



Updated Flash Report: Carnage in Douma! "Deliberate Killing of More than Sixty Civilians"

Violations Documentation Center in Syria - VDC
August 2015

Introduction:

[Douma city](#), in Damascus Suburbs, witnessed one of the most horrific massacres on 16 August 2015. This massacre, which followed deliberate attacks by war-planes against civilians that started on 12 August 2015, was documented by the violations Documentation Center's team of field researchers on the Syrian territory. The attacks [killed more tens of civilians](#) in the various cities and towns of Eastern Gouta including [Douma](#), [Kafar Batna](#), [Erbeen](#), [Hamouria](#), [Saqba](#), Jesreen, Hazzeh and Ein Tarma as shown in dozens of [videos](#) and [images](#) posted by activists. They also showed the fall of dozens of victims and the destruction of several houses and the already worn-out infrastructure due to the [siege imposed](#) on the area by the Syrian government forces for over two years.

VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi visited most of the shelled places and conducted several interviews with eyewitnesses, survivors and medical cadres.

In this report, VDC lists the attacks launched by the Syrian government air force between 12 and 22 August 2015

Few days after [the carnage in Douma city](#) in eastern Gouta on 16 August 2015, which claimed the lives of more than [100 civilians](#) and wounded other 450, a new carnage took place on 22 August 2015. This killed about 40 civilians and injured dozens of them. Moreover, relentless efforts were to no avail to remove the people who were reported missing under the debris of their houses that crumbled over their heads due to the government forces shelling of residential buildings, which led to their total destruction. These attacks were among a series of deliberate attacks carried out by the Syrian government forces against the opposition-held civilian areas, specifically Douma city.



Douma Attacks 12 August 2015:

At 10:18 am, four airstrikes were launched on the city, the first targeted al-Hal Market, known for being a crowded place especially in the morning. As a result, many civilians were either killed or injured and many shops were damaged, five of which were completely destroyed. The second airstrike targeted another market in the city, usually crowded with street merchants as well. The death toll in the two attacks [reached 28 civilians](#), who were identified and documented. And the number of injured was about 150 serious, medium and minor injuries. It is worth mentioning that there are no military headquarter near the targeted area, which was deliberately targeted by warplanes

Saqba and Hamouria – Ein Tarma Attacks 12 August 2015

On the same day, after targeting Douma city, four airstrikes targeted [Saqba](#) city as well. The fiercest of them was launched on a highly crowded main market. [Eight civilians](#), documented by names, were immediately killed (Six from Saqba city and two from Eastern Gouta) and more than 40 sustained injuries. Additionally, 12 shops were destroyed. Two other airstrikes targeted [Hamouria city](#) killing 4 civilians and two targeted [Ein Tarma](#) killing several people and injuring 12. Four airstrikes also targeted Kafar Batna city, which killed 5 civilians. After that, Douma city was targeted again with eight artillery shells launched from the Department of Motor Vehicles in Harasta.

[The first attack on Saqba city](#) was about 9 am. Then, Jami'yat Square, which is a highly crowded main market in the city, was shelled with guided missiles. The total number of airstrikes on that day reached five, the fiercest of which was on the aforementioned square where 30 people were injured and 4 were killed (two were unidentified), as recorded in our medical unit. Among the injured was an amputation case of a six-year-old girl in addition to five eye injuries, 7 bone injuries and a neurological one.

Field researcher [Thaer Hijazi interviewed a survivor named Abu Abdo al-Saqbani](#), who owns a restaurant at Jami'yat Square. He stated:

“It was about 9 in the morning when warplanes targeted the area with a missile that made a huge hole in Jami'yat Square, where I own a restaurant. As a result, all the surrounding buildings and shops were damaged. Moreover, a man was hit and turned into pieces in front of me, which made it impossible to identify him. Another was martyred and the leg of a third was cut. I saw about [11 injured](#) as well. I was injured myself and my body was full of shrapnel”

Among the people who fell victims of Saqba attacks was a civil defense member named Sameer Abu al-Kheir, according to activist Sameer Tatin, a member of Saqba Coordination Committee, who also stressed that the targeted area was full of civilians and has no existence of any military faction of FSA or any other armed group.

Kafar Batna – Zamalka – Harasta - Mesraba Attacks of 13 and 14 August 2015

On 13 August, at about 4 pm, an airstrike was launched on Kafar Batna city, near al-Firen (the furnace) area, which led to the death of 5 civilians and the injury of 15.

A series of airstrikes followed on 14 August 2015 on the towns and cities of Ghouta; three on Zamalka city, three on Harasta and [Mesraba](#), 6 on Erbeen and three on Douma. The violations Documentation Center in Syria could document [more than 190 civilians](#) who were killed due to warplanes attacks and hundreds of shells and missiles fired by the Syrian Army on Gouta between 12 and 16 August 2015.

Douma Massacre 16 August 2015

On Sunday 16 August 2015, at about 1:30 pm, a warplane shelled Douma city with four rockets causing massive destruction and killing hundreds of people. The field researcher Thaer Hijazi rushed to the targeted area and inspected it. Depending on his observations, he stated the following:

“The first rocket targeted the southern part of Ghanam Square (Sheep Square), which is usually full of hundreds of civilians, street merchants, shops and others. When I rushed to the place of explosion, the street was strewn with dozens of victims and wounded and the shops were greatly destroyed. I could count more than 15 partially damaged shops and lots of junk handcarts¹ I could not figure out the actual number of.

As for the second rocket, it fell 150 meters from the first one, particularly on the intersection of Ghanam Square (Sheep Square) and al-Hal grocery market (The main market in the whole Eastern Ghouta, injuring several civilians, especially the shop owners, as I saw five of them injured. I also saw 5 burned cars, one destroyed building and several partially-damaged buildings.

The third rocket, however, fell directly amid al-Hal Market, which was packed with shops, shoppers and merchants from all the Eastern Gouta. I witnessed more than ten injured; I raced one of them, who had injuries in the head and shoulders, to one of the medical units where more than 100 wounded were taken. When I got there, fourteen dead bodies were lined on the ground. Meanwhile, the civilian and ambulance cars were hospitalizing the rest of the casualties. The fourth rocket fell on Halab Street (Aleppo St), which led to massive destruction and killed several civilians.

After these attacks, the warplanes renewed their shelling on (Abdulra’ouf neighborhood with four guided missiles; the first of which fell at the entrance to the neighborhood on the intersection with the inhabitation area. I rushed to the place again. There, I saw the scattered flesh (carnages scattered to 100 meters away from the targeted area). Among the casualties was a young man from Baghdadi family, who was selling fuel and gas in addition to two firewood sellers, named Hamza al-Shifouni and Maher al-Shifouni. Furthermore, the surrounding buildings were damaged and a house was completely destroyed. The second missile, falling at the entrance of Safa neighborhood, injured ten civilians. Few minutes later, a mortar shell fell on Shouhadaa Square (Martyrs Square) killing a civilian and injuring five children. On that day, more than forty airstrikes were reported in the various cities of Eastern Gouta starting from Douma to Erbeen, Madyara and Harasta, which caused a massive internal displacement movement between the cities and the villages.”

1- Small carts used by street merchants to sell merchandise in streets, alleys and public markets.

A member at the Unified Medical Office, who refused to reveal his identity for security reasons, told VDC that he was executing some duties when he heard the sound of warplanes shelling. He added that after few minutes, hundreds of injured flocked to the medical point they were working. He continued:

“At first, we expected to receive 20 to 30 casualties as the case usually goes when there is an attack. However, the huge numbers of the people who fall victims of the massacre on 16 August 2015 were perplexing. First, we received more than 150 victims then they started to arrive in dozens following the successive attacks. It was because the attacks targeted the public markets directly and consecutively (Sheep Square, al-Hal Market, Martyrs Square and the entrance to an inhabitation area). Even when the residents were bidding farewell to their deceased before burying them, the warplanes shelled them!

After the casualties arrived to the hospital, the entire medical personnel were summoned to help because our capacities (in the central emergency unit) were limited. We only had a capacity for 20 casualties while the numbers on that day were hundreds. In six hours, we had to receive 285 cases although we were only six doctors. That is, each doctor had to treat an average of 50 people. We also made 78 surgeries during the first six hours. In order to achieve that, we had to set a temporary table next to the operation bed so we can perform more operations at a time. More than 100 cases were transferred to other medical points in Gouta where 38 surgeries were conducted. The greatest disaster was after the operations because each patient needed a hospitalization period at the intensive care unit, which was packed with 28 casualties although it had a capacity of 13 beds only. Other hurdles included the lack of fuel, medical personnel, including paramedics, blood donors and spare parts (as ambulance cars were targeted on that day too). Luckily, we could reach to 289 blood donors from the besieged Gouta although some of them had already had anemia.

“On that day 550 injured were reported, two hundred of them were kids under eighteen and 116 surgeries were made, including 9 cases of limbs amputation” Activist Moayad, 22 years old, from Maliha city, a member of the Civil Defense Assistance team, told the center that he headed to the massacre location after he called for the help of Douma Civil Defense when Ghanam Market was targeted. He stated:

“It was about 2 pm on Sunday 16 August 2015 when I was asked to head to Douma to help rescuing the civilians who were shelled by the warplanes. The numbers of victims exceeded our expectations. There were more than 75 civilian martyrs and more than 200 wounded. During the rescue operations, the warplane targeted another place in the city and killed 15 civilians. We believe that the missiles used in the shelling were vacuum rockets because during the

consecutive attacks I was close to the shelled area. I could feel a huge pressure and a massive explosion that caused me and my colleagues headaches that continued till the next day. The numbers of martyrs documented by the Civil Defense teams were 114 in addition to 450 injured. The destruction was immense as well.”

Attacks of 17th till 21st August 2015

During August 17 and August 2015, more horrific military attacks targeting civilian dwellings in Douma were carried out by the regime war planes. VDC Field researcher, Thaeer Hijazi covered the attacks and reported the following:

“Shelling the cities of Eastern Gouta, particularly Douma city, with dozens of rockets and shells has massively and fiercely continued after the massacre of 16 August 2015. However, a curfew had been imposed on the civilians by the city’s well respected notables and civil committees in order to avoid the repetition of the previous incident helped reducing the casualties. Residents also did not go to Friday prayers-for the first time in the city’s history- for fear of being targeted while in the mosques by the governmental forces. Despite all these precautions, seven civilians were killed on [17 August 2015](#) due to random shelling on residential areas. On 18 August 2015, the shelling continued on the [Douma](#) causing several casualties. On 19 August 2015, several cities and towns in the Eastern Gouta ([Harasta](#), Hammouria, Kafar Batna, Erbeen and [Douma](#)) were targeted as well including [Douma](#). During these attacks, dozens of civilians, [mostly documented by name](#), were killed and injured. [Nine of them](#) fell victims of more than ten airstrikes on Harasta city when the Local Council and the Civil Defense Headquarters were targeted. Eight were employees at the Council and one was a civil defense volunteer. Two airstrikes on Douma city followed.”

On 20 August 2015, the shelling renewed on the city of Douma. At noon, war-planes launched two airstrikes; the first targeted a residential building near Shuhadaa Square (Martyrs Square) killing the civilian Hassan Hamed al-Khanshour, damaging the building, specifically its ground floors and burning five cars that parked nearby. The second airstrike was launched on a civilian dwelling just 200 m from the first targeted area. As a result, [five civilians were killed](#), a whole building was destroyed, a nearby fuel station and four apartments were burned and five shops were damaged.

Attack of 22 August 2015 on Douma

The carnage that took place on this day was just like that of 16 August, according to VDC researcher Thaeer Hijazi. It took place about 2:30 pm when the city was shelled with a surface-to-surface missile launched from a regime-forces-controlled area (A mountain near Douma city close to Hafir Tahta area), according to direct eyewitnesses who saw the launching of the missile.

Hijazi continued:

“The first missile targeted a civilian area and led to the destruction of three inhabited buildings. A following missile targeted al-Hummera area and destroyed four buildings. After that, a third missile fell on al-Hummera area. However, it was less destructive than the first two. Immediately, ten civilians were killed by the three missiles. Furthermore, regime forces targeted again already targeted areas along with other places with mortar shells and missiles. This killed other six civilians, most of whom fell at the public market (near the graveyard). Then, the civil defense teams, along with the neighbors and relatives of the victims who remained under the rubbles, began rescue operations. Nevertheless, the capabilities were limited in comparison with the gravity of the crisis, the huge numbers of victims and the few numbers of civil defense vehicles. Under the rubble of the building near Mesraba Bridge was the Issa family trapped. We could rescue only five of them including two children while the rest remained missing till now. The death toll on that day reached more than forty civilians not to mention more than ten missing, who were trapped under the four three-story buildings that collapsed over the heads of their civilian residents.”

The Unified Medical Office in Douma has announced that before the rescue operations began to remove the victims under the debris, they received [120 wounded as a preliminary total](#) and twenty dead bodies following the first hour of the attack.

Media activist Yousef al-Bustani told VDC that several surface-to-surface missiles fell on inhabited buildings in a residential area and denied the presence of any military headquarters near the targeted areas. He added:

“After I arrived to the targeted location, I saw three completely-leveled inhabited buildings. The neighbors informed us that more than 25 people, including an entire family, were still under the rubbles. Several people, including children, were martyred due to walls that fell on them. This area had never been targeted before and it is known to be a civilian area that is highly populated. Only a woman and her daughter could come alive from under the rubbles. After a while, another surface-to-surface missile fell on a nearby residential area killing a family (a father, a mother and their son). The airstrikes continued after that accompanied by the fall of dozens of missiles and mortar shells.

The shelling on the cities and towns of Eastern Gouta has continued till the date of this report. Dozens of air strikes have been launched and an unprecedented number of rockets and shells have fallen on the residential areas. Our center, accordingly, will issue another special report on the incidents that followed 22 August 2015

Legal Assessment

The situation in Syria is a non-international armed conflict since July 2012. The rules of international law are fully applicable, particularly the international human rights law and the relevant rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). In particular, Article 3- common to the four Geneva Conventions (1949)- is applicable in all Syrian territories and to all actors of the conflict.

The principle according to which “parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants” is the cornerstone of customary IHL. Attacks must not be directed against civilians. In addition, parties to all types of armed conflicts are prohibited, under IHL, from targeting civilian objects, in particular those which by their nature, location, purpose or use do not make effective contribution to military action. Furthermore, indiscriminate attacks are prohibited in all types of conflicts.

In all locations of Eastern Ghouta cited in this report, attacks, by Syrian government war planes, which have the monopoly of the skies in the area, have deliberately targeted popular well known and particularly exposed marketplaces, at the height of affluence of civilians in those localities. A marketplace is by its very nature and purpose civilian, from the perspective of the applicable international humanitarian law. All casualties documented in this report resulting from these attacks are civilians. There is indeed a pattern of deliberate attacks against civilian places and populations. The al-Hal market place in Douma was targeted at least two times deliberately on August 12, and August 16, 2015, each time through a sustained air campaign. The attacks targeting al-Hummera neighborhood in Douma on August 22, 2015 is yet another example of attacks against manifestly civilian dwellings. In those attacks, there was a sustained campaign using a combination of surface-to-surface missiles and mortar shells to target the same civilian dwellings. The VDC has in numerous instances over the past three years documented and denounced attacks in the same localities.

According to customary international humanitarian law, indiscriminate attacks on civilians are serious violations of IHL. They accordingly constitute war crimes. The criminal responsibility for the commission of such attacks rests with the individual commanders who gave the orders, as well as anyone who has committed or facilitated the attacks, and anyone who has assisted, aided or abetted them.

Furthermore, the attacks documented in the cities of Douma, Sakba, Zmalka, Misraba, Kafar Batna, Hamouria and Arbin during August 12, and August 22, 2015, are likely to constitute crimes against humanity as defined by the case law of international criminal tribunals and article 7 of the Rome Statute. The killing of civilians in violation of international humanitarian law constitutes “murder.” The multiplicity of the murders documented in this report indicate a more general “attack against the civilian population”, which is the contextual condition for crimes against humanity. This attack against the civilian population seems to exhibit – in itself – both a “widespread” and a “systematic” character, thereby reaching the level of a crime against humanity. The scale of the attacks documented in this report, including the number of deaths resulting from them, confers to it a widespread character. Its systematic character can be inferred, notably, from the source of all attacks documented in this report: the Syrian air force, which suggests high-level planning and use of public resources.

The consistency with which densely populated civilian areas have been targeted in the Eastern and Western Ghouta makes it more likely that the regime air force was not directing the attack on any specific military objective, but was acting within a design to provoke and complete a “forcible transfer of population,” out of the Eastern and Western Ghouta, by systematically rendering life impossible through long sieges and deliberate attacks against the civilian populations resulting in horrific carnages, in pursuit of what appears to be a grand design to cleanse, and clean what is viewed by the regime as restive areas around Damascus.

At the same time when the attacks documented in this report were taking place, UN officials were present in Damascus and conducting diplomatic exchanges with representatives of the Syrian government. The attacks against Douma and other localities in Eastern Ghouta, were using the public resources of the state against its own civilian population. It took the United Nations more than three years to agree on an investigation mechanism to identify perpetrators who are using chemical weapons and substances against civilian populations. However, death in a mutilated condition is not less concerning than death in a composed state, as a result of inhalation of chemical substances. Other than words of condemnation which have even lately become softer, the UN system is failing ordinary Syrian civilians in their basic demand to recognize that the carnage inflicted on their lives is by the action of their own public authority. Softness in words emboldens perpetrators in action. Civilians under siege in Eastern and Western Ghouta require deed not action. Only boldness in pursuing effective and credible mechanisms of accountability is capable of softening the suffering of many civilians in the Syrian conflict.



Violations Documentation Center in Syria

For any questions and comments:

editor@vdc-sy.org

to view our previous reports:

<http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/ar/reports>