SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

Jordanian Forces and the Syrian Regime are Responsible for the Killing of Seven Syrian Civilians, including Five Children and One Woman

The Syrian Regime is Hiding Captagon Traffickers Among the Syrian People, Jordanian Forces Must Respect International Law

Friday, May 12, 2023

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

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I. Introduction and Methodology

At around dawn on Monday, May 8, 2023, two warplanes, believed to have entered Syrian airspace from Jordan, carried out airstrikes in the governorates, Daraa and Suwayda which killed multiple civilians, including women and children. This infringement of Syrian sovereignty by Jordanian forces is an unusual event. While the Jordanian authorities did not officially claim responsibility for the operation in question, the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, speaking in a press conference held jointly with his Dutch counterpart a few hours after the operation, noted that Jordanian authorities had reached an agreement with the Syrian regime to form a joint security force to combat and eradicate the threat of drug trafficking, adding that the plan would be set in motion in the very near future. At the same press conference, the Jordanian minister also revealed that the two sides have established communication channels.

This statement suggests that the airstrikes earlier in the day were carried out in coordination with the Syrian regime. On one hand, the Syrian regime has never shown any regard for Syrian civilian lives or any infringement of the sovergnity of the Syrian state, while, on the other, Syrian regime-controlled areas have become the world's largest hub for the manufacturing and distribution of the amphetamine Captagon, sponsored by the Syrian regime itself in coordination with Hezbollah.

The objective of this report is twofold. First, the report aims to shed light on the human rights violations carried out in this attack under the pretext of combating Captagon production. Secondly, the report emphasizes that the Syrian regime is wholly responsible for hiding Syrian and non-Syrian drug traffickers among Syrian civilians.

This report uses an investigative methodology based on collecting and examining evidence, statements and accounts in the context of collecting, organizing, and analyzing the available data to draw an accurate picture of the events that transpired that day To this end, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) works with field researchers, as well as with a wide network of contacts built up over the course of the past 12 years. SNHR's team has also analyzed related videos and photos posted online, or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or SNHR's social media channels. Some of the footage we have received from activists shows the site of the attacks, the victims' bodies, the injured, and the massive destruction left by the attack.

We have retained copies of all the videos and photos included in this report in a secret database, as well as keeping backup copies on hard drives. Still, we cannot claim that we have documented all such incidents in light of the ban and crackdown on our team members by Syrian regime forces and other armed groups. For more details, please read about the methodology adopted by SNHR.

This report only covers the bare minimum of information on the incident which we have been able to document, and of the actual magnitude and gravity of the violation that occurred. It also does not reflect the social, economic, and psychological ramifications arising from it.

II. Details of the Attack Carried out by Jordanian Forces on Syrian Territory

At around dawn of Monday, May 8, 2023, two warplanes entered Syrian airspace from Jordan, both of which we suspect are affiliated with the Royal Jordanian Air Force (RJAF), before carrying out two simultaneous attacks on two targets in southern Syria.

First attack: This took place near Khrab al-Shahm in the western suburbs of Daraa governorate near the Jordanian-Syrian border. The targeted site was formerly a regime sewage treatment plant. At the time of the airstrike, it was under the control of armed groups affiliated with Syrian regime forces and the Lebanese group Hezbollah. The bombardment destroyed some buildings in the facility. We documented no civilian casualties, considering that the targeted site was under the control of combatants with no civilian presence.

It should be noted that the targeted facility was being used to temporarily store narcotic shipments, particularly Captagon produced in the areas of Damascus and its suburbs, before these are smuggled abroad via the Jordanian-Syrian border.

Damage caused by airstrikes by fixed-wing warplanes believed to be affiliated with the Royal Jordanian Air Force on a sewage treatment plant near Khrab al-Shahm town in Daraa suburbs - May 8, 2023

Second attack: This was carried out against al-Sha'ab village in the far southeast of Suwayda governorate. The targeted site was a residential house occupied by the family of 45-year-old Mer'ie Ruwyshed al-Ramthan, a local from the village. Al-Ramthan, who is believed to have been a head figure of a massive drug trafficking network in southern Syria responsible for distributing Captagon and other narcotics, was the key figure responsible for recruiting and arming smugglers across the south of the country. He commanded a local armed militia whose manpower is estimated to number in the hundreds, centered in the desert 'badiya' of Suwayda, where it controls a number of areas. This militia is responsible for securing the trafficking routes and overseeing operations involving the transporting and smuggling of Captagon and other narcotics, as well as arms. According to our intelligence, this operation is run in coordination and collaboration with the Syrian regime's 'al-Ferqa al-Rabe'a' (Fourth Division), headed by Major General Maher Assad, brother of the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar Assad.

Al-Sha'ab village is the largest and best known of the areas used for the storage and distribution of shipments of Captagon and other narcotics set to be trafficked. This village, which is also the main starting point for drug-smugglers and drug shipments headed for Jordan, is known as a safe haven for many individuals involved in activities related to manufacturing and trafficking Captagon and other narcotics, including non-Syrian and non-Lebanese people.

Village residents told SNHR that at around 04:30 on May 8, they heard two warplanes overhead coming from the direction of Jordan. A few minutes later, two consecutive explosions shook the village. The residents later found out that the attack targeted the home of Mer'ie Ruwyshed al-Ramthan.

SNHR documented the killing of seven civilians in this airstrike, identified as: Mer'ie, his 36-year-old wife Hend al-Ramthan, and their five children whose ages ranged from two to 10 years old.

Additionally, a girl named Asil al-Ramthan, who sustained critical injuries in the attack, was transferred to the intensive care unit in Suwayda National Hospital.

Photo showing the aftermath of the airstrike on the house of Mer'ie al-Ramthan by fixed-wing warplanes believed to be affiliated with the Royal Jordanian Air Force - May 8, 2023

Victim's names:

- Mer'ie al-Ramthan, the father
- Hend al-Ramthan, the mother
- Hamza al-Ramthan, boy
- Abbas al-Ramthan, boy
- Yamama al-Ramthan, girl
- Malak al-Ramthan, girl
- Lamis al-Ramthan, girl

Photo of Mer'ie al-Ramthan and his sons Hamza and Abbas who were killed in a targeted airstrike by fixed-wing warplanes believed to be affiliated with the Royal Jordanian Air Force on May 8, 2023

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

- Given the highly centralized nature of the Syrian regime, it would be impossible to operate a narcotics-production and distribution network of such a massive scale as the one currently operating in areas under its control without its central approval and supervision. It is an absurd notion to cooperate with the entity responsible for producing and distributing the Captagon on operations to combat the same Captagon production networks.
- Mer'ie al-Ramthan was just one of a large network of dozens of drug traffickers, all of whom operate under the command of the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. Killing any one of these figures will not put an end to Captagon production, with others quickly emerging to take their place.
- The Syrian regime and Hezbollah bear responsibility for hiding Captagon and narcotics traffickers among Syrian civilians, effectively endangering the lives of their families and of the local residents living in and around those areas.
- Jordanian military forces are responsible for killing civilians, including children, due to their failure to respect the principle of proportionality established in international law, which requires that, in determining the legitimacy or lack thereof in any attack, the attacking party should first assess the context. Any attacks that "may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited."[1] There must be always a balance between the means, the end, and the actual outcomes. We have extremely strong indicators which suggest that the damage inflicted in this case was exceptionally excessive compared to the anticipated military advantage.

1. International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Rule 14 of the customary international law. https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule14

Recommendations

UN and the international community

- The Security Council should adopt a resolution obliging the Syrian regime to cease the production of and trade in Captagon and other narcotics, and imposing strict UN sanctions in cases of non-compliance.
- The Captagon trade will not stop so long as the Syrian regime that enables, supports, and manages it remains in power. The Security Council must show real and actual support for a real path to the peace process in Syria, and help to bring about a fair political transition that ensures security and stability.

International community

- Take action against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah through every mean possible, considering the fact that the production of Captagon and other addictive narcotics poses a threat to all the peoples of the world.
- Renew pressure on the Security Council in order to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).
- UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- The OHCHR must condemn this attack, which resulted in a massacre, and submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other concerned UN organs.
- Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)
- Work on documenting this attack, which resulted in a massacre, and include this information in the Commission's upcoming report, explicitly identifying and naming the perpetrators.

Jordanian government

- Launch an investigation into this incident that resulted in the killing of civilians, including children, and make the findings of this investigation available to the public.
- Apologize to the victims and compensate their families.
- End all forms of coordination with the Syrian regime that is the producer, manufacturer and distributor of Captagon. The failed policy of coordinating with the Syrian regime is the reason for this horrifying massacre.

Syrian regime

- Cease hiding drug traffickers among the Syrian people.
- Cease all operations of producing and trading narcotics.
- Apologize to the victims and compensate their families.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

We extend our most sincere gratitude to the witnesses, victims' families, and all local activists in various fields for their invaluable contribution to this report. Our most heartfelt condolences go to the victims' families.

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