

AZ- ZABDANI

DARAYYA

MADAYA

MADAMIYET ELSHAM

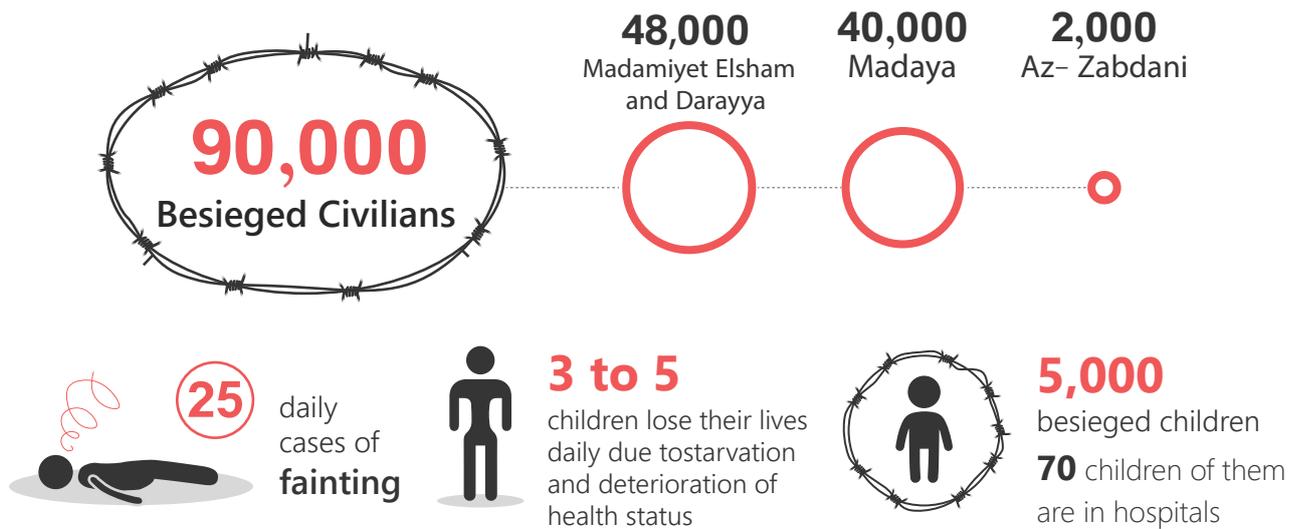
BESIEGED AREAS IN RURAL DAMASCUS

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Introduction

Since the beginning of Syrian conflict, the civilians were and still are the most affected party from the ongoing events. The Syrian regime followed a strategy of besieging any area that he is unable to control and used the civilians as pushing card to raid the targeted area and after that deliberately displace the families from their homes. After the international community uses its influence on the regime to break the siege in besieged areas, the regime moves to another area and applies new blockade aiming to bargain on the bread loaf against achieving his objectives of expansion in new areas and displace population there.



Az- Zabdani

The civil uprising has started in the form of peaceful demonstrations in Az-Zabdani town which is located 45 km North of Damascus city, on March 22, 2011. The Syrian Regime forces have conducted several arrests since April 2011 with the expansion of the number of wanted males between 15 – 60 years old. While the regime was oppressing those demonstrations with the use of live ammunition, the first innocent civilian was killed in Az-Zabdani town on May 27, 2011 with the continuity of daily arrests.

On August 2011, few people were armed to prevent the regime soldiers from breaking into houses, especially after the start of arresting women. The Regime soldiers have setup several checkpoints around the town on main and sub-entrances.

In the beginning of November 2011, the Regime started to gather its forces, heavy artillery and tanks to break into Az-Zabdani town. For eight days the regime forces could not enter the city, after all it resorted to bombing in order to weaken the town which led to the displacement of nearly half of the town's population from western neighborhoods towards eastern neighborhoods and Bludan town that belongs to Az-Zabdani sub-district.

A delegation from the League of Arab States accompanied this campaign with the lead of Aldabi after which the regime retreated from Az-Zabdani and a truce to stop fire was signed at that time which lasted to the beginning of January 2012. Military and Local Councils were founded in Az-Zabdani during the short truce.

After the truce was breached, the regime has started again to mobilize its troops on a larger scale with more than 15,000 soldiers and big number of heavy machinery. The severe shelling lasted for 12 days, and on February 2, 2012 the regime forces broke into all town neighborhoods.

Many checkpoints were setup in the town in order to separate the neighborhoods from each other and started to arrest everyone without exceptions, as well as the regime forces robbed the civilians' homes, this situation has lasted to the month of June 2012. Regime soldiers removed some checkpoints in the town and resumed the random bombing and targeting the civilians but with higher intensity and use of explosive barrels and warplanes. With the beginning of the month of July 2012, almost all Az-Zabdani residents got out the western neighborhoods towards the neighborhoods of Al-Mahata, Al-Jirjaniyeh, Al-Mamura and Al-Shallah located in the east of Az-Zabdani.

For the second time regime troops attacked the town, but this time the attack was faced by opposition forces that consists of town residents. The military campaign was extended to the eastern neighborhoods as well, so the civilians left their homes and moved again beyond those areas to more safe places and to Bludan town. This situation did not change till the end of 2012, very small part of original residents of besieged town of Az-Zabdani remained in the town and chose to protect their homes. The daily shelling did not stop since June 2012 with the beginning of blockade from all directions, several attempts to cease-fire failed due to regime forces rejection of all those efforts.

Lebanese Hizbullah troops began arriving to the town surroundings in June 2015, and sieged Az-Zabdani from all sides to start the fieriest campaign since the beginning of Syrian revolution. The regime's attempts to break into Az-Zabdani town had started since July 2015 with the support of Lebanese Hizbullah, Iraqi militias of Abu Alfadl Abbas and Palestinian militias of Ahmed Jibril. The regime used all kinds of weapons to bomb the town warplanes, rockets of different sizes and all kinds of bombs until September 24, 2015 regime forces controlled Az-Zabdani valley and half of western residential blocks.

Then, the agreement of Az-Zabdani – Kafraya and Foaa was concluded, this agreement included cease-fire, bring out the wounded and open relief passages to besieged areas. Nevertheless, only two points were implemented until now in Az-Zabdani town: the stop of fire and getting the wounded out of the town.

The civilians in Az-Zabdani suffer from deliberate displacement from Almamura, Alinshaat and Bludan town on sectarian basis by Hizbullah fighters. Large campaign of cutting trees was launched by the regime to cut the trees in town's valley on very large areas from about half of agricultural lands that exceed 60 km². Many residential buildings were blown up and tens of young men were arrested.

To date, there are 2,000 civilians including women and children who had refused to leave their homes to protect them, so regime and his militias besieged those families and prohibited the basic living necessities from them.

The residents in Az-Zabdani suffer from fainting due to malnutrition and absence of all living requirements and live in catastrophic situation of besiege and daily shelling.

Madaya Sub-district

To date, Madaya lives under tight blockade with explosive barrels bombing by Assad regime and Hezbollah militia since July 2015.

Madaya and Bqine towns are located 44 km northwest of Damascus, alongside Zabadani in the south east, and they are under the administration of Rural Damascus Governorate. Twenty thousand IDPs moved from Az-Zabdani to these two towns so that population density notably increased and the number of civilians reached 40,000 people.

Both towns suffer from severe loss of basic foodstuff and medical supplies since the end of August that resulted in the prevalence of chronic diseases among civilians, and an increase in the mortality rate because of hunger and lack of medical care. According to local doctors, more than 25 cases of fainting happen daily and one or two people lose their lives everyday especially patients, disabled, elderly and patients suffering from chronic diseases.

Several deaths have been documented and many cases of chronic and other diseases have been registered, with 453 diabetic patients, 700 heart disease patients, 30 epilepsy cases, and 350 malnutrition cases, most of those were children under 5 years old and about 55 of them were in the field hospital which suffers complete lack of medical equipment.

Poisoning cases spread due to eating rubbish and weeds. Most of wounded people due to shelling and mine explosions were treated by limb amputation because of the scarcity of medical supplies. After besieging the civilians in the town, the regime sought to make it unbreakable prison by land mining its surroundings to make those who try to escape the siege threatened by death or wounding, in a time the town suffers a scarcity of medical personnel and medical equipment to revive them.

The town suffered from unprecedented high food prices and the scarcity of foodstuff. Food basket that weighs 30 kg and includes basic types of legumes and cooking oil costs 1,916,000 SYP, considering that the dollar exchange rate against Syrian pound is 370 SYP for 1\$. Therefore, the price of one food basket equals 5,178\$.

The besieged Ein Alfiga sub district needs 8,000 food baskets which cost approximately 41,427,027\$ according to high food prices and the dollar exchange rate. It is important to mention that the food items are very rare in the area and are not available in the markets. The prices mentioned above are according to population's hearsay with scarce amounts and high prices.

Activists have spread on social media websites campaigns to break the siege of Madaya sub-district. Big number of local and international organizations have sent SOS calls to United Nations and international community via documents attached with medical reports that confirm the death of number of civilians due to starvation and absence of minimum living needs. Therefore, United Nations started to force the Syrian regime to open immediately transit corridors to deliver the humanitarian aid, and on January 1, 2016, 44 relief trucks entered Madaya consist of medicine, blankets and 7,800 food baskets. In addition to flour was entered on January 14, 2016.

It is important to focus on the fact that the delivered aid to besieged Madaya sub-district suffices for 15 days max especially after the severe siege and the starvation that the sub-district was exposed to.

Madamiyet Elsham and Darayya

On Saturday 26 December 2015, the Syrian Regime forces have closed the only crossing that connects Madamiyet Elsham town with the capital of Damascus, and prevented the population from passing including the employees and students. The closure of this crossing happened after applying a lot of constraints and pressure on the civilians who are allowed to go back and forth from the town, and restraining them from bringing any foodstuff. Madamiyet Elsham town has witnessed intensive clashes on Eastern and Southern fronts along with fierce bombing with explosive barrels and rockets and even toxic gases.

On the same date, the Regime has asked for a delegation from Madamiyet Elsham to meet military officers from the presidential palace. The Syrian Regime has demanded in the meeting the surrender of the Free Syrian Army in the town with laying down their arms or emptying the town of its citizens, otherwise, the town will be shelled with explosive barrels and the army will break into Madamiyet Elsham.

Until the moment of writing this report, the crossing is still closed. After a couple of days of its closure, the Regime forces have established a barrier there and spread the soldiers from the fourth squad in the area. The town includes big number of families, where the estimated population is around 45,000 counting the displaced families from Darayya. The continuation of this town blockade will lead to humanitarian catastrophe with the unavailability of the most important food items and medicine. After hours of closing the crossing all shops were crowded with people but most of them were closed soon and all food items disappeared from the markets. At this time, no foodstuff is available and all shops and stores are closed. The Regime was allowing the entering of very small amounts of foodstuff to the town to make sure that the sellers and people would be unable to store any food, on the other hand big quantities of fruit and vegetables were entered which are hard to keep fresh due to power outages. At present, meat is the only available food in the markets which is sold with very high prices, where 1 kg of beef costs 4,500 SYP and the price of 1 kg of lamb meat costs 4,000 SYP.

Madamiyet Elsham civilians were buying bread in the Eastern neighborhood from a car that used to park near Allijan Alshabiya checkpoint paying 100 SYP per one bag of bread that consists of 9 loaves. Overall, 1,500 bread bags were sold every morning in the town. After applying the siege, no more bread is allowed to be sold there, so the residents depend on the leftover bread which became crusty and not suitable for eating. Fuel, medicine, vaccinations and water became missing now, because the Regime was preventing the enter of medicine when the crossing was open and child vaccinations were distributed via town clinic. The absence of fuel has affected the availability of water in the area because the water in the town was connected to the main water network which completely cutoff from Madamiyet Elsham and Darayya. The residents depend on the well water and water tanks and they face many difficulties in extracting and transporting water due to lack of fuel.

The possibility of bombing the town is the biggest danger for the civilians now. If the residential buildings will be targeted with explosive barrels, many families will be killed who do not have safe place to resort to. The civil defense team in Madamiyet Elsham has taken preparatory procedures in case the Regime will proceed with his threats of bombing the town, and prepared some basements within several neighborhoods.

Regarding Darayya, the town is bombed as well on a daily basis with explosive barrels, rockets and mortar shells, with continuous regime's pursuance to separate Darayya from Madamiyet Elsham by bombing the road between the two cities. Every truce provided setup of barriers of sand on the road between the two cities, and the foodstuff was entered to Madamiyet Elsham only without reaching Darayya, so the regime ensures to achieve this condition by entering small quantity of food that is not sufficient at all for Madamiyet Elsham population.

The Syrian Regime aims to besiege the civilians in Darayya after breaking into Madamiyet Elsham and deliberately displace its residents. The Syrian regime's army opened the road to Darayya under the condition of raiding Madamiyet Elsham town in order to empty the town from its residents and settle the Shiite loyal people there.

Kafraya and Alfoaa

Kafraya and Alfoaa towns are located in northern Idlib. Alfoaa town administratively belongs to Binnash sub-district with a population of approximately 12,242 people according to 2011 statistics, while Kafraya administratively belongs to Maaret Tamsrin sub-district with a population of nearly 5,230 people according to 2011 statistics. Although the two towns belong to different sub districts, they are related geographically. Since the beginning of Syrian crisis, a large number of those towns' inhabitants mainly belong to Shiite sect moved to coastal and interior regions in Syria. Another part of them moved to Idlib city with the aim of fighting with the regime against revolutionaries where the majority of them are part of the regime's army and its security forces.

After opposition groups had entered the city of Idlib, a large part of regime forces withdrew from Idlib city to Kafraya and Alfoaa, including Hezbollah fighters. Jaish Al Fath has been surrounding the two towns since March 29, 2015 preventing entry and exit. However, the regime since the early days of the siege has been using helicopters for delivering umbrellas loaded with all supplies of food, medicine and the salaries of the fighters and even weapons.

Sometimes those umbrellas landed in areas controlled by the opposition, some of them contained weapons and snipers, and others contained huge sums of money and umbrellas loaded with food. Regime at the beginning of the siege was delivering aid by air three times per week between 35 to 50 umbrellas above the towns of Kafraya and Alfoaa.

One of truce conditions signed with Jaish Al-Fath was that the regime helicopters stop delivering umbrellas to Kafraya and Alfoaa, fearing the arrival of arms to fighters in such umbrellas. However, the truce came under several violations by the regime where he continued to throw up umbrellas on the two besieged towns, the last truce violation took place on November 27, 2015.

Kafraya and Alfoaa contain more than 5,000 fighters, some of them are from Lebanese Hezbollah, and food is available in abundance in those two towns, but they lack fuel.

Conclusion

Syrian Regime depends on a strategy of besieging the areas out of his control and apply restrictions on civilians. Once the humanitarian organizations recorded the entry of aid to the besieged city of Madaya by regime's army and the sectarian militias loyal to him, the regime has begun tightening siege on Darayya and Madamiyet Elsham. As well as, recording the entry of aid does not mean breaking the siege there, as the regime has allowed entering humanitarian aid to them in order to keep them away from media focus. The situation is similar to breathing life into semi-dead bodies to prolong their period of torture.

Therefore, humanitarian standards should be applied in Syria by neutralizing the civilians in the continuing conflict and allowing the arrival of food aid to people in need on regular basis and developing a plan to provide all requirements for those affected by the crisis in Syria.

Besieged Areas and Recent Aid - 15 January 2016

