



# **‘CIVILIAN OBJECTS WERE UNDAMAGED’**

RUSSIA’S STATEMENTS ON ITS ATTACKS IN SYRIA UNMASKED

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



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**Cover photo:** This Civilians inspect a site hit by what residents said were air strikes carried out by the Russian air force in the town of Darat Izza, Aleppo governorate, 7 October 2015  
© Reuters/Ammar Abdullah.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's armed forces formally intervened in the armed conflict in Syria on 30 September on the side of the Syrian government, a long-term ally, launching multiple air strikes. Fixed-wing military aircraft based primarily at the Hmeymim air base in Latakia governorate have since then carried out thousands of sorties across the country and attacked thousands of locations that Russia has described as "terrorist" targets. Russia's armed forces have also deployed long-range bombers from Russia, sea-launched cruise missiles and, according to military analysts, combat helicopters, tanks, artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems.

The Russian authorities have claimed that their armed forces are only striking "terrorist" targets and have not publicly acknowledged that they have caused any civilian deaths and injuries and have dismissed some such claims as part of an "information war". However, according to Syrian human rights organizations, Russian attacks in Syria have actually killed hundreds of civilians not directly participating in hostilities and destroyed or damaged hospitals and dozens of homes and other civilian objects.

Between September and December 2015, Amnesty International researched remotely more than 25 attacks that took place in five governorates (Homs, Hama, Idleb, Latakia and Aleppo) between 30 September and 29 November and, according to witnesses, human rights defenders and a review of video clips and other images, killed at least 200 civilians and around a dozen fighters. In doing so, it interviewed by phone or over the internet 16 witnesses to attacks and their aftermath, including two doctors, and spoke to more than a dozen human rights defenders and representatives of medical organizations supporting work in the areas of the attacks. It obtained and reviewed audiovisual imagery relating to all these attacks or their aftermath, and commissioned advice from weapons experts on munitions visible in them. It also reviewed statements published by the Russian Ministry of Defence and relevant articles in Russian and other media. Amnesty International sent a memorandum with its preliminary findings to the Russian authorities on 9 November 2015 and requested meetings with them, but has received no substantive response to date.

In this briefing, Amnesty International sets out its findings with respect to six attacks. In five of the attacks, suspected Russian air strikes targeted residential areas, killing 119 civilians. The sixth attack concerns air strikes in the immediate vicinity of a hospital in which 13 civilians were killed.

On the morning of 29 November 2015, for example, the public market in the centre of Ariha, Idleb governorate, was bustling with people buying and selling vegetables and fruit and other goods when it was struck with three missiles. Forty-nine civilians were killed and many others injured. One witness told Amnesty International that he spoke with a woman crying beside a line of dead bodies. Her husband and three children had just been killed and the body parts of her children were in bags. According to further testimony and audiovisual material, as well as the research of Syrian human rights defenders, there were no military targets in the vicinity.

Amnesty International's research indicates serious failures to respect international humanitarian law. In some attacks, the Russian armed forces appear to have directly attacked civilians or civilian objects by striking residential areas with no evident military objective and even medical facilities, resulting in deaths and injuries to civilians. In others,

they seem to have attacked military objectives and civilian objects without distinction, or caused disproportionate harm to civilians when striking military targets. Such attacks may constitute war crimes.

There is also evidence that they unlawfully used unguided bombs in densely populated areas and inherently indiscriminate cluster munitions.

In the first week of October, for example, SPBE series cluster munitions – which weapons experts consider Syria's armed forces incapable of delivering – were deployed near Kafr Halab, Aleppo governorate, and near Maasran, Idlib governorate, during operations in both areas by Russian armed forces.

Amnesty International is calling on the Russian authorities to:

- Fully comply with the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law in the planning and execution of any air strikes by ensuring that civilians and civilian objects, including homes and medical facilities, are not targeted; and end indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks;
- Take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects, including giving advance effective warnings of impending attacks when possible to civilians likely to be affected; ensure that targets are in fact military objectives; and, particularly in the case of medical facilities, adhere strictly to the presumption of civilian character in case of doubt;
- Ensure that the cases detailed in this briefing, and any others where there is credible information that violations of international humanitarian law have taken place, are independently and impartially investigated, make public the findings of the investigations, and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to trial in proceedings that adhere to international standards.

Russia's attacks are taking place in the context of increased international military intervention in Syria. Amnesty International is also researching and documenting its concerns relating to air strikes by the US-led coalition in Syria.

## METHODOLOGY

Amnesty International researched remotely more than 25 Russian attacks in Syria between September and December 2015. It interviewed by phone or over the internet 16 witnesses to attacks and their aftermath and spoke to more than a dozen Syrian human rights defenders and representatives of medical organizations supporting work in the areas of the attacks. It obtained and reviewed audiovisual imagery relating to all of these attacks or their aftermath, and commissioned advice from weapons experts on munitions visible in them. It reviewed statements published by the Russian Ministry of Defence and relevant articles in Russian and other media. It also reviewed reports of Syrian and international human rights organizations, humanitarian organizations, UN agencies, military and weapons analysts and open-source research networks.

Amnesty International sent a memorandum including its preliminary findings to the Russian Ministry of Defence on 9 November 2015. It requested further information on 20 attacks that took place in five governorates (Homs, Hama, Idlib, Latakia and Aleppo) between 30



September and 20 October and, according to local human rights defenders and other witnesses, killed at least 170 civilians and around a dozen fighters. It asked for comments on reports about the use of cluster munitions and the deployment of unguided bombs in civilian areas. It also suggested a meeting with the Ministry in order to discuss the findings before publication. As of 18 December 2015 Amnesty International had received no response to the memorandum or the suggestion of a meeting.

On 23 November 2015 Amnesty International forwarded a copy of the memorandum to the Russian embassy in London and requested a meeting with the ambassador and/or the military attaché to discuss its findings regarding Russian military operations in Syria and to seek the Russian government's views on them. The embassy responded on 4 December 2015 to say that the letter was "under the consideration of the authorities of the Embassy", but had not replied more substantively or accepted the request for a meeting as of 18 December 2015.

## OVERVIEW

Russia's armed forces formally intervened in the armed conflict in Syria on 30 September on the side of the Syrian government, a long-term ally, launching multiple air strikes. Since then they have carried out thousands of attacks across the country and attacked thousands of locations that Russia has described as "terrorist" targets.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian authorities have claimed that their armed forces are only striking "terrorist" targets and have not acknowledged causing civilian deaths and injuries or destruction and damage to civilian infrastructure. Amnesty International has closely followed all statements from the Russian Ministry of Defence and has not found any recognizing such casualties or damage. Ministry of Defence officials have at times denied that its forces carried out operations in civilian areas and caused death and destruction despite evidence to the contrary. Referring to the opening air strikes on 30 September in which dozens of civilians were reported as killed in Homs governorate and elsewhere, Major-General Igor Konashenkov, a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Defence, stated that weaponry of Russian aircraft were not used on or near civilian infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> In statements carried by Russian media on 30 September, Mariya Zakharova, a spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that reports of civilian casualties were part of an "information war" and on 1 October

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<sup>1</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin was quoted as saying: "The only right way to fight international terrorism – it is gangs of international terrorists in particular who run rampant in Syria and neighbouring countries – is to act pre-emptively, to fight and kill the terrorists and militants on the territories they have already captured, not wait for them to come to our home." TASS (Russian news agency), "Putin: the IS group has long since declared Russia its enemy" (in Russian), 20 September 2015, available at [tass.ru/politika/2304543](http://tass.ru/politika/2304543). According to Russian state-owned news agency RIA, around 4,000 sorties have been flown and more than 8,000 targets destroyed, as of 14 December 2015; see RIA, "The Operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria" (in Russian), 12 November 2015, available at [ria.ru/infografika/20151112/1319261719.html](http://ria.ru/infografika/20151112/1319261719.html)

<sup>2</sup> TASS (Russian news agency), "Ministry of Defence: IS command centres have been destroyed as a result of strikes by Russian Federation aircraft in Syria" (in Russian), 30 September 2015, available at [tass.ru/politika/2305766](http://tass.ru/politika/2305766)

she again denied any civilian casualties.<sup>3</sup> Referring to the sea-launched cruise missile strikes that destroyed residential buildings and killed five civilians in Darat Izza, Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu stated that “according to objective monitoring, all targets were destroyed and civilian objects were not damaged”.<sup>4</sup> In a press conference on 30 October, Colonel-General Andrey Kartapolov said that “new fabricated stories alleging indiscriminate strikes appear in Western media on an almost daily basis – to the extent that the number of hospitals, mosques, homes and cultural monuments allegedly destroyed by Russian air strikes exceeds the number of strikes on terrorists as a whole.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, according to Syrian human rights organizations, Russian attacks in Syria have actually killed hundreds of civilians not directly participating in hostilities. According to the research of the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, by 15 November 2015 Russian attacks had killed at least 526 civilians including 137 children and 71 women.<sup>6</sup> A report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the deaths of 570 civilians between 30 September and 1 December 2015 as a result of Russian attacks.<sup>7</sup> As of 17 December 2015, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 635 civilians, including 141 children and 100 women, had been killed in Russian attacks.<sup>8</sup> These attacks have also destroyed or damaged hospitals – according to Physicians for Human Rights, at least 10 medical facilities in October alone<sup>9</sup> – and dozens of homes and

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<sup>3</sup> Russia-1 TV, *Vesti* news programme (7pm Moscow time), 30 September 2015, and Channel Five, *Seychas* news programme (3.30 pm Moscow time), 1 October 2015. Mariya Zakharova says: “All this is an information attack, a war which we have heard about many times”.

<sup>4</sup> Official Website of the President of Russia, “Meeting with Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu” (in Russian), 7 October 2015, available at [www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50458](http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50458).

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Andrei Kartapolov summed up the results of the actions of the Russian air group in Syria for the last month”, 30 October 2015, available at [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12062281@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12062281@egNews).

<sup>6</sup> Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *Russian Strikes on Syria’s Civilians: Cluster Munitions, Vacuum Bombs and Long-Range Missiles*, November 2015, available at [www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf](http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, “*They came to kill us*”: Russian forces kill 570 civilians including 152 children and 60 women, 17 December 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/They\\_Came\\_to\\_Kill\\_Us\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/They_Came_to_Kill_Us_en.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Telephone conversation with Rami Abdulrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 18 December 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, “Russian Forces Carried Out At Least 10 Attacks On Medical Facilities In Syria In October”, 16 November 2015, available at [physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/russian-forces-carried-out-at-least-10-attacks-on-medical-facilities-in-syria-in-october.html](http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/russian-forces-carried-out-at-least-10-attacks-on-medical-facilities-in-syria-in-october.html).



other civilian objects.<sup>10</sup>

Subsequent to the Turkish air force's shooting down of a Russian fighter jet on 24 November there was a reduction in the amount of information released by the Russian Ministry of Defence about its campaign in Syria. However, it did announce that its warplanes had conducted some 431 combat flights against 1,458 targets between 26 November and 4 December.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's attacks are taking place in the context of increased international military intervention in Syria. Members of the Lebanese Hizbullah movement are fighting with Syrian government forces, as are other predominantly Shi'a fighters from Iran and Iraq. A number of countries have provided military and other assistance to armed groups opposing the government of President Bashar al-Assad. A US-led coalition is targeting the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Amnesty International has been researching and documenting its concerns relating to civilian casualties caused by its air strikes.

## ATTACKS ON RESIDENTIAL AREAS

In the five cases highlighted in this section, the first four of which were included in Amnesty International's memorandum to the Russian Ministry of Defence (the fifth took place after the memorandum was submitted), suspected Russian air strikes in residential areas resulted in the deaths of 119 civilians and injuries to many more. Amnesty International's research into these strikes indicates that there were no military objectives or fighters in the immediate vicinity of objects that were struck. This suggests that the attacks may have deliberately targeted civilian object or civilians, or failed to take feasible precautions to avoid, or at least minimize, harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects. As such they would violate international humanitarian law and may in some circumstances constitute war crimes.

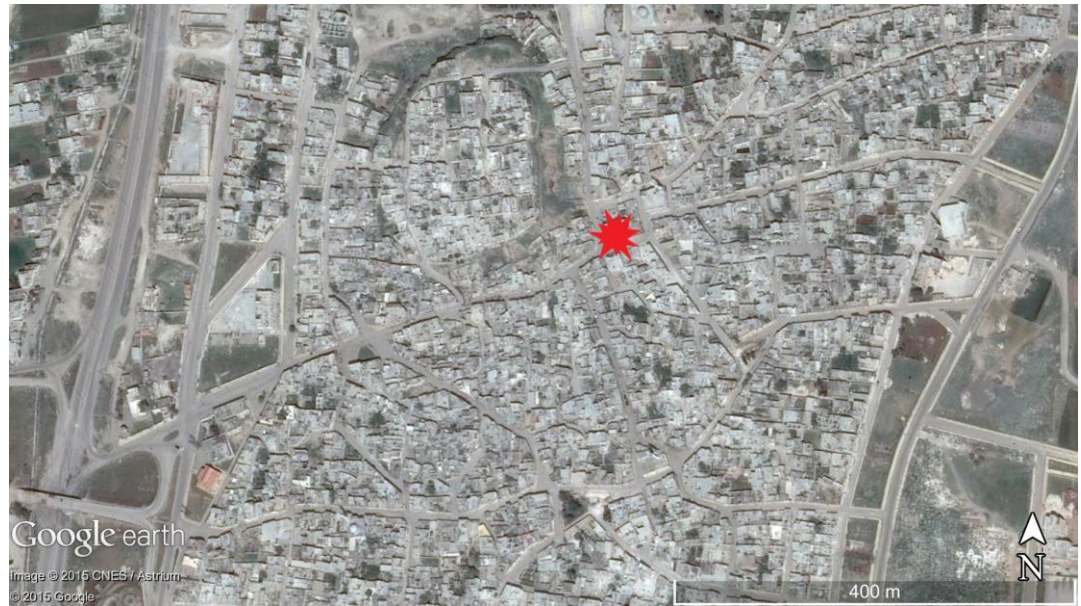
Russia's initial air strikes were concentrated on the governorates of Hama, Idlib, Homs and Latakia in areas under the control of, or contested by, armed opposition groups and mostly far from the presence of any IS fighters. Air strikes on 30 September included Zafraneh, Talbisseh and al-Rastan in Homs governorate. According to witness testimony, video footage

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<sup>10</sup> Suspected Russian air strikes are alleged to have also targeted bakeries (see for example, IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, "Russia bombs bakery belonging to IHH", 30 November 2015, available at [ihh.org.tr/fr/main/news/0/russia-bombs-bakery-belonging-to-ihh/3019](http://ihh.org.tr/fr/main/news/0/russia-bombs-bakery-belonging-to-ihh/3019)), olive presses and similar facilities (see for example, Almarra Today, "Olive processor and a bakery belonging to civilians targeted by jets of the Russian enemy in Jabal Zawiya in Idlib Countryside" (in Arabic), posted on 16 November 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=BR52rrn\\_YYo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR52rrn_YYo)), water treatment facilities (see for example, Christiaan Triebert, "Syria's Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry", 11 December 2015, available at [bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/](http://bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/)) and otherwise targeted humanitarian aid routes in particular from Turkey (Liz Sly, "Russian airstrikes force a halt to aid in Syria, triggering a new crisis", *Washington Post*, 14 December 2015, available at [wpo.st/NSEyO](http://wpo.st/NSEyO)).

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "For the week from 26 November to 4 December, the Aerospace Forces of the Russian Federation carried out 431 sorties, as a result of which it dealt pinpoint strikes against 1,458 terrorist targets in Syria" (in Russian), 4 December 2015, available at [syria.mil.ru/news/more.htm?id=12070991@egNews](http://syria.mil.ru/news/more.htm?id=12070991@egNews)

and other information obtained and analysed by Amnesty International, at least 43 civilians were killed and around 100 civilians injured in these locations on that date. One fighter was reportedly killed, in al-Rastan.



Location of suspected Russian air strike in the centre of Talbisseh on 30 September 2015. Imagery date: 2 April 2014. Coordinates: 34.844437, 36.731687 © Google Earth / CNES/ Astrium.

In Talbisseh, 17 civilians whose names Amnesty International has obtained, including three children, were killed, and at least 34 civilians were injured, in suspected Russian air strikes on Karama Street in the centre of Talbisseh.<sup>12</sup> An 18<sup>th</sup> civilian fatality is suspected since the remains of one man were not identified among the scattered corpses and body parts. Civilian buildings, including a bakery, were badly damaged. According to the testimony of two eyewitnesses whom Amnesty International interviewed, complementary testimony, audiovisual material of the direct aftermath of the attacks and reports received from human rights defenders in and from Homs there were no military targets in the vicinity and there were no military casualties. Armed groups allied with the Free Syrian Army controlled the area but were not located in the town itself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Violations Documentation Center in Syria cited a doctor in Talbisseh who said that 65 injured people received treatment at Talbisseh Central Hospital. See Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *Russian Airstrikes in Syria: Shelling of Civilian Homes in the Northern Suburbs of Homs*, 30 September 2015, available at [www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1444252328#.VnKuevmLTcs](http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1444252328#.VnKuevmLTcs)

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International interviewed the two eyewitnesses, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, by internet calls on 28 October 2015. Video clips of the attack and its aftermath dated and uploaded on 30 September 2015 showing injured people being pulled from the rubble include Talbisa H, "Talbisseh recovering the wounded and the martyrs from the rubble 30/09/2015" (in Arabic), posted on 30 September 2015, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=05LfgtVgUTE&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05LfgtVgUTE&feature=youtu.be)

One of the eyewitnesses, "Mustafa"<sup>14</sup>, a resident of Talbisseh, told Amnesty International:

*At around 10.40am I heard and saw more than one warplane hovering in the sky. A few minutes later missiles fell on residential buildings causing a massive blast like we have never seen before. Several buildings were destroyed, killing 17 civilians. Thirty-four others, all civilians, were injured. I went to the field hospital and took pictures. I saw the destruction and bodies scattered everywhere. People were injured from shrapnel and flying objects from the destruction. Some were stuck under the rubble and were later removed as corpses. The buildings hit are far from the front line. There were no bases or fighters inside the town and no military vehicles parked in these residential buildings.<sup>15</sup>*

The following day, 1 October, the Russian Ministry of Defence was cited in Russian media stating that 20 sorties were carried out against 20 "IS" targets by Su-24M and Su-25 Russian military aircraft, including on a site near Talbisseh and in the al-Rastan area.<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Defence spokesperson Major-General Igor Konashenkov said that "weaponry of Russian aircraft was not used on or near civilian infrastructure" and Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Mariya Zakharova denied any civilian deaths and said that such reports were part of an "information war".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Mustafa" is a pseudonym. His real name has been withheld for security reason.

<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International interview by internet call on 28 October 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Novaya Gazeta, "Bombing in Syria by the Russian Air Force. The Ministry of Defence has reported about strikes on the positions of IS militants. (Chronicle of 30 September)" (in Russian), 30 September 2015, available at [novayagazeta.ru/news/1696888.html](http://novayagazeta.ru/news/1696888.html), and Interfax, "More than 10 IS targets were struck by Russian aircraft over the first 24 hours" (in Russian), 1 October 2015, available at [interfax-russia.ru/main.asp?id=657761](http://interfax-russia.ru/main.asp?id=657761)

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Russia-1 TV, *Vesti* news programme (7pm Moscow time), 30 September 2015, and Channel Five, *Seychas* news programme (3.30 pm Moscow time), 1 October 2015.



Location of suspected Russian air strike on the Omar Bin al-Khattab mosque in Jisr al-Shughour on 1 October 2015. Imagery date: 14 April 2014. Coordinates: 35.821100, 36.322129 © Google Earth / CNES/ Astrium.

Also on 1 October 2015, at around 11am, a suspected Russian air strike on the Omar Bin al-Khattab mosque in central Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib governorate, killed one civilian immediately, mortally wounded another and injured six more; Amnesty International has obtained the names of all eight individuals.<sup>18</sup> According to one eyewitness interviewed by Amnesty International, there were no military casualties and no military targets in the vicinity, with the nearest checkpoint some 500m away.<sup>19</sup> Reports by Syrian human rights organizations give similar accounts.<sup>20</sup>

“Manal”<sup>21</sup>, the eyewitness to the attack, told Amnesty International:

*I was 300m away from the mosque. I saw two warplanes hovering in the sky, which was unusual because you only ever see one Syrian government warplane at a time. Four bombs were dropped and I tried to hide before the impact. They landed next to each other. I saw more than three buildings completely destroyed as well as the mosque. I saw the body of one young man, a civilian from our neighbourhood called Marwan Mustafa. He was 17. Seven other civilians were injured including three women and a child.<sup>22</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> A video clip showing the rubble of the Omar Bin al-Khattab mosque after being hit by Russian air strikes is viewable on-line; see Jisr Al-Shighour Coordination, “The effect of the destruction left by Russian airstrikes on the Ali Bin Al-Khattab mosque in Jisr Al-Shighour” (in Arabic), posted on 1 October 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=MnCaTJITERI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MnCaTJITERI)

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International interview by internet call, 26 October 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *Russian Strikes on Syria’s Civilians: Cluster Munitions, Vacuum Bombs and Long-Range Missiles*, November 2015, p. 6, available at [www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf](http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> “Manal” is a pseudonym. His real name has been withheld for security reasons.

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International interview by internet call, 28 October 2015.





Image of the Omar Bin al-Khattab mosque in Jisr al-Shughour, which was hit by an air strike on 1 October 2015  
© Mustafa al-Ahmad.

On 1 October 2015 a Russian Ministry of Defence spokesperson stated that Russia's air force had targeted IS infrastructure and had destroyed one such command post in Jisr al-Shughour.<sup>23</sup> On 30 October, following the emergence of reports and images showing that the Omar Bin al-Khattab mosque had been destroyed, Colonel-General Andrey Kartapolov stated that such information was a "hoax" and presented a satellite image claiming that the mosque was still intact.<sup>24</sup> However, the satellite image showed a different mosque, not the one destroyed in the attack.

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<sup>23</sup> Russia Today, "Russia: IS command post in Jisr al-Shughour destroyed in latest airstrikes – DefMin", 1 October 2015, available at [ruptly.tv/vod/view/35510/russia-is-command-post-in-jisr-al-shughour-destroyed-in-latest-airstrikes-defmin](http://ruptly.tv/vod/view/35510/russia-is-command-post-in-jisr-al-shughour-destroyed-in-latest-airstrikes-defmin), and Interfax, "The Russian Airforce carried out new strikes on IS positions in Syria" (in Russian), 1 October 2015, available at [interfax.ru/russia/470640](http://interfax.ru/russia/470640)

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Andrei Kartapolov summed up the results of the actions of the Russian air group in Syria for the last month", 30 October 2015, available at [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12062281@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12062281@egNews)



Approximate impact location (in red) of suspected Russian cruise missile strike in Darat Izza on 7 October 2015. Imagery date: 25 August 2014. Coordinates: 36.281051, 36.849916 © Google Earth / DigitalGlobe.

Five civilians, including two women, four of whose names have been obtained by Amnesty International, were killed on 7 October 2015 when a suspected Russian sea-launched cruise missile struck residential buildings in Darat Izza, Aleppo governorate. More than six residential buildings with at least a dozen homes were destroyed by the attack according to an eyewitness interviewed by Amnesty International as well as reports of human rights organizations. Information provided by local human rights defenders, Syrian human rights organizations and video clips of the aftermath of the attack reviewed by Amnesty International indicated that there was widespread destruction and damage but no military casualties nor any armed presence in the town.<sup>25</sup>

A resident of Darat Izza, “Ridha Halabi”<sup>26</sup>, told Amnesty International:

*I was asleep in my home around 200m away from the site of the shelling [when] I woke up to the noise of the first explosion, which occurred around 6.55am. The second missile fell around two seconds later, making another loud explosive noise. It felt very*

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International interview by internet call, 14 December 2015. See also Violations Documentation Center in Syria, *Russian Strikes on Syria's Civilians: Cluster Munitions, Vacuum Bombs and Long-Range Missiles*, November 2015, available at [www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf](http://www.vdc-sy.info/pdf/reports/1447972413-English.pdf); Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Russian airstrikes kills [sic] 254 civilians including 83 children and 42 women*, November 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Russian\\_aviation\\_caused\\_the\\_deaths\\_of\\_254\\_people\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Russian_aviation_caused_the_deaths_of_254_people_en.pdf); and a video clip of the aftermath of the attack, Media Office of the town of Dara ‘Izza, “Aleppo Suburbs – Dara ‘Izza II First instances of Russian airstrike on the town” (in Arabic), posted on 6 October 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=N-o4Q6TEf1A](http://youtube.com/watch?v=N-o4Q6TEf1A)

<sup>26</sup> “Ridha Halabi” is a pseudonym. His real name has been withheld for security reasons.

*different from other air strikes; it felt more like an earthquake – the ground shook like an earthquake. I ran outside straight away, as did everyone in the neighbourhood. It was the worst destruction we have seen so far. I have documented air strikes and shelling for four years, and this was the worst destruction I had seen. There was so much dust and all the electricity cables had collapsed in the street. Six or seven buildings were completely destroyed; they were all residential buildings. A mother and her two children were killed in one house and a young couple in another house. The couple were married about a week before the attack. We helped rescue a displaced family from under the rubble and an old man from under a three-storey building who also survived... The area is residential. There are no military bases of any armed groups.<sup>27</sup>*

“Ridha Halabi” told Amnesty International that he and other activists asked eyewitnesses who were out on the street at the time of the attack whether they had seen any warplanes and all said they had neither heard nor seen any planes. Witnesses were, however, able to recall that the two missiles had come from the east.



Remnant of Russian Kalibr cruise missile. Still taken from video © Darat Izza Media Office.

The Russian Ministry of Defence issued a statement that four Russian frigates in the Caspian Sea had fired 26 missiles into Syria on the night of 6/7 October.<sup>28</sup> Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu said: “According to objective monitoring, all targets were destroyed and civilian objects were not damaged.”<sup>29</sup> The Ministry of Defence did not clarify the exact locations of the strikes, but a map in a video that it released indicates that one of the strike

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<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International interview by internet call, 14 December 2015

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Russian Defence Ministry published a video on the Youtube-channel featuring a massive precision weapon strike at ISIS infrastructural facilities on the territory of Syria”, available at [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12059977@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12059977@egNews)

<sup>29</sup> Official Website of the President of Russia, “Meeting with Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu” (in Russian), 7 October 2015 available at [kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50458](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50458)



points was in or in the immediate vicinity of Darat Izza.<sup>30</sup> Weapons experts advised Amnesty International that images of remnants of the missile indicated that it was of a model used by the Russian navy, a Novatur 3M14 Kalibr-NK.<sup>31</sup>

On 15 October 2015, at least 46 civilians including 32 children and 11 women, all of whose names have been obtained by Amnesty International, were killed by suspected Russian air strikes in al-Ghantu, Homs governorate. Most of the casualties had been sheltering in the basement of a civilian building. Many of those killed were from the same extended family and were related to a commander of a local armed group who was away at the time of the attack. A video clip of the immediate aftermath of the attack shows a number of casualties, all apparently civilian, and damage over a wide area.<sup>32</sup> There are no indications of any military presence. A weapons expert who analysed the images of the aftermath of the strike told Amnesty International that the nature of the destruction indicated possible use of fuel-air explosives or “vacuum bombs”, which leave a wide destructive “footprint” and can kill humans without causing significant visible injuries. Fuel-air explosives are particularly prone to indiscriminate effects when used in the vicinity of civilians.

A local Civil Defence first responder told Amnesty International:

*At around 1-1.30pm the Civil Defence operation room in northern Homs intercepted Russian communication and shortly afterwards those of us in al-Ghantu heard the warplanes approaching. I did not see the warplanes but other activists told me it was more than one. I heard a very strong explosion. The office started shaking as if we were attacked. The strike was 100m away. I saw three craters, a building completely destroyed, one crater at the entrance of the building and a third maybe 7-8m away. The underground shelter or basement in the building was destroyed. The missile penetrated the ceilings and reached the basement. We had never seen anything like this. Part of our work in the Civil Defence was to make such shelters for people. I have seen buildings destroyed before but the destruction did not reach the basement. We removed 12 martyrs from under the rubble. I removed body parts. I can't remember how many were injured because I focused on removing the bodies. We managed to open a small hole in the building. I saw the bodies of my relatives but we couldn't remove them. We don't have the equipment to remove all the rubble. My aunt, her children and my uncle's children were killed. So my family and I decided that the destroyed building would be the grave so we covered the destruction with soil and planted trees on it. In total, 47 people were killed by this strike; 46 were killed in the basement including 33 children and 11 women. They are all civilians and nobody was from the FSA. The closest FSA*

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<sup>30</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Russian Defence Ministry published a video on the Youtube-channel featuring a massive precision weapon strike at ISIS infrastructural facilities on the territory of Syria”, available at [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12059977@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12059977@egNews)

<sup>31</sup> See image, Syrian Network for Human Rights, “Aleppo – Dara 'Izza: the remains of one of the Russian rockets that fell on the town 07.10.2015 – Part 1” (in Arabic), 7 October 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-video/watch.php?id=42&token=voY1EMNxMPgo8JIYTOEU7MIACaSbnCDJ](http://sn4hr.org/wp-video/watch.php?id=42&token=voY1EMNxMPgo8JIYTOEU7MIACaSbnCDJ)

<sup>32</sup> See a video clip of the aftermath of missile strikes, Syrian Network for Human Rights, “Homs – Al-Ghantu: Victims of several rockets in by Russian fighter jets hitting the village 15.10.2015 part 1 18+” (in Arabic), 15 October 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-video/watch.php?id=40&token=L0ukLcbfGbpQWyzpsrba9h9QZObi1IT](http://sn4hr.org/wp-video/watch.php?id=40&token=L0ukLcbfGbpQWyzpsrba9h9QZObi1IT)

*base was 300m away.*<sup>33</sup>

Amnesty International is not aware of any statement by the Russian authorities acknowledging or denying responsibility for this attack despite several reports claiming that Russian forces were behind it, including one by Human Rights Watch.<sup>34</sup>



Impact location (in red) of a suspected Russian air strike on a market in Ariha on 29 November 2015. Imagery date: 23 September 2014. Coordinates: 35.813144, 36.610613 © Google Earth / DigitalGlobe.

At around 9am on 29 November 2015, a suspected Russian warplane fired three missiles into a busy market in the centre of Ariha in Idlib governorate. Information received by Amnesty International from a local activist group, Ariha Today, indicated that a total of 49 civilians were killed. The information included a list of 34 civilians identified as killed, the names of four others who were missing and presumed killed in the attack, and a mention that five unidentified individuals were also killed. The group also reported that the identities of six other civilians from neighbouring villages who died in the attack were not documented by activists in Ariha as the remains were taken away to be buried outside Ariha. Scores of others were injured. Amnesty International has viewed numerous video clips and other images of the aftermath of the strikes which appear to confirm the civilian nature of the market and of the

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International interview via internet call, 26 October 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Russia/Syria: Possibly Unlawful Airstrikes", 25 October 2015, available at [hrw.org/news/2015/10/25/russia/syria-possibly-unlawful-russian-air-strikes](http://hrw.org/news/2015/10/25/russia/syria-possibly-unlawful-russian-air-strikes)

victims of the attack.<sup>35</sup> A report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights made similar observations.<sup>36</sup>

Local media activist Mohammed Qurabi al-Ghazal told Amnesty International:

*[Shortly before 9am] opposition observatories announced that a Russian warplane had taken off from Hmaymim base and was heading north-east, then sent an update that it was in the Ariha area.<sup>37</sup> Ten seconds later the attack happened. I was in the market itself, 600m away from the attack itself. It was a normal Sunday; there was nothing unusual. People were buying goods; children were eating, shouting. It was busy as usual. First there was a loud explosion – dirt flying in the air – followed immediately by shock. In just a few moments, people were screaming, the smell of burning was in the air and there was just chaos. There was a primary school nearby, and children were running out absolutely terrified.*

*As a civil activist I always have my camera with me. So I took it out of my bag and began taking photos – there were bodies everywhere, decapitated and mutilated. As I went to an open square, I saw a horrific scene. I have seen horrific sights since the beginning of the war, but this was unlike anything before. Forty bodies were lined up, and next to the bodies was a woman sitting and crying.*

*I asked her “What is wrong?”, and she said: “My husband and three children were killed. I am alone at home now. I have no one.” Her children were literally in bags. To this day, I cannot get over it.*

*I saw three craters close to each other, approximately 2m wide. Permanent buildings, as big as five storeys, were completely destroyed. The heart of the market itself was the target and was destroyed.<sup>38</sup>*

He told Amnesty International that the armed group Jaysh al-Fateh controlled the area but did not have any presence inside Ariha, only outside it.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, see Maara Media Center, “Scenes from the massacre in which 40 victims were killed as a result of Russian air strikes on a market in the town of Areeha in the Aleppo suburbs” (in Arabic), posted on 29 November 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=khVFdwp5QEQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khVFdwp5QEQ). See also Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Russian Forces Destroy a Market in Areeha and Kill its People Following the Steps of the Syrian Regime*, 2 December 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Following\\_the\\_Steps\\_of\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Regime\\_en.pdf](https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Following_the_Steps_of_the_Syrian_Regime_en.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Russian Forces Destroy a Market in Areeha and Kill its People Following the Steps of the Syrian Regime*, 2 December 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Following\\_the\\_Steps\\_of\\_the\\_Syrian\\_Regime\\_en.pdf](https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Following_the_Steps_of_the_Syrian_Regime_en.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> A number of observatories in Syria inform a network of civilian agencies – local authorities, emergency services, medical services and journalists – of pending attacks, law and order issues and other matters.

<sup>38</sup> Amnesty International interview via internet call, 14 December 2015.



Damage to Ariha market area after 29 November 2015 air strike © Muhammad Qurabi al-Ghazal.

A second activist, “Abu Diab”<sup>39</sup>, told Amnesty International:

*I was in Ariha when the market was attacked at 8.45am. The market includes shops and carts and is around 100m long. My house is 200m away. On the day of the attack I had heard two warplanes above and then an hour later they returned and launched three rockets. The entire house shook as if it was an earthquake. The windows in my house shattered.*

*I went to the market and saw three craters. The rockets fell 10m apart. Two of them fell on shops and the third fell on the pavement. When I arrived I saw bodies everywhere and I was able with other friends to gather 30 bodies but the number of people killed is higher. I saw the bodies of five children. I also collected flesh scattered everywhere. The shops were destroyed. It was a horrible scene – something I have never seen before. The market is extremely busy because people living in the suburbs of Ariha also shop [there]. The entire market is destroyed.*

*The closest front line is 40km away at Sahel al-Ghab. There are several checkpoints but at the entrances of the town, between 500m and 700m from the market. We know that it was Russian because of the number of warplanes in the sky and based on intercepted communications between pilots in Russian and the armed groups, which announced that planes had left Hmaymim airport at 8.35am.<sup>40</sup>*

As far as Amnesty International is aware, the Russian authorities have neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for this attack on Ariha.

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<sup>39</sup> “Abu Diab” is a pseudonym. His real name has been withheld for security reasons.

<sup>40</sup> Amnesty International interview via internet call, 15 December 2015



## ATTACKS ON OR IN THE VICINITY OF MEDICAL FACILITIES

Suspected Russian air strikes have struck multiple medical facilities or the immediate vicinity of medical facilities, in some cases killing and injuring civilians. Medical facilities and medical personnel, as well as the protection of their civilian status, have special protection under international humanitarian law and parties to an armed conflict must respect and protect medical objects and personnel.

On 20 October at around midday two missiles fired by suspected Russian warplanes struck the vicinity of Sermin field hospital in Idlib governorate, killing 13 civilians, whose names Amnesty International has obtained, and injuring 30 others. The first missile struck an empty school building some metres from the hospital and the second struck about 20m away. Physiotherapist Hassan Taj al-Din, a hospital guard and a Civil Defence first responder were among the fatalities of the second strike.<sup>41</sup>

One doctor in the hospital at the time of the attack told Amnesty International:

*Two missiles fell, 10 minutes apart. The first attack was at around 12.45pm. The first missile fell around 10m from the physiotherapy building and 30m from the main hospital building. It did not kill anyone. After the first missile fell people gathered, including the Civil Defence, to help the injured. That's when the second missile fell – almost in exactly the same place, maybe a metre or two off. The second missile killed 12 people including two hospital staff and a Civil Defence worker. All the other casualties were civilians too. The hospital has stopped working. All patients – there were around 200 there before the attack – have been moved to various other hospitals in the area.*

*The hospital was targeted by Syrian government planes before and we know that they fly very low when they are about to bomb. In this instance we did not hear or see the plane before the missiles were dropped, signalling that it was a more sophisticated plane, and therefore Russian. Also the opposition in Sermin try to intercept communication from planes, such as flight crew speaking to their command centres, and usually they hear Arabic but this time they heard Russian.*

*The hospital treated both civilians and armed men, but the majority were civilians. There is no military base or target near the hospital. The hospital was partially destroyed.<sup>42</sup>*

A local Civil Defence first responder told Amnesty International:

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<sup>41</sup> See Syrian American Medical Society (which runs the Sermin centre), “Two Medical Staff Killed in Russian Airstrikes on Sarmin”, 22 October 2015, available at [sams-usa.net/foundation/index.php/component/content/article/2-uncategorised/205-press-release-two-medical-staff-killed-in-russian-airstrikes-on-sarmin](https://sams-usa.net/foundation/index.php/component/content/article/2-uncategorised/205-press-release-two-medical-staff-killed-in-russian-airstrikes-on-sarmin); a video clip of the second strike and the testimony of injured documentarian Motii Jalal, Syria White Helmets, “The moment a Russian airstrike hit a hospital clinic in Syria”, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2015, available at [theguardian.com/world/video/2015/nov/09/moment-russian-airstrike-hit-hospital-clinic-syria-video](https://theguardian.com/world/video/2015/nov/09/moment-russian-airstrike-hit-hospital-clinic-syria-video); a video clip of emergency first aid being administered to injured people at Serrmin hospital, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, “Bloody Aftermath Of Air Strikes At Syrian Field Hospital”, 23 October 2015, available at [rferl.org/media/video/syria-hospital-strike/27322143.html](http://rferl.org/media/video/syria-hospital-strike/27322143.html)

<sup>42</sup> Amnesty International interview via telephone, 12 November 2015.

*I was standing at the primary school [in Sermin] talking on the phone as the schoolchildren were leaving. It was around 12.15pm. Suddenly I heard an explosion around 700m away. I saw the smoke and knew that the hospital had been hit. I went and saw that the bomb had fallen on another school, Sermin's secondary school, which was empty...*

*People had gathered and the Civil Defence started to tell them to pull back in case the plane returned. They hadn't had the chance to finish their sentences when the second bomb fell on the entrance of the school, killing 10 people and destroying part of the hospital. The second bomb was eight to 10 minutes after the first one. I fell on the ground but was not unconscious. I saw people on the ground like me. I started shouting for help but nobody wanted to approach me fearing another strike. I lay on the ground for five minutes. Dust covered the area. I began crawling until a man saw me and shouted "injured, injured". They took me to a different field hospital, but it was closed, and then to another. My entire body was injured from the shrapnel and I had other bruises. I lost 40% of my hearing. There are no headquarters, bases or military vehicles in Sermin. There are two bases on the periphery of Sermin, about 2km away. These headquarters were not shelled. As for the hospital, its X-ray department, surgery and laboratory were destroyed.<sup>43</sup>*

A third witness told Amnesty International:

*I witnessed the attack on the mixed secondary school, just a few metres away from the hospital. There were no students in the school. It was around 12.30pm. There were two strikes, around eight minutes apart. I heard and saw two warplanes but they were at an unusually high altitude so couldn't identify them. One launched a missile. I saw it fall on the school courtyard. I saw three people lightly injured. People started gathering. Another strike then hit the entrance of the school, around 20m from the hospital. The hospital is no longer operational. When I arrived to [the scene of] the second strike I saw dust. I was barely able to see anything. The explosion was unusually strong. The second strike killed 11 civilians. I saw the body of a nurse, Hassan Taj al-Din, the [hospital] guard and nine other bodies including one 14-year-old boy. There were no fighters among the casualties. We transferred around 30 people to other field hospitals. The wall of the surgery collapsed and the X-ray room was destroyed. There are no military vehicles or bases in the centre of Sermin, only in the surrounding areas and they were not targeted. The closest front line is about 50km away.<sup>44</sup>*

The Russian Ministry of Defence rejected reports that its forces had struck the hospital in Sermin saying that the hospital was undamaged and publishing a satellite image of the area which it dated 31 October 2015 in an attempt to prove the point.<sup>45</sup> However, Amnesty International has reviewed multiple videos and photographs of the actual attack on Sermin and its aftermath, allowing the organization to determine locations and dates. Infrastructure that appears damaged or destroyed in footage immediately after the attack is seen intact in the satellite image presented by Russian authorities, indicating the satellite image is from

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<sup>43</sup> Amnesty International interview via internet call, 11 November 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Amnesty International interview via internet call, 28 October 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "In the course of the last two days, the aircraft of the Russian air group in the Syria have been making strikes against uncovered infrastructural facilities of the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist groupings", 31 October 2015, available at [eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12062400@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12062400@egNews)

before the attack. The image shown by the Russian Ministry of Defence did not therefore display damage in the immediate vicinity of the hospital, which is visible in several video clips of the aftermath of the attack that Amnesty International has reviewed.<sup>46</sup> Similar findings concerning damage to the hospital and the incorrect nature of statements by the Russian Ministry of Defence were made by other organizations, including Bellingcat.<sup>47</sup>

The attack on Sermin is one of four suspected Russian attacks on medical facilities in Syria about which Amnesty International wrote to the Russian Ministry of Defence but has yet to receive a response to. According to Physicians for Human Rights, Russian forces carried out at least 10 attacks on medical facilities in Syria in the month of October alone.<sup>48</sup>

## POSSIBLE UNLAWFUL USE OF WEAPONRY

In the context of their ongoing military campaign in Syria, Russia's armed forces have deployed fixed-wing military aircraft based primarily at the Hmaymim air base in Latakia governorate, long-range TU bombers from Russia, sea-launched cruise missiles (from warships and a submarine) and, according to military analysts, combat helicopters, tanks,

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Al Jazeera Mubasher, "A tour in a civilian hospital targeted by Russian fighter jets in Sermin village in Idleb Countryside" (in Arabic), posted on 24 October 2015, available at [youtu.be/Z8xqMMs3d6A?t=1m50s](https://youtu.be/Z8xqMMs3d6A?t=1m50s); and Face the Truth, "OGN Report 14", posted on 23 October 2015, available at [youtu.be/aU7IA1eGW4I?t=1m3s](https://youtu.be/aU7IA1eGW4I?t=1m3s)

<sup>47</sup> Nathan Patin, "Fact-checking Russia's claim that it didn't bomb a hospital", Bellingcat, 4 November 2015, available at [www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/11/04/fact-checking-russias-claim-that-it-didnt-bomb-a-hospital-in-syria/](http://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/11/04/fact-checking-russias-claim-that-it-didnt-bomb-a-hospital-in-syria/)

<sup>48</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, "Russian Forces Carried Out At Least 10 Attacks On Medical Facilities In Syria In October", 16 November 2015, available at [physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/russian-forces-carried-out-at-least-10-attacks-on-medical-facilities-in-syria-in-october.html](http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/press/press-releases/russian-forces-carried-out-at-least-10-attacks-on-medical-facilities-in-syria-in-october.html)



artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems as well.<sup>49</sup> These have fired a range of weaponry. In some cases, Russia's use of weaponry appears to have been unlawful.

#### CLUSTER MUNITIONS

There has been a surge in reports of the use of cluster munitions in the areas being targeted by Russian forces since they formally joined the conflict on 30 September. For example, footage from 4 October appears to show a Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft (of which Russia deployed 12 to the Hmaymim air base) dropping cluster munitions identified as PBK SPBE cluster bombs, near Kafr Halab, Aleppo governorate.<sup>50</sup> Amnesty International has reviewed images taken in the vicinity of these strikes showing unexploded SPBE submunitions on the ground, most likely from an air-delivered RBK-500 SPBE cargo munition.<sup>51</sup> It has also seen images and reports, sent to it by Syrian human rights activists and also documented by military and security organizations, of unexploded cluster submunitions lying on the road right outside the town of Maasran in Idlib governorate after suspected Russian air strikes in

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<sup>49</sup> See, for example, IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, "Russia said to deploy artillery, helicopters to Syrian fronts", 6 November 2015, available at [janes.com/article/55805/russia-said-to-deploy-artillery-helicopters-to-syrian-fronts](http://janes.com/article/55805/russia-said-to-deploy-artillery-helicopters-to-syrian-fronts); a video clip of pro-government forces in Latakia in which a voice identified as of a native Russian speaker appears to be directing tank artillery shelling (from 4:21), Press TV News, "SANA video of SAA in Latakia, Russian speech at 4:21", posted on 8 October 2015, available at [youtu.be/R3IXH1kPI](http://youtu.be/R3IXH1kPI); Louisa Loveluck and Roland Oliphant, "Russia sends its most advanced tank to Syria frontline", *The Telegraph*, 4 December 2015, available at [telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12034237/Russia-sends-its-most-advanced-tanks-to-Syria-frontline.html](http://telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12034237/Russia-sends-its-most-advanced-tanks-to-Syria-frontline.html); Tony Wesolowsky and Mark Krutov, "Activist says Russia using 'hybrid warfare' in Syria", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 12 November 2015, available at [rferl.org/content/russia-syria-cybersleuth-hybrid-warfare/27358490.html](http://rferl.org/content/russia-syria-cybersleuth-hybrid-warfare/27358490.html); statements by a spokesperson for the Russian air force that Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters were being used in Syria to maintain a "safety zone" in the vicinity of the Hmaymim air base and to take part in search and rescue missions, RIA, "Officer: Russia is using helicopters in operations against IS in Syria" (in Russian), 6 October 2015, available at [ria.ru/syria/20151006/1297759084.html](http://ria.ru/syria/20151006/1297759084.html); an article by the Sputnik state-owned news agency promoting the activities of Russian Mi-24 helicopters in Syria and quoting a Western commentator claiming the pilots are Russian, Sputnik, "Russian Mi-24 Helicopter Pilots in Syria Wow Western Analysts", 14 October 2015, available at [sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151014/1028536243/mi-24-helicopter-wows-west.html](http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151014/1028536243/mi-24-helicopter-wows-west.html) (there has been no official statement from the Ministry of Defence or other official Russian sources confirming or denying this reported use of helicopters); and state-owned Russia-24 News reporting TU bombers taking off from Russia and delivering cruise missiles in Syria, Russia-24 News, *Vesti*, "Russia has dealt a massive blow against ISIS" (in Russian), 17 November 2015, available at [vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2687948](http://vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2687948)

<sup>50</sup> Taftanaz Media Office video clip, ShaamNews SNN, "New weapon used by Russian warplanes in Syria" (in Arabic), posted on 4 October 2015, available at [youtu.be/3sKZE7qs0Qk](http://youtu.be/3sKZE7qs0Qk); SNN, "Russian fighter jets carry out air strikes on Kafr Halab village in Aleppo suburbs" (in Arabic) posted on 4 October 2015, available at [www.facebook.com/ShaaamNetwork.Arabic/videos/1050496838334223/](http://www.facebook.com/ShaaamNetwork.Arabic/videos/1050496838334223/); and Qasiyoun Agency, "Aleppo Russian fighter jets target Jabhat al-Nusra camp in Kafr Halab village 4-10-2015" (in Arabic), 4 October, available at [youtu.be/N9OvWpHOZpw](http://youtu.be/N9OvWpHOZpw)

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Syria: New Russian-made Cluster Munition Reported", 10 October 2015, available at [www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/10/syria-new-russian-made-cluster-munition-reported](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/10/syria-new-russian-made-cluster-munition-reported)

the area on 6 October.<sup>52</sup> Syrian government forces are not considered to be capable of delivering SPBE series submunitions, making it even likelier that Russian armed forces were responsible for their deployment.<sup>53</sup>



Area outside Maasran where unexploded cluster submunitions were found (in red) following a suspected Russian air strike on 6 October 2015. Imagery date: 18 June 2014. Coordinates: 35.706833, 36.791472 © Google Earth / CNES/ Astrium.

Amnesty International has also seen accounts, including a video clip, of civilian casualties from attacks purportedly involving cluster munitions at the Nuqeyr camp for internally displaced people in Idleb on 8 October.<sup>54</sup> On the night of 12/13 November, Russian forces are suspected of delivering ZAB2 5S incendiary bomblets via RBK-500 cluster munition bombs in attacks near Maaret Numan, Idleb governorate. According to statements from local activists, the attacks appear to have been carried out in connection with other air strikes on a

<sup>52</sup> Image file named [armamentresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/AO-2.5RT\\_Oct2015.jpg](http://armamentresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/AO-2.5RT_Oct2015.jpg), Armament Research Services (ARES), “Renewed use of Ao-2 submunitions in Syria”, 15 October 2015, available at [armamentresearch.com/renewed-use-of-ao-2-5rt-submunitions-in-syria/](http://armamentresearch.com/renewed-use-of-ao-2-5rt-submunitions-in-syria/); see also videos by Maara Media Center, “Massacre carried out by Russian fighter jets against civilians in the Maasran village in Idleb Countryside, 6 martyrs” (in Arabic), posted on 7 October 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=kn49Kzp--08](https://youtube.com/watch?v=kn49Kzp--08), and by Almarra Today, “Russian jet planes attacked civilians houses in ma'saran town, and killed many people”, posted on 7 October 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=gbkBZdK0Fw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=gbkBZdK0Fw)

<sup>53</sup> Armament Research Services, “SPBE submunitions employed in Syria”, 6 October 2015, available at [armamentresearch.com/rbk-500-spbe-cargo-munitions-employed-in-syria/](http://armamentresearch.com/rbk-500-spbe-cargo-munitions-employed-in-syria/)

<sup>54</sup> See video, Shaam Network SNN, “Syria Idleb Countryside Russian rockets loaded with cluster warheads target an IDP camp 9.10.2015” (in Arabic), 9 October 2015, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=wzqTSU2IEYw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=wzqTSU2IEYw)

nearby olive oil press and a bakery.<sup>55</sup> Amnesty International is continuing to look into reports that cluster munitions delivered by Russian-made multiple rocket launcher systems may have involved Russian forces.

Cluster munitions are inherently indiscriminate weapons that scatter a large number of bomblets over a wide area, many of which fail to explode upon impact and pose an ongoing danger to anyone who subsequently comes into contact with them. Customary international humanitarian law prohibits the use of weapons which are by nature indiscriminate.

#### UNGUIDED BOMBS

According to military experts and Amnesty International's review of publicly available imagery, the Russian air force has delivered a mixture of guided weaponry and unguided bombs (also known as "dumb" or "free fall" bombs) in Syria. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Russia's air campaign in Syria has relied heavily on such bombs and a Russian military science expert has written of the "relatively limited use of high-precision weapons by the Russian air force in Syria".<sup>56</sup> There are numerous images publicly available of Russian aircraft in Syria fitted with unguided bombs, particularly OFAB 250-270 bombs and OFAB-500 bombs.

Russia has deployed four categories of combat aircraft from the Hmaymim air base: the Sukhoi Su-34, the Su-30SM, the Su-25SM and the Su-24M2. The Su-30SM, Su-25SM and Su-24M2 have all been seen at Hmaymim carrying unguided bombs. The Su-25SM has also been seen fitted with four rocket pods used to launch S-8 80mm unguided rockets.<sup>57</sup> As of late October 2015, only the Su-34 had been seen using an air-to-surface precision weapon.<sup>58</sup> The use of unguided explosive weapons to attack targets in the vicinity of densely populated civilian areas would violate the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks.

In some of the attacks documented in this briefing, the Russian armed forces appear to have

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<sup>55</sup> Almarra Today, "An oil press and a bakery for civilians are what were targeted by the aircraft of the Russian aggression on buildings in Jebel Zawiya in Idlib Countryside" (in Arabic), posted on 16 November 2015 available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR52rrn\\_YYo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR52rrn_YYo); Syrian Network for Human Rights, "After Using Cluster Munitions and Long-Range Missiles, Russian Forces Use Phosphorous Bombs in Syria", 22 November 2015, available at [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Russian\\_forces\\_used\\_phosphorus\\_bombs\\_en.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Russian_forces_used_phosphorus_bombs_en.pdf); and Ruslanleviev, "First Evidence of New Weapons being used in Syria", 16 November 2015, available at [ruslanleviev.livejournal.com/45737.html](http://ruslanleviev.livejournal.com/45737.html)

<sup>56</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Something old, something new – Russian air-delivered weapons in Syria", 1 November 2015 [www.iiss.org/en/manama%20voices/blogsections/2015-f60f/russian-weapons-in-syria-5916](http://www.iiss.org/en/manama%20voices/blogsections/2015-f60f/russian-weapons-in-syria-5916); see also Voenno-Promyshlenny Kuryer Online "Expert Details Ordnance Being Used by Russian Air Force in Syria, Stresses Targeting Accuracy" (in Russian), 28 October 2015, available at [vpk-news.ru](http://vpk-news.ru)

<sup>57</sup> Russian Ministry of Defence, image of Su-25SM in Syria with unguided rocket pods, 6 November 2015, available at [eng.mil.ru/images/upload/2015/IMG\\_5583.jpg](http://eng.mil.ru/images/upload/2015/IMG_5583.jpg)

<sup>58</sup> International Institute of Strategic Studies, "Something old, something new – Russian air-delivered weapons in Syria", 1 November 2015 [www.iiss.org/en/manama%20voices/blogsections/2015-f60f/russian-weapons-in-syria-5916](http://www.iiss.org/en/manama%20voices/blogsections/2015-f60f/russian-weapons-in-syria-5916)

used unguided bombs, as well as fuel-air explosives or “vacuum” bombs, in the vicinity of residential areas.

The repeated use of unguided bombs and other explosive weapons with wide area effects in the vicinity of densely populated civilian areas would violate the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks.

## APPLICABLE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

As a party to the armed conflict in Syria, Russia is bound to ensure that its forces respect its obligations under international humanitarian law, the laws of war.

Russia is a party to key instruments of international humanitarian law, including the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocol relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II).<sup>59</sup> Russia is also bound by customary international humanitarian law.

International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, sets out rules that legally bind all parties to armed conflict, whether state armed forces or non-state armed groups. These rules aim to minimize human suffering, and offer particular protection to civilians and those who are not directly participating in hostilities. Serious violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes and those who commit or order war crimes are individually responsible and must be brought to justice.

The principle of distinction, a cardinal rule of international humanitarian law, requires that parties at all times distinguish between combatants and military objectives and civilians and civilian objects and direct attacks only at the former. Intentionally directing attacks against civilians who are not directly participating in hostilities and civilian objects is prohibited and is a war crime.<sup>60</sup> Protocol II and customary international humanitarian law require that parties respect and protect medical units exclusively assigned to medical purposes in all circumstances.<sup>61</sup> Making medical personnel or objects the object of attack is a war crime.<sup>62</sup>

The corollary of the rule of distinction is that “indiscriminate attacks are prohibited”.<sup>63</sup> 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

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<sup>59</sup> Additional Protocol II, 8 June 1977, [www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/7c4d08d9b287a42141256739003e636b/d67c3971bcff1c10c125641e0052b545](http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/7c4d08d9b287a42141256739003e636b/d67c3971bcff1c10c125641e0052b545). The involvement of Russia forces in the conflict in Syria does not make the conflict an international armed conflict, as Russia’s intervention is taking place at the request of the Syrian government.

<sup>60</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Vol 1: Rules (ICRC Customary IHL Study), Rule 156, pp. 591, 593, 595-598. See also Rome Statute of the ICC, Article 8(2)(e)(i). See also discussion in ICRC Customary IHL Study, p. 27.

<sup>61</sup> Protocol II, Article 11(1); ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 28.

<sup>62</sup> Rome Statute of the ICC, article 8(2)(e)(ii); ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, p. 595.

<sup>63</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 11; Additional Protocol I, Article 51(4).

directed at a specific military objective or has effects that cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law.<sup>64</sup> Launching an indiscriminate attack which results in death or injury to civilians constitutes a war crime.<sup>65</sup> It is also prohibited to launch a disproportionate attack, that is an attack 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. Knowingly launching a disproportionate attack constitutes a war crime.<sup>66</sup>

In the conduct of military operations, constant care shall be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects.<sup>67</sup> International humanitarian law requires an attacking party take feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and damage to civilians objects. Failure to take feasible precautions is itself a violation and can lead to other violations of international humanitarian law. Everything feasible must be done to verify that targets are military objectives, to assess the proportionality of attacks, give effective advance warning to civilians unless circumstances do not permit, and to halt attacks if it becomes apparent they are wrongly directed or disproportionate.<sup>68</sup> In this regard the following rule is particularly important to the protection of homes and mosques: "In case of doubt whether an object which is normally dedicated to civilian purposes, such as a place of worship, a house or other dwelling or a school, is being used to make an effective contribution to military action, it shall be presumed not to be so used."<sup>69</sup>

Parties to the conflict also have an obligation to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects under their control from the effects of attacks, including, to the extent feasible, by avoiding placing military objectives in and in the vicinity of densely populated areas.<sup>70</sup>

States are responsible for violations of international humanitarian law by their forces and must make full reparation for loss or injury caused.<sup>71</sup> And states have a responsibility to investigate alleged war crimes perpetrated by their nationals and armed forces or on their territory, and, if warranted, prosecute the suspects.<sup>72</sup> Further, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, all states have a right to investigate and, where enough admissible evidence is

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<sup>64</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 12; Additional Protocol I, Article 51(4)(a).

<sup>65</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156, p. 599.

<sup>66</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 14; Rule 156, p. 599.

<sup>67</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 15.

<sup>68</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 16-19.

<sup>69</sup> Additional Protocol I, Article 52(3); see also discussion of Rule 10 in ICRC Customary IHL Study.

<sup>70</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 23

<sup>71</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 150.

<sup>72</sup> ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 158.

gathered, prosecute war crimes.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The cases in this briefing indicate serious failures to respect international humanitarian law. In some attacks, the Russian armed forces appear to have directly attacked civilians or civilian objects by striking residential areas with no evident military objective and even medical facilities, resulting in deaths and injuries to civilians. In others, they seem to have attacked military objectives and civilian objects without distinction, or caused disproportionate harm to civilians when striking military targets. Such attacks may constitute war crimes.

There is also evidence that they unlawfully used unguided bombs in densely populated areas and inherently indiscriminate cluster munitions.

Amnesty International is calling on the Russian authorities to:

- Fully comply with the relevant provisions of international humanitarian law in the planning and execution of any air strikes by ensuring that civilians and civilian objects, including homes and medical facilities, are not targeted; and end indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks;
- Take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and damage to civilian objects, including giving advance effective warnings of impending attacks when possible to civilians likely to be affected; ensure that targets are in fact military objectives; and, particularly in the case of medical facilities, adhere strictly to the presumption of civilian character in case of doubt;
- Ensure that the cases detailed in this briefing, and any others where there is credible information that violations of international humanitarian law have taken place, are independently and impartially investigated, make public the findings of the investigations, and bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to trial in proceedings that adhere to international standards;
- Provide full reparation to victims of unlawful attacks and their families, including compensation, restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition;
- Disclose the intended targets of strikes that resulted in civilian casualties or which destroyed or damaged civilian objects.

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<sup>73</sup> See for example ICJ, Arrest Warrant of 11 April 2000 (*Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Belgium*), Judgment, ICJ Reports 2002, p. 3, where the majority of the court confirmed the right of all states to exercise universal jurisdiction. Amnesty International, *Universal jurisdiction: The duty of states to enact and implement legislation* (Index: IOR 53/003/2001), 31 August 2001, available at [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior53/003/2001/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ior53/003/2001/en/)

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# **'CIVILIAN OBJECTS WERE NOT DAMAGED'**

## **RUSSIA'S STATEMENTS ON ITS ATTACKS IN SYRIA UNMASKED**

Since Russia formally intervened in the armed conflict in Syria on 30 September, its armed forces have launched thousands of attacks. It has claimed that its armed forces are only striking "terrorist" targets and has not publicly acknowledged that they have caused any civilian deaths and injuries. However, Russian attacks in Syria appear to have actually killed hundreds of civilians and destroyed or damaged hospitals and dozens of homes and other civilian objects.

In this briefing, Amnesty International sets out its findings with respect to six attacks. In five of the attacks, suspected Russian air strikes targeted residential areas, killing 119 civilians. The sixth attack concerns air strikes in the immediate vicinity of a hospital in which 13 civilians were killed. Amnesty International's research indicates serious failures to respect international humanitarian law. Some attacks may constitute war crimes. There is also evidence that Russia has unlawfully used unguided bombs in densely populated areas and inherently indiscriminate cluster munitions.

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to ensure that civilians and civilian objects are not targeted and that all incidents where there is credible information that violations of international humanitarian law may have taken place are independently and impartially investigated.

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