The Sixth Annual Report on Russian Forces' Violations Since the Start of Russia's Military Intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, Some of Which Amount to Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes

Russia's Wholly Illegitimate Military Intervention Has Resulted in the Death of 6,910 Civilians, Including 2,030 Children, and Targeted 1,231 Vital Facilities

Thursday 30 September 2021

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. The Illegitimacy of Russia's Military Intervention in Syria:

On this day, six years ago, Russia announced its military intervention in the internal armed conflict in Syria, in which it sided with the Syrian regime, with Russian forces immediately launching ferocious bombardment that has killed civilians since the first day of Russia's military intervention, and continuing to routinely commit numerous violations up to the present day.

Russia bases the supposed legitimacy of its intervention in Syria on the grounds that it came at the request of the Syrian regime led by Bashar al Assad, which Russia asserts is a legitimate regime and speaks in the name of the state; Russia also claims that the legitimacy of its presence is based on UN Security Council Resolution No. 2249 issued in November 2015, that is, nearly two months after Russia's intervention; this resolution called on "Member States that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures [...] on the territory under the control of ISIL also known as Da'esh, in Syria and Iraq, to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts [...]."

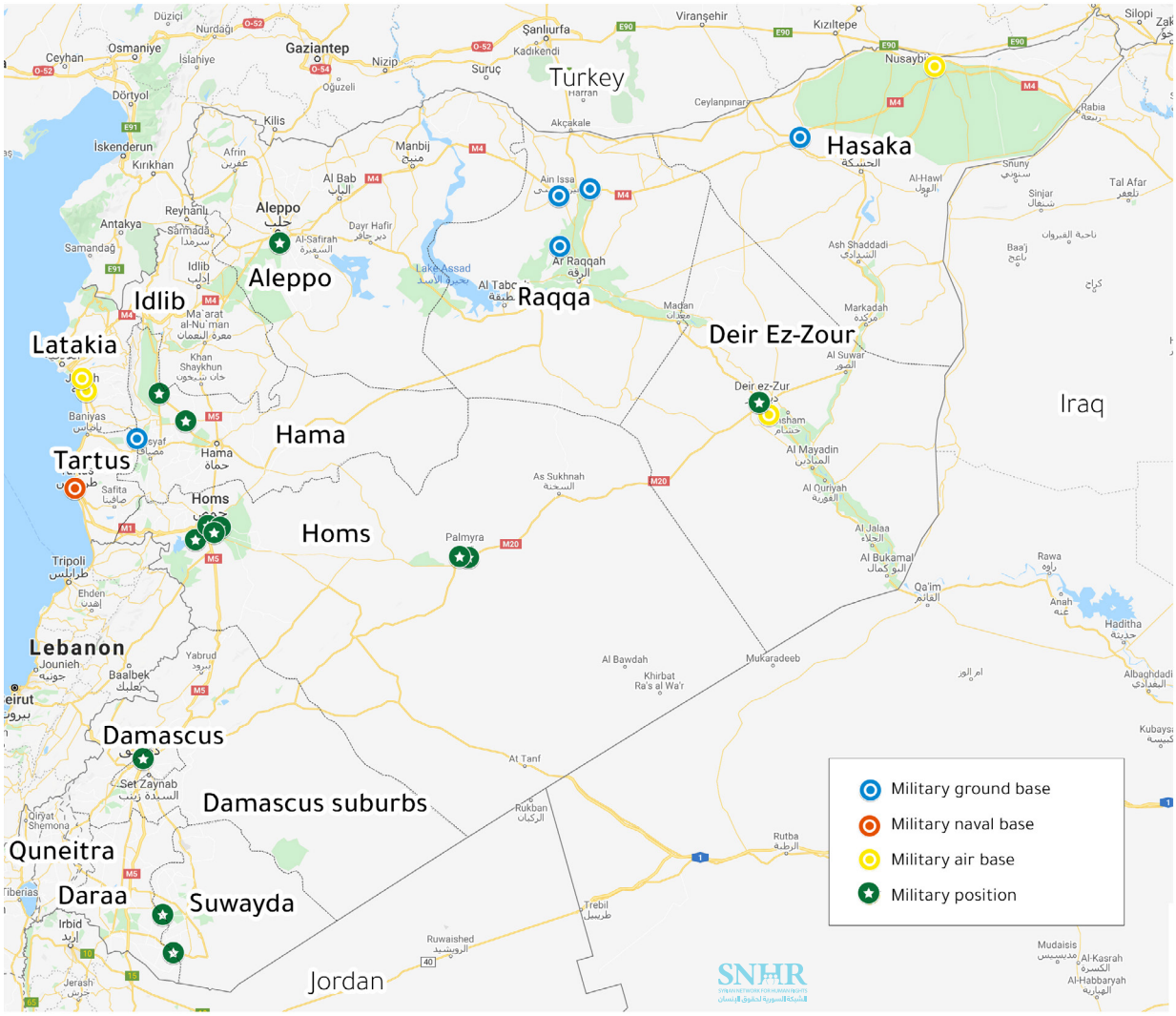
Russia has repeatedly cited these two points as legitimizing its presence on dozens of occasions, and has harnessed a number of jurists and journalists to write articles validating its military intervention in Syria; despite these efforts, however, we believe that Russia's military intervention in Syria is wholly illegitimate for the following main reasons:

1. The approval of the state is not sufficient cause to validate the intervention through its request. Rather, the authority that extends such a request must be legitimate, with the Syrian regime lacking any such legitimacy, having seized power through sham elections staged under coercion, threat, repression and intimidation by the security services, and with no free and fair elections ever having taken place under its rule, and no constitution legally admissible under international law having been written; it is a dictatorial regime that is hostile to the most fundamental principles of human rights. In addition to all these facts, the Syrian regime is involved in committing multiple crimes against humanity against the Syrian people, as noted by the reports issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI), with these and numerous other points refuting the supposed legitimacy of the current Syrian regime.
2. Russia's military intervention has violated Russia's obligations under international law; by intervening alongside a regime involved in committing crimes against humanity, including torture, the use of chemical weapons, enforced disappearance, and others, Russia is violating many peremptory norms of international law, making it an accomplice in the violations committed by the Syrian regime rather than an ally of a legitimate authority.
3. The Russian forces themselves have been involved in committing thousands of horrific violations in Syria, some of which, including extrajudicial killing and forced displacement, constitute crimes against humanity, while some others, such as bombing hospitals and Civil Defense centers, constitute war crimes; this culpability is proven in many international reports, as well as in reports and statements by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR).

For all these reasons, we believe that the Russian military intervention is wholly illegitimate. In any case, Russia does not care about international law, but at the same time it seeks to justify its actions and intervention in front of its supporters through invoking international law, since Russian support for the Syrian regime began in the early days of the Syrian popular uprising in March 2011 against the Syrian regime, by providing it with expertise, advice, and weapons, by repeatedly using its veto at the Security Council (Russia has used its veto 16 times in favor of the Syrian regime), and by permanently voting at the Human Rights Council against resolutions condemning the violence and brutality of the Syrian regime, and even mobilizing Russia's allies to vote for the Syrian regime.

Russian support for the Syrian regime has extended to various fields, including justifying the regime's use of chemical weapons, questioning the reports of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, exploiting cross-border humanitarian aid (we have issued two extensive reports on this issue), and harnessing media to promote propaganda in favor of the Syrian regime, attempting to improve its image of or flatly denying its violations.

Russian forces have been deployed in various areas of Syria; the following map shows the most notable Russian military bases and positions in Syria:



The details of the bases and positions included in the map above can be seen via the interactive map link.

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

> Russia has made a terrible mistake by standing by a repressive, authoritarian, sectarian regime, and involving itself in supporting and defending it, with Russia's own forces even committing violations amounting to crimes against humanity. Russia must re-examine its illegitimate military intervention in Syria, launch investigations into the violations it has committed, and compensate the victims. There will be no stability in Syria and no return of refugees with the survival of the current Syrian regime, so support for it must end, and pressure must be put on it to reach a genuine political transition.

II. Report's Methodology:

This report provides an update on the record of the most notable human rights violations committed by the Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, up until September 30, 2021. It also includes examples of the most notable incidents recorded by the Syrian Network for Human Rights in the last year, i.e. between September 30, 2020, and September 30, 2021.
In the course of the SNHR team's ongoing documentation of incidents and reports, carried out via an extensive network comprising dozens of various sources, which has been gradually increased through building relations with a wide variety of credible individuals since the start of our work in 2011 to date, whenever we receive information, or hear some news about a violation via the internet or media outlets, we work to follow up on these reports and try to verify them and collect as much evidence and information as possible in every case. Moreover, our methodology in assigning responsibility to Russian forces in relation to specific incidents relies on a number of determinants, including cross-checking large quantities of information and statements published by Russian officials, in addition to cross-checking a large number of first-hand accounts, most of which come from central signal operators who work on tracking the movement of the warplanes that take off from Syrian or Russian airbases and determining their course. In many attacks, observatory operators are able to specify the models of these warplanes and their flight codes, as well as monitoring some instructions issued by the ground military bases. In many cases, we have also noted the difference in the destructive power seen in Russian attacks compared to that inflicted in attacks by Syrian regime forces in order to assign responsibility to Russian forces for specific attacks, in addition to noting that the Russian air force has the ability to fly and carry out bombing raids at night and to use high-precision ground weapons. For more details on our working methodology, please visit the following link.

Within the past year, the Russian forces intensified their ground attacks; while these were previously carried out mostly by Syrian regime forces, Russian forces have begun using ground weapons in their bombardment far more than in previous years, with this bombardment differing from that carried out by the air force, in that while we can often identify aerial attacks by Russian warplanes according to the shape of the warplane, the type of munitions used, and other factors, in the case of ground bombardment, the process of identifying the perpetrators and assigning responsibility to a particular party, whether this is the Syrian regime or Russia, is more complicated, even if the responsibility is largely shared between the Russian forces or Syrian regime forces, which are partners in an alliance and bear joint responsibility, with the majority of the Syrian regime's weapons being Russian, and the Syrian regime being the party that brought about the Russian military intervention.

This report contains four first-hand accounts that we've collected through speaking directly with eyewitnesses, with none of these being cited from any open sources. We explained the purpose of these interviews beforehand to the eyewitnesses, who gave us permission to use the information they provided without us offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR endeavors always to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering often traumatic violations as much as possible, and to provide assurances that we will conceal the identity of any witness who prefers to use an alias in order to protect witnesses' confidentiality and prevent them from being harassed or persecuted. All our procedures are carried out in accordance with SNHR's internal protocols, on which basis we have worked for years, and we strive constantly to develop these through our experience to ensure the highest standards of care and reliability.

The investigations included in this report have proved conclusively that the targeted locations were in civilian areas where no military bases or armories for the Armed Opposition/ Syrian National Army, ISIS, or Hay'at Tahrir al Sham were situated during or even before the attack. Also, Russian forces failed to issue any warnings to civilians prior to any of these attacks, despite such warnings being required under international humanitarian law.

SNHR has analyzed numerous videos and photos posted online or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some of the videos posted by activists showed the sites of the attacks, dead bodies, injuries inflicted, and the large extent of the destruction caused by the bombardment.

We retain copies of all the videos and photos included in this report in a confidential electronic database and in 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.

Russia has always denied carrying out any attacks against civilians, and its foreign minister has repeatedly stated that Russia's intervention is legitimate since it took place at the request of the Syrian regime and to fight ISIS, further asserting that Russia is committed to the rules of international humanitarian law; in reality, however, Russia has yet to launch a single investigation into any of its violations in Syria, despite numerous international and local reports, as well as reports by the New York Times, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, all of which documented numerous incidents in which Russian forces were involved in violations that constitute war crimes.

Since the start of Russia's military intervention, the SNHR has worked to monitor and document the violations committed by the Russian forces, including killing, destruction, and forced displacement, and we have published a large number of news reports on these violations. We have also issued 92 reports since September 2015 in which we detailed various types of violations perpetrated by Russian forces in Syria; these reports can be found at the following link:

The information contained in this report only represents the bare minimum of incidents which we have been able to document, and of the severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications of all these events on the Syrian people.

III. The Russian Regime Has Declared on Several Occasions That Syria Is an Arena for Testing Russian Weapons:

In the sixth year of Russia's military intervention, we documented Russian forces continuing to bring in new weapons, including warplanes and artillery, and using these in Syria; this has been clearly evident during the recently launched campaign by Russia in partnership with Syrian regime forces against the Jabal al Zaweya area and its vicinity (since the beginning of June 2021), in which it relied on bombardment using ground weapons. During that campaign, we have documented the deployment of munitions whose use we hadn't previously documented in the Syrian conflict, which are highly accurate and have a horrendously destructive impact.

Remnants of a munition used in a Russian/ Syrian regime ground attack on Ihsem town - July 17, 2021 - Photo by: Kenana Hindawi

Russia has used the Syrian territory and population as a ground for testing, developing and promoting its weapons. The Russian regime has repeatedly announced and even boasted of carrying out tests of Russian weapons in Syria, including warplanes, helicopters, robots and various missiles. The following are the most prominent of these statements, all of which are issued to serve the interest of Russian arms companies; furthermore, according to many press and research reports, these companies have a close relationship with the Russian President, his Foreign Minister and many senior officials in the Russian regime.

On November 7, 2020, Russian media outlets published a statement by Sergey Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defense, stating that Russia's military campaign in Syria was a test of the effectiveness of almost all of the Russian army's weapons, as well as allowing Russia to test the effectiveness of its military education system.

On December 7, 2020, Sergey Chemezov, CEO of the Russian Rostec Corporation, announced that Kalashnikov attack drones had been tested during Russia's combat missions in Syria.

On April 16, 2021, the Russian Interfax Agency published a statement by the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, which quoted him as saying that for Russia, Syria is still an arena for testing its military weapons and the capabilities of its soldiers.

On April 17, 2021, Russian media outlets, including Novosti Agency, revealed that Russian forces had used a suicide drone in Syria several years ago against what they called terrorists.

On May 25, 2021, TASS news agency reported statements by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the opening of a defense conference in the city of Sochi in which he revealed that more than 85% of the commanders of the Russian army's formations and regiments had obtained combat experience in Syria.

On August 5, 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, announced via the Russian Ministry of Defense's Zvezda TV channel that the duration of the flight mission required to assess the effectiveness of the SU-34's weapons had been reduced to a third of its original length, and that this had been tested during the fighting in Syria.

On August 14, 2021, the Russian Tass Agency quoted Major General Alexander Maksimtsev, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Russia's Aerospace Forces for military-political work, as saying that "The number of sniper pilots has increased in the Russian Aerospace Forces due to the military operation in Syria." We note that this was not the first time Russian military officials have spoken about the impact of the military operations that they've carried out in Syria in enhancing their combat capability and developing their weapons.

On August 30, 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said, in an exclusive interview for the Solovyov-Live YouTube Channel, "All of the latest Russian weapon systems have been tested in the counter-terror operation in Syria." He added, "In Syria, where we have tested over 320 [types of weapon], in fact, we have tested all the weapons, except for easy-to-understand versions."

On August 28, 2021, the Russian Sputnik news agency quoted officials from the Russian Rostec Corporation that the external structures that the Russian army has tested in Syria have increased the military units' combat capabilities.

Dozens of Russian media reports also have talked about dozens of the weapons that Russia has used in Syria, such as Kalibr missiles, Mi-28 helicopters, Iskander-E missiles, Su-35 fighters and drones.

Krasnopol is a model of the new weapons used by Russia on Syrian territory:

The Krasnopol shell is a Russian weapon first manufactured at the Leningrad Kirov Plant in Russia in 1986. The Krasnopol shell is characterized by its accuracy in striking the target, great destructive impact and relatively high cost - about 3,500 US dollars per shell. The Russian forces have used these shells extensively in their recent campaign on the Jabal al Zaweya area and its vicinity in Idlib suburbs.

The Krasnopol, a 152mm artillery shell, weighs about 50.8 kg, with the explosive content weighing about 20 kg. It has a range of 20 km, and it is fired using Msta-S or Msta-T artillery, moving in an arc trajectory that starts like that of any artillery shell or missile until reaching its peak, which is when the shell begins to aim precisely at a laser spot, illuminated by a laser designator located on the side of the shell; this laser spot is created in one of the following two ways: (1) a P-12 or P-15 laser rangefinder, or (2) a Russian Orlan-10 reconnaissance plane.

The shell body consists of the following sections:

The first section: Detonator to ignite the explosive charge, which is either an impact detonator that explodes as soon as it touches any surface, or a time detonator by which the place of its detonation is calibrated.

The second section: Laser designator, whose task is to locate the laser spot on the observed target and send data to the guidance device to direct the front wings towards the target.

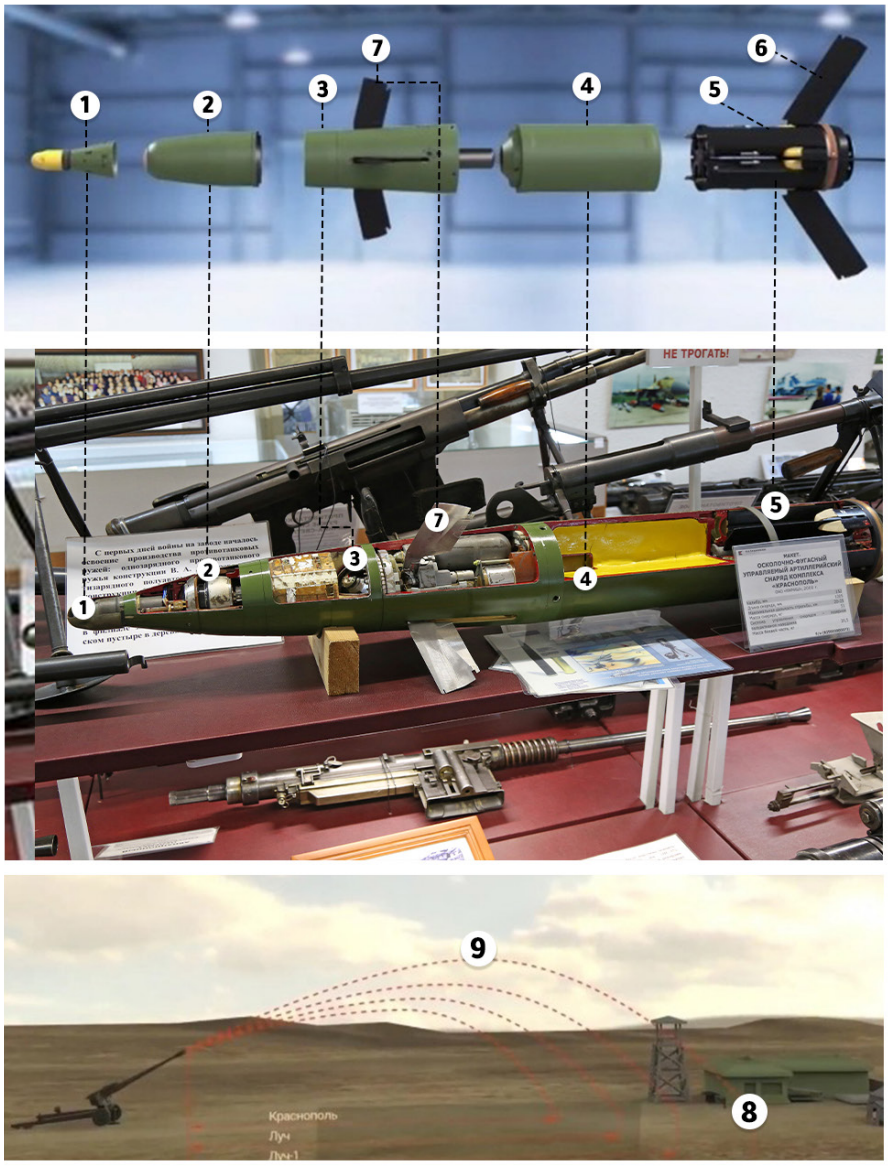
The third section: Guidance system consisting of a group of electrical circuits and capacitors with the aim of guiding the shell toward a laser light spot.

The fourth section: Trotyl explosive charge.

The fifth section: Compartment containing propellant with a jet at the rear end, which is a frame containing holes distributed in succession, the task of which is to direct the shell towards the target.

On the shell's body there are two sets of wings; the task of the first set located at the front of the shell (often consisting of four wings) is to contribute to directing the shell towards the target, while the task of the second set, located at the end of the shell body (often consisting of six wings), is to maintain the stability of the shell on its orientation axis.

The following diagram shows an illustration of the Russian Krasnopol shell sections:



1. Detonator to ignite the explosive charge
2. Laser designator
3. Guidance system consisting of a group of electrical circuits and capacitors with the aim of guiding the shell toward a laser light spot
4. TNT explosive charge
5. Compartment containing propellant with a jet at the rear end contributes to guiding the shell towards the target
6. Front wings that contribute to guiding the shell towards the target
7. Back wings whose purpose is to preserve the stability of the shell on its axis of orientation
8. Arc path of a shell equipped with the Krasnopol laser guidance system
9. Track peak

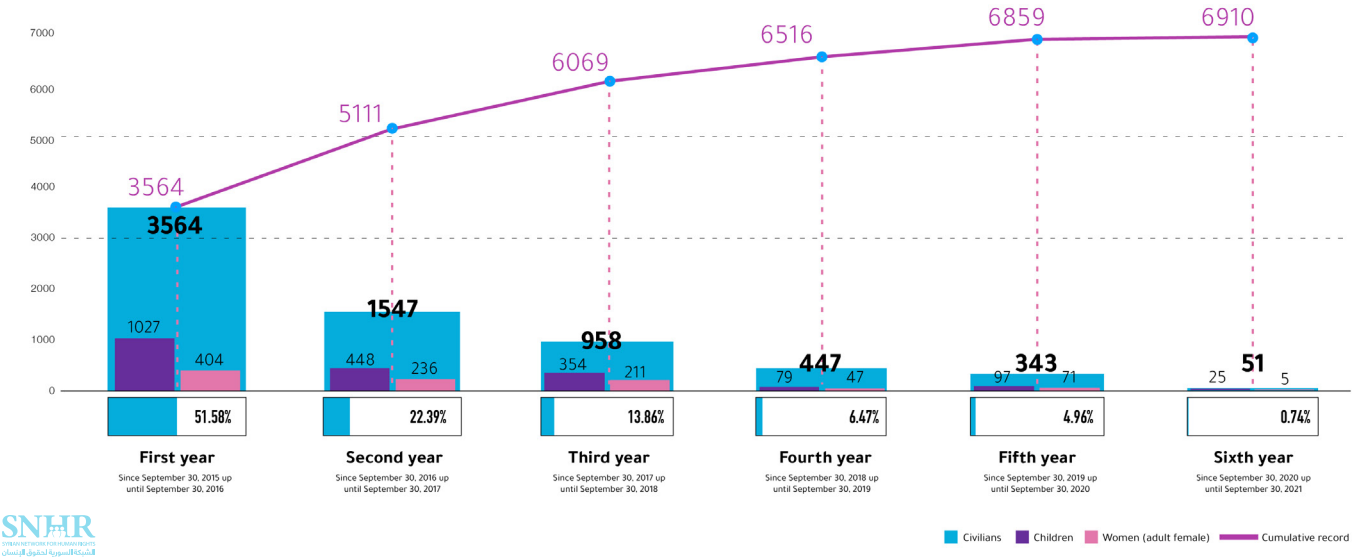
We note that we have also documented the Russian forces using the Krasnopol guidance circuit on other models of shells to achieve more accurate strikes and a greater destructive impact.

IV. Analysis of the Record of the Most Notable Violations Committed by Russian Forces Since Russia's Military Intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, to September 30, 2021, According to SNHR's Database:

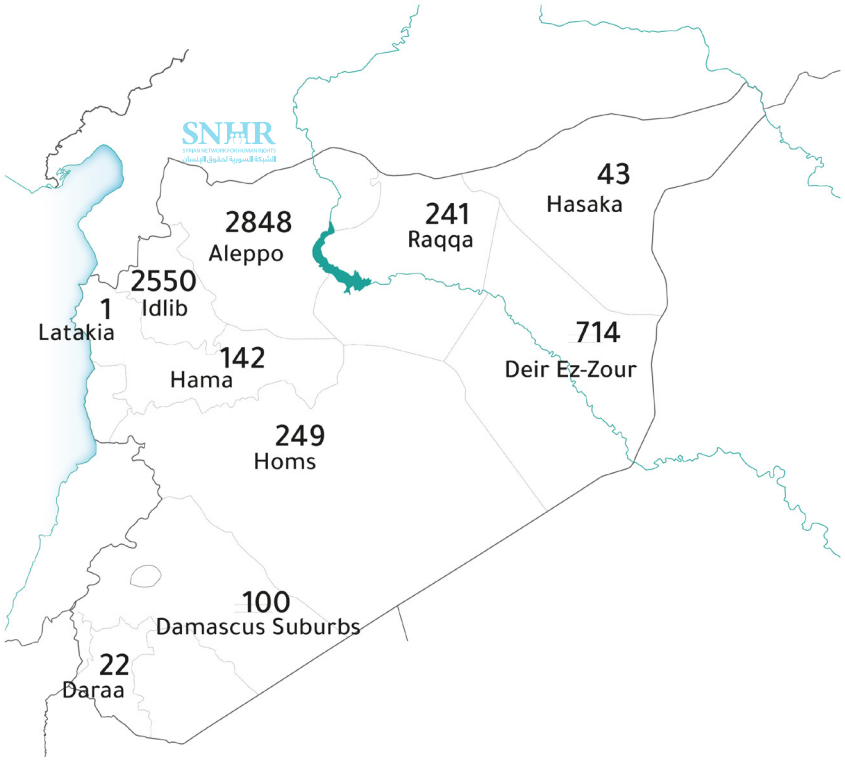
A. Civilian death toll

SNHR has documented the deaths of 6,910 civilians, including 2,030 children and 974 women (adult female), at the hands of Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

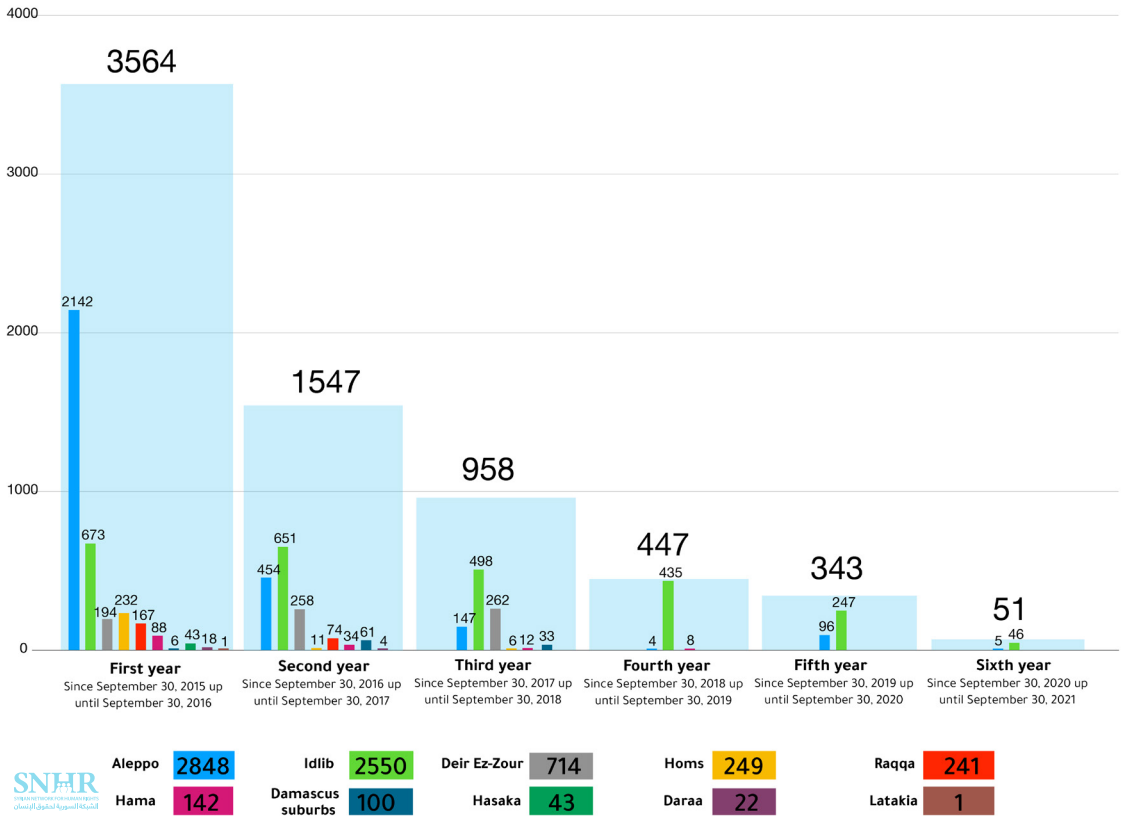
The death toll of civilian victims killed by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The death toll of civilian victims killed by Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The death toll of civilian victims killed by Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

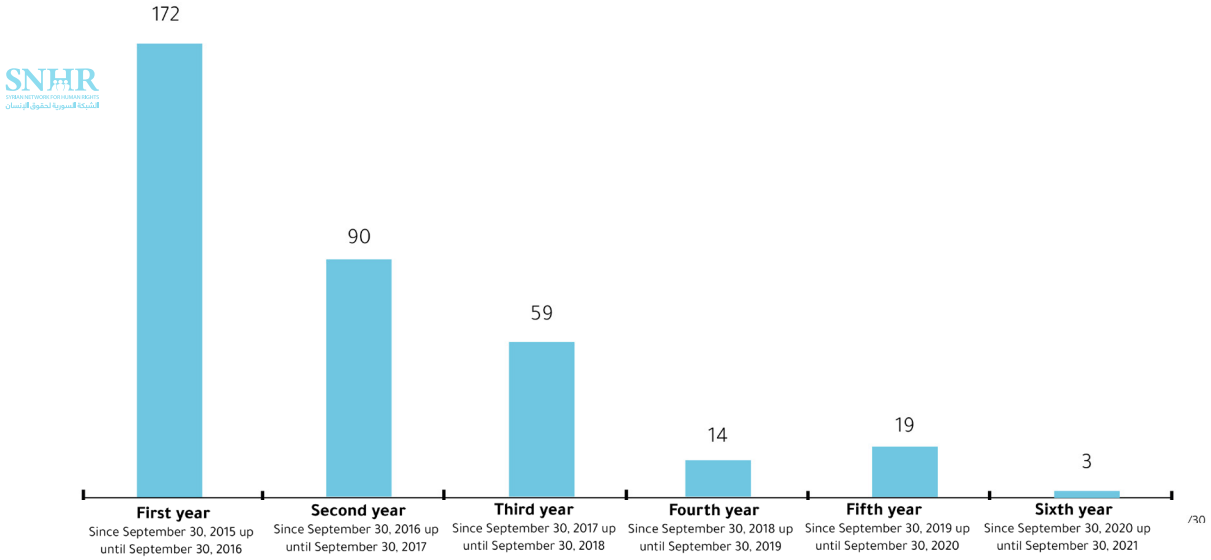


The above record shows that the first year of the Russian intervention saw the highest death toll, accounting for approximately 52% of the total record, followed by the second year of the intervention with approximately 23%. Aleppo governorate saw the highest death toll, followed by Idlib governorate, with statistics indicating that nearly 80% of the total death toll occurred in both governorates - approximately 42% in Aleppo and approximately 38% in Idlib.

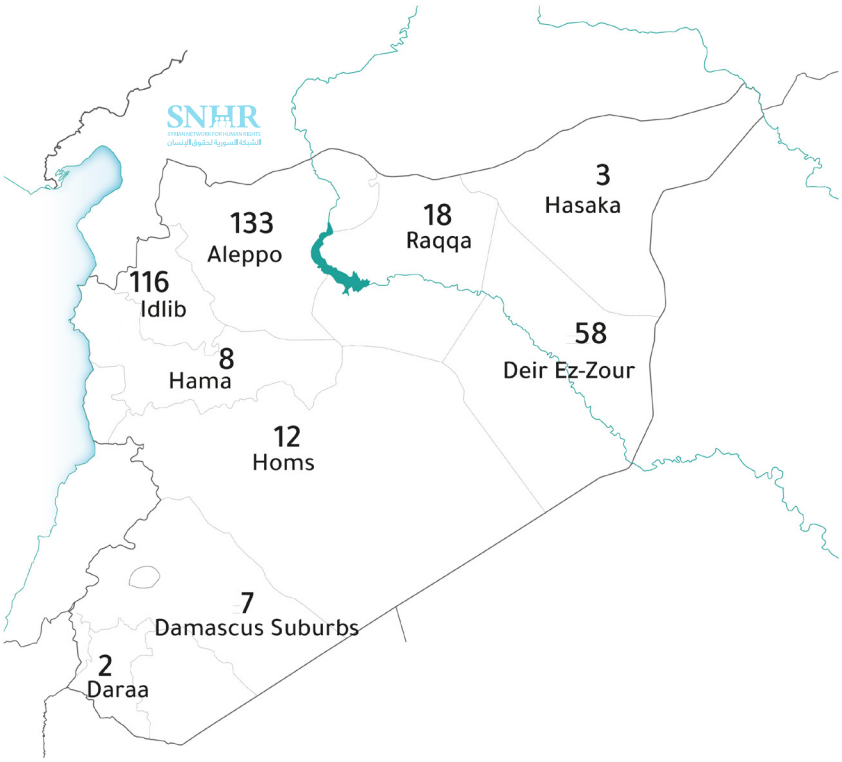
B. Record of massacres:

SNHR has documented at least 357 massacres committed by Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

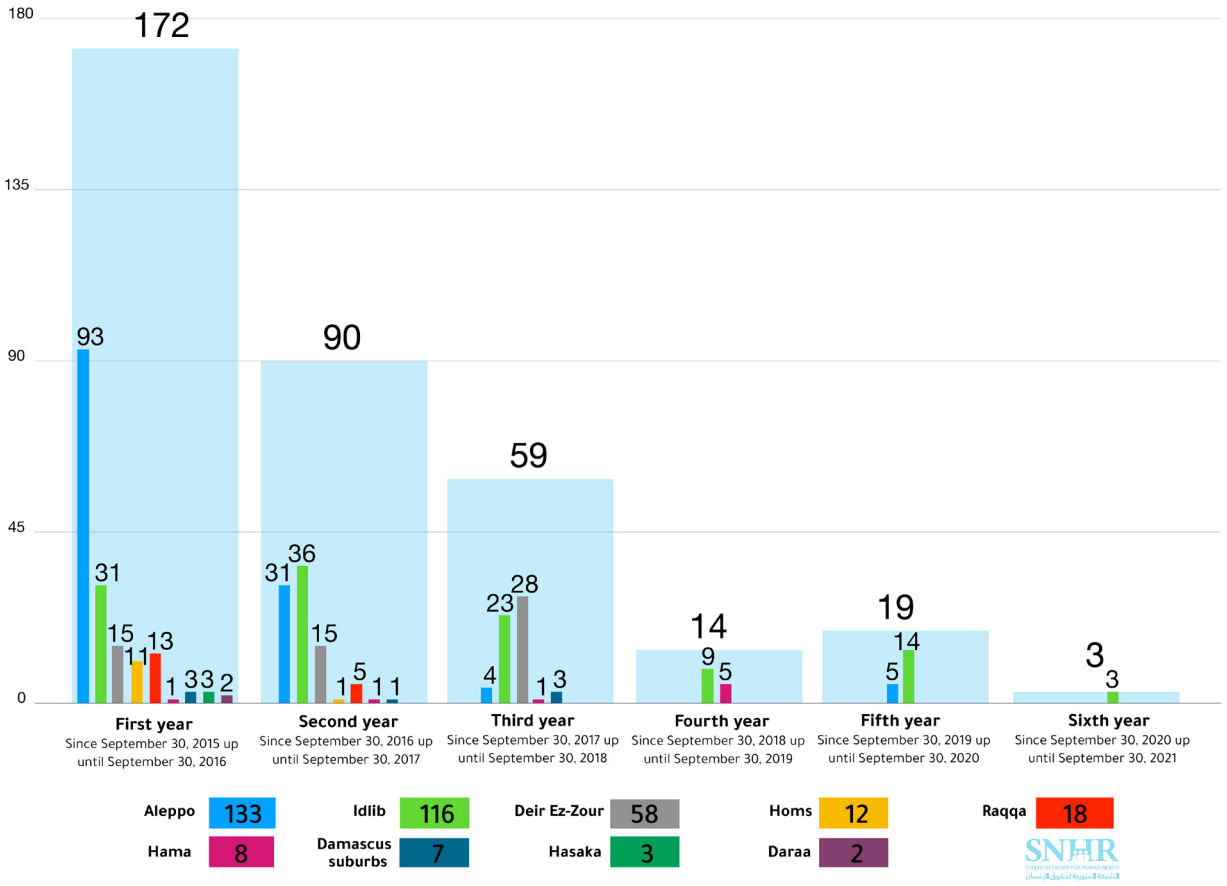
The record of massacres committed by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The record of massacres committed by Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The record of massacres committed by Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

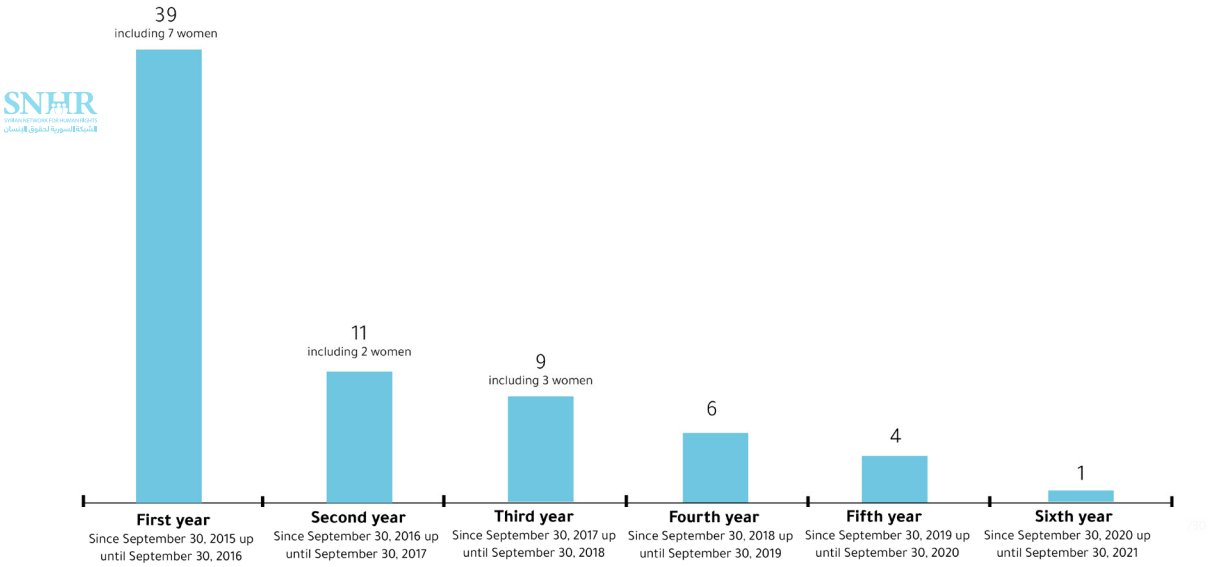


Statistics of massacres committed by Russian forces in Syria indicate that the first year of Russia's intervention saw the highest number of massacres, reaching 172 in total - approximately 49% of the entire record - this record then gradually decreased over the six years of its intervention to date. The largest number of massacres have been committed in the governorates of Aleppo, then Idlib, then Deir Ez-Zour.

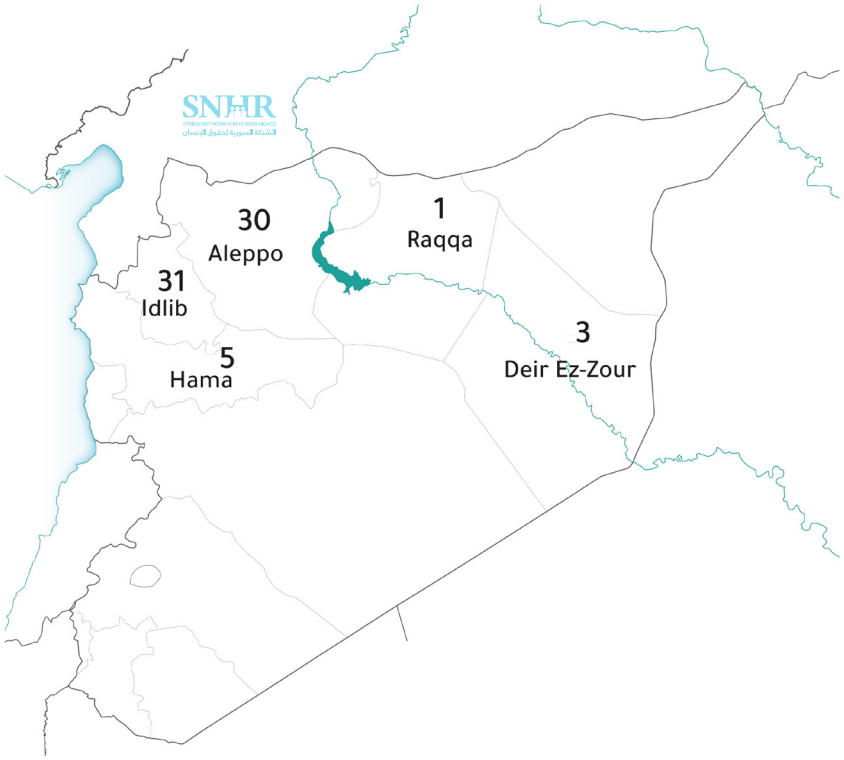
C. The death toll of victims among medical personnel:

SNHR has documented the deaths of 70 medical personnel, including 12 women (adult female), killed at the hands of Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

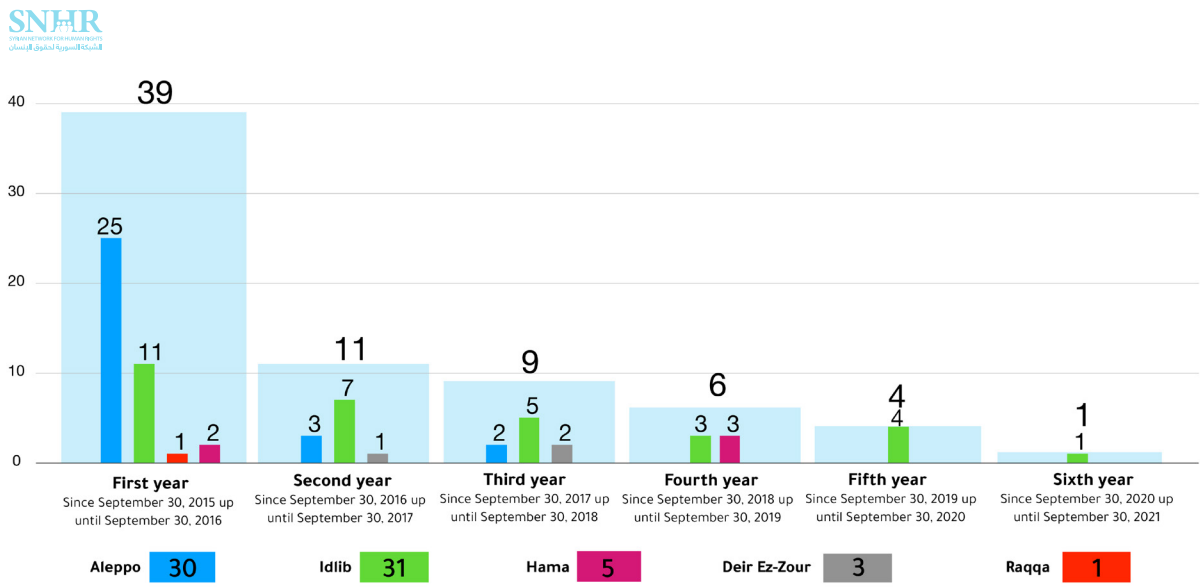
The death toll of victims among medical personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The death toll of victims among medical personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The death toll of victims among medical personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

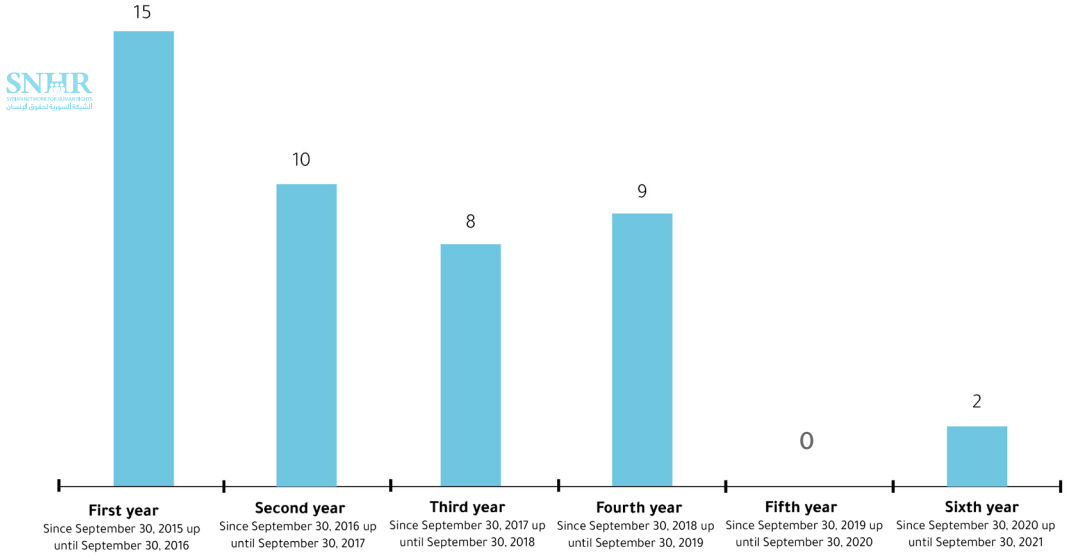


The above-mentioned statistic confirms the role played by the Russian forces in the deterioration of the medical situation in Syria by killing medical personnel, and causing the displacement of hundreds of others for fear of being killed. The highest annual death toll of medical personnel was seen in the first year of Russia's military intervention, reaching 39 victims, mostly in Aleppo governorate (25 victims), followed by Idlib governorate (11 victims).

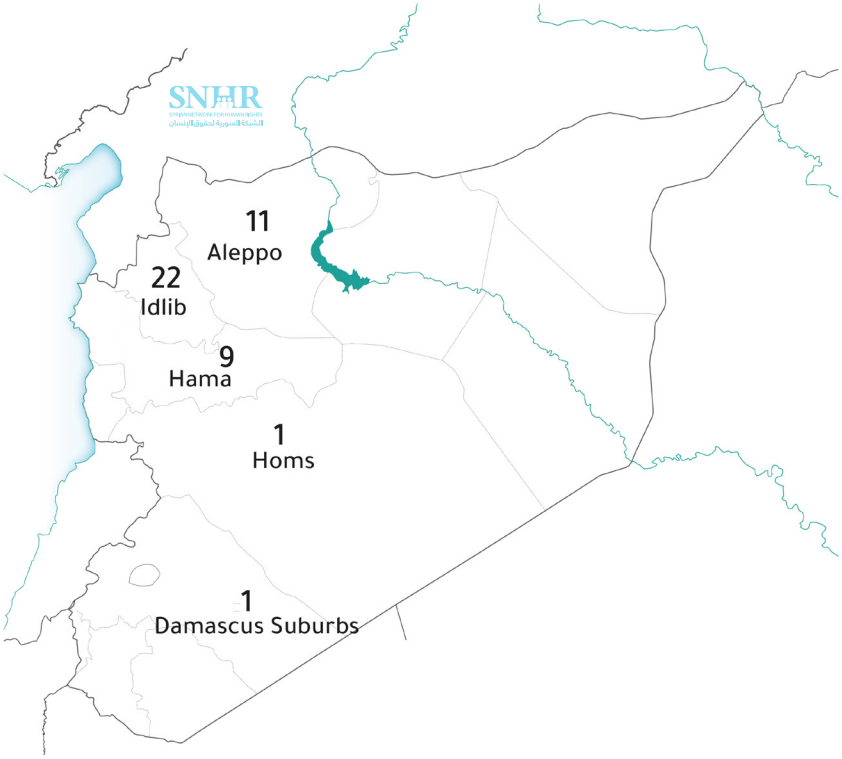
D. The death toll of victims among Civil Defense personnel:

SNHR has documented the deaths of 44 Civil Defense personnel, killed at the hands of Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

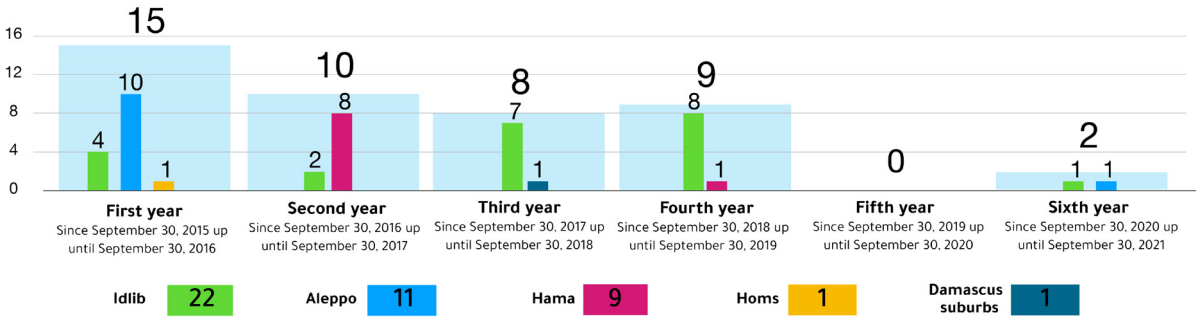
The death toll of victims among Civil Defense personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The death toll of victims among Civil Defense personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The death toll of victims among Civil Defense personnel killed by Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

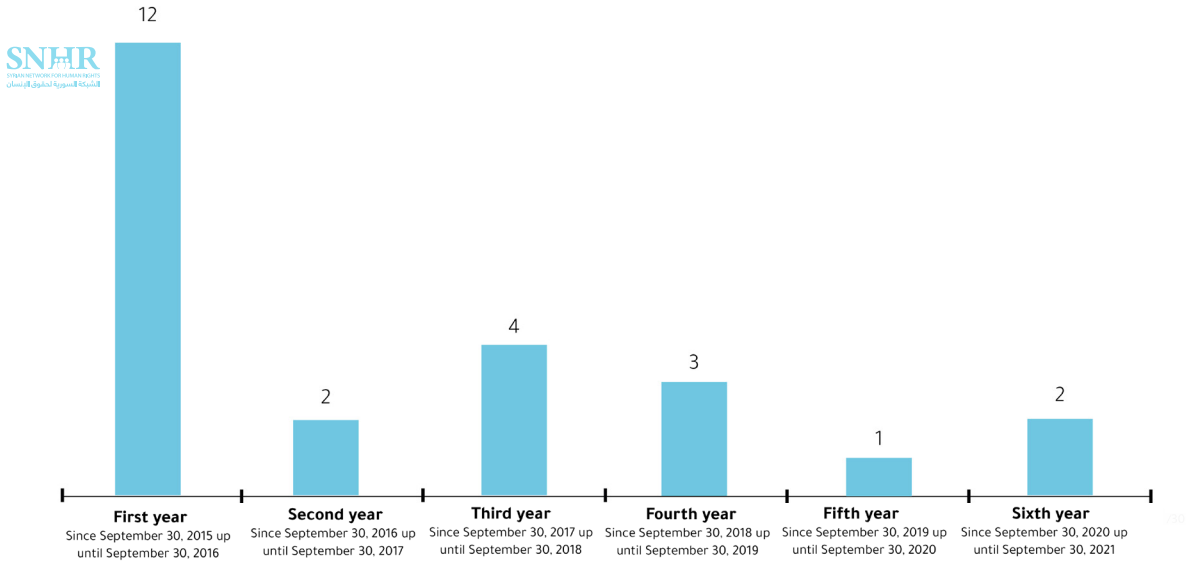


The Russian forces have targeted the Civil Defense Organization, whether by bombarding its headquarters buildings or through the double-tap airstrike policy, which has inflicted a high death toll, especially among Civil Defense personnel and paramedics, as is demonstrated by the above-mentioned records. These statistics show that the first year of Russia's military intervention saw the highest death toll (15 victims), followed by the second year (10 victims). The highest death toll of victims was in Idlib governorate, specifically in the fourth and third years of Russia's military intervention respectively, then in Aleppo governorate, where most of the deaths were seen in the first year of Russia's military intervention.

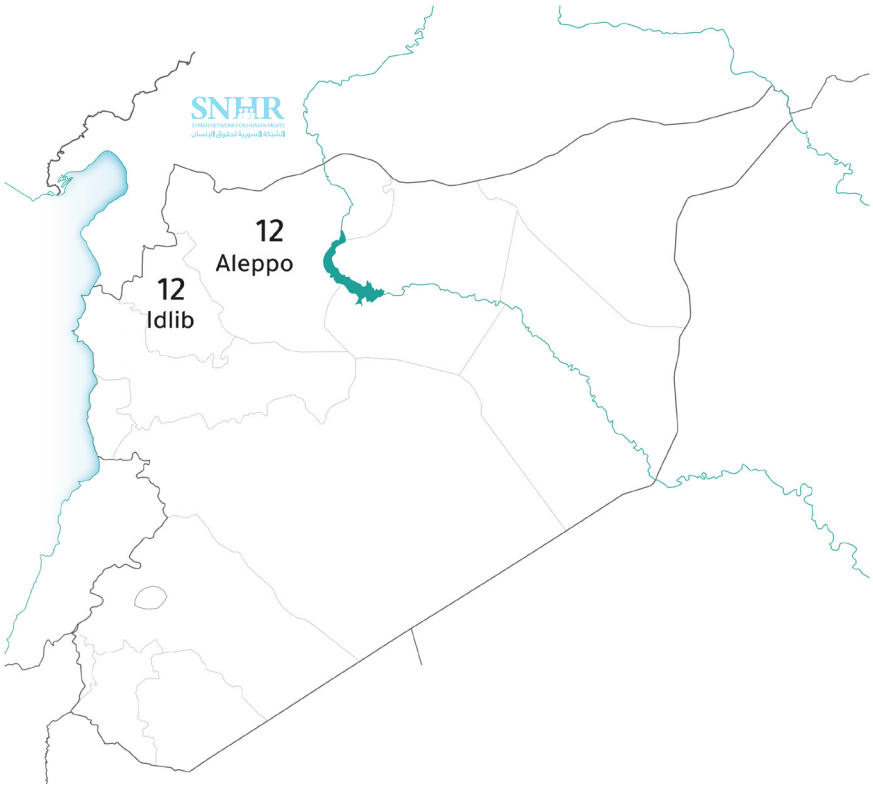
E. The death toll of victims among media workers:

SNHR has documented the deaths of 24 media workers at the hands of Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

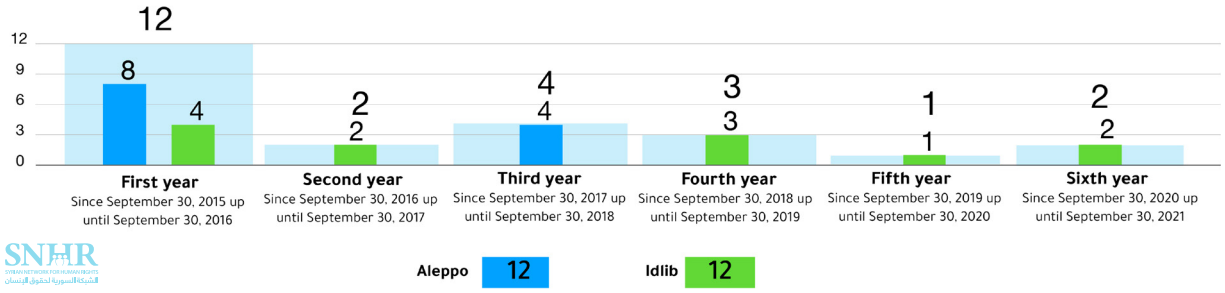
The death toll of victims among media workers killed by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The death toll of victims among media workers killed by Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The death toll of victims among media workers killed by Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

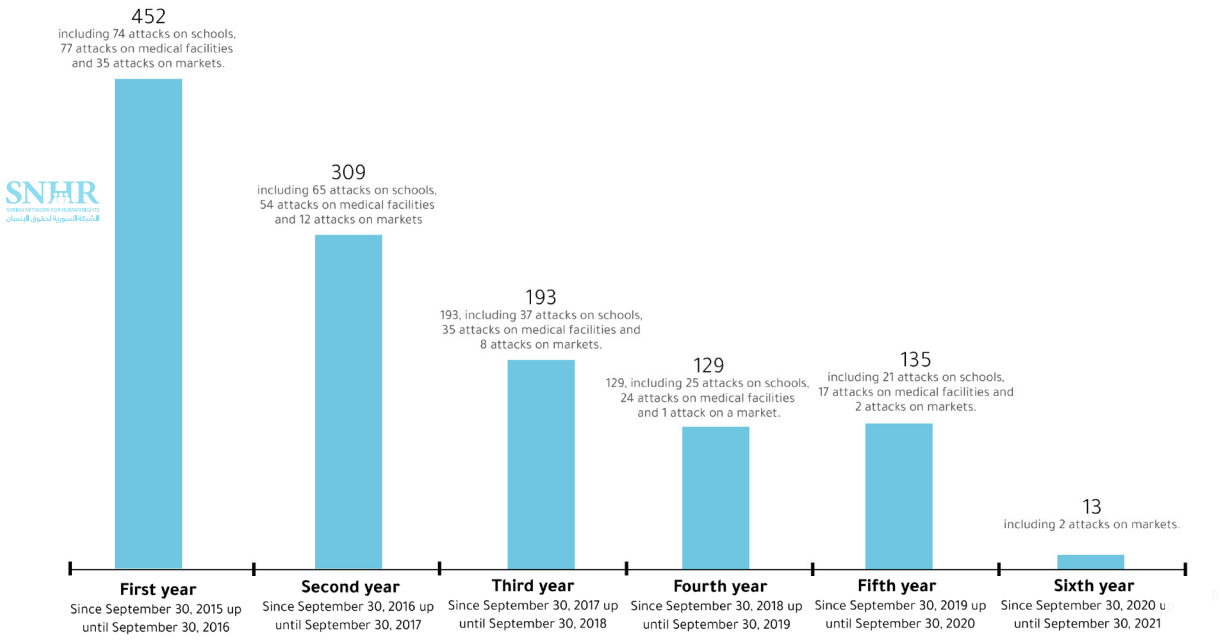


The statistics above show that Russian forces targeted media workers primarily in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib, with the total death toll being distributed equally between these two governorates. The first year of Russia's military intervention saw half of its total death toll of media workers, with 12 victims, followed by the third year with four victims.

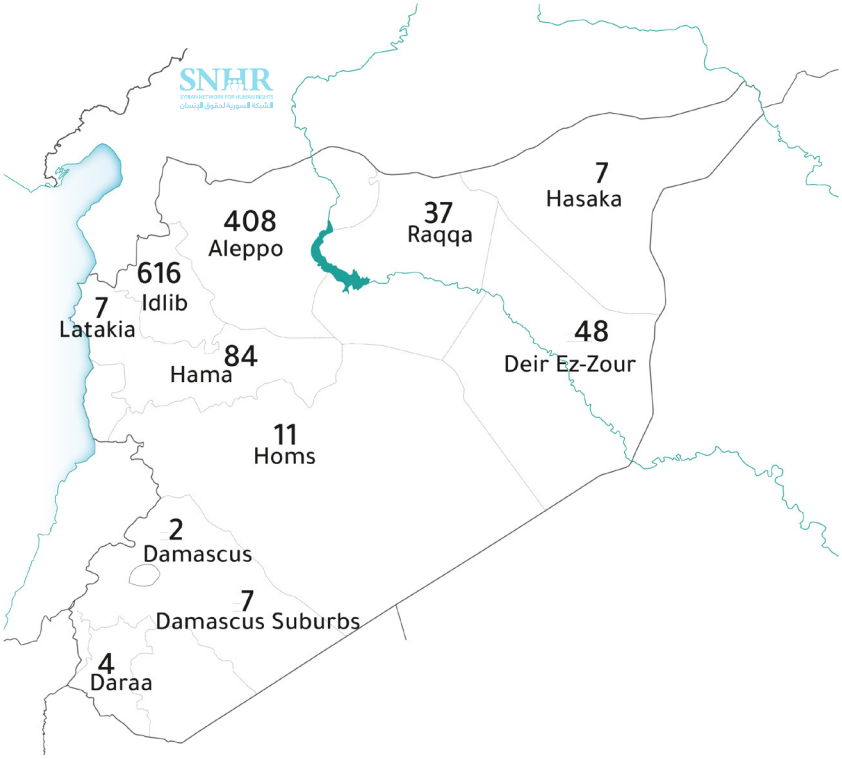
F. Record of attacks on vital civilian facilities:

SNHR has documented at least 1,231 attacks on vital civilian facilities by Russian forces, including 222 attacks on schools, 207 attacks on medical facilities and 60 attacks on markets, since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

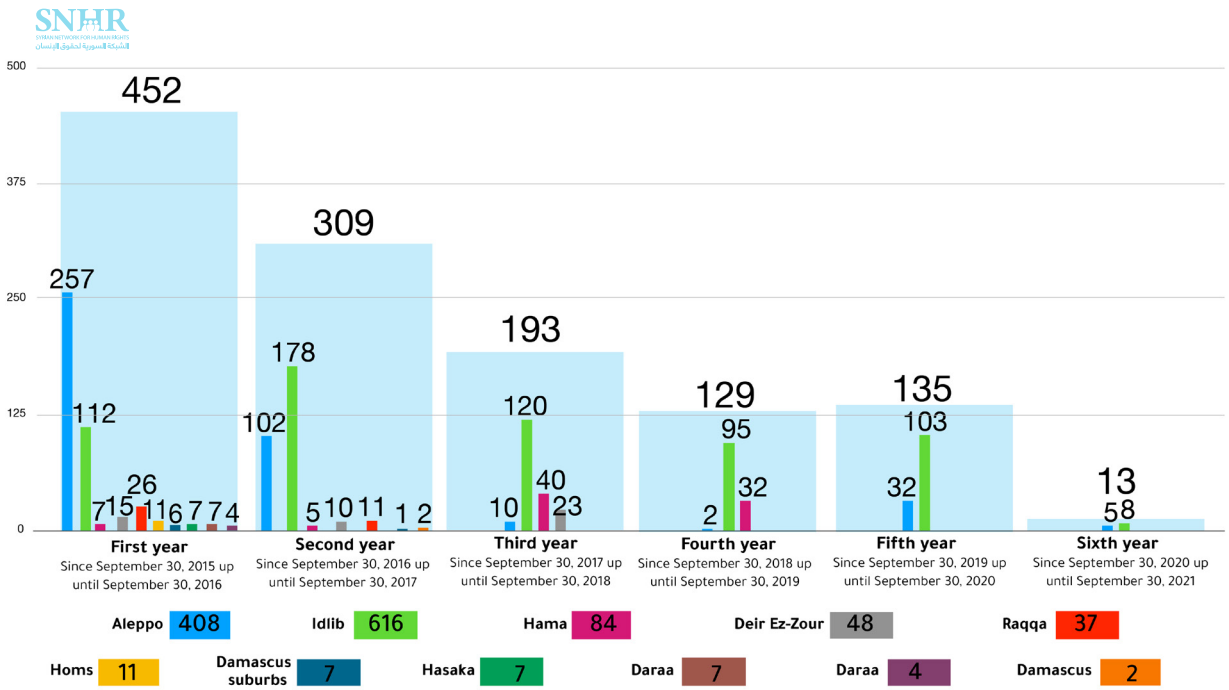
The record of attacks on vital civilian facilities at the hands of Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



The record of attacks on vital civilian facilities at the hands of Russian forces was distributed across governorates as follows:



The record of attacks on vital civilian facilities at the hands of Russian forces was distributed by year across governorates as follows:

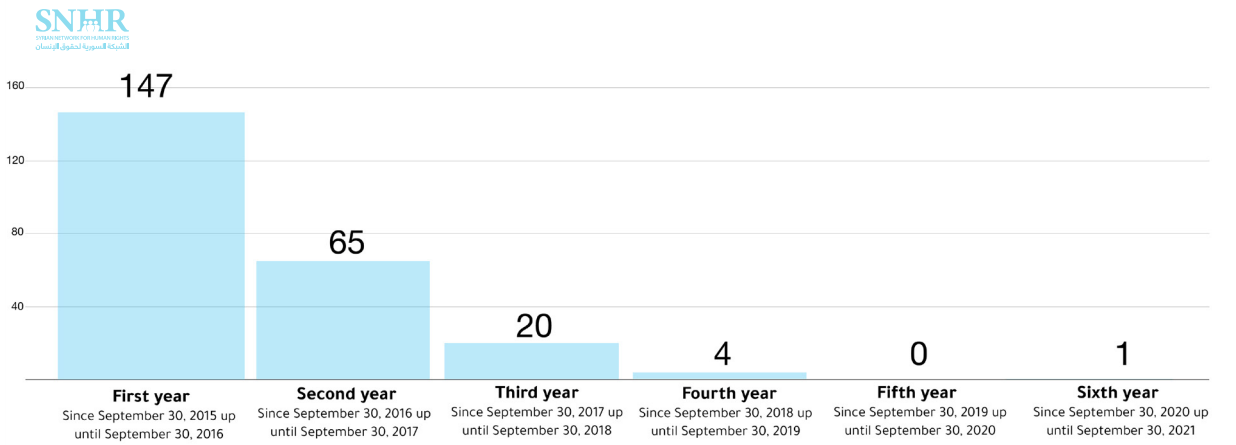


The above record reflects the massive scale of the destruction caused by Russian forces as a result of Russia's military intervention in Syria, especially in the first and second years of the intervention; the first year saw 452 attacks on vital civilian facilities - approximately 37% of the total record of such incidents - 257 of them in Aleppo governorate and 112 in Idlib governorate. Meanwhile, the second year saw 309 incidents - approximately 26% of the total number of incidents -, 178 of them in Idlib governorate and 102 in Aleppo governorate. Idlib governorate has seen the highest number of attacks on vital civilian facilities, reaching 616 in total - 51% of the total number of such attacks.

G. Record of the use of cluster munitions:

SNHR has documented at least 237 attacks using cluster munitions carried out by Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

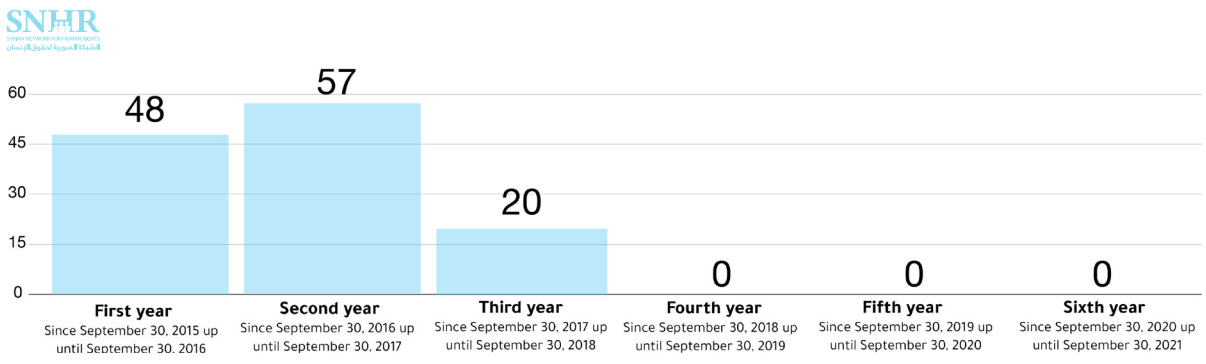
The record of attacks by Russian forces using cluster munitions was distributed by year as follows:



H. Record of the use of incendiary munitions:

SNHR has documented at least 125 attacks using incendiary munitions carried out by Russian forces since the start of Russia's military intervention in Syria up until September 30, 2021.

The record of the use of incendiary munitions by Russian forces was distributed by year as follows:



I. Forced displacement

The escalating violence inflicted by Russian forces has had the largest impact in terms of exodus and forced displacement, with Russian attacks, in parallel with attacks carried out by the Syrian-Iranian alliance, resulting in the displacement of approximately 4.7 million people, most of whom have been forcibly displaced multiple times.

V. Details Summarizing Some of the Incidents That Were Added to SNHR's Database During the Past Year

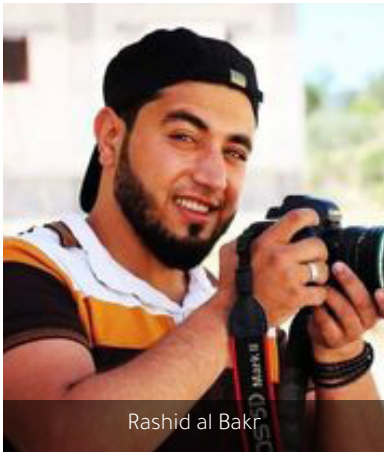
A. The Most Notable Incidents of Extrajudicial Killings by Russian Forces in the Sixth Year of Russia's Intervention:

On Monday, October 26, 2020, media activist Rashid Rashid al Bakr died when fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a number of missiles at al Dweila airbase near Kafr Takhareem city in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, while he was reporting on military training underway inside a military camp belonging to the Failaq al Sham brigade faction affiliated with the National Front for Liberation. The city was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition 'the National Front for Liberation' and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

Rashid, born in 1996, worked as a military correspondent for the Failaq al Sham brigade faction, as well as being a photographer for Syria 1 News Agency and al Moharar Media Network. Originally from Kafr Takhareem city, Rashid held a high school certificate, and was unmarried.

The SNHR spoke with Rashid's colleague and fellow media activist Muhammad Walid Jebs[1] , who told us that, according to the observatories' announcement, a fixed-wing warplane which belonged to the Russian Air Force launched an air raid using four missiles on al Dweila airbase in al Dweila area, near Kafr Takhareem city in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate while Rashid was reporting on military training at a military camp belonging to the Failaq al Sham brigade faction inside the airbase.

Muhammad said, "**At the beginning, we received news that Rashid was injured, so I went with his brother to look for him in the medical centers. At first, we could not find him until we reached the Martyr Wasim Husseino Surgical Hospital in the center of Kafr Takhareem city, where we saw the bodies of dozens of dead fighters; Rashid's brother was able to recognize him from the pieces of his torn clothes and some marks on his body; Rashid's body was torn to pieces.**"



Rashid al Bakr

[1] Via WhatsApp on October 29, 2020

On Thursday, June 10, 2021, Russian artillery forces, stationed in areas controlled by Syrian regime forces, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area, fired several shells (equipped with Krasnopol laser guidance systems) targeting the al Asi family's complex of houses in the south-eastern outskirts of the rural development project in the center of Ebleen village in Jabal al Zaweya in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate; while other local residents were evacuating the injured and retrieving the dead, in conjunction with the arrival of a military Santa Fe SUV-type vehicle carrying Hay'at Tahrir al Sham leaders to help transport the injured, the same artillery forces shelled the same location. The attack resulted in the deaths of 12 individuals, including seven civilians, two of them children and one a woman, as well as five fighters, in addition to injuring about 11 people. Ebleen village was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident. We note that on the same day, RusVesna Russian channel broadcast a video taken from the air showing the bombardment of Ebleen village by Russian forces.

Victims killed in a ground attack by forces we believe to be Russian that targeted the center of Ebleen village, south of Idlib - June 10, 2021

On Saturday, July 3, 2021, at around 05:45 local time, Russian artillery forces, stationed in areas controlled by Syrian regime forces, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area, fired a shell (equipped with a Krasnopol laser guidance system) targeting a house west of Ebleen village in Jabal al Zaweya in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in the deaths of five civilians from one family, namely three children (two males and one female) and their parents, in addition to injuring two other children from the same family. Ebleen village was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

Funeral ceremonies for the victims of the massacre committed by Russian forces in Ebleen village, south of Idlib - July 3, 2021 - Photo by Ahmad Rahhal

On Thursday, July 15, 2021, Russian artillery forces, stationed in the areas controlled by Syrian regime forces, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area, fired a shell targeting a group of workers who were cutting rocks, near the al Manar family's swimming pool in the outskirts of al Fou'a town in the northeastern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in the deaths of six civilian workers, including three children. Al Fou'a town was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

On Saturday, July 17, 2021, Russian artillery forces, stationed in areas controlled by Syrian regime forces, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area, fired a shell (equipped with a Krasnopol laser guidance system) targeting a house in the southeast of Sarja village in Jabal al Zaweya in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in the immediate deaths of three sisters - female children - and injuring the other family members; when Civil Defense teams arrived and other local residents gathered to evacuate the injured and retrieve the dead, the same artillery forces shelled the same location, resulting in the deaths of three civilians, including an elderly woman, and Hammam al Asi, a Civil Defense media worker with the Bazabour center, as well as the injury of two Civil Defense personnel who sustained various injuries, in addition to causing extensive destruction to the house and the surrounding area. The total death toll resulting from the attack as of this writing reached seven civilians, including four female children, who were sisters, and an elderly woman. Sarja village was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

The SNHR spoke with Kamel Zreiq[2] , a team leader at the Syrian Civil Defense Center in Bazabour in Jabal al Zaweya, who reported on the incident:

"**On July 17, 2021, we received a report from the emergency room that Sarja village was bombed, and I went with the media worker Hammam al Asi to the site; before I got there, I learned that the targeted house belonged to a relative [of mine]. Upon our arrival, we asked the driver to return for fear of being targeted**." Kamel added: "**I learned upon our arrival that four female children were inside the house while the rest of the family was in the field. We recovered three of them who were taken to a hospital, and one female child remained under the rubble. During our work, the children's grandmother and their father arrived, and some civilians gathered at the site. The reconnaissance aircraft did not leave the airspace during our work, but we continued our work until we were informed through the walkie-talkies of the necessity of evacuating the place for fear of being bombed. Immediately after that, I heard the sound of artillery firing, which I believe came from the Khan al Sebel area. We immediately went to a nearby olive field to take cover, but the shell that landed near the first site killed the grandmother, whom we took away by ambulance. Then I took cover with Hammam and another colleague in a small nearby house, fearing that we would be bombed again. Indeed, we heard the sound of a new shell being fired, which we expected to hit the first location, but it fell in front of us and injured the three of us, so I called our driver who came and took us with another civilian to the hospital, where Hammam and the civilian died**."

Kamel confirmed that the bombardment of the area was carried out using laser-guided shells, and that he also saw them used in the bombardment of Bazabour village, where five shells fell in one location. These were new weapons to him, which he had not seen before this recent military campaign in the area.

On Thursday, August 19, 2021, at around 05:35 local time, Russian artillery forces, stationed in areas under the control of Syrian regime forces, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area, fired five shells, equipped with the Krasnopol laser guidance system, at Balshoun village in Jabal al Zaweya in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. One shell fell in the middle of a house in the west of the village, killing four civilians from the same family (three children and their mother) and severely damaging the house. Another shell hit another house, located near al Rahman Mosque in al Gharbi neighborhood of the village, killing a child. Balshoun village was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

On Friday, August 20, 2021, at around 05:40 local time, artillery forces which we believe were Russian fired a number of shells, equipped with the Krasnopol laser guidance system, in conjunction with a Russian reconnaissance aircraft overflying the area. One shell fell near a residential house on the eastern outskirts of Kansafra village from the direction of al Bara town road in Jabal al Zaweya in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate; another shell targeted a neighboring house, killing four children, all siblings from one family, in addition to causing extensive destruction to the house. The area was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

[2] We contacted him via WhatsApp on July 28, 2021

Bodies of victims of a ground attack on Kansafra village in the south of Idlib governorate - August 20, 2021 - Photo by: Ahmad Rahhal

B. The Most Notable Attacks on Vital Civilian Facilities by Russian Forces in the Sixth Year of Russia's Intervention:

On Friday, October 23, 2020, forces which we believe were Russian and stationed at the Hmeimin Russian Military airbase in the suburbs of Latakia governorate fired three long-range missiles at al Afyoul market, which contains fuel tankers and burners, in al Dabes village in the south of Jarablos city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, resulting in casualties, and causing massive fires in the market, as well as inflicting severe material damage to its facilities. The village was under the control of the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

A video showing the damage caused by a Russian ground attack on the al Afyoul market in al Dabes village, Aleppo - October 23, 2020

On Friday, March 5, 2021, at around 19:05 local time, forces which we believe were Russian fired a number of long-range missiles at al Humran crossing - which is located at the dividing line between the territories controlled by Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian National Army - in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, with the missiles targeting the fuel market at the crossing, resulting in casualties, as well as causing massive fires as a result of the explosion of a number of tanks loaded with fuel at the market there; the explosions and fires resulted in significant material damage and losses in the area. The area was under the control of Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

Fires caused by a Russian ground attack on the fuel market at al Humran crossing, eastern Aleppo - March 5, 2021

Remnants of one of the missiles fired by Russian forces at al Humran area, eastern Aleppo - March 5, 2021

The SNHR spoke with Faisal Muhammad Ali[3] , Director of the Civil Defense Sector in Jarablos area in Aleppo suburbs, who told us that they had received a report that al Humran area, which contains a large fuel market, had been subjected to missile strikes. He added: "**A number of our teams from several areas and I headed to the site after we learned that the fires were very large. When we arrived, the fires were huge and the flames were everywhere. We started the process of extinguishing it; while we were working, there were several explosions, after which the fires spread to other tanks, which prompted us to request support from al Bab, Afrin and Izaz sectors, which arrived two hours later. Nevertheless, we requested support from the Idlib sectors. After 20 hours of work, we managed to control the fires with more than 30 vehicles and 100 personnel taking part in the work.**" Faisal also noted that the bombing killed three people and injured more than 23 others, in addition to burning more than 200 tankers.

On Sunday, March 21, 2021, at around 17:04 local time, fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a missile targeting a gas filling and compression plant, located northwest of Sarmada city in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate. The missile fell next to the Bab al Hawa petrol station, causing significant material damage and damage to cars at the scene; the warplane also fired another missile that landed behind the wall of the plant at about 17:10, causing minor material damage. The area was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.

The crater resulting from the first Russian air attack on the gas filling plant - March 21, 2021

[3] Via WhatsApp on March 7, 2021

The SNHR spoke with activist Muhammad al Abdullah[4] , who was in the Qahh area in the north of Idlib governorate at the start of the attack on the Sarmada area: "**I clearly heard the sound of warplanes flying, and when they started carrying out their attacks on the gas plant area, I went to the site - which is about 12 kilometers away - my arrival in the area coincided with the Russian warplanes carrying out their fourth attack near a relief organization's warehouse. I observed the fire that broke out there and the damage that hit the organization's warehouse and trucks there, then I went to the gas plant site and it was dark. I took some photos and saw the crater caused by the missile that fell near the gas station**."

The Syrian Network for Human Rights issued a detailed report on this attack.

On Saturday, July 3, 2021, at around 10:00 local time, fixed-wing warplanes, which we believe were Russian, fired a number of missiles targeting al Rouj al Shamali Water Station, located at the junction of al Namra village, near al Sheikh Yousef village in Sahl al Rouj in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, where the electronic equipment building of the Civil Defense Center - Sahl al Rouj 425 - is located. The bombing caused **partial destruction** to the main building of the station, as well as moderate material damage to its equipment, and partial destruction to the building where the Civil Defense is based, in addition to causing significant material damage to a firefighting vehicle and a rescue vehicle belonging to the Civil Defense, with the bombing also injuring five Civil Defense personnel. The Syrian Network for Human Rights notes that the station, which has stopped working due to the lack of electricity, contains 10 pumps that are supposed to irrigate 3,500 hectares of agricultural land. The area was under the joint control of factions of the Armed Opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham at the time of the incident.
The Civil Defense Organization published a statement on the incident on its official website.

Damage caused by a Russian air attack on the Civil Defense Center near al Sheikh Yousef village, Idlib - July 3, 2021 - Photo by: Hashem al Abdullah

[4] Via WhatsApp on March 24, 2021

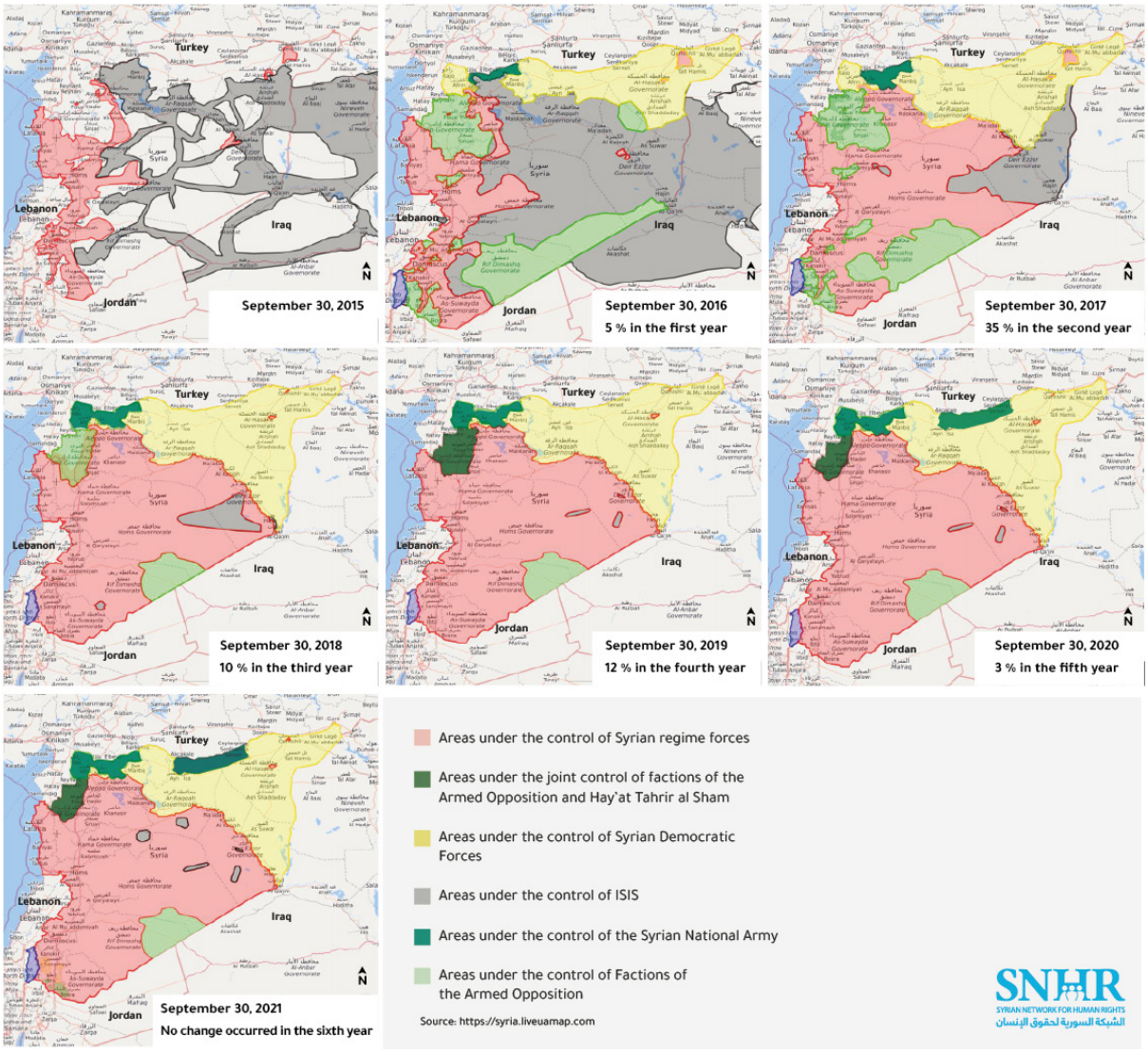
C. The Cluster Munition Attack Carried Out by Russian Forces in the Sixth Year of Russia's Intervention:

On Friday, March 5, 2021, at around 20:00 local time, a number of long-range 9M55K missiles, which were believed to have been fired from the Russian Hmeimim airbase, at least one of which was loaded with 9n235 cluster submunitions, targeted the fuel refining burners, that are primitive refineries in which crude oil refining takes place, in Tarhin village near al Bab city in the eastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate; the missiles fell on two sites within the area, causing massive fires in the area and to the fuel tanks there; during the firefighting operation by Syrian Civil Defense personnel, one of the fuel tanks exploded, resulting in the death of Ahmad al Waki, a Civil Defense member, with the blaze also burning heavy 'excavator' type machinery, and gutting a fire engine, both belonging to the Civil Defense. The area was under the control of the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

Remnants of a 9n235 cluster submunition incubator used by Russian forces in bombing Tarhin village, Aleppo - March 5, 2021

VI. Russia's Military Intervention, Killing and Displacing Hundreds of Thousands of Syrians, Assisted the Syrian Regime to Regain Territories That Had Broken Free of Its Control:

Russia is a superpower and one of the most powerful countries in the world militarily, and there is no doubt that its military intervention in favor of the Syrian regime in the internal armed conflict has significantly tilted the scales in the regime's favor, which was reflected in the regime regaining control over territories that had broken free of its control. The following is a map showing the change of areas of control in favor of the Syrian regime since Russia's military intervention in 2015 to date:



We note that the Syrian regime has regained approximately 65% of the territories that had escaped its control since 2015 to date, with the Russian Air Force having played a primary role in this, due to the intensive, violent and indiscriminate attacks it launched, often deliberately bombing vital facilities, inflicting widespread destruction and causing a state of panic and terror that forced the people into displacement, while the Armed Opposition forces were militarily unequipped and unable to stand in the way.

In the first year of Russia's military intervention, Russian forces focused their attacks on areas that were under the control of the armed opposition, notably failing to attack ISIS, which they claimed to have intervened to eliminate.

In the second year, the Russian aerial bombardment enabled the Syrian regime to regain large areas in the eastern suburbs of Raqqa (Shamiya villages south of the Euphrates River), western suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour (Shamiya villages south of the Euphrates River).

In the third year, the Russian aerial bombardment enabled the Syrian regime to regain three zones that were included in the de-escalation agreement, namely northern Homs governorate and southern Hama, the Eastern Ghouta in Damascus Suburbs, and parts of Daraa and Quneitra governorates.

In the fourth and fifth years, the Russian aerial bombardment enabled the Syrian regime to regain control over the Syrian Badiya east of Syria and parts of the south of Idlib region.

In the sixth year, we noted a noticeable decrease in the intensity of military operations, which was reflected in the record of the violations committed, although these did not cease completely, as the Syrian Badiya in eastern Syria saw military operations during the past year, while northwest Syria, which is still subject to the Turkish-Russian ceasefire agreement concluded in March 2020, witnessed a period of relative calm during which air attacks were carried out only on military areas belonging to Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. At the beginning of June 2021, we monitored a sudden military escalation by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces, concentrating on the Jabal al Zaweya area and its surroundings, which are outside the control of the Syrian regime in northwest Syria, through launching ground-based attacks on civilian areas, causing civilian casualties and significant material damage to vital installations and facilities; we documented this in an extensive report.

VII. Russia Promotes the Idea of Refugees Returning in Order to Start the Reconstruction Process:

During the sixth year of its military intervention, Russia has intensified its efforts to promote the idea that since the military battles are almost over, conditions are ripe for the return of refugees, with Russia supervising the holding of the International Conference on the Return of Syrian Refugees at the Conference Palace in Damascus on November 11, 2020; this event took place over two days, with the participation of 27 countries and 12 organizations, with most of the participating nations being dictatorial states allied with Russia and Iran, including China, Lebanon, Pakistan, Oman, and UAE. On July 26, 2021, the work of the Syrian-Russian joint meeting to follow up on the work of the international conference on 'the return of Syrian refugees and IDPs' began, also at the Conferences Palace in Damascus, with the three-day event held in the presence of a large Russian delegation; speaking at the conference, the Chief of the Russian National Center for State Defense Control, Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, said, according to Russia's TASS state news agency: "To date, more than 2,278,000 Syrian citizens have already returned to their homes, over 1,362,000 of them were internally displaced persons, while more than 915,000 refugees came from abroad"

Contradicting Russia's claims, however, UNHCR statistics, the latest of which were released in March 2021, indicate an increase in the number of refugees and IDPs fleeing, while a recent Amnesty International report entitled 'You're going to your death' addressed the horrible violations practiced against refugees returning to Syrian regime-controlled areas, including killing, torture, enforced disappearance,

rape, material extortion; all these points completely undermine and refute the Russian narrative, as does the report issued by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on September 14, 2021, which said that all of Syria is an unsafe country.

We have repeatedly emphasized that the Syrian regime does not actually want the refugees or IDPs to return, as it considers them to be its opponents, actively working to keep them outside the areas under its control, whether through continuous arrests of returnees, forcibly conscripting them into its forces, or confiscating the property of absentees; according to what we at the SNHR have monitored, those refugees who have returned represent less than 7% of the total number of Syrian refugees around the world, including 6% who returned from Jordan and Lebanon, meaning that only 1% of the total refugees around the world have returned to areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

We have also stressed that the conditions for safe, voluntary return set by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have not yet been met with regard to Syrian refugees, and we stress that they will not be achieved as long as the regime of Bashar al Assad and the security services that are involved in crimes against humanity and war crimes continue to rule large areas of Syria.

VIII. Conclusions and Recommendations:

Legal conclusions:

1. The Russian regime has been and continues to be involved in supporting the Syrian regime, which has committed crimes against humanity against the Syrian people, by providing it with weapons and military expertise and through direct military intervention alongside it. The support of a regime involved in crimes against humanity constitutes a clear violation of international law and makes the Russian regime vulnerable to accountability.
2. The Russian military intervention in Syria is wholly illegitimate, regardless of its taking place at the request of the Syrian regime, because this military intervention has been used to continue the Syrian regime's perpetration of violations against the Syrian people, many of which constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes. In addition, the Russian forces themselves are involved in committing crimes against humanity and war crimes; for these two reasons alone, the intervention is clearly in violation of international law, as well as making Russia's regime complicit in the Syrian regime's crimes.
3. Russia has used its veto many times since its direct military intervention even though it is a party to the Syrian conflict, which is a direct violation of the Charter of the United Nations; these uses of the veto have been employed to provide Syria's regime with impunity for its crimes, giving it absolute immunity, with the veto being used in a wholly arbitrary fashion that contradicts and disregards human rights

4. .The Russian authorities have not conducted any serious investigations into any of the attacks included in this report or in previous reports; the Russian leadership, both military or political, bears responsibility for these attacks based on the principle of command responsibility under international humanitarian law[5] , as they did not prevent the attacks and did not punish those responsible. Rather, the widespread repeated attacks indicate that they can only be the policy of a state ordered directly from the highest levels of the Russian leadership, which implicates them in crimes against humanity and war crimes; and emphasizes once again that sanctions must be imposed and maintained by various states of the world that target all those involved in these barbaric attacks.
5. The Russian regime has unquestionably violated UN Security Council Resolutions No. 2139 and 2254 which ordered the cessation of indiscriminate attacks, as well as violating Article 8 of the Rome Statute by committing intentional homicide, all of which constitute war crimes.
6. We can confirm that the incidents of bombardment cited in this report targeted unarmed civilians. This provides additional evidence that Russian forces have violated the rules of international human rights law, which protects the right to life. In addition, this bombardment has been carried out extensively in a non-international armed conflict and as part of widespread offensives in many of the attacks which, therefore, amount to crimes against humanity, and in some cases war crimes, fulfilling all the relevant criteria.

Recommendations:

Security Council

- There should be no use of the veto in the case of any state involved in the conflict, with Russia, which is an active brutal participant in the Syrian conflict, using the veto in its own and the Syrian regime's favor, despite both being primary parties in the conflict
- The Security Council should take additional steps following the adoption of Resolution No. 2254, which clearly demands that all parties should, "...Immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment."
- The Syrian issue should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those involved in perpetrating crimes should be held accountable, including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been proven.
- Seriously work to achieve a political transition under the Geneva Communiqué and Security Council Resolution No. 2254.
- Impose UN economic and military sanctions on the Syrian and Iranian regimes which have been directly involved in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people.

[5] ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, Article 152, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule152

ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, Article 153, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule153

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 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.
- Support the political transition process and impose pressure to compel the parties to implement the political transition within a time period of no more than six months so that millions of displaced people can safely and settled return to their homes.
- In light of Russia's recurring use of its veto, despite the Syrian regime continuing to commit crimes against humanity and war crimes, it is imperative to form an international civilized alliance outside the Security Council that aims to protect civilians in Syria from Russian and Syrian regime attacks.
- Expand political and economic sanctions against the Russian regime for committing war crimes in Syria, for continuing to violate sanctions imposed against the Syrian regime, and for assisting it in breaching UN Security Council resolutions, including those regarding non-recurrence of using chemical weapons and barrel bombs.
- As a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP), SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the 'Responsibility to Protect (R2P)' norm in dozens of studies and reports, more especially after all the political initiatives, from the Arab League agreement, then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan, to the Cessation of Hostilities and Astana agreements which followed, proved to be useless. As such, 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 pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Seek to refer adjudication on the Syrian case to the UN General Assembly.
- Clearly condemn the violations by Russian forces, and hold it legally and materially responsible for the destruction of vital buildings and facilities in Syria that were bombed by Russian forces, and for compensating all victims affected by Russian violations.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Conduct extensive investigations into the incidents included in this report, and clearly designate the Russian forces as the perpetrators if sufficient evidence is found by COI.

OHCHR

- Issue a statement condemning the violations by Russian forces in Syria on the occasion of the six-year anniversary of Russia's military intervention in Syria, clarify the catastrophic repercussions on the Syrian people and state resulting from that intervention, and condemn Russia's use of the veto in favor of the Syrian regime.

UN Special Envoy to Syria

- Call for rapid implementation of democratic political change that restores victims' rights and embodies the principles of transitional justice.
- There is no sense in pursuing any political process in light of the continued bombing of hospitals and UN aid, and the pursuit of a zero-security-military solution by the Syrian regime and its allies, and the UN Envoy must acknowledge this.

The Russian regime

- Stop supporting the current Syrian regime and apologize to the Syrian people for all violations committed by Russian forces.
- Support a genuine political transition away from the dynastic dictatorship of one family and its brutal security services, which is the only way to achieve security, stability and reconstruction.
- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report, make the findings of those investigations publicly available to the Syrian people, and hold those involved accountable.
- Compensate all the damaged centers and facilities, rehabilitate them, and provide reparations for all the families of those killed or wounded by the current Russian regime.
- Completely cease the bombing of hospitals, protected objects, and civilian areas, and respect customary humanitarian law.
- Reconstruct and restore the residential buildings and shops destroyed by Russian military forces, and compensate victims throughout the duration of their displacement.

European States and the European Union

- Apply economic sanctions on Russia befitting the severity of the crimes against humanity and war crimes it has perpetrated in Syria.
- Clearly condemn Russia's atrocious violations in Syria, and allow universal jurisdiction to prosecute it for these violations.
- Support those displaced as a result of Russia's attacks, mainly hundreds of camps in northwest Syria and on the Syrian/ Turkish border.

Gratitude and Condolences

We extend our most sincere and heartfelt condolences to the victims' families and to all those affected whom we have got to know and whose names we have documented. We would also like to sincerely thank the residents, local activists, and victims' families whose contributions made our database and this report possible.

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
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