

# Siege Watch

Seventh Quarterly Report on Besieged  
Areas in Syria May-July 2017



## **Colophon**

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Photo cover: Girls carry balloons on the first day of a supposed ceasefire in Douma. 22 July 2017.

Photo credit: Rami Saleh

## **About PAX**

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

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## **About TSI**

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

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May-July 2017

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>09</b>
General Developments	10
<b>2. Besieged Community Overview</b>	<b>12</b>
Damascus	12
Eastern Ghouta & Jobar	13
Qaboun & Barzeh (Watchlist)	26
Southern Suburbs	33
Other Rural Damascus (Watchlist)	36
Homs	39
Northern Homs Governorate	40
Al-Waer (Watchlist)	44
Deir Ezzor	47
Idlib	49
Other Watchlist Communities	51
Aleppo	51
Daraa	51
Al-Raqqa	52
<b>3. Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Annex – Community Lists &amp; Population Data</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Index of Maps &amp; Tables</b>	
Map 1: Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province	10
Map 2: Besieged Communities in Damascus and Rural Damascus	12
Map 3: Besieged Communities in Homs	39
Map 4: Besieged Neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor	47
Map 5: Besieged Communities in Idlib	49
Map 6: “Watchlist” Neighborhoods of al-Raqqa City	52
Table 1: Eastern Ghouta & Damascus Besieged Communities	13
Table 2: Southern Damascus Suburbs Besieged Communities	33
Table 3: Homs Governorate Besieged Communities	39
Table 4: Deir Ezzor Besieged Neighborhoods	47
Table 5: Idlib Besieged Communities	49
Table of Siege Watch Besieged Locations	60
Table of Current Siege Watch “Watchlist” Locations	62
Table of Depopulated Communities	63

# 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
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
YBB	Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm
YPG	People's Protection Units (Kurdish)



# Executive Summary

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

- ◆ An estimated 821,210 people remain trapped in at least 34 besieged communities across the country and nearly 1.7 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 most of the threats to “Watchlist” communities.
- ◆ ISIS-controlled al-Raqqa city was added to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for the first time ever, after being surrounded by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in June.
- ◆ Two more “Watchlist” communities – Barzeh and Qaboun – capitulated to forced surrender agreements in the face of humanitarian crises caused by Syrian government’s “surrender or die” strategy. Both were subjected to forced population transfers uprooting thousands of civilians. Qaboun was entirely depopulated and removed from project monitoring efforts.
- ◆ At least six suspected chemical attacks were launched against opposition fighters in Jobar and Ein Tarma during the reporting period. In one case, victims showed symptoms consistent with exposure to a nerve agent.
- ◆ Eastern Ghouta, the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country, is the most likely target of the Syrian government’s next major scorched earth campaign after pro-government forces capture Jobar. More than 420,000 people are at risk.
- ◆ Humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate in Deir Ezzor, where besieged civilians are bracing for escalated hostilities.

During the May – July reporting period the Syrian government and its allies continued their “surrender or die” strategy; bringing three more besieged and “Watchlist” communities under government control. Forced population transfers of civilians out of these areas are war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.

Attacks continued to target civilian residential areas, hospitals, schools, and Civil Defense centers. Russian airpower and Iranian-backed militias play a central role in enforcing the Syrian government's sieges, and both countries played a role in forced surrender negotiations. Humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate in besieged areas as violence levels remained high and humanitarian access remained low.

In addition to the ongoing government siege, Eastern Ghouta was plagued throughout the reporting period by fighting between armed opposition groups. Attacks on healthcare, restrictions on movement between besieged towns, and forced displacements all added to deteriorating conditions. The outcry from civilians in the form of protests and mediation initiatives had little success in stemming the simmering tensions, which are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Notably, this reporting period saw the addition of al-Raqqa city to the Siege Watch “Watchlist” for the first time, after US-backed SDF surrounded it in June. This development is indicative of a dangerous evolution of the tactics used by the US-led Global Coalition to defeat Daesh and its partners on the ground. Reports from al-Raqqa suggest that the SDF and Global Coalition are violating international humanitarian law with indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas, compounding the suffering of civilians already victimized by years of ISIS rule.

With no signs of progress in the UN-led Geneva talks during the reporting period, representatives of long-besieged enclaves in Homs and Damascus were forced to engage in de-escalation zone negotiations with Russia – a key military backer of the Syrian government and an active participant in attacks on besieged areas. These Russian-led efforts failed to bring relief to Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period, with the Syrian government undermining progress by redeploying elite Fourth Division units from Daraa to Damascus and intensifying its attacks. De-escalation negotiations related to northern Homs showed more potential, and were ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

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, ISIS, armed opposition groups, and the Global Coalition. International community stakeholders must stop relying on ineffective efforts and take real steps towards ending the sieges to avert this outcome.

Key recommendations:

- ◆ The US-led Global Coalition against Daesh and its local SDF partners must ensure that its combat operations in al-Raqqa are in compliance with the laws of war. They must provide safe passage for civilians escaping ISIS-controlled parts of al-Raqqa, and ensure that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are treated humanely and provided with necessary care and provisions.
- ◆ The UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) should immediately open investigations into the suspected chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar during the reporting period.
- ◆ International stakeholders, including the UN Security Council, must increase political pressure on besieging parties and their allies to prevent Eastern Ghouta – the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country – from becoming the next eastern Aleppo.
- ◆ International monitors – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into communities that have been forced to surrender to the Syrian government, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) violations.
- ◆ The UNDP, UN Habitat, and other agencies working on early recovery initiatives in post-surrender communities in cooperation with the Syrian government should take measures to protect the housing, land, and property rights of forcibly displaced civilians.



# 1. Introduction

This report is the seventh 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 May – July 2017. Data collected during the quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that an estimated 821,210 Syrians are still living under siege in 34 communities in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Deir Ezzor, and Idlib governorates. Nearly 1.7 million additional people live in areas on the Siege Watch "Watchlist," where they face siege-like conditions and are at risk of further decline.

Despite numerous United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions calling for unobstructed humanitarian access<sup>1</sup> and a growing list of ceasefire announcements, the Syrian government, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and armed opposition groups (AOGs) continue to besiege communities across Syria. This quarter, the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) joined this group with the siege of al-Raqqa, which was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" and will be designated as fully besieged in September unless the situation changes.

During the May – July reporting period the Syrian government and its allies continued their "surrender or die" strategy, bringing three more besieged and "Watchlist" communities under government control. Pro-government forces then launched an offensive aimed at isolating and capturing the Jobar neighborhood of Damascus, which will shape the battlefield for a final assault on Eastern Ghouta.

Thousands more civilians were forcibly transferred out of their communities to dangerous areas of Idlib governorate where humanitarian conditions are poor, with no safeguards to ensure their eventual return. These are considered forced population transfers instead of evacuations, because the populations in question are given no choice but to surrender to the government's abusive forced surrender terms, or to resist and face complete annihilation. Local civil governing institutions have been cut out of many of the surrender deal negotiations in the past year, leaving civilians with no say in their fate. Civilians who have remained in many post-surrender communities have continued to suffer abuses and access restrictions. Too little attention is paid to the fate of those in post-surrender communities, where people cannot speak about their circumstances for fear of retribution by pro-government forces.

Until the international community takes concrete action 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.

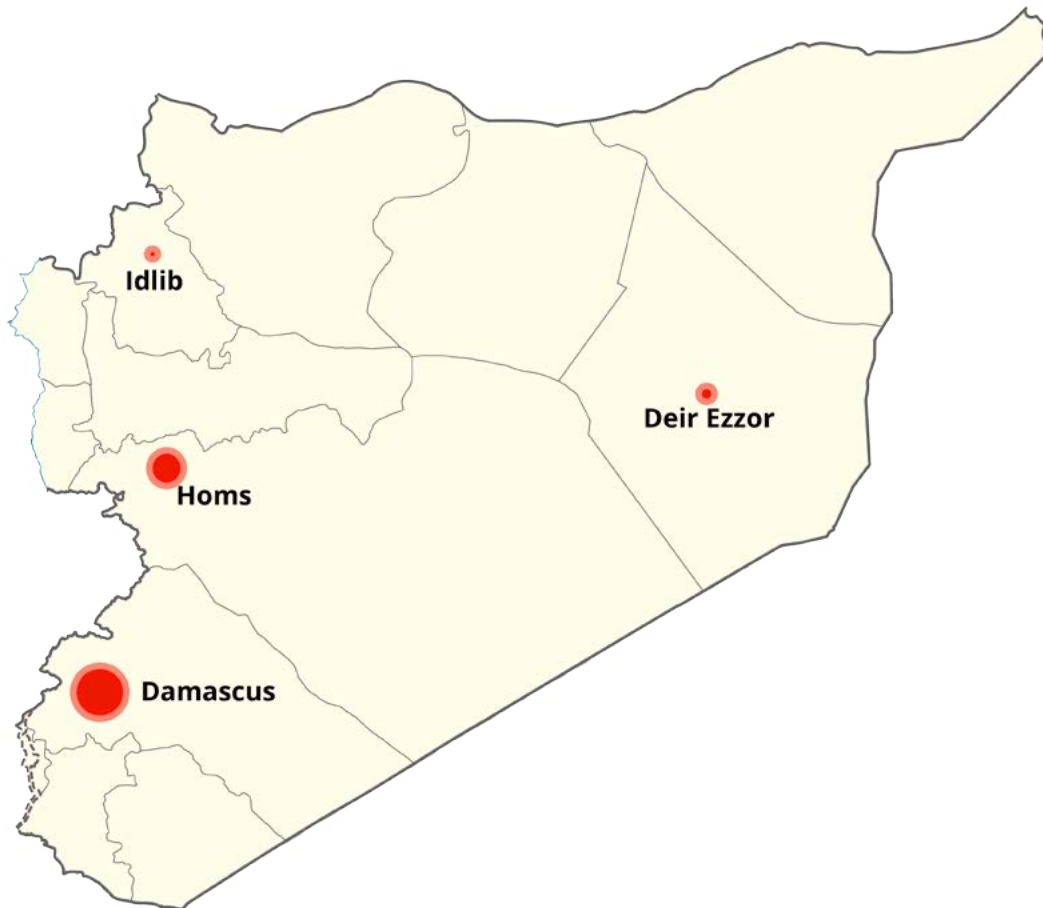
<sup>1</sup> UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015).

This report focuses primarily on developments from May to July 2017. Additional updates with developments since July 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>.

### Map 1:

Country Overview: Besieged Communities in Syria by Province



## General Developments

During the May – July reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies - emboldened by the success of its “surrender or die” strategy – continued their systematic campaign to force besieged and “Watchlist” communities to surrender. Following scorched earth offensives that were launched in February, the Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh and

Qaboun surrendered in early May and thousands of fighters and civilians were transferred to northern Syria. Barzeh was subsequently downgraded from besieged to the project's "Watchlist," and Qaboun was removed from project monitoring efforts altogether after being completely depopulated.

The weekly forced population transfers out of the al-Waer neighbourhood of Homs that began in March when the neighborhood surrendered were finally completed in May. Al-Waer was subsequently downgraded to the Siege Watch "Watchlist." In total, more than 20,000 people left al-Waer during the population transfers, making it the second largest forced population transfer of the conflict after eastern Aleppo.

Following the completion of the surrender processes for Qaboun, Barzeh, and al-Waer, Syrian government forces turned their main focus towards Jobar and Eastern Ghouta. Starting in mid-June, a new offensive was launched to completely sever the remaining links between Jobar and the larger Eastern Ghouta besieged enclave. During the fierce offensive, thousands of civilians were uprooted from Ein Tarma, and at least six suspected chemical attacks were launched at opposition fighters on the front lines. In one case, victims showed symptoms consistent with exposure to a nerve agent, suggesting a dangerous tactical escalation.

Al-Raqqa city was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" for the first time after becoming encircled by US-backed SDF in June. It will be designated as fully besieged in the coming quarter unless circumstances improve, which will make it the fifth Syrian provincial capital in which civilians have come under siege.

Reports coming out of the increasing list of post-surrender communities indicate that, while the violent attacks have stopped and access to supplies has increased, persecution and abuses of civilians are continuing in these areas, which are out of sight of the international community and out of reach of most humanitarian actors.

On 4 May 2017, Russia, Iran, and Turkey announced that they had reached an agreement in Astana to create four de-escalation zones in Syria. Two of these zones – Eastern Ghouta and northern Homs – were supposed to cover besieged enclaves. A ceasefire in Eastern Ghouta did not materialize during the reporting period, and violence actually increased in areas like Ein Tarma. Russian-led de-escalation negotiations for northern Homs appeared to have greater potential for success with an initial reduction in violence in the al-Rastan and Talbiseh areas, although attacks on al-Houleh continued. The negotiations were still ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

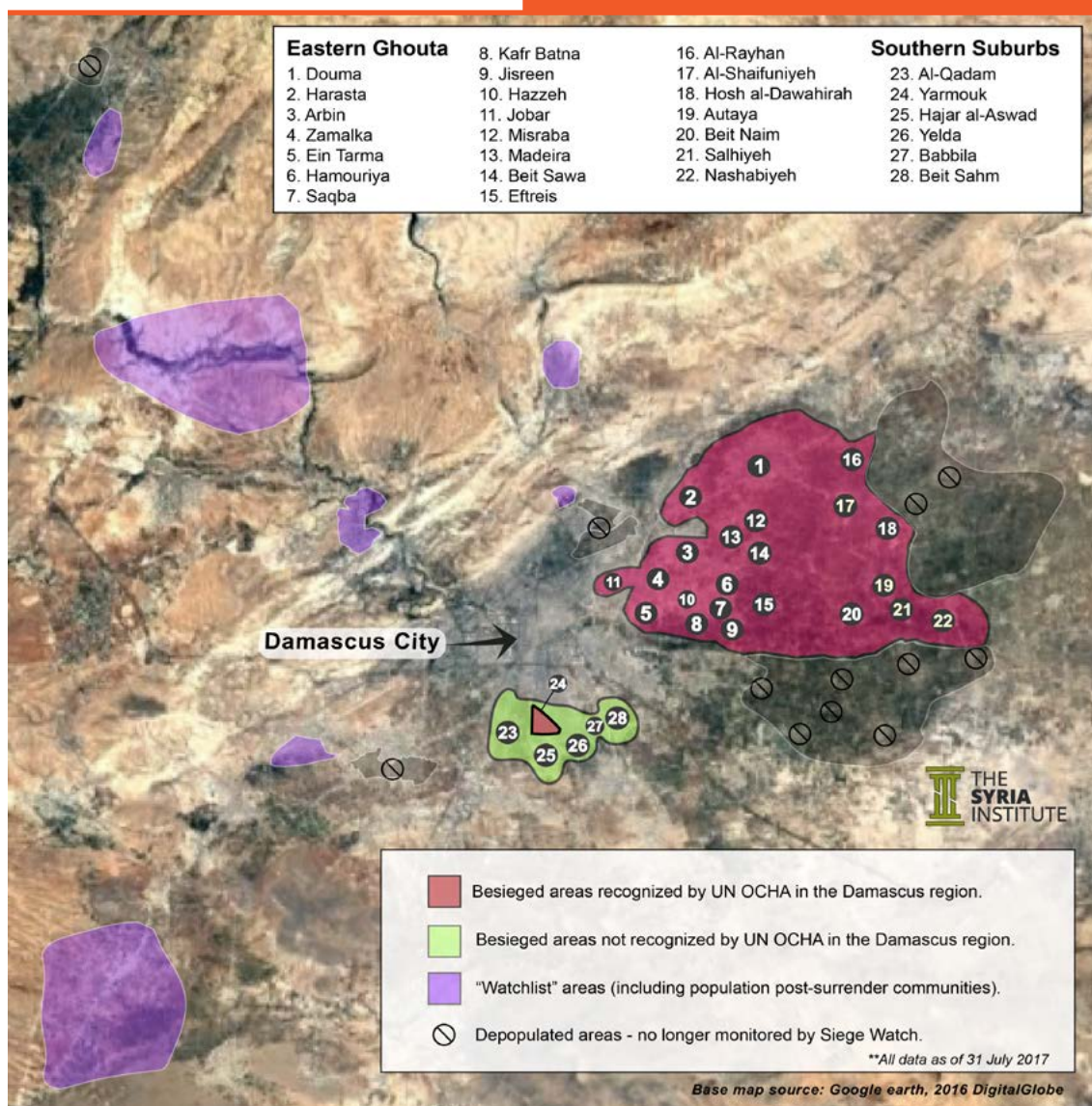
International political processes gave besieged Syrians little reason to hope during the May – July period. Momentum seemed to shift from the UN-led Geneva negotiations to the Russian-led Astana talks. Russian initiatives are viewed with extreme skepticism in areas besieged by the Syrian government, since Russia is one of its key backers.

# 2. Besieged Community Overview

## Damascus

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.	425,910

\*Note: See Annex I for a complete list.

### Snapshot:

Humanitarian conditions in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar remained poor during the reporting period, and violence levels remained high. Population estimate adjustments were made to several besieged communities as a result of significant internal displacement. No Tier levels were changed.

### Details:

During the May – July period, Eastern Ghouta saw high levels of violence in the form of attacks by pro-government forces, and low levels of humanitarian access. Civilian suffering was compounded by sporadic fighting between armed opposition groups, which placed new restrictions on internal movement between communities and led to the death and injury of civilians caught in the crossfire.

### Military

On 1 May, the very first day of the reporting period, a brutal wave of attacks by government forces targeted towns and villages across Eastern Ghouta. Ten civilians were killed and dozens injured as airstrikes and shelling targeted Saqba, Hamouriya, Zamalka, Kafr Batna, Arbin, Misraba, Harasta, and Autaya. The attacks damaged civilian infrastructure, including a school in Saqba, a section of the Arbin surgical hospital, and numerous civilian homes. In Hamouriya, a four-story building collapsed after being targeted with a guided missile, killing a woman and three children. The use of internationally banned cluster munitions was also reported.

Attacks on the rural southern and eastern peripheries of Eastern Ghouta took place at intervals throughout the reporting period as pro-government forces continued their efforts to shrink the besieged enclave. On 28 May, photos from al-Rayhan appeared to show government forces burning nearby crop fields,<sup>2</sup> a method of collective punishment meant to deprive the besieged area of local agricultural production during harvest periods. On 8 June, pro-government forces briefly took control of Hosh al-Dawahira and al-Rayhan before they were both recaptured by Jaysh al-Islam (JAI).

<sup>2</sup> Rayhan Media Center Facebook Page, Post, 28 May 2017, <bit.ly/RMC2xyD>





Doctors examine the aftermath of an attack on the Arbin Surgical Hospital 1 May 2017. Source: Arbin Surgical Hospital



Dust from bombardment destruction covers Hamouriya 1 May 2017. Source: Abdulmonam Eassa





Rescuers look for victims in a building that collapsed after an airstrike in Ein Tarma. 14 July 2017, Source: Syrian Civil Defense in Rural Damascus

In mid-June, pro-government forces launched an offensive aimed at severing the remaining links between the embattled Jobar neighborhood and the larger Eastern Ghouta enclave. This campaign was the Syrian military's primary focus in the Damascus area for the remainder of June, July, and beyond the end of the reporting period.

There are unconfirmed reports that Fourth Division units were withdrawn from Daraa to reinforce the Jobar/Ein Tarma offensive in late July,<sup>3</sup> a move made possible by the relative calm that has prevailed in Daraa since Russian forces were deployed to enforce its recent ceasefire initiative.

The slow advance of government forces into the Ein Tarma valley was accompanied by aerial and artillery assaults not only on Jobar and the front line areas, but also on the residential center of Ein Tarma. As a result, much of the population of Ein Tarma was displaced, many people for the second or third time. The towns of Kafr Batna and Saqba received most of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Ein Tarma, with smaller numbers going to Madeira, Beit Sawa, and other communities. Siege Watch contacts noted that there was insufficient housing available, and in some cases the displaced Ein Tarma residents moved into partially built structures and other ad hoc shelters. Those left behind in Ein Tarma were the most vulnerable members of society, too poor to find the resources to relocate.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Qasioun News, "بالصور: الفرقة الرابعة تسحب قواتها من درعا", 26 July 2017, [www.qasioun.net](http://www.qasioun.net).

<sup>4</sup> Alaa Nassar and Madeline Edwards, "Too poor to flee, residents are left behind in frontline east Damascus suburb: 'No one hears our cries'", Syria Direct, 17 August 2017, [www.syriadirect.org](http://www.syriadirect.org).

There were at least six suspected chemical attacks launched by Syrian forces against armed opposition fighters during the fighting in Jobar and Ein Tarma in June and July:

- ◆ 22 June – In the afternoon, grenades thrown by government forces released a toxic substance against Faylaq al-Rahman (FAR) fighters in the Jobar neighborhood. Five fighters and one media activist were affected. They displayed mild symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent, and described a chlorine-like smell.<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ 1 July – In the afternoon, 30 fighters on the front lines in the Ein Tarma valley were hospitalized with symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent.
- ◆ 2 July 2017 – Less than 24 hours after the Ein Tarma attack, a series of three suspected attacks using grenades which released a toxic substance were launched at opposition fighters near the front lines of Zamalka late at night and in the early hours of the morning on 2 July. Ten fighters were treated by medical staff, all of whom displayed symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent. The victims described a chlorine-like smell.<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ 6 July 2017 – The local medical center treated two patients – FAR fighters from the front line area near Ein Tarma valley – who were suffering from symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent. The two fighters treated were the most severe cases among eight who experienced symptoms after being targeted by hand grenades that released a toxic substance. The victims reportedly smelled a disinfectant-like odor.<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ 14 July – Fighters in Ein Tarma were hit twice in 24 hours with hand grenades that released a toxic substance. In one of these cases, four opposition fighters were treated for symptoms of exposure to an unknown toxic gas. Both doctors and patients reported chlorine-like smells as in other cases, but this attack stands out from the others in several ways. The injured men described the smoke coming from the grenades as white – yet chlorine gas is yellow/green.<sup>8</sup> At least one of the patients exhibited the symptom of unresponsive pinpoint pupils, which is associated with nerve agents such as sarin.<sup>9</sup> The suspected chemical attacks came amidst a major spike in bombings overnight, which also targeted civilian populations.

5 SN4HR, "The Syrian Regime Has Used Chemical Weapons Five Times after Khan Sheikhoun Incident," 14 August 2017, [www.sn4hr.org](http://www.sn4hr.org).

6 Jobar News, "بيان صادر من مديرية صحة دمشق وريفها في الغوطة الشرقية , وتأكيد استهداف كل من بلدة عين ترمنا و زمكلا بغاز الكلور السام", 4 July 2017, [www.jobarnews.net](http://www.jobarnews.net);

Syrian Network for Human Rights (SN4HR), "The Syrian Regime Has Used Chemical Weapons Five Times after Khan Sheikhoun Incident," 14 August 2017, [www.sn4hr.org](http://www.sn4hr.org).

7 Jobar Medical Office Facebook Page, Video, 6 July 2017, <[bit.ly/JMO2wPn](http://bit.ly/JMO2wPn)>; Jobar Medical Office Facebook Page, Statement, 6 July 2017, <[bit.ly/JMO2wGE](http://bit.ly/JMO2wGE)>; Smart News Agency, "حالات إختناق بصفوف «الحر» جراء قصف بالغازات على حي جوبر بدمشق", 6 July 2017, [www.smartnews-agency.com](http://www.smartnews-agency.com).

8 SN4HR, "The Syrian Regime Has Used Chemical Weapons Five Times after Khan Sheikhoun Incident," 14 August 2017, [www.sn4hr.org](http://www.sn4hr.org).

9 Ghouta Now, YouTube video, "إصابات بحالات إختناق بغاز سارين بجرعات مخففة في بلدة عين ترمنا للمرة الثانية خلال ال 24 ساعة", 14 July 2017,

<http://bit.ly/Ghouta2xyk> ; Jobar Medical Center, Facebook post, 14 July 2017, <[bit.ly/JMO2x0](http://bit.ly/JMO2x0)>.



Opposition fighters are treated for symptoms of exposure to chemical choking agent near Ein Tarma. 6 July 2017. Source: Jobar Medical



Pinpoint pupils suggests a nerve gas attack in Ein Tarma. 14 July 2017, Sources: Jobar News and Jobar Medical Center



- ◆ 20 July – Several FAR fighters were targeted with suspected toxic substances on the front line in Ein Tarma and were treated at the medical center for symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent.<sup>10</sup>

In all of the suspected chemical attacks the victims exhibited symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent, including difficulty breathing, coughing, dizziness, nausea, and burning eyes and nose. In most cases the reports included details that the toxin was released through a grenade and victims smelled a chlorine-like odor. None of the attacks were fatal. The 14 July attack stands out from the others because of the fact that at least one victim suffered additional symptoms like pinpoint pupils and a rash, which are associated with a nerve agent such as sarin, indicating that a more deadly chemical – or combination of chemicals – was used.

Heavy attacks across Eastern Ghouta continued in early July during the fifth round of Astana talks,<sup>11</sup> where Russia, Turkey, and Iran led discussions on strengthening the four “de-escalation zones” announced in May, which were supposed to include Eastern Ghouta. Major opposition groups including FAR and JAI in Eastern Ghouta boycotted the talks, which ultimately failed to make progress towards de-escalating violence in the besieged enclave.<sup>12</sup>

On Saturday 22 July, Russia suddenly announced another ceasefire for Eastern Ghouta, to be accompanied by a deployment of Russian forces and the introduction of humanitarian aid and medical evacuations.<sup>13</sup> According to its statement, the deal was negotiated in Egypt, with the “opposition,” although the details were murky.<sup>14</sup> JAI appears to have played a role in the negotiations, while FAR was not invited to participate.<sup>15</sup> The Syrian government was not present at the negotiations, but it released a statement that the cessation of hostilities would begin on 22 July at noon and warned that it would respond “appropriately” to any breaches.<sup>16</sup>

After the announcement, there was a reduction of aerial attacks against Douma, JAI’s primary area of control, though artillery bombardments continued. There was also a brief pause in the ground assault on Ein Tarma and Jobar though artillery and airstrikes continued. This only lasted for a few days before the Syrian military resumed its ground advance, this time including new elite units of the Fourth Division. The reinforcements, combined with the fact that the aerial assault against Ein Tarma and Jobar continued, suggests that the Syrian government used the pause in the ground offensive primarily for the reconfiguration of strategic assets as opposed to an effort to respect the ceasefire.<sup>17</sup>

10 Jobar Medical, YouTube video 20/07/2017, “حالات إختناق نتيجة إستنشاقهم لمواد سامة في بلدة عين ترمّا”, 20 July 2017, <bit.ly/JMYouTube2uf>.

11 The Syria Institute, “TSI Syria Update: July 5, 2017,” 5 July 2017, <syriainstitute.org>.

12 Dana Omirgazy, “Little progress in Syria peace talks but negotiators agree to continue Astana meetings,” The Astana Times, 10 July 2017, <astanatimes.com>.

13 TASS, “Agreements on East Ghouta zone in Syria signed – Defense Ministry,” 22 July 2017, <tass.com>; Enab Baladi, “جوبر خارج المعادلة.. جوبر خارج المعادلة”, 23 July 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>; Jilal Siris and Mahmoud Darwish, “غوة دمشق التصعيد في غوة دمشق الشرقية”, 22 July 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>; Smart News Agency, “روسيا تحدد آلية اتفاق «تخفيف التصعيد» في غوة دمشق الشرقية”, 22 July 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>; Enab Baladi, “يوافق على اتفاق الغوطة الشرقية”, 22 July 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

14 Baladi News, “Tayyar Al Ghad Al Souri Mediates the Eastern Ghouta Agreement,” 23 July 2017, <www.baladi-news.com>.

15 @GIIIMedia Tweet, English translation of statement, 22 July 2017, <bit.ly/GIIIMedia2i3s>.

16 SANA, “القيادة العامة للجيش تعلن وقف الأعمال القتالية في عدد من مناطق الغوطة الشرقية: سيتم الرد بالشكل المناسب على أي خرق”, 22 July 2017, <www.sana.sy>.

17 Andrew Illingworth, “Elite Syrian Army formation arrives in east Damascus as battle for key suburbs is restarted,”

Al Masdar News, 27 July 2017, <www.almasdarnews.com>.



Children injured in airstrikes on Arbin await treatment. 24 July 2017, Source: Abu Yisr al-Baraa

The 22 July de-escalation announcement brought no notable changes in violence levels to other parts of Eastern Ghouta. On the evening of 24 July, an intensive wave of aerial attacks was launched on civilian areas of Arbin, which continued into the next day. At least eleven people, including women and children, were killed in the airstrikes and more than 50 others were wounded.<sup>18</sup>

### **Armed Opposition Groups Infighting**

AOG infighting that began on 28 April continued sporadically throughout the reporting period, even as Syrian government munitions were raining down on the panicked civilians. The fighting began when JAI, the strongest group in the area, launched a series of attacks on the enclave's small Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) contingent after accusing the group of a number of grievances, notably of obstructing fighters headed to the front lines in Qaboun.<sup>19</sup> HTS is an extremist opposition alliance dominated by the former al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.

<sup>18</sup> Arbin Media Office, YouTube video, 24-7-2017 "جرى مدنيين و أطفال جراء الغارات الجوية على مدينة عرين بريف دمشق." 24 July 2017, <bit.ly/ArbinMO2vFnI>; Syria Civil Defense in Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 24 July 2017, <bit.ly/SCDRifDim2Ft>; Arbin Media Office, YouTube video,

24-7-2017 «مشاهد مروعة من المجزرة التي ارتكبت بحق المدنيين في مدينة عرين منذ قليل» 24 July 2017, <bit.ly/AMO2xK8>; Arbin Surgical Hospital, Facebook post, 25 July 2017, <bit.ly/ArbinSH2wf>; All4Syria, "الطيران الحربي يرتكب مجزرة في (عرين) بالغوطة الشرقية" 25 July 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.

<sup>19</sup> @GIIMedia Tweet, English translation of statement, 29 April 2017, <bit.ly/GIIMedia2wGc>.

Members of FAR – second in strength only to JAI – were caught up in the JAI crackdown on HTS. FAR is an FSA-affiliated AOG and does not share HTS's ideology, but the two groups are known to cooperate in tactical operations in Eastern Ghouta. While the small HTS contingent in Eastern Ghouta has little local support, the same cannot be said for FAR, and many in the community felt that JAI was using HTS as an excuse to crack down on a rival rebel group. Tensions remained high between FAR and JAI throughout the quarter, and both sides traded accusations as violence flared.<sup>20</sup> Dozens of fighters were killed in the clashes, and hundreds were injured.

The fighting between armed opposition groups compounded civilian suffering in a number of ways. The infighting led to an increase in attacks on medical personnel and facilities in Eastern Ghouta.<sup>21</sup> On 1 May, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) announced that it was suspending its support to medical facilities in Eastern Ghouta following “outrageous breaches of respect” by armed groups on 29 – 30 April after the start of infighting.<sup>22</sup>

FAR and JAI engaged in incidents involving the harassment and abuse of doctors, detention of paramedics, and raids on hospital warehouses by both FAR and JAI continued throughout May.<sup>23</sup> Finally, on 16 June, MSF announced that it was restarting its support to medical centers in Eastern Ghouta after improvements in respect for medical neutrality by armed groups.<sup>24</sup>

Civilians were killed and injured during the AOG infighting throughout the reporting period, and suffered due to the increased restrictions that armed groups placed on daily life. Warring AOGs closed roads and set up checkpoints between communities, demarcating their lines of control and stifling civilian movement within Eastern Ghouta as civilians risked detention and harassment at the checkpoints. This negatively impacted everything from education and medical care to trade and livelihoods.<sup>25</sup> There were also reports of civilians being intentionally displaced – expelled from their homes – by FAR as it worked to consolidate its control.<sup>26</sup>

20 @GIIMedia Tweet, English translation of statement, 9 May 2017, <bit.ly/GIIMedia2iEp>; Enab Baladi, “Battles to Uproot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Weaken Resistance in Ghouta,” 3 May 2017, <english.enabbaladi.net>.

21 Syrians for Truth & Justice, “Documenting Arrests and Attacks against Medical Personnel Operating in Eastern Ghouta,” 1 June 2017, <stj-sy.com>; Enab Baladi, “فيلق الرحمن” يعتدي على أطباء في الغوطة الشرقية, 13 May 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

22 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), “Syria: MSF condemns incursion by armed men into supported hospitals in East Ghouta,” 1 May 2017, <www.msf.org>.

23 Enab Baladi, “فيلق الرحمن” يعتدي على أطباء في الغوطة الشرقية, 13 May 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>; All4Syria,

“فيلق الرحمن يطلق سراح المسعفين المعتقلين في الغوطة الشرقية,” All4Syria, 16 May 2017, <www.all4syria.info>; All4Syria, “فيلق الرحمن يعتقل 9 مسعفين في الغوطة الشرقية وحملة لإطلاق سراحهم” 18 May 2017 <www.all4syria.info>; Majdoleen a-Zouabi, and Yazan Torko, “Jaish al-Islam confiscates warehouse full of medical supplies, sparking days of protests by hospital staff,” Syria Direct, 1 June 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

24 MSF, “Syria: MSF condemns incursion by armed men into supported hospitals in East Ghouta,” 1 May 2017, <www.msf.org>; Damascus and Rural Damascus Health Directorate, Facebook post, 16 June 2017, <bit.ly/DimHD2x1b>.

25 Enab Baladi, “Ghouta Infighting Internally Displaces Its Inhabitants and Divides it into Strips,” 16 May 2017, <english.enabbaladi.net>.

26 All4Syria, “هيئة تحرير الشام وفيلق الرحمن يطردان مئات العائلات في الغوطة الشرقية,” 24 May 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.





Medical staff in Eastern Ghouta protested after fighters seized medical supplies. 29 May 2017, Source: Al Salam Surgical Hospital

Throughout the reporting period there were calls from a range of external actors to end the infighting, including the Syrian Interim Government, the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham, and the Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council.<sup>27</sup> Local civil society also spoke out, as dozens of peaceful demonstrations were held throughout the reporting period calling for an end to infighting, the dissolution of HTS, and for all armed groups to focus on fighting the Syrian government. A group of female activists launched the “Al-Ghouta is One” campaign to reject infighting.<sup>28</sup> A civil commission attempting to mediate the fighting even took the initiative to remove some of the barriers built by armed groups between the different Eastern Ghouta communities.<sup>29</sup> Local Councils and the provincial council condemned the infighting, and launched new governance and service initiatives in an attempt to bring some relief to civilians, as the infighting added to declining humanitarian conditions.<sup>30</sup>

27 All4Syria, “احرار الشام توضح موقفها من اقتتال الغوطة الشرقية,” All4Syria, “10 June 2017, <www.all4syria.info>; All4Syria, “1 May 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.”

28 RFS Media Office, “Activists In Eastern Ghouta Launch The “Al-Ghouta Is One” Campaign Rejecting Internal Fighting And Division,” 13 June 2017, <rfsmediaoffice.com>.”

29 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 4 May 2017 <bit.ly/GMC2wQ9>.”

30 All4Syria, “مجلس محافظة ريف دمشق: نسعى لتفعيل الرقابة الشعبية على جميع مؤسسات الغوطة,” All4Syria, “30 July 2017, <www.all4syria.info>;

All4Syria, “مجلس محافظة ريف دمشق يطلق مشروع الأمن الغذائي في الغوطة الشرقية,” All4Syria, “16 July 2017, <www.all4syria.info>;

All4Syria, “بالصور: لخلق أجواء المشاركة والتفاعل... (محلي عرين) يطلق حملة مكثفة لتنظيف المدينة,” All4Syria, “19 July 2017, <www.all4syria.info>;

All4Syria, “مشروع يهدف لتطوير منظومة الإسعاف المركزي في الغوطة الشرقية,” All4Syria, “23 May 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.”

## Humanitarian Situation and Access

During the last reporting period, the already-high prices of goods in Eastern Ghouta skyrocketed due to two events: the closure of smuggling tunnels after the capitulation of Barzeh and Qaboun, and the Syrian government's unexpected decision to halt the trade of Moheddine al-Manfoush at the Wafideen checkpoint.<sup>31</sup> While the corrupt trading monopoly run by al-Manfoush lined the pockets of the Syrian military and JAI by providing supplies at extremely inflated prices to the besieged residents, it was still an important source of resources for an area of more than 400,000 people that has been under siege for approximately four years. The loss of two primary means of obtaining supplies spread panic throughout the besieged enclave, as residents feared that it signaled that the government may be planning a final Aleppo-style assault.

Then, on 8 May 2017, a private trader by the name of Hasaba reportedly sent in six cars of food through the Wafideen checkpoint – the first such supplies to enter since al-Manfoush's trade was ended months earlier. Prices in Eastern Ghouta dropped almost immediately after word of the new Hasaba shipment spread,<sup>32</sup> although they were still higher than before the shutdown, and far higher than areas outside of the siege. By the end of the reporting period, al-Manfoush's sales at al-Wafideen checkpoint had also resumed.

The availability of goods in Eastern Ghouta did not necessarily translate to widespread access during the reporting period. As a result of the high levels of unemployment and poverty, many families were unable to afford what they needed. Accordingly, malnourishment was widespread, particularly among children. People continue to rely on well water that is often contaminated, as running water has been unavailable in Eastern Ghouta since 2013. Ailments associated with unsanitary water, such as diarrhea and inflammatory bowel disease, were common. A heat wave that hit Syria during the reporting period exacerbated suffering in besieged areas because of the lack of access to running water or electricity.

The Syrian government generally does not allow civilians in need of medical care to be evacuated out of Eastern Ghouta. Prior to the surrender of Qaboun and Barzeh, civilians requiring advanced medical care could sometimes use smuggling tunnels to escape the besieged area. Since the surrender of these neighborhoods and closure of the tunnels, this has not been an option, and during the May – July period there were a number of deaths due to lack of access to medical care. On 16 July, three people in need of medical care were evacuated from Harasta for treatment in central Damascus.

Only a handful of international aid convoys were able to reach Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period:

- ◆ 2 May – A 51-truck UN interagency aid convoy reached Douma with supplies for approximately 35,000 people for a month. This is less than ¼ of the population of the community.<sup>33</sup> As usual, medical supplies were removed from the trucks by Syrian government authorities.

31 Alaa Nassar, Ammar Hamou, Justin Clark, and Madeline Edwards, "Syrian government closes final loophole to tighten siege of east Damascus suburbs," Syria Direct, 20 April 2017, <syriadirect.org>.

32 All4Syria, "أغذية تدخل الغوطة الشرقية بعد دفع أتاوات للنظام," 9 May 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.

33 Syrian Arab Red Crescent, (SARC) "51 Humanitarian Relief Aid Truck Reached Douma City," 3 May 2017, <sarc.sy>.

- ◆ 19 June – A 27-truck UN interagency aid convoy reached Harasta on its second attempt with food supplies for 11,000 people for one month.<sup>34</sup> It was the first international aid to reach the community in a year. The convoy's first attempt two days earlier was aborted after being delayed for hours at a government berm checkpoint. On its way back to central Damascus the convoy was fired upon by snipers in front of the Ministry of Water Resources building – an area under government control. One of the truck drivers was injured in the attack.<sup>35</sup>
- ◆ 25 July – Three vans were sent to the Wafideen checkpoint, carrying approximately ten tons of Russian food supplies.<sup>36</sup> After photos were taken of the aid on the government-controlled side of the border it was transferred to commercial traders' cars and sent into Eastern Ghouta. Siege Watch was unable confirm who was responsible for or received these supplies, which were in any case insufficient to meet the needs of even a small fraction of the population. This unusual case appears to have been linked to Russia's efforts to publicize the Eastern Ghouta "ceasefire" that it declared on 22 July.
- ◆ 27 July – An interagency convoy with five trucks of medical supplies, including desperately needed dialysis equipment, entered Douma.<sup>37</sup>
- ◆ 30 July – A UN/SARC aid convoy reached the rural al-Marj area of Eastern Ghouta for the first time since the start of the conflict, delivering a shipment of humanitarian supplies to the town of Nashabiyeh, the center of al-Marj and the largest town in the area.<sup>38</sup> A sustained uptick of pro-government airstrikes and shelling targeted the towns of al-Marj both before and after the convoy, pausing for a day or two while it entered.

The first ever shipment to Nashabiyeh in al-Marj is notable, as it highlights the importance of depoliticizing the UN OCHA reporting and besieged area classification process. After the UN's first ever direct glimpse at this neglected besieged area, UNICEF's Chief of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, Andreas Knapp, wrote that the "scale of destruction and depth of suffering is mind-blowing."<sup>39</sup> Despite the fact that it was under government siege along with the rest of Eastern Ghouta since 2013, the UN did not recognize the siege of al-Marj until a "comprehensive review" in November 2016.<sup>40</sup> This area was not placed at the top of the monthly negotiations for access until after being appropriately designated by UN OCHA.

34 Harasta Revolutionary Council, Facebook post, 19 June 2017, <bit.ly/HRC2wGNV>.

35 Harasta Revolutionary Council, Facebook post, 17 June 2017, <bit.ly/HRC2gWfB>; Harasta Local Council Facebook Page, Post, 18 June 2017, <bit.ly/HLC2xKj>;

@SyRedCrescent, Tweet, 17 June 2017, <bit.ly/SARC2wge>.

36 Mahmoud al-Darwish, "قليلة وبعضها مستهلك" تخفيف التصعيد «اتفاق» المساعدات التي دخلت ضمن اتفاق "محلي دوما": المساعدات التي دخلت ضمن اتفاق "محلي دوما": Smart News Agency, 26 July 2017, <smartnews-agency.com>.

37 @ICRC\_sy Tweet, 27 July 2017, <bit.ly/ICRC2wPX>.

38 SARC, "SARC teams entered Al-Nashabieh area in Rural Damascus," 30 July 2017, <sarc.sy>

39 Andreas Knapp, "Syrian families struggle to survive in besieged east Ghouta," UNICEF Blog, 1 August 2017, <blogs.unicef.org>.

40 UN Security Council, S/2017/962, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), and 2258 (2015)," 15 November 2016, <www.un.org>.





Burning plastic to extract fuel in Eastern Ghouta. 17 May 2017, Source: Ghouta Media Center



Harasta aid convoy aborted after fired upon in government-controlled area. 17 June 2017, Source: SARC





UN and SARC vehicles enter Nashabiyeh with first aid convoy to area. 30 July 2017, Source: Ghouta Media Center



Rescuers recover remains from airstrikes during scorched earth Qaboun offensive. 5 May 2017, Source: Qaboun Media Office

## **QABOUN & BARZEH (WATCHLIST)**

### **Snapshot:**

Both communities surrendered to government forces during the reporting period. Qaboun was depopulated during a forced surrender agreement and removed from project monitoring entirely, Barzeh remains on the project “Watchlist.”

### **Details:**

The government’s offensive against the Damascus neighborhoods of Qaboun and Barzeh began in February, ending several years of relative calm under a previous truce agreement. The violent offensive reached a peak at the start of the seventh Siege Watch reporting period in May. In Qaboun in particular, the offensive seemed to employ scorched earth tactics aimed at destroying the neighborhood. The strategy used against Barzeh and Qaboun – of breaking years of ceasefire with a complete siege and an intense offensive aimed at forcing the communities to surrender quickly and submit to forced population transfers – is the same one that has led to the surrender of at least nine besieged and “Watchlist” communities in Rural Damascus in the past year. Qaboun and Barzeh stand out from these other cases with regard to the chaotic and complicated negotiations surrounding surrender and forced population transfers, which highlights the lack of organization in both the opposition groups as well as the negotiators on the government side under Russian guidance.

On 5 May, a group of opposition fighters in Qaboun suddenly surrendered, and were quietly transferred out of the neighborhood on government buses. A week later, a wider deal was reportedly reached for Qaboun to include additional deportations that would completely empty the destroyed neighborhood, which would then revert to government control.

For Barzeh, the situation surrounding surrender negotiations was complicated, and confusing even for those in the neighborhood. As with other recent besieged communities forced to surrender, the negotiations were conducted mainly by armed groups, cutting civil society out of the process and leaving civilians in the dark about their fate.

According to details of a tentative surrender agreement for Barzeh released on 7 May, there would be eight rounds of forced population transfers in which a total of 8,000-10,000 people – civilians and fighters – would be transferred to Idlib or Jarablus in northern Syria. The agreement would be overseen by Russia. Hypothetically, those who wanted to stay could “reconcile” with the Syrian government. In practice, residents in other post-surrender communities have been arbitrarily arrested, harassed by pro-government militias, and forced into front line service in the Syrian military, oftentimes in contradiction of the terms of the surrender deal.

As per Siege Watch guidelines, these transfers are considered forced population transfers instead of voluntary evacuations because the populations in question face no choice but to surrender or die, and the deportations are clearly not intended to be temporary in nature. As in other cases, the displaced were sent to overcrowded and dangerous opposition-controlled areas where humanitarian conditions are poor and the threat of violence is high.





Fighters from Barzeh register their names for deportation to Idlib. 8 May 2017, Source: Barzeh Media Office



Forced population transfer from Barzeh. 8 May 2017, Source: Barzeh Media Office

Population transfers from Qaboun and Barzeh took place as follows:

- ◆ 8 May – During the first Barzeh transfer, 22 buses carried approximately 1,500 people to Idlib. The deportees consisted primarily of fighters who wanted to leave, and their family members. According to local Siege Watch contacts these deportees were largely people who were from Idlib and other areas to start with, but had been in Damascus since early in the conflict.
- ◆ 12 May – Eight buses took approximately 300 more fighters and their families to Idlib in the second installment of forced displacement from Barzeh.<sup>41</sup>
- ◆ 14 May – Eight buses carrying 1,000-1,500 people, transported both fighters and civilians to Idlib from Qaboun.<sup>42</sup>
- ◆ 15 May – 25 buses departed for Idlib from Qaboun. Local reports indicated that as many as 1,000 people from this group were instead arrested by government forces. This prompted armed groups in Idlib to threaten to turn back future buses from Qaboun unless the Syrian government released the detainees.<sup>43</sup> By 20 May, an estimated 400 of the detained people had been released.<sup>44</sup>
- ◆ 20 May – An estimated 1,300 people on 25 buses were deported to Idlib in the third Barzeh transfer.<sup>45</sup> An additional five buses departed for Idlib from Qaboun.<sup>46</sup>
- ◆ 29 May – An estimated 1,000 people were transported to Idlib in the fourth and final batch of forced displacements from Barzeh.<sup>47</sup>

After the final buses left Qaboun, leaving the neighborhood depopulated, photos emerged of what appeared to be rampant looting and vandalism by pro-government forces and the burning of remaining property. The looted property was sold in the government-controlled Mezze 86 neighborhood in so-called “Sunni Markets.”<sup>48</sup>

The process in Barzeh appeared to be primarily driven by direct negotiations between Syrian military units and various armed opposition groups, rather than consolidated negotiations with a local committee that represented the civilian population. This led to a seemingly haphazard series of population transfers and caused widespread confusion among the population.

41 Barzeh Damascus, YouTube video, “دمشق \_ برزة : تهجير الدفعة الثانية من مقاتلين حي برزة مع عوائلهم إلى مدينة إدلب,” 12 May 2017, <bit.ly/Barzeh2wUQi>; Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 12 May 2017, <bit.ly/GMC2iGd>.

42 Barzeh Damascus, YouTube video “دمشق \_ القابون : خروج مقاتلين وأهالي حي القابون الدمشقي إلى الشمال السوري,” 14 May 2017, <bit.ly/Barzeh2wwX>.

43 Qasioun News Agency, “ما الشروط التي وضعها جيش النصر لاستقبال المهجرين من دمشق,” 18 May 2017, <qasioun.net>; Enab Baladi,

“جيش النصر”: لن نستقبل مهجري دمشق إلا بإخراج معتقلي القابون,” 18 May 2017, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

44 Qabon Event, Facebook post, 19 May 2017, <bit.ly/Qabon2wFq>; Qabon Event, Facebook post, 17 May 2017, <bit.ly/Qabon2xK7>.

45 Barzeh Damascus, YouTube video, “دمشق \_ برزة : تهجير الدفعة الثالثة من مقاتلي حي برزة مع عوائلهم إلى مدينة إدلب,” 20 May 2017, <bit.ly/Barzeh2wDX>.

46 Local Council the Tishreen Neighborhood of Damascus, Facebook post, 20 May 2017, <http://bit.ly/2x6guPv>.

47 Qasioun News Agency, “وصول الدفعة الأخيرة من مهجري برزة إلى إدلب,” 30 May 2017, <www.qasioun.net>.

48 Micro Syria, “بعد تهجير الدمشقيين... مفروشات حي القابون في مزادات الشبيحة وأسواق النظام السوداء,” 29 May 2017, <microsyria.com>.





Families leave Qaboun during forced population transfers. 14 May 2017, Source: Revolutionary Coordinating Committee in Qaboun Neighborhood

In one unusual incident, seven buses of fighters from Tishreen departed without warning on 12 May, which surprised others in the area.<sup>49</sup> In another example of the disorder, after a call on 11 May for the suspension of population transfers because the Syrian government refused to release approximately 300 detainees,<sup>50</sup> armed groups continued to make their own deals with the government for transfer to Idlib, undermining a unified negotiation process. One small group of fighters departed the very next day. In another strange incident, on 23 May a group of armed opposition fighters reportedly reached a secret deal with the Republican Guard to be transferred to Eastern Ghouta and left Barzeh with supplies and arms in a small convoy of six trucks. However they were turned back by the Syrian Army's Fourth Division at a checkpoint near the Harasta military hospital and were sent back to Barzeh without their weapons.<sup>51</sup>

On 18 May, the Local Council of Barzeh publicly issued a plea for international leaders to end the forced displacement deals, a sign of their marginalization, since civilian leadership was cut out of the negotiation process.<sup>52</sup>

Civilians in Barzeh and Qaboun felt betrayed by the local armed opposition groups in this case of surrender and forced transfer. This sentiment was relayed by Siege Watch contacts but

49 Ghouta Media Center, Facebook post, 12 May 2017, <[bit.ly/GMC2vH4](https://bit.ly/GMC2vH4)>.

50 Bahira al-Zarier, Aya Emad, and Justin Clark, "Rebels suspend Barzeh evacuation deal after regime reportedly fails to release 300 detainees," Syria Direct, 11 May 2017, <[syriadirect.org](https://syriadirect.org)>.

51 All4Syria, "قافلة برزة باتجاه الغوطة الشرقية تعود أدرجها دون ذخيرة" 24 May 2017, <[www.all4syria.info](http://www.all4syria.info)>.

52 @FSAPLatform Tweet, 18 May 2017, <[bit.ly/FSA2x1tY](https://bit.ly/FSA2x1tY)>.



Destroyed mosque in Tishreen area of Qaboun. 17 May 2017, Source: Media Office in the Tishreen Neighborhood

was also widely expressed online, with locals posting to social media that the armed groups that agreed to go to Idlib were corrupt traitors who abandoned their cause.<sup>53</sup> One fighter who decided to stay in Barzeh was quoted as saying: “The [opposition] commanders who left Barzeh were selling Syrian blood, and surrendered us fighters without guaranteeing our rights.”<sup>54</sup>

It is likely that corruption among the leaders of armed groups indeed played a significant role in the chaotic and opaque processes in Barzeh and Qaboun, as they do in other besieged area surrenders. Few armed factions have not trended towards warlordism over the past years, and in a number of cases it seems that their leaders have conceded important civil society demands and civilian protection to the government and foreign negotiators for personal gain. It is not an accident that local civil governing institutions have been cut out of many of the surrender deal negotiations in the past year, leaving civilians with no say in their fate. In Barzeh and Qaboun, which became centers of the war economy trade serving as smuggling routes into Eastern Ghouta for years, the level of corruption and cronyism among armed group leadership may have been more exaggerated than in more isolated communities.

Although the Syrian government has portrayed what happened in Barzeh as the same as the surrender agreements of communities like Qudsaya and Moadamiya, which reverted completely to government control, it appears to be slightly more complex.<sup>55</sup> Because the surrender of

<sup>53</sup> Qabon Event, Facebook post, 16 May 2017, <[bit.ly/Qabon2xJF4](https://bit.ly/Qabon2xJF4)>.

<sup>54</sup> Alaa Rateb and Madeline Edwards, “In recently surrendered Damascus suburb, rebel fighter stays behind: ‘I want a normal life,’” Syria Direct, 5 June 2017, <[syriadirect.org](https://syriadirect.org)>.

<sup>55</sup> SANA, “إنجاز اتفاق التسوية في حي برزة بإخلائه من جميع المظاهر المسلحة,” 29 May 2017, <[www.sana.sy](http://www.sana.sy)>.





The ruins of the Tishreen area of Qaboun. 16 May 2017, Source: Media Office in the Tishreen Neighborhood

Barzeh was driven by talks directly with individual armed groups, the deals were limited only to the forced population transfers and the closure of the smuggling tunnels, and did not address the lifting of the siege or the handover of neighborhood to the Syrian government. Accordingly, the remaining residents of Barzeh appear to have slightly more autonomy than those in other post-surrender communities.

Following the end of deportations from Barzeh, the siege and restrictions were not immediately lifted. While some small shipments of bread were allowed in each day, other movement remained restricted. The exception was students who were allowed to go out of the neighborhood to class during the day and return with small quantities of food supplies. Pro-government forces did not enter Barzeh and establish internal checkpoints after the surrender. On 9 June, a shipment of aid delivered by the SARC was finally allowed into Barzeh. The shipment was coordinated with a visit from the Governor of Damascus.

Since then the situation in Barzeh appears to have essentially reverted to its state before the recent government offensive, with the difference being that the neighborhood is now disarmed. People not wanted by the Syrian government had no problem leaving and entering the neighborhood, and cars were allowed through the checkpoints. The neighborhood maintained electricity, water, and sanitation services. The SARC has been allowed to bring in more humanitarian assistance with the exception of medical aid or mobile clinics, although people can generally exit the neighborhood for medical treatment. Notably, it does not seem that the government has sent forces into Barzeh to exert control, instead choosing to maintain the checkpoints around the periphery.

Although people in Barzeh appear to have fared better than those in other post-surrender communities due to the neighborhood's strategic location and the politics between different Syrian military bodies, by mid-July, familiar signs of abuse began to emerge. Between 10 – 31 July, an estimated 20 people were arrested by government forces at the checkpoints surrounding the neighborhoods, breaking assurances made by the Syrian government during the surrender process in May.

On 22 July, government forces began restricting what cars could bring into the neighborhood, banning shipments with food, medical supplies, and animal feed, as well as other materials in any significant amount. People were limited to what they could carry in by hand. The rationale given was the possible existence of another smuggling tunnel into Eastern Ghouta. This was accompanied by the entry of government forces to inspect tunnels. While no one was arrested in Barzeh during the inspection, several were asked to leave the area to answer questions and then detained once they were outside.

In addition to these crackdowns on Barzeh towards the end of the reporting period, visibility into the neighborhood has decreased significantly since the surrender. Several social media pages associated with local civil authorities that documented developments have been shut down, and residents are unable to discuss the situation freely for fear of retribution.



## 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
<b>SUM:</b>			<b>72,500</b>

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

### Snapshot:

Despite rumors of surrender agreement negotiations, none materialized and conditions in the southern suburbs remained relatively static during the reporting period.

### Details:

The southern suburbs enclave of Rural Damascus remained surrounded by Syrian military forces and sectarian pro-government militias during the May - July reporting period. The besieged neighborhoods are still controlled by a patchwork of armed groups who have effectively segmented the enclave into three sections. On the east, the neighborhoods of Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) are controlled by a handful of armed opposition groups. These neighborhoods have most of the enclave's remaining population and the primary checkpoint into government-controlled Damascus. To their west, the neighborhoods of Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad are controlled primarily by ISIS, with a small corner of Yarmouk remaining under the control of HTS. On the western side of the besieged enclave is the isolated al-Qadam neighborhood.

Four of the six besieged communities – Yelda, Babbila, Beit Sahm, and al-Qadam – all have had truces with the government in place since 2014, but conditions have not completely normalized. During the reporting period there were daily skirmishes in the Yarmouk area between ISIS and HTS. Otherwise the southern suburbs remained calm during the reporting period.

While humanitarian conditions in the southern suburbs were better than in some other besieged areas, they were still poor during the reporting period. There was limited movement through the YBB checkpoint, which only an estimated 10-15% of the besieged population could use. It was open six days a week but was subject to closure without notice. As with the al-Wafideen checkpoint, government forces imposed a tax on goods, inflating the prices in the besieged enclave.

Medical supplies were still highly restricted and the medical sector remained in shambles. Residents have not had running water in years and continued to survive on dirty well water, contributing to the frequent outbreaks of disease such as typhoid.

One UN interagency aid convoy reached the southern suburbs during the reporting period. The 27-truck aid convoy entered YBB on 8 July with 7,000 food baskets and medical supplies.<sup>56</sup>

Yarmouk is the only portion of the southern suburbs that is officially recognized as besieged by the UN, although it is part of the same besieged enclave as the surrounding neighborhoods. Notably, civilians trapped in Yarmouk face similar conditions to those in adjacent Hajar al-Aswad, which is also under ISIS control. Civilians in both neighborhoods live under a double siege, suffering both from the lack of services and supplies as well as the tyranny of ISIS rule. Regardless, Hajar al-Aswad, which has never been reached with UN humanitarian assistance, is not recognized as besieged in the UN OCHA reporting, nor are any of the other southern suburbs.

### **Negotiations**

In April, there were reports that several separate surrender negotiations were being undertaken in parallel behind the scenes by various actors in different parts of the southern suburbs. On the pro-government side, there were reports of negotiations efforts undertaken by Russia, the Syrian government, and Iran, all with slightly different terms, representing their divergent preferred results. Reportedly the Russian negotiators have a marked preference for allowing civilian populations to stay in place as compared to Syrian and Iranian negotiation efforts. A similar divergence between Russian and Syrian desires regarding displacement was also noted last year during the forced surrender of Moadamiya, which lies to the west of the southern suburbs enclave.

One of these negotiations was an effort by Iran and Qatar conferring directly with Ahrar al-Sham's leadership to add Yelda, Babbila, and Beit Sahm (YBB) to the "Four Towns" agreement. This was the same "Four Towns" agreement that led to large population transfers out of Madaya, Zabadani, Fuaa, and Kefraya and the handover of Madaya and Zabadani to pro-government forces. News of this effort brought civilians in YBB out into the streets in April, holding major protests to reject the idea of forced displacement and to demand a say in negotiations. Ahrar al-Sham has only a minor presence in YBB, with an estimated 60-100 fighters, and news of this negotiation drew ire from both other armed groups and civil society.

Another add-on to the "Four Towns" agreement appeared to involve HTS, which would hand over control of its northwestern section of Yarmouk camp to pro-government forces and be transferred out of the area. On 8 May, a group of injured HTS fighters were evacuated from Yarmouk for medical treatment under the auspices of the SARC, reportedly a piece of the second stage of the "Four Towns" agreement, in return for a medical evacuation of four ill patients from Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib.<sup>57</sup> The HTS fighters were evacuated with their families for a total of 20 people.

<sup>56</sup> @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 8 July 2017, <bit.ly/SARC2vBmv>.

<sup>57</sup> Yarmouk Camp in our Hearts, Facebook post, 8 May 2017, <bit.ly/Yarmouk2xK4>; Noura Hourani, Tariq Adely, and Lina Eghzawi, "Sick residents evacuated, injured fighters leave as second round of Four Towns Agreement begins," Syria Direct, 8 May 2017, <syriadirect.org>; Pictures of Our Yarmouk Camp 2, Facebook post, 8 May 2017, <bit.ly/Yarmouk2vBz>.



Children wait while supplies are offloaded during a rare aid delivery in the southern suburbs. 8 July 2017, Source: SARC

A third stage was supposed to involve further population transfers out of Fuaa and Kefraya in Idlib governorate in return for the transfer of all remaining HTS out of Yarmouk, but this had not yet taken place by the end of the May - July reporting period.

In late May there appeared to be some sort of movement towards a Russian deal with ISIS in Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad. The details are fuzzy, but the general outline seemed to be that ISIS would hand over control of its areas to the armed FSA-affiliated groups from YBB, and receive safe passage to al-Raqqa. On 21 May, the ISIS forces in the southern suburbs reportedly received the order from outside leadership to prepare to leave within 72 hours, and began quickly selling off their supplies and belongings. Vehicles to transport the fighters were sent to the area. Two days later the departure was delayed, and then ultimately failed to materialize. Local rumor is that the reason the deal fell through was that the Syrian government – which had no part in the Russian designed deal – refused to provide any guarantees that the ISIS fighters would be allowed to continue to al-Raqqa.

On 7 June, a group of wounded ISIS fighters was reportedly evacuated from Hajar al-Aswad for medical treatment. Details of the incident are not known.

In the case of al-Qadam, in May it was rumored that Afnan al-Sham – the controlling opposition group – had reached a deal directly with the Syrian government to hand over the neighborhoods within a month. For unknown reasons this deal has not yet materialized.

As of late May, most efforts to negotiate a surrender deal for YBB appeared to be on pause. Siege Watch contacts believed that nothing further would happen while the Syrian government was focused on Eastern Ghouta, but expressed anxiety about what would happen after that.

## OTHER RURAL DAMASCUS (WATCHLIST)

### Snapshot:

Madaya, al-Tal, Khan al-Shieh, Wadi Barada, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, and Moadamiya all remain on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” after surrendering to the government in prior reporting periods.

### Details:

The post-surrender communities of al-Tal, Qudsaya, al-Hameh, Moadamiya, Khan al-Shieh, Madaya, and Wadi Barada all share a number of common experiences and circumstances. All of the communities surrendered to pro-government forces after being subjected to intensified siege and bombardment campaigns in prior reporting periods. Under the terms of the surrender agreements, several busloads of both armed opposition fighters and civilians were forcibly transferred out of the areas to opposition-held Idlib. Following each of the population transfers, government forces entered the neighborhoods and asserted control by setting up internal checkpoints, monitoring movement and communications, and forcing everyone to submit to security screenings as part of their “reconciliation” process.

Humanitarian conditions in all locations have improved since surrendering, and some have seen the return of a number of displaced residents or IDPs from other areas. But government-controlled checkpoints still surround all of the post-surrender communities, and continue to enforce partial access restrictions for both people and supplies. In general, construction and medical supplies are the most tightly restricted categories of items. Patients requiring treatment must generally exit their towns and seek treatment in central Damascus. Access for UN humanitarian agencies remains limited and for the most part, charity aid organizations are not permitted to operate. In some areas, basic services such as water and electricity have been partially restored, while others still go without.

Residents in the post-surrender communities are afraid to speak to outside parties for fear of retribution from the security services. Communications with the outside world are monitored, and even a call with a family member is enough for residents to be brought into intelligence headquarters for questioning. This repression of information is a cause for concern given the sporadic reports of civilian abuses collected during the Siege Watch data gathering efforts.

The Syrian government has also repeatedly failed to live up to the full terms of the surrender agreements, especially with regard to the release of detainees and the provision of a six-month grace period for men before compulsory military service. Thousands of young men from these communities have been forcibly conscripted into the pro-government Syrian forces since their surrender, often into the National Defense Force (NDF) militias.

In all of the post-surrender “Watchlist” areas in Rural Damascus people were frequently harassed at government checkpoints, and there were sporadic reports of arbitrary detention by Syrian security services. Oftentimes, but not always, these detentions are used to force men into the Syrian armed forces before the six month grace period established in the surrender agreements. In other cases the detainees appear to have been on intelligence agency “lists” and are believed to be in one of the government’s notorious detention centers. Some of the worst cases of arbitrary detention have come out of Wadi Barada. Reportedly, since the enclave’s surrender more than 50 people have been detained as leverage to use against their family members who are activists or opposition fighters. In these cases, people who were forcibly transferred to Idlib during the surrender period have been pressured to turn themselves in to





Ein al-Fijeh after the scorched earth campaign. 11 August 2017, Source: Ain al Fijeh – Pulse of Damascus

government forces or risk the lives of their detained family members.

There is no end in sight for the slow, steady purging of people in the post-surrender communities, where nearly everyone has a relative who participated either in the fighting or in the peaceful protests.

**Wadi Barada** – The Wadi Barada enclave surrendered in January 2017, a month after pro-government forces launched a major offensive against the area, breaking a multi-year truce. Two out of the dozen towns in Wadi Barada – Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema – were destroyed during the assault, and their entire populations were displaced either to other villages in Wadi Barada, or to Idlib during the forced population transfers. The civilians remaining in Wadi Barada appear to be subjected to greater abuses and worse living conditions than in any other post-surrender community.

Access for humanitarian agencies is still highly restricted into the Wadi Barada enclave, and Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema remain off-limits even for civilians in adjacent towns. On 6 May 2017, a 20-truck interagency aid convoy was sent to Wadi Barada, but locals claim that significant portions of the aid – particularly the aid intended for displaced Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema residents – was stolen.<sup>58</sup> This is consistent with reports that the IDPs from Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema are more frequently targeted for harassment and abuse. Residents in Wadi Barada still lack sufficient access to medical care. Siege Watch was informed of a hepatitis outbreak during the May – July reporting period with approximately 50 serious cases, leading to the deaths of three young children.

<sup>58</sup> Ein al-Fijeh Pulse of Damascus, Facebook post, 2 June 2017, <[bit.ly/EinFijeh2i](https://www.facebook.com/ainal-fijeh)>.

As more details trickle out of Wadi Barada, the signs increasingly point to a serious and decisive demographic engineering strategy in at least the towns of Ein el-Fijeh and Bassema by the Syrian government and its ally Hezbollah.

Upwards of 90% of the land of Ein al-Fijeh has reportedly been confiscated by the government through a combination of methods ranging from violence and threats to administrative changes. The government-owned zone around the Ein el-Fijeh spring – the Damascus region’s main water source – has been expanded to three times its prior size. Displaced residents who owned land in that zone have reportedly lost their property without compensation.

The government has also changed the zoning of land from agricultural to residential, in order to sell it off to government officers. A number of displaced residents who owned land in both Bassema and Ein al-Fijeh have been coerced into selling their land below value, with officers taking steps like threatening the safety of detained family members to ensure compliance. One individual reported to have purchased a significant amount of land is Jamil Hassan, head of the Syrian government’s Air Force Intelligence directorate and target of EU and US sanctions for his role in violent crackdowns against peaceful protestors.

Both Ein al-Fijeh and Bassema were heavily targeted during the offensive that forced the enclave to surrender, and much of their infrastructure was destroyed. There are reports that the government later demolished a number of private homes that survived the offensive. In several cases related by Siege Watch contacts, displaced owners outside of the Wadi Barada enclave were contacted by acquaintances affiliated with the Syrian military and told that their homes had been destroyed and they should not bother trying to return.

Because of the challenges associated with getting information out of the Wadi Barada area since it surrendered, the timeline of when all the aforementioned developments happened following the January surrender is unclear. Many of these steps were reportedly issued as verbal changes instead of being put in writing, to avoid leaving a paper trail. This multi-pronged approach to ensuring that an intentionally displaced population cannot return is very similar to the developments in depopulated neighborhoods of Homs city since 2014.<sup>59</sup>

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

## Homs

Map 3:

Besieged Communities in Homs

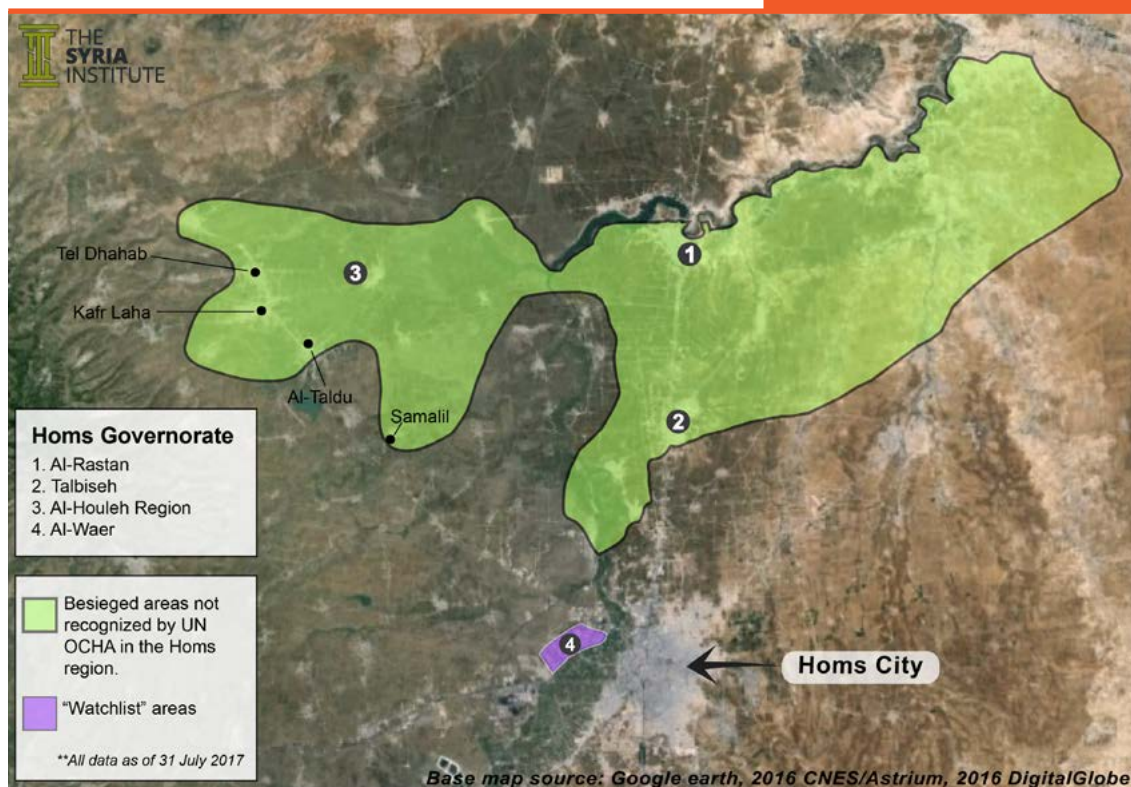


Table 3:

Homs Governorate Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Al-Houleh Region +	3	Syrian Govt.	55,000
Al-Rastan +	3	Syrian Govt.	115,000
Talbiseh +	3	Syrian Govt.	70,000
<b>SUM:</b>			<b>240,000</b>

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

### Snapshot:

The humanitarian and military conditions in northern Homs remained poor but relatively static. There were no changes to Tier level, and minor changes to population estimates. Al-Waer was re-designated to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" after the completion of forced population transfers out of the neighborhood.



## Details:

### NORTHERN HOMS GOVERNORATE

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 Syrian armed forces and a variety of affiliated groups including the Syrian National Defense Forces, Iran-backed foreign militias, Syrian al-Ridha militia, Hezbollah, and Iranian IRGC forces. None of the besieged areas in northern Homs have ever been officially designated as besieged by the UN.

Violent shelling attacks against the besieged areas of northern Homs took place throughout the reporting period although the attacks were not evenly distributed. Contacts in al-Rastan and Talbiseh reported a noticeable decrease in attacks, although several civilians in Talbiseh were still killed in pro-government shelling.<sup>60</sup> A child was killed in shelling on 6 May. Two men were killed in shelling on 13 May. On 29 June intense shelling killed a nurse and injured at least five others.

Unlike al-Rastan and Talbiseh, al-Houleh area saw several waves of airstrikes in addition to frequent shelling by pro-government militia forces. Notably, in mid-July, attacks were launched on all of the towns of al-Houleh and remained consistently high throughout the remainder of the month. *[Note: The strikes dropped off in early August with Russia's announcement of a new ceasefire initiative brokered in Cairo for all of northern Homs. A six-man local committee representing the northern Homs areas then took over the negotiations, as the Cairo agreement did not include any representatives from the area, and people objected to the fact that it made no mention of releasing detainees. The Syrian government was not involved in either the Cairo agreement, or the negotiations between Russia and the local committee, which were ongoing as of the time of writing.]*

Trapped civilians relied on local food production, smuggling, charitable assistance, and trade with pro-government traders at the government-controlled checkpoints. Goods that were brought into besieged areas this way incurred extra fees to both the traders and the government checkpoint forces, and were ultimately sold at inflated prices in the besieged area. The prices of goods continued to be subject to unpredictable fluctuations.

Water shortages – a problem in previous reporting periods – were noted as a concern in all three communities in May, as Local Councils lacked the fuel to pump potable water for the local populations. The low water levels of the Rastan dam reported during the prior reporting period persisted throughout the current reporting period. The cause of the water levels in al-Rastan is unknown, although intentional cuts by government forces are suspected.

The Syrian government reportedly cut water to the Houleh Dam on 5 May, causing water levels in the Taldu reservoir to drop significantly by mid-May. This water cut to the Taldu reservoir – the primary source of water for local agricultural irrigation – negatively impacted crop production in the area.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Rastan United Media Office, Facebook post, 6 May 2017, <[bit.ly/RMO2xJU](https://bit.ly/RMO2xJU)>.

<sup>61</sup> @SiegeWatch Tweet, 20 June 2017, <[bit.ly/SiegeW2vQ](https://bit.ly/SiegeW2vQ)>.



Rescuers examine the rubble of a home destroyed in an airstrike in Taldu, al-Houleh. 8 May 2017, Source: Syrian Civil Defense in Homs Governorate



Empty waterways and barren agricultural land in al-Houleh. 17 June 2017, Source: Jihad Mousa



The low water levels and lack of fuel for water pumps led many civilians to dig their own wells. In Kafr Laha, so many illegal wells were created the Local Council had to intervene. Unsanctioned wells drew water away from public wells, and were often too close to public wells to meet safety standards.<sup>62</sup>

The water situation was slightly better in the Talbiseh area, where people have been receiving support from international aid groups to dig and maintain wells. In Talbiseh, the Local Council also pumps in water every three days from the “Sariko” water station.

There was limited movement of people through the checkpoints, with certain groups such as students and government employees allowed to pass through, representing less than 20% of the population. Cars were not allowed through the checkpoints. Patients requiring medical treatment were generally permitted to exit the enclaves with supervision.

Humanitarian aid was allowed to enter the area infrequently, with one shipment reaching each of the three main enclaves between May – July:<sup>63</sup>

- ◆ 15 June – A 45-truck interagency aid convoy of 45 trucks reached Talbiseh with food aid sufficient for 84,000 people for one month, as well as some medical and other essential supplies.<sup>64</sup> This was a reduction from the amount initially requested, and a significant amount of medical supplies were removed from the shipment.
- ◆ 23 June – A 40-truck interagency aid convoy carrying food, sanitation, and other supplies reached al-Rastan with aid for 107,500 people for one month.<sup>65</sup> Siege Watch contacts previously reported that the expected aid convoy had been delayed for several months, but were not sure of the reason. Government forces removed medical supplies from the convoy.
- ◆ 15 July – A 31-truck interagency aid convoy with aid for 87,000 people reached al-Houleh.<sup>66</sup>

At the beginning of June, al-Rastan residents staged protests against the local Shura Council, calling it illegal and without authority to negotiate with Russia on their behalf. The protestors proclaimed their support instead for the Local Council and local Sharia Court. They also called for the downfall of the Syrian regime.<sup>67</sup>

62 Hussein Abu Mohammad, “حفر الآبار يحتاج رخصة بريف حمص”, Aleppo Media Center, 14 July 2017, <amc-sy.net>. Houla Media Office, Facebook post, 8 July 2017 <bit.ly/HMO2wG2>.

63 UN Security Council, S/2017/623, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 21 July 2017 <www.un.org>.

64 SARC, “Aid Convoy to Talbiseh,” 10 July 2017, <sarc.sy>.

65 Qasioun News Agency, YouTube video, “قافلة مساعدات تدخل مدينة الرستن بريف حمص,” 23 June 2017, <bit.ly/Qasioun2wGy>.

66 @SYRedCrescent Tweet, 15 July 2017, <bit.ly/SARC2vpL>.

67 Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 2 June, <bit.ly/RMO2wfe>; Rastan Media Office, Facebook post, 2 June 2017, <bit.ly/RMO2x1E>; Al-Jisr Satellite Channel, “مظاهرات في الرستن ترفض التفاوض مع النظام وتطالب بإسقاطه,” 2 June 2017, <bit.ly/Jisr2xJZ>.





Water is pumped into Talbesh once every three days. Source: Omar Qayson



Protests against the Shura Council and the Syrian government in Rastan. 3 June 2017, Source: United Media Office in al-Rastan

## AL-WAER (WATCHLIST)

During the prior reporting period, al-Waer was subjected to a scorched earth offensive that precipitated a humanitarian disaster and ultimately resulted in the neighborhood's surrender to government forces in March. As a result of the surrender agreement, forced population transfers to Idlib and northern Aleppo began on 18 March and continued on a weekly basis into the current reporting period. The final convoy of people to leave al-Waer under the surrender took place on 19 May. Pro-government forces delayed the final convoy for more than 36-hours at a checkpoint on the outskirts of the city, before finally allowing them to continue on 21 May. During the transfer process, more and more people decided to leave the area, and the last few convoys were larger than originally expected.

More than 20,000 people ended up being transferred out of the neighborhood, making it the second largest population transfer of the conflict after eastern Aleppo. According to UN estimates only 17,500 people remained following the transfers.<sup>68</sup>

As with other post-surrender communities, all Siege Watch contacts were deported from the neighborhood during the population transfer process, and information about conditions in al-Waer became more difficult to ascertain. Humanitarian conditions for the remaining civilians in al-Waer improved after the surrender, although the fear of arbitrary arrests remained. Pro-government forces reportedly arrested at least five people in the middle of night on 10 June.<sup>69</sup> Sporadic reports of additional arbitrary detentions occurred throughout the remainder of the reporting period.<sup>70</sup>

After the final buses departed, Russian forces reportedly entered the neighborhood to assert control, as per the terms of the surrender. Despite their presence there were reports of rampant looting and destruction by pro-government militia, who entered the neighborhood on the day of the final transfer, breaking the terms of the surrender agreement.<sup>71</sup>

The displaced al-Waer residents who ended up in IDP camps in both Aleppo and Idlib encountered poor living conditions. The camp near Jarablus, Aleppo that has been set up for the IDPs reportedly has insufficient tents, forcing some families to live outside. Turkish AFAD is supposed to be responsible for supplying the camp but has not been providing the required aid. The conditions were so bad that several hundred of the displaced residents reportedly decided to return to al-Waer during the May – July period, subjecting themselves to “reconciliation” with the government forces.<sup>72</sup>

For those in Idlib who did not have family or friends to stay with, the situation was equally bleak. The population of Idlib has ballooned in the past year and areas hosting IDPs are overcrowded and undersupplied. Poor humanitarian conditions are made worse by the ongoing airstrikes and clashes between HTS and other opposition factions.

68 UN Security Council, S/2017/623, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 21 July 2017 <[www.un.org](http://www.un.org)>.

69 SN4HR, “Civilians arrested by Syrian regime forces in al Wa'er neighborhood in Homs city on June 10,” 11 June 2017, <[sn4hr.org](http://sn4hr.org)>.

70 Al-Houleh News, Facebook post, 11 June 2017, <[bit.ly/Houleh2w0K](https://bit.ly/Houleh2w0K)>.

71 Baladi News, “After Evacuation, Assad's forces Storm al-Waer and Arrest Civilians,” 26 May 2017, <[www.baladi-news.com](http://www.baladi-news.com)>.

72 Mohammed Al-Haj Ali, and Tariq Adely, “After leaving Waer, residents choose to return from life in camps in northern Syria,” Syria Direct, 9 May 2017, <[syriadirect.org](http://syriadirect.org)>.

Al-Dorar, “المئات من مُهَجَّرِي الوعر يقررون العودة لمناطق النظام السوري” 10 July 2017, <[aldorars.com](http://aldorars.com)>.





Children from al-Waer await transfer to Idlib. 15 May 2017, Source: Abody Wika



A child waits during final population transfer out of al-Waer. 21 May 2017, Source: Abdulmalik Manzalji





Al-Waer IDP belongings in the Zoghara camp in northern Aleppo. 14 May 2017, Source: Fadi Yahya



Al-Waer IDPs wait for water in the Zoghara camp. 29 July 2017, Source: Abdulmalik Manzalji



### Details:

The besieged neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor city have been surrounded by ISIS forces since the beginning of 2015, but are controlled by Syrian government forces. Many civilians consider themselves besieged by both ISIS and the Syrian government. Government forces tightly regulate humanitarian aid distribution and prevent civilians from fleeing or evacuating the neighborhoods. ISIS forces continued to block exit routes over land and water and launched daily artillery attacks, leading to the deaths of dozens of civilians during the reporting period.

The besieged neighborhoods have been receiving regular WFP airlifted food supplies since April 2016. During the May – July reporting period, WFP continued airdropping aid deliveries to the besieged areas, though the airdrops were reportedly less frequent in June and July. Government forces and affiliated militias continued to appropriate much of the international assistance dropped by the WFP.<sup>73</sup> The food not hoarded by pro-government forces is sold to traders who in turn sell it in the besieged areas at exorbitant prices that most of the impoverished residents are unable to afford. During the reporting period the level of malnutrition in the government-controlled neighborhoods of Deir Ezzor continued to increase.<sup>74</sup> Conditions are worst in the more isolated eastern neighborhood of Harabesh.

The medical sector in besieged Deir Ezzor has been devastated, and medical aid has not reached the areas since August 2016. According to Siege Watch contacts, at least three civilians in Deir Ezzor died due to the lack of medical care during the reporting period: A man died in Harabesh on 24 May, and two children died on 13 June.

The besieged areas continued to receive airdrops of supplies from Russian and Syrian aircraft, but these were used exclusively for military resupply, despite the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian conditions. The pro-government merchants also flew in supplies to sell, paying shipping fees for the Syrian government to airlift supplies into the area.

There were also reports that government forces flew in a significant number of reinforcements from the Hasakeh area in recent months. These arrivals have coincided with a drop in forced conscription campaigns, although at least one such sweep was reported on 24 July, when flying checkpoints were set up to detain and enlist young men and bolster troop strength.<sup>75</sup>

There is fear among the civilian population of Deir Ezzor over what will happen in the coming months. People are expecting much more intensive fighting as both pro-government and US-backed anti-ISIS forces approach the city from different fronts.

73 Deirezzor24, "World Food Programme completed its 250th air drop of humanitarian food supplies to the trapped civilians in the besieged city of Deir Ezzor,"

31 May 2017, <en.deirezzor24.net>.

74 Shaam News Network, "ناشطون يحذرون من مجاعة في المناطق الخاضعة لسيطرة قوات الأسد في دير الزور,"

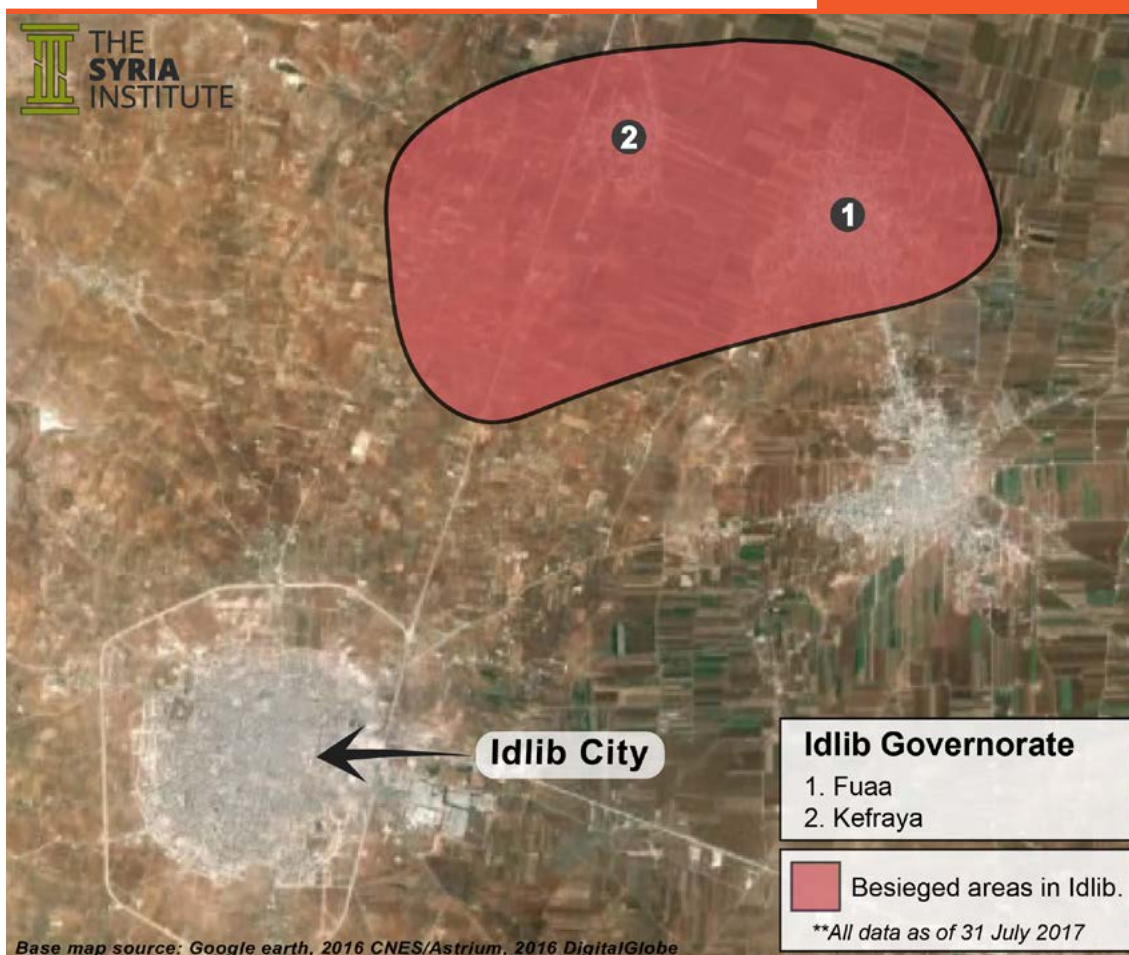
16 May 2017, <www.shaam.org>.

75 Said Jawdat, "قوات النظام تلاحق المحاصرين في دير الزور للزج بهم في المعارك" All4Syria, 24 July 2017, <www.all4syria.info>.



**Map 5:**

Besieged Communities in Idlib



**Table 5:**

Idlib Besieged Communities

Community Neighborhood	Siege Tier	Besieged by	Est. Current Population
Fuaa and Kefraya	3	Armed groups	10,800

**Snapshot:**

No change in besieged designation or Tier level. Population estimate lowered following population transfers associated with the “Four Towns” agreement during the prior reporting period.



### Details:

The government-controlled towns of Fuaa and Kefraya remained besieged by armed opposition groups and HTS throughout the May – July reporting period. During the prior reporting period, the “Four Towns” agreement saw reciprocal population transfers out of Fuaa and Kefraya in coordination with reciprocal transfers out of Madaya and Zabadani in Rural Damascus. Prior reports on the terms of the complex agreement – negotiated by Iran and Qatar directly with different fighting factions – indicated that the entire remaining populations of Fuaa and Kefraya would be transferred to government-controlled areas, and the towns would be handed over to armed opposition group control, as Madaya and Zabadani in exchange reverted to government control.

In early June there were reports of explosions and fires in Fuaa and Kefraya as fighters burned their supplies in preparation for transfer out of the area.<sup>76</sup> For unknown reasons, the transfer did not happen and an estimated 10,800 people remained trapped in Fuaa and Kefraya throughout the entire reporting period.

Fuaa and Kefraya received some supplies through a number of airdrops from government allies during the reporting period.<sup>77</sup> The towns were not reached with any UN aid convoys.

<sup>76</sup> Qasioun News Agency, “Explosions and Fire Blazes in Kafraya and Fua Towns Northern Idlib,” 8 June 2017, <qasioun.net>.

<sup>77</sup> Edlib Media Center YouTube Channel, Video, “طيران اليوشن يلقي سلال مظلمية على بلدتي القوعة و كفرىا شمال إدلب,” 5 June 2017, <bit.ly/EMC2iGh>; Qasioun News Agency, “Idlib:

Ilyushin Planes Drop Food Baskets Over Kafraya and Fua,” 5 June 2017, <video.qasioun.net>.

## Other Watchlist Communities

### ALEPPO

Following the capture of eastern Aleppo by pro-government forces in December, the community was reclassified from besieged to “Watchlist.” During the past quarter, significant civilian abuse by pro-government militias was reported in the post-surrender enclave. Despite these challenges, an estimated 290,000 people have returned to formerly besieged areas of Eastern Aleppo since the surrender in December, according to the UN.<sup>78</sup> As in other post-surrender communities, displaced Siege Watch contacts have been unable to return home, and information is more difficult to collect than before the population transfers.

The Siege Watch project will keep eastern Aleppo on the “Watchlist” for the foreseeable future due to reports of human rights abuses, decreased visibility, and the vulnerability of remaining civilian populations. For a more detailed accounting of the fall of eastern Aleppo see the Fifth Quarterly Siege Watch report covering the November 2016 – January 2017 period, and the Atlantic Council’s “Breaking Aleppo” report.<sup>79</sup>

### DARAA

Muhajja, in Daraa, was placed on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” during the previous period. Realistically, it met the criteria for total siege as early as December 2016. Its designation by the project was belated due to data gathering challenges. The siege of Muhajja was notable for the government’s successful efforts to suppress information coming out of the town, which drew little to no international attention, including from the UN. The Siege Watch project was prepared to reclassify Muhajja to the besieged list, when on 13 May the town negotiators reached a détente deal with pro-government forces that led to a partial relaxation of access restrictions.<sup>80</sup> Restrictions on the entry of goods were sequentially relaxed over the weeks following the agreement.<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, Siege Watch determined not to designate Muhajja as besieged. Muhajja is still under the control of a local armed opposition group and surrounded by government forces, who control checkpoints on the four main routes out of the town. While there has not been any recent fighting in Muhajja, the town remains vulnerable to sudden shifts in circumstances or government strategy. As a result it remained on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” during the May – July reporting period.

78 UN Security Council, S/2017/733, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016),” 24 August 2017, <[www.un.org](http://www.un.org)>.

79 PAX and The Syria institute, “Siege Watch – Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria: November 2016 – January 2017,” March 2017, <[siegewatch.org](http://siegewatch.org)>; The Atlantic Council, “Breaking Aleppo,” February 2017, <[www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org)>.

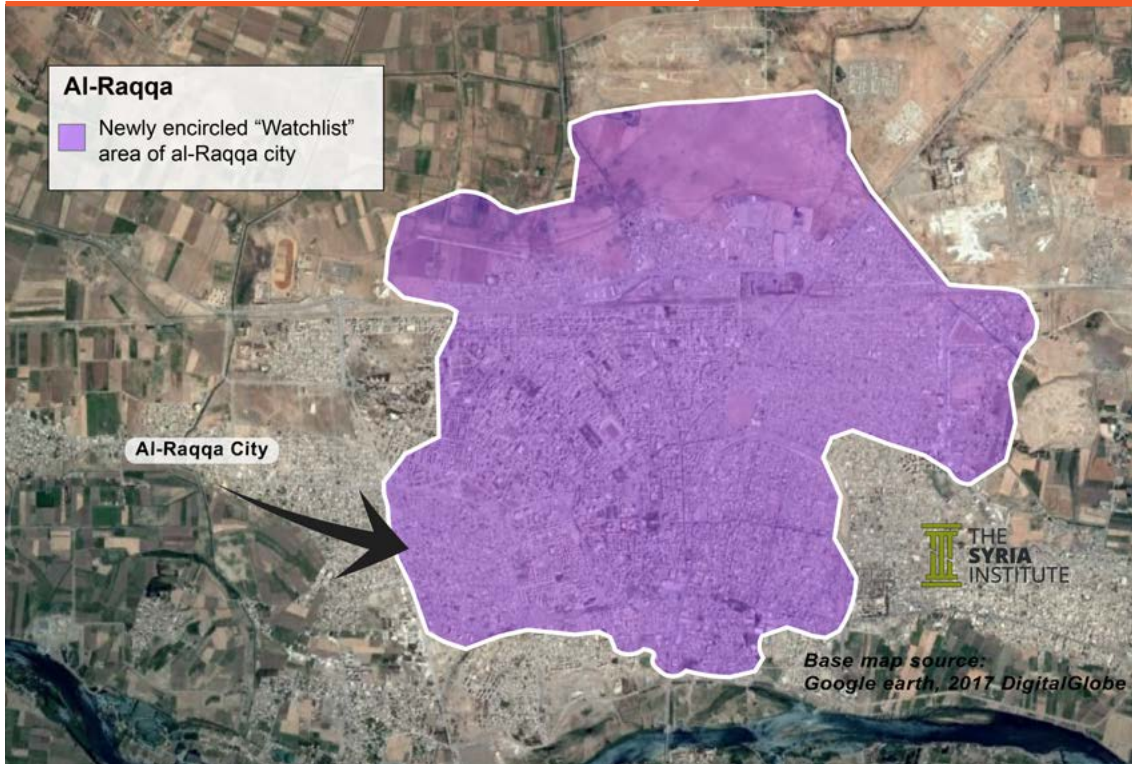
80 Mahajja Media Office, Facebook post, 13 May 2017, <[bit.ly/Mahajja2gB4](https://bit.ly/Mahajja2gB4)>.

81 Mahajja Media Office, Facebook post, 22 May 2017, <[bit.ly/Mahajja2gnC](https://bit.ly/Mahajja2gnC)>; Mahajja Media Office, Facebook post, 24 May 2017, <[bit.ly/Mahajja2wQ9](https://bit.ly/Mahajja2wQ9)>.

## AL-RAQQA

### Map 6:

"Watchlist" Neighborhoods of al-Raqqa City



The city of al-Raqqa was added to the Siege Watch "Watchlist" in August for the first time after the end of the May – July reporting period. Al-Raqqa city is controlled by ISIS, and estimates of the current population by the UN and other humanitarian major actors range from 10,000-50,000.<sup>82</sup> The SDF, backed by the US-led Global Coalition, launched an offensive to capture al-Raqqa at the start of June, and the city became completely surrounded as of 26 June.

Al-Raqqa is the only community in Syria currently under siege by the Global Coalition and its SDF partners. Unlike those communities in Syria besieged by the Syrian government where the siege is used as a form of collective punishment against civilians, it appears that combatants (ISIS fighters) are the primary targets of the siege of al-Raqqa city. Nonetheless, civilians are being severely impacted by the siege and are facing indiscriminate attacks from the SDF and the Global Coalition that violate international humanitarian law.<sup>83</sup>

Prior to the complete encirclement of al-Raqqa, Global Coalition airstrikes destroyed the bridges out of the city across the Euphrates. Other civilian infrastructure inside of al-Raqqa has also been targeted in attacks and people are without running water or electricity. Humanitarian conditions for

<sup>82</sup> REACH Initiative, "Ar-Raqqa City, Syria – Situation Overview III," 28 July 2017, <reliefweb.int>; UN Security Council, S/2017/623, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), and 2332 (2016)," 21 July 2017, <www.un.org>.

<sup>83</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Indiscriminate Attacks and Indiscriminate Weapons in International Humanitarian Law," March 2016, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

civilians in al-Raqqa are increasingly grim with food supplies running low and little access to clean water or medical supplies.

ISIS fighters are reportedly using civilians in al-Raqqa as human shields, preventing their escape and shooting many who try to flee. But for those who do escape ISIS and attempt to leave the city there are no good options. Escaping is physically dangerous. People are afraid of being caught in crossfire or killed by SDF or US-led Global Coalition members who think that they are ISIS fighters. There are reported cases of civilian boats being targeted by Global Coalition airstrikes.<sup>84</sup> The Global Coalition has not designated any safety zones for civilians seeking protection nor established corridors for civilians to use to leave the city. Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the commander of the US operations in al-Raqqa, told the New York Times: “We shoot every boat we find.”<sup>85</sup> Civilians also face a serious risk of hitting one of the thousands of landmines that ISIS has planted in the area.

Amnesty International has documented the use of unguided missiles by the US-led Coalition against civilian neighborhoods. Civilian casualties from US-led Coalition airstrikes and shelling have dramatically increased since the offensive started. According to Airwars, 87-100 children were killed in Global Coalition actions during the al-Raqqa offensive in June and July.<sup>86</sup> War crimes committed by ISIS, such as using civilians as human shields, do not relieve the Global Coalition of its duty to respect international humanitarian law.

Many civilians are also concerned about the fate that awaits them under the control of the Kurdish YPG-dominated SDF. Displaced citizens from al-Raqqa are reportedly detained in screening camps controlled by the Asayish – the Kurdish police – and identification documents are taken from IDPs who enter the camp to prevent them from leaving. Living conditions in the camps are poor and international agencies have little if any access. For displaced men, there is a high risk of being forcibly conscripted to fight with the SDF. Asayish forces are reportedly demanding that one member of each family join the fighting forces, in some cases using that as leverage to release families from the screening camps.

84 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “21 Casualties in a new massacre carried out by warplanes of the coalition after targeting a boat gathering in Al-Raqqah city,” 6 June 2017, <[www.syriahr.com](http://www.syriahr.com)>.

85 Michael R. Gordon, “U.S.-Backed Forces Close to Trapping ISIS Holdouts in Raqqa,” The New York Times, 2 July 2017, <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)>; Amnesty International, “Syria – ‘I won’t forget this carnage’. Civilians Trapped in Battle for Raqqa,” 24 August 2017, <[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)>.

86 Samuel Oakford “Children pay high price in fight to take Raqqa from ISIS,” Airwars, 28 July 2017, <[airwars.org](http://airwars.org)>.



# 3. Conclusions and Recommendations

This Siege Watch report – the seventh 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 remain responsible for the vast majority of long-term sieges and forced population transfers and the nearly 1.7 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 more than 820,000 people still living under siege:

- ◆ 88% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 30 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- ◆ 11% of the besieged Syrians in three communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups. In Deir Ezzor the siege is primarily enforced by ISIS, while the Syrian government imposes further access restrictions from the inside. In the southern Damascus suburbs, the primary siege is imposed by the Syrian government, but ISIS and other armed groups impose further access restrictions to Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad inside the siege.
- ◆ 1% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate.

This quarter was once again marked by more forced surrenders, more population transfers, and intensified siege conditions and violence against communities that will likely be the next “surrender or die” targets. The “de-escalation zone” announcement made by Russia, Turkey, and Iran at the start of the quarter, and another ceasefire announced by Russia for Eastern Ghouta towards the end of the quarter, had little impact on the continuation of the fighting.

Al-Raqqa city was added to Siege Watch monitoring efforts for the first time this quarter, as the US-backed SDF reached a new phase in their campaign to retake the city from ISIS, leaving thousands of civilians trapped in increasingly horrifying conditions.

The Syrian government’s systematic campaign to recapture all of the besieged and “Watchlist” communities by force continued during the reporting period. Al-Waer’s forced population transfers came to an end after roughly 20,000 people were deported from the neighborhood, and it reverted

to government control. Major military campaigns against Barzeh and Qaboun ended with the surrender of armed groups in both neighborhoods and forced population transfers to northern Syria. After these neighborhoods were brought back under government control, an intense new “surrender or die” operation was launched against the Jobar neighborhood. Once Jobar is captured, it will pave the way for a final assault on Eastern Ghouta, where more than 400,000 people remain trapped under siege. There are no signs that the Syrian government’s “surrender or die” campaign against besieged and “Watchlist” communities will end anytime soon.

One of the earliest and largest sieges in the conflict – that of Eastern Ghouta – is now dragging into its fifth year. An entire generation of children in Eastern Ghouta has never known electricity, running water, or freedom from constant fear of violent attack. The string of suspected chemical attacks documented against Jobar and Ein Tarma is an especially disturbing development because symptoms displayed by victims in one of the attacks pointed to the use of a nerve agent. This sequence of events may represent an effort by the Syrian government to gauge the international reaction, as it has done previously before escalating to larger and more deadly chemical attacks in the area.

In 2016, the Syrian government cemented its stranglehold on the long-besieged community of Darayya and launched a scorched earth campaign that led to the community’s collapse, surrender, and the forced transfer of the entire remaining population. This “surrender or die” strategy involves targeting a besieged or semi-besieged opposition-controlled community with intensified siege conditions, relentless attacks, and coercive negotiations often involving threats of complete annihilation. Local civil governing institutions have been cut out of many of the surrender deal negotiations in the past year, leaving civilians with no say in their fate.

In the most extreme cases like Darayya, the targeted communities hold out until the point of humanitarian crisis and effectively collapse. More commonly, targeted communities or the armed opposition groups surrender before reaching that point, and are still punished with population transfers and post-surrender repression, but are not completely depopulated.

Since the Syrian government’s success in Darayya, pro-government forces have used some version of this “surrender or die” model over and over again to bring besieged and “Watchlist” communities back under government control with complete disregard for international law. Including the cases covered in this quarterly report, Siege Watch has documented up until now at least 12 communities that have been conquered in this manner: Moadamiya, al-Tal, al-Hameh, Qudsaya, Khan al-Shieh, Madaya, Zabadani, Wadi Barada, Eastern Aleppo City, al-Waer, Barzeh, and Qaboun. Three of these communities were completely depopulated in the process: Zabadani, Darayya, and Qaboun. Jobar and Eastern Ghouta are at imminent risk of sharing their fate.

In every case of community surrender, civilians were given little to no support by the international community. Almost all the civilians displaced in this manner have been sent to dangerous areas where humanitarian conditions are poor and the threat of violence is high. There has not been a single case documented by the Siege Watch project where a majority of the forcibly transferred civilian population has been allowed to return in the post-surrender period once the fighting subsided. Quite the opposite: in a number of post-surrender communities there are unmistakable signs that the Syrian government and its allies are taking steps to make sure that the displaced can never go home.

Those left behind when the post-surrender communities revert to government control are in need of concrete efforts to ensure their protection, such as third-party monitoring. The Syrian government's efforts to repress information coming out of these communities through fear and intimidation have thus far been successful at stifling widespread recognition of its abuses. As the reports of arbitrary detention, harassment, and abuse of civilians continue to trickle out of post-surrender communities, it is increasingly clear that under the current paradigm, the Syrian government will continue its efforts to purge dissent and stifle civil society long after it regains control.

Signs of demographic engineering efforts being undertaken in areas like Wadi Barada should raise international alarm bells. In recent comments, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad essentially acknowledged the government's rationale for undertaking its demographic engineering strategy, saying that Syria "has won a healthier and more **homogeneous** society."<sup>87</sup> In its strategy, the government forcibly displaces "opposing" communities – which happen to be majority Sunni areas – and prevents their return through intimidation and administrative measures. Such sort of politically motivated forced displacement of civilians is a clear violation of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions.<sup>88</sup>

In addition to constituting war crimes that may rise to the level of crimes against humanity, the Syrian government's systematic "surrender or die" campaign has a myriad of detrimental short and long-term consequences for the country. It inflicts tremendous suffering on civilians, irreparably damages communities, exacerbates sectarian and political tensions, contributes to the IDP and refugee crisis, empowers war profiteers and militias, weakens civil society, and creates a host of new grievances that will undermine efforts to reach a sustainable solution to the conflict for years to come. The more communities that succumb to the Syrian government's efforts, the greater these consequences become, making it ever more critical that key stakeholders in the international community recognize these issues and take steps to mitigate the fallout of the "surrender or die" campaign.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has abjectly failed to take any steps to enforce its own Resolutions calling for access. For forty months in a row, the UNSC has been presented with a Secretary-General's report on the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014) etc. For forty months in a row, this same UN report has shown that the demands for access in these resolutions are being ignored, and there is no implementation to speak of.

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 complete lack of an effective international response to the atrocities committed therein. By failing to take political action to end sieges, the UN Security Council has abdicated its responsibility to maintain international peace and security. Instead the Security Council has passed the buck to UN humanitarian agencies, which have neither the mandate nor the duty to end these atrocities.

In the case of besieged communities, the UN humanitarian agencies lack the power even to fulfill the mandates they do have to reach besieged Syrians in need with lifesaving assistance.

87 H. Sabbagh, M. al-Frieh, and H. Said, "President al-Assad: Everything related to the destiny and future of Syria is a 100% Syrian issue, unity of Syrian territory is self-evident and not up for debate," SANA, 20 August 2017, <sana.sy>.

88 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), "Commentary of 1987 Prohibition of Force Movement of Civilians," 1987, <ihl-databases.icrc.org>. [accessed 30 August 2017]



UN humanitarian agencies have stayed the course on a strategy of access requests and denials for years, continuing their close coordination with the Syrian government despite overwhelming evidence that these efforts are not effective at reaching besieged civilians. The denial of access for humanitarian assistance has become a central tactic in the Syrian government's campaign of deprivation against besieged communities: in other words, a weapon of war.

## Recommendations

Allowed to operate with impunity, the Syrian government and its allies will continue the pattern of escalated violence, destruction, surrender, and forced population transfer for the foreseeable future, destroying any prospect of a peaceful and inclusive Syria. Stakeholders in the international community must acknowledge the many new immediate and long-term challenges being created by the Syrian government's "surrender or die" campaign. It is critical that the UN Security Council, UN humanitarian agencies, the US-led Global Coalition, and other major actors stop relying on processes that have proven ineffective, and instead take real steps towards ending the sieges and addressing their harmful impacts.

Following the findings of this seventh quarterly Siege Watch report, PAX and TSI recommend the following:

### Urgent Siege Risks

- ◆ The Global Coalition and its local partners must provide safe passage for civilians escaping ISIS-controlled parts of al-Raqqa. Safety corridors or asylum zones should be designated for civilians seeking protection, and fleeing vehicles must not be targeted until proper identification of their passengers can be made.
- ◆ Members of the Global Coalition against Daesh should require that their SDF partners give UNHCR and other relevant international organizations appropriate access to Asayish-controlled camps where IDPs from al-Raqqa are being processed. UNHCR and other international organizations should ensure that the IDPs are provided with appropriate shelter, supplies, and care. International agencies should also monitor the camps to ensure that IDPs are screened in a humane manner and not being held against their will.
- ◆ The Global Coalition must ensure that its combat operations are in compliance with the laws of war. TSI and PAX support and echo the recent findings of Amnesty International, that: "IS' violations of the laws of war do not in any way lessen the obligation of the forces fighting IS to select lawful targets, to strike them in a way that is neither indiscriminate nor disproportionate, and to take all feasible measures to minimize harm to civilians."<sup>89</sup>
- ◆ The UN and OPCW should immediately open investigations into the suspected chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar during the reporting period. With-

out any form of deterrence or accountability, it is likely that the use of chemical agents in the battles around Damascus will continue and even escalate in the coming months.

- ◆ International stakeholders, including the UNSC, must increase political pressure on besieging parties and their allies to prevent Eastern Ghouta – the largest remaining besieged enclave in the country – from becoming the next eastern Aleppo. An estimated 425,910 people are at direct risk.
- ◆ The WFP and other UN agencies should take immediate steps to investigate reports of diversion of humanitarian assistance, such as those by government forces and affiliated militias in Deir Ezzor city. The UN agencies should take actions to prevent future misuse, and punitive action should be taken against parties found to be expropriating aid from civilian beneficiaries. Alternative channels for aid distribution should be explored when parties are found to be misusing international assistance.

### 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 working on early recovery initiatives in post-surrender communities in cooperation with the Syrian government 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 cadastral records, documentation of property claims and disputes, and advocacy for the return of inhabitants.
- ◆ International aid organizations and agencies should increase efforts to provide sufficient care for civilians who are forcibly transferred out of besieged communities into opposition-controlled areas of northern Syria.

The preceding recommendations stem directly from issues identified during the May – July reporting period. Recommendations from earlier Siege Watch reports related to political action, UN reporting issues, and accountability for war crimes remain fundamental and urgent and provide a framework to address sieges for all key stakeholders.<sup>90</sup>

89 Amnesty International, "Syria – 'I won't forget this carnage'. Civilians Trapped in Battle for Raqqa," 24 August 2017, <[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)>.

90 PAX & The Syria Institute, "Siege Watch: Sixth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria February-April 2017," pp. 70-73, <[siegewatch.org](http://siegewatch.org)>.





# 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.	60,250
	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.	16,750
	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.	138,400
	Hosh al-Dawahirah	2	Syrian Govt.	0

	Al-Rayhan	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Al-Shaifuniya	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Harasta	2	Syrian Govt.	23,500
	Madeira	2	Syrian Govt.	8,750
	Misraba	2	Syrian Govt.	40,000
	Autaya	2	Syrian Govt.	1,000
	Beit Naim	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Nashabiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	4,000
	Al-Salhiyeh	2	Syrian Govt.	?
	Hajar al-Aswad	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS + armed groups	11,000
Deir ez-Zor	Deir Ezzor	2	Syrian Govt. + ISIS	72,000
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	} 10,800
	Kafraya	3	Armed groups	
<b>Total</b>				<b>821,210</b>

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

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

<b>Governorate</b>	<b>Community/ Neighborhood</b>	<b>Siege Tier</b>	<b>Besieged by</b>	<b>Est. Current Population</b>
Aleppo	Eastern Aleppo	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	371,725
Damascus	Barzeh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	30,000
Daraa	Muhajja	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	25,000
Rural Damascus	Moadamiyet al-Sham	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	41,000
	Qudsaya	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	200,000
	Al-Hameh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	35,000
	Wadi Barada	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	50,000
	Khan al-Shieh	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	6,000
	Al-Tal	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	850,000
	Madaya + Baqeen	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.+ Hezbollah	41,000
Homs	Al-Waer	Watchlist	Syrian Govt.	17,500
Al-Raqqa	Al-Raqqa	Watchlist	Global Coalition + SDF	30,000
<b>Total</b>				<b>1,697,225</b>



## Table of Depopulated Communities

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

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



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