

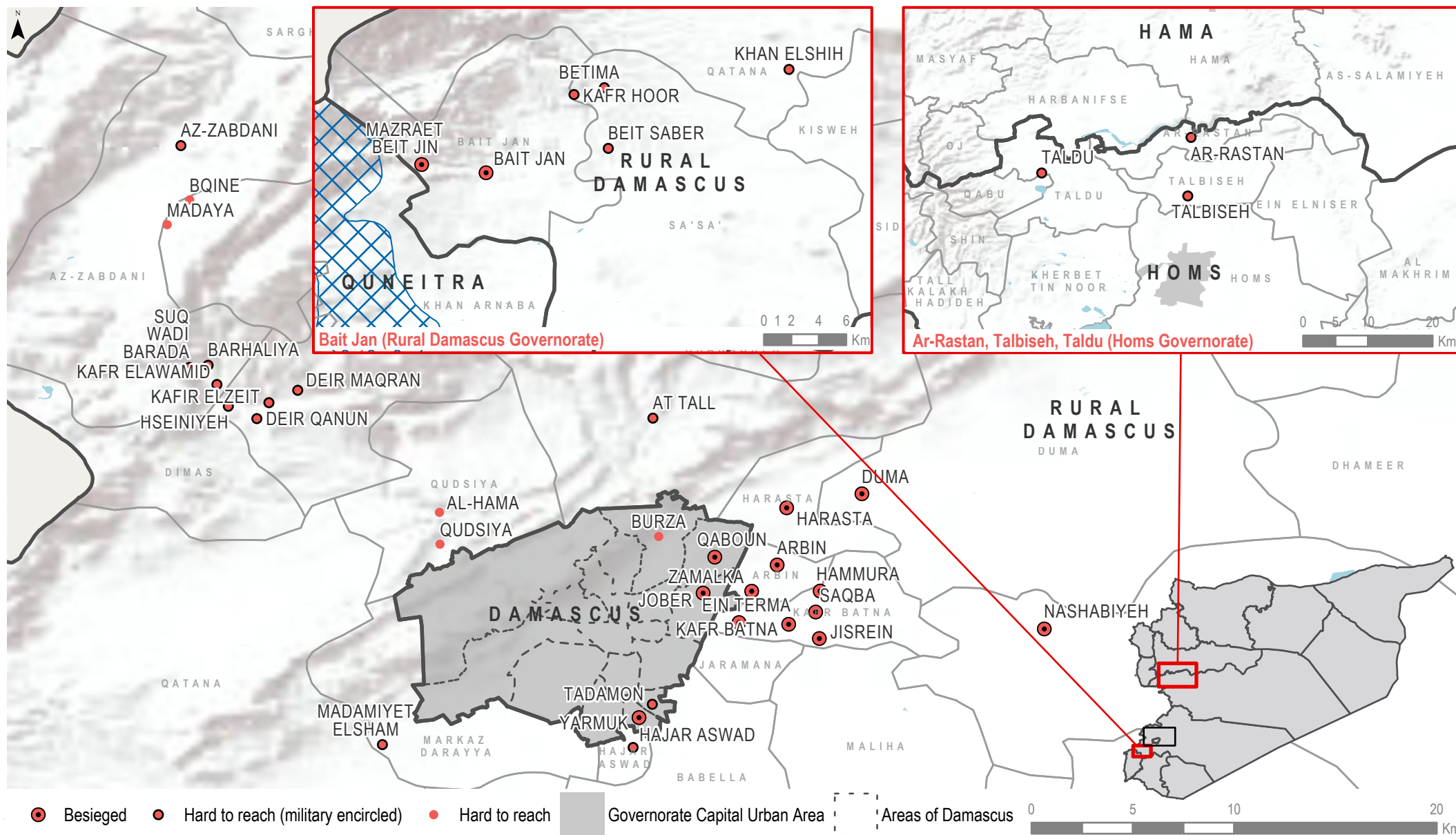
Community Profiles: Situation Overview

October 2017



REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

Coverage¹



1. Az Zabdani and Jober were previously assessed, but the former was evacuated in May 2017, while the civilian population of the latter reportedly left during July 2017 due to the prevalence of active conflict in the community.

INTRODUCTION

Between 29 October and 9 November, REACH, in partnership with the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF), assessed the humanitarian situation in 14 besieged and 22 hard-to-reach communities in Syria². Residents of these locations have faced or are currently facing restrictions that impact freedom of civilian and commercial vehicle movement; the entry of humanitarian aid; access to basic services; and access to goods. The findings presented in this overview refer to the humanitarian situation in these areas in October. All assessed communities were located in Damascus, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 159 Community Representatives (CRs).

October saw an increase in conflict across several assessed areas, which caused the humanitarian situation in affected communities to decline. The situation in areas in which truces agreements had previously been signed remained stable, although access restrictions persisted. Meanwhile, humanitarian access continued to be limited and was not reported in most communities in October.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EASTERN GHOUTA (Rural Damascus)

The humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta deteriorated significantly. A UN convoy carrying food, non-food, and medical items entered on 30 October, but aid was reportedly not distributed until 5 November and was insufficient to meet population needs. In October, commercial vehicle access to the area was forbidden for the second consecutive month, while severe barriers to civilian movement also remained in place, including the general risk of airstrikes and shelling. This led to sharp increases in already-inflated prices of goods following years of restricted entry of commodities and the limited capacity for internal production of food, fuel, and non-food items. Access to food and other commodities deteriorated, and reports of malnutrition among children³ surfaced in late October. The health situation also worsened, due to depleting stocks of medical supplies, and the use of negative strategies to cope with a lack of medical supplies was prevalent.

HAJAR ASWAD, TADAMON, AND YARMUK (Rural Damascus/Damascus)

The communities of Hajar Aswad and Yarmuk also saw escalations in conflict during October. In Hajar Aswad, this led to the closure of an informal access point that was crucial to the flow of goods to the community via civilians, as commercial and humanitarian vehicle access has been prohibited since at least June 2016. Although the route re-opened after approximately 12 days, residents reportedly had to skip meals to cope with a lack of access to food for the first time since assessments of the community began in June 2016. Similarly, in Yarmuk, a formal access route was closed due to tensions between actors in the area. As a result, no civilians were reportedly able to enter or exit the community in October for the first time since assessments began, which led to a decrease in the entry of goods and in access to healthcare in neighbouring communities. In Tadamon, the situation remained stable yet critical in October.

BAIT JAN (Rural Damascus)

In the Bait Jan area, assessed communities without truces experienced intensified conflict and an increase in access restrictions in October. The situation in Mazraet Beit Jin remained volatile, with clashes and shelling continuing in October. Meanwhile, residents of Bait Jan community were no longer permitted to leave the Bait Jan area via formal routes and reportedly faced the risk of shelling due to the community's proximity to Mazraet Beit Jin. Direct commercial vehicle access from the wider area was forbidden in both, for the second consecutive month in Mazraet Beit Jin and the first month in Bait Jan. Conversely, in communities with truces in the Bait Jan area, commercial vehicle access and civilian movement remained unrestricted. However, there have been reports of airstrikes in the truce area in November, which may indicate that the humanitarian situation in the truce communities will change significantly in future months.

QABOUN (Rural Damascus)

The situation in Qaboun improved in October with a reported increase in the entry of goods mainly due to an inter-agency humanitarian delivery that included food baskets and non-food items. Additionally, a new formal route opened in October. However, movement via this formal route was severely restricted; residents had to obtain official permission from the authorities at the checkpoint to leave, and residents could only remain outside of Qaboun for two hours. As such, only 1-10% of the population was reportedly able to utilise this route.

AR RASTAN, TALBISEH, AND TALDU (Homs)

In Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, the situation improved slightly in October as a result of an increase in goods entering the area, which in turn led to an improvement in access to healthcare. In Taldu, this was attributable to the humanitarian delivery which took place there, while in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, it was reportedly because of increased access to informal routes by which needed supplies could enter. Additionally, no new cases related to the outbreak of typhoid fever in September were reported. However, residents reportedly continued to skip meals and reduce their meal sizes, which indicates a persisting lack of access to food, and access to water remained insufficient in all three communities.

TRUCE COMMUNITIES

The situation in communities in which truces were signed remained comparatively better than in communities without truces in terms of commercial vehicle access and access to services. Prices of goods were also typically lower in these areas than in communities without truces. However, severe security risks in truce communities remained prevalent and commonly included detention and conscription, while access to water also remained insufficient in some communities. For more information on truce communities, please see REACH's Truce Overview document, to be released in December.

2. Classification by the United Nations (UN) as of 27 September, 2017.

3. Kansa, Heba. "Image of starving baby shows need to help children in besieged Syrian region: UN agencies." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-hunger-ghouta/image-of-starving-baby-shows-need-to-help-children-in-besieged-syrian-region-un-agencies-idUSKBN1CU2MQ> (retrieved 4 December).



ACCESS AND CIVILIAN MOVEMENT

- In Hajar Aswad and Yarmuk, rising tensions between parties to the conflict resulted in the closure of access routes in both communities, while airstrikes were also reported in the former. In Hajar Aswad, this negatively impacted food security, as residents could not leave the community informally to procure items from nearby areas for a third of the month, while access to formal routes remained limited.
- In Yarmuk, no civilian movement was permitted in October for the first time since assessments of the community began, as formal routes were closed. This resulted in an increase in the prices of goods.
- Meanwhile, in Tadamon, 26-50% of civilians could leave in October, with verbal harassment reported as a risk at formal checkpoints.
- In Eastern Ghouta and Qaboun, severe restrictions on civilian movement remained in place. Only 1-10% of civilians were permitted to enter or exit either area. In Eastern Ghouta, residents reportedly faced severe risks while crossing internal checkpoints as well as when utilising Al Wafideen checkpoint to leave the besieged area.
- Only 11-25% of civilians could leave the Ar Rastan area in rural Homs between the hours of 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. This group reportedly included government employees, students, and those with serious injuries who were not wanted by parties to the conflict for conscription or other reasons.
- In Bait Jan community and Mazraet Beit Jin, no movement outside of the Bait Jan area was possible in October. This has been the case in Mazraet Beit Jin since September. Shelling was a reported risk to movement for residents of both communities due to conflict in Mazraet Beit Jin. Meanwhile, residents of truce communities (Beit Saber, Betima, and Kafr Hoor) were able to travel to places outside the Bait Jan area without restrictions.



MOVEMENT OF GOODS AND ASSISTANCE

- Commercial and humanitarian vehicle movement into the community has reportedly remained prohibited in Hajar Aswad and Tadamon since at least June 2016, although cash assistance from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was reported in the latter. In Hajar Aswad, this meant that no food (or any other items) entered the community while the access route was closed in October. In Tadamon, civilians could bring back items from neighbouring communities.
- Similarly, in Yarmuk, commercial vehicle access has not been permitted since assessments began, and no material humanitarian deliveries reportedly took place during October, although cash assistance from UNRWA was reported. The entry of goods was dependent on civilians transporting them from nearby communities.
- Meanwhile, the amount of goods that entered increased in Qaboun in October because of a humanitarian delivery carrying food and non-food items, such as kitchen supplies and blankets from the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), who also continued to provide medical assistance in the community. However, commercial vehicle movement remained prohibited.
- In Eastern Ghouta, no commercial vehicle access was reported for the second consecutive month, while one humanitarian delivery was reported to have entered on 30 October, although the distribution of aid was delayed and supplies were reportedly insufficient to meet population needs.
- In Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, no commercial vehicles have been permitted since assessments began in November 2016. However, a humanitarian delivery was reported in Taldu in October, delivering food, non-food, and medical items. Food was reportedly produced locally in all three communities, while civilians brought back fuel, non-food items, and medical supplies via formal or informal routes.
- No humanitarian vehicles have reportedly entered Bait Jan community or Mazraet Beit Jin since assessments began in November 2016. As a result, residents of these communities continued to rely largely on local food production in October, as well as on sourcing non-food items and fuel from other communities in the Bait Jan area. Local food production was also reported in most truce communities, and all truce communities relied on commercial vehicles for food and other commodities.



ACCESS TO MARKETS

- In Eastern Ghouta, prices of food, fuel (produced locally), and non-food items increased significantly due to the continued access restrictions on commercial vehicles and civilian movement, while availability of food and access to bread also decreased in October. Fuel has not entered the area since late February 2017.
- Meanwhile, in Yarmuk, the prices of some food, fuel, and non-food items reportedly increased. The availability of non-food items remained stable due to existing stocks, while the availability of food and fuel reportedly decreased due to the closure of formal routes in October.
- In Hajar Aswad, food availability and prices remained overall unaffected by the temporary closure of roads, while the price of fuel decreased due to a lack of demand for some types and a change in the exchange rate of the US Dollar for others. No significant changes in availability of fuel, or the price and availability of hygiene items, was reported.
- In Tadamon, the prices and availability of non-food and fuel items remained stable, while food prices remained overall stable with the exception of a decrease in the price of produce. Meanwhile, availability of some items decreased as they were unavailable in the nearby areas in which they were usually procured.
- In Qaboun, the prices of some food and non-food items decreased with the entry of humanitarian aid, while availability increased, although many items had already been generally available in markets. Regarding fuel, prices and availability were overall stable.
- The availability of food and non-food items decreased in Bait Jan community and Mazraet Beit Jin while the availability of fuel items also decreased in Mazraet Beit Jin. Food prices were largely unaffected in both communities, while the prices of non-food items increased slightly. No major changes in the prices or availability of goods were reported in Beit Saber, Betima, or Kafr Hoor in October.
- In Ar-Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, the prices of some food items decreased slightly, but the overall price of food remained stable as did availability. Meanwhile, the price of fuel decreased as it was widely available in markets, while the prices and availability of non-food items remained unchanged.



ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

- Although the types of medical services and facilities available did not change significantly in Eastern Ghouta, the health situation deteriorated due to a decrease in the availability of medical items.
- In Mazraet Beit Jin, access to medical services required civilians to leave the community and seek care in Bait Jan community, exposing them to the risk of shelling. Meanwhile, access to healthcare deteriorated in Bait Jan, as fewer medical supplies entered due to commercial vehicle restrictions. Meanwhile, the health situation in Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor remained largely unchanged.
- In Hajar Aswad and Yarmuk, access to healthcare deteriorated further due to restrictions on movement of civilians and medical supplies. While the formal route was closed in Hajar Aswad, residents could not seek medical care in nearby areas and therefore could not obtain skilled care for childbirth or surgery; similarly, in Yarmuk, medical care was limited to that which could be obtained in the community as no outward movement was permitted. Available services did not include complex surgeries, diabetes care, or child immunisations.
- Meanwhile, in Tadamon, access to healthcare remained extremely limited, although new information obtained by Community Representatives indicated that there have been individuals with informal training administering basic emergency care in the community. All other services were unavailable, and residents continued to be reliant on using informal routes to obtain care in Hajar Aswad.
- In Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, improved access to informal routes in the former two communities, and humanitarian deliveries in the latter, led to an increase in the amount of medical supplies that entered the communities in October. Meanwhile, access to medical services and facilities remained unchanged; mobile clinics remained available, as did all services except for diabetes care and child immunisations.
- In Qaboun, access to medical care remained stable in October. Only an informal emergency care point was available, although a small percentage of residents was reportedly able to access care in nearby areas via a formal access point that opened in October. Additionally, SARC has facilitated medical evacuations when needed. In all cases, residents had to return to Qaboun immediately upon the completion of treatment.

WATER

- In Eastern Ghouta, access to water remained sufficient, although the main network was unavailable across communities. Instead, residents relied on private water trucking or closed wells, although water from the latter reportedly had a bad taste.
- In Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, access to water remained insufficient despite having increased in Talbiseh in October due to the procurement of fuel by local charities to power water pumps. In Taldu, residents continued to employ multiple negative strategies to cope with a lack of access to water, and residents of all communities reportedly had to use money intended for other things to purchase water despite having access to the water network.
- Residents of Qaboun reportedly continued to have daily access to the water network in October.
- Meanwhile, in Hajar Aswad, Tadamon, and Yarmuk, water continued to be sourced from either closed wells or private trucking services, and access to water reportedly remained insufficient.
- In Bait Jan, the water network remained available in all communities in October. While access was limited to 1-2 days per week, it reportedly continued to be sufficient.

ELECTRICITY

- In Eastern Ghouta, electricity from generators was available for 4-8 hours daily in October, while access to the main electricity network remained unavailable.
- The main electricity network was available in Taldu and Ar Rastan, while generators were used in Talbiseh. Of the three communities, residents of Taldu had access to electricity least often, at only 4-8 hours per day. In Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, electricity was available between 8-12 hours daily.
- In Qaboun, access to the electricity network improved and was reportedly more than 12 hours daily in October.
- Access to electricity in Hajar Aswad, Tadamon, and Yarmuk remained limited to only 2-4 hours per day.
- In Bait Jan community and Mazraet Beit Jin, residents relied mostly on electricity from generators, which was reportedly only available 1-2 hours per day. Meanwhile, the other assessed communities in the Bait Jan area could access the main electricity network for approximately 8-12 hours daily.

EDUCATION

- In Hajar Aswad and Yarmuk, access to education decreased due to increased movement restrictions, which prevented students from attending school in nearby areas. Additionally, a number of schools in these communities had been destroyed in previous months, and parents reportedly did not approve of the curriculum offered in those that were functioning.
- In Tadamon, schools were reportedly destroyed in 2013, although a small proportion of students continued to access educational services in nearby areas in October. Similarly, in Qaboun, no schools have been functioning since assessments began, although children could reportedly access educational facilities in a nearby area by utilising informal routes.
- Schools have been closed in Mazraet Beit Jin since September 2017, as no school-aged children reportedly remained in the community due to conflict. Children in all other Bait Jan communities had access to educational facilities with no barriers reported.
- Meanwhile, in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu, persisting barriers to education reportedly included destroyed facilities, a lack of teachers, and unsafe routes to access services.
- In Eastern Ghouta, severe barriers to education persisted. A number of educational facilities were reportedly hit by shelling in October, and some children had to work to provide for their families or travel long distances to reach available services.

ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

- Cash assistance from UNRWA was reported in Tadamon, and Yarmuk, while residents in Yarmuk also received money from friends and family. In Hajar Aswad, selling humanitarian aid procured from nearby communities was reported as a source of income, while residents of Qaboun relied on remittances and unstable employment. In both Hajar Aswad and Qaboun, residents also used savings to cover basic needs. In all four communities, findings indicated a lack of steady livelihoods opportunities.
- In Eastern Ghouta, farming and crop production, remittances from outside Syria, unstable wage labour, and joining armed groups were the reported sources of income.
- In Ar Rastan, Taldu and Talbiseh, income from farming and crop production as well as stable employment or salaried work were reportedly common resources used to cover basic needs. Additionally, residents of Ar-Rastan and Talbiseh commonly received remittances from outside Syria, while humanitarian assistance was also reported in Taldu.
- The most common forms of generating income across Bait Jan communities were raising livestock and trade. In Beit Saber and Kafr Hoor, manufacturing was also a common source of income, while Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin reported farming and crop production.