



Flash Report: Carnage in Douma City "An Attack on a Public Market Kill Dozens of Civilians"

Violations Documentation Center in Syria - VDC
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Introduction

[Douma city](#), in Damascus Suburbs, witnessed one of the most horrific massacres on 16 August 2015. This massacre, which followed deliberate attacks by warplanes against civilians that started on 12 August 2015, was documented by the violations Documentation Center's team of field researchers on the Syrian territory. The attacks [killed more tens of civilians](#) in the various cities and towns of Eastern Gouta including [Douma](#), [Kafar Batna](#), [Erbeen](#), [Hamouria](#), [Saqba](#), Jesreen, Hazzeh and Ein Tarma as shown in dozens of videos and images posted by activists. They also showed the fall of dozens of victims and the destruction of several houses and the already worn-out infrastructure due to the [siege imposed](#) on the area by the Syrian government forces for over two years.

VDC's field researcher Thajer Hijazi visited most of the shelled places and conducted several interviews with eyewitnesses, survivors and medical cadres.

In this report, VDC lists the attacks launched by the Syrian government air force between 12 and 16 August 2015

Douma Attacks 12 August 2015

At 10:18 am, four airstrikes were launched on the city, the first targeted al-Hal Market, known for being a crowded place especially in the morning. As a result, many civilians were either killed or injured and many shops were damaged, five of which were completely destroyed. The second airstrike targeted another market in the city, usually crowded with street merchants as well. The death toll in the two attacks [reached 28 civilians](#), who were identified and documented. And the number of injured was about 150 serious, medium and minor injuries. It is worth mentioning that there are no military headquarter near the targeted area, which was deliberately targeted by warplanes

Saqba and Hamouria – Ein Tarma Attacks 12 August 2015

On the same day, after targeting Douma city, four airstrikes targeted [Saqba](#) city as well. The fiercest of them was launched on a highly crowded main market. Eight civilians, documented by names, were immediately killed (Six from Saqba city and two from Eastern Gouta) and more than 40 sustained injuries. Additionally, 12 shops were destroyed. Two other airstrikes targeted [Hamouria city](#) killing 4 civilians and two targeted [Ein Tarma](#) killing several people and injuring 12. Four airstrikes also targeted Kafar Batna city, which killed 5 civilians. After that, Douma city was targeted again with eight artillery shells launched from the Department of Motor Vehicles in Harasta.

[The first attack on Saqba city](#) was about 9 am. Then, Jami'yat Square, which is a highly crowded main market in the city, was shelled with guided missiles. The total number of airstrikes on that day reached five, the fiercest of which was on the aforementioned square where 30 people were injured and 4 were killed (two were unidentified), as recorded in our medical unit. Among the injured was an amputation case of a six-year-old girl in addition to five eye injuries, 7 bone injuries and a neurological one.

Field researcher [Thaer Hijazi](#) interviewed a survivor named [Abu Abdo al-Saqbani](#), who owns a restaurant at Jami'yat Square. He stated:

“It was about 9 in the morning when warplanes targeted the area with a missile that made a huge hole in Jami'yat Square, where I own a restaurant. As a result, all the surrounding buildings and shops were damaged. Moreover, a man was hit and turned into pieces in front of me, which made it impossible to identify him. Another was martyred and the leg of a third was cut. I saw about [11 injured](#) as well. I was injured myself and my body was full of shrapnel”

Among the people who fell victims of Saqba attacks was a civil defense member named Sameer Abu al-Kheir, according to activist Sameer Tatin, a member of Saqba Coordination Committee, who also stressed that the targeted area was full of civilians and has no existence of any military faction of FSA or any other armed group.



Hadi Tatin Photography

An image taken on 12 August 2015 in Saqba, Damascus Suburbs
A girl named Maram, who lost her left arm due to airstrikes on the city. By activist: Hadi Tatin.



An Image showing the destruction in Saqba Market (Jami'at Square), 12 August 2015-08-21
Taken by media activist: Hasan Mouhammad/ Exclusively for VDC.

Kafar Batna – Zamalka – Harasta - Mesraba Attacks of 13 and 14 August 2015

On 13 August, at about 4 pm, an airstrike was launched on Kafar Batna city, near al-Firen (the furnace) area, which led to the death of 5 civilians and the injury of 15.

A series of airstrikes followed on 14 August 2015 on the towns and cities of Ghouta; three on Zamalka city, three on Harasta and [Mesraba](#), 6 on Erbeen and three on Douma. The violations Documentation Center in Syria could document [more than 190 civilians](#) who were killed due to warplanes attacks and hundreds of shells and missiles fired by the Syrian Army on Gouta between 12 and 16 August 2015.

Douma Massacre 16 August 2015



A number of civilians trying to rescue an injured of warplanes shelling, Douma, 16 August 2015
Taken by: Mouhannad Badra/Exclusively for VDC.

On Sunday 16 August 2015, at about 1:30 pm, a warplane shelled Douma city with four rockets causing massive destruction and killing hundreds of people. The field researcher Thaer Hijazi rushed to the targeted area and inspected it. Depending on his observations, he stated the following:

“The first rocket targeted the southern part of Ghanam Square (Sheep Square), which is usually full of hundreds of civilians, street merchants, shops and others. When I rushed to the place of explosion, the street was strewn with dozens

of victims and wounded and the shops were greatly destroyed. I could count more than 15 partially damaged shops and lots of junk handcarts. I could not figure out the actual number of.

As for the second rocket, it fell 150 meters from the first one, particularly on the intersection of Ghanam Square (Sheep Square) and al-Hal grocery market (The main market in the whole Eastern Ghouta, injuring several civilians, especially the shop owners, as I saw five of them injured. I also saw 5 burned cars, one destroyed building and several partially-damaged buildings.

The third rocket, however, fell directly amid al-Hal Market, which was packed with shops, shoppers and merchants from all the Eastern Gouta. I witnessed more than ten injured; I raced one of them, who had injuries in the head and shoulders, to one of the medical units where more than 100 wounded were taken. When I got there, fourteen dead bodies were lined on the ground. Meanwhile, the civilian and ambulance cars were hospitalizing the rest of the casualties. The fourth rocket fell on Halab Street (Aleppo St), which led to massive destruction and killed several civilians.

After these attacks, the warplanes renewed their shelling on (Abdulra'ouf neighborhood with four guided missiles; the first of which fell at the entrance to the neighborhood on the intersection with the inhabitation area. I rushed to the place again. There, I saw the scattered flesh (carnages scattered to 100 meters away from the targeted area). Among the casualties was a young man from Baghdadi family, who was selling fuel and gas in addition to two firewood sellers, named Hamza al-Shifouni and Maher al-Shifouni. Furthermore, the surrounding buildings were damaged and a house was completely destroyed. The second missile, falling at the entrance of Safa neighborhood, injured ten civilians. Few minutes later, a mortar shell fell on Shouhadaa Square (Martyrs Square) killing a civilian and injuring five children. On that day, more than forty airstrikes were reported in the various cities of Eastern Gouta starting from Douma to Erbeen, Madyara and Harasta, which caused a massive internal displacement movement between the cities and the villages.”

A member at the Unified Medical Office, who refused to reveal his identity for security reasons, told VDC that he was executing some duties when he heard the sound of warplanes shelling. He added that after few minutes, hundreds of injured flocked to the medical point they were working. He continued:

“At first, we expected to receive 20 to 30 casualties as the case usually goes when there is an attack. However, the huge numbers of the people who fall victims of the massacre on 16 August 2015 were perplexing. First, we received

more than 150 victims then they started to arrive in dozens following the successive attacks. It was because the attacks targeted the public markets directly and consecutively (Sheep Square, al-Hal Market, Martyrs Square and the entrance to an inhabitation area). Even when the residents were bidding farewell to their deceased before burying them, the warplanes shelled them!

After the casualties arrived to the hospital, the entire medical personnel were summoned to help because our capacities (in the central emergency unit) were limited. We only had a capacity for 20 casualties while the numbers on that day were hundreds. In six hours, we had to receive 285 cases although we were only six doctors. That is, each doctor had to treat an average of 50 people. We also made 78 surgeries during the first six hours. In order to achieve that, we had to set a temporary table next to the operation bed so we can perform more operations at a time. More than 100 cases were transferred to other medical points in Gouta where 38 surgeries were conducted. The greatest disaster was after the operations because each patient needed a hospitalization period at the intensive care unit, which was packed with 28 casualties although it had a capacity of 13 beds only. Other hurdles included the lack of fuel, medical personnel, including paramedics, blood donors and spare parts (as ambulance cars were targeted on that day too). Luckily, we could reach to 289 blood donors from the besieged Gouta although some of them had already had anemia.

“On that day 550 injured were reported, two hundred of them were kids under eighteen and 116 surgeries were made, including 9 cases of limbs amputation” Activist Moayad, 22 years old, from Maliha city, a member of the Civil Defense Assistance team, told the center that he headed to the massacre location after he called for the help of Douma Civil Defense when Ghanam Market was targeted. He stated:

“It was about 2 pm on Sunday 16 August 2015 when I was asked to head to Douma to help rescuing the civilians who were shelled by the warplanes. The numbers of victims exceeded our expectations. There were more than 75 civilian martyrs and more than 200 wounded. During the rescue operations, the warplane targeted another place in the city and killed 15 civilians. We believe that the missiles used in the shelling were vacuum rockets because during the consecutive attacks I was close to the shelled area. I could feel a huge pressure and a massive explosion that caused me and my colleagues headaches that continued till the next day. The numbers of martyrs documented by the Civil Defense teams were 114 in addition to 450 injured. The destruction was immense as well.”

Legal Assessment

The situation in Syria is a non-international armed conflict since July 2012. The rules of international law are fully applicable, particularly the international human rights law and the relevant rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). In particular, Article 3- common to the four Geneva Conventions (1949)- is applicable in all Syrian territories and to all actors of the conflict.

The principle according to which “parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants” is the cornerstone of customary IHL. Attacks must not be directed against civilians. In addition, parties to all types of armed conflicts are prohibited, under IHL, from targeting civilian objects, in particular those which by their nature, location, purpose or use do not make effective contribution to military action. Furthermore, indiscriminate attacks are prohibited in all types of conflicts.

In all locations of Eastern Ghouta cited in this report, attacks, by Syrian government war planes, which have the monopoly of the skies in the area, have deliberately targeted popular well known and particularly exposed marketplaces, at the height of affluence of civilians in those localities. A marketplace is by its very nature and purpose civilian, from the perspective of the applicable international humanitarian law. All casualties documented in this report resulting from these attacks are civilians. There is indeed a pattern of deliberate attacks against civilian places and populations. The al-Hal market place in Douma was targeted at least two times deliberately on August 12, and August 16, 2015, each time through a sustained air campaign. The VDC has in numerous instances over the past three years documented and denounced attacks in the same localities.

According to customary international humanitarian law, indiscriminate attacks on civilians are serious violations of IHL. They accordingly constitute war crimes. The criminal responsibility for the commission of such attacks rests with the individual commanders who gave the orders, as well as anyone who has committed or facilitated the attacks, and anyone who has assisted, aided or abetted them.

Furthermore, the attacks documented in the cities of Douma, Sakba, Zmalka, Misraba, Kafar Batna, Hamouria and Arbin during August 12, and August 16, 2015, are likely to constitute crimes against humanity as defined by the case law of international criminal tribunals and article 7 of the Rome Statute. The killing of civilians in violation of international humanitarian law constitutes “murder.”

The multiplicity of the murders documented in this report indicate a more general “attack against the civilian population”, which is the contextual condition for crimes against humanity. This attack against the civilian population seems to exhibit – in itself – both a “widespread” and a “systematic” character, thereby reaching the level of a crime against humanity. The scale of the attacks documented in this report, including the number of deaths resulting from them, confers to it a widespread character. Its systematic character can be inferred, notably, from the source of all attacks documented in this report: the Syrian air force, which suggests high-level planning and use of public resources.

The consistency with which densely populated civilian areas have been targeted in the Eastern and Western Ghouta makes it more likely that the regime air force was not directing the attack on any specific military objective, but was acting within a design to provoke and complete a “forcible transfer of population,” out of the Eastern and Western Ghouta, by systematically rendering life impossible through long sieges and deliberate attacks against the civilian populations resulting in horrific carnages, in pursuit of what appears to be a grand design to cleanse, and clean what is viewed by the regime as restive areas around Damascus.

At the same time when the attacks documented in this report were taking place, UN officials were present in Damascus and conducting diplomatic exchanges with representatives of the Syrian government. The attacks against Douma and other localities in Eastern Ghouta, were using the public resources of the state against its own civilian population. It took the United Nations more than three years to agree on an investigation mechanism to identify perpetrators who are using chemical weapons and substances against civilian populations. However, death in a mutilated condition is not less concerning than death in a composed state, as a result of inhalation of chemical substances. Other than words of condemnation which have even lately become softer, the UN system is failing ordinary Syrian civilians in their basic demand to recognize that the carnage inflicted on their lives is by the action of their own public authority. Softness in words emboldens perpetrators in action. Civilians under siege in Eastern and Western Ghouta require deed not action. Only boldness in pursuing effective and credible mechanisms of accountability is capable of softening the suffering of many civilians in the Syrian conflict.

Annexes

Annex 1

Images and videos of the massacre/exclusively for VDC



An Image showing an injured in a medical unit in Douma, 16 August 2015.
Taken by: Mouhammad Badra/Exclusively for VDC.



An Image showing injured in a medical unit in Douma, 16 August 2015.
Taken by: Abu Ali al-Hasan/Exclusively for VDC.



An Image showing some of the injured and dead bodies in a medical unit in Douma, 16 August 2015. Taken by: Abu Ali al-Hasan/Exclusively for VDC



Residents hurrying to the targeted area, Douma, 16 August 2015. Taken by: Mouhammad Badra/Exclusively for VDC

Annex 2

A list of the victims that were documented and verified by VDC according to its usual methodology. It includes the civilian casualties from 12 till 16 August 2015 in Damascus Suburbs who were killed due to warplanes and random artillery and mortar shelling

To view all the names, [click here](#)

Annex 3

Exclusive Videos for the Violations Documentation Center in Syria:

1. [A video](#) showing a shop owner named (Abu Abdo) telling his observations about the shelling on Saqba city (Market Massacre, Jami'yat Square). Interviewer: VDC's field researcher. Taken by: Hasan Mouhammad. Saqba city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 13 August 2015
2. [A video](#) showing wounded and victims of shelling on Kafar Batna city arriving to the medical unit. Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Kafar Batna city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 13 August 2015
3. [A video](#) showing the moment the casualties of shelling arrived at a medical unit in Kafar Batna. Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Kafar Batna city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 13 August 2015
4. [A video](#) showing the destruction due to warplanes shelling on (Abdulraouf neighborhood). Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Douma city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 16 August 2015
5. [A video](#) showing the arrival of several wounded and victims to a medical unit following the warplanes shelling. Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Douma city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 16 August 2015
6. [A video](#) showing several wounded and victims following the attacks. Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Douma city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 16 August 2015
7. [A video](#) showing the moments that followed the shelling of a market in Douma city. Taken by: VDC's field researcher Thaer Hijazi. Douma city, Eastern Gouta, Damascus Suburbs 16 August 2015



Violations Documentation
Center in Syria

For any questions and comments:
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