

## SYRIA

***Attacks on education continued to occur frequently during current the reporting period, as the Syrian government intensified military operations to retake control of areas across the country. Attacks on schools, the vast majority of which were air strikes, spiked at times, particularly in Idlib and Hama governorates in 2018 and 2019. Dozens of schools continued to be used for military purposes, and attacks on students, teachers, and education personnel at all levels of education occurred periodically.***

### **Context**

Armed conflict continued across Syria during the 2017-2019 reporting period. In 2018, the Syrian government tasked its state military forces to regain control of the southern and western parts of the country. In early 2018, the Syrian government, backed by Russian air forces, launched an offensive to regain control of Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus,<sup>1950</sup> which opposition groups evacuated by mid-April 2018.<sup>1951</sup> In mid-June 2018, Syrian government forces pushed opposition groups out of Dar'a to Idlib governorate<sup>1952</sup> where government forces began an assault on anti-government groups in September 2018.<sup>1953</sup>

In April 2019, Syrian government ground forces and Russian air forces increased attacks on opposition-held areas of southern Idlib and northern Hama governorates.<sup>1954</sup> Fighting forced the displacement of almost 700,000 people in southern Idlib, northern Hama, and western Aleppo governorates, between May and December 2019, many of whom had been previously displaced, according to the UN.<sup>1955</sup>

By 2018, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant ("ISIL") had been defeated in most areas previously under its control,<sup>1956</sup> and in March 2019 the last "ISIL" territorial strongholds fell.<sup>1957</sup> On October 9, 2019, Turkish government forces conducted air and ground military action in northeast of Syria, where Kurdish-led groups had taken control of territories previously held by "ISIL".<sup>1958</sup> The UN reported that military operations by Turkish armed forces and allied armed groups led to the displacement of over 200,000 people between October 9 and December 18, 2019.<sup>1959</sup>

At the end of 2019, the UN identified over 11 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria.<sup>1960</sup> In 2018, the UN verified 3,021 grave violations against children, the highest number recorded in a single year since the conflict began.<sup>1961</sup> In addition, ACLED found that, based on reporting from the UN, civil society, media and other sources, the Syrian conflict experienced the highest annual number of reported conflict-related civilian fatalities in 2018,<sup>1962</sup> though the precise number of civilian casualties was unclear.<sup>1963</sup>

Escalations in violence severely impeded access to education in conflict-affected areas throughout the 2017-2019 reporting period. For example, Amnesty International reported an offensive by Turkish forces and allied Syrian armed groups against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in January 2018 that resulted in all but one school in Afrin city, Aleppo governorate, being rendered out of service, as well as the closure of Afrin University.<sup>1964</sup> According to the UN, in September 2018, active conflict in several districts of Idlib governorate and northern rural Hama governorate repeatedly forced educational authorities to suspend classes.<sup>1965</sup> In 2019, school closures in Idlib governorate prevented 400,000 primary and secondary school children from taking their final exams.<sup>1966</sup> More than 200 schools in Idlib were also used as shelters for internally displaced people (IDPs) from early May to late August 2019.<sup>1967</sup>

In areas of northeastern Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, changes to the curriculum functioned as a barrier to education. The UN reported that during September 2018 the Kurdish Self Administration (KSA) had issued a decree preventing children from studying at Syrian government schools teaching the national curriculum and that the KSA had established checkpoints to prevent access to such institutions<sup>1968</sup>. Moreover, an assessment conducted by REACH in Al-Hasakeh governorate found that parent disapproval of the Kurdish school curriculum was the most commonly mentioned barrier to education, cited by 27 percent of those interviewed in October 2018.<sup>1969</sup>

### **Attacks on schools**

During the 2017-2019 reporting period, GCPEA collected over 400 reported incidents of attacks on schools. As in the 2013-2017 reporting period, when attacks on schools peaked in 2016 with 90 UN-verified incidents,<sup>1970</sup> targeted and

indiscriminate attacks on schools continued to occur frequently. According to the UN, perpetrators included government forces, foreign armed forces, anti-government armed groups, pro-government militias, and violent extremist groups.<sup>1971</sup> Such attacks had a devastating impact on the education system. In 2019, the UN estimated that 40 percent of schools in Syria were damaged or destroyed as a result of conflict.<sup>1972</sup>

In 2017, GCPEA identified over 150 reported incidents of attacks on schools in media and NGO sources,<sup>1973</sup> almost twice as many as verified by the UN during the same year (78).<sup>1974</sup> According to reports collated by GCPEA, Raqqah, Idlib, and Aleppo governorates were the most heavily affected areas in 2017, and reported attacks consisted primarily of air strikes.<sup>1975</sup>

In 2018, the UN verified 113 incidents of attacks on schools in Syria, which caused 96 child casualties.<sup>1976</sup> According to the UN, nearly 70 percent of verified attacks on schools and hospitals were air strikes, primarily attributed to government or pro-government air forces.<sup>1977</sup> The UN also reported that in 2018, 48 education personnel and health personnel were killed or maimed, though it was unclear whether these were targeted attacks on personnel or casualties from attacks on school facilities.<sup>1978</sup>

In 2018, through reporting on individual incidents by media, and human rights monitors, and the UN, GCPEA collated at least 85 reported incidents of attacks on schools, over 50 of which involved air strikes.<sup>1979</sup> Some of these may have been verified. According to information collected, the majority of alleged air strike attacks took place in Idlib governorate. In some reported cases, air strikes killed or injured students and education staff. For example:

- The UN reported that, on February 8, 2018, air strikes in Harasta, Damascus, killed a teacher and an adult student who were leaving an education charity.<sup>1980</sup>
- The UN reported that, on March 21, 2018, air strikes hit a school in Kafr Battikh town, Idlib governorate, killing 13 schoolchildren who were between the ages of seven and 11 years old.<sup>1981</sup>
- According to Save the Children, a school run by one of its partner organizations in Dar'a was hit by an air strike in late June 2018; a guard was killed.<sup>1982</sup>

In addition to air strikes, ground-launched strikes, including artillery and mortars, frequently affected schools in 2018, making up approximately one quarter of all attacks on schools. This form of attack occurred most frequently in Idlib and Aleppo, but also occurred in Dar'a, Damascus, and Homs governorates. For example:

- According to the UN, ground strikes killed three children in the vicinity of a school in Damascus, on February 20, 2018.<sup>1983</sup>
- On March 5, 2018, shelling injured at least ten children and school staff and caused minor damage to a school in Taftanaz, Idlib governorate, also according to the UN.<sup>1984</sup>
- On September 10, 2018, ground strikes in the form of a rocket that released cluster bombs reportedly hit two adjacent schools—the Quds primary school and the Nidhal secondary school—in Jarjanaz village, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man district, Idlib governorate. Between three and seven students were injured, and both schools were damaged and closed for three days, according to multiple UN sources.<sup>1985</sup>
- On November 24, 2018, the UN and Human Rights Watch reported that mortar projectiles, reportedly launched by pro-government forces, struck near Khansa' primary school in Jarjanaz village, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man district, Idlib governorate. The explosion killed six children between the ages of eight and 11 years, one teacher, and a parent, and injured several others. More than 200 children were allegedly in the schoolyard at the time of the blast. Human Rights Watch reported that the attack was launched from a 240mm rocket-assisted mortar system designed to demolish fortifications.<sup>1986</sup> Both Human Rights Watch and the UN reported that the attack may have constituted a war crime.<sup>1987</sup>

In 2018, GCPEA identified several cases in which explosive devices planted at schools or on vehicles near schools reportedly injured students or destroyed educational facilities. For example:

- The UN reported that an unexploded ordnance severely injured nine children at a school in Judaydah al-Fadl, Rif Dimashq governorate, on February 2, 2018.<sup>1988</sup>
- According to a local human rights monitor, "IS" allegedly detonated explosives at a secondary school in al-

Shafa city, Deir ez-Zor governorate, on September 13, 2018. The explosion reportedly destroyed a building and damaged the school's fence.<sup>1989</sup>

- The UN reported that on November 8, 2018, a car-borne improvised explosive device (IED) detonated in front of Andalus primary school in I'zaz city, Aleppo governorate.<sup>1990</sup> The explosion took place during the school day, injuring three girls and three boys, and partly damaged the school building and furniture.<sup>1991</sup>

In 2019, attacks on schools occurred at a higher rate than in 2018. The UN verified 157 attacks on schools in 2019.<sup>1992</sup> Through reporting by the UN, international NGOs, and human rights monitors, GCPEA identified a similar number of reported incidents of attacks on schools in 2019; these incident reports showed that air strikes remained the most common form of attacks on schools. An escalation of attacks began in April 2019, when the Syrian government led an intensive military operation on Idlib and Hama governorates against opposition forces. GCPEA collected at least six reports of air strikes between early January and the end of April 2019, which damaged schools in Idlib and Hama governorates.<sup>1993</sup> In contrast, GCPEA collected over 60 reports of airstrikes between May and August 2019 on or near schools, which damaged or destroyed at least 70 schools.<sup>1994</sup> Air strikes continued throughout 2019 and escalated again in Idlib, northern Hama, and southern Aleppo governorates from the end of October to December, when UN and human rights observatories reported another 15 incidents of air strikes.<sup>1995</sup> Attacks on schools in 2019 included:

- On May 3, 2019, the UN and a human rights monitor reported that an air strike hit an educational complex containing three schools in Habit village, Ma'arrak district, Idlib governorate. The human rights monitor also reported that ground-launched missiles were also launched, causing damage to the school building and furniture.<sup>1996</sup>
- On May 7, 2019, the UN and a human rights monitor reported that an unidentified aircraft fired air-to-ground rockets near an all-girls high school in Kafr Sajna village, Idlib governorate. One of the rockets allegedly landed on the school, damaging the building and its furniture.<sup>1997</sup>
- SNHR and other local media and civil society sources reported that, on June 9, 2019, alleged Russian and Syrian aircraft carried out air strikes on Morek town, Hama governorate, damaging a school. No injuries or fatalities were reported.<sup>1998</sup>
- On November 6 and 8, 2019, the UN verified two air strikes on schools in Jisr al-Shughur city, Idlib governorate. The attack destroyed one school and damaged the other.<sup>1999</sup>

In addition, reports identified that ground strikes, artillery, and mortars were used in attacks on schools throughout 2019. GCPEA received reports of at least 50 incidents of these violations that damaged or destroyed schools.<sup>2000</sup> The majority of these occurred between January and April 2019, and appeared to subside as air strikes became more prominent from May through August. Reports also indicated that landmines and IEDs were used in attacks on schools in 2019.<sup>2001</sup> In addition, at least one reported incident of an arson attack on a school had occurred at the time of writing, and another attack, the details of which remained unspecified.<sup>2002</sup> Incidents included:

- On January 1, 2019, the UN verified that a mortar round hit a school in Nile Street neighborhood of Aleppo city and governorate, causing partial damage to the building. The school was reportedly closed during the attack and no injuries were reported.<sup>2003</sup>
- On or around April 23, 2019, Save the Children reported that at least two schools supported by the NGO were heavily damaged during intensive shelling in Khan Sheikoun, Idlib governorate. The schools were closed for an unspecified amount of time following the incident, but no casualties were recorded.<sup>2004</sup>
- According to reports collected by a local human rights monitor, on January 29, 2019, unknown actors allegedly burned Al Keshkiya School for Boys in Al Keshkiya town, Deir ez-Zour governorate, severely damaging the building and furniture. The school closed for an unspecified amount of time.<sup>2005</sup>
- A local human rights monitor reported that, on August 7, 2019, a car bomb allegedly exploded near Khawla Bint al Azwar High School in Qahtaniya town, Al Hasaka governorate. The school building and furniture were damaged; the report indicated an unspecified number of casualties but did not state their connection to the school.<sup>2006</sup>

### **Attacks on students, teachers, and other education personnel**

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA collected at least ten reports of attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel. These attacks continued at a similar rate to the previous reporting period, when GCPEA identified occasional allegations of incidents. In some years, the UN reported attacks on schools and protected personnel together, and these figures are reported in the previous section.

The Secretary-General's 2018 report on Children in armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic reported that from November 2013 to June 2018, the UN verified nine cases of attacks physically targeting education personnel, including shootings, as well as threats and intimidation collectively aimed at hundreds of teachers. The UN also verified that at least 415 children were killed and 615 injured while at school or near a school during that period.<sup>2007</sup>

In 2018, the UN reported that at least nine education personnel were detained and that 48 education and medical personnel were maimed and killed, though it was unclear how many were education personnel and whether killing and maiming occurred as a result of attacks on schools or direct attacks on teachers.<sup>2008</sup> According to information collected by GCPEA from the UN, NGOs, and media sources, three incidents affected at least seven students and education staff. These included:

- According to the UN, a mortar shell reportedly struck and killed two 14-year-old boys who were on their way home from an UNRWA school in Jaramana refugee camp on February 21, 2018.<sup>2009</sup>
- The UN reported that, on May 28, 2018, armed men from an unidentified armed group entered the al-Bashaer college in Nawa city, Dar'a governorate, and opened fire on students and teaching staff, according to the UN. One student was injured. According to school staff, the school had refused to pay fees to the armed group.<sup>2010</sup>
- International media group *Syria Direct* and local sources reported that, on September 22, 2018, unidentified armed assailants attacked Isa Rashid Isa, the head of the Syriac curriculum committee, while he was leaving his home in Al-Qamishli city, Al-Hasakah governorate.<sup>2011</sup>

In 2019, GCPEA collected two reported incidents of attacks on teachers and personnel. On February 2, 2019, *AFP* and *France24* reported allegations that a roadside explosive device detonated near a bus transporting teachers in Manbij city, Manbij governorate. The explosion killed the bus driver and wounded four others.<sup>2012</sup> In a second incident, according to a UN news release, on March 20, 2019, unknown perpetrators reportedly attacked a school bus in the al-Zahra area of Aleppo city and governorate, killing a five-year-old boy and injuring a teacher who were en route from school.<sup>2013</sup>

During the reporting period, GCPEA also received information that armed groups controlling territorial borders harassed female students traveling from Hama to Idlib to participate in exams administered by the Syrian government.<sup>2014</sup>

### **Military use of schools and universities**

Between 2017 and 2019, the UN, NGOs, and media sources reported that Syrian government forces and armed groups used schools for military purposes.

From November 2013 to June 2018, the UN verified 72 cases of military use of schools. Approximately one third of all cases occurred in Aleppo (23), followed by Raqqah (14), and Idlib (12). The UN attributed cases to "ISIL" (34), Syrian government forces (13), groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (10), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (8), and the YPG and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) (7). The UN also noted that at least 29 schools used for military purposes were subsequently attacked.<sup>2015</sup>

In 2017 alone, according to the UN, there were 22 verified incidents of military use of schools, including 20 by "ISIL" and by YPG/YPJ. A majority of these schools (16) were later attacked.<sup>2016</sup>

In 2018, the UN verified reports of the military use of 24 schools by the following parties: YPG/YPJ (14), groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (7), Nusrah Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2), and "ISIL" (1). Three of those schools were attacked as a result of being used by armed forces.<sup>2017</sup> In 2018, Amnesty International also reported three incidents in which Turkish forces were involved in using schools in Aleppo governorate for military purposes:

- Amnesty International reported that Turkish forces and Turkish-supported armed groups were using the public school in Shara city, Afrin district, Aleppo governorate, as a police headquarters, in June 2018.<sup>2018</sup>

- According to Amnesty International, in June 2018, Turkish forces were using a second school in Jenderes, Aleppo governorate, as a field hospital.<sup>2019</sup>
- Satellite imagery reviewed by Amnesty International showed that Turkish forces and allied Syrian armed groups were using Amir Ghabari school in Afrin district, Aleppo governorate, as a military headquarters in late April 2018.<sup>2020</sup>

In 2019, the UN verified reports of 32 incidents of military use of schools.<sup>2021</sup> For example, in the first half of October 2019, the UN reported that unidentified armed groups used two schools in Tal Abiad, Raqqah governorate;<sup>2022</sup> a local human rights monitor reported that armed groups had allegedly turned both into a military headquarters on October 8, 2019.<sup>2023</sup>

### **Attacks on higher education**

Between 2017 and 2019, GCPEA identified ten incidents of attacks on university students, staff, and facilities. In *Education under Attack 2018*, attacks by “ISIL” and unidentified parties, including explosives and air strikes, affected university infrastructure; armed parties also targeted university staff and students during that period.<sup>2024</sup> A study by Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) found that, since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, university students and staff have been subjected to arbitrary arrests and heightened security control that restricted academic freedoms.<sup>2025</sup>

In 2017, GCPEA identified at least five reported attacks on university facilities which occurred in Raqqah and Idlib governorates.<sup>2026</sup> In 2018, GCPEA identified reports of three attacks on higher education facilities. These included:

- According to a local human rights monitor, helicopters dropped a barrel bomb near a teacher preparation institution in Jarjanaz town, Idlib governorate, partially destroying the building and damaging furniture, on January 7, 2018.<sup>2027</sup>
- The UN and a local human rights monitor reported that air strikes in Saraqib town, Idlib governorate, struck near Elba Private University on January 21, 2018, reportedly killing a school technician and injuring three students. The air strikes damaged multiple school buildings, causing the suspension of classes and the temporarily closure of the university.<sup>2028</sup>
- The UN and a local human rights monitor reported that, on November 24, 2018, artillery fire struck a teacher training institute, damaging the building. The attack occurred during an offensive which also damaged Khansa’ primary school on the same day, as reported above.<sup>2029</sup>

In 2019, two attacks on higher education were reported, one affecting university personnel and the other university facilities. These were:

- On May 7, 2019, a local human rights monitor reported that an air strike perpetrated by presumed government forces occurred near the Medical Technology Institute of Aleppo Free University in Kafr Sajna village, Idlib governorate.<sup>2030</sup>
- On August 26, 2019, Scholars at Risk reported that authorities arrested a scholar at a checkpoint in Damascus while he was en route to Qalamoun University, his place of employment. The report noted that he was a prominent scholar and public figure who often published on his political views.<sup>2031</sup>

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