

# COMMUNITY PROFILE UPDATE: Besieged and Hard-to-Reach Community Profiles

**SYRIA**

**SITUATION OVERVIEW**

**FEBRUARY 2017**

## Executive Summary

Between 27 February and 6 March 2017, REACH, in collaboration with the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF), assessed the humanitarian situation in 41 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 18 of which are classified by the UN as besieged and 23 as hard-to-reach.<sup>1</sup> The data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in February. All profiled communities were located in Dar'a, Damascus, Deir ez Zor, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 180 community representatives (CRs). Coverage of Deir ez Zor (Joura and Qosour), which was not assessed in January due to ongoing hostilities, resumed in February. The communities of Bseimeh and Ein Elfijeh in Rural Damascus, previously assessed with other Wadi Burda communities, have not been covered since January 2017 following reports that no populations remain.

### In February:

- **A truce agreement was reached in assessed communities across Wadi Burda on 30 January 2017.** It resulted in the lifting of access restrictions, which allowed for civilian movement and the entry of goods for the first time since November 2016. The cessation of hostilities also led to the re-opening of markets and schools, and an increased access to health and basic services, which significantly improved the overall humanitarian situation in Wadi Burda in February.
- **The humanitarian situation further worsened in Al Waer, Az Zabdani and Madaya, Burza, Deir ez Zor and the Eastern Ghouta communities in February.** This was due to ongoing hostilities as well as particularly tight restrictions on movement experienced by those communities.
- **The humanitarian situation improved significantly in Ash Shajara,** as shifts in local conflict dynamics allowed for the lifting of restrictions on civilian movement and commercial vehicles, and an associated influx of all types of goods.
- Across assessed communities which signed truce agreements between September 2016 and January 2017 (At Tall, Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor, Hama, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham and Qudsiya), improvements were observed in February, mainly attributed to an increased number of commercial vehicles entering those locations. Additionally, Hama, Qudsiya and Khan Elshih received humanitarian aid in February.
- **Following repairs to the Ein Elfijeh water facility, access to water increased across most assessed communities in Damascus city and Rural Damascus in February (At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Burza, Jober, Tadamon and Wadi Burda).**

### Of the 41 communities assessed:

- **Ar Rastan, Hama, Khan Elshih, Qudsiya and Talbiseh received humanitarian deliveries in February. Bread was also delivered via air drops to Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor). No aid reached the remaining 34 communities.**
- **Seven reported no civilian movement, while in 12 communities 1-10% of populations could leave or enter.** This was an overall improvement in mobility across assessed communities from January, subsequent to the partial lifting of access restrictions in some locations.
- **The food and health situation remained critical in five of the assessed communities (Al Waer, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Joura and Qosour)** primarily due to ongoing or escalating conflict combined with persisting, extreme access restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement. This was a relative improvement compared to January when eleven communities reported critical situations, and resulted from the cessation of hostilities across the Wadi Burda area.

Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in February, populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability in the communities of Al Waer, Az Zabdani, Madaya, and Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor). Conversely, the communities of Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu, At Tall, Ash Shajara, Khan Elshih and the Wadi Burda area experienced improvements, although ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these locations.

### Assessed communities in February 2017, by UN classification<sup>1</sup>

<b>Besieged</b>	Al Waer, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Bqine, <sup>2</sup> Damascus (Jober, Yarmouk), Deir ez Zor (Joura, Qosour), Eastern Ghouta (Arbin, Duma, Ein Terma, Hammura, Harasta, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh, Saqba, Zamalka), Khan Elshih.
<b>Hard-to-reach</b>	Ash Shajara, At Tall, Damascus (Burza, Tadamon), Bait Jan region (Bait Jan, Beit Saber, Beitama, Kafr Hoor, Mazraet Beit Jin), Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, Hajar Aswad, Hama, Qudsiya, Madamiyet Elsham, Wadi Burda (Barhaliya, Deir Maqran, Deir Qanun, Hseiniyeh, Kafr Elawamid, Kafir Elzeit, Suq Wadi Burda).

## Overview

In order to inform a more evidence-based response to address the needs of vulnerable communities across Syria, REACH, in support of 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 and access to food, healthcare, water, education and humanitarian assistance, price data, as well as the specific conditions associated with limited freedom of movement. The list of assessed communities is not intended to be exhaustive of the total areas in Syria facing limited freedom of movement and access. With greater partner inputs and collaboration, the list of profiled locations will be expanded. This overview presents a summary of the overarching observations identified across communities assessed.

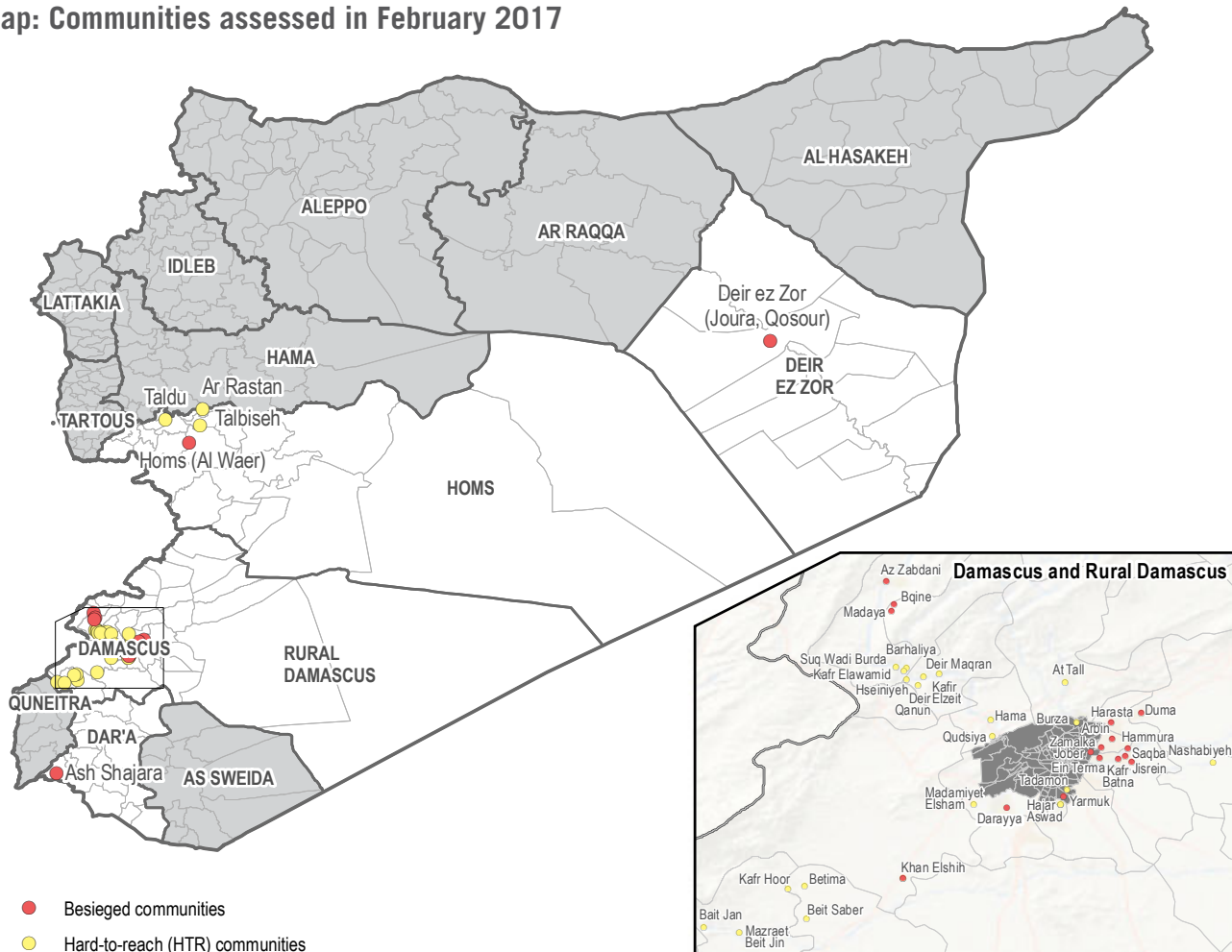
## Methodology and Limitations

Data presented in the Community Profiles is collected through contact with community representatives (CRs) residing within assessed locations, who are responsible for gathering sector-specific data from their areas of expertise (i.e. health, education). Data for this round was gathered during the end of February and early March 2017, referring to the situation in February 2017. Each community has a minimum of three CRs, with up to six depending on the location. 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 (if any) and follow up is conducted with CRs to build a thorough understanding of situational developments within locations. In the case of some profiles, multiple communities are presented together; decisions to do so are based on their geographical proximity to one another or similarities in the access restrictions faced by populations.

Due to the challenges of data collection inside Syria, representative sampling, entailing larger-scale data collection, remains a challenge. Consequently, information is to be considered indicative rather than generalisable across the population of each assessed community. Further, an improvement or deterioration in circumstances 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 locations 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 locations.

Map: Communities assessed in February 2017



- Besieged communities
- Hard-to-reach (HTR) communities

## Key Findings

### Movement of Civilians

With the exception of communities experiencing changes in conflict dynamics, restrictions on movement of civilians remained largely unchanged in February.

- Across assessed communities, Ash Shajara, Hama and Qudsiya, and the Bait Jan area were the only communities reporting unrestricted movement of civilians, subject to documentation requirements.
- Only 1-10% of residents were able to move through formal checkpoints in Yarmouk and Ar Rastan. The same number was reported in Al Waer at the beginning of February, but later decreased following the closure of the existing one formal access point.
- **Significant improvements were reported in Ash Shajara following a shift in control over neighbouring communities, and in Wadi Burda subsequent to the implementation of a truce agreement on 30 January. Small increases in movement were also reported in At Tall and Khan Elshih. A new access point opened in Taldu, but no large change in the number of people leaving the community was recorded in February.**

### Negative developments since January

- Burza** (closure of all formal access points)
- Al Waer** (closure of formal access point mid-month)
- Eastern Ghouta** (increased risks associated with movement)

### No civilian movement allowed

- Az Zabdani, Madaya** (since September 2016)
- Deir ez Zor** (since June 2016)
- Burza** (since February 2017)

### Movement of Commercial Vehicles

Movement of commercial vehicles continued to remain completely blocked in 12 communities and limited in some others in February.

- Commercial vehicle access was completely prevented in 12 of the assessed communities in February; this represented a long-term trend in all of those communities.
- Some vehicles were allowed to enter Duma (Eastern Ghouta), At Tall, Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya, Madamiyet Elsham and the Wadi Burda communities. The most common restrictions on commercial vehicles entering included searches, fees and documentation requirements.
- **For the first time since assessments began, all commercial vehicles could enter Ash Shajara. Similarly, commercial vehicle access to Wadi Burda resumed for the first time since December 2016.**

### No commercial vehicles allowed

- Al Waer** (since October 2016)
- Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu** (since June 2016)
- Az Zabdani, Madaya** (since September 2016)
- Burza, Jober, Tadamon** (since June 2016)
- Hajar Aswad** (since June 2016)
- Deir ez Zor** (since June 2016)
- Yarmouk** (since June 2016)

### Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

There was an increase in aid deliveries between January and February, with five of the assessed communities reporting humanitarian vehicle entry in February, in contrast to only the previous month.

- In Khan Elshih and Hama and Qudsiya, some vehicles carrying aid were able to enter but restrictions were imposed, including searches and rules regarding distribution times and beneficiaries.
- Aid entered unhindered into Ar Rastan and Talbiseh in February, for the first time since November and October 2016, respectively. The deliveries carried food, NFIs and medical items.
- Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor) reported the resumption of airdrops in February, following a halt in January due to ongoing hostilities. However, aid delivered reportedly only contained bread in February.
- **Across all assessed communities, 34 remained without any humanitarian assistance in February.**

### No aid entering

- Al Waer** (since October 2016)
- Ash Shajara** (since September 2016)
- At Tall** (since January 2017)
- Az Zabdani, Madaya** (since November 2016)
- Bait Jan** (since November 2016)
- Burza** (since October 2016)
- Eastern Ghouta area** (since October 2016)
- Hajar Aswad** (since June 2016)
- Jober, Tadamon** (since June 2016)
- Taldu** (since October 2016)
- Wadi Burda area** (since August 2016)
- Yarmouk** (since June 2016)

### Health Situation

In February, the health situation continued to deteriorate across several of the assessed communities. This was particularly evident in communities experiencing hostilities and communities where access restrictions prevented the entry of medical items.

- The health situation remained critical in Al Waer, Az Zabdani and Madaya, and Deir ez Zor, where volatile situations prevented medical items from entering and limited the availability and accessibility of healthcare services.
- The health situation deteriorated in Burza following the closure of access points in the community, and an influx of IDPs. Communities across Eastern Ghouta reported outbreaks of measles for the first time since assessments began, and respiratory diseases.
- **Significant improvements were reported in Ash Shajara and across communities in Wadi Burda following the lifting of access restrictions. Availability of medical items also increased in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, and Bait Jan, and another round of immunizations was reported in Khan Elshih.**

\*These communities experienced a critical health situation this month, as had been the case since December 2016.

### Negative developments since January

**Burza** (depleting stocks of medical items)

**Eastern Ghouta** (lung infections, outbreak of measles in Ein Terma)

### Critical health situation

**Al Waer\*** (depleting stocks of medical items, health facility damaged)

**Az Zabdani, Madaya\*** (conflict-related casualties; depleting stocks of medical items)

**Deir ez Zor\*** (outbreaks of cholera, hepatitis and HPV, depleting stocks of medical items)

### Food Security

Most assessed communities reported prices significantly higher than in nearby communities not considered besieged or hard-to-reach except in Hajar Aswad, Tadamon, Yarmouk and Wadi Burda, where average prices were similar or lower.

- All core food items remained unavailable or generally unavailable in Az Zabdani and Madaya, and Deir ez Zor. This was due to ongoing hostilities and extreme access restrictions.
- Communities where access restrictions increased in February experienced decreased food availability and a significant rise in prices (Burza, Eastern Ghouta and Al Waer).
- **Food security improved in Ash Shajara and across the Wadi Burda area following the lifting of access restrictions. It also improved in Khan Elshih, and in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh subsequent to the entry of aid, and in the Bait Jan area as food items continued to enter unhindered.**

### Negative developments since January

**Al Waer** (bread completely unavailable, malnutrition reported)

**Burza** (tighter access restrictions, decreased availability, rising prices, influx of IDPs)

**Eastern Ghouta** (rising prices)

### Critical food situation

**Al Waer** (no food entering, depleting stocks, rising prices)

**Az Zabdani, Madaya** (no food entering, shops closed, no items available for purchase)

**Deir ez Zor** (depleting stocks, extensive coping strategies reported, deaths due to lack of food)

### Access to Services

A majority of the assessed communities reported no access to either the electrical or water networks, or both, in February. Additionally, in Al Waer, Burza and Duma (Eastern Ghouta) the number of children attending schools decreased due to conflict-related security concerns.

- Access to electricity decreased further in communities already experiencing minimal services, including Deir ez Zor, Madaya and communities in Eastern Ghouta, due to the scarcity of fuel required to run generators.
- **In February, access to water increased across most assessed communities in Damascus city and Rural Damascus (At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Burza, Jobber, Tadamon and Wadi Burda) following repairs to the Ein Elfijeh water facility. Access to water also increased in Ash Shajara and Ar Rastan following local repairs to networks.**

### Negative developments since January

**Al Waer** (schools closed due to insecurity)

**Az Zabdani, Madaya** (decrease in fuel availability)

**Burza** (fewer children in schools due to insecurity)

**Eastern Ghouta** (decrease in fuel availability, fewer children in schools due to insecurity)

**Deir ez Zor** (decrease in fuel availability)

**Taldu** (breakdowns and rationing of electrical network)

### Critically poor access to services

**Az Zabdani, Madaya** (insufficient water, 1-2 hour access to electricity, schools closed)

**Deir ez Zor** (insufficient water, water untreated, low availability of fuel, schools closed)

## Communities that signed truce agreements

Since September 2016, fifteen of the communities assessed have signed truce agreements, all located in Rural Damascus. These include At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, and all seven communities part of Wadi Burda. In contrast to January, when ongoing challenges were reported in some of the communities, in February all communities which had signed truce agreements reported varying degrees of improvement in the humanitarian situation.

### Improved humanitarian situation: At Tall, Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor, Khan Elshih, Hama, Madamiyet Elsham, Qudsiya, Wadi Burda

- The seven assessed communities in **Wadi Burda** signed a truce agreement on 30 January, following a period of intense hostilities which started in December 2016. Subsequently, two formal access points opened allowing for civilian movement and commercial vehicles access. The influx of goods had a positive impact on the situation across all communities, improving food security and medical services. Access to the water network was restored, while access to electricity increased and schools re-opened. Within the framework of the agreement an estimated 1,900 fighters and family members have been evacuated since January. Populations reported a perceived risk of detention and conscription, although no cases were reported.
- Following the signing of truce agreements in **Khan Elshih** and **At Tall** in November and December, the humanitarian situation improved for the second consecutive month in February in both communities. In Khan Elshih, more commercial vehicles entered this month compared to January. Also, aid was delivered to the community in February for the first time since December. In At Tall, access to services and the health situation further improved in February. Repairs to the Ein Elfijeh pumping station resulted in improved access to drinking water, while some health facilities acquired the necessary medical supplies and equipment to perform surgeries in the community.
- Restrictions on movement in **Hama**, **Qudsiya** and **Madamiyet Elsham** remained in February, after being reintroduced in December. Nonetheless, the overall situation improved in all three communities this month. A higher number of vehicles reportedly entered Madamiyet Elsham compared to January, resulting in increased availability of food and non-food items in markets. In turn, reducing meal size was no longer reported in the community as a strategy to cope with a lack of food, in contrast to January. Further, access to electricity improved, and damaged schools were repaired in February. In Hama and Qudsiya, access to water improved following repairs to the Ein Elfijeh pumping station.
- The humanitarian situation also improved for the second consecutive month in **Beit Saber**, **Betima** and **Kafr Hoor**. Following the truce agreement in January, all access restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement were lifted, and no new restrictions were reported in February. Freedom of movement allowed for a continued increase in the availability of food, fuel and medical items. The improvements also had a positive effect on the humanitarian situations in Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin, where no agreement had been signed.

## Conclusion

- Restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement continued to negatively affect populations across assessed communities in February. Local developments in conflict dynamics resulted in improved situations in Ash Shajara and the Wadi Burda communities, while ongoing hostilities and extreme access restrictions continued to negatively affect Al Waer, Az Zabdani and Madaya, and Deir ez Zor.
- Repairs to the Ein Elfijeh water facility resulted in increased access to water across thirteen assessed communities in Damascus city and Rural Damascus.
- Among communities where a truce agreement had been signed since September 2016, an overall improvement in the humanitarian situations was observed in February. Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya received humanitarian deliveries, and all of the communities reported increased commercial vehicle movement.
- **Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in February, in the communities of Al Waer, Az Zabdani, Madaya, and Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor), populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Conversely, the communities of Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu, At Tall, Ash Shajara, Khan Elshih and the Wadi Burda area experienced improvements, although ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these locations.**

### 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](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org)) or to our Syria Regional Coordinator ([zulfiye.kazim@reach-initiative.org](mailto:zulfiye.kazim@reach-initiative.org)).

Visit [www.reach-initiative.org](http://www.reach-initiative.org) and follow us @REACH\_info.