

Siege Watch

Eighth Quarterly Report on Besieged
Areas in Syria August – October 2017



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Photo Cover: Peaceful protest in al-Marj area of Eastern Ghouta, 23 October 2017

Photo Credit: Anas Aldimashqi, Ghouta Media Center

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 or contact TSI at info@syriainstitute.org.

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Eighth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria
August – October 2017

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Acronyms

AFAD	The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency Turkey
AOG	Armed opposition group
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities
FAR	Faylaq al-Rahman
HTF	Humanitarian Task Force
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (second rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IHRL	International Human Rights Law
IRGC	Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group
JAI	Jaysh al-Islam
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
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
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SN4HR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSG	United Nations Secretary-General
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
YPG	People's Protection Units (Kurdish)

Executive Summary

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

- ◆ An estimated 744,860 people remain trapped in at least 33 besieged communities across the country and more than 1 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.
- ◆ Al-Raqqa city was first elevated to Tier 1 critically besieged during the reporting period and then removed from monitoring efforts altogether in October after it was almost entirely depopulated by the US-led Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during their campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)
- ◆ The siege of Deir Ezzor was broken by pro-government forces with heavy Russian support, and the city was subsequently reclassified as a “Watchlist” community.
- ◆ Conditions deteriorated significantly in Eastern Ghouta – the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country – due to intensified siege conditions and increased violence. In November, after the end of the eighth reporting period, all of the communities in Eastern Ghouta were elevated to Tier 1 critically besieged status for the first time. More than 420,000 people are at urgent risk.
- ◆ Two new suspected chemical attacks were recorded during the reporting period: one by pro-government forces against opposition fighters in Eastern Ghouta, and the other by ISIS against opposition fighters in the Southern Damascus Suburbs.
- ◆ There were no new surrenders or forced population transfers during the reporting period, but the conditions facing civilians in “Watchlist” communities that surrendered in prior quarters remains a concern.

During the August – October reporting period the Syrian government and its allies continued their “surrender or die” strategy. Attacks targeted civilian residential areas, hospitals, schools, and Civil Defense centers in besieged communities. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias play a central role in enforcing the Syrian government’s sieges, and both countries played a role in ongoing surrender negotiations. Humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate in besieged areas, most notably in Eastern Ghouta, which is facing a humanitarian disaster this winter as a result.

The deteriorating siege conditions in Eastern Ghouta were once again exacerbated by warring armed opposition groups (AOGs), which continued to restrict civilian movement between besieged communities. In addition to direct attacks on civil society, there were increasing reports of AOGs taking over local governance institutions in their efforts to consolidate power. Civilians protested the AOG crackdowns and the presence of a small Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) contingent in Eastern Ghouta, but with little result. The shrinking space for civil society and grassroots local governance institutions in Eastern Ghouta is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

This quarter, two sieges - Deir Ezzor and al-Raqqa - came to an end this quarter with very different results. The siege of al-Raqqa city escalated dramatically as a result of the final offensive against ISIS by the SDF and the US-led Global Coalition. Al-Raqqa was first moved from the Siege Watch “Watchlist” and classified as a Tier 1 fully besieged area in September. By the time the siege was “broken” in October, the city was in ruins and almost entirely depopulated, as a result al-Raqqa was removed from Siege Watch monitoring efforts.

The siege of Deir Ezzor by ISIS was broken in September by pro-government ground forces, which were spearheaded by an elite Russian military unit and supported by Russian airstrikes. Quickly after pro-government forces reached Deir Ezzor city, the UN responded by sending a steady stream of humanitarian aid convoys. Deir Ezzor was subsequently removed from the Siege Watch besieged list, and classified as a “Watchlist” area for continued monitoring.

The “de-escalation zones” announced earlier in the year at Astana, and a series of local agreements backed by Russia, delivered few – if any – results on the ground in besieged areas. It remains unclear whether Russia can be a credible negotiator for besieging pro-government forces, as it remains either unable or unwilling to enforce the terms of the deals announced up until this point.

The current trajectory of developments will lead to deepening humanitarian crises in besieged areas, as hundreds of thousands of civilians face suffering, loss, and forced displacement at the hands of the Syrian government, armed opposition groups, and ISIS. Eastern Ghouta is at the highest immediate risk. International community stakeholders must take real steps towards ending the sieges to avert the looming catastrophe.

Key recommendations:

- ◆ Eastern Ghouta is facing a man-made humanitarian disaster and an estimated 424,260 people are at risk. Urgent action, including increased political pressure, is needed to stop the bombardments, allow for medical evacuations, and secure the sustained entry of food and medicine. International stakeholders including the UN Secretary General, the UN Security Council, and member states, must immediately identify steps they can take to prevent Eastern Ghouta from becoming the next eastern Aleppo.
- ◆ International development donors should increase their support of Local Councils, charity organizations, media reporting networks, and other civil society actors in besieged communities. The actors serve critical roles in maintaining community resilience and stemming the growth of extremist ideology.
- ◆ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UN Habitat, and other agencies should undertake comprehensive protection analyses before beginning any early recovery initiatives in post-surrender communities in cooperation with the Syrian government. When any early recovery efforts are undertaken, these agencies should take measures to protect the housing, land, and property rights of forcibly displaced civilians.
- ◆ Since the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism was vetoed in November, it has become critical that UN member states take the lead in addressing the continued use of chemical weapons. Individual countries should support independent investigations, call for a comprehensive study of all suspected chemical attacks in Syria, and actively engage with the OPCW to identify new mechanisms for investigation and accountability.
- ◆ The US-led Coalition and its local SDF partners should undertake a comprehensive review of its civilian casualty findings from the offensive to defeat ISIS in al-Raqqa. Ex gratia redress payments should be made to the family members of Syrian civilians who were killed in US-led combat operations.

1. Introduction

This is the eighth 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 – October 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that an estimated 744,860 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,¹ as well as a growing list of ceasefire announcements, the Syrian government and armed opposition groups (AOGs) continue to besiege communities across Syria. After 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 taken no serious steps to break the sieges or even to enact punitive measures against their perpetrators.

During the August – October reporting period the Syrian government and its allies continued their "surrender or die" strategy against the long-besieged enclaves in Rural Damascus, Damascus, and Homs. The situation in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated dramatically as pro-government forces cut the flow of all supplies and intensified their military assault. By the end of October conditions for nearly 425,000 civilians trapped in Eastern Ghouta were critical, with a humanitarian disaster looming. Accordingly, Siege Watch raised the siege level for all communities in Eastern Ghouta to Tier 1 in November to reflect the severity of the situation.

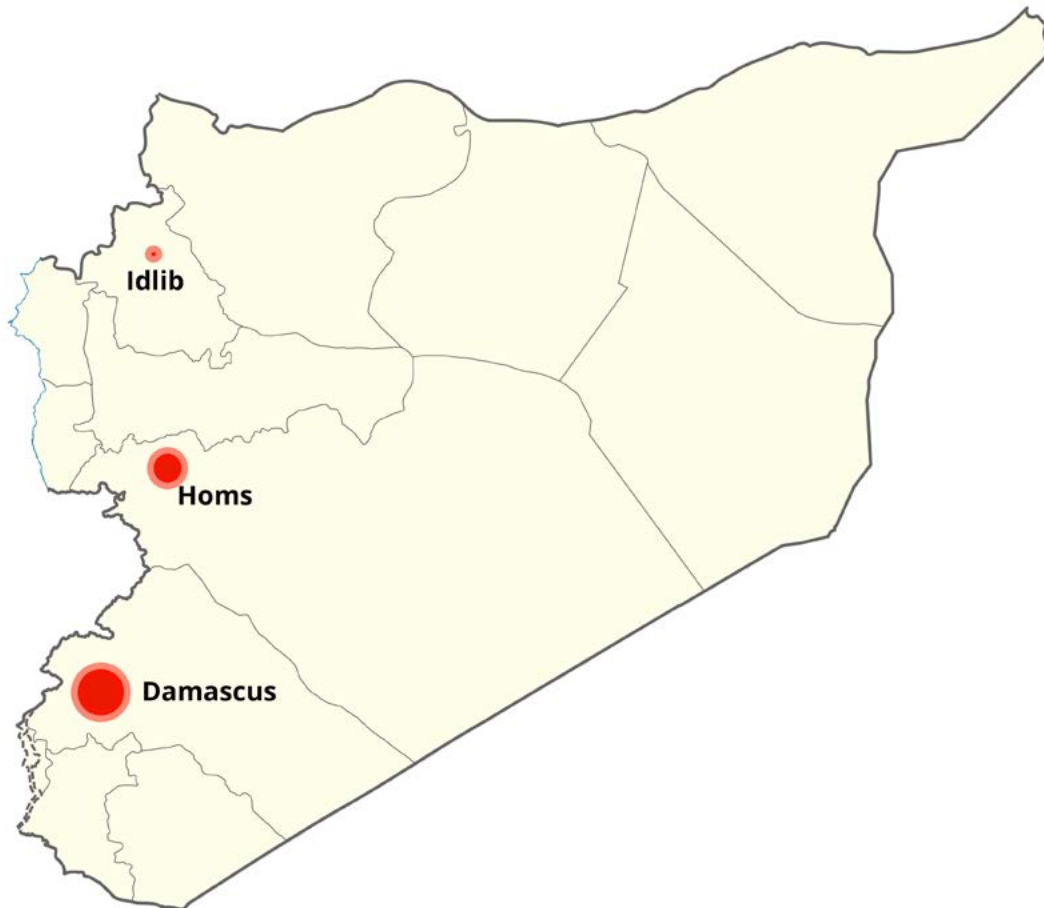
During the reporting period, al-Raqqa city was moved from the "Watchlist" to the besieged list as a Tier 1 area, and was then removed from project monitoring efforts entirely. These rapid classification changes reflected the speed and the severity of the anti-ISIS offensive by the US-led Coalition and their SDF partners. Reports from al-Raqqa suggested that the SDF and US-led Coalition violated international humanitarian law with indiscriminate attacks on hospitals, wells, and homes, trapping thousands of civilians in conditions reminiscent of the final offensive against Eastern Aleppo in late 2016.

The siege of Deir Ezzor by ISIS was broken in September by pro-government ground forces,

¹ UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), 2258 (2015), 2268 (2016), and 2332 (2016).

Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



which were spearheaded by an elite Russian military unit and supported by Russian airstrikes. Quickly after pro-government forces reached Deir Ezzor city, the UN responded by sending a steady stream of humanitarian aid convoys.

Civilians in communities that were forced to surrender to government forces in prior reporting periods have continued to suffer abuses and access restrictions. Unlike Deir Ezzor, in most post-surrender communities, government forces continue to impose restrictions on international aid and civilian movement. People in these communities cannot speak freely for fear of retribution by pro-government forces, since communications are closely monitored, and too little attention is being paid to their fate.

Until the international community increases political pressure on besieging forces, and identifies other steps they can take to end the sieges, the “surrender or die” pattern of violence, destruction, and forced population transfers will be repeated until all of the remaining besieged and “Watchlist” communities are conquered.

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

For details on project methodology, definitions, and challenges, please see <http://siegewatch.org>.

General Developments

During the August – October reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies – emboldened by the success of their “surrender or die” strategy – continued their systematic campaign to force besieged and “Watchlist” communities to surrender.

With the removal of al-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor from the list of besieged communities during the reporting period, Eastern Ghouta and northern Homs are the largest remaining besieged enclaves in the country, with a combined total of more than 650,000 people. Despite Russian-led negotiation efforts and even the announcement of de-escalation deals, violence escalated in both enclaves towards the end of the reporting period.

The pro-government offensive on the Jobar/Ein Tarma front of Eastern Ghouta that began over the summer continued and intensive aerial and ground attacks against other parts of the besieged enclave renewed after a brief pause. In addition to the escalating violence, the quarter brought a steep decline in humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta as a result of the complete cutoff of commercial access at al-Wafideen checkpoint. With supplies dwindling and the onset of winter, Eastern Ghouta is facing a humanitarian catastrophe unless international action is taken to de-escalate the violence and break the siege.

Local negotiations in the besieged Southern Suburbs of Damascus similarly failed to bring about notable progress, and in fact contributed to elevated levels of political, military, and humanitarian turmoil throughout the reporting period.

The offensive against al-Raqqa city by the SDF and US-led Coalition peaked during the reporting period. As a result of the violent scorched earth campaign and complete access cut, al-Raqqa city was classified as a Tier 1 besieged area in September and then ultimately removed from Siege Watch monitoring efforts in October as the defeat of ISIS came only with the nearly complete destruction and depopulation of the city. The US-led Coalition attacks destroyed medical facilities, wells, and other civilian infrastructure, razing parts of the city to the ground. Trapped ISIS fighters held thousands of civilians as human shields and monopolized what little water and medical resources remained. Reports from Siege Watch contacts, local reporting networks, and third party monitors all indicate that the number of civilian casualties was far higher than acknowledged by the US-led Coalition.

In September the siege of Deir Ezzor city by ISIS was broken by pro-government forces with the support of Russian airstrikes and elite ground units. Deir Ezzor was subsequently moved to the Siege Watch “Watchlist.” Shortly after pro-government forces reached the besieged neighborhoods, UN agencies began to send a steady stream of humanitarian aid convoys to the city. This type of response has not been witnessed in any other post-siege community.

Al-Tal, Qudsaya, al-Hameh, Wadi Barada, Khan al-Shieh, Barzeh, Moadamiya, Madaya, al-Waer and Eastern Aleppo all remained on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” after surrendering to government forces and submitting to forced population transfer deals in previous reporting periods. The Siege Watch project’s visibility into these communities dropped off dramatically following the surrender deals in most cases, as all Siege Watch contacts were among those forcibly transferred to northern Syria. Civilians who stayed behind in these communities remain cloaked under a barrier of fear, unable to speak freely for fear of retribution by government and militias.

The limited data obtained by Siege Watch about these post-surrender communities suggests that they face a range of outcomes after pro-government forces reassert control. While the availability of goods and services has improved in all post-surrender communities, most are still subject to some types of access and movement restrictions. In the worst cases such as Wadi Barada, there are continuing reports of detentions, property grabs, and other abuses happening out of sight of the international community and out of reach of most humanitarian actors.

Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib – the only opposition-besieged communities in the country – remained under siege during the reporting period with no notable developments. Earlier in the year it appeared that these sieges would come to an end when Madaya and Zabadani surrendered under the “Four Towns Agreement,” but over 8,000 people remained in the communities and there have been no updates since. The “Four Towns Agreement” was a complex and opaque series of negotiations with armed groups led by Iran and Qatar.

“They will kill a lot of people and the world will just watch“

– Siege Watch contact in Madyara, November 17

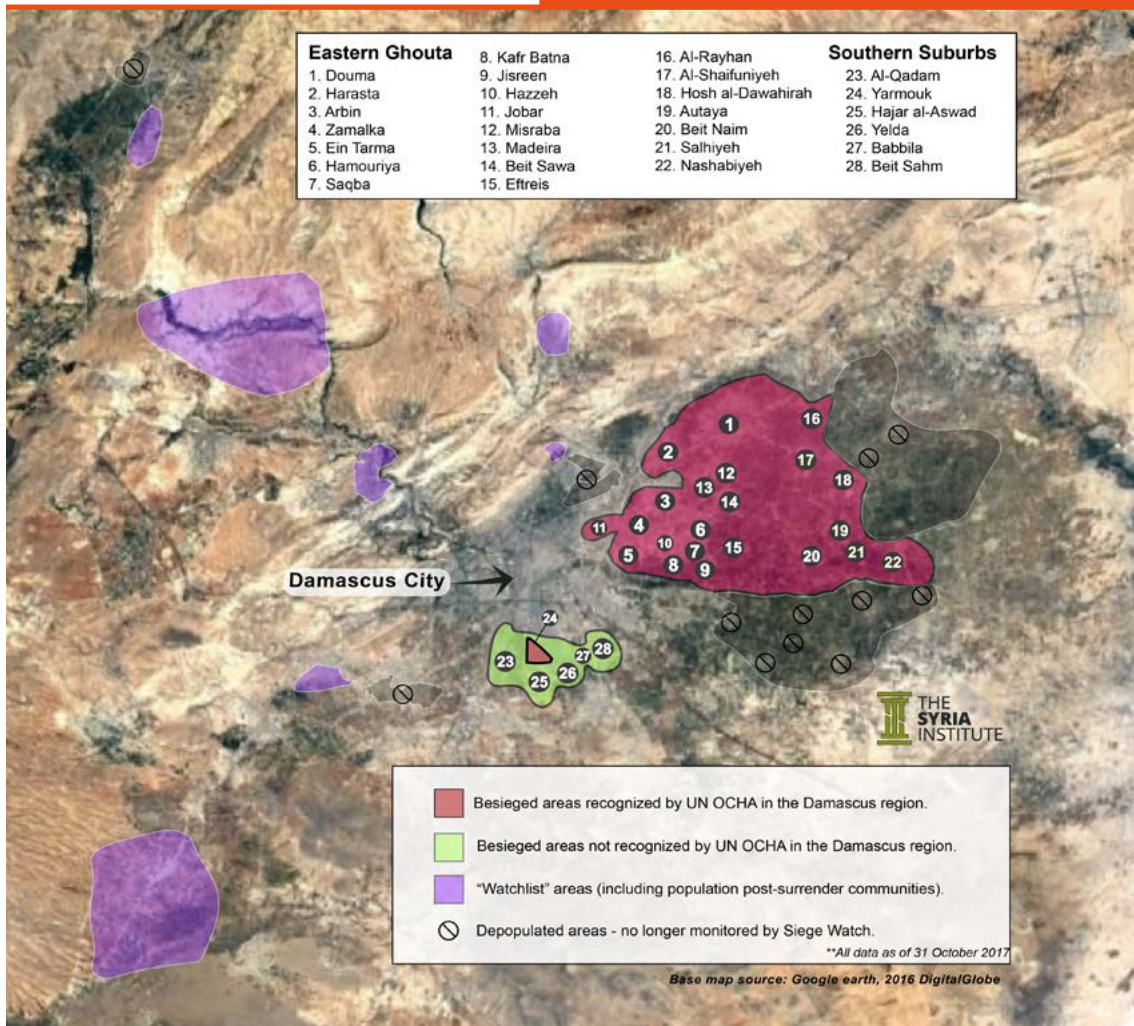
Siege Watch contacts in besieged communities have lost all faith in the international community, and hold no hopes for the success of ongoing negotiations in Geneva or Astana. Iranian and Russian initiatives are viewed with extreme skepticism by many in areas besieged by the Syrian government, since both countries are supporters of the government and are active contributors to the sieges and forced surrenders.

2. Besieged Community Overview

Damascus Area

Map 2:

Besieged Communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus



EASTERN GHOUTA & JOBAR

Table 1:
Eastern Ghouta & Damascus Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Eastern Ghouta (22 communities)	Mainly 2*	Syrian Govt.	424,260

*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:

The poor humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar deteriorated further during the reporting period and violence levels escalated. Population estimate adjustments were made to several besieged communities. No Tier levels were changed. *[Note: In November, after the end of the eighth reporting period, all of Eastern Ghouta was raised to Tier 1 due to the rapidly deteriorating conditions.]*

Details:

Despite the announcement of new ceasefire agreements in July and August, violence in Eastern Ghouta never completely paused, and in fact escalated throughout the August – October reporting period. By late September an aerial bombardment campaign had resumed, and the use of internationally prohibited cluster munitions and chemical agents were reported. Schools, medical centers, and first responders were repeatedly and systematically targeted in attacks by pro-government forces. The Syrian government cut off all remaining commercial access to Eastern Ghouta, sparking an urgent humanitarian crisis that grew throughout the reporting period as food and medical supplies dwindled. Armed opposition groups continued to fight among each other and became increasingly bold in their crackdowns on civil society, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis facing civilians.

Military and Political

Near the start of the reporting period, pro-government attacks focused largely on Jobar and the adjacent Ein Tarma community as the offensive launched in June continued. Jobar is the only remaining opposition-held neighborhood of Damascus city and is a strategic frontline. Attacks on the rest of Eastern Ghouta continued but at a relatively low level, using only ground-based artillery and missile fire. Airstrikes had paused in July with the “reduction of hostilities” agreement negotiated in Cairo between the armed group Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) and Russia. On 18 August, the armed group Faylaq al Rahman (FAR) announced that it too had signed a similar agreement with Russia. With this FAR announcement most of Eastern Ghouta would hypothetically be covered by a ceasefire and humanitarian crossings would open.² But in a now familiar pattern, the agreements failed to achieve the desired results.

² Damascus Capital Voice, “عُرف على بنود الاتفاق بين روسيا وفيلق الرحمن حول الغوطة الشرقية,” 21 August 2017, <damascusv.com>.



Cultural center in Jobar damaged in shelling 17 August 2017.

Notable attacks and milestones in the military situation during the reporting period:

- ◆ 1 August – The Local Council (LC) in Ein Tarma declared the town a disaster area as a result of a month of intense bombardment during the government's military campaign.³ On 4 August the LC announced a suspension of all services after Ein Tarma was hit with more than 50 missiles in one day.
- ◆ 9 August – Five civilians were killed and several wounded in government shelling that targeted a market in Kafr Batna.⁴ That same day, JAI and the Syrian government completed a small prisoner exchange.⁵
- ◆ 16-18 August – Two unconfirmed reports of a toxic substance suspected to be chlorine being deployed against Faylaq al-Rahman (FAR) fighters on the frontlines in Ein Tarma and Jobar, where FAR was fending off the advance of pro-government forces with a series of massive tunnel bombs. On 17 August, the Jobar Local Council issued a public distress call begging the UN to stop the bombardment.⁶ This came amidst deadly shelling and surface-to-surface missile attacks across the besieged Eastern Ghouta enclave. On 18

³ Ein Tarma Media Center, Facebook post, 1 August 2017, <bit.ly/2kd9JXC>.

⁴ Ghouta GMC, YouTube video, "كيف النظام السوري يكثف القصف المدفعي عندما يرتكب المجزرة لحظة إسعاف المصابين في كفرطنا," 9 August 2017, <bit.ly/2vFAQPe>.

⁵ Walid Al-Ashqar, "بالفيديو... جيش الإسلام) يبرم صفقة تبادل أسرى مع قوات النظام," All4Syria, 9 August 2017, <all4syria.info>.

⁶ Jobar News YouTube video, "اطلق المجلس المحلي لحي جوبار بدمشق نداء استغاثة نالده فيه الأمم المتحدة لوقف الحملة على المدنيين," 17 August 2017, <bit.ly/2uTE2mz>.



Damaged ambulance in Madyara. 11 September 2017. Source: Eastern Ghouta Unified Medical Bureau



Destroyed rehabilitation center in Douma after airstrike. 26 September 2017. Source: Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee

August FAR reportedly signed an agreement with Russia similar to the one signed by JAI. It was supposed to bring the devastating bombardment of Jobar to a halt within hours,⁷ but clashes and missiles strikes in the neighborhood continued after the signing of the agreement.

- ◆ 24 August – A large prisoner exchange took place between JAI and the Syrian government. Touted as the largest exchange ever, the government released 36 detainees and JAI released 11 Syrian army soldiers.⁸ The 36 people released by the government had been detained during the forced displacement of Barzeh and Qaboun earlier in the year. The group was made up of 14 children, 10 women, and 12 men.
- ◆ 5 September – Six people were killed in pro-government shelling on the area of Misraba, including the head of the Rif Dimashq Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) force.⁹
- ◆ 11 September – An ambulance in Madyara was taken out of service after being hit by shelling from pro-government forces.
- ◆ 14 September – Two hospitals were attacked and four health workers killed.¹⁰
- ◆ 25 September – Pro-government forces launched a new offensive on the eastern front of Eastern Ghouta, attempting to advance in the al-Rayhan and Hosh al-Dawahira area, while continuing battles on the western front near Jobar.¹¹ A few days later, FAR launched a series of ambushes against advancing pro-government forces near Ein Tarma, killing dozens of soldiers.¹²
- ◆ 26 September – Douma was targeted with pro-government airstrikes for the first time since the JAI-Russia deal was announced in July. Reports from the ground indicate Russian jets were responsible for the strikes, which targeted and destroyed a rehabilitation center for people with disabilities. Four people were killed, including two disabled patients and a nurse.¹³
- ◆ 29 September – The bombing campaign escalated further, with the first airstrikes on besieged Jobar neighborhood since the agreement between FAR and Russia was announced in August. Artillery shelling killed nine people in

7 @SiegeWatch Tweet, 18 August 2017, <bit.ly/2AiE5Ob>.

8 Walid Al-Ashqar, "جيش الإسلام يُجري أكبر صفقة تبادل للأسرى في الغوطة الشرقية", All4Syria, 24 August 2017, <all4syria.info>.

9 Syria Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 5 September 2017, <bit.ly/2ByTCaU>.

10 @MhdKatoub Tweet, 14 September 2017, <bit.ly/2i2NJu7>.

11 RevoSpring, "قوات الأسد تخرج اتفاق خفض التصعيد في الغوطة", 25 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>

12 Moaz Abu Yazin, "ثلاثة كمانن لفيلق الرحمن تحصد أرواح العشرات من الفرقة الرابعة", Jobar News, 28 September 2017, <jobarnews.net>.

13 Douma Revolution, Facebook post, 26 September 2017, <bit.ly/2i4aC0l>; @SiegeWatch Tweet, 26 September 2017, <bit.ly/2j3P7h7>;

@MhdKatoub Tweet, 25 September 2017, <bit.ly/2j54khH>.

Beit Sawa, including five children.¹⁴ Three civilians including two young brothers were killed by shelling in Douma.¹⁵ Three were killed in Ein Tarma,¹⁶ two in Misraba,¹⁷ one in Saqba,¹⁸ and many more were injured.

- ◆ 6 October – Pro-government airstrikes targeted the al-Shifa medical center in Douma, taking it out of service.¹⁹
- ◆ 16 October – A school in Kafr Batna was targeted by government artillery shelling, killing a student and a teacher.²⁰ The same day, a child and her grandmother were killed in an airstrike on the town of Hazzeh.²¹
- ◆ 26 October – Shelling in Douma killed eight civilians and injured more than ten others.²²
- ◆ 29 October – There was escalated shelling against several towns in Eastern Ghouta, one day before the arrival of a UN humanitarian aid convoy (Note: intensified attacks by pro-government forces commonly proceed and follow international aid convoys in Ghouta on the rare occasions when they are allowed to proceed). Nine civilians were killed, including two journalists, and more than a dozen wounded when pro-government forces shelled a market in Hamouriya.²³ In Kafr Batna, mortar shells targeted a school, injuring several students and leading to the cancellation of classes throughout the city the next day.²⁴ In Saqba shelling killed three people – including one child on his way home from school – and injured more than ten others.²⁵
- ◆ 31 October – The final day of the reporting period was a bloody one, as pro-government bombardments killed approximately 12 people in Eastern Ghouta – more than half of whom were children. Seven people were killed in shelling

14 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2jzNYgJ>; Syria Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2yytA5B>.

15 @SCDrifdimashq Tweet, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2zSjRb2>.

16 Douma Revolution, Facebook post, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2i3OcMu>.

17 @SCDrifdimashq Tweet, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2zCi89O>.

18 Saqba City Martyrs, Facebook post, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2AhuffE>.

19 Unified Medical Office in Eastern Ghouta, Facebook post, 7 October 2017, <bit.ly/2iq59EP>.

20 Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 16 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AMzaGk>.

21 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 16 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BzUqfA>.

22 Douma Revolution, Facebook post, 26 October 2017, <bit.ly/2i4Rlfk>; Douma Medical, "أكثر من عشرة جرحى وستة شهداء نتيجة القصف الذي طال مدينة"، 26 October 2017, <doumamedical.com>.

23 Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BoYXkr>; Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2ziyecm>.

24 Local Council of Kafarbatna City, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BoIX1D>; Mouaz Harbottle, GMC YouTube video, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2ziwOOO>; Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zjuaZc>.

25 Local Revolutionary Council in Saqba City, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zAS3rB>.



A child injured in shelling in Harasta. 31 October 2017. Source: Syrian Civil Defense – Rif Dimashq



Victims of a school shelling in Jisreen. 31 October 2017. Source: Jisreen Media Office

that targeted a school in Jisreen – six students and one teacher.²⁶ Mortar shells hit civilian homes and a school in Misraba, killing four people, two of whom were children.²⁷ Artillery shelling in Harasta wounded nine civilians and caused the evacuation of a school.²⁸

Civil activists tried to draw attention to the deteriorating conditions in Eastern Ghouta, holding protests throughout the reporting period. On 14 October, people in Eastern Ghouta joined those in other opposition held areas across the country to participate in large anti-Assad protests as part of the “Day of Rage.” On 23 October media activists organized a campaign calling on the end of the siege that included protests and Tweetstorm with the hashtag #AssadBesiegesGhouta.²⁹ These efforts drew little if any response from international actors.

Armed Opposition Groups

Armed group infighting continued throughout the August – October reporting period. The two strongest armed opposition groups in the area – Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) and Faylaq al-Rahman (FAR), divided Eastern Ghouta into the “Douma Sector” controlled by JAI and the “Middle Sector” controlled by FAR. Despite announcing that they had reached an agreement to end the infighting at the start of August,³⁰ these groups continued their disputes throughout the reporting period, clashing openly several times and trading public threats and accusations.³¹

Both JAI and FAR increased their crackdowns on civil society in Eastern Ghouta by suppressing media organization and NGOs, undermining the integrity of Local Councils. Both groups exacerbated the worsening humanitarian crisis by closing checkpoints and restricting movement between their respective areas of control. On several occasions, civilians were injured or killed after being caught in the crossfire in clashes between the two groups.

On 13 August, a mob of around 100 men associated with JAI raided the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), assaulting staff and vandalizing the office.³² The VDC is a Douma-based NGO that has done important human rights documentation work since early in the conflict. JAI is widely believed to be responsible for the disappearance of four of its founders, including the well-known human rights lawyer Razan Zeitouneh, in 2013. The VDC office was forced to close after the August JAI raid and has not resumed operations since.

26 Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2i36nC7>; Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, “31-10-2017 إخلاء أطفال مصابين جراء قصف منفعي لقوات النظام على إحدى المدارس في بلدة جسرين 31-10-2017”, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zm54J7>.

27 Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, “31-10-2017 إخلاء الشهداء والجرحى بعد قصف بقذائف الهاون على الأحياء السكنية في بلدة #مسرابا 31-10-2017”, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zlsxdl>; Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2i3TBTW>.

28 Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, YouTube video, “31-10-2017 إصابات عديدة بينهم أطفال نتيجة القصف المدفعي الذي تعرضت له مدينة حرسنا”, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AmvUP3>; Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AnKB4y>.

29 AssadBesiegesGhouta activist Google site, 23 October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2A0u8pV>; Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 23 October 2017, <bit.ly/2nju0vG>.

30 All4Syria, “(جيش الإسلام) و (فيلق الرحمن) يتفقان على حل الخلافات بينهما وهذه التفاصيل”, All4Syria, 8 August 2017, <all4syria.info>.

31 Walid Al-Ashqar, “اشتباكات متجددة بين فيلق الرحمن وجيش الإسلام في غوطة دمشق”, All4Syria, 17 August 2017, <all4syria.info>; Walid Al-Ashqar

“(فيلق الرحمن): (جيش الإسلام) هاجم مقرنا لا مواقع (النصرة)”, Walid Al-Ashqar “(جيش الإسلام) هاجم مقرنا لا مواقع (النصرة)”, All4Syria, 17 August 2017, <all4syria.info>; Walid Al-Ashqar “(جيش الإسلام) هاجم مقرنا لا مواقع (النصرة)”, All4Syria, 17 August 2017, <all4syria.info>;

All4Syria, 8 August 2017, <all4syria.info>; Walid Al-Ashqar “(جيش الإسلام) يمهل (فيلق الرحمن) 24 ساعة”, All4Syria, 11 September 2017, <all4syria.info>;

Walid Al-Ashqar, “(جيش الإسلام) يمهل (فيلق الرحمن) 24 ساعة”, All4Syria, 11 September 2017, <all4syria.info>; Walid Al-Ashqar, “بيان (جيش الإسلام) مشهّد جديد من الانتقام والمزاودة الإعلامية”, All4Syria, 11 September 2017, <all4syria.info>.

32 Violations Documentation Center in Syria, “New Attack on the VDC Office in Duma”, 13 August 2017, <vdc-sy.net>.



Day of Rage protest in Arbin. 14 October 2017. Source: Unified Arbin Media Office



Day of Rage rally in Douma. 14 October 2017. Source: Douma Coordinating Committee

On 22 August JAI detained a young media activist named Munib Abu Taim who worked for the Damascus Media Center, raiding his home and equipment. Munib was eventually released 18 days later without explanation.³³ On 28 September JAI fired on a group of civilians, primarily farmers, who were protesting for the removal of checkpoints between Beit Sawa and Hamouriya, wounding two people.³⁴

Faylaq al-Rahman (FAR) also increased its crackdowns on civil society during the reporting period, although to a lesser extent than JAI. In early October the group attacked a warehouse in Hazzeh that stored humanitarian aid for a number of charity organizations, arresting the director of the aid coordinating group and several staff members, as well as confiscating supplies and assets.³⁵ FAR claimed the aid group was corrupt and was hoarding supplies and driving up prices in Eastern Ghouta.³⁶

On 27 October, FAR detained two media activists with the Ghouta Media Center reporting network, releasing them a day later without explanation.³⁷

Although Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Eastern Ghouta was reduced to just a few small pockets by JAI attacks over the summer, the presence of the extremist group in Eastern Ghouta continued to anger civilians, and was a key source of tension between the other armed groups. On 16-17 September a civilian and four fighters were killed and several more injured in skirmishes between FAR and HTS in Kafr Batna.³⁸ FAR fighters reportedly stepped in to defend civilians after HTS members tried to take over their homes.³⁹ Civilians and Local Councils repeated public calls and protests for HTS to dissolve or be removed from Eastern Ghouta throughout the reporting period.⁴⁰

There were also clashes between FAR and Ahrar al-Sham early in the reporting period, before the two groups reached an accord to end the conflict on 10 August.⁴¹ Ahrar al-Sham is based in Harasta, and its area of influence overlaps with FAR in nearby frontline areas.

Local Governance

Local Councils (LCs) continue to be the key service providers in most besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta and have gained a meaningful degree of legitimacy over the years by holding regular elections. Beyond providing local autonomy and representation, the local and provincial councils serve critical resilience functions for besieged civilians. For example during the reporting period, the Rural Damascus Provincial Council worked to rehabilitate damaged buildings in order to provide shelter for the tens of thousands of internally displaced persons in

33 Almodon Online, "بشوريا: جيش الإسلام يطلق سراح الناشط منيب أبو تيم", 11 September 2017, <almodon.com>.

34 SMART News Agency, YouTube video, "جريحان بإطلاق نار من جيش الإسلام على مظاهرة في الغوطة الشرقية", 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2j4m6Sk>; Moaz Abu Yazin, "حمورية| مظاهرة حاشدة تتوجه إلى الحواجز العسكرية مطالبةً بإزالتها.. وجيش الإسلام يطلق النار ويوقع مصائب", Jobar News, 28 September 2017, <jobarnews.net>.

35 Mohammad Ksah, "فيلق الرحمن(يُبَرر مصادرتة لمستودع إغاثي في الغوطة الشرقية)", All4Syria, 13 October 2017, <all4syria.info>.

36 @TNTranslations Tweet, English translation of statement, 12 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AuM4Z2>.

37 Mohammad Ksah, "فيلق الرحمن يُطلق سراح اثنين من نشطاء الغوطة", All4Syria, 28 October 2017, <all4syria.info>.

38 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 17 September 2017, <bit.ly/2BoUoGB>.

39 Abd Al-Shami, "قتلى حصيلة ضحايا الاقتتال الداخلي في كفر بطننا بالغوطة الشرقية 5", All4Syria, 17 September 2017, <all4syria.info>.

40 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 17 September 2017, <bit.ly/2BAAdZ7w>; @SiegeWatch Tweet, 4 August 2017, <bit.ly/2AL3Jwb>; Douma Revolution, Facebook post, 31 August 2017, <bit.ly/2AtXjkE>.

41 Harasta City, Facebook post, 10 August 2017, <bit.ly/2AttYHa>.



Jisreen local council election. 7 October 2017.

Eastern Ghouta.⁴² These buildings will save lives this coming winter as the weather worsens. LCs have also subsidized the costs of essential goods such as bread, and served as conduits for the distribution of charitable humanitarian assistance.

At the same time, the democratic nature of some of Eastern Ghouta's LCs is being undermined by power hungry armed groups, most notably Jaysh al-Islam (JAI). In Douma, the seat of JAI's power, the group reportedly completed a takeover of the Douma Local Council – previously a shining example of effective grassroots local governance – which it had been slowly implementing for the past year. Independent members of the council were forced out through threats and harassment by JAI's sharia police force. JAI-affiliated council members pushed through new bylaws and election procedures that would stifle opposition and guarantee their permanent control. JAI security services in Douma increasingly control all aspects of life in the besieged city.

In addition to giving JAI more freedom to crack down on civil society institutions, JAI's local governance coup in Douma has reportedly led to the cutoff of foreign support from international donors like USAID. Siege Watch contacts report that JAI has been implementing similar takeovers of other LCs in its area of control such as Hosh al-Dawahira, Hosh Nasri, and Shaifuniya.

While Faylaq al-Rahman (FAR) has not reached the same level of 'warlordism' as JAI, it is heading in that direction. Reportedly FAR began to mimic JAI's strategy in the spring of 2017, exerting more and more influence over the Local Councils in towns under its area of control.

42 Khalid Al-Rifai, "محافظة ريف دمشق تُطلق مشروعاً لإيواء مهجري الغوطة الشرقية", All4Syria, 21 September 2017, <all4syria.info>.

While the larger communities with stronger councils such as those of Saqba and Jisreen have reportedly managed to resist FAR's efforts thus far, it is a troubling sign of things to come.

Contacts noted that the Rural Damascus Provincial Council remained civilian-led and democratic, but there were reports of efforts by JAI to influence candidates and exert more control over the council in elections that it held elections at the end of October.

Humanitarian

Both the July de-escalation agreement between Jaysh al-Islam and Russia and the August agreement between Faylaq al-Rahman and Russia failed to deliver on promises of humanitarian access and medical evacuations for Eastern Ghouta. Prices for many goods reached all-time highs during the reporting period as a result of the halt of government-sanctioned trade at al-Wafideen checkpoint in September. Prices were already elevated in Eastern Ghouta due to the government's capture of smuggling tunnels in Barzeh and Qaboun earlier in the year. These tunnels had previously played a critical role in Eastern Ghouta, particularly in supporting the beleaguered medical sector by letting in a trickle of medical supplies (not allowed in via al-Wafideen checkpoint and usually removed from UN aid convoys) and allowing some patients in need of urgent medical care to seek treatment in hospitals in Damascus.

The closure of al-Wafideen led prices of basic goods like seeds, grain, and sugar – which used to enter in limited quantities and at exaggerated prices – to skyrocket to some of the highest prices ever recorded in Eastern Ghouta. At one point prices for bread in Douma were recorded as high as 48x the price in Damascus city nearby.⁴³ By the end of October, some products that used to be available in limited quantities such as eggs and potatoes could no longer be found at all. Even when items were available in markets, many civilians could not afford them as the economy of Eastern Ghouta has essentially collapsed and more than 80% of the population is unemployed. Most people in the besieged area rely on charity organizations to meet their basic needs, but anecdotal evidence indicates that even private charity assistance may be in decline.

Three UN interagency convoys reached Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period. The amount of aid in these convoys was insufficient to meet the needs of the population, supplying only a portion of the civilians in targeted communities with food for a few weeks at most. As usual, the majority of medical aid was removed from all three convoys by government forces.

- ◆ 17 August – A 48-vehicle interagency humanitarian aid convoy reached Douma with food and medical aid for Douma and the rural Shaifuniya and Hosh al-Dawahira areas of Eastern Ghouta.⁴⁴ The UN team accompanying the aid convoy met with Local Council leaders and assessed the area's needs. The convoy contained supplies for approximately 35,000 beneficiaries. This was less than half of the amount originally requested by the UN to the Syrian government, and 143,000 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government forces.⁴⁵ The aid was not enough for a quarter of the civilians in

⁴³ Siege Watch survey respondent.

⁴⁴ Douma Revolution, Facebook post, 17 August 2017, <bit.ly/2i2hRpA>.

⁴⁵ UN Security Council S/2017/794, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 21 September 2017, <undocs.org>.



Humanitarian aid is offloaded in Douma. 18 August 2017



UN, SARC, and ICRC officials meet with local leaders during an aid delivery in Harasta. 23 September 2017. Source: Harasta LC



Caption: Protestors greeted UN aid convoy to Kafr Batna. 30 October 2017. Source: Firas Abdullah

the towns it reached and only a fraction of the entire besieged population in Eastern Ghouta.

- ◆ 23 September – A 42-vehicle interagency humanitarian aid convoy reached Harasta with supplies for Harasta, Misraba, and Madyara. The food aid was sufficient for around 25,000 people – less than half of the population in the targeted towns – for several weeks. According to the UN report, 21,160 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government authorities.⁴⁶
- ◆ 30 October – A 49-vehicle interagency humanitarian aid convoy reached the Kafr Batna and Saqba area. The convoy carried food aid for 40,000 people, less than half of the 93,000 requested by UN OCHA to the Syrian government and enough to meet the needs of the local population for little more than a week. According to the UN, 5,720 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by pro-government forces.⁴⁷ The convoy was met with large protests, as residents demanded that the UN take action to end the siege.

46 UN Security Council S/2017/902, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 25 October 2017, <undocs.org>.

47 UN Security Council S/2017/982, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 16 November 2017, <undocs.org>.



Protestors greeted a UN aid convoy to Kafr Batna. 30 October 2017. Source: Firas Abdullah

Overall the level of aid to reach Eastern Ghouta was low and insufficient to meet the needs of the population. Over the August-October reporting period, the rising malnutrition and shrinking stocks of medical supplies led to a number of potentially preventable deaths. A partial list of these siege victims is as follows:

- ◆ 11 August – Six-month old Kenan died of leukemia. According to medical staff Kenan would have had a high chance of survival with treatment, but his request for emergency evacuation was not granted.⁴⁸
- ◆ 15 August – A child named Wissam died of stomach cancer in Eastern Ghouta. Wissam had improved under treatment in Damascus city but was trapped in Eastern Ghouta when the tunnels through Qaboun were closed in March 2017 while he and his mother were home for a visit.⁴⁹
- ◆ 24 August – Nine-year old Sara from Arbin died of a bilateral retinoblastoma. Although her evacuation had been technically approved, government authorities delayed the process and she died with negotiations ongoing. Previously, Sara had traveled to Damascus for treatment through a smuggling tunnel in Barzeh before it was closed earlier in the year.⁵⁰

48 Dar Al Rahma Official Center for Hematology and Oncology, Facebook post, 13 August 2017, <bit.ly/2itDDXa>.

49 Syrians for Truth & Justice, "الحصار يحمّد مزيداً من أرواح مرضى السرطان والقصور الكلوي في الغوطة الشرقية بريف دمشق", 1 October 2017, <stj-sy.com>.

50 Fares Al-Rifai, "وفاة 'سارة' يفتح ملف الإخلاء الطبي في الغوطة الشرقية", Zaman Al-Wasli, 30 August 2017, <zamanalwasli.net>.



6-month old Kenan died of cancer after his request for Evacuation was denied. 11 August 2017. Source: Douma Coordinating Committee



9-year old Sara suffering from untreated retinoblastoma in Arbin. 25 August 2017. Source: @MhdKatoub



5-year old Osama died of encephalitis in E. Ghouta without being granted evacuation for treatment. 23 September 2017. Source: Syrians for Truth & Justice



Sahar, a severely malnourished infant in E. Ghouta, shortly before her death. 22 October 2017. Source: Dar al Shifa Hospital



A baby is evacuated from Harasta. 16 September 2017. Source: SARC

- ◆ 19 September – 47-year old Samira died of breast cancer in Douma. Requests for her medical evacuation were denied.⁵¹
- ◆ 23 September – Five-year old Osama died of acute encephalitis. The antiviral medication he needed was available in Damascus city, but his request for emergency evacuation was not granted.⁵²
- ◆ 21 October – 15-day old Obeida died of complications from acute malnutrition. His mother was malnourished throughout the pregnancy.⁵³
- ◆ 22 October – 34-day old Sahar from Kafr Batna died in a hospital in Hamouriya. Sahar was malnourished from birth and died of complications from severe malnutrition and related metabolic conditions for which treatments were unavailable in the besieged enclave.⁵⁴
- ◆ 27 October – Three-year old Mohammad died in Saqba of complications for severe malnutrition and the inability to access needed medical care.⁵⁵

Throughout the quarter, medical centers were running out of supplies. Medical staff reported coping by reusing single use materials, and rationing treatments even for critically ill patients.⁵⁶

A handful of patients were evacuated from the Harasta area by the SARC in September,⁵⁷ but the vast majority of the civilians requiring medical evacuation for treatment were denied approval by the Syrian government. By the end of October there were an estimated 1,200 cases of severe malnutrition among children in Eastern Ghouta.⁵⁸ According to the UN, there were an estimated 400 people needing urgent assistance or evacuation at the end of October.⁵⁹ By mid-November, ten patients from the evacuation list had died, while only eight total were allowed out for treatment in 2017.⁶⁰ In one of the cases that was allowed to proceed, Syrian intelligence services reportedly arrested the father who was accompanying his child for treatment.⁶¹

51 Syrians for Truth & Justice, "الموت على لوائح الإخلاء الفوري," 5 November 2017, <stj-sy.com>.

52 Syrians for Truth & Justice, YouTube video, 31 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AJHGWT>; SAMS, "Save East Ghouta," <sams-usa.net>.

53 Eastern Ghouta Observatory for Children's Rights, Facebook post, 21 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BoGvs4>.

54 Dar Alshifa Hospital, Facebook post, 24 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zBnzWv>; Dar Alshifa Hospital, Facebook post, 22 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zCIYQ8>; Geroun, "اهل تغير الطلقة "سحر" مصير الغوطة"⁵⁴, 25 October 2017, <geroun.net>.

55 Medical Office of Saqba City, Facebook post, 27 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zCq22Q>.

56 @Doumamedical Tweet, 23 October 2017, <bit.ly/2j5mdwX>; Syrians for Truth & Justice,

"الحصار يحصد مزيداً من أرواح مرضى السرطان والقصور الكلوي في الغوطة الشرقية بريف دمشق"⁵⁶, 1 October 2017, <stj-sy.net>.

57 @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 16 September 2016, <bit.ly/2BpACL4>; @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 7 September 2017, <bit.ly/2AtPNpR>.

58 Noura Hourani, Maria Nelson, and Justin Clark, "Syrian doctor on malnutrition in East Ghouta: 'We expect for deaths in the coming days'," Syria Direct, 26 October 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

59 UN Security Council S/2017/982, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 16 November 2017, <undocs.org>.

60 Direct communications with Syrian American Medical Society.

61 Kamal Sheikhou, "ديعصتلا ضريغذ قافتا دجو قشمد أطوغ رلا لوماتيد حبة," 480 Asharq Al-Awsat, 9 September 2017, <aawsat.com>.

While the crisis in Syria is often measured in casualties and number of buildings destroyed, these measures are insufficient to capture the full damage that prolonged deprivation, fear, and anguish has on civilians living under siege. On 20 October, 14-year old Maher hung himself from the ceiling in his room in Eastern Ghouta. Maher and his family had been previously displaced from Jobar to Ein Tarma. On the morning of his suicide, Maher woke up before dawn and went to wait in line at a bakery, but failed to procure bread after several hours of waiting and went home empty handed. When his family returned later in the day they found him hanging from the ceiling.⁶² This incident was described by residents as the first suicide of a child this young in Eastern Ghouta.

SOUTHERN SUBURBS

Table 2:

Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,000
Babbila	3	Syrian Govt.	11,000
Beit Sahm	3	Syrian Govt.	16,000
Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	8,000
Yelda	3	Syrian Govt.	23,500
SUM:			72,500

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

Snapshot:

Increased political, military, and humanitarian turmoil during the reporting period. No changes to Tier levels or population estimates.

Details:

Military and Political

The level of violence in the Southern Damascus Suburbs was higher during the August – October reporting period than in any other period since the start of Siege Watch monitoring in late 2015, although it was still lower than violence in other besieged areas. Political tension and uncertainty related to secretive negotiations between various local opposition and pro-government actors continued throughout the quarter.

As the sixth round of Astana talks approached on 15 September there were swirling rumors that Turkey and Iran were reaching an agreement in which Iran would gain control of the southern suburbs area. On 13 September, the armed opposition factions in Yelda, Babila, Beit Sahm,

62 Walid Al-Ashqar, "الجوع يدفع طفلًا في غوطة دمشق إلى شنق نفسه," All4syria, 21 October 2017, <all4syria.info>.



Protests against a surrender deal in the Southern Damascus Suburbs. 15 September 2017. Source: Babila LC



A nighttime vigil in Babila. 14 September 2017. Source: Babila LC

and al-Qadam released a joint statement firmly rejecting any deals tied to the “Four Towns Agreement” that would involve forced population transfers out of the enclave.⁶³ Residents held large protests and nighttime vigils to reject any deal involving forced civilian displacement and demographic engineering.⁶⁴ These were just a few of the many related protests held during the August – October reporting period, as civilian anxiety of a surrender agreement increased.⁶⁵

Local officials from al-Qadam – which is isolated from the other opposition-controlled neighborhoods in the southern suburbs – engaged in their own negotiations for a surrender agreement, and in late September a deal was reportedly reached that would include the transfer of around 600 opposition fighters out of the neighborhood.⁶⁶ Implementation of the deal was first delayed,⁶⁷ and then later fell apart. Negotiations were ongoing at the end of the quarter.

On 31 October, government forces closed al-Asali checkpoint, the only crossing into al-Qadam, after stopping a car full of weapons bound for fighters in the neighborhood.⁶⁸ Prices in al-Qadam quickly rose and many goods became unavailable. *[Note: Al-Asali was reportedly reopened in late November for limited commercial access and civilian movement.]*

On 12 October Jaysh al-Islam spokesman Mohamad Alloush announced that, under a deal negotiated with the Russians in Cairo, the Southern Damascus Suburbs would be added to the de-escalation zone agreement announced by Russia, Turkey, and Iran at an earlier round of Astana talks.⁶⁹ The agreement was signed by three armed groups: Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Ababil, and the Palestinian militia Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis.⁷⁰ The deal was reportedly negotiated without the approval of other factions in the southern suburbs enclave and without consulting local civilian leadership. Accordingly, the announcement of this deal came as a surprise to most of the people in the besieged area, who learned of it from media reports.

The October Cairo deal announcement seems to have sparked a wave of escalating violence in the Southern Damascus Suburbs. On 13 October the Syrian government launched 14 airstrikes on the ISIS-controlled neighborhood of Hajar al-Aswad, which it said were in retaliation for suicide bombings in Damascus. These were the first airstrikes to target any neighborhood in the besieged Southern Damascus Suburbs in years.⁷¹

63 RevoSpring, “رفضاً لاتفاقيات ومشاريع التهجير القسري.. بيان للفصائل العسكرية في جنوب دمشق”, 13 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>; Ibrahim Hamidi,

“إنبلب مقاتل جنوب دمشق”, Asharq al-Awsat, 12 September 2017, <aawsat.com>.

64 Syrian Revolution Coordinating Committee in Beit Sahm, Facebook video, 13 September, <bit.ly/2Bo9Cvr>; The Local Council of Babila, Facebook video, 13 September 2017, <bit.ly/2i6C918>; RevoSpring, “اعصام شعبي في بلدة بيدا رفضاً لأي اتفاقية تهجير تطلّ البلدات الثلاث”, 15 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>; The Local Council of Babila, Facebook video, 14 September 2017, <bit.ly/2BypZ9D>.

65 RevoSpring, “تظاهرة تندد بالمصالحة والتهجير في جنوب دمشق”, 26 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

66 Foad Al-Safi, “محلي (حي القدم) الممشقي: المفاوضات مع النظام لم تُفض لاتفاقية مؤكدة بعد”, All4Syria, 14 September 2017, <all4syria.info>; RevoSpring,

“مصدر: 600 مقاتل من حي القدم بدمشق سيغادرونه دون ضمان سلامتهم”, Obaida Nabouani, “لا جديد في مفاوضات حي القدم مع نظام الأسد”, Smart News, 4 October 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>; RevoSpring, “التهجير القسري يصل حي القدم الممشقي”, 22 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

67 Local Council of Qadam Area in Damascus, Facebook post, 26 September 2017, <bit.ly/2kdkSrK>.

68 Enab Baladi, “النظام يطلق المعبر الوحيد لحي القدم جنوبي دمشق”, 31 October 2017, <enabbaladi.net>; RevoSpring, “قوات الأسد تُطلق حاجز العسالي في حي القدم الممشقي”, 31 October 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

69 Orient News, “علوش يعلن من القاهرة دخول جنوب دمشق في اتفاق “خفض التصعيد”, 12 October 2016, <orient-news.net>.

70 RevoSpring, “تفاصيل “الإعلان التمهيدي” لوقف الأعمال القتالية في جنوب دمشق”, 13 October 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

71 Tom Rollins, “Escalation Threatens South Damascus “De-Escalation” Deal”, Atlantic Council, 24 October 2017, <atlanticcouncil.org>.

At the same time, ISIS escalated clashes with armed opposition groups (AOGs) in Yelda, Babila and Beit Sahm, and on 16 October JAI closed the Orouba checkpoint separating Yelda from ISIS-controlled Yarmouk.⁷² The closure of the checkpoint sparked demands from people on both sides of Orouba to reopen the barrier.⁷³ Although JAI did allow several medical evacuations from Yarmouk into Yelda for treatment,⁷⁴ the closure still led to a sharp decline in the already poor humanitarian conditions in Yarmouk.⁷⁵

On 22 October, ISIS bombed opposition fighters with toxic gas near a strategic location between Yelda and Yarmouk and ten fighters were hospitalized with symptoms that suggested chlorine.⁷⁶

[Note: After the end of the reporting period, the Orouba checkpoint between Yarmouk and Yelda was finally reopened on 5 November but the political turmoil continued. On 11 November, government forces partially closed the Babila checkpoint connecting the Southern Suburbs with Damascus city. Prices spiked and some goods quickly became unavailable.]

Humanitarian

During the August – October reporting period, contacts noted with alarm the decrease in international support for humanitarian and civil institutions in the Southern Damascus Suburbs, including a reduction in food aid by United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the primary UN agency tasked with providing for the humanitarian needs in the area.⁷⁷

The reduced support has impacted all aspects of society, but perhaps it has been felt the most in the medical sector. One of the last remaining donors, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), stopped funding the primary hospital in the Yelda Southern Suburbs earlier in the year forcing it to operate at a significantly decreased capacity.⁷⁸ The hospital and smaller clinics resorted to rationing supplies and cutting back staff as the crisis deepened. Most civilians in the Southern Damascus Suburbs continued to be restricted from crossing the only operational checkpoint to Damascus city because they feared arrest by pro-government forces, and were therefore left without options for medical care. This heightened tensions in the Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahem area. On 30 August, a doctor at the main hospital in Yelda turned away the child of the leader of a local armed opposition group. In response the armed group stormed the hospital, assaulting the staff and terrifying patients.⁷⁹

On 15 September, 31-year old Mahmoud, a Palestinian from al-Yarmouk camp who had been displaced to the Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm area several years earlier, died of cancer. His requests to be allowed to travel to a hospital in Damascus for chemotherapy were denied.⁸⁰ After a media campaign to raise awareness, the government allowed 44 Palestinians from the

72 Damascus Capital Voice, "فصائل المعارضة تغلق المعبر مع تنظيم داعش جنوب دمشق لليوم الثالث على التوالي," 19 October 2017, <damascuscv.com>.

73 RevoSpring, "فعاليات مدنية تُطلق نداء استغاثة لفتح حاجز العروبة ببيروت," 24 October 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

74 Yarmouk Camp Offline, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AJCYrT>; Yarmouk News, Facebook post, 30 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BoAtYu>; Yarmouk Camp Offline, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BC7SQv>.

75 Damascus Capital Voice, "يُخيم اليرموك مُهدد بالجوع ونداءات لفتح المعبر مع يلدًا," 25 October 2017, <damascuscv.com>.

76 RevoSpring, Youtube video, "شاهد: شهادات حول إصابات التوار بقذائل الغاز السام" التي ألقاها تنظيم الدولة في مخيم اليرموك," 24 October 2017, <bit.ly/2ArlLlw>.

77 RevoSpring, "دعوة لاعتصام في جنوب دمشق احتجاجاً على تخفيض المعونة المقدمة من الأونروا," 17 October 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

78 Al Jazeera, Youtube video, "أطباء بلا حدود" توقف دعم مستشفى "شهيد المحراب" بدمشق," 12 November 2017, <bit.ly/2njK4SP>.

79 Damascus Capital Voice, "فصيل عسكري يعتدي على المشفى الميداني الوحيد بجنوب دمشق," 30 August 2017, <damascuscv.com>.

80 Palestinian Refugees Portal, "وفاة اللاجئ الفلسطيني المريض محمود دانيال فاضل" في جنوب دمشق," 14 September 2017, <refugeesps.net>.

Southern Damascus Suburbs to travel to Damascus City for treatment in August, but there were an estimated 189 still in need of medical care outside of the besieged enclave who were not approved for evacuation.⁸¹

On 7 September, the small northwestern al-Rijeh section of Yarmouk was reached by SARC with an interagency humanitarian aid convoy carrying aid for 2,000 people, out of the 11,050 originally requested.⁸² According to the UN, 862 medical treatments were removed from the convoy. The al-Rijeh portion of Yarmouk is controlled by the extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and contains no more than 350 civilians. The majority of the civilian population of Yarmouk is in the larger ISIS-controlled portion of the neighborhood portion, and there is little if any movement between the two areas. According to local reports, HTS kept the majority of the aid delivered for its fighters, distributing only a small portion to the trapped civilians who live under multiple layers of siege.⁸³

This delivery appeared to be allowed in return for a reciprocal aid delivery to the towns of Fuaa and Kefraya, besieged by opposition forces in Idlib, as part of a sort of extended “Four Towns Agreement.” HTS was a party to the original “Four Towns Agreement” negotiations backed by Iran and Qatar, which saw deliveries and evacuations in Madaya and Zabadani in return for reciprocal measures in Fuaa and Kefraya before the former towns surrendered to government and Hezbollah forces.

Neither UN OCHA nor SARC publicly admitted the fact that this 7 September convoy was sent only to the small al-Rijeh portion of the besieged neighborhood. Based on the figure of 11,050 beneficiaries that the UN says it requested to reach, it is likely that this was originally a request to reach the entire Yarmouk neighborhood that was included in the monthly aid plan that OCHA submits to the Syrian government, but when the government approved the delivery it only approved access to al-Rijeh in order to fulfill a “Four Towns Agreement” deal with HTS.

Civilians in ISIS-controlled parts of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad face the worst humanitarian conditions because they face multiple levels of siege due to the internal checkpoints between ISIS areas and those controlled by other groups within the government-besieged enclave.⁸⁴ In late October, local activists issued a public distress call as conditions for trapped civilians reached critical levels.⁸⁵

On 26 October a 35-vehicle interagency aid convoy of food, health, and other supplies was delivered to Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm by the SARC.⁸⁶ The aid was reportedly sufficient for 33,500 people, lower than the 40,250 requested by UN OCHA, and 2,460 medical treatments

81 All4Syria, “بينها السرطان... 189 مصاباً بأمراض خطيرة في بلدات جنوب دمشق المحاصرة,” 16 September 2017, <all4syria.info>.

82 UN Security Council, S/2017/902, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),” 25 October 2017, <undocs.org>.

83 RevoSpring, “كيلو من كل مادة غذائية.. نصيب العائلة من المساعدات التي دخلت لتحرير الشام بمخيم اليرموك,” 10 September 2017, <revoSpring.com>.

84 Jalal Serres, Smart News Agency, “نازحو مخيم اليرموك في جنوب دمشق يعانون من نقص أساسيات الحياة,” 13 September 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

85 Yarmouk Camp, Facebook post, 24 October 2017, <bit.ly/2AmdQoc>.

86 @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 26 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zTelJz>.



SARC workers walk aid into the al-Rijeh section of Yarmouk. 7 September 2017. Source: SARC



A malnourished man from Yarmouk being examined in Beit Sahn. 30 October 2017. Source: Beit Sahn Healthcare Center



Aid is offloaded in Babbila. 26 October 2017. Source: Babbila Local Council

were removed from the convoy.⁸⁷

WATCHLIST & DEPOPULATED AREAS

A significant number of communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus remain on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” after surrendering to pro-government forces and submitting to forced population transfers in prior reporting periods. These communities include al-Tal, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, Wadi Barada, Khan al-Shieh, Moadamiya, and Madaya in Rural Damascus, and Barzeh in Damascus city.

While humanitarian conditions have improved for all of these communities, most still continue to face partial restrictions and the restoration of services has been slow. In some communities, such as Madaya, access for international agencies is still irregular. In late October, new checkpoints were erected around Madaya,⁸⁸ restricting civilian movement because many feared being detained by pro-government forces, particularly young men.

Al-Tal and al-Hameh have become hotbeds of sectarian pro-government militias.⁸⁹ In these communities, the August – October period brought a mixture of positive developments and troubling abuses. There was some international aid access to both areas, but it remained minimal.⁹⁰ Partial movement restrictions remained in place: according to a REACH assessment of al-Tal from September, only 25-50% of the population could enter and exit the city through the government-controlled checkpoints.⁹¹ Local social media pages report the opening of markets, along with frequent alerts of detention raids, flying checkpoints, and funeral notices for young men who were promised they could serve in local militia after “reconciliation” but were instead sent to the front line. Many of these developments violate the terms of the forced surrender deals.

Some locations such as Moadamiya seemed to be faring better than others. While the improvement was not immediate after the neighborhood surrendered and submitted to a forced population transfer in October 2016, during the August – October 2017 reporting period international aid access to the area became much more regular.⁹² Moadamiya has even reportedly taken in internally displaced persons (IDP) from other parts of the country. On 16 October there were reports that local shuttle service would be restored to Moadamiya for the first time in years.⁹³

87 UN Security Council, S/2017/982, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),” 16 November 2017, <undocs.org>.

88 All4Syria, “حواجر جديدة في مضايا وحملة اعتقالات في ركن الدين بدمشق,” 24 October 2017, <all4syria.info>.

89 Damascus Capital Voice, “ميليشيا جديدة تابعة للحرس الجمهوري في مدينة التل,” 8 October 2017, <damascuscvc.com>; Damascus Capital Voice, “المدن: ‘زينبيون’ و‘الحرس الثوري’ في التل,” 29 October 2017, <damascuscvc.com>.

90 Al-Tal RCC, Facebook post, 20 September 2017, <bit.ly/2AnnDua>.

91 REACH, “Syria Community Profiles Update: September 2017,” September 2017, <www.reachresourcecentre.info>.

92 Damascus Capital Voice, “حكومة النظام ومنظمات دولية تُدخل مساعدات إنسانية إلى ‘معضمية الشام,’” 25 October 2017, <damascuscvc.com>.

93 Damascus Capital Voice, “بعد خمس سنوات: سرفيس (دمشق – معضمية الشام) يعود للعمل من جديد,” 16 October 2017, <damascuscvc.com>.

On 26 August 2017 an interagency humanitarian aid convoy reached the Barzeh neighborhood of Damascus with food aid for 20,000, half of the amount requested.⁹⁴ This was the first time the international agencies had been able to deliver aid to the neighborhood since its surrender in May. The next day the government erected new concrete barriers at all but one entrance into the neighborhood.

Depopulated Areas

In the case of some of the depopulated communities such as Darayya and two towns in Wadi Barada – Ein al-Fijeh and Bassima – there are no signs that civilians are or will be allowed to return home. Instead the Syrian government appeared to be confiscating and demolishing property while working on plans to redevelop the towns with government supporters.⁹⁵

The abuses being carried out against civilians of Wadi Barada that were described in the Seventh Quarterly Siege Watch report continued during the August – October period.⁹⁶ There were further demolitions and confiscations of property in the depopulated towns of Bassima and Ein al-Fijeh,⁹⁷ and reports of serious overcrowding in the remaining Wadi Barada villages hosting these IDPs. Contacts with friends still inside these villages said that medical supplies continued to be restricted and there were a high number of cases of hepatitis, leading to the deaths of at least three children by mid-August.

Qaboun was removed from Siege Watch monitoring when it was nearly entirely depopulated in the scorched earth offensive and forced population transfers earlier this year. According to UN and third party reporting, a small number of people are now living in the neighborhood once again.⁹⁸ There have similarly been reports of the return of some families to Zabadani. In these cases, Siege Watch has been unable to establish contact with the new or returning residents of the communities, or with family, friends, or contacts who have any knowledge of the situation. These communities will remain unmonitored by Siege Watch unless further information can be obtained that indicates a need for oversight.

94 UN Security Council, S/2017/794 "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 21 September 2017, <undocs.org>.

95 Damascus Capital Voice, "المدن: وقد إيراني في داريا لترميم 'مقام سكينه'," 23 October 2017 <damascuscvc.com>.

96 TSI & PAX, "Siege Watch Seventh Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria: May-July 2017," September 2017, <siegewatch.org>; Barada News, "بعد كل الممار و التهجير ، الإجهاز على ما تبقى من أنبية في عين الفيجة لقتل أمل العودة في نفوس أهاليها," 14 September 2017, <www.bardanews.com>.

97 @SiegeWatch Tweet, 11 August 2017, <bit.ly/2ngMwVG>.

98 Reach/SIRF, "Syria Community Profiles Update: July 2017," July 2017, <www.reachresourcecentre.info>.

Homs

Map 3:

Besieged Communities in Hom

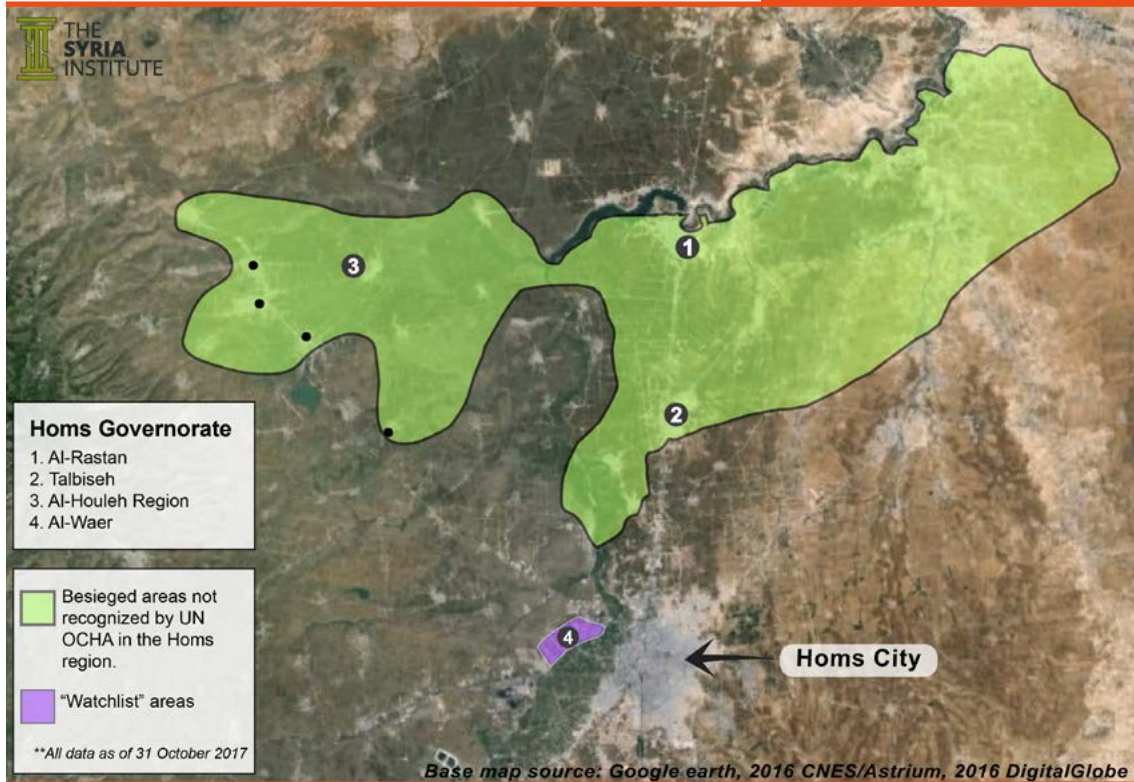


Table 3:

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.	115,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
SUM:			240,000

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

Snapshot:

Small increase in attacks during the reporting period. No changes to Tier levels or population estimates.

Details:

The besieged northern countryside enclaves of Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and al-Houleh encompass a large expanse of rural land, two main cities, and several villages. They 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 Syrian National Defense Forces, Iran-backed foreign militias, 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.

Military and Political

Despite several ceasefire proclamations by Russia and ongoing negotiations, violent attacks continued to target besieged towns and cities in northern Homs intermittently throughout the reporting period. Iran-backed foreign militias make up a significant portion of the forces surrounding the northern Homs enclave, and it is unclear to what degree – if any – Russia exerts control over these groups.

In early August, Russia announced a new ceasefire initiative brokered in Cairo with Ahmad al-Jarba's al-Ghad movement for all of northern Homs, set to begin on 3 August 2017.⁹⁹ The terms of the agreement included a halt in the shelling on besieged communities, and the release of detainees, neither of which happened. The agreement also reportedly included a clause for Russia to deploy its forces to three observation points to monitor and enforce the ceasefire, but Russia only deployed to the Dar al-Kabira checkpoint for two days before withdrawing as violence escalated once again.¹⁰⁰

Russian media posted false reports that its military police had deployed to other points using video from Hama to support its claim.¹⁰¹ This was one of a number of false reports by state-run Russian and the Syrian media regarding aid deliveries, agreements, and the deployment of observers in northern Homs during the reporting period. Many in the besieged region felt that this was an intentional form of psychological warfare, aimed at causing confusion and division among the opposition and civilians.

Local representatives in Homs rejected the Cairo agreement, as the discussions did not include anyone with legitimacy to negotiate on behalf of the people of besieged northern Homs. Neither local armed groups nor Local Councils had been consulted before the agreement or given any terms to accept or reject. In an effort to explain how Russia could announce a deal without local consultation one contact on the ground noted: "There are no clashes to stop, it's the regime that's targeting the area."

On 7 August, Russia published another false report, this time claiming that it delivered aid to the besieged al-Rastan area, but Siege Watch contacts and local reporting networks were quick to dispel this disinformation.¹⁰² Reportedly, the Russians had brought 12 small vehicles of children's toys and biscuits to the checkpoints but they were dismissed by the local negotiating committee as an effort to manipulate them and distract from the detainee issue, and the vehicles were turned away. Russia distributed these items to pro-government areas nearby and claimed the photos were from al-Rastan.

99 Qasioun News, "EXCLUSIVE: Qasioun Obtains a copy of the terms of the Northern Homs countryside agreement," 16 September 2017, <www.qasioun-news.com>.

100 All4Syria, "ريف حمص الشمالي يطالب الروس بإيقاف الخروقات وفتح المعتقلين," 13 August 2017, <all4syria.info>.

101 Al Arabiya, "روسيا تقول إنها نشرت شرطة عسكرية بريف حمص ونشيطون بنفون," 5 August 2017, <www.alarabiya.net>.

102 Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 9 August 2017, <bit.ly/2zSTfKW>.

On 8 August, a six-man local committee from northern Homs met with the Russians near Dar al-Kabira and agreed to the drafting of a new agreement.¹⁰³ The Syrian government was not involved in either the Cairo agreement, or the subsequent negotiations between Russia and the local committees. On 13 August there was a meeting between the Russians and an expanded 20-person local negotiating committee near Dar al-Kabira. They reportedly agreed to hold a series of meetings to renegotiate the terms of a ceasefire deal. According to pro-opposition media, Russia agreed to stop its allies, namely Iran-backed militias, from violating the ceasefires through ongoing shelling of besieged towns and cities.¹⁰⁴

On 6 September an expanded northern Homs and southern Hama negotiating body of 34 members representatives met with the Russians near the Dar al-Kabira crossing.¹⁰⁵ They agreed to move forward focusing on a detainee file and a file regarding the opening of the north-south highway between Homs and Hama as well as humanitarian crossings. The highway that passes through the besieged northern Homs enclave was previously one of the key arteries in Syria, but has been under opposition control since mid-2012. Regaining control of this roadway would be a major step for the government towards a consolidation and normalization of its power in western Syria. Following the 6 September meeting, pro-government forces halted commercial access at a nearby checkpoint, leading to a spike in prices of basic goods in al-Houleh.

On 10 September, for the second time during the reporting period, Russian media spread false reports claiming that Russia had deliver an aid shipment to al-Rastan in conjunction with the opening of the Homs-Hama highway.¹⁰⁶ These reports used staged footage from a delivery to government supporters about 5 km north of al-Rastan, outside of the besieged area. The local negotiating committee reiterated that the reopening of the highway was linked to the detainee file and no progress on the release of detainees had been made.¹⁰⁷

Then in mid-September Russia suspended the negotiations, reportedly to focus on Idlib and political negotiations at the Astana talks.¹⁰⁸ The meetings between Russia and the local negotiating committee resumed after Astana on 23 September, but without any notable progress.

On 27 September the Syrian government announced that a ceasefire agreement had been reached in northern Homs,¹⁰⁹ but the announcement was false. The photos shared along with the government's announcement were staged using government supporters who did not live in the besieged area.¹¹⁰ A few days later pro-government militias launched a heavy day of attacks on Talbiseh, killed seven civilians, including an entire family of six.¹¹¹

103 Enab Baladi, "لجنة تفاوض ريف حمص تُقرّ صياغة اتفاق جديد.. والوسيط ينفي"، 8 August 2017 <www.enabbaladi.net>.

104 All4Syria, "ريف حمص الشمالي يطالب الروس بوقف الخروقات وقت المعتقلين"، 13 August 2017, <all4syria.info>.

105 All4Syria, "هيئة التفاوض عن ريف حمص الشمالي تنشر نتائج اجتماعها مع الروس"، 6 September 2017, <all4syria.info>.

106 Sputnik, "Russia Delivers Food and Medicine to Ar Rastan in Syria's Homs Province," 9 September 2017, <sputniknews.com>; RT, Youtube video, "RAW: Al-Rastan receives Russian humanitarian aid along reopened Hama-Homs highway," <bit.ly/2BombHe>; Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 11 September 2017 <bit.ly/2ALRYpr>.

107 Smart News Agency, Youtube video, 10 September 2017, <bit.ly/2AiYXoH>.

108 Smart News Agency, "روسيا تزجّل اجتماعها مع "هيئة التفاوض" شمال حمص"، 13 September 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

109 Sana, "انضمام مدينة الرستن وعدد من القرى والبلدات إلى اتفاق وقف الأعمال القتالية بريف حمص الشمالي"، 27 September 2017, <www.sana.sy>.

110 Saleh al-Dahik, "هيئة التفاوض بحمص تنفي لبلدي نيوز أي اتفاق مع نظام الأسد"، Baladi News, 28 September 2017, <www.baladi-news.com>.

111 Syrian Revolution Talbisa1, Facebook video, 29 September 2017, <bit.ly/2BBelBA>.

On 4 October the local negotiating body for northern Homs met with the Russians and signed onto what they called a preliminary agreement. The deal included the opening of a humanitarian corridor and the submission - again - of a list of 12,146 detainees for the Russian delegation to work on.¹¹² The fact that the detainee issue remained unaddressed essentially doomed the deal to failure. Artillery shelling targeted Talbiseh in the morning before the agreement was announced, and al-Houleh in the evening after the deal was signed.¹¹³

In mid-October there was a riot and hunger strike in Homs Central Prison. Prisoners were reportedly rebelling against efforts by pro-government forces to extract around 550 political prisoners.¹¹⁴ These prisoners were among those on the detainee list presented to Russia, and it is possible that the Syrian government was trying to undermine the negotiating efforts by making it impossible to release them. Around this same time there was a notable escalation in violent attacks against the besieged enclaves in northern Homs, with daily shelling and airstrikes leading to a steady stream of civilian casualties for the remainder of the reporting period.

Civilians in northern Homs went out into the streets throughout the August – October reporting period to protest against the Assad government.¹¹⁵ On 14 October hundreds took to the streets in al-Rastan, holding large protests as part of the nationwide “Day of Rage.”¹¹⁶

Humanitarian

Humanitarian conditions in northern Homs did not change significantly from previous Siege Watch reporting periods. Trapped civilians relied on local food production, smuggling, charitable assistance, and trade with pro-government traders at the government-controlled checkpoint. Goods that were brought into the besieged enclave through checkpoints incurred extra fees from both the traders and the government checkpoint forces, and were sold at inflated prices in the besieged area. Dar al-Kabira remained the primary checkpoint into the area. The checkpoint was intermittently closed without explanation, leading to unpredictable price spikes.

Students, government employees, and people not wanted by the security services could travel through the checkpoint, but this is only a small portion of the besieged population and even they risked being detained. For example, on 25 October a group of 15 women and children from al-Houleh area were detained without explanation shortly after leaving through the checkpoint towards Homs city.¹¹⁷

112 Aldorar Alshamia, “Northern Homs and Southern Hama Countryside into a ceasefire agreement,” 4 October 2017, <aldorars.com>.

113 Syrian Revolution Talbisha1, Facebook post, 4 October 2017, <bit.ly/2BzSIR8>.

114 Iran Arab Spring, “#HomsPrisonersInDanger Statement From Besieged Detainees in Homs Central Prison,” 17 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zSa60J>.

115 @Syrians4Freedom Tweet, 10 September 2017, <bit.ly/2ALfa76>.

116 Smart News Agency, Youtube video, “المنات من مدينة الرستن بجمص يشاركون في ‘يوم الغضب السوري’,” 15 October 2017, <bit.ly/2Bzhs6A>.

117 Syrian Revolution Talbisa1, Facebook post, 25 October 2017, <bit.ly/2zSJhta>.

Several UN interagency convoys reached northern Homs during the reporting period:

- ◆ 19 August – A humanitarian aid convoy reached besieged Talbiseh with supplies for 84,000 people, lower than the requested amount for 92,500 people. According to the UN, 69,485 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government forces.¹¹⁸
- ◆ 27 August – A 48-vehicle humanitarian aid convoy reached al-Rastan area with food and school supplies for 107,500 people. The aid was sufficient to support the population of the city an estimated ten days. All 49,716 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government forces.¹¹⁹
- ◆ 5 October – A 61-vehicle interagency humanitarian convoy delivered assistance to al-Houleh area sufficient for an estimated 89,000 people.¹²⁰ According to the UN, 3,412 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government forces.¹²¹

Siege Watch contacts reported that there was decreased support from international charities to the Local Councils in northern Homs, leading to a slow but steady decline in humanitarian conditions. In mid-August there were renewed distress calls for baby formula due to a shortage in al-Rastan.¹²² Baby formula is one of the most heavily restricted types of supplies in areas besieged by the Syrian government, along with medical items. Contacts also reported a lack of support for the education sector in the besieged areas of northern Homs.¹²³

Wheat became largely unavailable in the besieged areas of northern Homs, leading to growing concerns over the lack of bread. Local Councils tried to meet this need by baking bread directly and providing it for free to local civilians. In early October, al-Rastan's Local Council put out several public distress calls for assistance from humanitarian organizations.¹²⁴ While wheat had entered northern Homs with UN aid convoys, the amount provided inevitably ran out long before another convoy was able to return.

118 UN Security Council, S/2017/794, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),"

21 September 2017, <undocs.org>; Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), "مساعدات إنسانية لمنطقتي تلبسة و تلول الحمر," 2 October 2017, <sarc.sy>.

119 UN Security Council, S/2017/794, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 21 September 2017, <undocs.org>.

120 @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 4 October 2017, <bit.ly/2jyljay>.

121 UN Security Council, S/2017/794 "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016)," 21 September 2017, <undocs.org>.

122 Qasioun News, "نداءات استغاثة متواصلة لتأمين حليب الأطفال شمال حمص," 15 September 2017, <qasioun-news.com>.

123 Syrian Revolution Talbisah1, Facebook post, 29 October 2017, <bit.ly/2Bnc1a0>.

124 Fresh Syria, "المجلس المحلي لمدينة الرستن بريف حمص يوجّه نداء استغاثة لتأمين مادة الطحين للمدينة," 4 October 2017, <fresh-syria.net>.



Bread produced for civilians by Local Council in al-Rastan. 7 October 2017. Source: Rastan Local Council



Russians meet with the local negotiating committee near Dar al-Kabira, Homs. 5 October 2017. Source: Baladi News

Map 4:

Besieged Communities in Idlib

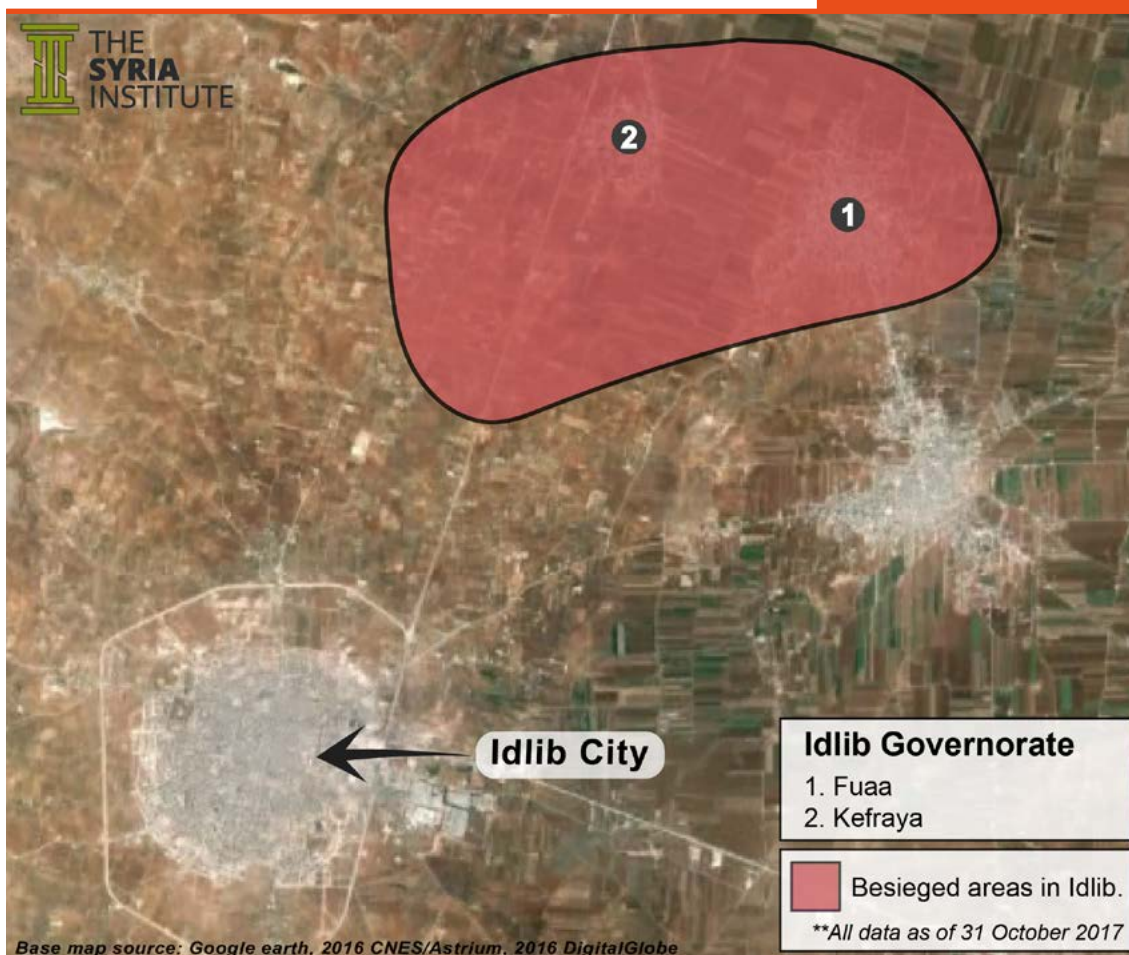


Table 4:

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 or Tier level. Population adjusted to match UN estimates.

Details:

The government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by HTS and other



An interagency aid convoy reaches Fuaa and Kefraya. 7 September 2017. Source: Military Media Page for Fuaa and Kefraya”

AOGs during the August – October reporting period. Residents in Fuaa and Kefraya faced a static security situation, with intermittent shelling and sniper fire. The Syrian government and Russia continued to airdrop supplies to change to the two towns.

On 7 September Fuaa and Kefraya were reached with an interagency humanitarian aid convoy carrying aid for 7,000 people.¹²⁵ According to the UN monthly reporting, amount requested was for 12,000 beneficiaries, which was more than the 8,100 people estimated to be in the two towns. This practice of requesting aid for a higher number of beneficiaries than estimated to be in the target location has not been witnessed with other besieged communities. According to the UN, 262 medical treatments were removed from the convoy, presumably by the armed groups besieging the two towns.

¹²⁵ UN Security Council, S/2017/902, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),” 25 October 2017, <undocs.org>.



Food in a market in the Joureh neighborhood shortly after the siege was broken. 20 September 2017. Source: Source: DeirEzzor24



Russian troops were among the first to enter the besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor. 19 September 2017. Source: DeirEzzor24

Deir Ezzor – Watchlist

Snapshot:

The siege of Deir Ezzor city was broken by pro-government forces during the reporting period. As a result, Deir Ezzor was reclassified from a Tier 2 besieged area to the Siege Watch “Watchlist.”

Details:

The besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city were controlled by the Syrian government, and surrounded by ISIS forces from the beginning of 2015 to September 2017. Many civilians considered themselves besieged by both ISIS and the Syrian government since the government forces enforced internal access restriction upon trapped civilians even as ISIS encircled the area from the outside. Unlike other besieged communities in Syria, Deir Ezzor received regular WFP airdrops of food supplies starting in April 2016. Nonetheless, humanitarian conditions were poor in the besieged neighborhoods and civilians were killed and injured in daily ISIS shelling attacks.

At the beginning of September, pro-government forces advanced against ISIS into Deir Ezzor with heavy Russian aerial support. On 5 September 2017 these forces reached the 137th mechanized brigade base on the western outskirts of the government-controlled area of Deir Ezzor. Five days later they advanced into the besieged neighborhoods themselves. Contacts noted that a contingent of 300 elite Russian service members spearheaded the advance and that they were the first men to enter the besieged neighborhoods.

Food entered Deir Ezzor quickly after the pro-government forces broke the siege. Initial reports for the first week indicated that these supplies were taken by pro-government National Defense Force militias and the small amount reaching the civilian population was being sold in markets at inflated prices. By the second week as more humanitarian aid convoys entered Deir Ezzor, significant quantities of aid finally began to reach civilians as intended, leading to an improvement in humanitarian conditions. The World Food Programme (WFP) airdrops stopped in early September and UN agencies quickly began sending convoys loaded with goods to the formerly besieged enclave. On 8 September the first 42-vehicle interagency aid convoy carrying supplies for 80,000 people reached the formerly besieged neighborhoods.¹²⁶ By the end of September, eight such convoys had reached Deir Ezzor.¹²⁷ Deir Ezzor city is the only post-siege area to receive this type of UN assistance right after the end of a siege. Siege Watch reclassified Deir Ezzor from besieged to 'Watchlist' in mid-September 2017.

After the end of the siege few of the civilians who were displaced from the city of Deir Ezzor returned. The security situation remained poor as a result of continued fighting and shelling from ISIS-controlled parts of the city. Civilians were not a priority for the pro-government military and militia forces that broke the siege of Deir Ezzor, and reports indicated that hunger was still a problem alongside the rampant abuse and corruption.¹²⁸ Due to the continuing poor conditions and nearby military offensives, Deir Ezzor will remain on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for the coming quarter.

¹²⁶ Syrian Arab Red Crescent, “The first humanitarian aid convoy reached Deir Ezzour,” 8 September 2017, <sarc.sy>.

¹²⁷ Syrian Arab Red Crescent, “The 8th humanitarian aid convoy reached Deir Ezzour city,” 27 September 2017, <sarc.sy>.

¹²⁸ Syrian Observer via Alsouria Net, “The Reality Inside Deir-ez-Zor is Darker than the Regime Will Have you Believe,” 20 September 2017, <syrianobserver.com>.



A US-led Coalition airstrike near the al-Raqqa city center. 26 September 2017. Source: Raqqa is Silently Slaughtered

Raqqa - Removed

Al-Raqqa city was added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for the first time in the previous reporting period after becoming encircled by the US-backed SDF in June during their anti-ISIS offensive. During the August-October period, conditions became increasingly grim for trapped civilians: supplies ran low, there was little access to clean water, and the medical sector was completely destroyed during the intense US-led Coalition aerial campaign. Accordingly, al-Raqqa city was elevated to the Siege Watch Tier 1 besieged status in September. In October the military campaign and siege of al-Raqqa came to an end, but only after the decimation and nearly complete depopulation of the city. As a result, al-Raqqa was removed from Siege Watch monitoring efforts entirely.

Al-Raqqa was the only community in Syria that was besieged by US-backed SDF forces. While the siege of al-Raqqa was not intended as a form of collective punishment against civilians, civilians were severely impacted by both the lack of humanitarian access and the intense military offensive, and reports suggest that both the SDF and US-led Coalition often failed to take sufficient precautions to protect people trapped inside of the city or to ensure appropriate treatment of those who escaped.

Significant numbers of civilians were killed in US-led Coalition airstrikes and SDF shelling throughout the reporting period. Civilian infrastructure inside of al-Raqqa was repeatedly targeted, and there were reports of white phosphorus use in US-led Coalition airstrikes.

Some of the high-casualty airstrikes documented during the reporting period:¹²⁹

- ◆ 7 August – 18 civilians were killed (including two doctors) and at least 30 wounded in a US-led Coalition airstrike while trying to get water at a well.
- ◆ 23 August – A US-led Coalition airstrike caused a residential building to collapse in the al-Bedu neighborhood, killing at least 40 civilians.
- ◆ 6 September – At least 17 people were killed when a six-story building in al-Firdous Street collapsed following an airstrike.
- ◆ 26 September – An estimated 40 people were killed when a US-led Coalition airstrike in the al-Bedu neighborhood caused a building to collapse.
- ◆ 28 September – An estimated 29 people were killed in an airstrike on the Hadiqa Abiyad neighborhood – 18 of them in a building collapse.
- ◆ 3 October – US-led Coalition airstrikes hit an area right near water wells in the northern part of the city, killing at least 13 civilians and injuring more than 11.¹³⁰ That same day, an estimated 31 civilians were killed in US-led Coalition airstrikes on other parts of the city.

For most of the reporting period there were no designated safety corridors or zones for civilians to seek protection. On the few occasions where the SDF announced a safe zone that civilians could reach to be rescued, the routes were reportedly quickly blocked by ISIS snipers.

Trapped civilians faced multiple barriers that prevented many from escaping the besieged city:

1. ISIS was preventing civilians from escaping when possible, herding them further into the besieged enclave to use as human shields.
2. A number of civilians were mistakenly or indiscriminately killed by the SDF and US-led Coalition forces during escape attempts.
3. The risk of hitting an unexploded ordinance was high, as ISIS mined large parts of al-Raqqa.
4. Movement was logistically difficult as most roads were destroyed and there was no fuel available for vehicles.

Wounded civilians could not be moved for treatment due to the lack of fuel for vehicles, the poor condition of bombed out roads, the danger of unexploded ordinances, attacks by both ISIS and US-led Coalition forces, and the lack of medical centers, supplies, and staff. People who were injured in attacks were treated in place if at all, and many died of their wounds. One

¹²⁹ Unless otherwise noted, data was provided directly by the Raqqa 24 reporting network, one of the only groups with reporters inside of the besieged city.

¹³⁰ UN Security Council S/2017/982, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),"

16 November 2017, <undocs.org>.



A devastated street in al-Raqqa. 22 September 2017. Source: Raqqa is Silently Slaughtered

doctor reported performing an amputation without sterile equipment or painkillers after gangrene threatened the life of a patient. Bodies remained trapped in rubble or in civilian homes, as people were unable even to exit their homes to extract or bury the dead.

The dead bodies contributed to the spread of disease in al-Raqqa, as sanitary conditions became abysmal. In addition to dead bodies, garbage piled up in the streets. The lack of access to clean water exacerbated the spread of disease and parasites.

Humanitarian conditions for civilians in al-Raqqa were increasingly grim throughout the reporting period as civilians had little access to food, clean water, and medical supplies. People found food to survive largely by scavenging supplies from the homes of those who had already fled. Malnutrition became a more serious threat after canned and dried supplies ran out, leaving only the items like rice and beans that required cooking, as people lacked water and fuel to make fires.

The intensity of the situation and poor access to communications made solid casualty figures difficult to come by, but on 25 September the Raqqa24 reporting network reported that 11 civilians in need of urgent medical care had died in the previous five days.¹³¹ Many of those trapped in the besieged neighborhoods could not even interact with one another because they were afraid of leaving their homes due to the shelling and artillery fire.

131 @24Raqqa Tweet, 25 September 2017, <bit.ly/2nmEmv1>.

Even at the height of the US-led Coalition bombardment, ISIS continued to terrorize civilians still in shrinking besieged area. People were regularly executed upon suspicion of communicating with the US-led Coalition, publishing reports online, smuggling supplies, helping civilians escape, and other perceived offenses. ISIS hoarded medical supplies and blocked civilians from using wells. ISIS snipers repeatedly targeted and killed civilians as they tried to escape to SDF-controlled areas.

In August, Siege Watch contacts raised disturbing concerns about the treatment of al-Raqqa IDPs who managed to escape the city by the SDF forces, which are dominated largely by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Al-Raqqa IDPs were taken to processing camps run by the Asayish – the Kurdish police force affiliated with the YPG – their identification papers were confiscated, and some were held indefinitely without explanation. Humanitarian conditions in these detention camps were reportedly very poor, and the IDPs often lacked food and medicine.

Forced recruitment was also a problem for al-Raqqa IDPs. Kurdish fighters reportedly demanded one “volunteer” per IDP family to join the fight against ISIS in order to gain the release of families from the detention camps. There were also several forced conscription raids by Kurdish forces in the camps during the reporting period. The fear of being forcibly conscripted to fight with the SDF after escaping the city was reportedly so high that it stopped some young male civilians from attempting to escape al-Raqqa city.

On 24 September it was reported that the remaining ISIS fighters in al-Raqqa were using a group of families containing several hundred civilians as human shields in the stadium, as clashes and airstrike increased in the final push to gain control of the city.¹³²

The population of al-Raqqa shrank dramatically during the reporting period. UN estimated 15,000 people in the city by end of August.¹³³ By late September/early October this number had decreased to a maximum of 8,000 people remaining in the besieged areas of the city.¹³⁴ The final devastating weeks of the SDF/US-led Coalition offensive drove several thousand civilians to attempt the dangerous escape from al-Raqqa.

By early October there were an estimated 3,000 civilians left trapped in the embattled remaining ISIS-controlled pocket of al-Raqqa. Local tribal leaders reportedly pushed the SDF to engage in negotiations with ISIS in order to save civilian lives, and eventually a deal was reached for a complete final evacuation. In mid-October, thousands of civilians were evacuated from al-Raqqa along with the remaining ISIS fighters, leading to nearly complete depopulation of the area.¹³⁵ While some civilians began returning to the outer neighborhoods of al-Raqqa city even during the final parts of the offensive, most neighborhoods remained inaccessible due to landmines and the continuing military and political developments. As a result, on 23 October Siege Watch officially removed al-Raqqa from project monitoring efforts.

132 @24Raqqqa Tweet, 24 September 2017, <bit.ly/2zE7kYU>.

133 UN Security Council, S/2017/794” Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016),”

21 September 2017, <undocs.org>.

134 Reach, “Ar-Raqqa City, Syria – Situation Overview V,” 25 September 2017, <reachresourcecentre.info>.

135 Quentin Sommerville and Riam Dalati, BBC, “Raqqqa’s dirty secret,” BBC News, 13 November 2017, <www.bbc.co.uk>.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

This Siege Watch report – the eighth in a quarterly series compiling information gathered from an extensive network of contacts across the besieged areas in Syria – showed a continuation of negative trends in most besieged areas. The 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. The government is the only party in Syria that has employed sieges against civilian populations systematically across the country.

Of the estimated 744,860 people still living under siege:

- ◆ 96.5% of besieged Syrians in approximately 29 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 2.5% 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% of besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

The “surrender or die” strategy being carried out by the Syrian government and its allies against civilians amounts to a campaign of widespread collective punishment. Tactics including the restriction of civilian access to water, food, medicine and other materials necessary for survival; the use of chemical weapons;¹³⁶ and intentional attacks on hospitals and other civilian targets,¹³⁷ all violate tenets of international humanitarian and human rights law.¹³⁸ These violations of international law by the Syrian government and its allies rise to the level of crimes against

136 OHCHR legal note, “Indiscriminate Attacks and Indiscriminate Weapons in International Humanitarian Law, March 2016,” 30 March 2016,

<www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

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

138 OHCHR legal note, “International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law Relevant to Siege Warfare – January 2017,” 31 January 2017,”

<www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

humanity, as they are being committed as part of a widespread and systematic strategy.¹³⁹

The August – October reporting period marks two years of monitoring by the Siege Watch project, but many of the sieges in Syria have been going on for far longer. One of the most shocking aspects of the sieges remains the inability of international stakeholders to end them. Increased awareness of the scope of sieges in Syria and detailed analysis of the Syrian government's systematic surrender-or-die strategy against civilian populations has not led to decisive action.

Long-term sieges, such as those in Eastern Ghouta, northern Homs, and the Southern Damascus Suburbs, are testaments to the impotence of the international community to prevent, deter, or seek accountability for crimes against humanity. The lack of political will at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to take action in the face of crimes against humanity like sieges sets a dangerous precedent and undermines fundamental international norms, underscoring the urgent need for reform of the UN system. The UN Secretary General began presenting a monthly report on the implementation of Security Council resolutions in Syria beginning in March 2014, when it was first mandated under Resolution 2139.¹⁴⁰ Since then, the Secretary-General has presented forty-three such monthly reports to the Security Council, adding on mandates under Resolution 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016). For forty-three months in a row, this reporting has shown that the demands for humanitarian access and for civilian protection continue to be ignored.

This past quarter was marked by a series of failed Russian-led local ceasefire agreements, and the intensification of sieges in opposition-controlled communities that have been surrounded by pro-government forces since 2013.

Towards the end of the reporting period, conditions for nearly 425,000 civilians in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated dramatically as the Syrian government and its allies launched a new wave of attacks. Hospitals, schools, and first responders were repeatedly targeted in attacks that continued to escalate even further in November after the end of the reporting period. At the same time, stores of food and medical supplies were running dangerously low, leading to a growing number of preventable deaths due to acute malnutrition and the lack of access to medical care.

The sieges of al-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor – besieged respectively by the US-led Coalition and ISIS – ended during the reporting period, with very different results. Al-Raqqa was completely devastated in the SDF/US-led Coalition offensive. Civilians trapped inside the ISIS-controlled neighborhoods faced apocalyptic conditions, reminiscent of the final days of the assault on Eastern Aleppo in late 2016. By October al-Raqqa city had been recaptured from ISIS, but is almost entirely uninhabitable as a result.

The siege of Deir Ezzor by ISIS was broken by pro-government forces with heavy Russian support. Shortly after they reached the city, a stream of UN interagency aid convoys quickly followed. This type of robust response has not been experienced by any other post-siege

¹³⁹ Amnesty International, "Syria: 'We Leave or we Die': Forced Displacement Under Syria's 'Reconciliation' Agreements," 13 November 2017, <www.amnesty.org>.

¹⁴⁰ UN Security Council S/2014/208, "Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolution 2139 (2014)," 24 March 2014, <undocs.org>.

community immediately after the end of a siege, once again highlighting the power that the Syrian government has to manipulate the UN's humanitarian response to its military advantage.

In most cases, civilians who still live in the growing list of post-surrender communities formerly besieged by government forces in the Damascus countryside, Aleppo, and Homs, still face restrictions on movement and limited access to humanitarian assistance and public services. These post-surrender communities are difficult to monitor, as the people who remain fear government reprisal for sharing information about recent developments, even with family members. Like much of Syria, these communities are traumatized, underserved, depleted of human and physical capital, and socially shattered, but they are especially vulnerable because they are under the control of armed forces that once sought their destruction. Access to civilians in these communities should be an urgent priority for human rights monitors.

For depopulated communities such as Darayya and two towns in Wadi Barada – Ein al-Fijeh and Bassima – there are no signs that civilians are or will be allowed to return. Instead, the Syrian government appears to be confiscating and demolishing property while working on plans to redevelop the towns and repopulate them with government loyalists. Several thousand of the civilians who were forcibly transferred out of Darayya over a year ago remain trapped in Hirjelleh, which is essentially a government detention camp. The clear demographic engineering efforts taking place in areas like Darayya and parts of Wadi Barada, as well as the continued abuses being perpetrated against civilians in other post-surrender communities, are creating new grievances with every passing day, undermining future reconciliation efforts before they begin.

“There is a sense of anger towards the international community that is unable to save half a million people from starvation under the bombardment by the Assad militias.”

– Siege Watch contact in Arbin, October 2017

The division and inaction of the Security Council with regards to the sieges has created a situation where the burden falls on UN humanitarian agencies, which have neither the mandate nor the responsibility to end these atrocities. There have been no notable improvements in the ability of UN agencies to reach communities besieged by the Syrian government since Siege Watch reporting began two years ago. Furthermore, the UN has been unable to tackle the main challenges to reaching this besieged population: obstruction and denial by the Syrian government, continuing close coordination with the Syrian government despite evidence that these efforts are ineffective.

The Syrian government has been emboldened not only by the military support of its allies, but also by the success of the siege strategy and the inadequate international response to the atrocities committed therein. Until the international community identifies and implements concrete actions that deter, disrupt, or circumvent the sieges, and hold those responsible accountable, the same cycle of violence, destruction, and forced population transfers will be repeated over and over again.

PAX and TSI therefore recommend the following measures be taken:

Urgent Siege Risks

- ◆ Eastern Ghouta is facing a man-made humanitarian disaster and an estimated 424,260 people are at risk. Urgent action, including increased political pressure, is needed to stop the bombardments, allow for medical evacuations, and secure the sustained entry of food and medicine. International stakeholders including the UN Secretary General, the UN Security Council, and member states, must immediately identify steps they can take to prevent Eastern Ghouta from becoming the next eastern Aleppo.
- ◆ International development donors should resume or continue their support of Local Councils (LCs) in besieged communities, which serve critical roles in maintaining community resilience. Support strategies should be adapted to bolster independent council members and democratic activists in situations where armed opposition groups threaten LC integrity. 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, 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 LCs and local armed groups by demanding accountability and stemming the growth of extremist ideologies.

Post-Surrender Protection

- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and IHL violations.
- ◆ The UNDP, UN Habitat, and other agencies should undertake comprehensive protection analyses before beginning any early recovery initiatives in post-surrender communities in cooperation with the Syrian government. When any early recovery efforts are undertaken, these agencies should take measures to protect the housing, land, and property rights of forcibly displaced civilians. These measures might include: 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.

Accountability

- ◆ Since the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism was vetoed in November, it has become critical that UN member states take the lead in addressing the continued use of chemical weapons. Individual countries should support independent investigations, call for a comprehensive study of all suspected chemical attacks in Syria, and actively engage with the OPCW to identify new mechanisms for investigation and accountability.
- ◆ The US-led Coalition and its local SDF partners should undertake a comprehensive review of its civilian casualty findings from the offensive to defeat ISIS in al-Raqqa. Investigators should be deployed on the ground to interview al-Raqqa IDPs in person as part of this review. Ex gratia redress payments should be made to the family members of Syrian civilians who were killed in US-led combat operations, as authorized in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act as part of the Commander's Emergency Response Program.¹⁴¹ In addition, the US-led Coalition should play a lead role in efforts to rehabilitate the city and ensure that its inhabitants are able to return to their homes.
- ◆ War crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of the siege strategy must be investigated and documented so that those responsible can be held accountable.

¹⁴¹ House of Representatives, "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017," p. 481, Subtitle B, Sec. 1211, U.S. Government Publishing Office, 30 November 2016, <www.congress.gov>.

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.	15
	Al-Qadam	3	Syrian Govt.	3,000
	Yarmouk	1	Syrian Govt. + ISIS +armed groups	8,000
Rural Damascus	Arbin	2	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Zamalka	2	Syrian Govt.	14,850
	Beit Sawa	2	Syrian Govt.	13,000
	Eftreis	2	Syrian Govt.	5,000
	Ein Tarma	2	Syrian Govt.	2,000
	Hamouriya	2	Syrian Govt.	24,000
	Hazzeh	2	Syrian Govt.	20,250
	Jisreen	2	Syrian Govt.	19,395
	Kafr Batna	2	Syrian Govt.	33,000
	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.	10,750
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	55,000
	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	11,000
Homs	Al-Houleh Region	3	Syrian Govt.	55,000
	Al-Rastan	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
	Talbiseh	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
Idlib	Fuaa	3	Armed groups	} 8,100
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
Total				744,860

Note: Orange names indicate besieged locations not recognized by UN OCHA as of October 2017

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

Governorate	Community/ Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	371,725
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	30,000
Daraa	Muhajja	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	25,000
Deir ez-Zor	Deir Ezzor	Watchlist	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000
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*
Homs	Al-Waer	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	17,500
	Al-Raqqa	Watchlist	US-led Coalition + SDF	30,000
Total				1,092,395

* Note: Siege Watch direct access to data from post-surrender communities is extremely limited. Population figures are low-confidence estimates 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>.

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
Al-Raqqa	Al-Raqqa	Depopulated	US-led Coalition/ SDF	October 2017

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.



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