

Syria Community Profile Update: Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu

Homs - December 2017

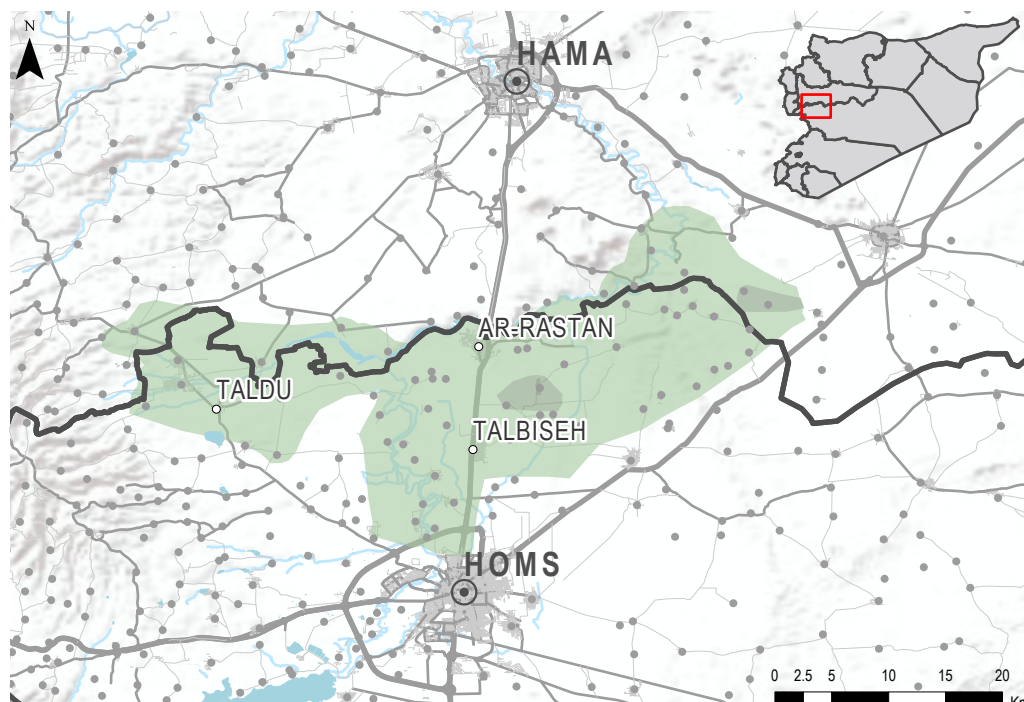


CONTEXT

Situated in the Ar Rastan area between the cities of Homs and Hama, the communities of Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu have faced access restrictions since 2012. In early 2016, an escalation of conflict led to a deterioration in the humanitarian situation. The situation further worsened in October 2016, when conflict escalated again before stabilising in November. Since April 2017, humanitarian aid has been delivered every few months, and access restrictions have varied.



Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu*



- Community Covered in Profile
- Community Not Covered in Profile
- ⊙ Governorate Capital
- Governorate Boundary
- Opposition Area of Influence
- Opposition Area of Influence (Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham)

*Sourced from Live UA Map: 31 December, 2017



DEMOGRAPHICS

	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
UN classification:	Hard-to-reach	Hard-to-reach	Hard-to-reach
Estimated Population ¹	47,029	42,520	7,332
Of which estimated IDPs ¹	8,575	1,476	596
% of pre-conflict population	26-50%	26-50%	26-50%
% of female-headed households	1-25%	1-25%	1-25%

SUMMARY

The situation in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, and Taldu remained largely unchanged in December. A humanitarian delivery containing 12,000 baskets of assistance reached Taldu in December. However, the aid was reportedly insufficient to meet population needs. Meanwhile, no deliveries were reported in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, who last received aid in November 2017.

Civilian movement continued to be heavily restricted, with only 11-25% of residents reportedly able to leave, and no commercial vehicle access has been reported since assessments began in June 2016.

The overall price of food, hygiene items, and fuel stayed the same, although there were fluctuations in the prices of individual items mostly due to fluctuations in the exchange rate of the United States dollar (USD).

As was the case in November, coping strategies associated with a range of goods and services were used. Reducing the size of or skipping meals altogether continued to be reported across communities. Residents also continued to burn plastics in order to cope with reduced access to fuels. In Taldu, residents once again purchased water with money usually intended for other things due to insufficiency of access, although in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, water supplies reportedly became sufficient, primarily due to decreased demand related to seasonal change.

Finally, barriers in accessing education remained largely the same, with communities reporting destroyed facilities, a lack of teaching staff and school supplies, and unsafe travel routes to access educational centres.

1. ACCESS & MOVEMENT

Communities that are classified as besieged or HTR are characterised by unique access restrictions that impact civilian movement in and out of the community, commercial and humanitarian vehicle access, entry of goods, supply chains, power and control dynamics, and protection issues. The economy is unable to function normally due to the inability to use usual trade routes or foster competition. Prices soar and supplies dwindle, leading to an unsustainable and ultimately precarious situation. Furthermore, in areas of conflict or contested control, the average resident faces increased protection concerns. These can include risks such as conflict-related violence, physical, psychological, or gender-based violence, increased surveillance, harassment, detention, and conscription. Risks associated with crossing checkpoints can also limit or decrease mobility and create constraints for certain residents to access services in other areas. For this reason, this profile first considers access restrictions and their impact on other sectors.



MOVEMENT OF CIVILIANS

In December, civilian movement into and out of Ar Rastan area was possible through the formal access point that opened daily from 8am to 4pm, but continued to be restricted. Only 11-25% of residents were able to pass through the formal access point. As previously reported, this group consisted most notably of students, employees, and people with severe injuries, all of whom were required to present identification papers in order to leave.

Accessing the formal route did not include specific risks, although shelling reportedly continued to be viewed as a general risk related to movement within the Ar Rastan area. Meanwhile, civilian movement within the Ar Rastan area remained unrestricted in December as has been the case since June 2016.

As has been the case since September 2016, informal access routes² were not reportedly used for civilian travel in December.



MOVEMENT OF GOODS AND ASSISTANCE

Similarly to previous months, commercial vehicles were not allowed to enter any of the three communities through formal access points in December. However, apart from the reported risk of shelling, commercial vehicles could move without restrictions between the three communities.

As opposed to November, humanitarian vehicles were not able to reach Ar Rastan and Talbiseh in December; they were, however, able to reach Taldu after lacking access to this community in November. Despite this, Community Representatives (CRs) reported that the amount of delivered aid baskets decreased in comparison to previous months (from 14,000 to 12,000

baskets). This, in turn, translated into insufficient levels of assistance to serve the population in need. As a result, civilians residing in Taldu reportedly continued bringing goods, including food items, from other communities through formal or informal routes in what appears to be a coping strategy to make up for a lack of humanitarian assistance and commercial vehicle access from outside of the area. Residents from Talbiseh also procured items not available in the community from other areas.

As a result of humanitarian assistance to Taldu, amounts of medical equipment, medicine and NFIs entering the community in December were reported to have increased in comparison to November. Talbiseh and Ar Rastan, on the other hand, relied on civilian movement between communities to increase access to these goods. The availability of fuel remained stable across all three communities and was dependent on civilians procuring fuel items from within the area.

2. FOOD & MARKETS



ACCESS TO FOOD

Amounts of food items entering the community in December decreased in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh due to the absence of humanitarian assistance. However, residents of all three communities continued to produce food items as well as bring them from other communities through formal or informal routes. As a result, food availability in the Ar Rastan and Talbiseh remained stable in December. Meanwhile, the availability of food increased in Taldu due to the humanitarian delivery there. As in previous months, CRs from all three communities reported all food items, except bread from public bakeries, to be generally available (21+ days per month). Civilians within the Ar Rastan area relied primarily on shops, markets and local farmers to purchase food in December; bread was mainly bought from private bakeries. **While no deaths related to the lack of food have been reported since September 2016, residents across communities had to adjust the frequency and size of their meals, as shown below, indicating a lack of sufficient access to food.**

COMMONLY³ REPORTED STRATEGIES

TO COPE WITH A LACK OF FOOD	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Reducing meal size	✓	✓	✓
Skipping meals	✓	✓	✓
Days without eating	✗	✗	✗
Eating non-edible plants	✗	✗	✗
Eating food waste	✗	✗	✗
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	◆	◆	◆

CORE FOOD ITEM/NFI PRICE AND AVAILABILITY INDEX (SYP)^{4*}

	Item	Ar Rastan	Price change since November ⁵	Talbiseh	Price change since November ⁵	Taldu	Price change since November ⁵
 Food Items	Bread private bakery (pack)	300	◆	250	▼ -17%	200	◆
	Bread public bakery (pack)	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info
	Bread from shops (pack)	300	◆	250	◆	200	◆
	Rice (1kg)	200	◆	200	◆	200	◆
	Bulgur (1kg)	200	▼ -20%	200	▼ -20%	200	◆
	Lentils (1kg)	300	▼ -8%	300	▼ -8%	300	▼ -14%
	Chicken (1kg)	550	▼ -19%	600	▼ -11%	800	▲ +23%
	Mutton (1kg)	2,600	▼	2,600	◆	2,700	▼ -10%
	Tomatoes (1kg)	325	▲ +117%	350	▲ +100%	300	▲ +33%
	Cucumbers (1kg)	250	▼ -17%	250	◆	250	▼ -29%
	Milk (1L)	200	◆	200	◆	200	◆
	Flour (1kg)	275	◆	250	▼ -9%	200	▼ -20%
	Eggs (1 unit)	45	▼ -10%	45	▼ -10%	50	◆
	Iodised salt (500g)	50	▼ -33%	50	▼ -33%	25	▼ -50%
	Sugar (1kg)	275	▼ -11%	275	▼ -11%	275	▼ -15%
	Cooking oil (1L)	650	▼ -7%	750	▼ -6%	650	▼ -13%
 WASH Items	Soap (1 bar)	100	◆	100	◆	100	◆
	Laundry powder (1kg)	650	◆	650	◆	600	▼ -14%
	Sanitary pads (9 pack)	650	◆	650	◆	650	◆
	Toothpaste (125ml)	250	◆	250	◆	250	◆
	Disposable diapers (24 pack)	900	▼ -18%	900	▼ -18%	850	▼ -26%
 Fuel Items	Butane (cannister)	8,200	▲ +6%	8,200	◆	7,500	◆
	Diesel (1L)	400	◆	375	▼ -6%	400	◆
	Propane (cannister)	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info
	Kerosene (1L)	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info	Not available	◆ No info
	Coal (1kg)	800	◆	800	◆	800	◆
	Firewood (1T)	85,000	▼ -6%	85,000	▼ -6%	85,000	▼ -6%

*As data regarding prices in nearby communities not considered besieged or HTR was unavailable, comparisons between assessed communities and nearby areas was not possible.



ACCESS TO MARKETS

The average price of a standard food basket⁶ decreased in Talbiseh and Taldu in December by 11% and 7%, respectively. The fluctuation in the prices of individual food items, however, did not reflect a significant change.

The decline was instead attributed to the change in the USD exchange rate (1 USD = 508 Syrian Pounds (SYP) as of 1 November; 1 USD = 434 SYP as of 1 December 2017). Further, humanitarian deliveries contributed to the price decreases reported in in Taldu.

AVERAGE PRICE OF A STANDARD FOOD BASKET

BASKET FOOD BASKET	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Average price (SYP)	28,982	27,320	24,357

CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER



FOOD ITEM AVAILABILITY & PRICES

All food items, except bread from public bakeries, were generally available (21+ days per month) to residents in markets in all three communities in December, and food availability did not change significantly in comparison to previous months. Additionally, although the prices of the majority of assessed food items decreased across communities in comparison to November, the overall average price of food stayed largely the same. The recorded decreases were mostly due to the change in the USD exchange rate.

The most significant price change recorded across all three communities was for tomatoes, whose price increased by 117% in Ar Rastan, 100% in Talbiseh, and 33% in Taldu.



WASH ITEM AVAILABILITY & PRICES

In December, the availability and prices of hygiene items reportedly remained stable.

As was the case with food items, the decreases in the prices of laundry powder and disposable diapers were attributed to the decline of the USD exchange rate. Prices for the abovenamed goods decreased significantly more in Taldu (14% for laundry powder and 26% for disposable diapers) in comparison to Ar Rastan and Talbiseh, which was likely explained by the delivery of humanitarian assistance and, consequently, by an overall decrease in prices.



FUEL ITEM AVAILABILITY & PRICES

Access to fuel is especially critical for people living in besieged and HTR areas, which often face high levels of conflict and unique access restrictions. The transport of goods via commercial vehicles, provision of medical services such as ambulances, functionality of bakeries, and the powering of well pumps and electric generators in the absence of functioning water and electricity networks all depend on access to fuel.

In December, diesel, coal and firewood remained generally available (21+ days per month) to residents of the three communities, whereas kerosene and propane continued to be unavailable.

Prices remained largely stable, while CRs in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh reported an increase in the price of butane of respectively 6% and 5%, which was attributed to the higher cost of acquiring it from the source.

Similar to the overall trend in December, the decline in the price of firewood can be explained by the change of the USD exchange rate.

As was the case in November, residents in all three communities burned plastics in December in order to cope with a lack of fuel. This coping strategy has been continuously reported since the introduction of the indicator in November 2016.

3. LIVELIHOODS



ACCESS TO LIVELIHOODS

In all three communities, farming and crop production, as well as stable employment/salaried work, were reported as the most common sources of livelihoods in both November and December.

In December, the livelihoods coping strategy of relying on remittances was not reported in Taldu (having been previously reported in November). Meanwhile, relying on remittances from abroad was reported in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh both of which did not receive humanitarian assistance in December.

It is worth noting that, both in November and December, CRs from communities that did not receive humanitarian assistance reported relying on remittances from abroad. In contrast, residents receiving humanitarian assistance did not report relying on remittances to cover essential needs during the respective month.

4. ACCESS TO SERVICES

Access to services in besieged and HTR areas is often reduced due to restrictions on civilian movement, limitations on the entry of goods and vehicles, and rationing of the main water and electricity networks.



HEALTHCARE

AVAILABLE MEDICAL SERVICES	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Child immunisation ⁶	✓	✓	✓
Diarrhoea management	✓	✓	✓
Emergency care	✓	✓	✓
Skilled childbirth care	✓	✓	✓
Surgery ⁷	✓	✓	✓
Diabetes care	✗	✗	✗
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	◊	◊	◊

The amount of medicine and medical items entering Ar Rastan and Talbiseh communities decreased in December, while the amount of items that entered Taldu increased. However, this reportedly did not affect the availability of individual items in any of the communities.

Available medical items in December included anti-anxiety medication, contraception, clean bandages, blood transfusion bags, heart, diabetes and blood pressure medicine, antibiotics, burn treatment, anaesthetics, as well as medical scissors. Assistive devices, artificial limbs and surgical equipment continued to be reported as the most needed⁸ medical items, with assistive devices replacing artificial limbs as the most needed item in both Ar Rastan and Talbiseh.

Medical facilities reportedly continued to be available to all parts of the population. **Medical services were primarily provided in mobile clinics/field hospitals, as those remained the only medical facilities inside of all three communities.**

AVAILABLE MEDICAL FACILITIES	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Mobile clinics/field hospitals	✓	✓	✓
Informal emergency care points	✗	✗	✗
Pre-conflict hospitals	✗	✗	✗
Primary healthcare facilities	✗	✗	✗
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	◊	◊	◊



AVAILABILITY OF MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Professionally trained surgeons, doctors, nurses and midwives continued to provide health care services across all three communities in December. Additionally, dentists and pharmacist in Ar Rastan, pharmacists in Talbiseh, as well as volunteers with informal or no medical training, continued to be present in December.



EDUCATION

ACCESS TO EDUCATION	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Available education facilities	✓	✓	✓
Barriers to education	✓	✓	✓
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	◊	◊	◊

Despite the continued presence of educational facilities in all three communities, barriers in accessing education remained largely the same. **The most commonly reported barriers were destroyed facilities, a lack of teaching staff and school supplies, and unsafe travel routes to access educational centres,** although the latter was not reported as a barrier in Taldu.

ELECTRICITY

In December, CRs across communities did not report changes in access to electricity. **While residents in Ar Rastan and Taldu continued to have access to the electricity network, it was unavailable in Talbiseh**; however, civilians in Talbiseh could access electricity via generators 8-12h per day. The same amount of hours was reported by CRs in Ar Rastan, while access to the main source of electricity was restricted to 4-8 hours in Taldu.

ACCESS TO ELECTRICITY	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Access to electricity network	✓	✗	✓
Main source of electricity	Network	Generator	Network
Access to main source/day	8-12 hours	8-12 hours	4-8 hours
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	◊	◊	◊

WATER

The main source of drinking water across communities was the water network, deemed safe to drink⁹. **While CRs in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu reported not having enough water to meet their household needs in November, CRs in Ar Rastan and Talbiseh stated that water supply in December was sufficient.** This was likely due to a decrease in the need of water due to seasonal factors in winter.

As was the case in November, however, residents in Taldu spent money usually used for other purchases to buy water in December as a coping strategy.

ACCESS TO WATER	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Access to water network	✓	✓	✓
Main source of water	Network	Network	Network
Water safe to drink ⁹	✓	✓	✓
Access to water network/week	3-4 days	3-4 days	1-2 days
Sufficiency of water for HH needs	Sufficient	Sufficient	Insufficient
Coping strategies used	NA	NA	✓
CHANGE SINCE NOVEMBER	↑	↑	◊

5. SUMMARY OF CHANGES SINCE PREVIOUS MONTH

	AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU		AR RASTAN	TALBISEH	TALDU
Movement of Civilians	◊	◊	◊	Core Food Item Prices	◊	◊	◊
Commercial Vehicle Access	◊	◊	◊	Access to Healthcare	◊	◊	◊
Humanitarian Vehicle Access	◊	◊	↑	Access to Education	◊	◊	◊
Core Food Item Availability	◊	◊	◊	Access to Electricity	◊	◊	◊
Access to Water	↑	↑	◊	Overall Humanitarian Situation	◊	◊	◊

ENDNOTES

1. Population estimates are from the HNO 2018 population data (September 2017). Population estimates provided by Community Representatives were reportedly 77,000-80,000 including 7,000-8,000 IDPs (Ar Rastan); 50,000-52,000 including 3,000-4,000 IDPs (Talbiseh); and 13,000-14,000 including 500-700 IDPs (Taldū).
2. The fact that some informal routes may exist does not mean that they are safe or free to use.
3. Only strategies that are used by the majority of the population in a given community are reported, meaning that additional strategies may also be in use.
4. 1 USD = 434 SYP (UN operational rate of exchange as of 1 December 2017).
5. Price fluctuations of 5% or less were not reported.
6. Calculation of the average price of a food basket is based on the World Food Programme's standard basket of dry goods (link here). The food basket includes 37 kg of bread, 19 kg of rice, 19 kg of lentils, 5 kg of sugar, and 7 kg of vegetable oil, and provides 1,930 kcal a day for a family of five for a month. In communities where bread from bakeries is not available, the price of bread from shops is used to calculate the food basket price.
6. The absence of child immunisations in a given month does not necessarily indicate a decline in access to medical services, as vaccinations in Syria are commonly administered in rounds and therefore may not be available on a monthly basis.
7. The availability of surgery does not mean that procedures were carried out by formally trained medical personnel or that anaesthetics and appropriate surgical equipment were used.
8. An item being listed as among the 'most needed' does not necessarily indicate that it is unavailable in the community.

BACKGROUND

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.

METHODOLOGY

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 December and early January 2017 and refers to the situation in December 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

About REACH

REACH is a joint initiative of two international non-governmental organisations - ACTED and IMPACT Initiatives - and the UN Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT). REACH's mission is to strengthen evidence-based decision making by aid actors through efficient data collection, management and analysis before, during and after an emergency. By doing so, REACH contributes to ensuring that communities affected by emergencies receive the support they need. All REACH activities are conducted in support to, and within the framework of, inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, please visit our website: www.reach-initiative.org. You can contact us directly at: geneva@reach-initiative.org and follow us on Twitter: @REACH_info.