



## The Tunnels of Ghouta

**OE Watch Commentary:** Tunnels and other subterranean structures have become a persistent feature of the Syrian battlefield. When Syrian loyalist forces reclaimed Damascus's eastern periphery (the Eastern Ghouta) in April 2018, they uncovered an extensive subterranean network crisscrossing the area. The Ghouta's residents and its rebel fighters had withstood years of siege and bombardment thanks in large part to this underground network. The tunnels did not play a direct role in rebel defenses of the Ghouta's densely populated areas closest to the capital, though, as opposition fighters withdrew under Russian-brokered truces and surrender deals, in echoes of what occurred in the eastern half of Aleppo in late 2016. The tunnels of Ghouta were instead abandoned and left behind for pro-government and foreign news channels to gawk at and examine. The first accompanying excerpt, from the French news agency *AFP*, describes "an underground labyrinth, fitted with hospitals and military headquarters," connecting several of the Eastern Ghouta's neighborhoods and stretching for as long as 5 kilometers.

Digging and maintaining a semi-sophisticated tunnel network is cheaper and easier than ever before. Rebels in Eastern Ghouta appear to have used a combination of mechanical and manual digging, with most tunnels fully furnished with electrical power provided by generators placed at tunnel entrances, often in the basements of multi-story apartment buildings. Regular power meant many of the tunnels had lighting, cameras, communications systems and various amenities needed to remain underground for an extended period of time, including medical facilities. Existing subterranean infrastructure was leveraged where possible: as noted in the second excerpt, from official Syrian state media, one of these tunnels linked to the sewer line in the Ghouta village of Hazah.

Syrian loyalist forces have collapsed many of the tunnels, particularly those posing security and/or structural threats. According to the third excerpt, from the pro-government news channel *al-Mayadeen*, the rebels provided the Syrian military with detailed maps showing the location of tunnels and IEDs. The *AFP* article further notes that part of the truce deal involved rebels handing over maps of their underground tunnel system to Russian forces. Now, according to the fourth accompanying excerpt, from the Syrian opposition news website *Enab Baladi*, the Syrian government plans to take a close look at the tunnel system. According to the article, "the government decided to produce a detailed map to determine the location and characteristics of all the tunnels. It also resolved to conduct a topographical survey and an electronic rendition of the map, as well as establishing plans to deal with each of the tunnels in order to benefit from them as much as possible." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

*"...In Eastern Ghouta, Syrian rebels left behind an underground labyrinth, fitted with hospitals and military headquarters..."*

**Source:** Rim Haddad. "Rebels leave behind labyrinth of tunnels under Syria's Ghouta," *AFP* (via *Yahoo News*), 2 April 2018. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/rebels-leave-behind-labyrinth-tunnels-under-syrias-ghouta-183848292.html>

*Tunnels stretch into the darkness, some wide enough to drive a car through. In Eastern Ghouta, Syrian rebels left behind an underground labyrinth, fitted with hospitals and military headquarters. "This network of tunnels is a real spider's web," said a Syrian army official who escorted journalists on a visit Monday to areas of the Damascus suburb recaptured from the rebels... The tunnels are dug about 15 metres (50 feet) deep. The walls are reinforced with metal rods and the tunnels are equipped with surveillance cameras and lights. Some corridors are wide enough to drive a car through, while others can only be accessed on foot. The network is about five kilometres (three miles) long, connecting Jobar with the rebel-held areas of Ain Tarma and Zamalka... In talks leading up to the deal, Russia, the Syrian government's strongest ally, demanded that the rebels hand over the plans of the tunnel network*

**Source:**

الجيش يعثر على شبكة أنفاق ومشاف ميدانية فى بلدي حزة وعين ترما بالغوطة الشرقية  
"The Army Finds a Tunnel Network and Field Hospitals in Hazah and Ein Terma in the Eastern Ghouta," *General Organization of Radio and TV - Syria*, 26 March 2018. <http://www.ortas.gov.sy/index.php?d=100451&id=239638>

*A field commander noted that following the Syrian Army's advance toward the village of Hazah, a complex tunnel network was discovered linked to the sewer line, which the terrorists used for movement and to transfer ammunition between the towns of Sabqa, Irbeen, Harasta and Zamalka. The tunnel was 3 meters wide and 4 meters deep and could easily be traversed by cars.*

**Source:**

بعد تحرير الغوطة... اكتشاف شبكة أنفاق ومستشفيات تحت الأرض  
"Following Ghouta's Liberation... Network of Underground Tunnels and Hospitals Discovered," *al-Mayadeen*, 2 April 2018. <https://goo.gl/jbKXVL>

*Al-Mayadeen's correspondent confirmed that the main obstacle for returning life to normal in the Ghouta are the massive tunnels dug by militants. She added that the [Syrian] Army had obtained a map from rebels showing IEDs and tunnels, and that the army's engineering units were working to detonate the mines.*

**Source:**

النظام السوري يدرس استثمار أنفاق الغوطة الشرقية  
"Syrian Regime Studies How to Benefit from Eastern Ghouta Tunnels," *Enab Baladi*, 9 April 2018. <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/219898>

*The Syrian regime government announced that it will launch a study of the Eastern Ghouta's tunnels dug by opposition fighters over the past several years, in order to benefit from these tunnels. In a meeting focused on the reconstruction of the Ghouta held on 9 April, the government decided to produce a detailed map to determine the location and characteristics of all the tunnels. It also resolved to conduct a topographical survey and an electronic rendition of the map, as well as establishing plans to deal with each of the tunnels in order to benefit from them as much as possible.*