



**SYRIAN  
EMERGENCY  
TASK FORCE**

# **IDLIB: SYRIA'S LAST HOPE**

Policy recommendations for ending mass atrocities  
in Syria's last opposition stronghold.

**The Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF)** is a tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization established in March 2011 to support the needs of the Syrian people for freedom and democracy, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, or background. SETF advocates in solidarity with the Syrian people to inform and educate the American public and its representatives about their suffering, while addressing Syria’s colossal humanitarian crisis and promoting the development of Syrian civil society based on respect for human dignity and freedom.

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Cover: A young student from Wisdom House, an SETF-sponsored kindergarten in Idlib. Photo taken by our ground team. Cover art by SETF staff member Natalie Larrison.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Biden administration will soon have to address the situation in Syria, and there is little doubt that Idlib will be one of the first tests the White House faces in this decade-long conflict. For several reasons, the resolution of the Syrian war hinges on protecting Idlib. Retaking Idlib would enable the regime of Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad to declare a complete military victory, annihilate any chance for a negotiated settlement or return of refugees, and impede international efforts to hold the regime accountable for its atrocities. Millions of civilians, including 1 million children<sup>1</sup>, are trapped within an ever-shrinking space surrounded by the Assad regime and Russian and Iranian-backed forces, including Hezbollah. The regime and its allies are determined to displace, kill, or detain Idlib's population, including over 2 million internally displaced persons<sup>2</sup>. The scale of previous, ongoing, and potential atrocities in Idlib constitutes one of the 21st century's worst crimes against humanity.

Beyond the humanitarian stakes, the crisis in Idlib threatens the interests of the United States and its allies. First, an Assad-Russian-Iranian offensive could double the number of refugees in Europe as a new flood of civilians flees the violence. Second, this offensive will serve to empower extremist elements in Syria and beyond. Violent extremist organizations use the international community's inaction in the face of mass atrocities in Idlib to feed their propaganda and recruitment efforts. Third, Idlib distracts the regime and its allies from focusing on northeast Syria, where U.S. troops are continuing the fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS. Retaking Idlib would enable Assad and his backers to refocus their efforts on pushing the United States out of Syria, potentially imperiling U.S. troops and their local coalition partners and enabling an ISIS resurgence.

Today, a tentative ceasefire in Idlib teeters on the verge of collapse. This ceasefire was established mostly thanks to NATO ally Turkey, whose military intervention in Idlib early last year stopped an unfolding humanitarian disaster. In contrast to its destabilizing actions in northeast Syria, Turkey's opposition to a further regime offensive aligns with U.S. and European interests. At minimal cost and without a direct U.S. military intervention or deployment, the United States can work with its European allies and Turkey toward the common goal of resolving the Idlib crisis and avoiding a humanitarian and national security disaster. The United States must lead in coordinating a multi-pronged strategy that incorporates diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to protect civilians in Idlib. The United States and its allies must establish a zero-tolerance policy on violence against civilians in Idlib. Washington should leverage the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and other targeted sanctions to deprive Assad's war machine of resources. The United States must engage directly with Turkey to support its military efforts to counter the military operations of Assad-Russia-Iran in Idlib.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, "An Estimated 1 Million Children across Idlib are at Risk," September 9, 2018. (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/stories/estimated-1-million-children-across-idlib-are-risk>)

<sup>2</sup> Omer Karapsan, "The Internally Displaced in the Middle East and North Africa: Harbingers of Future Conflict?" *The Brookings Institution*, July 5, 2017. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/05/the-internally-displaced-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-harbingers-of-future-conflict>)

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS OVERVIEW:**

- 1) The United States must pursue and strengthen efforts for the immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib's civilian population.<sup>3</sup>
- 2) The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts with Geneva.<sup>4</sup>
- 3) The United States must step up support for existing independent civilian infrastructure in Idlib province.<sup>5</sup>
- 4) The United States must intensify and broaden Caesar Act accountability efforts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020; virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

## I. Introduction

Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has called the Syrian conflict “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world.”<sup>7</sup> Today, the epicenter of this suffering is one small province located in Syria’s northwest: Idlib.

Over the past decade, Idlib has become the last refuge for Syrians from all over the country who are desperate to escape the brutality of the Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies. As a result of the massive inflow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to Idlib, the province now hosts more than 2 million Syrians from across the country in addition to its population.<sup>8</sup> Local communities have been generous in responding to the needs of IDPs, but local resources are simply overwhelmed. Millions of people live in conditions of extreme vulnerability and poverty, lacking adequate housing, medical care, education, and employment.

Syrians in Idlib also remain vulnerable to atrocities committed by the Assad regime and its backers. Despite a ceasefire agreement signed in March 2020, there have been multiple breaches. The international community has so far largely stood by in silence even as the Assad regime and its allies continue to attack civilian targets.

As pro-regime forces close in, Idlib sits a hair’s breadth away from a massive humanitarian disaster. If fighting reaches the city of Idlib, the last hope and safe haven for many civilians, humanitarian atrocities there would likely dwarf the massacres committed by the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia over the past decade. In addition, further regime incursions into Idlib would likely trigger the largest wave of displacement yet seen in the Syrian conflict. Those incursions could also threaten U.S. interests by escalating military tensions between Russia and NATO ally Turkey and by leading the regime and its backers to focus more heavily on northeast Syria including areas in which U.S. troops operate.

### A) Idlib: A Microcosm of Syria on the Brink of Mass Atrocity

Over the course of the Syrian conflict, the population of Idlib province has doubled in size due to the influx of IDPs. Of Idlib’s approximately 4 million residents,<sup>9</sup> over half are IDPs, and roughly a million are children. The province’s closed borders and lack of infrastructure has forced residents to shelter under olive trees and makeshift camps. Northern Idlib alone contains over 1,270 IDP

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<sup>7</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Press Release, “UN High Commissioner for Refugees appeals for safety for civilians trapped in Idlib,” February 20, 2020. (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2020/2/5e4e51d04/un-high-commissioner-refugees-appeals-safety-civilians-trapped-idlib.html>)

<sup>8</sup> Omer Karapsan, “The Internally Displaced in the Middle East and North Africa: Harbingers of Future Conflict?” *The Brookings Institution*, July 5, 2017. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/05/the-internally-displaced-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-harbingers-of-future-conflict>)

<sup>9</sup> Jen Kirby, “Syria’s Idlib was already a humanitarian nightmare. Now the coronavirus has arrived,” *Vox*, July 16, 2020. (<https://www.vox.com/2020/7/16/21322665/syria-idlib-coronavirus-humanitarian-nightmare>)

camps,<sup>10</sup> which have little humanitarian support and face constant danger of aerial attack by the regime and Russian air forces.

Despite former President Donald Trump’s claim that “millions of people have been saved” in Idlib,<sup>11</sup> pro-regime forces have systematically targeted civilians in recent years. From April 2019 to early 2020 alone, attacks against civilians included “30 cluster munitions, at least 21 incendiary weapons, 9 missiles, and nearly 5,000 ‘barrel bombs,’” according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>12</sup> In May 2020, the Assad regime and its allies re-initiated military operations in northwest Syria and have since gradually scaled up attacks. Meanwhile, the regime refuses to engage in meaningful negotiations toward a political solution to the conflict, opting instead—with Russian and Iranian support—for a military victory. Assad views Idlib as the last obstacle to declaring victory, vowing to reclaim “every inch”<sup>13</sup> of Syria. Daily bombardments target civilian areas such as hospitals, schools, and residential neighborhoods, typically considered off-limits under international humanitarian law.<sup>14</sup> The United Nations Human Rights Council’s July 2020 report stated that “Syrian regime forces alongside the Russian Aerospace Forces carried out air and ground attacks which decimated civilian infrastructure, depopulated towns and villages, and claimed the lives of hundreds of Syrian women, men and children.”<sup>15</sup>

Due to the increased bombings, hundreds of thousands of innocent Syrians, including the community living and working around a Syrian Emergency Task Force (SETF)-sponsored school called The Wisdom House,<sup>16</sup> have been forced to leave their homes as the regime pushes north toward the Turkish border. Prior to May, Idlib had been a safe haven for IDPs across Syria,<sup>17</sup> making Idlib’s ever-shrinking territory under opposition control increasingly crowded. Over the course of a single day in March of 2018, approximately 1,000 people living in the eastern Ghouta region of Syria left on Green Buses due to the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Phone interview with Dr. Zaher Sahloul, president of MedGlobal, senior advisor at the Syrian American Medical Society, and founder of American Relief Coalition for Syria, December 22, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Conor Finnegan, “Trump Sends Warning to Assad and his Allies Against Syrian Military Offensive,” *ABC News*, December 26, 2019. (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/trump-sends-warning-assad-allies-syrian-military-offensive/story?id=67933147>)

<sup>12</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>). A cluster munition is a form of explosive weapon that releases or ejects smaller munitions. A barrel bomb is an improvised bomb, typically made from a barrel-shaped container filled with high explosives.

<sup>13</sup> James Denselow, “Syria’s Green Buses: Symbol of a Seismic Shift,” *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), March 22, 2017. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/3/22/syrias-green-buses-symbol-of-a-seismic-shift>)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Press Release, “Rampant Human Rights Violations and War Crimes as War-Torn Idlib Faces the Pandemic UN Syria Commission of Inquiry Report,” July 7, 2020. (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26044&LangID=E>)

<sup>16</sup> “Wisdom House,” *The Wisdom House Project*, accessed March 9, 2021. (<https://www.thewisdomhouseproject.com>)

<sup>17</sup> Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, “Stark Choice for Syrians in Rebel Areas: ‘Doom’ or the Green Bus,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2016. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/30/world/middleeast/once-propelled-by-hope-for-a-modern-syria-green-buses-now-run-on-tears.html>)

<sup>18</sup> “Eastern Ghouta evacuations: Thousands to be Bused to Idlib,” *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), March 25, 2018. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/25/eastern-ghouta-evacuations-thousands-to-be-bused-to-idlib>)

## B) How Did We Get Here?

The Assad family and its Ba’ath Party have ruled Syria, formally known as the Syrian Arab Republic, since 1970.<sup>19</sup> In 2000, President Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafiz al-Assad.<sup>20</sup> Despite initial steps toward democratic reforms, Assad soon reverted to the authoritarian style of his father’s presidency.<sup>21</sup> Political repression and economic conditions worsened, coming to a head in early 2011 during the Arab Spring. The following timeline describes the events leading up to the current situation in Idlib.

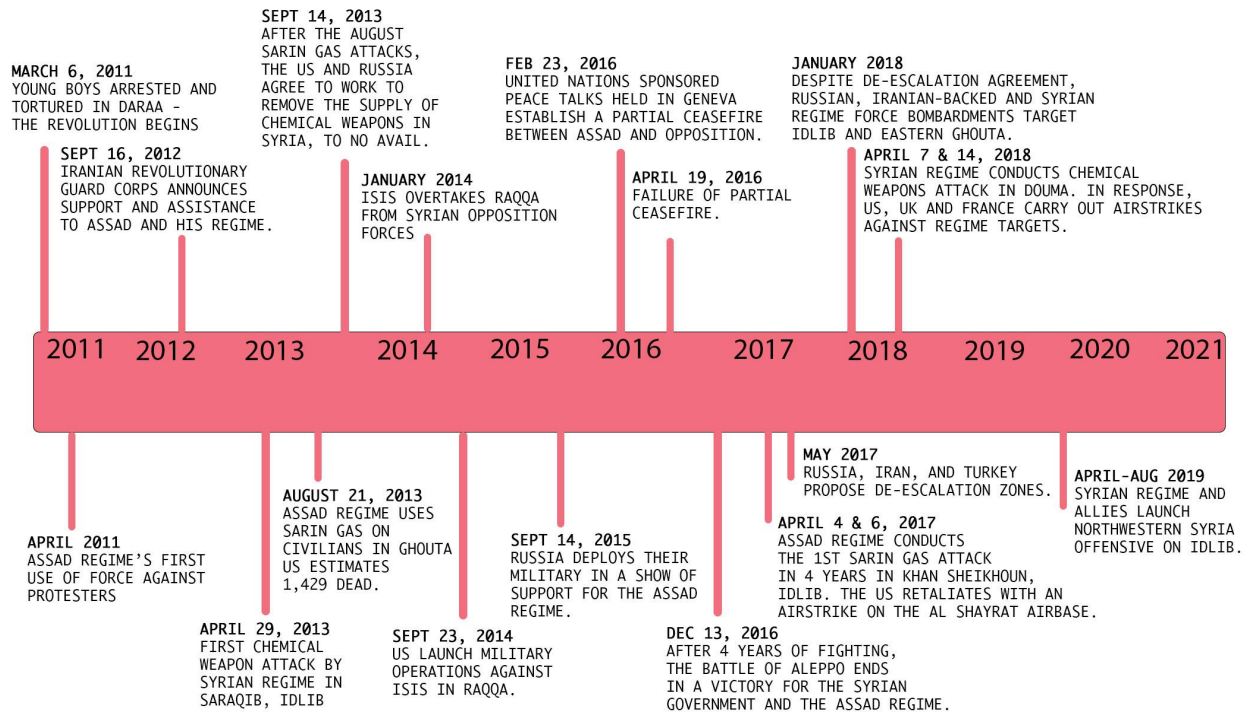


Figure 1: Timeline of Syrian Revolution up to 2019.<sup>22</sup>

For years, the Assad regime has systematically targeted civilians in Idlib—despite several attempted ceasefires and agreements brokered or backed by the United Nations and other nations involved in the conflict (especially Russia and Turkey). In late 2019, regime forces, backed by

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, “Syria,” *The World Factbook*, February 16, 2021. (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria>)

<sup>20</sup> “Idlib, Syria,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed March 9, 2021. (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Idlib>)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Information used to create the following timeline from: Natalie Kikoler, Janelle Roberts, “Is the Worst Yet to Come?” *Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2018. ([https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Syria\\_Bearing\\_Witness\\_Report\\_031218.pdf](https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Syria_Bearing_Witness_Report_031218.pdf)) ; US Government, Press Release, Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013, August 30, 2013. (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>) ; BBC, “Syria war: What we know about Douma chemical attack” BBC News. July 10, 2018. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43697084>) ; Igor Matveev, “Syria's Territorial Divisions Complicate Reconstruction,” *Al, Al-Monitor*, 23 Aug. 2019. ([www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/russia-syria-reconstruction-challenges.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/russia-syria-reconstruction-challenges.html))



Russia and Russian-backed militias (e.g., Liwa al-Quds)<sup>23</sup> as well as Iran and Iranian-backed militias (e.g., Hezbollah, 42nd Brigade, Liwa Fatemiyoun),<sup>24</sup> resumed their air and ground offensive in Idlib. According to the United Nations, the offensive displaced 900,000 people in Idlib and Aleppo from early December to mid-February, including 500,000 children.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 2: Screenshot of Syria Watch App from February 3rd, 2021.<sup>26</sup>



Fearing a massive influx of refugees across its border, Turkey launched a counterattack against regime forces. Using drones, armored vehicles, and artillery, the Turkish military inflicted heavy losses on regime forces and allied militias, causing the regime offensive to grind to a halt. As a result of this Turkish military pressure, Turkey and Russia negotiated a ceasefire along new frontlines.

Until recently, the ceasefire has largely been holding, albeit with some continued attacks by the Assad regime and allied forces. Though its app Syria Watch, SETF provides real-time reports on ceasefire breaches in Idlib (and across Syria).<sup>27</sup> The recorded attacks range from bombings of towns to sustained missile and artillery barrages as well as ground troop movements. Examples include a Russian airstrike that wounded civilians near Ariha (a town south of Idlib City) on October 31 or shelling by regime forces that left three dead and several injured in Ariha on November 4.<sup>28</sup>

Ceasefire breaches have increased since late 2020. For instance, on February 3 alone, Syria Watch reported seven attacks in Idlib, six of them against civilians.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Document Provided by the Institute for the Study of War.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Faheem, Karim, "As Civilians Suffer in Syria's Idlib Province, Death and Displacement Stalk Aid Workers, Too," *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/as-civilians-suffer-in-syrias-idlib-death-and-displacement-stalk-aid-workers-too/2020/02/19/0a33f3f2-51d0-11ea-87b2-101dc5477dd7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/as-civilians-suffer-in-syrias-idlib-death-and-displacement-stalk-aid-workers-too/2020/02/19/0a33f3f2-51d0-11ea-87b2-101dc5477dd7_story.html))

<sup>26</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, *Syria Watch 1.1*, accessed March 9, 2021. (Available at: (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/syria-watch/id1500814764>))

<sup>27</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, *Syria Watch 1.1*, accessed March 9, 2021. (Available at: (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/syria-watch/id1500814764>))

<sup>28</sup> Syrian Emergency Task Force, *Syria Watch 1.1*, accessed March 9, 2021. (Available at: (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/syria-watch/id1500814764>))

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

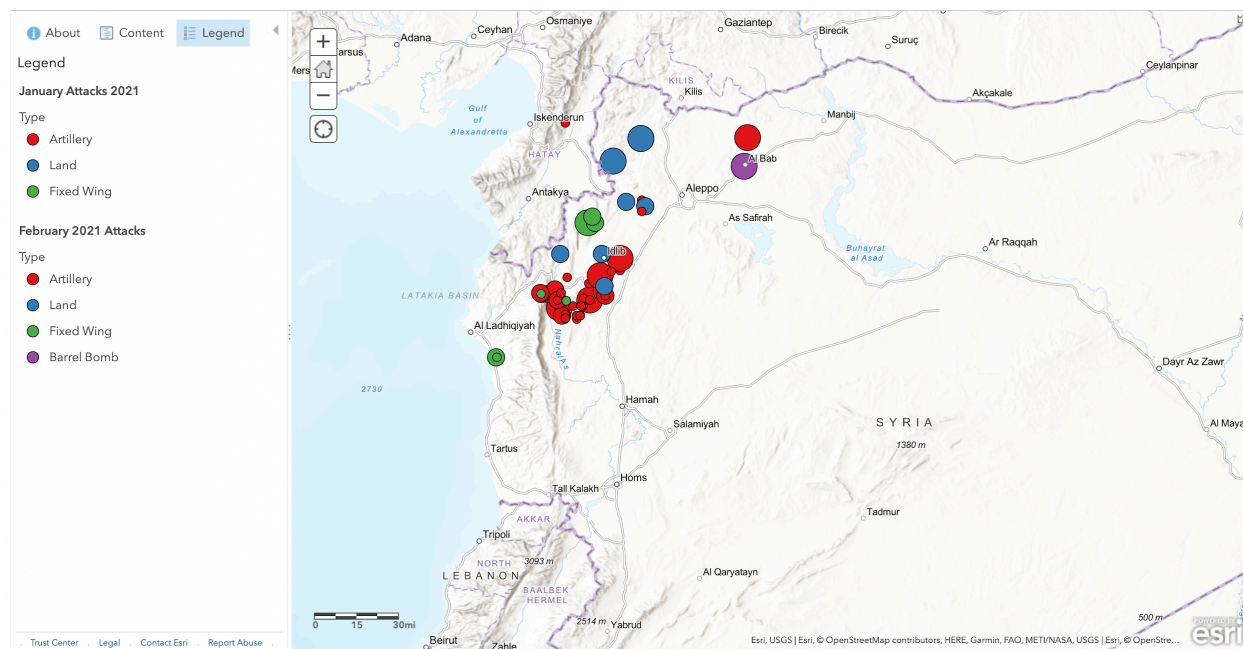


Figure 3: Syrian Civilian Attacks Map<sup>30</sup>

Of the 960,000 civilians in Idlib forced to leave their homes between December 2020 and February 2021,<sup>31</sup> over 80 percent are women and children. Many of the remaining men are elderly, disabled, or members of other at-risk groups.<sup>32</sup> Almost all civilians displaced since late 2019 have been unable to return to their homes. The few who have returned have found their towns “decimated by the latest military offensive, with collapsed infrastructure and limited access to food, water, shelter, education, and health care, including psycho-social (mental health) support,” according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>33</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the crisis. Human Rights Watch warns that “the actual number of cases is likely much higher [than reported] due to limited testing. A further outbreak of the pandemic will exacerbate existing shortages and associated vulnerabilities. Crowded conditions in camps and poor access to basic services make it impossible to properly engage in social distancing or take other health precautions.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> “Syrian Civilian Attacks December 2020–February 2021,” *Syrian Emergency Task Force*, accessed March 9, 2021. (<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=c9c3f157f18445928f57fb95b7cf477e&extent=34.6131,33.7909,39.0626,37.595>)

<sup>31</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Cross-border Humanitarian Response Fact Sheet: North-west Syria,” February 2020. ([bit.ly/2KnZoBS](https://bit.ly/2KnZoBS)); United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria,” *Situation Report No. 10*, March 12, 2020. ([bit.ly/2JIGsbm](https://bit.ly/2JIGsbm)); “Nowhere is safe for us - Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in North-West Syria,” *Amnesty International*, 2020, page 23. (<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420892020ENGLISH.PDF>)

<sup>32</sup> “Nowhere is safe for us - Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in North-West Syria,” *Amnesty International*, 2020, page 23. (<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420892020ENGLISH.PDF>)

<sup>33</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. A Report on Deliberate Civilian Targeting in Idlib

Since 2019, reports of aerial attacks on civilian infrastructure and residential areas in Idlib have significantly increased. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), these attacks peaked in mid-December 2019<sup>35</sup> and included particularly lethal barrel bombs and cluster munitions.<sup>36</sup> On December 18 and 19 alone, OHCHR documented 36 aerial strikes in three populated areas near Jarjanaz, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Kafr Nbul.<sup>37</sup> The Syrian regime and its allies conducted these attacks while advancing along the M5 highway toward the strategic town of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, the site of some of the first peaceful protests in 2011.<sup>38</sup> This aerial strike strategy aims to inflict terror on the civilian population, forcing them to abandon their cities.

OHCHR has specifically highlighted the deliberate targeting of marketplaces and medical facilities in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, estimating that between December 1, 2019, and February 1, 2020, pro-regime forces conducted 433 airstrikes in and around Ma'arrat al-Nu'man alone.<sup>39</sup>

Since 2019, of the approximately 4 million civilians living in Idlib,<sup>40</sup> 1.4 million have fled or been displaced—over a third of the governorate's population.<sup>41</sup>

Human Rights Watch clearly outlines the intent behind the Syrian regime's strategy: "The attacks appear intended to deprive civilians of the means to sustain themselves and to force them to flee, or to instill terror in the population."<sup>42</sup> In the Jabal al-Zawiya

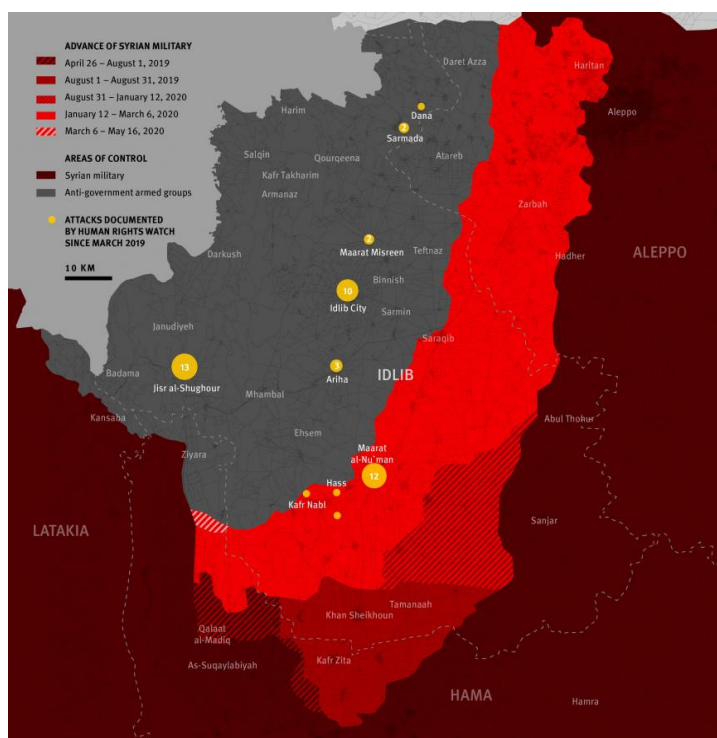


Figure 4: "Targeting Life in Idlib': Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure," Human Rights Watch<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/44/61, July 7, 2020. (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26044&LangID=E>)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Omer Karapsan, "The Internally Displaced in the Middle East and North Africa: Harbingers of Future Conflict?" *The Brookings Institution*, July 5, 2017. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/05/the-internally-displaced-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-harbingers-of-future-conflict>)

<sup>41</sup> "Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure," *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

region of southern Idlib province, residents fled in anticipation of the Assad regime's return to the region. Despite the ceasefire, the Assad regime and Russia continue to conduct air raids on the region's empty villages to prevent civilians from returning to their homes.

International humanitarian law clearly emphasizes that "all parties to a conflict" must "distinguish between civilians and combatants" as well as "between civilian objects and military objects."<sup>43</sup> As such, the deliberate targeting of medical facilities, schools, places of worship, residential areas, and other forms of civilian infrastructure constitute war crimes. In addition, international humanitarian law provides special protections for health care facilities and children.

Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court identifies specific atrocities that qualify as crimes against humanity. These include but are not limited to acts of murder, extermination, torture, deportation, or unlawful imprisonment deliberately executed as part of a state policy of "widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population."<sup>44</sup> The Assad regime has committed all of these violations. In 2020, the United Nations Human Rights Council's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI) accused the regime and Russia of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity by systematically targeting civilian infrastructure.<sup>45</sup>

### **A) Attacks on Educational Facilities**

Throughout Syria, and in Idlib governorate in particular, the Assad regime and its Russian backers have deliberately targeted schools, which are used both for classes and to house internally displaced individuals. The consequences of these attacks are especially great in Idlib because roughly half of the civilian population consists of children under the age of 15.<sup>46</sup> Multiple human rights organizations have documented this pattern of abuse. OHCHR, for example, says that attacks by pro-regime forces damaged 55 educational facilities in Idlib and western Aleppo—Idlib's neighboring governorate—between November 2019 and June 2020.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Amnesty International accuses pro-regime forces of conducting 95 attacks against schools in Idlib, western Aleppo, and the neighboring governorate of Hama between April 30, 2019, and February 29, 2020, including 10 schools attacked on February 25, 2020, resulting in nine civilian deaths.<sup>48</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> "Nowhere is safe for us - Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in North-West Syria," *Amnesty International*, 2020, page 23. (<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420892020ENGLISH.PDF>)

<sup>44</sup> United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, "Crimes Against Humanity," accessed December 23, 2020. (<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.shtml>)

<sup>45</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/44/61, 15 June- 3 July 2020; "Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure," *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>46</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic," A/HRC/44/61, July 7, 2020. (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26044&LangID=E>)

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> "Nowhere is safe for us - Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in North-West Syria," *Amnesty International*, 2020, page 23. (<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420892020ENGLISH.PDF>)

organization added that “the number of injuries from fragmentation and collapsed structures were magnified by the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to causing student and teacher casualties, these attacks have forced many schools to shut down permanently or temporarily, disrupting education for extended periods of time. For instance, Human Rights Watch has documented that attacks on 10 schools in Idlib, including one preschool, “denied at least 4,733 children access to schooling, at least temporarily.”<sup>50</sup>

Witness testimonies collected by SETF speak to the horrors of these attacks. Moumena, a local schoolteacher in Idlib, describes a January 2018 attack on her village outside of Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān that forced the teachers to flee with their students: “We had to leave our village after 67 airstrikes hit our tiny town and the towns around us, back in January of 2018.”<sup>51</sup> She and other civilian victims, children and adults alike, continue to suffer from the regime’s brutality:

There hasn’t been a normal day for us. By normal I mean days like the ones before the war. Before the war, the kids were always happy; they worried only about their studies, playing, and field trips. But now with the shadow of the war over us, anytime a plane flies overhead, it is terrifying. We constantly hear the bombardments, shelling, and airstrikes around us. A good day for the kids is when they don’t hear an airplane, or they don’t hear a bombardment; that makes them happy. Every day, from when the school opened until today, we have not had a day without hearing some explosion or plane fly over.<sup>52</sup>

Another teacher, Khansaa, explains that her school had to relocate several times for safety reasons. On one occasion, they had to choose an underground location on the outskirts of Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān, as the city’s center was a target for pro-regime forces seeking to maximize civilian casualties.

We chose a location that was on the outskirts of our town. The fact is that the Assad regime and its allies target the center of our town regularly. I think they want to have as many casualties as possible when they do target our areas and that’s why they choose the center of towns. And so we wanted [the school], first of all, to be on the outskirts of the town in the hopes that it would be safer for the children. [We also chose an] underground basement ... under a building that has multiple stories... And so ... the location itself [was] actually sort of a bunker.<sup>53</sup>

A photographer in Hass, a city in the Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān district of Idlib, describes a “double-tap” attack that targeted an area with three schools located in very close proximity to one another. The “double-tap” is a tactic pro-regime forces use to deliberately target civilians: after an initial

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<sup>49</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Olivia Stephens with Colette Mazzucelli and Mouaz Moustafa, “The Wisdom House: Principal Moumena and Ms. Khansaa Speak,” *Global Connections: Syrian Hidden Voices*, Episode 4, March 1, 2021.

(<https://open.spotify.com/episode/03jiOeAaZlihk9VpDMxH7N?si=Y3UJkcMjRGOrgLoXSGcDkA&nd=1>)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

aerial attack on an area, the regime waits for first responders and bystanders to come help the victims, then conducts a second attack on the exact same location. The photographer said,

One day, in the morning, I was near the town of Hass fixing my car. We heard the sound of a plane in the air and then the sound of a powerful explosion, it was 2 km away. I took my camera out and pointed towards the airplane and began to film and as usual we began to understand that military airplanes will often bomb a location multiple times usually four separate strikes and the location being targeted unfortunately was a group of schools in a southern neighborhood of the town of Hass. After the plane finished its airstrikes, I headed directly to the targeted area, as soon as I reached the location, another plane came targeting the same place. I tried to give first aid to those I found on the ground and then we ran as far away from the location as we could. The second plane conducted three airstrikes culminating in seven airstrikes from the Assad regimes' military planes, Sukhoi 22s. We returned to the area of the airstrikes and it was a catastrophe. Parts of bodies of schoolchildren laid all around. Many civilians had gone to the location after the first airstrike to check on their kids and became victims. There was large destruction of three schools and buildings. We as civilians documented what happened in the location and I was able to document multiple airstrikes. The type of the airstrikes was a parachute carrying an explosive missile which it released on the locations. I documented the deaths of 36 civilians, between them were 17 school boys and girls and a teacher and a doctor, among other civilians. I documented 116 other wounded civilians, mostly students.<sup>54</sup>

## **B) Attacks on Residential Areas and Markets**

The Syrian regime and its allies have focused their aerial and ground attacks on populated city centers to increase casualties and instill terror. This strategy aims to force civilians to flee their homes, leaving behind empty cities for the regime to take over. Airstrikes deliberately targeting densely populated residential areas increase the injuries and deaths caused by collapsed buildings and shelling fragments.<sup>55</sup> This is especially common with the use of cluster and barrel bombs. Civilian centers targeted by pro-regime forces include populated markets, places of worship, prisons, offices of nongovernmental organizations, and IDP camps.

According to Human Rights Watch, most attacks in Idlib occurred near “four main population centers: Ariha, Idlib city, Jisr al-Shughour, and Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān.” The organization also documented attacks on IDP camps near Dana, Hass, and Sarmada. Over an 11-month period between April 2019 and March 2020, Human Rights Watch documented “46 strikes [that] killed at least 224 civilians and wounded 561 others.”<sup>56</sup> The Syrian Network for Human Rights also

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<sup>54</sup> WhatsApp interview with a witness from Kafr Nabl, December 17, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

recorded “at least 882 attacks in and around Idlib on civilian infrastructure” from April 2019 to May 2020. Targets included “220 places of worship, 218 educational facilities, 93 healthcare facilities, 86 Syrian Civil Defense (SDC) centers, and 52 markets.”<sup>57</sup>

Syrian regime forces and their Russian allies continue to conduct “double-tap” air strikes. A resident from Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān describes below the first “double-tap” attack on his hometown on September 10, 2012, targeting Bilal mosque. The initial strike killed eight individuals, and the second strike, conducted 10 minutes later to target first responders, killed 22 more. The resident, whose witness testimony was confirmed by video footage, said,

“The first double-tap attack I witnessed in Ma’arrat al-Numan was the airstrike that hit Bilal mosque, a mosque in the southwest of Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān city. It was at night I believe. [...] The first [attack occurred] within less than 60 seconds was the second strike at the same location.”<sup>58</sup>

The following testimonies collected by SETF depict the regime and its Russian backers’ relentless, deliberate attacks against densely populated city centers. These attacks have rendered daily life nearly impossible. Moumena, an Idlib schoolteacher, describes a series of Syrian and Russian airstrikes on her town of al-Ghadfa, which is located in the eastern countryside of Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān and is now under government control.

The Russian air force started at the beginning [by] throwing cluster bombs and huge missiles on our town and the villages surrounding us. Then the regime of Bashar al-Assad started dropping barrel bombs all over. We lived 10 or 12 days under consistent bombardment by military airplanes and helicopters. And we were at that time in communication with the Turkish checkpoints. They were trying to comfort the people by saying that the regime’s army would not advance on the ground to Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān and its countryside. We would stay in the basements in hiding, hoping that we could then remain in our villages and not be displaced from our homes, but the campaign only intensified, with the constant presence of military aircraft overhead. They would come out from about 7:30 in the morning and would continue their attacks over our village until 8:00 pm at night. And the situation became worse and worse. Women and children couldn’t handle being in this situation and watching the horrific bombardment of their village. So we had no other choice than to leave our home. We left our homes in al-Ghadfa for the last time in January 2020.<sup>59</sup>

Another witness from Kafr Nbul describes an attack by the Assad regime that deliberately targeted residential areas in Kafr Nbul that included a popular market and several schools.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> WhatsApp interview with a witness from Ma’arrat al-Numan, December 14, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Olivia Stephens with Colette Mazzucelli and Mouaz Moustafa, “The Wisdom House: Principal Moumena and Ms. Khansaa Speak,” *Global Connections: Syrian Hidden Voices*, Episode 4, March 1, 2021. (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/03jiOeAaZlihk9VpDMxH7N?si=Y3UJkcMjRGOrgLoXSGcDkA&nd=1>)

I was in Kafr Nbul when we heard the sound of military airplanes and as usual when we hear a plane overhead not even a second goes by before we hear the sound of a powerful explosion. I felt that it was very close. I went to the roof of our house and I didn't know where the location of the explosion was. Then I saw that it was about 800 meters away (almost half a mile) in an area where some of my family lives. It's also where the market is. At this time, I didn't think at all that the plane would return and strike once again in the same location. I took my camera and ran to the location of the airstrike. I began to film and search among the wounded for my relatives and friends, ensuring my family was ok, as the cars were burning, and the dust was all over the place. No one could see anyone else. While I was at the location the plane returned but struck another neighborhood in the same town of Kafr Nbul. I wasn't scared because there were so many wounded people and so many people inside a bus burning. The plane struck on that day five separate times from a military plane type 24 of the Assad regime's airfare. We transferred the dead and the wounded, and nobody remained in the place except for the blood, the smoke, and the blackness. I was standing on a metal door that was laying on top of the rubble, when one of the civilians starts running and tells me "...under the door you're standing on is a body." I wasn't paying attention at all, I put my camera around my neck and lifted the metal door, while all the people ran towards me to pick up the body. I couldn't take the smell of blood and fire, so I backed up a little bit and held up my camera to document them picking up the body from under the rubble and was shocked to see through the screen of the camera that the body was my uncle, my father's brother - his grey hair, his blue eyes. At that moment I did not know what to do. I put my camera back around my neck and carried my uncle back to his home. On that day I documented 22 civilians killed, between them was a lady that was 70 years old, and I documented approximately 48 wounded. On that day, I lost my uncle, filmed him on my own camera and didn't even recognize him.<sup>60</sup>

### **C) Deliberate Attacks on Medical Facilities**

The Syrian regime and Russian forces continue to systematically target healthcare facilities. International humanitarian law requires special protections for medical personnel and institutions to ensure the proper functioning of healthcare during a conflict.<sup>61</sup> According to Dr. Zaher Sahloul, senior advisor of the Syrian American Medical Society and founder of American Relief Coalition for Syria:

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<sup>60</sup> WhatsApp interview with a witness from Kafr Nabl, December 17, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> "Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure," *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)



There are shortages of healthcare in Syria compared to the rest of the world. Idlib has the lowest percentage of physicians and midwives per population, as well as proper healthcare equipment.<sup>62</sup>

In April 2019, attacks on healthcare facilities in Idlib by the Assad regime and allies surged. The organization Physicians for Human Rights documented 40 attacks on medical facilities in northern Hama, Idlib, and western Aleppo between April 2019 and February 2020,<sup>63</sup> 24 of which occurred in Idlib.<sup>64</sup> Amnesty International reported that many of the medical facilities targeted were on a “deconfliction” list the United Nations had previously shared with Russian, Turkish, and U.S.-led coalition forces in Syria to highlight sites where attacks were prohibited. Amnesty International and the Idlib Health Directorate further reported that “Syrian or Russian attacks damaged or destroyed 10 medical facilities in Idlib and Aleppo between December 2019 and February 2020.”<sup>65</sup> The United Nations and Syrian medical organizations have reported that at least 15 hospitals have been damaged or destroyed in Idlib and Hama since the beginning of May 2019.<sup>66</sup> The attacks have forced at least 16 humanitarian organizations to suspend operations in Idlib, amplifying the number of displaced persons—now counting 1.4 million people—in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>67</sup>

In an interview with SETF, Dr. Zaher Sahloul, described the Syrian and Russian practice of targeting on healthcare facilities in Idlib:

Bombing hospitals is the best way to get people to leave. We hear explosions every few minutes and are used to it, but if they do not have a clinic or way to take care of family they are forced to leave, and the regime knows that. In Idlib during the last wave of bombings, there [were] 67 hospitals bombed, some multiple times. Some were deconflicted, meaning the secure locations were shared by NGOs to the UN, but they were still bombed. This is a very effective tactic that has shown to be successful.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, Sahloul explained that a rise in COVID-19 cases in recent months has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis:

There have been 12,000 official cases and between 400–450 deaths. The testing rate is about 50 percent, but most cases are being missed due to poor access to

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<sup>62</sup> Phone interview with Dr. Zaher Sahloul, president of MedGlobal, senior advisor of the Syrian American Medical Society, and founder of American Relief Coalition for Syria, December 22, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> “Physicians for Human Rights’ Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria,” *Physicians for Human Rights*, February 2020. (<https://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/findings>)

<sup>64</sup> “Illegal Attacks on Health Care in Syria,” *Physicians for Human Rights*, accessed March 9, 2021. (<https://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/attacks/563>)

<sup>65</sup> “Nowhere is safe for us - Unlawful attacks and mass displacement in North-West Syria,” *Amnesty International*, 2020, page 23. (<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2420892020ENGLISH.PDF>)

<sup>66</sup> “Syria: Security Council must address crimes against humanity in Idlib,” *Amnesty International*, May 17, 2019. (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/syria-security-council-must-address-crimes-against-humanity-in-idlib>)

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Phone interview with Dr. Zaher Sahloul, president of MedGlobal, senior advisor of the Syrian American Medical Society and founder of American Relief Coalition for Syria, December 22, 2020.

information and healthcare. Physicians think the number is about 10 percent [of the population] in terms of infection. There is an overcrowding in camps, which makes them more prone, but ... this overcrowding ... has created immunity to other viruses. The [officially reported] numbers of COVID [infections] are much lower than [the] real numbers, and the [reported] deaths are [lower than] expected. 80 percent of healthcare facilities are full of COVID patients. There are about 223 ventilators total in the Idlib governorate. There is a shortage of ICU beds and doctors compared to developed countries and other parts of Syria. There have been senior physician deaths due to COVID, which has added to the gravity of the situation, as they are very hard to replace. There is a shortage of oxygen in Idlib; they do not have that luxury, so we have been distributing oxygen concentrators to be used in Darkoush and in Idlib City. In terms of livelihood, a lockdown and social distancing [are] difficult to enforce, as there are over 1.4 million people who live in over 1,270 IDP camps. People cannot afford not to work.<sup>69</sup>

#### **D) Types of Weaponry Used by the Syrian Regime When Targeting Civilians**

The Assad regime and its allies utilize several different types of weapons against civilians. These include internationally banned munitions, chemical weapons, and conventional weaponry. According to a report published by Human Rights Watch in early 2020,

Explosive weapons used in Idlib included bombs, rockets, and artillery. Three of the attacks Human Rights Watch documented on or near schools involved cluster munitions, which have widespread indiscriminate effects and pose a long-term danger to civilians. Cluster munitions typically release or disperse dozens or even hundreds of small submunitions in the air over an area the size of a football field. Many submunitions may fail to explode on initial impact, leaving remnants that act like landmines. The widely accepted Convention on Cluster Munitions bans cluster munitions; it has been joined by 121 states, although not Syria or Russia.<sup>70</sup>

The same report suggests that since April 2019, the Assad regime and Russian forces have conducted attacks in Idlib province using “30 cluster munitions, at least 21 incendiary weapons, 9 missiles, and nearly 5,000 ‘barrel bombs.’”<sup>71</sup> Cluster munitions are a form of air-dropped or ground-launched explosive weapon that releases or ejects smaller munitions; barrel bombs are improvised, unguided bombs, often described as flying improvised explosive devices. The Armed Conflict Location and Data Project has documented a total of 17,156 “events”—defined as including battles, explosions and remote violence, violence against civilians, and riots—and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

13,658 fatalities in Idlib province since 2017, with explosions and remote violence peaking in 2019. The Syrian regime and its allies perpetrated 11,467 of these events.<sup>72</sup>

Over the years, these attacks have killed, wounded, or displaced millions of Syrians. The Syrian people live in constant fear and agony as they await the next attack and grapple with their memories of previous ones. An Idlib schoolteacher interviewed by SETF recalls:

If you could only hear the airplanes as they are about to shoot their missiles, your heart would drop out of your chest just out of fear of the sound. It's terrifying. How can anyone not be afraid if they hear the sound of an airplane getting closer and louder? When it launches its missiles, it is as if it is coming directly to where you are sitting. And there's nothing for you to do. You can do nothing except find a wall and put your back to it or wait by a strong foundation in the house that you are in. And make your last prayers and pray to God for help. But what's worse is whenever you see the helicopter dropping an explosive barrel bomb, you see it as if it's coming right at you. You see it falling down on top of your head, and you hear a loud whistling noise as it's going through the air. It's truly terrifying. It's probably more terrifying than when it explodes, and then you see the huge explosion. You see the dirt and the smoke completely surrounding you from every direction, and you have nothing to do except ask and call around, "Where's my father? Where's my mother? Where are my brothers or sisters? Where is my husband? Where's my uncle?" The only thing that comes to mind is all the things that are most dear to your heart—the things that you love the most. These are all horrific situations to have lived in.<sup>73</sup>

The Assad regime has also used chemical weapons against civilians hundreds of times, including in Idlib. In March 2013, the regime carried out its first ever chemical weapons attack in Idlib using sarin gas. In 2015, government forces used chlorine gas 58 times in a protracted offensive in Idlib,<sup>74</sup> making no attempt to disguise their actions. In April 2017, the regime attacked Khan Shaykhoun (in southern Idlib) with sarin gas, prompting U.S. missile strikes against a government-held airbase. The United States also alleged that the Assad regime again used chlorine gas in Idlib in 2019.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> "Country View: Syria: From: 15/03/2017 To: 26/02/2021; Event types: Battles, Violence against civilians, Explosions/Remote violence, Riots," *Armed Conflict Location and Data Project*, accessed March 4, 2021. (<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>)

<sup>73</sup> Olivia Stephens with Colette Mazzucelli and Mouaz Moustafa, "The Wisdom House: Principal Moumena and Ms. Khansaa Speak," *Global Connections: Syrian Hidden Voices*, Episode 4, March 1, 2021. (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/03jiOeAaZlihk9VpDMxH7N?si=Y3UJkcMjRGOrgLoXSGcDkA&nd=1>)

<sup>74</sup> "Nowhere to Hide: the Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria," *Global Public Policy Institute*, February 2019. ([https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPi\\_Schneider\\_Luetkefend\\_2019\\_Nowhere\\_to\\_Hide\\_Web.pdf](https://www.gppi.net/media/GPPi_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf))

<sup>75</sup> State Department Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus, U.S. Embassy in Syria, Press Statement, "Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons by the Assad Regime in Northwest Syria," May 21, 2019. (<https://sy.usembassy.gov/alleged-use-of-chemical-weapons-by-the-assad-regime-in-northwest-syria>)

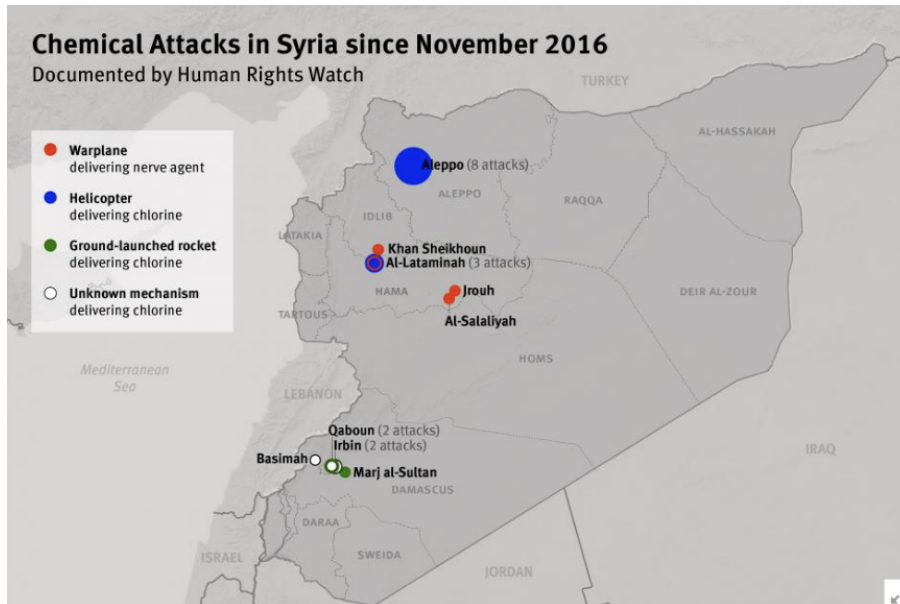


Figure 5: “Death by Chemicals. The Syrian Government’s Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons,” *Human Rights Watch*<sup>76</sup>

The use of chemical weapons is prohibited both by the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 (CWC) and by customary international law.<sup>77</sup> Syria acceded to the treaty in 2013 and is thus bound by its provisions. In international law, accession to a treaty has the same legal effect as ratification, since accession usually occurs when a treaty enters into force in the state in question.<sup>78</sup> The CWC prohibits the use of chemical weapons in any armed conflict and allows no reservations to its provisions, meaning that states who accede accept the convention in its entirety and are bound by all its provisions. Chemical weapons attacks are also considered war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998.<sup>79</sup> Syria is not a party to that treaty but can be held accountable if referred to the court by the UN Security Council or by a neighboring country impacted by the conflict.

<sup>76</sup> “Death by Chemicals. The Syrian Government’s Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons,” *Human Rights Watch*, May 1, 2017. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/01/death-chemicals/syrian-governments-widespread-and-systematic-use-chemical-weapons>)

<sup>77</sup> Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons, Paris, January 13, 1993; “Practice Relating to Rule 74 Chemical Weapons,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, accessed March 9, 2021. ([https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2\\_rul\\_rule74](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule74))

<sup>78</sup> Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, Articles 2(1)(b)–15.

<sup>79</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8(2)(b)(viii–xiv).

## E) Mass Displacement

Deliberate targeting of civilians has left over 6.1 million people in Syria internally displaced,<sup>80</sup> including 1.4 million people in Idlib alone.<sup>81</sup> According to the United Nations, “more than 500,000 children have been displaced due to the escalation of violence in northwest Syria since December 2019, leaving children and families living in tents amid very cold temperatures and rain.”<sup>82</sup> That figure includes at least 299 civilians killed since 2020, at least 77 of them children.<sup>83</sup> Pro-regime forces have also targeted the IDP camps hosting these forcefully displaced persons. Human Rights Watch has documented 10 “attacks on residential areas and displacement camps in Ariha, Idlib city, Ma’arrat al-Nu`man, and Ma’arrat Misreen, and four camps ... in Dana, Hass, and Sarmada,” resulting in at least 91 civilian deaths and at least 221 civilians wounded.<sup>84</sup> Displaced persons interviewed by Human Rights Watch say their main reason for fleeing their homes is the repeated use of explosive weapons by Syrian and Russian forces.<sup>85</sup>

SETF has conducted several interviews with displaced Syrians, one of whom described her experience with displacement:

When we left our village, our souls remained in it. We could not eat or drink for about two days as we traveled, and we couldn’t even do it if we wanted to. How could we? When it is the homes that we lived all of our lives in—where we laughed and where we were happy...

We came to the western countryside of Aleppo. All of the sudden, the regime started yet another battle in western Aleppo province. The same scenario started all over again: barrel bombs dropping, cluster bombs, missiles, terrorism, and fear. When the shelling and the bombardment started in the western countryside of Aleppo where we had been displaced, we got all of our stuff and we once again had to be displaced. We went towards the northern countryside of Aleppo near Azaz, close to the border with Turkey. Here, we suffer from the lack of homes, or housing, or a roof to stay under. Imagine, the western countryside of Aleppo and the countryside of Idlib. The vast majority of the people displaced by the regime from

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<sup>80</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs with Humanitarian Response and Humanitarian InSight, “Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic,” December 30, 2020. ([https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020\\_syria\\_humanitarian\\_response\\_plan.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020_syria_humanitarian_response_plan.pdf))

<sup>81</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>82</sup> United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, Press Release, “Over Half a Million Children in Northwest Syria forced to flee amid Continued Violence and Harsh Weather,” February 18, 2020.

(<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/over-half-million-children-northwest-syria-forced-flee-amid-continued-violence-and>)

<sup>83</sup> Karim Faheem, “As civilians suffer in Syria’s Idlib province, death and displacement stalk aid workers, too,” *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2020. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/as-civilians-suffer-in-syrias-idlib-death-and-displacement-stalk-aid-workers-too/2020/02/19/0a33f3f2-51d0-11ea-87b2-101dc5477dd7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/as-civilians-suffer-in-syrias-idlib-death-and-displacement-stalk-aid-workers-too/2020/02/19/0a33f3f2-51d0-11ea-87b2-101dc5477dd7_story.html))

<sup>84</sup> “Targeting Life in Idlib - Syrian and Russian strikes on civilian infrastructure,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2020. (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

all over Syria are here now in these areas. Alongside us are the displaced from Homs and Hama and Damascus countryside and Daraa. All of us are now here in this area. Imagine that we stay with more than seven families in a home that is essentially two rooms. Twenty-four people in these two rooms. The first room is about 4 meters by 5 meters and the second room is 3 meters by 4 meters, without electricity. God is our only help.”<sup>86</sup>

Since 2016, SETF’s Wisdom House school in Idlib has provided education for hundreds of students, mostly orphans displaced by the war. The following timeline outlines the multiple forced displacements suffered by Wisdom House and its community.



Figure 6: Timeline of the Wisdom House's Displacement<sup>87</sup>

A Syrian schoolteacher also describes her take on displacement in a testimony explaining how Assad forces justify taking control of villages.

<sup>86</sup> Olivia Stephens with Colette Mazzucelli and Mouaz Moustafa, “The Wisdom House: Principal Moumena and Ms. Khansaa Speak,” *Global Connections: Syrian Hidden Voices*, Episode 4, March 1, 2021. (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/03jiOeAaZlihk9VpDMxH7N?si=Y3UJkcMjRGOrgLoXSGcDkA&nd=1>)

<sup>87</sup> Timeline by the Syrian Emergency Task Force.

Who are the people that you liberated from the terrorists? You're standing in front of homes that you've completely destroyed and you know civilians have been killed and forced out of their homes and then, there's a ghost town now occupied as military posts.

And so, this said victory by the regime and its allies is really just the displacement, killing the tension, and destruction of Syria, the burning of the country. When we look at our town, they stole and looted everything out of our homes, nothing is left. Even when it came to the metal that's inside the foundation of our homes, they stripped the roofs off and they took the metal. This is their victory - the complete destruction of the country.<sup>88</sup>

Dr. Zaher Sahloul, the aforementioned Syrian doctor, describes displacement like this:

I went to a camp and met a family from Hama, where they were displaced seven times before reaching Idlib. Young people who cannot leave to other countries and who do not want to be drafted into the regime military end up in Idlib. Over 75 percent of displaced people are women and children.<sup>89</sup>

Yet Sahloul explains that the people in Idlib remain resilient despite the circumstances.

People are resilient and strong despite the situation—building malls, creating civil societies, universities. A class just graduated from medical school a few weeks ago. Civilians are doing well in spite of everything, especially if they are given new opportunities. About 200 kids from a camp in Idlib are still going to school, walking an hour and half in the cold.”<sup>90</sup>

### **III. The Importance of Idlib**

#### **A) Highest Risk of Mass Atrocities**

Idlib is at extreme risk of becoming Syria's next humanitarian tragedy, potentially dwarfing the mass atrocities already committed by Assad.

With the Idlib-Turkish border sealed off and regime, Russian, and Iranian-backed forces continuing to bomb civilian targets, Idlib's opposition-controlled territory continues to shrink. The Assad regime aims to displace, detain or kill the Idlib province's population. Which the regime

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Phone interview with Dr. Zaher Sahloul, president of MedGlobal, senior advisor of the Syrian American Medical Society, and founder of American Relief Coalition for Syria, December 22, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

sees as the last obstacle to a full military victory in Syria. Since late 2019, the Assad regime and its allies have systematically emptied towns and communities, pushing farther into the province. From December to February 2020, the regime's military forcibly displaced over 500,000 people from Idlib.<sup>91</sup> Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues Stephen Rapp emphasizes that

even during a ceasefire, the Syrian regime continues its campaign of atrocities against the people of Idlib, committing the war crimes of indiscriminate bombardment, targeted attacks on hospitals and medical personnel, use of poisonous gases, and deprivation of objects necessary to the survival of the civilian population.<sup>92</sup>

The gravity of the crisis in Idlib is reminiscent of some of recent history's worst tragedies that sparked international action to protect civilians. Indeed, the potential human toll in Idlib exceeds that of Srebrenica and the entire Bosnian Genocide. By failing to address this crisis, the international community is repeating failures of the past.

The international community, led by the United States, must stand up to Assad and his backers to avert further suffering by the Syrian people. If Idlib falls, Assad's power will be solidified. Any hope of over 11 million displaced Syrians<sup>93</sup> ever returning home would be effectively extinguished. Standing up for Idlib is also crucial to give a measure of hope to the Syrian people and protect the over 1 million children in the province.<sup>94</sup>

## **B) Risks to U.S. Interests**

The crisis in Idlib poses grave threats to the national security of the United States and its allies, including the potential for direct conflict between Turkey (a NATO ally) and Russia.

First, a renewed military offensive in Idlib will almost certainly result in a largescale exodus. Facing death or imprisonment, Idlib's civilian population will flee en masse, potentially doubling the number of refugees in Europe. This mass displacement could trigger populist backlash in Europe detrimental to transatlantic interests. A regime victory in Idlib would eliminate any hope for refugees in the region and Europe to ever return home.

Second, an Assad military offensive, coupled with inaction from the international community, could empower violent extremist organizations (VEOs) such as the Islamic State (IS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). These organizations could exploit the instability and Western inaction to feed their propaganda and disinformation campaigns and enhance their recruitment efforts. The

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<sup>91</sup> "UN: Northwest Syria fighting displaces over 500,000 in 2 months," *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), February 4, 2020. (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/4/un-northwest-syria-fighting-displaces-over-500000-in-2-months>)

<sup>92</sup> Virtual interview with former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues Stephen Rapp, February 18, 2021.

<sup>93</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, "Syria," *The World Factbook*, February 16, 2021. (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria>); "Idlib, Syria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed January 15, 2021. (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Idlib>)

<sup>94</sup> United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, "An estimated 1 million children across Idlib are at risk," September 9, 2018. (<https://www.unicef.org/mena/stories/estimated-1-million-children-across-idlib-are-risk>)



United States would do well to remember that although the IS territorial caliphate has been dismantled, battlefield victories do not last unless followed by efforts to ensure stability and rebuild communities.<sup>95</sup>

With Idlib continually under siege from the Assad regime, local civilians have struggled to push back against VEOs. HTS, an extremist organization formed in 2017, has exploited the weakened local governance to take control over much of Idlib.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, throughout 2019 and 2020, there have been at least 40 anti-HTS protests in Idlib.<sup>97</sup> These protests, held despite violent crackdowns by HTS, demonstrate that the local population is willing to stand up to VEOs. By pushing for a cessation of military operations against civilians in Idlib and empowering civil society organizations and local governance, the United States and its allies can help local populations counter and ultimately eliminate VEOs.

Third, if Idlib is taken, the Assad regime and its Russians and Iranian backers will be free to focus their attention and resources on areas in northeast Syria under the control of the United States and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This includes the U.S. garrison at al-Tanf, which sits astride a major artery Iran could otherwise use to funnel men and materiel to Hezbollah. Iran and the Assad regime would also likely fuel further tensions between Arabs and Kurds in Deir ez-Zor. Attacks by regime and Iranian-backed forces against the international coalition and local partners across the northeast would likely increase. Intensified military operations by pro-regime forces and encroachment by Iranian-backed militias would further destabilize northeast Syria, creating a ripe environment for an IS resurgence.

Finally, the fall of Idlib would make it harder to reach a negotiated settlement to the war. The United States and the Syrian opposition would have less bargaining power vis-a-vis the Assad regime and Russia. Having taken Idlib, the Assad regime and its allies would then be able to declare a military victory. The Assad regime and Russia would likely then ramp up pressure on U.S. troops to withdraw, allowing the regime to gain full territorial control. The United States would lose its leverage to pursue its policy goals, including a political solution to the Syrian conflict and the full implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254 which calls for a ceasefire and political transition.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> David Adesnik and LTC Robert L. Green, “America’s Small but Effective Presence in Syria,” *Defending Forward: Securing America by Projecting Military Power Abroad*, December 15, 2020. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/12/15/defending-forward-americas-small-but-effective-presence-in-syria>)

<sup>96</sup> “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>); virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Information documented by key influencers on the ground, January 20, 2021. The sources wish to remain anonymous to protect their safety.

<sup>98</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

#### IV. Past Mistakes to Avoid

During the past two administrations, the United States lacked a clear strategy for resolving the conflict in Syria. Absent U.S. leadership has not only left civilians vulnerable to mass atrocities, but has also created opportunities for the Assad regime and its allies to increase their influence and involvement in the war, with decreasing engagement from U.S. allies. Cutting off funds for civilian programming shows a lack of U.S. commitment to Syria. Under the Trump administration, the United States cut stabilization aid that previously helped empower local and civil governance in northwestern Syria. Cutting aid in a region where Syrians already face an increasing threat of violence from the Assad regime and allies presented VEOs such as HTS with additional room to exploit weak local governance. Weak local governance, exacerbated by a lack of international funding and support, is precisely what allowed IS to seize Raqqa and other Syrian governorates in 2014.<sup>99</sup> Inaction under both the Obama and the Trump administrations gave the Assad regime and its backers a free hand to inflict atrocities that caused mass migration into Europe.

Stronger U.S. leadership in Syria could have helped prevent or at least lessen one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. The Obama administration's failure to enforce its red line regarding chemical weapons allowed the Assad regime to continue using these weapons and emboldened the Russians to launch their military intervention in 2015. While the Trump administration conducted missile strikes in 2017 and 2018 in response to Syrian chemical weapons use, the State Department reports that the regime continues to produce materials for chemical weapons.<sup>100</sup> U.S. disengagement from UN-led diplomacy on Syria has weakened international efforts to hold the regime accountable for its chemical weapons use and other atrocities.

#### V. Policy Recommendations

- 1) **The United States must pursue and strengthen efforts for the immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib's civilian population.**<sup>101</sup> The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies continue to escalate military operations in Idlib, including by deliberately targeting civilians—a war crime and crime against humanity. Aside from Turkish efforts, aerial attacks by Russian and Syrian forces have gone unchallenged. The United States must act to stop the further slaughter and forced displacement of civilians in Idlib. The current precarious ceasefire in Idlib was made possible by Turkey's military action against regime and Iranian-backed forces including Hezbollah in northwest Syria. That action stalled further atrocities and mass displacement. The United States must work to support its NATO ally on the ground through logistical, intelligence, and diplomatic coordination. Through these efforts, coupled with continued economic sanctions under the Caesar Act, the United

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<sup>99</sup> "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>)

<sup>100</sup> David Adesnik, "Syria," *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>101</sup> Virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice President at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

States can help protect Idlib without direct U.S. military intervention. Protecting Idlib is conducive to a negotiated settlement and bolsters U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

2) **The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts in Geneva.**<sup>102</sup> The United States must push for the advancement of UNSCR 2254, which calls for “an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.”<sup>103</sup> The United States, as a significant donor to humanitarian aid in Syria, must use its diplomatic efforts to hold the United Nations accountable for ensuring the safe and adequate delivery of humanitarian aid to the region. Specifically, Washington must sway Russia and China to extend the UN authorization for cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing currently authorized for humanitarian aid. This authorization is set to expire in July 2021.<sup>104</sup> Washington should also push Russia and China to reopen the three border crossings that previously carried cross-border aid but were closed at Russia’s behest: Al-Rathma and Al-Yaroubiyah, which have been closed since January 2020,<sup>105</sup> and Bab al-Salam, which has been closed since July 2020.<sup>106</sup> (See Figure 7<sup>107</sup>)



Figure 7: “August 2020 Monthly Forecast,” *Security Council Report*

Furthermore, the United States must develop a diplomatic strategy to achieve the full implementation of UNSCR 2254.<sup>108</sup> The United States must reaffirm and emphasize its commitment to a red line regarding the use of chemical weapons. Washington should use its influence to push the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to suspend the Syrian regime’s rights and privileges to holding the regime accountable for using chemical weapons against its

<sup>102</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>103</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015. ([https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF99B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF99B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf))

<sup>104</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>105</sup> United Nations, Meeting Coverage SC/14127, “Greater Cross-Border, Cross-Line Access Needed for Assistance to Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council,” February 27, 2020. (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14127.doc.htm>)

<sup>106</sup> United Nations, *Press Release SC/14268*, “Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council,” 29 July 2020, (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14268.doc.htm>); Jacob Kurtzer and Will Todman, “The Possible End of Cross-border Aid in Syria,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 6, 2020. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria>)

<sup>107</sup> “August 2020 Monthly Forecast,” *Security Council Report*, July 31, 2020. (<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-08/in-hindsight-six-days-five-resolutions-one-border-crossing.php>)

<sup>108</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

own people.<sup>109</sup> Finally, the United States must send a strong message against the normalization of relations with Assad.<sup>110</sup>

- 3) **The United States must step up support for existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib province.**<sup>111</sup> Existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib is not operating at full capacity, due to limited international support. The United States must engage with and support existing and additional civilian programming, including schools, medical facilities, and local governing councils to stabilize the region and develop a strong democratic civil society. Strengthening civilian infrastructure and civil society will help counter the influence of VEOs in Idlib by providing people with alternatives to, and the means to resist, VEOs such as HTS.
- 4) **The United States must intensify and broaden 2019 Caesar Act accountability efforts.**<sup>112</sup> Strict enforcement of Caesar and other U.S. sanctions are crucial for “limiting the resources available to the Assad regime for military offensives.” According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the Caesar Act went into effect in June 2020, the departments of State and Treasury have imposed sanctions on 113 individuals and entities for supporting the Assad regime or preventing a resolution of the war in Syria.<sup>113</sup> The Biden administration must continue this effort and ensure that the United States will make no exception for allies or partners who evade sanctions.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020; virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.

<sup>112</sup> Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.

<sup>113</sup> According a document provided by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan think tank focused on national security issues that has tracked the announcement of Caesar-related sanctions, there have been 119 Treasury and 34 State Department designations since June 17, 2020.

<sup>114</sup> David Adesnik, “Syria,” *From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria>)