

No less than 485,000 People Displaced from the Suburbs of Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo as the Russian-Syrian Alliance Progresses

Blatant Coordination between the
Syrian-Iranian Alliance and ISIS

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 de-escalation agreement went into force in May 2017. However, the agreement didn't prevent the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces from perpetrating atrocious breaches in the months that followed in areas that were included in the agreements – particularly the governorates of Hama, Idlib, and Damascus suburbs. We have released several reports in which we documented the most notable violations of human rights by the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces in [Idlib and Damascus suburbs](#).

Held over the course of two days, September 14-15, 2017, the sixth round of Astana talks concluded with the establishment of the de-escalation agreement in Idlib governorate. Nonetheless, Syrian-Russian alliance forces carried out heavy airstrikes that were followed by raids which saw the involvement of Iranian militias in villages located in eastern suburbs of Hama. These military operations expanded later to eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib, as well as southern suburbs of Aleppo. Most of these areas are under the joint control of factions from the armed opposition and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. Given the strategic importance of these areas, the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance was hoping to gain a number of advantages on the ground by seizing these areas – most notably taking control of Abu al Thohour Military Airbase which the alliance forces seized on Monday, January 22, 2018.

Unlawful attacks and the use of prohibited weapons

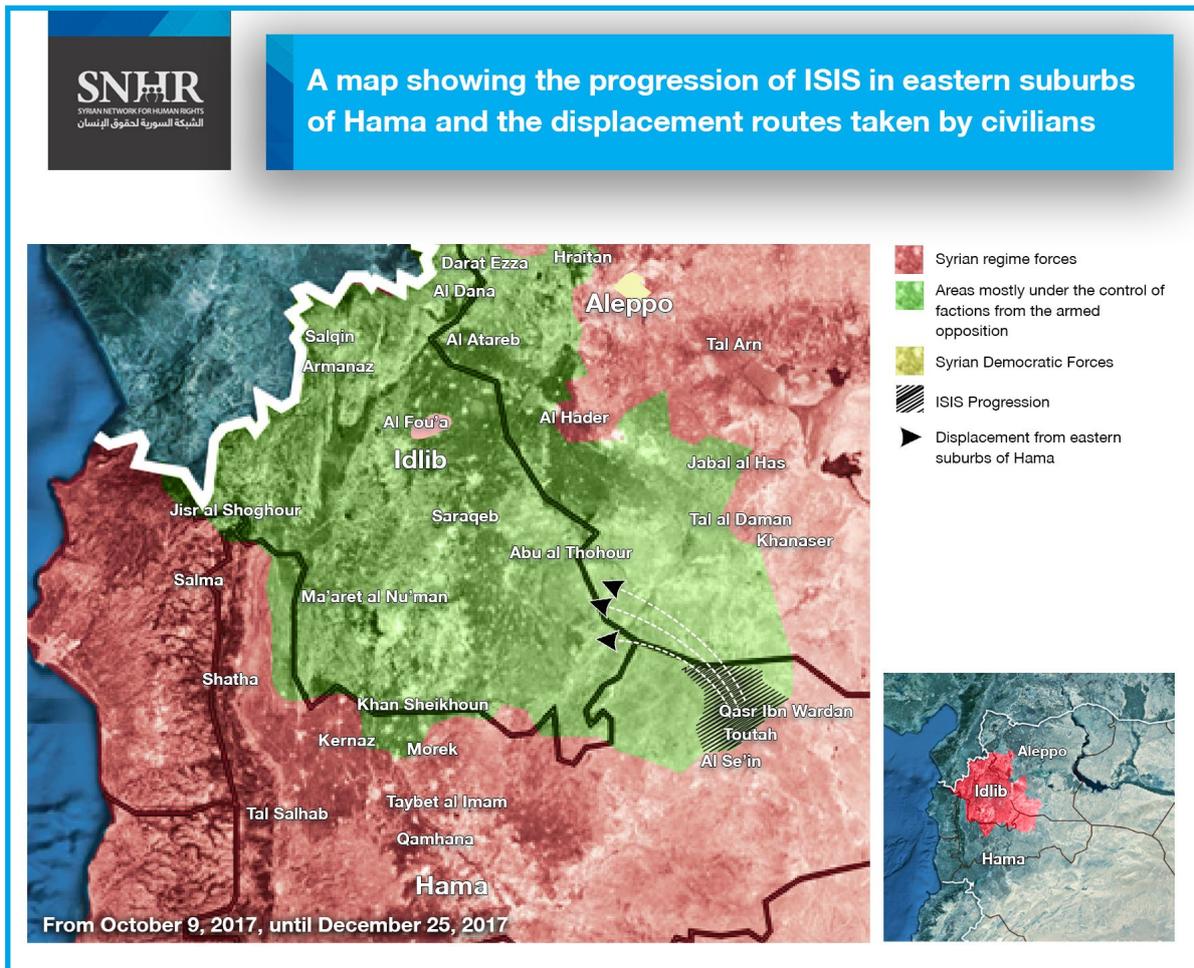
In their widespread offensives, Syrian-Russian alliance forces used incendiary ammunitions and cluster munitions. We've also recorded a number of attack in which highly-explosive missiles were used on populated areas, whereas Russian media outlets reported that Russian forces used Kalibr missiles in Caspian Sea. In addition, we've recorded one attack using [chemical weapons](#) by the Syrian regime in Saraqeb city, eastern suburbs of Idlib on February 4, 2018.



Explicit coordination between Syrian regime forces and ISIS

During the battles in eastern suburbs of Hama and then eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib, the level of cooperation and coordination between ISIS and Syrian regime forces was highly and unprecedentedly visible, as the latter benefited heavily from ISIS. Rather than targeting the group in its areas of control which are adjacent to the Syrian regime's areas of control, the Syrian regime facilitated the group's troops advancement towards the clash line with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham and factions from the armed opposition. We've also recorded that Syrian regime forces passed through ISIS's areas of control with no resistance.

Between October 9, 2017 and November 25, 2017, ISIS took over 25 villages in eastern suburbs of Hama, including Toutah, Qasr Ibn Wardan, and al Shakousiya villages, after Syrian regime forces facilitates the passage of ISIS tanks and military vehicles from the county of Eqeirbat via the Syrian regime-held "Ahtraya" road, as the group went on to clash with Hay'at Tahrir al Sham in a number of areas in al Rahjan area, eastern suburbs of Hama.



Simultaneously, Syrian regime forces progressed through ISIS's areas of control in eastern suburbs of Hama on October 24, 2017, to reach "Jub Abyad" village. A development that significantly escalated displacement waves from the areas of al Rahjan, al Sa'en, and al Sboura towards Senjar county, while ISIS fighters surrendered their areas of control to the regime and retreated to Toutah and Enitq villages.

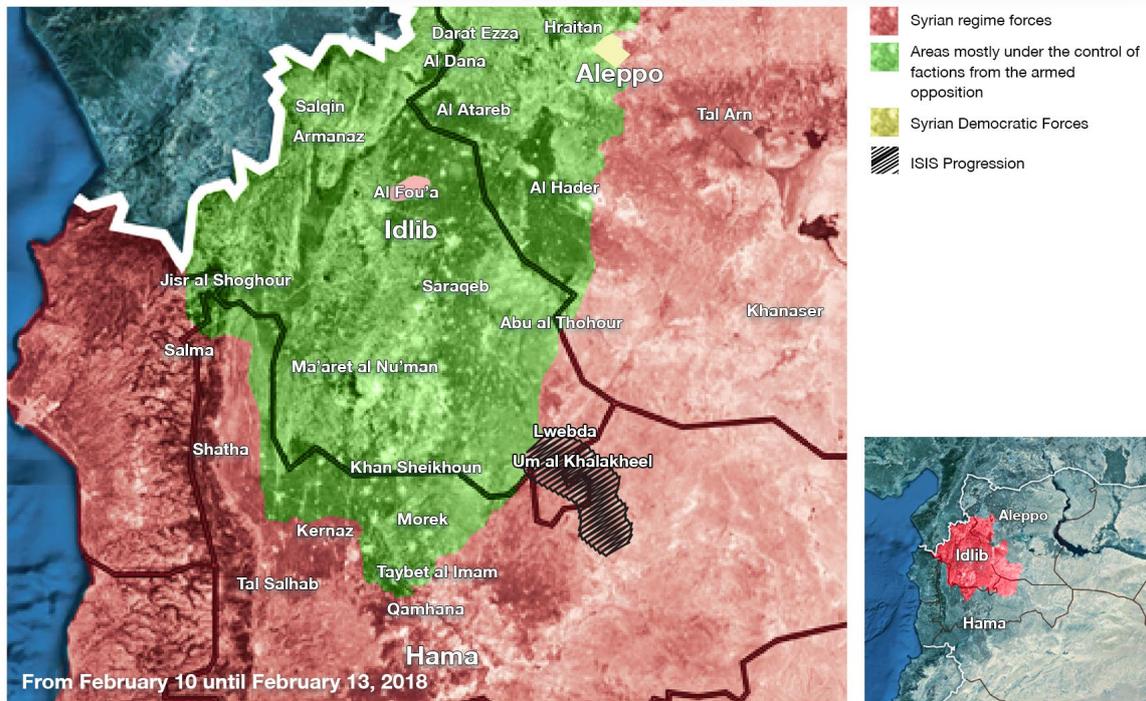
Between December 25, 2017, and mid-January 2018, Syrian regime forces and ISIS carried out simultaneous raids in the villages of eastern suburbs of Hama. Both parties managed to take over tens of villages that were previously under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham. We never recorded any clashes or engagements between the Syrian regime and the group. Rather, the progression of ISIS in a number of villages in light of the siege that is supposedly imposed on them in the counties of al Sa'en, Ibn Wardan, and al Hamra suggests continued human and material support, which confirms that existence of joint coordination between the two parties.

On February 10, 2018, the same scenario came to be repeated as Syrian regime force facilitated the passage of ISIS fighters from their areas of control through areas that are under the control of the Syrian regime towards southern suburbs of Idlib where ISIS managed to take over Um al Khalakheel and al Lwebda villages to arrive at the borders of al Khwein al Kabir and al Zarzour villages after clashes ensued with factions from the armed opposition.

On February 13, 2018, ISIS fighters fell under a siege imposed by factions from the armed opposition who managed to take back all the villages that ISIS had taken over in southern suburbs of Idlib while Syrian regime forces took over the areas that were under ISIS's control in eastern suburbs of Hama.



A map showing the progression of ISIS in the areas of eastern suburbs of Hama and southern suburbs of Idlib with the support of Syrian regime forces



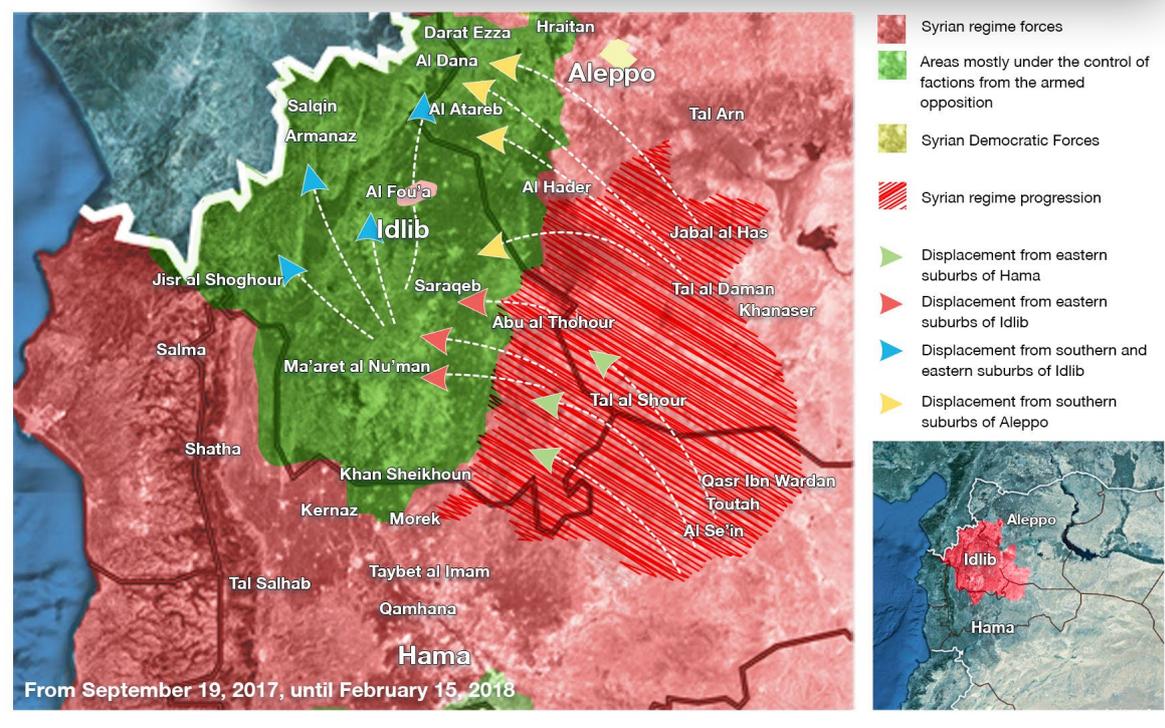
Fleeing and forced displacement

The heavy indiscriminate attacks by the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces that involved airstrikes in which hundreds of missiles and artillery shells were used, as well as ISIS's attacks and artillery shelling have resulted in the displacement of no less than 485,000 residents from the areas (eastern suburbs of Hama, eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib, and southern suburbs of Aleppo). Most of these people headed for the northern and western suburbs of Idlib which heavily increased the pressure in camps and shelters which were built with a vastly less capacity that these facilities ended up receiving due to the large number of IDPs. This, in turn, led to a worsening human situation in light of cold weather poor food and medical resources. Also, this added to the pressure on local communities who already suffer from limited resources and the insufficient and irregular U.N. aid convoys.

[The United Nations](#) said that about 2 million people are living in Idlib governorate while figures released by local councils and aid offices suggest that there are approximately 2.9 million. Half of those are IDPs from other governorates, such as Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus suburbs who fled in fear of the brutality of the Syrian regime forces and their allies.



A map showing the progression of Syrian regime forces in eastern suburbs of Hama, eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib, and southern suburbs of Aleppo, and the displacement routes taken by civilians



Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of SNHR, says:

“One could easily conclude how residents are afraid of the new controlling forces, namely Syrian regime forces and ISIS, considering the routes IDPs took. Why would those residents flee rather than welcome those forces otherwise? Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to leave their homes and jobs in fear of the Syrian regime’s and ISIS’s terrorism. They would rather live with no homes than fall into their hands.”

In early-March 2018, Syrian regime forces opened a passage in Tal al Sultan area in eastern suburbs of Idlib governorate. They said that they would allow residents and IDPs to return to the villages that are now under their control. Hundreds of families indeed returned to the villages of l’jar, al Mutawsetta, and the town of al Thohour. We received information that a number of those people who are within the age for conscription have been arrested, while other accounts suggested that Syrian regime forces are extorting people at these passages where they don’t allow families who have men within the age for conscription to enter unless they surrender said men to join the Syrian regime forces’ ranks.

Additionally, we recorded in March that thousands of families have returned to Saraqeb city, Ma'aret al Nu'man city, Jarjanaz town, Ma'ar Shoreen after those areas saw a relative stability, while hundreds of thousands of IDPs are still left to an uncertain future in camps and shelters in different areas in northern and western suburbs of Idlib.

Methodology

In the course of the ongoing monitoring for incidents and developments by SNHR team through a wide network including tens of various sources that have been built over an accumulation of extensive relations since the start of our work. When we receive information, or hear some news about a violation via the internet or media outlets, we work on following-up on this news and try to verify and collect evidences and data. In some cases, the researcher is able to visit the incident location at the soonest. However, this is a rarity in light of the incredibly high security risks, and given the frequency of daily incidents and in light of the human and material resources at hand. Therefore, the possibility to access evidences vary from one case to another, and, hence, the degree of its classification. Usually, what we do, at SNHR, in such cases is relying on accounts from survivors who experience the violation firsthand, where we try to access those directly, and, to a second degree, who saw or filmed the violation, in addition to analyzing available materials from open sources such as the internet and media outlets. Thirdly, we try to speak to medical personnel who treated the wounded, assessed the symptoms, and determined the cause of death.

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

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

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

Furthermore, the investigations included in this report have proved that the targeted areas were civilian areas where no military centers or armories for armed opposition factions or extremist Islamic groups were found before or during the attack. Also, Syrian/Russian forces didn't alert the civilians prior to the attacks as the international humanitarian law requires. This report only represents the bare minimum, which we were able to document, of the magnitude and severity of the violation that occurred. It also doesn't cover the social, economic, and mental ramifications.



II. Details

A. eastern suburbs of Hama and eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib

Attacks in eastern suburbs of Hama, according to the Russians' claims, started as a retaliation to attacks carried out by Hay'at Tahrir al Sham on some villages in northeastern suburbs of Hama (al Qaher and al Tliesiya villages) on September 19. However, all of the attacks we've monitored occurred tens of kilometers away from the clash lines in an utter disregard for the rules of the international humanitarian law.

As of February 15, 2018, Syrian regime forces, with the support of Shiite militias, have been able to take over about 150 villages and towns in eastern suburbs of Hama and eastern suburbs of Idlib. These military maneuvers came with serious violations of human rights. We have recorded that Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces killed no less than 204 civilians, including 40 children and 46 women (adult female), between September 19, 2017 and February 15, 2018. Among those who were killed were 17 civilians who were killed as they were trying to flee. In addition, we've recorded no less than 191 attacks on vital civilian facilities, including 21 on medical facilities and 11 on refugee camps in the region of eastern suburbs of Hama and eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib. We've also documented no less than 12 attacks using cluster munitions and six attacks using incendiary ammunitions. Most of these attacks were carried out by Russian forces, in addition to one attack using chemical weapons by the Syrian regime.

These ruthless attacks have driven approximately 420,000 people who reside in these areas to flee in fear for their lives. The mass waves of displacement have taken a very tragic manner, as some residents found themselves forced to flee multiple times, where airstrikes and military operations followed them in order to take over new areas they'd fled to.

Waves of forced displacement and fleeing can be broken into three phases based on the areas that were attacks. Primarily, Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces were the major responsible for displacement, while ISIS was responsible for the displacement of thousands of residents from the villages of eastern suburbs of Hama they'd taken over.



According to what SNHR team was able to record in the period of time covered by the report, the three phases are as follows:

Phase one: started on September 19, 2017, as thousands of residents were forced to flee the counties of Hamra, al Sa'en, and al Sboura in eastern suburbs of Hama to Senjar and Abu al Thohour areas in eastern suburbs of Idlib in light of the attacks carried out by the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliances and then ISIS's attacks in early-October.

Phase two: started in November 2017. Thousands of residents were again forced to flee the counties of Senjar and Abu al Thohour in eastern suburbs of Idlib, along with IDPs from villages in eastern suburbs of Hama, to areas in the eastern suburbs of Ma'aret al Nu'man.

Phase three: started in late-December 2017. Thousands of IDPs and original residents were forced to flee villages in eastern and southern suburbs of Idlib to northern and western suburbs of Idlib and Jabal al Zawiya area.

SNHR spoke to a number of aid workers who spoke of the extremely dire humanitarian conditions that IDPs are living under, as thousands of them are sleeping in the open under the bitter cold in these areas. The areas to which IDPs fled lack equipped camps that can house these large numbers of people, in addition to severe shortage in food, medical, and heating supplies. Moreover, reports released by groups that are concerned with IDPs, as well as the interim government's coordination and support offices noted that camps and food and medical supplies are direly and urgently needed.



IDPs children in Atama camp on the Syrian-Turkish borders in the aftermath of the Syrian-Russian offensive on eastern suburbs of Hama and southern suburbs of Idlib – January 19, 2018. By: Mohammad al Abdullah



Mnahi al Ahmad¹, a supervisor of the aiding of IDPs from the villages of eastern suburbs of Hama, told us that thousands of families are living in the open with no home, food, or means of heating in light of a severe shortage in drinking water, as well as basic supplies such as flour and children's milk: **“Tens of villages in the suburbs of Hama have been completely emptied of their residents. Most of the people fled to areas in eastern suburbs of Idlib and to agricultural lands and groves. But even there they weren't safe from Russian's and the Syrian regime's attacks who targeted their camps. They are following people to target them with gases and shells.”**



B. Southern suburbs of Aleppo

In parallel with the Russian air attacks and the advancement of Syrian regime forces and pro-regime Shiite militias in the areas of eastern suburbs of Idlib in November 2017, similar attacks were carried out on the majority of the villages and towns of southern suburbs of Aleppo, especially the area of Jabal al Hus and Tal al Daman. After about four months of military escalation, Syrian regime forces managed to take over 80% of the villages in southern suburbs of Hama, such as al Rashadiya and Ramla. These attacks came with blatant violations of the international humanitarian law. SNHR team has recorded that Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces have killed 49 civilians, including 13 children and 12 women

¹ We contacted him via WhatsApp



(adult female), between mid-November 2017 and February 15, 2018. Among those were seven civilians who were killed as they trying to flee. In addition, these forces carried out seven attacks on vital civilian facilities, including one attack on a medical facility that was rendered out of commission on December 13, 2017. In light of that, the nearest medical facility to the areas of southern suburbs of Aleppo is located about 85 kilometers away in Saraqeb city, Idlib suburbs.

All of those forced no less than 65,000 residents of southern suburbs of Aleppo to flee to areas in western suburbs of Aleppo and eastern and northern suburbs of Idlib. Most of these people settled in primitive camps in groves and agricultural lands.

Abdul Mun'im al Dali², a volunteer with the civil defense and an IDP from al Smiriya village in southern suburbs of Idlib, told SNHR: **“I fled with my wife and three children after shells and missiles started falling on us like rain. One of the missiles landed near my house. I arrived at Deir Hassan Camp in al Dana village, northern suburbs of Idlib.”**

Abdul Mun'im talked about the poor humanitarian conditions the IDPs are living with: **“I live along with my family and my brother's family in one camp. They can't give each family a separate camp. The bitter cold and severe shortage in food and heating are all difficulties we have to deal with now. There is no safe place. We were afraid of the [Syrian] regime and its militias if they were to get to us.”**

Ramadan Hasan al Mohammad³, a volunteer with the civil defense and an IDP from Tal al Daman area in southern suburbs of Aleppo, told us that he was forced to flee in early-December 2017 after Russian warplanes carried out heavy airstrikes on his village: **“I didn't want to leave the village, but the bombing was horrifying and forced thousands of residents of southern suburbs of Aleppo to flee. They have destroyed everything, mosques, schools, and hospitals. My wife is sick and sometimes needs medical attention, but there is no nearby medical point to be found. All medical points were rendered out of commission in light of the bombardment. I fled to al Sheikh Ali area in western suburbs of Aleppo. It is like I fled death to meet despair as the situation here is very dire. We are living in a pre-built chamber with hundreds of families with no aids or means of heating.”**

² We contacted him via WhatsApp

³ We contacted him via WhatsApp



Speaking via WhatsApp, Ziad, an IDP from Jabal al Has area, told us that a missile he describe as “bunker-buster” landed near his family on the night of the fourth of December, so he fled with his wife and children to Deir Hassan Camp: **“I am living now in a primitive camp that can’t protect my family from the cold and the rain. Things are extremely dire here. Thousands of people are living in camps. There is no food or medical facilities. There is no heating or sanitation supplies.”**

III. Conclusions and Recommendations

Legal conclusions

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

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

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

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

5. These attacks constitute a violation of the de-escalation agreements considering that they targeted areas under the control of factions from the armed opposition. This takes away any purpose Geneva path and agreements had.

6. Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces have perpetrated the crime of forced displacement through the military operations they have carried out which affected approximately 485,000 people who are living under extremely dire conditions. In addition, Syrian regime forces didn't secure any shelters or alternative residencies for the IDPs, nor they facilitated the displacement movement or secured safe passages.



Recommendations

International Community

- In light of the split of the Security Council and its utter inability, steps should 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 have been consumed, as well as the Cessation of Hostilities statements and Astana agreements that followed. Therefore, steps under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations should be taken and the norm of the “Responsibility to Protect”, which was established by the United Nations General Assembly, should be implemented. The Security Council is still hindering the protection of civilians in Syria.
- Renew the pressure on the Security Council to refer the case in Syria to the International Criminal Court
- Work on fulfilling justice and achieving accountability in Syria through the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council and work on activating the principle of the universal jurisdiction.

Security Council

- The Security Council has to take additional steps after Resolution 2254 was adopted, which explicitly states: “Demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects...”
- Adopt a binding Resolution that prevents and punishes the crime of forced displacement, and puts an end to the forced displacement operations, while explicitly states that IDPs have the right to a safe return to their homes, and that the damages that have befallen their homes should be redressed.
- Compel the Syrian regime to cease settlement and demographic replacement operations in the cities and neighborhoods whose residents have been displaced.
- Enforced displacement is a threat to the region and the Syrian lands that will shake security and stability. Instilling peace and security in Syria is a core part to the responsibilities of the Security Council.
- The Syrian case should be referred to the International Criminal Court and all those who are responsible for crimes should be held accountable including the Russian regime whose involvement in war crimes has been proven.
- Expand sanctions to include the Syrian, Russian, and Iranian regimes who are directly involved in committing crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Syrian people.



OHCHR

- The OHCHR should submit a report to the Human Rights Council and other organs of the United Nations on the incidents mentioned in this report, seeing that they were perpetrated by Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance forces.
- Help with establishing a central data for residencies and properties in Syria in order to achieve compensation and carry out voluntary return programs in accordance with the UN's "Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons" known as the Pinheiro Principles.

United Nations special envoy to Syria

- Expand Security Council briefings rather than only limiting them to the violations of al Nusra Front and ISIS
- Condemn the perpetrators of the crimes, the massacres, and those who were primarily responsible for breaching Security Council resolutions

The Russian regime

- Launch investigations into the incidents included in this report and make the findings of these investigations public to the Syrian people and hold the people involved accountable.
- Compensate all affected centers and facilities, and rebuilt and rehabilitate these facilities, and compensate the all of the families whose members were killed and wounded by the present Russian regime.
- Completely cease the bombardment on hospitals and protected objects as well as civilian areas, and respect the customary international law.
- As a guarantor party to Astana talks, the Russian regime should stop failing de-escalation agreements and apply pressure on the Syrian regime in order to cease all indiscriminate attacks.
- Stop shielding the Syrian regime at the Security Council and using veto to prevent the passing of any international resolution that punishes the Syrian regime.
- The Syrian state is one of the state parties to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Therefore, it is bound to refrain from carrying out enforced displacement operations, and it should prevent its occurrence and secure protection of residents from such practices rather than being the one who is carrying out these practices under a clear support from the Iranian regime.

International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM)

Investigate the perpetrated crimes that were documented in this report and bring their perpetrators to justice.



Commission of Inquiry (COI)

Document the horrifying violations that took place in these areas, and document the destruction that have befallen the cities and villages mentioned in this report, and heavily highlight it in the Commission's upcoming 16th report.

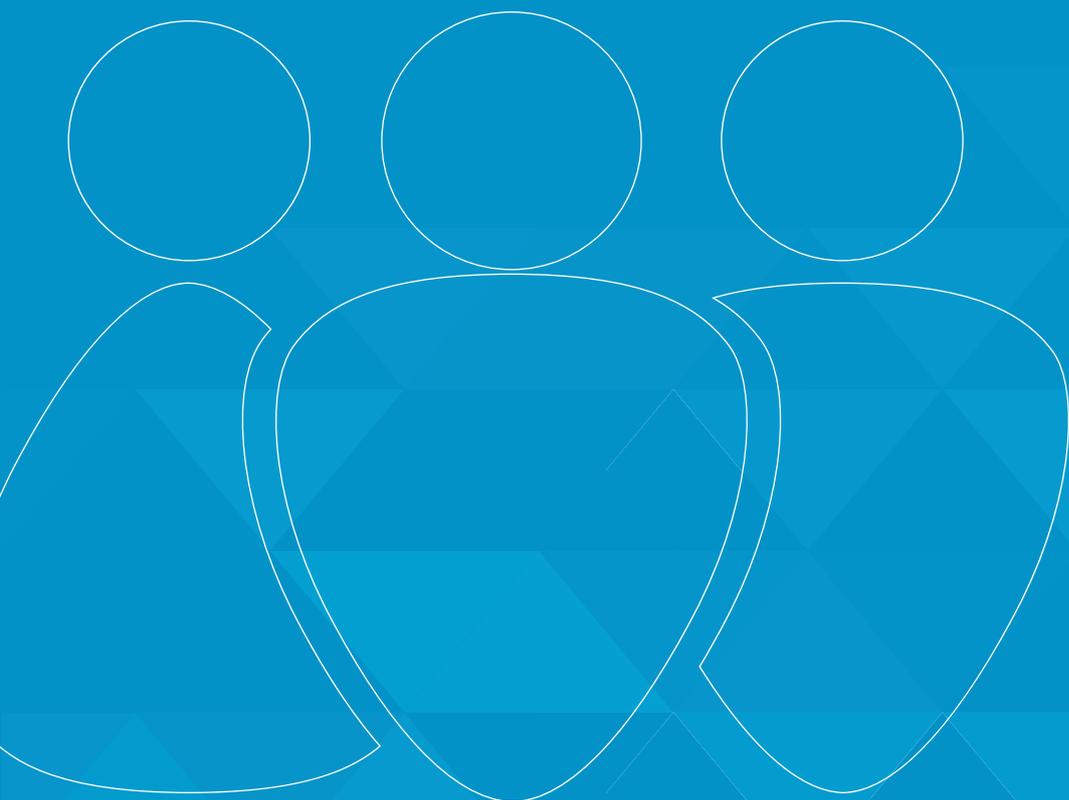
International relief organizations

Find the necessary ways to secure water, food, and shelter for thousands of homeless people in northern and western suburbs of Idlib and western suburbs of Aleppo.

Acknowledgment

Our most sincere thanks and condolences to all the families and local activists who contributed effectively to this report.





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