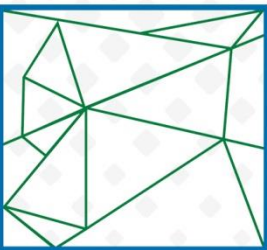


Syria: Turkish Drone Attacks, Russian Airstrikes Ramped Up in Tandem with Astana Talks



Syria: Turkish Drone Attacks, Russian Airstrikes Ramped Up in Tandem with Astana Talks

Targeting AANES employees or any other civilians to whom the classifications of international law relating to continuous combat function or direct participation in hostilities do not apply may amount to a war crime

Executive Summary

Turkish drone strikes have been alarmingly increasing in frequency in northern Syria over the past three months, hitting targets at ever-diminishing intervals.

On 2 August 2023, a Turkish drone attack [targeted](#) two cars in the suburbs of Qamishli/Qamishlu city in al-Hasakah province. The drone-fired missiles killed four fighters from the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) and injured two others as they headed home for their monthly leave.

This drone strike furthers a widespread pattern of attacks in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This strike happened only four days after another drone hit a site on the outskirts of Tell Rifaat town in Aleppo's northern countryside on 30 July 2023. This [attack](#) inflicted damage on the targeted house.

A third drone [attack](#)—the Turkish military launched on 27 July 2023—killed three SDF fighters. The drone targeted the fighters' vehicle on the road between Tall Ma'rouf and Khaznah villages in the southern suburbs of Qamishli/Qamishlu city.

Keeping tabs on Turkish drone attacks in north-eastern Syria, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented at least **92** strikes between 2021 and mid-August 2023. The strikes killed approximately **83** people and wounded at least **55** others.

The recurrent drone attacks are often met with silence from the international community, even though drone mortalities are not limited to military personnel. In a breakdown of the documented numbers, STJ recorded the deaths of **21** civilians, among them **three** AANES staff members. The casualties also included **five** members of the Internal Security Forces (Asayish), **three** staff members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), **one** of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and **one** of the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist, as well as **seven** fighters from the People's Protection Units (YPG), **eight** from the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), **33** from the SDF, and **four** from the Syrian government forces.

The wounded also included civilians. The drone attacks injured **37** civilians, **nine** Asayish members, **two** YPG fighters, **four** SDF fighters, and **three** from the Syrian government forces.

One of the documented Turkish drone attacks [targeted](#) a car driving AANES employees on 20 June 2023. The drone hit the vehicle in Beyandru village, east of Qamishli/Qamishlu city, killing three passengers and wounding the fourth.

The AANES [condemned](#) the attack, saying that Türkiye "never hesitated to fulfill its threats, hitting and targeting civilians and infrastructure in the AANES areas since the start of the Syrian crisis in full view of the international community." The AANES added that drone strikes "prove there are agreements and joint policies between the [Astana Talks] group and the Turkish government."

This attack stands out particularly as it corresponded to the first day of the [20th session](#) of the Astana Talks about Syria, held over 20-21 June and in which Türkiye acts as one of the three guarantor States to the "de-escalation" agreements, along with Russia and Iran. In their [joint statement](#) for the latest Astana session, which again excluded local authorities in north-eastern Syria, the three guarantor States rejected "all attempts to create new realities on the ground, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives under the pretext of combating terrorism."

Notably, Türkiye was not the only guarantor that "breached" the purposes of the Astana Talks—purportedly aiming at maintaining "de-escalation" across Syria. Also in tandem with the first day of the 20th session, Russian fighter jets [bombarded](#) the al-Hersh area and the outskirts of Sheik Bahr village near Idlib city, controlled by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The air raid caused massive damage to civilian properties in the targeted area.

The Russian air force escalated strikes in the area after the Astana Talks ended. On 25 June 2023, Russian aircraft renewed attacks on Idlib's suburbs. The [raids](#) killed nine civilians, mostly farmers, and wounded at least 61 others who assembled at a farmers' market on the outskirts of Jisr al-Shughour city in Idlib's western countryside.

The air raid on the farmers' market falls within ongoing Russian airstrikes and joint artillery and rocket shelling by the Russian military and Syrian government forces in Aleppo, Idlib province, and its suburbs in northern Syria. Between 2021 and 2023, STJ documented **10** Russian airstrikes in Idlib and Aleppo. The attacks killed nearly **36** people and wounded **88** others, mostly civilians.

Additionally, STJ documented **84** artillery and rocket bombings over the same duration. The shelling killed approximately **45** people and wounded **56** others in Idlib. In Aleppo's northern and western suburbs, the joint shelling killed nearly **38** people and wounded **92** others. Some of the shelling instances in Aleppo are carried out jointly by the SDF and Syrian government forces deployed in the al-Shahbaa area.

Notably, Idlib remains a constant target for Russian air raids even though it is subject to a ceasefire under the Turkish-Russian [Moscow Agreement](#), signed in March 2020.

In this report, STJ unveils the details of two Turkish drone attacks in north-eastern Syria, shedding light on the adverse impact these strikes have on civilians in the region. Additionally, STJ investigates the Russian airstrike on the farmers' market in Idlib, touching on the instability and concerns gripping the province due to recurrent raids.

For this report, field researchers with STJ carried out six interviews. The interviewees were met online or in-person and included five witnesses and survivors of drone strikes in north-eastern Syria and one source in Idlib, who relayed the details of the Russian airstrike on the farmers' market.

In addition to the interviews, the report draws from relevant publications and open-source visual and written material on the Turkish and Russian attacks. The contents of many of the open sources consulted were verified and inscribed into the visual evidence analysis the digital forensic expert with STJ carried out regarding the Russian air raid on the farmers' market in Idlib.

Legal Opinion

Several legal doctrines intersect upon analyzing drone attacks in Syria under international law, primarily international humanitarian law applicable during armed conflict; State sovereignty and self-defense in line with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter; and the relevant provisions of international human rights law.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

Syria is experiencing several parallel international and non-international armed conflicts, including the non-international armed conflict between Türkiye, on the one hand, and the SDF, comprising the YPG and the YPJ, on the other; and the non-international armed conflict between the HTS and the armed groups of the Syrian National Army on one side, and Syrian and Russian forces on the other.¹ IHL applies to non-international armed conflict and governs the practices of the parties to such conflict irrespective of whether one or all of the parties to the conflict recognize its status; the justification of the conflict as lawful or unlawful; or other labels, such as countering terrorism or self-defense. As long as the necessary and commonly accepted criteria for the classification of a conflict as non-international are in place, the relevant contractual and customary provisions of IHL shall apply. These criteria include the level of organization of non-State armed groups involved in the conflict, the severity and duration of violence, and the territorial scope within the State or across borders.²

The parties to this armed conflict must respect the rules and principles of IHL, particularly military necessity, distinction, proportionality, and precaution, in all their military actions. This applies to the use of drones. Nowhere in its provisions does the IHL ban the use of drones or consider drones per se as prohibited means or methods of war, for drones are not regarded as indiscriminate weapons or as causing superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering. Therefore, the use of drones is subject to the principles of IHL, primarily distinction, which equally applies to the use of any other means or methods of war, such as artillery shelling or airstrikes by the Russian forces documented in this report.

As is well established as an international norm, only military objectives may be targeted during armed conflict, be they individuals or objects. Parties to the conflict must always distinguish between civilians and combatants/fighters and between military objectives and civilian objects. This rule applies to any attack, regardless of its method or means, including drones. When drones are used in hostilities, they must not be used to attack civilian individuals or objects.

Those in control of drone attacks must ensure that targets meet the necessary criteria for attacks against them to be considered legitimate under IHL. They must therefore be either regular combatant members of organized non-State armed groups involved in the conflict,³ or civilians who directly participate in hostilities and for such time they take a direct part in hostilities.⁴ In order to classify targeted individuals as regular members of an organized armed group within the meaning of Article 1(1) of Additional Protocol II, it must first be recalled that "[t]he term organized armed group, however, refers exclusively to the armed or military wing of

¹ For further information on the classification of armed conflicts in Syria and the parties they involve, see: Geneva Academy, RULAC, Syria (Available at: <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/non-international-armed-conflicts-in-syria> ; <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/international-armed-conflict-in-syria> ; <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/military-occupation-of-syria> ; <https://www.rulac.org/browse/conflicts/military-occupation-of-syria-by-israel>).

² For further details, see: Lindsay Moir, *The Law of Internal Armed Conflict*, Cambridge University Press (2002).

³ See: International Institute of Humanitarian Law, *The Manual on the Law of Non-International Armed Conflict*, San Remo (2006), p. 4.

⁴ For detailed analysis and guidelines on direct participation in hostilities, see:

Nils Melzer, *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*, ICRC (2009) (Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0990.pdf>).

a non-State party: its armed forces in a functional sense."⁵ The non-application of this distinction by the attacking party warrants the legitimization of attacks on any person solely for their political affiliation or non-hostile support of a non-State party during the non-international armed conflict. Accordingly, attacks must be exclusively initiated against those with established regular membership in an organized armed group. Membership, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), is characterized by continuous combat function, which requires lasting integration into an organized armed group acting as the armed forces of a non-State party to an armed conflict.⁶

It is well known that the more organized, hierarchical, and responsible a non-State armed group is in terms of command, the more likely it is to have clear signs of regular membership, such as uniforms, distinctive insignia, quality of weapons, points of presence or deployment, well-known commanders, and other criteria that help tell these members with continuous combat function apart from other individuals who may not be targeted in accordance with the distinction principle of IHL. Upon meeting these membership criteria, IHL warrants targeting such members at any time, unlike other individuals, who may from time to time be directly involved in hostilities, and who might be targeted only during such participation. Thus, any individuals who perform non-combat roles, although reflecting an affiliation, inclination, or support of a general service for an organized armed group, may not be targeted, as this distinction is one of the pillars of the protection of civilians, which is at the core of IHL, and has been endorsed by the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions in his study on "targeted killings".⁷

Therefore, drone attacks on AANES employees or any other civilians who do not meet the above classifications cannot be justified, and their killing may amount to a war crime.⁸ Although the targeting of members of the SDF or other non-State armed groups may not be contrary to the principle of distinction, the attacking parties remain obliged to apply the principles of proportionality and precaution in each attack. It is not sufficient for the attack to be directed against these members; collateral damage to civilian objects and incidental civilian casualties must not exceed the anticipated specific and direct military advantage of the attack. Although there is no specific equation for calculating collateral damage in relation to the anticipated military advantage, the attacker must consider the immediate and long-term effects on civilians and take all precautions possible to minimize the damage. For instance, even though drones can be used to target SDF members in their vehicles, the attacking party must seek and evaluate alternative means or methods that provide the same military advantage with less damage to civilians, such as targeting the vehicles in less densely populated areas. Notably, the use of drones with advanced and complex technical capabilities may be interpreted as an indication of the available military and technological ability to collect credible information, monitor and evaluate the anticipated damage to civilians, and choose alternative and less harmful methods accordingly.⁹

⁵ Nils Melzer, Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law, ICRC (2009), p. 32 (Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0990.pdf>).

⁶ Ibid. p. 34.

⁷ Human Rights Council, Report of the Special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Study on targeted killings, A/HRC/14/24/Add.6 (28 May 2010), p. 21.

⁸ Rome Statute, Article 8.2(C)(I).

⁹ Michael N. Schmitt, Precision Attack and International Humanitarian Law, 87 International Review of the Red Cross 445 (Sept. 2005).

State Sovereignty and Self-defense

Before addressing these two overlapping doctrines, it must be reiterated that they fall within the context of the *jus ad bellum* and that, therefore, none of their provisions should affect the operation of the *jus in bello*, which is primarily IHL, as mentioned above. The question of the legality of the targeting of individuals and objects by drones remains limited to the application of the provisions of the IHL.

Under Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, States are prohibited from using force on the territory of another State. In line with this rule, "targeted killings" on the territory of another State may not be considered a violation of its sovereignty if it so agrees or in the context whereby the attacking State is using this force as self-defense in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter if the State—on whose territory the attack is carried out—is responsible for a military attack against the attacking State or is unwilling or unable to stop a military attack against it.

Notwithstanding the controversy as to whether the right of a State to defend itself by force on the territory of another State applies in the case of a military attack by a non-State armed group,¹⁰ it is well established that the invocation of this right needs to prove that the "military attack" has exceeded a high threshold of criteria, since sporadic and low-intensity attacks cannot be considered to be up to the threshold at which the State exposed to such attacks could violate the principle of non-use of force, which is a customary norm, by giving effect to the right to self-defense.¹¹ Accordingly, the preventive pretexts of national security do not amount to a legitimate justification for giving effect to the right to self-defense through the use of force on the territory of another State.¹²

In any event, the attacking State cannot use self-defense claims as justification to violate IHL during the attack. In its controversial advisory opinion,¹³ the International Court of Justice considered that the threat or use of nuclear weapons generally violate IHL, but it could not determine the legality or illegality of such a threat or use in situations of extreme self-defense where the survival of a State is at stake.¹⁴ Within the perspective of this view, any State's appeal to this extremely limited exception in any circumstances in which it claims self-defense is tantamount to warranting negligence and renunciation of the IHL provisions. Self-defense measures are subject to the principle of proportionality, which requires States to use force only in a defensive manner and at the level necessary for defense purposes to counter the attack, for which the right to self-defense has been invoked.¹⁵

¹⁰ Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. reports 2004, p. 136, para. 139.

¹¹ Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2005, p. 168, paras. 106-147.

¹² Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda), Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2005, p. 168, para. 143.

¹³ See, for example: Christopher Greenwood, The Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons and the Contribution of the International Court to International Humanitarian Law, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 316, p. 65 (1997).

¹⁴ Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 1996, p. 226, paras. 95-97.

¹⁵ Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J., Dissenting Opinion of Judge Higgins, para. 5.

Conclusion

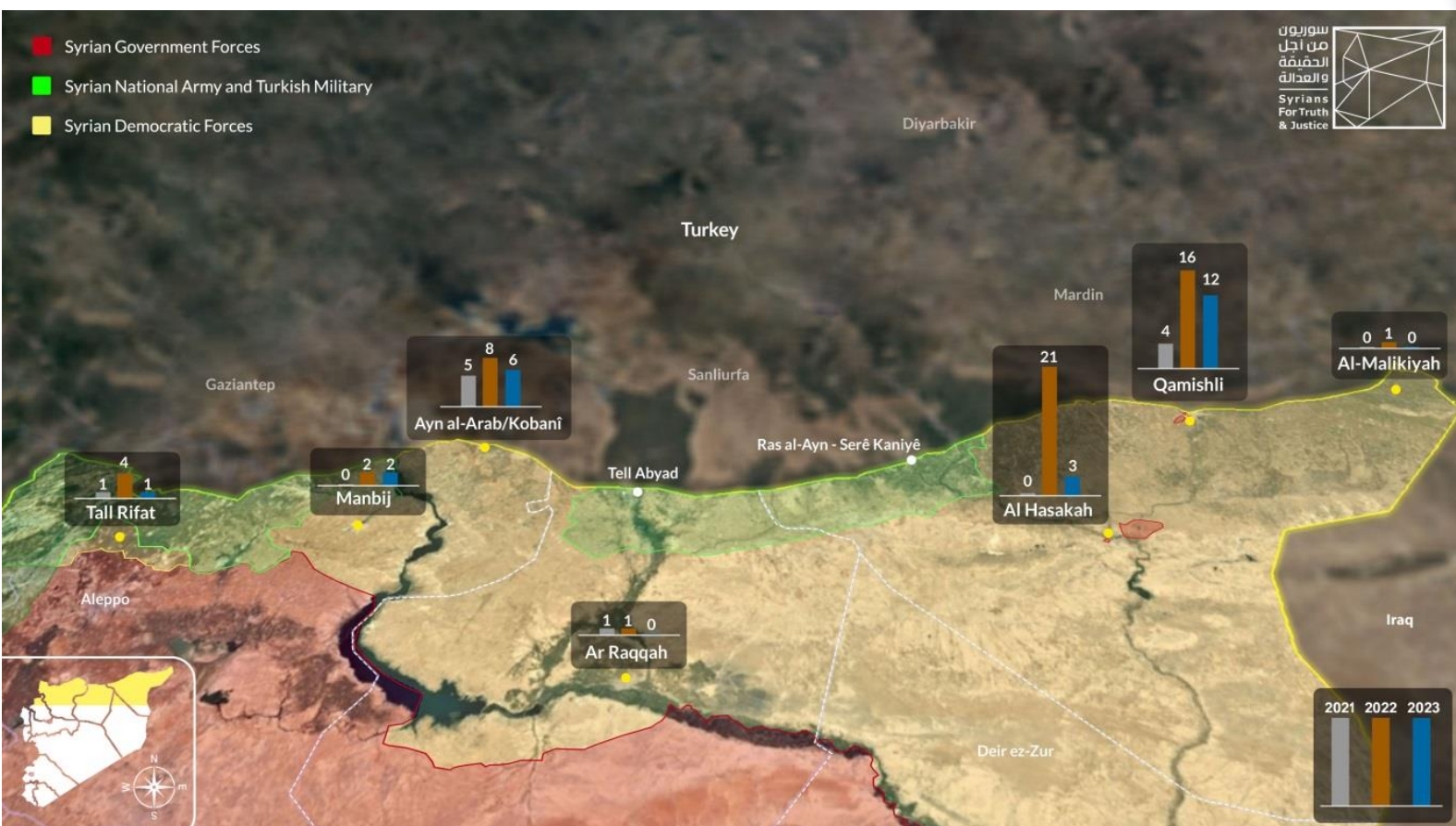
In parallel armed conflicts in Syria, IHL continues to be the primary legal system that must be adhered to by all parties, in addition to the provisions of international human rights law that must remain applicable even in armed conflicts. Therefore, the exercise of self-defense legal frameworks does not eliminate, replace, or authorize the violation of the law in effect during armed conflict. Moreover, allegations of safeguarding national security and preventive response to so-called "terrorism" are not considered a legal justification for the use of force on the territory of another State because they do not meet the level of danger and severity required to give effect to the right of self-defense and the use of force.

In view of the practices documented in the report, the emphasis must remain on the fact that the use of drones and other means and methods of war by Türkiye and Russia must be subject to the provisions of IHL, in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. The targeting of individuals on the basis of their political affiliation or civilian function for the benefit of a non-State actor is contrary to the essence of IHL, which is aimed at protecting civilians by distinguishing them from combatants. The targeting of civilian objects simply because they are suspected of being used for military purposes without the required standards of proportionality and precaution also exposes the entire doctrine of laws of war to the risk of violation by all parties and causes unnecessary harm and loss to civilians.

Turkish Drone Attacks in AANES-Held Areas

The 92 drone strikes STJ monitored over the stated duration are distributed as follows:

- **In 2021**, STJ recorded **13** attacks: **six** in al-Hasakah province, particularly in Qamishli/Qamishlu city; **six** in Aleppo, mostly in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî; and **one** in Raqqqa province. The strikes killed at least **21** people and injured **eight** others. The deaths included five civilians, one PYD staff member, and 15 SDF fighters, while all the injured were civilians.
- **In 2022**, STJ recorded **54** attacks: **38** in al-Hasakah province, particularly in Qamishli/Qamishlu city; **15** in Aleppo, eight of which were carried out in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî, four in Tell Rifaat, two in Manbij, and one in A'zaz; and **one** in Raqqqa province. The drone strikes killed at least **32** people and wounded **36** others. Among the dead were 11 civilians, including five young girls, five Asayish members, four SDF fighters, two YPG fighters, seven YPJ fighters, and three PKK staff members. As for the wounded, 25 are civilians, among them a little girl and three women at least, eight Asayish members, and three members of the Syrian government forces.
- **From early 2023 to mid-August**, STJ recorded **25** attacks: **15** in al-Hasakah province, particularly in Qamishli/Qamishlu city; **10** in Aleppo, six of which were carried out in Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî, one in Tell Rifaat, two in Manbij, and one in A'zaz. These drone strikes killed at least **30** people and injured **11** others. Among the dead were five civilians, including three AANES employees, 14 SDF fighters, five YPG fighters, one YPJ fighter, one staff member of the Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist-Leninist, and four members of the Syrian government forces. The wounded included four civilians, among them one AANES employee, two Asayish members, two YPG fighters, and four SDF fighters.



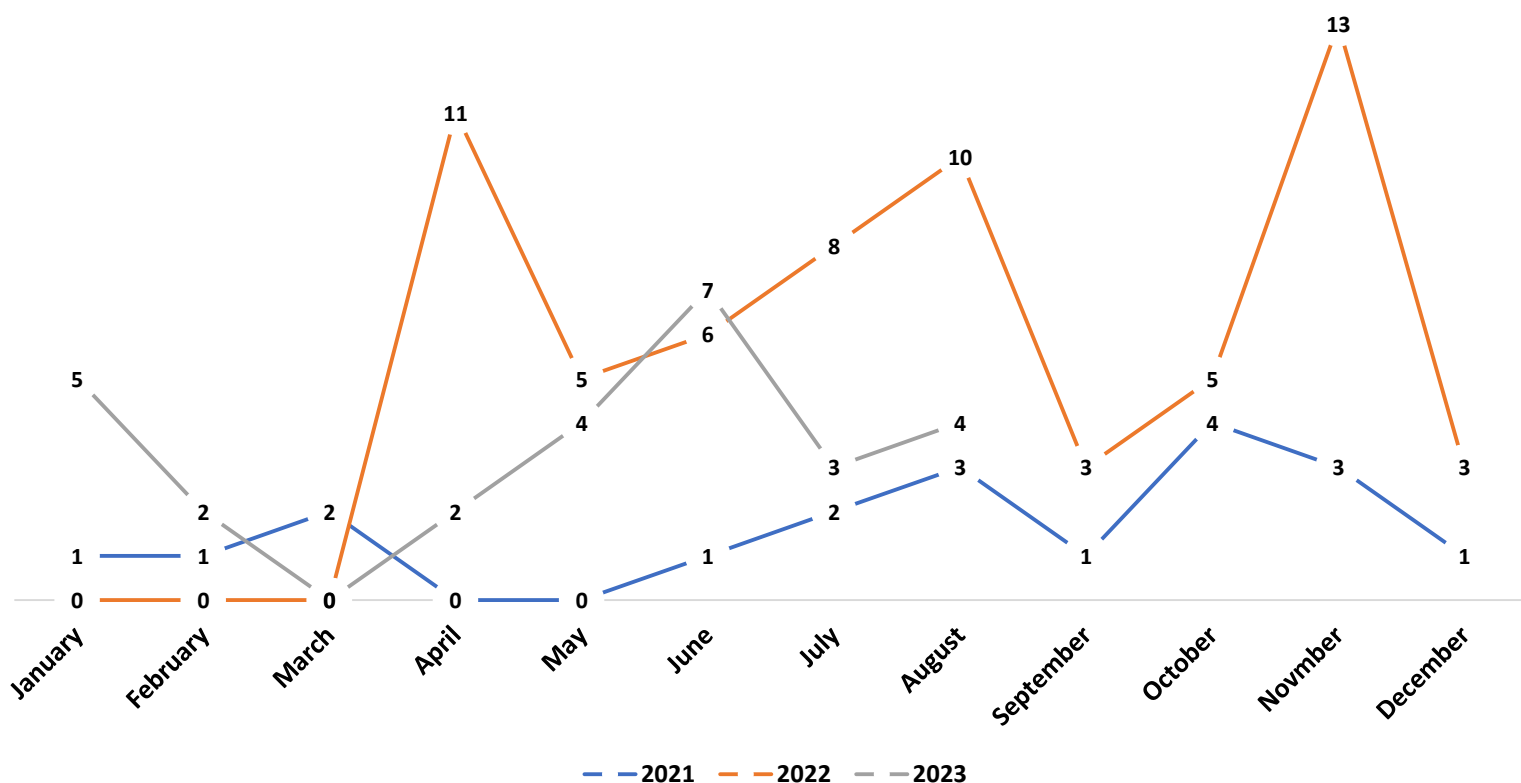
Map illustrating Turkish drone attacks in north-eastern Syria, marking the locations hit between 2021 and mid-August 2023

At odds with Türkiye's allegations, both the statistics listed above and the information STJ collected for this report demonstrate that Turkish drone attacks in north-eastern Syria—several of which have taken a toll on civilians—are a systematic and widespread attack against AANES affiliates, let them be civilian employees, Asayish members, or SDF fighters.

Türkiye launches drone attacks in north-eastern Syria on the [pretext](#) of "combating terrorism and maintaining national security". However, several of these attacks targeted members of the "Internal Security Forces" (Asayish), even though these forces are assigned only domestic and non-military [duties](#) across the AANES-held areas, including "maintaining public order, civil peace, and social security, as well as providing their needed conducive conditions; preserving civil institutions; defending the public and private property of the community; and combating terrorism and acts that undermine internal security."

Notably, Türkiye escalated its "[drone war](#)" in north-eastern Syria after it was [warned against](#) launching its fourth invasion into the region in May 2022. Several actors involved in the Syrian issue, primarily the U.S., Iran, and Russia, opposed the intended military operation; in response, Türkiye turned drone strikes into its new [strategy](#) to spread terror within the communities across north-eastern Syria and repeatedly target the local partners of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

TABLE AGGREGATING TURKISH DRONE ATTACKS IN NORTH-EASTERN SYRIA BY YEAR



In response to the drone attacks, in December 2020, US Colonel, Myles B Caggins, who was spokesperson for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2019 to 2020, [said](#): "[A]t a minimum, these attacks by Türkiye are a distraction from the fight against ISIS. But, even worse, these attacks can be harmful against the mission to defeat ISIS, especially when the attacks from Türkiye kill the YPG/YPJ who are responsible for fighting ISIS." He added that the raids "are harming hundreds of thousands of civilians who've become refugees and displaced persons because of the damage and fear from Türkiye's attacks."

Additionally, the U.S. Department of State addressed the Turkish drone attacks in north-eastern Syria during two press briefings this month. In a session held on 14 August, the Principal Deputy Spokesperson for the Department, Vedant Patel, [confirmed](#) that "[the U.S. does] not greenlight or otherwise provide permission for Turkish operations."

In a previous briefing on 9 August, Matthew Miller, Spokesperson for Department, [said](#): "[T]he United States remains concerned about the increase in violence in northern Syrian, in particular the impact it's had on the civilian population and the effectiveness of our operations to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS."

He added: "Our position on this matter has not changed. We continue to support the maintenance of the current ceasefire lines and condemn any escalation. It is crucial for all sides to maintain and respect ceasefire zones to enhance stability in Syria and work toward a political solution to the conflict," stressing that the U.S. will continue to consult with Türkiye closely on policy.

Capturing the views of another Coalition State member, the *al-Nahar* newspaper [quoted](#) high-ranking French and Kurdish sources, who expressed France's concerns regarding the increasing Turkish drone strikes in north-eastern Syria, especially since the raids have started to target "female civil and governmental leaders." The sources said France "fears the attacks will cause the situation to spiral out of control, which might pose a serious threat to French and European national security in general."

The newspaper also channeled the French side's skepticism of the effectiveness of the U.S. policy and "its ability to strike a 'constant balance' between Türkiye and the SDF, through preventing Türkiye from embarking on a full-scale ground war on north-eastern Syria, in return for permitting it to launch airstrikes and operations against fighters in the region."

In the same vein, the Washington Institute issued a [report](#) in early 2023 criticizing "U.S. passivity in the face of Turkish aggression against northern Syria." The report emphasizes that "[i]t is unacceptable to have any ongoing threat at the northern border against the SDF given that these forces are combating ISIS and protecting more than four million people in the eastern Euphrates region."

The report also stressed that the U.S.'s "potential subsequent shift towards other partners would clearly undermine U.S. strategy in Syria, raising questions about the objectives of the U.S. presence there and weakening the focus on preventing terrorist groups from taking hold once again." Additionally, the report highlighted the repercussions the Turkish drone strikes are giving rise to on a civilian level, as they "undermine the local economy, destabilize security, and inflict casualties." Among the drone casualties are children, including four whose tragic stories were [narrated](#) by *al-Monitor*.

Major Drone Attacks

On 20 June 2023, the Turkish military carried out one of the year's most reported drone strikes, which killed two AANES civilian officials and their driver. The drone [hit](#) their car in Beyandru village, east of Qamishli/Qamishlu city.

The killed officials were identified as the Co-chair of the Qamishli Region Administrative Council, Yusra Darwish, her deputy, Liman Shwaish, and their driver, Furat Touma. The attack also injured the co-chair of the council, Gabi Shamoun. The group was on a field trip to AANES institutions in the area.

Several local media outlets described Darwish and Shwaish as among the leading figures of the Kurdish civil and feminist movements. In an [interview](#) with *North Press*, Yusra's husband shed light on his wife's career, especially her role as a Kurdish language tutor and her contribution to the institutionalization of Kurdish and the administration of its schools in Amuda city. The bereaved husband is quoted as asking, "My wife is a civilian. She works within social departments that serve people. She does not carry arms and does not fight. Why are civilians targeted so barbarically?"

For a first-hand account of the attack, STJ reached out to the Co-Chair of the Qamishli Council, Ghabi Shamoun. As the sole survivor, Shamoun narrated the following:

"On Tuesday, 20 June 2023, at around 11:30 a.m., my colleagues Yusra Darwish, Co-chair of the Qamishli Region, Liman Shwaish, Deputy Co-Chair, and I, with our driver Furat Touma, left Tall Sha'ir village in Qamishli's suburbs, in the Jeep I am assigned. We had just finished a field trip to the Helwa Village Council, located in Tall Sha'ir. The visit

was strictly business. [We drove for] nearly a kilometer. I was in the front passenger seat, looking back, and chatting with my colleagues. I heard an intense sound and felt something leaning on me and pressing me. For a moment, I thought we had an accident and crashed into a car, which caused the airbag to inflate. However, once the car stopped off the road, I understood that martyr Furat had pumped into me due to the injury he directly sustained from the drone's shell."

The witness added:

"I was able to get out of the car right away, and I immediately tried to remove Furat's body, but his body was too heavy and stuck. I had lost my strength due to the trauma. Meanwhile, my colleagues Yusra and Liman in the backseat had no signs of injury or blood stains. They collapsed behind the front seats and appeared to have lost their consciousness. The car's glass was shattered. I tried to unlock the doors, but to no avail. The doors on the driver's side had caved in [and were jammed]. The car's base caught on fire. I tried to pull the martyr Yusra's body through the rear side window but could not. I attempted to open the other rear door; however, its handle was broken."

The witness added:

"When I lost all hope because the fire was raging and the situation was extremely challenging, I called for help from the harvest workers who gathered 50 meters away. A few approached, and just then, two successive shells landed 20 meters away from the car. The workers escaped. Then, I called [a colleague] to dispatch a fire truck. Even though the fire truck reached the location in less than 15 minutes, the fire had already consumed the car entirely. After the fire engine arrived, the dead bodies were recovered and taken to a hospital in al-Qahtaniya. I had minor injuries. However, the psychological impact was far more severe than the physical injury."

The two shells dropped by the drone impeded the rescue of the injured, resulting in their deaths by fire.

The source described the nature of the tasks he and his deceased co-workers were assigned:

"I had assumed the co-chairmanship of the region late in February, and martyr Yusra had taken over several months earlier. We follow up on the work of town and district councils, which in turn supervise the work of communes (the smallest administrative unit to run a district, village, or group of neighbourhoods). We have committees specializing in all areas of the civil service. We have the Water Committee, the Health Committee, the Women's Committee, and the Youth Committee, among others related to civilian life. We are directly responsible for the city and town district councils. We are associated with AANES's Executive Council in the Jazira Canton. In preparation for wheat field fires, fire trucks were dispatched throughout the countryside, and a fire station was established near the village."

STJ contacted one of the harvest laborers mentioned by the source. He confirmed the account of the source and stated that he and other nearby workers were unable to rescue the wounded because the drone struck the car's perimeter twice after the initial attack. The witness narrated:

"On Tuesday, 20 June 2023, at approximately 11:30 a.m., a group of young men and I were harvesting a wheat field in Tall Sha'ir village in Qamishli when a Santa Fe-type car was targeted while leaving the village. Only 150 meters separated us from the vehicle. Initially, we heard a tremendous noise. However, we were uncertain as to its origin. After a minute or so, we heard another sound. We approached the road and found a car on fire. As soon as we headed towards the car to rescue its passengers, the drone fired a third shell. It fell into the vicinity of the car. We retraced our steps out of fear of being targeted if we approached the car. In addition to the workers operating the harvesters nearby, there were many civilians from Tall Sha'ir."

The witness added:

"The drone launched a missile that hit the driver's side of the car. The second and third missiles were warning shots. They were dropped from an unobserved aircraft, whose hum, however, could still be heard. As if the drone was attempting to prevent us from reaching the car. The car burned for more than 15 minutes. We only approached it after the fire truck arrived. We found three charred and unidentifiable bodies—two in the backseat and the third, of the driver, in the front seat. The driver's legs were restrained, and his upper body was leaning against the passenger seat, causing his body to be in an inclined position. When we approached the vehicle, one of the passengers was standing next to it. He was significantly shaken and suffered from minor facial injuries. I heard him say that the driver's body catapulted him out of the car during the blast. He appeared well and was able to use the phone. The others could have been saved if we had been able to reach them before the car caught fire. "

The witness said the attack wreaked havoc on the site:

"Horror spread across the nearby area. Business in the village stopped, as did the harvesters and the workers in the fields and groves. The road is usually the busiest at this time of the year. However, silence prevailed."

This attack took place only four days after another Turkish drone [targeted](#) a vehicle east of Qamishli/Qamishlu on 16 June 2023. The attack killed four SDF fighters and injured a number of civilians in the area.

For additional information on this attack, STJ reached out to a source who relayed the account of one of the strike's survivors. The source confirmed that several civilians who happened to be in the area at the time of the attack were injured and that many of them also suffered material losses. This source narrated:

"On 14 June 2023, at approximately 2:30 p.m., I was at home when I learned that a Turkish drone had bombed a car near the Qamishli Canteen on the Qamishli-Malikiya road, located 8 kilometer from the entrance to Qamishli. The canteen is a small shop facing the street, and it has a backdoor that connects to a space with chairs and tables to accommodate customers. Because my home is close, I reached the location in 10 minutes. Jalal Safo (one of the canteen's owners) and Sa'ad Moustapha Ismail survived. They escaped through the canteen's backdoor after they saw a car on the road being targeted and then crashing into Sa'ad's car, parked in front of the canteen at the time."

The source added:

"A white Avante-type car, carrying four people, was heading from Qamishli to al-Malikiya. A Turkish drone struck the car before it reached the canteen on the main road. It drifted off the road to the right and kept going for about 100 meters until it collided into Sa'ad Mustafa Ismail's car in front of the canteen. After one and a half minutes, the drone hit the car's hood. After a comparable interval, the drone dropped a shell that landed to the left of the two cars. Shrapnel spread in the direction of the canteen. The body parts of the four people in the targeted car were scattered. However, thank God the car did not explode."

The source added that the Turkish drone attack injured at least two civilians:

"A civilian minibus was on the main road, headed towards Qamishli, when the first shell hit the car. Shrapnel shattered the minibus's glass and punctured a number of its parts. The driver's hand was injured by shrapnel. When the third shell went off, it also hit a taxi driver, leaving him with shrapnel in his face and eye. He was heading in the direction of al-Qamishli. The car was hit by shrapnel, which destroyed its windows."

On material damage, the source added:

"Sa'ad Mustafa Ismail's car was damaged. He completed its maintenance today. It (cost him) approximately 3,000 USD. A wall across from the canteen collapsed, and the canteen's glass front shattered. [The canteen owners'] losses amounted to at least 300 USD. If the canteen had not had a backdoor, Jalal Safo and Sa'ad Ismail would have been injured in the accident."

The source highlighted the overwhelming effect drone attacks have on the local community, especially the lingering anxiety that continues to hamper the people's lives:

"People are scared of walking the streets due to repeated drone attacks. It might happen any moment; you cannot be sure; a car gets hit, and you fall victim, even though you have nothing to do with the incident."

STJ communicated with one of the civilians injured in the strikes following the initial attack on the car. The witness had shrapnel injuries across his body. He narrated:

"On 14 June 2023, I was in the car dealership where I work with my cousin, in the offices' area east of Qamishli. My cousin had purchased a car from customers from Kardim village in al-Qahtaniyah/Terbasbiyah town and had agreed to drive them to the village. On the way back and before I got to the Qamishli canteen, 8 kilometers away from the entrance to Qamishli, I saw a minibus from afar and two cars in front of the canteen. I expected it to be a car accident. I parked in front of the canteen about 10 meters from the two cars and advanced to help the injured. However, I saw body remnants in the Santa Fe-type car's front and back seats. I then realized that it was a drone attack."

The witness added:

"I had to get away quickly. Nevertheless, I had walked only several meters when the third shell landed. I had shrapnel in my shoulder and chest. A splinter injured the edge of my eye, and another broke four of my lower front teeth. I also had shrapnel under my left knee. [My car's] windshield was broken. Shrapnel had hit it extensively. A car helped me after I left my car there. So far, my material losses have been about 1,000

USD, including 400 USD for the maintenance of the car that I had. My teeth need to be treated."

To capture the suffering of civilians in the region, who continue to grapple with the consequences of unabating drone attacks, STJ contacted a witness who is still fighting to resume normal life after he survived a drone attack on al-Sina'a neighbourhood in Qamishli/Qamishlu city on 6 August 2022. The attack killed the witness's teenage son and robbed him of his livelihood. He narrated:

"At about 5:30 p.m., I was in my house in the A'ntariya district east of Qamishli. My son Ahmed, who worked in a car repair shop near mine, where I sold spare parts for agricultural machinery in the industrial district, came in and told me that customers were asking for spare parts. When we arrived at the shop, I saw a Honda-type car parked right in front of my shop, only one and a half meters from the door. I talked to the driver. He stood next to another person. I asked him what he needed. He wanted a piece I did not have. At that exact moment, I heard a whistling sound in the sky. I looked up at the sky and saw an object like a plastic bag. I concentrated, and the object turned out to be a missile changing its direction towards us. I shouted, 'Get down!'".

The witness added:

"I was not fast enough. I was immediately injured. After the dust cleared, I saw that my intestines were outside my belly. My left leg was broken. My leg bones were fractured into little pieces, and the veins were ruptured. I looked around and saw the body of my son (17) sprawled on the floor, along with the body of Ahnek (15), my cousin's son, and the body of a friend, whose name was Shamdeen. Ahnek used to work for me. He was in ninth grade and played football with a local team."

The witness added:

"Some of the neighbours had shrapnel injuries. It was Saturday, and the attack occurred at about 6:00 p.m. The shops had begun to close. Had the attack happened on another day, dozens would have died. My shop was extensively damaged. I lost all the items in the warehouse. I sold a piece of land and my car and received treatment in Damascus for two months. It cost me nearly 165 million Syrian pounds. Two days ago, I pulled shrapnel out of my chest, and there are still about 60 fragments in my body. Every time a fragment nears the skin surface, I have to visit a doctor to get it out. This costs about 350,000 Syrian pounds each time. Shrapnel are small metal balls."

The witness added:

"The attack affected me and my family very deeply, as it has turned our lives upside down. I lost the most precious thing I had, my son Ahmed. I lost my store. Despite the time that has passed, the shop remains unrepaired. My finances have declined dramatically. I was doing very well, and now I am struggling with debt. On the same day of the attack, Shamdeen's wife gave birth to triplets at one of the city's hospitals. Whenever I hear that a drone hit a car, I remember the whistling and those moments when I lost my son, friend, and cousin. I understand the suffering of the injured and their relatives; I lived it, and I know how painful it is."

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic documented this drone attack in its March 2023 [report](#). The Commission highlighted that "the attack occurred in a densely populated neighbourhood of Qamishli. The presence of civilians at the chosen time and location of the attack should normally have been observable by drone. Therefore, Turkish Armed Forces may have failed to take all feasible precautions to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects."

Additionally, the Commission linked its findings on this attack to its August 2018 [report](#), saying: "In conducting airstrikes beginning on 20 January, the Turkish air force may have failed to take all feasible precautions prior to launching certain attacks, in violation of international humanitarian law."

Notably, drone attacks are an extension of the multiple invasions the Turkish military carried out in the AANES-held regions, most of which were former Kurdish-majority areas. The last of these incursions was Operation Claw-Sword in parts of Syria and Iraq, launched on 20 November 2022.

In Syria, the Turkish air force carried out a series of airstrikes on dozens of critical sites in the north-eastern territories, using aircraft and drones. In a January 2023 [report](#), STJ documented how the airstrikes injured and killed civilians, among them a journalist, destroyed oil infrastructure and terminals, and rendered several other energy facilities in the area inoperable.

In a [report](#) on the same incursion, Human Rights Watch said: "Turkish airstrikes since November 20, 2022, are inflicting damage on densely populated areas and critical infrastructure across north and northeast Syria and exacerbating an already catastrophic humanitarian crisis for Kurds, Arabs, and other communities in the region."

At the time, Adam Coogle, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, emphasized that "Türkiye can, and should, ensure that its military actions do not further aggravate northeast Syria's humanitarian and displacement crises," adding that "Türkiye's international allies should press the government to ensure that its campaign does not put Syrians' basic rights at risk."

Airstrikes in HTS-held Areas

Russian military escalation in north-western Syria led to the failure of two Astana-governed agreements in Idlib province—the entirety of which is controlled by the HTS today. Türkiye and Russia geared the 1st session of the Astana Talks in January 2017 towards [sustaining](#) a ceasefire they proposed on 28 December 2016 and applied in the same month. The ceasefire did not hold, undermined by repeated violations.

The ceasefire developed into the "de-escalation zones" [agreement](#), signed by Türkiye, Russia, and Iran during the 4th Session of the Astana talks, held on 4 May 2017. Idlib was the largest area covered by this trilateral agreement.

Countless [breaches](#) by the Russia-backed Syrian government forces ended the de-escalation agreement in Idlib. The agreement disintegrated after the government forces controlled the cities of Khan Shaykhun, Saraqib, and Ma'arat al-Nu'man. In 2020, Idlib became subject to the Russia-Türkiye Moscow Agreement, signed in the aftermath of fierce battles between the Turkish military and the Syrian government forces.

However, the extensive Russian air raids continue to threaten the existing agreement, amidst fears that the end of the ceasefire would open the door to a military operation by the Syrian government forces. The anticipated operation remains a source of instability for north-western Syria's local population. *The New Arab* media outlet [registered](#) the concerns of locals in the area, who fear that the Syrian government forces will control new swathes in Idlib, which will induce fresh waves of displacement.

On 5 August 2023, Idlib suffered the most recent Russian airstrike after the Astana talks. The raid [targeted](#) farmlands and civilian structures on the road connecting Idlib city and Ayn Sheeb village. The strike killed three civilians and injured six others.



Image (1)-Screenshot from a [video](#) published by the White Helmets, documenting the Russian airstrike on the road between Idlib city and Ayn Sheeb village.

This air raid was the second to kill civilians in Idlib after the strike on the farmers' market on June 25, [described](#) as the "bloodiest" in 2023.

The Russian Airstrike on the Framers' Market

For details on the attack, STJ reached out to an Idlib-based media worker. The source said he arrived at the market half an hour after the attack and described the situation he came to witness as "insane". The source recounted:

"On the same day [of the attack on the market], Idlib and its suburbs witnessed several airstrikes. First, and through the walkie-talkie, I heard that a warplane had kicked off towards Idlib. Then I saw the city of Jisr al-Shughour and its center being bombarded. I was on the city's outskirts and immediately left for the location of the shelling. I identified the hit site as the city's market. The situation was disastrous and tragic. The market was an empty lot. The locals rehabilitated it and transformed it into a marketplace, where they gathered food products for Jisr al-Shughour's residents. Cars loaded with merchandise park in the market and sell their goods to residents, including vegetables, clothes, and almost everything else. There are also many stalls. According to one of the vendor's accounts, the strike hit at the busiest time of the day."

The source added:

"The Russian aircraft targeted the market directly with missiles. Based on my observations and experience, the missiles were thermobaric. Missiles and stone shrapnel, as well as pressure, killed and injured many people. A significant number of those killed died on the spot and turned into pieces. I also learned that one of the people injured was maimed. The rest of the injuries I observed were shrapnel wounds that [people] sustained in the arms, legs, abdomen, and back areas. I personally managed to count at least 30 wounded people who were transferred to makeshift clinics. I saw three serious cases from the airstrike on the market. They were all admitted to the operations room in Idlib's hospital. Of course, during the entire time that the wounded were being transported, the Russian aircraft remained in the air."

On the material damage, the source said:

"The missiles caused losses to all vendors present, based on their proximity to the location of the strike. A few cars and the goods they carried were almost entirely damaged. The [cars' owners] thus lost their trade and livelihood that once supported their children. Some other cars were less damaged. All those in the market were certainly affected, albeit to varying degrees. Multiple cars burned down or were destroyed, not to mention the many that were [partially] damaged. I am unsure about the exact number of cars that were on the market, but definitely there were no less than 50."

The source said that the shelling on the farmers' market was preceded by airstrikes on the outskirts of Ariha city and earlier raids in Idlib's vicinity. He narrated:

"A White Helmets volunteer told me the attack on Jisr al-Shugour was a double tap. Russian aircraft hit the area twice. One of the airstrikes targeted the Industrial School in Jisr al-Shugour, destroying an entire section of it. As I observed, the school has three sections. There was no one within the school [during the attack]. If there had been students, teachers, or displaced people living in the school, there would have been a much larger massacre. The school is out of service because one of its three sections was decimated, while the other two were damaged due to pressure and shrapnel. The strike on the school also catapulted stone shrapnel towards the market because the market was adjacent to the school's wall. You can imagine the situation given the location."

The source's account intersects with the analysis STJ's digital forensic expert carried out of open-source visuals of the air raid on the market. The analysis corroborated Russia's involvement in the airstrike and the attack on the school cited by the source.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that the Russian warplanes targeted a facility on the [pretext](#) that it "was used for military purposes by the HTS." The Russian military carried out the attack without considering the large and active civilian assembly near the school or even taking the necessary precautions to spare civilians the harm or minimize it, which ultimately led to nine deaths.

According to the analysis, the airstrike targeted a former vocational school approximately 2 kilometers southeast of Jisr al-Shugour (Geolocation: [35.798827](#), [36.333741](#)). Moreover, the airstrike occurred while a vegetable market was being held 20-30 meters southeast of the targeted school.

All local sources identified Russia as the party responsible, and a Russian plane was [reported](#) in the area at the exact time of the strike (10:08 local time).



Image (2)- Screenshot of the tweet [reporting](#) a Russian plane at the airstrike's exact time.

Several days later, drone [footage](#) of the strike was published to Twitter by a pro-government/Russia [account](#), claiming the building targeted was an HTS ammo depot. The footage of the airstrike shows a secondary explosion but this claim remains unverified (images 3-4-5). A large portion of the targeted building collapsed (images 6-7-8).

The drone footage also shows the ongoing vegetable market located just southeast of the building. Many of the same civilian vehicles can be seen in both the drone footage and imagery captured after the attack (images 9-10).





Images (3& 4& 5)-Satellite images of the targeted site matched with the drone [footage](#) and [photos](#) published by local sources.





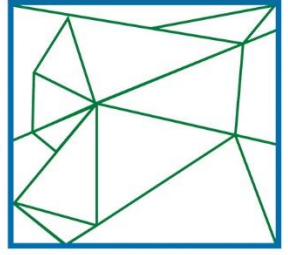
Images (6& 7& 8)-Satellite images of the targeted site matched with live [footage](#) published by local sources.





Images (9&10)-Live [photos](#) published by local sources matched with the [drone](#) footage.

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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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