

# Siege Watch

## Sixth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria February-April 2017 Executive Summary

The full report can be downloaded from [www.siegewatch.org/reports](http://www.siegewatch.org/reports)

This is a summary of the Sixth Siege Watch quarterly report, focusing on developments from February to April 2017. Siege Watch is 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. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground found that:

- ◆ An estimated 879,320 people remain trapped in at least 35 besieged communities across the country and more than 1.3 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 for the threats to all "Watchlist" communities.
- ◆ Five communities capitulated to forced surrender agreements during the reporting period – three (al-Waer, Madaya and Zabadani) besieged by government forces and two (Fuua and Kefraya) by opposition forces. All five were subsequently subjected to forced population transfers, uprooting tens of thousands of civilians.
- ◆ Two more "Watchlist" communities in Damascus that were previously covered by local truces – Barzeh and Qaboun - were attacked and brought under intensified siege by pro-government forces. The

attacks are precipitating a humanitarian crisis that demands urgent international action.

- ◆ Eastern Ghouta, the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country, is the most likely target of the Syrian government's next scorched earth campaign. Nearly 420,000 people are at risk.
- ◆ Muhajja in Daraa was added to the "Watchlist" for the first time, indicating an expansion in the government's siege strategy.
- ◆ Humanitarian conditions deteriorated in Deir Ezzor. As a result it has been upgraded to a Tier 2 intensity siege.

During the February - April reporting period, the government grew increasingly emboldened by the success of its "surrender or die" strategy. The increasing pace of forced surrender agreements in besieged and "Watchlist" communities that was noted in prior Siege Watch reports continued apace. Al-Waer, Madaya, and Zabadani all capitulated in the face of increased attacks and threats. Opposition-besieged Fuua and Kefraya signed similar forced transfer surrender agreements in parallel with Madaya and Zabadani under the "Four Towns" framework. Population transfers of both fighters and civilians commenced in all five areas during the reporting period. As a result of these transfers, Madaya reverted to government control, and Zabadani was completely emptied.

*[Note: Al-Waer remained on the besieged list during the reporting period, but was reclassified to the "Watchlist" in late May following the end of the population transfers as the neighborhood reverted to the control of pro-government forces. Fuaa and Refraya had not yet reverted to opposition control and remained on the besieged list as of time of writing.]*

While many post-surrender communities have seen improvements in civilian welfare, there are also worrying signs that they are vulnerable to fresh human rights abuses by pro-government forces. In all of the besieged and "Watchlist" areas that surrendered to the Syrian government in recent reporting periods, local governance institutions were dismantled, and civilians remaining were afraid to share information for fear of retribution. This silence from post-surrender communities should raise alarm bells for human rights monitors and those concerned with civilian protection in Syria. The limited data obtained by Siege Watch from post-surrender communities indicates they face a range of treatments after pro-government forces reassert control – ranging from an uneasy version of normalcy to prolific and blatant human rights abuses. Humanitarian aid access to many post-surrender communities is still being restricted. Civilians remaining in Wadi Barada appear to be experiencing the worst treatment of any post-surrender community, and displacement out of the area is expected to continue, although the official population transfers have ended.

During the reporting period, the Syrian government attacked Qaboun and Barzeh, two "Watchlist" communities in the eastern part of Damascus city, bringing the neighborhoods under intensified siege. Muhajja, a town in Daraa governorate, was added to the "Watchlist" for the first time. In all of these cases, the government and its allies are actively trying to force surrender agreements on the communities that include population transfers and exclude the issue of detainee releases. In Qaboun and Barzeh, violent attacks intensified as a punishment for rejecting the government's terms.

*[Note: In May, opposition fighters in Qaboun (and Tishreen) quietly surrendered and submitted to transfers out of the neighborhoods. A tentative agreement was reached in Barzeh, but stalled after*

*the government refused to release detainees. While there were some population transfers out of Barzeh, the neighbourhood had not yet surrendered to government control as of time of writing. In mid-May, local authorities in Muhajja reached a détente deal with pro-government forces, leading to a partial relaxation of access restrictions. The town did not surrender to government control or submit to forced population transfers.]*

Also during the reporting period, pro-government forces intensified the siege of Eastern Ghouta by cutting off key smuggling routes and blocking trade at the Wafideen checkpoint, the only official access point for goods. As a result, prices have spiked and humanitarian conditions have declined. There are growing fears that the government is planning a "final assault" on Eastern Ghouta, with the goal of forcing the enclave to surrender and submit to population transfers. With nearly 420,000 people trapped in the enclave, the humanitarian toll of this sort of assault could be tremendous.

Few UN interagency convoys reached besieged areas during the quarter, and life-saving medical supplies continued to be removed from the aid convoys that did succeed. Meanwhile, the lack of medical supplies and equipment has reached a critical point in most besieged communities, and civilians are dying as a result.

As in previous periods, attacks continued to target civilian residential areas, hospitals, schools, and Civil Defense centers. There were also continued reports of the use of banned munitions such as cluster bombs and chemical weapons, as well as incendiary weapons, bunker busters, and more conventional weaponry. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias play a central role in enforcing the Syrian government's sieges, and both countries took the lead in forced surrender negotiations.

By the end of April 2017, UN OCHA estimated that a total of 624,500 people were trapped in besieged communities in Syria, compared to nearly 880,000 estimated by Siege Watch. The gap will

be even wider once the UN reporting accounts for the completion of the forced transfer agreement in Madaya. Most of the discrepancy between the UN and Siege Watch figures can be accounted for by the besieged communities in northern Homs and the southern Damascus suburbs that Siege Watch counts, but which are still not officially recognized in the UN reporting.

Accurate reporting of the crisis in the besieged areas is an important and necessary step that the UN should take in its approach to besieged areas, but it must also be accompanied by concrete action from the international community to lift the sieges. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council – not the humanitarian agencies – to restore peace and end the atrocities being committed in besieged areas. All signs indicate that the Syrian government – encouraged by the recent success of the “surrender or die” strategy and emboldened by the lack of international response – will continue to intensify and expand its efforts to subdue besieged communities through violence, coercion, and depopulation in the coming months. These violent and forced surrenders create new grievances and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The forced civilian population displacements, along with the other collective punishment tactics of the sieges, constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.

## Key recommendations:

- ◆ The UN Security Council must act on its commitment to enforce Resolution 2139 (2014), which called upon all parties “to immediately lift the sieges of populated areas” and threatened further steps in the case of non-compliance.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 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.

- ◆ UN OCHA’s Damascus hub should be relieved of any role in the decision-making process on siege designation given the close working relationship that the office must maintain with the Syrian government. Relevant data gathered by the Damascus hub should be sent to be analyzed in a more neutral environment where determinations will be less vulnerable to political pressure.

- ◆ As part of the accountability mechanism established in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248 of 21 December 2016, resources must be allocated to ensure cases are prepared on war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the framework of sieges, such as starvation and forced population transfers.<sup>2</sup>

*Note: Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period covered the period of February – April 2017. Since then, there may have been subsequent developments impacting many besieged communities. Please check [www.siegewatch.org](http://www.siegewatch.org) for the most recent updates.*

<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council, “Resolution 2139 (2014),” S/RES/2139,

22 February 2014, <undocs.org>.

<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 71/248, “International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011,” A/71/L.48, 21 December 2016.

## Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



### The Syria Institute (TSI)

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

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