

SYRIA - Kafr Batna Inter Agency Assessment

Food Security Update: October 30, 2017



vam
food security analysis



WFP Syria - Household interview in Kafr Batna



Profile of the Population



Estimated **400,000 people** living in Eastern Ghouta



Estimated **25 percent female headed households**



Agriculture and some livestock herding



Recycling refuse to produce fuel



Livelihood profile

Key points:

- The food security situation in Kafr Batna (Eastern Ghouta) has been significantly impacted by the intensification of the siege.
- Food is in such short supply that there are many cases of people eating refuse, consuming animal fodder, sending children to beg, and even spending entire days without eating. These are all examples of households adopting severely eroded negative coping strategies, poor food consumption scores and extremely low household diet diversity.
- Some households reported applying a daily rotation system for feeding their children as they did not have enough food to feed all household members. On average one meal (mainly raw vegetables or maize corn due to lack of fuel to cook) is consumed per day, if available.
- WFP delivered 8,000 food rations which are expected to feed 40,000 people in Eastern Ghouta in November, of which 6,000 rations for Kafr Batna.
- The siege has intensified since July 2017. There is now a total block on food trade along commercial supply routes into and out of Eastern Ghouta. People are now consuming their last remaining food supplies. Commodity prices are increasing rapidly as a result of the quickly diminishing quantity of food stocks.
- The market assessment found food stocks to be in very limited supply on the market, especially for rice and pulses.
- The food security situation in Kafr Batna is expected to deteriorate further in November 2017 as food supplies are expected to be totally exhausted in a matter of weeks. The rapidly approaching lean season is also expected to seriously impact the food security situation especially for those households that are already struggling to meet their daily food needs.

Recommendations:

- As a result of the above WFP recommends that blanket general food distributions be provided as soon as possible and are to be continued at least until the end of the lean season (April 2018) to improve and stabilize the food security situation in Kafr Batna.
- In addition, targeted nutritious food interventions need to be provided for those people found to be acutely malnourished. Untaxed commercial trade of goods into the besieged area needs to also be resumed as soon as possible. There is also a need for salt towards food preservation to cover the winter season in addition to the increased demand on agriculture inputs and support.



Situation update of the besieged area

Eastern Ghouta (Kafr Batna, Arbin, Duma, Al-Nashabiyeh and Harasta sub districts) is a besieged area located in the eastern part of Rural Damascus Governorate. The area is one of the key agricultural zones surrounding Damascus city. It has been besieged by the military and under daily shelling/airstrikes for over five years. A limited number of civilians and traders have been able to use the check points for trading of goods, but the siege intensified in July 2017 with a total block of food trade on most of its supply routes. Recently, in September, the crossing of al-Wafideen camp, the only remaining semi-active supply route into East Ghouta from neighbouring areas, was totally closed. The 400,000 residents in Eastern Ghouta are now forced to depend solely on their alarmingly depleted stocks of food and on very limited own food production.

The last time humanitarian food aid was allowed to reach Kafr Batna was back in June 2016 when Inter Agency Convoys (IACs) entered with limited supplies. Since July 2017, food supplies have been significantly disrupted and smuggling routes have been closed. WFP's monthly market price monitoring shows that compared to September 2017, food prices have increased sharply. This in addition to the severe shortage of food makes it impossible for highly vulnerable families, especially female-headed households, to meet their minimum daily food needs. Furthermore, the situation is expected to deteriorate in the coming weeks where estimated food stocks will be totally exhausted. The rapidly approaching lean season is also expected to seriously impact the food security situation especially for those households that are already struggling to meet their daily food requirements.



Objective of the assessment

WFP VAM undertook a rapid food security and market assessment in Kafr Batna on 30th October 2017. The assessments aimed to:

- Assess Eastern Ghouta's food security situation.
- Verify how the intensification of the siege is affecting Kafr Batna's general food security situation; market functionality; and also assess how people's livelihoods have been affected.
- Identify immediate priority areas for humanitarian assistance.



Food consumption and accessibility

Food access:

In most of the besieged areas in Eastern Ghouta, access to food has become increasingly problematic as a result of a prolonged siege. The main factors that underpin the prevailing food insecurity in the besieged area are severely disrupted supply routes, high food prices, and reduced/limited livelihood activities. Agriculture lands are also difficult to access as most of them are located in frontline and active conflict zones. The situation further deteriorated in October 2017 when complete closure of commercial supply routes to the area the previous month, led to serious depletion of food stocks. Access to food has become a daily challenge and adoption of severe negative coping strategies has become common practice such as eating refuse and spending entire days without eating. As a result, households have become extremely food insecure with alarming prospects for the coming months.

Food Consumption:

Local agricultural production has been the primary mode of survival for many households living under siege and due to lack of staple food commodities and severe shortfall of cooking fuel, residents have been reduced to subsist on raw vegetables such as maize corn, cabbage and cauliflower. Bread was also not readily available during October. On average households are consuming one meal per day with priority given to the children. Vegetables and water are the main food consumed by almost all households on daily basis. Some families drink large quantities of water to suppress their feeling of hunger. Most of the households derive over 80 percent of their caloric intake from vegetables, reflecting poor access to a nutritious and balanced diet. Moreover, cases of severe acute malnutrition among children were captured by the UNICEF team and key informants reported three cases of death due to lack of food.

Abu Salah (a father and household head): "I can't feed my children more than maize corn, even though it is unaffordable for us to buy it all the time. It is SYP 200 per maize cob and I have four children".

Salma is a teacher in a school in Kafr Batna: "I asked my students to draw their dreams and it broke my heart when I saw that the dream of children becomes a falafel sandwich".



Livelihood profile in the besieged area

Livelihoods for many families have been shattered. Most of the arable lands previously farmed are either in zones on the frontline of the conflict or in areas targeted by snipers. Tools and farming equipment are extremely limited. There is also extreme shortage of fuel and seeds. All these factors compound to make it extremely difficult to cultivate even the little land remaining. High mortality rates among livestock as well as distress sales in recent years have resulted in wide-scale depletion of dairy herds and farm traction animals.

The main livelihood in Kafr Batna was identified by key informants to be recycling whatever available item for the production of fuel. Other key livelihood activities are agriculture, food processing (but it was scarce due to shortage of salt) and very limited margins of remittances in addition to working with relief committees, press (media) and armed groups.

The recent intensification of the siege has further aggravated the speed and depth of erosion of people's livelihoods. People's resources and assets have been heavily depleted with most of the derived revenue being spent on food, reducing household's resilience and increasing their vulnerability to future shocks.



Food and livelihood based coping strategies

Due to the long-lasting siege, almost every household is experiencing hardship in accessing food. Information from focus group discussions, key informants and household interviews showed that desperate and irreversible negative coping strategies have been adopted, especially after the recent intensification of the siege. As food is in such short supply, there are many severe cases of people eating refuse, consuming animal fodder, sending children to beg, and spending days without eating. Moreover, some households indicated applying a daily rotation system for feeding their children as they did not have enough available food to feed all household members.

Um Salah (a resident in Kafr Batna) said: “When you walk in the streets of Kafr Batna at night you can hear the crying of hungry children”. Um Ahmad, a female headed of household said: “I have three orphans and we are so poor that I can only feed one child per day. The others have to wait and it is killing me to see their tears.”



Markets and food prices

The majority of the besieged communities in Eastern Ghouta are completely surrounded by armed groups which are blocking access to and from the sieged area inhibiting the movement of people and goods. Hereby resulting in extreme shortages of even the most basic items needed to survive including food, water, and medical supplies.

There has been a total block on food trade along commercial supply routes since September 2017 as the crossing of al-Wafideen camp, the last remaining supply route used to smuggle food into Eastern Ghouta, was closed. Residents of Eastern Ghouta have since been consuming their remaining food supplies while traders were unable to replenish their stock hereby pushing-up commodity prices. During the market assessment, supply of staple food commodities was observed to be severely low especially for rice, pulses, sugar and oil. The situation is expected to deteriorate rapidly in the coming weeks. If the borders remain closed it is estimated that food supplies will be totally exhausted by end November.

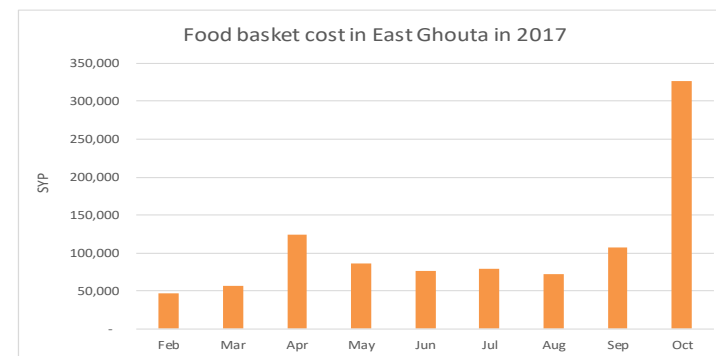
The market assessment visit found Kafr Batna’s food supplies in its market extremely depleted and with very limited variety of available goods being sold. Based on the market assessment data, the cost of the standard food basket in October 2017 reached SYP 327,000 which is 204 percent higher compared to last month and more than five times higher than prices in August 2017 (before closing the crossing of al-Wafideen camp). This is almost ten times higher than national average food basket price for the same time of year.

It was also identified by traders that there is no cooking fuel except melted plastic which costs SYP 3,500/L, which is ten times higher than the national average price of diesel. Moreover, some families reported relying on burning used diapers to boil vegetables. Currently a bundle of bread in Kafr Batna is being sold at 2,000 SYP, which is more than 35 times above the average cost in accessible markets.

Furthermore, many traders, customers and key informants in markets indicated that more than 60 percent of their sales are on credit due to customers’ limited liquidity and poor purchasing power.



“The total available stock in my shop is half a pack of lentils and some condiments” Interview with one of the traders in the picture above.



Methodology

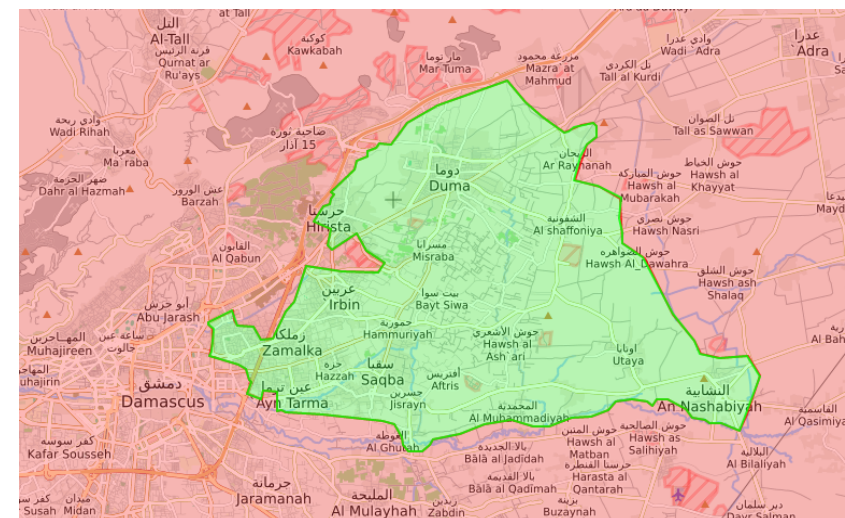
The assessment employed qualitative data collection instruments and secondary data analysis (IA convoy reports, mVAM, FSA, HNO, WFP market price monitoring).

Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with the local relief committee, local council, community leaders and key informants including a mix of males and females. A number of interviews were also conducted with traders. The following topics/indicators were included in the survey: (the map needs to include where in Syria it is located in)

1. Food sources, consumption pattern, coping strategies, community-level priorities, shocks and livelihood/ income activities;
2. Market volumes, flows, constraints and capacity, supply routes beside food stocks and prices.
3. The general impact of the conflict on market functionality, availability and prices of main staple commodities through secondary information and FGD;
4. Population estimation, food security profile, health, nutrition and sanitation through secondary information (FSA, HNO, mVAM).

Limitations

Due to security situation constraints, movement restrictions and time limitation, household and market interviews were limited in number. The assessment findings are therefore only indicative of the food security situation in the area at the time of the assessment. The data are also not statistically representative of geographical areas or population groups.



Map1: Eastern Ghouta sub-districts in Rural Damascus governorate



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