



“The Trump Administration’s Syria Policy: Perspectives from the Field”  
Testimony for the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Subcommittee on National Security

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### OVERVIEW

I want to thank Chairman Lynch and Ranking Member Hice for organizing today’s hearing on the crisis in Syria and focusing in part on the humanitarian situation – particularly the impact that the recent cross-border conflict in the northeast has had on Syrians and on humanitarian organizations like Save the Children. We sincerely appreciate the time and attention that you have dedicated to this crisis.

This is my third time testifying before the House on Syria during the nearly nine years of this crisis. When looking back at my prior testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, most recently in 2015, I am deeply saddened to see not only how much worse the humanitarian situation has become, but also how little our key advocacy messages have changed. In fact, one of the only improvements – if it can be called that – is that Syria is no longer considered the world’s worst humanitarian crisis – but sadly, that is not because the situation for Syrian children has improved, but rather because conflicts elsewhere have spiraled even further out of control.

The needs inside Syria remain at staggering levels. Nearly 12 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, including five million children. The average life expectancy in Syria has fallen by 20 years since this conflict started. Half of all children now living in Syria have grown up knowing nothing but war.

Since the beginning of Save the Children’s response to this crisis, we have reached more than 3.2 million people inside Syria with lifesaving assistance, including more than two million children, in addition to millions more reached in the refugee responses hosted across Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt.

Through our many programs across all sectors of humanitarian response, we have seen how children in particular have suffered disproportionately in this conflict, with their rights being violated daily through maiming and killing, forced recruitment, attacks on schools and hospitals, denial of humanitarian access, and more. The risk of gender-based violence (GBV) is high with harassment, family violence, sexual violence and child marriage among the many forms of GBV documented throughout Syria. In addition to the many physical wounds inflicted on children in Syria, the long-term mental stress they have experienced will likely stay with many of them for the rest of their lives. More than two million children in Syria are out of school, and 1.3 million are at risk of dropping out. Nearly six million children are in need of protection assistance. In short, we are witnessing the loss of a generation in real time.

Sadly, all of these statistics do not even take into account the events of the last two weeks, which have only added to the suffering of Syrians who are exhausted by nearly a decade of war.

Today, I will focus on three elements of this crisis. First, I will focus the bulk of my testimony on recent events in northeast Syria, including the humanitarian impacts of the Turkish military operation and U.S. withdrawal, as well as the situation in Al-Hol and other camps housing women and children linked or perceived to be linked to armed groups such as ISIS. Second, I will speak to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Idlib and other parts of northwest Syria, which remains dire but has been recently overshadowed by the tragic events in the northeast. Finally, I will provide an overview of the regional refugee response in Syria's neighboring countries, where threats of forced refugee returns are on the rise.

### **HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF TURKISH OPERATION IN NORTHEAST SYRIA**

While the Turkish military operation launched into northeast Syria two weeks ago has dominated headlines in the U.S. and around the world, a less-frequently discussed element of the story is just how dire the situation in northeast Syria already was before October of this year. Across the northeast, the UN, local and international NGOs, and other aid actors were reaching an average of 1.25 million people per month from January to August of this year in northeast Syria. In the area where Turkey has launched its military operation, there were already estimated to be nearly 800,000 people living there – 475,000 of whom were in need of humanitarian assistance, and 120,000 who were displaced from conflict in other parts of Syria.

In the past two weeks, the situation has only deteriorated further. It is currently estimated that at least 160,000 people, including around 70,000 children, have been displaced in the fighting, with the true figures likely being higher. Many of the IDPs are women and children, including children with serious medical conditions and disabilities. While most people have been displaced from the immediate area of fighting to areas further south and east within Syria, reportedly up to 4,000 people have fled across the border into Iraq. The UN estimates that 120,000 people are living in camps and informal settlements across northeast Syria, which are short on humanitarian supplies and lack the necessary infrastructure to provide proper shelter and prevent the spread of communicable disease. We know that both increased displacement and makeshift shelters are particular risk factors for sexual and gender-based violence for women and girls across crises. Schools are commonly being used as collective shelters for those with nowhere else to go, which threatens to interrupt children's learning. These newly displaced populations also face the challenge of a fast-approaching winter, with temperatures dropping significantly in the coming months, placing young children at additional health risks.

Although the United States announced a five-day ceasefire last week, humanitarian actors have reported artillery fire and other significant outbreaks of violence in these areas. In addition to causing mass panic and displacement, UNICEF has confirmed that several children have been killed and injured in the fighting on both sides of the border. Health facilities and schools have been attacked. A water station supplying nearly 400,000 people temporarily stopped functioning last week and a UN-supported maternity facility serving 40,000 people closed after being partially destroyed. At least 170,000 children may be in need of humanitarian assistance due to the high levels of violence. Save the Children is responding to the needs of the newly displaced through providing goods and services such as psychological first aid, education and recreational activities for children, child protection case management, nutrition and health screenings, hygiene promotion and awareness, and more.

But while we and other NGOs are in some areas able to continue our programming, this new outbreak of violence and ensuing instability has severely restrained the capability of humanitarian actors to

respond, with many NGO offices and programs suspending or closing down in the towns and camps closest to the fighting, such as Tel Abyad, Ras Al Ayn, and Ein Issa. Many organizations have withdrawn international staff, while many Syrian staff have left to be with their families or fled the violence themselves. If the violence continues, needs will likely increase across a wider area, even as our ability to sustain assistance may be further challenged by dwindling supplies, impassable roads and staff or suppliers unwilling or unable to put their lives at risk to deliver aid.

In addition to the violence, a possible reconciliation between the Kurdish authorities and the Government of Syria will have an impact on NGO operations. Local staff in many cases report being afraid of coming to work which has also led to the suspension of some programs. Staff movement at this time is both challenging and highly risky, with significant confusion about which armed actors control various towns and checkpoints. Local staff and citizens have expressed fears of conscription of themselves and their children.

While these challenges may feel insurmountable, there is much the U.S. government can and should do to help improve the humanitarian response in the northeast. Primarily, the U.S. must continue to wield its diplomatic leverage with the parties to the conflict and other influential actors in the region to press for a lasting cessation of hostilities, protection of civilians and unobstructed humanitarian access to reach all those in need. We are grateful that the House has passed strong funding for humanitarian assistance in the FY20 appropriations process – the State Department and USAID should ensure that humanitarian funds are allocated in a manner that is both timely and flexible, allowing NGOs to respond to the ever-changing conditions on the ground. And while immediate needs such as medical care and food must be a priority, the U.S. and other donors cannot forget about the medium- to long-term needs of the displaced, primarily mental health and psychosocial support as well as access to education for the hundreds of thousands of children caught up in the violence. As the US considers and imposes sanctions and other measures to apply diplomatic pressure or prevent aid from falling into the wrong hands, it must do so in a way that permits the continued flow of humanitarian assistance to areas of need.

Above all, the U.S must use its voice in Congress, at the UN Security Council and in international negotiations to ensure that all parties to the conflict abide by International Humanitarian Law, ensure the protection of civilians and immediately cease attacks on schools, hospitals, and other critical civilian infrastructure, including ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

### **FOREIGN FAMILIES AND CHILDREN LINKED TO ARMED GROUPS**

An additional layer that further complicates the dire situation in northeast Syria is the presence of multiple camps near the zone of conflict that are housing thousands of foreign women and children with perceived or real affiliations with armed groups, such as ISIS. Already in the first days of this conflict, we have seen Ein Issa camp, which houses some of these families, come under attack. In the ensuing chaos, hundreds of women and children escaped the camp and are largely unaccounted for.

The five-year conflict with ISIS in Syria and Iraq has left in its wake a population of foreign nationals with links to ISIS living in displacement camps in the northeast. This includes thousands of foreign children, who are in Syria as a result of being groomed and recruited to come from abroad to join ISIS, or alternatively, who as the child of a foreign fighter, were brought or trafficked into Syria, or born there over the course of the conflict. The parents of these children may have joined ISIS voluntarily or by force, or they may have been groomed and recruited as children themselves.

There are currently 12,300 foreign nationals present in three camps, including nearly 9,000 children from more than 40 different nationalities, from every region of the world. More than 8,000 of these children are under the age of 12, while more than 4,000 are under the age of five.

The conditions in the remaining two displacement camps where foreign families are present, in particular Al-Hol, are challenging. Critical gaps exist across all sectors, especially water, sanitation, hygiene, health, nutrition, education and protection. Severe overcrowding greatly increases the risk of communicable diseases, and deaths linked to poor health and sanitation continue to be registered in the camp.

In camps such as Al-Hol, in addition to the main camp for displaced Syrians and Iraqis, there is a separate area called the Annex that houses the foreign women and children. Save the Children is one of the only actors present and operational in the annex, providing vital services such as education and child protection case management. While operating in these contexts comes with significant difficulties, humanitarian actors have been committed to improving services, with plans to expand in all sectors, including mother-baby nutrition areas, new medical and education facilities, as well as improve hygiene facilities. Assuming conditions allow response efforts to continue, sustained donor commitment is needed to ensure adequate resources are provided to meet the needs in the camps.

I want to underscore one crucial point about these camps and the families housed within them: foreign children trapped in Syria are innocent victims of the conflict and must be treated as such, rather than looked at as terrorists. Like all children inside Syria, they have lived through conflict, bombardment and acute deprivation. They need specialized help to recover from their horrific experiences and return to normality, which is impossible in an overwhelmed displacement camp in a volatile warzone. Given the life-threatening dangers these children and their families continue to face in Syria, Save the Children calls on the United States and other governments to take steps to repatriate these extremely vulnerable children to their country of origin.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the U.S. Administration for embracing a policy of repatriation of American citizens in these camps, and for its efforts to press other nations to repatriate their own nationals as well. Repatriation is not only the best course of action – it is vital that this takes place as soon as possible to ensure that the larger camps such as Al-Hol are not hosting such large populations of foreign families if the conflict continues to spread further south. If the events in Ein Issa were to play out in Al-Hol, the results would be even more devastating in terms of child casualties and family separation.

In recent days, we have seen some positive steps towards increased repatriations from governments such as the UK, but much more must be done – as of last week, fewer than 350 foreign children in these camps had been repatriated since January.

### **CONFLICT IN IDLIB AND THE WIDER NORTHWEST**

While the events of the past two weeks have rightfully drawn the world's attention to northeast Syria, we must not forget about the massive needs in the northwest. In 2019, conflict and displacement have raged across Idlib and other parts of northwest Syria, where nearly 3 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, in an area where more than half the population are children. Two million people are displaced across the northwest, with 400,000 of those displaced since May 1 alone. In short, increasingly larger numbers of people are being squeezed into a progressively shrinking space.

After years of conflict, the local population's ability to cope has been exhausted. Ongoing conflict between Government of Syria forces and non-state armed groups have created further devastation for families already living on the brink. Just three months ago, Save the Children reported that the number of children killed in Idlib during four weeks in July exceeded the total number of child deaths from the conflict in all of 2018. Families in Idlib have had to forgo funeral proceedings for children killed in the offensive so that they could escape the ongoing hostilities in the area. Of the child deaths that occurred during the summer offensive, 11 were killed while at school, 25 were in their own homes, 10 in a marketplace, two in a displacement camp, and one child who was already hospitalized was killed when a bomb hit the hospital. Around this same time, the UN and humanitarian agencies reported relentless attacks on schools, medical facilities and water stations serving hundreds of thousands of people.

Because of this violence, schools, health facilities and other service points have closed all across northwest Syria. In September, we reported that around half of all schools in northwest Syria are damaged, abandoned, unsafe or being used as shelters for the displaced. The scale of this devastation means that more than half of all children in Idlib could miss out on school this year.

Our staff in northwest Syria spoke to a 12-year-old girl, who we will call Rasha, who described what this conflict has meant for her:

*"I was small before the war. I was living a nice, good and safe life with my family [...] My life has changed a lot. I lost the most precious person to me; I lost my father, who was everything to me.*

*"The war has affected my education. We were displaced and didn't stick to school because of the situation. When I grow up and become a doctor, I want to treat children who are injured and in need."*

As with the violence in northeast Syria, Save the Children is calling on all parties to de-escalate the conflict in the northwest and support a ceasefire that can put an end to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib. Of vital importance will be the renewal of UN Security Council resolution 2165, which ensures cross-border access into Syria from Turkey and Iraq. The United States must make the renewal of this resolution a priority in December during its presidency of the Security Council. U.S. leadership at the UN and beyond is vital to ensure that the violation of fundamental human rights and international laws designed to protect vulnerable children does not become the new normal.

## **REGIONAL SYRIAN REFUGEE RESPONSE**

Finally, the element of the Syrian crisis that earns perhaps the least amount of international attention is the situation facing millions of Syrians living as refugees across the world, particularly in the neighboring host countries of Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. Across these countries and beyond, more than 5.6 million Syrians are registered as refugees, with more than 2.5 million being children. In 2018, more than 180,000 Syrians fled the country, an average of more than 500 people per day. Over the past five years, the funding needed to support Syrian refugees has nearly doubled, while in 2018 only 62-percent of the regional refugee response plan was funded.

While donor governments have made generous commitments at international conferences, pledging to fund the needs of Syrian refugees, key sectors such as education and livelihoods remain underfunded year after year. The U.S government must continue to allocate robust funding for the Syrian refugee response, as well as press other donor governments to honor their commitments to ensure more Syrian refugee children are in school, that mechanisms are in place to enable Syrian refugees to access

dignified work, and for durable solutions to be put in place given the high likelihood that most Syrian refugees will not be able to return for some time.

One of the most urgent concerns related to the refugee response currently are the efforts by some host governments, namely Turkey and Lebanon, to repatriate Syrian refugee populations back to unsafe areas of the country. The Government of Turkey has announced plans to repatriate one to two million Syrian refugees into the already densely populated area of northeast Syria where its military operation has taken place. It is worth noting that most Syrian refugees in Turkey do not originate from the areas of the northeast that Turkey is seeking to control. In Lebanon, mandatory demolitions of Syrian refugee homes in Aarsal and other parts of the country over the summer threatened to make 15,000 children homeless. The Lebanese military declared in mid-April that all “semi-permanent structures” built by Syrian refugees using materials other than timber and plastic sheeting in informal camps must be deconstructed. Meanwhile, the alternatives for these refugee families remain unclear, other than living in rudimentary tent structures. At the same time, local authorities have begun registering and returning some refugees to Syria, claiming the process is voluntary, as tensions between the host communities and refugees have grown.

The United States has been very clear about its opposition to forced returns, and it must continue to make this clear to the governments of refugee-hosting countries. The rights of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in other countries must at all times be fully respected. Any returns of refugees or asylum-seekers should be voluntary, safe and dignified, to the place of origin or another place of their choosing. Additionally, the United States could set a positive example itself by significantly raising its own caps on refugee admissions—indeed, it is challenging for the United States to effectively convince other countries to continue welcoming refugees and guarantee them access to services when the U.S. itself is falling short as a host country.

## **CONCLUSION**

100 years ago our founder Eglantyne Jebb said that “Every war is a war against children.” Syria is no exception. And yet, before recent events, the world barely seemed to be paying attention to the devastation in Idlib and elsewhere in northwest Syria. In fact, throughout the nearly nine years of this conflict, it has been rare to see this level of attention to Syria on the global stage, and each time it has been in response to shocking events such as chemical warfare or the fall of Aleppo. The danger is that once the headlines about Turkey fade, the conflict in Syria will yet again fall off the radar screen, even as its impact on Syrian children continues. Sustained political engagement by American leaders and the international community, as well as their support for humanitarian programming, is needed now more than ever.