

The fourth quarterly Siege Watch report will be published on 12 December. This is the executive summary as it will appear in the report and is available for citation.

Siege Watch 4th Quarterly Report: Executive Summary

This report is the fourth 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 August to October 2016. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that:

- Sieges in Syria are expanding, and an estimated 1,326,175 people are trapped in at least 39 besieged communities across the country.
- The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the majority of existing sieges, as well as all “Watchlist” areas, where more than 1.1 million additional Syrians face the threat of complete siege.
- Four communities – eastern Aleppo city, Madaya and Douma in Rural Damascus and al-Waer in Homs – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to prevent looming humanitarian catastrophes. These four critically imperiled areas combined contain more than half a million people.
- In contrast to the previous reporting period, the August-October period was characterized by an intensified effort by the Syrian government to force besieged communities into submission, using military escalation and coercion to forcibly displace besieged populations. These forced population transfers are war crimes.
- During the August-October reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies broke longstanding truces with opposition-controlled enclaves in Rural Damascus that had previously enjoyed relative stability.
- UN agencies in Damascus repeatedly ignored or denied calls from besieged communities to monitor government negotiations and subsequent forcible population transfers.
- Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias now play a central role in enforcing Syria's sieges and both countries participate in overseeing local forced surrender negotiations.

- Civilians in many besieged communities will face serious food insecurity and vulnerability to cold this winter as a result of the capture and destruction of agricultural land, deforestation, and severe access restrictions.
- The medical situation in besieged areas is alarming, as life-saving medical supplies continue to be excluded from most aid convoys and hospitals are being targeted at an increasing rate.
- Indiscriminate attacks and attacks against civilians, including with internationally banned landmines, cluster munitions, and chemical weapons, as well as with incendiary munitions, bunker busters, and explosive weapons with wide-area effects, are being conducted on besieged communities at an alarming rate.
- The status of detained and disappeared persons is a key issue in local truce negotiations in besieged areas but remains the most difficult issue to resolve and often derails truce implementations. There are not currently any known cases in which the Syrian government has fulfilled this clause in local agreements.
- Civilian residential areas and critical services including hospitals, schools, and Civil Defence (search and rescue) centers were both indiscriminately attacked and intentionally targeted by the Syrian government and its allies. These attacks deliberately undermine the resilience of besieged communities.

This reporting period was notable for the number of forcible transfers from besieged areas as the government and its allies have shifted tactics from “surrender or starve” to “surrender or die,” in an effort to neutralize besieged communities, alternating intense attacks with periods of negotiation. After the complete destruction and depopulation of Darayya in August, other communities faced increased pressure to capitulate. Local negotiating committees are being coerced through a mixture of threats, lies, warnings and ever-changing terms, pushing besieged residents to new depths of despair. Communities are forced to accept conditions that leave them vulnerable to abuse and to make concessions without any guarantees that the government side would comply. In al-Waer, the Syrian government extracted concessions and evacuated a number of fighters, but when it came time to implement its concessions and release information on 7,500 detainees, pro-government forces instead launched a new wave of attacks.

Darayya, in Rural Damascus, was completely destroyed during the reporting period and its entire population surrendered and was forcibly displaced. An additional community, Hosh Nasri in the Eastern Ghouta area of Rural Damascus, was captured in a military offensive and its entire population was displaced into other besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta.

Moadamiya and the two “Watchlist” communities of Qudsaya, and al-Hameh were forced to capitulate to government truce conditions under the threat of increased violence and destruction. Some of these conditions include disarming, forced transfer of part of the population, and conscription into the Syrian army for military-aged males. In return, the communities are supposed to get the return of goods and services, normalization of civilian movement, and in some cases the release of detainees. While there is potential that these developments could lead to lasting improvements for civilians, there is also fear and concern that the conditions imposed by the government have left the population extremely vulnerable to human rights abuses.

According to Siege Watch reporting sources, Russian and Iranian intermediaries are overseeing the local negotiations. In almost all recent cases, local negotiating committees have reached out to the UN agencies in Damascus to request independent monitoring of the agreements and their requests have been ignored or denied. In some instances similar requests have been made for years without result. The UN has said that they only “get involved in evacuation operations when requested by all parties.”¹ As a result, the deals reached in these besieged communities have been capitulations made under extreme duress, resulting in violations of international humanitarian law.

At the beginning of the August-October Siege Watch reporting period, UN OCHA recognized 590,200 Syrians living under siege. This total rose to 861,200 with the addition of eastern Aleppo in September. Then, shortly after the end of the Siege Watch reporting period, the UN announced that after a “comprehensive review,” it was increasing its estimate to 974,080 as of 1 November. The main cause of this increase was the recognition of 16 additional besieged locations in Rural Damascus. Nearly all of these newly added locations have been besieged since 2013 by the Syrian government forces, and Siege Watch has long advocated for their recognition. The official UN population figures for besieged areas have nearly tripled since Siege Watch began monitoring and reporting in late 2015, but even these new estimates fall short of the more than 1.3 million people trapped in besieged areas that are monitored by the project now. Most of the discrepancy is due to the fact that the UN reporting still does not recognize the besieged enclaves of northern Homs governorate, where an estimated 272,000 people have been trapped under complete siege since 2013. The sieges in the al-Houleh, al-Rastan, and Talbiseh areas of Homs all meet the UN’s official criteria for the besieged designation.

In addition to violating United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), the deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and therefore a war crime. Forced population transfers constitute another war crime committed as part of the strategy of sieges. The sieges of civilians in Syria inflame sectarian tensions, destroy communities, and undermine UN-led negotiation efforts.

A successful approach to addressing the besieged area crisis must be based in an accurate understanding of the situation on the ground. Accordingly:

- UN agencies should recognize the full scale of sieges, including the long-besieged communities of the northern Homs countryside. Failure to do so may encourage the expansion of the Syrian government’s “surrender or die” strategy, and depress international response. Donors should require transparency and independent oversight of designations moving forward to ensure that data is not politicized.

¹ Bahira al-Zarier, Osama Abu Zeid, Orion Wilcox, and Sama Mohammed, “UN declines to monitor Waer evacuation: ‘We only get involved when requested by all parties’,” 22 September 2016, <<http://syriadirect.org/>>.

- Strong, principled, and consistent leadership is required to respond to local requests for assistance in monitoring local ceasefire negotiations and ensure that they are implemented without further violations of international humanitarian law.
- Parties who continue to violate UN Security Council Resolutions and international humanitarian law (IHL) with regards to besieged areas and hinder access are committing war crimes that may amount to crimes against humanity. Concrete steps to set up accountability mechanisms are needed urgently.
- Ultimately, it is clear that humanitarian aid shipments will not solve this problem. The UN and the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) must invest more time, energy, and political will into lifting the sieges and ending this festering scourge on humanity, and shift focus away from convoy counting.

Note: Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period were from August-October 2016. Please check www.siegewatch.org for more information.

