The Russians, Like Assad, are Committing War Crimes

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“Our town has been hit three times today by the Russians and the town’s bakery was mostly destroyed. I can’t talk much now — not to keep the line busy as the fighter jets are still flying over the town.”

My brother said this to me shortly after reports [emerged](http://syriadirect.org/ar/news/120-___-___-__-___-____-___-___-_____-_____/) on 17 November that Russian airstrikes were targeting my town, Atarib, in the Aleppo countryside. Our conversation wasn’t much different from other calls I normally have with my family, mainly focused on estimating the danger they live under by counting the number of times they were hit per day. This danger has significantly increased with the Russian intervention, not only because of the increased number of daily aerial attacks but also because they have been mirroring Assad’s strategy of terrorizing civilians.

Russia’s airstrikes are easily distinguished from Assad’s as their fighter jets usually fly in a group of three and bomb without maneuvering, which sounds different than regime attacks.

It’s well known now that, by and large, Russia’s airstrikes have [targeted non-ISIS groups](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis), which contradicts Russia’s publically-stated goal, but little research has been done to document the impact of such airstrikes on civilians and whether they constitute war crimes.

War crimes

According to different human rights organizations, various groups in Syria have committed war crime violations, but the majority of them have been committed by the Assad regime and its allies. A recent [report](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/92_Vital_Centers_were_Targeted_during_october_2015_en.pdf) by the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 92 attacks on civilian facilities (hospitals, schools, markets, etc.) last month alone — 64 by the regime and 16 by Russian forces, with the rest committed by other groups.

The level of violations by Assad’s regime shouldn’t come as a surprise — it fits with Assad’s systematic strategy since the beginning of the peaceful revolution in March 2011. Assad’s regime has implemented a policy of collective civilian punishment meant to kill and terrorize and drive out populations in areas controlled by opposition groups. Assad has thus pursued a ‘[total war](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Total_war)’ strategy that the Geneva Conventions and the law of war flatly prohibit.

The Syrian regime is well aware of the impact of fear this strategy has on the lives of Syrians in areas outside its control, ensuring that everyone is too preoccupied with minute-to-minute survival to think of the future or create alternative administrative systems. I experienced this personally every time I went to opposition-held areas, especially just after attacks. I still remember how I felt during a visit to my hometown just a few days after a barrel bomb hit the town center and killed more than 30 civilians. The only feeling I had during my visit was the constant, inescapable fear of the probability of dying, no matter where I went.

Mirroring Assad’s strategy

Russia has been attacking non-ISIS groups using the regime’s definition of terrorism, which includes everyone opposing it, including civilians. Moreover, it seems that Russia is also mirroring Assad’s total war strategy. Of the systematic Russian [attacks](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/10/3/_____-______-_______-________-_______-______-_______-_______) on civilian facilities since the start of Russian airstrikes on 30 September, 16 were documented in October alone, making the collateral damage excuse absurd.

Russian attacks using [indiscriminate weapons](https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/10/syria-new-russian-made-cluster-munition-reported) also mirror Assad’s collective punishment strategy. The [systematic attacks](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/10/3/_____-______-_______-________-_______-______-_______-_______) on civilian facilities in particular and civilian areas in general are used to push locals to blame opposition groups for their suffering and being the cause of the attacks. Russian airstrikes have [killed](http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1447972413#.VlL4g4TPxsN) 329 civilians, among them 88 children, during the first months of its Syrian operations, and more than 120,000 Syrians were internally [displaced](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/29/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-refugees-idUSKCN0SN1PD20151029#UAomeOm64f3zS5PZ.97) last month alone.

The bakery in my hometown that was destroyed by Russian airstrikes on 17 November was the biggest bakery in the eastern countryside of Aleppo and [served](http://syriadirect.org/ar/news/120-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9/) 120,000 people. Destroying such facilities doesn’t just impact people in the short-term by terrorizing them — it increases their suffering in the long-term, as finding ways to provide 120,000 people with bread could prove a difficult task for a long time to come.

In the absence of a political solution to the conflict in Syria, governments and NGOs should at least press for the cessation of targeting civilians and to hold those responsible accountable. Politics is limited to the feasibility of demands, but ethics, at least, make it possible to do what's right. Calling for the cessation of aerial bombardment and other types of indiscriminate attacks in Syria is necessary for the protection civilians and an ethical obligation for us all.