

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

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

AUGUST 2017

Executive Summary

Between 28 August and 11 September, REACH, in partnership with the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF), assessed the humanitarian situation in 37 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 14 of which are classified as besieged and 23 as hard-to-reach by the United Nations (UN).¹ The data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in August. All assessed communities were located in Damascus, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 159 community representatives (CRs). In August, Deir ez Zor city (Joura and Qosour), and Abu Kamal and Sosa communities in Deir ez Zor governorate could not be assessed due to access limitations.

In August:

- **Aid entered the community of Duma in Eastern Ghouta for the third time in four months**, delivering food, hygiene and medical items. However, as was the case with previous deliveries, supplies were reportedly insufficient for the entire population of Duma, and residents of other areas in Eastern Ghouta did not benefit from the delivery.
- **Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation deteriorated in the nine other communities assessed in Eastern Ghouta, despite an improvement in access to education in the majority of these communities. Compared to July, fewer commercial vehicles entered the area in August due to shelling, and restrictions on vehicle entry persisted.** Medical supplies have not entered Eastern Ghouta via commercial vehicles since March 2017; in August, medical stockpiles were almost depleted, and a proliferation of negative coping strategies was reported. These included, but were not limited to: recycling medical items such as syringes and needles and using non-medical items such as sticks for casts. Significant increases in the price of food and fuel were also reported across assessed communities in August. **In addition, approximately 40% of the population of Ein Terma was reportedly displaced in August due to heavy shelling and active conflict in and around the community.**
- **In At Tall, a higher number of commercial vehicles were permitted entry in August compared to July, leading to an increase in availability of food items and a decrease in prices.** Improved access to the electricity network was also reported in the community following reduced rationing restrictions. However, despite these improvements in the humanitarian situation, **a large number of men aged 18-40 years were reportedly detained at formal access points during August for the purpose of conscription.**
- **Humanitarian deliveries reached both Ar Rastan and Talbiseh (Homs governorate), leading to child immunizations being available in Talbiseh.** However, increased fees for civilians bringing goods were also reported (as well as in Taldu) leading to an average increase in the price of food of around 20% in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, despite the inclusion of food items in the humanitarian deliveries.

Of the 37 communities assessed:

- **Humanitarian aid reached Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Hama and Qudsiya, Duma and Qaboun.**
- **No civilian movement was allowed in two communities (Jobber and Qaboun). Meanwhile, in 12 communities, only 1-10% of the populations providing identification could reportedly exit or enter, as was the case in July.** Of the assessed communities, only six reported that civilian movement was unrestricted upon presentation of identification.

Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in August, critical levels of vulnerability were present among populations in all Eastern Ghouta communities (including Duma) as well as in Qaboun (Damascus). Residents of these communities continued to face the most stringent restrictions on movement of civilians, vehicles and goods. Conversely, in communities such as At Tall, where access restrictions were reduced, improvements to the humanitarian situation were reported. Ongoing monitoring of these communities will be required to assess any further developments.

Assessed communities in August 2017, by classification¹

Besieged	Damascus (Burza, Qaboun, Jobber), Yarmuk, Eastern Ghouta (Arbin, Duma, Ein Terma, Hammura, Harasta, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh, Saqba, Zamalka)
Hard-to-reach	Madaya, Bqine ² , At Tall, Bait Jan area (Bait Jan, Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor, Mazraet Beit Jin), 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, 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 list of profiled communities will be expanded when feasible. This overview presents a summary of overarching trends across communities assessed.

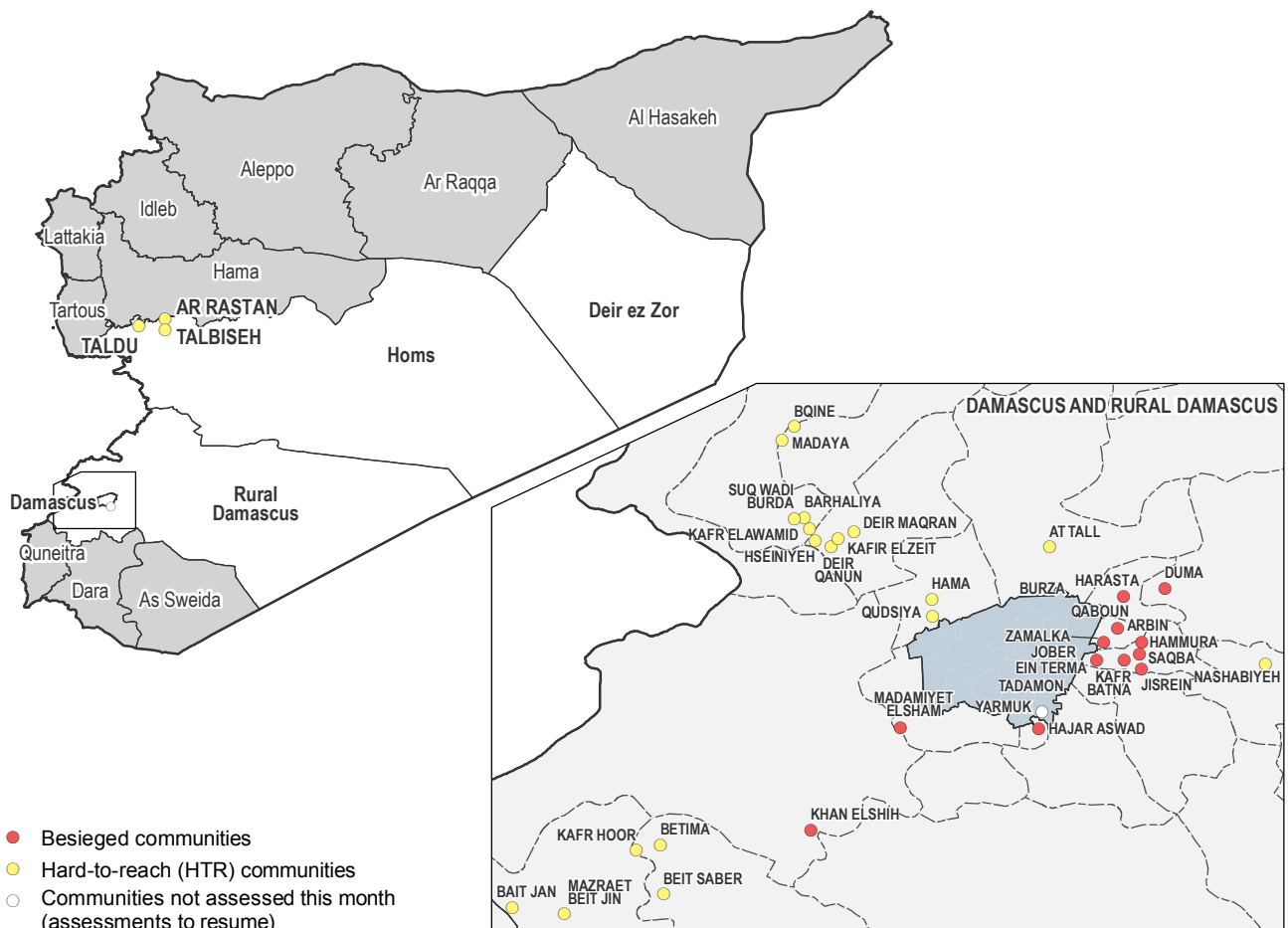
Methodology and Limitations

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 August and early September 2017, and refers to the situation in August 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, 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 August 2017



Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

In August, restrictions at formal checkpoints remained largely the same across communities, and the majority of populations still faced limitations on freedom of movement in and out of their respective communities.

- **Mass displacement was reported in the community of Ein Terma (Eastern Ghouta) due to intense conflict that has persisted for the second consecutive month, and civilians still residing in the community were reportedly at risk of heavy shelling.**
- In Burza, Hama, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, residents continued to be able to move unrestricted upon presenting identification, as was the case in June and July. Conversely, in Qudsiya, authorities reportedly established more internal checkpoints and confiscated many motorcycles following a perceived threat from an improvised explosive device (IED) within the community. Meanwhile, residents of Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu reported that increased informal fees were required in order to be able to bring goods inside their respective communities.
- In At Tall, although formal movement restrictions did not change, **a large number of men between 18 and 40 years of age were reportedly detained for the purpose of conscription.**

Negative developments since July

- **Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu** (Increased fees required to bring in goods via the formal access point)
- **At Tall** (high rate of detention of males this month)
- **Qudsiya** (establishment of more internal checkpoints)

No civilian movement allowed

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

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

Commercial vehicle movement remained largely the same across communities, with the exception of At Tall, where some restrictions were reportedly lifted and access increased.

- Commercial vehicles were no longer subject to fees or confiscation of loads in At Tall, resulting in an increased number of vehicles able to enter the community in August in comparison to July.
- In contrast, fewer vehicles entered Eastern Ghouta through Al Wafideen checkpoint in Duma due to the risk of shelling. Commercial vehicles remained subject to searches and fees, confiscation of loads, conditional entry depending on the day of the week, and documentation requirements. **Additionally, they have not been permitted to bring medical supplies into Eastern Ghouta since March 2017.**
- **Unrestricted commercial access was only reported in Burza, Betima, Beit Saber and Kafr Hoor, as was the case in June and July.**

No commercial vehicles allowed

- **Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu** (since assessments began - June 2016)
- **Hajar Aswad** (since assessments began - June 2016)
- **Jobber and Tadamon** (since assessments began - June 2016)
- **Qaboun** (since assessments began - April 2017)
- **Yarmuk** (since assessments began - June 2016)

Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

In August, humanitarian vehicles could access only six of the assessed communities. **The remaining 31 communities did not receive humanitarian assistance.**

- Humanitarian vehicles entered Duma (Eastern Ghouta), delivering food, hygiene and medical items for the third time in four months. However, none of this aid reportedly reached other communities within the besieged area and was insufficient for populations in Duma.
- Food and hygiene items were delivered to Ar Rastan and Talbiseh in August, with the latter community also receiving medical items. In Qaboun, medical supplies and assistance entered the community for the second consecutive month via Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) vehicles although no other aid was provided.
- As has been the case in previous months, aid delivered to Hama and Qudsiya was prioritised for families with a lack of income and resources. No other change to humanitarian vehicle access was reported in August.

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)
- **Khan Elshih** (since February 2017)
- **Madamiyet Elsham** (since October 2016)
- **Madaya** (since March 2017)
- **Wadi Burda communities** (since May 2017)
- **Burza** (since May 2017)
- **Jobber, Tadamon** (since assessments began - June 2016)
- **Eastern Ghouta** (no consistent humanitarian access reported since assessments began in June 2016)
- **Yarmuk** (since April 2017)

Health Situation

In August, the health situation deteriorated in communities that continued to face access restrictions, while it improved in communities that received humanitarian assistance.

- SARC vehicles containing medical supplies continued to enter Qaboun, while child immunizations were available in Talbiseh following the humanitarian delivery that took place there in August.
- **In 14 communities, men reportedly did not seek medical care in nearby areas because of considerable risks at checkpoints, which limited their access to adequate healthcare.**
- In Duma, the availability of medical supplies increased following the entry of medical items via the humanitarian delivery that took place in August.
- Meanwhile, the health situation worsened in the nine other communities assessed in Eastern Ghouta for the second consecutive month. Medical stocks reached critical lows, and an increase in the use of negative coping strategies (such as recycling medical items or using non-medical items for treatment) was reported across the majority of communities.

Negative developments since July

Eastern Ghouta other than Duma (continued depletion of medical stocks, prevalence of negative coping strategies)

Critical health situation

Eastern Ghouta communities

Food Security

In August, the food security situation worsened in communities where further restrictions were placed on the movement of goods. These included communities in Rural Damascus and Homs governorates.

- The prices of some food items decreased in the Wadi Burda communities, due to a depreciation of the US dollar, and in At Tall, where restrictions on the entry of commercial vehicles were loosened.
- **In contrast, significant price increases were reported across Eastern Ghouta communities due to reduced commercial vehicle access.** Similarly, in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, increased informal fees collected in exchange for permitting the entry of goods resulted in higher food prices, as did decreases in seasonal availability of some produce.
- In Jober, no food items were available for purchase in markets, and the amount of food that was able to enter the community decreased, although food reportedly entered informally via non-commercial vehicles coming from Eastern Ghouta.

Negative developments since July

Eastern Ghouta (significant price increases across communities)

Ar Rastan and Talbiseh: (average increase of 18% in price of assessed food items)

Critical food situation

Jober

Access to Services

In August, access to services remained stable in most communities. Access to water decreased in two of the assessed communities, while access to education and electricity improved in others.

- Across Eastern Ghouta, except for the communities of Ein Terma and Nashabiyeh, where conflict was ongoing, access to education improved after new fortified facilities were built.
- Access to electricity improved in Madaya and Bqine, as well as At Tall. In the latter, residents had access to the electricity network for 4-8 hours daily as opposed to only 2-4 hours in July.
- Access to water decreased significantly in Jober, after the water network sustained damage during ongoing conflict in the community. As a result, water supplies reportedly ran critically low in August.
- Similarly, the water network in Ein Terma was damaged, which led to a decrease in access to water. However, the amount of water available remained sufficient as a result of water trucking.

Negative developments since July

Jober (decreased access to water)

Ein Terma (decreased access to water)

Critically poor access to services

Qaboun (no educational facilities, children unable to seek education outside of Qaboun)

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

Jober (insufficient access to water, residents modifying hygiene practices, e.g. bathing less)

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, and the seven Wadi Burda communities. In August, the humanitarian situation in most communities remained stable, with significant improvements only reported in At Tall.

Significantly improved humanitarian situation: At Tall

- In **At Tall**, the humanitarian situation improved significantly for the first time since March 2017. A number of restrictions on commercial vehicle access and usage of the electricity network were lifted in August, food prices and availability improved, and fuel became more available. However, security risks persisted for men entering and exiting the community via checkpoints, and the reported risks of detention and conscription at these checkpoints negatively affected men's ability to seek medical care in other communities. Additionally, in August, a notably high detention rate of men for the purpose of conscription was reported.

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

- The general humanitarian situation in **Qudsiya**, where a truce agreement was signed in October 2016, remained largely unchanged in August. However, new restrictions on civilian movement within the community were implemented, as a reported explosive device threat led the official authorities to set up barriers within the community and to confiscate a number of motorcycles. Although all residents of Qudsiya were able to access official checkpoints to enter and exit the community, men continued to risk conscription at these access points. Commercial vehicles remained permitted to access the community, although they were subject to searches and confiscations of goods, as was the case in previous months.
- Similarly, there were no substantial changes in Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, which are all in the Bait Jan area. After a truce agreement was signed in these communities in January 2017, restrictions on commercial vehicle movement and movement of civilians were lifted, resulting in a significant increase in the goods and services entering the area, which stabilised after a few months. Additionally, residents of Beit Saber were finally able to resume farming in August after gaining the necessary agricultural resources during previous months.
- In Burza, the humanitarian situation stabilised in August. Positive developments that had occurred in July led to an overall improvement in the situation, such as increased access to medical care and higher availability of food.

Critical humanitarian situation: Qaboun, Eastern Ghouta communities

- As was the case in previous months, the situation in **Qaboun** remained critical in August. No civilian or commercial vehicle movement into or out of the community via formal checkpoints has been allowed since May 2017, although SARC vehicles were permitted to enter in July and August. Additionally, there was neither access to educational services in the community nor the option for children to attend school in other communities due to movement restrictions. Meanwhile, access to medical facilities remained limited to an informal emergency care point.

Conclusion

- In communities with the fewest restrictions on movement of civilians and of humanitarian and commercial vehicles, the situation was comparatively better than in communities facing tighter restrictions. Additionally, the situation in the majority of truce communities stabilised in August, after many saw improvements in their respective humanitarian situations in July.
- Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in August, populations in Qaboun and Eastern Ghouta indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Conversely, residents of At Tall experienced relative improvements, though access restrictions and risks associated with movement out of the community persisted for male residents in particular. 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).