

Damascus's Eastern Ghouta Siege is a Form of Collective Punishment

Over 350,000 Civilians are still Living under Siege Despite the De-Escalation Agreement with Russia

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



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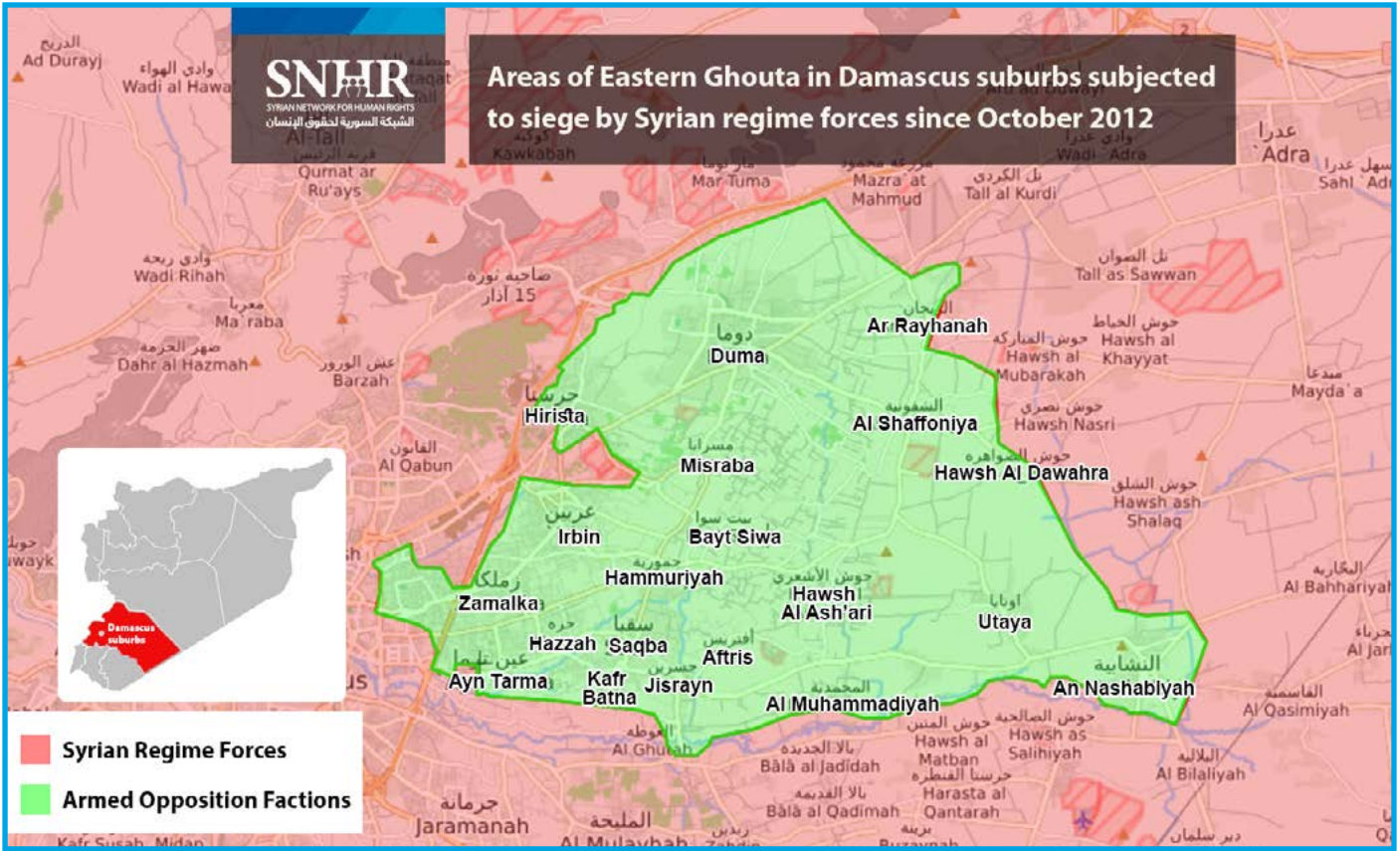
I. Introduction and Methodology

Since October 2012, the Syrian regime has been imposing a partial siege in the region of Eastern Ghouta, Damascus suburbs. That is, until October 19, 2013, as the siege expanded and encompassed almost the entirety of Eastern Ghouta.

In early-2015, we recorded that some food supplies have entered limited areas in Eastern Ghouta via "al Wafideen Camp" crossing following an agreement that was struck between the Syrian regime and armed opposition factions. Additionally, some goods and food supplies get smuggled into Eastern Ghouta via tunnels that connects the region with al Qaboun, Barza, and Tishreen neighborhoods in Damascus city.

What happened, particularly recently, is that Syrian regime forces has launched a wide offensive in the eastern neighborhoods of Damascus city (Qaboun and Tishreen) and completely seized the tunnels that connect Eastern Ghouta with those neighborhoods. Furthermore, Syrian regime forces shut down al Wafideen crossing at the end of March 2017, which further deepened the grip of the suffocating siege on over 350,000 individuals who are mostly civilians, resulting in a severe shortage in basic food supplies, such as children's milk, as costs for all supplies soared, if it even existed at all in the first place. Residents resorted to plants and grasses. Until the start of May 2017, we recorded that food supplies prices rose significantly by 30%, as the cost of one kilogram of flour amounted to 850 Syrian pounds, one kilogram of rice was priced at 1,200 Syrian pounds, and one kilogram of Sugar costed 3,000 Syrian pounds.





Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

“It is not only that the Syrian regime used siege as a mean of warfare, but the siege is now beyond military necessities and their proportions, as the siege has turned into a matter of starving and restricting civilians. Its cost is higher than any anticipated military objective, and has become a form of collective punishment that denied civilians basic services and food.”

According to our records, Syrian regime’s siege of Eastern Ghouta that struck the five-year mark on October 22, 2017, has resulted in the death of no less than 397 civilians, including 206 children and 67 women who died due to lack of food and medication particularly. Most of the deaths were among the vulnerable groups, such as children, elders, sick people, and wounded who were injured in the repeated shelling and couldn’t access sufficient medication for their treatment. In addition, the siege largely reflected on pregnant women who suffered from anemia, as we also recorded a number of birth defect cases. All of this adds to the hundreds of massacres that resulted from the indiscriminate or deliberate shelling on populated areas and the destruction of thousands of houses and vital civilian facilities.



We relied mainly, in this report, on field-visits conducted by a SNHR researcher who contacted a number of activists working the field of relief and local services and a number of affected families. We have altered names for safety concerns, and also had received a number of pictures and videos, in addition to other media that we collected from the internet, where we cross-examined them with our team's work and eyewitness accounts. Statistics draw upon SNHR database and archive that have built diligently and cumulatively with names and details over the course of seven years. For more about our methodology, please see the following [URL](#)

II. The Syrian-Russian Alliance's Siege Continues Despite the De-Escalation Agreement with Russia

On July 22, 2017, a de-escalation agreement was struck in Eastern Ghouta between armed opposition factions and Russian forces under an Egyptian sponsorship. It was agreed that aid convoy would enter and the wounded evacuation process would start. Since the agreement was signed, only four convoys have entered, as we recorded, that included some food baskets and medical supplies – the most recent of which entered the 24th of last September. It should be noted that these convoys only cover 25% of the residents' needs. Despite the de-escalation agreement, Syrian-Russian alliance forces continued to target civilians and vital civilian facilities, where the killing and destruction never stopped in parallel with the starvation policy. We have recorded four massacres and 23 incidents of attack on vital civilian facilities, including four medical facilities, between July 22, 2017 and October 22, 2017. This clearly suggests that the Syrian-Russian alliance intends to doom any de-escalation agreement, and is working avidly to submit the Syrian people into surrendering and acknowledging the legitimacy of the Syrian regime and its Russian ally, who would, consequently, take full control of Syria. We noted in a [past report](#) how Astana Agreements were shattered in Idlib, as the sponsoring Russian side has failed to bind the Syrian regime to commit to deliver aids and evacuate the wounded, which was one of the most basic demands.

After nearly seven months of siege, prices have risen by 50%, as one kilogram of rice is now priced at approximately 2,300 Syrian pounds, while one kilogram of Sugar costs 5700 Syrian pounds. Flour is non-existent except in extremely limited quantities. Moreover, Syrian regime forces have banned the passage of any medical supplies, fuel, or clothes for seven months except for allowing some supplies in Eid al Adha.





Female infant Sahar Defda' died due to food shortage and lack of medical care in light of the imposed siege on Eastern Ghouta – October 2017

Abdul Mu'in Homs¹, a documentation officer at a medical point in Eastern Ghouta, told us about the poor living conditions in Eastern Ghouta: **“We are living in a mass prison. Unemployment rates are high here, and a person’s daily income is no more than 1,000 Syrian pounds. On the other hand, the price of any kind of food supply exceeds that by a lot.”**

“Since the crossing was shut down, we have been living in a difficult austerity, as food supplies are banned except on very rare occasions, which doesn’t cover residents’ needs. Even though passing aids and evacuating the wounded were among the most important items of the de-escalation agreements, only four convoys have entered which weren’t enough for even one-fourth of the residents,”

“For months now, we have been relying on crops such as corn and some grasses, in addition to small quantities of supplies that we had previously stored.”

The tightening siege has reflected on people with chronic illnesses – especially cancer and kidney patients. Our estimations suggest that there are 543 people who suffer from cancer inside Eastern Ghouta – seven of those had died, including four children and one woman since the crossing was shut down in March 2017 in light of the lack of sufficient dosages for their treatment.

¹ We contacted him via Facebook on October 18, 2017



Dr. Majd Dalati, an SNHR researcher, speaks on Eastern Ghouta:

“The available medication is extremely scarce. We are in need of specific medications such as vitamin doses that are required to treat neurological illnesses and anesthetics which are essential to surgeries. We also suffer from a dire shortage of solution bags and specific medical supplies, such as bone and jaw plates and hydrocephalus shunts. We are trying to manufacture new metal plates to compensate for the shortage, but they are causing some medical complications.”

“Hospitals and medical centers that haven’t been targeted by the Syrian regime yet are working in minimum capacity with supplies and equipment. Some of these facilities are no longer supported after the crossing was shut down, and are about to close their doors.”

“Cancer patients and people with chronic disease remain the most affected groups in light of the lack of sufficient medication for their treatment.”



A girl who suffers from cancer receiving limited chemical therapy at a medical center in Eastern Ghouta – October 2017



III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Syrian regime forces have systematically and deliberately imposed a siege against another party in the non-international armed conflict beyond any medical necessity or its proportion. And instead of facilitating relief aids, Syrian regime forces have banned them.

Syrian regime forces have heavily bombed besieged areas, and barred civilians from leaving, forcing them to live in inhumane conditions under the threat of death – either from starving in light of the food and medication shortages, or by shelling. This constitutes a war crime according to the international humanitarian law.

The Syrian regime aims, through the siege it imposed on the residents of Eastern Ghouta, to drive them to a state of complete drain, which will force them to accept any settlements and displace from the area – same as what happened in eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo, Darayya city in Damascus suburbs, al Wa'er neighborhood, Homs city, and other areas- or to submit and acknowledge the legitimacy of the Syrian regime and its Iranian ally which is encouraged by the absence of any serious deterrent from the international community as of this writing.

Recommendations

Security Council

Implement the resolutions pertaining to deliver humanitarian aids and lift the siege – 2139, 2165, 2191, 2254, and 2258 – in an effective and steady manner.

The international community

- Uphold its financial obligations that were promised for the sake of aiding the Syrian people. Eastern Ghouta is one of the most affected areas in Syria.
- Pressure towards a transition from a temporary passage of aids and easing escalation for merely a few weeks towards creating a permanent passage to deliver medical and food supplies.
- Provide immediate support for the working local relief and medical organization in coordination with the regional office of the World Health Organization.



The Russian regime

As a sponsoring party to the de-escalation agreement in Eastern Ghouta, as well as Astana Agreements, the Russian regime should apply pressure on the Syrian-Iranian alliance to commit to the provisions of the de-escalation agreement, and deliver sufficient food and medical supplies and start evacuating the sick and the wounded.

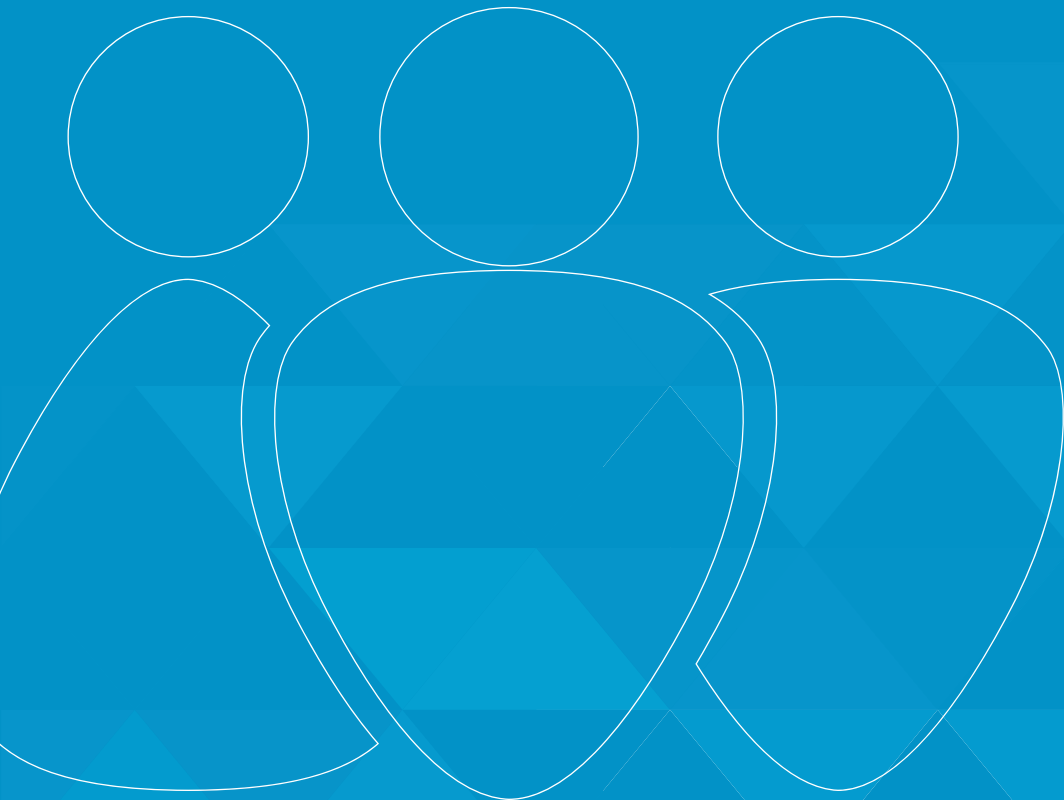
The United Nations special envoy to Syria

Explicitly condemn the perpetrators of siege and massacre, as they were the main reason for dooming the de-escalation agreements and shattering any progress in the political transitions.

Acknowledgment

Our most heartfelt thanks and gratitude to all the residents and activists who effectively contributed to this report.





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