

In the last few days, from 3-8 February 2012, the bombardment of the city of Homs with mortars, rockets, and artillery and tank shells has killed hundreds of civilians.¹ The range and intensity of the explosive weapons used by the Syrian armed forces in Homs marks a significant escalation in the conflict. Data collected from English-language news-sources by AOAV on incidents of explosive violence in Syria has shown that in the past year explosive weapons have killed or injured more than 1,200 civilians, and has indicated a collapse in the relationship of accountability between the Syrian state and its population.²

Attacks in Homs

As many as 300 people are reported to have been killed in Homs by explosive weapons since 3 February 2012. Hundreds of mortars have been fired across residential neighbourhoods from elevated positions outside the city.³ On 6 February, shells landed in Homs at a reported rate of one every two minutes.⁴ During the barrage, a 120-mm calibre mortar reportedly struck a makeshift hospital that had been set up to treat victims of the weekend's shelling.⁵ Two people were killed instantly outside the clinic, and there are reports of many people wounded, including volunteers and people awaiting treatment.⁶

In early February, for the first time, the use of artillery shells⁷ and multiple rocket launchers⁸ has been reported in Homs, a development that signals a significant intensification in violence in Syria. The weapons that are now being used in Homs are capable of covering wide areas with blast and fragmentation effects, and their impacts can be hard to control. When used in populated areas,⁹ as is being seen in Homs, there is a dramatic increase in the likelihood that civilians will be killed or injured.

"There have been severed hands and body parts. The rockets slice open people's stomachs. The roads are covered with body parts. After one attack, the roof fell in on the people living in a house. It took us half an hour to get one body out."

Mahmoud Haddad, Homs resident, 7 February 2012

International condemnation

The sustained use of mortars, artillery shells and rockets in Homs has been described by witnesses as indiscriminate,¹⁰ and the pattern of explosive weapon use in the city has prompted international outrage. On 6 February, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon released a statement saying he is appalled by *"the use of heavy artillery and the shelling of civilian areas."*¹¹ The Secretary-General also asserted that *"no state can commit such acts against its people without its legitimacy being eroded."*¹²

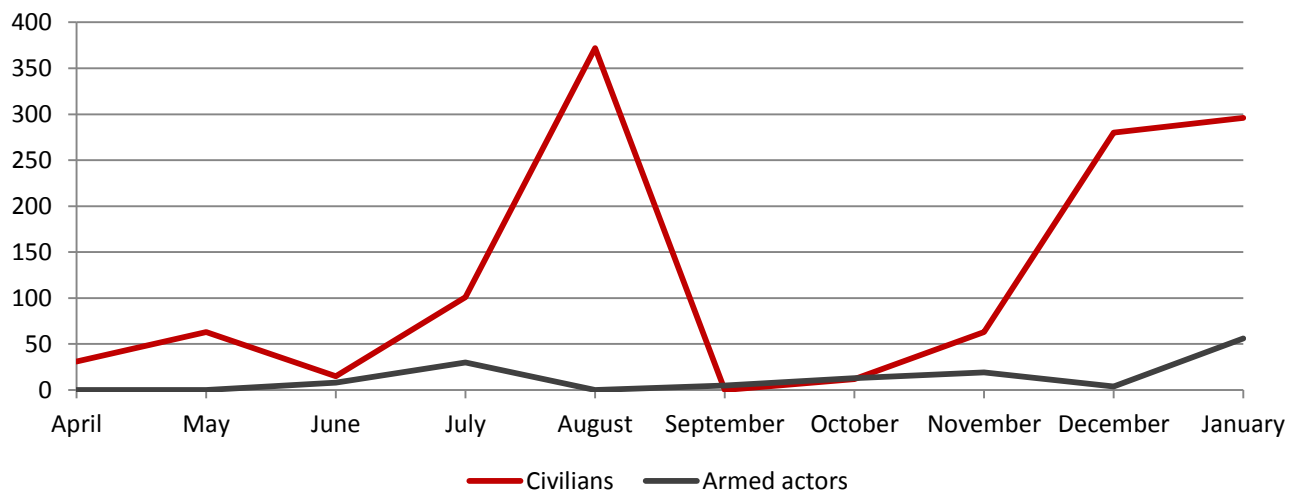
"I am horrified at reports of an assault on Homs during the night of 3 February which has led to over 200 fatalities. I condemn unequivocally the use of tanks, mortars and artillery in civilian areas."

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague, 4 February 2012

Explosive weapons in Syria

The protection of its civilians should be a primary responsibility of any state, but reports from Homs are the latest and most blatant illustration of the Syrian state's failure to fulfil that responsibility, and illustrate a complete collapse in the relationship of accountability between the Syrian state and its population. Based on the monitoring of English-language media reports AOAV has recorded **1,233 civilians killed and injured from explosive violence in Syria between 1 April 2011 and 31 January 2012.** Given the difficulties in accessing affected locations and the limited clear information emerging it is likely that the actual number of casualties is far higher.

Explosive violence casualties in Syria: April 2011- 31 January 2012



As shown in the graph, the intensity and frequency of explosive violence in Syria has increased significantly with **48% of civilian casualties¹³ recorded in the last two months**. Much of the violence has been located in populated areas with 95% of the civilian casualties of explosive weapons recorded in Syrian cities, towns and villages.

The full scale of the civilian casualties in Homs in the past week is not yet clear amid the ongoing bombardment and with such restricted access to the besieged city. It has been too dangerous for residents to collect bodies from the streets and collapsed buildings in Homs.¹⁴ The use of explosive weapons in residential areas and other populated areas not only puts civilians' lives at risk but also significantly increases the likelihood of damage to vital infrastructure and services, as well as creating the additional danger of contamination from explosive remnants of war. In Homs, initial reports indicate that the long-term damage caused by the widespread mortar fire and shelling may be severe, with affected neighbourhoods described as lying in *"partial ruins, with the roofs of numerous buildings pancaked onto the floors below. Dozens of people are still believed to be trapped with residents having no equipment other than shovels with which to rescue them."*¹⁵

A range of manufactured explosive weapons have been recorded as causing civilian casualties: **430 have been caused by shelling (35%); 205 (17%) specifically reported as caused by tank shells; and 145 (12%) by mortars**. As part of the broader

escalation of violence in Syria, there has been increasingly reported use of improvised explosive devices. Since October 2011, the EVMP has recorded **14 incidents of IED use causing 370 civilian casualties**, most of which occurred in two car bomb incidents in the capital city Damascus. The reported use of artillery shells and rockets in Homs is the most recent indicator of a dramatically escalating crisis in Syria.

Recommendations

1. AOAV calls on all actors to refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas.
2. AOAV calls on the Syrian government to end immediately any use of explosive weapons to deliberately target civilian populations.
3. In particular, AOAV condemns the use of indirect-fire weapons, such as artillery shells and multi-launch rocket systems (MLRS) in civilian areas as entirely unacceptable due to their indiscriminate effects and the disproportionately high levels of harm caused to civilians.
4. AOAV calls on states, international organisations, and civil society to join the United Nations Secretary General in condemning the shelling of civilian areas, and advocate for stronger and renewed efforts to protect Syrian civilians.

¹ The EVMP records casualties reported in media sources as civilians if they are not identifiable as security personnel, weapons bearers, or non-state armed actors.

² The Explosive Violence Monitoring Project (EVMP) records information from English-language news-sources on incidents of explosive violence. It does not claim to capture every incident or casualty of explosive violence in Syria, but is indicative of the scale and pattern of harm from these weapons. The EVMP records incidents involving explosive weapons and causing at least one casualty. Only incidents with at least one reported casualty and with a precise date (day/month/year) and place (city/location and country) are included. The methodology is an adaptation of that used in: Richard Moyes, "Explosive Violence: the problem of explosive weapons," Landmine Action, 2009, which in turn is based on the Nathan Taback and Robin Coupland model. Further information on the EVMP is available here:

<http://www.aoav.org.uk/archive/archives2/explosive-violence-monitoring-project-publications>

³ Martin Chulov, 'Assad forces continue deadly assault on Homs,' The Guardian, 5 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/05/assad-forces-continue-assault-homs-syria?newsfeed=true>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

⁴ Omar Sheker, resident of Homs, cited in 'Syrian troops accused of shelling homes, hospital,' Associated Press, 6 February 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/02/06/syria-shelling-homs.html>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

⁵ Chiekh Raed, resident of Homs, cited in 'Witness describes horror of Homs bombing,' France 24, 6 February 2012, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20120206-syria-first-hand-witness-account-homs-bombardment-bab-amr-neighbourhood>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

⁶ Omar Sheker, resident of Homs, cited in 'Syrian troops accused of shelling homes, hospital,' Associated Press, 6 February 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/02/06/syria-shelling-homs.html>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

⁷ Martin Chulov, 'Assad forces continue deadly assault on Homs,' The Guardian, 5 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/05/assad-forces-continue-assault-homs-syria?newsfeed=true>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

⁸ Paul Wood, 'Pretty constant shelling in Homs,' BBC, 6 February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16902703>, (accessed on 8 February 2012)

⁹ Incidents are designated as occurring in populated areas if: a) It is stated in the source (e.g. a busy street, a crowded market etc); b) If an incident occurs in or near a pre-defined location which is likely to contain concentrations of civilians: Commercial premises, Entertainment venues, Hospitals, Hotels, Encampments (IDPs, Refugees, Nomads), Markets, Places of worship, Police stations, Public gatherings, Public buildings, Public transport, Schools, Town centres, Urban residential neighbourhoods, Villages/ compounds. This definition is based on Protocol III of the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) which defines concentrations of civilians as: any concentrations of civilians, be it permanent or temporary, such in inhabited parts of cities, or inhabited towns or villages, or as in camps or columns of refugees or evacuees, or groups of nomads."

¹⁰ 'Heavy bombings on Homs, at least 12 killed,' ANSAMED, Beirut, 6 February 2012, http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/nations/syria/2012/02/06/visualizza_new.html_74821994.html, (accessed 6 February 2012)

¹¹ 'Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on Syria', United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, New York, 6 February 2012, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=5840>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

¹² 'Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General on Syria', United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, New York, 6 February 2012, <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=5840>, (accessed 7 February 2012)

¹³ Casualties refers to people killed or injured.

¹⁴ Abu Abdu al-Homsi, spokesman for the Syrian Revolutionary Council in Homs, cited in Richard Spencer and David Blair, 'Syrian regime smashes

Homs with shells and rockets in unrelenting offensive,' The Telegraph, 6 February 2012,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9065043/Syrian-regime-smashes-Homs-with-shells-and-rockets-in-unrelenting-offensive.html>, (accessed 8 February 2012)

¹⁵ Martin Chulov, 'Assad forces continue deadly assault on Homs,' The Guardian, 5 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/05/assad-forces-continue-assault-homs-syria?newsfeed=true>, (accessed 7 February 2012)