



**Flash Report**  
**Russian Airstrikes in Syria**  
"Shelling of Civilian Homes in the Northern Suburbs of Homs"

Violations Documentation Center in Syria - VDC  
**30 September 2015**

## **Introduction:**

On 30 September 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.”

As a result, Konashenkov said that “arms and fuel depots and military equipment were hit. ISIS coordination centers in the mountains were totally destroyed,” adding that “Russian jets did not use weapons on and around civilian infrastructure.”

The Russian Defense Ministry’s official website also released [aerial footage](#) of airstrikes in Syria on 30 September 2015, adding that the jets that carried out the eight strikes took off from [Bassel Al-Assad](#) Airport (Humaymim Airbase) in the countryside of Latakia, achieving highly-accurate strikes against the terrorist organization ISIS.

## **Targeting Zaafaraneh Village:**

The Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) and its field reporter in Homs’s northern suburbs have reviewed dozens of videos showing air raids that took place on 30 September 2015, after which the VDC contacted a number of eyewitnesses – namely activists, doctors and Civil Defense members – whose testimonies were used to verify the nature of the locations targeted on that day.

Anas Abu Adnan, a Jisr News Channel correspondent from [Zaafaraneh village](#) in the [countryside of Homs](#) told the VDC that on September 30, at about 9:00 am, two explosions were heard in the vicinity. Earlier that day, observatories used by the local villagers to detect potential airstrikes had announced that warplanes were flying over the area and that the pilots did not speak Arabic, as Abu Adnan was informed by the observatory.

“The two attacks were launched on the southern entrance to the village”, 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. Unfortunately, fourteen civilians, many unidentified, were instantly killed and more than thirty others were injured in the two strikes. Following this, at 10:00 am, warplanes targeted the area of al-Makramiah, south-west of Zaafaraneh village. As a result, a young man was killed and eight civilians were injured. On that day, the air strikes did not stop, they continued targeting the southern part of the village at about 11:00 am, causing injury to eight more people.”

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1- A number of volunteers (mostly military) supervise the observatories. They monitor communications between the aircraft flying over Syrian territory and the airbase until it takes off from the military airports. Volunteers warn villagers through radio devices to hide in shelters ahead of attacks.



Abu Adnan further stated that the shelling of the village that day was different from the usual shelling, as the sound was very strong and strange. In addition, he said the fighter jets were flying faster and higher than usual, and the explosions set houses on fire. Abu Adnan also provided the VDC with a list of names for victims that the VDC's correspondent in the northern suburbs of Homs was able to verify.

**Some of the victims were:**

1. Hassan al-Hamada /2. Mahasin al-Hamada /3. the child Retage al-Khatib (was killed in Talbeeseh) /4. Abdul Jabbar al-Allawi /5. Reem Khalid al-Akkari /6. Samira al-Khatib /7. Diba al-Khalaf /8. Rahaf al-Habash /9. Mohamed Ahmed al-Rajab (N.B. five more victims remain unidentifiable due to the severity of their injuries)

**Targeting Talbeeseh City:**

After shelling the village of Zaafaraneh, warplanes [targeted Talbeeseh city](#), leading to the death and injury of many civilians, according to direct witnesses. Paramedic Omar Al Daqa (Abu Khaled Al Homsy), one of Talbeeseh's field hospital staff, recounted his experience to the VDC:

“On Wednesday 30 September 2015, around 10:00 am, Russian warplanes launched several fierce airstrikes on Talbeeseh city, targeting a number of neighborhoods with vacuum missiles, including: Karameh, Bareed and Mashjer streets, as well as the city's bread distribution center. The shelling was along one track with almost 100 meters between each missile. As a result, 17 civilians were killed, 34 were wounded and one is missing (probably torn into pieces).”

**The victims' names were:**

1. Eido Ahmad Joumaa /2. Latouf Ahmad Joumaa (child) /3. Moussa Mahmoud Joumaa /4. Ahmad Mohammed Joumaa (child) /5. Huda Muhemed /6. Khaled Al Qassab /7. Muna Sulaiman Al Aror /8. Tawfeeq Abdul Ghani Al Duhaik /9. Yamen Mohammed Joumaa (child) /10. Bilal Ahmad Joumaa /11. Abdo Mahdi Khashfeh /12. Ahmad Ibraheem Al Duhek /13. Abdul Ghani Abdul Rahman Al Sheikh /14. Mustafa Khaled Wakeh /15. Abdul Lateef Al Duhek Al Wawi /16. Joumaa Al Shnat( Al Qado) /17. Retaj Al Khateeb (child) – from Zaafaraneh; died in Talbeeseh (Khaled Omar Hadeed is reported missing).



Children Yamen Mohamed Joumaa and his brother, Ahmad Mohamed Joumaa. Source: Talbeeseh Network

**Paramedic Omar Al Daqa provided the VDC with exclusive images following the attack on Talbeeseh city on 31 September 2015.**





**Syrian Civil Defense member Dhiaa Abu Musaab (26), who was present during the airstrikes on the city of Talbeeseh told the VDC:**

“On 30 September 2015, at about 11:00 am, we were informed by the observatories (radars) that two warplanes were flying over the northern countryside of Homs, including over the city of Talbeeseh. I took my video camera and rushed to the roof of my house to film them, but before I got there, the observatories requested civilians to instantly evacuate the streets, adding that the pilots were speaking Russian. A few seconds later, the warplanes launched eight vacuum missiles – specifically on the northern neighborhoods, which were crowded with civilians. The attack also hit a civilian bread distribution center, although there was no military headquarters in the targeted area. It was probably the first time that I saw a smoke cloud that large after an explosion. When I arrived to the scene, I saw three large holes in the street of different depths from one meter to two and a half meters. Some of the missiles had fallen directly between civilian houses and streets. One of the casualties was Abdul Latif Aldhak, a member of the Civil Defense, who rushed to one of the targeted areas to extinguish the fires. Then, another rocket landed near him and amputated his hand, leading to his death. “

In his testimony, Dr. Abu Sham, who works as a specialist at Talbeeseh Central Hospital and whose identity has been withheld for security reasons, told the VDC that the death toll reached 18, including four children, two women, and a civil defense member, some of whom were killed in the bread distribution center, while others were killed in their houses. The doctor added:

“We received 65 wounded with injuries from minor to critical. Among them, there were cases of suffocation as a result of dust and smoke. As for the martyrs, they were killed by the enormous pressure or shrapnel that pierced their bodies and tore some of them into pieces. One victim was missing and they couldn’t find his remains. A diagnosis of the victims how that some were killed because of an enormous pressure on them, sometimes causing a perforation in the ear drum, while others died because of rupture in their internal organs, caused but without any external signs of damage.”

### **Targeting Rastan City:**

The VDC’s correspondent in the northern suburbs of Homs asserted the targets that were subjected to Russian air raids on 30 September 2015, specifically in [Rastan city](#), were civilian.

“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”, he said. “Moreover, Rastan city does not have any ISIS presence at all. We were able to document the following names: Ahmad Al-Taweel and his children – Bassam Ahmad Al-Taweel, Muhammad Ahmad Al-Taweel and Khaled Ahmad Al-Taweel – as well as two other children, Iyad Kasem Al-Deek and Mousa Ma’amoun Al-Deek.”

**Similarly, Dr. A.K, a field hospital director in Rastan city, told the VDC in a video testimony we quoted hereinafter:**

“On 30 September 2015, more than forty injured and six dead bodies were moved to the field hospital after the city had been raided by warplanes whose pilots spoke in Russian, as the observatories informed us. One family, including four children and their father, were among the victims, and five others passed away after succumbing to their wounds, bringing the death toll up to 11 civilians. We attempted to treat the casualties with the scarce medical materials available due to the siege imposed on the area.”



**Photos showing destruction in Zaafaraneh village in the northern suburbs of Homs on 30 September 2015.**

Source: Activist Anas Abu Adnan. Exclusive to VDC.







[Some videos](#) (combined in one clip) shot exclusively for the VDC by our field reporter in Rastan city in Homs, 31 September 2015, showing damage and several injuries caused by the shelling.

Russian warplanes launched an airstrike the same day on Latamna city in the northern suburbs of Hama, targeting the headquarters of the Izzah Battalions and Brigades Congregation (an armed opposition battalion affiliated to the Free Syrian Army) as a number of sources and the faction's official spokesperson, [Captain Mustafa Ma'arati](#), confirmed in a live interview.

Media activists Anwar Abu Al-Walid and Suhaib Al-Ali told the VDC that there is no presence of the so-called Islamic State in the northern suburbs of Homs.

During the first day of the Russian airstrikes, the VDC was able to document the names of at [least 43 civilian fell due to these strikes](#), the majority of them from Homs northern countryside, among them 9 children and 7 women.

### **Legal Assessment:**

The VDC affirms that all parties carrying out airstrikes from the Syrian airspace, including the Russian Air Force must uphold international humanitarian law (IHL), as applicable in international/non-international armed conflicts, including the Geneva Convention of 1949, as well as the Additional Geneva Protocols I and II of 1977, which all codify customary international humanitarian law. All parties, including the Russian air force must abide by their international obligations to refrain from targeting civilians; to avoid indiscriminate attacks, and to refrain from using weapons that cause unnecessary suffering. The VDC further affirms that regardless of the legitimacy or lack of legitimacy in the use of force by any party operating over the Syrian airspace, all parties, including the Russian air force must abide by their obligation to take every precaution to avoid targeting civilians, carrying out indiscriminate attacks or causing excessive and unnecessary suffering.

The VDC condemns the use of thermobaric weapons (known as vacuum bombs) by the Russia Air Force in Talbeeseh and Zaafaraneh on September 30, 2015. The VDC documented the dropping of at least two vacuum bombs (which have been recognized from previous experiences), on civilian locations in scattered neighborhoods in Talbeeseh (al-Karama street, al-Barid street, Central Bread Committee) and Zaafaraneh (al-Makramieh area) leading to the collapse of the buildings affected, with inhabitants including families with women and children inside them. In Talbeeseh, the vacuum bombs caused blast winds. The inhabitants of the affected buildings were obliterated. The casualties, as noted by the testimonies of doctors receiving them in the medical units, suffered many internal injuries, sometimes not visible to the naked eye, including ruptured internal organs, which is a characteristic effect of vacuum bombs. As such, vacuum bombs “have an obvious and uncontrollable tendency towards indiscriminateness.”<sup>2</sup> When dropped on civilian buildings, they are unequivocally indiscriminate. Their destructive effect is so devastating that it makes it impossible for civilian to take shelter even in basements and caves. The United States had used vacuum bombs in Vietnam. The Russian forces used such bombs against Chechnyan cities, specifically targeting persons in fortified bunkers. The use by the Russian Air Force of “vacuum bombs” in Talbeeseh and Zaafaraneh on September 30, 2015 appears to be intended to cause maximum casualties among civilians, as it is impossible for civilians to shelter themselves from their destructive effect.

According to international humanitarian law, indiscriminate attacks on civilians are serious violations of IHL. They accordingly constitute war crimes. The criminal responsibility for committing 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.

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2- See ICRC, Weapons that may Cause Unnecessary Suffering or have Indiscriminate Effects, Report on the Work of Experts, (Geneva: ICRC, 1973), p. 48, par. 150.



## Violations Documentation Center in Syria

For any questions and comments:

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