



# **DESPAIR AND DECAY**

## **EAST GHOUTA AFTER 18 MONTHS OF RENEWED REGIME RULE**

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE AND ETANA SYRIA

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Methodology: ETANA maintains extensive networks of sources across Syria and within Syria's neighboring countries which it uses to gather and cross-verify information. Data gathered is analyzed by civil, political, and military experts to understand relations and conditions and recognize trends. Maps produced are visual representations of verified data.

Cover photo: Syrian children ride their bike past destroyed buildings in the former rebel-held town of Zamalka, in East Ghouta, on April 5, 2018. (Photo by STRINGER/AFP via Getty Images)

Contents photo: A Syrian farmer walks through his land in Deir al-Asafir in East Ghouta, on June 10, 2019. The former opposition stronghold was once the breadbasket of Damascus, but a five-year siege and an intense bombing campaign has taken its toll on farmland and crops. (Photo by LOUAI BESHARA/AFP via Getty Images)

Key points photo: Footage captured by an unmanned aerial vehicle shows the wreckage of structures in Irbin, in East Ghouta, following assaults by the Assad regime. (Photo by Ammar Al Bushy/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

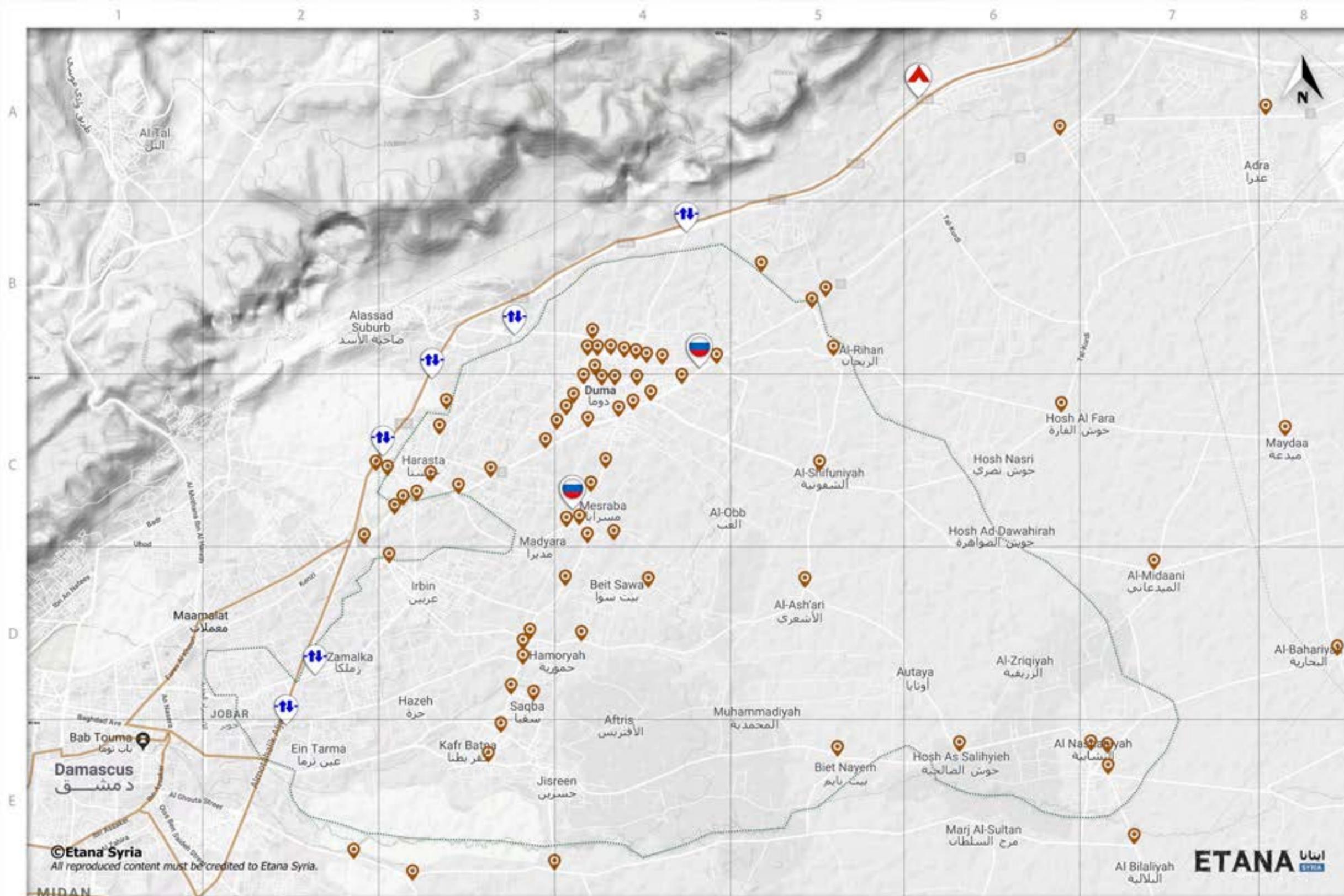




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## KEY POINTS

- **SECURITY & INTELLIGENCE CRACKDOWN:** Raids on homes and forced disappearances carried out by regime intelligence forces are common, with numerous reports of adults and children being kidnapped by security forces. Reporting violations or learning the whereabouts of missing loved ones is an often-futile process, with more than 500 detainees unaccounted for since April 2018.
- **CHECKPOINTS & EXTORTION:** The regime and its security apparatus have established at least 88 checkpoints in East Ghouta, and residents report constant harassment and summary detainments. Extortion is common, and local residents are forced to pay exorbitant bribes at checkpoints to pass freely.
- **ABSENCE OF BASIC SERVICES:** Residents of East Ghouta are facing a humanitarian crisis amid a total lack of basic services. The sewage system is operable in only 10 percent of the region, and this represents a growing health risk for residents. Only 55 percent of occupied neighborhoods have access to electricity, and drinking water, much of which is polluted, must be purchased from expensive, unreliable, and water tanker trucks. What little is available as far as services go to neighborhoods populated by regime loyalists and senior officials.
- **SCHOOLS & HOSPITALS:** Many East Ghouta residents lack access to education and health facilities despite promises from regime officials that these services would be restored. Only 60 percent of children have access to schools, most of which are in a major state of disrepair, and many facilities remain out of service or destroyed. The limited number of medical facilities in East Ghouta are expensive and poorly staffed. Local residents must obtain a security clearance before receiving any treatment, leaving many wary of seeking healthcare due to fears of arrest or forced conscription.
- **DESTROYED ECONOMY:** The basic pillars of East Ghouta's economy remain in total disrepair, and local residents cannot even repair their homes without paying a fee and obtaining a security clearance. Fertilizer and fuel are barred from being brought in to major swathes of East Ghouta, meaning that agricultural and manufacturing businesses are unable to resume operations.
- **PROPERTY SEIZURES:** Regime security and intelligence forces have seized a number of homes and other properties belonging to local residents using several different methods. Those with a backlog of service bills or back taxes who are unable to pay their debt to the government are given a brief window to leave their property, while some former opposition members have had their homes and businesses summarily seized by intelligence forces.
- **DOMESTIC SPYING:** The regime's intelligence apparatus closely monitors and tracks phone calls, text messages, and internet activity in East Ghouta. The regime also distributes counterfeit mobile programs — namely malicious phishing applications disguised as legitimate copies of WhatsApp or other messaging platforms — designed to intercept communications and track telephone activity. Residents' lack of awareness around cybersecurity makes an already challenging situation worse.



### Checkpoints in East Ghouta

29<sup>th</sup> October 2019

The regime and its intelligence apparatus have asserted control over East Ghouta in the form of ubiquitous security checks and densely grouped checkpoints where extortion, harassment and arrest of residents are common.

**Map Legend**

- Former Opposition Area
- Main Highway
- Regime Checkpoint
- Russian Military Police Position
- Shelter
- Crossing Point



## INTRODUCTION

East Ghouta is perhaps the darkest example of renewed Assad regime rule over former opposition territory. 18 months after the regime recaptured the area, its security forces and intelligence apparatus continue to terrorize Syrians there. Night-time raids on homes, mass arrests, and forced disappearances are common occurrences across the region. Intelligence forces assert themselves in every aspect of daily life. Personnel at the ubiquitous checkpoints across East Ghouta extort residents for bribes when they pass, subjecting them to security checks that can lead to civilians either being arrested on the spot or conscripted into military service. These mandatory security checks serve as a constant reminder of the pervasiveness of the regime's intelligence apparatus, and residents must go through them whenever they need to obtain official documents or receive treatment at medical facilities. Constant fear of arrest leaves many unwilling to seek treatment or assistance, and more than 500 detainees are completely unaccounted for since April 2018.

East Ghouta suffered years of bombardment and starvation from a brutal regime siege that obliterated homes and destroyed infrastructure. Yet nearly two years after the opposition's final surrender, essential services remain unavailable. The regime's rebuilding efforts so far have proven superficial, ineffective, and inadequate. Nearly half

of occupied residential neighborhoods are still without electricity. Drinking water must be obtained via tanker trucks or informal wells, often too polluted to drink. Roughly 40 percent of children do not have access to schools, and many educational facilities lack basic essentials like windows. Only a handful of short-staffed and poorly equipped hospitals are still in service, despite a major public health crisis worsened by an inoperative sewage system. Despite the poor quality and lack of services, the regime continues to charge exorbitant fees and extort residents for eight years of back taxes and service bills — a tool it uses to seize residents' homes.

## SECURITY SITUATION

Since the return of East Ghouta to regime hands in 2018, a number of different security and intelligence forces have taken control of the area by force, arresting perceived enemies of the regime with impunity and subjecting local residents to harsh treatment. Residents report that arrests and forced disappearances are common. State Security has an especially bad reputation in East Ghouta. Its members often drive distinctive grey jeeps, and residents associate the mere sight of these vehicles in their neighborhood with the likely disappearance of a neighbor or relative.

## REGIME VIOLATIONS

There are dozens of checkpoints across the region, and traveling from town to town or into Damascus is impossible without undergoing one or more security checks.

**Arrests & forced disappearances:** State Security and other regime intelligence branches routinely conduct extrajudicial arrests of individuals suspected of having ties to the former opposition or those dissenting against regime control, often at checkpoints or during raids. However, residents have reported numerous incidences of intelligence forces kidnapping relatives, neighbors, and community members unannounced, usually without explanation or cause. In such instances, regime State Security vehicles enter a neighborhood and quickly apprehend their target. Families are unable to obtain information about why or where their relative has been detained.

**Checkpoints:** As they pass through the dozens of checkpoints across the region, residents and travelers have their names checked by intelligence forces and can be arrested on the spot if they are wanted for any reason. Bribes to pass safely through a checkpoint can vary from several hundred Syrian pounds per person to 15,000 SYP (\$22) or more per vehicle.

**Wanted lists:** While security personnel at checkpoints frequently run residents' names through their databases of wanted individuals, these checks are

carried out elsewhere as well. Any time residents go to a government office or even a hospital, for instance, their name is referenced against wanted lists, leading many to refuse to visit such institutions altogether.

## RUSSIAN MILITARY POLICE

There is a limited Russian military police presence at two locations in East Ghouta. As in southwest Syria, Russian forces log complaints by local residents and make attempts to curb abuses by the regime, but these efforts are largely ineffective, producing only superficial results.

**Checkpoint removal:** In one prominent example, Russian forces intervened to dismantle a checkpoint after numerous residents complained of violations at a checkpoint operated by State Security. The commander was arrested, but released quickly after a brief investigation. The Russians ordered the removal of the checkpoint, but State Security merely moved its forces into a nearby building along the same road and continued their activities. This situation, among others, underscores the limited influence of Russian military police in East Ghouta.

## SHELTERS

Thousands of East Ghouta residents took refuge in regime-operated shelters following the April 2018 offensive, and some 500 families (1,500 individuals) remain in these facilities. Although numerous violations have been documented at the shelters, following



Regime security forces stand guard at the Wafdeen checkpoint, a crossing between regime-controlled Damascus and opposition-held East Ghouta, on April 2, 2018. (Photo by STRINGER/AFP via Getty Images)

the establishment of a Russian military police presence there, many occupants believe they are safer staying rather than returning to their homes in East Ghouta. This is especially true for those whose homes were destroyed.

**Forced conscription & arrest:** Most of those living in the shelters are women and children, as many of the men were either arrested or forced into military service. When the regime consolidated the shelters into one location several months ago, every male between 18 and 60 was investigated by regime intelligence, mainly by the infamous Palestine Branch. Many were placed in reserve service, while others volunteered to serve in the National Defense Forces militia. More than 500 men were arrested and their whereabouts remain unknown.

## SERVICES CRISIS IN EAST GHOUTA

Basic services are widely unavailable across much of East Ghouta, and what little there is available often goes to wealthy individuals with ties to the regime. Schools, hospitals, and roads are in various states of disrepair and unable to meet the needs of local residents.

### ELECTRICITY

Electricity in East Ghouta comes from two sources: regime-operated lines and privately-owned generators. Up to 60 percent of East Ghouta's residents have no access to electricity. Only around half of still-inhabited areas receive power from the regime, and even then for no more than six hours a day.

**Private generators:** 30 percent of residents that receive power get it from private generators. These provide more consistent service but at a much higher cost, with an average-sized family paying an estimated 2,500 SYP (\$3.60) for service on a weekly basis.

**Outstanding electrical bills:** The regime-controlled state electricity company is using outstanding and unpaid service bills to extort residents and deprive them of basic services. Homeowners are routinely tasked with paying back electricity bills dating as far back as 2011, regardless of whether or not they have actually been living in their homes. Complicating the matter further, many of the area's electrical meters have been damaged or destroyed, making accurate readings of energy use impossible. Those who are unable to pay these extortionate bills have their homes cut off from the power grid. The regime has been known to confiscate private generators from those behind on their bills or — with the cooperation of local generator owners — prevent them from buying private power. To resume service, residents must pay their outstanding bills as well as a fee of 12,000 SYP (\$17.60) to obtain proof of debt clearance.

**Bill-related evictions:** If a resident is served with a bill but is not the owner of the property, they must begin paying it within 45 days in order to remain

in the home. Otherwise, they will be evicted by local intelligence forces and investigated.

### WATER

Across much of East Ghouta running water is limited or non-existent and high-ranking officials and businessmen have priority when it comes to service provision. Water mains are in a state of extreme disrepair or destroyed altogether, pushing residents to rely on informally excavated wells and tanker trucks for their water, much of which is polluted. Areas that receive running water tend to be those where high-ranking officials or businessmen close to the regime live and work.

**Sewage:** An estimated 90 percent of East Ghouta's sewage system is inoperable or destroyed, and waste is overflowing into the groundwater. Built-up waste, which is difficult to dispose of, is contributing to a growing public health and environmental crisis.

**Public water:** Residents across East Ghouta rely on tanker trucks for water. Although the regime provides a limited quantity of water by tanker truck, most of the tanks used to store the water are polluted, making it unsuitable for drinking. Further complicating matters is the source of the trucks' water — local wells largely contaminated by overflowing sewage — adding to the prevalence of water-borne illness in the region.

**Private water sources:** East Ghouta residents have several other options for obtaining water from private sources, but these are of mixed quality and often prohibitively expensive.

**Informal wells:** Some residents have access to informal water wells, providing largely non-potable water to homes for around 500 SYP (\$0.73) per cubic meter. In some areas, due to sewage overflow and pollution, this water may not be suitable for irrigating crops.

**Private companies:** Private water companies sell water to residents at grossly inflated prices, with each cubic meter costing up to 5,000 SYP (\$7.33).

## EDUCATION

The majority of East Ghouta's schools are in a state of total disrepair, with no major reconstruction efforts underway. Schools are short-staffed and many teachers are working without pay and adequate supplies. Repairs mostly come from crowd-sourced and funded labor.

**Schools:** Schools are still damaged from fighting and bombardment, and many lack basic essentials like windows or doors. This is a growing issue as winter quickly approaches, with parents and teachers pooling money on especially cold days to pay to heat the classrooms. Poor sanitary conditions have led to numerous health issues, including a major infestation of head lice in many schools, and on several occasions students have been injured by roof and wall collapses.

**Staffing:** Schools are short-staffed and teachers are either underpaid or not paid at all, volunteering their services. A major call has gone out to community members with basic education degrees to help staff primary and middle schools.

**Testing:** Post-secondary exams are a major component of the Syrian education system, and scores define a child's educational and professional future. Students taking these annual tests have to leave East Ghouta to travel to testing facilities in Damascus, often a long journey across territory ravaged by war. While some communities can arrange transportation for large groups in the form of regime buses, those from remote or more sparsely populated areas must pay their way to Damascus. The trip costs roughly 2,500 SYP (\$3.66) per student, too expensive for many. As such, large numbers of students — especially girls fearing harassment — are not able to take these crucial exams.

## HEALTHCARE

Operational hospitals in East Ghouta are few in number and understaffed, with ongoing equipment and medicine shortages. Some areas remain without any medical facilities, including Irbin, a town of 80,000. Open hospitals in Ghouta are more aptly described as warehouses for limited medicine and basic clinics, lacking surgeons and emergency professionals.

**Staff:** East Ghouta's hospitals are grossly understaffed, with few doctors available to operate the facilities. Specialized



Syrian children play amid badly damaged buildings in Zabdin, in the East Ghouta region on the outskirts of Damascus, on October 8, 2018. (Photo by LOUAI BESHARA/AFP via Getty Images)

doctors are in especially short supply, with the regime's health directorate in Damascus providing staff to hospitals on a sporadic basis.

**Equipment & medicine:** Hospitals in East Ghouta lack crucial equipment and medicine. Many medical tests and procedures are unavailable to patients. Medicine stocked by these facilities is largely limited to painkillers and antibiotics, and insulin and blood pressure medication is only available in small quantities. For other drugs, what is available is mostly smuggled from Damascus by intelligence officers and sold at high prices, sometimes triple the cost of a given medication.

**Intelligence apparatus:** Doctors cannot provide any form of treatment to patients without first informing regime intelligence forces, who may decide to investigate. As such, many of those

with long-standing injuries sustained in the 2018 regime operation to retake the region or those wanted by intelligence forces often go without essential treatment. If discovered treating civilians without informing regime intelligence, medical staff have been known to be arrested and investigated.

**Childbirth:** Women giving birth in East Ghouta face enormous challenges given the absence of quality medical care, resulting in a high infant mortality rate stemming from a dearth of pre- and post-natal care. Nurseries are largely unavailable in hospitals, and women often turn to poorly equipped clinics in order to give birth. In the event that surgery or a caesarian section is required, women who are able travel to hospitals in Damascus, but those who cannot obtain permission or are avoiding contact with intelligence forces



A Syrian farmer rakes the land in Deir al-Asafir in Syria's southwestern region of East Ghouta, on June 10, 2019. (Photo by LOUAI BESHARA/AFP via Getty Images)

must risk an operation at an incomplete East Ghouta hospital or pay upwards of 50,000 SYP (\$73) in bribes to travel to Damascus.

## HOUSING

East Ghouta's housing stock is in a state of disrepair and decay, with the regime extorting residents and often raiding properties.

**Back taxes:** The Douma Financial Directorate has launched a sweeping investigation into the financial histories of many residents and local business owners. Regime forces are demanding they pay unpaid back taxes with service fees added to the delinquent account. Those who cannot or refuse to pay face prison.

**Rebuilding approval:** Residents are not permitted to rebuild their property without getting official approval from local regime officials.

**Spot checks & evictions:** Regime officials regularly visit properties in East Ghouta demanding paperwork from residents. They must provide either proof of ownership or a rental agreement in order to live at a given property. Those who cannot produce documentation are given one week to either do so or vacate the property. This is an especially challenging prospect for those who bought or began renting property during the period of opposition control in East Ghouta; they lack official government civil documentation, as documents issued during that period are not accepted by regime authorities.

**Property seizures:** The homes of several prominent opposition figures have been seized by the regime and cordoned off, likely to be sold at public auctions next year.

## COMMUNICATIONS & INTERNET

Phone and internet services in East Ghouta are of poor quality and regularly used by the state to spy on residents.

**Spying:** The Syrian government, which owns the telecommunications infrastructure in East Ghouta, can intercept phone calls and SMS messages. Although third-party messaging applications, such as Telegram and WhatsApp, are often more secure, the regime has co-opted local phone dealers to install monitoring and tracking apps on phones and computers. A lack of awareness and technical savvy on the part of residents places them — along with those they communicate with locally and abroad — at risk of being compromised by the regime.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Roads and streets across the region are full of potholes and difficult to traverse. Debris and rubble still litter even main roads throughout East Ghouta.

**Roads:** Main roads remain unrepaired, with the exception of the major entrances and exits to East Ghouta. Most local roads have become dirt and mud paths as a result of bombardment and neglect. Accidents are common, as drivers either hit sinkholes or lose control after running into debris or potholes.

**Isolated communities:** Distant communities like al-Marj in the southeastern reaches of East Ghouta are sometimes cut off from the rest of the region during the winter as rainfall turns neglected dirt roads into un-traversable mud traps.

## ECONOMIC SITUATION

East Ghouta's economy is in tatters following years of bombardment, siege, and conflict. The mainstays of the local economy — manufacturing, trade, and agriculture — have not been able to rebound amid neglect, lack of services, and a region-wide recession that is worsened by widespread poverty in local communities. The exceptions to this situation are those individuals and businesses that have close ties with the regime and can leverage their connections for preferential treatment and business opportunities.

## AGRICULTURE

The farmers of East Ghouta are major victims of the region's economic recession and the government-led security crackdown.

**Supply restrictions:** Adding to the challenges facing local farmers is that many of the supplies they need for growing crops are restricted. Fertilizer, given its explosive properties, cannot be brought into the region, meaning that treating crops for disease and pests is exceedingly difficult. For the handful of farmers who can obtain fertilizer, they pay upwards of double the price and are required to sign official paperwork stating they will only use the product for agricultural purposes.



Syrian women walk past the entrance to an underground hospital in Douma on the outskirts of Damascus on April 16, 2018. (Photo by LOUAI BESHARA/AFP via Getty Images)

## TRADE AND MANUFACTURING

Restrictions on goods and raw materials, coupled with the broken infrastructure, have crippled these industries.

**Bribes & extortion:** Those seeking to bring raw materials and resale goods into East Ghouta are forced to pay large bribes and payments to security personnel. Raids and spot checks on businesses are also common, and owners often have to pay large bribes to avoid having them shut down or their goods seized.

**Manufacturing:** Many factories across East Ghouta are destroyed, and those that are still operational face difficulties when buying raw materials. Some powerful business owners with ties to the regime, however, do benefit from the relatively low cost of labor in the region.

## BLACK MARKET DRUGS

Drugs and narcotics represent a growing concern among local residents, especially in central East Ghouta. Marijuana and Captagon, a brand of fentanyl, are the two most commonly used and sold drugs, with the latter in heavy use by 4th Division personnel at checkpoints. These security personnel use local drug dealers to sell Captagon pills in the area and the drug trade provides them with extra income. Drugs are less common in Douma, where the purchasing power of residents is often too low to afford them.

## CONCLUSION

- The regime's recapture of East Ghouta has not promoted stability and normalcy, but rather led to more suffering and insecurity for its residents. The situation resembles that of southwest Syria and other former opposition territories where the regime's security apparatus has recently asserted itself: arrests, disappearances, and killings both terrorize residents and prevent them from resuming their lives. Ubiquitous security checks along with attempts to spy on residents by intercepting phone calls and internet activity are constant threats for residents that could result in their detention.
- More than 18 months after its recapture by the regime, East Ghouta remains in a state of disrepair and decay. Reconstruction efforts by the regime have been minimal, with the majority of rebuilding taking place via grassroots efforts. As in other former opposition-held territories, the regime enforces collective punishment against civilians for years of opposition rule, while crony businessmen and high-ranking intelligence officers are given preferential treatment and priority for services.
- Services are largely unavailable across the region, and a dearth of drinking water and a destroyed sewage system are contributing to a mounting public health crisis at a time when hospitals are few in number and short-staffed.
- The regime is using back taxes and unpaid service bills to justify the confiscation of civilian property in East Ghouta. This most recent attempt by the regime to seize land in the region mirrors land grabs elsewhere in and around the Syrian capital, such as Law 10 and Decree 66.
- Though East Ghouta is not the only recaptured territory facing regime violence, it is a particularly dark example of collective punishment and state-sanctioned violence following years of siege, starvation, and bombardment.

## ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers — Policy & Research, Arts & Culture, and Education — MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.



## 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.



