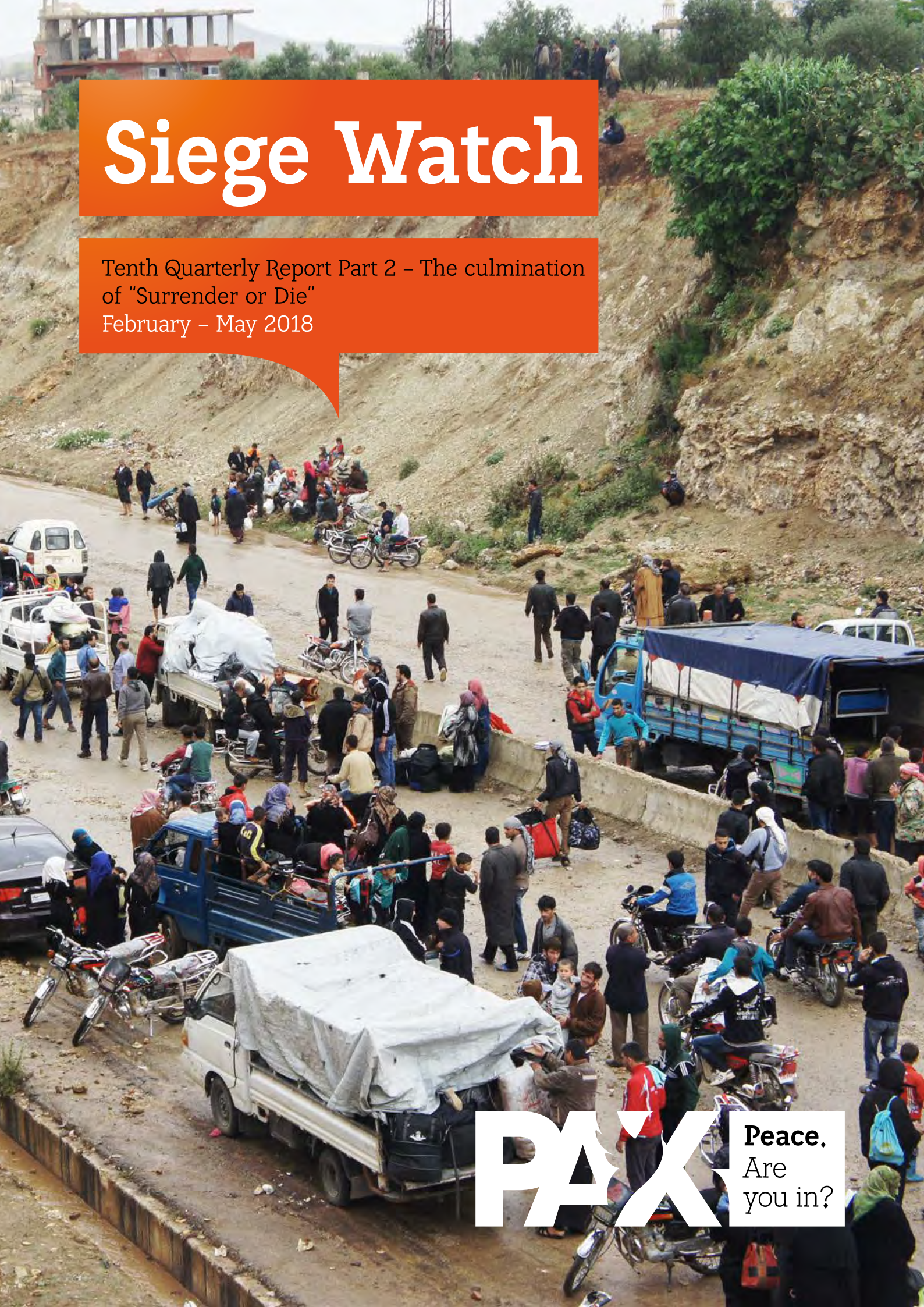


Siege Watch

Tenth Quarterly Report Part 2 – The culmination of “Surrender or Die”
February – May 2018



PAX Peace.
Are you in?

Colophon

ISBN: 978-94-92487-3-08 NUR 689

PAX serial number: PAX/2018/06

Photo cover: Forced displacement convoy being loaded in northern Homs. 7 May 2018. Source: Mohamad al-Rahal

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.

www.paxforpeace.nl / P.O. Box 19318 / 3501 DH Utrecht, The Netherlands / info@paxforpeace.nl

This report was written by Valerie Szybala with support from the PAX team. It would not have been possible without the participation of Siege Watch's voluntary network of reporting contacts on the ground. This past quarter, Siege Watch contacts from the Southern Damascus Suburbs and northern Homs continued to provide updates and information with the project during difficult times. Thank you to everyone from these areas who communicated with the project team over the years, for your openness, generosity and patience. We have been inspired and humbled by your strength through adversity, and will continue to support your search for justice and peace.

Siege Watch

Tenth Quarterly Report Part 2 - The culmination of "Surrender or Die"
February - May 2018

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	06
Introduction	09
Southern Damascus Suburbs	11
Background	11
Al-Qadam Surrenders	13
Escalating Pressure & a New Offensive	15
YBB Surrender & Population Transfers	19
Continuing Attacks on Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad	25
The Aftermath	28
Northern Homs	34
Background	34
Humanitarian	35
Escalating Military & Political Pressure	36
Final Surrender Deal	41
Forced Population Transfers	44
The Aftermath	50
Fuaa & Rēfraya, İdlib	55
Discussion: Life After Siege	59
Life in Exile	59
Life in Post-Surrender Communities	63
Conclusions	67
Rēcommendations	72
Index of Maps	
Map 1. Besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs - February 2018	11
Map 2. Besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs - March 2018	14
Map 3. Besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs - April 2018	16
Map 4. Besieged Northern Homs – February 2018	35
Map 5. Highways Reopened in Northern Homs – June 2018	51
Map 6. Besieged Towns in Idlib - February 2018	55

Acronyms

AFAD	The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency Turkey
AOG	Armed opposition group
COI	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (second rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra)
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IIIM	International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
JAI	Jaysh al-Islam
NC	Negotiating Committee for Northern Homs and Southern Hama
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCD	Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SYP	Syrian Pound
UNRWA	United Nations Refugee and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UOSSM	Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations
YBB	Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm

Executive Summary

This is part 2 of the tenth and final quarterly report by Siege Watch, a project of PAX, which aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses primarily on developments in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs from February – May 2018, during which period both besieged enclaves surrendered to the Syrian government and its allies, marking the end of the government's ruthless "surrender or die" campaign against Syrian civilians. It follows a part 1 report which covered the fall of Eastern Ghouta. Information collected during the quarter from a network of contacts on the ground and other sources showed that:

- ◆ Northern Homs and parts of the Southern Damascus Suburbs came under intense political and military pressure as the scorched earth campaign in Eastern Ghouta was winding down, leading negotiators in al-Rastan, Talbiseh, al-Houleh, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahn to surrender to the terms imposed upon them.
- ◆ The ISIS-controlled neighborhoods of Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk were subjected to a scorched earth military campaign by pro-government forces. As a result, both neighborhoods were completely depopulated and largely destroyed, and ISIS forces were transferred to the Badiya area through a deal with Syrian government forces.
- ◆ Opposition forces in al-Qadam surrendered to the Syrian government and most of the remaining residents and fighters were forcibly transferred to northern Syria. The neighborhood was quickly attacked and taken over by ISIS, and the few remaining civilians were displaced in the subsequent scorched earth campaign.
- ◆ Around 45,000 people, most of them civilians, were forcibly displaced to Idlib and Aleppo under the terms of the surrender agreements.
- ◆ Russia took complete ownership of the final stages of the "surrender or die" strategy, cutting other pro-government forces out of the process, and committing Russian forces to maintaining security in post-surrender communities for at least six months.
- ◆ Fuaa and Kefraya – pro-government towns besieged by opposition and extremist forces in Idlib – were the only remaining long-term sieges in the country by the end of the reporting period in May. Subsequently, all remaining civilians and fighters were forcibly displaced from both towns in July as part of a prisoner exchange deal between the Syrian government and the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The end of the sieges of Fuaa and Kefraya marked the end of all long-term sieges in Syria.

The surrenders of northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, and subsequent forced population transfers, took place immediately after the scorched earth campaign in Eastern Ghouta. The devastation of Eastern Ghouta, and the lack of international efforts to stop it, played a decisive role in the decision by both remaining besieged enclaves to surrender. The end result of the sieges covered in this report was both foreseeable and preventable, and yet actors at all levels of the international system failed either to heed early warnings or to appropriately adjust their responses as the sieges evolved.

The “surrender or die” campaigns waged against northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs were allowed to proceed for years unhindered. The culmination of this strategy involved the forcible displacement of tens of thousands of additional civilians from their homes, a gross violation of the Geneva Conventions that the Assad government and its allies knew they could carry out without consequence because they have done so many times before. Highlighting the degree of impunity that developed, Russia – a Security Council permanent member and active leader of current international negotiation efforts – took the lead role in the culmination of the Syrian siege strategy and its accompanying crimes against civilians.

“Post-surrender” does not necessarily mean “post-conflict,” nor does it signify the end of international community’s duty to protect and support siege victims. Instead, the end of the sieges brings with it a whole new array of issues. In northern Syria where humanitarian response mechanisms are already overwhelmed, the recent internally displaced persons (IDPs) from northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs are not getting the level or type of support that they require. In addition to immediate humanitarian assistance, these forcibly displaced siege victims require significant psychosocial support and assistance integrating into host communities and seeking asylum, because most will never be able to go home. The end of the sieges represents the transition to a new phase in the Syrian government’s punishment of the civilians who rose up against it. It is imperative that the international actors recognizes this reality and adjusts all interventions, especially those involving coordination with the Syrian government in post-surrender enclaves, to avoid becoming a tacit partner in this ongoing persecution.

International actors must do better in the post-siege era to protect and support civilians, and take steps to restore international norms and the credibility of the UN system to prevent these brutal collective punishment campaigns from becoming normalized.

Key Recommendations

- ◆ Independent third-party monitors must be deployed to post-surrender communities to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to further human rights violations.
- ◆ Measures must be taken to protect civilians in northern Syria and ensure that they have a path to safety, given the growing threat of a major military offensive against Idlib.
- ◆ Pressure must be increased on the Syrian and Russian governments to allow and facilitate unrestricted access for international humanitarian agencies to post-surrender communities. Pressure must also be increased on the Turkish government to allow and facilitate unrestricted humanitarian access to IDP camps in parts of Aleppo under its control.

- ◆ The level of humanitarian support available to IDPs in Idlib and Aleppo must be significantly increased. Donors and humanitarian actors should implement programs that focus on the unique needs of this population, including specialized psychosocial support, and on the challenges surrounding missing civil status documentation and Housing Land and Property rights.
- ◆ Conflict sensitivity guidelines must be put in place for all humanitarian, early recovery, and livelihood programs in post-surrender communities.
- ◆ The UN Commission of Inquiry and other competent independent parties should immediately open investigations into all incidents where there is clear evidence that war crimes or crimes against humanity were committed against besieged populations – not only those involving the use chemical weapons.
- ◆ The Secretary-General should appoint a panel to conduct an internal review of United Nations actions in Syria related to the sieges.

Introduction

This is part 2 of the tenth quarterly report by Siege Watch, a project of PAX, which has monitored the situation in besieged areas of Syria since late 2015. This report focuses largely on developments in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs from February – May 2018, when these last two remaining besieged opposition-controlled areas both surrendered in the face of renewed threats of destruction, marking the culmination of the Syrian government’s “surrender or die” strategy.

This report is the companion to part 1 of the tenth quarterly report in the series, which was released in June 2018 and covered the fall of Eastern Ghouta from February – April 2018. Part 2 covers an extended four-month reporting period in order to include the final surrender developments in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, which stretched into May. More recent updates will be included where available. This is the last quarterly report of the Siege Watch project series. It will be followed in late 2018 by a final Siege Watch project report, which will take a critical look at the role that the siege strategy has played in the course of the war and the lasting impact these sieges will have.

The international community’s repeated failure to protect and support Syrian civilians during their years under siege was felt acutely in the surrenders monitored by Siege Watch during the tenth reporting period. The horrifying imagery of civilian slaughter and massive forced displacement from the scorched earth campaign in Eastern Ghouta played a decisive role in the subsequent surrender deals in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs. Because of the absence of international action to stop the atrocities in Eastern Ghouta, people in the remaining besieged areas knew that the Russian and Syrian threats to do the same to their communities were both credible and existential. Faced with the immediate choice to surrender or die, they chose to surrender, despite the lack of international protection guarantees and knowing that the war crime of forced displacement would follow. The absence of support for siege victims continues to be felt in the aftermath of the siege era.

The tens of thousands of newly displaced civilians who were forcibly transferred from northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs to northern Syria joined multitudes of other internally displaced persons (IDPs) in an increasingly miserable, crowded, tense, and untenable situation. Humanitarian agencies in the north were unable to keep up with the rapidly increasing needs and living conditions for new IDPs were abysmal. These conditions drove some people from northern Homs to seek government approval to return home within weeks of their displacement – a striking fact, considering that these families were so afraid of their fate under government rule that they felt they had no choice but to abandon everything they had ever known.

International efforts are needed both to alleviate the continuing suffering of siege victims and to prevent the even greater humanitarian disaster on the horizon. With the Turkish border closed and more forced displacement convoys arriving from Daraa and Quneitra when the Syrian government and its allies captured the southern “de-escalation zone,” the breaking point in

northern Syria is fast approaching. In September 2018, the Syrian government and its allies appeared poised to launch a new assault on Idlib, the only remaining “de-escalation” zone in the country. If the UN Security Council fails to renew authorization for cross-border humanitarian aid in December 2018, it will significantly exacerbate this crisis.¹

The international community also remains largely absent from the post-surrender communities in both northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, despite urgent continuing civilian support and protection needs. The government’s military logic of denying international aid and access to these areas throughout the years of siege should have ended with the end of the sieges. The fact that the denial of access – even of many humanitarian aid deliveries – has continued in the aftermath of the sieges, reveals the true intent of the government’s strategy. While claiming to fight terrorism, the Syrian government and its allies were actually fighting Syrian civilians, and the collective punishment campaign continues to this day. International actors must recognize that post-surrender does not necessarily mean post-conflict. When the Syrian government and its allies punish people from formerly besieged communities through continued aid denial, property confiscation, detention, and preventing return, it is a continuation of the war through different means.

DATA COLLECTION

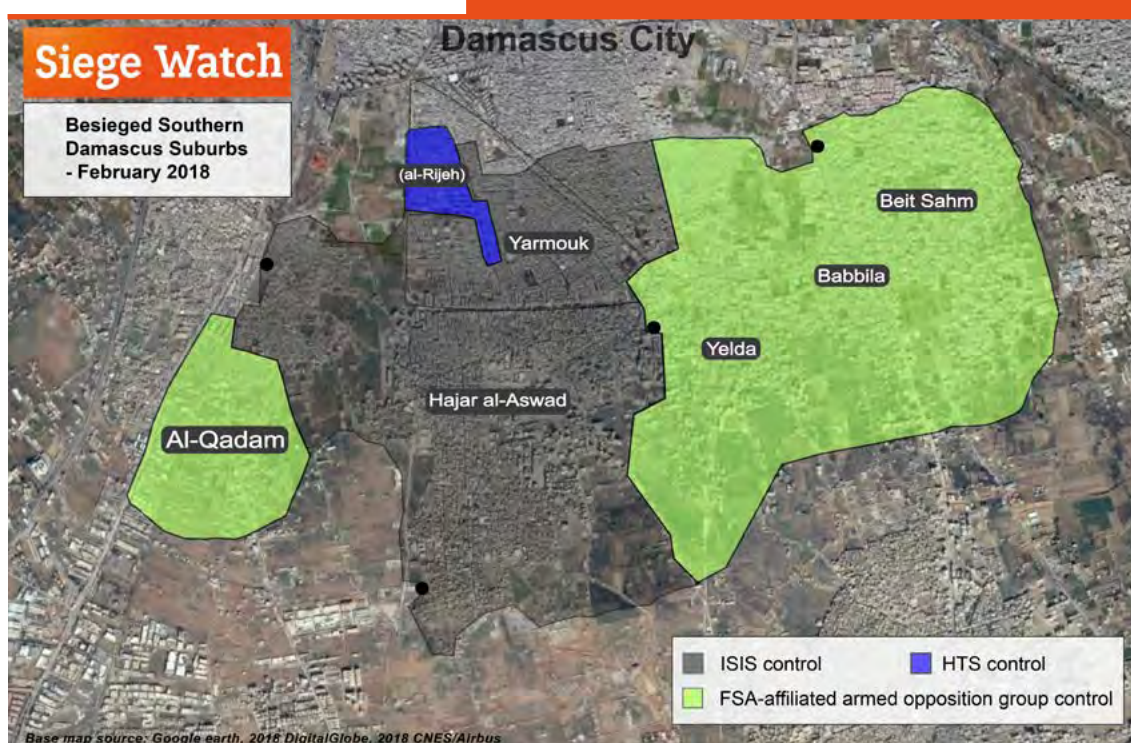
This reporting period Siege Watch did not collect written questionnaires from contacts on the ground. The dramatic upheavals experienced by contacts in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs as both areas surrendered after years of siege, made this method of data collection both insensitive and impractical. Many Siege Watch contacts were forcibly displaced to northern Syria during the reporting period, and several who were not displaced became difficult to contact due to safety concerns posed by the Syrian government and its allies as they reasserted control.

Instead of written questionnaires, ongoing conversations with Siege Watch contacts allowed for continuous monitoring of developments in their respective communities. After they had resettled, at least temporarily, in Idlib and Aleppo provinces and in Turkey, calls were arranged to conduct more in-depth debriefings. Additional information on relevant military, political, and humanitarian developments was collected from media outlets, trusted local social media pages, and humanitarian organizations with staff members in Syria. All open source information was confirmed with contacts on the ground or crosschecked with multiple trustworthy sources.

¹ Last annual authorization was on 19 December 2017 as Resolution 2393 (2017), see: <www.un.org>.

Southern Damascus Suburbs

Map 1.



Background²

Communities in the Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave were besieged by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias from 2012/2013 until 2018. Between February-May 2018, the opposition-controlled neighborhoods of Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) surrendered to the government and its allies and underwent forced population transfers. The ISIS-controlled neighborhoods of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad were subjected to a scorched earth campaign and ultimately depopulated. Al-Qadam neighborhood experienced both of these outcomes: first, opposition forces surrendered to pro-government forces and civilians and fighters were forcibly transferred to northern Syria; then ISIS took over the

² Developments referenced in this section can be explored in more detail in Siege Watch Reports 1-9, see: <siegewatch.org>.

neighborhood, which was depopulated and largely destroyed in a pro-government offensive.

During the sieges, the neighborhoods of Southern Damascus Suburbs were controlled by a patchwork of armed groups that effectively divided the enclave into three sections. On the eastern side, the neighborhoods of Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) were controlled by a handful of Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated armed opposition groups. These neighborhoods contained most of the enclave's remaining population and maintained the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint, which was the primary point of access to government-controlled Damascus. Directly to their west, in the center of the besieged enclave, the neighborhoods of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad were controlled primarily by ISIS, with a small corner of Yarmouk Camp known as al-Rijeh controlled by the al-Qaeda affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Although the Southern Damascus Suburbs were besieged by pro-government forces for years, ISIS did not enter the area and take control of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad until 2015. After ISIS did enter, its presence was not challenged by pro-government forces until the February - May 2018 reporting period. Next to these ISIS-controlled neighborhoods, on the western side of the besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave, the opposition-controlled al-Qadam neighborhood stood alone.

Four of the six besieged communities – Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and al-Qadam – had local truces in place with the government since 2014. While these truces did not end the sieges, they meant that – besides the fighting with ISIS and HTS, which flared up intermittently – the neighborhoods remained relatively calm.

All neighborhoods of the Southern Damascus Suburbs met the UN definition of besieged and were designated as such by Siege Watch, but Yarmouk was the only neighborhood that was officially recognized as besieged by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Hajar Aswad was the most striking example of the internal inconsistency of these UN designations. Hajar al-Aswad was never directly reached with UN humanitarian assistance and faced the same exact conditions as Yarmouk. Civilians in both neighborhoods lived under a sort



ISIS execution of a man on reportedly false spying charges in Yarmouk, 27 February 2018.

of double siege, as they struggled to survive in the isolated ISIS-dominated enclave within the besieged area. UN OCHA briefly designated Hajar al-Aswad as besieged from November 2016, but this decision was abruptly reversed in January 2017, without any clear supporting rationale.

Al-Qadam Surrenders

Al-Qadam was in a less stable situation than the other communities in the besieged enclave. It was isolated from YBB since 2015 when ISIS took control of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad. Although it had years of de facto truce with the government, al-Qadam did not have the same formalized type of agreement as YBB. The few civilians in the neighborhood faced poor but relatively stable living conditions, with little violence but great uncertainty. The al-Asali checkpoint connecting al-Qadam to Damascus allowed some limited movement and small amounts of food supplies in, but was subject to sporadic and unpredictable closures by government forces.

Conditions in al-Qadam were poor for the estimated 1,400 people who remained by the time the deal was reached. Around 400 of the people in al-Qadam were fighters, and the rest civilians.³ The fighters in al-Qadam were primarily in the armed opposition group (AOG) Ajnad al-Sham, with a smaller element of Liwa Mujahedin al-Sham, and around 20 HTS members.⁴ They were trapped in approximately one square kilometer, surrounded by ISIS and pro-government forces. They faced an acute lack of access to medical care, since people in al-Qadam could not reach YBB or exit to Damascus for treatment.

Long-running talks between local armed groups and the government finally materialized in March 2018, with the sudden announcement that a surrender deal had been reached. The deal emerged after the local fighters were issued a 48-hour ultimatum on Friday, 9 March to capitulate or face attacks like those ongoing against Eastern Ghouta.⁵ This came in the context of the peak of the Eastern Ghouta offensive. On 11 March the government and its allies split Eastern Ghouta into three separate pockets, signaling the beginning of the end, and making its threats against other besieged communities like the Southern Damascus Suburbs more credible. That same day word arose that al-Qadam had agreed to the surrender deal.

All of the fighters in al-Qadam neighborhood chose forced displacement, rather than staying to “reconcile” with the Syrian government and join its military in the fight against ISIS. Most of the area’s remaining civilians also chose exile. Although the deal was negotiated by AOG leaders, there was reportedly little civilian dissent. With the final days of Eastern Ghouta clearly approaching, many in al-Qadam – as in other parts of the Southern Damascus Suburbs – saw the writing on the wall. One local contact told Siege Watch that they were just “waiting for our turn.”⁶ With all eyes on the devastation in Eastern Ghouta, the fate of al-Qadam’s civilians drew little notice from the international community.

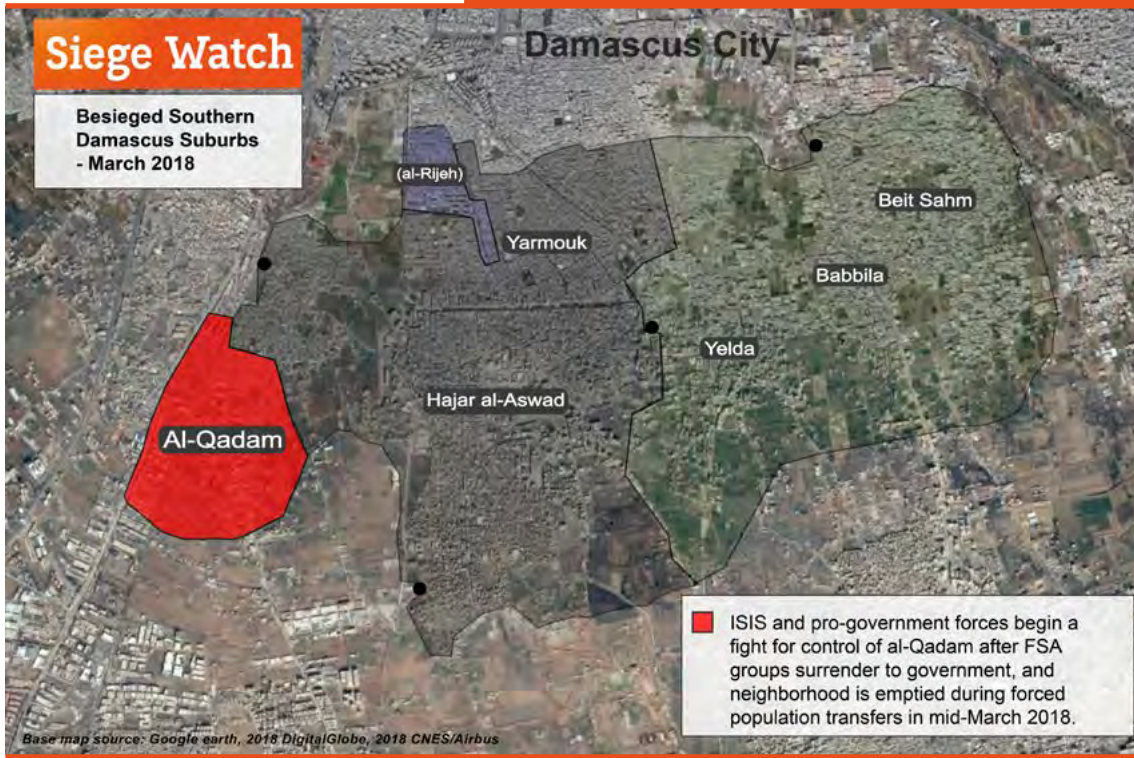
3 Interview with Siege Watch contact BA on 2 July 2018.

4 Taht al-Mujhar, “بدء عملية إخلاء مسلحي حي القدم الدمشقي باتجاه مدينة إدلب,” 12 March 2018, <www.almjhar.com>.

5 Revo Spring, “نظام الأسد يهدد حي القدم.. إما “المصالحة” أو الخروج أو القتال,” 10 March 2018, <revo.spring.com>.

6 Interview with Siege Watch contact BA on 2 July 2018.

Map 2.



The first forced displacement convoy from the Southern Damascus Suburbs reaches Qal'at al-Madiq, 13 March 2018. Source: SCD Hama

On 12 March, the first forced displacement convoy departed from al-Qadam, carrying around 1,055 people. Around 200 of the people in the group were fighters, the rest civilians.⁷ They reached the Qalaat al-Madiq checkpoint in Hama en route to Idlib the next day. An additional smaller group of buses and private cars carrying around 350 people – many of them earlier IDPs who were forcibly displaced to al-Qadam from nearby communities – went on to try to reach Jarablus in Aleppo, but they were stopped at the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint separating government and Turkish controlled areas.⁸ The reasons for the denial of entry were unclear, but may have been related to the refusal of Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces in al-Bab to accept the Seif al-Sham AOG fighters in the convoy, due to their prior dealings with both the Syrian military and ISIS.⁹ After waiting more than 24 hours the group turned back to Idlib, reaching Qalaat al-Madiq checkpoint in Hama the next day.¹⁰

In total, around 1,400 people were displaced to northern Syria from al-Qadam. ISIS forces in the adjacent Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk neighborhoods began attacking al-Qadam as soon as the displacement process started in an effort to take control, prompting heavy retaliatory attacks by government forces.¹¹ Several people were killed by ISIS snipers.¹² As result, the few remaining families who had decided to try and stay in al-Qadam were forced to flee, leaving the neighborhood completely depopulated.

The fighting between ISIS and pro-government forces in al-Qadam raged, and by 11 April ISIS had made significant progress, taking control of almost 90% of the neighborhood.¹³ The fighting continued and intensified further with the start of a major military pro-government campaign against Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad on 19 April.

Escalating Pressure & a New Offensive

On 10 April – when the forced displacement from Douma in Eastern Ghouta was nearly complete – Russian representatives met with local opposition negotiators for YBB. The negotiations committee included representatives of the area's armed factions: Jaysh al-Islam JAI, Jaysh al-Ababil, Liwa Sham al-Rasul, Ahrar al-Sham, and Furqat Dimashq.¹⁴ At the meeting the Russians put intense pressure on the groups to surrender, threatening to wipe the besieged enclave off the map.¹⁵ The armed groups in the Southern Damascus Suburbs were not as well armed as those of Eastern Ghouta, and had been weakened through years of sporadic fighting with ISIS. They had little chance of withstanding such an assault.

7 Syria TV, "مُهَجَّرُونَ من حي القدم عالقون على مشارف مدينة الباب"، 14 March 2018, <www.syria.tv>; UN OCHA Access and Analysis Team, "Al-Qadam Evacuations Tracking" document.

8 Nedaa Syria, "مهجرو حي القدم يصلون إلى إدلب.. ودفعه جرابلس عالقة في مناطق النظام السوري"، 13 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

9 Aleppo24, "الباب، "حي القدم" إلى الباب"، 15 March 2018, <aleppo24.com>.

10 Fidaa News Network, Facebook post, 15 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2nXBPof>>.

11 Revo Spring, YouTube video, 12 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N7QQ1Q>>.

12 Revo Spring, "استشهاد الشاب أبو محمود حمود" برصاص قناص "داعش" في حي القدم الدمشقي"، 14 March 2018, <revospring.com>; Revo Spring,

"شهيدي مدني من حي القدم برصاص "داعش" اليوم"، 13 March 2018, <revospring.com>.

13 Enab Baladi, "The Syrian Regime and Russia Move to Finalize Southern Damascus' File," 11 April 2018, <english.enabbaladi.net>.

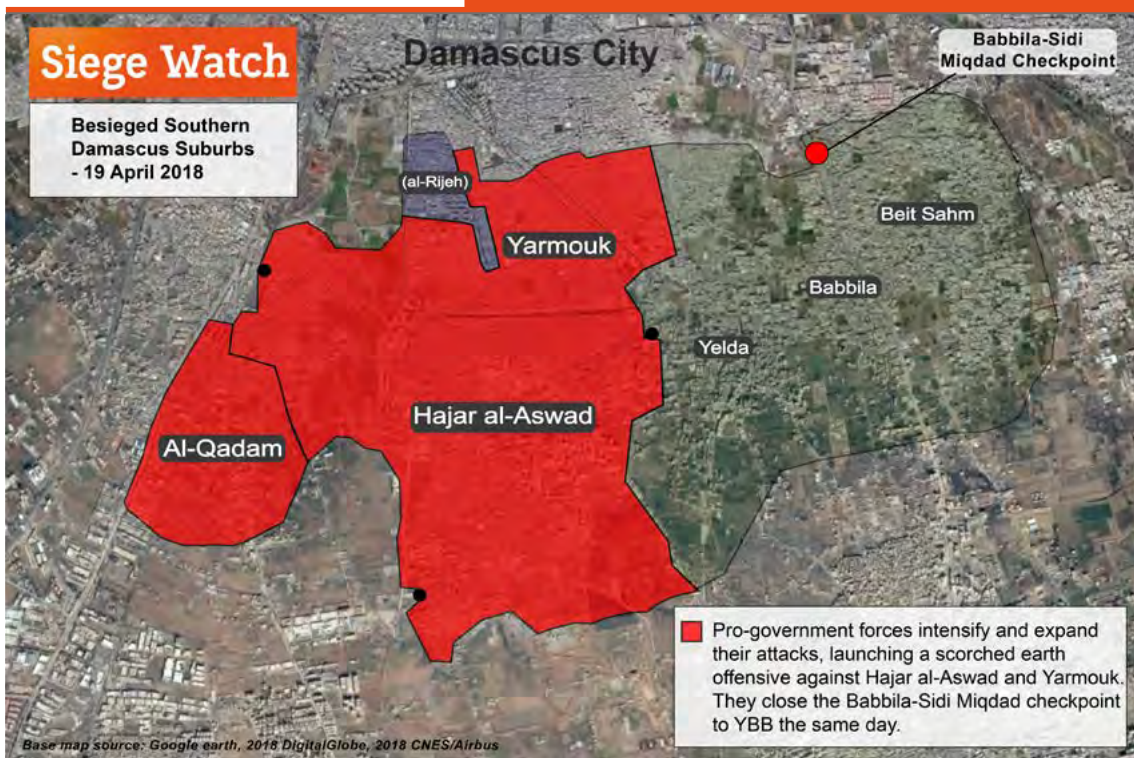
14 Al Modon, "الجنوب الدمشقي: حان موعد التهجير القسري"، 2 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

15 Interview with Siege Watch Contact AK on 3 May 2018.



Empty market stalls in YBB after the checkpoint closure on 19 April. Source: Revo Spring

Map 3.



On 19 April, pro-government forces expanded their military campaign against ISIS beyond al-Qadam, launching an intense ground and aerial military assault against Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad, and parts of the adjacent Tadamon neighborhood. Iran-backed sectarian militias, Palestinian militias, Syrian military brigades including the elite Tiger forces, the Russian air force, and recent con-scripts from Eastern Ghouta all participated in the assault, which resembled the scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta in its ferocity. More than 400 airstrikes were launched on Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad, and al-Qadam within the first four days.¹⁶ On 23 April alone, there were a reported 160 airstrikes, 35 barrel bombs, and 42 surface-to-surface missiles on the embattled area.¹⁷

On 19 April, the same day the offensive was launched, pro-government forces closed the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint connecting YBB with Damascus, and issued new threats to attack the area. The closure quickly led to declining humanitarian conditions for the tens of thousands of people trapped in the area, with shortages of key staples like flour, bread, sugar, vegetables, and fuel, and a spike in prices. Eight days after the checkpoint was closed, a man in Yelda died of renal failure after being prevented from leaving for medical treatment in Damascus.¹⁸

The concurrent launch of the offensive on ISIS-controlled neighborhoods and closure of the main checkpoint into YBB brought the area under unprecedented pressure as talks between Russia and the local negotiators continued. It sparked a series of rapid developments that led to a final surrender agreement ten days later:

- ◆ 20 April – The Palestine Hospital, the only operating medical center left in Yarmouk, was shelled by pro-government forces and taken out of service. The rapidly escalating humanitarian crisis prompted urgent calls for intervention to save the remaining civilian lives.¹⁹
- ◆ 24 April – On the sixth day of the scorched earth campaign against ISIS-controlled neighborhoods, pro-government shelling hit a JAI position on the frontlines between Yelda and Hajar al-Aswad. Ten JAI fighters were killed and three seriously injured, including key military leadership.²⁰ This attack likely expedited the final surrender deal for YBB, as it forced JAI to pull back from the western border of Yelda, ceding the way to pro-government forces fighting ISIS.
- ◆ 27 April – Fifteen wounded opposition fighters, including the injured JAI fighters hit days earlier by government fire, were evacuated from YBB to northern Syria as part of an interim agreement, while final surrender negotiations continued.²¹ As a further sign that a final deal for YBB was imminent, government forces partially reopened the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint, allowing supplies in for the first time in a week.²² Meanwhile, the scorched earth campaign against ISIS-controlled neighborhoods raged on, with 165 airstrikes launched that same

16 Al-Thawrah al-Yom, "البرموك" 22 April 2018, <thawrah2day.com>.

17 Action Group for Palestinians, "إيجاز صحفي حول آخر التطورات في مخيم البرموك يوم 23 نيسان إبريل 2018" 23 April 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

18 Tadamon Media Office, Facebook post, 26 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LfBjK>>.

19 Action Group for Palestinians, "إيجاز صحفي حول آخر التطورات في مخيم البرموك يوم 21 نيسان إبريل 2018" 22 April 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

20 Revo Spring, Facebook post, <<http://bit.ly/2OWaoXI>>.

21 Walid al-Agha, Facebook post, 27 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2w4K4U3>>.

22 Dimashq News Network, Facebook post, 28 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2whhvBZ>>.



Protest of civilians trapped under bombardment in Yarmouk, 25 April 2018. Source: Hamada Hamid

day. In addition to the use of cluster munitions and hose bombs, activists reported the use of incendiary munitions in the area for the first time, which set more than 100 homes in Yarmouk and al-Tadamon on fire.²³

- ◆ 28 April – The government announced that, nearly seven weeks after opposition forces surrendered the neighborhood, it had finally captured al-Qadam from ISIS.²⁴ ISIS simultaneously increased its attacks against opposition factions in YBB, intensifying the pressure upon them.
- ◆ 29 April – Opposition negotiators reached a final YBB surrender agreement with the Russian negotiators.²⁵ The Ouruba checkpoint between YBB and ISIS-controlled Yarmouk was handed over to Russian and government forces, and after eleven days of closure, the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint was finally reopened to limited civilian traffic.²⁶ Also on 29 April, HTS reached a deal with the government and its allies for 150 HTS fighters and their families, approximately 425 total people, to be evacuated from the al-Rijeh portion of Yarmouk in exchange for the evacuation of 1,000 fighters and civilians from Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib.²⁷ The deal was implemented the next day and pro-government forces subsequently took control of the al-Rijeh portion of Yarmouk.

23 SYRCU, Facebook post, 27 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Lfm1qk>>.

24 SANA, «الجور، ويستهدف بنيرانه ما تبقى من تنظيمات إرهابية مسلحة في المنطقة», 28 April 2018, <www.sana.sy>.

25 Qasioun News, «تسوية وضع وتهجير... اتفاق جديد في قرى وبلدات جنوب دمشق», 29 April 2018, <www.qasioun-news.com>.

26 Revo Spring, «بعد 11 يوماً على إغلاقه.. قوات الأسد تعيد فتح حاجز بيلاسيدي مفدأ», 29 April 2018, <revo.spring.com>.

27 Shaam News Network, «بدء عملية خروج مسلحي كفريا والفوعة وعناصر هيئة تحرير الشام من مخيم اليرموك», 30 April 2018, <www.shaam.org>.

YBB Surrender & Population Transfers

Public sentiment in YBB was divided as to the merits of the surrender agreement, with some still resistant even though they had no real choice. The idea of forced population transfers out of the enclave had long been a red line for residents and armed opposition fighters alike. But the bloody fall of Eastern Ghouta had broken the spirits of residents in the Southern Damascus Suburbs, confirming to them that they would not be able to survive a military assault by the government and its allies, and nobody would come to their assistance.

“The dream is dead... [we have] no choice but displacement.”

– AK, Southern Damascus Suburbs resident

The surrender agreement for YBB was dictated by Russia, and its terms were similar to those for all other besieged areas. People who did not want to “reconcile” with the government would be forcibly displaced to opposition-controlled northern Syria. Men who decided to stay and “reconcile” would hand over their weapons and be granted a six-month grace period before they would be forced into mandatory military service. The Russian military police agreed to provide security for the area and government forces and militias would be prevented from entering for six months. When they did enter, Russia would still be responsible for security, including protecting the Shi’a majority areas around Sayyida Zeinab.²⁸ The heavy presence of Iranian forces and sectarian militias in the area was a major cause of concern for residents of YBB, who feared retaliatory attacks and future displacement efforts if Russia failed to uphold its end of the deal.

Iran had been cut out of the YBB negotiations and final surrender agreement and tensions between the Syrian government’s allies in the area surfaced within days of the deal’s announcement. Russian officials decided not to use the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint for the forced population transfers, out of concern that the Iran-backed Shi’a militias could not be prevented from attacking the departing convoys on this route. Instead they decided to open a blocked route from Beit Sahm to the airport road on the eastern side of the enclave. On 30 April while crews were removing earthen barriers to clear the route for the displacement buses, Iran-backed militias fired on them, killing several government soldiers. This incident put the road clearing work on hold and delayed the scheduled 1 May start of the population transfers. The road crews finally returned on 2 May to complete the task.²⁹

“I cannot explain in words what I feel now.... The Syrian revolution taught us what the meaning of freedom is.”

– AK, Southern Damascus Suburbs resident

YBB’s forced population transfers began on 3 May and continued for a week. The buses took people to either Idlib via the Qalaat al-Madiq checkpoint in Hama, or Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo through the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint. Abu al-Zindin was the “zero point” just south of al-Bab that separated government-controlled territory from the Turkish-controlled Euphrates Shield area. Additional convoys scheduled to take some civilians and fighters from the AOG Jaysh al-Ababil to Daraa never materialized after they failed to get sufficient safety guarantees from the Syrian government.³⁰

28 Qasioun News, “تسوية وضع وتهجير... اتفاق جديد في قرى وبلدات جنوب دمشق»، 29 April 2018, <www.qasioun-news.com>.

29 Al Modon, “الجنوب الدمشقي: حان موعد التهجير القسري”, 2 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

30 Baladi News, “الدفعة الثانية من مهجري جنوب دمشق تصل إلى ريف حلب”, 5 May 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.



Forced displacement buses await inspection before leaving YBB, 5 May 2018. Source: Qais al-Shami



Russian forces oversee the loading of forced displaced convoys in YBB, 3 May 2018. Source: Rami Nasser

- ◆ 3 May – The first convoy left YBB and headed for northern Aleppo, carrying nearly 1,650 people.³¹ When they reached the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint the next day they were delayed by Turkish forces. They refused an offer to be rerouted to Idlib instead and were eventually let through the checkpoint.³²
- ◆ 4 May – The second YBB convoy departed for northern Aleppo carrying around 620 people. It arrived the next day.³³ The convoy was reportedly supposed to carry more people, but the government could not find enough buses, which also delayed their departure.³⁴
- ◆ 5 May – The third YBB convoy carried around 2,700 people, and reached northern Aleppo the next day.³⁵ During the trip, government loyalists near Deir Baalba, Homs, attacked the convoy with stones and bullets, injuring a passenger. One woman gave birth en route without access to medical assistance.³⁶
- ◆ 6 May – The fourth YBB convoy departed for Idlib carrying around 1,750 people. They reached the Qalaat al-Madiq checkpoint in Hama the next day and crossed into opposition territory.³⁷
- ◆ 7 May – The fifth YBB convoy departed for northern Aleppo carrying around 1,370 people.³⁸ During the trip, some of the buses were attacked by government supporters wielding stones.³⁹ When they reached the Abu al-Zindin crossing the next morning, they joined a forced displacement convoy from northern Homs that had arrived five hours earlier. Turkish authorities refused to let either group cross the checkpoint.⁴⁰ Eleven people in the YBB convoy in need of urgent medical assistance were allowed through for treatment, but the rest of the IDPs spent the night in their buses, under the glare of the headlights of the government military vehicles that surrounded them.⁴¹ They waited there for five days until they were allowed into the Turkish-controlled areas.
- ◆ 8 May – The sixth YBB convoy departed for northern Aleppo carrying around 650 people.⁴² It joined the fifth YBB convoy and several from northern Homs at the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint the next morning. They would go on to wait for four days.
- ◆ 10 May – The seventh and final convoy left YBB in two batches. The first group of around 150 people headed to Idlib via Qalaat al-Madiq. The second group of around 350 people headed to northern Aleppo where they joined the previous two convoys stuck at the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint where Turkish officials continued to deny the IDPs entry.⁴³

31 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 13 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2BAihA6>>.

32 Ammar Essah, Facebook post, 4 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Mro0NB>>.

33 Smart News, "Second group of people from Southern Damascus are displaced to Northern Syria," 4 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

34 Rami Nasser, Facebook post, 4 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2nXn3hf>>.

35 Baladi News, "لدفعة الثالثة من مهجري دمشق تصل ريف حلب," 6 May 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.

36 Zaman Al Wasl, "ولادة في باص مهجري جنوب دمشق واعتداء على القافلة في حمص," 6 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

37 Smart News, YouTube video, 7 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2nW1pKe>>.

38 Shaam News Network, "مهجر ضمن ثلاث قوافل من حمص وجنوب دمشق تنتظر إذن الدخول لشمال حلب," 10 May 2018, <www.shaam.org>.

39 Atef Abu al-Khair, Facebook post, 10 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2wggdaE>>.

40 Baladi News, "قوافل من مهجري حمص ودمشق عالق في ريف حلب 4," 9 May 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.

41 Abedallah al-Hariri, Facebook post, 8 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2w2Mdj7>>.

42 Zaman Al Wasl, "قوافل المهجرين تصل الشمال..الثانية من ريف حمص الشمال والسادسة من جنوب دمشق," 9 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

43 Qasioun News, "وصول القافلة الأخيرة من مهجري جنوب دمشق إلى الشمال السوري," 11 May 2018, <www.qasioun-news.com>.



People in the 6th YBB convoy wait for days near the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint in Aleppo, 10 May 2018. Source: Hamza Al-Omar



People in the 6th YBB convoy wait for days near the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint in Aleppo, 11 May 2018. Source: Hamza Al-Omar



People in the 5th YBB convoy wait for days with little shelter near the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint in Aleppo, 9 May 2018. Source: Majed El Masre



People forcibly displaced from YBB wait for days with little shelter near the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint in Aleppo, 12 May 2018. Source: Majed El Masre

On 9 May, with two convoys from Southern Damascus Suburbs trapped at the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint near al-Bab alongside IDPs from northern Homs, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) team accompanying the convoys temporarily withdrew when Russian forces stepped in to try and calm angry protests. This caused temporary panic, since the SARC team was the IDPs' only lifeline, providing them with what little water, food, and medical assistance they had. During the long, miserable, and tense wait, the YBB convoys refused numerous offers from the Russian forces to change their destination to Idlib – where Syrian opposition groups and HTS were battling for control – or to be resettled in a government-controlled village nearby.⁴⁴ They also turned down an offer from representatives of the stuck northern Homs convoys to join them in re-routing to Idlib via Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama, so that they could travel as one group for safety.⁴⁵ Finally on 12 May, Turkey allowed the fifth, sixth, and seventh convoys containing nearly 2,400 people from the Southern Damascus Suburbs to pass through the checkpoint into the Euphrates Shield territory in northern Aleppo.⁴⁶

The Turkish government gave no clear rationale for why it tried to prevent the YBB forced displacement convoys from crossing Abu al-Zindin. Possible explanations reported in the media included a lack of prepared camp housing, the failure of Russian or opposition forces involved in the deal to coordinate with the Turkey in advance, security concerns, etc.⁴⁷ But many suspected that the real motivations were political as Turkey looked to extract concessions from Russia and secure its area of control in northwest Syria, with the ninth round of Astana talks between Turkey, Russia, and Iran scheduled to begin within days.⁴⁸

On 11 May after the last forced displacement convoys had departed, the Syrian government announced its control over the YBB neighborhoods.⁴⁹ In total, an estimated 9,250 people had been sent to northern Syria in the convoys, a little over half of the 17,000 people originally estimated based on registrations.⁵⁰ Part of this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that many residents removed their names from the displacement lists as they saw the challenges faced by the IDPs in the earlier convoys. There were also local community leaders who worked hard to convince people not to leave the area.

The Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave is adjacent to Sayyida Zeinab, a hub for Iran-backed Shi'ite militias in the area. This means that the area has been both a hotbed of sectarian animosity and a prime target for demographic engineering. Because of these dynamics, the people remaining in YBB face a serious threat of sectarian violence and post-surrender human rights violations. Local sheikhs and elders who maintained relationships with government officials exerted significant influence on the population, convincing many people to stay who might otherwise not have.⁵¹ They felt that the larger the remaining population, the better chance they had of preventing a complete sectarian takeover of the area in the future, presenting a stronger united front to stand up to the ongoing threats from the government and its Iranian allies.

44 Smart News, "لهلال الأحمر" يعود لمراقبة مهجري جنوب دمشق شمال حلب بعد انسحاب مؤقت", 9 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

45 Atef Abu al-Khair, Facebook post, 9 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2BBxwZC>; Atef Abu al-Khair, Facebook post, 9 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2LifXj>.

46 Enab Baladi, "تركيا تسمح لمهجري دمشق بالدخول إلى ريف حلب", 12 May 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

47 Khaled Khatib, "أزمة قوافل المُهجّرين: ما بين مسؤولية تركيا..وروسيا", Al Modon, 10 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>;

Enab Baladi, "تركيا تسمح لمهجري دمشق بالدخول إلى ريف حلب", 12 May 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

48 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "No: 139, 15 May 2018, Press Release regarding the 9th High Level Astana Meeting on Syria," <www.mfa.gov.tr>.

49 Al Jazeera, "المعارضة المسلحة تغادر دمشق وريفها بالكامل", 11 May 2018, <www.aljazeera.net>.

50 Palestinian Refugee Camp Network, Facebook post, 2 May, <http://bit.ly/2MBQN1p>.

51 Ismail Matar, "الجنوب الدمشقي: حان موعد التهجير القسري", Al Modon, 2 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

Continuing Attacks on Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad

At the start of the reporting period in February, there were only an estimated 6,000 civilians left in Yarmouk. In the week or so after the start of the 19 April government offensive, an estimated 5,000 of them fled through the opposition – controlled Ouruba checkpoint into the adjacent Yelda neighborhood.⁵² Those who remained in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad – with estimates ranging from several hundred to as many as 1,200 – were trapped in extreme conditions similar to those experienced in Eastern Ghouta, as the attacks escalated into a scorched earth offensive.⁵³ On 30 April, the government and its allies completely closed the Ouruba checkpoint when they took over frontline positions from AOGs in YBB, trapping the remaining civilians in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad from fleeing the bombardment.⁵⁴ The remaining residents were believed to be largely elderly Palestinians, who had refused to leave their homes earlier. Under intense attack by pro-government forces, they were trapped in underground shelters for days on end without access to sufficient supplies or medical care. Conditions for these unreachable civilians in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad reached catastrophic lows.



A Russian drone captures an aerial view of the bombing of Yarmouk, 8 May 2018.

On 2 May, pro-government forces detained around 60 civilians who were trying to escape Yarmouk through the Ouruba checkpoint.⁵⁵ They were finally released into YBB on 6 May after protests and efforts by the local negotiations committee.⁵⁶ Others did not fare as well.

52 UNRWA, "UNRWA deeply concerned about the escalation of fighting and fate of thousands of Palestine refugees in Yarmouk camp and surrounding areas," 26 April 2018, <www.unrwa.org>.

53 Tom Rollins, "Civilians trapped in Yarmouk face 'unimaginable' end to siege," IRIN News, 23 April 2018, <www.irinnews.org>.

54 Palestinian Refugee Camp Network, Facebook post, 30 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2OVCqCi>>.

55 Jobar News, "قوات النظام السوري المجرم تعتقل 60 مدنيا من أبناء #مخيم_اليرموك" غاليتهم "أطفال ونساء وعجزة," 3 May 2018, <jobarnews.net>.

56 Yarmouk Camp (heart of the event), Facebook post, 6 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2w0Duhu>>.

A group of approximately 20 civilians fleeing the bombardment of Yarmouk waited for days by the checkpoint in hopes of being let into YBB. On 12 May, the fourth day of their wait, pro-government militiamen manning the checkpoint shot and killed three of the trapped civilians, all men between the ages of 60-80. The remaining 17 people sat next to their dead bodies for an additional 24 hours before they were finally allowed to cross the checkpoint the next day.⁵⁷

Small protests took place inside of Yarmouk throughout May, as trapped civilians sent out desperate SOS calls.⁵⁸ None of the towns in the Southern Damascus Suburbs had the advantage of Syrian Civil Defense (SCD) first responders to help save people from the aftermath of attacks, since local SCD services were suspended in December 2017.⁵⁹ The smell of death reportedly permeated Yarmouk as civilian corpses lay in the rubble of basement shelters for weeks, even after the area was completely captured.⁶⁰

On 21 May, the government declared that it had finally gained full control of Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk. ISIS fighters and their families were quietly bussed out of the area the evening before the announcement as part of a secret surrender deal with the Syrian government.⁶¹ As many as 1,200 ISIS fighters were reportedly sent to the Badiya desert area of southeastern Homs province.⁶² State media denied that the government cut a deal with ISIS, but the move was consistent with years of limited cooperation between ISIS leadership and Syrian military security forces in the area which had given injured ISIS fighters access to medical care in Damascus, and in recent months allowed many ISIS members pay a \$4,300 - \$5,000 fee to be smuggled out of the besieged enclave to northern Syria and on to Turkey.⁶³ Some of the ISIS fighters evacuated by the government in May reportedly went on to conduct deadly terror attacks against civilians in Sweida.⁶⁴ An estimated 600 women and children, family members of the ISIS fighters, were taken to the Qalaat al-Madiq crossing in Hama for entry into opposition-controlled northern Syria, bringing the total number of forcibly displaced civilians from the Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave to approximately 9,850.⁶⁵

Dozens of civilians in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad were killed during the month-long final scorched earth campaign by the government and its allies, and much of the remaining infrastructure was completely destroyed.⁶⁶ Before the war, these were densely populated neighborhoods with residents that were already among the most vulnerable in Syria. Yarmouk was an unofficial Palestinian refugee camp with at least 160,000 registered Palestinian refugees

57 Jobar News, "استشهاد ثلاثة لاجئين فلسطينيين من مخيم اليرموك إثر إصابتهم برصاص عناصر من جيش الأسد," 13 May 2018, <jobarnews.net>; Omar Abdallah, Facebook post, 13 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MJxbs1>>.

58 Majed El Masre, Facebook post, 18 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N7ISpn>>.

59 Geiroom, "الخوذ البيضاء توقف عمل فرقها في جنوب دمشق," <geiroom.net>.

60 Omar Abdallah, Facebook post, 17 May 2018.

61 Jobar News, "ميليشيات الأسد تعلن فرض سيطرتها على حي الحجر الأسود جنوب العاصمة دمشق بعد إجلاء عناصر تنظيم داعش بشكل سري من المنطقة," 21 May 2018, <jobarnews.net>.

62 OCHA, Tweet, 23 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MsDoJt>>.

63 See the Ninth Quarterly Siege Watch Report at: <siegewatch.org>.

64 Ravina Shamdasani, "Press briefing notes on Syria and Saudi Arabia," OHCHR, 31 July 2018, <www.ohchr.org>.

65 OCHA, Tweet, 23 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MsDoJt>>.

66 UNSC S/2018/619, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 20 June 2018, <undocs.org>.



Pro-government forces walk through the wreckage of Yarmouk, 23 May 2018. Source: Jobar News



Pro-government forces walk through the wreckage of Yarmouk, 23 May 2018. Source: Jobar News

and hundreds of thousands of other residents.⁶⁷ The adjacent Hajar al-Aswad was a poor neighborhood that also housed many Palestinians along with Syrian IDPs from the Golan Heights.⁶⁸ After nearly five years of intense government siege and three years of hardship under ISIS rule, the April-May 2018 bombing campaign by the government and its allies led to the complete and final depopulation of these once bustling neighborhoods.

The Aftermath

At the end of the reporting period in May, three of the six Southern Damascus Suburbs communities monitored by Siege Watch – al-Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad, and Yarmouk – were depopulated and largely destroyed. The other three neighborhoods – Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm – had reverted to government control, and the people who remained were adjusting to life under the terms of the surrender agreement. Humanitarian conditions in YBB remained poor in the months after the surrender – with widespread unemployment and disconnected services – but were not as bad as conditions facing many who had been displaced to northern Syria. YBB also had the advantage of remaining relatively structurally intact, compared to Yarmouk or other post-surrender enclaves like Eastern Ghouta.

The post-siege conditions were the hardest on Palestinian refugees from Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad who were displaced into neighboring YBB during the final military campaign. Many lost everything they had and were forced to sleep on the streets or to squat in empty homes in Yelda. As some displaced YBB residents returned to their homes from Damascus city following the end of the siege, they forced the Palestinian refugees out, creating a housing crisis for this vulnerable stateless population, who have faced extra restrictions from traveling outside of the enclave post-siege.⁶⁹

Displaced Siege Watch contacts who had spoken with friends and family who stayed in YBB reported that they could not speak freely and openly because their communications were monitored – a common development in post-surrender situations. Some of those who stayed had changed their phone numbers and closed social media accounts to try and distance themselves from their communications history, out of fear of government crackdowns. They reported that people did not feel safe and most did not leave their homes at night due to the proximity of the pro-government militia forces. There were some cases of people who left YBB to Damascus through the reopened Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint and in Damascus, were detained by government security forces.

In late May the government opened six “reconciliation” offices each in Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm.⁷⁰ Yelda hosted the largest Russian military presence due to the location of Russia’s military police headquarters in the neighborhood, but they did patrol other areas of YBB.

67 Amnesty International, “Syria: Squeezing the Life out of Yarmouk: War Crimes Against Besieged Civilians,” 10 March 2014, <www.amnesty.org>.

68 Interview with SW contact

69 UNRWA, “First UNRWA convoy in Two Years Reaches Palestine refugees in the Damascus suburb of Yalda,” 5 June 2018, <www.unrwa.org>.

70 Voice of the Capital, “است مكاتب لإتتامر التسويات والمُصالحات جنوب دمشق,” 22 May 2018, <damascusv.com>.

Since the end of the reporting period, some humanitarian assistance was finally permitted into YBB. On 5 June, the first United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) humanitarian aid convoy to access the enclave in two years reached Palestinian refugees in YBB with supplies for 3,500 people.⁷¹ On 14 June, an interagency UN aid convoy reached YBB with supplies for 51,000 people – ten thousand less than the requested amount.⁷²

VIOLATIONS

Although the situation in YBB remained fairly stable in the aftermath of the surrender agreement due to the presence of Russian security forces, there were still sporadic violations reported. In Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad, which had been recaptured by force and were devastated and depopulated, were prolific looting and reports of serious abuses committed against civilians who tried to return to even survey their property, including detentions and field executions. On 21 May, 20 elderly men from Yarmouk who had refused to leave the camp despite the scorched earth bombardments, were detained by pro-government forces. Many of the men were released a week later, but at least one was held until July.⁷³ On 23 May a young mentally disabled Palestinian refugee was beaten and detained by pro-government forces who claimed that he was a member of ISIS.⁷⁴

There was widespread looting in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad after pro-government forces took control of the area.⁷⁵ Stolen goods were sold at markets that had opened earlier in government loyalist neighborhoods to accommodate looted property from Eastern Ghouta. The looting, particularly as it took place in neighborhoods that had been under ISIS control, drew an unusual amount of criticism, even some protests in the streets.⁷⁶ In response, both Russian forces and the Syrian government made efforts to show that they were trying to restore order. On 26 May, photos circulated on pro-government social media pages showing Russian forces beating and detaining several men in Syrian military uniforms as they were attempting to loot homes in Babbila.⁷⁷ The semi-official Facebook page of the Hmeimeem military base posted a message saying that Russia would not tolerate this criminal activity.⁷⁸ The government media outlet al-Watan also ran an article claiming that Syrian security services were cracking down on the sale of looted goods and raided one of the markets in Dahiyat al-Assad.⁷⁹

But the crackdowns appeared largely for show and did little to stop the looting in Yarmouk. On 26 May, the same day that the Russian arrest photos surfaced, 15-year old Rami Salman was shot and killed by pro-government militias on the outskirts of Yarmouk when he tried to stop them from looting his family home. Another boy, Mohammad Bakr, had been killed for the same

71 UNRWA, "First UNRWA convoy in Two Years Reaches Palestine refugees in the Damascus suburb of Yalda," 5 June 2018, <www.unrwa.org>.

72 UNSC S/2018/724, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 20 July 2018, <undocs.org>.

73 Action Group for Palestinians, "ناشطون: النظام السوري لا يزال يحتجز عشرات المدنيين في مركز الحرجلة جنوب دمشق," 4 June 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>; Action Group for Palestinians, "لنظام يفرج عن 'فوزي حميد' بعد احتجاج دامر لأكثر من 40 يوماً," 12 July 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

74 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "مخيم اليرموك: موالون النظام يعتدون بوحشية على احد ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة ومصيره مجهول," 24 May 2018, <refugeesps.net>.

75 Al Bawaba, "فيديو جديد يظهر دمار مخيم اليرموك وانشغال جنود الاسد بالتهب والتعفيش," 26 May, <www.albawaba.com>.

76 Syrian Snack, "الداخلية آخر من 'يريد' أن يعلم.. قوى الأمن تزيل سوق التعفيش من 'الضاحية'," 27 May 2018, <snacksyrian.com>.

77 Arab Window, "أصوّر مدلّة لمقاتلي الأسد بعدما اعتقلهم الروس بجدر سرقه," 26 May 2018, <arabwindow.net>.

78 The Central Channel of Hmeimeem Military Base, Facebook post, 26 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LinFY3>>.

79 Al Watan, "قوى الأمن الداخلي تدهم أسواق 'التعفيش' في ضاحية الأسد بريف دمشق," 26 May 2018, <<http://www.alwatanonline.com>>.



Government media shows security forces raiding looted goods market, 26 May 2018. Source: Al-Watan

reason the day before.⁸⁰ Two weeks later, two more young Palestinian men were reportedly executed by pro-government forces in separate incidents after entering Yarmouk camp to inspect their homes.⁸¹ There were also reports of some homes being burned by the looting forces.⁸² People who did manage to enter the camp to inspect their homes reported being harassed by pro-government forces at the checkpoints and forced to pay bribes.⁸³

Although government forces issued some permits for people to inspect their homes in Yarmouk in the aftermath of the military campaign, they did not issue any approvals for residents to move back to the neighborhood. While they cited risk of mines as the reason, many saw this simply as a cover for the expansive looting to continue. Three families who entered Yarmouk to inspect their homes and tried to stay were reportedly expelled by pro-government forces.⁸⁴ The pro-government forces also refused to allow recovery teams in to exhume the bodies of dead civilians buried under the rubble by the end of May, more than a week after the government reasserted complete control over the area.⁸⁵ There were an estimated 15 bodies believed to be rotting in the basement of an UNRWA facility where they had taken shelter during the scorched

80 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "مخيم اليرموك: طفل ثان تقتله قوات النظام بعد اعتراضه على "التعفيش", 26 May 2018, <refugeesps.net>.

81 Baladi News, "قوات النظام تقتل شابا فلسطينيا من أهالي مخيم اليرموك", 4 June 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>; Baladi News,

"محور الممانعة" يعدم فلسطينيين رفضوا تعفيش بيوتهم في "اليرموك", 5 June 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.

82 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "مخيم اليرموك: حرق منازل و"تعفيش" يتوغل الى باطن الأرض", 4 June 2018, <refugeesps.net>.

83 Action Group for Palestinians, "حلوان التحرير" طريقة جديدة يبتز فيها جيش النظام أهالي مخيم اليرموك", 31 May 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

84 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "مخيم اليرموك: طرد 3 عائلات عادت الى منازلها بحجة عدم التصريح لهم بالعودة", 31 May 2018, <refugeesps.net>.

85 Omar Abdallah, Facebook post, 29 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2BASQyt>.



Image circulating on social media shows pro-government forces loot Yarmouk after recapturing it in May. Original source UNK



Russian forces arrest pro-government forces trying to loot homes in Babbila, 26 May 2018. Source: Damascus Now

earth bombardment, hoping it would not be targeted.⁸⁶ Residents who had returned to inspect their homes nearby reported the smell of decomposing flesh.

Estimates since the end of the scorched earth campaign suggest that 70-90% of the infrastructure of Yarmouk camp was destroyed.⁸⁷ On 3 July, when UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl visited Yarmouk, he said that the scale of destruction “compares to very little else that I have seen in many years of humanitarian work in conflict zones.”⁸⁸

CIVIL SOCIETY

The surrender agreement had a devastating impact on civil society in the Southern Suburbs of Damascus, which had already been weakened by years of siege and dwindling external support. In the wake of the forced population transfers in May, local organizations that had boosted the resilience of the civilian population were forced to close. The civil registry in the area announced that it was closing, but first it had digitized its documents to ensure their preservation and destroyed the hard copies to prevent the government security forces from abusing sensitive civilian records.⁸⁹ A capacity development and training center that had offered training for men and women in areas such as languages and computer programs closed.⁹⁰ One Siege Watch contact noted that the former building used for his organization had been taken over by Russian forces as their new headquarters in Yelda.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the collapse of civil society organizations in the Southern Damascus Suburbs is the Damascene Library, which was opened in Yelda on 2 December 2017 as a new cultural initiative meant to give the people of besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs access to learning and cultural resources and provide a safe space for children. The project was years in the making, coming to fruition after local staff were able to buy or gather more than 8,500 books from private civilians and identify a large hall attached to the civil registry building to use. Each book was catalogued by hand into searchable spreadsheets.⁹¹ The library was run mostly by volunteers and it offered enrichment activities including a reading club,⁹² writing workshops,⁹³ and even a chess tournament.⁹⁴ It hosted visiting school children to introduce them to reading and research methods. When the surrender agreement for the Southern Damascus Suburbs in May brought the inevitable close of the library, its staff managed to pack around 5,000 of its books and get them onto one of the buses headed for northern Syria, despite resistance from Russian officials. The books found their new home in an al-Bab cultural center in Aleppo, where they will help preserve the cultural legacy of the Southern Damascus communities destroyed by the siege.⁹⁵

86 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "مخيم اليرموك: جثث تحت أنقاض منشآت الأثروا" زز لماذا لا تتدخل لانتشالها؟", 30 May 2018, <refugeesps.net>.

87 Action Group for Palestinians, "من مبانٍ وحارات مخيم اليرموك طالها الدمار والعفشية يسرقون كايلاات الكهرياء من الأرض 70%", 29 May 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

88 UNRWA, "UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl Visited Yarmouk Today," Press Release, 3 July 2018, <www.unrwa.org>.

89 Civil Registry in South of Damascus, Facebook post, 7 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2N7D9jt>.

90 Kadarat Center, Facebook post, 7 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2wghkXS>.

91 Moubader, "7 آلاف كتاب..محاصرون يفتتحون مكتبة عامة جنوبي العاصمة", 19 February 2018, <moubader.com>.

92 General Damascene Library, Facebook post, 25 December 2017, <http://bit.ly/2Mp6Fop>.

93 General Damascene Library, Facebook post, 18 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2BvtmCg>.

94 General Damascene Library, Facebook post, 3 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2OX015x>.

95 General Damascene Library, Facebook post, 7 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2o1wIDr>.



Children attend a short story session at the Damascene Library, 1 February 2018. Source: General Damascene Library Facebook

Northern Homs

The opposition-controlled northern Homs enclave was besieged by government forces and pro-government militias from 2013 until May 2018, when local armed opposition groups finally surrendered rather than face a scorched earth offensive. Under the terms of the surrender, an estimated 35,000 civilians and fighters from the enclave were transferred to northern Syria in forced population transfers.

Background

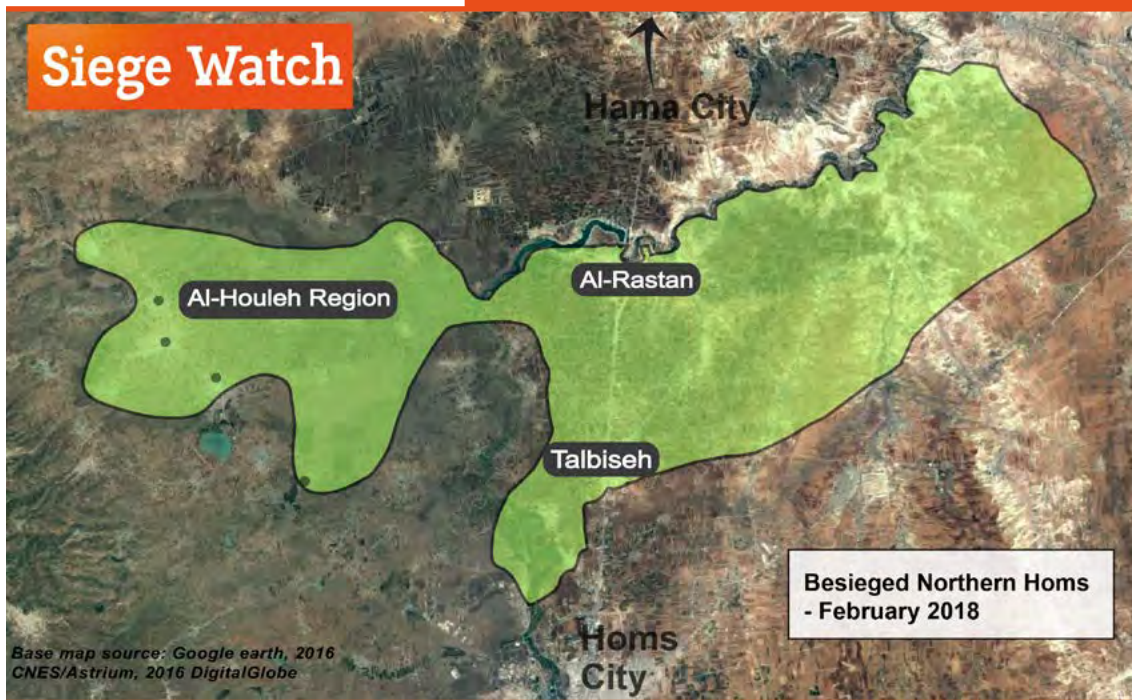
The main population centers in northern Homs are the cities of Talbiseh and al-Rastan – both on the main north-south highway running through the enclave – and al-Houleh, a cluster of smaller towns to the west that was connected to the Talbiseh and al-Rastan areas by a single perilous path. Much of the besieged area consisted of agricultural land. The siege of northern Homs was enforced by a variety of pro-government forces including Syrian military, the National Defense Force militias, Iran-backed foreign militias, the Syrian al-Ridha militia, Hezbollah, and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces. The rural portions of the besieged enclave were ringed with pro-government communities that hosted sectarian militias.

Homs city and the surrounding areas were home to a military academy and several important military installations before the war. There were so many military officers in al-Rastan that the city was jokingly referred to as “Qardaha #2” by its residents.⁹⁶ Early in the Syrian conflict, the area saw a high number of military defections and these dissident officers founded the local armed opposition groups. Northern Homs came to host thousands of IDPs displaced from the Old City of Homs and the al-Waer neighborhood – both previous targets of the “surrender or die” strategy.

Because of the availability of smuggling routes, arable land, and limited checkpoint trade, humanitarian conditions in northern Homs were relatively better off than in more intensively besieged areas like Eastern Ghouta, and the entire enclave was classified by Siege Watch as a Tier 3 siege. Regardless, civilian movement was restricted, and most medical supplies and baby milk were prevented from entering the area even when food supplies were allowed in, and humanitarian aid convoys were regularly delayed or denied entry. As in other besieged areas, the siege tactics used against northern Homs led to frequent bread shortages, outbreaks of diseases, and civilian deaths from preventable conditions for which people were unable to access sufficient medical care. Besieged northern Homs was intermittently attacked by Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces. Despite nearly five years of this collective punishment and

96 Qardaha, Latakia, is the traditional home of the Assad family. It contains a high concentration of the country's military elite. Anecdote provided by Siege Watch contact WR, during a 20 June 2018 interview.

Map 4.



conditions that clearly met UN OCHA's criteria for a besieged area, none of the besieged areas in northern Homs were ever officially designated as besieged by the UN.

The territorial boundaries of the besieged pocket of northern Homs remained relatively stable for years, as the government and its allies lacked the military resources to recapture the large area while fighting on other fronts. The north-south international highway between Homs and Hama cities had been closed since 2011, and reestablishing control of the highway was a high priority for the Syrian government and its allies.

Humanitarian

Humanitarian conditions in northern Homs remained poor but relatively stable throughout the reporting period. Government forces repeatedly delayed the entry of UN aid convoys to the enclave and sporadically cut off the entry of food supplies through the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint, ensuring that pressure remained on the population despite the relative calm that had prevailed since the area was declared a “de-escalation zone” in May 2018. For example, for over a week in early February government forces prevented the residents who were allowed to commute across the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint, such as government employees and women, from bringing any food items with them back into the enclave. Bags of bread that people did try to bring in were confiscated and thrown away.⁹⁷ The decline in international support to local governing and

⁹⁷ Interview with Siege Watch contact WR on 6 May 2018.

charitable bodies in northern Homs negatively impacted their ability to provide basic supplies and services for the civilian population. High prices and frequent shortages spurred SOS calls from local councils across the besieged enclave throughout the reporting period.⁹⁸

In early February, the Local Council of Tel Dhahab in al-Houleh instituted a tax of 500 SYP, imposed on residents every two months, in a desperate attempt to fund some of their service provision.⁹⁹ Joint UN/SARC interagency aid convoys, which were supposed to reach the area on a semi-monthly basis, were delayed. Despite the “de-escalation zone” designation, not a single aid convoy was permitted to reach any of the communities in the besieged enclave during the reporting period until after the area’s surrender in late May.

Escalating Military & Political Pressure

Just as it had in Eastern Ghouta, this reporting period, the Russian-designed “de-escalation zone” for northern Homs revealed itself to be a military strategy masquerading as a peace plan. Instead of paving the way for good faith negotiations, the “de-escalation zone” had simply been a way to put military operations in northern Homs on pause, giving the Syrian government and its allies the breathing room needed to strengthen their position elsewhere and focus on the remaining opposition-controlled areas one at a time.

The besieged northern Homs enclave had enjoyed relative calm since it was declared a “de-escalation zone” in May 2017 under the agreement reached by Russia, Turkey, and Iran at Astana. Yet there were still violations, and these violations against northern Homs increased throughout the February–May Siege Watch reporting period as the pro-government assault on Eastern Ghouta neared completion. When the government and its allies finally turned their full attention to northern Homs they were able to deploy more forces to the area and present a credible existential military threat to the last remaining opposition-controlled enclave under siege.

FEBRUARY AND MARCH

The Negotiating Committee for Northern Homs and Southern Hama (NC) included 24 military and civil representatives from all major communities in the enclave. The NC had been in negotiation talks with Russia since May 2017. During these talks, the Russian negotiators appeared to agree in the abstract to addressing opposition priorities such as the release of political prisoners, but they perpetually delayed making commitments or giving firm responses, instead stalling with promises to study the NC proposals for months on end.¹⁰⁰ In early February, NC members received an email from the Russian negotiators saying that the “de-escalation” agreement for northern Homs would be cancelled on 15 February – earlier than the previously agreed-upon date of 4 May. The Russians told the NC members to meet directly with Syrian government officials in al-Safir hotel in Homs city to work out surrender terms, or face a scorched earth offensive.¹⁰¹

98 Unified Media Office in the City of al-Rastan, Facebook post, 15 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2w4OHxf>>; Shaam News Network,

“مجلس تليبية: نفاذ كمية الطحين وقلة المساعدات يندّر بكارثة إنسانية تهدد 75 ألف مدني محاصر” 21 April 2018, <www.shaam.org>.

99 Smart News, “محلّي” تل ذهب بحمص يفرض “جباية” على أهالي القرية لتوفير الخدمات اللازمة” 9 February 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

100 Unified Media Office in the City of al-Rastan, Facebook post, 16 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Lg8WNT>>.

101 Enab Baladi, “In Rural Homs.. ‘De-escalation’ Agreement Ends with Threats,” 21 February 2018, <english.enabbaladi.net>.

Even before the 15 February date arrived, northern Homs was hit with fresh attacks by Syrian military and Iran-backed militia forces, including a ground offensive against the far eastern part of the besieged enclave on 12 February.¹⁰² In coordination with these attacks, state media began escalating their threatening rhetoric.¹⁰³ The threats spurred fresh calls from the NC to the Turkish government to set up observation posts around northern Homs to monitor violations of the “de-escalation zone” agreement.¹⁰⁴ Attacks on the towns of northern Homs increased in frequency in the latter half of February and into March. Siege Watch contacts noted that the attacks initially appeared to be carried out by Syrian government militias and Iran-backed forces, without the participation of the Russian air force.

The AOGs in northern Homs were not nearly as well armed as those in Eastern Ghouta, and faced little chance of withstanding a similar scorched earth offensive. Their only structural advantage for groups in northern Homs was that they did not suffer from the same level of factional infighting as AOGs in Eastern Ghouta. Capitalizing on this advantage, there were new consolidation efforts by northern Homs opposition forces in response to the rising pressure. On 15 March, a number of local AOGs, including Ahrar al-Sham, announced that they were merging to form a new group called the Fourth Corps, as part of the Syrian Interim Government’s (SIG’s) national army initiative.¹⁰⁵ Then on 3 April, all major armed groups in northern Homs and southern Hama announced the formation of the “Unified Leadership in the Central Area,” also under the SIG’s national army initiative.¹⁰⁶ The body included: Harakat Tahrir al-Watan (Homs Sector), the Fourth Corps, Jaysh al-Tawhid, Jaysh Homs, Jaysh al-Izza, Faylaq al-Sham (Homs Sector), al-Houleh operations room, al-Rastan Operations Room, the Southern Hama Operations Room, the Eastern Area Operations Room, and the Southwest Area Operations Room, and was led by defected officers.¹⁰⁷

This military consolidation among the opposition did not translate into political unification, and during the reporting period, Talbiseh’s representatives diverged from other local parties. On 11 March, Talbiseh’s main armed group, Jaysh al-Tawhid, withdrew from the NC, citing its failure to make tangible progress. In early April, Talbiseh city’s Shura Council followed suit and also withdrew from the NC.¹⁰⁸ Jaysh al-Tawhid preferred an earlier Cairo agreement that it had signed with Russia, with the help of Ahmad al-Jarba’s al-Ghad movement. Instead of participating in the NC talks, Talbiseh’s representatives began meeting directly with Syrian government officials in al-Safir hotel in Homs city.¹⁰⁹

APRIL

In April, the Syrian government and its allies launched new attacks against northern Homs,

102 Andrew Illingworth, “Breaking: Syrian Army unleashes major offensive against militants in Rastan pocket on Homs-Hama border,”

Al Masdar, 12 February 2018, <www.almasdarnews.com>.

103 Madar al-Yom, “لتهديدات والضغوط تحيط بريف حمص الشمالي,” 18 February 2018, <madardaily.com>.

104 Nedaa Syria, “هيئة التفاوض في ريف حمص الشمالي تدعو تركيا لتثبيت نقاط مراقبة لخفض التصعيد,” <nedaa-sy.com>.

105 Nedaa Syria, “Fourth Corps of the Syrian National Army in Homs countryside,” 15 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

106 Unified Command in the Central Region, YouTube video, 3 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N6uFcg>>.

107 Nedaa Syria, “Top Military Command in Homs and Hama countryside,” 30 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

108 Nedaa Syria, “Jaish al-Tawheed gives up negotiations of northern Homs,” 11 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

Baladi News, “هيئة مفاوضات ريفي حمص وحماة,” 3 April 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.

109 Enab Baladi, “Damascus-Aleppo Highway Decides Assad’s Forces Next Destination,” 3 April 2018, <english.enabbaladi.net>.



The Russian and local negotiating committees meet in a tent near Dar al-Kabira, 18 April 2018. Source: Unified Media Office in al-Rastan

taking advantage of momentum from their recapture of Eastern Ghouta and the disillusionment it caused. Indiscriminate attacks on civilian neighborhoods were launched with airstrikes, barrel bombs from helicopters, and artillery shelling. For example, on 9 April, strikes on a residential neighborhood in Talbiseh killed a mother and daughter and injured nine other civilians. No AOG targets were located nearby.¹¹⁰ The NC sent a private SOS message to Turkey calling on it to step in as a de-escalation guarantor to help stop the bombardments, to no avail.¹¹¹

On 16 April, Iran-backed militias tried to advance into northern Homs in the northeastern portion of the enclave, from southern Hama but were pushed back by an opposition counterattack.¹¹² The next day, communities across the lightly-populated eastern portion of besieged enclave came under attack. Bombings killed eight civilians in al-Zaafaraneh and injured more than 40, forcing many to flee into the countryside.¹¹³

On 18 April the NC held an emergency meeting with the Russian delegation at Dar al-Kabira. During the meeting, Russian negotiators took a new hardline tone, making it abundantly clear that the NC had no choice but to abandon the terms hammered out over more than six months of negotiations and unilaterally accept government “reconciliation” demands.¹¹⁴ They agreed

110 UNSC S/2018/484, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 22 May 2018, <undocs.org>.

111 Mohammad Ayoub, “ماذا يحدث في ريف حمص الشمالي؟,” Al Modon, 18 April 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

112 Al Souria, “سيناريوهات عديدة ومصير غامض.. ريف حمص وحماة بين خطين عسكري وسياسي,” 17 April 2018, <www.alsouria.net>.

113 Mohammad Ayoub, “ماذا يحدث في ريف حمص الشمالي؟,” Al Modon, 18 April 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

114 Mohammad Ayoub, “ماذا يحدث في ريف حمص الشمالي؟,” Al Modon, 19 April 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

to a temporary ceasefire until a follow up meeting could be held four days later.¹¹⁵ While the meeting was in progress, Syrian government warplanes bombed al-Rastan city and as a result, al-Rastan's bloc of representatives withdrew from the NC in protest.¹¹⁶ The temporary ceasefire failed to materialize as pro-government forces launched new attacks in the following days and the 22 April follow up meeting was then cancelled when NC members refused to move the location to government-controlled Homs city.¹¹⁷

In late April, with the scorched earth military campaign in Eastern Ghouta complete and a surrender agreement in the Southern Damascus Suburbs approaching, reports began to emerge of pro-government forces being redeployed to northern Homs.¹¹⁸ On 24 April, the Syrian government "reconciliation" minister Ali Haidar confirmed that northern Homs was their next military target during an interview with Reuters news.¹¹⁹

29 April was a turning point for northern Homs. The military campaign against the region escalated dramatically, with targeted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure including medical facilities – echoing the final days of Eastern Ghouta. Heavy attacks on al-Rastan city killed at least four civilians and injured others.¹²⁰ A primary healthcare clinic in al-Zaafaraneh and al-Zaafaraneh Surgical Hospital were both targeted by airstrikes and taken out of service.¹²¹ During the attacks on al-Zaafaraneh Hospital a security guard and hospital worker were both killed, and four other guards were injured. The hospital had been previously de-conflicted by the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), meaning that it was a verified civilian facility and its coordinates had been provided to Russia and the US.¹²²

The same day as the military escalation, pro-government forces closed the Dar al-Kabira crossing to all traffic. News of the closure caused panic among civilians, who gathered at the checkpoint in protest, fearing that they would be completely trapped as violence spiraled out of control. By the next day on 30 April, heavy bombing across the besieged enclave had killed at least six civilians and injured dozens more.¹²³ Al-Rastan field hospital was bombed and taken out of service.¹²⁴ Pro-government media reports indicated that – in contrast to earlier in the reporting period – the Russian air force was heavily involved in the wave of attacks on northern Homs in late April, even while it continued to lead negotiations with the NC.¹²⁵

115 Smart News, "التوصل لوقف إطلاق نار مؤقت في شمال حمص وجنوب حماة" 18 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

116 Smart News, "كتلة الرستن" تتسحب من المفاوضات مع روسيا شمال حمص" 18 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

117 Smart News, "فشل انعقاد جلسة مفاوضات في ريف حمص الشمالي لخلاف على مكانها" 22 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

118 Qalaat al Mudiq, Tweet, 28 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2N5io88>; Orient News, "لنظام يوجه ميليشيات النمر" إلى ريف حمص الشمالي" 29 April 2018, <www.orient-news.net>.

119 Reuters, "Syrian government plans to retake north Homs from rebels next: minister," 24 April 2018, <www.reuters.com>.

120 UNSC S/2018/484, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 22 May 2018, <undocs.org>; Al Jazeera Mubashar, YouTube video, 30 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2nW22n4>.

121 UOSSM, "UOSSM PHC and Two Other Hospitals Attacked by Airstrikes in Homs," 30 April 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

122 UNSC S/2018/484, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 22 May 2018, <undocs.org>.

123 Syria Direct, "Rebel-held north Homs sees heaviest bombardment in weeks ahead of ceasefire negotiations" 30 April 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

124 Unified Media Office in the City of al-Rastan, Facebook post, 30 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2LhS0pA>.

125 Leith Aboufadel, "Russian airstrikes pile on jihadist rebels as Syrian troops prepare to launch northern Homs offensive," Al Masdar, 30 April 2018, <www.almasdarnews.com>.



A home in al-Zaafaraneh destroyed in an airstrike, 29 April 2018. Source: SCD Homs



A home in al-Rastan destroyed by pro-government bombing, 30 April 2018. Source: SCD Homs

Amidst the rapidly escalating violence, Russian representatives and the NC met at Dar al-Kabira on 30 April and agreed upon a 24-hour ceasefire, so that they could meet again the next day to determine the final surrender terms.¹²⁶

Final Surrender Deal

On Tuesday 1 May, the NC and Russian negotiators reconvened for a long day of talks near the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint. Russian negotiators threatened the NC members to agree to the prepared terms that were dictated to them, or their homes would be destroyed and children killed.¹²⁷ They invoked the examples of Eastern Ghouta and Yarmouk in their threats.¹²⁸

The meeting ended with a 24-hour extension of the temporary ceasefire while the local representatives returned to consult with their communities. There were major debates within local factions and governing bodies as people struggled with the decision. That night, a number of armed opposition groups announced their rejection of the deal – notably the Fourth Corps, Harakat Tahrir al-Watan, Faylaq al-Sham, and the Taldu Operation's Room – calling the deal humiliating and citing concerns over the lack of civilian safety guarantees.¹²⁹ The Homs Provincial Council called on Turkey, as a guarantor of the Astana agreement, to intervene directly to stop the forced population transfers.¹³⁰ Protests against the deal broke out in several parts of the enclave including al-Rastan, al-Houleh, and Zaafaraneh.¹³¹

On the other hand, in light of the Russian threats and with the devastation in Eastern Ghouta looming large in people's minds, other armed groups and many civilians wanted to accept the government terms without a fight. The Talbiseh Local Council and other civilian bodies in the city put out statements announcing their support for the deal.¹³² On 2 May, the unified NC announced that they agreed to the deal.¹³³ There was an immediate ceasefire, and armed groups had three days to turn in their heavy weapons, after which time Russia would ensure that heavy weapons were also removed from surrounding pro-government villages.¹³⁴

During the negotiations, there were serious efforts by Russia – as well as government officials and reportedly also the France-based defected Syrian business tycoon Firas Tlass, who played a role in negotiating the final agreement – to get the estimated 2,500-3,000 dissident officers in

126 Radio Al-Kul, Tweet, 30 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N5TONv>>.

127 Interview with Siege Watch contact HJ on 27 June 2018.

128 Zafarana News, Facebook post, 1 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2nYSWWZ>>.

129 Mohammad Ayoub, "حمص الشمالي: اقتربت ساعة الصفر", Al Modon, 2 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>; El Dorar,

"جبهة تحرير سوريا" و"فيلق الشام" يرفضون العرض الروسي حول شمال حمص", 2 May 2018, <eldorar.com>.

130 Homs Governorate Council, Facebook post, 2 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Lj0rBb>>.

131 Smart News, "مظاهرات ليلية في ريفي حمص وحماة رفضا لاتفاق تحاول روسيا فرضه على المنطقة", 2 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

132 Khaled al-Tallawi, Facebook post, 2 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2wmla0y>>.

133 Southern Hama and Northern Homs, Facebook post, 2 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2wkCMLj>>.

134 Wael Goma, Facebook post, 5 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Mr8jpG>>.



AOGs in al-Rastan hand over heavy weapons, 3 May 2018. Original source UNK

the region to stay and “reconcile” rather than choose forced displacement to northern Syria.¹³⁵ The full details of the behind-the-scenes politics of this effort are not publicly known, but it is likely that the Russians felt they needed these former officers to maintain order in the area. The defected officers who led local opposition groups had proven reliable and competent negotiating partners during months of talks, even though Russian negotiators had not. The large sprawling area of northern Homs presented a real risk of retaliatory bloodshed, and the Russians may have over-promised on their willingness to police the whole region.

Under the terms of the final agreement, fighters and civilians who did not wish to “reconcile” with the Syrian government or who were unable to do so for fear of their life, would be deported to Idlib province or Jarablus in Aleppo province, accompanied by Russian police. They were not allowed to bring money or jewelry with them.¹³⁶ Like other previous surrender deals, this one allowed departing fighters to bring their personal weapons. Those who stayed and “settled” their situation with the government had to give up their personal weapons, and all men between the ages of 18-42 would be called to mandatory military service after a period of six months. Students and employees would be allowed to return to their work and studies.¹³⁷

135 El Dorar, “تسريبات صوتية خطيرة لـ”فراس طلاس” بشأن تسويات شمال حمص.. والجيش السوري الجديد,” 17 April 2018, <eldorar.com>; Interview with Siege Watch contact WR interview on 20 June 2018.

136 Zafarana News, Facebook post, 2 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Bv3gzv>>.

137 Nedaa Syria, “Rebel Factions of Northern Homs Countryside Conclude an Agreement with the Russian Delegation,” 2 May 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

Syrian government agencies would enter immediately and begin re-establishing services, and Russian military police and Syrian police would enter to take control after the last convoy departed. Syrian military and security forces were not supposed to enter the post-siege enclave for at least six months after the deal, while Russian military police maintained a presence there. Russian forces set up some observation points to secure certain strategic assets, and the critical north-south highway – once Syria’s most important artery – was to be reopened for the first time in almost seven years.¹³⁸

Some opposition groups, notably the Talbiseh-based Jaysh al-Tawhid, chose to stay and reconcile with the Syrian government instead of accepting forced displacement. Harakat al-Watan and other armed groups blamed Jaysh al-Tawhid for its dealings with Russia in Cairo, saying that their actions had weakened the unity of the local resistance.¹³⁹ Under Jaysh al-Tawhid’s agreement with the government and Russia, its estimated 2,500 fighters would become a Russian-backed militia and provide security for Talbiseh city.¹⁴⁰

Disagreements on the opposition side continued even as the initial stages of the surrender agreement began to take place. On 4 May, Harakat Tahrir al-Watan reiterated its public rejection of the agreement and again called for outside intervention, as thousands of people in al-Rastan gathered to protest the deal.¹⁴¹ The protestors denounced forced displacement and called for international protection to prevent any post-surrender reprisal attacks from the sectarian militias based nearby. The next day, after local dignitaries and civilians intervened asking the fighters



Large protests in al-Rastan against the surrender agreement on 4 May. Source: Al-Rastan Unified Media Office

138 Smart News, "اتوصل لاتفاق "تهجير" شمال حمص وجنوب حماه", 2 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

139 Smart News, "تحرير وطن": "اتفاق القاهرة" ساهم بإخراج شمال حمص من إطار محادثات "أستانة", 8 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

140 Rozana, "ريف حمص.. الفصائل العسكرية في تلييسة تتجه إلى تسوية جماعية مع النظام", 30 May 2018, <rozana.fm>.

141 Smart News, "تحرير وطن": "نجري اتصالات دولية لمنع تهجير شمال حمص", 4 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

to accept the deal in order to avoid further bloodshed, most of the armed groups in al-Rastan announced that they would agree to forced displacement rather than staying and trying to fight.¹⁴²

Residents who decided that forced population transfers to northern Syria were their safest bet registered with their local council and were assigned a convoy and date.¹⁴³ The leaders of AOGs worked with the local councils to coordinate the exit of fighters and their families.¹⁴⁴ This relatively organized process, and the fact that local governing authorities and not just armed groups were included in the negotiations, is indicative of how developed and mature local governance infrastructure had become in northern Homs during its years under siege.

Forced Population Transfers

Forced population transfers began five days after the surrender deal for northern Homs was announced. The initial convoys from northern Homs overlapped with the final few forced displacement convoys from the Southern Damascus Suburbs. In contrast to the relatively organized preparations to inform and register people before the convoys, the transfers themselves were fraught with complications from start to finish. The greatest challenges involved the convoys to northern Aleppo, which were blocked from entering the Turkish-controlled Euphrates Shield area of northern Aleppo. All northern Homs forced displacement convoys originally headed for Aleppo were delayed at the Abu al-Zindin crossing and ultimately, only one was allowed through.

“My feeling is that my soul is leaving my body... My wife is pregnant, I have a 2-year-old child, I am afraid of what we will find in the north.”

– WG, al-Rastan resident

- ◆ 7 May - The first convoy departed for northern Aleppo from al-Rastan, carrying nearly 3,400 fighters and civilians.¹⁴⁵ The deportees gathered in the rain at 9:00 am to find that the buses were delayed and the SARC team that was supposed to accompany the convoy was missing.¹⁴⁶ The buses finally left that evening, but did not reach the Abu al-Zindin crossing in Aleppo until the next morning. The convoy was kept waiting for 12 hours as Turkish forces initially denied their entry. They were finally allowed in that night after pressure from local groups in al-Bab, but even then, the Turkish authorities initially rejected requests from local civil society groups to help them.¹⁴⁷ Eventually, the people on the convoy were accommodated through a combination of host families and local shelters.¹⁴⁸ On 12 May, 500 people from the group were allowed to proceed further north to their intended destination of Azaz.¹⁴⁹

142 Smart News, “الحزب” في مدينة الرستن يسلم أسلحته الثقيلة لروسيا ويقرر الخروج نحو الشمال، 5 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

143 Step News, “دفعته التهجير الأول لحمص وحماة تنطلق غداً وسط تخطيط كبير”، 6 May 2018, <stepagency-sy.net>.

144 Site of the Syrian Solution, “قافلة مهجرين من شمالي حمص تستعد للخروج عبر معبر مورك إلى إدلب”، 10 May 2018, <7al.net >.

145 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 8 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2nYm4xi>.

146 Mohammad al-Rahal, Facebook post, 7 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MqmR8R>.

147 Unified Media Office in the City of al-Rastan, Facebook post, 8 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MIZGGg>.

148 Khaled Khatib, “أزمة قوافل المهجرين: ما بين مسؤولية تركيا وروسيا”، Al Modon, 10 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

149 Enab Baladi, “لقافلة الأولى من مهجري ريف حمص تدخل اعزاز بعد انتظار طويل”، 12 May 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.



People in al-Rastan gather for the first forced displacement convoy, 7 May 2018. Source: Media Center in Rastan



People in al-Rastan gather for the first forced displacement convoy, 7 May 2018. Source: Media Center in Rastan

- ◆ 8 May – The second northern Homs convoy carrying around 2,800 departed for northern Aleppo after delays due to the poor organization and bad weather.¹⁵⁰ It too was stopped at the Abu al-Zindin crossing by Turkish authorities. After a 40-hour wait, the convoy was re-routed toward Idlib via the Qalaat al-Madiq crossing and finally entered opposition-controlled territory on 10 May.¹⁵¹

The Turkish denials of entry caused a convoy pile up at the Abu al-Zindin crossing, and by 9 May, as many as 8,000 IDPs from northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs were stuck there.¹⁵² Conditions were awful for these displaced civilians who were stuck in a precarious position in government-controlled territory near the Abu al-Zindin checkpoint. They lacked sufficient food, shelter, water, housing, medical care, or bathroom facilities. During the first northern Homs convoy's wait at Abu al-Zindin, a woman named Houria Touqaj died of a heart attack, without access to sufficient medical care.¹⁵³ People in al-Bab held large protests, demanding the displaced be let in.¹⁵⁴

On 10 May, the NC held an emergency meeting with Russian representatives where they agreed to pause the departure of new convoys for two days, until the status of the first few convoys stuck in northern Aleppo was resolved. Ultimately, the pause only lasted for one day, and a new forced displacement convoy departed on 11 May.¹⁵⁵

- ◆ 11 May – The third convoy left northern Homs carrying around 3,500 people. They reached Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama at dawn on 12 May.¹⁵⁶
- ◆ 12-13 May – The fourth convoy left northern Homs in two batches. The first left al-Rastan on 12 May carrying around 1,500 people, all civilians. They reached Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama, the next day, and were transferred to temporary accommodation centers in Idlib.¹⁵⁷ The second part of the fourth convoy included over 1,300 people, and departed for Idlib after midnight on 13 May.¹⁵⁸
- ◆ 12 May – A convoy of around 2,500 people left northern Homs. It included around 1,500 HTS members from southern Hama and their family members, and was not considered part of the main northern Homs surrender deal.¹⁵⁹ During a separate meeting between HTS and Russia on 9 May, they had agreed for HTS to leave the towns of the eastern part of the besieged enclave.¹⁶⁰ Unlike the other convoys, it entered opposition-controlled territory through the

150 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 9 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2wjluxR>>.

151 Orient News, YouTube video, 10 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LfsJN2>>.

152 Alaa Nassar and Avery Edelman, "Thousands of displaced people from Homs and Damascus 'stuck' at crossing to rebel-held northern Aleppo," Syria Direct, 9 May 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

153 Zaman Al Wasl, "أول حالة وفاة ضمن قافلة المهجرين الأول من ريف حمص والالاف ينتظرون في العراء," 8 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

154 Abu Mohammad Yasin, Facebook video, 8 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N7XBAM>>.

155 Homs Media Center, Facebook post, 10 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MppSq0>>.

156 Radio Al-Kul, "استمرار عملية التهجير من ريف حمص الشمال," 12 May 2018, <www.radioalkul.com>.

157 Smart News, "First part of fourth group of internally displaced persons from Homs and Hama arrives at Qalat al-Madiq," 13 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

158 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 13 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2BBCN3m>>.

159 Smart News, "تأجيل خروج قسم من الدفعة الرابعة لمهجري شمال حمص," 12 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

160 Nedaa Syria, "HTS Concludes Agreement with Russia to leave northern countryside of Homs & eastern Hama," 9 May 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.



Protestors in al-Bab demand the displacement convoys be allowed in, 9 May 2018. Source: SyriaTV



Russian and local negotiators hold an emergency meeting near Dar al-Kabira, 10 May 2018. Source: Al-Hal



A long line of forced displacement buses leaves northern Homs on 12 May 2018. Original source UNK



Forcibly displaced civilians from northern Homs reach Qal'at al-Madiq, 15 May 2018. Source: SyriaTV

- ◆ Morek checkpoint, which it reached the next day.¹⁶¹
- ◆ 13 May – The fifth regular convoy left northern Homs for Idlib in two batches carrying a total of more than 3,700. They reached the Qalaat al-Madiq crossing the next day.¹⁶²
- ◆ 14 May – The sixth convoy left northern Homs for Idlib in three batches, departing from al-Rastan bridge and al-Samalil crossing near al-Houleh.¹⁶³ This group contained nearly 5,700 people in total.¹⁶⁴ They were reportedly harassed and stoned by government loyalists during their trip and reached the Qalaat al-Madiq crossing the next day.¹⁶⁵
- ◆ 15 May – The seventh convoy departed from northern Homs to Qalaat al-Madiq in three batches carrying a total of around 6,850 people.¹⁶⁶ They arrived the next day.
- ◆ 16 May – The eighth convoy departed northern Homs for Qalaat al-Madiq in two batches, carrying a total of 3,800 people. They arrived the next day.¹⁶⁷
- ◆ 17 May – A ninth convoy left northern Homs carrying almost 600 people, reaching Qalaat al-Madiq at dawn the next day.¹⁶⁸

On 16 May, the Syrian government pre-emptively announced the end of forced population transfers and declared that it had retaken control over the entire northern Homs enclave, even though more convoys were scheduled.¹⁶⁹ The final ninth convoy was supposed to be more than double the size it ended up being and was scheduled to leave the day before, but when people gathered on 16 May they found that no buses were there for them at their meeting point at al-Samalil crossing. The Russian forces gave local leaders several excuses, saying that the buses needed maintenance and the drivers were tired, but also claiming that the transfers officially ended on Monday 15 May, and the eighth convoy that left on Tuesday 16 May had been a special exception.¹⁷⁰ After almost two days, only 570 people out of more than 1,500 who originally intended to join were still waiting at al-Samalil.

While giving these excuses for the delays to the ninth convoy, Russian forces also reportedly told local council leaders that they would be happy to return people who changed their minds from Qalaat al-Madiq to northern Homs, and send buses there to pick them up within three days. This eagerness to return IDPs even while sabotaging the final convoys suggests that Russia was uncomfortable with the high numbers of people wishing to leave the region.¹⁷¹

161 Syria Noor, "لقافلة الرابعة من 'مهجري' ريف حمص وحماة تصل مورك," 13 May 2018, <syrianoor.net>.

162 Syria TV, "لقافلة الخامسة من مهجري ريف حمص تصل إدلب," 14 May 2018, <www.syria.tv>.

163 Zaman Al Wasl, "آلاف مهجر يفترشون العراء في 'قلعة المضيق' ومأدبة غذاء لعراية المفاوضات في ريف حمص 6," 15 May 2018, <www.zamanalwasl.net>.

164 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 14 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2vYgLM7>.

165 Smart News, "وصول دفعة جديدة من مهجري حمص إلى شمال حماة," 15 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

166 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 15 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2w5iMgh>; Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 15 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MFyJDu>; Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 15 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2nZBIsi>.

167 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 16 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2LdMPqJ>; Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 16 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Ndu1JW>.

168 Unified Media Office in the City of al-Rastan, Facebook post, 17 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Pyf334>.

169 Smart News, "النظام السوري يعلن السيطرة على كامل شمال حمص وجنوب حماة," 16 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

170 Step News, "الدفعة العالقة شمال حمص تصل إدلب، والنظام يُخرج من الحولة," 18 May 2018, <stepagency-sy.net>.

171 Horrya Press, "مئات المهجرين عالقون في الحولة بحمص.. والروس يعلنون انتهاء عمليات الخروج," 16 May 2018, <horrya.net>.

Just as it had done with the blocked Southern Damascus Suburbs convoys, Turkey gave multiple reasons for refusing to let the northern Homs convoys in. Turkey's emergency response agency AFAD and the Turkish Red Crescent said they were unprepared from a humanitarian perspective to support the new arrivals. There were also reports that Turkey was angry that the surrender deal was concluded by Russia without its input and that it was not even consulted by the AOGs or negotiation committee.¹⁷²

The northern Homs IDPs who were transferred to Idlib – many of them after being rerouted from their original destination in northern Aleppo – found that little preparation had been made for their arrival at Qalaat al-Madiq. Local relief organizations were in crisis, struggling to cope, as they did not have the tents, food, or water to care for the tens of thousands of new IDPs. This prompted local officials to send out distress calls for assistance.¹⁷³

Around 35,000 people were displaced from northern Homs in total.¹⁷⁴ The final number of forcibly displaced people was lower than the original estimates that over 50,000 people would choose displacement. Part of the reason for this discrepancy can be explained by the de-registration of civilians throughout the forced transfer process as people became aware of the problems facing the first few convoys, the fact that entry to Turkish-controlled parts of Aleppo was no longer an option, and the poor humanitarian conditions awaiting IDPs in northern Syria upon their arrival.¹⁷⁵ Also, few people from Talbiseh were transferred in the displacement convoys, as most had decided to stay and take their chances, with Jaysh al-Tawhid providing security for the city.¹⁷⁶

The Aftermath

Civilians who stayed in northern Homs fared relatively well in the first few months following the surrender agreement, compared to other post-surrender areas. The area had no communities that were completely depopulated and relatively little infrastructure had been destroyed. While there were limited violations, northern Homs largely avoided the widespread looting and egregious civilian abuses like detentions and executions by pro-government forces that were recorded in areas like Eastern Ghouta and Eastern Aleppo following their respective surrenders. Tens of thousands of those who remained went to regional “reconciliation centers” to begin the process of being vetted to settle their status with the government.¹⁷⁷ The government also opened three centers to force those who had not gotten national identification cards yet to do so, fining them 10,000 SYP.¹⁷⁸

In mid-May, Russia set up its first checkpoints along the highway near Talbiseh and jointly manned them with Jaysh al-Tawhid.¹⁷⁹ On 25 May the Russian military police entered al-Houleh and set up

172 Khaled Khatib, “أزمة قوافل المهجرين: ما بين مسؤولية تركيا وروسيا,” Al Modon, 10 May 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

173 El Dorar, “رئيس مجلس قلعة المضيق لـ”الدرر الشامية“: مهجرو حمص يعيشون على “التمر والماء,” 15 May 2018, <eldorar.com>.

174 UNSC S/2018/619, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 June 2018, <undocs.org>; Zaman Al Wasl, “Arabic Title,” 16 April 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

175 Bahira al-Zarier and Alice Al Maleh, “North Homs residents rethink decision to evacuate after convoy redirected to rebel-held Idlib,” Syria Direct, 10 May 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

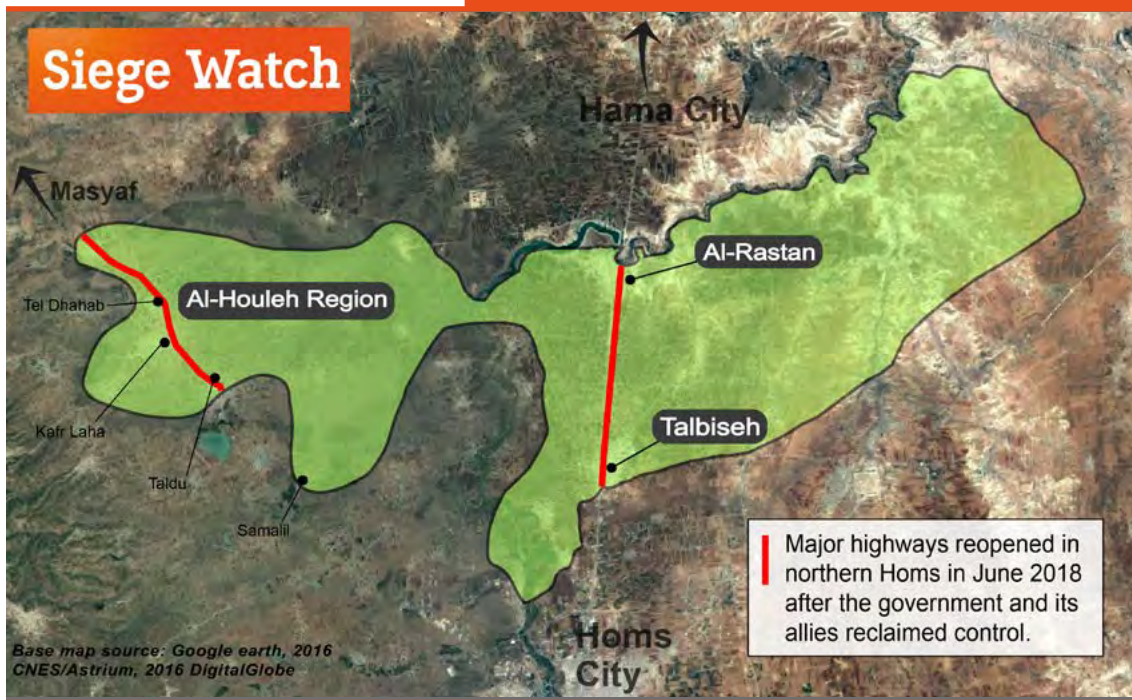
176 Step News, “دفعه التهجير الأول لحمص وحماة تنطلق غداً وسط تخطيط كبير,” 6 May 2018, <stepagency-sy.net>.

177 Zaman Al Wasl, “زمان الوصل” تحصل على صور لأوراق التسوية مع النظام,” 28 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

178 Syria TV, “بطاقات شخصية” شمال حمص,” 11 June 2018, <www.syria.tv>.

179 Nedaa Syria, “Talbissa’s Commission” illustrates why Russian troops deployed on the International Highway,” 18 May 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

Map 5.



several observation points.¹⁸⁰ They set up additional observation points around Talbiseh and al-Rastan in June.¹⁸¹ Some internal checkpoints were also reportedly set up in al-Rastan city by June. By contrast, no external forces, not even Russian security forces, entered Talbiseh city where Jaysh al-Tawhid remained in control. For people who chose to stay in northern Homs, the Russian checkpoints were the main thing protecting them from pro-government sectarian militias.

In the days following the surrender, the Syrian government and its allies focused on rehabilitating and reopening the highways through northern Homs – their main strategic objective in the area. On 5 June the highway between Talbiseh and al-Rastan was reopened.¹⁸² On 28 June, the main highway in al-Houleh, connecting it to the Masyaf area, was reopened.¹⁸³

Less attention was devoted to improving conditions for civilians in northern Homs and humanitarian conditions remained poor, with high unemployment and a lack of basic services. By early July, electricity had still not been fully restored even to the area's major cities, and water service was still intermittent.¹⁸⁴ The restoration of the region's devastated medical sector was also neglected.¹⁸⁵

180 Enab Baladi, "لشطرة العسكرية الروسية تدخل الحولة بحمص," 20 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

181 Enab Baladi, "لشطرة العسكرية الروسية تدخل الحولة بحمص," 20 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

182 Zaman Al Wasl, "بعد إغلاق 6 سنوات.. فتح أوتوستراد حمص -حماة," 5 June 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

183 Zaman Al Wasl, "إعادة فتح طريق حمص - الحولة - مصياف، بعد 7 سنوات من إغلاقه," 30 June 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

184 Horrya Press, "غياب المنظمات الإنسانية يزيد معاناة الأهالي شمال حمص," 9 July 2018, <horrya.net>.

185 Smart News, "إهمال وخدمات محدودة لمراكز النظام الطبية شمالي حمص," 13 July 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

Immediately after the end of the forced population transfers on 30 May, one international aid convoy was allowed to enter the area. Its supplies were split between Talbiseh and Hama.¹⁸⁶ The aid was delivered by SARC alone, because the Syrian government denied UN staffers permission to participate in the delivery and monitor aid distribution.¹⁸⁷ On 26 June, a UN/SARC aid convoy was allowed to access al-Rastan with humanitarian assistance for 107,500 people.¹⁸⁸ On 15 July, a UN/SARC aid convoy finally accessed al-Houleh, carrying assistance for 89,000 people.¹⁸⁹ Although access for international humanitarian actors remained restricted, commercial access to northern Homs was largely restored in the aftermath of the surrender. All goods became available again in northern Homs and prices dropped compared to before the agreement.¹⁹⁰

Each community in northern Homs set up its own “civilian committee” to communicate with authorities in the post-siege period. These committees were composed largely of former local council members, many of whom had opted to stay in the area. One of the tasks they handled was managing the situation of forcibly displaced residents who wanted to return to northern Homs after seeing the poor conditions in northern Syria firsthand. The civilian committees collected lists of individuals who wanted to return and submitted them to government authorities in Damascus for vetting.¹⁹¹ Several hundred civilians who feared the Syrian government enough to choose forced displacement just weeks earlier, returned to northern Homs within the first month after the transfers – a striking testament to the dismal conditions in the north.¹⁹²

This relatively quick and uncontested return of some of the forcibly displaced residents to northern Homs is unique among the post-surrender communities and speaks to several dynamics specific to the area. One such dynamic noted by Siege Watch contacts is the high proportion of defected officers in local armed group leadership and their persistent relationships with government officials and intermediaries. Another is the configuration of northern Homs. Several of the country’s most critical highways pass through the formerly besieged enclave and securing and reopening these routes was a major priority for the government. But beyond the highways, these routes the area holds little strategic value for the government, particularly compared to the areas around Damascus. As one local contact told Siege Watch “No one fears of law 10 in Talbiseh,”¹⁹³ supporting the idea that the population centers of northern Homs are not a high priority target of the government’s demographic engineering strategy.

Just as in other post-surrender communities, the surrender of northern Homs brought an end to many of the vibrant civil society institutions in the region, such as its well-developed network of media centers.¹⁹⁴

186 OCHA, Tweet, 30 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2NaGoqe>>.

187 UNSC S/2018/619, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 June 2018, <undocs.org>.

188 UNSC S/2018/724, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 July 2018, <undocs.org>.

189 OCHA, Tweet, 15 July 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LczoHK>>.

190 Interview with Siege Watch contact AK on 26 June 2018.

191 Interview with Siege Watch contact HJ on 27 June 2018.

192 Interview with Siege Watch contact AK on 26 June 2018.

193 For background on Law no. 10 see: Human Rights Watch, “Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law,” 29 May 2018, <www.hrw.org>.

194 Zaman Al Wasl, “إغلاق أشهر وسيلة إعلامية بريفي حمص الشمال وحماة الجنوبي,” 21 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

VIOLATIONS

While conditions in northern Homs were relatively good in the aftermath of the surrender, there were still several reports of violations including detentions, looting, and executions, as well as more general issues of Russian and Syrian military forces failing to follow through on the terms that were agreed to in the surrender deal.

In some areas, Syrian government forces and militias entered post-surrender villages almost immediately after the forced displacement convoys departed, in violation of the terms of the agreement which said that their military police would not enter the area for at least six months.¹⁹⁵ On 22 May, just days after the official forced population transfers were completed, a new batch of around 200 fighters from Jaysh al-Tawhid in Talbiseh announced that they also wanted to depart for the north. The sudden change of heart was made after an incursion by pro-government forces into the city.¹⁹⁶

Despite Russian protection guarantees, in late May, a van carrying a group of civilians from the town of Aqrab was shot at by pro-government militias while en route to a government reconciliation center in southern Hama. At least seven died and another four were injured.¹⁹⁷ In another incident, two young men from Zaafaraneh near Talbiseh were attacked by pro-government militiamen.¹⁹⁸

While not nearly as prevalent in besieged areas that surrendered after scorched earth campaigns, there were some reports of civilian detention in northern Homs. Notably several Palestinian medical personnel were arrested.¹⁹⁹ There were also reports in July that some of those who had returned to Homs from northern Syria were targeted by pro-government militias for detention and extortion upon their return.²⁰⁰

There were isolated reports of looting in the wake of the forced displacements, as well as ongoing incidents of confiscation of civilian property under the pretext of punishing militants.²⁰¹ Reports suggest that internet equipment and industrial equipment were targeted. Compared to other post-surrender areas the looting was minimal and appeared tied to specific corrupt officials or local militias who did so in defiance of – rather than with the approval of – Russian and Syrian authorities. In one incident, residents reportedly went out to the road connecting their city to the highway in the middle of the night to physically block a pro-government militia from driving into the city, while they called Russian officials to drive away the would-be looters.²⁰² In another case, pro-government militiamen who looted civilian property in al-Houleh area were later arrested by regular government military forces.²⁰³

195 Qasioun News, "قوات النظام تُعلن بدء التجهيز لدخول شمال حمص"، 15 May 2018, <www.qasioun-news.com>.

196 Geroun, "دفعه مقاتلين تغادر "تلبسة" إلى الشمال"، 22 May 2018, <geroun.net>.

197 Geroun, "ريف حماة.. قتل مدنيون برصاص "الشبيحة"، 23 May 2018, <geiroon.com>.

198 Horrya Press, "توتر وقلتان أمني تشهد مناطق شمال حمص"، 29 May 2018, <horrya.net>.

199 Nedaa Syria, "حملة أمنية للنظام السوري.. واعتقال لكوادر طبية بريف حمص"، 11 June 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

200 Smart News, "عناصر النظام و"الشبيحة" يعتقلون ويختطفون المهجرين العائدين لشمال حمص"، 11 July 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

201 Horrya Press, "على مرأى من الروس.. قوات الأسد تنتهك اتفاق شمال حمص"، 1 June 2018, <horrya.net>; Horrya Press, "على مرأى من الروس.. قوات الأسد تنتهك اتفاق شمال حمص"، 31 July 2018, <horrya.net>.

202 Al-Ayyam Syria, "الأفرع الأمنية تقسم السلطة على مدن شمال حمص"، 28 May 2018, <ayyamsyria.net>.

203 Smart News, "شبيحة" النظام تسرق ممتلكات المدنيين شمال حمص بعد تهجيرهم"، 21 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

In early June, Russian military police reportedly withdrew from several of their observation points,²⁰⁴ and in July, government security services installed heavily armed checkpoints around the major cities and towns in the area. Government forces began inspecting all passing vehicles and people and charging fines to bus drivers and motorists.²⁰⁵ One Homs resident reported paying 100 SYP at each of five checkpoints he encountered between al-Rastan and Homs city.²⁰⁶ Limited at first, reported incidents of civilian harassment by pro-government militias at these checkpoints increased over time as Russian enforcement began to lapse.

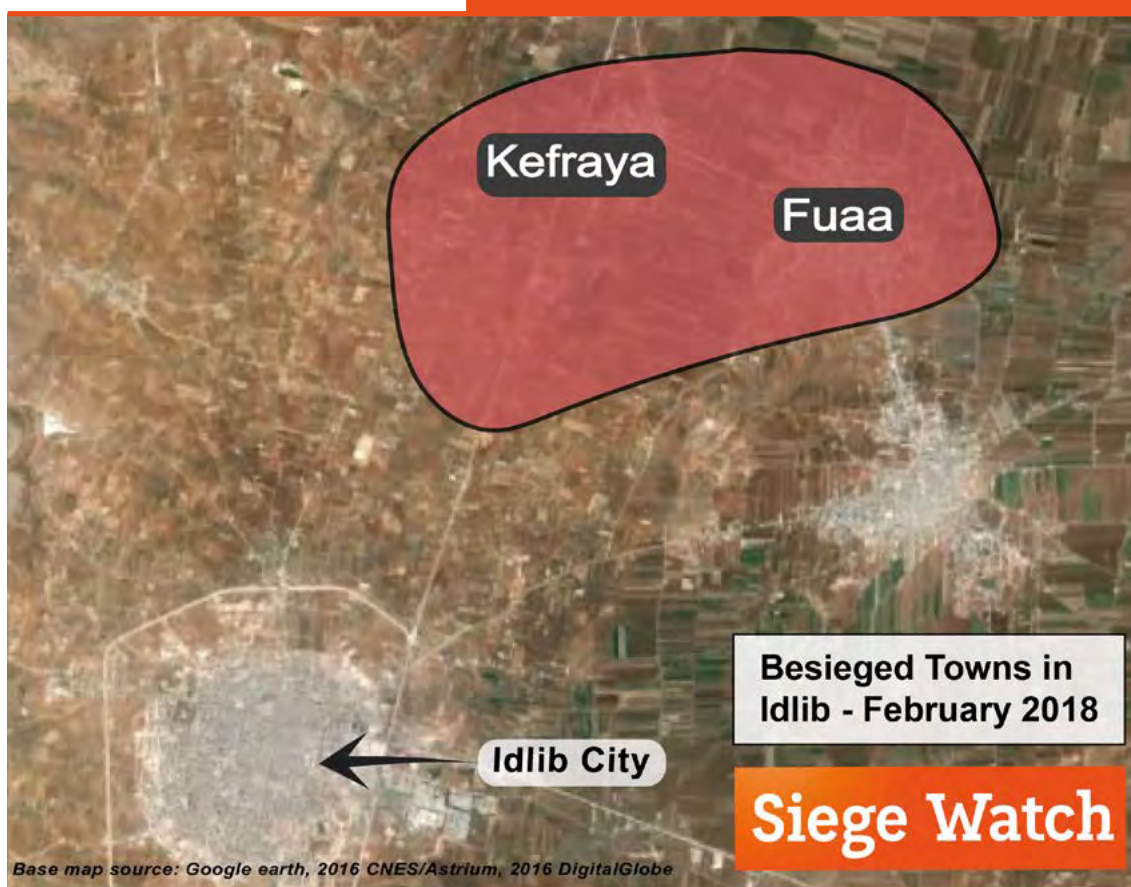
204 Zaman Al Wasl, "الشرطة الروسية تنسحب من مواقع في ريفي حمص وحماة إلى القصير," 11 June 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

205 Horrya Press, "توتر وفلتان أمني تشهده مناطق شمال حمص," 29 May 2018, <horrya.net>.

206 Horrya Press, "قوات الأسد تفرض أتاوات على الأهالي شمال حمص," 13 July 2018, <horrya.net>.

Fuaa & Kefraya, Idlib

Map 6.



The government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by armed opposition groups and HTS during the February – May reporting period. With the government and its allies retaking control of northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, this left Fuaa and Kefraya as the only remaining long-term sieges in the entire country by the end of May.

Residents in Fuaa and Kefraya faced a relatively static military and humanitarian situation throughout the reporting period. The towns continued to be hit with sporadic fire from surrounding opposition and extremist forces, but no serious military offensives were launched.



An Iranian plane drops aid to Fuaa and Kefraya, 16 Jun 2018. Source: IRIB News



A medical evacuation from Fuaa and Kefraya on 20 February 2018. Source: SARC

Similarly, humanitarian conditions remained poor but unchanged as the towns continued to receive regular airdrops of assistance including fuel and warm clothing, provided by the Syrian government and its allies.

On 20 February, five patients were evacuated along with their families for medical treatment under an unknown deal.²⁰⁷ On 30 April, around 1,000 fighters and their families were evacuated from the towns under an exchange deal reached between HTS and the government's allies. In return for the partial transfer out of Fuaa and Kefraya, approximately 150 HTS fighters and their families were evacuated from the al-Rijeh portion of Yarmouk camp, and they handed control of the area over to pro-government forces.²⁰⁸ Subsequent population transfers out of Fuaa and Kefraya envisioned under the terms of the agreement failed to materialize as residents resisted and went to the streets in protest.²⁰⁹

In July, after the end of the Siege Watch reporting period, the situation in Fuaa and Kefraya changed dramatically for the first time since the towns first came under siege by opposition forces in 2015. In mid-July, HTS forces and some other opposition groups appeared to be preparing to launch a major new offensive on the two towns.²¹⁰ The development came amidst the backdrop of infighting in Idlib as armed opposition groups and HTS competed for control. This tension was increased by the influx of opposition and extremist fighters displaced from formerly besieged areas like Eastern Ghouta and northern Homs.

Suddenly, on 17 July, Syrian government media announced that a deal had been reached with HTS for the final surrender of Fuaa and Kefraya. The basis of the deal was a prisoner exchange. Under the terms of the deal, all remaining fighters and civilians would be transferred out of the towns, which would be handed over to HTS control.²¹¹ The deal was apparently reached without the buy-in of local residents, who remained unsure that any agreement had been reached right up until the last moment.²¹²

Buses arrived quickly, and the entire displacement process took place the next day on 18 July. Around 7,000 people in 120 buses were forcibly transferred out of Fuaa and Kefraya to government-controlled territory in Aleppo, as the government released hundreds of detainees.²¹³

The process of forced displacement from Fuaa and Kefraya mirrored displacements from formerly besieged opposition areas in many ways. Residents of Fuaa and Kefraya concern over their safety under the terms of the deal and called on international actors to intervene to provide security guarantees.²¹⁴ The sudden announcement and the speed of the population transfers doubtless helped prevent a number of challenges from arising, as stakeholders had little time to

207 News Network of Fuaa and Kefraya, Facebook post, 20 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2N8vFW>>.

208 Revo Spring, "هيئة تحرير الشام" تتوصل لاتفاق يقضي بخروج مقاتليها من مخيم اليرموك", 30 April 2018, <revo.spring.com>.

209 Mohammed Al-Haj Ali and Alice Al Maleh, "No evacuation for encircled Idlib towns after residents refuse multi-stage exit," Syria Direct, 8 May 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

210 Enab Baladi, "A Source: Idlib's Factions Are Preparing for an Offensive against Kafriya and Al-Fu'ah," 14 July 2018, <english.enabbaladi.net>.

211 Enab Baladi, "تفاق بين 'تحرير الشام' وإيران يخلق ملف كفريا والقوقعة", 17 July 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

212 Media Office in al- Kefraya and Fuaa, Facebook post, 17 July 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2nYoBYk>>.

213 Reuters, "Evacuation of two pro-Assad Syrian villages complete," 18 July 2018, <www.reuters.com>; Enab Baladi,

"تحرير الشام" توضح أسباب عدم اكتمال اتفاق "كفريا والقوقعة", 18 July 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

214 Media Office in al- Kefraya and Fuaa, Facebook post, 18 July 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Muj0E>>.

stop the deal. But even though they took place quickly, the transfer process was still fraught with problems. Several of the buses were attacked with stones as they passed through opposition-controlled territory. Around 22 buses, the the last group to depart depart, were stopped by HTS forces before they reached government-controlled territory and temporarily held as additional demands were worked out.²¹⁵

The final prisoner exchange and surrender deal for Fuaa and Kefraya left the two towns completely depopulated. After the buses departed, the HTS - affiliated “Salvation Government” in Idlib declared the towns a military zone as they took control and warned nearby residents from approaching.²¹⁶ The end of the sieges of Fuaa and Kefraya marked the end of all long-term sieges tracked by the Siege Watch project.

215 Orient News, “حكومة الإنقاذ” تحذر من الاقتراب من كفرية والقوعة.. وتوضح الأسباب” 19 July 2018, <www.orient-news.net>.

216 El Dorar, “عشرات العائلات المهجرة من حمص وحماة بلا رعاية صحية ولا إغاثة” 18 July 2018, <eldorar.com>.

Discussion: Life After Siege

Life in Exile

An overwhelming number of siege survivors were forcibly displaced to northern Syria during the reporting period. In addition to the nearly 45,000 from northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs described in detail in this report, there were an additional 65,000 from Eastern Ghouta, and thousands from Eastern Qalamoun area. Then in July and August, more than 10,000 additional people were forcibly displaced to northern Syria from the southern provinces of Daraa and Quneitra.²¹⁷ These recently displaced people join more than 2.2 million others displaced to Idlib and Aleppo earlier in the conflict.²¹⁸

An upheaval of this magnitude, inflicted upon a population that had already suffered years of unthinkable suffering in isolation, should have been greeted with a major international mobilization. Instead, these forcibly displaced siege victims entered in a new world of chaos, uncertainty, neglect, and hopelessness. These new IDPs became pawns in the geopolitical strategies of international actors and armed groups. They had no real say as to where they were taken, and were often stuck at checkpoints for days without assistance. They arrived at their destinations following years of previous displacement waves that had already overwhelmed support systems and exhausted international interest. Waning international support for humanitarian efforts meant the needs of these new IDPs far outstripped the available assistance. Many of the civilians deported to northern Syria found conditions to be as bad as or even worse than their prior lives under siege. Furthermore, large swathes of northern Syria are still unstable and civilians there are vulnerable to the violence of armed group infighting and bombing by the Syrian government and Russia.

The overlapping mass population transfers from northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs as well as other surrendering areas like Eastern Qalamoun overwhelmed humanitarian organizations at the zero point crossing in Qalaat al-Madiq in May, leading to urgent calls for international support.²¹⁹ Among the arriving IDPs were people with serious untreated injuries and malnourished children, requiring urgent medical care.²²⁰ Insufficient humanitarian preparedness was also given as a rationale by Turkish agencies for rejecting IDP convoys trying to enter Turkish-controlled areas of northern Aleppo.

217 Northern Syria Response Coordinators, Facebook post, 11 August 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2os0a5R>>.

218 USAID, "SYRIA - COMPLEX EMERGENCY FACT SHEET #8, FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2018," 8 June 2018, <reliefweb.int>.

219 Nedaa Syria, "Local Council in Qala't al-Madeeq addressing Distress Call to help IDPs from the countryside of Homs," 15 May 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

220 Medecins Sans Frontieres, "Newly displaced Syrians face multiple challenges in Idlib and northern Hama," 14 May 2018, <www.msf.org>.



An IDP camp in Sarmada Idlib hosts forcibly displaced people from Homs, 22 May 2018. Source: Samer al-Homsi

Those who ended up in formal IDP camps in northern Syria faced some of the worst conditions.²²¹ For example, more than half of the Southern Damascus Suburbs IDPs were sent to the Deir Ballut camp in rural Afrin – an area where many of the original residents had themselves been recently displaced by a Turkish-backed offensive against Kurdish forces. According to Siege Watch contacts and others, residents who arrived in Deir Ballut were shocked and dismayed by the horrendous conditions. The tents provided little privacy and were made of poorly ventilated material that burnt in the hot weather. There was no electricity to help provide relief from the heat or to cook food.²²² Weekly aid distributions from Turkish agencies were insufficient. Residents with the means to do so had to travel several kilometers to the town of Jindares to buy food and water, but many could not afford this expense.²²³ Some residents spent up to a week without fresh drinking water.²²⁴ The desperation forced people to drink from dirty water tanks, leading to outbreaks of intestinal conditions.²²⁵ Severe cases of dehydration were reported, and in June there was an urgent call for baby milk.²²⁶ There were only shared unsanitary public toilets, leading to protection concerns for women and children, and spreading communicable diseases like meningitis.²²⁷

221 Horrya Press, "عشرات العائلات المهجرة من حمص وحماة بلا رعاية صحية ولا إغاثة," 12 June 2018, <horrya.net>.

222 Interview with Siege Watch contact RS on 4 July 2018; Hwaida Saad and Megan Specia, "Memories Lost and Futures on Hold: A Look Inside a Camp for Syria's Displaced," New York Times, 11 July 2018, <www.nytimes.com>.

223 Osama Moussa and Tom Rollins, "Assad's evacuation deals leave bitter taste for displaced Syrians," The National, 10 June 2018, <www.thenational.ae>.

224 Shaam News Network, "نشاط حمص ينتقدون تقصير الحكومة المؤقتة في إعانة المهجرين ويحملوها مسؤولية عودة أي منهم لمناطق النظام," 31 May 2018, <www.shaam.org>.

225 Ammar Hamou, Barrett Limoges, and Media al-Kurdi, "Facing blistering heat and squalid conditions, scores of Outer Damascus displaced fall ill at Turkish-administered camp in Afrin," Syria Direct, 6 June 2018, <syriadirect.org>; Interview with Siege Watch contact RS on 4 July 2018.

226 Action Group for Palestinians, "A call to secure infant milk in Deir Balout camp in north Syria," 24 June 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

227 Step News, "لحزّ يحوّل مخيم ديربلوط لـ"ساونا" وغرق أحد أطفاله," 20 May 2018, <stepagency-sy.net>.

People in Deir Ballut were forced to use the nearby river to escape the extreme heat and to bathe, and several displaced civilians from the Southern Damascus Suburbs drowned as a result.²²⁸ For example, on 23 May, an elderly man from Yarmouk named Abu Aziz al-Shehabi drowned while rescuing a young boy from the river.²²⁹ The camp did not have a medical center and several people died of medical emergencies like heart attacks without access to care. In mid-June, two tents belonging to IDPs from the Southern Damascus Suburbs in the Deir Ballut caught fire and burned down, due to a lack of water to put out the flames.²³⁰ Trapped in the camp during the sweltering summer heat, one contact said it felt like they were in prison.

Turkey – one of the biggest supporters of the Syrian opposition and most welcoming country to Syrian asylum seekers throughout the course of the conflict – treated the recent waves of displaced Syrians from besieged areas poorly. In addition to blocking many of the forced displacement convoys trying to reach northern Aleppo, Turkey also denied most humanitarian organizations access to IDP camps in recently captured areas like Afrin. Only AFAD, which manages the Deir Ballut camp, and the Turkish Red Crescent have been granted access.²³¹ As of July, leaders within the camp had little success in getting improvements in the situation during their meetings with AFAD officials. Deir Ballut still had no electricity, medical centers, schools, or areas where children could play.²³²

Even for those who had the resources to live outside of IDP camps, living conditions were poor, and few jobs were available in the overcrowded northern areas. Some, including Siege Watch contacts, were unable to access sufficient medical care to treat wounds and other conditions that had been neglected under siege.²³³ There were also reports that in Afrin, displaced members of armed opposition groups and their families were being settled into the homes of Kurds who themselves had been forcibly displaced by a Turkish-backed offensive.

With the Turkish border closed, and the opposition-controlled area in northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates defined by checkpoints held by the Syrian government, Turkish forces, and in some cases armed opposition groups, newly displaced civilians found themselves still trapped despite leaving the sieges behind. Some of those forcibly displaced from northern Homs found the desperate conditions in northern Syria so intolerable that they applied to return to the post-siege enclave in June, despite the risks of life under repressive Syrian government control.²³⁴ Others who could afford the often-prohibitive smuggler costs attempted the dangerous border crossing into Turkey. Several displaced civilians from the Southern Damascus Suburbs were shot and killed by Turkish border guards during the reporting period while attempting this journey.²³⁵ Displaced siege victims who did reach Turkey faced a wide range of new challenges and barriers, and continued to suffer from inadequate international support.

228 Walid al-Agha, Facebook post, 20 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2OV4vcS>>.

229 Zaman Al Wasl, "وفاة مهاجر من جنوب دمشق بعد إنقاذه شاباً من الغرق في عفرين," 23 May 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

230 Action Group for Palestinians, "Two tents burn in Deir Ballut camp amid harsh conditions," 19 June 2018, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

231 Osama Moussa and Tom Rollins, "Assad's evacuation deals leave bitter taste for displaced Syrians," The National, 10 June 2018, <www.thenational.ae>.

232 Interview with Siege Watch contact RS on 4 July 2018.

233 Smart News, "مهاجرو حمص يشكون عدم تقديم المساعدات لهم بالشمال السوري," 18 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

234 Zaman Al Wasl, "الإهمال يدفع عائلات مهاجرة من ريف حمص للعودة إلى حضن النظام," 8 June 2018, <www.zamanalwsl.net>.

235 Revo Spring, "Arabic Title," 6 April 2018, <revo.spring.com>; Rami Nasser, Facebook post, 15 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MKhVek>>.



Displaced Syrians trying to reach Deir Ballut camp in Afrin hosts IDPs from the Southern Damascus Suburbs, 13 May 2018. Source: Rami Nasser



Displaced Syrians trying to reach Turkey sleep in the streets, 2 June 2018. Source: Rami Nasser

Adham,²³⁶ a Siege Watch contact from the Southern Damascus Suburbs, serves as an illustrative case of many of these challenges. Adham was entrusted to take two young children, extended family members, with him on a forced displacement bus to northern Syria in hopes that they could find a better future than one under the repressive rule of the Assad government. After three weeks in the unpredictable and dangerous conditions of Idlib, they decided to cross the Turkish border. Twice they were caught and sent back by Turkish border patrols, on the third try they made it. While they were finally free from the violence in Turkey, doors that were once open to refugees are increasingly being slammed shut in faces of the newly displaced, and Adham and the children had trouble finding support or options. Life in Turkey is more expensive than in Syria, and newer refugees have struggled to register as refugees and get work permits from the Turkish government.²³⁷ In Turkey, Adham avoids walking out on the streets, because without official paperwork, he fears being picked up by the Turkish police and deported back to Syria. With little hope of making a life in Turkey, Adham sent the two children onward to Greece with a friend he knew from back home. They survived the journey, and are reportedly now in the custody of a humanitarian organization there.

People displaced after years under siege have other unmet needs, beyond the immediate challenges of physical survival and safety. They all require psychosocial support, as they all have experienced serious trauma. They also need opportunities to restart their lives and plan for the future. In both northern Syria and Turkey, there are few opportunities for the displaced to find work or to continue interrupted education. In many communities in northern Syria, the influx of IDPs has had a major impact on the hosting communities. Programs focused on community integration are needed in these areas in order to prevent further instability.

A significant proportion of the more than 100,000 siege victims forcibly displaced to northern Syria during the reporting period have little hope of returning home as long as Assad is in power. While their displacement is clearly permanent, humanitarian and political stakeholders appear to have done little planning to respond appropriately. These siege victims still live in uncertainty as warring parties including armed opposition groups, extremist organizations, the Turkish military, US-backed Kurdish forces, and the Syrian government and its allies all continue to jockey for control in northern Syria. When asked, most of the recently displaced Siege Watch contacts said that they could not picture a future for themselves or their families; they were unable to plan for even a few months out. All expressed some sense of depression, desperation, and hopelessness. People forcibly displaced from besieged areas during the reporting period have been deprived not only of their basic needs, but also of their dignity and their hopes for a better future.

Life in Post-Surrender Communities

People that stayed behind in the post-surrender communities of northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs have had a variety of experiences, representing the entire spectrum of potential outcomes of the Syrian government's systematic "surrender or die" strategy.

²³⁶ Name has been changed for safety reasons.

²³⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Turkey Stops Registering Syrian Asylum Seekers," 16 July 2018, <www.hrw.org>.

Northern Homs

At one end of the spectrum is northern Homs. People in the post-surrender communities of northern Homs still face challenges and protection concerns that may increase in the future if Russian forces pull back and cede more control to government forces. But, several months after the surrender agreement, civilians and even fighters who stayed in the area appeared to be experiencing better conditions than in any other post-surrender enclave covered by the Siege Watch project. Freedom of movement was partially restored shortly after the surrender as was commercial trade – even though access for international humanitarian actors remained restricted. There have been reports of looting, detention, and at least one deadly attack by militias, but all of these appear to have been isolated incidents that were discouraged and even reprimanded by pro-government authorities in the area.

Many opposition local council members that governed during the siege chose to stay in their communities rather than be forcibly displaced to the north, in contrast to many other formerly besieged enclaves. This valuable governing experience remaining in place has served as a stabilizing force. Each post-surrender community in northern Homs has a representative body made up largely of these former local council members, which serves as a mechanism to communicate with the Russian security forces. At least in the cities of al-Rastan and Talbiseh, there are also offices where people can officially lodge complaints with Russian forces if they encounter any issue. For example, one contact reported that after the surrender deal the internet in Talbiseh was disconnected, but after they complained to the Russian authorities it was restored. By mid-July though, the Russians were not as responsive to complaints, and residents who complained of harassment by pro-government forces at checkpoints reported suffering increased harassment after they complained.²³⁸

There are two other unique features of the post-surrender scenario in northern Homs worth mentioning here. First, in northern Homs, the initial communications situation in the aftermath of the surrender has been much more permissive than in other forced surrenders monitored by Siege Watch – more than two dozen cases since mid-2016 – in which the communities “went dark.” In these other cases, information became difficult to transmit out of the communities in question as the government reasserted control. Most journalists, activists, local council members, charity workers, and others who communicated with the outside world during the sieges were deported to northern Syria or detained. For people who stayed behind the consequences of transmitting information from the ground could be deadly, as communications were monitored by Syrian and/or Russian intelligence services. By contrast in northern Homs, for the first time ever, several Siege Watch contacts stayed in the area, and one felt safe enough to have a follow-up call to talk about post-surrender conditions. The Talbiseh-based contact said that their internet connection went through Turkey and was not subject to government monitoring, and because pro-government forces had not set up positions inside the city he had little fear of detention.

A second unique aspect of post-surrender northern Homs is the continued presence of Jaysh al-Tawhid, the Talbiseh-based armed opposition group that cut a deal to stay and provide security for the city, with Russian support. This arrangement is essentially the deal the armed group JAI had tried to negotiate with Russia a month earlier in Douma, Eastern Ghouta. It is unclear

238 Smart News, “Syrian government forces harass people at checkpoints in Northern Homs after residents complained to Russians,” 13 July 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

how seriously the JAI proposal was being entertained by Russia, but ultimately it did not come to pass. Instead, JAI surrendered on 8 April in the aftermath of a deadly government chemical weapons attack and the entire AOG was transferred to northern Syria. There are examples from other post-surrender communities where individual opposition fighters or even small groups stayed, but in those cases they were integrated into pro-government units. By contrast, Jaysh al-Tawhid was not only allowed to stay in Talbiseh, but as of July it remained the sole security force in the city, and jointly monitored checkpoints outside of the city with Russian forces.

Southern Damascus Suburbs

In the Southern Damascus Suburbs, YBB fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of how besieged communities have fared after surrendering. Russian forces have helped maintain stability in the short term, but the situation remains tense. These neighborhoods are urban areas, in close proximity not only to government forces, but also to sectarian Iran-backed militias over which Russia has little control. Residents report Yelda, where Russian forces are based and frequently patrol, is the most secure area, but the situation grows more dangerous for civilians the further away one gets into Beit Sahm and Babbila, where Russian influence wanes and the presence of pro-government forces grows.²³⁹

There was significant early conscription of men in the area before the six-month deadline, because many wanted to get it over with, or felt they faced a higher risk of detention or other dangers the longer they waited. As of July, almost 800 men from the Southern Damascus Suburbs were reportedly fighting with the pro-government forces in places like Albu Kamal, Daraa, and elsewhere. Some of them had already been killed, fighting for the military that destroyed their lives, homes, and communities.²⁴⁰

Services in YBB had only improved slightly by early July and humanitarian conditions remained poor. This was especially true for Palestinians displaced from Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad. This uniquely vulnerable population has faced extra movement restrictions and a lack of housing options, and many lost everything in the scorched earth offensive. The limited reintroduction of UNRWA assistance has not been sufficient to meet their need.²⁴¹

At the opposite end of the spectrum from northern Homs are Hajar al-Aswad, al-Qadam, and Yarmouk. These neighborhoods, particularly Yarmouk, were completely depopulated and much of their infrastructure was destroyed. Rampant state-sanctioned looting and property destruction accompanied the reimposition of government control, stripping the neighborhoods of what little was not destroyed by the siege, ISIS-rule, and the scorched earth military campaign. Instances of severe abuses by pro-government forces including field executions were reported by civilians trying to return to the area temporarily to check on their property. All of these actions send a message to displaced residents that they are not welcome to return home. Furthermore, these neighborhoods are in an area that the government and its allies appear to have targeted for demographic engineering. In July, Yarmouk, al-Qadam, and adjacent areas were slated for

²³⁹ Interview with Siege Watch contact AK on 6 July 2018.

²⁴⁰ Interview with Siege Watch contact RS on 4 July 2018.

²⁴¹ UNRWA, "Lack of UNRWA Funding Exacerbates Housing Crisis for Palestine Refugees Displaced from Yarmouk," 30 June 2018, <www.unrwa.org>.

redevelopment under Law No. 10, and will be turned into a new area called “Basilia City.”²⁴² This will formalize the permanent displacement of most the neighborhoods’ original residents, and is a major step towards erasing the signs that they ever existed.

During this tenth quarterly reporting period, Russia took full control over the final phase of the Syrian government’s siege strategy. In both northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs communities of YBB, the six-month Russian security guarantees were critical in facilitating the final surrender deals. Iran-supported sectarian militias make up a significant portion the pro-government forces surrounding both enclaves and neither Russia nor the Syrian government has proven capable of exerting full control over these groups. While relative calm has prevailed in the short term, the risk of future violence and retributive actions against civilians is high, if and when Russia pulls back from these post-surrender areas. Already by mid-July, Russian protection began to wane as new heavily armed security barriers were erected by government militias, mandatory conscription notices were issued to some men in northern Homs, in violation of the six-month grace period.²⁴³

As of the time of writing, both the northern Homs and Southern Damascus Suburbs enclaves were still within the six-month grace period during which Russian forces were providing security. In both areas, considerable uncertainty remains as to how the situation might change in the future after this period elapses, and all of the people in these communities face serious and well-defined protection risks.

242 Geroun, “القانون رقم 10 و”مارونا سيتي“,” 24 June 2018, <geroun.net>; Horrya Press, “حكومة الأسد تبدأ بتطبيق مخططها التنظيمي لمناطق جنوب دمشق,”

30 July 2018, <horrya.net>.

243 Smart News, “انتشار مكثف لحواجز أجهزة أمن النظام في مدينتي الرستن والحولة بحمص,” 8 July 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>;

Smart News, “النظام يبدأ بتبليغات “الخدمة الإلزامية” شمالي حمص في خرق لاتفاق “التهجير,” 14 July 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

Conclusions

The tenth Siege Watch reporting period saw the end of the Syrian government's "surrender or die" siege strategy. Part 1 of the tenth quarterly Siege Watch report covered the fall of Eastern Ghouta, which was decimated during a final scorched earth military campaign with catastrophic consequences for civilians. 158,000 people were displaced – more than 65,000 of them forcibly transferred to northern Syria. Part 2 of the tenth quarterly Siege Watch report has covered the subsequent surrender of besieged communities in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, and the forced transfer of approximately 45,000 additional people to northern Syria.

This tenth and final reporting period was the most devastating in terms of its impact on civilians out of all periods monitored by the Siege Watch project. In total, more than 200,000 people were displaced from their homes, approximately 110,000 of them forcibly transferred to northern Syria as part of an intentional displacement process. Yarmouk, al-Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad, and vast stretches of Eastern Ghouta were almost entirely depopulated, and in some of these communities upwards of 90% of the infrastructure was destroyed. There was prolific use of banned weapons, including chemical weapons and cluster munitions, and tactics – such as the targeting of hospitals and mass forced civilian population transfers – that are blatant violations of international law.

None of the sieges that ended during this reporting period did so through genuine reconciliation and negotiation processes, and in no cases did international stakeholders take sufficient action to protect civilians. Instead, these sieges were brought to a close through the culmination of the "surrender or die" strategy that the Syrian government and its allies have inflicted on more than a million Syrian civilians over the course of the conflict. The end of these sieges epitomizes the international community's failure to protect Syrian civilians. The end of sieges does not mean the end of the conflict nor the end of suffering of siege victims. In the aftermath of the sieges, a plethora of new challenges has already arisen.

THE EASTERN GHOUTA EFFECT

While the capitulations of northern Homs and YBB in the Southern Damascus Suburbs did not entail the same level of bloodshed and devastation as Eastern Ghouta, they did tear apart communities and upend lives, forcibly displacing tens of thousands of civilians without any guarantees of safety or return. Forced civilian population transfers are war crimes, and amount to crimes against humanity when committed on such a widespread and systematic level.

The international community's repeated failure to stop war crimes and protect and support civilians during the years of sieges in Syria was felt acutely in the surrenders described in this report. These sieges were part of a widespread collective punishment campaign enacted by the Assad government and its allies against civilians in opposition-controlled enclaves. The international community failed to adequately respond in a way that could end the sieges and the war crimes committed therein. Both the inaction of the Security Council and certain policies

pursued by humanitarian agencies enabled the Syrian government to pursue the siege strategy unhindered, emboldened by the lack of consequences, and able to wield humanitarian access as leverage to achieve its military ends.

As the sieges evolved and as Russia increasingly inserted itself, the strategy shifted from one of attrition to one of annihilation, from “surrender or starve” to “surrender or die.” Eastern Ghouta went the latter path, and seeing the consequences of continued resistance, the remaining besieged areas had no choice but to choose the former. But even choosing to “surrender” rather than “die” has not protected civilians from the war crimes of forced population transfers, nor has it provided them with any guarantees of non-recurrence or protection moving forward.

The surrender deals in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs were reached only against the backdrop of the unmitigated slaughter in Eastern Ghouta. After watching Eastern Ghouta fall without any outside attempts to stop the bloodshed, many of these long-suffering siege victims in the remaining besieged enclaves lost hope, realizing they had no choice. Every Siege Watch contact from the Southern Damascus Suburbs and northern Homs interviewed for this report described the scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta and its subsequent fall as decisive in the developments that followed in their area. They saw how the fighters of Eastern Ghouta were not able to negotiate a deal that prevented forced displacement, and the horrific consequences of refusal.

The psychological damage resulting from these developments, from tens of thousands of long-suffering civilians feeling abandoned by the world, should not be underestimated. In late February as the final phase of the bombing of Eastern Ghouta began, a Siege Watch contact in northern Homs who had participated with the project’s monitoring efforts since they began in 2015, demonstrated this shift in mindset when he suddenly cut off communication, telling us that he had hoped to help but he now realized it did not matter.

“The whole world is watching, listening, not stirring. Everyone is silent.”

- JM, al-Houleh resident

To the extent that international stakeholders will require local cooperation in the years to come as they tackle the challenges of the refugee crisis, of repatriation, of reconstruction, and reconciliation, they have a tremendous amount of trust building to do.

PATTERN OF ESCALATION

Siege Watch reports previously described the ways in which the Syrian government capitalized on massive scorched earth campaigns – like those against Darayya and Eastern Aleppo – to pressure other areas to surrender more easily. Siege Watch also elucidated the ways in which the Russian-led “de-escalation zone” agreements were really a military strategy in disguise. Part 1 of the tenth quarterly report described the threats to northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, as well as to the southern Syria “de-escalation zone” once the government and its allies completed their scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta. The scenarios warned about in these analyses quickly came to pass.

In addition to terminating the “de-escalation zone” in northern Homs, the Syrian government, Russia, and Iran broke all prior agreements and disregarded the “de-escalation zone” in

southern Syria as well, launching a new offensive in June 2018.²⁴⁴ Just as Turkey failed to protect the northern Homs “de-escalation zone” – the US and Jordan failed to take action to prevent pro-government forces from invading the southern “de-escalation zone,” despite their ostensible roles as guarantors. As violence there escalated, the level of civilian displacement in southern Syria quickly outpaced that caused by the scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta. Hundreds of thousands of uprooted civilians were trapped in brutal environmental conditions at the Jordanian border, and at least a dozen had died by 3 July.²⁴⁵ On 15 July, the first forced displacement convoy from Daraa departed for northern Syria as towns began to fall and were subjected to surrender deals.²⁴⁶ By the end of July pro-government forces had recaptured the region.²⁴⁷

With southern Syria back under control of the government and its allies, Idlib – the only remaining “de-escalation zone” under opposition control – will likely be next. The recently displaced people from northern Homs and the southern Damascus Suburbs are at risk, along with the millions of other previously displaced people who are trapped in the area. They could find themselves once again at the mercy of another devastating military campaign.

The clear patterns of escalation by the Syrian government and its allies against besieged enclaves provided ample forewarning. The diplomatic community should have taken proactive steps to head off this latest crisis, and the international humanitarian community to prepare efforts to ease the inevitable suffering of displaced civilians. Instead the international community has primarily been reactive - only responding in the aftermath of the most extreme of humanitarian crises.

CONTINUING NEGLECT & PERSECUTION

Months after the end of the sieges, siege survivors remain neglected. Civilians in post-surrender communities remain largely out of reach due to continuing access restrictions by the government, and there has been little progress towards improving the conditions for displaced Syrians in the north where they can be accessed. Small, under-resourced Syrian humanitarian groups are unable to meet the scale of the humanitarian crisis, and their distress calls for help have gone unanswered. At the same time, the larger international aid agencies are increasingly making the decision to register with the Syrian government, a choice that will give them access to areas that the government wants to reward, but obstruct them from reaching areas that need their support the most. This means that while the humanitarian need in northern Syria continues to grow, the capacity to meet this is shrinking. If the UN Security Council fails to renew authorization for cross-border humanitarian aid in December, this would significantly exacerbate this crisis. The situation is desperate and unsustainable.

In addition to the lack of safety, the crowded and poor conditions in the north, and the possibility of further displacement, displaced siege victims are also faced with the very real possibility that their exile will be permanent. In April 2018 the Syrian government passed Law No. 10, giving it

244 Karen DeYoung, Liz Sly, and Zakaria Zakaria “Cease-fire in southwestern Syria nears collapse as U.S. and Russia trade blame,” Washington Post, 28 June 2018, <www.washingtonpost.com>.

245 UN News, “As many as 330,000 displaced by heavy fighting in southwest Syria – UN agency,” 3 July 2018, <news.un.org>.

246 Nedaa Syria, “1st. Convoy of evacuees from Daraa preparing to go to the north of Syria,” 15 July 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

247 Kareem Shaheen, “Syrian government forces seal victory in southern territories,” The Guardian, 31 July 2018, <www.theguardian.com>.

a veneer of administrative legitimacy while it confiscates the land and property of the displaced. On 1 July, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing was ordered to start developing new organizational plans for recaptured parts of Damascus formerly under siege including Yarmouk, Qaboun, Barzeh, and Jobar, triggering the 30-day window for residents to reclaim their property in person or lose it forever.²⁴⁸ The decision to include Yarmouk in these redevelopment plans was made despite prior government assurances to the contrary, and will ensure that most of the neighborhoods Palestinian residents will never be able to return.

While the nature of the Syrian conflict has evolved over the years, one core aspect has not changed: when it comes to opposition-controlled areas, the Syrian government is still waging war against its own people, punishing those that sought to break free of tyranny. Massive civilian displacement – a form of collective punishment – is a central component of the government’s military strategy. Destruction and suffering have been inflicted on civilians in besieged areas in order for the Syrian military – with the help of its powerful allies – to reclaim the territory; and the depleted population in the aftermath of sieges has allowed the state to more easily reassert control.

In late July, Jamil Hassan, Head of the notorious Syrian Air Force Intelligence Directorate, made the importance of permanent forced displacement to the government’s strategy crystal clear when he said that “A Syria with 10 million trustworthy people obedient to the leadership is better than a Syria with 30 million vandals.” He also said that anyone getting in the way of the government’s plans will be considered a “terrorist” and that more than three million displaced Syrians are already on their wanted list.²⁴⁹

In the context of the sieges, forced displacement has been used as a tool of war. Not only as a way to punish and control targeted communities, but also as a way to permanently alter their demographic make up. This is particularly true of the areas targeted by the Syrian government, which has instituted a systematic demographic engineering strategy,²⁵⁰ but is also increasingly of concern elsewhere. In Afrin, where more than 100,000 Kurdish people were displaced from their homes by a Turkish-backed offensive, there are reports of Syrian opposition fighters and their families from Eastern Ghouta and Homs being resettled in emptied Kurdish homes, while the original owners are prevented from returning.²⁵¹ Instead of ushering in an era of transitional justice and reconciliation, injustices of this nature create fresh grievances and sow the grounds for continuing ethnic and sectarian conflict in the future.

As described by Siege Watch, the international community’s response to the sieges was painfully inadequate and failed to protect civilian victims from years of suffering. The end of the sieges in Syria has not brought an end to the suffering of siege victims and – despite its previous failures – the international community still has a duty to support siege victims and protect them from the increasing threats they face. The warning signs are abundant: the unsettled military situation and increasing pro-government attacks in northern Syria where many forcibly displaced people are trapped; the increasing reports of violations against civilians in post-surrender communities; the announcement of redevelopment plans in the Southern Damascus Suburbs, etc.

248 Aron Lund, “Dispossession or development? The tug of war over Syria’s ruined slum dwellings,” 4 July 2018, <www.irinnews.org>.

249 The Syrian Reporter via The Syrian Observer, “Jamil al-Hassan: Any and All Opposition Will Be Eliminated,” 2 August 2018, <syrianobserver.com>.

250 Documented in Siege Watch, “No return to Homs,” see: <www.paxforpeace.nl>.

251 Amnesty International, “Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin,” 2 August 2018, <www.amnesty.org>.

In addition to protection, siege victims require humanitarian and psychosocial support and assistance with responsible resettlement options, given the fact that most will not be able to return home. The victims and survivors of the sieges must be assured of justice and accountability. Towards this end, international stakeholders should take assertive steps to prosecute those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as to support victims and survivors at all levels to secure their rights to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence. The Syrian government and its allies have perpetrated one of the largest and longest atrocities in modern history. The looming threats and crises posed by the aftermath of these sieges are clear. The international community must heed these signals and take action now to head off developing crises in both northern Syria and in the post-surrender enclaves before they have the chance to mature.

States should not normalize relations with the government of Syria and donors should not mobilize reconstruction funding as long as those responsible for massive war crimes and crimes against humanity are in power in Syria, and the violations continue. Instead, states and donors should demand accountability and support those Syrians who continue their struggle for freedom and dignity, ensuring that they are represented in a long-term political transition strategy for the country. Strong international leadership is needed to restore the credibility of the international system, and to prevent the end of the siege era from becoming the beginning of a new stage of persecution.

Recommendations

PAX recommends the following measures be taken:

Protection

- ◆ Independent third-party monitors must be deployed to post-surrender communities to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to further human rights violations.
- ◆ The UN Security Council and its member states must back the Human Rights Council and strongly advocate for its demands that the government of Syria give the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) access to the country.
- ◆ Measures must be taken to protect civilians in northern Syria, given the growing threat of a major military offensive against Idlib. The UN, the EU, and other key stakeholders must work with the Turkish government to ensure that civilians are provided a path to safety and are not trapped at the border with bombs falling around them.

Humanitarian Programming

- ◆ Pressure must be increased on the Syrian and Russian governments to allow and facilitate unrestricted access for international humanitarian agencies to post-surrender communities.
- ◆ Pressure must be increased on the Turkish government to allow and facilitate unrestricted humanitarian access to IDP camps in parts of Aleppo under its control.
- ◆ The level of humanitarian support available to IDPs in Idlib and Aleppo must be significantly increased. Donors and humanitarian actors in the health and protection sectors should implement large-scale specialized psychosocial support programs for siege survivors in Syria and in neighboring countries.
- ◆ Humanitarian actors in the Protection, Shelter, and Early Recovery/Livelihood sectors should develop programs to tackle the challenges related to Housing Land and Property rights and missing civil status documentation for the displaced. These efforts should include documenting property ownership claims, providing legal consultation, and working with refugee host governments and local authorities in Syria to find solutions for missing vital records.
- ◆ Conflict sensitivity guidelines must be put in place for all humanitarian, early recovery, and livelihood programs in post-surrender communities to ensure that assistance funds do not benefit war criminals, do not entrench demographic engineering, do not infringe on the property rights of the displaced, and do not

- ◆ deepen grievances by favoring only areas that the government wants to reward.
- ◆ Donors must put in place due diligence mechanisms to ensure transparency and compliance with these and other guidelines, including the October 2017 Parameters and Principles of UN assistance in Syria.²⁵²
- ◆ UN agencies and other humanitarian actors should take the lead in assessing the environmental risks and acute and chronic health risks for civilians who remain in post-surrender communities to ensure that they will be provided with adequate context-specific medical care, and that conflict-related pollution concerns are part of remediation and cleanup efforts.²⁵³

Justice and Accountability

- ◆ Donor countries should provide funds and diplomatic support to international justice and accountability mechanisms for Syria, such as the COI; the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIIM); and a referral to the International Criminal Court. Donor countries should also continue to support Syrian civil society groups in their efforts to document human rights violations, litigate criminal cases, and advocate for accountability.
- ◆ States with universal jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed outside their territory should investigate crimes perpetrated as part of the Syrian government's "surrender or die" strategy. Such states should also strengthen the legal basis for universal jurisdiction, enhance the capacity of the relevant authorities, and increase cooperation and information sharing with other states and investigative mechanisms.
- ◆ The UN COI and other competent independent parties should immediately open investigations into all incidents where there is clear evidence that war crimes or crimes against humanity were committed against besieged populations – not only those involving the use of chemical weapons. This includes violations against the health sector such as the removal of medical supplies from aid convoys and the bombing of medical facilities that were "de-conflicted" by the UN, as well as human rights abuses that reportedly continue to occur against civilians who remained in post-surrender communities.
- ◆ Efforts to address human rights violations committed against the people of northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs must start now. International actors should support victims and survivors of sieges and forced displacement to organize themselves and to participate in international political processes and justice and accountability initiatives.
- ◆ The UN Secretary-General should appoint a panel to conduct an internal review

²⁵² See Annex of Global Protection Cluster document, "Guidance Note on Housing, Land and Property (HLP) for Mine Action Implementers in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria)," February 2018 <<http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org>>.

²⁵³ In line with UN Environment Assembly resolutions 2.15 and 3.1: United Nations Environment Assembly of the UNEP, "3/1. Pollution mitigation and control in areas affected by armed conflict or terrorism," UNEP/EA.3/Res.1, 30 January 2018, <undocs.org>; and "2/15. Protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict," UNEP/EA.2/Res.15, 4 August 2016, <undocs.org>.

of UN actions regarding besieged areas of Syria, similar to the 2012 review of UN actions in Sri Lanka.²⁵⁴

- ◆ An independent international mechanism must be developed to document property claims of forcibly displaced, to collect and preserve proof of property, and to prepare for justice including property restitution and reparations for damaged properties.

²⁵⁴ UN, "Report of the Secretary General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka, November 2012, <www.un.org>.



.....

PAX

Sint Jacobsstraat 12
3511 BS Utrecht
The Netherlands

www.paxforpeace.nl
info@paxforpeace.nl

+31 (0)30 233 33 46
P.O. Box 19318
3501 DH Utrecht
The Netherlands