

# Russian Forces Perpetrated a Huge Massacre in a De-Escalation Zone

79 Civilians Killed, Including  
Eight Children in a Russian  
Bombing on al Atareb Town

**SNHR**

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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



## Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. The Attack on al Atareb Town
- III. Attachments
- IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

## I. Introduction

On May 6, 2017, de-escalation agreement went into effect and specified suburbs of Aleppo government, which are under the control of factions from the armed opposition, as one of four de-escalation zones. We have noticed a significant and relatively good drop in killing rates. However, Syrian-Russian alliance forces have deliberately breached the agreement in a number of areas such as Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, and then Aleppo in a manner that clearly suggests that the Syrian-Russian alliance wishes to doom any de-escalation agreement and actively work on submitting the Syrian people into accepting the legitimacy of the Syrian regime.

## II. The Attack on al Atareb Town

### **Summary**

Al Atareb town is part of al Atareb area in western suburbs of Aleppo governorate and has a population of approximately 80,000 people, including IDPs from Aleppo. Armed opposition factions seized control of the town in April 2012

This report documents an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian at a market and a police station in the center of al Atareb town. The attack resulted in the killing of 79 civilians, including eight children and eight women.



## **Methodology**

The report draws upon the ongoing monitoring of news and incidents by SNHR team through an extensive network of relations with various sources that have been built over the course of our work in the past years. When we receive information, or hear some news about a violation via the internet or media outlets, we work on following-up on this news and try to verify and collect evidences and data. In some cases, the researcher is able to visit the incident location at the soonest. However, this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks, and given the frequency of daily incidents and the human and material resources. Therefore, the possibility to access evidences vary from one case to another, and, hence, the degree of its classification. Usually, what we do, at SNHR, in such cases is relying on accounts from survivors who experienced the violation firsthand, where we try to access those directly, and, to a second degree, who saw or filmed the violation, in addition to analyzing whatever material available in open sources such as the internet and media. Thirdly, we rely on speaking with the medical teams that treated the wounded and examined the dead bodies to determine the cause of death.

Please see the methodology adopted by SNHR for [documenting victims](#) and [classifying vital civilian facilities](#)

We have talked to eight individuals, including people who were injured, survivors, paramedics, and workers at the central signal, which is a network that works on picking up call signals between Syrian regime forces who are stationed on the artillery weapon, military bases and pilots.

All accounts were collected through speaking directly to eyewitnesses and are not cited from any open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interviews to the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives.

SNHR has tried to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible, and gave guarantees to conceal the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.

Furthermore, the investigations included in this report have proved that the targeted areas were civilian areas where no military centers or weapon warehouses for armed opposition factions or extremist Islamic groups were found before or during the attack. Also, Russian forces didn't alert the civilians prior to the attack as the international humanitarian law requires.



SNHR has analyzed the videos and pictures that were posted online, or were sent to us by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some of the videos published by activists show the location of the attacks, dead bodies, injured, and the overwhelming destruction in the aftermath of the bombardment.

This report only represents the bare minimum, which we were able to document, of the magnitude and severity of the violation that occurred. It also doesn't cover the social, economic, and mental ramifications.

## **Details**

Monday, November 13, 2017, around 14:08, two fixed-wing warplanes we believe were part of the Russian air force carried out three airstrikes on a market in the center of al Atareb town and near a police station. The bombardment has resulted in the killing of 79 civilians, including eight children and eight women while no less than 83 individuals were injured. Also, shops were heavily destroyed as well as a police station and [a clinic center](#) that is [affiliated](#) to [Doctors Without Borders](#).

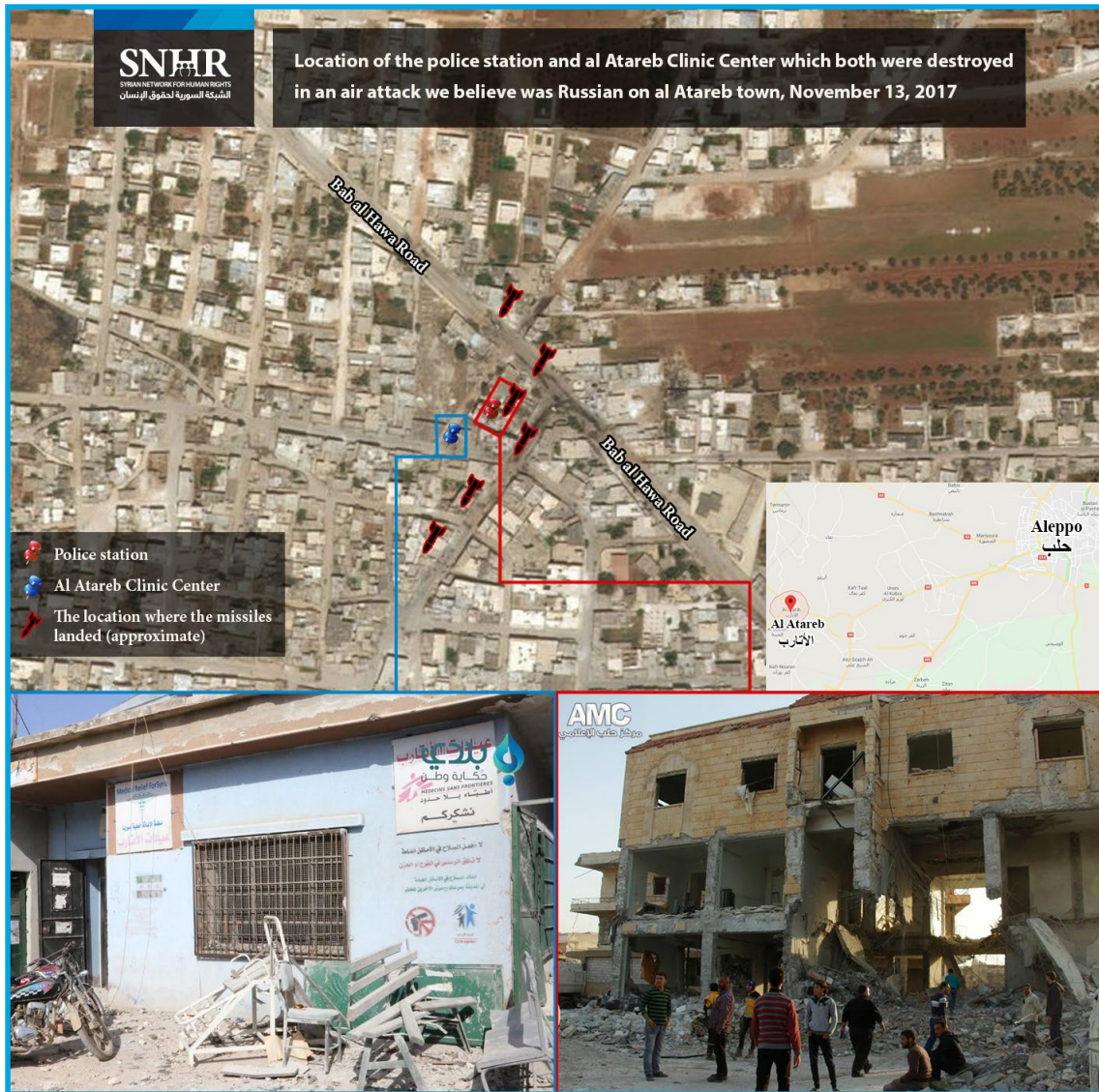
According to the eyewitnesses we spoke to, the police station is a civilian entity that is affiliated with the interim government<sup>1</sup> and not a part of any military faction. According to the international humanitarian law, policemen and their facilities are civilian targets unless they were directly engaged in combat operations.

Our colleagues at Human Rights Watch were able to determine the type of one of the ammunition that were used in al Atareb attack which were BETAB-500 – a bunker buster-type of ammunition. These ammunition, according to the Commission of Inquiry, have been used multiple times in eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo in late-2016.

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<sup>1</sup> A government formed by opposition bodies in March 2013





Three accounts by three observatory workers -one in Idlib governorate and two in Aleppo governorate- corresponded as the three confirmed that they monitored two Russian warplanes taking off from Hmeimim Airbase before the attack on al Atareb town. One of the workers, Abu Mohammad<sup>2</sup>, said: **“Around 13:55, I monitored two Russian warplanes taking off from Hmeimim Airport and tracked its movements towards Jabal al Arba’in in Idlib governorate and then southern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, before moving to the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The pilot was talking in Russian and I was able to map out his complete route.”**

<sup>2</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp





Shahoud Qasem<sup>3</sup>, a policeman, was present at the police station at the time of the attack and was severely injured: **“Unfortunately, we haven’t come around to activating the devices that enable us to hear the observatories warnings at the time, so we weren’t prepared for the attack. It was about 14:00 when everything in front of me was turned into smoke and rubbles. I completely lost consciousness and didn’t wake up until three days later in Atma Hospital. I have lost a large number of my friends who were buried alive under rubbles. I miraculously survived.”** Shahoud told us that the police station is affiliated with the interim government and is not affiliated with any military faction, adding that the station doesn’t have any weapons aside from light weapons such as pistols.

Ali Abeid<sup>4</sup>, a civil defense volunteer at “al Atareb town” center, told us that he received a signal from the observatory workers at around 14:00 about two Russian warplanes that took off from Hmeimim Airbase and passed through Idlib governorate towards western suburbs of Aleppo governorate: **“The bombardment was a few minutes after the warning. I saw smoke rising from the center of the town, so I headed along with the other workers to the area. The bombing was with six missiles including two that landed while we were there.”** Ali said that he saw the market floor covered with dead bodies and described the destruction as huge: **“I was shocked by what I saw. Tens of dead bodies including women and children, who were only shopping at the market, and dead bodies for policemen who were at the nearby police station. We kept working for 24 hours on saving the injured while pulling dead bodies lasted for nearly a week because the destruction was overwhelmingly huge. This is the first time missiles of this type were used. These missiles caused all of this destruction and deaths. There are no armed factions or military presence in the market. All the victims are civilians”**

Ahmad Shahoud<sup>5</sup>, a civil defense member in al Atareb town, visited the attack site immediately after the first bombardment: **“I heard two explosions coming from the center of the town and I headed immediately there. A few minutes later, I heard other explosions. It sounded like it was two warplanes because the second airstrike immediately followed the first one which is impossible had it been only one warplane. The third airstrike was before I got to the market. I headed for the police station and we stayed for three hours trying to pull out victims and wounded from the destroyed building. The destruction was almost in every floor and the victims and the wounded were buried under rubbles.”** Ahmad said that he also pulled out victims and wounded from the rubbles of the shops at the market: **“One of the dead bodies I pulled out was a little child who died under the rubbles of a restaurant that sells hummus and beans and an elderly who lasted six hours under rubbles until we managed to pull him out alive. All that is left in the market is ruins as it was wiped out completely.”**

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<sup>3</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp

<sup>4</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp

<sup>5</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp



We contacted Najib Bakkour<sup>6</sup>, head of the civil defense at al Atareb town, who said that he was near the market around 14:05 and saw two missiles that directly targeted the market: **“The missiles were highly explosive, and targeted the entirety of the market area. This happened at peak time when the market was heavily crowded.”** Najib told us that civil defense members spent an entire day pulling out victims and wounded from under rubbles. The final toll was 80 victims – most of them were injured who died in the days that followed the massacre in light of the limited medical capabilities and the severe injuries: **“The bombing buried tens under rubbles which caused serious injuries that undermined the odds of survival. These missiles have caused a destruction that we have never seen before. The markets, the shops, and the police station were completely wiped off.”** Najib confirmed that the area is completely a civilian area with no military centers that would justify this bombing.

Abdul Latif al Shnoun<sup>7</sup>, a survivor, said: **“I was at the market in the afternoon when I heard a sound like a whistle and then pressure that resulted from the explosion tossed me away and I lost consciousness completely. I was injured in my back, feet, and I sustained an internal bleeding and my face was disfigured.”**



A victim being aided in the aftermath of an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017

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<sup>6</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp

<sup>7</sup> Contacted via WhatsApp





A victim trapped under rubbles in the aftermath of an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017



A hole created by a missile from the attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017





### III. Attachments

#### Victims' names



Destruction in the aftermath of an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017

Victims killed in an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017

A hole created by an attack by fixed-wing warplanes we believe were Russian on al Atareb town – November 13, 2017

### IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

#### Legal conclusions

1- The Russian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which both state that indiscriminate attacks must be halted. Also, The Russian regime has violated Article 8 of Rome Statute through the act of willful killing which constitutes war crimes.

2- We can confirm that the bombardment mentioned in this report has targeted defenseless civilians. Therefore, the Syrian-Russian alliance forces have violated the rules of the international human rights law which guarantee the right to life. Additionally, these violations were perpetrated in a non-international armed conflict which amount to a war crime where all elements were fulfilled.

3- The attacks mentioned in this report, which were carried out by Russian warplanes, are considered a violation of the customary international humanitarian law as the shells were fired at a populated area rather than a specific military object.

4- Aerial bombardment has caused collateral damages that involved loss of lives, injuries, and significant damages to civil facilities. There are strong indicators suggesting that the damage was too excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.

5- The attacks carried out by Russian forces constitute a breach of the de-escalation agreements as they bombed areas under the control of factions from the armed opposition which strips Geneva path and agreements of any meaning and strengthen al Nussra Front at the expense of these factions.



## **Recommendations**

### **Security Council**

- The Security Council has to take additional steps as Resolution 2139 has been adopted and no pledges to cease the indiscriminate bombardment operations have been made. All the parties to the conflict should respect these steps and adhere to the rules of the international humanitarian law.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible must be held accountable, including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been proven.
- Instill security and peace in Syria and implement the norm of the Responsibility to Protect in order to protect the lives, culture, and history of the Syrian people from being destroyed, looted, and ruined.
- Expand the sanctions to include the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian regimes who are directly involved in committing crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.

### **OHCHR**

The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on this massacre in particular, and the massacres that preceded as they are a glaring point in a string of daily, sporadic massacres of a smaller scale. The OHCHR should also work on implementing the recommendations included in this report.

### **The International community**

- In light of the split of the Security Council and its utter inability, Steps must be taken on the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people that would protect them from the daily killing and siege and enhance the support for the relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction must be activated in local courts regarding these crimes in order to conduct fair trials for all those who were involved.
- SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the “Responsibility to Protect” norm in tens of studies and reports and as a member of the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (ICRtoP) after all political channels through the Arab League’s agreement and then Mr. Kofi Annan’s plan have been brought out. Therefore, steps under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations should be taken, 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 the pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and work on activating the principle of the universal jurisdiction.

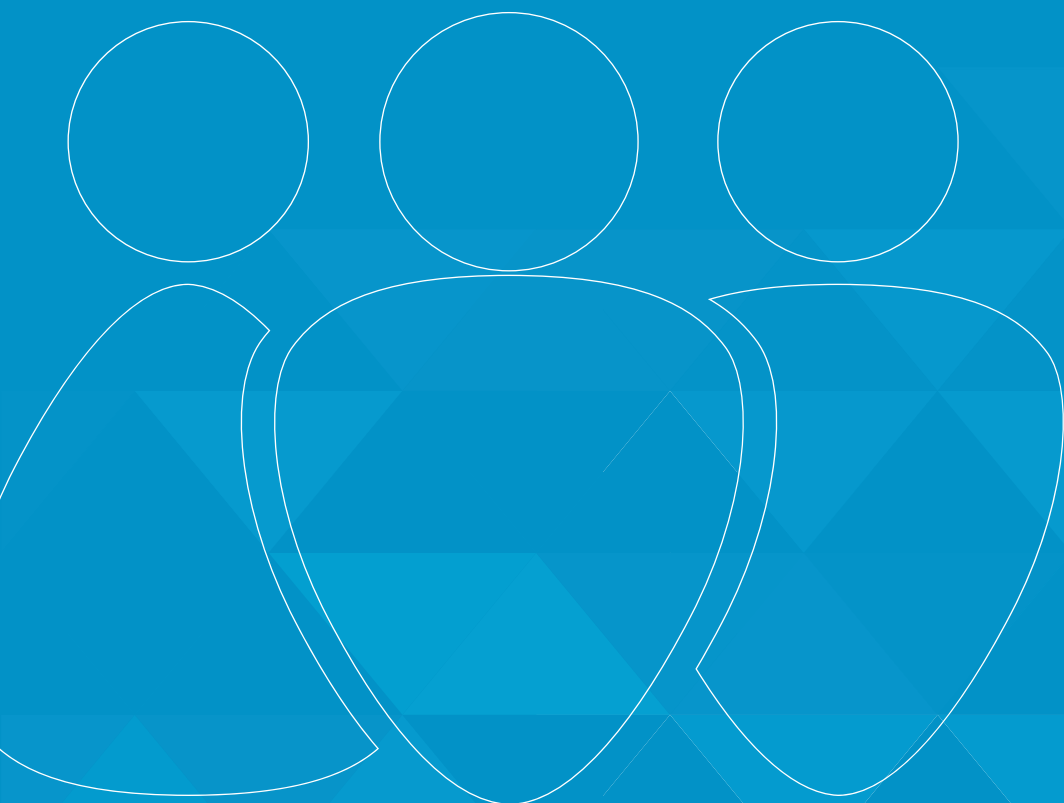
### **The European Union and the United States of America**

Support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism that was established in accordance with General Assembly Resolution 71/248, adopted on December 21, 2016. And establish local tribunals that enjoy a universal jurisdiction, and address the war crimes that were perpetrated in Syria.

### **Acknowledgment and Condolences**

Our most heartfelt gratitude and condolences to all the residents and local activists of al Atareb town who contributed effectively to this report.





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