

COMMUNITY PROFILE UPDATE: Besieged and Hard to Reach Community Profiles

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

DECEMBER 2016

Executive Summary

Between 26 December 2016 and 7 January 2017, REACH, in collaboration with SIRF, assessed the humanitarian situation in 43 communities in Syria currently facing restrictions in movement and access, 20 of which are classified by the UN as besieged and 23 as hard to reach.¹ Data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in December. All profiled communities were located in Rural Damascus, Homs, Dar'a, Deir Ez Zor and Damascus governorates and information was gathered through a total of 160 community representatives (CRs). Coverage remained unchanged compared to November. **Across assessed indicators, the overall humanitarian situation in these communities remained poor, with several becoming increasingly vulnerable in comparison to the situation in November, and improvements being reported at few locations.**

In December:

- **Escalation in conflict** was reported in Ash Shajara, Az Zabdani and Madaya, and the Wadi Burda communities, resulting in a drastic worsening of the overall humanitarian situation at these locations.
- **A truce agreement was reached in At Tall on 2 December**, but no significant improvement was reported, aside of the partial lifting of access restrictions on commercial vehicles and the resulting amelioration of the food situation. In Khan Elshih, where a truce agreement was signed on 27 November, the humanitarian situation started to significantly improve from 10 December onwards.
- Communities that reached a truce agreement between September and October 2016, namely **Hama, Qudsiya and Madamiyet Elsham, experienced a worsening of the overall situation in December**; this was reportedly due to the reinstatement of some access restrictions on people and vehicles this month.
- **Infrastructural damage to the Ein Elfijeh water facility in the Wadi Burda area, affected all assessed communities in Damascus City, along with At Tall and the Wadi Burda communities.** These communities (13) experienced worse access to water, worse water quality, or both, in December.

- **A significantly higher risk of conscription was reported in At Tall, Madamiyet Elsham and the Bait Jan communities this month**, resulting in a drastic decrease in the number of people willing to move through checkpoints in these communities.

Of the 43 communities assessed:

- **Only Khan Elshih reported receiving humanitarian aid in December**, while most other communities had received no aid since at least two months.
- **28 reported that less than 10% of the resident population was able to move outside the community or of a wider area.**
- **The health situation significantly worsened in 14 of the communities assessed**, mostly due to escalating conflict and increased access restrictions this month, while it further worsened in Al Waer, Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu and Deir ez Zor, due to continued lack of medical items entering and progressively depleting stocks.
- **Only At Tall and Khan Elshih reported improvements in the food situation**, which instead worsened in all communities affected by conflict escalation. In Al Waer, Talbiseh, Taldu and Deir ez Zor, continued access restrictions resulted in a further lowering of food item availabilities and a further increase in prices, compared to November.
- **Access to services worsened significantly in 15 of the communities assessed.**

Based on data referring to the humanitarian situation in December, in the communities of Ash Shajara, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda, populations indicate critical levels of vulnerability and are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance.

Assessed communities in December 2016 by classification¹

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

Overview

In order to inform a more evidence-based response to addressing 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.

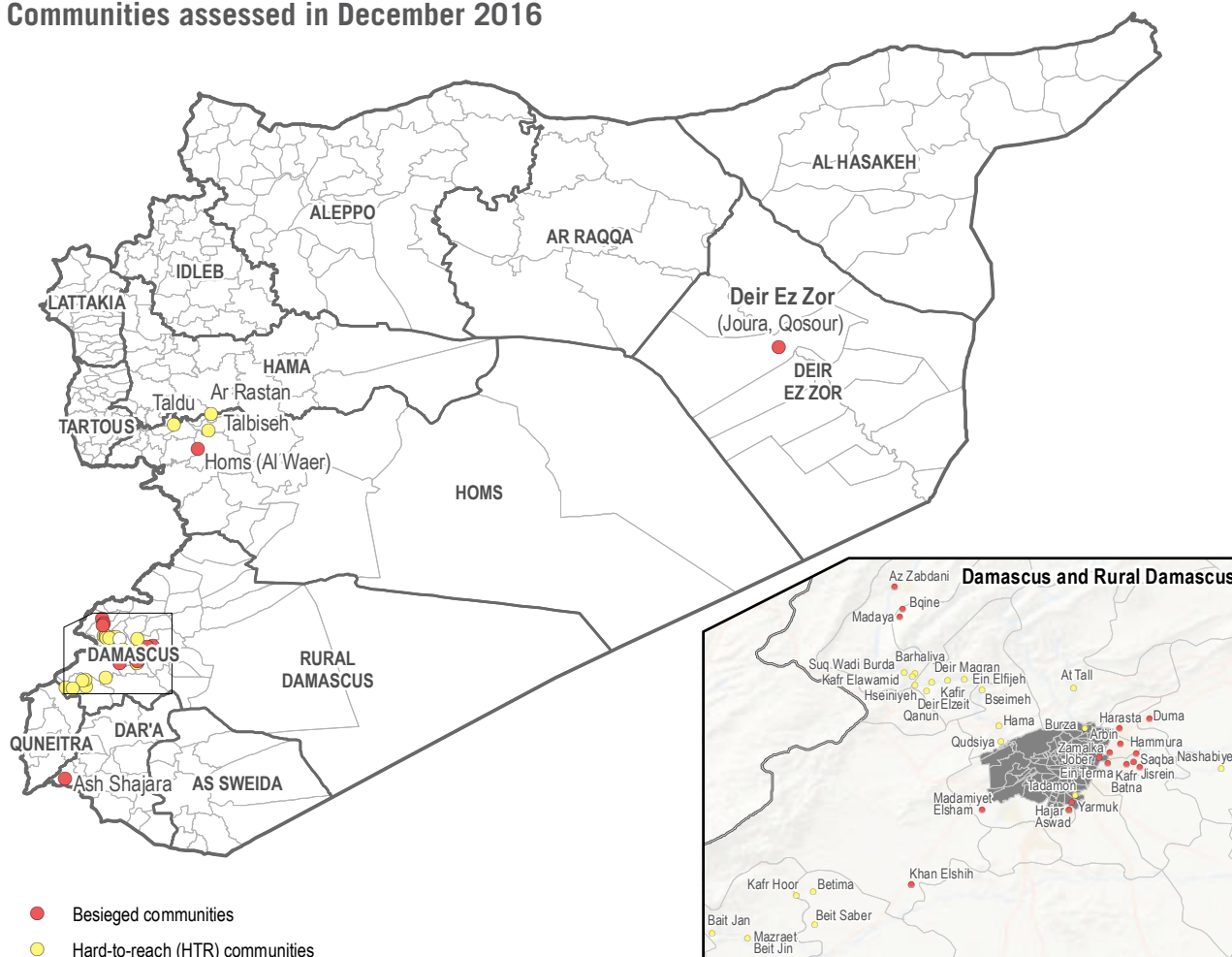
Methodology and Limitations

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 December 2016 and early January 2017, referring to the situation in December 2016. 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 barrier. 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 December 2016



Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

Civilian movement remained limited in all communities assessed in December, with the exception of Burza, where all civilians were reportedly able to enter and leave without restrictions, as had been the case since September 2016. With the exception of Khan Elshih, risks when attempting to enter or leave were faced in all communities where formal or informal routes were available. These included gunfire, shelling, detention, conscription, confiscation of documents, as well as verbal, sexual and physical harassment.

None were able to move in or out of Deir ez Zor, Az Zabdani, Madaya, and Wadi Burda, and only 1-10% were able to enter or leave Ar Rastan, Ash Shajara, Al Waer, At Tall, the Bait Jan area, the Eastern Ghouta area and Khan Elshih.

Significant changes since November



Positive developments:

After the signing of a truce agreement in late November, the only formal route into Khan Elshih re-opened in December, for the first time since October 2016. Although no risks were reportedly associated with moving through this checkpoint, only 1-10% of the population, mostly students and medical evacuees, were allowed to use it.

Negative developments:

In the aftermath of the truce agreement, fewer people reportedly attempted to move through checkpoints in At Tall in December, compared to November, due to a very high risk of conscription. Similarly, a much higher risk of conscription was reported for populations attempting to leave the Bait Jan area, resulting in fewer people attempting to use formal routes.

Escalation of conflict severely limited movement of civilians in Ash Shajara, where only 1-10% of the population were able to move this month. Similarly, intensified clashes in the Wadi Burda area resulted in a drastic worsening of the security situation; no one could enter or exit the wider contiguous area in December, and high risks were associated with moving between communities.

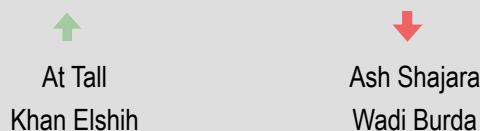
In Az Zabdani and Madaya, where no one had been reportedly able to enter or leave since August 2016, further escalation of conflict resulted in people not being able to move within the communities themselves.

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

Overall access of commercial vehicles remained extremely limited in the areas assessed. Some vehicles were allowed, with restrictions, into the Bait Jan and Eastern Ghouta areas, as well as into Khan Elshih and At Tall. Commercial vehicles were prevented from accessing all other communities. In a majority of cases, this had been the case since the communities were first assessed in June, August or September 2016.

This had a particularly negative impact on those communities where access restrictions on civilian movement and humanitarian vehicles were also tight, including Al Waer, Ash Shajara, Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, Az Zabdani and Madaya, Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda.

Significant changes since November



Positive developments:

Despite restrictions, following the truce agreement, commercial vehicles were allowed into Khan Elshih in December, for the first time since the community was first assessed in June 2016. Similarly, in At Tall restrictions on commercial vehicle access partly eased in the aftermath of the truce agreement. This had a positive impact on the food and health situation in the two communities.

Negative developments:

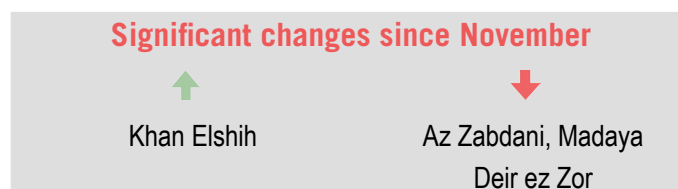
Following escalation of conflict and the closure of the only formal access point to Ash Shajara, no commercial vehicles were able to enter the community in December, for the first time since September 2016. This, along with lack of aid and severe limitations of civilian movement, resulted in a significant worsening of the food and health situations this month.

Similarly, due to escalating conflict, no commercial vehicles were permitted into the Wadi Burda area this month. The few vehicles already present in the area largely stopped moving between Wadi Burda communities, due to increased risks and to the shutting down of most shops.

Humanitarian Assistance*

Of all the assessed communities, only Khan Elshih received humanitarian aid in December. In a majority of cases, aid has been prevented from entering since assessments began in June, August or September 2016.

This had particularly negative consequences in those communities where access restrictions on people and commercial vehicles were the tightest in December, namely, Al Waer, Ash Shajara, Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Deir ez Zor, and Wadi Burda.



Positive developments:

In Khan Elshih, following the truce agreement and the lifting of access restrictions, humanitarian vehicles carrying food and limited amounts of medicine, fuel and NFIs were allowed into the community for the first time since assessments of that community began. However, the aid was reportedly being distributed unevenly, in particular according to political affiliation.

Negative developments:

Although aid was delivered to Madaya and distributed also in Az Zabdani in late November, as no delivery occurred in December, stocks of received items were reportedly running out in the second half of the month. This had negative effects on the health and food situations in particular.

In December, due to a decrease in the number of airdrops in Deir ez Zor compared to November, a corresponding decrease in the amount of food that entered the community was reported. This had critical effects on food security, as local populations almost entirely depend on aid for food procurement.

*The reported delivery of humanitarian assistance does not necessarily imply that such assistance was sufficient, adequate, or that all portions of the affected population were able to access it.

Health Situation

At least some medical facilities and services, and some medical personnel, were available in most communities, while, overall, availability of medical items remained low in a majority of locations.

No medical facilities, services or personnel were reportedly available in Tadamon and in a majority of communities within the Wadi Burda area. In Al Waer, Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu, continuing access restrictions resulted in a further depletion of medical stocks and a decrease of available medical services; this was particularly marked in Al Waer, as no medical items have reportedly entered the community since October 2016. Little information was available in Deir ez Zor, where a military hospital was reportedly providing services which a majority of residents could not access, and where an outbreak of skin disease has been reported since November.



Positive developments:

Following the truce agreement in Khan Elshih, the cessation of fighting and the renewed entry of medical items resulted in a number of facilities re-opening in December and in some medical services becoming available. Reportedly, all assessed medical items were available in the community this month.

Negative developments:

Tightening access restrictions had a negative impact on the previously stable health situation in Ash Shajara, as no medicine or medical items were able to enter in December,

resulting in significantly reduced capacities at medical facilities. In addition to this, an outbreak of diarrhea and vomiting was reported among small children this month.

In Az Zabdani and Madaya, escalation of hostilities resulted in extensive injuries. Outbreaks of diarrhea, meningitis and kidney failure were also reported in December, as had been the case in November. Infrastructural damage forced the only clinic in Madaya to shut down this month.

In Al Waer, where no commercial or humanitarian vehicle has entered since October, diabetes care was reportedly no longer available, as were most medical items.

Despite a stable health situation in Burza, new access restrictions prohibited any type of medical items from entering the community, causing a decrease in their availability.

Following the escalation in conflict in late December, the majority of health facilities in Wadi Burda stopped functioning. Although facilities remained in Deir Qanun and Kafir Elzeit, security concerns posed significant barriers to accessing services available there.

Food Security

Most core food items were reportedly available on markets in a majority of communities. However, all assessed communities except Yarmouk, Hajar Aswad and Tadamon reported prices significantly higher than in nearby communities not considered besieged or hard to reach.

Food security this month was critical in Ash Shajara, Az Zabdani, Madaya, Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda, where most core food items were unavailable for purchase or had prohibitively high prices. In Al Waer, Talbiseh and Taldu, continuing access restrictions resulted in a further depletion of food stocks, lower food availabilities and higher prices across several of the assessed core food items.

Significant changes since November

↑	↓
At Tall Khan Elshih	Ash Shajara Az Zabdani, Madaya Deir ez Zor Wadi Burda

Positive developments:

Following the truce agreements reached in At Tall and Khan Elshih, and the lifting of some access restrictions, the amount of food items entering the two communities significantly increased compared to November, resulting in greater availabilities and lower prices. While prices in At Tall remained significantly higher than in nearby communities not considered hard to reach, in Khan Elshih prices decreased by an average 44%, and were comparable to those in non-hard-to-reach communities.

Negative developments:

Significant escalation of conflict negatively affected Ash Shajara, and Az Zabdani and Madaya. Following the closure of access points in Ash Shajara, most core food items became unavailable on markets, while the remaining ones were on average 63% more expensive than in November. Security concerns resulted in all shops and markets closing in Az Zabdani and Madaya, where none of the assessed core food items were available this month.

Similarly, due to conflict-induced insecurity, most shops reportedly shut down in the Wadi Burda area this month. This, along with restrictions on the movement of people and vehicles, resulted in significant food shortages throughout Wadi Burda.

In Deir ez Zor, where the situation had been critical in November, the amount of food items entering was at its lowest since assessments began in June 2016, due to fewer air drops occurring this month. Most food items were unavailable or generally unavailable, or had prohibitively high prices.

Access to Services

Overall, access to services remained extremely limited in a vast majority of the communities assessed, with either the water or the power network, or both, being unavailable in all communities except the Bait Jan area, and barriers to education being reported in all communities except Ar Rastan, the Bait Jan area, Burza and Eastern Ghouta communities.

Az Zabdani, Madaya, Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda experienced particularly poor access to services in December. Access to water was reportedly insufficient to meet household needs in all thirteen communities, while sickness after water consumption was reported in Deir ez Zor. Access to electricity remained limited to 1-2 hours per day in all thirteen communities, due to poor availability of fuel to run generators. While children faced security-related barriers to accessing education in Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda, in Madaya, all educational facilities stopped working due to conflict escalation.

Significant changes since November

↑	↓
Eastern Ghouta Khan Elshih	Ash Shajara At Tall Burza, Jobber, Tadamon, Yarmouk Madaya Wadi Burda

Positive developments:

A majority of communities within Eastern Ghouta reported increased access to electricity due to the introduction of a new payment method for generator-produced electricity this month. The new method, whereby households were allowed to pay according to their actual consumption, resulted in increasing demand for generators and higher electricity consumption.

Improved access to electricity was reported in Khan Elshih, where availability of fuel significantly increased following the distributions by UNRWA to most households in the community.

Negative developments:

Damage to the Ein Elfijeh water facility in Wadi Burda, the main water source feeding Damascus, resulted in reduced access to water in Burza, Jobber, Tadamon and the Wadi Burda communities, and affected water quality in Burza, Tadamon and Yarmouk. Similarly, the targeting of the facility resulted in poorer access to water in At Tall. Water became insufficient to meet household needs in all of the above-mentioned communities, except Yarmouk.

Wadi Burda communities also experienced a drastic worsening in access to electricity and education, as the main network was damaged and most schools shut down due to conflict.

Conflict escalation in Ash Shajara and Madaya resulted respectively in fewer children attending schools and facilities shutting down, due to insecurity.

Communities that signed truce agreements

Since September 2016, five communities in Rural Damascus have signed truce agreements: At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih and Madamiyet Elsham. The humanitarian outcomes of these agreements have varied, with some communities seeing overall improvements in their humanitarian situation and others experiencing further problems. In Al Waer, the truce agreement signed in September 2016 collapsed in November when fighting resumed.

Improved humanitarian situation: At Tall, Khan Elshih

- Following the signing of a truce agreement in At Tall on 2 December 2016, the security situation in the community stabilised. Restrictions on commercial vehicle access partly eased, resulting in greater amounts of food, non-food, fuel and medical items entering. However, restrictions on civilians and humanitarian vehicles, as well as the health situation, remained unchanged compared to November. Also, access to services reportedly worsened this month, due to structural damage incurred by the water network, and increasing barriers to accessing education.
- In Khan Elshih, the improved security situation, along with the lifting of some restrictions on the movement of civilians and vehicles, resulted in increased access to food, health services and basic services. Despite improvements, restrictions remained tight, and access to services limited.

Worsening humanitarian situation: Hama, Qudsiya, Madamiyet Elsham

- In Hama and Qudsiya, restrictions on the movement of vehicles were re-introduced this month for the first time since September 2016. Specifically, no aid was allowed to enter and commercial vehicles faced restrictions, in contrast to October and November. As a result, fewer food, non-food and medical items entered the two communities, and strategies to cope with a lack of food (skipping meals or reducing their size) were reported for the first time since September 2016.
- Similarly, in Madamiyet Elsham, restrictions on commercial vehicles were re-introduced for the first time since September 2016. A decrease in the number of commercial vehicles entering, along with a decrease in the number of civilians leaving or entering the community due to a higher risk of conscription, resulted in fewer food, non-food, fuel and medical items entering this month. No other changes were reported since October, however access to services, and availability and prices of all assessed market items were comparatively worse than in Hama and Qudsiya.

Conclusion

- In December 2016, limitations on civilian and vehicle movement continued to negatively affect populations across assessed communities. Tight access restrictions were imposed this month in Ash Shajara and the Wadi Burda area, while they persisted in Az Zabdani, Madaya and Deir ez Zor City. Civilians have reportedly been unable to leave Madaya since September, and Az Zabdani and the neighbourhoods of Joura and Qosour in Deir ez Zor city since June 2016.
- Hama, Qudsiya and Madamiyet Elsham, which had seen truce agreements in September or October, experienced a worsening of the humanitarian situation for the first time since the agreements were reached. A significant improvement of the humanitarian situation was reported in Khan Elshih, where a truce agreement was signed at the end of November. In the meantime, comparatively fewer improvements were observed in At Tall, where a truce agreement was signed on 2 December.
- Conflict-induced infrastructural damage to the Ein Elfijeh source, in the Wadi Burda area, had widespread consequences, negatively affecting access to water in 13 of the communities assessed.
- **Based on data referring to the humanitarian situation in December, in the communities of Az Zabdani, Madaya, Deir ez Zor and Wadi Burda, populations indicate critical levels of vulnerability and are in need of emergency humanitarian assistance.**
- **Information collected from Al Waer, Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu indicate that, while the same levels of urgency have not been reached, these communities are experiencing an ongoing, progressive deterioration of the humanitarian situation.**

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.

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