

February 2019

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## Shelling Displaces Thousands of Families from Rural Parts of Hama and Idlib

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Starting early in February to the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the same month, the shelling<sup>1</sup> of northern rural Hama and southern rural Idlib, conducted by the Syrian/Russian forces, has triggered several intermittent waves of displacement, for no less than 8314 families have abandoned their homes in these areas. The majority of these families headed to camps near the border strip with Turkey while the remaining part is yet in the open air.

The field researchers of Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ have monitored the displacement waves caused by the bombardment of the demilitarized zone;<sup>2</sup> they have also spoken to several internally displaced persons and a number of the local officials concerning the situation the people are enduring.

In this respect, Mohammad Halak, the director of the Response Coordinators Team, concerned with monitoring and evaluating the urgent needs of the internally displaced persons, said:

**“Since the beginning of the shelling campaign, early in February 2019 to February 27, 2019, the displacement of no less than 8314 families has been documented, leaving the demilitarized zone, which incubates 212 towns and villages, 99 of which have been a target to bombardment by the Syrian regular forces and their allies. The displaced families spread in more than 86 villages, towns and camps throughout the areas held by the armed opposition groups, as far as the Turkish borders. The displaced persons reside in 14 camps basically, while about 17% of the displaced persons are living in rented homes or inhabitable buildings while a part of them are yet in the open air.”**

Halak added that they have documented the shelling of 41 towns and villages in Idlib, 42 towns and villages in Hama and 16 towns and villages in the western and north-western rural parts of Aleppo by the Syrian regular forces and their allies from 2 to 24 of February 2019.

Fayez Dughaim, a displaced man, narrated the details of his repeated displacement due to shelling and military operations, for he is originally from the town of Jarjnaz, which he was forced to leave to the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man; from where, once again, he was displaced to the town of Ihsem in Mount Zāwiya. He said:

**“On November 24, 2018, my family and I were displaced from our town, Jarjnaz, when the massacre took place. We headed to the house of one of our relatives in the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man, given no chance to take clothes or any of our belongings. We could not return home due to the escalation of the shelling; accordingly, we rented a house in**

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<sup>1</sup> “In Sync with Russia-Turkey Talks in Sochi, Civilians Are Falling Dead”, Syrians for Truth and Justice, February 27, 2019. Last visit: March 7, 2019. <https://stj-sy.com/en/view/1201>.

<sup>2</sup> The demilitarized zone: It is an area, the establishment of which was decided during the Sochi talks in September 2018, conducted by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Back then, the deal provided for the removal of the heavy weapons from a 15-20km deep area along the lines of contact between the Syrian regular forces and the armed opposition groups. The area begins at the city of Bidama, western Idlib, to the area of Qalaat al-Madiq, western Hama, as far as areas in southern and south-eastern rural Idlib and northern rural Hama, to end at areas in western and south-western rural Aleppo.

the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man, and I went back to Jarjanz to get some of our possessions, leaving half of the furniture behind, at our home. After a short time, early in February, the bombardment of the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man started to intensify. We tried to stay longer, hoping that the shelling would stop, but its tempo increased and there were many casualties. We were displaced, for the second time, to the town of Ihsem, Idlib.”

He added: **“Displacement is no easy word; it is a material and moral distress.”**

Mohammad Juma’a al-Ghajar, also an internally displaced man, had a different tale to narrate, for he was coerced to leave his town for a short period, to which he returned triggered by the harsh financial reality and the fact that he received no aid from any party. He said:

**“We are from the town of al-Tah, which has been heavily attacked. In the beginning, we were displaced to the surrounding of the town without taking any of our belongings with us. Several days later, after living in the open air, I returned home and brought us some clothes and supplies. However, the shelling targeted the place we were displaced to as well. We moved to the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man, where we stayed for several days, till the shelling broke out, once again, and extensively. We, accordingly, left the city and moved between several villages. In the end, we headed back to a house in the vicinity of the town of al-Tah. Services are completely lacking, and there are no entities to offer [us] aid.”**

In Qalaat al-Madiq, Ibrahim al-Saleh, the director of the city’s local council, said that the bombardment has caused the displacement of no less than 40,000 persons, including the original population, forcibly displaced persons, and previous internally displaced persons, part of whom chose to move to the borders with Turkey while the majority headed to the surrounding of the areas where the Turkish observation posts are stationed in the area of Shair al-Maghar. The families, there, are either in the open air or in the tents they erected.

## ● **Destruction of Homes and Infrastructure:**

In the regions that have been a target to shelling in February 2019, the damage that befell houses and civil facilities increased by approximately 47%, with preliminary estimations that indicate a massive difficulty of the renovation or the reform of the destruction which resulted from the shelling, according to Mohammad Halak, the director of the Response Coordinators Team.

For his part, Bashar Qittaz, a media personality at the local council of Maarrat al-Nu'man, told STJ’s field researcher that 5 houses were completely destroyed in the shelling this month, 25 houses were partially destroyed, in addition to the destruction that befell the streets and most of the residential neighborhoods.

The local council of the city of Khan Shaykhun, on a similar note, said that so far they did not manage to assess the damage caused to houses and facilities due to the intensity of the shelling.

**Throughout the areas that have been attacked in northern rural Hama and southern rural Idlib, education has been suspended at schools and institutes, in addition to a number of hospitals which stopped operating, not to mention that a few vital facilities have been targeted by the bombardment, including a bakery and a school in the city of Maarrat al-Nu'man and a building of the Education Directorate in Qalaat al-Madiq.**

Making the civilian population or individual civilians, not taking a direct part in hostilities, or civilian objects, such as medical, religious and cultural units, the object of attack during a non-international armed conflict is a war crime.<sup>3</sup>

This type of attacks is defined as the those which are directed at military objectives, civilians or civilian objects without discrimination because the attacks are of a nature that is not directed at a specific military objective or because they employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited according to what the International Humanitarian Law stipulates. The mentioned law prohibits employing inherently indiscriminate weapons or those expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof.<sup>4</sup>

The International Humanitarian Law explicitly prohibits the displacement of civilians, for all its rules aim to protect the civilians from hostilities; it also prohibits discriminate and indiscriminate attacks directed at civilians or civilians' possessions. If displacement takes place in spite of this, internally displaced persons are to enjoy the same protection guaranteed for other civilians. Parties in control of the areas to which they have fled must ensure the protection of civilians from the effects of hostilities and ensure that they get their basic needs of food, water and housing. These basic rules, which guarantee the protection of the local population, apply to both international and non-international armed conflict.<sup>5</sup>

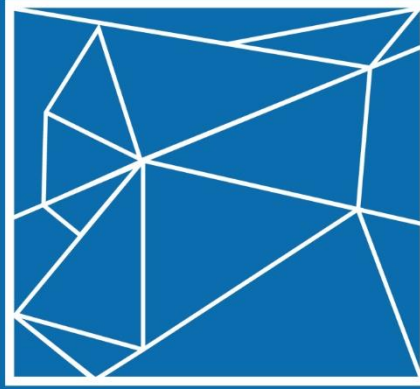
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<sup>3</sup> The Customary International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule: 156, pages 591, 595, 593, 598.

<sup>4</sup> The Customary International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule: 11, Article 51(4)(a) of Additional Protocol I.

<sup>5</sup> Displaced inside Their Countries, International Committee of the Red Cross, Last Visit: March 9, 2019. <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?reldoc=y&docid=5a842e104>.

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## About Syrians for Truth and Justice:

**STJ** is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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