

LOSING THEIR LAST REFUGE

INSIDE IDLIB'S HUMANITARIAN NIGHTMARE

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Cover Photo: Displaced Syrians are pictured at a camp in Kafr Lusin near the border with Turkey in Idlib province in northwestern Syria. Photo Credit: AAREF WATAD/AFP/Getty Images.

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SUMMARY

As President Bashar al-Assad and his allies retook a large swath of Syrian territory over the last few years, rebel-held Idlib province and its surroundings in northwest Syria became the refuge of last resort for nearly 3 million people. Now the Syrian regime, backed by Russia, has launched a brutal offensive to recapture this last opposition stronghold in what could prove to be one of the bloodiest chapters of the Syrian war.

This attack had been forestalled in September 2018 by a deal reached in Sochi, Russia between Russia and Turkey. It stipulated the withdrawal of opposition armed groups, including Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS)—a former al-Qaeda affiliate—from a 12-mile demilitarized zone along the front lines, and the opening of two major HTS-controlled routes—the M4 and M5 highways that cross Idlib—to traffic and trade. In the event, HTS refused to withdraw and instead reasserted its dominance over much of the northwest. By late April 2019, the Sochi deal had collapsed in the face of the Syrian regime's military escalation, supported by Russia.

Idlib's civilian population has largely borne the brunt of this escalation. Nearly half of that population have been displaced from other parts of the country retaken by Assad, and roughly two-thirds depend on humanitarian assistance. In the past three months, the Syrian regime and Russia's indiscriminate bombardment has killed more than 500 civilians and injured thousands more. More worrisome, Russian and Syrian airstrikes have deliberately targeted vital civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) shared the coordinates for these facilities with the United Nations, which in turn shared them with the warring parties in a bid to protect them and first responders. In August 2019, the UN announced an investigation into these airstrikes. However, it did not provide any details about its timeline and process.

Rebel groups have indiscriminately shelled government-controlled towns, killing scores of civilians. In addition, HTS has reportedly committed serious human rights violations against civilians in northwest Syria, including arbitrary arrests, kidnapping, torture, and murders.

Turkey is deeply concerned over the impact of the offensive. It already hosts more than 3.5 million Syrians, and the recent escalation could cause additional tens of thousands of refugees to seek refuge across the border. To prevent refugee flows into Turkey, Ankara has built a wall nearly 500 miles long on its southern border with Syria. However, Turkey also remains deeply engaged inside Idlib—where it supports armed groups fighting the regime—and in Syria more broadly, where it controls parts of the Aleppo province. Thanks in no small part to Turkey's backing, these armed groups largely held the Syrian regime and Russia to a military stalemate on the ground for more than three months. However, Syrian forces recently made significant advances. Under heavy Russian air cover, they recaptured strategic areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib and regained control of the M5 highway. To halt these advances and stop the offensive, Ankara intensified diplomatic efforts with Russia. On August 31, following Turkish President Erdogan's visit to Moscow, Russia committed to a unilateral ceasefire. However, that ceasefire, remains deeply fragile.

Humanitarian aid operations in Idlib and its surroundings are regulated by UN Security Council Resolution 2165, which is renewed annually and has been in place since 2014.¹ This resolution allows cross-border aid into nongovernment-controlled areas without previous approval from Damascus. Because the resolution expires in January 2020, humanitarian organizations worry that Russia—highly critical of cross-border assistance—might veto it.

Despite their best efforts, humanitarian organizations are reeling under the weight of Idlib’s overwhelming needs. The latest offensive has triggered the largest wave of displacement in the Syrian war thus far, displacing more than half a million people living in opposition-controlled areas. Because camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) are over capacity, most IDPs live in informal, overcrowded settlements. Life in these settlements is a daily struggle. Some lack even the most basic services, including access to toilets or water. Thousands of IDPs are reportedly living in open air under olive trees.

In addition, reports about early marriage, gender-based violence, and sexual exploitation, at times perpetuated by relief workers and camp managers, are on the rise. Further complicating the situation is a decline in funding driven by donor fatigue and concern among Western governments over the diversion of aid to HTS. Specifically, the United States ended its stabilization funding to northwest Syria in 2018 and significantly reduced its 2019 humanitarian contribution to the country.

Diplomatically, the U.S. administration has been largely disengaged from events in northwest Syria. The Trump administration has yet to make meaningful diplomatic efforts to reach a durable cessation of hostilities in northwest Syria. It remains to be seen how long the current ceasefire will hold. In August, a previous ceasefire fell apart in a matter of days. However, the fighting in Idlib has now reached a critical juncture and significant pressure on warring parties is urgently required to bring a lasting end to hostilities. Without it, the UN has warned that the situation in Idlib could turn into a “humanitarian nightmare unlike anything we have seen this century.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Turkey and Russia should seize the opportunity of the existing ceasefire and immediately enter into talks to negotiate a resumption of the Sochi agreement.
- In support of these talks, Syrian government forces and armed opposition groups should stop the ongoing shelling and commit to refrain from further offensive operations in Idlib and its surroundings.
- The Syrian government and Russia should commit to not resume aerial bombardments in northwest Syria.
- The United States should undertake a concerted diplomatic effort to push for and support renewed talks between Turkey and Russia. President Trump should personally and forcefully condemn any violations of the current ceasefire.
- The United States and other members of the UN Security Council should pressure Russia to

1. The number of the resolution changes every time it is renewed.

ensure the protection of humanitarian infrastructure and personnel, and relentlessly denounce attacks on humanitarian facilities as war crimes.

- The UN should expedite the completion of its investigation into attacks on humanitarian facilities, attribute responsibility, and publicly share its findings.
- Members of the UN Security Council should engage with Russia to ensure that the cross-border aid resolution is renewed in January 2020.
- To bolster the ongoing relief effort inside Idlib, the following steps should be taken:
 - The United States should immediately release emergency funds to support relief operations in Idlib and reverse its decision to cut stabilization funds to northwest Syria.
 - European and Gulf donors should immediately scale up funding of lifesaving activities and restore funding for protection, education, and revenue-generating opportunities.
- To prepare for an expansion of the regime's offensive and a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation inside Idlib, the following steps should be taken:
 - Turkey should move quickly to establish IDP camps in areas it controls in northern Syria and increase the capacity of existing refugee camps inside southern Turkey to temporarily accommodate tens of thousands of civilians fleeing violence.
 - The international community should press Turkey to open its southern border to refugees fleeing the violence.
 - Western donors and Gulf countries should pledge the necessary funding and assistance to allow Turkey to temporarily accommodate more refugees.
- Humanitarian organizations operating in Idlib should strengthen their internal accountability and monitoring mechanisms to prevent aid diversion.
- Humanitarian organizations should enhance training for and monitoring of their staff with respect to sexual abuse and exploitation, and provide safe pathways for victims to report abuses. These organizations also should conduct community awareness sessions about early marriage, sexual exploitation, and gender-based violence.
- Turkey should facilitate the registration of NGOs and access to work permits to their staff. In return, humanitarian organizations should comply with Turkish laws and regulations.

AS OF MARCH 11, 2019



Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised March 11, 2019. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include UN OCHA, ESRI, and social media reports.

BACKGROUND

In February 2019, Syria and its ally Russia launched a campaign to reclaim Idlib province and its surroundings—the last opposition stronghold in northwest Syria. Turkey, whose military and humanitarian presence in the area is one of its main forms of strategic leverage in Syria, has successfully prevented previous Syrian military incursions. Now it stands to lose if the regime and Russia win.

Idlib and its surroundings are important to Ankara's domestic and external politics. Turkey already hosts more than 3.5 million Syrians displaced by the conflict and, given the ongoing war, more refugees will likely attempt to cross the border from Idlib. Warning that its national security could be threatened by the infiltration of jihadi fighters, in 2017-2018 the Turkish government built a wall nearly 500 miles long on its border with Syria. Moreover, Turkish forces maintain a presence in northwest Syria near the southern border, and Ankara supports some major Syrian armed factions in the area. Lastly, Turkey controls Syrian territory contiguous to Idlib in the Aleppo province.

In 2017, during talks in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Russia, and Iran reached a de-escalation agreement that covered four zones. Subsequently, the Syrian regime and its allies have retaken all but one—the so-called “Idlib de-escalation zone” in northwest Syria that includes Idlib province and contiguous areas in the northeastern Latakia, western Aleppo, and northern Hama provinces.² In September 2018, in an attempt to preserve this last “de-escalation zone,” Moscow and Ankara reached a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Sochi, Russia.

The Sochi deal was reached even as Syria's Assad-led regime intensified its military presence in the area. Although flawed, the Sochi MoU forestalled what seemed to be an imminent humanitarian disaster. It called for removing armed groups and all heavy weaponry from a nearly 12-mile demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the front line in the northwest, and securing two major routes for traffic and trade controlled by Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate designated as a terrorist organization by most countries—the M4 and M5 highways linking Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia through Idlib. It also stipulated Russia's commitment “to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and the existing status quo will be maintained,”³ and called on Turkey to reinforce the presence of its troops in observation posts inside the province, thus underlining Ankara's crucial role in preserving the northwest region's stability.

In accordance with the agreement, Turkish-backed armed groups withdrew from the DMZ. However, HTS rejected the terms of the MoU. Instead, HTS launched a sweeping attack against Turkish-backed rebels in January 2019, reasserting its dominance over much of the area. Growing impatient with Turkey's inability to implement the Sochi deal, Russia supported a military escalation led by the Syrian regime in February 2019. By late April 2019, this escalation had turned into a full-scale, bloody offensive.

Armed factions affiliated with Turkey have been crucial in pushing back the regime's advances for several months. However, the Syrian regime and Russia recently seized strategic areas in northern Hama and southern Idlib and retook control of the M5 highway. The aerial bombardment, though very brutal, is still largely confined to southern

2. In this report, this region is referred to as northwest Syria or Idlib and its surroundings, although some parts of this area subsequently have been retaken by the regime.

3. Joyce Karam, “Full Text of Turkey-Russia Memorandum on Idlib Revealed,” *The National*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A Refugees International team traveled to Turkey in June 2019 to research the impact of the Syrian regime military offensive on Idlib and its surroundings, assess humanitarian needs, and examine the humanitarian response to the unfolding crisis. Unable to travel to Idlib for security reasons, the team visited Gaziantep, Antakya, and Rihanley in southern Turkey along the border with Syria, in addition to Ankara. They conducted more than 50 interviews with representatives of Syrian, international and Turkish non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, Turkish think tanks, and western governments, as well as Syrian activists and western donor officials. Moreover, to better understand the humanitarian situation on the ground, the team conducted phone interviews with IDPs, relief workers, and activists inside Idlib.

Idlib and contiguous pockets in the countryside of Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia provinces. With Russia's support, the regime is likely to intensify bombing, thus increasing pressure on fighters and local communities, in a bid to continue its advance toward the M4 highway.

Moreover, the regime offensive has exacted a grim humanitarian toll. Of the more than 3 million people living in northwest Syria, half have been displaced from other parts of the country. They had fled their homes as the regime moved through and captured large swaths of rebel-controlled territory. This area became the last safe haven for these internally displaced persons (IDPs), who now find themselves trapped.

Indiscriminate regime and Russian bombings have killed more than 500 civilians since April 2019, injured many thousands, and displaced hundreds of thousands. Rebels also have indiscriminately shelled government-controlled towns, killing civilians.⁴

On August 30, Russia declared a unilateral ceasefire that warring parties have largely respected, despite sporadic violations from both sides.⁵ However, if this ceasefire collapses and violence escalates further, as seems likely, the crisis could become the “worst humanitarian disaster the world has seen so far this century.”⁶

THE LAST RESORT

The situation in northwest Syria has evolved dramatically in recent years. A historically marginalized area, Idlib province and its surroundings have been the subject of a series of de-escalation and demilitarization agreements between Turkey, Iran, and Russia since 2017. At times, these agreements have resulted in a degree of normalcy for the civilian population, despite intermittent bombardment.

4. “Syrian Insurgents Shell Government-Held Rural Area, Kill 12,” Associated Press, June 17, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/9f88a272eb004ef89607c9a99b725623>; Vivian Yee and Hwaida Saad, “Syrian Government Starts Campaign to Retake Last Opposition Stronghold of Idlib,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/world/middleeast/syria-retaking-idlib.html>.

5. “Syria: Idlib Truce Violated, Media,” ANSAMED, September 3, 2019.

6. “U.N. Warns 21st Century’s Worst Humanitarian Crisis Unfolding in Syria,” *Democracy Now*, August 1, 2019, https://www.democracynow.org/2019/8/1/headlines/un_warns_21st_centurys_worst_humanitarian_crisis_unfolding_in_syria.

The area has benefited from the growth of small businesses started by displaced people from other parts of the country. Construction, an active trade route with Turkey, and an ever-growing network of humanitarian organizations and private contractors have helped to stimulate the local economy periodically. However, the vast majority of the population has struggled. Even before the February 2019 military campaign, more than 2 million people in northwest Syria already relied on humanitarian aid.⁷ Basic services and infrastructure were already collapsing under the weight of a population that had doubled in only a few years.

Now the local population lives in fear. “Every day, I say goodbye to my family when I leave the house. They might all be killed in an airstrike, or I can be killed and never see them again,” said a Syrian activist from Idlib. As it drives more and more people deeper into

Idlib, the impact of the military offensive is exhausting what remains of the host community’s hospitality. Many fleeing civilians left their belongings behind, walking for long hours or even days because they could not afford transportation. Others spent the little remaining money they had to reach safety. They are arriving in impoverished host communities largely dependent on humanitarian organizations to meet even their most basic needs.

“Every day, I say goodbye to my family when I leave the house. They might all be killed in an airstrike, or I can be killed and never see them again.”

- SYRIAN ACTIVIST FROM IDLIB



People in Idlib fleeing with all of their belongings to escape regime and Russian bombings. Photo Courtesy of the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS).

7. United Nations, “Harsh Winter Conditions, Ongoing Hostilities Have Forced Even Greater Displacement of Civilians in Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council,” January 30, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13684.doc.htm>.



Aerial footage shows the sprawl of informal camps that have spread across northwest Syria, near the border with Turkey. Photo from Google Maps.

Although some refugees headed to Turkish-controlled areas in Aleppo province,⁸ for most of them, the communities along the border with Turkey but inside Syria offer the best chance for safety. Crossing into Turkey itself, however, is now virtually impossible because of the wall separating the two countries. Newly displaced people are arriving in areas already saturated with IDPs. A few have been able to seek shelter in unfinished buildings or collective sites, such as schools and mosques. Others have squeezed into existing formal camps managed by humanitarian organizations, though these also exceeded their capacity long ago. Consequently, up to 90 percent of newly displaced people are living in informal camps.

“Back to the Stone Age:” Living Conditions for Idlib’s IDPs

Informal camps are makeshift encampments not supported by a humanitarian organization, although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) try to fill some gaps. However, this assistance remains insufficient at best, and these camps do not meet the minimum humanitarian standards for access to basic services or protection. Still, “if you have a tent above your head, you are considered lucky,” said the country director of a Syrian NGO, thinking of the thousands of people reported to be living in the streets or under olive trees throughout the region.

Daily life in these informal settlements is a Hobbesian affair. Amid the overcrowded conditions, chaos, hardship, and misery abound. “It is beyond what words can describe. To

8. Hussein Akoush, “Syrians Head to Turkish-Controlled Afrin to Escape Assad’s Death Chase,” *TRT World*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/syrians-head-to-turkish-controlled-afrin-to-escape-assad-s-death-chase-26733>.

say it is inhumane is not enough,” lamented a representative of a Syrian relief organization based in Gaziantep in southern Turkey. “When I go to northern Idlib and see the camps, I can’t believe what I see. I feel like we are back to the Stone Age,” said another.

Families struggle to meet their most basic needs—from shelter, food, and water to protection and dignity. Privacy has become impossible for most. Many families, with an average size of six,⁹ are crammed into single tents. In some cases, two or three families share the same tent, separated only by sheets.¹⁰ Moreover, weather conditions present safety hazards to families; those living in tents facing extremely hot weather in the summer and freezing cold and the risk of flooding in winter.

More broadly, the recent influx of hundreds of thousands of people has put immense pressure on existing water supplies, community latrines, and solid waste management efforts. As a result, access to WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) has become increasingly limited, compounded by regime attacks on water facilities.¹¹ Humanitarian organizations are increasingly concerned about the spread of hygiene-related diseases. The head of programs at a Syrian NGO that provides occasional services in informal camps said, “We do awareness sessions about hygiene, the importance for people to wash their hands after using the bathroom. But people don’t even have restrooms, they don’t have water.”

Latrines are scarce, unsanitary, and gender-mixed in most camps. “People must walk for long distances on unlit and dangerous

paths between tents to access them, which poses a protection risk for women, girls, and boys,” warned a humanitarian worker. According to several interlocutors, this situation has resulted in an increased risk of gender-based violence in the camps. Yet even such limited access to latrines is considered a luxury that many IDPs lack.

Heightened Vulnerabilities

The war in northwest Syria has spared no one. All segments of society struggle to cope with the resulting displacement, violence, and economic collapse, with each facing specific vulnerabilities.

Women and Girls

There are relatively few men still living in communities in Syria’s northwest region. Many are fighting on the front lines, whereas others have been killed, disappeared, or imprisoned. As a result, more than half of the population in the area is estimated to live in female-headed households.¹² In a society largely ruled by patriarchal norms, this situation has left entire families without their traditional source of protection and income. In some cases, it has forced women and girls to resort to negative coping strategies or deal with conditions that expose them to greater risk.

For example, early marriage among girls has become more prevalent. Several humanitarian workers and activists told Refugees International that young girls are forced to marry much older, often already-married men.¹³ Sexual and physical abuse

9. “Situation Overview: Idlib Governorate and Surrounding Areas,” REACH, August 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/situation-overview-idlib-governorate-and-surrounding-areas-north-west-O>.

10. Interviews with relief workers in Gaziantep, Antakya, and Rihanley, and by phone inside Idlib, May-June 2019.

11. UNICEF, “Eight Water Facilities Come Under Attack in Idlib, Northwest of Syria, Affecting Water Supply for Nearly 250,000 People,” July 20, 2019, <https://www.unicefusa.org/press/releases/eight-water-facilities-come-under-attack-idlib-north-west-syria-affecting-water-supply>.

12. Interviews with relief workers, doctors, and activists in Gaziantep, Antakya, and Rihanley, and by phone inside Idlib, May-June 2019.

13. See Hadya Yahya and Hassan Arfeh, “The Link Between Suicide Among Girls in Rural Idlib and Underage Marriage,” Syria Deeply, July 28, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/07/28/the-link-between-suicide-among-girls-in>.

has also been on the rise. Alarming, even the humanitarian workers who should be protecting the displaced have reportedly committed abuses against women and girls. “Sex for aid is not uncommon,” said a Syrian activist working for an international human rights organization. “I heard several accounts of camps managers or aid providers sexually exploiting women and girls in return for access to food or services.” The full nature and scope of the problem are difficult to assess because women often are reluctant to report abuse for fear of scandal or retaliation. Organizations focusing on gender-based violence and those supporting reproductive health programs should increase their training of humanitarian workers, camp managers, and communities at large on protection against sexual abuse and exploitation. Humanitarian and relief organizations operating in Idlib need to ensure that they adequately monitor their programs for incidents of abuse or exploitation. In addition, they should provide safe pathways for civilians to report abuses, including among their own staff.

Even in the face of such adversity, Syrian women in Idlib have displayed an extraordinary degree of resilience. They have stepped up to fill the void left by the disruption of social and family structures, defying attempts by extremist groups to impose social norms that violate basic human rights. Many have become the breadwinners in their families and started small businesses. They also take part in programs and workshops to acquire new skills and expertise.

As they increasingly take on leadership roles, women have also established programs to

equip other women with decision-making skills. One Syrian activist described her personal experience to the Refugees International team:

“You know, I’m an activist and doing so much work, but the first time I heard the term ‘workshop,’ was in 2015 or 2016. I was like, ‘Workshop! What does it mean?’ So, after knowing about the workshops, we women said we should improve ourselves. Now you see us working in politics, in the community, and so many other fields. You can see how Syrian woman showed their creativity during the war.”

Children, Youth, and Other Vulnerable Groups

Among children and youth, school dropout is on the rise. Violence, displacement, insufficient resources for schools, and a shortage of qualified teachers have deeply impacted education. “Students could be in their fourth or fifth grade and still don’t know how to read,” said the head of an NGO supporting education in Idlib. Moreover, according to several NGO representatives, donors often require them to focus on elementary schools, allocating little funding to middle and high schools, let alone higher education. As a result, without prospects for education and a better future, boys and young men are increasingly being recruited into armed groups.

People with special needs and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. Communities in Idlib are ill-equipped to address their needs.¹⁴ “They have limited access to WASH,” ex-

[rural-idlib-and-underage-marriages](#); Molly Bernestein and Sahar Atrache, “Disrupted Health Care in Syria: The State of Reproductive Health,” Syrian American Medical Society, December 2018, <https://www.sams-usa.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/RH-report-04-1.pdf>.

14. Last year, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimated that more than 1.5 million people were living with permanent, war-related impairments, including 86,000 people who have lost limbs. “No End in Sight to Seven Years of War in Syria: Children with Disabilities at Risk of Exclusion,” UNICEF, March 11, 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/no-end-sight-seven-years-war-syria-children-disabilities-risk-exclusion>; Nisan Ahmado, “Disabled Victims Are Syrian War’s Most Vulnerable,” *Voice of America*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/disabled-victims-are-syrian-wars-most-vulnerable>.



NEVERTHELESS, IDLIB'S WOMEN PERSIST: HIBA EZZIDEEN

Hiba Ezzideen, a Syrian activist living as a refugee in Turkey, grew up in Idlib. When the Syria uprising started in 2011, she was working as a university lecturer in nearby Raqqa, teaching English literature. A feminist fan of Virginia Woolf and inspired by news of the Egyptian uprising that deposed long-term President Hosni Mubarak, she supported the revolutionary spirit she saw opening up throughout the country.

“Participation of women in public issues was not welcome in the Syrian community in

Raqqa,” she said. “But when I saw what was happening in Egypt, I knew that we had to try.”

She participated in demonstrations and started organizing politically in Raqqa despite concerns over the violent turn the country was taking. One day late in 2011, she entered her lecture hall and saw that someone had hung a large portrait of Bashar al-Assad behind her lectern. It provoked in her an act of defiance that would change the course of her life.

“I took my car key and put it through the eye of Bashar al-Assad. I got in my car and drove back to Idlib. From that time until now, I haven’t been to regime-controlled areas,” Hiba said.

Back in Idlib, Hiba took up more work coordinating activists. But in 2014, things in her hometown started to change.

“First people started coming in from outside of Idlib. We started to see black flags in the demonstrations,” she said. “People were not aware of what it meant. I started reading about jihadism and the Taliban. I didn’t know much about it yet. But once I understood more, I started a campaign documenting the violations of ISIS.”

Boldly, she started running an anonymous watchdog site called Idlib Assassination that documented crimes committed by ISIS from 2014-15. She would wear a video camera under her abaya and anonymously post what she recorded in the streets. She remained anonymous for some time, but one day things changed.

“In 2015 I was driving back from my office to my house and a group of people fired at me,” she said. “They sent me threatening messages on Facebook.”

She shut down the site and fled to Turkey. A year later, she smuggled herself by sea to the Netherlands and claimed asylum. But soon she felt guilty.

“I felt I encouraged people to demonstrate, and now other people are dying,” she said. “After one year, I decided to go back to Syria. I walked back from Greece to Turkey. ... It was eight hours walking.”

Hiba made it back to Idlib, but realized her activism put her in danger there and posed a risk to her family. She fled once again for Turkey and has been there since. When Turkey opens their border for Syrians during the

twice-yearly Eid holidays, she returns to the province to see family.

Hiba said she was in awe of the resolve of women she encountered when she visited displacement camps in Idlib during the Eid al-Fitr holiday in June 2019.

“I saw women collecting exploded barrel bombs,” she said. “They were using them as wash basins to bleach their husbands’ clothes because it is traditional to wear white during the Eid holiday. They were collecting carnation seeds and crushing them to sweeten the smell of the clothes.”

“When I asked about it, they said, ‘Bashar is trying to kill us, and we are fighting him with carnation seeds.’”

Witnessing these small acts of resistance and resilience gave her hope.

The lives of women in Idlib have changed dramatically since the war broke out—and not just for the worse. The majority of households in the region are now female-headed, remaking the role of women in the historically conservative area.

“The war changed even the professions of women,” she explained. “After the revolution, you saw female business owners. They’re working on exporting clothes. They have their own shops. They have their own restaurants. It means a lot to us.”

Many women in Idlib, like Hiba, will continue to resist.

“Women are still trying to go to universities and schools,” she said. “They’re still willing to give birth. They’re still willing to work. Idlib is their last resort.”



Displaced Syrian children living under olive trees in Atmeh, Syria. Photo Credit: AAREF WATAD/AFP/Getty Images.

plained the representative of a Syrian NGO. Those whose situation restricts their ability to move around come under greater threat during aerial bombings because they have greater difficulty seeking cover. Moreover, said the aid worker, “In the camps, they are mostly confined to their tents, as their mobility is hampered by crowded tents.”

Even as humanitarian organizations and donors focus on providing life-saving assistance, they must look beyond emergency needs. As the stories of Idlib’s IDPs show, protection, quality education, specialized care, and revenue-generating opportunities are all essential to alleviate human suffering in that war-torn province.

Communal Tensions

Throughout the war, Idlib’s local population has displayed extraordinary resilience and solidarity. However, the new flow of IDPs is testing these qualities. Host communities’

compassion is mixed with anger and frustration over the continuing hardships. Many residents have opened their homes; prepared meals; offered goods; and collected blankets, mattresses, and other items to give to the newly displaced. People in longer-term displacement have shared the little space they had with newcomers. Others, however, have exploited the situation to raise rents and the price of goods, for which IDPs often bear the blame.¹⁵

The concentration of IDPs in an ever-shrinking area has led to fierce competition for limited resources. Tensions between old and new IDPs are on the rise, as is resentment among original residents who have seen the social fabric of their community deeply altered. “My town is a vacation destination for its people. Now it has turned into a sea of IDPs. They brought with them their problems and chaos. Our hometown doesn’t feel calm and safe anymore. I dream of the day when I don’t see any tent in it,” complained a Syrian doctor.

15. Some interlocutors mentioned unconfirmed reports about landowners charging \$20 per olive tree.

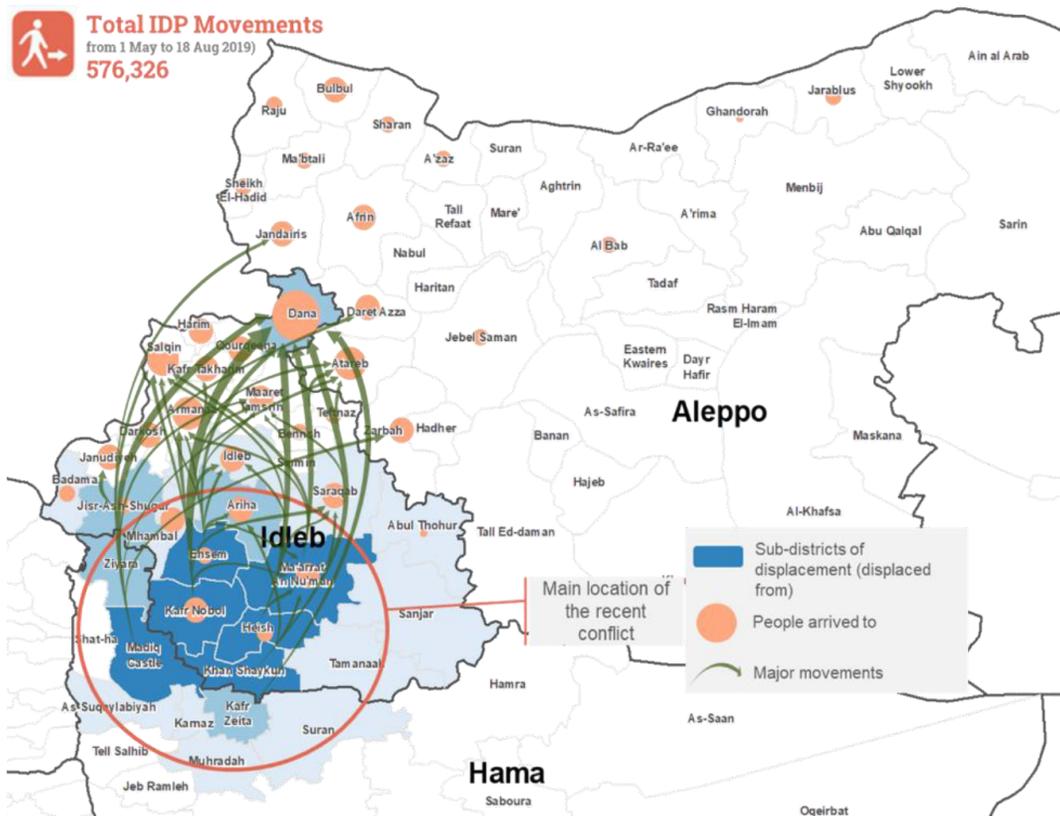
Communities and even neighborhoods are becoming increasingly Balkanized. A former head of a local council in Idlib explained, “The Assad regime had always triggered and played on dichotomies: urban versus rural, city versus countryside, a town against the other, a family or a tribe inside a town against another. Today, we are seeing this dichotomy at play again: original residents versus IDPs, old IDPs versus new ones. Neighborhoods are now separated according to which areas their residents come from—there are Homs, Aleppo, Ghouta neighborhoods...”

These divisions could easily create community conflict. Humanitarian organizations need to respond to the needs of host communities

and improve communication with community leaders. For their part, donors should support income-generating opportunities and other programs designed to ease growing social tensions by helping to address the needs of the host population.

THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE UNDER DURESS

In 2014, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165 regulating the humanitarian



Source: CCCM Cluster / IMU – TO BE UPDATED

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Source: OCHA.



Emptied shelves in an aid distribution warehouse in Reyhanli, Turkey just over border from Idlib. Aid organizations are struggling to keep up with enormous needs and a lack of resources. Photo by Refugees International.

response in northwest Syria. The resolution allows cross-border assistance to be delivered into nongovernment-controlled areas without the government’s authorization. It is a unique case and “one of the most complex countries in UN humanitarian response’s history.”¹⁶ However, Russia has repeatedly threatened to veto the resolution, and there is growing apprehension that it will do so in January 2020 when the resolution is due for renewal. Fellow UN Security Council members will need to use all of their leverage with Russia to ensure that Moscow does not carry out its threat.

The recent offensive has forced humanitarian organizations to prioritize urgent, life-saving interventions over, and at the expense of, other forms of assistance. They have had to turn schools, mosques, and other existing infrastructure into IDP reception centers.

Medical organizations have switched their operations to emergency status in bombed areas, treating only trauma and urgent cases. Non-essential staff, as well as equipment and supplies, have been reallocated to areas receiving the new waves of displaced people. Even so, continuing significant challenges mean that basic needs remain largely unmet.

Operational Challenges

The scale and speed of displacement has overwhelmed aid groups’ capacity to respond. A humanitarian worker explained: “The current humanitarian crisis is so enormous, we [humanitarian organizations] don’t have the ability to address it.” Another said, “Humanitarian organizations can’t fill a gap that requires states’ resources.”

16. Phone interview with a UN official based in New York, May 2019.



Health workers and health facilities have been deliberately targeted by regime bombings. Photo Courtesy of SAMS.

In addition, the intensity of the fighting and the presence of extremist groups largely preclude the presence of international relief workers, and push many skilled Syrian workers to leave Idlib. As a result, aid groups are forced to manage their relief programs remotely at a time when brain drain has sapped local capacity. These operations often suffer from miscommunication, a lack of trust between local staff and their internationally based supervisors, and burdensome layers of management and monitoring.

Those staff who do remain often become overwhelmed and burned out. Local relief workers are being displaced by the bombing and now are themselves in need of assistance. A doctor working with a medical organization in Atmeh, along the border, lamented his situation:

“For once, I want someone to ask me about me, my health condition, physical and mental, my unbearable back pain for working non-stop. In the past eight years, I conducted more than 9,000 surgeries, more than any doctor does in his life. Every three months, I have a breakdown and decide to stop, then I pull my torn body together and keep going.”

Finally, lack of funding has further hamstrung relief efforts. Donor fatigue is on the rise. In 2018, the Trump administration cut more than \$200 million in stabilization funds to northwest Syria.¹⁷ In March 2019, the United States pledged \$397 million to Syria—\$300 million less than the aid budget in 2017.¹⁸ Furthermore, none of the major donors have pledged significant funds to the unfolding crisis in Idlib. This lack has forced relief groups

17. Frances Z. Brown, “U.S. Cuts to Syria Stabilization Funds Jeopardize a Fragile Recovery,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 18, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/18/u.s.-cuts-to-syria-stabilization-funds-jeopardize-fragile-recovery-pub-77068>.

18. Robin Emmott, “U.N. Raises \$7 Billion for Syria From Donors,” Reuters, March 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-eu/u-n-raises-7-billion-for-syria-from-donors-idUSKCN1QV144>.



Displaced Syrians in the south of Idlib province escape bombing by Syrian government forces. Photo Credit: AAREF WATAD/AFP/Getty Images.



to shift resources from ongoing programming in other areas to fill the gap. As a result, local resentment against humanitarian workers is growing. “They put a big blame on us for their distress,” said a Syrian NGO worker inside Idlib. “Whatever we do, it is not going to be enough. We don’t have the means to respond to their needs.”

Idlib’s Complex Context

These operational challenges are exacerbated by Idlib’s complex political and military realities. Although bombings against civilians are indiscriminate, humanitarian and civil society efforts are often targeted deliberately. Aerial bombardment of schools, hospitals, civil defense centers, ambulances, and other civilian infrastructure is all too common. A desperate plea for protection has led many NGOs to share the coordinates of their facilities with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In turn, OCHA has shared them with warring parties through a so-called “humanitarian deconfliction mechanism.”

OCHA is reportedly investigating several attacks against “deconflicted” facilities but has yet to issue its report. In early August 2019, the UN Secretary General authorized another investigation into this targeting. The completion of this investigation and publication of its findings should be a top priority. The UN has not been able to secure protection for humanitarian facilities, but it does have an important role in facilitating accountability.

At a June 2019 press conference, U.S. President Donald Trump asked his Russian counterpart to “Please, take it easy with Idlib.”¹⁹ Apart from these rather muted

remarks, his administration appears largely disengaged from events in northwest Syria. Russia and the Assad regime have largely enjoyed a free hand in northwest Syria. The United States has proven reluctant in recent years to engage Moscow in search for a diplomatic solution in Idlib (and indeed Syria more broadly). The humanitarian consequences of that reluctance are currently on full display.

Furthermore, the control of extremist groups over Idlib poses a significant challenge to humanitarian and civil society organizations.

The Dominance of HTS

In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda-affiliate created in 2011 and led by Abu Mohamad al-Jolani, cut its external ties with al-Qaeda and rebranded itself as Jabhat Fateh As-Sham. Soon after, following the merger of several other factions, it gave way to HTS. In its January 2019 offensive, HTS evicted mainstream Turkish-backed armed opposition groups to Turkish-controlled areas in Aleppo province, known as the Euphrates Shield area. Today, the majority of the 20,000 to 30,000 fighters in northwest Syria belong to HTS and other radical jihadist groups.²⁰ In late August, a U.S. missile attack killed dozens of militants belonging to some of these groups.²¹

HTS has used its military power to exert control over governance structures in Idlib. The group established the “Salvation Government” as the ultimate governing institution, taking over other governance bodies such as local councils and directorates. HTS and other extremists have sought to impose a very conservative dress code for both men and women, and ban smoking, drinking alcohol, and listening to music. They enforce gender segregation in

19. “Remarks by President Trump in Press Conference, Osaka, Japan,” The White House, June 29, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-osaka-japan/>.

20. “Syria: Who’s in Control of Idlib?” *BBC*, June 22, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474>.

21. Harun al-Aswad, “Dozens of Militants Killed by Coalition Strike on Syria’s Idlib Amid Ceasefire,” *Middle East Eye*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/government-halts-idlib-bombardment-after-ceasefire>.

hospitals, schools, and other civilian facilities. Although some residents welcome these practices, many resent and even resist them. One activist from Idlib told the Refugees International team that “Wearing makeup, for instance, is an act of defiance for many women.”

Reportedly, members of HTS frequently commit serious human rights abuses, including harassment, assassinations, kidnapping, and torture. It is widely believed that ransoms constitute one of HTS’s numerous sources of revenue. However, HTS is not a monolithic bloc. It certainly brings together battle-hardened jihadi fighters from Syria and abroad; however, its members also include locals who joined for opportunistic reasons or in support of its military exploits against the Assad regime. As a result, the strength, influence, and conduct of HTS’s fighters vary across the northwest.

Counterterrorism and Aid Diversion Risks

The presence of HTS and other extremists has curbed humanitarian operations and undoubtedly compounded donor fatigue. In the northwest region, interlocutors from NGOs, UN agencies, and donor governments have reported HTS intimidation and attempts to divert aid to various degrees, depending on the group’s local grip. These attempts include meddling with beneficiary

lists, restricting access to people in need, controlling aid delivery processes, and interfering with staff recruitment.

In the wake of the HTS January 2019 takeover, some aid agencies suspended their funding, including for lifesaving programs.²² Others cut funding to most areas except for humanitarian operations.²³ In addition, the United States required that all U.S.-funded organizations get prior approval to work in HTS-controlled territory and humanitarian organizations run individual vetting of staff, partners, and contractors through the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) system.²⁴ Overall, the group’s dominance pushed donors to back away from “funding all but the most critical needs in Idlib,” according to the UN regional humanitarian coordinator.²⁵ Counterterrorism regulations have placed additional constraints on humanitarian organizations, forcing them to take on resource-intensive compliance measures,²⁶ reduce their operations, and, in extreme cases, end their programs altogether. Some cuts have affected non-humanitarian funds, including to some local governance structures, essential to the implementation of the humanitarian response. For instance, these cuts have targeted Idlib’s health and education directorates, reportedly based on suspicions—not a thorough investigation—of interference by the Salvation Government.²⁷

22. As a result, doctors and relief workers continued to work for several months without pay. Also see, “EU Groups Suspend Support for Medical Centres in Syria, Idlib,” *Middle East Monitor*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190123-eu-groups-suspend-support-for-medical-centres-in-syrias-idlib/>.

23. Humanitarian aid is assumed to address urgent needs such as food, shelter, and medical care. Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response, Congressional Research Service, March 13, 2014; also see Ben Parker, “Shutdowns, Suspensions, and Legal Threats Put Relief in World’s Troublespots at Risk,” *The New Humanitarian*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/09/26/shutdowns-suspensions-and-legal-threats-put-relief-world-s-troublespots-risk>.

24. Interviews with NGO workers in Turkey and the United States, June–July 2019. Also see Ben Parker, “U.S. Tightens Counter-Terror Clampdown on Syria Aid,” *The New Humanitarian*, September 21, 2018, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2018/09/21/us-tightens-counter-terror-clampdown-syria-aid>.

25. Parker, “US Tightens Counter-Terror Clampdown.”

26. Most organizations spend significant resources to comply with those donors’ counterterrorism regulations. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), for instance, “increased [its] spending on compliance from \$40,000 in 2017 to \$575,000 in 2019 for a dedicated unit, including a full-time anti-corruption investigator. Including the costs of staff, estimated NRC expenses devoted to compliance with counter-terror regulations amount to over \$1 million,” wrote Joel R. Charny, the NGO’s executive director in the United States. “Counter-Terrorism and Humanitarian Action: The Perils of Zero Tolerance,” *War on the Rocks*, March 20, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/counter-terrorism-and-humanitarian-action-the-perils-of-zero-tolerance/>.

27. Interviews with NGOs workers in Turkey and by phone, June and August 2019.

Finally, these regulations have curtailed private donations, on which many Syrian NGOs rely. The head of a Syrian NGO explained, “In the past, Muslim communities in Europe and elsewhere were quick to respond to any crisis. However, because of tightening counterterrorism regulations, people are scared. They don’t want to be accused of funding extremist groups.”

Resisting Interference

Donors do have legitimate reasons to be concerned about aid diversion. Most humanitarian organizations working inside Syria have adopted significant measures to address these concerns. The UN OCHA-led Access Working Group (AWG) has become a venue for UN agencies and NGOs to discuss interference by armed groups and report aid diversion incidents. In recent years, many organizations have developed additional and more sophisticated tools to vet their staff, contractors, or any other party for affiliations with terrorist groups. However, their greatest source of leverage in resisting HTS attempts to divert aid or otherwise interfere with their operations remains the threat of stopping services in affected communities. When relief groups find it necessary to suspend aid, these communities know that HTS and other armed groups are to blame and often pressure them to change their behavior. NGO representatives told Refugees International that they have repeatedly stopped their operations, suspended aid delivery, and even withdrawn from an area entirely to counter attempts at aid diversion.²⁸ In those circumstances, community pressure proved a “remarkably effective mechanism,” said a U.S. official in Ankara.

More important, financial cuts to relief organizations because of counterterrorism

concerns deeply harm people in desperate need of such assistance. Ironically, it may undermine those organizations’ capacity to resist interference and preserve their independence from armed groups. The fewer resources humanitarian organizations have at their disposal, the less influential they become in the communities they serve. This lack in turn leaves them more susceptible to predatory behavior by armed groups. A Western stabilization official, commenting on a recent suspension of funds to the Idlib Health Directorate, warned: “The Directorate plays a critical role in preventing HTS from controlling the health sector. Suspending its funds will weaken its role as a buffer between medical organizations and workers on the one hand and armed groups on the other.”²⁹

Moreover, the UN and NGOs have used their access to communication channels with HTS to relay donors’ “redlines.” According to a UN official and a western donor, these channels have been fairly effective in influencing HTS behavior. For instance, UN mediation with the HTS Salvation Government led the latter to stop taxing aid trucks and reopen the Bab al-Hawa official crossing between Turkey and Idlib so humanitarian organizations could deliver critical assistance.³⁰

Donors should continue their support to partners critical to the humanitarian response while the UN, NGOs, and other local governance bodies should enhance their accountability and monitoring mechanisms and ensure full transparency in reporting incidents of aid diversion to donors.

28. Interviews with NGO workers in Turkey, June 2019.

29. Phone interview with a stabilization official in Turkey, August 2019. For instance, medical organizations refuse to sign MoUs with the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government and coordinate their work with the de facto government; instead, they deal with the Health Directorate.

30. Interviews with UN officials in Turkey and the United States, November 2018 and June 2019.



To prevent refugee flows into Turkey, Ankara has built a wall nearly 500 miles long on its southern border with Syria. Turkey seems determined to keep its borders closed even as bombings continue. Photo by Refugees International.

Ankara's Mixed Role

Turkey hosts an estimated 3.5 million Syrians—more than any other country in the world. However, responding to the needs of this population has put immense economic and political pressure on Turkey. Unwilling to accept more refugees, Ankara seems determined to keep its borders closed, even as relentless bombing continues in Syria. Turkish military forces have even shot and killed Syrians attempting to cross into the country.³¹ However, pressure along the Turkish border has been mounting. On August 30, thousands of Syrians held demonstrations at a border crossing point. Some protestors pushed past Turkish border guards and took control of a Turkish armored vehicle.³² Nevertheless, Turkey is unlikely

to open its borders to new refugees unless strong international pressure is brought to bear.

However, international actors—and European countries in particular—also wish to avoid fresh waves of Syrian refugees reaching their shores through Turkey. European governments thus have refrained from criticizing Turkey's decision to keep its border closed. As a human rights researcher put it, "Turkey is well insulated diplomatically. Everyone stands to gain from the borders remaining closed." Yet if the crisis escalates, Ankara should allow a certain number of Syrians to temporarily seek refuge in existing camps along Turkey's southern borders. Europe and other big donors must be prepared to use a mix of new international aid and diplomatic pressure

31. Zouhir Al Shimale, "Death in the Dark: Stories From the Smuggling Routes out of Syria," *The National*, June 10, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/death-in-the-dark-stories-from-the-smuggling-routes-out-of-syria-1.872500>.

32. "Syrians protest Turkey's Erdoğan as Idlib crisis deepens", *Ahval*, August 30, 2019, <https://ahvalnews.com/idlib/syrians-protest-turkeys-erdogan-idlib-crisis-deepens>.

to convince Turkey to choose this path and open its border crossings to refugees. Moreover, more civilians are likely to seek refuge in Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria. Therefore, Turkey should establish IDP camps in these areas to accommodate additional numbers of civilians feeling the violence.

Meanwhile, Ankara should also use its influence to push for durable solutions in northwest Syria. So far, the ceasefire has been holding. This has given some mild respite to civilians in the northwest. However, most observers are deeply skeptical that this cessation of hostilities will prove durable. According to a Syrian president's advisor, the ceasefire is "temporary... and not part of any boarder understanding".³³ A similar arrangement in early August collapsed in three days. Ankara, Moscow, and all other stakeholders must discuss realistic steps for reaching a long-lasting ceasefire.

Pressure on Humanitarian Organizations

The Turkish government and several Turkish NGOs provide important humanitarian assistance inside Idlib. Turkey also serves as a base of operations for most humanitarian organizations carrying out cross-border assistance into Syria. However, Turkey has gradually limited operational space for NGOs in Gaziantep and other Turkish cities that have been serving as hubs for aid delivery. In 2017, major international NGOs, including Mercy Corps, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee, were forced to close or downsize their offices in Turkey. These international organizations brought decades of experience in responding to major crises around the world. Although some have been able to shift their operations to Amman, Jordan, the impact of their diminished presence is felt today as less experienced local NGOs attempt to fill the resulting gap.

Turkey is increasingly targeting the remaining, mostly Syrian, humanitarian community.

For example, it has proven impossible for some organizations to comply with the new regulations. Several NGOs have been fined hundreds of thousands of dollars for using an informal money transfer system despite Turkey requiring the use of its national post and telegraph directorate PTT (Posta ve Telgraf Teşkilatı) for transfers of funds.

More worryingly, heightened restrictions on work permits have deeply affected organizational efficiency and staff morale. Several Syrian NGO staff told Refugees International that Turkey has refused to renew their work permits. Others are forced to work from home for fear of raids by the police. Syrian staff in Turkey live in constant fear and uncertainty. According to several interlocutors, Ankara has grown suspicious about the foreign humanitarian presence and is seeking to exert greater control over the remaining NGO community. "For Turkey, it is a matter of sovereignty," said the representative of a think tank in Ankara.

CONCLUSION

Ending a ruthless offensive that is causing killing and massive destitution and misery is not just a moral responsibility. It is also a must if further destabilization of Syria's neighbors is to be prevented. Thus, all actors should spare no efforts to attain this goal. The warring parties should move quickly to consolidate the current ceasefire and achieve a lasting cessation of hostilities. If violence resumes, the humanitarian crisis threatens to reach unprecedented levels and many more civilians will lose their own lives or those of their loved ones.

SAHAR ATRACHE, SENIOR ADVOCATE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST, AND SARAH SHEFFER, SENIOR COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, TRAVELED TO TURKEY IN JUNE 2019.

33. "Bouthaina Shaaban: The truce decision in Idlib is "temporary" .. The Turkish army will "forcibly" leave Syria," *Syria.News*, September 1, 2019, <https://syria.news/c6821484-01091912.html>.

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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees international advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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