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SIEGES IN SYRIA: PROFITEERING FROM MISERY

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Five years of war in Syria has seen the emergence of a war economy that is further incentivizing the prolongation of the conflict, as well as certain military practices that offer lucrative financial reward. One such practice is the imposition of sieges. No longer simply a military tactic to subdue opponents, sieges have also become a profitable enterprise, encompassing a complex web of businessmen, traders and armed actors, each of whom benefit at the expense of besieged civilians. This paper by scholar Will Todman reveals the intricate details of the siege economy, and the challenges facing humanitarian relief providers who are obliged to deal with the illicit siege business in order to prevent widespread starvation among besieged civilians.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ Seventy-eight percent of Syria's besieged population are under sieges imposed by the Syrian government and its allies
- ◆ Traders within and outside besieged areas coordinate with businessmen to maintain monopolies of supplies, resulting in significant price hikes of basic goods for besieged civilians
- ◆ The siege enterprise reaches the upper echelons of the Assad regime, which awards contracts to businessmen and traders to supply goods to the besieged areas
- ◆ Armed rebel groups also benefit from the trade, collecting fees from traders and managing distribution to besieged civilians
- ◆ Some NGOs participate in the illicit siege enterprise by relying on traders to provide essential goods to besieged civilians
- ◆ U.N. convoys have proven to be the most effective in undermining the siege enterprise as they bypass traders, and supply goods directly to checkpoints

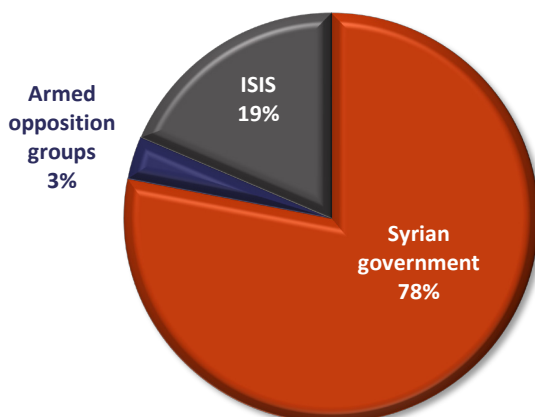
INTRODUCTION

On June 9, 2016, a joint U.N.-Syrian Arab Red Crescent aid convoy with food entered the besieged Damascus suburb of Daraya for the first time since November 2012. However, hours later the Syrian government bombarded it with 28 barrel bombs, preventing local factions from delivering the aid.¹

While having some of the worst conditions in all of Syria, Daraya is just one of a number of populated areas under siege in Syria. In May 2016, the U.N. estimated that 592,700 people lived in besieged areas in Syria, the majority of which are imposed by the Syrian government.² As illustrated below, of the total, 462,700 (78.1 percent) are besieged by the Syrian government in various locations in rural Damascus, al-Wa'er in Homs, and Yarmouk camp; 110,000 (18.6 percent) are besieged by ISIS in Deir Ezzor city; and 20,000 (3.4 percent) are besieged by armed opposition groups in Fu'ah and Kefraya.

Siege warfare in Syria emerged as a brutal tactic of counter-insurgency that the regime deployed early in the uprising when it failed to locate insurgents in urban areas.

Percentage of besieged people per perpetrator



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Sealing off whole areas and preventing the entry of goods and the movement of people, sieges aimed to force a restive population to surrender.

Siege tactics had a number of benefits, and proved an effective defensive tactic by cutting off areas of dissent that had the potential to spread to the regime's key strongholds. For example, besieging rebel-held areas in the Damascus suburbs has prevented the spread of fighting into the city center. Sieges have also been an efficient military tactic as the Syrian army has become increasingly over-stretched, as they require less manpower than would a full ground assault.

However, while the siege of eastern Ghouta has achieved the defensive objective of preventing any major rebel offensive on Damascus city from the area, it has failed thus far in forcing the besieged population to surrender.

Indeed, in most besieged areas instances of bribery and smuggling are common, and often conducted by the very forces besieging the area. The prevalence of these illicit

practices implies that economic incentives are now one of the primary drivers of sieges in Syria, as they have become embedded in the country's war economy.

SYRIA'S WAR ECONOMY

The Syrian war has resulted in a ravaged infrastructure, a significant drop in economic output, and a sharp decline in investment. The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated the total accumulative loss to the Syrian economy by the end of 2015 to be in excess of \$254 billion.³ The devaluation of the Syrian pound reached new highs in May 2016, when the Syrian Central Bank issued the official exchange rate between as SY £620 to \$1.⁴

Despite this economic destruction, President Bashar al-Assad has expended considerable resources to ensure that services are still provided to areas under regime control—a key element of his strategy of legitimization.

Waging war is, nevertheless, a costly endeavor that has cut into the regime's bottom line. The regime has not only had to procure weapons, military equipment and ammunition, but has also had to pay, feed, treat and transport troops, and repair damage to vital infrastructure.

In order to achieve this, government spending has been cut, external allies have provided economic assistance, new investment projects have been abandoned, and the regime has come to rely more heavily on the business elite, whose interests are linked with the regime's survival.

Another important source of income has come from allowing the spread of corruption and other nefarious activities, including theft and demanding ransoms for kidnapped civilians.⁵

Both the Syrian army and pro-government militias have a history of profiting from illicit economic practices, such as smuggling drugs from Lebanon, a practice that has been ongoing since the 1970s.⁶ Officers from the Syrian government are known to take cuts of the militias' revenues and accepted bribes. These practices have continued and intensified during the current conflict.

One of the most lucrative means by which pro-government militias and army officers have benefitted economically since the beginning of the uprising has been from their control over check-

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points in Syria. At times, the regime has allowed pro-government militias to benefit financially from the conflict in exchange for supporting the Syrian army in key military offensives. In 2015, the regime gave the militias free rein over areas of Aleppo, and they set up checkpoints and extracted fees from civilians in order to pass.⁷

THE SIEGE ENTERPRISE— BUSINESSMEN, TRADERS, ARMED GROUPS

Since sieges are imposed by armed forces erecting checkpoints on strategic entry points to the besieged area, they provide ample opportunities for many illegal economic practises. Instances of armed groups allowing in goods to besieged areas in exchange for bribes are most common in sieges in rural areas, such as the countryside surrounding Damascus. Here, agricultural land is often contained within the perimeter of the siege, and so the population has the ability to produce a limited amount of its own food. Thus, the tactic of attempting to starve the besieged population into submission is less feasible, which helps explain the prevalence of bribery. As a resident of the besieged town of Douma in Rural Damascus said, “only corruption can explain why the siege has endured so

“Instances of armed groups allowing in goods to besieged areas in exchange for bribes are most common in sieges in rural areas.”

long.”⁸ Nevertheless, the regime recognizes the importance of depriving besieged areas of the ability to provide food through self-sustenance, and thus forcing besieged populations to rely on traders. This was evident last month, with the regime seizing the southern part of eastern Ghouta, including 10,000 acres of wheat fields and 100,000 fruit trees, which will significantly affect the amount of food that can be grown inside the besieged area, and likely result in a spike in food prices.⁹

Soldiers at checkpoints are incentivized to exploit their position as much as possible due to the nature of their deployment. Neither Syrian army soldiers nor members of pro-government militias are told how long they will be deployed to checkpoints. With the regime unable to pay their wages in full due to its increasing economic constraints, those posted to checkpoints are encouraged to extract as much money as possible before they are moved to another posting, which may have limited opportunities for making money, if at all. The system is semi-regularized, as the soldiers are allowed to keep a certain portion of the revenue they generate, with the rest going to the regime’s coffers. During the spring of 2014, soldiers

from the Presidential Guard and Air Force Intelligence took \$2 for each kilogram of food allowed into eastern Ghouta at the Wafideen Checkpoint, which later became known as the ‘One Million Crossing’ as soldiers were believed to make SY £1 million per hour (roughly \$5,000) from bribes.¹⁰

It is rare for civilians to pay armed forces at checkpoints directly for goods, but rather, intermediaries known as ‘traders’ per-

“Traders negotiate permission from the regime to purchase goods from businessmen outside the besieged area, and coordinate with them to deliver the goods to the checkpoint.”

form the exchanges. These traders are typically businessmen who lived or worked in the besieged area before the conflict, thus having local connections. The majority of businessmen who remain in Syria have ties with the regime—a crucial quality for them to be able to operate. Traders negotiate permission from the regime to purchase goods from businessmen outside the besieged area, and coordinate with them to deliver the goods to the checkpoint.

PROFILE OF A TRADER

Abu Ayman al-Manfush, a wealthy businessman in his 40s originating from the besieged town of Mesraba, is the most prominent trader in eastern Ghouta. He has used his personal connections with the Syrian regime, rumored to be with the office of Bashar al-Assad himself, to secure permission to import food and fuel to the besieged

area of eastern Ghouta, and to export dairy products and electrical items from the area to Damascus.¹¹

Even though no cease-fire has been signed, his local area of Mesraba has been spared the vast majority of regime attacks, seemingly part of the arrangement.

The regime benefits by taking a cut of his profits, and those inside the besieged area benefit as he employs over 1,000 workers, pays the salaries of some local bureaucratic employees, and provides a degree of security to those living near his factory.¹² A resident of eastern Ghouta estimated that before the tunnels came into regular use, he made a daily profit of at least \$10,000.¹³

Businessmen can buy contracts from the highest levels of the regime in order to have an effective monopoly over the supply of a certain good into the besieged area.¹⁴ The trader inside the besieged area must also have a relationship with the rebel armed

groups operating there and fees or goods must be paid for the trader to pass between the checkpoints.

Once these goods are inside the besieged area, the traders often hoard them and release them strategically to maximize their profit. After having paid the expenses of importing the goods, the traders mark prices up by as much as 70 percent, meaning their profit is roughly 40 percent of the goods' final cost.¹⁵ The result of this process, coupled with the high demand caused by the general lack of availability, is an exorbitant spike in prices of basic goods to prohibitive levels. Prices are constantly fluctuating, according to demand and the besieged population's ability to buy them. The table below shows a comparison of reported prices of basic goods in Damascus and the besieged eastern Ghouta when they were at their peak during the winter of 2013-14.

ITEM	DAMASCUS CITY	BESIEGED EASTERN GHOUTA
SUGAR (1 KG)	\$0.66	\$19
RICE (1 KG)	\$0.67	\$21
BREAD (1.5 KG)	\$0.16	\$11

When a tunnel out of eastern Ghouta controlled by armed opposition groups was opened for humanitarian goods in the summer of 2015, the prices of staple goods supplied by traders dropped significantly.¹⁶ This tunnel bypassed regime checkpoints, leading to a hidden location in regime-con-

trolled territory. As such, traders outside the siege who were aligned with the besieged opposition groups were able to send weapons and goods to the besieged fighters.

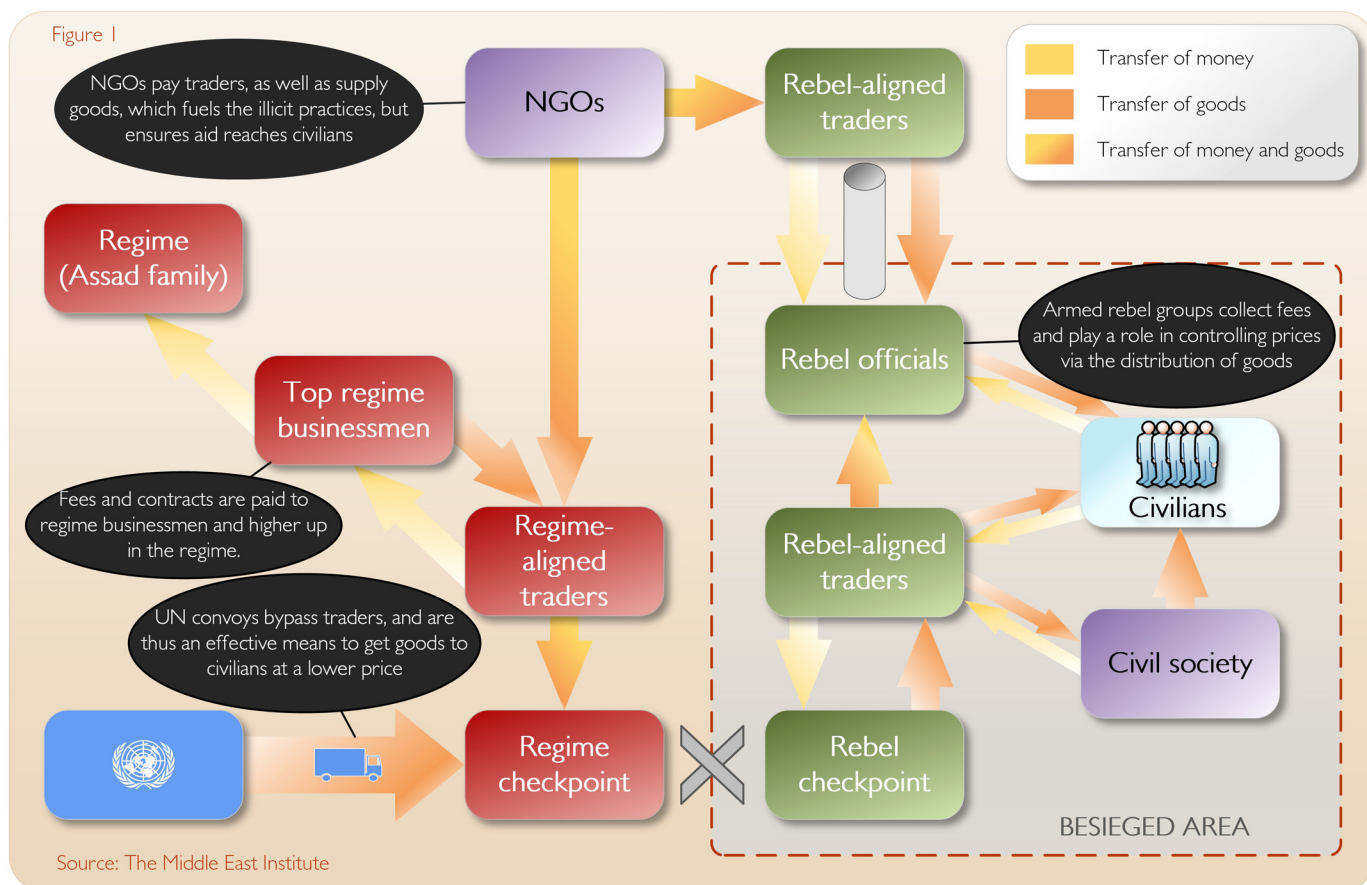
Given extreme levels of unemployment and poverty in besieged areas, civilians are only able to pay for these goods as a result of money transfers from relatives or connections living outside the besieged area, or due to assistance from humanitarian organizations. The financial and material exchanges between various actors in the siege of eastern Ghouta are summarized in Figure 1.

The figure shows the number of different actors who benefit financially from the existence of the siege. There are three main ways in which goods enter the besieged area, listed from most to least frequent:

1. TRADERS ALIGNED WITH THE REGIME

Traders, such as Abu Ayman Manfush, provide the regime with a cut of their profits in exchange for permission to import goods to the besieged area. They liaise with businessmen outside of the siege area to source the goods, which are then transported through regime checkpoints. NGOs occasionally contract these traders to deliver aid to besieged areas. The traders must also have relationships with officials from armed groups inside the besieged area, as armed rebels extract fees from traders in order to facilitate the operation.

Figure 1



2. TRADERS ALIGNED WITH ARMED GROUPS (THROUGH TUNNELS)

After the construction of tunnels connecting eastern Ghouta with the rebel-held areas of al-Qaboun and Barzeh, which have agreed a truce with the regime, goods could be more easily smuggled into the besieged area. Although regime checkpoints are circumvented, the opposition armed groups that control the tunnels take a cut of traders' profits from importing goods into eastern Ghouta.

3. U.N. CONVOYS

U.N. convoys are the most effective way of limiting profiteering. The goods are not

sourced through the same regime-aligned traders, and bribes are not taken at checkpoints. However, some goods that the regime believes could be used by opposition armed groups to their advantage are removed. A besieged resident of al-Wa'er in Homs said that diapers were always removed from aid shipments under the pretext that they could be used as bandages for injured fighters. Removing other items helps ensure that favored traders maintain their monopolies over certain goods.

Such convoys are rare. In May 2016, the Syrian government authorized the United Nations to deliver assistance to 24.7 percent of the planned beneficiaries in full and to 33.8 percent with conditions. Requests to deliver

er assistance to 41.5 percent of the planned beneficiaries were not approved.¹⁷

Traders also control the flow of goods *out* of besieged areas. Although goods tend to be severely depleted in besieged areas, at times farmers sell agricultural products to traders to be exported outside of the siege, and civilians also sell personal belongings to traders. Given the lack of electricity in the besieged areas, people on the inside do not have the means to use electrical goods and so traders purchase and sell them on the outside. At each checkpoint they pass, traders must pay armed groups fees to traverse with these goods.

Therefore, exporting goods from besieged areas is another way in which both traders and rebels benefit financially.

“A number of inhabitants of besieged areas stated that both regime and opposition forces benefited from the existence of the siege.”

FIGHTERS ON BOTH SIDES PROFIT FROM SIEGE

A number of inhabitants of besieged areas stated that both regime and opposition forces benefited from the existence of the siege. The extent to which armed groups on the inside exploit the situation for financial or material gain varies considerably. However, besieged residents expressed widespread resentment at rebel groups for hoarding supplies, diverting humanitarian aid, and

profiting from the smuggling. Riots and protests against rebels in besieged areas are common. Armed rebel groups are not alone in having been accused of amassing limited supplies. In eastern Ghouta, civilians rioted against a hospital in 2015, accusing it of stockpiling fuel. Civil society groups seem unable to constrain armed actors' exploitation of the siege conditions, and struggle to challenge their relationships with traders.

Beyond smuggling and trading goods, armed actors on both sides often demand significant sums of money for civilians to leave the besieged area. This practice either

involves the passage of civilians through checkpoints, the besieged airport (in the case of Deir Ezzor), or tunnels controlled by armed rebels inside the besieged areas.

The city of Deir Ezzor in the east of Syria is controlled by the Syrian regime and besieged by ISIS forces. However, government forces place so many restrictions on the flow of goods and the movement of people that the civilian population is effectively under siege by both ISIS and the regime.

Former residents of the city confirmed that they had paid the regime between £150,000 SYP and £300,000 SYP (c.\$625-\$1,360) for seats on military aircraft to escape the siege, becoming a lucrative source of revenue for the regime.

Residents of Douma in eastern Ghouta have also protested the rebels' control over tunnels on multiple occasions. In 2015, armed groups inside the besieged area developed a semi-official system for use of a tunnel out of eastern Ghouta, with a formal application process necessary for civilians' passage out of the besieged area. One resident of eastern Ghouta expressed their anger at opposition armed groups:

“There is no siege, this is a lie. How can there be a siege when the head of [Jaish al-Islam] can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year and appear in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, or when 1,000 of his fighters leave Ghouta last month to go and allegedly fight ISIS in Qalamoun? [...] There are arrangements in place to suck the best out of this area, allowing certain actors to benefit, while civilians suffer.”¹⁸

However, it is important to recognize that these practices do not occur in all sieges.

“How can there be a siege when the head of [Jaish al-Islam] can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year?”

In 2014 during the siege of Yarmouk, for example, smuggling was severely restricted and there is little evidence of armed actors benefiting financially from the siege. Likewise, Hezbollah forces took control of the checkpoints surrounding the town of Madaya, north of Damascus, in late 2015, and cracked down on the corruption and smuggling networks that had been allowed by Syrian government forces. As such, the siege intensified and the humanitarian situation swiftly deteriorated. Médecins sans Frontières reported that at least 16 people died from malnutrition in the winter of 2015-16 as a result.¹⁹

HUMANITARIAN AID AND THE WAR ECONOMY

The situation in Madaya demonstrated the devastating impact of what happens when humanitarian assistance does not reach a besieged population. Aid has been instrumental in preventing further civilian casualties in besieged areas, but given armed actors' stranglehold over the entry of goods, it is inevitable that it interacts with this war economy.

Even after the improved access to besieged areas that came as part of the negotiations surrounding the recent cessation of hostilities, the U.N. reached less than a

“As much as 90 percent of the aid to eastern Ghouta is diverted by those who profiteer from the conflict.”

quarter of the Syria's besieged population with food aid in March.²⁰

However, many NGOs provide assistance to besieged areas in Syria. Due to the operational risks of data falling into the hands of parties in the conflict who wish to control aid delivery into besieged areas, figures for aid delivered through informal mechanisms, such as local organizations and INGOs operating covertly, are not collected.

The moral aspect of providing aid that interacts with a war economy and benefits certain armed actors is hugely complex. By stocking local markets, aid may fuel pre-existing illicit economic practices such as looting and predation.

As can be seen in Figure 1, many NGOs deliver aid to besieged areas by setting up relationships with traders who are aligned to various armed groups, either to get goods through checkpoints, or to smuggle it through tunnels. A humanitarian provider estimated that as much as 90 percent of the aid to eastern Ghouta is diverted by those who profiteer from the conflict.²¹

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

As the illicit practices that have come to constitute the war economy in besieged areas have become entrenched, those who benefit have grown more powerful, and their grip has tightened. To undercut their

exploitative practices most effectively, a fundamental shift in aid provision is necessary.

One such shift could be the expansion of airdrops to besieged areas, which the international community is currently considering more seriously. Airdrops would bypass many of the stages of the war economy listed above, and would help force market prices in besieged areas down. However, Staffan de Mistura, the U.N.'s Special Envoy to Syria, warned that airdrops were a “last resort,” being “the most expensive, the most complicated and the most dangerous” way to get aid to besieged areas.²²

So far, the U.N. has only attempted to drop aid to Deir Ezzor city. The first attempt, in February 2016, was fraught with difficulties. Out of the 21 pallets of food dropped by the World Food Program (W.F.P.), seven landed in no man's land, four were damaged, and ten remained unaccounted for.

Although more recent attempts have been more successful, residents of Deir Ezzor complain that they see little of the aid from airdrops. Regime soldiers frequently seize pallets and then distribute them to their families and supporters, before selling the rest at exorbitant prices in the city's markets.²³

As such, airdrops are not immune to diversion and profiteering, as with other methods of delivering aid to besieged areas. For them to be successful, careful coordination must take place between the U.N. and local civil groups inside the besieged areas, to ensure that the aid is not seized by armed groups.

The type of aid that is delivered should also be tailored in a way that promotes self-reliance and sustainability within the besieged areas. If airdrops are considered more widely, humanitarian providers should take the opportunity to provide the types of aid that are frequently removed from land convoys. Medicines and medical equipment should be complemented with seeds and agricultural tools to foster domestic level food production. Cheap forms of renewable energy generation would also help undercut the monopolies certain traders enjoy on fuel provision.

The International Syria Support Group (I.S.S.G.), including Russia, agreed in May 2016 that if the U.N. was denied access to any besieged areas in Syria by June 1, then the W.F.P. should proceed with a program of air bridges and air drops to deliver humanitarian aid.²⁴ Although it was a crucial development that all parties of the I.S.S.G. pledged their support for such a move, the deadline has passed without, as of writing, implementation. It would be extremely difficult to implement the plan in rural Damascus, despite Russia's backing.

The United States, in its ongoing negotiations with Russia to re-launch the Syrian peace process as well as its direct discussions with the Iranians, should press for greater humanitarian access to besieged areas as a condition for the renewal of talks. Winning Russian and Iranian support for greater humanitarian access to besieged areas is crucial to obtain cooperation from the Syrian government. In turn, the United States can pressure rebel groups via their backers in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to allow similar access, while coordinating with Russia and the U.N. to improve aid delivery to areas besieged by ISIS. This will also serve as a confidence-building measure for peace talks, and discourage all actors from imposing sieges as an act of warfare.

This conflict has shown that the victims of sieges are often not the targeted armed forces, but ordinary civilians caught in the wrong place, as illustrated in the below quote from a resident of besieged Douma:

“I want you to tell the world that I have played no role in this conflict. I am not with any armed group, faction, or sect. I have no job, no food for my children, and no means of escaping this hell. Every day, we see the barrel bombs and we expect to die. We are waiting for death. May God protect our souls, just let us die.”²⁵

ENDNOTES

The information in this article was collected from 21 interviews with humanitarian and diplomatic officials, as well as from surveys completed by 16 inhabitants of besieged areas in Syria.

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