

Siege Watch

Tenth Quarterly Report Part 1 – Eastern Ghouta
February – April 2018



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Photo cover: "A raid killed my dream, and a raid killed my future, and a raid killed everything alive inside of me, while I was watching." - Wael al-Tawil, Douma, 20 February 2018

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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This report was written by Valerie Szybala with support from the PAX team. It would not have been possible without the participation of Siege Watch's voluntary network of reporting contacts on the ground. This past quarter, Siege Watch contacts from Eastern Ghouta continued to provide updates and information with the project during the darkest period of their lives. Thank you to everyone from Eastern Ghouta who communicated with the project team over the years, for your openness, generosity and patience. We have been inspired and humbled by your strength through adversity, and will continue to support your search for justice and peace.

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Acronyms

ACU	Assistance Coordination Unit
AOG	Armed opposition group
COI	Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic
FAR	Faylaq al-Rahman
FFM	Fact-Finding Mission
GMC	Ghouta Media Center
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (second rebranding of Jabhat al-Nusra)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IIIM	International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (aka Daesh, ISIL, IS)
JAI	Jaysh al-Islam
LC	Local Council
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
SAMS	Syrian American Medical Society
SARC	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
SCD	Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets)
SIG	Syrian Interim Government
SN4HR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
STJ	Syrians for Truth and Justice
SYP	Syrian Pound
UN	United Nations
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UOSSM	Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

This is part 1 of the tenth quarterly report by Siege Watch, a project of PAX, which aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses on developments in Eastern Ghouta and Jobar from February – April 2018, during which period the besieged enclave was captured by the Syrian government and its allies in a final scorched earth campaign. It will be followed by a part 2 report which will cover developments in northern Homs, the Southern Damascus Suburbs, and other besieged areas. Data collected during the quarter from a network of Eastern Ghouta contacts and other sources showed that:

- ◆ At least 1,700 people were killed, 5,000 injured, and 158,000 displaced, leaving entire towns empty. In some areas, upwards of 90% of the structures were destroyed.
- ◆ The brutal campaign created a 'demonstration effect' and was used to push other besieged areas to surrender with significantly less force.
- ◆ At least eight suspected chemical attacks were launched against civilians and fighters in Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period. In total, an estimated 45 civilians were killed and nearly 700 injured in these attacks.
- ◆ More than 65,000 people, most of them civilians, were forcibly displaced to Idlib and Aleppo in northern Syria as part of the final surrender agreements.
- ◆ In the wake of the capture of Eastern Ghouta and Jobar by pro-government forces, there were reports of field executions, detentions, threats, and widespread looting. Thousands of men from Eastern Ghouta were forced into mandatory military service.
- ◆ The end of the siege of Eastern Ghouta highlights the government's demographic engineering strategy. Roughly 200,000 people remained in the enclave by the end of the reporting period – around half of the estimated population from before the offensive began, and just 18% of the area's pre-war population.

As the pinnacle of the Syrian government's "surrender or die" campaigns, the offensive against Eastern Ghouta and Jobar included an unprecedented military onslaught and caused a humanitarian catastrophe. During the two-months long final offensive, the Syrian government and its allies acted with impunity, committing a slew of human rights violations and war crimes, including: targeted attacks on medical centers and other critical civilian infrastructure, widespread indiscriminate attacks on populated areas, the use of internationally banned weapons intended to spread terror, large-scale forced displacement, and more.

Russia took a lead role in the orchestrating the assault and surrender of Eastern Ghouta. Russian forces played a role on the ground, and were heavily involved in the devastating aerial assault. Russian officers led negotiations over forced surrender agreements, and made questionable commitments to provide security and protection for civilians in post-surrender communities. The Russian government blocked meaningful international action at the Security Council, and helped obscure the facts on the ground through an information warfare campaign that spread propaganda and disinformation, particularly surrounding chemical attacks. Iran also played important role in the final offensive against on Eastern Ghouta, as Iran-backed militias participated in the ground assault on multiple fronts.

All of the victims of the siege of Eastern Ghouta remain traumatized, vulnerable, and under-supported, despite the end of the siege. Civilians from Eastern Ghouta who remain in the Damascus area in both government-run processing centers and in post-surrender communities are denied freedom of movement, and are at risk of retribution actions and other forms of abuse by the government and affiliated militias. As of June, humanitarian agencies have been granted limited access to Eastern Ghouta, where conditions reportedly remain dire. People who boarded buses to northern Syria did so involuntarily, and had no choice in their destination. These IDPs were not sufficiently supported upon their arrival, facing poor housing, nutrition, health, and hygiene conditions. The situation in parts of northern Syria remains volatile, and many of the displaced face continued safety threats from violence, including airstrikes by pro-government forces. Few of the displaced have hopes of returning home and reclaiming their property as long as Bashar al-Assad's government remains in power. The Syrian government has already begun enacting new barriers to return such as Law No. 10, which will formalize government confiscation of property belonging to the displaced.

The international community and humanitarian agencies in Syria failed to respond adequately to this crisis. The violent end to the siege of Eastern Ghouta was both foreseeable and preventable, and yet actors at all levels of the international system failed either to heed early warnings or to appropriately adjust their responses as the siege evolved, claiming a self-imposed "powerlessness." The international community must recognize that "post-surrender" does not mean "post-conflict," and make urgent reforms in their operations in Syria to more appropriately respond to the new challenges of the post-siege era.

Key Recommendations

- ◆ Independent third-party monitors must be deployed to IDP camps for people from Eastern Ghouta, as well as to the post-surrender communities in Eastern Ghouta, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights violations.
- ◆ Pressure must be increased on the Syrian and Russian governments to allow and facilitate unrestricted access for international humanitarian agencies to the post-surrender communities in Eastern Ghouta and the IDP camps in the Damascus region. Humanitarian support to the IDPs in Idlib and Aleppo provinces must also be increased.
- ◆ Humanitarian actors supporting siege survivors should implement programs that focus on the unique needs of this population, including specialized psychosocial support, and on the challenges surrounding missing civil status documentation and Housing Land and Property rights.

- ◆ Conflict sensitivity guidelines must be put in place for all humanitarian, early recovery and livelihood programs in post-surrender contexts, to prevent this work from deepening grievances and supporting war criminals. Donors must put in place due diligence mechanisms to ensure compliance with these guidelines.
- ◆ States with universal jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed outside their territory should specifically investigate crimes perpetrated as part of the “surrender or die” strategy.
- ◆ The UN COI, and other competent independent parties should start investigations into all incidents where there is clear evidence of war crimes or crimes against humanity – not only those involving the use chemical weapons.
- ◆ The Secretary-General should appoint a panel to conduct an internal review of United Nations actions in Syria related to the siege of Eastern Ghouta and other besieged areas.

Introduction

This is the tenth in a series of quarterly reports as part of the Siege Watch project – which has monitored the situation in besieged areas of Syria since late 2015. This report focuses on developments in Eastern Ghouta from February – April 2018, during which period the Syrian government and its allies launched a devastating scorched earth offensive, and Eastern Ghouta finally collapsed, succumbing to the final stage of the “surrender or die” strategy. The offensive and siege had a catastrophic impact on the hundreds of thousands of civilians left in Eastern Ghouta, who were subjected to a litany of horrors while the world looked on. Nearly two months later, the government and its allies declared victory, having retaken control of all parts of Eastern Ghouta and displaced more than 158,000 people, killed at least 1,700, and injured 5,000 more.¹

This Siege Watch report differs from prior reports in the series in several aspects. The Siege Watch project was started by PAX and The Syria Institute, and was run as a joint initiative through the ninth quarterly report. Starting with the tenth reporting period, the Siege Watch project is being solely run by PAX.

The tenth report will be the last quarterly report in the Siege Watch series, and it will be split up and covered in two installments. This current installment is Part 1 of the Tenth Quarterly Siege Watch Report, and it covers Eastern Ghouta for the period of February – April 2018. It will be followed by a second installment, which will look at developments in the other besieged areas. The reporting period for Part 2 of the Tenth Quarterly Siege Watch will be extended by an extra month, from February – May 2018, in order to include the final surrender agreements and forced displacements for the Southern Damascus Suburbs and northern Homs enclaves.

Data Collection

This is the first reporting period during which Siege Watch did not collect written questionnaires from contacts in Eastern Ghouta. The intense violence and dramatic upheaval made this method of data collection both insensitive and impractical. It also nullified many of the standard questions, since all Eastern Ghouta contacts were displaced midway through the reporting period. Instead, ongoing conversations with Siege Watch contacts allowed for continuous monitoring of developments in their respective communities and helped to confirm or clarify open source information. The majority of Siege Watch contacts from Eastern Ghouta were forcibly displaced to northern Syria in March and April. After they had resettled, at least temporarily, in Idlib and Aleppo provinces and in Turkey, calls were arranged to conduct more in-depth debriefings. At least four project contacts were in government custody of one form

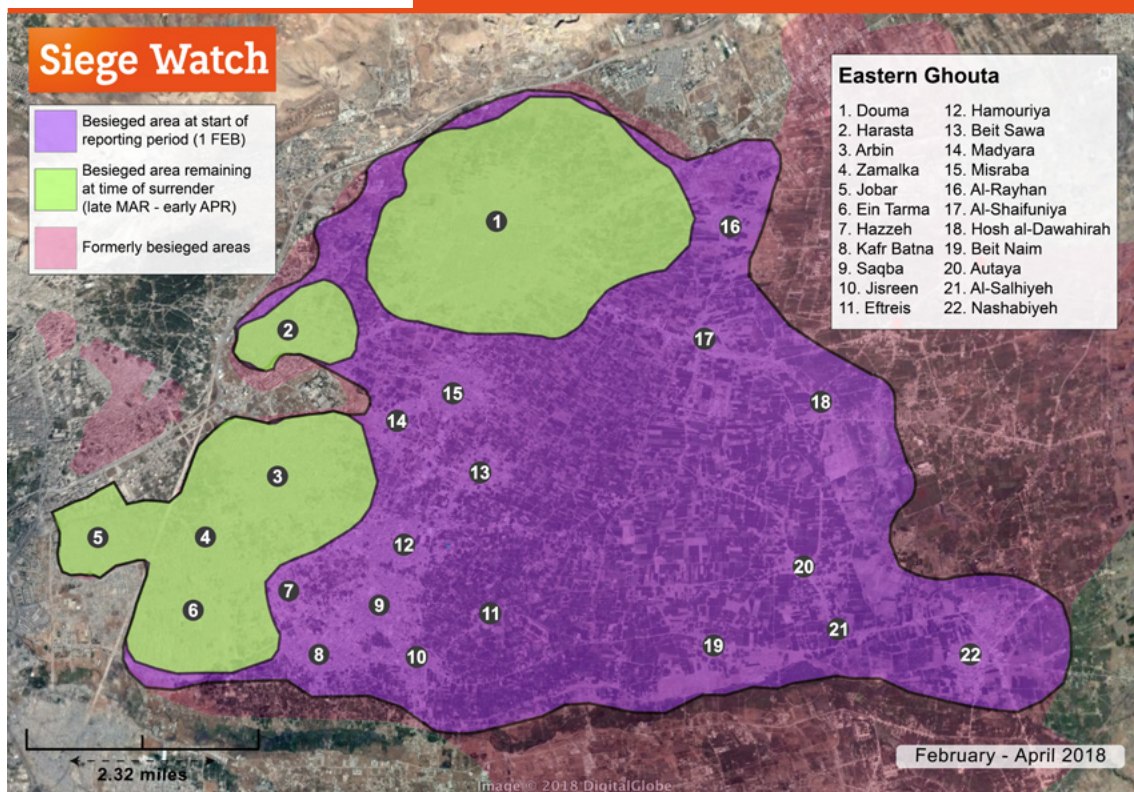
¹ UNOCHA, “Syria: East Ghouta - Humanitarian Update, Facts and Figures - 22 April 2018, <reliefweb.int>; International Rescue Committee, “We’ve been buried alive: Inside Eastern Ghouta’s underground bunkers,” 4 April 2018, <www.rescue.org>”.

or another following the fall of Eastern Ghouta, and could no longer be contacted for security reasons. Additional information on military, political, and humanitarian developments in Eastern Ghouta was collected from media outlets, trusted local social media pages, and humanitarian organizations with staff members on the ground.

Eastern Ghouta

Map 1.

Besieged Eastern Ghouta before and after operation “Damascus Steel”



Snapshot

Conditions in Eastern Ghouta were catastrophic during the reporting period, leading to the eventual collapse of the enclave and mass population displacement. Many communities were completely depopulated. By the end of the reporting period, the Syrian government had regained control of all of Eastern Ghouta and its communities were reclassified as “Watchlist” areas.

Background

The suburbs and agricultural countryside to the east of Damascus city are collectively known as Eastern Ghouta. Along with the adjacent Damascus neighborhood of Jobar, Eastern Ghouta had the largest population and was one of the longest besieged enclaves in the country. Government forces began to put components of the siege in place in late 2012 – gradually erecting checkpoints to restrict movement and reducing access to public utilities. The final

access points to Eastern Ghouta were closed in mid-2013 during a military offensive, bringing the enclave under full siege. From that time forward few international aid deliveries were allowed to enter the area, and a small amount of commercial food supplies were allowed in through al-Wafideen checkpoint, with frequent interruptions. Local industries, smuggling, and agriculture helped the roughly 400,000 people trapped in Eastern Ghouta survive the extended deprivation.

Eastern Ghouta was in turmoil for much of its time under siege, undergoing failed negotiation initiatives, attacks from pro-government forces, opposition infighting, and waves of internal displacement. The enclave contained at least 29 major populated communities when the Siege Watch project began in late 2015, but this number decreased over time. During a notable offensive in May 2016, the government and its allies took control of Eastern Ghouta's rural Southern Sector, an area known as the region's breadbasket. All of the estimated 12,000 residents were displaced from the towns of Nouleh, Bzeina, Deir Assafir, Harasta al-Qantara, Zebdine and surrounding agricultural land into other parts of Eastern Ghouta. In July 2016 pro-government forces captured Maydaa and Hosh al-Farah on Eastern Ghouta's eastern front,² and in September 2016 they took control of Hosh Nasri,³ internally displacing more civilians and further shrinking the size of the enclave.

In February 2017 the Syrian government broke long-standing truces with opposition forces in the Damascus neighborhoods of Barzeh and Qaboun, cutting off all access and launching heavy attacks, ultimately forcing them to surrender.⁴ Until that point, smuggling tunnels connecting Eastern Ghouta to Barzeh and Qaboun had served as important lifelines for the besieged area. While some of the tunnels were used by opposition fighters to smuggle arms, others allowed cancer patients to leave for treatment and brought in medical supplies. The closure of these smuggling tunnels led to a significant decline in humanitarian conditions in besieged Eastern Ghouta.

In the summer of 2017, Siege Watch reports began to raise the alarm that a scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta was looming.⁵ On 14 November 2017, the first phase of the fall of Eastern Ghouta began with a month-long wave of violent attacks that was at that point unprecedented. On 16 November, Siege Watch elevated all communities in Eastern Ghouta to Tier 1 critically besieged status for the first time, indicating rapidly deteriorating conditions due to the intensified siege conditions and violence. After a brief lull, a second major wave of violence began around 27 December 2017 and lasted through late January 2018. These two waves of military escalation, along with the crippling impact of the intensified siege restrictions, served to soften the besieged enclave for the final assault.⁶

2 For more details, see "Siege Watch: Third Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria May - July 2016," <siegewatch.org>

3 For more details, see "Siege Watch: Fourth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria August - October 2016," <siegewatch.org>

4 For more details, see "Siege Watch: Sixth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria February-April 2017," <siegewatch.org>

5 For more details, see "Siege Watch: Seventh Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria May-July 2017," <siegewatch.org>

6 For more details, see "Siege Watch: Ninth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria November 2017 – January 2018," <siegewatch.org>;

STJ, "Shelling Civilian Objects and Facilities in Eastern Ghouta Deprives Thousands of Residents from Services," 27 February 2-18, <www.stj-sy.com>.

Military Developments

The Syrian government and its allies launched the final offensive on Eastern Ghouta, known as operation “Damascus Steel,” on 18 February with an aerial assault, starting the ground offensive a week later.⁷ Eastern Ghouta was already in a severe humanitarian crisis prior to the start of this final offensive, suffering from severe food, sanitation, medical, and educational supply shortages. With the launch of the final offensive Eastern Ghouta became a “hell on earth” for its residents.⁸ Hungry, sick, scared, tired civilians were forced to take shelter underground in cellars and tunnels ill-suited for extended human habitation. Most of these shelters were overcrowded and lacked electricity, water, ventilation, and stockpiles of supplies. Diseases spread, and people died of their wounds without access to medical care. Above their heads, missiles targeted critical infrastructure like medical centers, bakeries, and schools, along with rescue workers, ambulances, and everything else that moved. Helicopters, warplanes, and surveillance drones rarely left the skies. One resident described the trips that some people had to make out of shelters to seek food as “suicide” missions.⁹ Prices skyrocketed out of reach for most residents as the remaining shops closed, making it nearly impossible for people to find food.

As time went on, roads became impassable – bombed out and blocked by piles of wreckage and with fewer emergency response crews available to clear them. This slowed and even prevented rescuers from responding to bombings. Attack victims were left on their own to die or reach help if they could find any. Incendiary attacks were frequently launched amidst sustained bombardments, making it difficult for anyone to respond as the fires ravaged buildings and homes. Rescue vehicles could not respond to attacks at night, because their headlights gave away their positions and drew aerial attacks. When rescuers did make it to the scene of an attack they were often targeted by “double tap” attacks intended to kill them. Siege Watch recorded at least 14 Syrian Civil Defense (SCD) rescuers killed in targeted and “double tap” attacks during the reporting period.¹⁰ The bodies of men, women, and children sometimes remained in the rubble of collapsed buildings for days before they were found. Medical workers suffered extreme exhaustion, working around the clock in horrific circumstances for days on end. Terrorized residents were cut off from communication, and had no idea where to find safety in the violent chaos of the military campaign. Rumors and malicious propaganda were intentionally spread to add to the confusion and fear. The sound of nighttime raids kept civilians awake for days.

The remainder of the ‘Military Developments’ section contains several timelines of notable military developments and attacks. Included on these lists are attacks on critical civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and bakeries as well as incidents that are notable for the type of weapon used or their strategic importance. For the second quarter in a row, the number

7 Gregory Water, “2018 East Ghouta Offensive: the Cost of Securing Damascus,” *International Review*, 2 May 2018, <international-review.org>.

8 UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ remarks to the UNSC, “International Community Cannot Give Up on Syria, Secretary-General Tells Security Council, Stressing Implementation of Resolution 2401 Still Possible,” SG/SM/18932-SC/13245, 12 March 2018, <www.un.org>.

9 STJ, “Tunneling Underground Becomes the Only Hope to Survive in Eastern Ghouta,” 12 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

10 The fourteen SCD volunteers are: 1. Mahmoud Hamouriyah (Arbin - 2/5/18); 2. Firas Juma (Beit Sawa - 2/20/18); 3. Mahmoud al-Kilani (Autaya – 2/28/18);

4-6. Ismael Hashish, Mohammed Hashish, and Yasser Sobieh (3/7/18); 7. Mohammad Al-Asas (Saqba – 3/8/18); 8. Mohammad Masrawa (Douma – 3/9/18);

9. Rifaat Idris (Zamalka – 3/13/18); 10. Ayman Jamal al-Din (Hazzeh – 3/15/18); 11. Hassan al-Huseini (Saqba – 3/16/18); 12-14. Yousef al-Hamouri, Wisam

al-Najar, and Mohammad Al-Awa (Douma – 3/21/18).



Civilian huddle in a tunnel in Eastern Ghouta during the final government offensive. Source: SAMS



Boys in a shelter in Douma, 8 March 2018. Source: Muhammad al-Najjar



Residential buildings in Douma burn after incendiary attacks, 22 March 2018. Source: GMC



SCD volunteers bury their colleague Mahmoud Hamouriya, who was killed when his ambulance was targeted by an airstrike in Arbin, 5 February 2018.

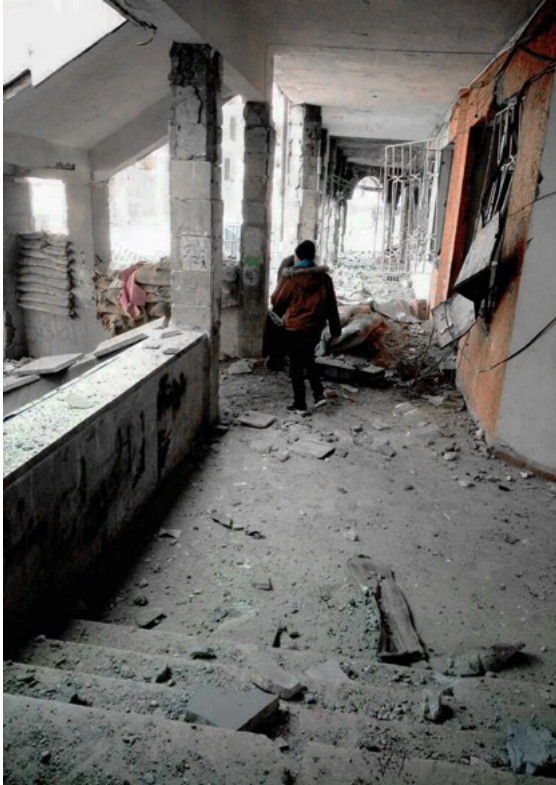
Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



Victims of airstrikes that killed 13 people in Douma, 25 February 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



Municipal workers dig a mass grave in a park in Douma for more than 70 attack victims as airstrikes targeted the cemetery, 11 March 2018. Source: Douma LC



Douma LC destruction after aerial attack, 6 February 2018. Source: SCD



Aftermath of attacks on the "Save a Soul" clinics in Kafr Batna, 6 February 2018.

Source: Save a Soul

of mass-casualty attacks conducted by the Syrian government and its allies against civilians in Eastern Ghouta was so high that many could not be well-documented, and only a few of the most horrific mass-casualty events are included.¹¹ Targeted "double tap" strikes that killed and injured rescue workers were ubiquitous during the reporting period, and most will not be captured here. Many other notable attacks – including strikes on markets and mosques – are not included for similar reasons. Much information was lost in the fog of war, especially later in the reporting period as lines of communication were destroyed and people were displaced and driven underground as they struggled to survive. All listed attacks were conducted by pro-government forces unless otherwise noted.

STAGES OF THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

Preparation (1-17 February)

There were spikes of violence against Eastern Ghouta in the first few weeks of February even before operation "Damascus Steel" was officially launched. Bombardments from 5-8 February coincided with intensified fighting around Harasta during which opposition forces made some small territorial gains. During these four days, Eastern Ghouta was hit with over 200 airstrikes in addition to escalated shelling and surface-to-surface missile attacks on civilian areas. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented more than 240 civilians killed and 1,250 injured.¹²

¹¹ Visit the Siege Watch Twitter feed at <<https://twitter.com/siegewatch>> to read our updates about attacks as they happened throughout the quarter. Additional resources include the annexes of the monthly Secretary-General's reports to the UNSC: S/2018/243, S/2018/369, and S/2018/484.

¹² STJ, "Unprecedented Military Escalation on Eastern Ghouta Killing Dozens of Civilians in February 2018," 22 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

- ◆ 1 FEB – Two schools in Douma were hit and damaged by shelling: Dhiraar elementary school and the Douma Language Institute. While most classes had been suspended due to the violence, the Douma Language Institute – a private facility – was still open. Two children there died in the attack and 12 civilians were injured.¹³
- ◆ 1 FEB – Suspected chemical attack in Douma. See details on page 37.
- ◆ 2 FEB – Misraba, Douma, Hamouriya, Beit Sawa, Arbin, and Madyara were hit by a total of 14 surface-to-surface missiles containing cluster munitions.¹⁴ These were the first recorded cluster bomb attacks on Eastern Ghouta in 2018.
- ◆ 6 FEB – A primary school in Kafr Batna was partially destroyed in an airstrike.¹⁵
- ◆ 6 FEB – The “Save a Soul” primary health care center and mental health clinic in Kafr Batna were both damaged in attacks. Two staff members and two patients were wounded.¹⁶
- ◆ 6 FEB – A medical facility in Harasta was hit by an airstrike that killed the son of an aid worker and injured seven other civilians.¹⁷
- ◆ 6 FEB – The Beit Sawa medical center was bombed out of service by airstrikes.^{18 *}
- ◆ 6 FEB – A school in Madyara was damaged by airstrikes.¹⁹
- ◆ 6 FEB – The Douma Local Council was targeted by airstrikes and forced to suspend all operations for nearly a week.²⁰
- ◆ 7 FEB – The Douma obstetrics center was targeted by airstrikes and severely damaged, a staff member was killed.²¹
- ◆ 7 FEB – The Syrian Interim Government (SIG)’s provincial Education Directorate ordered the complete closure of all schools.²²
- ◆ 8 FEB – A school in Arbin was hit and nearly destroyed by airstrikes.²³

13 STJ, “Suspension of the Educational Process in Eastern Ghouta due to Recent Military Attacks,” 4 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

14 STJ, “Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day,” 12 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

15 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>; Kafr Batna Media Center, Facebook post, 6 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JEoBpU>>.

16 UOSSM, “Breaking: 4 Day Surge in Violence Leaves 237 Dead, 1250 Injured, 7 Medical Facilities Wrecked,” 9 February 2018, <www.uossm.org>.

17 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

18 Ghouta GMC, Facebook post, 6 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JtQcy2>>.

* Note: “Taken out of service” implies that a facility was damaged and forced to temporarily suspend operations. “Destroyed” means that a facility closed permanently after an attack.

19 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

20 STJ, “Shelling Civilian Objects and Facilities in Eastern Ghouta Deprives Thousands of Residents from Services,” 27 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

21 UOSSM, “Breaking: 4 Day Surge in Violence Leaves 237 Dead, 1250 Injured, 7 Medical Facilities Wrecked,” 9 February 2018, <www.uossm.org>.

22 Local Council of Harasta, Facebook post, 7 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2y4bBbv>>.

23 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

Launch of operation “Damascus Steel” (18-23 February)

On 17 February, a visible build-up of pro-government forces was reported around Eastern Ghouta, and the next day, operation “Damascus Steel” began. The offensive involved the combined might of Iran-backed militias, Syrian militias, the Syrian military, Russian and Syrian air forces, and Russian ground support. Over the next two months, these combined forces would launch a wide array of weaponry against the enclave, including: incendiary munitions,²⁴ cluster bombs, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, barrel bombs and explosive hoses,²⁵ thermobaric bombs, chemical weapons, armed drones, mortars, machine guns, and more.

On 19 February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the “experience gained in Aleppo” could be used in Eastern Ghouta, foreshadowing the catastrophic carnage that would follow.²⁶ That same day, as many as 100 civilians were killed and 300 injured in the bombing.²⁷

In the first four days of the operation “Damascus Steel,” an unprecedented number of medical facilities and supporting infrastructure were bombed, eclipsing anything else previously seen even in the Syrian conflict. The Turkey Health Cluster and World Health Organization (WHO) reported that between 18-22 February alone, 24 medical facilities were attacked and at least temporarily taken out of service.²⁸ Chronic conditions could often not be treated, and the number of people who died of their wounds spiked. This intensive focus on destroying medical infrastructure at the start of the offensive ensured that subsequent attacks would inflict maximum harm on the civilian population, and helped hasten the collapse of Eastern Ghouta.

- ◆ 18 FEB – The “Save a Soul” emergency center was hit by five airstrikes and taken out of service.²⁹
- ◆ 19 FEB – Al-Hayat hospital in Hazzeh was targeted and taken out of service by airstrikes.³⁰
- ◆ 19 FEB – The Saqba Hospital, Saqba Material Center, and the office of al-Seeraj charity were all targeted and taken out of service by airstrikes.³¹
- ◆ 19 FEB – Al-Shaifuniya medical center was taken out of service by three barrel bombs. An anesthesiologist and a patient were killed, and three patients injured.³²
- ◆ 19 FEB – A hospital and ambulance in Douma were attacked.³³

24 For more documentation about incendiary attacks, See: DFR Lab, “#PutinAtWar: Rebels Burned Out of Eastern Ghouta,” 4 April 2018, <medium.com>; and relevant reporting from the STJ: <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/index/report>.

25 SN4HR, “Satellite Imagery Proves that Russian Attacks Have Exterminated Entire Eastern Ghouta Towns,” 31 May 2018, <sn4hr.org>.

26 TASS, “Russia calls on West to use its sway to discipline Jabhat al-Nusra,” 19 February 2018, <tass.com>.

27 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JAe9PT>>.

28 WHO Gaziantep Office, “Eastern Ghouta update (18 - 22 February 2018),” <<http://www.who.int>>.

29 Al-Seeraj, “New attack on health facilities in Eastern Ghouta,” 21 February 2018, <alseeraj.net>.

30 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

31 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>; Al-Seeraj, “Attack on our office in Eastern Ghouta,” 21 February 2018, <alseeraj.net>.

32 UNSC S/2018/243, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017),” Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

33 UOSSM, “Breaking: New Bombing Campaign Hits 5 Hospitals, Among Worst Days in Syrian History,” 20 February 2018, <www.uossm.org>.



Homes burn in Harasta after incendiary attacks, 6 February 2018. Source: Harasta LC



The aftermath of cluster munition attacks against Eastern Ghouta, 11 March 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq

- ◆ 19 FEB – Al-Manfoush company warehouse in Misraba, which contained one of the main bread ovens in Eastern Ghouta, was taken out of service in a series of airstrikes and barrel bomb attacks amidst a major escalation against the city. This was the property of the same Manfoush who previously held a contract with the government to maintain a monopoly over trade at the al-Wafideen checkpoint. As many as 4,000 families fled Misraba during the onslaught.³⁴
- ◆ 20 FEB – The main bread oven in Saqba – one of only two in the town – was targeted by an airstrike and destroyed.³⁵
- ◆ 20 FEB – A hospital in Arbin was directly hit by airstrikes and barrel bombs. At least 300 patients and staff were stranded in the hospital while the attacks continued in the area for five straight hours.³⁶ A young nurse named Bushra Abid was killed.
- ◆ 20 FEB - Dar al-Shifa hospital in Hamouriya was taken out of service by airstrikes and barrel bombs. Two medical staff members were injured and 30 patients were stranded with no safe place to go. The next day it was bombed again by five new airstrikes.³⁷ Also in Hamouriya, al-Quds Hospital and al-Amal Physical Therapy Center in Hamouriya were both targeted and taken of service by barrel bombs.³⁸
- ◆ 20 FEB - At least five other medical centers were targeted and taken out of service that day, including: Zamalka medical center, Jobar medical center, Save a Soul hospital, al-Anwar Hospital, and the Cave Hospital.³⁹
- ◆ 21 FEB – The Beit Sawa medical center was destroyed in an airstrike. The center had already been out of service for several days due to earlier attacks.⁴⁰
- ◆ 21 FEB – Al-Yaman Hospital in Douma was taken out of service after being targeted by several airstrikes.⁴¹
- ◆ 21 FEB – Al-Rahma medical center in Hazzeh was targeted and taken out of service.⁴² A bakery oven in Hazzeh was also targeted and taken out of service.⁴³
- ◆ 21 FEB – The Jisreen medical center, the only remaining functional clinic in the city, was targeted and taken out of service by an airstrike.⁴⁴
- ◆ 21 FEB – The ambulatory center in Madyara was targeted and taken out of service.⁴⁵
- ◆ 21 FEB – The medical center in Saqba was targeted for a second time.⁴⁶

34 STJ, "As If it's Doomsday!" 23 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

35 STJ, "Targeting Ovens in Eastern Ghouta Deprives Tens of Thousands Residents from Bread," 2 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

36 SAMS, "Thirteen Targeted Attacks on Hospitals in East Ghouta in 48 Hours. Medics Describe the Situation as "Catastrophic," 20 February 2018, <www.sams-usa.net>.

37 Whatsapp messages from SAMS' medical staff on the ground, 20 February 2018.

38 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 20 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JuEyCU>>.

39 UOSSM, "UOSSM Staff Killed, 8 Medical Facilities Attacked, Illegal Barrel Bombs Used," 20 February 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

40 Beit Sawa Medical Office, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JCX15y>>.

41 Shaam Network, "طيران روسيا والأسد يستهدفان مشفى اليمان في دوما ومركز طبي في مديرا في الغوطة الشرقية," 21 February 2018, <<http://www.shaam.org>>.

42 Al-Rahma Medical Center in Hazzeh, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JtXyBE>>.

43 Shaam Network, "طيران روسيا والأسد يستهدفان مشفى اليمان في دوما ومركز طبي في مديرا في الغوطة الشرقية," 21 February 2018, <<http://www.shaam.org>>.

44 UOSSM, "Third Day Of Bombings Traps Civilians in Rubble; Aid Agencies Desperate," February 21, 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

45 UOSSM, "Third Day Of Bombings Traps Civilians in Rubble; Aid Agencies Desperate," February 21, 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

46 Ghouta GMC, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Mm56Uu>>.



Dar al-Shifa Hospital in Hamouriya after two days of direct attacks, 21 February 2018. Source: SAMS

- ◆ 21 FEB – The Douma obstetrics center was attacked and taken out of service.⁴⁷
- ◆ 21 FEB – The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) branches in Harasta and Douma were both bombed out of service.⁴⁸
- ◆ 21 FEB – SCD centers in Jisreen, Kafr Batna, and Saqba were bombed out of service.⁴⁹
- ◆ 22 FEB – Douma’s SCD center was targeted and taken out of service.⁵⁰
- ◆ 22 FEB – The medical center in Saqba was taken out of service by barrel bombs and airstrikes.⁵¹ It was at least the third targeted attack on the center in as many days.
- ◆ 22 FEB – Towns in the rural al-Marj area experienced a major escalation. One resident reported 42 airstrikes on the small town of al-Shaifuniya in just one hour.⁵²
- ◆ 23 FEB – The main bread oven in Hamouriya was taken out of service by an airstrike. It had previously produced around three tons of bread daily.⁵³
- ◆ 24 FEB – Al-Marj hospital was hit by two barrel bombs and taken out of service.⁵⁴

47 UOSSM, “Third Day Of Bombings Traps Civilians in Rubble; Aid Agencies Desperate,” February 21, 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

48 SARC, “Statement by The Syrian Arab Red Crescent,” 22 February 2018, <sarc.sy>.

49 UOSSM, “Third Day Of Bombings Traps Civilians in Rubble; Aid Agencies Desperate,” 21 February 2018, <www.uossm.us>.

50 SAMS Jordan Office, incident report, 21 February 2018.

51 Saqba Surgical Hospital, Facebook post, 22 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JuJxDC>>.

52 VDC Syria, “A Child Killed Twice,” 3 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

53 STJ, “Targeting Ovens in Eastern Ghouta Deprives Tens of Thousands Residents from Bread,” 2 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

54 VDC Syria, “A Child Killed Twice,” 3 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.



SCD rescuers search for victims amidst the destruction in Douma. 21 Feb. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



Damaged medical center in Saqba after multiple attacks, 22 February 2018. Source: GMC

UNSC Res. 2401 & Rural Advances (24 February – 6 March)

On 24 February, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Resolution 2401 (2018), calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities by all parties, a 30-day humanitarian pause, the deployment of humanitarian convoys, medical evacuations, and the lifting of all sieges.⁵⁵ The very next day there was a major escalation in the ground offensive as pro-government forces began to advance into Harasta from the northwest, and around Hosh al-Dawahira and al-Marj areas from the southeast.

- ◆ 25 FEB – The Zahraa maternity hospital in Saqba was taken out of service by an airstrike, which destroyed valuable medical supplies.⁵⁶
- ◆ 25 FEB – Suspected chemical attack on al-Shaifuniya. See page 37 for more details.
- ◆ 25-26 FEB – Hours after the chemical attacks on al-Shaifuniya, the Local Council building was targeted with napalm-like incendiary weapons that set it on fire. The charred remains of six people were later found in the basement of the building, among them were the president and two members of the Local Council, a child named Mohammad Shihab – reportedly a victim of the earlier chemical attack – and his father.⁵⁷ Remaining civilians in the area fled, and the town would be captured within a week.

On 26 February, Russia announced that there would be a five-hour humanitarian pause each day to allow civilians to leave Eastern Ghouta through al-Wafideen crossing. Only two civilians – both children – are known to have passed through this crossing in the days after the announcement, and they were immediately turned into government propaganda icons.⁵⁸ As part of their messaging, Russia and the Syrian government heavily pushed the narrative that Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) prevented civilians from leaving through al-Wafideen with snipers and the imposition of a curfew.⁵⁹ The claim of a curfew was denied by multiple sources on the ground. With no actual evidence in either direction regarding the claim that armed groups used snipers to block civilians from fleeing, it is difficult to assess its veracity. Large-scale civilian displacement through al-Wafideen and other checkpoints would not begin until pro-government forces began to invade the heavily populated towns and villages in the central sector of Eastern Ghouta more than a week later.

Siege Watch contacts did describe several factors that would have prevented people from even attempting to reach al-Wafideen to try and escape Eastern Ghouta if they had wanted to. For instance, while airstrikes did initially stop during the “humanitarian pauses,” ground-based bombing continued, vehicles were targeted, and movement remained dangerous. Additionally, the journey to reach al-Wafideen – a distance of over four miles for some in the further remaining portions of Eastern Ghouta at that time – remained practically difficult due to the destruction and blockage of roads.⁶⁰

55 UNSC, “Resolution 2401 (2018),” 24 February 2018, <undocs.org>.

56 SAMS Arabic, Facebook post, 25 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Ju6uGZ>>.

57 VDC Syria, “A Child Killed Twice,” 3 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

58 Russian Embassy UK, Tweet, 3 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Mlh9kX>>.

59 Reuters, “Russia says militants impose curfew in Syria's Ghouta: Interfax,” 3 March 2018, <www.reuters.com>.

60 Ammar Hamou, Justin Clark, “Virtually 'nobody is leaving' East Ghouta despite humanitarian corridor,” Syria Direct, 1 March 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

Sources on the ground also shared a sentiment that echoes the final days of Eastern Aleppo a year earlier, when Russia made a similarly dubious announcement about “humanitarian crossings”: for many, placing themselves in the hands of the Syrian government was at least as frightening as staying in Eastern Ghouta under bombardment. The government and Russia were the main perpetrators of the years-long siege and devastating final offensive against Eastern Ghouta, and they were in absolute control over the fate of those who fled into government-controlled Damascus. There were no assurances of protection offered by neutral humanitarian organizations or United Nations (UN) agencies. Additionally, people did not want to be displaced from their homes and live as IDPs in camps or as refugees in exile from their country, and feared that if they fled Eastern Ghouta they would not be allowed to return.

Despite Russia’s “humanitarian pauses,” the bloodshed continued unabated and intensified as pro-government forces began to capture parts of Eastern Ghouta. Contacts reported that airstrikes actually increased in intensity from around 1:00am-9:00am before the “pauses” each day. Hospitals were unable to cope. Panicked contacts on the ground began to use words like “apocalypse” “genocide” “annihilation” and “catastrophe” to try and convey the horrors around them. Basement shelters were increasingly overcrowded and a growing number of IDPs were left out in the streets as bombs fell.

- ◆ 28 FEB – The town of Hosh al-Dawahira was captured from JAI by pro-government forces. All civilian inhabitants had been previously displaced to other parts of Eastern Ghouta.⁶¹
- ◆ 28 FEB – The SCD center in Autaya was targeted by an airstrike, causing significant damage and taking the ambulance out of service. An SCD rescue team leader was killed.⁶²
- ◆ 3 MAR – The Ibn Sina psychiatric hospital in Douma was damaged by mortars.⁶³
- ◆ 3 MAR – Al-Bairouni cancer hospital in Harasta was damaged by mortar fire. One person was injured⁶⁴
- ◆ 3-4 MAR – JAI was forced to withdraw from a number of smaller rural towns in the path of advancing pro-government forces, who claimed control of Autaya, al-Salhiyeh, Nashabiyeh, Shaifuniya, most of Beit Naim, and nearby farmland and villages.⁶⁵ All remaining civilian inhabitants of these areas had fled to other parts of Eastern Ghouta in the preceding days preceding the capture.
- ◆ 5 MAR – Hamouriya and Kafr Batna were hit by especially intense attacks during the entry of a rare UN aid convoy into Douma. Airstrikes and shelling even continued to hit Douma while the international team was on the ground, killing six civilians.⁶⁶

61 Gregory Water, “2018 East Ghouta Offensive: the Cost of Securing Damascus,” *International Review*, 2 May 2018, <international-review.org>.

62 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 28 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2sOz77q>.

63 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

64 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

65 SOHR, “Within its continuous attack, the regime forces impose its control over more towns in the Ghouta, force Jaysh al-Islam to withdraw out of fear of being besieged,” 3 March 2018, <www.syriahr.com>.

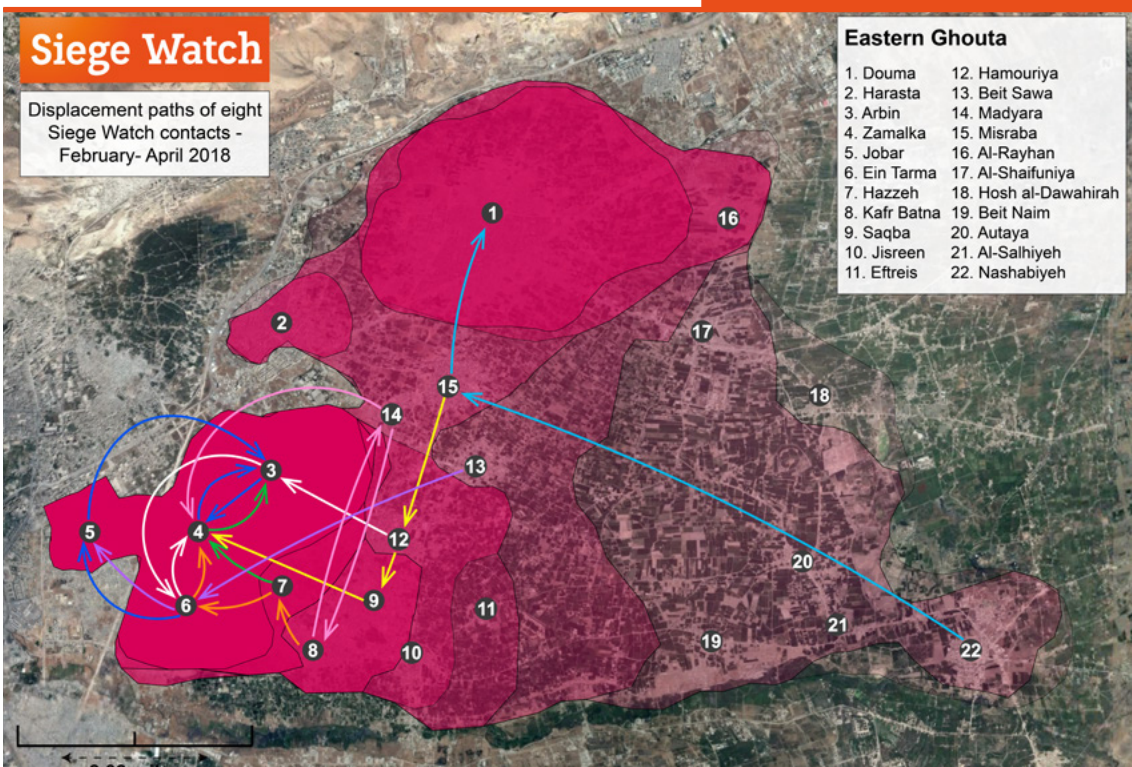
66 Douma Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 5 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MitZKE>.



A man flees Autaya with his belongings ahead of the government advance. 2 Mar 2018. Source: SAMS

Map 2.

Internal displacement in Eastern Ghouta



- ◆ 5 MAR – The Ibn Sina psychiatric hospital in Douma was again hit and damaged by a missile, injuring a staff member.⁶⁷
- ◆ 5 MAR – Suspected chemical attack in Hamouriya. See page 40 for details.
- ◆ 5 MAR – The SCD center in Saqba was targeted by an airstrike. Two SCD volunteers were injured and the center's ambulance was damaged.⁶⁸
- ◆ 7 MAR – Suspected chemical attack between Hamouriya and Saqba. See page 40 for more details.

Splitting Eastern Ghouta (7 - 12 March)

On 7 March, pro-government forces took control of Beit Sawa and surrounding farmland and villages.⁶⁹ This first major population center to fall was a critical strategic gain, as it put pro-government forces within days of severing the heavily populated western portion of Eastern Ghouta in half. Around this time, the arrival of significant pro-government reinforcements was reported, in the form of foreign and domestic militiamen being brought in from northern Syria.⁷⁰ Hamouriya was subjected to indescribably intense bombardments as pro-government forces sought to split Eastern Ghouta into pieces.

- ◆ 8 MAR – Six medical centers in Hamouriya were attacked: Central Quds Hospital, Al-Hakeem Maternity and Pediatric Center, Al-Balsam Clinics, Al-Amal Rehabilitation Center, Dar al-Shifaa Hospital, and the Central Laboratory.⁷¹
- ◆ 8 MAR – A primary care center in Misraba was bombed. Nobody was injured as the clinic had previously been shut down.⁷²
- ◆ 8 MAR – Al-Bairouni hospital in Harasta was again hit and damaged by three mortar shells, injuring one person. It was targeted again the next day.⁷³
- ◆ 9 MAR – Misraba and Madyara were subjected to extremely intense bombardments.
- ◆ 10 MAR – The Harasta city medical office was taken out of service after being targeted by several airstrikes and surface-to-surface missiles. Infrastructure and equipment was damaged, and a staff member was injured.⁷⁴
- ◆ 11 MAR – The bombardment on Arbin increased, and the city was hit with over 165 airstrikes and over 70 barrel bombs. Among the munitions dropped were incendiary weapons, cluster bombs, and suspected chemical weapons.⁷⁵ (see page 40 for more)

67 UNSC S/2018/369, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

68 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 5 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2l5lQCe>>.

69 Gregory Water, "2018 East Ghouta Offensive: the Cost of Securing Damascus," International Review, 2 May 2018, <international-review.org>.

70 AFP, "Regime sends more forces to Ghouta as UN decries 'apocalypse' in Syria," 7 March 2018, <www.france24.com>.

71 UOSSM, "Breaking: UOSSM PHC and Office Attacked in Ghouta, Doctors Describe Attacks as 'Mass Hysteria'," 8 March 2018, <www.uossm.org>.

72 UOSSM, "Breaking: UOSSM PHC and Office Attacked in Ghouta, Doctors Describe Attacks as 'Mass Hysteria'," 8 March 2018, <www.uossm.org>.

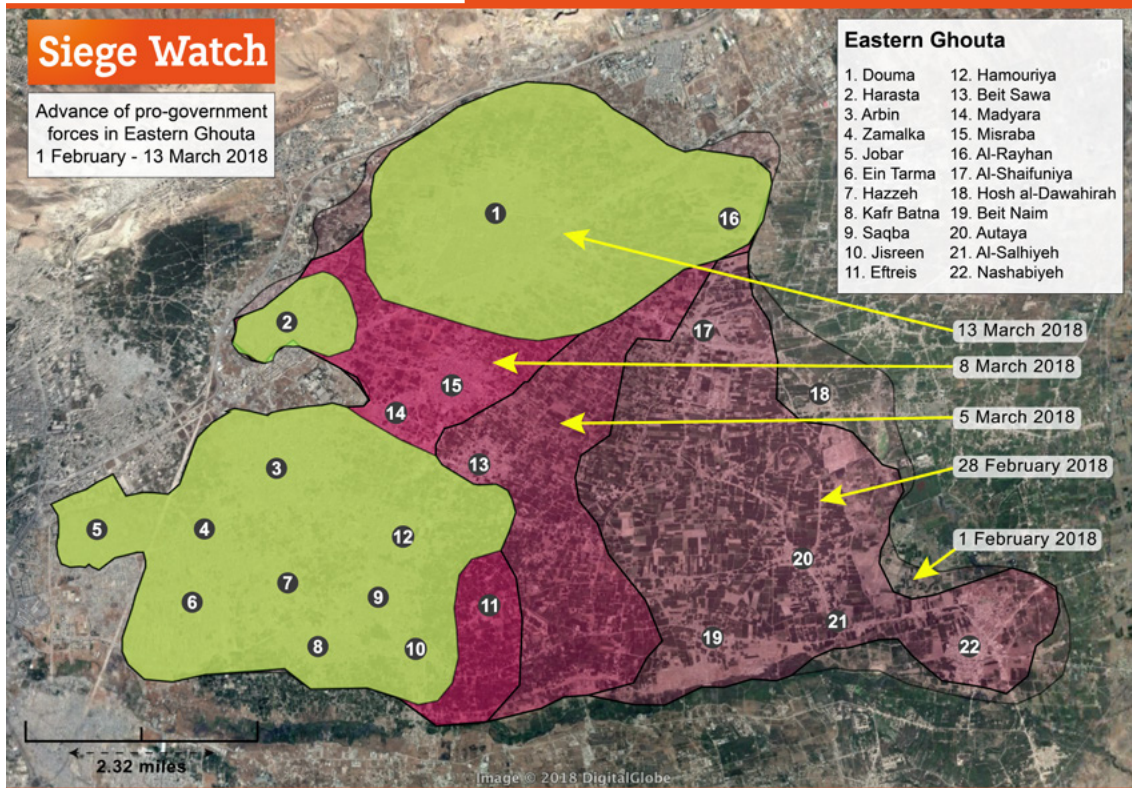
73 UNSC S/2018/369, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

74 Harasta Medical Office, Facebook post, 10 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2HHadeB>>.

75 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook post, 12 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2y0D7H9>>.

Map 3.

Advance of pro-government forces in Eastern Ghouta 1 FEB - 13 MAR



On 10 March the pro-government forces advancing from the east captured Misraba from JAI, and by 11 March they had connected with pro-government forces near the vehicles management building just south of Harasta city, cutting Eastern Ghouta in two.⁷⁶ By the next day, 12 March, the city of Madyara was fully under government control. Pro-government forces advancing from the north between Harasta and Douma reached the area, decisively severing Eastern Ghouta into three separate enclaves,⁷⁷ and signifying a major milestone in campaign. Both Misraba and Madyara were largely destroyed and their entire populations displaced. The capture of Misraba in particular, sparked the first notable displacement of civilians out of al-Wafideen, as the surrounding communities could no longer absorb the IDPs.

By 12 March, approximately 870 civilians had been killed and over 3,300 wounded since the passage of UNSC Res. 2401, and since the start of the offensive on 19 February, 1,450 had been killed and almost 5,500 wounded.⁷⁸

76 Gregory Water, "2018 East Ghouta Offensive: the Cost of Securing Damascus," International Review, 2 May 2018, <international-review.org>.

77 Jomana Karadsheh, Tamara Qiblawi and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "Eastern Ghouta: Syrian regime forces cut rebel-held enclave in three," 12 March 2017, <edition.cnn.com>.

78 Central Department of Statistics - Unified Relief Office in Eastern Ghouta

The Fall (13 March- 8 April)

After Eastern Ghouta was split into three parts, all advances by pro-government ground forces were into major populated cities full of panicked civilians, with their populations swollen further by the IDPs already displaced from elsewhere in Eastern Ghouta. The Russian and Syrian negotiators were also able to more effectively manipulate the armed groups in negotiations by playing the three enclaves against each other. Significantly, the three Eastern Ghouta enclaves aligned with the main area of operations of Eastern Ghouta's three largest armed groups: JAI in Douma, Ahrar al-Sham in Harasta, and Failaq al-Rahman (FAR) in the "Central Sector." Some Siege Watch contacts have blamed the armed group infighting – which went on for more than a year and resulted in the groups carving up of Eastern Ghouta into these three areas of control – for the eventual fall of the enclave.

"This might be the last message I can send... it is as if it is the end of the world in Hammouriya."

- 13 March, SAMS doctor in Hammouriya

- ◆ 13 MAR – The SCD center in Zamalka was bombed. One volunteer was killed, and three others were injured.⁷⁹ This came during several days of unprecedented escalation on the city.
- ◆ 14-15 MAR – A massive ground and air assault on Hammouriya sent thousands of civilians fleeing. Both of the town's hospitals – Dar al-Shifaa and Al Ghouta Central Hospital – were repeatedly bombed. The closest SCD center was unable to respond, having been previously bombed out of service.⁸⁰ By 15 March, pro-government forces captured most of Hammouriya from FAR, gaining full control the next day.⁸¹ "There was also a suspected chemical weapons attack, see page 40 for more details. Siege Watch and other sources accused the advancing pro-government forces of using hundreds of civilians as human shields, hindering FAR's ability to defend the town.⁸² Invading forces reportedly gave thousands of remaining civilians an order to leave within the hour. Most of Hammouriya was destroyed and its entire population displaced. The number of people fleeing Eastern Ghouta through al-Wafideen picked up speed as a result of the large-scale displacements.⁸³
- ◆ 15 MAR – Eman Hospital in Saqba was targeted by tank fire.⁸⁴
- ◆ 15 MAR – Hazzeh came under the heaviest attacks to date.
- ◆ 16 MAR – Pro-government forces captured Jisreen from FAR, after several days of fighting in the city.⁸⁵
- ◆ 16 MAR – In a gruesome mass-casualty attack, a Russian jet dropped four missiles containing a napalm-like incendiary substance on Kafr Batna, killing an

79 Syrians for Truth and Justice, "The Neutral Safe Triangle" Turns into a Triangle of Death!" 2 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

80 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 14 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MiCNqf>>.

81 VDC, "The Forced Eviction of Hammouriya," 16 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

82 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 15 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2l3OW63>>.

83 Avery Edelman, Alaa Nassar, and Ammar Hamou, "Thousands of civilians leave East Ghouta in largest exodus from the opposition-held enclave since five-year siege began," Syria Direct, 15 March 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

84 VDC, "The Forced Eviction of Hammouriya," 16 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

85 Gregory Water, "2018 East Ghouta Offensive: the Cost of Securing Damascus," International Review, 2 May 2018, <international-review.org>.



Medical supplies during targeted airstrikes on Douma Local Council, 18 March 2018. Source: Douma LC



Incinerated bodies after an incendiary attack in a crowded area of Kafr Batna, 16 March 2018. Original Source UNK



The aftermath of a deadly incendiary attack in a crowded area of Kafr Batna, 16 March 2018. Original Source UNK

estimated 61-70 civilians and injuring 200 more.⁸⁶ Kafr Batna was crowded with IDPs from other parts of Eastern Ghouta, and photos and videos show charred bodies littering the streets in the aftermath of the attack.

- ◆ 18 MAR – Heavy attacks on Douma resumed and escalated to new heights with nonstop incendiary attacks, after a period of relative calm that had allowed for some medical evacuations and an aid convoy.⁸⁷ The Ibn Sina psychiatric hospital in Douma was targeted for the third time in two weeks, by a mortar that damaged the facility and killed a staff member.⁸⁸ The Douma Local Council's warehouse was targeted by airstrikes, destroying some of the humanitarian aid delivered several days earlier.⁸⁹ There was also a suspected chemical attack on Douma. See page 40 below for details.
- ◆ 18 MAR – Pro-government forces fully captured Saqba after entering it the day before, pushing opposition fighters back to Hazzeh.⁹⁰ Pro-government forces also began to enter Kafr Batna, gaining full control by the next day with the help of a group of local government supporters.

86 Siege Watch, Tweets, 16 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2xZ0BMC>>.

87 Syria Direct, "Pro-government forces target East Ghouta's de facto capital with airstrikes, artillery," 19 March 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

88 UNSC S/2018/369, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

89 Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 19 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Jt6dUE>>.

90 Enab Baladi, "قوات الأسد تتحرك باتجاه سقبا شرق دمشق," 17 March 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

A local sheikh named Bassam Dufdaa played an important role in the government's capture of Kafr Batna – a turning point in the offensive. At the height of attacks on Kafr Batna during operation “Damascus Steel,” Sheikh Dufdaa gathered a small group of supporters and held a series of small pro-government demonstrations. During a 9 March demonstration, Sheikh Dufdaa and his supporters raised the government flag in Kafr Batna's city center and called for the military to enter and protect them.⁹¹ By the time pro-government ground forces finally began to enter Kafr Batna on 18-19 March, Sheikh Dufdaa's supporters numbered an estimated 400 men. This self-described “reconciliation force” joined the fight in support of the Syrian military.⁹² FAR fighters were unable to withstand the simultaneously attacks from two directions, and withdrew. As many as 100 civilians were reportedly killed in the ground invasion.⁹³

This incident shocked many in Eastern Ghouta. It was a huge psychological blow to opposition fighters and civilians alike, draining their will to continue resisting. It is likely that this pivotal incident hastened the subsequent collapse of several opposition front lines. It may also explain the preferential post-surrender treatment that Kafr Batna later received after the Syrian government reasserted control.

- ◆ 19 MAR – A school in Arbin that was serving as a shelter for hundreds of civilians was targeted and damaged in airstrikes. As many as 20 civilians – all women and children – were killed and 40 injured. With nowhere else to go, others remained in the school even after the airstrike.⁹⁴
- ◆ 20 MAR – The Arbin hospital was damaged in an attack that used guided missiles, one patient was killed, and part of the hospital was closed.⁹⁵ The UN monthly report noted that this hospital had previously been “deconflicted by the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group,” meaning that its coordinates had been shared with both the US and Russia on 12 March after it was verified by the UN as a civilian facility.
- ◆ 20 MAR – A surrender agreement for Harasta was reportedly reached.⁹⁶
- ◆ 21 MAR – Attacks on Harasta continued. The SCD center was bombed out of service.⁹⁷ Ahrar al-Sham announced a final surrender deal and forced population transfers began the next day.
- ◆ 22 MAR – FAR announced that a ceasefire would begin in the central sector at midnight, amidst final surrender negotiations with Russia.⁹⁸ Pro-government forces took control of the Ein Tarma valley, and began to make progress into populated neighborhoods as armed opposition groups (AOGs) began to withdraw towards Zamalka.⁹⁹

91 Kafr Batna Now, Facebook post, 9 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/24fPqx>>.

92 Enab Baladi, “رأس حربة في اقتحام الغوطة الشرقية,” 22 May 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

93 Interview with Siege Watch contact, 9 May 2018.

94 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

95 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

96 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Syrian rebels agree to evacuate town in Ghouta: sources,” 20 March 2018, <www.reuters.com>.

97 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 21 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2HFtQU>>.

98 Voice of the Capitol, Facebook post, 22 March 2018 <<http://bit.ly/2sW5NLm>>.

99 Annahar, “النظام سيطر على وادي عين ترمنا وخروج مقاتلي المعارضة من حرستا,” 23 March 2018, <newspaper.annahar.com>.

- ◆ 23 MAR – Attacks on central sector communities continued despite the ceasefire announcement. Overnight on 22-23 March, pro-government forces advanced into the town of Hazzeh.¹⁰⁰ In Arbin, at least 47 civilians were killed, most of them incinerated, when their shelter in was targeted by incendiary weapons. There was little that rescuers could do to treat the nine survivors pulled from the rubble.¹⁰¹ Shortly afterwards, FAR announced a final surrender agreement for the remaining cities in the central sector of Eastern Ghouta: Jobar, Arbin, Zamalka, Ein Tarma.¹⁰² Evacuation of the wounded began immediately and mass forced population transfers started the next day as attacks on the central sector finally ceased. The area reverted fully to government control on 31 March after the final convoys of civilians and fighters departed, leaving Douma as the only remaining besieged enclave.
- ◆ 4 APR – The SARC center in Douma was taken out of service by guided missiles and barrel bombs. Several ambulances were destroyed.¹⁰³
- ◆ 6 APR – The obstetrics hospital in Douma, which had also been “deconflicted by the Co-Chairs of the International Syria Support Group,” was attacked and partially destroyed.¹⁰⁴
- ◆ 7 APR – The Douma Central (Specialized) Hospital was attacked and damaged by airstrikes, a barrel bomb, and shelling, taking the facility out of service. The Hamdan Hospital, which specialized in prenatal and natal care, was also attacked.¹⁰⁵
- ◆ 7 APR – Suspected chemical attack on Douma. See page 40 for more details.
- ◆ 8 APR – Overnight, pro-government forces finally took full control of al-Rayhan on the outskirts of Douma.¹⁰⁶ JAI announced a final surrender agreement for Douma, and population transfers began.

The intensive bombardments and advancing pro-government forces throughout the reporting period caused tens of thousands to flee their homes and communities, seeking safer areas of Eastern Ghouta, only to find that none existed. Many were displaced repeatedly throughout the quarter. The systematic destruction of civilian shelters meant that fleeing people had nowhere to turn, and families wandered the streets looking for new shelter after bombings that destroyed their prior hiding places. Towards the end of the offensive, the remaining besieged communities were overburdened with IDPs from those areas that had been captured. Existing shelters were overcrowded. People did not know where they should go, and were guided only by rumors and fear. It was in this context that civilians finally began to exit through al-Wafideen checkpoint, when pro-government forces were entering the few remaining parts of the enclave and there was nowhere else to turn.

100 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, “المرصد: 37 قتيلاً مدنياً يقصف روسي على عربين بالغوطة الشرقية,” 23 March 2018, <aawsat.com>.

101 United Media Office of Arbin, Facebook post, 23 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2JO3GUC>; Siege Watch, Tweets, 23 March 2018. <http://bit.ly/2sQfUIH>

102 United Media Office of Arbin, Telegram Post, 23 March 2018, <https://t.me/umoerbeen/5860>.

103 VDC, “Suspected Chemical Attack on Douma City,” 8 April 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

104 UNSC S/2018/484, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 22 May April 2018, <undocs.org>.

105 UNSC S/2018/484, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 22 May April 2018, <undocs.org>.

106 Zen Adra, “BREAKING: Syrian Army, rebels declare ceasefire in East Ghouta,” Al-Masdar News, 8 April 2018, <www.almasdarnews.com>.



Burns on a survivor of the deadly incendiary attack on a shelter in Arbin, 23 March 2018. Source: SAMS



Rescuers pull charred bodies from aftermath of an incendiary attack that killed 47 people in a shelter in Arbin, 23 March 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



A boy scavenges belongings from his family home in Arbin, 28 February 2018. Source: SAMS



People seek shelter with some belongings in Douma, 20 March 2018. Source: Muhammad al-Najjar

CHEMICAL WEAPONS ATTACKS

Continuing a trend previously noted by Siege Watch, pro-government forces launched a significant number of suspected chemical weapons attacks against communities in Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period. Many of these attacks came amidst the final assaults just before invading pro-government forces advanced into an area. The use of chemical weapons spread terror among the population. Because chlorine and other weaponized chemicals are heavier than air, they sank into the basements and cellars where civilians were seeking shelter, turning them into suffocation chambers.

By deploying these chemical weapons amidst massive conventional weapons assaults, the Syrian government could be reasonably confident that evidence would be destroyed and information would be difficult to share and verify. As long as the attacks were primarily with dual-use chemicals like chlorine and did not lead directly to high death tolls, the government could feel relatively confident that the attacks would not be investigated and it would face few if any repercussions at the international level.

The following list includes suspected chemical attacks on Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period for which sufficient information could be obtained from multiple reliable sources:

- ◆ 1 FEB – At around 5:30am, Douma was hit with five surface-to-surface missiles containing a chemical substance. Three civilians were treated for symptoms consistent with exposure to a chlorine-like gas, as was an SCD volunteer, and witnesses near the attack site as well as medical staff reported an intense chlorine-like smell.¹⁰⁷ The missiles hit the western side of Douma where pro-government forces were trying to advance from the Harasta Orchards, and followed two earlier chemical attacks on Douma in January.
- ◆ 25 FEB – Amid heavy airstrikes on al-Shaifuniya, two chemical attacks using barrel bombs dropped from airplanes occurred in the evening, approximately four hours apart. In both cases the substance used was suspected to be chlorine gas based on the strong chlorine-like odor, and the symptoms including bluish lips, respiratory distress, and irritated membranes. The first attack hit residential buildings at around 6:00pm. Four-year old Adnan was killed in the attack, although it was unclear whether the direct cause of death was chemical inhalation or traumatic injury from the rubble. 18 civilians suffering symptoms of exposure to toxic gas were taken to medical centers, including two first responders who inhaled the substance after arriving on the scene.¹⁰⁸ One child, five-year old Mohammad Shihab, was reportedly fatally injured during the first chemical attack. His father took his body to the nearby Local Council (LC) building seeking help, but according to a witness he was already dead when he arrived. Then around 10:00pm a second chemical attack targeted the LC building, based on the smell and the sound of the munition, although the direction of the wind limited its impact on people nearby. The intense aerial

¹⁰⁷ Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 1 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Jwhwvt>>; Eliot Higgins, "New Details of the February 1st 2018 Chlorine Attack in Douma, Damascus," Bellingcat, 12 February 2018, <www.bellingcat.com>.

¹⁰⁸ SIG Health Directorate in Damascus and its Countryside, Facebook post, 26 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2t6LQlt>>; Bellingcat & Syrian Archive, "Syrian Forces Bombard Eastern Ghouta with Chemical Weapons for the Fourth Consecutive Time since the Beginning of 2018," 15 March 2018, <www.bellingcat.com>.



Missile used in suspected chemical attack against Douma, 1 February 2018. Source: Firas Abdullah



SCD rescuers suffer symptoms of exposure after responding to suspected chemical attack. 25 February 2018. Source: Douma Coordinating Committee



Victims of suspected chemical attack in Nashabiyeh, 25 February 2018. Source: SAMS



Chemical attack victims in Hamouriya struggle to breath. 7 March. Source: SAMS.



SCD volunteers struggle to put out fire after two men were hit with incendiary munitions in Hamouriya, 7 March 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq

bombardments following the chemical attacks delayed a more robust response from rescuers. According to VDC analysis, Russian fighter jets were likely involved.¹⁰⁹ On 1 March, another child injured in the attack on al-Shaifuniya, 10-month old Ahmad al-Ahmad, died of respiratory failure after four days in a Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)-supported medical center¹¹⁰

- ◆ 5 MAR – More than 29 people were treated with symptoms of exposure to a chlorine-like toxic substance after suspected attack on Hamouriya, included several first responders.¹¹¹ Instead of exploding, the missile began emitting an irritating smoke. The attacks took place just hours after a UN aid convoy was prematurely forced to depart Douma.
- ◆ 7 MAR – Around 120 civilians were injured in a suspected chemical attack, when a barrel bomb filled with a toxic gas was dropped in the area between Hamouriya and Saqba during an intensive bombardment that killed 29 civilians, including two who were incinerated by incendiary munitions.¹¹² Medical staff reported an intense chlorine-like smell, and victims presented with symptoms such as wheezing, hypoxia, and coughing.
- ◆ 11 MAR – Arbin was hit with an airstrike that dropped three missiles containing toxic gas suspected to be chlorine, at around 1:30pm, amidst a barrage of around 40 airstrikes. No injuries reported from the gas attack but several were killed in the other attacks, including a girl who was incinerated by incendiary munitions.¹¹³
- ◆ 14 MAR – In Hamouriya, multiple sources on the ground, including the SCD, reported that amidst heavy bombardment, a barrel bomb appeared to release a toxic gas. Nearly 20 civilians were taken to medical points after with symptoms consistent with exposure to a choking agent like chlorine.¹¹⁴
- ◆ 18 MAR – Douma was hit with a chemical attack in the evening amidst a heavy bombardment with all sorts of munitions including incendiary devices. Residents believe it was chlorine, and report that the wind speed and direction helped prevent serious injuries.¹¹⁵
- ◆ 7 April – Amidst a paralyzing wave of bombardments that began the day before, Douma was hit with two chemical attacks. The first was a government airstrike that hit the Saada Bakery at around 4:00pm, injuring 15 people. Several hours later at 7:30pm an airstrike deployed chemical weapons on the nearby Martyrs square area. The attacks killed an estimated 43 Syrians and injured around

109 VDC Syria, "A Child Killed Twice," 3 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

110 SIG Health Directorate in Damascus and its Countryside, Facebook post, 1 March 2018 <<http://bit.ly/2HH5MQU>>.

111 SIG Health Directorate in Damascus and its Countryside, Facebook post, 6 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2HG6cqZ>>; SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 5 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LlqNgA>>.

112 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 7 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2HFnapn>>; STJ, "Syrian Forces Re-Use Toxic Gases in Eastern Ghouta for a Five Time in 2018," 10 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

113 STJ, "Repeated Attacks with Incendiary Weapons, Cluster Munitions and Chemicals on Eastern Ghouta," 26 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

114 SCD Rural Damascus, Facebook Post, 14 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Mme4RY>>.

115 STJ, "Brutal Attacks of 18 and 19 March 2018, on Douma-Eastern Ghouta," 10 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>; Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 19 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2y0bDRT>>.

500 others.¹¹⁶ While victims and medical staff reported a chlorine-like smell and victims had some symptoms consistent to exposure with a smoking agent, such as respiratory distress, many victims also exhibited other symptoms including pinpoint pupils, corneal burns, and heavy foaming at the mouth, that are more consistent with exposure to an organophosphate, or nerve gas.¹¹⁷ Those symptoms combined with the high death toll indicate that the government may have used some formulation of both classes of chemicals in its attacks. Earlier that day, Douma's SARC branch had been taken out of service by targeted missile attacks, limiting the capacity of first responders to rescue attack victims.

The high death toll of the 7 April attack had two significant consequences: it pushed JAI to quickly surrender the enclave, and it drew international attention. Through a deal with JAI as part of its surrender, Russian military police gained access to the site of the 7 April attack within two days.¹¹⁸ Russian forces set about destroying evidence at the site and Russian and Syrian forces worked to find and coerce potential witnesses. Source networks on the ground reported that Russian officers even attempted to remove some of the victims' bodies. An Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) fact-finding mission (FFM) did not arrive in the country until 14 April, a week after the attacks occurred, and Syrian and Russian officials denied the inspectors access to the site for another week after that. The rationale offered for the continuing delay was reportedly "security issues,"¹¹⁹ yet they allowed in a series of pro-government journalists without hesitation. On 16 April, an advance UN security reconnaissance mission was fired on while attempting to visit the sites,¹²⁰ a brazen attack by pro-government forces considering the fact that there were no armed opposition fighters left for them to pin the blame on.

Instead of access to the attack sites, the Syrian government offered international investigators access to 22 "witnesses," who would testify to the government narrative that the attack never happened.¹²¹ According to trusted Siege Watch sources, these "witnesses," which included doctors who treated patients of the chemical attack, were being held in government custody, and were threatened that their own safety and that of their families would be at risk if they did not say that the chemical attack was a hoax. Similar accounts were independently published by several media sources.¹²² The FFM was finally allowed to enter the sites in Douma on 21 and 25 April.¹²³

116 VDC, "Suspected Chemical Attack on Douma City," 8 April 2018, <vdc-sy.net>; SN4HR, "Additional Evidences and Investigations Prove that the Syrian Regime was Probably Implicated in Attacking Douma City Using Chemical Weapons" 11 May 2018, <sn4hr.org>; WHO "WHO concerned about suspected chemical attacks in Syria," 11 April 2018, <www.who.int>.

117 SAMS and SCD, "SAMS, Syria Civil Defense Condemn Chemical Attack on Douma," 8 April 2018, <www.sams-usa.net>.

118 VDC, "Russian Military Police Inspects Chemical Attack Site," 9 April 2018, <vdc-sy.net>; Shadi Abdallah, YouTube video, 9 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Mhzujb>.

119 Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, "Syria: chemical weapons inspectors barred from Douma site," The Guardian, 16 April 2018, <www.theguardian.com>.

120 OPCW, "Media Alert: Update on the Deployment of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to Douma, Syria," 18 April 2018, <www.opcw.org>.

121 OPCW "Opening Statement by the Director-General to the Executive Council at its Fifty-Eighth Meeting," 16 April 2018, <www.opcw.org>.

122 Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian medics 'subjected to extreme intimidation' after Douma attack," The Guardian, 17 April 2018, <www.theguardian.com>.

123 UNSC S/2018/484, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 22 May April 2018, <undocs.org>.



Civilians killed in their shelter in suspected Douma chemical attack, 7 April 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



A victim killed in suspected Douma chemical attack foaming at the mouth, 7 April 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



SCD volunteer carries a dead child out of a Douma building targeted by suspected chemical attack, 7 April 2018. Source: SCD Rif Dimashq



Girl struggles to breath after suspected Douma chemical attack 7 April 2018. Source: Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee

There were a number of other attacks during the February – April quarter where chemical weapons use was suspected, but where sufficient detail and/or confirmation from medical staff was unavailable.

On 21 February the Autaya Local Council reported a suspected chlorine gas attack on the southwestern part of the town.¹²⁴ Overnight of 7-8 March, a medical center in Hazzeh treated victims of a suspected chlorine gas attack on the area between Hazzeh and Hamouriya.¹²⁵ On 15 March, an STJ field researcher and local media reported that a barrel bomb containing a toxic gas hit Zamalka, amidst a wave of attacks. No injuries were reported from the gas as the wind blew it away from civilian locations.¹²⁶ That same day local media also reported a suspected chlorine attack in Hazzeh.¹²⁷ On 21 March there were reports of a suspected chlorine gas attack on the area between Zamalka and Arbin.¹²⁸ The next night, there were reports of an additional suspected chemical attack on Zamalka.¹²⁹

With residents pinned down underground, medics overwhelmed, and movement difficult, thorough documentation of these suspected chemical attacks was nearly impossible. They all took place amidst intense bombardments on populated areas with all sorts of conventional and incendiary munitions. In all cases, the suspected chemical substance used was chlorine-like, based on the heavy odor that witnesses smelled and symptoms exhibited by victims.

TARGETING CIVILIANS

More than 1,700 civilians were estimated killed and over 5,000 injured during the nearly two month long final offensive against Eastern Ghouta.¹³⁰ Reporting indicates that some of the spikes in attacks on certain civilian population centers by government forces corresponded with AOG efforts to go on the offensive, suggesting that civilians were intentionally targeted as a direct response to AOG attacks. For example, on 18-19 March when JAI reportedly tried to retake areas such as Misraba that had been captured by pro-government forces days earlier, there was an intensive violent wave of attacks on civilian areas of Douma that included more than 50 airstrikes, a substantial number of incendiary munitions, and the targeting of an aid warehouse.¹³¹ Douma was the main area of control of JAI.

Because most of the AOG fighters in Eastern Ghouta were locals, the intensive targeting of civilians greatly undermined fighter morale as men saw their homes destroyed and loved ones killed at an increasing rate. This intentional targeting of civilians as well as indiscriminate attacks on populated areas are both clear violations of international law.

Some of the deadliest attacks on civilians in Eastern Ghouta occurred when strikes took down entire buildings in residential areas, turning basement shelters where civilians were gathered

124 Autaya Local Council, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MlvttR>>.

125 Al-Rahma Medical Center in Hazzeh, Facebook post, 7 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JO7ll6>>.

126 Syrians for Truth and Justice, "The Neutral Safe Triangle" Turns into a Triangle of Death!" 2 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

127 Damascus Media Center, Facebook post, 15 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sOKigq>>.

128 Barada Media Network, Facebook post, 21 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MI1Ed0>>.

129 Baladi News, "بخاز الكلور وقنابل الفسفور والنايلج.. النظام يشن هجوما بريا على الغوطة," 23 March 2018, <www.baladi-news.com>.

130 International Rescue Committee, "We've been buried alive." Inside Eastern Ghouta's underground bunkers," 4 April 2018, <www.rescue.org>.

131 Douma Local Council, Telegram post, 19 March 2018, <<https://t.me/doumalc/1284>>.



Residents sift through the rubble of their homes in Douma, 21 March 2018. Source: Muhammad al-Najjar



People flee with belongings after their building in Douma was bombed, 20 March 2018. Source: Muhammad al-Najjar

into death traps. Several contributing factors played a role in the increase in the number of these deadly building collapses during the reporting. For one thing, the integrity of many buildings was compromised from repeatedly being hit during the extended waves of attacks beginning in November, making them more likely to fall with each ensuing hit. At the same time, there were significantly more people gathered in basement cellars than in prior periods, and for much longer stretches of time due to the unprecedented intensity of the assault. This meant that when buildings did collapse, groups of civilians were more likely to be concentrated underneath them. Also, Russia played a major role in the final aerial assault on Eastern Ghouta, deploying more powerful bunker-buster munitions designed to penetrate deeper into the earth than those possessed by the Syrian air force. Finally, civilian basement shelters were also systematically and intentionally targeted. Pro-government reconnaissance drones were omnipresent in the skies of Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period, recording everything that moved, including the entrances to civilian shelters housing women and children.

On 20 February, at least 42 civilians were killed in Beit Sawa when two barrel bombs hit the building where they were sheltering in the basement. It took three days for rescue teams to remove all of the bodies from the rubble¹³² On 16 March, 15 civilians in Zamalka were killed when an airstrike hit their shelter. On 19 March another 20 civilians – 16 children and four young women – were killed in a similar direct strike on a shelter in Arbin. The heavy bunker buster rocket, reportedly dropped by a Russian aircraft, penetrated the roof of the school turned shelter, penetrating three floors before exploding in the basement.¹³³

Humanitarian Conditions and Civil Response

The complete cutoff of all supply routes and destruction of supply stores in Eastern Ghouta for a maximum intensification of the siege was an important part of the strategy during the final offensive. Around 15 February, a few days before the launch of the final offensive, al-Wafideen checkpoint was once again completely closed after having been opened to limited commercial deliveries for almost two months, and prices started to rise once again.¹³⁴

The cost of basic goods in Eastern Ghouta was extremely high during the reporting period, far beyond what most could afford after years of deprivation and unemployment. The systematic targeting and destruction of bread ovens in February led to shortages and a spike in the price of bread, putting it out of reach of most families in Eastern Ghouta. The UN reported in February that bread in Eastern Ghouta was 15-20 times more expensive than in Damascus city.¹³⁵

AID

Limited aid reached Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period, and the deliveries that did arrive were fraught processes.

132 STJ, "Death Followed Them Even Inside Basements," 17 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

133 STJ, "Death Followed Them Even Inside Basements," 17 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

134 STJ, "Scantiness of Humanitarian Assistance Compounds the Tragedy of about 400 Thousand People Trapped in Eastern Ghouta," 5 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

135 UNSC S/2018/243, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.



UN and SARC staff take cover in the Douma Local Council building while pro-government forces attack nearby. 5 March 2018. Source: Mohammed Hamdoun

- ◆ 14 FEB – A nine-vehicle interagency aid convoy reached al-Nashabiyeh area with 1,440 food baskets, for 7,200 people for one month. The beneficiary number was less than half of the 16,500 target beneficiaries in the request sent by the UN to the Syrian government, and a minute portion of those in need in Eastern Ghouta. 3,810 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government forces.¹³⁶ Much of the aid had still not been distributed to civilians by the end of February due to the intensity of subsequent government attacks on al-Nashabiyeh.¹³⁷
- ◆ 5 MAR – A 46-vehicle joint SARC, UN, and ICRC aid convoy reached Douma. It reportedly contained food aid for 27,500 people and health items for more than 70,000 people.¹³⁸ Around 70% of the WHO health supplies, including surgical kits, insulin, and dialysis treatments, were removed by government officials before it entered Eastern Ghouta.¹³⁹ Aid workers were rattled by nearby pro-government air and helicopter strikes,¹⁴⁰ before Russian forces called and told the convoy to depart immediately, with food aid for 15,500 people in nine trucks yet to be offloaded.¹⁴¹

136 Al-Nashabiya Local Council, Facebook post, 14 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sQaFmg>>; UNSC S/2018/243, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)," Report of the Secretary General, 20 March 2018, <undocs.org>.

137 STJ, "Scantiness of Humanitarian Assistance Compounds the Tragedy of about 400 Thousand People Trapped in Eastern Ghouta," 5 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

138 SARC, "Humanitarian Aid Reaches Eastern Ghouta," 5 March 2018, <sarc.sy>.

139 Reuters, "Syrian government removes trauma kits, surgical items from Ghouta convoy: WHO," 5 March 2018, <www.reuters.com>.

140 Mohammad Hamdoun, Facebook post, 5 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JFyvaJ>>.

141 VDC, "A Bloody Day in Eastern Ghouta," 6 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

- ◆ 9 MAR – SARC and the ICRC returned to Douma with the remainder of the aid that was supposed to be delivered on 5 March, in a 13-vehicle convoy delivering food for 12,000 people.¹⁴² The total amount delivered in the two-part convoy was sufficient for only 27,500 people, less than half of the 90,000 beneficiaries that the UN had requested to reach. The aid convoy was targeted by government forces during its visit, forcing aid workers to take shelter for several hours.¹⁴³
- ◆ 15 MAR – A 25-vehicle joint SARC, UN, ICRC aid convoy reached Douma in Eastern Ghouta with food supplies for 26,100 people.¹⁴⁴ Again, this was less than half of the 90,000 beneficiaries that the UN requested to reach. 124,010 medical treatments were removed from the convoy by government officials.¹⁴⁵ While the convoy was there, at least two children by mortar attacks just 50 meters from the UN trucks.¹⁴⁶ During the visit, SARC was able to evacuate 40 people in need of medical care and their families. Nearby, Hamouriya was being emptied of its remaining population in a day of bloodshed.
- ◆ 19 MAR – A 10-vehicle joint SARC, UN, ICRC aid convoy reached Kafr Batna, Saqba, and Hamouriya in the central sector of Eastern Ghouta with food supplies, as well as a mobile clinic, a medical team, and two ambulances.¹⁴⁷
- ◆ 20 MAR – A 20-vehicle joint SARC, UN, ICRC aid convoy reached Kafr Batna, Saqba, and Hamouriya in the central sector of Eastern Ghouta.¹⁴⁸ The convoy carried food supplies along with some nutrition and medical items, and was accompanied again by a mobile clinic, ambulance, and medical team.

The opposition's Provincial Council put out a statement about the 14 February aid delivery to al-Nashabiyeh, pointing out that it was carefully timed by the Assad government to take place on the same day as a UN Security Council meeting on humanitarian conditions in Syria, accusing it of trying to get positive attention for letting in this small amount of aid while in fact it was letting people starve.¹⁴⁹

When aid did reach Eastern Ghouta it was not enough for the population in any given area. As a result, single food baskets that the UN says should have each supported one family for a month were divided up by local authorities to distribute to multiple families. For example, the aid delivered to Douma on 5 March was distributed at the amount of one food basket for every 40 people. Accordingly, the humanitarian assistance in the convoys always ran out much quicker than noted by the UN, often in a week or even less.

142 UNSC S/2018/369, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

143 VDC, "Commentary on UN Convoy Entries into Eastern Ghouta, 19 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

144 SARC, "340 tons of food items reached Eastern Ghouta," 15 March 2018, <sarc.sy>.

145 UNSC S/2018/369, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018)," Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

146 Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 15 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2JLivqQ>.

147 SARC, "Humanitarian aid reached Saqba and Kafr Batna and Hamuria in Eastern Ghouta," 19 March 2018, <sarc.sy>.

148 SARC, "Another humanitarian aid convoy reached Saqba and Kafer Batna and Hamuria in Eastern Ghouta," 20 March 2018, <sarc.sy>.

149 Rural Damascus Provincial Council, Telegram post, 14 February 2018, <https://t.me/RifDimGovr/508>.



Douma aid convoy, 15 March 2018. Source: SARC



Injured people wait for evacuation by SARC in Douma, 15 March 2018. Source: SAMS

HEALTH

There were as many as 1,000 civilians in Eastern Ghouta on a waiting list for urgent medical evacuation by the end of the offensive.¹⁵⁰ Civilian casualties due to untreated illnesses and conditions exacerbated by malnutrition continued throughout the February – April period. However, the reporting on these cases declined as the intensity of the military offensive eclipsed all other aspects of life in Eastern Ghouta, and communications were disrupted.

A non-exhaustive list of recorded siege casualties due to untreated illnesses is below, although the true number of probably far higher:

- ◆ 5 FEB – 9-year old Fatima from Douma died of tuberculosis for which she could not access sufficient treatment.¹⁵¹
- ◆ 8 FEB– Ubida Mufeed Nassan died of an untreated bacterial infection.¹⁵²
- ◆ 11 FEB – A 35-year old woman named Bassema died of cancer.¹⁵³
- ◆ 13 FEB – Mohammad Jawish from Harasta died after an eight-month battle with tuberculosis for which he could not access sufficient treatment.¹⁵⁴
- ◆ 22 FEB – Marwan Iskandar from Jisreen died of cancer, for which he could not receive treatment.¹⁵⁵
- ◆ 23 FEB – Hassan al-Durra reportedly died due to untreated disease in Madyara.¹⁵⁶
- ◆ 24 FEB – A 45-day old infant named Khaled Dahbour died in Kafr Batna of malnutrition, as his parents could not find infant formula.¹⁵⁷
- ◆ 2 MAR – 5-year old Noah al-Rifai reportedly died while on the urgent medical evacuation list, awaiting evacuation.¹⁵⁸

Infants and expecting mothers were among the hardest hit by the abysmal conditions in Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period. Women’s access to maternal medical care decreased as maternity centers were bombed out of service, violence made movement difficult, and extreme shortages of medical supplies grew. Maternity centers in Eastern Ghouta reported a sudden rise in premature deliveries after the start of operation “Damascus Steel,” possibly triggered by the extreme anxiety and fear of the bombardments.¹⁵⁹ Infants born during the reporting period continued to display high levels of congenital abnormalities due to maternal malnutrition. Infant formula was incredibly scarce.

150 VDC, “Speech by the Violations Documentation Center Executive Director at the UN Security Council Meeting,” 12 March 2018, <vdc-sy.net>.

151 Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee, Facebook post, 5 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MkEiE9>>.

152 STJ, “Up to 600 Medical Cases Await Death on “Urgent Evacuation Lists” from Eastern Ghouta,” 21 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

153 STJ, “Up to 600 Medical Cases Await Death on “Urgent Evacuation Lists” from Eastern Ghouta,” 21 February 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

154 Harasta City, Facebook post, 14 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sVPKOP>>.

155 Jisreen Media Office, Facebook post, 22 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2t6TJaz>>.

156 Minhebik Madyara, Facebook post, 23 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2l55Z7u>>.

157 Kafr Batna Media Office, Facebook post, 24 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2J00Kp9>>.

158 Dr. Mohamad Katoub, Tweet, 2 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sQ48N>>.

159 UOSSM, “Press Release: Ghouta Doctors Sound Alarm Over Emergency C-Sections, Siege Endangering Newborns,” 19 March 2018,

<www.uossm.org>; Whatsapp conversation with SAMS doctor, 2 March 2018.

Many people spent weeks or even months in underground shelters without the supplies, assistance, or communications tools they needed. Lack of access to potable water was a tremendous problem. Respiratory conditions, viral skin infections, infestations such as scabies and lice, and gastrointestinal conditions were common in the shelters, and infections spread quickly in the cramped and unsanitary confines. Much of the population was forced to take coping measures such as reduce their food intake to one or two meals a day, or even less. A doctor from SAMS reported that most of the patients in his clinic had anemia and low hemoglobin levels, and that incidents of people experiencing dizziness and fainting due to hunger were common.¹⁶⁰

LOCAL COUNCILS & CIVILIAN VOICES

Local Councils (LC) and civil society organizations in Eastern Ghouta put out many public distress calls during the reporting period. A 20 February statement from the Hazzeh LC called urgently for food, bread, and baby milk.¹⁶¹ In a 10 March statement the Douma LC said that they were overwhelmed by the number of displaced people flooding into Douma, and that the shelters were overcrowded and people were living in the streets. The heavy shelling of the cemetery meant that they could not bury the dead. Many LCs put out statements calling on the international community, particularly the UN, to uphold its legal and moral responsibilities to end the siege, help the injured, and stop the systematic and devastating bombardments on civilians.¹⁶²

Even as they pressured the international community to act, many LCs knew that their calls were falling on deaf ears. On 3 March when the Misraba LC put out a statement about incendiary rocket attacks that targeted clinics and residential areas the day before, it said that the LC was “not begging for the intervention of the international community or the human rights organizations as they are unable to apply the resolutions and protocols they issue...” instead they were putting out the statement solely “to be among thousands of other documents issued to condemn the international community.”¹⁶³

The Provincial and Local Councils and other local organizations tried their best to respond to some of the overwhelming civilian needs. Towns formed emergency committees, which were coordinated at a provincial level by a central emergency committee created on 23 January by the Syrian Interim Government.¹⁶⁴ The outcomes of a 21 February meeting by the Douma emergency committee gives an example of their work: 1) The formation of local volunteer teams to dig new shelters with engineering support from the committee; 2) The coordination of local charities to provide food to airstrike victims and their families; 3) The creation of a process for residents to formally request the opening of private shelters to the general public. In addition to LC members, the committee included representatives of a broad swathe of society including the medical, education, relief, and law enforcement sectors.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Whatsapp message from SAMS doctor, 19 February 2018.

¹⁶¹ Hazzeh Local Council, Facebook post, 20 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2MgKGMJ>>.

¹⁶² Arbin News Network, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LLmPUC>>; Jisreen media Office, Facebook post, 22 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LJL8BY>>; Harasta Local Council, Facebook post, 14 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JvJyY2>>.

¹⁶³ Misraba Local Council, Facebook post, 3 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2t1lctd>>.

¹⁶⁴ Harasta Local Council, Facebook post, 15 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JClmXT>>.

¹⁶⁵ Douma Local Council, Facebook post, 21 February 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JHMxMj>>.



People wrap dead children in UNHCR tarps in an effort to get the world's attention. Douma, 4 March 2018. Source: Yasser al-Doumany, DoumaRCC



LC efforts to continue trash collection in Douma despite bombing, 13 March 2018. Source: Douma LC

On 17 March a Civilian Bloc was formed, with Syrian representatives of a range of governance, humanitarian, and civil society groups from inside and outside of Eastern Ghouta. The civilian bloc aimed to amplify civilian voices and interests in issues of crisis response, in negotiations as to the fate of Eastern Ghouta, and in future justice initiatives.¹⁶⁶

Throughout the offensive, civil society organizations continued to provide relief to the population. Activists and local journalists organized media outreach to share the carnage with the world and risked their lives by leaving their shelters to record events, give interviews, and upload photo and video materials online. These crucial voices from the ground diminished throughout the reporting period as people were killed and displaced, communications equipment was destroyed, internet connections were cut, and local media centers were forced to shut down.¹⁶⁷

Information Warfare

The Syrian government and its allies, particularly Russia, wielded disinformation and propaganda as effective weapons during the final offensive against Eastern Ghouta. Their information warfare was used to galvanize supporters, obscure facts, control external media narratives, spread confusion on the ground, and to discredit, dehumanize, and slander their opponents and victims.

Pro-government media outlets and supporters repeatedly maligned the SCD, trying to paint the volunteer rescuers as al-Qaeda allies or crisis actors. For example, after the deadly 7 April chemical attacks on Douma, Russian state TV claimed that the British government ordered the White Helmets to stage the chemical attack, using promotional material from a film called *Revolution Man* as evidence.¹⁶⁸ In another case, an SCD volunteer who was killed in a “double tap” airstrike during a rescue mission in Autaya was described to as a “terrorist leader.”¹⁶⁹ Similar efforts were made to slander doctors and medical charities. On 3 April, when pro-government forces were exploring recently captured towns, Syrian state media accused the US-based SAMS of supporting terrorists and paying their salaries after finding receipts of their financial support to civilian field hospitals and doctors.¹⁷⁰

Pro-government propaganda machines were especially active in efforts to discredit and obscure the details of chemical weapons attacks. For example, on 25 February the Russian Center for Reconciliation pre-emptively spread the narrative that armed opposition groups in Eastern Ghouta were planning to stage a false flag attack: “preparing a provocation using poisonous agents in order to accuse the government forces of using chemical weapons against civilians.”¹⁷¹ That night al-Shaifuniya was hit with several chemical weapons barrel bombs amidst a heavy barrage of other missiles. After the deadly 7 April Douma chemical attack, Russian official channels, Russian trolls, and their Western “anti-imperialist” followers went into

166 Pulse Media Blog, “Statement by the civilian block in eastern Ghouta,” 19 March 2018, <pulsemedia.org>.

167 For example the Barada News Network suspended its Eastern Ghouta office on 23 February 2018 after a bombing : <<http://bit.ly/2y5owKk>>.

168 Eliot Higgins, “The Douma Chemical Attack – Fake News about Fake News on Russia’s Fake News,” Bellingcat, 13 April 2018, <www.bellingcat.com>.

169 Aleppo Military and Civilian – Al-Ridha, Facebook post, 1 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sOIK5Z>>.

170 Al Ikhbaria, YouTube video, 3 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2y9zBtM>>.

171 Russian Ministry of Defense, “Briefing by Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria,” 25 February 25 2018, <eng.mil.ru>.

overdrive on social media trying to build a narrative that the entire attack was staged.¹⁷²

Propaganda was also used to wage psychological warfare against the residents of Eastern Ghouta. For example, Russian media prematurely reported that a surrender deal had been reached in Douma while negotiations were still ongoing.¹⁷³ Not only were the reports untrue, but they included details of population transfers terms that contradicted what JAI was saying publicly at the time. As rumors like these circulated and evolved on social media platforms, they made it difficult for Eastern Ghouta residents to trust anything they read. Siege Watch contacts reported that while they were aware of the intentional spread of disinformation, this awareness was not enough to overcome the challenge of discerning truth from fiction. Instead they were left in the dark about critical developments that would determine their fate.

Flyers dropped by Syrian government helicopters served both as psychological warfare against residents, and as propaganda intended for international audiences, allowing them to claim to be acting in compliance with the laws of war by warning civilians of impending attacks and safe corridors.¹⁷⁴ The flyers generally came during major waves of attacks, when people could not leave their shelters to read them, or after deadly attacks had occurred. Many of the flyers contained threats, and disinformation.¹⁷⁵

As Eastern Ghouta's Central Sector was collapsing, civilians fleeing through the "humanitarian corridors" were greeted by government propagandists holding microphones. These siege victims were humiliatingly paraded on state TV, forced to praise the government and military that sought their extermination. These videos were effective external propaganda aimed at international media outlets that did not understand or believe the safety threats that these civilians faced.

Surrender & Forced Displacement

Negotiations for surrender deals were undertaken separately in the isolated parts of Eastern Ghouta after it was split into three – Harasta, Douma, and the Central Sector – with each area controlled by a different armed group, which took the lead in respective surrender negotiations. Even in Douma where the negotiating group was described as a "civilian committee," it included a JAI representative who dominated the outcome. The terms of the surrender deals were dictated by Russia, not negotiated, as the extreme power imbalance left the armed opposition groups with no real leverage.

In each of the three enclaves, the surrender negotiations were pushed over the finish line by a spectacular final escalation. In Harasta, this meant that attacks continued and even escalated for over 24 hours after the deal had reportedly been reached, forcing a complete capitulation. In the central sector, negotiations were reportedly nearing completion when a civilian shelter in

172 DFR Lab, "#PutinAtWar: Far Right Converges on 'False Flag' in Syria," 9 April 2018, <medium.com>; Bethania Palma, "Disinformation and Conspiracy Trolling in the Wake of the Syrian Chemical Attack," Snopes, 12 April 2018, <www.snopes.com>.

173 Smart News Agency, "Jaysh al-Islam: 'Our negotiations with Russia are in order to stay in Douma,'" 30 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

174 SANA, "Syrian Army helicopters throw leaflets on Ghouta to inform civilians about safe corridor," 2 March 2018, <sana.sy>.

175 STJ, "Masked compliance; The use of flyers by the Syrian regime," 26 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

Arbin was hit with an especially deadly and gruesome incendiary attack, quickly precipitating a complete surrender. In Douma, the negotiations dragged on until the deadly 7 April chemical attack, after which JAI quickly surrendered. In all three cases the armed groups and local negotiators were forced to abandon previously held stances, notably the rejection of forced displacement, and calls for the release of political prisoners.

A key part of the surrender deals were the forced population transfers, in which fighters were transferred to opposition-controlled northern Syria, along with people in need of medical care, and civilians who felt they would not be safe if they remained. The displacement process in each enclave took place over several days. People would board the convoy of buses, accompanied by SARC representatives, and undergo lengthy security screening by government forces, during which they were subjected to threats and abuse, and told never to return. There are unverified reports that some people had their civil status documentation confiscated before boarding the buses.¹⁷⁶ The convoys then headed north, in most cases passing through government strongholds of Latakia and Tartous since the most direct route through Homs remained closed.

The convoys first entered opposition territory at Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama, where they were met by SCD teams, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the Syrian Interim Government's health directorate staff from Hama and Idlib who tried to prepare supplies, medical care, and housing in advance. Still, at several points during the transfers, the teams at Qalaat al-Madiq were unprepared for the tremendous size of the displaced population and the severe medical needs of the IDPs.¹⁷⁷ Most of the Eastern Ghouta IDPs were processed through Hama and transported to IDP camps in Aleppo and Idlib. In total, more than 65,000 were forcibly displaced to northern Syria.

HARASTA

Isolated and on the brink of collapse, Ahrar al-Sham reached a surrender agreement for Harasta around 20 March, with Russia serving as guarantor. The deal allowed for fighters, their families, and other civilians who wanted to – or had no choice but to – leave to be deported to northern Syria. Under the terms of the deal, the displaced fighters were allowed to keep their light weapons, and civilians who chose to stay were promised that they would not be displaced in the future after a “reconciliation” process with the government. Men of fighting age who stayed would be forced into mandatory military service after a six-month grace period.¹⁷⁸ The deal also included a prisoner exchange between the Syrian government and Ahrar al-Sham. Multiple sources reported that these negotiations were facilitated by the UN, although the UN has denied involvement in any local negotiations.

- ◆ 22 March - The first forced displacement convoy took almost 2,000 people in 40 buses out of Harasta.¹⁷⁹ Around two-thirds of the people in the convoy were civilians, a large number of them in need of medical care. The next day, the convoy safely reached northern Syria, with the exception of one patient who

176 Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey), “Protection Monitoring Update: Displacement from Eastern Ghouta, Syria,” April 2018, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

177 Doctors Without Borders, “Syria: Displaced People From Eastern Ghouta Need Treatment,” 13 April 2018, <www.doctorswithoutborders.org>.

178 Nedaa Syria, “تفاصيل الاتفاق بين مقاتلي حرسنا والنظام السوري بوساطة روسية,” 21 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

179 UOSSM, “UOSSM Assists 5000 Forcefully Displaced From Ghouta,” 24 March 2018, <www.uossm.org>.



The first convoy of Harasta IDPs reached Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama, 23 March 2018. Source: SCD Hama

died en route, before reaching medical care.¹⁸⁰ A woman who gave birth during the journey was taken to a hospital in Baniyas. She and her newborn were allowed to rejoin the convoy, but with no birth certificate or equivalent documentation.¹⁸¹ The convoy's destination was reportedly Azaz in northern Aleppo,¹⁸² but they were at least temporarily taken to reception centers in Idlib.

- ◆ 23 MAR – The second convoy left Harasta on Friday night. It included 57 buses carrying around 3,250 people.¹⁸³ Four civilians who were supposed to be on the convoy were killed when an arms depot near the bus loading site exploded for unknown reasons.¹⁸⁴ The convoy reached Qalaat al-Madiq in Hama the next day.

Government forces entered Harasta on 24 March after the final buses had departed. In total, more than 5,000 people were displaced from Harasta.¹⁸⁵ In one of its final statements, the Local Council of Harasta reported that 90% of the buildings in the city had been destroyed.¹⁸⁶

180 Harasta City, Facebook post, 23 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2t0UBgx>>.

181 Media Channel of Damascus and its Countryside, Telegram post, 27 March 2018, <<https://t.me/alrefnews/35312>>.

182 Harasta Local Council, Facebook post, 22 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Jz00qj>>.

183 SCD Hama, Facebook post, 24 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sLwH9J>>; UN OCHA Access and Analysis Team, "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations Tracking" document.

184 Local Council of Harasta, Facebook post, 23 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JwZWHK>>.

185 Damaski Media Agency, Facebook post, 24 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JFmFI>>; UN OCHA Access and Analysis Team, "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations Tracking" document.

186 Smart News Agency, "Syrian rebels leave besieged Eastern Ghouta city, Harasta," 22 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

CENTRAL SECTOR

On 23 March, the day of the final convoy from Harasta, FAR agreed to a surrender and forced displacement agreement that covered the remaining communities in the central sector of Eastern Ghouta: Arbin, Zamalka, Ein Tarma, and Jobar.¹⁸⁷ The surrender came shortly after a horrific and deadly incendiary bombing incident in Arbin. The terms of the deal were similar to those imposed in Harasta.¹⁸⁸ The small remaining group of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) fighters in Eastern Ghouta, consisting of 200-300 fighters, were reportedly included in the first two convoys out of the enclave.¹⁸⁹ The process was relatively orderly, with people in the enclave who wanted to join the convoys registered their names and received instructions about when and from where their assigned buses would depart.¹⁹⁰

- ◆ 24 MAR – Late at night, the first central sector convoy departed from Arbin. It was made up of 17 buses carrying around 1,000 people, including more than 200 injured.¹⁹¹ It reached Qalaat al-Madiq, Hama on Sunday afternoon.
- ◆ 25 MAR – The second central sector convoy departed from the Arbin crossing, after a 12-hour inspection by government forces. The convoy included more than 75 buses carrying approximately 5,400 people.¹⁹² It reached Qalaat al-Madiq the next day. Four women reportedly gave birth during the long journey.¹⁹³
- ◆ 26 MAR – The third group left the central sector of Eastern Ghouta late at night. The convoy included more than 100 buses carrying around 7,000 people, including around 500 in need of medical care.¹⁹⁴ It arrived at Qalaat al-Madiq the next day.
- ◆ 27 MAR – The fourth group from central sector departed in two batches. One reached Qalaat al-Madiq early in the morning on 28 March, and the second arrived around noon. In total, the convoys included over 100 buses carrying around 6,300 people.¹⁹⁵
- ◆ 28 MAR – The fifth group departed central sector, reaching Qalaat al-Madiq in two batches the next day. In total it included over 100 buses carrying more than 5,000 people.¹⁹⁶
- ◆ 29 MAR – The sixth group departed the central sector, reaching Qalaat al-Madiq in two batches the next day. In total the convoys included more than 120 buses carrying almost 7,000 people.¹⁹⁷

187 STJ, "Death Followed Them Even Inside Basements," 17 April 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

188 Smart News Agency, "التوصل لاتفاق خروج من الغوطة الشرقية بين "فيلق الرحمن" وروسيا," 23 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

189 Smart News Agency, "Most of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham members leave Eastern Ghouta for Northern Syria," 27 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

190 United Media office of Arbin, Telegram post, 26 March 2018, <<https://t.me/umoerbeen/5874>>.

191 Smart News Agency "خروج الدفعة الأولى من مدينة عربين شرق دمشق," 25 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>; Idlib Media Center, "

خروج وصول مهجري عربين للقعة المضيق وجيش الإسلام يعلن ثباته ويرفض الخروج," 25 March 2018, <www.edlib-emc.net>.

192 Smart News Agency, "خروج 75 حافلة نقل مهجري الغوطة الشرقية إلى شمالي سوريا," 25 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

193 Enab Baladi, "الدفعة الثانية من مهجري القطاع الأوسط تصل إلى ريف حماة," 26 March 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>; SCD Hama, Facebook post, 26 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LJvsyW>>.

194 SCD Hama, Facebook post, 27 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2LHRpy8>>.

195 SCD Hama, Facebook post, 29 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JAHytf>>; UN OCHA Access and Analysis Team, "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations Tracking" document.

196 SCD Hama, Facebook post, 30 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2JDEXpX>>.

197 Al Jazeera, "الدفعة السادسة من مهجري الغوطة تصل إدلب," 30 March 2018, <<http://www.aljazeera.net>>.



People gather to board displacement buses in Arbin, 24 March 2018. Source: SAMS



Man breaks down during central sector displacement process, 25 March 2018. Source: Jobar News



People gather near loading point in Arbin for displacement to northern Syria, 26 March 2018. Original source UNK.



SARC vehicles wait while displacement buses loaded in Arbin, 26 March 2018. Source: Firas Abdullah

- ◆ 30 MAR – The seventh convoy departed from the central sector carrying around 6,400 people in more than 120 buses. It reached Qalaat al-Madiq the next day in two batches.¹⁹⁸
- ◆ 31 MAR – The eighth and final convoy departed from the central sector of Eastern Ghouta, reaching Hama the next day. It contained 65 buses carrying almost 2,900 people, including almost 700 in need of medical care.¹⁹⁹

In total over the nine day long process, more than 40,000 people were forcibly transferred from the central sector of Eastern Ghouta to northern Syria.

DOUMA

On 25 March, after the surrender of the central sector was finalized, final negotiations for Douma restarted in earnest, bringing a week of relative calm to the city as most attacks paused. The Douma negotiations were particularly fraught, and rumors of internal JAI disputes circulated throughout the period. During the negotiations, JAI proposed to stay in Douma and serve as a local security force akin to the security committees of government loyalists set up in other post-surrender communities.²⁰⁰ According to Siege Watch contacts, this proposal caused resentment among civilians in Douma, who saw it as a betrayal. Throughout the period of negotiations, JAI spokesmen publicly affirmed that the group was refusing forced displacement initiatives.

Overnight on 31 March-1 April, the Negotiations Committee announced that it had reached an interim agreement that would allow the evacuation of “humanitarian cases,” while talks continued.²⁰¹ The Committee also reached a deal with the Russian negotiators that let the hundreds of FAR fighters who had been stranded in JAI-controlled Douma when the Syrian military cut it off from the central sector leave for northern Syria with their families.

- ◆ 1 APR – Roughly 1,200 people left Douma for Idlib, in the convoy of FAR fighters and their families.²⁰²
- ◆ 2 APR – The first humanitarian group left from Douma under the interim “humanitarian” agreement. The convoy reportedly included over 1,100 people.²⁰³
- ◆ 3 APR – The second humanitarian group left Douma, reaching al-Bab, Aleppo the next day. The convoy included 24 buses carrying approximately 1,200 people, included some who were wounded.²⁰⁴
- ◆ 4 APR – A third humanitarian group left Douma. The convoy carried around 685 people in 13 buses, reportedly including wounded JAI fighters and their families.²⁰⁵

The buses in the second “humanitarian” group were halted at the “zero point” crossing between Syrian government and opposition control in the northern countryside south of Aleppo for hours,

198 Smart News Agency, “Seventh group of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Eastern Ghouta arrive in Hama,” 31 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

199 Enab Baladi, “آخر دفعة من مهجري الغوطة تصل ريف حماة,” 1 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>;

200 Smart News Agency, “Jaysh al-Islam; Our negotiations with Russia are in order to stay in Douma,” 30 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

201 Smart News Agency, “Agreement allows evacuating “humanitarian cases” from Douma to Northern Syria,” 1 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

202 Nedaa Syria, “Stranded Fighters of Al Rahman Corps start evacuating from Douma city,” 1 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

203 Shaam Network, “وصول الدفعة الخامسة من مهجري دوما والأولى بعد اتفاق التهجير النهائي إلى شمال حلب تتضمن 3548 شخصاً,” 10 April 2018, <www.shaaam.org>.

204 Al Modon, “الدفعة الخامسة من مهجري دوما تصل إلى ريف حلب,” 11 April 2018, <www.almodon.com>.

205 Shaam Network, “وصول الدفعة الخامسة من مهجري دوما والأولى بعد اتفاق التهجير النهائي إلى شمال حلب تتضمن 3548 شخصاً,” 10 April 2018, <www.shaaam.org>.

reportedly as a result of poor communication between Turkey and Russia. They were finally allowed to enter the area of northern Aleppo controlled by Turkish-backed opposition forces after residents of al-Bab took to the streets in protest.²⁰⁶

On 5 April, preparations for a fourth humanitarian convoy to depart were halted by government forces, immediately after an extended meeting between JAI and Russian/Syrian government negotiators.²⁰⁷ On 6 April, pro-government forces began the heaviest bombardment yet against the city, ending over a week of relative calm. The next day Douma experienced the deadliest chemical attack in Syria since the attack a year earlier on Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib. JAI surrendered quickly after the attack, and the deal was announced on 8 August by the affiliated “Civil Committee.”²⁰⁸ The terms of the Douma agreement mirrored those before it with regards to “settlement,” military service, displacement, and AOG prisoner releases.²⁰⁹ Under the agreement, Russian military police would enter the city to provide security, and commercial traffic at al-Wafideen checkpoint would resume.

The final series of forced displacement convoys began on 9 April 2018. The Douma convoys were reportedly more chaotic than from other areas. Registration lists were not kept, and many people were not made aware of the bus locations and times.²¹⁰ These final convoys from Douma were taken to Aleppo instead of Idlib – a concession to JAI which did not want to be trapped in the HTS stronghold.

- ◆ 9 APR – The first convoy in the final displacement wave left Douma, reaching Aleppo the next day. It included around 70 buses carrying an estimated 3,500 people.²¹¹
- ◆ 11 APR – The second convoy from Douma reached Aleppo after a departure delay caused by disorganization and the lack of available buses. The group of over 80 buses included nearly 3,900 people. The buses were also held up at the “zero point” in Aleppo and Turkey only allowed them enter after civilian protests in al-Bab.²¹²
- ◆ 12 APR – The third convoy from Douma reached Aleppo after departing early in the morning. The group of almost 40 buses carried around 1,500 people.²¹³
- ◆ 12 APR – A fourth group, which many had expected to be the last, left Douma, as Russian forces entered the neighborhood.²¹⁴ The convoy carried around 3,500 people in over 80 buses and reached Aleppo the next day.²¹⁵
- ◆ 14 APR – A fifth convoy left Douma, carrying almost 100 buses of over 3,600 people. It reached northern Aleppo the next day.²¹⁶

206 Enab Baladi, “لنقطة صفر” تعرقل عبور مهجري دمشق إلى حلب,” 4 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

207 Smart News Agency, “Syrian government suspends evacuating civilians from Douma city in Eastern Ghouta,” 5 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

208 Civil Committee Participating in the Negotiations, Telegram post, 8 April 2018, <<https://t.me/civiliangroup/14>>.

209 Nedaa Syria, “Douma’s Negotiating Committee illustrates fate of those who wish to stay in the city,” 8 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

210 Smart News Agency, “غياب تنظيم وفوضى خلال خروج حافلات التهجير من مدينة دوما,” 9 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

211 Enab Baladi, “الدفعة الرابعة من مهجري دوما تدخل شمالي حلب,” 10 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

212 Enab Baladi, “لدفعة الخامسة من مهجري دوما تنطلق باتجاه الشمال,” 11 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>; Enab Baladi, “احتجاجات في الباب بسبب منع دخول مهجري دوما,” 11 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>; Shaam News, “وصول الدفعة السادسة من مهجري دوما إلى شمالي حلب تتضمن 3852 شخصاً,” 11 April 2018, <<http://www.shaam.org>>.

213 Shaam News, “الدفعة السابعة من مهجري دوما تصل إلى مشارف المحرر شمالي حلب تتضمن 1668 شخصاً,” 12 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

214 Enab Baladi, “آخر مهجري دوما يغادرون إلى الشمال السوري,” 12 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, YouTube video, 12 April 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sQAX7H>>.

215 Shaam News, “لدفعة الثامنة من مهجري دوما تصل معبر أبو الزندين شمال حلب تضم 3532 شخصاً,” 13 April 2018, <<http://www.shaam.org>>.

216 Enab Baladi, “الدفعة الأخيرة من مهجري دوما تصل إلى جرابلس,” 15 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.



Buses line up for forced population transfer of Douma residents to Aleppo, 9 April 2018. Source: SyriaTV

In total, the nine displacement convoys from Douma took more than 20,000 people to northern Syria in April. On 15 April after the final forced displacement convoy left Douma, the Syrian government announced its control over all of Eastern Ghouta.

The journey to northern Syria was a long, uncomfortable, and intentionally humiliating experience for Eastern Ghouta IDPs. The buses generally did not take sufficient food or water and did not stop for bathroom breaks, but were delayed repeatedly at checkpoints and took unnecessarily long routes, which extended the length of trips. People could not meet their hygienic need, and many medical conditions worsened.²¹⁷

The displacement convoys were accompanied only by Syrian military forces and SARC during their transportation through government-controlled territory. People on the buses reported that drivers would slow down while driving through pro-government communities, allowing government supporters time to threaten and verbally harass the the IDPs, and sometimes even attack the buses.²¹⁸ Some of these incidents led to minor bus damage, but several were more serious. On 1 April, the last convoy from the central sector of Eastern Ghouta was attacked with bullets and stones while passing through the Beit Yashout area of Latakia. Windows and doors on the buses were broken, and six people – including two children and one woman – were injured.²¹⁹ On 14 April, a convoy of IDPs from Douma was shot at while traveling on the

217 Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey), "Protection Monitoring Update: Displacement from Eastern Ghouta, Syria," April 2018, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

218 Syria Protection Cluster (Turkey), "Protection Monitoring Update: Displacement from Eastern Ghouta, Syria," April 2018, <www.humanitarianresponse.info>.

219 Nedaa Syria, "Wounded as Syrian regime's militia target Evacuees of Eastern Ghouta in rural Lattakia," 1 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

Salamiyah road outside of Hama city. One child, Yasser Samoud, was killed by the attack and four people were wounded.²²⁰

The Aftermath

Most civilians from Eastern Ghouta who survived the offensive ended up in three main categories when their enclaves fell to pro-government forces: 1) Those who stayed in Eastern Ghouta, 2) Those who fled through a crossing into government-controlled territory, and 3) Those who were forcibly displaced in a convoy to northern Syria. The first two options entailed trusting – or joining – a military that spent years trying to kill them and living under a regime known for arrest campaigns and persecution of dissenters. By some estimates, more than 9,000 men from among these two groups who stayed in the Damascus area were forced into military service by June.²²¹ The third option meant losing everything, and leaving their homes and communities forever. Many activists, journalists, medical personnel, family members of fighters, and local leaders were all on government “wanted” lists and did not have a choice to stay and “reconcile.”

For many, the choice was excruciating, as it was not clear which, if any, option could guarantee their safety and give them the hope of a better future.

Families, social networks, and communities were torn apart by this process. Every displaced Siege Watch contact interviewed for this report had friends and family members who stayed behind in Eastern Ghouta or fled and were taken to an IDP holding center in the Damascus area. A displaced Siege Watch contact from Beit Sawa shared the illustrative story of his uncles Salam and Hamza,²²² twin brothers aged 27. The brothers both at first decided to go to a collection point with their families for transfer to one of the Damascus-area government-run IDPs centers. At the very last minute, Salam changed his mind and jumped off the collection point bus, thinking he would be safer going to Idlib. Salam’s wife disagreed and stayed on the bus, along with Hamza and his family. Salam is now in Idlib, and says he will remarry, because there is no chance of reuniting with the wife he left behind. Hamza is being held with other men in a government center in Hirjilleh, south of Damascus, where he believes he will be kept until he is forced into mandatory military service. He is separated from his wife and children, who were released to join family members in Damascus. Both men feel regret and uncertainty about their decisions.

THOSE WHO STAYED

The Syrian government and Russia continued to deny UN agencies access to Eastern Ghouta even after they retook control of the entire enclave.²²³ UN said in March that in partnership with SARC it had access to populated areas of Eastern Ghouta under government control and

220 Nedaa Syria, “Syrian regime militia target a convoy of Douma rebels and kill a child,” 14 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

221 Syria TV, “الكشف عن مصير آلاف المعتقلين من غوطة دمشق الشرقية,” 2 June 2018, <www.syria.tv>.

222 Note: For security and privacy reasons, their real names have not been used.

223 UNSC Meeting Coverage, “Humanitarian Response in Syria Must Be Urgently Boosted, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council,” 17 April 2018, <www.un.org>.

provided aid and protection.²²⁴ But according to contacts with friends and family in these areas, the international access has been extremely limited, and there were no apparent protection activities as the Russian and Syrian militaries exerted complete control.

Estimates of how many people remain in Eastern Ghouta vary widely, since the lack of direct access and challenges communicating with people in the post-surrender enclave have made thorough assessments impossible. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) estimated on 22 April that 100,000-140,000 people remained in Eastern Ghouta.²²⁵ In May, a World Food Programme (WFP) estimate put the number at closer to 200,000,²²⁶ which is more in line with population estimates prior to the final offensive – although those estimates also had a high margin of error. Many of those who stayed in Eastern Ghouta were elderly, women, or children, since they were the least likely to be detained or disappeared. Fear of the unknown in northern Syria, and a desire to try and retain ownership of their land and property, were key factors driving their choice.

Government forces canvassed the remaining populated communities in Eastern Ghouta in the weeks after the sieges ended. Residents were forced to sign pledges of loyalty to the government and were subjected to security screenings.²²⁷ A number of displaced Siege Watch contacts had spoken to relatives or friends who stayed behind in Eastern Ghouta since the surrender. These calls were risky for the people who stayed, and they were able to have only brief, stilted conversations, because the mere fact that such a phone call occurred might be enough to draw unwanted attention from government intelligence services. These contacts said that their families in Eastern Ghouta were interrogated in their own homes as soldiers looted their belongings. They were asked if they had loved ones who were sent to the north, and if so, what were their names; leaving people afraid of future retribution if their displaced loved ones names were on one of the government's lists. Interrogation questions have focused intensively on determining the names of people who took photos and videos of the aftermath of chemical attacks launched during the final offensive.

For those who chose “reconciliation” and stayed in Eastern Ghouta, ongoing abuses and retribution actions by the Syrian government forces are creating new grievances and perpetuating old ones.

Executions - As pro-government forces entered the central sector communities they captured during the offensive, several reports of summary executions began to filter out. For example, on 26 March, around 23 people in Kafr Batna were executed by a pro-government “popular committee” militia from nearby Jaramana.²²⁸ The militiamen had been allowed into Kafr Batna by Syrian security forces to loot the empty homes of recently displaced residents. When remaining residents protested this looting, around two dozen were reportedly rounded up and shot.²²⁹

224 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

225 UN OCHA, “Syria: East Ghouta - Humanitarian Update, Facts and Figures - 22 April 2018,” <reliefweb.int>.

226 WFP, “WFP Syria Situation Report #5, May 2018,” 31 May 2018, <reliefweb.int>.

227 COI, “Sieges as a Weapon of War: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate,” OHCHR, 29 May 2018, <www.ohchr.org>

228 Nedaa Syria, “Field Executions & Abductions in East Ghout by Pro-Syrian regime militias,” 26 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

229 Syrian News (pro-government), Facebook post, 26 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2t1plOr>.



Men detained at a humanitarian corridor on charges of being al-Qaeda by Syrian Army Tiger Forces, 17 March 2018. Original source UNK

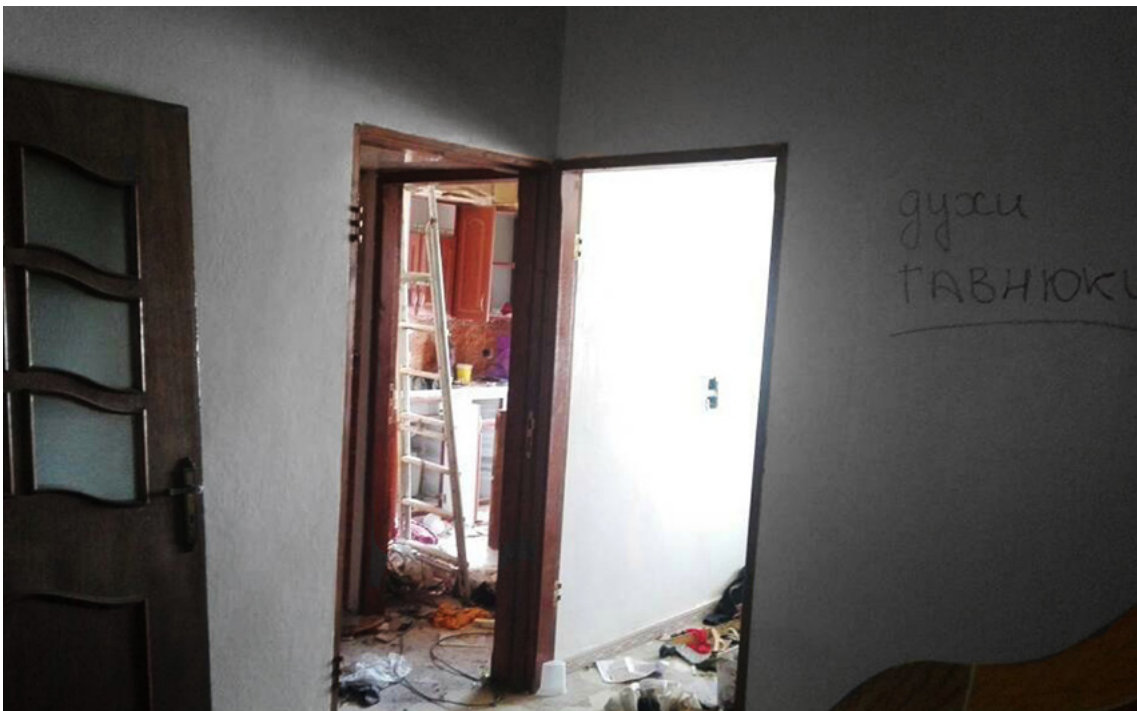


Photo Siege Watch contact received after displacement, of his looted home in Madyara with Russian graffiti on the wall

This incident was described in both pro-opposition and pro-government media sources. Two days later there was another reported summary execution in Kafr Batna, this time of a family of four: Mohammad Deeb, his wife, his three-month old son, and his brother.²³⁰ Siege Watch recorded other reports of executions in Saqba and Misraba.²³¹ The nature of the situation – a nearly complete media blackout during government “clean up” operations in an inaccessible area following a massive military and displacement campaign – makes these types of reports notoriously difficult to verify. But given the severity of these alleged acts and the fact that extrajudicial executions of this sort amount to war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity under international law, these claims deserve to be documented and investigated and those responsible held accountable.

Detentions – There have also been widespread reports of pro-government forces detaining civilians, mainly but not entirely men, who stayed in Eastern Ghouta. The reports of detentions began as soon pro-government ground forces started entering major population centers in March – the first recorded by Siege Watch is from 10 March when at least 15 civilians were detained in Beit Sawa,²³²– and have continued ever since. These ongoing detentions occur both at checkpoints set up inside of Eastern Ghouta, and during raids of homes that may be targeted based on specific intelligence. Two Siege Watch contacts said that they knew young men who were convinced to stay in Eastern Ghouta by guarantees of safety, given respectively by friends in Syrian military and a local religious leader and negotiator. They were instead detained by government security forces. In late April a man who stayed in Eastern Ghouta was reportedly caught secretly photographing a chemical attack site and was immediately detained.

Many of these detentions appear to be aimed at forcing men into their mandatory military service in violation of Russian guarantees of a six-month grace period. On 8 May, government forces reportedly bussed around 100 young men from Douma to a military base for training, and as part of their training forced some of them to participate in looting empty homes in al-Rayhan.²³³ But the fate of some of the detained men remains unknown. One Siege Watch contact had received news that three people he knew that had been detained in Harasta when the government took control were killed under torture.

Looting - Rampant looting reported was in almost every Eastern Ghouta community entered by pro-government forces in the days and months after their surrender. Homes were stripped of everything from the furniture to the copper pipes, to be sold in “looters markets” to government supporters in Damascus.²³⁴ Several displaced contacts shared pictures of their looted homes that had been surreptitiously sent to them by friends and family left behind. In one of these cases where the home was in a depopulated area, the friend in Eastern Ghouta had to pay 5,000 SYP to a government soldier at a checkpoint outside of the town in order to enter to check on his home.

230 United Media Office of Arbin, Telegram post, 28 March 2018, <<https://t.me/umoerbeen/5884>>.

231 Al Jazeera, Facebook post, 20 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2sS4M83>>; Horrya, “قوات الأسد تنفذ إعدامات ميدانية بحق أهالي مسرابا,” 10 March 2018, <horrya.net>.

232 Interview with Siege Watch contact.

233 Smart News Agency, “ناشطون: قوات النظام تعتقل عشرات الشبان في مدينة دوما بالغوطة الشرقية,” 13 May 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

234 SOHR, “After about two weeks of the raid on markets of looted property and arresting the looters by a Russian request, a new looting of citizens’ property takes place in the Eastern Ghouta,” 9 June 2018, <www.syriahr.com>; Alsouria Net via The Syrian Observer, “Items Looted From Eastern Ghouta Find a Market in Al-Assad District,” 29 March 2018, <syrianobserver.com>.

Living conditions – Compared to the steep decline in conditions in the months before the enclave’s surrender, living conditions improved dramatically for those in Eastern Ghouta who were not detained. In some areas the government had already started repaving roads, and commercial food supplies were being allowed in, helping prices to drop significantly. Despite the improvements, the UN still described humanitarian conditions in the post-surrender areas of Eastern Ghouta as “dire” in late May.²³⁵ UN agencies were still being denied direct access to the enclave,²³⁶ and the remaining residents were still being denied freedom of movement. Water and electricity were still largely disconnected, and most people relied on aid to survive.

By some accounts, Kafr Batna was treated better than other communities in Eastern Ghouta in the immediate post-surrender period, and was not subjected to the same level of looting.²³⁷ It is there that the government has filmed their propaganda news pieces showing their efforts to support civilians, reopen schools, and clear roads. Sheikh Bassam Dufdaa – who reportedly helped deliver the city to the government – remained in the area serving as a government intermediary and commentator.²³⁸

THOSE IN DAMASCUS-AREA IDP CENTERS

Over 90,000 of the people who left Eastern Ghouta in March and April crossed through the “humanitarian corridors” and were taken to government-controlled IDP centers near Damascus. Some of these shelters such as the ones in Adra, al-Duweir, and Hirjilleh, were previously used to house IDPs who fled from other governorates, and the government had been emptying in recent months in preparation for the influx.²³⁹

In the holding centers, men and women were separated and subjected to security screening by pro-government forces. One Siege Watch contact that spoke to a female relative who was processed through the Adra IDP holding center reported that numerous cases of rape took place during these screenings, although this claim cannot be easily verified. Men between the ages of 15-55 were not allowed to leave the centers, with the exception of those who agreed to start their mandatory military service.

By late April, about half of the people who entered these IDP centers were ultimately allowed out after being processed and screened by the Syrian government.²⁴⁰ People were only allowed to leave if they had a family member outside the center who came to sponsor them and serve as a guarantor, giving the government a way to monitor and track the IDPs moving forward. Even though half of the original influx of IDPs had been processed out of the centers, they were still more than double their intended capacity.²⁴¹ In the second half of May this number dropped further, as nearly 12,900 people from the IDP centers were allowed to return to Eastern Ghouta, although some later returned due to the widespread destruction and the lack of access to

235 UN, “Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General,” 21 May 2018, <www.un.org>.

236 UN OCHA, Tweet, 24 May 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2Juprtc>>.

237 Interviews with Siege Watch contacts.

238 ORTAS, YouTube video, “جوار خاص مع بسام ضفدع خطيب وإمام في جوامع كفر بطنا,” 26 March 2018, <<http://bit.ly/2HH0uF5>>; Enab Baladi,

“الأسد يحصر خروج أهالي كفر بطنا إلى دمشق بيد ‘الضفدع’,” 22 April 2018, <www.enabbaladi.net>.

239 Souriyati, “حكايات من سوريا: مراكز الإيواء: سجون كبيرة لأهالي الغوطة... يطعم الرأفة,” 24 March 2018, <<http://www.souriyati.com>>

240 UN OCHA, “Syria: East Ghouta - Humanitarian Update, Facts and Figures - 22 April 2018,” <reliefweb.int>.

241 UN “Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General,” 16 April 2018, <www.un.org>.

services and support in the post-surrender enclave.²⁴²

While UN agencies and humanitarian groups were allowed to provide some provisions to the overcrowded sites, they remained under military control of the Russian and Syrian armed forces. UN and humanitarian agencies did not control any of the IDP centers and were unable to provide protection to the tens of thousands of vulnerable civilians who suddenly found themselves at the mercy of the government after escaping its scorched earth campaign. Perhaps as a result of the Russian presence and oversight, fears –especially among male IDPs – of more aggressive acts of revenge such as torture, disappearance, and execution, were not realized. For the tens of thousands who remain in these holding centers, their biggest concern is uncertainty about what will happen to them in the future.

For men outside the centers, detention and conscription are constant threats. Two men who were transferred from a holding center by SARC to al-Qutaifeh hospital for medical treatment were reportedly detained by Syrian military police and forcibly conscripted.²⁴³ There were also reports of three men, who had presumably been processed out of the IDP centers, being arrested by pro-government forces near al-Tal on 27 March.²⁴⁴

Post-surrender, displaced civilians in the Damascus area were subjected to indignities and humiliation by government forces and officials. Government officials toured the IDP facilities for photo ops, and government media produced hours of news coverage using the IDPs as props in their propaganda. Videos showed Syrian Member of Parliament Mohammad Kanbad forcing IDPs in one center to praise Bashar al-Assad in order to receive food and water.²⁴⁵ One group of government soldiers posted a smiling selfie in front of a room full of women and children huddled on the floor, after being separated from male family members.

Most men of fighting age were not allowed to leave the holding centers, even if the rest of their family was released to a guarantor. Most are reportedly being held for the duration of the six-month grace period that they were given under the surrender deal before being forced into military service, unless they agreed to fight earlier. One source who was in contact with a man being held in the Hirjilleh facility was told that each day a group of Syrian military officers would enter and ask for volunteers to join their battle in nearby Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk, taunting the IDPs that they would be detained for months and then have to join the fight anyway. A few men from Hirjilleh reportedly agreed each day to begin their conscription duty early. Within the space of a few weeks these men went from being civilian victims of the Syrian government's collective punishment campaign under siege in Eastern Ghouta for five years, to being sent to the front lines of the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Hajar al-Aswad on behalf of the Syrian military. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), by 14 March, more than 350 men from Eastern Ghouta were fighting for the government in the Southern Damascus Suburbs.²⁴⁶

242 UNHCR, "Syria: Flash update on recent events - 7 June 2018," <reliefweb.int>; USAID, "Syria Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2018," 8 June 2018, <reliefweb.int>.

243 Souriyati, "حكايات من سوريا « مراكز الإيواء: من المزيد", 24 March 2018, <http://www.souriyati.com>.

244 Al-Tal Coordinating Committee, Tweet, 27 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2HHCxgW>.

245 Videos/KafrNabl News, Facebook post, 23 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2y44bVN>.

246 SOHR, "More than 50 injuries out of more than 350 members from the Eastern Ghouta of who were sent to fight the organization in the south of Damascus," 14 May 2018, <www.syriahr.com>.



Catastrophic destruction in Arbin, 4 March 2018. Source: SAMS



Eastern Ghouta IDPs arrive in Hirjilleh IDP holding center, 24 March 2018. Source: Voice of the Capital



Russian military contractors guard men from Eastern Ghouta in a processing center set up in a former school in late March. Original source UNK



Syrian soldiers take a smiling selfie in front of scared women and children in an IDP processing center in March. Original source UNK

Forced conscription of men from post-surrender communities bolstered the ranks of the Syrian military when it was in desperate need of manpower. Conscripts from post-surrender communities like Eastern Ghouta are considered expendable on the front lines, as all those who die in battle save the government from having to deal in future with the reintegration of men with deeply ingrained grievances against it. There are as yet no known cases of forcibly conscripted men from post-surrender communities who have been discharged from military service, so it remains to be seen how the Syrian government plans to cope with this challenge. According to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI), this forced conscription may violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.²⁴⁷

THOSE IN EXILE

Over 65,000 people from Eastern Ghouta submitted to forced population transfers to Aleppo and Idlib in northern Syria rather than live under government control.

The massive influx of displaced people from Eastern Ghouta – followed by subsequent displacements from al-Qalamoun, northern Homs, and the Southern Damascus Suburbs – strained humanitarian response capacities to their breaking points, immiserating all involved. Many of the civilians from Eastern Ghouta ended up in hastily constructed, overcrowded IDP camps where humanitarian support was insufficient to meet the needs of the ballooning population. Siege Watch contacts in IDP camps in Idlib and Aleppo described their poor conditions, particularly after heavy rains caused major flooding. Whether in a camp or not, all of the displaced Siege Watch contacts interviewed for this report were in need of some sort of basic assistance: help finding a job to support their family, help finding medical care from untreated wounds, or help finding a way to continue their education.

In Turkish-controlled areas of Aleppo, the Turkish government has contributed to the suffering by blocking UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs from accessing IDP camps. The Turkish government has also reportedly used displaced people, many of them fighters, from Eastern Ghouta to secure gains made against the Kurds during “Operation Olive Branch.” Between the launch of the Turkish-backed military campaign in January and 1 May, it is estimated that more than 137,000 Kurds were displaced from Afrin.²⁴⁸ Turkey has reportedly confiscated some of the empty homes in Afrin and offered them to Eastern Ghouta IDPs, feeding fears that Turkey is undertaking its own demographic engineering campaign. According to the ACU, an estimated 6,000 forcibly displaced people from the Damascus countryside were living in Afrin district by the end of April 2018.²⁴⁹ Sensitive to the injustices of property confiscation and demographic engineering, many Eastern Ghouta IDPs have reportedly refused to participate in the Turkish efforts and are paying rent or have received permission from displaced Kurdish owners to stay in their homes temporarily.²⁵⁰ With access to the enclave restricted by Turkish forces, the scope of the confiscation is unclear.

Many of the IDPs, particularly those in Idlib, survived the bombardment of Eastern Ghouta only to face continuing attacks by the Syrian government and its allies in the north. On 31

247 COI, “Sieges as a Weapon of War: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate,” OHCHR, 29 May 2018, <www.ohchr.org>.

248 Syria Direct, “Seizing lands from Afrin’s displaced Kurds, Turkish-backed militias offer houses to East Ghouta families,” 1 May 2018, <syriadirect.org>.

249 Assistance Coordination Unit, “Forced Displacement from the Eastern Ghouta and Qalun,” May 2018, <www.acu-sy.org>.

250 AFP, “Displaced from Ghouta, Syrians seek refuge in emptied Afrin,” 30 May 2018, <www.dailystar.com>.

March, three civilians were killed and others wounded when government warplanes bombed a residential neighborhood in the city of Ariha, Idlib. Among the dead was a displaced man from Zamalka, Eastern Ghouta who had arrived days earlier; his son was also wounded.²⁵¹ On 1 April, an IDP camp in Ariha set up for IDPs from Eastern Ghouta was targeted by an airstrike.²⁵²

IDPs in the north also faced new threats of violence due to fighting between armed opposition groups. Along with the civilian displacement, tens of thousands of uprooted opposition fighters – including HTS extremists – were also tossed into the same arena in the north, inflaming tensions and igniting new power struggles.

Options were limited for displaced people who wanted to leave Aleppo and Idlib, with the Turkish border closed, and movement to other parts of the country blocked by warring parties enforcing their areas of control. Some of the Eastern Ghouta IDPs who could find the \$500-\$2,500 per person, paid smugglers to take them across the border into Turkey. The journey was dangerous, and several contacts reported being shot at by Turkish forces and being returned to Syria. Those who did make it to Turkey faced a new set of challenges trying to legalize their status and figure out a way to gain asylum or a work permit.

Media activists did not have the choice to stay in Eastern Ghouta when the government reasserted control. Because of their work to document life under siege, all of Eastern Ghouta's media activists are wanted by Syrian intelligence agencies – a threat which has followed them even in exile. After arriving to the north, a number of the displaced activists received terse calls from their family members still in Eastern Ghouta, telling them that the government security forces threatened to harm them unless the activists stopped posting photos and videos online – especially materials related to chemical attacks.

Media activists displaced to the north also face threats from the extremist group HTS, which has been waging an arrest campaign against media activists who publish information online in areas they control. Several Siege Watch contacts displaced in earlier 2017 forced surrender deals were detained by HTS in Idlib as a result of their continuing media work.

On top of everything else, the geopolitical situation in northern Syria was shocking and bewildering for people after years trapped in the revolutionary enclave of Eastern Ghouta.

“To be honest I feel I am in another country, I do not feel like I am in Syria.”

- Siege Watch contact from Jobar commenting on his arrival to northern Syria

IDPs in Aleppo and Idlib face existential uncertainty, as military powers including Turkey, Russia, the US, and Syria carve up the territory, and the final arrangement remains a mystery.

251 Smart News Agency, “Airstrikes kill and wound civilians, including displaced persons from Eastern Ghouta, in Idlib,” 31 March 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

252 DFR Lab, “#PutinAtWar: Air Raid Hit Refugee Camp,” 12 April 2018, <medium.com>.



Turkish-run IDP camps for people from Douma flood in northern Aleppo, 28 April 2018. Source: Douma Revolutionary Coordinating Committee



Men from Eastern Ghouta amidst their belongings in a receiving center in northern Syria. 27 March. Source: Anas al-Dyab

Assessment, Conclusion & Recommendations

The Syrian government and its allies applied lessons learned from their long list of forced surrender scenarios to finally recapture Eastern Ghouta during the February-April reporting period. This strategy evolved since the first devastating siege against Homs city in 2014, becoming more brutally efficient over time. The government and its allies faced few consequences for the myriad war crimes they committed against hundreds of thousands of civilians in a series of long-term collective punishment campaigns, and were emboldened by the lack of international deterrence. After the Russian military intervention in late 2015, the siege strategy was kicked into overdrive, morphing from a “surrender or starve” strategy of attrition into a “surrender or die” strategy of decimation. The “Damascus Steel” offensive launched against Eastern Ghouta in February 2018 was the anticipated culmination of this process, and it inflicted catastrophic suffering and devastation on the country’s largest besieged population, already exhausted by almost five years of siege. It would have been impossible for the Syrian government to undertake the offensive without Iran-backed foreign militias, and without Russian aerial and ground support.

The International Response

Russia took an increasingly dominant role in military aspects of the conflict during the reporting period. The Russian air force played an active role in the final scorched earth offensive against Eastern Ghouta, evidenced by the sightings of SU-34 aircraft – only found in the Russian fleet – on bombing runs throughout operation “Damascus Steel.”²⁵³ Russian officers led all of the surrender negotiations, served as guarantors for the final deals, and committed forces to provide security for remaining Eastern Ghouta civilians afraid of reprisals from the Syrian military.

253 DFR Lab, “#PutinAtWar: Further Signs of Russia’s Involvement in Eastern Ghouta,” 23 March 2018, <medium.com>.

On the diplomatic level, Russia displayed contempt for the UNSC and diplomatic initiatives to protect civilians in Eastern Ghouta. After using the threat of a UNSC veto to ensure that UNSC Resolution 2401 (2018) lacked enforcement provisions, Russia acted with impunity in continuing its bombing runs.

“From the ground we felt the whole world and especially the Security Council just wanted the file to be over. After the [Russia and the regime] breaking of the ceasefire, the world wanted Eastern Ghouta to end.”

- Siege Watch contact from Nashabiyeh

In the month after Resolution 2401 was passed pro-government forces killed more than 1,700 people in Eastern Ghouta,²⁵⁴ a sobering display of the deterioration of the UNSC’s relevance, in large part a result of its repeated failures to enforce international law and its own resolutions in Syria.

On 10 April, Russia vetoed a UNSC Resolution that would have opened an investigation into the deadly 7 April chemical attack on Douma. With this and other recent vetoes, Russia effectively paved the way for the Syrian government to use chemical weapons with impunity. The frequent use of chemical weapons during operation “Damascus Steel” in Eastern Ghouta is evidence of the normalization of chemical weapons use, and the erosion of important international norms and conventions.

Russia continued its efforts, along with Iran and Turkey, to turn the Astana talks into the primary negotiating venue for the future of Syria, supplanting the UN-led Geneva process. On 16 March, at the height of the offensive in Eastern Ghouta, Turkey, Russia, and Iran held the ninth round of Astana “peace talks,” without any Syrian government representatives, opposition leaders, or western country representatives in attendance²⁵⁵ After the meeting, Russia, Iran, and Turkey reaffirmed their commitment to the “de-escalation zone” framework that was borne out of the Astana process in 2017.²⁵⁶ Despite being sold as a peace initiative, these “de-escalation zones” actually facilitated the success of the government’s “surrender or die” strategy. The framework allowed the government and its allies to focus on military escalation, but to do so sequentially in one “de-escalation zone” at a time. Eastern Ghouta had been declared one such “de-escalation zone” under the framework guaranteed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

The international community’s humanitarian response to the crisis in Eastern Ghouta was a failure. There is no question that UN agencies faced dangerous and extraordinarily complex challenges in calculating their response. They were severely weakened by the lack of UNSC leadership and were limited by organizational structures and processes that were not suited to address a humanitarian crisis precipitated by calculated violations of their host government.

In terms of the international humanitarian response, while there is no question that UN agencies and other Damascus-based humanitarian actors faced dangerous and extraordinarily complex

254 UN OCHA, “Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock: Statement to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria (27 March 2018),” <reliefweb.int>.

255 Georgi Gotev, “Astana meeting on Syria takes place without Western oversight,” 16 March 2018, <www.euractiv.com>.

256 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on Syria, Astana, 16 March 2018,” <www.mid.ru>.

challenges in calculating their response, still they failed to adequately counter the obstructionist policies of the Syrian government and to stand up for the rights of civilians they were mandated to assist. They were severely weakened by the lack of UNSC leadership, threatened by the impunity with which the parties to the conflict acted, and limited by organizational structures and processes that were not suited to address a humanitarian crisis deliberately precipitated by calculated violations on the part of their host government.

The UNSC authorized cross-line aid deliveries without government consent in Resolution 2165 (2014), yet despite frequent assertions by humanitarians that they were pursuing aid delivery “by the most direct routes,” the option of notifying the government rather than obtaining its permission remained under-explored. Instead, the UN humanitarian agency leadership in Syria continued to rely on a modality predicated on an irreconcilable contradiction: obtaining Syrian government approval to deliver aid to areas besieged by the Syrian government.

That choice by the UN humanitarian leadership in Syria – to treat the Syrian government as a good faith partner even at the height of its war crimes – may have validated the government’s siege strategy by allowing the Syrian government to manipulate humanitarian assistance to achieve military ends. This and other operational choices documented by Siege Watch – such as under-reporting the extent of the sieges and failing to publicly identify the Syrian government as the primary protection concern for besieged civilians – represent a failure by humanitarian agencies in Syria to uphold the principles of impartiality, independence, and “Do No Harm.”

The perceptions that Siege Watch reporting contacts and affected civilians conveyed of UN and other humanitarian agencies, included in this and other reports, are damning.

“I saw no role for the UN in our experience. No politics, no medicine, they did nothing.”

-Doctor from Nashabiyeh, displaced to Douma

Rebuilding trust in international humanitarian action in Syria will be a long and difficult process, requiring strong guidelines and mechanisms to ensure that all assistance will be held to the highest standards in terms of transparency, conflict sensitivity, and the Do No Harm principle.

Post-Surrender

Continuing Threats

The dangers and abuses that people from Eastern Ghouta have continued to face since the end of the siege create new schisms and grievances, contributing to instability and undermining the possibility for genuine justice and reconciliation in Syria in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, the end of the siege of Eastern Ghouta should not be confused for the end of the conflict, or of civilian suffering.

Fresh injustices such as the confiscation of land and property are a continuation of the Syrian government’s war against its own people by other means. Most of the displaced Siege Watch contacts interviewed for this report said that they or a family member currently have ownership documentation for their properties in Eastern Ghouta, placing them in a minority according to a

2016 Norwegian Refugee Council report.²⁵⁷ Even so, not a single one of them has hopes that their documentation will help them retain ownership of the property they left behind.

Under Law 10, passed by the Syrian government on 2 April 2018, people in “redevelopment zones” essentially have 30 days to provide proof of ownership, or their property can be appropriated by the government without compensation. One contact summed up the problem with this law:

“Yes, I have documents, but I cannot give them because I cannot go back to apply.”

- Siege Watch contact displaced from Beit Sawa

It is also almost impossible for wanted people to appoint a legal representative to claim property on their behalf, as this requires security clearance. According to Human Rights Watch, displaced residents from areas like Eastern Ghouta are particularly vulnerable to property seizure under Law No. 10, and the law creates a significant barrier to return.²⁵⁸ A recent COI report described this law as part of a wider “plan to strip the displaced of their property rights with the aim of transferring populations or enriching the state and its closest allies.”²⁵⁹

Law No. 10 is one of several tools that the Syrian government is using to legitimize its confiscation of property from the people of Eastern Ghouta. For example, government officials in Douma declared that property transactions made under opposition control – a nearly five-year period – were invalid, and said the government would not recognize land registry records kept by the LC during this time.²⁶⁰

Law No. 10 is one of several tools that the Syrian government is using to legitimize its confiscation of property from the people of Eastern Ghouta. For example, government officials in Douma declared that property transactions made under opposition control – a nearly five-year period – were invalid, and said the government would not recognize land registry records kept by the LC during this time.²⁶¹

Satellite imagery shows the extent of the massive infrastructure destruction in Eastern Ghouta by the time of its final capture.²⁶² In addition to these visible consequences of the scorched earth campaign, there are also enduring hidden dangers for civilians who remained in Eastern Ghouta or who may return in the future. These risks include, most notably, unexploded ordnance, as well as the environmental health risks posed by the destruction of industrial zones and of infrastructure such as water and sewage systems, which increases the risk of outbreaks of communicable diseases and pollutes coping strategies.²⁶³ These environmental health risks must be assessed

257 Norwegian Refugee Council, “Reflections on future challenges to Housing, Land and Property restitution for Syrian refugees,” 26 January 2017, <www.nrc.no>.

258 Zeitoun via The Syrian Observer, “Law No. 10: Regime Officially Entrenches Demographic Change,” 6 April 2018, <syrianobserver.com>.

259 Human Rights Watch, “Q&A: Syria’s New Property Law,” 29 May 2018, <www.hrw.org>.

260 COI, “Sieges as a Weapon of War: Encircle, starve, surrender, evacuate,” OHCHR, 29 May 2018, <www.ohchr.org>.

261 Voice of the Capital, “دوما: من التسوية الأمنية إلى التسوية الأموال والممتلكات,” 7 May 2018, <damascusv.com>.

262 UNITAR-UNOSAT, “Rapidly assessed damage occurring between 3 December 2017 and 23 February 2018 in Eastern Ghouta Area, Syria,” 1 March 2018, <unitar.org>.

UNITAR-UNOSAT, “Rapidly assessed damage occurring between 23 February 2018 and 6 March 2018 in Eastern Ghouta Area, Damascus Governorate,” 8

March 2018, <unitar.org>; Osama Bin Javaid, “Images taken week apart show destruction in Syrian enclave,” Al Jazeera, 2 March 2018, <www.aljazeera.com>.

263 For more on the environmental hazards of conflict in Syria, see: PAX, “Amidst the debris...” 11 April 2015, <www.paxforpeace.nl>.

and addressed in any humanitarian and early recovery efforts. Unexploded ordnance removal and remediation of conflict-related environmental pollution risks will be key in efforts to make these communities safe and habitable again in the future.

Trauma

Years of deprivation, death, suffering, fear, and displacement have inflicted an incalculable psychological toll on the hundreds of thousands of victims of the siege of Eastern Ghouta. The survivors of the siege must now cope with tremendous loss: loss of property, destruction of communities, death of loved ones, separation of families, disruption of education, disability, and more. The impact of this widespread trauma will echo throughout Syria and refugee host countries for generations to come. Psychosocial support should be an urgent priority in the post-siege response, but remains largely unavailable and/or underutilized by siege victims.

On top of the trauma suffered during the siege and final offensive, a significant portion of the siege survivors continue to experience new traumas on a daily basis. For the men still being held in government-run centers around Damascus, their immediate conditions have improved, but their futures are filled with uncertainty and dread. Many of those who remain in Eastern Ghouta also live in fear, as the threat of government abuses and future retribution actions remains, and they are unable to communicate or move freely.

The Eastern Ghouta IDPs who were displaced to volatile locations in northern Syria not of their own choosing were essentially relocated from one inhumane situation to another. Upon their arrival in northern Syria, the displaced were met with insecure conditions, and shamefully little support from the UN and the international community. They continue to face safety threats including bombardment by pro-government forces, violence from armed group infighting, and repression from HTS. Many continue to live in poor humanitarian conditions in crowded and underserviced temporary IDP camps, with insufficient access to medical care, and limited prospects to rebuild a life.

Beyond Eastern Ghouta

The scorched earth campaign against Eastern Ghouta had a “demonstration effect” on other besieged communities in the country. The Southern Damascus Suburbs and northern Homs besieged enclaves subsequently surrendered to pro-government forces with significantly less pressure, abandoning long-held conditions on the release of political prisoners and refusing forced displacement. The threat of being turned into another Eastern Ghouta was explicitly made by Russian negotiators, and the overwhelming horrors of Eastern Ghouta’s fate pushed local negotiators in both enclaves to do what five years of siege could not.

The severe punishment inflicted on Eastern Ghouta even had a similar “demonstration effect” on opposition-controlled areas not considered besieged by the Siege Watch project, notably parts of the Qalamoun region. In April, pro-government forces started escalating military operations against Eastern Qalamoun towns, while Russian officers threatened to repeat the “Eastern Ghouta scenario” in talks with local negotiators.²⁶⁴ As a result, the communities of al-

264 Smart News Agency, “Free Syrian Army: Russia threatens to repeat Eastern Ghouta scenario in Eastern Qalamoun,” 18 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

Dumayr,²⁶⁵ al-Ruhaybeh,²⁶⁶ al-Atana, Mansoura,²⁶⁷ Jayroud, and Nasiriyah,²⁶⁸ all surrendered to terms similar to those imposed on Eastern Ghouta, and forced population transfers began in late April.

With the fall of Eastern Ghouta and subsequent surrenders, the remaining opposition-controlled territory in Syria became concentrated in the two remaining “de-escalation zones” in Idlib and Daraa. This raises the potential that the government and its allies will break their remaining “de-escalation” agreements and begin new offensives in these areas. Increased psychological and military pressure was already apparent in Daraa during the reporting period, as attacks were reported with increasing frequency.²⁶⁹ On 21 February, during a meeting between Russian and Syrian negotiators and local representatives in Daraa, “The Russian envoy and the Syrian regime threatened to transfer military operations to the southern region after the completion of the Eastern Ghouta file.²⁷⁰ This threat was echoed in March by Russian Hmeimim base spokesman Alexander Ivanov, who said that after Eastern Ghouta they would seek to eliminate “terrorists” in the south.²⁷¹ The looming threat of further escalation in Daraa already led to large new waves of internal displacement in March as thousands of civilians fled their homes to be closer to the Jordanian border.²⁷²

In March, Muhajjah – a Daraa town that was previously besieged and which remains on the Siege Watch “Watchlist” – was among several towns issued a 24-hour ultimatum by Russian negotiators to sign a reconciliation protocol, which they refused.²⁷³ In April, there were reports of Russian forces withdrawing from some of the observation points they had set up to monitor the “de-escalation zone”²⁷⁴

Conclusion

The final offensive against Eastern Ghouta was a tragic low point in the Syrian conflict. The government’s five-year collective punishment campaign culminated in the decimation of the region, with tens of thousands killed and injured, hundreds of thousands displaced, and catastrophic infrastructure destruction. The way the siege of Eastern Ghouta would end was both foreseeable and preventable, and yet actors at all levels of the international system failed either to heed early warnings or to appropriately adjust their responses as the siege evolved, claiming powerlessness that was in fact self-imposed. As a result, during the February-April

265 Nedaa Syria, “Besieged town of Al Dumeer in a final agreement with Russia concludes its fate,” 11 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

266 Smart News Agency, “التجهيزات الأخيرة لمغادرة مهجري مدينة الرحيبة نحو عفرين,” 21 April 2018, <smartnews-agency.com>.

267 Nedaa Syria, “Forced Displacement Seasons reach eastern Qalamoun, 100s to north of Syria,” 19 April 2018 <nedaa-sy.com>.

268 Nedaa Syria, “What’s the fate of Qalamoun region under Agreement held by Rebel Factions with Russians,” 19 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

269 UNSC S/2018/369, “Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018),” Report of the Secretary General, 19 April 2018, <undocs.org>.

270 STJ, “Threats to Reiterate Eastern Ghouta Scenario in Southern Syria-Daraa,” 26 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

271 Joe Macaron, “Jordan, Israel hedge their bets in southwest Syria,” Al-Monitor, 22 March 2018, <www.al-monitor.com>.

272 STJ, “Threats to Reiterate Eastern Ghouta Scenario in Southern Syria-Daraa,” 26 March 2018, <www.stj-sy.com>.

273 Nedaa Syria, “Daraa’s ‘Mahjah’ refuses to sign the Russian-proposed ‘protocol’ of reconciliation,” 27 March 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

274 Nedaa Syria, “Russian Military Police withdraw from positions of Daraa province,” 29 April 2018, <nedaa-sy.com>.

reporting period, the Syrian government and its allies acted with impunity as they committed massive crimes against civilians in Eastern Ghouta. The unmitigated human suffering and blatant contempt for international law documented in this report could not have occurred without systemic international failure.

The death, destruction, and displacement that unfolded in Eastern Ghouta during the reporting period were not unfortunate side effects of the fighting between two warring parties; they were intentional and essential components of the Syrian government's military strategy. Demographic engineering – achieved in large part through systematic forced population transfers and the creation of obstacles to return – is seen by the Syrian government as necessary to cement its survival in this new phase of the conflict and in the long term.²⁷⁵ In April, the government gave itself the most significant tool yet for the pursuit of this strategy in the post-surrender phase, when Bashar al-Assad ratified Law No. 10. This law will allow the government to “legally” confiscate the property of the displaced on a massive scale and ensure that their exile is permanent..²⁷⁶

According to the best estimates available, the final offensive against Eastern Ghouta and Jobar nearly halved the remaining population of the enclave, from some 400,000 people in January to roughly 200,000 in April. The end results of the Syrian government's strategy to control an area by intentionally displacing its residents are sobering: these 200,000 remaining residents represent just 18% of the combined 1.1 million pre-war population of Eastern Ghouta and Jobar.²⁷⁷

The clear risk now is that the Syrian government will continue its campaign to force people into submission even after the fighting ends. People from Eastern Ghouta and other post-surrender communities remain among the most vulnerable in this new phase. All the victims and survivors of the Eastern Ghouta siege still require international protection and support. Whether they ended up displaced, detained, in holding centers, or still in their homes – they are all still in the grip of a severe protection crisis: threatened or in limbo, waiting for the Syrian government, UN Member States, or other international stakeholders to determine their fates.

Civilian voices and initiatives emanating from Eastern Ghouta during the final assault were largely ignored; drowned out by the bombs, dramatic scenes at the UNSC, and empty diplomatic statements. As a result, there has been little recognition of what these efforts really represented: grassroots democracy and community-building focused on the welfare of civilians and not corrupt and repressive dictators, the sort of society that millions of people across the Arab world took to the streets to demand in 2010-2011. For years, hundreds of thousands of civilians in Eastern Ghouta persisted against all odds, forging local institutions and an active civil society while resisting the siege, the bombs, the warlords, and the extremists. This experience in local governance and civil society is what was decimated in the fall of Eastern Ghouta, and what the government and its allies are trying to stamp out in the parts of Syria where it still exists.

275 See PAX and TSI report: “No Return to Homs,” 27 February 2017, <reliefweb.int>.

276 Al Jazeera, “Syria: ‘Absentees law’ could see millions of refugees lose lands,” 7 April 2018, <www.aljazeera.com>.

277 A 2017 study by the Syrian American Council derived rough 2011 population numbers for Eastern Ghouta using community-level 2004 census records and an estimated rate of growth based on 2011 provincial-level data. Their resulting estimate of 787,704 people, combined with the best available estimate for Jobar of 300,000, puts the total pre-war population of the besieged enclave at nearly 1.1 million people. Their analysis can be read at: Syrian American Council, “No Going Back: Forced Displacement in the Syrian Conflict,” February 2017, <<http://bit.ly/2sY73hf>>.

The international community and humanitarian agencies operational in Syria must recognize that “post-surrender” does not mean “post-conflict,” and respond accordingly. Failures in the response to Eastern Ghouta must be thoroughly assessed, acknowledged, and understood so that international actors can improve their response moving forward. Urgent reforms are needed so that UN agencies are better equipped to address the challenges of the post-siege era.

States should not normalize relations with the government of Syria and donors should not mobilize reconstruction funding as long as those responsible for massive war crimes and crimes against humanity are in power in Syria, and their human rights violations continue. Instead, those Syrians who continue their struggle for freedom and dignity must be supported in a long-term strategy for political transition. In the long-term, the victims and survivors of the siege must be assured of justice and accountability.

The brutal end of the siege Eastern Ghouta, and the inability of the international community, in particular the UNSC, to compel the Syrian government and its allies to comply with its resolutions, should serve as a wake-up call to the world. International actors charged with the protection of civilians and the maintenance of international peace and security can no longer afford to make excuses for inaction, the results of this path are clear. The international community must take assertive steps to prosecute those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as to support victims and survivors at all levels to secure their rights to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

Principled leadership and a return to basic principles are urgently needed in order to restore trust in the international community and to prevent the normalization of this kind of scorched earth siege warfare from becoming a legacy of this conflict.

Recommendations

Protection

- ◆ Independent third-party monitors must be deployed to IDP camps for people from Eastern Ghouta, as well as to the post-surrender communities in Eastern Ghouta, to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights violations.
- ◆ The UN Security Council and its member states must back the Human Rights Council’s efforts, and strongly advocate for its demands that the government of Syria give the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic access to the country.

Humanitarian programming

- ◆ Pressure must be increased on the Syrian and Russian governments to allow and facilitate unrestricted access for international humanitarian agencies to the post-surrender communities in Eastern Ghouta and the IDP camps in the Damascus region. Humanitarian support to the IDPs in Idlib and Aleppo provinces must also be increased.

- ◆ Donors and humanitarian actors in the health and protection sectors should implement large-scale specialized psychosocial support programs for siege survivors in Syria and in neighbouring countries.
- ◆ Humanitarian actors in the Protection, Shelter and Early Recovery/Livelihood sectors should develop programs to tackle the challenges related to Housing Land and Property rights, and civil status documentation for the displaced; and should support the preservation of their rights by documenting property ownership claims, providing legal consultation, and working with host governments and local authorities to find solutions for missing vital records.
- ◆ Conflict sensitivity guidelines must be put in place for all humanitarian, early recovery and livelihood programmes in post-surrender contexts, to ensure that funds do not benefit actors responsible for war crimes, do not entrench demographic engineering, do not infringe on the property rights of the displaced, and do not deepen grievances by preferring areas that the government wants to reward for being loyal.
- ◆ Donors must put in place due diligence mechanisms to ensure transparency and compliance with these and other guidelines, including the October 2017 Parameters and Principles of UN assistance in Syria.²⁷⁸
- ◆ UN agencies and other humanitarian actors should take the lead in assessing the environmental risks and acute and chronic health risks for civilians who remain in Eastern Ghouta, to ensure that civilians will be provided with adequate context-specific medical care, and that conflict-related pollution concerns are part of remediation and clean-up of the areas.²⁷⁹

Justice and accountability

- ◆ Donor countries should provide funds and diplomatic support to international justice and accountability mechanisms for Syria, such as the COI; the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIIM); and a referral to the International Criminal Court. Donor countries should also continue to support Syrian civil society groups in their efforts to document human rights violations, litigate criminal cases and advocate for accountability.
- ◆ States with universal jurisdiction over war crimes and crimes against humanity committed outside their territory should specifically investigate crimes perpetrated as part of the “surrender or die” strategy. Such states should also strengthen the legal basis for universal jurisdiction, as well as enhance the capacity of the relevant authorities and increase cooperation and information sharing with other states and investigative mechanisms.

²⁷⁸ See Annex of Global Protection Cluster document, “Guidance Note on Housing, Land and Property (HLP) for Mine Action Implementers in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria),” February 2018 <<http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org>>.

²⁷⁹ In line with UN Environment Assembly resolutions 2.15 and 3.1: United Nations Environment Assembly of the UNEP, “3/1. Pollution mitigation and control in areas affected by armed conflict or terrorism,” UNEP/EA.3/Res.1, 30 January 2018, <undocs.org>; and “2/15. Protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict,” UNEP/EA.2/Res.15, 4 August 2016, <undocs.org>.

- ◆ The UN COI, and other competent independent parties should start investigations into all incidents where there is clear evidence of war crimes or crimes against humanity – not only those involving the use of chemical weapons. Investigations should be opened into the targeting of the health sector in particular, such as the removal of medical supplies from aid convoys, and the bombing of medical facilities that were “de-conflicted” by the UN, as well as the executions, detentions and other abuses that reportedly took place amongst the communities that stayed in Ghouta.
- ◆ Efforts to address human rights violations committed against the people of Eastern Ghouta must start now. International actors should support victims and survivors of sieges and forced displacement to organize themselves and to participate in international political processes on Syria and in justice and accountability initiatives.
- ◆ The Secretary-General should appoint a panel to conduct an internal review of United Nations actions in Syria related to the siege of Eastern Ghouta and other besieged areas.
- ◆ An independent international mechanism must be developed to document property claims of forcibly displaced, to collect and preserve proof of property and to prepare for justice including property restitution and reparations for damaged properties.



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