**Russia Is Bombing Ambulances in Syria**

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By Michael Weiss

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http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/06/why-are-the-russians-bombing-my-ambulances.html

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One of the cofounders of Orient Humanitarian Relief, a nonprofit that provides medical treatment and educational services in northern and central Syria, Martini was recounting to The Daily Beast how [Russian airstrikes](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/30/putin-orders-u-s-jets-out-of-syria.html) in the Idlib countryside Saturday destroyed a part of his emergency ambulance center. “They destroyed four or five of our vehicles,” he said. “These attacks were specifically targeting Orient.”

Below is a video Oubai Shahbandar, a former Pentagon officials turned Orient employee, shared with The Daily Beast, showing the charred vehicles. “If the Russians think ambulances are legitimate terrorist targets,” Shahbandar emailed, “imagine what they’re going to do to the rest of Syria.”

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[Russia](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/30/putin-s-every-move-worsens-the-situation-in-syria-and-russia.html), too, nearly hit a separate Doctors Without Borders hospital in a refugee camp in Al Yamdiyyah, Latakia. According to [McClatchy](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article37739349.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), “The bomb struck in the village just a few hundred yards from the actual border, wounding several townspeople, local residents said. The Doctors Without Borders hospital apparently was not damaged.” However, Dr. Jawad Abu Hatab, a heart surgeon at the hospital, told the news agency that he believed Russia had been targeting the site and missed.

So far, [80 percent](https://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref%3AC560E9A3D1FCD8/%22%20%5Cl%20%22.VhKh1rSJlFI%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) of Russia’s air sorties in Syria have hit decidedly non-ISIS targets, mainly in the center, north, and west of the country. That’s where, in addition to civilians, a grab bag of fighters opposed to President Bashar al-Assad ranging from hardline Islamists to al Qaeda to U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army[units](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/30/putin-orders-u-s-jets-out-of-syria.html) have all had bull’s-eyes painted on their backs.

“They attacked Jisr al-Shughour and Latakia,” Martini said, “but also Yamadea, where there is a big hospital that’s been in operation for about 40 years. Thank God they didn’t hit it! The missile went elsewhere. They also struck on the outskirts of Hama, attacking a the field hospital and killing a lot of people.”

One recent sortie struck another Orient ambulance, this one transporting casualties from Ihsem, a village in the Jabal al-Zawiyah area, which lies about 30 kilometers southwest of the provincial capital of Idlib City. A medical facility there maintained by the White Helmets, a civil volunteer corps opposed to the regime and ISIS, was bombed on October 3. Two Orient paramedics were wounded while ferrying the injured out of the village. Luckily, they survived. But after the Russians bombed Jabal al-Zawiyah, regime helicopters swooped in and dropped one of their nastier munitions—barrel bombs, according to Martini. These are large metal drums packed with shrapnel and explosives, which Assad’s air force has relied on increasingly as a means to unleash the highest degree of devastation on the least discriminate target zone.

The one-two punch on Jabal al-Zawiyah only underscored for Martini the operational coordination between Damascus and Moscow, and the true nature of Vladimir Putin’s Syria adventure: “Russian forces came to continue what the regime began. I think the regime is giving the targets and locations. There is no ISIS here, absolutely.”

Martini had been a successful surgeon in Idlib, Syria’s northwest province, before the 2011 uprising against Assad. That’s when he was instructed by Assad’s military police to ignore his Hippocratic oath altogether, and let any opposition-affiliated patients die on the slab at the Red Crescent hospital he then worked in. Martini refused. So he, too, was arrested and tortured, an experience he [declined](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/once-wealthy-syrian-doctor-works-in-exile-to-treat-refugees-dreams-of-healing-his-country/2014/01/16/ece0a7c2-6753-11e3-a0b9-249bbb34602c_story.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) to relay in detail to *The Washington Post*18 months ago. His hospital’s general manager was murdered by the regime.

Orient was established in 2012 by Martini and a wealthy Syrian, the Dubai-based entrepreneur Ghassan Aboud, who financed the project. It aimed to inject a bit of humanity into a ghoulish conflict that has since become not one civil war but several.

Although Orient runs an anti-Assad television station out of the Gulf, its charitable activities inside Syria are strictly non-aligned, Martini insists: “Our ambulance system works for all people, from the regime to the rebels to innocent civilians who are on neither side. We treat anyone who is wounded.”

Orient’s only no-go zone, Martini told The Daily Beast, is territory controlled by ISIS. “We don’t work inside ISIS areas because they are criminals who attacked Orient already,” he said. “In March 2014, they sent a car bomb to Atmeh [a border town in Aleppo] and killed 17 people, five of them children. In Marea, ISIS attacked people with chemical weapons. We treated people with very strange symptoms.”

Martini is based in Turkey, about a kilometer from the Syrian border. But he darts in and out of his homeland, at great personal risk, to oversee Orient’s extensive network. Today, the charity maintains 10 surgical hospitals in Syria, from the north to the Aleppo borderline. “These are all free. We perform more than 500 operations each day. Every hospital has outpatient clinics. It is very dangerous to shoot these hospitals because we have oxygen pumps and highly flammable equipment. One explosion can cause a lot of damage.”

One Orient hospital in Kafranbel city, Idlib, contains 70 beds. It routinely provides kidney dialysis to 15 patients with renal failure. But all that is now under threat, thanks to Putin. “We cannot open the hospital or accept any patients because we were very afraid the Russians will attack us again. All hospitals are afraid. They’re working in the basement, closing outpatient clinics. We run outpatient clinics at night. We can work only then and treat people to avoid the warplanes.”

As The Daily Beast earlier reported, [Russian jets](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/02/russia-is-using-old-dumb-bombs-making-syria-air-war-even-more-brutal.html) have mainly been using “dumb bombs” rather than guided munitions, making it difficult to discern intended targets and guaranteeing higher body counts. There’s already evidence that Russia’s Su-24 bombers have been firing [cluster munitions](http://www.interpretermag.com/putin-in-syria-russian-fighter-enters-turkish-airspace/%22%20%5Cl%20%2210256%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) in southwest Aleppo. These bombs have been proscibed by U.N. convention, to which Russia is not a signatory.