

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

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

MARCH 2017

Executive Summary

Between 27 March 2017 and 5 April 2017, REACH, in collaboration with SIRF, assessed the humanitarian situation in 40 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 18 of which are classified as besieged by the UN, and 22 as hard-to-reach.¹ The data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in March. All profiled communities were located in Damascus, Deir ez Zor, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 175 community representatives (CRs). Data regarding the situation in Ash Shajara (Dar'a governorate), which was profiled in previous rounds, could not be collected in March due to security concerns related to ongoing hostilities in the area.

In March:

- **A truce agreement was reached in Al Waer on 14 March.** The agreement followed a period of hostilities which had started in November 2016, and allowed for the partial lifting of access restrictions previously imposed on the community. Increased civilian movement and the entry of commercial vehicles improved food security, while some medical services were restored and schools re-opened. While the overall humanitarian situation improved in Al Waer following the truce, the community continued to face challenges, including reduced access to water and electricity.
- **The humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate in Burza, Deir ez Zor, Jober and the Eastern Ghouta communities in March.** This was due to ongoing hostilities and particularly tight restrictions on movement and access experienced by those communities.
- **The humanitarian situation improved further in the Wadi Burda area, as humanitarian aid entered for the first time since assessments began in August 2016.** The entry of humanitarian aid to Az Zabdani and Madaya in March, for the first time since November 2016, also alleviated some of the extreme vulnerabilities faced by those communities.
- Across remaining communities which signed truce agreements between September 2016 and March 2017 (At Tall, Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor, Hama, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham and Qudsiya), no significant changes in the humanitarian situation were reported. Hama and Qudsiya were the only ones to receive humanitarian aid in March.
- **Ongoing hostilities had a negative impact on access to education in several communities in March, with schools forced to close in Burza and across all Eastern Ghouta communities due to security concerns.** Educational facilities in Madaya, and Joura and Qosour have been closed since at least December 2016 for the same reasons.

Of the 40 communities assessed:

- **Humanitarian vehicles reached Ar Rastan, Az Zabdani, Hama, Madaya, Talbiseh, Qudsiya and all seven Wadi Burda communities in March.** Limited amounts of food and NFIs were also delivered via airdrops to Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor). No aid reached the remaining 25 communities.
- **Five communities reported no civilian movement, while in 13 communities only 1-10% of populations could leave or enter.** Across all assessed locations, only seven communities reported unrestricted civilian movement (subject to documentation requirements).
- **The food and health situation remained critical in five of the assessed communities** (Az Zabdani, Madaya, Burza, Joura and Qosour), due to ongoing conflict combined with extreme access restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement.

Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in March, populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability in the communities of Az Zabdani and Madaya, Burza, and Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor). Conversely, the communities of Al Waer, Yarmuk and the Wadi Burda area experienced relative improvements, although ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these locations.

Assessed communities in March 2017, by classification¹

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|----------------------|--|
| Besieged | Al Waer, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Bqine, ² Damascus (Jober, Yarmuk), Deir ez Zor (Joura, Qosour), Eastern Ghouta (Arbin, Duma, Ein Terma, Hammura, Harasta, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh, Saqba, Zamalka), Khan Elshih. |
| Hard-to-reach | 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.

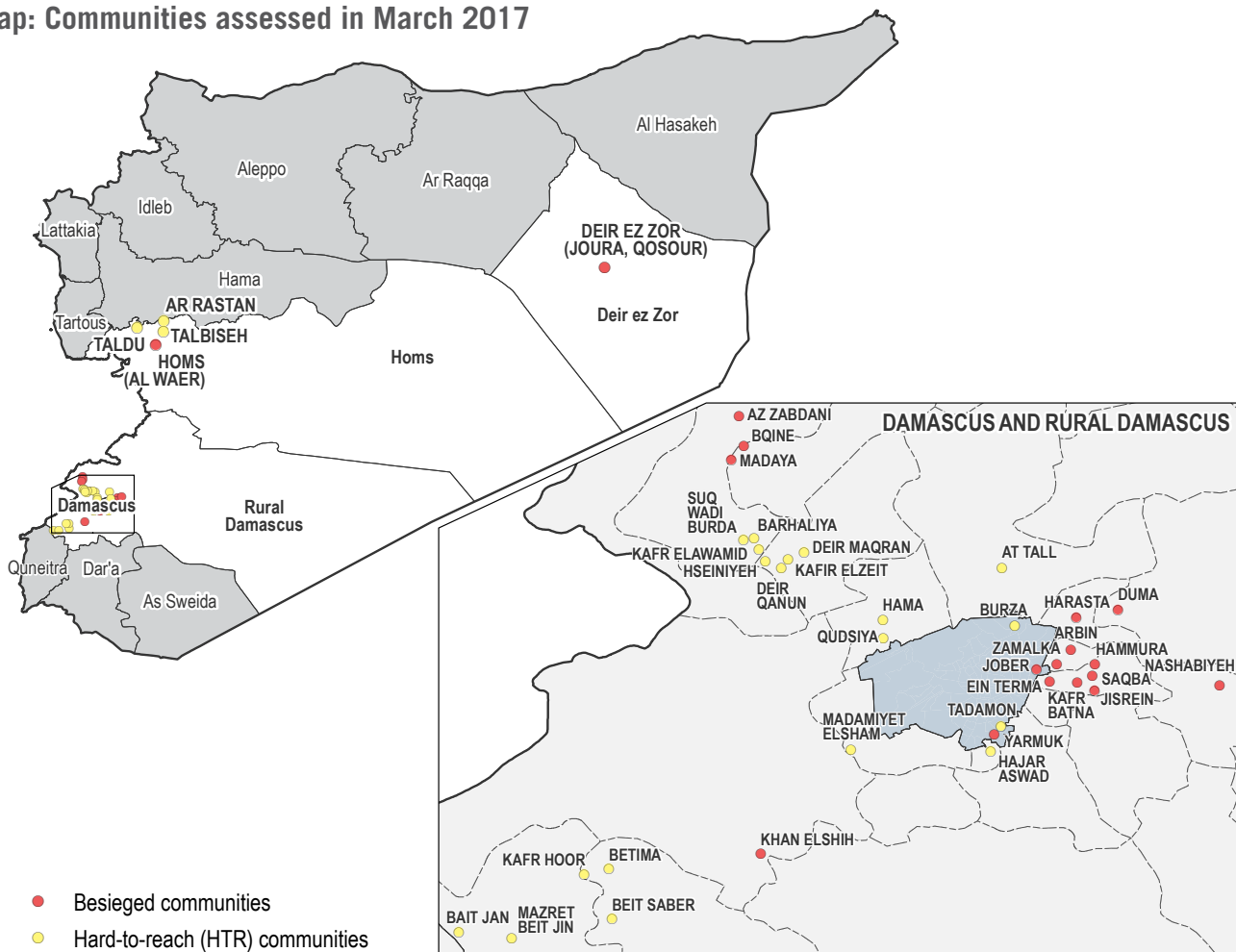
Methodology and Limitations

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 March and early April 2017, referring to the situation in March 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 March 2017



Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

As was the case in February, restrictions on the movement of civilians remained largely unchanged in March across a majority of the assessed communities. The most significant changes were reported in communities experiencing ongoing hostilities, or implementing a truce agreement.

- Across assessed communities, Hama, Qudsiya and the Bait Jan area remained the only communities reporting unrestricted movement of civilians, subject to documentation requirements.
- Only between 1-10% of the populations in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu and Duma were able to utilize formal access points in March. While this did not signify a change for Ar Rastan or the Eastern Ghouta region, it represented a negative decrease in Talbiseh and Taldu following the imposition of increased restrictions.
- **After the implementation of a truce agreement in Al Waer mid-March, limitations on civilian movement decreased, allowing 11-25% of the population to leave and enter the community. A small improvement in freedom of movement was also noted in Yarmuk and the Wadi Burda communities.**

Negative developments since February

- Burza** (increased risks associated with movement inside the neighbourhood)
- Eastern Ghouta** (all informal routes closed)
- Talbiseh, Taldu** (closure of one formal access point)

No civilian movement allowed

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

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

The number of communities reporting commercial access decreased in March.

- No commercial vehicle access was permitted in 22 of the assessed communities in March. With the exception of Eastern Ghouta, where limited commercial access had been reported during previous assessments, this represented a long-term trend in those communities.
- Some commercial vehicles were allowed to enter Al Waer, At Tall, Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya, Madamiyet Elsham and the Wadi Burda area. The most common restrictions on commercial traffic included searches, fees and documentation requirements.
- **All commercial vehicles could enter the Bait Jan communities without restrictions. Commercial access resumed in Al Waer, for the first time since November 2016.**

No commercial vehicles allowed

- Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu** (since June 2016)
- Az Zabdani, Madaya** (since September 2016)
- Burza, Jober, Tadamon** (since June 2016)
- Eastern Ghouta** (since March 2017)
- Hajar Aswad** (since June 2016)
- Deir ez Zor** (since June 2016)
- Yarmuk** (since June 2016)

Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

The number of humanitarian deliveries across all assessed communities increased for the second consecutive month, with 15 locations reporting aid distributions in March.

- For the first time since assessments began in August 2016, aid entered all Wadi Burda communities in March. The delivery included food, NFIs and medicine, but was reportedly insufficient to meet all needs, and overcrowding at distribution points was reported.
- Aid also entered Az Zabdani and Madaya for the first time since November 2016, delivering critically needed food, NFIs and medical items. However, the amounts were reportedly not enough to meet needs.
- Airdrops continued in Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor) in March, including food and some non-food items. However, the aid was reportedly unevenly distributed and only reached a small portion of the civilian population.
- **Across all assessed communities, 25 remained without any humanitarian assistance in March.**

No aid entering

- Al Waer** (since October 2016)
- At Tall** (since January 2017)
- 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)
- Khan Elshih** (since February 2017)
- Madamiyet Elsham** (since January 2017)
- Taldu** (since October 2016)
- Yarmuk** (since June 2016)

Health Situation

In March the health situation improved in communities which received humanitarian aid, while it deteriorated further in locations where access restrictions prevented medical items from entering.

- The health situation remained critical in Deir ez Zor, where no medical items have been delivered since January. A critical situation was also reported in Burza, where restrictions have prevented medical items from entering since December.
- The health situation continued to deteriorate in the Eastern Ghouta region due to ongoing hostilities, coupled with higher needs and tighter access restrictions preventing required medical items from entering.
- **A primary healthcare facility which sustained damage in February resumed operations in Al Waer, and the decrease in hostilities improved the overall health situation in March. New emergency care points were also established in Khan Elshih. The delivery of aid temporarily alleviated the critical health situation in Az Zabdani and Madaya.**

Negative developments since February

Burza* (depleting stocks of medical items, deteriorating security situation, decrease in personnel)

Deir ez Zor* (depleting stocks of medical items, increased security concerns related to seeking medical assistance)

Eastern Ghouta (depleting stocks of medical items, deteriorating security situation, higher caseloads)

*These communities experienced a critical health situation this month.

Food Security

Most assessed communities continued to report prices significantly higher than in nearby communities not considered besieged or hard-to-reach, with the exception of At Tall, Hajar Aswad, Khan Elshih Tadamon and Yarmuk, where prices were similar or lower.

- Most core food items remained unavailable or generally unavailable in Deir ez Zor, as aid which reached the community was insufficient.
- Although a humanitarian delivery to Az Zabdani and Madaya addressed immediate food insecurity, availability of food items could not be conclusively assessed as all markets remained closed in the communities.
- Increased access restrictions had a negative impact on food availability in Burza, the Eastern Ghouta communities, As Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu.
- **Following developments in conflict dynamics in Al Waer, food availability increased while prices decreased, and bread became available again in the community. All core food items became generally available across Wadi Burda in March.**

Negative developments since February

Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu (decreased availability, higher prices)

Burza (decreased availability)

Eastern Ghouta (tighter access restrictions, rising prices, barriers to accessing bread reported)

Jober (higher prices)

Critical food situation

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

Access to Services

While there was an overall improvement in access to water across assessed communities in March, access to electricity deteriorated in several locations due to fuel shortages.

- Due to continuing access restrictions and depleting stocks of fuel, 80% of residents in Joura and Qosour reportedly had no access to electricity whatsoever in March.
- In addition to Madaya, where schools have been closed since December, all schools closed in Burza and the Eastern Ghouta region due to security concerns related to ongoing hostilities.
- **More communities, including all in Wadi Burda, reported improved access to the water network in March compared to February, following continued repairs to the Ein Elfijeh water facility in Rural Damascus. The repairs also improved the water quality in Yarmuk.**

Negative developments since February

Al Waer (insufficient water, decreased access to electricity)

Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu (insufficient water)

Burza (all schools closed due to insecurity)

Eastern Ghouta (decrease in fuel availability, all schools closed due to insecurity)

Deir ez Zor (decrease in fuel availability)

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, 16 of the communities assessed by REACH have signed truce agreements. These include Al Waer, At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, and the seven Wadi Burda communities. While the humanitarian situation remained largely unchanged in most of these locations in March, in comparison to February, it improved in those communities which had signed agreements most recently.

Improved humanitarian situation: Al Waer, Wadi Burda

- **Al Waer** signed a truce agreement on 14 March, following a period of hostilities which had started in November 2016 and negatively affected the community until mid-March. Subsequently, access restrictions were partially lifted, increasing civilian movement and allowing commercial vehicles to enter for the first time since assessments began in June 2016. This improved food security, while some medical services were restored and schools re-opened. An extensive evacuation process initiated shortly after the truce agreement was still taking place in April. While the overall humanitarian situation improved in Al Waer following the truce, the community continued to face challenges, including reduced access to water and electricity.
- The **Wadi Burda** area, which signed a truce agreement on 30 January, continued to report improvements in March, as civilian and commercial movement increased further. Additionally, a humanitarian convoy reached all communities for the first time since assessments began in August 2016. Continued repairs to the water and electricity infrastructures also improved access to basic services.

Unchanged humanitarian situation: At Tall, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, Hama, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Qudsiya

- Restrictions on civilian movement and commercial access remained unchanged in **Hama, Qudsiya** and **Madamiyet Elsham**, which implemented truce agreements in September and October 2016. While humanitarian deliveries continued to reach Hama and Qudsiya, none have been reported in Madamiyet Elsham since January. Despite some fluctuations in prices of food and fuel, there was no significant change in food security, or access to health and basic services in March in all three communities.
- In both **At Tall** and **Khan Elshih**, portions of the populations remained able to use formal access points, but risks associated with movement (harassment, detention, conscription) continued to be reported. No humanitarian deliveries reached either community in March, but commercial traffic supplied necessary goods. In Khan Elshih, new emergency care points opened.
- No significant change was reported in **Beit Saber, Betima** and **Kafr Hoor**, which signed truce agreements in January; all civilian population was permitted to leave and enter the area, and commercial vehicle access remained unrestricted. Additionally, these developments continued to benefit the communities of Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin, which did not formally partake in the truce agreement.

Conclusion

- Restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement continued to negatively affect populations across assessed communities in March. The implementation of truce agreements and the subsequent lifting of access restrictions resulted in improved situations in Al Waer and the Wadi Burda communities, while ongoing hostilities and extreme access restrictions continued to negatively affect Az Zabdani and Madaya, Burza, Deir ez Zor and Eastern Ghouta.
- Ongoing hostilities had a negative impact on access to education in March, with schools forced to close in Burza and across all assessed Eastern Ghouta communities due to security concerns.
- Among communities where a truce agreement had been implemented, positive developments were reported in Al Waer and Wadi Burda, while no significant changes were noted in At Tall, Bait Jan (Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor), Hama, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham and Qudsiya.
- **Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in March, in the communities of Az Zabdani, Burza, Madaya, and Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor), populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Conversely, the communities of Al Waer, Yarmuk 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) or to our Syria Regional Coordinator (zulfiye.kazim@reach-initiative.org).

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