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Subcommittee: Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism

“The Crisis in Idlib”

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I. Introduction

I would like to thank Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of this subcommittee for holding this timely hearing on Idlib. My name is Hardin Lang. I am the Vice President for Program and Policy at Refugees International. In my testimony today, I will address the crisis in Idlib, its humanitarian implications and prospects for the current ceasefire recently agreed between Turkey and Russia. My team and I have visited northern Syria and the Turkish border with Idlib repeatedly in the last few years. We have had the opportunity to investigate the nature and scope of the what has become the worst humanitarian chapter of Syria’s longstanding brutal war.

Refugees International is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in parts of the world impacted by conflict, persecution, and forced displacement. Based here in Washington, we conduct fact-finding missions to research and report on the circumstances of displaced populations in countries such as Somalia, Guatemala, Bangladesh, and the Central African Republic. Refugees International has been reporting on the humanitarian crisis in Syria for the entirety of the conflict. Refugees International does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which helps ensure that our advocacy is impartial and independent.

II. Background

This latest phase of humanitarian crisis in Idlib can be traced back to 2017. That year, Turkey, Russia, and Iran reached a de-escalation agreement that covered four zones throughout the country.ⁱ In the years that followed, the Syrian regime and its allies violated this agreement, retaking all but one—the so-called “Idlib de-escalation zone” in northwest Syria that includes Idlib province and contiguous areas in the northeastern Latakia, western Aleppo, and northern Hama provinces.ⁱⁱ

In September 2018, in an attempt to preserve this last “de-escalation zone,” Moscow and Ankara reached a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Sochi, Russia.ⁱⁱⁱ The Sochi deal called for removing armed groups and all heavy weaponry from a nearly 12-mile demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the front line in the northwest. It also called for two major routes for traffic and trade routes—the M4 and M5 highways—to be secured. These highways link Damascus to Aleppo and Latakia and were controlled by Hay’at Tahrir as-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate designated as a terrorist organization by most countries. For its part, Russia committed to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib would be avoided.

In accordance with the agreement, Turkish-backed armed groups withdrew from the DMZ. However, HTS rejected the terms of the MoU and launched a sweeping attack against Turkish-backed rebels. Shortly thereafter, Russia supported a military escalation led by the Syrian regime in February 2019. By late April 2019, this escalation had turned into a full-blown offensive.^{iv} In the months that followed, the offensive forced rebels from strategic positions along key roads in an apparent effort to retake some of the area’s major population centers.

In December 2019, the Assad regime and Russia intensified its campaign, displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians.^v Turkey responded by deploying up to 7,000 additional troops to reinforce some 12,000 soldiers already manning Turkish observation posts in Idlib—posts established as part of the de-escalation agreements. In early March, Turkey launched a counteroffensive in response to attacks on Turkish positions that killed at least 36 of its soldiers.^{vi}

In addition to the counteroffensive, Turkey also announced that it will no longer abide by a 2016 deal with the European Union (EU) in which Turkey agreed to restrict migration of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe. As a direct result of this announcement, there

are now more than 13,000 refugees stuck on the Turkish-Greek land border. By Turkey's own admission, encouraging refugees—including some Syrians from Idlib, but also refugees originating from other countries—to attempt entry into the EU is meant to pressure the EU for financial and military support in Turkey's engagement with Idlib.

III. The March 2020 Ceasefire

On March 5 in Moscow, President Erdoğan and President Putin reached agreement on a ceasefire.^{vii} The deal took effect the next day. The agreement calls for the establishment of a 6 km “security corridor” to be established on either side of the M4 highway. Specific parameters for the functioning of the security corridor are to be worked out between the Turkish and Russian defense ministries. Turkish and Russian forces are then slated to begin joint patrols on March 15 along this stretch of the M4. The deal allows the Syrian government to keep territorial gains its forces made since April 2019.

While there have been reports of sporadic fighting along the front line, the ceasefire seems to be largely holding. No airstrikes or major clashes between Russian-backed government forces and Turkish-backed rebel fighters have been reported since the truce went into effect.

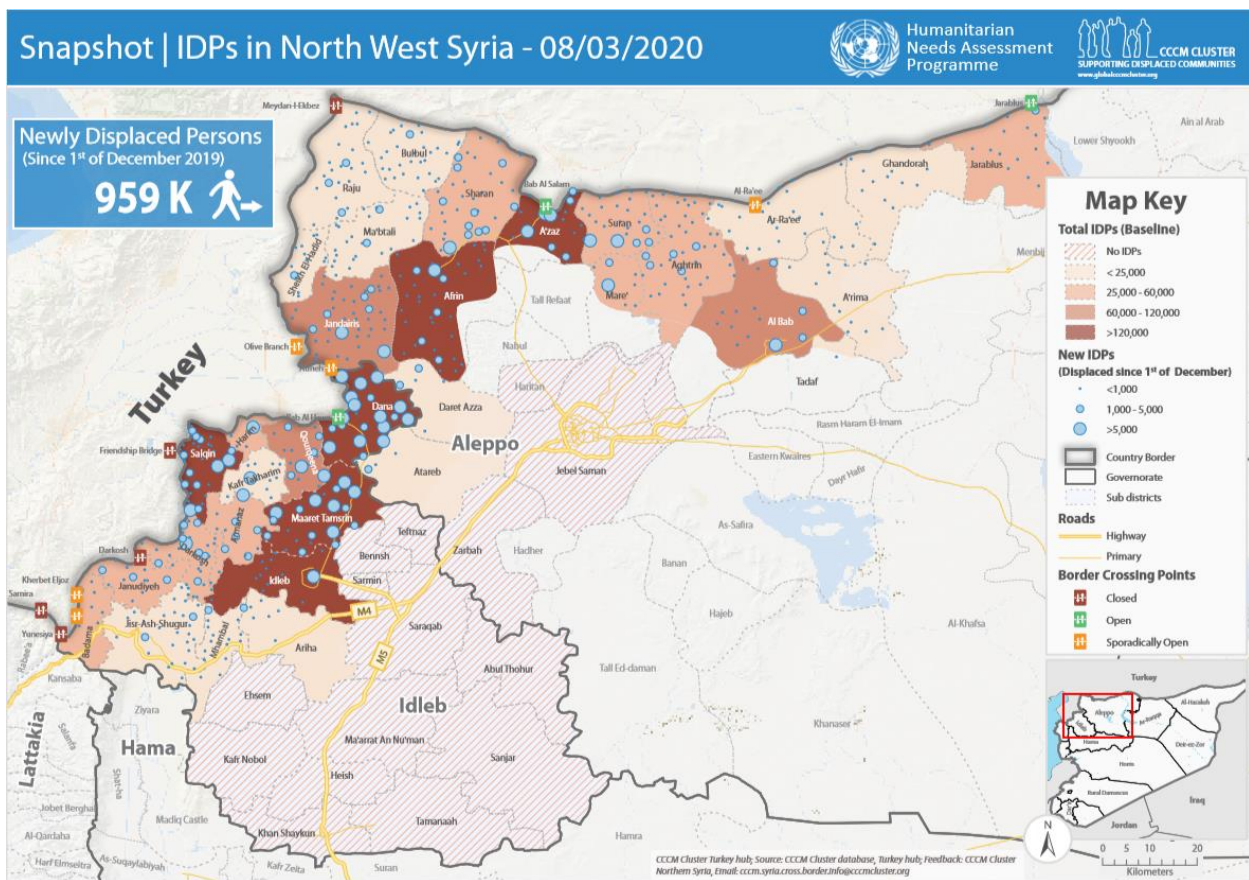
The deal brings a badly needed respite to the civilian population of Idlib. However, few expect the ceasefire to hold for long. The terms of the agreement do not address the original Achilles heel of the 2018 Sochi deal according to which Turkey was expected to expel or defeat jihadist groups in the zone. This was a commitment that Ankara was either unable or unwilling to fulfil.

Under the most recent ceasefire, Turkey must once again take on these extremist groups. Furthermore, President Assad remains committed to fully restoring his control of the entirety of Syrian territory. For its part, Russia has demonstrated little interest or capacity to restrain its client in Damascus. Indeed, most of the Syrians we have spoken with worry that it is only a matter of time before the deal falls apart.

That said, we must do everything we can to strengthen the ceasefire, prolong its duration and ease the conditions of the millions of civilians in Idlib. This should be our immediate and overriding priority. Civilians in Idlib tell us that they see the Turkish intervention and the resulting ceasefire as their last hope. We should listen to their voices.

Recommendation: The United States should provide diplomatic support for the Turkey-Russian ceasefire and encourage our European and NATO allies to do the same. While we are a humanitarian organization, we are persuaded that strong pressure must be exerted against Russia if the ceasefire is to have any chance of succeeding.

Recommendation: Turkey should live up to its responsibilities under International Humanitarian Law and protect civilians in areas under its control. With 20,000 troops in Idlib, Turkey has more troops on the ground than the UN stabilization force in Mali or the AU stabilization mission in Somalia. Turkey should leverage its significant presence and take measures to protect civilians at imminent risk of harm.



Source: United Nations Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme,
https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idp_map_08-03-2020.pdf

IV. Conditions in Displacement

While the deal has curbed the fighting, the humanitarian crisis in northwest Syria continues to have devastating consequences for the 3 million civilians in Idlib and neighboring areas affected by the fighting.^{viii} From December 2019 to February 2020, almost one million people were forced from their homes to escape from the violence.^{ix} In other words, more people have fled in Idlib over the past three months than all the Rohingya Muslims displaced in Myanmar over the past five years. Over 80 percent of the displaced are women and children.^x

Life in Idlib remains nasty, brutish, and short. The recent fighting has aggravated an already dire situation in northwest Syria, where almost three-quarters of the population were already in need of humanitarian assistance.^{xi} Now, hundreds of thousands of civilians are starving. Food prices have increased by 120 percent since last year. The displaced are trapped in makeshift camps along the Turkish border, where they struggle to access even basic aid and endure freezing temperatures with no real shelter. These informal encampments are not officially run or supported by the United Nations. Humanitarian NGOs try to fill some gaps, but this assistance remains insufficient to the task. Conditions in the camps do not meet the minimum humanitarian standards for access to basic services or protection.

Shelter: Shelter is perhaps the most acute need of the displaced. Some 338,000 people are currently staying in camps and individual tents making up 35 percent of those displaced in the past three months, while 173,000 people are in unfinished houses or buildings. Every single inhabitable space is occupied by internally displaced people (IDPs).^{xii} Single family apartments or homes are hosts to at least two or three families, and sometimes more. IDPs are sheltering in schools, mosques, unfinished buildings, garages, and even animal pens and stables. Privacy is impossible for most. Many families are crammed into single tents. In some cases, two or three families share the same tent, separated only by sheets.

Those not fortunate enough to find shelter are sleeping in the open air and under olive trees under very harsh weather conditions. In several cases, children have frozen to death.^{xiii} Almost none of the remaining land is suitable for setting up camps. Local NGOs are taking individual initiatives to build camps. However, the topography requires greater efforts and resources to prepare the ground and then build new shelter.

Health: Access to healthcare is another major challenge. The United Nations reports that conditions have significantly worsened following unprecedented levels of displacement in recent weeks. The constant influx of internally displaced people moving into an increasingly shrinking area has put an enormous strain on what remains of the healthcare system. Health workers are struggling to meet even the most basic needs.

The targeting of hospitals has significantly hampered healthcare services. When health workers try to rehabilitate a medical facility, it is targeted again. As a result, the United Nations reports that some 84 hospitals and clinics have suspended operations in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. This means, for example, that over the next month some 100,000 medical outpatient consultations and 1,700 major surgeries will not take place.^{xiv}

Women and Girls: Women and girls are disproportionately affected by the crisis. The widespread absence of men—many of whom are on the frontlines of the fighting or were killed, disappeared, or imprisoned—has left many Syrian women as heads of households. According to some estimates, more than half the population in Idlib is headed by females. In many cases, this has left entire families without their primary source of protection and provision. Moreover, the vulnerability and insecurity due to the conflict and displacement have exacerbated social problems. Early marriage among girls, not completely strange to the rural society in Idlib, has reportedly become more prevalent. Sexual and physical abuse has also been on the rise, further compounded by economic hardship and other conflict-related problems. Many recounted their hardship because of repeated displacement, the lack of dignified conditions for women inside the camps, fear for their children, and the struggle of moving them to safety.

On a brighter side, the disruption of social and family structures has pushed women to step up to fill the void. Many have become their families' main or sole breadwinners. Thus, they have invested in their skills and entrepreneurial spirits through trainings and workshops. Many have also defied the ever-constraining environment imposed by radical military groups.

- **Recommendation:** Given the overcrowding and harrowing living conditions in Idlib, it will be extremely challenging for responders to accommodate additional large numbers of IDPs. If violence resumes, the United States should support Turkey in establishing IDP camps in safer Turkish-controlled areas in northern Aleppo to alleviate civilian suffering.

- **Recommendation:** Refugees International has repeatedly called for Turkey to open the border and allow Syrians to seek refuge. In the event of the collapse of the ceasefire, such a measure would be particularly critical. If Turkey opens its borders, the United States should help Ankara increase the capacity of existing refugee camps to temporarily accommodate tens of thousands of civilians fleeing violence. The United States should rally European and other international donors to provide Turkey with the necessary support to host these additional refugees.

V. The Humanitarian Access and Assistance

In response, humanitarian organizations have struggled mightily for months to mount a massive humanitarian operation in northwest Syria. In January, food assistance for some 1.4 million people was delivered, along with health supplies for almost half a million people, and non-food items for more than 230,000 people.^{xv} All this is made possible by UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165 adopted in 2014, which allows cross-border assistance to be delivered into nongovernment-controlled areas without the government's authorization.

Cross-border Assistance: In January 2020, the UN Security Council renewed the cross-border mechanism.^{xvi} However, at Russian insistence, the Council dropped two aid delivery crossing points into Syria from Iraq and Jordan. It also only renewed the operation for six months instead of a year. There is considerable concern that Russia will seek to close the two crossing points from Turkey into Syria at Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama. If Russia is successful, an essential humanitarian lifeline for the people of Idlib would be cut.

The cross-border modality is absolutely essential to the international humanitarian response in northwest Syria. In February alone, nearly 800 hundred trucks transported UN humanitarian assistance into northwest Syria via the Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama border crossings, providing vital humanitarian assistance to more than 2 million people.^{xvii} People in need in Idlib cannot be reached at this scale through any other means.

Funding: In addition, funding for humanitarian relief operations currently falls far short of what is needed. In late February, the UN Secretary-General has called for a total of U.S. \$500 million in order to provide basic humanitarian support to the roughly 1 million people who are displaced or at risk of displacement in the greater Idlib area and northern

Aleppo for the next six months. So far, the United Nations reports that roughly half the funding for this emergency appeal has been raised. ^{xviii}

On March 3, the U.S. Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Kelly Craft, announced \$108 million in additional humanitarian assistance for the people of Syria in response to the ongoing crisis caused by Assad regime, Russian, and Iranian forces. This includes nearly \$56 million from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and more than \$52 million from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Local Groups: The humanitarian response in Idlib depends almost entirely on Syrian relief workers. Local groups have demonstrated a great commitment to serve their communities, from evacuating people under bombardment, to building camps, distributing food, providing healthcare, and all other services. In doing so, these relief workers often put their lives at risk. Last June, our team met with an organization, Violet, whose three paramedics and a patient were killed in a strike targeting their ambulance. We met with Violet again in Turkey two weeks ago. They told us that the one paramedic who survived the attack last year was back to helping evacuate and assist civilians, although his hand was amputated in the strike. This is just one example of many amazing local organizations in Idlib whose contribution and dedication could not be stressed enough.

- **Recommendation:** The United States should launch a full diplomatic press at the UN Security Council to ensure the renewal of the cross-border resolution and the reopening of the crossing points from Jordan and Iraq into Syria.
- **Recommendation:** The United States should mobilize European, Arab, and other humanitarian donors to close the remaining gap of \$250 million required for the humanitarian response in Idlib over the next six months.
- **Recommendation:** The United States should increase its funding to local organizations in Idlib and continue supporting the capacity building of their staff.

VI. Targeting of Civilian Infrastructure & Accountability

Throughout the campaign, the Russian and Syrian regime have purposely and repeatedly targeted schools, hospitals, and other civilian facilities. Pro-Government forces have carried out aerial and ground attacks in southern Idlib that decimated civilian

infrastructure, including through the use of cluster munitions. Attacks on health facilities have been particularly brutal and, most recently, included the bombing of Idlib's central hospital on February 25.^{xix} These strikes have often forced relief groups to suspend operations.

Make no mistake – these are war crimes, and they demand accountability. Indeed, this past week a UN investigation accused Russia for the first time of direct involvement in war crimes for indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas.^{xx} The latest report from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria found substantial evidence that Russian aircraft were directly involved in the bombing of civilian areas.^{xxi}

The UN Security Council should move quickly to hold a session on the findings of the Commission of Inquiry. The United States has substantial tools at its disposal to bring economic pressure to bear on those responsible for war crimes and other atrocities, and it should move aggressively to exercise these tools. In addition, as David Miliband of the International Rescue Committee has pointed out, the members of the European Union have yet to impose sanctions on Russia for its actions in Syria.^{xxii} A move to achieve meaningful accountability for crimes committed in Syria must be a shared endeavor, and the Europeans have an important role to play in that regard.

- **Recommendation:** The United States and other members of the UN Security Council should pressure Russia to ensure the protection of humanitarian infrastructure and personnel, and relentlessly denounce attacks on humanitarian facilities as war crimes.
- **Recommendation:** The United States should use the tools set out in the Caesar Act and other relevant legislation to target those responsible for violations of international humanitarian law in Idlib. The United States should pressure other members of the UN Security Council and European Union to take similar steps to sanction such violators.

I would like to close by saying that American leadership and support by Congress for humanitarian and development programs helping those displaced inside Syria and in the region have saved countless lives. We have seen it for ourselves in the numerous Refugees International missions to the field from the start of the Syria crisis nine years ago. We thank members of Congress for their support and concern for the people of Syria, and we hope and expect the United States to play a critical diplomatic and humanitarian role to help this vulnerable population.

Endnotes

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