

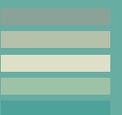


# When the Planes Return

*Double-Tap Strikes on Civilians in Syria*

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Syria Justice and  
Accountability Centre



# **When the Planes Return**

## **Double-Tap Strikes on Civilians in Syria**

July 2022



The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

## *About the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre*

*The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC) strives to prevent impunity, promote redress, and facilitate principled reform. SJAC works to ensure that human rights violations in Syria are comprehensively documented and preserved for use in transitional justice and peace-building. SJAC collects documentation of violations from all available sources, stores it in a secure database, catalogues it according to human rights standards, and analyzes it using legal expertise and big data methodologies. SJAC also supports documenters inside Syria, providing them with resources and technical guidance, and coordinates with other actors working toward similar aims: a Syria defined by justice, respect for human rights, and rule of law.*

*Learn more at [syriaaccountability.org](http://syriaaccountability.org)*

*When the Planes Return: Double-Tap Strikes on Civilians in Syria  
July 2022, Washington, D.C.*

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*A man gets stuck under debris at a damaged site after an airstrike in the Saqba city, in the Eastern Ghouta near Damascus.*

*© Bassam Khabieh*

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# Introduction

Throughout the last eleven years in Syria, various military tactics have been callously implemented to crush popular dissidence. No method has been left off the table—from besieging entire cities to using chemical weapons. As a result, civilians are caught in the crosshairs of the conflict and are forced to cope with its endless ramifications. One such method is a double-tap strike, which is a common tactic employed by the Syrian Armed Forces, alongside its Russian allies, to maximize harm. A double-tap is the practice of striking an initial location, then striking the same location soon after to target civilians and first responders who arrive at the scene between the strikes.<sup>1</sup>

Having identified the usage of double-tap strikes as a regularly implemented military strategy, the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre’s (SJAC’s) investigation team examined the patterns surrounding the tactic’s usage. The following report details the team’s findings and suggests that double-tap strikes were performed to intentionally harm persons and objects protected by international humanitarian law (IHL), rather than for attacking an identifiable enemy. This “shock and awe” approach is meant to quash opposition sentiment and terrorize civilians. The nature of their performance shows that these double-tap strikes constitute serious violations of IHL amounting to war crimes.

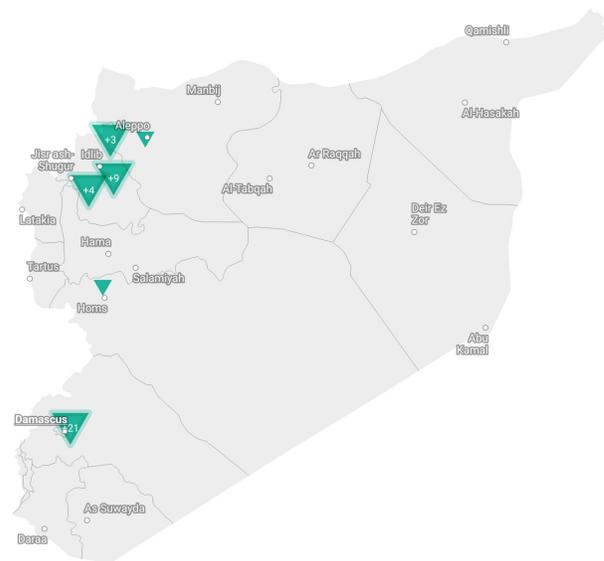
## Methodology

SJAC’s Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Investigators investigated double-tap strikes performed in Syria throughout the conflict. The team used SJAC’s documentation database, Bayanat, to find and cluster information gathered from social media platforms, media outlets, and

satellite imagery. Hundreds of videos were reviewed during this process.

The investigators evaluated the documentation by verifying three elements: (i) the location of the initial strike, (ii) the arrival of first responders or civilians at the location after the strike was conducted, and (iii) the occurrence of at least one subsequent attack on the same location within an hour of when first responders or civilians arrived on site after the initial strike. For this report, only incidents for which there was clear and convincing evidence that supported each element were considered. New information was also subject to SJAC’s documentation analysis methodology and securely stored in Bayanat.<sup>2</sup> Based on these criteria, 58 incidents of double-tap strikes were identified spanning from 2013 to 2021 across Syria.

Locations of Double Tap Strikes



Created with Datawrapper

For each incident, the investigators identified and reviewed a cluster of videos to verify the timing, location, and targets of each strike. Videos came from multiple sources, showing different angles.

The analysts confirmed the execution of the first strike, as well as the subsequent strike(s). Each piece of documentation was then assessed for authenticity. The team used tools, such as geolocation and weather patterns, to verify that the videos showed the same locations and time frame. Along with videos, first-hand accounts were gathered from social media and news articles documenting the strikes and casualties. This report will walk through the process of investigating each of the five selected cases. All 58 incidents will be shared with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism on Syria.

The findings in this report are based on publicly available material. Allegations expressed below reflect what the investigators could deduce from such material. They should not be construed as matters of fact.

## Incidents

All 58 incidents detected by SJAC occurred in residential areas outside of government-held territory: 1 in Aleppo, 1 in Homs, 22 in Idlib, and 34 in Rif Dimashq. As a result, the victims overwhelmingly consisted of civilians, including women and children, as well as first responders who were assisting victims after the initial strike. SJAC's investigation reveals that most deaths and injuries resulted from the immediate impact of a strike or subsequent damage to buildings that entrapped or hit civilians. But estimating the number of casualties from Syrian and Russian airstrikes over the course of the conflict is impossible given the strikes' frequency and their large-scale destruction. Initially, the Syrian armed forces utilized aircraft to conduct double-tap strikes on targets. After 2015, when Russia entered the conflict, double tap strikes climbed in frequency and intensity, resulting in broadened destruction, in part because of the availability of more advanced weapons, like laser-guided artillery shells.

The five incidents highlighted in this report represent a sample of the 58 double-tap strikes identified by SJAC. More specifically, they exemplify the large-scale commission of the Syrian Armed Forces' policy to attack civilians and humanitarian actors who reside in areas outside of government control. This policy is intended to maximize civilian harm, diminish the capacity of humanitarian actors to provide life-sustaining support, and terrorize the civilian population into submission. The incidents point to the temporal and geographic scope of the attacks which have claimed countless lives and caused immeasurable damage across Syria from 2011 through today.

# Incidents of Double-Tap identified by SJAC

An interactive map of all incidents reported by SJAC can be [found online](#)

Serial	ID	Latitude	Longitude	Date	Location	Alleged Perpetrator	Weapon
1	49	33.57004349	36.39656427	8/3/2014	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
2	53	33.5712461	36.40641107	9/1/2015	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
3	54	33.57893211	36.40642743	11/5/2015	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling
4	55	33.56881103	36.39828985	10/2/2015	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
5	56	33.55245359	36.3926408	2/19/2018	Misraba, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
6	57	35.90680281	36.72563475	10/20/2015	Sarmin, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
9	60	33.70051317	36.39662388	3/21/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
11	63	33.55744903	36.39182699	2/14/2016	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
12	64	35.81218545	36.79417754	12/19/2019	Mardikh, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
13	66	33.51168008	36.38868606	2/8/2018	Jisrein, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
15	103	33.51251743	36.3781438	8/9/2017	Kafr Batna, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
16	104	33.53036012	36.39056452	11/28/2017	Hammurya, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
17	105	35.64559488	36.67683749	7/22/2019	Ma'arrat An Nu'man, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
18	106	34.82501084	36.69525973	8/8/2015	Ghanto, Homs	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
21	109	33.56693439	36.399525	9/11/2016	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Cluster munitions
24	113	35.86259187	36.8218249	8/31/2014	Saraqab, Idlib	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
26	115	35.70176069	36.51823987	7/3/2021	Balyun, Idlib	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
27	116	36.24782939	36.81974183	7/11/2016	Termanin, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Cluster munitions
28	117	33.55860716	36.37110191	8/19/2015	Harasta, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike + Shelling \ Mortar
29	119	35.65245423	36.67724627	1/12/2016	Ma'arrat An Nu'man, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
30	120	35.75480081	36.62892648	7/21/2021	Sarjeh, Idlib	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Laster guided artillery
31	121	35.92755532	36.63983424	12/15/2015	Idleb	Unknown	Shelling
33	124	33.56821027	36.40645402	11/17/2016	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Russian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
35	126	33.5640396	36.40826121	3/2/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike + Shelling
36	127	33.57542801	36.39893237	1/3/2013	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
37	128	36.17849715	37.14272357	6/16/2014	As-Sukkari, Aleppo	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
38	129	33.5709156	36.40217929	3/19/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
40	131	33.57541488	36.40547257	3/17/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Rocket artillery
41	132	33.56975841	36.39898144	2/3/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
42	133	33.51613633	36.36040783	11/7/2017	Hazzeh, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
43	134	33.57196921	36.39027098	1/12/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
46	137	33.57161894	36.39018832	11/27/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
47	138	33.56931489	36.40205096	11/27/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Shelling \ Artillery
49	142	36.04393013	36.75225651	6/7/2018	Zardana, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
50	143	35.70539211	36.55251186	10/3/2015	Ehsem, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike

Serial	ID	Latitude	Longitude	Date	Location	Alleged Perpetrator	Weapon
51	144	35.91977931	36.63436415	6/21/2018	Idleb	Unknown	Explosion \ Car bomb + IED
52	145	35.92184473	36.63258952	2/18/2019	Al-Qosour, Idlib	Unknown	Explosion \ Car bomb
53	146	35.63190285	36.6764585	8/17/2019	Ma'arrat An Nu'man, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
55	181	33.53724942	36.36892088	7/6/2013	Arbin, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
57	219	36.16269492	36.75026953	5/5/2016	Al-Kamoonah Camp, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon
58	220	35.6269962	36.57903743	3/20/2018	Has Camp, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon

#### Double-Tap strikes identified by SJAC where exact locations could not be determined through open source investigation

7	58			2/18/2016	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Artillery
8	59			5/4/2019	Idleb	Unknown	Airstrike \ Rockets
10	61			12/9/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
14	80			6/20/2019	Ma'arat al-Nu'man, Idlib	Unknown	Airstrike
19	107			6/3/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
20	108			2/9/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Airstrike
22	110 & 111			4/21/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Airstrike
23	112			3/9/2019	Al-Mantar, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
25	114			7/1/2017	Saqba, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Airstrike
32	122			11/19/2017	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces	Cluster munitions
34	125			3/3/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
39	130			2/10/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Rocket artillery
44	135			1/2/2018	Douma, Rif Dimashq	Unknown	Shelling \ Artillery
45	136			9/7/2018	Khan Shaykhoun, Idlib	Unknown	Airstrike
48	139			6/26/2019	Khan Shaykhun, Idlib	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike
54	149			11/15/2017	Saqba, Rif Dimashq	Syrian Armed Forces / Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Cluster munitions
56	190			4/27/2017	Idleb, Eastern Deir	Russian Armed Forces	Airstrike \ Volumetric weapon



**Location:** Douma, Rif Dimashq Governorate  
**Coordinates:** 33.57091559954843,  
36.40217928734359  
**Date:** March 19, 2018  
**Alleged Perpetrator:** Syrian Armed Forces and  
Russian Armed Forces  
**Weapon:** Airstrike

“Do not be afraid [of the explosions]...leave it to God.”

## Incident I: Douma

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Syrian and Russian aircraft began their assault on Douma in March 2018. Over the next few weeks, 127 strikes from 27 aircraft rained down on the city's urban neighborhoods using a barrage of weapons, including white phosphorous, barrel bombs, and cluster munitions.<sup>3</sup> The Syrian Civil Defense ("White Helmets") were dispersed throughout the city to assist civilians amid the chaos of constant bombing and the near-total destruction of the city.<sup>4</sup> During this time, the White Helmets and other humanitarian actors were continuously targeted by double-tap strikes.<sup>5</sup>

One such incident was documented on March 19, 2018. A vehicle with the Syrian Civil Defense insignia visible on its sides and windshield drove past corpses strewn on a street. Dust covered the

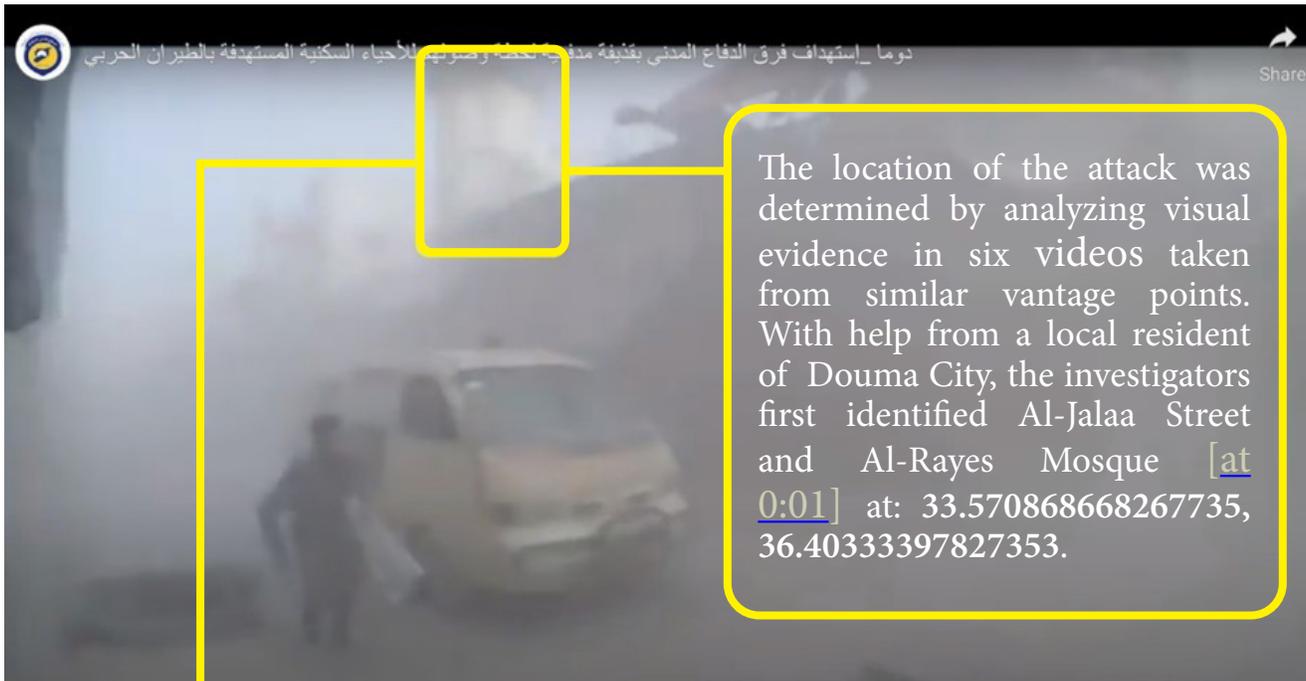
corpses after an apparent strike.<sup>6</sup> Four volunteers in White Helmet uniforms stopped the vehicle to rescue two survivors on the ground who called for help. The volunteers worked together to lift the first man by his arms and legs into the vehicle's trunk. Then they used the same tactic on the second man. Once both survivors and the volunteers were inside the vehicle, the driver reversed down the street. About five seconds later, a strike hit the spot where the vehicle was just parked.

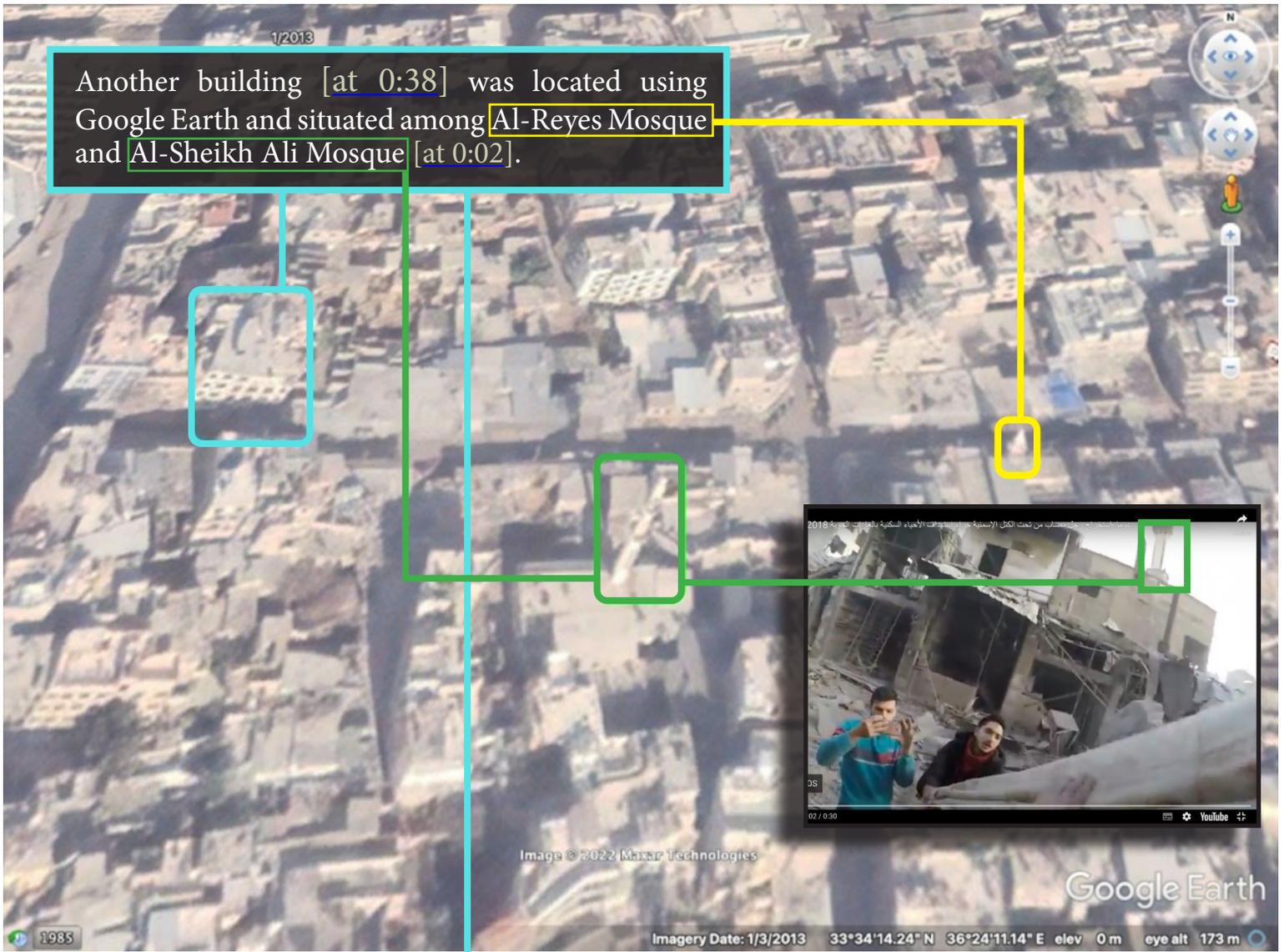
According to activists, 15 people were killed in Douma on that day, including three children. Victims included Maher Obeida al-Tabbakh, Inas Ayman Al Malih, Mohammad Khaled Al Ajo, Mohammad Mustafa Al-Basha, and Ahmed Muhammad Al-Tabji.<sup>7</sup>



# The Investigation

A [report](#) by local activists claimed that 15 people were killed by the double-tap strike. It also made clear that various weapons were used by the Syrian and Russian Armed Forces throughout the bombardment on Douma. This assessment was shared by the investigators who found videos from the impacted area around the day and time of this incident. The videos showed a range of weapons, including one on March 19, 2018 at 20:55 in which white phosphorous was used.







**Location:** Al-Kamooneh IDP Camp, Idlib Governorate

**Coordinates:** 36.162694922576634,  
36.750269526583104

**Date:** May 5, 2016

**Alleged Perpetrator:** Russian Armed Forces

**Weapon:** Airstrike using volumetric weapons

Google Earth

“There was more blood than smoke.”<sup>8</sup>

# Incident II: Al-Kamooneh IDP Camp

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In a remote location in northern Idlib, Al-Kamooneh Camp served as a temporary home for internally displaced persons, most of whom fled the northern and western parts of Aleppo. The camp's tarpaulin tents were sporadically placed on the countryside terrain and housed displaced families, primarily consisting of women and children.<sup>9</sup>

Around 16:30 on May 5th, Russian aircraft allegedly attacked Al-Kamooneh repeatedly. The first strike hit the center of the camp. According to witnesses, at least 14 people were killed as dozens of tents went up in flames.<sup>10</sup> One child described the scene, "I was picking herbs in the yard, west of the camp. I ran...and my family followed me. My

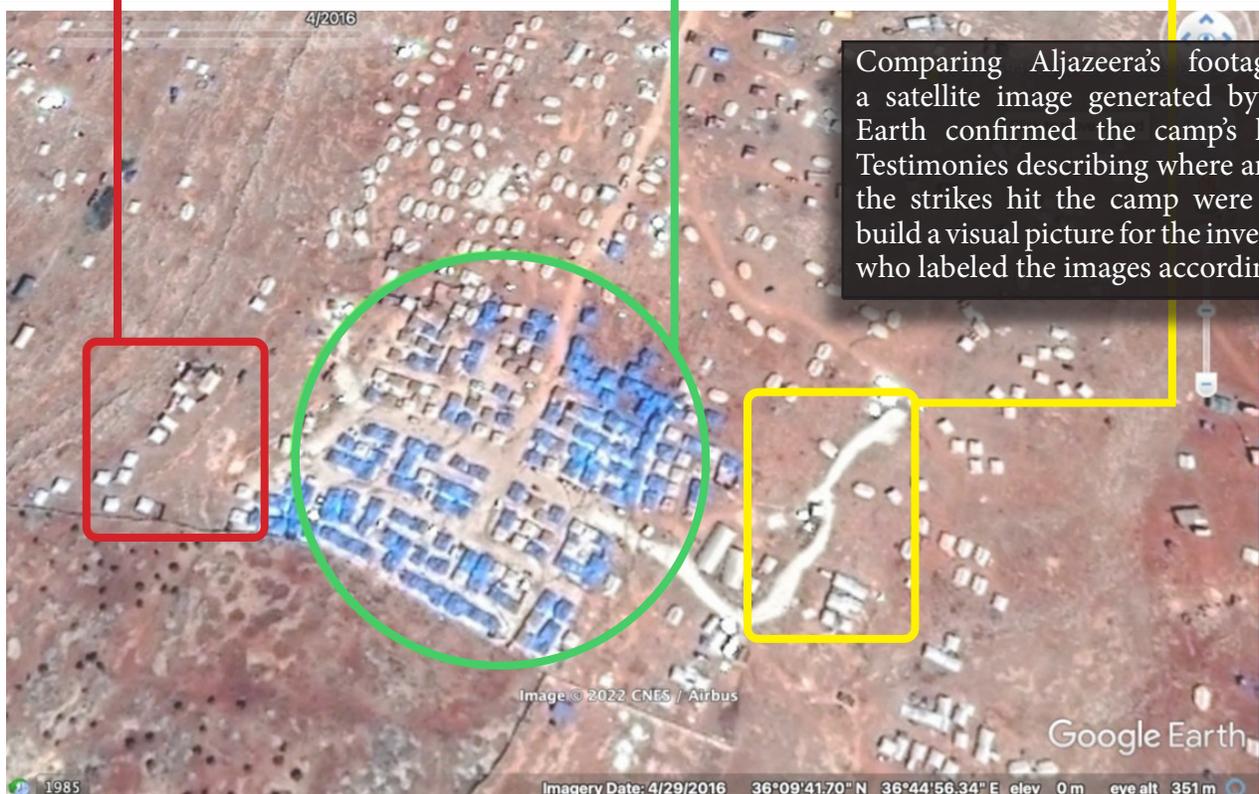
uncle witnessed people burning."<sup>11</sup> Soon, a second strike hit the tent that housed the camp's school, leaving behind remnants of brightly colored notebooks. Class had been in session, and all the children were killed.<sup>12</sup> In the time between the two strikes, the White Helmets and other humanitarian teams arrived at the scene to evacuate families, help injured persons, and control the raging fire.<sup>13</sup> As they were working, Russian planes were heard overhead. Then, a third strike hit the camp near a red firetruck and several volunteers.<sup>14</sup>

The camp was severely damaged. Around 45 people were killed and 70 were injured.<sup>15</sup>



# The Investigation

Journalists spoke with humanitarian personnel who provided information on the attack. One [reporter](#) interviewed a member of the White Helmets who suggested that the aircraft belonged to the Russian Armed Forces, and that 45 people died and 60 were injured. In another [video](#), a survivor blamed Bashar Al-Assad for the attack. SJAC's investigators could not verify if the perpetrator was Syrian or Russian Armed Forces directly from the videos, nor were they able to specify the alleged weapon based on the [videos](#). That said, the reports consistently held that three strikes occurred in the aforementioned locations, and almost all of them listed the same number of casualties.





**Location:** Al-Ghantu, Homs Governorate  
**Coordinates:** 34.82501083709347,  
36.69525973327487  
**Date:** August 8, 2015  
**Alleged Perpetrator:** Syrian Armed Forces  
**Weapon:** Airstrike using volumetric weapons

Google Earth

“Not even the animals are spared from the  
brutality.”<sup>16</sup>

## Incident III: Ghantu

---

Throughout 2015, Syrian and Russian aircraft indiscriminately dropped volumetric weapons on Homs Governorate. As a result, airstrikes killed entire families and reduced villages to debris.<sup>17</sup> Bombardment occurred in both urban and rural areas. Vulnerable civilians across Homs Governorate had nowhere to hide. The area became scarred with craters, evidence of strikes by barrel bombs and missiles.<sup>18</sup>

On August 8, 2015, civilians in Al-Ghantu faced an aerial attack by Syrian aircraft using volumetric weapons.<sup>19</sup> In one incident, civilians gathered near a damaged building in a populated area in

the neighborhood.<sup>20</sup> The rising plume of dust and smoke was evidence that the building was recently targeted. As members of the growing crowd assessed the situation and tried to pull civilians from the rubble, a plane was heard flying overhead.<sup>21</sup> People ran in different directions before a second building behind the first target was hit.<sup>22</sup> Later, a witness showed the deep crater created by the missile's first impact, which is still visible today.<sup>23</sup> It was surrounded by uprooted olive trees and dead livestock.<sup>24</sup>

Activists reported ten injuries from this double-tap strike.

وزارة الدفاع  
في الجمهورية العربية السورية



الأخبار

الأخبار
القيادة
البنية التنظيمية
نوع الخدمة
تعليم
ثقافة
وثائق
الموسوعة
وسائط متعددة

الرئيسية > الأخبار > الأخبار المحلية


شارات و اوسمة

اخبار الصحف
اخبار دولية
اخبار محلية


معجم المصطلحات العسكرية

17:53 السبت, 8 آب, 2015 - التوقيت

تدمير أوكار وآليات إرهابيي داعش والقضاء على أعداد كبيرة منهم في ريف حمص


التنمية الاجتماعية



تدمير أوكار وعدة آليات إرهابيي داعش في القريتين ومحيطها وشرق جزل وعز الدين وتدمير والغطفو بريف حمص والقضاء على أعداد كبيرة من الإرهابيين وإصابة آخرين.

[Announcement](#) about the attack on Al-Ghantu from the Syrian Ministry of Defense

# The Investigation

Sources blamed the government for the attack and claimed that ten people were wounded. On the same day, the Syrian Ministry of Defense [announced](#) that it destroyed “hideouts and vehicles of ISIS terrorists and eliminated large numbers of them in and around...[Al-]Ghantu...eliminating large numbers of terrorists and wounding others.” No other attack on Al-Ghantu occurred that day, suggesting that this double-tap strike was the same attack referenced by the Ministry of Defense.

حمص الغنطو غارة جوية من الطيران الحربي على بيوت الامنين في البلدة 8 8 2015



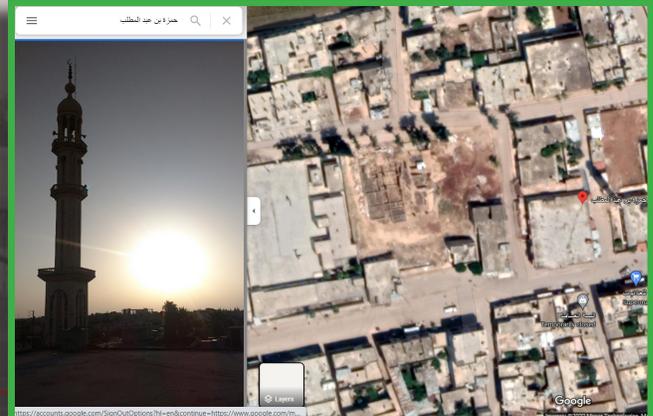
The investigators started by analyzing a notable minaret [at 0:18] and compared it to the shape of another minaret adorning the other local mosque. The location was thus identified as Hamza Bin Abdul Muttalib Mosque.

Google Earth



سوريا - حمص - الغنطو - مسجد الحمرة سيد الشهداء

Where's the old Photos layer?



0:13 / 0:24

الغارة الاولى والثانية اثناء اخراج المصابين من الغارة الاولى بلدة الغنطو حمص 8/8/2015



تجمع ثوار سوريا

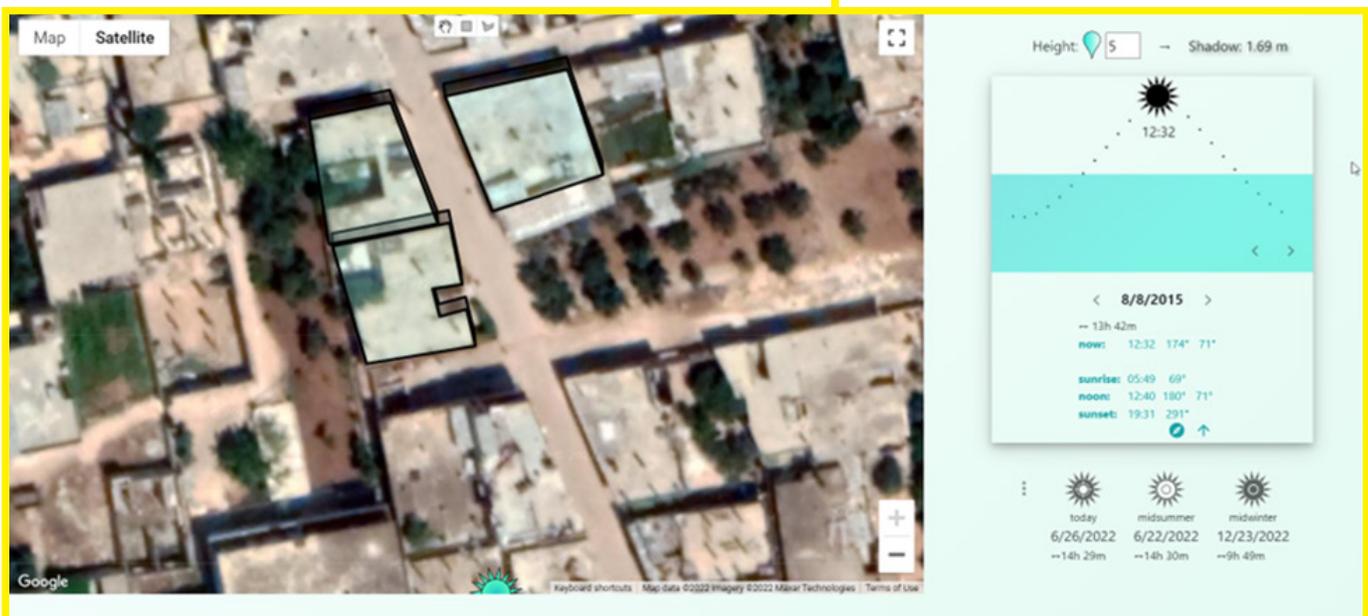
In one video, the sound of a jet fighter was heard as the attack happened, and a missile was seen falling on the target [at 0:54]. The type of missile was impossible to determine based on the video, but the source claims that the attack was carried out by volumetric missiles which matches the crater and damage caused by the surrounding buildings.

0:53 / 2:05



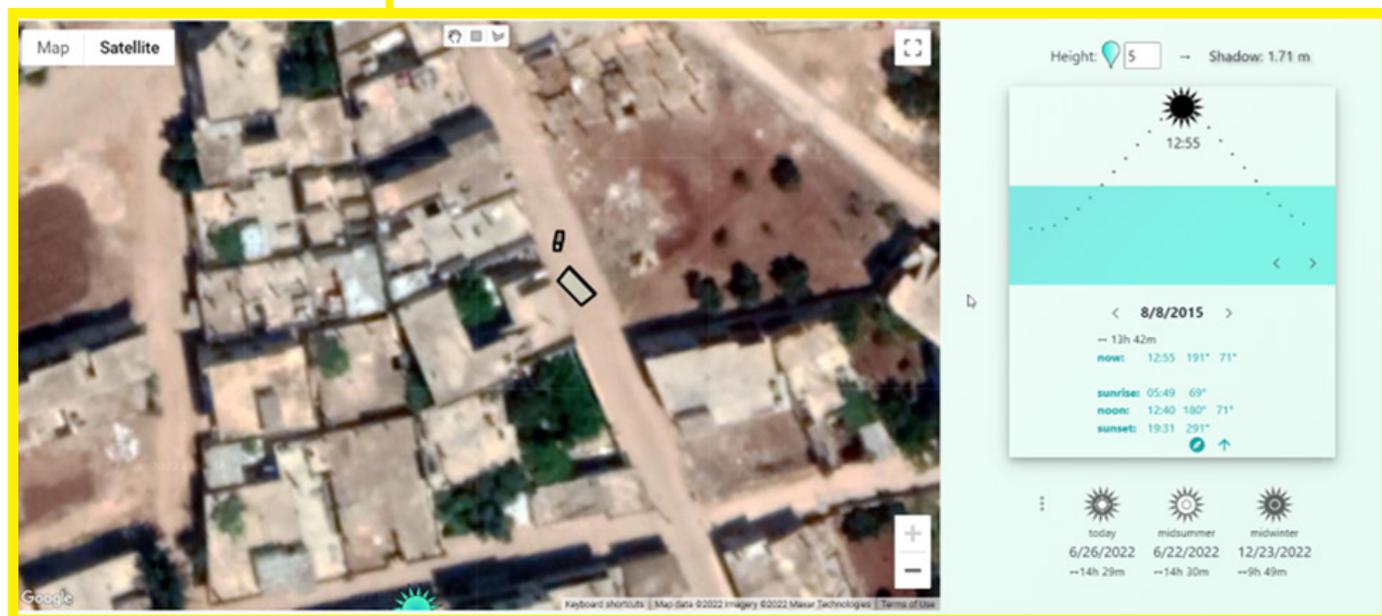
Another video showed short shadows around the people and objects in the frame [at 0:23], suggesting that filming occurred around noon, and that the street ran from south to north. Using the same geographical footprint, the investigators placed the targeted location at 34.82499209206273, 36.69519905368944.

The investigators then studied the shadows more thoroughly to pinpoint the times at which the strikes occurred. They looked at a video from when the photographer arrived at the scene of the first strike. The investigators concluded that the first strike occurred around 12:30 PM based on the shortness of the shadows, the location, and the date.

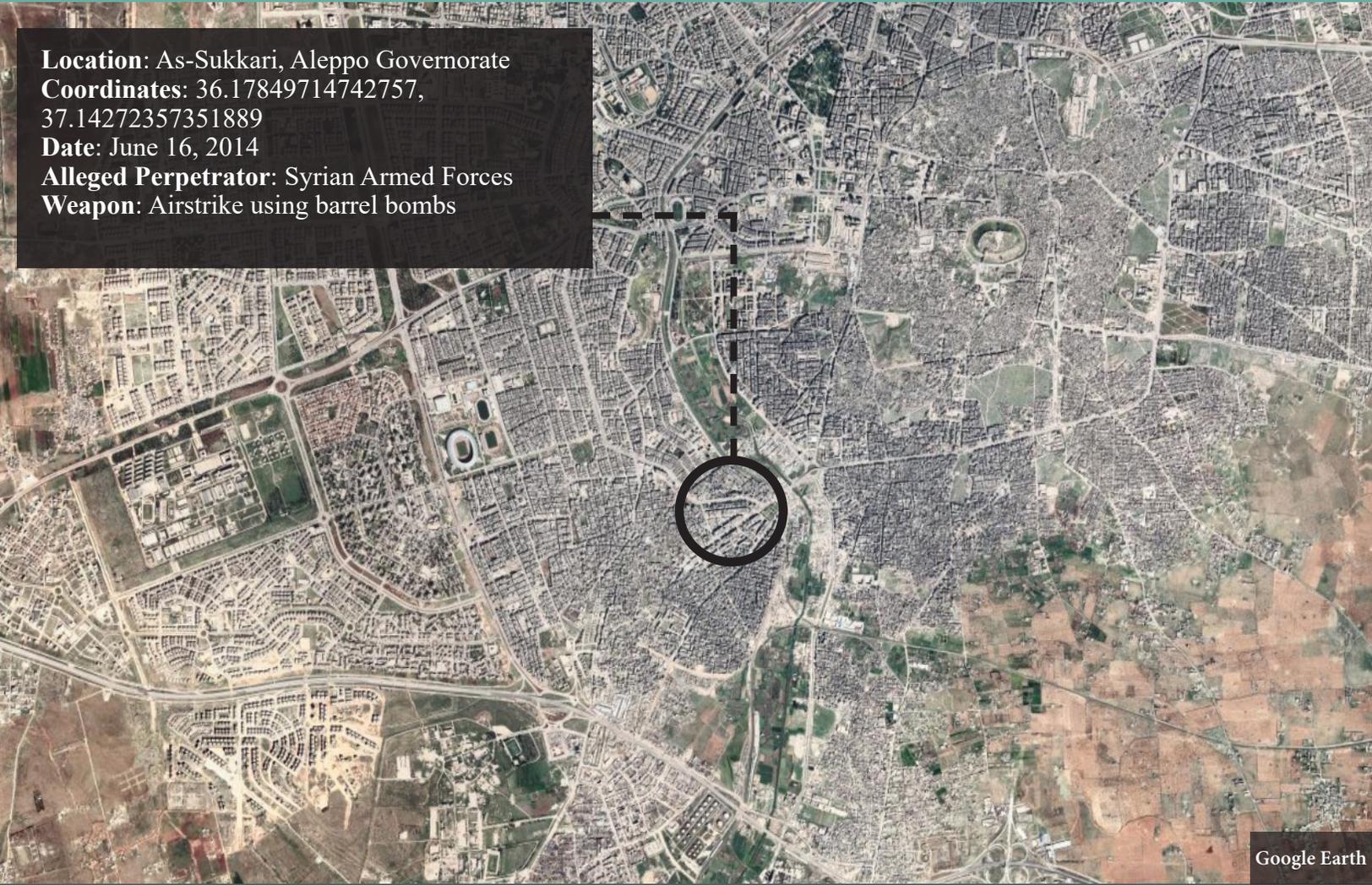




Between the time when the photographer arrived at the scene and when the second strike occurred, the length of the shadows did not significantly change, aside from a slight deviation toward the east. This slight deviation indicates that the second strike took place shortly after the first one—likely around 12:55PM based on the coordinates and date.



**Location:** As-Sukkari, Aleppo Governorate  
**Coordinates:** 36.17849714742757,  
37.14272357351889  
**Date:** June 16, 2014  
**Alleged Perpetrator:** Syrian Armed Forces  
**Weapon:** Airstrike using barrel bombs



**Grinding Down the Opposition**

# **Incident IV: As-Sukkari**

By 2014, disproportionate attacks on residential areas of Aleppo surged as the Syrian Armed Forces took control of the skies.<sup>25</sup> Pathways for the entry of humanitarian aid dwindled and civilians were subject to pounding aerial bombardment. The southern Aleppo City, As-Sukkari, faced heavy airstrikes that caused severe damage to the neighborhood during this time.

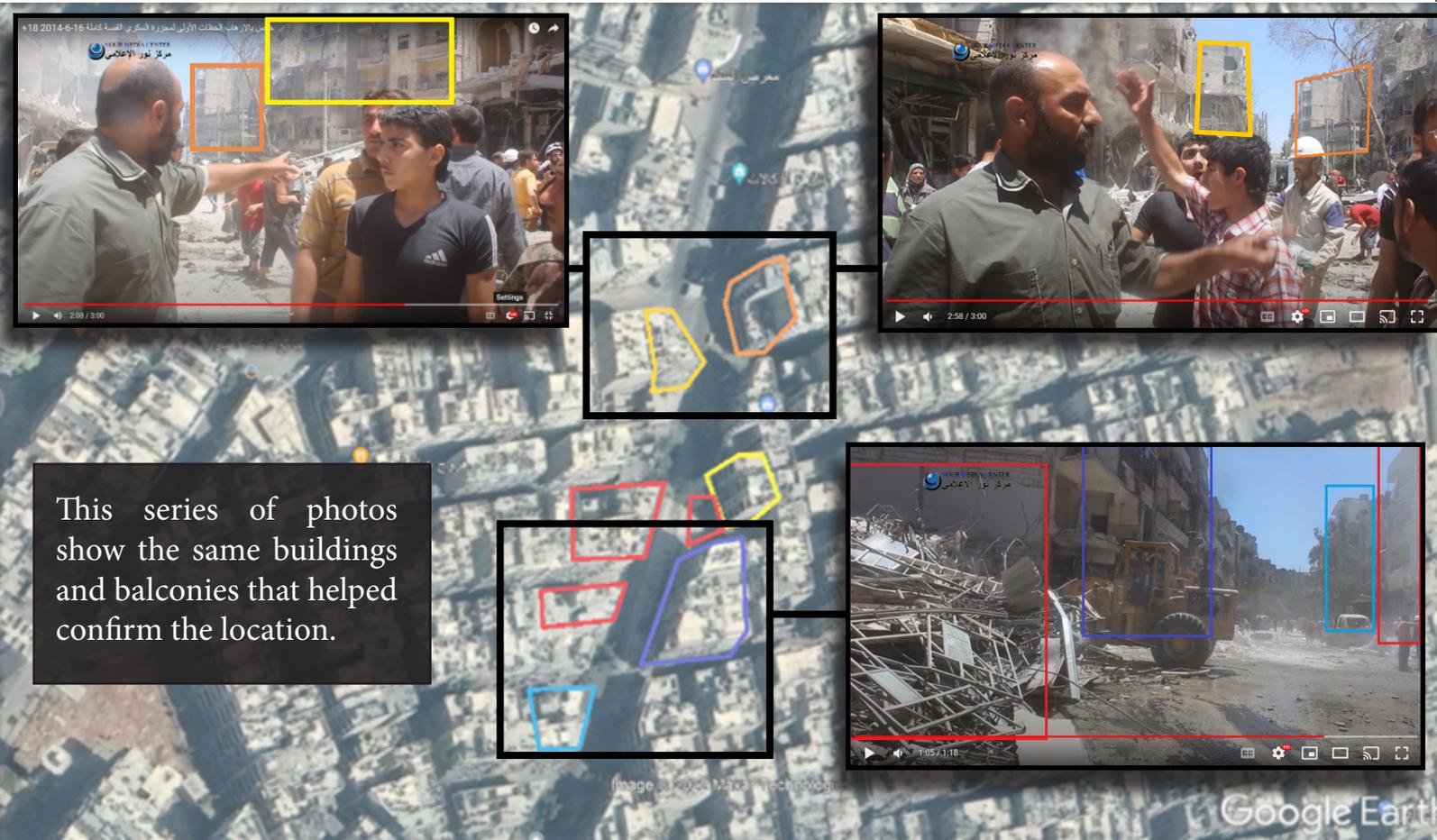
covered the ground.<sup>26</sup> As a crowd of men inspected the damaged buildings, an aircraft quickly approached and dropped a second barrel bomb directly on them. Dust, sparks, and flying debris inundated the scene.<sup>27</sup> Later, strewn corpses laid amid the rubble, then were placed in body bags and returned to their loved ones.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, injured survivors were treated on hospital floors while doctors held blood transfusion bags.<sup>29</sup>

On June 16, 2014, an airstrike dropped a barrel bomb on a market on Al-Wakalat Street near a relief center. Videos show the immediate aftermath of the strike; dust wafted through the air and debris

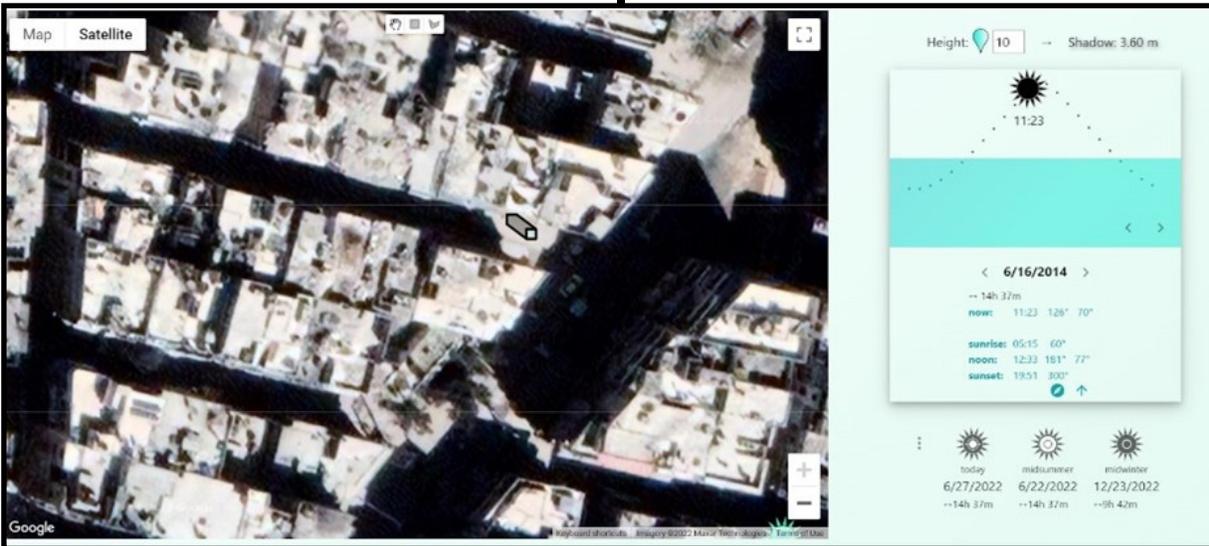
Around 80 people were killed by the two airstrikes, among whom were seven children, five women, and 11 unidentified persons.<sup>30</sup>

## The Investigation

Video footage from the attack does not show unique structures that could help the investigators geolocate the targeted location, but according to a spokesperson, the attack targeted Al-Wakalat Street in As-Sukkari neighborhood. The investigators then inspected a video that toured As-Sukkari neighborhood [\[at 06:45\]](#). They confirmed As-Sukkari as the geolocation of the double-tap strike.



The investigators analyzed a **video** showing people gathered around a targeted area. Dust in the air signified that the attack was recent and that the second strike took place shortly after the first one. Knowing the coordinates and the date, the investigators could determine that the time of the attack was around 11:20AM based on the shadows.



While the weapon was not visible in the videos, the sound was similar to that made by a falling barrel bomb before it explodes [\[at 0:42\]](#). This theory was confirmed by sources who stated that the weapon was a barrel bomb. Several sources alleged that the Syrian Armed Forces committed the double-tap strike [\[at 0:18, at 2:20\]](#), but no notable elements were identified which might allow the investigators to determine the perpetrator conclusively. In terms of casualties, videos show corpses being evacuated from the scene. Another video documents corpses of individuals allegedly killed in the double-tap strike at the Forensic Medical Center in Aleppo [\[at 0:07\]](#). The investigators searched the profiles of some of the alleged victims and confirmed around 80 of them.



**Location:** Arbin, Rif Dimashq Governorate  
**Coordinates:** 33.537249415542114,  
36.36892088358438  
**Date:** July 6, 2013  
**Alleged Perpetrator:** Syrian Armed Forces  
**Weapon:** Airstrike using volumetric weapons

Google Earth

**Tightening the noose around besieged Arbin**

## **Incident V: Arbin**

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By July 2012, opposition forces took control of the northern suburbs of Damascus, including Arbin. Over the next year, thousands of the city's residents were forced to flee as Syrian and Russian airstrikes leveled the city. Among the buildings ravaged by the conflict was Saint George Orthodox Church, built in 1873.<sup>31</sup>

On July 6, 2013, Arbin's residential neighborhoods took the brunt of these government airstrikes.<sup>32</sup> In one incident, civilians collectively worked to rescue survivors and find bodies amid a destroyed

complex. Video footage recorded the moment when a plane struck nearly the same location as the first strike.<sup>33</sup> The only warning came from an onlooker who yelled "Plane! Plane!" just seconds before the missile landed. The civilians rescuing survivors had no time to run.<sup>34</sup> A headless body was carried out from a bombed-out structure.

Mohammad Mohyi Ad-Deen Al-Khawaja and Fadi Sameeh At-Tan, a minor, were victims of this double-tap strike.<sup>35</sup>

## The Investigation



To identify the location of the attack, the investigators used a **unique minaret** [at 0:03] as their first reference point. They identified it as the minaret atop Al-Rahman Mosque.



Then, they determined the geographical footprint of the attack site by looking at the shape of the **damaged buildings** [e.g., at 0:28], **nearby buildings** [e.g., at 0:14], and other notable structures [e.g., 0:09]. Based on this information, they determined the location of the double-tap strike.



After determining the location of the double-tap strike, the investigators turned to a video that showed people gathering in front of the damaged structure after the first strike [\[at 0:58\]](#), as well as the moment when the second strike hit the same target [\[at 0:09\]](#). Based on the coordinates and the date, the investigators determined that the attack happened around 9:00AM through chronolocation.



While the investigators could not confirm the identity of the perpetrator, sources allege that the double-tap strike was carried out by the Syrian Armed Forces. The investigators could determine, however, that the weapon was launched from a fighter jet, which could be heard right before the explosion [\[at 0:03, at 0:09\]](#). Other videos show injured victims, including minors. Actor profiles for the casualties were available on Bayanat.

# Legality of Double-Taps

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As the uprisings in Syria evolved into an armed conflict, the threshold for triggering international humanitarian law was reached. From then on, parties to the conflict were bound by IHL. Yet the double-tap strikes reflect an armed conflict in which the parties have ignored their obligations under IHL, namely the principles of distinction, proportionality, and limitation. Although the United Nations Commission of Inquiry has noted the illegality of double-tap strikes, there has yet to be a thorough legal analysis of such strikes in Syria.<sup>36</sup>

In each of the five incidents, no military members were observed at the scene, nor were any military members identified as casualties. Rather, airstrikes hit residential areas where there were no identifiable military targets, thus violating the principle of distinction by which civilians should be distinguished from combatants and civilian objects are respected, as well as the principle of proportionality which obligates respect for civilians and civilian objects to the fullest extent possible.<sup>37</sup>

Like civilians, humanitarian actors also constitute a protected class of persons. Articles 15 and 71 of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Convention specifically state that medical personnel and humanitarian relief personnel should be respected.<sup>38</sup> Video footage shows that first responders identify their ambulances and team uniforms with their logo to facilitate access to civilians. That the perpetrators struck clearly marked ambulances and humanitarian actors, despite overwhelming evidence of who and what constituted their targets, also displays a reckless disregard for the Geneva Conventions which provide that parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need.<sup>39</sup> Thus, medical personnel may not be attacked or hindered from performing their duties such that there would be dire consequences for them or wounded persons.<sup>40</sup>

## The core principles of IHL

- I. **Distinction:** parties must distinguish between civilians and combatants and to respect civilian objects
- II. **Proportionality:** civilians and civilian objects must be respected to the fullest extent possible while military objectives are attacked
- III. **Military necessity:** parties may act to weaken their enemies, but their actions must reflect necessary, but reasonable, force
- IV. **Limitation:** weapons and tactics are prohibited if they cause unnecessary suffering or injury
- V. **Good faith:** parties must show good faith in their interpretation of IHL
- VI. **Humane treatment and non-discrimination:** all people should be treated humanely and without discrimination based on their sex, nationality, race, religion, or political beliefs

Furthermore, the brutal impact of the strikes suggests that the motivation for conducting attacks was not to weaken an enemy but to cause severe damage to civilian objects, induce panic and fear among the impacted population, and inflict long-term trauma on communities. This motive violates the principle of limitation as much as double-tap strikes are used to intentionally inflict unnecessary suffering and injury. Additionally, this motive violates Article 51(2) of Additional Protocol I which bans violence aimed at spreading terror among a civilian population.<sup>41</sup> It also puts double-tap strikes within the category of war crimes such that the commission of double-tap strikes represents large-scale patterns of: (i) intentionally directing attacks against a civilian population or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities, (ii) intentionally directing attacks against buildings, material, medical units, transport, and personnel using the distinctive emblems of the Geneva Conventions in conformity with international law, (iii) intentionally directing attacks against personnel, installations, material, units, or vehicles involved in humanitarian assistance that are entitled to protection under IHL, (iv) intentionally directing attacks on hospitals and places where the

sick or wounded are collected provided that they are not military objectives, and in some cases, (v) employing poisoned weapons.<sup>42</sup>

At the time of writing, crimes committed in Syria do not fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) because Syria is not a State Party to the Rome Statute. Nor is a Security Council referral to the Office of the Prosecutor probable given Russia's alliance with the Syrian government and its own commission of crimes in Syria. Furthermore, while Russia and Syria are state parties to the Geneva Conventions and evidence of their violations is plentiful, international humanitarian law lacks an enforcement mechanism.

Similarly, the same patterns of double-tap strikes have emerged in Ukraine where Russian Armed Forces strike locations shortly after humanitarian actors and civilians arrive at the scene in response to an initial strike.<sup>43</sup> Weapons used to conduct strikes have been consistent with those used in Syria, including barrel bombs.<sup>44</sup> One such incident occurred in Kharkiv and was documented by journalists who were following a local Red Cross unit. Civilians, members of the Red Cross,<sup>45</sup> and paramedics gathered to rescue survivors in the wake of a Russian missile strike. Soon, a second missile hit the same building. The use of double-tap strikes in Ukraine is evidence that the Russian Armed Forces are intentionally employing tactics used in the Syrian conflict to maximize civilian casualties in Ukraine.

## CONCLUSION

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These double-tap strikes represent a portion of the incidents identified by SJAC's investigations team. They constitute serious human rights violations tantamount to war crimes. They also reflect the widespread and systematic nature of Syrian and Russian attacks on civilians, particularly communities that were not under Syrian Government control. With no regard to the tenets of IHL, these strikes cruelly wreaked havoc on their targets and left survivors with physical and emotional scars. Yet like most crimes committed by state actors over the eleven years of conflict, no venue is currently available for survivors of double-tap strikes to seek accountability. If individual

pilots or those issuing orders for such attacks are identified and are present in states exercising universal jurisdiction, these individuals could be investigated and prosecuted for war crimes.<sup>46</sup> Even so, the senior leadership most responsible for the double-tap strike policy will remain out of reach until the ICC is granted jurisdiction or a hybrid (or other) tribunal is created. Until this opportunity arises, SJAC will continue to document the realities facing Syrians, laying the foundation for future transitional justice efforts. In the meantime, parties to the conflict must respect the protected status of civilians and humanitarian personnel in line with international law.

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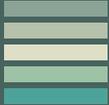
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