



**Statement provided by the White Helmets (Syria Civil Defence) at the first international follow up conference to the adoption of the Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences Arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas**

22 April 2024

The White Helmets – also known as Syria Civil Defence – was established in 2014 when Syrian volunteers came together to respond to the withdrawal of essential public services during the revolution, including ambulance, search and rescue and firefighting. Originally, we worked across all parts of Syria, but due to the dynamics of the war the forced displacement of civilians, including our volunteers, we currently work in the northwest, in Idlib and North Aleppo Countryside.

We are 3,000 volunteers responding to every kind of military attack affecting civilians. We've saved the lives of more than 128,000 civilians since 2014, removing victims of explosive weapons from buildings and transferring them to hospitals. We have grown to also provide primary healthcare services through a network of 39 women's centres, survey and remove unexploded ordnances, and provide community awareness and education on basic health and safety information.

We have lost 238 volunteers to direct targeting. The majority of these volunteers have been killed in double tap attacks, which are target first responders.

Despite a ceasefire signed in 2020, we are still responding to military attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. From 2020 to 2024, we have responded to 5,161 attacks, more than 60% of these attacks were on populated areas.

As first responders, we are witnesses to attacks and we collect data on all of the attacks we respond to.

We collect data about the casualties, the types of weapons, the remnants, the suspected party, the location, our volunteers record their response on GoPro cameras for visual documentation, our volunteers provide testimonies to international investigations, and we follow up with victims.

We created our own system to collect this evidence on direct effects, and archive it

We know about our communities under attack – the public services that have been destroyed and the impact on the displaced – we have the potential to collect more information about the indirect effects of attacks.

Much of the day's discussion has focused on what states themselves can do, but when states are unable, or, in the case of Syria, unwilling to collect data on civilian harm, the task is left to civil society.

In Syria the pattern of attacks (in terms of the targets chosen, the types of weapons used, the practice of double tap attacks) shows that civilian harm is a key objective of military activity. Local organisations like ours are the frontline in responding to the use of explosive weapons in populated areas - civil society is responsible to collect information on a massive scale to fill this gap.

Data on attacks and its direct and indirect effects is crucial – not just for understanding current and past harm caused using explosive weapons in populated areas – but for ensuring accountability and justice in the future, and for combatting disinformation about the true narrative of events.

Local organisations like ours need your support to continue. We share all our information with any states, media or researchers and we are looking for more ways to share it. We want support and partnerships to be able to collect more information on indirect effects to support the implementation of the EWIPA Declaration.

We ask you, as states supportive of the EWIPA Declaration, to take all steps possible to combat impunity and support accountability for violations on International Humanitarian Law to be able to strengthen the laws and norms protecting civilians.

Thank you for supporting this declaration, we want to work with you to learn about how to make sure civilians are protected from the use of explosive weapons in the future.