

Siege Watch

Summary of the Third Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria. May-July 2016

The full report can be downloaded from www.siegewatch.org/reports

This report is the third in a series of quarterly reports by Siege Watch – a joint initiative of PAX and The Syria Institute that aims to provide the international community with timely and accurate information on conditions in Syria's besieged communities. This report focuses on developments from May to July 2016.

Key Findings

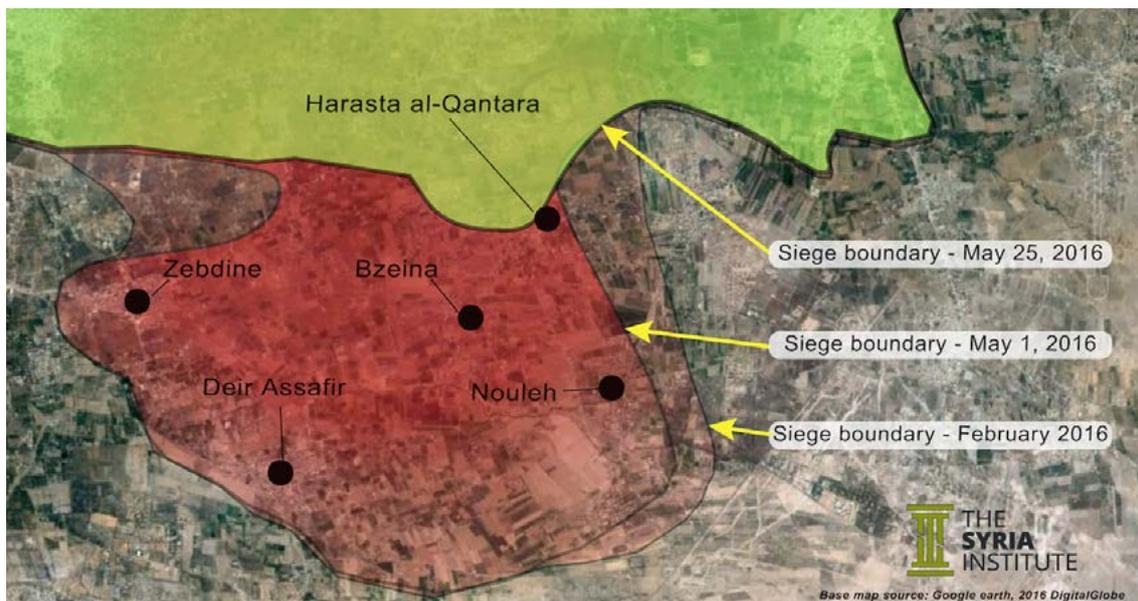
Data collected during the past quarter from an extensive network of contacts on the ground shows that:

- ◆ An estimated 1,005,275 remain people trapped in at least 40 besieged communities across the country.
- ◆ The Syrian government and its allies remain responsible for the majority of existing sieges, as well as all “Watchlist” areas, **where more than 1.4 million** additional face the threat of complete siege.
- ◆ In contrast to the previous reporting period, the May-July period was characterized by **high levels of violence and reduced humanitarian access**, after the Geneva negotiation process and “Cessation of Hostilities” both collapsed.
- ◆ Six besieged communities were captured in military offensives, and their populations were displaced into other besieged communities. So, **while the number of besieged areas in the current report has fallen from the previous quarter, it has not led to a corresponding decrease in the besieged population.**

[See Map Change in Eastern Ghouta Siege Boundary]

- ◆ Conditions in many besieged deteriorated, and civilians will face greater food insecurity moving forward as a result of the **intentional destruction of agricultural land.**
- ◆ The medical situation in besieged areas is alarming, as life-saving medical supplies continue to be excluded from most aid convoys and hospitals continue to be targeted.
- ◆ **Only a handful of communities** – namely Deir Ezzor, Moadamiya, and part of the southern suburbs of Damascus – **saw static conditions or even slight improvements** over the quarter.
- ◆ Two communities – Darayya in Rural Damascus and al-Waer in Homs – require immediate and unfettered international assistance to prevent looming humanitarian catastrophes. [Note: Since the end of July the critically-besieged community of Darayya surrendered to Syrian government forces in the face of complete collapse. All remaining citizens were evacuated in late August, and Darayya is now empty. Al-Waer requires immediate assistance to avoid a similar fate.]

At the beginning of the May-July reporting period, UN OCHA recognized 517,700 Syrians living under siege. This total rose to 590,200 with the addition of al-Waer in late May. The official UN figures for besieged areas have nearly doubled since Siege Watch began monitoring and reporting began in late 2015, but are still far short of the more than 1,000,000 people trapped in besieged areas documented in this project.



Changes in Eastern Ghouta Siege Boundary

There were at least 22 besieged communities in Homs, Damascus, and Rural Damascus governorates that were not recognized in official UN reporting by the end of the third Siege Watch reporting period despite meeting UN OCHA's criteria for the besieged designation. All of the unacknowledged besieged communities are located in Homs and Rural Damascus governorates and all are besieged by the Syrian military and its allies.

Several "Watchlist" communities including Eastern Aleppo and Khan al-Sheih are at high risk of becoming completely besieged as violence levels increase. The Wadi Barada area of Rural Damascus was added to the "Watchlist" in July following an access cut by Hezbollah forces.

The steady pace of WFP airdrops to Deir Ezzor has continued to provide stability and food security for besieged civilians, although the siege remains in place. Moadamiya and several communities to the south of Damascus saw minor but incremental improvements resulting from partial implementation of local ceasefire agreements with the Syrian government. It is unclear whether these conditions can be replicated in other besieged

areas: the UN has not moved forward with humanitarian air airdrops to other besieged communities despite a self-imposed 1 June deadline, and local ceasefire negotiations in other areas like al-Waer have fallen apart.

In addition to violating UNSC Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2254 (2015), and 2258 (2015), the deliberate starvation of civilians is a grave breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and therefore a war crime. The sieges of civilians in Syria inflame sectarian tensions, destroy communities, and undermine UN-led negotiation efforts.

In his June report to the Security Council, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the following:

"While I welcome the recent progress in reaching some besieged locations, I wish to make clear that a complete lifting of all sieges is required. That dozens of barrel bombs were reportedly dropped in Darayya on 10 June, the day after the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered the first food aid to the town since November 2012, shows that the situation for people in besieged areas will



Internally displaced families in Eastern Ghouta live in abandoned vehicles

not be resolved by delivering humanitarian aid... Besiegement is not a natural or necessary consequence of conflict; it is a deliberate policy of parties, and one that can be undone if the political will to do so can be mustered.”¹

Despite this knowledge, the scourge of besieging civilians as a tactic of war continues to spread in Syria, and few changes have been made in the UN approach.

Recommendations

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

◆ The international community, particularly the ISSG and the United Nations Security Council, must act now to prevent the critically besieged community of Al-Waer from becoming the next Darayya, as it is on the brink of complete collapse with nearly 100,000 people at risk.

◆ UN agencies and their donors should undertake a review of current reporting efforts and apply an independent and transparent designation process to ensure that data is not politicized.

◆ Strong, principled, and consistent UN leadership is required to guide local ceasefire negotiations and ensure that they are implemented and in compliance with international humanitarian law.

◆ Parties who continue to violate UN Security Council Resolutions and hinder access should be named and held accountable for their actions.

◆ Ultimately, it is clear that humanitarian aid shipments will not solve this problem. The UN and ISSG must shift focus away from convoy counting and invest more time, energy, and political will into lifting the sieges, and ending this festering scourge on humanity.

[Note: Data collection efforts for this Siege Watch reporting period were from May-July 2016. There have been de-velopments impacting many of the besieged areas in the intervening period. Please check www.siegewatch.org for the most recent available updates.]

¹ UN Security Council S/2016/546, "Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015)," 17 June 2016, <http://undocs.org/S/2016/546>.

Table 1:

OCHA underreporting of communities and people under siege

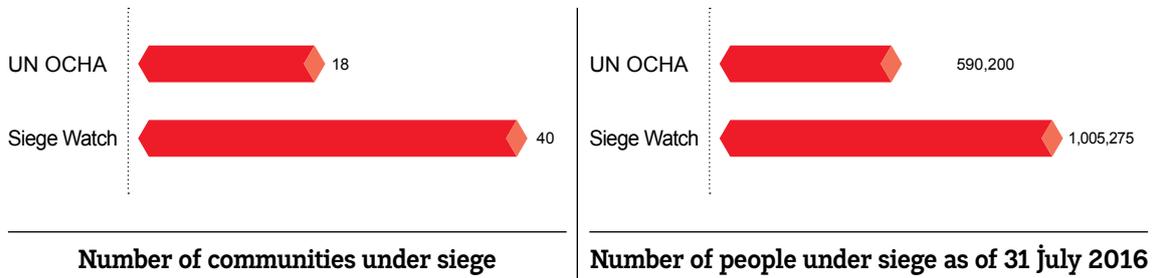
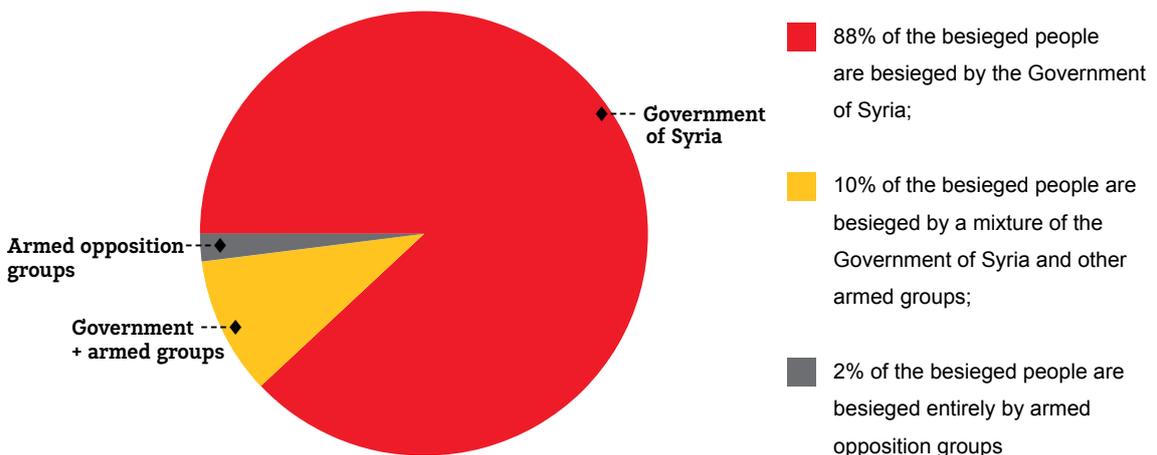


Table 2:

Government of Syria is responsible for 98% of sieges



The Syria Institute (TSI)

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

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