



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا  
Violations Documentation Center in Syria

## A brief report on the attack on Qah camp north of Idlib

Displaced people fleeing military operations  
are killed by Syrian government missiles  
November 2019

## Summary

The Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (hereinafter referred to as the VDC) presents and details in this report the attack which was carried out by Syrian government forces and its affiliated militias on camp that shelters thousands of displaced people on 20 November 2019. The attack also targeted a hospital near the Syrian-Turkish border, to the north of Idlib governorate.

The VDC underlines that the strike contained in this report is a ‘premeditated murder against a specific group and unarmed civilian population,’ which is a war crime. Since Syrian government forces systematically target civilians and civilian objects, this strike also is tantamount to a crime against humanity according to the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute. Also, the use of cluster munitions by government forces violates the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use of Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Be Indiscriminate, and the United Nations General Assembly resolution prohibiting the use of cluster munitions.



## Introduction

Coinciding with the World Children's Day, which falls on November the 20th, Syrian government forces launched a rocket attack, targeting a camp which accommodates displaced civilians at the border with Turkey, to the north of Idlib governorate, as well as a Obstetric Gynaecologic Hospital. Internationally banned cluster bombs were used during the attack, which indicates the intent of forces behind them to inflict the greatest number of casualties among the residents of the camps, whose residents are mainly woman and children.

The use of [cluster munitions](#) is prohibited under international law provisions in the agreement signed in August 2010, to which Syria was not a party. A report published by the United Nations on its official website in September 2019, citing the Coalition Against Cluster Missiles, confirms that Syria tops the list of countries where cluster munitions are mostly used. In fact, the highest number of casualties of cluster munitions have taken place in Syria. The VDC has already documented the use of cluster munitions dozens of times in Syria.

## Violation of international humanitarian law

Mark Cutts, the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, expressed his shock at the attack by the Syrian government forces on Qah camp. He said that 'international humanitarian law strictly obliges all parties to distinguish between civilians and combatants and to act with care and not to harm civilians during military operations. Any strike on civilians is a violation of international humanitarian law.' He also described the strike at the camp as 'disgusting' and 'horrific massacre', calling the international community to investigate it.

The targeted camp is located near the village of Qah, north of Idlib governorate, which is less than 3 km from the Turkish borders. This is 90 km far from the front-line and military operations taking place to the south of the governorate. The camp is a civilian settlement. The VDC team documented the deaths of at least [14](#) civilians, including eight children. In addition, four medical personnel were injured in al-Umouma Hospital, which is supported by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS). According to local statistical offices, the border between Syria and Turkey in Idlib has hundreds of camps, accommodating at least 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDP).



## Details of the Attack

In the evening of 20 November 2019, between 8 and 8.30 pm, when most of the displaced persons returned to their tents to sleep, a loud explosion was heard throughout the camp, followed by less loud explosions. It was later revealed that the explosion was caused by a Russian-made “9M79 Tochka” surface-to-surface missile. The subsequent explosions resulted from cluster munitions carried by the missile. (Photo 1)



Photo 1: The remains of the missile used by the Syrian government forces to shell the Qah camp in north Idlib. The photo to the left shows the serial number and the other relevant information of the missile. | Source: Qasioun Agency.

The Syrian Civil Defense Organization issued a statement saying that the Syrian government forces fired the missile from Mount Azan, located south of Aleppo governorate, where government forces as well Iranian militias are stationed. (Photo 2)



(Photo 2: Photo (taken by "Google Map") showing the distance between the missile launching site (red box) and the targeted camp (blue box)

The explosions killed 14 civilians, including seven children and three women, and injured 52 others, including 23 children and 17 women. Critical injuries prompted ambulance teams to transfer seven wounded people to medical centres inside Turkey. The VDC correspondent said that paramedics encountered great difficulties in reaching victims due to major fires that resulted from the attack. The camp's location in a rugged area which has one unpaved entrance has further exacerbated the situation and impacted evacuation and rescue operations. Given the numbers of the death toll and the nature of the targeted groups, the



The Qah Camp – Exclusive photos for the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria



VDC believe that the attack was intended to target a military point or location. Rather, it was deliberately directed at unarmed civilians, which constitutes a crime against humanity. The VDC correspondent reported that the attack led to the burning of dozens of IDPs' tents. Already struggling to secure food supplies, IDPs, whose tents were destroyed, lost their food supplies and solar panels that provide them with electricity. A VDC volunteer confirmed that tents that were damaged and burned in the attack were mostly in the centre of the camp. Eight tents were burned, 20 tents were completely damaged and 40 tents were partially damaged by shrapnel.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) said in a statement that the missile strike occurred near al-Umouma Hospital, which is supported by the Society. The attack resulted in a massacre, as well as serious damage to the hospital building and wounding four staff in the hospital. Another SAMS hospital were also targeted around the middle of last May.

This attack is the 65th attack on medical facilities in northern and western Syria since late April. 47 medical facilities were attacked, 24 of which are run by SAMS. The VDC has also documented 40 attacks on medical points and civil defense centres in Idlib and Hama launched by Syrian government forces and Russia.

#### Dr. Mazen Kiwara of the Syrian American Medical Society told the VDC

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the strike was 50 meters far from the hospital, whose doors and windows as well as everything that is made of glass were destroyed. He added: The damage ration is between 20 and 30 percent.” (Photo 3)

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Photo 3: Extent of damage to al-Umouma Hospital in Qah camp resulting from cluster-munitions-missile attack  
Source: SAMS

The hospital was closed for two days to restore windows, doors and all damaged parts. Later, it was partially opened while the renovation work continued due to the urgent need of obstetric gynaecologic services we provide to the camp inhabitants. Dr. Kiwara underlined that if shelling resumed and the hospital closed again, 'IDPs will face many obstacles if they resort to the services of other hospitals which may be far from where they are located. This would result in burden on people, especially with limited accessibility during the winter and high transportation costs.' (Photo 4)



Photo 4: Paramedics attending an injured person in al-Umouma Hospital in Qah camp, after being targeted by cluster-munitions-missile attack | Source: SAMS

According to the civil defense, the survivors of the missile attack had to leave the camp because of unexploded cluster munitions, consequently becoming homeless. The VDC correspondent reported that around 50 families (who constitute the majority of the camp's residents) have been displaced from it to neighbouring camps or their relatives until it is cleared of rubbles and explosive remnants. A VDC volunteer also noted that two local organizations have pledged to provide assistance to the affected camp residents. (Photo 5)



Photo 5: Tents burning in the Qah camp after it was targeted by a missile loaded with cluster munitions  
Source: Idlib Media Centre

## Recommendations

- The VDC underlines that attacks carried out by Syrian government forces and their allies against civilians, vital installations and medical facilities, are of systematic nature. This is particularly the case in Idlib governorate, [where dozens of attacks on health centres and vital facilities in Idlib and Hama have been documented during 2019](#).
- The VDC reminds all parties to the conflict that targeting the civilian population and civilian objects is a war crime described under international humanitarian law. The VDC calls for the protection of civilians and treating them as neutrals in accordance with the provisions of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the First and Second Geneva Protocols of 1977, and the customary rules of international humanitarian law.
- The VDC underlines that the Syrian government forces did not abide by the principles of international humanitarian law in the attack on Qah camp on 20 November 2019, violating the principle of 'proportionality in the conduct of hostilities' and the principle of drawing a distinction between military and civilian objects. According to testimonies gathered by the VDC, at least 14 civilians, most of them children, were killed and many more wounded, which is likely to cause an increase in the number of deaths. This indicates that these forces have failed to estimate the extent of 'casualties' in civilian lives. Apparently, testimonies and verified information showed that the attack did not result in a military advantage.
- The VDC strongly condemns the deliberate attacks by Syrian government forces on al-Umouma Hospital, which operates entirely for medical purposes. These medical units shall in all cases be respected and protected. This rule is implicit in Common Article 3 to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which Syria has ratified. Under customary international humanitarian law, the term "medical units" refers to establishments and other units, whether military or civilian, organized for medical purposes, be they fixed or mobile, permanent or temporary.
- The term includes, for example, hospitals and other similar units, blood transfusion centres, preventive medicine centres and institutes, medical depots and the medical and pharmaceutical stores of such units. Article 8(2)(b)(ix) of the Rome Convention, postulates that intentional and direct attacks against buildings dedicated to hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives; is a war crime in armed conflict.
- The VDC calls on the international community and the United Nations to find swift and sustainable solutions to protect IDPs and ensure that they are not exposed to additional risks. In this regards, serious steps should be taken to pressure the Syrian government and its allies, in order to protect civilians from indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. The VDC urges international actors to investigate attacks such as the one detailed in this report, and hold those responsible to account.





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**[www.vdc-sy.net](http://www.vdc-sy.net)**

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[inquiry@vdc-sy.info](mailto:inquiry@vdc-sy.info)

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