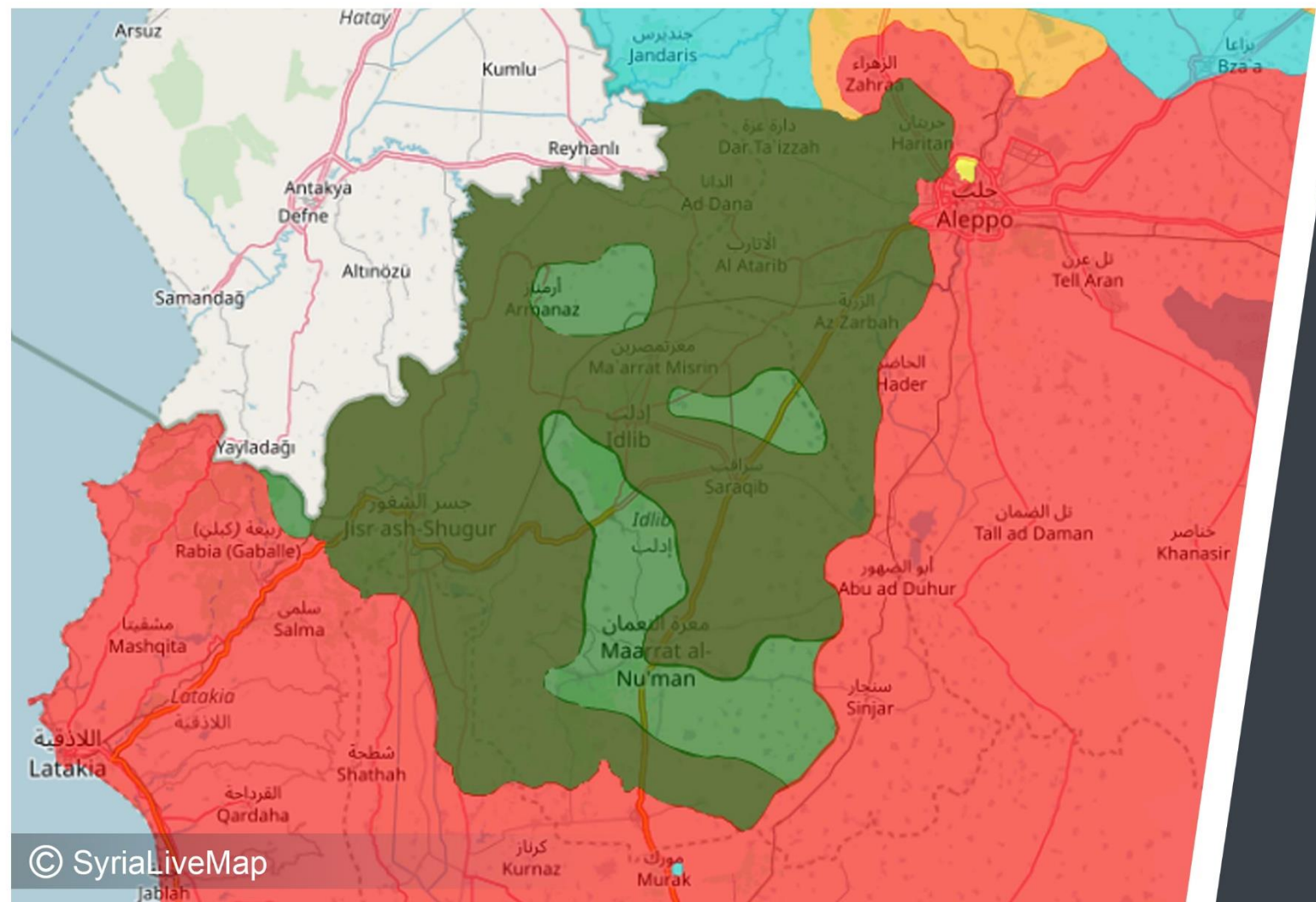


September 2019



Syria: Violent Airstrikes Take Toll on Civilians, including Children, in Southern Rural Idlib

Syria: Violent Airstrikes Take Toll on Civilians, including Children, in Southern Rural Idlib

The Syrian and Russian forces have intensified their attacks on these areas for their proximity to the international highway connecting Damascus and Aleppo/M5

Introduction:

In August 2019, the Syrian regular forces, their Russian counterparts and both sides' allies continued to escalate military action against Idlib province, for the ghastly shelling concentrated mainly on southern rural Idlib's areas, located near the International Highway M5, which, passing through Idlib province, connects the two provinces of Damascus and Aleppo, as well as Turkey. In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ records several incidents of bombardment, where neighborhoods and residential areas were targeted, resulting in the death and the injury of numerous civilians, the majority of whom are children.

The deal, which later on was dubbed the 'Sochi deal,' concluded by the Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Russian Black Sea resort Sochi on September 17, 2018, provided for 10 principal terms, the most important of these were the foundation of a demilitarized zone, 15 to 20 kilometres deep, between the Syrian government-held areas and those controlled by the opposition armed groups and the resumption of transit traffic through the two international highways—Aleppo-Latakia/M4 and Damascus-Aleppo/M5, among other terms.¹

On August 16, 2019, the town of Deir al-Sharqi², located near the M5 International Highway, was a target to a violent airstrike, initiated by the Syrian Air Forces, which caused the death of a family, including six children, whose age varies between 6 and 17 years old, in addition to their mother, not to mention the massive destruction inflicted upon the place. The massacre triggered fear in the hearts of the area's residents, urging many of them to flee it seeking safer ones. On August 19, 2019, the town of Hesh³, also located near the M5

¹ For further information, refer to the following links as an example: Mahmoud Osman, "Sochi Summit and Turkish Veto Spare Idlib a Humanitarian Crisis (Analytical Article)," Anadolu Agency. September 19, 2018. Last visited: August 31, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D9%82%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AB%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A/1258706>.

"Is Syrian Arab Army to Implement M4 and M5 Terms with Force?," Russia Today. August 21, 2018. Last visited: August 31, 2019. https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1040097-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9/

² The town is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham HTS. On January 28, 2017, several jihadist factions in Syria's north announced integration under "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham/HTS". The factions that dissolved themselves and joined together under the new name were (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham-previously known as al-Nusra Front- Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din Front, al-Sunna Army). Nonetheless and due to the confrontations that broke out between the Ahrar al-Sham Movement and HTS on July 15, 2017, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement announced its separation from HTS on July 20, 2017.

³ Controlled by HTS.

International Highway, bore witness to an air attack, conducted by warplanes, thought to be Russian, for the aircraft kicked off from the Khmeimim Air Base, Latakia province, hitting the residential blocks in the town's northern parts with a double raid, causing the death of four persons and the injury of several others. According to the many testimonies obtained by STJ, the town of Hesh is almost void of any population, owing to the many attacks it received and its residents' displacement.

On August 22, 2019, helicopters bombarded residential areas in the city of Ma'arat al-Nu'man⁴, located exactly on the M5 International Highway, deploying barrel bombs and naval mines. Back then, six helicopters took turns to shell the populated areas, leading to the death of four persons, including a woman, and the injury of another ten. One day separated these attacks from the Syrian regular forces' control of the strategic city of Khan Shaykhun, southern rural Idlib, and the northern parts of rural Hama, which for years were outside the control of the central government in Damascus.⁵

According to STJ's female field researcher, who contacted eyewitnesses and collected evidence provided in this report, the areas in southern rural Idlib, on a specific term, are yet suffering an escalating military action at the hands of the Syrian regular forces and their Russian allies, which turned the area into a target for hundreds of air raids, boosting the number of casualties and inflicting significant destruction on infrastructure, hospitals and vital facilities, for they adopted the scorched land policy to forcefully evacuate the area's residents, coercing them into fleeing their homes and heading to distant locations, not to mention the rush to regain control of southern rural Idlib, near the M5 International Highway, which connects Damascus, Aleppo, Syria's North and Turkey, while passing through Idlib province.

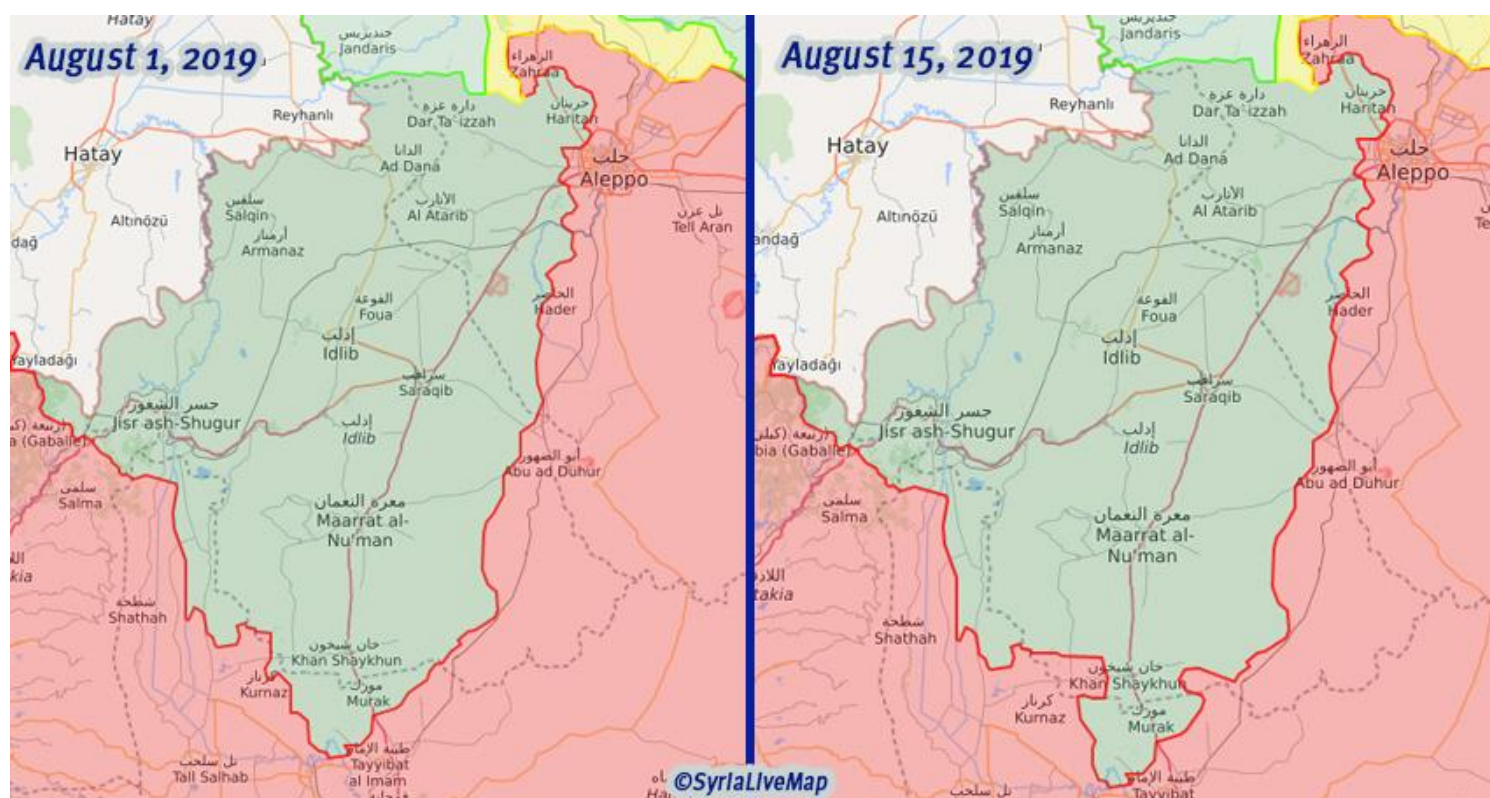
Background:

In sync to the 12th round of Astana Talks, held in April 2019, the Syrian regular forces and their allies embarked on a large-scale military campaign against Idlib province and the northern parts of Hama province's countryside. This military action persisted and the airstrikes continued to target populated areas, ignoring the signed pacification deal and the 13th round of the Astana Talks, concluded on August 2, 2019. The shelling frenzy and military

⁴ Controlled by HTS.

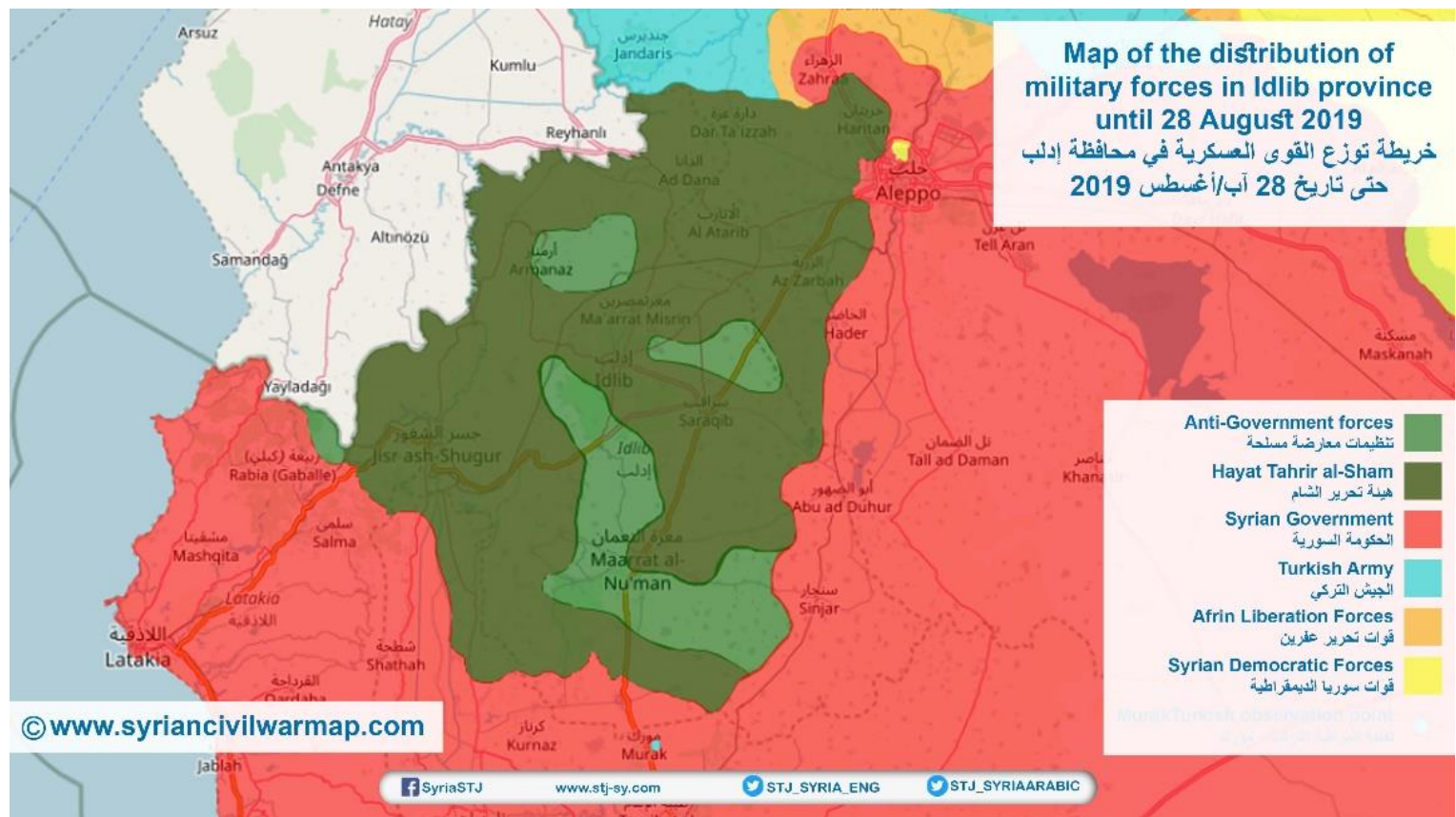
⁵ "Syria: Military Escalation Continues in Idlib Rendering 26 Civilians Dead in Two Separate Attacks," STJ. August 27, 2019. Last visited: August 31, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/ar/%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b5%d8%b9%d9%8a%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%b3%d9%83%d8%b1%d9%8a-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a5%d8%af%d9%84%d8%a8/>.

action, addressed here, corresponded to massive and incessant waves of displacement, for people fled the areas close to the frontlines belonging to the two sides of the clashes. STJ's field researchers, local activists and relief organizations' staffers estimated that the number of internally displaced persons, who escaped their areas driven by the latest military operations, with about 720 thousand IDPs, mainly from northern rural Hama, Khan Shaykhun city and other areas in southern rural Idlib. The majority of the IDPs head to the Syrian-Turkish borders. STJ documented the death of no less than 26 persons, eight children and nine women included, in two separate attacks on residential areas, housing IDPs in the towns of Hass and Ma'aret Hurmah on the 6th and 17th of August 2019.⁶



Map showing military control status, where parts of northern rural Hama and southern rural Idlib have been taken over between the 1st and 15th of August 2019.

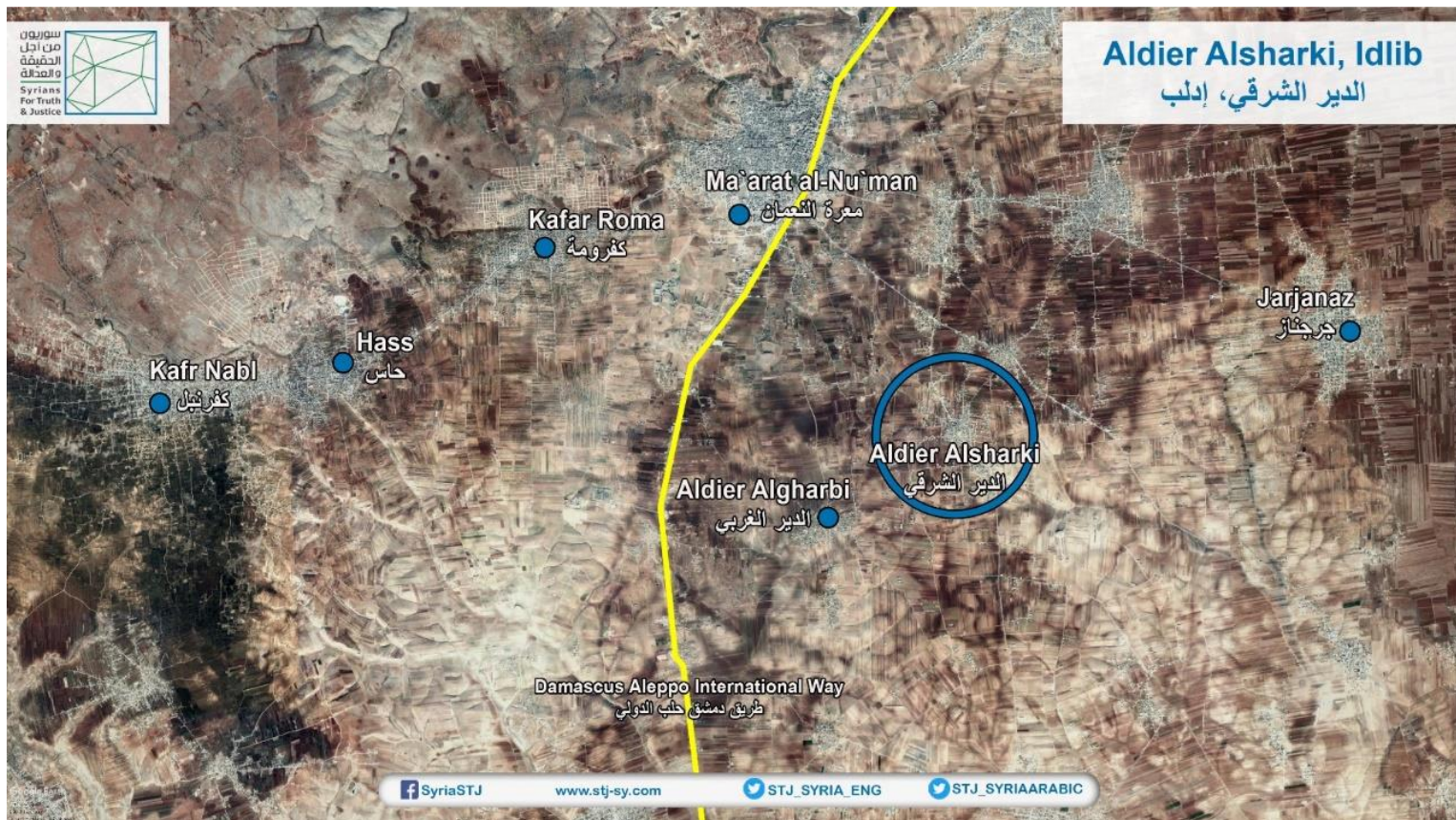
⁶ "Syria: Military Escalation Continues in Idlib Rendering 26 Civilians Dead in Two Separate Attacks," STJ. August 27, 2019. Last visited: August 31, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/ar/%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d9%85%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%b5%d8%b9%d9%8a%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%b3%d9%83%d8%b1%d9%8a-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a5%d8%af%d9%84%d8%a8/>.



Map showing military control status in northern rural Hama and southern rural Idlib, where the Syrian regular forces managed to take over the full range of northern rural Hama and the strategic city of Khan Shaykhun.

1. Ghastly Massacre Renders Mother and Her Children Dead in Deir al-Sharqi Town:

The town of Deir al-Sharqi, southern rural Idlib, was one of the towns to bear witness to the hostile military escalation of the Syrian regular forces and their allies on August 16, 2019, the only objective of which seems to be paving the way for taking over the M5 International Highway, for the town is located 5 kilometers east of the highway, near the city of Ma`arat al-Nu`man. Many of the residents and locals believe that the shelling that targeted the residential neighborhoods on that day and which caused the death of a whole family, mostly children, aimed to empty the area of its population in the first place and forcing them into abandoning it to other areas, especially since the town incubates numerous families, displaced from northern rural Hama.



Satellite image indicating Deir al-Sharqi town's location, southern rural Idlib, of the international highway which the Syrian regular forces seek to control.

Details of the Massacre:

On August 16, 2019, around 9:30 a.m., Sukhoi warplanes, affiliated with the Syrian Air Forces, targeted the residential areas with four consecutive raids, putting to death a family, whose members are children mainly, according to Mohammad al-Ahmad, one of the area's residents who was near the strikes' location. He told STJ that the hit site lacked all forms of militarization, adding:

"On the morning of that day, I was at home with my family. I heard the Warplane Observatories warning that an aircraft has left the Hama Military Airport and is approaching the town. My family and I immediately hid in a safe place. We could hear its roar while it drew closer. It was a matter of seconds; the warplane struck the town's western part with the first raid. A few minutes later, it embarked on the second raid, hitting the southern part of the town. The third raid, however, was aimed at the south-western part of the town, causing a severe injury of a civilian, which necessitated hospitalizing him. Separated from the third raid with a few seconds, the warplanes initiated the fourth raid, attacking a family house in the northern part of the town. The house belongs to Hamoud Ibrahim al-Hamoud, the Principal of the town's school, who was not at home when the warplanes struck. While his seven children watched the warplane from their house's window, they

never thought that it would hit their home with an extremely explosive missile. The house was completely destroyed and the family members, six children and their mother, have all died. One child survived the attack. By then, the father, yet ignorant of the shelling incident, arrived in the place. Words fail to describe the scene's emotional load. The Civil Defense teams, then, hurried to work, amidst a frenzy of raids that targeted the town's vicinity. The residents of the town were shocked by the grotesque massacre, which urged them to leave it for safer areas."



Photo showing an aspect of the destruction caused to the house of civilian Hamoud Ibrahim al-Hamoud in the attack on the Deir al-Sharqi town, southern rural Idlib, on August 16, 2019. Photo credit: STJ.

Mohammad Bala'as, a media activist who was also near the attack's location in Deir al-Sharqi town on August 16, 2019, recounted to STJ what happened back then:

“While on the outskirts of the Ma`arat al-Nu`man city to monitor the IDPs’ traffic and hundreds of cars that headed from southern rural Idlib to its northern rural parts, I saw more than seven warplanes taking turns in bombarding towns in southern rural Idlib. The first of the raids targeted the Deir al-Sharqi town. I rushed to the attack’s site and had to wait for a little, for the warplanes bombed the town several times. When I arrived there, the scene was about pure pain, for one of the raids had targeted a family house in the town, and the Civil Defense teams were trying to rescue the only child who survived the massacre.”



A photo of the children who died in the Deir al-Sharqi town due to an attack on one of the civilians’ houses on August 16, 2019. Photo credit: STJ.

Bala'as added that the airstrikes endured by the Deir al-Sharqi town that day corresponded to attacks on various areas in Idlib province, including Ma`arat al-Nu`man, Kafar Sijnah, Rakaya, Hizareen, Kafr Nabl, al-Naqeer and Ma'aret Hurmah.

One of the Warplane Observatories' supervisors in Idlib province pointed out that the warplanes that have committed this massacre, type Sukhoi Su-2, have kicked off from the Hama Military Airport at 9:15 a.m., taken Syria's north axis towards the Deir al-Sharqi town, the airspace of which they entered around 9:30 a.m., hitting it with four consecutive raids. More than six aircraft were targeting the villages and towns of southern rural Idlib.

The massacre, according to STJ's female researcher, has terrorized the civilians and the residents of the Deir al-Sharqi town, pushing massive numbers of them to abandon the town.

The researcher also managed to document the names of the civilians who died in the attack on the residential neighborhoods in Deir al-Sharqi town. They are:

1. The 13-year-old boy Ibrahim Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
2. The 8-year-old boy Majd Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
3. The 6-year-old Mohammad Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
4. The 11-year-old Ahmad Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
5. The 15-year-old girl Hamasah, Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
6. The 17-year-old girl Hudiabah Hamoud al-Hamoud, born in Deir al-Sharqi town.
7. The 37-year-old Ghada al-Yousef, the wife of Hamoud al-Hamoud, also born in Deir al-Sharqi town.

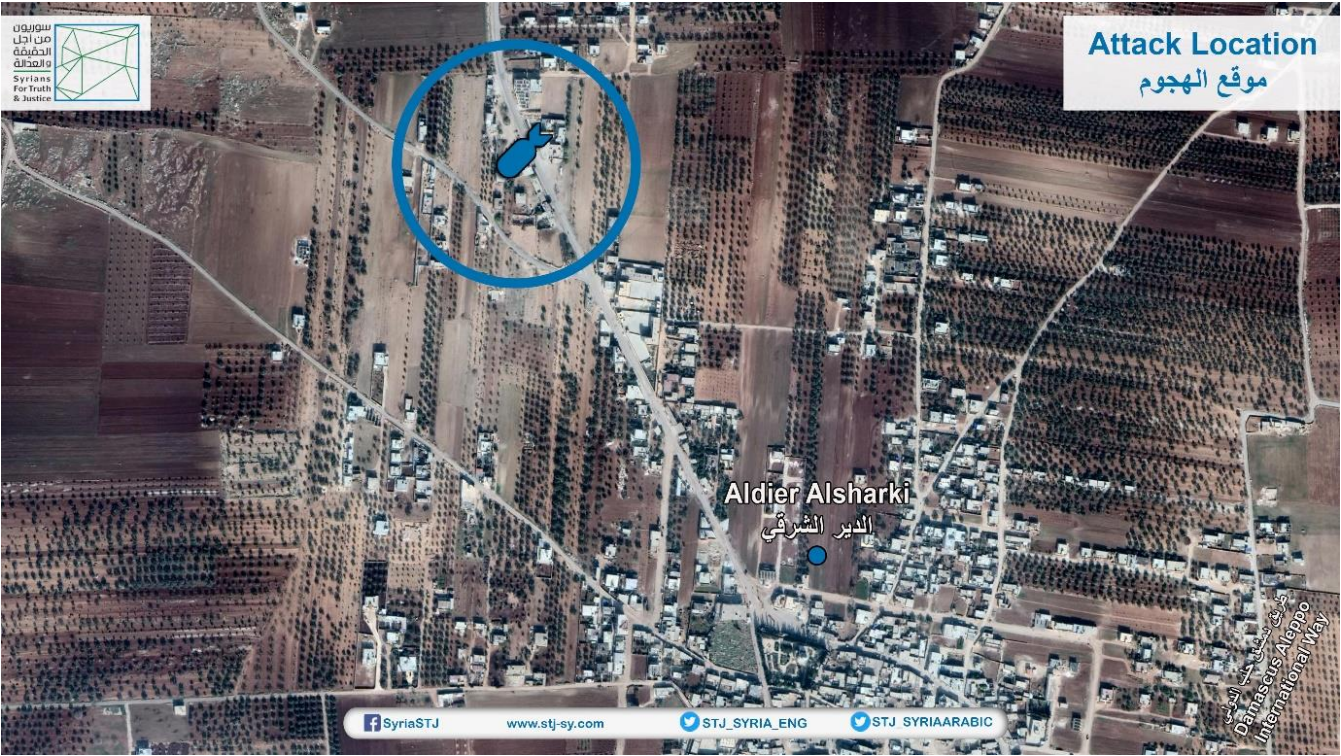
A video⁷ posted by a media activist showed the moment of targeting a civilian's house in Deir al-Sharqi town on August 16, 2019.



Footage taken from the above mentioned [video](#), showing the moment a civilian's house was bombed on August 16, 2019.

⁷ For further information, refer to the following link:

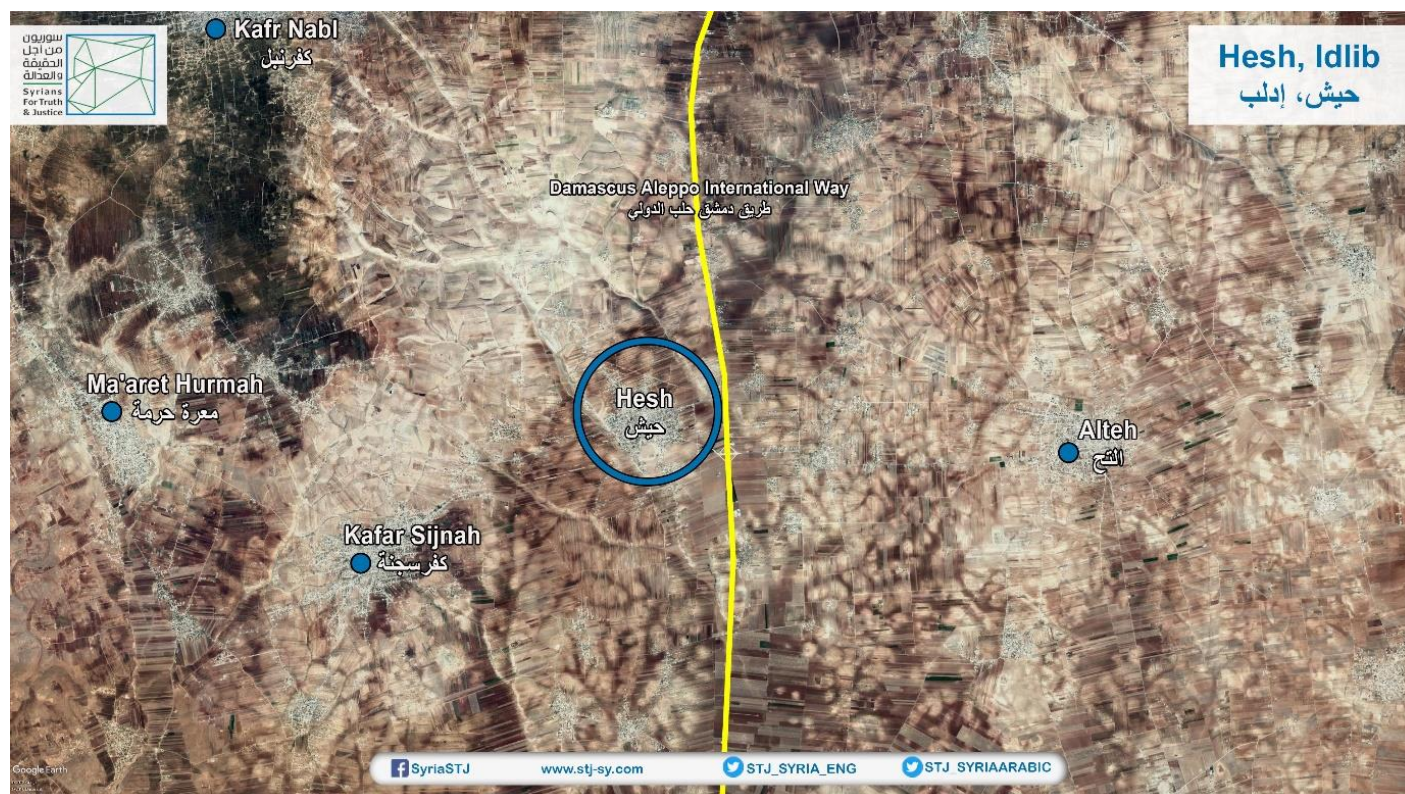
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=614143865776591&id=100015429490257.



Analysis of visual evidence.

2. Another Airstrike Targets Residential Areas in Hesh Town:

The town of Hesh, southern rural Idlib, also had a fair share of the brutal military escalation, undertaken by the Syrian regular forces and their allies against the areas of southern rural Idlib in general, especially when a Turkish observation post was set up north of Hesh town, located near the international highway connecting Aleppo and Damascus.



Satellite image indicating Hesh town's location, southern rural Idlib, of the M5 International Highway connecting Aleppo with Damascus.

On August 19, 2019, around 2:00 p.m., warplanes, thought to be Russian, embarked on a double raid, targeting several residential compounds in the northern part of the Hesh town, which caused the death of several civilians and the injury of others, as Mohammad al-Ali, one of the town's residents who was close to the attack's location, told STJ. He added:

"At noon, through the walky-talky, we heard that many warplanes entered the town's airspace. A few seconds have passed only when the sound of a massive blast reached our ears. The warplanes raided several of the town's houses, deploying highly explosive missiles. Arriving there, the sight was beyond description, for the victims were mutilated into pieces by the explosion, and the house collapsed over them. The attack resulted in the death of four and the injury of another four, who were rushed to the town's hospitals."

Following the airstrike, local activists reported to STJ, the Hesh town was again bombed by rocket launchers positioned in the Braideej district, northern rural Hama, destroying over 70% of it. The town's population has also fled the violent attacks their area was subjected to, leaving it almost vacant.

STJ's female researcher documented the names of the civilians who died in the airstrike on the residential neighborhoods of the Hesh town:

1. Mohammad Ahmad al-Ali, born in Hesh town in 1980, a married farmer and a father of six.
2. Khalid Ahamd Aloush, born in Hesh town in 1989, a married farmer and a father of three.
3. Ahmad Soubhi al-Ali, born in Hesh town in 1985, a married farmer and a father of four.
4. Mohammad Hussian al-Qasem, a farmer born in Hesh town in 1990.

According to STJ's female researcher, the attack on the Hesh town synced with another airstrike on a Turkish military convoy while on the way to the Turkish Observation Post set up in Murak city, northern rural Aleppo. The surrounding of the convoy and the vehicles accompanying it were targeted by the Syrian regular forces, rendering three of the Turkey-backed al-Sham Legion's personnel dead, in addition to three civilians on the international highway, connecting Aleppo and Damascus. On August 12, 2019, the town, reported the researcher, also suffered aerial shelling by nail-loaded rockets, which caused the injury of little boy Mustafa Mohammad al-A'alshan and necessitated that he be hospitalized.

Nails and rockets, into which they were loaded, which the Syrian regular forces used to bombard the residential compounds in Hesh town on August 12, 2019. Photo credit: STJ.



3. Bombarding Ma`arat al-Nu`man City's Residential Compounds with Barrel Bombs and Naval Mines:

On August 22, 2019, the city of Ma`arat al-Nu`man, southern rural Idlib, was not spared the airstrikes launched by the Syrian regular forces, for helicopters used barrel bombs and naval mines to shell the residential areas within the city, rendering several civilians either dead or wounded, not to mention that massive batches of civilians were forced to abandon their houses and seek safer areas. The escalation against Ma`arat al-Nu`man city follows the Syrian regular forces and their allies' control of the Khan Shaykhun city on August 21, 2019, in an introduction to reopen and take over the international highway connecting Aleppo and Damascus, since Ma`arat al-Nu`man is also located near the highway.

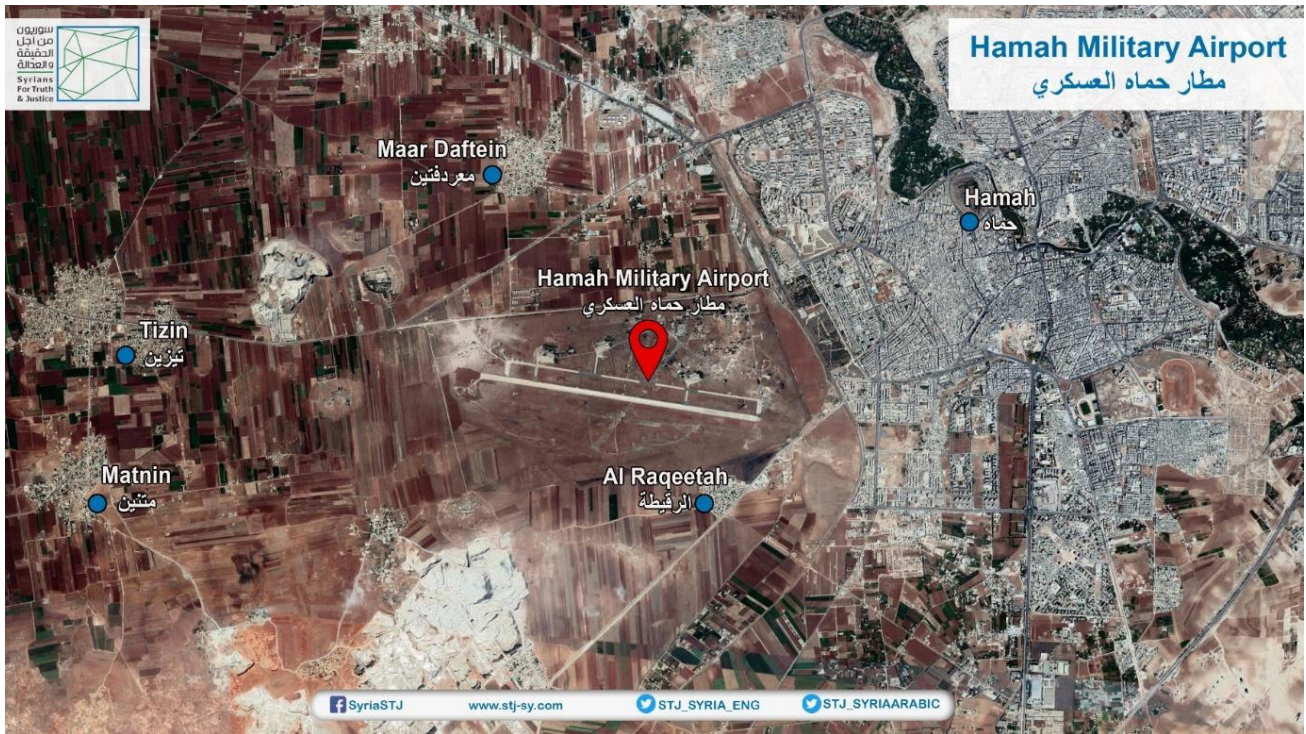


Satellite image indicating the location of Ma`arat al-Nu`man city, southern rural Idlib, of the international highway's location.

Around 12:30 a.m. on August 22, 2019, six helicopters affiliated with the Syrian Air Forces left the [Hama Military Airport](#) and the [Jub al-Ramleh](#) landing field, west Muhradah city in western rural Hama, according to the Warplane Observatories, poring their loads of barrel bombs and naval mines over the residential neighborhoods in Ma`arat al-Nu`man city, killing three civilians, one women included, and injuring more than ten others, as Omar Kashtou, one of the city's residents who were near the attack's location, told STJ:

"At midnight, over the walky-talky, I heard that helicopters have taken off from the Hama Military Airport. The Warplane Observatories started warning the residents, calling on them to evacuate the areas in southern rural Idlib. About half an hour later, the helicopters entered the city's airspace. Six in number, they emptied their

load of barrel bombs over the southwestern neighborhood, turning it into a fireball. The neighborhoods started collapsing over the heads of the people they incubated. When the Civil Defense teams arrived for rescue, the helicopters bombed the neighborhood again, leading to additional civilian casualties. Due to this, the residents fled their neighborhood.”





A photo showing an aspect of the destruction inflicted upon the civilians' houses in the Ma'arat al-Nu'man city by the helicopter bombing on August 22, 2019.

STJ's female researcher documented the names of the civilians who died in the attack on the residential compounds in the southeastern neighborhood of Ma'arat al-Nu'man city. They are:

1. Ali Khalid al-Shaleh, a 28-year-old man from Ma'arat al-Nu'man, married and a father of three.
2. Wasel Ahmad al-Driss, a 33-year-old, from Ma'arat al-Nu'man married and a father of two girls and a boy.
3. Kawkab Hussian al-Sha'arawi, a woman from Ma'arat al-Nu'man, married and a mother of six.

Jamil al-Hassan, an activist and eyewitness from the Ma'arat al-Nu'man city, told STJ that the helicopters, six in number, head to raid the two towns of Deir al-Sharqi and Deir al-Gharbi and then returned to hit Ma'arat al-Nu'man. Due to the shelling, the residential neighborhoods collapsed, and fires fed on the civilians' houses and shops. He pointed out that while the Civil Defense teams were conducting rescue operations, the helicopters struck the same

neighborhood again, which triggered fear in the hearts of civilians and led them to leave the neighborhood. On July 22, 2019, the city of Ma`arat al-Nu`man bore witness to a hostile aerial shelling, thought to be Russian, which targeted its popular market, for warplanes, believed to have kicked off from the Khmeimim Air Base, Latakia province, attacked the market, known for being ever crowded with civilians. The aircraft, back then, targeted the market with a double raid, killing no less than 43 persons, children and women included, and injuring more than 60 others.⁸



A photo showing an aspect of the destruction inflicted upon the civilians' houses in the Ma`arat al-Nu`man city by the helicopter bombing on August 22, 2019.

⁸ "Syria: Joint Syrian-Russian Aerial Attacks Render Dozens of Civilians Dead in Idlib", STJ. August 2, 2019. Last visited: August 31, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-joint-syrian-russian-aerial-attacks-render-dozens-of-civilians-dead-in-idlib/>.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.