

# **Destroying Ma'aret al Numan and Saraqeb Cities and Displacing Their Residents Is a Clear Example of the Syrian Regime's Tactics in the Recent Military Campaign Since Early December 2019 Until March 2020**

Destroying Cities and Their Environs, Displacing Their People, and Seizing Their Properties Is the Syrian Regime's Malicious Tripartite Crime to Punish Those Demanding or Dreaming of Political Change



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. Background on Destruction and Forced Displacement in and Around Idlib

Many factors have contributed to uprooting and dispossessing Syrians from their lands and homes, and pushing them towards forced displacement. The vast majority of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country have been displaced through violence practiced by the parties to the conflict in Syria, with the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies by far outdoing the other parties to the conflict in this practice due to several reasons, the foremost of which is the use of the air force, violent barbaric shelling and the population's fear of brutal reprisals, of arrest, torture or illegal conscription into the Syrian regime's forces. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has compiled an extensive database on forced displacements in Syria, which has continued for the past nine years, through collecting data, testimonies and photos throughout this period of the various areas whose populations have been displaced. We note that some of the displaced population has been subjected to displacement more than once, and that people in some areas have been displaced by more than one party. The issue of internal forced displacement in Syria



is a complex and thorny one, in which a large number of factors overlap. We have reflected this in the database within a large number of [reports](#); in recent reports, we talked about [the de-escalation zones](#), and how their populations were forcibly displaced one after another. After covering this, we moved on to talk about the remaining area, and about the focused military campaign that began on April 26, 2019, during whose first months the population of large areas was displaced, including the people of Khan Sheikhoun city and its environs. At the end of 2019, particularly in early December 2019, the Syrian regime and its allies resumed their military attacks on and around Idlib governorate; during this campaign they targeted Ma'aret al Numan city, Saraqeb and their environs, along with the northwestern suburbs of Aleppo.

Despite the five cease-fire agreements the region saw, which were as follows:

The first: Announced by the Syrian regime on August 1, 2019.

The second: Announced on August 31, 2019, after the failure of the first one.

The third: Announced on January 9, 2020, when Major-General Yuri Borenkov, chief of the Russian Center for Reconciliation of the Opposing Parties in Syria, declared the start of a ceasefire in Idlib region, starting at 14:00 on the same day, which had no actual effect, even in briefly reducing the frequency of military attacks.

The fourth: The Turkish Ministry of Defense announced that it had concluded a ceasefire agreement with Russia that would enter into force at 00:01 on January 12, 2020.

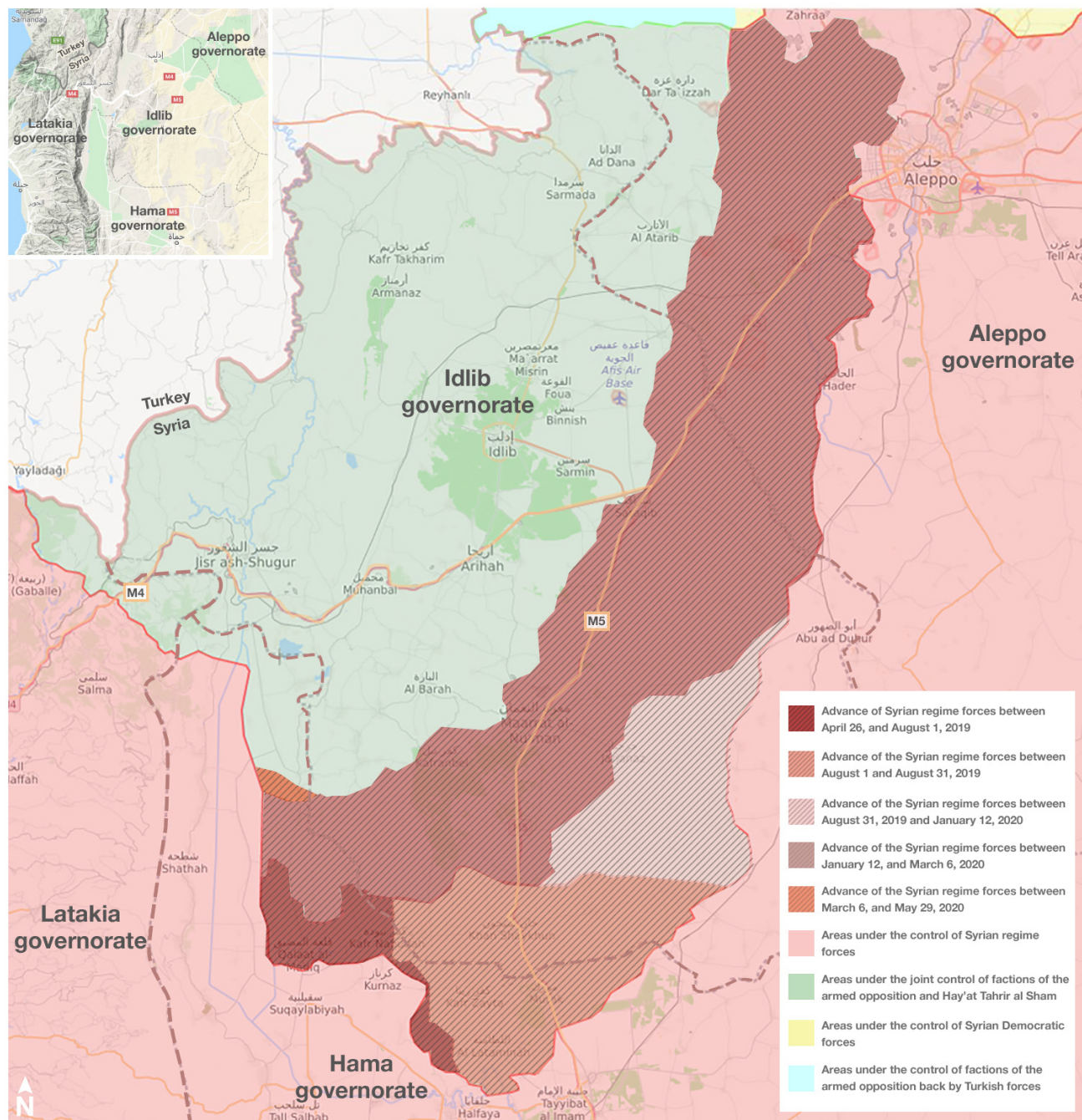
The fifth: The agreement that resulted from the meeting of the Turkish and Russian Presidents, which came into force at 00:00 on March 6, 2020.

All these ceasefire agreements failed completely to achieve any actual cessation of violence. On the contrary, each agreement was followed by a military escalation more violent than its predecessor, which led to the Syrian regime advancing on the ground, attaining the largest advance since the Armed Opposition factions taking control of these areas, reaching up to the moment of preparing this report around 45 percent of the area outside the control of the Syrian regime in northwest Syria.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has issued several reports in which it detailed these military campaigns and the truces and cease-fire agreements during these campaigns, as well as documenting the most notable violations committed during these military campaigns, and [the accompanying massacres](#) and [attacks on medical facilities, Civil Defense centers](#), along with details of the most notable weapons used during them and the [destruction and forced displacement](#) resulting from them.



Map showing the stages of the advance of Syrian regime's forces and allies in the Idlib region in northwest Syria:



The map above shows the areas that Syrian Regime forces have subsequently controlled after each ceasefire agreement, showing that the largest advance they made was after the ceasefire agreement on January 12, 2020, during which they managed within 54 days to control approximately 65 percent of the total area they captured between April 26, 2019, and May 29, 2020; by taking control over these areas, the Syrian regime has tightened its control over the M5 Aleppo - Damascus International Road.



In this report, we chose to carry out an analysis of the destruction caused to Ma'aret al Numan city by the bombardment operations that it was exposed to since April 2019; this bombardment targeted various areas in and around Idlib, focusing particularly on the southern areas. It should be noted, however, that the Syrian regime and its Russian ally were carrying out almost daily bombing operations on Ma'aret al Numan city, which were not limited to the last campaign that started at the end of 2019, but intensified in power and were more focused during the last campaign, with the process of destroying the city and displacing its people. This dates back to April 2019; the photos and videos which we were receiving almost on a daily basis from residents of Ma'aret al Numan city, local activists, and others that were published via the Internet, all provide a visualization of the massive scale of the catastrophic destruction that took place in the city. In order to obtain a clearer picture helping with further analysis, we used the help of high-resolution satellite imagery showing the entire area of the city, using one image of the city prior to the recent attack on it, alongside an image of the city after the air strikes and the Syrian regime's and Russian forces' taking control of it.

The report also talks about the displacement of the people of Ma'aret al Numan and Saraqeb cities, which is organically linked to the process of destruction. We observed during our work on the issue of forced displacement in Syria that the operations of destroying cities and towns were a deliberate strategic objective of the Syrian regime and its allies in order to force the people towards surrender, displacement, and humiliation, because IDPs are usually the poorest members of society, with the loss of their homes, possessions, and any commercial properties meaning that they have lost everything and have no resources to fall back on. The goal of the Syrian regime is to exact brutal revenge against all dissidents and not only to uproot people from their homes, but to make them pay the largest price possible for their demands for political change; this fact is absent from the attention of many researchers when questioning the regime's objective in bombing civilian neighborhoods of this size and with such ferocious intensity. We have also noted that this is a consistent pattern, as we have conducted similar analyses of satellite imagery in [Eastern Ghouta](#), eastern Aleppo neighborhoods, and [Khan Sheikhoun](#).

We found that air strikes are responsible for 70 percent of the total destruction in Syria, with the air forces which have bombed these areas being those of the Syrian and Russian regimes; the Syrian regime and its allies have also used other types of weapons, including cluster munitions, against residential neighborhoods.



It took many working hours and several days of continuous, detailed and exhaustive investigation to analyze the sites of destruction in the cities of Ma'aret al Numan and Saraqeb. We also prepared several visual guides of the sites that we chose to provide illustrative examples of the total destruction of the city. We also used the helpful knowledge of local people and activists, with our analyses intersecting with the accounts of eyewitnesses, activists, and survivors, who witnessed the bombings and were present at the sites. We also retain copies of all the videos, photos and accounts included in this report in a confidential electronic database, along with backups on hard disks.

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

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

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

“The Syrian regime hasn't just displaced hundreds of thousands through brutal violence, but pursued them through relentless bombardment, targeting camps, schools and gathering places where they were located. The regime also sought, along with its Russian ally, to obstruct and plunder desperately needed humanitarian aid by canceling the extension of the cross-border aid resolution, and finally by passing laws that contravene the most basic human rights principles with the objective of controlling their property and lands. This sequence of crimes is an essential part of the Syrian regime's strategy in the issue of forced displacement in Syria.”

## **II. At Least 882 Attacks on Vital Facilities, Including 93 Medical Facilities and 218 Schools, Since April 2019 to Date in and Around Idlib**

The Syrian regime's and its Russian ally's plan often starts with targeting vital facilities; we have observed both using this tactic in all the besieged areas subjected to bombing, with this barbaric strategy depending on forcing people to despair and to flee into displacement. When medical facilities, Civil Defense centers, and markets are bombed, this is a clear, murderously violent message that the people have no option but to surrender or leave (particularly in light of the absence of an option of any international intervention to protect civilians in Syria). These crimes continue despite the fact that International Humanitarian



Law is clear in prohibiting all attacks or acts of violence designed to spread terror among the civilian population (Protocol I Article 51-2, Protocol II Article 13-2).

On its database dedicated to coverage of attacks on vital facilities, the SNHR has documented at least 882 attacks in and around Idlib at the hands of Russian-Syrian alliance forces between April 26, 2019, up to the moment of preparing this report, including:

Places of worship: 220

Educational facilities: 218

Medical facilities: 93

Civil Defense centers: 86

Markets: 52

We've documented some of the destruction to ordinary residential buildings with the help of satellite imagery, along with ground-based photos and footage that we were able to obtain, as we carried out an approximate inductive survey, attempting to extrapolate these images to those villages and neighborhoods which we were unable to obtain photos and videos of; in the areas where the Syrian regime has regained control, we estimate that approximately 70 percent of the residential buildings are either damaged or completely or almost completely destroyed. It should be noted that a single residential building may contain multiple apartments housing dozens of families, with Syrian citizens needing years and possibly decades to be able to purchase a home.

During our daily work, we have monitored the use of different types of weapons by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally to bomb the areas outside the regime's control. These have been so frequent and so widespread that our team cannot keep an exact count of the missile strikes from warplanes or ground platforms, and it is very difficult to know the record of artillery and tank attacks, given the intensity and widespread nature of these types of bombardment on a daily basis. In our work, we have focused on counting specific types of attacks, particularly those with relatively less used weapons and munitions that are easier to document and keep track of, such as those using cluster munitions, barrel bombs, incendiary weapons, nail missiles, and chemical weapons. The following is a record of the Russian-Syrian alliance's use of these types of weapons specifically since the start of the military campaign on April 26, 2019, up until May 29, 2020:



## A. Cluster Munitions:

We documented 30 cluster munitions attacks, distributed as follows:

Syrian Regime forces: 27 attacks, all in Idlib governorate, which resulted in the deaths of 38 civilians, including 18 children and nine women (adult female), and injured 36 people.

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

- Hama governorate: One
- Idlib governorate: Two

These attacks also injured four people.



## B. Incendiary Weapons:

The SNHR has documented at least 21 incendiary weapon attacks, all at the hands of Syrian Regime forces, distributed across the Syrian governorates as follows:

- Hama governorate: Nine
- Idlib governorate: 12

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

## C. Nail Missiles:

Between April 26, 2019, and May 29, 2020, the SNHR documented at least seven nail missile attacks, all carried out by Syrian Regime forces in Idlib governorate.





## D. Chemical Weapons:

The Syrian regime renewed its use of chemical weapons in the context of its military advance in Latakia suburbs, with the SNHR documenting one attack on al Kbaina village on May 19, 2020.

## C. Barrel Bombs:

The SNHR has documented at least 4,849 barrel bombs dropped by Syrian regime helicopters and fixed-wing warplanes on the Idlib region in northwest Syria in this period, distributed as follows:

- Idlib governorate: 2,658
- Hama governorate: 1,546
- Latakia governorate: 499
- Aleppo governorate: 146



The [investigation](#) carried out by the Internal Board of Inquiry established by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, on August 1, 2019, to investigate the attacks that occurred in northwest Syria, which was issued on April 6, 2020, confirmed four incidents that occurred in the Idlib region after the military campaign began on April 26, 2019, and confirmed the Syrian regime's implication in them.



### III. Russian forces repeat the scenario of Grozny, Eastern Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and Khan Sheikhoun in Ma'aret al Numan

We chose Ma'aret al Numan city as a study model to demonstrate the true scope of the destruction that took place in the cities in the last campaign that started in early December 2019, due to its being the largest and most populous city in the areas that the Syrian regime and its allies controlled in their last campaign, which lasted until March 2020. The city includes many central vital civilian facilities, whose services extend to include areas located in the districts around the city, with the most important of these facilities being the Ma'aret al Numan Central Hospital, which is considered one of the largest hospitals in the north of Syria, and al Zarqaa water station, a pumping station with a collective ground tank that provides water for approximately 250,000 people and is supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The city is considered to be of great historical significance and includes many monumental buildings, according to UNESCO, most notably the city's archaeological museum.

Ma'aret al Numan city is situated in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate on the M5 Damascus - Aleppo International Road, and located 45 km south of Idlib city. It was stormed by Syrian Regime forces on August 8, 2011, after its people participated in the popular uprising and demanding political change, with the regime forces being stationed in al Hamidiya military camp, south of the city, and in Wadi al Dhaif military camp, to its east. On October 8, 2012, factions of the Armed Opposition took control of the city, while Syrian Regime forces remained in control of the two camps until December 15, 2012, when factions of the Armed Opposition took control of the entire area.

The city has been a haven for thousands of IDPs who had been displaced by violence, military operations and atrocious violations, who have been, often repeatedly, internally displaced from multiple areas of Damascus Suburbs, Homs, and Hama, until the beginning of 2019. Ma'aret al Numan also housed large numbers of IDPs who fled from the northern suburbs of Hama and the southern suburbs of Idlib due to the military attacks that took place after April 2019 until September 2019. We estimate that the city's population, including the IDPs living there, at the time of the regime's last attack stood at about 140,000 people, including nearly 40,000 IDPs, all of whom were displaced when the Syrian regime's forces and their Iranian and Russian allies attacked the city in fear for their lives.





The frequency of the bombardment of Ma'aret al Numan city increased after mid-2019, before intensifying massively in the recent campaign that began in early December 2019, which resulted in Syrian Regime forces taking control of the city on January 28, 2020, at which point it was emptied of its population and almost completely destroyed.

To show the extent of the massive destruction, the Syrian Network for Human Rights obtained satellite images taken on February 27, 2020, that is, after the Syrian regime and its allies took control of the city. After numerous, long working days engaged in exhaustive analysis of these images showing the destroyed or damaged buildings, we have identified numerous points of destruction in the city, totaling approximately 770 points in all, which are distributed as follows:

Completely destroyed building: 15 points.

Buildings which sustained average damage: 716 points.

Buildings which sustained minor damage: 36 points.

Calculating the ratio of the points of destruction to the area of the inhabited city that we analyzed, which is approximately 8.5 square kilometers (850 hectares), it becomes clear to us that in each one- square kilometer area there are 90 points that have been destroyed (9 points in every 10 hectares) which is a very high proportion. We concluded that at least two percent of the city's area is completely destroyed, and approximately 40 percent of it is partially destroyed, as shown in the following images:

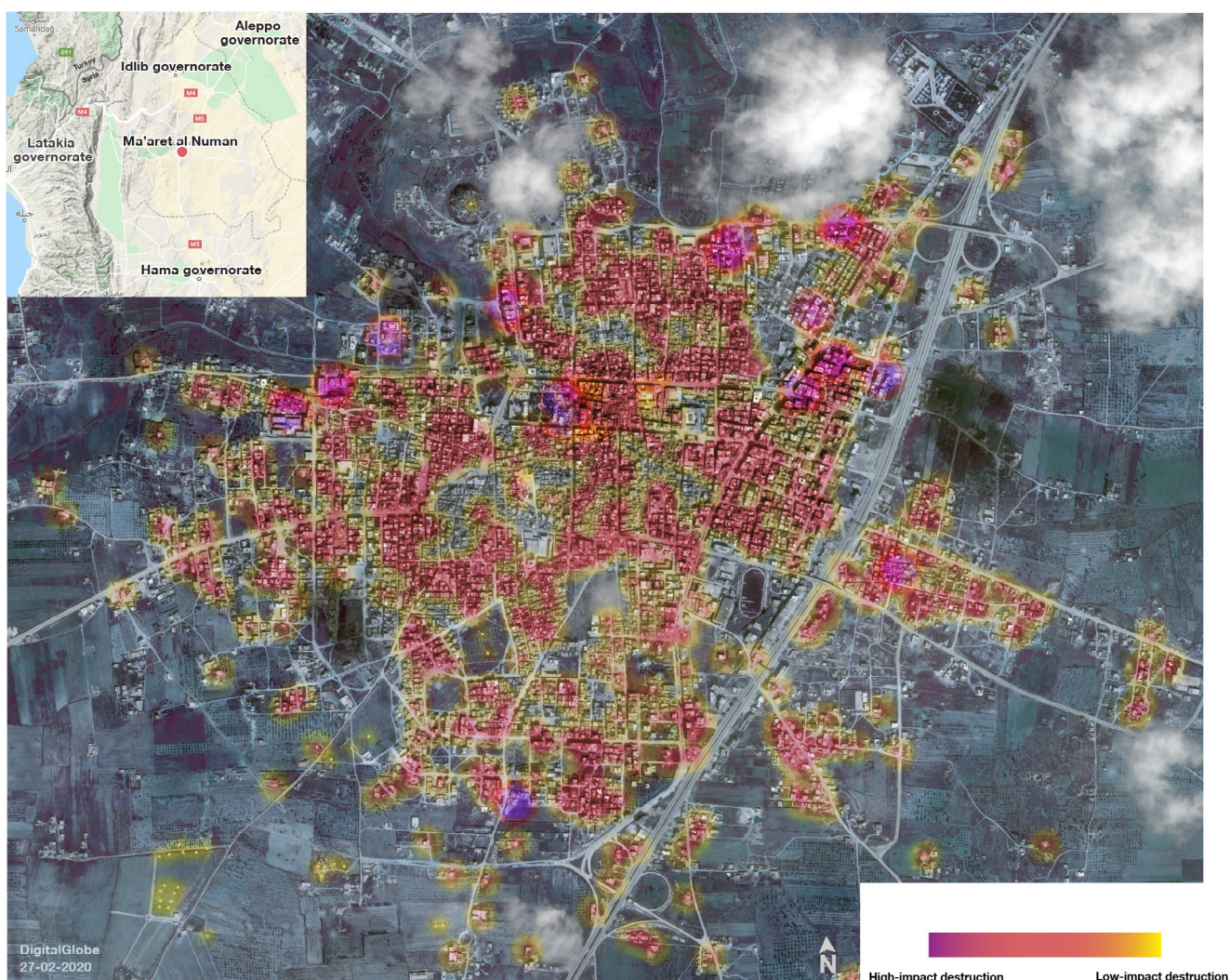




Analysis based on satellite images taken on February 27, 2020, showing the magnitude of destruction in Ma'aret al Numan and its being empty of its population after Syrian Regime forces took control of it on January 28, 2020, by using various types of weapons and methods of unlawful bombing:



Analysis based on the satellite images shows the magnitude of destruction as a result of the military campaign carried out by Syrian- Russian alliance in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib, between April 26, 2019 and January 28, 2020

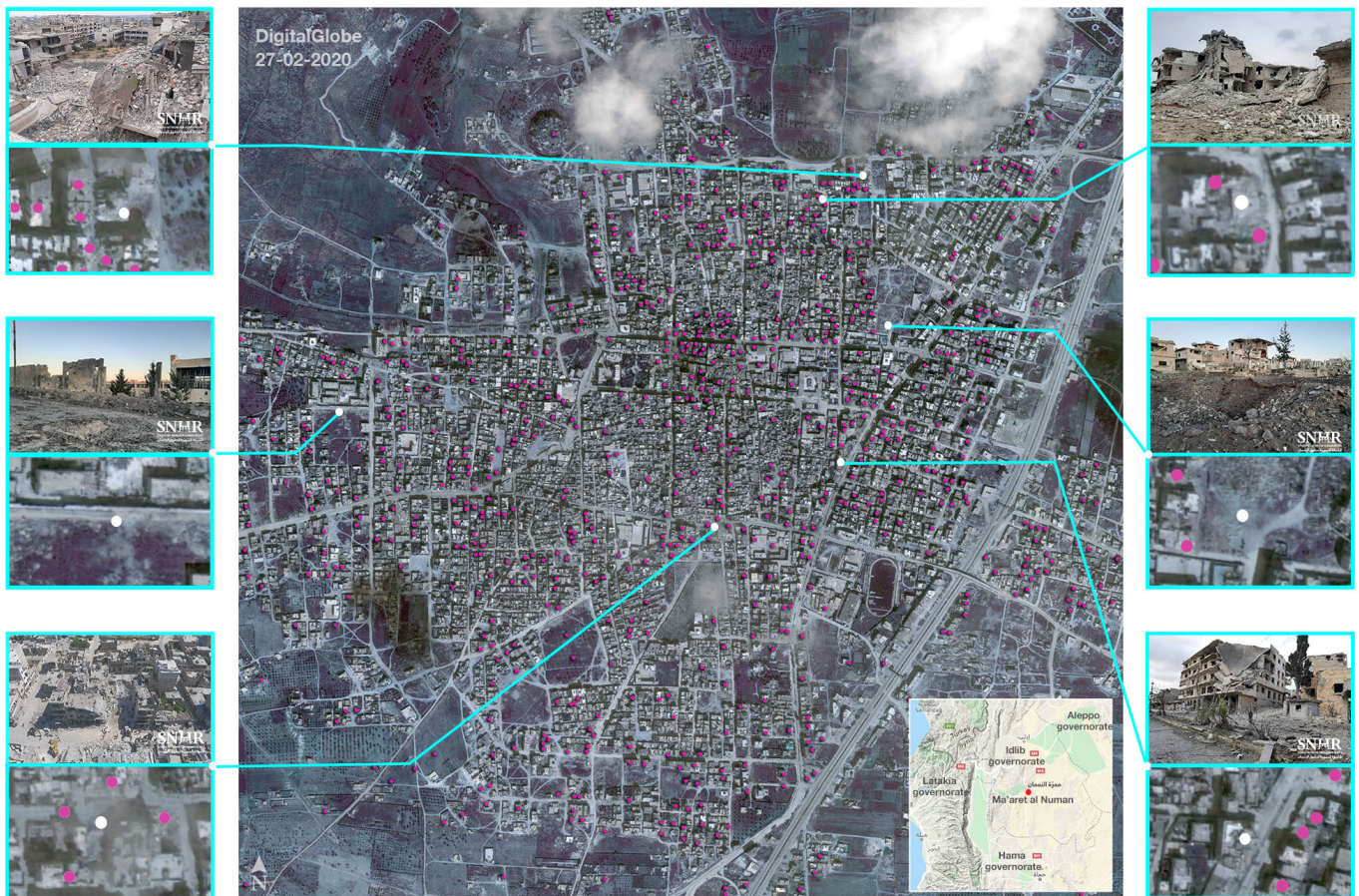




Analysis based on satellite images taken on February 27, 2020, to identify the sites of the most damaged buildings in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib, after Syrian regime forces and their Iranian and Russian allies bombed and controlled it on January 28, 2020:



Analysis based on the satellite images shows the sites of the most affected buildings in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib as a result of the attacks carried out by Syrian- Russian alliance, between April 2019 and March 2020

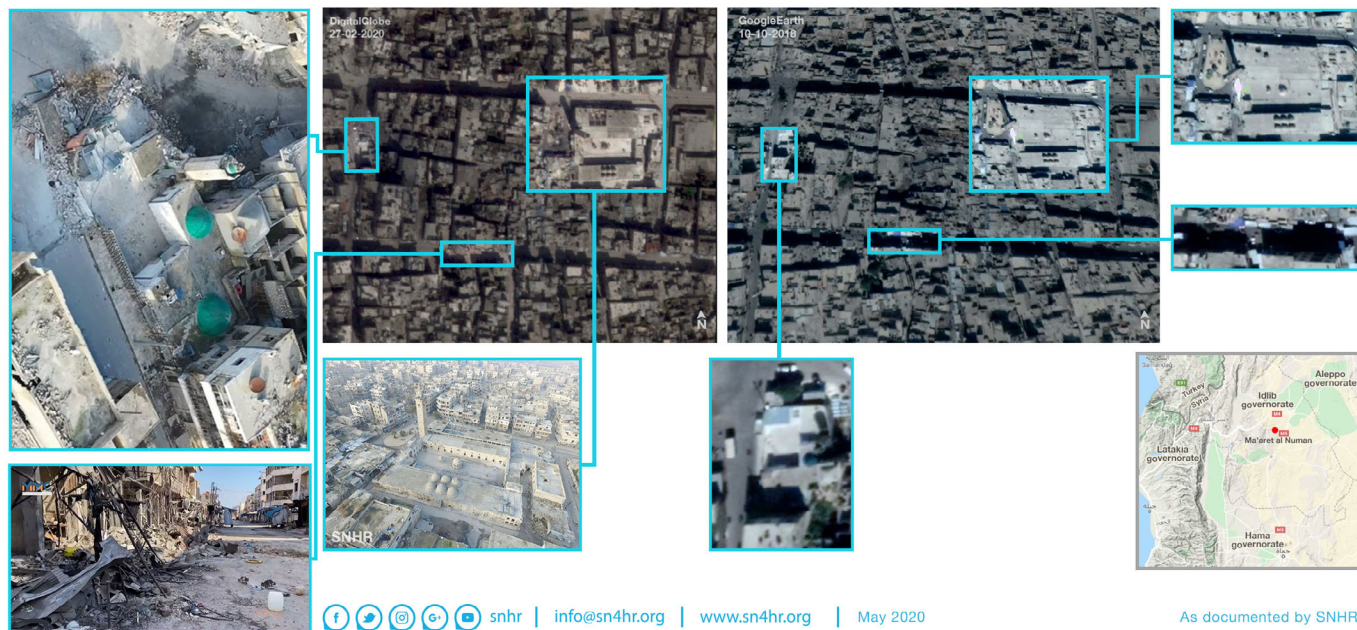




Two satellite images comparing the state of the buildings in Ma'aret al Numan city in 2018 and the destruction there in February 2020 following the Syrian regime forces and its allies taking control of the city after large-scale indiscriminate bombing:



Satellite images show the magnitude of destruction in the market area in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib between 2018 and 2020



Syrian Network for Human Rights' photos show the massive destruction to residential neighborhoods in Ma'aret al Numan city in January 2020 – Taken by: Macro Media Center:

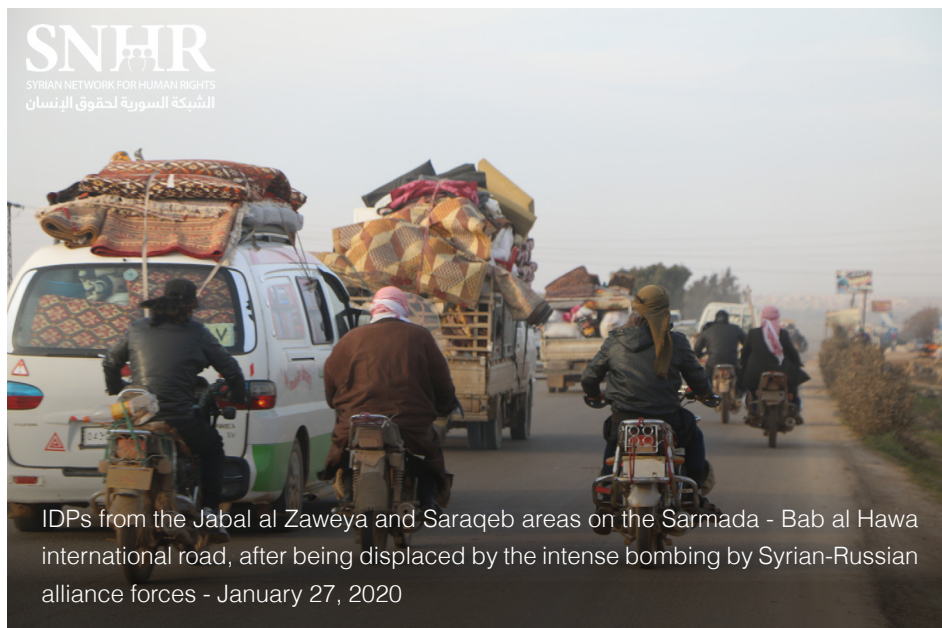






#### IV. The Destruction of Ma'aret al Numan City Is Very Similar to That of Other Cities Which the Syrian Regime Wishes to Control, With Saraqeb Being Another Model Confirming This Rule

The destruction that afflicted Ma'aret al Numan city is not an isolated case, meaning that it is quite possible to compare it to the various cities and towns where the Syrian regime has seized control. In order to prevent the recurrence of the above, we will briefly present another model that shows that the destruction of cities and towns and the displacement of their people is a goal in itself for the Syrian regime in order to inflict the most severe types of punishment possible on anyone who seeks political change.



Saraqeb city is of strategic importance due to its location at the crossroads of M4 Aleppo - Latakia and M5 Aleppo - Damascus International Roads; it was freed from the control of Syrian Regime forces on November 15, 2012. The city is also one of the areas that sheltered thousands of IDPs from multiple regions. On February 5, 2020, Syrian regime forces and its allies took control of the city; although factions of the Armed Opposition briefly regained control of the western part of the city on February 27, the Syrian regime forces quickly took back control of it again on March 2, 2020.

The city was bombed in a similar way to Ma'aret al Numan city, and during the same time period. We published a large number of [news reports](#) about incidents of massacres and destruction caused by the unlawful bombardment carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies, as well as documenting their bombardment targeting the roads used by IDPs to escape, and of random camps housing these fleeing families. We previously issued [several reports](#) in which we talked about these attacks.

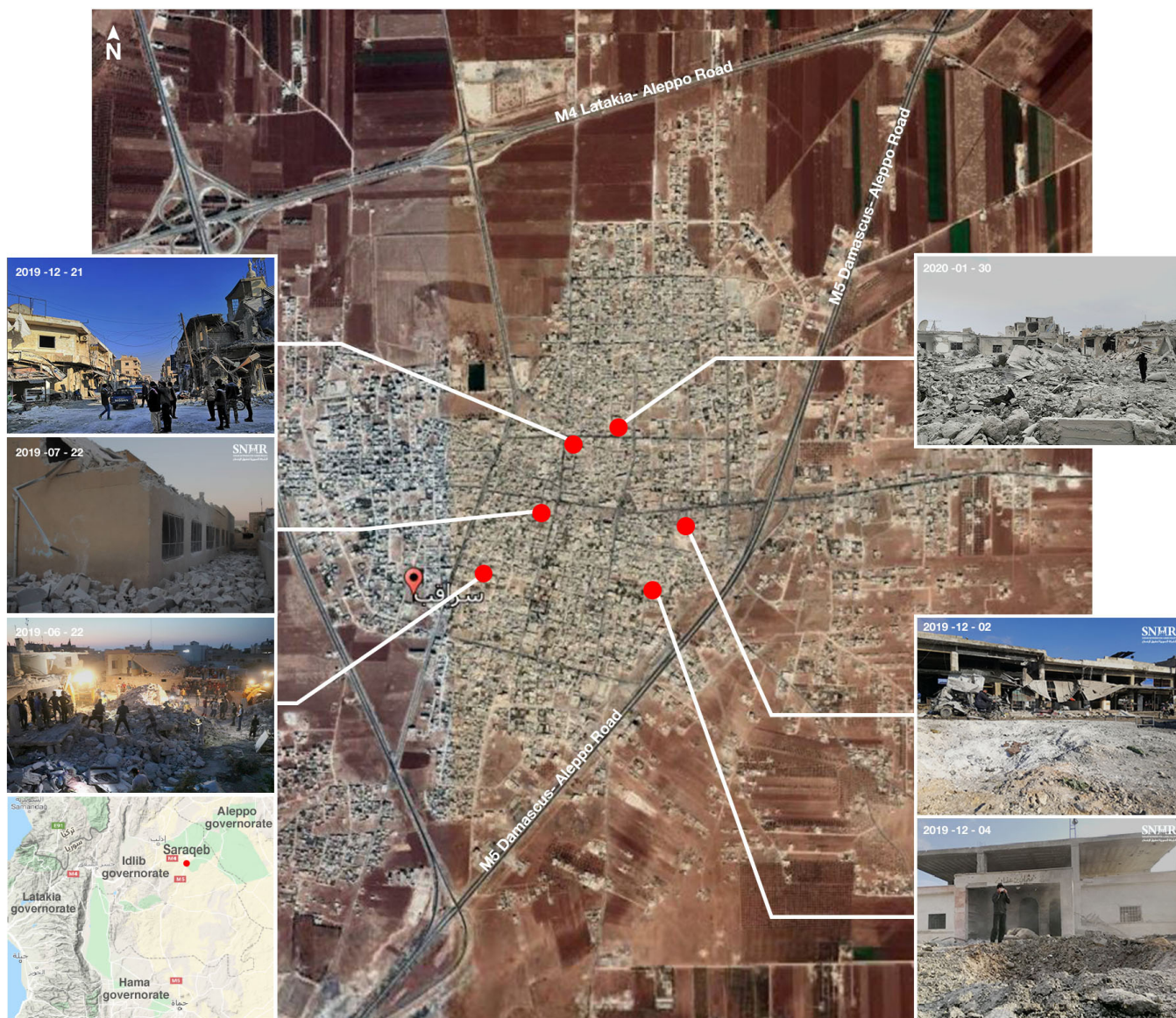




Map shows the locations of civilian objects which were destroyed in Saraqeb city in the eastern suburbs of Idlib, according to the SNHR's documentation, as a result of the unlawful bombardment by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which took control of the city on March 2, 2020:



Map shows sites of civilian objects which were destroyed in Saraqeb city in the eastern suburbs of Idlib as a result of the military campaign carried out by Syrian- Russian alliance, between April 2019 and March 2020





Aerial photos obtained by the SNHR, taken on September 8, 2019, showing the destruction in Saraqeb city due to the intensive and unlawful bombardment by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, which took control of the city on March 2, 2020:







## **V. Nearly 99% of the Population Is Forcibly Displaced as the Syrian Regime and Its Allies Approach Their Areas, Fearing for Their Lives**

The continuous bombardment over many months, has consistently targeted vital civilian facilities and residential neighborhoods, with the Syrian regime and its allies not focusing this bombardment against areas containing combatants, but rather using a strategy of indiscriminate and ferocious bombing, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. The bombardment also causes terror among the population of people of brutal reprisals similar to those against residents of areas which previously rose up for freedom, such as the terrible reprisals which we have documented in the Old Homs neighborhoods, Damascus Suburbs, and a number of areas subjected to compulsory 'reconciliation'; when some of the residents of those areas decided to remain there, they were subjected to arrests and enforced disappearances, unlawful conscription of young men into the ranks of Syrian Regime forces, and other violations, all of which served as an example to other areas warning them of their own fate. All of these factors led to the population of other areas fleeing as soon as the forces of the Syrian regime and its allies approached them, a pattern which further undermines the Syrian regime's implausible claims to be ridding Syria of terrorists and protecting its people. This well justified fear of the regime's persecution is the reason why hardly any of the residents of the areas the Syrian regime enters remain there, despite being fully aware of the terrible conditions that they will face after leaving their homes, and



in light of a sharp decline in the quantities and delivery of humanitarian aid. Despite all the daunting challenges facing them, they decided to flee because they are fully aware that what awaits them if Syrian Regime forces and Iranian militias arrest them is far worse than displacement, and for this reason also, they do not voluntarily return after the Syrian regime controls these areas.

The bombing and destruction carried out by Syrian Regime forces, which, as we have shown, is similar across various cities and towns, has caused the displacement of their populations. Consequently, nearly a million people have been internally displaced since December 2019, due to the Syrian regime and its allies taking control of new cities and towns in the southern suburbs of Idlib and the northwestern suburbs of Aleppo.

The latest [statistics](#) from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) indicate that there are now approximately 3 million people in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime in and around Idlib, and that the largest percentage of these were previously displaced from several regions such as Eastern Ghouta, the northern suburbs of Homs, southern Syria, the northern suburbs of Hama and the southern suburbs of Idlib, all of whom are confined to an area that does not exceed 3,100 square kilometers, meaning that the population density has become approximately 960 people per 1 square kilometer, which is a very high proportion according to the international standards approved by [the World Bank](#); this percentage is distributed according to the geography of the region, where the areas near the lines of control of Syrian Regime forces are considered almost empty of civilians, while the highest population density is concentrated in the areas near the Syrian-Turkish border, with the vast majority of the people packed into this area being asylum seekers due to the persecution and violence they suffer in their country. International law is clear in granting asylum seekers assistance in obtaining it for this reason.





The latest ceasefire that came into effect on March 6, 2020, which halted the air strikes by Syrian-Russian alliance forces, contributed to the return of approximately 280,000 displaced people to their homes in areas outside the control of the Syrian regime, after they had been reassured that the Syrian regime would not advance to control them - at least at this stage. While we expected a larger scale return of IDPs, we saw only a limited return of IDPs due to the understandable lack of confidence in the settlement agreements, which have been largely and frequently breached, as well as due to the destruction and collapse of their homes.

In light of the inadequacy of the humanitarian response and the high population density, especially in the regular and informal camps and shelters that are wholly insufficient for housing, and in light of the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic, IDPs are one of the groups most vulnerable to infection with the virus, due to their lack of adequate housing and their accommodation in overcrowded tents which lack basic sanitation facilities such as toilets, functioning sewage networks and clean water; this means that the allocations of water necessary for maintaining even basic cleanliness for each individual is far less than the normal state and far smaller than that provided to the other regions in Syria. The homeless IDPs also struggle to obtain adequate tents, and are sometimes forced by lack of any other option to share tents with strangers, which has a particularly negative effect on women due to their special needs. We have released [a report](#) that addresses the challenges faced by this group, amid fears of the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.





The SNHR spoke to Mustafa al Gharib<sup>1</sup>, a media worker with the Civil Defense Organization, who is from Ma'aret al Numan city. He told us about the bombardment the city had been exposed to and the movement of displacement that accompanied it: **“On December 19, 2019, Syrian Regime forces began a bombardment campaign of unprecedented violence on the city, using hundreds of shells and missiles, targeting the residential neighborhoods in the city and concentrating on the city center which was crowded with civilians.”** Mustafa also told us that the people of the city were displaced from the beginning of this military campaign, fleeing with only a few of their belongings due to the intense bombing. He added: **“In the last three days, before the regime tightened its control over the city, the city became completely empty of its entire population, and I could not enter it due to the heavy bombing.”**

The SNHR also spoke with Laith al Abdullah<sup>2</sup>, a media worker at the Civil Defense Organization, from Saraqeb city, who told us about the forced displacement of the city's residents: **“The harshest campaign against Saraqeb city began on December 18, 2019, with the frequency of violence increasing with the passage of days until the bombing became daily on the city in January, concentrating on the market area and residential neighborhoods in general, and on the areas adjacent to the international road inside the city in particular, which caused massive destruction to the city and caused the displacement of most of its people from it.”**

Laith added: **“Our center was not spared from the bombing either, as it was bombed on January 31, forcing us to leave and get out of the city, and we worked for the remaining time to help the remaining civilians to get out despite the difficulty in light of the ongoing bombing.”**

<sup>1</sup> Via WhatsApp on May 17, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Via WhatsApp on May 17, 2020



## VI. Laws Enacted by the Syrian Regime Aim to Control the Property of the Forcibly Displaced Persons, Which Contravene the Principles of International Human Rights Law

After destroying buildings and whole neighborhoods and displacing their residents comes the last stage in the regime's and its allies' campaign of dispossession and humiliation against Syrian citizens; this is the stage of passing laws giving the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies total possession of and power over the property of the displaced people. The current President of the Republic, Bashar al Assad, has issued a large number of such decrees that violate basic human rights and the Syrian constitution; there is no independent legislative or judicial authority in Syria, all of which are subject to the authority of the security services and are effectively merely regime ornaments, with all serving to support the executive authority in justifying its crimes against the Syrian people and the Syrian state.

The following are the most prominent of the relevant laws and decrees enacted by the People's Assembly in Syria which constitute clear violations of international human rights law, the foremost of which is the right to property:

Law 63 of 2012 allows the confiscation of the property of "terrorists"; according to the regime's definition, anyone who demands or supports changing the dynastic system of governance to a modern pluralistic democratic system can be classified as a terrorist. The Ministry of Finance has seized the properties of hundreds of activists who participated in or supported the political uprising under the pretext of their having "supported terrorism", transferring ownership of these properties to the government, with many of these properties then being seized by individuals and militias within the Syrian regime, especially within the security services.

Legislative Decree 66 of 2012, aimed at regulating the destroyed areas, was limited to two zones in Damascus governorate, while Law No. 10, which appeared in 2018, covered all Syrian territory.

Legislative Decree 19 of 2015, allowed local boards of directors to establish holding companies. According to this law, the Damascus Cham Holding Company, managed by the Governor of Damascus, was established in 2016.

Legislative Decree 11 of 2016, aimed to stop any work in maintaining real estate ownership records closed due to the war in all Syrian territories.



Legislative Decree 12 of 2016 was nominally aimed at automating the cataloguing of real estate ownership records, but demanded large numbers of ownership and identification documents to prove ownership, deliberately ignoring the fact that many of these documents had been lost due to the destruction of houses by the Syrian regime warplanes.

Legislative Decree No. 3 of 2018, aimed at clearing the rubble of destroyed residential properties, making it almost impossible for the owners of these properties to prove ownership after ownership documents were ruined or destroyed by air strikes.

Law No. 10 of 2018, subsequently amended by Law No. 42 of 2018, aims to establish regulatory areas throughout Syria without specifying the nature of these regulatory areas, i.e. the Syrian regime can restructure any area it wants in Syria under the pretext of the existence of this law, including residential and commercial property.

All these decrees and laws intentionally ignore the main cause of the destruction, siege and displacement of the people. It is ludicrous, therefore, to treat the contents and details of these laws as though they were legitimate articles of legislation since they were issued by the party directly responsible for the violations of bombing residential, all of which constitute war crimes. The Syrian authorities will certainly pass laws that enable them to earn hundreds of millions of dollars through the theft and looting of land and property, and through reconstruction operations, having already begun by passing these barbaric laws.

The expropriation and theft of properties through enactment of legislation that fundamentally violates and disregards international human rights law and violates the most basic property ownership rights of Syrian citizens constitutes a major obstacle to the return of refugees and IDPs, amounting to enforced evictions and to an effort to manipulate demographics and social structures. There will be no solution to the issue of the forced displacement of millions of Syrians and their property until after a political change is achieved that achieves democracy, human rights and accountability.

## VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance forces have unquestionably violated the UN Security Council Resolutions No. 2139 and 2254 to stop indiscriminate attacks, and also violated International Humanitarian Law rules of distinction between civilians and combatants.
- Indiscriminate bombardment has caused a succession of violations, including the destruction of vital facilities and residential neighborhoods, and contributed to the forced displacement of the population.





- The Syrian regime violated the procedures established by International Humanitarian Law, what caused civilians to panic and flee, at the forefront of which are making civilians the target of attacks, and launching violent and indiscriminate attacks aimed at spreading terror.
- The Syrian regime has practiced the crime of forced displacement, which constitutes a war crime according to Statute of the International Criminal Court (Articles 8 (2) (b) (7) and 8 (2) (e) (8). The Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies have also committed the crime of forced displacement in a widespread manner, which constitutes a terrible violation of the Geneva Conventions and amounts to crimes against humanity (Article 7 (1) (d)).
- The Syrian regime has broadly violated the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, since international human rights law applies in both peace and wartime, in particular Principle No. 3, which provides protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons, and Principle No. 6 that displacement shall last no longer than required by the circumstances, with Principle 7, Principle 14 and Principle 21 providing protection, in all circumstances, to the possessions and property of internally displaced persons.
- The destruction of cities, towns, vital facilities and shops, and displacing their people, the overwhelming majority of whom have stopped working, as the number of internally displaced persons is estimated at approximately 6.5 million Syrian citizens, and the externally displaced at approximately 7 million Syrian citizens. This destruction and displacement, for which the Syrian regime and its allies are directly responsible, are among the primary causes behind the collapse of the Syrian economy, with the impact of economic sanctions being negligible compared to the displacement of nearly 13 million Syrian citizens and the destruction of millions of buildings.

## **Recommendations:**

### **UN Security Council**

- Issue a binding resolution that prevents and punishes the crime of forced displacement, compels the cessation of forced displacement, and explicitly provides for the right of forcibly displaced people to return safely to their homes, and receive reparation for what they have suffered, that is through a political transition process that guarantees dignity and stability in accordance with a strict timetable not to exceed six months.
- Compel the Syrian regime to stop its policy of settlements and population replacement, which it carries out in cities and neighborhoods whose residents have been displaced.



- Destruction of buildings and forced displacement threaten the region and Syrian territory, destabilizing security and stability, with the establishment of peace and security for Syria being at the core of the Security Council's tasks, responsibilities and capabilities.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible should be held accountable including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes and crimes against humanity has been proven, while UNSC states' veto power should be withheld when crimes against humanity and war crimes are committed.
- To establish peace and security, to implement the principle of the Responsibility to Protect civilians, and to save Syrians' lives, heritage and cultural artefacts from destruction, pillage and vandalism.
- Extend sanctions to include the Syrian, Russian and Iranian regimes who are directly implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people.

### **International community**

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





- Renew pressure on the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.
- Work to fulfil justice and achieve accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and on implementing the principle of the universal jurisdiction.

## **OHCHR**

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

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

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

## **UN Envoy to Syria**

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

## **The Russian regime**

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



## VIII. Attachments and Annexes:

[Photo from the Syrian Network for Human Rights](#) showing the extent of the destruction in Ihsem Preparatory School for Girls in Ihsem town, in the western suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces - Photo was taken on September 24, 2019

[Aerial photo](#) published by Qasioun News Agency on September 30, 2019, showing the extent of the massive destruction in Jarjanaz town in the eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate resulting from the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian forces on the town before they took control of it.

[Video showing](#) the extent of the massive destruction in Kafr Sajna village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the village before they took control over it - November 3, 2019 – Video source media activist Abdul Razzaq al Sbaih

[Photos from Syrian Network for Human Rights](#) showing the [extent of destruction](#) in al Ikhlas Children's and Women's Hospital in Shnan village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of a Russian air attack - November 6, 2019





[Aerial photo](#) published by the Erem News website on December 26, 2019, showing the extent of the destruction in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city before they took control over it.

[Video showing](#) the destruction in several areas inside Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburb of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city before they took control over it - January 13, 2020

[Aerial photography](#), posted on the Civil Defense Organization's media platforms, showing the extent of the massive destruction inflicted by the bombing by fixed-wing Syrian regime warplanes on the industrial zone, east of Idlib city, causing a massacre – January 15, 2020

[Aerial photo](#) from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing the extent of the destruction in the industrial zone of Idlib city, as a result of a missile attack by fixed-wing Syrian regime warplanes, causing a massacre - January 15, 2020



[Aerial photography](#) published by Anadolu Agency on January 29, 2020, showing the extent of the massive destruction in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city before they took control over it.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the Marco Media Center on January 29, 2020, showing the extent of the destruction in Ma'aret al Numan city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city before they took control over it.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the French News Agency, AFP, on February 7, 2020, showing the extent of the massive destruction in Sarmin city in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the French News Agency, AFP, on February 15, 2020, showing the extent of the large destruction in Kafranbel city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city.

[Aerial photography](#) published by Russia Today TV, on February 20, 2020, showing the extent of the destruction in Ariha city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the city.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the French News Agency, AFP, on February 19, 2020, showing the extent of the massive destruction in Ihsem town in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the town.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the French News Agency, AFP, on March 2, 2020, showing the extent of the large destruction in Balyoun village in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the village.





[Aerial photo](#) from the Syrian Network for Human Rights showing the extent of the destruction in an IDP shelter, west of Ma'aret Misreen town in the northern suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of a Russian air attack that resulted in a massacre – March 4, 2020.



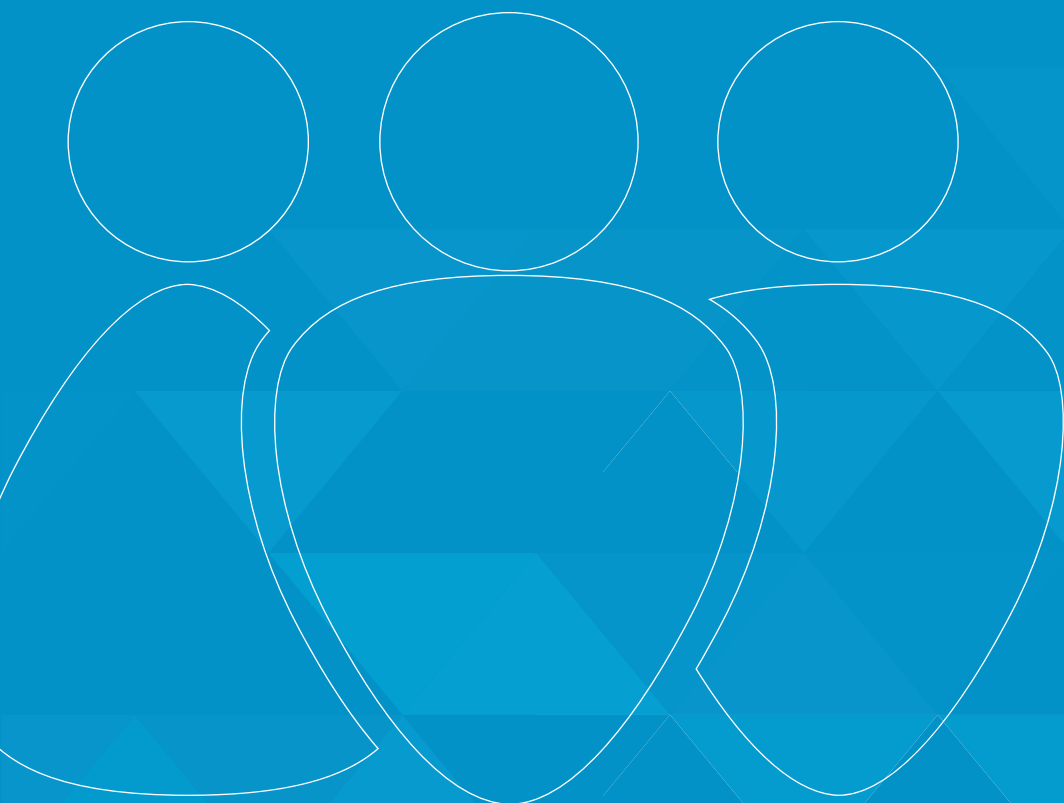
[Aerial photography](#) published by Al Aan TV, on March 13, 2020, showing the extent of the destruction in both Saraqeb city and al Nayrab village in the suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the area.

[Aerial photography](#) published by the French News Agency, AFP, on March 13, 2020, showing the extent of the massive destruction in Ifes village in the suburbs of Idlib governorate, as a result of the intense attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on the village.

### Thanks and condolences

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





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