

The Deaths of 87 Civilians Have Been Documented Since the Start of the Russian-Turkish Ceasefire, Including the Largest Massacre by the Syrian Regime in Idlib Since April 26, 2019

The Constitutional Committee's Progress Makes No Sense in Light of the Syrian Regime's Continuous Crimes against Humanity

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.

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I. Introduction

Northwest Syria has experienced an intense and terrible variety of violations over many months, yet the region does not receive international attention from media and human rights bodies at any level equivalent to the massive scale and breadth of human suffering. We no longer even hear international condemnations of this continuous brutal killing of civilians, with the displacement of hundreds of thousands increasing the people's suffering and their despair of any hope or belief in justice and international law. Since April 26, 2019, northwest Syria, which includes the northeastern suburbs of Hama, Idlib governorate, southwestern suburbs of Aleppo, and northwestern suburbs of Latakia) has seen a military escalation by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which is the most violent to date compared to previous military campaigns seen in the region. In this time, the region witnessed the declaration of four ceasefire agreements; the Syrian regime announced the first two of these on August 1 and 31 2019 respectively, with Syrian-Russian alliance forces quickly proceeding to violate them; further military escalation resumed from October 30. We issued [a report](#) on the most notable violations committed during this campaign.



In the past few days, specifically on January 9, 2020, Major-General Yuri Borenkov, chief of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Parties in Syria, [announced](#) the start of a ceasefire in the de-escalation zone in Idlib, starting at 14:00 on the same day; the [Turkish Ministry of Defense](#) announced the next day that it had concluded a ceasefire agreement with Russia that would enter into force at 00:01 on January 12. Despite both announcements, the ground attacks by Syrian Regime forces continued, with only the air-strikes by Syrian-Russian alliance forces stopping briefly until January 14, 2020, when the Syrian Network for Human Rights' (SNHR) monitoring team recorded that fixed-wing Russian warplanes bombed Khan al Sebel town in the southern suburbs of Idlib; thereafter, the bombardment and escalation continued, focusing on the western suburbs of Aleppo, resulting in the deaths of dozens of civilians and attacks on vital civilian facilities, which caused a large wave of displacement for the people of that region, who were forced to flee to preserve their lives.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, says:

“Syrian Regime forces committing a massacre of this magnitude in Idlib three days after the alleged ceasefire agreement starkly affirms the impossibility of controlling the brutal Syrian regime with any kind of agreements including those in which its Russian ally is a direct party, and provides additional evidence that the Constitutional Committee can never succeed in its objectives or make Syrian society believe in or care about it, regardless of the efforts of the UN envoy and his team, as long as there is a continuity in committing crimes against humanity by the Syrian regime, the direct party in discussing the constitution!”

Methodology:

This report provides a documentary record of the air attack launched by the Syrian regime's fixed-wing warplanes on the east of Idlib city on January 15, 2020, and notes that this massacre was simply one in a long series of massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces since April 26, 2019, continuing until January 27, 2020.

The SNHR has relied on field researchers working for us, who helped to obtain direct testimonies from survivors, relatives of victims, relief workers and media activists, assisted by the extensive network of contacts we have built up through our eight years of work. This report contains six first-hand accounts out of other accounts that we've collected through speaking directly with witnesses or survivors, none of which are cited from any open sources. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the witnesses, who gave us permission to use the information they provided without us offering or giving them any in-



centives. Also, SNHR endeavors always to spare the witnesses the agony of remembering the violations as much as possible, providing assurances that we will conceal the identity of any witness who prefers to use an alias.

SNHR also analyzed videos and photographs that were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. Videos posted by activists show, amongst other things, the sites of attacks, and the bodies of the deceased victims and the injured, as well as the scale of destruction caused by the attacks.

We also retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in this report in a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by Syrian Regime forces and some other armed groups.

Our investigations confirm that all of the attacks included in this report targeted civilian areas where we documented no military presence or armories belonging to factions of the Armed Opposition or to extremist Islamist groups before or during the attacks, and where Syrian Regime forces failed to issue any warnings to civilians prior to any of the attacks as required by international humanitarian law.

This report only represents the bare minimum of what we were able to document, given the vast actual severity and magnitude of the violations that have occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications of these events.

II. The Death Toll Since the Announcement of the Russian-Turkish Ceasefire

The SNHR has documented the deaths of at least 87 civilians, including 33 children and 11 women (adult female), at the hands of Syrian-Russian alliance forces in northwest Syria between January 12, 2020, and January 27, 2020. These were distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** Killed 37 civilians, including eight children and three women, distributed as follows:
 - Idlib governorate: 34, including seven children and two women.
 - Aleppo governorate: Three, including one child and one woman.
- **Russian forces:** Killed 50 civilians, including 25 children and eight women. These were distributed as follows:
 - Idlib governorate: 11 civilians, including five children and two women.
 - Aleppo governorate: 39, including 20 children and six women.

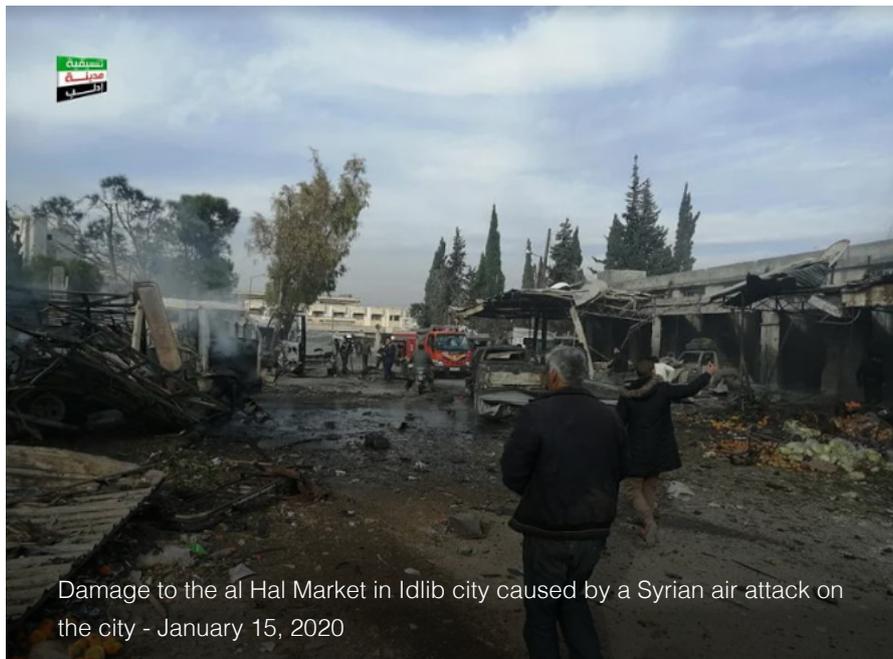




Bodies of deceased victims in the Clinics hospital (al Eyadat) in Idlib city, who were killed in a Syrian air attack on the city - January 15, 2020 – Photo by Ahmad Rahhal

The attack also caused material damage to the two missile impact sites, as follows:

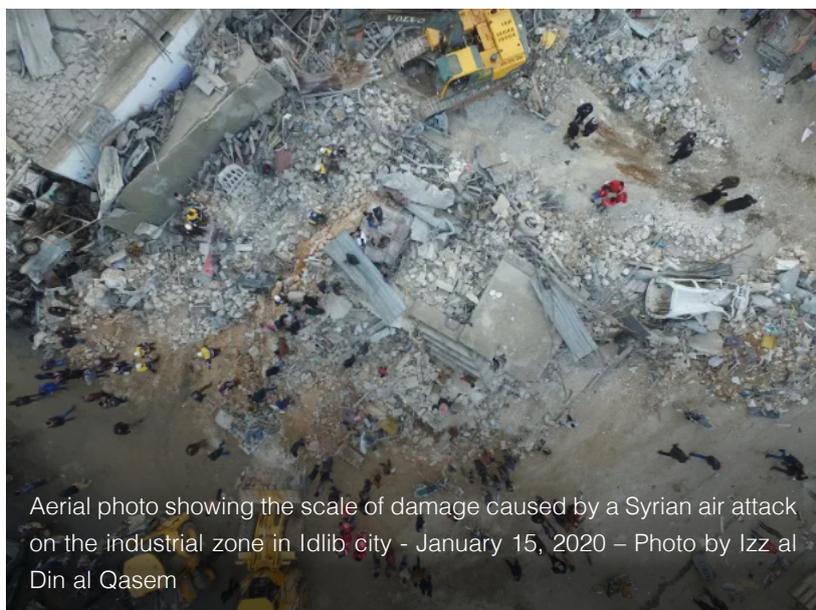
Material damage at the first site: [The missile](#) destroyed part of the perimeter wall of the National Museum and caused moderate material damage to the museum building, in addition to inflicting significant material damage on some shops and damage to most of the goods in them. It also caused minor material damage to the Municipal Council depot housing garbage collection vehicles, located to the north of the missile's impact site - about 50 meters in a line of sight.



Damage to the al Hal Market in Idlib city caused by a Syrian air attack on the city - January 15, 2020



Material damage at the second site: The second missile landed in the industrial zone, causing one building to collapse completely, igniting fire in a number of shops, and inflicting material damage to many other stores with varying degrees. To the south of this site - about 60 meters in a line of sight – is the Transportation Directorate of the Salvation Government, whose building sustained minor material damage.



Aerial photo showing the scale of damage caused by a Syrian air attack on the industrial zone in Idlib city - January 15, 2020 – Photo by Izz al Din al Qasem

All of the people we contacted assured us that the target zone was crowded with civilian shoppers at the time it was targeted and that it was free of any potential military targets.

The SNHR spoke with media activist Ahmad Ghajar¹, from Idlib city, who was in al Najjarin Market (Carpenters market) in the industrial zone at the time of the attack, and learnt through observatories' notifications of the flight of fixed-wing warplanes from the airspace of Saraqeb city towards the west, which, he explained, is the course the warplanes usually take before entering the skies over Idlib city. He told us: **“I tracked the warplane and watched it from the roof of our shop as it travelled from east to west, then I saw its swoop up to 1 km above the ground and fire two missiles, the second of which was about 700 meters away from me. Those were then followed with thermal balloons; the warplane then headed west, then south towards Ariha.”** Ahmad told us that he then went directly

¹ Via WhatsApp on January 16, 2020



to the impact site of the missile to photograph the damage, but he quickly began helping the paramedics to recover the dead and injured instead, adding: **“The largest number of victims was in the industrial zone, including Mohammad Shadi al Assad, known as Shadi Ambulance, a member of the Civil Defense team.”** Ahmad added that the destructive ability of the missile used was greater than those usually used by the Syrian air force, causing the total collapse of the building.



The SNHR also spoke with media activist Ahmad Rahhal², who lives in Idlib city. He said: **“Through my daily work to track the bombardment in the Idlib areas, I learned that Ariha city had been bombed by a Syrian warplane, so I went there to cover the attack, and while I was there, we learned through the walkie talkies of warplanes being in the skies over the region in the north; we monitored this, thinking that it would resume bombing Ariha city, but it carried out an attack on the eastern side of Idlib city after it flew over Saraqeb, then turned towards Ariha, then left.”**

Ahmad continued **“Immediately, I went with a number of my colleagues to Idlib city, and arrived about ten minutes after the attack; the warplane targeted the al Hal Market and the industrial zone; fires were widespread at the bombing site in the industrial zone, and many bodies were burning inside their cars. I saw the body of a burned child and witnessed the removal of another child alive from under the rubble.”**

² Via WhatsApp on January 16, 2020



Ahmad told us that he then went to the Clinics hospital (al Eyadat), where victims had been taken. **“The hospital floor was covered in blood. I saw injured people receiving treatment on the floor of the hospital because of the high number of injuries that overwhelmed the hospital.”**

Ahmad added that he had also visited the bombing site in al Hal Market and estimated that the damage there was less severe than that inflicted on the industrial zone, due to the fact that the missile fell in the street.



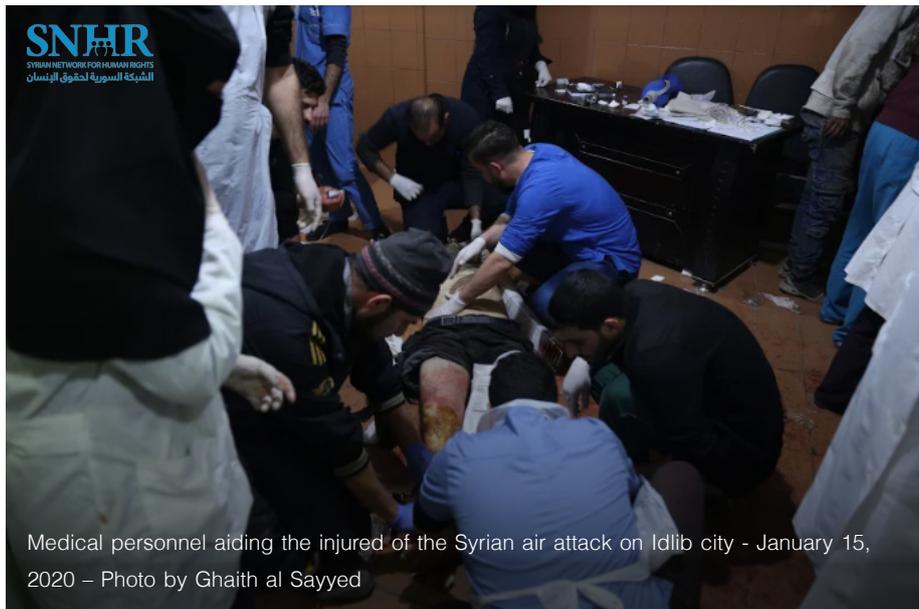
SNHR also spoke with Mu’aweya Agha³, a media activist working for the Syrian American Medical Society (‘SAMS’), who went to the Idlib Central Hospital immediately after the attack: **“After my arrival at the hospital, ambulances began to arrive until the ambulance department was no longer able to accommodate the injured. We raised the alert status in the hospital and called in medical personnel from outside the city, and due to the magnitude of the incident, I was unable to just document events but contributed to the transportation of the injured.”**

Mu’aweya added that most of the injuries were young men and children, and he was able to count one martyr and 38 injuries, among whom were a number who had to undergo amputations as a result of their injuries. He added: **“We were unable to transfer some of the injured to the Internal hospital because of the overcrowding as well, so we had to conduct operations on about 30 injured.”**

³ Via WhatsApp on January 16, 2020



Obayda Dandoush⁴ , the Director of Response at the Syria Relief and Development Organization (SRD), rushed to the Clinics hospital following the attacks, finding it full of casualties transported by the ambulance and Civil Defense teams. He told us: **“I saw six martyrs in the hospital and nearly 30 injured people, most of whom were workers in the industrial zone. Some of the injured were referred to Turkish hospitals because of their critical condition.”** Obayda told us that he learned via the walkie talkies that the warplane that carried out the attack belonged to the Syrian Air Force and that it was in the airspace over Sarmin city before carrying out its attack on Idlib city.



The SNHR also spoke with Abdul Razzaq Ghafir⁵ , head of the Communication, Media and Documentation Department at the Specialized Surgical Hospital in Idlib city, who told us: **“At four minutes past two, I heard the sound of the warplane swooping, followed by the sound of two big explosions in the eastern area of the city. I later learned via walkie talkies that the warplane’s targets were the al Hal Market and the industrial zone. The Specialized Hospital in Idlib received nine martyrs (one of whom died after arriving at the hospital) and approximately 35 injured, most of whom were children working in the industrial zone and the al Hal Market; most of the injuries varied between moderate and severe, and we conducted more than 10 amputation operations.”**

⁴ Via WhatsApp on January 16, 2020

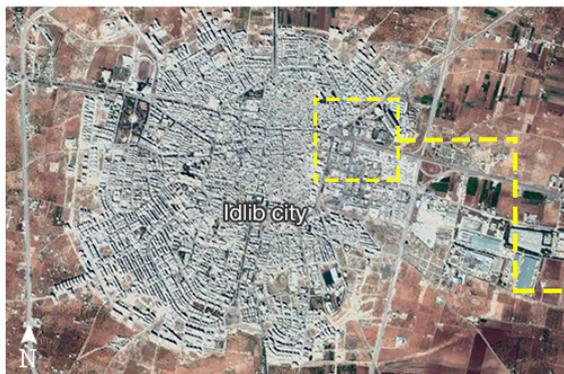
⁵ Via WhatsApp on January 16, 2020



Visual guide shows the impact sites of the two missiles in al Hal Market and the industrial zone:



Site of a Syrian air-strike that caused a massacre in Idlib city in January 15, 2020



- 1 Landing site of the first missile
- 2 Landing site of the second missile



To discover more details about the type of warplane that carried out the attack, the SNHR contacted Ahmad Majlawi⁶, an observer of air traffic in the Jabal al Zaweya area in Idlib governorate, who was monitoring air traffic at the time of the attack. He told us: **“At 13:57, on January 15, a MiG-23 warplane carrying the symbol of ‘Shumukh’ took off from Hama Military Airbase to the north on the course of Morek, Heesh then Ma’aret al Numan. It reached the airspace over Khan al Sebel at 14:02, then entered the skies over Saraqeb then Sarmin at 14:03, then diverted northwest and conducted an airstrike on Idlib city, then headed south to Ariha and Jabal al Zaweya, then returned to its base.”** Ahmad added: **“I learned through the news groups and through my communication with the activists that the attack on Idlib resulted in a big massacre in Hal Market and the industrial zone.”**

Based on all of these facts, we, at the Syrian Network for Human Rights, believe that the warplane that carried out the attack belongs to the Syrian Air Force and is (MiG-23).

IV. Documentation of Syrian-Russian Alliance Committing 66 Massacres in Northwest Syria Since April 26, 2019, According to the SNHR’s Database

The aforementioned Idlib massacre is simply one in a long series of massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which are encouraged by the failure of the Security Council to protect civilians, and the international community’s failure to form a civilizational alliance to take over the task of protecting civilians in light of the Security Council’s failure. Given this apparent impunity for every type of violation, Syrian-Russian alliance forces have committed almost limitless violations of every variety. It is necessary here to emphasize the fact that Russia is the sponsor of the ceasefire agreements, despite Russia and its ally, the Syrian regime, being by far the most prolific violators of those agreements, the last of which was the alleged truce agreement on January 12, 2020, which was almost immediately disregarded by the Russian Air Force with its attacks concentrating on the western suburbs of Aleppo.

According to SNHR’s database, Syrian-Russian alliance forces committed 66 massacres in northwest Syria between April 26, 2019, and January 27, 2020. These were distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 45, distributed as follows:
Idlib governorate: 44
Aleppo governorate: One.

⁶ Via WhatsApp on January 17, 2020



- **Russian forces:** 21, distributed as follows:

Idlib governorate: 13.

Hama governorate: Five.

Aleppo governorate: Three.

According to the SNHR's Victim Documentation team, the massacres documented resulted in the deaths of 542 civilians, including 187 children and 107 women (adult female). This means that 55 percent of all the victims were women and children, which is a very high proportion of the casualties, and a clear indication that civilian residents were specifically targeted in most of these massacres.

The death toll of these massacres was distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 358 civilians, including 127 children and 71 women.

- **Russian forces:** 184 civilians, including 60 children and 36 women.

Among these attacks we documented four massacres committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces since the last ceasefire agreement entered into force at 00:00 of January 12, 2020, until January 27, 2020, distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** One in Idlib governorate.

- **Russian forces:** : Three (two in Aleppo governorate and one in Idlib governorate).

These massacres resulted in the deaths of 44 civilians, including 13 children and four women, distributed as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 22 civilians, including two children.

- **Russian forces:** 22 civilians, including 11 children and four women.

V. The Responsibility to Protect Civilians in Syria

For eight years, the Syrian regime has committed heinous crimes and violations against Syrian civilians on a daily basis. It has also consistently failed to comply with any of the demands of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, or those of the High Commission for Human Rights, or even Security Council resolutions. The Security Council, which is supposed to take collective measures and action under Article 41 and 42 of the Charter of the United Nations, has also failed because of the immunity granted by Russia to the Syrian regime, with Russia routinely using its veto in the case of the Syrian regime, which not only failed to abide by its responsibility to protect civilians, but committed the most egregious violations against them, reaching the level of crimes against humanity, and extermination within detention centers through torture.



In a report issued in December 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty stressed that: “The Security Council should take into account in all its deliberations that, if it fails to discharge its responsibility to protect in conscience-shocking situations crying out for action, concerned states may not rule out other means to meet the gravity and urgency of that situation”

Such conscience-shocking situations are exactly what have continued to happen routinely in Syria, not only in the form of one massacre or one violation but in industrial-scale killings and torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and sieges against civilians. The list of crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Syrian regime and its allies goes on. The Security Council has signally failed to assume its responsibilities in the Syrian case, despite the Syrian Network for Human Rights, international organizations and UN commissions of inquiry crying out for action by the Security Council many thousands of times. In this context, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty also affirmed in the aforementioned report: “it would be impossible to find consensus, in the Commission’s view, around any set of proposals for military intervention which acknowledged the validity of any intervention not authorized by the Security Council or General Assembly. But that may still leave circumstances when the Security Council fails to discharge what this Commission would regard as its responsibility to protect, in a conscience-shocking situation crying out for action. It is a real question in these circumstances where lies the most harm: **in the damage to international order if the Security Council is bypassed or in the damage to that order if human beings are slaughtered while the Security Council stands by.”**

At the 2005 Summit, states unanimously agreed that each country had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from egregious crimes, or itself is committing such crimes as in the case of the Syrian regime, it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.

VI: Legal Profile and Recommendations

- Syrian and Russian forces violated several rules of international humanitarian law, primarily by failing to discriminate between civilians and combatants or between civilian and military targets, instead bombing hospitals, schools, centers and civilian neighborhoods, with these violations amount to war crimes.



- Displacement or forced displacement is a war crime in non-international armed conflicts when committed as part of a deliberate or widespread attack against the civilian population (Articles 8 (2) (b) (7) and 8 (2) (e) (8) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court), and may also be considered crimes against humanity (Articles 7 (1) (d) of the Statute of the International Criminal Court).
- The Syrian-Russian alliance forces have violated the de-escalation zone agreement in all regions, including the Idlib region.
- Syrian Regime forces have explicitly violated the Sochi Agreement by carrying out artillery bombardment of a number of villages and towns in the fourth de-escalation zone, mostly in the demilitarized zone, the eastern suburbs of Hama and the southeastern suburbs of Idlib. These attacks have resulted in civilian casualties.
- The Syrian and Russian regimes' forces undoubtedly violated UN Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which demanded the cessation of indiscriminate attacks, as well as violating a wide range of customary international humanitarian law rules, and also violating articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute by committing intentional homicide, all of which constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- The incidents of bombardment have incidentally caused civilian casualties, including injuries, as well as causing significant damage to civilian objects. There are very strong indications suggesting that the damage was extremely excessive in comparison to the intended military benefit, with the attacks failing to discriminate between civilians and combatants in most cases. Also, it seems that some of the attacks appear to have deliberately targeted vital facilities and civilian areas.
- The report issued by the delegates to the 2005 Summit states unanimously that each country had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from egregious crimes, or itself is committing such crimes as in the case of the Syrian regime, means that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.

Recommendations:

UN Security Council:

- The Security Council must take additional steps following its adoption of Resolution 2254, which clearly insists that “ all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.”
- The Security Council must pass a resolution to stabilize the ceasefire in Idlib and include punitive measures for all violators of the ceasefire.



- The Security Council must provide genuine support for serious implementation of the peace process in Syria and for achieving a just political transition that guarantees security and stability.
- The Syrian issue must be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those involved, including the Russian regime, must be held accountable, having been implicated in committing war crimes.
- The Security Council must ensure the establishment of peace and security and the implementation of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect civilians and save Syrians' lives, heritage and cultural artefacts from destruction, pillage and vandalism.
- The UN Security Council must pass a resolution concerning some seven million internally displaced persons in Syria that addresses forced displacement, to ensure that this does not become a long-term crisis, and must put pressure on the Syrian regime to end displacements, and enact laws aimed at preventing the plunder of displaced persons' properties and possessions.

The UN Secretary-General:

- Should clearly identify perpetrators of violations and contribute to condemning their actions, disclosing their practices, and sending a message of solidarity to the affected communities. Ignoring any mention of the perpetrators of apparent violations simply encourages them to commit more violations and to repeat them.
- Should request that the Security Council take urgent action and hold an emergency meeting to ensure a ceasefire and to protect tens of thousands of displaced civilians.

International Community:

- Council and its complete ineffectiveness, 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 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, then 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 ensure justice and achieve accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and to implement the principle of universal jurisdiction.
- The countries that support the parties to the conflict in Syria, especially Russia, must put pressure on their allies on the ground to ensure the neutrality of the Idlib area from combat operations, and protect the lives of at least three million people living there.

UN General Assembly

- Must attribute full responsibility to the Syrian regime for the displacement of over one-third of the Syrian people, including legal and material responsibility, and must also ensure that victims receive full compensation for the heavy losses they have suffered, including the return of looted properties to their owners.

OHCHR

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations concerning the violations committed by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces.

UN special Envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of the crimes and massacres and the main culprits in the collapse of agreements on de-escalation zones, and thus declare the collapse and the end of the political process in full, as well as holding the Syrian-Russian alliance responsible for this.
- Disclose to the Syrian people Russia's pursuit of full control of Syrian territory by force, and its public desire to rehabilitate the current regime, which means the creation of a political solution which satisfies only its own interests.

Donor countries and OCHA

- The international community and donor countries must ensure basic living conditions, pay attention to the needs of and help provide care for thousands of displaced Syrians who are displaced in the north-western Idlib suburbs, to ensure they are furnished with the most pressing basic needs, primarily water, food, housing, clothing and medical care.



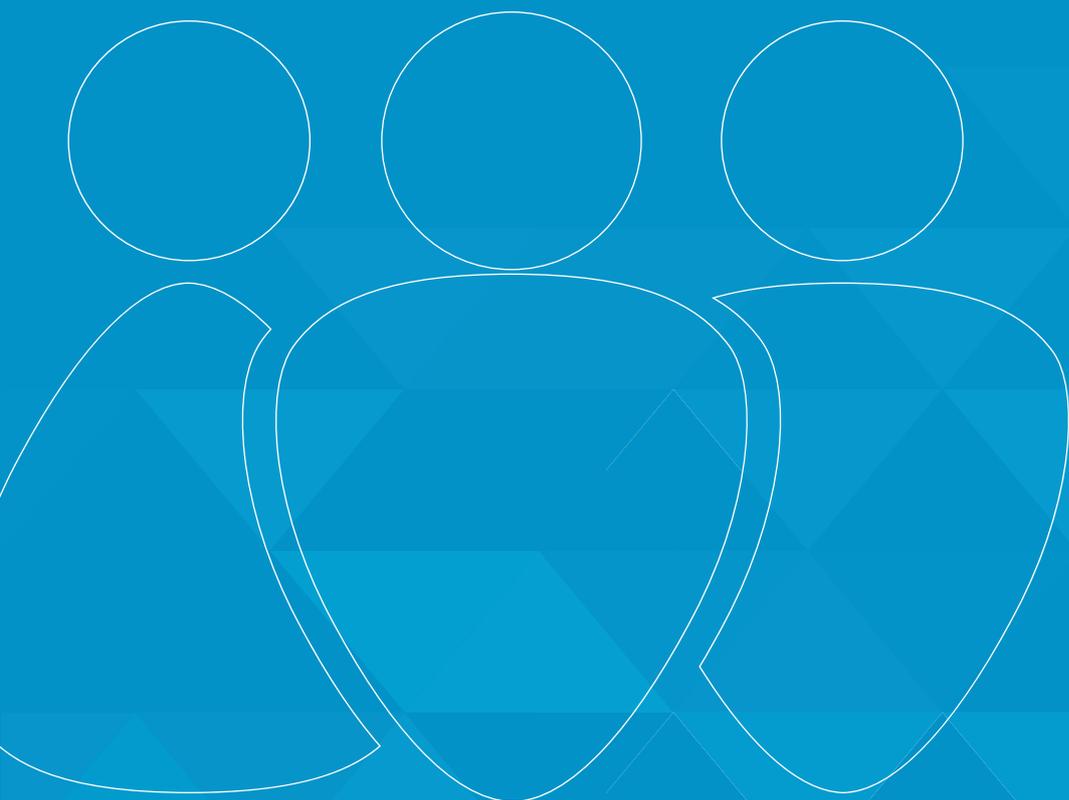
Russian forces

- Stop committing all types of war crimes in Syria.
- Reconstruct what was destroyed by the Russian war machine.
- Compensate victims financially and morally, and apologize publicly.
- Commit to compliance with the outcome of the Sochi Summit and not repeat the scenario of violations we have seen in the agreements of de-escalation zone.
- Stop supporting the war crimes and crimes against humanity which the Syrian regime has been committing for nine years, with the current support being categorized as direct involvement in these crimes.
- Contribute to the assistance of displaced persons who were displaced by the Russian war machine from the Eastern Ghouta in the Damascus Suburbs governorate and the governorates of Homs and Daraa, and protect the residents of those areas who remained from the arrests, persecution, kidnappings and enforced disappearances being perpetrated by the Syrian Regime and the Iranian militias.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

We offer our sincere condolences and gratitude to all local people and activists, whose contributions have enriched this report.





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