

WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY RAED AL-SALEH, SYRIAN CIVIL DEFENSE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Syrian regime's indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilians areas, including its use of indiscriminate barrel bombs, is a primary cause of the Syrian refugee crisis.
- The exodus from Syria will not stop until Syrians are protected from Assad's indiscriminate aerial bombardment, which is now the leading killer of Syrian civilians, responsible for over 60 percent of all civilian deaths.
- UK air strikes against ISIS alone will not stem the refugee crisis nor counter the growth of extremism. To tackle extremism and stem the flow of refugees, Syrian rescue workers implore the international community, led by the United Kingdom, to take the necessary measures to provide civilian protection, including through the enforcement of a no-bomb zone in Syria.
- Ending indiscriminate air strikes is the only way to provide meaningful protection for Syrian civilians, and the only means to offer Syrians the hope and security they need to stay inside Syria and the wider region.

DETAIL

1. I am writing on behalf of the Syrian Civil Defense, also known as the White Helmets. We are an all-volunteer group made up of more than 2,700 volunteer search-and-rescue workers, operating from 110 local community centers across Syria. Since early 2013, we've risked our lives to save the lives of more than 30,000 Syrians from barrel bombings, chemical attacks, and collapsing buildings. 109 of my colleagues have died in the process. The Syrian Opposition was described by U.S. President Obama as being "lawyers, farmers and doctors". We are proudly so, and attach as Annex I the story of Issam Al Saleh, one of our brothers killed in a Russian airstrike last week. As the head of Syria's Civil Defense, it is on their behalf that I write to you today.
2. As Syrian rescue workers, our primary job is to save people's lives, not judge them. When we see someone in need, we save them—regardless of whether they are a Syrian civilian or a Syrian regime fighter. As a nonpartisan, apolitical organization, we believe that "to save one life is to save all of humanity".
3. But the process of saving lives in Syria has become increasingly difficult. Five years into the Syria crisis, the violence has gone from bad to catastrophic. Schools, hospitals, and market places are now regular subjects of indiscriminate air strikes. These aerial attacks are now the leading killer of Syrian civilians, responsible for over

60 percent of all civilian deaths. They are reducing entire cities to rubble. They are impeding access to humanitarian aid. And they are fueling the refugee crisis.

4. As we see day in and day out, our people will not stay in Syria if they or their loved ones are subject to indiscriminate aerial attacks. No one can raise a family in a home that could be bombed at any moment. No one can build a future in a city that is being starved into submission.
5. But it need not be this way. Were civilians to have the protection they require, fewer of my compatriots would leave. And fewer would be driven into the ranks of extremists. Unfortunately, however, UK airstrikes against ISIS alone will not achieve this. UK airstrikes against ISIS alone will not stop the bombs that are driving Syrians from Syria and the wider region. And UK airstrikes against ISIS alone will not counter the growth of extremism, which threatens Syria and Europe.
6. To stop ISIS and stem the flow of Syrian refugees, civilian protection must be at the forefront of the UK's Syria policy. That means stopping the indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas, which is a major recruiting tool for extremist forces and is driving Syrians from their homes.
7. Make no mistake: the primary driver of the refugee crisis is not ISIS—it's Assad. And while Assad claims to be tackling ISIS, the facts tell a different story. Of those killed by Assad's airstrikes, 95 percent are Syrian civilians (see Annex II). And every barrel bomb that falls from Assad's helicopter is a recruiting gift to ISIS. To stop the rise of ISIS and stem the flow of refugees, we must therefore tackle both at their source: by stopping Assad's indiscriminate aerial attacks.
8. We understand that the United Kingdom has the capacity to stop these aerial attacks immediately through the enforcement of a no-bomb zone implemented from the sea. As ordinary Syrians, it is difficult for us to ask for any form of Western-led intervention in our country. And yet today, given the enormity of the crisis in Syria and the lack of effective alternatives, we appeal to you to intervene on civilians' behalf by stopping the bombs in Syria.
9. A no-bomb zone would save lives immediately. It would help tackle the refugee crisis and the threat posed by ISIS. And it could potentially open the door to political negotiations, which the Syrian people desperately need. A no-bomb zone is practical. It is feasible. Why then is it not being enforced?
10. As rescue workers, we cannot fathom why we are being expected to risk our lives, when the United Kingdom can save lives at no risk to its own personnel. Why will the United Kingdom not take the limited actions that we all know will save civilian lives? How many more innocent men, women and children must die before the United Kingdom is compelled to act?

11. The Syrian people need a no-bomb zone. With everyday that passes, more of our citizens die and the crisis worsens. Russia's recent intervention in Syria—including its indiscriminate aerial attacks that have killed over 50 civilians—only reinforces the urgency with which the international community must act to end the bombs.
12. Today, we ask that the United Kingdom take the measures needed to save lives and stem the refugee crisis. The enforcement of a no-bomb zone is a feasible, effective way to achieve this. On behalf of the Syrian people, we ask that you stand with the Syrian people and join our calls for a no-bomb zone. I, or one of my colleagues from Syrian Civil Defense, would be happy to discuss this submission in person as part of oral evidence presented to the International Development Committee.

Annex I: Issam al Saleh

On 4th October 2015, Issam al Saleh was killed in a Russian airstrike in the town of Ihsem, in Idlib Province, Syria. He and his team members, were responding to an airstrike against a civilian home that had killed three people: a mother and her two children. While responding to the bombing, a second Russian aircraft returned to the site and fired a rocket that killed Mr al Saleh and wounded five members of his team.

The attack is captured on video and is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmpOqbhsNgg>

Issam was 29 years old and leaves a 3 year old son. He is one of seven brothers, all of whom served in the Assad Regime apparatus before the revolution. Issam and one brother were policemen, two were university professors, two army officers.

At the outbreak of the revolution they all defected. Issam and one brother joined Syria Civil Defence, two brothers joined the FSA and the remainder are involved in humanitarian aid delivery.

While serving as a police officer, Issam was detailed to the diplomatic protection squad in Damascus, where his duty post was to protect the Russian Embassy and personnel.

Issam al Saleh was the 108th member of Syria Civil Defence to be killed while carrying out rescue operations in Syria.

Annex II: Syria Crisis Fact Sheet

The crisis in Numbers:

- More than **220,000 people killed** since the crisis began in 2011, nearly half of them civilians.
- **75%** of all civilian deaths perpetrated by Syrian government. In the first half of 2015, Assad's forces killed **seven times** the number of civilians that the Islamic State (IS) did ([SNHR](#)).
- After four years of conflict, **half** the country has been killed, displaced or exiled, **half** the country is in need of aid and **one in four** Syrians have little or no access to aid ([OCHA](#)).
- **One in five Syrians** is now a refugee. **99%** of Syria's 4.1 million refugees are hosted by the region, but many of these countries can't cope. As a result, Syrians are looking to Europe. Today, more than **half** of all refugees to Europe are Syrian ([UNHCR](#)).
- Syria is now **the root of the two most serious global problems**: refugee crisis and ISIS.

Aerial Attacks:

- Air strikes by Syrian Government forces are the foremost driver of the Syrian refugee crisis and a major radicalising factor within Syria. They are now the leading cause of death in Syria.
- In May 2013, air strikes caused 8 percent of civilian deaths. By May 2015, they accounted for **66 percent** of civilian deaths ([VDC](#)). Today, air strikes kill 150 civilians every week ([VDC](#)).
- Syrian government airstrikes overwhelmingly affect civilians. **95 percent** of all deaths caused by Syrian government airstrikes are civilians—not ISIS or moderate opposition groups ([VDC](#)).
- **75%** of civilian deaths from air strikes are caused by barrel bombs deployed from helicopters. By their nature, barrel bombs are indiscriminate – their use is against IHL.

No-Bomb Zone (NBZ):

- A NBZ will stop the leading killer of Syrian civilians and offer a solution to exodus and to ISIS.
- A NBZ zone, implemented by sea via **naval assets**, would **deter air strikes** and would **not require pre-emptive attacks** on Syrian air defences. Instead, a no-bombing zone would:
 - (a) **Save lives** by deterring the leading killer in Syria and saving roughly 150 lives a week.
 - (b) **Slow the exodus** to Europe by improving life conditions within Syria and sending a clear signal to refugees outside of Syria that there is an intention to resolve the crisis in Syria.
 - (c) **Reduce radicalization** by removing a key recruiting tool for ISIS extremists: the West's failure to provide civilian protection. The fact that US, Russia and Syrian regime planes bomb in the same vicinity has led civilians to conflate and equate the two bombs
 - (d) **Combat IS** by freeing up moderates that have been fighting ISIS to fight them more effectively, which will be easier to achieve once the relentless bombing has stopped;
 - (e) **Make a political solution more likely**. If the regime can't use its most prolific weapon, its battlefield assessment changes. Fearful of its own survival, it will come under pressure from allies to engage in negotiation on transition, as confirmed by [Crisis Group](#).

- (f) **Lower the risk** of a sudden collapse of the Syrian regime by increasing the odds of a negotiated transition in which key elements of the Syrian state remain in place and minorities are protected.