



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا
Violations Documentation Center in Syria

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Cover Image: VDC SY

Summary Report

The military escalation of Syrian government forces and Russian resulted in casualties and forced mass exodus from Maarat al-Numan area forced displacement of more than 300,000 civilians, south of Idlib

Introduction

Many villages and regions in Idlib governorate were subjected to hundreds of unlawful airstrikes that resulted in many horrific massacres against civilians. According to figures from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, these massacres left dozens of dead and hundreds of wounded and were a direct cause of the displacement of at least 235.000 people, including at least 140.000 children, from southern Idlib Since 12 December. Moreover, these airstrikes have affected thousands of homes, most of which have been almost completely destroyed. The airstrikes launched by the Syrian Air Force and Russian war fighters were intensified especially in the middle of December 2019 and during the days that followed, dozens of densely populated residential neighborhoods were targeted, systematic and regular attacks were recorded that clearly and unambiguously targeted civilian neighborhoods, killing hundreds of civilians and causing huge losses of property to the residents, especially in terms of destroying homes, shops and commercial facilities.

Summary

The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) warns of the catastrophic consequences of the military escalation of Syrian government forces and Russian forces in the Maarat al-Numan area, foremost among them is the pushing of thousands of civilians to forced displacement from the region, as the attacks by the Syrian government and Russian forces are using warplanes, helicopters and surface-to-surface missiles targeting civilian objects, markets, infrastructure, as well as advances on the ground are forcing civilians to be forced displaced from their homes, which will deepen the humanitarian crisis in Idlib governorate.

The VDC presents information about the violent attacks and massacres committed by the Syrian and Russian government forces in Maarat al-Numan area, where attacks were launched targeting residential neighborhoods, civilian objects and infrastructure and killed tens of civilians with the aim of forcing the population to flee. As a result, more than 200.000 civilians were displaced during the period between 1 November and 22 December 2019, according to the United Nations, most of them are from the city of Maarat al-Numan and the surrounding villages.

Background

The area of Maarat al-Numan is located in the south of Idlib governorate, it contains more than 300.000 civilians including the original residents of the region, previous internal displaced people (IDPs) and forcibly displaced persons by the Syrian government and Russia from various Syrian governorates, of whom about 200.000 are displaced due to the recent escalation that started early November 2019.

The Syrian government forces, with air support from Russian war fighters, escalated their attacks in the Maarat al-Numan area at the beginning of November 2019, as part of the military campaign they have been waging against Idlib Governorate since 10 February 2019, which targeted dozens of hospitals, civilian objects and infrastructure in the region.

The VDC has documented the killing of at least 154 civilians, including 27 women and 30 children, in the Maarat al-Numan area alone, with the attacks of the Syrian and Russian government forces since the escalation of Idlib between 10 February and 22 December 2019. The attacks also caused extensive damage to infrastructure. The civilians were forced to leave their homes and forcibly displaced, still, a large number of civilians remained stuck in the area for lack of transportation, which made them direct targets of the attacks.

Recently, Syrian government forces, with the support of Russian forces, were able to advance on the ground and control dozens of villages in the eastern countryside of the Maarat al-Numan area. The forces reached the outskirts of the city, which is considered a strategic and vital area as it is the link between east and west Idlib. Also the international route (M5) passes through, this is an important route that runs along the whole country and connects Turkey and Jordan. Besides, it is one of the largest cities in the Idlib province.

Massacres and attacks on civilian sites

Since the beginning of the military escalation by the Syrian and Russian government forces in the Maarat al-Numan area, dozens of air and ground attacks have been launched, which have led to massacres and destruction of infrastructure and civilian objects.

The VDC has documented the killing of about 100 civilians, including 14 women, 9 female children and 17 male children, in the area of Maarat al-Numan from early November 2019 until the 22nd of December, the most prominent of which are the following attacks:

1. The massacre in Tell Mannas village:

On 17 December 2019, Syrian government forces launched intense missile strikes on residential neighborhoods in the town of Tell Mannas, located in the eastern countryside of the city of Maarat al-Numan. As a result, 9 civilians, including 3 women and 3 children, were killed and 6 others, including 3 women and 2 children, were wounded.



Syrian Civil Defence volunteers recovering the bodies of the victims from the rubble in Tell Mannas village, as Syrian government forces committed a massacre that killed 9 civilians as a result of warplane shelling, 17 December 2019 | Image source: Syrian Civil Defence

2. The massacre in Maasaran village:

Russian warplanes launched missile attacks on civilian homes in the town of Maasaran, which is located in the eastern countryside of Maarat al-Numan. As a result, 3 civilians were killed and property was destroyed.



Destruction in the market of Maasaran village in Idlib as the warplanes of the Syrian government Forces targeted a popular market and killed 3 civilians, 17 December 2019 | Image source: Macro Media Center MMC.

3. Souq Al-Hal massacre in Maarat al-Numan:

On 2 December 2019, the warplanes of the Syrian government forces launched intense raids on the “Souq Al-Hal” a popular vegetable market in the city of Maarat al-Numan, killing more than 11 civilians.



Destruction in Souq Al-Hal in Maarat al-Numan in Idlib after being bombed by planes of the Syrian government forces, which led to a massacre of 11 civilians, 2 December 2019 | Image source: Violations Documentation Center in Syria.

4. Targeting the Civil Defence center in Maarat al-Numan:

On 18 December 2019, Russian warplanes launched raids on Maarat al-Numan city, one of which targeted the Civil Defence center, which resulted in severe damage to the center.

5. Targeting the emergency center of “Violet” relief organization:

On 18 December 2019, Syrian government Forces helicopters dropped several explosive barrels bombs on Maarat al-Numan neighborhoods, one of which targeted the emergency center of “Violet” relief organization causing damages to the building.

6. Targeting the Historical mosque:

On 20 December 2019, Syrian regime forces missile launchers, located in Sinjar village, shelled Maarat al-Numan city neighborhoods. The missile landed on the Historical Mosque, known as “Umayyad Mosque”, partially destroying its building and its courtyard.



Destruction and damage to “al Kabir Umayyad Mosque” square in Maarat al-Numan city in Idlib Governorate as a result of missile strikes by Syrian government forces, 20 December 2019 | Image source: Macro Media Center MMC.

Displacement:

Forced mass exodus took place in southern rural Idlib as the Syrian government and the Russia forces stepped up the ground and air bombing in the area. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Syria (OCHA), more than 235.000 people have been displaced from southern Idlib since December 12, 2019, including more than 140.000 children.

The United Nations has expressed grave concern about the fate of millions of civilians stranded in conflict areas northwest of Syria. In a press conference held at the United Nations headquarters on 4 December 2019, spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General, Stéphane Dujarric, said:

“Our humanitarian colleagues remain deeply concerned for the safety and protection of more than four million civilians in the northwest of Syria following continued upsurge in violence and hostilities in the area, more than half of these people are internally displaced in the past few days dozens of communities have been impacted by airstrikes, artillery shelling resulting in death and displacement.”





Hundreds of displaced civilians from Maarat al-Numan area, south of Idlib governorate, heading to safer areas in the north of the governorate | Image source: Violations Documentation Center in Syria.

The director of Syria Response Coordinators team “Muhammad Hallaj” said in a statement to the VDC “The military escalation in the Maarat al-Numan area peaked in mid-November, the area shelters no less than 350,000 people, of whom 105,000 are in the city of Maarat al-Numan itself”, he also indicated that this number had decreased due to previous waves of displacement.

According to the source, the area has been almost completely emptied of civilians, the displaced people suffer from deplorable humanitarian conditions and a lack of basic necessities for life. The displaced people went to informal settlements at the border area with Turkey and Idlib, some went to the areas of the national army and Turkey in the northern and the northwest rural of Aleppo (olive branch and Euphrates shield)

Hallaj highlighted the great deficiency of relief teams and organisations in providing shelter for the displaced, moreover, there is a huge shortage in the amount of food, health, humanitarian and in-kind baskets, as well as a shortage of mobile clinics that provide the primary health care needed for the displaced.

In addition, there are large numbers of displaced people who live in the open on the edge of roads, under trees or in agricultural lands, in conjunction with bad weather and rain, which increases the scale of the disaster and the suffering of the displaced.

The attacks by the Syrian government forces

The attacks by the Syrian government forces and its ally Russia have not only targeted residential neighborhoods and markets and forced residents to flee their homes, but also have launched attacks that directly target civilians as they attempt to flee and escape the bombing.

According to the Syrian Civil Defense, an elderly man and his wife were killed on 22 December 2019 as a result of an air strike by Russian warplanes targeting them while they were trying to move from the town of Aldier Alsharki, located in the countryside of Maarat al-Numan.

A member of the media office of the Civil Defense Organization, Siraj Mahmoud, told the VDC that their teams documented an air attack by Russian warplanes targeting a family in a car while they were trying to move from the city of Maarat al-Numan via the (Maarat al-Numan - Saraqib) road, killing three civilians.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The attacks documented in this report constitute a single pattern in attacking places and civilians. The persistence in targeting densely populated areas makes it more likely that the air forces of both Syrian and Russian forces are not target specific military targets. Besides, the indiscriminate nature of these attacks is constant (consistent) due to the nature of the weapons used. Based on the available information, Explosive barrels, pressure grenades, and other improvised are Non-steerable. The design of the barrels, as described in this report, is improvised to produce the most explosive effect and to amplify the harm caused to the population and objects. Bombing residential areas crowded with Non-steerable improvised weapons is “a method of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective”. The ICRC study stresses that the rule to “prohibits the use of indiscriminate weapons” in armed conflict is part of customary international humanitarian law, meaning that it is binding on all parties to the armed conflict in Syria.
- The VDC stresses that Russian forces and Syrian government forces are violating the principles of international humanitarian law. It is targeting civilians directly and intentionally. These forces also intend to target aid and relief workers, infrastructure and civilian objects. A systematic and regular attacks unambiguously targeting civilian neighborhoods have been recorded, killing hundreds of civilians and causing heavy property losses.
- VDC stresses the need to take serious steps by the international community to stop the attacks of the Syrian government forces and Russian forces on populated areas.
- VDC stresses the necessity of the commitment of the parties to the conflict, foremost of which are the Syrian government forces and Russia, to a ceasefire and the return to the de-escalation agreement sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran.
- VDC stresses the need to ensure the protection of displaced civilians, the opening of safe humanitarian corridors, providing basic and primary needs for them, as well as heating and health care.

- VDC calls on the conflicting parties to spare civilians the effects of military operations, including withdrawal from civilian areas, for the civilian population to return to it.
- VDC stresses the necessity of continuing the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution regarding the introduction of humanitarian aid to Syria across borders in order to secure the necessary humanitarian needs of IDPs in Idlib and ensure that aid reaches them without political interference from the Syrian government and Russia.



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