



Syria Is Among the World's Worst Countries for the Number of Mines Planted Since 2011, Despite Prohibition of Their Use in International Law

Mines Have Killed at Least 2,601 Civilians in Syria Since 2011, Including 598 Children and 267 Women, with Women and Children Accounting for 33% of All Victims

Thursday 10 December 2020

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.

SNHR
SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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I. The Report Methodology, We Are Often Unable to Determine Which Party Planted the Landmines and Therefore Cannot Definitively Assign Responsibility for Killings or Injuries:

Syrian citizens have been subjected to relentless and intensive extrajudicial killings ever since the start of the popular uprising in March 2011. Various types of weapons have been used in the killing of Syrian civilians, including: machine guns, knives, machetes and similar bladed weapons (in the massacres that carried a sectarian or ethnic character), mortars, bombs, barrel bombs, missiles of various types, cluster munitions, mines, chemical weapons, and suicide bombings, as well as death due to torture, and others.

In the course of our work at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), which has been ongoing for nearly ten years, we have tried as much as possible to attribute each killing to the party responsible; we were able to do so in the vast majority of the cases we recorded about extrajudicial killings, relying on several factors that we have indicated extensively in [our methodology](#) in documenting violations. The majority of the victims were killed through airstrikes using missiles and barrel bombs, with the air force being controlled solely by the Syrian regime and Russia, as well as by US-led coalition forces, although the coalition bomb within confined areas. We can also determine those responsible for artillery shelling operations, to a significant extent, depending on the area where the shell fell, its angle, type, etc., and we also determined the party that carried out the killings using bladed weapons, based on survivors and eyewitnesses, who witnessed the storming operations and were able to identify the perpetrators through their clothing or accents, the place from which they came and other criteria. The same goes for killings by dropping barrel bombs, with this shameful and heinous weapon only possessed by the Syrian regime army. We have also counted the types of cluster munitions that were used in Syria, and identified the party that used each type, which is either Russia or the Syrian regime, and so on with various types of weapons. Overall, we were largely able to attribute each of the killing incidents to the party that carried it out, according to the evidence and data available to us.

Despite this, we have faced many difficulties in assigning specific responsibility for dozens of other killings, in particular attacks launched by the Syrian regime and the Russian regime simultaneously, which makes it difficult to determine exactly which of them was responsible for the attack, and in this case we use the term Syrian / Russian alliance.

Two cases are excluded from the process of assigning responsibility:

- Anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines. (Sea mines were not used in the Syrian conflict.)
- Remote bombings, including suicide or forced suicide attacks, which we have detailed in [our report](#) issued on November 13, 2020.

In this report, we are going to talk about anti-personnel and anti-vehicle landmines, which are weapons designed to be placed under or above the ground, then to explode because of the proximity or contact of a person or vehicle.

There are great difficulties and challenges that face and prevent us from assigning responsibility for killings caused by landmines to a specific party of the conflict, which are added to the challenges mentioned in our general methodology, with the most prominent of these being:

- Most of the parties to the conflict use this type of weapon.
- The multiple changes of control by parties to the conflict and forces over the areas where minefields exist. None of the parties to the conflict and the controlling forces in Syria have revealed maps of the places where they planted landmines

This report aims to show the human losses suffered by the Syrian citizens caused by these landmines, between March 2011 and December 2020, particularly highlighting the death toll of victims, including children and women, the medical, media and Civil Defense personnel, and their distribution according to the governorates in which they were killed, as well as highlighting some of the most prominent incidents caused by the explosion of landmines.

II. Mines Are a Weapon Prohibited under International Law, But It Is Heavily Used in the Syrian Conflict, Threatening Syrians for Decades to Come:

The military forces plant mines primarily for the purpose of preventing the advance of opposing forces towards certain areas, which contributes to their fortification and protection. The nature of the work of military mines requires that their locations not be detected in order to cause the greatest human and equipment losses among the adversary; because their location cannot be easily identified, particularly by civilians, with the conflicting forces planting mines in many different areas; they are, therefore, by the nature of their use, a very indiscriminate weapon, and in most conflicts, mines are removed only after decades, making them an unguided weapon which doesn't distinguish between civilians, military forces and combatants.

Accordingly, since its inception, international humanitarian law has significantly restricted the use of these weapons; the rules of customary humanitarian law have provided for this¹, with the Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons², which came into force on December 3, 1998, defining the rules of landmines' use but has not prohibited them.

Given the developments in the mine production industry, including those to be dropped intensively and indiscriminately from aircraft, as well as those that are difficult to detect as a result of technical advancement in their manufacture, their extensive use in Syria sharply contradicts any possibility of the parties to the conflict taking all feasible precautions to protect civilians from the effects of these weapons or opposing the principle of their indiscriminate use, meaning that the international humanitarian law and international human rights law restricting the use of these types of weapons on the ground and actual use is no more than a fantasy.

On the basis of this impossibility, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a number of NGOs have made great efforts to work towards an absolute ban on the use of mines because they are contrary to the basic principles of the law of war, with these efforts culminating in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Ottawa Convention)³, which entered into force in March 1999, with 164 states⁴ are currently party to the convention, constituting the vast majority of the world states, making the international mine ban a binding international norm for all states and parties to the conflict, whether signatory or not.

Despite the international ban on the use of mines, we at the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) have documented the use of mines by different parties to the conflict for almost 10 years (although we have not recorded the US-led coalition forces or the Russian forces using mines). We have also documented hundreds of deaths and injuries due to the explosion of large numbers of these mines, with the armed conflict in Syria being one of the worst globally

¹ ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, Rule 81, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule81

ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, Rule 82, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule82

ICRC, International Humanitarian Law, Rule 83, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule83

² Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps and Other Devices as amended on 3 May 1996 (Protocol II as amended on 3 May 1996), https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1996/05/19960503%2001-38%20AM/Ch_XXVI_02_bp.pdf

³ Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction - Ottawa Convention, 1997, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Treaty.xsp?documentId=B587BB399470269441256585003BA277&action=openDocument>

⁴ United Nations, list of the state parties to the Ottawa Treaty, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XXVI-5&chapter=26&clang=en

in terms of respect for the rules of international law, in particular by the Syrian regime⁵, which possesses tens of mines; the ease and low cost of manufacturing mines have also enabled other parties to the conflict to use them extensively, showing absolute indifference to disclosing their locations or clearing them, which means that their lethal danger has been extended for many decades and threatens the lives and movement of Syrian citizens, particularly children, which is evident in the governorates that have witnessed clashes and changes in the controlling forces and their areas of control.

III. The Massive Death Toll of Victims Killed by Mines in Syria Underscores the Need for the World to Be Free of This Indiscriminate Weapon:

We at the SNHR have recorded continuous deaths and injuries due to landmines despite repeated appeals by the SNHR, and urgent requests for the essential intervention of international teams to help expose the locations where landmines are deployed and to put pressure on the controlling forces in Syria to determine their locations of deployment in order to reduce the number of casualties among civilians resulting from them. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, as a member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines - Cluster Munition Coalition ([ICBL-CMC](#)), emphasizes its pursuit within this international coalition to reach a world free of the use of landmines and cluster munitions.

⁵ We generally use the term 'the Syrian regime' rather than 'the Syrian government', because the nature of the ruling power in Syria is a totalitarian dictatorship based on ruling the nation in an authoritarian fashion through a very limited group of individuals, primarily the President of the Republic and his selected leaders of the security services, while the ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, play a restricted, largely ceremonial role, which is limited to implementing precisely what the ruling regime orders, without any decision-making power or active role; this means that the government's role is wholly subordinate and limited to serving the regime, with all the main powers being concentrated in the hands of the President of the Republic and the security services. Governance in Syria is wholly decided by the autocratic authority of the ruling family and there is no independent decision-making structure. Rather, the government is an empty façade there for show; the Minister of Interior receives orders from the security branches over which he nominally presides which are in turn under the command of the President, while the Minister of Justice cannot summon a civilian-level security agent other than the head of a security branch; the security branches, along with the president, are the true power and the governing regime in Syria.

Although we acknowledge that the United Nations and its agencies use the term 'the Syrian government' in general, we believe that this is a completely inaccurate and misleading term in the Syrian context.

To make further progress towards that goal, the SNHR for nearly 10 years has monitored mine incidents including determining the locations and types of landmines, and the casualties resulting from their explosion. We also plan in the future to prepare maps containing the coordinates of the locations where mine explosions have occurred in various Syrian governorates, facilitating the work of local demining teams and helping to create greater awareness among the local population and local authorities in the areas affected to take all possible precautions and safety measures to avoid further such incidents.

According to the SNHR database

at least

2601 

including

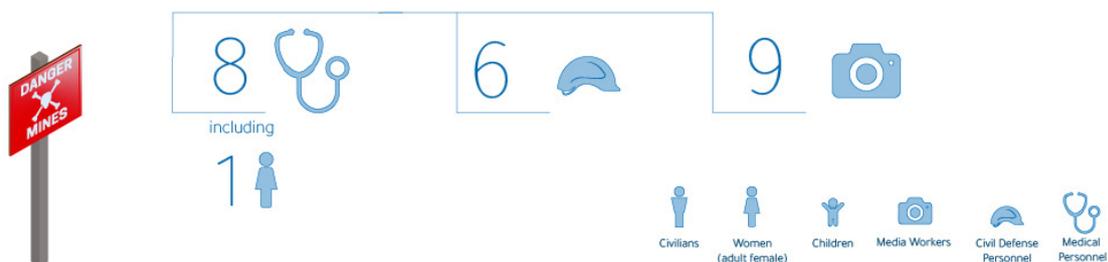
598 

267 

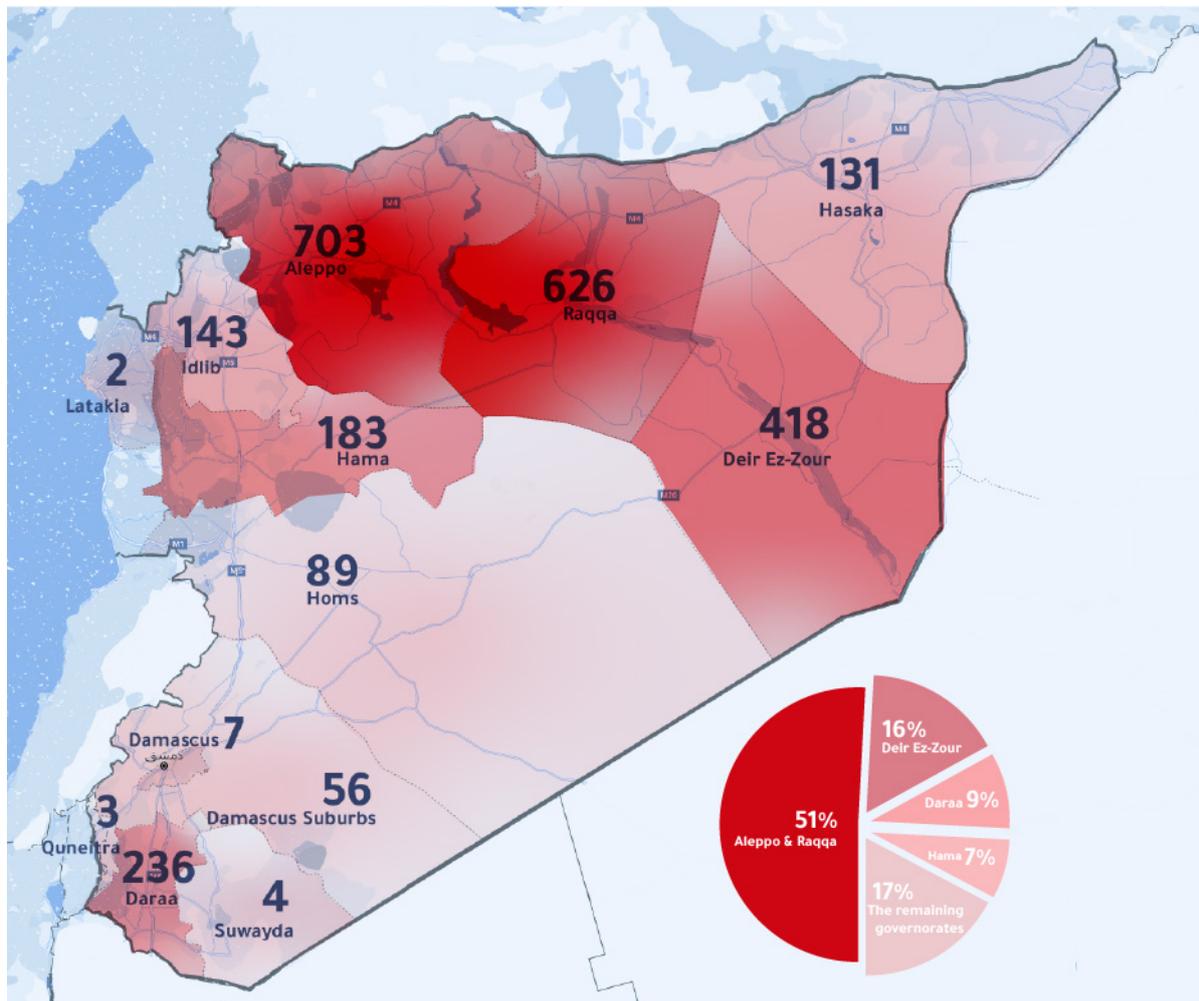
were killed



at least 2,601 civilians, including 598 children and 267 women (adult female), were killed between March 2011 and December 2020 due to hundreds of mine explosions in various Syrian governorates; among the 2,601 civilians, there were casualties among medical, Civil Defense, and media personnel, which were distributed as follows:

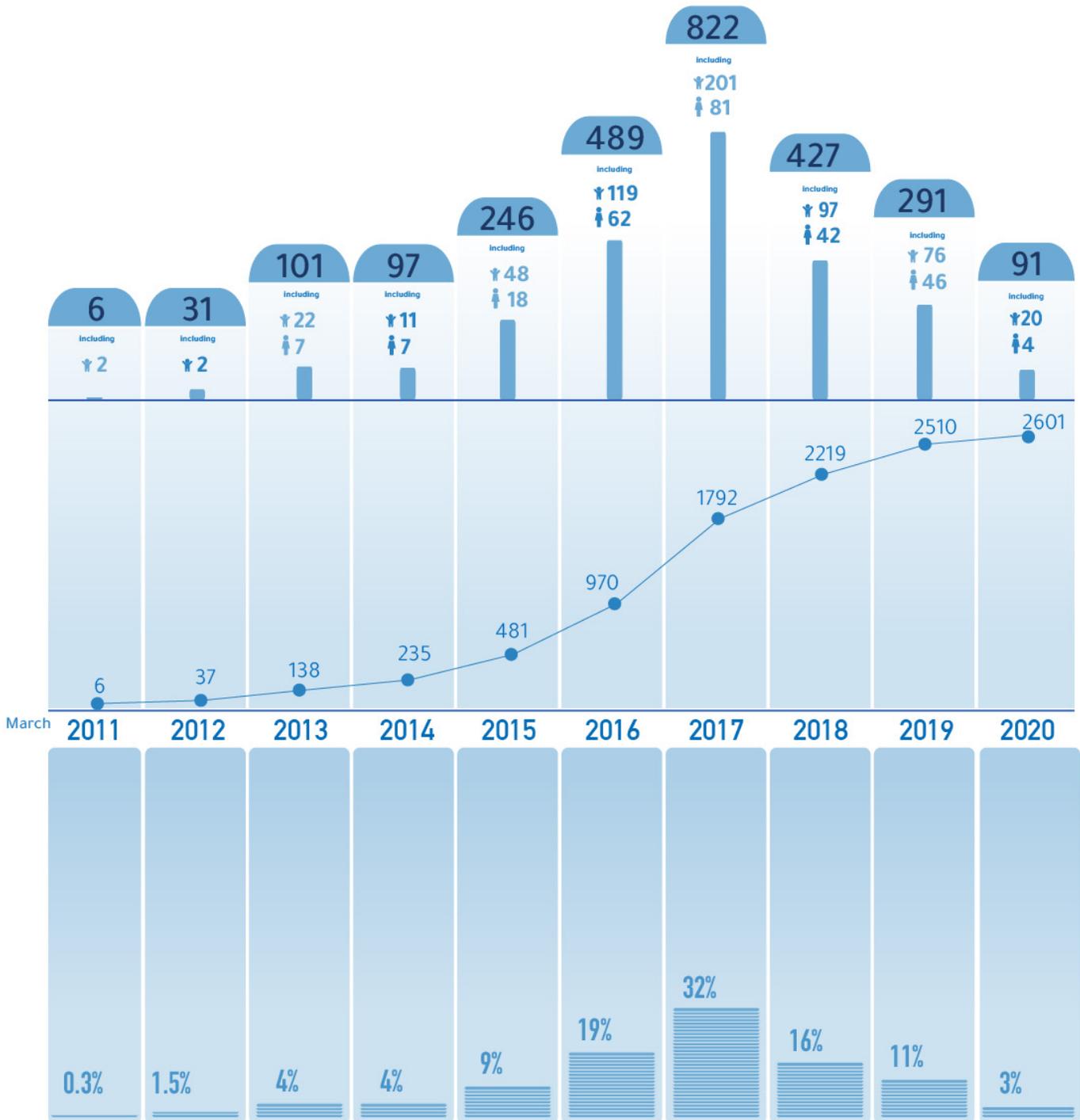


The death toll is distributed across the Syrian governorates according to the following figure:



We note from the map that most of the landmine victims were documented in Aleppo and Raqqa governorates, with the death toll from landmine explosions in both governorates comprising approximately 51% of the total death toll, meaning that half of the recorded fatalities from landmines in Syria have been killed in these two governorates, followed by Deir Ez-Zour governorate with approximately 16% of the total, Daraa with approximately 9%, then Hama with 7%; after this come the remaining governorates with 17%, at rates ranging between 2% and 6%, while Damascus, Latakia, Suwayda, and Quneitra ranked last with a ratio of less than 1%, and we recorded no victims in Tartous. The varying percentages between different areas are due to many factors, the most prominent of which is the changing nature of control over the areas, and the multiplicity of the parties that controlled the same governorate, with Aleppo governorate being one of the governorates which saw the highest rates of shifting control among the various parties.

The following is the distribution of the death toll by years since 2011 to date, which has not stopped until 2020:



- Between March 2011 and the end of 2011: We documented the deaths of six civilians, including two children, accounting for nearly 0.3% of the total death toll.
- 2012: We documented the deaths of 31 civilians, including two children, accounting for nearly 1.5% of the total death toll.
- 2013: We documented the deaths of 101 civilians, including 22 children and seven women, accounting for nearly 4% of the total death toll.
- 2014: We documented the deaths of 97 civilians, including 11 children and seven women, accounting for nearly 4% of the total death toll.
- 2015: We documented the deaths of 246 civilians, including 48 children and 18 women, accounting for nearly 9% of the total death toll.
- 2016: We documented the deaths of 489 civilians, including 119 children and 62 women, accounting for nearly 19% of the total death toll.
- 2017: We documented the deaths of 822 civilians, including 201 children and 81 women, accounting for nearly 32% of the total death toll.
- 2018: We documented the deaths of 427 civilians, including 97 children and 42 women, accounting for nearly 16% of the total death toll.
- 2019: We documented the deaths of 291 civilians, including 76 children and 46 women, accounting for nearly 11% of the total death toll.
- Between January 2020 and December 2020: We documented the deaths of 91 civilians, including 20 children and four women, accounting for nearly 3% of the total death toll.

The data indicate that the highest death toll occurred in 2017, accounting for nearly one third compared to the other years, with casualties continuing to occur as a result of mines despite the decline in military operations, many years passed since mines were planted, with many of these discovered by local organizations working to clear them, including the Civil Defense organization (the 'White Helmets'), and therefore we believe that there are still many minefields and locations that have not yet been discovered, which threaten generations of Syrians for decades to come, and with children being among the worst affected.

IV. Most Notable Incidents We Have Recorded over the Past Years of Mine Explosions That Caused Human and Material Losses:

A. Medical Personnel:

[Maisaa Muhammad al Da'as](#), a doctor from Tadmur city in the eastern suburbs of Homs, was killed on Monday, May 18, 2015, as a result of the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, on the international road, as the car she was traveling in with some of her family members was being driven from Tadmur city heading for Homs city. The city was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

[Mahmoud Ismail Matar al Naser al Assaf](#), a dentist, aged 49, from Mouhasan city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, [married](#) with three children, was killed on Friday, April 6, 2018, as a result of the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, on the Deir Ez-Zour- Raqqa Road in al Jazarat area in the eastern suburbs of Raqqa governorate. The area was under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces at the time of the incident.

B. Civil Defense Personnel:

Jamal al Hafez, head of the Civil Defense Center in Marea city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, died on Tuesday, March 6, 2018, due to wounds sustained in the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, in Deir Souran village, which is administratively a part of Afrin city in northern suburbs of Aleppo governorate. The area was under the control of the Armed Opposition/ the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.



Ahmad Hallaq, Muhammad Naqqouh, and Saleh Jubran Arafat, members of the Civil Defense Unexploded Ordinance Clearance team 'UXO' - Qastoun Center, were killed on Friday, December 13, 2019, as a result of the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, in Qastoun village in Sahl al Ghab in the western suburbs of Hama governorate, while they were removing unexploded remnants of previous bombing. SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors of the incident to obtain more details. The area was under the control of the Armed Opposition/ the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

[The Syrian Civil Defense](#) mourned the three members via its official account on the social networking platform 'Twitter'.

[Ahmad Hallaq](#), from Atshan village in the eastern suburbs of Hama governorate, aged 27, had worked with the Civil Defense since 2014 and was the director of the UXO Clearance Center.

[Muhammad Naqqouh](#), from Ma'ar Zita in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, aged 23, married with two children, had worked with the Civil Defense since 2015.

[Saleh Jubran Arafat](#), from Kafr Zita in the northern suburbs of Hama governorate, aged 35, married with one child, had worked with the Civil Defense since 2014.



C. Media Workers:

[Media activist Kamal Abu al Walid](#), aged 25, was killed on Monday, March 19, 2018, as a result of the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, in Afrin city in the northwestern suburbs of Aleppo, while filming a press report in the city after the Armed Opposition and the Syrian National Army took control of it. It is noteworthy that he worked independently and was from Jarablos city in the north of Aleppo governorate.

D. A Large Number of Victims Killed in Mine Explosions:

Two children, 17-year-old Hussein Ahmad al Shar' al Zu'be, and 16-year-old Moutaz Naser al Ahmad al Zu'be, were killed on Thursday, November 10, 2011, by the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, on an agricultural road in al Msaifra district, south of Daraa governorate. The area was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.



Ms. Anwar al Hraki and her three children, Ahmad, Hala and Hadi Mu'ath al Hraki, were all killed on Friday, January 18, 2013, by [the explosion](#) of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, while a vehicle they were travelling in was passing through an agricultural area in al Mleiha al Gharbiya town in the eastern suburbs of Daraa. The area was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Monday, April 29, 2013, a landmine planted by a party which we were unable to identify near Tal'aran town in the southeastern suburbs of Aleppo governorate, exploded, resulting in the deaths of [seven civilians](#), including three children and four women. The area was under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (formerly Fateh al Sham) at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, June 10, 2015, six civilians from one family, including three children, were killed by the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, on the Nahta-Al Hrak road near Nahta town in the eastern suburbs of Daraa. The area was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Monday, April 9, 2018, seven civilians, including one female child and three women, were killed by the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, as the bus they were traveling on was passing near Nubul town, while they were returning to Qast-al Jando village, which is administratively a part of Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo. The area was under the control of the Armed Opposition/ the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

A 16-year-old child, [Nehad Hammou Hmaid](#), was killed on Wednesday, July 10, 2019, as a result of the explosion of a landmine, planted by a party which we were unable to identify, on the road linking Qerzaihel village and Basouta town in Afrin city in the northern suburbs of Aleppo, while he was heading to one of his family's agricultural fields in the area. The area was under the control of the Armed Opposition/ the Syrian National Army at the time of the incident.

On Sunday, November 24, 2019, at around 11:00, [a landmine exploded](#) during school hours inside the Ibn Sina Primary School in al Tayba village, which is administratively a part of al Mayadeen city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ez-Zour governorate, killing six of the children attending school there (three males and three females), and injuring about a dozen others. The explosion took place while some of the children were playing with the mine, believing it to be a toy. We are still trying to contact witnesses and survivors of the incident to obtain more details. The village was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

On Wednesday, October 28, 2020, a landmine planted by a party which we were unable to identify exploded as a car carrying workshop workers engaged in harvesting olives in a local grove was driving through the outskirts of Khan Sheikhoun city in the southern suburbs of Idlib governorate, resulting in the deaths of five civilians. SNHR is still trying to contact witnesses and survivors of the incident to obtain more details. The area was under the control of Syrian Regime forces at the time of the incident.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations:

- The continuing deaths and injuries resulted from mines underscore the widespread use of mines by various parties to the conflict in Syria, and show that there are many areas planted with mines that have not yet been discovered.
- The Syrian governorates which have seen the greatest number of changes in the controlling forces and the areas that have been controlled by various forces are most vulnerable to the spread of mines, which pose a sustained threat to the lives of residents there, particularly children.
- More than a third of victims killed as a result of mine explosions in the Syrian conflict are women and children, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights victims' database, once again underlining the indiscriminate nature of this weapon.
- Mines are an indiscriminate weapon prohibited under international law, which are used to spread fear and terror; 'indiscriminate attacks' are defined as those which are not directed at achieving a specific military objective, those which employ a method or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective, or those which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited⁶. Consequently, mines clearly violate the principle of distinction between civilian and military objects⁷, and the principles of precautions and proportionality in attacks⁸. Failure to respect these provisions constitutes a war crime under international humanitarian law and under the statute of the International Criminal Court.
- None of the perpetrator parties which have used mines in Syria have revealed maps of where the mines were planted, nor did they work seriously to remove them, most particularly the Syrian regime, which has not carried out any deliberate mine clearance operations despite recapturing large areas. Civilian and military commanders bear criminal responsibility according to the principle of command responsibility, in the event that they knew or should have known about the violations committed by the forces under their control and did not prevent them or punish their subordinates responsible for them, as they must respect and enforce respect for international humanitarian law.
- The UN Security Council bears the primary responsibility for the state of insecurity in Syria due to its terrible failure to protect civilians in Syria for ten years, and its failure to achieve a political transition to date; the longer the conflict lasts, the more chaos, violations and prohibitions there will be.

⁶ ICRC, Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol I) 1977, Article 51(4), <<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=4BEED9920AE0AEAC12563CD0051DC9E>>

⁷ ICRC, Rules of the International Humanitarian Customary Law, Rules 1 to 10, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/customary-international-humanitarian-law-i-icrc-eng.pdf>>

⁸ ICRC, Rules of the International Humanitarian Customary Law, Rules 11 to 24, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/customary-international-humanitarian-law-i-icrc-eng.pdf>>

Recommendations:

All parties to the conflict:

- Respect the rules of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.
- Stop planting mines targeting civilians and civilian objects, which do not distinguish between civilians and combatants, and which are prohibited by international law, and destroy all stored mines.
- Initiate mine clearance operations in areas under their control, especially in places where they planted mines and which are under their control or over which they have regained control and where they are aware of the mines' locations.
- Provide detailed maps of the locations where they planted mines, especially civilian sites or near residential communities.

The UN Security Council and International Community:

- Increase logistical assistance to local organizations and local police working in the field of detecting and dismantling mines.
- Allocate a significant amount of money for clearing mines left over by the Syrian conflict from the United Nations Mine Action Service, particularly in areas prepared to carry out this task with transparency and integrity.
- Begin to compensate victims and their families, focus on the psychological treatment process for survivors, and support humanitarian organizations working in the field of psychological care.
- There will be no stability and safety in Syria without achieving a political transition towards democracy and human rights in Syria, and this will only be achieved through a strict timeline and making serious efforts and pressures.

High Commissioner for Human Rights:

- Condemn the use of mines by many parties to the Syrian conflict.
- Prepare a report to highlight this dangerous phenomenon in the Syrian conflict and call on the Security Council and the international community to exercise more capabilities to combat it on various levels, including awareness and logistical levels.
- Train Syrian organizations to undertake clearance of mines and other unexploded cluster munitions, raise local awareness of the dangers of such ordnance, and work to identify the most prominent locations where mines were planted.

Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI)

- Allocate a paragraph in the upcoming reports to addressing the policy of mine-usage and its devastating effects on society.

Thanks

The Syrian Network for Human Rights extends its sincere thanks to everyone who has shared news and information, especially survivor victims, eyewitnesses, and local activists, whose information has contributed to substantiating and strengthening the available data and evidence in documenting the various incidents included in this report.



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