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Russian Krasnopol Guided Artillery Shells Kill Civilians in Idlib

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Russian and Syrian government forces escalated their artillery attacks on Idlib province in early June 2021. This recent violent bombing campaign continued to the end of July 2021 and killed at least 44 persons—mostly civilians, among them at least 17 children and eight women. Additionally, the hostilities injured at least 30 persons, the majority of whom were women and children. The majority of the 44 documented deaths occurred during six fatal attacks on Mount Zāwiya in the southern countryside of Idlib. Russian and government forces launched these attacks from a joint military base.

The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) provided Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) with the names of 72 casualties of the recent attacks carried out by Russian and Syrian forces from 1 June to 31 July 2021. The death toll includes the victims of the attacks investigated in this report, as well as the victims of other strikes.

Notably, the extensive shelling by Russian and Syrian government forces disrupted a relative calm in Idlib which lasted nearly a year since a ceasefire agreement between Russia, which supports the Syrian government, and Turkey, which backs Syrian armed opposition groups and has [established several military posts](#) across Idlib province under the provisions of the Astana agreement.

However, the latest round of [Astana Talks](#), held between Turkey, Russia, and Iran, on 7-8 July 2021, did little to stop the attacks. Extensive shelling preceded the Astana Talks and continued despite them, even as the three states agreed on the “need to maintain the de-escalation agreement [in Idlib].”

The recent hostilities in Idlib have garnered international attention. The United Nations (UN) expressed “deep concern” over escalating violence in northwestern Syria.¹ For his part, UNICEF Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Ted Chaiban, said on 3 July that “this is just tragic. These attacks are the worst since a ceasefire was brokered in March last year. An escalation of violence will only result in cutting short the lives of more children.”²

The Russian-Syrian attacks, which intensified beginning in early July, mainly hit Mount Zāwiya, south of Idlib province. The targeted area is adjacent to the M4 International Highway and has significant strategic and military importance because it overlooks massive areas in the provinces of Hama and Idlib.

In addition to locating the targets of these extensive attacks, field researchers with STJ monitored the weapons Russian forces used during the attacks. Field researchers documented that Russian forces relied heavily on Russian-developed Krasnopol laser-guided

¹ “UN Concerned over Escalating Violence in Northwestern Syria, Following Death of 7 Civilians, Including Children” (In Arabic), UN News, 23 July 2021, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/07/1080142> (last accessed: 31 July 2021).

² “Six Children killed and scores injured in attacks on three villages south of Idlib, Syria,” UNICEF, 3 July 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/six-children-killed-and-scores-injured-attacks-three-villages-south-idlib-syria> (last accessed: 31 July 2021).

artillery shells.³ According to evidence, Russian forces located targets and controlled the shells using high-tech reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), which are known for their high precision. *The laser-guided artillery systems and the advanced technology Russian forces used to locate targets suggest that the attacks on homes, rescue teams, paramedics, as well as civilian objects were likely deliberate and may amount to war crimes.* All the attacks were launched from the jointly-controlled Syrian-Russian military base in [Basakla village](#), near Kafr Nabl city, south of Idlib province.

Furthermore, field researchers observed that Syrian government and/or Russian forces used “double-tap attacks” in all six reported strikes. “Double-tap attacks” entail striking the same target twice, leaving a small-time interval between the first and second strike. In the interim period following the first strike, people gather at the attack site to find and aid victims – then are subsequently turned into victims themselves during a second strike. “Double-tap attack” methods potentially double the number of potential casualties, and in the case of the recent Idlib strikes, are responsible for high numbers of casualties and injuries.

This report draws on information collected by Idlib-based field researchers and five interviews conducted by STJ with eyewitnesses and sources, among them survivors, civilians, media activists, and military observatories. Additionally, the report provides open-source analysis of photographs and videos documenting the six attacks.

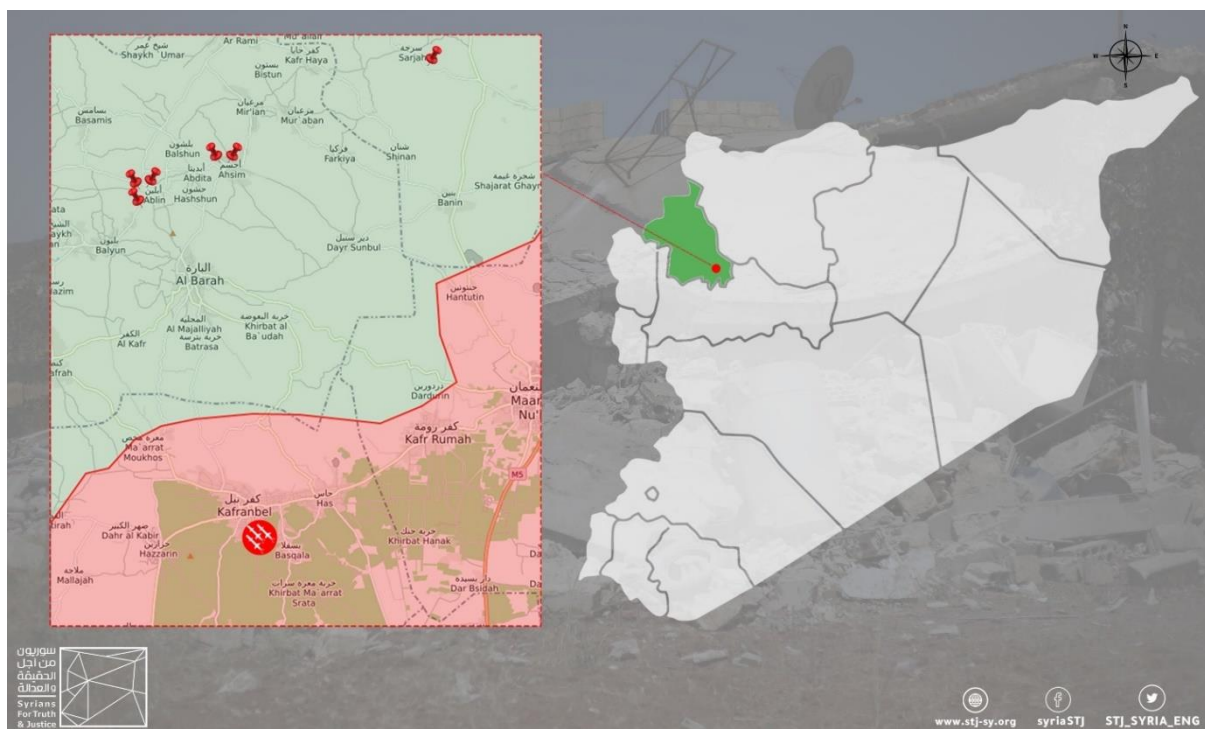


Image 1- A map locating the sites where the six reported attacks occurred, as well as the military base from where they were launched. Credit: STJ.

³ “Russian Weapon that Devours Tanks and Destroys Shelters” (in Arabic), Sputnik, 29 July 2021, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/military/201812101037378528-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA/> (last accessed: 31 July 2021)

I. Six Large-Scale Attacks in June and July 2021

In the following sections, STJ provides a detailed account of six attacks that Russian and Syrian government forces carried out in Mount Zāwiya, south of Idlib, which killed at least 44 and injured at least 30 people. STJ confirmed that most of the 44 people killed were civilians, with more than half of the victims being women (8 casualties) and children (17 casualties).

In addition to the six major attacks, STJ's team recorded several separate targeting operations which similarly impacted Idlib's population, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries.

1. The Attack on Ablin Village

At 7:45 a.m. on 10 June 2021, Russian forces stationed in Basakla village carried out a “double-tap attack” on Ablin village using guided shells. The shells hit [civilian houses](#) and killed 12 persons.⁴ Among the dead were four children, one woman, three civilian men and four fighters of the military group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Notably, three of the fighters were in the village and rushed to the attacked site to assess the situation. They died in the second attack that targeted the same location. The second attack injured five persons. The names of dead persons are listed below.

#	Name	Sex	Age
1	Muhammad Abdulhamid al-Assi	Male	50
2	Walid Subhi al-Assi	Male	35
3	Abdullah Abdulqader al-Assai	Male/Boy	14
4	Walaa Muhammad al-Assi	Woman	32
5	Huzifa Tariq al-Assi	Male/Boy	6
6	Walid Samih Harmoush	Male/Boy	13
7	Ahmad Masoud Daqmaq	Male	20
8	Abdullah Muhammad al-Assi	Male/Boy	14
9, 10, 11, 12	Four HTS fighters	Male	25 -35

⁴ Coordinates of the attacked site: 35°42'50.3"N 36°31'02.2"E

Among the wounded, STJ identified: Hassan Muhammad Assi, Ahmad Sakher Daqmaq, Muhammad Mamdouh Shuhaiber, Taljah Abdo Harmoush, and Tariq Nazih Assi.

Documenting the tragedy, a field researcher with STJ interviewed Youssef al-Assi, who survived but lost six family members in the brutal attack. He recounted:

“On the morning of 10 July, I was sleeping at my uncle’s house. The sound of a shell striking the village woke me up. I rushed to the site of the attack. On the way there, I saw my brother heading in the same direction. We went there together, riding a motorcycle. The shelling targeted a two-story house in the other part of the village. There were no casualties. We left the place. On the way back, we saw my father. He was drinking tea on his house’s balcony. We joined him there. A few minutes later, we heard a second shell.

Chaos consumed us in seconds. Stones and rubble began falling on us. Dust and smoke engulfed my father’s house. Women and children started wailing and crying. I was shocked; I could not process what was happening. I was in the house with my father, brother, mother, sister, and my sister-in-law, who was pregnant and a mother of two. I recovered gradually and saw that most of my family were either injured or trapped beneath the rubble. We managed to send one of my sisters to the hospital. Her shoulder was injured. We then got the women and the children out of the place and pulled my mother from under the rubble. We carried them and ran for nearly 30 meters. We reached the main street. One driver stopped for us; he took my brother and the children in his car to the hospital.”

Al-Assi continued his account, describing the horror of the second attack, which robbed him of his family:

“Moments later, my cousins arrived to help. Another car also came, with three men inside it, to help the wounded. My second sister got into the car, and my father stood next to it. Then another shell struck the car.

The car caught fire and burned everyone inside. They died, all of them. My father who was standing next to the car, and my brother who was close to it also died. The scene was terrifying. The victims’ body parts, their maimed limbs, the fire devouring them... I stood there, completely helpless. I tried to save my father. He had shrapnel wounds in his chest, blood gushing out of them. He died instantly. I managed to pull my mother out of the fire and rescue her. I tried to reach for my brother, save him from the flames, but I could not. I collapsed.

The second strike killed my father, brother, sister, my sister’s son, and two of my cousins, as well as two young men from the Daqmaq family and one from the al-Harmoush family, in addition to the three men inside the car. I sat on the ground and started screaming: ‘We need ambulances!’ Moments later, people came. We tried to help the victims, but they were all dead. My mother and I are the only two survivors.”



Image 2 – The house targeted in Ablin village. Credit: STJ.

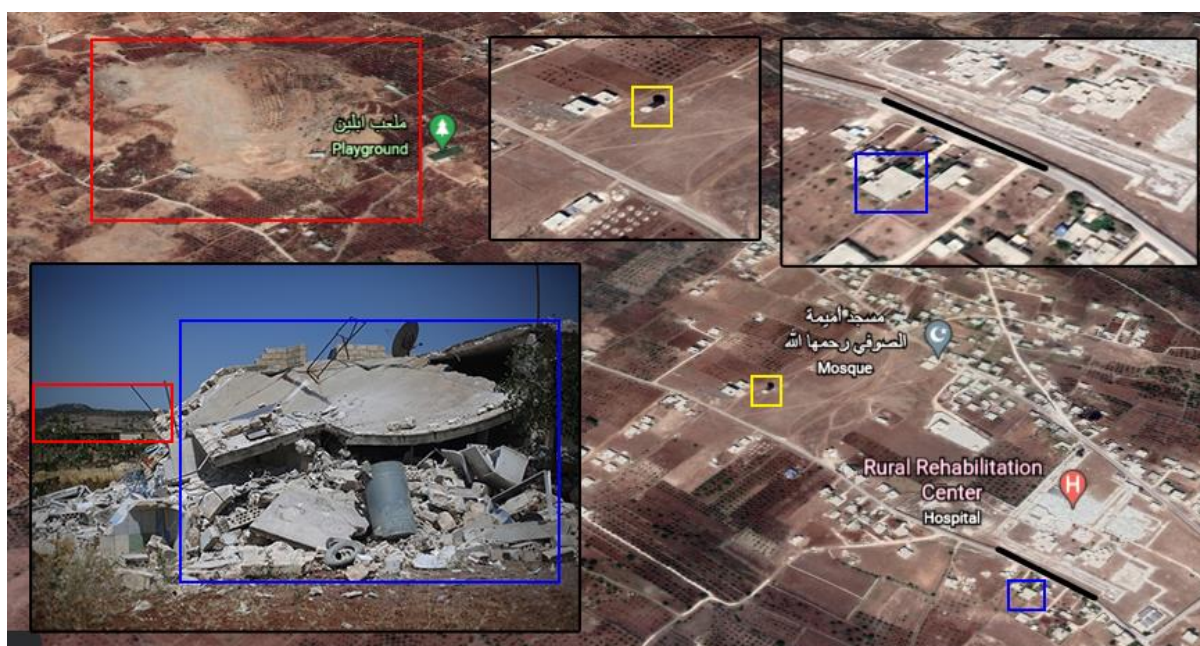


Image 3 – Open-source analysis locating the house targeted in Ablin village. Credit: STJ.



Image 4 – The car targeted in Ablin village. Credit: STJ.

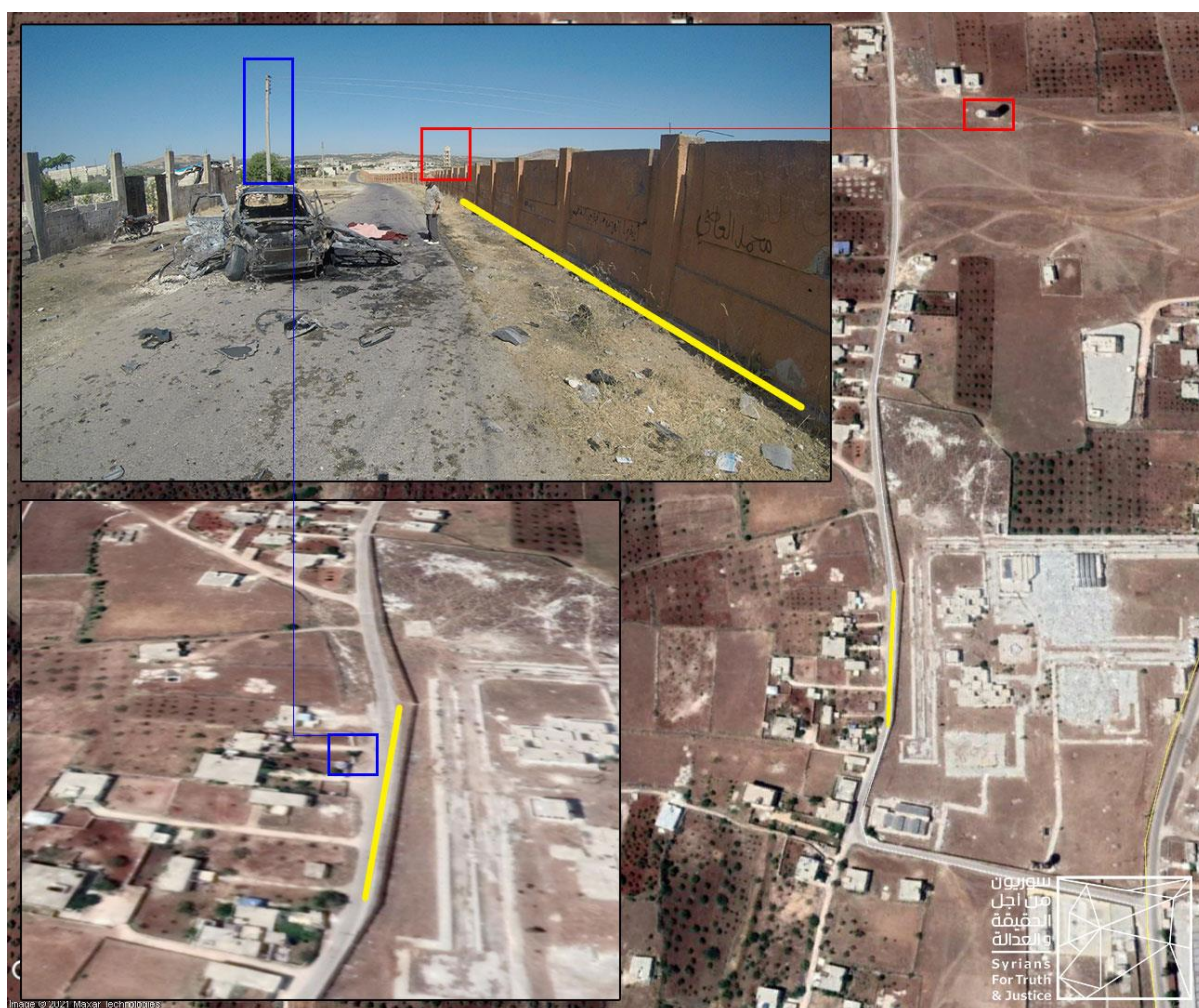


Image 5 – Analysis locating where the car was struck in Ablin village. Credit: STJ.

2. The Attack on Ihsim Police Station

At 9:00 a.m. on 21 June, military forces stationed in Basakla village targeted a police station operated by the HTS-affiliated Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and a nearby military post. The two targeted sites are located in Ihsim town, south of Idlib. This was yet another “double-tap attack”. The strike killed five people, including three civilians detained at the police station, a police officer, and an armed opposition fighter. Additionally, the attack wounded five persons.

Those killed were: Walid al-Asaad (police officer), Muhammad Abdulilah al-Qadi (fighter), Iyad al-Ahmad (civilian), Mustafa al-Nasouh (civilian), and a young man from the Yusuf family (civilian).

Those wounded were: Hazem al-Omar (45), Muhammad al-Muhammad (25), Ihab Haj Ahmed (22), Mustafa al-Nasouh (23), and Yousef al-Yousef (31).

El-Dorar Al-Shamiya News Agency—close to HTS— posted a [video](#) documenting the first moments of the bombing on the [Ihsim Police Station](#).⁵ Notably, the footage in the video starting from second 00:33 is of another attack carried on the same day but in a different area; namely, in the Bara village.



Image 6 - Screenshots from a video showing the onset of the attack on the SSG's Ihsim Police Station in Ihsim Town, south of Idlib, on 21 June 2021. Credit: El-Dorar Al-Shamiya News Agency.

⁵ The coordinates of the Ihsim Police Station: 35.72462331186946, 36.55009634200637

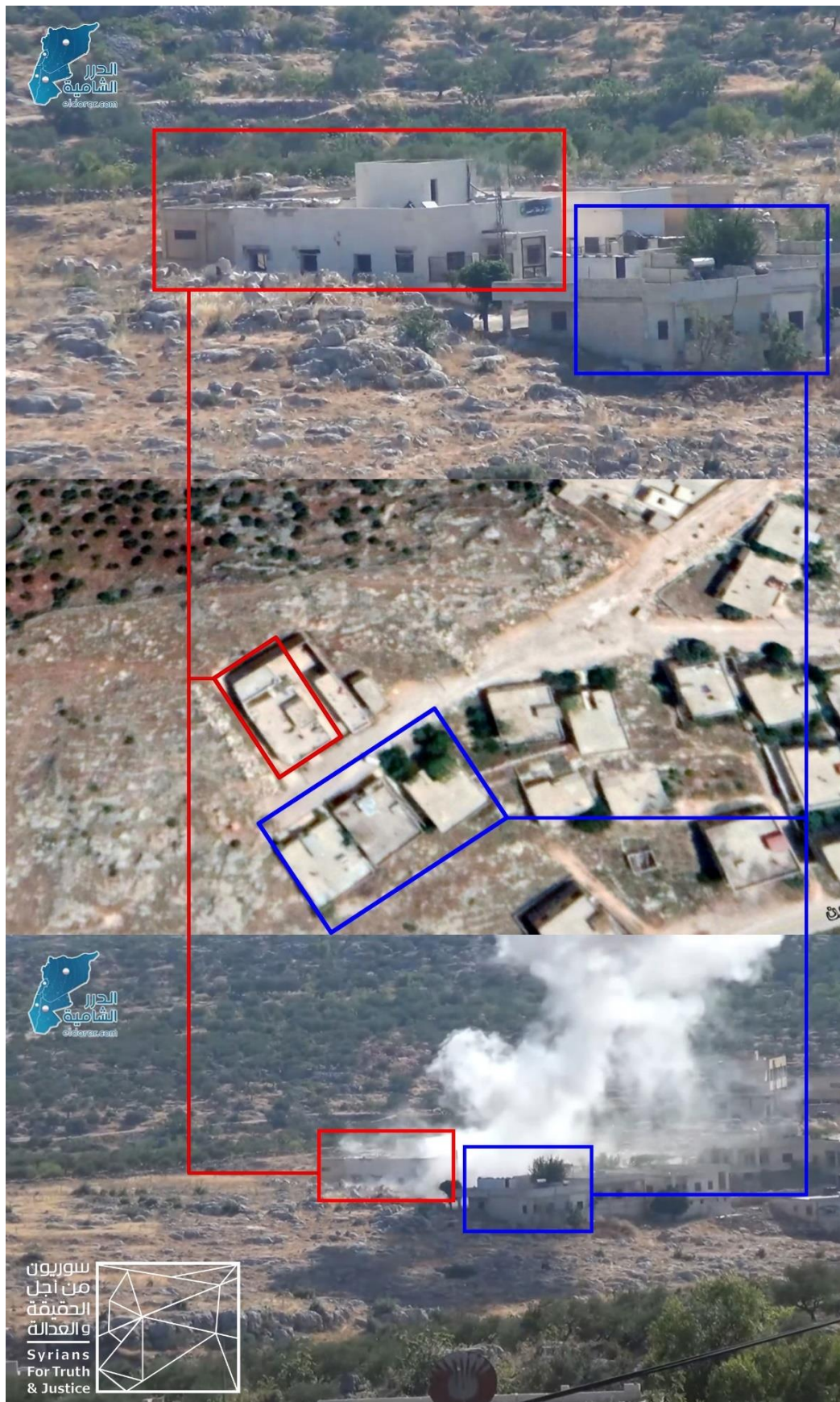


Image 7- Screenshots from the video matched with satellite imagery using open-source analysis.

Investigating the attack, STJ interviewed media activist Ahmad al-Mustafa, who said that the police station was hit by laser-guided rounds. Al-Mustafa recounted:

“On 21 June, we woke up to the sound of a loud explosion. Later, we learned that the source of the sound was laser-guided shells that Russian forces used to hit the village’s police station. [The target] is a civil police station that addresses criminal offences and minor disputes. The shell landed exactly at the station’s door. The attack killed one of the station’s police officers. Moments later, a second shell struck the station’s prison cells and killed three detainees and injured five others. The wounds were serious. The station was detaining people involved in a dispute that erupted in the adjacent al-Bara town.”

A second witness to the attack, a staffer at a military observatory called Abu Ahmad Ihsim, recounted to STJ the panic that followed the first attack. Ihsim said that after the first shell landed just at the station’s door, killing an officer, the rest of the policemen escaped the station and sought shelter at a nearby military post. The witness added that Russian forces hit that post and killed a fighter. Ihsim narrated:

“[Russian forces] hit the station with Krasnopol shells, guided with Orlan-30 UAVs. The shells were fired from the self-propelled howitzer, Akatsiya 52, stationed at the Russian base, located near Kafr Nabl city. Three shells hit the station, confirmed by the three holes in the station’s building.”

STJ talked to a third witness, an Ihsim-based civilian who said that Russian reconnaissance aircraft have made this recent military campaign in Idlib the most dangerous since the beginning of 2021. The witness said:

“The recent bombing campaign on Mount Zāwiya has been the most dangerous and brutal since the beginning of 2021. This is due to the Russian reconnaissance aircraft that are capable of accurately locating targets. These aircraft hover daily in the region’s airspace from 5:00 a.m. to nearly 10:00 a.m. Usually, these aircraft do not stick to the same place. However, on the day the station was hit, the reconnaissance aircraft kept making rounds over the village. I knew it. I knew that the village would be shelled. A while later, a warning over walkie-talkies was circulated. [The observatory] reported that shells were fired from the Russian military camp [Basakla base], south of Kafr Nabl city. Three shells hit the station.”

3. A Second Attack on Ablin Village

At 5:45 a.m. on 3 July, military forces stationed in the Basakla village targeted [houses](#) in Ablin village with Krasnopol shells. The attack killed five civilians from the same family, including three children. The bombing wounded three other persons.

A field researcher with STJ documented the names of the victims. They were Subhi Abdelhamid al-Assi and Souad Subhi al-Assi, as well as Ibrahim, Saad, and Bayan — Subhi al-Assi’s children.

4. The Attack on Sarjah Village

About 9:30 a.m. on 17 July, military forces stationed at the Basakla military base targeted a house in Sarjah village using Krasnopol shells. The attack killed several members of the same family. Minutes after the first attack, military forces targeted the same location. By then, ambulance teams had already arrived at the site of the first strike. As a result, this “double-tap attack” killed a volunteer with the White Helmets/Syrian Civil Defense, three children, a woman, and three men. Additionally, the attack wounded a child and four men. The names of the dead are listed below.

Name	Sex	Age
Humam al-Assi (White Helmets volunteer)	Male	29
Sa’ida al-Assi	Adult Female	60
Ritaj Izzo Zriq	Female/little girl	11
Mayis Izzo Zriq	Female/little girl	13
Sa’ida Izzo Zriq	Female/little girl	16
Husain Hajj Mousa	Male	40
Muhammad Zaineddin	Male	25

Kamel Zriq (37), Mahmoud Othman (28), Humam Hajj Darwish (17), and Abdulmalik Staifi (24) were wounded.



Image 8- The recovery of bodies of the victims from under the rubble of a house targeted in Sarjah village on 17 July 2021. Credit: STJ.

5. The Attack on Ihsim Village

At 12:00 a.m. on the morning of 19 July, military forces stationed at Basakla base struck a house in Ihsim village using Krasnopol shells. The attack killed four women and three children and injured nine others. The casualties are all from the same family. The names of the victims are listed below.

Name	Sex	Age
Yussra Sarjawee	Female	50
Hiba Taqika	Female	20
Maryam Barakat	Female	20
Khadija Taqika	Female/little girl	6
Iman Taqika	Female/little girl	4
Tasnim Taqika	Female/little girl	5
Widad	Female	45

The identified wounded persons are: Muhammad Taha Taqiqa (55), Taha Taqiqa (26), Akram Taqiqa (14), Hamza Taqiqa (4), Hadil Taqiqa (17), Fatima Taqiqa (20), Aya Taqiqa, Sadiq Taqiqa (50), and Siba Taqiqa(14), who lost her arm.

6. A Third Attack on Ablin Village

At 6:30 a.m. on 22 July, the military forces stationed at Basakla base targeted a [house](#) in the village of Ablin with Krasnopol shells. The bombing killed four children, a woman, and two men, and wounded additional six civilians — all from the same family. The victims are listed below.

Name	Sex
Fouad Mustafa Harmoush	Male
Imad Fouad Harmoush	Male
Maryam Mustafa Harmoush	Female/little girl
Alaa Mustafa Harmoush	Female/little girl
Khadija Mustafa Harmoush	Female/little girl
Fouad Mustafa Harmoush	Male/boy
Fatima al-Nimer	Woman

Fatima al-Qassim, the two little girls, Hanadi and Duaa, were wounded, in addition to three unidentified men.

II. The Krasnopol Guided Artillery Shell

According to [Military Today](#)— a website that provides information about modern warfare— “Krasnopol is a Russian laser-guided artillery shell. It is similar in concept to the [US M712 Copperhead](#) and was designed to engage tanks, armored vehicles, buildings, bunkers and various field fortifications, water targets and so on.”

In addition to the self-propelled howitzer, Akatsiya 52, Krasnopol shells are launched from a variety of artillery systems, including an old D-20 field gun-howitzer. The Russian army has used these shells in different conflicts, most recently in Ukraine and Syria. A Krasnopol projectile weighs 50.8 kg. It is equipped with a warhead weighing 20.5 kg and loaded with 6.4 kg of explosive content.

A field researcher with STJ collected some of the fragments of the Krasnopol projectiles Russian forces used to bomb Ablin village on 10 June 2021 and took the photos included below.



Image 9 - Fragments of Krasnopol projectiles used to bomb Ablin village. Credit: STJ.



Image 10 - Fragments of Krasnopol projectiles used to bomb Ablin village. Credit: STJ.



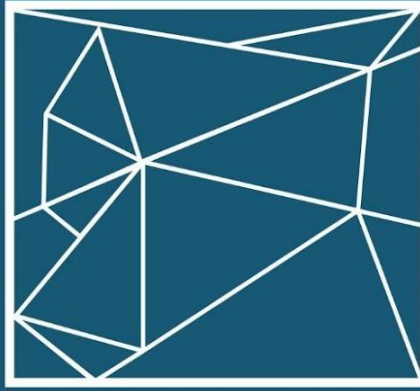
Image 11 - Fragments of Krasnopol projectiles used to bomb Ablin village. Credit: STJ.

A media activist, al-Mustafa, shared the feelings among Idlib's population following the use of Krasnopol artillery shells in the recent attacks:

"These shells are extremely agonizing and are the source of our day-to-day fear. A solution must be found to stop Russian forces from using these guided projectiles. The forces are hitting civilian homes, and a single projectile can completely destroy a house due to its devastating explosive charge and the pressure it emanates."

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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.

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