

‘DEATH EVERYWHERE’

WAR CRIMES AND HUMAN RIGHTS
ABUSES IN ALEPPO, SYRIA

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“It became routine for the helicopter to be there above us, so I finally stopped looking up. I smelled death everywhere.”

Resident of Bustan al-Qasr neighbourhood, Aleppo city

More than four years since the crisis in Syria began, its resolution remains as elusive as ever. The parties to the conflict continue to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law and grave abuses of human rights, and the civilian population is bearing the brunt of the violence.

In an effort to reduce this civilian suffering and pave the way toward a more comprehensive peace process, the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, proposed a “freeze” in hostilities in Aleppo. Since autumn 2014, the Aleppo “freeze” proposal has captured the attention of the international community. This attention has been largely focused on the military and political aspects of the situation, especially as hostilities between the parties have surged in Aleppo and the UN has been engaging the parties in talks over the initiative.

Yet beyond the military and political aspects of the situation, what are the realities faced by civilians on the ground in Aleppo? Amnesty International conducted research on violations committed by the Syrian government and non-state armed groups in Aleppo city and its closest suburbs since January 2014. For this report, researchers interviewed 78 current or former residents of Aleppo and 29 professionals working in or on Aleppo. These interviews, which were conducted either in person or by phone, email or virtual means, were carried out in Turkey in December 2014 and January 2015 and in Lebanon in February and March 2015. Amnesty International also reviewed extensive photo and video materials and crosschecked them with witness accounts. In March 2015, Amnesty International contacted the Syrian authorities to share its preliminary findings, request a response to these findings and seek clarifications and additional details on incidents examined in this report, but had received no response as of 23 April 2015.

Based on this research, our conclusions are clear and incontrovertible: civilians in Aleppo are suffering unthinkable atrocities. Our assessment is that the violations committed by the Syrian government and many armed opposition groups in Aleppo not only violate UN Security Council Resolution 2139, which was unanimously adopted more than one year ago, but are also war crimes. In some cases, the actions of the Syrian government amounted to crimes against humanity.

Civilians in opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo have been bombarded in their homes, hospitals, schools, public markets and places of worship in air attacks launched by government forces. The majority of attacks in this campaign have involved the use of “barrel bombs” – large, improvised explosive devices, which are delivered from helicopters and consist of oil barrels, fuel tanks or gas cylinders that have been packed with explosives, fuel and metal fragments to increase their lethal effect.

From January 2014 to March 2015, government forces launched continual attacks using barrel bombs and other imprecise explosive weapons on areas populated with civilians, including at least 14 public markets, 12 transportation hubs and 23 mosques, and on civilian objects, including at least 17 hospitals and medical centres and three schools. The vast majority of fatalities caused by barrel bomb attacks in Aleppo have been civilians. According to the Violations Documentation Center, a Syria-based monitoring group, barrel bomb attacks killed at least 3,124 civilians – and 35 fighters – in Aleppo governorate from January 2014 to March 2015. For this report, Amnesty International conducted in-depth inquiries into eight barrel bomb attacks and found that they killed at least 188 civilians; only one fighter was recorded among the fatalities. Meanwhile, the Syrian government has failed to acknowledge that its aerial bombardment campaign in Aleppo has resulted in a single civilian casualty and has insisted that air attacks have targeted only “terrorists”.

These and other factors examined in this report suggest that the aerial bombardment campaign conducted by government forces in Aleppo city deliberately targeted civilians and civilian objects. It is a war crime to intentionally make civilian objects and civilians who are not directly participating in hostilities the target of attacks. Such a systematic attack on the civilian population, when carried out as part of government policy as appears to have been the case in Aleppo, would also constitute a crime against humanity.

Amnesty International and other monitoring groups have also documented attacks by armed opposition groups on residential neighbourhoods in government-held areas of Aleppo. These attacks often involved the use of imprecise explosive weapons such as mortars, which should never be used in the vicinity of concentrations of civilians. Given the nature of the weapons used, many of these attacks are likely to constitute indiscriminate attacks, which, when they kill or injure civilians, are war crimes. Some of these attacks may have also constituted deliberate attacks on civilians or civilian objects, which are also war crimes.

Amnesty International and other monitoring groups have documented hundreds of cases since January 2014 involving the arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, as well as the torture and other ill-treatment, of civilians by the Syrian government in Aleppo city and its closest suburbs. These violations have taken place within the context of thousands of similar cases that have been documented across Syria since 2011. In so far as torture and enforced disappearances in Aleppo appear to have been perpetrated as part of a systematic and widespread attack on the civilian population by the Syrian government, these violations may amount to crimes against humanity.

Amnesty International has also concluded, based on cases examined in this report and prior work, that many non-state armed groups have engaged in abductions and hostage-taking, as well as the arbitrary detention, torture, and other mistreatment of prisoners in Aleppo. Such acts would constitute war crimes.

As a backdrop to these grave violations, residents of Aleppo city live in appalling conditions. Residents in both opposition-held and government-held areas lack basic services such as water and electricity, and suffer shortages in food, medicine and gas to heat their homes. Humanitarian workers told Amnesty International that they are generally able to reach areas controlled by residents in all areas of the city. Yet those providing assistance to opposition-controlled areas discussed significant challenges to providing aid, not least of which is the

government forces' continual targeting of the road that serves as the primary access route for humanitarian assistance to the city.

The rate of air attacks by government forces on opposition-held areas in Aleppo city appeared to decrease between September 2014 and March 2015, but has recently risen again drastically; they continue to occur on a daily basis. Furthermore, civilians are being arbitrarily detained, tortured and disappeared, and the threat of a siege is ever present.

Amnesty International therefore calls on all parties to the Syrian conflict to end deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects such as hospitals and schools; to end the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons such as barrel bombs and mortars in populated areas; to end arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, abduction and torture and other ill-treatment; and to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to the UN and its implementing partners in Aleppo and in Syria as a whole. Ultimately, the success of initiatives like the Special Envoy's "freeze" should be measured by the commitment of all warring parties to halt the human rights abuses, war crimes and crimes against humanity that are being committed in Aleppo and across Syria.

METHODOLOGY

Amnesty International conducted research for this report from December 2014 to March 2015. From 15 to 19 December 2014 and from 12 to 30 January 2015, a researcher conducted fieldwork in Turkey. Additional research was conducted from Lebanon. For this report, researchers interviewed 78 current or former residents of Aleppo, including eyewitnesses to attacks, medics, rescue workers and members of the media, and 29 professionals working in or on Aleppo, including staff of UN agencies as well as national and international NGOs. Interviews were conducted either in person or by phone, email or virtual means. Due to the security concerns of residents of government-controlled areas in Aleppo city, Amnesty International had limited access to witnesses from these areas. The majority of witnesses in this report asked that their names be withheld, either to protect their own safety or the safety of family members living in Syria.

While Amnesty International was able to visit parts of northern Syria in 2012 and 2013, it has not sent researchers to such areas in 2014 or 2015 due to heightened security concerns. The Syrian authorities have never responded to Amnesty International's repeated requests to travel to areas they control since the start of the crisis in March 2011.

For this report, Amnesty International reviewed Syrian government statements; reports from UN agencies, international NGOs and local monitoring groups; and media reports. It also reviewed extensive photo and video materials provided by Syrian human rights and humanitarian organizations, human rights activists and witnesses, and crosschecked them with witness accounts. While in Turkey, Amnesty International co-operated with several monitoring groups to gather information and to establish contact with witnesses and local experts. These groups included the Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability, the Violations Documentation Center, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, and the Syria Research and Evaluation Organization.

In March 2015, Amnesty International contacted the Syrian authorities to share its preliminary findings that the Syrian government had committed serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Aleppo, to request a response to these findings and to seek clarifications and additional details on specific incidents and cases examined in this report. Amnesty International also invited the Syrian authorities to share information regarding potential violations committed by armed opposition groups in Aleppo city. As of 23 April 2015, when this report was finalized, Amnesty International had received no response.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the conflict, Aleppo was Syria's largest city and economic hub. Its ancient city was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986, and it is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. When protests against the Syrian government broke out in March 2011, residents of Aleppo initially remained largely uninvolved. Clashes between government forces and armed opposition groups emerged in Aleppo governorate in February 2012. In the first months of 2012, Aleppo's protest demonstrations remained smaller than in other major towns; by June and July 2012, however, the demonstrations increased in scale and frequency. By August 2012, armed opposition groups controlled the eastern half of the city; four months later, in December, they had cut the government forces' main supply line to Aleppo, making forces based there dependent on the Syrian Arab Air Force for resupply. In an attempt to reclaim the city, government forces launched a major offensive in September 2013. Nevertheless, the two sides remained at a stalemate. Government forces continued their advance in 2014, capturing villages north of Aleppo, and coming within a few kilometres of encircling the city.¹ In February 2015, government forces continued to make advances in the countryside north of Aleppo city, with the apparent aim of assuming control of the main supply road from Turkey to Aleppo city and lifting the opposition's siege of the predominantly Shi'a villages of Nobel and Zahraa. In response, armed opposition forces launched a counter-offensive. As of 23 April 2015, the fighting was ongoing.

At least 18 non-state armed groups are currently operating in Aleppo city.² Many of these groups are comprised of sub-factions and have varying levels of command and control. There are considerable rivalries between the groups, but also various forms and levels of collaboration. Currently, one of the most prominent of the coalitions that has emerged is the Levant Front (al-Jabha al-Shamiya), formed in December 2014 from five of Aleppo's largest opposition groups.³ The Levant Front does not include Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qa'ida's affiliate in Syria, which is active in Aleppo city. Other opposition factions operating in Aleppo city include a limited number of Free Syrian Army brigades and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (commonly known simply by its Kurdish initials YPG), which controls Sheikh Maqoud, a predominantly Kurdish neighbourhood. The armed group that calls itself the Islamic State

¹ International Crisis Group, *Rigged cars and barrel bombs: Aleppo and the state of the Syrian war*, 9 September 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/155-rigged-cars-and-barrel-bombs-aleppo-and-the-state-of-the-syrian-war.pdf> (accessed 11 March 2015).

² For more details on armed opposition groups active in and nearby Aleppo city, see The Carter Center, *Syria: Countrywide conflict report No. 5*, February 2015, http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Feb-28-2015.pdf (accessed 20 March 2015).

³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *The Levant Front: Can Aleppo's rebels unite?*, 26 December 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57605> (accessed 20 March 2015). The Levant Front saw small but significant defections in April 2015, and some analysts predict that the coalition's longevity is limited.

is not present in Aleppo city, though its forces are located around 30 kilometres to the east.

Throughout the battle for Aleppo, civilians have suffered grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.⁴ In 2012, demonstrators and bystanders at peaceful protests were killed and injured by live rounds fired by security forces and state-armed pro-government *shabiha* militias. Hundreds of peaceful demonstrators and their supporters were hunted down by government forces and killed, arrested or subjected to enforced disappearances.⁵ As the situation in Syria escalated into an internal armed conflict, government forces and pro-government militias summarily executed fighters from opposition groups, their relatives and other civilians, and destroyed their homes and businesses.⁶ In August 2012, Syrian government forces began aerial bombardments of areas controlled by opposition forces in Aleppo city and its countryside, using weapons such as internationally banned cluster bombs and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles.⁷ In mid-2013, government forces in Aleppo began using barrel bombs – high explosive unguided weapons dropped from helicopters – in a lethal campaign that has continued into 2015.⁸ Meanwhile, the Syrian government continued to subject individuals to enforced disappearances as well as arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment in detention centres in Aleppo.⁹

Amnesty International and other organizations have also documented violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses committed by non-state armed groups in Aleppo since the outbreak of the conflict. These violations include the widespread summary killing of captured, injured or otherwise *hors de combat* members of government forces, including armed forces, security forces, intelligence agencies and *shabiha* militias, and suspected informers or collaborators; the torture and other ill-treatment of captives and detainees; abductions and hostage-taking; and the indiscriminate use of weapons such as mortars and improvised explosive weapons in attacks on residential neighbourhoods in government-held areas of Aleppo.¹⁰

⁴ "Aleppo", in this report, refers to Aleppo city and not the whole governorate, unless otherwise specified.

⁵ Amnesty International, *All-out repression: Purging dissent in Aleppo, Syria* (MDE 24/061/2012), 1 August 2012.

⁶ Amnesty International, *Deadly reprisals: Deliberate killings and other abuses by Syria's armed forces* (MDE 24/041/2012), 14 June 2012.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Syria: Government bombs rain on civilians* (MDE 24/009/2013), 14 March 2013.

⁸ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *9th report*, 5 February 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx> (accessed 5 March 2015).

⁹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Surrounded by death: Former inmates of Aleppo Central Prison*, 12 August 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/AleppoCentralPrison.pdf> (accessed 5 March 2015); Human Rights Watch, *Torture archipelago: Arbitrary arrests, torture and enforced disappearances in Syria's underground prisons since March 2011*, July 2012, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0712webwcover_0.pdf (accessed 6 March 2015).

¹⁰ See Amnesty International, *Syria: Summary killings and other abuses by armed groups* (MDE

In response to the human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed in Aleppo and in Syria as a whole, the UN Security Council has adopted several resolutions. On 27 September 2013, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2118, which primarily called for the verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles.¹¹ This was followed by the adoption on 22 February 2014 of Resolution 2139, the only resolution to address key violations of international human rights and humanitarian law affecting civilians on a daily basis.¹² Resolution 2139 demanded that all parties to the conflict immediately cease the indiscriminate use of weapons in populated areas; subjecting civilians to arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances; and restricting the delivery of humanitarian assistance. When the Syrian government failed to comply with this resolution, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2165, which authorized the delivery of humanitarian aid across borders and conflict lines by the UN and its implementing partners.¹³ As of 23 April 2015, the Security Council had failed to address other areas of continuing non-compliance with Resolution 2139. The Security Council has also failed to refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, despite calls to do so by Amnesty International since April 2011 and by the UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic since February 2013, as well as by dozens of UN member states and more than 100 NGOs. The Security Council resolution that would have made this referral possible was vetoed by Russia and China in May 2014.¹⁴

Three UN envoys have attempted to broker a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Syria. Kofi Annan, after assuming the role of Joint Special Envoy of the UN and League of Arab States in February 2012, developed a "six-point plan" for peace and convened an Action Group for Syria that released the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012, which emphasized the need for a transitional government body that could include members of the present Syrian government and of the opposition.¹⁵ Kofi Annan was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi in August 2012. He

24/008/2013), 14 March 2013; Reuters, "Syrian rebel 'hell cannons' kill 300 civilians: monitoring group", 12 December 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/12/us-mideast-crisis-attacks-idUSKBNQJ17I20141212> (accessed 12 March 2015). *Hors de combat* is a technical term under international humanitarian law referring to 1) anyone who is in the power of an adverse party; 2) anyone who is defenceless due to unconsciousness, wounds or sickness; or 3) anyone who clearly expresses an intention to surrender, provided that he or she abstains from hostile acts and does not attempt to escape. See Customary IHL, Rule 47, International Committee of the Red Cross, https://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule47 (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2118, 27 September 2013.

¹² UN Security Council Resolution 2139, 22 February 2014.

¹³ UN Security Council Resolution 2165, 14 July 2014. The delivery of humanitarian aid across borders in Syria was renewed with UN Security Council Resolution 2191, 17 December 2014.

¹⁴ UN News Centre, "Russia, China block Security Council Referral of Syria to the International Criminal Court", 22 May 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47860#.VREkCzSUdX8> (accessed 24 March 2015).

¹⁵ Al Jazeera, "Kofi Annan's six-point plan for Syria", 27 March 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/03/2012327153111767387.html> (accessed 24 March 2015); Action Group for Syria, "Final Communiqué", 30 June 2012, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf> (accessed 24 March 2015).

led the Geneva II conference on Syria in January and February 2014, which was successful in convening Syrian delegations from the government and the opposition for the first time since the outbreak of hostilities but yielded no tangible results.¹⁶ Lakhdar Brahimi resigned in May 2014 and was succeeded by Staffan de Mistura in July 2014. Staffan de Mistura has so far focused on de-escalating violence in Syria through localized ceasefires intended to alleviate civilian suffering as well as pave the way toward a more comprehensive peace process. His plan was to begin with a “freeze” in fighting and military operations in Aleppo city and its closest suburbs.¹⁷ As of April 2015, Staffan de Mistura was still exploring the possibility of a “freeze” with the warring parties in Aleppo, which seemed increasingly unlikely to be accomplished, while considering how to revive a political process.

¹⁶ Reuters, “Mediator apologizes to Syrians for lack of peace progress”, 15 February 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/15/us-syria-crisis-brahimi-idUSBREA1E0G220140215> (accessed 24 March 2015).

¹⁷ UN, “Transcript of a press encounter by Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria”, 11 November 2014, <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=3718> (accessed 25 March 2015).

OVERALL FINDINGS

In 2014 and the first three months of 2015, government forces and many non-state armed groups committed serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Aleppo city and its closest suburbs, all of which defied the demands of UN Security Council Resolution 2139, and some of which appear to constitute war crimes. In some cases, the actions of the Syrian government may have amounted to crimes against humanity.¹⁸ This chapter provides an overall description of these violations and examines how they fit into broader patterns of violations across Syria. In the subsequent three chapters of this report, these violations are explored in more depth and illustrated through case examples.

Attacks on civilians and civilian objects and use of explosive weapons in populated areas

On 10 February 2015, Syrian President al-Assad denied that forces loyal to his government had used barrel bombs, calling the allegation “a childish story” and later stating, “there are no barrel bombs.”¹⁹ In reality, barrel bomb and other air attacks have killed, injured and displaced tens of thousands of civilians in Aleppo and across Syria. Amnesty International has documented and received reports on hundreds of incidents in Aleppo city from January 2014 to March 2015 involving air strikes on civilian objects and populated areas, including at least three schools, 17 hospitals, 12 transportation hubs, 14 public markets and 23 mosques.²⁰ Residents as well as monitoring groups told Amnesty International that barrel bombs were used in the majority of these attacks.²¹ The massive destruction and casualties caused by these attacks, as well as clearly identifiable remnants of barrel bombs, have been captured in thousands of videos and photos from monitoring groups, media sources and witnesses.²²

Civilians make up the vast majority of victims from barrel bomb attacks. The Violations Documentation Center recorded the names of 3,124 civilians – and only 35 fighters – who were killed in barrel bomb attacks from January 2014 to March 2015 in Aleppo governorate. Similarly, based on eyewitness testimony and reports from monitoring groups on the eight barrel bomb attacks documented in this report, at least 188 civilians were killed. Only one

¹⁸ Based on its research to date, Amnesty International is not in a position to determine that the actions of armed opposition groups in the Aleppo area during the period covered in this report amount to crimes against humanity.

¹⁹ Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), “President al-Assad to BBC news: We are defending civilians, and making dialogue”, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=28047> (accessed 20 February 2015).

²⁰ These figures are based on incidents documented by Amnesty International as well as a survey of reports by international and Syrian monitoring groups.

²¹ Email correspondence with Violation Documentation Center (VDC) spokesperson, 24 March 2015; email correspondence with a staff member of an international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, 20 March 2015.

²² See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efUXKkVmesE&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9DnX2Skrgc>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiJzqNPz-Ak> (accessed 1 April 2015).

fighter was recorded among the fatalities. Since it began aerially bombarding Aleppo in 2012, the Syrian government has failed to acknowledge that its campaign has resulted in a single civilian casualty and has stated that air attacks have targeted only "terrorists".²³

According to the Violations Documentation Center, barrel bomb attacks peaked between April and July 2014, with an average of 107 attacks per month, and decreased to an average of around 17 per month from September 2014 to March 2015.²⁴ This campaign caused the displacement of tens of thousands of families in the spring and summer months of 2014; the head of a Syrian monitoring group informed Amnesty International that the flows of refugees and internally displaced persons from opposition-held areas in Aleppo city had lessened but continued in recent months.²⁵ The decrease in attacks could be explained by several factors, including a shift in the government's military tactics or resources, poor weather conditions, or the possibility that the government had largely accomplished its aim of displacing the civilian population and destroying civilian infrastructure in opposition-controlled areas.

In individual cases, Amnesty International has generally concluded that the attacks appeared to be either directly targeting civilians and/or civilian objects or, at the least, disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate attacks; indiscriminate attacks that kill or injure civilians amount to war crimes. However, when assessing the government's aerial bombardment campaign in Aleppo city as a whole, a number of factors, including the large number and proportion of civilian casualties it caused, the nature of the weapons used, the means of delivery, the frequency with which civilian objects such as hospitals were attacked, and the apparent lack of military objectives in the vicinity of the strikes, together suggest that government forces have indeed deliberately targeted civilians and civilian objects. The deliberate targeting of civilians or civilian objects is a war crime.

Furthermore, evidence indicates that these bombings – together with acts of torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance – have been carried out as part of a systematic, as well as widespread, attack on the civilian population in furtherance of government policy. Amnesty International's assessment is therefore that they constitute crimes against humanity.²⁶ In addition, the scale, intensity and duration of the Syrian government's

²³ To come to this conclusion, Amnesty International's researchers conducted a search of all public statements by the Syrian authorities that are available online.

²⁴ Email correspondence with VDC employee, 15 March 2015.

²⁵ See Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *8th report*, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015), p. 21. Skype interview with head of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 24 March 2015.

²⁶ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic concluded that from January to July 2014, "The Government has carried out a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population of Aleppo to punish and terrorize civilians for supporting or hosting armed groups, in an apparent strategy to erode popular support for those groups... The gravity of the attacks, established by their scale, pattern and virtually continuous repetition over a six-month period indicates that the war crimes of attacking civilians were committed as part of a plan or policy. The attacks amounted to area bombardment and constituted a large-scale attack on the civilian population of non-State armed group-controlled districts of Aleppo city and Rif Aleppo." *8th report*, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015).

campaign strongly suggests that it has adopted a policy of collective punishment against the civilian population in opposition-held areas of Aleppo city. Collective punishment is a war crime.

Amnesty International and other monitoring groups also documented attacks by armed opposition groups on residential neighbourhoods and other civilian objects in government-held areas of Aleppo. These attacks often involved the use of imprecise explosive weapons such as mortars. Given the nature of the weapons and the manner in which they were used, many of these attacks are likely to constitute indiscriminate or otherwise disproportionate attacks and may constitute war crimes. Some of them may also have constituted deliberate attacks on civilians or civilian objects, which are war crimes.

Arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances

The Syrian government has carried out widespread arbitrary arrests and detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearances in detention centres across Syria. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented in 2014 more than 6,400 civilians who were arrested by the Syrian government, and at least 1,915 civilians who died in detention, whether by torture, starvation, execution or other means.²⁷ During the same period, the SNHR reported that 750 members of non-state armed groups were arrested by Syrian government forces, and that 48 had died in detention. The group also estimates that, between 2011 and 2014, the Syrian government subjected at least 85,000 individuals to enforced disappearances.²⁸ On 20 March 2014, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances stated that enforced disappearances in Syria were “being perpetrated as a systematic and widespread attack on civilians” and called on the highest UN bodies to give immediate attention to the matter.²⁹

The abuses documented by Amnesty International in Aleppo are representative of the violations committed by government forces in Syria as a whole. Amnesty International and other organizations have documented hundreds of cases involving the arbitrary detention or enforced disappearance of civilians in Aleppo governorate since 2011. In many cases those detained appear to have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated. According to the Violations Documentation Center, 1,196 civilians have been detained by the Syrian government in Aleppo governorate since 2011, 90% of whom were tortured or otherwise ill-treated and 541 of whom died in detention.³⁰ As well as being serious human rights violations, many of these acts also constitute war crimes. Given the fact that enforced disappearances and torture appear to have been perpetrated as part of a systematic and widespread attack on civilians in

²⁷ Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Harvest of the most prominent human rights violations in Syria in 2014*, 25 January 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYFJ1-H8iSQ> (accessed 17 March 2015).

²⁸ Syrian Network for Human Rights, *85,000 forcibly displaced persons in the Syrian regime detention centers on the International day of the disappeared*, 30 August 2014, http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/enforce-disappearance.pdf (accessed 17 March 2015).

²⁹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Syria: Group of experts call for action into enforced disappearances as crimes against humanity”, 20 March 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14410&LangID=E> (accessed 3 March 2015).

³⁰ Email correspondence with VDC spokesperson, 24 February 2015.

Syria, in furtherance of the state's policy, they would amount to crimes against humanity.³¹

Additionally, based on the cases examined in this report and prior work, Amnesty International concludes that many non-state armed groups have engaged in the abduction of civilians and summary killings, hostage-taking, torture, and other mistreatment of detainees in Aleppo and its closest suburbs since January 2014. Many of these abuses constitute war crimes.

Humanitarian conditions and access

For the residents of Aleppo, the human rights abuses and war crimes detailed above are taking place against a backdrop of extremely poor living conditions. Residents of both opposition-held and government-held areas lack basic services such as water and electricity and face shortages in necessities such as food and medicine. In terms of humanitarian access, actors who provide assistance to opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo city cited the government forces' continual targeting of the road that serves as their primary access route to the city as one of many challenges.

³¹ Amnesty International has argued since 2011 that many violations of international law committed by Syrian government forces have amounted to crimes against humanity because they appear to be part of a widespread, as well as systematic, attack against the civilian population involving multiple commissions of a range of crimes against a multiplicity of victims in an organized manner and pursuant to a state policy to commit such an attack. These crimes include murder, torture, arbitrary detention and other severe deprivation of liberty, and other inhumane acts committed intentionally to cause great suffering or serious damage to mental or physical health.

ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS AND CIVILIAN OBJECTS AND USE OF EXPLOSIVE WEAPONS IN POPULATED AREAS

“We are in the circle of hell in Aleppo... The streets are filled with blood. The people who have been killed are not the people who were fighting. There is no solution for the ones who are left.”

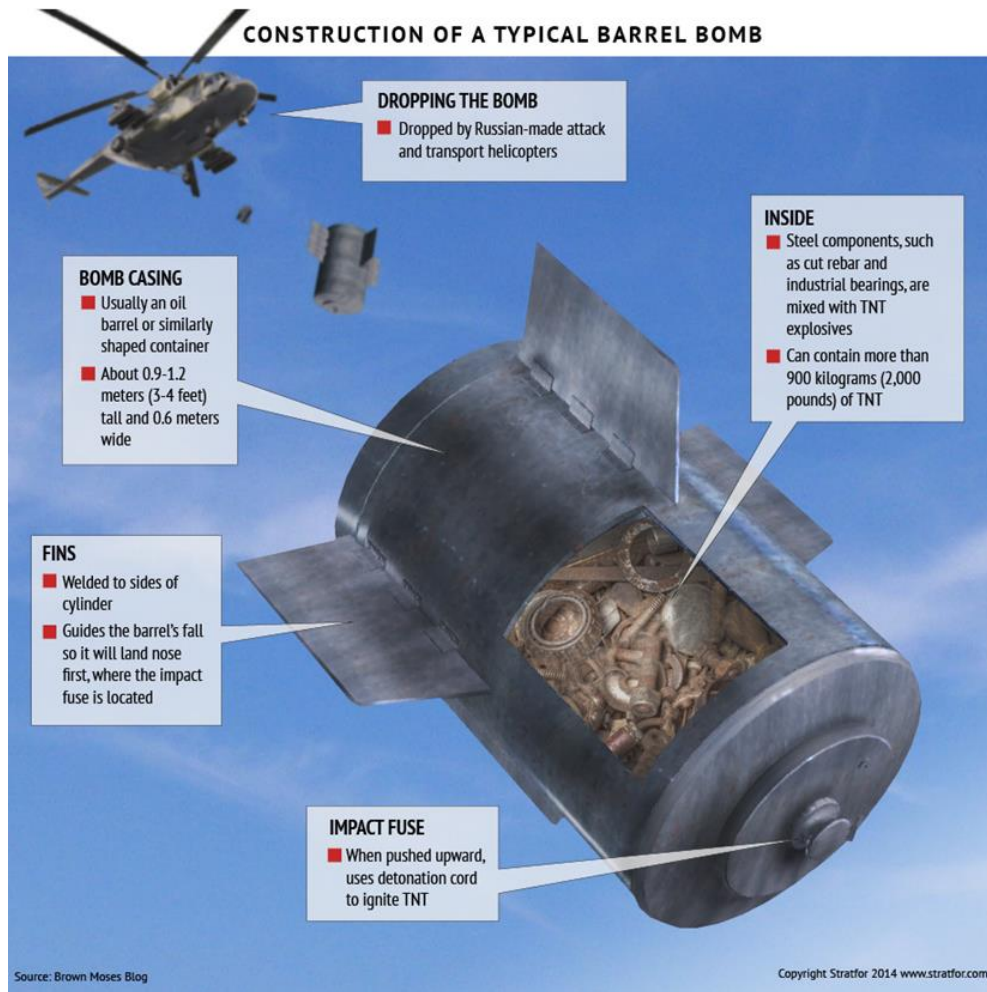
Member of the Civil Defence in Aleppo city

In its Resolution 2139 of February 2014, the UN Security Council demanded that all parties immediately cease “the indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas, including shelling and aerial bombardment, such as the use of barrel bombs”. It further recalled “the obligation to distinguish between civilian populations and combatants, and the prohibition against indiscriminate attacks, and attacks against civilians and civilian objects.”³² Government forces and many armed opposition groups have systematically and flagrantly defied these demands in Aleppo.

³² UN Security Council, Resolution 2139, 22 February 2014, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139(2014)) (accessed 15 March 2015).

VIOLATIONS BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

BARREL BOMB ATTACKS



WHAT IS A BARREL BOMB?

Syrian barrel bombs are large improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which are dropped from helicopters. They consist of oil barrels, fuel tanks or gas cylinders that have been packed with explosives, fuel and metal fragments - such as ball bearings, nails and machine parts - to increase their lethal effect. They cannot be accurately aimed at specific targets. Since 2014, eyewitness accounts and reports from monitoring groups suggest that barrel bombs have been used to deliver chlorine gas, including in two attacks on Sermin and nearby Qmainass on 16 March 2015. Their use has been widely condemned as unlawful, given their indiscriminate nature and wide-area effect when used over densely populated areas.



A man looks down at an unexploded barrel bomb dropped by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad at a cemetery in the al-Qatanah neighbourhood of Aleppo. 27 March 2014 © REUTERS/Mahmoud Hebbo

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 12,194 people were killed in Syria from 2012 until February 2015 as a result of barrel bomb attacks by government forces. Only 473 of these people were fighters, meaning that 96% of this total were civilians. More than half were killed after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2139. As of February 2015, of all governorates in Syria, Aleppo suffered the greatest number of victims from barrel bomb attacks. According to the Violations Documentation Center, 3,124 civilians – and only 35 fighters – were killed in barrel bomb attacks from January 2014 to March 2015 in Aleppo governorate. Local monitors told Amnesty International that the large number of civilian casualties is likely due to the fact that barrel bombs are so imprecise that the government rarely drops them near the front line, where they might hit their own forces. Instead, barrel bombs have struck apartment buildings and populated areas such as public markets, transportation hubs and mosques.

Civilian objects such as hospitals are at particular risk of being damaged in barrel bomb attacks in Aleppo. Barrel bombs have been used by government forces in at least 12 attacks that damaged hospitals and other medical facilities in Aleppo city between April and July 2014.³³ Due to these attacks, many hospitals in opposition-controlled areas have been forced to move underground.³⁴ A doctor who works at a field hospital in al-Sakhour neighbourhood

³³ Physicians for Human Rights, *Doctors in the crosshairs: Four years of attacks on health care in Syria*, March 2015, https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/doctors-in-the-crosshairs.pdf (accessed 17 March 2015).

³⁴ Several doctors based in Aleppo asked that Amnesty International refrain from disclosing which

described his working conditions: "There is no sun, no fresh air, we can't go upstairs, and there are always airplanes and helicopters in the sky. Some hospitals are above the ground, but they face huge risks."³⁵ Many schools in opposition-held areas of Aleppo city have also moved into basements or underground bunkers to avoid being struck in targeted or indiscriminate attacks.³⁶

Members of the Civil Defence, a group of volunteer search and rescue workers from local communities, told Amnesty International that they believe the actual number of victims from barrel bomb attacks could be even higher than the estimates cited above, as this type of attack presents several challenges for documentation. First, victims of barrel bomb attacks are often found dismembered or are otherwise unidentifiable. Second, bodies can be buried under the rubble for weeks or months after a strike. Third, due to the limitations of both supplies and staff at hospitals in opposition-held areas, injured victims are taken to hospitals and medical centres throughout the city, making it difficult for monitors to track subsequent deaths. Finally, monitors and media activists who arrive at the scene of the strike intending to document deaths and injuries are often compelled to participate in urgent rescue efforts instead.

Civilian impressions of barrel bomb attacks

Of all the causes of civilian suffering, barrel bombs were the primary concern of current and former residents of Aleppo city. For this report, Amnesty International interviewed 39 individuals who had first-hand experience of barrel bomb attacks and their immediate aftermath. Several of these witnesses told Amnesty about the intense fear generated by this kind of attack. A 24-year-old woman explained, "The barrel bombs are the most miserable weapons. If they explode we know our bodies will be in pieces... [Also] we can see them coming. There is a minute of waiting to die."³⁷ A shopkeeper from Sukkari neighbourhood echoed this. "After you see the barrel falling, you don't know where to go," he said. "Sometimes we accidentally run toward the barrels. You crash into things while you are running, because you are looking up... My brother dislocated a disc in his spine because he was always looking up to the sky."³⁸ A 34-year-old teacher summarized the mentality of many in Aleppo: "We are always nervous, always worried, always looking to the sky."³⁹

Aleppo residents expressed particular concern about "double-tap" strikes, in which a first barrel bomb strike is followed by a second, which usually occurs nearby up to 30 minutes after the first. In these types of strikes, those who come to rescue the injured or document the event, such as members of the local Civil Defence force, human rights monitors, or the

hospitals are now underground, as they feared that such details would be used by the Syrian government to target the hospitals and clinics that are still above ground.

³⁵ Skype interview, 30 January 2015.

³⁶ Interview in Turkey with teacher based in Aleppo, 17 December 2014; interview in Turkey with staff member of Syria Relief, 19 December 2014; Skype interview with former teacher in Aleppo, 28 January 2015.

³⁷ Interview in Turkey, 14 January 2015.

³⁸ Interview in Turkey, 13 January 2015.

³⁹ Interview in Turkey, 17 December 2014.

media, are at particular risk of being killed.⁴⁰ A 48-year-old man from Anadan, a northern suburb of Aleppo, described to Amnesty International his experience of a “double-tap” strike near his home on 14 June 2014. “At noon, they started calling from the mosque for help. I ran to the site of the shelling, and then when I got there, 20 minutes later, I heard another sound. This was the second barrel – they wanted to kill even more of us.”⁴¹ Eventually, he said, the Civil Defence team in his community learned to wait several minutes to begin their rescue missions after a barrel bomb attack, as so many of their members had been killed or injured in second strikes.

The explosive materials inside the barrel or container can cause horrific injuries. A 30-year-old factory worker described the aftermath of an attack on al-Fardous neighbourhood in 2014: “After the bombing, I saw children without heads, body parts everywhere. It was how I imagine hell to be.”⁴² According to a surgeon from a hospital in al-Sakhour neighbourhood, “Barrel bombs are the most horrible and hurtful weapon... [We deal with] multi-trauma, so many amputations, intestines out of the body, it’s too horrible. We have seen incredible things. We have not seen these types of injuries in any medical book.”⁴³

Barrel bomb attacks and their effects

This report examines eight attacks involving the use of barrel bombs since January 2014. These cases are illustrative of the hundreds of barrel bomb attacks launched by government forces in that period.⁴⁴ Amnesty International obtained testimony relating to five additional incidents involving barrel bombs that are not documented in this report due to limitations of space: an air strike on a residential building in Hellok neighbourhood on 27 May 2014, an air strike on a crowded market-place in Anadan on 14 June 2014, an air strike on Dar al-Shifa field hospital in Sha’ar neighbourhood on 9 July 2014, an air strike on the main square in Haydariya neighbourhood on 5 September 2014, and an air strike on a residential area between two mosques in al-Fardous neighbourhood on 19 September 2014.

Al-Fardous neighbourhood, 20 April 2014

At around 5pm on 20 April 2014 government forces launched an air attack on a busy intersection in al-Fardous neighbourhood. Two witnesses, as well as local and international monitoring groups, told Amnesty International that government forces used two barrel bombs

⁴⁰ The following incidents in this report involve “double-tap” strikes: al-Fardous neighbourhood, 20 April 2014; Sukkari neighbourhood, 16 June 2014; al-Mowasalat neighbourhood, 6 November 2014; Baideen neighbourhood, 1 February 2015.

⁴¹ Interview in Turkey, 13 January 2015.

⁴² Interview in Turkey, 19 January 2015.

⁴³ Skype interview, 30 January 2015.

⁴⁴ According to an international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, government forces launched at least 943 attacks using barrel bombs in Aleppo city from April 2014 to March 2015. Furthermore, using satellite imagery, Human Rights Watch identified at least 1,000 major damage sites in Aleppo between 22 February 2014 and 25 January 2015. These sites show damage consistent with the explosion of large, air-dropped munitions, including barrel bombs and other conventional bombs dropped by helicopters, as well as with the use of rockets, missiles and fuel-air bombs. Human Rights Watch, “Syria: New spate of barrel bomb attacks”, 24 February 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks> (accessed 15 March 2015).

in this attack.⁴⁵ Ahmed⁴⁶, a 25-year-old resident of al-Fardous who survived the attack, told Amnesty International that he heard a helicopter as well as the distinctive sound made by a barrel falling just before the attack. Ahmed reported that the first barrel was dropped on a major intersection in al-Fardous, and the second was dropped one minute later on an apartment building 50 metres away. He told Amnesty International:

*"It was around sunset, and we were sitting near the traffic light in the biggest local market when they attacked... Immediately after the first attack, there was another strike. The regime wanted to cause the biggest number of deaths, so they used two barrels... [After the strike] I saw so much dust, women crying and screaming for their children. I saw pieces of bodies and cars burning with people inside. Houses were burning too. There was blood everywhere on the ground."*⁴⁷

Muhammed Basbous, a media activist from Aleppo, arrived at the intersection 10 minutes later. He described what he saw:

*"[There were] civilian cars, services [public taxis], bicycles, people, all burning. There was a parking lot nearby, with around seven minibuses that were destroyed... The shrapnel and TNT inside of the barrel burned all the cars. All the people I saw were injured or dead. Some people were in two pieces. They were no longer people."*⁴⁸

The two witnesses told Amnesty International that in addition to the many vehicles that were damaged, two buildings were destroyed and five buildings were severely damaged. Muhammed Basbous and his colleague documented the deaths of 35 civilians who were killed as a result of the attack. Other monitoring groups identified at least 37 civilian fatalities.⁴⁹ According to Muhammed Basbous, the nearest armed group base was nearly four kilometres away, on the last street of al-Fardous neighbourhood, and there were no other military objectives in the vicinity of the attack.⁵⁰ Considering the location of this strike, an intersection crowded with civilians, the apparent lack of military targets in the vicinity, and the explosive nature of the weapons used, the attack on 20 April is likely to have constituted either a direct attack against civilians and civilian objects or at the least an indiscriminate attack.

⁴⁵ Email correspondence with a staff member of the Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability, 2 February 2015. This incident was also documented by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *8th report*, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015).

⁴⁶ Real name withheld.

⁴⁷ Interview in Turkey, 22 January 2015.

⁴⁸ Interview in Turkey, 21 January 2015.

⁴⁹ See VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1z8BwE1> (accessed 15 March 2015). The Syrian Institute for Justice and Accountability identified 53 victims by name; email correspondence, 11 February 2015.

⁵⁰ Neither Muhammed Basbous nor the Civil Defence could identify the particular armed group; however, the Civil Defence stated that the group was one of the groups that now makes up the Levant Front.

Inzarat neighbourhood, 25 May 2014

Two witnesses told Amnesty International that government forces dropped a barrel bomb near Sakan al-Shababi in Inzarat neighbourhood at around 8pm on 25 May 2014. The Aleppo Civil Defence and media sources confirmed that a barrel bomb was used in this attack.⁵¹ One survivor, Musab Ibrahim, told Amnesty International:

*"Three hours before the attack, I saw the helicopter, making its rounds in the sky. That night, I was working in my shop. I didn't know the barrels would come that day. Then I heard it. I started running immediately, but nobody knows where to run... My friend, and my younger brother, and I were together in the shop. I jumped to protect my younger brother, and I covered him completely. My friend then tried to cover me. My brother was unhurt from the explosion. I had pieces of shrapnel in my body from my fingers to my toes. My friend was killed immediately. His head and back were cut open completely from the shrapnel."*⁵²

Darwish Khalifa, whose home was destroyed in the attack, described his experience:

*"I had left the house to get dinner for my family. My family and the whole neighbourhood was watching the Bab al-Hara series on TV. When I returned 30 minutes after [the attack] there was no one left, nothing left. There weren't enough ambulances and cars to take the injured, so they were using motorcycles as ambulances... At that time of day, most of the men are outside and most of the women are inside. So why did they strike the buildings where the women were?"*⁵³

Both men fled Syria after the attack. Musab Ibrahim described his situation now:

"I made it to Turkey. I am covered all over in burns, I have a head injury, and I still have the shrapnel in my body. I can't get it out, so I can't sleep. My leg has a lot of shrapnel in it, and it's in my hand too. Thank God for the hospitals in Syria. They received all the injured from this attack. But they had too many people, so they didn't have time to remove all the shrapnel... I lost my shop. I lost my car too. I lost everything. Now I am a poor man."

The two witnesses reported that five homes and two commercial shops were damaged in the attack. Among the dead were Darwish Khalifa's sister, Rajaa Khalifa; Musab Ibrahim's sister, Amena Ibrahim; and five other civilians. They told Amnesty that more than 20 civilians were injured as a result of the attack, including Darwish Khalifa's wife and son, and Musab Ibrahim's sister-in-law and father. Both witnesses independently told Amnesty International that there were no fighters in the vicinity of the attack. Musab Ibrahim stated that the nearest military checkpoint was more than 500 metres away. Based on this and other factors – including the residential character of the neighbourhood and the type of weapon used – this strike appears likely to have constituted a direct attack against civilians and civilian objects,

⁵¹ Email correspondence with Civil Defence member, 15 March 2015; Halab News, "Barrel bomb dropped on Sakan al-Shababi in Inzarat neighbourhood led to the fall of a number of victims", 26 May 2014, <http://halabnews.com/news/53578> (accessed 10 March 2015).

⁵² Interview in Turkey, 23 January 2015.

⁵³ Interview in Turkey, 23 January 2015.

or at the least an indiscriminate attack.

Bab al-Neirub neighbourhood, 13 June 2014

Amnesty International spoke with Saleh Soufan, aged 11, who survived an air attack by government forces in his neighbourhood in Bab al-Neirub at around 3pm on 13 June 2014. He said the weapon used was a barrel bomb because of the distinctive sound it made as it was dropped; the Violations Documentation Center confirmed that a barrel bomb was used in this attack.⁵⁴ Saleh Soufan's mother said that at the time of the attack, her son was playing with his cousins just outside his grandfather's carpentry shop, which is located behind the main electrical substation in Bab al-Neirub.

Saleh Soufan told Amnesty International:

*"I was with three of my four cousins. I heard the sound of the helicopter, and everyone knew it was coming – then the barrel was falling down. I hid under a tree. My cousins ran the other way, and they hid in front of the house. Omar and Hamzeh died. My youngest cousin, who was under both his brothers, survived... I was taken to Omar Bin Abdul Aziz hospital. They saw my leg, and they sent me to Kilis [Turkey]. Eventually they took [amputated] my leg, which was full of shrapnel, and half of my finger. I'm ok now. It's just that it's really boring not being able to move around and always staying at home."*⁵⁵

Saleh Soufan's mother reported that 15 houses and a large warehouse were destroyed in the attack and that the entire Fayyad family was killed. In addition to Omar Soufan, aged 11, and Hamzeh Soufan, aged 9, the Violations Documentation Center reported that Maryam Ali Fayyad, aged 4, and Kamel Attar, aged 12, were killed, as well as Dalia Atef and Abd al-Qader Dalal.⁵⁶ Saleh Soufan's mother said that although some of the members of an armed opposition group sometimes slept at the electrical substation, which was around 250 metres away from the strike, all those who died in the attack were civilians, and the strike hit only civilian homes. If so, the attack is likely to have constituted either a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or an indiscriminate attack.

Sukkari neighbourhood, 16 June 2014

On 16 June 2014 at around 11am, government forces launched an air strike on a crowded public market in Sukkari neighbourhood. Khaled Khateeb, a member of the Civil Defence team that led the rescue effort for this attack, as well as several monitoring groups, confirmed that government forces used two barrel bombs.⁵⁷ Witnesses told Amnesty International that the second barrel bomb hit between five and seven minutes after and 50 metres away from the first strike, just as the local Civil Defence force and others were

⁵⁴ Email correspondence with VDC staff member, 13 March 2015.

⁵⁵ Interview in Turkey, 23 January 2015.

⁵⁶ See VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1aVCDSh> (accessed 15 March 2015).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *8th report*, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015); Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Barrage of barrel bombs", 30 July 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/30/syria-barrage-barrel-bombs> (accessed 4 March 2015).

gathering to assist those injured in the first attack. Nader⁵⁸, a resident of al-Fardous neighbourhood, reported that the first bomb struck an apartment building, and the second hit a main intersection near the neighbourhood's local council headquarters. Both Khaled Khateeb and Khalil Hajjar, a media activist, reported that the second strike hit 50 metres away from a distribution point for humanitarian aid, where around 150 people were queuing to receive food baskets. Nader arrived at the site four minutes after the first strike and received minor shrapnel wounds in the second strike. He described his experience to Amnesty International:

*"When we arrived, the people in that neighbourhood [near the strike] were running away, and the people from outside were running toward the strikes to help rescue the people. We didn't hear the second barrel coming because people were crying and shouting, and the cars were honking. [After the second strike] there were heads, hands, body parts everywhere... Our neighbour, Ayman, was lost in the ruins and never found. They could not recover his body. There are a lot of people who were lost on that day. My uncle died there. We put his hand in the tomb, and we put his legs there too – but we are not certain they are his legs. The other pieces of his body are still in the rubble."*⁵⁹

Khalil Hajjar was in the office of People in Need, a humanitarian organization, when he heard the first strike. He told Amnesty International:

*"We heard a huge explosion. We went to see what it was, and then five minutes later the second barrel came. The people who were there to help had also become victims, so there was no one to help after the second bomb... I couldn't document the event because I needed to try to rescue some people from the rubble."*⁶⁰

Barraj al-Halabi, a member of the Aleppo Media Centre, described the scene when he arrived 10 minutes after the attack:

*"Bodies were strewn out on the ground. Six cars were burning, and the people inside them were dead. A little girl came up to me and said, 'My family is inside that building, I need my family.' I told her to be patient and that we would bring them to her. Because of the dust, I couldn't see, and I thought she had a house. But when the dust came down, there was no house at all. She had no house and no family."*⁶¹

Majd⁶², a dentist, was in his office at the time of the attack. The second barrel struck only 20 metres away from him, and shrapnel from the blast lodged in his back. He then crawled out to the street. He told Amnesty International:

⁵⁸ Real name withheld.

⁵⁹ Skype interview, 28 January 2015.

⁶⁰ Interview in Turkey, 21 January 2015.

⁶¹ Skype interview, 19 January 2015.

⁶² Real name withheld.

*"I don't know how to describe it... It was pure horror. I guarantee you everyone I saw – everyone on the ground – was a civilian. They were people I knew, people I saw every day. Some were from the Civil Defence, others were media activists who came to document the first strike, there was the man who ran the ice-cream shop, the man who ran the sandwich shop, the man who ran the toy store. These are people I would say good morning to every day on my way to work. They were all killed."*⁶³

Witnesses reported that five buildings were severely damaged in the strikes, including a bakery and several commercial shops. The Violations Documentation Center identified at least 77 civilians who were killed in the attack, including seven children between the ages of 2 and 17; no fighters were recorded among the dead.⁶⁴ All witnesses reported there was no military presence in the vicinity of the strikes. Civil defence member Khaled Khateeb stated that at the time of the attack there was a bunker for an armed opposition group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army located about 500 metres away, and the nearest front line was more than three kilometres away. Given the location of this attack, on a public market and near an aid distribution point, the nature of the weapons and the means of delivery, and the fact that only civilians were killed, it appears to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Al-Sakhour hospital, 1 July 2014

At around 5pm on 1 July 2014, a field hospital in al-Sakhour neighbourhood was damaged in an air strike conducted by government forces. Monitoring groups as well as Khaled Khateeb, from the Civil Defence, told Amnesty International that a barrel bomb was used in this attack.⁶⁵ Khaled arrived a few minutes after the strike. He told Amnesty International:

*"The main damage was in the hospital's break room and cafeteria. We saw two ambulances that were destroyed and one that was still burning. I saw body parts I couldn't even recognize. We moved the dead bodies out, and then we took all the injured people from the attack and from before the attack to nearby clinics and hospitals. The hospital was completely damaged, so they had to move it under the ground after that."*⁶⁶

A doctor from a nearby field hospital told Amnesty International that he received several of the patients who had been transferred, including one who was paralyzed by a shrapnel injury from the attack that day. He stated that the majority of the injuries he treated were the result of fragments from explosive weapons.⁶⁷ Khaled confirmed that there were no military checkpoints, bases or members of armed groups near the hospital, saying, "Of course a hospital is a civilian place." According to the Civil Defence and Physicians for Human Rights, four civilians were killed in the attack and seven were injured. This hospital had been repeatedly damaged in attacks before the incident. In June 2014 alone, it suffered seven

⁶³ Skype interview, 15 March 2015.

⁶⁴ See VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1JCibBq> (accessed 15 March 2015).

⁶⁵ Skype interview with Khaled Khateeb, 21 February 2015; email correspondence with staff member of Physicians for Human Rights, 29 January 2015.

⁶⁶ Skype interview, 21 February 2015.

⁶⁷ Phone interview, 30 January 2015.

barrel bomb and missile attacks, a strong indication that it was being deliberately targeted.⁶⁸ Hospitals, ambulances and medical facilities are specially protected under international humanitarian law, and their civilian status must be presumed. The attack on 1 July, as well as the previous seven attacks, flouted these protections and appear likely to have constituted direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, indiscriminate attacks.

Al-Mowasalat neighbourhood, 6 November 2014

On 6 November 2014 at around 3.30pm, government forces dropped two barrel bombs on al-Mowasalat neighbourhood, five minutes apart.⁶⁹ Firas⁷⁰, a resident of the neighbourhood, described what he saw when he arrived at the scene minutes after the first attack:

*"The site became very crowded with people who came to help. Then five minutes after the first attack, they attacked us again. The people started calling, 'A barrel, a barrel,' and we ran to hide inside a building near Nur Shuhada mosque... Inside the barrel, there is a sharp plate that can cut steel, so how about the humans? They are sliced through. I saw more than 50 injured people. I saw a child whose face was completely turned to blood. Another child was holding in one hand his other hand, which had been cut off completely. He was screaming, 'Bring it back to me.'"*⁷¹

Firas said the attack severely damaged the building he was in as well as several others nearby. He also noted that a main water pipe was damaged, resulting in the water supply to the neighbourhood being cut for several days. Syrian monitoring groups identified at least 13 civilians who were killed as a result of the attack.⁷² According to a media source, the first attack may have been aimed at an evacuated checkpoint for Jabhat al-Nusra; however, Firas stated that the nearest checkpoint was nearly 1.5 kilometres from the site of the attack.⁷³ This attack was likely to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects. However, even if the intended target was the abandoned checkpoint, the residential character of the neighbourhood and the presence of so many civilians should have ruled out the use of an

⁶⁸ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *8th report*, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015), p. 42.

⁶⁹ The type of weapon and other details of this strike have been confirmed by several monitoring groups and news sources. See, for example, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "The regime barrel bomb kills 12 people in Aleppo," 6 November 2014, <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/11/the-regime-barrel-bombs-kill-12-people-in-aleppo-while-u-s-and-allied-coalition-warplanes-attack-al-nusra-positions/> (accessed 1 January 2015); Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, *9th report*, 5 February 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/IndependentInternationalCommission.aspx> (accessed 5 March 2015).

⁷⁰ Real name withheld.

⁷¹ Skype interview, 21 January 2015.

⁷² See VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1JCicp5> accessed 15 March 2015); Aleppo Database for Martyrs, <http://aleppom.com/List.aspx> (accessed 15 February 2015).

⁷³ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "The regime barrel bomb kills 12 people in Aleppo", 6 November 2014, <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/11/the-regime-barrel-bombs-kill-12-people-in-aleppo-while-u-s-and-allied-coalition-warplanes-attack-al-nusra-positions/> (accessed 1 January 2015).

imprecise explosive weapon with a large blast radius such as a barrel bomb. In that case, this attack would have been disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate.

English Tomb area, 18 November 2014

On 18 November 2014 at around 10am, government forces launched an air attack on Castello Road, near the Carrefour mall in Hreitan, in the northern suburbs of Aleppo. Omar Haj Omar, a member of the Civil Defence team in Anadan, confirmed that a barrel bomb was used, as he saw the bomb falling from the window of his office and later observed the blast site. Several monitoring groups also confirmed the use of at least one barrel bomb in this attack.⁷⁴ Omar Haj Omar described the scene of the attack:

*"The Civil Defence had seen a helicopter in the air earlier in that area, so we knew they might attack. I arrived 10 minutes later... The bomb had hit exactly in front of the Carrefour mall. I saw an ambulance burning, full of dead people, and a minibus that had been full of people. They were spread out all over the road. We took three dead bodies from the ambulance. Two of them were patients, and one was a nurse. From the minibus, we removed a woman whose head had been severed, and four other dead bodies. The driver of a motorcycle had been chopped into two pieces. The body parts were everywhere. I can't say how many people were killed because they were in pieces."*⁷⁵

Sami al-Raj, a media activist, arrived around two minutes after the strike. He described what he saw:

*"There was a minibus burning, and the fire was still going when I arrived. Many people were inside. There were injured people, dead people, there were old people who couldn't walk... Ten vehicles were destroyed and more than 20 were damaged."*⁷⁶

The Civil Defence identified 17 civilians who were killed as a result of this attack and 10 who were injured; no fighters were recorded among the dead. Syrian monitoring groups reported that at least 16 civilians were killed, including five children.⁷⁷ The two witnesses reported that there were no military checkpoints, bases or members of armed groups near the site of the strike, and Omar Haj Omar further noted, "There was absolutely nothing related to the military anywhere close to that place." If this is the case, the attack appears to have constituted a direct attack against civilians and civilian objects. Even if there were a military objective in the vicinity, this still would have constituted an indiscriminate attack.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Syrian Human Rights Committee, "The daily report on human rights violations in Syria for November 18, 2014", <http://www.shrc.org/?p=19837> (accessed 15 March 2015); Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, "14 people killed by the regime explosive barrels on an ambulance in Aleppo", 19 November 2014, <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/11/14-people-killed-by-the-regimes-explosive-barrels-on-an-ambulance-in-aleppo/> (accessed 15 February 2015).

⁷⁵ Skype interview, 19 February 2015.

⁷⁶ Skype interview, 19 February 2015.

⁷⁷ Syrian Human Rights Committee, "Daily Report on Human Rights Violations in Syria", 18 November 2014, [http://www.shrc.org/?p=19837%20\(15%20killed](http://www.shrc.org/?p=19837%20(15%20killed) (accessed 15 March 2015); VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1FAJxnE> (accessed 15 March 2015).

Baideen neighbourhood, 1 and 5 February 2015

According to monitoring groups and media sources, government forces dropped two barrel bombs in Baideen neighbourhood, moments apart, on the afternoon of 1 February 2015. Media sources reported that both bombs landed on a residential building and that the attack resulted in the deaths of at least 10 people, including eight children.⁷⁸ On 5 February 2015, government forces dropped another barrel bomb in Baideen, this time on the main roundabout in the neighbourhood. Monitoring groups identified at least 24, and possibly as many as 45, civilians who were killed as a result.⁷⁹ Most of those injured or killed were aboard or waiting to board civilian buses that were on the roundabout at the time of the attack. Amnesty International spoke to the director of a field hospital in al-Sakhour neighbourhood, who said he had received 80 injured patients from this attack. He confirmed that the victims had been injured by fragments from explosive weapons and that two medical staff had been injured.⁸⁰ Even if these attacks had legitimate military objects, which seems unlikely given that they struck a residential building and a crowded roundabout, they appear to have been indiscriminate and could also have constituted direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects.

ATTACKS WITH MISSILES AND OTHER PROJECTILES

The attacks examined in this section used weapons, such as missiles, that appear capable of being used with some precision. This fact and the circumstances of the attacks examined here suggest that civilians and civilian objects were deliberately targeted by government forces and therefore amounted to war crimes.

This report examines three missile attacks below that are illustrative of the hundreds of similar ones launched by government forces since January 2014.⁸¹

Ain Jalut school, 30 April 2014

On the morning of 30 April 2014, just before 9am, government forces attacked Ain Jalut school. The school, located in al-Ansari al-Sharqi neighbourhood, had been attacked previously in August 2013.⁸² At the time of the 30 April attack, students and teachers from Ain Jalut and nearby schools were arriving for an exhibition of children's drawings depicting the students' experiences of the conflict. The use of two missiles in this attack was

⁷⁸ See, for example, Halab News, "Martyrs of Aleppo and its suburbs", 1 February 2015, <http://halabnews.com/news/62749> (accessed 22 February 2015).

⁷⁹ According to the VDC, 24 civilians were killed. See Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1OpW7N7> (accessed 15 March 2015); Syrian Human Rights Committee, "A massacre in Baideen after the massacre in Eastern Ghouta", 6 February 2015, <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=24451> (accessed 1 March 2015).

⁸⁰ Skype interview, 25 February 2015.

⁸¹ According to an international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, government forces launched 315 attacks using missiles or other projectiles from June 2014 to April 2015. Email correspondence, 13 April 2015.

⁸² Syrian Network for Human Rights, "Government forces are destroying the schools", 7 May 2014, http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/ain-jaloot-english.pdf (accessed 3 February 2015). According to the SNHR, nine civilians were killed in the attack in May 2014.

confirmed by several monitoring organizations.⁸³

Amnesty International spoke with three teachers and administrators and two students who survived the attack. They reported that the first missile struck the first floor of the school between the rooms for students aged between 6 and 7 and between 8 and 9 and the second missile struck the courtyard, around 200 metres away from the school's main building. Osama al-Findi, a 23-year-old geography teacher at Ain Jalut, recalled the events of that day:

*"For more than two weeks before, we were preparing this festival for the children... I arrived at the school between 7.30 and 8am. There were around 60 students and teachers there, and 200 were still coming. I was in the management room of the school when I heard the sound of the explosion. Then I heard the sound of the fighter jet, going away at high speed... [After the attack] it was so dusty that I didn't know whether I was alive or dead. I was with my friend Muhammed Ibrahim. We started looking in the rooms for survivors. The first person I saw was Muhammed Daqqaq, a teacher, lying dead. Then I went to where the children were preparing their drawings. I saw things there I can't describe. There were parts of children, blood everywhere. The bodies were in shreds... After the Civil Defence arrived, I didn't move. I stayed sitting in one place because of the shock."*⁸⁴

Marwa⁸⁵ was in the room where the drawings were to be displayed when the missiles struck the school. She told Amnesty International:

*"At 7am, I arrived at the school with my most talented students, the ones who had done the best drawings. We were arranging everything and preparing, and another teacher was hanging the drawings on the walls. When the jets came, I didn't hear any sound. Then the ceiling fell on us. A rocket had targeted the room we were in. When I tried to move one of my students, she was dead. She had a hole in her head... I was injured badly. I was injured in my lungs, and my skull, my ribs and my legs were broken. My left leg couldn't move at all. I found out later it was affected by damage to my brain. My body was covered in bruises – I was completely blue. After the attack, I couldn't see anything, but I am getting my sight back, slowly... [The attack] was a shock for me, not just because of my injuries, but because of my students. I trained each one of them. It is impossible to think they are not alive."*⁸⁶

Muhammed Ibrahim, a 26-year-old school administrator, described his the attack:

"I heard an explosion, and then I felt it. My ears went deaf from the sound of the explosion... I started hearing the sound of children crying and screaming... All of the bodies were in the corners, because of the air pressure from the rocket. I was taken to the hospital. I returned

⁸³ See, for example, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 8th report, 13 August 2014, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A.HRC.27.60_Eng.pdf (accessed 2 March 2015).

⁸⁴ Skype interview, 28 January 2015.

⁸⁵ Last name withheld.

⁸⁶ Interview in Turkey, 18 December 2014.

back in the afternoon and saw that the main school building had collapsed. You wouldn't have believed the damage – It looked like an earthquake had hit."⁸⁷

Muhammed Ibrahim reported that the festival had been featured in the local media in the days before the event and an invitation was posted on Facebook.⁸⁸

Ibrahim Mandou, a 12-year-old student, survived the attack. He told Amnesty International:

*"The teachers wanted to throw a party to make us happy. All schools in the neighbourhood were invited to come to Ain Jalut, and my pictures were being shown at the exhibition. I was sitting with my little brother, Ayham, in the school. Then the fighter jet came, and my brother got big pieces of shrapnel in his chest and face. I became unconscious, and I woke up and found myself under the ruins. I got myself out of there, and I went to the people helping and asked them where to go. They put me in a pick-up truck and took me to the hospital. The shrapnel was inside my back and my head, since the missile exploded behind me. I still have a few pieces of shrapnel inside of my body. Ayham died on the way to Turkey. He was 11 years old."*⁸⁹

Bayan Masri, aged 11, was also injured in the attack. Her two sisters, Heba, aged 5, and Aya, aged 12, were killed. Five pieces of shrapnel lodged in Bayan's head, chest, liver and one of her lungs. One of her legs was also severely damaged. In January 2015, her father explained to Amnesty International that Bayan had difficulty breathing, and she could not yet move her leg. After the attack she did not speak for five days. "I think she forgot who we were," her mother said.⁹⁰

Witnesses identified several people who were killed as a result of the attack on Ain Jalut school, including students Ayham Mandou, Heba and Aya Masri, Rayan Awad, Israa Kapara, Mays Rajoub; and teachers Muhammed Daqqaq and Bashar al-Ghoufari.⁹¹ According to monitoring organizations, at least 21 civilians – 19 of whom were students – and possibly as many as 35 civilians were killed. Further, at least 25 civilians were injured in this attack, and many of those, like Bayan and Marwa, lost the use of their limbs or senses. Monitoring groups did not record the deaths of any fighters in the attack.⁹² As of 23 April 2015, the Syrian

⁸⁷ Interview in Turkey, 27 January 2015.

⁸⁸ See the Facebook invitation for the event: <http://bit.ly/1CyBR4t> (accessed 11 March 2015). The text reads, in part, "In the midst of destruction and war there is hope and childhood dreams... We invite you to attend our exhibition on Wednesday 30 April and Thursday 1 May, which will take place in Ain Jalut school."

⁸⁹ Interview in Turkey, 27 January 2015.

⁹⁰ Interview in Turkey, 15 January 2015.

⁹¹ Last name withheld for security reasons.

⁹² See, for example, VDC, Martyrs Database, <http://bit.ly/1FAJg4b> (accessed 15 March 2015); UNICEF, "UNICEF Syria statement on killing of children in Hama and Aleppo", 4 May 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unicef-syria-statement-killing-children-hama-and-aleppo> (accessed 5 January 2015).

government had not issued any statement or comment on the attack on Ain Jalut school.

Two of the witnesses stated that a non-state armed group used a barracks that was located about 100 metres from the school; however, one stated that it had been abandoned at least three months before the attack.⁹³ If the intended target was the nearby barracks, the attack nevertheless is likely to have been unlawful. Syrian forces should have been aware of the location of the school and they should have taken necessary precautions to avoid the school, knowing that students and other civilians would be present at that time of the day. For example, they could have given a warning, or chosen to attack at night. And if the barracks had indeed been abandoned for three months, they should also have taken this into consideration. The fact that the school had been struck before, and was hit with two missiles, suggests that this may have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects. Otherwise, it was a grossly disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate attack.

Castello Road, 15 October 2014

At around 11am on 15 October 2014, government forces targeted a vehicle containing four people that was travelling near the Castello Road, next to the village of Kafr Hamra. Majed⁹⁴, a medical doctor, was killed. According to an international NGO with monitors on the ground, a surface-to-surface missile was used in the attack.⁹⁵ Two of the survivors said the vehicle was a small van that prominently featured the logo of a local health organization on its bonnet and door.

Imad⁹⁶, a doctor who was in the vehicle, described what happened to Amnesty International:

*"We were working with a local health organization, on the way to see their project... We were riding in a car that was the same shape as an ambulance, and the logo of the health organization was very clear – it had a big logo on the front and the sides of the car. I could feel something hit the car, and I saw a flashing of lights. I was in the front seat, and I was pushed onto the driver. I lost consciousness for some time. I couldn't see because my eyelids were burned. I looked behind me, and I saw only blood."*⁹⁷

Raja⁹⁸, the third passenger and also a medical doctor, told Amnesty International:

"We were in the van for my organization, and the logo was definitely visible. I was riding in the back seat of the van, next to Dr Majed. [After the strike] I lost consciousness for a moment, and then I came back and started screaming for help. Someone heard my voice, and they started pulling me out of the ambulance... We drove very fast to the hospital. I was

⁹³ One of the witnesses was unsure which armed group had used the barracks; the other believed it to be Sukhour al-Sham. Interviews in Turkey, 16 and 27 January 2015.

⁹⁴ Last name withheld.

⁹⁵ Skype interview with international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, 13 April 2015.

⁹⁶ Real name withheld.

⁹⁷ Interview in Turkey, 21 January 2015.

⁹⁸ Real name withheld.

injured in my right eye, and my foot was amputated. I had lots of burns and fractures.”⁹⁹

The witnesses reported that two other civilians in a nearby car were also killed in the attack. They also confirmed that there was no military presence in the vicinity, and that the last checkpoint they had passed was more than four kilometres away. Imad noted, “This was the official route, and the only route, for aid and medical supplies.”¹⁰⁰ Based on the evidence provided to Amnesty International and considering the absence of any legitimate target nearby, the attack on 15 October is likely to have constituted a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects and a violation of the obligation to respect and protect medical personnel and medical transports.

Bayyada neighbourhood, 1 January 2015

At 12 noon on 1 January 2015, a residential area in Bayyada neighbourhood was hit with at least one missile. An international NGO with monitors on the ground in Syria confirmed that a surface-to-surface missile was used in the attack.¹⁰¹ Sana¹⁰², a media activist from Aleppo who survived, told Amnesty International:

“I was with my friend in the old city, and the three houses next to our house were attacked. The street was crowded with people. The windows all broke in our building, and the air pressure was so intense that we flew back and all of the doors flew open. We stayed inside for two hours, because we were afraid that we would be hit again. We are used to two strikes. When we went out, we saw that eight buildings were destroyed. The missile hit about 100 metres away... They were land-to-land missiles – and the opposition groups don’t have this type. Mortars don’t destroy like these rockets do.”¹⁰³

According to Sana, two women were killed in the attack: Muna Jroukh, aged 20, who was pregnant with twins, and Nisreen Jroukh, aged 27. Her friend, Ali¹⁰⁴, also reported to Amnesty International that the strike damaged eight buildings, as well as a historic mosque in the neighbourhood. Ali stated that the area was “a civilian neighbourhood, crowded with people” and confirmed that there were no military checkpoints or bases in the vicinity.¹⁰⁵ If so, this appears to have constituted either a direct attack on civilians and civilian homes or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

VIOLATIONS BY ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS

On several occasions in 2014 and early 2015, armed opposition groups attacked residential neighbourhoods, hospitals, medical centres, schools, and cultural property such as mosques

⁹⁹ Phone interview, 30 January 2015.

¹⁰⁰ See “Humanitarian Conditions and Access” for more details on this access road.

¹⁰¹ Email correspondence with international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, 29 January 2015.

¹⁰² Last name withheld.

¹⁰³ Interview in Turkey, 14 January 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Last name withheld.

¹⁰⁵ Interview in Turkey, 13 January 2015.

and historic sites in government-held areas of Aleppo. Given the nature of the weapons used, many could amount to disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate attacks. Indiscriminate attacks that kill or injure civilians and disproportionate attacks are war crimes. Some may constitute direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects, which also are war crimes. These attacks have often involved the use of weapons such as mortars and improvised rockets fitted with gas canisters, referred to by local residents as “hell cannons”. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented the names of 672 civilians who were killed in indiscriminate shelling in Aleppo city by armed opposition groups in 2014, including 137 children, 80 women and 455 men.¹⁰⁶

WHAT IS A HELL CANNON?

The “hell cannon” is an improvised explosive device (IED) reported to have been first built by the armed opposition group Ahrar al-Shamal in 2013. The cannon barrel is usually around three feet long and mounted on wheels. The projectile is a re-purposed propane gas canister, which is filled with explosives and shrapnel. The typical hell cannon can fire more than 15 types of shells that weigh more than 40 kilograms and has a range of 1.5 kilometres. The hell cannon is just one of a variety of IEDs that have been developed by armed opposition groups during the conflict in Syria. It continues to be a popular choice with armed opposition forces and dozens of videos showing it in action have been posted online.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Skype interview with head of Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 9 March 2015.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpnzLlgtoYc&index=2&list=PLPCOUdeof3T5xf3IxSQI0pzTYd-zIdBvT> (accessed 15 April 2015).



A group of armed opposition fighters preparing a "hell cannon", which was made locally. Opposition fighters in Aleppo have created their own rockets and their own launchers. 22 November 2014 © PA/Demotix

A resident of Muhafazat neighbourhood described how these indiscriminate attacks have affected the civilians living in government-held areas. "It's completely random," he said. "Wherever they send the mortars, there is no military target there, I promise. And if they justify it by saying the *mukhabarat* [intelligence services] are nearby, well then the *mukhabarat* are everywhere. Just because I live near them doesn't mean that I support them."¹⁰⁸ A woman from al-Jamaliya neighbourhood said that the frequent attacks have taken away any sense of security she once had. "You don't feel secure or safe, ever. You never know – you could be hit any time," she explained.

The eight incidents examined below are illustrative of the hundreds of indiscriminate attacks launched by armed opposition groups in Aleppo city since January 2014.

Armenian Relief Society clinic, June 2014

In early June 2014, several media sources reported that armed opposition groups shelled the Armenian Relief Society clinic and day care centre.¹⁰⁹ The specific group that launched this

¹⁰⁸ Interview in Lebanon, 11 March 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Asbarez, "Aleppo's Nor Kyugh declared a disaster zone", 4 June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1p6ZTi4> (accessed 5 March 2015); *The Armenian Weekly*, "ARS Condemns Anti-Armenian Attacks on Nor Kyough", 6 June 2014, <http://bit.ly/1HkEBVU> (accessed 5 March 2015); the Armenian National Committee of America Twitter page, "The Armenian Relief Society day care center in the Meedan (Nor Kyough) neighbourhood", 13 June 2014, https://twitter.com/ANCA_DC/status/477555303370612737/photo/1 (accessed 5 March 2015).

attack, which caused material damage but no casualties, has not been identified. Amnesty International has found no information suggesting there was a legitimate military target in the vicinity. It appears therefore to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Salah al-Din Neighbourhood, 26 September 2014

On the afternoon of 26 September, opposition forces launched an attack on Salah al-Din neighbourhood, near al-Bassel Mosque. Kawthar¹¹⁰, a family member of a victim, said that the weapon used was a "hell cannon". She described the incident to Amnesty International:

"My sister-in-law, Amani, was with her daughter, Salma, and my sister, Muna. They were just approaching my brother-in-law's house, and a gas can exploded above them and released ugly shrapnel. Amani was carrying her daughter, and she hugged her close to protect her. A piece of shrapnel went into Amani's chest and made a big hole. Salma had a long gash on her head, but she survived. My sister had shrapnel in her liver, kidney, and stomach. She has now had three operations, and she is waiting for the fourth. My brother-in-law saw it all from his balcony. He still hasn't said one word about the attack since it happened. Whenever anyone mentions his wife, he just says, 'Alhamdulillah, alhamdulillah [thanks be to God].'"¹¹¹

Kawthar reported that as a result of the attack, Amani was killed and more than 40 other civilians were injured, including Salma and Muna. Kawthar told Amnesty International that there was a government checkpoint about 200 metres from the strike. If so, this appears to have been, at the least, an indiscriminate attack, especially in light of the weapon that was used. It could also have constituted a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects.

Huda She'rawi school, 26 October 2014

According to monitoring groups, a mortar shell landed on the Huda She'rawi school in the New Seryan neighbourhood of Aleppo on 26 October 2014. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights attributed the attack to the Shuhadaa Badr Brigade, a group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and led by Khalid Hayani.¹¹² Video footage reviewed by Amnesty International suggests that the attack killed at least two civilians and injured 26 more.¹¹³ The armed group also shelled the area around the school, causing extensive property and material damage. Amnesty International has found no information suggesting there was a legitimate military target in the vicinity. It appears therefore to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Al-Kamal school, 27 October 2014

A day later, on 27 October, an armed opposition group launched an attack on al-Kamal school in al-Hamdaniya neighbourhood in Aleppo. This attack, which according to media

¹¹⁰ The last names of all individuals involved in this incident have been omitted for security reasons.

¹¹¹ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹¹² Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "Shells launched by Shuhadaa Badr Brigade killed 2 people and injured 26 others in Aleppo", 26 October 2014, <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/10/shells-launched-by-shuhadaa-bader-brigade-killed-2-people-and-injured-26-others-in-aleppo/> (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹¹³ See Alikhbaria Syria, "Terrorist shells target a school in al-Seryan neighbourhood", uploaded 27 October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYCXEZCZDa4> (accessed 5 March 2015).

sources used a rocket-propelled grenade, resulted in the deaths of four children, all aged 9.¹¹⁴ At least 17 other people were injured, the majority of whom were civilians.¹¹⁵ It is unclear which group is responsible for the attack; however, footage uploaded on video sharing sites by Jaysh al-Mujahadeen, an armed group formed in January 2014 in response to advances by the armed group that calls itself the Islamic State and made up of several member factions, shows the group launching rocket-propelled grenades from al-Hamdaniya stadium on the same date, suggesting that the group may have been responsible for the attack.¹¹⁶ It appears to have been, at the least, a disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate attack.

Al-Achrafiya neighbourhood, 29 November 2014

According to Mahmoud, a 39-year-old fabric merchant, opposition forces attacked al-Achrafiya neighbourhood with three improvised rockets at 12.30am on 29 November 2014. The rockets fell near Sewar restaurant, each around 200 metres apart. Mahmoud described the attack:

*"I was with my family at home when the rockets came. The explosion killed my wife and three of my children. Now I am left alone with my last child, who is five years old. I tried to take my wife and the children to a hospital after the attack but there was no time. I just stood there, helpless, until some of the neighbours came and found me. My family's injuries were fatal because of the power of the explosion and the number of fragments that came from the shell... My house was completely destroyed in the attack."*¹¹⁷

He attributed the attack to the Shuhadaa Badr Brigade; this was confirmed by a Syrian monitoring group.¹¹⁸ Mahmoud stated that he lives in a crowded residential neighbourhood: "There are about 50 families around us in the neighbourhood, and there are no checkpoints or bases nearby." If that is so, this attack may have constituted either a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Andalus Hospital, 31 December 2014

On 31 December 2014, mortar shells landed near the Andalus Hospital in Shahbaa neighbourhood. According to media sources, the attack was launched by opposition forces and resulted in the deaths of two civilians.¹¹⁹ Amnesty International has found no information

¹¹⁴ Syria Now, "List and photographs of four children reportedly killed in the attack", <http://bit.ly/1B3wSbf> (accessed 7 March 2015).

¹¹⁵ SANA, "Six civilians killed in terrorist attacks in Aleppo and Damascus", 27 October 2014, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=16218> (accessed 5 March 2015).

¹¹⁶ The Baath Electronic Brigade, "Rocket-propelled grenades target al-Kamal school", uploaded 27 October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvH3zmQMFeE> (accessed 7 March 2015).

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted in Syria by a field researcher associated with the Syrian Research and Evaluation Organization, 23 February 2015.

¹¹⁸ According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a woman and her three children were killed in this attack, which used rocket-propelled grenades. See Mojaz News, "The killing of one woman and her three children in shelling in Aleppo", 30 November 2015, <http://www.mojaznews.com/?p=44089> (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹¹⁹ Mojaz News, "A shell landed on a taxi on Andalus street in Aleppo", 31 December 2014,

suggesting there was a legitimate military target in the vicinity. It appears therefore to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Al-Shuhadaa neighbourhood, 1 January 2015

An unidentified opposition group launched at least four rockets on the al-Shuhadaa neighbourhood of New Aleppo on 1 January 2015. According to monitors and media sources, at least 13 civilians were killed and 18 were injured in the attack.¹²⁰ Amnesty International has found no information suggesting there was a legitimate military target in the vicinity. It appears therefore to have been a direct attack on civilians and civilian objects or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack.

Umayyad Mosque, 30 January 2015

On 30 January 2015, an unidentified armed opposition group detonated a tunnel bomb under the walls of the historic Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo, causing the eastern exterior wall to collapse.¹²¹ The mosque had previously been targeted by Jabhat al-Nusra in April 2013, an attack which destroyed its minaret.¹²² Amnesty International has found no information suggesting there was a legitimate military target in the vicinity. It appears therefore to have been a direct attack on a civilian object or, at the least, an indiscriminate attack. Making religious or cultural objects the object of attack also constitutes a war crime.

<http://bit.ly/1BGRxRv> (accessed 6 March 2015).

¹²⁰ See Halab News, "Martyrs of Aleppo and its countryside", 1 January 2015, <http://halabnews.com/news/61593> (accessed 30 March 2015); SANA, "13 civilians killed, 18 injured in terrorist attack on Aleppo and Damascus", 1 January 2015, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=23798> (accessed 5 March 2015).

¹²¹ The Syrian Observer, "New attack on Umayyad Mosque", 30 January 2015, <http://syrianobserver.com/News/News/New+Attack+on+Umayyad+Mosque> (accessed 10 March 2015).

¹²² The Guardian, "Minaret of historic Syrian mosque destroyed in Aleppo", 24 April 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/24/minaret-historic-syrian-mosque-destroyed-aleppo> (accessed 10 March 2015).

ARBITRARY DETENTION, TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT, AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

“There are a lot of people who lived this story. Many didn’t make it to the end. I want to give a voice to those people who lost their future. I am one of them.”

“Ashraf”, former Aleppo University student

In its Resolution 2139, the UN Security Council strongly condemned the “arbitrary detention and torture of civilians in Syria, notably in prisons and detention facilities, as well as the kidnappings, abductions and forced disappearances” and demanded “the immediate end of these practices and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons”.¹²³ These demands have been consistently defied in Aleppo.

Additionally, Amnesty International is gravely concerned about reports it has received regarding incidents of sexual and gender-based violence in Aleppo governorate. Reliable research conducted by other monitoring groups, as well as six cases that were referred to Amnesty International, most often involved incidents where women were raped and sexually assaulted at checkpoints and in detention by both government forces and armed opposition groups.¹²⁴ Due to underreporting and the stigma associated with such acts, Amnesty International was not able to assess the magnitude of this pattern of abuse. However, based on the information and reports it has received, Amnesty International has concluded that acts of sexual and gender-based violence are occurring in Aleppo.

VIOLATIONS BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

The Syrian government has been subjecting its citizens to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, as well as enforced disappearances, in detention centres across Syria for many years. But for the last four years, the government has been committing these violations on a massive scale. Violations in Aleppo are representative of these nation-wide practices. According to the Violations Documentation Center, 1,196 civilians have been detained by the Syrian government in Aleppo governorate since 2011, 90% of whom were tortured or otherwise ill-treated and 541 of whom died in detention, whether by torture, starvation,

¹²³ UN Security Council, Resolution 2139, 22 February 2014, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139(2014)) (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹²⁴ See, for example, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, *Violence against women: Bleeding wound in the Syrian conflict*, November, <http://www.euromedrights.org/eng/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Doc-report-VAW-Syria.pdf> (accessed 12 February 2015); interviews in Turkey where such incidents were referenced included those conducted on 8 December 2014, 15 December 2014, 16 December 2014, 17 December 2014, 23 January 2015 and 28 January 2015.

execution, or other means.¹²⁵ Amnesty International and other organizations have documented hundreds of cases since 2011 involving the arbitrary detention or enforced disappearance of peaceful political activists, humanitarian aid workers and medics, and other civilians in Aleppo governorate, many of whom appear to have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Many of these individuals appear to have been subjected to these violations simply for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association or assembly.

The individual cases below highlight the suffering, loss of dignity, and despair experienced by those who have been subjected to these violations – as well as the anguish and grief experienced by their family members, friends and colleagues.¹²⁶

PEACEFUL POLITICAL ACTIVISTS

The Syrian government has consistently subjected peaceful political activists in Aleppo to arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and enforced disappearance. One of these activists, Ashraf¹²⁷, videotaped the first protests at Aleppo University and shared them with the international media.¹²⁸ He described his arrest in May 2012 and the first day of his detention:

*"I was living in the dorms of Aleppo University. They came in the evening, on the first day of exams. They beat me with the butt of a gun, took my phone and blindfolded me. I was given a 'welcome party' when I arrived at the police station in Aleppo. A man grabbed me and started beating me, then another person came and they were beating my head against the wall. It felt like my whole body was bleeding. They tortured me for four hours. They stuck me into a car tyre, even my head. They beat me with a thin silicon cable, which cut my skin like a knife. I actually thought I had died... The first night was the hardest. I could hear the sounds of people being tortured. I didn't sleep that night. Around 5 to 6am, you could hear only the women scream. At 7am, the women stopped, and then you heard the men. The screaming was scheduled."*¹²⁹

After four days, Ashraf was transferred to Aleppo Central Prison, where he witnessed prisoner revolts; the shelling of the prison by government and opposition forces; the mass starvation of the prisoners during the siege, which began in 2013; and the summary execution of more than 20 of his fellow inmates.¹³⁰ He was released in mid-2014, more than two years after his

¹²⁵ Email correspondence with VDC spokesperson, 24 February 2015.

¹²⁶ The cases examined below involve individuals who were arrested since January 2014, individuals who were arrested and detained before January 2014 but were detained, and in many cases subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, during the period concerned, and others who were arrested before or since January 2014 and remain disappeared as of 23 April 2015. Enforced disappearance is a continuing violation.

¹²⁷ Real name withheld.

¹²⁸ For this individual's complete testimony, see Amnesty International, *Syria: Voices in crisis*, February 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1068/2015/en/> (accessed 15 March 2014).

¹²⁹ Interview in Turkey, 31 January 2015.

¹³⁰ For more details on the siege in Aleppo Central Prison, see Amnesty International, *Updated briefing on sieges across Syria* (MDE 24/023/2014), 5 June 2014.

arrest. He told Amnesty International:

"When the guards called my name one day, I thought they were calling me to be executed. My friends started crying, kissing me, and saying goodbye. I wasn't even afraid. I felt numb. The whole time I was in prison was like a dream, and I felt I needed to see the dream end. In fact, they were calling me to release me. I was incredibly weak by then. I entered weighing 82kg and when I left I was 45kg. My friend was 35kg – they had to carry him in a blanket because he couldn't walk... When I got out of the van, my foot stepped in the mud. I hadn't stepped on anything but tiles for two and a half years. I thought I would faint from the feeling of the earth. We didn't have light in the prison, so I couldn't cope with the sun. It was so bright. Now, having fled Syria, I need to start over. I just want to continue my education; I want my three years of study back. But I don't have any documents, so maybe I will have to go back to high school."

Marwan¹³¹, who was involved in organizing political protests at Aleppo University, was arrested on 9 September 2013. At around 2am, he was taken from his home in Jam'iyat al-Zahra neighbourhood to the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo. He described the torture he received the next day:

"First I was put in the 'dulab' position [being forced into a vehicle tyre] and my feet were hit repeatedly with a silicon whip. They would put water on my feet and hit me again and again – I think I was whipped around 150 times. After this I was put in the 'shabah' position [being suspended, often by manacled wrists with the hands placed behind the back] for around two hours... Then they burned the bottom of my feet with the coal from their shisha pipe... By this point, I became numb, but I did not confess. I was left naked in the 'shabah' position for another six hours. They then used electricity on my feet. This was so painful because my feet were already bleeding from the burns. During this time they hit me over the head with a water hose. My head was cut in three different places. For the next seven days, I was put into the 'dulab' position on a daily basis and repeatedly urged to confess, which I did not do. They drove me to an open field outside and told me I should confess or I would be shot and executed."¹³²

After he refused to confess, Marwan was kept in the Air Force Intelligence Branch for several months. He said of this time:

"I slept in a cell that was four metres by four metres, with 80 other men. The conditions were terrible. There were also a lot of illnesses there, mostly diarrhoea, to the extent that we feared the food was poisoned... In the winter people were dying from the cold... There was no water – they gave us around two litres of water each day to share for 80 people. We were not given access to medical care and no one was taken to any kind of hospital."

After six months, Marwan was forced to sign a document, which the authorities did not allow him to read and he assumed to be a false confession. After being transferred to the Mezzeh

¹³¹ Real name withheld.

¹³² Skype interview, 4 March 2015.

branch of Air Force Intelligence in Damascus, where he said the conditions were just as bad, he was taken to Adra prison in Damascus, from where he was released in July 2014. He immediately fled to Germany, where he still suffers from the effects of the torture he underwent. "I now get seizures due to the beatings I received on my head and I get regular nervous spasms that prevent me from walking for a day or two," he told Amnesty International.

Mohamed Bachir Arab, a doctor from Aleppo, went missing on 2 November 2011.¹³³ He was believed to have been arrested by the Syrian authorities for organizing peaceful protests in Aleppo. Family members received updates on his status from released detainees who saw him in various locations, including the Aleppo Air Force Intelligence Branch, the al-Ameerya branch of Air Force Intelligence in Damascus, the Qaboun branch of Military Intelligence, and Saydnaya Prison. Despite repeated requests, the Syrian authorities have never confirmed his arrest nor offered any information on where he is being held or whether he is still alive. A friend who is based outside Syria explained to Amnesty International how Mohamed's disappearance has affected her:

*"Of course we are worried about him. We have not received any information since the first year of his arrest, between 2012 and 2013, when we heard that he was transferred to hospital on more than one occasion. How can I describe what his disappearance has done to me? It is like I have lost a part of myself and my soul for three years and four months. It is our right to know his fate. For how long will he remain absent from our lives?"*¹³⁴

HUMANITARIAN AID WORKERS AND MEDICS

Humanitarian aid workers and medics are also at risk of being arbitrarily detained, tortured or subjected to enforced disappearance in Aleppo. Ayman¹³⁵ was a volunteer for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent before he was arrested in Damascus in February 2012. He was first held at State Security Branch 258 in Damascus and was then transferred to Aleppo Central Prison. He described his experience there:

"[During the siege on the prison] both sides were shelling us: the FSA and the regime. I always had diarrhoea and a fever. There was no food, not anything. If we called for water they screamed at us. The water was disgusting anyway. Many people died in the prison from the starvation. I went from 100kg to 60kg... Women and children were kept in the prison. The guards would just choose a woman and then rape her. I was asked to bring the bread to them, so they told me what was happening, and I would hear the sounds. Because I was younger, [the guards] used me in the prison. I don't want to talk about the torture I received. I am ashamed. I am afraid to talk with anyone any more. My psychological situation is so bad now. Prison changed me into a new person. I am stuck in Turkey, with no chance for an

¹³³ For more details on Mohamed Bachir Arab's disappearance, see Amnesty International, "Disappearances in Syria: The ghosts of war", 29 August 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2014/08/disappearances-syria-ghosts-war/> (accessed 1 March 2015).

¹³⁴ Name withheld. Skype interview, 23 February 2015.

¹³⁵ Real name withheld.

education."¹³⁶

Bassel¹³⁷, a 37-year-old humanitarian aid worker for the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, was arrested in May 2014 from his office in Aleppo. He was charged with providing financial aid to opposition forces, and detained in Aleppo's State Security branch and Criminal Security Branch. During the 74 days he spent at the State Security branch, he did not have access to a lawyer and was questioned only once. He was beaten on one occasion but was not otherwise tortured; however, he reported that at least 30% of the other prisoners at the State Security branch were being tortured through routine, severe beatings with leather whips, especially on the soles of their feet. The individuals who received the worst treatment, he said, were humanitarian aid workers and journalists. Before he was released in August 2014, he was forced to place his thumbprint on several white sheets of paper that he assumed they would fill in later and use as his "confession".

Amnesty International received a report that security forces arrested teacher and Syrian Arab Red Crescent volunteer Ali Ibrahim Muslim at al-Ramoussa checkpoint in Aleppo on 6 November 2014. Two days later, according to family members, the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo told his family that he had died in detention. The reasons for Ali Ibrahim Muslim's arrest and the circumstances of his death have not been confirmed.

Finally, according to reports received by Amnesty International, two medics from Aleppo were subjected to enforced disappearance. Abu Ibrahim¹³⁸, a doctor from Zarzour hospital, was arrested from an ambulance on 1 December 2012. His whereabouts have been unknown since then. Mahmoud Issa was arrested on 26 June 2012 in front of his house in the Martini neighbourhood in Aleppo; he was last seen by another detainee in the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo. Since then, his family members have received no information on his whereabouts.¹³⁹

VIOLATIONS BY ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has documented the detention of at least 996 individuals by non-state armed groups in Aleppo governorate since 2011, including 44 women, 142 children and 810 men. According to the SNHR, as of March 2015, the fate or whereabouts of at least 226 individuals in Aleppo who were abducted by armed opposition groups remains unknown.¹⁴⁰ Amnesty International has documented several cases of serious detention-related abuses by armed opposition groups in Aleppo.

¹³⁶ Interview in Turkey, 30 January 2015.

¹³⁷ Real name withheld. Interview in Turkey, 15 January 2015.

¹³⁸ Name withheld.

¹³⁹ VDC, *A Special Report On the Medical Conditions in Aleppo Including the Violations Against the Medical*, June 2013, <http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1401644133-English.pdf> (accessed 24 February 2015).

¹⁴⁰ Email correspondence with head of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 13 March 2015.

Adnan¹⁴¹, a humanitarian aid worker, was held for two months in a centre run by the Nur al-Din al-Zanki Brigades (Zanki Brigades), one of the largest armed groups operating in Aleppo and a current member of the Levant Front. On 11 July 2014, a group of men from the Zanki Brigades abducted him from al-Huda field hospital and took him to a nearby prison inside the military base of the Zanki Brigades, located near Hoor village. He noted that the location of the prison, inside the base, put it at risk of being targeted: "We would often hear the rockets going by. They must know the building can be targeted, because it has been hit so many times in the past."¹⁴² He described his experience in the prison:

"They brought me into the [prison], and I immediately saw them beating some others with electrical cables. Then they called me in to question me. They put a black bag on my head and tied it at the bottom, so I couldn't see anything. There were more than six people shouting at me. They accused me of dealing with the regime. I could always hear the others being beaten, but because of my status in the community, they didn't bother me as much as the others... I have a Ph.D., and because I was called a doctor they thought I knew about medicine. I saw hundreds of medical cases during my time in the prison, and most of them were from torture or the terrible conditions. Because of my medical duties, I saw every part of the prison, which held around 90 people. The solitary confinement cells were tiny, one metre by half a metre. There were nine of these, always occupied. God help them."

Adnan said the prison authorities would sometimes bring witnesses from the Zanki Brigades' "Shari'a court" into the prison:

"They would bring in witnesses so that they could finish the case. There was a man who was charged with the rape of a woman, and they brought three witnesses from his case inside the prison. They were kept inside and suspended from their wrists so that they would say something against him. There was so much pain."

Near the end of his time in the prison, Adnan was again threatened with torture. "I said I wouldn't sign anything, and they brought out a wooden slab," he said. "They tied me to the slab and covered my eyes. In the end I decided to pay instead of being tortured. [The guard] stood there like he had had a victory." In addition to a fine, the authorities demanded that he pay the equivalent of US\$15 for each day he had stayed in the prison. "If someone can't pay this," he said, "they will keep him inside until their family brings the money. If there is no money, they will wait 20 days, and then they will take his car, house, whatever they can get."¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Real name withheld.

¹⁴² Interview in Turkey, 22 January 2015.

¹⁴³ On 24 February 2015, Amnesty International received the video testimony of two men who were also detained by the Zanki Brigades in Aleppo. The first was arrested in May 2014 and the second in July 2014. Both men stated that they were subjected to torture in detention, including severe beatings and suspension by their wrists for long periods of time. Additionally, the first man stated that he was shot in the neck by the prison authorities, and the other described being subjected to mock execution. Adnan confirmed the men's identities and stated that they were present in the same detention centre where he was held. He also noted that he had treated the men's injuries after they were tortured. Skype interview, 25 February 2015.

Amnesty International also spoke with Akram¹⁴⁴, a lawyer and human rights activist who was detained in early 2014 by the Nourin Armed Brigade, a group that was then a part of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. In January 2014, he was taken from a checkpoint near his home, in the southern suburbs of Aleppo, and held for several weeks. The group took him to their detention centre in the nearby village of Alam Siheir. Akram described his time there:

"I was held at a place known as the 'Moroccan base'. When we arrived, they handcuffed me and put a bag on my head. They put me into a refrigerated room, where it was so cold and there was no light. When they started the investigation, they were hitting me and accusing me of encouraging people to fight the Islamist groups. In the first 30 minutes, if I tried to talk, they beat me more... They called my wife, and they told her I would be executed. She was pregnant, and at this news, she lost her baby. There were around 100 people in the prison at one time, and I saw 500 people coming and going. In my cell, there were two other people. One of them was executed, and the other was brought back from his investigation black and blue... For me, the torture was usually to go into the refrigerated room for around two hours, and then when they took me out, they would torture or kill other people in front of me. I saw them kill at least 10 people. They were educated in torture and execution by the regime. My wife started pressuring the group, and then offered them money, so I was released in the end."

According to Akram, many armed opposition groups torture and mistreat detainees in makeshift prisons across Aleppo governorate. However, the victims of these abuses and their family members do not often speak publicly about their experiences, for fear of retribution.

Raed¹⁴⁵, a 19-year-old man who worked as a locksmith and volunteer for humanitarian groups that distribute aid to the Kurdish community in Aleppo city, was first abducted during the first quarter of 2014. His uncle, Mounir¹⁴⁶, told Amnesty International about his nephew's experience.¹⁴⁷ In 2013, Raed was abducted by a non-state armed group and transferred to the custody of the armed group that now calls itself the Islamic State. After being severely beaten, shocked with electricity and hung from his wrists for extended periods of time, he was released and fled to Turkey. Raed returned to Syria several months later, only to be abducted on 23 November 2014 by the leader of an armed group affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra. According to Mounir, the group targeted his nephew because they believed he had ties to the Syrian government. Mounir was asked to pay a sum of 600,000 Syrian pounds, the equivalent of US\$3,175, to release his nephew. Mounir was unable to provide the money; several weeks later, he was informed that Raed had been killed. Since then, Mounir has sent official complaints to the opposition-run Shari'a Authority asking for his nephew's remains, but he has received no response.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Real name withheld.

¹⁴⁵ Real name withheld.

¹⁴⁶ Real name withheld.

¹⁴⁷ Interview in Turkey, 5 March 2015.

¹⁴⁸ The Shari'a Authority (*Hay'at al-Shari'a*) is a body that applies its interpretation of certain aspects of Islamic law in some opposition-held areas of Aleppo city. For more details, see *The Washington Post*,

Others who have suffered abductions or hostage-taking by armed opposition groups include two Italian aid workers, Vanessa Marzullo and Greta Ramell. They were abducted by members of an unknown armed Islamist group in late July 2014. In December last year, a video appeared on a social media site showing the two women wearing black *abaya* cloaks and *hijabs* and calling on the Italian government to ensure their release.¹⁴⁹ Following their abduction, sources confirmed that the women were “sold” to Jabhat al-Nusra and held hostage until their release on 15 January 2015.¹⁵⁰

Amnesty International also received reports that two doctors were abducted by non-state armed groups in 2015. On 9 January 2015, Dentist Salem Naser was abducted from his clinic in al-Sha'ar neighbourhood of Aleppo by an unknown non-state armed group. He was released on 25 January after several of his colleagues started a campaign for his release.¹⁵¹ Paediatrician “Abu Teem” was also abducted in early January 2015; news reports attributed the kidnapping to members of Jabhat al-Nusra. According to a statement released by a union of medical workers in Aleppo, he was tortured and later released.¹⁵²

“Islamic Law comes to rebel-held areas of Syria”, 19 March 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/islamic-law-comes-to-rebel-held-syria/2013/03/19/b310532e-90af-11e2-bdea-e32ad90da239_story.html (accessed 1 April 2015).

¹⁴⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwYdC2NkU10> (accessed 16 March 2015).

¹⁵⁰ *The Telegraph*, “Two Italian women held by al-Qaeda released”, 16 January 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/11349214/Two-Italian-women-seized-by-al-Qaeda-released.html> (accessed 16 March 2015).

¹⁵¹ Al Watan, “The release of Doctor Salem Abu al-Naser after one month of his detention in liberated Aleppo”, 25 January 2015, <http://www.watan.fm/syria-news/6334> (accessed 16 March 2015).

¹⁵² Al Jazeera, “Fear of kidnapping, targeting of doctors in Aleppo”, 21 January 2015, <http://bit.ly/1CHXGIF> (accessed 31 March 2015).

HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS AND ACCESS

“There are many different levels of emergency in Aleppo. You have the obvious emergency of the bombings and the killings – but you also have all the smaller emergencies of daily survival.”

Doctor from Aleppo city

The international community recognized the deterioration of humanitarian conditions in Syria in UN Security Council Resolution 2139, demanding that “all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for UN humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners, including across conflict lines and across borders, in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches people in need through the most direct routes.” The resolution also demanded that “all parties respect the principle of medical neutrality, facilitate free passage to all areas for medical personnel, equipment, transport and supplies,” and recalled that “the wounded and sick must receive, to the fullest extent practicable, and with the least possible delay, medical care and attention required by their condition.”¹⁵³ In Aleppo, these demands have been continually denied.

HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS

STRUGGLING FOR SURVIVAL: OPPOSITION-CONTROLLED AREAS

According to current and former residents of opposition-controlled areas in Aleppo city, each day there is a struggle to attain the most basic necessities. One aid worker noted, “Yes, humanitarian aid may be getting there [to Aleppo]. Still, this has not alleviated the crisis – there are huge problems with food, medicine, water, electricity, everything.”¹⁵⁴

The chief concern of many residents in Aleppo was staying warm in the winter of 2014-15. The price of diesel fuel, which residents use to heat their homes, has climbed so high that many cannot afford it. A young woman who had recently fled from Qalaseh neighbourhood described her efforts to combat the cold temperatures: “I couldn’t afford to have a heater, so I had to wear three pairs of trousers and three sweaters at all times. The temperature inside and outside was the same. Actually, the temperature inside was sometimes colder.”¹⁵⁵ A 38-year-old woman from al-Sha’ar neighbourhood said, “Just one bottle of gas is so expensive, and diesel even worse. We have a big family, so we can’t afford this. So most of the time we

¹⁵³ UN Security Council, Resolution 2139, 22 February 2014, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139\(2014\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2139(2014)) (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹⁵⁴ Skype interview, 28 January 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Interview in Turkey, 19 December 2014.

are using blankets to stay warm.”¹⁵⁶ Other residents of Aleppo city told Amnesty International that they burned wood or other materials to heat their homes. An employee of Syria Relief reported that her organization had recently treated several infants and children with lung infections caused by smoke inhalation from such fires.¹⁵⁷

Civilians in opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo also face severe shortages in essential services such as electricity and water, as well as appalling sanitary conditions, with rubbish and sewage clogging the streets. A foreign aid worker confirmed, “Garbage and waste disposal is the biggest need at the moment in Aleppo.”¹⁵⁸

Residents reported that while food was available in most opposition-controlled neighbourhoods, much of it was unaffordable, especially when, as one 52-year-old resident put it, “The livelihood in Aleppo is zero.”¹⁵⁹ Because of this, a large number of residents depend on food aid provided by humanitarian organizations.¹⁶⁰ As described by Mahmoud¹⁶¹, an activist based in Aleppo, some residents were finding alternative ways to feed themselves and their families:

*“Yesterday, I saw people planting vegetables. They are gardening wherever they can in the city... Some families are raising rabbits, since they give birth so fast. They have rabbit farms, which will provide a lot of food for the families. Also people are letting the cats breed because they will cost nothing for food. So the cats and the rabbits are the ‘fast food’ in Aleppo. They are ready to eat and cost nothing.”*¹⁶²

The state of medical care in opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo city is of particular concern. Doctors based in Aleppo complained that as a first priority, they are in desperate need of more doctors and medical professionals. Out of an estimated 2,500 doctors working in Aleppo city in 2011, fewer than 100 have remained.¹⁶³ At the time of writing, doctors in Aleppo reported that there were no more than 60 doctors and fewer than 15 specialists to serve a population of around 400,000 people in the opposition-controlled areas of the city.¹⁶⁴ According to a doctor who directs a local health organization: “many doctors have fled

¹⁵⁶ Interview in Turkey, 17 December 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Interview in Turkey, 19 December 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Interview in Turkey, 25 February 2015.

¹⁵⁹ Interview in Turkey, 17 December 2014.

¹⁶⁰ According to the UN Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs, “1.25 million people are in need of food in Aleppo city and rural parts of the governorate.” OCHA, “Syria: UN leaders renew pleas”, 23 April 2014, <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/syria-un-leaders-renew-plea> (accessed 16 March 2015).

¹⁶¹ Last name withheld for security reasons.

¹⁶² Interview in Turkey, 12 December 2014.

¹⁶³ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Aleppo's reality: Daily life under barrel bombs: Voices from Eastern Aleppo*, 11 March 2015, <http://www.msf.org/article/syria-report-aleppo%E2%80%99s-reality-daily-life-under-barrel-bombs> (accessed 15 March 2015).

¹⁶⁴ Interviews in Turkey, 12 January 2015 and 29 January 2015.

Aleppo. They need security, support and supplies, and they don't have any of this.”¹⁶⁵

These shortages in medical staff and supplies mean that doctors must make compromises, including sending patients to Turkey for advanced medical procedures. In the aftermath of large-scale attacks, the shortage in supplies and doctors is exacerbated. A surgeon at a hospital in al-Sakhour explained the situation in his hospital after an air attack hit a nearby neighbourhood in 2013: “We had 150 injured here – this huge number would overwhelm the biggest hospitals in the world. What do you think about our little hospital? Our staff has good training, but there are only a few of us and we couldn't contain all the injuries... We had to do many amputations.”¹⁶⁶ The mother of Saleh Soufan, an 11-year-old boy whose leg was pierced by shrapnel in an air strike in June 2014, described the care he received at a field hospital in Bab al-Neirub: “There was bad service at the hospital and no supplies... If they had sent him to Turkey, he would still have his leg. They told us that his doctor was not a specialist.”¹⁶⁷

Doctors and other medical professionals in Aleppo told Amnesty International that the most common illnesses and diseases in the city are related to the lack of basic services and poor sanitary conditions. Around 10% of the civilians in Aleppo suffer from lice or scabies. A doctor from the Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations said that while these parasitic infestations were rife now, “just wait until the summer. It will be a catastrophe with all the garbage.”¹⁶⁸ Due to the low capacity of the health system and the decreased immunity of the population, there is a likelihood that diseases of concern in Syria, including measles, polio and leishmaniasis [a disease that can cause infected sores and is now commonly referred to as “Aleppo lesions”], will be more prevalent during the high transmission seasons of spring and summer.¹⁶⁹

These terrible living conditions, in combination with the aerial bombardment campaign that has been inflicted upon civilians, have led tens of thousands of people to flee from opposition-held neighbourhoods in Aleppo city. Those who remain do so usually because of poverty or a lack of other options. Abu Hamzeh, an electrician from Bustan al-Qasr, noted that it is “only the old and the poor” left in the city.¹⁷⁰ A photographer based in Aleppo said: “People have no money to get out, no work, no contacts. The people who are left are the most desperate in the city.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Interview in Turkey, 12 January 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Skype interview, 30 January 2015.

¹⁶⁷ Interview in Turkey, 23 January 2015.

¹⁶⁸ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹⁶⁹ ACAPS, *Regional Analysis: Syria*, 4 April 2014, http://www.acaps.org/reports/downloader/part_i_syria_apr_2014/79/syria (accessed 15 March 2015); interview in Turkey, 12 January 2015.

¹⁷⁰ Interview in Turkey, 13 January 2015.

¹⁷¹ Interview in Turkey, 15 December 2015.

CORRUPTION AND IMPUNITY: GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED AREAS

Humanitarian actors reported that conditions in government-controlled areas of Aleppo are generally less dire than in opposition-controlled areas. Nevertheless, residents of government-held areas expressed similar concerns about shortages in water and electricity as well as massive inflation in prices. A doctor who had recently fled the city reported severe shortages of doctors and other medical staff as well as of medicines, particularly for chronic illnesses such as diabetes. He also said that his and other hospitals had received a large number of patients with scabies and lice.¹⁷²

Residents were particularly concerned about corruption in the distribution of food aid. A 44-year-old man from al-Hamdaniya neighbourhood explained: "Without working for Assad, you could not even get a loaf of bread. The bakery would give to the *shabiha* first, and then they would sell it to the ordinary people for more money."¹⁷³ A primary school teacher from al-Achrafiya neighbourhood added: "There was a lot of corruption. They distribute only to certain people... I had to hold the bread under my dress so that no one would steal it. I had to smuggle it away from sight."¹⁷⁴

Residents' concerns about the *shabiha* went beyond their involvement in food distribution; many residents of government-held areas told Amnesty International that the *shabiha* operated with complete impunity in their neighbourhoods. Samer¹⁷⁵, who until two months before speaking with Amnesty International was living in al-Jamaliya neighbourhood, explained: "Some of them [*shabiha*] will rob you. Others might rape or abuse a woman. They will take a car, if they want it – they will just walk up to you and take your car. No one can do anything against them."¹⁷⁶ Residents also discussed how *shabiha* are paid to provide "reports" to the government on the activities of their neighbours and acquaintances, whether they are accurate or not. Those mentioned in these reports can be arrested, detained or subjected to enforced disappearances.¹⁷⁷ Some residents also said that they stayed in hiding because they feared being picked up and called to serve in the military. One young man said: "The main risk is that anybody from age 18 to 41 will be taken to fight. The ones who get sent to the hot frontlines are like me... [so] I hid in my house and never left."¹⁷⁸ A woman from al-Jamaliya neighbourhood confirmed: "All of the people on the street are women and older people – the men under 40 stay at home to avoid being taken into the military."¹⁷⁹

OBSTACLES TO ACCESS

Foreign officials and local actors reported to Amnesty International that they have experienced no major challenges in providing humanitarian assistance to government-held

¹⁷² Interview in Turkey, 12 January 2015.

¹⁷³ Interview in Turkey, 15 January 2015.

¹⁷⁴ Interview in Turkey, 13 January 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Last name withheld.

¹⁷⁶ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Interviews in Turkey, 19 December 2014 and 22 January 2015.

¹⁷⁸ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹⁷⁹ Interview in Turkey, 16 January 2015.

areas of Aleppo city. Meanwhile, humanitarian actors providing assistance to opposition-controlled areas have said that, although they are generally able to access such areas, they have experienced significant challenges that have led these areas of Aleppo city to be classified as “hard to reach” by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and “partially besieged” by the Syrian American Medical Society.¹⁸⁰ Notably, government forces have frequently targeted the Castello Road, the only major access route into opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo not blocked by government checkpoints or forces. According to the Civil Defence team in Anadan, a northern suburb of Aleppo city, the Castello Road has been attacked more than 50 times since September 2014 with explosive barrel bombs, missiles and other weapons.¹⁸¹ An international NGO told Amnesty International that the most serious of these attacks included a strike on a humanitarian convoy on 8 May 2014.¹⁸² Amnesty International documented two other incidents along this route: an air strike on a vehicle carrying three doctors on 15 October 2014 and a barrel bomb attack on an ambulance, a minibus and other vehicles on 18 November 2014.¹⁸³

To avoid attack, humanitarian actors told Amnesty International that they now avoid using large trucks for shipments and travel only at certain times of day. A doctor from the Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations explained, “Before, we would send in one truck. Now we use four normal cars. The truck is more likely to be targeted and, if they do target it, we would lose everything.”¹⁸⁴ Humanitarian actors also shared concerns about the many armed opposition checkpoints along the access route from Turkey to Aleppo, which can double or triple the time it takes for assistance to reach the city.¹⁸⁵ According to a foreign official, “there are an endless number of checkpoints. Of course this delays the shipments and hinders how quickly we can respond to a given situation.”¹⁸⁶ Compounding these obstacles was the government’s recent expulsion of two UN humanitarian officials from Syria who were responsible for co-ordinating aid convoys and negotiating aid access.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁰ OCHA, “Statement to the Security Council on Syria,” 28 August 2014, <http://syria.unocha.org/sites/default/files/28%20Aug%20ASG%20Kang%20Statement%20on%20Syria.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2015); Syrian American Medical Society, *Slow death: Life and death in Syrian communities under siege*, 24 March 2015, https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/images/PDFs/Slow%20Death_Syria%20Under%20Siege.pdf (accessed 31 March 2015).

¹⁸¹ Skype interview, 13 March 2015.

¹⁸² Email correspondence with international NGO that wishes to remain anonymous, 29 January 2015. The organization whose convoy was targeted also wishes to remain anonymous, to preserve its access to Syria.

¹⁸³ For further details these incidents, see above, in “Attacks on Civilians and Civilian Objects and Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas.”

¹⁸⁴ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹⁸⁵ Interview in Turkey, 30 January 2015.

¹⁸⁶ Phone interview, 25 February 2015.

¹⁸⁷ Associated Press, “Syria expels 3 key humanitarian staffers”, 27 February 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/f499b08eb7f94de78df7e7b963be7802/un-envoy-heads-damascus-pursue-aleppo-truce-plan#> (accessed 15 March 2015).

Assistance providers expressed serious concerns about the risks they would face if the Castello Road were blocked by government forces in the future. Given the recent increase in hostilities north of Aleppo city, these fears do not seem to be unfounded. Because there is currently only one major access route to the opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo, the threat of a siege is ever-present. The director of a hospital in al-Sakhour neighbourhood told Amnesty International on 25 February that aid shipments had been stopped for the last two weeks due to fighting near the main access road: "We are not getting diesel, food, anything. The stockpiles are going down, prices are going up, and we are running out of essential medicines and supplies. I am worried. The siege is coming."¹⁸⁸ Aleppo residents, too, fear the prospect of a siege. A Syrian aid worker explained their mentality: "The people are always, always worried that the siege is coming. They have seen Homs and Ghouta. They are thinking and wondering if they are next."¹⁸⁹ A member of the Local Council in Aleppo city added: "I feel the future here will be very bad. I am sure we will be under siege soon. I don't see good things coming in the new year for Aleppo."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Phone interview, 25 February 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Interview in Turkey, 29 January 2015.

¹⁹⁰ Skype interview, 15 December 2014.

APPLICATION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

International human rights law, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, applies both in peacetime and during armed conflict and is legally binding on states, their armed forces and other agents. It establishes the right of victims of serious human rights violations to remedy, including justice, truth and reparations. Syria is a party to some of the major international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Syria is legally bound by its obligations under these international treaties, as well as by relevant customary international law. The International Court of Justice, as well as the UN Human Rights Committee, affirmed that international human rights law applies in times of armed conflict as well as peacetime. Of particular relevance to this report are Syria's international human rights law obligations related to the right to health¹⁹¹; the right to life; the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment; the right to liberty and security of person; prohibition of enforced disappearance; the prohibition of arbitrary detention and the right to a fair trial.¹⁹²

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Hostilities between warring parties in the Syrian conflict are subject to the laws of war, also known as international humanitarian law.¹⁹³ This contains the rules and principles that seek to protect primarily those who are not participating in hostilities, notably civilians, but also certain combatants, including those who are wounded or captured (*hors de combat*). It applies only in situations of armed conflict and its rules are binding on all parties to a conflict, whether state forces or non-state armed groups. International humanitarian law sets out standards of humane conduct and limits the means and methods of conducting military operations. Its central purpose is to limit, to the extent feasible, human suffering in times of armed conflict.

A fundamental rule of international humanitarian law is that parties to any conflict must at all times "distinguish between civilians and combatants", especially in that "attacks may only be directed against combatants" and "must not be directed against civilians."¹⁹⁴ A

¹⁹¹ ICESCR, Article 12.

¹⁹² ICCPR Articles, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14.

¹⁹³ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Syria: ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent maintain aid effort amid increasing fighting*, 17 July 2012, <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/update/2012/syria-update-2012-07-17.htm>, (accessed on 4 March 2015).

¹⁹⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 1. See also Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), Article 48, and Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the

similar rule requires parties to distinguish between “civilian objects” and “military objectives”. These rules are part of the fundamental principle of distinction.

For the purposes of distinction, anyone who is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict is a civilian, and the civilian population comprises all persons who are not combatants.¹⁹⁵ Civilians are protected against attack unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities.¹⁹⁶

Civilian objects are all objects (that is, buildings, structures, places and other physical property or environments) which are not “military objectives”; military objectives are “limited to those objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose partial or total destruction, capture or neutralisation, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.”¹⁹⁷ Civilian objects are protected against attack, unless and for such time as they become military objectives because all of the criteria for a military objective described above become temporarily fulfilled.¹⁹⁸ In cases of doubt whether an object that is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a place of worship, a house or other dwelling or a school, is being used for military purposes, it is to be presumed not to be so used.¹⁹⁹

Intentionally directing attacks against civilians not taking direct part in hostilities or against civilian objects is a war crime.²⁰⁰ The principle of distinction also includes a specific rule that “acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population are prohibited.”²⁰¹

The corollary of the rule of distinction is that “indiscriminate attacks are prohibited”.²⁰² Indiscriminate attacks are those that are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, either because the attack is not directed at a specific military objective, or because it employs a method or means of combat that cannot be directed at a specific military objective or has effects that cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law.²⁰³

Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), Article 12(2).

¹⁹⁵ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 5; see also Protocol I, Article 50.

¹⁹⁶ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 6; see also Protocol I, Article 51(3); Protocol II, Article 13(3).

¹⁹⁷ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 8 and 9; Protocol I, Article 52.

¹⁹⁸ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 10.

¹⁹⁹ Protocol I article 52(3). See also ICRC Customary IHL Study, pp. 34-36.

²⁰⁰ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, pp. 591,593,595-598. See also Rome Statute of the ICC, articles 8(2)(b)(i) and (ii) and 8(2)(e)(i)(ii)(iv) and (xii). See also discussion in ICRC Customary IHL Study, p. 27.

²⁰¹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 2; see also Protocol I, Article 51(2) and Protocol II, Article 12(2).

²⁰² ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 11; Protocol I, Article 51(4).

²⁰³ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 12; Protocol I, Article 51(4)(a).

International humanitarian law also prohibits disproportionate attacks, which are those “which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”²⁰⁴ Intentionally launching an indiscriminate attack resulting in death or injury to civilians, or a disproportionate attack (that is, knowing that the attack will cause excessive incidental civilian loss, injury or damage) constitutes a war crime.²⁰⁵

In addition to benefiting from the protection accorded civilians and civilian objects, certain persons and objects are afforded special protection under international humanitarian law. Medical personnel and medical transports must be respected and protected in all circumstances.²⁰⁶ Humanitarian relief personnel and humanitarian relief objects must be respected and protected.²⁰⁷ And “special care must be taken in military operations to avoid damage to buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education or charitable purposes and historic monuments unless they are military objectives.”²⁰⁸

The protection of the civilian population and civilian objects is further underpinned by the requirement that all parties to a conflict take precautions in attack. In the conduct of military operations, then, “constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects”; “all feasible precautions” must be taken to avoid and minimize incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects.²⁰⁹ The parties must choose means and methods of warfare with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects.²¹⁰ Everything feasible must be done to verify that targets are military objectives, to assess the proportionality of attacks, and to halt attacks if it becomes apparent they are wrongly directed or disproportionate.²¹¹ Where circumstances permit, parties must give effective advance warning of attacks which may affect the civilian population.²¹²

Parties must choose appropriate means and methods of attack when military targets are located within residential areas. This requirement rules out the use of certain types of weapons and tactics. The use of means of combat (such as using imprecise explosive weapons on targets located in densely populated civilian areas) that cannot be directed at a specific military objective may result in indiscriminate attacks and is prohibited. The use of barrel bombs, mortars, artillery and improvised rockets in populated civilian neighbourhoods

²⁰⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 14; Protocol I, Articles 51(5)(b) and 57.

²⁰⁵ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, pp. 599-601.

²⁰⁶ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 26 and 29.

²⁰⁷ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 31 and 32.

²⁰⁸ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 38.

²⁰⁹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 15. See also Protocol II, Article 13(1).

²¹⁰ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 17.

²¹¹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 16-19.

²¹² ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 20.

of Aleppo city – even if intended to target military objectives – violates this prohibition. Choosing methods of attack that do not minimize the risk to civilians (e.g. attacking objectives at times when many civilians are most likely to be present) also violates international humanitarian law.

Attacks by both government forces and armed groups that are carried out in the knowledge that they will cause massive civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects flagrantly violate the prohibition of indiscriminate attack and constitute war crimes. Shelling and bombardments of residential areas in which there are no fighters, soldiers or military objectives constitute direct attacks on civilians and are war crimes.

Warring parties have obligations to take precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks by the adversary. As with precautions in attack, these rules are particularly important when fighting is taking place in areas with large numbers of civilians. Each party to the conflict must, to the extent feasible, avoid locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas.²¹³

However, Article 50(3) of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), states: “The presence within the civilian population of individuals who do not come within the definition of civilians does not deprive the population of its civilian character.” The fact that military checkpoints, bases or barracks may be located within civilian areas does not in any way negate the Syrian government forces’ and armed opposition forces’ obligations with respect to civilians, including the principle of distinction, the prohibition on indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks, and the precautions in attack detailed above.

International humanitarian law also provides fundamental guarantees for civilians as well as fighters or combatants who are captured, injured or otherwise rendered unable to fight (*hors de combat*). Between them, Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and customary international humanitarian law include the following rules: murder is prohibited; humane treatment is required; discrimination in application of the protections of international humanitarian law is prohibited; torture, cruel or inhuman treatment and outrages on personal dignity (particularly humiliating and degrading treatment) are prohibited, as are enforced disappearances, the taking of hostages, and arbitrary detention. No one may be convicted or sentenced except pursuant to a fair trial affording all essential judicial guarantees. Collective punishments are also prohibited.²¹⁴ Depending on the particular rule in question, many or all acts that violate these rules will also constitute war crimes.²¹⁵

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL LAW

Certain human rights violations, such as torture and enforced disappearances, amount to crimes under international law and states are required to make such violations a criminal

²¹³ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 23; see also Protocol I, Article 58(b).

²¹⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 87-105.

²¹⁵ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, pp. 590-603.

offence in domestic legislation. States are also obliged to bring to justice those responsible for these and other serious violations. Individuals – whether civilians or military – can be held criminally responsible for certain violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights law.

All states have an obligation to investigate and, where enough admissible evidence is gathered, prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as other crimes under international law. As this report has shown, government forces should be investigated for war crimes committed in Aleppo. These include, inter alia, directing attacks against civilians not directly participating in hostilities and civilian objects; indiscriminate attacks resulting in deaths and injury to civilians; torture and cruel treatment; murder; rape and other sexual violence; making medical personnel or objects the object of attack; and making persons or objects involved in humanitarian assistance the object of attack; and making religious or cultural objects the object of attack. Armed groups should be investigated for the war crimes of directing attacks against civilians not directly participating in hostilities and civilian objects; indiscriminate attacks resulting in deaths and injury to civilians; torture and cruel treatment; hostage-taking; and making religious or cultural objects the object of attack.

According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, certain acts, if directed against a civilian population as part of a widespread or systematic attack, and as part of a state or organizational policy, amount to crimes against humanity. Such acts include, among others, the deliberate targeting of civilians, murder, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer of population, torture, rape and other sexual crimes, and enforced disappearances. Some of the violations by the Syrian government that are documented in this report appear to constitute crimes against humanity, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian objects, enforced disappearances, and torture. All governments have a duty to investigate and prosecute crimes against humanity including by exercising universal jurisdiction over the crimes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Government forces and many armed opposition groups in Aleppo are committing grave human rights abuses and serious violations of international humanitarian law, many of which amount to war crimes. In some cases, the actions of the Syrian government have amounted to crimes against humanity.

The evidence examined in this report strongly suggests that government forces and many armed opposition groups are indiscriminately using imprecise explosive weapons such as barrel bombs and mortars on a systematic basis. The incidents documented represent just a fraction of these unlawful attacks, which have killed and injured scores of civilians and damaged or destroyed apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, mosques and ambulances. Furthermore, attacks have been launched on populated areas, such as residential neighbourhoods, crowded markets, and busy intersections or roads. In many instances, government and armed opposition forces appear to have directly targeted civilians or civilian objects. In other instances, where military checkpoints, bases or members of government forces on the one hand, or of armed groups on the other, were present in the vicinity of the attacks, the warring parties have launched attacks that, at the least, were grossly disproportionate or otherwise indiscriminate. In either scenario, these attacks constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law and are war crimes.

The government's aerial campaign in Aleppo appears to have deliberately targeted civilians and civilian objects and forms part of a systematic, as well as widespread, attack against the civilian population throughout Syria, a campaign that is also marked by the torture, murder and enforced disappearance of thousands of civilians in Aleppo and across Syria. As the evidence points to these violations having been committed in furtherance of a state policy, Amnesty International's assessment is that they amount to crimes against humanity.

Based on the cases examined in this and prior work, Amnesty International also concludes that many opposition groups have engaged in abductions and hostage-taking, as well in as the torture and other mistreatment of prisoners in Aleppo from January 2014 to March 2015. Such acts amount to war crimes.

Finally, residents of both opposition-held and government-held areas have been subjected to extremely poor living conditions, including shortages in basic services and necessities such as food and medicine. In opposition-held areas in Aleppo, residents told Amnesty International that each day was a struggle for survival. While assistance providers are generally able to reach areas controlled by the opposition and the government in Aleppo city, those providing assistance to opposition-controlled areas discussed significant challenges to providing aid. These dire conditions and abuses are seen elsewhere in Syria on an even greater scale, especially in areas currently under siege, such as Homs, areas of Damascus city and the countryside around Damascus.

In Aleppo, government forces and many armed opposition groups have therefore committed

crimes under international law, as well as breached almost every demand of UN Security Council Resolution 2139. Both sides are violating international humanitarian law and must be held to account. However, throughout the more than four years since the crisis began, government forces have been responsible for the large majority of violations and crimes. Their responsibility for creating one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history cannot be overstated. This crisis started with the state's brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters. Its response seemed tailored to send the message that they would stop at nothing to quash dissent: methods include the use of torture, summary executions and enforced disappearances on a massive scale; merciless bombardment of civilians and use of prohibited weapons; starvation of civilians and collective punishment.

After three years of inaction and paralysis, the UN Security Council finally demanded, in a binding resolution, that the Syrian government and other parties respect international humanitarian law and stop the unlawful killing, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and sieges of civilians. More than a year after UN Security Council Resolution 2139, Syria's beleaguered civilians are still waiting for action to enforce compliance. Measures to stop arming the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity and bring suspects to justice are long overdue, and are needed now more than ever.

Amnesty International makes the following recommendations, which concern the situation in Aleppo and in Syria more broadly:

To the Syrian authorities:

- End deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects such as hospitals, homes and schools;
- End the use of imprecise explosive weapons such as barrel bombs in populated areas;
- End arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture and other ill-treatment;
- Allow unhindered humanitarian access to the UN and its implementing partners in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria;
- Provide full co-operation and unhindered access to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as other international human rights monitors, to investigate all alleged crimes under international law and violations and abuses of international human rights law;
- Comply with provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2139 related to respect for international humanitarian law and human rights.

To armed opposition groups:

- End deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian objects such as hospitals, homes and schools;
- End the use of imprecise explosive weapons such as mortars in populated areas;

- End torture and other ill-treatment and ensure humane treatment of detainees;
- End abduction of civilians and hostage-taking;
- Make clear to those under their command that unlawful attacks, torture and ill-treatment will not be tolerated;
- Remove from the ranks anyone suspected of violations of international humanitarian law;
- Allow unhindered humanitarian access to the UN and its implementing partners in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria;
- Reduce the number of checkpoints on the access route from Turkey to Aleppo city so as to better assist and sustain the civilian population there;
- Comply with provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2139 related to respect for international humanitarian law and human rights.

To the UN Security Council:

- Refer the situation in Syria to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court;
- Demand prompt and unhindered access to Syria for the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, humanitarian and human rights organizations, and international journalists;
- Insist upon receiving regular updates and objective information on attributable violations of human rights and international humanitarian law;
- Impose targeted sanctions against those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2139;
- Impose an arms embargo on the Syrian government.

To the UN Special Envoy for Syria:

- Ensure that any plan to “freeze” hostilities in Aleppo or elsewhere in Syria incorporates human rights components and safeguards to ensure their implementation, including by:
 - Contributing to remedies for detainees held arbitrarily;
 - Developing a robust mechanism to monitor parties’ respect for international human rights and humanitarian law in and around any “freeze” area;
 - Generating measurable improvements in humanitarian access to civilians in Aleppo;
 - Incorporating a component related to truth and justice.

To the international community:

- Support and build the capacity of Syrian human rights organizations that are documenting violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in the Syrian conflict to gather and share objective and impartial information, and encourage the UN and other international actors to ensure that such support and training is made available to them;
- Engage in greater and more effective information-sharing around humanitarian conditions in Aleppo and throughout Syria, which will increase the effectiveness of the humanitarian response;
- Urge the Syrian government to grant the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic and other international human rights monitors access to Syria;
- In the absence of a UN Security Council arms embargo, immediately impose a comprehensive national and (where possible) regional arms embargo on the Syrian government;
- Comply with the arms embargo imposed under UN Security Council Resolution 2170 of 2014 on Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as on the armed group that calls itself the Islamic State;
- Make no transfers to any other non-state armed group in Syria where there is a substantial risk of the group committing serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law;
- If considering supplying arms to non-state armed groups in Syria, first carry out a rigorous human rights risk assessment and establish a robust monitoring process which would enable all arms transfer proposals to be carefully considered before any approval is granted and for any such transfers to be rapidly halted if arms are used to commit human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law. The onus should be on states considering military transfers to armed groups to first ensure the establishment of concrete, enforceable and verifiable mechanisms so as to remove all substantial risks that any military equipment supplied is not misused or diverted to commit or facilitate serious human rights abuses or violations of international humanitarian law;
- Accept a shared responsibility to investigate and prosecute war crimes and other crimes under international law committed in Syria and elsewhere in the world. In particular, seek to exercise universal jurisdiction over these crimes before national courts in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty;
- Recognize and condemn the violations being committed in Aleppo city and in Syria more broadly, as failure to act opens the way for intolerable human suffering and poses a challenge to the universality of international law.

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