



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandinê û Azadiya Derbirinê
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

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I. Introduction

1. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) data indicates that the number of Syrian casualties since the start of the Russian intervention in Syria on September 30, 2015, has reached about 6,193 people, composed of 5,974 civilians and 219 combatants who died mainly because of air, artillery and missile strikes. The SCM data shows that the killed civilians are 3,512 men and 941 women and 925 male, and 596 female children. Six thousand sixty-two victims were killed in the Russian air strikes, and 57 victims because of artillery and missile strikes.
2. Emergency personnel, as well as hospitals, were also targeted with missiles, barrel bombs, as well as cluster and vacuum munitions. Amnesty International has commented on the shelling of hospitals in the northern countryside of Aleppo, and Médecins Sans Frontier (MSF) issued a report on the bombing of one of the field hospitals they support in the area. Among the many violations included in previous reports on Russian attacks inside Syria, The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) has monitored grave violations regarding Russia's targeting of vital facilities.¹

II. Russian airstrikes in Syria

3. On September 30, 2015, Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson Major General Igor Konashenkov publicly announced the beginning of a Russian offensive against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), claiming that: "Russian aerospace force jets delivered pinpoint strikes on eight ISIS terror group targets in Syria. In total, 20 flights were made."²
4. According to the SCM Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), the attacks were launched on the southern entrance to the Zaafaraneh village in the countryside of Homs ", said Abu Adnan," specifically on four adjacent civilian houses. In each air strike, the village was shelled with what seemed to be six vacuum missiles. They did not, however, cause the usual dust explosion. Instead, fire and black smoke followed the explosions. There were neither military locations nor an ISIS presence in the targeted area. Fourteen were instantly killed, and thirty others were injured in the two strikes.³
5. The VDC's field correspondent in the northern suburbs of Homs asserted that the Russian air raids on September 30, 2015, targeted civilians. According to him: "Russian warplanes, likely Sukhoi jets, targeted the southern entrance to Rastan city at about 11:30 am, destroying a simple house for civilians of the Al-Taweel family, causing the death of six civilians and injuring several others, although the area had no military significance". "Moreover, there is

¹ *Ibid.*

² Russian Airstrikes in Syria: "Shelling of Civilian Homes in the Northern Suburbs of Homs" Flash Report. Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), September 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

no ISIS presence in Al Rastan.⁴

6. On Friday, November 13, Russian fighter jets launched airstrikes on the ASIA Pharmaceutical Industries factory in the northern countryside of Aleppo, targeting it with five vacuum missiles and destroying much of the building along with the machinery inside. No casualties were reported. This factory is one of the giant factories in the governorate of Aleppo. It produces medicine that is difficult to find in opposition-controlled areas, such as hormonal and neural drugs.⁵
7. On Wednesday, November 25, Russian warplanes targeted a relief office housing humanitarian aid for displaced people. According to eyewitness Mouhammad Hanzal, the shelling targeted the relief office at Azaz Roundabout near the city's grand mosque, which is purely a civilian area with no military presence. According to the VDC documentation, the Russian shelling destroyed the office and killed four civilians (: Mouhammad Abdul Ghani Darweesh, Hussein Hasan Al-Khalaf, Shadi Khaled Suleiman, and Ammar Al-Mousa).⁶
8. On Sunday, November 29, 2015, Russian fighter jets launched several airstrikes on Azaz City, specifically on the road connecting the city with the border crossing of Bab al-Salama. Three highly explosive vacuum rockets struck a garage for cargo cars, trucks, and a gas station, causing the station and its fuel tanks to explode. Five civilians were killed in the attack. The VDC confirmed three names of whom: Ahmad Matar Al-Zaghir, Eleiwi Mouhammad Al-Sanad, and Bilal Al-Daqqa, and two victims. Furthermore, ten people were also injured in the attack, and several trucks carrying goods were set alight in the blaze.⁷
9. The Russian bombardment was not limited to targeting civilians and infrastructure but also targeted hospitals. On Friday, December 25, 2015, Russian warplanes targeted the Maternity Hospital and Eye Hospital in Azaz with five airstrikes, also shelling the city's main square, which lies inside a residential district. The extent of the damage caused to both hospitals was so large that they could no longer continue their services. The shelling also set fire to several cars and caused heavy damage to nearby residential buildings. VDC documented the deaths of 12 civilians in the attack, including an entire family: Seven adult males were killed in the strike: Ali Mahmoud Naaso, Ahmad al-Sheikh, Oqba Hajola, Anas Najjar, Ibrahim Moustafa Aqqash, Awash Dahilik, and Mouhanad Rina.⁸
10. The VDC documented 120 attacks on Aleppo City and its surrounding areas during 21-26 September 2016. These attacks resulted in the killing of 369 civilians, including 16 humanitarian and aid workers. On September 21, volunteers from the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) attacked Aleppo City and workers in the Union of Medical Care and Relief

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Our Lives Under Russian Attack. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Organizations (UOSSM) in Khan Toman. The VDC also documented the killing of 254 civilians due to the Russian assaults, including 28 children.⁹

11. In April 2019, the Syrian government and its ally, Russia, launched a major military offensive to retake the Idlib governorate and surrounding areas in northwest Syria— one of the last areas controlled by anti-government armed groups. Over the next 11 months, the Syrian-Russian alliance showed callous disregard for the lives of the area's roughly 3 million displaced civilians. The coalition launched dozens of air and ground attacks on civilian objects and infrastructure, violating the laws of war, and striking homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and markets. They used cluster munitions, incendiary weapons, and improvised “barrel bombs” in populated areas to deadly effect. The attacks killed at least 1,600 civilians, destroyed, and damaged civilian infrastructure, and displaced an estimated 1.4 million people.¹⁰

III. Recruitment of Mercenaries

12. The humanitarian suffering from the ongoing conflict across Syria makes mercenaries attractive for financial gain for many young Syrians who have grown up in extended war and displacement conditions. The economic desperation among young people and their families has driven many individuals to enlist for combat abroad.

13. Testimony 1

The SCM has documented dozens of testimonies regarding the Russian recruitment of Syrian mercenaries. The SCM Violation and Documentation Center (VDC) obtained in October 2020 testimony regarding recruitments in Der Ezzor, which stated:

“The first center for recruiting volunteers was opened in Al-Mayadeen and the Al-Arba’een neighborhood of Deir Ezzor to recruit those who wish to volunteer to go to Libya to fight alongside the Russian-backed forces to be recommended by a specific person from the area. Usually, this person has a connection to one of the security branches. He requests that the volunteer bring a person with him to act as his representative in receiving his benefits in case he is killed. This is what the Russians tell the people of the region, and the recruits received from Russia cards on which was written an “external mission card.”

The witness told the SCM: *“Those who recommend recruiting people are Abd Al-Hadi Al-Lafi, Abd Al-Aziz Al-Hassan, and Tayseer Al-Zaher (he was killed in the desert in a mine explosion while he was accompanying a Russian general in August 2020).”*

He also mentioned to the SEM: *“In the beginning, the news was spread such as that the salaries paid to fighters in Libya ranged between 1,200 and 2,000 dollars. Therefore, many people*

⁹ Who kills civilians in Syria? Violation and Documentation Center (VDC), September 28, 2016. Accessed on March 13, 2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3YNCI7g>.

¹⁰ Targeting life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure. Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2020. Accessed on March 13, 2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3YDvRYI>.

returned from Lebanon to volunteer after they were tempted by the high salaries and believed that. They were immediately transferred to Hmeimim. Later they were taken to camps in Homs and Palmyra, where they were assembled. More than two months ago, a center was opened in the city of Deir Ezzor, in the suburb, and worked according to recommendations of people from the area."

- 14.** The first center for volunteering and recruitment was opened in Al-Mayadeen and the Al-Arba'een neighborhood of Deir Ezzor. It is required to accept those who wish to volunteer to go to Libya to fight alongside the Russian-backed forces to be recommended by a specific person from the area, usually. This person has a connection to one of the security branches as well. He requests that the volunteer bring a person with him to act as his representative in receiving his dues if he is killed, and this is according to what the Russians say to the people of the region and the recruits received from Russia cards on which was written an "external mission card."
- 15.** In relying on Syrian mercenaries to intervene in conflicts in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Russia has depended on the networks of armed groups and labor brokers that both governments had cultivated in Syria in the preceding years. While the intended purpose of recruitment drives has sometimes varied, the governments involved in regional conflicts, either directly or by proxy, regularly engage Syrians in combat abroad in exchange for promises of monetary payment.¹¹ As such, they are complicit in the practice of mercenaries as defined by Article 47 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions. A "mercenary" is a person who takes a direct part in hostilities motivated essentially by the desire for private gain. A captured mercenary is not a prisoner of war.¹²
- 16.** The so-called Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner is suspected of committing serious crimes in Syria, including torture and extrajudicial killings. SCM and other human rights NGOs filed litigation on behalf of a family of a Syrian victim to hold Russian suspects accountable for serious crimes committed in Syria. The complaint demands the initiation of criminal proceedings of murder committed with extreme cruelty for establishing the alleged Wagner perpetrators' responsibility for this and other crimes, including war crimes.

17. Testimony 2

The SCM has documented dozens of testimonies regarding the Russian recruitment of Syrian mercenaries. The SCM Violation and Documentation Center (VDC) obtained in October 2020 the testimony of the brother of a Syrian mercenary who was recruited by Russia and killed in Libya. According to the testimony:

¹¹ Mercenaryism in Syria: Predatory Recruitment and the Enrichment of Criminal Militias. Syria Justice and Accountability Centre. Accessed on March 13, 2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3yBmvCd>.

¹² Mercenaries, ICRC homepage. Accessed on March 11, 2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3YJyVTh>.

“Russian influence played a significant role in the recruitment mechanism that began in December 2019 and in financing the transfer process considering the poor living conditions in the areas controlled by the Syrian government. The Russian forces, which after 2018 became more responsible for the work of some security agencies in southern Syria (such as Military Security and Air Force Intelligence), benefited both poverty and the security situation to open the door to temporary recruitment in exchange for temptations such as exemption from military service for those who failed to do so, or settling the situation with the security services for those wanted in both Dara ‘a and As-Suwayda. In addition to material temptations, there was a narration that the dispatched Syrian recruits would guard Russian military installations in Libya in return for a monthly salary of \$1,000 per month (a 3-month contract) or a monthly salary of \$2,000 (a contract for an entire year).”

The Witness Told the SCM that In Al-Sanamayn, in Dara ‘a province, recruitment was carried out by leaders of the Military Security who are linked to the Russians. One of them was Wassim Qassem Al-Zarqan, from the village of Kafr Shams, adjacent to Al-Sanamayn, was the commander of the “Burkan Houran Brigade” affiliated with the “Jaish Al-Thawra” bloc and currently leads a local armed group affiliated with the Military Security. He is close to Brigadier General Wafiq Nasser, the head of the Security Committee in the south until 2018, and - Alaa Jamal Al-Labbad, who is from al-Sanamayn and leads a local group affiliated with the Military Security as well.

The witness mentioned: “The contracts are signed through a Russian intermediary present in the leadership of the Ninth Division in Al-Sanamayn. In June 2020, 80 young men were transferred from Al-Sanamayn and surrounding villages to a Russian training camp in Homs governorate. They conducted training courses on the use of weapons and military tactics. The course lasted 15 days, after which they were transferred to Hmeimim Airport. They were transported by plane from Cham Wings to Cairo Airport. Egyptian intelligence transferred them to Libya and handed them to the Russian forces. They are still present in the Al-Jawf oil field in northeastern Libya, and their mission is to guard with a salary of 300 dollars per month, not 1000 dollars, as was agreed upon at the beginning.”

The recruitment of mercenaries was condemned by a broad segment of society in Dara‘a when the Military Security Division asked the leaders of the reconciliation factions working with it to recruit members to fight in Libya. A statement was issued on April 26 by many Dara‘a Clan Council notables and activists rejecting the proposal of the Russian recruitment of Syrians to fight in Libya. The report stated: “We warn our deceived sons, who are people of honor, manhood, and chivalry, to reject such invitations, as the first goal of them is to empty Hawran of her youth and the pleasure of her livers so that the aggressor applies to her and wreaks havoc on her and turns them into deviant horizons for paid killers.”

The witness told the SCM that the Military Security Branch in Sa'sa' in the western Damascus countryside, headed by Brigadier General Talal al-Ali, supervises the recruitment operations for Russia in Quneitra Governorate. He Mentioned: “On April 12, 2020, the first batch of former fighters of the armed opposition (about 90 fighters) was transferred to go to Libya to protect oil facilities under the control of Haftar, where the story was also that the salary was

1000 dollars per month, and that the members would undergo training at the hands of the Russian “Wagner Groupe,” with compensation of about \$25,000 to the families of those injured or killed. However, after they arrived at the headquarters of the 18th Division in the Furqlus area on Palmyra Road, it became clear to them that the contracts were false and that they were going to fight alongside Haftar's forces, which prompted them to put pressure on the coordinator of the operation ("Muhammad Al-Ar" nicknamed "Abu Jaafar grateful") to return. On Monday, April 13, several of them returned to their towns (Al-Mal village in Daraa countryside, seven members, Jaba town, 10, Mashara, 12, Mumtana, 15, Ayouba, 3, Al-Nabaa, 7, while 41 people joined the 18th Division training course in Homs countryside”.

IV. Recommendations

Given the violations mentioned above, we make the following recommendations to the Russian government:

- To immediately cease all indiscriminate and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, attacks on medical facilities and objects indispensable for the civilian population's survival.
- To conduct independent, impartial, and credible investigations into incidents entailing civilian casualties in which their forces are implicated to ensure that those responsible for violations are held accountable, non-repetition, and publicize their findings.
- Allow unfettered access to independent humanitarian aid, protection, and human rights organizations in every part of the country.
- Imposes an absolute ban on using unguided weapons and weapons with wide-area effects, including cluster munitions and blast weapons, mainly in densely civilian populated areas.
- End impunity and ensure accountability for the systematic and widespread violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law that the Russian Army is committing on a large scale throughout the Syrian Arab Republic.
- Refrain from mobilizing mercenaries, which aim to support its war efforts in the context of the Syrian conflict and ensure compliance with International Humanitarian Law
- Stop and prevent the exploitation of Syrian mercenaries and ensure compliance with International Humanitarian Law.