

COMMUNITY PROFILES UPDATE: Besieged and Hard-to-Reach Community Profiles

SYRIA

SITUATION OVERVIEW

MAY 2017

Executive Summary

Between 28 May and 7 June 2017, REACH, in collaboration with SIRF, assessed the humanitarian situation in 42 communities in Syria currently facing movement and access restrictions, 18 of which are classified as besieged by the UN, and 24 as hard-to-reach.¹ The data gathered refers to the humanitarian situation in May. All profiled communities were located in Damascus, Deir ez Zor, Homs and Rural Damascus governorates, and information was collected through a total of 163 community representatives (CRs). In May, coverage of the besieged neighbourhoods of Joura and Qosour in Deir ez Zor city resumed, after access issues had prevented data collection in April. There were no further changes in coverage compared to April.

In May:

- **Ceasefires reached in early May in Burza and Jober, whilst leading to a de-escalation of conflict, resulted in mixed outcomes, as access restrictions played a key role in humanitarian impact.** In Jober, civilian mobility increased, and consequently an improvement in access to food, NFIs, fuel and medical services was reported. Conversely, in Burza, extreme access restrictions remained in place, negatively affecting food security and health services.
- **Following a shift in control, the majority of residents in Qaboun (3,000-3,500 people) left the community in May;** for those remaining, the humanitarian situation remained critical with no other movement permitted, and no access to markets or health services. In May, water infrastructure was destroyed, the last medical facility closed, remaining medical personnel left the community, and medical items were seized.
- **Following the implementation of the Four Towns Agreement³ in Madaya, restrictions on movement and access to the community were partially lifted for the first time since assessments began in June 2016.** This resulted in an overall improvement to the humanitarian situation in the community, as all types of goods were able to enter via commercial vehicles and civilians, health facilities reopened, and access to the water and electricity networks was partially restored.
- **Conflict escalated across all communities assessed in Deir ez Zor governorate (Abu Kamal, Joura, Qosour, Sosa), with several casualties reported.** In Abu Kamal and Sosa, ongoing hostilities prompted local authorities to open formal access points, increasing overall civilian movement; however, populations were only allowed to move to other areas under the control of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant.
- **The humanitarian situation continued to improve in Al Waer and the Wadi Burda communities,** which had implemented local agreements in March and January 2017, respectively. A final round of evacuations from Al Waer occurred in May, with an estimated 4,000-6,000 residents remaining in the community by the end of the month, in accordance with the local agreement. Access to various goods and services increased in May. In Wadi Burda, a humanitarian aid distribution containing food, NFIs and medical items reached all assessed communities. It was the second aid delivery since assessments of the area began in August 2016.

Of the 42 communities assessed:

- **Humanitarian aid reached Burza, Deir ez Zor city (Joura, Qosour), the Eastern Ghouta region, Hama and Qudsiya, Qaboun and Wadi Burda in May (a total of 23 communities); no aid was delivered to the remaining 19 assessed locations.**
- **Four communities reported no civilian movement (Burza, Joura, Qaboun, Qosour), while in 12 communities only 1-10% of populations could leave or enter the relevant areas.** Across all assessed locations, eight communities reported unrestricted civilian movement (subject to documentation requirements).

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

Assessed communities in May 2017, by classification¹

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

Overview

In order to inform a more evidence-based response to address the needs of vulnerable communities across Syria, REACH, in support of the Syria INGO Regional Forum (SIRF) and other humanitarian actors, regularly monitors the humanitarian situation within communities facing restrictions on civilian movement and humanitarian access. The Syria Community Profiles, which commenced in June 2016, intend to provide aid actors with an understanding of the humanitarian situation within these communities, by assessing availability and access to food, healthcare, water, education and humanitarian assistance, price data, as well as the specific conditions associated with limited freedom of movement. The list of assessed communities is not intended to be exhaustive of the total areas in Syria facing limited freedom of movement and access. With greater partner input and collaboration, the list of profiled locations will be expanded. This overview presents a summary of the overarching observations identified across communities assessed.

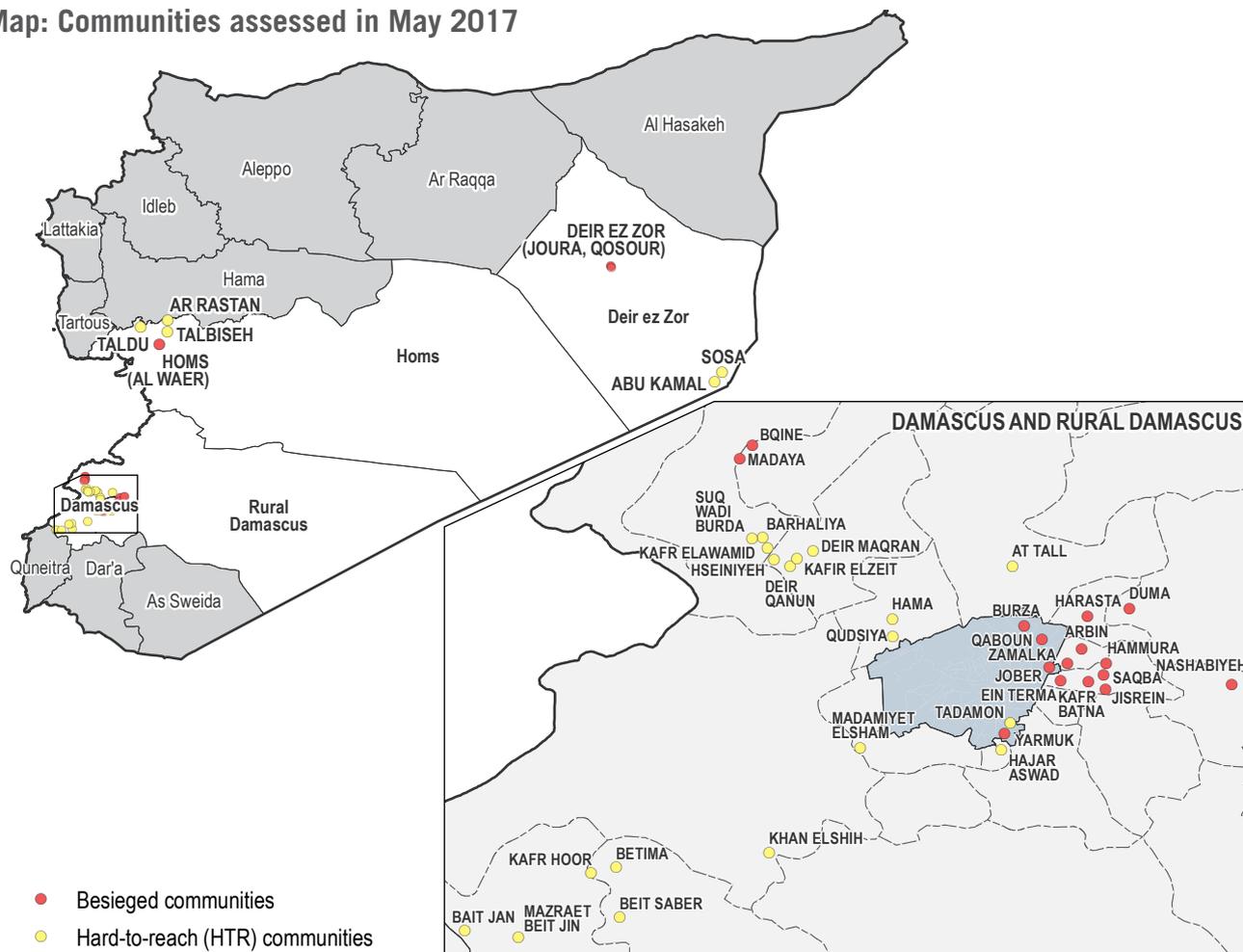
Methodology and Limitations

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 (e.g. health, education and so forth). Data for this round was gathered during the end of May and early June 2017, and refers to the situation in May 2017. Each community has a minimum of three CRs, with up to six depending on the location. The network continues to expand with ongoing collaboration with SIRF and other partners.

During analysis, data is triangulated through secondary information, including humanitarian reports, news and social media monitoring, and partner verification. Comparisons are made to findings from previous assessments (where possible) and follow up is conducted with CRs to build a thorough understanding of situational developments within locations. In the case of some profiles, multiple communities are presented together; decisions to do so are based on their geographical proximity to one another or similarities in the access restrictions faced by populations.

Due to the challenges of data collection inside Syria, representative sampling, entailing larger-scale data collection, remains a challenge. Consequently, information is to be considered indicative rather than generalisable across the population of each assessed community. Further, an improvement or deterioration of the situation 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 May 2017



³ The Four Towns Agreement was a deal between parties to the conflict, affecting, among others, humanitarian access to the communities of Az Zabdani and Madaya (Rural Damascus governorate) and Foah and Kafraya (Idlib governorate).

Key Findings

Movement of Civilians

In May, following developments in local conflict dynamics, there was a decrease in the number of communities reporting the tightest access restrictions. However, in a majority of assessed locations, restrictions remained unchanged from previous months.

- Across assessed locations, Abu Kamal and Sosa, Al Waer, Hama and Qudsiya, and Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor were the only communities where residents could move unrestrictedly (subject only to identification requirements).
- Only between 1-10% of the populations in Bait Jan, Mazraet Beit Jin and Duma (Eastern Ghouta) were able to use formal access points in May, as had also been reported in April.
- **In May, increases in civilian movement were predominantly reported across communities which had recently implemented truce agreements, or were in the process of doing so. These included Al Waer, Bqine and Madaya, Burza and Qaboun. While restrictions were lifted in Abu Kamal and Sosa, residents could only move within certain parts of Deir ez Zor governorate.**

Negative developments since April

Eastern Ghouta area (higher security risks associated to movement inside area; new checkpoints)

No civilian movement allowed

Burza* (since February 2017)
Joura, Qosour (since June 2016)
Qaboun* (since April 2017)

* While an increase in civilian movement was reported in these communities in May, it only referred to pre-planned evacuations of residents.

Movement of Commercial Vehicles

There was a slight increase in the number of communities reporting commercial access in May, as compared to April.

- No commercial vehicles were permitted to enter 11 of the assessed communities during May.
- Some commercial vehicles were allowed to enter Abu Kamal and Sosa, Al Waer, At Tall, Bait Jan and Mazraet Beit Jin, Bqine and Madaya, Khan Elshih, Hama and Qudsiya, Madamiyet Elsham, the Eastern Ghouta communities and the Wadi Burda area. The most common restrictions on commercial traffic included searches, fees, documentation requirements and partial confiscation of loads.
- **Beitema, Beit Saber and Kafr Hoor remained the only communities to report unrestricted commercial access in May, as was also the case in April.**

No commercial vehicles allowed

Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu (since June 2016)
Burza, Jober, Tadamon (since June 2016)
Hajar Aswad (since June 2016)
Joura, Qosour (since June 2016)
Qaboun (since April 2017)
Yarmuk (since June 2016)

Movement of Humanitarian Vehicles

There was an increase in the number of communities reporting the entry of aid in May, with 23 of them receiving deliveries, as compared to 5 in April.

- For the first time since October 2016, humanitarian vehicles entered Burza in May, distributing bread among residents. Three deliveries also occurred in Qaboun throughout May; in both communities, no restrictions on the aid deliveries were reported.
- In the Wadi Burda area, where aid was delivered for the second time since assessments of the communities began, no restrictions on entry were reported. However, the delivery was only directed towards poorer families, and limited amounts of goods resulted in overcrowding.
- Across remaining locations which received aid in May, humanitarian vehicles were subject to restrictions, including documentation requirements, searches and confiscation of goods.
- **No humanitarian deliveries were reported in 19 of the assessed communities in May.**

No aid entering

Abu Kamal, Sosa (since assessments began - April 2017)
Al Waer (since October 2016)
At Tall (since January 2017)
Ar Rastan, Talbiseh (since March 2017)
Bait Jan area (since assessments began - November 2016)
Hajar Aswad (since assessments began - June 2016)
Jober, Tadamon (since assessments began - June 2016)
Khan Elshih (since February 2017)
Madamiyet Elsham (since January 2017)
Madaya (since March 2017)
Qaboun (since assessments began - April 2017)
Taldu (since April 2017)
Yarmuk (since April 2017)

Health Situation

In May, the health situation improved across various locations, but remained critical in those communities facing the tightest access restrictions.

- The situation in Qaboun, reported as critical since at least April, continued to deteriorate in May, as the last medical facility closed, with the remaining medical personnel leaving the community, and medical items were seized.
- The health situation also deteriorated in Burza, Joura and Qosour, due to continued access restrictions, and in Yarmuk, following the closure of primary healthcare facilities.
- **The overall health situation in Madaya improved in May following the entry of medical items, the reopening of healthcare facilities and the return of some medical personnel to the community. Entry of medical items also improved the situations in Jober and Eastern Ghouta, while a round of immunizations was administered in Ar Rastan. Additionally, more doctors were reported in Taldu.**

Negative developments since April

- Burza*** (depleting stocks of medical items, decrease in personnel)
- Joura, Qosour*** (depleting stocks of medical items, higher caseload due to deteriorating security situation)
- Qaboun*** (no remaining medical facilities or personnel)
- Yarmuk** (closure of primary healthcare facilities, decreased availability of medical items)

*These communities experienced a critical health situation this month.

Food Security

While positive developments related to food security were reported across several communities in May, the situation remained critical in those locations facing the tightest restrictions on movement and access.

- Following the partial lifting of access restrictions in Madaya, food could enter in May via commercial vehicles and civilians bringing such items from nearby communities, improving overall food security. For the first time since assessments began, no negative coping strategies were reported in May.
- The entry of some commercial vehicles into Eastern Ghouta in May, and improvements in the security situation in Jober, increased availability of assessed food items in those areas.
- **Due to extreme access restrictions and depleting food stocks, food security continued to deteriorate in Burza, Joura, Qosour and Qaboun; in Joura and Qosour, all assessed coping strategies related to a lack of food⁴ were reported.**

Negative developments since April

- Burza*** (decreased availability of core food items, rising prices)
- Joura, Qosour*** (decreased availability of core food items)
- Qaboun*** (decreased availability of core food items)

*These communities experienced a critical food insecurity this month.

Access to Services

While some communities reported better access to water and electricity in May, following structural repairs, increased seasonal demand resulted in water reported as insufficient in others. In most assessed communities, it was reported that with summer vacations, children were out of schools.

- Access to water, which has been declining in Ar Rastan, Talbiseh and Taldu since March, deteriorated further in May, as demand increased due to seasonal needs.
- Across assessed locations, the number of communities reporting insufficient access to drinking water increased from 8 in April to 10 in May.
- All educational facilities across communities assessed in Deir ez Zor governorate - Abu Kamal, Joura, Qosour, Sosa - remained closed due to security concerns as well as disagreements about the curriculum between parents and local authorities.
- **Following repairs to the water networks, access to drinking water increased in Abu Kamal, Bqine and Madaya, and across all Wadi Burda communities in May.**

Negative developments since April

- Ar Rastan, Talbiseh, Taldu** (decrease in water access)
- Joura, Qosour** (decrease in fuel availability)
- Qaboun** (destruction of water infrastructure, decrease in water structure)

Critically poor access to services

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

Communities that signed truce agreements

Since September 2016, 17 of the communities assessed by REACH have signed truce agreements. These include Al Waer, At Tall, Hama, Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham, Madaya, Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, and the seven Wadi Burda communities. In May, the humanitarian situation continued to improve in some of these communities, while it remained largely unchanged in others.

Improved humanitarian situation: Al Waer, At Tall, Madaya, Wadi Burda

- Access restrictions were finally relaxed in **Madaya** in May, after the Four Towns Agreements was implemented in mid-April. For the first time since assessments of the community began in June 2016, civilian movement and commercial access was permitted, improving food security which had previously been critically poor. Following repairs, the community was able to re-connect to the electrical and water networks. Further, subsequent to the entry of medical items and return of some medical personnel, the overall health situation improved and health facilities reopened in May. Despite improvements in the security situation, men in the community reported perceived risks of detention and conscription.
- The situation continued to improve in Al Waer and across Wadi Burda, which had signed agreements in March and January, respectively. The final round of evacuations took place in May in **Al Waer**, leaving an estimated 4,000-6,000 residents in the community. Food security improved due to increased movement of commercial vehicles and civilians bringing goods from nearby communities, with no negative coping strategies reported for the first time since assessments of the community began (June 2016). In **Wadi Burda**, humanitarian aid entered for the second time since the agreement, and access to drinking water improved following additional repairs to the water network. Perceived risks of detention and surveillance continued to be reported by men in the Wadi Burda communities.
- While the overall humanitarian situation in **At Tall** remained largely unchanged, access to electricity, which had been disrupted in April, was restored following repairs to the network.

Unchanged humanitarian situation: Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor, Hama and Qudsiya, Khan Elshih, Madamiyet Elsham

- There were no substantive changes reported in May in **Hama and Qudsiya**, and **Madamiyet Elsham**, which signed truce agreements in October and September 2016, respectively. While a majority of residents in all three locations could move freely, documentation requirements remained in place and certain restrictions on the entry of commercial vehicles persisted. In Madamiyet Elsham, the increase in civilian movement experienced in April, with populations feeling more comfortable in using formal access points, remained as such in May. Conversely, in Hama and Qudsiya, perceptions of heightened risks of detention and conscription, first reported in April, persisted. As has been the case in previous months, humanitarian aid targeting the most vulnerable families entered Hama and Qudsiya in May.
- The situation also remained unchanged in three of the **Bait Jan communities** which had signed an agreement in January (Beit Saber, Betima and Kafr Hoor), with residents able to move freely, and stable access to food and services. The situation inside **Khan Elshih**, which had reported an improvement in April, did not change in May, with some civilian and commercial movement allowed. However, various restrictions related to such access remained, and risks of detention and conscription continued to be reported, as has been the case since the implementation of the truce agreement in December 2016.

Conclusion

- Restrictions on civilian and vehicle movement continued to negatively affect populations across assessed communities in May. The implementation of truce agreements and the subsequent lifting of access restrictions resulted in the overall improvement to the humanitarian situations in Al Waer, Madaya and the Wadi Burda communities, while ongoing hostilities and/or extreme access restrictions continued to negatively affect Abu Kamal, Burza, Deir ez Zor city (Joura, Qosour), Qaboun and Sosa.
- Among communities where a truce agreement had been implemented, relative positive developments were reported in Al Waer, At Tall, Madaya and the Wadi Burda area. No significant changes were noted in Bait Jan (Beit Saber, Betima, Kafr Hoor), Hama and Qudsiya, Khan Elshih and Madamiyet Elsham, in comparison to April.
- **Based on data regarding the humanitarian situation in May, in the communities of Burza, Deir ez Zor city (Joura, Qosour) and Qaboun, populations indicated critical levels of vulnerability. Conversely, populations in the communities of Al Waer, Madaya and the Wadi Burda area experienced relative improvements, although ongoing monitoring will be required to assess further developments in these locations.**

About REACH

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. For more information, you can write to our global office (geneva@reach-initiative.org) or to our Syria Regional Coordinator (zulfiye.kazim@reach-initiative.org).

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