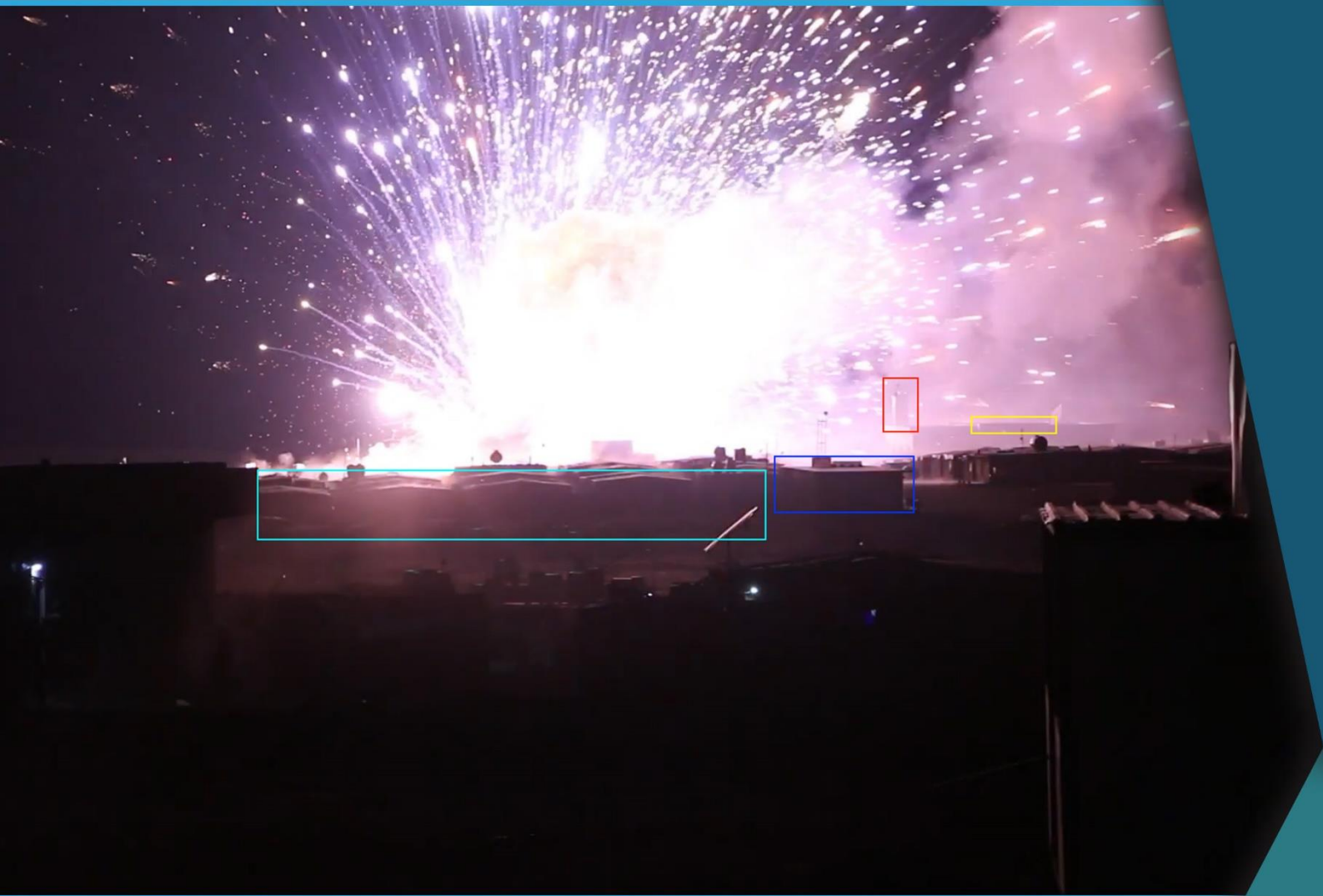
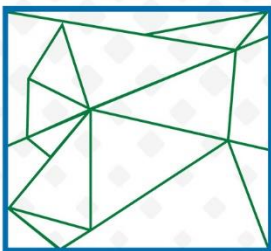


# Northern Syria: Explosion of Weapons Depot in a Residential Area Raises Demands to Protect Civilians

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For Truth  
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15 July 2022

## **Northern Syria: Explosion of Weapons Depot in a Residential Area Raises Demands to Protect Civilians**

*A weapons depot of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham went off in Babisqa village in northern rural Idlib resulting in casualties and displacements*

On 1 June 2022, around 10:30 PM, a huge blast occurred in a weapons depot in a military base of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in [Babisqa](#) village, [adjacent](#) to Bab al-Hawa [border crossing](#) with Turkey.

The White Helmets, officially known as [Syria Civil Defense](#), reported that the [explosion](#) continued for more than two hours and resulted in the killing of a girl with special needs and a member of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group as well as the injury of two civilians. Furthermore, the blast threw the shrapnel of rockets, explosives and munitions that affected tens of tents in the IDP camps adjacent to the depot, prompting the Civil Defense to evacuate at least 12 camps in the area.

Media sources reported that the explosion was caused by a drone attack. However, exclusive sources told STJ that the real cause was that the weapons and ammunition were haphazardly stored in a depot without proper safety measures.

We should recall that Idlib witnessed earlier huge explosions in ammunition and weapons depots, as well as in plants for explosive manufactory located in residential buildings. Those explosions killed and wounded dozens of civilians. The largest casualty toll; however, was the [explosion](#) of an ammunition depot in Bab al-Hawa, which took place on 12 August 2018. This explosion killed 67 people, including children and women, and wounded more than 70 others.

Many of the Syrian armed opposition groups locate their headquarters and weapons depots in civilian residential areas or near IDP camps in order to shield them from military operations. Nevertheless, these groups do not take any kind of precautions to guarantee the safety of civilians living in the vicinity of their military objects.

## Details of the Explosion of 1 June 2022

The detonation occurred in a weapons depot located in Babisqa village, where the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham is mainly positioned.

A local activist reported to STJ:

“The explosion occurred in a weapons depot dedicated for the storage of heavy weapons like Grad rockets, mortar shells and tanks. The depot is located in an old building that the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham repaired in 2017 and turned into a headquarters in 2018. This building is adjacent to the borderline with Turkey, where there are densely populated IDP camps. In the vicinity of the building, there are hangars of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham members and others for weapon storage.”

After hearing from the local activist, STJ located satellite images of the explosion site and found that:

Until June 2016, the site was an empty land with some buildings in the vicinity.





Image (1) - Satellite images of the site taken in August 2017 showed military vehicles and militant activity.



Image (2) - Satellite images of the site taken in April 2018 showed continued militant activity, newly constructed buildings, and newly established IDP camps.





Image (3) - Satellite images of the site taken in March 2020 showed newly established IDP camps adjacent to the military base and military vehicles.



Image (4) - Satellite images of the site taken in August 2020 showed a noticeable increase in the number of camps, set adjacent to the military base that included the weapons depot.





Image (5) - Satellite images of the site taken in August 2020 showed a noticeable increase in the number of camps, set adjacent to the military base that included the weapons depot.

A military source in the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham also testified to STJ on the explosion incident saying:

“The explosion occurred in a base of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group in Babisqa village. To my knowledge, the cause of the explosion was the random storage of the weapons. The depot contained homemade weapons like mines, Elephant rockets, Hell Cannons, and Russian weapons. Storing such types of weapons indiscriminately for a long time is highly risky. The explosion was so powerful; it was heard in far areas in northern Syria and the shrapnel of the Grad rockets, which has a range of 20 or 40 km, sprayed to very long distances.”

The Syria Civil Defense stated that it evacuated more than 12 camps in the vicinity of the explosion site because of the shrapnel resulting from the explosion.

[The Response Coordination Group](#) reported that the blast caused damage to 17 camps, burnt 19 tents and accommodations, left casualties among civilians and led to the displacement of 3500 people. The Response Coordination Group also said it would take months to clear explosive remnants and resettle IDPs in relatively safe areas.

## Popular Demands to Remove Weapons Depots from Civilian Areas

Establishing ammunition depots and military posts in civilian residential areas exposes these areas to bombardments by other parties to the conflict, explosions and other risks. [The Response Coordination Group](#) issued a statement on 2 June 2022, in which it appealed to armed opposition groups to locate their military positions away from residential areas in order not to endanger the lives of civilians. However, armed groups did not consider this demand seriously, as said by a commander in the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group.

The same commander told STJ:

“We always hold discussions on the need not to store homemade weapons in residential buildings so as not to risk the lives of civilians. However, we did not take serious steps toward that until the disaster struck. We will work in the coming days to find alternates for the weapons depots we have in the residential areas or to allocate a budget to hire experts in weapons storage to organize those depots and ensure their safety. The series of explosions of this kind caused great panic among civilians, who are growing increasingly exasperated living amidst military objects.”

Here, we should recall the principles of distinction and precaution in the International humanitarian law (IHL) which obliged parties to the conflict to establish their military positions away from residential areas and to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian objects.

Ammunition and weapons depots are legitimate military objectives according to the IHL. However, if these objectives are located near or within civilian areas, the attacks on them will cause considerable physical damage and undoubtedly lead to dire consequences for civilians.

Moreover, the ammunition and weapons depots constitute a threat in their nature; any human or technical error in their control system would lead to a disaster, exactly like what happened in Babisqa.

The principles of distinction and precaution are [binding](#) on both parties to the conflict (the attacker and the defender), regardless of the nature of the conflict or the international contractual law in force. Furthermore, if a military party intended to locate its military position in civilian areas to entitle them to the legal protection afforded to civilian objects, that may amount to perfidy, a practice which is prohibited by the [Customary International Humanitarian Law](#).

The fact that the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group located its military position before the expansion of IDP camps towards it does not waive in any way the obligation on the group to take necessary precautions to protect civilians. The protection procedures include the location of military positions out of densely populated civilian areas. Article 58 of the Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions states: “The Parties to the conflict shall, to the maximum extent feasible: (a) Without prejudice to Article 49 of the Fourth Convention, endeavor to remove the civilian population, individual civilians and civilian objects under their control from the vicinity of military objectives”. This Article is a [customary rule](#) that has to be applied by conflicting parties involved in any kind of conflict, taking fully into account the legal and humanitarian conditions of this removal provided for in the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#).

Supposing there was an imperative military necessity to keep this military base despite the expansion of the nearby IDP camps, the obligation of evacuating these camps is still binding on the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group not on those responsible for the expansion of the camps. That is because the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham controls the area, thus it shall not settle IDPs in it with the presence of weapons depots and military positions in it. This is according to [Rule 131](#) of the Customary IHL that states: “In case of displacement, all possible measures must be taken in order that the civilians concerned are received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety and nutrition and that members of the same family are not separated.” Thereby, the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham was supposed to move its military objects from near IDP camps or move the residents of those camps to safe settlements.

Moreover, the area in question is occupied by Turkey, thus the latter has a double responsibility to protect civilian residents including evacuating them when their interest demands, according to Article 49 of the Geneva Convention (IV). In its [commentary](#) on the second paragraph of Article 58 of Additional Protocol I the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said:

“Sub-paragraph (b) 2251: This sub-paragraph covers both permanent and mobile objectives. As regards permanent objectives, governments should endeavor to find places away from densely populated areas to site them. These concerns should already be taken into consideration in peacetime. For example, a barracks or a store of military equipment or ammunition should not be built in the middle of a town..... Occupying Powers which might be inclined to ignore the fate of the population of the occupied territory and only take into account the fate and the safety of their own troops. It should be recalled that in this respect Article 28 of the fourth Convention prohibits Occupying Powers from using protected persons to shield certain points or areas from military operations.”

Accordingly, Turkey, as an occupying power had to take the necessary measures before the expansion of IDP camps either by ordering the relocation of the military site of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham group operates under the Turkish-backed SNA, or by resettling residents of the nearby IDP camps in other safe accommodations that meet the humanitarian and legal conditions.





Image (6) - The first moments of the explosion. [Credit.](#)



Image (7) - Syria Civil Defense response. [Credit.](#)



Image (8) - The explosion site a day after the incident. [Credit](#).



Image (9) - Matching the previous image with a satellite image of the same site taken in May 2021.





Image (10) - This image was presented in a TV program on a local Syrian channel, as showing the geographical location of the weapons depots. Upon verification; however, STJ found that the explosion site is to the north of the location defined.

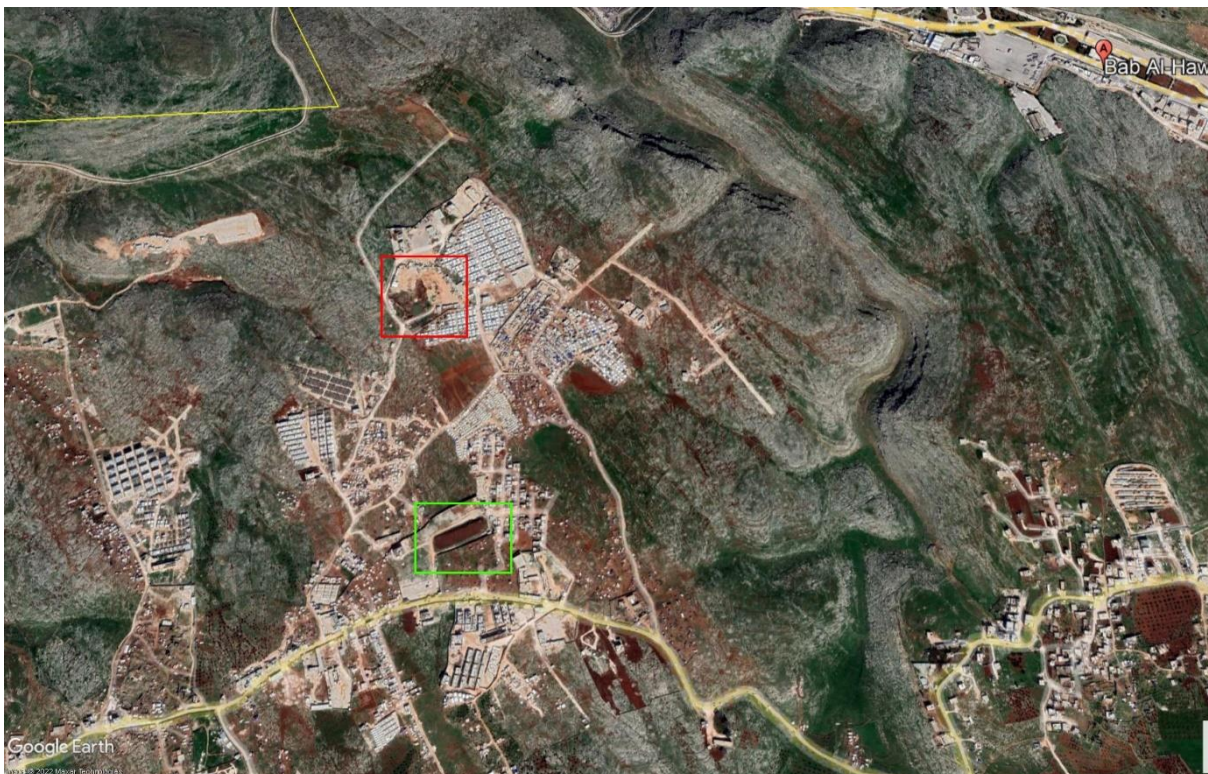


Image (11) - The red square defines the location of the explosion site that STJ verified, and the green one points to the location of the site defined by the local TV channel.





Image (12) - Satellite images show militant activities in the site where the explosion occurred.



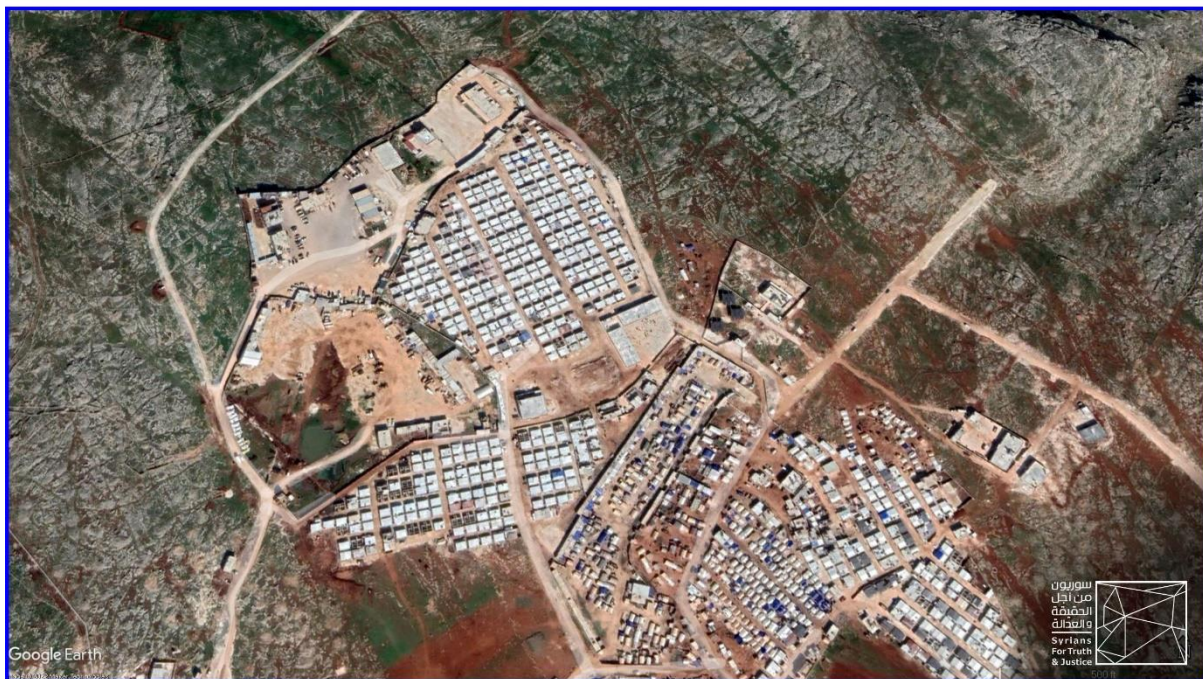
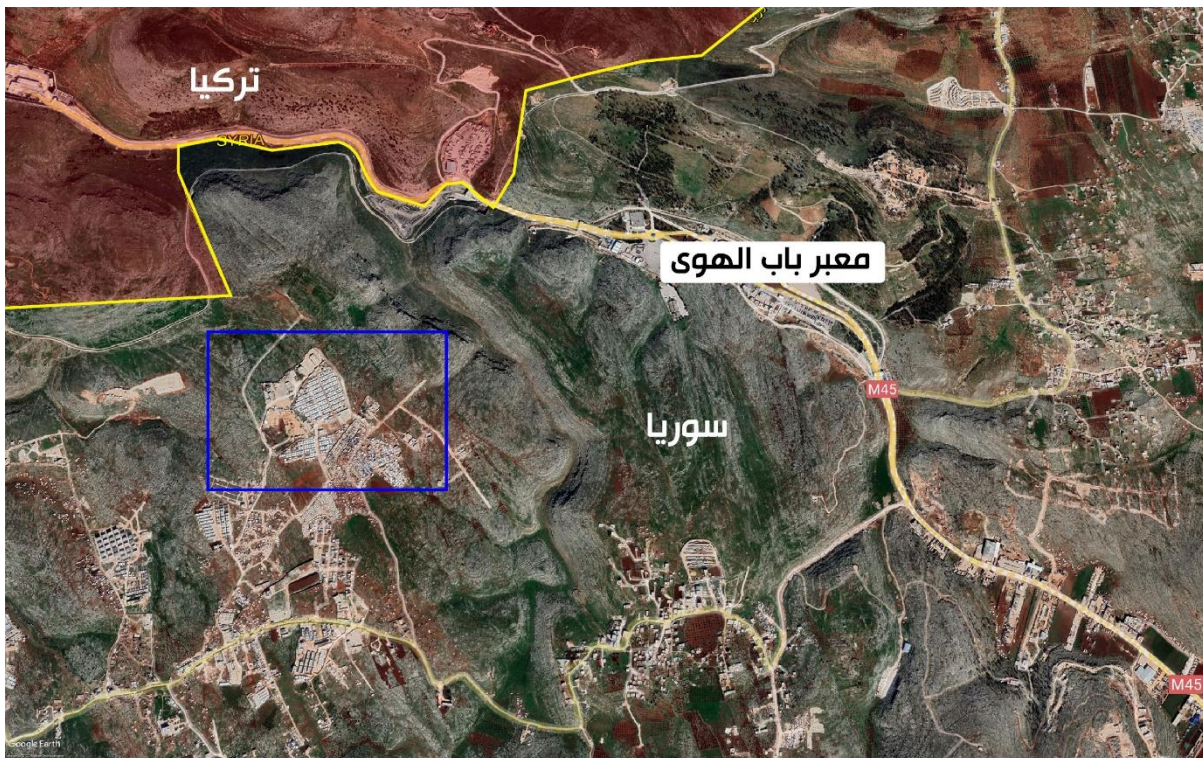


Image (13) - A satellite image shows the proximity between the explosion site and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syria-Turkey border.





## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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