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Syria: Government Forces Apparently Abuse Civilians

People Who Don't Flee Recaptured Areas Risk Retaliation

(Beirut) – Syrian (<https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/syria>) government forces appear to have retaliated against civilians who chose to remain behind in areas retaken in Idlib, Human Rights Watch said today. Images provided to Human Rights Watch show that government forces may have shot at civilians and despoiled their bodies in towns where the government retook control in Idlib and Aleppo governorates.

The Syrian-Russian military alliance escalated an offensive on the last anti-government held areas in Idlib and western Aleppo governorate in April 2019. Human Rights Watch obtained images that appeared to show members of the 25th Special Forces Division, a Russian-backed elite Syrian government force formerly known as the Tiger Forces, standing atop the body of a man they appear to have killed after taking control of Maaret al-Nu'man city. The Tiger Forces, led by General Suheil al-Hassan, have received Russian training and military equipment and Russian forces say they are closely integrated within Russian operations.

“Syrian-Russian forces have indiscriminately bombed areas to force civilians to flee en masse, and now appear to be terrorizing civilians who remain behind,” said Michael Page (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/michael-page>), deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, “The abusive troops, and the commanders who fail to stop them, should be held accountable.”

Human Rights Watch had previously documented indiscriminate attacks on civilian infrastructure (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/18/syria-russia-attack-refuge-apparent-war-crime>), and the use of unlawful weapons, including cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and improvised explosives (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/03/russia/syria-flurry-prohibited-weapons-attacks>) in the course of the offensive. As of December 1, the continued violence resulted in the displacement of almost 1 million people, in horrific humanitarian conditions, while Turkey maintains a closed border.

On January 28, 2020, Syrian forces retook Maaret al-Nu'man, a key city in Idlib governorate originally home to 85,000 people, following a two-month offensive.

On January 31, a media activist who chose to remain anonymous for security reasons provided Human Rights Watch with a screenshot and screen recording of a Facebook story apparently from the account of a government soldier, appearing to show that soldier and another one standing over a partially burned body. The screenshot was tagged with “Al-Maaret” indicating Maaret al-Nu'man. Facebook Stories are only visible for 24 hours, so this image is no longer available online.

Human Rights Watch spoke to three people who identified the body as Ahmed al-Jaffal, a long-time Maaret al-Nu'man resident who had refused to leave. One was al-Jaffal's neighbor and two were part of the Syrian Civil Defense team who knew him and said they had seen him alive two days before the Tiger Forces entered the area.

Obeida Zikra, the head of Syrian Civil Defense in Maaret al-Nu'man and one of the last to evacuate the city, said al-Jaffal had come to the group's center for food and assistance.

“He's a simple man, but he used to come around to the center and we would give him food,” Zikra said. “At the end of January, the situation had gotten so bad – strikes and artillery everywhere, and we were evacuating everyone. I and two others went to the location where Ahmed usually stayed, and asked him to evacuate with us. He refused, said he was not leaving.”

On January 27, Zikra and his colleague, who chose to remain anonymous, said they returned to the city: “I looked everywhere for Ahmed, but couldn't find him,” Zikra said. “We left. There was still shelling. The next day, Syrian [government] forces entered the city.”

When shown the picture, all three said they recognized the body as al-Jaffal, based on his clothing and the area where the picture was taken. Human Rights Watch also compared the body in the photo with prior videos and pictures available online in the days before his death, where he seems to be wearing the same clothes. Two people interviewed provided details of where the picture was taken.

Human Rights Watch reviewed the image and through matching several visible landmarks with satellite imagery could confirm that it was captured in Maaret al-Nu'man where the people interviewed said it was. In addition, the government soldier posting the image added “Al-Maaret” as a location tag, along with a peace sign emoji.

Human Rights Watch also compared the body in the photo with prior videos and pictures provided by witnesses and available online.

Local news reports said that members of the 25th division killed al-Jaffal at 10 a.m. in Maaret al-Nu'man. A media center says its sources have said that the members of the armed group executed al-Jaffal with a Kalashnikov rifle, then put him in a rubber/plastic tire, and burned his body. Human Rights Watch has not been able to verify the details of the killing but can confirm that the body appears to be burned and the soldiers standing atop it are from the 25th division.

Human Rights Watch tracked the soldier's Facebook account and found that it appears to be the same on which the story was posted, although the story no longer exists. On the Facebook page, he lists himself as working for Air Force Intelligence, and pictures on the account dating back to September 2018 show that he has been to Idlib. In a September 2018 photo, he is standing next to a van with markings similar to those on the van in the original photo, indicating that it is the same vehicle. The van in the September 2018 photo also has markings showing that it belongs to the “Tiger Forces,” and the logo of a subdivision of the Tiger Forces called “Yasser Suleiman Group.”

This would not be the only incident in which Syrian government forces have retaliated against residents after they took control of an area. On February 11, the Tiger Forces also opened fire on older women (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/21/exclusive-syrian-forces-deliberately-shot-elderly-women-near/>) as they prepared to flee from advancing troops in western Aleppo, media reported. Video recordings obtained by the United Kingdom’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/21/exclusive-syrian-forces-deliberately-shot-elderly-women-near/>) show the older women gathering their belongings and preparing to escape when they appear to come under attack. Human Rights Watch had previously interviewed people who said that Suheil al-Hassan, now the head of the Tiger Forces, gave orders to shoot directly at protestors in 2011.

Under international law, parties must take all possible measures to prevent the dead from being despoiled, and the mutilation of dead bodies is prohibited. In September 2017, Swedish prosecutors charged another soldier ([https://www.apnews.com/177e3494d8354604afbc55df9e9cf61d/Sweden-charges-Syrian-asylum-seeker-with-war-crimes?](https://www.apnews.com/177e3494d8354604afbc55df9e9cf61d/Sweden-charges-Syrian-asylum-seeker-with-war-crimes?utm_content=bufferc86f4&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)

[utm_content=bufferc86f4&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer](https://www.apnews.com/177e3494d8354604afbc55df9e9cf61d/Sweden-charges-Syrian-asylum-seeker-with-war-crimes?utm_content=bufferc86f4&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer)) with violating the laws of war under their domestic criminal law, based on the legal principle known as “universal jurisdiction (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/20/qa-first-cracks-impunity-syria-iraq>),” which allows for investigating certain international crimes that take place outside a country’s jurisdiction.

The charge was based on a photograph of that soldier smiling victoriously over the body of a civilian. The indictment used that and other evidence to charge him with “outrage upon personal dignity,” defined to include humiliating, degrading, or otherwise violating the dignity of a dead body.

The Syrian government and Russia should immediately suspend members of government forces against whom there are credible allegations of human rights abuse. Military commanders and intelligence officials should be placed under targeted sanctions until they stop abuses committed by their forces. They should also be investigated and held accountable for violations by units under their command, in accordance with the command responsibility doctrine.

“Syrian government forces have abused civilians for a long time and have never been held responsible,” Page said. “But these soldiers should take heed that as history shows, those who violate international law will be brought to justice when they least expect it.”

ecoi.net summary:

Aleppo and Idlib governorates: Civilians who stayed behind in areas re-taken by Syrian government forces face deadly violence and abuse



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