

A DEVASTATING DECADE

Violations of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in the Syrian War

A REPORT BY RUSSIAN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

January 2021 saw the ten-year anniversary of the initially peaceful protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian Arab Republic. In September 2021, six years will have passed since the official entry of Russian armed forces into the Syrian conflict. The ongoing violence in Syria and the continued failure to secure justice for those harmed make it more critical than ever that the Russian public is informed about the grave human rights abuses that have occurred in Syria over the last decade, including those committed under Russia's watch and, since 2015, with its participation.

Russian leadership justified the 2015 intervention by citing the need to combat international terrorism, particularly the so-called Islamic State (IS or Daesh), an organization banned in Russia. However, the first Russian military operations in Syria showed that one of Russia's main goals was to help Bashar al-Assad regain control of the country and preserve his Moscow-friendly regime from being overturned by initially peaceful protests. Russian political and financial support to al-Assad predated the 2015 intervention. From the beginning of the conflict, Russia was a powerful ally to al-Assad at the United Nations (UN): its first veto on a Syria resolution at the UN Security Council occurred in October 2011, blocking condemnation of grave human rights violations. Russia has now exercised its Security Council veto 16 times to deter action against violations of international humanitarian law by the Syrian government.

In this report, we seek to present readers with an analysis of violations of human rights and humanitarian law during the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. We have the sense that Russian society is not adequately informed about this conflict in which our country has played a key role. For most Russians, state media is the primary source of news on Syria, and these outlets have focused on civilian suffering at the hands of terrorists and anti-government armed opposition groups while remaining silent about the Syrian government's flagrant and systematic human rights violations and war crimes. For obvious reasons, Russian state media does not report on the victims of bombardments, nor the forced displacement of civilians resulting in part from Russia's military actions in Syria. As a result, the Russian public does not have sufficient knowledge to judge whom and what we are supporting

in Syria, how much this war costs us, and how much suffering the war has inflicted upon civilians—people who have never taken up arms. Focusing on the plight of these civilians, we conclude that much greater responsibility for Syria's future lies with all state parties to the conflict, Russia foremost among them.

The report is the result of nearly two years of work by a group of Russian nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and human rights defenders. The report is based on field interviews with survivors of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Russia as well as with Syrian experts, journalists, and members of civil society. Additionally, we have analyzed and relied upon materials from various UN agencies, international nongovernmental human rights organisations, and humanitarian and medical groups that have been working in or on Syria for many years.

This report covers violations during the conflict in Syria by all parties from the beginning of protests in 2011 through to the March 2020 ceasefire in Idlib. The largest number of first-hand accounts that we were able to gather pertain to the most severe abuses suffered at the hands of the Syrian government, the army, and their allies as well as armed opposition groups, including terrorist groups. The primary types of abuses documented are arbitrary detentions, torture, and enforced disappearances; violations of international law in military operations; use of indiscriminate and prohibited weapons; and sieges and starvation as methods of warfare.

Violations began from the onset of protests in 2011, when Syrian security forces responded to initially peaceful demonstrations with armed force and shelling. Our team collected multiple eyewitness testimonies of actions prohibited under international law. Most of these testimonies concerned bombardments or shelling of residential areas and civilian infrastructure, including with the use of prohibited weapons. The consistency between witness testimonies, photographs, and analysis provided by human rights groups and other NGOs indicates that these allegations have a high degree of credibility.

According to our witnesses and international monitors, the 2015 Russian military intervention dramatically shifted the conflict in Bashar al-Assad's favour. The Syrian government has reportedly carried out numerous

indiscriminate attacks across Syria that have led to enormous civilian casualties. Since 2015, many of its military operations were carried out jointly or with support from the Russian Air Force. Attacks on civilian objects are often justified with the claim that “terrorists” were hiding among civilians. However, based on our interviews and the review of documentation, there was a clear pattern of indiscriminate and targeted attacks that did not correspond to the presence of military targets. Many of our witnesses insisted that in most cases residential areas, located far away from any military objects, were targeted.

The use of prohibited weapons has been documented by human rights groups from the beginning of the war, including multiple alleged incidents of the use of sarin and chlorine gas by the Syrian government in at least 2013, 2016, and 2017; alleged use of sulphur mustard by non-state actors between 2015 and 2016; use of incendiary weapons by the U.S.-led coalition in 2017; and alleged use of barrel bombs and cluster munitions by Syrian forces and by the Russian-Syrian coalition. Investigations into these incidents have been hampered by the inability to directly access attack sites and difficulties in interviewing the victims. However, the evidence collected by human rights defenders strongly suggests that the means of warfare in Syria from 2012 to 2018 included the use of incendiary weapons, inherently indiscriminate weapons, and strictly prohibited chemical weapons. Our group was unable to independently verify these claims, but has collected multiple witness accounts describing what witnesses called “a chemical attack,” or attacks by weapons that can be classified as inherently indiscriminate or prohibited.

Illegal sieges were used as a military tactic throughout the conflict in Syria by the Syrian government and its allies and also by the IS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham,⁴ and other armed opposition groups. Major government-led sieges included those in Eastern Ghouta and al-Waer starting in 2013, Madaya and Zabadani in 2015, and Eastern Aleppo in 2016. Armed opposition groups besieged the towns of Kefraya and Foua from 2015 to 2018.

In the report, we trace the trajectory of the conflict in detail through six key regions of Syria: Eastern Ghouta, Raqqa, Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and Idlib. Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, was subjected to a brutal five-year siege from 2013 to 2018. The northern governorate of Raqqa was taken over by the IS in 2013; in 2017, the terrorist organization was driven out by a US-led operation in which civilians suffered heavily. Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, was the site of intense fighting from 2012–2016. Its residents endured relentless bombardments and an extended siege, and the city’s infrastructure was effectively obliterated. Another two-year siege was imposed by government forces in Homs city; in 2017, a Russian-sponsored deal brought the last

4 Organization banned in Russia.

city neighbourhood back under government control and resulted in the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents.

Daraa, renowned as the city where mass anti-government protests began in 2011, witnessed brutal government crackdowns and years of fighting that culminated in a 2018 offensive by Syrian government forces to wrest control from armed opposition groups. The northwestern governorate of Idlib is the last de-escalation zone outside of Syrian government control. Over the course of the conflict, it became home to hundreds of thousands of Syrians from other cities who had fled fighting or been forcibly displaced. The situation in Idlib remains extremely tense and humanitarian access to the region is severely limited. This report compiles eyewitness accounts of extensive human rights violations and war crimes in all of these regions.

Since laying its first siege to quell protests in Daraa in 2011, the Syrian authorities have repeatedly blockaded heavily populated areas. These sieges led to severe shortages of food, medical aid, and other necessities and contributed to widespread preventable deaths from malnutrition, chronic health conditions, infectious diseases, and traumatic injuries. The areas besieged by the government were subjected to heavy bombings that continued after Russia's military intervention in 2015 and included attacks by Russian air forces. According to the Siege Watch project, at least 1,450,000 Syrian civilians survived lengthy sieges, while another million lived under partial sieges. This represents 10 percent of Syria's population. Former UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura described the sieges in Syria as "medieval."

Russian authorities defended the Syrian government's actions at the UN and in other international arenas. In late 2017 and 2018, following military operations and heavy bombing, agreements for the surrender of armed opposition groups were negotiated and implemented under the sponsorship of the Russian authorities, who assisted in forcibly displacing inhabitants of besieged territories to Idlib. Almost half of Idlib's population of 3 million are displaced people from other regions of Syria.

The issue of detention and enforced disappearances is another central theme of this report. Tens of thousands of Syrians have been arbitrarily detained and subjected to the cruellest forms of torture or sexual violence. An estimated 88,000 civilians have died under torture or were executed in government detention centres and prisons. Tens of thousands have been forcibly disappeared or are missing, including 3,200 civilians and fighters abducted by the IS; 4,100 members of the government forces; and more than 1,800 people abducted by armed extremist opposition groups for their support of the Syrian government. In addition to our analysis of available documents and reports, we interviewed multiple former prisoners and families

of detainees and the disappeared. Although multiple parties involved in the Syrian conflict have been responsible for disappearances and deaths in detention, the overwhelming majority of these were committed by the Syrian security forces, which have consistently refused international humanitarian and medical organizations access to all places of detention.

All of our formerly incarcerated interviewees provided similar descriptions of their experiences: detention without charge, lasting from several days to several months; beatings and torture; poor sanitation; overcrowded cells; and inadequate food, which resulted in prisoners starving for weeks and sometimes even months. The report finds that these actions were not the result of underfunding of the Syrian penitentiary system, but rather a deliberate policy to inflict unbearable suffering or death on the prison population.

The Russian government has refused to grant status or asylum to all but a handful of Syrians, despite Russia's role in their forced displacement. By interviewing Syrians living in Russia and analyzing government policy on this issue, we have identified many serious challenges confronting Syrians seeking refugee status there, from confrontations with migration services to interactions with police and access to healthcare, education, and employment. The government has also largely refused to acknowledge the unique situation of Circassian Syrians displaced by the war, who, according to local human rights activists, hold unique ancestral claims to resettlement in Russia as compatriots.

The war in Syria has destroyed the country's infrastructure, devastated its economy, and, most crucially, led to massive loss of life and profound trauma that will require years of recovery and reconciliation to heal. Despite the ceasefire agreements, military operations are still ongoing in parts of Syria, along with continued flagrant violations of human rights. These hostilities represent a major impediment to the safe return of Syrian refugees to their homes. While refusing to accept more than a handful of refugees in its own territory, Russia has actively encouraged a policy of refugee return.

Without the restoration of justice, long-term peace in Syria will be maintained only at bayonet point. We hope that this report will help our readers to draw their own conclusions as to whether they want their country to play this role. We call on all parties involved to take every possible measure to prevent harm to civilians, and to pursue investigations into grave human rights violations and war crimes.

Influence entails responsibility. Given Russia's key role in keeping the al-Assad regime in power, we urge the Russian government to use its influence on Syrian authorities to end arbitrary arrests, torture and degrading treatment in prisons, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances. It should

support the immediate release of those arbitrarily detained and reveal the fates of the disappeared following their detention by government forces. After a decade of devastating conflict, these crucial measures will be essential to any possibility of lasting peace in Syria.

We call on Russian civil society to constantly monitor human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in Syria and to build contacts among representatives of Syrian civil society with the aim of conducting joint investigations and preventing grave human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law in Syria. We hope that this report will help to build bridges, promote joint peacebuilding initiatives, and facilitate reconciliation.