

The Humanitarian File

Siege as a Tool of War





This report is the first of a series which together constitute the humanitarian file prepared by the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP). This data was collected through consultations held with nearly 3,500 diverse Syrians between October 2017 and May 2018.

Executive Summary:

Siege has been one of the most significant methods utilized by the belligerent parties in Syria over the past eight years. It has been adopted as a systematic policy by multiple parties without taking into consideration the plight of the hundreds of thousands of civilians living in areas that have been plagued by siege.

This report sheds light on the views of the population in the following nine Syrian provinces: Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Hassakeh, Idlib, Homs, Daraa, Quneitra, Suweida, and Damascus countryside. This information was attained by conducting 304 community consultation sessions between October 2017 and May 2018. A total of 3,376 people participated in these sessions, 46.6% (1,580) of whom were women. The number of participants representing civil society organizations (CSOs) numbered 705.

From the consultations, the report concluded the following:

- The humanitarian crisis affecting all of Syria has led many Syrians to believe that they are living in a permanent state of siege, due to the lack of access to basic necessities and requirements of life.
- The various parties to the conflict are still imposing conditions on the entry of humanitarian aid and relief materials into the areas under their control, thereby hampering access to critical humanitarian assistance.
- The population's basic needs in most areas are food and medicine, in addition to sources of livelihood, whether in the form of agricultural projects or others.
- CSOs play an important role in delivering humanitarian assistance in most areas. Some participants said that their roles are still limited given the increasing need for their services.
- The Rome Statute defines as a war crime, "...intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions," (Article 8, section b, item xxv). The siege conditions under which Syrians have lived in many parts of the country amount to such crimes of war.

Introduction:

Since the onset of the popular movement in 2011, the besieging of cities, towns and other civilian areas has been one of the most significant tools used systematically and continuously by the various warring parties in Syria. The Government of Syria (GoS), the major force on the ground, has repeatedly imposed sieges on multiple cities and towns as part of a systematic strategy against areas beyond its control, in order to subject residents to its authority without regard for the impact on civilians living in these areas.

This report, which studies in-depth the use of siege tactics in Syria, is the first of a series of reports that together constitute the Humanitarian File compiled by the SCP, based on community consultation sessions conducted with diverse groups of Syrians between October 2017 and May 2018. The accompanying reports address the following issues:

- Demographic change
- The Astana de-escalation zones agreement
- Detainees and forcibly disappeared persons.
- Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

This Humanitarian File is the second such document issued by the SCP, which conducted its first community consultation sessions on the humanitarian file in March 2016.

Through this report, the SCP attempts to delve into the details of the siege issue in multiple provinces in Syria, based on the perspectives of people who live in the affected areas

In its analysis of the aforementioned issues, this report relies on the UN format for classifying siege and its various levels of severity.

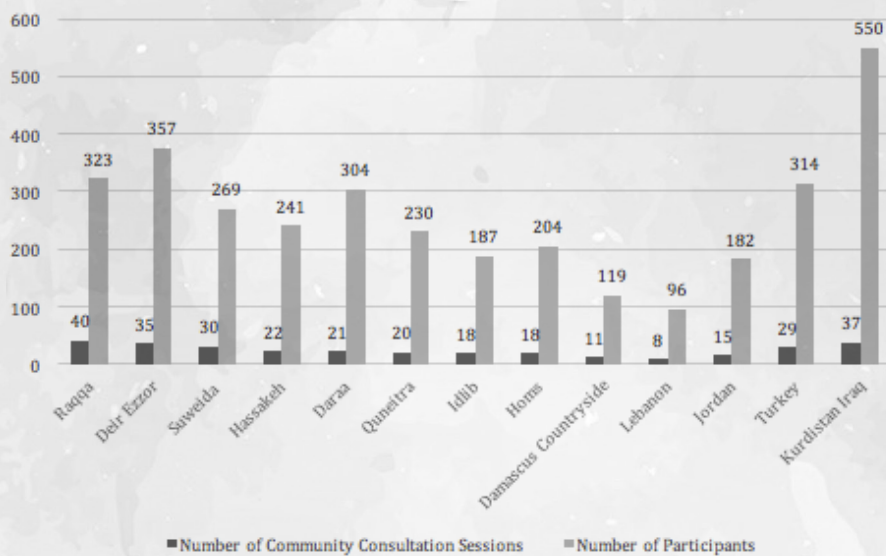
To view the first humanitarian file, please follow this link: <https://goo.gl/PhGR74>
"Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017: Syria." OCHA, December 2016. 55. https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Syria/2017_Syria_hno.pdf
"Humanitarian Needs Overview 2017: Syria." OCHA, December 2016. 55.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) defines a besieged area as one that is “surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter... [and] civilians, the sick and wounded population cannot regularly exit the area.”

A hard-to-reach area is defined as “an area that is not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors for the purposes of sustained humanitarian programming due to denial of access, the need to negotiate access on an ad hoc basis, or due to restrictions such as an active conflict, multiple security checkpoints or failure of the authorities to provide timely approval.”

The report was based on 304 community consultation sessions conducted between October 2017 and May 2018, in nine Syrian provinces: Idlib, Hassakeh, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Homs, Damascus countryside, Suweida, Daraa, and Quneitra. Additional sessions were conducted with Syrians seeking asylum in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan.

A total of 3,376 people participated in the sessions, 1,580 of whom were women, and 705 of whom represented civil society organizations. The average time for each session was between 4 and 6 hours.



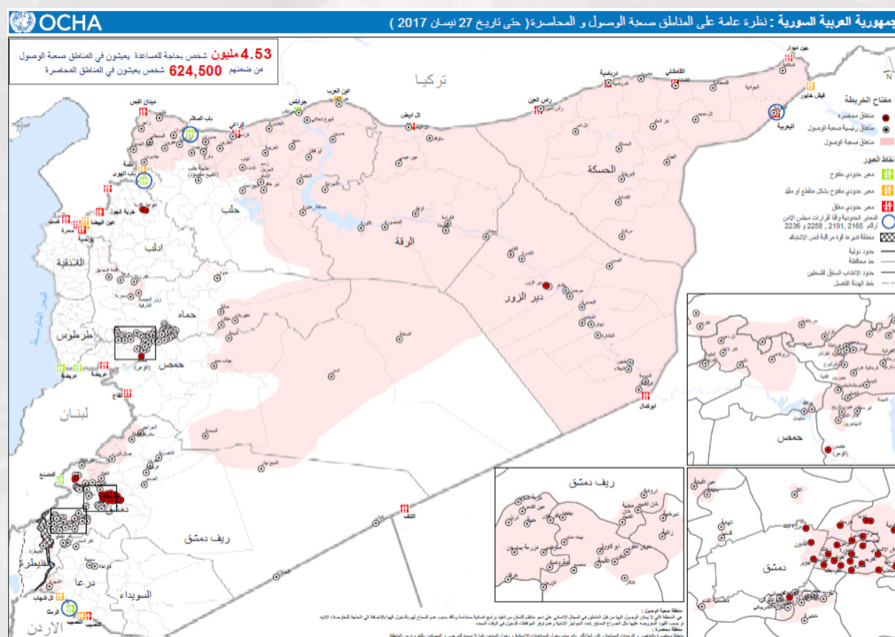
Siege in Syria:

Siege conditions in Syria have been present since the second half of 2013. The belligerent parties to the conflict have imposed sieges on different areas in order to exert pressure. Siege has become one of the basic tactics used in the conflict for securing territorial gains, and thus it can be considered a systematic method adopted by the various forces. The impact of these tactics on civilians uninvolved in the military conflict have rarely been considered by forces imposing the siege.

In addition to the deliberate sieges, the ongoing battles in many Syrian areas, and the impediments they present to humanitarian convoys and humanitarian workers, have made regular access to the neediest populations difficult.

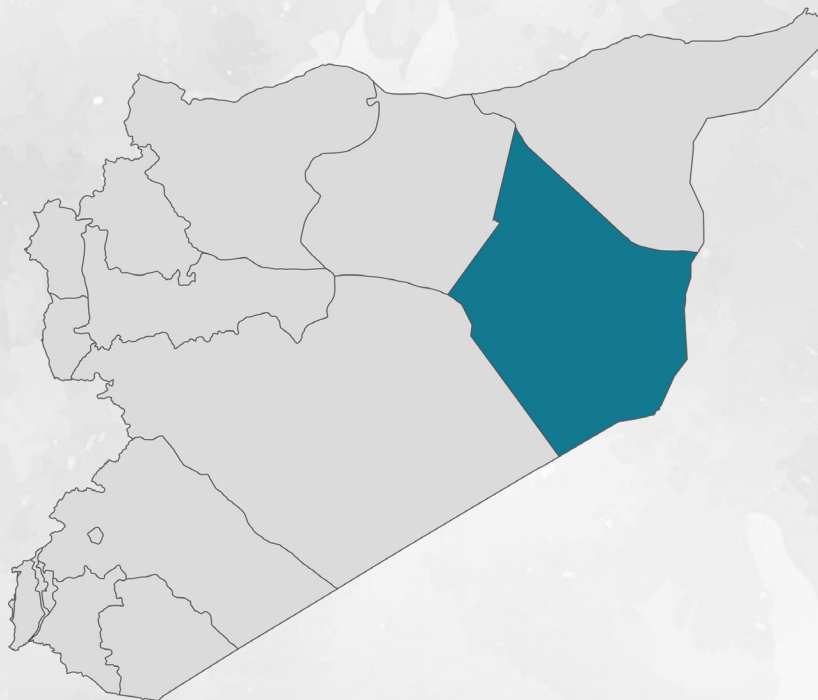
As of April 2018 there were roughly 2.3 million civilians living in hard-to-reach and besieged areas; more than 413,920 civilians are living in besieged areas.

The besieged areas are spread throughout the provinces of Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Homs, and Idlib, while the hard- to-reach areas, according to the UN, were concentrated in the north-eastern regions of Syria; in the provinces of Deir Ezzor, Hassakeh, and Raqqa, as well as parts of Homs eastern countryside, Hama eastern countryside, and Aleppo northern countryside.



Siege conditions by Syrian province:

Deir Ezzor province



Siege conditions by Syrian province:

I. Deir Ezzor province:

For over three years – since August 2014 – Deir Ezzor province was under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which imposed a military siege on some neighborhoods of the province that were controlled by GoS forces. Roughly 250,000 civilians were living under almost complete siege in these areas until November 2017, after which these areas witnessed the advancement of GoS forces and allied militias, which took control of the entire city, as well as most of the rural areas south of the Euphrates River. Today ISIS has been expelled from the province, and its forces have retreated towards the Syrian Badia area (central and south-eastern Syria) and the Syrian-Iraqi border.

At the present time, GoS forces control the regions south of the Euphrates River (areas from the city of al-Bukamal in the east to the village of Maadan in the west), while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control the areas north of the Euphrates River. ISIS still controls small, isolated parts of the province. For this report, 35 discussion sessions were held, half of them inside Syria where the residents of Deir Ezzor are located, and the other half in the city of Şanlıurfa, Turkey, with Syrian refugees from the province. The sessions took place between February and May 2018. These consultations included 357 participants, 198 of whom were women. Fifty CSO representatives participated in the sessions.

Siege in Deir Ezzor province:

According to the UN, Deir Ezzor is currently classified as a hard-to-reach area due to the following reasons:

- In areas controlled by the GoS, military operations are still taking place against ISIS in the Badia region as well as on the Damascus Road. ISIS enclaves still exist in the Badia region, south of the Euphrates River. The combination of this ISIS presence and significant GoS military activity impedes access and delivery of humanitarian aid to affected populations.
- In areas controlled by the SDF, humanitarian access is hindered in the eastern areas on the Iraqi border as a result of the presence of an ISIS-controlled

enclave in the towns of al-Baguz, al-Sousseh, Hajin and al-Saafeh, which are considered areas of military operations.

Although Dier Ezzor was classified as a hard-to-reach area, and despite the fact that ISIS has been expelled from almost the entire province, the population continues to feel as though they are living under siege because of the excessive cost of foodstuffs in the province. This is the result of royalties, imposed on commercial goods entering the province at military checkpoint along major roads, and because humanitarian assistance remains insufficient.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering:

The majority of participants said that there were no significant efforts being made to alleviate the suffering of civilians. In order to adapt to the high cost of living, the population relies on remittances from relatives living outside the province.

The roles of civil society in lifting the siege:

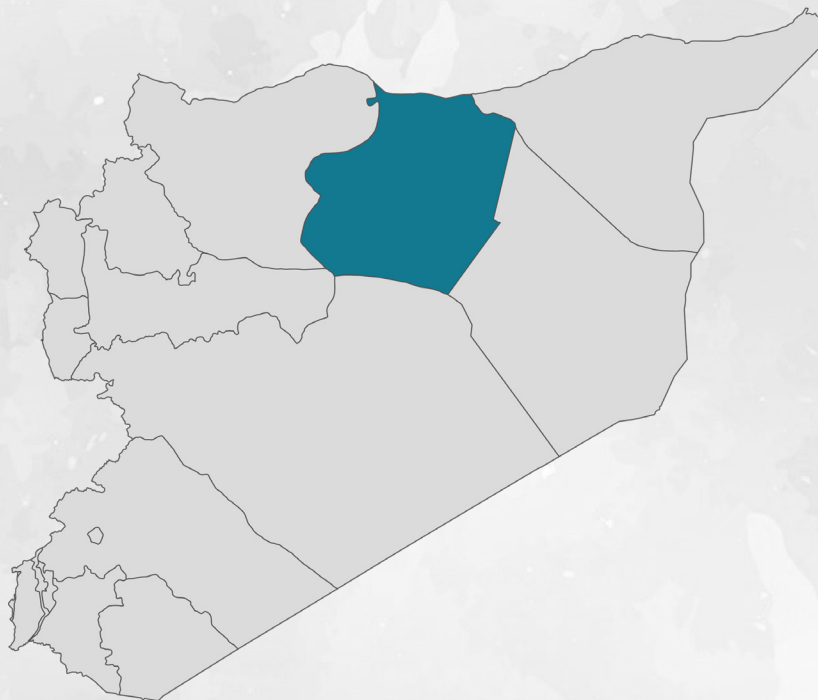
Some participants said that civil society is indeed playing an important role through advocacy campaigns that aim to influence actors on the ground, while others said that civil society has no real role, and CSOs will not be able to achieve anything due to the strong 'security grip' of the GoS on the region.

Recommendations:

- 1) International and local humanitarian organizations must intensify their efforts to distribute and deliver relief aid to eligible beneficiaries.
- 2) It is very important to start providing support to agricultural development projects as well as other small development projects in the province, which will contribute to driving economic growth and creating jobs for the population.

Siege conditions by Syrian province:

Raqqa province



II. Raqqa province:

When ISIS controlled Raqqa province, most of the province's area was partially besieged. Foodstuffs and humanitarian aid entered through smuggling routes. Following the expulsion of ISIS from most areas, on October 20, 2017 the SDF took control of most of the province. The GoS now controls the parts of the province south of the Euphrates River.

40 discussion sessions were held with 323 individuals from Raqqa, 115 of whom were women and 37 of whom were CSO representatives.

Siege in Raqqa province:

- After the expulsion of ISIS from Raqqa, the city transitioned from classification as a besieged area to a hard-to-reach area according to OCHA. This is due to several factors, especially the continuation of military operations against ISIS enclaves in the Badia region both on the Turkish side and in the Euphrates Shield areas. This has imposed a kind of security grip on the province.

- Humanitarian assistance enters the province via two routes: in areas controlled by the GoS, humanitarian assistance is provided through the OCHA office in Damascus. Humanitarian assistance enters the SDF-held areas through several roads from Iraqi Kurdistan and from the Euphrates Shield areas.

- The province suffers from a lack of health and relief services. Infrastructure has been destroyed. Landmines planted by ISIS are widespread, and dozens of bodies are still trapped under mounds of debris around the city. All of these factors contribute to the continued suffering of civilians in Raqqa.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering in Raqqa:

While some participants said that there had been no effort to alleviate the suffering of civilians, others said that efforts were being made by some relief organizations, in addition to local efforts to remove debris and to secure safe drinking water.

The role of civil society in lifting the siege:

Most participants suggested that CSOs did not have a tangible role on the ground, due to military control of the region and a lack of support. Others indicated that CSOs should further mobilize and advocate by communicating

the problems experienced by the population to decision-makers. They also indicated that CSOs have a clear role in solving some of the problems such as mine clearance.

Recommendations:

- 1) Intensify efforts to deal with the devastation caused by the military campaign against ISIS, especially with regard to removing landfills/rubble as well as mine clearance.

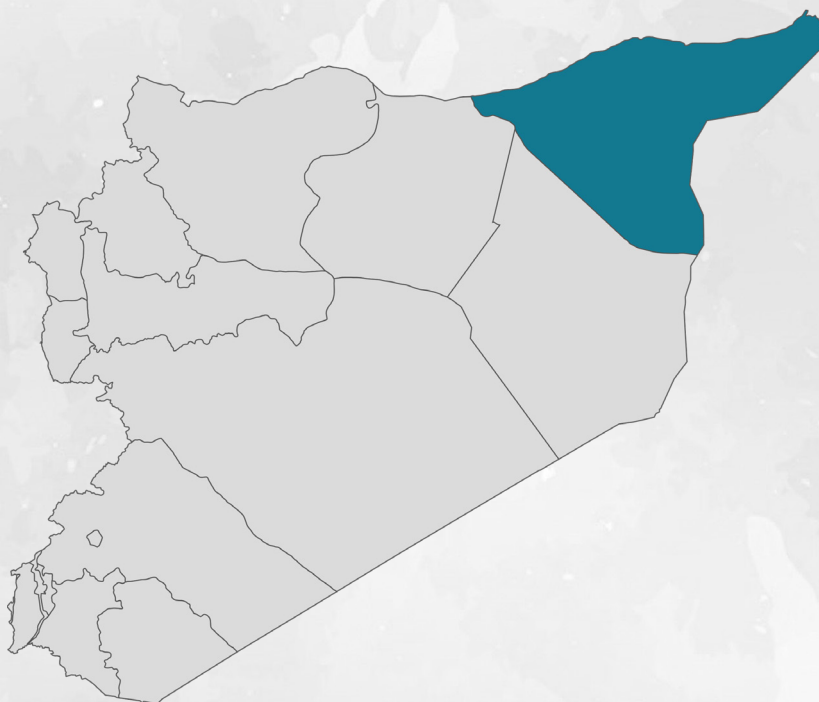
- 2) Increase immunization campaigns and medical prevention, as communicable diseases are spreading due to bodies that remain trapped under the wreckage.

- 3) Increase humanitarian assistance to those in need in the province, including in places where IDPs are concentrated.

- 4) Facilitate the work of CSOs and relief organizations in the province.

- 5) Secure viable employment by supporting small businesses in the province.

Siege conditions by Syrian province: Hassakeh province



III. Daraa province

Hassakeh province is under the control of the SDF and is classified as a hard-to-reach area. However, residents of the province feel that they are subject to a partial siege, as a result of the lack of food and medical supplies. Where such supplies are available, prices are very high due to the widespread military checkpoints that intermittently prevent the entry of certain commodities such as baby milk, sugar and building materials. The GoS also prevents some medication from entering. More than two million people in the province live under these conditions.

Twenty-two discussion sessions were held in Hassakeh province with 241 people 142 of whom were women, as well as with representatives of 77 CSOs. Thirty-seven additional discussion sessions were held in the Kurdistan region of Iraq with 550 Syrian refugees, 210 of whom were women, and 15 of whom were CSO representatives.

Siege in Hassakeh province:

According to the participants, the closure of the borders with neighboring countries, as well as the closure of local roads due to the ongoing conflict, have led to conditions of partial siege. There is limited availability of basic needs in the province, leading to high prices. Most of these needs are related to foodstuffs such as baby milk and sugar, as well as some medicines and medical equipment. There is also a scarcity of building materials.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering in Hassakeh:

Local mediation efforts have been made between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdish self-administration in Hassakeh to open the Faysh Khabur crossing. These efforts have been derailed due to disagreements over customs. According to the participants in the sessions, citizens' views were not considered during these conversations.

The same is true of the negotiations between the Kurdish self-administration and the GoS, where the views and needs of citizens were not included. There have not been negotiations between the government of Turkey and the Kurdish self-administration due to political hostility between them.

During the SCP consultations, it was clear that political priorities were prized over humanitarian or civilian considerations. However, despite the failure of all negotiations to open the crossings and secure access to basic supplies, participants said that finding temporary solutions may still be possible; temporary solutions such as opening a humanitarian crossing with Turkey under the auspices of international organizations and the provision of alternative materials and supplies for those that have been denied access through existing channels are some of the options participants suggested.

Participants also expressed hope that it might be possible to resolve international differences and reach agreements regarding humanitarian assistance and the opening of crossings with the KRG or with Turkey, and that these steps could be achieved by exerting pressure on the relevant parties. They also suggested that an agreement could be reached with the GoS to allow access of food and medical supplies.

The role of civil society in lifting the siege:

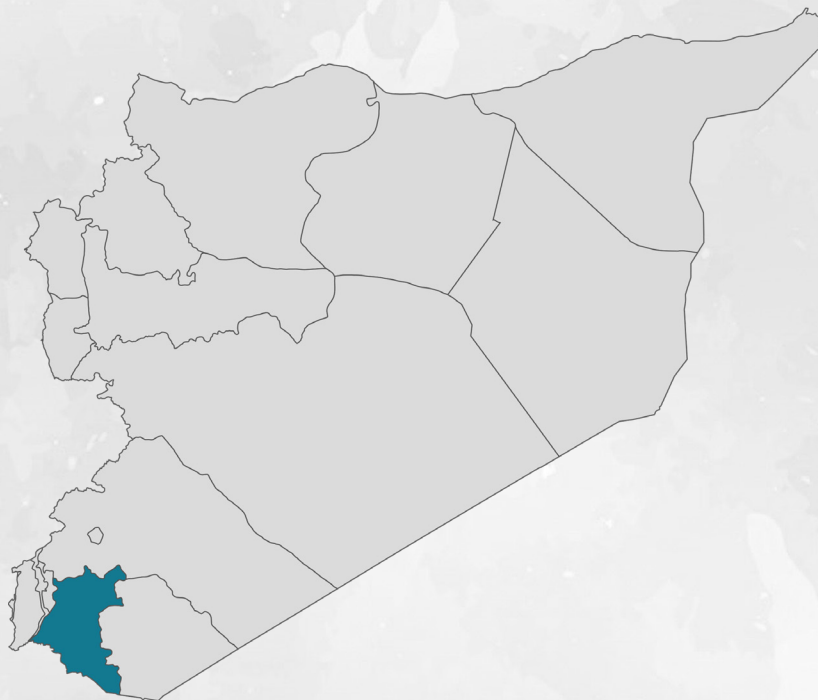
Some participants said that civil society has not play the role entrusted to it, while the rest said that civil society has played a major role in highlighting people's suffering through mobilization and advocacy, and has played a major role in reaching out to humanitarian organizations. However, they indicated that efforts were still insufficient and that CSOs should increase pressure on the relevant parties through their various channels until real solutions are found.

Recommendations:

- 1) Increase pressure to advocate for the opening of crossings with Turkey and KRG to enable the entry of humanitarian aid on a regular basis, since crossings are the easiest and most secure way to ensure humanitarian access.
- 2) Obtaining operating licenses is one of the main obstacles for humanitarian organizations in the province, especially from the GoS, but also from the Kurdish self-administration. This issue requires pressure on both parties to ease cumbersome licensing procedures.

Siege conditions by Syrian province:

Daraa province



IV. Daraa province:

Daraa is controlled both by opposition armed groups and the GoS, while ISIS controls some areas in the Yarmouk Basin, and along the borders with the occupied Golan Heights and Jordan.

21 discussion sessions were held in Daraa with the participation of 304 people, 159 of whom were women and 147 of whom were representatives of CSOs. An additional 15 consultation sessions were held in Jordan with the participation of 182 Syrian refugees from Daraa, 70 of whom were women.

Besieged areas in Daraa province:

It is important to mention that the situation in Daraa has changed significantly since 18 June 2018 with the rapid GoS offensive to overtake the area, resulting in siege of some areas and GoS control of the majority of the province. The information below was gathered before this offensive.

The UN does not classify Daraa as a besieged area nor does it classify the province as a hard-to-reach area. However, participants in the discussions indicated that there are areas that are completely besieged, such as the ISIS-controlled Yarmouk Basin which is besieged by opposition armed groups, and areas that are under partial siege such as the towns of Mahja, Western Ghariyah, al-Sanamayn, Daraa al-Balad, Tariq Al-Sadd, Daraa Station, Atman, Sheikh Maskin, Naima, Qarfa, Namer and Heit. Some other participants pointed out that all areas beyond the control of the GoS are subject to partial siege. According to statistics provided by local councils, the population in the towns of Daraa al-Balad and Tariq Al-Sadd is 22,000; in Mahja 23,000; in Western Ghariyah 15,000; in Naima 10,000; and in Heit 4,500. In the towns of Sheikh Maskin and Atman, the population has been completely displaced.

Siege in Daraa province:

According to participants, sometimes basic supplies such as baby milk, flour, medical materials, gas, and fuel are allowed to enter in small quantities and at high prices. Participants also indicated that restrictions imposed in Daraa affect the livestock sector; civilians often suffer from a shortage of animal feed, medicines and basic animal-care materials. Participants pointed out that the border areas have access to more goods and materials compared to other, more isolated areas.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering in Daraa:

The participants mentioned that in some areas, efforts have been made to alleviate suffering. One such example is the agreement between the GoS and opposition armed groups in Daraa to pump water from the armed group-held areas to the GoS-held areas, while the GoS provided fuel and electricity in return. There are also a number of areas under truce agreements, including the towns of Da'el, Mahja, Abtaa, and Lajat.

The participants pointed out that negotiations to secure better conditions often fail for the following reasons:

- Constant breaches of the Astana De-escalation Zones Agreement, as well as non-compliance with any negotiated truce;
- The disabling or rejection of negotiations by actors on the ground;
- A lack of credibility, mainly on the part of the GoS;
- Pre-conditions set by warring parties that lead to the failure of ongoing negotiations;
- The absence or ineffectiveness of the international community;
- Lack of consideration of civilian needs during negotiations.

However, according to some participants, local informal efforts have contributed to alleviating the suffering of civilians; as local committees and associations have been formed, livelihood projects and service projects have been established to provide basic medical, educational and water services, as well as humanitarian assistance. There has been communication and coordination between the local council and organizations to provide these services. Unfortunately, these efforts are not always successful. Some participants reported that local efforts did take place to allow access of materials into the province, but the intransigence of armed group leaders led to the failure of these efforts to achieve their goals.

The role of civil society in lifting the siege:

Some participants observed that CSOs were not effective enough, while others indicated that there was an attempt to initiate participatory projects, secure financial support from residents, establish a local fund to intervene in critical situations, exert pressure on international humanitarian organizations to further mobilize and advocate for the most critical issues, and strengthen community capacity.

Recommendations:

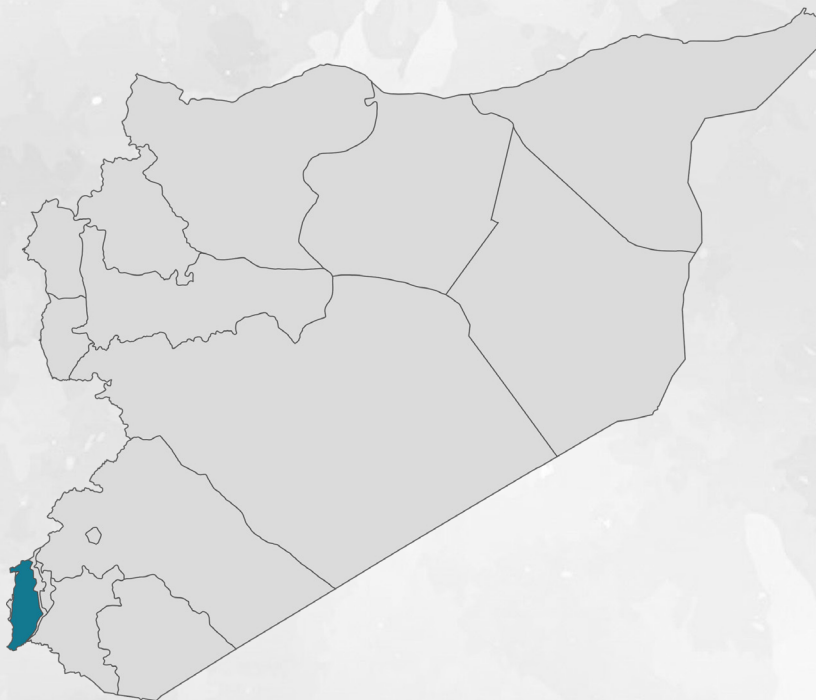
Generally, Daraa province is in need of external support, outlined as follows:

- 1) The GoS should be pressured to lift the siege on the besieged areas in the province.
- 2) International efforts to open humanitarian corridors to all areas and ensure unhindered delivery of aid to the entire province should be strengthened and consolidated.
- 3) Supplies of flour, fuel and food should be increased, and medical points activated.

In addition, relevant actors should:

- 1) Activate the role of local councils in supervising humanitarian assistance, especially in regard to discrimination in the distribution of relief materials.
- 2) Develop and implement early recovery projects and monitor health facilities.
- 3) Allow the export of products produced in the province. This could be achieved through the opening of local roads to other Syrian cities and towns, as well as to neighboring countries, primarily Jordan.
- 4) Fund the restoration of infrastructure, schools and streets.
- 5) More attention should be paid to the health sector and water network, while NGOs should increase the provision of medical and psychological support.
- 6) Communicate with local actors with the purpose of finding common ground that will help alleviate people's suffering.

Siege conditions by Syrian province: Quneitra province



V. Quneitra province:

It is important to mention that the situation in Quneitra has changed significantly since 18 June 2018 with the rapid GoS offensive to overtake the area, resulting in siege of some areas and GoS control of the majority of the province. The information below was gathered before this offensive.

Opposition armed groups control most of Quneitra province, while the GoS controls only the city center and some other areas. The provinces of Quneitra and Daraa neighbor one another, making the two provinces strategically linked. Twenty discussion sessions were held in Quneitra with the participation of 230 people, 62 of whom were women and 27 of whom were representatives of CSOs

Siege in Quneitra province:

Participants indicated that the province is subject to partial siege. There are areas that are more affected than others, such as the towns of Jibata al-Khashab, Ufania, al-Huriyah and Turnejeh. Generally, basic foodstuffs, medical supplies, and fuel enter through unsafe avenues. The limited quantities of goods that are allowed to enter are subsequently sold at very high prices. According to the provincial council, the population of Quneitra is estimated at 80,000, in addition to 33,000 IDPs from the Yarmouk Basin and 25,000 IDPs from different areas.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering in Quneitra:

Some participants said that there were no negotiations taking place to lift the siege, while others pointed to a few negotiations between local leaders and the GoS which would require the surrender and reconciliation of any group in control of an area that wants to negotiate the lifting of the siege. Absent these negotiations, populations rely on self-production, such as agriculture, and people generally contact their local councils to secure relief and medical materials.

The role of civil society in lifting the siege:

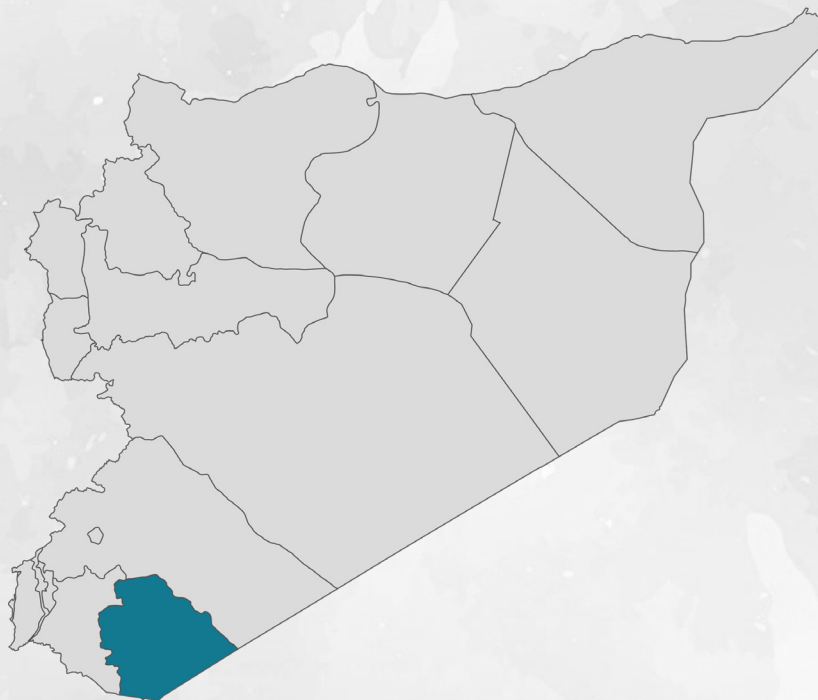
Some participants reported that the role of civil society was limited due to a lack of resources. Other participants said that civil society groups did provide support to alleviate people's suffering, and are continuously in contact with

the UN and other international organizations. Participants also noted the role CSOs play in convening media activities and events through which civil society can highlight regional issues and call for the siege to be lifted. These efforts do not meet the needs of the entire province.

Recommendations:

- 1) Guarantee the provision of agricultural supplies such as fuel and irrigation.
- 2) Call for the lifting of the siege and the entry of humanitarian organizations.
- 3) Help young people find employment.
- 4) The siege issue should be raised regionally and internationally, highlighting the scarcity of food, medicine, and medical supplies across the province.

Siege conditions by Syrian province: Suweida province



VI. Suweida province:

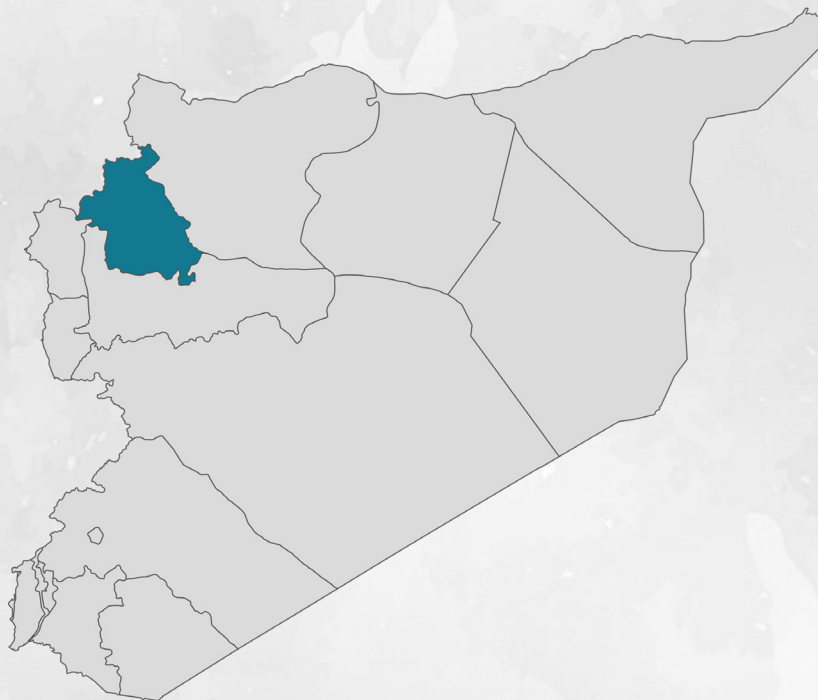
Suweida province is under the full control of the GoS. It is not classified as a besieged or hard-to-reach area. The province plays host to a high concentration of IDPs from Daraa and other areas. Thirty discussion sessions were held in Suweida with the participation of 269 people, 172 of whom were women and 48 of whom were representatives of CSOs.

The high demand for services due to the large number of IDPs has made some participants in the sessions believe that the province is subject to a partial siege. Some have also pointed out that the entry of relief and medical supplies into the province is proceeding smoothly, but quantities do not meet the population's needs.

Since the displacement began, local and informal efforts have contributed to alleviating the suffering of civilians by providing local assistance, including the provision of housing, food, medicines and clothing.

The participants in the consultation sessions believe that human suffering is not limited to IDPs in Suweida, but affects the whole population of the province. Therefore, there is a need to increase relief and medical assistance sent by the UN, and to support the efforts made by humanitarian organizations to provide relief in the province.

Siege conditions by Syrian province: **Idlib province**



VII. Idlib province:

Idlib is under the complete control of opposition armed groups, including the jihadist group Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front).

A total of 18 consultation sessions were held with the participation of 187 persons, 66 of whom were women, and 35 of whom were representatives of CSOs.

Siege in Idlib province:

The majority of participants in the sessions said that Idlib was besieged from three sides, while some consider the province completely besieged. Medical supplies, flour, and fuel are allowed to enter, but sell at very high prices. CSOs are able to bring food into the area.

Efforts to alleviate civilian suffering in Idlib:

The majority of participants reported that there were no local negotiations to lift the siege, while some have said that there had been some attempts at negotiation, all of which have failed. Participants suggest that until the siege is lifted, some interim steps can be taken to alleviate suffering. Some of these steps are listed below:

- Allow the safe exit of people wishing to leave GoS-held areas without arrest.
- Support CSOs working in this field.
- Guarantee the provision of food and medical materials.
- Conduct educational courses in homes.
- Secure the safety of tribal elders as well as key local actors participating in negotiations with the GoS.
- Improve local coordination with international organizations.

The role of civil society in lifting the siege:

Some participants believe that civil society currently could not play any role because of the overwhelming military role, while others believe that its role is limited because it lacks the capacity or authority to stop the bombing of civilians.

However, there are those who believe that civil society has played a role in providing food aid, advocating for resolutions issued through international meetings to lift the siege, and delivering people's voices to decision makers. Civil society has also made efforts to come to terms with GoS forces in an effort to convince them to ease bombing or to limit military incursions.

Recommendations:

According to the participants, Idlib province is in need of external support as outlined below:

- 1) Provide protection for refugees and guarantee safe and dignified return to their homes. CSOs should coordinate among themselves and other actors to achieve this.
- 2) Support organizations and actors working on reconciliation locally and grant them complete legitimacy.
- 3) Coordination should be improved between all parties, and the implementation of agreements should be adhered to.
- 4) Provide people who are partially besieged with the necessary foodstuffs, gas, medicine and transportation they will need in case of any emergency.

Siege conditions by Syrian province:

Areas that were besieged during the period in which the consultation sessions were held

VIII. Areas that were besieged during the period in which the consultation sessions were held:

There have been changes to the distribution of dominant forces on the ground in the time between when the consultations cited in this report took place and the report's publication. The main changes took place in the province of Damascus Countryside, as well as Homs northern countryside.

Areas in Damascus Countryside have been under complete siege for a number of years, resulting in the deaths of many civilians due to hunger and an absence of appropriate medical care. The besieged areas were the following:

- The opposition armed group-held area of Eastern Ghouta was under siege from the end of 2013 until March 2018, when the GoS took full control of the whole of Ghouta following a brutal military campaign. The number of civilians in Ghouta who remained during the siege is estimated at 400,000.
- The south of Damascus, which includes the neighborhoods of the Yarmouk Camp and al-Hajar al-Aswad, were under control of opposition armed groups as well as ISIS. The area was under siege from mid-2013 until May 2018. The number of civilians living in the South of Damascus is estimated at 12,000.
- Homs northern countryside, which includes the towns of Hula, Rastan and Talbessa was under siege from the beginning of 2013. A truce was reached with the GoS in 2017, and lasted until April 2018, when a military offensive launched by GoS forces led to the area falling fully under control of the government. The number of residents in Homs northern countryside is roughly 150,000.
- In the town of Afrin, which was under control of the Kurdish self-administration, a near-total siege was imposed on the area with the start of a military campaign launched by the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army on January 20, 2018; the movement of civilians was initially restricted and they were prevented from leaving the area. Afrin is currently classified as a hard-to-reach area, following the cessation of the military campaign in.

Legal and political analysis of the use of siege as a tool of war in Syria:

The besieging of villages, towns and cities in Syria is a grave violation of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. It is also considered a war crime by the Rome Statute of 17 July 1998. As stated in Article (8), section (b), item (xxv), the following conditions are designated as grounds for prosecution at the International Criminal Court:

“Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions”.

The Rome Statute also suggests that the subjection of a given area to total siege can be classified as a crime against humanity, in accordance with Article 7:

“Crime against humanity” means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: [...]

b) “Extermination: includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population.”

The continuation of sieges is also a violation of UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, most notably resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2254 (2015), and finally resolution 2401 (2018). Article 12 of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) includes the following clause:

“Calls on the parties to immediately allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes, allow immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas, release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, calls on ISSG states to use their influence immediately to these ends, and demands the full implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and any other applicable resolutions”.

Summary of community consultation sessions:

- Siege is one of the most significant tactics adopted by the warring parties in Syria over the past eight years. It has been adopted into a systematic policy by multiple parties without taking into account the hundreds of thousands of civilians living the besieged areas.
- The humanitarian crisis across Syria has made many participants in the sessions feel that they are living in a state of siege due to their lack of access to basic necessities and requirements for life.
- The various parties to the conflict continue to impose barriers to the free flow of humanitarian aid and relief materials into areas under their control, thereby increasing costs, as well as hampering access to critical humanitarian assistance.
- People's basic needs in most areas are food and medicine. Support for job creation and livelihoods, whether through agricultural or other projects, is also critical.
- CSOs play important roles in delivering humanitarian assistance in most areas. However, some participants see their capacities as limited.
- Siege conditions in many parts of Syria amount to war crimes, according to international law.

General Recommendations:

1. Civil society must assume greater responsibility in efforts toward lifting sieges on civilian areas. In addition, civil society should be actively involved in advocating for a binding resolution by the UN Security Council instructing all parties not to use civilians as leverage.
2. Open a special investigation into the crimes that have resulted from the sieges imposed on civilians by all parties.
3. Local humanitarian organizations as well as CSOs should intensify their efforts to distribute relief aid and deliver it to eligible beneficiaries.

4. The international community and donor organizations should work towards revitalizing economic and business activity in the various provinces; this will create new job opportunities and reduce poverty among the population. The focus should be on supporting the agricultural sector, in addition to small enterprise.

5. In hard-to-reach areas, the international community must shoulder its responsibilities by exerting pressure on the parties to the conflict to deliver aid without any hindrance, and to open special investigations into the systematic and widespread obstruction of humanitarian relief access.

6. The parties to the conflict must uphold the interests of civilians above political considerations and must consider civilians neutral to the conflict.

7. The neighboring countries of Turkey, Jordan and Iraq must take measures to alleviate the humanitarian crisis faced by displaced populations on their territory. This will involve economic and social reforms to stabilize areas in which large numbers of displaced persons live. In addition, they should guarantee and secure regular access to humanitarian assistance for displaced populations on their territory.

8. In their respective areas of control, the major powers in the Syrian conflict should facilitate the work of civil and relief organizations.

9. All parties should activate the role of local councils in supervising humanitarian assistance, and especially work to prevent discrimination in the distribution of relief materials.

10. CSOs and other leaders should open communication channels with actors on the ground to search for common ground in the interest of alleviating the suffering of Syrian civilians.
