

## **Warplanes strike Syrian town hit by chemical attack, 18 killed**

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**Beirut:** At least 18 people, including five children, were killed when warplanes on Saturday struck Syria's northwestern province of Idlib, where a chemical attack had killed scores of people earlier this week.

**Photo: AP. Syrian President Bashar Assad speaking with journalists in Damascus**

The airstrikes were carried out on the opposition-held northern town of Khan Sheikhoun, where 87 people were killed in the chemical attack earlier this week, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Local Coordination Committees, an activist collective.

According to the Observatory and Ariha Today, an activist group, the airstrike on a rebel-held town in the northern Idlib province killed at least 18 people, including women and children.

It was not immediately clear who carried out the strike.

The chemical attack last week had prompted the U.S. to launch nearly 60 Tomahawk missiles on a Syrian air base early Friday, which killed nine people and marked the first time Washington has directly targeted Syrian government forces since the war began in 2011.

Over 320,000 people have been killed in Syrian conflict that began in March 2011 with demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad and his government.

### **Turkey, Saudi Arabia welcome US strikes; Iran, Russia fume**

The move was welcomed by the Syrian opposition and its main backers, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, but harshly condemned by Russia and Iran, who back Assad and said striking his forces would complicate the struggle against extremist groups.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the U.S. strike should be the start of a renewed effort to end the civil war, which has killed an estimated 400,000 people and displaced half of Syria's population.

In Saudi Arabia, the official Saudi Press Agency reported that U.S. President Donald Trump has spoken by telephone with King Salman about the U.S. missile strike on Syria.

The news agency reported that during the Friday phone call, the Saudi monarch congratulated Trump for his "courageous decision."

Saudi Arabia said the missile launch was the right response to "the crimes of this regime to its people in light of the failure of the international community to stop it."

The kingdom is among the most vehement opponents of Assad and supports Sunni rebel groups fighting to oust him. The Sunni rulers of Saudi Arabia are in a power struggle for regional dominance with Iran's Shiite government.

Iran, which has provided crucial military and political support to Assad, meanwhile called for a fact-finding mission to

determine what caused the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhou. State television quoted Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as saying the committee should be impartial and "must not be headed by Americans."

Rouhani said. "Neutral countries should come and assess to make it clear where the chemical weapons came from."

Syria's government has denied carrying out any chemical attack, and Russia's Defense Ministry said the toxic agents were released when a Syrian airstrike hit a rebel chemical weapons arsenal and munitions factory.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson cancelled a planned trip to Russia because of fast-moving events in Syria. Johnson said the situation in Syria has changed "fundamentally" following the chemical attack and the U.S. response.

Johnson condemned Russia's continued defense of Assad "even after the chemical weapons attack on innocent civilians."

He had planned to travel to Russia Monday on a trip intended to start a fresh dialogue with Moscow.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson meanwhile plans to meet with G-7 foreign ministers in Europe next week before going on to Moscow. Johnson said Tillerson will be able to give a "clear and coordinated message to the Russians."

### **Syrians protest in Damascus against US strikes**

In Damascus, dozens of Syrian students gathered outside the offices of the United Nations to protest the U.S. missile attack, chanting "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."

University student Ashraf Fadel said he came to denounce "the unjust American aggression against Syria." He added that the United Nations was "created to support America instead of serving the wronged people."

- (With AP inputs)