

Approximately 198,000 Displaced and 214 Killed in South Syria, and the Security Council is Standing Idly By

President Trump Abandoning His
Commitments in Daraa Governorate
the Same Way President Obama
Disregarded His Redline
on Chemical Weapons

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. South Syria Has been the Subject of Several Agreements, Most Notably the Bilateral Agreement between Presidents Trump and Putin:

After most of the buildings in Eastern Ghouta, a de-escalation zone that was included in the de-escalation agreement as per Astana talks, have been bombed and destroyed, as its residents found themselves displaced and forced to agree to degrading agreements just so can reality demonstrate how the Astana talks were merely a big deception on the Syrian people that aimed to divide, bomb and destroy Syrian regions and displace their residents one by one. The attack on Daraa governorate comes now to expose this path. The south-western region of Syria (parts of the governorates of Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda) was part of the de-escalation agreement which was struck during Round 4 of Astana talks and came into force in May 2017. The same region is also a part of another, more important agreement - the US-Russia bilateral ceasefire agreement, which came into effect on July 9, 2017, as it was followed by the signing of a memorandum to establish a de-escalation zone in south Syria between the representatives of the three states (Russia, the US, and Jordan) on Saturday, November 11, 2017.

Both agreements provided for a comprehensive cessation of hostilities and aerial attacks. This had a tangible impact on the day-to-day lives of the residents, as rates of killing and destruction dropped. As a result of the bilateral agreement, the rates of violations by Syrian-Russian alliance forces have also decreased in the south region compared to other areas that were only included in the de-escalation agreement. Surely, however, the past period of time didn't pass without deliberate attacks by the Syrian regime from time to time in which it targeted civilians and vital civilian facilities.



On [May 25](#), and then [June 14](#), the US Department of State released two statements in which it stressed the US's concerns over the Syrian regime's potential intentions to arrange an offensive against the south region. The statements asserted that such plans would constitute violations of the de-escalation agreement and the Russian-American agreement. On the other hand, the statements called on Russia to use its diplomatic influence over the Syrian regime to prevent the government from violating the agreements it has committed to.

On June 21, about one week after the beginning of the offensive on Daraa governorate, the US Department of State issued another statement that was based on news reports that talked about offensives on the south region by the Syrian regime and its pro-regime militias. The [statement](#) demanded that Russia applies pressure on the Syrian regime to cease its attacks.

On June 28, [Russia's Ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya](#), stated that the de-escalation zones weren't meant to be perpetuated, but they were purposed for specific durations in order to enable the people to live under acceptable conditions. Nebenzya also said that there are 15,000 terrorist who are affiliates of extremist Islamic groups in Daraa governorate.

Our data suggests that the south region is under the control of moderate armed opposition factions. The region embodied a vital model on how to eject extremist Islamic groups who only had a very limited presence in the most southwest areas (Tasil, Adwan, and Sahm al Golan towns). Nonetheless, we haven't recorded that those areas have been targeted in any Syrian or Russian offensives in the past few months.

In addition, all of these pretenses that the Russian government has used to justify its attacks on the de-escalation zones in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Homs, and most recently Daraa which revolved around the existence of terrorists and extremist gunmen shouldn't divert attention from Russia's serious violations of human rights and its failure to abide by international agreements. Undoubtedly, the Russian government, and its ambassadors, have no credibility now that their false claims have been exposed hundreds of times and their use of deceit continues even after facts have been revealed.



Lastly, SNHR feels an utmost sorrow over the vague statements made by [Prince Zeid bin Ra'ad al Hussein](#), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as his statement reads, "... but there is also the grave risk that the intensified fighting will see many civilians trapped, caught between Syrian Government forces and their allies on the one hand and armed opposition groups and ISIL on the other." Without holding Russia and the Syrian regime directly and primarily responsible for the casualties and the aerial bombardment which actually led to the displacement of civilians. These are blatant violations of the international law, first and foremost, and violations of the de-escalation agreement.

Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

"President Trump's administration has to uphold its pledges in protecting civilians in south Syria from the vicious attacks that are being carried out by Russian and Syrian forces. This sends a distorted message to the Syrian communities there, that reminds them of President Obama's pledges that he failed to uphold, which further complicated the situation and enabled the chemical weapon criminals to escape justice."

II. International Agreements Have Failed to Protect the Civilians in South Syria

This report sheds light on the attacks by Syrian regime and Russian forces on Daraa governorate in South Syria from mid-June to the end of the month. We have relied on field researchers who work with SNHR to collect direct accounts from survivors or victims' relatives, thanks to our wide network of relations that have been built over the course of our work in the past seven years. We have also analyzed the pictures and videos we received. This report contains two accounts that have been collected by 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. Additionally, SNHR has tried to spare the eyewitnesses the agony of remembering the violations as much as possible, and we gave guarantees to conceal the identity of any witnesses who wanted to use an alias.

SNHR works on documenting the violations in south Syrian in a daily basis. The gravest crime of all is killing, and so it is a political indicator that helps in assessing the impact of the agreements, in addition to targeting vital civilian facilities. We are going to outline the violations we recorded from the commencement of the de-escalation agreement, and then the commencement of the US-Russia bilateral agreement, and lastly the outcome of the most recent joint land and air attack that started in mid-June.

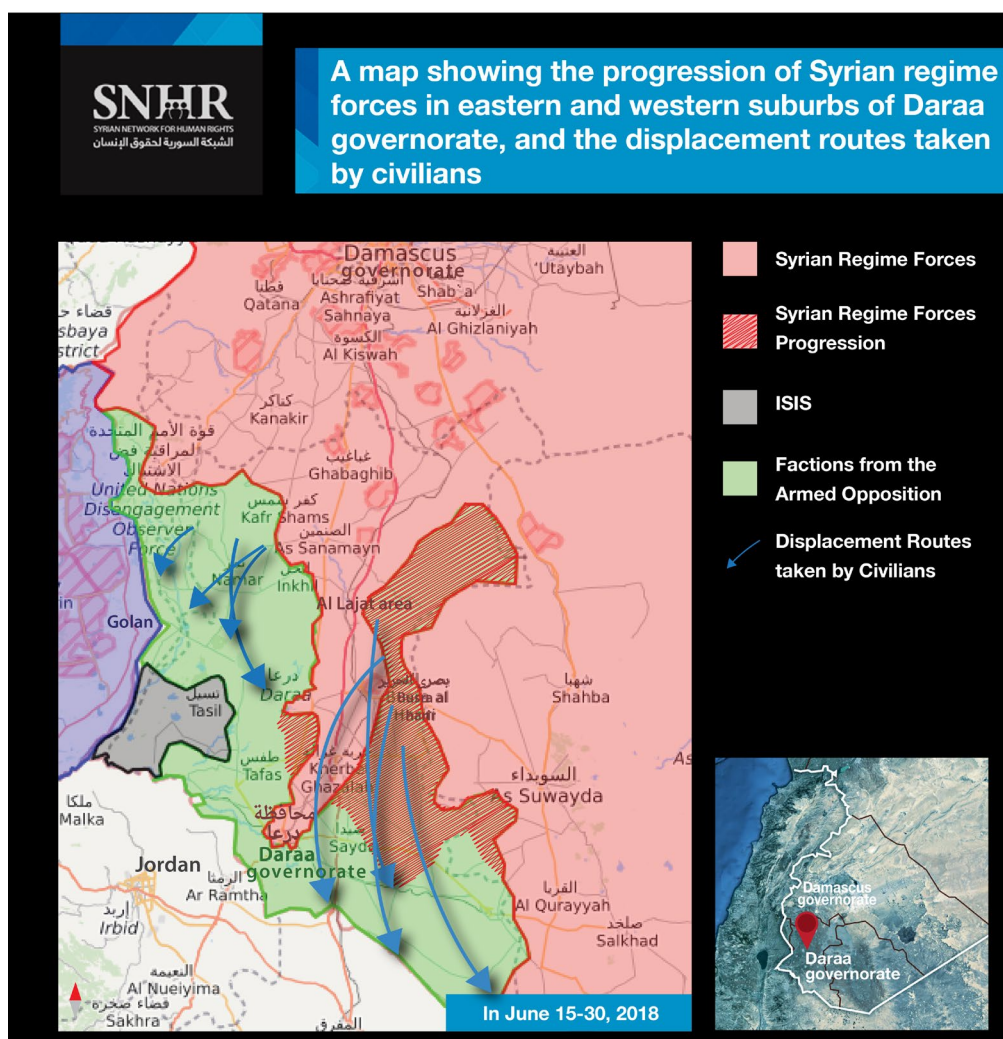


A. Death toll since the commencement of the de-escalation agreements and the bilateral agreement between the US and Russia

According to SNHR's database, no less than 416 civilians were killed in Daraa governorate at the hands of the Syrian-Russian alliance, including 117 children and 79 women (adult female), from May 2017 until June 30, 2018. Of those, 283 civilians, including 87 children and 58 women, were killed after the Russian-American bilateral agreement went into effect on July 9, 2017.

B. Escalation amid horrendous violations and the beginning of the land attack in mid-June

On June 15, 2018, Syrian regime forces started, with a major backing from Russia that we haven't seen since the Russian intervention started in Syria on September 30, 2015, carrying out heavy air strikes, in addition to artillery shelling by Syrian regime forces who are mainly stationed in Izra city at Tha'la Military Airbase, and the security branches in al Suwayda. The artillery shelling targeted areas in eastern suburbs of Daraa (Bosr al Harir, Mliehat al Atash, Nahta, and al Hrak), as well as the northern suburbs.



The offensives and airstrikes by the Syrian-Russian alliance were in parallel of serious violations of human rights. We have recorded attacks that targeted numerous vital civilian facilities – most notably hospitals and civil defense facilities. SNHR documented the following in Daraa governorate in June 15-30, 2018:

- No less than 214 civilians were killed, including 65 children and 43 women.
- 6 massacres
- 14 attacks on vital civilian facilities, including 5 medical facilities
- No less than 397 barrel bombs were dropped by Syrian regime forces helicopters
- Approximately 258 surface-to-surface rockets
- Approximately 293 mortar and artillery shells.

Ahmad Mousa, a local media worker who worked on covering the recent bombing on Daraa governorate, said that the area hasn't seen a bombing of this intensity in a long time, **“Once airstrikes stop, the shelling continues with rocket launchers and mortar shells. I have counted 150 Russian airstrikes in just one day that landed on several areas in Daraa. They are burning us. They have destroyed all the towns of the eastern suburbs and have targeted hospitals and medical facilities.”** We learned from Ahmad that he witnessed a shelling on al Hrak city in Daraa that involved approximately 40 surface-to-surface rockets on the first day of the offensive, **“I saw a woman and her daughter walking, and they were reduced to two dead bodies in a matter of moments. One rocket was enough to kill them both.”**

On June 26, Syrian regime forces managed to take over Bosr al Harir town, eastern suburbs of Daraa, to enclose al Laja area which was fled by most of its residents in light of the airstrikes that preceded the siege. Those who were forced to stay weren't allowed to leave by the Syrian regime forces towards their areas of control, as we recorded. In addition, some activists told us about some reconciliation provisions and settlements that will be enforced on the people besieged in al Laja area.

On June 28, 2018, a 12-hour truce was announced in Daraa governorate between the Russian side and factions from the armed opposition. The truce was set to commence at midnight on Thursday. Syrian-Russian alliance forces haven't demonstrated any commitment to the truce as we recorded several Russian-Syrian attacks on Nawa city and al Sahwa town in Daraa governorate.



III. The Recent Violations Have Resulted in Displacing Approximately 198,000 Individuals

The recent bombings, killings, and destruction that started in mid-June have resulted in the displacement of no less than 198,000 individuals from the villages of al Hrak, Nahta, Bosr al Harir, al Mleiha al Sharqiya, Nawa, al Hara, and Aqraba. IDPs headed for the southern villages and villages on the borders with Jordan, while other headed for the borders with the Golan region.

The displacements were excessively tragic, as thousands of IDPs found themselves forced to sleep in schools and shelters that were hastily constructed, and with mostly local resources. Those facilities had extremely limited capacities. A number of the residents who have been displaced told us that they were forced to stay in the open and set up rudimentary tents on the villages near the Jordanian borders under extremely high temperatures and alarming shortage of basic needs such as drinking water, food, and medications.

Musa al Zu'be, a relief activist, told SNHR of the dire conditions. Some of the IDPs, Musa noted, were forced to sleep in their cars, and those who were slightly more fortunate found a room in a school or a public institution. Musa added that the situation in the southern areas, where most of the IDPs are concentrated, is worse than ever, as basic needs are no longer sold, and people are not finding many basic materials, such as flour and fuel, **“The situation might even grow into a bigger crisis in the days to come. The shelling never stopped. We are seeing continued airstrikes and an indescribable influx of IDPs. Most of them are women and children. All of the services we provided were from personal donations. There are no relief organizations or groups present to alleviate the suffering.”**

This heavy and wide movement of thousands of people wasn't compelling enough for the Security Council to hold a special session to discuss the fate of 198,000 Syrian citizens who were forcibly displaced and have no place to live. In addition, [the Jordanian minister of foreign affairs asserted that the borders will stay shut down](#), and that Jordan is not willing to shoulder the ramifications of violating the de-escalation agreement in the south and will not take in any more refugees.

Lastly, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has declared that its cross-border aids [have been discontinued](#) in light of the battles in the area. All of what we have outlined signals a complete and absolute abandonment by the international community of its legal and moral obligations towards the Syrian people in order to force it to surrender and forcibly go back and perish under the one-family rule in Syria. Otherwise, what does displacing 198,000 people with no urgent action, condemnation, or at least providing urgent aids mean?



IV. Legal Description and Recommendations

Russian-Syrian alliance forces have violated the de-escalation agreement and the Russian-American bilateral agreement, in addition to Security Council Resolutions 2139 and 2254 which both states that indiscriminate attacks must be ceased. Also, these forces have violated Articles 7 and 8 of Rome Statute through the crime of willful killing which constitutes war crimes.

Moreover, Russian-Syrian alliance forces have committed the crime of displacement in a systematic, organized, and widespread manner which is a blatant violation of the Geneva Conventions and constitutes a crime against humanity according to Article 7 of the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute. Those forces had no measures in place to provide shelter, healthcare, or food for the displaced civilians.

Recommendations

Security Council

- Adopt a Resolution on approximately 7 million IDPs in Syria addressing the process of forced displacement and preventing displacement from turning into a permanent state. The Security Council should also apply pressure on the Syrian regime to compel it to stop displacement and passing laws that aim to seize IDPs' possessions and estates.

UN General Assembly

- Hold the ruling Syrian regime fully responsible for displacing one-third of the Syrian people, including legal and materials responsibilities. Also, ensure that victims are fully compensated for the grave losses they had to endure, including returning properties to their rightful owners.

UN special envoy to Syria

- Condemn the perpetrators of crimes and massacres who were primarily responsible for dooming de-escalation agreements, effectively shattering and ending the entire political process and hold the Syrian-Russian alliance fully responsible for this.
- Disclose to the Syrian people Russia's intentions to completely take control of the Syrian lands by force and its explicit desire to rehabilitate the present Syrian regime, which means formulating a political solution that suits its interests.

Donor states and UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

- The international community and donor states should secure the basic life needs and care for more than 198,000 IDPs in south Syria. The most indispensable needs include water, food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare services.



United States of America

- The US administration should uphold its pledges in protecting the south region which was one of the outcomes of the Russian-American agreement.
- President Donald Trump should make sure not to follow the steps and pledges of President Obama, and that the south Syria deal doesn't have the same fate as the insulting deal for surrendering chemical weapons.

Jordanian government

- The Jordanian government should allow the thousands that were displaced as a result of the offensives and whose houses and shops were destroyed to enter, especially children, women, and critical cases. Also, the Jordanian government should facilitate access for relief groups through the Jordanian borders to aid thousands who are trapped in the open, hold the aggressing Syrian and Russian parties responsible instead of the victim, and try to find a solution by shining a light on this tragedy at the UN General Assembly.

Acknowledgment and Condolences

We would like to express our most heartfelt gratitude and condolences to all the residents and local activists who contributed effectively to this report.





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