

Syrian Regime's Chemical Terrorism Hits Syrians for the 211th Time

After Diminishing the American
Red Line, the Syrian Regime
Diminishes France's Initiative

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.



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I. Introduction and Methodology

The Russians have failed repeatedly to deter the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons while a conviction is growing among the Syrian people that this can be interpreted as Russia wanting their allies to use chemical weapons, considering the number of times chemical weapons were used by the Syrian regime, and particularly after Russia pledged that the Syrian regime will surrender its chemical weapons stockpile following the Two Ghoutas Attack in August 2013. However, the Syrian regime has carried out 178 attacks using chemical weapons since then even though none of these attacks were of the same manner, and not all of them resulted in large number of victims. In addition, poison gases were loaded in various types of ammunitions, ranging from ground-based weapons to barrel bombs, aerial ammunitions, and hand grenades.

De-escalation agreements, to which Russia were a guarantor party, haven't succeeded in stopping the machine of killing, bombing, and destruction, but, instead, Russia was a partner and perpetrator of tens of barbarian attacks, and surely Russia didn't fulfil its pledges in deterring the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons even though the de-escalation agreement went into effect. We have recorded no less than eight chemical attacks between May 2017 and February 2018 by the Syrian regime forces in the governorates of Idlib and Damascus suburbs.

Of the 11 times Russia used veto at the Security Council in favor of the Syrian regime, five vetoes were on the file of chemical weapons in particular, where Russia expressed their discontent with respect to the Joint Investigative Mechanism's work, which was established in accordance with Security Council resolution 2235, using three vetoes within one month



to stop the renewal of the JIM's mandate that ended in November 2017. Since then, as of February 2018, the Syrian regime has carried out three attacks at least using chemical weapons according to what SNHR team recorded.

We found out that the Russian attacks have been recently supporting the Syrian regime in its chemical attacks. This was clearly seen in Khan Sheikhoun attack on April 4, 2017 and Saraqeb attack on February 4, 2018 which this report addresses.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

“Again, the Syrian regime has undermined the red line that was established by the French President, as it had disregarded the former American President's pledges, with no serious response that deterred the Syrian regime from using chemical weapons again in the 21st century. Saraqeb attack is the first major breach after France's initiative was announced on January 23, 2018, and pledged to prosecute those who were responsible for chemical attacks in Syria. So far, no serious actions, it seems, will be taken against the Syrian regime. We were hoping that this initiative will see a decisive, speedy implementation, and that it fares better than President Barack Obama's red line.”

Methodology

We relied mainly on interviews with survivors who were injured in the chemical attack on Saraqeb city, as well as doctors who treated them, paramedics, eyewitnesses, and civil defense members. The report contains an account by one of the operators who work on picking up radar signals from warplanes and tracking calls between the pilot and the airbase from which he took off. Usually, these observatories announced when warplanes take off from military bases and track their movement to notify residents in armed opposition-held areas, in order to warn them to hide in shelters in the areas that might be targeted by warplanes.

This report contains eight accounts that we collected by speaking directly to eyewitnesses, and are not cited from open sources. We have explained the purpose of these interview for the witnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in the report without offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR team tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violations as much as possible, and we concealed the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.



This report doesn't include the social, economic, and mental ramifications and damages. In addition, we couldn't take any blood or soil test samples for in light of the present circumstances. Eyewitnesses' accounts corresponded with the pictures and videos we had analyzed, which yielded a high degree of credibility.

SNHR has analyzed videos and pictures that were posted online, or sent by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media. Some of the pictures showed yellow cylinders that we believe contained a poison gas while other picture showed some of the injured, including civil defense members. Also, other videos that were posted by activists shortly after the attack showed some of the injured being treated by spraying their bodies with water in order to get rid of the gas symptoms.

We used the website "www.worldweatheronline.com" to assess the weather conditions in Saraqeb city such as temperature and windspeed.

II. Use of Chemical Weapons by the Syrian Regime According to SNHR Data

According to the data documented by SNHR on the use of chemical weapons in Syria since the first use in 2012, the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons 221 times. We are going to divide those attacks with respect to the dates on which Security Council resolutions were adopted as landmarks and to highlight the number of times each of those resolutions were breached by the Syrian regime with no deterrent to be found.

- 1- Before Security Council resolution 2118, adopted on September 27, 2013: 33 attacks
- 2- Since Security Council resolution 2118, adopted on September 27, 2013: 178 attacks.
- 3- After Security Council resolution 2209, adopted on March 6, 2015: 109 attacks
- 4- After the U.N.'s mechanism was established and Security Council resolution 2235, adopted on August 7, 2015: 53 attacks.
- 5- After the Russian veto on the renewal of JIM's mandate, November 18, 2017: 3 attacks

All of these attacks have resulted in the killing of 1,421 individuals, recorded with names and details in our records. The death toll is divided into:

- 1,357 civilians, including 187 children and 244 women (adult female).
- 57 armed opposition fighters.
- 7 captives from Syrian regime forces who were being held at an opposition prison.

Also, no less than 6,684 individuals were injured.



III. Saraqeb City Chemical Attack

Saraqeb city is located in eastern suburbs of Idlib. Having a strategic location on the international highway Aleppo-Damascus, the city had been under the control of factions from the armed opposition since January 2012. The city remained under the control of these factions until Hay'at Tahrir a Sham (mainly al Nusra Front) managed to seize control of some of the areas following clashes with armed opposition factions in July 2017.

Saraqeb city had a population of 60,000 people before the offensive on the city started in December 2017. 90% of the city's population fled in the wake of the most recent offensive.

Preface

In late-December 2017, Syrian-Russian alliance forces escalated their airstrikes on areas in eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib which was an extension of the offensive that was launched in mid-September 2017 on the areas of eastern suburbs of Hama. No less than 320,000 people had fled from the areas that were targeted. We are working on a report on the mass displacement waves that this area has seen.

On Saturday, February 3, the Russian Ministry of Defense [announced](#) that a fixed-wing Russian Su-25 warplane was shot down by a shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft rocket in al Sawamea village, eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate. On the same day, the [Russian Ministry of Defense announced](#) that the area, where the plane was shot down, has been bombed, adding that they'd killed 30 individuals who were referred to as "terrorists".

Through our daily work and monitoring for the violations in Syria, we have monitored an alarming escalation in Russian airstrikes on the areas of eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib governorate. These areas are almost on the same front as the village where the Russian warplane was shot down.

It seems to us that Russian forces, in collaboration with Syrian regime forces, are seeking to commit retaliatory acts against the residents of these areas. This is similar to how Syrian-Russian alliance forces acted following the downing of its warplanes Su-24 in suburbs of Latakia in November 2015 and the [helicopters Mi-8 in eastern suburbs of Idlib in August 2016](#).



On the day of the attack, February 4, 2018, the entirety of Idlib governorate saw heavy Russian-Syrian airstrikes in which missiles and barrel bombs were used. A media worker told us that he couldn't count all of the attacks: **“It was a horrifying day. Warplanes never left the sky, and the warplanes kept coming including all kinds of weapons, Killing and destruction everywhere.”**

According to our records, Ma'aret al Nu'man Central Hospital was heavily destroyed and rendered out of commission about 30 minutes before Saraqeb attack. Ma'aret al Nu'man Hospital is one of the most important hospitals in southern suburbs of Idlib. We have also recorded damages to Kafranbel Surgical Hospital and the dispensary in Kafranbel city, eastern suburbs of Idlib as a result of Russian attacks, which was about an hour before the chemical attack.

We were able to monitor no less than 80 airstrikes by Syrian-Russian alliance forces that targeted approximately 22 points in Idlib governorate.

A deliberate criminal intention by the Syrian-Russian alliance forces

The tactic adopted by the Syrian regime in Saraqeb attack is largely similar to the one adopted in the two chemical attacks on Khan Sheikhoun and Eastern Ghouta with regard to timing and strategy.

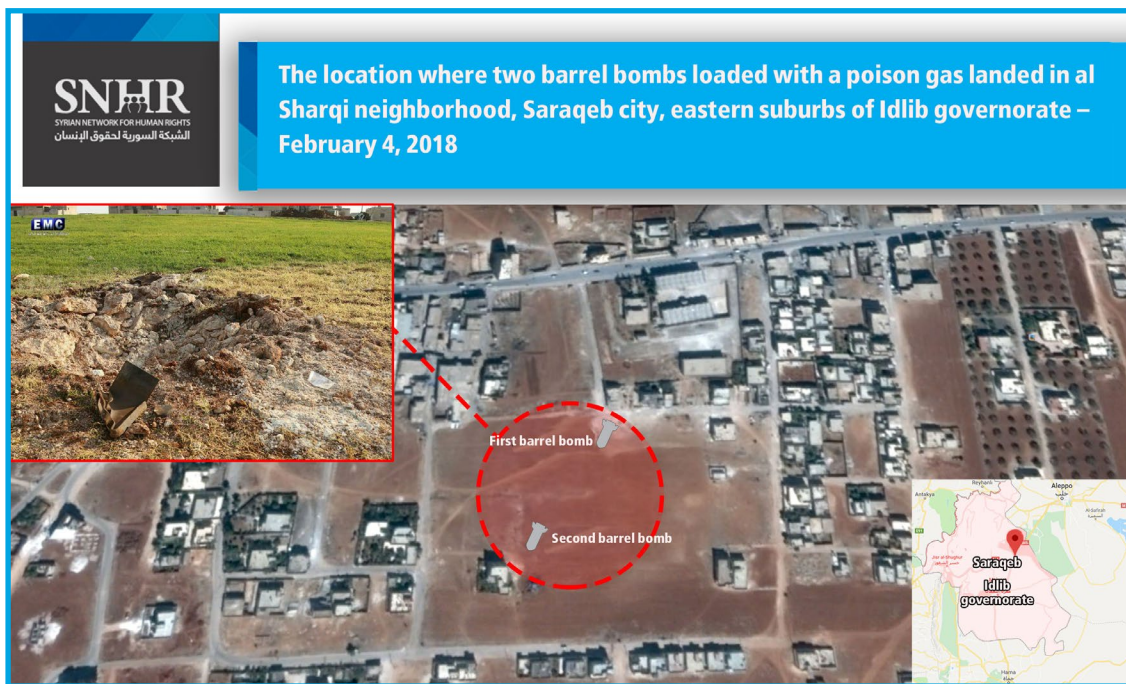
- 1- Choosing a time when temperature is as low as possible to ensure that the gas spread over as much as possible.
- 2- Three medical facilities in southern and eastern suburbs of Idlib were targeted minutes before the attack by airstrikes we believe were Russian. This is exactly what we have documented on the day of Khan Sheikhoun attack.
- 3- Fixed-wing Su-25 warplanes we believe were Russian carried out a number of airstrikes, targeting the roads leading to Saraqeb which impeded the transferring of injured to outside the city.

Attack details

Sunday, February 4, 2018, around 21:20, Syrian regime forces helicopters dropped poison gas-loaded barrel bombs that targeted civilian houses in al Sharqi neighborhood in Saraqeb city, eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate. Eight civilians were injured and suffered from suffocation. After civil defense members arrived at the site, three of them suffered from suffocation as well. All of them were transferred to makeshift hospitals.



According to the data listed by worldweatheronline, the temperature was around 15 Celsius at 21:00 on the day of the attack, while windspeed was around 2 miles per hour.



Mahmoud al Hasna¹, an operator at one of the armed opposition observatories, told us that he monitored a Syrian government helicopter that took off from al Majnzarat School in eastern Hama city. The helicopter headed north for Saraqeb city. **“The code on the helicopter was Alpha-253. The helicopter dropped two barrel bombs and returned to its post. We couldn’t find out for sure if the barrel bombs were carrying chlorine gas even though we tracked signals and the pilot’s calls with the military airbase.”**

Due to the difficulty to speak directly to the three civil defense members who were injured -Rami Dandal, Mohammad al Haj Qasem, and Ayham Zidan- Saraqeb city’s Media Office provided us with audio recordings that contained their account.

In an audio recording, Rami said that the attack took place during his shift, adding that the explosion caused by the barrel bombs was very minor: **“I headed for the site. As soon as I got off the car, I smelled a strong, nasty smell and I realized, then, that the bombing wasn’t usual. I wore a protective mask, but I had already inhaled the gas. I started exhibiting symptoms after I evacuated the injured. I suffered from breathing difficulties, and I couldn’t move my limbs, and then I lost consciousness. My colleagues transferred me to the medical point and preformed first-aid.”**

¹ We contacted him via WhatsApp on February 7, 2018



Mohammad said, in his audio recording, that the symptoms he exhibited were breathing difficulties, nausea, and vomiting. He suffered from those symptoms after aiding the injured: **“We didn’t take precautions, and we didn’t know that the bombing was with chlorine. The minor explosion made us think that the barrel bombs didn’t even explode.”**

Ayham said: **“Once we arrived at the site, I sensed the nasty smell. I realized that the bombing was with poison gases, so I wore a protective mask and aided the rest of the injured. As I was heading for the medical point, Rami, my colleague, was near me and he started exhibiting suffocating symptoms, and his feet were paralyzed. He asked us to remove his mask and then he lost consciousness.”**

“I was driving an ambulance when I started feeling shortness in my breath and my limbs were shaking. I issued a call to our colleagues at the center to aid us.”

SNHR spoke to doctor Mohammad² who treated the injured in the chemical attack:

“Injuries varied between moderate and minor. The injured exhibited symptoms such as coughing, a burning in the eye, mydriasis, and breathing difficulties. We’ve assisted their breathing, and sprayed them with bronchodilators. We used hydrocortisone on some of the injured.”

Motea Jalal³, a local media worker, headed for the medical point where the injured were treated: **“The observatory announced that helicopters took off around 21:20.”**

“The injured were taken to a medical point that is approximately 8 km away from Saraqeb. They had to use a far medical point after Kafranbel and Ma’aret al Nu’man hospitals were bombed.” Motea asked us to abstain from revealing the location where the injured were treated out of fear it might be bombed as the other medical facilities that were targeted by Syrian-Russian alliance forces.

Motea added: **“I saw civil defense members spraying the injured with water to get rid of the chlorine effects. Then, the medical team preformed first-aid by giving them atropine injections and oxygen masks. I also saw three of the injured suffering from symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, severe breathing difficulties, and red eyes while the rest of the injured were more stabilized. The injured were all civilians, and three of them were civil defense members who were injured after they arrived at the barrel bombs’ site.”**

² We contacted him via WhatsApp on February 10, 2018

³ We contacted him via WhatsApp on February 5, 2018





Remnants of barrel bombs, allegedly carrying a poison gas, in the aftermath of an air attack by Syrian government helicopters, Saraqeb – February 4, 2018

Obayda Fadel⁴, a local media worker from Saraqeb city, told us that he headed for the attack site after the attack and examined the holes created by the barrel bombs: **“The barrel bombs landed in two sites that were separated by no more than 50 meters. They didn’t create a huge destructive impact. The diameter of both holes was no more than one meter. The grass color in the vicinity of the area where the barrel bombs landed had turned into yellow and became similar to ashes. I also noticed a white sand substance on the ground in the same place.”**

Obayda told us that he smelled a nasty smell in the attack site, adding that he visited the same in the next two days and the smell was still present.

⁴ We contacted him via WhatsApp on February 7, 2018





The effects on the surrounding grass in the area where barrel bombs loaded with a poison gas landed, as the grass turned into yellow, Saraqeb – February 4, 2018

IV. Attachments

Remnants of barrel bombs, allegedly containing a poison gas, after they were dropped by Syrian government helicopters, Saraqeb – February 4, 2018

Names of the injured

- 1- Rami Mughira Dandal, civil defense member at Saraqeb center, 20-year-old.
- 2- Ayham Walid Zidan, civil defense member at Saraqeb center, 20-year-old.
- 3- Mohammad Haj Qasem, civil defense member at Saraqeb center, 20-year-old.
- 4- Haitham Amad Kafrtouni, civilian, from Saraqeb, 53-year-old.
- 5- Omar Abdul Karim Kafrtouni, civilian, from Saraqeb, 20-year-old.
- 6- Hasan Manhal Haj Hussein, civilian, from Saraqeb, 22-year-old.
- 7- Hasan Hussein al Safar, civilian, from Saraqeb, 24-year-old.
- 8- Fayez Ahmad Khattab, civilian, from Saraqeb, 45-year-old.
- 9- Hussein Zuhair Bakir, civilian, from Saraqeb, 32-year-old.
- 10- Eyad Maher Kafrtouni, civilian, from Saraqeb, 20-year-old.
- 11- Dammar Hasan Haj Hussein, civilian, from Saraqeb, 36-year-old.

[Pictures showing](#) some of [the injured](#) after a Syrian regime [helicopter dropped](#) barrel bombs loaded with [a poison gas](#), Saraqeb – February 4, 2018

[A video showing](#) injured being treated by washing their bodies with water after the chemical attack in Saraqeb



V. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Syrian regime has, through the use of chemical weapons, violated the customary international humanitarian law, which prohibits the use of chemical weapons no regardless of the circumstances. Secondly, the Syrian regime has, beyond any doubt, violated the CWC, to which the Syrian government had acceded in September 2013. The CWC prohibits the use of poison gases and provides for their destruction. Thirdly, the Syrian regime has breached all relevant Security Council resolutions – particularly 2118, in 2013, 2209, in 2015, and 2235, in 2015. Also, the use of chemical weapons constitutes a war crime according to the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute.

In addition, the Russian government had ratified to the CWC which strictly prohibits any form of assistance or encouragement on the contribution to any prohibited activity by any member state. However, a number of evidences suggest that Russian forces were involved in providing a preceding and succeeding assistance to Syrian regime forces.

Security Council

- The Syrian regime has violated three Security Council resolutions on multiple occasions, even though all of them refer to Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations.
- The four permanent members should apply pressure on the Russian government in order to cease its support for the Syrian regime, who is using chemical weapons, as its involvement in this regard has been proven.

Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council should shed more light on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime.

Commission of Inquiry (COI)

The Commission of Inquiry should start investigating this incident immediately, as well as the bombing incidents that preceded and the ones that followed and identify their perpetrator.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

Address the incident included in this report, as well as past reports. SNHR is prepared to cooperate and provide more evidences and data.



European Union and 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.

International Community

States of the world should demonstrate a better unification against the Syrian regime – the sole use of chemical weapons in this century. Also, states of the world should take serious, joint action to impose deterring, strict, real sanctions immediately.

Russian government

- Stop using veto in order to protect the Syrian regime who is involved in perpetrating crimes against humanity and war crimes, and using chemical weapons.
- Launch an investigation into the support provided by Russian forces in Syria to the Syrian regime in Saraqeb attack.
- Stop hindering the referral the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Friends of Syria Group

Provide the areas that have been bombed with chemical weapons (in light of the Security Council's failure to put an end to the attacks) with protective masks. The report estimates that approximately 20,000 protective masks are needed in these areas, in addition to the necessary equipment to get rid of the impact of the chemical pollution.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank all the victims, injured, and their families, as well as the residents and activists who contributed effectively to this report.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

