

July 2014

Rebel-held Suburbs of Damascus: Resilience Mechanisms in the Face of Chemical Attacks

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This paper describes the resilience mechanisms and governance structures in East and West Ghouta in Syria's Rif Dimashq province between August 2013 and April 2014. It outlines the networks and institutions that permitted the civilians in rebel-held towns to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the chemical attacks of 21 August 2013 and to avoid being overtaken by regime ground forces. The evolution of local city councils and larger civilian bodies on the provincial level acted as support structures for the besieged towns in East and West Ghouta following the chemical attacks. Medical, relief, services, information and human rights offices set up by civilians have been crucial for the management and redistribution of scarce resources in towns that suffered chemical attacks, air strikes, ground invasions and prolonged sieges.

The civilians in East Ghouta and in Douma, its administrative centre, have developed a wide network of such offices that have strengthened their crisis response mechanisms and resilience to regime assaults. The January and April 2014 elections for the Douma city council, which acts also as the provincial council, signify a new phase in the development of civilian administration in East Ghouta and a step towards greater vertical integration between the various bodies active in the area. In West Ghouta, on the other hand, such civilian initiatives have remained more limited, and less durable resilience mechanisms have been established. This is one of the reasons why some towns, such as Moaddamia, had no other choice but to sign a truce with the regime in late December 2013. The examples of East and West Ghouta demonstrate that where the formation of local city councils is possible, such civilian initiatives greatly strengthen the resilience of the population in the face of crises such as chemical attacks, siege or bombardment.

The chemical attacks of 21 August 2013 caught the population of East and West Ghouta in *Rif Dimashq*¹ province at a vulnerable moment, but not in a state of complete unpreparedness. Given that chemicals in small quantities and concentration had been used in April 2013 on Adra and Jobar, two contested areas in East Ghouta, the August attacks were not a surprise. Numerous witness accounts² described the chaos and panic in the early hours of 21 August as people responded to the emergency but lacked proper medication and knowledge of how to treat those exposed to sarin gas. Nevertheless, the rebel-held towns did not succumb to the regime invasion which immediately followed the chemical attacks. They managed to mobilise their resilience mechanisms and activate networks to coordinate a response to the humanitarian crisis of that day, saving the lives of hundreds of people. In the aftermath of the chemical attacks, further initiatives of self-governance and new administrative bodies continued to proliferate, evolving from coordination committees into city councils with various degrees of complexity and organization. Between August 2013 and April 2014, in the areas where those councils developed more extensively, the civilian opposition managed to better respond to the medical, food and infrastructure needs of the population. They succeeded despite overwhelming obstacles presented by the lasting after-effects of the chemical attacks, the sieges imposed by the regime, continual bombardment and ground attacks. This paper illustrates the evolution of these civilian administration initiatives and their effects on the resilience of the population in rebel-held towns targeted by chemical attacks.

1) Resilience mechanisms at the time of the chemical attacks

The Ghoutas form an agricultural belt around Damascus that includes about sixty localities, with a total population of approximately 2 million people. The Ghoutas entered the revolution on 25 March 2011 when the first big protest took place in Douma. This was followed by protests in Harasta, Zamalka, Jobar, Arbin, Ain Terma and Kafr Batna. What started out as a protest against the regime later developed into a militarised struggle, with East Ghouta and pockets of West Ghouta, including towns such as Moaddamia and Darayya, becoming strongholds of the opposition in *Rif Dimashq*. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), composed mainly of local fighters and residents of the Ghoutas, has progressively acquired and consolidated its control over numerous towns in East and West Ghouta since the second part of 2012, thwarting the numerous regime attempts to retake those territories up to August 2013. Unable to push the opposition out of those areas and confronted with the danger posed by the rebel operation Al-Furqan in late July 2013, when the FSA entered through East Ghouta and Jobar into areas close to central Damascus, the regime faced an intensified situation of vulnerability that led to its decision to employ chemical weapons.

¹ Literally 'the Governorate of the Countryside of Damascus'

² Information regarding the events of 21 August 2013, and the civilian organisation and resilience mechanisms during and after the chemical attacks, was gathered between September 2013 and February 2014 through Skype interviews with witnesses and local activists still living in the Ghoutas as well as with journalists, NGO workers and experts working on the issue. Other sources were official documents produced by the local councils as well as the websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts of the various administrative bodies in East and West Ghouta.

The towns of Zamalka and Ain Tarma in East Ghouta were hit by chemical strikes at 2am on August 21, 2013. Moaddamia in West Ghouta was hit by chemical strikes three hours later. Though most civilians in those areas were asleep, information about the attacks spread with remarkable speed: while the first report from Ain Tarma claiming “bombing with toxic substances” came at 2:45 am, the news from the neighbouring towns and the Local Coordination Committees came only minutes later, at 2:55 am, demonstrating the high degree of communication between the information offices in the area. As a result, the arrival of first responders and activists documenting the strikes was also very swift. Photos and videos from media activists who had arrived to the impact sites from neighbouring Arbin, Jobar, and Kafr Batna started to emerge as early as 4:27 am. Many of those first responders, however, suffered the lethal effect of the chemical gas: all but one member of the Zamalka media office were killed and at least six doctors died subsequently, with many continuing to suffer the after-effects of the chemicals long after the attacks.

A second instance of pre-existing networks that strengthened the resilience of the population in the face of the crisis was evident in the collaboration between the medical points in the area. As numerous affected civilians were transported across all of East Ghouta to medical points in Jisreen, Arbin, Saqba, Harasta Hamourieh, Kafr Batna and Douma, the ensuing scarcity of atropine prompted the medical office in Jobar to redistribute 25,000 atropine and 7,000 hydrocortisone ampoules to the towns needing supplies. Thanks to existing networks, the medical points were able to immediately organise their redistribution efforts at this time of crisis and provide the affected civilians with the necessary medication.

The division of tasks between the civilian bodies and the armed groups in the targeted towns reveals a third resilience mechanism triggered at the time of the attacks. The existence of a number of organised groups and networks of human rights activists, first responders and medical staff allowed the civilians to take charge of crisis management within the towns, while FSA units remained at the outskirts where the regime was attempting to break their lines and enter rebel-held territory. Witnesses of the events of 21 August have confirmed that very few armed rebels were present within the towns of East Ghouta or Moaddamia in West Ghouta. All available fighters were concentrated on the front lines and managed to successfully repel the regime’s attempt to re-take those territories.

2) The evolution of civilian administration in East Ghouta

In the immediate aftermath of the chemical attacks, volunteers were organized to search for survivors in the buildings at the impact site, transport the dead from the buildings, identify and count victims and see to their burial. The collection of tissue, ground and blood samples by doctors and human rights officials, as well as the documentation and location of the remains of the chemical rockets, was completed to document the strikes. As a result, the Violations Documentation Center (VDC) founded by Razan Zeitoune produced some of the most detailed reports about the events of 21 August. These reports were used by UN chemical inspectors who visited the impact sites at the end of August and by governments in their analysis of the events.

Residents, fearing another chemical strike, prepared themselves to respond to such an event by organising emergency chemical-weapons treatment centres and undertaking a campaign for the preparation of gas masks. In September 2013, special sessions were organised to train those teams in the principles of evacuation and in appropriate responses to chemical attacks. These ad-hoc civil defence teams were also tasked with cleaning debris and remaining chemicals from the streets and buildings, and with instructing local residents how to clear their own houses of chemical residue.

All these activities involved the creation of new committees and the expansion of the functions of existing bodies, which demonstrated the need to establish city councils. City councils, which disappeared with the collapse of state-run municipal services after the rebellion took control in summer 2012, were created or strengthened in most of the areas which were targeted or affected by the chemical attacks, including Ain Tarma, Zamalka, Arbin, Saqba, Kafr Batna and Douma in East Ghouta, as well as Moaddamia and Darayya in West Ghouta. Most of the city councils have similar structures, with most including medical, information, relief, and services offices. These offices were created to respond to the most pressing needs of the population: the scarcity of food, water and medical supplies due to the regime siege around the Ghoutas, the resulting increase in food prices, the destruction of infrastructure, the lasting psychological and physiological effects of the chemical attacks, and the new injuries caused on a daily basis by government bombardment. Several examples speak of the effectiveness of these organisations. In November 2013, the Zamalka services office implemented a project to secure drinking water for its residents by connecting their pipelines to the pipelines of Jobar and by fixing or purchasing water pumps. The relief office of Arbin worked on the cultivation of 100 acres of wheat and barley. Kafr Batna's services office worked on refuse collection, digging wells for water otherwise unavailable due to the siege, while its relief office organised a clothing project to produce more than 4000 items of winter clothing for families in need and to provide employment opportunities.

Some city councils set up novel bureaus according to local needs as and citizens adapted to their towns' needs. The cultural club of Arbin, for example, offered opportunities for borrowing books, drawing, attending lectures and taking language courses to residents who were looking for a way to avoid the cultural decline and collapse of society. Another example is the "siege and external relations office" of Saqba which is responsible for coordination with external donors such as Syrians Abroad, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution, and Opposition Forces' Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) and other international groups, for the provision of needed supplies.

The various offices making up each city council in East Ghouta also organised among themselves on the provincial level into Unified Medical, Relief, and Services Offices. Their role is to maximise the already scarce food and medical resources by re-distributing them between the cities, standardising their utilisation, communicating directly with external donors and providing funds to the local offices according to their needs. The United Relief Office has developed emergency procedures for the distribution of aid in towns affected by bombardments, while the Unified Medical Office has disseminated standardisation plans for using medical resources across the hospitals in East Ghouta. The Unified Services Office works on the evaluation of the infrastructure needs in East Ghouta cities and the provision of

financial and material assistance to local services offices for projects that they would otherwise not be able to carry out on their own.

The changing civilian administration bodies in Douma show how the first improvised responses to the crisis developed into increasingly advanced forms of governance, not only on the local city level but, for the first time in the Damascus region, on the provincial level. In 2012, the General Authority for Civil Defence in Douma was founded by seven young men and was later transformed into the Civil Defence Corps of 100 volunteers. On 8 October 2013, the residents built on the local city council established in November 2012 to form the Expanded Local Civil Council of Douma whose more complex structure included finance, media, medical, education, administration and civil offices. Due to its upgraded organisational structure and its consolidation, this council became the location of the central branches for the Unified Medical, Relief and Services Offices and for the Violations Documentation Center, founded by Razan Zaitoune.

The Douma local Council³ also became the central location for the National Assembly of the Forces of the Revolution in East Ghouta⁴, which was established as a broad movement of political activists, civilians and rebels from 58 urban centres in the area with the purpose of creating a unified council for the entire East Ghouta region. Such a council was to be created to serve as an elected government and manage the affairs and public services of the region, according to the movement's manifesto. In the pursuit of this goal, the National Assembly created a Supervisory Electoral Commission which organised in January 2014 elections for the Local Douma Council, also known as the Local Council of the Civil Administration and Services for all of East Ghouta. The vote by ballot, supervised by an independent Electoral Commission, was held under exceptionally difficult circumstances, given the continuous siege and shelling of the city. The 25 council members were elected and are responsible for the 15 offices covering the majority of the services provided in Douma. The elections represented an impressive achievement for the civilian administration in East Ghouta, which only six months earlier had suffered the devastating chemical attacks and had only minimally organised to deal with the crisis.⁵

However, while the creation of this Local Council of Civil Administration represents a step in the direction of centralisation, significant political and ideological differences remain between the various civilian groups in East Ghouta. Other rival bodies, such as the Local Council for the Damascus Suburb Governorate, also held separate elections in February and in April to challenge the elections for the Douma Council. Nevertheless, those instances of disagreement between the representatives of the civilian opposition have not decisively weakened their ability to carry out their functions or to aid the local city councils in providing the most necessary services.

³ Local City Council of Douma (also known as the Local Council of the Civil Administration and Services): <https://www.facebook.com/Douma.local.council> / <http://www.doumalc.com>

⁴ Facebook page of the National Rally for the forces of the revolution in East Ghouta: <https://www.facebook.com/N.R.O.F.REG1?fref=ts>

⁵ Souad Khibyeh, "An Interview with the Head of the Elected Local Council in Douma," *The Syrian Observer*, 13 March, 2014. <http://syrianobserver.com/Interviews/Interviews/An+Interview+with+the+Head+of+the+Elected+Local+Council+in+Douma>

3) The evolution of civilian administration in West Ghouta

In West Ghouta, the creation of organised bodies in the town of Moaddamia, which was targeted by the chemical attacks, was significantly more difficult than it was in East Ghouta because of the complete siege around the small town of 8000 residents and the very fast deterioration of living conditions as medical and food supplies became increasingly unavailable.

In Moaddamia, a local city council was created, but its activities and organisation of offices of the type seen in East Ghouta has been limited by the fact that 90% of the Free Syrian Army members were town residents, so the division of labour into military and civilian activities was not as simple as it was in East Ghouta. Most of the young men of the town were based at the outskirts to defend it from regime incursions, while many of the remaining men who considered themselves members of the peaceful opposition were heavily involved as media officers, communicating extensively with foreign media outlets and documenting the deteriorating living conditions.

To fill the gap left by the absence of an active city council, an improvised body called “the FSA negotiation committee” was created in December 2013 to carry out negotiations on a truce with the regime, signed on December 29 2013. Some of the members of this committee were also residents of Moaddamia who had left the town, but became involved in the negotiations with the regime from the outside, which has further complicated the centralisation of all civilian efforts into one body.

A further factor which weakened the resilience mechanisms of the civilian opposition in Moaddamia was the siege around the town. It had first been partially imposed in May 2012 but was then tightened in November 2012. Given that for more than one year no food or medications were allowed to enter the town, the gradual exhaustion of those supplies meant that there was nothing left for the city council to redistribute or work with. Efforts to grow vegetables in the green spaces in town were interrupted by the winter storm Alexa in December 2013, which fatally damaged the only remaining vestiges of organized agriculture in Moaddamia. In brief, while Moaddamia clearly had resilience mechanisms sustained by the individual efforts of local leaders, which allowed it to remain defiant for six months after the chemical attacks with virtually no food or medication, the absence of more centralised structures, coupled with the siege around the town, led to its surrender in late December 2013.

4) Conclusions

The examples of East and West Ghouta demonstrate that where the formation of local city councils is possible, such civilian initiatives greatly strengthen the resilience of the population in the face of crises such as chemical attacks, siege or bombardment. The division of labour among multiple offices allows for the development of various projects that engage civilians on a daily basis. This reinforces their sense of community and their defiance against the deterioration of their living conditions, and improves the efficiency of their responses in the case of further attacks. The cooperation between the offices of different cities through the province-level Unified Offices was an important step for improving civilian administration in rebel-held territories. It allows for a maximisation of resources and a redistribution of supplies, ensuring that cities that otherwise would not make it on their own manage to endure as a collective. The centralisation initiatives are also efficient insofar as they permit a more direct channel of communication with outside donors and the development of broader strategies for the distribution of funds and the implementation of infrastructure, agricultural or medical projects.

Lastly, the rapid evolution of governance initiatives in East and West Ghouta after the chemical attacks and as a response to the tightening of the sieges illustrates the ability of the civilian opposition to learn from its moments of vulnerability, adapt to the changing demands of their environment and propose efficient governance solutions while also preserving the democratic and pluralistic character of their struggle. In spite of the rivalries between groups of different ideological backgrounds, the existence of these civil administration structures has helped preserve the resilience of the civilian opposition in the liberated territories and its ability to provide essential services to the population.

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