

COMMUNITY PROFILES UPDATE: Besieged and Hard-to-Reach Communities

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

SEPTEMBER 2017

Executive Summary

Between 28 September and 9 October, REACH, in partnership with the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF), assessed the humanitarian situation in 36 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 15 of which are classified as besieged and 21 as hard-to-reach by the United Nations (UN).¹ In September 2017, two communities were re-classified from hard to reach to besieged: Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin in Rural Damascus governorate. The data presented in this overview refers to the humanitarian situation in September. All assessed communities were located in Damascus, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 156 community representatives (CRs). Additionally, coverage of Jobet was discontinued after it was determined that the entire civilian population had left the neighbourhood.

In September:

- **A humanitarian delivery was reported in Eastern Ghouta, which reached the communities of Harasta, Misraba and Modira** (the latter two are not assessed by REACH). The delivery reportedly included food, hygiene items, and a small amount of medical supplies. However, as was the case in previous deliveries to Eastern Ghouta, supplies were reportedly insufficient to meet the needs of the populations to which they were delivered, while other communities in Eastern Ghouta did not receive aid other than a round of child immunisations.
- **The humanitarian situation worsened considerably in the Eastern Ghouta communities. Fewer commercial vehicles accessed Eastern Ghouta for the second consecutive month, following the end of a contract in September between authorities and the only trader whose vehicles had been permitted to enter the area.** This led to sharp increases in the prices of food and hygiene items, as well as a decrease in the availability of food. As medical items have not entered Eastern Ghouta other than in humanitarian deliveries since February 2017, the use of negative strategies to cope with depleting medical supplies reportedly increased in the majority of communities. Meanwhile, severe barriers to education were reported, including child labour and children joining armed groups to cope with the rising prices of commodities.
- **An escalation in hostilities in Mazraet Beit Jin reportedly resulted in the displacement of the majority of residents there.** Commercial vehicles were reportedly banned from entering in September, which led to a decrease in the availability of food, while access to services also reportedly decreased. **No educational facilities were reportedly functioning and access to electricity decreased from 2-4 to 1-2 hours a day.**
- **Meanwhile, the situation in Qaboun saw a marked improvement, although civilian movement and the entry of commercial vehicles remained prohibited.** There was reportedly an increase in the amount of humanitarian assistance delivered by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which has provided medical services to the neighbourhood since July. All children reportedly accessed education in September with the start of the school year. Meanwhile, authorities reportedly set price ceilings, leading to a decrease in the price of food items in the neighbourhood.

Of the 36 communities assessed:

- **Humanitarian aid reached Yarmuk, Qaboun, Hama, Qudsiya and Harasta. Additionally, a round of child immunisations was reportedly administered in the communities of Eastern Ghouta (Rural Damascus governorate) and Ar Rastan (Homs governorate).**
- **Civilian movement in and out of the community was not permitted in Qaboun and Mazraet Beit Jin. Meanwhile, in 11 communities, only 1-10% of populations could exit or enter without restrictions.** Of the assessed communities, unrestricted civilian movement upon presentation of identification was reported in only six, as was the case in August.

Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in September, critical levels of vulnerability were present in the neighbourhood of Qaboun in Damascus, as well as the Eastern Ghouta communities and Mazraet Beit Jin in Rural Damascus. These communities continued to face the most stringent restrictions on movement of civilians, vehicles and goods. Ongoing monitoring of all communities will be required to assess any further developments.

Assessed communities in September 2017, by classification¹

Besieged	Damascus (Burza, Qaboun), Yarmuk, Eastern Ghouta (Arbin, Duma, Ein Terma, Hammura, Harasta, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh, Saqba, Zamalka) Bait Jan, Mazraet Beit Jin
Hard-to-reach	Madaya, Bqine, ² At Tall, Bait Jan region (Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor), Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, Hajar Aswad, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Wadi Burda (Barhaliya, Deir Maqran, Deir Qanun, Hseiniyeh, Kafr Elawamid, Kafir Elzeit, Suq Wadi Burda) Khan Elshih

Overview

In order to inform a more evidence-based response to address the needs of vulnerable communities across Syria, REACH, in partnership with the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF) and other humanitarian actors, regularly monitors the humanitarian situation within communities facing restrictions on civilian movement and humanitarian access. The Syria Community Profiles, which commenced in June 2016, intend to provide aid actors with an understanding of the humanitarian situation within these communities by assessing availability of and access to food, non-food items, healthcare, water, education and humanitarian assistance, as well as the specific conditions associated with limited freedom of movement. The list of assessed communities is not intended to be exhaustive of all the areas in Syria facing limited freedom of movement and access. With greater partner input and collaboration, the number of assessed communities will be expanded when feasible. This overview presents a summary of overarching trends across communities assessed.

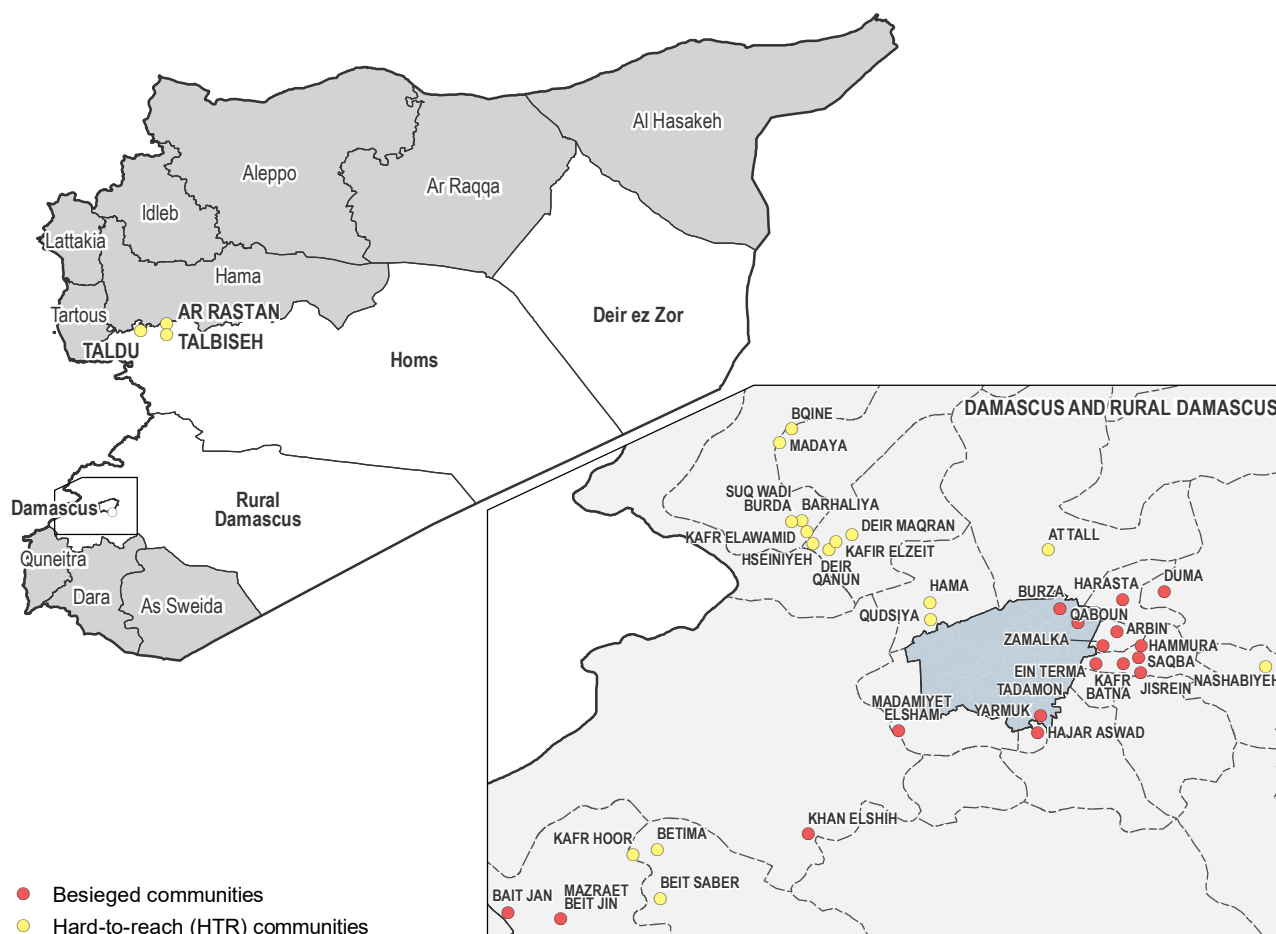
Methodology and Limitations

Data presented in the Community Profiles is collected through contact with community representatives (CRs) residing within assessed communities, who are responsible for gathering sector-specific data on their areas of expertise (e.g. health, education and so forth). Data for this round was gathered during the end of September and early October 2017 and refers to the situation in September 2017. Each community has a minimum of three and up to six CRs. The network continues to expand with ongoing collaboration with SIRF and other partners.

During analysis, data is triangulated through secondary information, including humanitarian reports, news and social media monitoring, and partner verification. Comparisons are made to findings from previous assessments (where possible) and follow up is conducted with CRs to build a thorough understanding of situational developments within communities. In the case of some profiles, multiple communities are presented together; decisions to do so are based on geographical proximity, or on similarities in the access restrictions faced by populations.

Due to the inherent challenges of data collection inside Syria, representative sampling, entailing larger-scale data collection, remains difficult. Consequently, information is to be considered indicative rather than generalisable across the population of each assessed community. Furthermore, an improvement or deterioration in the situation between months may not necessarily indicate a trend, but rather a distinct development specific to the month assessed. The exclusion or inclusion of assessed communities is influenced by the availability of CRs within communities and, therefore, the list of assessed communities should not be considered representative of all areas within Syria facing acute vulnerability. Finally, the level of information presented in each profile varies due to difficulties in obtaining data from certain communities.

Map: Communities assessed in September 2017



Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

In September, restrictions at formal checkpoints remained largely the same across communities as they were in August, with the majority of civilians in assessed communities still facing varying levels of restrictions.

- In Mazraet Beit Jin, most residents reportedly fled to other communities in the Bait Jan area following an escalation in conflict. Residents who did stay in Mazraet Beit Jin were barred from using the formal access point into and out of the Bait Jan area. Relatedly, the risk of shelling on roads leading to the community was reported in Bait Jan community, and only 1-10% of the population there remained able to enter and exit the Bait Jan area.
- In Burza, Hama, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, residents continued to be able to move without restrictions or associated risks upon presenting identification. Meanwhile, in Hama and Qudsiya, the risks of physical harassment, confiscation of documents, detention and conscription were reported at checkpoints, as was the sexual harassment and beating of women.
- In Tadamon (Damascus) the number of civilians able to enter and exit the neighbourhood reportedly increased due to a stabilized security situation and loosened restrictions at formal access points.

Negative developments since August

Mazraet Beit Jin (residents no longer permitted to use the formal access point, mass displacement to other communities in the Bait Jan area)

No civilian movement allowed

Qaboun (other than planned evacuations in May 2017, no movement permitted since assessments began in April 2017)

Mazraet Beit Jin (since September 2017)

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

Commercial vehicle movement in September remained largely the same compared to August and was restricted in the majority of communities.

- In Eastern Ghouta, the number of commercial vehicles allowed to enter decreased after a contract between authorities and the single trader permitted access ended in early September.
- In the Eastern Ghouta and Wadi Barada communities, as well as Madamiyet Elsham, Khan Elshih and Madaya, commercial vehicles entering the communities reportedly continued to be subject to extensive access restrictions. These included searches and fees, confiscation of loads, documentation requirements and only conditional entry.
- For the third consecutive month, unrestricted commercial vehicle access was only reported in Burza, Betima, Beit Saber and Kafr Hoor.

No commercial vehicles allowed

Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu (since assessments began - June 2016)

Hajar Aswad (since assessments began - June 2016)

Tadamon (since assessments began - June 2016)

Qaboun (since assessments began - April 2017)

Yarmuk (since assessments began - June 2016)

Mazraet Beit Jin (since September 2017)

Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

In September, humanitarian vehicles could access only six of the assessed communities, as was the case in August. **The remaining 30 communities did not receive any humanitarian assistance other than child immunisations in Eastern Ghouta and the Ar Rastan area.**

- Humanitarian vehicles entered Harasta (Eastern Ghouta), delivering food, hygiene and a small amount of medical items there and to two nearby communities. However, this aid was reportedly insufficient and did not reach other assessed communities within the besieged area.
- Similarly, in Yarmuk, a humanitarian delivery reached the western part of the camp, but residents in other areas reportedly did not benefit from it.
- Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) vehicles accessed Qaboun for the third consecutive month, leading to an increase in available medical supplies.

No aid entering

At Tall (since January 2017)

Bait Jan area (since assessments began - November 2016)

Hajar Aswad (since assessments began - June 2016)

Taldu (since July 2017)

Ar Rastan and Talbiseh (since August 2017)

Madamiyet Elsham (since October 2016)

Madaya (since March 2017)

Wadi Burda communities (since May 2017)

Burza (since May 2017)

Tadamon (since assessments began - June 2016)

Eastern Ghouta (no consistent humanitarian access reported since assessments began - June 2016)

Khan Elshih (since February 2017)

Health Situation

In September the health situation remained the same in half of all assessed communities but deteriorated significantly in others due to severe, persisting access restrictions.

- SARC vehicles provided Qaboun with medical supplies for the third consecutive month and trained doctors and additional nurses were reportedly present. Harasta also received limited medical aid.
- In the Ar Rastan and Eastern Ghouta communities, child vaccines were reportedly delivered, although an outbreak of typhoid was reported in the former.
- However, the health situation worsened across Eastern Ghouta. Medical stockpiles continued to deplete and a sharp increase in the use of strategies to cope with a lack of medical supplies was reported. Also, the only physical rehabilitation centre in Eastern Ghouta was reportedly destroyed during conflict in late September.
- Men in Hajar Aswad reportedly stopped accessing medical facilities inside the community due to the risk of detention. Meanwhile, medical facilities and services remained absent from Mazraet Beit Jin and Tadamon.

Negative developments since August

Eastern Ghouta (depletion of medical stocks, increased use of negative coping strategies, physical rehabilitation centre destroyed)

Critical health situation

Eastern Ghouta communities

Mazraet Beit Jin

Tadamon

Food Security

In September, the food security situation deteriorated significantly for some communities due to increased access restrictions, while it improved in communities where price ceilings were set by authorities.

- Although the availability of some food reportedly increased in Tadamon following loosened restrictions on the entry of goods, an enduring lack of food reportedly led some residents to start skipping meals in September.
- Prices increased dramatically across Eastern Ghouta while the availability of some food items decreased.
- Conversely, access to food improved in Qaboun and Yarmuk. In the former, food became less expensive following price regulations set by authorities. In the latter, food availability increased following loosened access restrictions and no strategies to cope with a lack of food were reported.
- In Mazraet Beit Jin, no food was permitted to enter the community, leading to a decrease in availability.

Negative developments since August

Eastern Ghouta (dramatic increases in price, decrease in availability of some items)

Mazraet Beit Jin (no food permitted to enter in September, decrease in availability)

Tadamon (Skipping meals reported to cope with a lack of food)

Critical food situation

Eastern Ghouta

Mazraet Beit Jin

Access to Services

In September, access to services varied across communities. Access to electricity remained overall stable, while changes in access to education were reported in several communities.

- Access to education deteriorated in Arbin, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh and Zamalka (Eastern Ghouta), where children reportedly had to work or join armed groups to cope with rising prices. In Ein Terma, the volatile security situation continued to limit access to education.
- In contrast, access to education improved in Qaboun. Contrary to previous months, children did not encounter barriers to attending school. Additionally, new UNRWA* schools opened in Burza (Damascus) and Hseiniyeh (Wadi Barada).
- Access to water remained insufficient in eleven communities, where residents were forced to use funds intended for other things to purchase water. In Taldu (Homs), buying water on credit, borrowing money for water and borrowing water were also reported.
- Access to electricity decreased to only 1-2 hours a day in Mazraet Beit Jin due to a lack of fuel caused by an escalation in hostilities.

Negative developments since August

Mazraet Beit Jin (schools closed, decrease in access to electricity.)

Critically poor access to services

Eastern Ghouta (severe barriers to education present)

Hajar Aswad (water supplies insufficient, residents purchasing water with money intended for other things, limited access to electricity, barriers to education)

Taldu (multiple coping strategies to deal with a lack of water)

Communities that signed truce agreements

Since September 2016, truce agreements have been signed in 19 of the communities assessed by REACH. These include Al Waer³, At Tall, Burza, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Madaya, Qaboun, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, as well as the seven Wadi Burda communities. In September, the humanitarian situation in most communities with truces remained stable.

Significantly improved humanitarian situation: Qaboun

- The health situation improved, following increased amounts of medical supplies and higher numbers of medical personnel reported in the community. Meanwhile, children no longer faced barriers to education. More food items entered informally and authorities set price ceilings on goods in the neighbourhood, which led to decreases in the prices of assessed food items.

Overall unchanged humanitarian situation: Beit Saber, Kafr Hoor, Betima, Burza, Madaya, Barhaliya, Deir Maqran, Deir Qanun, Hama, Hseiniyeh, Kafir Elzeit, Kafr AlAwameed, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Qudsiya

- **Humanitarian actors only had access to four communities out of the 18 still currently assessed³: Burza, Qaboun, and Hama and Qudsiya. Meanwhile, aid was only actually delivered to Hama and Qudsiya, where truce agreements were signed in October 2016, and Qaboun, where a truce was reached in May 2017.**
- Civilian access to formal entry and exit points in the Bait Jan communities with truces (Kafr Hoor, Betima, Beit Saber) and in Burza neighbourhood of Damascus has been unrestricted since January and June 2017, respectively. Meanwhile, in the other 14 truce communities, movement through formal access points was either not permitted or risks were reported when entering and exiting, the most common of which being verbal harassment, detention and conscription.
- Meanwhile, in the majority of communities with truces, improved access to medical and educational services was reported. Additionally, access to the main water and electricity networks has been reported in all communities to varying extents except for Khan Elshih, where the water network remained unavailable.

Critical humanitarian situation: Qaboun

- As was the case in previous months, the situation in **Qaboun** remained critical in September, despite the significant improvements reported. Severe restrictions on the movement of civilians and of commercial vehicles persisted, with neither allowed to enter or exit the community. Additionally, despite an increase in medical personnel and the entry of more medical items, an informal emergency care point remained the only medical facility available.

Conclusion

- In communities where restrictions on movement of goods, civilians and vehicles were the most stringent, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate. Similarly, active conflict led to additional restrictions and hardships on access to medical and other basic services, as well as food security. Conversely, the humanitarian situation in communities where reduced access restrictions were reported, many of which were truce communities, continued to improve or remained stable.
- **Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in September, populations in Eastern Ghouta indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Similarly, residents of Qaboun continued to face severe limitations on movement. Ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these communities.**

About REACH

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, you can write to our global office (geneva@reach-initiative.org) or to our Syria Assessment Officer (laurel.mcdonald@reach-initiative.org).

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