

PAX Brief | Syria: Make protection of civilians a priority | March 14th 2018

Since mid-November 2017, residents of Eastern Ghouta have experienced the most extreme violence of the conflict, reaching a peak in recent weeks. Much of the bombing by the Syrian government and its allies has been aimed at areas where only civilians were present. In a forthcoming [Siege Watch](#) report (March 19th) - the ninth in a quarterly series - PAX and The Syria Institute document that in the period November to January, over 700 civilians were killed in Eastern Ghouta and nearly every hospital in the enclave had been bombed. Civilians are not unintended casualties of the government's attacks, they are the main targets.

In the past weeks and after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2401, the violence against the people in Eastern Ghouta has further escalated. The Syrian army, supported by Russian air power and different militias, has started a ground offensive and has since taken control of large parts of Eastern Ghouta, displacing people into the remaining parts under opposition control. The area has been under constant bombardments with heavy explosive weapons, banned cluster bombs, incendiary weapons and chemical weapons, leaving people with no choice but to surrender or die.

One of the most remarkable things about the catastrophic scenario currently playing out in Eastern Ghouta is how routine it has become. Even with all of the precedent of previous sieges ending in forced surrender, even with the forewarning, there is a lack of political will to prevent war crimes that may amount to crimes against humanity. Because Eastern Ghouta is different from Eastern Aleppo in some key ways it may be able to resist this assault for longer than Eastern Aleppo did, but the results will likely be more catastrophic. The fall of Eastern Ghouta, when it comes, may be the bloodiest saga of the war.

At the same time, Turkey has continued its military offensive on Afrin, in breach of UNSC Resolution 2401. Tens of thousands of people have been pushed out of the villages towards the city of Afrin, which is almost fully encircled now. According to the Afrin Health Council the heavy bombardments have caused 227 civilian deaths between January 20th and March 7th, including 32 children.

Six steps the international community should take as a matter of urgency

1. Since **UNSC Resolution 2401** (2018) and all prior Security Council resolutions demanding access to and protection of civilians in besieged areas remain unimplemented, the international community must take further measures. All UN member states – whether on the Security Council or not – have a responsibility to take swift action against non-compliant parties, including through more forceful measures such as **a framework of escalating sanctions**.
2. Members of the international community must take steps to prevent **forced population transfers** of civilians from Eastern Ghouta under the pretense of “evacuations.” In light of Russia's role in prior forced surrender negotiations and in the current fighting in Eastern Ghouta, it cannot be considered a good faith negotiator. It is therefore incumbent on other countries to step in and play a role in **oversight of local negotiations** to end the sieges, to ensure that any agreements comply with international humanitarian and human rights law.
3. If Eastern Ghouta eventually collapses under the intensity of the assault by the Syrian government and its allies, **third-party monitors should be deployed immediately to monitor the pre-surrender, surrender and post-surrender phase** to prevent field executions, unlawful arrests, forced conscription of men into the Syrian army, separation of families, and other forms of abuse.
4. **International monitors** – whether from the UN or another third-party stakeholder – should be immediately deployed into all **post-surrender communities** - communities that have been previously forced to surrender to the Syrian government - to ensure that vulnerable civilians are not being subjected to continuing human rights violations.
5. Humanitarian actors must approach post-surrender communities with the knowledge that **“post-surrender” does not necessarily mean “post-conflict”**. Proper **conflict sensitivity measures** must be put in place to ensure that recovery programming in these areas does not pay war crimes dividends to the Syrian government or contribute to deepening sectarian grievances.
6. The international community must take action to hold those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity accountable by **supporting the IIIM** and other accountability initiatives and **pushing for an ICC referral**.