

 **Author**
İrfan Tatlı

Field Report

September 2023



Putin's Bloody Support to Assad

RUSSIA'S IDLIB ATTACKS AND WAR CRIMES

 **Refugee**
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Report

Putin's Bloody Support to Assad: Russia's Idlib Attacks and War Crimes
September 2023

Author

İrfan Tatlı

Research & Reporting Dept. Manager

İbrahim Ergin

Editor

Selim Vatandaş

Proofreading

Rabia Esmâ Sakarya

The author is solely responsible for the content of this report.

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Cover Image

A civil society personnel in Idlib is carrying a dead baby. [Source: White Helmets]

Design of Cover and Page

Bilimon



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*This report
is dedicated to all children
that were killed in war and
conflict...*



Why does this report tell?

Russia, which entered the Syrian conflict following the “invitation” of the Assad regime, has violated and continues to violate fundamental human rights in Idlib, as it has in many other parts of Syria, while the whole world was watching. In violation of international law, residential areas have been targeted, and civilians have been massacred and maimed because of attacks. The international system has not yet questioned and held Russia accountable for these actions.

This report seeks to analyze the attacks conducted by Russia, which became militarily involved in 2015 in support of Bashar al-Assad, along with regime forces, particularly in Idlib region, which violated international law and resulted in the death or injury of thousands of civilians. In this context, the report asserts that Russia and Assad regime forces have conducted attacks in Idlib without discrimination against civilians and have forced people to migrate by exerting pressure on the people in the region; these attacks constitute a violation of international law. The report intends to draw attention to the severity of the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and the humanitarian situation in the region based on field observations and current data.

From 2015, when Russia entered the conflict, until 2022, air raids and ground strikes on the opposition controlled Idlib region were examined in this context. The results of field visits, interviews with field officials, eyewitness accounts, reports from international non-governmental organizations, video footage and photographs of the attacks were utilized in the examination of the attacks.

When analyzing the Russian airstrikes in Syria, it is evident that Russian warplanes target civilians, infrastructure, and civilian settlements without discrimination. Russian forces targeted civilians and all civilian infrastructure with little or no military equivalent, according to an analysis of data gathered on the ground, particularly visual sources, and witness accounts. The attacks analyzed and data presented in this report do not include all attacks allegedly carried out by Russian warplanes, but rather “symbolic” attacks for which visual and written content is available and verifiable. The attacks documented in the report increase the likelihood that Russia, which is blamed for these attacks, is also responsible for other attacks. The report intends to contribute to future reporting, advocacy, research, and analysis efforts.

Introduction

Idlib is in northwest Syria and is one of the country's 14 provinces. Idlib city, which is also the capital of Idlib governorate, has been a crucial region since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 due to its strategic location and capacity to house millions of refugees fleeing the conflict. The city is considered the “last stronghold” of anti-regime forces in Syria as of 2018. The conflicts that started in 2011, the balances that changed with the inclusion of Russia and Iran in 2015, caused the opposition to withdraw to Idlib by losing the regions they had taken from the regime over time. Before the civil war, the population of the entire province of Idlib was approximately 1.2 million, and the population of Idlib city was approximately 150,000¹. Today, more than 4.5 million people live in Idlib province², and the humanitarian crisis in the region worsens daily.



Image: Map of Syria and Idlib Region [Map: Esra Tath]

The regime's and its allies' attacks on the region are one of the primary causes of this humanitarian crisis. Thousands of civilians have been killed in these attacks by regime forces, which were primarily supported by Russia. In these attacks, which are in complete violation of international and humanitarian law, there are also isolated reports of the use of chemical weapons.

Russia is directly involved in the indiscriminate bombing of Syrian civilians and supports torture and atrocities by the Assad regime. Putin administration, along with its partner in Damascus, has indiscriminately targeted women, children, and medical personnel in civilian areas, schools, hospitals, and refugee centers. Hence, Russia is primarily liable for many crimes and violations of human rights committed in Syria, and in Idlib in particular.

These crimes, as defined and acknowledged by international agreements, compel the prosecution of Russian officials who participated in the attacks. Considering that even conflict has rules, Russia's attacks in Idlib constitute a clear violation of human rights.

In this regard, Idlib is one of the most challenging location to reside in the world today. Before the civil war, this city was known for its olive trees and olive oil. Now, it is associated with bombs, violence, and murder.

Methodology

The report utilizes publicly accessible sources from national and international organizations, reports, analyses, and documents from civil society organizations operating in Syria, video recordings, maps, flight logs, photographs, and other visual materials from the databases of organizations operating on the ground, and flight observation data. In addition, the report is supported by the testimonies of those who witnessed the attacks mentioned in it. In addition to satellite images and maps, the report makes use of information and field observations gathered during the visit to Idlib. In this respect, the report combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. During visits to the region, officials were subjected to semi-structured interviews.

The report covers the time between September 30, 2015, when Russia officially intervened in the Syrian civil conflict, and September 1, 2023.

Several obstacles were encountered while writing the report, including the planning of field visits to the region, security dangers, and the difficulties faced by organizations operating in the region when collecting information and documents.

Syrian Civil War and Idlib

“Arab Spring” demonstrations and protests that began in³ Tunisia in December 2010 quickly expanded to other North African and Middle Eastern countries governed by dictators and totalitarian regimes. It resulted in the overthrow of decades-long authoritarian regimes in countries like Tunisia and Egypt, which influenced other nations in the region. The Syrian people have organized demonstrations against the Assad family, which has governed the country with an iron fist for decades. In March 2011, during demonstrations in the city of Daraa, Bashar al-Assad bombed the area where the demonstrators were gathering, murdering numerous civilians.⁴



Picture: On March 2011, 15, the first protests against Bashar al-Assad's rule began in Daraa as residents gathered to demand reforms. The Assad regime responded by bombing civilians, sparking a twelve-year civil conflict. [AFP/Omar Kadour]

As a result of the Assad regime's strategy of bloody suppression of demonstrations, uprisings erupted in several Syrian cities, and the situation quickly degenerated into a civil war. In 2015, the opposition captured the Idlib city, which is located at the intersection of Latakia, Aleppo, and Hama and borders Turkey, and advanced to the outskirts of Damascus, prompting Bashar al-Assad to “invite” Russia to Syria and involve Russia in the country's civil war.⁵ Since then, the regime and its allies have intensified their attacks and made every effort to seize Idlib from the opposition, which is strategically located at a crucial juncture. During these assaults, tens of thousands of civilians have lost their lives. In addition, there is substantial evidence that the Assad regime and Russia violated international and humanitarian law by using chemical weapons..



Image: In August 2013, a mother weeps over the corpses of her children who were killed in a chemical attack in Ghouta by the Assad regime. [Nur Photo/Getty Images]

The Russia and⁶ Iran-backed regime attacks have been systematic and ruthless. The inhabitants of the areas blockaded and seized by the regime with the assistance of Russia and Iran were compelled to migrate to Idlib because of international negotiations including Turkey. Particularly, civilians who were frightened by the bombardment of neighboring regions, including Hama, Aleppo, Ghouta, and Homs, were encouraged to migrate to Idlib. In this way, the Assad regime, which has crammed its perceived opponents into a very small area, has transformed the Idlib region into a humanitarian crisis zone by launching inhumane and illegal attacks with the support of Russia and Iran. In this manner, the regime and its allies are simultaneously pursuing a psychological victory and employing the region's millions of refugees as a weapon against Turkey, which they accuse of supporting opposition groups. Hundreds of thousands of refugees escaping the persecution of ISIS and PYD/YPG forces have migrated to Idlib, which they perceive as a safe zone, worsening the humanitarian crisis in the region. Before the civil conflict, less than a half-million people lived in the region, whereas more than 4.5 million now reside there.

Living Conditions and Humanitarian Situation in Idlib

Today, the overwhelming majority of Idlib's 4.5 million inhabitants lack even the most fundamental shelter requirements. There are 1,633 internally displaced refugee settlements in the Idlib region.⁷ Approximately 1.9 million individuals reside in these regions. People living in improvised tents, unfinished or collapsed buildings, and irregular settlements that do not provide adequate protection from extreme weather conditions charac-

rize these regions. More than 800,000 people live in old, worn-out tents that lack water, electricity, and sewage, among other fundamental shelter necessities.

Data on the Humanitarian Situation in Idlib

- Before the Russian assaults, approximately 300 camps existed in Idlib.
- Currently, there are 13633 settlements in the region.
- There are 1,811,578 forcibly displaced individuals living in these camps.
- There are 1,017,871 children residing in camps, 476,224 women, and 317,483 men.
- 511 of these groups are irregular camps.
- 311,782 refugees reside in irregular settlements. 73,188 of these individuals have special requirements.
- Considering 1,633 camps in the region;
 - 57% of those residing in 1633 camps in the region are in need of food, whereas 62% are in need of other basic products.
 - The rate of people with housing problems is 58%.
 - 64% of children in the camps do not receive any education, and in some centers, educational activities are conducted with limited resources.
 - 69% of the settlements lack water infrastructure.

Source: Syrian Response Coordination Office, 2022

Although limited, the relatively more regular sites have access to water and electricity. Taking into consideration both regular and irregular camps, more than 2 million people reside in tents and ruins with poor and inadequate shelter conditions.⁸ Another 2 million people are estimated to reside in Idlib's urban core, rural communities, villages, and briquette houses, which are more protected than tents. However, Idlib's inhabitants struggle to endure in extremely difficult conditions. In addition to confronting a lack of access to necessities such as food, clean water, health care, and education, the population is struggling to survive in the face of Russian and regime bombings and a lack of security over their lives. The region, where sanitation and housing conditions are also deplorable, is experiencing a dire humanitarian crisis.



Image: Among tents in the Atme refugee camp, where refugees fleeing the civil conflict have sought refuge, a woman cooks food for her family. [AP/Mohammed Mubeisen]

Except for briquette houses and housing initiatives spearheaded by a few NGOs, most buildings have been rendered unusable or severely damaged as a result of the 12-year civil war and Russian-backed regime forces' bombardments.



Image: As part of the dwellings of Life initiative, Turkish non-governmental organizations constructed briquette dwellings with the slogan «2 Rooms 1 Hope» [Anadolu Agency]

Approximately 3,3 million people, or 80% of the population in Idlib province, lack access to food, with 60% of the population expressing concern about tomorrow's food supply.⁹ More than 4,1 million Idlib residents rely on aid from the United Nations (UN) and other non-governmental organizations to satisfy their basic needs.¹⁰ In addition, Idlib has seen the greatest increase in the number of Syrians in need of assistance since 2021. Humanitarian aid can only enter the region through Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which is the only accessible crossing between Turkey and Syria.¹¹

Millions of people are forced to live in tent cities with no infrastructure, lacking even the facilities of a refugee camp, lacking access to food and clean water. They also lack hygiene and sanitation facilities, making them vulnerable to the Covid-19 pandemic and other epidemics. In tent communities with limited toilet and shower facilities, dozens of people must share the same toilets and showers. In one irregular camp visited in the vicinity, camp officials reported that there is one toilet for every 23 people.¹²

Given the lack of access to hygiene supplies, it is simple to comprehend the severity of this threat. Inadequate health centers, apparatus, and access to medicines in the region exacerbate the dire situation.

Households in the city center only have access to water on certain days. Although there is a hospital in the city's center, the lack of equipment, personnel, and medicines in the hospitals prevents the local population from meeting its requirements. Additionally, regime artillery and Russian warplanes occasionally target the facility.



Image: A young girl fills a cistern with water in an irregular refugee settlement for forcibly displaced refugees in the countryside of Idlib. [AP/Anas Alkharboutli]

Numerous youngsters are unable to continue their education. Volunteer instructors in the region educate students in tents or buildings with extremely poor conditions. These volunteers, whose primary occupation is not instructing, provide free support for educational activities. However, these educational activities are limited due to a lack of facilities.¹³



Image: Children attempting to resume their education in Atme camp tent schools. [Anadolu Agency/Muhammad Abdullah]

In addition to these limited resources, the enormous earthquakes that struck northern Syria on February 6, 2023, and were centered in Kahramanmaraş had a significant impact. Numerous structures, already destroyed by bombardments and clashes, collapsed because of these earthquakes, thousands of people were killed and injured, and the humanitarian crisis in the region worsened. The earthquake caused widespread devastation in the Syrian regions of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia. Numerous structures, infrastructure, and workplaces were destroyed. In northwestern Syria, there were reportedly 7,692 deaths and 10,040 injuries. According to reports, however, there are many more people trapped under the debris, making the death toll significantly higher. In Syria, where 392 thousand families were displaced by the earthquake, the number of people affected by the earthquake reached 8.8 million. 4.9 millions of these individuals require immediate humanitarian assistance. Idlib is one of the regions most in need of assistance, with 3 million individuals in need.¹⁴ The earthquake has substantially increased the need for shelter in the region, as it has destroyed thousands of homes and tents. In this context, against the backdrop of 13 years of conflict, the humanitarian situation in the region is deteriorating, with failures to meet the medium- and long-term food and shelter requirements of the people affected by the earthquake, in addition to their immediate needs.

The situation described above demonstrates that Idlib is one of the most challenging places to reside in the world today. Access to even the most basic needs in the region is quite difficult and limited. This circumstance makes living conditions in the region more difficult. The humanitarian aid activities of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations are insufficient to meet the requirements of the millions of people crammed into the region. The sustainability of this assistance is also hindered by the regime's and its allies' attacks and Russia's vetoes.

In addition to these difficult living conditions, the Assad regime, its allies Russia and Iran, and their military forces use evacuees as a political weapon by destroying or forcing refugees to leave the region.

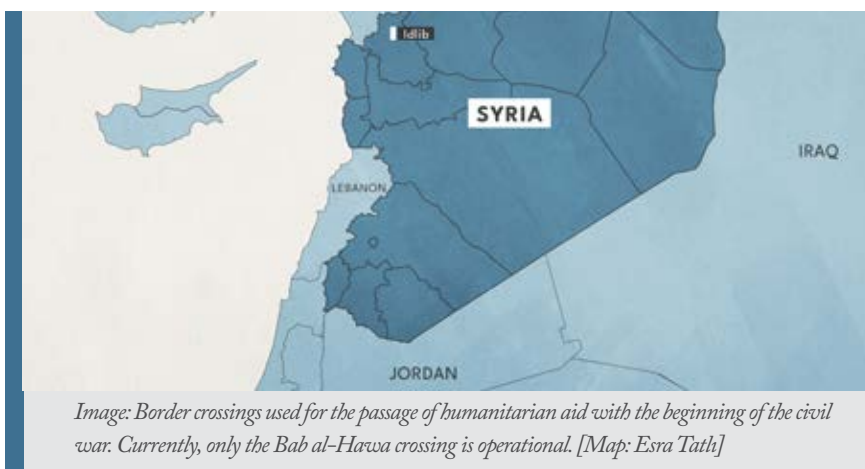
Political Trump of Russia: Humanitarian Aid

There are over 6 million Syrians who have fled the country due to the 13-year civil conflict, as well as over 6 million Syrians who are internally displaced. The preponderance of these displaced individuals requires humanitarian assistance. Since March 2011, Syria has experienced unprecedented destruction and devastation, and over 15 million people require humanitarian assistance.¹⁵ Several partner organizations, including the United Nations and its affiliates, are providing humanitarian aid to the region. These cargoes are transported via road through border crossings.



Image: Refugee woman in Idlib carrying a package of aid distributed by a humanitarian organization. [Getty Images/Burak Kara]

Immediately following the onset of hostilities, relief efforts for those in need in the region began. With Resolution 2165, the first UN cargo from Turkey to Syria began on July 24, 2014. After the adoption of Resolution 2165 (2014), the following resolutions were adopted: 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020), 2533 (2020), 2585 (2021), 2642 (2022), and 2672 (2023). These resolutions granted UN agencies and partners permission to use the Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, al-Yarubiyah, and al-Ramtha border crossings to deliver humanitarian and medical aid to Syria. In this context, UN agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, WHO, FAO, and IOM provide humanitarian assistance, which includes food, hygiene items, medical apparatus and medications, education, and shelter.¹⁶



Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq are just a few of Syria's neighbors who are providing aid to the region's more than 4 million residents. In January 2020, however, aid activities through al-Ramtha (Jordan) and al-Yarubiyah (Iraq) were terminated due to Russia's veto and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. The same decision prolonged the use of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for one year, while the use of the Bab al-Salam border crossing was extended for six months.

As of July 10, 2020, UNSCR 2533, the only border crossing through which humanitarian aid can enter Syria is the Bab al-Hawa crossing. Hence, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing is not a typical border crossing, but rather a "life saver" for millions of people in the region in need of humanitarian aid due to the ongoing civil conflict.

Before the expiration of Resolution 2533, negotiations were initiated to extend the aid for an additional year, but Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, vetoed the resolution. After the veto of the one-year extension, a six-month extension plan was agreed upon, taking into consideration Russia's proposal.

UNSC unanimously authorized the extension of UNSCR 2533, which expired on July 10, 2021, on July 9, 2021. Consequently, resolution 2585 (2021) extended the authorization for the UN and its affiliates and partners to coordinate and deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance from Turkey to northwestern Syria without the consent of the government of Bashar al-Assad for an additional year, until 10 July 2022.¹⁷ Prior to the negotiations, Russia threatened to veto the renewal of the authorization to enable cross-border aid, but just one day before the expiration of the previous authorization, a compromise was reached.¹⁸



Image: Humanitarian aid workers congregate near the town of Sarmada in Idlib province, close to the Turkish border, to protest the planned closure of the Bab al-Harwa border crossing due to Russia's veto. [Source: Getty Images/Omar Haj Kadour]

With the UNSC's decision no 2642 (2022), the authorization to use only the Bab al-Air border crossing for humanitarian aid activities to Syria has been extended for six months until January 10, 2023. For the next six months (through 10 July 2023), it was determined that a separate decision would be necessary.¹⁹

Resolution 2642 (2022) was passed with 12 affirmative votes to 3 abstentions. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America (USA) abstained from voting. The officials who made statements on the matter attributed the abstentions to Russia's imposition of a six-month extension of the resolution and their fears that this period was insufficient for humanitarian aid activities and could impede them.

The United Nations Security Council convened on January 9, 2023, and unanimously approved a resolution extending humanitarian aid operations through Turkey until July 10, 2023²⁰. Russia, which has repeatedly used its veto in previous votes and viewed the decision-making process regarding the continuation of humanitarian aid as a tool for its political interests, issued a statement through its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vassily Nebenzia, stating that they had made the "difficult decision" to support the adoption of the resolution.

This statement obviously reflects Russia’s perspective on the region, which approves the continuation of humanitarian aid with a “difficult decision” in a setting where millions of people require humanitarian aid. The statement made by UN Secretary-General’s spokesperson Stephane Dujarric after the vote, “The decision comes at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest level since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, and when people in Syria are struggling with a harsh winter and a cholera epidemic,” reveals the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in the region²¹

In accordance with the latest agreement between the Assad administration and the UN on cross-border humanitarian aid from Turkey to Syria, humanitarian aid activities to be carried out from Bab-ül Havva (Cilvegözü) and Bab-üs Selam (Öncüpınar) border gates have been extended until 13 November 2023. Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Aid

To deny the people in the region access to their most necessities, Russia intends to close the border crossing, which is their only hope for survival, by vetoing UN resolutions allowing aid to enter the region. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia is using its veto power to block the delivery of aid to the region. Due to Russia’s use of the veto as a diplomatic trump card, the humanitarian assistance activities, have occasionally been in jeopardy of being halted since 2014.



Vassily Nebenzia, permanent representative of Russia to the United Nations, at the UN Security Council. [Source: Reuters]

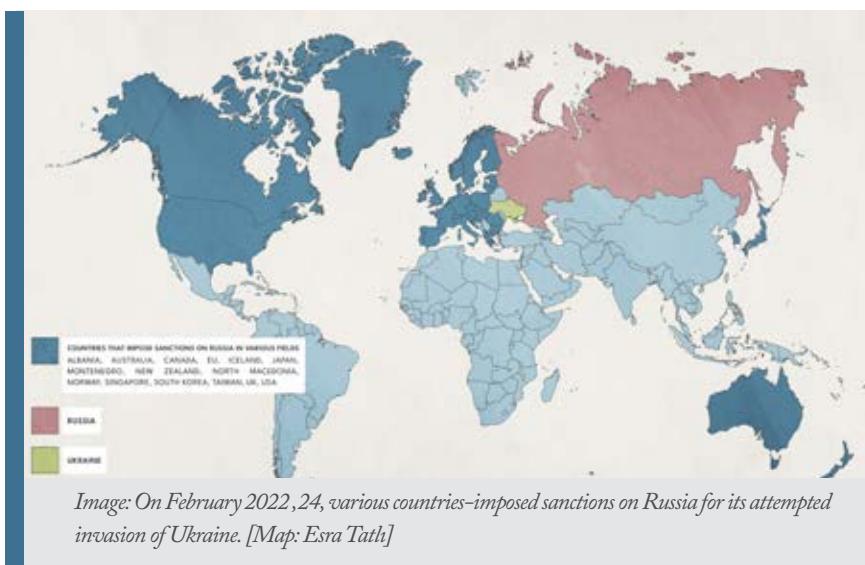
Russia, which is directly involved in the Syrian conflict, is employing its position and veto authority in the UN Security Council to exert pressure

on Damascus to channel all humanitarian aid, including aid to northern Syria.

However, if aid is coordinated by Damascus, it will undoubtedly only reach regime supporters. In addition, the fact that the United Nations and international community are addressing the Regime in humanitarian aid activities will give the impression that the Regime is the sole “legitimate” power. From this perspective, it is possible to assert that Russia and the Assad regime have instrumentalized and exploited humanitarian aid efforts

Retaliation for Sanctions

Russia’s attempted invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 prompted the United States and European nations to impose severe sanctions against Russia. Russia responded in various ways to these sanctions. Restrictions on natural gas exports to Europe, price adjustments for natural gas, and the deployment of missiles in the Kaliningrad region are among Russia’s countermeasures to Western sanctions. Syria is another theater of the “counterrattack” by Moscow. Russia desires to use its prohibition over the extension of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing as leverage against the United States and the European Union (EU). In fact, its veto of the decision to extend the border entry for an additional year and subsequent imposition of its own draft are examples of this circumstance.



In addition, the scenario of a global wheat crisis that emerged because of the Ukraine conflict has had devastating effects on the Idlib region, which was already experiencing wheat shortages.

In addition, negotiations with Russia facilitate the export of Ukrainian cereals from the ports. Thus, Russia uses the situation in Syria both directly and indirectly for its invasion attempt in Ukraine.

Idlib: A strategic dead end for Russia

The Syrian Civil War has become a battleground where international actors play a decisive role. In this context, Russia's interventions will determine the trajectory of the Syrian conflict. September 2015 decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin to send troops to Syria at Bashar al-Assad's request was a significant turning point in the conflict. This decision prevented the overthrow of the Assad regime at a time when the opposition

Since 2011, Russia has exercised its veto 17 times, demonstrating unequivocally its support for Assad.

was besieging the capital. With the assistance of Russia, the Assad regime was able to drive back the opposition, after which it increased its attacks against the opposition.

Regional powers and international power centers, such as the United States and the European Union, have subsequently positioned Russia as a pivotal actor in Syria. However, it is incorrect to assume that Russia's support for the Assad regime began in 2015. Even prior to 2015, Russia engaged in significant military, diplomatic, and economic activities with Syria under Bashar al-Assad's rule and supported the Assad regime in a variety of areas. In October 2011, just a few months after the start of anti-Assad protests, Russia used its veto in the UN Security Council to shield Bashar al-Assad from international condemnation, the possibility of harsher sanctions, and the possibility of military action against Syria²². Since 2011, Russia has exercised its veto 17 times, demonstrating unequivocally its support for Assad.²³

UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTIONS ON SYRIA VETOED BY RUSSIA

8 July 2022	S/2022/538
10 July 2020	S/2020/667
7 July 2020	S/2020/654
20 December 2019	S/2019/961
19 September 2019	S/2019/756
10 April 2018	S/2018/321
17 November 2017	S/2017/970
16 November 2017	S/2017/962
24 October 2017	S/2017/884
12 April 2017	S/2017/315
28 February 2017	S/2017/172
5 December 2016	S/2016/1026
8 October 2016	S/2016/846
22 May 2014	S/2014/348
19 July 2012	S/2012/538
4 February 2012	S/2012/77
4 October 2011	S/2011/612

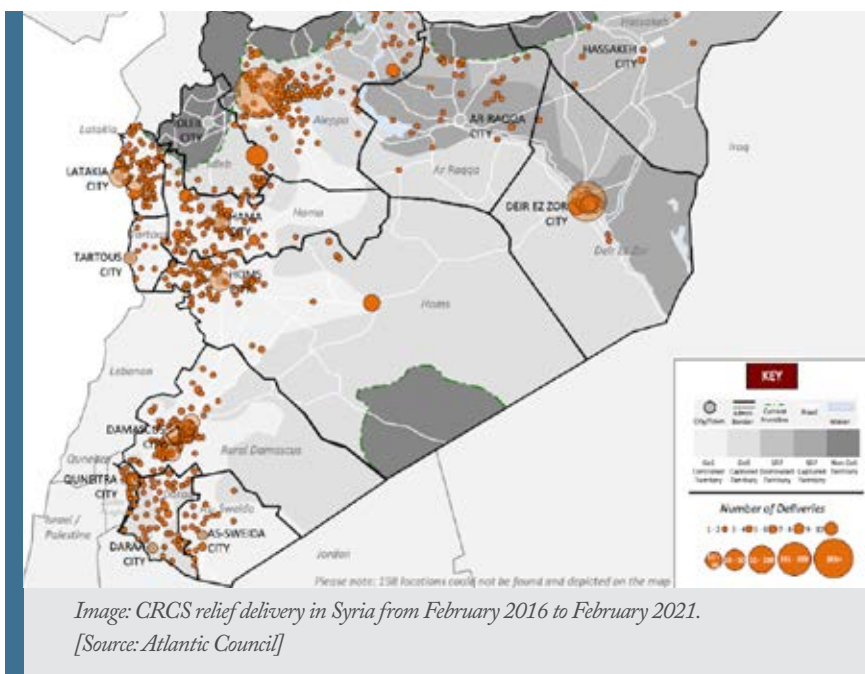
Image: Graph depicting Russia's vetoes on United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Syria from the outbreak of the civil conflict in 2011 to 2022. [Source: UNSC/ Graphics by Esra Tatlı]

In addition, Russia has made its position plain by supporting the Assad regime in UN-led mediation efforts such as the 2012 Geneva Summit.²⁴ Russia has also provided economic assistance to the Assad regime, allowing it to endure despite international sanctions. Recently, however, this support has diminished.

The Russian Ministry of Defense established the Center for Reconciliation of Conflict Parties (CRCS) in Syria, which represents Russia’s “soft power” in the country. According to reports published by this organization, which has become the principal player in Russia’s humanitarian aid activities in Syria, between February 2016 and February 2021, Russia conducted 3,090 aid activities in 731 locations in Syria.²⁵



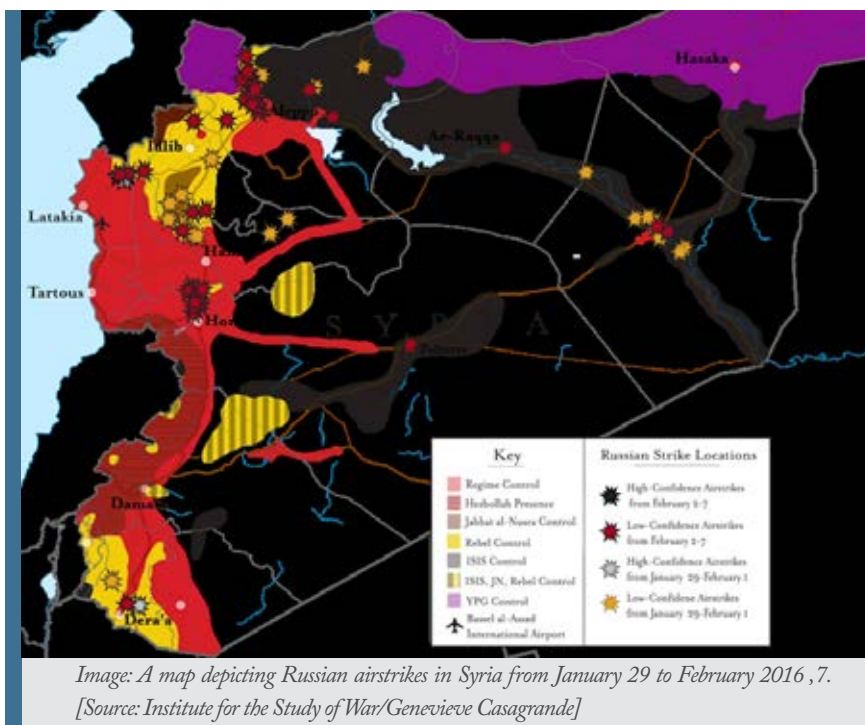
However, Russia’s aid activities appear unplanned, and to have little long-term effect. According to data from Russian sources, Russia’s aid efforts in Syria are insufficient to meet the requirements of the Syrian people, and the aid is used to advance Russia’s interests rather than those of the Syrian people. Examining the CRCS’s published data would be sufficient for reaching this conclusion. 98% (717) of the 731 regions that CRCS helped between 2016 and 2021 received symbolic one-time assistance. Another notable element here is that help to areas controlled by Russian and Iranian-backed regime forces fluctuates in accordance with Russian priorities.²⁶



This reveals that Russia has instrumentalized humanitarian aid activities in line with its own interests. There are also fluctuations in health and food, two areas where Russian help is focused. While the rest of the world was dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak, Russia paused or curtailed its health supplies to Syria area by region. Food aid comes in the form of modest packages containing a few commodities such as canned tuna fish, rice, and wheat.²⁷

The humanitarian help provided by Russia in Syria is “modest.” For example, Russia has donated only 23.3 million dollars in UN-coordinated aid, compared to 3 billion dollars provided by the United States and the European Union. Furthermore, Russia’s on-the-ground relief initiatives cannot compensate for the loss caused by its lack of support for UN-coordinated aid.²⁸

In contrast to its inadequate humanitarian aid, Russia has been aiding the Assad government in the political and economic areas in order to keep the Assad regime afloat and has not shied away from demonstrating this “benevolence” in the military sphere as well. In this regard, the Russian air force has aided the Assad administration in retaking several districts. Between 2016 and 2018, Russian air force planes provided aerial support to Syrian and Iranian ground troops in several military operations, including the capture of opposition-held eastern Aleppo, Ghouta, and Daraa, as well as the capture of ISIS-held Palmyra and Deir al-Zour.²⁹



These bombardments continue in the Idlib region. Meanwhile, Russia has strengthened its presence in Syria, constructing numerous new military outposts such as the Tartus naval facility and the Latakia air base, as well as training and equipping the Assad regime’s troops with military weapons. The escalation of Syria’s civil war and the prolongation of the conflict strengthens Russia’s position in the area and its bargaining power.

In addition to the failure of UN mediation initiatives and Russia’s use of its veto power to prevent numerous resolutions from becoming law, Russia has established a new mediation process on its own initiative known as the Astana Platform. Turkey’s participation in this process, in which it gained certain concessions, raised the prominence of the process, and generated international interest in the Astana Platform.

Although there have been various talks and initiatives between Syrian opposition groups and the Assad regime in cities such as Geneva, Vienna, Riyadh, and Lausanne, with agendas such as a ceasefire, a peaceful end to the conflict, and a new constitution, these talks, in which states such as the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have also participated, have yielded no results. On December 20, 2016, Turkey’s, Russia’s, and Iran’s foreign ministries agreed to hold Syrian

peace negotiations in Astana, Kazakhstan, in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 18, 2015³⁰. On December 28, 2016, Turkey and Russia reached an agreement on a cease-fire arrangement that would go into effect on December 30, 2016. This initiative by Turkey and Russia was also endorsed by UN resolution 2336 adopted on 31 December 2016.³¹



*Image: 18th Astana Talks taking place in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana.
[Source: The Astana Times]*

Turkey, Russia, and Iran reached an agreement in May 2017 to establish four de-escalation zones across Syria³². Despite the agreement, Regime forces, supported by Russia and Iran, conquered three of the four de-escalation zones with heavy aircraft bombardment. With three of the four conflict zones in question coming under the control of the Regime forces, only the northwestern Idlib region remains. Idlib, regarded as the last stronghold of opposition troops, has become a haven for millions of civilians fleeing airstrikes and atrocities by Russian and Iranian-backed government forces in other parts of Syria.



Image: A map of the conflict zones. [Source: BBC/Map: Esra Tath]

On June 15-16, 2022, the representatives of Turkey, Russia, and Iran, the guarantor states of the Astana negotiations launched to find a long-term solution to the Syrian issue, gathered for the 18th time in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan's capital³³. The parties that came together lastly held talks on 20 June 2023 within the scope of the 20th Astana talks.³⁴

The Russian-led negotiations in Sochi are occurring concurrently with the Astana talks, in coordination with the previous negotiations. The Astana process is viewed as a supplement to the Geneva-launched negotiations. The negotiations that began in Sochi continue in accordance with the Astana procedure. Consequently, the Geneva, Astana, and Sochi procedures can be characterized as complementary in the context of the search for a solution to the ongoing crisis in Syria. Within the scope of these talks, numerous crucial negotiations and decisions have been made for the resolution of the Syrian crisis, including reconciliation for detainees, increased cooperation on providing favorable environments for the return of refugees, the determination of conflict zones, the mutual release of prisoners, the humanitarian situation in Idlib, UNSC resolutions, and the establishment of the Constitutional Committee.³⁵



Image: Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the United Nations for Syria, addresses the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi, Russia, on January 2018, 30.

[Image: Getty Images/Alexander Nemenov]

This process, which was initiated with the intention of establishing a lasting peace in Syria and ensuring the return of more than 6 million Syrian refugees living outside the country, has not yet achieved the anticipated success, despite the positive atmosphere created by the agreements and understandings reached by the parties on occasion.

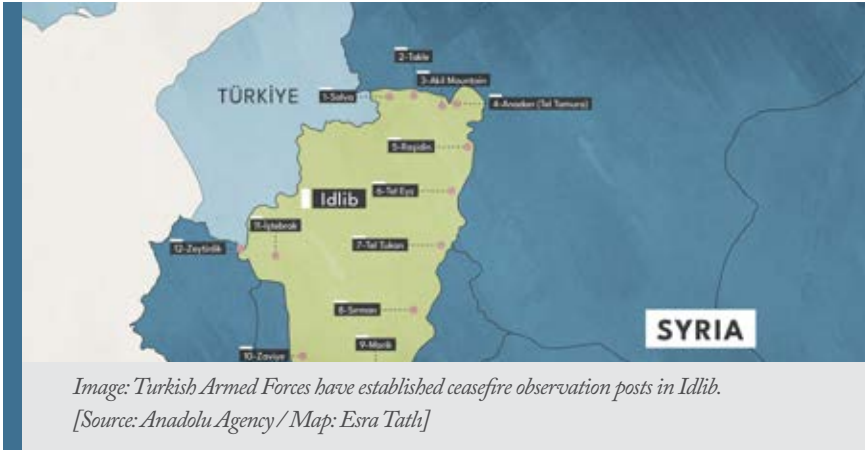
Russia continues to envisage a Syria in which Bashar al-Assad remains in power. Considering Russia's regional and global interests, particularly in the Mediterranean, this situation highlights the fact that Russia will not hesitate to defend Bashar al-Assad at any cost, including the use of chemical weapons and the massacre of civilians.

There are several explanations for Russia's aggressive position. In addition to opening a space for the regime and squeezing the opposition in Idlib because of its involvement in the conflict, Russia has also reached a strategic impasse in Idlib. The Russian-backed regime forces may have the opportunity to seize the Idlib region through a military operation in Idlib, given the current circumstance. Even though this would be a "victory" for the Assad regime, the situation for Russia has very distinct dimensions.

First, Russia's periodic attacks on civilian targets in the Idlib region exert psychological pressure on the residents of Idlib and are occasionally used as a threat against Turkey. This trump card, which can be quite beneficial for Russia, is a strategic loss if it is surrendered.

In fact, the attacks against the areas that the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) have taken control of in the region and the points that are very near to these areas demonstrate that these attacks are not random and that there is cause for concern. In 2019, it was alleged that one Turkish soldier was killed, and 3 soldiers were injured in an attack on observation post No. 10 in the south of Idlib by regime forces backed by Russia.³⁶

In addition, Turkish observation post No. 9, which remained under the authority of regime forces in the Morik region, was relocated after Russia did not assist with resupply. Russia's refusal to assist in resupply has been interpreted by experts as an effort to exert pressure on Turkey³⁷. Even though the regime forces attacked the observation posts, Russia, and Iran, as guarantor countries, are also accountable for these attacks.³⁸



*Image: Turkish Armed Forces have established ceasefire observation posts in Idlib.
[Source: Anadolu Agency / Map: Esra Tath]*

Russia and regime forces also attacked a battalion of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) stationed in the Balyun region south of Idlib on February 27, 2020, resulting in the deaths of 34 Turkish soldiers³⁹. This attack, conducted by Russian jets equipped with KAB-1500-type missiles launching from Khmeimim Air Base and Regime forces, will go down in history as the bloodiest instance of Russia and the Assad regime’s unease with the Turkish presence in the area.



*Image: Vehicle wreckage at the site of the airstrike on Turkish personnel.
v[Source: AFP/Omar Haj Kadour]*

Russia is bombing refugee centers, infrastructure facilities, villages, and even schools in the region to force people to flee, as regime forces intensify their infiltration attempts in Idlib to gather intelligence for their planned attacks on the region. According to Mohammad Hallaj, Director of the Syria Response Coordination Office, which has been working on migration movements in the Idlib region, 5,834 civilians from Jabal Zawiyah, Jabal Shahishbo, Kansafra, Mozara Ainlaruz, Fattira, Bara, and Kafaravid villages migrated to camps along the Turkish border in just 24 hours following the intensification of Russian airstrikes in 2020.⁴⁰

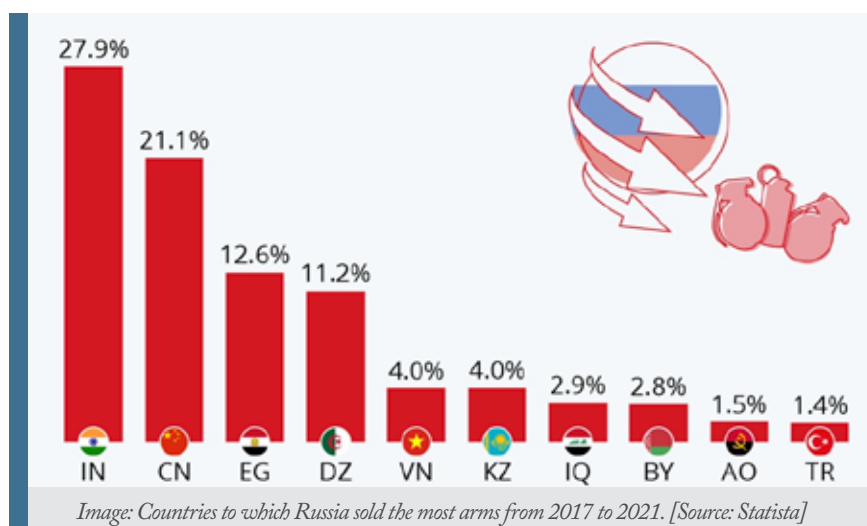
Second, the conclusion of the conflict and civil war in Syria may diminish Russia's regional influence. In the event of an agreement between the parties, Assad's 'victory', or the victory of the opposition, Russia may be forced to reduce its military bases and presence in the region. In the context of the ancient Russian ideal of reaching the warm seas, Russia's naval facilities in Syria are of critical importance. In addition, Russia's position in Syria may function as a trump card for Putin in other international matters. The expanding Russian presence in African nations can also be understood in this context. In addition, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria would further damage the Russian military's international reputation, which has already been damaged by its attempted invasion of Ukraine and its significant losses on the front lines.



Image: Russian and Syrian servicemen during a rehearsal for a military parade at the Khmeimim airbase. [Source: EPA]

Thirdly, it is known that Russia has utilized the Syrian conflict and bombardments to test some of its armaments and equipment. In this regard, the end of the Syrian conflict, which Russia views as a very valuable field for its weapons and defense industry, would be a loss for Russia. This is because Russia is employing in Ukraine several the armaments and military strategies its tested in Syria. Particularly Western nations should learn from this situation. The West, which has not imposed serious sanctions on Russia, has been actively involved in Syria since 2015, and has failed to develop policies and attitudes toward the massacres and rights violations committed by Russia in Syria, is now seeing the consequences of this permissive attitude toward Russia in Ukraine. Syria serves as a “demonstration center”

for Russian arms exports. Su-34 fighter jets and cruise missiles, the Ratnik infantry combat system used by Russian troops in Ukraine, and Su-35 fighter jets, which are frequently used in Syria, have been “selling out” since Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian civil war. Russia sold 12 Su-34 aircraft to Algeria in 2016, 21 to China, 10 to Indonesia, and 10 to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2016⁴¹. The fact that Russia has tested over 600 new weapons and military equipment in Syria, as stated by Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov to the Interfax news agency, demonstrates that Russia views Syria as a military testing ground.⁴²



The Russian Ministry of Defense summarized its military operations in Syria between September 2015 and August 2018 in a video titled “Military Operations of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Syrian Arab Republic” posted on its official YouTube channel on August 22, 2018. The video features 34 aircrafts (12 Su-24; 10 Su 25CM; 4 Su 30CM; 4 Su-34; 2 Su-25UB; 1 An-30, 1 Il-20), 16 helicopters (12 Mi 24p; 4 Mi-8MT-Sh), as well as other military vehicles and equipment used by Russia in its attacks on Syria during the time.⁴³ In the video, which is a “promotional film” of the weapons and warplanes used by Russia in the attacks in the region, it is stated that Russian aircraft perform more than 100 flights per day, with each plane performing between three and four flights. The video also mentions Russia’s military aircraft and its humanitarian efforts in the region. However, the video, which is quite extensive and detailed, makes no mention of the civilians who were slain or injured because of the Russian

air force's attacks. Russia intends to conceal the civilian atrocities it has committed. Nonetheless, the available visual evidence plainly depicts the civilians killed, including humans, animals, civilian settlements, hospitals, and schools, as well as the fact that Russia was responsible for these attacks.

Considering all these reasons, it is possible to state that Russia prefers a controlled conflict situation in the Idlib region, strives to establish psychological superiority with the attacks it intensifies periodically and targets civilians, employs these attacks as a tool for its diplomatic gains, and refrains from conducting an operation against Idlib due to the limitations of its ground forces. Considering that Bashar al-Assad's desire for "victory" is contingent on Iran's ground support and Russia's aviation support, Idlib region has likely become a strategic dead end for Russia.

Regime-Russia Alliance Bombing of Civilians in Idlib

Even before Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil conflict, the Assad regime was conducting attacks on civilians in the Idlib region. According to the 2014 report of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, regime forces attacked multiple sites in and around Idlib.⁴⁴ Between July and October 2013, the Jabal al-Zawiya region, and the villages of Saraqib, Kafr Nabl, and Maaret al-Numan were subjected to heavy bombardments. The bombardment of a marketplace in Ariha on July 21, 2013, was one of these attacks.⁴⁵ According to the Commission's report, barrel explosives were also used in these attacks.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁶



*Image: A fragment of a barrel weapon used by the air force of the regime in Ariha.
[Source: Reuters]*

In addition to bombardments, regime forces and their Iranian-backed militias committed numerous murders in Idlib and Homs in the early years of the civil war. On May 25, 2012, pro-regime Shabiha militants and affiliated militias committed an hours-long massacre in Houla, a region containing three villages northwest of Homs. During this atrocity, they murdered at least 108 people, including women and children, house by house in the surrounding villages using knives and bullets. In the massacre, 49 infants and 20 women were killed.

Data on Russian Attacks

- *Between September 2015 and September 2022, there were 5,700 airstrikes in Idlib.*
- *4,056 individuals were killed in these assaults. 1,065 infants and 753 women were among those who lost their lives.*
- *12,000 civilians were injured in the attacks.*
- *During this time, the Russian air force conducted 262 attacks that could be regarded massacres*. [*refers to attacks in which 5 or more persons were killed].*
- *Khmeimim Air Base, one of the Russian airfields from which warplanes lift off, has 17 aircraft storage hangars containing jets.*

Source: Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets), 2022

Human Rights Watch reports that some of those responsible for the massacre wore military uniforms, while others wore civilian clothing and identified the victims by name before murdering them.⁴⁸ This makes what occurred in Houla more than an atrocity; it is viewed as a massive and systematic attempt to eradicate a predominantly oppositional region.



Image: A woman slaughtered by Shabbihas in Houla. [Source: A Separate State of Mind]

Hula Massacre

On May 25, 2012, 109 civilians, including 49 children and 34 women, were murdered by government forces in Syrian hamlet of Houla near Homs. Numerous visual resources depict the Houla massacre and the murdered civilians. However, these visual sources could not be included in the report because they contain extremely sensitive images.

By scanning the QR code, you can access images of the Houla Massacre, in which civilians were murdered.



Attention, Sensitive Content!

With Russia's involvement in the civil war, regime-aligned forces, backed by Iran and Russia, started to seize opposition-held territory. There have been tens of thousands of civilian casualties because of these attacks, which were conducted without regard for civilian vulnerability. Airstrikes have caused the greatest number of civilian casualties among these attacks. These airstrikes are predominantly conducted by Russian aircraft. In addition to civilian communities, Russian aircraft also target infrastructure facilities, commercial zones, refugee centers, hospitals, and schools. The fact that the civilian population, children, animals, and infrastructure facilities are harmed in these attacks, which are ostensibly aimed at armed groups, rather than the armed elements in the region, reveals that Russia and the regime forces' true objective is not to fight armed groups in the region, but rather to victimize the 4.5 million people who live in the region.

These attacks conducted by Russian aircraft are a grave violation of human rights. In addition, these assaults should be investigated under international law's law of war and crimes against humanity provisions. Investigations into the attacks on the Idlib region revealed that they were carried out by elements loyal to Russia and the Assad regime, that they targeted civilians, residential areas, infrastructure facilities, and commercial areas, and that they resulted in the deaths of many civilians, including children. This report will focus on some "symbolic" attacks carried out by Russia and the Assad regime in the Idlib region, as it would be challenging to detail all the attacks conducted by Russia and the Assad regime in Idlib. The strikes include attacks on civilians, including women and children, as well as attacks on civilian areas, infrastructure facilities, commercial areas, and public locations like schools and hospitals.

Thus, it will be disclosed that Russia's airstrikes in the region are not limited to fighting armed opposition groups in the region or terrorism, but also directly target civilians and civilian settlements. The following assaults will be analyzed in this context:

Airstrike on al-Shami Hospital

On the evening of Wednesday, January 29, 2020, between 22:30 and 22:40 local time, Russian warplanes launched three missiles at the al-Shami Hospital in Ariha, also known as the Ariha Surgical Hospital. Due to the proximity of civilian settlements to the hospital, numerous residential areas were damaged, and the assault caused destruction and fires in numerous residential areas. Several mothers and children were reportedly present in the hospital during the attack.

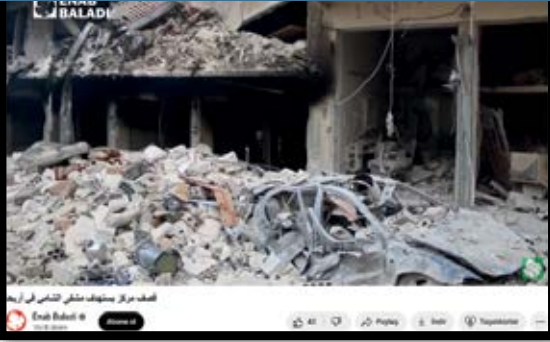
The assault killed 13 individuals, including children, women, physicians, and hospital staff. 68 individuals were injured. Zakwan Tamaa, the general director of Ash-Shami Hospital and an anesthesia technician at the hospital, was injured during the Russian airstrike but subsequently passed away. Tamaa formerly worked at al-Bayan Hospital in Aleppo but was compelled to flee to Ariha after Russian and regime airstrikes rendered the hospital inoperable. Dr. Wajih Qarat, the executive director of Ash-Shami Hospital, stated that approximately 200 patients were treated the day prior to the attack.

On January 29, between 22:30 and 22:40 local time, three missiles launched an airstrike against the Al-Midan neighborhood of Ariha. The first missile struck near the hospital's eastern side. Shortly thereafter, two more missile strikes were conducted on the southern and western portions of the hospital, inflicting severe damage, and rendering it inoperable. Within a 500-meter radius of the hospital, the airstrikes damaged not only the hospital, but also several civilian residential areas and a patisserie.

Syrian Civil Defense Ariha Director
Muhammed el-Hasimi

Given that most of these patients are women and children, the magnitude of this atrocity is quickly comprehended. Although the Russian Ministry of Defense denied that its air force bombed a hospital and a bakery in Ariha, available evidence indicates the contrary. In addition to corroborating the available information about the assault, the testimonies of those who resided at the site of the attack provide additional confirmation.

Bombardment of the Al-Shami Hospital by the Russians!



The Bashar al-Assad regime and its supporters launched poison gas attacks against civilian settlements in the Eastern Ghouta villages of Sakba and Hammuriyeh. Those afflicted by the gas were transferred to the region's field hospital and treated there.

Source: Enab Baladi, 2021, Youtube Page
<https://youtu.be/kO4xOIat6ls>




Note: The relevant video can be accessed by scanning the QR code.

The chronology of social media posts and additional incident-related information coincides with Hashim’s testimony. The fact that a Facebook page titled “Coordination of the Syrian Revolution in Idlib” shared a post about a Russian airstrike on Ariha immediately after the attack⁴⁹, as well as photos and news reports shared the day after the attack⁵⁰, clearly demonstrate that the attack occurred and the extent of the destruction, while undermining Russia’s claims that it did not conduct such an attack.

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

The Ash-Shami Hospital is situated in Ariha, approximately 12 kilometers south of Idlib. Before 2011, it was a private hospital for general surgery and obstetrics, but in 2015 it became a public hospital for Ariha and the surrounding area.



Coordinates: 35.817512, 36.610382
 [Google Maps]



Hospital's general superintendent and anesthesia technician, Zakwan Tamaa, receiving treatment after the attack.



First responders from the Violet Organization at the site of the attack.



Teams from the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) continue their search and rescue efforts around the hospital.



Images taken by the investigation team in and around the hospital after the attack.



Images taken by the investigation team in and around the hospital after the attack.



Images taken by the investigation team in and around the hospital after the attack.

Handheld camera footage following the initial assault on Al-Shami Hospital



Anas Tracey arrives at the bombing site and assesses the condition of the injured after the attack on the hospital.

Source: Anas Tracey, 2020, Youtube Page
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=We8ydiYK2dI>

Attention, Sensitive Content!



Note: The relevant video can be accessed by scanning the QR code.

Images from Ariiha



Anas Tracey arrives at the bombing site and assesses the condition of the injured after the attack on the hospital.

Source: Syrian Archive, 2021, Youtube Page
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry9HwVPn7d0>

Attention, Sensitive Content!



Note: The relevant video can be accessed by scanning the QR code.

This attack on Ash-Shami Hospital is not the first time Russia and the Assad regime have targeted hospitals in the region, nor is it likely to be the last. This assault on civilians and civilian areas was conducted by Russia as part of its strategy to dehumanize the region. Although Russia denies the assault, images and documents readily available demonstrate the attack and the resulting destruction.

Bombardment of the al-Arshani water facility

A Russian warplane twice bombarded the al-Arshani Water Pumping Station in western Idlib city on January 2, 2022, between 11:30 and 12:00 local time. The bombardment was conducted in two attacks, with the first strike targeting the northeastern portion of the station and the second strike targeting the western portion of the station; one station employee was injured. The station was severely damaged, rendering most of its apparatus inoperable. The damage to the station, which supplies water to approximately 300 thousand people in the region, prevented hundreds of thousands of people from obtaining water.

The damage to the water station, which supplies water to approximately 300 thousand people in the region, prevented hundreds of thousands of people from obtaining water.

There was no military equipment or ammunition at the station, nor were there any armed individuals. In addition, satellite imagery reveals that there were no settlements in the immediate proximity of the station where armed individuals could have hid. It is also possible to corroborate the

devastation caused by the attack by comparing satellite images with photographs taken in the area after the attack.



Image: Satellite image of Al-Arshani Water Pumping Station. [Google Earth]



Image: Satellite image of Al-Arshani Water Pumping Station and site images after the attack. (Orange icons in the shape of cameras denote the locations where the photographs were taken). [Syrian Archive]

This facility served over 300,000 individuals. Russia targeted one of the most fundamental requirements of civilians by depriving them of water.

[Idlib Water Works Director Cemel Diyben]

Russia has intensified its attacks on infrastructure facilities. Around 300,000 to 400 000 Idlib residents will be without water. The populace has no purchasing power already. The conflict for survival of civilians intensifies daily. Warplanes formerly attacked at random. Now they are targeting infrastructure systematically. The world is observing Russia's actions in Syria.

[Ibrahim Zeer, a regional inhabitant]

It is extremely difficult to purchase water at such a high price. Purchasing water will be an additional encumbrance for the population.

[Mohammed Khaled, a local resident]

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

The Al-Arsbani Water Pumping Station is located 1.2 kilometers southeast of the al-Arsbani village, 1 kilometers northwest of the Sejer and Fayoum villages, and 7.5 kilometers west of the Idlib city center.



Coordinates: 35°56'55.3"N 36°33'21.2"E

[Google Maps]



After the assault, the eastern façade of Plant 1 at the water station.



After the assault, the 2nd water station will be built.



Station structures with damage.



The targeting of the water station, where there is no military presence, is a clear violation of human rights and the laws of war, and the direct targeting of infrastructure facilities by Russian jets has exacerbated the already difficult living conditions of the civilian population in the region. This attack demonstrates conclusively that Russia and the Assad regime are targeting civilians in Idlib.

Airstrike on chicken farm in Kafr Tahkarim area

On 3 January 2022, Russian warplanes attacked a chicken farm located between the Kafr Tahkarim and Armanaz regions. A nearby civilian settlement was also damaged, a woman and an infant were injured, and the farm’s chickens perished. Two attacks were conducted in the region. The first assault targeted the poultry farm, while the second assault targeted the settlement of civilians. While 70% of the poultry farm was destroyed, 30% of the nearby civilian settlement was damaged.

When the first attack, which did not directly target the building, occurred near the poultry farm, I went with my colleagues to the scene, which was 4-5 kilometers from the center. We were informed that a second strike on the same location was possible because the airplanes had not yet completed their attacks. I was roughly 900 meters distant from the building when the second attack with two missiles directly targeting the poultry farm occurred. Following the attack, we evacuated those leaving the area and relocated them to safer locations.

White Helmets / Journalist
Mustafa al-Ghazeb

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

The chicken farm and surrounding residential districts are in the northwestern countryside of Idlib, between the villages of Kafr Tabrim and Armanaz.



Coordinates: 36°05'53.5"N 36°29'56.2"E
[Google Maps]



A view of the chicken farm from a distance.



Civilian communities near the poultry farm suffered damage because of the attack.



Damage to the chicken farm after the attack.



Civilian communities near the poultry farm suffered damage because of the attack.



After the attack, a house in the civilian community near the poultry farm was damaged.



A chicken farm was attacked by Russian bombers. The strike also caused damage to civilian residential areas.

*Source: Milteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nocNmdn-IM&list=PLs85RBs8oyBxEOP4RxxqvdQcdFZZHBOJHW&index=1*



The moment of being hit by a missile



Civilian Settlement and Wasted Chickens



Damage to the farm

The fact that Russian jets targeted this chicken farm, which is entirely civilian, even though there are no armed groups, munitions, or military buildings/settlements in the area, contradicts Russia's claim that the strikes and bombardments are carried out to combat terrorism.

Airstrikes on the schools of Munib Kemicha and Zuhair Radwan

On February 25, 2020, Russian jets dropped four thermobaric bombs (vacuum bombs) on the Ma'arrat Misrin region, targeting multiple civilian residential areas, schools, and mosques. The incident killed 11 individuals, including 7 children, 2 women, and 2 men, and injured 44 others, including 12 children, 12 women, and 20 adults.

One of the missiles was aimed at a residential neighborhood near the Salah al-Din Mosque in the city center. Another missile targeted a field on the city's southern outskirts, while the missiles also hit the Munib Kemicha and Zuhair Radwan schools, as well as a residential area nearby.

The attack badly damaged Munib Kemicha school and Zuhair Radwan school, both basic education schools in Ma'arrat Misrin's city center. A considerable number of civilian settlements and structures in the vicinity of the assaulted locations were also damaged.

Russian airplanes launched an airstrike with four thermobaric missiles on Ma'arat Misrin city on February 25, 2020, approximately 15:45. I was at home, but because the raid was targeting four different sites, I decided to go out and assist my pals on duty. The wireless communication device informed me that one of the missiles had struck a school near my house. I got dressed and went there. There were several displaced families from the southern and eastern countryside of Idlib, as well as youngsters playing. When I got in the schoolyard, the air was thick with smoke. The devastation was immense. When I entered the school, I saw an injured man. He was with his children and wife wailing on the ground around him. When I looked around, I saw children playing ball who were hurt and lying on the ground.

Then I left the house of the lady who was crying for her injured husband but couldn't help him. Children just have the right to play in a safe environment. Their only crime is that they were born in this area! When I discovered the school had been demolished... I felt helpless when I saw that the school where I had learned, played, and spent the finest days of my life had been destroyed. At the time, I attempted everything I could to come out of the shock and help people. The ambulance that was with us moved to a second attack site to assist civilians. I attempted to use whatever I could to help us rescue these folks and get the injured to the hospital.

White Helmets / Ma 'arat Misrin Center Volunteer
Muhammed Abdel-Razzaq Danwar

*In the attack on schools,
civilian settlements and
many structures near
the attacked areas were
damaged.*

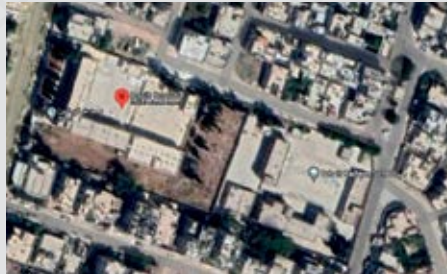
On 20/25/2020, the air force launched an airstrike with four thermobaric missiles against multiple civilian targets in Ma'arat Misrin city, including a school and civilian homes. We were alerted via a wireless communication device, after which we rushed to the explosives site. As a member of the Civil Rescue squad, I witnessed one of the missiles target a school containing displaced people. There were dozens of injured people, some of whom were only mildly hurt, while others required an ambulance. We assisted civilians and rushed them to a nearby hospital because there was one nearby. I transported two severely injured individuals to the hospital, but before I realized it, my family and younger brother were also injured and hospitalized.

During the second assault, a missile struck our building. I rushed to the site of the second detonation. Only ruins could be seen. Our house was destroyed. I was looking around. Thankfully, my children were still alive, but our neighbor's son, who was not even 10 years old, was severely injured. Then he lost his life from his wounds. After experiencing this situation, I am at a loss for what to do. I will never forget the situation we were in up until now, the terror and dread in the children's eyes and the parents' fear for them. I pray that these days will never return and that we will never experience a similar circumstance again.

White Helmets / Ma 'arat Misrin Center Volunteer
Hamid Al-Khaled

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

Munib Kemicha and Zubair Radwan schools are located 9 kilometers north of Idlib in Ma'arrat Misrin.



Coordinates: 36.010129, 36.672339
[Google Maps]



After the assault, civilians attempt to escape the scene.



Debris removal following the attack.



Russian planes hit civilian settlements. 11 civilians were slain and 44 were injured.

*Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page
[Link: <https://bit.ly/3XCBDKk>]*



*Munib Kemicha 1
Images from the attack*



*Munib Kemicha 2
Images from the collapsed building*

Although the strikes are said to be conducted in the context of the fight against armed groups in the region, the fact that they were conducted indiscriminately against civilians and that areas with a high concentration of children, such as schools, were so openly targeted is a tragic example of how vulnerable civilians and children are to Russian and regime attacks.

Bombardment of civilian habitations in the Ma'arrat Misrin region

Russian aircraft targeted civilian residential areas in the Ma'arrat Misrin region on 3 May 2022. After a reconnaissance aircraft flew over the area, Russian fighters reportedly attacked with high-explosive missiles, according to eyewitness accounts. A

A Civil Defense volunteer, who was transferred to the region after the attack, was injured due to the shrapnel that hit her in the attack.

volunteer for the Civil Defense who was deployed to the area following the attack was injured by projectiles. Families who had been forcibly displaced resided in the area. After the assault, it reportedly took more than seven hours to free those trapped beneath the rubble.

The attack resulted in the deaths of sixteen civilians, including two infants, seven women, and seven men. 21 civilians were injured, including 2 infants, 4 women, and 15 men. Three hangars, a poultry farm, one of which was destroyed and two of which sustained 50% damage, and low-slung, small dwellings housing refugees in the area are among the damaged structures.

I am volunteer Abd al-Malik Hanano. At approximately 2:00 a.m. on March 5, 2020, Russian warplanes targeted a farm west of Ma'arat Misrin with an airstrike and three missiles. We arrived at the raid site in an ambulance after people reported it. We went to the attack site because there were numerous civilians buried beneath the debris. On the way, we observed an ambulance transporting injured individuals to the hospital. At the execution site, the team commander was waiting for us to complete search and rescue operations. We were on our way there when a wireless communication device alerted us that the soldiers were going to launch another attack. We immediately exited the vehicle and sought refuge from the aviation attack. There was a reconnaissance aircraft and Russian aircraft at the time. The second assault was directed at the ambulance. Following the conclusion of the attack, we went to see the team leader who was waiting for us. We located the injured at the detonation site and transported him to Ma'arat Misain Hospital. Thank God his injury was mild as he moved away from the scene of the attack.

Due to the presence of Russian warplanes and a reconnaissance aircraft monitoring the area, we were unable to enter. But when we heard the cries of the people, we were unable to stop. Because we were familiar with the area, we took a different route to the attack site, waited until after the flight, and then entered. The scene was heartbreaking, and the destruction was beyond description.

The impact site consisted of 3 hangars for the Chicken farm. The victims were displaced agricultural laborers and their families. There were those who attempted to heal the injured children from the double raid. The number of casualties and injuries was astronomical. Not only were numerous birds killed, but the devastation was so extensive that emergency vehicles were unable to reach the scene. Because the ambulance could not accommodate all of the wounded, my colleague and I were required to transfer them over a distance of 300 meters in multiple batches. In the interim, we were in a race against time. We were thinking about the other wounded until we got back from the hospital. The injured we treated would return and implore us to assist their family. We continued to work with the rest. We were working with the teams responding to the support and helping the civilians trapped in the wreckage. I recall the scenario from that time and the children's cries of "Help!" It terrifies me...

*White Helmets / Ma 'arrat Misrin Center Volunteer
Abdul Malik Hanano*

This is Mohammed Ali Aoun, a volunteer from the Ma'arat Misrin Center. At 2:00 a.m. on March 5, 2020, radio communication devices informed us of fatalities and injuries caused by an airstrike on farms west of Ma'arat Misrin city. The missiles were directed at a property where several displaced families reside. A three-member ambulance crew was dispatched. When we arrived and inspected the area, three missiles had been launched. The destruction was great. They targeted the area in order. We did a general examination. I assisted the light-appearing wounded and placed them in an ambulance. The ambulance was taken to the hospital after I contacted other personnel from the center. The ambulance was transporting twelve injured patients. I stayed there.

At that time, according to the observatories, the Russian warplane was leaving the area, and ten minutes later, the Russian warplane was reported to be approaching. The area was full of civilians. I fled while yelling, "Run away, Russian warplanes will strike again!" I was approximately 100 meters distant from the central ambulance. The target of the missile was an ambulance. Following the conclusion of the assault, I was lying on the ground with stones and projectiles embedded in my thigh. Then I communicated with the device in my hand at high frequency. I informed the hospital about my injury. I was able to stand up after a few minutes when a rescue vehicle arrived. Following the departure of the Russian aircraft, I was transferred to the hospital. We dispatched an ambulance. Eight of the injured were transported to the scene in groups, after which search and rescue operations proceeded to look for missing individuals.

The location was fully civilian and contained workers from a poultry farm as well as displaced individuals living in poultry farms.

White Helmets Response Team Leader
Mubammed Ali Aoun

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

The incident took place in a residential neighborhood that is entirely made up of civilians, west of the Ma'arrat Misrin district.



Coordinates: 36°00'42.9"N 36°38'56.0"E
[Google Maps]



Those trapped under the rubble are being rescued by search and rescue personnel.



In the aftermath of the incident, numerous persons were trapped beneath the debris.



*A baby retrieved from the wreckage is being carried by search and rescue personnel.
[White Helmets]*

Images and Witnesses of Ma 'arrat Misrin's Attack



The strike also caused damage to civilian residential areas.

Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page

[Link: <https://bit.ly/3XCBDKk>]



*First Video
Images from the
attack*



*Third Video
Images from the
attack*



*Second Video
Images from the
attack*



*Fourth Video
Images from the
attack*



**Attention!
Content!**

Sensitive

The area is entirely rural and devoid of any military outposts, armed groups, etc. It is obvious that Russian jets target these regions to push displaced refugees in the area to leave, put further psychological pressure on local residents, and instill terror among the populace.

Airstrike on civilian settlements in al-Jadidah

On Friday, 22 July 2022, starting at 05:50 a.m. local time, the Russian air force conducted an airstrike on the area of civilian settlements of displaced families and a poultry farm in the al-Jadeida countryside in the Jisr ash-Shughur area of Idlib.

I heard the first explosion! It was in the village next to where I live, not far away! I hurried outside to the scene of the explosion! There was a second explosion at that very instant. I got in touch with the traveling group. At the time of the first explosion, they were en route. The team that arrived before us was unable to enter the area because there were soldiers present when we arrived. I saw blood on the road for the first time. A motorcycle was lying on the ground. A civilian paramedic was the injured party. He was crossing the road. We went to the front. An elderly man was yelling. We went right to him. He showed us where the kids were lying. We were digging and looking for the bodies of the children while our other teammates were carrying the martyrs' bodies. Then came a message. They informed us that soldiers were approaching the area. So, it took us about five minutes to leave the area. When there was no activity around, we went back. A young man's body was found during the excavation and search. The force of the explosion among the olive trees had blown the man to pieces. We put him in the car. The ambulance brought the search team and I back to this location. Using a shovel and basic tools, the first boy was discovered while being dug up. The team succeeded in extracting him, but he was sadly already deceased when we arrived at the hospital.

Two of his children were found with him. All of the martyrs' bodies were dug up and brought to the hospital. We went to the hospital with the young people. We were stopped by an old woman looking for her son. She said he went out after the first explosion. He hadn't come back by now. The body discovered among the olives later proved to be her son.

Everything was different at the hospital when we got there. There were the majority of the martyrs' bodies. In one of the hospital rooms, there were three girls and their brother. The remaining rooms contained more injured people. I took a few pictures before leaving the hospital. I noticed five kids with minor injuries on the way out. We then returned to the center.

Journalist
Mubammad Al-Johar

The strike, which was carried out in two successive bombardments by Russian airplanes, was discovered and verified by the Khaldoun Observatory, a field observatory in Idlib. According to Observatory officials, two high-explosive missiles and cluster bombs were dropped by each warplane during each bombardment.

In the attack, 7 civilians died, including 4 children and 3 men. 8 children, 1 woman, and 4 men were among the 13 people who suffered injuries. When Civil Defense teams arrived, they took the injured to al-Kunya Hospital. Based on the accounts of the injured, another team began to reach the victims under the rubble and eventually found the bodies.



Collapse in Idlib, Source: Associated Press

Assalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatub, on Friday morning, July 22, 2022, after turning over the guard duty, we left the center and were on our way home when we heard planes and bombs. Me, my friend Nawras and the ambulance driver went by ambulance and our other friends went straight to the bomb site with the pickup car.

We moved quickly from the main road to the bomb site to rescue the people, help the wounded and retrieve the bodies of the martyrs. A referral coming to us in the middle of the road said, "Beware that the soldier will still be dropping bombs." We were right in the middle of the Aljadidiya neighborhood and very near the bomb site. A new message came, saying, "The soldier dropped the bomb, go back". The cries of the injured could be heard, families were escaping, and there were martyrs.

From what I saw, Subhan Allah gave me a feeling. My aunt's house was in this area. I instinctively wanted to run to my aunt's house when I sensed that the bomb had gone off there. Without an ambulance, perhaps I could help someone or even save them.

Me and Nawras sped down the road in the ambulance car right after the second bomb went off. A man's body was lying on the highway. I saw someone fall on the road beside him. From head to toe, he was covered in blood. When the man on the ground shouted, "My children, my children!" I didn't realize at first. He was the son of my aunt. I was very surprised and immediately took him to the hospital in an ambulance. My aunt's son cut me off while I was trying to calm him down by pleading with me to save his children, saying, "Please save my children, they are under the rubble, the wall fell on them, please save my children, please save my children, my children are dead, all my children are dead, please save them." I cannot express my feelings at that moment. We immediately returned to the bomb site after we arrived at the hospital. We went out onto the road. The situation was extremely serious. It was a catastrophe. The family was there. Everyone crying included the father, grandfather, kids, and uncle. Three kids were confined inside the structure. Young people from the neighborhood, including myself and my friends, began working. Another group from the Darkush region then arrived to assist us. May Allah favorably reward them. Sadly, three children who were inside under the roof perished. May Allah grant them mercy and grant them their rightful places in heaven. They will pray for their departed loved ones in heaven, God willing. We should all be able to live in peace after this war, in my opinion.

White Helmets /Al-Yacoubiyah Volunteer
Ali Na'asan

The Attack's Location and Coordinates

Al-Jadidah village is a village in Jisr al-Shughour governorate in Idlib's al-Janudiya district. About 14 km separate the village from Jisr al-Shughour, which is where it is situated



Coordinates: 35.929416, 36.302193
[Google Maps]



Others sobbing in memory of their children who perished in the attack.



Children who were injured and treated in the attack.



A girl injured in the attack is taken to the hospital.



A young woman who perished after becoming trapped beneath the wreckage of a home that was hit by the attack.



Children who perished in a terrorist attack intended to kill civilians.



Animals as well as civilians are impacted by the attacks.

Footage and Witnesses of Al-Jadidah Attack



The strike also caused damage to civilian residential areas.

Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page



Note: The relevant video can be accessed by scanning the QR code.

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Body of a child tried to be removed under debris in Al-Jadidah attack




The strike also caused damage to civilian residential areas.

Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page



Note: The relevant video can be only accessed by scanning the QR code.

 Attention, Sensitive Content!


Drone Shooting of the Attacked Settlement



Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page



Note: The relevant video can be only accessed by scanning the QR code.

 Attention, Sensitive Content!

There were casualties among civilians because of the attack, which was targeted at them. It is obvious that Russia launched these attacks to instill a sense of unease and psychological pressure among the local populace. This thesis is supported by the fact that the attack took place on Friday in the early morning hours and was directed at civilians rather than any military facility or group.

Aerial attacks on the camps in Maram, Watan, Wadi Haj Khaled, and Kafr Rouhain

There have been civilian casualties because of Russia and the Regime's targeting of civilian settlements in Idlib with both airstrikes and ground missile attacks. At 6:55 a.m. local time on October 6, 2022, Russia and the regime attacked the countryside of Idlib. Numerous locations in the countryside of Aleppo launched hundreds of mis-

The attacks also included the use of 9N235 cluster munitions, which have been banned by international agreements.

siles. Six 220 mm 9 M27-K Uragan and six 300 mm 9 M55-K Smerch multiple rocket launcher systems were used to carry out the attacks.

The attacks also included the use of 9N235 cluster munitions, which have been banned by international agreements but were previously employed by Russian forces in Syria. In the region west of Idlib, the attacks targeted 4 refugee camps for people who had been forcibly displaced.

I was awakened by an explosion on Sunday, November 6, 2022, at 6:55 a.m. I got dressed and went to the Idlib fire brigade's headquarters in the city center. There were no fire departments or ambulances present. Ambulance crews went to the explosion points. I went to the local drivers, and Mohammed Darwish, the service car's driver, and I traveled to the explosion site west of Idlib. We encountered the second and third ambulance teams along the way, not far from the civil defense facility. They had two martyrs along with many wounded.

Given that we were unsure of the bomb's location, we took the western route to Kafr Rubin before continuing to Kafr Jallis. I ran into the third team's ambulance on the way and transferred from the service vehicle to the ambulance. Mohammed Juma Osman operated the ambulance as its driver. I snapped a few pictures from the ambulance as I was driving by to show how he was shooting from the plane with strewn bullets.

The siren sounded and the horror and fear of the people on the road were inexplicable. Around 7.33 am, Russian warplanes dropped their first bomb on the forests of Al-Basil while we were still on the road. Numerous photographs were taken proving the bombing. We then walked through the Idlib Corniche on our way to Kafr Jales. We went back to the wooded area where the ambulance had been after by the plane, which had launched two missiles in its direction. Our teams were summoned by ambulance to the scene of the accident where the injured were after the video was taken (the video captured the fire from the airplanes, but it was unclear where the bomb hit). When we arrived at the Ladikkani pool, we could see missile fragments, but no casualties were visible. A few pictures of this missile were taken.

The driver then refueled the vehicle at the center, and while traveling there, we came across the second team's ambulance. I stood between the two vehicles so that I could remain on the scene with Mohammed al-Hasan, the driver. The fourth attack occurred after that. This assault was also captured on camera. I stayed with the teams and didn't head back to the center until it was over even though I received the news of my cousin's death (my aunt's son) in the interim. Mohammed Juma'a Osman, the ambulance driver at the Third Idlib Center, informed me of this information. When I got back to the center, I notified three journalists who were covering other parts of Idlib that I was leaving and sent the pictures I had taken with the "go pro" camera to the media directorate of Idlib's first district. Then I informed 3 journalists in other parts of Idlib that I would leave the region.

I notified the Aldaba'ir center's media officer after learning that my cousin Amer al-Ali had perished in the first attack using cluster missiles. I requested that he join the team and told the team leader. I instructed him to visit every hospital in Idlib City and compile data on the wounded and martyrs in the third center. When I told Hamid Qutini, the editor of the Information and Communication Bureau, that my aunt's son had passed away, I left the area. I then went to the department of forensic medicine.

Journalist
Ammar al-Hamdo

Nine civilians were killed in the attacks, including 2 pregnant women, 5 children, one of whom was still in the mother's womb. 70 people were injured. In the Maram camp, where there were the most casualties, Azzam, the son of Hassan Bakir, a volunteer with one of the local organizations called the White Helmets, was among the children who perished.

The attacks severely damaged the camps as well. Numerous tents were completely unusable and hundreds were severely damaged. Most of the inhabitants were removed from the camps following the attack. Later, some people went back to the camps. The camps' buildings, including masjids, solar panels, and water stations, were also severely damaged.

The camps' buildings, including masjids, solar panels, and water stations, were also severely damaged.

The first bomb was dropped near the chicken farm and missed the building as my coworkers and I were traveling to the targeted location, which was 4-5 kilometers from the center. The plane had not yet completed its sortie, so I stood 900 meters away from the building in case a second bomb was dropped on the same location. Then I noticed that two missiles were used in the second attack. This time, it directly struck the chicken farm. Before the second attack, all civilians were completely removed from the area. We relocated those who left the area following the initial attack.

Journalist
Mustafa Al-Ghareeb

Location and GPS Coordinates of the Camp Maram Attack



Coordinates:
35°58'10.4"N 36°35'43.0"E
[Google Maps]

Location and Coordinates of the Camp Watan Attack



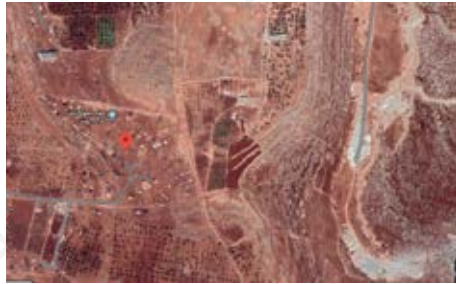
Coordinates:
35°58'32.3"N 36°35'52.3"E
[Google Maps]

Location and Coordinates of the Wadi Haj Khaled Camp Attack



Coordinates:
35°56'31.4"N 36°35'34.0"E
[Google Maps]

**Location and Coordinates
of the Kafr Rouhain Camp
Assault**



Coordinates:
35°58'21.9"N 36°34'57.3"E
[Google Maps]



Civilian communities harmed by the attacks



Civilian communities harmed by the attacks



Civilian communities harmed by the attacks



Civilian communities harmed by the attacks

Footage and Testimonies from Airstrikes on Camps



*Children lost their lives in the attack!
Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page*



Note: The relevant video can be only accessed by scanning the QR code.

 Attention, Sensitive Content!


Footage and Testimonies from Airstrikes on Camps



*The strike also caused damage to civilian residential areas.
Source: Mülteci TV, 2023, Youtube Page*



Note: The relevant video can be only accessed by scanning the QR code.

 Attention, Sensitive Content!

Footage and Testimonies from Airstrikes on Camps



Source: Refugee TV, 2023, Youtube Page



Note: The relevant video can be only accessed by scanning the QR code.

 Attention, Sensitive Content!

Russia's Prosecutability in the Context of the Legal Dimension of the Attacks

In the Idlib region, airstrikes, and bombardments by Russian and Assad regime warplanes on hospitals, schools, infrastructure facilities, commercial areas, and refugee camps for forcibly displaced people amount to war crimes. Many of these attacks, which were allegedly directed at terrorist organizations and armed opposition groups in the area, only hit civilians. Hundreds of civilians have died because of Russia's "indiscriminate attacks" despite the March 2020 cease-fire agreement between Turkey and Russia, and 1 million people who were already in a humanitarian crisis have been forced to leave their homes and camps. Some believe that these events may be considered crimes against humanity.

With its strikes in Idlib, as it has in Aleppo and other areas, Russia has flagrantly violated international law and the rights of Syrian civilians, according to the available documents, flight data, visual documentation, and other evidence.

Nevertheless, international legal institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Rome Statute, and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) do not recognize Russia and Syria as members or parties. Due to their inability to open investigations in the area, these mechanisms are unable to bring charges against Russia and the Bashar al-Assad regime. The Court cannot look into violations in Syria because neither Russia nor Syria are parties to the Rome Statute and the ICC only has jurisdiction over crimes committed on the soil of member states or by citizens of member states.

In 2016, after the ICC declared Russia's annexation of Crimea to be an occupation, Russia, a former member of the ICC, withdrew. The Rome Statute, which served as the ICC's founding document, was signed by Russia in 2000, but the Russian Parliament has not yet ratified the agreement. Russia is not a party to the Rome Statute as

a result. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which Russia has been a party since February 8, 1996, was also announced to be leaving in 2022. This ruling prevents Russia from being tried before the ECHR.

The Rome Statute, which was ratified by several UN member states, established the International Criminal Court (ICC), which is regarded as the most capable international judicial institution. The Rome Statute gave the ICC jurisdiction over crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression, and it went into effect in 2002. 139 nations have signed the agreement and agree that the ICC has jurisdiction over the crimes listed above. As was already mentioned, the main requirement for the ICC to prosecute these crimes is that either the crime occurred within the territory of a member state that has ratified the Rome Statute or that the offender(s) be a national or citizen of the member state.

When the UNSC gives the ICC investigative authority, this rule is an exception. 5 permanent members of the UNSC must agree to grant the ICC prosecutor the necessary authority before the prosecutor can begin looking into the crime and the criminals. States may also be investigated and tried even if they are not members of the ICC under Chapter VII of the UN Charter on Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression. This depends on the decision to be taken by the UNSC.

But there is a contradiction in this situation that works in favor of both Russia and the Bashar al-Assad government. This is due to the fact that Russia, a permanent member of the UNSC, uses its veto power to prevent the ICC from opening an investigation into both it and the Bashar al-Assad government. In these votes, the People's Republic of China largely supports Russia.

The ICC cannot investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria because neither Russia nor Syria are parties to the Rome Statute and because China and Russia have established a “shield of protection” in the UNSC to prevent looking into war crimes and criminals in Syria.

Despite this, some nations have taken steps to bring charges against Russia. For instance, several nations, led by the UK, asked the ICC to open a war crimes investigation into Russia in connection with the airstrikes that Russian troops launched in Syria. Russia and China, however, vetoed these motions. In addition, as was already mentioned, Russia’s withdrawal from the ICC means that it will no longer be held accountable for its annexation of Crimea, occupation of Ukraine, and military operations in Syria before the court.

From a legal standpoint, there are some exceptions to this pessimistic outlook. The ICC’s determination that it has jurisdiction over the Myanmar government for its genocidal acts against Rohingya Muslims is one of these exceptions. Despite not being a signatory to the Rome Statute, Myanmar, which has been guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity for years but reached its peak in 2017 when it forcibly displaced Muslims from their homes and committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in the process, is still subject to prosecution by the ICC.

The conclusion reached in this case was that the ICC can exercise jurisdiction over a non-member nation if a portion of the crime in question occurred on the soil of a nation that is a member of the ICC. Since Myanmar committed crimes of forced displacement, war crimes, and crimes against humanity on the territory of Bangladesh, which became a party to the Rome Statute in 2010, despite not being a member state, the ICC prosecutor decided to open an investigation in this situation.

It can also be used in the context of Syrian citizens who have been forcibly discharged from Syria. Jordan, where many Syrian asylum seekers reside, is crucial in this context even though Turkey, where most Syrian asylum seekers live, cannot be taken into account because it is not a party to the Rome Statute. Jordan is a state party to the Rome Statute. A legal foundation could be established by this circumstance for the prosecution of both Russia and the Bashar al-Assad government.

Although it will create a politically intense agenda, another practice that can be realized in order to create the necessary grounds for Russia to be prosecuted is to remove Russia from the permanent membership of the UNSC and to give the ICC prosecutor the authority to investigate Russia's war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria by removing Russia from the permanent membership of the UNSC and by conducting the necessary diplomatic negotiations with China, which left Russia "alone" by abstaining in the last vote that Russia vetoed.

The departure of Bashar al-Assad and the installation of a democratically elected government, which would open the door to the prosecution of Russia and the Assad regime, in 2011 was the catalyst for the unrest that broke out in Syria. In such a scenario, the new administration might adopt the strategy Ukraine used to charge Russia with annexing Crimea in 2014. In a letter to the ICC on April 9, 2014, Ukraine acknowledged the ICC's jurisdiction. In this declaration, Ukraine acknowledged that the ICC had the authority to find and bring charges against Russians for actions taken on Ukrainian soil between November 21, 2013, and February 22, 2014.⁵¹

In terms of time, the jurisdiction of the ICC covers the crimes committed after the entry into force of the Statute (Article 11/1). If a state joins the Statute after it has already come into effect, jurisdiction over that state begins on the day of that state's accession (Article 12/3). While the ICC cannot prosecute crimes that occurred prior

to April 11, 2002, a state that acceded to the Statute after it entered into force may accept the ICC's jurisdiction over crimes that occurred after that date but before the state's accession date (Article 12/3).⁵² This is also the case with Ukraine.

Additionally, the ICC used its previously mentioned jurisdiction in Ukraine to conduct lengthy investigations and gather evidence regarding Russia's alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine at the request of 39 of its member states. The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber announced the issuance of an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Presidential Commissioner for the Rights of the Child Maria Alekseyevna Lovova-Belova on March 17, 2023, marking the conclusion of the process. According to this decision, Putin is accused of forcibly removing thousands of Ukrainian children from their families and trafficking them into Russia. UCM Chief Prosecutor Kerim Han explained that the decision in question is valid for life.

Actions should be taken to ensure that this standard is applied to Syria, taking into account both the years that Assad started his atrocities in 2011 and the year that Russia started its military operations and attacks there in 2015. This is so that the fight for the rights of Ukrainian children can be waged without neglecting the rights of Syrian children to a safe life. Additionally, it is a known fact that brutal bombardments, chemical weapons, and barrel bombs have killed thousands of Syrian children. Additionally, Russia has been conducting similar atrocities in Idlib and throughout much of Syria for years.

In the context of this legal conjuncture, in addition to analyzing the rights violations and war crimes committed by Russia in Syria in general and in the Idlib region in particular, the legal status of Russia's presence in Syria is an important issue to highlight.

The legal basis for Russia's presence in Syria is the regime of Bashar al-Assad's "invitation" in 2015 under the self-defense exception to Article 2/4 of the United Nations Charter. In the context of this concept, which is also known as intervention by invitation, Russia entered the Syrian Civil War in September 2015 at the invitation of Bashar al-Assad in the context of combating internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, which have been particularly active in Syria since 2013. Since then, Russia has conducted numerous operations and aerial bombardments in numerous regions of Syria, including the Idlib region at present. In the context of self-defense, the legitimacy of Russia's "invitation" by the Bashar al-Assad regime is questioned, and it is asserted that Russia's military presence in Syria violates international law.

This situation, which necessitates an examination of the concepts of *Jus ad bellum* (the right to wage war) and *Jus in bello* (just war and proper conduct in war), may also affect Russia's ability to be prosecuted. Even though Russia has committed war crimes, the fact that the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria is still recognized as a legitimate government and has representatives, spokespersons, etc. on international platforms is an obstacle to Russia's military presence and interventions in Syria and Idlib region since 2015.

International actors must take the necessary steps to ensure that both Russia and the Bashar al-Assad regime are held legally accountable for their human rights violations, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia has supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad, including by vetoing United Nations Security Council resolutions. As of 2015, Russia has taken this support one step further by officially participating in military operations. Initially, Russia's military assistance consisted of attacks

against ISIS, which had expanded its influence in Syria following the fall of Iraq. However, these attacks targeted ISIS's command and control centers, fuel, weapons and ammunition depots and armed groups, and no civilian infrastructure facilities were targeted. In this regard, Russia's current attacks in Idlib are significantly more brutal than its previous attacks against ISIS. In addition, despite having signed a de-escalation zone agreement with Turkey and Iran in May 2017, Russia has conducted hundreds of airstrikes on de-escalation zone territory. Russia, which does not discriminate between civilians in these attacks, has not only massacred civilians in the region, including women and children, but also attacked infrastructure facilities, in violation of human rights and international law, and has not shown the same "sensitivity" toward the Syrians, the true owners of Syria, as it did towards ISIS.

With Russia's involvement in the civil war, the Assad regime, which has captured cities held by opposition groups one by one, has set its sights on Idlib, which is seen as the "last stronghold". The brutal and unlawful attacks on the region deepen the humanitarian crisis in Idlib. Selected attacks in the report reveal Russia's disregard for all norms of international law and human rights.

Russia is attempting to justify its attacks in Idlib by citing Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and other armed groups in the region. Numerous nations recognize HTS and the majority of the armed groups in the region as terrorist organizations. This strengthens Russia's position and makes it a useful tool for its attacks against civilians. International actors must devise a road map for Idlib to counter Russia's legitimization campaign through HTS and other armed groups in the region. This is because Russia violates all laws by increasing its attacks on the region daily. The population affected by the attacks and the number of civilians killed have increased in direct proportion to the attacks. The closure of Bab al-Hawa, the sole entrance to the region, may result from the escalation of the conflict in the region. In such a scenario, it is evident that the region's humanitarian crisis will deteriorate in an unpredictable manner.

The following actions must be taken to achieve this goal;

- As documented in previous reports and in this one, all international mechanisms must be activated to ensure those responsible for the documented Russian attacks are brought to justice.
- Since the attacks are in complete violation of international law, the law of war, and human rights, the International Criminal Court, the European Court of Human Rights, and other international courts should judge all those responsible for the attacks, especially the Russian officials in the chain of command.
- An international legal delegation should be dispatched to the region, and legal proceedings on behalf of the victims should be initiated against Russia.
- The perpetrators of the attacks should be identified, and actions such as flight bans and asset freezing, etc. should be taken.
- International Criminal Court (ICC) should prosecute Russian President Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad and other officials responsible for the attacks on civilians in Idlib and the massacres in the Syrian civil war. The possibility of establishing a tribunal like the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda should be put on the agenda.
- The International Criminal Court should conduct a similar investigation in Syria as it did in Ukraine. It is also a requirement of the equality principle and a legal obligation and responsibility that Syrian children have the same fundamental rights as Ukrainian children.
- Necessary steps must be taken to stop the Russian and regime-led attacks that have claimed the lives of civilians and targeted infrastructure, civilian residential areas, schools, and hospitals.

- Sanctions and embargos against Russia and the Assad regime must be increased in severity.
- To prevent the fate of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which is the only hope for most people in the region in need of humanitarian aid, from being sacrificed to Russia's veto, all options, including Russia's expulsion from the UNSC's permanent membership, should be considered.
- Instead of focusing on a single border crossing to deliver humanitarian aid to the region, the United Nations and its affiliates should generate the necessary public pressure to reopen Bab al-Salam and other alternative border crossings.
- It should be comprehended that the major players in the international system should adopt the same unyielding stance towards Russia in regard to the Syrian people as they have in regards to the war in Ukraine, and that Putin and Bashar al-Assad should be subjected to comprehensive legal, political, and economic sanctions.

Russia's attacks in Idlib are a clear violation of human rights. Russia is massacring civilians, destroying infrastructure, targeting hospitals and schools, and destroying people's means of subsistence in these attacks. Under the guise of combating terrorists, Russia's attacks have inflicted the most damage on the 4.5 million people trapped in Idlib amid a humanitarian crisis.

It is abundantly clear that the humanitarian crisis in Idlib will worsen if international actors do not abandon their passive stance against Russia and consider interests other than their own. If the attacks in the region continue, Turkey's borders will inevitably see a new influx of migrants. In 2015, the impact of a potential migration movement to Europe was witnessed by the entire globe. Russia's attacks on Idlib must cease, and those responsible for the attacks carried out thus far must be prosecuted, for all the above reasons, but especially in the name of humanitarian concerns. Recent examples of Bosnia-Her-

zegovina, Afghanistan, and Iraq demonstrate that inaction against oppression leads to another oppression in a different geographical location.

According to Martin Luther King, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

ANNEX-1

Law of War within the scope of the International Law

There were efforts to prosecute individuals for criminal liability after World War I. However, these efforts were not successful until World War II. In the Statute of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which was enacted because of the decisions of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal and the Far Eastern International Military Tribunal established by the victors after World War II, three categories of crimes were included within the court’s jurisdiction. These are (1) war crimes, (2) crimes against humanity, and (3) crimes against peace.

War Crimes

Certain behaviors have been prohibited during wars throughout history. However, especially after World War II, it became clearer what states and individuals could not do in war, and as a result, extensive regulations on war crimes were enacted. Under international law, war crimes are one of the four fundamental crimes. Certain international agreements and conferences have undoubtedly resulted in the prohibition and criminalization of certain behaviors displayed during wars, for example. Even though there is no convention in international law that defines all war crimes, these crimes have been defined by various international conventions. The Geneva Conference (1929), the Nuremberg Tribunal (1945), the International Military Criminal Tribunal for the Far East (1946), the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the Rome Statute (1998) are the factors that define war crimes and enable them to be adopted by the international community.

Although war crimes share some characteristics with another international crime, crimes against humanity, there are some distinctions. Crimes against humanity can occur at any time, whether in war or peace. However, war crimes can only be committed during times of armed conflict. Crimes against humanity are defined as attacks that systematically target a specific group of civilians or a specific segment of society.

The 1907 Hague Convention on the Law of War on Land aims to protect civilians' physical and mental integrity by limiting occupation forces'/authorities' authority over the civilian population.

The 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War was signed to improve the condition of the armed forces' sick, wounded, and other victims of war.

Two protocols were added to the Geneva Conventions in 1977, broadening their scope and guarantees. Protocol I governs the protection of victims of international military conflict and the natural environment, outlawing civilian starvation, the destruction of vital resources, and attacks on nuclear power plants and dams. . Protocol II, on the other hand, provides for civilian protection, medical assistance, and survival in non-international conflict situations under humanitarian law.

Convention on the Rights of the Child dated November 20, 1989, also provides for the protection of children in conflict. At the Moscow Conference in 1943, the Allies agreed to establish a court to try war criminals after the war.

Following World War II, there were two major and historic declarations that recognized international prosecution of war criminals. These were the Treaty of London of 1945 and document II, which established the Tokyo International Military Tribunal for the Far East by a special decree issued on January 19, 1946, by General Douglas MacArthur, as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in the Pacific Theater of War.

For the first time in international practice, the Allied States accepted the international trial of war criminals by establishing an international military tribunal to try war crimes whose acts could not be linked to a single geographical location. War crimes that can be traced back to a specific location in terms of acts and the sovereignty of a specific state will be prosecuted under the laws of that state.

In the second paragraph of Article 6 of the Statute annexed to the London Agreement of 8 August 1945, this crime is defined as the violation of the laws and customs of war. Such violations shall include murder, ill-treatment, or deportation to Wave labour or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.

War crimes are defined by the Charter of the International Criminal Tribunal at Nuremberg as violations of the laws or customs of war, such as the abuse or neglect of slave laborers, the civilian population for any reason, the population of occupied territories, prisoners of war, people at sea, killing hostages, deportation, looting of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns, and villages, or destruction in a manner not justified by military necessity. Complicity in the commission of war crimes is a crime under international law, it was also emphasized.

Individual criminal responsibility was recognized in the Nuremberg Tribunal Trials by customary international law. Both soldiers and civilians participated in the trials as war crime offenders.

War crimes were covered in 2 articles by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. While Article 3 addresses transgressions of the law of war or custom, Article 2 addresses serious violations of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Article 7/1 of the Statute recognizes that anyone who plans, prepares, instigates, commands, commits, or otherwise aids or abets in the planning, preparation, or commission of these crimes is personally liable for the crime.

Article 7/2 prohibits the limitation of responsibility by stating that the accused's official position as the head of state or government shall not absolve such person of personal responsibility or mitigate the punishment.

The RUCM Statute recognizes its authority to try those responsible for grave violations of Common Article 3 and Additional Protocol II of 1977. However, the article does not limit the types of violations to those listed.

Article 8 of the Rome Statute, the statute of the International Criminal Court, regulates war crimes in detail. When examining the article on war crimes in the Rome Statute, it is clear that Article 8/2(a) and Article 8/2(b) specify crimes related to international armed conflicts, whereas Article 8/2(c) and Article 8/2(e) specify crimes related to non-international armed conflicts.

Crimes Against Humanity

The concept of crimes against humanity was first introduced in an international text by the Nuremberg Tribunal's Charter, followed by the statutes of the International Criminal Tribunals for Tokyo, the former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, and finally by the Rome Statute. The United Nations has signed a number of international conventions defining crimes against humanity or relating to this category of crime. As a result of all these efforts, the Rome Statute now includes a detailed section on crimes against humanity.

In Article 6 of the Nuremberg Statute, "murder, mass extermination, enslavement, deportation and other crimes against humanity committed against the civilian population, or persecution for political, ethnic, or religious reasons, or execution or persecution or the perpetration of acts related to war crimes or crimes against humanity" were determined to be criminal offenses under international law and included in the definition of crimes against humanity.

In accordance with Article 5 of the Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, intentional killings, mass exterminations, enslavement, deportation, imprisonment, torture, rape, persecution for political, religious, or racial reasons, and other inhumane treatment committed against any civilian population during armed conflicts, whether international or national in nature, are crimes against humanity, and it is recognized that the perpetrators of the events in the former Yugoslavia will also be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. For a crime to be considered a crime against humanity, it must have occurred during a state of armed conflict.

The Statute of the International Tribunal for Rwanda defines crimes against humanity as those resulting from widespread or systematic attacks against any civilian population for national, political, ethnic, racial, or religious motives. The Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda were established to prosecute those responsible for violating international humanitarian law by failing to protect civilians outside the war from the violence of war and to prevent the disproportionality of war. The International Military Tribunal for Rwanda did not require armed conflict, but the crime must have been motivated by national, political, ethnic, racial, or religious discrimination, i.e. specific intent.

According to Article 7/1 of the Statute of the International Criminal Court, crime against humanity means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack: murder; extermination; enslavement; deportation or forcible transfer of population; imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; torture; rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity; persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender; enforced disappearance of persons; crime of apartheid; other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

Article 5 of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East Statute pertaining to crimes against humanity is as follows: “Namely, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political or racial grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.”

Article 77 of the Turkish Penal Code governs crimes against humanity in Turkish law. The article defines as criminal acts those listed as “a) deliberate killing b) deliberate injury c) torture or enslavement d) deprivation of person’s freedom e) subjecting to scientific experiments f) sexual assault, sexual abuse of children g) forced pregnancy h) forced prostitution”. However, if these acts are committed systematically against a section of society with political, philosophical, racial, or religious motivations in accordance with a plan, the type of crime against humanity will occur, and the existence of a special intent in the perpetrator’s motivation is sought.

Crimes Against Peace

Crime against peace is one of the crimes that came to the forefront during the Nuremberg trials. . World War II, the victorious states established two tribunals to try Nazi and Japanese leaders. The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg and the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. The decisions of both tribunals, which were subsequently supported by resolutions of the UN General Assembly, established the international principles of the law of war. Notably, such a crime is typically committed by high-ranking officials representing a state or state-like organization, and such charges are rarely brought to trial. In 1950, the International Law Commission established international legal principles at the request of the UN General Assembly. In this context;

- (i) The planning, preparation, initiation, or conduct of an attack or war in violation of international treaties, conventions, or assurances;
- (ii) Participation in a common plan or conspiracy to commit any of

the acts listed in (i), or collusion for this purpose, is recognized as a crime against peace.

Article 5 of the Rome Statute, which defines the jurisdiction and mandate of the International Criminal Court, states that the ICC has jurisdiction over “the gravest crimes of concern to the entire international community, namely genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression as a crime against peace.”

In addition, crimes against peace are recognized as criminal offenses by Principle 6 of the text adopted by the International Law Commission in the statute of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal and the principles of international law acknowledged during the trial of the case. In addition, the resolutions of the European Parliament and Council of 13 December 2011, Article 12 (2) (a) QD and Article 17 (1) (a) QD, refer to serious violations of international law, such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against peace, as defined by international instruments. In this context, acts of war and aggression committed in violation of international agreements by a country’s leader, or a high-ranking official may be considered crimes against peace.

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Putin's Bloody Support to Assad

RUSSIA'S IDLIB ATTACKS AND WAR CRIMES

- Russia and the Assad regime are committing crimes against humanity in Idlib!
- The human rights violations in Idlib put the vulnerable groups living under difficult conditions in the region even more constraint!
- As Martin Luther King underlined "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
- The brutal and unlawful attacks on the region deepen the humanitarian crisis in Idlib.

