

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

|                                    |                                                      |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>                  | <b>735</b>                                           |
| Land:                              | Syrien                                               |
| Kilde:                             | Human Rights Watch                                   |
| Titel:                             | Russia-Syria. Deadly airstrikes on trapped civilians |
| Udgivet:                           | 31. oktober 2017                                     |
| Optaget på<br>baggrundsmaterialet: | 8. december 2017                                     |



## Russia/Syria: Deadly Airstrikes on Trapped Civilians

Publisher [Human Rights Watch](#)

Publication Date 31 October 2017

Cite as Human Rights Watch, *Russia/Syria: Deadly Airstrikes on Trapped Civilians*, 31 October 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a0acc6f4.html> [accessed 8 December 2017]

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The [Russian-Syrian](#) joint military operation has carried out unlawful airstrikes in recent weeks that have killed civilians trapped in northern Syria, Human Rights Watch said today. The ongoing attacks and the lack of escape routes highlight the dangers facing civilians in the area and undermine any notion that Idlib can be considered safe for civilians. Russian and Syrian aircraft started the attacks on Idlib province and surrounding areas on September 19, 2017. A Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson stated that it was responding to a large-scale offensive in the area by Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which includes fighters from the group Jabhat Fath al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. However, evidence Human Rights Watch collected indicates that some of the attacks struck markets and populated residential areas, including camps for the displaced. The attacks used cluster munitions and explosive weapons with wide-area effect in populated areas. "Two million civilians in Idlib are sitting ducks," said [Nadim Houry](#), terrorism and counterterrorism director at Human Rights Watch. "Rather than a safe zone, Idlib has effectively become in some parts a 'killing zone' with escape routes closed." On September 15, Russia, [Iran](#), and [Turkey](#) agreed to a ceasefire zone in Idlib province and parts of Hama and Western Aleppo, as part of a de-escalation agreement. One of the main armed groups in the area, HTS, which includes fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, was not part of the agreement, however. The [de-escalation zones](#) are often [referred to](#) as [safe zones](#). Turkey appears to have all but closed its border with Idlib province to Syrian refugees. As fighting continues in Syria with offensives by the Syrian government, Russia, and HTS, this cuts off one escape route for civilians in Idlib, who have said they feel it is dangerous to try to reach other parts of Syria. On October 16, Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority [announced that it was prepared](#) to receive refugees from Idlib, but maintained that waves of refugees were unlikely to occur. Turkey has yet to open its border except for urgent medical cases, and only temporarily according to witnesses. The United Nations has said that [2 million civilians](#) are currently in Idlib province, half of them displaced people. Human Rights Watch investigated three air strikes conducted after September 19. The three attacks killed at least 72 people, including at least nine children, according to local witnesses and first responders. Human Rights Watch also reviewed photos and video footage showing remnants of cluster munitions in four attacks and investigated one of them, which reportedly killed two civilians, in greater depth, interviewing witnesses and residents. Prior

to the September offensive, fighters and civilians from other parts of the country and Syrian refugees in [Lebanon](#) had moved to opposition-controlled territory in and around Idlib province, following local evacuation agreements. In July alone, Idlib received upward of 24,000 displaced people, including thousands of Syrian refugees from Lebanon and thousands more fleeing fighting in other parts of the country. Russian-Syrian strikes have hit at least two displacement camps since September 19, according to local reports, and killed at least four displaced people according to witnesses. Russia has claimed that the offensive came in response to a large-scale offensive by HTS against Syrian troops in the Idlib de-escalation zone on September 18, which led to the encirclement of a platoon of 29 Russian military police in the area. Sources close to HTS [told local news outlets](#) that HTS opened its offensive to undermine the de-escalation agreement. Russia and Syria responded with massive firepower, with Russia's military stating on September 20 that in "the past 24 hours, 187 facilities were hit by airstrikes and artillery fire, and about 850 terrorists were destroyed." The attacks on Idlib province and surrounding areas continued for at least 10 days after that. Since September 30, the intensity of attacks has reduced, but local media and the Syria Civil Defense, which provides search-and-rescue operations, reported that airstrikes continued to hit civilian areas as recently as October 8. Russia has [denied that it is targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure](#) and claimed that the targets were "[far away](#)" from residential areas, but Human Rights Watch has documented numerous attacks on residential neighborhoods as well as a main road lined with shops in the city of Jisr Al-Shughur. Local activists and first responders [estimate that 102 airstrikes](#) hit Jisr Al-Shughur between September 19 and 28, killing 55 people and injuring 135. The attacks destroyed significant parts of the infrastructure in the city and surrounding areas and led to the evacuation of two hospitals in the city, according to [statements by Médecins Sans Frontières \(Doctors Without Borders - MSF\) and the local council](#). The attacks led people from Jisr Al-Shughur to flee to nearby displacement camps. A camp manager on the border with Turkey said that approximately 12,000 people fled the city and surrounding areas following the attacks. On September 28, MSF found that the airstrikes had put four hospitals in Idlib and Hama provinces out of service. On October 5, the UN Regional Humanitarian Coordinator [said in a statement](#) that between September 19 and 30, 149 people had died from airstrikes on residential areas in Idlib. At least some of the attacks Human Rights Watch documented were indiscriminate and therefore prohibited under international law. Russia and Syria used cluster munitions, which are inherently indiscriminate, over the towns of Qalaat Al-Madiq, Jisr Al-Shughur, and Al-Tamaneh, among others, in populated areas. They may have used enhanced blast weapons, also called fuel-air explosives or "vacuum bombs," in populated areas. More powerful than conventional high-explosive munitions of comparable size, these weapons inflict extensive damage over a wide area and produce indiscriminate effect in populated areas. Human Rights Watch documentation shows the strikes caused what appears to be significant destruction, implying use of heavy firepower, in heavily civilian populated areas, including main roads and shopping and residential areas, potentially violating the principle of proportionality, which says that harm to civilians must be proportionate to the military gains.

On October 12, Turkey deployed troops inside Idlib province, Anadolu Agency [reported](#). The Syrian government responded with a statement calling on Turkey to immediately withdraw, per [news reports](#).

Russia and Syria should comply with the laws of war in its 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. All parties to the conflict should ensure that civilians can flee the fighting in safety, including to seek refuge in Turkey, and respect the laws of war in their military operations in Syria.

"The intense fighting in Idlib and the uncertainty surrounding the area's future exposes the myth that Idlib is a safe area for Syrians to return to," Houry said.

This investigation is based on 16 remote interviews by Human Rights Watch researchers with first responders, local residents, hospital staff, and relatives of victims involved in the three attacks. Human Rights Watch also reviewed images and videos available as open source information, and provided to Human Rights Watch directly by local witnesses and first responders.

Human Rights Watch has chosen to publish only the names of sources who gave permission and if Human Rights Watch determined that it would not put them at additional risk. For some sources, Human Rights Watch has used pseudonyms, or left them unidentified, either because the sources requested confidentiality, or because Human Rights Watch determined that publishing their names could pose a risk to them.

### **Armanaz, September 29**

On September 29, aircraft attacked Armanaz, a town 20 kilometers northwest of the city of Idlib and 10 kilometers from the Turkish border, killing at least 35 people, including at least three children, according to five witnesses and photos and video footage analyzed by Human Rights Watch.

Local residents told Human Rights Watch that an aircraft dropped several munitions on a residential neighborhood close to al-Zahra Mosque in Armanaz around 8:30 p.m. People interviewed said that armed groups fighting the Syrian government had no presence inside the town and that the attack killed and injured only civilians. One witness said that although HTS was in general control of the area, all the victims were civilians.

Yasser Yahya, a local resident, went to the area immediately after the attack:

We went to rescue people and we found people all over the ground and under the rubble. Everyone was trying to rescue them. We pulled out whoever was close, most were children and women. Those who were stuck deeper, they weren't pulled out except days later. Most people who died are women and children, there are also men, and also elderly people, some in wheelchairs - they couldn't go out of their homes.

Approximately an hour and a half after the initial attack, local residents said, an aircraft attacked the same location again. Ahmad Jabas, a first responder from Syria Civil Defense, said that his group tried to evacuate the area when they heard a warning on the radio that an aircraft was flying toward them. He said the second attack killed at least four people trapped under the rubble. "They could have survived [if it were not for the second attack]," he said.

The attacks destroyed at least 30 residential buildings, Syria Civil Defense and first responders said. Video footage and photos Human Rights Watch reviewed show a significant amount of destruction to what appear to be residential buildings.

Local residents, including relatives of victims, provided the names of 42 victims of the two attacks, saying they were civilians. More than one source included the same 35 names. The list includes at least three children. Abdelkader Khashan, a Syria Civil Defense first responder, described finding a small child under the rubble: "I thought I could save him so we took him to the nearest medical point, but he was dead. He was around 8 months." Khashan shared with Human Rights Watch a video of himself with an infant covered in dust who appeared lifeless.

Human Rights Watch interviewed two people whose relatives were killed in the attack. Samir (not his real name) said that he was on his way to visit his relatives when the attack struck their houses:

The houses were all razed to the ground. You wouldn't recognize the area. As we removed the rubble, we could hear people screaming, we could hear my aunt, her husband, we could hear their voices. We first saw the body of my cousin, he was already dead. Then we saw the body of his sister-in-law and her son. We kept digging for an hour and a half and we saw her son's hand. I think he's three or four years old. We assumed he was dead, he wasn't moving, he wasn't crying. But when we pulled him, he suddenly took a deep breath, and started crying.

A second witness provided the names of five relatives killed in the attack, including two children.

Some of the witnesses said they believed, based on the extent of the destruction, that the aircraft dropped fuel-air explosive bombs on the area. These enhanced blast weapons are more powerful than conventional high-explosive munitions of comparable size and inflict extensive damage over a wide area. Because of these wide area effects, Human Rights Watch believes that belligerents should refrain from using enhanced blast weapons like fuel-air explosives in populated areas. The destruction seen in photos and videos is consistent with the use of an enhanced blast weapons, but Human Rights Watch has not been able to otherwise independently confirm the type of weapon used in the attack.

A network of observers monitoring aircraft movement in Syria, known as "Sentry Syria," reported that an Su-24 aircraft - used by both the Syrian and Russian air forces - took off from the Tiyas, or T4, airbase, west of Palmyra in Homs province, at 8:13 p.m. on September 29 and was spotted heading north. At 8:26 p.m., the network reported that an Su-24 was flying north over Kafr Nabl, and at 8:27 p.m., that an Su-24 was flying northwest over Saraqib. Armanaz is 35 kilometers northwest of Saraqib. The timing could correspond to the aircraft that carried the strike in Armanaz.

### **Jisr Al-Shughur, September 25**

On September 25, aircraft attacked a shopping area on the main road in Jisr Al-Shughur, killing at least 19 people, including at least two children, according to two activists and Syria Civil Defense.

Ibrahim Haj Ali, a local resident, said he saw aircraft "constantly" in the air above Jisr Al-Shughur the day before the attack. He said he was in the area on the afternoon of September 25:

I was having coffee with one of my friends. Suddenly, everything went black, fire erupted in our face, and we were in thrown in the air. We didn't feel anything, we didn't understand what had happened. Cars and people were thrown into the air. Buildings were razed to the ground, cars were on fire, it was like the apocalypse.

Haj Ali said that the attack killed and injured several of his friends. He said that the market consisted of multi-story buildings with stores and shops on the ground floor and civilians living on the other floors. The people interviewed said there were no military bases or vehicles in the area. Human Rights Watch could not independently confirm that.

Mustafa Abu Akef, a local media activist from Jisr Al-Shughur, said he could provide some of the names of those killed but not all as some of the others were unidentifiable due to the extent of their burns. He shared photos of bodies that appeared to be heavily burned, as well as a photo of a 7-year-old girl he said he had saved but who had lost her leg as a result of the attack.

Video footage circulated by local activists on social media and reviewed by Human Rights Watch showed extensive damage to what appear to be the center of Jisr Al-Shughur.

Most residents of the city had fled the airstrikes for displacement camps in the northern part of the governorate. "The situation in the city is tragic," Abu Akef said. "Only very few of the city people are left, and they need help - food, bread, basic things. No one is left in the city. They all fled."

On September 27, the Jisr Al-Shughur City Council announced that the city was a "devastated area," a designation reserved for areas where disaster has struck leaving primary facilities destroyed and the majority of the population has been displaced.

### **Qalaat Al-Madiq, September 20**

On September 20, aircraft attacked Qalaat Al-Madiq, a town 45 kilometers northeast of the city of Hama, killing at least 10 people immediately, including four children, according to four local residents.

The aircraft attacked the town at 4:15 p.m., witnesses said. Hussein Kanaj, a local resident who was about 500 meters away when the attack happened, said the airstrikes hit the market in the center of the city, as well as a residential neighborhood. Two other residents and a Syria Civil Defense first responder confirmed this.

Ahmad Nairouzi, a Syria Civil Defense first responder, said:

We could feel the impact of the explosion from across the town. We knew where it landed from the smoke and flames, and ran to the location. There was a lot of destruction. We immediately started to evacuate the wounded and collect the remains of the dead.

When Human Rights Watch spoke to Nairouzi on October 7, he said that they were still finding human remains in areas far from the initial explosion: "That's how powerful the explosion was."

The consecutive strikes on Qalaat Al-Madiq killed a total of 18 people, among them seven children, with more at risk from severe injuries, the witnesses said. Residents said that people displaced from other areas in Syria were among the dead, including at least one child.

The attacks forced many people to flee. Noor Nabhan, a town resident, said that after the first attack, about 90 percent of the population of the city fled to nearby areas, including displacement camps near the border.

### **Cluster Munitions**

Local residents, monitoring groups, local journalists, activists, and first responders have reported at least 12 occasions when aircraft used cluster munitions during attacks between September 19 and 30. In four of those attacks, photos or video footage posted online show unexploded submunitions or other cluster munition remnants. Human Rights Watch documented in detail one of these attacks, in Qalaat Al-Madiq on September 21.

Cluster munitions are delivered from the ground by artillery and rockets, or dropped from aircraft, and contain multiple smaller submunitions. A total of 119 countries have banned cluster munitions due to the harm caused at the time of attack and because their submunitions often fail to explode and threaten civilians and military alike, until cleared and destroyed. Syria and Russia should join the Convention on Cluster Munitions, Human Rights Watch said.

Since mid-2012, Syrian government forces have used both air-dropped and ground-launched [cluster munitions](#). Cluster munition attacks in Syria [increased significantly](#) after Russia began its military operation on September 30, 2015.

## **Qalaat Al-Madiq, September 21**

On September 21, an aircraft attacked Qalaat al-Madiq with cluster munitions, according to three local residents, Syria Civil Defense, and photos and video footage analyzed by Human Rights Watch. The attack killed at least two civilians and injured at least 10, according to the witnesses.

Residents said that an aircraft attacked the town with four cluster munitions shortly after 6:00 p.m. Three witnesses said that the submunitions landed in various locations in town: two payloads struck the Hay Al-Zahra' neighborhood in the middle of the town, one struck the Haret Makhfar neighborhood, and one struck the main town's street and market.

Hussein Kanaj, a local resident who was close to the impact site of one of the cluster munition attacks, said that the attack had a greater effect on him than other attacks he had witnessed: "After the cluster munition attack I was so terrified, so scared that I could barely feel my legs under me. I said whoever wants to stay can stay, I won't. So I moved."

Noor Nabhan, who was nearby when the cluster munition attack struck, said that unexploded submunitions were a real problem and that a child had found one, which she brought to Syria Civil Defense. "It is terrifying," he said. "People are afraid of what they could find, even in their own houses."

Both Nabhan and Ahmad Nairouzi, a Syria Civil Defense member, said that the September 21 cluster munition attacks killed two civilians, a man and a woman. Abu Muhannad Al-Ghaby, also a local resident, said that the cluster munition attack on the market injured six shop owners while the attack in the northern neighborhood injured nine civilians, he said. He provided the names.

Al-Ghaby shared a photo of remnants he said Syria Civil Defense collected after the cluster munition attacks. The photo shows more than 30 unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunitions. The ShOAB-0.5 fragmentation submunition, a tennis-ball-shaped submunition produced by the Soviet Union, is only known to be delivered by a specific type of air-dropped RBK-500 cluster bomb. Human Rights Watch documented the use of this type of cluster munition by the Syrian air force starting in March 2013.

Al-Ghaby also provided Human Rights Watch with a video he said he filmed in the northern neighborhood, which shows a flash in the sky of the bursting charge opening the weapon in mid-air followed by dozens of small explosions within seconds on a hillside. A large number of small explosions within a short period in a defined area are signature features of a cluster munition attack. The video also shows the medieval fortress in Qalaat Al-Madiq, confirming that the attack took place in the town.

A different video, which Qalaat Al-Madiq News [posted on its Facebook page](#) in the evening of September 21, shows a similar attack, but this time among a group of houses, corroborating the reports that more than one cluster munition hit the town.

All of the witnesses interviewed said the targeted areas were full of civilians. One witness said that some of the strikes hit headquarters of the Free Syrian Army-affiliated groups, but that HTS was not present in these areas. Human Rights Watch has no independent confirmation of this.

## **Other Cluster Munition Attacks**

For the following attacks, Human Rights Watch has not conducted detailed investigations, but photos and video footage said to be from the attacks show remnants of cluster munitions.

Shortly after midnight on September 25, the Edlib Media Center [reported](#) that a cluster munition attack in the town of Maarat Harma, had wounded two civilians. The center [posted photos](#) of one unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunition.

The Edlib Media Center [reported](#) in the morning of September 29 that a cluster munition attack in al-Tamanah shortly after midnight that day had killed three women and a child and injured several people. Syria Civil Defense [posted photos](#) on its Facebook page showing unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunitions and [the tail section](#) of an RBK-500 cluster munition, saying that they were found after the September 29 attack on al-Tamanah. The Syrian Network for Human Rights also [posted a photo](#) of an unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunition, saying it was from the same incident.

Syria Civil Defense [posted photos](#) of its staff members locating unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunitions in Tel'adeh.

Syria Civil Defense posted on its Facebook page [photos](#) of the tail section of an RBK-500 cluster munition, saying that it was found after a cluster munition attack on September 29. In [another post](#), it included photos of unexploded ShOAB-0.5 submunitions that were found in Jisr Al-Shughur on September 29.

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