

## Saving Ghouta

The [agreement reached between armed groups in Eastern Ghouta and a UN delegation](#) to evacuate some militants from the besieged enclave is the first major concession the rebels have made since Syrian government attacks began a month ago. Under the deal, the Jaish al-Islam, the main rebel group, will evacuate militants linked to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly an al-Qaeda front, from Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus. HTS militants will go to Idlib, a province in northwestern Syria run by the rebels, mainly the HTS. Over the past month, the rebels had refused to strike any deal with the regime even after repeated bombardment. At least 1,000 people have been killed in one month, with the UN warning of an “apocalypse” in Syria. The regime's argument was that it was seeking to liberate Eastern Ghouta from terrorist occupation. But about 400,000 people are stuck in the enclave; some reports say the rebels are using them as human shields. But the regime and its Russian backers are paying little attention to human suffering. Last month, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Eastern Ghouta. Thereafter, the Syrian government eased the siege of the city, allowing aid groups to supply assistance. But the ceasefire is yet to take effect. The Russians, who voted for the resolution at the Security Council, continued to justify attacks by citing the presence of the HTS, which is linked to an internationally designated terrorist organisation.

With HTS fighters now being evacuated, it is an opportunity for Russia and the Syrian regime to cease hostilities and engage with the other armed groups, including Jaish and Faylaq al-Rahman, an affiliate of the Free Syrian Army. Both the rebels and the government can learn from the battle for eastern Aleppo, which regime forces captured in late 2016. After the rebels ran out of all options in the face of continued Syrian/Russian assaults, both from land and air, they finally decided to leave the city under Turkish mediation, handing it over to government forces. The battle for Eastern Ghouta bears an eerie similarity to that of eastern Aleppo. In Ghouta, the rebels do not have any meaningful support coming from outside that could allow them to resist regime forces. What they do now to deter regime advances is to shell the government-controlled parts of Damascus and its suburbs, killing more civilians and giving further reason for the regime to justify its military operations. This will only prolong the conflict, endangering civilians on both sides. Given the Aleppo example and the reality on the ground in Eastern Ghouta, the sooner the government forces and the armed gangs reach an agreement for evacuation, the better it will be for the hundreds of thousands of people in the enclave.

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It is unclear whether the threat of confiscation of property will encourage fugitives to return

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