

Syria, Assad Regime: Eastern Ghouta is another Srebrenica, we are looking away again

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The horror of the Bosnian Muslim massacre of 1995 is being repeated today in Syria.

With every child who dies, with every act of brutality that goes unpunished, eastern Ghouta more closely resembles what Kofi Annan once called the worst crime committed on European soil since 1945. Eastern Ghouta is turning into Syria's Srebrenica [[1](#)].

Like the Bosnian Muslim enclave in 1995, eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus, has been besieged by regime forces since the early stages of the Syrian war. Years of attrition have failed to dislodge rebel factions that control it.

As was the case in Srebrenica, food supplies, aid and medical assistance have been cut off. In 1993, the UN designated Srebrenica a "safe area". Last year, as part of Moscow's abortive Astana peace process, the Russians declared eastern Ghouta a "de-escalation zone".

To no avail. As in Bosnia, nobody attempted to protect the civilian population when a regime offensive began there in December after negotiations failed. The airstrikes and bombardments now taking a terrible toll are carried out with impunity by Syrian forces and their Russian backers.

The UN has almost begged the pro-Assad coalition, which includes Iranian-led militias, to agree to an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. Its appeals have been ignored. Relief agencies' pleas for access have also gone unanswered.

The attention of the big powers - the US and Russia - and regional actors such as Turkey, is focused instead on a grand strategic game played over the corpses of half a million Syrians. Their eyes are on future control of a country in effect partitioned into zones of influence.

For the Trump administration, this means curbing Iran's supposed ambitions to create a "land bridge" to the Mediterranean, or a "Shia crescent" stretching from Herat in Afghanistan to the Bekaa valley in Lebanon. For the Turks, it is all about crushing the Kurds. For Vladimir Putin, it is about power.

But for the residents of eastern Ghouta, it is about survival. Record numbers have died in the past 36 hours in an area where the overall death toll since 2011, when the war began, runs into uncounted thousands. And there is no escape.

More than 100 dead, over 500 wounded and five hospitals bombed. The violence is relentless and unbearably cruel.

In Srebrenica, about 8,000 Muslim men and boys were massacred in a few days. Between 25,000

and 30,000 Bosniak women, children and elderly people were subject to forcible displacement and abuse. The international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia later decreed that these crimes constituted genocide.

At the time, the world stood back and watched as Gen Ratko Mladic's Bosnian Serb army and Scorpion paramilitaries closed in, overrunning Dutch peacekeepers. The international community knew full well what Mladic might do, that a massacre was imminent. It looked the other way [2].

The agony of eastern Ghouta, already infamous as the scene of a 2013 chemical weapons attack using sarin gas, is slower but similarly ignored. Once again civilians, including large numbers of children, are being killed. Once again, the western powers, with forces deployed in the country, refuse to intervene. Once again, the UN is helpless, the security council rendered impotent by Russian vetoes.

"This could be one of the worst attacks in Syrian history, even worse than the siege on Aleppo ... To systematically target and kill civilians amounts to a war crime and the international community must act to stop it," said Zaidoun al-Zoabi of the independent Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations [3].

But for now at least, Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad - like Mladic in 1995 - appears to be impervious to reason or outside pressure. The evidence implicating Assad in war crimes and crimes against humanity is plentiful. So far no charges have been brought, and he carries on regardless.

Today, in eastern Ghouta, like Srebrenica in 1995, vile crimes that could constitute genocide are being committed. In November, Mladic was finally convicted of genocide in The Hague. That took 22 years. How many more children will die before justice is served in Syria?

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/eastern-ghouta-is-another-srebrenica-we-are-lookin-g-away-again>

'It's not a war. It's a massacre': scores killed in Syrian enclave

Aid groups warn situation in eastern Ghouta could unfold into worst atrocity of war so far.

Almost 200 civilians have been killed in dozens of airstrikes and shelling by forces loyal to Syria's Bashar al-Assad in eastern Ghouta over two days of "hysterical violence", which has led to warnings of a humanitarian catastrophe that could eclipse past atrocities in the seven-year war.

The surge in the killing in the besieged region came amid reports of an impending regime incursion into the area outside Damascus, which is home to 400,000 civilians. More than 700 people have been killed in three months, according to local counts, not including the deaths in the last week.

This is eastern Ghouta, where hundreds are being killed and injured by Assad's forces. Amnesty International said "flagrant war crimes" were being committed in eastern Ghouta on an

“epic scale.”

Diana Semaan, the charity’s Syria researcher, said: “People have not only been suffering a cruel siege for the past six years, they are now trapped in a daily barrage of attacks that are deliberately killing and maiming them, and that constitute flagrant war crimes.”

Seven hospitals have also been bombed since Monday morning in eastern Ghouta, which was once the breadbasket of Damascus but has been under siege for years by the Assad government and subjected to devastating chemical attacks. Two hospitals suspended operations and one has been put out of service.

“We are standing before the massacre of the 21st century,” said a doctor in eastern Ghouta. “If the massacre of the 1990s was Srebrenica, and the massacres of the 1980s were Halabja and Sabra and Shatila, then eastern Ghouta is the massacre of this century right now.”

He added: “A little while ago a child came to me who was blue in the face and barely breathing, his mouth filled with sand. I emptied it with my hands. I don’t think they had what we do in any of the medical textbooks. A wounded child breathing with lungs of sand. You get a child, a year old, that they saved from the rubble and is breathing sand, and you don’t know who he is.

“All these humanitarian and rights organisations, all that is nonsense. So is terrorism. What is a greater terrorism than killing civilians with all sorts of weapons? Is this a war? It’s not a war. It’s called a massacre.”

The Syrian civil defense, a search and rescue organisation, said 61 people were killed on Tuesday alone, while the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitor, said 194 people had died in the last 48 hours- a toll that encapsulated the unbridled violence of the war in Syria. After seven years and interventions by regional and global powers, the humanitarian crisis has heightened instead of abating, as forces loyal to Assad’s regime and his Russian and Iranian backers seek an outright military victory instead of a negotiated political settlement.

Exact death tolls were difficult to obtain owing to ongoing rescue operations and because some families buried their dead without taking them to local hospitals.

Rebel groups responded with a wave of artillery bombardment targeting Damascus, killing 12 people and wounding 50 in government-controlled areas, according to the Observatory.

Aid workers said the latest violence in eastern Ghouta, where 1,300 people died in 2013 after the Assad regime deployed sarin gas, has included the use of notorious barrel bombs. The weapons are so inaccurate that their use is seen as a war crime by human rights watchdogs. The regime has also used fighter jets and artillery bombardment, on top of the punishing siege.

“The situation in eastern Ghouta is akin to the day of judgment,” said Mounir Mustafa, the deputy director of the White Helmets, the volunteer group that rescues people from under the rubble of bombed buildings.

The White Helmets said one of its volunteers, Firas Juma, died on Monday while responding to a bombing.

In Geneva, the UN children’s fund issued a blank “statement” to express its outrage at the casualties among Syrian children, saying it had run out of words.

Medical organisations said at least five clinics and hospitals, including a maternity centre, were

bombed on Monday, some of them multiple times. An anaesthetist was killed in the attacks. Another two facilities were hit on Tuesday.

“The bombing was hysterical,” said Ahmed al-Dbis, a security official at the Union of Medical and Relief Organisations (UOSSM), which runs dozens of hospitals in areas controlled by the opposition in Syria. “It is a humanitarian catastrophe in every sense of the word. The mass killing of people who do not have the most basic tenets of life.”

Mark Schnellbaeher, the Middle East director for the International Rescue Committee, said: “Once again we are seeing civilians in Syria being killed indiscriminately. Once again we are seeing medical facilities attacked. We have long feared eastern Ghouta will see a repeat of the terrible scenes observed by the world during the fall of east Aleppo and these fears seem to be well founded.”

Sonia Khush, an official with Save the Children, described the situation as “absolutely abhorrent.”

“The bombing has been relentless, and children are dying by the hour,” she said. “These families have nowhere left to run – they are boxed in and being pounded day and night.”

Elsewhere in Syria on Tuesday, pro-government fighters started entering the northern Kurdish enclave of Afrin, where Turkish troops have been on the offensive for a month. The development came a day after Turkey said it would hit back at the troops if their goal was to protect the Kurdish fighters.

Syrian state media said Turkish troops fired on the pro-government militiamen, a development that risks widening an already complicated war.

Kareem Shaheen in Istanbul

* The Guardian. Tue 20 Feb 2018 17.19 GMT First published on Tue 20 Feb 2018 09.33 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/its-not-a-war-its-a-massacre-scores-killed-in-syrian-enclave-eastern-ghouta>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/srebrenica-massacre>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/22/ratko-mladic-convicted-of-genocide-and-war-crimes-at-un-tribunal>

[3] <http://www.uossm.org>