



THE WHITE HELMETS

SUICIDE DRONE ATTACKS

IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

A NEW THREAT TO CIVILIANS

MAY 2024

www.whitehelmets.org

INTRODUCTION

The White Helmets is documenting a new pattern of attacks using suicide drones in northwest Syria. Since the beginning of 2024, we have responded to 41 attacks using suicide drones. The attacks originate from areas controlled by Syrian regime forces and are concentrated in areas near the frontlines in the countryside of Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo, although attacks are increasingly coming beyond frontlines, up to 9km from the frontline in one case.

In the past four months, we have witnessed their direct impact in terms of the threat to civilian lives and the reverberating effects on people's livelihoods and by extension the agriculture and food security of the region.

Almost half of the attacks observed by White Helmets teams targeted civilian cars or motorcycles. A total of three civilians have been killed, with 18 injured, including a woman and four children. The impact of these attacks is not limited to direct loss of

life and damage to property. Targeting civilian areas, villages, towns, farms, and agricultural areas threatens the livelihoods of the population and the income of thousands of families. The resilience of communities in northwest Syria has already been devastated by thirteen years of war and the catastrophic 2023 earthquakes. New threats, like suicide drones, compound the psychological trauma and the suffering of the civilian population.

The introduction of suicide drones in northwest Syria warrants international attention because of the historic pattern of deliberate attacks on civilians by the Syrian regime. Suicide drones have the potential to undertake attacks with increased accuracy due to the high level of control over the direction and target of the drone's payload. In our experience, weapons that provide increased accuracy in targeting have not resulted in a decline in civilian casualties or a reduction in destruction of civilian infrastructure when used by the regime in northwest Syria. The relative ease of acquiring and constructing suicide drones with minimal resources is also a cause for concern.

Remnants of suicide drones



A photograph showing several pieces of debris from a destroyed drone scattered on a green lawn. The debris includes a small red and white plastic component, a long grey metal arm, a rectangular metal plate, and a larger, jagged metal fragment. A small orange square is visible in the top right corner of the image.

Remnants of suicide drones

SUICIDE DRONES

“Suicide drone” in this report, also known as Kamikaze drone, can refer to a First-Person-View Drone (FPV), loitering munition or “One-way attack” drone, which is a type of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) with a built-in munition that attacks a target by crashing into it and exploding. It can also be equipped with an explosive charge that can be detonated remotely when in range of the launch base.

Since the drone is destroyed during the attack, it is difficult to identify the type of drones being used by solely relying on the remnants collected from attack sites.

As such, this report also relies on an analysis of armed drone observations, witness accounts and an analysis of the impact of the explosions. The report does not rely on third party data sources or open-source data. As such, while we are aware of additional suicide drone attacks on military targets, our data in this report is limited only to those attacks we respond to, where civilian lives or infrastructure are under threat.

While there are reports of suicide drones being used in Syrian before 2024, the White Helmets has previously not witnessed any attacks using this weapon before this year in the areas we serve (Idlib and North Aleppo Countryside).

SENTRY PROGRAM



Analysis of Armed Drone Observations in 2024 (Until April 27, 2024)

The White Helmets' Sentry service plays a crucial role in providing early warnings about aircraft and UAV activity in northwest Syria, alerting civilians and minimizing casualties from aerial bombardments. The program gathers observations of aircraft movements from reliable civilian sources, analyzes them to predict potential targets, and estimates the time-of-flight arrival, promptly disseminating warnings through active channels, including systems installed in hospitals, schools and other public buildings.



From the beginning of 2024
until April 27, 2024, 291-armed
drone observations were
recorded, of which

135

**ARE SUSPECTED
SUICIDE DRONES**

OBSERVATION FREQUENCY

The observations of suicide drones through the Sentry system are spread throughout the day, with higher frequency of observations during the late morning to early afternoon period (around 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM) and late evening to early night period (around 9:00 PM to 12:00 AM). This could suggest that these are the peak times for drone activities.

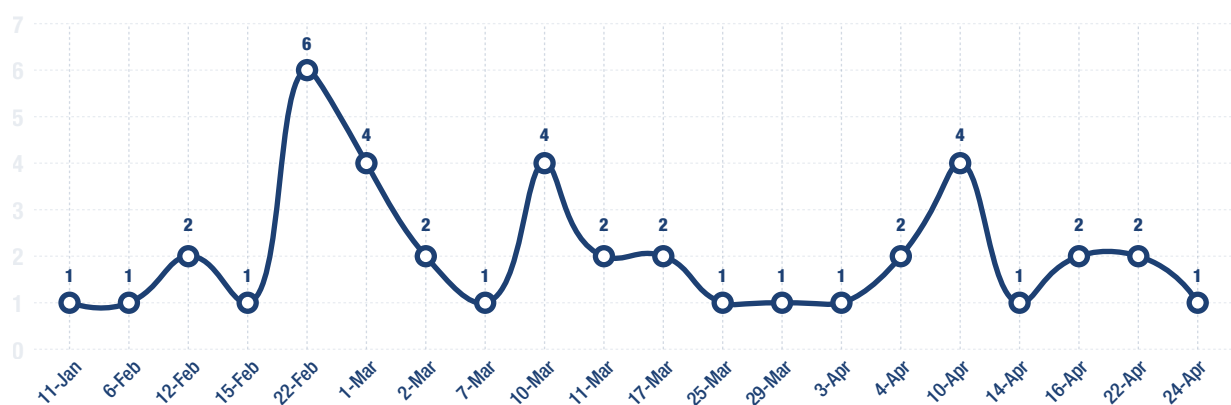
It is also important to note that attacks so far have never taken place simultaneously in more than one geographic area. Rather, we have witnessed waves of successive attacks concentrated in the same area. The observations are spread across various

subdistricts, with multiple observations recorded in Atareb, Daret Izza, Idlib, Jabal Turkman, Kafr Aleppo, Kafr Takhareem, Ma'rrat Tamsrin, Saraqib, Sarmin, Mhambal and Ziyara.

Attacks Documented by White Helmets with Suicide Drones against Civilians

Since the beginning of 2024 until 30 April, White Helmets volunteers have responded to 41 suicide drone attacks, all launched from areas controlled by the Syrian regime, targeting civilians. We responded to ten attacks in February, with the number increasing to 17 attacks in March, and 13 other attacks in April. Several attacks have been observed to involve multiple drones in a single attack, with up to six suicide drones observed in one attack.

Figure: Number of Suicide Drone Attacks



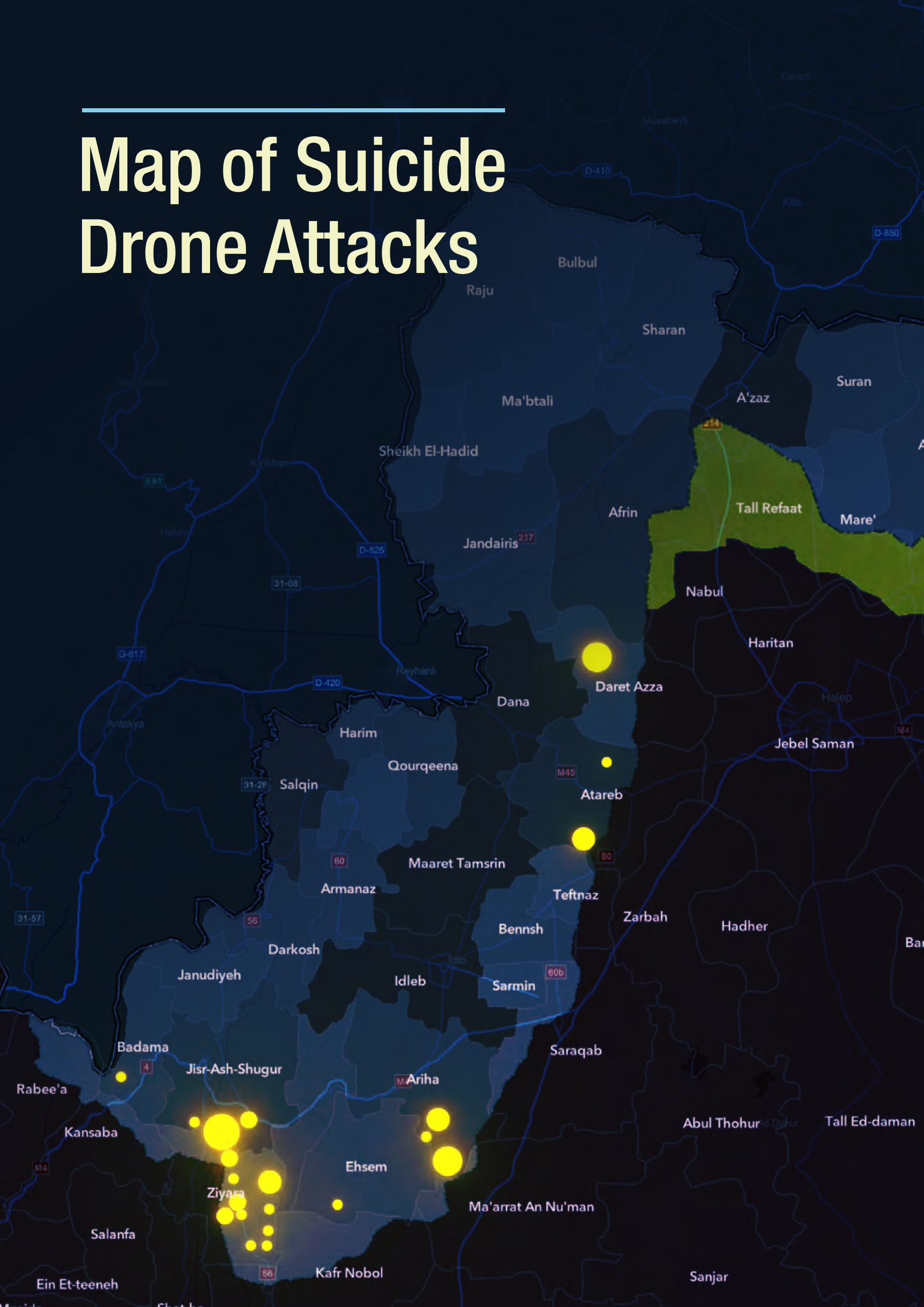
BREAKDOWN OF SUICIDE DRONE ATTACKS BY LOCATION

The attacks targeted 21 villages, putting approximately 70,000 civilians at risk, including 22,000 displaced persons. Attacks have targeted areas up to 9km from frontlines.

The areas most affected include:

- **Al-Ghab Plain, Hama Countryside (20 attacks):** This region near the frontlines witnessed the highest number of attacks. Targeted villages included: Al Zaqum, Al-Hamidiah, Mansura, Qarqur, Qastun, Tal Wassit, Qalidin, Kherbet Elnaqus, Alqahera, Al-Mashiak and Al-Ziyara.
- **Idlib Countryside (13 attacks):** The following villages were targeted: Benin, Sarja, Shinan, Kansafra, Safiyat, Frikeh, and Sheikh Sindyan.
- **Aleppo Countryside (8 attacks):** The attacks targeted Al-Abzemo, Kafr Noran, and Daret Izza.

Map of Suicide Drone Attacks



The majority of attacks targeted roads (17 attacks), including targeting motorcyclists and vehicles on the roads. Eight attacks targeted agricultural fields, and 13 attacks targeted civilian homes, with one attack targeting each of a public market, a shop, and a water body.



NUMBER OF CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

The attacks resulted in the deaths of three civilians and injuries to 18 others, including a woman and four children.



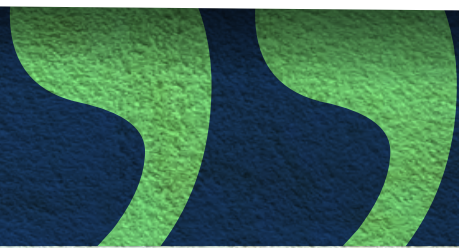
NOTABLE EXAMPLES OF SUICIDE DRONE ATTACKS CAUSING CIVILIAN CASUALTIES



“Fishing is my primary source of income. Every day, I fish at the Qarqour Dam in the Al-Ghab Plain, alongside my fellow fishermen. We share a small room near the dam where we store our fishing tools. While we are accustomed to the constant presence of reconnaissance planes above us and being exposed to attacks and artillery shelling, suicide drones are a new weapon we have been seeing in Al-Ghab Plain. On Thursday, February 22, my fellow fishermen and I were fishing as we heard a strange sound which we discovered was a suicide drone. We were fishing when the first drone attacked our storage room, and about 10 minutes later, another fishermen’s storage was also attacked by another drone. We were watching from a distance as the drone fell from the air while it was in the air and hit its target. The scene was terrifying and demonstrated how there is really no way to escape a drone if you are at the targeted location. We continue to see these drones regularly in our area targeting farmers and fishermen, but we have no option but to take the risks and go to work because the second alternative is death from hunger.”

- **Rifaat Qaed,**

fisherman from the village of
Qarqour in the Al-Ghab Plain



22 February

Six suicide drone attacks launched from areas controlled by the Syrian regime forces on February 22. One of them targeting a motorcycle injuring a man and his two children in the Al-Ghab Plain area in Hama countryside. While two other attacks targeted at around 03:30 PM fishermen's rooms in Qarqour village in the Al-Ghab Plain.

11 March

A suicide drone attack launched from areas controlled by the Syrian regime forces on March 11 targeted a tractor in the town of Kafr Nouran in Aleppo western countryside, killing the tractor driver.

7 March

A suicide drone attack launched from areas controlled by the Syrian regime forces on March 7 targeted a shepherd on the outskirts of Darat Izza city in Aleppo western countryside, killing him.

16 April

A suicide drone attack launched from areas controlled by the Syrian regime forces on April 16 targeted a car in the city of Darat Azza in Aleppo western countryside, injuring five civilians from the same family.

“With every year that passes, we see new trends and tools being used to target civilians in northwest Syria. The war has become more systematic through new weapons, and the goal is to kill and destroy communities’ livelihoods.”

“Our teams responded to the suicide drone attack in the city of Darat Azza in the western countryside of Aleppo. The drone targeted a car injuring a family of five including a woman and two children. Our ambulances transported them from the scene to the hospital. The way that these drones hit their target is terrifying, and you could see the fear and shock in their eyes.”

- SCD Volunteer, Saeed Mando.

CONCERNS GOING FORWARD

The White Helmets will continue to record and analyse these attacks. Given examples of the use of consumer drone technology for military purposes from contexts such as Myanmar, Yemen and Ukraine, we are concerned that these weapons provide the capacity to undertake precise targeted attacks on civilians extremely cheaply, without the need for strong industrial capacities, large defence budgets, or deep technical expertise.

The Al-Ghab area is renowned as one of Syria's most fertile agricultural regions, particularly for cultivating grains, such as wheat, which serve as a main source of food for the population. The region is also home to the Al-Qarquor Dam, which civilians use for fishing. Repeated attacks in these areas undermines the livelihoods of those who rely on the land for food and income, and by extension threatens food security by reducing the amount of usable arable land. Another key concern is the terror and psychological impacts of this lethal weapon on affected communities.

The White Helmets has responded to a total of 337 attacks this year, including 298 by the regime. While suicide drone attacks represent a small proportion of overall attacks, their ability to surpass the frontlines and target civilians and civilian objects is a cause for deep concern.

While the use of suicide drones is not inherently against international law, their introduction in the Syrian context warrants international attention given the historic pattern of deliberate attacks on civilians by the Syrian regime, and the potential for these weapons to be used in a manner contrary to the principles of distinction, proportionality and preventing unnecessary suffering. Our response to and documentation of attacks in northwest Syria suggests that the use of weapons with high levels of precision by the regime does not lead to a reduction in civilian casualties. Indeed, our report on the use of laser-guided weapons in northwest Syria showed that while precision-guided weapons represented only a small number of attacks in 2022 (4 percent), they had caused a disproportionate number of civilian deaths (20 percent of all deaths that year).¹ Suicide drones also present additional challenges for documentation and future accountability given the difficulties with documenting remnants and attributing responsibility.

Warfare and technology advance much faster than international regulations and legal frameworks. There is an urgent need for states to collaborate and develop clear regulations and guidelines regarding the use of suicide drones in armed conflicts, and prevent the development of autonomous targeting capabilities. States must ensure that their actions comply with international legal obligations, particularly those outlined in international humanitarian law, to mitigate the risks posed by these weapons and uphold the protection of civilians in conflict zones.

White Helmets volunteers faced difficulties reaching many of the targeted locations due to their exposure to regime forces and the presence of drones in the air.


1- "Krasnopol: The latest Russian weapon killing civilians in Syria", May 2022, available at <https://www.syriacivildefence.org/en/latest/statements/krasnopol-latest-russian-weapon-killing-civilians-syria/>

Photo: Targeting of a civilian car in the city of Daret Azza in Aleppo western countryside, April 2024 ,16



Targeting of a civilian car in the village of Qastoun in the countryside of Hama, February 2024 ,22





Escalating Suicide Drone Attacks

**Threaten Civilians
in Northwest Syria**

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