



مركز توثيق الانتهاكات في سوريا
Violations Documentation Center in Syria

Cover Image: [Syrian Civil Defense](#)

Idlib Governorate.. The Ongoing Massacre

Special report on the attacks
in Idlib governorate
01 Sep 2019 - 31 Dec 2019

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Idlib governorate is currently living a new chapter of forced displacement where the human suffering amounts to a disaster. Several months ago, the Russian warfighters, the Syrian government forces and their pro-government groups displaced the civilian population in the Khan Sheikhoun area. Now again, these forces are targeting people and buildings alike, committing dozens of massacres against civilians and causing their displacement from the city of Maarat al-Numan and its eastern and western rural areas. The result was mass waves of movement from this region. Approximately 200.000 people were displaced. Those people are facing severe weather conditions and the lack of support provided by humanitarian organizations. Moreover, there are serious concerns about further worsening of the situation as the military operations are continuing to cover more cities such as Saraqib, Idlib, and Arihah

VDC correspondent in Idlib governorate

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Introduction

The Syrian government and allied forces, led by Russia, have been waging a bloody military campaign against the northern Idlib governorate since February 2019. The ongoing military operations have killed hundreds of civilians and wounded thousands more. The attacks by government forces and Russia have focused on targeting civilian objects and health facilities, which violate the rules of international humanitarian law and constitute war crimes.

The attacks by Syrian government forces, backed by Russian warplanes, are a clear violation of the de-escalation agreement signed by Russia and Turkey in May 2017. This agreement covers the Idlib governorate. It states that the two countries must restrain military operations between the conflicting parties. They should also establish points to monitor the progress of the agreement; besides, they should facilitate humanitarian aid access. The attacks also violate the cease-fire declaration that Russia agreed to at the end of last August.

Most of the attacks targeted villages, towns and residential neighborhoods in the south of Idlib Governorate. It caused massive damage to public and private property and hundreds of civilian casualties, in violation of the laws of war. Moreover, it caused significant losses among civilians, as the forces attacking did not take into account the civilian nature of the areas targeted. Additionally, they did not take precautions to reduce the damage. Besides that, the attacks forced the people to flee their homes, which constitutes the crime of forced eviction of the population by using force in conflicts for collective punishment, which in turn constitutes another war crime to be added to the registry of the Syrian government and Russia, under United Nations resolutions.

According to the United Nations report issued on 7 November 2019, "Since the end of April, over 400,000 women, children and men have been displaced by the violence in north-west Syria, many of them multiple times, and over 1,000 have lost their lives, many of them children."

The Internally Displaced Person (IDPs), who fled the attacks of the government and Russian forces, are living in severe humanitarian conditions, especially with the onset of winter, freezing temperatures and rains. They are residing in open agricultural areas under olive trees or camps lacking essential services and were affected by the attacks as well.

Summary

- VDC presents this report in which it describes in detail the recent attacks in Idlib governorate during the military campaign from the beginning of September 2019 until the end of November. It also explains the outcome of the situation there and the results of the bombing as it led to a severe deterioration in all aspects of life, especially concerning the medical condition.
- VDC adopts a working methodology that is compatible with international humanitarian law, international human rights law and the four Geneva Conventions, all of which constitute the legal framework for the documentation methodology at the center.

- VDC defines the definition of violations as it exists in international human rights conventions, human rights standards and the Geneva Conventions, including, to name a few, attacks against civilians, attacks on civilian infrastructure and attacks on humanitarian and relief facilities.
- VDC documents the violations committed by all actors in Syria, regardless of race, religion, or any other aspect. As much information as possible is documented on each violation. This includes the perpetrator, the location and the date of occurrence, the type of violations besides other statistical characteristics of victims and violations.
- VDC confirms that the attacks referred to in this report are a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. VDC notes that the Russian and Syrian forces are fully aware that attacking civilian objects qualified as war crimes.
- VDC shows in this report that the Russian and Syrian forces have not taken any preventive measures to avoid targeting civilians or to stop carrying out indiscriminate strikes against non-military or military objectives. Instead, they prevent health workers from carrying out their work without being frightened or killed or injured while performing their humanitarian duty.
- This report is a continuation of the series of reports (1-2) that VDC published since the beginning of the military campaign against the governorates of Hama and Idlib in northern Syria on 9 February 2019. In the previous reports, VDC monitored in detail the attacks on civilian housing and objects in the governorates of Hama, Idlib and their rural areas.

Figures and Statistics

- VDC has documented at least 4820 attacks in the period between September 2019 until the end of December 2019. These attacks are carried out by the Syrian and Russian government forces using the air force (more than 1,360 strikes) and artillery (3500 attacks) on cities, towns, villages, residential neighborhoods, health facilities, and civilian objects in Idlib governorate.
- VDC has documented the killing of at least 360 civilians in the period between the beginning of September until the end of December 2019. These killings were a result of government forces' attacks and the bombing of Russian warplanes. This raised the death toll to 984 civilians since the beginning of the military campaign against Idlib Governorate in February until 31 December 2019.
- VDC team, in cooperation with the Directorate of Health in Idlib, was able to document direct and indirect attacks carried out by the Syrian and Russian government forces on medical establishments and hospitals. These attacks led to the destruction of most hospitals and health centers, damage to others and the killing of two medical personnel.

Attacks* carried out by Russian and Syrian warplanes, and the artillery weapon of the Syrian government forces

4820

Attacks with the Air Force

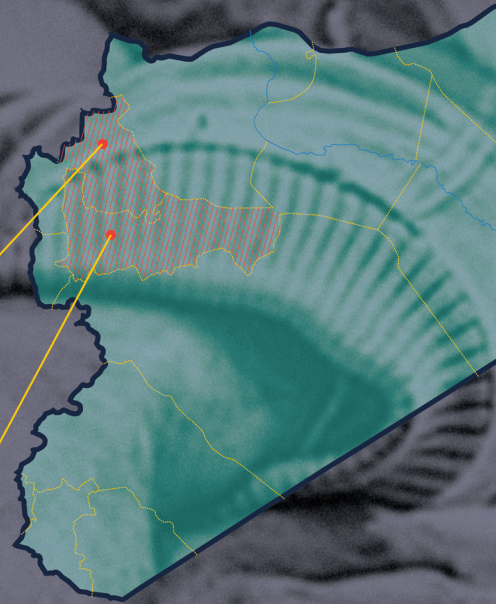


1360

Attacks with an artillery weapon



3500



360

Civilians in the period from the beginning of September to the end of December 2019



1150

Civilians in the period from the beginning of February to the end of December 2019



18



direct attacks targeting places of worship

28



attacks targeting educational facilities

6



attacks targeting bakeries

7



attacks targeting the civil defense centres and headquarters

*A single attack means a full day of bombing that targets one place, not the number of shells

- VDC has documented the targeting of seven of the Syrian Civil Defense Organization (White Helmets) centers, headquarters and teams by the Syrian and Russian government forces. Four centers were destroyed, ambulances and service vehicles were damaged, and several volunteers were killed and injured.
- VDC correspondents documented at least 28 attacks carried out by the Russian and Syrian government forces that targeted educational facilities directly and indirectly. Most of the facilities were destroyed or became out of service.
- VDC correspondents documented the targeting of many places of worship, namely mosques and churches by the government forces and Russia. The number of attacks on places of worship reached 18. The attacks resulted in partial or complete damage to the mosques.
- VDC correspondents recorded at least 6 attacks by the Syrian government and Russian forces, targeting ovens and bakeries directly.

Methodology and challenges

In its Methodology, the report relies on testimonies collected by VDC correspondents from the residents of Idlib Governorate, especially those involved in humanitarian activity, civil defense volunteers and health workers. This report also revealed the cruel suffering experienced by the population in all aspects of daily life. Especially that this suffering is associated with increased military operations by the Syrian government forces backed by Russian warplanes and the systematic bombing targeting all facilities of everyday life, mainly the infrastructure, hospitals, medical units, schools, educational facilities, bakeries, power stations, fuel, and places of worship.

It is important to mention and note the following points to take into consideration before reading the report:

This report covers the period from 1 September 2019 to the end of December 2019. The casualties are continuing in light of the conflict in Syria. Civilians still constitute the largest percentage of the victims, including children and women. The bombing with diverse weapons continues to target civilian neighborhoods. This is usually accompanied by waves of mass displacement, especially from areas that are targeted by vacuum bombs and barrel bombs in deliberate, indiscriminate attacks.

Statistics mentioned in this report are not final. It is subject to a periodic and continuous audit process by the center's activists first, then by the data entry operator and the field monitoring team inside Syria.

Numbers may differ between reports, even for one region. This difference is due to the continuous correction done by the field monitoring activists who do constant scrutiny after which they correct the deficiencies and mistakes, as well as follow-up unidentified victims, who are documented by name when identifying them.

Article VIII of the Rome Statute defines war crimes as gross violations of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, which are acts against persons or property protected under the relevant provisions of the Geneva Convention. This includes not only international armed conflicts but also non-international armed conflict situations. It also includes the other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable to international armed conflicts in the established scope of international law.

Targeting these facilities can constitute a crime against humanity according to Article VII of the Rome Statute because it is a widespread, systematic attack directed against the civilian population who do not take any active part in hostilities, and imposes on their deplorable living conditions that lead to their death.

In this report, VDC excluded all targets that were proved to be of military origin.

VDC team extends its sincere gratitude to all activists cooperating with the center, to the families of the victims, and the field monitoring teams and its researchers who spread on most of the Syrian soil facing daily risks while carrying out their duties to document crimes and human rights violations in Syria, complete data, provide information and conveying the voice of the victims and their families to the concerned authorities and organizations.

Deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against the civilian

Syrian government forces, supported by Russian warfighters, continued to launch systematic and widespread attacks against civilians. The government forces ignored the special protection granted to hospitals, medical and humanitarian workers and civilian facilities. Idlib governorate was subjected to a bombing campaign with barrel bombs that targeted entire areas and spread terror among civilians. Government forces used prohibited weapons, causing superfluous injury and unnecessary suffering, in violation of international humanitarian law. The indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial and artillery bombardment resulted in widespread arbitrary displacement. These bombardments have resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of civilian casualties. Illegal attacks remain the main cause of internal displacement.



According to customary international humanitarian law, indiscriminate attacks on civilians constitute grave violations of international humanitarian law and customary international humanitarian law, and as such, constitute war crimes. Under customary international humanitarian law, war crimes committed in any type of conflict involve individual criminal responsibility on the commanders who gave orders to such attacks and on any person who has committed or facilitated attacks that are described as a war crime, or by anyone who aided, or who helped or contributed to its implementation.

Massacres and other unlawful killings

1- In a documented incident on 17 November 2019, Russian warplanes bombed homes in the village of Malaga in Idlib governorate. The shelling killed 6 civilians, including 4 women and a girl, and widespread damage to buildings and surrounding shops. [\[Video\]](#).



A photo showing the extent of damage to the residential buildings that were targeted by Russian warfighters on 17 November 2019| Source: Macro Media Center MMC

2- In another separate and documented incident, Russian warplanes bombed the city of Maarat al-Numan in Idlib governorate on 20 November 2019, killing 6 civilians, including four children. The shelling also resulted in widespread damage to surrounding homes and shops.



A photo showing civil defense teams recovering children who were killed as a result of Russian airstrikes on the city center of Maarat al-Numan on November 20, 2019.| Source: Macro Media Center MMC

Deliberate attacks against civilian objects

The Syrian government forces and their pro-government groups under Russian air cover continued to launch large-scale attacks of a random and deliberate nature - in an overwhelming proportion - against civilian objects and civilians in many Syrian cities and towns, especially in the areas of Idlib governorate and its rural areas.

These attacks have terrified civilians and resulted in hundreds of victims and injuries. On top of that, the medical units are not capable of treating the injuries due to the low capacity as the medical units and hospitals itself are targeted and shelled by the Syrian government forces and Russian warfighters. The targeting was by guided missiles, cluster and vacuum bombs, and others. VDC has monitored some violations of the vital facilities that will be mentioned in succession in this report.

All the witness accounts we interviewed show that attacks on vital installations have affected civilians and have not hit any military objective, in violation of the laws of war by failing to distinguish between combatants and civilians, or that they unlawfully caused civilian casualties disproportionate to the expected military advantage. Moreover, the Syrian and the Russian government have not taken all reasonable precautions to minimize harm to civilians in the attacks.

This report clearly and unequivocally confirms that Syrian and Russian government forces have deliberately directed attacks on many vital installations, which are exclusively for service purposes. In all circumstances, these facilities must be respected and protected as it is implied in common Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which Syria has ratified. Under customary international humanitarian law, the term "medical units" refers to establishments and others either military or civilian.

The attacks documented in this report constitute a single pattern of attacking civilian places and populations. The persistence in targeting densely populated areas makes it more likely that the air forces of both Syrian and Russian forces are not targeting specific military targets. The indiscriminate nature of these attacks is consistent with the nature of the weapons used. Based on the available information, the barrel bombs, pressure bombs, etc. are improvised and unguided; the goal is to produce the most explosive effect and to amplify the harm caused to residents and objects. Bombing residential areas packed with improvised weapons that cannot be directed is "a method of combat that cannot be directed at a military objective."

A study of The International Committee of the Red Cross stresses that the rule that "prohibits the use of indiscriminate weapons" in non-international armed conflicts is part of customary international humanitarian law. For this reason, it is binding on all parties to the armed conflict in Syria.

Deliberate attacks on medical establishments

The Syrian government forces, supported by Russian warfighters, deliberately targeted medical establishments and centers in all regions of Idlib Governorate. These attacks led to the destruction of most hospitals and medical centers and their complete or partial loss of its functioning.

1- The attack on Kiwan Hospital in the Kansafra village in Idlib

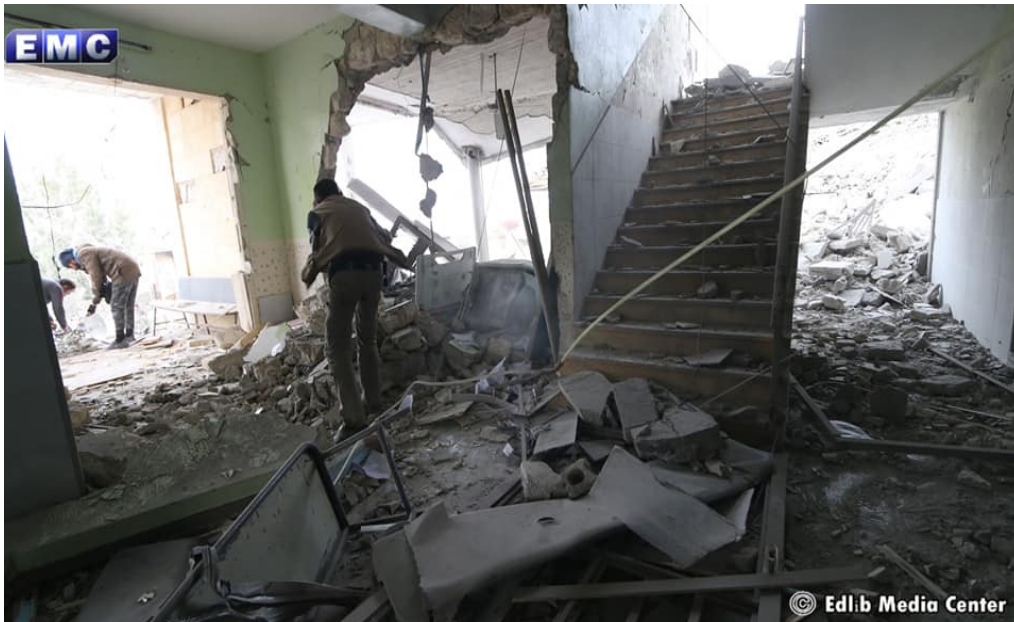
The Syrian government forces launched a massive artillery attack on the Kiwan Hospital supported by the "Sima" (Medical Association for Syrian Expatriates) in the village of Kansafra, south of Idlib Governorate, on September 13, which resulted in damage to the building of the hospital.

The Sima organization said in a statement:

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Kiwan Hospital covers a wide area of southern rural Idlib, to include approximately 175,000 beneficiaries of the local population and the displaced in the following areas: Jabal Zawiya - part of Jabal Arbaeen - part of the rural of Maarat al-Numan - part of the rural of Khan Sheikhoun and Medina Khan Sheikhoun. The hospital provides reproductive health services "natural and cesarean deliveries", as well as the incubator service and hospitalization of women and children and gynecological clinics that offer various women consultations, family planning, pregnancy monitoring, and postpartum review, in addition to the pediatric clinic. There is a specialized laboratory that provides laboratory analyzes and a pharmacy to dispense the medicine free of charge

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A photo showing the extent of the damage to Kiwan Hospital in the town of Kansafra in Jabal Al-Zawiya, which led to complete discontinuance of service. Source: Idlib Media Center

2- Targeting the health care center in the city of Maarat al-Numan

At 12.15 p.m. on Thursday, 3 October 2019, Syrian government forces stationed in Khan Sheikhoun targeted the Primary Health Care Center in Maarat al-Numan with several artillery shells that landed on the western side of the center and wounded the dentist, Yousef Al-Hussein, in the foot. Also, Ray Khadija was seriously injured due to severe bleeding in the abdomen and the injury of six civilians. The number of people in the center was more than 80 people in the waiting room. The clinics and departments were operating normally, and the people were secured in a safe place by the civil defense team. The shelling resulted in massive destruction; the center became out of service and the work was suspended until further notice, pending maintenance



The primary health care center in Maarat al-Numan city, south of Idlib, was damaged on 3 October 2019, as a result of an attack by Syrian government forces| Source: Maarat al-Numan media center



The blood of the victims in the primary health care center in the city of Maarat al-Numan, south of Idlib, on 3 October 2019, as a result of an attack by the Syrian government forces.| Source: Maarat al-Numan media center

3- Targeting the primary health care center in the city of Jisr Al-Shughour

The Syrian government forces launched an intense missile attack from their headquarters in Jourin Camp, Hama, on 4 November 2019. The attack targeted residential neighborhoods in the city of Jisr al-Shughour, several rockets landed near the primary health care center in the city, causing damage to the construction of the center.



The effects of the damage to the building of the primary health care center in the city of Jisr Al-Shughour, west of Idlib, as a result of a missile attack by the Syrian government forces on 4 November 2019. Source: Zaytoun website

4- Targeting the Women and Children Hospital in Shanan village, south of Idlib

On 6 November 2019, Russian warplanes launched a direct attack with several raids targeting the Women and Children Hospital in the village of Shanan, which almost destroyed it and made it out of service. "The Shannan Hospital used to provide services to three thousand beneficiaries per month." Safwat Shaykhouni, The official in the Idlib Health Directorate, told the VDC.



The destruction of the Women and Children Hospital in Shanan village, south of Idlib, as a result of a focused attack by Russian warplanes on 6 November 2019, which led to the destruction of the hospital. Source: Shaam Network website

5- Targeting the surgical hospital in the city of Kafr Nabl

Russian warplanes launched a direct missile attack on the Surgical Hospital in the city of Kafr Nabl, south of Idlib, on 6 November 2019, which resulted in severe damage to it.

This is the second time that Russia has bombed this hospital specifically, as it launched a violent attack on the hospital on May 5, 2019, with four missiles, which led to widespread destruction, killing and wounding several patients.

Hand in Hand for Relief and Development:

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a British humanitarian organization, said in a statement: “On Wednesday, the sixth of November at 17:45 local time, Kafr Nabel Surgical Hospital was subjected to three direct attacks from the air that caused severe damage to the hospital infrastructure and trapped all staff and patients inside the Enterprise

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6- Targeting the Women and Children Hospital in Qah

On 20 November 2019, Syrian government forces bombed a camp with forcibly displaced people near the town of Qah, north of Idlib, using cluster bombs. The bomb resulted in damages to the Women and Children Hospital supported by the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), causing a massacre.

VDC has already issued a brief report on the attack on Qah camp, in which it confirmed that the attack is a prescribed war crime amounting to a crime against humanity, as government forces deliberately targeted civilians.



The effects of the destruction of medical equipment at the Women and Children Hospital in the town of Qah, north of Idlib, as a result of a missile attack by the Syrian government forces on November 20, 2019, where the attack resulted in damage to the hospital and a massacre of forcibly displaced people. | Source: "Syrian American Medical Society - SAMS"

7- Targeting Kiwan Hospital again causing full destruction

Russian warplanes launched a violent missile attack on the Kiwan Hospital in the village of Kansafra on 24 November 2019, causing the hospital to be fully destroyed, and the attack occurred less than two months after it was attacked by artillery from the Syrian government forces.



The “Kiwan” Hospital in the village of Kansafra, south of Idlib, was fully destroyed after being subjected to a concentrated attack by Russian warplanes on 24 November 2019. | Source: Kiwan Hospital Official Website

8- Targeting Al-Rawda Hospital in the city of Kafr Nabl

The Syrian government forces, using helicopters, launched an attack with barrel bombs on Tuesday evening, 26 November 2019, targeting the Al-Rawda Maternity Hospital in the city of Kafr Nabl in the southern rural of Idlib, causing massive damage to the hospital’s structure. Southern Idlib.



Damage to Al-Rawda Hospital, in the city of Kafr Nabl, south of Idlib, as a result of an attack by helicopters belonging to the Syrian government forces on the barrel bombs on November 26, 2019. | Source: Idlib Health Directorate

"Two health workers, working in the hospital, as a result of the attacks were killed, and thousands of civilians lost the health services that were provided by these facilities," Safwat Sheik-houni, an official in the Idlib Health Directorate told the VDC.

By attacking hospitals, medical units, and health-care workers, the Syrian and Russian government forces have violated international humanitarian law, which obliges parties to treat the sick and wounded. They also committed the war crime of attacking protected objects, destroying hospitals, and killing medical personnel. Moreover, these attacks caused inefficiency in the work of the medical service in those areas, which worsen the situation of the civilian population there.

The failure of the Humanitarian Deconfliction Mechanism in protecting medical establishments

Since September 2014, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has activated the Humanitarian Deconfliction Mechanism to define and protect humanitarian workers, offices, facilities and sites for humanitarian operations, places of displacement of displaced persons, the road leading to humanitarian facilities and mobile clinics, to the maximum extent during Kinetic operations by coalition forces in Syria.

The Air Force of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey are not considered part of this process mentioned in 2014. Hence, it was agreed with the two countries on a mechanism to neutralize the fixed and mobile sites of humanitarian organizations.

VDC documented approximately 8 incidents in which vital facilities listed within the humanitarian mechanism to avoid conflict were targeted.

Dr. Mazen Kwara, SAMS Organization, told the VDC:

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Since 28 April 2019 until now, a large number of operating hospitals supported by the Sams system have been directly targeted, we have documented about (25) targeting against (13) facilities and projects, including (11) centers within the neutralization mechanism. Two from Mobile systems, which include a mobile clinic and an ambulance system, were not included in the mechanism due to the nature of the mobile tasks

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Following centers were among the centers and hospitals that were targeted: Kafr Nabudah Health Center, Tarmala Hospital for Gynecology and Obstetrics, Al-Zorba Health Center (twice), Kafr Zita Health Center, Tarmala Hospital, Ambulance System in Hama, Surgical Hospital in Atarib (twice), Tranquil Soul Mental Health Center in Al Dana, Al-Salam Hospital in Maarat al-Numan, Al-Atareb Hospital for Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Ambulance System Center in Hama, Saraqib Health Center (twice), Maarat Al-Numan National Hospital, Idlib Central Hospital, Ambulance System in Hama Governorate (3 times), a second targeting of Al-Salam Hospital (twice)).

Medical establishments are directly targeted or damaged while targeting neighborhoods and other facilities. During eight years, a large number of facilities were bombed even though all parties shared the coordinates of these facilities through the Humanitarian Deconfliction Mechanism of the OCHA. Thus, this bombing cannot be considered as random and indirect. The bombing is direct and to deny the civilians the primary services they have the right for.

Targeting these facilities constitute a crime against humanity according to Article VII of the Rome Statute because it is a widespread, systematic attack directed against the civilian population who do not take any active part in hostilities and imposes on them inadequate living conditions that lead to their death.

Targeting Syrian civil defense centers and teams

The attacks of the Syrian government forces and Russia were not limited to medical establishments and health centers. It also included deliberate and direct attacks on the centers, headquarters, and teams of the Syrian Civil Defense Organization. These attacks destroyed their facilities, killing several volunteers and wounding others. The targeting operations included attacks targeting the teams while they were working to rescue the victims, as the Russian and the government forces intentionally re-target the same location when the rescue teams arrive.

1- Targeting the civil defense center in the town of Sefhohn, south of Idlib

On the morning of 12 September 2019, fighter jets of the Syrian government forces bombed the civil defense center in the town of Sfouhan, causing damage to the building and equipment, in addition to destroying the ambulance on duty. No injuries to the volunteers occurred.



The Civil Defense Center was destroyed in the town of Sefhohn, south of Idlib, on 12 September 2019, as a result of an attack by Syrian Air Force warplanes. | Source: The Civil Defense

2- Targeting three civil defense centers in the city of

Jisr Al-Shughour at the same time

On 6 November 2019, warplanes of the Syrian government forces launched an intense attack with several missiles, targeting the administration building of the Jisr al-Shughur city sector and the building of the Women's Civil Defense Center and the ammunition removal center, where the attack caused partial damage to the buildings and damaged equipment and machinery in the centers.



The civil defense center in the city of Jisr al-Shughur, west of Idlib, was destroyed on 6 November 2019, as a result of a missile attack by the Syrian government forces. Source: The Civil Defense

Regarding the civil defense teams, they were targeted 11 times during their work, which directly killed 3 volunteers and injured 14 others during October and November.

Ahmed Sheikho, the director of the General Information Office of the Civil Defense Directorate in Idlib, told the VDC:

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Deliberately and directly targeting centers and teams resulted in the disruption or delay of some services provided by civil defense teams due to double and repeated bombing, so it became difficult to reach some areas due to the targeting of nearby centers in addition to slow response. The biggest impact is the inability to use large dredging and dredging mechanisms due to being monitored by aviation and re-targeting while on the job.

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Targeting educational facilities

The Syrian government forces, backed by Russian warfighters, have targeted educational facilities, especially in the southern Idlib governorate.

The reported massive destruction included infrastructure for the education sector. About (28) schools and educational facilities were damaged as a result of being targeted directly or indirectly by the Syrian and Russian government forces, and (18) schools were almost destroyed.

1- In a documented incident on 12 November 2018, Russian warplanes bombed a school in the southern rural of Idlib during official working hours, wounding a child and killing a teacher. The shelling also resulted in widespread damage to the building of the school and its temporary suspension from service. [[Video](#)]

2- In another documented incident on 12 September 2019, Syrian helicopters carried out a bombardment targeting the areas and towns in the southern rural of Idlib, killing the student Israa Al-Ashqar from the Sarjah village, as she was targeted when she returned from her school. Another student was wounded.



Photo showing the injury of a school student and the killing of a female student while returning from school as a result of the bombing of Syrian government forces. Source: Directorate of Education in Idlib Governorate

3- Due to the intensive air attacks, the Directorate of Education in Idlib Governorate published a statement on 15 November 2019 in which it suspended all official working hours in each of Ahsam district schools, the schools of the city of Arihah, its southern and eastern rural and the schools of the town of Mhambel and its southern rural.

4- On 30 November 2019, the Education Directorate in the Idlib Governorate announced the suspension of official working hours in all schools of Maarat al-Numan in the southern rural of Idlib due to the heavy shelling of the city.

5- The attack on the Zakaria Aktaa School in the western rural of Idlib

On November 9, 2019, Russian warplanes bombed the Zakaria Aktaa School in the city of Jisr al-Shughur in the western rural of Idlib. The bombing resulted in the injury of a woman and extensive damage to the surrounding building and housing.



A photo showing the scale of the destruction resulted by targeting the Zakaria Aktaa School in the western rural of Idlib. Source: Syrian Civil Defense

5- The attack on the Maarzita Secondary School in Maarzita village

On 07 December 2019, helicopters carried out a bombing of explosive missiles targeting the Maarzita Secondary School in the southern rural of Idlib.

The bombing caused widespread damage to the main building of the school, so it became completely out of service.

Denying children the right to education as a result of indiscriminate attacks on schools violates the rules of international human rights and humanitarian law. [[Video](#)]

Targeting popular markets

Most of the popular markets in the areas under the control of the Syrian armed opposition in Idlib Governorate have been subjected to direct airstrikes and attacks by Syrian government forces as well as bombing by Russian warfighters, killing and wounding dozens.

According to the records of VDC correspondents who are located in northern Syria, 9 popular markets were targeted during the recent military campaign.

International humanitarian law prohibits direct attacks against civilians. Attacks may only be directed against combatants.

Deliberate attacks against the civilian population as such or individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities is a serious violation of humanitarian law and amount to a war crime that may lead to individual criminal responsibility. Additionally, the principle of distinction also prohibits indiscriminate attacks.

1- The attack on the popular market in Maarat al-Numan

On 02 December 2019, a Syrian Air Force SU-22 jet fighter bombed the "Souq Al-Hal" a popular market in Maarat al-Numan city in the southern rural of Idlib.

The bombing killed 10 people, caused dozens of injuries and widespread damage to shops.



A photo showing the scale of the destruction in the popular market in the city of Maarat al-Numan on 02 December 2019.| Source: Macro Media Center

2- The attack on the popular market in Saraqib

On 02 December 2019, Syrian Air Force fighter jets bombed the popular market in Saraqeb in the eastern rural of Idlib using vacuum bombs.

The bombing killed one person, caused several injuries and widespread damage to the surrounding buildings and shops.



A photo showing the scale of the destruction as a result of targeting the popular market in Saraqib on 02 December 2019.| Source: Macro Media Center

3- The attack on the popular market in Al-Barah

On 07 December 2019, Russian warplanes bombed the popular market in Al-Barah Village in the southern rural of Idlib.

The bombing killed four civilians, caused several injuries and widespread damage to the surrounding buildings and shops.



A photo showing the scale of the destruction as a result of targeting the popular market in Al-Bara village, in the southern rural of Idlib. | Source: Macro Media Center

4- The attack on the popular market in the Billion village in the southern rural of Idlib.

On 07 December 2019, Russian warplanes bombed the popular market in the Billion village in the southern rural of Idlib.

The bombing killed 10 civilians, caused several injuries and widespread damage to the surrounding buildings and shops.



A photo showing the extent of the damage to the popular market in the Billion village, as a result of being targeted by Russian warfighters. | Source: Macro Media Center



The International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC mentioned in 2011 the high probability of the indiscriminate effects of certain types of explosive weapons with a wide range of shocks, such as artillery, mortars and unguided rockets. It uses detonation and fragments to kill and the injury is inherently inaccurate when used in residential locations. Although there is no explicit legal ban on specific types of weapons, the ICRC believes that explosive weapons with a wide range of effects in densely populated areas must be avoided. "The use of these types of weapons against military targets located in populated areas" are against the rules of international humanitarian law, which prohibit indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. The principle of distinction is particularly important in the context of the intensive use of heavy weapons in populated areas, as in the bombing incidents mentioned above.

Targeting oven and bakeries

Most of ovens and bakeries in Idlib have been directly attacked by Syrian and Russian government forces alike, resulting in their permanent discontinuation.

VDC correspondents in North Syria have recorded targeting (6) bakeries, taking them out of service.

1- The attack on the Iman bakery in the town of Benin

On 25 November 2019, Russian warplanes bombed Al-Iman bakery in Benin village in the southern rural of Idlib with a vacuum bomb, which destroyed it and took it out of service.



A photo showing the scale of the destruction in the Iman bakery as a result of being targeted by Russian warfighters. | Source: Macro Media Center

2- The attack on Abu Ratib industrial bakery in the Marshourin village

On Sunday 15 December 2019, the Syrian helicopter air force carried out an airstrike with explosive barrels on the Marshourine village, which led to the destruction of the Abu Ratib industrial bakery, where the explosive barrel fell meters away from the bakery, resulting in a big fire causing material damage. No injuries were recorded.

Arbitrary and Forced Displacement

The Syrian government forces and their pro-government groups, supported by Russian forces, have caused massive population movements and widespread arbitrary displacement. This is a result of indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery strikes, which show that the government did not fulfill its obligations under international human rights law to protect civilians from such displacement. Additionally, it also did not comply with the obligations established by international humanitarian law to provide shelter.



A photo showing the massive displacement movement in the southern and eastern countryside of Idlib, towards the border areas with Turkey, as a result of the intense shelling targeting their cities and villages.] Source: Macro Media Center

On 7 November 2019, the United Nations expressed grave concern about the safety and protection of about 4.1 million women, children and men in northwestern Syria, including nearly 2.1 million internally displaced persons, following intensified airstrikes and shelling in recent days in Idlib.

On 4 December 2019, Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesperson for the Secretary-General, said during the press conference held at the United Nations permanent headquarters, that humanitarian organizations are deeply concerned about the fate of millions, "our humanitarian colleagues remain deeply concerned for the safety and protection of more than four million civilians in north-west Syria, following a continued upsurge in violence and hostilities in the area." He added: "More than half of these people are internally displaced. In the past few days, dozens of communities have been impacted by airstrikes and artillery shelling, resulting in death and displacement."

VDC correspondent in northern Syria visited one of the IDP camps in the north of Idlib Governorate. He obtained testimonies from the residents about the catastrophic humanitarian situation there.

Electricity and water: Electricity has been cut off for more than two years, some of the camp residents rely on energy panels to manage their daily lives while the majority do not have enough money to acquire them.

Regarding the water, it is available but not sufficient, especially with the increase in the number of displaced people. This led to a rise in demand for the use of drinking water and regular water for daily use.

Education: Education is almost non-existent in displacement camps. Despite the presence of shy and few initiatives, the majority of the camp's children are not adequately educated, and some of them also cannot read and write well despite their presence in advanced classes and stages. The reason is the educational corruption that does not give any attention to students and their absorptive capabilities.

Food aid and fuel: The tragic situation exacerbates every year with the onset of winter due to the great lack of fuel and its high price. Despite the many promises from the concerned authorities and relief organizations to provide heating fuel, clothing and blankets, the displaced do not get anything in the end. Also, the periods between the distribution of foodstuffs are very long and it may take up to six months to distribute a single basket, which leads to many people to purchase foods at very high prices.

Medical centers: There is only one medical center that provides medical services for camp residents. The center is located far from the camp.

Attacks on shelters and displacement camps

Many shelters and displacement camps have witnessed airstrikes either by Russian warfighters or by guided missiles from the military bases of the Syrian government forces and their pro-government groups. VDC issued a special summary report on the attacks on Qah camp in the northern Idlib governorate.

1- On Tuesday 24 December 2019, one of the fiercest attacks was documented, where fighter planes, believed to be Russian, have bombed a school in the Jawbas village, west of Saraqib, inhabited by displaced people, killing ten people, most of them children and wounding others.



A man deposits his son after the bombing of Jawbas in Idlib, Tuesday morning, by Russian warplanes, targeting the camps for the displaced. Source: Syrian Civil Defense



A photo showing the severe humanitarian conditions in the northern Syrian camps. | Source: Macro Media Center



The pattern of behavior of the Syrian government forces and their pro-government groups indicates a coordinated and planned campaign aim to forced displacement of civilians. The methods used by them, including the threats of violence, subsequent military operations, and violent attacks, outlines the intention to displace the civilian population in those areas and villages. This behavior constitutes the war crime of forced displacement.

The UN Secretary-General expressed his deep concern over the military escalation in north-western Syria and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. In a statement issued by his spokesperson on the evening of Monday 24 December 2019, the Secretary-General expressed grave concern over the scale of the military operation and reports of attacks on the evacuation routes for civilians trying to flee north to safety. The statement indicated that the recent military escalation resulted in dozens of civilian casualties and the displacement of at least 80,000 civilians, including 30,000 people last week alone at time of writing.

Targeting mosques and places of worship

The places of worship, particularly the mosques, were also a direct target to both the Syrian government forces and Russian warplanes. So, they had a share of the daily attacks on these areas. Several mosques were bombed to damage, and others were completely and deliberately destroyed.

1- Attack on Othman Bin Affan Mosque in Saraqib

On December 04, Syrian Air Force helicopters carried out a focused bombardment on the Othman Bin Affan Mosque in Saraqib in the eastern countryside of Saraqib, which led to partial damage to the building of the mosque and damaged furniture and its construction.



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 | Source: Macro Media Center MMC

Targeting these facilities constitutes a crime against humanity according to Article VII of the Rome Statute as it is a widespread, systematic attack directed against the civilian population who do not take an active role in hostilities, and impose upon their inadequate living conditions that lead to their death.

Targeting water stations

Multiple attacks were recorded on water and fuel stations, which were supplying several villages and towns in Idlib Governorate.

VDC recorded 3 attacks where both water and fuel stations were targeted and resulted in widespread damage. Consequently, the stations became out of service.

1- The attack on the Kfaruma water station

On 24 November 2019, the Syrian Air Force bombed the water station of Kafroma village in the city of Maarat al-Numan.

The shelling resulted in major damage to the station and its complete shutdown.

"Benea Development" published a [statement](#) about the bombing, in which it said:

“

The Kfaruma water station located in Maarat al-Numan is the main station in feeding the village with potable water. It has been rehabilitated and maintained by Benea Development Foundation in 2017. Later in August 2019, it was supplied with an electric generator, a submersible pump, and a water disinfection system, all with the support of UNICEF. Before that, it was disrupted for several years due to the bombing and lack of maintenance. The recent bombardment caused damage to the generator rooms, which damaged the generator and its operating panels beside other facilities at the station, leaving it out of service and depriving nearly 25,000 people of safe water.

”

2- The attack on the Kafr Nabel water station

On 03 December 2019, Russian warfighters launched several consecutive airstrikes targeting the water station of the town of Kafr Nabl, the educational complex, and the town's stadium directly. What led to widespread destruction and a complete shutdown of the facilities mentioned above.



The moment of explosion when an explosive barrel was dropped by the Syrian Air Force helicopters on the city of Kafr Nabl in the southern rural of Idlib on 03 December 2019| Source: Macro Media Center



In line with international humanitarian law, all parties to the conflict and those with influence have an obligation to stop attacks on water facilities and basic civilian infrastructure throughout Syria.

The use of illegal weapons

Cluster and incendiary munitions.

Incendiary weapons were used in separate areas of Idlib Governorate. In addition to incendiary phosphorus, there are several other types, including "burning napalm," which consider one of the most dangerous and widespread and used types of incendiary weapons. It is characterized by unstable viscosity. Its composition includes kerosene. Napalm is a substance that adheres to human bodies and solid bodies, no matter how smooth or soft and leads to severe burns and deformities accompanying the victim who survives the death.



A photo showing the remains of Russian missiles equipped with cluster munitions that were dropped over the village of Mhambel in rural Idlib on 30 December 2019. Source: Syrian Civil Defense

Systematic and regular attacks targeting civilian neighborhoods were recorded, causing severe material losses to residential homes and shops. The month of December 2019 witnessed a notable escalation in the use of phosphorus munitions and incendiary bombs by Russian warfighters. Since the beginning of the military campaign in early 2019, many villages, cities, and towns of Idlib governorate were attacked by phosphorus munitions and incendiary bombs. VDC was able to document (36) attacks on civilian targets in the period from the beginning of November to the end of December. The targets were attacked by phosphorous and incendiary munitions, by Russian warfighters and the Syrian Air Force.

Russia has joined the 1980 Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW), which has a protocol on incendiary weapons. The protocol bans the use of air-delivered incendiary weapons in areas with “concentrations of civilians.”. However, Syria is not a state party to this protocol.

1- In a documented incident on 29 December 2019, Syrian artillery forces carried out a bombardment with a guided missile loaded with cluster munitions, in addition to shells containing incendiary munitions, “white phosphorous”, the bombing targeted the outskirts of Sarjah village in Jabal al-Zawiya (Idlib). One woman was wounded.

By using incendiary bombs in Sarjah village attacks, Russian forces have violated the rules of international humanitarian law that prohibits the use of weapons causing unnecessary suffering or excessive injury, or that are indiscriminate.



A photo of a guided missile containing cluster munitions after it landed on the outskirts of the Sarjah village on 29 December 2019. Source: Syrian Civil Defense.

The basic rules of international humanitarian law regulate the use of weapons containing white phosphorus, just like any other weapon. These rules require that parties to a conflict distinguish between military and civilian targets and the civilian population alike. International law also obliges them to take all possible measures to spare civilians and civilian objects the evil of military operations. Attacks that destroy civilians and civilian objects “indiscriminately” are prohibited.

Conclusion and recommendations

VDC recommends that all parties:

To the Syrian and Russian governments alike:

- To end the use of explosive weapons with widespread impact in populated areas, consistent with the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks. Furthermore, to stop the use of illegal weapons in civilian areas, including incendiary weapons and others, such as explosive, unguided, or poorly directed barrels.

The Syrian and Russian governments must stop targeting hospitals, medical centers, ambulances, medical personnel, and crews while performing their humanitarian work in transporting and aiding the wounded.

- The Syrian government must refrain from targeting and bombing medical personnel. It must also abide by the Geneva Convention for Humanitarian Action of 1949 and abide by the agreements of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 1993, which is international humanitarian law that protects individuals working in medical services.
- Article VIII of the Rome Statute defines war crime as gross violations of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, which are acts against persons or property protected under the relevant provisions of the Geneva Convention. It is applied in both international and non-international armed conflicts. It also includes other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable to international armed conflicts in the established scope of international law.
- VDC confirms that the Russian and Syrian government forces violate the principles of international humanitarian law. It targets civilians directly and deliberately. These forces also intend to target aid and relief workers, infrastructure and civilian objects. Systematic attacks targeting civilian neighborhoods were recorded clearly and unambiguously, killing hundreds of civilians and causing heavy losses to the property of the population.
- VDC condemns the method of punishing civilians and using them as a tool to win battles. VDC states that targeting the civilian population and civilian objects is a war crime and a crime against humanity according to human rights law, international humanitarian law, and international criminal law. VDC calls for complete neutralization and protection of civilians under the requirements of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, the First and Second Geneva Protocols of 1977, and the customary rules of international humanitarian law.

- Indiscriminate attacks on civilians constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law and customary international humanitarian law. Accordingly, they constitute war crimes, and commanders who issued orders, bear individual criminal responsibility for these attacks. In addition to all who have committed, facilitated, aided, or assisted in the commission of these attacks, this is considered as war crimes.
- VDC expresses its strong condemnation of the Syrian government forces for their intended and direct attacks on several medical units in Idlib Governorate, which are exclusively for medical purposes. Medical units, i.e. hospitals and mobile medical facilities, may in no circumstances be attacked. This rule is implied in common Article 3 of Geneva Conventions 1949, which Syria has ratified. Under customary international humanitarian law, medical units and establishments must be respected and protected and must not be made the object of attacks. Medical units means establishments and other units, whether military or civilian, organized for medical purposes. The term "medical units" must be understood in a wide sense and includes hospitals and similar units; blood transfusion centers; preventive medicine centers and institutes; medical depots; medical and pharmaceutical stores of such units. According to article 8 (2) (b) (ix) and (4) of the Rome Convention that established the International Criminal Court, intentionally directing attacks against hospitals and places where the sick and wounded are collected is considered a war crime.



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