

# IS THE WORST YET TO COME?

Ongoing Mass Atrocity  
Risks in Syria

BEARING WITNESS TRIP REPORT



UNITED STATES  
**HOLOCAUST**  
MEMORIAL  
**MUSEUM**

SIMON-SKJODT CENTER  
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

**THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S** work on genocide and related crimes against humanity is conducted by the **Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide**. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multipronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments and institutions, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity. Learn more at [ushmm.org/genocide](https://ushmm.org/genocide).

Bearing Witness trips are an essential tool to implement the Simon-Skjodt Center's mandate to catalyze international action to prevent mass atrocities. They are intended to shed light on the risk factors, warning signs, and effects of potential and actual mass atrocities. Importantly, these fact-finding trips are intended to elevate the voices and experiences of those facing persecution and most affected by violence. The Simon-Skjodt Center is honored to be able to share the experience and demands of communities at risk of mass atrocities with policy makers around the world. Previous Bearing Witness trips have included Iraq, Burma, Jordan, Southern Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The Simon-Skjodt Center would like to thank the Syrian men and women who agreed to be interviewed for this report and have partnered with the Museum over the years. Staff are particularly indebted to those who took the time to share their personal stories, experiences, and perspectives.

This report was prepared by Naomi Kikoler, Deputy Director of the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, with the assistance of Janelle Roberts. They recently returned from a Bearing Witness trip to Jordan and the Turkey-Syria border.

Cover: A man walks on rubble at a damaged site after an airstrike in the besieged town of Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Damascus, Syria, February 9, 2018. REUTERS/Bassam Khabieh

The Syrian crisis is *not* coming to a definitive end. Rather, it is entering a new phase in which civilians will face heightened risks of mass atrocities as the government intensifies its perpetration of atrocity crimes against Syrian civilians living in areas held by the armed opposition, in particular the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta and Idlib province. Furthermore, new scenarios of risks outside of these areas may develop as dynamics on the ground change. These new dynamics will pose risks to civilians for years to come.

After seven years of assaults and more than 470,000 Syrians killed,<sup>1</sup> an estimated 6.1 million Syrians internally displaced, and 5.5 million having fled the country,<sup>2</sup> it is hard to imagine that conditions could worsen for civilians, but indicators point in that direction.

In January 2018, Simon-Skjoldt Center staff undertook a Bearing Witness trip to Jordan and the Turkey-Syria border to assess the risks of further atrocity crimes facing Syrian civilians in the short- and long-term.<sup>3</sup> We assess that the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, believes that it has the upper hand and is on the cusp of defeating the armed opposition. After a brief period of decreased attacks, Idlib province and Eastern Ghouta, areas home to high concentrations of civilians, are being targeted in a final effort to destroy the last

pockets of resistance. This violence has surged despite the existence of de-escalation agreements<sup>4</sup> guaranteed by the Russian, Iranian, and Turkish governments and allegedly intended to stop the fighting and ease civilian suffering.

From the beginning, Assad has pursued a two-tiered divide-and-conquer strategy as a means of securing the regime's survival: divide the population from the opposition and divide the opposition. The commission of mass atrocity crimes is an integral part of that strategy. Based on interviews and an assessment of the regime's behavior, the regime directly targets civilians to achieve the following goals:

1. To punish and seek revenge on real or perceived opponents of the government
2. To regain territory lost to opposition fighters and secure key infrastructure and military assets

The commission of atrocities is used to advance the second goal as the onslaught of attacks erode local support for the armed opposition. Committing atrocities helps the regime regain territorial control by demonstrating the opposition's inability to protect civilians from air strikes or chemical weapons, thus incentivizing armed groups to capitulate to the regime and enter into reconciliation agreements.<sup>5</sup> Local populations are so desperate for an end to the attacks that they demand that the armed groups reconcile. The commission of atrocities while attacking the "second line"—civilian areas where food, medical, and other supplies can be obtained or are transported through—is also used to cut off supplies to opposition fighters.

At a moment when Assad is brutally regaining control of opposition-held areas and the international community speaks of an end to fighting and to future stabilization and reconciliation, the worst may be yet to come for

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2017: Syria*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/syria>.

<sup>2</sup> Remarks of Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller to the UN Security Council, January 30, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SyriaSCStatementAsDelivered.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Simon-Skjoldt Center staff conducted interviews with UN officials, US government officials, NGO staff, Syrian civil society organizations, and Syrian refugees in Amman, Istanbul, and Gaziantep, January 16–22, 2018.

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<sup>4</sup> As part of the Astana process, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, and the Syrian regime agreed to establish four so-called de-escalation zones: areas in which a ceasefire is to be observed, although Russia and the Syrian regime vowed to continue fighting "terrorism." These zones are Idlib province, Eastern Ghouta, an enclave in northern Homs province, and the southern border with Jordan, which includes parts of Deraa and Quneitra provinces.

<sup>5</sup> Since September 2016, the Syrian government has attempted to reestablish administrative and military control over areas previously held by opposition forces. It has achieved this through a four-step strategy: intensifying siege and conflict conditions to force the population to pressure local opposition groups to negotiate a truce; working with a "local reconciliation committee" to negotiate terms of an agreement; applying access restrictions and threatening renewed hostilities to force local reconciliation, including the forcible relocation of irreconcilable armed fighters and civil society leaders; and the reintegration of the remaining community into the Government of Syria municipal structure.

Syrian civilians. There is no indication that Assad perceives any consequences for, or a credible deterrent to, the ongoing commission of atrocities. Thus far it appears that no government or international organization has been able or willing to stop him. In an environment that he regards as permissive, he will continue to target civilians with impunity until he has achieved and sustained his goal of holding onto power or is stopped. The regime's allies—Russia, Iran, and Iranian affiliated militia<sup>6</sup>—each commit atrocities and have their own interests motivating their involvement.

The Syrian people have suffered war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Assad regime, its allies, anti-government forces, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>7</sup> This report does not attempt to document the actions of all actors in Syria, nor does it assess the geopolitical interests of those actors. Rather, it focuses on those responsible for the vast majority of mass atrocities and who pose the greatest risk to civilians going forward—the Assad regime and its allies. The report looks at populations currently most at risk of attack by these actors at the start of 2018: civilians living in besieged Eastern Ghouta near the capital, Damascus, those living in the northwestern province of Idlib, and real or perceived supporters of the opposition who face the threat of detention, torture and death should they return to regime-controlled areas. Civil society in opposition-controlled areas that come under government control face a unique and serious risk of detention that needs to be mitigated.

This report urges the international community to redouble efforts to protect civilians and save lives. Protecting civilian populations must be a primary priority of any Syria policy discussion, no less urgent than other near-term political interests or longer-term strategic interests. Greater effort must also be made to (1) compel the Assad regime to release those arbitrarily detained and reveal the fate and location of those subjected to enforced disappearance; (2) to provide continued support to civil society in opposition-held areas and outside of Syria; and (3) to advance accountability to help ensure justice for the victims and end the culture of impunity that has given Assad license to terrorize and murder.

Failure to progress toward these objectives will mean dramatic consequences for millions of Syrians. Failure will lead to substantial new loss of life, increased refugee flows, and protracted displacement. It will also contribute to future instability and conflict and send a dangerous signal to potential perpetrators elsewhere of a permissive global environment in which norms protecting civilians can be violated without cost.

As an institution devoted to the memory of the Holocaust, we understand all too well the consequences of inaction in the face of mass atrocities. Syria has yet again shown us that the resolve of those committing atrocities against civilians is often greater than the resolve of those who seek to protect them. Seventy-three years after the end of the Holocaust, the international community has failed to uphold the commitment of “Never Again” made at the end of World War II. The most common refrain that we heard from Syrians that we interviewed was that they felt abandoned by the world.

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<sup>6</sup> Iran supports by funding, training, and arming Shiite militias from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. See “Iran, Deeply Embedded in Syria, Expands ‘Axis of Resistance,’” *New York Times*, 19 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/19/world/middleeast/iran-syria-israel.html>

<sup>7</sup> Over the years the crisis has metastasized and become more complex. Political and armed opposition movements formed to oust the Assad regime; external actors sent funding and militias to support the regime or opposition, creating a de facto regional conflict; and, taking advantage of the ensuing chaos, the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) began to claim vast tracts of Syrian territory in 2014.

# ATROCITIES PERPETRATED BY THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

Syrians originally took to the streets in mass protests not to demand regime change, but to call for respect, basic dignity, and political and economic reform. President Bashar al-Assad authorized government forces to respond with mass arrests and by shooting protesters. It is telling that some of the first victims of the Syrian uprising were children who were tortured, and some killed, for drawing anti-Assad graffiti.<sup>8</sup> Over the past seven years, the Assad government has displayed a ruthlessness defined by casting entire swaths of the Syrian people as *terrorists* for their real or perceived opposition to his manner of rule, thereby dehumanizing them and inferring they need to be eliminated.

The Assad regime has committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against Syrian civilians, including forced displacement; arbitrary detention;<sup>9</sup> extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; sexual violence; torture; aerial bombardments in civilian areas, including the use of cluster and barrel bombs; attacks on hospitals, schools, and markets; starvation through besiegement; chemical attacks;<sup>10</sup> and the blocking of humanitarian convoys, medical supplies, and food<sup>11</sup> from reaching those in need.

According to the United Nations (UN), 419,000 Syrians are living in UN-declared besieged areas, “surrounded by armed actors with the sustained effect that humanitarian assistance cannot regularly enter and civilians, the sick and wounded, cannot regularly exit the

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<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the events of the Arab Spring, 15 young students—all under the age of 17—scrawled the words “Your Turn Doctor” on the side of a school in Dar’a, Syria, in February 2011. They were arrested by government security forces, many were tortured, and some were killed. The brutal treatment of these children, combined with decades of frustration with the rule of the Assad family and rising economic hardship linked in part to a drought gripping the country, fueled the start of peaceful protests throughout the country.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Deaths in Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/31/CRP.1, February 3, 2016, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_hrc\\_31\\_crp\\_1.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_31_crp_1.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Chemical Weapons’ Attacks Documented by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (as of September 6, 2017),” [http://www.ohchr.org/SiteCollectionImages/Bodies/HRCouncil/IICISyria/COISyria\\_ChemicalWeapons.jpg](http://www.ohchr.org/SiteCollectionImages/Bodies/HRCouncil/IICISyria/COISyria_ChemicalWeapons.jpg).

<sup>11</sup> According to one UN official we spoke to in Jordan, only 27 percent of cross-line assistance planned for 2017 was allowed by Syrian authorities.

## USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS

The attacks by the regime are intended to instill fear and collectively punish populations in opposition-controlled areas. The United Nations and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inquiry found the Syrian government used the nerve agent sarin and chlorine as a weapon. It is impossible to effectively protect civilians from these weapons. According to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS)—an organization working on the ground—chemical weapons were used more than 161 times, primarily by the regime, between 2011 and December 2015, with six attacks by regime forces in the first months of 2018 alone. One father from Eastern Ghouta recounted to us that during an August 2013 sarin attack the window to his apartment was open, resulting in his children’s parrot dying. He said that had the wind blown in the opposite direction, his children would have been killed. In response to such attacks, some Syrian medical providers have attempted to build underground facilities, but such efforts can protect only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands who remain vulnerable every day.

area”.<sup>12</sup> Another 2.56 million are in hard-to-reach areas.<sup>13</sup> One person we spoke to told us his parents are alive in Eastern Ghouta—where close to 400,000 Syrians are trapped—but lacking food they are wasting away with each passing month. He said he could not recognize his parents anymore when he sees photos. On February 14, 2018, UN officials reported that the first humanitarian supplies in 78 days had been allowed in, but they reached only 2.6 percent of those in need.<sup>14</sup>

Aerial bombardment by Syrian and Russian planes have become a daily reality. Civilians often have little to no warning to be able to flee and take cover. Physicians for

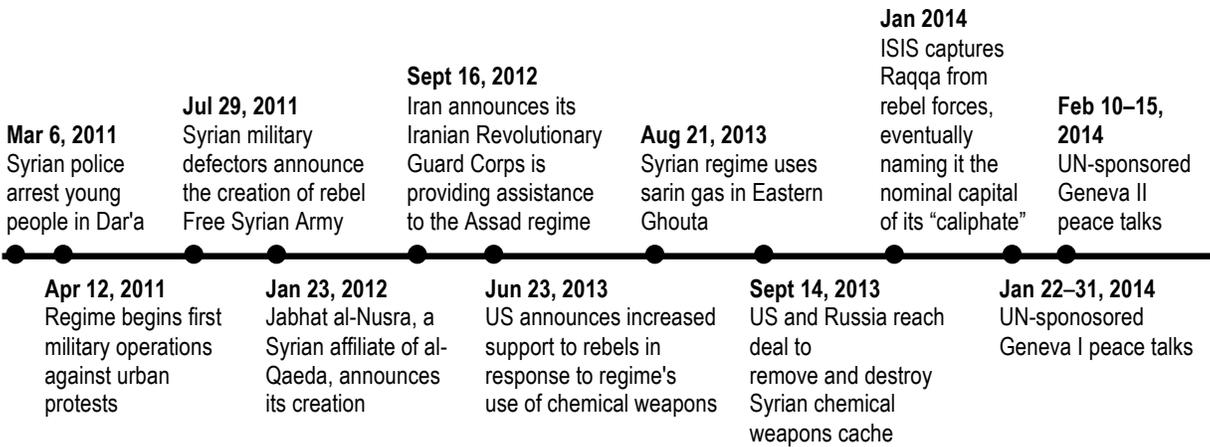
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<sup>12</sup> Opposition armed groups also have imposed sieges in the course of the conflict, though not on the scale of the regime.

<sup>13</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview,” November 2017, <https://hno-syria.org/#key-figures>.

<sup>14</sup> UN News, “UN, partners complete first aid delivery in months to Syria’s war-battered east Ghouta,” February 16, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/02/1002911>.

## Key Events (2011–February 2018)



Human Rights has documented that 492 healthcare facilities were attacked between 2011 and the end of 2017.<sup>15</sup> The Syrian air force routinely uses double-tap barrel bombing to target first a healthcare facility and then, minutes later, the first responders who arrive to help rescue the injured.<sup>16</sup> The attacks are so calculated that in 2016, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) ended the practice of sharing GPS coordinates with the Syrian and Russian governments because they believed it heightened the likelihood that their facilities would be targeted.<sup>17</sup> In September 2016, US officials alleged that Russian planes bombed a UN humanitarian convoy, prompting then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to declare, “just when we think it cannot get any worse, the bar of depravity sinks lower.”<sup>18</sup>

Chemical weapons continue to be used despite an August 2012 assertion of a “red line” for their use by former US President Barack Obama, and the September 2013 agreement by the Assad regime to give up its chemical weapons negotiated by Russia and the United States. The

agreement did reduce Assad’s ability to kill large numbers of civilians and minimized the frequency of the use of deadly sarin gas. Yet Assad violated the terms of the agreement and did not turn over all of his chemical weapons stockpile. In April 2017, sarin was used by the regime for the first time since August 2013 in an attack on Khan Sheikhou, killing dozens, the majority women and children. In response, US President Donald Trump authorized targeted air strikes on Al Shayrat air base from which the plane that made the sarin attack originated. Since then, the regime has not used sarin in attacks. Assad has continued to weaponize chlorine, which causes serious injury and spreads terror, including of future sarin attacks.

It is believed that more than 100,000 Syrians have been arrested, forcibly disappeared, or abducted in the past seven years.<sup>19</sup> The majority are being held in a network of government detention centers. Torture, sexual violence, and murder are widespread in these centers. In May 2017, the Trump administration released satellite imagery showing that the Assad regime had likely built a crematorium at the infamous Saydnaya prison as a way of hiding evidence of its crimes.<sup>20</sup>

These atrocity crimes have been thoroughly documented by Syrian and international nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations. In August 2011, the

<sup>15</sup> Physicians for Human Rights, *Anatomy of a Crisis: A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria*, <http://www.phr.org/syria-map>.

<sup>16</sup> Barrel bombs are oil drums or other large containers filled with explosives and metal fragments. They are dropped from helicopters and planes in an indiscriminate manner. They are not precise, and thus devastate communities in areas where they are dropped.

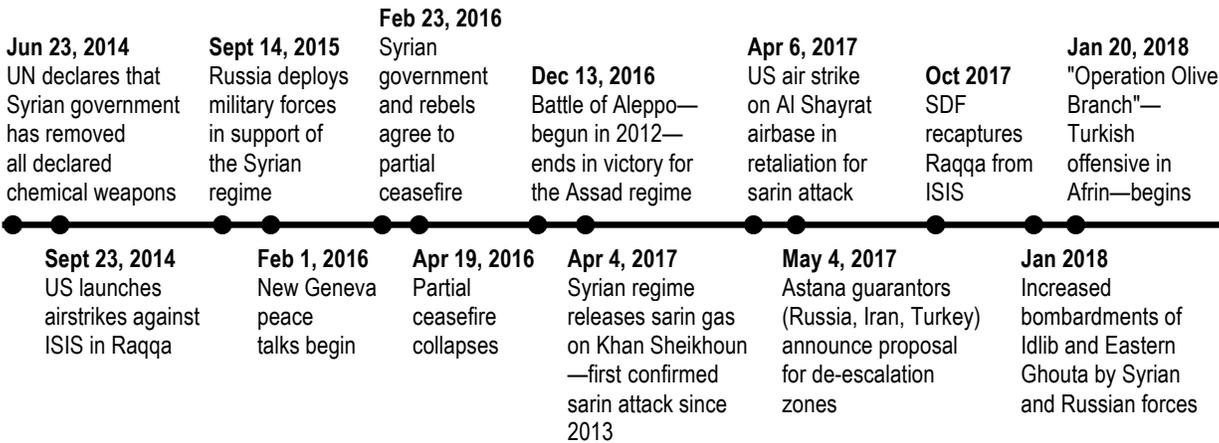
<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Nebehay, “MSF seeks independent probe into bombing of Syria hospital”, Reuters, February 18, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-msf/msf-seeks-independent-probe-into-bombing-of-syria-hospital-idUSKCN0VR15H>.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, “Urging Peaceful Transition in Syria, Secretary-General Tells Member States to Stop Blocking Essential United Nations Action, Good Ideas,” news release, September 20, 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sgsm18093.doc.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Estimates of arbitrary detention or enforced disappearance from the Syrian Network for Human Rights (as of August 2017), <http://sn4hr.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of State, “Briefing by Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Stuart Jones on Syria,” May 15, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270865.htm>.

## Key Events (2011–February 2018)



UN Human Rights Council established the Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) on the Syrian Arab Republic to investigate human rights violations. It has published multiple reports on violations by all parties, including deaths in detention, targeting of medical providers and infrastructure, and the use of chemical weapons. In December 2016, the UN General Assembly approved the establishment of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), tasked with the collection, consolidation, preservation, and analysis of evidence pertaining to violations and abuses of human rights and humanitarian law for the purpose of transitional justice, including future prosecutions. A Joint Investigative Mechanism was established by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the United Nations to determine, to the extent possible, perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks. In 2017, the Russian government vetoed a resolution extending the mandate of this mechanism, thus it is no longer operational. Frontline responders who we spoke to said that the veto was directly correlated to an uptick in chemical weapons attacks by the government since the start of 2018.

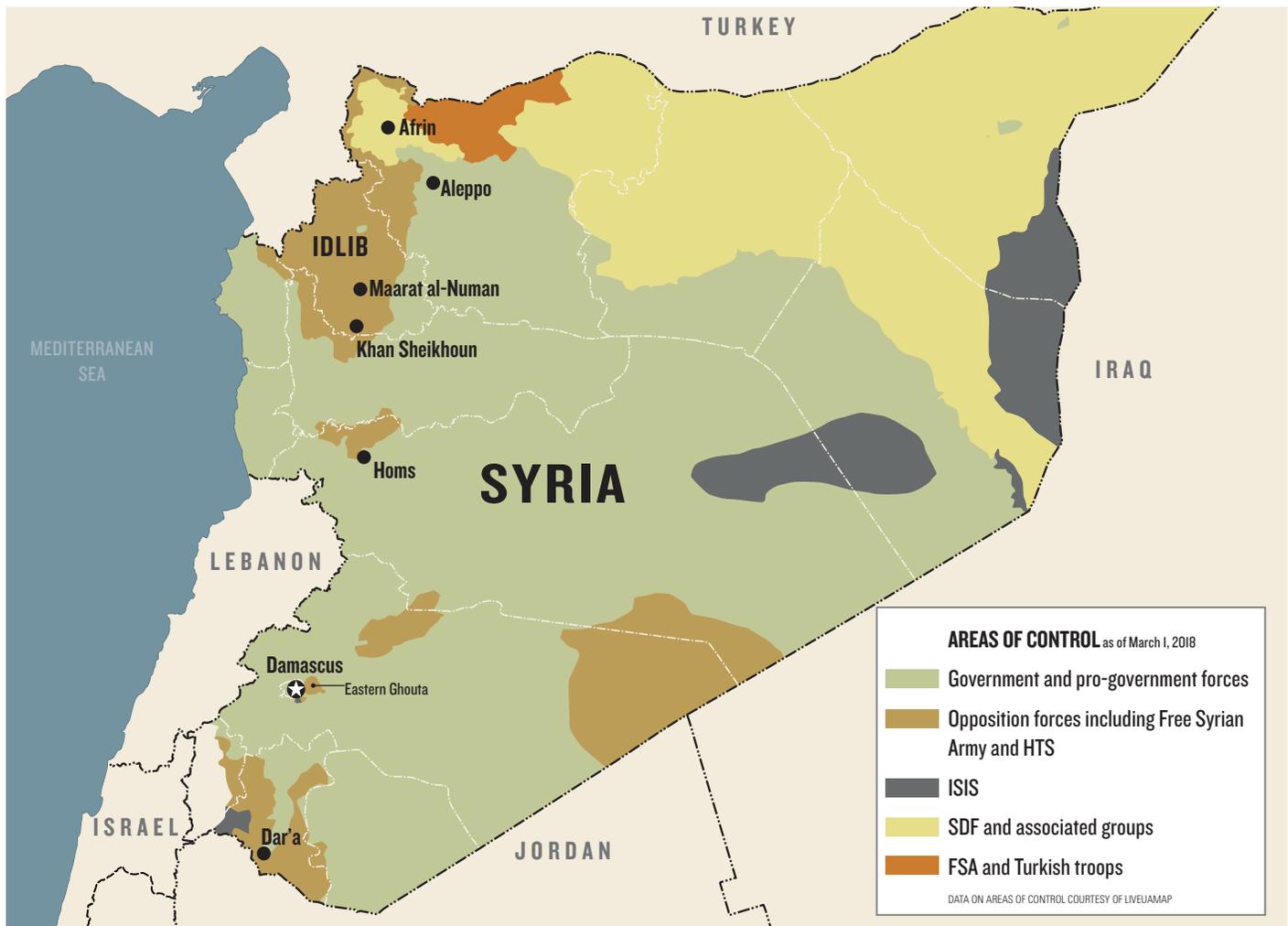
The Syrian and Russian governments assert that the findings of the various United Nations and independent bodies are so-called fake news. They allege that their security forces are engaged in counterterrorism activities and fighting insurgents who embed themselves in local populations. They argue that the targets they hit are not civilian and their actions are not in violation of international law. As Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary-General for humanitarian affairs, told the Security Council on February 22, 2018,

“Counterterrorism efforts cannot supersede the obligation to respect and protect civilians. They do not justify the killing of civilians and the destruction of entire cities and neighborhoods.” He further noted, “obligations under international humanitarian law are just that; they are binding obligations. They are not favors to be traded in a game of death and destruction.”<sup>21</sup> The Syrian and Russian governments’ disregard for these norms and perception that civilians in opposition-held areas are terrorists and their sympathizers correlates directly with increased risks of mass atrocities to civilians.

## CURRENT RISKS TO CIVILIANS

In the immediate term, there will be large-scale loss of life and the commission of heinous mass atrocity crimes in the de-escalation zones with the highest concentration of civilians, notably the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta and Idlib province. Those we spoke to feared that the situation would either persist as it is for the next year or two with civilians facing regular attacks, or—more likely—that the regime would begin an all-out offensive to retake Idlib and the besieged areas in the first half of 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Under-Secretary-General For Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, “Statement to the Security Council on Syria,” February 22, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/USG%20Lowcock%20Statement%20to%20SC%20on%20Syria.pdf>.



The offensive has begun. Following the military defeat of significant parts of ISIS (though pockets remain), the regime has re-focused its attention back to opposition-held areas. Using a similar pattern as in Aleppo and Homs, the Assad regime with the help of Russian aircraft and Iranian militias is intensifying air and ground attacks in its effort to reassert control over Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. As mentioned above, the regime’s calculus is that, when faced with constant bombardments and besiegement, civilians will choose to accept regime rule and pressure opposition authorities to negotiate and/or reconcile with the regime. In this instance, the opposition groups would be negotiating from a place of weakness, essentially leading them to capitulate to the regime’s demands.

The de-escalation agreements for Idlib and Eastern Ghouta have revealed themselves to be hollow. Though

the agreements exist ostensibly to protect civilians, they allow for the targeting of “terrorist” entities, such as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).<sup>22</sup> External guarantors to the de-escalation agreements, notably Russia, are active parties to the conflict and are claiming that their attacks in Idlib and Eastern Ghouta specifically target terrorist groups. Their actions suggest otherwise. Russia has been responsible for attacks on civilians, including recent bombings of hospitals in Idlib. After the downing of a Russian jet by armed opposition on February 3, 2018, in northern Idlib, Russian planes reportedly conducted 68

<sup>22</sup> Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham is a coalition of rebel groups led by al-Qaeda’s former affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, which is on the United States’s Foreign Terrorist Organization list.

airstrikes in Idlib province in one day, killing dozens of civilians.<sup>23</sup>

These are not accidents. The lack of adherence to international law, and to the terms of the de-escalation agreements is related to the Syrian and Russian governments' expansive, and illegal, perception that all civilians in opposition-held areas are terrorists. International humanitarian law is clear: combatants need to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians from harm. Fighting armed groups in urban areas is challenging; however, combatants need to ensure that they do not cause harm to civilians or civilian property that is disproportionate to the military gain. Yet for the regime and its allies these counterterror tactics have been working. Statements by the military and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov regarding the offensive on Eastern Ghouta supports this conclusion, stating "the successful attempt to liberate the city of Aleppo from terrorists is applicable against the militants of the Nasra terrorist front in the eastern Ghouta."<sup>24</sup> The government's statement ignores the widespread atrocities committed and scores of civilians killed during the battle for Aleppo.

Tragically there is nowhere for these civilians to flee in the midst of the escalation. The Turkish and Jordanian borders are largely closed to Syrians fleeing atrocities and there have been recent reports of Turkish security forces shooting at Syrians seeking to cross the border.<sup>25</sup> Idlib province cannot sustain more internally displaced persons (IDPs). Syrians in Eastern Ghouta remain under siege with neither the regime nor armed opposition taking steps to protect civilians. Detention will continue and we believe will increase as more territory comes under regime control.

As the conflict intensifies in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, service providers are being directly targeted precisely to prevent them from carrying out their work to save lives

and maintain diverse services from healthcare and education to media training, human rights monitoring, and projects on women's empowerment. Assad and the Russian government have labeled organizations that provide alternatives to government services, including the Syria Civil Defence—the White Helmets<sup>26</sup>—as terrorists. This designation puts these individuals at greater risk than the average Syrian. In January 2018, SAMS reported that there had been 28 attacks on medical facilities—including 24 air strikes. There have been attacks on medical facilities every day since the start of the year—up from one attack every three days in 2017.<sup>27</sup> An attack on a maternity hospital in Maarat al-Numan in southern Idlib province killed a newborn baby and destroyed the hospital.<sup>28</sup>

## BESIEGED EASTERN GHOUTA

Since April 2013, Eastern Ghouta, an area neighboring the capital Damascus and consisting of a number of population centers, has been under a government-enforced military siege.<sup>29</sup> Today, close to 400,000 Syrians, down from more than two million at the start of the war, are living in what the UN Special Envoy for Syria calls the "epicenter of suffering."<sup>30</sup> It is one of the last remaining opposition-held areas under siege and though it was intended to be a "de-escalation zone," the agreement for Eastern Ghouta was never implemented.

Many whom we spoke to said that given the area's proximity to Damascus and the continued rocket attacks by armed groups from Eastern Ghouta into the city, there

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<sup>23</sup> "Russia steps up Idlib strikes after Sukhoi jet downing," Al Jazeera, February 4, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/russia-retaliates-idlib-sukhoi-jet-downed-180204064444409.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "The regime is mobilizing to sweep the Ghouta... Russian is promoting the scenario of Aleppo", Al Araby News, 20 February 2018. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2018/2/19/النظام-يحشد-لاجئياح-الغوطة-وروسيا-تروج-السيناريو-حلب>

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Turkey/Syria: Border Guards Shoot, Block Fleeing Syrians," news release, February 3, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/03/turkey/syria-border-guards-shoot-block-fleeing-syrians>.

<sup>26</sup> The Syria Civil Defense, known as the White Helmets, are a group of volunteer search and rescue workers who have been working since 2012 to save lives in besieged communities across Syria.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Syrian American Medical Society, January 22, 2018, in Gaziantep, Turkey.

<sup>28</sup> Syrian American Medical Society, "The Only Maternity Hospital in Ma'arat Al-Nu'man City Destroyed Following Three Attacks in Four Days," news release, January 3, 2018, [https://www.sams-usa.net/press\\_release/maternity-hospital-maarat-al-numan-city-destroyed-following-three-attacks-four-days/](https://www.sams-usa.net/press_release/maternity-hospital-maarat-al-numan-city-destroyed-following-three-attacks-four-days/).

<sup>29</sup> Eastern Ghouta comprises more than 20 neighborhoods/communities, including Harasta, Douma, and Jobar. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: Besieged Communities," September 2017, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/acc-11\\_syr\\_overview\\_besieged\\_en\\_20170928.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/acc-11_syr_overview_besieged_en_20170928.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> "Note to Correspondents: Joint Press Stakeout by UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and UN Senior Advisor Jan Egeland," December 7, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-12-07/note-correspondents-joint-press-stakeout-un-special-envoy>.

is added pressure on Assad to regain control of this territory. The strong presence of armed groups may increase the level of, and prolong the duration of, fighting.

The entire population is subjected to persistent bombardments—including an increased number of chemical attacks since the start of 2018. On February 6, 2018, 80 people were killed in air strikes.<sup>31</sup> On February 12, the regime announced that security forces were re-deploying from Idlib to Eastern Ghouta and on February 18, 2018, a formal announcement was made that the government was launching an offensive to reclaim Eastern Ghouta. Between February 19 and 22, more than 300 civilians were killed.<sup>32</sup> The Syrian and Russian governments have been carrying out strikes and allege that they are only targeting terrorists and not civilians. Iranian militias and Hezbollah are providing ground forces for the fight to regain the area. The cost of basic life-sustaining goods, such as food and cooking fuel, is exorbitant, and the regime continues to deny access to medicine, food, and other life-saving assistance. Despite the presence of more than 600 individuals with critical health conditions, including 120 children, virtually no medical evacuations have been allowed by the regime. Many believe that the attacks will go on, even if it means large-scale loss of life, until the area is violently regained by the military.

## IDLIB PROVINCE

The regime has focused its attention on regaining control of the northwest Syria province of Idlib. In the early days of the uprising, protests in the province's cities and towns against the Assad regime were common and the province has remained an opposition stronghold. Though there has been aerial bombardment of towns and villages throughout the conflict, there has been a marked intensification of such attacks in recent months. This has put the more than two million Syrians living there, of

whom more than one million are internally displaced, at heightened risk.<sup>33</sup>

Their lives are in danger because the regime seeks to regain the territory and is targeting them as part of its strategy for doing so. They are at risk also because the regime sees them, more so than perhaps any other population in the country, as individuals who pose a continued threat of opposition to Assad's rule. Many who live in Idlib now were forcibly relocated there by the regime when it retook opposition-controlled areas, such as Aleppo, in evacuations or in so-called "reconciliation agreements" for cessation of hostilities. Among those forcibly relocated, which is itself a war crime, are civilians, doctors, Syrian nongovernmental organization staff, and members of local civil councils. When faced with the option of staying in areas that came under the regime's control or being relocated to Idlib, many civilians preferred continued displacement rather than facing the possibility of forced military conscription, detention, or worse in regime-controlled territory.

Armed fighters were also moved to Idlib province, including members of the extremist group HTS, the dominant armed group in Idlib province. Everyone we spoke to stressed that this has created an area with a high concentration of individuals—both civilians and combatants—whom the regime perceives as "undesirables"—terrorists, and their sympathizers. Even Syrian humanitarian workers who uphold the principle of impartiality are regarded by the regime as opposition supporters. The presence of HTS in particular has been used as a pretext for the regime and Russia to attack civilian areas as, under the de-escalation agreements, areas with HTS present are not covered.

Currently the government is using aerial bombardment, chemical weapons, and ground forces in its attack on eastern and southern Idlib. Since early 2018, parts of Idlib in the south have been heavily bombarded. That area contains the most important highway in the country, which the regime wants to regain control of—the M5 roadway linking Aleppo and Damascus. The towns around that road in Idlib have been decimated. We spoke

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<sup>31</sup> Anne Barnard, "'Extreme' Suffering in Syria as Government Steps Up Bombing," *New York Times*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/world/middleeast/syria-bombing-damascus-united-nations.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "Syria war: Families struggle to survive in Eastern Ghouta, under siege," *BBC News*, February 22, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43148010>

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<sup>33</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syria: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria (Idlib Governorate and Afrin District) as of 30 January 2018," [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Latest\\_Developments\\_in\\_North-western\\_Syria\\_20180130.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Latest_Developments_in_North-western_Syria_20180130.pdf).

to a Syrian refugee in Turkey who, anticipating a push to take back the highway, re-entered Syria to move his mother from their town to a safer part of Idlib. Two days after he moved her, their home was bombed. Unable to take her to Turkey because of that country's refusal to accept more refugees, he is now trying to find another place for her, as the fighting has spread to the location that he had thought would be safe. This pattern of multiple displacements within Idlib is commonplace. Today, nowhere appears safe.

Those we spoke with discussed multiple potential scenarios for Idlib going forward, including the possibility that the government would push to regain the entire territory. Under this scenario, civilians would continue to suffer aerial bombardments, ground offensives, and chemical weapons attacks until the opposition is routed or surrenders. Another scenario is one in which the government will fight to regain key infrastructure, leaving a densely populated pocket to be administered by a myriad of elements, including remnants of the civilian opposition interim government,<sup>34</sup> armed groups, and local civil society. Some interviewees expressed concerns about the risks HTS and other extremist groups pose to civilians, but many noted that the groups consist primarily of local fighters. Thus, they argue that while they routinely violate human rights such as the freedom of expression, they were unlikely to commit atrocities against civilians. Others we spoke to noted that the regime may very well be anticipating that disunity amongst the opposition will result in fighting among groups, making it easier for the regime to eventually regain control of the area. Undoubtedly when that occurs, civilians will again be targeted.

## RISK OF INCREASED DETENTIONS IN AREAS OF REGIME CONTROL ACROSS SYRIA

The mass enforced disappearance of more than 100,000 people held in hundreds of detention centers across Syria remains a persistent atrocity crime. Each day, people are taken into detention where men and women, young and old, face torture, rape and sexual violence, starvation, and murder. Every Syrian we spoke to had a family member who has been detained, either under Bashar al-Assad or his father, Hafez al-Assad. The system remains intact. This governance by terror has both immediate- and long-term consequences for the future of the country.

In the short-term, there will likely be an increase in detentions as opposition-held areas are reclaimed by the regime. Each of the civil society actors we spoke to fears that they or their family members will be detained if they come under, or return to, regime-held areas. Their fears are well-founded. Worryingly, in areas where there have been reconciliation agreements and/or evacuations, civilians, notably members of local civil society, are going missing. During the evacuation of eastern Aleppo, for instance, two members of the Syria Civil Defence were detained and remain missing. This occurred despite Russian guarantees that evacuees would be protected. We were also told of three young men from Hama who went to the Syrian consulate in Istanbul seeking to return, were given assurances, and were detained a week after returning to Syria. Three weeks later, their bodies were delivered to their parents.

Those we interviewed felt that there has been no discernible decrease in the regime's use of the practice. As a result, the fear of detention serves as a driver for people to flee the country, an inhibitor to their returning, and dissuades dissent both within Syria and abroad as individuals fear their family in Syria would be penalized for their outspokenness. One intention, especially of the targeting of civil society and political opponents, may be to try to weaken the opposition and prevent it from reconstituting in the future.

## FUTURE RISKS

There are additional risks to civilians beyond the imminent threats in opposition-held areas. The conflict is entering a new phase. As dynamics on the ground change, they set the stage for future conflicts in Syria that pose a risk of atrocities. The international

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<sup>34</sup> The Syrian Interim Government was established in Turkey in 2013 as an alternative to the Assad regime. It was originally formed to deliver public services for civilians in opposition-controlled areas and to serve as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It currently operates in Idlib province, where it works to administer schools and hospitals run by Syrian civil society organizations.

community needs to be cognizant of them and seek to develop strategies to mitigate the emerging risks. These dynamics include: (1) the proliferation of armed groups, (2) the de facto separation of the country into rule by different entities—including external states party to internal conflicts, (3) the growing presence of extremist groups—including remnants of ISIS that have gone underground and may re-emerge, and (4) an influx of weapons into Syria. From our interviews there are two particularly worrisome trends emerging:

## RISKS IN SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES-CONTROLLED AREAS<sup>35</sup>

Civilians may very well face short- and long-term risks in areas under control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the mostly Kurdish fighters supported by the United States who control territory in the northeast provinces of Hasakah, Raqqa, and parts of Aleppo governorates. We were told of two primary risks of atrocities relating to: (1) the current conflict with the Turkish military in Afrin, and (2) emerging tensions with local Sunni Arab populations that might lead to clashes or local support for insurgents.

*Afrin:* Afrin is a district bordering Turkey in Aleppo governorate in northwestern Syria. The population is majority Kurdish and is currently under the control of the SDF and their security forces, the People's Protection Units (YPG). On January 19, 2018, Turkish troops began offensive operations against SDF forces near Afrin. According to the United Nations, 300,000 civilians are caught in the heavy fighting amongst what is now a myriad of armed actors who are failing to take adequate steps to protect civilians.<sup>36</sup> It is believed that fighting will continue until Turkey determines that it has

achieved sufficient territorial control to deter what it sees as the expansionist SDF aspirations.

*Tension with local Sunni Arab populations:* Tensions between the Kurdish-dominated SDF and local non-Kurdish communities in areas such as Raqqa, which is predominantly Sunni Arab, are rising and might lead to future conflicts. There is also a possibility that extremist groups could exploit grievances to elicit support for a future insurgency, including possibly a re-emergence of ISIS, in SDF areas. Sources of grievance include: Sunni Arab marginalization in local governance and political representation; the forced recruitment of Sunni-Arab men and boys by the SDF; and the poor treatment of Sunni Arabs perceived as having been supportive of ISIS.

## FUTURE RISKS POSED BY THE REGIME

The seeds of future uprisings and conflict are readily apparent in Syria today. Rampant impunity, risks of revenge killings, resentment over loss of property and related government-designed demographic shifts, the decimated economy, and destroyed infrastructure are all factors that may be drivers of future tensions and conflict.

Of serious concern is the demographic shift that appears to be underway in Syria. As the United Nations has noted, “only those civilians who are offered the chance to pledge loyalty to the Government in the form of reconciliation may remain in their homes. Overall, the pattern of evacuations occurring throughout the country appears intended to engineer changes to the political demographics of previously besieged enclaves, by redrawing and consolidating bases of political support.”<sup>37</sup> These political demographics often track sectarian divisions, with Sunni Arabs from poor communities disproportionately affected. These relocations, along with a process of confiscating the property of IDPs who were living in informal settlements and making it increasingly difficult for IDPs and refugees to uphold their legal property rights in absentia, appear to be part of a strategy of demographic

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<sup>35</sup> The country outside the control of the regime is divided. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), mostly Kurdish fighters supported by the United States, control territory in the northeast provinces of Hasakah, Raqqa, parts of Aleppo, some Damascus suburbs and Afrin. Turkish forces and those they support control the Euphrates Shield area, and there are pockets of opposition control in Idlib, Hama, and Homs provinces as well as in areas around Damascus, including Eastern Ghouta. Extremist groups also remain present in parts of the country, including remnants of ISIS.

<sup>36</sup> Remarks of Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller to the UN Security Council, January 30, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SyriaSCStatementAsDelivered.pdf>.

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<sup>37</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,” A/HRC/36/55, August 8, 2017

change affecting primarily Sunni Arabs. In some cases, seized land was reportedly being given as the spoils of war to regime loyalists or foreign militia. The dispossessed communities formed the backbone of the Syrian uprising and subsequent armed opposition and might very well again in the future.

Sunni Arabs are also significantly impacted by the forced conscription of men between the ages of 18 and 45. As part of the reconciliation agreements in formerly opposition-held areas, the Assad regime is conscripting men to join the army, police, or pro-regime militia. This is creating tensions between local communities and the regime. As one person said, “if the government doesn’t detain you, they will conscript you.” Some people who we spoke to argue that the government is both in need of fighters and is seeking to create a population that is more conducive to the regime’s rule, thus losing soldiers on the frontlines is a desirable outcome that would eliminate potential future regime opponents. It is believed that the conscription process will breed further grievances toward the government.

Many noted that for Syrians, a voice exists now that did not before—people know how to protest and have shown that they will do so despite brutal crackdowns and attempts by the regime to use detention to dissuade dissent. The social fabric that existed before has been broken—from that, future calls for change and economic prosperity might emerge. As one man said, “If people are unable to feed their children, they will shout about it.” There is no reason to imagine that the regime will respond any differently to future calls for change than it did in response to the children’s graffiti in February 2011.

## THE WAY FORWARD

There is no easy solution to the conflict in Syria, but there are two principles that should be adhered to: Civilians should not be the victims of mass atrocity crimes and the commission of such acts, as a strategy of war, should not be tolerated by the international community. International efforts to halt the atrocities and facilitate a peaceful resolution have thus far failed, lacked sincere political resolve, or have been blocked, primarily by Russia in the United Nations Security Council. There is no international strategy to protect civilians that is being implemented alongside ongoing political negotiations. These two approaches—trying to end the conflict and trying to support and protect civilians while the war continues—are both critical and complement one another. The Assad government has continued to commit, and in fact

intensify, its commission of atrocities, while participating in negotiations aimed at bringing the conflict to an end. Events suggest that Assad has been executing a strategy of setting the terms for the negotiations and distracting the international community with fleeting concessions, while committing atrocities for the purpose of creating favorable ground conditions and securing the regime’s survival.

To protect civilians we need better analysis of the conflict dynamics and the motives of the perpetrators. As the Simon-Skjoldt Center noted in 2016 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, thus far, the international response has appeared to rest on faulty assumptions about the likely actions and response of the Syrian leadership and the motives and interests of Russia and Iran, as well as about their leverage over the Assad regime.<sup>38</sup> In this case many people whom we spoke to questioned where Russia, long touted as exercising determining control over the Assad regime, does have such leverage. Nor does the protection of civilians factor into Russia’s calculus of interests in Syria. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights noted, the Russian-advanced “term ‘de-escalation area’ is becoming all too reminiscent of the so-called ‘safe areas’ in Bosnia, which proved anything but safe.”<sup>39</sup> Russia’s very actions, supporting and participating in strikes on civilian populations, contradict their efforts to position themselves as trusted partners working in pursuit of the protection of civilians.

Seven years on we are no longer talking about early warning for mass atrocity crimes. We know from other cases that the failure to act early contributes to a narrowing of policy options. As the conflict in Syria persists, the challenge of preventing new atrocities by the Syrian government and others has grown ever larger, the political and financial costs of pursuing these actions has increased, and their potential efficacy has dwindled.

That does not mean that there are no options available. As we noted in 2016,

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<sup>38</sup> Naomi Kikoler, “Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?” testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 23, 2016, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/syria-s-humanitarian-crisis-what-more-can-we-do>.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “UN rights chief urges international action as violence soars in Syria,” news release, February 10, 2018, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22647>.

“there are no easy options to address the crisis in Syria today. But that is true in all situations where mass atrocities occur. We cannot let a lack of imagination or lack of a serious assessment of all options contribute to the commission of continued mass atrocities. All options must be closely considered, and the evaluation of their potential efficacy an ongoing process. As conditions on the ground change, opportunities may emerge, or close, for the use of certain strategies by the United States, other governments, and local actors. But as we rightfully debate the perceived costs and risks of taking more aggressive actions to protect civilians, we must weigh those against the well-understood costs of inaction or insufficient action: the loss of hundreds of thousands more innocent civilians and destruction of the civilian infrastructure of the country that is so complete that the millions already displaced will have no hope of ever returning home.”<sup>40</sup>

A comprehensive strategy involving, where applicable, a full range of coercive and non-coercive responses to protect civilian populations from mass atrocities must be considered, and must reinforce a common political strategy that reflects evolving threats against Syrian civilians. Vigorous diplomacy with the warring parties and other influential actors is absolutely necessary even in times when the prospects of a negotiated solution appear slim.

Nonmilitary approaches, if carried out in full, have the potential to provide important relief to civilians under threat of mass atrocities. They include: multilateral diplomacy, ceasefire agreements, and various means of civilian self-protection. In Syria, each of these have been tried with fleeting short-term success. As the 2008 non-partisan Genocide Prevention Task Force found, “the credible threat of coercive measures, including ultimately

the use of force, is widely seen as a necessary complement to successful preventive diplomacy.”<sup>41</sup> The Task Force went on to warn that “unless they are truly credible, however, such threats should generally be avoided.”

Unfortunately, in Syria threats from the international community have in large part proved either absent or empty. This has created a situation that the Task Force warned could occur: “aggressive rhetoric matched with meager action ... sends a clear message of weakness to potential perpetrators and damages the credibility of the United States more broadly. Policymakers must seriously consider what they are willing to do to prevent or halt mass atrocities before making bold public statements.”<sup>42</sup> As one expert noted, the regime has tested repeatedly the resolve of the international community to halt the commission of atrocities against civilians first by using tear gas, then bullets, then barrel bombs, and now chemical weapons. Almost every time they have been able to use these tactics with few if any consequences.

It appears that few in the international community want to grapple with the hard discussions about the array of options, including use of force, for civilian protection, some of which may pose serious unintended risks. But we need to have those discussions if we are to raise the costs of perpetrating atrocities and limit the ability of perpetrators to target civilians by impairing their ability to strike vulnerable communities. It is important that people are specific about the language they are using, what they hope to achieve through military action, and how these strategies could accomplish that goal. None of the options, by themselves or in combination, is a panacea. The 2017 targeted air strikes undertaken by the United States helped to prevent the further use of sarin, but the day after the attack that same air base was used to launch an aggressive aerial bombardment campaign that killed civilians. This underscores the challenge that, as perpetrators’ tactics change, the international community is often not willing to recalibrate its response to protect civilians from new threats on the ground. Similarly, all tools need to be considered if we are to influence and change the calculus of those who are aiding and abetting the regime, notably the Russians, Iran, and Iranian-affiliated militias.

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<sup>40</sup> Naomi Kikoler, “Syria’s Humanitarian Crisis: What More Can We Do?” testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, September 23, 2016, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/syria-s-humanitarian-crisis-what-more-can-we-do>.

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<sup>41</sup> Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (Washington, DC: Genocide Prevention Task Force, December 7, 2008) 69.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Mass atrocities in Syria pose a serious threat to the US and other governments' strategic interests. In addition to its humanitarian consequences, the conflict in Syria has led to massive refugee flows, challenged our allies, emboldened our adversaries, created a haven for actors such as ISIS, and created the conditions for future extremism to emerge. All these results threaten our security. Inaction in response to the targeting of civilians will only increase the current death toll, undermine any durable resolution of the conflict, and further threaten the security of the region and our own national security.

In the face of growing risks to civilians, and cognizant that the world appears unwilling to have the hard conversations about how to physically protect civilians, those we spoke to highlighted a few areas of focus: (1) prioritize non-coercive options for protection of civilians in Idlib and Eastern Ghouta, (2) release those arbitrarily detained and reveal the fate and location of those subjected to enforced disappearance, (3) provide continued support to civil society in opposition-held areas and outside of Syria, and (4) advance efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

**Protection:** The Syrians we spoke to implored the international community to do everything possible to protect those most at risk in Idlib and in Eastern Ghouta. This included (1) pressuring and compelling, including through the threat and use of coercive measures, the guarantors of the de-escalation zones—Russia, Turkey, and Iran—to force the Syrian and Russian governments to comply with the terms of the agreements and a recent UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire, (2) calling on neighboring countries to open their borders to Syrians fleeing attacks, and (3) pushing for humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach communities. Many noted that Turkey, which is establishing observation posts in Idlib in keeping with the de-escalation agreement, might be able to help protect civilians—but that civilian protection was not a guiding interest informing Turkish behavior in Idlib and as such actions by Turkey posed risks. As a result, the reports that Turkey might establish a buffer zone along the Syrian-Turkish border was met with mixed reactions. Some noted that a similar entity, the Euphrates Shield in the northeast, had provided protection for civilians and some humanitarian actors were operating in that space. At the same time, concerns were raised that a new zone would be used to push Syrian refugees in Turkey back into Syria—in violation of international law—and that civilians might not be sufficiently protected from attacks.

**Detention:** Everyone whom we spoke to stressed the need for the international community to shine a spotlight on the plight of the detained and disappeared. Families are yearning for information about whether their loved ones are dead or alive. They urged the prioritization of the release of the detainees in international negotiations and bilateral engagement with the regime, and the provision of information on their loved ones' whereabouts. There is irrefutable evidence that the regime is responsible for these violations. Further efforts to document the orders and process used by officials, as well as their conduct toward detainees, will help lay the foundation for future accountability and can help put pressure on the regime in negotiations to heed the calls for actions from the families of the detained. Tactics such as the release by the US government of classified satellite imagery showing the construction of an alleged crematorium at Saydnaya prison also could put pressure on the regime.

**Accountability:** Every Syrian we spoke to was clear that they did not see accountability measures as having a deterrent impact on the regime's current tactics. Yet they all stressed the need for accountability and an end to the culture of impunity that is pervasive in Syria. They also said accountability could serve as a deterrent to the commission of atrocities in the future. Many Syrian human rights advocates expressed dismay that, despite considerable documentation of atrocities committed by the Assad regime, the prospects for accountability both inside and outside Syria appear nonexistent. Many were frustrated by what they saw as unmatched expectations around what the International Independent Investigative Mechanism would lead to. A few mentioned that perhaps in territory held by the SDF, cases could be brought forward against more local-level perpetrators, including acts committed by the regime, ISIS, and opposition armed groups. The hope of the majority we spoke to was that cases being brought forward in Europe, notably in Spain and Germany, might yield some form of justice and help to start a historical record of the atrocities committed. They urged the international community to assist those two governments in efforts to investigate and prosecute perpetrators—including in absentia—for cases where the perpetrator has not been arrested. This includes the sharing of best practices for how to prosecute these cases and information about the location of known perpetrators so that cases can be brought forward.

Some people we spoke to also emphasized the lack of international focus on supporting whistleblowers,

defectors, and witnesses. Those who have—at great risk to their and their families’ lives—exposed the horrors of Assad’s crimes and those who will serve as witnesses in the cases that have been taken forward face unique challenges. They could be targeted by regime officials operating outside of Syria, they face a particularly precarious future if they lack refugee status, and many are financially vulnerable as they are unable to work for a number of reasons, including the threats they face and the trauma they have endured. The pursuit of justice for Syrians will rest on their shoulders and they need to be physically protected, provided with asylum, and have their livelihoods better secured.

**Support and Protect Local Civil Society:** Syrians themselves are the primary protectors of local communities providing lifesaving aid and maintaining basic service such as healthcare and education. They are also building and sustaining a civil society that was nonexistent under the Assad regime, but has now flourished in opposition areas, supported in large part by the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union. Civil society groups provide media training and independent journalists, projects of women’s empowerment, and human rights monitoring, to name only a few services. Civil society survives despite the growing narrative amongst donor governments that extremist groups entirely control opposition areas. These individuals are helping to protect vulnerable communities and are at acute risk of being detained, tortured, and killed as the regime regains opposition-held areas.

They are concerned that the perception that extremist groups control opposition areas will lead donors to cease support for their activities. Thus, those whom we spoke to asked to “not be abandoned.” They recommended that the international community continue providing training and financial support so that they can continue their often life-saving work. They noted that supporting their efforts is a way of strengthening the hand of vulnerable Syrians and protecting Syrians from extremist groups as civil society has been able to act as a deterrent to local armed groups like HTS.<sup>43</sup> These groups do face

additional challenges and threats, and everyone we spoke to on this issue said that the space for them to function will continue to shrink if international support is withdrawn and that Syrian civilians would suffer in the absence of their life-saving work.

## CONCLUSION

For seven years the world has watched in real time as a people have been targeted daily in the most heinous of ways—mass rape, mass starvation, mass detention, chemical attacks, and aerial bombardments.

Millions of lives have been irrevocably changed. It would be hard to look at the situation and not conclude that this has been a cataclysmic failure of the international community to respond. States cannot deny that they knew what was happening, nor can we debate the responsibility of the perpetrators—no atrocity situation is as thoroughly documented by independent and UN actors as that of Syria.

Those of us outside Syria have been bystanders to atrocities. There will be much to learn from this experience—about the unintended consequences of both action and inaction by the international community. For now, however, this is much more than an academic discussion. At a moment when we see an unprecedented risk of further atrocities—a moment when it seems like the world has turned away and that the crisis might be ending—we believe that the worst might be yet to come for civilians in Syria. At this moment, the international community needs to redouble efforts to protect those most at risk in Idlib and besieged communities, push for an end to detention, extend greater protection to civil society, and advance accountability to help ensure justice for the victims and end the culture of impunity that has given Assad license to terrorize and murder.

Protecting civilians will not be easy, and the gains will be incremental. But the alternative is the devastation of the Syrian people, the destruction of families, and untold suffering that will affect generations to come and the safety and security of the entire region.

Until now, Assad has won the narrative—casting millions of Syrians as terrorists—and has, and will continue, to intentionally target them with atrocity crimes. There are few heroes here save for the Syrian people who persevere. They are asking the world to please not abandon them.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, local communities protested against an HTS attempt to close Kafer Takhreem University and prevailed; the same occurred with Al Salam hospital in Maarat al Numan (a maternity hospital later destroyed by aerial bombardment on January 3, 2018). Furthermore, the Idlib Health Directorate, a division of the interim government, seized \$2 million USD in outdated medicine sold by war profiteers, and destroyed it so that people would not be harmed by the medicine.

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