



Atlantic Council

DIGITAL FORENSIC
RESEARCH LAB

Breaking Ghouta



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BACKGROUND

The breaking of Ghouta was a pivotal event in the Syrian war. Its fall removed any enduring threat to the Syrian capital, freed up Syrian government military resources for other fronts, demoralized Syrians opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, both armed and unarmed, and demonstrated that his forces were confident enough with their military situation to attack a heavily fortified opposition stronghold, ostensibly protected by an internationally recognized de-escalation agreement. Capturing Ghouta rewarded the government and its allies for years of visible mass atrocities and continued to weaken the international rules-based order. This report provides an evidence base for a concerted effort to hold the perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable, helping to demonstrate that regimes may not act with impunity against their own people.

The most important geography of the Syrian war is not Aleppo, the northern provinces, or the US-held northeast but the suburbs north and east of Damascus, known as eastern Ghouta. From the outset of the war, the regime recognized that an approach from Ghouta was the most likely axis for a rebel attack on the capital. Districts of Damascus are within rocket and mortar range of Ghouta. For years such attacks undermined the regime narrative of providing security in, and shielding its capital from, the immediate effects of the war. In February 2013, the rebels in the Damascus suburbs reached the outer ring road of the capital and its Jobar district—the closest they would get to directly threatening it. Ultimately, Assad resorted to chemical weapons gas attacks in the government's early attempts at breaking Ghouta, without success. It expended a great deal of effort at keeping insurgents confined to Ghouta itself.¹

The Syrian government knew that Ghouta contained some of the insurgency's more capable and organized militant groups, including the Islamist group Jaish al-Islam based in Douma and led by the late Zahran Alloush. This militia, at home in its environment and less susceptible to the infighting that plagued so many other rebel

groups, was a resilient and resourceful opponent. In May 2013, the regime opted to impose a siege on the area, which remained in place for some five years.² Yet these insurgents held out against years of siege, constant bombing, and chemical warfare until pressure on the militias' smuggling networks, aerial bombardment, and waning interest from foreign sponsors broke opposition resistance during the final assault on the enclave between February and April of this year.

Ghouta's crucial geostrategic location partly explains its especially harsh treatment by the regime—from the longest siege since Sarajevo to the largest and most lethal chemical attack of the war in August 2013—culminating in its systematic destruction and depopulation through large-scale population transfers in 2018.³

The significance of the final regime offensive on Ghouta, its military success, and the lasting effects on Syria are profound. To start, that a regime offensive took place at all spoke to the advanced stage of its war effort elsewhere in the country, the imbalance of power, and the state of geopolitical alignments. Although the regime had always recognized Ghouta's importance, it was never able to subdue the rebels there and had opted for a siege and attrition strategy instead, not least because it lacked the manpower to capture Ghouta without pulling much-needed fighters from other active fronts.

The Ghouta offensive was a watershed moment partly because it signalled, and was made possible only by, transformations in the Syrian civil war. For it to succeed, the war had to reach a point at which the government was comfortable with its strategic situation in key areas such as Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, and the south. In a series of similar military operations across the country since August 2016, the regime has besieged, bombarded, and forcibly displaced those unwilling to surrender to

1 Human Rights Watch report "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," September 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf.

2 United Nations, United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, (1 February 2018), available from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A-HRC-37-72_EN.pdf.

3 PAX report "Siege Watch: Tenth Quarterly Report Part 1 – Eastern Ghouta," February-April 2018, <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/siege-watch-10-part-1>.

A boy is seen on rubble of damaged buildings in the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, in Damascus, Syria March 21, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh



it, and returned long-held pockets of resistance to its control. That success is testament to the insurgency's waning power and the international community's failure to prevent or reverse this trend through intervention or indirect support even as the regime's human rights violations continued.

The fall of Ghouta also marked the end of any meaningful existential threat to the Syrian government from a once-menacing Syrian uprising. By eliminating the proximate threat to the Syrian capital and securing much of the government's core sociopolitical base, Assad was able to restore some normalcy in Damascus and project the inevitability of a regime victory. The symbolism was potent and likely had a demoralizing effect on insurgents elsewhere, facilitating further military advances against the rebels and ending a long period of danger for the government.

The regime's takeover of Ghouta highlights a broader issue, as it was the culmination of years of "kneel or starve" siege tactics, indiscriminate aerial bombardment, cynical manipulation of truce and ceasefire, and the likely use of chemical weapons

against population zones. The significance lies less in the regime's using these tactics—it was reasonable to expect it would do anything it could to ensure its own survival—than in the fact that it not only went unpunished for, but ultimately was rewarded by, the fall of Ghouta. Not once in six years of war in Ghouta was there a meaningful international effort to disrupt Assad's atrocities or exact a serious price for them. That Assad got away with and ultimately profited from the siege, starving, bombing, and gassing of hundreds of thousands was a watershed moment in itself, not only for the Syrian conflict but for international relations and the prospect of a decent, rules-based international order.

The Syrian regime and its foreign backers have benefited from disarray, distraction, and self-doubt among the international community and public, rooted in the disappointment of the Iraq war, economic crisis, and a breakdown in foreign policy consensus amid domestic political polarization. This crisis was a key reason the regime was able to defeat the insurgency in Ghouta by committing mass atrocities in plain view for years. In failing to

Breaking Ghouta

preserve the central norms of a rules-based order, including respect for basic human rights even in wartime and the principle that governments derive legitimacy from the consent of the governed rather than by killing masses of them, the international community's failure to prevent or complicate Assad's atrocities is undeniable.

It is not too late to hold the regime accountable for its violations, offer justice for the victims, and, perhaps most importantly, restore credibility to the promise of a rules-based international order and the threat of punishment for violating it—both of which have been ravaged in the humiliation of the Syrian civil war.

This is unlike other dark moments in history. We see the atrocities as they happen. In a world connected, we cannot turn a blind eye. The evidence is in front of us, captured by a device, distributed to the world on social media, and verified beyond refute.

This report offers a record of serial violations of these norms and a basis for holding the perpetrators accountable for their atrocities. At the very least, it can help make the victims heard, but its goal is to re-energize and restore meaning to the universal principles and norms espoused by the international community and the mechanisms through which they are enforced.

Siege, Access, and Aid

Since the Russian Federation joined the Syrian conflict as an active military partner in September 2015, the priority has been to return the government to control across the country, particularly the country's major cities of Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus. A so-called reconciliation strategy has been employed against pockets under armed opposition control, many of which endured years under siege and access restrictions, spurring the creation of a war economy system.

Regaining control of these areas through reconciliation is best characterized as a three-part process: besiege, bombard, and displace. This strategy was deployed across the country, beginning with Darayya in August 2016, and continuing neighborhood by neighborhood

It was this same strategy that was deployed in an attempt to vanquish resistance in eastern Ghouta, in the early months of 2018. By tightening an enduring besiegement of the rebel-controlled enclave, the Syrian government was able to weaken resistance within Ghouta's dwindling population of 393,000.¹ Siege warfare as a form of collective punishment is an especially malevolent means of targeting pockets of resistance, placing the greatest burden on the population's most vulnerable: infants and young children, the elderly and infirm, and pregnant and nursing women.

1 Aron Lund, "The Man-Made Disaster in Syria's Eastern Ghouta," IRIN News, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.

Eastern Ghouta is a collection of towns and villages in the countryside outside of Syria's capital city, Damascus. The region was home to an estimated two million people before the war,² and was traditionally an agricultural area. However, urban growth in the pre-war period saw agricultural land replaced with houses and industrial buildings.³

2 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian Army Command Says It Has Regained Most of Eastern Ghouta," Reuters, March 31, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrian-army-command-says-it-has-regained-most-of-eastern-ghouta-idUKKBN1H70IR>.

3 United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, *Food, Agricultural and Rural Development Policies in a Globalizing World*, (2005), available from http://www.fao.org/farmingsystems/pdf/IFSA/Theme1_Food_Agricultural_Policies.pdf.



A Syrian man works at a bakery in the rebel-held town of Douma, east of the capital Damascus on June 19, 2016, as a part of an initiative to distribute bread to impoverished families in the Eastern Ghouta area during the holy fasting month of Ramadan. The bakery is managed by the Douma Society which was created in 1960. Sameer Al-Doumy/AFP/Getty Images

The protests against the Bashar al-Assad regime first began in eastern Ghouta on March 25, 2011, spearheaded by political opposition in Douma. Soon after, residents of Harasta, Kafr Batna, and Ayn Terma took to the street.⁴ The first week of peaceful protests ended in bloodshed when snipers, suspected of being government troops, opened fire, and local anger at the killing of peaceful protestors fueled the opposition.⁵

In July 2012, more than a year after the start of the uprising, Free Syrian Army rebels attacked Damascus from its outskirts in Ghouta. Regime forces quickly reasserted control, but some areas fell into the hands of the rebels, who fell back to eastern Ghouta.⁶ In late November 2012, Assad's forces lost control over the area of eastern Ghouta, which was controlled by the armed opposition from that point on.⁷ In response, the Syrian government imposed a siege on this opposition stronghold in April 2013.⁸ Between then and the start of the February 2018 offensive, the population dwindled to around 393,000.⁹

Siege has been used extensively throughout the conflict. Several of the warring parties have employed siege as a military tactic, although the vast majority of the Syrian conflict's long-term sieges were perpetrated by the government of Syria. The Siegewatch project, run by PAX and The Syria Institute, has monitored sieges throughout the conflict. At the peak, they recorded thirty-nine besieged communities in the period August-October 2016—with 1,326,175 people living under siege conditions, and more than 1.1 million more

facing the threat of complete siege.¹⁰ The tactic was used to subdue populations and contain the armed opposition.

Since the Russian Federation joined the conflict as a military player in September 2015, its forces have, along with the Syrian forces, been executing military offensives against one besieged community after another. These primarily urban conflicts have taken on a regular pattern, with the attackers first tightening the siege, before bombarding the area and then forcing a reconciliation agreement that returned the area to the government's control, while those unable or unwilling to return to the government's jurisdiction were displaced to the country's northwestern Idlib Province.¹¹

A stalemate emerged in Ghouta, though persistent Syrian army bombing of towns in the area and the routine salvo of rebel mortar shells and rockets on Damascus, continued.¹² Outgoing fire from eastern Ghouta, mostly from mortars, into government-controlled districts, such as Bab Touma in the Damascus Old City, made it untenable for the government to leave it unchecked long term.¹³ The government's siege of the area deprived residents of access to aid, medical treatment, goods and services, economic opportunities, and free movement for years. Humanitarian aid convoys and commercial goods access from Damascus were also heavily restricted.

Goods and Aid Access

Humanitarian aid access has been restricted by the Syrian government throughout the war, in particular for besieged areas. Multiagency United Nations (UN) convoys became a heavily politicized subject, with the UN Security Council frequently debating the need to break Assad's long-standing

4 Amnesty International report "Syria: 'Left to Die under Siege': War crimes and human right abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria," August 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420792015ENGLISH.PDF>.

5 Katherine Marsh, "Syrian Mourners Say Government Snipers Carried Out Massacre," *The Guardian*, April 03, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/03/syria-demonstrations-douma-funerals>.

6 "Syria's Eastern Ghouta: The Rebel-Held Enclave under Siege since 2013," *SBS News*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/syria-s-eastern-ghouta-the-rebel-held-enclave-under-siege-since-2013>.

7 Amnesty International report "Updated Briefing on Sieges across Syria," June 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE240232014ENGLISH.pdf>.

8 Aron Lund, "The Man-Made Disaster in Syria's Eastern Ghouta," *IRIN News*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.

9 Aron Lund, "The Man-Made Disaster in Syria's Eastern Ghouta," *IRIN News*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.

10 Pax, The Syria Institute report "Siege Watch - Fourth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria, August - October 2016," 2016, <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/PAX-TSI-Syria-SiegeWatch-report-4.pdf>.

11 Kim Hjelmgaard, "Syria Conflict Explained: How Did We End Up Here?" *USA Today*, April 13, 2018, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/04/09/syria-conflict-explained-bashar-assad/498756002/>.

12 Nabih Bulos, "With Syria's Ghouta Area Back in Government Hands, a Pseudo-State Ends," *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-ghouta-2018-story.html>.

13 "Syria War: Rebel Shellfire Kills Nine in Damascus Old City," *BBC News*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42788049>; Human Rights Watch report "'He Didn't Have to Die': Indiscriminate Attacks by Opposition Groups in Syria," March 22, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/03/22/he-didnt-have-die/indiscriminate-attacks-opposition-groups-syria>.

policy of “kneel or starve” of areas that opposed his rule. Throughout the country, when aid convoys were allowed, essential food items were removed, in particular baby’s milk and critical medical supplies.

Ghouta’s siege began in April 2013. The following year, the Syrian government banned civilian traffic into the enclave, allowing only a trickle of commercial food deliveries to be imported, which were then sold for up to five times their original price.¹⁴

For much of the siege, eastern Ghouta had only two access routes to the outside world: al-Wafideen crossing and a network of tunnels that lead to the Damascus suburbs. Al-Wafideen crossing, near Douma, was run by Syrian state forces on one side and Jaish al-Islam on the other.¹⁵ Goods were smuggled in through the crossing by businessmen who shared their profits with the Assad regime and rebel leaders, and paid bribes to those manning the checkpoints on the way into the enclave.

This clandestine trade, which enriched the warring parties at the expense of the civilian population, was exemplified by the wealthy Syrian businessman Moheddine al-Manfoush, a local from the eastern Ghouta town of Misraba who struck deals between the regime and rebels that allowed smugglers to sell food to traders in eastern Ghouta. Under the agreement, traders would buy goods from Damascus at al-Wafideen checkpoint, then restock their grocery stores—often with al-Manfoush’s own products—in eastern Ghouta.¹⁶ The goods produced in al-Manfoush’s dairy farms in Ghouta would be exported to Damascus through the crossing as well.¹⁷ By bribing government officials, al-Manfoush was able to pass an estimated 150 tons of food and other

supplies through al-Wafideen daily.¹⁸ But on March 21, 2017, government forces quietly, and without prior notice, closed down al-Wafideen crossing. In the hours after the crossing closed, the price of all goods inside the rebel pocket rose steeply.¹⁹ Only intermittent commercial access was allowed from that point on.

The other access route was a network of tunnels that ran out to the Damascus suburbs, and served to move goods not permitted at al-Wafideen, including people, fuel, medicine, cigarettes, and ammunition.²⁰ The disruption of these rebel-controlled underground smuggling routes, which ran to al-Qaboun, Tishreen, and Barzeh, occurred as regime forces undertook an offensive against the areas. By late April 2017, the tunnels were completely out of commission.²¹ Living conditions were poor throughout the siege, and became particularly unbearable when smuggling routes were closed down.

High prices for goods meant many residents relied on humanitarian aid. Through the first half of 2017, no UN aid convoys were allowed to enter eastern Ghouta. The May 4 “de-escalation” agreement²² and the July 22 Cairo ceasefire agreement²³ that backed it up both detailed the need to allow aid access. On June 19, 2017, a UN interagency aid convoy of thirty-six trucks entered Harasta city.²⁴ There were other interagency convoys in May and July to Douma, and to Harasta in June. In addition, on August 17, a UN interagency convoy

14 Aron Lund, “The Man-Made Disaster in Syria’s Eastern Ghouta,” IRIN News, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.

15 Aron Lund, Into the Tunnels, The Century Foundation, December 21, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/report/into-the-tunnels/>.

16 “Syrian Government Closes Final Loophole to Tighten Siege of East Damascus Suburbs,” Syria Direct, April 20, 2017, <https://syriadirect.org/news/syrian-government-closes-final-loophole-to-tighten-siege-of-eastern-damascus-suburbs/>.

17 Enab Baladi, “The Economic Map of Ghouta: Tunnels and ‘the Prince of Cheese,’” July 26, 2017, <http://syriauntold.com/2017/07/the-economic-map-of-ghouta-tunnels-and-the-prince-of-cheese/>.

18 Abdelhaq Hammam and Justin Clark, “After 3 Years of Uneasy Truce, Sudden Regime Offensive Disrupts East Ghouta Tunnel Trade,” Syrian Voice, March 09, 2017, <http://syrianvoice.org/en/archives/2101?lang=en>.

19 Enab Baladi, “The Economic Map of Ghouta: Tunnels and ‘the Prince of Cheese,’” July 26, 2017, <http://syriauntold.com/2017/07/the-economic-map-of-ghouta-tunnels-and-the-prince-of-cheese/>.

20 Aron Lund, “A Timeline of the Tightening Siege in Eastern Ghouta,” News Deeply, December 27, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/12/27/a-timeline-of-the-tightening-siege-in-eastern-ghouta>.

21 Abdelhaq Hammam and Justin Clark, “After 3 Years of Uneasy Truce, Sudden Regime Offensive Disrupts East Ghouta Tunnel Trade,” Syrian Voice, March 09, 2017, <http://syrianvoice.org/en/archives/2101?lang=en>.

22 Abdullah Almousa, “De-Escalation Agreements on the Brink of Failure,” Atlantic Council, SyriaSource, January 12, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/de-escalation-agreements-at-risk-of-failure>.

23 “Russia: New Ceasefire Deal Agreed in Syria’s Ghouta,” Al Jazeera, July 22, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/07/russia-ceasefire-deal-agreed-syria-ghouta-170722215635284.html>.

24 “Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #2 FY18,” US Agency for International Development, December 08, 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria/fy18/fs02>.

reportedly carrying medical and food supplies entered Douma. On October 30, 2017, supplies were allowed for only forty thousand residents in the two towns of Kafr Batna and Saqba.²⁵

With such a small amount of aid forthcoming, restrictions on commercial goods through al-Wafideen and the destruction of the tunnels had a harsh impact on Ghouta's residents. Instances of starvation were recorded as a result.²⁶ Where food was permitted to enter the enclave, it was subjected to a high fee, which had to be recovered through high prices. In November 2017, one kilogram of bread in eastern Ghouta cost 1,150 percent more than in nearby Damascus. From January 2017, bread and wheat flour prices increased by more than 174 percent and 390 percent, respectively, while sugar prices rose by more than 1,000 percent. Boiling water to make it safe to drink often became impossible due to fuel shortages.²⁷

In September 2017, eastern Ghouta's de-escalation zone was finalized, and the situation worsened even more. The heavily restricted commercial traffic through al-Wafideen crossing was halted. Food stockpiles rapidly decreased and triggered locals to scramble for any goods that still remained available on the market.²⁸ In October 2017, most inhabitants of eastern Ghouta were reportedly able to afford only one meal per day.²⁹ Once adults found themselves unable to cut back any more on their own food rations, child malnutrition rates started to increase.³⁰

After seventy-eight days with no access to the pocket, a UN aid convoy arrived in eastern Ghouta in mid-February 2018.³¹ According to UN figures, the regime stripped it of 3,810 units of medical equipment, including syringes, intravenous catheters, sterile surgical gloves, anesthetics, adrenaline, and anti-asthma medicines.³² The same happened in early March 2018, when one of the deadliest government assaults had begun in the region: a UN convoy brought some relief to the besieged enclave, but government forces removed most of the medical equipment,³³ including surgical kits, insulin, dialysis equipment, and other supplies.³⁴ Even the goods that were allowed to pass did not all make it into the hands of those who needed them so desperately. During the night, forty trucks pulled out of Douma in darkness after shelling on the town, without fully unloading the supplies they had brought in. Out of the forty, ten trucks left the town "fully sealed," while four more had been partially unloaded, according to an aid source interviewed by Reuters.³⁵

As documented in other areas, such as eastern Aleppo, tightening access restrictions and siege, as well as limiting both humanitarian aid access and commercial goods, meant the population was desperate, hungry, and restless in advance of and during the military campaign. Depriving eastern Ghouta's residents of basic needs hastened the fall of the opposition as the military campaign progressed.

25 "Aid Enters Besieged Syria Region Hit by Hunger Crisis," Daily Mail, October 30, 2018, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5032043/Aid-enters-besieged-syria-region-hit-hunger-crisis.html>.

26 Maram Haddad, "Children Will Continue to Die of Starvation in Besieged East Ghouta," News Deeply, November 21, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/11/21/children-will-continue-to-die-of-starvation-in-besieged-east-ghouta>.

27 ACAPS briefing note "Syria: Conflict in Eastern Ghouta," November 15, 2017, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/slides/files/20171115_acaps_briefin_note_syria_eastern_ghouta.pdf.

28 Aron Lund, "A Timeline of the Tightening Siege in Eastern Ghouta," News Deeply, December 27, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/12/27/a-timeline-of-the-tightening-siege-in-eastern-ghouta>.

29 "OCHA Factsheet - East Ghouta," Reliefweb, December 15, 2017-January 31, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/East_Ghouta_Factsheet_Feb%20Final.pdf.

30 Aron Lund, "The Man-Made Disaster in Syria's Eastern Ghouta," IRIN News, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.


31 United Nations, *UN, Partners Complete First Aid Delivery in Months to Syria's War-Battered East Ghouta*. 16 February 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002911>.

32 United Nations, Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General: Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016) and 2393 (2017)*, S/2018/243, (20 March 2018), available from https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7b65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7d/s_2018_243.pdf.

33 Menaka Wilhelm, "Syria Systematically Harasses Medical Aid Convoys," NPR, April 13, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/04/13/600834161/syria-systematically-harasses-medical-aid-convoys>.

34 "Syria's Ghouta Receives First Aid Convoy, Stripped of Medical Supplies," ABC News, March 05, 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-06/first-aid-convoy-reaches-syrias-ghouta-stripped-of-medica/9515906>.

35 Angus McDowall and Stephanie Nebehay, "Aid Reaches Ghouta but Retreats after Shelling; Syria Presses Assault," Reuters, March 05, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/aid-reaches-ghouta-but-retreats-after-shelling-syria-presses-assault-idUSKBN1GH1HN>.



Russian soldiers are seen as they guard at a checkpoint near at Wafideen camp in Damascus, Syria March 2, 2018. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki

Military Tactics

In a military campaign that mirrored operations to break resistance elsewhere in Syria, the final days of opposition-held eastern Ghouta were marked by heavy Russian and Syrian airpower and artillery upon a weary citizenry and a defiant opposition. As one town after another within the pocket retreated, attacking forces took increasingly drastic measures to demoralize and break the resistant rebel element with an overwhelming display of conventional, incendiary, and, eventually, chemical firepower.

The indiscriminate nature of the military action was consistent with a continuous trend deployed by regime forces attempting to bring pockets of resistance to heel. Across Syria, unguided weapons have been used against heavily populated urban areas, and Ghouta was no exception.

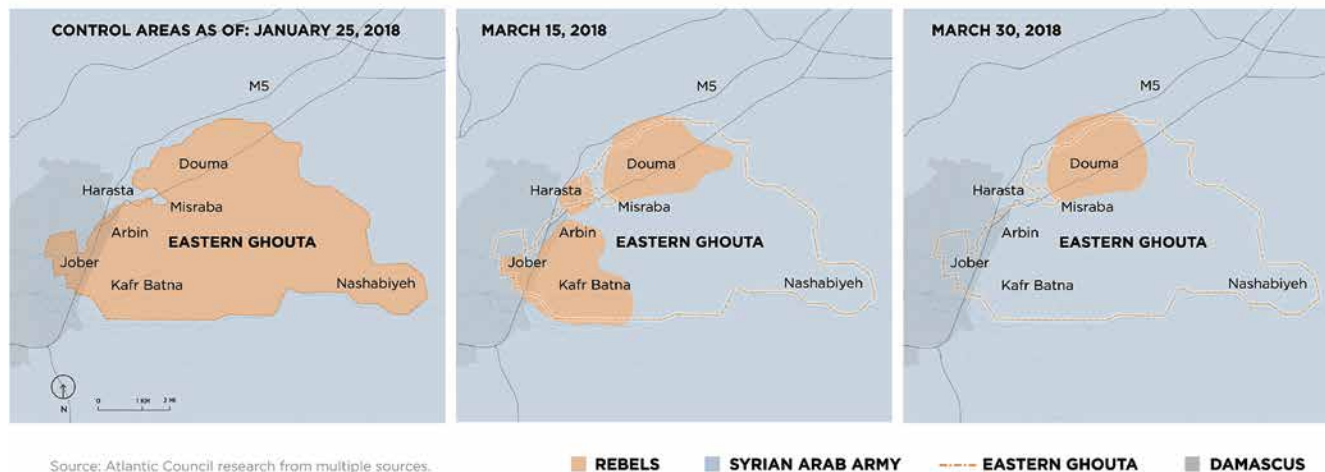
Dishonest use of a de-escalation agreement served only to free up government military assets to advance where they saw fit, while front lines were virtually frozen elsewhere. By the end of the siege on eastern Ghouta, hundreds of civilians had lost their lives in the final assault, and tens of thousands more had been forcefully displaced by the Assad regime. Just as the regime's attention turned to the Damascus suburbs in February after the conclusion of a major regime offensive elsewhere, after the breaking of Ghouta, the regime headed south towards Daraa.

“**The worst bombardment was during the last offensive. The offensive was going on 24/7, completely destroying the city. Stronger weapons were used to inflict massive destruction.**”

- YOUNG MAN IN EASTERN GHOUTA

Areas of Control

The area of opposition control in Eastern Ghouta from January 25, 2018



Protests first erupted in eastern Ghouta in the largest city in the area, Douma, on April 1, 2011. The protesters were met with live gunfire.¹ In September of that year, locals formed the first Free Syrian Army “battalion” of eastern Ghouta, the Abu Ubaida Bin Jarrah Battalion.² In October–November 2012, local rebels launched several attacks on Damascus and were able to consolidate control over the eastern outskirts of the capital.³ The growing involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war helped the government consolidate its control over crucial areas in Homs and surrounding Damascus, and in April 2013, government forces backed by Hezbollah were able to capture the strategic town of al-Otaiba, the last supply route into the enclave.⁴ In August 2013, the government tightened the siege on eastern Ghouta by shuttering the last crossings used by civilians in Douma and Mleha to travel in and out of Ghouta.⁵ The same month, on August 21, the Syrian government launched the most lethal

chemical weapons attack of the entire Syrian civil war against eastern Ghouta. This attack saw the delivery of sarin gas payloads using surface-to-surface rockets, in a move then-United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon termed “a war crime and a grave violation of the 1925 Protocol and other rules of customary international law.”⁶ There are differing estimates of the death toll. The UN itself spoke of “significant quantities” of sarin causing “mass casualties.”⁷ Sources on the ground put the number of dead on the order of 1,500.⁸

In September 2013, at least fifty groups in the Damascus area merged with the Islam Brigade, a rebel group established by the Alloush family in Douma. Together, these factions formed Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam).⁹ The second-largest

1 “At Least 10 Killed in Syria,” Ynet News, April 01, 2011, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4050879,00.html>;
 قوشمة ببق تاريخه قيرفت بى لى، “Al Jazeera, 01.04.2011, <http://bit.ly/2pp4J1t>.

2 Damascus Countryside Now, Facebook, March 30, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/DamasCountryside.Now/posts/612114118874999>.

3 Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “Living under Assad’s Siege,” New York Times, February 08, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/opinion/syria-bombing-assad.html>.

4 “Syrian Army Seizes Strategic Town Near Capital,” Reuters, April 24, 2013, <https://www.voanews.com/a/fighting-in-syria-lays-siege-to-historic-mosque/1648130.html>; “Syria: Children under Attack in Damascus Enclave,” Human Rights Watch, January 11, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/11/syria-children-under-attack-damascus-enclave>.

5 Amnesty International report “Syria: ‘Left to Die under Siege’: War crimes and human right abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria,” August 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420792015ENGLISH.PDF>.

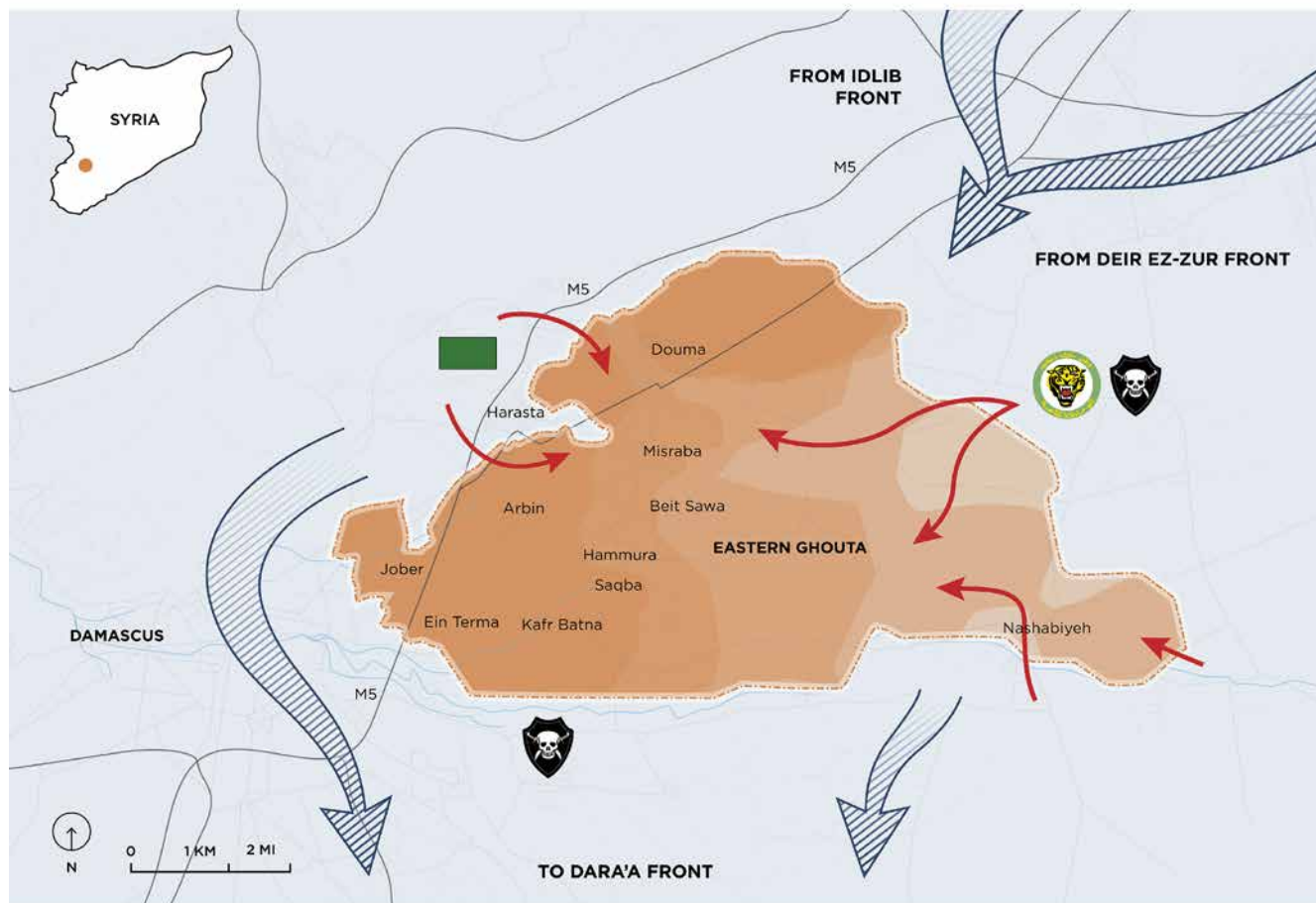
6 United Nations, United Nations Secretary-General, *Secretary-General’s Remarks to the Security Council on the Report of the United Nations Missions to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons on the Incident that Occurred on 21 August 2013 in the Ghouta Area of Damascus*. 16 September 2013, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2013-09-16/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-report-united-nations>.

7 United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 25/65, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/25/65, (12 February 2014), <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53182eed4.html>.

8 “Bodies Still Being Found after Alleged Syria Chemical Attack: Opposition,” Daily Star Lebanon, August 22, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Aug-22/228268-bodies-still-being-found-after-alleged-syria-chemical-attack-opposition.ashx>; “Syria/Syrian Chemical Programme – National Executive Summary of Declassified Intelligence,” French Foreign Ministry, September 03, 2013, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Syrian_Chemical_Programme.pdf.

9 Hassan Hassan, “The Army of Islam Is Winning in Syria,” Foreign Policy, October 01, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/01/the-army-of-islam-is-winning-in-syria/>.

Movements of Main Government Armed Groups



Source:
Atlantic Council research
from multiple sources.

— EASTERN GHOUTA
 REBEL CONTROL
 — MOVEMENTS ON FRONT LINES
 MOMENTUM OF GROUPS
🐯 TIGER FORCES
 👤 REPUBLICAN GUARD
 4TH DIVISION

faction operating in Ghouta was Faylaq al-Rahman (The Corps of the Merciful One), which adopted both nationalist and Islamic rhetoric. The group branded itself as part of the Free Syrian Army.¹⁰ The origin of the group was with the formation of al-Baraa Brigade in August 2012. Several local rebel groups, including al-Baraa Brigade, merged in late 2013 to form Faylaq al-Rahman.¹¹ Other small factions included the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Islamist Ahrar al-Sham.

From this point on, there was a stalemate of sorts, with smaller clashes and offensives taking place, but with territorial boundaries between armed-opposition control and government control remaining reasonably static. The war profiteering surrounding the siege economy and operation of tunnels and crossings, struggles for power and dominance, and regime manipulations contributed

to several rounds of infighting among eastern Ghouta's factions.¹² The Assad regime exploited the rebels' divisions to great effect. In February and March 2016, the regime denied United Nations aid convoys access to Douma, Harasta, Arbin, Zamalka, and Zabadin.¹³ However, on February 23, and March 4 and 7, it granted access to UN and the Syria Arab Red Crescent convoys heading for Kafr Batna, Ein Terma, Saqba, Jisreen, and Hammura with aid for some 46,800 people. All of these neighborhoods were exclusively controlled by Faylaq al-Rahman and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, stoking preexisting tensions with Jaish al-Islam in Douma, which was denied aid for any of its territories. The infighting,

¹⁰ Aron Lund, "Understanding Eastern Ghouta in Syria," IRIN News, February 23, 2018, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/02/23/understanding-eastern-ghouta-syria>.

¹¹ "تمجيداً وقيادته أم"، 22.08.2017, <https://bit.ly/2OJXLPL>.

¹² Aron Lund, "The Syrian Rebel Who Tried to Build an Islamist Paradise," Politico, March 31, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/the-syrian-rebel-who-built-an-islamic-paradise-214969>.

¹³ United Nations, Security Council, *Implementation of Security Council Resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015)*, S/2016/272 (23 March, 2016), available from <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1607835-2.pdf>.

war profiteering, and authoritarian conduct of the rebel factions all contributed to widespread dissatisfaction with the rebels among Ghouta's civilians.¹⁴

Following a particularly deadly round of infighting in mid-2017, eastern Ghouta became effectively divided among the various rebel factions, with each group setting up checkpoints to restrict the movement of people between the different fiefdoms inside the enclave.¹⁵ Ghouta became divided into two enclaves: one centered in Douma and the eastern section of the enclave under the control of Jaish al-Islam, and the other, the southwestern sector, under the control of Faylaq al-Rahman and partial control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.¹⁶ The town of Harasta came to be controlled by Ahrar al-Sham.¹⁷

Truces and Cease-Fires

During the fourth round of talks between the Astana guarantors--Iran, Turkey, and the Russian Federation--in the Kazakh capital on May 4, 2017, an agreement was reached to establish a series of "de-escalation zones" in Syria.¹⁸ The four armed-opposition controlled zones agreed on included Idlib Province, an enclave in northern Homs, eastern Ghouta, and an area in the south of Syria that included parts of Quneitra and Daraa Provinces.¹⁹

The agreement was the latest in a long series of attempted cease-fires, reaching back over

three years. In early 2014, negotiations had been attempted with eastern Ghouta's opposition. On January 6, 2014, the neighborhood of Barzeh reached a truce deal with the Syrian government after an exhausting siege.²⁰ The truce agreement allowed rebels to maintain their checkpoints in the enclave. An unofficial truce followed for the neighboring Qaboun, which, along with Barzeh, came to be an important point for smuggling goods into eastern Ghouta.²¹ While no formal agreement with Ghouta was reached, it was long suspected that an informal agreement was in play between the government and the armed opposition.

On February 27, 2016, a nationwide cease-fire went into effect in Syria, covering more than one hundred rebel factions.²² Just three days later, local sources claimed that Assad's forces and pro-government militias had taken advantage of the cease-fire to amass on the strategic hill of Farazat, capturing it.²³ A similar chain of events unfolded two months later. On April 29, 2016, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) General Command announced that it would be enacting a cease-fire on April 30. The cease-fire, referred to as a "regime of calm," covered eastern Ghouta for twenty-four hours and the northern Latakia countryside for seventy-two hours.²⁴ On Monday, May 2, regime forces announced that they would extend the truce another forty-eight hours.²⁵ Instead of observing the extended truce, however, government forces took advantage of rebel infighting and resumed their attacks on the Deir al-Asafir salient in the south of the pocket, collapsing it on May 20.²⁶ The SAA advances meant that eastern Ghouta

14 Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Breaking of Syria's Rebellion," The Forum for Regional Thinking, July 10, 2018, <http://www.regthink.org/en/articles/the-breaking-of-syrias-rebellion>.

15 Noura Hourani, Waleed Khaled a-Noufal, and Justin Schuster, "East Ghouta's Rebel Infighting Spills over to Embattled Civilians: 'The Factions Are Sowing Hatred,'" Syria Direct, May 16, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/east-ghouta%E2%80%99s-rebel-infighting-spills-over-to-embattled-civilians-%E2%80%98the-factions-are-sowing-hatred%E2%80%99/>.

16 Aron Lund, "Understanding Eastern Ghouta in Syria," IRIN News, February 23, 2018, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/02/23/understanding-eastern-ghouta-syria>.

17 "Fajr al-Umma Brigade and the Islamic Movement of Ahrar al-Sham Merge in the Eastern Ghouta," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 12, 2017, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=66297>.

18 "Memorandum on the Creation of De-escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, May 06, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2746041; "Fourth Round of Astana Talks on Syria Ends with De-escalation Zones Deal," TASS, May 05, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/944724>.

19 "Syria's 'De-escalation Zones' Explained," Al Jazeera, July 04, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html>.

20 Sadek Abed Alrahman and Karen Leigh, "In Barzeh, Two Versions of a Truce," News Deeply, March 10, 2014, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2014/03/10/in-barzeh-two-versions-of-a-truce>.

21 Jana Salem, "Hameesh Checkpoint: Business in the Time of Truce," April 17, 2017, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/hameesh-checkpoint-business-time-truce>.

22 Samer Abboud, "Syria War: What You Need to Know about the Ceasefire," Al Jazeera, February 28, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/syria-war-ceasefire-160228063752872.html>.

23 "هتتقششلا قطوغلل يف رازلا قالطا فتقو قزنده دسالا تاوق تلغتسرا فنيك," Alsouria.net, 01.03.2016, <https://goo.gl/cG3kGM>.

24 "Syria Declares 'Regime of Calm' in Two Major Areas," ParsToday, April 29, 2016, http://parstoday.com/en/news/middle-east-i10603-syria-declares_'regime_of_calm'_in_two_major_areas.

25 Patrick Strickland, "Syrian Army 'Violates' Ghouta Truce as Rebels Clash," Al Jazeera, May 03, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-ghouta-ceasefire-160503083045131.html>.

26 LiveUAMaps, Twitter (archived), May 20, 2016, <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2016/20-may-drone-footage-of-the-areas-captured-by-the-saa--allies>.

lost a significant portion of its farmland, further jeopardizing its inhabitants.²⁷ At the very end of that year, on December 30, another cease-fire went into effect, which only a select group of rebel factions ascribed to; these included Jaish al-Islam and the pocket's small number of Ahrar al-Sham fighters.²⁸

After broad agreement about the principle of de-escalation at the Astana talks in July 2017, localized negotiations for each de-escalation zone were managed location by location.²⁹ Shortly after these talks, on July 22, an agreement was reached for the eastern Ghouta safe zone mechanism. The last of the four de-escalation zones was put into effect after another round of talks in Astana that September.³⁰ The zones were envisioned to be in effect for six months with the possibility of renewal, but eastern Ghouta suffered its first civilian casualties in heavy aerial bombing just days after the agreement was reached.³¹ Battle events did dip slightly in the area after July 2017, but surged again by December of that year.³²

On November 28, 2017, the day scheduled for the eighth round of Geneva talks, the Syrian government announced a cease-fire for eastern Ghouta without addressing the existing de-escalation agreement it had repeatedly breached.³³ UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura greeted the announcement with some

skepticism, noting that a cease-fire was offered, but that it remained to be seen if it would take place.³⁴ De Mistura later cited the biggest obstacle in negotiations as being "trust."³⁵ In spite of the truce, heavy shelling continued in eastern Ghouta.³⁶ As had occurred in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta before,³⁷ the cease-fire was almost certainly announced as means of creating a smoke screen between the political process and facts on the ground.

While the de-escalation zones were ostensibly in place to aid the peace process, their primary utility for the Assad regime was to allow the SAA and its allied forces breathing space to concentrate their military efforts one by one against opposition-held locations around the country, including the areas covered by the de-escalation zones. In May 2017, the SAA launched a campaign to reclaim the eastern and southeastern borders, while the government offensive to close the rebel pocket running tunnels from Damascus to eastern Ghouta was winding down.³⁸ Government forces returned to the offensive in and around northern Hama in October 2017, before intensifying their attacks on eastern Ghouta.³⁹ In December 2017, after

27 Waleed Khaled a-Noufa et al., "East Ghouta Loses Its Breadbasket: 'The Regime Exploited the Ongoing Infighting,'" Syria Direct, May 19, 2016, <https://syriadirect.org/news/east-ghouta-loses-its-breadbasket-%E2%80%98the-regime-exploited-the-ongoing-infighting%E2%80%99/>.

28 "List of Armed Formations, Which Joined the Ceasefire in the Syrian Arab Republic on December 30, 2016," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, December 29, 2016, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12107227@egNews.

29 Emma Beals, "De-Escalation and Astana," Atlantic Council, SyriaSource, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/de-escalation-and-astana>.

30 "Russia Says It Has Agreed Safe Zone Mechanism with Syrian Rebels," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 22, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-syria-rebels-safe-zone-mechanisms-ghouta/28632161.html>; "Final De-escalation Zones Agreed on in Astana," Al Jazeera, September 15, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/final-de-escalation-zones-agreed-astana-170915102811730.html>.

31 "Air Strikes, Shelling Strain Moscow-Backed Damascus Truce," Reuters, July 25, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/air-strikes-shelling-strain-moscow-backed-damascus-truce-idUSKBN1AA0JV>.

32 "Violence in Syria's De-escalation Zones," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, April 12, 2018, <https://www.acleddata.com/2018/04/12/violence-in-syrias-de-escalation-zones/>.

33 "Syria War: Government 'Agrees to Eastern Ghouta Truce,'" BBC, November 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42156499>.

34 "Syrian Government Team to Arrive in Geneva for Peace Talks on Wednesday," Reuters, November 28, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks/syrian-government-team-to-arrive-in-geneva-for-peace-talks-on-wednesday-idUSKBN1DSORE>.

35 "Syrian Talks in Geneva to Continue to Dec 15: UN Envoy," China Daily, December 01, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/01/content_35150939.htm.

36 "Rebel Area Near Damascus Hit by Heavy Shelling despite Two-Day Truce," Al Jazeera, November 29, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ceasefire/rebel-area-near-damascus-hit-by-heavy-shelling-despite-two-day-truce-idUSKBN1DT1D1>.

37 Liz Sly and Karen DeYoung, "Syrian Cease-Fire Backed by U.S. and Russia Gets Off to Rocky Start," Washington Post, September 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ceasefire-in-syria-set-to-take-hold-as-scores-die-in-air-strikes/2016/09/12/c93bbf4e-7850-11e6-8064-c1ddc8a724bb_story.html; Jamie Dettmer, "Syrian Government Warplanes Breach Truce for 2nd Day," Voice of America, July 25, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-airstrikes-cease-fire/3958293.html>.

38 "Syrian Army Retakes Most of Rebel-Held District on Edge of Damascus," Al Arabiya English, May 13, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/05/13/Deal-reached-to-evacuate-rebel-held-Damascus-district.html>; "Syria Army 'Moves into Area' Where Rebels Evicted ISIL," Al Jazeera, May 15, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-army-moves-area-rebels-evicted-isil-170515043533965.html>.

39 Hashem Osseiram, "How De-escalation Zones in Syria Became a War Management Strategy," Syria Deeply, February 6, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/02/06/how-de-escalation-zones-in-syria-became-a-war-management-strategy>.

recapturing Deir al-Zour and severing the salient off the southern side of the Euphrates River, Assad set his sights on the Syrian northwest. With the help of Russian airpower and Iranian militias, government forces regained control of a large stretch of opposition-held territory, eventually capturing Abu al-Duhur military airport in Syria's northwest by January 20, 2018, forcing more than 212,000 people to flee their homes in the process.⁴⁰ One by one, the de-escalation zones allowed Assad to concentrate his depleted forces for decisive offensives.

From there, the attention of Assad's forces turned to eastern Ghouta, and a renewed military offensive, with little concern for other front lines, as was the case during the previous six months.⁴¹ On February 18, 2018, the Syrian forces and their backers began a full-scale assault on the de-escalation zone of eastern Ghouta.⁴² On February 24, with the air offensive already underway, the UN Security Council unanimously voted in favor of a thirty-day cease-fire in Syria, demanding that the siege in eastern Ghouta, among others, be lifted.⁴³ Undeterred, Syrian government forces launched a series of ground assaults on the enclave, starting the following day.⁴⁴

Overall Military Strategy

A defining practice of the battle for eastern Ghouta, and for the Assad regime more generally, was characterized by three main stages that

have been repeated time and time again since the offensive in Darayya in August 2016: besiege, bombard, and displace. The first stage was tightening the siege of the already encircled area and weakening the morale and physical health of the targeted fighters, at enormous costs to the civilian population. Following the tightening of siege, the attackers launched intensive offensive operations, characterized by the use of heavy bombardment from the ground and the air to break the rebels' defensive lines and willingness to resist, followed by ground assaults. Finally, after it became evident that an SAA victory was inevitable, the Assad regime offered surrender deals to the rebels, and displaced them and civilians refusing to surrender to the regime north to rebel-held areas, in a capitulation process facilitated by Russian forces.

They did this while holding defensive lines elsewhere. The Liwa al-Quds (Quds/Jerusalem Brigade) was engaged on the front lines of Idlib Province the month prior to arriving in Damascus Province for the offensive against eastern Ghouta.⁴⁵ Likewise, Suheil al-Hassan's Tiger Forces were involved in this offensive prior to moving manpower to eastern Ghouta.⁴⁶ In an article for the Russian magazine *Military-Industrial Courier*, the former commander of Russian forces in Syria, Aleksandr Dvornikov, took note of the usefulness of these types of irregular units, noting their higher combat preparedness compared with regular SAA units.⁴⁷ Once they claimed victory in one area, they focused on the next. After the fall of Ghouta, they headed to Syria's south.

On February 18, 2018, the final operation against eastern Ghouta commenced, as government forces and their allies unleashed overwhelming firepower against the suburbs to soften up resistance for the impending ground assault. This campaign of intense bombardment by air and artillery continued through February 25, when the ground assault on eastern Ghouta began. The first major breakthrough was in the south of the eastern Ghouta pocket, in which regime forces took Hawsh al-Dawahra on February 28. Shortly afterward, the SAA collapsed the salient of Nashabiyah, the

40 "Syrian Army, Allies Capture Idlib Air Base: State TV," Reuters, January 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airport/syrian-army-allies-capture-idlib-air-base-state-tv-idUSKBN1F9OM7>.

41 Hashem Osseiram, "How De-escalation Zones in Syria Became a War Management Strategy," Syria Deeply, February 06, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/02/06/how-de-escalation-zones-in-syria-became-a-war-management-strategy>.

42 Samuel Osborne, "Syrian Civil War: Assad Regime Air Strikes Kill 71 and Wound 325 in 24 Hours, Says Monitoring Group," Independent, February 19, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-assad-regime-killed-air-striked-wounded-eastern-ghouta-rebel-damascus-a8218001.html>.

43 United Nations, Security Council, *UN Security Council Agrees 30-Day Ceasefire in Syria*. 24 February 24 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1003501>.

44 "Syrian Forces Begin New Offensive in Eastern Ghouta," Al Jazeera, February 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/syrian-forces-offensive-eastern-ghouta-180225071935104.html>; Ellen Francis and Andrew Bolton, "Syrian Government Ground Forces Attack Ghouta despite Russian Truce Plan," Reuters, February 28, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrian-government-ground-forces-attack-ghouta-despite-russian-truce-plan-idUKKCN1GCOVD>.

45 Syrian Reporter, Twitter, January 17, 2018, <https://twitter.com/ReporterSyrien/status/953683929315209216>.

46 "Video: Tiger Forces Make Their Way from Eastern Syria to Northern Hama ahead of Large Offensive," Al-Masdar News, December 20, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/video-tiger-forces-make-way-eastern-syria-northern-hama-ahead-large-offensive/>.

47 Aleksandr Dvornikov, "Штабы для новых войн," ВПК, July 23, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971>.

southeastern-most point of the pocket, with the capture of the connecting town of Utaya.

Pro-Assad forces continued a steady advance along this vector, receiving significant fire support when confronted with major entrenched positions. This advance continued until March 12, when the rebel enclave in eastern Ghouta was split into three pockets: Douma under Jaish al-Islam control, Harasta under Ahrar Al-Sham, and the Faylaq al-Rahman-controlled cluster of towns that once comprised the western area of the pocket (also known as the “central sector”). At this point, as defeat appeared inevitable, each pocket was forced into submission, with the help of Russian negotiators.

The last enclave to resist the onslaught of the SAA and its allies was Douma, which would last significantly longer, holding out into April. As the western enclave folded on March 23, Douma saw heavy bombardment. This came both in the form of conventional artillery and air strikes, and incendiary strikes.⁴⁸ A week later, the SAA issued a forty-eight-hour ultimatum for the rebels to leave Ghouta or face a renewed military offensive.⁴⁹

On April 6, 2018, regime forces pummeled Douma with artillery relentlessly. A mountain ridge north of Douma was a perfect location to deploy artillery units on an elevated position. Relentless pummeling of the town was recorded in a video by artillery soldiers themselves.⁵⁰ Through the next two days, the ferocity of the air and artillery attacks on the suburb were enormous. Gas attacks killed at least seventy civilians and affected hundreds on April 7.⁵¹ On April 8, a deal was reached between Jaish al-Islam and the government. Assad ended the chapter of Syria’s resistance in eastern Ghouta using the cruelest methods.

On Thursday, April 12, the regime of Bashar al-Assad raised its flag over the ruins of the city

48 Qalaat Al Mudiq, Twitter, March 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/977171593775509504>; Mohammed Ghorab, Twitter, March 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/MGhorab3/status/976958192931540992>.

49 Danny Makki, Twitter, March 30, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Dannymakkisyria/status/979814451992985600>.

50 Lukas Andriukaitis, “#PutinAtWar: Rebels Burned Out of Eastern Ghouta,” Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, April 05, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-rebels-burned-out-of-eastern-ghouta-e0769667992d>.

51 “Syria Chemical Attack: Scores Killed in Douma, Rescuers Say,” Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/suspected-chemical-attack-kills-dozens-syria-douma-180407202906316.html>.

of Douma, the final pocket of eastern Ghouta.⁵² Douma had managed to hold out for only a few weeks after the central sector of eastern Ghouta fell. A total of 1,473 civilian deaths were recorded in the last thirty days of the siege and campaign, and 158,000 people were displaced from their homes.⁵³

Negotiations and Forced Evacuation

The government implemented a surrender or die strategy in the rebel enclave,⁵⁴ reducing large areas of its towns to rubble with air strikes and artillery fire, while keeping the offer of “reconciliation” or evacuation open. Once the government had whittled down rebel territory to three isolated pockets, each controlled by a different rebel group, it pursued separate reconciliation deals with each.⁵⁵

The first deal brokered by Russia with a rebel group was reached with Ahrar al-Sham on March 18, and displacement began on February 22.⁵⁶ While this population transfer took place, the Syrian and Russian governments’ pressure intensified on the western pocket, including by carrying out heavy incendiary raids.⁵⁷ These incendiary attacks began on March 20 and continued through the night of March 22.⁵⁸ Under heavy bombing from both conventional and incendiary munitions, the Damascus suburbs of Arbin, Zamalka, and Ein Tarma and the neighborhood of Jobar finally surrendered and agreed to a forced evacuation deal on March 23.⁵⁹

52 “Syrian Government Forces Have Reportedly Taken Control of Douma,” Reuters, April 12, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syrian-forces-take-douma_us_5acf2573e4b0701783aba9ca.

53 OCHA report “Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta,” ReliefWeb, May 03, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/East%20Ghouta%20SitRep_No.5.pdf; “Eastern Ghouta: What Happened and Why,” Al Jazeera, April 13, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/eastern-ghouta-happening-180226110239822.html>.

54 “More Rebels and Civilians Abandon Syria’s Eastern Ghouta,” DW, March 24, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/more-rebels-and-civilians-abandon-syrias-eastern-ghouta/a-43115234>.

55 “Over 105,000 Civilians Have Fled Syria’s Eastern Ghouta,” France 24, March 23, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180324-syria-eastern-ghouta-civilians-fled-rebels-militants>.

56 “Syria war: First Rebels Leave Defeated Eastern Ghouta Town,” BBC News, March 22, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43500234>.

57 Qalaat Al Mudiq, Twitter, March 21, 2018, <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/976364542304415744>.

58 Free Syrian Army News, Twitter, March 20, 2018, <https://twitter.com/FSAPlatfrom/status/976103547489128448>.

59 Louisa Loveluck, “Syrian Rebels Agree to Evacuation from Desperately Besieged Enclave,” Washington Post, March 23, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syrian-rebels-agree-to-evacuation-from-desperately-besieged-enclave/2018/03/23/7255d024-2e08-11e8-8dc9-3b51e028b845_story.html?utm_term=.d6e52ce713e7.

More than 4,500 people, including 1,400 fighters, left Harasta for opposition-held Idlib in convoys of green buses, which have become symbolic of Assad's forced displacement doctrine.⁶⁰ Seventeen buses left Harasta, and twenty-five buses from Arbin.⁶¹ Two out of three rebel groups that controlled the enclave since 2013 had already surrendered, with thousands of fighters and their relatives departing for Idlib as part of the evacuation deal between the Russian army and two main rebel groups in the area.⁶²

A week later, the SAA issued a forty-eight-hour ultimatum for the rebels to leave Ghouta or face a renewed military offensive.⁶³ Shortly after, news appeared suggesting that Russia had struck a deal with rebels in the main town of the eastern Ghouta region to allow civilians to leave along with fighters.⁶⁴ Three convoys, carrying 2,350 Jaish al-Islam fighters and their families⁶⁵ to opposition-held Idlib, were completed before April 5, when the SAA resumed its bombardment of Douma, claiming that rebels had halted the displacement process.⁶⁶ Jaish al-Islam had been in talks with the Russian army over the town's fate. The armed group's wish to act as a regime auxiliary force in Douma, and its insistence on retaining its heavy weapons, hampered negotiations.⁶⁷ This prospect did not suit

the Syrian government.⁶⁸ On April 7, 2018, Douma was struck by chemical weapons, killing dozens of civilians and affecting hundreds more. The following day, April 8, Jaish al-Islam surrendered and agreed to a forced relocation to opposition-held territory in the north.⁶⁹ The Syrian government dismissed the attacks as a "fabrication" in spite of global outrage.⁷⁰ The Russian army struck a deal with Jaish al-Islam to withdraw about eight thousand of its fighters and some forty thousand of their relatives leaving for the northern province of Idlib; in exchange, Jaish al-Islam would release hostages it had been holding.⁷¹

By April 22, 2018, more than 158,000 people had been displaced from eastern Ghouta since March 9, approximately 66,000 of whom were evacuated to opposition-held areas in Idlib and Aleppo, according to UN estimates.⁷²

Russia's Involvement

Russia's support has been crucial to Assad's survival both on the battlefield and in the diplomatic arena. Diplomatically, Russia has used its UN Security Council veto eleven times to shield Syria from accountability.⁷³ On February 24, 2018, the Security Council passed a resolution⁷⁴ calling for a thirty-day cease-fire in eastern Ghouta to allow in humanitarian aid and stop indiscriminate attacks on civilians, as required by international law. But the resolution had no appreciable impact on the ground. Russia refused to apply the truce to

60 "Over 105,000 Civilians Have Fled Syria's Eastern Ghouta," France 24, March 23, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180324-syria-eastern-ghouta-civilians-fled-rebels-militants>.

61 "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations: Thousands to Be Bused to Idlib," Al Jazeera, March 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/eastern-ghouta-evacuations-thousands-bused-idlib-180325094113482.html>.

62 "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations: Thousands to Be Bused to Idlib," Al Jazeera, March 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/eastern-ghouta-evacuations-thousands-bused-idlib-180325094113482.html>.

63 Danny Makki, Twitter, March 30, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Dannymakkisyria/status/979814451992985600>.

64 "Deal Reached to Evacuate Rebels from Syria's Douma," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 01, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-douma-deal-rebels-evacuate/29138534.html>.

65 "Syria: Government Takeover of Eastern Ghouta Near Complete," Al Jazeera, April 05, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-government-takeover-eastern-ghouta-complete-180405110513723.html>.

66 "Evacuation of Syria's Douma Suspended over Disagreements," AP News, April 05, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/101b05486bd042799f5c8b7bedd2ad16>.

67 Danny Makki, Twitter, April 07, 2018, <https://twitter.com/dannymakkisyria/status/982383228295241728?lang=en;> "Douma Agreement Is Suspended and Talks and Negotiations Are Underway to Reach a "New Settlement" about Douma, the Eastern Qalamoun and Damascus," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, April 05, 2018, <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=88579>.

68 Kareem Shaheen, "Dozens Killed in Suspected Chemical Attack on Syrian Rebel Enclave," The Guardian, April 08, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/syrian-government-accused-of-chemical-attacks-on-civilians-in-eastern-ghouta>.

69 "Deal Reached to Surrender Last Rebel-Held Town in Eastern Ghouta," Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/deal-reached-surrender-rebel-held-town-eastern-ghouta-180408172342106.html>.

70 "Deal Reached to Surrender Last Rebel-Held Town in Eastern Ghouta," Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/deal-reached-surrender-rebel-held-town-eastern-ghouta-180408172342106.html>.

71 "Deal Reached to Surrender Last Rebel-Held Town in Eastern Ghouta," Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/deal-reached-surrender-rebel-held-town-eastern-ghouta-180408172342106.html>.

72 OCHA report "East Ghouta Humanitarian Update - Facts and Figures, 22 April 2018," ReliefWeb, April 22, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/East%20Ghouta%20Facts%20and%20Figures%2022%20April.pdf>.

73 "Russia Backs Syria in Unlawful Attacks on Eastern Ghouta," Human Rights Watch, March 18, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/18/russia-backs-syria-unlawful-attacks-eastern-ghouta>.

74 United Nations, *Syria 'bleeding Inside and Out' as Conflict Enters Eighth Year, Says UN Chief*. 12 March 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004742>.

eastern Ghouta and launched a separate proposal for daily five-hour humanitarian truces.⁷⁵ That proposal also made no difference on the ground, and was widely dismissed as a way of shifting the discussion away from the terms of the UN resolution.⁷⁶

The Russian air force actively joined the fight at the end of September 2015. The air cover of the Russian military was crucial in helping pro-Iranian militias, Syrian militias, and the SAA to besiege and then retake east Aleppo in 2016.⁷⁷ Russia was ready to provide assistance when eastern Ghouta's time came to be recaptured.

In Ghouta, their attacks started on February 19, 2018;⁷⁸ on February 21, the Russian military announced that talks to try to peacefully resolve the situation had broken down as rebels had ignored calls to cease resistance.⁷⁹ On the same day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described accusations that Russia bears some of the blame for civilian deaths in eastern Ghouta as "groundless."⁸⁰

The Syrian government and Russia denied dropping indiscriminate barrel bombs from helicopters, whose use was condemned by the United Nations.⁸¹ Nonetheless, DFRLab's monitoring of the conflict also concluded that many of the aircraft hitting eastern Ghouta

belonged to the Russian air force.⁸² A variety of Syrian civilian-provided videos suggest Russian air force involvement in the attacks as early as February 2018. For example, a video⁸³ posted by the Ghouta Media Center claimed the location of one particular bombing was the town of Zamalka in eastern Ghouta. DFRLab's geolocation data analysis confirmed the location was, in fact, most likely Zamalka.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the same video also captured the aircraft responsible for dropping the ordnance—a Russian Sukhoi Su-34 (NATO reporting name: Fullback). The Syrian air force does not possess this type of plane, but Russia reportedly⁸⁵ deployed Su-34 to Syria as early as September 2015. The aircraft has also been recorded⁸⁶ via satellite imagery over Hmeimim Air Base.

On April 12, the Syrian government army took full control over the city of Douma, mustering all of eastern Ghouta under the control of the government forces.⁸⁷ Russian military police were deployed to Douma on the same day, in accordance with the rebel surrender deal. According to the Russian military, these forces were deployed to prevent provocations and guarantee security—to support law and order and organize aid for the local population. Russian military police oversaw the transition of the Douma territory to the government forces.⁸⁸ The military victory was Assad's, but it was Russia's military might that had enabled it.

75 Jamie Tarabay and Jomana Karadsheh, "Putin Orders Daily Pause in Fighting in Eastern Ghouta," CNN, February 26, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/26/middleeast/syria-ceasefire-violation-ghouta-intl/index.html>.

76 Aron Lund, "Aleppo Again? A Plea to Save Lives in Eastern Ghouta," The Century Foundation, December 21, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/aleppo-plea-save-lives-eastern-ghouta/>.

77 "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo," Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo>.

78 "An Economic War Races the Military Attack on Eastern Ghouta," Enab Baladi, February 28, 2018, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/02/economic-war-races-military-attack-eastern-ghouta/>.

79 Maxim Rodionov and Andrew Osborn, "Talks to End Conflict in Syria's Eastern Ghouta Break Down: Russia," Reuters, February 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta-russia/talks-to-end-conflict-in-syrias-eastern-ghouta-break-down-russia-idUSKCN1G52ME>.

80 "Кремль отрицает причастность ВС РФ к гибели мирных жителей в Восточной Гуте," TASS, February 21, 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/4978441>.

81 "Кремль отрицает причастность ВС РФ к гибели мирных жителей в Восточной Гуте," TASS, February 21, 2018, <https://tass.ru/politika/4978441>.

82 Lukas Andriukaitis, "#PutinAtWar: Further Signs of Russia's Involvement in Eastern Ghouta," Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, March 23, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-further-signs-of-russias-involvement-in-eastern-ghouta-cla35e293e33>.

83 Ghouta Media Center, Youtube, February 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aetDL6jRdM>.

84 Lukas Andriukaitis, "#PutinAtWar: Russia's Involvement in Eastern Ghouta," Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, March 15, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-russias-involvement-in-eastern-ghouta-60413a4b67ab>.

85 Daniel Brown, "These Are the 11 Types of Russian Military Jets and Planes Known to Be Stationed in Syria," Business Insider, February 26, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-10-russian-military-aircraft-stationed-in-syria-2017-10>.

86 Google Maps, <https://www.google.lv/maps/@35.4118036,35.9446577,300m/data=!3m1!1e3>.

87 "Syrian Military Takes Full Control over Eastern Ghouta," TASS, April 12, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/999240>.

88 "Russia Calls UN Security Council Meeting on Syria," Daily Sabah, April 12, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2018/04/12/russia-calls-un-security-council-meeting-on-syria>.


Attacks Overview

“Since 2012, indiscriminate and disproportionate bombardments have been the primary cause of civilian casualties and mass displacement” in Syria according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Syria.¹ Such bombing of civilian areas and humanitarian infrastructure has been a theme throughout the Syrian conflict, and eastern Ghouta was no exception. This trend was seen in other rebel-held enclaves such as eastern Aleppo and Darayya, where weapons of all kinds were used against highly populated areas.

¹ United Nations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, *The Use of Barrel Bombs and Indiscriminate Bombardment in Syria: The Need to Strengthen Compliance with International Humanitarian Law*, (12 March 2015), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/CoISyriaIndiscriminateBombardment12032015.pdf>.

The tightening of the siege of eastern Ghouta in 2017 was followed by a military offensive against the enclave from early 2018. Following the start of the ground offensive on February 18, the frequency of air strikes and shelling increased significantly as the Syrian regime and Russians supported their ground offensive with airpower and artillery to wrest control of one neighborhood at a time back from the armed opposition. A wide variety of weapons were used against the population of Ghouta, including more pernicious weaponry like chemical gas, incendiary weapons, and cluster munitions in addition to more traditional weaponry.

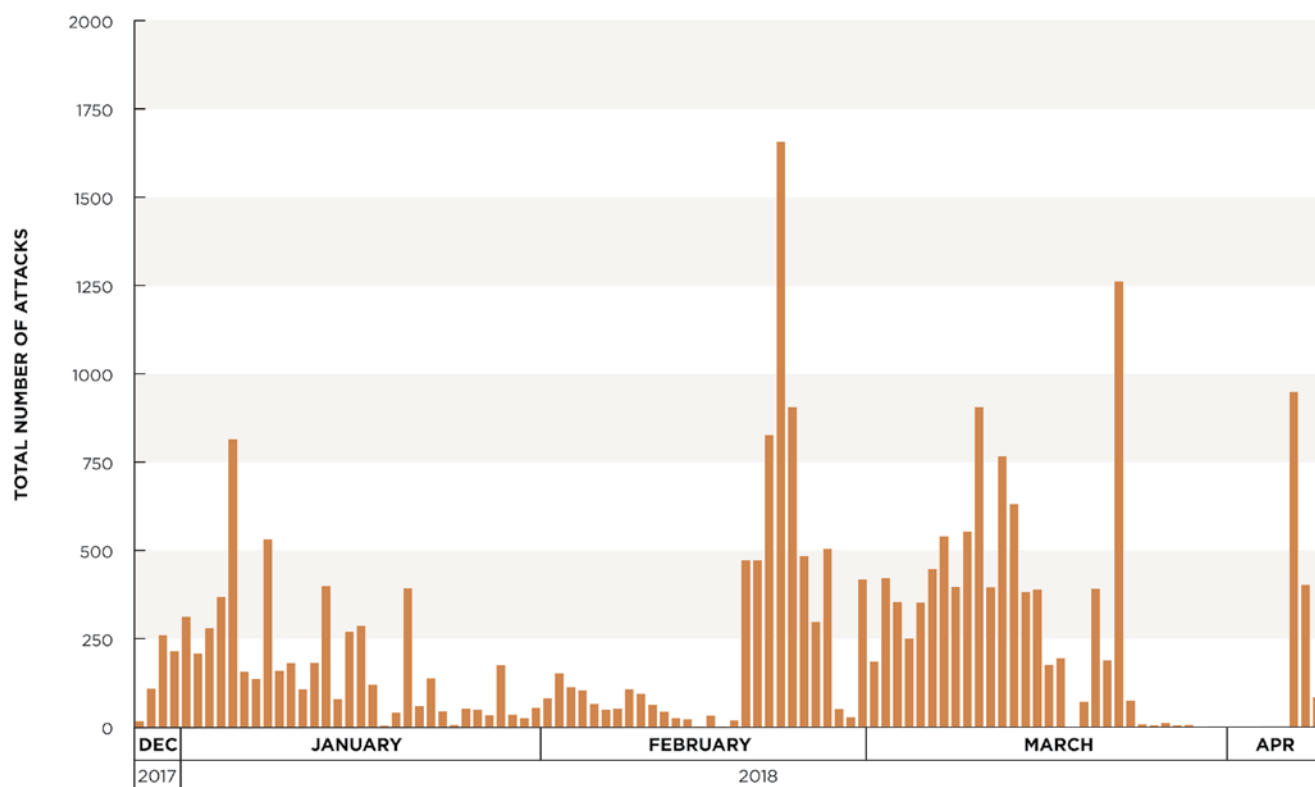
The firepower was overwhelming. An average of 345.6 attacks were documented per day, in a period spanning forty-nine days, between the beginning of the ground campaign on February 18 until the fall of Douma, the last opposition-held town in the enclave, on April 8. On February 21, the heaviest day of strikes, 1,658 attacks were recorded.



Civil defence help a man from a shelter in the besieged town of Douma in eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria, February 22, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh

Total Number of Recorded Attacks per Day in Eastern Ghouta

Between December 28th 2017 and April 8th 2018



Source: Atlantic Council research from multiple sources.

During the offensive in Ghouta, the number of air and artillery attacks against the area increased significantly when compared with the years preceding the offensive. The graph above charts the total number of recorded attacks per day between February 18 and April 8, the end of the ground offensive on Ghouta. It shows that during this forty-nine-day period, a total of 16,934 attacks were recorded against the enclave, an average of 345.6 attacks each day, or about 14.4 strikes per hour. Bombing was so heavy that local medical services and first responders often failed to reach the injured in time to save them or put out fires that erupted due to incendiary munition deployment. On eight of the days of the offensive, eastern Ghouta witnessed over 800 documented strikes, and on twenty-six of the forty-nine days more than 200 strikes were recorded; seventeen days saw more than 400 attacks.

On February 21, the heaviest day of strikes, 1,658 attacks were recorded, an average of 69 strikes per hour. Locals reported that corpses and body parts were often left rotting under the rubble and even strewn in the streets due to the danger

and difficulty in retrieving them. Multiple victims were buried in mass graves with merely numbers attached to their improvised shrouds, as relatives and friends were unable to reach the hospitals and morgues to identify their loved ones. The prolonged government-imposed siege, which prevented the entry of most types of medicine and supplies to Ghouta, coupled with direct attacks on medical facilities, ensured that many of those injured in attacks would later die due to a lack of proper medical care. Dr. Hamid, a doctor in Ghouta, described the state of Ghouta's medical services shortly before its fall: "We are working with stitches that were used before, disposable gloves that we wore before, chest drainage that was used on other patients. Most wounds get infected and need bandages, but we are using bandages that we used before."²

The majority of these attacks employed traditional weaponry. However, some involved more

² Joel Gunter, "In Syria's Eastern Ghouta, a Doctor's Battle: 'We Will Stay until the End,'" BBC News, March 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43415128>.


pernicious weaponry prohibited under international law to be used in civilian populated areas—as they were in Ghouta—due to their indiscriminate nature. The next four chapters of this report will examine these four particularly pervasive and pernicious types of attacks: chemical weapons, cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and attacks on health facilities whose locations had been shared with the Russian and US governments in an effort to protect them.

In Ghouta, at least six suspected chemical weapons attacks took place during the government's campaign to recapture eastern Ghouta. The deadliest attack occurred on April 7, precipitating Douma's surrender one day later and prompting international outcry and retaliatory air strikes on April 14 by the United States, United Kingdom, and France against Syrian military sites implicated in the manufacture, storage, and deployment of chemical weapons.

On five days during the offensive, local activists documented multiple cluster munition attacks. Most of eastern Ghouta's population centers were hit, injuring and killing individuals who appeared to be mostly civilians. Incendiary weapons appear to have been used in at least twenty-five attacks during the ground operation against eastern Ghouta, with the weapons being deployed primarily against urban areas behind the front lines. Attacks on hospitals have occurred since the beginning of the conflict, with Physicians for Human Rights having recorded 446 attacks by Syrian government and Russian forces on medical facilities over the course of the conflict.³ Ghouta also suffered from attacks on healthcare centers, including two whose locations had been "deconflicted" by sharing them with the Russian military in an attempt to protect them.

³ "Anatomy of a Crisis: A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria," Physicians for Human Rights, accessed on September 09, 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_syria_map/web/index.html

Chemical Weapons Attacks



A child and a man are seen in hospital in the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Damascus, Syria February 25, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh

There has been widespread use of chemical weapons during the conflict in Syria. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism, which is mandated by the UN Security Council to investigate chemical weapons use in Syria, has confirmed Syrian government forces have used both the nerve agent sarin and chlorine gas as chemical weapons. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry (UN-COI) on the Syrian Arab Republic has documented dozens of attacks,¹ while other organizations allege much higher numbers; for example, 198 attacks were documented between 2012 and March 2018 by the Syrian American Medical Society.²

Despite President Barack Obama's chemical weapons "red-line" statement in 2012, widespread international condemnation of, and retaliatory air strikes against, the Syrian government following the April 2017 sarin attack on Khan Sheikhoun, multiple years of condemnation and documentation by a range of human rights nongovernmental organizations, and the threat of military action against Syria from various nations, Syrian government forces have continued to use chemical weapons throughout 2017 and 2018.

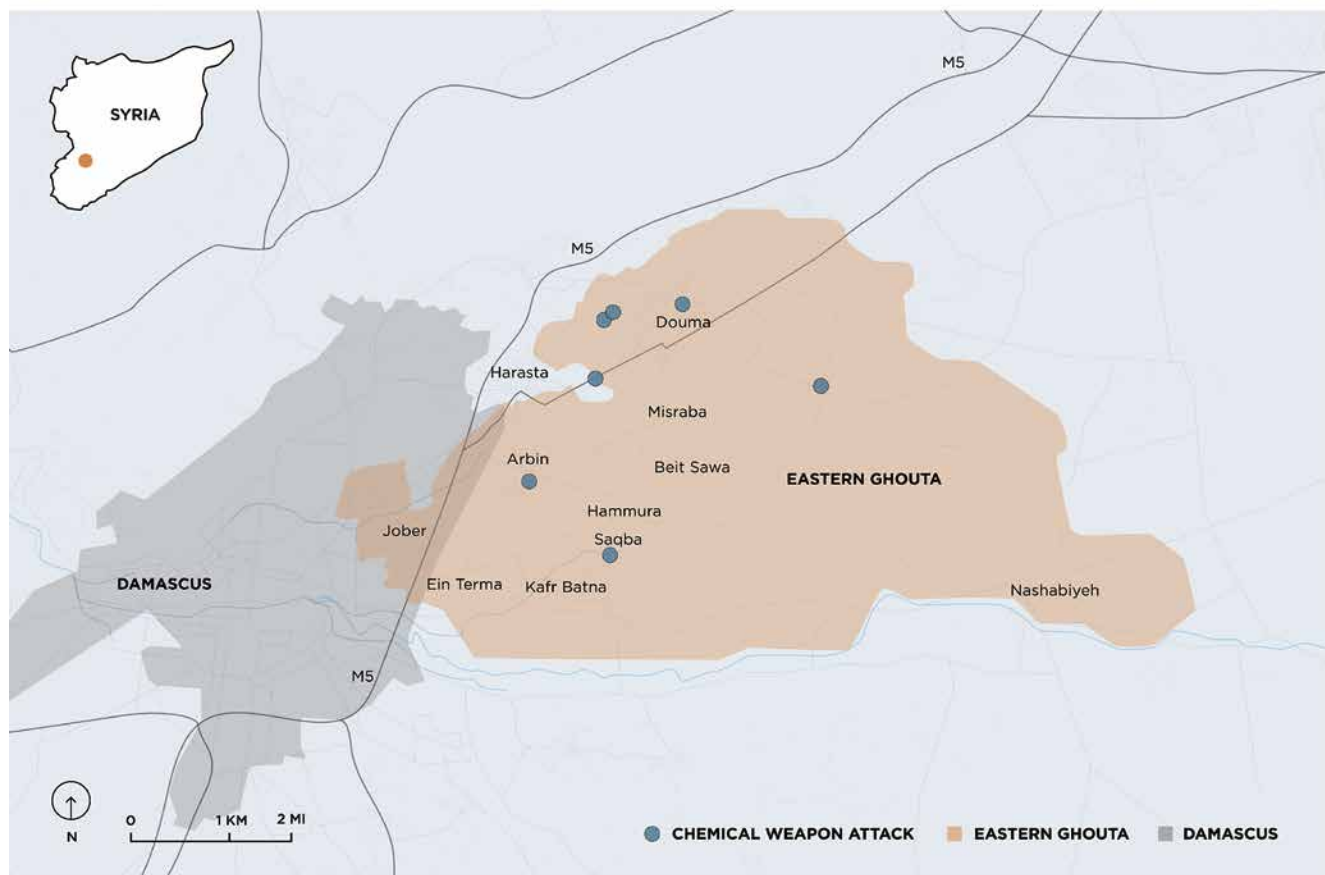
In the ground assault during the final months of the siege of eastern Ghouta, at least six suspected chemical weapons attacks were reported by local organizations and activists. While the April 7, 2018, chemical attack in Douma received extensive media coverage, it was preceded by a number of less-publicized attacks in January and February. The most well-documented of these early attacks were chlorine attacks in which surface-to-surface rockets were used. The April 7 attack on Douma, on the other hand, used modified chlorine gas cylinders of a type used in aerial chlorine attacks. Five of the chemical attacks in Ghouta's final days have been verified in this report, by examining images and witness statements collected following the attacks.

1 United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, (September 2017), available from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_36_55_EN.docx.

2 "SAMS Strongly Condemns Use of Internationally-Prohibited Weaponry on Besieged Civilians," SAMS-USA, March 08, 2018, https://www.sams-usa.net/press_release/sams-strongly-condemns-use-internationally-prohibited-weaponry-besieged-civilians/.

Chemical Weapons in Eastern Ghouta

Recorded attacks between January 13th and April 7th 2018



Source: Atlantic Council research from multiple sources.

The first recorded incident of chemical weapons use in the Ghouta offensive took place on the morning of January 13, 2018, and was documented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a human rights documentation organization working both inside of Syria and internationally. Its report, “Exposure of Six Civilians to Poisonous Substances in Eastern Ghouta-Damascus Countryside”³ provides details of the attack from multiple witnesses. According to witnesses interviewed by STJ, the attack took place on a frontline position controlled by opposition Ahrar al-Sham movement forces between Douma and Harasta, with “several” rockets filled with poison gas--believed by witnesses to be chlorine gas--falling on the area.

Sources reported differing casualty counts, with one stating that six civilians--women and children--were injured in the attack,⁴ while another said

seven civilians were injured.⁵ The injured sought treatment at Damascus Countryside Specialty Hospital. On January 13, the hospital published a video depicting some of the attack victims receiving treatment, and explaining the treatment they had received.⁶ Victims at the hospital were described as having mild respiratory disorder, dyspnea (shortness of breath), and irritation to the eyes--all injuries consistent with those reported in other chlorine attacks. The Health Directorate in Damascus and witnesses at Damascus Countryside Specialty Hospital explicitly stated that none of the victims presented constricted pupils, which would have indicated the possible use of a nerve agent such as sarin.⁷

The remains of the rockets used in this first attack were not recovered, making it impossible

3 “Exposure of Six Civilians to Poisonous Substances in Eastern Ghouta-Damascus Countryside,” Syrians for Truth and Justice, January 21, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/392>.

4 “Suspected Gas Attack in Eastern Ghouta Injures Six,” Reliefweb, January 13, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/suspected-gas-attack-eastern-ghouta-injures-six>.

5 [يصرصختل قشمد فئير فئشيم](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1bxYSZffg), YouTube, January 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1bxYSZffg>.

6 [يصرصختل قشمد فئير فئشيم](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1bxYSZffg), YouTube, January 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu1bxYSZffg>.

7 “Exposure of Six Civilians to Poisonous Substances in Eastern Ghouta- Damascus Countryside,” Syrians for Truth and Justice.

to identify the munition used. This was not the case in the next rocket attack reported in Douma on January 22, 2018. As with the January 13, 2018, incident, the attack took place early in the morning, between 5:30 and 6:00 a.m. Multiple witnesses reported that several rockets were fired at Douma, landing close to each other. These rockets released poisonous gas, identified as chlorine by locals. Local resident Nu'man Slick, interviewed by STJ as part of a joint investigation with Bellingcat, described "a strange smell that seemed like chlorine."

The chlorine smell was noted on the clothes of the victims treated by Mohammed Oyoum, a doctor from Damascus Countryside Specialty Hospital, where twenty-one victims who experienced exposure to the gas sought treatment. Footage from the attack shows at least seven children and seven adult males being treated at the hospital, numbers that align with other reporting about the number of victims from the attack.⁸ Dr. Oyoum reported:

The hospital received twenty-one suffocation cases, including eight men, six women, and seven children, with a child who is less than three months. The injured showed the following symptoms: dyspnea, a cough, and a neurological irritation; in addition, their clothes smelled of chlorine. We were able to cure most of the cases through the spray with oxygen and bronchodilators. Many cases were directly cured, whereas many remained under surveillance for twenty-four hours; thank God, no casualties were recorded.⁹

Remains of the rockets used in the attack were filmed and photographed, allowing open source investigators to understand the nature of the munition used, and where the weaponry originated.¹⁰

The above image from January 22 shows the remains of the rocket, a modified Iranian 107mm artillery rocket, with the warhead replaced by a large pressurised gas cylinder and additional tailfins added. Iranian rockets have been widely used and documented throughout the Syrian



Photograph of one of the chlorine rockets used in the January 22 2018 chlorine attack in Douma (Source - مزع, post on Twitter, January 22, 2018, https://twitter.com/Azm_Lens/status/955367581002686464)

conflict. These weapons have a distinct olive color scheme and text, in English, which includes the name of the rocket, lot number, date, net weight (N.W.), and the marking R.No, likely a serial number. In this photograph, the warhead is covered in frost, indicating it had recently rapidly released a pressurised gas contained in the warhead which forms frost due to a phenomenon known as auto-refrigeration. The two circular objects protruding from the rear of the warhead are pressure-release valves, and in other images from the attack, pressure-filling valves from the front of the warhead are also visible.¹¹

The rocket was geolocated to the roof of a building in northwest Douma, matching the area identified by Mohammed Al-Shami, an armed Syrian opposition member who spoke to STJ using an alias for protection. Al-Shami described the attack as one involving nine rockets, five of which landed on residential areas and four on agricultural areas in the northwest of Douma.¹²

Ten days later, on February 1, there was another early morning chlorine attack in the same area of Douma, with the rockets landing within one hundred meters of the January 22 attack. At least four rockets, identical to those used in the January 22 attack, were used. Images of the rockets used on February 1 were posted online, allowing researchers to identify the munitions and geolocate three of the rockets, before cross-checking their research against statements from

⁸ Bellingcat, YouTube, February 02, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLq6cQ--4f90h9zkqPc1YHnb52lxT2XFKr>.

⁹ Elliot Higgins, "More Details of the January 22nd 2018 Chlorine Attack in Douma, Damascus," Bellingcat, February 05, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/02/05/details-january-22nd-2018-chlorine-attack-douma-damascus/>.

¹⁰ مزع, Twitter, January 22, 2018, https://twitter.com/Azm_Lens/status/955367581002686464.

¹¹ Douma Revolution, Facebook, January 21, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution.2011/posts/1649995365081372>.

¹² "Syrian Forces Use Chemical Weapons in Duma for a Second Time in a Month," Syrians for Truth and Justice, February 5, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/392>.



Remains of three rocket motors and two warheads from the munitions used in the February 1, 2018, attack, photographed by STJ (Source –Syrians for Truth and Justice, “‘German Materials’ Again Used in Chlorine Gas Rockets in Eastern Ghouta, February 12, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/416>)



Remains of a chlorine gas cylinder at the balcony impact location in a video filmed on April 9, 2018 (Source – “Important: video from 9 April, 7:02pm showing presence of chemical gas canister in Douma. Same location as video of casualties. Also same location that Russia visited reporting ‘no sign of chemical weapons,’” Twitter, posted by The White Helmets, April 10, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/983768284133806080>)



One of the impact craters filmed by Firas Abdullah in Douma following the February 1, 2018, chlorine attack (Source – Firas Abdullah, post on Twitter, February 1, 2018, https://twitter.com/firasabdullah_/status/958951468748460032)

the local activist who documented the impact sites, and footage filmed by a member of the STJ team.¹³

Images of the impact sites show that the attack would have come from the west of Douma.¹⁴ In one geolocated video, a local activist filmed the impact crater of one of the rockets.¹⁵

The shape of the crater in the image on the bottom left indicates the rocket would have come from the west. At the time, the Syrian government held military positions around one kilometer to the west of this location. Another video filmed by a local activist shows an impact site where the warhead of the chemical munition remains embedded in the ground, close to a large wall.¹⁶ The impact crater is west of the north-south running wall, and the height of the wall in relation to the position of the impact crater would make it extremely unlikely for the munition to have come from the east without first hitting the wall. Given that the wall appears to be undamaged, this again indicates the munition came from government positions in the west.

Statements from witnesses to the earlier January 13 attack reported that rockets came from the direction of the 41st Regiment military base. This

13 Bellingcat, YouTube, February 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6-sFJU-Y7Q>.

14 Eliot Higgins, “New Details of the February 1st 2018 Chlorine Attack in Douma, Damascus,” Bellingcat, February 12, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/02/12/new-details-february-1st-2018-chlorine-attack-douma-damascus/>.

15 Firas Abdullah, Twitter, February 01, 2018, https://twitter.com/firasabdullah_/status/958951468748460032.

16 Firas Abdullah, Twitter, February 01, 2018, https://twitter.com/firasabdullah_/status/958956122324504576.



One of the munitions used in the January 22nd attack decorated by the Syrian artist Akram Abo Alfoz with the pressure valve used for filling the munition visible of the front of the warhead (Source - Akram Abo Alfoz, Twitter, posted on 30 January, 2018, https://twitter.com/akram_abo_alfoz/status/958444531850063872).

base is also consistent with the direction of travel of the rockets used in the February 1 attack, which is proximate to the site of the January 22 attack. Both sites are located around two kilometers west of the 41st Regiment base. According to various sources documenting government and opposition control of the area, the attack sites were around four hundred to six hundred meters east of the frontline positions. The range of unmodified Iranian 107mm rockets is believed to be up to nine kilometers, putting the attack sites well within range;¹⁷ however, with the modifications seen on the rockets in these incidents, it would be impossible to estimate the specific range of the rockets used in these attacks, meaning we cannot conclusively say they were fired from the 41st Regiment base using open source investigation.

The January and February attacks were not the first time these modified 107mm rockets were seen in the conflict. In early 2017, the same rockets

were documented following attacks on frontline positions elsewhere in Damascus, including a January 2017 attack on the town of al-Marj, around eight kilometers southeast of Damascus.¹⁸

A recent report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic said of the munitions used in the January 22, 2018, and February 1, 2018, attacks:

While munitions of this type have been employed by a range of actors across the Syrian Arab Republic, the particular design of the munitions observed during the two attacks indicated a type known to have been used only by government forces or, rarely, by affiliated militias. Specifically, the munitions documented were built around industrially produced Iranian artillery rockets known to have been supplied to forces commanded by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic.

¹⁷ "Iranian Artillery Rockets," Global Security, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/mrl-iran-specs.htm>.

¹⁸ Qasioun News Agency, YouTube, February 01, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99-175jlkZQ>.

They went on to conclude that: “government forces and/or affiliated militias committed the war crimes of using prohibited weapons and launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian populated areas in eastern Ghouta.”¹⁹

19 United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, (12 September 2018), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyrria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>.



Remains of a chlorine gas cylinder, with a metal external structure, filmed at the balcony impact location in a video published on April 9, 2018 (Source - Baladi-News Network, Youtube, April 09, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JmAOWmkFvk>)

Despite repeated warnings by the international community, the Syrian government continued to use chemical weapons in Douma. On February 25, 2018, yet another chlorine attack was reported, this time in Shifouniyeh town, southeast of Douma. Unlike the attacks earlier in the year, some witnesses claimed the gas bombs had been dropped from a helicopter. According to STJ, eighteen civilians were treated in a hospital for their injuries. Data provided by Hala Systems, an organization that tracks aircraft data for the purpose of providing early warning to civilians to prevent injury and death, showed that shortly before the attack, at 5:39 p.m. local time, a Syrian military Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter left Dumayr Air Base, and departed southwest in the direction of al-Shefonia. A few minutes later, between 5:44 p.m. and 5:55 p.m., Hala Systems' reporting network spotted an Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter above eastern Ghouta. Soon after, the first reports of a chemical attack in al-Shefonia began to emerge. Two children, a ten-month-old and four-year-old, were reported to die as a result of injuries sustained in the attack.²⁰

20 “Syrian Forces Bombard Eastern Ghouta with Chemical Weapons for the Fourth Consecutive Time since the Beginning of 2018,” Syrians for Truth and Justice, March 15, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/463>.

The April 7 Douma Attack

On April 7, 2018, aircraft spotters working with Hala Systems tracked two Mi-8 Hip transport helicopters, used by the Syrian air force to drop barrel bombs and chlorine bombs throughout the conflict, moving from Dumayr Air Base towards Douma at 7:16 p.m. and 7:23 p.m. local time. At 7:38 p.m., two Mi-8 Hip transport helicopters were seen above Douma. It was not long afterward that reports of a chlorine attack in Douma were shared on social media and messaging apps by activists on the ground in Douma.

Two chlorine cylinders, modified with an external structure that added tail fins and suspension lugs, were found at two sites: the balcony of an apartment building where the cylinder had pierced the floor, and a bedroom where the modified gas cylinder was found on a bed.

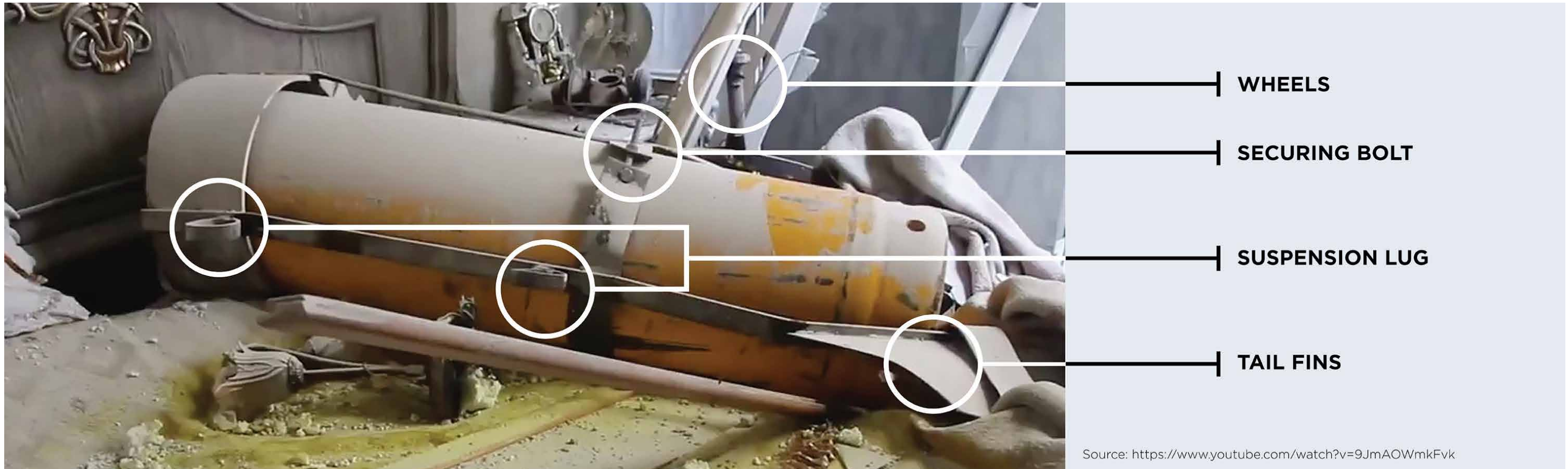
At the balcony site, footage filmed inside the building showed dozens of bodies located throughout the building, many of which displayed corneal burns and heavy foaming around the mouth, signs of exposure to chlorine gas according

to chemical weapons experts.²¹ At least thirty-four bodies were visible in footage from inside and directly outside the building. The presence of additional bodies in the basement was reported; however, there is no footage available from open sources showing those bodies. According to the interim OPCW report on the attack, between forty and seventy people were reportedly killed, with hundreds of others injured.²² Unlike the balcony location, the other reported impact point produced no images of dead or injured individuals at the site of the alleged attack.

The position of the chlorine gas cylinder on the balcony would have resulted in gas from the cylinder rapidly discharging into one of the

21 Malachy Browne, Christoph Koettl, Anjali Singhvi, Natalie Reneau, Barbara Marcolini, Yousur Al Hlou and Drew Jordan, “One Building, One Bomb: How Assad Gassed His Own People,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>.

22 United Nations, OPCW, *Note by the Technical Secretariat: Interim Report on the Progress of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding an Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018*, S/1645/2018 (06 July 2018), available from https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf.



WHEELS

SECURING BOLT

SUSPENSION LUG

TAIL FINS

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JmAOWmkFvk>



Remains of a modified chlorine cylinder with an external metal structure (Source - لسعلا ناخ قنيدم يف ماسلا رولللا زاغ يوحى ليجرب قلازا - يروسلا يندملا عافدلا ليق نم يبرغلا بلح فيرب بلدا تظفاحم يف يروسلا يندملا عافدلا, YouTube, uploaded by عافدلا يندملا عافدلا, August 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5ZeRxyz4h>).

apartment's top floors. Video footage uploaded to YouTube at 2:46 a.m. local time on April 8 briefly shows the end of the chlorine cylinder protruding through the roof of the room below the balcony. In the footage, the cylinder is covered in frost, a clear sign of auto-refrigeration as a result of pressurized gas rapidly discharging.²³ Later reporting from the *New York Times* included the exact time the video was filmed—10:06 p.m. on April 7, a few hours after the attack—which it confirmed by contacting the person who filmed the video and examining the metadata on the original video file.²⁴

Chlorine gas is heavier than air, and would have sunk through the central staircase down throughout the building. Civilians are trained to respond to chlorine attacks by reaching higher ground, and washing their eyes and faces. This is likely the reason many of the victims were found, lifeless, in the building's kitchens and bathrooms. It is probable the victims found in the building were unaware that the chlorine gas cylinder was discharging into the building, and that their attempts to reach higher ground meant they were moving toward the source of the noxious

gas—resulting in their deaths.²⁵ The unusually high casualty numbers are simply a result of a perfect storm of circumstances.

By examining the munitions themselves—industrial chlorine gas cylinders with an external cage structure adding tail fins and other features—it is possible to draw clear connections to other aerial chlorine attacks that have taken place in Syria over the past four years. The most obvious connection is the yellow chlorine gas cylinders used in the attacks, which have been seen at the sites of dozens of chlorine attacks since 2014, when chlorine began to be widely used as a chemical weapon in Syria. Early examples of chlorine bombs were chlorine gas cylinders partially inside barrel bomb casings that were partly filled with explosives. These chlorine-laden barrel bombs would then be pushed out of the back of a transport helicopter. By the time of the siege of Aleppo in 2016, chlorine bombs had changed, with the barrel bomb casing used in earlier prototypes abandoned. From that point, most examples of chlorine gas cylinders displayed little sign of modification.²⁶ However, some examples had the remains of a metal structure attached to them.

23 لولا دبع يادف, YouTube, April 07, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4lkf1SNcJI>.

24 Malachy Browne, Christoph Koettl, Anjali Singhvi, Natalie Reneau, Barbara Marcolini, Youssur Al Hlou and Drew Jordan, "One Building, One Bomb: How Assad Gassed His Own People," *New York Times*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/25/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attack-douma.html>.

25 Keith B. Ward, "The Lethality of Chlorine Gas – A Possible Explanation for High Casualties and Deaths Following the April 7, 2018 Attacks in Douma, Syria," *Bellingcat*, May 01, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/05/01/lethality-chlorine-gas-possible-explanation-high-casualties-deaths-following-april-7-2018-attacks-douma-syria/>.

26 Keith B. Ward, "Syria Used Chlorine Bombs Systematically in Aleppo, Report Says," *New York Times*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/middleeast/syrian-chlorine-bombs-aleppo-human-rights-watch.html>.

One example from late 2016 showed the clear remains of this metal structure. Similar remains were found after an August 2017 chlorine attack in Khan al-Assal, Aleppo, showing the same three metal bands around the circumference of the cylinder, secured in place by bolts, with metal straps running the length of the cylinder with tail fins and suspension lugs welded to the straps.²⁷ The same yellow gas cylinders with identical cage-like structures were documented at the two attack sites in Douma. At the impact site with the cylinder on the bed, the metal structure is plain to see, with all the metal straps, bolts, suspension lugs, and even wheels on an axle visible.²⁸

At first, it appears that the metal structure is absent from the balcony impact site, but in a pile of metal debris next to the gas cylinder, the same metal straps, bolts, suspension lugs, and wheels can be seen.²⁹ Working with Forensic Architecture, the New York Times recreated the scene as a 3-D rendering, allowing Forensic Architecture to reconstruct the metal debris as it would have looked before it was damaged, which showed that it would have fit perfectly over the chlorine gas cylinder. In addition, a criss-cross pattern on the paint work of the gas cylinder matched that of

another piece of debris, indicating that it had hit that structure at high speed before making impact on the balcony, clearly indicating the gas cylinder had been dropped from the sky.

The September 12, 2018, report by the UN-COI states that the following happened on April 7, 2018:³⁰

A vast body of evidence collected by the Commission suggests that, at approximately 7.30 p.m., a gas cylinder containing a chlorine payload delivered by helicopter struck a multi-storey residential apartment building located approximately 100 metres south-west of Shohada square. The Commission received information on the death of at least 49 individuals, and the wounding of up to 650 others.

With all of these information sources combined, it is clear that the April 7 chlorine attack in Douma was carried out by the Syrian government, using the same modified chlorine gas cylinders seen in previous chlorine attacks dropped from Mi-8 Hip helicopters onto Douma, resulting in the deaths of forty to seventy men, women, and children, and injuring many others.

27 بلدا خلفاحم يف يروسلا يندمل عافدلا, YouTube, August 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5ZeRxyz4h0>.

28 Baladi-News Network, YouTube, April 09, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JmAOWmkFvk>.

29 Eliot Higgins, "All the Pieces Matter - Syria's Chlorine Bombs and the Douma Chemical Attack," Bellingcat, April 29, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/29/pieces-matter-syrias-chlorine-bombs-douma-chemical-attack/>.

30 United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, (12 September 2018), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>.



Handout photo provided to Reuters on February 13, 2017, by Human Rights Watch claiming to show the remnant of a yellow gas cylinder found in Masaken Hanano, Aleppo, Syria, after a chlorine attack on November 18, 2016. Courtesy of Human Rights Watch/Handout via Reuters.

Hospital Attacks



Doctors treat an injured civilian in a field hospital after what activists said was shelling by forces of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad in the Douma neighbourhood of Damascus, Eastern Ghouta, Syria in this November 19, 2015. The injured are taken to basements and shelters transformed into field hospitals run by medical staff who have stayed in the battered neighbourhood of Damascus. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh

It “rained hell” in Douma on April 6 and 7, according to Dr. Muhammed, who used an alias for fear of reprisals. A possible deal between Russian negotiators and Jaish al-Islam—the Islamist rebel group that controlled half of eastern Ghouta—fell apart, and a new wave of bombing began. In seven years of war, Douma’s residents had grown used to the violence. But not like this—1,309 attacks were recorded in Douma over the two days, according to the Syrian Civil Defense (known as the White Helmets).

In the confusion caused by the heavy bombing, medics found their work difficult. “The bombing was so bad they couldn’t move patients, they had to stay inside, underground,” said Dr. Muhammed. In the most documented war in modern history, the heavy bombing left scant evidence of the ferocity of the attacks across Douma, save the images of the now-infamous chemical attack that struck in the afternoon and evening of April 7.

Piecing together images was critical. Attacks on Arbin Surgical Hospital on March 20 and Hamdan Hospital on April 7 represented a new low in a conflict where targeting hospitals and medical workers had become a routine occurrence. These were attacks on hospitals whose locations had been “deconflicted” by being shared with the Russian government the month prior—information that was shared to protect the hospitals against

attack, and to hold the attackers to account if the facilities were subsequently struck. While the events of April 7 left little evidence of the Hamdan Hospital attack, over six months since the Arbin Surgical Hospital incident, images and videos have been tracked down through both open sources and from now-displaced individuals, and show, for the first time, the violence against a hospital whose location was known to its attackers.

Hospitals, medical facilities, and medical workers, have been attacked throughout the conflict. There were 492 attacks on 330 facilities recorded between March 2011 and the end of December 2017 by Physicians for Human Rights—446 of these were committed by the Syrian government and its allies.¹ Between January 1 and May 4, 2018, there were 92 attacks on 79 medical facilities, causing 89 deaths and 135 injuries, according to OCHA statistics.² To date, nobody has been held to account for the attacks.

1 “Anatomy of a Crisis: A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria,” Physicians for Human Rights, accessed on September 9, 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_syria_map/web/index.html

2 “Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria,” ReliefWeb, May 29, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-85>.

Targeting hospitals and medical facilities is a war crime, if the identity of the target was known to those responsible for the violence. Doctors³ and media reports⁴ have highlighted the phenomenon in Syria for years. Politicians and diplomats have expressed concern and outrage.⁵

It is normal practice for humanitarian organizations to share the location of hospitals and other humanitarian structures with parties to conflicts to ensure they avoid them and comply with the Geneva Conventions, which state that “civilian hospitals... may in no circumstances be the object of attack but shall at all times be respected and protected by the Parties to the conflict.”⁶ But the system works only if the warring parties play by the rules. With all parties—most notably the Syrian government itself—demonstrating casual disregard for the laws of war, Syria has changed the landscape of international law.

Humanitarians have long agonized over what should be done in the new landscape. Should they share the locations of humanitarian structures—known as “deconfliction”—and risk deliberate attacks on the projects and personnel? Or keep the locations hidden and hope that camouflage prevents the violence? For many, early attacks on buildings that had served as public, government-run medical facilities for years prior to the war made the decision not to deconflict easy. As the war went on, deconfliction was discussed time and again. An official working for one major international non-governmental organization (INGO) in the country, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was

not authorized to speak publicly about the issue, said the subject had been discussed frequently, as far back as 2014 when United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2165 was agreed to, allowing humanitarians to work in the country “by notification” rather than “by permission” of the government of Syria.⁷ For this INGO, though, the decision had always been easy—“we’ve never shared locations.” Another INGO official, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals against their organization, stated that they have “never shared medical locations and never would.”

On March 12, 2018, eleven non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), took the unprecedented decision to share the locations of sixty medical facilities, including some in eastern Ghouta. Later, some 680 humanitarian locations—including warehouses, schools, and bakeries—were shared with both Russia and the United States by a range of NGOs, with the United Nations (UN) acting as the umbrella for sharing the location details, as well as for investigating any attacks on deconflicted locations. Less than a month after the March deconfliction, there were two attacks on deconflicted hospitals in eastern Ghouta.

SAMS said its aim was accountability⁸—it was frustrated that there had been none for the hundreds of attacks on medical facilities throughout the war. In many cases, the hospitals had been attacked prior to their locations being shared; for example, according to SAMS, the al-Maghara Hospital in Kafr Zita was hit eight times before they agreed to location sharing. One motivator for the decision to share locations was the belief that the coordinates were already known to the Syrian government and Russia, coupled with the hope that taking part in deconfliction might provide protection, or, failing that, accountability—they wanted publicity when shared locations were attacked, and robust UN investigations into any incidents.

Open source investigations into many of the hospital attacks in Syria have benefited from the extensive range and quantity of photos, videos, and testimony available online and through NGOs of all stripes. Bellingcat, DFRLab, the Atlantic Council in its *Breaking Aleppo* report, the *New York*

3 Gro Harlem Brundtland et al., “Open Letter: Let Us Treat Patients in Syria,” *The Lancet*, September 16, 2013, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)61938-8/fulltext?elsca1=TW&elsca2=socialmedia](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)61938-8/fulltext?elsca1=TW&elsca2=socialmedia).

4 “Suspected Gas Attack in Eastern Ghouta Injures Six,” ReliefWeb, January 13, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/suspected-gas-attack-eastern-ghouta-injures-six>.

5 United Nations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Human Rights Council Holds Urgent Debate on the Situation in Syria’s Eastern Ghouta*. 02 March 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/FR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=22750&LangID=E>.

6 *Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, Geneva 12 August 1949, *International Committee of the Red Cross*, available from <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5>. See more: *Practice Relating to Rule 35. Hospital and Safety Zones and Neutralized Zones*, Geneva 12 August 1949, *International Committee of the Red Cross*, available from https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule35.

7 Security Council resolution 2165 (2014), S/RES/2165 (2014) (14 July 2014), available from [undocs.org/S/RES/2165\(2014\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2165(2014)).

8 ReliefWeb report “SAMS and 11 Other Humanitarian Organizations Share Hospital Coordinates,” April 04, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sams-and-11-other-humanitarian-organizations-share-hospital-coordinates>.

Times, and others, have used the technology and testimony to document atrocities such as chemical attacks, the September 2016 Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy attack, bombing campaigns, and hospital attacks, in detail. Laying out the details of the two reported hospital attacks in Ghouta—on March 20 in Abrin and April 7 in Douma—ought not to have been any different.

However, the reported attack on the Hamdan Hospital in Douma on April 7, 2018, was impossible to prove using open source investigation techniques. No footage of the attack or its aftermath could be found online or in extensive requests to NGOs and organizations working on the ground. SAMS claimed the Hamdan Hospital was hit during the heavy bombardment of Douma on April 7. Local news reported that it was targeted by “heavy shelling of military aircraft and artillery.”⁹ The specialized hospital (يفشمل) (يصرصختلا) and a medical point (في بطل قتل) in Douma were reportedly also struck. The Douma Medical Office tweeted at 5:50 p.m. local time on April 7 that the “specialised hospital” was out of services due to “direct targeting of all kinds of weapons.”¹⁰ This tweet was referred to by some as being the Hamdan Hospital, but it was in fact a different hospital not included in the deconfliction agreement, according to a local medical source.

The lack of evidence can be explained by the sheer intensity of the bombardment. The White Helmets reported that “on April 7th, Syrian Civil Defence responded to 403 bombardment in Duma [*sic*] including 3 chemical attacks, 165 airstrikes, 84 barrel bombs, 100 rocket artillery and 50 artillery bombardment. In such circumstances, teams were not able to document the targets of these attacks, as there wasn’t time.” Due to the absence of footage and photos, and the lack of specificity about the timing of the attack, it was impossible to double-check the flight path with groups that track flight data in Syria. The Violations Documentation Center referred back to SAMS testimonies.

The lack of available footage does not mean that the attack did not happen, only that it is impossible to verify externally using the information available. Due to the ferocity of the violence, the quest for accountability was compromised. In a statement to the UN Security Council in late May, the UN

Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, highlighted the number of attacks on medical facilities, and Panos Moutmtzis, the UN regional coordinator for Syria, mentioned the two Ghouta attacks.¹¹ The UN was sent reporting information about the attacks that was not available to this investigation, though its detailed findings regarding attacks on deconflicted medical facilities have not been released.

The attack on the SAMS-supported Arbin Surgical Hospital, in the town of Arbin in eastern Ghouta, is clearer, and helps highlight the difficult decision-making process and impossible choices faced by those managing the deconfliction process. Thanks to images shared by media and displaced survivors, it has been possible to piece together the facts of the strike, and confirm that it took place.

Prior to the March 20 attack, a bigger attack on February 20 hit the facility during a forty-eight-hour period when six hospitals were hit.¹² On that day, the hospital itself and neighboring houses were targeted—using an unknown form of weapon. The building was heavily shelled and sustained severe damage, and there were a number of reported casualties, including a female nurse named Bousra Abied, who was killed inside the hospital. At the same time, her newborn twenty-day-old baby was killed in her house, which is near the hospital.¹³ The hospital’s Facebook account was not updated after this date.¹⁴

A hospital worker described the February 20 attack in a testimony given to the authors of the report:

On 20 February, Arbin hospital was attacked, the ambulance department was targeted and the eastern part of the hospital was completely destroyed [the entrances], they were bunker buster missiles, the attack first targeted an area near the hospital, injuring 25 people, then followed ambulances movement to locate the

9 “دمدغل نخ امود يف يصرصختلا يفشمل جرخي اوسورو ماطزل فصرق ... فايح لك ني مدتل,” Shaam News Network, 07.04.2018, <http://bit.ly/2Nu374Y>;
تارشن ع عقوت دم اسلا تاراغلا و ني موي لالخ اديش 55 دملا هوج اوم يف امود .. دم اي قلا اناك
“تابا اصل,” Shaam News Network, 07.04.2018, <http://bit.ly/2xswB9k>.

10 “امود يف بطل بتكلم,” Twitter, April 07, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Doumamedical/status/982676907211808768>.

11 “UN Investigating Attacks on Syrian Hospitals after Locations Shared with Russia,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 29, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/un-investigating-attacks-syrian-hospitals-locations-russia/29257543.html>.

12 “Syria Regime, Russian Airstrikes Target Six Hospitals in Eastern Ghouta,” New Arab, February 20, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/2/20/six-hospitals-bombed-in-eastern-ghouta-in-two-days>.

13 “‘End This Senseless Human Suffering:’ UN Demands End to Eastern Ghouta Bombardment after 100 Killed,” New Arab, February 20, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/2/20/un-condemns-senseless-suffering-as-100-killed-in-ghouta>.

14 Erben Hospital, Facebook, September 20, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Erbenhospital/>.

hospital to attack it then, we moved to the second building to the west which was also targeted, so we moved to the third building. There were 300 people then in the third building – we were lucky that one wasn't bombed.

Medics cited by the *Daily Telegraph* suggested it may have been a bunker-buster bomb. Other media have also mentioned the use of this specific type of bomb.¹⁵ An Agence France-Presse photographer is said to have identified a warplane on the hospital in Arbin as a Russian Su-34 jet.¹⁶

It was after this major February attack, which reduced the hospital's operational capacity significantly, that the location was shared with the Russian and US militaries. The hospital worker said: "We wanted to move the hospital to a new location, but we couldn't, mainly because civilians of a certain area didn't allow us to move near them as it was known that hospitals are the regime's favorite targets. The staff of the hospital fixed the

ambulance/ICU [intensive care unit], since then only severe cases were brought to the hospital." It was, perhaps, out of sheer desperation, and the fact that the hospital had been damaged and its efficacy impacted by previous strikes, that its location was added to the deconfliction list.

Eight days after the location was shared, on March 20, the Arbin Surgical Hospital was reportedly hit with an attack. The bomb went right through the hospital, which was partly built underground, and sheltered beneath a four-story building. "The hospital was hit. With a missile that went through the whole building of 5 floors and didn't explode, killing one patient," said the hospital worker.

The attack on March 20 killed one patient and damaged the facility, according to SAMS.¹⁷ In a tweet, the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations claimed that the hospital had been destroyed.¹⁸

Two videos allegedly taken after the March 20 attack were shared on WhatsApp with the report authors. Based on those videos, combined with

15 Josie Ensor, "UN under Fire for Giving Russia Coordinates of Syrian Hospitals in 'High-Risk' Strategy to Stop Attacks," *Telegraph*, March 24, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/24/un-fire-giving-russia-coordinates-syrian-hospitals-high-risk/>.

16 Scott Lucas, "UN Gives Coordinates of Syria's Hospitals to Russia - Russia Then Attacks Hospital?" *EA WorldView*, March 23, 2018, <https://eaworldview.com/2018/03/un-gives-coordinates-of-syrias-hospitals-to-russia-assad-russia-bomb-hospitals/>.

17 "SAMS and 11 Humanitarian Organizations Share Hospital Coordinates," SAMS, April 04, 2018, https://www.sams-usa.net/press_release/sams-11-humanitarian-organizations-share-hospital-coordinates.

18 Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, Twitter, March 20, 2018, <https://twitter.com/UOSSM/status/976193473270439936>.



Photo of the aftermath of the attack on the hospital, along with the casualty of the attack.

Breaking Ghouta

other open source information, it is possible to determine the exact location of the Arbin Surgical Hospital and make some cautious observations about the damage. The most recent satellite image was taken on March 27. Comparing that with imagery taken on March 1, no new damage can be observed. Witnesses to the attack stated that the missile did not explode, which would be consistent with the lack of new damage in the satellite images. This is also supported by images of the unexploded bomb.

On the footage from within the hospital, a large hole can be observed in at least three floors and a wall of the building in which Arbin Surgical Hospital is situated. This may indicate that a bomb went through several roofs before hitting a wall inside the underground hospital. It appears that one of the holes has been closed, either due to a

secondary effect of the impact or a deliberate act to ease the work and/or movement after the strike. A Getty Images/Anadolu Agency photographer visited the hospital after an attack on February 8, 2018, showing what appears to be an underground entrance big enough for an ambulance.¹⁹ There are in total seven pages of photos, many of which show the interior of the hospital, confirming that the video footage of SAMS was indeed taken in the same location.²⁰

19 Dia Al-Din, "Syrians Carry a Wounded Man to a Hospital after Assad Regime Carried Out Airstrikes over Arbin Town of the Eastern Ghouta Region of Damascus Which Is a De-escalation Zone in Syria," February 08, 2018, Photograph, Getty Images, <http://bit.ly/2QMWF78>.

20 "Arbin Hospital Pictures and Images," January 20, 2015-February 21, 2018, Photographs, Getty Images, <http://bit.ly/2QK9yyF>.

Screenshot from the video of the munition used in the March 20 Arbin hospital attack.





Screenshot from the video of the munition used in the March 20 Arbin hospital attack.

Another video obtained from a different doctor who had been working at the hospital at the time of the attack, shows the remains of an unexploded munition that shares characteristics with the BETAB-500 concrete-piercing bomb,²¹ such as the shape of the nose of the bomb and the wedge-like shapes around the rear of the bomb, which the tail section would have been attached to. While the bomb is incomplete and partly covered, these characteristics make it highly likely to be a BETAB-500, a bomb used to penetrate reinforced concrete structures. The remains of these bombs have been documented throughout the conflict.

While BETAB-500s can penetrate concrete, and would logically be used when trying to penetrate a basement or through several floors of concrete, as a targeted attack on a basement hospital would require, they are also unguided missiles and the ability to hit precise targets depends entirely on pilot skill. Therefore, while the location was known to the pilot, and the munition used was appropriate for a targeted attack, it is not possible to say with certainty that the hospital was the intended target. However, the urban nature of the surrounding area would indicate that at a minimum a concrete-piercing weapon was directed at an urban area.

²¹ Brown Moses, "New Bomb Identified in Syria - BETAB," *Brown Moses blog*, September 16, 2012, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2012/09/new-bomb-identified-in-syria.html>.

Incendiary Weapons


The use of incendiary weapons has been a consistent reality of the conflict in Syria. Dramatic footage depicting bright, burning balls falling from the sky has become emblematic of the apocalyptic warfare and damage inflicted upon areas besieged by Syrian forces. The famous phrase “Assad or we burn the country,” first used by supporters of Bashar al-Assad early in the conflict, became a nightmarish reality for residents of eastern Ghouta, as it has for residents of other besieged locations.¹

Since late 2012, a variety of incendiary munitions have been used in the conflict,² with the earliest documented examples being a type of incendiary cluster munition known as the RBK-250 ZAB-2.5.³

Despite the horrific injuries incendiary munitions can cause to civilians, their use has repeatedly been documented in populated areas, with both the Syrian and Russian air forces using these types of munitions in Syria's cities and urban centers. The impacts of these attacks were documented in the Atlantic Council's *Breaking Aleppo* report, where multiple incidents of incendiary munition use were researched in a similar military campaign.

At least twenty-five incendiary weapons attacks were reported in eastern Ghouta between February 1 and April 8, during the final Syrian government offensive against the area. The injuries caused by these weapons are particularly traumatic when sustained under siege conditions, due to the Syrian government's insistence on restricting and removing emergency medicines and medical equipment for the treatment of burns from the limited number of aid convoys it allows into besieged areas.

- 1 Maksymilian Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins, and Emma Beals, “Breaking Aleppo,” Atlantic Council, February 2017, <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BreakingAleppo.pdf>.
- 2 “Syria: Incendiary Weapons Used in Populated Areas,” Human Rights Watch, December 12, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/12/syria-incendiary-weapons-used-populated-areas>.
- 3 Brown Moses, “First Evidence of Incendiary Submunition Cluster Bombs Used in Syria,” *Brown Moses Blog*, November 21, 2012, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2012/11/first-evidence-of-incendiary-submunition.html>.



A man stands on rubble after an airstrike in the besieged town of Douma in eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria, February 7, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh

A picture taken early on March 23, 2018 shows what appears to be white phosphorus incendiaries landing during regime bombardment in Douma, one of the few remaining rebel-held pockets in Eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of the capital Damascus. Hamza Al-Ajweh/AFP/Getty Images



What Are Incendiary Munitions?

Incendiary weapons are defined as any munition that “is primarily designed to set fire to objects or to cause burn injury to persons through the action of flame, heat, or combination thereof, produced by a chemical reaction of a substance delivered on the target.”⁴ They come in many forms—flamethrowers, grenades, air-dropped bombs, cluster munitions, rockets, and artillery shells—all of which can be designed to create an incendiary effect on impact. However, weapons in which the incendiary effect is a secondary rather than primary effect, such as smoke-producing systems or illumination rounds or tracers, are not included in this definition.⁵

Although the use of incendiary weapons is not illegal according to international law, there are restrictions on how they may be utilized. The United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons restricts the use of some conventional weapons, including incendiaries. Article 2 of Protocol III states that incendiary

weapons should not be used on civilian objects. It also prohibits the use of air-dropped incendiary weapons against military objects in residential areas.⁶ While Russia is a party to this convention, Syria is not.⁷

The use of incendiary munitions, like cluster bombs and chemical weapons, has been a constant in the Syrian conflict, with reports of their use frequently emerging from opposition-held areas. Breaking Aleppo noted their widespread use in the Syrian government’s military campaign in east Aleppo, and multiple reports from international bodies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have highlighted their continued use in the conflict.⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has strongly denied using this kind of weapons system, and in 2015 claimed that Amnesty International’s reports on their use in the conflict were “fakes.”⁹

4 *Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Incendiary Weapons (Protocol III)*, Geneva, October 10, 1980, *International Committee of the Red Cross*, available from <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/3a507447d94ad829c125641f002d2729?OpenDocument>.

5 *Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Incendiary Weapons (Protocol III)*, Geneva, October 10, 1980, *International Committee of the Red Cross*, available from <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/3a507447d94ad829c125641f002d2729?OpenDocument>.

6 *Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons*, Geneva, 10 October 1980, *United Nations*, available from <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20II/Chapter%20XXVI/XXVI-2.en.pdf>.

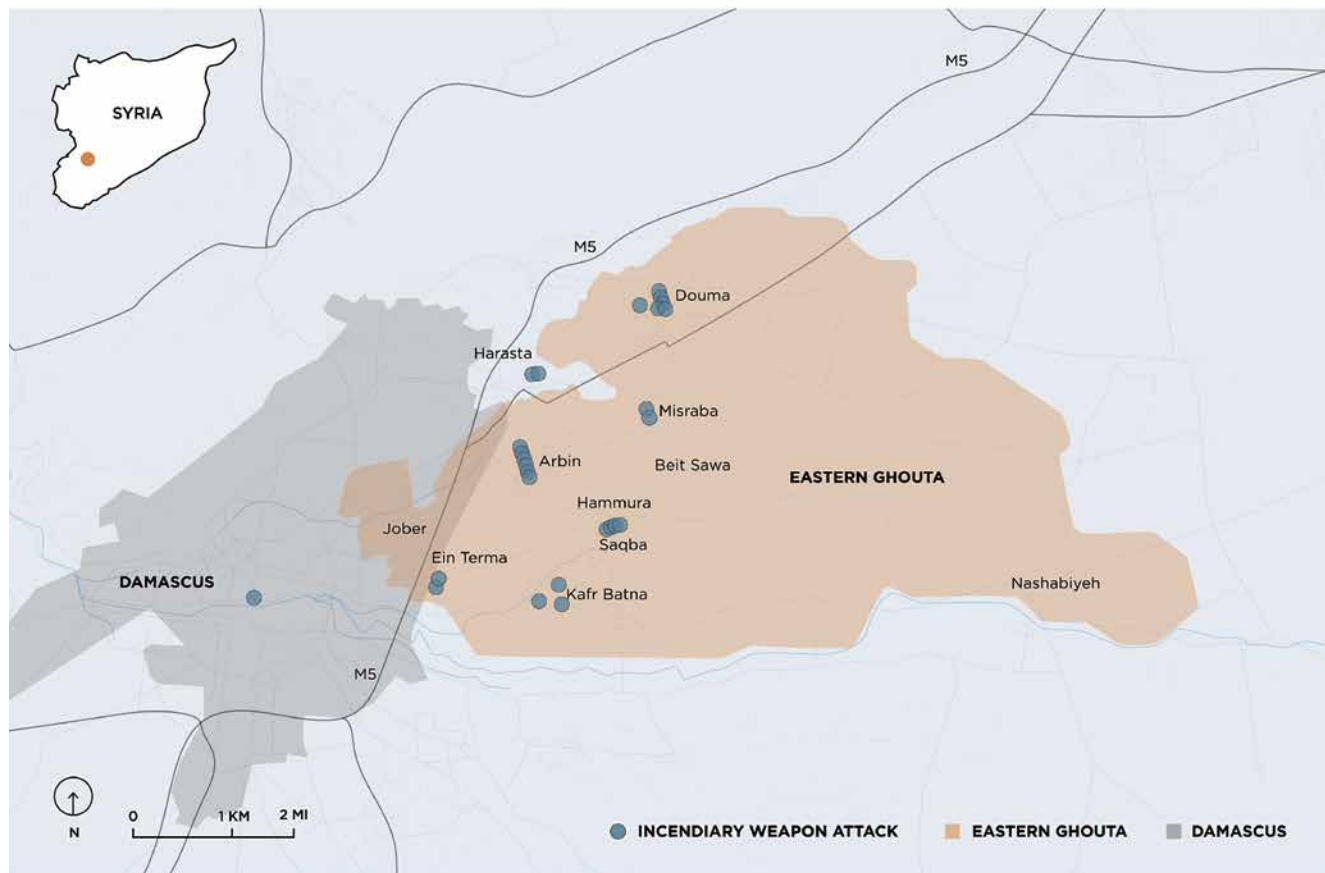
7 United Nations, United Nations Office at Geneva, *State Parties and Signatories*. September 26, 2017, [https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/\(httpPages\)/3CE7CFC0AA4A7548C12571C00039CB0C?OpenDocument](https://www.unog.ch/80256EE600585943/(httpPages)/3CE7CFC0AA4A7548C12571C00039CB0C?OpenDocument).

8 “Time to Act against Incendiary Weapons,” Human Rights Watch, December 12, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/12/time-act-against-incendiary-weapons>, 1.

9 “‘Clichés and Fakes’: Russia’s Response to Concerns about Its Attacks in Syria Fails to Convince,” Amnesty International, January 29, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2432962016ENGLISH.pdf>.

Incendiary Weapons in Eastern Ghouta

Recorded attacks between February 6th and April 7th 2018



However, footage captured in the Russian Hmeimim airbase, and later broadcast by Russia Today (RT) on June 8, 2016, accidentally revealed the use of incendiary munitions by the Russian air force. A segment of the footage, since deleted, clearly shows a Shukhoi Su-34, a kind of aircraft used only by Russia, loaded with RBK-500 ZAB-2.5S/M incendiary cluster munitions.¹⁰ The Russian MoD continues to deny the use of incendiary weapons.¹¹

The impact of incendiary weapons is difficult to control, leading some organizations to call for a complete ban on these weapons due to their

indiscriminate nature.¹² Most often deployed from artillery or air-dropped ordnance, many incendiary munitions during the Syrian conflict have taken the form of cluster munitions, which scatter a large number of smaller incendiary munitions around an area. These smaller munitions are neither guided nor particularly aerodynamic, meaning that these kinds of attacks are not very accurate. Therefore, when these weapons are used against populated areas, they will inevitably hit locations that may not have been the intended targets, such as civilian housing and infrastructure. Because the effect of these weapons is not limited merely by the blast and its radius, but also by the presence of flammable materials, incendiary weapons create toxic fumes and start fires that can trap and kill people as they hide in their shelters.

¹⁰ Ruslan Leviev, "Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD Expose Cluster Bombs at Hmeimim Airbase," Conflict Intelligence Team, June 7, 2016, <https://citeam.org/sputnik-rt-and-russian-modexpose-cluster-bombs-at-hmeimim-airbase>.

¹¹ AFP News Agency, Twitter, March 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/977212639746121730>.

¹² "Time to Act against Incendiary Weapons," Human Rights Watch, December 12, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/12/time-act-against-incendiary-weapons>, 1.

Use of Incendiaries in Eastern Ghouta

Based on reports from activists and media reporting on the ground in eastern Ghouta, at least twenty-five incendiary weapons attacks were recorded between February 1, 2018, and the final evacuation of armed opposition of the eastern Ghouta pocket on April 14, 2018. These weapons were primarily used in urban areas located behind the front lines. Images and videos accompanying these reports suggest that a significant number of these attacks involved the use of air-dropped or rocket-fired incendiary munitions, with many cluster submunitions clearly visible in videos of these attacks.

This is supported by images showing expended munitions, which can be used to identify the exact kinds of munitions being used, in this case 117 x ZAB-2.5SM incendiary submunitions and incendiary pellets from a 9N510 warhead, which we examine later in this report.

An attack on Irbin on March 16, 2018, was reported to have killed at least forty-seven people, according to Siege Watch, a monitoring body from the NGO PAX. Images from the attack showed dead bodies and injured casualties who had clearly been exposed to extreme heat, causing horrific burns.¹³

¹³ Siege Watch, Twitter, March 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/977031884206198785>.

Siege Watch also reported on a further attack in Kafr Batna on March 22, 2018, which reportedly killed at least sixty-one people.¹⁴ Siege Watch collected and posted a large amount of open source information on the second of these two incidents, helping to illustrate the horrifying effects of these weapons. A large amount of photo and video documentation of the March 22 attack on Kafr Batna was available, allowing investigators to cross-check between multiple sources. Several of the images of this attack show multiple fires and brightly burning material that appears to be consistent with incendiary submunitions. Organizations reported a range of casualty figures: the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported forty-six casualties,¹⁵ and Syrian Civil Defense reported that the attack killed at least sixty-one people.¹⁶

The videos and images associated with this attack allow the attack's locations to be geolocated within

¹⁴ Siege Watch, Twitter, March 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/974737852419526658>.

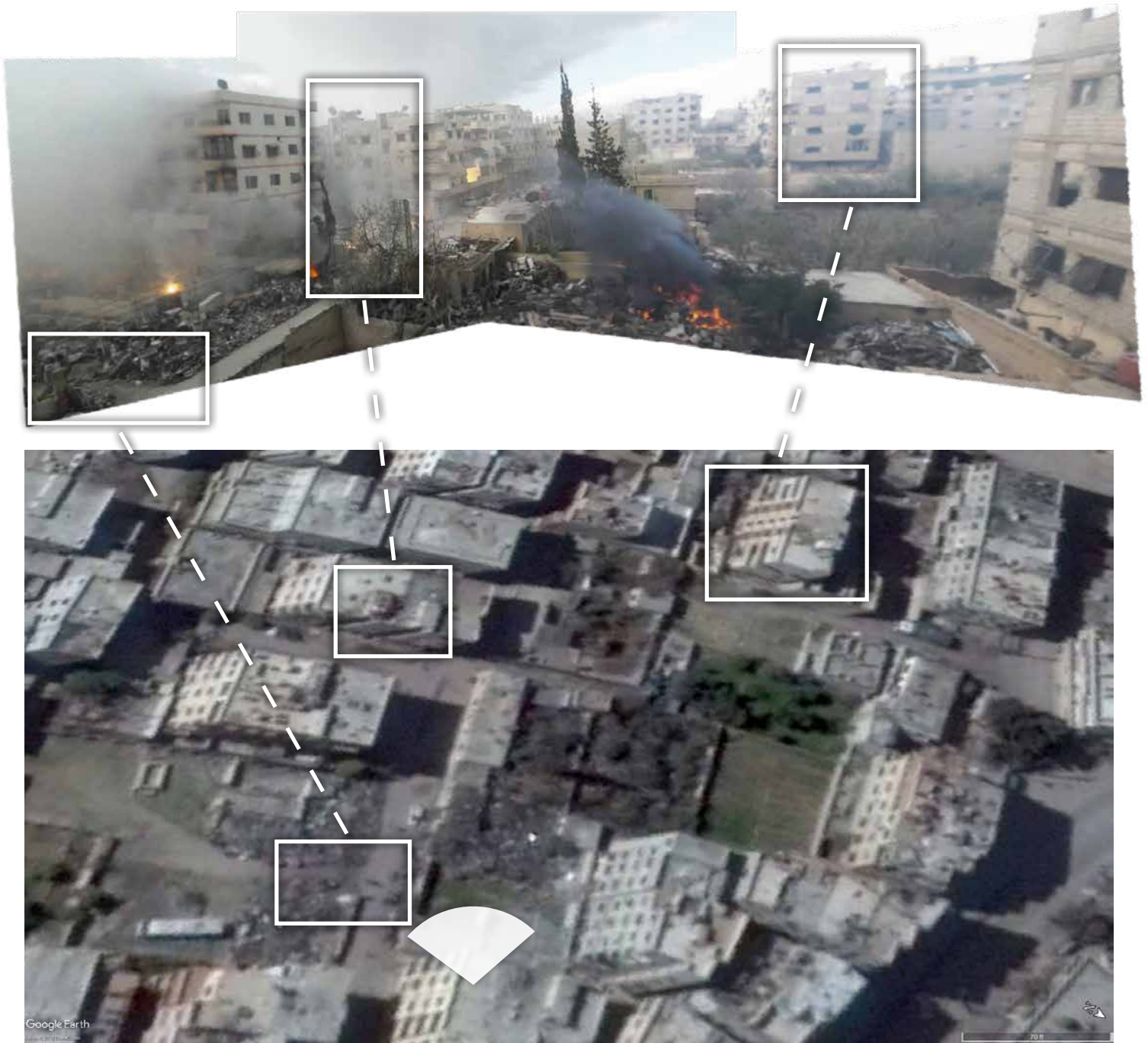
¹⁵ "46 Casualties in the Massacre of Kafr Batna Increases the Number of Casualties in the eastern Ghouta to More than 1,300 Citizens since the Start of the Aerial and Ground Escalation on It," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 16, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=86832>.

¹⁶ "Russia Backs Syria in Unlawful Attacks on Eastern Ghouta," Human Rights Watch, March 18, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/18/russia-backs-syria-unlawful-attacks-eastern-ghouta>.

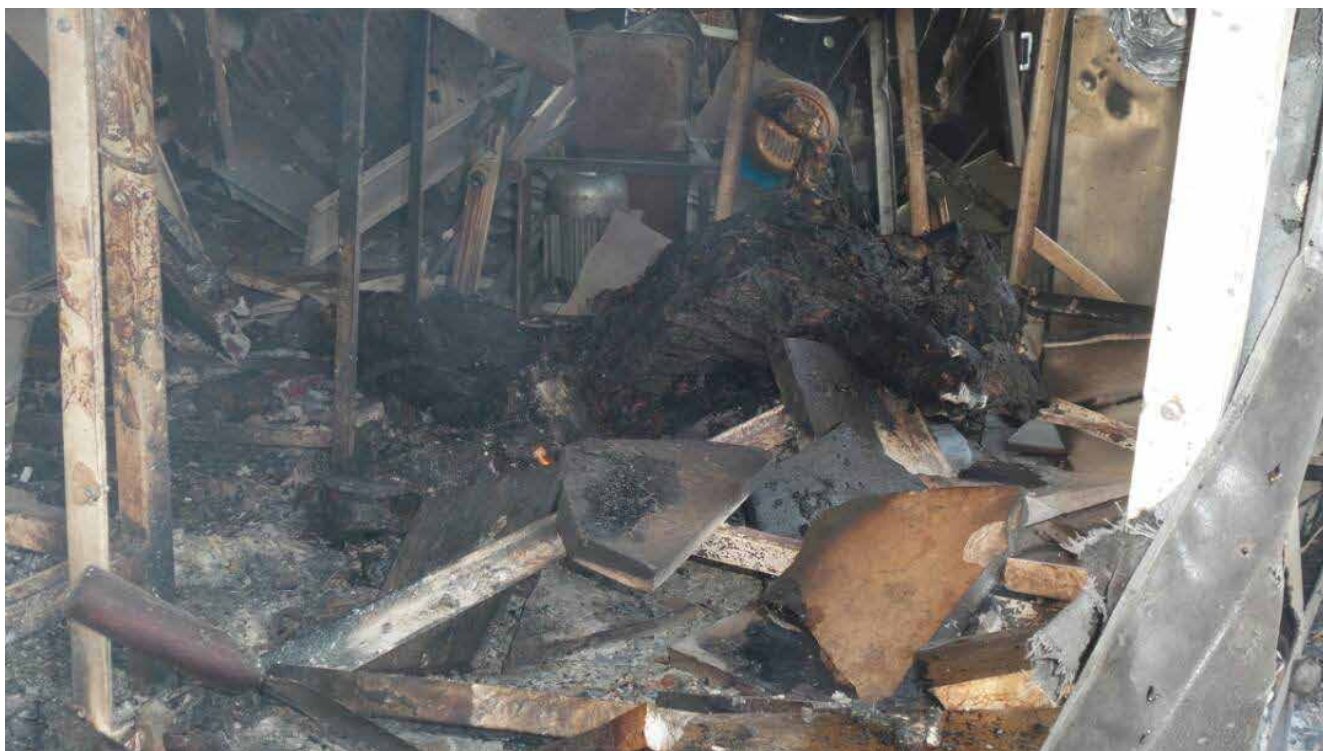


Fires in Kafr Batna following the March 22, 2018, incendiary attack (Source – Associated Press, "The Latest: UN Security Council Renews Syria Cease-Fire Call," March 16, 2018, <https://apnews.com/e5bdf9e0c99d4821b708ec8cae722a70>).

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First attack location in Kafr Barna at 33.5128, 36.3698 (Source - Local activist via SAMS Siege Watch, post on Twitter, March 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/974739564454666242> and Google Earth).



Aftermath of the Kafr Banta incendiary attack, showing the incinerated corpse of one of the victims, via SAMS_usa (Source – Siege Watch, post on Twitter, March 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/974742497569144838>).

Kafr Batna, and show two locations. At the time of this attack, the eastern Ghouta pocket had already started to collapse, and the outskirts of Kafr Batna had become the front line of the fighting between armed opposition fighters and Syrian government forces. The geolocation shows that at least two locations were hit, both of which appear to have been within a residential area. Considering the inaccuracy of many incendiary weapons, it is difficult to know exactly what the original target of the attack was. Two days after this attack, the area was captured by government fighters.

Although it is not possible to independently verify that this attack killed exactly sixty-one people, it is clear that the attack caused a large number of casualties. Several videos show a makeshift morgue, where twenty bodies wrapped in shrouds or carpets can be counted,¹⁷ and other videos claim to show additional casualties from this attack in a hospital.¹⁸ Several of the bodies in the morgue have clearly been exposed to extreme heat and appear

to be charred almost beyond recognition as human beings.¹⁹

Munitions Used in Eastern Ghouta

Incendiary weapons leave behind not only a trail of destruction, but unexploded ordnance and expended submunitions, allowing identification of the kinds of weapons being used. Using images of expended or unexploded munitions from the documented attacks in eastern Ghouta, it is possible to see that at least two kinds of weapons were used in these incidents. One appears to be consistent with an incendiary pellet contained within Russian 9N510 warheads, which can be fired by the BM-21 Grad.²⁰ The second is a Russian air-dropped 117 x ZAB-2.5SM incendiary submunition,²¹ which are deployed from the RBK-500 cluster

17 SMART News Agency, YouTube, March 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8HlyOwteQk>.

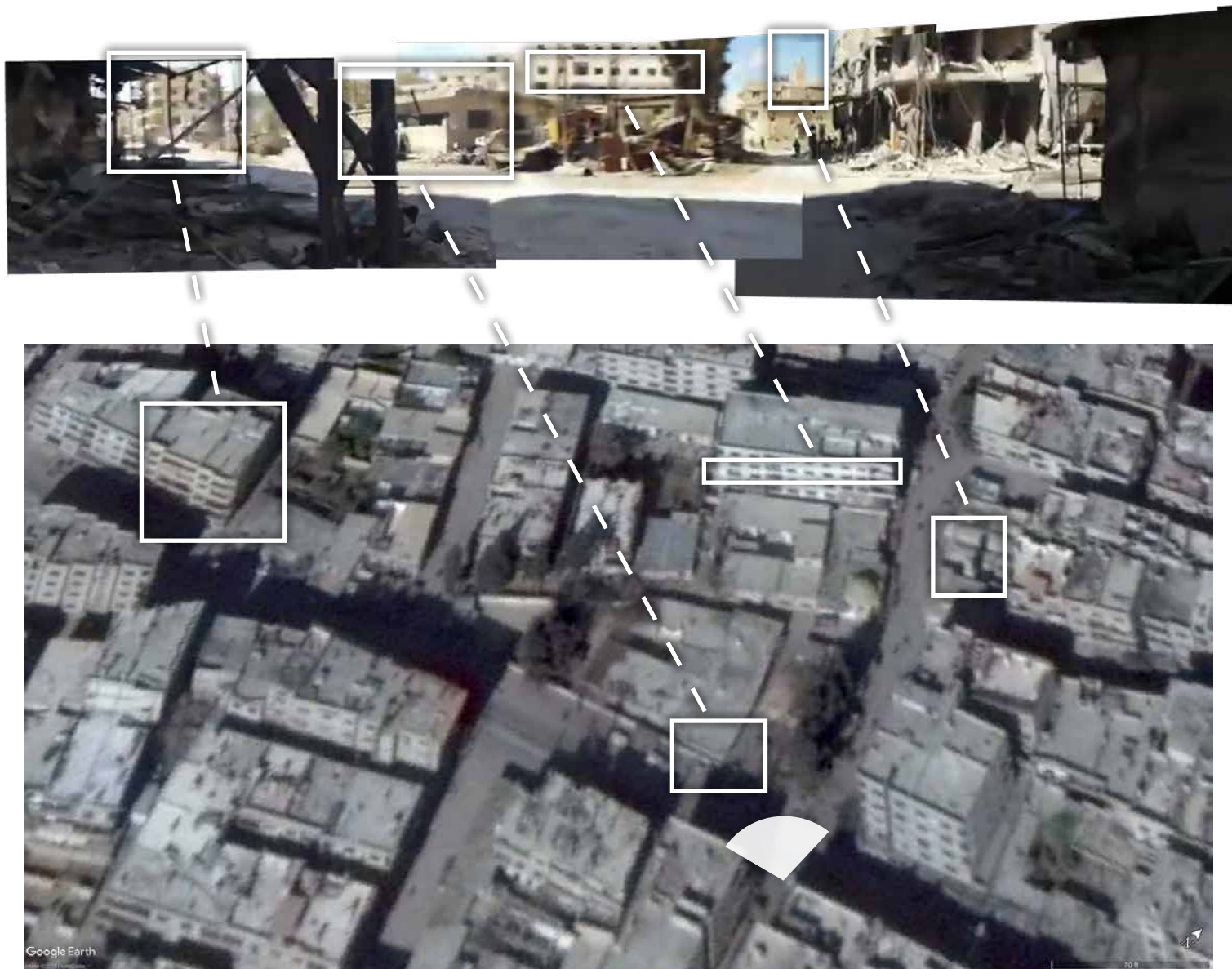
18 SMART News Agency, YouTube, March 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8HlyOwteQk>.

19 Siege Watch, Twitter, March 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SiegeWatch/status/974742497569144838>.

20 “122-мм реактивный снаряд МЗ-21 индекса 9М22С с зажигательной боевой частью 9Н510,” Soviet Ammo, http://soviet-ammo.ucoz.ru/index/122_9m22c/0-139.

21 Lukas Andriukaitis, “#PutinAtWar: Rebels Burned Out of Eastern Ghouta,” Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, April 05, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/putinatwar-rebels-burned-out-of-eastern-ghouta-e0769667992d>.

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Second attack location in Kafr Barna at 33.51223, 36.37507.

bomb, the same weapon that was filmed being mounted onto a Russian aircraft in 2016.²²

These reports, images, and videos are consistent with the continued use of incendiary weapons in urban areas by the Syrian regime and its allies. The indiscriminate nature of these weapons, and the horrific injuries they cause, make them a particularly serious threat to civilians, especially in urban areas.

²² Ruslan Leviev, "Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD Expose Cluster Bombs at Hmeymim Airbase," Conflict Intelligence Team, June 7, 2016, <https://citeam.org/sputnik-rt-and-russian-modexpose-cluster-bombs-at-hmeymim-airbase>.



Left: Incendiary pellet from a 9N510 warhead photographed in eastern Ghouta on February 23, 2018. Source: Ghouta Media Center via Syrians for Truth and Justice (Source - Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Syrian Regime Bombards Eastern Ghouta with Incendiary Substances Similar to Phosphorous [sic]," March 12, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/456>).
Center and right: Comparison images (Source - "122-мм реактивный снаряд МЗ-21 индекса 9М22С с зажигательной боевой частью 9Н510," Soviet Ammo).



Left and bottom: An RBK-500 ZAB-2,5SM incendiary cluster bomb submunitions photographed in Ein Tarma in March 2018. Source: Local activist via Elizabeth Tsurkov (Source - Elizabeth Tsurkov, Twitter, March 21, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/976505668516630528>, via local activist).
Right: Comparison image (Source - "RBC-500 ZAB-2.5 Single Bomb Cartridge with Incendiary Submunitions," Air Base, August 07, 2014, <http://www.airbase.ru/weapons/r/rbk-500-zab-2,5/>).



Civil defence members and civilians are seen running after an air raid in the besieged town of Douma in eastern Ghouta in Damascus, Syria, February 6, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabieh

Cluster Munitions

Cluster munitions have been used extensively throughout the Syrian conflict. The Cluster Munition Coalition has recorded over six hundred cluster munition attacks from the beginning of the conflict through July 2017, causing over three thousand casualties.¹ As the government of Syria launched military campaigns against one opposition-held pocket of the country after another in the period between August 2016 and July 2017, the use of cluster munitions increased dramatically when compared with previous years, with 238 recorded attacks. This period included offensive operations against opposition groups in Aleppo. The actual number of cluster munitions used, and casualties caused, is likely to be much higher, as these figures account only for the attacks that were properly documented and reported.²

Cluster munitions are inherently inaccurate weapons due to their use of multiple submunitions which burst out of the primary munition container—in the majority of cluster munitions,

including those seen in Syria, these smaller submunitions cannot be individually guided. Because of this characteristic, their use in densely populated civilian areas is regarded as indiscriminate and is, therefore, illegal under Additional Protocol I of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions.³ Due to the often high number of submunitions they carry, even those submunitions designed and manufactured with a low failure rate leave a toxic legacy of unexploded ordnances (UXO) wherever they are used, indiscriminately killing and maiming people for decades after conflicts have ended. The vast majority—up to 98 percent—of recorded casualties from cluster bombs are civilians, many of them children, who can be drawn to the small, toy-like nature of many of the munitions.⁴ Despite this, the Russian and Syrian armed forces continue to use cluster munitions extensively, including in densely populated cities inhabited by civilians, with eleven reported cluster munition attacks in eastern Ghouta.

1 “Syria Casualties Overview,” Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, July 13, 2017, <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2017/syria/casualties.aspx>.

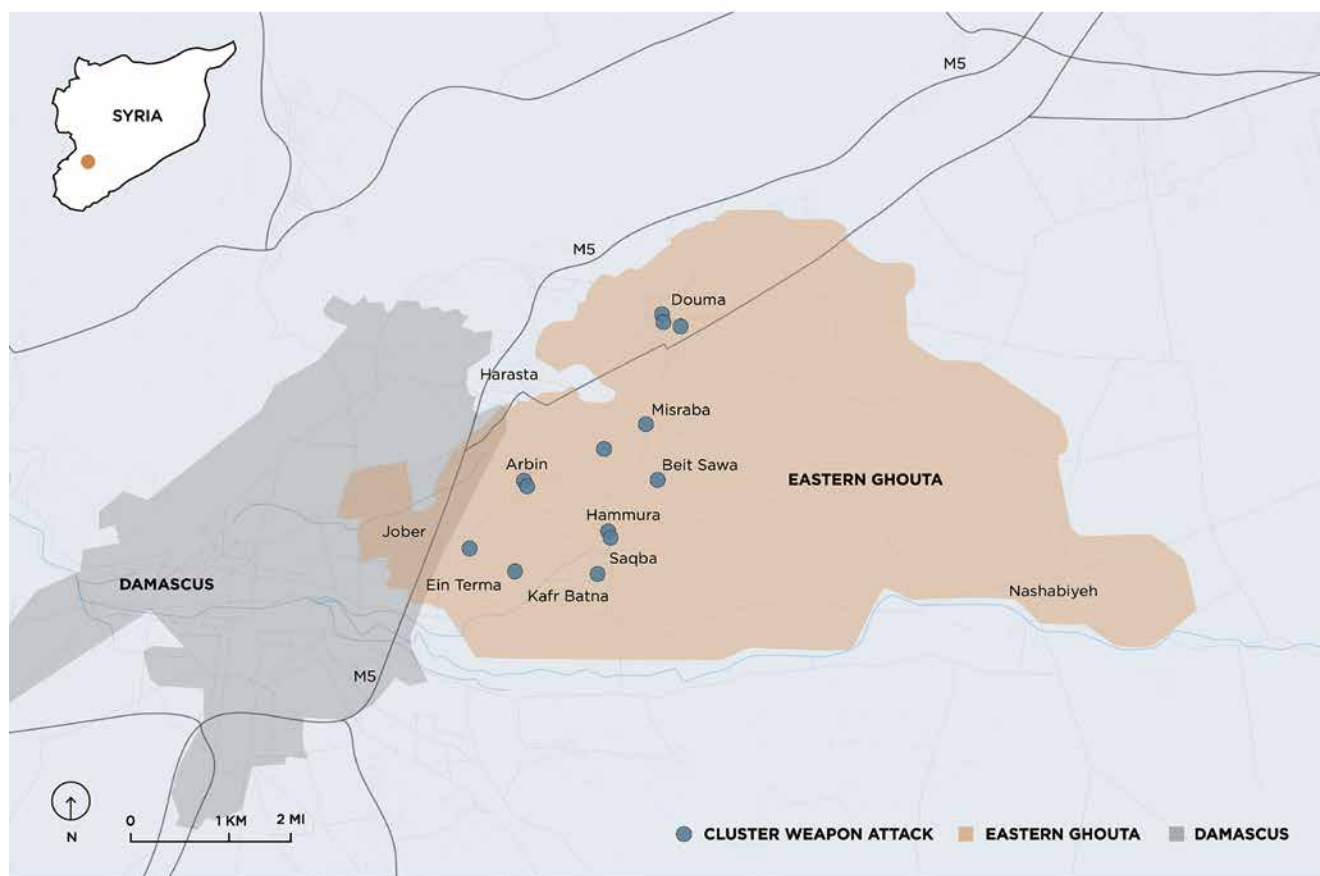
2 “Syria Casualties Overview,” Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor, July 13, 2017, <http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2017/syria/casualties.aspx>.

3 “Existing International Humanitarian Law,” Human Rights Watch, July 2004, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounders/arms/clusters0704/2.htm>.

4 Handicap International preliminary report “Fatal Footprint: The Global Human Impact of Cluster Munitions,” November 2006, <https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/kilde/ud/rap/2006/0155/ddd/pdfv/295996-footprint.pdf>, 42.

Cluster Weapons in Eastern Ghouta

Recorded attacks between February 2nd and March 19th 2018



Source: Atlantic Council research from multiple sources.

The Convention on Cluster Munitions defines cluster munitions as “a conventional munition that is designed to disperse or release explosive submunitions each weighing less than 20 kilograms, and includes those explosive submunitions.”⁵ For the purpose of this report, incendiary cluster munitions have been included in the “incendiary attacks” section. It should be noted that a significant number of the reported incendiary attacks appear to have been carried out using cluster munitions.

On five days between February 1, 2018, and April 14, 2018, there were credible reports of cluster munition attacks. On three of these days, there were allegations that multiple locations were hit. In its report, “Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day,” Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a human rights documentation organization

working both inside of Syria and internationally, recorded that on February 2 the areas of Misraba, Douma, Hamouriya, Beit Sawa, Irbin, and Madyara had all been hit by cluster munitions.⁶ A local reporter from STJ also reported that fourteen rockets had been fired into eastern Ghouta on that day. Civil society groups and activists reported that at least three people had been killed in Hamouriya⁷ and two in Douma,⁸ and at least one person had been injured in Misraba.⁹

5 “What Is a Cluster Bomb?,” Cluster Munition Coalition, <http://www.stopclustermunitions.org/en-gb/cluster-bombs/what-is-a-cluster-bomb.aspx>.

6 “Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day,” Syrians for Truth and Justice, February 12, 2018, <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/420>.

7 Hamouriya Media Office, Facebook, February 02, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/HAMOURIAREVO/posts/2071532829799377>.

8 White Helmets Rif Dimashq, Twitter, February 02, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SCDrifdimashq/status/959417545307639810>.

9 “قوسمدم فخر ي ف يروسلا ي زمل ع افسل,” YouTube, February 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29wvTYhWrlw&feature=youtu.be>.

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On March 11, the suburbs of Douma,¹⁰ Saqba,¹¹ and Irbin¹² were attacked, and on March 16, Zemlka and al-Hazza faced cluster munition attacks.¹³ The cluster munition attacks across eastern Ghouta documented through open sources have employed a range of munitions, including rockets such as the 3-O-8 rocket-assisted cargo projectile¹⁴ and air-dropped munitions like the RBK-500 AO-2.5 PT cluster bomb.¹⁵ The attacks were executed against residential areas of most of the major population centers of the eastern Ghouta pocket. The targeted locations were all densely populated urban areas, and examination of local reports and images and footage from these attacks indicates that many of the casualties caused by these attacks appear to have been civilians.



A still from an SCD video. Note the explosion that can be seen in the reflection on the vehicle.

On February 2, 2018, multiple locations across eastern Ghouta were targeted with cluster munitions. These locations were urban areas densely populated by civilians. The locations hit allegedly included Misraba, Douma, Hamouriya, Beit Sawa, Irbin, and Madyara.¹⁶ Reports of the use of cluster munitions on February 2 came from



A still from an SCD video. Note the small crater next to the curb.

activists from STJ,¹⁷ Syrian Civil Defense (SCD),¹⁸ activists in Douma,¹⁹ and the Ghouta Media Center.²⁰ The SCD captured part of at least one of these attacks, as well as their aftermath, on video, which can be geolocated to the town of Misraba.



A still from an SCD video showing a casualty from an alleged cluster munition attack. Note that he appears to have sustained injuries to his legs.

Three of these videos can be geolocated to the same street in Misraba, and show the results of one of these attacks in detail. In the first video,²¹ a Syrian Civil Defense team is filming as they move through Misraba. Considering the large number

10 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا يندملا عافدلا، YouTube، March 11، 2018، <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWHpDjoQWZE>.

11 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا يندملا عافدلا، YouTube، March 11، 2018، <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZ8JnpyZnnQ>.

12 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا يندملا عافدلا، Facebook، March 12، 2018، <https://www.facebook.com/SCDrifdimashq/posts/2144398402252124>.

13 The White Helmets، Twitter، March 16، 2018، <https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/974603517804535810>.

14 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا قروشل - امود قزيم قيقيسنت، Facebook، February 02، 2018، <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/photos/a.287942671416331/731970183680242/?type=3&theater>.

15 Qalaat Al Mudiq، Twitter، March 11، 2018، <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/972858674338287617>.

16 "Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day," Syrians for Truth and Justice، February 12، 2018، <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/420>.

17 "Fourteen Rockets Loaded with Cluster Munitions Target Eastern Ghouta Cities and Towns within One Day," Syrians for Truth and Justice، February 12، 2018، <https://www.stj-sy.com/en/view/420>.

18 White Helmets Rif Dimashq، Twitter، February 02، 2018، <https://twitter.com/SCDrifdimashq/status/959417545307639810>.

19 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا قروشل - امود قزيم قيقيسنت، Facebook، February 02، 2018، <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/photos/a.287942671416331/731970347013559/?type=3&theater>.

20 Ghouta Media Center، Twitter، February 02، 2018، https://twitter.com/Ghouta_GMC/status/959401334993801218; Ghouta Media Center، post on Twitter، February 02، 2018، https://twitter.com/Ghouta_GMC/status/959422499850158081.

21 قشمد فير يڤ يروسلا يندملا عافدلا، YouTube، February 02، 2018، <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29wvTYhWrlw&feature=youtu.be>.



Geolocation of an alleged cluster munition attack in Misraba. Left: Composite Google Earth image to aid geolocation, Right: Still from an SCD video.

of attacks recorded that day in Ghouta, with 152 attacks employing both cluster and conventional munitions, it is likely they were already responding to an incident. As they dismount, an explosion can be seen in the reflection on their vehicle, meters away from their position.

A second video²² shows the scene of the attack, as the Syrian Civil Defense members rush to the aid of an elderly man who appears to have sustained leg injuries in the attack. They load him into an ambulance and rush away, presumably to the hospital. A third video²³ shows the attack aftermath. Items from a shop immediately next

to the point of impact are scattered across the street, as blood from the elderly man pools nearby. The crater from this attack is also visible, its size consistent with an explosion from a cluster-bomb submunition.

These images can be geolocated to a junction in Misraba at 33.54856, 36.39626. (see image above)

Unexploded submunitions, alleged to be from the strike on Douma on the same day, were also identified and recorded by local activists. These not only help us identify the original munitions being used to attack densely populated urban areas, but are also indicative of the lethal legacy of UXO that cluster munitions leave behind. These UXO appear to be O-10 submunitions, which are delivered by the 3-O-8 rocket-assisted cargo projectile. This

22 قشمد فير ي ف يروسلا ينملا عافدا، YouTube، February 02، 2018، https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-GoWZzaq_A.

23 قشمد فير ي ف يروسلا ينملا عافدا، YouTube، February 02، 2018، <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5dCf3iFEqQ>.



An unexploded O-10 submunition embedded in the ground, photographed in Douma on February 2, 2018 (Source – قشمد فير ي ف يروسلا قروثلا - امود تنيديم فيقيسينت، post on Facebook، February 2، 2018، <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/photos/a.287942671416331/731970347013559/?type=3&theater>)



An unexploded O-10 submunition, markings visible, photographed in Douma on February 2, 2018 (قشمد فير ي ف يروسلا قروثلا - امود تنيديم فيقيسينت، post on Facebook، February 2، 2018، <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/photos/a.287942671416331/731970183680242/?type=3&theater>)



The remains of an AO-2.5 PT submunition reportedly photographed in Sabqa on March 11, 2018 (Source - Qalaat Al Mudiq, post on Twitter, March 11, 2018, <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/972858674338287617>).

munition is effective on unarmored targets over an area of 1.4 hectares, or just under two soccer fields.²⁴ According to Human Rights Watch, the use of this kind of Russian manufactured munition was first reported in Syria after the start of Russia's direct military intervention in 2015.²⁵

Other submunitions that have been identified include those from an attack on March 11, 2018, which allegedly targeted multiple locations in eastern Ghouta according to the SCD,²⁶ local activists,²⁷ and monitoring non-governmental organizations.²⁸ The markings on the submunitions, visible in the image below, indicate these are

AO 2.5RT submunitions, deployed using either the RBK-500 or KMGU universal dispenser, both of which are air-dropped munitions. These submunitions are noted for their high “dud” rate—meaning the submunitions do not explode—resulting in a large number of UXOs remaining in the area after the attack.²⁹ In the images on this and the next page, we can see from the batch and factory numbers that this specific example was manufactured in the Soviet Union over thirty years ago, in 1987. The use of these munitions has been documented across Syria by a range of organizations and outlets, including Human Rights Watch,³⁰ and in the Breaking Aleppo report, which documented their use in the military campaign to capture the rebel-held east of the city.³¹ From August 2016 to July 2017, Cluster Munition Monitor

24 “240-мм выстрел 3В011 с активно-реактивной миной 308 «Нерпа» с кассетной БЧ с осколочными БЭ,” Soviet Ammo, http://soviet-ammo.ucoz.ru/index/240_3o8/0-160.

25 “Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions,” Human Rights Watch, December 20, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions>.

26 “قشمد فخير يف روسلا يذملا عافدل,” Facebook, March 12, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/SCDrifdimashq/posts/2144398402252124>.

27 “قشمد فخير يف روسلا قروئلا - امود قزيم قزيسنت,” Facebook, March 11, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/photos/a.287942671416331/754593728084554/?type=3&theater>.

28 PAX report “Siege Watch: Tenth Quarterly Report Part 1 - Eastern Ghouta,” June 25, 2018, <https://siegewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/pax-report-siege-watch-10.pdf>.

29 Kenton Fulmer, “Renewed Use of AO-2.5RT Submunitions in Syria,” ARES, October 15, 2015, <http://armamentresearch.com/renewed-use-of-ao-2-5rt-submunitions-in-syria/>.

30 “Russia/Syria: Widespread New Cluster Munition Use,” Human Rights Watch, July 28, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/28/russia/syria-widespread-new-cluster-munition-use>.

31 Maksymilian Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins, and Emma Beals, “Breaking Aleppo,” Atlantic Council, February 2017, <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BreakingAleppo.pdf>.

also recorded the use of the AO 2.5RT 115 times.³² Despite Russian Ministry of Defense stating that it does not use cluster munitions,³³ Russian media have shown the RBK-500 cluster munition, which can deploy AO 2.5RT submunitions, loaded onto Russian aircraft at Hmeimim airbase in 2015.³⁴ The Cluster Munitions Monitor has also identified the Syrian military as having used this cluster munition since mid-2012.³⁵

Cluster munitions are inherently indiscriminate weapons, wherever they are used. Reporting from eastern Ghouta shows that the effects of their use

were magnified by incidences of cluster munitions being fired directly into major population centers. Whether they were dropped from a jet or borne by cargo rockets, it is obvious that those who fired them showed a blatant disregard for the safety of civilians inhabiting these urban areas, or intended to deliberately target them. This repeats the pattern observed across a number of opposition-held cities, and was documented with great detail in *Breaking Aleppo*.

The legacy cluster munitions leave behind is deadly. With their tendency to create a high number of UXO, submunitions remain scattered wherever they fall. The small, toy-like nature of submunitions makes them an object of interest for children, who make up a significant share of post-conflict casualty statistics for cluster munitions.³⁶ Whether in a city, on agricultural land, or in a recreational area, these submunitions will continue to endanger civilians in Syria for years, if not decades, after the conflict has ended.

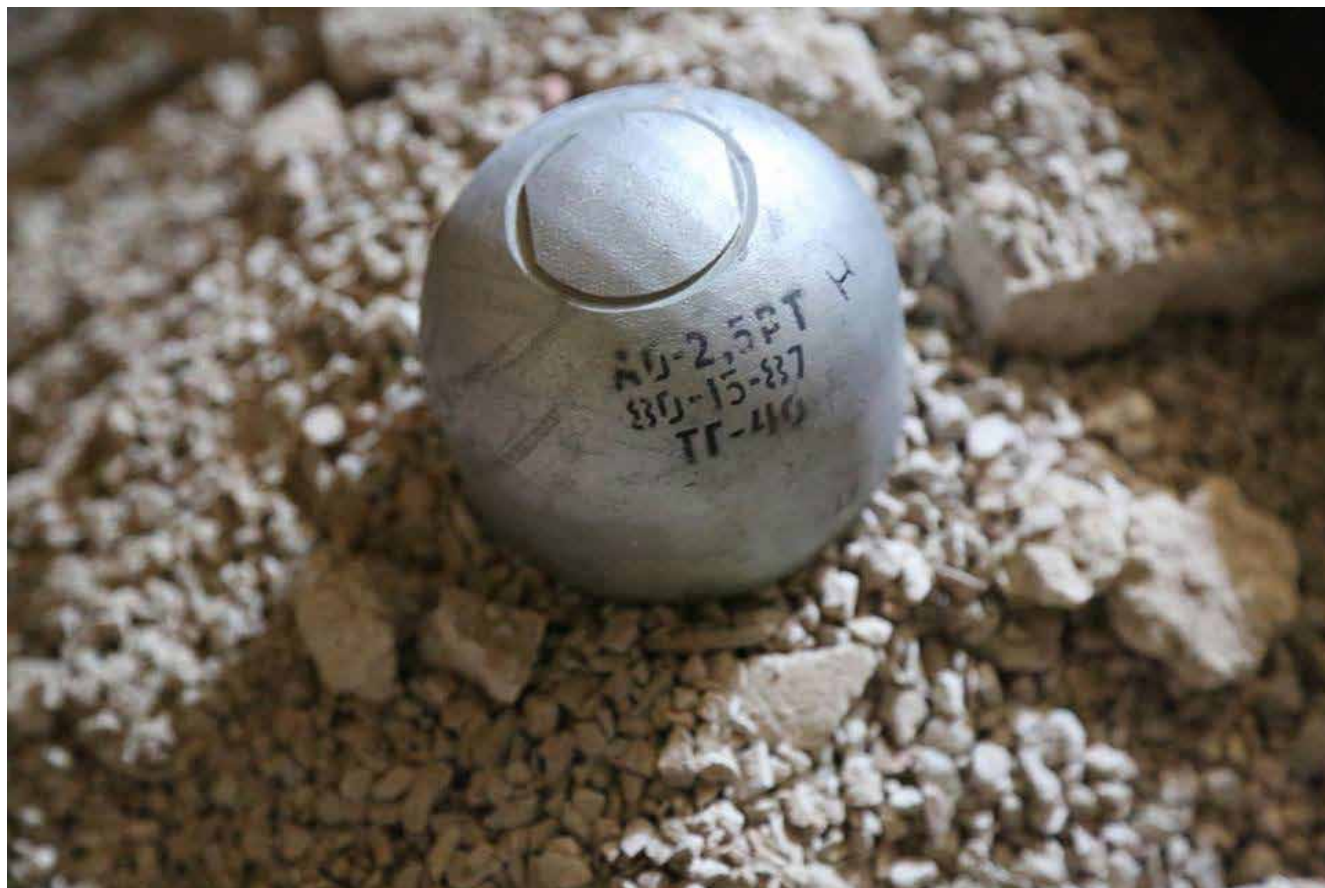
32 Cluster Munition Coalition report “Cluster Munition Monitor 2017,” August 2017, http://www.the-monitor.org/media/2582190/Cluster-Munition-Monitor-2017_web4.pdf.

33 AFP News Agency, Twitter, March 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/977212639746121730>.

34 Ruslan Leviev, “Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD Expose Cluster Bombs at Hmeimim Airbase,” Conflict Intelligence Team, June 7, 2016, <https://citeam.org/sputnik-rt-and-russian-modexpose-cluster-bombs-at-hmeimim-airbase>.

35 Cluster Munition Coalition report “Cluster Munition Monitor 2016,” August 2016, <http://www.the-monitor.org/media/2394895/Cluster-Munition-Monitor-2016-Web.pdf>.

36 Handicap International preliminary report “Fatal Footprint: The Global Human Impact of Cluster Munitions.”



The remains of an AO-2.5 PT submunition reportedly photographed in Sabqa on March 11, 2018, with markings visible (Source –Syrian Civil Defense - The White Helmets, Facebook, March 11, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/SyriaCivilDef/photos/a.1712251465765921/2028943330763398/?type=3&theater>).

Post-Reconciliation

As in previous Syrian government sieges that ended in “reconciliation,” submission to the regime did not end the human rights abuses of local residents in eastern Ghouta. In the aftermath of the enclave’s gradual fall into government hands, the area witnessed the largest forced population transfer recorded throughout the Syrian civil war, a crime against humanity in and of itself,¹ which saw 66,369 people displaced from their homes in eastern Ghouta to the rebel-held north.² Those who remained behind are under the constant surveillance of the Syrian security state and endure daily humiliations, arrests, forcible recruitment into the armed forces, and restrictions on their freedom of movement.

Just as it did during the years-long siege, the Syrian government continues to restrict the ability of humanitarian organizations to enter Ghouta and the “aid centers” in which thousands of Ghouta’s residents are still detained, five months after the end of the offensive. Access to Ghouta itself has also been restricted, despite the immense needs of the population.

United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in relief efforts are not the only ones whose access

to Ghouta has been restricted. In the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack on Douma on April 7, which precipitated the surrender of the enclave to the government a day later, government forces and Russian military police prevented the UN’s chemical weapons watchdog, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), from accessing the site of the attack for two weeks, and possibly tampered with the evidence. At the same time, Syrian government officials intimidated medical personnel and locals who witnessed the deadly attack into remaining silent.

Ghouta’s violent and gradual return to government control was accompanied by a mass population transfer operation, which began on March 23 and concluded on April 14, displacing a total of 66,369 Syrians who refused to reconcile with the government to the rebel-held north.³ “Reconciliation” is the term used by the Syrian government and its allies to describe deals between the opposition, those remaining in the area, and those being displaced. In some—not all—cases, including in Ghouta, these agreements include guarantees for the safety of those choosing to remain in their homes under government control.⁴ The agreements call for unimpeded

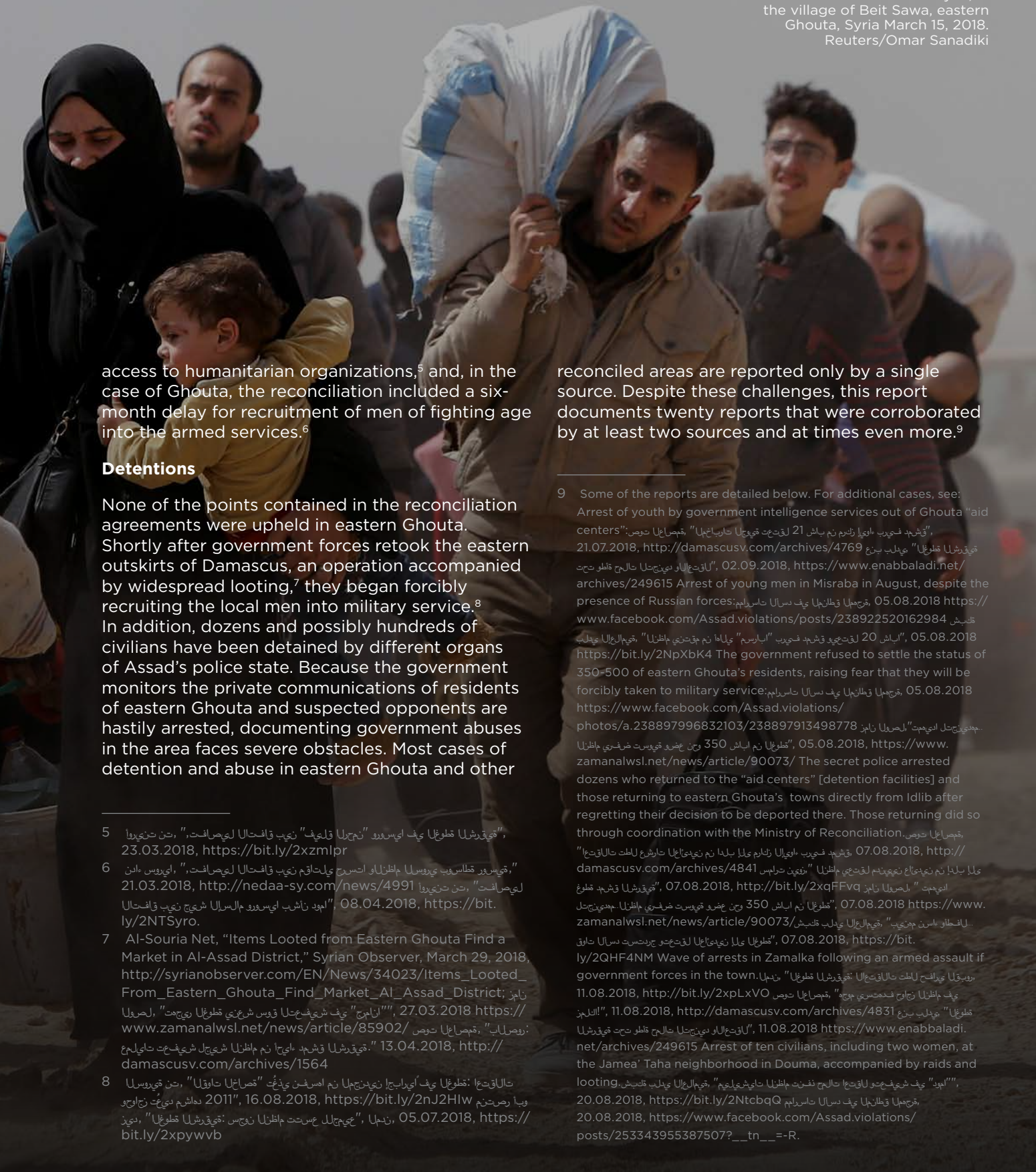
1 *Rome Statute of the Criminal Court*, Rome, 17 July 1998, *International Criminal Court*, available from https://www.icc-cpi.int/nr/rdononlyres/ea9aef7-5752-4f84-be94-0a655eb30e16/0/rome_statute_english.pdf.

2 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2>.

3 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2>.

4 Kareem Shaheen, “Ceasefire Deal Agreed in Syria’s Eastern Ghouta,” *The Guardian*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/23/ceasefire-deal-agreed-in-syrias-eastern-ghouta>

People walk with their belongings as they flee the rebel-held town of Hammouriyeh, in the village of Beit Sawa, eastern Ghouta, Syria March 15, 2018. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki



access to humanitarian organizations,⁵ and, in the case of Ghouta, the reconciliation included a six-month delay for recruitment of men of fighting age into the armed services.⁶

Detentions

None of the points contained in the reconciliation agreements were upheld in eastern Ghouta. Shortly after government forces retook the eastern outskirts of Damascus, an operation accompanied by widespread looting,⁷ they began forcibly recruiting the local men into military service.⁸ In addition, dozens and possibly hundreds of civilians have been detained by different organs of Assad's police state. Because the government monitors the private communications of residents of eastern Ghouta and suspected opponents are hastily arrested, documenting government abuses in the area faces severe obstacles. Most cases of detention and abuse in eastern Ghouta and other

reconciled areas are reported only by a single source. Despite these challenges, this report documents twenty reports that were corroborated by at least two sources and at times even more.⁹

9 Some of the reports are detailed below. For additional cases, see: Arrest of youth by government intelligence services out of Ghouta "aid centers": "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", <http://damascusv.com/archives/4769>, 21.07.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615> Arrest of young men in Misraba in August, despite the presence of Russian forces: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 02.09.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615> Arrest of young men in Misraba in August, despite the presence of Russian forces: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 05.08.2018 <https://www.facebook.com/Assad.violations/posts/238922520162984> قلابيش "ايوش 20 لقتحت فيوجال فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 05.08.2018 <https://bit.ly/2NpXbK4> The government refused to settle the status of 350-500 of eastern Ghouta's residents, raising fear that they will be forcibly taken to military service: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 05.08.2018 <https://www.facebook.com/Assad.violations/photos/a.238897996832103/238897913498778> "لصروا ناهز", 05.08.2018, <https://www.zamanawsl.net/news/article/90073/> The secret police arrested dozens who returned to the "aid centers" [detention facilities] and those returning to eastern Ghouta's towns directly from Idlib after regretting their decision to be deported there. Those returning did so through coordination with the Ministry of Reconciliation: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 07.08.2018, <http://damascusv.com/archives/4841> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 07.08.2018, <http://bit.ly/2xqFFvq> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 07.08.2018 <https://www.zamanawsl.net/news/article/90073/> قلابيش "ايوش 20 لقتحت فيوجال فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 07.08.2018, <https://bit.ly/2QHF4NM> Wave of arrests in Zamalka following an armed assault if government forces in the town: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 11.08.2018, <http://bit.ly/2xpLxVO> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 11.08.2018, <http://damascusv.com/archives/4831> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 11.08.2018 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615> Arrest of ten civilians, including two women, at the Jamea' Taha neighborhood in Douma, accompanied by raids and looting: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 20.08.2018, <https://bit.ly/2NtcbqQ> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 20.08.2018, https://www.facebook.com/Assad.violations/posts/253343955387507?__tn__=-R.

5 "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 23.03.2018, <https://bit.ly/2xzmlpr>

6 "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 21.03.2018, <http://nedaa-sy.com/news/4991>

7 "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 08.04.2018, <https://bit.ly/2NTSyr0>

8 "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 13.04.2018, <http://damascusv.com/archives/1564>

9 "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 27.03.2018 <https://www.zamanawsl.net/news/article/85902/> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 11.08.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615> Arrest of ten civilians, including two women, at the Jamea' Taha neighborhood in Douma, accompanied by raids and looting: "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 20.08.2018, <https://bit.ly/2NtcbqQ> "مجلس فوري ايواء زعيم نم باش 21 لقتحت فيوجال تارياخها", 20.08.2018, https://www.facebook.com/Assad.violations/posts/253343955387507?__tn__=-R.

Those who do not join “voluntarily” have been swept up in large-scale arrest campaigns and sent to the Dreij military camp for brief training that lasts between twenty and thirty days. Such arrest campaigns occurred in Douma in May²¹ and in August and September in Shifouniya, Douma, Misraba, and al-Marj, netting hundreds of new recruits for the Syrian army,²² which has faced manpower shortages from the first months of the Syrian uprising.²³

Restrictions on Freedom of Movement

Residents of eastern Ghouta who chose to remain behind rather than be displaced can be divided into three groups: those still detained in aid centers to which they fled during the offensive on Ghouta, those residing in the destroyed towns of eastern Ghouta under the watchful eye of the government’s secret police and military, and those who managed to leave to areas that remained under government control, such as Damascus, after finding a “sponsor” willing to vouch for them. Those remaining in eastern Ghouta and in the detention/aid centers, are subject to severe restrictions on their freedom of movement.

After retaking eastern Ghouta’s towns, government forces established checkpoints between the towns and within some of the larger urban areas. Government forces continue maintaining checkpoints surrounding eastern Ghouta, which residents need to cross if they wish to travel to Damascus. The government uses these checkpoints to severely restrict the ability of Ghouta’s residents to move between the area’s towns and in and out

of Damascus.²⁴ In April, an internal UN document stated that “Medical referrals [from eastern Ghouta] encountered occasional delays due to the need for security approval.”²⁵ In August, the restrictions on patients’ ability to exit eastern Ghouta persisted, with internal UN discussions showing that patients requiring referrals to Damascus for “diabetes, cancer, thalassemia, orthopedic surgeries, dialysis, [and] neglected war injuries” were blocked by the government’s security apparatus. The Syrian Department of Health and Syrian Arab Red Crescent are able to refer patients to Damascus only “upon receiving the approvals from security forces.” The report added: “Transportation of patients to Douma is challenging.”²⁶

Movement of goods is restricted as well and requires paying bribes to soldiers at the checkpoints.²⁷ Residents crossing through the checkpoints are subjected to verbal and at times physical abuse; men fear crossing through them due to the possibility that they will be forcibly taken to military service.²⁸ More goods are available in Ghouta’s markets and prices are lower compared with the period of the siege,²⁹ but the restrictions on the movement of people are only slightly less severe than those that existed during the siege they lived in for years before the bloody offensive.

21 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “After Their Control over the East of Damascus and the Eastern Ghouta through ‘Reconciliation Agreements and Demographic Change’...the Regime Forces Arrests Young Men in the Neighborhoods of the Capital and Douma city,” May 14, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=92127>; ايوس زيترفتت، “ايوس زيترفتت”، 15.05.2018, <https://bit.ly/2OAWCKc>.

22 “ايوس زيترفتت”، 15.05.2018, <https://bit.ly/2OAWCKc>.

23 Joseph Holiday, “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War,” Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>.

24 “الاقوات والادوية تحت قيود شديدة في شرق غوطة”، 17.08.2018, <https://bit.ly/2xzsvel>; “ايوس زيترفتت”، 02.09.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615>.

25 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2>.

26 Health Cluster report “Draft, the Minutes of Health Working Group Meeting, Syria, 14 August (Tuesday), 10:00 – 12:00,” https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/draft_hwg_14_august.docx.

27 “ايوس زيترفتت”، 16.08.2018, <https://bit.ly/2nJ2Hlw>; “ايوس زيترفتت”، 21.06.2018, <https://bit.ly/2NpezyF>.

28 “ايوس زيترفتت”، 04.09.2018, <http://www.souriyati.com/2018/09/04/108867.html>; “ايوس زيترفتت”، 02.09.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/249615>; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “The Regime Replaces Checkpoints of Its Army with Intelligence in the Vicinity of the Eastern Ghouta and Conducts Sweep and Search Operations with the ‘Reconciliation’ Fighters in Search of Buried Weapons,” September 5, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=101826>; “ايوس زيترفتت”، 09.09.2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/250833>.

29 Ammar Hamou and Justin Clark, “‘Nothing Is as It Should Be’: Residents in East Ghouta Struggle under Broken Economy Six Months into Government Rule,” Syria Direct, September 20, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98nothing-is-as-it-should-be%E2%80%99-residents-in-east-ghouta-struggle-under-broken-economy-six-months-into-government-rule/>.

Detention Facilities

During the forty-nine-day military campaign against the area, 92,338 of Ghouta's residents fled to so-called aid centers opened by the Syrian government during the last days of the offensive to recapture Ghouta. Over half were allowed to return to their homes within days.³⁰ However, those who were prevented from doing so realized that the aid centers are in fact detention camps. Married women, the elderly, and children who find a sponsor in Damascus can leave. However, young men and women have to pay hefty bribes to secure their release, or join military service.³¹ About twenty-five thousand continued to be held in the centers as of late July.³² The camps are supplied by relief organizations and living conditions are poor. Multiple families are held in overcrowded rooms, there are not enough bathrooms, and residents are closely monitored by government officials running the centers.³³ According to an internal UN document from April, "secondary medical health services and specialized medical care (including orthopedic, dental, ENT [ear, nose, and throat] and ophthalmology related services) are not provided in the IDP [internally displaced person] sites." In addition, "Referrals from IDP sites are only allowed to public hospitals for urgent and life-saving medical care."³⁴ A month later, during internal deliberations of UN agencies present in Damascus, it became apparent that the government was preventing those detained in the shelters from accessing even life-saving medical care, stating: "There is a number of detected cancer patients not being able to be hospitalized for repeatedly

required treatment."³⁵ During the meeting, the participants were informed that the government was demanding that the employees of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent "sign papers as guarantors of the return of the patient to the shelter upon completing the treatment."³⁶

The Syrian government severely restricted the access of UN relief agencies to the IDP camps. An April internal report of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs described: "Interagency monitoring and support visits to the East Ghouta IDP sites could not be realized in the period between 10 and 25th of April as no permission was granted by [Syrian government] authorities. Visits were resumed on the 26th of April."³⁷ Internal UN documents obtained by the Atlantic Council show that the Syrian government placed significant restrictions on the ability of UN agencies to access eastern Ghouta. An internal document from May 8 described one of the "challenges inside eastern Ghouta" thus: "No access by UN agencies to date."³⁸ The document states that this denial of access prevented UN agencies from carrying out an assessment of the needs of the local population. In July, an internal UN document clarified that the situation has not improved: "In general, many sectors are currently providing humanitarian assistance to the population inside East Ghouta through implementing partners [Syrian NGOs approved by the government], while direct access for the UN remains restricted."³⁹

30 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in Rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*.

31 "تقرير شرا طوغللا يلاها ءاوي زلنارم يف لاقتعلا تالاح تائيمو "هتييس" هتياسنزا عاضروا" ضراير هتمأ بطسروالا قرشلا <https://bit.ly/2xvEzNW>, 27.05.2018, "مظنلا قطنمب", "بيدعتلا تحت اوتام ءانجسل هيفاضرا حياوقو... «لاقتعلا زلنارم» يف طوغللا بابش نم افا 25", 29.07.2018, <https://bit.ly/2vfZrYm>

32 "تقرير شرا طوغللا يلاها ءاوي زلنارم يف لاقتعلا تالاح تائيمو "هتييس" هتياسنزا عاضروا" ضراير هتمأ بطسروالا قرشلا <https://bit.ly/2xvEzNW>, 27.05.2018, "مظنلا قطنمب", "بيدعتلا تحت اوتام ءانجسل هيفاضرا حياوقو... «لاقتعلا زلنارم» يف طوغللا بابش نم افا 25", 29.07.2018, <https://bit.ly/2vfZrYm>

33 "تقرير شرا طوغللا يلاها ءاوي زلنارم يف لاقتعلا تالاح تائيمو "هتييس" هتياسنزا عاضروا" ضراير هتمأ بيديلح راجع <https://bit.ly/2xvEzNW>, 27.05.2018, "مظنلا قطنمب", "بيدعتلا تحت اوتام ءانجسل هيفاضرا حياوقو... «لاقتعلا زلنارم» يف طوغللا بابش نم افا 25", 29.07.2018, <https://bit.ly/2NXdBCL>

34 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2>.

35 Health Cluster report "Draft, the Minutes of Health Working Group Meeting, Syria 8 May (Tuesday), 10:00 - 12:00," https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/minutes_hwg_meeting_8_may_eng.pdf.

36 Health Cluster report "Draft, the Minutes of Health Working Group Meeting, Syria 8 May (Tuesday), 10:00 - 12:00," https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/minutes_hwg_meeting_8_may_eng.pdf.

37 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5*, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2>.

38 Health Cluster report "Draft, the Minutes of Health Working Group Meeting, Syria 8 May (Tuesday), 10:00 - 12:00," https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/minutes_hwg_meeting_8_may_eng.pdf.

39 Health Cluster report "Draft, the Minutes of Health Working Group Meeting, Syria 24 July (Tuesday), 10:00 - 12:00," https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/draft_minutes_hwg_meeting_24_july.docx.

Interference in the OPCW's Investigation of the Douma Chemical Attack

Following the reports of chemical weapons use in Douma on April 7, the UN's OPCW dispatched a fact-finding mission to Syria on April 14, but Syrian forces and Russian military police present in Douma prevented members of the mission from accessing the Douma site until a week later. On April 17, a UN reconnaissance team, intended to ensure the safety of the OPCW mission, carried out a preparatory visit to Douma and in one location encountered small-arms fire,⁴⁰ three days after the displacement of Syrian rebels and those refusing to reconcile with the regime was completed.⁴¹ After Douma's surrender, Russian military police gained control over the impact sites of the chlorine canisters and visited the sites, raising concerns about possible tampering with the evidence.⁴²

Only on April 21 was the fact-finding mission allowed to access Douma. The mission carried out a visit to a second site in Douma on April 25 and completed its mission on May 4.⁴³

State media outlets in Russia and Syria disputed the reports about the chemical weapons attack on Douma, claiming that the footage documenting it was staged. Medical personnel and civilians who were documented to have been in a hospital treating survivors of the attack appeared on Russian and Syrian state television to deny the

veracity of the attacks' documentation.⁴⁴ In interviews with the *Guardian* and *Washington Post*, medical personnel from Douma reported intimidation and pressure on them by Syrian security services and Russian military police to keep silent about what they had witnessed, not cooperate with investigations into it, hand over samples they had collected from victims, and appear on state television to deny the attacks had happened.⁴⁵

On April 26, the Russian mission to the OPCW organized a press conference at The Hague with seventeen alleged eyewitnesses to the Douma attack, who were not made available to the OPCW to interview despite OPCW's request. The participants in the press conference OPCW's request.⁴⁶ The participants in the press conference echoed Russian claims that the videos documenting the attack had been staged.⁴⁷

44 Robert Mackey, "Russian TV Interview with Syrian Boy Was Secretly Conducted at Army Facility," *The Intercept*, April 23, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/23/russian-tv-interview-syrian-boy-secretly-conducted-army-facility/>; Eliot Higgins, "The Douma Chemical Attack - Fake News about Fake News on Russia's Fake News," *Bellingcat*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/13/doumafakenews/>.

45 Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian Medics 'Subjected to Extreme Intimidation' after Douma Attack," *Guardian*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/17/syria-crisis-medics-intimidated-over-douma-gas-attack>; Sly and Ajroudi, "Russia Accused of Tampering with the Site of Alleged Syrian Chemical Attack."

46 OPCW, "OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Visits Second Site in Douma, Syria."

47 Robert Mackey, "Russia Brings Syrians to The Hague to Make Underwhelming Case Chemical Attack Was Fake," *The Intercept*, April 26, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/26/russia-brings-syrians-hague-make-underwhelming-case-chemical-attack-fake/>.

40 "Media Alert: Update on the Deployment of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission to Douma, Syria," OPCW, April 18, 2018, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/media-alert-update-on-the-deployment-of-the-opcw-fact-finding-mission-to-douma-syria/>.

41 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Situation Report for the Eastern Ghouta and Afrin Humanitarian Emergencies as of 16 April 2018*, 16 April 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-situation-report-eastern-ghouta-and-afrin-humanitarian-3>.

42 Liz Sly and Asma Ajroudi, "Russia Accused of Tampering with the Site of Alleged Syrian Chemical Attack," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/russia-accused-of-tampering-with-the-site-of-alleged-syrian-chemical-attack/2018/04/16/5b424dfc-4183-11e8-b2dc-b0a403e4720a_story.html?utm_term=.185b3f5aa29b.

43 Sasha Ingber, "Chemical Weapons Inspectors Finish Their Trip to Syria's Douma," *NPR*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/05/04/608606987/chemical-weapons-inspectors-finish-their-trip-to-syrias-douma>; "OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Visits Second Site in Douma, Syria," OPCW, April 25, 2018, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-fact-finding-mission-visits-second-site-in-douma-syria/>.


Disinformation

Throughout the Syrian war, fighting on the ground has been paralleled by fighting in the information space. Beginning on a small scale during the early protests, when activists were uploading images of protests to YouTube and Twitter, it gathered pace as the conflict progressed. The use of information—and disinformation—as a weapon reached new levels of sophistication and grew in scope following Russia’s direct military intervention in September 2015. Since then, Syrian and Russian actors and their allies have attempted to discredit the opposition, Western critics, and independent witnesses to the atrocities committed by their forces.

In these attempts to sow doubt about events on the ground, the use of biased, unverified, distorted, or falsified information has been so prevalent, and covered so many areas, that it would require a separate report to document all of it. This chapter focuses on the information and disinformation surrounding one incident, the chemical weapons attack in Douma on April 7, 2018.

The Douma case is of particular importance because it triggered both a particularly fierce conflict in the information space and rare Western strikes against Assad’s forces. Disinformation and denial have been a standard accompaniment to reports of chemical attacks throughout the conflict, but the scale, organization, and intensity of the response to the Douma attack, both by regime actors and by their supporters, marked a step up in the campaign.

That, in turn, has disturbing implications for future chemical attacks, and future conflicts. The disinformation surrounding the Douma attack represented a wholesale attempt to cover up war crimes. If successful, those techniques are likely to be transferred to other theaters. It is therefore important to study and understand them now.



Members of the Civil Defense rescue children after what activists said was an air strike by forces loyal to Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad in al-Shaar neighbourhood of Aleppo, Syria June 2, 2014.
Reuters/Sultan Kitaz



“
The information war was on both sides. Its results were directly reflected in world public opinion. I will say this: without carrying out information operations, we would not have had success in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and Ghouta.”

**- ALEKSANDR DVORNIKOV,
COMMANDER OF RUSSIAN
OPERATIONS IN SYRIA 2015-16¹**

¹ Aleksandr Dvornikov, “Штабы для новых войн (Headquarters for the new wars),” Военно-Промышленчй Курьер, Moscow, July 24, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971>.

Information as Weapon

The use of information as a weapon is as old as warfare itself, including in Syria. Ancient Egyptian accounts of the Battle of Kadesh in 1274 BCE, fought some two hundred kilometers north of Damascus, describe how the Hittite Empire sent false "deserters" to feed disinformation to the Egyptian high command.¹ In modern Syria's civil war, the ability to spread information and disinformation--defined as "the deliberate spreading of false information"--has played a crucial role throughout the conflict.

The ability of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to recruit, intimidate, and conquer through innovative use of propaganda and social media, while macabre and cruel in its content and message, was incredibly successful, and has been extensively studied as a result. Many articles published in 2015-16 wrote of the group's ability to "win the propaganda war."² Analyses of their success have continued well after their battlefield decline.³ Other groups, while less effective, appear to have tried to emulate its online campaigns for their own recruiting and messaging.

The Syrian and Russian regimes have also poured significant resources into information and disinformation. Their understanding of the role and importance of information is best expressed in an essay by General Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of Russia's Southern Military District, and thus of operations in Syria, from 2015-16, published in Russian military journal *Военно-Промышленный Курьер* (*The Military-Industrial Courier*) in July 2018.⁴

During the operation in Syria, as nowhere else before, we were convinced of the practical importance of informational struggle. Information resources have in fact become one of the most effective weapons. Their wide use allows you to swing the situation within a few days. For example, during the operation for

the liberation of Aleppo, information work with the local population helped to liberate entire neighborhoods without a fight, to withdraw more than 130,000 peaceful civilians.

The effect of this kind of impact can be compared with the results of a large-scale operation involving the use of troops and forces. It should be noted that the information war was on both sides. Its results were directly reflected in the world public opinion. I will say this: without carrying out information operations, we would not have had success in Aleppo, Deir al-Zour and Ghouta.

The Russian government's understanding of the military importance of controlling information and spreading disinformation dates back to at least 2008, and its war with Georgia. According to the editor in chief of both RT and Sputnik, Margarita Simonyan, the Georgian war was the moment when the Kremlin realized the importance of the "information weapon."⁵

It seems to me that before this Georgian story, very many people, even in high places, were skeptical, not just about us [RT] personally, but about this idea in general. And afterwards, I don't know any people, at least in high places, who continued to believe that it's unnecessary. In 2008, it became absolutely clear to everyone why this is needed, why we need such a thing as an international television channel representing the country. This is a lesson in itself.

Underlining the military nature of the task, Simonyan compared RT's role with that of the army:

In 2008 we were fighting. The Defense Ministry was fighting with Georgia, but we were conducting the information war, and what's more, against the whole Western world. It's impossible to start making a weapon only when the war already started! That's why the Defense Ministry isn't fighting anyone at the moment [in 2012], but it's ready for defense. So are we.

In particular, she underlined Russia's lack of "English-speaking talking heads"—fluent commentators who could represent and defend Russia's point of view to an international audience. Following the Georgian war, in an

1 John A. Wilson, "The Texts of the Battle of Kadesh," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, July 1927, online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/528771>.

2 For example, Brendan I. Koerner, "Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War," *Wired*, April 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/>.

3 Fady Alghorra and Mahmoud Elsobky, "Of Fan Boys and Soldiers - How ISIS Perfected Jihadist Propaganda," *Mondiaal Nieuws*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.mo.be/en/report/fan-boys-and-soldiers-how-isis-changed-jihadist-propaganda>.

4 Aleksandr Dvornikov, "Штабы для новых войн (Headquarters for the new wars)," *Военно-Промышленный Курьер*, Moscow, July 24, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971>.

5 "«Нет никакой объективности» ("There is no objectivity")," *Kommersant* interview, April 07, 2012, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1911336>.

apparent attempt to fill the gap, Russian state messaging increasingly turned to English-speaking supporters and validators, often from fringe online communities, to corroborate Kremlin talking points. In the words of former RT anchor Liz Wahl, describing her experience at the broadcaster until 2014, “The experts we were meant to interview were selected based on his or her ability to deliver the chosen narrative of Western hypocrisy.”⁶

Such validators played a key role in the response to the Douma attack.

Precursor to the Attack: The ‘False Flag’ Claim

As with information warfare, the use of chemical weapons has taken place throughout the Syrian conflict. Former US President Barack Obama heightened the stakes around the use of chemical weapons in 2012 when he made his now-infamous “red-line” comments.⁷ This resolve was tested in August 2013 following the war’s most lethal chemical weapons attack, in which more than one thousand people died. Political maneuvering in Washington, DC, and London ultimately had little effect, and neither the United States nor the United Kingdom (UK) intervened militarily. Their hesitancy was widely criticized, and seen as empowering the further use of chemical weapons.⁸ The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) verified the use of chemical weapons by both ISIS and the Syrian regime in 2017.⁹ When US President Donald Trump came to power, he inherited the legacy of 2013. When a chemical weapons attack was reported in Idlib’s Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, he took action. On April 6-7, 2017, the United States launched almost

sixty missiles at sites in Syria in retaliation for the use of sarin in Khan Sheikhoun.

Trump’s actions in Khan Sheikhoun set a precedent for action, and cemented the attitudes of the conflict’s parties toward the use of chemical weapons. For the Syrian opposition, the use of these weapons in high-casualty attacks now brought the possibility of US military intervention. For the Syrian government and Russia, that same possibility brought an urgent need to sow doubt around the veracity of any claims of chemical weapons use—including by claiming that the reports of chemical weapons use were a conspiracy launched by foreign enemies to trigger more strikes.

It was within this context that the information space around the use of chemical weapons in eastern Ghouta formed. Open source evidence shows that chlorine was used repeatedly against Ghouta in the early months of 2018. According to online reporting, chlorine was used as a weapon at least five times in February and early March 2018.¹⁰ One alleged attack, on February 25 in Shifouniyeh, eastern Ghouta, reportedly killed a child; in late February, the OPCW opened an investigation into the alleged attack.¹¹

These reported attacks had important political ramifications, especially in Washington. On March 5, 2018, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump “requested options for punishing the Assad regime after reported chlorine gas attacks” at a meeting “early last week”—that is, around February 26-28, just after the reported chlorine attack on February 25 that was said to have produced eighteen injuries and killed a child.¹²

In parallel, perhaps in an attempt to deflect potential consequences, Russian government sources began claiming that rebel groups and

6 Liz Wahl, “Discrediting the West: An Insider’s View of Russia’s RT,” Institute for Statecraft, March 04, 2016, <https://www.statecraft.org.uk/research/discrediting-west-insiders-view-russias-rt>.

7 Roman Houeix, “A History of the Syrian Chemical Weapons ‘Red Line,’” France 24, April 16, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180414-syria-chemical-weapons-red-line-obama-macron-assad-russia-usa-france-idlib>.

8 Hisham Melhem, “How Obama’s Syria Chemical Weapons Deal Fell Apart,” The Atlantic, April 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/how-obamas-chemical-weapons-deal-fell-apart/522549/>.

9 United Nations, Security Council, *Both ISIL and Syrian Government Responsible for Use of Chemical Weapons, UN Security Council Told*. November 07, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/11/570192-both-isil-and-syrian-government-responsible-use-chemical-weapons-un-security>; United Nations, OPCW, *OPCW Confirms Use of Sarin and Chlorine in Ltamenah, Syria, on 24 and 25 March 2017*. 13 June 2018, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-confirms-use-of-sarin-and-chlorine-in-ltamenah-syria-on-24-and-25-march-2017>.

10 Adam Rawnsley, “All the Alleged Syrian Chemical Attacks since Trump Bombed an Airstrip Last Year,” Daily Beast, April 09, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/all-the-alleged-syrian-chemical-attacks-since-trump-bombed-an-airstrip-last-year>.

11 Anthony Deutsch, “Exclusive: Chemical Weapons Watchdog Investigates Ghouta Attacks - Sources,” Reuters, February 27, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons/exclusive-chemical-weapons-watchdog-investigates-ghouta-attacks-sources-idUKKCN1GB12S>.

12 Karen DeYoung et al., “After Reports of Chemical Attacks, White House Considers New Action against Syrian Regime,” Washington Post, March 05, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/after-reports-of-chemical-attacks-white-house-considers-new-military-action-against-syrian-regime/2018/03/05/d5d2de2e-1d7a-11e8-b2d9-08e748f892c0_story.html?utm_term=.411b7a028a4c.

the White Helmets rescue organization, backed by Western powers, were planning "false flag" chemical attacks, designed to kill civilians and point the blame at the Syrian government.¹³ Against the background of the 2017 US strikes that followed the Khan Sheikhoun attack, such claims introduced the idea of American complicity in any future attacks, suggesting that such attacks would be a false flag to cover an already-decided US engagement, rather than a consequence of the regime or Russia's decision to use chemical weapons. This seeded a narrative that could later be passed on to anti-interventionist media outlets and campaigners in the West.

The claim that a given incident was a false flag attack, designed to discredit the Russian government, has regularly been deployed by Kremlin supporters—for example, over the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine¹⁴ and the poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in England,¹⁵ as well as in Syria.¹⁶ Such claims have been repeated and disseminated through a complex ecosystem of blogs and social media posts, largely written in English by self-styled "investigative journalists" with ties to Kremlin-operated media outlets.¹⁷ These provided vital validation to the Syrian/Russian narrative, and played an important role in its dissemination.

On February 13, 2018, for example, RT quoted Russia's Center for Reconciliation in Syria as saying that it had been given an anonymous tip-off that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) terrorists were planning to stage a chemical attack with the White Helmets (officially Syria Civil Defense)—not around Ghouta, but in Idlib Governorate. The article claimed that HTS had brought "three cars packed with more than 20 cylinders of chlorine" to the town of Saraqib in Idlib, while White Helmets

volunteers had rehearsed first-aid drills on local residents.¹⁸ No chlorine attacks were reported in Saraqib after the RT article. The false flag warning was either incorrect information from a genuine source, leading to a reporting error, or a work of disinformation. Of note, however, is the fact that Saraqib had been struck by a suspected chlorine attack before the RT report, on February 4.¹⁹ The OPCW later confirmed that chlorine was "likely used as a chemical weapon" in the February 4 attack,²⁰ making it likely that the report was spread by Russian government sources to deflect attention from, and cast doubt upon, the earlier attack, and to plant the seeds of suspicion about the perpetrators of chlorine attacks in order to preempt future ones.

Russian warnings of false flag attacks continued through March. Details of the specific "provocations" varied, but all warnings claimed that opposition groups were planning a genuine attack, using chlorine. For example, on March 2, the Russian Defense Ministry warned that "Jabhat al-Nusra, Feylaq al-Rahman and Akhrar al-Sham" were planning a chemical attack in eastern Ghouta, aiming to "exploit" the victims and "blame the Syrian government for using chemical weapons against the people."²¹ "The Syrian government's Command categorically states that it does not plan to use chemical weapons. Moreover, it does not possess chemical weapons at all," the briefing stated, in defiance of the findings of a joint OPCW/UN investigation that Assad's forces used sarin on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017.²²

The false flag warnings intensified after the *Washington Post* article, suggesting that Russia was attuned to the high stakes around chemical weapons use, and the possible implications of

13 For example, Andrew Osborn, "Russia Says U.S. Plans to Strike Damascus, Pledges Military Response," Reuters, March 13, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa/russia-says-u-s-plans-to-strike-damascus-pledges-military-response-idUSKCN1GP0TY>.

14 William Engdahl, "Ukraine MH17 May Be a CIA False Flag and It Ain't Flying," RT, August 01, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/177388-mh17-cia-false-ukraine/>.

15 "Skripal Incident Likely a False Flag by UK to Vilify Russia - Journalist," Sputnik, April 05, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201804051063242381-skripal-false-flag-uk>.

16 Chris York, "Syria Gas Attack 'False Flag' Claims and Why They're Totally Wrong," Huffington Post, April 06, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/syria-gas-attack-false-flag_uk_58e5e0f6e4b06a4cb30f2fe1.

17 Kate Starbird et al., "Ecosystem or Echo-System? Exploring Content Sharing across Alternative Media Domains," University of Washington, April 25, 2018, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi/Starbird-et-al-ICWSM-2018-Ecosystem-final.pdf>.

18 "Tip-Off Received on al-Nusra, White Helmets Plotting Chemical Weapons Provocation in Syria - Moscow," RT, February 13, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/418649-alnusra-white-helmets-chemical-provocation/>.

19 Eliot Higgins, "Evidence of the February 4th 2018 Chlorine Attack on Saraqib, Idlib," Bellingcat, February 14, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/02/14/evidence-february-4th-2018-chlorine-attack-saraqib-idlib/>.

20 United Nations, OPCW, *Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding an Alleged Incident in Saraqib, Syrian Arab Republic, on 4 February 2018*. S/1626/2018, (15 May 2018), available from https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1626-2018_e_.pdf.

21 Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, Facebook, March 2, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/videos/2056448887931190/>.

22 Rodrigo Campos, "Syrian Government to Blame for April Sarin Attack: U.N. Report," Reuters, October 26, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un/syrian-government-to-blame-for-april-sarin-attack-u-n-report-idUSKBN1CV3GP>.

increased US political and military attention on Syria and chemical weapons in particular. On March 17, the ministry provided an extremely detailed briefing on other planned "provocations." The claim is worth repeating in full, for the level of detail it shows (grammar and punctuation as the original)²³:

It is be stressed that insurgents do not stop taking efforts to organize provocations with the use of poisonous agents in order to accuse the government troops of using chemical weapons against civilians.

In regard to information about preparation of provocations by insurgents in the Eastern Ghouta, the Russian party has evidence that American instructors have trained several groups of insurgents near al-Tanfa in order to hold provocations with chemical weapons in the south of Syria.

In the early March, the sabotage groups were deployed in the southern de-escalation zone near Daraa. formations of so-called Free Syrian Army are located there.

They are preparing provocations using explosive devices fitted with poisonous agents. In the future, this fact will be used in order to accuse the government troops of using chemical weapons.

Components for these chemical munitions have already been transported to the southern de-escalation zone under cover of humanitarian convoys of a number of non-governmental organizations.

Insurgents have not only components for poisonous agents but also detonating fuzes camouflaged as packs with cigarettes.

Besides, the Jabhat al-Nusra armed formations with support of so-called 'White Helmets' are preparing staged chemical attack near the settlements of al-Habid and Qalb Luza located 25 km northwest Idlib. Therefore, 20 containers with chloride have been delivered there.

It is planned that the event shall be widely broadcasted in the western mass media.

Such provocations will give the USA and its coalition grounds for an attack against military and government facilities in Syria.

This statement revived the February claim of a planned attack in Idlib Province using twenty chlorine containers, but this time with location details given: al-Habeet and Qalb Loze. As of September 11, 2018, no chlorine attack had been reported in either location. The statement also added a new accusation: that American instructors had trained "sabotage groups," and provided them with chemical weapons components and "detonating fuzes camouflaged as packs with cigarettes" for attacks in unnamed locations in southern Syria. It should be noted that, once more, the emphasis was on concrete physical detail, and the prediction of a genuine attack, which would be blamed on the government.

The 'Factory' and the Facts

Shortly before the mid-March briefing from Russia's Ministry of Defense (MoD), Syrian state media added another allegation to the false flag claims. On March 12, Syrian state media, SANA, reported that government forces had uncovered a "workshop used by foreign-backed militants to manufacture toxic chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta."²⁴ The report featured a number of images of plastic jerry cans that supposedly contained chemicals; chemical equipment; and several large boilers. The equipment was characterized as being of Saudi and Western origin. The report was picked up by Russia's Sputnik the same day,²⁵ by Iran's Press TV one day later,²⁶ and by RT on March 16.²⁷

Sputnik's reporting set the tone, opening its article with the statement, "According to Syrian Army reports, militants in eastern Ghouta planned a chemical attack provocation to put blame on Damascus," before detailing the find. In fact,

23 "Chief of Main Operational Directorate Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy Holds Briefing in National Centre for State Defence Control," Russian Ministry of Defense, March 17, 2018, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12167157@egNews.

24 "Syrian Army Finds Militants' Chemical Weapons Workshop in Eastern Ghouta," Press TV, March 13, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/03/13/555358/Syria-Eastern-Ghouta-chemical-weapons-workshop-Shefounieh-Jaish-allslam>.

25 "Syrian Army Finds Chemical Weapons' Workshop in Eastern Ghouta," Sputnik, March 12, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201803121062431574-syrian-army-chemical-weapons/>.

26 "Syrian Army Finds Militants' Chemical Weapons Workshop in Eastern Ghouta," Press TV, March 13, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/03/13/555358/Syria-Eastern-Ghouta-chemical-weapons-workshop-Shefounieh-Jaish-allslam>.

27 Sharmine Narwani, "Terrorist Capabilities Laid Bare in an Eastern Ghouta Chemical Lab," RT.com, March 16, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/421515-ghouta-syria-chemical-weapons/>.



Image from the purported lab. Source: SANA, via PressTV.



Image from the purported lab. Source: SANA, via PressTV.

according to Sputnik's own article, the Syrian army spokesman had been more circumspect, saying, "Presumably, the equipment of these munitions could be produced as part of a false flag accusation that government troops used chemical weapons."²⁸

On March 21, at another briefing, the Russian MoD referenced the discovery to claim "the workshop for chemical munitions is for provocational measures, as with previous impositions of guilt on Syrian government forces for employing chemical weapons."²⁹

Typical of the pieces written by pro-Putin and pro-Assad media was Sharmine Narwani's article for RT.com on March 16, 2018, headlined "Terrorist capabilities laid bare in an Eastern Ghouta chemical lab."³⁰ Narwani was one of a number of writers and journalists taken to the site, and she detailed what she was shown. She described the workshop as "a well-equipped chemical laboratory run by Saudi-backed Islamist terrorists" discovered by government forces after capturing territory in farmland between Shifouniyeh and Douma. Narwani complained about what she termed a lack of interest in the discovery from the Western media, stating, "Perhaps it's not so strange that a chemical lab discovered right at the epicenter of a major strategic battle over Syria is being ignored by one side. In the end, it is likely that only one side is right about who is using CWs [chemical

weapons] in Syria. Which is why one side went silent when this lab was revealed."

Analyses by independent experts pointed to a different conclusion. Based on the images of the lab provided by the regime forces themselves, these analyses concluded that the site in question was not, as Sputnik had claimed, a "chemical weapon plant." The pictures showed small, laboratory-scale equipment, rather than a large-scale production facility, and lacked any systems that would have allowed for the weaponization and delivery of any chemicals produced. After analyzing the images, Cheryl Rofer, a retired chemist with experience working on chemical weapons and environmental issues at Los Alamos National Laboratory, stated "All of the equipment, except for the boilers, is at laboratory scale. But the more fundamental problem is that none of the equipment is what is needed to produce chlorine and compress it into the cylinders" used in chemical attacks.³¹

Rofer's conclusion was ultimately confirmed by the OPCW. In its July 2018 interim report on the April 7, 2018, chlorine attack in Douma,³² the chemical weapons watchdog included its findings regarding the use of the workshops following a visit to the sites, stating emphatically: "Based on the equipment and chemicals observed during the two on-site visits to the warehouse and the facility

28 "Syrian Army Finds Militants' Chemical Weapons Workshop in Eastern Ghouta," Press TV, March 13, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/03/13/555358/Syria-Eastern-Ghouta-chemical-weapons-workshop-Shefounieh-Jaish-allIslam>.

29 RT, Youtube, March 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKyROKZn2Xc&feature=youtu.be&t=33m6s>.

30 Sharmine Narwani, "Terrorist Capabilities Laid Bare in an Eastern Ghouta Chemical Lab," RT.com, March 16, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/421515-ghouta-syria-chemical-weapons/>.

31 Adam Rawnsley, "Anatomy of a Russian Chemical Weapons Lab Lie," Bellingcat, April 16, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/16/anatomy-russian-chemical-weapons-lab-lie/>; Eliot Higgins, "All the Pieces Matter - Syria's Chlorine Bombs and the Douma Chemical Attack," Bellingcat, April 29, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/29/pieces-matter-syrias-chlorine-bombs-douma-chemical-attack/>.

32 United Nations, OPCW, *Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018*, S/1626/2018 (06 July 2018), https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf.



Image from the purported lab. Source: SANA, via PressTV.



Image from the purported lab. Source: SANA, via PressTV.

suspected by the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic of producing chemical weapons, there was no indication of either facility being involved in the production of chemical warfare agents.” As of September 11, 2018, the Syrian and Russian governments had yet to respond to the OPCW statement.

These comments were made after the Douma attack; as such, they cannot be used as direct proof that the Russian MoD or the various pro-Assad news outlets knew, when they were reporting on the find and the false flag claims, that they were wrong.

However, it is beyond the bounds of probability that the Russian Ministry of Defense, with all its expertise in armaments, including chemical weapons, should have concluded that the find exposed a “workshop for chemical weaponry,” let alone that it should have been able to conclude from the evidence that the workshop was intended for “provocational measures.”

Whatever the origin of the reported site, the Russian Ministry of Defense’s claim emerges as deceptive, and apparently designed to discredit genuine reports of chemical weapons use by the Syrian regime.

The Douma Attack

While the chemical weapons attacks against eastern Ghouta in January, February, and March were relatively small-scale and garnered little attention, that all changed in April, as Assad’s forces closed in on the last pockets of resistance. By early April, only the suburb of Douma remained in armed opposition hands. On April 1, reports circulated that Russia had brokered a withdrawal deal with the rebels,³³ but rumors that they would

be allowed to remain in the area operating as a security force angered the Syrian government, and the deal fell apart on April 6. In an effort to break the final pocket of resistance, pro-government forces unleashed a rain of fire on Douma.³⁴ Reporting from the scene spoke of large-scale air strikes and ground combat on two fronts.³⁵

On April 7, in the late afternoon and evening, two chemical weapons attacks were reported in Douma. The first strike was alleged to have occurred around 4 p.m. local time, the second around 7:45 p.m. The details of the location and incident are analyzed in the Chemical Weapons Attacks section of this report. Initial news reporting was chaotic, with the death toll placed at over 150.³⁶ Some sources said that there were over 1,000 casualties and that sarin gas had been used.³⁷ As with any breaking story from a battlefield, all such claims had to be weighed with great caution. The Syrian and Russian governments had a clear interest in denying any use of chemical weapons at all; opposition militants had an equally

34 Tom Perry, “Syrian Government Launches Assault on Last Rebel Enclave in Ghouta,” Reuters, April 06, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-douma/syrian-troops-push-into-rebel-held-douma-as-talks-collapse-idUSKCN1HD1VO?ref=hvper.com&utm_source=hvper.com&utm_medium=website.

35 “The Latest: Syrian State TV Says Troops Closing in on Douma,” Associated Press via usnews.com, April 06, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-04-06/the-latest-new-wave-of-violence-erupts-near-syrian-capital>.

36 Quoted from a deleted tweet in “Syria War: At Least 70 Killed in Suspected Chemical Attack in Douma,” BBC, April 07, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43686157>.

37 For example, Ghouta Media Center, Twitter, April 07, 2018, https://twitter.com/Ghouta_GMC/status/98272722288150528.; John Irish, “Full Text - French Declassified Intelligence Report on Syria Gas Attacks,” Reuters, April 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-france-intelligence/full-text-french-declassified-intelligence-report-on-syria-gas-attacks-idUKKBN1HLONP>.

33 “Deal Reached to Evacuate Rebels from Syria’s Douma,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 01, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-douma-deal-rebels-evacuate/29138534.html>.

clear interest in exaggerating both the scale and the nature of the attacks. Throughout the Douma incident, these conflicting imperatives polluted the information environment.

Progressively, Western media reporting on the allegations coalesced around a series of more specific details: a revised death toll of around seventy,³⁸ a scent of chlorine on the casualties,³⁹ and the possible additional presence of sarin or another nerve agent, based on the high death toll, which appeared unusual for a chlorine attack.⁴⁰ Most cited a number of sources in their presentation of the evidence. These can be divided into three clusters:

1. Images and videos posted on social media, apparently showing dozens of dead bodies, many of them children, positioned throughout an apartment block⁴¹
2. Images and videos on social media, apparently showing victims being treated with oxygen and hosed down (a common treatment for chemical attacks) in a hospital setting⁴²
3. Statements from medical personnel on the ground⁴³

38 "Syria War: At Least 70 Killed in Suspected Chemical Attack in Douma," BBC, April 07, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43686157>.

39 Holly Williams, "Medics Describe Smelling Chlorine on Survivors of Apparent Chemical Attack in Syria," CBS, April 09, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-chemical-attack-medics-describe-smell-of-chlorine-on-survivors-of-apparent-strike/>.

40 Chris Graham et al., "Russia Blames Israel for Attack on Syrian Air Base as Pressure Mounts over Gas Atrocity," Daily Telegraph, April 08, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/08/dozens-reported-dead-chemical-attack-insyria-us-blames-russia/>.

41 For example, White Helmets, Twitter, April 07, 2018, <https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/982727239132418050>; and Douma Revolution, Facebook, April 08, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution.2011/videos/1739440859470155/>.

42 For example, a photo by the White Helmets published by PBS Newshour: Larisa Epatko, "What We Know about the Suspected Gas Attack in Douma, Syria," PBS Newshour, April 09, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/what-we-know-about-the-suspected-gas-attack-in-douma-syria>; Douma Revolution, Facebook, April 07, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution.2011/videos/1739291059485135/> and <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution.2011/videos/1739271562820418/>.

43 See, for example, Kareem Shaheen, "'Most of Them Were Going to Die': Syria Aid Workers Tell of Apocalyptic Scenes," The Guardian, April 08, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/syria-aid-workers-tell-of-apocalyptic-scenes-douma-alleged-chemical-attack>; Joel Gunter, Twitter, April 08, 2018, <https://twitter.com/joelmgunter/status/983003841514926080>.

For example, *BBC* reporter Joel Gunter, who had recently published an extensive feature on the medical community in Ghouta,⁴⁴ quoted three medical professionals, including one who gave a first-hand account of a dying patient whose symptoms were consistent with chemical poisoning.⁴⁵ *Guardian* reporter Kareem Shaheen, reporting from Istanbul, quoted two local medics, one of whom described victims suffocating and smelling of chlorine.⁴⁶ None of these sources was named using their given names, for security reasons, but their testimony corroborated the imagery and video footage, which showed a large number of bodies—certainly in the dozens—with symptoms characteristic of a chemical attack, such as foaming at the mouth, together with more victims being treated. Together, and with the initial exaggerated reports discounted, the available evidence painted a consistent picture of events: a chemical attack had occurred and caused dozens of fatalities, followed by attempts to treat many more casualties in local medical facilities.

As the UK-based Channel 4's FactCheck concluded on April 20,

to deny that a chemical weapons attack occurred at all, we would need to believe that scores of people have been involved in a vast and elaborate hoax, executed without any flaws. They would have needed to coordinate without any problems through a war-torn area, to ensure civilians, doctors, aircraft-spotters, and people on social media all came out with the right story at the right time. Plus, they needed to plant a gas canister at the right spot, and produce fake videos to such a high quality they not only fool millions across the world, but also medical experts assessing the symptoms.⁴⁷

It should also be noted that this would have had to have occurred while eastern Ghouta was under a sustained and intensive bombardment—hardly conditions conducive to an elaborate plot.

44 Joel Gunter, "In Syria's Eastern Ghouta, a Doctor's Battle: 'We Will Stay until the End,'" BBC, March 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43415128>.

45 Joel Gunter, Twitter, April 08, 2018, <https://twitter.com/joelmgunter/status/983009050404237312>.

46 Kareem Shaheen, "Most of Them Were Going to Die": Syria Aid Workers Tell of Apocalyptic Scenes, The Guardian, April 08, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/08/syria-aid-workers-tell-of-apocalyptic-scenes-douma-alleged-chemical-attack>.

47 Martin Williams, "Syria Chemical Attack: The Evidence," Channel 4 FactCheck, April 20, 2018, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/syria-chemical-attack-the-evidence>.

This accumulation of evidence from different sources leads to the conclusion that a chemical attack using chlorine was launched on Douma on April 7. The following day, the remaining fighters agreed to an evacuation deal.⁴⁸

While Western governments expressed outrage at the attack,⁴⁹ the Syrian government, followed by Russia and Iran, dismissed the reports as a "fabrication" intended to trigger a Western intervention.⁵⁰ The "fabrication" was variously attributed to terrorist groups and the White Helmets. In a perhaps unconscious, but revealing, moment, Sputnik quoted the Russian Center for Reconciliation in Syria as saying that it was "ready to send its specialists to the scene *so that they could collect the evidence to prove the fabricated nature of the reports.*"⁵¹ [Emphasis added.] The same quote, with a variation in translation, was carried by TASS.⁵²

This mission statement—"so that they could collect the evidence to prove the fabricated nature of the reports"—is important for two reasons. First, it should be compared with the mission statement of the OPCW investigation into Douma: "to gather facts in connection with the reported use of chemical weapons in Douma."⁵³ The OPCW's mission was to gather facts and establish what happened. The Russian mission, according to Sputnik, was to "prove the fabricated nature of the reports." Second, it implies that the Russian government's categorical denial of the event in question was made before that government was actually in possession of the evidence. Both these factors reveal a clear prejudice in the Russian

approach, which was to prove that the reports were fabricated—not to assess *whether* they were.

Further, more detailed denials followed. On April 8, the Russian Ministry of Defense stated that "no chemical weapons were used in this area."⁵⁴ On April 10, the ministry reported that its experts had visited "a hospital" in Douma, and that they had "found no traces of chemical poisoning with chlorine or sarin."⁵⁵ This reflected the initial reporting that either chlorine, or a mixture of chlorine and nerve agents such as sarin, had been used. On April 11, the ministry said that soil samples taken from the site "showed the absence of nerve agents and chlorine-containing poisonous substances."⁵⁶

It is important to note that the OPCW, in its interim report on the Douma incident, released in July, found "Various chlorinated organic chemicals... along with residues of explosive" in samples taken from the two alleged attack sites.⁵⁷ The OPCW stated that it did not find traces of nerve agents. This conclusion gave added weight to the eyewitness reports of the smell of chlorine on the victims, and appeared to disprove the Russian claim that no "chlorine-containing poisonous substances" had been found, while confirming that nerve agents such as sarin had not been used.

Strikingly, RT headlined its article on the July OPCW report, "Nerve agents not found in samples from Syria's Douma - interim OPCW report." The lede ran, "No traces of any nerve agents have been found at the site of a suspected chemical attack in the Syrian city of Douma, an interim report issued by the OPCW says, adding that several chlorine compounds were detected."⁵⁸ This emphasis on what was *not* found, and the low prominence given

48 "Deal Reached to Surrender Last Rebel-Held Town in Eastern Ghouta," Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/deal-reached-surrender-rebel-held-town-eastern-ghouta-180408172342106.html>.

49 "World Condemns Assad Regime's Chemical Attacks on Douma, Moscow Deny Allegations," ArabNews.com, April 08, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1281001/middle-east>.

50 The arguments are summarized by Sputnik in "Damascus Calls Chemical Attack Accusations 'Unconvincing Broken Record,'" Sputnik, April 08, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804081063343657-syria-chemical-attacks-claims-douma/>.

51 "Damascus Calls Chemical Attack Accusations 'Unconvincing Broken Record,'" Sputnik, April 08, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804081063343657-syria-chemical-attacks-claims-douma/>.

52 "Russian Defense Ministry Refutes Reports that Syrian Forces Use Chemical Weapons in Douma," TASS, April 08, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/998406>.

53 "OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Visits Second Site in Douma, Syria," OPCW, April 25, 2018, <https://www.opcw.org/news/article/opcw-fact-finding-mission-visits-second-site-in-douma-syria/>.

54 "Russian Military Reports No Chemical Weapons Used in Vicinity of Syria's Douma," Sputnik, April 09, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804091063349323-russian-military-detects-no-chemicals-douma/>.

55 "No Trace of Alleged Chemical Weapons Use in Douma - Russian MoD," Sputnik, April 10, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804101063398629-weapons-chemical-ministry-douma/>.

56 "Soil Analysis in Douma Didn't Reveal Any Poisonous Substances - Russian MoD," Sputnik, April 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804111063446349-syria-examination-soil-no-poisonous-substance/>.

57 United Nations, OPCW, *Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018*, S/1626/2018 (06 July 2018), available from https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf.

58 "Nerve Agents Not Found in Samples from Syria's Douma - Interim OPCW report," RT, July 06, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/431994-nerve-agents-not-found-douma/>.

to what was, betrays a desire to support Russia's narrative of "no attack," even in the face of the facts. Indeed, the most remarkable feature of these responses is that they chose to deny the fact of the attack. All the earlier warnings had focused on the claim that militants, armed with chemical weapons, "workshops," and even detonators disguised as cigarette packets, had been planning a real attack, which they would then blame on the government. The response to the Douma attacks departed from that narrative, alleging, in essence, that nothing had happened at all.

It is unclear why, given the relative wealth of evidence from multiple, cross-referencing sources, the decision should have been taken to issue such a categorical denial. As this report shows, there is strong evidence from a range of sources to support the claim that a chemical attack was carried out. That decision placed the Syrian and Russian regimes' supporters in the position of having to discredit *all* the evidence of the attack, from all sources—rather than being able to acknowledge the fact of the attack, but dispute the perpetrator.

General Denials

In the following weeks, much of the rebuttal from the Syrian and Russian side focused on general accusations, rather than specifics. Many of the accusations centered on the White Helmets, and appeared designed to undermine their credibility as sources of evidence, rather than the evidence itself. This is consistent with the Russian tactics of "dismiss, distort, distract, dismay," which we have observed in many earlier cases, and which have been used particularly aggressively against the White Helmets themselves.⁵⁹ Thus, the rescuers were variously described as a "Western propaganda construct,"⁶⁰ "self-proclaimed humanitarian workers" who "filmed their propaganda videos,"⁶¹ "known for its ties with terrorist groups . . . associated with staging and filming false-flag chemical attacks,"⁶²

"terrorists with a facelift,"⁶³ and perpetrators of a "premeditated provocation" ordered by the United Kingdom.⁶⁴

Many of the attacks on the White Helmets were both voiced and amplified by a group of pro-Assad bloggers, of whom the most prominent were British citizen Vanessa Beeley and Canadian citizen Eva Bartlett.⁶⁵ These, in turn, were supported online by a group of Twitter users who have repeatedly targeted critics of the Assad regime.⁶⁶ Neither Bartlett nor Beeley can be viewed as a credible or impartial commentator. In October 2015, Beeley tweeted that the White Helmets are a "legit target";⁶⁷ in 2016, she described a meeting with Assad as her "proudest moment."⁶⁸ At a lecture in Sweden in June 2018, she called respected human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch a "fake, front organization funded by a Zionist billionaire."⁶⁹ Bartlett's editorial position emerges clearly in her publications—for example, writing that Western nations "do everything in their power to ensure civilians suffer from terrorism and sanctions" in Syria,⁷⁰ writing of the "lapdog media" in the West,⁷¹ and accusing US National Security Advisor John Bolton of issuing a "very public command to Al-Qaeda and co-extremists to stage yet another fake chemical attack."⁷²

59 Olivia Solon, "How Syria's White Helmets Became Victims of an Online Propaganda Machine," *The Guardian*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories>.

60 Eva Bartlett, "Syrian Civilians from Ground Zero Expose Chemical Hoax," RT, June 01, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/428514-douma-civilians-chemical-hoax/>.

61 "Syrian Army Discovers White Helmet's Filming Site in Eastern Ghouta," *Sputnik*, April 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804111063422215-white-helmets-fake-video-site/>.

62 "Watch Syrian Boy in White Helmets Fake Chemical Attack Video Reveal the Truth," *Sputnik*, April 18, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804181063698154-syrian-boy-reveals-truth-helmets/>.

63 "White Helmets, Terrorists with a Facelift," *PressTV*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/04/20/559083/Syria-White-Helmets-Douma>.

64 "Russia Accuses UK of Staging Fake Chemical Attack in Syria," *CBS*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-accuses-uk-of-staging-fake-chemical-attack-syria/>.

65 Their impact on the conversation is detailed in Kate Starbird et al., "Ecosystem or Echo-System? Exploring Content Sharing across Alternative Media Domains," *University of Washington*, April 25, 2018, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi/Starbird-et-al-ICWSM-2018-Ecosystem-final.pdf>.

66 Ben Nimmo, "#TrollTracker: From Tags to Trolling," *Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab*, via *Medium*, June 27, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-from-tags-to-trolling-58bb2ef87acd>.

67 Vanessa Beeley, *Twitter*, October 30, 2015, <https://twitter.com/VanessaBeeley/status/660159072457637888>.

68 Vanessa Beeley, *Facebook*, August 09, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/vanessa.beeley/posts/10155410477838868#>.

69 "Top University's Course Turns Out to Be Propaganda," *Postimees*, June 28, 2018, <https://news.postimees.ee/4511277/top-university-s-course-turns-out-to-be-propaganda>.

70 Eva Bartlett, "Caught in a Lie, US & Allies Bomb Syria the Night before International Inspectors Arrive," RT, April 15, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/424186-us-allies-syria-lie/>.

71 Eva Bartlett, "Syrian Civilians from Ground Zero Expose Chemical Hoax," RT, June 01, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/428514-douma-civilians-chemical-hoax/>.

72 Eva Bartlett, "Bolton Calls on Al-Qaeda to Stage More Chemical Attacks in Syria," RT, August 24, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/436783-us-syria-chemical-attack-bolton/>.

Most accusations against the White Helmets were justified by making reference to spurious claims that had already been investigated in detail by independent media, and rebutted.⁷³ The most-repeated claim was that the White Helmets regularly faked videos of their rescues; this claim was based on a single “Mannequin Challenge,” which members of one White Helmets team staged to raise awareness of the Syrian situation as part of a global craze in 2015, and which was identified as such at the time.⁷⁴ Another frequent accusation was that the White Helmets claimed to have rescued the same girl three times. On one occasion, the claim was based on three photos of the same girl being carried by three different rescuers; in fact, as the photographer confirmed, she had been photographed after one rescue, being carried by three men as she was passed out of the rescue area.⁷⁵ On another occasion, the claim was based on a meme that had circulated in pro-Assad groups, claiming to show the same girl in three different rescues between August and October 2016. The UK’s Channel 4 analyzed the footage and concluded that the images showed three different girls.⁷⁶ Repeatedly, critics called the White Helmets a “propaganda construct,” and argued that they were a covert tool for “regime change” because they were funded by Western governments; writing in 2016, Beeley called them “NATO’s pseudo ‘NGO’ construct”

and “NATO’s White Helmets.”⁷⁷ While the White Helmets are funded by the British, Danish, Dutch, and German foreign ministries,⁷⁸ they grew out of grassroots rescue efforts.⁷⁹ To argue, on the basis of their funding, that they are a Western tool for “regime change” defies the rules of evidence-based reporting, while to call them “NATO’s White Helmets” shows sheer ignorance of the difference between NATO and its member states.

The evidence for these claims was so thin, and so easily dispelled, that they cannot credibly have been put forward in good faith. In particular, the claim that the Mannequin Challenge—a publicity stunt labeled as such at the time—showed that the White Helmets regularly “faked” their rescues can be regarded only as a deliberate piece of dishonesty, designed to discredit the group. Paradoxically, this reinforces the argument that the White Helmets are genuine witnesses to atrocities: the use of such flagrantly false “evidence” to discredit them suggests that no genuine evidence was available.

One novel attack on the White Helmets in the wake of the Douma attacks featured the claim that the group had run a film studio in the besieged city, and used it to stage propaganda videos. This was initially reported by Lebanon-based Al-Ahmed News⁸⁰ and Iran’s Fars News,⁸¹ each of which attributed it to the other. It was then picked up by Russian state outlets in both Russian⁸² and English.⁸³ As Bellingcat was quick to point out, the images of the studio were actually taken from the

73 “White Helmets ‘Staging Fake Attacks’ in Syria? We Sort the Fact from the Fiction,” France24, May 14, 2018, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20180514-white-helmets-allegations-fact-fiction>; “Fact Check: Eva Bartlett’s Claims about Syrian Children,” Channel 4, December 20, 2016, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-eva-bartletts-claims-about-syrian-children>; “Fact Check: Are the Syrian ‘White Helmets’ Rescue Organization Terrorists?” Snopes, December 15, 2016, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/syrian-rescue-organization-the-white-helmets-are-terrorists/>.

74 Eliot Higgins, “There’s No Such Thing as a Good Fake,” Bellingcat, November 30, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/articles/2016/11/30/theres-no-thing-good-fake-publicity-stunts-go-wrong/>.

75 Gregoire Lemarchand, “Non, cette fillette syrienne n’est ni une figurante mise en scene, ni une rescapée de plusieurs attaques,” (No, this little Syrian girl is neither an actress in a staged scenario, nor the survivor of several attacks), Agence France-Presse, April 26, 2018, <https://factuel.afp.com/non-cette-fillette-syrienne-nest-ni-une-figurante-mise-en-scene-ni-une-rescapee-de-plusieurs>.

76 “Fact Check: Eva Bartlett’s Claims about Syrian Children,” Channel 4, December 20, 2016, <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-eva-bartletts-claims-about-syrian-children>.

77 Vanessa Beeley, “Exclusive: The Real Syrian Civil Defence Exposes Fake ‘White Helmets’ as Terrorist-Linked Imposters,” 21st Century Wire, September 23, 2016, <https://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/23/exclusive-the-real-syria-civil-defence-expose-natos-white-helmets-as-terrorist-linked-imposters/>.

78 “Donors,” Mayday Rescue, <http://www.maydayrescue.org/content/donors>.

79 Maria Jan, “Q&A: Syria’s White Helmets,” Al Jazeera, August 21, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/qa-syria-white-helmets-150819142324132.html>; Scott Lucas, “Who Are Syria’s White Helmets, and Why Are They So Controversial?” The Conversation, October 07, 2016, <http://theconversation.com/who-are-syrias-white-helmets-and-why-are-they-so-controversial-66580>.

80 “Syrian Army Discovers White Helmets’ Filming Site in Eastern Ghouta,” Al-Ahd News, April 10, 2018, <https://english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=42810&cid=390>.

81 “Syrian Army Finds White Helmets’ Video Shooting Location,” Fars News, April 10, 2018, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13970121001313>.

82 Россия 24, Youtube, April 09, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXcU49u1wss&feature=youtu.be>.

83 “Syrian Army Discovers White Helmets’ Filming Site in Eastern Ghouta,” Sputnik.

Facebook page of a film called *Revolution Man*.⁸⁴ The way in which this demonstrably false claim was amplified on pro-Assad channels reinforces the conclusion that its purpose was to discredit

the White Helmets because their reporting was accurate—not because it was false.

A separate line of argument focused on the Western response to the Douma attack, and the conclusion that the chemical attack had indeed been launched by Assad's forces. This argument claimed, in essence, that the West's response was hasty, ill-judged, and went beyond the evidence.⁸⁵

In this context, President Trump's tweets, first warning Russia to "get ready" for missile strikes and calling Assad a "Gas Killing Animal," then claiming that he had not said when or if a strike might come, provided an easy target.⁸⁶ The tweets were mentioned in a slew of articles across pro-Assad channels, often compared with Trump's own tweets from 2013 warning then-president Obama not to attack Syria.⁸⁷ However, they were equally called out, and criticized, by mainstream Western media outlets, which also thought the president's Twitter diplomacy ill-considered.⁸⁸ While the United States, UK, and France claimed to have enough evidence to support their conclusion that Assad's forces were responsible for the attack,⁸⁹ Trump's tweets made it exceptionally easy for Assad's supporters to denigrate the entire

Western response, and handed them a priceless propaganda asset.

A third line of attack focused on accusing the West of condoning or staging chemical attacks, including the Douma one, and thus delegitimizing Western outrage. On April 13, the Russian Ministry of Defense said that it had "evidence proving the United Kingdom's direct involvement in the organization of this provocation in eastern Ghouta,"⁹⁰ without sharing the evidence. An op-ed published some days later on RT was headlined, "Gassing is bad, but OK for some: US complicity in past chemical attacks,"⁹¹ and argued that the United States had supported Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran, and that the strike of over one hundred missiles it had by then undertaken against Syrian regime targets might have been a way of hiding evidence of Western involvement in the Douma incident.

A fourth tactic featured apocalyptic warnings that any Western strike into Syria that harmed Russians could trigger World War III. On April 8, for example, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned of "very grave consequences" of an American strike.⁹² On April 10, an RT editorial warned, "By jumping to conclusions about the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria, Donald Trump's war cabinet and their media cheerleaders are recklessly pushing us closer to a military confrontation between Russia and the US."⁹³

Overall, therefore, responses to the Douma attack followed a pattern familiar from earlier cases, and focused on the broader situation, the witnesses and the Western leadership, rather than the detail of what actually happened on the ground.

There were two main exceptions to this rule of generalized invective. In the first, RT published the claim that some of the bodies shown in the aftermath of the attack had been moved, and

84 Eliot Higgins, "The Douma Chemical Attack - Fake News about Fake News on Russia's Fake News," Bellingcat, April 13, 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/04/13/doumafakenews/>.

85 "NATO vs. Syria, Russia, Iran: Damascus Again Accused of What Has Yet to Be Proven," Sputnik, April 08, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804081063346109-nato-douma-chem-attack-blame/>.

86 John Wight, "Trump's Deranged Tweet: Madness in an Age of Unreason," Sputnik, April 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/201804111063452771-trump-tweet-russia-get-ready/>; "Syria's Assad Says Trump's 'Animal' Slur Represents Himself," PressTV, May 30, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/05/30/563409/syria-assad-trump-us;22>.

87 For example, "Don't Attack Syria: Look What Trump Tweeted When Obama Was 'in da House,'" Sputnik, April 11, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/us/201804111063453623-what-trump-tweeted-obama-syria/>; and John Wight, "Trump's Deranged Tweet: Madness in an Age of Unreason."

88 For example, Peter Beaumont, "Trump's 'Get ready' Threat to Moscow Isn't Just Careless, It's Dangerous," The Guardian, April 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/11/trump-threat-moscow-tweet-war-syria>.

89 Patrick Wintour et al., "US Says It Has Proof Assad's Regime Carried Out Douma Gas Attack," The Guardian, April 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/13/uk-denounces-claims-it-was-behind-staged-syrian-gas-attack>.

90 "Russian Top Brass Reports It Has Proof of UK's Involvement in Douma Chemical Incident," TASS, April 13, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/999641>.

91 F. Michael Maloof, "Gassing Is Bad, but OK for Some: US Complicity in Past Chemical Attacks," RT, April 19, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/424236-us-complicity-chemical-attacks/>.

92 Russian Embassy to South Africa, "Russian MFA on the Situation in Syria Including the Provocation in Douma," April 09, 2018, <https://russianembassyza.mid.ru/-/russian-mfa-on-the-situation-in-syria-including-the-provocation-in-douma?inheritRedirect=true>.

93 Rania Khalek, "Biased Media Coverage of 'Chemical Attack' in Syria Could Provoke a Dangerous New War," RT, April 10, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/423646-syria-chemical-coverage-us-russia-war/>.

that the footage showing them was therefore “manipulated.”⁹⁴ The images that RT published did, indeed, seem to show that some of the corpses had been moved. The broadcaster claimed that “Many within the journalistic community have expressed a high degree of skepticism about the authenticity of both the attack and the alleged video and photographic evidence that emerged in the aftermath,” implicitly challenging the evidence base for the attack.

On this occasion, RT’s specific allegation appears to have been justified by the evidence. The photographs did show what appeared to be some of the same corpses in different locations; in some they appeared to have been deliberately repositioned for maximum visual effect. This appears to have been an attempt to create a viral image that would trigger Western outrage, and possible action. It muddied the integrity of the photographic evidence, undermined the credibility of the “pro-rebel activists,” and handed an open target to the supporters of the Syrian regime. The incident highlights the complexity of reporting from a battlefield, when both sides are engaged in information operations. It also underlines the importance of verifying the evidence presented by all sides in such incidents, and of not taking any source for granted.

However, the broader implication that RT drew from the allegation was equally flawed. It did not provide any evidence to bolster its central claim that “many” journalists had expressed a “high degree of skepticism” about the evidence; the only “journalists” cited challenging the evidence were RT’s own tweets. More broadly, the implicit suggestion that the moving of the bodies supported the claim that the whole incident had been faked went far beyond what was defensible. No matter how much the corpses had been moved, and no matter how much this had been done for propaganda purposes, the photographs showed dead children in a shocking degree of detail. Other images, not discussed in the RT article, showed the bodies of adults and children with foam on their lips and blue-tinged skin, consistent with a chemical attack. The fact that the bodies had been moved certainly had an impact on the attack site as a crime scene; it cannot be taken to prove that the attack site was a fake. Perhaps for this reason, the claim of tampering with the attack site did not make waves in the online debate.

94 “Douma ‘Gas Attack’ Aftermath Footage Shows Opposition Groups Moving Victims’ Bodies,” RT, April 12, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/423968-douma-gas-attack-aftermath-footage/>.

The second exception had far more impact. It focused on a video, originally published on Facebook by pro-rebel group Douma Revolution, that showed children being hosed down and given inhalers in a hospital setting.⁹⁵ This was one of the

pieces of visual evidence widely cited by Western media in their reporting on the attack.

On April 13, Russian Ministry of Defense spokesman Igor Konashenkov cited witnesses who claimed that, rather than showing a genuine treatment of the victims of a genuine chemical attack, the hosing down had been staged for the cameras by “unidentified people,” and that the victims had not been suffering from chemical poisoning.⁹⁶ Konashenkov described the Douma Resistance video as “the key ‘evidence’ of all these accusations made by western countries,” and said that Russia had “overwhelming evidence” that the Douma incident was a “planned provocation” designed to trigger Western intervention.⁹⁷

Over the following two months, Syrian, Russian, and Iranian outlets repeatedly argued that the “hosing-down” video was faked, and that the Douma attack therefore had never happened. The Russian government went as far as organizing a press conference for some of the witnesses in The Hague; RT headlined it, “No attack, no victims, no chem weapons.”⁹⁸ Sputnik headlined one video, “WATCH Douma Doctor Blow Lid Off White Helmets’ ‘Chemical Attack’ Claims.”⁹⁹ Pro-Assad blogger Eva Bartlett, writing for RT, cited pro-Assad blog *Moon of Alabama* on “discrepancies” in the same videos, to prove that the West was “caught in a lie” over the attacks.¹⁰⁰ This argument was reinforced by Robert Fisk of the *Independent*,

95 Douma Revolution, Facebook, April 08, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution.2011/videos/1739440859470155/>.

96 “Briefing by Official Representative of Russian Defence Ministry Major General Igor Konashenkov,” Russian Ministry of Defense, April 13, 2018, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12171238@egNews.

97 “Briefing by Official Representative of Russian Defence Ministry Major General Igor Konashenkov,” Russian Ministry of Defense, April 13, 2018, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12171238@egNews.

98 “No Attack, No Victims, No Chem Weapons: Douma Witnesses Speak at OPCW Briefing at The Hague,” RT, April 26, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/425240-opcw-russia-syria-douma-witnesses/>.

99 “Watch Douma Doctor Blow Lid Off White Helmets’ ‘Chemical Attack’ Claims,” Sputnik, April 13, 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201804131063533219-douma-witnesses-dismantle-chemical-weapons-claim/>.

100 Eva Bartlett, “Caught in a Lie, US & Allies Bomb Syria the Night before International Inspectors Arrive,” RT, April 15, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/424186-us-allies-syria-lie/>.

who visited Ghouta on a government-sponsored press tour, and interviewed a doctor in an "underground clinic" who said that the patients he had treated were suffering from smoke inhalation.¹⁰¹ Fisk said that the doctor agreed the video was genuine, and filmed on the night of the alleged strikes; the question was therefore whether the treatment filmed was genuine or staged. As late as June 1, Bartlett used the incident as the central piece of evidence in a post claiming that the entire attack was a "hoax."¹⁰²

Fisk's testimony itself met with criticism. Fact-checking website Snopes contrasted his reporting with that of other journalists in the same tour:¹⁰³ "Although Fisk said he interviewed more than 20 people but didn't quote anyone who witnessed evidence of a chemical attack, crews from both CBS News¹⁰⁴ and Sweden's TV4¹⁰⁵ were on the same convoy as Fisk. Both teams found locals who said they had inhaled toxic gas, and one resident led CBS to a canister believed to be used for dispersing gas. Another local led TV4 to the site where many of the victims died."

It is worth mentioning that the Chemical Weapons Attacks section of this report does not include the hospital incident from April 7 as an open source investigation of the events on that day. This is because the images and video available do not allow for the confirmation that an additional attack took place using open source methods, nor do they allow confirmation that one did not take place. In short, other evidence would be needed to reach the required evidentiary standards for this report, whereas the other incidents on April 7 are more conclusive through these research methods.

There are a number of possibilities for the ambiguity surrounding the "hosing down" incident. The line taken by the Syrian and Russian governments was that it was a deliberate fake

designed to provoke Western intervention. Using the evidence available, that is impossible to either determine or disprove. It would certainly be unjustifiable to take the video at face value without corroborating evidence, given the apparent tampering with corpses by pro-rebel groups, which RT highlighted.

However, it is also possible that the hosing down was precautionary and conducted in good will, but ultimately unnecessary. Douma was under heavy bombardment at that stage, and rumors of chemical attacks had been circling. Providing a typical treatment out of undue concern and sheer panic cannot be ruled out.

Finally, it is possible that the witnesses, who were in the hands of the Syrian and Russian regimes by the time they testified in interviews with the Russian military, were coerced or pressured into giving testimonies that supported the Russian version of events, or that they believed that their own safety and security was contingent on providing such a narrative. On April 16, the *Washington Post* quoted local activists as saying that some witnesses had, indeed, been coerced.¹⁰⁶ The following day, the *Guardian* reported that some of the medics who had treated witnesses claimed to have been subjected to intimidation.¹⁰⁷ Snopes pointed out that the original witnesses whom Konashenkov cited on April 13 had been interviewed by the Russian military, not journalists, and termed this "journalistic interference."

Given the current state of the evidence, none of these possibilities can be ruled out definitively. The hosing down incident is a cautionary tale in the difficulty of verifying information from a longstanding conflict zone, and highlights how much the burden of proof lies on the victims of Syria's atrocities. Without clear and consistent evidence from a variety of sources gathering and disseminating usable and verifiable information during an emergency situation, remote confirmation of these events can be difficult.

101 Robert Fisk, "The Search for the Truth in the Rubble of Douma - and One Doctor's Doubts," *Independent*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-chemical-attack-gas-douma-robert-fisk-ghouta-damascus-a8307726.html>.

102 Eva Bartlett, "Syrian Civilians from Ground Zero Expose Chemical Hoax," *RT*, June 01, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/428514-douma-civilians-chemical-hoax/>.

103 Bethania Palma, "Critics Slam Viral Stories Claiming Douma Chemical Attack Victims Died from 'Dust,'" *Snopes*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.snopes.com/news/2018/04/20/critics-slam-viral-stories-claiming-douma-chemical-attack-victims-died-dust/>.

104 CBS Evening News, YouTube, April 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m_gpBch0Fs&feature=youtu.be&t=41s.

105 TV4Nyheterna, YouTube, April 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDey9vvPmlM&feature=youtu.be>.

106 Liz Sly and Asma Ajroudi, "Russia Accused of Tampering with the Site of Alleged Syrian Chemical Attack," *Washington Post*, April 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/russia-accused-of-tampering-with-the-site-of-alleged-syrian-chemical-attack/2018/04/16/5b424dfc-4183-11e8-b2dc-b0a403e4720a_story.html?utm_term=.14ca9242ba4d.

107 Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian Medics 'Subjected to Extreme Intimidation' after Douma Attack," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/17/syria-crisis-medics-intimidated-over-douma-gas-attack>.

What is clear is that the pro-Assad media used this incident—as we have seen, one of several sources of evidence linked to the attack—to argue that there therefore had been *no* chemical attack on the night in question. This conclusion is simply not valid. Even if this particular piece of evidence—taken at one location and provided by one source—was proven to have been falsified, this cannot logically be used to demonstrate that all the pieces of evidence, from all the sources and locations, were also falsified. The focus on the hosing down incident failed to address any of the other evidence—the witness testimonies collected by outlets such as the *BBC* and *The Guardian*, the geolocated images from the attack sites, the munitions themselves, the OPCW’s finding of chlorinated substances from the site, and the report by the UN Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which wrote in September that “a vast body of evidence collected by the Commission suggests that, at approximately 7.30 p.m., a gas cylinder containing a chlorine payload delivered by helicopter struck a multi-storey residential apartment building” in Douma.¹⁰⁸

Konashenkov’s comment is especially important in this light. He introduced the “hosing down” video as “the key ‘evidence’ of all these accusations,” and then proceeded to debunk it. The video was not the key evidence: it was one of a range of pieces, which the ministry failed to address. The decision to portray that one video as “the key ‘evidence’” was itself a distortion of the evidence.

Amplification

The disinformation campaign waged by the Syrian and Russian regimes was large scale, persistent, and supported by a range of Western commentators. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, its impact was limited, and the bulk of mainstream reporting focused on establishing the series of events. According to an online scan of Twitter mentions of the word “Douma” conducted with the Sysomos online service, none of the ten most-retweeted tweets posted on April 7-9 contained pro-Assad content, indicating that the conversation was dominated by other voices.¹⁰⁹

108 United Nations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria Arab Republic A/HRC/39/65*, (12 September 2018), available from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/documentation.aspx>.

109 Sysomos scan of Twitter traffic, search term “Douma,” date range from 00:01 UTC on April 7, 2018, to 23:59 UTC on April 9, 2018.

In all, the scan collected some 435,000 tweets. Progressively, however, the mainstream media shifted their focus to other issues, while the supporters of the Syrian and Russian regimes kept their focus on Douma; thus, the overall volume of traffic declined, and the share of the conversation dominated by pro-Assad voices increased. In a similar scan of the period from April 10-16, six of the ten most-retweeted posts came from Assad supporters, out of a total of 487,000 posts.¹¹⁰

The sources of these attacks on the White Helmets have been studied by digital researchers, notably a group led by Kate Starbird at the University of Washington,¹¹¹ and a group at the Syria Campaign supported by social media intelligence firm Graphika.¹¹² Both studies concluded that the disinformation was driven by a small core of dedicated users and websites, including official Russian government outlets, apparently independent websites, and hyperpartisan bloggers, most notably Beeley and Bartlett.

According to the University of Washington’s analysis, this core consisted of the websites of RT and Sputnik, together with 9/11 “Truther” site 21stcenturywire.com,¹¹³ for which Beeley writes;¹¹⁴ anti-Western disinformation site globalresearch.ca;¹¹⁵ anti-Israeli, anti-Saudi, and anti-Western site

110 Sysomos scan of Twitter traffic, search term “Douma,” date range from 00:01 UTC on April 10, 2018, to 23:59 UTC on April 16, 2018.

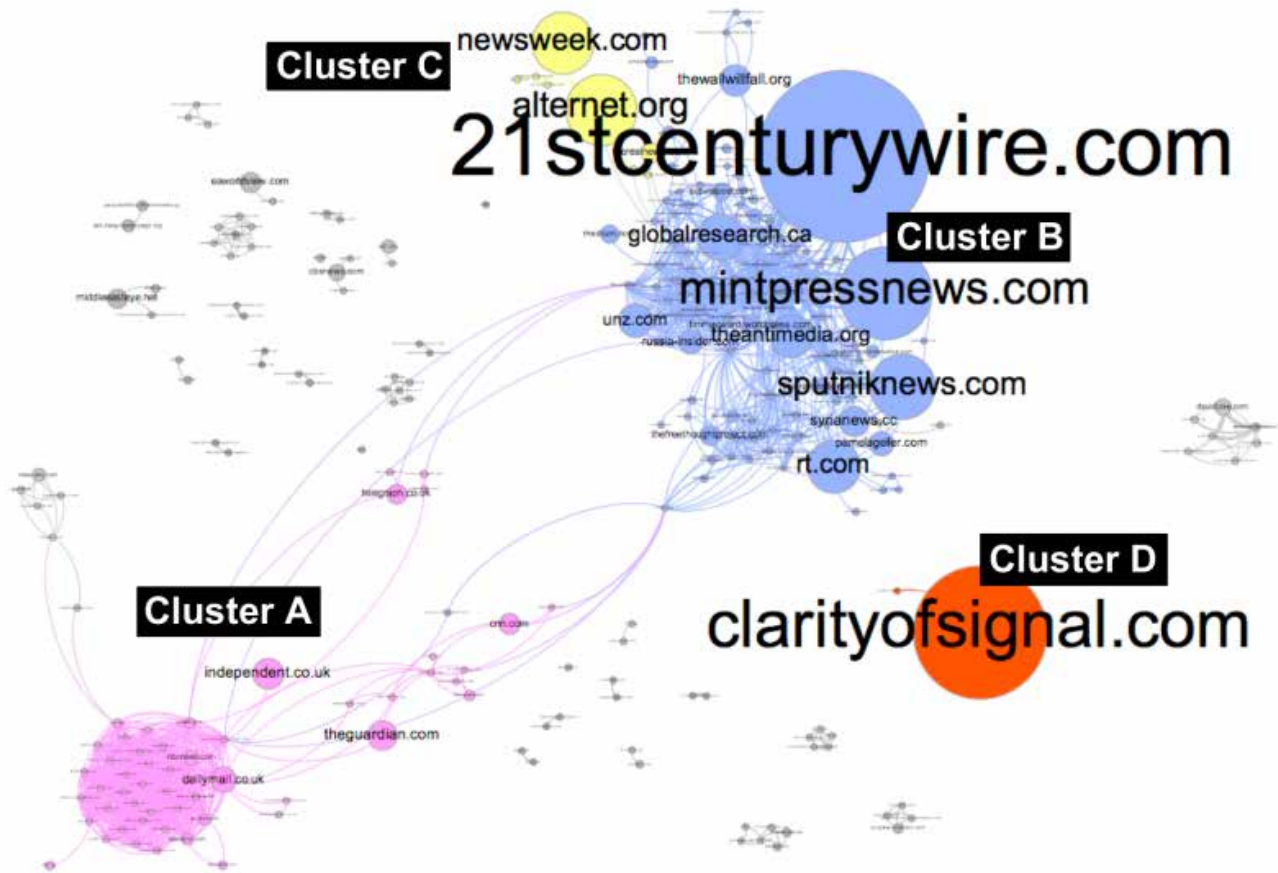
111 Kate Starbird et al., “Ecosystem or Echo-System? Exploring Content Sharing across Alternative Media Domains,” University of Washington, April 25, 2018, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi/Starbird-et-al-ICWSM-2018-Ecosystem-final.pdf>.

112 The Syria Campaign report “Killing the Truth,” December 2017, <http://thesyriacampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/KillingtheTruth.pdf>.

113 For an example of its stance on 9/11, see “Naming Names: Here Are the Key Players in the 9/11 False Flag Conspiracy,” 21st Century Wire, September 11, 2015, <https://21stcenturywire.com/2015/09/11/naming-names-here-are-the-key-players-in-the-911-false-flag-conspiracy/>.

114 Vanessa Beeley, “Exclusive: The Real Syrian Civil Defence Exposes Fake ‘White Helmets’ as Terrorist-Linked Imposters,” 21st Century Wire, September 23, 2016, <https://21stcenturywire.com/2016/09/23/exclusive-the-real-syria-civil-defence-expose-natos-white-helmets-as-terrorist-linked-imposters/>.

115 See Ben Nimmo, “Three Thousand Fake Tanks,” Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, January 12, 2017, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/three-thousand-fake-tanks-575410c4f64d>.



Network visualization of the online conversation around the White Helmets in summer 2017, showing the way in which the largest cluster, and the largest share of the conversation, coalesced around the pro-Assad sites (Cluster B).

mintpressnews.com;¹¹⁶ and anti-establishment site clarityofsignal.com.¹¹⁷ (The latter’s editorial tone was exemplified by its own description of billionaire financier George Soros as “Sith Lord Soros.”)¹¹⁸ Twitter users who referenced these sites in their comments on the White Helmets formed a distinctive and highly active cluster that seldom interacted with more mainstream news outlets, as the network diagram demonstrates.

The study concluded, “our analysis reveals a small set of source domains (and authors) generating content that is spread across diverse domains, drawing audiences from distinct communities into a common narrative. This analysis also reveals the integration of government-funded media (RT, SputnikNews) and geopolitical think tanks (GlobalResearch) as source content for anti-WH [anti-White Helmet] narratives.”¹¹⁹

Pro-Assad and pro-Russian disinformation was further amplified by a group of ostensibly independent news websites that have since been

116 A specimen of the site’s stance on Israel can be viewed in the article “Forget Putin, Trump Is Behaving in Every Way Like Netanyahu’s Manchurian Candidate,” MintPress News, September 15, 2018, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/forget-putin-trump-is-the-perfect-manchurian-candidate-for-netanyahu/249393/>. Its stance on Saudi Arabia appears in the article “US-Backed Saudi Coalition Ramps Up Terror Attacks in Yemen,” MintPress News, September 18, 2018, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/us-backed-saudi-coalition-terror-attacks-yemen/249496/>.

117 Kate Starbird, Twitter, September 21, 2017, <https://twitter.com/katestarbird/status/910988793125023745?lang=en>.

118 As of September 19, 2018, the nickname formed a separate menu entry on the website at <https://clarityofsignal.com/>.

119 Kate Starbird et al., “Ecosystem or Echo-System? Exploring Content Sharing across Alternative Media Domains,” University of Washington, April 25, 2018, <http://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi/Starbird-et-al-ICWSM-2018-Ecosystem-final.pdf>.

demonstrated to have Iranian links,¹²⁰ and which systematically promoted pro-Iranian regime messaging.¹²¹ These sites included IUVMPress.com, an apparent news site that reproduced content from Iranian regime and pro-regime sources, stripped it of its attribution, and passed it onto other sites; institutomanquehue.org, ostensibly a think tank focused on Latin America; and britishleft.com, apparently a site dedicated to left-wing British politics. IUVMPress led the way, with articles such as “Douma chemical weapons attack is a fake”¹²² and “Fake evidences are used to blame Syria government.”¹²³ The English-language page of Instituto Manquehue carried pro-Assad and pro-Russian messaging, such as “Top 10 Western lies about Syria conflict,”¹²⁴ although the article gave only eight reasons; the original, on RT, listed ten.¹²⁵ Britishleft.com also carried occasional pieces in the same vein, such as “Theresa May Is A Colonialist Liar Who Helped Stage Chemical Attack In Syria: Bashar Assad.”¹²⁶ These sites do not appear to have achieved significant impact; for example, as of September 19, the article on Britishleft.com had no likes and no comments. However, they enlarged the online footprint of this messaging, and are likely to have made it appear more widely spread and organic than would otherwise have been the case.

More impact came from a small but highly active and vocal group of social media users, often associated with the websites listed in Starbird’s study, who drove anti-White Helmets traffic on Twitter. According to the study by The Syria Campaign, and supported by Graphika, Beeley herself was “the second most connected Twitter

account in the disinformation campaign identified,” being amplified both by overt Kremlin voices such as RT, and by pro-Kremlin outlets such as 21st Century Wire.¹²⁷ Commentators such as Beeley, Bartlett, and 21st Century Wire colleague Patrick Henningsen bridged the gap between the “alt-right” movement in the United States and the Russian state communications network, being cited both on sites such as RT, and alt-right hubs such as Infowars. Beeley and Bartlett contribute to both 21st Century Wire¹²⁸ and RT;¹²⁹ Henningsen formerly wrote for Infowars,¹³⁰ writes for 21st Century Wire, and is featured as a contributor on RT’s site.¹³¹ Their contributions helped to spread pro-Assad and pro-Kremlin messaging into US audiences, very much in the manner described by Simonyan, when she spoke of the need for “English-speaking talking heads” to validate the Kremlin’s view.

In the words of the study by The Syria Campaign,

Whilst most of the individuals involved in spreading the conspiracies are usually dismissed as cranks and extremists by the vast majority of policy makers and opinion formers, their reach online has inarguably been extraordinary. Twitter activity during news peaks such as the Aleppo offensive in 2016 and the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack in 2017, shows that far right groups in the United States (the so-called ‘alt-right’) and Russian networks are reaching more people with manufactured stories than any other group.¹³²

On at least one occasion, their messaging broke into the mainstream. On April 13, 2018, rock guitarist Roger Waters told a concert in Barcelona that he thought the White Helmets were a “fake organization that is creating propaganda for jihadists and terrorists”—a very similar misrepresentation to that publicized by the Kremlin

120 “Suspected Iranian Influence Operation Leverages Network of Inauthentic News Sites & Social Media Targeting Audiences in U.S., UK, Latin America, Middle East,” FireEye Intelligence, August 21, 2018, <https://www.fireeye.com/blog/threat-research/2018/08/suspected-iranian-influence-operation.html>.

121 Ben Nimmo, “#TrollTracker: An Iranian Messaging Laundromat,” Atlantic Council, Digital Forensic Research Lab, via Medium, August 29, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-an-iranian-messaging-laundromat-218c46509193>.

122 “Douma Chemical Weapons Attack Is a Fake,” IUVMPress, April 28, 2018, <http://iuvmpress.com/23742>.

123 “Fake Evidences Are Used to Blame Syria Government,” IUVMPress, June 23, 2018, <http://iuvmpress.com/28117>.

124 “Top 10 Western Lies about Syria Conflict,” Instituto Manquehue, September 09, 2016, <http://en.institutomanquehue.org/publications/analysis/top-10-western-lies-about-syrian-conflict.html>.

125 Neil Clarke, “Top 10 Western Lies about Syrian Conflict,” RT, September 07, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/358507-top-10-western-lies-syrian/>.

126 “Theresa May Is a Colonialist Liar Who Helped Stage Chemical Attack in Syria: Bashar Assad,” Britishleft.com, June 20, 2018, <http://britishleft.com/theresa-may-colonialist-liar-helped-stage-chemical-attack-syria-bashar-assad>.

127 The Syria Campaign report “Killing the Truth,” December 2017, <http://thesyriacampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/KillingtheTruth.pdf>.

128 “Vanessa Beeley, Author at 21st Century Wire,” 21st Century Wire, <https://21stcenturywire.com/author/21vbeeley/>; “Eva Bartlett,” 21st Century Wire, <https://21stcenturywire.com/category/eva-bartlett/>.

129 Beeley’s contributions can be viewed at <https://www.rt.com/search?q=Vanessa+Beeley&type=Post>; Bartlett’s, at <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/authors/eva-bartlett/>.

130 For example, Patrick Henningsen, “Bye-Bye Syria: The Globalist Destruction of a Nation State,” Infowars, July 10, 2012, <https://www.infowars.com/bye-bye-syria-globalist-destruction-of-a-nation-state/>.

131 “Authors: Patrick Henningsen,” RT, undated, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/authors/patrick-henningsen/>.

132 The Syria Campaign report “Killing the Truth,” December 2017, <http://thesyriacampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/KillingtheTruth.pdf>.

disinformation networks.¹³³ Waters is a supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, aimed at putting pressure on Israel over its policies towards the Palestinians.¹³⁴ Both Beeley and Bartlett began their careers blogging about the Gaza conflict; they thus share an ideological starting point with the guitarist. A video clip of his comments was repeatedly uploaded to YouTube by Kremlin and pro-Kremlin users, including RT UK,¹³⁵ Beeley,¹³⁶ Hands Off Syria,¹³⁷ and Clarity of Signal.¹³⁸ Together, these totalled more than 140,000 views by September 19, 2018. This is a striking example of how messaging from such sources can break into mainstream discourse, given a sufficiently high-profile validator.

Post-reconciliation

When incidents such as the Waters amplification are taken into account, the reason that Russia's General Dvornikov spoke so highly of information operations becomes clear. The combination of state-funded outlets, covert outlets such as IUVMPress, official statements, and supporting bloggers and trolls allowed the pro-Assad narrative to dominate the online conversation for extended periods, especially during times when the credible media outlets were focusing on other issues.

The impact of their messaging should not be overstated. Despite the many denials and attempts at distraction, Western governments and the bulk of the mainstream media treated the claims of the Syrian and Russian governments with skepticism. Western air strikes against Assad's forces were the embodiment of their confidence that the disinformation narratives were unfounded. Similarly, at the most critical moments, notably in the immediate aftermath of the Douma chemical attack, the troll narratives were largely drowned out by more mainstream and credible voices.

The decision to contest the very fact of the Douma attack also appears to have been a strategic error. This was a high-risk strategy, which forced its advocates to deny any and all evidence pointing to the attack, rather than allowing them to admit the fact but dispute who launched it. As international analysis continues through the OPCW and the UN's Syria Commission, this flat denial may yet come back to haunt those who insisted upon it.

In the short term, however, the consequences of the disinformation campaigns are negative. As Waters' comment shows, the pro-Assad narrative has found high-profile adherents beyond the usual circle of Syrian and Russian government outlets and bloggers. The exposure of apparent manipulation by pro-rebel groups in the aftermath of the Douma attack will only contribute to raise the bar of skepticism. The perception by the Russian and Syrian regimes that disinformation is a vital tool will, itself, make it more likely that more disinformation will follow. Indeed, as this report was being written, Russian officials claimed that "terrorists" were planning false flag attacks in Idlib, in an apparent rerun of the tactics used in Ghouta.¹³⁹

As the conflict moves on from the ruins of Ghouta, the techniques of disinformation are sure to follow.

139 "Terrorists Carry Chlorine Canisters to Idlib Village for False-Flag Attack: Russia," Press TV, September 16, 2018, <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2018/09/16/574335/Syria-Idlib-Russia-chlorine-terrorists-Bsanqul-UN>; Daniel Brown, "Russia Keeps Saying the West Is Planning Chemical Attacks in Syria — and It's a Sign Assad May Be about to Use Them Again," Business Insider, August 30, 2018, <https://nordic.businessinsider.com/assad-may-be-about-to-use-chemical-weapons-again-and-blame-the-us-2018-8?r=US&IR=T>.

133 "Roger Waters Slams Syria's White Helmets: 'A Fake Organization Fronting for Terrorists,'" Haaretz, April 17, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/amp/world-news/europe/roger-waters-slams-fake-white-helmets-as-a-terrorist-front-1.6007488>.

134 Roger Waters, "Tear Down This Israeli Wall," The Guardian, March 11, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/11/cultural-boycott-west-bank-wall>.

135 RT, YouTube, April 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NupaxXozSCE>.

136 Vanessa Beeley, YouTube, April 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVaG10AEI0>.

137 Hands Off Syria, YouTube, April 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FFReCibdMM>.

138 Clarity of Signal, YouTube, April 17, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbHdpAzyxj8>.



Children look through a bus window during evacuation from the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, in Damascus, Syria March 13, 2018. Reuters/Bassam Khabie

To the South and Idlib

Assad's territorial gains in Ghouta opened the way for a subsequent offensive on opposition-held southern Syria. Just as troops arrived to reinforce eastern Ghouta's front lines and support the ground offensive after they had been freed up by the success of operations in Deir al-Zour and Homs, the surrender of Douma's last rebels allowed them to deploy to Daraa and Quneitra in Syria's south. Ghouta's bloody battle was fresh in the mind of Daraa's rebels and residents alike, and the desire to avoid similarly lethal outcomes aided the government's swift advances in the area. Syria's neighbors, too, were motivated to avoid the levels of displacement seen in eastern Ghouta and similar campaigns before it and to keep the offensive's impact within Syria's borders. Ghouta not only went unpunished, but begot significant military rewards for Syrian forces.

The heavily populated northwestern province of Idlib is Assad's next priority. There, the Syrian government's experience in and lessons learned from the Ghouta campaign are likely to encourage similar aggression and risk-taking, despite US warnings against an offensive. The inevitable atrocities of an Idlib campaign will have larger consequences than the war has seen to date, subjecting Idlib's eight hundred thousand residents to displacement,¹ humanitarian crisis, and brutal military tactics. In an attempt to break the last of the rebellion, a government offensive will deploy the methods and tactics documented in Ghouta, and Aleppo before it, and once again harm the international norms-based liberal order.

1 "10 Things You Need to Know about Idlib Province in Syria Today," ReliefWeb, September 12, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/10-things-you-need-know-about-idlib-province-syria-today>.

basic functions, as is securing the power and electrical infrastructure that runs between the northern provinces. The border between Idlib and Turkey is controlled by a combination of insurgents and Turkish authorities, implying the ever-present prospect of active opposition supply lines into Syrian territory. Additionally, Idlib Governorate itself is dominated by the militant hardline al-Qaeda derivative Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose continued presence poses a threat to Syria's security both directly and through foreign interest in the broader terrorist threat they pose. Assad's insistence on retaking "every inch" of Syria means that while the regime has consolidated its power and position in the conflict, it will not have won the war until it retakes Idlib.

The regime's success in Ghouta has had a complex effect on its calculus in Idlib and the likely shape of an Idlib campaign. On the one hand, the tactics used in Ghouta succeeded and went unopposed by the international community, just as they had in Aleppo, Madaya, Homs, Darayya, and other opposition-held pockets before. Heavy shelling and indiscriminate air strikes against civilian areas, as well as targeted attacks against humanitarian assets and hospitals, were key components of collective punishment meant to lower morale and increase civilian pressure on armed groups to surrender. The United States has repeatedly warned Assad not to use chemical weapons in Idlib,⁸ but seeing as it has done so dozens of times elsewhere without incurring serious costs—most dramatically in the August 2013 attacks in Ghouta—it may well do so again in Idlib to shorten the campaign and minimize its own casualties. Even when the United States has conducted air strikes in retaliation for Syria's chemical weapons use, as it did in response to the April 2017 attack in Idlib's Khan Sheikhoun⁹ and eventually to the April Douma attack, they have been limited, targeted, and largely symbolic, inflicting little in the way of genuine accountability or punishment on the regime. The international community's tolerance of Syrian and Russian behavior in Ghouta, and similar campaigns over the preceding two years, and the resulting regime victory have demoralized civilians and opposition-fighters alike. Ghouta was a lesson in the futility of resistance.

8 Zachary Cohen and Richard Roth, "Haley Warns Russia, Iran of 'Dire Consequences' over Syria Military Assault," CNN, September 12, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/11/politics/russia-us-united-nations-idlib/index.html>.

9 "Breaking: Idlib Chemical Attack Kills 100 Including 25 Children and Injures over 400," ReliefWeb, April 04, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/breaking-idlib-chemical-attack-kills-100-including-25-children-and>.

On the other hand, the regime would face some complications in trying to capture Idlib that were not present in the eastern Ghouta campaign—some of which are a result of the campaign itself. For example, the regime was able to capture Ghouta at an acceptable cost to itself partly because the irreconcilable elements of the armed opposition, as well as civilians, within the besieged population could be transported to Idlib, rather than return to regime control. The displacement of populations unable or unwilling to return to the jurisdiction of the Syrian government and its security apparatus to Idlib Province has been deployed during each so-called reconciliation since 2016. The now-infamous green buses transported more than one hundred thousand people to the northwestern province, giving both sides a way out of costly battle and removing those unwilling to surrender to the regime. In the case of Idlib, however, those displaced from elsewhere, as well as those who will inevitably be displaced in any offensive, have nowhere to go. Fleeing to Turkish-controlled territory in northern Aleppo and Efrin may not be an option, both politically and practically, as the geographical area simply cannot absorb all of Idlib's inhabitants. As a result, with 2.9 million Syrians packed into Idlib and surrounding areas,¹⁰ if insurgents decide to fight, the death toll could be very high indeed.

To date, the regime has not hesitated to inflict mass civilian casualties, but this would coincide with some international developments that make such tactics more likely to attract unwanted attention from the United States. US officials have been hinting that a regime attack on Idlib would be unacceptable (without clarifying what price, if any, it would entail) amid meetings to try to improve relations with Turkey and possibly coordinate over Idlib. However, the history of Ghouta, as well as those of southern Syria and Aleppo before it, offers enough evidence of past Western passivity to make the regime unlikely to heed warnings.

Idlib presents a difficult topography and thousands of battle-hardened, relatively well-organized fighters in HTS and other groups. As ever, the regime will be mindful of its manpower shortage and the need to demonstrate to Syrians that the war is won and normalcy is at hand. This indicates the regime offensive may be especially intense as it seeks to decide the outcome quickly. This may well involve the use of chemical weapons. Indeed, the regime already used chemical weapons

10 "New UK Help to Protect Millions at Risk from Deadly Airstrikes in North West Syria," ReliefWeb, August 16, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/new-uk-help-protect-millions-risk-deadly-airstrikes-north-west-syria>.

in Idlib in 2017, and faced little impact from the West's limited retaliatory cruise missile attacks.¹¹ The regime and its backers may calculate that international repercussions are less likely than ever seeing as the war is all but won and the West may be even less inclined to intervene.

Idlib's civilian population has few places left to run in the event of a regime takeover—the border with Turkey is closed. In theory, some Syrians would opt to stay behind regime lines, as they have done elsewhere. Attempts to ensure the continued protection and security of these individuals must be prioritized. The extensive reports of post-reconciliation security concerns documented in this report are likely to be repeated in Idlib without significant action to change this trajectory. Moreover, Idlib already contains tens of thousands of people sent there by the regime as “irreconcilables.” In Aleppo, Ghouta, and other theaters, populations the regime perceived as hostile—both military and civilian—were forcibly displaced to Idlib, adding hundreds of thousands to its population. In the event of an offensive that reinstates government control, they have nowhere to go. This crisis has been allowed to build for years amid consecutive forced displacements at the regime's hands, culminating in possible disaster in Idlib.

Idlib's fate will be decided in the coming months, but whatever it is the West is saddled with baggage accumulated over its inaction over the atrocity that was Ghouta, and the years of atrocities that preceded it. With low credibility and limited leverage, it must decide whether Idlib would be one atrocity too many or merely the final chapter in a long campaign of violations by the regime. Either course carries its own risks: the first is the real risk of unwanted military escalation thanks to vagueness and lack of credibility on the West's part; the second is to simply repeat the mistake of Ghouta and further degrade the concept of a rules-based liberal international order.

11 Stephanie Nebehay, “Syrian Government Forces Used Chemical Weapons More than Two Dozen Times: U.N.” Reuters, September 06, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-warcrimes/syrian-government-forces-used-chemical-weapons-more-than-two-dozen-times-u-n-idUSKCN1BH18W>.

A view of damaged buildings in Jobar as seen from Harasta highway, in Damascus, Syria March 27, 2018. Reuters/Omar Sanadiki



Timeline

2011

1 APRIL

Protests across Syria reach Ghouta, when thousands who gather to protest in Douma are met with live gunfire, killing at least three of the protesters.¹

2012

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER

Rebel factions expel government forces from eastern Ghouta towns.²

2013

APRIL

Backed by Lebanese Hezbollah, government forces advance around eastern Ghouta and capture the strategic town of al-Otaiba, placing the enclave under siege.³

AUGUST

Government forces close key crossing points in Mleha and Douma, preventing residents from leaving the enclave.⁴

21 AUGUST

Government forces launch sarin-laden rockets at eastern Ghouta and rebel-held southwestern suburbs of Damascus, killing at least 1,429 people according to US government estimates.⁵

25 SEPTEMBER

The first instance of death due to a lack of medicine in eastern Ghouta is recorded.⁶

- 1 "At Least 10 Killed in Syria," Ynet News, April 01, 2011, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4050879,00.html>; <http://bit.ly/2pp4J1t>
- 2 Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Living under Assad's Siege," New York Times, February 08, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/opinion/syria-bombing-assad.html>.
- 3 "Syrian Army Seizes Strategic Town Near Capital," Reuters via VOA News, April 24, 2013, <https://www.voanews.com/a/fighting-in-syria-lays-siege-to-historic-mosque/1648130.html>; "Syria: Children under Attack in Damascus Enclave," Human Rights Watch, January 11, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/11/syria-children-under-attack-damascus-enclave>.

- 4 Amnesty International report "Syria: 'Left to Die under Siege': War crimes and human right abuses in Eastern Ghouta, Syria," August 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420792015ENGLISH.PDF>.
- 5 White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," August 30, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>.
- 6 Violations Documentation Center, Statistics, Deaths due to malnutrition in the Damascus countryside, <http://bit.ly/2xzslKM>

2016

19 MAY

Deir al-Asafir pocket is captured by the Syrian government. Farmland that helped sustain eastern Ghouta through the previous years of the siege is lost.⁷

2017

FEBRUARY

Syrian government forces capture the areas al-Qaboun and Barzeh, bordering Harasta, closing all smuggling tunnels that for years provided a supply corridor for food, water, and medical supplies, barely managing to sustain the opposition-held enclave.⁸

3 OCTOBER

The Syrian government closes al-Wafideen crossing, the last remaining entry point into Douma, tightening the siege and sending the enclave into a humanitarian crisis.⁹ Only a handful of shipments of goods would subsequently enter, skyrocketing the costs of basic goods in eastern Ghouta.¹⁰

3 NOVEMBER

Syrian forces capture Deir ez-Zor from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), freeing up forces for redeployment elsewhere in the country.¹¹

2018

17 FEBRUARY

Additional Tiger Forces arrive in eastern Ghouta, many converging on the rebel enclave after battling ISIS near Deir ez-Zor.¹²

18 FEBRUARY

The Syrian government and allied forces commence their military offensive against the eastern pocket, marking the beginning of Operation Damascus Steel.¹³

24 FEBRUARY

The United Nations Security Council passes UNSC Resolution 2401, calling for an immediate cease-fire with a thirty-day humanitarian pause.¹⁴

25 FEBRUARY

The ground assault on eastern Ghouta begins, with the main fighting vectors on the southeastern front lines and around the Harasta vehicle base.¹⁵

26 FEBRUARY

Russia announces a daily five-hour humanitarian pause for civilians to pass through al-Wafideen crossing, but artillery shelling persists during these pauses. Only two civilians were recorded to have passed through the crossing in the days following the announcement.¹⁶

28 FEBRUARY

The regime takes Hawsh Dawahirah, a heavily fortified position in the southeastern area of the pocket, as heavy bombardment covers Syrian Arab Army advances.¹⁷

5 MARCH

Humanitarian aid is allowed into eastern Ghouta for the first time since the beginning of the offensive, but government air strikes prevent completion of the aid delivery and the United Nations aid convoy is forced to retreat.

9 MARCH

Remaining food from the previous convoy is delivered.¹⁸

10 MARCH

All of Mesraba is lost to pro-government forces. The Syrian army splits eastern Ghouta into two pockets, taking full control of Madira and the Harasta-Ghouta-west link. Douma remains attached to Harasta. Shortly after, the link between Harasta and Douma is severed by advancing regime forces.¹⁹

7 "Deir Al-Assafir Finally in Hands of Syrian Army," Fars News Agency, March 19, 2016, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950230000634>.

8 "The Unfolding Humanitarian Catastrophe in Eastern Ghouta," Amnesty International, April 06, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/02/unfolding-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-eastern-ghouta/>.

9 "The Unfolding Humanitarian Catastrophe in Eastern Ghouta," Amnesty International, April 06, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/02/unfolding-humanitarian-catastrophe-in-eastern-ghouta/>.

10 "هي قريشلا تطلو غلا قوقص نم ماظنلا اجابرا رالود نوي لم 20"، Enab Baladi, November 27, 2017, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/187087>.

11 "Syrian Army Retakes Town of Deir Al-Zor, from ISIS Occupation," CBC, November 03, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1087872067923>.

12 Qalaat Al Mudiq, Twitter, February 17, 2017, <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/964816518780465154>.

13 Gregory Waters, "2018 East Ghouta Offensive: The Cost of Securing Damascus," International Review, May 02, 2018, <https://international-review.org/2018-east-ghouta-offensive-assad-secures-damascus/>.

14 Security Council resolution 2401 (2018), *The Situation in the Middle East*, S/RES/2401 (24 February 2018), available from <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2401>.

15 United Nations, OCHA, *Syria: East Ghouta - Situation Report No. 4 (1 February - 13 March 2018)* [EN/AR], (13 March 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-east-ghouta-situation-report-no-4-1-february-13-march-2018-enar>.

16 "Syria Conflict: Putin Orders Eastern Ghouta 'Humanitarian Pause,'" BBC, February 26, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43200956>.

17 Gregory Waters, "2018 East Ghouta Offensive: The Cost of Securing Damascus," International Review, May 02, 2018, <https://international-review.org/2018-east-ghouta-offensive-assad-secures-damascus/>.

18 United Nations, UN News, *Syria: UN Aid Convoy Returns to Eastern Ghouta*, 09 March 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/03/1004642>.

19 Angus McDowall, "Syrian Army Gains Ground in Intensified Ghouta Assault," Reuters, March 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrian-army-gains-ground-in-intensified-ghouta-assault-idUSKBNIGM090>.

15 MARCH

An aid convoy is allowed into Douma with twenty-five trucks, marking the second convoy since the commencement of the assault on eastern Ghouta.²⁰ Civilians begin fleeing in large numbers the eastern Ghouta pocket, with thousands crossing into government-held Damascus from Hammouriya.²¹ By the end of the ground operation, 92,235 people would flee into government-run internally displaced person (IDP) centers.²²

20 MARCH

A displacement deal is reached for Harasta as the first of now three eastern Ghouta enclaves fall to the SAA and its allied forces.²³

22 MARCH

The first convoys of those refusing to “reconcile” with the government begin leaving eastern Ghouta, with thousands in Harasta boarding buses headed to the rebel-held north.²⁴

23 MARCH

Rebels in the Damascus suburbs of Arbin, Zamalka, Ein Tarma, and the Damascus Jobar neighborhood agree to a surrender deal, after heavy incendiary bombings on Arbin.²⁵

1 APRIL

An interim agreement is reached for the evacuation of urgent humanitarian cases from Douma, while talks for final surrender continue between the Russian military and Jaysh al-Islam, the rebels in control of Douma.²⁶

6 APRIL

After a breakdown in negotiations between the Russian military and Jaysh al-Islam, the Syrian government resumes its assault on Douma with heavy bombardments.²⁷

7 APRIL

A chemical attack is launched on Douma, killing between forty and seventy people, in one of the deadliest chemical weapons attacks of the Syrian conflict.²⁸

8 APRIL

Douma’s rebels agree to surrender and be displaced to the rebel-held north.²⁹

14 - 22 APRIL

The first and last convoy of those refusing to “reconcile” with the government is dispatched to rebel-held Idlib. A total of 66,369 people were displaced from eastern Ghouta in this forcible population transfer operation.³⁰

20 “Thousands Flee in First Mass Exodus from Syria’s Besieged Eastern Ghouta,” Reuters, March 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/thousands-flee-in-first-mass-exodus-from-syrias-besieged-eastern-ghouta-idUSKCN1GROVM>.

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26 “Syria War: ‘Deal Struck’ to Take Critically Injured Out of Douma,” BBC, April 01, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43609046>.

27 “Syria Forces Launch Assault on Rebel-Held Douma,” Al Jazeera, April 06, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/syria-forces-launch-assault-rebel-held-douma-180406142904124.html>; Danny Makki, Twitter, April 05, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Dannymakkisyria/status/982327538843357184>.

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29 “Deal Reached to Surrender Last Rebel-Held Town in Eastern Ghouta,” Al Jazeera, April 08, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/deal-reached-surrender-rebel-held-town-eastern-ghouta-180408172342106.html>.

30 United Nations, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Syrian Arab Republic: East Ghouta Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5, (01 May 2018), available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-response-east-ghouta-crisis-rural-damascus-2..>

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