

# **Russian Forces Continue Their Streak of Atrocious Massacres, 6,187 Civilians, including 1,771 Children, Killed by Russia since the Intervention Started in Syria**

Russian Forces Kill 52 Civilians, including 10 Children, in a Horrifying Massacre in Zardana village, Northeastern Suburbs of Idlib

# **SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



## Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Zardana Village Attack
- III. Conclusions and Recommendations

## I. Introduction

Since the de-escalation agreement came into effect, SNHR has ensured to closely monitor the human rights aspect, as well as rates of violations by the signing parties as [nine reports](#) have been released so far by SNHR in this regard. The reality on the ground, as well as the monitoring, have demonstrated that the Syrian-Russian alliance forces have been the main and primary perpetrator of violations. While we indeed recognized a notable drop in rates of killing, bombardment, and destruction in the first four months, this was followed by an alarming escalation of hostilities that kicked off in Idlib governorate in September 2017 and expanded to other areas that were included in the agreement until it the agreement came to completely fall apart in Eastern Ghouta, northern suburbs of Homs, and, since mid-June, this was also the case in south Syria.

On June 13, we released [a report](#) documenting the most notable violations by Russian-Syrian alliance forces in Idlib governorate in a year following the de-escalation agreement's commencement – from May 2017, the month in which the agreement came into force, until May 2018. The report concluded that Idlib governorate alone saw 32 massacres by Russian-Syrian alliance forces, in addition to 223 incidents of attack on vital civilian facilities in the period of time covered by the report as we were able to document.

In this report, we shed light on a massacre perpetrated by forces we believe were Russian in Zardana village, northeastern suburbs of Idlib. The massacre resulted in the killing of 52 civilians as we have been able to record. Notably, this massacre saw a deliberate intention by Russian forces to carry out two consecutive aerial attacks in order to kill as many residents as possible, including civil defense members who were trying to rescue and pull out the injured and the victims following the first attack.



Syrian regime forces have deliberately adopted the double-strike strategy in multiple attacks, which surely means that paramedical, rescue teams, and survivors from the first attack will be targeted which is one of the purposes of this form of barbarian offensives. Since the Russian intervention started in Syria in September 2015, we monitored the very same pattern dozens of times in several areas as SNHR team is working on a special study highlighting this pattern of attack that should cover all Syrian governorates and all the incidents we have been able to document in our database.

### **Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNRH, says:**

“The pattern of bombing civilians for a second time in the same area where they were targeted in the first bombing demonstrates a flagrant disregard for any form of potential accountability or prosecution as a criminal would try to conceal their crime by escaping after bombing. However, the Syrian catastrophe has seen a deterioration with regard to legal and humanitarian ideals that is still yet to be seen in the modern age. Condemning and exposing this barbarian pattern of offensives is a joint responsibility that all nations and human right defenders around the world should uphold.”

In the first three months of their military intervention in Syria, Russian forces consistently revealed their attack sites in Syria. Those statements were useful since they enabled our team to cross them with accounts from eyewitnesses and central signal operators<sup>2</sup> that we've obtained. This yielded highly strong indicators that pinpointed Russian forces' responsibility in particular attacks. Russian forces, nonetheless, stopped publicizing any statements afterwards as it seems that they became aware that a number of human rights groups, SNHR included, have been using those statements against them. Since then, Russian forces have adopted a denial-based narrative, particularly in cases of attacks that result in a large number of casualties while the dismissal was even more vehement over attacks in de-escalation zones such as Eastern Ghouta in Damascus suburbs, as well as Idlib and Homs governorate and most recently Daraa governorate. In addition, Russia has justified a large number of attacks that involved killing civilians using the pretext of the existence of terrorists and extremist gunmen. For instance, and according to what we have been able to monitor, SNHR has been able, after extensive investigations, to prove the implication of Russian forces in six massacres out of seven major massacres that Russian forces had previously denied to have been involved in, including [Zardana village massacre](#) which is the subject matter of this report.

<sup>1</sup> A policy adopted by the Syrian and Russian regimes where the same site is targeted again a few minutes after the initial attack in order to kill as many casualties as possible among civil defense members, medical teams, and doctors.

<sup>2</sup> A network for picking up warplanes' radio signals and tracking communications between the pilot and the airbase from which they took off. These observatories usually work on alerting residents when warplanes take off from military airbases and track their movements as they are able to distinguish between warplanes that took off from Hmeimim, which is a Russian military facility, and the ones that took off from airbases in Hama and Homs suburbs which are used by the Syrian regime warplanes.



## II. Zardana Village Attack

Zardana village is administratively a part of Ma'arat Misreen city, northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. With a population of 15,000 people, the village is 20 km to the northwest of Idlib city and was under the joint control of armed opposition factions and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham during the period of time over which this report was done.

### **Methodology**

This report draws upon the ongoing monitoring of incidents and developments by SNHR team, as well as a network of relations including tens of various sources which have been built over the course of our work, in addition to verifying information provided by survivors, eyewitnesses, and central signal operators against each other.

Our investigations have proved that the targeted area, in which the massacre took place, was a civilian area that is devoid of any military bases or armories for factions from the armed opposition or extremist Islamic groups during or even before the attack. Also, Russian forces never alerted civilians prior to the attack as required by the international humanitarian law.

This report contains four accounts that we've collected by speaking directly to the eyewitnesses and are not cited from any open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interviews for the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR has tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible, and guarantees were given to conceal the identity of any witness who preferred to use an alias.

SNHR has analyzed the videos and pictures posted online or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. These pictures show the sites of the attacks and the large destruction in the aftermath of the bombardment, in addition to pictures of individuals who were injured as a result of the attack.

This report only covers the bare minimum, which we have been able to document. It doesn't also cover the social, economic, mental, and demographic ramifications and damages.

### **Details**

Thursday, June 7, 2018, two aerial attacks were carried out within 45 minutes by two fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian in southwest of Zardana village, northeastern suburbs of Idlib.



The first attack took place approximately at 21:00 when a Russian Su-24 warplane fired a number of missiles that landed on residential houses in the vicinity of Saed ben Mu'ath Mosque in southwest of the village. After medical and civil defense teams gathered and rescue operations started, a Russian Su-30 warplane targeted the same area with a number of missiles which resulted in the killing of a large number of victims, including civil defense members.

The two attacks resulted in the killing of [52 civilians](#), including [10 children](#) and [10 women \(adult female\)](#) while no less than 80 civilians were injured. We have yet to determine the death toll of each attack independently. The investigations conducted by SNHR, however, suggest that the second attack was the one resulting in the larger number of deaths and injuries, particularly among civil defense members.

### Victims' names

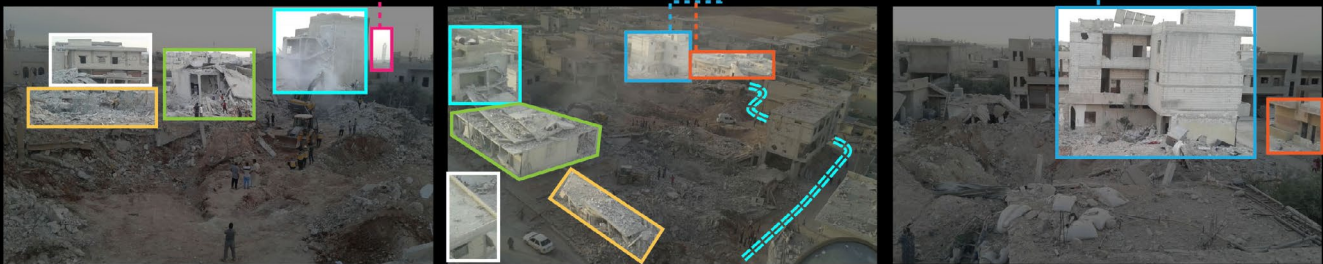
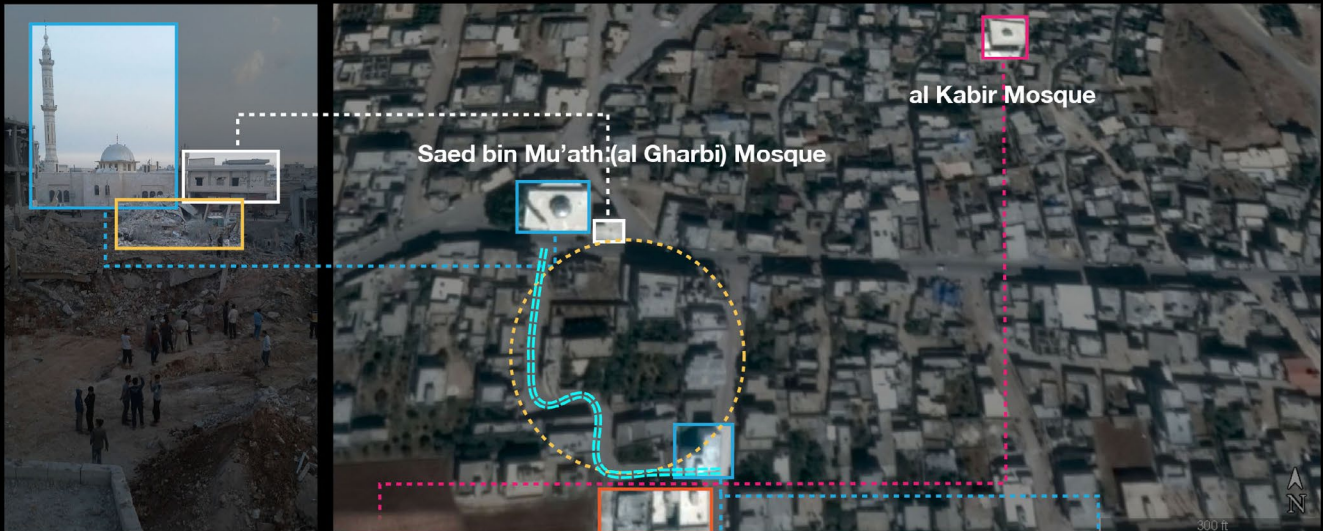



The pictures and videos we've acquired, which corresponded with eyewitnesses' accounts, suggest that highly-explosive missiles were used and caused wide destruction that [involved about seven residential buildings](#).





# Site of a double airstrike we believe was Russian on Zardana village, northeastern suburbs of Idlib governorate, June 7, 2018



 Area where several missiles landed as some of them caused a massacre



SNHR contacted Mohammad Hamroush, a local media worker with the civil defense, via Facebook on June 8, 2018. Mohammad told us that he was at the outskirts of the town when the first attack took place. He described the explosions of the missiles, **“It was like a glow of flames in the sky. The sound was very loud and was heard throughout the village.”** Mohammad said that the observatories tracking warplanes’ movement issued an alert before the attack about Russian warplanes that entered the village, and then announced after the attack that al Janoubi neighborhood was attacked, **“I headed there, as many residents. The attack was sudden. Our village have never been targeted like this before. We started pulling out the victims and the injured. Many of them were trapped under the rubble of destroyed houses.”**

Mohammad said that another Russia aerial attack took place 40 minutes after the first one and targeted the same area, **“The observatory detected that Russian warplanes were soaring in the sky and alerted the residents to evacuate the site in light of a potential second attack. I fled the site, but tens of residents and civil defense members were still there trying to pull out the victims and the injured. A few minutes later, the tragedy occurred. I couldn’t count the missiles that were fired in the second attack. Many residents and civil defense members were killed, as well as injured from the first attack.”**

Mohammad said that a missile from the first attack destroyed a multi-floor house and under which five families were trapped, **“One of the holes created by the bombing had a diameter of 10 meters. I also noticed three additional holes created by the missiles that were fired in the second attack. The destruction was huge over a radius of approximately 200 meters.”** Mohammad stressed that the targeted area has no military presence, and that all missiles landed in a residential neighborhood.



Three injured victims at a makeshift hospital in the aftermath of an aerial attack by Russian forces in Zardana village, northeastern suburbs of Idlib governorate – June 7, 2018



Mohammad Ali, director of the civil defense's Idlib branch, visited the attack site. Mohammad told SNHR, over a phone call via WhatsApp on June 8, that the attack took place about one hour after Iftar time when civil defense members started receiving distress calls from the village to head to the attack site and aid the injured, **“Two civil defense centers were alerted to send their members. The news we received talked about the collapse of multiple buildings as dozens of families were trapped underneath.”** Mohammad Ali didn't determine the type of warplanes that targeted the area, but he stressed that the observatories charged with monitoring warplanes' take-off from military airbases issued an alert that the two attacks were carried out by Russian warplanes, **“The second attack took place less than 30 minutes after the first one. Even though observatories issued alerts for the residents to evacuate the site, our members carried on as they couldn't just leave the injured who were trapped in the rubble. The second attack was with three missiles and was the bigger and more vicious of the two. The number of victims and injured doubled and we lost one of our colleagues while four others were injured. Rescue efforts lasted for over 24 hours and we were able to pull out 50 victims, most of them were children and women.”**

Ahmad Me'mar, a local media worker, headed for Zardana town in the aftermath of the first attack and witnessed the second one. We contacted Ahmad via Facebook on June 8, 2018, **“I arrived in the village 10 minutes after the first Russian airstrike. On my way, I saw tens of cars transporting the injured out of the village. At the attack site, the destruction was everywhere. Entire houses were destroyed and dozens were trapped underneath. The observatory issued an alert about a potential second attack after a Russian warplane entered the village. I took shelter in a shop. A few minutes later, the warplanes targeted us with a number of missiles. The second attack was more vicious. Multiple missiles rained down on the destroyed houses, as well as the ambulances and civil defense members and whoever managed to survive the first attack.”**

SNHR contacted Abu Ali, a central signal operator in Idlib governorate, via WhatsApp on June 9, 2018. Abu Ali told us that a Su-24 warplane took off from Hmeimim Airbase, which is a Russian military airbase, in Latakia governorate around 21:00, **“The warplane headed east until it arrived in Abu al Thohour area, eastern suburbs of Idlib, before turning west towards western suburbs of Aleppo and then arriving in northern suburbs of Idlib. The warplanes carried out an airstrike with six missiles on Zardana village. After less than 30 minutes, a Su-30 warplane took off from Hmeimim Airbase and headed east towards Sahl al Ghab and then towards the same village to target the same site with multiple missiles.”**





### III. Conclusions and Recommendations

#### **Legal conclusions**

1. The Russian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which both state that indiscriminate attacks must be ceased. Also, the Russian regime has violated, through the crime of willful killing, Articles 7 and 8 of Rome Statute, which constitutes war crimes and crimes against humanity.
2. We can confirm that the bombardment mentioned in this report has targeted defenseless civilians. Therefore, Russian forces have violated the rules of the customary international humanitarian law, which guarantee the right to life. In addition, the bombardment was carried out in a non-international armed conflict, which constitutes a war crime as all elements have been fulfilled.
3. The attacks included in this report, which were carried out by Russian warplanes, constitute a violation to the customary international humanitarian law as shells were directed at populated residential areas rather than a specific military object.
4. The bombardments have resulted in collateral damages that involved casualties, injuries, or significant damages to civilian objects. There are strong indicators that compel to believe that the damage was too excessive compared to the anticipated military advantage.
5. The attacks carried out by Russian forces constitute a violation to the de-escalation agreement through bombing areas held by factions from the armed opposition. This strips the path and agreements of Geneva of any meaning and strengthens al Nusra Front at the expense of those factions.

#### **Recommendations**

##### **Security Council**

- The Security Council should take additional steps after Resolution 2139 was adopted, and no pledges to cease the indiscriminate bombardments have been made. All parties to the conflict should respect those steps and adhere to the rules of the international humanitarian law.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who were implicated should be held accountable, including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes have been proven.
- Instill security and peace in Syria and implement the 'Responsibility to Protect' norm in order to preserve the Syrians' lives, heritage, and arts from being destroyed, looted, and tainted.
- Expand sanction to include the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian regimes who have been directly involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.



## **OHCHR**

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other UN Organs on this massacre in particular and the ones preceding it seeing that they are glaring marks in a string of daily, sporadic massacres of less scale. The OHCHR should also work on implementing the recommendations included in this report.

## **International community**

- In light of the Security Council's division and utter inability, action should be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people. This would manifest in protecting the Syrian people from the daily killing and lifting the siege, as well as raising the support with respect to relief efforts. Additionally, steps should be taken in order to exercise universal jurisdiction on these crimes before national tribunals as part of fair trials for all those who were involved.

- SNHR has repeatedly called, as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP), for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect (R2P)' norm in tens of studies and reports after all political initiatives, through the Arab League agreement and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan and the Cessation of Hostilities and Astana agreements that followed, have been to no avail. Therefore, after all of this, action should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and the 'Responsibility to Protect' norm, which was established by the UN General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.

- Renew the pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

- Works towards achieving justice and accountability in Syria through the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, and use the principle of universal jurisdiction.

## **European Union and United States of America**

- Support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) that was established in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 71/248, adopted on December 21, 2016. And establish local tribunals that enjoy a universal jurisdiction, and address the war crimes that were perpetrated in Syria.

## **UN special envoy to Syria**

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres who were primarily responsible for dooming de-escalation agreements, effectively shattering and ending the entire political process and hold the Syrian-Russian alliance fully responsible for this.



- Disclose to the Syrian people Russia's intentions to completely take control of the Syrian lands by force and its explicit desire to rehabilitate the present Syrian regime, which means formulating a political solution that suits its interests.

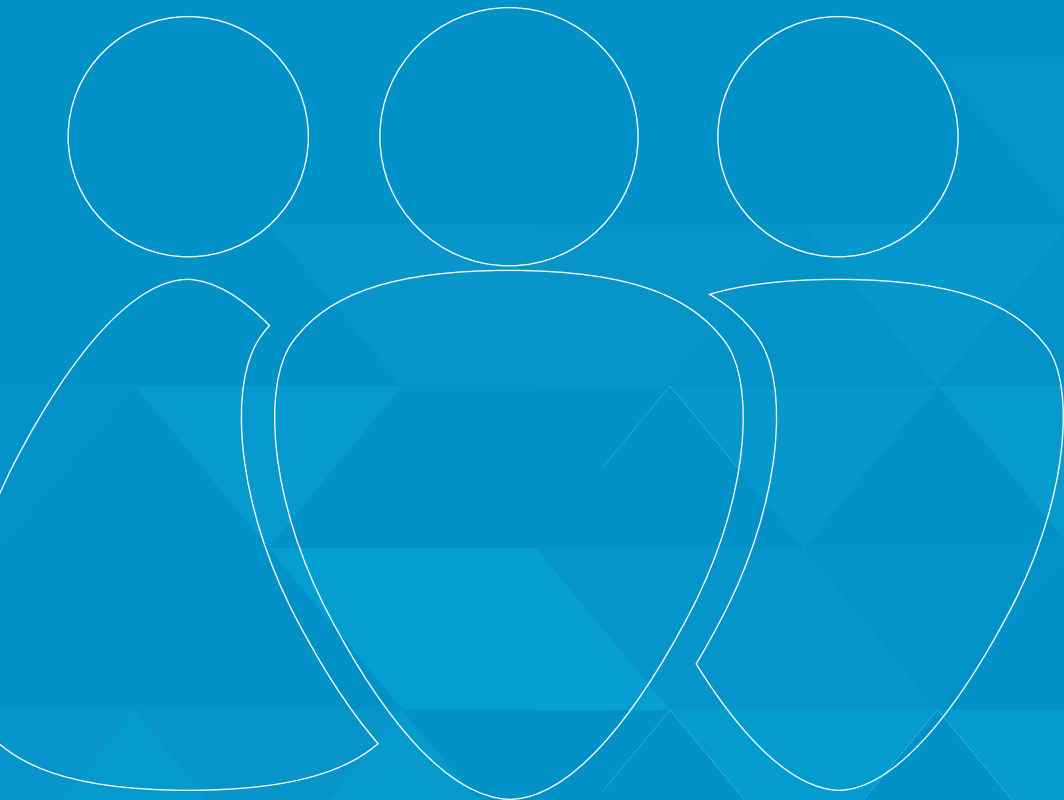
### **Russian regime**

- Immediately compensate the families of the victims who were killed by Russian forces, and those whose homes, shops, and properties were destroyed in Russian bombardments.
- Russia has to pledge to reconstruct all of the facilities and buildings that were destroyed by its instruments of war, and shoulder the complete economic and moral expenses instead of asking some European states to do so.
- Respect the rules of the international humanitarian law and launch wide, impartial investigations into the gross violations Russian forces perpetrated in Syria.

### **Acknowledgment and Condolences**

Out most heartfelt gratitude and condolences to the residents and local activists who have effectively contributed to this report.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

