The U.N. Helps Syria Bomb the Opposition

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For months, as part of its deconfliction program for the Syrian war, the United Nations has been sharing the GPS coordinates of health care facilities in rebel-held territory with the Russian government. The aim was to ensure Russia and its Syrian allies do not hit them by mistake.

The system is not working. Indeed, it seems to be achieving the opposite of its ostensible goal. During the Syrian government’s recent offensive in Idlib, as many as 46 civilian facilities were [reportedly](https://phr.org/our-work/resources/briefing-to-the-united-nations-security-council-on-attacks-on-health-facilities-and-personnel-in-syria/) attacked. The Syrian American Medical Society, a local partner of the U.N. in Idlib, reported that at least 14 medical facilities that were attacked in Idlib were on the U.N.’s list. The Russian and the Syrian governments, in other words, knew exactly where the facilities were when they bombed them.

On July 30, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres authorized an inquiry to investigate who bombed the facilities, especially those supposedly under the international body’s protection. The organization should consider investigating whether its deconfliction program, as currently designed, serves any useful purpose at all. In the meantime, Russia and its allies will continue receiving information from the U.N. about opposition whereabouts.

This was not the first time that identified facilities have been targeted. In March and April 2018, four such hospitals were [attacked](https://www.rferl.org/a/un-investigating-attacks-syrian-hospitals-locations-russia/29257543.html). Susannah Sirkin, the director of policy at Physicians for Human Rights, a U.S.-based advocacy organization that has tracked attacks on medical infrastructure from the beginning of the war eight years ago, said it was clear the U.N.’s system was not working. “With this mechanism utterly failing, one would have to question the wisdom of anyone sharing the coordinates,” she said.

At least some of the organizations that agreed to share sensitive data with Syria’s Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies, including Russia, were aware of the risks—and hoped to use any eventual transgressions as evidence for their cause. Ahmad Dbeis, an official with the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations from the United States, France, Germany, and other countries that helps run the rebel health care facilities, said that the decision to share their data was taken after much difficult consideration.

“The idea of sharing the coordinates was completely rejected at first, in 2015, but after the Russians and the regime started to systematically target medical facilities in eastern Aleppo, everybody realized that they were already aware of the locations thanks to their spies,” he said. “So we thought we could share the coordinates and use this issue as legal and ethical evidence before international courts and organizations, proving the regime and the Russians deliberately hit medical facilities after obtaining their coordinates.”

The relentless bombardment of Idlib recommenced on April 29 as the regime and its Russian allies attempt to reclaim the last rebel stronghold. Civilians and activists have had no option other than to hope the international community would come to their rescue. It didn’t. The decision to share the location of their health facilities with Russia through the U.N. was thus part of a strategy born of desperation: take the risk of being bombed, but at least expose the perpetrators.

Sirkin, while questioning the success rate of the deconfliction system, described the decision of the local actors as “agonizing” and an “absolutely desperate measure.”

“My impression is that they wanted to be able to show the world that even when you give these locations, Russian and Syrian governments will blatantly bomb, in violation of international law,” she said.

The strategy might have worked to the extent of focusing the attention of the U.N. Security Council on a humanitarian disaster that has been steadily unfolding. But not everyone affected willingly signed up for it. Yasser al-Samm, a surgeon at Maaret al-Numan central hospital, was reluctant to hand over coordinates, because it increased the chances of an attack, he said. He gave in after he was assured the hospital was protected. “We had been given guarantees that the hospital would not be hit,” he said. “But it was. I always knew it was a mistake.”

Some of the most prominent international proponents of the deconfliction program now accept its failings. Mark Lowcock, the head of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the body that oversees all the deconfliction arrangements, told the Security Council that the system had failed. “I have come to the conclusion that in the current environment, deconfliction is not proving effective,” he [said](https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13903.doc.htm)last month. Even Jan Egeland, the U.N.’s former humanitarian negotiator for Syria, who played a crucial role in establishing the organization’s presence there, told Foreign Policy the attacks in Idlib worried him. “My concern now is that a much higher number of deconflicted hospitals have been hit in Idlib, and that could indicate it is not providing active protection anymore,” he said. “That’s dramatic not just for Syria, but elsewhere. We swim or we sink in conflicts with our ability to be protected as neutral and independent.”

Many of the local doctors and activists who shared the exact locations of their hospitals and clinics are now hoping to leverage the U.N.’s reputation to shine a spotlight on the Syrian government’s crimes. They say the U.N. secretary-general’s inquiry presented an opportunity, albeit an unlikely one, to make the world notice their suffering. They hope the findings will eventually ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable for violating international law.

The Syrian government and its allies, for their part, deny using U.N. data in their attacks. In a letter to the U.N. last month, Bashar Jaafari, the Syrian government’s U.N. envoy, claimed that all health care facilities in Idlib governorate had been overrun by “terrorist groups” and were “inoperable.” But it only named four of them: Maaret al-Numan Central Hospital, Ibn Sina Hospital, Idlib National Hospital, and Jisr al- Shughur Hospital. The envoy’s missive was seen as an admission that striking “inoperable” hospitals, in the grip of armed men, was justified.

Both these assertions have been contradicted by local actors. According to the Syrian American Medical Society, all four of these hospitals were on the U.N.’s deconflicted list, and all four actively and exclusively performed humanitarian work. Basel Termanini, a former vice president of the Syrian American Medical Society, told Foreign Policy that his organization directly supported Maaret al-Numan and Ibn Sina hospitals and rejected the government’s claims that they were ever taken over by terrorists. “SAMS has strict rules. We do not allow any weapons inside our facilities nor do we allow any military group to interfere in our operations,” he said. “In [a] few instances when a military group tried to interfere in the daily operations of certain facilities, we suspended work in those facilities and threatened to suspend all our operations in NW Syria.” Safawat Khan Shikouni, the secretary of the Idlib Health Directorate, said that the Idlib National Hospital was attacked twice but has since restarted operations. “It is run entirely by us and is not subject to the influence of any armed groups,” he said.

The question now is what the U.N. can do with the evidence that Russia and the Syrian government have been abusing its deconfliction program. Activists are aware that the U.N.’s hands are tied at the Security Council because of Russia’s veto power, and yet they hope something more is done to hold Damascus and Moscow accountable for their crimes.

Sirkin, of Physicians for Human Rights, said it was imperative the findings of the U.N.’s inquiry be made public. Egeland, the former U.N. envoy, said that while the organization might not be able to bring cases against the perpetrators to court, it could and should use the opportunity to name and shame them. Termanini believes that more can and eventually will be done. He said the U.N.’s report should be handed over to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, which is assisting in investigating other war crimes in Syria, including forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial executions. He said the body could be asked to build legal cases for prosecution in the future.

Humanitarian actors seem prepared to jump through the hoops necessary to try to shame Russia and the Syrian government. Unfortunately, there’s plenty of reason to believe that shame will have little effect on Assad and Vladimir Putin.