

Syrian Russian Alliance Forces Deliberately Targeted Civil Defense Members in Hama Suburbs

Eight Civil Defense Members
Killed in Kafr Zita City

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights, founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, non-profit independent organization that is a primary source for the United Nations on all death toll-related statistics in Syria



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I. Introduction

The Syrian civil defense organization was founded in March 2013 in Aleppo governorate, and expanded to reach most of the Syrian governorates. They focus particularly on providing help and quick and direct services in the aftermath of shelling operations which leave people killed and wounded, in addition to the destruction shelling causes. This has made the civil defense a target for the Syrian-Russian alliance forces in specific, as these attacks targeted civil defense centers and facilities as well as targeting civil defense teams in action as they are tending to the wounded or pulling out victims through the “double strike” strategy (a strategy adopted by the Syrian and Russian regime in which the targeted location is targeted again a few minutes later in order to inflict as much human losses as possible among civil defense and medical teams and doctors)

SNHR monitors violations on a daily and regular basis, and releases monthly reports that document the most notable violations of human rights in Syria by the parties to the conflict. In light of the escalated bombardment and targeting of hospitals, medical facilities, and civil defense facilities, SNHR has devoted a [monthly report](#) to highlight these violations. Also, we released [a report](#) on May 22, 2016 that documented the most notable violations against the Syrian civil defense since it was founded.

At the time of this writing, Syrian-Russian alliance has killed 153 civil defense members and have been responsible for no less than 230 incidents of attack on civil defense centers or vehicles belonging to the civil defense since March 2013. These figures reflect the methodology adopted by the Syrian-Russian alliance in targeting civil defense teams and facilities.



II. Details of the Targeting of Two Civil Defense Centers in Kafr Zita City

Summary

Kafr Zita city administratively follows Hama governorate and is located 38 kilometers to the northwest of Hama city. The city was taken over by armed opposition factions at the end of 2012. Consequently, the Syrian regime carried out several military campaigns against the city that forced thousands of residences to flee, the most recent of which were in late-February 2017 when Syrian-Russian alliance forces intensified their attacks on northern suburbs of Hama governorate and southern suburbs of Idlib governorate in retaliation of the recent advancements by armed opposition factions in these areas. This campaign caused 5000-6000 residents to flee Kafr Zita city alone. Kafr Zita city is populated currently by roughly 1000 people who still live in the city and its suburbs, whereas its population was over 25,000 when the popular uprising for freedom started in March 2011.

The city is currently under the joint control of armed opposition factions and Fateh al Sham Front (formerly al Nusra Front)

Kafr Zita city is surrounded by a number of Syrian regime-supporting villages in which a number of military checkpoints, rocket launchers, and artillery are stationed, and used to target the city: “Bredij village” artillery from the west, an artillery stationed in Mharda city from the southeast, and an artillery stationed in Jabal Zain al Abdin from the southeast.

The report documents a number of repeated attacks by Syrian-Russian alliance forces on Saturday April 29, 2017 on two Syrian civil defense centers in Kafr Zita -107 and 109- which resulted in the killing of nine individuals including eight civil defense members. Additionally, civil defense facilities were heavily destroyed.

The report sheds light on the attacks that targeted the medical teams and the rescue workers who came to the massacre location to pull out the victims.

Report methodology

SNHR team contacted a number of city residents, eyewitnesses, survivors, media activists, and civil defense members. We cross-checked these accounts against what the observatories announced in the city on that day, which are observers who work on picking up the warplanes’ radio signals and tracking the conversation between the pilot and the airbase from which he took off. These observatories usually announce when warplanes take off from military airbases and track their movement so they can notify the residents in armed opposition factions-held areas and warn them to take shelter in the areas that could be targeted.



These observatories can distinguish between the warplanes that take off from Hmeimim Military Airbase, which is a Russian military base, and the ones that take off from airbases in Hama and Homs suburbs which are used by Syrian regime forces.

We were not able to declare either the Syrian regime or the Russian regime completely responsible for these attacks on account of the fact that both parties use the same weapons and warplanes. Additionally, both Syrian and Russian warplanes take off from Hmeimim Airbase in Latakia and al Tefour Airbase in Homs.

This report includes 11 accounts. We have explained the purpose of these interviews for the eyewitnesses who gave us permission to use the information they provided in this report without offering or giving them any incentives. Also, SNHR tried to spare them the agony of remembering the violation as much as possible. We also gave assurances to conceal the identity of any witnesses who preferred to use an alias.

The investigations included in this report have shown that the targeted areas were civilian areas where no military bases or weapon warehouses for armed opposition factions and extremist Islamic groups were found before or during the attack. Also, Syrian regime forces didn't issue a warning for the civilians prior to the attack, as the international humanitarian law requires.

This report only represents the bare minimum of the magnitude and severity of the violation that occurred, which we have been able to document. In addition, this report doesn't cover the social, economic, and psychological ramifications.

SNHR analyzed the pictures and videos that was posted on social media, where some videos show the hole that was created by the highly-explosive missiles, while other pictures showed unexploded PTAB-1M cluster submunitions, and pictures for the hole that was created by the highly-explosive missiles.



Details

Saturday, April 29, 2017, around 12:00, the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance fired no less than two highly-explosive missiles, targeting civil defense center 107 in northern Kafr Zita city – on the road leading to Tal Aas village- which resulted in the killing of [eight civil defense members](#).

After the first attack, we recorded several consecutive attacks that lasted for four hours, where Syrian-Russian alliance forces used aerial weapons and ground launchers, targeting the vicinity of civil defense center 107 and the medical and civil defense teams who were conducting rescue operations.

- Around 12:30, the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance fired a number of missiles in the vicinity of civil defense center 107
- Between 14:00 and 15:00, the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance carried out two missile airstrikes in the vicinity of civil defense center 107
- Around 15:00, we recorded that Syrian regime forces targeted the vicinity of the same civil defense center with 6 artillery shells at least
- Between 15:30 and 16:00, the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance fired a RBK-500 missiles loaded with PTAB-1M submunitions, which resulted in the killing of the paramedic Hasan Mohammad Arafat. Additionally, the vehicles used by civil defense teams to remove the rubbles and pull out victims were damaged.

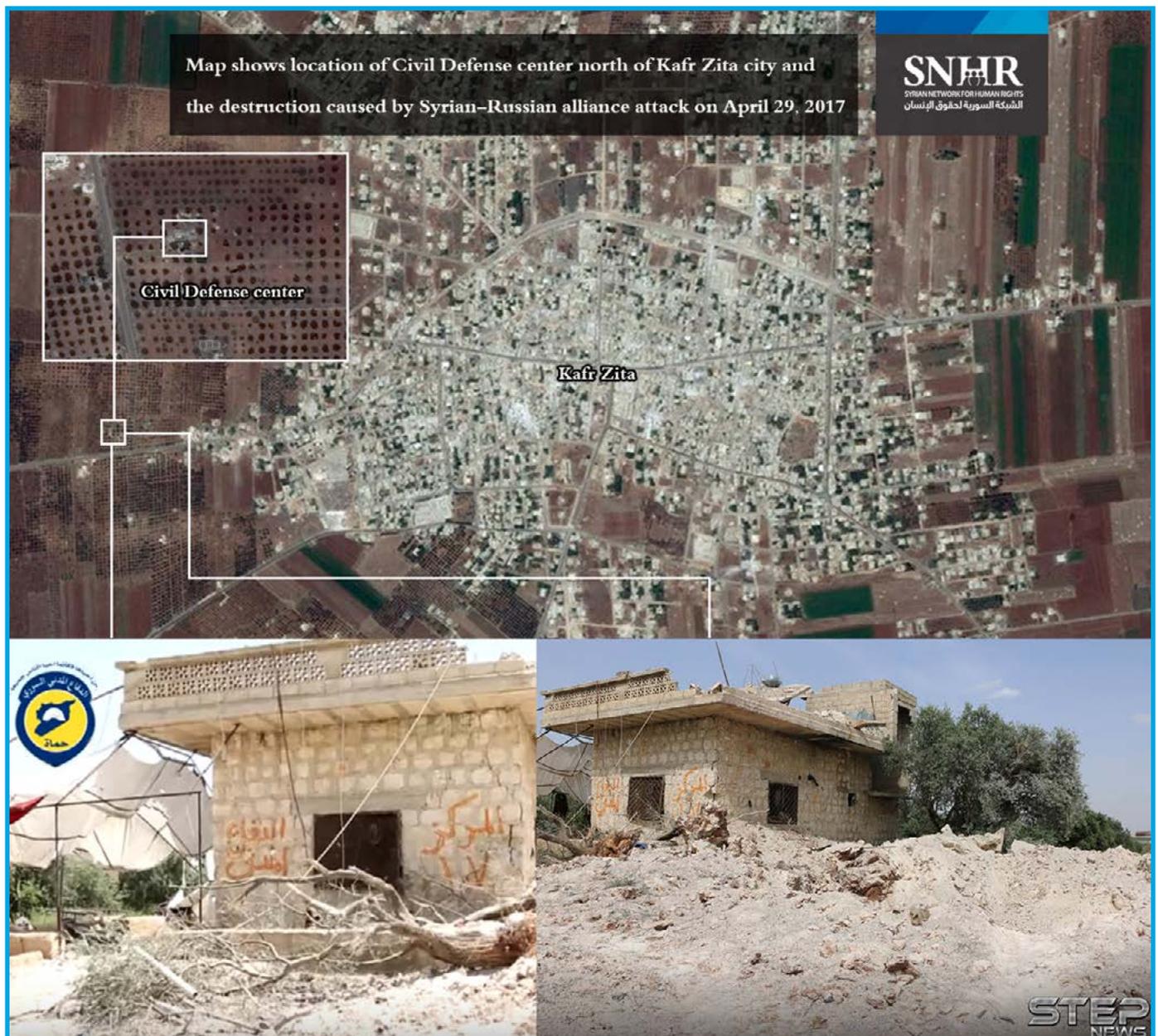
The repeated attacks that followed destroyed the civil defense center and hindered the efforts to help the wounded and pull the victims, where rescue workers found themselves forced to work intermittently in light of the airstrikes and the artillery shells that targeted the same locations, which also killed one of the paramedics. This clearly reflect the intentions of the Syrian-Russian alliance forces to inflict as much material and human harm as possible.

Civil defense center 109 was targeted between 19:30 and 20:30 by fixed-wing Syrian regime forces warplanes, which damaged its building. This center specializes in removing weapon remnants.

The Syrian civil defense organization issued a [statement on the killing of the eight members](#), noting that Syrian regime warplanes targeted the centers 107 & 109.



Eyewitnesses, civil defense members, and media activists who visited the site described what they saw. Center 107 is composed of two rooms and an underground cave that are connected via stairs. The fortified cave is used as a shelter during bombardment. Even though the building is fortified, it was destroyed completely in the first airstrikes and everyone inside was killed. Apparently, Syrian-Russian alliance forces used highly-explosive missiles or concrete-piercing missiles, which consists with the destruction that was caused and with the eyewitnesses' account. The Commission of Inquiry noted in its last report, released in [February 2017](#), that similar missiles were used several times in eastern Aleppo.



We spoke to five observatory workers who observed the warplanes in the airbases of Hama suburbs, Homs suburbs, and Hmeimim. Four of them confirmed that fixed-wing warplanes took off from Hmeimim Airbase before the first attack in Kafr Zita, adding that it is likely that those warplanes were the ones responsible for targeting the civil defense center. On the other hand, another observatory said that they observed a warplane in al Tefour Airbase in Homs suburbs at roughly 11:32, and said that it is probably the one responsible for the first airstrike that targeted the center.

However, all of the five observatories stressed unanimously that Russian and Syrian warplanes were present at the time of the attack, approximately between 11:45 and 15:30, and said that they observed Su-34, Su-24, and MiG-23 warplanes.

The sky was under the control of Syrian and Russian forces for the entire duration of the attack. Given that these forces carried out tens of airstrikes, we couldn't assign responsibility specifically for each airstrike.

A civil defense member in Hama governorate gave us a video that, according to him, was taken in Kafr Zita city on April 29, 2017, and shows a fixed-wing warplane, which we believe is Russian, [soaring in the sky](#).

Mohamamd al Mohammad¹, director of civil defense 109, told SNHR that he heard an observatory announcing that fixed-wing warplanes are soaring in Kafr Zita sky after it took off from Hmeimim Airbase. The warplanes carried out two airstrikes in 10 minutes that targeted center 107. He headed to the bombed site, and described the destruction and damages to the civil defense vehicles and the rampant panic: **“One of the members who were at the center at the time of the attack told me that he and his colleagues hid in the cave before the attacks, as they were scared that they might be targeted. However, the cave collapsed as a result of the bombing. We tried to pull out the victims and remove the rubbles, but more airstrikes were conducted at about 12:30 that targeted residential neighborhoods in the city that are in the vicinity of the center, which hindered out work and prevented us from running our vehicles, making the process of pulling out victims even more difficult.”**

¹ We contacted him via WhatsApp – April 30, 2017



Mohammad said that the attacks lasted for hours. Seemingly, the scouting planes were assigning targets before warplanes came and attacked the center and its vicinity as well as the Syrian regime artillery. Mohammad added that they had to stop working several times because of the repeated attacks: **“Around 15:30, fixed-wing warplanes used cluster submunitions in three airstrikes near the center. As a result, the paramedic Hasan Arafat was killed who works for the Medical Network which is affiliated with Hama Health Administration. We kept working until the sunset. We were able to pull out five dead bodies for our colleagues, and we resumed working on the next day, as we feared that we might have been targeted if we worked at night.”**

Mohammad told us that center 109 was also targeted on the same day, adding that damages were only material, as the center was evacuated before the attack in preparation for potential attacks.

Abu Hesham al Hamwi ² -a local media activist- said that he saw the warplane that targeted the civil defense center when he was in the nearby town of al Hbeit. He said that it was a white or light blue-colored warplane, and the observatory announced that it was Russian: **“One of the missiles targeted a cave where civil defense members were hiding. However, all of them were buried alive under the rubbles. Warplanes took turns in targeting the center and its vicinity including Su-25 and MiG-23 warplanes. Around 3:00 PM, the bombing resumed, and Russian warplanes carried out a missile airstrike using one missile, while a Syrian warplane carried out a cluster attack.”**

Abu Hesham described the missile as a “Concussion missile” on account of the fact that it heavily destroyed the fortified cave according to him.

We documented that the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance used an anti-armor cluster munitions. [The pictures](#), given to us by [civil defense members](#), showed a [RBK500 container carrying PTAB-1M submunitions](#).

² We contacted him via Facebook – April 30, 2017





Tail of a RBK-500 container loaded with PTAB-1M cluster submunitions that were found in Kafr Zita city in the aftermath of a Syrian-Russian aerial attack – April 29, 2017



Unexploded small PTAB-1M cluster submunitions that were found in Kafr Zita city after a Syrian-Russian aerial attack – April 29, 2017



Media activist Hadi Abdullah ³ told us that he visited the targeted side a few hours after the attack and described the hole that resulted from the missile collision near the center. He said that it was a 3-4 meters deep hole, adding that two ambulances, a bulldozer, and motorbikes were damaged in the bombardment. Hadi, along with his media team, were the target of an airstrike a few minutes after they arrived at the scene: **“As soon as we got close to the area, warplanes dropped cluster missiles. The cluster submunitions exploded above us and injured a civilian. I also saw two airstrikes when I got to the city. I think they were in a place near the center.”**

Hadi added that he didn't notice any military aspects near the civil defense center's site and didn't find any opposition fighter.

[Picture taken](#) from a video that Hadi gave to us. The picture shows the hole that was 3-4 meters deep according to eyewitnesses.



³ We contacted him via WhatsApp – April 30, 2017



Munaf al Saleh ⁴, director of the civil defense in al Latamena city (six kilometers away from Kafr Zita city), was near the bombed site at the time of the attack, and assisted the teams as they were pulling out victims: **“After the airstrikes, I got near the center building and learned that eight of my colleagues were buried alive in the cave after it was targeted directly with a missile. We removed the rubbles and pulled out five of the our colleagues’ dead bodies. The warplanes kept soaring in the sky all the time we were working, and targeted us with cluster missiles in addition to artillery shells.”**

Munaf added that he saw two Russian warplanes; one of them fired a number of missiles a few minutes before the attack. He also said that he heard the observatory’s announcement after a Russian warplane took off from Hmeimim Airbase towards Kafr Zita city. Additionally, Munaf told us that the civil defense centers in Hama city have become a target for the Syrian regime and Russian forces, noting that al Latamena civil defense center, which he directs, was moved to center 107 in Kafr Zita after it was targeted multiple times in April 2017.

Abu Mohammad ⁵, director of the northern sector of the civil defense network, gave us his account of what happened. Abu Mohammad visited the site about one hour after the attack, and talked about the destruction at civil defense center 107. Abu Mohammad said that two concussion missiles destroyed the cave completely, adding that three airstrikes at least and eight artillery shells targeted them as they were pulling out victims, a process that took several hours: **“As we were working on pulling out the victims, we were scared and wary. The warplanes didn’t leave the sky, and we couldn’t distinguish between Russian and Syrian warplanes.”**

In an interview with SNHR, Mr. Mohammad Hamada ⁶, director of the civil defense administration’s media office who headed for the incident site, said that a fixed-wing warplanes targeted the vicinity of civil defense center 107 using cluster munitions as they were pulling out victims: **“I arrived after the first airstrikes that killed my colleagues. I saw a severed hand for one of them and scattered body parts for another. It was a heavily painful sight to see.”**

Mohammad gave us [a video](#) that he filmed himself of civil defense members pulling out the victims from the rubbles

⁴ We contacted him via WhatsApp – April 30, 2017

⁵ We contacted him via WhatsApp – April 30, 2017

⁶ We contacted him via WhatsApp – May 2, 2017





A civil defense member who was killed in the aftermath of a Russian-Syrian aerial attack in Kafr Zita city – April 29, 2017

III. Attachments

Victims' names



SNHR has documented the killing of 9 civilians in a bombing by the fixed-wing warplanes of the Syrian-Russian alliance that fired multiple missiles in the vicinity of the civil defense center 107 in north of Kafr Zita city, northern suburbs of Hama governorate on Saturday, April 29, 2017.

- 1- Ghassan al Dallal, from Hama
- 2- Ahmad Khaleel al Mustafa, from Kafr Zita
- 3- Mustafa al Najjar, from Hama
- 4- Ahmad al Hallaq, from Kafr Zita
- 5- Amer al Abboud, from Kafr Zita
- 6- Ahmad al Hussein, known as (Karakis), al Fika village
- 7- Mazen al Samara, from al Lutayma
- 8- Abdul Hakim Ahmad al Shakhir, al Lutayma
- 9- Hassan Hamoud al Anfal, ambulance driver

[Pictures](#) showing [civil defense members](#) after they were [pulled out](#) from the rubbles

[Other pictures](#) showed [the efforts](#) to pull out [the victims](#) after [the bombing](#) on [civil defense center 107](#)



IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions

1- According to the international humanitarian law, indiscriminate, deliberate, or disproportionate are deemed unlawful attacks. Syrian regime and Russian forces' attack on civil defense centers and vehicles is an utter and blatant disregard for all the standards of the international humanitarian law, and constitutes repetitive war crimes.

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

3- We can confirm that the bombardment mentioned in this report has targeted armless civilians. Therefore, 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.

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

5- 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.

Recommendations

The 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 must respect the Resolutions and adhere to the rules of the international humanitarian law.
- The Syrian case must 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.



The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

The Office must submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on this massacre specifically considering that it is a glaring sign in a string of daily, sporadic and less significant massacres. The OHCHR also should 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 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 plan and then Mr. Kofi Annan's plan were drought out. Therefore, steps under Article 7 of the Rome Statute must be taken and the norm of the Responsibility to Protect, which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, must 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.

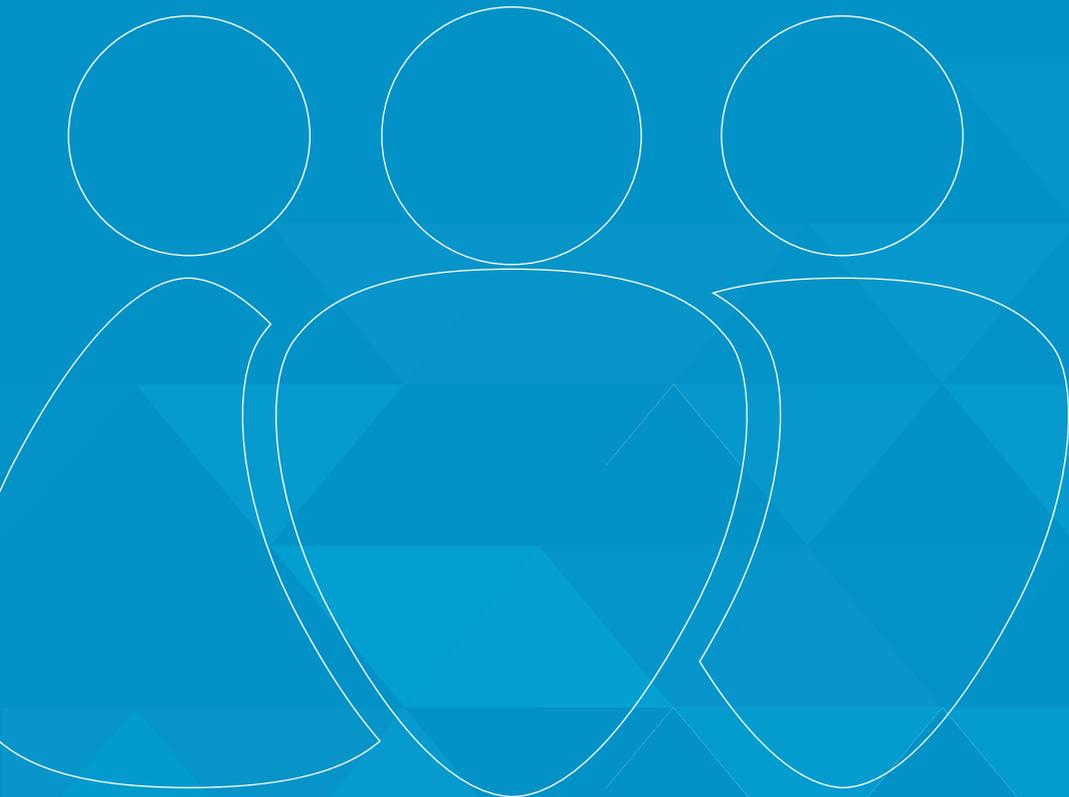
The European Union and the United States of America

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

Acknowledgment and Condolences

We would like to thank and extend out most heartfelt condolences to all the residents and local activists and especially civil defense members who effectively contributed to this report.





@snhr



Info@sn4hr.org

www.sn4hr.org

