

COMMUNITY PROFILES UPDATE:

Besieged and Hard-to-Reach Community Profiles

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

APRIL 2017

Executive Summary

Between 27 April and 7 May 2017, REACH, in collaboration with SIRF, assessed the humanitarian situation in 40 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 16 of which are classified as besieged by the UN, and 24 as hard-to-reach.¹ The data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in April. All profiled communities were located in Damascus, Deir ez Zor, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 162 community representatives (CRs). Following a rapid deterioration in the humanitarian and security situations in eastern Damascus city, REACH assessed the neighbourhood of Qaboun for the first time in April. Additionally, while due to access limitations the neighbourhoods of Joura and Qosour (Deir ez Zor city) could not be covered in April, REACH assessed the communities of Abu Kamal and Sosa, which are considered hard-to-reach, in southeastern Deir ez Zor governorate, with a view to expand coverage in the area where possible in anticipation of developments in the coming months. The Rural Damascus community of Az Zabdani, which has been assessed by REACH since June 2016, was no longer covered in April after it was emptied of all remaining population following the implementation of an agreement in mid-April.

In April:

- **The Damascus neighbourhoods of Burza and Qaboun were re-classified as besieged by the UN**, while Khan Elshih was de-classified from besieged to hard-to-reach.
- **A truce was reached under the Four Towns Agreement in Madaya, and evacuations started on 12 April.** The cessation in hostilities followed a period of escalated conflict which commenced in December 2016, while extreme access restrictions have been reported in the community since assessments began. Despite the agreement and the relocation of an estimated 3,200 people from Madaya and Bqine, there was no immediate improvement in the humanitarian situation in the communities, as restrictions on movement persisted and no aid entered in April.
- **The humanitarian situation also continued to deteriorate in Burza, Jober, Qaboun and the Eastern Ghouta communities in April.** This was due to ongoing hostilities in eastern Damascus, and particularly tight restrictions on movement and access experienced by those communities. Additionally, the situation deteriorated in those communities in the Bait Jan area where no truce agreement had been reached (Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin), as restrictions on movement were re-introduced in April.
- **The humanitarian situation continued to improve in Al Waer and Wadi Burda, where following the implementation of truce agreements, access restrictions were largely lifted.** It also improved in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu following the re-opening of a formal access point, and Khan Elshih where prices across fuels and some food items decreased in April.
- **In contrast to March, access to education improved in April in some communities, as all schools in the Eastern Ghouta area re-opened and more children returned to schools in Wadi Burda.** However, in Burza, Qaboun, Madaya, Abu Kamal and Sosa all schools remained closed.

Of the 40 communities assessed:

- **Humanitarian vehicles reached Ar Rastan, Taldu, Hama, Qudsiya and Yarmuk. No aid reached the remaining 35 communities in April.**
- **Five communities reported no civilian movement, while in 12 communities, only 1-10% of populations could leave or enter.** Across all assessed locations, only six communities reported unrestricted civilian movement (subject to documentation requirements).

Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in April, populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability in the communities of Madaya, Burza and Qaboun. Conversely, the communities of Al Waer, Ar Rastan, Khan Elshih, Talbiseh, Taldu and the Wadi Burda area experienced relative improvements, although ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these locations.

Assessed communities in April 2017, by classification¹

Besieged	Al Waer, Madaya, Bqine, ² Damascus (Burza, Jober, Qaboun, Yarmuk), Eastern Ghouta (Arbin, Duma, Ein Terma, Hammura, Harasta, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Nashabiyeh, Saqba, Zamalka).
Hard-to-reach	At Tall, Damascus (Tadamon), Bait Jan region (Bait Jan, Beit Saber, Beitema, Kafr Hoor, Mazraet Beit Jin), Abu Kamal, Sosa, 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).

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.

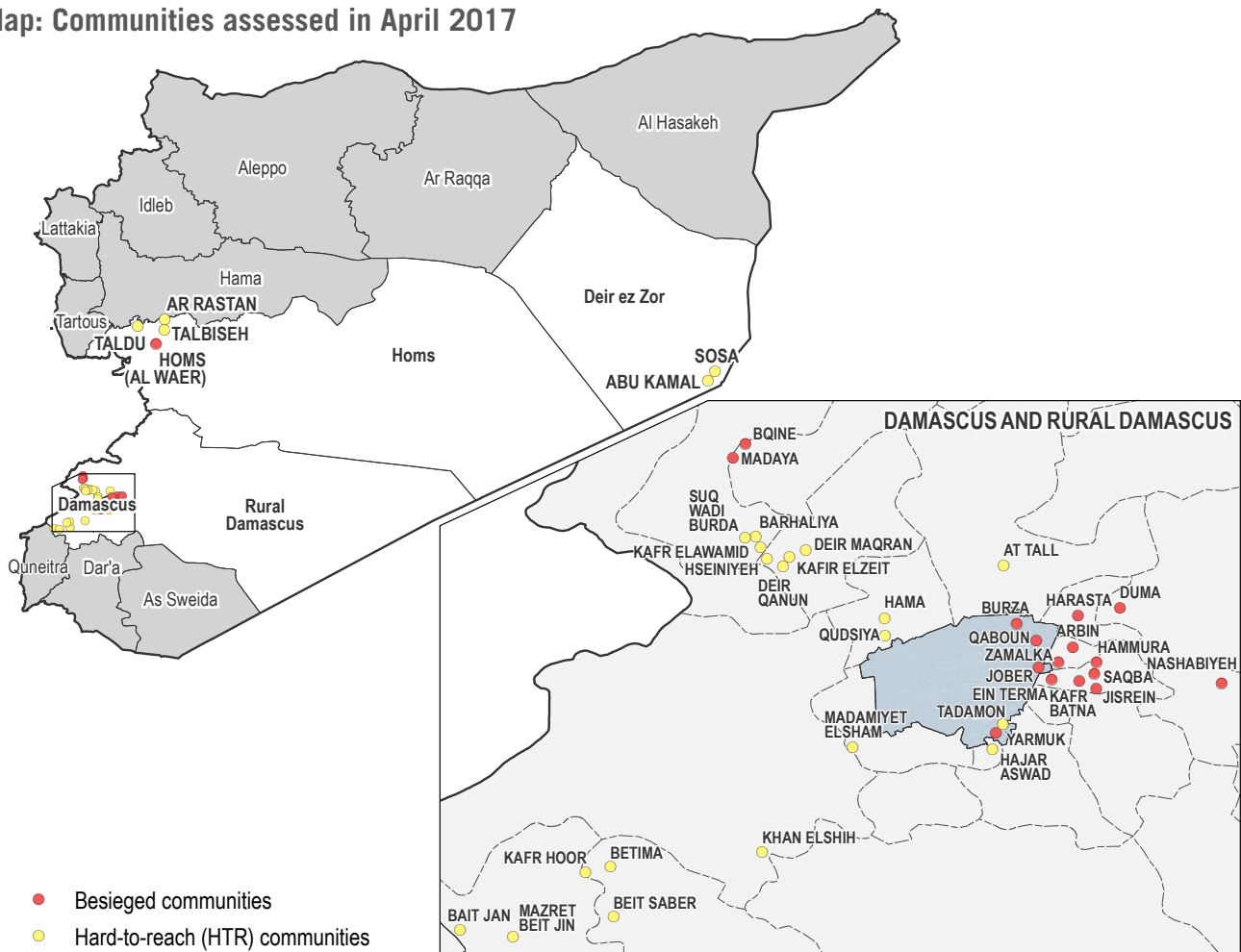
Methodology and Limitations

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



Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

In April, some communities reported an increase in permitted civilian movement. However, in a majority, restrictions remained unchanged, while four locations reported a decrease in the number of people able to leave and enter the communities.

- Across assessed locations, Al Waer, Hama and Qudsiya, and Beit Saber, Beitima and Kafr Hoor were the only communities where residents could move unrestricted (subject only to identification requirements).
- Only between 1-10% of the populations in Bait Jan, Mazraet Beit Jin and Duma (Eastern Ghouta) were able to utilize formal access points in April. This represented a decrease for the Bait Jan communities, where residents had been able to move unrestricted in March.
- **More people were allowed to leave and enter Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu following the re-opening of a formal access point in March. Civilian movement also increased in Khan Elshih and Madamiyet Elsham, due to decreasing restrictions and lower perceived risks associated with movement.**

Negative developments since March

Burza (evacuations through informal routes no longer possible)

Bait Jan, Mazraet Beit Jin (new restrictions imposed at formal access points)

Qaboun (informal routes closed)

No civilian movement allowed

Abu Kamal, Sosa (no data)

Burza (since February 2017)

Madaya (since September 2016)

Qaboun (no data)

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

The number of communities reporting commercial access remained unchanged between March and April.

- No commercial vehicles were permitted to enter 21 of the assessed communities during April. Additionally, across the Eastern Ghouta area, where commercial vehicles had previously moved unrestricted between assessed communities, access ceased due to fuel shortages.
- Some commercial vehicles were allowed to enter Abu Kamal and Sosa, Al Waer, At Tall, Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin, 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.
- **Beitema, Beit Saber and Kafr Hoor were the only communities to report unrestricted commercial access in April.**

No commercial vehicles allowed

Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu (since June 2016)

Madaya (since September 2016)

Burza, Jober, Tadamon (since June 2016)

Eastern Ghouta area (since March 2017)

Hajar Aswad (since June 2016)

Qaboun (no data)

Yarmuk (since June 2016)

Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

There was a decrease in the number of locations accessed by humanitarian vehicles in April, with only five reporting aid deliveries, as compared to 15 in March.

- For the first time since assessments began in June 2016, aid entered the community of Yarmouk. However, only people in a certain area of the neighbourhood reportedly had access to the distribution due to differences in administration and military control. As such, the vast majority of residents did not benefit from or receive any aid in April.
- Aid also entered Ar Rastan and Taldu without restrictions, but quantities were reportedly limited. In Hama and Qudsiya, humanitarian vehicles were subject to restrictions, including documentation requirements, searches and confiscation of goods.
- **No humanitarian deliveries were reported in 35 of the assessed communities in April.**

No aid entering

Abu Kamal, Sosa (no data)

Al Waer (since October 2016)

At Tall (since January 2017)

Bait Jan area (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)

Madaya (since March 2017)

Qaboun (no data)

Talbiseh (since March 2017)

Wadi Burda (since March 2017)

Health Situation

In April, the health situation deteriorated in several of the locations experiencing particularly tight restrictions on movement and access.

- Following a marginal improvement in March, the health situation in Madaya became critical again in April as no medical items entered. Following partial evacuations, there was a decrease in available medical personnel, which forced the only medical facility in the community to close.
- The health situation continued to deteriorate in Burza, Jober and the Eastern Ghouta area due to hostilities ongoing in the area, and continued tight access restrictions.
- **Child immunization rounds in At Tall and across Wadi Burda improved the medical situation in those communities. Two new (private) hospitals opened in Hama and Qudsiya, while some medical personnel returned to Madamiyet Elsham in April. There was also a slight increase in medical item availability in Yarmouk following the aid delivery.**

Negative developments since March

- Burza*** (depleting stocks of medical items, deteriorating security situation, decrease in personnel)
- Bait Jan area** (decreased availability of medical items)
- Eastern Ghouta area** (depleting stocks of medical items, higher caseloads)
- Jober** (depleting stocks of medical items, decrease in personnel)
- Madaya*** (no medical facilities remaining, decrease in personnel)
- Qaboun** (depleting stocks of medical items, access to medical services limited due to security situation)

*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 Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldou, Hajar Aswad, Khan Elshih, Tadamon and Yarmouk, where prices were similar or lower.

- As no goods entered Madaya in April, and rations from the March aid delivery were exhausted, food security once again reached critical levels, despite the implementation of the truce agreement mid-April.
- Continued hostilities in eastern Damascus continued to negatively affect availability and prices in Burza, Jober and the Eastern Ghouta communities, as well as Qaboun.
- Lower supplies of cucumbers and tomatoes across all Syria affected prices and availability in most assessed communities.
- **Prices continued to decrease in Al Waer, with an average 18% decrease since March. In Wadi Burda, private bakeries resumed operations across all assessed communities in April.**

Negative developments since March

- Burza** (decreased availability, rising prices)
- Eastern Ghouta area** (rising prices, access to bread decreased)
- Jober** (rising prices, access to bread decreased)
- Qaboun**

Critical food situation

- Madaya** (depleting stocks, extensive coping strategies reported)

Access to Services

Several communities relying on the main electrical network experienced increased access in April following a nationwide decrease in rationing. Additionally, due to seasonal preferences, firewood became unavailable across many assessed communities as demand decreased.

- Due to continuing access restrictions and depleting stocks of fuel, residents in Madaya reported less than one hour of electricity access in April.
- Across assessed locations, seven continued to report that access to drinking water was insufficient to meet household needs.
- Due to conflict-related security concerns, all schools remained closed in Burza, Madaya and Qaboun. No educational facilities were available in Abu Kamal and Sosa, as was the case in previous months, reportedly due to disagreements between parents and local authorities about the curriculum.
- **Conversely, all schools re-opened in Eastern Ghouta area in April, including a repaired facility in Nashabiyeh which had been closed for four months. More children also returned to schools across Wadi Burda.**

Negative developments since March

- Abu Kamal** (decrease in water access)
- Eastern Ghouta area** (decrease in fuel availability)
- Qaboun** (damage to electrical network)

Critically poor access to services

- Madaya** (insufficient water, less than one hour access to electricity, schools closed)
- Qaboun** (1-2 hours access to electricity, schools closed)

Communities that signed truce agreements

Since September 2016, 17 of the communities assessed by REACH have signed truce agreements. These include Al Waer, At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Madaya, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, and the seven Wadi Burda communities. While the humanitarian situation improved in a majority of these communities, it remained unchanged in others, and deteriorated in some.

Deteriorating humanitarian situation: Madaya and Bqine

- Despite the implementation of the Four Towns Agreement on 12 April, which saw the relocation of 3,200 individuals (fighters and family members) from **Madaya** and **Bqine**, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate in the community as extreme access restrictions persisted throughout the month. No humanitarian or commercial access was permitted, and all schools and markets remained closed.

Improved humanitarian situation: Al Waer, Wadi Burda, Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya

- The situation continued to improve in Al Waer and across Wadi Burda, which had signed agreements in March and January, respectively. In **Al Waer**, prices of foods and fuels continued to decrease, while access to water and electricity increased. In **Wadi Burda**, a round of child immunizations was administered in April, private bakeries resumed operations in all assessed communities, and more children returned to schools.
- **Khan Elshih**, which signed an agreement in November 2016, was de-classified from besieged to hard-to-reach by the UN. In April, the health situation in the community improved as more medical items became available. Additionally, for the first time since assessments began in June 2016, no coping strategies related to a lack of food were reported.
- The situation also improved in **Hama** and **Qudsiya**, which signed agreements in October 2016. Two new private hospitals started operating in the communities in April, and food availability increased due to local agricultural production.

Unchanged humanitarian situation: At Tall, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, Madamiyet Elsham

- There were no substantive changes in the communities of **At Tall** and **Madamiyet Elsham**, which implemented truces in September and December 2016. Some restrictions on civilian as well as commercial access remained, and no aid entered the communities. Private medical facilities continued to open up in both locations, but portions of the populations in both At Tall and Madamiyet Elsham were unable to access these due to prohibitive costs.
- No significant change was reported in **Beit Saber**, **Betima** and **Kafr Hoor**, which signed truce agreements in January. However, while previously developments in these communities had also benefited the remaining Bait Jan communities (Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin), this was no longer the case in April; restrictions on movement and access were reinstated in Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin following a breakdown in truce negotiations.

Conclusion

- Restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement continued to negatively affect populations across assessed communities in April. The implementation of truce agreements and the subsequent lifting of access restrictions resulted in overall improved situations in Al Waer and the Wadi Burda communities, while ongoing hostilities and/or extreme access restrictions continued to negatively affect Madaya, Burza, Qaboun and the Eastern Ghouta area.
- Among communities where a truce agreement had been implemented, relative positive developments were reported in Al Waer, At Tall, Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya, and the Wadi Burda area. While no significant changes were noted in Bait Jan (Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor) and Madamiyet Elsham, the situation continued to deteriorate in Madaya, despite the implementation of an agreement in mid-April.
- **Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in April, in the communities of Burza, Madaya, and Qaboun, populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Conversely, the communities of Al Waer, Ar Rastan, Khan Elshih, Talbiseh, Taldu and the Wadi Burda area experienced relative 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).

Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info.