

Over a million Syrians under siege

Lifting of all sieges an essential confidence-building measure for the Vienna process

While the situation of 42,000 people threatened with death by starvation in Madaya is alarming, it is just the tip of the iceberg. Siege Watch, an initiative of The Syria Institute and PAX, estimates that over a million people live under siege in Syria. These sieges primarily take place in the greater Damascus area, and in the vast majority of cases the Syrian army and its allies, in support of the Syrian regime, are responsible.

The deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore a war crime, and violates United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

Together with Syrian civil society activists and representatives of the civilian population living in besieged areas, PAX calls for:

- ◆ Recognition of the full extent of the problem of besieged areas with a political effort to enforce international law and break the sieges.
- ◆ Using the political momentum of the upcoming negotiations in Geneva to demand that immediate lifting of all sieges by all parties to the conflict is included as one of the main confidence-building measures for a peace and transition process.
- ◆ Diplomatic efforts with Russia and Iran, the main allies of the Syrian regime, to convince them to use their leverage on the regime to lift all sieges and allow movement of people and goods
- ◆ Investigating how airdrops of food and medicine in besieged areas could lead to at least temporary relief for the starving civilian population.

Starvation as a weapon of war

Starvation of civilians is not an uncontrollable collateral effect of the conflict in Syria, but a deliberate decision that violates international humanitarian law. It therefore requires a political response, and those responsible must be held accountable. For years, the Assad regime has used starvation as a weapon, with the aim of forcing communities controlled by opposition groups to surrender¹. Although other fighting parties have also applied sieges, the Assad regime is responsible for the vast majority.

¹ Several Peace and human rights organizations have been reporting on the sieges and the deliberate starvation of civilians since 2013. PAX published a Syria Alert in November 2013 on the "Starvation as a weapon" and in April 2015 another Syria Alert "Save Yarmouk". <http://www.paxvoorvrede.nl/media/files/syria-alert-12-honger-als-wapen.pdf>, <http://www.paxvoorvrede.nl/media/files/syria-alert-xv-save-yarmouk.pdf>

PAX SYRIA ALERT XVIII | January 12th 2016

Activists and representatives from the besieged communities have been calling for international attention and humanitarian aid for several years, but mostly in vain. For example, the local council of the besieged community of Daraya stated on 10 January that “it has been in constant contact with the United Nations and the Office of the UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura for a long time, but none of its appeals for humanitarian aid has been met.”²

Since February 2014, the UNSC has passed numerous resolutions calling on all parties to lift sieges and allow the delivery of humanitarian assistance, in compliance with international humanitarian law. The United Nations Secretary-General has been reporting monthly on besieged communities for nearly two years.

However, the worsening situation indicates that renewed action must be taken. Moadamiyeh, Yarmouk, Eastern Ghouta, and Darayya are all sieges mentioned in the February 2014 UNSC resolution. Every single one remains besieged, despite the fact that some of these sieges are no longer on the list that UN OCHA uses, and new locations have been added to the list.

Previous outrage over besieged areas has not produced tangible results for starving civilians. In March of 2015, the UNSC developed a three-point plan to assist Yarmouk’s besieged civilians. To date, the plan has not been enacted and civilians remain trapped, with no access to food, water, or medical supplies.

The Syrian regime’s promise to comply with international humanitarian law by allowing aid into Madaya follows a familiar pattern: allow a one-time delivery of just enough aid in to silence the world’s outrage, but not enough to meet the needs of the starving population. A band aid solution to Madaya may temporarily silence international outrage and a temporary relief for its inhabitants, but it will not provide relief for Syrian civilians who have long suffered from sieges.

Landmines

The problem is further compounded by the use of internationally banned landmines. As highlighted in the UN joint statement on Syria, landmines are restricting the humanitarian response and freedom of movement. A report issued by the Syrian American Medical Society on the situation in Madaya indicates there are new casualties from landmines laid by government and allied Hezbollah forces.³ According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 22 people trying to flee from Madaya have been killed by landmines.⁴ There are also several reports of people who had to have limbs amputated as a result of a landmine injury.

However, landmine use is not unique to Madaya. By its own admission, the Syrian government began using internationally banned landmines at the end of 2011. In 2012, Syria was one of only two governments in the world to use landmines, and continues use to this day. Some opposition forces have now started re-purposing those very same landmines. Since the conflict began in 2011, the numbers of casualties identified annually in Syria significantly increased from previous years.

²Statement of the Local Council of the City of Daraya, 10 January 2015

<https://www.facebook.com/daraya.council/photos/a.300587250135850.1073741828.300477163480192/455610537966853/?type=3&theater>

³Madaya: Starvation Under Siege

https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/images/Madaya_Starvation_Under_Siege_Report.pdf

⁴The Lethal Ceasefire http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/deadly_Armistice_killing_of_63_civilians_en.pdf

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Ending all sieges by allowing unhindered movement of people and goods is, next to other measures to improve the human security situation in Syria, a key confidence-building measure that must be implemented in order for the Syria peace talks to have any chance at success. For as long as war crimes continue, people will not have any faith in the political process.

Parties to the conflict must also stop attacking civilians and civilian infrastructure, and end the use of indiscriminate and banned weapons, as well as the use in populated areas of explosive weapons, such as barrel bombs. There must also be an agreement on the release of political prisoners and disappeared persons.

Such measures, and a monitoring mechanism to enforce them, must be stipulated in a UNSC resolution with a credible threat of sanctions in case of noncompliance. As long as these violations of international humanitarian law continue, a credible political process is not viable.

The countries involved in the International Syria Support Group, which is responsible for the negotiation process starting the end of January in Geneva, should demand in particular that Russia and Iran, the main allies of the Syrian regime and parties to the ISSG, use their full leverage on the Syrian regime to implement these measures.

About the Siege Watch project: siegewatch.org

[The Siege Watch project](http://siegewatch.org) monitors and reports on Syria's besieged areas using data collected on an ongoing basis from an extensive network of reporting contacts on the ground. Background information and updates on each besieged community are shared in the Siege Watch interactive map, and through in-depth quarterly reports, ensuring that the international community has access to timely, accurate information about the ongoing sieges. Siege Watch is a joint initiative of The Syria Institute and PAX. The Syria Institute and PAX will publish a more extensive report on the sieges in Syria in February 2016.

The Syria Alert is a policy brief published by the Dutch peace movement PAX.

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