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Syria: In Talks, Focus on Protecting Civilians

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[Russia](#), [Turkey](#), and [Iran](#) should make protecting civilians a priority when they meet in Sochi, Russia on November 22, 2017, Human Rights Watch said today. Recent airstrikes by the Russian-Syrian joint military operation that hit a market and police station in an area of Northern Syria included in a recent safe zone agreement shows the risks facing civilians living in so called "safe zones." The attacks killed at least 75 civilians, including five children.

The talks are taking place during escalating violence in Eastern Ghouta. The area has been hit with more than 181 airstrikes in the past four days, according to the Syrian Civil Defense, with 400,000 [civilians in the area under a tightening siege](#) creating risks of starvation and lack of adequate medical care. Russia has announced that the Sochi talks between the Iranian, Russian, and Turkish presidents will aim to [discuss de-escalation zones and a settlement](#) to the Syrian crisis.

"If Russia is serious about protecting civilians in Syria, it needs to do more to spare civilians from its airstrikes and ensure that its ally in Damascus allows aid into besieged areas," said [Nadim Houry](#), terrorism and counterterrorism director at Human Rights Watch. "Many of the de-escalation agreements [have failed to deliver](#) the promised protect for the residents there."

On November 13, shortly after 2 p.m., an aircraft of the Russian-Syrian alliance carried out three airstrikes on Atarib, a town in Aleppo governorate 25 kilometers from the Turkish border. Atarib is part of the de-escalation zone announced in the Astana talks on September that cover Idlib province and areas of West Aleppo and Hama. The airstrikes hit a commercial street with a market and a police station.

Human Rights Watch spoke to five residents, one of them a survivor of the attacks, by phone and reviewed photographs and [videos](#) provided by witnesses and [publicly posted](#). Residents reported three strikes, each consisting of two bombs in the heavily populated area, with one hitting the police station and the other two the nearby market. Five bombs apparently detonated on impact while one near the police station remained unexploded. One witness shared a map of the impact sites.

All witnesses said that there was no military presence or target, and no presence of Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham, the armed group excluded from the de-escalation agreement. One witness said the person knew almost everyone in Atarib, and that Atarib authorities have been consistently successful in excluding all armed factions from the city.

The police station was a civil entity affiliated with the Syrian Interim government, an opposition body established in 2013, and the policemen did not carry weapons, all five residents said. Under the laws of war, police and police stations are presumptively civilian unless the police are taking a direct part in the hostilities, are incorporated into the armed forces, or police stations are being used for military purposes, Human Rights Watch said.

Najib Bakour, head of the local Syria Civil Defense chapter, who was nearby during the attack, was a first responder said: "The market is the lifeline of Atarib, everyone thought it was safe because there was a de-escalation agreement in place and so people are always in the streets, the market is busy all the time. They thought there was nothing to be afraid of."

Abdel Razzaq al-Faj, a resident who works in the police station and was there at the time of the strike said it caught them by surprise.

The attack killed 75 civilians, with several more injured or missing, according to residents, first responders, and relatives who shared the names with Human Rights Watch. Among the dead were seven women, five children, and five people displaced from other areas. The dead also included 13 police officers and three detainees.

The attack caused significant damage to the market, the street, and surrounding residential buildings, witnesses said. Mohammed Shakerdy, a resident whose office is on that street, was on his way back to work when the attack happened which damaged his office extensively.

Based on the videos Human Rights Watch reviewed, and witnesses' descriptions, at least some of the munitions used in the attack were a variant of a BeTAB-500 air dropped bomb, a Soviet-era "bunker buster" type of munition that penetrates concrete and then explodes upwards. This type of BeTAB-500 bomb carries 12 rocket-assisted submunitions, each weighing 25-kilograms, capable of creating craters measuring four-square meters according to its Russian manufacturer. The same type of bombs were [used in February 2017](#) at al-Tamanah in Hama.

Al-Faj described the destruction: "The building [of the police station], is three floors. The first and second were destroyed, but the third remained standing. The rocket would go through the building, penetrate deep into the ground then a lot of pressure, a lot of black smoke as it pushed upward. I'd never seen or heard anything like it. How I survived, it was a miracle."

Human Rights Watch reviewed three videos posted on social media, as well as photos provided by witnesses that show the missiles falling and black smoke rising. Pictures of the damage to the police station that witnesses shared with Human Rights Watch, also showed destruction consistent with "bunker busters." Human Rights Watch has been unable to find or examine images of remnants of the munitions.

On November 13, Alexander Ivanov, the spokesman for the Khmeimim airbase used by Russia, denied that Russian aircraft committed a "massacre" at a civilian site in Atarib.

If the Russian-Syrian alliance was targeting a populated area with no apparent military presence or target, it would violate international humanitarian law. Russia and Syria should comply with the laws of war in their military operations and take all feasible precautions to avoid civilian casualties, including taking adequate steps to determine that the sites targeted served a military

objective and distinguishing between civilians and combatants. Russia and Syria should allow independent investigations into these strikes and make information about them available.

"While the world talks about de-escalating conflict in Syria, residents in many of these supposedly safe zones are starving, lacking adequate medical care, or like the residents of Atarib, face deadly threats from the air," Houry said. "If President Putin wants to show that he cares about civilians, he should use the meeting in Sochi to deliver concrete protection for the civilians."

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