

# Siege Watch

Ninth Quarterly Report on Besieged  
Areas in Syria November 2017 –  
January 2018



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## **Colophon**

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Photo Cover: The moment after a deadly air strike on a residential area of Hamouriya, Eastern Ghouta, 6 January 2018.

Photo Credit: Moayed al-Hafi, Ghouta Media Center (GMC)

## **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 research organization based in Washington, DC. TSI seeks to address the information and understanding gaps that hinder effective policymaking and drive public reaction to the ongoing Syria crisis. We do this by producing timely, high quality, accessible, data-driven research, analysis, and policy options that empower decision-makers and advance the public's understanding. To learn more visit [www.syriainstitute.org](http://www.syriainstitute.org) or contact TSI at [info@syriainstitute.org](mailto:info@syriainstitute.org).

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# Acronyms

AOG	Armed opposition group
FAR	Faylaq al-Rahman
GMC	Ghouta Media Center
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
IIIM	The International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria
IRGC	Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
JAI	Jaysh al-Islam
JIM	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NDF	National Defense Forces
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCD	Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SN4HR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
STJ	Syrians for Truth & Justice
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
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UOSSM	Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations
VMB	Vehicle Management Building in Harasta
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

# Executive Summary

This report is the ninth 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 2017 – January 2018. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground found that:

- ◆ An estimated 714,345 people remain trapped in at least 33 besieged communities across the country and more than one million additional Syrians live in “Watchlist” areas, under threat of intensified siege and abuse.
- ◆ The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the vast majority of all of the sieges in Syria and all of the threats to “Watchlist” communities.
- ◆ The situation in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated dramatically due to an unprecedented increase in attacks combined with intense siege conditions, precipitating a humanitarian crisis. In November, all of the communities in Eastern Ghouta were elevated to Tier 1 critically besieged status for the first time.
- ◆ At least four new suspected chemical attacks were recorded during the reporting period, all of them launched by pro-government forces against Eastern Ghouta.
- ◆ Deir Ezzor city was removed from the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” as there is a low risk that the city will revert to a state of siege. Eastern Aleppo may be removed in the coming quarter.
- ◆ A new community, Beit Jinn, was added to the “Watchlist” for the first time during the reporting period. After an intensified assault by pro-government forces the area capitulated, and was subjected to a forced population transfer of fighters and civilians.
- ◆ The conditions facing civilians in post-surrender communities that surrendered in prior Siege Watch reporting periods remained a significant concern.



First responders dodge targeted artillery fire in Douma on 19 November 2017. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq

During the November – January reporting period, Eastern Ghouta became the next target of the Syrian government’s series of “surrender or die” scorched earth campaigns. Violence against the besieged enclave escalated to unprecedented levels. In addition to conventional munitions, there were reports of prolific cluster and incendiary munition attacks by pro-government forces and at least four suspected chemical attacks. Hospitals, schools, and first responders were systematically targeted. Supplies of basic goods including medications, food, and fuel ran critically low after months of intensified siege and access cuts. As a result, conditions in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated rapidly, precipitating the humanitarian disaster that Siege Watch has warned of for the past two quarters. This reporting period saw the highest number of civilian deaths due to malnutrition and lack of access to medical care since Siege Watch monitoring began. With violence escalating even further in February, after the end of the reporting period, the scale of the humanitarian disaster in Eastern Ghouta may surpass that seen in Eastern Aleppo.

Conditions in the other remaining besieged enclaves in Idlib, Homs, and the Southern Damascus Suburbs remained relatively stable throughout the reporting period, and violence levels in northern Homs decreased. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias continued to play a central role in enforcing the Syrian government’s sieges. Russia took the lead in most ongoing surrender negotiations, although Iranian influence still appeared relevant in parts of the Southern Damascus Suburbs.

Civilians in post-surrender communities on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” continued to be vulnerable to reprisals and abuse from pro-government forces. Many people faced movement restrictions due to the threat of detention at government checkpoints, and access for humanitarian agencies remained limited. Communications also remained limited due to the

heavy surveillance, preventing civilians from safely reporting on the challenges they faced.

Despite international diplomatic initiatives that took place during the reporting period, including UN-sponsored talks in Geneva and Vienna, and a Russian conference in Sochi, there was little visible progress towards ending the sieges. The “de-escalation zones” announced at Astana made no impact on Eastern Ghouta, where attacks actually escalated after local opposition groups signed onto the agreement in July and August 2017. In northern Homs, Russia and the Syrian government threatened to end the “de-escalation zone” in February 2018 and take the besieged enclave by force. This suggests that the Syrian government and its allies have been using the “de-escalation” zones as a tool of war – allowing them to put some frontlines on pause and focus their efforts on one or two areas at a time – and not a path to peace.

The Syrian government’s strategy for capturing besieged communities has become a well-established pattern: intensified siege and military escalation in order to push besieged enclaves to the point of collapse, followed by a bloody surrender and forced population transfers. The current assault on Eastern Ghouta is the latest step. Unless action is taken to stop the attacks on Eastern Ghouta and enforce the basic principles of international humanitarian and human rights law, this pattern of “surrender or die” scorched early campaigns will continue, and more besieged communities may face a similar fate.

#### **Key recommendations:**

- ◆ Since UNSC Resolution 2401 (2018) and all prior Security Council resolutions demanding access to and protection of civilians in besieged areas remain unimplemented, the international community must take further measures. All UN member states – whether on the Security Council or not – have a responsibility to take swift action against non-compliant parties, including through more forceful measures such as a framework of escalating sanctions.
- ◆ Members of the international community must take steps to prevent forced population transfers of civilians from Eastern Ghouta under the pretense of “evacuations.” In light of Russia’s role in prior forced surrender negotiations and in the current fighting in Eastern Ghouta, it cannot be considered a good faith negotiator. It is therefore incumbent on other countries to step in and play a role in oversight of local negotiations to end the sieges, to ensure that any agreements comply with international humanitarian and human rights law.
- ◆ International stakeholders should take pre-emptive measures now to avert yet another “surrender or die” campaign against the besieged communities in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs.
- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into all communities that have been previously forced to surrender to the Syrian government, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights violations.

- ◆ Humanitarian actors must approach post-surrender communities with the knowledge that “post-surrender” does not necessarily mean “post-conflict.” Proper conflict sensitivity measures must be put in place to ensure that recovery programming in these areas does not pay war crimes dividends to the Syrian government or contribute to deepening sectarian grievances.
  
- ◆ The international community must take action to hold those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable by pushing for a referral to the International Criminal Court and supporting the IIM and other accountability initiatives.

# 1. Introduction

This is the ninth 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 2017 – January 2018. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that an estimated 714,345 Syrians are still living under siege in 33 communities in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, and Idlib governorates. More than one million additional people live in areas on the Siege Watch “Watchlist,” where they face siege-like conditions and are at risk of further decline. The overwhelming majority of besieged communities in Syria and all “Watchlist” communities are besieged and threatened by pro-government forces.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access and civilian protection,<sup>1</sup> as well as a growing list of “ceasefire” announcements, the Syrian government and armed opposition groups (AOGs) continue to besiege communities across Syria. After more than two years of Siege Watch reports documenting the sieges – which are collective punishment tactics amounting to crimes against humanity – the international community has made no progress in combating the Syrian government’s continuing denial and restriction of lifesaving aid, and has failed to take meaningful steps to break the sieges or even to enact punitive measures against their perpetrators.

While many besieged communities remained relatively stable during the reporting period, conditions in the largest besieged enclave, Eastern Ghouta, deteriorated rapidly as a result of unprecedented levels of attacks by pro-government forces combined with an intensification of the siege. The humanitarian crisis precipitated by this newest stage in the Syrian government’s “surrender or die” scorched earth campaigns may surpass that seen in Eastern Aleppo, which was devastated and nearly depopulated in a similar scenario in December 2016.

The normal set of challenges to Siege Watch data gathering efforts was magnified this past quarter in the case of Eastern Ghouta due to the heightened level of violent attacks.<sup>2</sup> The bombardments caused widespread displacement, and forced tens of thousands of people into underground shelters. Population estimates were particularly difficult to verify, as even local governing bodies could not keep track of civilian movements. Survival became the overwhelming priority for everyone in Eastern Ghouta.

Prior iterations of the quarterly Siege Watch report included a bulleted list of mass casualty attacks recorded in Eastern Ghouta. But during the November 2017 – January 2018, the

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), 2258 (2015), 2268 (2016), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Project implementation challenges have been described in earlier Siege Watch reports, and can also be read online at <https://siegewatch.org/about-the-siege-watch/>.



Rescuers pull a girl from the rubble after an airstrike in Hamouriya in January. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



11 civilians were killed by airstrikes in Misraba on 3 January 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



Rescuers search for victims in the rubble in Madeira, 17 November 2017. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq

number of mass casualty attacks was so high that collecting information on all of them exceeded the capacity of the Siege Watch project. As a result, the list of attacks included in this report is focused more narrowly on those that targeted schools and medical infrastructure/ personnel, and attacks that used chemical weapons.

The disillusionment and hopelessness felt by Siege Watch project contacts and other civilians in Eastern Ghouta was palpable this reporting period. Many residents felt that the international community abandoned them, and that no amount of reporting about what was happening to them or sending out distress calls would change their fate. This lowered Siege Watch survey response rate and decreased the interest of many contacts in sharing information. Their reactions are understandable: they are trapped in a living hell, and we have all failed them.

Siege Watch has repeatedly warned that the international community must urgently prioritize ending the sieges. Breaking the “surrender or die” pattern of escalation, destruction, and forced population transfers is the only way to spare the remaining besieged communities the same fate as Eastern Ghouta. The last two quarterly Siege Watch reports tried to raise the alarm about Eastern Ghouta, warning of the looming catastrophe, the scenario that has now come to pass. The international community must throw real weight into bringing an immediate end to the assault on Eastern Ghouta to save thousands of lives and to prevent another massive forced population transfer. Otherwise, the pattern will continue, and other communities after Eastern Ghouta will face this unacceptable fate.

By the end of January 2018, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimated that a total of 417,566 people were trapped in besieged communities in Syria, compared to 714,345 estimated by Siege Watch.<sup>3</sup> There are still besieged areas that the UN OCHA reporting, which is included in the monthly UN Secretary General’s Monthly report to the Security Council, does not recognize as such despite the fact that they meet UN OCHA’s own definitions.<sup>4</sup> These include al-Rastan, Talbiseh, and al-Houleh in the northern countryside of Homs, as well as the Southern Damascus Suburbs communities of Hajar al-Aswad, al-Qadam, Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm. Most of the discrepancy between the UN and Siege Watch figures can be accounted for by these communities

This report focuses primarily on developments from November 2017 – January 2018. Additional updates with developments since January are included when available. For frequent updates on current developments follow the Siege Watch Twitter feed at: <https://twitter.com/siegewatch>.

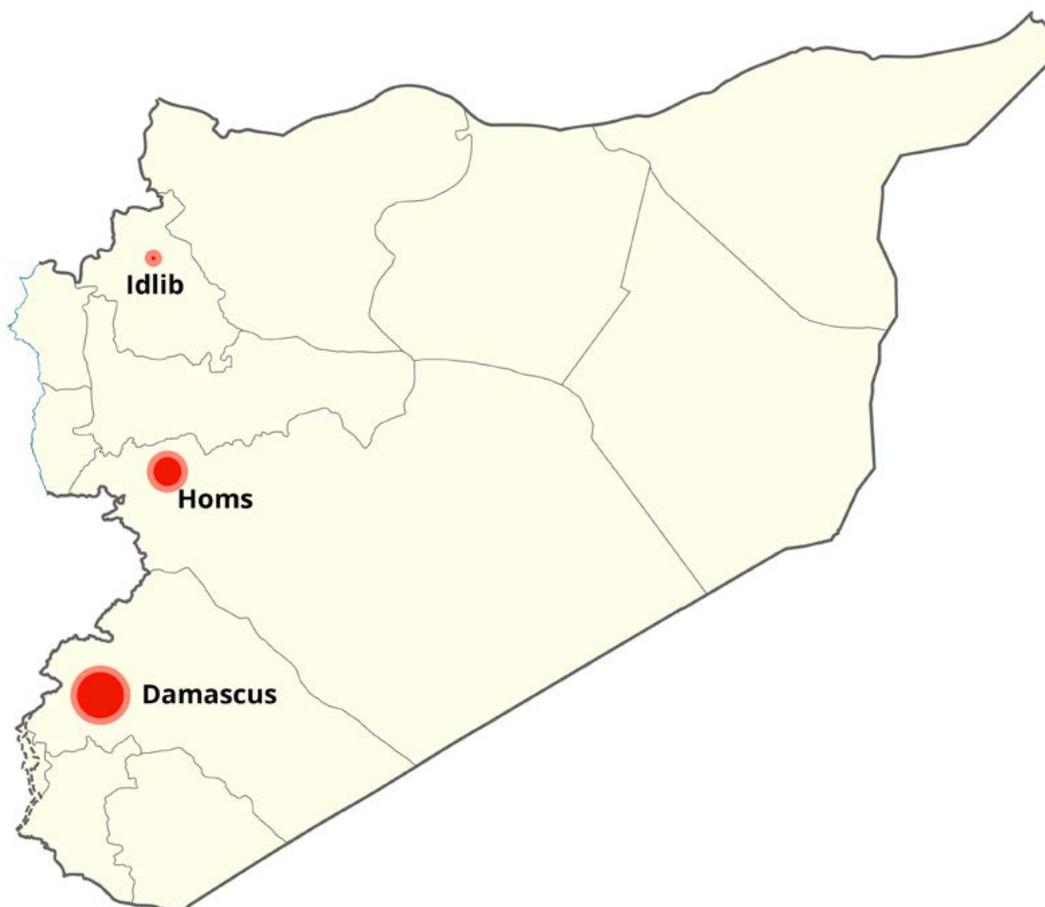
For details on project methodology, definitions, and challenges, please see <http://siegewatch.org>. For a detailed background on the project and additional information on the specific besieged areas, refer to the first Siege Watch report published in February 2016. All of the reports can be found at: <http://siegewatch.org/reports>.

<sup>3</sup> UNSC S/2018/138, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 February 2018, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>

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

## Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



## General Developments

During the November – January reporting period, the situation in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated dramatically as the Syrian government and its allies launched a new military campaign aimed at forcing the enclave to surrender, following the same tactics used against Eastern Aleppo a year earlier. Escalating waves of attacks on Eastern Ghouta starting in November 2017 brought some of the most intense violence the enclave has ever experienced. Concurrently, the pain of earlier supply route cuts grew throughout the winter, taking a devastating toll on the availability of food, medicine, and other necessities. Accordingly, Siege Watch raised the siege level for all communities in Eastern Ghouta to Tier 1 – the highest intensity designation – on 16 November to reflect the severity of the situation. By the end of the reporting period, conditions for around 400,000 civilians trapped in Eastern Ghouta had reached the point of crisis, illustrated by the growing body count both from violent attacks, the lack of food, and the lack of access to medical care. *[Note: In mid February, pro-government attacks escalated to unprecedented levels, precipitating a fully-fledged Eastern Aleppo style crisis.]*

Humanitarian conditions in the other remaining besieged enclaves in Idlib, Homs, and the Southern Damascus Suburbs remained relatively stable throughout the reporting period, and violence levels in northern Homs decreased.

“Watchlist” classifications for all prior listed communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus remained unchanged during the reporting period. While most of these communities saw slow progress towards the restoration of services, the threat to civilian safety posed by pro-government forces remained high. In several communities, notably al-Tal and al-Hameh, there were reports of a greater number of detentions by security forces than in prior quarters. The Syrian government continued to police checkpoints around and inside of post-surrender communities, limiting civilian movement and access to services for many, particularly men, who fear being detained. The clampdown on outside communications by civilians in these post-surrender communities remained in place, making it difficult to monitor potential abuses. Furthermore, humanitarian access remains inconsistent in all post-surrender communities on the Siege Watch “Watchlist.”

A new community, Beit Jinn, was added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for the first time in December. Beit Jinn is a small enclave in southern Rural Damascus near the Israeli border that was partially surrounded by pro-government forces for years. Pro-government forces escalated their attacks on the area during the eighth reporting period, but Siege Watch held off on adding Beit Jinn to the “Watchlist” due to the difficulty in identifying contacts on the ground, as well as indirect reports that the enclave maintained a small supply route to Israel which could not easily be cut off by pro-government forces. After sufficient information had been gathered, Siege Watch belatedly designated Beit Jinn as a “Watchlist” community in December, shortly before it capitulated to pro-government forces and a group of civilians and fighters were forcibly transferred out of the community.

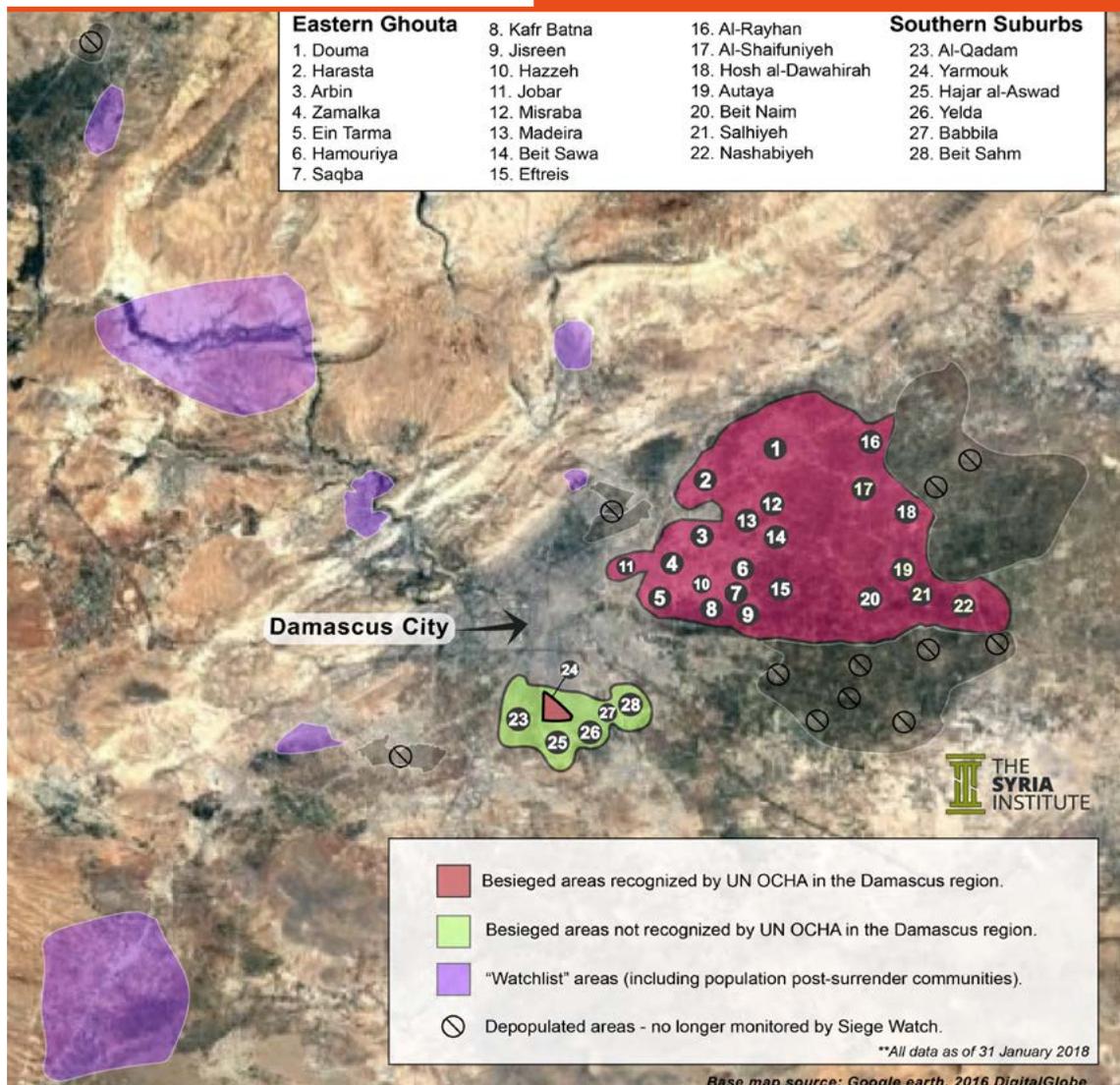
Deir Ezzor city was removed from project monitoring efforts at the end of the quarter. Conditions for civilians there have remained challenging since pro-government forces broke the siege by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in September 2017, but with ISIS weakened and humanitarian assistance regularly reaching the city via land routes, the risk of siege has passed.

# 2. Besieged Community Overview

## Damascus Area

### Map 2:

Besieged Communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus\*



\*Note: The scorched earth offensive escalated significantly in February, and pro-government forces began capturing large areas of rural Eastern Ghouta. By the second week of March pro-government forces managed to cut the enclave into three separate besieged areas.

## EASTERN GHOUTA

**Table 1:**  
Eastern Ghouta & Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Ghouta (22 communities)	1	Syrian Govt.	407,245

\*Note: In November the Tier level was raised to 1 – the highest level - for all of Eastern Ghouta. See Annex for a complete list of communities.

### Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar deteriorated rapidly during the reporting period. All communities previously classified as Tier 2 were raised to Tier 1 – the highest intensity of siege. Population estimate adjustments were made to several communities.

### Details:

Conditions in Eastern Ghouta declined rapidly during the November 2017 – January 2018 reporting period due to a severe escalation in violence and the intensification of the siege. In response, Siege Watch raised the siege designation for all Eastern Ghouta communities to Tier 1 on 16 November. This designation change reflected the high risk to civilian life due to malnutrition, lack of access medical care, and frequent violent attack. The period saw numerous mass casualty events, significant internal displacement, skyrocketing prices, high rates of malnutrition, the devastation of Eastern Ghouta’s medical sector, and massive infrastructure damage. By the end of January 2018, Eastern Ghouta was in the throes of a fully-fledged humanitarian catastrophe and headed towards an Eastern Aleppo-like fate, as relentless attacks by the Syrian government and Russia continued beyond the end of the quarter.

In prior iterations of the Siege Watch report, this section on Eastern Ghouta included a bulleted list of attacks deemed “notable,” including those resulting in mass civilian casualties, using new or internationally-banned weapons, or hitting critical civilian facilities such as schools and hospitals. During the November 2017 January – 2018 period, the number of attacks that would fit this “notable” criteria was so high that listing them all would take up the bulk of this report, and is beyond the capacities of the project.<sup>5</sup>

Early in the quarter, civilian gathering places such as popular markets were targeted dozens of times. After the violence levels forced people to avoid gathering in groups and take shelter underground, the use of heavy munitions in aerial attacks on populated neighborhoods caused dozens of buildings to collapse, killing groups of families who were taking shelter in their basements. According to estimates from the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SN4HR), between 14 November 2017 and 14 February 2018, 729 civilians were killed in attacks from

<sup>5</sup> Syrians for Truth & Justice (STJ), “Horrible Massacres by the Syrian-Russian Alliance in Eastern Ghouta, during the Run-Up to Sochi Congress ‘for National Dialogue,’” 28 January 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, “Statement Regarding the Military Escalation against the Civilian Areas of Eastern Ghouta,” 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.



Airstrike in Arbin, 4 January 2018. Source: GMC



A massive crater where a building used to stand after an airstrike in Saqba, 9 January 2018. Source: GMC

pro-government forces.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, most mass casualty attacks will not be listed out individually in this section of the report, and will instead be described in terms of general violence levels and trends.<sup>7</sup> The lists presented below in the military section will focus more narrowly on attacks that targeted schools and medical infrastructure/personnel and attacks that used chemical weapons.

## Military

The violence in Eastern Ghouta reached new heights during the November 2017 - January 2018 reporting period. Starting in mid-November the enclave was hit with escalating waves of severe violence – a notable change from the relatively low-level violence, without the use of airstrikes, that had prevailed for much of the intervening period since Jaysh al-Islam and Failaq al-Rahman negotiated to join the Russian de-escalation zone plan in July and August respectively. Pro-government forces repeatedly and intentionally targeted schools, mosques, markets, medical centers, and first responders. There was prolific use of cluster munitions and incendiary weapons, complicating the ability of first responders to rescue victims.<sup>8</sup> There were at least four suspected chemical weapons attacks during the reporting period. The real number may be higher, as several possible additional chemical attacks impacted primarily fighters on the frontlines and were not well documented.<sup>9</sup>

A new weapon was introduced for the first time this quarter – armed drones. After the first reported drone attack on 1 November in Jobar, the use of small armed drones by pro-government forces became fairly regular by December. With limited range, the armed drones were used only in the front-line communities of Jobar, Harasta, Zamalka, and Ein Tarma.<sup>10</sup> Still, several civilians were reportedly killed and injured in these drone attacks during the reporting period.<sup>11</sup>

The first major wave of violence in Eastern Ghouta began in mid-November and lasted for

6 The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SN4HR), "Three-Month's Toll of the Ongoing Offensive on Eastern Ghouta," 16 February 2018, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

7 Note: The Siege Watch project seeks to monitor and collect evidence on all mass casualty attacks in besieged communities. Those seeking more information on such attacks should send a request to [info@syriainstitute.org](mailto:info@syriainstitute.org). Many attacks were reported as they occurred on the Siege Watch Twitter feed <https://twitter.com/siegewatch>.

8 Amnesty International, "Syria: Banned Soviet-made cluster munitions fuel humanitarian catastrophe in Eastern Ghouta," 30 November 2017, <[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)>; SN4HR, "The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round," 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>; STJ, "Military Escalation in Eastern Ghouta, Rockets Loaded with Incendiary Substances on Harasta," 19 November 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, "Cluster Munitions Kill Civilians in Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns," 17 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, "Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day," 12 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, "Three Consecutive Attacks with Incendiary Substances on Residential Neighbourhoods of Harasta City in late January 2018," 12 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; Media Office of Kafrbatna City, Facebook post, 16 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/kbfb11>>.

9 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, November 8 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SWT11817>>.

10 Ghouta Now, YouTube video, 20 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCvid112017>>; Ghouta Media Center (GMC), Facebook post, 21 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb122117>>; Jobar News "استهداف حي جوبر الدمشقي بعدة قنابل ألقيت من طائرة بدون طيار," 1 December 2017, <[jobarnews.net](http://jobarnews.net)>; GMC, Facebook post, 7 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12717>>; GMC, Facebook post, 1 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12117>>; Media Office in the Town of Ein Tarma, Facebook post, 4 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ETfb12417>>; GMC, Facebook post, 4 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12417>>; GMC, Facebook post, 5 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12517>>.

11 Syrian Civil Defense (SCD) in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 4 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SCDfb12417>>; GMC, Facebook post, 4 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMC12417>>; SCD in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 22 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SCDfb122217>>; GMC, Facebook post, 22 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb122217>>.



An incendiary munitions attack in Harasta on 30 January 2018. Source: Harasta LC

several weeks.<sup>12</sup> This assault started almost a year to the day after pro-government forces launched their final assault on besieged Eastern Aleppo. With UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura aiming to hold a new round of Geneva talks at the end of November, the timing for the launch of this first wave of intense attacks also fit an established pattern where pro-government forces escalate violence in advance of international political initiatives.

The first two weeks of November were violent ones for Eastern Ghouta, with multiple deadly bombings of civilian neighborhoods reported. The violence then spiked further starting on November 14, when armed opposition groups led by Ahrar al-Sham launched an offensive on the Vehicle Management Building (VMB) – a strategic location on the southern side of Harasta city that gave pro-government forces an extended reach into Eastern Ghouta.<sup>13</sup> The government and its allies responded with overwhelming force, not only against fighters on the frontlines, but also against civilian areas where no fighters were present.

Siege Watch contacts described the horrors they experienced during these attacks through a fog of sleep deprivation, as nighttime bombardments kept entire communities awake for days on end. The number of airstrikes alone repeatedly topped 70 a day. Eastern Ghouta's hospitals were quickly overwhelmed with casualties, and their ability to treat patients was reduced not only by the dire lack of supplies, but also by repeated targeted attacks against them. In just the

<sup>12</sup> SN4HR, "The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round," 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>; Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "Syria: Medical services stretched beyond limit after shelling in East Ghouta," 27 November 2017, <[www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)>.

<sup>13</sup> TNTranslations, Facebook post, Translation of Ahrar al-Sham statement, 16 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/TNT111617>>.



Massive damage to civilian homes in Douma, 17 November 2017. Source: GMC



A kindergarten destroyed in Hamouriya, 8 November 2017, Source: GMC

first three days of the November assault, a total of 87 civilians were killed and 659 injured.<sup>14</sup>

A list of select notable attacks with the wave of violence that started in November is as follows:

- ◆ 2 NOV – Widespread airstrikes lead to the cancellation of Friday prayers. One strike targeted the Douma Local Council, forcing it to suspend operations.<sup>15</sup>
- ◆ 7 NOV – At least three separate schools were targeted in attacks, leading to the cancellation of all school in Eastern Ghouta for several days.<sup>16</sup>
- ◆ 8 NOV – Three medical centers and three schools were bombed. Dar al-Shifa hospital in Hamouriya and the Harasta Medical Center were both partially damaged, while a private clinic in Saqba was completely destroyed. A kindergarten next to Dar al-Shifa hospital in Hamouriya was targeted by an airstrike and destroyed.<sup>17</sup> A mosque and two schools in Kafr Batna were also targeted by airstrikes.<sup>18</sup> The earlier decision to cancel schools likely saved dozens of lives.
- ◆ 9 NOV – A Syrian Civil Defense (SCD) team was directly targeted by artillery fire while rescuing civilians in Nashabiyeh.<sup>19</sup>
- ◆ 14-15 NOV – Pro-government artillery fire hit two mosques in Hamouriya on two successive days, partially destroying both.<sup>20</sup>
- ◆ 15 NOV – A warehouse in Douma housing international humanitarian aid that was delivered just days before was targeted in an airstrike, and some of the food aid was destroyed.<sup>21</sup> Artillery shelling hit a primary school in Kafr Batna,<sup>22</sup> and classes were again cancelled in all of Eastern Ghouta.<sup>23</sup>
- ◆ 16 NOV – Mortar shells containing a substance believed to be chlorine gas targeted opposition fighters storming the VMB. Five journalists and media

14 Health Directorate in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 18 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2l37y01>>.

15 UN Security Council (UNSC) S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

16 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 8 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2l2M5EH>>.

17 Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), "Two Infants Died This Week in Besieged Ghouta From A Lack of Medication And Malnutrition,"

10 November 2017, <[reliefweb.int](http://reliefweb.int)>; @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 8 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FXh9Fn>>.

18 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 8 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FfeDce>>.

19 SCD in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 9 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SCDFb11917>>.

20 SN4HR, "The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round," 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

21 STJ, "Aerial Attacks on a Warehouse Containing UN Aid for People Trapped in Eastern Ghouta," 25 November 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

22 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

23 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 14 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2Fg6FzE>>.

professionals embedded with the fighters were injured.<sup>24</sup>

- ◆ 17 NOV – Double-tap government airstrikes using guided missiles killed three SCD volunteers who were rescuing victims of a prior shelling in Douma, injured several more, and damaged their ambulance.<sup>25</sup> Aircraft also targeted a school in Arbin, partially destroying it and taking it out of service.<sup>26</sup>
- ◆ 18 NOV – Pro-government forces launched grenades containing a toxic substance at opposition fighters on the frontlines in Harasta. Varying accounts state that between 39-61 fighters suffered symptoms as a result of exposure to the substance.<sup>27</sup> 15 of those injured experienced worsening symptoms after they were treated for exposure to chlorine gas, and they required further treatment. 11 of them were placed in intensive care.” Symptoms including convulsions and pinpoint pupils combined with the smell led doctors to suspect that phosphorus compounds were used.<sup>28</sup>
- ◆ 19 NOV – Rockets fired by pro-government forces damaged an ambulance in Hamouriya, taking it out of commission, and killed Alaa Addin Juha, a member of the SCD.<sup>29</sup>
- ◆ 20 NOV – Surface-to-surface rockets hit and partially destroyed al-Kahf Hospital, the only hospital in Kafr Batna, and took an ambulance out of service.<sup>30</sup> The attack injured a medical staff member and killed a nearby family of five.<sup>31</sup>
- ◆ 25 NOV – Artillery fire damaged a vehicle used by the Ein Tarma SCD to evacuate victims, taking it out of service.<sup>32</sup>
- ◆ 27 NOV – A mosque was destroyed and a member of the SCD injured in

24 STJ, “New Attack by Toxic Gases on a Battlefield in Harasta- Damascus Countryside,” 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

25 UNSC S/2017/1057, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),” Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>; Rural Damascus Specialized Hospital, YouTube video, 17 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/Doumamed111717>>.

26 SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

27 SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

STJ, “New Attack by Toxic Gases on a Battlefield in Harasta- Damascus Countryside,” 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) “Attacks on East Ghouta: Patients with Symptoms Indicative of Chemical Agent Treated at SAMS Facilities,” 19 November 2017, <[www.sams-usa.net](http://www.sams-usa.net)>.

28 STJ, “New Attack by Toxic Gases on a Battlefield in Harasta- Damascus Countryside,” 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>; Health Directorate in Damascus and its Countryside, YouTube video, 20 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SIGhealth112017>>.

29 SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

30 MSF, “Syria: Medical services stretched beyond limit after shelling in East Ghouta,” 27 November 2017, <[www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)>.

31 SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

32 SN4HR, “The Barbarian Bombardment and Siege on Eastern Ghouta Practically Invalidates the Upcoming Geneva Round,” 27 November 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.



Injured SCD members in Douma, 17 November 2017. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



A school in Arbin was targeted with an airstrike on 4 December 2017. Source: Erbin Media Office



Pinpoint pupils on men injured in chemical attack in Harasta, 18 November 2017. Source: Al-Kahf Hospital



SCD volunteers hold a funeral for Alaa Addin Juha, 19 November 2017. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq

airstrikes in Misraba.<sup>33</sup>

- ◆ 2 DEC – An ambulance was targeted and taken out of service while rescuing civilians in Harasta.<sup>34</sup>
- ◆ 3 DEC – A kindergarten in Saqba was targeted by artillery fire and severely damaged.<sup>35</sup>
- ◆ 4 DEC – A primary school in Arbin was targeted in an airstrike and damaged.<sup>36</sup>
- ◆ 6 December – A maternity center was bombed, and two children from the neighborhood were killed.<sup>37</sup>

The suspected chemical attacks that began on 16 November began just hours after Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution renewing the mandate of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) – United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).<sup>38</sup> The timing suggests that government forces saw the veto as a green light to use chemical weapons in its attacks, which would continue throughout the remainder of the Siege Watch reporting period.

After a lull in heavy violence in December during which artillery attacks continued but aerial attacks paused, a second, more intense wave of violence began just ahead of the Russian-sponsored Sochi Congress from 29 – 30 December.<sup>39</sup>

- ◆ 30 DEC – An SCD paramedic was killed in artillery shelling in Harasta.<sup>40</sup> On 30 December, the Rural Damascus Education Directorate suspended school in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>41</sup>
- ◆ 31 DEC – A health center in Harasta was damaged in an airstrike and two nurses were injured.<sup>42</sup>
- ◆ 3 JAN – Two nurses were killed in separate attacks in Douma and Arbin.<sup>43</sup> A SCD first responder was killed in an airstrike in Misraba.<sup>44</sup>

33 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 27 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FdRevU>>.

34 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 2 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2oLrVqH>>.

35 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 3 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FFXzCR>>.

36 Media Office of Arbin City, YouTube video, 3 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2iOWNa3>>.

37 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 6 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2oluWrK>>.

38 United Nations SC/13072, "Security Council Fails to Adopt 2 Draft Resolutions on Extending Mandate of Joint Mechanism Investigating Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria," 16 November 2017, <[www.un.org](http://www.un.org)>.

39 STJ, "Horrible Massacres by the Syrian-Russian Alliance in Eastern Ghouta, during the Run-Up to Sochi Congress 'for National Dialogue'," 28 January 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, "Statement Regarding the Military Escalation against the Civilian Areas of Eastern Ghouta," 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

40 UOSSM, "Hospitals Attacked During Holiday Season, 11 Attacks in Wave Of Violence," 3 January 2018, <[reliefweb.int](http://reliefweb.int)>.

41 Education Directorate in Rural Damascus, Telegram post, 30 December 2017, <<https://t.me/moudiria/1367>>.

42 UOSSM, "Hospitals Attacked During Holiday Season, 11 Attacks in Wave Of Violence," 3 January 2018, <[reliefweb.int](http://reliefweb.int)>.

43 Al Seeraj, Facebook post, 3 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/Seeraj1318>>.

44 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 5 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2l4YdVQ>>.



A child is treated for exposure to a chemical substance in Douma, 13 January. Source: Douma Medical Office

- ◆ 5 JAN – A secondary school in Arbin was hit in an airstrike and taken out of service.<sup>45</sup> Also in Arbin, two nurses and an ambulance driver were injured by shelling.<sup>46</sup>
- ◆ 6 JAN – A primary school in Autaya was hit and damaged by artillery shells.<sup>47</sup>
- ◆ 6 Jan – A hospital was bombed, and the last ambulance in Madyara was destroyed in an airstrike.<sup>48</sup>
- ◆ 13 JAN – Pro-government forces launched three missiles containing a toxic gas believed to be chlorine at the area between Harasta and Douma. Wind carried the chemicals into Douma, and six civilians – five women and one child - were hospitalized with symptoms of chemical exposure.<sup>49</sup> Schools that had just reopened so that students could sit for exams were quickly shut down after students at a school in Douma experienced minor symptoms including nausea

45 STJ, "Suspension of the Educational Process in Eastern Ghouta due to Recent Military Attacks," 4 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

46 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 5 January 2018 <<http://bit.ly/2oPGVmB>>.

47 STJ, "Suspension of the Educational Process in Eastern Ghouta due to Recent Military Attacks," 4 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

48 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 7 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2FdP8Mi>>; @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 8 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2CYDH5s>>.

49 STJ, "Exposure of Six Civilians to Poisonous Substances in Eastern Ghouta- Damascus Countryside," 21 January 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; STJ, "Horrific Massacres by the Syrian-Russian Alliance in Eastern Ghouta, during the Run-Up to Sochi Congress 'for National Dialogue'," 28 January 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>;

Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), "Suspected Chlorine Attack in Western Douma," 15 January 2018, <[vdc-sy.net](http://vdc-sy.net)>.



A baby is treated with oxygen after a chemical attack in Douma 22 January. Source: Douma Medical Center



Al-Marj residents flee, 3 January 2018. Source: GMC



Children in Harasta play on the remains of a ballistic missile, 23 January 2018. Source: Harasta LC



A basement shelter in Harasta, 2 January 2018. Source: Harasta Local Council

and dizziness from the chemical attack, and could not complete their exams.<sup>50</sup> That same day, the garage of the Douma Local Council was targeted with four missile strikes<sup>51</sup>

- ◆ 20 JAN – A “double tap” missile strike targeted first responders who were responding to an initial missile attack on a market in Douma, killing one and injuring another.<sup>52</sup>
- ◆ 22 JAN – 21 civilians were exposed to a chemical substance believed to be chlorine after pro-government forces launched rockets fill with the toxic substance at the northwestern part of Douma.<sup>53</sup> An airstrike targeted and damaged the Grand Mosque in Arbin.<sup>54</sup>

This January wave of attacks against Eastern Ghouta was the heaviest violence the area had ever experienced. According to the SCD, during the first 16 days of the assault Eastern Ghouta was hit with 695 airstrikes, 645 surface-surface missiles, and more than 3,000 artillery shells. Cluster munitions were dropped in more than 46 locations.<sup>55</sup> The onslaught sparked significant new internal population displacement, sent thousands of people into hiding in underground basement shelters,<sup>56</sup> and put daily life on pause.

The attacks were the most intense on Harasta, where an estimated 20,000 civilians were trapped in underground shelters in dismal conditions.<sup>57</sup> In late January the Local Council in Arbin declared that four neighborhoods in the city had been completely destroyed and their residents displaced and driven underground. They estimated that 2,500 families – as many as 12,500 people – were displaced. Of these, 1,375 families – around 4,000 people – were trapped underground in just 75 cellars, 40 of which were not well prepared with proper ventilation and water, and 17 were unsuited to support human survival.<sup>58</sup> Without clean drinking water and sanitation supplies, diseases like Hepatitis A spread.

At the end of January, there were reports that Russia had declared a ceasefire that was set to begin on 26 January. It was supposed to bring an immediate halt to the fighting and allow humanitarian assistance into Eastern Ghouta within 48 hours, just ahead of the 29-30 January

50 STJ, “Suspension of the Educational Process in Eastern Ghouta due to Recent Military Attacks,” 4 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

51 Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 20 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/DLCfb12018>>.

52 UNSC S/2018/138, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 February 2018, <<http://undocs.org/>>.

53 STJ, “Syrian Forces Use Chemical Weapons in Duma for a Second Time in a Month,” 5 February 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 22 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/DCCfb12218>>.

54 Media Office of Arbin City, YouTube video, 22 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Ds6Yqd>>.

55 @SCDrifdimashq, Tweet, 14 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2FTRkFQ>>.

56 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook posts, 22 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb122181>>, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb122182>>, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb122183>>.

57 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 5 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2FiluS0>>.

58 Arbin Local Council, Telegram post, 22 January 2018, <<https://t.me/localerbincity/296>>; GMC, Facebook post, 24 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12418>>; STJ, “Horrific Massacres by the Syrian-Russian Alliance in Eastern Ghouta, during the Run-Up to Sochi Congress ‘for National Dialogue’,” 28 January 2018, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>; SMART News Agency, “مئات العائلات تلجأ لأقضية غير مخدمة في مدينة عربين بسبب قصف النظام,” 19 January 2018, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

Sochi Conference.<sup>59</sup> This agreement failed to materialize and the bombing continued, as did fighting between opposition and government forces around the VMB in Harasta.<sup>60</sup> It is unclear whether Russia was unable to convince the Syrian government forces to comply, or whether the announcement was simply for show.

*[Note: After a brief lull in February, the violence against civilians in Eastern Ghouta escalated even further, marking the start of the Eastern Aleppo-like catastrophe that Siege Watch has warned of in prior quarterly reports. Between 19-23 February nearly all medical facilities in Eastern Ghouta were bombed.]*

### Humanitarian

Humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta during the November 2017 – January 2017 period were the worst since Siege Watch began monitoring in 2015. The loss of smuggling tunnels through Barzeh and Qaboun in early 2017 and the halt of commercial trade at al-Wafideen checkpoint in the fall of 2017 led to a severe scarcity of food and medical supplies during the reporting period. Accordingly, prices spiked. In August, the price of bread in Eastern Ghouta was 24x higher than in Damascus city. By November bread cost 85x more in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>61</sup> The dramatic increases in prices of was especially painful with the onset of winter, when fewer local agricultural products were available.

According to the UN, 21 trucks with commercial supplies were allowed to enter Eastern Ghouta on 26 November,<sup>62</sup> but this amount was not sufficient to ease the need in the besieged enclave. At some point during the reporting period towards the end of December/start of January, the trader al-Manfoush was allowed to resume his monopoly on commercial trade and bring supplies in through al-Wafideen once again, but the fees were reportedly double what they had been before the cut – jumping to 2,000SP or higher per kilo. These shipments were not allowed to include fertilizer or medical supplies. This resumption of trade at al-Wafideen led to a slight decline in the prices from their November peaks, but they remained around 30x higher in Eastern Ghouta than in Damascus in December.<sup>63</sup> This put many basic goods out of reach of much of the population, with unemployment rates in the besieged enclave upwards of 80%.

This quarter marked the fifth winter under siege in Eastern Ghouta, and five winters of burning wood to keep warm. Many of the trees in Eastern were cut down in prior years, and supplies of wood during the reporting period were lower and prices higher than ever before. Siege Watch contacts reported that desperate civilians were burning clothing, trash, or anything else they could find to keep warm.

With the increasingly desperate humanitarian conditions, rates of malnutrition rose. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported in November that the proportion of children in

59 Reuters, "Syrian opposition says Russia pledges ceasefire in eastern Ghouta," 26 January 2018, <[www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)>.

60 SMART News Agency, "هجوم جديد لفصائل الغوطة الشرقية على «إدارة المركبات»," 28 December 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

61 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Child malnutrition levels increase sharply in besieged East Ghouta," 29 November 2017, <[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)>.

62 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

63 UNSC S/2018/60, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 23 January 2018, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.



Children at malnutrition clinics in Eastern Ghouta. Sources: Eftreis Medical Complex; Harasta Medical Office

Eastern Ghouta suffering from acute malnutrition was 11.9%, the highest ever recorded in Syria. This is a marked increase from the 2.1% assessed in January 2017, before the smuggling tunnels and al-Wafideen checkpoint trade were both interrupted.<sup>64</sup>

Medical supplies were depleted at a dramatic rate over the reporting period due to the elevated level of attacks. The few specialized medical centers capable of treating cancer and kidney failure were forced to ration treatments, and even these measures were not enough to prevent them from running out.<sup>65</sup> MSF warned in November that its reserve stocks for the 21 facilities that it supported in Eastern Ghouta were running out, and staff were afraid to go to work due to the increased threat of being targeted in a hospital.<sup>66</sup> By January 2018, with almost all medications gone, Eastern Ghouta's only specialized cancer treatment center, Dar al-Rahma, was only able to treat 3% of its patients with cancer medications.<sup>67</sup> The rest they tried to make comfortable, providing painkillers and other symptomatic relief. On 22 January, Eastern Ghouta's only dialysis center ran out of supplies completely.<sup>68</sup>

64 UNICEF, "Child malnutrition levels increase sharply in besieged East Ghouta," 29 November 2017, <[www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)>.

65 Al-Seeraj, Facebook post, 24 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/Seeraj12418>>.

66 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), "Syria: Medical services stretched beyond limit after shelling in East Ghouta," 27 November 2017, <[www.msf.org](http://www.msf.org)>.

67 Firas al-Abdullah, "Cancer Center in Syria's Besieged East Ghouta Struggles to Survive," Global Voices, 3 January 2018, <[globalvoices.org](http://globalvoices.org)>; Dar al-Rahma Center for Hematology and Oncology, Facebook post, 5 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DarRahma12517>>.

68 UN OCHA, "Syria: Factsheet - East Ghouta (15 December 2017 - 31 January 2018)," 31 January 2018, <[reliefweb.int](http://reliefweb.int)>.

The lack of medical supplies and equipment led to an increase in the number of deaths of people with chronic and potentially treatable conditions; a continuation of a trend described in the 8 Eighth Quarterly Siege Watch report.

A full accounting of civilians killed not directly by bombs, but as a secondary impact of the siege is impossible to measure because of the many ways that extended deprivation impacts siege victims. A partial list of 23 siege victims documented during the reporting period is as follows:<sup>69</sup>

- ◆ 2 NOV – One-year old Maram died in Saqba. She required advanced treatment that she was unable to get in Eastern Ghouta after surgery for a congenital kidney condition.<sup>70</sup>
- ◆ 4 NOV – Mohammad Ali Asida from Hazzeh died of intestinal cancer. He could not receive chemotherapy treatment due to the lack of medications in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>71</sup> Mohammad was one of the first cancer patients to die since the intensification of the siege caused a severe treatment shortage, with around 550 cancer patients at risk.
- ◆ 7 NOV – 48-year old Abdullah Abdulrauf from Douma died of complications from Hepatitis B.<sup>72</sup> His condition had been improving until medication shortages forced an early end to his treatment.
- ◆ 9 NOV – 14-month old Muatasim Arbash died in Douma.<sup>73</sup> Muatasim died of an underlying medical condition exacerbated by malnutrition. He could not receive sufficient care in Eastern Ghouta.
- ◆ 10 NOV – 20-year old Osama Hassoun from Hamouriya, died of kidney failure while awaiting approval for medical evacuation that never came.<sup>74</sup> [Pic] There is only one dialysis center in Eastern Ghouta and it had to severely ration supplies due to shortages.<sup>75</sup>
- ◆ 12 NOV – A child named Walid Obeid in Saqba died of congestive heart failure. His request for evacuation for emergency surgery was ignored.<sup>76</sup>

69 Some of the data provided directly by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) to Siege Watch.

70 Qasioun News, "بالصور: وفاة طفلة رابعة في الغوطة الشرقية", 2 November 2017, <[www.qasioun-news.com](http://www.qasioun-news.com)>.

71 Al-Rahma Medical Center, Facebook post, 5 November 2017 <<http://bit.ly/Rahmamed11517>>; Daraj, "شخص يموت كل ٥ أيام: «موت مزجّل» في غوطة دمشق", 13 November 2017, <[daraj.com](http://daraj.com)>.

72 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 7 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb11717>>.

73 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 9 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb11917>>; UOSSM, "Two Infants Died This Week in Besieged Ghouta From A Lack of Medication And Malnutrition," 10 November 2017, <[reliefweb.int](http://reliefweb.int)>.

74 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 10 November 2017 <<http://bit.ly/2tkLpXS>>.

75 Douma Medical Office, "وفاة مريض قصور كلوي بعد انتظار نقله إلى مشافي دمشق", 10 November 2017, <[doumamedical.com](http://doumamedical.com)>.

76 SMART News Agency, "وفاة طفل في مدينة سقبا شرق دمشق لعدم إجلائه إلى مشاف بالعاصمة", 13 November 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>; Al Rowad School, Facebook post, 12 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FbMgQ9>>; Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, 13 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb11317>>.



6-month old Musaab died 20 November of a congenital heart disease. Source: Mohammad Katoub



Muhannad Alawi died 8 December without receiving the medical care he needed. Source: Center for the Revival of the Medical Self



Abdullah Abdulrauf died in Douma on 7 November. Source: Douma Revolutionary Council



Osama Hassoun died of kidney failure on 10 November. Photo taken by UN OCHA in August 2017

- ◆ 20 NOV – 56-year old Nabeel al-Nisreen died awaiting approval for medical evacuation to receive treatment for his brain cancer.<sup>77</sup>
- ◆ 20 NOV – 6-month old Musaab died of a congenital heart disease, and could not receive the surgery he needed in Eastern Ghouta as violence escalated.<sup>78</sup>
- ◆ 29 NOV – A child named Mahmoud Khattab died of Thalessemia, a blood disorder, for which he was unable to receive appropriate medical care under siege.<sup>79</sup>
- ◆ 1 DEC – 44-year old Bassam Qazak from Harran al-Awamid died of adrenal cancer. He sat for two months on the medical evacuation list without receiving approval.<sup>80</sup>
- ◆ 2 DEC – 38-year old Abdulmonam Ghazi from Beit Sawa died of lung cancer. His medical evacuation request was ignored.<sup>81</sup>
- ◆ 8 DEC – 40-day old infant Muhannad Alawi died of hydronephrosis, a kidney condition, for which he could not receive sufficient treatment in Eastern Ghouta due to the lack of medication.<sup>82</sup> He would have had a high chance of survival if evacuated.
- ◆ 9 DEC – A 21-year old man named Ahmad Abd al-Wahab died in Ein Tarma of severe malnutrition. Ahmad was mentally disabled and living with just his elderly father, neither of them was able to care for themselves.<sup>83</sup>
- ◆ 11 DEC – A 9-year old girl named Batoul al-Hattawi died of tuberculosis in Douma. She was the 14<sup>th</sup> person on the emergency evacuation list maintained by the Syrian American medical Society (SAMS) to die without being evacuated to receive the necessary care.<sup>84</sup>
- ◆ 12 DEC – 29-year old Marwa Abdulfattah from Arbin died of cancer. She was unable to receive necessary treatment due to the medication shortages in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>85</sup>

77 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 20 November 2017 <<http://bit.ly/DRCC112017>>.

78 GMC, Facebook post, 20 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb112017>>.

79 GMC, Facebook post, 29 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FeGX2D>>.

80 Al-Araby, "مصرع المريض السوري الحادي عشر بسبب حصار غوطة دمشق", 4 December 2017, <[www.alaraby.co.uk](http://www.alaraby.co.uk)>.

81 GMC, Facebook post, 2 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb12217>>; Geroun, "مرضى السرطان في الغوطة.. الحصار يفرض الخيار الوحيد", 7 December 2017, <[geroun.net](http://geroun.net)>

82 Center for the Revival of the Medical Self, Facebook post, 9 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2oPyKH2>>; GMC, Facebook post, 10 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb121017>>.

83 GMC, Facebook post, 11 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb121117>>.

84 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 11 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FRVJZW>>.

85 Arbin Media Center, Facebook post, 12 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ArbinMC121217>>.

- ◆ 14 DEC – 7-month old Husein Maqdah died of acute malnutrition. Husein was born with a cleft palate and had to be tube-fed a special nutritional formula that was not readily available.<sup>86</sup> Husein was among those screened, but not treated, for malnutrition by UN officials during their last aid delivery.
- ◆ 18 DEC – 12-year old Safook Toami died of cancer. He required medical care outside of Eastern Ghouta but his evacuation request received no response.<sup>87</sup>
- ◆ 24 DEC – 47-year old Hannan al-Homsy from Jisreen died of lung cancer while awaiting approval for medical evacuation.<sup>88</sup>
- ◆ 27 DEC – 6-month old Qatr al-Nada died of a congenital heart treatment. She died the day before her scheduled evacuation as part of the deal between the Syrian government and JAI.<sup>89</sup>
- ◆ 25 JAN – 50-year old Hadieh Rayhan died of stomach cancer, without receiving evacuation for the treatment she needed.<sup>90</sup>
- ◆ 31 JAN – An infant, Baraa Otaibani, died when her heart stopped due to the extreme cold. She was acutely malnourished.<sup>91</sup>
- ◆ 31 JAN – 1.5-year old Amamah Yassin Darwish from Jisreen died of cancer. She was not allowed to leave the besieged area for treatment.<sup>92</sup>
- ◆ 31 JAN – A young man named Mohammad Abdul Aziz al-Selik from Douma died of kidney failure for which he could not get medical care after dialysis supplies ran out.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to being weakened by chronic malnutrition, and more susceptible to disease, civilians in Eastern Ghouta were also driven out of desperation to make decisions that they would not otherwise make. On 22 November, the poor choices of a merchant in Zamalka led to the deaths of three children, and caused around 30 people to fall ill. All of the victims bought “salt” from a trader who had cut the salt with an unknown substance and was selling it at nearly half price, which was elevated to around 7,000SP at the time of the incident.<sup>94</sup> Later testing confirmed that

86 GMC, Facebook post, 14 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb121417>>.

87 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 18 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2l3genj>>.

88 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 24 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2H7SM72>>; Shaam News Network,

“وأخرون ضحية نقص الرعاية الطبية جراء حصار قوات الأسد المفروض على الغوطة الشرقية” 24 December 2017, <[www.shaam.org](http://www.shaam.org)>.

89 Geroun, “بيان (سامر) حول إجلاء مرضى الغوطة” 28 December 2017, <[geroun.net](http://geroun.net)>.

90 STEP News, “رحلة ربحانة الموت، ومعاناتها مع مرض السرطان في دوما” 26 January 2018, <[stepagency-sy.net](http://stepagency-sy.net)>.

91 Al-Fayha, “وفاة طفلة في الغوطة بسبب البرد وسوء التغذية” 1 February 2018, <[alfayha.net](http://alfayha.net)>.

92 Jisreen Media Office, Facebook post, 1 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/JMCfb2118>>.

93 Damascus Media Center, “الغوطة الشرقية وفاة الشاب محمود عبد العزيز السليك” من أبناء مدينة دوما بعد معاناة مع المرض وعدم توفر الدواء بسبب الحصار المفروض على الغوطة الشرقية” 31 January 2018, <[dmc-sy.news](http://dmc-sy.news)>].

94 Alaa Nassar, Avery Edelman, Kafa Al-Faisal, Asma’a Al-Jabar, “Three killed, dozens poisoned in East Ghouta after residents consume salt-like substance,” Syria Direct, 23 November 2017, <[syriadirect.org](http://syriadirect.org)>; STJ, “Three Children Killed and Dozens Injured As a Result of Poisoning in Zamalka City-Eastern Ghouta,” 2 December 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

the salt was laced with sodium nitrite, a compound more commonly for industrial use, and toxic at high concentrations.<sup>95</sup>

With infrastructure destroyed and supplies dwindling as needs skyrocketed, Eastern Ghouta Local Council's struggled to meet the magnitude of the needs of their residents. The Local Council in Harasta said it was only able to assist 30-40% of its population at the end of January.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, the ability of international charities to operate in Eastern Ghouta declined throughout the reporting period as the violence increased.

### Aid & Evacuations

The level of UN humanitarian assistance to reach Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period was low, and vastly insufficient to meet the heightened needs of the population. Only two convoys were allowed to reach the area, and both of them were in November. The combined total of supplies in both convoys was barely enough for the needs of seven percent of the besieged population for several weeks. The UN described the situation as "the worst regarding United Nations access to besieged locations since 2015."<sup>97</sup>

The two aid convoys to reach Eastern Ghouta were:

- ◆ 12 NOV – A joint UN/ICRC/SARC 24-vehicle aid convoy entered Douma with food sufficient for an estimated 21,500 people, and medical and nutrition supplies.<sup>98</sup> This amount was reduced from the UN's original request to reach 107,500 people, and reached only a portion of the residents of Douma.<sup>99</sup> While the aid agencies claim the supplies should last a month, residents say they generally last for less than half of that time.<sup>100</sup> 3,440 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by Syrian government authorities.<sup>101</sup> The convoy was met with protestors decrying both the insufficient amounts of aid and demanding an end to the siege.<sup>102</sup> Douma last received humanitarian aid in August.

95 Zamalka Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 22 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ZamalkaRCC112217>>; SMART News Agency,

"صححة دمشق وريفها" تصدر بيانا حول تفاصيل حادثة التسمم في مدينة زملكا" 23 November 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>; Center for the Revival of the Medical Self, Facebook post, 22 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/Zamalkamed112217>>.

96 Nedaa Syria, "رئيس المجلس المحلي لحرسنا: المدينة تتعرض لأزمة إنسانية تقترب من الكارثة," 23 January 2018 <[nedaa-sy.com](http://nedaa-sy.com)>.

97 UNSC S/2018/138, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

98 Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), Facebook post, 12 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SARCFb111217>>.

99 UN Security Council S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

100 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 13 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaRCC111317>>, Shaam News Network,

"التخفيف حدة الانتقادات التي تطالها .. الأمم المتحدة تدخل قافلة مساعدات لمدينة دوما لا تكفي ربع احتياجاتها لأيام" 2 December 2017, <[www.shaam.org](http://www.shaam.org)>.

101 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

102 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 13 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DRCCfb111317>>.



UN officials examine a malnourished child in Nashabiyeh on 28 November. The child later died. Source: GMC



Destroyed food aid in Douma, 15 November 2017. Source: Anas Alshamy

- ◆ 28 November 2017 – A small aid convoy was allowed to reach the town of al-Nashabiyeh in the rural al-Marj area with food aid for 7,200 people and some medical supplies.<sup>103</sup> The amount of aid was reduced from the 16,500 people that UN agencies requested to reach.<sup>104</sup> Water and sanitation materials and other critical non-food items were not allowed to be loaded onto the convoy, and 3,810 medical treatments were removed.<sup>105</sup>

On 14 November, days after the delivery of aid to Douma, a Syrian government airstrike targeted the warehouse of the Douma Local Council where some of the humanitarian aid was located, damaging the contents. The distribution of aid had been slowed by the continued government bombing, and approximately one-third of the food baskets delivered were still in the warehouse when it was hit.<sup>106</sup>

The Nashabiyeh aid convoy took place as international stakeholders tried to convene a round of UN-sponsored Geneva talks in late November, and Russia called for a two-day pause in fighting that failed to materialize.

In November, only eight civilians out of around 500 on a medical evacuation list were evacuated out of Eastern Ghouta for treatment.<sup>107</sup> In December, a deal between Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) and the Syrian government allowed for the medical evacuation from Eastern Ghouta of 29 civilians in need of advanced care, in exchange for the release of 24 prisoners being held by JAI.<sup>108</sup> During a three-day process from 26-29 December, SARC evacuated a total of 85 people, the 29 patients and 56 family members, from Eastern Ghouta under the terms of the deal.<sup>109</sup>

Though it represented a small victory, the size of the evacuation was too small for the size of the challenge, as there remained by that time 765 civilians in need of evacuation on the list maintained by the SAMS at the end of January.<sup>110</sup> It also came too late for several of the evacuees, two of whom died before the transfer started and were replaced with other patients, and at least three of whom died after arriving in Damascus.<sup>111</sup> Nine of the 29 patients originally approved had to be replaced prior to the evacuation because they were too afraid of potential reprisals by government security forces in Damascus and there were no measures taken to

103 @OCHA\_Syria, Tweet, 28 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/OCHA112817>>.

104 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

105 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

106 STJ, "Aerial Attacks on a Warehouse Containing UN Aid for People Trapped in Eastern Ghouta," 25 November 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

107 @SyRedCrescent, Tweet, 6 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/SARC11617>>.

108 Reuters, "Syrian rebels release 24 detainees from besieged Damascus suburb: SANA," 16 January 2018, <[www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)>.

109 SARC, "PRESS RELEASE: Syrian Arab Red Crescent completes evacuation of 86 civilians with 29 patients among them in critical need of emergency medical care from Eastern Ghouta," 29 December 2017 <[sarc.sy](http://sarc.sy)>; UNSC S/2018/60, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 23 January 2018, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

110 Voice of the Capital, "وفاء شخصين بعد خروجهما من الغوطة إلى دمشق للعلاج," 31 January 2018, <[damascusv.com](http://damascusv.com)>.

111 Euan McKirdy, Angela Dewan, Sarah Sirgany, "Baby dies awaiting evacuation from Syria's besieged Eastern Ghouta," CNN, 28 December 2017, <[edition.cnn.com](http://edition.cnn.com)>; @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 21 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2plBrjZ>>.



29 patients and 56 family members were evacuated from Eastern Ghouta in late December. Source: SARC

guarantee their safety.<sup>112</sup> On 16 January, five of the evacuees were returned to Eastern Ghouta, despite the heavy attacks that awaited them.<sup>113</sup>

### Political

Local Councils continued to play a critical role in providing services to civilians in Eastern Ghouta such as waste removal, infrastructure maintenance, etc. At the same time, Local Councils struggled to continue many of their operations as the intensity of the siege increased and the level of violence escalated throughout the reporting period. The Local Council in Douma was forced to suspend operations several times during the reporting period as it was repeatedly targeted by pro-government attacks.

In November the head of the Kafr Batna Local Council resigned after a controversy over equitable distribution of humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as locals.<sup>114</sup> The scarcity of aid and the tremendous IDP burden carried by strained communities brought distribution issues to the fore, and disputes such as the one in Kafr Batna became increasingly common.

<sup>112</sup> Mat Nashed, Omar AlKhateeb, "Medical evacuation comes too late for trapped Syrians," Deutsche Welle, 27 December 2017, <[www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com)>.

<sup>113</sup> GMC, Facebook post, 16 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb11618>>.

<sup>114</sup> Kafr Batna Local Council, Facebook post, 13 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/KBLC111317>>; SMART News Network,

"رئيس «محلي» مدينة كفر بطنا يقدم استقالته لعدم تقديم المساعدات للنازحين" 8 November 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

Local Council elections were held in Nashabiyeh,<sup>115</sup> Zamalka,<sup>116</sup> Douma,<sup>117</sup> and Misraba<sup>118</sup> during the reporting period. In December, Elections were held for leadership of the Rural Damascus Provincial Council.<sup>119</sup> These local elections hold symbolical and institutional importance in the development of nascent local governance institutions in Eastern Ghouta, but faced implementation challenges due to population displacement. To try and address this challenge, during its election, the Nashabiyeh Local Council placed one of its ballot boxes in the town – a rural frontline area from which many civilians have been displaced – and a second in the more central city of Saqba where many of displaced Nashabiyeh residents could access it.<sup>120</sup> The Local Council of Mleiha held elections in November, despite the fact that the town had been captured by pro-government forces and all of its residents displaced in 2014.<sup>121</sup> The council has continued to exist to represent the interests of Mleiha IDPs in other Eastern Ghouta host communities.

The perceived legitimacy of Local Councils in Eastern Ghouta by their constituents varies, and is impacted by their degree of independence from armed groups and their capacity to provide local services. Siege Watch contacts from Beit Sawa and Madyara said that their Local Councils were irrelevant, and did nothing to support town residents. On the other end of the spectrum, in Zamalka, the Local Council solicited chairs for neighborhood committees, and developed a 2018 “community contract” aimed at increasing civilian participation in local governance.<sup>122</sup>

In Douma, the Local Council fell even further under the control of JAI - a trend described in detail in the eighth quarterly Siege Watch report. Following elections in November 2017, people loyal to JAI controlled eight out of nine seats on the Local Council. Jaysh al-Islam also continued to encroach on other local governance institutions in communities within its area of operations. In early November the group took over the Misraba mosque that served as the headquarters of the Ghouta Sharia Commission, the region’s judicial body. JAI was not successful in taking the Shariah Commission’s records, which would have allowed it to control Eastern Ghouta’s judicial proceedings and sideline elders not loyal to the armed group.<sup>123</sup>

On 9 November, JAI members severely beat a doctor named Nauman al-Fawal, leaving him with a dislocated shoulder, fractured bones in his face, and a bullet through his leg. The attack was believed to be a form of intimidation after Dr. al-Fawal wrote several Facebook posts that

115 Damascus Media Center, Facebook post, 12 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DMC111217>>; Al-Nashabiyeh Local Council, Facebook post, 12 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/NashabiyaLC111217>>.

116 Zamalka Local Council, Facebook post, 14 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ZamalkaLC121417>>.

117 Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 27 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaLC112717>>; Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 6 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DoumaLC12617>>.

118 Misraba Local Council, Facebook page, 5 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/Misrabalc11517>>.

119 Zamalka Local Council, Facebook post, 12 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ZamalkaLC121217>>.

120 GMC, Facebook post, 12 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/GMCfb111217>>.

121 Damascus Media Center, YouTube video, 6 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/DMCvid11617>>.

122 Zamalka Local Council, Facebook post, 2 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/ZamalkaLC11217>>; Zamalka Local Council, Facebook post, 17 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/ZamalkaLC11718>>.

123 Misraba Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 6 November 2017 <<http://bit.ly/Misrabafb11617>>; Enab Baladi “Title Arabic,” 7 November 2017, <[www.enabbaladi.net](http://www.enabbaladi.net)>.



Local Council workers dig a water well in Harasta, 20 December 2017. Source: Harasta Local Council



Trash collection in Ein Tarma, 14 December 2017. Source: Ein Tarma Local Council

were critical of the JAI leadership.<sup>124</sup> Later that month another medical professional, a dentist named Dr. Mahmoud al-Haski, was reportedly detained by JAI and then kicked out of Douma for being similarly outspoken about his political views.<sup>125</sup> In December, the JAI-affiliated police force detained a nurse named Ghasoun Murshad, head of the neonatal department in Douma, accusing her of killing children and practicing witchcraft.<sup>126</sup> This drew widespread criticism, including from the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)-affiliated Provincial Health Directorate, but to little avail.

JAI's interference in governing institutions was met with protests and resistance from activists, elders, and outspoken residents. Ultimately this tension took a backseat to survival as attacks from pro-government forces surged, and both the abuses by JAI and activism against the armed group declined in December and January. While critical of its abuses and interference in governing affairs, many civilians still viewed JAI and other local armed groups as their only protection against the Syrian government, Russia, and Iran. Shows of support for the groups fighting against the government on the frontlines were common throughout the reporting period.

Skirmishes between JAI and Failaq al-Rahman (FAR) were reported in November, along with continuing rumors and tensions. But compared to the level of infighting in prior reporting periods, the situation this winter appeared to remain relatively stable at a new sort of equilibrium, with the groups' areas of control firmly established and the reduced internal mobility for civilians between communities continuing.

There were a few cases of arbitrary detentions by FAR recorded during the reporting period. Notably, in December the group detained Salah al-Masri, the director of a humanitarian organization and a local leader in Saqba. Civilians protested in response.<sup>127</sup> Provincial authorities called for the immediate release of al-Masri and condemned FAR for its attacks on civil society. Al-Masri was finally released 20 days later.<sup>128</sup>

Throughout the reporting period, there were debates and negotiations surrounding efforts to evacuate some or all of the fighters of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) from Eastern Ghouta to Idlib. The al-Qaeda-linked HTS group makes up a small percentage of the opposition fighters in Eastern Ghouta – estimated at less than 500<sup>129</sup> – and they are isolated in a few locations, but their presence is used by the Syrian government as a rationale for its attacks. HTS has little popular support in Eastern Ghouta and civilians have regularly protested the group, calling for it to leave the area.

Schisms within HTS over whether to leave Eastern Ghouta at times boiled over into the public view, particularly after rumors in December that a decision had been negotiated between FAR and Russia for foreign members of HTS and their families to depart for Idlib. Pro-opposition

124 STJ, "Masked Men Attack a Medical Staff Member in Eastern Ghouta," 12 November 2017, <[www.stj-sy.com](http://www.stj-sy.com)>.

125 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 26 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FpwwUM>>.

126 Al-Etihad Press via The Syrian Observer, "Interim Govt Demands Immediate Release of Nurse 'Arbitrarily' Detained by Army of Islam" 18 December 2017, <[syrianobserver.com](http://www.syrianobserver.com)>.

127 Saqba News Network, Facebook post, 1 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/Saqbann12117>>.

128 Shaam News Network, "فيلق الرحمن يفرج عن المدير السابق لمنظمة البشائر الإنسانية," 25 December 2017, <[www.shaam.org](http://www.shaam.org)>.

129 Voice of the Capital, "انقسام في 'تحرير الشام' حول قرار الخروج من الغوطة," 13 December 2017, <[damascusv.com](http://www.damascusv.com)>.

media sources reported that these internal disputes within HTS led to the delay of implementation of this deal, which did not materialize during the reporting period.<sup>130</sup>

Eastern Ghouta's civilian protests and activism continued through much of the reporting period, although the severe escalations of violence dampened public gatherings. In November activists launched a #BreakGhoutaSiege campaign on social media.<sup>131</sup> In December, activists started a #SolidaritywithKareem campaign to raise awareness of the situation in Eastern Ghouta. People around Syria and the world posted photos of themselves covering one eye, in solidarity with a child who lost his eye in a government attack.<sup>132</sup> In January after a wave of chemical attacks, activists launched the #DoumaSuffocating campaign.<sup>133</sup>

There were demonstrations in support of the armed opposition groups fighting on the frontlines in Harasta, and against the Syrian opposition negotiators in Geneva for their perceived capitulation to government demands.<sup>134</sup> In December there were demonstrations across Eastern Ghouta in solidarity with Palestinians, and in condemnation of President Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem.<sup>135</sup>

On 28 January, the Rural Damascus provincial leadership put out a statement reiterating their rejection of the Russian-sponsored Sochi conference, which people came out to demonstrate against despite the bombing campaign.<sup>136</sup> Eastern Ghouta's armed groups, along with most of the armed and political opposition, boycotted the Sochi conference, citing the devastating offensive in Eastern Ghouta as a sign of the lack of seriousness of the Syrian government and Russia.

130 SMART News Agency, "تأجيل خروج «تحرير الشام» من الغوطة الشرقية الى ادلب نتيجة خلافات داخلية," 17 December 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

131 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 11 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FdfJFu>> .

132 Twitter 'Moment,' "Campaign in #SolidarityWithKarim in #EastGhouta #Syria," December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/WithKareem>>.

133 @SiegeWatch, Tweet, 23 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/SW12318>>.

134 GMC, Facebook post, 1 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FSfele>>.

135 Free Arbin City, Facebook post, 10 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2oPBCU5>>; Zamalka Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post,

12 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2tcKHvW>>; Jisreen Media Office, Facebook post, 18 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FfZozH>>.

136 Rural Damascus Provincial Council – Eastern Ghouta, Facebook post, 28 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Fjghgn>>.

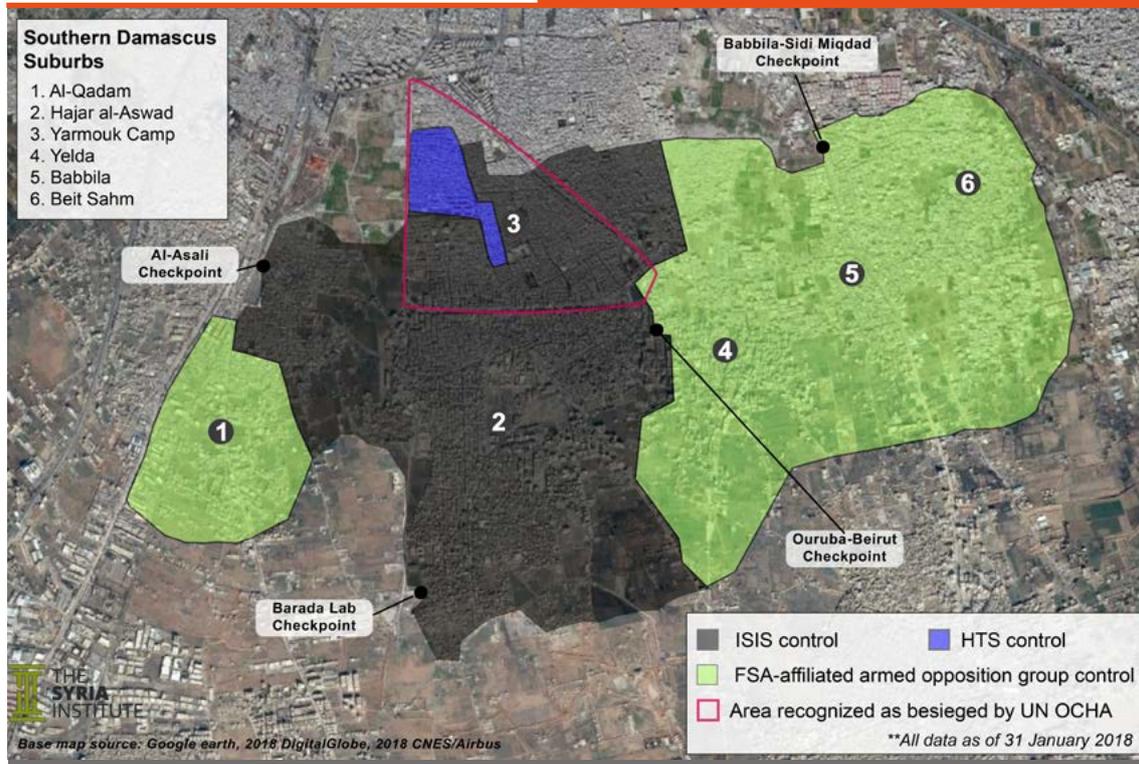


#DoumaSuffocating campaign

## SOUTHERN DAMASCUS SUBURBS

**Map 3:**

Besieged Communities in the Southern Damascus Suburbs



**Table 2:**

Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	2,500
Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
Beit Sahn	3	Syrian Govt.	16,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	6,000
Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	5,000
Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	23,500
<b>SUM:</b>			<b>64,000</b>

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of January 2018.

### Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions declined in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad and remained stable elsewhere. No changes made to Tier levels. Population estimates updated.

### Details:

The general dynamics in the Southern Damascus Suburbs did not change radically during the reporting period. Living conditions in Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) as well as al-Qadam remained better than in the ISIS controlled neighborhoods of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad. Armed groups and pro-government forces continued to close and reopen checkpoints intermittently throughout the period. There was no meaningful progress on reconciliation talks.

Yarmouk remained the only neighborhood in the Southern Damascus Suburbs designated as besieged by UN OCHA. All of the neighborhoods identified by Siege Watch are besieged by pro-government forces and should be recognized as such, but UN OCHA's failure to designate Hajar al-Aswad demonstrates a particularly egregious lack of internal consistency. Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk are contiguous, and both are ruled by ISIS. Both of these communities are under a sort of double siege, facing barriers to exit to the opposition-controlled communities, where people face barriers to exit into government-controlled Damascus. UN OCHA briefly designated Hajar al-Aswad as besieged from November 2016-January 2017, indicating an awareness of the severe access challenges. On 26 January 2017, when Stephen O'Brien, UN OCHA's Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, said that they were de-listing Hajar al-Aswad he cited "access that has been available through Yarmouk, Yelda and al-Qadam."<sup>137</sup> This claim was unsupported by any change on the ground, and the UN could not reach Yarmouk at the time and still considered it besieged. Hajar Aswad has never been directly reached with UN humanitarian assistance.

### Military & Political

#### Fighting

There was violence in the Southern Damascus Suburbs throughout the reporting period as ISIS lashed out at other armed actors. On 13 December, ISIS fighters in Yarmouk launched a surprise attack eastwards into al-Tadamon neighborhood, taking over a block of buildings from pro-government National Defense Force (NDF) militias.<sup>138</sup> The militias quickly retook the buildings, and launched shells into Yarmouk for days and weeks afterwards.<sup>139</sup> The small ISIS incursion into al-Tadamon was the first time that ISIS has attacked the NDF militias in al-Tadamon since it took control of al-Yarmouk in 2014.

Local media outlets reported that on 8 December, pro-government militia fighters made an unsuccessful attempt to storm al-Rijeh, the small northwestern pocket of Yarmouk controlled by HTS.<sup>140</sup> There were also some limited skirmishes reported between HTS and ISIS.<sup>141</sup>

Clashes between AOGs in Yelda and ISIS forces in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad continued throughout the reporting period, without either side making major territorial gains. Notably, on 20 December, JAI reported that ISIS launched thermobaric rockets against its fighters on the frontline between Hajar al-Aswad and Yelda. This is the first time that the use of this type of

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

138 Muhammed Khatib, "ISIS Seizes Positions In Damascus (Map)," Qasioun News, 13 December 2017, <qasioun-news.com>.

139 Voice of the Capital, "المدن: ماذا أراد 'داعش' من الهجوم على شارع نسرين؟," 14 December 2017, <damascusv.com>; Revo Spring,

"قوات الأسد تقصف حي التضامن بأسطوانات متفجرة" تسجيل مصور," 20 December 2017, <revo-spring.com>.

140 Revo Spring, "تحرير الشام تتصدى لمحاولة اقتحام قوات الأسد في مخيم اليرموك," 10 December 2017, <revo-spring.com>.

141 SMART News Agency, "تنظيم «الدولة» يهاجم مواقع لـ«تحرير الشام» في مخيم اليرموك جنوبي دمشق," 14 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

rocket by ISIS has been recorded in the besieged enclave. Several car bombs were detonated in YBB during the reporting period, injuring civilians. ISIS is believed to be responsible for the blasts.<sup>142</sup>

### Dueling Checkpoints

On 4 November, armed opposition groups temporarily opened the Ouruba-Beirut checkpoint separating Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm from ISIS-controlled areas to civilians for a few hours, after having closed it nearly three weeks earlier.<sup>143</sup> The reason given by the AOGs for the closure was the heightened threat, after an ISIS sniper killed a civilian and wounded a JAI fighter in October. However, some believed that the closure of the barrier to into ISIS-controlled Yarmouk was the result of a demand by the Syrian government and Russia as part of ongoing negotiations.<sup>144</sup> After the initial limited reopening on 4 November, the checkpoint was regularly opened several hours a day for civilians to enter YBB from Yarmouk and purchase supplies, with sporadic interruption.<sup>145</sup>

The Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint is the only access point into the besieged southern Suburbs area of Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm from Damascus. While it was generally open for certain civilian and commercial traffic, as in past reporting periods, it was closed sporadically by pro-government forces several times over the winter. On 13 November, pro-government forces closed the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint to commercial and civilian vehicles.<sup>146</sup> According to reports, the closure was a direct response to the AOGs decision to open the internal Ouruba-Beirut checkpoint to Yarmouk.<sup>147</sup> The Babbila-Sidi Miqdad closure quickly led to shortages of basic goods in YBB such as flour, bread, and sugar, and a spike in fuel prices.

At the start of January the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint was again closed completely by pro-government forces, this time in response to tumultuous negotiation dynamics. A group of young men led by Anas al-Tawil, a local cleric and the head of the Babbila reconciliation committee, made efforts to rally people in support of “reconciliation” with the Syrian government. The deal under discussion would involve the forced deportation of all armed groups and a number of civilians out of the area, and mandatory conscription into the NDF militias for young men. This deal was opposed by all armed opposition groups in the enclave.<sup>148</sup>

The tensions came to a head on 1 January when a meeting organized by al-Tawil turned violent. Two civilians were killed and three injured by fire from al-Tawil’s supporters.<sup>149</sup> After the incident al-Tawil fled into Damascus city. Local AOGs formed an operations room to manage the situation and arrested al-Tawil’s supporters.<sup>150</sup> The next day, government forces

142 SMART News Agency, “جرحي بانفجار عبوة ناسفة في بلدة بيت سحم جنوب دمشق”, 11 November 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>; SMART News Agency,

“إصابة طفل بانفجار عبوة ناسفة في بلدة ببيلا جنوب دمشق”, 7 December 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

143 Revo Spring, “فتح حاجز العروبة – بيروت للمدنيين بشكل مؤقت”, 4 November 2017, <revospring.com>.

144 Enab Baladi, “لماذا أغلق معبر مخيم الزمرك- بلدا جنوبي دمشق ومن المسؤول؟”, 2 November 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

145 Revo Spring, “فتح حاجز العروبة- بيروت جنوب دمشق”, 5 November 2017, <revospring.com>.

146 Revo Spring, “استمرار منع دخول وخروج السيارات التجارية والمدنية جنوب دمشق”, 14 November 2017, <revospring.com>.

147 Revo Spring, “فتح حاجز العروبة-بيروت لساعتين.. وقوات الأسد ترد بإغلاق حاجز ببيلا-سيدي مقداد”, 12 November 2017, <revospring.com>.

148 SMART News Agency, “تؤكد استمرار حملتها الأمنية ضد مناصري «المصالحة» ببلدة ببيلا جنوب دمشق”, 3 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

149 SMART News Agency, “Reconciliation supporters kill and injure civilians and fighters in Southern Damascus”, 1 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

150 Revo Spring, “الفصائل الثورية تخوض أول مواجهة مباشرة مع جماعة «المصالحة» جنوبي دمشق”, 1 January 2018, <revospring.com>.



The Ouruba-Beirut checkpoint. Source: Yarmouk Media Network



The Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint. Source: RevoSpring

closed the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint.<sup>151</sup> Civilian sentiment on the matter was split. The “reconciliation” pushed by Anas al-Tawil certainly had some popular support, with several demonstrations being held in support of al-Tawil after the 1 January incident. But many civilians sided with the AOGs, having long opposed any deal involving forced population transfers.

Within days of the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint closure, prices in YBB spiked by 20%. The checkpoint was opened briefly three days later but only to allow residents who had been stranded in Damascus by the unexpected shutdown to re-enter YBB.<sup>152</sup> After eight days, university students were allowed out of YBB to take exams.<sup>153</sup> On 10 January the checkpoint was finally reopened to normal traffic, which allowed commercial trade and a portion of the civilian population to pass through.<sup>154</sup>

Pro-government forces sporadically closed the al-Asali checkpoint as well. This checkpoint on the western side of the Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave connects al-Qadam to government-controlled areas. The dynamics surrounding closures of al-Asali checkpoint are not well understood.

Civilians in the Southern Damascus Suburbs continued to protest actively throughout the reporting period, including in December when, as in all other besieged areas of Syria, people went out into the streets in solidarity with Palestinians after US President Donald Trump announced his controversial move of the US Embassy to Jerusalem.

## ISIS

The most remarkable dynamics in the besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs during the reporting period involved ISIS, which seemed to be in disarray. This was possibly due to the collapse of the ISIS “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, which led to a collapse in morale and salary payments in the Southern Damascus Suburbs, and caused schisms in the ranks.

During the reporting period, a group of Syrian military officers began smuggling groups of people, mainly ISIS members, out of ISIS-controlled areas of the besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs enclave for a fee of just over \$4,000.<sup>155</sup> Groups of two to nine people would escape through the generally-closed Barada lab checkpoint, which separates Hajar al-Aswad and the government-controlled town of Sbeina. Reports of these ISIS defections occurred throughout the entire reporting period, and amount to well over 50 ISIS members in total. Some of these defectors were subsequently spotted in Daraa and Idlib.<sup>156</sup> On 12 December, ISIS announced a 10:00pm curfew in the neighborhoods under its control, and erected new checkpoints and security measures near the Barada lab checkpoint in an effort to stop further defections.<sup>157</sup> On

151 SMART News Agency, “Syrian government closes crossing as opposition factions escalate advance on reconciliation supporters in Southern Damascus,” 2 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

152 Revo Spring, “فتح حاجز ببيلا-سبدي مقدار لإخلاء ‘العالقين’ في العاصمة دمشق,” 4 January 2018, <revo-spring.com>.

153 Revo Spring, “إعادة فتح حاجز ببيلا-سبدي مقدار لطلاب الجامعات والمعاهد المتوسطة فقط,” 9 January 2018, <revo-spring.com>.

154 SMART News Agency, “Loyalist forces reopen Babila-Sidi Mikdak checkpoint crossing, Southern Damascus,” 10 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

155 Revo Spring, “بخط ‘تهريب’.. يُنذر بإفراغ المنطقة من كوادرها,” 13 February, <revo-spring.com>.

156 Voice of the Capital, “شرعي وعناصر في تنظيم داعش يصلون درعا بعد خروجهم من مخيم اليرموك,” 13 December 2017, <damascusv.com>; Voice of the Capital,

“المعارضة تلقي القبض على ‘دواعش’ خرجوا من مخيم اليرموك إلى درعا,” 15 November 2017, <damascusv.com>.

157 STEP News, “اجتماع هام لداعش بالحجر الأسود لمنع فرار المزيد من عناصره,” 16 December 2017, <stepagency-sy.net>.



A protest against Trump's decision in Babbila. Source: Babbila Today Facebook page

15 December, a group of eight ISIS members were reportedly detained by ISIS security while attempting to leave, but reports of further defections continued.<sup>158</sup> This process drew significant attention in local Syrian media but appeared to garner little to no notice beyond.

### Humanitarian

Overall, living conditions in Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm remained generally unchanged from the last reporting period, as did those in al-Qadam. Access to medical care continued to decline, and unemployment levels reportedly rose, making it more difficult for people to afford goods that entered with a 13% fee levied by government forces. Most people in the Southern Damascus Suburbs continued to live day to day, lacking the resources to stockpile goods. Accordingly, civilians were very vulnerable to the frequent checkpoint closures and unable to avoid the more expensive prices. There were also significant interruptions to electricity supplies.

The Martyr Mihrab Hospital, the only hospital in YBB, struggled to continue to provide care to area residents due to a lack of supplies.<sup>159</sup> The hospital remained the only option for medical care for many civilians in YBB who were afraid that they would be detained if they attempted to exit through the Babbila-Sidi Miqdad checkpoint and seek care in Damascus. In December, the SCD forces (White Helmets) put out a statement that they were closing down their centers in al-Qadam and in Yelda, effectively halting all operations in the besieged Southern Damascus

158 Revo Spring, "داعش" يعقل ثمانية عناصر خلال محاولة هروبهم من جنوب دمشق", 15 December 2017, <revo.spring.com>.

159 Enab Baladi, "Arabic title," 13 November 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

Suburbs enclave.<sup>160</sup> The last UN humanitarian assistance to reach the Southern Damascus Suburbs was in October 2017.

The already-poor living conditions in ISIS-controlled Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk declined further due to the checkpoint closures and growing tumult within the ISIS leadership. In November, there were warnings of a humanitarian crisis in Yarmouk, with groups of civilians putting out statements describing worsening conditions.<sup>161</sup> Several civilians in Yarmouk died during the reporting period due to the lack of access to medical care:

- ◆ 1 NOV – A one-year old girl named Taki Yousef died in Yarmouk after she had a medical emergency. With the Ouruba-Beirut checkpoint to YBB closed, her family was unable to get out of Yarmouk Camp to seek treatment.<sup>162</sup>
- ◆ 3 NOV – An infant from Yarmouk died due to heart problems and the lack of access to medical care.<sup>163</sup> Despite the internal checkpoint closure, the infant was allowed to access the hospital in Yelda for ventilator support, but died shortly thereafter.
- ◆ 4 NOV – Local media reported that a young man named Mohammad Rajah died in al-Yarmouk from lack of medical care, although the exact cause of death was not reported.<sup>164</sup>

160 Al-Fayha, "الدفاع المدني توقف عملها جنوبي دمشق", 23 December 2017, <alfayha.net>.

161 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, "إغاليات مدنية بمخيم اليرموك: كارثة إنسانية تنتظر الآلاف من المدنيين بسبب استمرار المعارضة بإغلاق المنفذ الوحيد للمخيم المحاصر", 1 November 2017, <www.actionpal.org.uk>; Revo Spring, "مخيم اليرموك وأحياء الحجر الأسود والتضامن والعسالي", 18 November 2017, <revo.spring.com>.

162 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, "وفاة طفلة رضية بعمر سنة في مخيم اليرموك نتيجة الحصار وسوء الرعاية الطبية", 2 November 2017, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

163 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, "وفاة رضيع ثمان خلال يومين بسبب الحصار ونقص الرعاية الصحية في مخيم اليرموك", 3 November 2017, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

164 Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, "لاجئ فلسطيني يقضي بسبب الحصار ونقص الرعاية الطبية في مخيم اليرموك", 5 November 2017, <www.actionpal.org.uk>.

## Homs

Map 4:

Besieged Communities in Homs

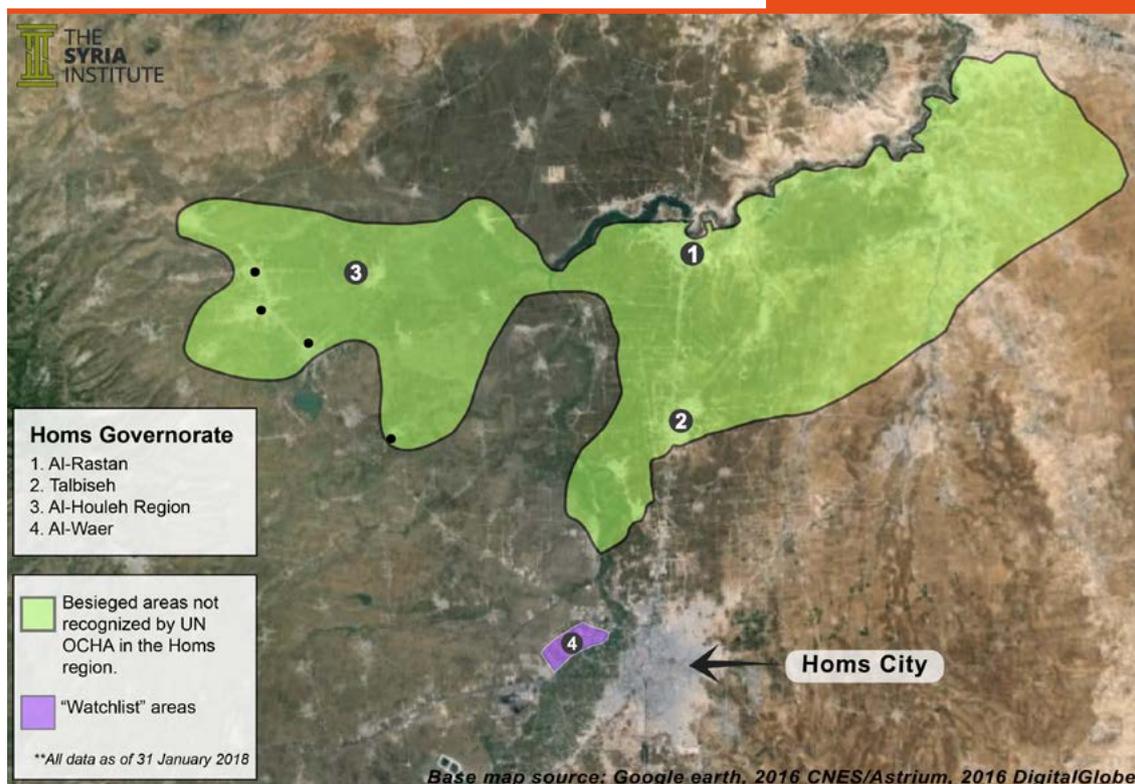


Table 3:

Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Houleh Region +	3	Syrian Govt.	55,000
Al-Rastan +	3	Syrian Govt.	110,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
<b>SUM:</b>			<b>235,000</b>

Note: Orange text indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of January 2018.

### Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions remained relatively unchanged. No changes to Tier levels. Slight adjustment to al-Rastan population estimate.

### Details:

The besieged northern countryside enclaves of Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh have been

surrounded by pro-government militias since 2012-2013. The sieges in northern Homs are enforced by a variety of government-affiliated forces including the Syrian military, the NFD, Iran-backed foreign militias, the Syrian al-Ridha militia, Hezbollah, and Iranian “Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces. None of the besieged areas in northern Homs have ever been officially designated as besieged by the UN.

In many ways, the situation in northern Homs appeared static during the November – January reporting period. As in prior reporting periods, humanitarian conditions in northern Homs continued their slow decline as waning international charitable support decreased the ability of medical and educational systems to support the population. Violent attacks occurred intermittently, but at a lower level than in prior periods and generally without the use of air strikes. Segments of the population such as students and government employees continued to be allowed to travel to Homs city through the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint, but there was a rise in the number of people who were detained by pro-government forces at the checkpoint and forced into mandatory military service. Negotiations between local authorities and the Russians dragged on, with no major progress.

### **Military & Political**

The military situation in all communities in northern Homs remained static during the reporting period. There was sporadic shelling and occasional clashes, but no changes to the balance of power or boundaries of the besieged area. A number of civilian casualties were reported throughout the period as a result of the shelling on civilian areas by pro-government militias. At the same time the level of sporadic attacks was lower than in prior periods. As a result of the decreased violence in parts of the enclave, some civilians who were people who were previously displaced into the countryside returned to their homes in al-Rastan and Talbiseh cities.

There was a notable uptick in attacks at the end of the reporting period in January,<sup>165</sup> coinciding with a cutoff of commercial deliveries through the Dar al-Kabira crossing.<sup>166</sup> This followed a message from Russia to the local negotiating committee that the Syrian government was planning to retake the region by force and the “de-escalation” zone agreement covering northern Homs would end on 15 February 2018. The Russians reportedly pushed the local negotiators to engage in direct talks with the Syrian government.<sup>167</sup> This new ultimatum came in the context of an agreement made in October directly with Russia that included promises of action on the issue of detainees and the opening of humanitarian crossings – neither of which came to pass. The local negotiating committee said that it would consider talks that included government officials, but only on certain conditions,<sup>168</sup> requiring guarantees in writing because Russia has proven to be an inconsistent negotiating partner: repeatedly changing its position and failing to follow through on interim agreement steps.

Residents of northern Homs, as in other besieged communities, held protests in December in support of Palestinians, condemning President Donald Trump’s decision to move the US

165 SCD Homs, Facebook post, 10 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2H4vAXc>>; SMART News Agency, “Loyalist bombing kills one child and injures three in Kafr Laha, Homs,” 9 January 2018, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>; Al-Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 22 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2oLCOc3>>.

166 Ammar Abu-Tarab, “The siege of the northern Homs countryside: depletion by escalations and crossings,” Madar Daily, <[madardaily.com](http://madardaily.com)>.

167 SMART News Agency, “روسيا تبالغ «هيئة التفاوض» شمال حمص بانتهاك الهدنة منتصف شباط القادم,” 10 January 2018, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

168 Al-Houleh Media Center, Facebook post, 15 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Fgkims>>.



Northern Homs negotiators meet with the Russians. 15 January 2018. Source: Al-Houleh Media Center

Embassy to Jerusalem.<sup>169</sup> There were also protests rejecting the Sochi Conference.<sup>170</sup>

### Local Councils

Local and provincial governance institutions in the besieged communities of northern Homs remained relatively strong, though still nascent, particularly considering the challenges of insufficient resources, waning international support, and political turmoil. They maintained written agreements between military and civilian authorities in an effort to preserve the civil nature of governing institutions.

One notable series of events that highlights the struggle for independence and accountability of the local governing bodies in northern Homs is a conflict between the Local Council in al-Rastan – affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government – and the provincial Supreme Shura Council which serves the judicial needs of the region. Al-Rastan Council leadership leveled allegations of corruption – primarily related to their ties to armed groups – against the provincial Shura Council, demanding in early January that the body be restructured.<sup>171</sup> When the Shura Council refused, the leadership in al-Rastan said they would not recognize the provincial Shura Council until it complied. Large demonstrations were held in al-Rastan in January demanding that the Shura Council leave the city, and a significant number of armed opposition groups in northern

169 Al-Rastan Media Office, YouTube video, 8 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FcRoUb>>.

170 SMART News Agency, "الحراك الثوري" في حمص ينظم وقفة احتجاجية رفضاً لـ«مؤتمر سوتشي»", 20 December 2017, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

171 Al-Rastan Shura Council, Facebook post, 4 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Fh82hk>>; SMART News Agency,

"بيانات مؤيدة لعدم الاعتراف بـ «المحكمة العليا» شمال حمص بسبب اتهامات بالفساد", 2 January 2018, <[smartnews-agency.com](http://smartnews-agency.com)>.

Homs put out statements in support of the al-Rastan Council's decision against the Shura Council.<sup>172</sup>

Local Council presidency elections took place in besieged communities in al-Houleh, in late December, including Taldu, Kafr Laha, Tel Dahab, and al-Taiba, under guidelines published by the provincial Homs Council.<sup>173</sup> In most cases, the election outcomes and voting details were published transparently online.

### Humanitarian

While humanitarian conditions in northern Homs remained better than in Eastern Ghouta, food and supply shortages still impacted all aspects of daily life. Local Councils in northern Homs issued calls for international assistance to provide their residents with bread in December and January.<sup>174</sup> In late December there was an appeal for baby milk in al-Rastan,<sup>175</sup> and for clean drinking water in villages near Talbiseh city.<sup>176</sup> On 20 January a distress call was launched for support to camps for displaced people in the northern Homs countryside, which were ill-equipped for winter conditions.<sup>177</sup>

The quarter saw a serious increase in Hepatitis A deaths in northern Homs besieged communities. One of the largest factors in the spread of Hepatitis was poor quality water contaminated with sewage, which was being used for both drinking and irrigation.<sup>178</sup> 500 cases of Hepatitis were reported in the besieged communities by November, more than half of them in al-Houleh area.<sup>179</sup> At least ten of those infected died within a period of three months from September – November 2017.<sup>180</sup>

The besieged communities in northern Homs received three UN/SARC aid convoys during the reporting period:

- ◆ 1 NOV – An interagency UN/SARC aid convoy with supplies for 84,000 people reached Talbiseh. 1,813 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government authorities.<sup>181</sup>
- ◆ 14 NOV – A 48-vehicle interagency UN/SARC/ICRC aid convoy reached al-Rastan with food aid for 21,500 families, or 107,500 people, as well as winter

172 SMART News Agency, "المنات يتظاهرون في مدينة الرستن بحمص ضد «المحكمة العليا»" 12 January 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

173 Local Council of Tel Dahab, Facebook post, 27 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FU3Rt7>>; Local Council of Tel Dahab, Facebook post, 16 December 2017 <<http://bit.ly/2H0ZwU4>>; Revolutionary Council of al-Houleh/Teldu, Facebook post, 16 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2l5SpeA>>.

174 Al-Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 17 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2CY3Z7P>>.

175 Al-Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 26 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2tcXQFi>>.

176 SMART News Agency, "محلي السعن الأسود" بحمص يناشد المنظمات لمواجهة أزمة مياه الشرب بالقرية" 18 December 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

177 Al-Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 21 January 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2oQChVA>>.

178 Enab Baladi, "التهاب الكبد يهدد أطفال ريف حمص" 31 December 2017, <[www.enabbaladi.net](http://www.enabbaladi.net)>.

179 Souriatna Press, "التهاب الكبد الوبائي" يُهدد شمال حمص المحاصر ولا لقاحات لمكافحته" 11 December 2017, <[www.souriatnapress.net](http://www.souriatnapress.net)>.

180 SMART News Agency, "وفاة عشرة أطفال بمرض التهاب الكبد خلال ثلاثة أشهر شمال حمص" 28 November 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

181 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.



Tree planting project in Tel Dhabab, al-Houleh in January 2018. Source: Tel Dhabab Local Council

clothes and medical supplies. 1,588 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government authorities.<sup>182</sup>

- ◆ 14 DEC – A 26-vehicle interagency aid convoy reached al-Houleh area with aid supposed to be sufficient for 50,000 people. This was a reduction from the 71,000 beneficiaries that the UN requested to reach, and 690 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government officials.<sup>183</sup>

The 14 December aid convoy was originally scheduled for 13 December, but was turned away the first time it tried to enter by local leaders because it contained 30% less aid than had been promised. The convoy was allowed to proceed the next day despite anger over the reduction because of the high needs in winter.<sup>184</sup> Local leadership who met with the SARC representatives explained that they felt there was an implied threat that aid may not enter again until mid-2018 if the December convoy was not accepted.<sup>185</sup>

The education sector in northern Homs was in serious need of support during the reporting

182 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <undocs.org>.

183 UNSC S/2018/60, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 23 January 2018, <undocs.org>.

184 SMART News Agency, "توزيع مساعدات إغاثية في مدينة تلدو شمال حمص بعد تقليصها بنسبة ٣٠ بالمئة"، 20 December 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

185 SMART News Agency, "الهلال الأحمر: يقلص مساعدات منطقة الحولة في حمص بنسبة ٣٠ بالمئة"، 13 December 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

period. Teacher salaries and teaching materials were the highest priority needs, as well as school reconstruction projects, since many were destroyed by government bombardments in earlier reporting periods.

The besieged communities in northern Homs had electricity provided via power line for several hours a day, although there were sporadic multi-day interruptions. This electricity had been provided for much of 2017 after a tenuous deal with the Syrian government was inked in December 2016.<sup>186</sup> The government agreed to give the besieged communities limited access to electricity in return for the ability to maintain the high voltage power lines to Hama city, which pass through the besieged region.<sup>187</sup> Not all besieged communities in northern Homs had consistent access to the electricity network because their electrical infrastructure was damaged after years of fighting.

In early November, pro-government forces reopened the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint to commercial trade after three months of closure.<sup>188</sup> Commercial food trade at the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint continued throughout most of the reporting period with sporadic closures at the crossing, resulting in spikes in the already high prices.

Local Councils relied heavily on the support of foreign charitable institutions to provide services and complete civil work projects ranging from tree planting, to repairing water and electrical networks, to training girls in computer literacy and rebuilding schools. Many of these projects focus on agricultural production and animal husbandry.<sup>189</sup> The economy of the traditionally agrarian region of northern Homs has become almost singularly centered on agriculture during the years of siege, both because of the economic isolation and lack of other opportunities and the need to produce local goods for survival. A recent Smart News estimate suggested that around 80% of the workers northern Homs were employed in the agricultural sector.<sup>190</sup>

186 Horrya, "اتفاق ناقص مع النظام وكبرى فصائل الزيف تعرقه," 20 January 2018, <horrya.net>.

187 Eqtsad, "النظام يُجبر على إعادة الكهرباء لريف حمص الشمالي," 28 January 2018, <www.eqtsad.net>.

188 SMART News Agency, "النظام يعيد فتح حاجز بلدة الدار الكبيرة شمال حمص بعد إغلاقه ثلاثة أشهر," 8 November 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

189 Al-Seeraj, Facebook post, 19 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2l3noYx>; Al-Rastan Revolutionary Council, Facebook post, 23 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2olXFNh>.

190 SMART News Agency, "Proportion of workers in agriculture sector in Northern Homs exceeds 80 percent due to siege," 18 February 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

Map 4:

Besieged Communities in Idlib

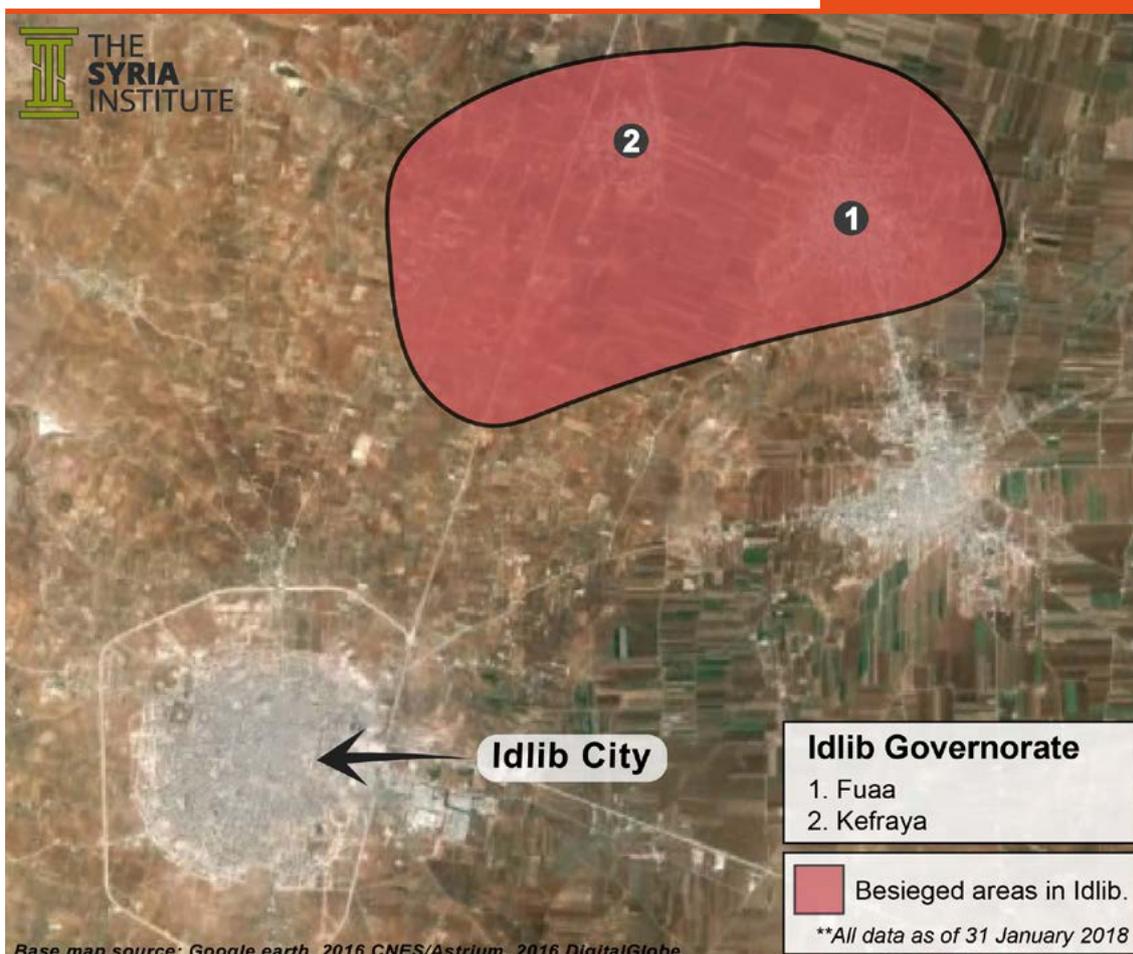


Table 5:

Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	Armed groups	8,100

**Snapshot:**

No change in besieged designation, Tier level, or population.

**Details:**

The government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by armed opposition groups and (HTS) during the November – January reporting period. Residents in Fuaa and



Residents of Fuaa and Kefraya receive airdropped aid. 3 January 2017. Source: Military Media Page for Fuaa and Kefraya on Facebook

Kefraya faced a static security situation. Minor skirmishes were reported during the quarter and occasional fire from besieging opposition forces, but there were no significant changes in the military situation.

The towns continued to receive regular airdrops of assistance including fuel and warm clothing, provided by the Syrian government and its allies. On 11 November an airdrop of fuel was destroyed when gunfire from opposition forces in Binnish caused the deliveries to catch on fire.<sup>191</sup>

On 15 December, civilian demonstrations were held in solidarity with Palestinians, denouncing President Donald Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem.<sup>192</sup> These demonstrations mirrored those in areas of Eastern Ghouta and Homs besieged by the Syrian government. A notable point of concurrence from the Shi'a communities of Fuaa and Kefraya, where public demonstrations and imagery are frequently framed in sectarian terms.

<sup>191</sup> Military Media Page of Fuaa and Kefraya, Facebook post, 11 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FUWstt>>.

<sup>192</sup> Media Office of Fuaa and Kefraya, 15 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FUkvbQ>>.

## Watchlist

### Damascus and Rural Damascus

All eight “Watchlist” communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus listed in the Eighth Quarterly Siege Watch report remained on the “Watchlist” during the November 2017 – January 2018 period. These communities include al-Tal, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, Wadi Barada, Khan al-Shieh, Moadamiya, and Madaya in Rural Damascus, and Barzeh in Damascus city. All of these communities remain vulnerable after surrendering to pro-government forces and submitting to forced population transfers in prior reporting periods.

Forced conscription and arrest raids continued and by many accounts even increased in post-surrender communities near Damascus such as al-Tal, al-Hameh, and Qudsaya. Initial promises made by the government regarding the mandatory military service were not kept. These promises included giving those who chose to “reconcile” their status with the government a period of six-months before they would be forced to serve, and allowing them to serve in local militias instead of sending them to the front lines. Many young men who had not yet served their mandatory military service went into hiding rather than join the Syrian army or militias, and were frequently detained at flying checkpoints or in home raids.<sup>193</sup>

Compulsory conscription was not the only reason for arrests in these former siege and “Watchlist” communities. Communications continued to be closely monitored in these areas, and a number of people were detained by government security forces after phone calls with relatives living in opposition-controlled areas.<sup>194</sup>

Analysis by REACH indicated that while food and goods became much more available in post-surrender communities than in the period prior to their surrender, restrictions remained on commercial access, and humanitarian access was still limited.<sup>195</sup> REACH also noted that reprisals such as property confiscation and looting were most prevalent in the post-surrender communities around Damascus.

As a result of the ubiquitous checkpoints, monitoring, and threat of detention, civilians in these post-surrender communities in the Damascus area continued to live in fear, and restricted in their movements and communications a year after they surrendered to government forces. They remained largely out of reach of Siege Watch follow-up monitoring efforts during the reporting period. Due to the continuing threats civilians in these post-surrender communities, and they will remain on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” during the coming quarter.

### Beit Jinn

The opposition-controlled Beit Jinn enclave in southern Rural Damascus came under increasing pressure from pro-government forces during the reporting period. Beit Jinn and the surrounding

193 Voice of the Capital, “القتل: حملة اعتقالات كبيرة طالت ٤٠ شاب للتجنيد الإجباري”, 2 December 2017, <damascusv.com>; Voice of the Capital, Facebook post, 27 December 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2FdkezL>>.

194 Voice of the Capital, “اعتقالات في قدسيا والهامة بسبب مكالمات هاتفية إلى الشمال السوري”, 7 December 2017, <damascusv.com>.

195 REACH Initiative, “Community Profiles: Truce Community Trends Analysis Syria - 2016 & 2017,” January 2018, <[www.reachresourcecentre.info/](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/)>.

areas, with an estimated population of 3,646,<sup>196</sup> had been partially surrounded by pro-government forces for several years prior to the escalation. The government offensive against Beit Jinn resembled those of other besieged areas, as the towns were subjected to intensive aerial and ground bombardments, and at least one suspected chemical attack.<sup>197</sup>

Siege Watch's addition of the enclave to the 'Watchlist' was delayed due to difficulty in establishing local Beit Jinn. Ultimately the enclave was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" in late December, shortly before the armed opposition groups capitulated to pro-government forces. On 30 December, 270 fighters and civilians were forcibly transferred out of the area under the surrender agreement.<sup>198</sup>

### Aleppo

Although conditions in Eastern Aleppo remain poor, by UN estimates some 300,000 people had returned by November 2017,<sup>199</sup> almost a year after the nearly complete depopulation of the area. Rehabilitation efforts have been slow, and focused on areas prioritized by the Assad government.<sup>200</sup> Many of the city's original inhabitants who were forcibly displaced fear returning, or have been prevented from doing so by the Syrian government, and civilians who have returned are vulnerable to abuses and reprisals from pro-government militia.<sup>201</sup> The post-surrender scenario in Eastern Aleppo appears to echo that of the Old City of Homs, where the Syrian government active steps to prevent the return of much of the population, and has manipulated UN agency and international assistance to support its demographic engineering efforts.<sup>202</sup>

Due to the minimal threat of returning to a siege situation, Eastern Aleppo may be removed from Siege Watch "Watchlist" monitoring during the coming quarter. This does not mean that the threats to civilians will have passed. Ongoing abuses by the Assad government against those who are from or in post-surrender communities is a serious problem that demands serious consideration from UN agencies and humanitarian actors. Failing to grasp this dynamic and to factor it into rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts will perpetuate the regional humanitarian crisis by leaving the displaced behind, and may contribute to resurgent violence in the future as a result of new grievances.

### Deir Ezzor City

The siege of Deir Ezzor city by ISIS was broken in September 2017, when pro-government forces advanced against ISIS into Deir Ezzor with heavy Russian aerial support. Siege Watch reclassified Deir Ezzor from besieged to "Watchlist," for observation throughout the November

196 UNSC S/2018/60, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 23 January 2018, <undocs.org>.

197 @MhdKatoub, Tweet, 18 November 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2oJjg3c>>.

198 UNSC S/2018/60, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 23 January 2018, <undocs.org>.

199 UNSC S/2017/1057, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," Report of the Secretary General, 15 December 2017, <undocs.org>.

200 Emma Beals, "UN allowing Assad government to take lead in rebuilding Aleppo," Fox News, 16 November 2017, <[www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com)>.

201 Saba Aziz, "Totally destroyed": East Aleppo a year after battle," Al Jazeera, 17 November 2017, <[www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com)>.

202 PAX and The Syria Institute, "No Return to Homs: A case study on demographic engineering in Syria," 21 February 2017, <[syriainstitute.org](http://syriainstitute.org)>.

– January reporting period. Conditions for civilians remained challenging, but improved notably compared to the period of siege as humanitarian aid deliveries to the city became fairly regular.

By the end of the reporting period, US-led Coalition and pro-government forces had routed ISIS from most of Deir Ezzor governorate. While civilians in the city will continue to require humanitarian assistance for the foreseeable future, the threat of a siege being reinstated has passed. Accordingly, Deir Ezzor is being removed from Siege Watch project monitoring efforts.

# 3. Conclusion

This Siege Watch report – the ninth in a quarterly series compiling information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas in Syria – clearly demonstrates that the government’s “surrender or die” campaigns are far from over. The Syrian government and its allies remained responsible for the vast majority of long-term sieges and all of the more than one million people trapped in “Watchlist” communities in Syria during the reporting period. The government is the only party in Syria that has employed sieges against civilian populations systematically across the country.

Of the estimated 714,345 people still living under siege:

- ◆ 97.33% of besieged Syrians in approximately 29 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 1.54% of besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups in the Southern Damascus Suburbs where 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.
- ◆ 1.13% of besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

PAX and The Syria Institute, along with other observers, are deeply disturbed by the failure of the international community to make any progress towards ending the sieges in Syria. The “surrender or die” strategy carried out by the Syrian government and its allies against civilians is a campaign of widespread collective punishment, and as the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Panos Moutzisz stated: “this collective punishment of civilians is simply unacceptable.”<sup>203</sup> Tactics including the restriction of civilian access to water, food, medicine and other materials necessary for survival; the use of chemical weapons;<sup>204</sup> and intentional attacks on hospitals and other civilian targets,<sup>205</sup> all violate tenets of international humanitarian and human rights law.<sup>206</sup> These “surrender or die” campaigns by the Syrian government and its allies

203 Panos Moutzisz, “Statement by Panos Moutzisz, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, on Implementation of UN Resolution 2401,” UN OCHA, 4 March 2018, <reliefweb.int>.

204 OHCHR legal note, “Indiscriminate Attacks and Indiscriminate Weapons in International Humanitarian Law, March 2016,” 30 March 2016, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

205 OHCHR legal note, “Transfer of the Civilian Population in International Law – January 2017,” 31 January 2017, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

206 OHCHR legal note, “International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare – January 2017,” 31 January 2017, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

rise to the level of crimes against humanity, as they are being committed repeatedly as part of a widespread and systematic strategy of collective punishment against Syrian civilians.<sup>207</sup>

During the ninth quarterly reporting period, numerous international diplomatic initiatives took place, including talks in Geneva, Vienna, and Sochi. These processes have ceased to have meaning for many people trapped in the besieged areas. The bombing of besieged communities continues, even increases, ahead of international talks. Some of these bombs come from Russian aircraft even as Russia claims to be working towards a diplomatic solution. The bombs targeting civilian hospitals, markets, schools, and rescuers in Eastern Ghouta tell people far more about their fate than the diplomatic statements released from New York and Geneva.

The Syrian government and its allies, have called the international community's bluff, and realized that they have a green light to act with impunity. Hours after Russia vetoed the renewal of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism's work in November the Syrian government launched a series of fresh chemical attacks on Eastern Ghouta. *[Note: The UN Security Council managed to pass a unanimous resolution calling for an immediate 30-day ceasefire and medical evacuations in February. The Resolution was not only ignored, but aggressively violated. Less than 24-hours after the passage of Resolution 2401 (2018), pro-government forces began ground force advances on Eastern Ghouta, signaling a new phase of their assault, and launched a chemical attack.]*

Siege Watch reports have repeatedly warned that the international community must prioritize ending the sieges to prevent this pattern of "surrender or die" escalation, destruction, and forced population transfers from being repeated over and over again. The last two quarterly Siege Watch reports raised the alarm for Eastern Ghouta, warning of the looming catastrophe that is now taking place. But the international community has continued to show a lack of political will in its approach to besieged communities.

The "de-escalation zones" announced in May 2017 are being used by the Syrian government and its allies as a tool of war, not a tool of peace. They have allowed the government and its allies to leverage their limited manpower effectively by reducing the number of battles they have to fight at once, sequencing their plan to dominate the entire country by military force, and at an incredibly high cost to Syria's people and infrastructure. This is, in effect, a broadening of the "surrender or die" strategy that the government and its allies have been effectively wielding against besieged communities to the national level. The temporary placation of other opposition-controlled areas through the "de-escalation zone" agreement has allowed the government and its allies to launch this final assault on Eastern Ghouta.

The Syrian government's pattern of escalation, pushing besieged enclaves to the point of collapse in order to force a bloody surrender, has been well established. This means that after Eastern Ghouta has met its end, the other "de-escalation zones" and the Southern Damascus Suburbs will eventually meet the same fate. Knowing that the Syrian government may next set its sights on these areas, international stakeholders should begin taking pre-emptive measures now to try and avert yet another man-made humanitarian catastrophe.

207 Amnesty International, "Syria: 'We Leave or we Die': Forced Displacement Under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements," 13 November 2017, <[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)>.

The UN OCHA reporting on besieged areas, which is included in the UN Secretary General's Monthly report to the Security Council, has improved in terms of accuracy since Siege Watch began, but is still falling short of providing a true picture of the problem. Parts of northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs are not recognized as besieged by UN OCHA despite meeting their own definition of besieged.<sup>208</sup> This is particularly clear in the case of Hajar al-Aswad, which ISIS governs as one contiguous area of control along with Yarmouk in the Southern Damascus Suburbs. These two neighborhoods are connected and face the exact same access restrictions, yet inexplicably, Yarmouk is listed as besieged while Hajar al-Aswad is not.

The nature of the discrepancies and unexplained changes in the figures – for example the designation of Hajar al-Aswad in late 2016 and reversal several months later – suggests that some of the designation decisions are guided by political sensitivities instead of objective assessments. This failure to acknowledge the complete reality on the ground is also 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. When the UN's assessments are incomplete, there is a real risk that alarm bells will not ring quickly or loudly enough to address emerging crisis, and that some long-besieged communities are not being prioritized for aid delivery.

Northern Homs, which is not designated as besieged by the UN, is nearing a clear turning point. This message was sent to northern Homs citizens at the end of January when threats were issued to end the de-escalation zone were accompanied with a closure of the main Dar al-Kabira checkpoint and an escalation of attacks from pro-government forces. In February, after the end of the reporting period, the local negotiating committee called on Turkey to install monitoring points in line with the terms of the initial de-escalation agreement reached at Astana.<sup>209</sup> The international community should take this risk seriously and work towards the deployment of third party observers. It is critical for international stakeholders to take an active role, using their political capital to steer this scenario in northern Homs towards gradual de-escalation to prevent it from becoming a future Eastern Aleppo. The same can be said for the Southern Damascus Suburbs. International actors that are not a party to the conflict should step in and take an active role in monitoring this enclave to prevent a future escalation.

Ongoing human rights violations by the Assad government have similarly not received sufficient consideration from UN agencies and humanitarian actors. Post-surrender does not mean post-conflict. The Syrian government has used post-surrender scenarios to reward supporters while punishing others through tactics such as property confiscation, detention, and preventing return altogether.<sup>210</sup> This is a continuation of the war through different means. In post-surrender areas where the Syrian government continues to present a direct safety threat to civilians and intentionally prevents return, international investments in rehabilitating and rebuilding support this strategy of continued abuse. In post-surrender enclaves that were besieged and subjected to the government's "surrender or die" strategy, UN agencies that are not careful may become complicit in the permanent marginalization of forcibly displaced communities. Failing to grasp

208 UN OCHA, "2015 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," November 2014.

209 Nedaa Syria, "هيئة المفارص في ريف حمص الشمالي تدعو تركيا لتثبيت نقاط مراقبة لخفض التصعيد," 15 February 2018, <<http://www.nedaa-sy.com>>.

210 REACH Initiative, "Community Profiles: Truce Community Trends Analysis Syria - 2016 & 2017," January 2018, <[www.reachresourcecentre.info/](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/)>.

this dynamic, and to factor it into rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, will perpetuate the regional humanitarian crisis by leaving the displaced behind, and may contribute to resurgent violence in the future as a result of new grievances.

During this ninth quarterly reporting period, Eastern Ghouta residents experienced the most extreme violence of the conflict. Much of the bombing by the Syrian government and its allies was aimed at areas where only civilians were present. Remarkably, after three months of intensified violence, pro-government forces made little discernable progress against opposition fighters on the frontline. During the same period of time over 700 civilians were killed,<sup>211</sup> and nearly every hospital in the enclave had been bombed. This stark reality leaves little doubt as to the nature of this collective punishment campaign. Civilians are not unintended casualties of the government's attacks, they are the main targets. The catastrophic infrastructure damage that the Syrian government and its allies are causing indicates that they intend to render Eastern Ghouta uninhabitable.<sup>212</sup> As Eastern Aleppo and the Old City of Homs have demonstrated, the government and its allies have neither the will nor the resources to rebuild these devastated areas on their own. They will call on UN agencies and donor countries to help implement the final step in their "surrender or die" strategy.

The most remarkable thing about the catastrophic scenario currently playing out in Eastern Ghouta is how routine it has become. We have seen these same scenes before: the starving children in Madaya, the hospitals in Darayya set afire by incendiary attacks, the skeletal remains of bombed out residential buildings in Homs City, the chemical attacks in Eastern Aleppo. Even with all of this precedent, even with the forewarning, there is a lack of political will to prevent the Syrian government and its allies from destroying Eastern Ghouta and forcibly displacing its residents, one of several crimes against besieged communities that may amount to crimes against humanity.

The Syrian government's assault on Eastern Ghouta began almost a year to the day of a final scorched earth campaign against Eastern Aleppo, and follows many of the same patterns. But Eastern Ghouta is different from Eastern Aleppo in some key ways: it has a larger population, it has been under siege for far longer, its civilians have developed more robust coping mechanisms, and there are no large opposition-controlled areas nearby to which civilians could be forcibly deported. This means that while the enclave may be able to resist this assault for longer than Eastern Aleppo did, the results will likely be more catastrophic. After years of siege, chemical attacks, bombs, detention, torture, and other abuses, the majority of the population of Eastern Ghouta has no future under the control of Bashar al-Assad. The fall of Eastern Ghouta, when it comes, may be the bloodiest saga of the war.

The international community must take immediate steps backed not just by words on paper, but by action, to avoid this scenario.

211 SN4HR, "Three-Month's Toll of the Ongoing Offensive on Eastern Ghouta," 16 February 2018, <sn4hr.org>.

212 See "Satellite-Detected Severity of Structure Damage" maps of Eastern Ghouta besieged communities produced by REACH and UNOSAT in February 2018: <www.reachresourcecentre.info>.

## Recommendations

In addition to reiterating the recommendations made in previous Siege Watch reports, PAX and TSI recommend the following measures be taken:

### Immediate Action to Protect Civilians

- ◆ Since UNSC Resolution 2401 (2018) and all prior Security Council resolutions demanding access to and protection of civilians in besieged areas remain unimplemented, the international community must take further measures. All UN member states – whether on the Security Council or not – have a responsibility to take swift action against non-compliant parties, including through more forceful measures such as a framework of escalating sanctions.
- ◆ Members of the international community must take steps to prevent forced population transfers of civilians from Eastern Ghouta under the pretense of “evacuations.” UN investigators and Secretary-General Guterres have identified similar forced displacements as war crimes when they have been inflicted as part of the Syrian government’s “surrender or die” campaign, and where civilians have no choice but to leave or die.<sup>213</sup> In light of Russia’s role in prior forced surrender negotiations and in the current fighting in Eastern Ghouta, it cannot be considered a good faith negotiator. It is therefore incumbent on other countries to step in and play a role in oversight of local negotiations to end the sieges, to ensure that any agreements comply with international humanitarian and human rights law.
- ◆ If the international community fails to rise to the gravity of this moment, and Eastern Ghouta eventually collapses under the intensity of the assault by the Syrian government and its allies, third-party monitors should be deployed immediately to monitor the pre-surrender, surrender, and post-surrender phases to prevent field executions, unlawful arrests, forced conscription of men into the Syrian army, separation of families, and other forms of abuse.
- ◆ International stakeholders should take pre-emptive measures now to avert yet another “surrender or die” campaign against the besieged communities in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs.
- ◆ UN agencies and the ICRC should take new, creative, and unconventional steps to gain access to Eastern Ghouta and other besieged communities. The current system of aid requests to the Syrian government can never be effective as long as the Syrian government continues to deny or block aid convoys and to remove critical medical supplies, as part of its collective punishment campaigns.

213 Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/36/55, 8 August 2017, <[www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)>; Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic “Special inquiry into the events in Aleppo,” A/HRC/34/64, 2 February 2017, <[www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)>; Edith M. Lederer, “UN chief: Forced evacuation of Syrians may be a war crime,” AP News, 24 April 2017, <[www.apnews.com](http://www.apnews.com)>.

## Post-Surrender Communities

- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into all communities that have been previously forced to surrender to the Syrian government, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights violations. These communities include: Madaya, Zabadani, Khan al-Shieh, Moadamiya, Wadi Barada, al-Tal, Qudsaya, al-Hameh, eastern Aleppo, Barzeh, Wadi Barada, Qaboun, al-Waer, and Beit Jinn.
- ◆ Humanitarian actors must approach post-surrender communities with the knowledge that “post-surrender” does not necessarily mean “post-conflict.” Proper conflict sensitivity measures must be put in place to ensure that recovery programming in these areas does not pay war crimes dividends to the Syrian government or contribute to deepening sectarian grievances.<sup>214</sup> Such measures may include: the creation of benchmarks of that the Syrian government must meet to ensure human rights protection, proactive outreach to displaced community members, the independent preservation of real estate records, documentation of property claims and disputes, and advocacy for the return of inhabitants with international monitoring.

## Accountability

- ◆ Members of the international community must acknowledge that the systematic and widespread war crimes as part of the “surrender or die” strategy amount to crimes against humanity and must be stopped, and those responsible must be held accountable.
- ◆ The UNSC must refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, a step called for repeatedly by UN Secretary-General Guterres,<sup>215</sup> and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein<sup>216</sup> as well as many member states.
- ◆ UN member states must provide increased political and financial support to document war crimes committed against civilians in besieged communities through the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria (IIIM) and other relevant inquiries.

<sup>214</sup> For more information on the concept of “war crimes dividends” in Syria, and the way that various UN agencies have approached post-surrender communities see: PAX and TSI, “No Return to Homs: A case study on demographic engineering in Syria,” 21 February 2017, <[www.paxforpeace.nl](http://www.paxforpeace.nl)>.

<sup>215</sup> UNSC S/2018/138, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” 20 February 2018, <[undocs.org](http://undocs.org)>.

<sup>216</sup> IIIM, “Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein,” Human Rights Council, 26 February 2018, <[www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org)>.

## UN Operations

- ◆ UN OCHA must recognize the long-besieged communities in northern Homs and the Southern Damascus Suburbs. UN OCHA should undertake a review of data collection and analysis efforts to ensure that siege designations are made based on objective criteria, independent of political considerations.
- ◆ The UN should conduct a review of its humanitarian access strategies in Syria and assess whether their interventions have benefited parties to the conflict.

## Local Structures

- ◆ International development donors should resume or increase their support of Local Councils in besieged communities with appropriate mechanisms to prevent diversion of aid and corruption. Support strategies should be adapted to bolster independent council members in situations where armed opposition groups threaten Local Council integrity. Local Councils often serve critical roles in maintaining community resilience. When international support is withdrawn in the face of these challenges it hastens the collapse of these critical grassroots governance initiatives and places civilians in increased peril.
- ◆ Similarly, international actors should increase their support to local charity organizations, media reporting networks, women's organizations, and other civil society actors in besieged areas. These actors not only help support civilians as conditions worsen, but they also serve as an important counterbalance to both the Local Council's and local armed groups by demanding accountability and stemming the growth of extremist ideology.

# Annex – Community Lists & 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.	0
	Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	2,500
	Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS +armed groups	5,000
Rural Damascus	Arbin	2	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	14,850
	Beit Sawa	2	Syrian Govt.	10,000
	Eftreis	2	Syrian Govt.	5,000
	Ein Tarma	2	Syrian Govt.	2,000
	Hamouriya	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000
	Hazzeh	2	Syrian Govt.	13,500
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	19,395
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	30,000
	Saqba	2	Syrian Govt.	22,000
	Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
	Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	16,000
	Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	23,500
	Douma	1	Syrian Govt.	132,000
	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.	1,500
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	60,000
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	2,000
	Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	6,000
Homs	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	55,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	110,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	Armed groups	} 8,100
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
<b>Total</b>				<b>714,345</b>

Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of January 2018.

### Table of Depopulated Communities

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Formerly Besieged by	Date of Capture
Rural Damascus	Qaboun + Tishreen	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2017
	Zabadani	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	April 2017
	Darayya	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	August 2016
	Hosh Nasri	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	September 2016
	Hosh al-Farah	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	July 2016
	Zebdine	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Deir Assafir	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Bzeina	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Harasta al-Qantara	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Nouleh	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	May 2016
	Marj al-Sultan	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	January 2016
	Al-Bilaliyeh	Depopulated	Syrian Govt.	January 2016

Note: This list is not exhaustive. It only includes besieged communities depopulated since Siege Watch monitoring began in late 2015. Communities such as the Old City of Homs, which were depopulated earlier, are not included.

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

<b>Governorate</b>	<b>Community/ Neighborhood</b>	<b>Siege Tier</b>	<b>Besieged by</b>	<b>Est. Current Population</b>
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	371,725
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	30,000
Daraa	Muhajja	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	25,000
Rural Damascus	Moadamiyet al-Sham	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	41,000
	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.	213,940
	Madaya + Baqeen	Watchlist	Syrian Govt. + Hezbollah	28,230
	Beit Jinn	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	3,646
Homs	Al-Waer	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	17,500
<b>Total</b>				<b>1,022,041</b>

\* Note: Siege Watch direct access to data from post-surrender communities is extremely limited. Population figures are not up-to-date and should not be used for operational planning purposes. Figures for Al-Tal and Madaya/Baqeen were updated to reflect populations in the REACH "Syria Community Profiles Update: September 2017" which can be accessed at <http://www.reachresourcecentre.info>.



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