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The Syria Campaign Briefing: Sieges

A million civilians are besieged in Syria as mass-starvation is being used as a weapon of war. Collectively punishing a population and using hunger as a weapon are both war crimes.

This briefing provides information on the situation in Syria today as well as recommendations for governments.

Situation

1. **An estimated million people are living under siege in Syria.** People in these areas have no freedom of movement, no access to food, water or medical supplies beyond what they can smuggle in or resource locally. International aid reaches these areas extremely rarely if at all.¹
2. **Hundreds of civilians have starved to death** across the besieged areas while many thousands have died as a result of malnutrition-related disease or the blockade on medical aid. All of the recorded siege-related deaths have occurred in areas besieged by the Syrian government and its allies.²
3. **The sieges by the Syrian government are the tightest.** Air drops have been carried out on areas besieged by rebel groups and there remains an open airport controlled by the Syrian government within the area besieged by Isis.
4. **The Syrian government is blocking aid deliveries to 99% of people under siege.** Of the 52 communities under siege, 49 of them are besieged by the government, 2 by the rebels and 1 by Isis. Deir Ezzor, the area besieged externally by Isis, contains a government airport that could be used to deliver aid. So far the government has denied the UN access to this airport citing safety concerns, despite using it several times a day for its own military needs.³

¹ 'Siege Watch' (www.siegewatch.org) - the most comprehensive study of besieged areas in Syria, a collaboration between the The Syria Institute (syriainstitute.org) and PAX (www.paxforpeace.nl). According to the UN, 4.5 million more live in 'hard to reach' areas, 68% of whom have not been reached by UN aid for three months <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1542221.pdf>

² Syrian American Medical Society. Slow Death Report <http://syriaundersiege.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/For-web-REPORT.pdf> and on Madaya: https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/images/Report_Madaya_Starvation_Under_Siege.pdf

³ Even by the UN's own flawed besieged population figures, the percentage of civilians denied aid by the Syrian government is 97% according to the UN OCHA's latest report to the Security Council in December 2015 <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1542221.pdf>. Residents in Deir Ezzor say the government is denying aid to the area because they want to maintain control over the local population - one of the first to rise up against Bashar al-Assad's rule. There are also widespread reports of government forces extorting bribes from civilians for food and to exit the siege via the airport.

UN failure

1. **The UN is waiting for authorisation from the Syrian government it does not need.** Three UN Security Council resolutions permit UN agencies to deliver aid into besieged areas without permission from the Syrian government: “[T]he United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners are authorized to use routes across conflict lines”.⁴ The Syrian government is working with the UN to distribute billions of dollars of international aid to areas under its control. It should not be allowed to veto aid delivery to other areas.
2. **The UN is silencing sieges.** The UN figures for besieged areas grossly underrepresent the scale of the problem. There are credible reports that individual UN agencies have pushed internally to downgrade the classification of areas from ‘besieged’ to ‘hard to reach’ in order to improve their relationship and access with the Syrian government. Madaya, the besieged area where no aid has reached the population for six months and so many have recently starved to death, is not classified by the UN as a siege⁵.
3. **The UN’s impartiality is seriously in question.** The UN’s Syria response is divided between Damascus and offices in Turkey and Jordan. There are internal divisions within the organisation and concerns that the personnel in Damascus, some of whose relationships with government officials pre-date the current crisis, are compromising the impartiality of the operation. Furthermore, the UN’s Damascus office agreed to a last-minute request from the Syrian government to remove all mention of ‘siege’ or ‘besieged’ from the UN’s Humanitarian Response Plan, the key document to be discussed at the London donor conference on February 4, 2016.⁶

Recommendations

Governments should:

1. **Push the UN to break the sieges today.** Demand UN agencies, particularly the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), exercise their authority under UN Security Council Resolutions 2165, 2191 and 2258 to deliver aid to civilians under siege, without waiting for bureaucratic permission. Any security threats related to delivery should be immediately reported to the UN Security Council.

⁴ UNSCRs 2165, 2191 and 2258

⁵ According to the last update to the Security Council in December 2015, Madaya was not listed by the UN as besieged. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1542221.pdf>

⁶ Humanitarian Response Plan 2016
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_hrp_syrian_arab_republic.pdf



2. **Demand transparency from the UN on sieges.** There needs to be clarity on the UN's population statistics and classification of besieged areas. This should never be subject to political negotiation by UN staff in Damascus.
3. **Strongly consider air drops.** In the case of continued denial of aid, states should air drop food and medical supplies to the besieged communities most at risk. The use of air drops by the US to the besieged Yazidi community on Mount Sinjar in Iraq in 2014 shows that this is possible and can reduce deaths.

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The Syria Campaign is an independent advocacy group campaigning for a peaceful and democratic future for Syria.