

# Satellite Images Obtained by SNHR Prove the Extent of Massive Destruction Inflicted on Khan Sheikhoun City

The Goal of the Russian-Syrian Alliance Is to Implement the Grozny and Eastern Ghouta Model and to Destroy as Many Buildings as Possible to Punish Society



SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Monday, September 16, 2019

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.



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## I. Introduction and methodology

Satellite images obtained by Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) show the magnitude and extent of the destruction of Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib; these are very similar to the satellite images we obtained after the Russian-Syrian alliance stormed the Eastern Ghouta region of Damascus between February and April 2018, and before that the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo at the end of 2016. We have noted that most of the bombardment lacked any military justification, as required by the law of war. Rather, all the evidence suggests that the extensive destruction inflicted through intense aerial carpet-bombing is not a chaotic process, but a deliberate strategy aimed at destroying as many buildings and facilities as possible to punish the inhabitants of those areas and force them to pay the greatest possible price, similar to the retaliation inflicted by criminal mafias against their victims. This strategy has been used with total impunity for several years now, with this impunity enabling and encouraging the Russian and Syrian forces to unleash relentless, merciless bombardment of civilians in whatever way and form they choose without any concern about being subjected to moral or legal censure, rules or regulations. While the SNHR's database contains tens of thousands of incidents of bombardment with various types of weapons, we found that aerial bombardment is responsible for 70 percent of the



total destruction in Syria, with the air forces responsible owned and controlled solely by the Syrian regime and Russia, as well as by the International Coalition forces, although it should be noted that the destruction caused by the aerial bombardment by International Coalition forces is not even close to being comparable to the devastation inflicted by the aerial bombardment by Syrian Regime and Russian air forces.

Nearly 3.1 million homes have been partially or completely damaged to date, meaning millions of Syrians have lost their homes. For many Syrians, this means not just losing a house, but losing their inheritance and a centuries-old part of their family's history, with a large proportion of these homes passed down through generations. Through dozens of previous reports, particularly [our monthly reports on targeting vital facilities](#), we determined that this destruction has been used by the Syrian regime as a planning tool of war against all those who opposed it and rose up for freedom, and is aimed at ending and destroying all forms of opposition to the regime's governance and achieving the total destruction of society in an effort to ensure no future insurrection. Throughout the period since 2011 and to date, the Syrian regime and its allies have possessed and still possess vast military superiority, especially in terms of aerial power, giving them the greatest ability to engineer the destruction processes.

Since the beginning of the recent military campaign by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on April 26, 2019, the SNHR has documented hundreds of violations of international humanitarian law, a large proportion of which constitute war crimes. We have recorded the deliberate bombing and destruction of as many houses as possible by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, especially targeting vital facilities located in the fourth de-escalation zone (consisting of Idlib governorate and parts of the governorates of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia), particularly in the southern part of the zone which is adjacent to areas under the control of Syrian Regime forces.

### **Methodology:**

This report proves that Russian-Syrian alliance forces have destroyed tens of thousands of residential buildings in recent months in the fourth de-escalation zone in northwestern Syria, through indiscriminate, heavy, extensive, and constant bombardment, particularly through using barrel bombs. The report provides satellite images of Khan Sheikhoun city, which serves as a template showing the similar destruction inflicted on other towns and cities such as al Latamena, Kafr Zita, Kafr Nbouda, and others.

We chose Khan Sheikhoun city because it has the largest area of the towns targeted and these images show the extent of the destruction most clearly. We analyzed the satellite images and compared these with photographs and videos we obtained showing the city's



buildings in recent months. We also presented several comparisons with visual guidance, with our findings intersecting with the accounts of eyewitnesses, activists and survivors who witnessed the bombings and reported on the effects in their locations. We also retain copies of all the videos, photos and accounts included in this report in a confidential electronic database, and backups on hard disks.

It should be noted that the evidence we have catalogued is the bare minimum showing only what we have been able to document and verify in the face of exceptional difficulties, most notably since most of those in Syria who work with us have been in frequent and continuous displacement and in a state of panic, leading to a lack of feasibility in documentation processes over the years as the Syrian regime and its allies continue to perpetrate their crimes with impunity.

Finally, this report doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

## **II. The Russian-Syrian alliance bombed the fourth de-escalation zone with tens of tons of munitions**

The Russian and Syrian forces have continued to use various types of weapons in their bombardment. We discussed the most notable of these types and the record of their use in [a previous report](#) issued less than a month ago. Investigations that we conducted and our monitoring of the bombardments showed that these incidents of bombardment have often been indiscriminate and chaotic. Sometimes they were deliberately focused, targeting certain civilian vital facilities, such as some medical centers and schools. We can say based on our daily monitoring, documentation of incidents of bombardment, and analysis of those on the SNHR's database that 85 percent of the incidents of bombardment and attacks have been on residential areas far from the front lines. This was evident in our report on the [targeting of medical facilities](#) and the report on the [targeting of Civil Defense headquarters](#). The following is the record of the Russian-Syrian alliance's use of the most notable types of weapons since the beginning of the recent military campaign on April 26, 2019 up until September 15, 2019:

### **A. Cluster Munitions:**

We documented 24 cluster munitions attacks, distributed as follows:

Syrian Regime forces: 21 attacks, all in Idlib governorate, which resulted in the deaths of 10 civilians, including three women (adult female), and injured 16 people.

Russian forces: Three attacks, distributed across governorates as follows:

- Hama governorate: One
- Idlib governorate: Two

These attacks also injured four people.



## **B. Incendiary Weapons:**

The SNHR has documented an unprecedented rise in the use of incendiary weapons compared to all previous years, according to the SNHR's database. We documented at least 21 incendiary weapon attacks, all at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, distributed across the Syrian governorates as follows:

- Hama governorate: Nine
- Idlib governorate: 12

These attacks caused damage to many properties and burned many areas of agricultural land.

## **C. Nail Missiles:**

From April 26, 2019, to September 15, 2019, the SNHR documented at least seven nail missile attacks, all carried out by Syrian Regime forces in Idlib governorate.

## **D. Chemical Weapons:**

The Syrian regime renewed its use of chemical weapons in the context of its military advance in Latakia suburbs, with the SNHR documenting one attack on al Kbaina village on May 19.

## **C. Barrel Bombs:**

The SNHR has documented at least 3,420 barrel bombs dropped by Syrian regime helicopters and fixed-wing warplanes on the fourth de-escalation zone in this period, distributed as follows:

- Idlib governorate: 1,636
- Hama governorate: 1,538
- Latakia governorate: 246

There have also been many incidents of vast numbers of missiles being fired by warplanes, not to mention innumerable incidents of shelling using heavy artillery and tanks.

## **III. Russian forces repeat the scenario of Grozny in Khan Sheikhoun, al Latamena, Morek, Kafr Zita, Kafr Nbouda, Kafr Sajna, Taman'a and Abdin in northwestern Syria**

All these heavy Russian-Syrian attacks with various types of weapons caused almost complete destruction of several cities and towns in the area that were later controlled by these forces in northwestern Syria (Hama northeastern suburbs, Idlib governorate, Aleppo southwestern suburbs, Latakia northwestern suburbs). At the level of vital facilities alone, we have documented 450 attacks by Russian-Syrian alliance forces since April 26 up until the time of publication of this report, including 109 attacks on places of worship, 125 on schools,



56 on medical facilities, 21 on markets, and 43 on Civil Defense centers. By far the most commonly targeted locations, however, have been houses and other residential buildings, with satellite images, photos and videos which we were able to obtain showing that entire villages and towns have been completely razed, including Jebbin village in the suburbs of Hama governorate. We tried, through an approximate inductive process, to extrapolate the destruction witnessed in these images to the other neighborhoods for which we could not obtain photos and videos; through all these processes, we estimate that tens of thousands of residential buildings have been either damaged, or almost or completely destroyed; one residential building may contain between four and 12 homes. Such absolute destruction shows a very literal interpretation of the catchphrase used by supporters of the Syrian regime since the early days of the popular uprising demanding the fall of the government and the ruling authority and calling for urgent elections and democratic change, with the Syrian regime supporters responding to these calls for freedom with the words: “Assad or we burn the country”; the regime has followed through on this terrible threat, inflicting almost complete destruction of the Syrian state at the urban and economic levels, as well as on the social, political, psychological and sectarian levels. Having inflicted such catastrophic devastation simply to save the regime, it is now, ironically, impossible to revive the Syrian state so long as the ruling authorities and the security services themselves survive.

**Khan Sheikhoun Case Study:** In this report, we are satisfied to use an analytical model of Khan Sheikhoun city, taking into account the size of the report and the need to prevent repetition. This model can be generalized to other cities and towns in northwestern Syria: Located in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, Khan Sheikhoun city is the most populous city in this region, adjacent to the northern suburbs of Hama. The international Aleppo - Damascus motorway runs to the east of the city. The people of Khan Sheikhoun participated in the protests for the Syrian popular uprising when these began in March 2011, sharing their compatriots' calls for peaceful change, democracy, freedom and dignity. As a result, the city was subjected to extensive raids and arrests by the regime; about 1,376 of its residents are still classified as forcibly disappeared according to the SNHR's database of enforced disappearances. Khan Sheikhoun remained under the control of the Syrian regime until it was controlled by factions of the Armed Opposition in May 2014. Syrian Regime forces carried out a [chemical weapons attack](#) on the city on April 4, 2017 using four missiles, one of which contained lethal chemicals, resulting in the deaths by suffocation of 91 civilians, including 32 children and 23 women, and afflicted at least 520 people with suffocation. This is categorized as the second largest chemical attack in Syria to date after the 'Two Ghoutas' attack in Damascus suburbs in August 2013. On Friday, August 23,



the General Command of the Syrian Regime's Army and Armed Forces [announced](#) that it had resumed control over Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib. According to the statistics of the Khan Sheikhoun city local council, the population of the city in August 2019 stood at around 110,000 people, including about 25,000 displaced persons, the vast majority of whom have been displaced northward into areas controlled by factions of the Armed Opposition for fear of brutal reprisals by the Syrian regime and the Iranian militias accompanying it which took control of the city at the end of August.

Mr. Abdul Majid Sarmani<sup>1</sup>, the head of the local council of Khan Sheikhoun, provided the SNHR with his testimony. He said: **“Since being outside the Syrian regime’s control, the city was subjected to constant bombardment. As Russian forces intervened, the living conditions of civilians became more difficult and many of them were displaced. What the city saw during the recent military campaign aggravated the situation, as the bombardment caused the destruction of 70 percent of the infrastructure and forced some 110,000 civilians, who were living in the city, including 25,000 displaced persons, to leave the city. The recent military campaign caused the destruction of many vital facilities such as schools, hospitals, markets, houses and hundreds of residential buildings.”**

We also spoke with local activist Mohammad al Salloum<sup>2</sup>, from Khan Sheikhoun city, who told us about the bombardment inflicted on his city: **“In May 2014, the Armed Opposition factions took full control of the city. Two months later, the city began to be bombarded by air and ground. The city saw tens of massacres, in which hundreds of civilians were killed. The city lost some 1,600 of its people during this uprising,”** Mohammed said, adding, **“In the recent campaign by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, the bombardments have not subsided, with the Syrian regime and its Russian ally adopting a policy of mass destruction of everything that could offer a service. As a result, tens of houses were destroyed, and hospitals, Civil Defense centers, mosques and schools were significantly damaged, until the city was all empty, up until the regime advanced and tightened its control on it on August 23.”**

The Syrian Network for Human Rights purchased satellite images of Khan Sheikhoun city taken on August 2, 2019, in order to further document and analyze the extent of the city's destruction since it first fell outside the control of the Syrian regime in May 2014 to date, particularly in light of the unprecedented attacks and the intensive and relentless heavy bombardment in the last four months.

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<sup>1</sup> Via WhatsApp on September 11, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Via WhatsApp on September 11, 2019





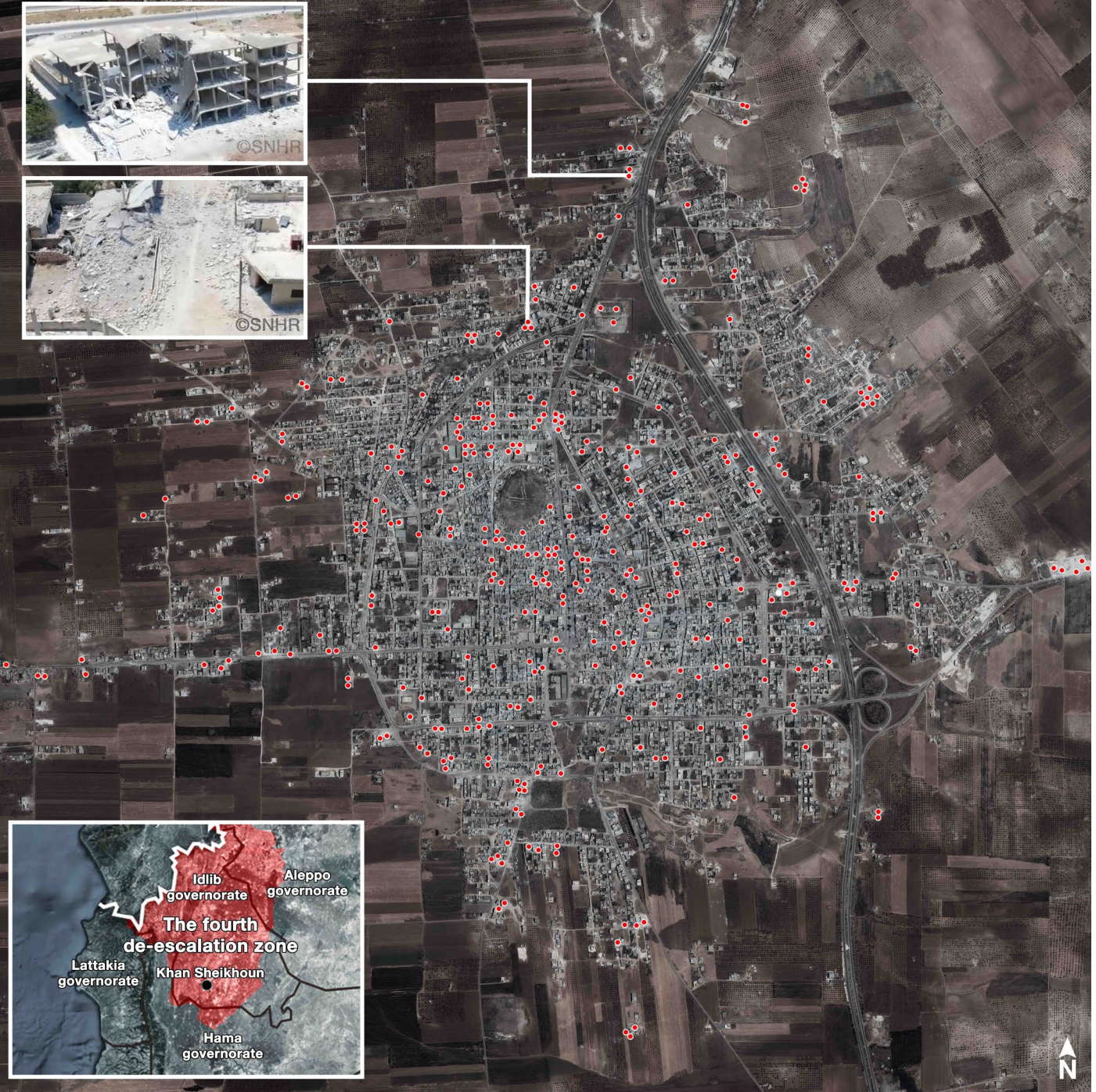
## Analysis based on the satellite images showing locations of buildings that suffered the worst damage in Syrian-Russian alliance attacks on Khan Sheikhoun city:

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Analysis based on the satellite images to identify locations of the buildings that suffered the worst damage in Syrian-Russian alliance attacks on Khan Sheikhoun city, located in the southern suburbs of Idlib, between March 2011 and August 2019

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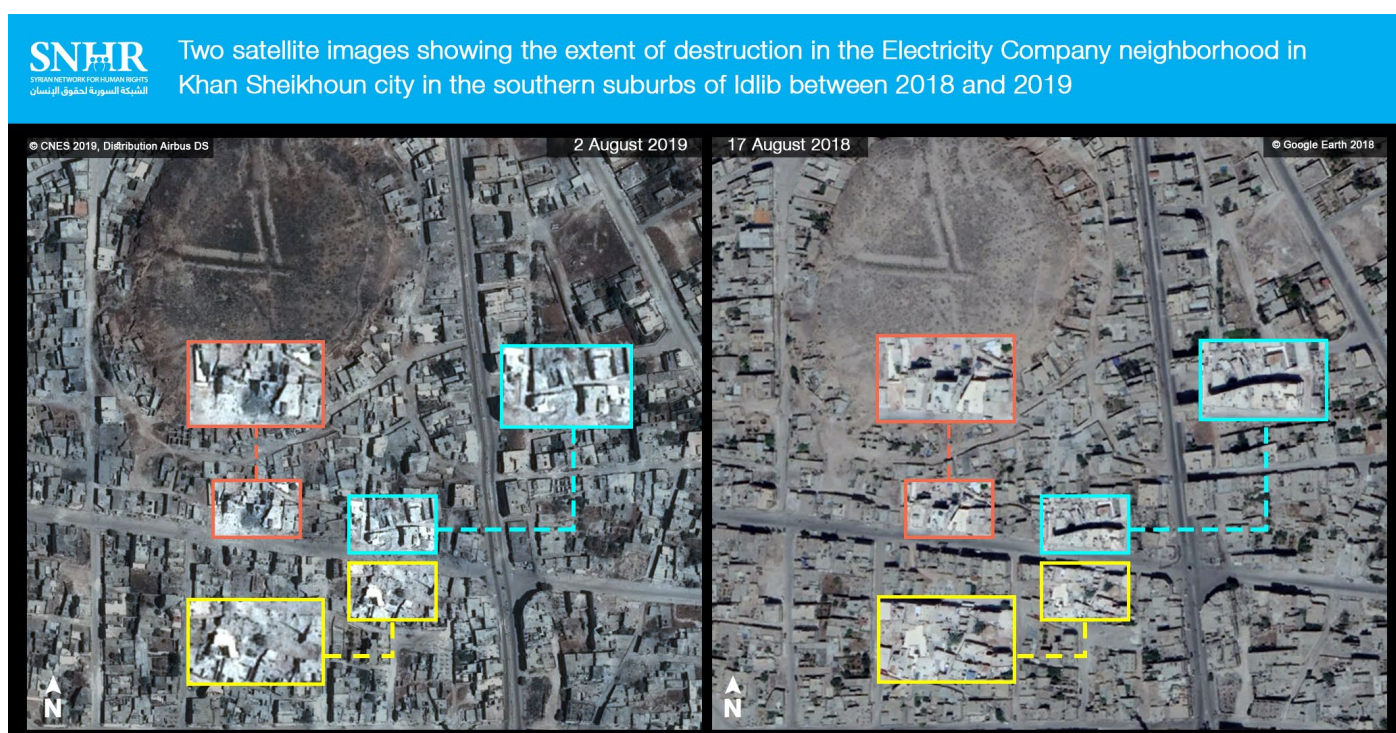
2 August 2019





The satellite image analysis above shows about 220 points where buildings were severely destroyed. We cross-checked the locations of most of these buildings with photographs and videos filmed at ground-level which we obtained previously. The results of the collective analysis showed that approximately 35 percent of the area of the city has been completely destroyed, and 40 percent of it partially destroyed. This means that about 75 percent of the city's buildings are either partially or completely destroyed.

### **Satellite images showing the extent of destruction to the Electricity Company neighborhood in Khan Sheikhoun city between 2018 and 2019**

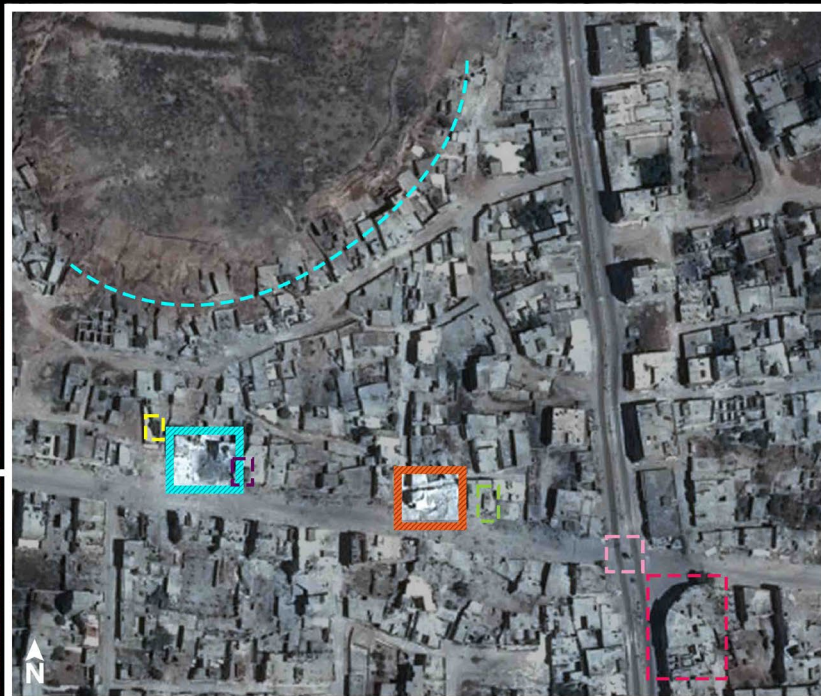




## Visual guidance showing the extent of destruction to the Electricity Company neighborhood in Khan Sheikhoun city until August 2, 2019:

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Destruction to buildings located in the Electricity Company neighborhood in Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib, caused by Syrian-Russian alliance forces' attacks on the city







Below are a few of the videos which we analyzed and cross-checked with the satellite images. These videos show the extent of destruction caused to Wadi al Ein neighborhood in the northwest of Khan Sheikhoun city, and to the northern entrance to the city. These videos were filmed on August 10, 2019.







#### **IV. The destruction of buildings and shops by Russian-Syrian alliance forces caused the forced displacement of approximately 650.000 people, in addition to the accumulation of approximately 500.000 asylum seekers on the Turkish border**

The impact of heavy and indiscriminate bombardments does not stop at the destruction of property, shops and vital facilities, especially in the case of northwestern Syria, a geographical area confined within about 6,500 square kilometers, and currently inhabited by about 3.2 million people either residents or displaced persons, more than half of whom are women and children. The bombardment by Russian-Syrian alliance forces targeting the fourth de-escalation zone resulted in the deaths of 1,012 civilians, including 272 children, and





171 women (adult female), as documented by the SNHR team from April 26, to September 15, as well as causing the displacement of approximately 630.000 civilians according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. In this context, we would like to emphasize that, at the humanitarian response level, the recent displacements are the worst to date according to our observation and assessment since the beginning of the popular uprising, given the very large number of internally displaced persons, and the inability of local and international humanitarian organizations to respond to all of them, causing unprecedented overcrowding in the camps and an increase in the cost of property rental in the villages and towns where IDPs were displaced too, with tens of thousands of displaced people being forced to live outdoors in agricultural land without even the most basic essentials of life, especially potable drinking water for daily use. The international response still does not meet 10 percent of these basic needs, and is completely inconsistent with the size of the human influx and the magnitude of the disaster that has befallen them.

## V. Conclusions and recommendations

- The Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance forces have unquestionably violated the UN Security Council Resolutions No. 2139 and 2254 to stop indiscriminate attacks, and also violated Articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute by committing intentional homicide, all of which constitute crimes against humanity.
- The Russian-Syrian alliance forces used indiscriminate and highly destructive indiscriminate weapons and used prohibited weapons such as cluster munitions and chemical weapons.
- Bombardments have inadvertently caused losses of civilian lives, injuries, and severe damage to civilian objects, and there are strong indications that lead us to believe the damage is disproportionately extreme compared to any military objectives for the attacks.
- Indiscriminate bombardment has caused a succession of violations, including the crime of enforced displacement, which constitutes a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and has been perpetrated extensively and deliberately in north-western Syria.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **UN Security Council**

- Issue a binding resolution that prevents and punishes the crime of enforced displacement, compels the cessation of enforced displacement, and explicitly provides for the right of forcibly displaced people to return safely to their homes, and receive reparation for what they have suffered.



- Compel the Syrian regime to stop its settlements and replacements it carries out in cities and neighborhoods whose residents have been displaced.
- Forced displacement threatens the region and Syrian territory, destabilizing security and stability, and establishing peace and security for Syria is at the core of the Security Council's tasks, responsibilities and capabilities.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible should be held accountable including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been proven.
- To establish peace and security, to implement the principle of the Responsibility to Protect civilians, and to save Syrians' lives, heritage and cultural artefacts from destruction, pillage and vandalism.
- Extend sanctions to include the Syrian, Russian and Iranian regimes who are directly implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people.

### **International community**

- The Russian and Iranian regimes should face heavy fines for the destruction of vital buildings and facilities in Syria. These amounts should be reflected in the compensation of the victims and the restoration of the houses and shops which these forces contributed to destroying.
- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter incapability, action should be taken at the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people that can protect them from the daily killings, and to lift the siege and increase support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be applied in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.
- The SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect' principle in dozens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after exhausting all political channels from the Arab League's plan, and after Mr. Kofi Annan's plan proved fruitless. Therefore, the steps recommended under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations should be adopted and the norm of the "Responsibility to Protect", which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work to fulfil justice and achieve accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and on implementing the principle of the universal jurisdiction.



## **OHCHR**

- Assist in the building of a central housing and real estate database in Syria, with the aim of achieving reparations, implementing voluntary repatriation programs and ensuring restitution of housing, land and real estate in accordance with the UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons - Pinheiro Principles.
- Prepare a special report on destroying buildings, shops and vital facilities in northwestern Syria and report to the Security Council on the seriousness and sensitivity of the issue of property destruction.

## **Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)**

- Include a broad paragraph on violations of property destruction by Russian and Syrian forces in the next report in February 2020 and do whatever is necessary to investigate the extent to which Russia and the Syrian regime intentionally destroy as many homes and other properties as possible.

## **UN Envoy to Syria**

- Highlight in the forthcoming UN Security Council briefing the destruction of tens of thousands of residential buildings in northwestern Syria by Russian and Syrian forces and the forced displacement of their people.
- Clearly condemn the perpetrators of crimes, massacres and the main perpetrators of violations of Security Council resolutions.
- Call for a speedy implementation of democratic political change that restores victims' rights and embodies the principles of transitional justice.

## **The Russian regime**

- Must not repeat its bombardments and killings of civilians and targeting their vital facilities, houses and shops.
- Stop supporting the Syrian regime in the Security Council and stop using its veto to block the passage of any UN resolution punishing the Syrian regime.
- Reconstruct and restore the residential buildings and shops destroyed by Russian military forces, and compensate victims throughout the duration of their displacement.



## VI. Attachments and annexes:

[Aerial photography](#) broadcast by Anadolu Agency showing the extent of massive destruction in Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib - August 19, 2019

[Aerial photography](#) broadcast by Al Jazeera Mubasher showing the extent of destruction in Deir al Sharqi village in the suburbs of Idlib governorate - September 7, 2019

[Aerial photography](#) showing the [extent of destruction](#) in al Gharbi neighborhood of Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib following bombing by fixed-wing Syrian Regime forces' warplanes on the city resulting in a massacre - July 27, 2019 - Video source: Hadi Al Abdullah

[Aerial photography](#) showing the [extent of destruction](#) following a double tap attack by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, using missiles against the vegetable market area in the center of Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in a massacre - July 22, 2019

[Aerial photograph](#) from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing the [extent of destruction](#) following a double tap attack by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, using missiles on the vegetable market area in the center of Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in a massacre - July 22, 2019



Aerial photograph from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing the extent of destruction following a double tap attack by fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, using missiles on Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in a massacre - July 22, 2019





[Aerial photograph](#) showing the extent of destruction caused by intensive aerial and ground bombardment by Russian-Syrian alliance forces on al Latamena town in the northwestern suburbs of Hama governorate, before the latter took control of the town - Photo date: August 25, 2019

[Aerial photograph](#) from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing the extent of destruction following the bombing by fixed-wing Syrian Regime forces' warplanes of al Gharbi neighborhood of Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in a massacre - July 27, 2019

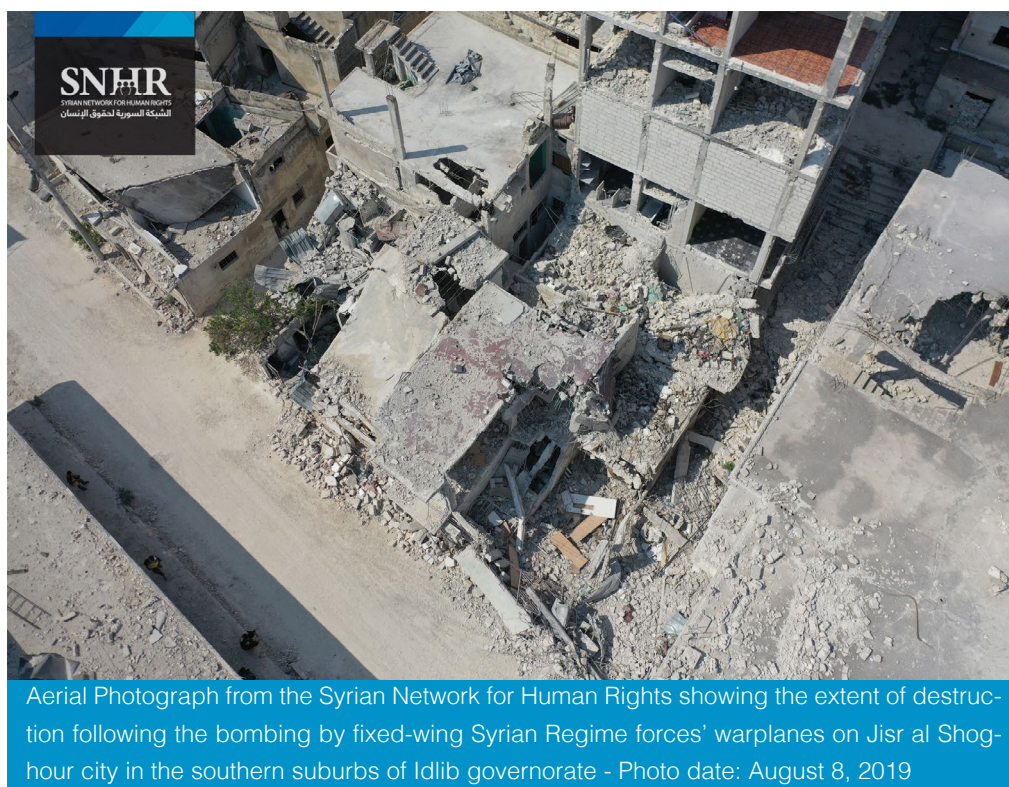


[Aerial photographs](#) from Agence France-Presse (AFP) showing [the extent of the massive destruction](#) following [intensive aerial and ground bombardment](#) by Russian-Syrian alliance forces on al Tah village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate - Photos date: August 25, 2019

[Aerial photographs](#) from Agence France-Presse (AFP) showing [the extent of destruction](#) caused by intensive aerial and ground bombardment by Russian-Syrian alliance forces of [Khan Sheikhoun city](#) in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate - Photos date: August 3, 2019

[Aerial photographs](#) from Agence France-Presse (AFP) showing the extent of destruction caused by [intensive aerial and ground bombardment](#) by Russian-Syrian alliance forces on [Ma'aret Harma village](#) in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate - Photos date: August 5, 2019

[Aerial Photographs](#) from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing [the extent of destruction](#) following the bombing by fixed-wing Syrian Regime forces' warplanes on Jisr al Shoghour city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate - Photos date: August 8, 2019



## Thanks and condolences

Our sincere thanks and condolences to all the local people and activists whose contributions have enriched this report effectively.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

[www.sn4hr.org](http://www.sn4hr.org)

