

# Targeting Christian Places of Worship in Syria is a Threat to World Heritage

The Syrian Regime Bears  
Primary Responsibility for 61%  
of the Targeting of Christian  
Places of Worship in Syria



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

Despite places of worship being designated as cultural and religious properties that should be protected, heavy and continuous aerial bombardment across Syria has resulted in the partial or total destruction of a large number of places of worship. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has highlighted this phenomenon because of its profound impact on society, its memory and sanctities. It is necessary to record the targeting of places of worship for different religions and sects, exposing the practices of the perpetrators of these attacks. We have issued several reports documenting the targeting of mainly Islamic and Christian places of worship since the start of the popular uprising for democracy in Syria in March 2011, particularly after this turned into an internal armed conflict. The importance of the protection of places of worship and the need for the international community to protect civilians and their heritage in Syria must be periodically emphasized to remind the world of its importance. In this report, we will focus on updating our previous accounts showing the scale of attacks against Christian places of worship in Syria. In addition, we will later issue a report to update on attacks against Islamic places of worship.

Targeting Christian places of worship is a form of intimidation against and displacement of the Christian minority in Syria. The current Syrian regime bears direct responsibility for the destruction, displacement and collapse of the Syrian state at various levels because it is the main cause of Syrian state institutions such as the army, police, transportation, passports, civil registry, the security services, the central bank and others being used to launch a systematic war against the popular uprising, which called for changing the rule of the Assad family and a move towards a democratically elected government that represents all the components of Syrian society, not one sect or one family. As the Syrian regime has



very clearly shown through this and other actions, it is indifferent to the damage which this causes to the Syrian state, including the nation's millennia-old history and civilizational heritage that has passed through Syria down the ages; some of the country's Christian places of worship, for example, were built in the first century AD, such as the Church of Lady of the Holy Belt (Um al Zennar) in Homs city, while Qalb al Lawza Church in Idlib suburbs was built in the fifth century AD.

The specious claim to be a protector of the Syrian people and other minorities, opposing sectarianism was always central in Bashar al Assad's efforts to cling to power; the reality and all the evidence, however, directly contradicts this claim, with the regime reliant on fomenting and exploiting sectarianism, as well as fighting and threatening all sections of the population, both from the minority and majority groups, who opposed its tyrannical practices, hereditary status, and totalitarian nature intent on retaining dynastic power forever.

According to international law (Protocol II, Article 16), it is prohibited to commit any acts of hostility directed against places of worship, and to use these locations in support of military efforts. Any deliberate attack against them constitutes a war crime; such crimes have been a routine feature in the Syrian conflict being carried out by several parties, mostly the Syrian regime. We believe that UNESCO should shed greater light on the destruction and damage caused to Christian places of worship, clearly identify those responsible for this destruction and shelling, and ask for special protection and the intervention of UN forces to protect civilians and places of worship in Syria.

**Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of SNHR, says:**

"The Syrian regime has always invoked good slogans, but on the ground, it has done the opposite. While the regime claims that it has not committed any violations, and that it is keen on protecting the Syrian state and the rights of minorities, it has carried out qualitative operations in suppressing and terrorizing all those who sought political change and reform, regardless of religion or race, and of whether this causes the destruction of the heritage of Syria and the displacement of its minorities. Syria will not become calm without transition to democracy and respect for human rights "



## **Methodology:**

This update on our previous study on the targeting of Christian places of worship in Syria comes as part of the ongoing documentation of the targeting of vital facilities conducted by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) since 2011 up to the present. We have issued several reports in previous years on the targeting of places of worship, hospitals, schools, bakeries and markets. SNHR also issues a special [monthly report](#) documenting the attacks on vital civilian facilities over the previous month, thus building a large database containing reports detailing attacks on various types of vital facilities, including places of worship.

This report includes the record of attacks carried out by the main parties to the conflict in Syria against Christian places of worship from March 2011 to September 2019. The report also outlines the most notable attacks against Christian places of worship that occurred since [our last study](#) at the end of April 2015, in order to stress that attacks against those places haven't ceased, and that the SNHR is working to document and archive these types of incidents and violations and will continue to expose the perpetrators of violations and preserve the rights of the community to know the truth and prosecute those involved.

The record of attacks included in this report include:

First: Bombings that targeted civilian places of worship, with no military headquarters or equipment nearby.

Second: Turning places of worship into military headquarters by some parties.

Third: Places of worship have regularly been subjected to more than one attack, and we document each attack as a separate violation.

Under international humanitarian law, civilian objects are classed as being protected from military attacks unless they are used for military purposes, with this protection suspended when these objects are used for military purposes and for the duration of such use; once the civilian object is no longer being used for any military purpose and returns to its former civilian status, military attacks are once again prohibited and the object's protected status is resumed.

In the course of our work on this report, we sometimes had difficulty in determining who was responsible for targeting these sites because of the location of the worship place at the contact lines. In such cases, the site in question may have been shelled by one or two parties involved in the conflict within a short time. We have categorized our data based on what information we have been able to confirm.



This report draws upon the ongoing daily monitoring of news and developments by SNHR's team, and on our extensive network of various credible sources that have been built up over the course of our work since 2011. When we receive information or learn some news about violations via the internet or media outlets, our team works to follow up these reports and attempts to verify information and collect evidence and data. In some cases, researchers are able to visit the incident location promptly, although this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks involved, and given the frequency of daily incidents and the scarcity of human and material resources to carry out this work. Therefore, the opportunities available to access evidence vary between one case and another, and consequently the level of certainty in classification of each incident varies. SNHR's customary policy in such cases is to rely on accounts from survivors who experienced the violation firsthand or those who saw or photographed the violation, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the Internet and media outlets. We also talk with medical personnel who treated the injured in these incidents, examined the deceased victims' bodies, and identified the cause of death.

SNHR also analyzes videos and photographs that our team has documented, or which were posted online, or submitted by local activists via e-mail, Skype, or social media platforms. These videos and photos show, amongst other things, sites of attacks and the scale and extent of the destruction inflicted on Christian places of worship following attacks by the perpetrator parties.

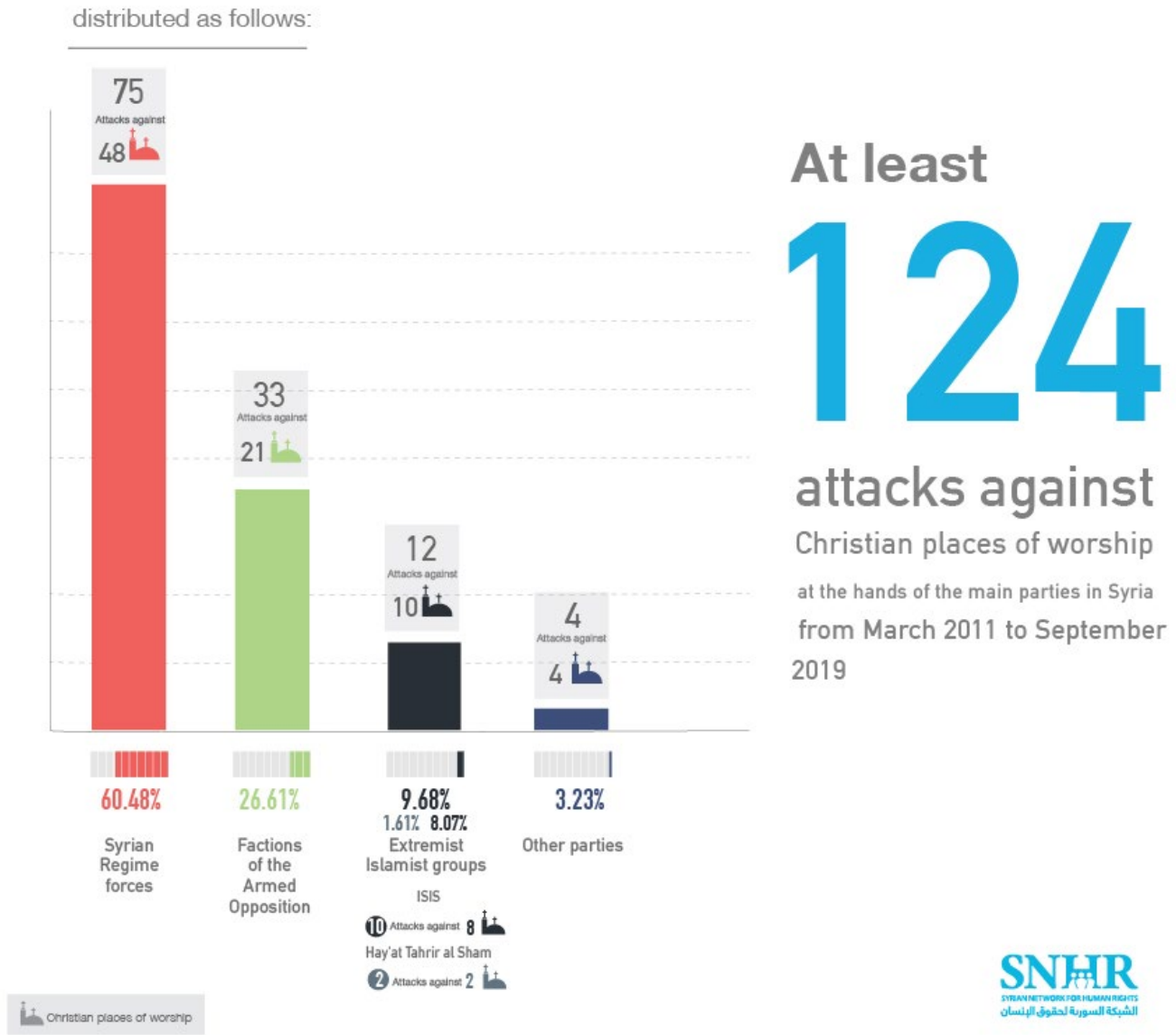
Furthermore, we retain copies of all the videos and photographs included in these reports, which are also reviewed in this report, in a confidential electronic database, as well as keeping hard disk backup copies, and we ensure always that all these data are stored with their original source material. We do not claim, however, that we have documented all cases, given the severe prohibitions, restrictions and persecution by the Syrian Regime forces and some other armed groups. Readers are welcome to find out more about SNHR's [methodology](#).

This report only represents the bare minimum of the actual severity and magnitude of the violations that occurred. Also, it doesn't include any analysis of the profound social, economic, and psychological ramifications.



## II. Executive Summary

SNHR documented at least 124 attacks against Christian places of worship by the main parties in Syria from March 2011 to September 2019. These incidents were distributed by the main parties as follows:

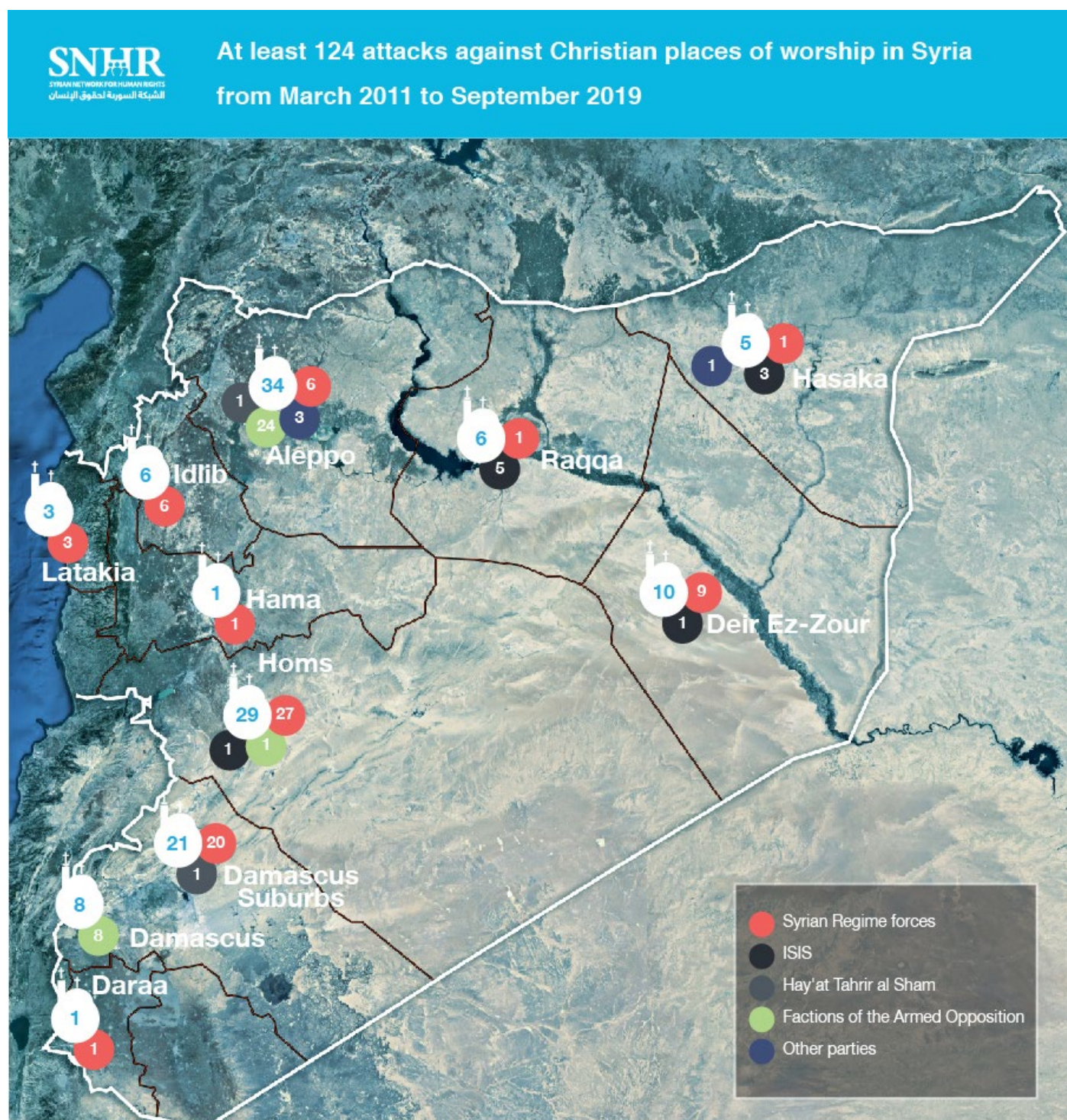


- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias): 75**
- **Extremist Islamist groups:**
  - o **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):** 10.
  - o **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition):** Two.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 33
- **Other parties:** Four.





Attacks against Christian places of worship were distributed according to the Syrian governorates as follows:



This map shows that the Christian places of worship in Aleppo governorate have been the ones subjected to the highest number of attacks, followed by Homs governorate then Damascus Suburbs, with the largest documented number of these attacks by the Syrian regime taking place in Homs governorate which saw 27 such incidents, followed by Damascus Suburbs with 20 incidents, while Aleppo governorate had the largest number of such attacks at the hands of factions of the Armed Opposition with 24 incidents.



A large number of Christian places of worship have been subjected to more than one attack, by one party or two or more. For example, the Church of the Lady of Peace in Homs suffered seven attacks, all by Syrian Regime forces, while the Church of Saint Takla in Damascus Suburbs suffered four attacks, which were also all by Syrian Regime forces as well. Meanwhile, the Roman Orthodox Church of the Holy Cross in Damascus suffered four attacks, all of which were by factions of the Armed Opposition, while many churches in Aleppo in 2012 and 2013 were subjected to attacks by factions of the Armed Opposition in the course of engagement with Syrian Regime forces, as in the case of the new Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, which was subjected to three attacks.

We also documented that some churches were attacked by more than one of the parties to the conflict, as happened to the Armenian Church of Independence in Raqqa city, which was subjected to three attacks, two of which were carried out by ISIS and one by Syrian Regime forces. Another example is the Church of St. Samaan in Darat Ezza in the western suburbs of Aleppo, which was subjected to three attacks, one of which was by Syrian Regime forces, another by Jabhat al Nusra (al Nusra Front), and the third by factions of the Armed Opposition.

The SNHR's records indicate that the attacks mentioned above have caused damage to at least 76 Christian places of worship, six of which have been attacked by more than one party.





An interactive map showing locations of Christian places of worship that have been attacked in Syria:



The previous map shows that Syrian Regime forces are the main party responsible for perpetrating attacks on Christian places of worship, targeting many of these more than once, with their attacks concentrated in the west of Syria, while ISIS' attacks were concentrated northeast of Syria, and most of the attacks by factions of the Armed Opposition were concentrated in areas adjacent to the lines of engagement in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus.



According to the SNHR's documentation, the record of attacks against Christian places of worship mentioned above includes 11 places of worship that were turned into military or administrative headquarters by the main parties to the conflict, distributed by the responsible party as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):** Six.
- **Extremist Islamist groups:**
  - **ISIS:** Two.
  - **Hay'at Tahrir al Sham:** One.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** Two.

In addition to the Syrian regime being far ahead of other parties in terms of the number of attacks, data analysis of these incidents of targeting Christian places of worship according to SNHR's database shows that the weapons possessed by the Syrian regime, including missiles and barrel bombs, caused the greatest damage to buildings and contents compared to other parties, followed by ISIS in terms of scale of damage. Despite the large number of attacks carried out by factions of the Armed Opposition, the damage resulting from their bombing was minor compared to that inflicted by the Syrian regime and ISIS.

### **III. The Most Notable Attacks Against Christian Places of Worship**

#### **A. Syrian Regime forces:**

##### **Damascus Suburbs governorate:**

##### **Greek Orthodox St. George's Church**

On Thursday, February 8, 2018, fixed-wing Syrian Regime forces' warplanes fired a number of missiles that landed near St. George's Church in Irbeen city in the Eastern Ghouta east of Damascus Suburbs governorate, partially destroying the building, and inflicting significant material damage to its interior furnishings. The city was under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time of the incident.







We note that the Church suffered three attacks by Syrian Regime forces between March 24, 2013, and February 8, 2018, causing considerable material damage.



A satellite image showing the scale of destruction inflicted in the church following the repeated attacks by Syrian Regime forces:

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Two satellite images showing the scale of destruction of St. George's Church in Irbeen city in Damascus Suburbs governorate, following several attacks by Syrian Regime forces between March 2013 and March 2018



February 2013



April 2018





## **B. Extremist Islamist groups:**

### **- ISIS:**

#### **Homs governorate:**

##### **Monastery of St. Elian:**

On Wednesday, August 19, 2015, ISIS [demolished](#) the [archaeological monastery](#) of '[Mar Elian](#)' in al Qaryatein city in the northeastern suburbs of Homs governorate, using bulldozers, which almost [completely destroyed](#) the monastery, putting it [out of service](#). The city was under the control of ISIS at the time of the incident.



Destruction of St. Elian Monastery in al Qaryatein city in Homs, after it was demolished by ISIS on August 19, 2015

## **C. Factions of the Armed Opposition:**

#### **Aleppo governorate:**

##### **Latin Church:**

On Sunday, October 25, 2015, a homemade artillery shell fell on the [Latin Church](#) in [al Aziziya neighborhood](#) east of Aleppo city, whilst a service was taking place inside it. We believe that the source of the shell was an artillery stationed in Bustan al Basha neighborhood, which was under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition. The incident injured one person, in addition to causing minor material damage to the church's dome. Al Aziziya neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.



### **Armenian Emmanuel Church:**

On Sunday afternoon, January 17, 2016, several homemade [artillery shells](#) landed on the church in [al Abbara area](#) in al Manshiya neighborhood in Aleppo city. We believe that the source of the shells was an [artillery stationed](#) in one of the [old neighborhoods](#) of Aleppo which were under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time. As a result, the roof of the church was [partially damaged](#), while some windows were broken. Al Manshiya neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

### **St. Joseph Church:**

On Sunday, April 24, 2016, several homemade [missile shells](#) landed [near the church](#) in al Aziziya neighborhood east of Aleppo city. We believe that the source of the shells was an artillery stationed in one of the old neighborhoods of Aleppo which were under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time. As a result, the church building was caused moderate material damaged. Al Aziziya neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

### **St. Demetrius Church:**

On Saturday afternoon, July 2, 2016, several homemade missile shells landed on the church in al Slimaniya neighborhood east of Aleppo city. We believe that the source of the shells was an artillery stationed in one of the old neighborhoods of Aleppo which were under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time. As a result, a fire broke out inside the church, with the artillery strike and the blaze causing moderate material damage to the church building. Al Slimaniya neighborhood was under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time of the incident.

### **Church of the Lady of Transition:**

On Friday morning, September 16, 2016, several homemade [missile shells](#) landed on the church in al [Aziziya neighborhood](#) east of Aleppo city. We believe that the source of the shells was an artillery stationed in one of the old neighborhoods of Aleppo which were under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition at the time. As a result of the bombardment, a hole was left in the ceiling of the priests' guest rooms, while one of the walls was partially damaged, and the church exterior's cladding and interior fixture also sustained [moderate material damage](#). Al Aziziya neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.





Damage inflicted in the Church of the Lady of Transition in al Aziziya neighborhood, Aleppo, following a ground attack by factions of the Armed Opposition – September 16, 2016

### **Church of St. Anthony (Mar Antonios):**

On Monday, January 8, 2018, a missile shell landed on the church located in [Bab Touma](#) neighborhood east of Damascus city, causing [moderate material](#) damage to the [church building](#) and [external cladding](#). We believe that the source of the shell was an [artillery stationed](#) in an area controlled by factions of the Armed Opposition at the time. Bab Touma neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

### **Cathedral of Our Lady al Niah (al Zietoun Church):**

On Tuesday, January 9, 2018, [a missile](#) shell landed on [the church](#) located in Bab Sharqi area east of Damascus city, causing moderate material damage to the [church building](#) and external cladding. We believe that the source of the shell was an artillery stationed in an area controlled by factions of the Armed Opposition. Bab Sharqi area was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident





Damage to Our Lady of al Niah Church in Damascus city following a ground attack by factions of the Armed Opposition in January 9, 2018

### **Mariamite Cathedral:**

On Monday, February 5, 2018, several mortar shells landed on the church in the Bab Touma neighborhood east of Damascus city, causing [moderate material](#) damage to the church building and exterior cladding. We believe that the source of the shells was an artillery stationed in an area controlled by factions of the Armed Opposition. The neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

### **D. Other parties:**

#### **Hasaka governorate:**

#### **Syrian Orthodox St. Georges Church:**

On Tuesday, May 17, 2016, intermediate machine gun [fire broke](#) out in the [Arman neighborhood](#) of Hasaka city between Self-Management forces (mainly the Democratic Union Party, branch of Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the National Defense Forces that are affiliated with Syrian Regime forces; the gun battle left holes in the walls of [Syrian Orthodox](#) St. Georges Church, as well as breaking its window glass and lights. We were unable to determine which of the two conflicting parties had caused the damage up to the preparation of the report. Al Arman neighborhood was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.





### **Holy Virgin Syriac Orthodox Church:**

On Thursday, July 11, 2019, at around 17:30, a car bomb exploded near the Holy Virgin Syriac Orthodox Church in al Wakalat Street in al Wusta neighborhood of al Qameshli city in the northern suburbs of Hasaka governorate, injuring 15 civilians, [and causing significant material damage to the church building](#). We were unable to determine the responsible party up to the time of preparing this report, given the difficulty in identifying the perpetrators of such bombings. Al Qameshli city was under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces at the time of the incident.



Damage caused by an unknown car bomb explosion near the Holy Virgin Syriac Orthodox Church in al Qameshli city, Hasaka - July 11, 2019

### **IV. Conclusions and Recommendations:**

- International humanitarian law strongly prohibits attacks on protected objects, which must be protected in times of international and internal armed conflict, and prohibits indiscriminate or deliberate attacks and reprisals against these objects. The prohibition is based on the principle of distinction. Cultural objects and places of worship are among the most prominent protected objects, which constitute a cultural and religious heritage of peoples and minorities, and must not be subjected to deliberate or indiscriminate attack and should not be used in the work of the war effort according to (Protocol 2, Article 16). SNHR condemns all the attacks mentioned in this report, which it has been able to document.



- The parties that carried out these attacks have violated the rules of international humanitarian law; the Syrian regime and its allies which provide it with military support, first and foremost Russia and Iran, are the primary offenders.
- Intentional attacks on places of worship constitute war crimes, and repeating such attacks on the same place of worship is a strong indicator of deliberation in regard to these attacks and of a desire to destroy a place of worship.
- We confirm that the incidents of bombing included in this report targeted civilian targets, with the attacking forces thereby violating Articles 52, 53, 54, 55 and 56 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.
- Some of the incidents of bombing caused collateral damage that involved loss of civilian lives or injuries. There are strong indicators suggesting that this damage was excessive compared to the anticipated military benefit.

### **Recommendations:**

#### **UN Security Council:**

- The Security Council should take further action after resolutions 2139 and 2254, having failed to impose any obligation to stop indiscriminate shelling which must be adhered to by all parties to the conflict, as well as to abide by the rules of international humanitarian law.
- The Syrian issue must be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those involved in perpetrating crimes should be held accountable.
- Impose sanctions that include the Syrian and Iran regimes, primarily the imposition of arms embargoes, and place those directly involved in committing war crimes on the lists of sanctions and international arrest warrants
- Include the militias fighting alongside the Syrian government, which have committed large-scale massacres, such as Iranian militias, Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shiite brigades, as well as the National Defense Army, and Shabbiha on the international terrorism list.

#### **International Community:**

- In light of the split within the Security Council and its utter inability to take any effective action, action should be taken at the national and regional levels to form alliances to support the Syrian people by protecting them from daily killing and to lift sieges, as well as increasing support for relief efforts. Additionally, the principle of universal jurisdiction should be enacted in local courts regarding these crimes in order to ensure that fair trials are held for all those who were involved.



- SNHR has repeatedly called for the implementation of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine in dozens 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 have proved fruitless, along with the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps should be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations, while 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.
- Impose further sanctions on the Syrian regime, which continues to use aircraft fuel to bomb and destroy places of worship, as well as to displace their people.
- Renew 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 to activate the principle of universal jurisdiction.

## **OHCHR**

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report and the incidents that preceded it as a stark landmark in light of smaller daily sporadic violations, and try to implement the recommendations included in this report.
- Recommend that the Security Council impose sanctions, including an arms embargo on the Syrian and Iranian regimes, and note that the failure of the United Nations to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime despite all these violations undermines the application of international law and human rights principles.

## **Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)**

- Launch investigations into the cases included in this report and previous reports. SNHR is willing to cooperate and provide further evidence and data.

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

- Make greater efforts to protect civilians and places of worship in Syria, use force in the event of repeated attacks on world heritage sites, and target airports that bomb civilians and places of worship.



### **The Russian Regime:**

- Put pressure on its ally the Syrian regime to stop bombing Christian places of worship and to take a serious stance in the event of repeated targeting.
- Remove the Syrian Regime's forces and military equipment from Christian places of worship, and undertake to respect and protect these properties.
- The Syrian regime is the greatest threat to society, the state, societal stability and minorities. Its continued existence means more displacement and instability. The Russian regime must play a serious role in political change towards a government that is elected safely, not under threat from the security services.

### **The Syrian Regime:**

- Stop bombing Christian places of worship, and repair all that were bombed.
- Remove troops and military equipment from Christian places of worship as soon as possible.
- Stop targeting minorities who demanded a change in the hereditary rule of the Assad family and stop threatening and extorting their religious and cultural symbols.

### **Armed Opposition Factions:**

- Ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects in all areas, open investigations into incidents reported in this report, and make the findings of such investigations known to the public locally and internationally.
- Hold those involved in the targeting of Christian places of worship accountable, impose sanctions against them and, most importantly, implement these sanctions.
- Restore and protect Christian places of worship in areas under their control.

### **Acknowledgment and Condolences**

Our sincere thanks to all the local people and activists whose contributions have enriched this report, and our condolences to the victims and their families.







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