

Siege Watch

Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged
Areas in Syria November 2016-January 2017



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Photo cover: Smoke rises after a bombing in Jobar, Damascus.

Photo credit: Abu Eyad

About PAX

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

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About TSI

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

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Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria -
November 2016-January 2017

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Acronyms

AOG	Armed opposition group
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
HTF	Humanitarian Task Force
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (second rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IRGC	Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
WHO	World Health Organization
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive Summary

This report is the fifth in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses on developments from November 2016 to January 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that:

- ◆ An estimated 913,575 people are trapped in at least 37 besieged communities across the country.
- ◆ More than 1.3 million additional Syrians live in 16 “Watchlist” areas, under threat of complete siege.
- ◆ Eastern Aleppo was reclassified from besieged to “Watchlist” after being captured by the Syrian government and its allies in December. The brutal month-long campaign displaced hundreds of thousands of people and caused catastrophic destruction.
- ◆ Three more “Watchlist” communities in the Damascus area capitulated to the government’s forced surrender terms.
- ◆ Three communities – Madaya, Douma, and al-Waer – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to prevent looming humanitarian catastrophes. These critically besieged areas, which contain approximately 241,000 people, are the most likely targets of the Syrian government's next scorched earth campaign.

[Note: Since the end of January the critically-besieged community of al-Waer surrendered to Syrian government forces in the face of an intense military offensive in order to stave off a complete humanitarian disaster. Russia acted as the primary mediator of the forced surrender. The first batch of 1,400 residents were forcibly transferred from al-Waer to Jarablus on 18 March 2017. More than 1,000 of them were civilians. A total of 15,000-20,000 people in total are expected to be deported out of al-Waer over a two month implementation period.]

- ◆ The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the majority of the sieges, as well as all “Watchlist” areas.

During the November-January reporting period, the government’s “surrender or die” strategy reached new heights with the catastrophic scorched earth campaign to recapture eastern Aleppo. The increased pace of forced surrender agreements in besieged and “Watchlist” communities that was noted in the prior Siege Watch report continued apace. Al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada were all forced to surrender in the face of increased attacks and threats. All of the surrenders that took place during the reporting period included partial population transfers of both fighters and civilians. These forced population transfers are war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.

While many post-surrender communities have seen improvements in civilian welfare, there are also worrying signs that they are vulnerable to fresh human rights abuses by pro-government forces. In all of the besieged and “Watchlist” areas that surrendered to the Syrian government in recent reporting periods, local governance institutions were dismantled, and civilians remaining were afraid to share information for fear of retribution. There have already been reports of abuses such as evictions, arrests, and forced conscription in several areas. Humanitarian aid access to many post-surrender communities is still being restricted.

During the reporting period the Syrian government issued surrender terms to the additional communities of al-Waer and parts of eastern Ghouta. In these cases the terms were rejected, and attacks on these besieged communities escalated as a result. The government also issued forced surrender terms to three communities in the southern Damascus suburbs, which had enjoyed relative stability under multi-year truces.

Among most of the communities remaining under government siege, humanitarian conditions deteriorated as a result of increased violence and decreased humanitarian access. Few UN interagency convoys reached besieged areas during the quarter, with December and January representing two of the worst months for access since the UN reporting began in early 2014. Life-saving medical supplies continued to be removed from the aid convoys that did proceed. After years of relying on wood for fuel and cooking, besieged communities are running out of trees. This was reflected in the significantly higher cost of firewood this past winter.

Attacks targeting civilian residential areas and critical services such as hospitals, schools, and Civil Defense centers continued at an alarming rate, despite the nationwide ceasefire announced in late December 2016. There continued to be reports of the use of banned munitions such as cluster bombs and chemical weapons, as well as incendiary weapons, bunker busters, and more conventional weaponry. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias continued to play a central role in enforcing Syria’s sieges, and both countries participated in local forced surrender negotiations.

The reporting period did bring some positive progress in terms of the UN's reporting on besieged areas. At the start of November 2016, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) announced that after a comprehensive review it was officially designating a significant number of besieged communities in Rural Damascus for the first time, in line with prior Siege Watch recommendations. Subsequently, OCHA inexplicably reversed its decision to designate the long-besieged community of Hajar al-Aswad, highlighting the lack of transparency in their reporting process. By the end of January 2017, UN OCHA estimated that a total of 643,780 people were trapped in besieged communities in Syria, compared to more than 900,000 estimated by Siege Watch. Most of this discrepancy is a result of the besieged communities in northern Homs and the southern Damascus suburbs that are still not officially recognized in the UN reporting.

Accurate reporting of the crisis in besieged areas is an important and necessary step that the UN should take in its approach to besieged areas, but it must also be accompanied by concrete action to lift the sieges. All signs indicate that the Syrian government's intensified efforts to subdue besieged communities through violence, coercion, and depopulation will continue in the coming months. These violent and forced surrenders create new grievances and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

Key recommendations:

- ◆ The UN Security Council must act on its commitment to enforce Resolution 2139 (2014), which called upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas,” and threatened further steps in the case of non-compliance.
- ◆ If requested by one of the parties, UN agencies should send monitors to oversee the negotiation and implementation of local forced surrender agreements. These monitors should actively discourage and condemn the practice of forced civilian transfers that are often mandated as part of these agreements.
- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations.
- ◆ Decision-making regarding UN OCHA's besieged community designations should be moved out of the Damascus hub. Relevant data should be compiled and analyzed in a more neutral environment where it will be less vulnerable to political pressures.
- ◆ War crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers, must be incorporated in the accountability mechanism that will be established in accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution of 21 December 2016.

NOTE

Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period were from November 2016 - January 2017. Since then, there may have been subsequent developments impacting many besieged communities. Please check www.siegewatch.org for the most recent updates. ♦

1. Introduction

This report is the fifth in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses on developments from November 2016 to January 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that an estimated 913,575 Syrians are still living under siege in 37 communities in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. Over 1.3 million additional people live in approximately 16 areas on the Siege Watch "Watchlist," which face siege-like conditions and are at risk of becoming completely besieged.

The November 2016-January 2017 period was a challenging time for Syrians trapped in besieged communities across the country. All besieged communities faced violent attacks throughout the quarter, despite a nationwide ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey in late December 2016. Most besieged communities were not reached with UN assistance even once. In December 2016, pro-government forces captured eastern Aleppo in a brutal assault that led to depopulation of many of the besieged neighborhoods. Three more "Watchlist" communities – al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada – submitted to forced surrender terms during the reporting period after facing renewed attacks.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access,¹ and the creation of the International Syria Support Group's (ISSG) Hu-

¹ UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

humanitarian Task Force (HTF) in February 2016,² the Syrian government – and in a few cases the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and armed opposition groups (AOGs) – continued to besiege communities across Syria.

After review and reassessment of their data, on 1 November 2016 the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) finally designated a significant number of besieged communities in Rural Damascus for the first time, acknowledging that these towns and neighborhoods in fact met the besieged criteria. While these new designations were a positive step towards increased accuracy in the reporting process, further review is still necessary to acknowledge the full scale of sieges throughout Syria. There are still besieged areas, such as al-Rastan and Talbiseh in the northern countryside of Homs, that have never been officially designated by the UN, and subsequent UN monthly reporting has reversed some of its 1 November 2016 changes. There is a lack of transparency in the UN OCHA reporting process and it is often unclear as to how or why specific decisions are made.

This failure to acknowledge the reality on the ground is problematic, because the UN's reporting plays an important role in framing the international community's understanding of the sieges and in turn shapes the urgency and nature of its response. Accurate reporting of the crisis in the besieged areas is an important and necessary step, but it must also be accompanied by concrete changes in the way that UN agencies and other international stakeholders approach the besieged areas.

Without international action to break, de-escalate, or seek criminal accountability for the sieges being waged against civilians in Syria, more communities will face the same fate as eastern Aleppo.

This report focuses primarily on developments from November 2016 to January 2017. Additional updates with developments since January will be included when available. For a detailed background on the project and additional information on the specific besieged areas, refer to the first Siege Watch report published in February 2016. All of the reports can be found at: <http://siegewatch.org/reports>.

General Developments

The last Siege Watch report described a strategic shift in the Syrian government's siege tactics from "surrender or starve" to "surrender or die," as it intensified efforts to conquer long-besieged areas. During the November-January reporting period, this "surrender or die" strategy reached a new level with the catastrophic scorched earth campaign to recapture eastern Aleppo. The Syrian government and its allies also launched fresh assaults on the Siege Watch "Watchlist" areas of al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada – eventually forcing all three to agree to government surrender terms that included the forced transfer of a portion of the population. They joined the communities of al-Hameh, Qudsaya, and Moadamiya, which surrendered to the same terms in the prior period.

² UN, "Note to Correspondents: Statement of the International Syria Support Group," 11 February 2016, <www.un.org>.

The government's strategy to conquer besieged areas through destruction, surrender, and displacement has become predictable, and will likely continue according to the observed patterns. All of the communities where government sieges have come to an end have faced one of two fates: either complete destruction and near-total depopulation, or a forced surrender that involves submitting to terms put forth by the government with little room for negotiation.

The besieged communities that have been targeted for complete destruction and depopulation thus far include Homs city (2014), Darayya (2016) and eastern Aleppo city (2016). These areas shared several key features: they were symbolically important centers of resistance, they were strategically important urban areas, and they refused the government's surrender terms. Both the destruction and the displacement are important and intentional components of the government's strategy. In the recently released report "No Return to Homs: A case study on demographic engineering in Syria," PAX and The Syria Institute explore how the Syrian government has been taking advantage of the destruction and displacement it caused in the formerly besieged areas of Homs city to prevent the return of its original inhabitants and rebuild the city along sectarian lines. Eastern Aleppo and Darayya may face a similar fate.³

The bulk of the besieged communities that have been conquered by the Syrian government have faced the second fate: forcible surrender according to government terms, which the government calls "reconciliation." In most of these cases, the Syrian government launched military attacks against the besieged or "Watchlist" community in question, often after several years of calm. The attacks were followed by demands to agree to the government's "reconciliation" terms or face destruction, explicitly citing the cases of Darayya and eastern Aleppo as a warning of their potential fate. Communities that refused to surrender faced successive rounds of attacks, often targeting critical civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and water pumping stations, until they ultimately conceded.

Communities that were forced to surrender in this manner are being kept on the Siege Watch "Watchlist" for ongoing observation due to the fact that the government conditions leave the remaining civilians vulnerable to continued persecution, and in some cases do not lead to significant improvements in access. Notably, local civilian leaders and media activists have also been deported alongside fighters during the population transfers, while local civilian support structures - including governing councils and charity organizations - have been dismantled. Information is much more difficult to get out of the post-surrender areas, as those left behind are often afraid to speak out for fear of retribution. Despite this fact, there have already been credible reports of abuses such as evictions, arrests, and forced conscription in several areas.

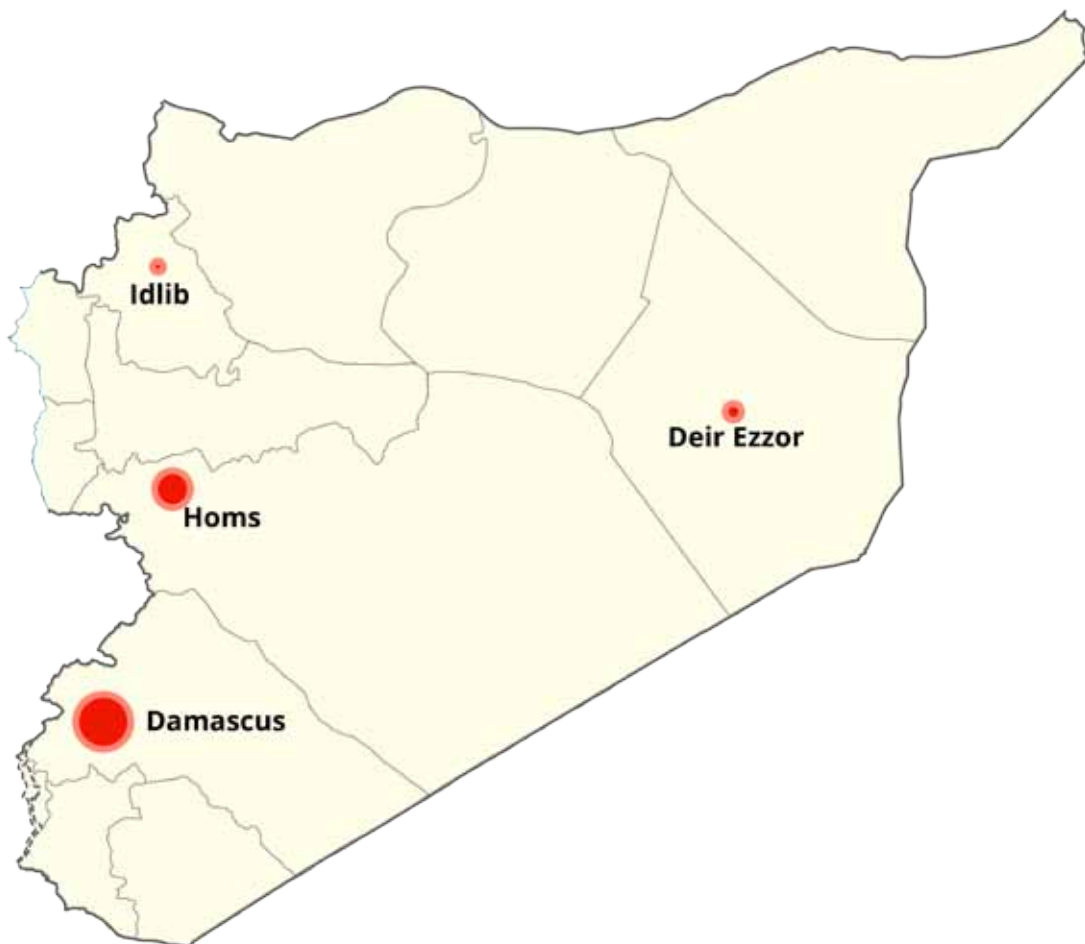
Among most of the communities remaining under government siege, humanitarian conditions deteriorated over the reporting period as a result of increased violence and decreased humanitarian access. Three communities containing approximately 241,000 people – Madaya and Douma in Rural Damascus and al-Waer in Homs – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to mitigate unfolding humanitarian catastrophes. These communities are the most likely targets of the government's next scorched earth campaign. Darayya and Eastern Aleppo – flagged as communities requiring urgent assistance in previous editions of Siege Watch – have since been destroyed and depopulated.

³ PAX and The Syria Institute, "No Return to Homs, A case study on demographic engineering in Syria," January 2017, <reliefweb.int>.

[Note: Since the end of January the critically-besieged community of al-Waer surrendered to Syrian government forces in the face of an intense military offensive in order to stave off a complete humanitarian disaster. Russia acted as the primary mediator of the forced surrender. The first batch of 1,400 residents were forcibly transferred from al-Waer to Jarablus on 18 March 2017. More than 1,000 of them were civilians. A total of 15,000-20,000 people in total are expected to be deported out of al-Waer over a two month implementation period.]

Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



Project Outline

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

The Siege Watch project designates three tiers of siege intensity, using a classification scheme proposed by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) in its March 2015 ‘Slow Death’ report.⁵ All three tiers meet the UN OCHA criteria for besieged. The tiers help further describe the variations in conditions in different area, drawing attention to the besieged communities where civilians are in the most immediate need. The designations range from Tier 1 (highest intensity) to Tier 3 (lowest intensity):

- ◆ Tier 1 – This is the highest level of siege, where very little is able to enter through smuggling or bribery, the UN can negotiate few if any aid deliveries, and supplies that do enter are insufficient for the population. Residents are at high risk of malnutrition/dehydration and denial of medical care. The area is frequently attacked by besieging forces.
- ◆ Tier 2 – This is the moderate level of siege, where small amounts of supplies can usually be smuggled in through bribery and purchased on the black market for inflated prices. Vehicle deliveries cannot enter but residents may have access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate few if any aid deliveries and assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at some risk of malnutrition/dehydration and at high risk of denial of medical care. The areas are regularly attacked by besieging forces.
- ◆ Tier 3 – This is the lowest level of siege, where supplies still must be smuggled in but are done so with regularity and the population has consistent access to alternative food sources such as local agriculture. The UN is able to negotiate some aid deliveries, but assistance that does enter is insufficient for the population. Residents in these areas are at low risk of malnutrition/dehydration and at moderate risk of denial of medical care. The areas are occasionally attacked by besieging forces.

The primary condition that demonstrates that an area is besieged is when it is surrounded by armed actors who restrict the movement of goods and people into and out of the area. A siege is an **intentional tactic** meant to deprive a populated area of the essentials needed for life. Other factors such as the level of violence, the delivery of aid convoys, and the availability of smuggling routes can change the intensity of the siege (the Tier level) but do not impact whether an area is designated besieged under the Siege Watch system. For example, in Deir Ezzor, aid

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

⁵ Syrian American Medical Society, “Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities Under Siege,” March 2015, <reliefweb.int>.

delivery has become frequent and regular as a result of the World Food Programme (WFP) airdrops, but the neighborhoods are still surrounded by ISIS forces that prevent the delivery of supplies by ground routes, and civilian movement is still restricted by both ISIS and the Syrian military. Accordingly Deir Ezzor is still considered besieged, but has been classified as Tier 3 to reflect the improved humanitarian conditions.

Siege Watch identifies an additional category of “Watchlist” locations that are at high risk of becoming under long-term siege. This category includes: communities that are under partial siege, where many of the conditions of a siege are met but a limited number of access points may be usable at least part of the time; newly besieged communities that have been blockaded for three months or less; and communities where a siege has recently ended but civilian populations remain in place.

Communities that come under a new siege are first added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” and in most cases will be considered for inclusion on the besieged list after a three-month observation period. Similarly, communities where a truce has brought an end to the siege will remain on the “Watchlist” for a probationary period of three months to ensure that the situation does not regress back to complete siege. Each siege situation is unique, and discretion may be used in waiving this three-month requirement should developments on the ground require it. For more details on the data collection process, please see the first quarterly Siege Watch report from February 2016.

Siege Watch monitors Syria's besieged areas using data collected on an ongoing basis from an extensive network of reporting contacts in besieged communities. Information on besieged communities is published in the interactive map on the Siege Watch website (www.siegewatch.org), on the Twitter feed (@siegewatch), and through in-depth quarterly reports.⁶

Challenges

The difficult, dangerous, and fluid circumstances on the ground in the besieged areas of Syria continued to present challenges for the Siege Watch project during the reporting period. Poor internet access, lack of electricity, bombings and other safety-related issues, in addition to shifting priorities among reporting contacts all impacted the type and amount of information gathered. Large population displacements between communities within besieged Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period once again hampered efforts to make accurate estimates.

The challenge of maintaining a network of voluntary reporting contacts was compounded during the reporting period by the forcible transfers from communities that surrendered to the government. In addition to local fighters and their families, the people deported from “reconciled” communities have included local council members and activists who maintain contact with the outside world. Siege Watch contacts were forcibly transferred from several communities during the reporting period, making it challenging to monitor post surrender developments.

⁶ Note: The situation in several of the besieged areas of Syria was changing quickly as of time of writing. Visit www.siegewatch.org for the most up-to-date data on specific communities.

While the Siege Watch tier system can be a useful tool to help stakeholders better understand the conditions in besieged communities and the variations between them, the circumstances in each area are unique, and do not always fit neatly into a classification. A number of areas currently on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” face siege-like conditions, and the decision to leave them on the “Watchlist” is not clear-cut. Communities that face limited movement and supply restrictions can blur the distinction between besieged and not besieged. In these cases of uncertainty, the Siege Watch project has opted to take a conservative approach and keep areas on the “Watchlist,” if any doubts exist. All such cases are frequently monitored and reevaluated on an ongoing basis.

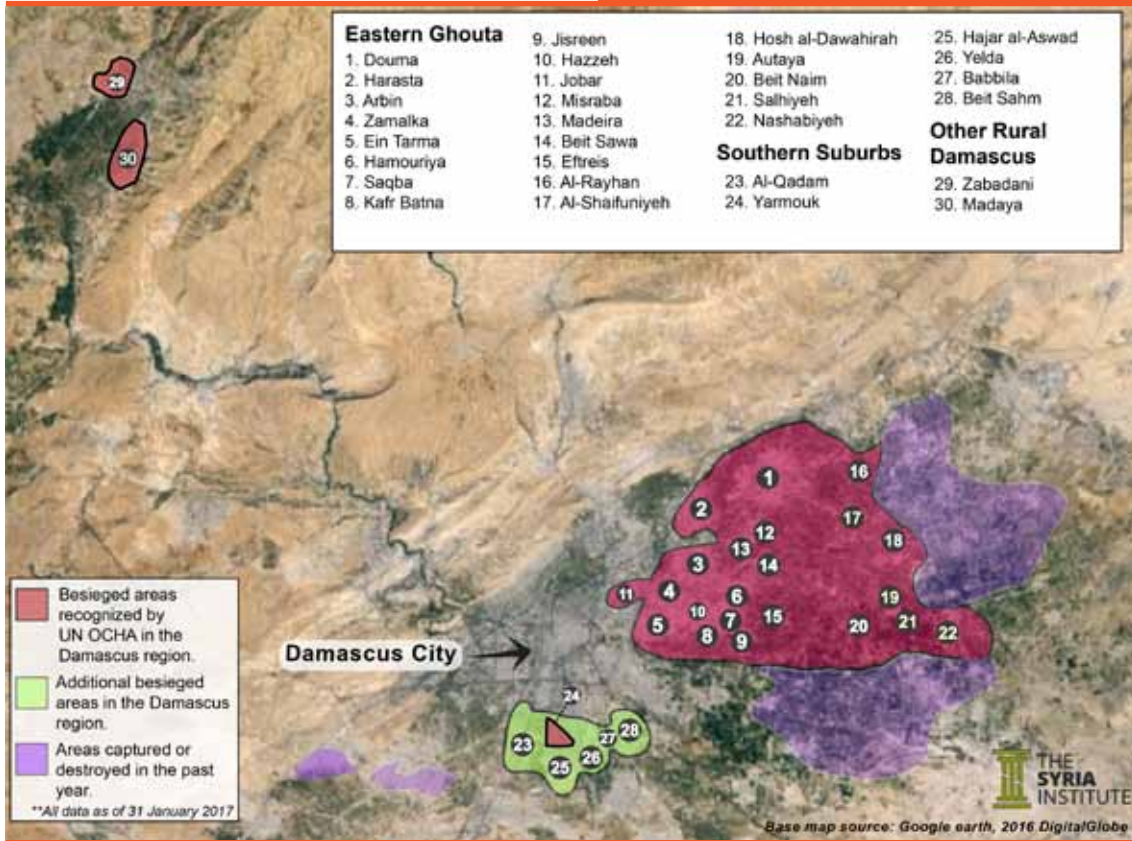
Rapid developments in some areas at times outpaced data collection efforts. Where updated information is unavailable, it is noted in the report. ♦

2. Besieged Community Overview

Damascus

Map 2:

Besieged areas in Damascus and Rural Damascus



EASTERN GHOUTA

Table 1:

Eastern Ghouta Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Ghouta (22 communities)	Mainly 2	Syrian Govt.	> 388,575

*Note: See Annex I for a complete list.

Snapshot:

Not a single community in Eastern Ghouta was reached with UN humanitarian assistance. Poor humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta continued to deteriorate during the reporting period. Attacks by pro-government forces continued and in some areas increased. The ongoing ground offensive in the rural area captured more agricultural land and caused additional civilian displacement.

Details:

The Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus governorate (along with the adjacent neighborhood of Jobar which is part of Damascus proper) remained besieged by government forces and pro-government militias during the November-January reporting period. The entire enclave has been completely besieged since 2013 but has decreased in size over time as pro-government forces have captured parts of the territory. There are at least 22 communities within this besieged area.⁷

Military Developments:

The nationwide ceasefire declared by Russia and Turkey on 29 December 2016 did little to calm the violence in Eastern Ghouta. While some of the besieged communities saw a brief pause, others experienced immediate breaches, including an elementary school bombing within hours of the ceasefire announcement. Over the past quarter, the waves of attacks launched against Eastern Ghouta included Russian and Syrian airstrikes on civilian markets, schools, and hospitals. In addition to conventional munitions, including banned cluster munitions, there were reports – backed in many cases by photographic and video evidence – of the repeated use of incendiary munitions as well as suspected toxic gas attacks.

A selection of notable attacks:

- ◆ 2 November 2016 – Pro-government forces planted explosives under an FSA-controlled building near the highway near Jobar (Abasayeen) and blew it up. This was the first of several tunnel bombs used by pro-government forces in November.
- ◆ 6-7 November 2016 – Douma and Harasta were struck with a wave of airstrikes and mortars. During these attacks, eight children were killed by artillery fire targeting a Harasta kindergarten, and five people were killed during airstrikes on a market in Douma. Incendiary weapons were used in some of these attacks.
- ◆ 17-18 November 2016 – A wave of airstrikes and artillery attacks hit towns across eastern Ghouta including: Douma, Harasta, Erbin, Jobar, Kafr Batna, Jisreen, Saqba, Beit Sawa, Ein Tarma, Hamouriya, al-Rayhan, and Zamalka. At least 20 people were killed and more than 100 were wounded. The attacks caused extensive infrastructure damage.

⁷ See Annex I for a full list of besieged communities. Communities included are based on the administrative areas listed in UN OCHA's 2013 "Syria P-code and Place Name Gazetteer," which can be found at: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/syrian-arab-republic-administrative-boundaries>. There are a number of small rural villages not captured in this schema, so the actual number of populated areas in besieged Eastern Ghouta is likely higher than recorded.

- ◆ 20 November 2016 – One child was killed and several injured in Nashabiyeh when an airstrike targeted a school.
- ◆ 23 November 2016 – A suspected chlorine chemical attack targeted opposition forces near the front lines in al-Rayhan.
- ◆ 29 November 2016 – Advancing pro-government ground forces captured the rural Meydani Hill area.
- ◆ 5 December 2016 – Airstrikes targeted the garage of the al-Marj hospital, destroying the only remaining ambulances in the area.
- ◆ 28 December 2016 – An air raid, reportedly by Russia, targeted an elementary school in Arbin. An entire family consisting of a woman, her son, and her two grandsons were killed in the attack.
- ◆ 29 December 2016 – A wave of airstrikes and artillery attacks hit towns across eastern Ghouta including Douma, Zamalka, Arbin, Saqba, Jisreen, Kafr Batna, and Harasta killing dozens of civilians. 13 people including two young girls were killed in Douma when airstrikes targeted a medical center and a school. An airstrike on Arbin damaged a school and killed a family of four.
- ◆ 30 December 2016 – Air raids targeted a civilian neighborhood in Zamalka, injuring four and killing two. The raids caused extensive infrastructure damage.
- ◆ 8-10 January 2017 – Pro-government forces captured the road between the communities of Salhiyeh and Nashabiyeh in the rural al-Marj area.
- ◆ 19 January 2017 – An air raid, reportedly by Russia, targeted a civilian residential area of Arbin, killing three people.
- ◆ 30 January 2017 – Al-Marj hospital received 14 victims of a suspected chemical gas attack, three in critical condition. The victims described seeing something green coming out of the bombs that hit and then immediately began experiencing symptoms consistent with exposure to chlorine gas.

On 30 December 2016, after the announcement of the nationwide ceasefire by Russia and Turkey, peaceful protesters came out in towns across Eastern Ghouta to demonstrate against the Syrian government and to call for the release of detainees.

As described above, there were several reported incidents in which pro-government forces planted tunnel bombs underneath opposition buildings in the Jobar/Harasta area. Though government forces have sought out and destroyed rebel smuggling tunnels since the beginning of the siege, the use of so-called tunnel bombs to detonate enemy-controlled buildings had traditionally been a tactic of the opposition. The government's use of this tactic suggests a growing frustration with its inability to capture Jobar after years of fighting for control of the central urban neighborhood.



The last ambulances in al-Marj, destroyed in airstrikes in December 2016



Fires after an incendiary munitions attack in Douma, November 2016



A bombing targeted a kindergarten in Douma, killing two girls, December 2016



Munitions in a suspected chlorine gas attack in the al-Marj area, January 2017

The ongoing ground campaign by pro-government forces that began in the spring of 2016 continued to make advances into Eastern Ghouta from the southern al-Marj front and the eastern al-Hosh front over the November-January period. An estimated 1,500 additional civilians were displaced from the frontlines during the reporting period. The trajectory of the territorial advances made by pro-government forces suggests that they may be trying to divide Eastern Ghouta into three pockets by severing access to Douma and Harasta in the north, and another portion of the rural al-Marj southern sector. This divide and conquer strategy was used successfully in the spring of 2016 to capture a sizeable part of the southern sector and reduce Eastern Ghouta's access to arable land.

Humanitarian Developments:

As a result of the continuing violence, the past quarter saw significant civilian displacement, with several thousand people fleeing from the rural frontline communities like Nashabiyeh and Autaya in the al-Marj area, towards the more suburban communities like Zamalka, Misraba, Arbin, Saqba, Jisreen, and Madeira. Contacts in Hazzeh reported that the town took in around 350 displaced persons from the eastern al-Hosh area.

Some towns in central Eastern Ghouta also noted the arrival of fleeing residents from the cities of Douma and Harasta, which once again were primary targets for pro-government forces. At the same time, Harasta also reportedly received around 600 displaced families from the rural al-Marj area. As Eastern Ghouta continues to shrink and the besieged civilians are compressed together, countervailing displacement flows like this will likely become more common.

The continued internal population displacement in Eastern Ghouta placed additional strain on the coping ability of local administrative bodies, as besieged host communities struggled to support new residents. The agricultural areas that have been captured by pro-government forces were a critical component of civilian resilience during nearly four years of siege. The fact that besieged civilians can no longer access these areas will have a notable impact on food prices and availability starting in the spring.

As expected, the winter months brought cold weather and a subsequent increase in suffering for besieged civilians. Eastern Ghouta residents relied largely on wood for both warmth and cooking for the past several years due to the lack of access to oil. As a result, many of the trees in the besieged enclave have been cut down and residents now face a wood shortage. In Douma, residents reported that the price of wood this winter was around 170 SYP/kg compared to an estimated 60 SYP/kg at this same time last year.

International charities continued to provide some support to Eastern Ghouta and there was still limited sale of goods by government-linked traders at the al-Wafideen checkpoint. Prices of available goods were significantly higher than those in government-controlled areas. Civilian movement across the government checkpoints remained prohibited even in cases of medical emergency. Smuggling, bribery, and internal production continued to be the primary means of procuring goods necessary for survival.

Baby milk continued to be one of the most critically needed goods in the besieged area. Like medical supplies, baby milk faced severe restrictions both from pro-government traders and international aid convoys (when they did occur). As in all besieged areas, there was a critical demand for medical supplies in Eastern Ghouta, particularly child vaccines and treatment for

chronic conditions. Not a single community in Eastern Ghouta was reached with UN international humanitarian assistance during the reporting period.

Political Developments:

Over the reporting period, the Syrian government continued to push forced surrender agreements on besieged communities in the Damascus area through a combination of threats and violent attacks. Eastern Ghouta has not been immune to these pressures.

On 27 November 2016, the Syrian government sent a letter with “reconciliation” terms to twelve Eastern Ghouta communities: Kafr Batna, Arbin, Beit Sawa, Jisreen, Hamouriya, Saqba, Hazzeh, Zamalka, Hteit al-Turkman, Shebaa, Zebdine, Deir Assafir.⁸ Strangely, four of the communities listed – Hteit al-Turkman, Shebaa, Zebdine, and Deir Assafir – were previously captured by pro-government forces and emptied of their original inhabitants. It is unclear why these locations were included in the message or why other besieged areas in Eastern Ghouta were excluded. The government’s offer cited the forced surrender agreements in Qudsaya and al-Hameh as models for the terms being offered to Eastern Ghouta.

On 1 December 2016, local authorities in Eastern Ghouta rejected the government’s terms. One contact from Zamalka described the scenario: “The regime sent a reconciliation request that asked the Zamalka population to abandon their claims, surrender to the regime, and for the young men to join the military. This was after clearly threatening the Zamalka population to start a big military campaign on all Eastern Ghouta. The population refused this initiative altogether.”

It is probable that the government and its backers attempted to reach other forcible surrender agreements in Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period through direct negotiations with armed group leaders, but the details are not publicly known. The government appears to be cutting community leaders out of the loop on recent local negotiations.

On 1 November 2016, the UN announced that “following a comprehensive review,” a number of additional communities in Eastern Ghouta were deemed to meet the besieged criteria and were officially added to their besieged list.⁹ The newly recognized communities included parts of the rural Eastern Ghouta countryside and the Jobar neighborhood, all of which have been under siege along with the rest of Eastern Ghouta since 2013. This adjustment brings the UN reporting more in line with the reporting of the Siege Watch project.

⁸ Hard copy available upon request.

⁹ UN Security Council, S/2016/962, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 15 November 2016, <www.un.org>.

SOUTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS

Table 2:

Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,500
Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	15,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	8,000
Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	16,500
SUM:			65,000

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 January 2017.

Snapshot:

The humanitarian and military situation in the southern suburbs of Damascus has remained relatively stable during the reporting period, although there were notable political developments. No changes made to population estimates or tier levels.

Details:

The southern suburbs enclave of Rural Damascus remained surrounded by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias during the November 2016-January 2017 reporting period. The besieged neighborhoods are still controlled by a patchwork of armed groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the former al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (now rebranded as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – HTS), and various armed opposition groups. Four of the six besieged communities – Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and al-Qadam – all have had truces with the government in place since 2014 but conditions have not completely normalized.

Sporadic violence was reported in the southern suburbs throughout the quarter. Most of the violent clashes occurred in and around al-Yarmouk Camp and involved ISIS fighting with either HTS, other opposition groups, or pro-government forces.

Damascus' southern suburbs continued to enjoy some entry of basic commercial goods into the area through the government-controlled checkpoints. The amount and type of supplies that entered this way were limited, and incurred a tariff that inflates prices by at least 20 percent. Medical supplies, particularly those needed for surgical interventions, were still highly restricted. The besieged enclave did not have access to running water and had inconsistent access to electricity.

The southern suburbs did not receive UN humanitarian aid during the reporting period. The

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is responsible for aid shipments to the area, but it has been unable to make a delivery into the southern suburbs since 25 May 2016.¹⁰ The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) has limited access to the area.

Civilians in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad continued to experience poor humanitarian conditions relative to the other southern suburbs neighborhoods due to the internal checkpoints between these ISIS-controlled communities and the opposition-controlled neighborhoods of al-Qadam, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and Yelda. Some of the goods that entered the southern suburbs through government controlled checkpoints were filtered into Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk, but the flow was intermittent and could be unpredictable. Residents in these two communities faced challenges when trying to travel to other adjacent besieged suburbs.

The UN has recognized Yarmouk as besieged on and off since mandated monthly reporting to the Security Council began in early 2014. On the other hand, UN OCHA - which makes these designations - had not officially recognized Hajar al-Aswad despite its similar circumstances to Yarmouk. This finally changed on 1 November 2016 when UN OCHA announced that it was listing Hajar al-Aswad as besieged for the first time, bringing the UN data more in line with Siege Watch reporting.¹¹ Hajar al-Aswad has been under siege since 2013, and Siege Watch has called for its official designation since the start of the project. The UN decision to recognize the siege of Hajar al-Aswad came as a result of an internal UN OCHA data review, which found that the neighborhood in fact met all of the criteria for the “besieged” classification.

However, on 26 January 2017, Stephen O’Brien, UN OCHA’s Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, announced that Hajar al-Aswad was no longer considered besieged, citing “access that has been available through Yarmouk, Yelda and Al-Qadam.”¹² This rationale for delisting the neighborhood is not supported by developments on the ground. Yarmouk is still officially listed as besieged and the other suburbs have not been accessed by any UN agency for the better part of a year. Civilians in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad live underneath essentially a double siege, and suffer both from the lack of services and supplies as well as the tyranny of ISIS rule. Hajar al-Aswad has never been directly reached with UN humanitarian assistance and the most recent UN monthly report confirmed that a January request to send aid to the community was denied.¹³

Forced Surrender Negotiations:

In keeping with its recent efforts to negotiate forcible surrenders for opposition-controlled communities in the Damascus area that had been quiet under longstanding truce agreements, the Syrian government began issuing ultimatums to the four southern suburbs communities of al-Qadam, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm during the reporting period. In mid-November 2016 local groups created a new working committee to participate in negotiations with the Syrian

10 “Syria: Humanitarian Snapshot, July – September 2016,” UNRWA, <<http://www.unrwa.org>>.

11 UN Security Council, S/2016/962, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 15 November 2016, <www.un.org>.

12 UN OCHA, “Syria: ‘We continue to be blocked at every turn’ - UN Humanitarian Chief,” 26 January 2017, <www.unocha.org>.

13 UN Security Council, S/2017/144, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),”

16 February 2017, <www.un.org>.

government. The local committee rejected the terms of the surrender proposed by the government negotiators. As in other besieged areas, this rejection prompted government threats of renewed attacks and annihilation. The threatened offensive did not materialize and negotiations continued for over a month before a new ultimatum was issued, calling on the neighborhoods of Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm to surrender by 12 January 2017 or prepare for attack. For the second time during the period, the government ultimatum deadline passed without apparent agreement or attack.

By the end of the reporting period, the government pressure on the southern suburbs to surrender had paused. Local contacts postulated that perhaps government forces decided to prioritize other areas like Wadi Barada and Eastern Ghouta for forced surrender first before returning attention to the southern suburbs in the future. It is notable that the southern suburbs are the only besieged area with an ISIS presence, as Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk are largely under ISIS control. The Syrian government has never seriously challenged ISIS' presence in these two communities.

The government's push to force surrender agreements caused tension and fear in the southern suburbs, where people had grown accustomed to the semi-besieged status quo that most of the communities have experienced since 2014. As a result of this renewed insecurity, some residents fled the southern suburbs into government-controlled neighborhoods during the reporting period. A new population estimate for the area is not yet available.

NOTE

Regarding Siege Watch classification of the southern suburbs: Due to the relatively improved conditions in these communities as a result of the partial checkpoint access allowing some civilians to obtain limited supplies, al-Qadam, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm have all been considered by the Siege Watch project for reclassification as "Watchlist" communities. The decision to maintain the besieged classification for the current reporting period is a result of the complexity of conditions in the southern suburbs enclave. The area is vulnerable to rapid shifts in access conditions as a result of tensions between ISIS, HTS, and other armed groups inside the besieged area, as well as threats from sectarian Shiite militias and government tactical shifts outside of the besieged area.

OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS

Table 3:

Other Rural Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Madaya/Baqeen	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	41,000
Zabadani	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	200
SUM:			41,200

Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions in Madaya and Zabadani reached new lows during the reporting period. No changes made to population estimates or tier level. Moadamiya was transferred to the “Watchlist” following its forced surrender during the prior period. The “Watchlist” communities of al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada all surrendered to government surrender terms but remained on the “Watchlist,” as did al-Hameh and Qudsaya after surrendering during the previous period. Khan al-Shieh is still under consideration for reclassification as fully besieged pending further review.

Details:

Madaya and Zabadani are the only remaining communities in the Damascus region outside of Eastern Ghouta and the southern suburbs enclaves that currently remain on the besieged list following the capture or surrender of other besieged enclaves in prior periods. Both towns remained critically besieged by Hezbollah, Iraqi militiamen, and Syrian government forces. Deteriorating humanitarian conditions reached a crisis point during the November-January quarter.¹⁴ At the end of the October 2016, Madaya’s only remaining medical clinic announced that it would be forced to shut down due to the lack of supplies, equipment, and personnel. The lack of medical treatment available has been devastating to civilians, and a steady stream of deaths was reported throughout the November 2016-January 2017 period among vulnerable populations such as infants and people with chronic conditions. Despite repeated requests, no medical evacuations were granted from Madaya during the reporting period.

Daily sniping targeted anything that moved in Madaya, leading to dozens of injuries and deaths, including women and children. On 5-6 December 2016, Madaya was hit with eight barrel bombs and several elephant rockets in addition to shelling and sniper attacks.¹⁵ This intensification marked the first time in over a year that barrel bombs were used against Madaya. At least four people were killed, including one child, and members of the local Civil Defense (White Helmets) rescue team. Five more Civil Defense rescuers were among the more than two dozen people who were wounded.

¹⁴ Note: The Baqeen area, which is an outlying suburb of Madaya, is herein considered as part of Madaya.

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of elephant rockets see: “Activists: Syria’s Assad Adds ‘Elephant Rockets’ to Arsenal,” VOA, 17 June 2015, <www.voanews.com>.



Madaya children protest near the humanitarian aid convoy in November.

In November, approximately 26 patients with kidney failure who required dialysis treatments were trapped in Madaya. Despite treatment rationing, the supplies began to dwindle and none of these patients were granted medical evacuation. On 5 November 2016, the first of these patients, a man named Dibu Ibrahim Al-Kwayfi, died. On 10 November, a second kidney failure patient, a 25-year old woman named Ola Mohammad Shabarek, also passed away. Another kidney failure patient named Ali Ghasn was in critical condition at the end of the reporting period when the final dialysis treatments ran out. With only painkillers available for treatment he died early in February following the end of the reporting period. More are expected to follow.

The “Four Towns agreement,” which previously allowed for aid deliveries and medical evacuations for the towns of Madaya and Zabadani in return for reciprocal measures for Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib, remained dysfunctional after breaking down in the fall of 2016. These areas received only one shipment of international humanitarian assistance during the reporting period. The shipment, delivered on 28 November 2016, included some flour, beans, canned food, and basic medical materials. According to SARC, the aid was sufficient for 8,000 families for one month.¹⁶ Medical staff in Madaya had issued an urgent call for the evacuation of the dialysis patients during the delivery. The request was not granted. Children held a peaceful protest during the delivery to call for an end to the siege.

The cold, coupled with the lack of medical treatment available, had an especially devastating impact

¹⁶ The Syrian Arab Red Crescent, “Humanitarian Relief Aid Reached Madaya & Zabadani and Foa & Kiffrya,” 29 November 2016, <sarc.sy>.



Families struggled to find wood to burn in Madaya this winter.

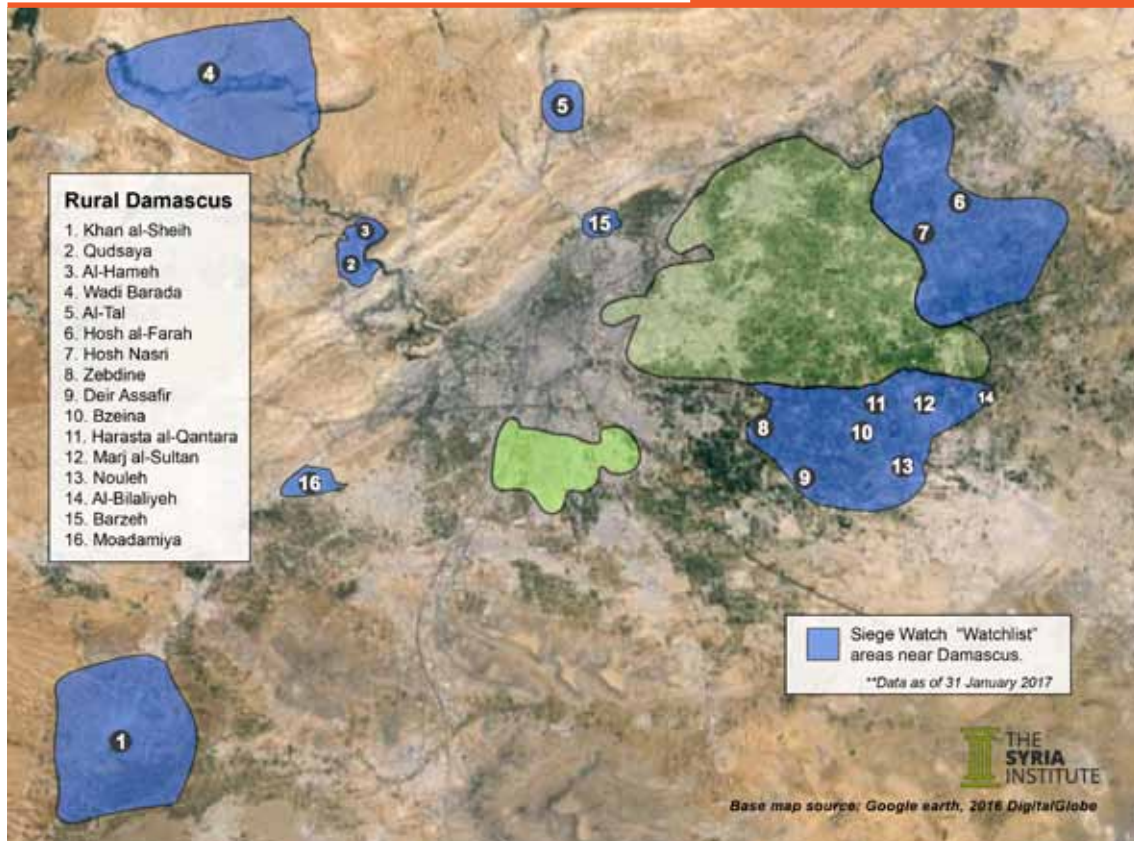
on newborns during the past quarter, and at least seven infants died during or shortly after birth. People in Madaya and Zabadani suffered greatly during the cold winter months due to the lack of fuel, as nighttime temperatures regularly dipped below freezing. Most of the trees and vegetation in the besieged area had previously been cut down, leaving little to burn.

In late December, civil society groups in Madaya collectively released a public statement proposing terms to end the suffering. Among other things, the statement stressed the need to stop efforts to displace the civilian population, noting that they had been asked (presumably by pro-government forces) to draw up a list of 1,500 people for deportation. As in prior periods, between November-January there continued to be sporadic reports of Hezbollah uprooting families outside of the besieged area, on the southern edge of Madaya, and evicting them from their homes.

Watchlist Areas:

Map 3:

Watchlist Communities in Rural Damascus



Moadamiya – In late October 2016, after weeks of threats and negotiations, Moadamiya capitulated to the government’s forced surrender terms. Beginning on 19 October 2016, approximately 3,000 people, including fighters and civilians, were forcibly transferred to Idlib. Several additional smaller rounds of deportation have taken place since then. While access and humanitarian conditions in Moadamiya have improved since the surrender, a partial siege still remained in place by the end of January and there were signs of ongoing human rights violations. Accordingly, Moadamiya remains on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for further observation.

Approximately a month after the initial surrender, there was a notable relaxation to movement restrictions for Moadamiya civilians. People on foot were relatively free to move across the checkpoints without harassment or having their belongings searched and patients requiring medical treatment were able to travel with escorts to Damascus hospitals. However, approximately half of the pre-surrender Syrian military force that surrounded Moadamiya remained in place despite a government promise to remove these forces. The one passage that was open for movement was heavily guarded, with approximately four checkpoints manned by the Fourth Division stationed on the road. Vehicles were subject to thorough inspection and confiscation of items that are still not approved by the government, such as construction materials.



Trash collection had not resumed in Moadamiya three months after surrender



A local school being repaired in Moadamiya three months after surrender

According to UN monthly reporting, agencies still struggled to get access to the town. An inter-agency aid convoy managed to reach Moadamiya once during the reporting period on 7 January 2017, but it was the approved “on an exceptional basis” as a long-delayed component of the November 2016 access plan. More recent access requests have not been approved.¹⁷ The January convoy reportedly contained supplies for 40,000 beneficiaries, but government forces removed 20,200 lifesaving medical treatments.¹⁸

While some local rehabilitation efforts have begun in Moadamiya, public services were not fully restored by the end of the reporting period. Electricity was available for a four-hour window each day and running water was still not available at all. Local bakeries all remained closed because the government had not yet approved their reopening.

As in other forcibly surrendered communities, there were reports of new arrests of Moadamiya civilians. The fear of possible detention still prevents some men from traveling through the checkpoint.

Post-surrender reports from Moadamiya were much more difficult for the Siege Watch project to obtain as many of those who remain in the town are afraid to speak for fear of retribution from government forces. As part of the surrender agreement, civilian institutions such as local charities and the local council were forced to disband, leaving the remaining civilians much more vulnerable to potential abuses. Both of these worrisome conditions – the renewed fear of sharing information and the dismantling of local institutions – are shared by all of the recently “reconciled” communities in the Damascus countryside.

Khan al-Shieh is a Palestinian refugee “camp” in southwest Rural Damascus governorate. The town and rural farming areas around it have been partially besieged by Syrian government forces for more than two years, with a dangerous rural farm road to the nearby town of Al-Zakiya serving as the sole lifeline for thousands of remaining residents. During the November-January reporting period, armed groups in Khan al-Shieh conceded to government forced surrender terms in the face of intensified Russian and Syrian attacks. Despite the capitulation and partial population transfer, the limited information available suggests that the access situation has not improved.

During the prior reporting period, conditions in Khan al-Shieh deteriorated significantly due to the Russian-backed offensive by pro-government forces. Incendiary munitions were used during several of these attacks, increasing the level of damage. On 13 November 2016 an UNRWA staff member was killed during an airstrike that targeted the Huda mosque. On 17 November 2016 the Biryia school was struck with elephant missiles and destroyed.

This heightened pressure from the violence and deteriorating humanitarian conditions led armed groups to surrender to government conditions in mid-November 2016. Starting on 29 November 2016, the Syrian government forcibly transferred several thousand fighters and civilians from

17 UN Security Council, S/2017/144, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),”

16 February 2017, <www.un.org>.

18 According to the UN this included: “Surgical kits, midwifery kits, basic X-ray machines, injectable analgesics, bottles of analgesics/antipyretics and items to treat 200 trauma cases.”



The destroyed Biryra School, Khan al-Shieh

Khan al-Shieh to Idlib governorate. One woman was killed during the transfer when the green government bus she was riding in overturned on a road in Hama. As in other forcibly surrendered communities, important civil society members, such as media activists and Local Council members, were transferred in addition to the armed group members and their families. Accordingly, the Siege Watch project's access to information from the community has decreased.

The limited information received from Khan al-Shieh since the population transfer suggests that at least a partial siege remained in place, despite local compliance with government terms. Civilian movement was still highly restricted and required individual approval from government security services. Only limited humanitarian assistance has been allowed into the camp from Palestinian humanitarian organizations, and critically needed supplies such as fuel were completely blocked.

Pro-government forces, including the Syrian military and the Syrian branch of the Palestinian Liberation Army (a Palestinian militia under state military control), have conducted a number of arrest raids in Khan al-Shieh since the surrender. There were unverified estimates that more than 100 people have been detained since the forced surrender was implemented, either during these raids or while attempting to enter or exit the camp. Families displaced from Khan al-Shieh during the preceding violence have not been allowed to return.

On 1 November 2016, the UN officially recognized Khan al-Shieh as besieged as part of its

“comprehensive review.”¹⁹ Due to a lack of verified information on current conditions, Khan al-Shieh still remains on the Siege Watch “Watchlist.”

Al-Tal is a city located in the mountainous region to the north of Damascus city. Al-Tal has taken in significant numbers of displaced populations from other besieged communities over the past several years, and they make up at least half of the estimated 800,000 people currently in the city. Until recently, al-Tal had been functioning under a long-standing truce with the Syrian government. While it faced siege-like conditions, al-Tal was on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” instead of the besieged list, due to the limited access provided to international agencies along with the fairly regular entry of basic commercial goods.

During the previous reporting period, the government broke longstanding truces and forced a surrender agreement with Qudsaya and al-Hameh, two other “Watchlist” communities near al-Tal. With both of these areas subdued, pro-government forces turned their attention to al-Tal and broke the long-standing truce with the city with attacks starting on 22 November 2016.

As with other locations, al-Tal was pressured to surrender through a combination of violent attacks and threats of complete annihilation. The violence intensified on 28 November 2016 after the local negotiating committee rejected the government’s surrender terms. At least one child was killed and several people were critically injured. In the face of the heightened attacks, al-Tal surrendered a week later. The terms of the agreement were nearly identical to those in other forcibly surrendered locations in Rural Damascus. These terms included the deportation of armed group members and civilians who did not wish to reconcile their status with the Syrian government, a six-month grace period before men would be forced to enter military service, the removal of barriers surrounding the town, and a promise that government forces would not enter unless there was specific intelligence on armed group activity.

On 2 December 2016, an estimated 2,000-3,000 people were transferred to Idlib on government green buses under Syrian Red Crescent supervision. Around 760 of the forcibly displaced were women and children. The displaced included fighters, their families, and community members such as media activists.

Following the government’s reassertion of control, communications with al-Tal became difficult. Siege Watch contacts were either part of the forcible displacement, or they shut down their online presence. This is very similar to the scenario witnessed in Qudsaya, al-Hameh, Khan al-Shieh and Moadamiya after their respective forced surrenders.

Through information received from indirect contacts and secondary sources, it appears that the humanitarian conditions in al-Tal have slowly improved, although access had not yet fully normalized by the end of the January reporting period. The pro-government checkpoints surrounding al-Tal remained in place, and civilians attempting to cross them faced heavy scrutiny, restrictions on goods, and unpredictable closures. SARC humanitarian aid deliveries have been arbitrarily blocked or delayed and the government has imposed excessively high tariffs on com-

19 UN Security Council, S/2016/962, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 15 November 2016, <www.un.org>.



Al-Tal population transfer, 2 December 2016

mercial goods.²⁰ Initiatives to rebuild critical infrastructure were not moving quickly enough to prevent civilian suffering during the cold winter months without sufficient access to heating fuel.

Under the terms of the surrender agreement, the Syrian government reportedly promised that its military forces would not enter the city unless there was intelligence about the presence of armed opposition group activity. The government forces failed to adhere to the agreement and entered the city two days after the forcible displacement, setting up internal checkpoints to regulate movement between neighborhoods.

As in other forcibly surrendered communities, international charities besides SARC did not appear to have access to the area, and there were some signs that the pro-government forces may have started committing a steady stream of human rights violations aimed at purging potential future dissent, most notably with a new wave of detentions. Despite promises of a six-month waiting period before men in al-Tal would be forced to serve their mandatory military service, some conscriptions happened quickly. According to one woman, just two weeks after the agreement “more than 90 percent of the young men who stayed involuntarily joined the regime’s forces.”²¹

Al-Hameh and Qudsaya had long faced partial siege conditions, but maintained multi-year truces with the Syrian government and were both classified on the Siege Watch “Watchlist.” In late September 2016 pro-government forces unexpectedly ended this calm and launched a major attack on the towns. At least 50 civilians were killed in the onslaught. The attacks were

20 Bahira al-Zarier, Alaa Nassar, Jessica Page and Kristen Demilio, “Post-surrender regret in Damascus suburb: ‘Everyone who lost sons and daughters to this revolution will never view Assad as anything but a criminal’,” Syria Direct, 18 January 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

21 Bahira al-Zarier, Alaa Nassar, Jessica Page and Kristen Demilio, “Post-surrender regret in Damascus suburb: ‘Everyone who lost sons and daughters to this revolution will never view Assad as anything but a criminal’,” Syria Direct, 18 January 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

used to pressure the towns to accept government surrender terms. In mid-October 2016, both al-Hameh and Qudsaya surrendered and were subjected to the government's terms, including partial forced population transfers.

Though there have been reported improvements in humanitarian conditions in al-Hameh and Qudsaya since their surrender, there have also been intermittent reports of human rights violations, such as arbitrary civilian detentions. Despite being promised a six-month grace period before men would be forced to serve their mandatory military service, some may have already been sent to the front lines.

Qudsaya received a World Health Organization (WHO) medical aid convoy during the reporting period, but nearly 6,000 life-saving medical treatments were removed by government forces.²²

Although it appears that civilians in al-Hameh and Qudsaya may be faring better than other forcibly surrendered communities, both communities remained on the Siege Watch "Watchlist" due to the continuing uncertainty and the reduced communications access since the surrender.

The **Wadi Barada** area encompasses a string of small towns along the Barada River to the northwest of Damascus city. The area – which effectively controls the source of the water supply used by Damascus city – had previously been under a longstanding local truce with the Syrian government. Wadi Barada was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" in late July 2016 after Hezbollah and Syrian government forces briefly closed all access points in an attempt to gain control of the springs.

Wadi Barada came under increased pressure from the Syrian government to surrender during the November-January reporting period. On 19 December 2016, a Siege Watch contact in Wadi Barada sent an ominous warning that they "were next," following the surrenders in al-Tal and other Rural Damascus areas. The next day, pro-government forces launched a major offensive in the area.

Communications to Wadi Barada were largely cut off during the onslaught, and information sent by Siege Watch project contacts was sporadic. On 22 December 2016 one contact reported intense attacks, particularly against the southern towns nearest to the Ein al-Fijeh spring. Barrel bombs filled with incendiary munitions bombarded the town of Bassema, forcing residents to take shelter underground, while other Wadi Barada towns were hit by artillery and machine gun fire. On 23 December 2016, barrel bombs hit the Ein el-Fijeh water facility, causing substantial damage and effectively cutting the flow of water to Damascus, sparking a water crisis in the region. The government aerial attack on the water facility, as reported by Siege Watch contacts, is supported by photo and video evidence.²³ The damaged facility was reportedly targeted again by government strikes on 28 December 2016.

On 30 December 2016, as Russia and Turkey declared the start of a nationwide ceasefire, the assault on Wadi Barada intensified. More than 30 airstrikes, 50 barrel bombs, and heavy snip-

22 UN Security Council, S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015)," 14 December 2016, <www.un.org>.

23 Nick Waters, "Wadi Barada – What Happened to Damascus's Water?" Bellingcat, 4 January 2017, <www.bellingcat.com>.



The damaged Wadi Barada water facility.

ing and artillery fire were reported on the besieged towns. On 17 January 2017, local groups in Wadi Barada issued a joint statement condemning the Astana negotiations due to the continuing ceasefire breaches.

While the offensive continued, local government and opposition negotiators eventually agreed to allow the entry of a maintenance team to repair the springs and restore water to Damascus. On 14 January 2017, while the team was on the ground in the Wadi Barada town of Deir Qanoon, Retired Major General Ahmad al Ghadban, the government's main negotiator, was assassinated. Local sources indicated that Hezbollah forces were responsible for the killing, since they launched an attack while the team was inside. While there is no verifiable evidence to confirm this claim, it does raise the possibility that the Syrian government and Hezbollah (and Iran) are pursuing different objectives in the Wadi Barada area.

By late January 2017, pro-government forces managed to make advances into the Wadi Barada enclave, capturing the villages of Afra and Bassemah. On 28 January 2017 the remaining towns agreed to the government's terms, and beginning on the 29 January, several thousand fighters and civilians were transported from Wadi Barada to Idlib.

Homs

Map 4:
Besieged Communities in Hom

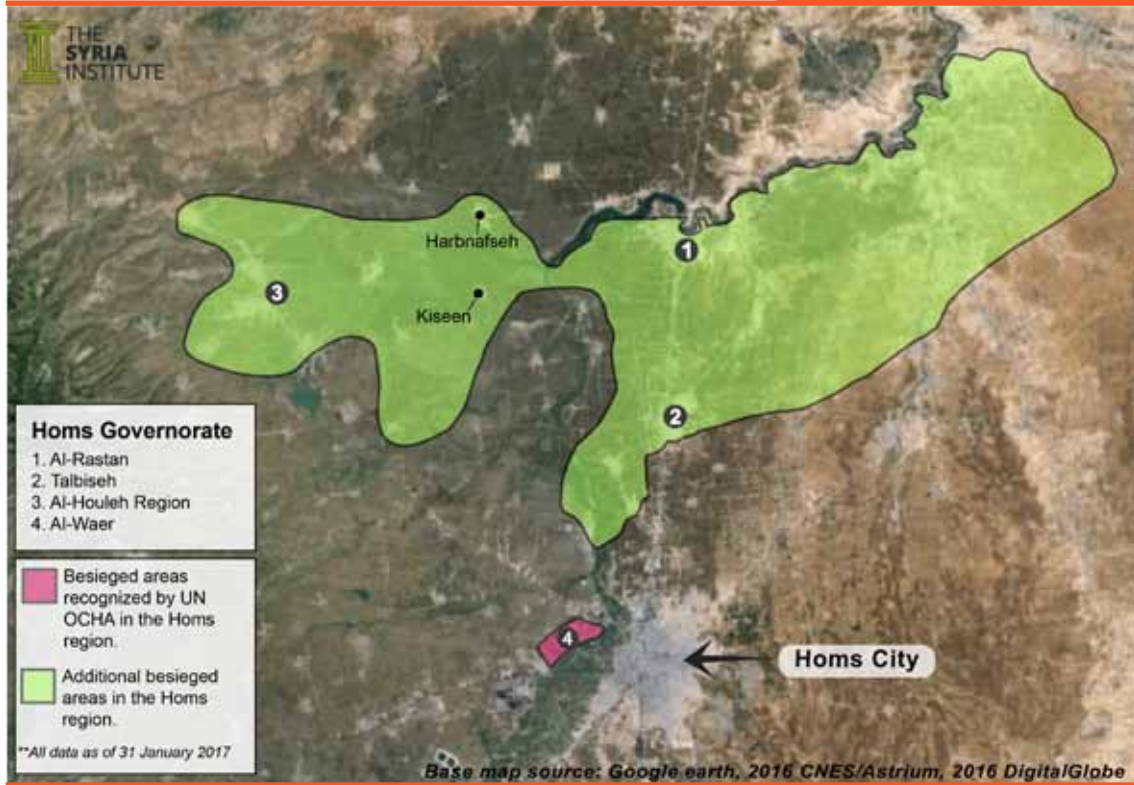


Table 4:
Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	60,000
Al-Houleh Region +	3	Syrian Govt.	83,000
Al-Rastan +	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
SUM:			328,000

*Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 January 2017.

Snapshot:

Conditions in the besieged enclaves of the northern Homs countryside fluctuated throughout the reporting period but remained poor overall. The situation in al-Waer is critical and unstable, and conditions deteriorated over the reporting period as a result of unprecedented attacks by pro-government forces. The population estimates for al-Waer and Talbiseh have been lowered slightly. No changes in tier levels were deemed necessary.

Details:

All of the sieges in Homs governorate remained in place during the reporting period. These sieges are enforced by Syrian armed forces and an array of affiliated groups including the Syrian National Defense Force militias, Iran-backed foreign militias, Hezbollah, and Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces. The besieged pockets of Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh in the northern countryside of Homs are still not recognized as besieged by the UN.

NORTHERN HOMS GOVERNORATE

The besieged northern countryside areas of **Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh** include two main cities, several villages and a relatively large expanse of rural land. In many ways, the situation is similar to that of Eastern Ghouta, which is also a large besieged area encompassing both rural and urban areas. The besieged communities of northern Homs have been surrounded by pro-government forces for approximately four years. Civilians trapped in these areas rely on local food production and smuggling for survival, as well as some pro-government traders who sell limited supplies for high prices at checkpoints.

Airstrikes by Syrian and Russian jets caused civilian casualties in northern Homs throughout most of the quarter. The single remaining dirt road that connects al-Houleh to the al-Rastan and Talbiseh pockets was frequently targeted by shelling from pro-government forces in nearby villages.

The nationwide ceasefire announced by Russia and Turkey at the end of December 2016 brought some initial relief to northern Homs, with minimal violations reported during the first few weeks of January 2017. As a result, internal movement became less risky and prices began to stabilize at civilian markets. Towards the end of January violence began to increase once again.

On 17 January 2017 an airstrike killed seven people in Talbiseh. On 22 January, in a major escalation, a wave of attacks was launched against all major urban areas in the northern besieged enclave including al-Rastan, Talbiseh, and several towns in the al-Houleh region. An unknown number of civilians were killed and wounded, as undersupplied medical centers were flooded with victims. Airstrikes and shelling by pro-government militias caused civilian casualties throughout the quarter. In the al-Houleh town of al-Taldu, nine people including four children were killed in the attacks. A fifth girl named Doaa Radwan was in left critical condition in a coma from her injuries.

A lack of fuel and declining levels of support from international organizations strained the ability of local authorities to provide basic services in the northern Homs besieged areas in the November-January period. Diesel was in short supply during the cold winter months, and there was less wood available to burn as many of the trees had been cut down in previous years. As in other besieged communities, residents in northern Homs have relied heavily on wood for both cooking and heating since the beginning of the siege.



Photo Source: Home Civil Defense

A Civil Defense member rescues children from bombing in a residential area of al-Rastan on 22 January.

In November, bread shortages in the Talbiseh area prompted public cries for assistance from local authorities. Due to a reduction in support from international aid organizations in al-Rastan, the local council has struggled to keep water-pumping stations running.²⁴ This resulted in a severe water crisis that worsened throughout the reporting period.

Medical supplies and baby milk remained among the hardest items to get in all of the rural besieged areas of Homs governorate. Malnutrition was widespread and those with chronic diseases struggled to find treatment. There were several reports of people who were taken to hospitals in Homs city for treatment being detained by government security services during the quarter.

Al-Rastan received one UN interagency aid delivery on 22 November 2016. The convoy consisted of 51 trucks carrying food aid, sanitation supplies, and a small amount of medical and education materials. Over 16,000 medical treatments were removed from the delivery by government forces.²⁵ The convoy was also reportedly missing baby milk. The November 2016 delivery was the first convoy to reach the area since July after prior attempts had been blocked by Russian airstrikes. Al-Rastan area was scheduled to receive additional UN humanitarian assistance in

24 Bahira al-Zarier and Madeline Edwards, "Water completely cut off in north Homs town with no end in sight," Syria Direct, 26 January 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

25 UN Security Council, S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015)," 14 December 2016, <www.un.org>.

January 2017, but the convoy was once again blocked and aborted. The November 2016 delivery to al-Rastan was the only one to reach any of the besieged northern Homs areas during the reporting period.

A number of families displaced from al-Waer and nearby rural villages were transported into al-Rastan and Talbiseh during the reporting period, but the increase in population size was minimal and offset a temporary relaxation of civilian movement restrictions following the nationwide ceasefire announcement, when some families were allowed to leave the area. Many, particularly men, were afraid to attempt crossing the government checkpoints even when they were open, due to the continuing threat of arrest.

AL-WAER

Al-Waer remained besieged by government forces and affiliated militias during the quarter, and humanitarian conditions in the neighborhood declined as a result of intensified attacks by pro-government forces. During the previous period it seemed like the local negotiation process that has been limping along since late 2015 might be gaining traction after the local negotiating committee agreed to government terms. An initial group of around 600 fighters and their families were deported out of al-Waer in September 2016. This process subsequently ground to a halt by the end of October 2016 after it became clear that the Syrian government would not follow through on its promise to release detainees.

[Note: Since the end of January the critically-besieged community of al-Waer surrendered to Syrian government forces in the face of an intense military offensive in order to stave off a complete humanitarian disaster. Russia acted as the primary mediator of the forced surrender. The first batch of 1,400 residents were forcibly transferred from al-Waer to Jarablus on 18 March 2017. More than 1,000 of them were civilians. A total of 15,000-20,000 people in total are expected to be deported out of al-Waer over a two month implementation period.]

Local negotiations were reportedly set to continue with a meeting on 3 November 2016 to discuss the detainee issue, but contacts reported that the government delegation first postponed and then cancelled the meeting, pending the outcome of the assault on eastern Aleppo. Al-Waer residents were surprised when instead of the continued negotiations, pro-government forces launched a new wave of attacks that escalated to unprecedented levels in the latter half of November 2016.

Key developments include:

- ◆ 6 November 2016 – Airstrikes and bombardment killed four and wounded more than 20. Three children and two women were among the casualties. One elderly man had a heart attack as a result of fear during the attacks and passed away.
- ◆ 15 November 2016 – An unprecedented two-week long assault against the neighborhood began, as barrel bombs, incendiary munitions, elephant missiles, mortars and shelling pummeled the neighborhood. On the first day alone, 25 barrel bombs hit the neighborhood and eight people were killed including two children. Both of the neighborhood's primary hospitals were damaged. The assault forced people to seek shelter underground for days on end. The crowded and unsanitary conditions in underground bunkers led to greater suffering, as disease and pests (such as lice) spread quickly. The devastated medical sec-

tor was unable to treat the injured. As part of the assault at least six were killed and 10 injured when a missile truck a store selling fuel, causing severe fatal burns on victims that some mistakenly attributed to a napalm-like substance.

- ◆ 28 November 2016 – As schools and prayer services were cancelled due to the intense shelling, the al-Waer negotiating committee reportedly met with a Russian officer. This meeting resulted in an agreement for a temporary weeklong truce.
- ◆ 29 November 2016 – The temporary truce began, bringing respite to the devastated suburb.

The November 2016 assault took a devastating toll on the neighborhood. A total of 16 people were killed including two children, and dozens more were injured. The bombings caused major infrastructure damage, especially in the older section in the city. Five charity centers serving as civilian shelters were directly targeted including: an orphanage, a kindergarten, a religious center, a charity, and a home for the deaf and mute. The orphanage was completely destroyed and 35 families were displaced. Nine members of the local Civil Defense team (White Helmets) were injured while attempting to rescue civilians.

With the start of the temporary local truce on 29 November 2016, a flurry of intense negotiations resulted in the government issuing a new ultimatum for the neighborhood to surrender by 14:00 on 2 December 2016 or face a new wave of attacks. This type of threatening ultimatum has been issued to al-Waer many times over the past few years, and passed without capitulation. Violent assaults continued to target the neighborhood throughout the remainder of the reporting period.

Government forces did not allow those who were injured or in need of medical treatment to leave al-Waer for treatment during the reporting period. As a result, three elderly people died due to the lack of heart disease drugs and blood pressure medication: Fatima al-Abdo (73), Ali al-Sahl (85), and Najimeh al-Abdullah (80).

Students and government employees were allowed to move into and out of al-Waer intermittently throughout the reporting period. During times of more lax enforcement, returning civilians were allowed to bring up to 2 kg of vegetables with them into the neighborhood. As conditions deteriorated, restrictions increased and the students and employees were banned from bringing any supplies with them when they re-entered al-Waer. As the violence worsened, some of these civilians did not return to the neighborhood, leading to a drop in the overall population.

Al-Waer did not receive any humanitarian assistance during the reporting period, despite the fact that a convoy had been approved in the UN plans submitted to the Syrian government. Malnutrition was widespread.



A severely malnourished infant in al-Waer in December

Deir Ezzor

Map 5:

Besieged Neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor

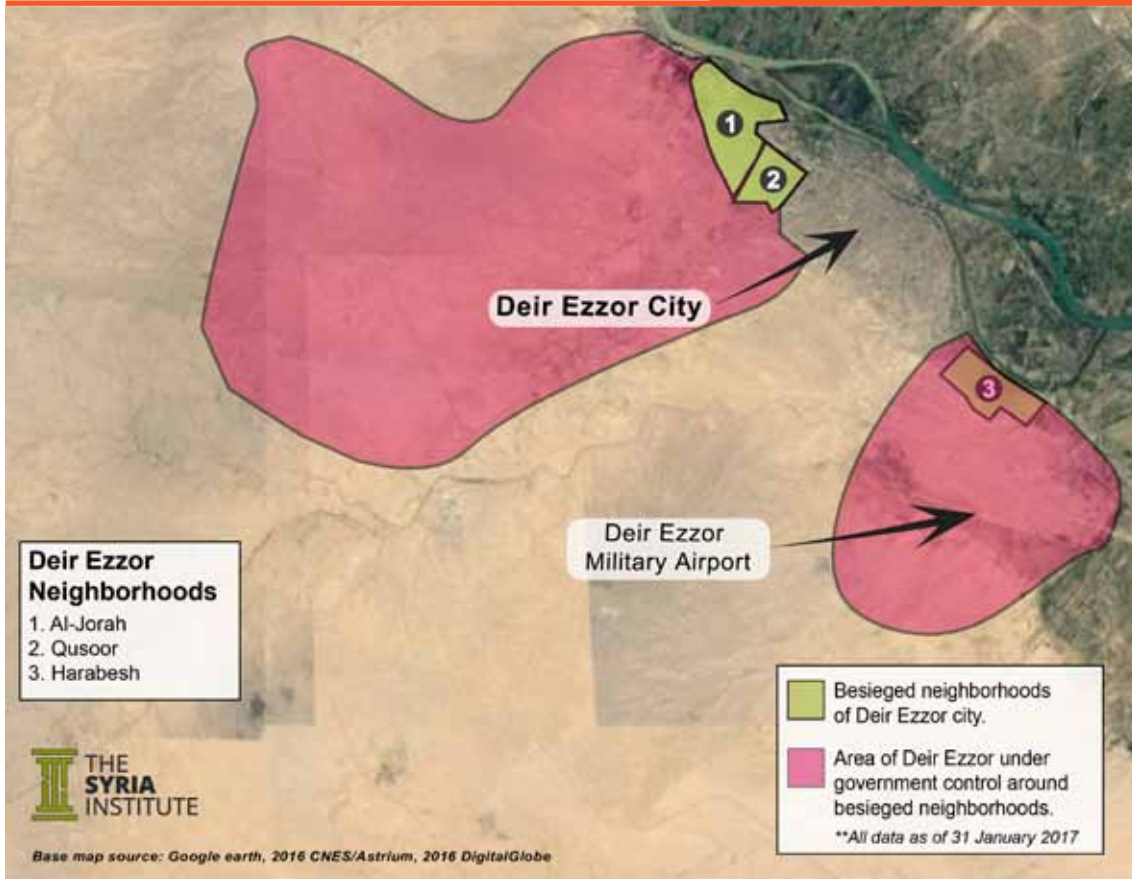


Table 5:

Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Deir Ezzor (besieged neighborhoods)	3	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000

Snapshot:

After a long period of relative stability since the WFP-led airdrops began in April 2016, Deir Ezzor experienced fresh turmoil during the November-January reporting period as the result of an ISIS offensive. Humanitarian conditions in the besieged neighborhoods declined notably. Population estimates were lowered.

Details:

Besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city have been surrounded by ISIS forces since the start of 2015. The neighborhoods are controlled by Syrian government forces, which regulate humanitarian aid distribution and restrict civilians from fleeing the neighborhoods. Many people consider themselves to be besieged by both ISIS and the government due to perceived abuses and restrictions emplaced on besieged civilians by the government forces.

As has been previously reported by Siege Watch, government forces continued to appropriate significant portions of the international assistance provided to Deir Ezzor through regular WFP-led airdrops. Siege Watch contacts have reported that more than half of the WFP food assistance is taken by government forces and either sold at high prices or used for military personnel, although this figure is unverified. Pro-government forces continued to prevent civilians from fleeing the besieged area. The cost of bribing government forces for helicopter evacuation is reportedly up to 600,000 SYP.²⁶

Syrian government aircraft reportedly supplied fuel to the besieged area, as it is not included in the WFP aid drops. Weather-related interruptions in late 2016 led to a fuel shortage, which in turn interrupted the production of local bakeries and precipitated a severe bread shortage. Fuel and other supplies brought in by government aircraft were sold at high prices to civilians by government-affiliated traders and many residents were unable to afford what they need even when it was available in the market. Prices of available goods in Deir Ezzor currently exceeded those in many other besieged areas, indicating the level of scarcity. Baby milk, fuel, and medical supplies were the most critically needed supplies.

In mid-January, ISIS forces managed to entirely sever the link between the government's military airport and the rest of the besieged neighborhoods, cutting the enclave in two. The regular WFP-led airdrops were put on pause around 12 January 2017 after ISIS took control of the drop zone. Pro-government social media accounts reported that after the WFP aid drops paused, Russia and Syria airdropped their own supplies to the besieged area, but only to resupply the government's military forces. UN updates confirmed these reports and indicated that the pro-government airlifts were taking place daily. Almost all of the aid sent was used exclusively for military resupply, despite the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian conditions.²⁷ The WFP reportedly resumed drops at the end of the reporting period on 27 January 2017 after identifying a new drop location under government control.²⁸

Dozens of civilians were killed in ISIS attacks on the besieged neighborhoods over the reporting period. In addition to shelling, there were also reports of unmanned armed drones dropping

26 Deir Ezzor 24, "Assad regime helicopters resume their flights between Deir Ezzor and Qamishli," 19 December 2016, <en.deirezzor24.net>.

27 UN OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Deir-ez-Zor Flash Update No. 2," 28 January 2017, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

28 Tom Miles, "WFP resumes air drops to Syrian city besieged by Islamic State," Reuters, 31 January 2017, <www.reuters.com>.

bombs on the besieged neighborhoods. Several civilians died as a result of the lack of available medical care, including 65-year-old Hatra Mahmoud al-Awwad on 24 December 2016, and 16-year-old Joud al-Najem on 31 December. Contacts also reported that the government and Russia launched more than 100 airstrikes against ISIS-controlled neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor in response to the offensive, causing significant civilian casualties.

The Siege Watch population estimate has been lowered slightly to 72,000 as people have escaped by bribing government soldiers at the checkpoints or paying for helicopter evacuation over time.

Map 6:
Besieged Communities of Idlib

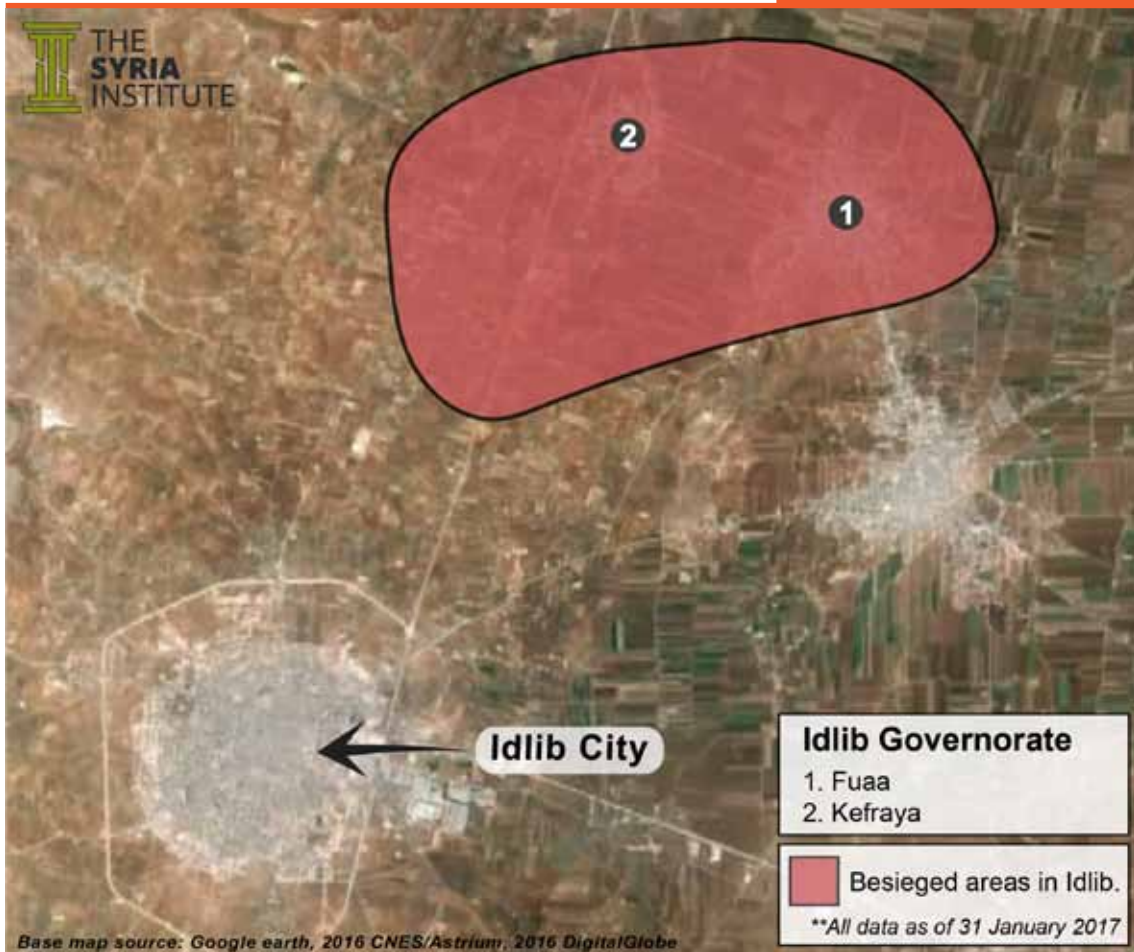


Table 6:
Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	Armed groups	18,800



Government airdrop of supplies to Fuaa and Kefraya in November

Snapshot:

No change in besieged designation or tier level. Population estimate lowered slightly following medical evacuations in December.

Details:

The pro-government towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by armed opposition groups and HTS throughout the November-January reporting period. Siege Watch was again unable to expand its network of reporting contacts into these communities during the reporting period.

The “Four Towns agreement” that had previously allowed for aid deliveries and medical evacuations in Madaya and Zabadani in return for reciprocal measures in Fuaa and Kefraya, remained dysfunctional after breaking down earlier in the fall of 2016. Fuaa and Kefraya received only one shipment of international humanitarian assistance over the reporting period, on 28 November 2016. According to SARC, the aid was sufficient for 4,000 families for one month.²⁹ Fuaa and Kefraya continued to receive supply airdrops from government and Russian aircraft during the reporting period.

There was a medical evacuation of civilians from Fuaa and Kefraya in mid-December, after Iran reportedly made it a requisite condition for the final evacuations from eastern Aleppo to proceed. During the Fuaa and Kefraya evacuations, disagreements between besieging armed opposition groups led to the seizure and burning of one convoy of buses en route to evacuate residents. Evacuations eventually proceeded and approximately 750 were removed by 20 December 2016. According to UN OCHA, approximately 1,200 people were transported out of the towns

29 SARC, “Humanitarian Relief Aid Reached Madaya & Zabadani and Foa & Kifrya,” 29 November 2016, <sarc.sy>.

in total.³⁰ They were taken to government controlled areas of Homs and Latakia.³¹ It is unclear whether these evacuations were voluntary in nature as few details about their negotiation have been made public.

30 UN OCHA, "Syria: 'We continue to be blocked at every turn' - UN Humanitarian Chief," 26 January 2017, <www.unocha.org>.

31 UN Security Council, S/2017/58 "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 20 January 2017, <www.un.org>.

Aleppo

Snapshot:

The situation in the eastern opposition-controlled part of Aleppo city was catastrophic during the reporting period. An extremely violent offensive launched by pro-government forces in mid-November continued without pause until the shrinking besieged pocket finally collapsed in mid-December. The area's infrastructure was destroyed and most of the residents were displaced, killed, arrested, or forcibly transferred into the countryside. Eastern Aleppo has been reclassified from besieged to "Watchlist," but will remain under indefinite observation due to reports of continuing human rights abuses.

Details:

During the November 2016-January 2017 reporting period, residents of besieged eastern Aleppo experienced a humanitarian catastrophe of historic significance. Eastern Aleppo has been on the Siege Watch "Watchlist" since February 2016, when fears began to rise that the Castello Road – the only remaining supply route into the opposition controlled part of the city – could be severed by pro-government forces. The area became completely encircled in July 2016. By the end of the prior Siege Watch reporting period in October, the situation in eastern Aleppo was critical. With supplies running low, malnutrition became widespread and the continuing attacks left the medical sector and other civilian infrastructure in ruins.

A final push to capture the enclave began in mid-November 2016. The attacking forces included the full slate of 'Assad Coalition' government allies.³² As pro-government forces started to capture northern sections of the besieged enclave, civilians fled in all directions. People escaped into government-controlled neighborhoods, to the safety of a UN reception center at Jibreen, to the opposition-controlled countryside, and into the city's remaining Kurdish-controlled neighborhood. Still more people fled south, deeper into the shrinking besieged pocket in a growing crush of humanity.

During the month-long final assault on eastern Aleppo, the area's few remaining medical facilities were targeted multiple times and all were eventually taken out of service. There were reports of the use of banned munitions such as cluster bombs and chemical weapons, as well as incendiary weapons, bunker busters, and more conventional weaponry. Reports also emerged of massacres committed by pro-government militias as they entered the besieged neighborhoods, as well as the mass detention of fleeing residents.

The following list highlights some of the key developments during the final assault on eastern Aleppo:

- ◆ 10 November 2016 – The UN announced that the last stockpiled food supplies were being distributed to residents.³³
- ◆ 15 November 2016 – The Syrian government began an intensive airstrike campaign.

³² The Syria Institute, "The Assad Coalition" Infographic, 5 December 2016, <syriainstitute.org>.

³³ "Transcript of press stakeout by Mr. Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria," UN, 10 November 2016, <<http://reliefweb.int>>.



Bodies litter the ground in Jub a-Quba after an airstrike targeted fleeing civilians.



Source: Thea Agency

People head towards the evacuation zone in Aleppo, 19 December 2016

- ◆ 18 November 2016 – A suspected chemical attack resembling chlorine was reported on the Hanano neighborhood. That same day it was reported that the remaining hospitals were all taken out of service.
- ◆ 19 November 2016 – The last five operational hospitals in eastern Aleppo were taken out of service in airstrikes, and residents reported a series of barrel bombs containing a toxic gas suspected to be chlorine.
- ◆ 20 November 2016 – Another suspected chlorine attack was reported in the Sakhour neighborhood. This one killed a family of six, who suffocated in a basement.
- ◆ 30 November 2016 – A Siege Watch contact reported that multiple bakeries were targeted and taken out of service: “Aleppo is a city without bread,” he said. That same day an airstrike targeted a group of civilians trying to flee the fighting in the Jub a-Quba area, more than forty were killed.
- ◆ 5 December 2016 – Russia and China vetoed a UNSC resolution to halt the violence in Aleppo.³⁴

During the devastation, there were reports of women asking their husbands to kill them rather than be captured by the sectarian Iran-backed militias, who have a reputation for rape and torture. While stories such as these cannot be independently verified, they are still illustrative of the level of fear and horror experienced by civilians trapped in eastern Aleppo at the time.

By 13 December 2016 a tenuous deal was reached to forcibly transfer tens of thousands of people trapped in the remaining pocket. The stop-start evacuations that began on 15 December and continued for approximately one week were exceptionally fraught and tense. Several times during the ordeal, buses carrying evacuees were turned back or stopped by Iran-supported pro-government militias. A number of people were reportedly pulled off of the buses and killed or detained.³⁵ At least one such incident was witnessed firsthand by a Siege Watch contact, who reported that a Russian officer and SARC representative were present while a man, woman, and child were removed from one of the buses and taken into custody by pro-government forces.

The forced transfers moved slowly, and many citizens waited for days without shelter near the transfer site in sub-zero temperatures with snow on the ground. By 23 December 2016 the evacuations were completed and the majority of the residents of the formerly besieged enclave had been displaced, deported, arrested, or killed.

Initial follow-up communications with Siege Watch contacts in January 2017 indicated that some of the displaced residents who attempted to return to eastern Aleppo after the assault was over, encountered persecution from pro-government militias and were forced to flee a second time.

³⁴ “Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Calling for Ceasefire in Aleppo,” UN News Center, December 5, 2016, <www.un.org>.

³⁵ UN Security Council, S/2017/58 “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),” 20 January 2017, <www.un.org>.



Civilians are loaded onto green government buses in Aleppo, 15 December 2016.

When eastern Aleppo first became encircled in July 2016, Siege Watch estimated a population of approximately 326,000. It is likely that this number had shrunk by the time of the final assault due to smuggling escapes. There is no reliable documentation on these changes. During the final assault on eastern Aleppo, the chaotic and fast-paced nature of events made determining new estimates challenging. UN agencies and other humanitarian actors involved in the evacuations generally estimated lower population figures for the final number of evacuees, but also provided varying figures.³⁶

Siege Watch has been unable to independently calculate a new estimate for the number of civilians in eastern Aleppo in late January 2017, at the end of the reporting period. According to a 4 February update, the UN had documented 81,735 registered people in the formerly besieged neighborhoods.³⁷ While the real number is likely higher, Siege Watch has used this figure as a minimum estimate in the current quarterly calculations.

For a more detailed accounting of the fall of eastern Aleppo beyond the brief overview provided here, see the Atlantic Council's "Breaking Aleppo" report.³⁸ ♦

36 The Atlantic Council, "Breaking Aleppo," February 2017, <www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org>.

37 UN OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Aleppo Situation Report No. 15," 4 February 2017, <reliefweb.int>.

38 The Atlantic Council, "Breaking Aleppo," February 2017, <www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org>.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

This Siege Watch report – the fifth in a quarterly series compiling information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas in Syria – found intensifying efforts by the Syrian government and its allies to conquer the besieged areas through forced surrender and destruction. War crimes and crimes against humanity – including intentional starvation, denial of access to medical care, the use of internationally banned weapons, and forced civilian displacement – continued with impunity.

Of the more than 900,000 people still living under siege:

- ◆ 88% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 32 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 10% of the besieged Syrians in three communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups. In Deir Ezzor the siege is primarily enforced by ISIS, while the Syrian government imposes further access restrictions from the inside. In the southern Damascus suburbs, the primary siege is imposed by the Syrian government, but ISIS and other armed groups impose further access restrictions to Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad inside the siege.
- ◆ 2% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

The Syrian government and its allies are responsible for the vast majority of long-term sieges in Syria, and all of the more than 1.3 million people trapped in 16 “Watchlist” communities are threatened with full siege by Syrian government forces. It is the only party in Syria that has employed sieges against civilian populations systematically across the country.

Living conditions for besieged Syrians continued to deteriorate over the reporting period. Few of the approximately 37 besieged communities and 16 “Watchlist” communities were reached with UN interagency humanitarian aid convoys during the reporting period. In November 2016, the “Four Towns” of Fuaa, Kefraya, Moadamiya, and Zabadani were each reached once, along with al-Rastan. In December 2016 the “Watchlist” area of Khan al-Shieh was reached once, and in January 2017 the “Watchlist” area of Moadamiya was reached once. In addition to the lack of international aid convoys, tightened access restrictions and the challenges of winter weather increased the level of suffering. After years of cutting down trees to burn for food and warmth, besieged areas have significantly depleted their supply of trees. This winter besieged communities reported skyrocketing costs for wood, and in the most critically besieged areas like Madaya there were recorded cases of weather-related infant deaths.

Violent attacks against many besieged communities increased throughout the period, with little or no sign of respite from the nationwide ceasefire announced by Turkey and Russia in late December 2016. In addition to conventional munitions, including banned cluster munitions, there were reports of the repeated use of incendiary munitions as well as suspected toxic gas attacks.

Between November 2016 and January 2017, four more communities on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” and besieged list were brought back under Syrian government control through violence, coercion, and forced civilian displacement. Eastern Aleppo was destroyed in a gruesome month-long scorched earth campaign, and al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada all surrendered to government terms after coming under renewed attack. In areas that were forced to surrender in this way, there are fears of on-going human rights abuses, but visibility into these areas is low. Key civil society members such as media activists were included in the forcible transfers, and many of the civilians left behind are now afraid to speak. Local institutions such as charities and local governance councils in post-surrender communities were summarily dismantled.

Accordingly, while the number of besieged communities has decreased, it is not necessarily a sign of positive progress. None of the sieges were lifted through diplomatic means that could support a sustainable path to peace.

As the Syrian government’s efforts to subdue besieged areas continue to pick up pace, more and more communities are being forced to make a devastating choice: either concede to abusive forced surrender terms and partial population transfers, or resist and face complete destruction and depopulation. Both of these unthinkable paths entail continued suffering and persecution for thousands of Syrian men, women, and children. These violent and forced surrenders create new grievances and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The government’s strategy for conquering besieged areas has become predictable and regular. Unless the international community takes concrete action to deter or disrupt the sieges, the same patterns of violence, destruction, and forced population transfers will be repeated over and over again until every last besieged community has been destroyed.

Besieged Syrians need another option. They must be presented with a path to ending the sieges that allows people to stay in their homes, reunite their families, and rebuild their shattered communities without the lingering threat of detention, eviction, and abuse.

Violations of International Law

Sieges are not prohibited under international humanitarian law (IHL) as a tactic when used against armed combatants for military aims. To be in compliance with relevant IHL rules, besieging parties must distinguish between combatants and civilians, as it is prohibited under IHL to restrict civilian access to water, food, medicine and other materials necessary for survival.³⁹ The sieges occurring in Syria overwhelmingly impact civilians. Indeed, in all of the sieges tracked by Siege Watch, civilians are intentionally denied access to the items necessary for survival, and appear to be the primary target of what amounts to a massive collective punishment strategy. This intent is clearly displaced in the Syrian government's sustained refusal to allow baby milk onto humanitarian aid convoys, and the repeated denial of requests for medical evacuations of civilians. Collective punishment of civilians is forbidden under customary international humanitarian law.⁴⁰

In addition to comprising clear violations of IHL, the sieges in Syria also appear to violate several rules of international human rights law (IHRL) – such as the rights to essential medicine and adequate food – and of international criminal law. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights therefore recommends that even though the Syrian conflict is classified as a non-international armed conflict, the intentional civilian starvation of civilians and the consequences of this starvation do amount to war crimes and should be prosecuted as such.⁴¹

In addition to the intentional starvation and denial of aid inherent in the enforcement of Syria's sieges, numerous other acts being committed by besieging parties against the trapped civilian populations represent further violations of IHL. This includes but is not limited to: indiscriminate attacks, the use of chemical weapons,⁴² intentional attacks on hospitals,⁴³ and the forcible removal of civilians.⁴⁴

The Siege Watch project reports have repeatedly documented the forced transfer of civilians from besieged areas as part of the Syrian government's surrender agreements. In the new report entitled "No Return to Homs," The Syria Institute and PAX have further detailed how tactics like targeted property destruction, massacres, and arrest campaigns are also used to intentionally and forcibly displace civilians from besieged areas, and how barriers are created to prevent their return.⁴⁵ IHL clearly prohibits the sort of forced displacement of civilians that is being

39 OHCHR legal note, "International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare - January 2017," <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

40 OHCHR legal note, "International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare - January 2017," <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

41 OHCHR, "Living under Siege: The Syrian Arab Republic," February 2014, <www.ohchr.org>; OHCHR legal note, "International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare - January 2017," <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

42 OHCHR legal note, "Indiscriminate Attacks and Indiscriminate Weapons in International Humanitarian Law," March 2016, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

43 OHCHR legal note, "Attacks on Medical Units in International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law," September 2016, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

44 OHCHR legal note, "Transfer of the Civilian Population in International Law - January 2017," <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

45 PAX and The Syria Institute, "No Return to Homs, A case study on demographic engineering in Syria," January 2017, <reliefweb.int>.

systematically and strategically undertaken from besieged areas.

In 2016, Siege Watch documented eight cases in which besieged or “Watchlist” communities conceded to the Syrian government’s forced surrender terms: Darayya, Moadamiya, eastern Aleppo, al-Tal, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, Khan al-Shieh, and Wadi Barada. In all eight of these cases surrender entailed the transfer of some or all of the civilian population out of the area. In all eight cases the transfers were a result of coercive measures including the targeted destruction of civilian infrastructure and threats of continued violence. In several of these cases it appears that the decisions to surrender were made without consultation of the civilian population, and the population transfers were undertaken without sufficient measures to ensure the safety and well-being of the deportees. Even post-surrender, many of the communities have been denied humanitarian assistance, and civilians who have remained have in some cases been subjected to persecution. All of these factors indicate that the forced displacements from besieged areas constitute gross violations of IHL and IHRL.

In its recent report on the destruction of eastern Aleppo, the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry report confirmed that these forced displacements indeed constitute war crimes.⁴⁶ The OHCHR further confirmed that if committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack – both features of the Syrian government’s siege and destroy strategy – that the forced civilian transfers would “likely also be considered a crime against humanity.”⁴⁷

UN Siege Reporting

When Siege Watch first began monitoring besieged locations in November 2015, UN OCHA’s official estimates only recognized 393,000 people living under siege in Syria. This underestimate failed to account for a significant number of long-term sieges in Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus governorates. Since then, the Siege Watch project has consistently presented a more realistic estimation of the size and scope of besieged areas in Syria, and repeatedly called on UN OCHA to reassess its calculations.

In November 2016, the UN made notable changes to its besieged community designations, in line with Siege Watch recommendations. The monthly UN Secretary General (UNSG) Syria report to the UNSC stated: “Following a comprehensive review by the United Nations, it was estimated that, as of 1 November, some 974,080 people were living in areas under siege, up from 861,200 in the previous report.”⁴⁸ As a result of this comprehensive review, the UN officially recognized approximately 16 additional besieged locations in Rural Damascus governorate for the first time since its monthly reporting began.

These newly recognized communities included places like Hajar al-Aswad, Jobar, and rural parts of Eastern Ghouta, which have all been besieged since 2013 and which Siege Watch has

46 UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” 2 February 2017, <undocs.org>.

47 OHCHR legal note, “Transfer of the Civilian Population in International Law - January 2017,” <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

48 UN Security Council, S/2016/962, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015),” 15 November 2016, <undocs.org>.

consistently called on the UN to designate as such. PAX and The Syria Institute welcome the UN's revision of its assessments and the recognition of long-besieged communities in Rural Damascus. This change brought the UN's data more in line with Siege Watch reporting and represented a positive step towards increased accuracy in the reporting process.

Following this positive progress, the UN then took a step backwards. In January 2017, Stephen O'Brien, UN OCHA's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, announced that one of the newly recognized areas was no longer considered besieged, citing "access that has been available through Yarmouk, Yelda, and al-Qadam."⁴⁹ The rationale for the delisting of Hajar al-Aswad – which has been continuously besieged since 2013 – is not supported by the reality on the ground. Yarmouk, Yelda, and al-Qadam are all themselves under siege and none are regularly accessed by UN agencies. Conditions in Hajar al-Aswad are nearly identical to those in Yarmouk, which the UN reporting still recognizes as besieged. Furthermore, the lack of humanitarian access is clearly described in the most recent monthly UN Secretary-General's report, which notes that UNWRA has been unable to reach Yarmouk and Yelda since May 2016 and that of the aid convoys proposed to the Syrian government in February "one location, Hajar al-Aswad in Rif Dimashq governorate, was denied."⁵⁰ The UN's unsupported reversal of the Hajar al-Aswad besieged designation highlight the continuing transparency issues with the UN reporting process.

Beyond the reversal on Hajar al-Aswad, there are still other besieged areas of Syria that have never been officially designated by the UN. In the al-Houleh, al-Rastan, and Talbiseh areas in northern Homs, an estimated 268,000 people remain trapped under siege by government forces and pro-government militias, but without recognition of the UN.

By the end of the reporting period in January 2017, the UN reporting estimated a total of 643,780 people living in besieged areas, after removing eastern Aleppo, Moadamiya, and Hajar al-Aswad from its list.⁵¹ This figure falls short of the more than 900,000 currently monitored by the Siege Watch project. The bulk of this discrepancy is a result of the besieged communities in places like northern Homs and the southern Damascus suburbs that Siege Watch monitors, but which are not officially recognized in the UN reporting.

Years of underreporting have distorted the international community's understanding of the conditions on the ground and potentially dampened the outcry and response. The UN's continuing failure to designate besieged areas that meet all of their criteria means that alarm bells do not always ring quickly or loudly enough to address critical emergencies, and that several long-besieged communities are not being prioritized for aid delivery. The way in which conditions on the ground have been mischaracterized in the UN reporting – for example in the reversal of its decision to recognize Hajar al-Aswad – indicates that some of the designation decisions are guided by political sensitivities instead of objective assessments. This has contributed to the growing resentment and distrust that many Syrians feel towards the UN agencies operating in Syria.

49 UN OCHA, "Syria: "We continue to be blocked at every turn" - UN Humanitarian Chief," 26 January 2017, <www.unocha.org>.

50 UN Security Council, S/2017/144, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),"

16 February 2017, <undocs.org>.

51 UN Security Council, S/2017/144, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),"

16 February 2017, <undocs.org>.

The UN's failure to acknowledge the reality on the ground in areas like northern Homs is problematic, because the UN's reporting plays an important role in framing the international community's understanding of the sieges and in turn shaping the urgency and nature of its response.

Accurate reporting of the crisis in the besieged areas is an important and necessary step in the way that the UN agencies approach besieged areas, but it must be accompanied by concrete action to lift the sieges. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council – not the humanitarian agencies – to restore peace and end the atrocities being committed in besieged areas.

Recommendations

The crisis of besieged civilians in Syria continued to worsen throughout the November-January 2016 reporting period as more besieged communities faced pressure to surrender in the face of increasingly violent attacks. Unless concrete action is taken to deter or disrupt the sieges, the unimaginable brutality to which eastern Aleppo was subjected in December 2016 will be relived time and again in besieged areas across the country. Continued failure to act while atrocities are committed with impunity in the besieged areas is not neutrality, it is complicity.

PAX and TSI therefore recommend the following measures be taken:

Lifting and Alleviating Sieges

- ◆ The UN Security Council must act on its commitment to enforce Resolution 2139 (2014), which called upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas,” and threatened further steps in the case of non-compliance.⁵²
- ◆ International stakeholders, including the UNSC and the ISSG, must increase political pressure on besieging parties and their allies to prevent the critically besieged communities of al-Waer, Douma, and Madaya from becoming the next eastern Aleppo. These three communities are all on the brink of complete collapse. A combined estimated 226,000 civilians are at immediate risk.

[Note: Since the end of January the critically-besieged community of al-Waer surrendered to Syrian government forces in the face of an intense military offensive in order to stave off a complete humanitarian disaster. Russia acted as the primary mediator of the forced surrender. A total of 15,000-20,000 people in total - primarily civilians - are expected to be deported out of al-Waer over a two month implementation period.]

- ◆ The UN should not consider receiving approvals for aid delivery as equivalent to receiving “access”, so long as the approving party hinders delivery through other means such as bombardments. A cessation of attacks must be considered an integral part of the granting of aid access.

⁵² UN Security Council, “Resolution 2139 (2014),” S/RES/2139, 22 February 2014, <undocs.org>.

Monitoring

- ◆ When their presence is requested by one of the parties, UN agencies should send monitors to oversee the negotiation and implementation of local forced surrender agreements. These monitors should actively discourage and condemn the practice of forced civilian transfers that are often mandated as part of these agreements. If such transfers are undertaken, the presence of international monitors can help discourage further abuses of civilians during the process, and ensure that any violations of IHL and human rights are documented.
- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and IHL violations. These communities include: Khan al-Shieh, Moadamiya, Wadi Barada, al-Tal, Qudsaya, al-Hameh and parts of destroyed communities – notably Darayya, eastern Aleppo, and the Homs old city – where civilians have returned.
- ◆ UN agencies must monitor the distribution of their aid deliveries through third-party local monitors. UN agencies and international donors should investigate continuing reports of abnormalities in aid distribution. Alternative channels for aid distribution should be explored when parties are found to be misusing international assistance.

UN Reporting

- ◆ Decision-making regarding UN OCHA's besieged community designations should be moved out of the Damascus hub. Relevant data should be compiled and analyzed in a more neutral environment such as the regional hub in Jordan or UN headquarters in New York, where it will be less vulnerable to political pressures.
- ◆ UN OCHA should recognize the long-besieged communities of the northern Homs countryside and the southern suburbs of Damascus, including Hajar al-Aswad. The UN should designate areas as besieged when the situation on the ground meets objective criteria based on needs assessments and data collection efforts. These determinations should be made independently of political considerations of UNSC and ISSG members or of parties to the conflict.
- ◆ Prioritization of areas for humanitarian aid convoys should be based on transparent and data-driven needs assessments. A tiered system such as the one used by the Siege Watch project can help identify the areas of greatest need.
- ◆ Donors who support the aid efforts of UN agencies in Syria should demand increased transparency in the designation process of the besieged areas. Consistency and transparency will help ensure that UN reporting is not being manipulated towards political or military ends.

Accountability

- ◆ Governments and intergovernmental bodies should acknowledge and condemn the war crimes and crimes against humanity that are committed in the context of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers.
- ◆ War crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of the siege strategy must be investigated and documented so that those responsible can be held accountable. This includes the actions of Syrian government allies of Russia and Iran, which have played a central role establishing and enforcing most of the sieges in the country.
- ◆ War crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers, must be incorporated in the accountability mechanism that will be established in accordance with the UN General Assembly Resolution of 21 December 2016 that created an accountability mechanism for war crimes in Syria.⁵³ ◆

⁵³ UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248, "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011," A/71/L.48, 21 December 2016.

Annex I – Community List & Population Data

Table of Siege Watch Besieged Locations

Governorate (Admin 1)	Community/ Neighborhood (Admin 4/5)	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Damascus	Jobar	1	Syrian Govt.	225
	Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,500
	Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	8,000
Rural Damascus	Arbin	2	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	13,350
	Beit Sawa	2	Syrian Govt.	11,250
	Eftreis	2	Syrian Govt.	5,000
	Ein Tarma	2	Syrian Govt.	9,500
	Hamouriya	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000
	Hazzeh	2	Syrian Govt.	16,750
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	19,250
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000
	Saqba	2	Syrian Govt.	19,000
	Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000

	Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	15,000
	Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	16,500
	Douma	1	Syrian Govt.	125,000
	Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	Syrian Govt.	0
	Al-Rayhan	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Al-Shaifuniya	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Harasta	2	Syrian Govt.	20,000
	Madeira	2	Syrian Govt.	8,750
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	1,500
	Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
	Zabadani	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	200
	Madaya + Baqeen	1	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	41,000
	Deir Ezzor	3	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000
Deir ez-Zor	Al-Waer	1	Syrian Govt.	60,000
Homs	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	83,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	Armed groups	} 18,800
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
Total				913,575

Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of 31 January 2017.

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

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	81,725
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	35,000
	Moadamiyet al-Sham			41,000
Rural Damascus	Al-Bilaliyeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Harasta al-Qantara	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Marj al-Sultan	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Nouleh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Bzeina	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Hosh al-Farah	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Hosh Nasri	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Deir Assafir	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Zebdine	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	0
	Qudsaya	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	200,000
	Al-Hameh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	35,000
	Wadi Barada	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Khan al-Shieh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	8,000
Al-Tal	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	850,000	
Total				1,300,725



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