



Physicians for Human Rights

The Syrian Conflict: Eight Years of Devastation and Destruction of the Health System

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Overview

As the crisis in Syria persists into its ninth year, civilians continue to suffer through a conflict defined by human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. PHR has researched, documented, and mapped widespread and systematic attacks on medical infrastructure in Syria since March 2011. 2018 was marked by phases of extreme violence as the Syrian government consolidated its hold over much of Syria's territory. In April 2019, Russian-backed Syrian government forces launched the biggest ongoing military offensive on northwest Syria. It is now more important than ever to maintain focus on past and ongoing crimes and to intensify calls for justice and accountability for the Syrian people.

The Systematic Targeting of Health Facilities

Attacks on health care, in gross violation of humanitarian norms and the Geneva Conventions, have been a distinctive feature of the conflict in Syria since its inception. PHR has documented and mapped 583 attacks on at least 350 separate facilities from March 2011 through August 2019. The increased number of attacks over the past few months is a direct result of the Syrian government's determination to take over the remaining opposition-held area. The systematic targeting of health facilities has been a crucial component of a wider strategy of war employed by the Syrian government and its allies – who are responsible for over 91 percent of attacks – to punish civilians residing in opposition-held territories, destroy their ability to survive, and draw them into government-held areas or drive them out of the country. This strategy of unbridled violence – which in addition to attacks on health care has included chemical strikes, sieges, and indiscriminate bombing of predominantly civilian areas – has devastated the civilian population, weakened opposition groups, and translated into direct military gains for the Syrian government.

Attacks on health care facilities by year

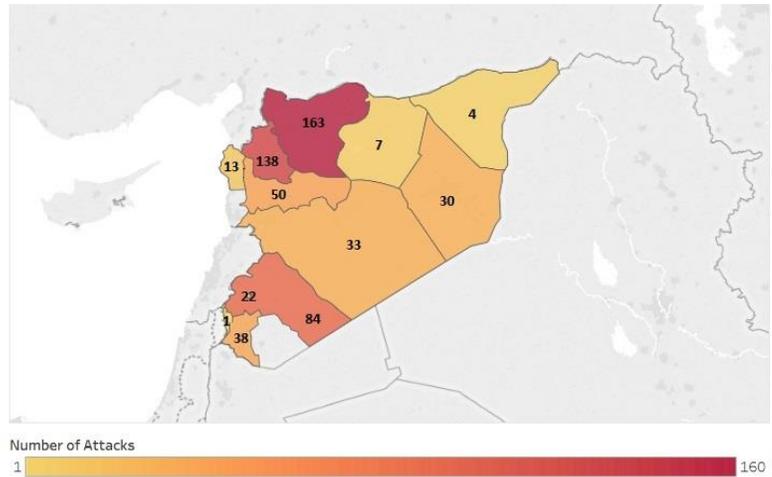


PHR documented 18 attacks in July 2016 – the highest number of attacks in any month throughout the conflict. The next highest numbers of attacks took place in October 2015, August 2016, and February 2018, with 16 attacks occurring in each month. 2015 was the worst year of the conflict in terms of attacks on medical facilities, with 123 attacks documented. The second worst year was 2016, with 109 attacks. There was a total of 57 verified attacks in 2018 (from January through December), with the majority of attacks occurring in January (14 attacks) and February (16 attacks). In 2019, PHR has so far verified 30 attacks (23 of which occurred between May and August) and is in the process of verifying more than two dozen other reported attacks. This high number of attacks is largely attributable to the Syrian government's military offensive on Idlib, northern Hama, and western Aleppo.

PHR has corroborated 583 attacks on 350 separate Syrian medical facilities from March 2011 through August 2019.

A Widespread Assault on Health Care

Attacks on health facilities have been verified in 12 out of Syria's 14 governorates. Opposition strongholds and heavily contested areas – Aleppo (163), Idlib (138), Hama (50), and Rif Dimashq (84) – bore the brunt of the violence, incurring over 75 percent of all attacks on health facilities documented since 2011. These areas witnessed clear increases in attacks on health care during government military campaigns, and sharp falls in attacks once government control was re-asserted. Eastern Ghouta, for example, suffered zero attacks after the Syrian government regained control over it in April 2018. Idlib, the only remaining opposition stronghold, incurred a total of 15 attacks from January through August 2019, which constitute 50 percent of total attacks documented by PHR during this period.



Map courtesy of the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria based on Physicians for Human Rights data

Conclusion and Recommendations

The magnitude, frequency, and distribution of attacks on health care in Syria over the past eight years reveal a widespread and systematic pattern of violations. These attacks rise to the level of war crimes and, in PHR's assessment, crimes against humanity. PHR calls on the international community to put a stop to these crimes and assure that any resolution to the conflict in Syria carries justice and accountability at its center. PHR calls on:

- All parties to the conflict in Syria to immediately end attacks on unlawful targets, including civilians, health facilities, and medical personnel;
- Russia, Turkey, and the United Nations to maintain the de-militarized zone in northwest Syria and prevent further military escalation in the area;
- The Secretary General to support the Board of Inquiry in its investigation of attacks against deconflicted health facilities, among other civilian structures, and to allow for its findings – including attribution of perpetrator – to be made public;
- The United Nations and states supporting a political solution to the Syrian conflict to integrate accountability into efforts to bring the conflict to an end, knowing that sustainable peace can only be built on the foundations of justice.



Physicians for
Human Rights

For more than 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used science and the uniquely credible voices of medical professionals to document and call attention to severe human rights violations around the world. PHR, which shared in the Nobel Peace Prize for its work to end the scourge of land mines, employs its investigations and expertise to advocate for persecuted health workers and facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.