

Investigation Confirms the Syrian Regime's Responsibility for the Massacre in Qarqour Village, Rural Hama, in Which Six Children Were Killed

Syrian-Russian Alliance Forces Have Killed No Fewer than 62 Civilians Since October 5 in Northwestern Syria, 60 Percent of Them Children & Women



Thursday 26 October 2023

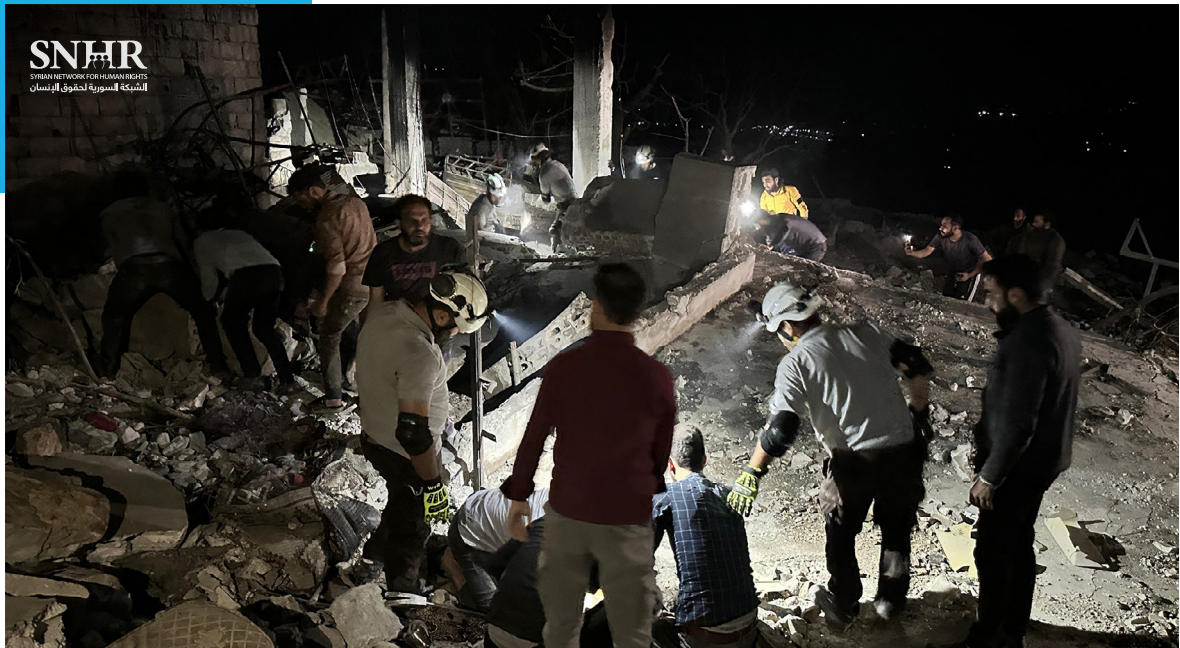
The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.

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I. Introduction & Methodology

Since October 5, 2023, northwestern Syria has been ravaged by heavy bombardment, which forms part of another military offensive against the region by the forces of the Syrian and Russian regimes. These attacks have wholly disregarded the rules of international law, with the Syrian Network for Human Rights' (SNHR) team documenting numerous violations, some of which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. While the frequency of these attacks has decreased since October 10, both indiscriminate attacks and incidents of deliberate targeting of civilian gathering places have continued. These attacks have taken place in Idlib city, the surrounding areas in southern, western, eastern, and northern rural Idlib, in western rural Aleppo, and in Sahl al-Ghab in western Hama. Most of these attacks targeted civilian areas that are located far from the dividing lines between areas controlled by regime forces and those controlled by armed opposition factions and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On October 13, we released [a report](#) that shed light on the most notable violations committed by Syrian-Russian alliance forces since their most recent military escalation. So far, this offensive has led to the displacement of over 100,000 people, according to estimates [released](#) by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on October 24.



👁️ Rescuers search for a body trapped under the rubble of a house in Bazza village in southern Idlib that was destroyed by a Russian airstrike - October 13, 2023 © SNHR

Methodology

This report outlines the findings of an investigation conducted by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) into a massacre in Qaraour village in Western rural Hama, in which six children were killed. In doing so, this report sheds light on the details of the attacks, as well as summarizing the civilian death toll and the attacks on vital civilian facilities carried out by Syrian-Russian alliance forces and documented on SNHR's database since the beginning of the most recent offensive on October 5, 2023 up until October 25, 2023. The report also sheds light on the Syrian regime's use of cluster and incendiary munitions during this offensive, with use of these internationally outlawed weapons being documented on a daily basis by our researchers on the ground.

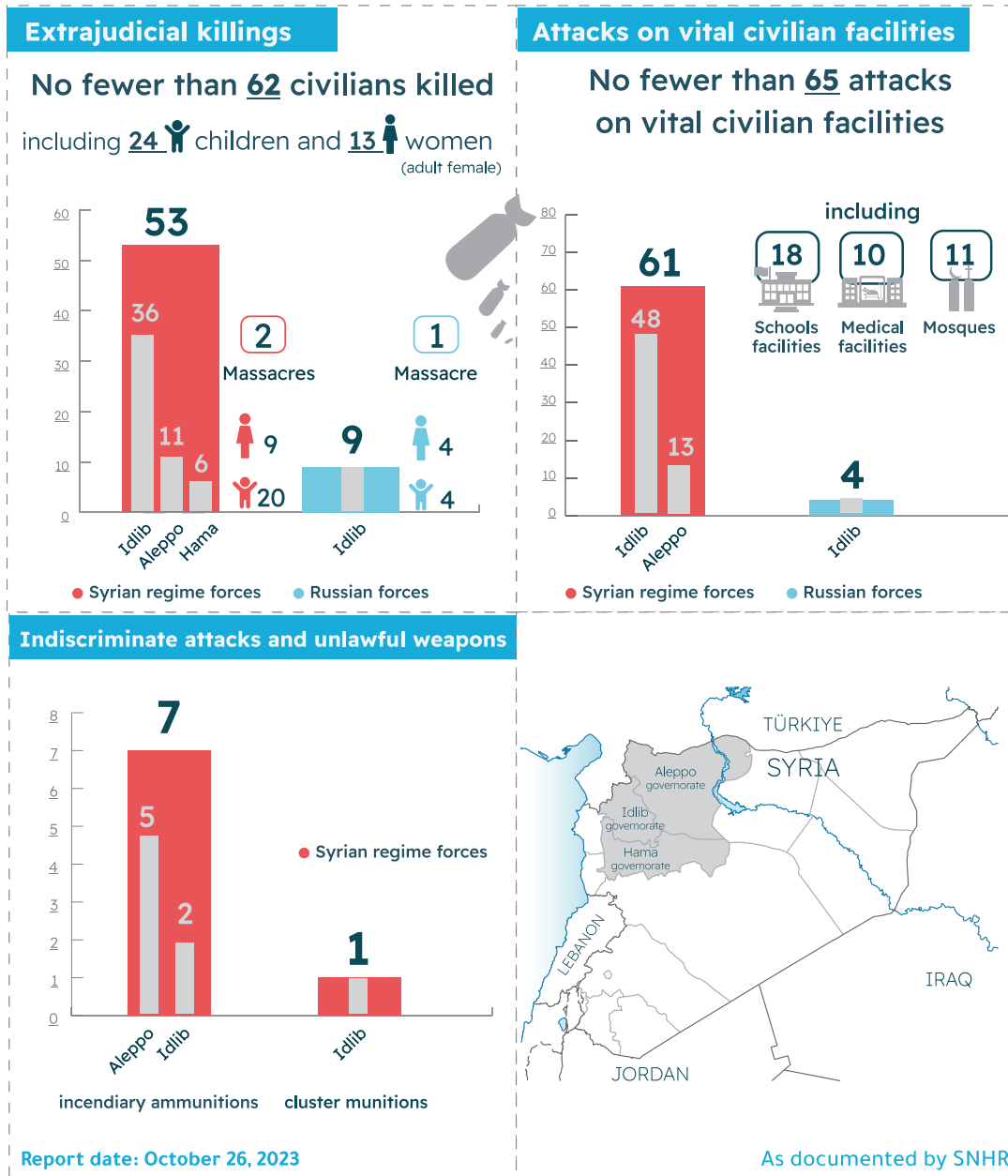
SNHR has also analyzed videos and photos posted online, or submitted to us by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media channels. Some of the footage published by activists shows the attack sites, the bodies of those killed and injured, and the massive destruction inflicted in the attacks.

We have retained copies of all the photos and videos included in this report in a well-protected online database, as well as retaining backup copies offline. Despite all of our team's exhaustive work, we do not claim to have documented all the cases that have occurred in light of the ban on SNHR's work and the pursuit and persecution of our personnel by Syrian regime forces and other armed groups. For more details, readers can see SNHR's working methodology at this [link](#).

This report includes three first-hand accounts, which we selected from among the many accounts we collected through directly talking with eyewitnesses, rather than from any second-hand sources. In all of our interviews, we explained the purpose of the interviews beforehand to the interviewees, who gave us permission to use the information they provided in the service of this report, without offering or promising any incentives. We have also tried, insofar as possible, to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of recalling the traumatic violations that occurred, and gave assurances that we will protect the confidentiality of any eyewitness who requested to use an alias.

This report only reflects the bare minimum of the magnitude and gravity of the violations that occurred. It also does not include any analysis of the social, economic, and psychological ramifications of these events.

II. Most Notable Violations at the hands of the Syrian-Russian Alliance Forces in Northwestern Syria From October 5 Until October 25, 2023, as Documented by SNHR



A. Extrajudicial killing

SNHR documented the killing of 62 civilians, including 24 children and 13 women (adult female), as well as three humanitarian workers, in attacks carried out by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on a number of areas in the governorates of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama in northwestern Syria between October 5 and October 25, 2023. These deaths are distributed as follows:

- **Syrian regime forces:** 53 civilians, including 20 children and nine women. We also documented two massacres at the hands of Syrian regime forces.

These are distributed by governorate as follows:

- **Idlib governorate:** 36 civilians, including 12 children and six women.
- **Aleppo governorate:** 11 civilians, including two children and three women.
- **Hama governorate:** Six civilians, all children.
- **Russian forces:** Nine civilians, including four children and four women in Idlib governorate. We also documented one massacre by Russian forces.

B. Attacks on vital civilian facilities

Between October 5 and October 25, 2023, SNHR documented no fewer than 65 attacks on vital civilian facilities by Syrian-Russian alliance forces in northwestern Syria. These are distributed as follows:

- Syrian regime forces: 61 attacks - 48 in Idlib and 13 in Aleppo.
- Russian forces: Four attacks in Idlib governorate.

Of these attacks, we documented 18 attacks on schools, 10 on medical facilities, five on Civil Defense (White Helmets) facilities and vehicles, 11 on mosques, and seven on IDPs gatherings/camps.

C. Indiscriminate attacks and unlawful weapons

SNHR documented one cluster munition attack by Syrian regime forces during their bombardment of Idlib governorate. This attack resulted in the death of one civilian and injured eight others.

We also documented seven attacks involving the use of incendiary ammunition targeting civilian areas distant from the frontlines. The seven attacks, all of which were carried out by Syrian regime forces were distributed as follows

- **Idlib governorate:** Two attacks.
- **Aleppo governorate:** Five attacks.

These attacks injured three civilians, and caused multiple fires.

III. Investigation Confirms the Syrian Regime's Responsibility for the Ground Attack on Qarqour Village , Western Rural Hama that Killed Six Civilians, All Children

[Qarqour](#) village, located on the eastern bank of the Orontes River, is in the region known as Sahl al-Ghab in western rural Hama governorate, and is administratively a part of al-Zeyara subdistrict in al-Sqebiliya area. According to local activists, the village had a population of 3,000 people by 2015, with most residents working in fishing and agriculture. In August 2015, armed opposition factions took control of the village following a battle with Syrian regime forces. Ever since then, the village has been the target of attacks by Syrian regime forces, due to its close proximity to the dividing lines with Syrian regime forces who closely observe the village through their military camps that are scattered across the hills surrounding the village. To the south of Qarqour village is al-Msheik village, the last point under the control of armed opposition factions before going into regime-held areas. As a result of the village's precarious location, most of its residents have fled the village, with only a few families left there who eke out a living through fishing. Most recently, the village has been under the control of armed opposition factions and the HTS.

Details of the Attacks

On Sunday, October 22, 2023, around 13:25 local time, Syrian regime forces stationed in Jourien town in western Hama carried out a ground attack in which they fired an artillery shell, which we suspect was a 130 mm shell, at the northwestern outskirts of Qarqour village. The shell [struck a tent](#) there set up by a family next to their house, as an alternative residence following the devastating February 6 earthquakes that hit northwestern Syria. The shell struck the tent when six children, four girls and two boys, were playing with a swing in front of it, [killing all of them, with the force of the blast dismembering some of their bodies.](#)

Victims' names

SNHR documented the killing of six children, four girls and two boys, in the attack by Syrian regime artillery forces that fired a shell at the site where those six children were gathered in northwestern Qarqour village in western rural Hama governorate on October 22, 2023:

1. [Taha Ref'at K'eid](#), five-year-old boy from Qarqour village.
2. [Jana Ref'at K'eid](#), two-year-old girl from Qarqour village.
3. [Hazar Ref'at K'eid](#), three-and-a-half-year-old girl from Qarqour village.
4. [Yazi Rakez K'eid](#), three-year-old from Qarqour village.
5. [Nour Mohsin al-Mohsin](#), one-and-a-half-year-old baby girl from Athar village in western rural Idlib governorate.
6. [Hosam Mohsin al-Mohsin](#), two-and-a-half-year-old boy from Athar village in western rural Idlib governorate.

1. SNHR has released [multiple reports](#) on that catastrophic event.



👁️ Impact site of a shell fired by Syrian regime forces at Qarqour village in western Hama, whose explosion resulted in a massacre - October 22, 2023 | Photo credit: Nedal al-Hmoud © SNHR

According to SNHR's monitoring team, this regime attack took place in tandem with Russian Orlan-10 reconnaissance aircrafts overflying the village. The aircrafts took off from the airbase in Jourien town. In the aftermath of the massacre, Syrian regime artillery forces fired additional shells at the area around Qarqour village. As the Civil Defense (White Helmets) and medical teams were unable to reach the site of the massacre, family members of four of the children transferred their bodies by motorbike to the nearby Frayka village, which is administratively part of Idlib governorate, where they were buried, while the remains of the other two children, from al-Mohsin family, were buried at the massacre site after their scattered body parts were recovered.

Visual analysis

of the strike site of an artillery attack by Syrian regime forces on Qarqour village in western rural Hama governorate that resulted in a massacre, in which six civilians were killed on October 22, 2023

Qarqour village map location



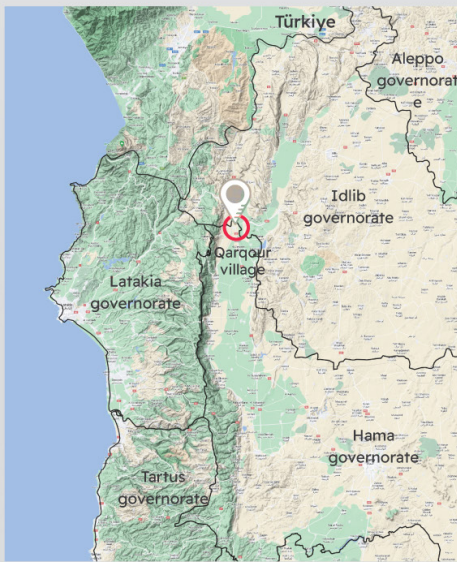
2- Photo of the site targeted following the attack



Aerial photo of Qarqour village



3- Another photo that was captured from a video



4- The shell's strike site (photo is exclusive to SNHR)



- Strike site of a shell in Qarqour village in western Hama. The shell was fired by Syrian regime forces and resulted in a massacre.
- tree fence
- house 1
- house 2

As documented by SNHR

October 26, 2023

SNHR spoke to Mohammad Najdat K'eid² from Qarqour village, a relative of some of the children killed in the massacre. While Mohammad was walking with his father and uncle beside the Orontes River on the noon of Sunday, October 22, he heard a shell being fired from the nearby regime-held Jourien town. He adds:

A few seconds later, the shell landed near me, where I was beside my uncle's house that was about 150 meters away from us. The shell landed near a tent that was set up after the earthquake, which was intended for the family to take shelter in since our house was damaged and was no longer safe. My cousins and our neighbor, who lives near us, were in the tent. We rushed there, and the first thing we saw were children's body parts that were everywhere, among the olive trees and on the houses' walls. I saw two of my cousins' dead bodies. The first was decapitated, and the second had its leg cut off. The rest were unrecognizable body parts." Mohammad told us that they collected the dead bodies in plastic bags. Ambulances and Civil Defense teams were unable to access the village since it is close to the dividing lines.. **"After the massacre, Syrian regime forces fired multiple shells at the vicinity of the village to block and target any vehicles trying to access the location. We were advised by everyone not to take the risk, and we transferred the dead bodies of four of the children on motorbikes to Frayka village where we buried them. We then returned to the massacre site to look for a missing girl, our neighbor's daughter. We found her brother Hosam's body as dismembered parts, while we only found some parts of her body."**



👁️ *The burial of one of the children killed in a massacre caused by a ground attack by Syrian regime forces on Qarqour village in western Hama - October 22, 2023 | Photo credit: Nedal al-Hmoud © SNHR*

2. Via WhatsApp on October 23, 2023.

SNHR also spoke with media activist Saed al-Din Zidan,³ who told us needed about 90 minutes to reach Qaraour village from his place of residence in al-Bardaqli area in northern Idlib. Saed al-Din rushed to the village after he heard the news of the bombardment at noon on Sunday October 22 and of children being killed there:

“There was a reconnaissance aircraft in the sky. We headed for the village’s cemetery, but found no one. We then left the village for Frayka village in western rural Idlib, where the families of the three sibling children, who were killed in the massacre, were burying them after they had been transferred here. The children’s uncle told us that the number of martyrs was six and the situation was horrifying. We rode our motorbikes and returned to Qarqour village, which is exposed to Syrian regime forces, so we continued on foot until we arrived at the massacre site on the village’s northwestern outskirts. We noticed that the shell landed in the middle of the tent which was set up at the time of the earthquake and was used by the family as a shelter. We also found the father of the other two children collecting the body parts of his son Hosam in a small bag and looking for the body parts of his daughter Noor, but he could not find her or her body parts, so we helped him in the search for her body parts, which took a long time, and he only managed to find some body parts that he suspected are from his daughter. In our search, we found body parts stuck to houses’ walls. One of the civilians told us that a dead body and a child’s body parts flew into the sky when the shell struck. I also spoke to the father of the two children, who was herding sheep near the massacre site. He also told us that his two children were around him before going to their neighbor’s house to play with the other children in the tent, when the shell struck there, and dust filled the place from the side of the tent. He did not immediately understand what had happened, but he ultimately realized that the children were struck. When we were in the village, the area on the west bank of the Orontes River was targeted with a number of shells.”



👁 Children killed by a massacre caused by a ground attack at the hands of Syrian regime forces on Qarqour village in western Hama - October 22, 2023

3. Via WhatsApp on October 23, 2023.

SNHR also spoke with media activist Nedal al-Hmoud⁴ from Zayzoun village. He said that he heard the sound of a shell being fired from his house in Frayka village in western Idlib, followed by a very strong explosion when the shell struck from the side of rural Hama. He learned from the news that it had come from Qarqour village, and that the bombardment had resulted in deaths and injuries

“I decided with other activists to get together and enter the village which is exposed to attacks by Syrian regime forces. We arrived in Qarqour cemetery, but found no one. We asked some of the Bedouin in the area and they told us that they took them to Frayka village. We headed for Frayka village and found out that four victims were killed - three siblings and a fourth who was also related to the three. We then found out that there were two siblings, who were neighbors to the four victims, that were killed, and we were told that a girl was missing. We returned to Qarqour village on motorbikes and headed for the targeted site which was a tent and in front of it was a swing that the children had been playing on. The rocket landed in the middle of the tent, and the residents told us that a reconnaissance aircraft was flying in the sky above them. We also found two people looking for the girl, one of them was her father, but they found no sign of her. As I was filming, I found a piece of flesh from the children's body parts and the girl's intestines scattered everywhere. It was a horrifying sight. We could not find the girl, named Nour, even though we searched for a long time. It was just blood and scattered body parts everywhere.”

Nedal said that after they left the village and on their way back, he noticed a reconnaissance aircraft in the sky and an alert was sent through the newsrooms that the area is being monitored by reconnaissance aircrafts, and that some areas in their vicinity have been targeted.

IV. Russian Forces Are Probably Responsible for Bombing a Camp that Resulted in a Second Massacre

On Tuesday, October 24, 2023, at around 12:25 local time, fixed-wing warplanes believed to be Russian fired multiple missiles at [al-Masbah Camp for internally displaced persons \(IDPs\)](#), also known as Ahl Saraqeb Camp, located in agricultural land on the southwestern outskirts of al-Hamam town in Jisr al-Shoghour city in western rural Idlib governorate, which resulted in the killing of six civilians - [two children, a fetus](#), and three women, - while five others were injured, including children, to varying degrees. Additionally, [seven IDPs tents were heavily damaged, as well as the camp's facilities](#). The area was under the control of armed opposition factions and HTS.

1. Via WhatsApp on October 23, 2023.

V. Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions:

1. In these attacks Syrian regime forces and Russian regime forces have yet again violated multiple rules of international humanitarian law, most notably in their failure to distinguish between civilian and military targets. These forces have bombed hospitals, schools, and other civilian facilities. Those violations constitute war crimes.
2. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have yet again categorically violated Security Council resolutions 2139 and 2254 that call for ending indiscriminate attacks,⁵ as well as violating a large number of the rules of customary international humanitarian law.⁶ Furthermore, through the crime of murder, the Syrian-Russian alliances forces have violated Article 7 & 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC),⁷ with these violations constituting war crimes and crimes against humanity.
3. These bombardment operations have collaterally caused loss of civilian lives, injuries, and/or heavy damage to civilian objects. There are also significant strong indicators suggesting that the damage was exceptionally excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage. In most cases, the attacks did not distinguish between civilians and military fighters; indeed, it seems that some of the attacks deliberately targeted vital facilities and civilian areas.
4. The use of cluster munitions by Syrian regime forces, under the leadership of the Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Bashar Assad, violates both the principles of distinction and proportionality according to international humanitarian law, which constitute a war crime.
5. States unanimously agreed at the World Summit 2005⁸ that every state is responsible for the protection of its residents against crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, including the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from crimes of atrocity, or is itself committing such crimes, as in the case of the Syrian regime, this means that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.⁹
6. International humanitarian law stresses that civilian objects must be provided with special protection. Under the same law, targeting those objects constitutes a war crime. Article 52 of Protocol I to the Geneva Convention¹⁰ defines civilian objects as "all objects which are not military objects," with military objects being "limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage." Civilian objects include medical facilities, educational facilities, infrastructure, places of worship, and other facilities used for civilian purposes.

5. The resolution also specifically mentions "the obligation to distinguish between civilian populations and combatants, and the prohibition against indiscriminate attacks, and attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such;" United Nations Security Council, Resolution [2139 \(2014\)](#), Paragraph 3.

"Demands that all parties 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," United Nations Security Council, Resolution [2254 \(2015\)](#), Paragraph 13.

6. "The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects." International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), [Rule 7](#) of the international humanitarian law.

"Indiscriminate attacks are prohibited." International Committee of the Red Cross, [Rule 11](#) of the international humanitarian law.

7. [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#), Rome Statute, Articles 7 (1-a) and Article 8-2 (a-i). See:

8. [United Nations General Assembly](#), 2005 World Summit Outcome

9. Ibid.

10. Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, Article 52. See: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-52?activeTab=1949GCs-APs-and-commentaries>

7. Syrian-Russian alliance forces have again and repeatedly violated the de-escalation agreement in all the zones to which it applies, as well as in the areas of Idlib. Those forces have also violated the Sochi agreement by bombing a number of villages in towns in de-escalation zone 4.

Recommendations:

United Nations Security Council

- The Security Council should take further action after the adoption of resolution 2254, which explicitly “demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such.”
- The Security Council should adopt a resolution to establish a ceasefire in Idlib that must involve punitive procedures in cases of non-compliance for all parties involved.
- Show serious support for the peace process in Syria and bring about a fair political transition that ensures safety and stability.
- The Syrian dossier should be referred to the International Criminal Court, and all those involved in crimes must be held accountable, including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes have been well-proven.
- The use of cluster munitions by the Syrian and Russian regimes threatens the safety and security of tens of thousands of Syrians. The Security Council should intervene directly and urgently to protect the Syrian people from the violations of the ruling authority, which constitute a war crime.

UN Secretary-General

- Condemn these senseless attacks in the strongest possible terms. The UN Secretary-General should also not ignore the deliberate killings of Syrian citizens.
- Clearly and explicitly identify the perpetrators of human rights violations which is a step towards their being convicted for their crimes and having their heinous practices exposed to the world. This would also send a message of solidarity to the people affected. Ignoring the explicit mention of the perpetrators of violations emboldens them to repeat and commit more violations.
- Call on the Security Council to act urgently and hold a special meeting with the aim of establishing a ceasefire and protecting the lives of tens of thousands of displaced civilians.

International community

- In light of the division and the state deadlock at the UN Security Council, action must be taken at the national and regional levels to establish alliances to support the Syrian people. This can be achieved through protecting the Syrian people from the daily killings inflicted on them and lifting the siege placed upon them, as well as increasing relief aid, and seeking to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction with respect to these crimes before national courts in fair trials for all those involved.
- As a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect SNHR has repeatedly called, in dozens of studies and reports, for the implementation of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Since all political channels have now been used and proved wholly ineffectual, first through the agreement sponsored by the Arab League and then the plan by Kofi Annan, the next natural step is to refer to Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and implement the R2P principle which was established by the UN General Assembly. Instead, the Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew pressure on the UN Security Council in order to refer the dossier on Syria to the ICC.
- Work towards establishing justice and accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, and activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.
- The states supporting parties to the conflict in Syria, especially Russia, should apply pressure on their allies to neutralize the Idlib area from hostilities in order to protect over 4 million people living there.

UN General Assembly

- Hold the Russian and Syrian regimes responsible for these attacks, which resulted in many civilian deaths, and put pressure on the UN Security Council to take action in order to protect the Syrian people, and prevent Russia from claiming impunity simply on the grounds of its status as a permanent member of the Security Council.

UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR)

- The OHCHR should condemn the attacks listed above which resulted in the deaths of dozens of civilians, and submit a report on these violations to the Human Rights Council and other UN organs.
- Train Syrian organizations in the proper removal of landmines and unexploded cluster munitions, and raise awareness at the local level about such threats.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI)

- Work to document these attacks, most of which have resulted in civilian deaths, and include this documentation in the COI's upcoming report while explicitly identifying the perpetrators.

UN Special Envoy to Syria

- Condemn these attacks and stress that massacres, killings, and torture have shattered the peace process.

Russian forces

- End the commission of the various patterns of war crimes in Syria.
- Reconstruct what has been destroyed by the Russian war machine.
- Compensate victims, both materially and morally, and issue a public apology.
- Comply with the outcomes of the Sochi meetings, and avoid repeating the same regrettable scenario of violating the de-escalation agreement.
- End support for the war crimes and crimes against humanity which the Syrian regime has been committing for 12 years. Such support constitutes a direct implication in these crimes.

Syrian regime

- Cease the killing of Syrian citizens and respect the Syrian constitution and international law.
- Comply with the rules of customary international humanitarian law, cease perpetrating crimes, and compensate the victims affected in these attacks.

Acknowledgment

We wish to thank all the survivors and the victims' families and friends, as well as eyewitnesses and local activists for their valuable contributions to this report.



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No justice without accountability

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