbors, which all fall under one large siege cordon.

Perceived inequity in the recent ISSG-led aid delivery efforts has had a noticeable psychological impact on Siege Watch respondents, who expressed frustration, anger, and cynicism. Some of the decisions to prioritize certain besieged areas for aid delivery – such as the high priority given to the critically besieged town of Madaya – have been clearly justified by need and have garnered no apparent negative reactions from project participants. The rationale behind designation and prioritization of other areas is much less clear, and as these official besieged classifications have increasingly led to aid deliveries reaching those communities, it and has sparked new distrust in both the UN agencies and the international stakeholders that form the ISSG. Multiple respondents expressed their suspicions that the Syrian government’s approval for convoys to just a handful

<sup>28</sup> UN Security Council, S/2016/460, “Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 19 May 2016, <http://undocs.org/S/2016/460>.

<sup>29</sup> UN “Transcript of remarks by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura and UN Senior Adviser, Jan Egeland,” 12 May 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=4521>.

of communities is intended to sow discord amongst the besieged communities, and resentment towards international actors for supporting this strategy. In Kafr Batna, a besieged community that received aid during the reporting period while many neighbouring towns did not, the Local Council issued a statement reminding the UN that they “are an integral part of Eastern Ghouta, which has been under siege for three years and has an approximate population of 475,000. We would like all the people of Ghouta to receive food and medical aids like our city.”<sup>30</sup>

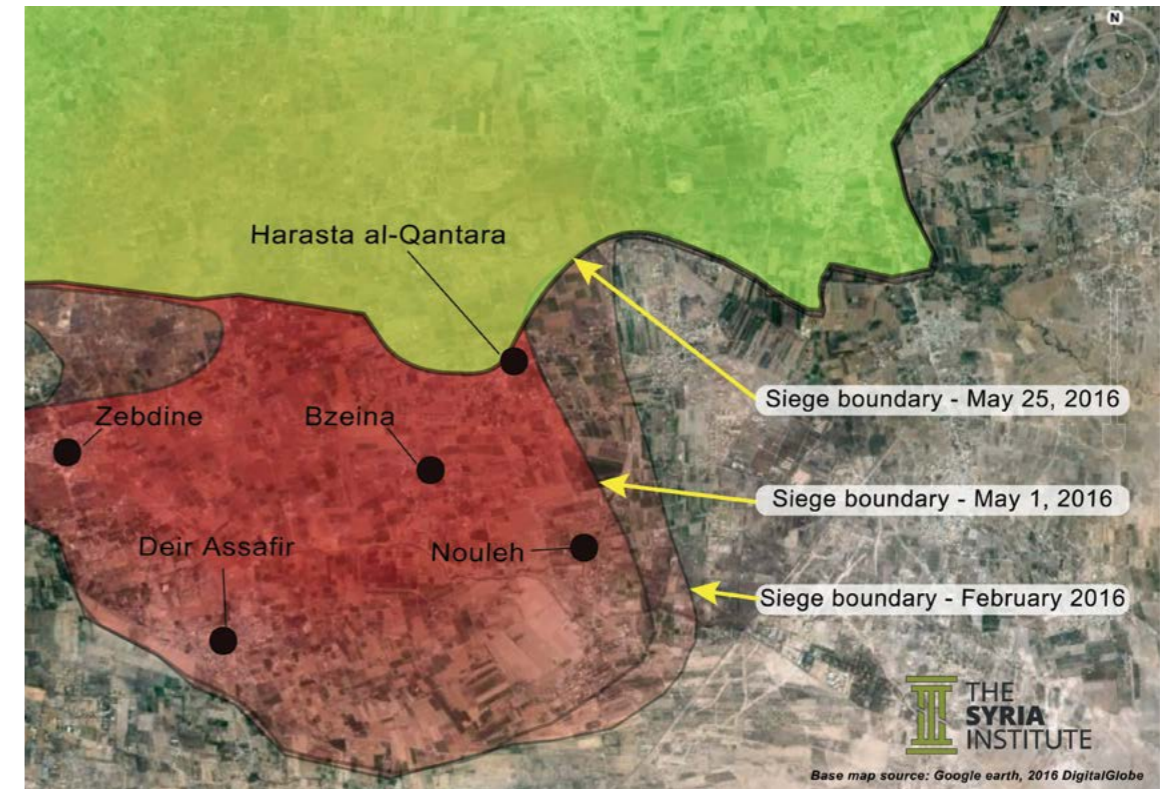
Besieged communities that are not listed in UN Secretary-General's monthly reports and not included in ISSG's efforts to increase access to trapped civilians do not receive the level of attention that they require. As Madaya demonstrated in the winter of 2015-2016 when dozens of people starved to death, if besieged areas are not designated and prioritized, the alarm bells may not go off in time to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

The situation that occurred in the southern sector of Eastern Ghouta is a prime example of what happens when critical decisions such as designating a besieged area or prioritizing an area for humanitarian aid efforts are politicized. Most of the towns of the southern sector – with the exception of Zebdine – were not designated as besieged in the UNSG reporting, and little attention was paid during the past quarter as the military offensive by pro-government forces led to steadily declining humanitarian conditions. While initial concerns were that this offensive could sever this area from the rest of Eastern Ghouta and place the remaining residents under a much higher intensity siege, the actual result, in which pro-government forces have taken the area by force and displaced its 12,000 residents, is not an obviously better outcome. These newly displaced residents – including at least two Siege Watch contacts – are now homeless and have fled to other Eastern Ghouta towns that do not have the resources or infrastructure to provide for even their existing residents. Further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis, the southern sector is a rural area and in past seasons, the crops grown there have helped support the rest of besieged Eastern Ghouta. Moving forward, all of the towns of Eastern Ghouta are more vulnerable and at risk of worsening siege conditions.

Eastern Ghouta is not the only area that has not received sufficient international attention. The besieged areas northern Homs governorate and Al-Waer all remain unrecognized in the UNSG reporting to the Security Council and all are experiencing deteriorating humanitarian conditions as a result of continuing attacks by the Syrian military and its allies. The UN and international mediators should prioritize addressing these situations now before they become both critical humanitarian crises and also potential spoilers in international negotiations.

Deir Ezzor stands out as the only besieged area that has experienced a significant improvement in humanitarian conditions as a result of international efforts shepherded by the ISSG. Since April, the WFP airdrops to Deir Ezzor have become frequent and unimpeded, with at least two airdrops per week resupplying the besieged population. There is no indication that this level of aid access can be approached or sustained in any other besieged area. Humanitarian access to other besieged areas is sporadic and insufficient where it does occur and some communities, like Darayya in rural Damascus, have still not been reached at all due to continued restrictions from the Syrian government. Even in communities like Madaya and Moadamiya that received multiple shipments during the past quarter, humanitarian conditions remain abysmal, with residents

<sup>30</sup> Supplied directly to Siege Watch.



Map 7. Syrian Government Offensive against Besieged Eastern Ghouta in Spring 2016

lacking access to electricity, clean water, and medical supplies. These communities remain extremely vulnerable to changing conditions since the access restrictions remain force, and future convoy approvals are not guaranteed. Unless the frequency of aid shipments to all besieged areas can be boosted to the levels seen in Deir Ezzor, humanitarian aid by itself cannot adequately address the problem of sieges in Syria. While these one off aid deliveries may be “seen as very successful and represent powerful information for media coverage,”<sup>31</sup> policymakers in the ISSG and the UN must not make the mistake of conflating increased aid delivery approvals with a solution to the problem.

Since the restart of negotiations between the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition in Geneva earlier this year, the ISSG task forces have focused on the need for improved humanitarian access and the lifting of sieges, as well as enforcement of a nationwide “Cessation of Hostilities.” But this political pressure on all parties in the conflict has not been effective at lifting any sieges during the past quarter and has done little to improve the lives of the more than one million Syrians trapped in these areas. In the absence of clear and credible enforcement, it appears that the CoH may have instead of provided political cover for continued and in some cases increased abuses against besieged civilians.

In a May 17, 2016 statement the ISSG made the unprecedented announcement that: “Starting June 1, if the UN is denied humanitarian access to any of the designated besieged areas, the ISSG calls on the World Food Program to immediately carry out a program for air bridges and

<sup>31</sup> “SYRIA – Meeting Minutes (Damascus),” Logistics Cluster, 3 May 2016, <http://www.logcluster.org/ops/syr12a>

air drops for all areas in need. The ISSG pledges to support such a program, and also calls on all parties to the cessation of hostilities to provide a secure environment for that program.”<sup>32</sup> This potential course action – particularly air bridges modelled after the continued aid drops to Deir Ezzor – is the closest the ISSG has come to a credible enforcement mechanism up to this point, but serious doubts and challenges remain. All of the remaining designated besieged areas that have not been reached with aid are located in Rural Damascus, and it is not clear what will happen if the Syrian government continues to deny access and “a secure environment” cannot be provided for airdrops. Also, critically, there are approximately half a million Syrians in 28 besieged areas that are not on the list of 18 designated areas who would not benefit from this program if it is implemented.

PAX and TSI therefore recommend the following:

- ◆ The goal of UNSC and the ISSG member states should be to lift the sieges and allow the free movement of civilians in and out of besieged areas, and the majority of their political pressure on all parties in the conflict, but in particular the Government of Syria which is responsible for the vast majority of the sieges, should be focused towards this end instead of on one-off aid convoys;
- ◆ UN OCHA and other relevant agencies should reassess the situation in the areas it currently designates as “hard to reach” when there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that many of these areas are in fact besieged. Areas should be designated as besieged when the situation on the ground meets objective criteria based on needs assessments and data collection efforts, and determinations should be made independently of political considerations of ISSG and UNSC members or of parties to the conflict;
- ◆ Donors who support the aid efforts of UN agencies in Syria should transparency on the assessment process of the besieged area designations by OCHA. It is essential that OCHA’s assessment, which informs the Security Council and the ISSG, is led by the facts on the ground and the needs of the people in besieged communities. Explanations should be provided when areas are moved to or from the list of besieged communities. Such transparency will help ensure that reporting mandated by the Security Council to verify implementation of four separate UNSC Resolutions is not being manipulated towards political or military ends. ◆



A girl sits in the rubble of besieged Daraya on 13 April 2016.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” May 17, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257295.htm>.

# Annex I – Community List & Population Data

Table of Siege Watch  
Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Damascus	Jobar	1	Syrian Govt.	225
	Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt. + AOGs	3,500
	Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + Palestinian faction	8,000
Rural Damascus	Arbin	2	Syrian Govt.	35,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	11,500
	Beit Sawa	2	Syrian Govt.	9,250
	Eftreis	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Ein Tarma	2	Syrian Govt.	6,500
	Hamouriya	2	Syrian Govt.	23,500
	Hazzeh	2	Syrian Govt.	7,500
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	10,000
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Saqba	2	Syrian Govt.	15,000
	Deir Assafir	2	Syrian Govt.	7,500
	Zebdine	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Yelda	3	Syrian Govt. + AOGs	16,500
	Douma	1	Syrian Govt.	200,000
	Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hosh al-Fara	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hosh Nasri	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Al-Rayhan	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Al-Shaifuniya	2	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Harasta	2	Syrian Govt.	2,500
	Madeira	2	Syrian Govt.	27,000
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Bzeina	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Harasta al-Qantara	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Nouleh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?	
Darayya	1	Syrian Govt.	8,300	
Moadamiya al-Sham	1	Syrian Govt.	45,000	
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	8,000	
Zabadani	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	1,000	



**Table of Siege Watch  
Besieged Locations**

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
	Madaya + Baqeen	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	40,000
Deir ez-Zor	Deir ez-Zor	3	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	80,000
Homs	Al-Waer	2	Syrian Govt.	100,000
	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	83,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	105,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	64,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	AOGs	12,500
	Kafraya	3	AOGs	
<b>Total</b>				<b>1,015,275</b>

NOTE: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of April 2016 report.

**Table of Current Siege Watch  
"Watchlist" Locations**

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Government	300,000
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Government	
Rural Damascus	Al-Bilaliyeh	Watchlist	Syrian Government	
	Marj al-Sultan	Watchlist	Syrian Government	
	Qudsaya	Watchlist	Syrian Government	200,000
	Al-Hameh	Watchlist	Syrian Government	35,000
	Khan al-Sheih	Watchlist	Syrian Government	12,000
	Al-Tal	Watchlist	Syrian Government	850,000
<b>Total</b>				<b>1,397,000</b>





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