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حراس الطفولة
Child Guardians

Policy Brief: **Alarming Surge in Attacks on Schools in Northwest Syria**

November 2024



Introduction

Deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools and educational facilities, have been a defining feature of the crisis in Syria, destroying not only physical structures but also Syria's future. Years of war have left impacts that will span generations. The education system is severely strained, with many facilities partially damaged or completely destroyed, leaving a lasting scar on children. These outcomes are the direct result of intentional attacks on educational facilities and civilian neighborhoods.

According to the 2024 Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview, there are more than 2.45 million Out of School Children across Syria.¹ Northwest Syria accounts for the highest percentages with 69 per cent of children in Idlib being out of school, and 38 per cent of children in Aleppo.² There are many drivers that may contribute to these exorbitant numbers, one of which is the damage to educational facilities caused by the ongoing war and deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure and neighborhoods, and attacks of educational personnel and students.

The UN estimates that 1,054 schools are damaged in north-west Syria,³ rendering hundreds of schools out of service. While these attacks on educational facilities have varied over the past 13 years, there has been a noticeable increase in attacks on education over the past year – between September 2023 and September 2024, there has been a total of 43 attacks on schools, compared to only 8 attacks in 2022-2023, and 10 attacks in 2022-2021. This represents an increase of more than 200 per cent. This briefing by Child Guardians (previously known as Hurras Network) and the White Helmets provides an overview of attacks on schools in Northwest Syria since October 2023.

Systematic attacks on schools

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), schools are considered prima facie civilian objects, meaning they must not be targeted unless they are being used for military purposes. This rule is part of customary international law. IHL provides schools with general protection against direct attacks and targeting them without justification constitutes a violation of the principle of distinction, thereby breaching IHL.

Since 2011, military operations and systematic bombings by Russian and regime forces have devastated thousands of schools. The repeated attacks by the Syrian-Russian alliance on civilian infrastructure in populated areas, where there was no apparent military objective, suggest that these unlawful attacks were deliberate.⁴

There has been a noticeable increase in attacks on schools in northwest Syria over the past 12 months, particularly following the military escalation in October 2023, which featured a systemic pattern of targeting civilian neighborhoods. During the heightened hostilities in October 2023 alone, 27 schools in northern Syria were damaged or destroyed, according to OCHA.⁵ Since the escalation in October 2023, Child Guardians have documented a total of 47 attacks on 40 schools. These attacks resulted in the death of a child and a teacher, and injuring 9 children and one teacher. In 2024 alone so far, we documented a total of 15 attacks on 14 schools across northwest Syria.

¹ReliefWeb, 2024, Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview (February 2024), available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2024-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2024>.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Human Rights Watch, 2020, "Targeting Life in Idlib: Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure," available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/10/syria1020_web.pdf.

⁵OCHA, 2023, Syrian Arab Republic: 2024 Humanitarian Needs Overview (December 2023), available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2024-humanitarian-needs-overview-december-2023>.

These attacks on schools exacerbated an already severely strained education system and preexisting damage to educational facilities in northwest Syria from years of war as well as the recent earthquakes in February 2023. Notably, the pattern of attacks over the past 12-month period targeted schools and areas that were not impacted by the earthquakes such as Sarmin, Idlib Ariha and Afis. Significantly, these are all areas that hosted internally displaced people (IDPs) and children from areas damaged by the earthquakes.

These ongoing attacks highlight a blatant disregard for international humanitarian law, further exacerbated by the persistent impunity surrounding these grave violations. There is an urgent need for states to take decisive actions towards justice and accountability to protect the children of Syria and secure their future.

Impacts on children

The ongoing attacks on education in northwest Syria has had a profound and multifaceted impact on children, severely affecting their safety, education, and overall well-being.

Physical and Psychological Harm

The immediate consequences of attacks on children include casualties and severe physical injuries. Beyond this, constant exposure to violence creates a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety, with 19% of children reporting that they do not feel safe at school due to fears of airstrikes or shelling, according to Save the Children.⁶ This ongoing trauma leads to long-term psychological disturbances, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety, severely affecting their mental health and emotional stability. Additionally, the loss of friends, family members, and homes contributes to heightened stress and feelings of social isolation. The psychological and social damage inflicted on children is often invisible or overlooked in initial reports, which typically focus on physical and material damage. Such harm to children's mental health remains a pressing yet under-addressed crisis.

Disruption of Education

Repeated attacks on schools and educational facilities severely disrupt children's education. The destruction and damage to schools not only interrupt learning but also exacerbates educational disparities. Children are either temporarily or permanently deprived of access to education, leading to significant gaps in their learning and long-term academic setbacks. In addition, with schools closed or damaged, children must often travel long distances to access education, increasing their risk of harm and contributing to higher rates of illiteracy.

Displacement and Drop-Outs

The displacement crisis not only forces children into unsafe environments but also contributes to high drop-out rates. Schools that remain functional often experience overcrowding, making them unsuitable for effective learning.

The use of schools as temporary shelters during displacement crises further reduces the availability of educational spaces. Today, northwestern Syria houses the largest number of IDPs living in camps, with children accounting for 58 percent the entire population of IDPs.⁷

⁶ Save the Children, 2022, "I used to love school": The Gendered Impact of Attacks on Education, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Gendered-Attacks-Education-2022.pdf>

⁷ International Blue Crescent (IBC), 2024, Emergency Appeal: North-West Syria (October 2024), available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/international-blue-crescent-ibc-emergency-appeal-north-west-syria-october-2024>.

Moreover, children live in extremely dangerous, life-threatening environments, including for example the contamination by unexploded ordnances.

Moreover, dropping out of school has led to gender-specific issues: girls face a heightened risk of early marriage, while boys are more susceptible to child labor. According to Save the Children,⁸ over a quarter of out-of-school girls are kept home due to safety concerns or because of the long distances to school, which also increase the likelihood of early marriage as families seek to protect them. Meanwhile, boys, facing similar educational interruptions, often enter the workforce to support their families, with 35% of out-of-school boys in Northwest Syria working to contribute to household income. These challenges not only undermine their educational opportunities but also perpetuate cycles of inequality and disadvantage, as girls lose future autonomy and boys miss out on foundational learning, reinforcing gendered economic vulnerabilities and limiting both groups' prospects.

Recommendations

- **States should focus on addressing attacks on schools and the need for accountability in any relevant resolution on the situation of children in Syria at all relevant international fora, including the UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council.** These efforts should include:
 1. reiterate that international humanitarian law prohibits indiscriminate attacks against schools and educational facilities,
 2. recall the disproportionate impact of attacks against schools on children, including but not limited to death and injury, loss of education, psychological harm, and displacement and
 3. acknowledge that any children-focused policy in Syria should start by stopping attacks against schools and educational facilities, and call for holding perpetrators accountable.
- **We urge the international community, including the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, to activate accountability mechanisms, to clearly attribute the crimes to their actual perpetrators, and to establish a comprehensive report whereby crimes and violations against children, including attacks on education, are reported to the UN Security Council and other international accountability structures.** Ample evidence of violations has been collected over the past 13 years, but requires clear steps by the international community to prosecute the perpetrators while the witnesses are still alive, capable, and willing to testify.
- **We call upon the investigation committees to establish local bodies or to support local committees inside Syria to document crimes against children, including attacks on schools.** The conditions for documenting the violations in Syria are unique and differ from all previous conflicts. In Syria's case, all investigation committees are stationed outside the country, and as such, they don't have access to witnesses who can freely speak about their experiences. Interviewing child witnesses requires a set of criteria, including having a competent person accompanying the child to provide him with the necessary support. Being inside the country, the witnesses might be subject to reprisals especially when the communications channels used to speak to them are not safe. This means that those witnesses are actually risking their lives every time they testify. The current mechanisms are not adequate nor sufficient considering the high risk to witnesses and the continued crimes against children.

⁸ Save the Children, 2022, "I used to love school": The Gendered Impact of Attacks on Education, available at <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Gendered-Attacks-Education-2022.pdf/>

- **We call upon the international community to extend the mandate of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2025 and to expand this mandate to focus more on violations against children.** The commission should allocate all the resources, and specialties required to monitor and document violations against children.
- **A national Safe Schools Declaration in Syria should be supported, encompassing a broader definition of attacks on education and gaining endorsement from various local actors and de facto authorities.** To date, Syria has not signed the internationally recognized Safe Schools Declaration, which presents an opportunity to develop a Syria-specific declaration during the early recovery phase. (This declaration could address all forms of attacks on education, such as the use of schools by security forces, unauthorized access, and the disruption of education for reasons unrelated to safety or educational plans.) The international Safe Schools Declaration, launched in 2015, has been signed by 120 countries to date. Its aim is to protect education during armed conflict by implementing concrete measures to prevent the military use of schools and ensure the continuation of education during crises. A national declaration for Syria could be a crucial step towards enhancing the protection of education, particularly during the early recovery phase when the country faces significant security and social challenges.

¹ Child Guardians, previously known as Hurras Network, is a leading charity protecting children in Syria with the aim for them to be safe, well and educated.

The White Helmets, also known as Syria Civil Defence, is a grassroots-led humanitarian organisation providing emergency services and supporting the resilience of communities in northwest Syria.

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