



FORGOTTEN LIVES

LIFE UNDER REGIME RULE IN FORMER OPPOSITION-HELD EAST GHOUTA

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE AND ETANA SYRIA

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Cover Photo: Syrian boy cycles down a destroyed street in Douma on the outskirts of Damascus on April 16, 2018. (LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/Getty Images)

Photo 2: Pro-government soldiers stand outside the Wafideen checkpoint on the outskirts of Damascus on April 3, 2018. (Photo by LOUAI BESHARA/AFP)

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SUMMARY

A “black hole” of information due to widespread fear among residents, East Ghouta is a dark example of the reimposition of the Assad regime’s authoritarian rule over a community once controlled by the opposition. A vast network of checkpoints manned by intelligence forces carry out regular arrests and forced conscriptions for military service. Russian-established “shelters” house thousands and act as detention camps, where the intelligence services can easily question and investigate people, holding them for periods of 15 days to months while performing interrogations using torture. The presence of Iranian-backed militias around East Ghouta, to the east of Damascus, underscores the extent of Iran’s entrenched strategic control over key military points around the capital. As collective punishment for years of opposition control, East Ghouta is subjected to the harshest conditions of any of the territories that were retaken by the regime in 2018, yet it now attracts little attention from the international community.

This paper examines the details of the regime’s military and intelligence rule over East Ghouta and the resulting human rights violations against the population. It also details the scale of the Iranian presence in key strategic locations around the capital.

Methodology: ETANA maintains an extensive network of sources across Syria which it uses to gather and cross-verify information. Data gathered is analyzed by civil and military experts to understand conditions and recognize trends. Maps produced are visual representations of verified data which accurately detail placement and locations.



KEY POINTS

- * The regime's military takeover of East Ghouta led to the implementation of a tight security regime of checkpoints and crossings that restrict and control the movement of residents and facilitate arrests.
- * East Ghouta is a clear example of the extent of the intelligence apparatus's control on the ground, with the full spectrum of intelligence branches involved in monitoring and controlling the remaining population.
- * The range of Iranian-backed militias in the region demonstrates the extent of its hold on the area around Damascus and its strategic control over major installations and locations.
- * Russian-established and regime-run "shelters" house around 40,000 people under strict security control. Shelters give the intelligence forces easy access to people for interrogation or forced conscription for military service.
- * The regime cancelled all property sales that took place under opposition control, creating an upheaval that benefits a powerful network of army and intelligence operatives and their relatives.



STATISTICS

180,000 people currently living in East Ghouta

84 checkpoints in East Ghouta

4 detention centers ("shelters") in East Ghouta

~1,500 individuals arrested in East Ghouta since the regime takeover

40,000 people housed in detention centers

1,200 individuals transferred from "shelters" to Adra prison for arbitrary detention

14 individuals who died as a result of torture after staying in a detention center

7,000 men conscripted for military service from a detention center

INTRODUCTION

Located to the east of Damascus, East Ghouta was taken by the armed opposition in mid-2012. The regime subjected the territory to a brutal siege for five years that utilized starvation as a weapon of war. Despite East Ghouta's inclusion as a "de-escalation zone" following the 2017 Astana talks, the Syrian regime and its Russian ally began an extensive military campaign using a range of internationally prohibited weaponry, including chlorine gas, in February 2018. Much of East Ghouta was taken over militarily, while other areas surrendered and made agreements that allowed for them to be evacuated, with survivors heading to the north. Over the last year, since regaining control, the regime has imposed a suffocating security regime of checkpoints and crossings manned by the army and the spectrum of intelligence forces, in addition to Iranian-backed militias. This has created a culture of human rights violations, involving arrests, arbitrary detentions, and forced conscription to military service. With no civil society organizations to document such violations, the area has become a "black hole," with the population fearful of sharing information due to the risk of arrest or detention. This study aims to shine a light on East Ghouta, which has been largely forgotten since the reimposition of regime rule.

East Ghouta is a major security priority for the regime. Isolated from surrounding population centers, it has a heavy concentration of checkpoints and is controlled by a spectrum of different forces connected to various authorities. The regime's increasing attention on East Ghouta is due to its proximity to the airport in Damascus as well as an area that is home to a number of security and military bases, north of the capital on the Damascus-Homs highway (M5).

Local sources estimate that the current population of East Ghouta is around 180,000 people, about half of its original population under opposition control (around 350,000 people). Of this total, 80,000 are those who remained in East Ghouta after the surrender agreement of April 2018, while 60,000 are those who returned to the area from Damascus and its outskirts after June 2018. There are an additional 40,000 people in regime shelters as well.

The security regime in East Ghouta is not only managed by regime army and intelligence forces but also by Iranian-backed militias, including Syrian and Lebanese Hezbollah. Indeed, this indicates that the area is a major security priority for Iran — one it considers vital for the stability and continuity of transport operations concentrated at Damascus International Airport, the main location for military supplies for Iran in Syria and the coordination center for Iranian-backed militias in the country. In this way, the presence of Iranian-backed militias extends south, adjacent to the

Syrian desert (Badīa), south of Damascus International Airport and Wadyan al-Rabea' (al-Rabia Valleys/Spring Valleys) (Map: G9, G10). This reflects Iranian concerns that its freedom of movement at Damascus International Airport could be affected by military groups that may be present in the southern areas of Deerat al-Tlool and al-Safa.

MAIN AREAS OF CONTROL

Security control areas in East Ghouta are divided and shared between multiple regime intelligence forces and non-Syrian militias. The dominant supervising authority in a given area controls the borders and therefore the movement in and out of the area. While the presence of multiple military forces is similar to the situation in former opposition territories in Daraa and Quneitra, there are major differences in terms of the nature of control and the isolation of areas from one another. For example, East Ghouta is exposed to the harshest security practices among the areas recaptured by the regime in 2018.

To illustrate this division, the forces and areas of control in East Ghouta are classified as follows:

REPUBLICAN GUARD AREA

Red Lined Area

Given the Republican Guard's formal responsibility for control around Damascus, this force headed military

operations against the opposition in East Ghouta and is still the formal authority in the area. Due to the regime's shortage of manpower, other regime forces and militias also participated in operations and remained in the territory. This densely populated area is considered to be the most important part of East Ghouta to the regime. As such, groups of the Republican Guard, State Security, Military Intelligence, and some groups of the 4th Armored Division supervise the densely populated areas of East Ghouta, including the cities and towns of Duma (B3), Misraba (C3), Madyara (C2), Beit Sawa (C3), Arbin (C2), Hamouriyah (C2), Saqba (D2), Kafr Batna (D2), and Hazze (D2). These forces also supervise the eastern parts of East Ghouta, including Adra al-Ommaliya (City of Adra Labor) and the Adra Industrial City (A7) until the edge of the area of supervision of the 3rd Division, by the south Damascus-Homs highway (M5). The Republican Guard, along with members of the 4th Division and State Security, control and supervise the Damascus-Homs highway, which represents the northern border of East Ghouta. In the middle sector of East Ghouta (C2, C3) local members of the National Defense Forces (NDF) are also present at checkpoints, in order to identify former members of opposition forces and civil society organizations. In addition to these two areas, the 4th Division also controls Jobar (C1), which remains a completely isolated area where entry is prohibited.

A

B

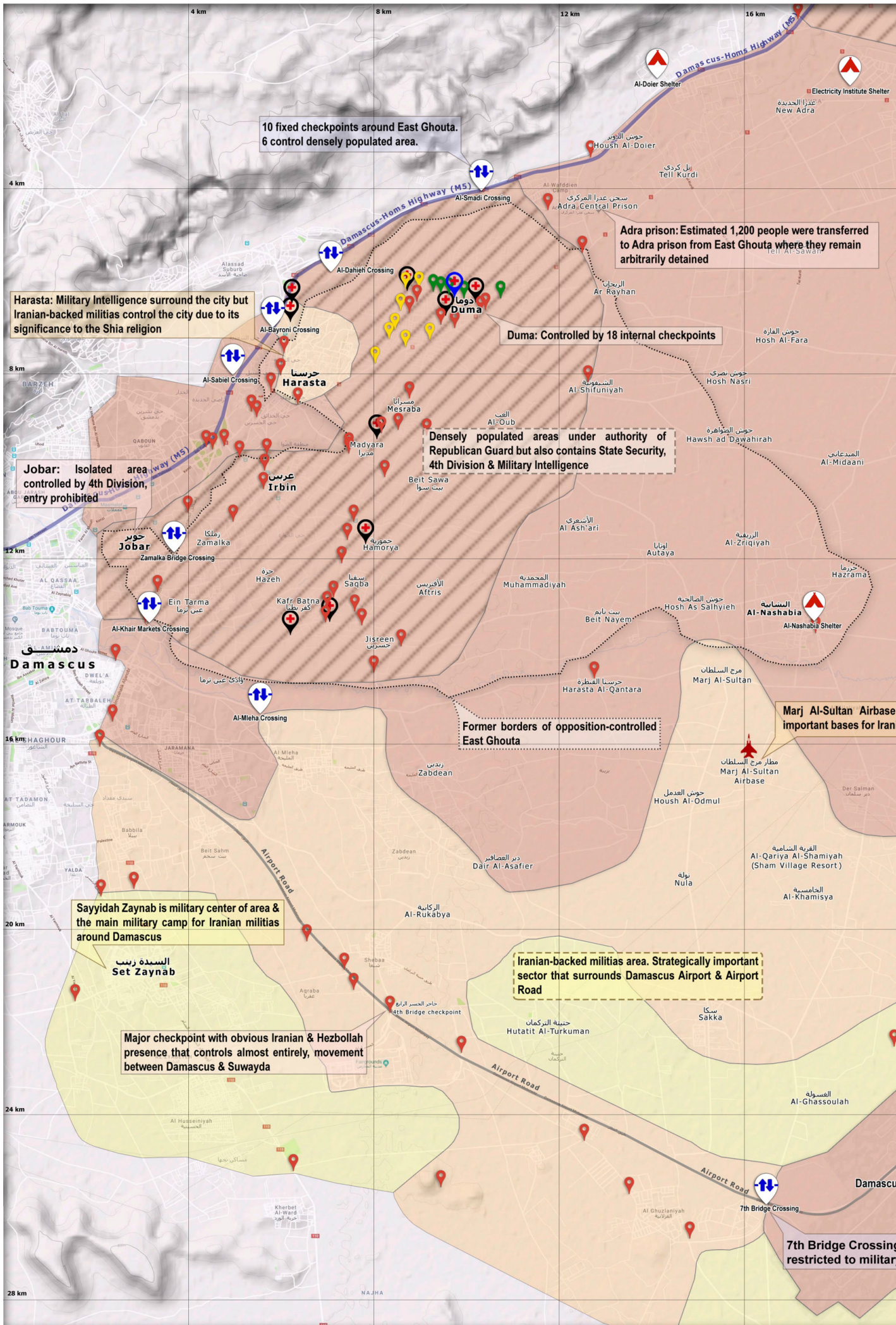
C

D

E

F

G



MILITARY CONTROL OF EAST GHOUTA

March 17, 2019

Map detailing regime and Iranian military control of former-opposition controlled East Ghouta. Vast networks of checkpoints and crossings restrict movement and ensure arrests can be easily carried out.






"Shelters" function as mass detention centers under strict security guard








المدينة الصناعية بعدرا
Adra Industrial City

Scarcely populated areas controlled by assortment of regime forces

Map Legend

Dominant Forces in the Area*

-  Republican Guard
-  Mixed Regime Forces
-  Regime Forces & Iranian-Backed Militias
-  Iranian-Backed Militias
-  Former Opposition Control Areas

-  Mixed Regime Forces Checkpoint
-  State Security Checkpoint
-  Republican Guard Checkpoint
-  Crossing Point
-  Shelter (detention center)
-  Russian Medical Point
-  Major Medical Point

* Determined areas denote areas of dominance rather than fixed areas of exclusive control. Forces & militias often move between determined areas.

& Sham Village Resort
Iranian-backed militias

Area of mixed supervision between regime & Iranian-backed militias, although the latter have more dominance

Iranian-backed militias control Widyan Al-Rabee' & Tishreen thermal power station, the second most important strategic locations in East Ghouta that connect Hezbollah & Iranian militias positions in Al-Waer, east Suwayda, to their headquarters in Sayyidah Zaynab & Al-Qarya Al-Shamiya (Sham Village Resort)

Military area - entry personnel only

MIXED REGIME FORCES AREA

Red Area

These areas are very scarcely populated. A variety of Republican Guard, Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and State Security forces are deployed in most areas of East Ghouta that are lightly populated and devoid of usable military sites. According to local sources, there is no single security authority in these areas, and all security services and forces operate on an equal footing. This area is also characterized by cooperation with Iranian-backed forces. Both the 4th Division and Air Force Intelligence operate here and are often misidentified by residents of East Ghouta. Part of this confusion can be attributed to the fact that both forces facilitate the presence and movement of Iranian groups, as their checkpoints also guard closed Iranian areas. All local sources agreed upon this.

REGIME FORCES AND IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIAS AREA

Orange Area

This is another area that is subject to mixed security supervision including Iranian-backed militias as well as multiple regime army and intelligence forces. This area is of strategic importance to Iranian-backed militias, which have dominant control, including over two of the most important facilities, Marj al-Sultan Airbase (E4) and al-Qarya al-Shamiyah (Sham Village Resort) (E5). These locations are known to be the Iranian military headquarters in the heart

of East Ghouta and have developed into a camp for Iranian-backed militias. The checkpoints of these militias at the entrances to the area have been used to control the movement of civilians and military personnel. There is considerable ambiguity about the nature of the military forces in Harasta (B2, C2), however. While local sources indicate that Military Intelligence has established the security cordon around the city, the forces actually controlling it are Iranian militias and groups affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah. This is understood to be due to Harasta's significance to Shi'ites, and this may mean Harasta is a new addition to Iran's list of priority areas in East Ghouta.

IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIAS AREA

Yellow Area

This area, under the supervision of Iranian militias and Lebanese Hezbollah, is of high strategic importance since it surrounds Damascus International Airport and the main road from Damascus (Airport Road). It also includes the town of Sayyida Zainab (Set Zainab) (F1), as well as the region south of the capital. This zone is the area's military center and the main camp for Iranian militias in the vicinity of Damascus. This area of Iranian supervision and control also includes the zone around Damascus Airport to the south, west, and north, as well as the populated areas to the north and south of the Airport Road. Iranian militias also control the second most important strategic location in East Ghouta: Widyan al-Rabee' (G9, G10)

and the Tishreen thermal power station (F10). This area connects Hezbollah and Iranian militia positions in al-Waer ("the rugged area"), east Suwayda, to their headquarters in Sayyida Zainab and al-Qarya al-Shamiya (Sham Village Resort) (E5). Local sources indicate that there are Lebanese Hezbollah units in these areas as well, unlike the former opposition areas in south Syria, where Hezbollah is expanding through groups of newly recruited local Syrian fighters.

MOVEMENT OF CIVILIANS

CROSSING POINTS AND CHECKPOINTS

A central characteristic of the regime's tight military control of the population of East Ghouta is its extensive network of crossing points and checkpoints. The regime uses these to control civilians' movement and ensure arrests can easily be made. There are 10 fixed crossing points around East Ghouta and at the entrances to some strategic sites. Of these 10 crossings, six surround densely populated areas that are entirely under the supervision of the Republican Guards and State Security. This supervision constitutes a tight security cordon that limits the movement of civilians and military personnel, and these checkpoints carry out the vast majority of arrests and forced conscriptions into the army. Civilians are not allowed to enter or exit areas of East Ghouta without permission from the security

force that controls that area. Movement through the military areas of Zamalka (C1), Ein Tarma (D1), and the 7th Bridge Crossings (G5) are restricted to military personnel only. Jobar district appears to be the most isolated and heavily restricted area, where civilians are denied entry unless they are laborers who work for the 4th Division and have had their access approved to carry out specific work.

Civilians in the areas south-east of Ghouta, where supervision is mixed, can travel between their towns and villages more easily compared to the other areas of East Ghouta. However, these areas are much less populous and made up primarily of small isolated communities. Internal security checkpoints separate this part of East Ghouta from the other areas, barring access to the main central road of East Ghouta (Harasta-al-Qantara intersection) (D4). Here the area under the control of Iranian-backed militias separates south-east and south-west East Ghouta.

IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIAS

Prior to 2011, Hezbollah and Iranian militias deliberately concealed the movement of their groups and fighters in closed military positions, such as the Marj al-Sultan Airbase (E4) and the military bases surrounding Damascus International Airport. In contrast, there are now a number of major checkpoints with an obvious Iranian and Hezbollah presence, most notably the 4th Bridge checkpoint (F3) on the Airport Road. This



Members of the Syrian government forces and the Syrian Red Crescent wait outside Wafideen checkpoint on March 9, 2018. (STRINGER/AFP/Getty Images)

checkpoint controls almost all movement between Damascus and Suwayda. There is also a visible presence at the checkpoint at the entrance to Damascus International Airport (7th Bridge Crossing), where troops from Hezbollah and the 4th Division are stationed.

VIOLATIONS AND ARRESTS

In contrast to former opposition areas in south-west Syria, there are no civil society groups in East Ghouta to document arrests and human rights violations. Therefore, it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of people arrested during the raids conducted by the regime after taking over East Ghouta in late April 2018 or over the past 10 months when the regime established its vast network of checkpoints. However,

local sources estimate that approximately 1,500 people were arrested from April 2018 until the end of February 2019.

It should be noted that these estimates do not include people in the mass detention centers located in East Ghouta, which were established by the regime after capturing the area. These “shelters” hold people and families seen by the regime as a potential threat, including the families and relatives of former opposition fighters, relatives of civil activists, as well as the families of former and current members of extremist groups.

DETENTION CENTERS

A network of “shelters” were established in East Ghouta by the Russians and are now run by the regime, and they function as mass detention centers under strict security control. They were created in many locations across East Ghouta, such as al-Doier, al-Nashabia, Adra Electricity Center, Adra schools, and al-Horjaleh (later closed), to house those who are security concerns for the regime, as well as those who were displaced or whose houses were destroyed in the military campaign to retake East Ghouta.

It is difficult to provide definitive statistics on the number of detainees in these detention centers as the regime maintains tight control, and widespread fear among those housed there limits their communication with others. The number of detainees fluctuates on a daily basis given departures and transfers to the security branches or to perform military service.

Intelligence branches supervising these centers are very secretive about what happens inside of them, but there have been some reports from families that left the centers in early 2019. These indicate that the largest percentage of the detainees are from Duma, Misraba, Hamouriyah, and al-Marj, and that new detainees enter the centers as others exit. Intelligence personnel supervising the centers conduct almost daily interrogations of detainees.

NUMBERS

The number of people living in these shelters has decreased from around 80,000 to about 40,000, as of January 4, 2019. They are distributed approximately as follows:

2,500 people at al-Nashabia shelter (D5)

9,700 people at Al-Doier shelter (A4)

14,600 people at Adra shelters (A5), including al-Nasr and al-Fayhaa schools and the electricity institute.

The al-Horjaleh and the Najha shelters contained around **3,600** people and around **13,500** people, respectively, but were eventually closed. Former residents of the Najha shelter were transferred to Adra schools and Electricity Center.

SECURITY AND INTERROGATION

Military Intelligence is responsible for all shelters, as they were set up by the Russians, with whom Military Intelligence has close ties. All other intelligence branches that wish to interrogate residents must first seek permission from Military Intelligence.

All men and some women who are transferred to security branches are subject to interrogation that normally lasts for 15-30 days. After that, they return to the shelters, and eventually to their homes in East Ghouta. The men are issued a deadline by which they must refer themselves to the conscription department in Duma before being drafted into the army. Some people have been interrogated for more than five months. According to activists, 14 detainees taken from shelters were tortured to

death. An estimated 1,200 people were transferred to Adra prison (B4), where they remain arbitrarily detained.

VISITORS, RELEASE, AND SERVICES

Visits from outside are only permitted in the middle of the week, and visitors must first apply to see their relatives before they are permitted to enter.

To leave the shelter permanently, women and children must be sponsored. Sponsors should submit an application, guaranteeing that they will provide those persons with accommodation, before they can take them out of the shelter. Those who leave the shelter are permitted to return. Men, on the other hand, are not allowed to leave the shelter temporarily or permanently until their interrogations have been completed and they are not required for military service, in which case they can be sponsored. An application must be submitted and approved by State Security before they are permitted to leave the shelter.

Services in the shelters are minimal. There are no educational services and medical services are limited and provided by small teams at each center during specific hours. Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is in charge of providing the residents with food and health care. Aid delivered by SARC includes blankets, mattresses, hygiene kits, diapers, sanitary pads, solar power chargers, water gallons, some kitchen equipment, and soap. SARC provides health care through 10 mobile clinics and six teams.

MILITARY CONSCRIPTION

Around 7,000 men who were previous occupants and were wanted for compulsory and reserve military service were conscripted into the army. Some of them voluntarily joined the 5th Corps and groups affiliated with Military Intelligence. Others also joined groups affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah.

PROPERTY AND REAL ESTATE UPHEAVAL

Real estate and property issues have caused major upheaval over the last three months, after the regime cancelled all sales contracts organized by local entities in East Ghouta before the regime takeover in April 2018. In addition, the Central Real Estate Directorate in Damascus issued a directive to ignore any changes made in terms of real estate ownership before April 2018 and requiring the original owners, if they wish to reregister or confirm their ownership, to be physically present and be identified as owners by acknowledged witnesses such as the *mukhtār* (village or neighborhood head) and heads of neighborhood committees who were in place before 2011.

Real estate and property issues were particularly problematic since over the past six years of opposition control, East Ghouta witnessed continuous waves of real estate sales that were organized outside the jurisdiction of the Syrian judiciary. Indeed, recent years saw many poor families sell

their property to newly wealthy residents in East Ghouta, most notably those that were part of or affiliated with the opposition.

After the regime takeover, these measures most directly impact those wanted by regime intelligence forces, especially those outside Syria. Security restrictions on East Ghouta paved the way for new sales in parallel to what happened before 2018, but in the opposite direction: A network of powerful regime officers and a wide circle of relatives and merchants pressured the owners to sell them their property in East Ghouta for cut-rate prices in line with those prevailing during the siege era in this formerly opposition-held territory.

The real estate crisis in East Ghouta benefits a wide circle of regime officers and some real estate agents, often those linked to Iranian militias or Iranian-backed militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah.

There are notable changes to real estate in a number of areas of East Ghouta, but most significant are the influx of new owners in Duma, mostly Damascene investors linked to the regime, which may change the traditional nature of the city and its conservative culture.

Changes in ownership and acquisitions of property can be classified in three main categories:

1. Real estate owned by people who left East Ghouta after the “surrender” agreement in April 2018 or who were outside Ghouta before it occurred

In these cases, regime officers used local agents from East Ghouta to identify property belonging to former opposition fighters who had left Ghouta as a result of the agreement, as well as that belonging to defectors and military commanders outside Syria. Officers from the 4th Division, Military Intelligence, and the Republican Guard seized real estate and forced many owners outside regime-controlled areas to sell their property through unregistered contracts, while some was also seized without making contact with the original owners.

2. Real estate property of former leaders of opposition groups in East Ghouta (Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman, and Fajr al-Ummah)

These properties were generally seized by persons close to or known by them.

3. Real estate property that was returned to its original owner after the cancellation of the former undocumented sales contracts.

Due to the current situation, persons wanted by intelligence branches cannot register their ownership of real estate property, while all others can have their ownership legally registered. Some people wanted by intelligence branches have sought to grant proxies who are not wanted inside East Ghouta private procuration to sell their property; however, such attempts failed and resulted in the arrest of those holding the sale procuration during the transfer of ownership procedures.

The behavior of the regime toward the population of East Ghouta is harsh, and the area is still plagued by widespread suffering akin to a state of war, regardless of the defeat of local opposition groups. In the medium term, this dire situation could force many in East Ghouta to leave, dramatically reducing the area's population in the next few years. It is difficult to view the return of some 60,000 former residents after the April 2018 agreement as voluntary; most were driven by the exhaustion of their savings and in response to the high cost of housing in Damascus and Suwayda.

CONCLUSION

The conditions facing residents of East Ghouta are an ugly demonstration of what the reimposition of the Assad regime's authoritarian rule looks like. Human rights violations are a part of daily life and they define the existence of many residents in this sealed-off area. However, the widespread suffering and the lack of basic freedoms are going undocumented given the absence of civil society organizations to witness and record this reality.

In this regard, any consideration of support for reconstruction or early recovery to the formerly besieged community of East Ghouta would validate and reward the regime's brutal besiegement and the litany of war crimes instrumental in its military campaign to retake control of East Ghouta. Any such support to this territory would also be condoning the oppressive military control which now characterizes daily life in this formerly opposition-held territory.

ABOUT ETANA



ETANA, a Syrian organization established in Damascus in 2001, is committed to achieving a democratic, inclusive future for all Syrians. Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, ETANA has worked to find a sustainable political solution by building linkages and accountability between local communities, as well as the international community. It focuses on providing accurate reporting and analysis of the situation on the ground in Syria, which has proven vital to achieving coherent Syria policy. Follow ETANA's work on Twitter @ETANA_Syria.

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