



DISCUSSION PAPER

# **Idlib and Beyond:** The Latest Crisis in the Now Nine-Year Civil War

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**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

FEBRUARY 2020

**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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## Introduction

**T**he Syrian Civil War has laid testament to an inordinate degree of human suffering over its now nine-year span; a brutal, protracted, and well-documented ordeal that now finds its most emblematic expression in the appalling crisis in Idlib. This Discussion Paper focusses on this latest iteration of the fallout of the Syrian Civil War, with particular emphasis on the plight of refugees and the internally displaced. The latest developments in the region in juxtaposition with other regional developments, as well as the more fundamental characteristics of the parties to the dispute, are brought together in an effort to forecast just how the situation may potentially unfold. The paper comes at a time when 33 Turkish soldiers were recently killed in a Russian-backed regime airstrike, and Turkey's military commitment in the region is set to increase.

In any case, the wholesale inability of the international community to end the violence in the region, alongside the sheer scale of devastation, weigh heavily on the conscious of those who value the sanctity of human life, and seek to set the basis for a political, rather than a military solution – the latter of which the Assad regime has strived for. That a tougher stance would ultimately be conducive to a negotiated settlement has also been advocated by Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria [Robert S. Ford](#). The sheer scale of the devastation wrought upon millions of Syrians by the Assad regime must be considered alongside the nature of the regime itself, one that has ruled with dictatorial impunity with an entrenched network of sectarian, familial, military-bureaucratic and secret police structure (Lesch 2019). It is this order the regime values more than the lives, and especially the political agency, of millions of its citizens.



Cem Genco - Anadolu Agency

# Refugee Flows and Weaponising Migration

On February 17, the U.N. Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator on Northwest Syria, Mark Lowcock, described the latest fallout from the regime's aggression as the "[biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century](#)". Violence has been "indiscriminate" and, beyond the 900,000 people recently displaced since December 1st, the horror story at play can only be avoided if "Security Council members, and those with influence put a collective stake in humanity first. The only option is a ceasefire". For its part, the Russian Ministry of Defence denied that such displacement had taken place. Worldwide, [the U.N.](#) reports over 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees, approximately 3.5 million of whom reside in Turkey. The U.N. has been [unable to count the dead](#) in Syria since 2014, though figures suggest a fatality count of [over 500,000](#), with around [6.2 million](#) internally displaced within Syria. Thus, approximately half of Syria's population is either internally displaced (in many cases, displaced multiple times), or are refugees. The figures are staggering, and the U.N warns of a further [bloodbath](#) [sic], if Assad pushes further into Idlib.

General Phil Breedlove, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander for Europe and head of U.S. European Command, had previously reasoned that Russia and the Assad regime indiscriminately bombed civilians with the express intent of generating a refugee crisis; in effect '[weaponising migration](#)'. Though the commander explained that Daesh could also exploit such refugee flows, "to set Europeans against refugee, but within Europe, to set citizen against citizen within communities, [...] country against country in the [European] Union" (*cited in* Dearden 2016), it need not only be Daesh that may benefit from such an outcome. Turkey, which according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, hosts the largest number of refugees in the world, with 3.6 million registered Syrian nationals in 2018, and 40,000 refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities, has done more than its fair share absorb the fallout. However, the sentiment in Turkey seems to be that a limit has been reached, both on the issue of refugees but also the cause that has generated them; the regime's relentless advance despite previously agreed ceasefire and de-escalation zones contained within the [2018 Sochi agreements](#).

## The Idlib Offensive

Ceasefires seem to be for the Assad regime akin to a red rag for a bull. This is perhaps even more so in Idlib province, which symbolically stands as one of the last-remaining bastions of the anti-Assad opposition, and for its status as the last of the four previously agreed de-escalation zones the regime has yet to assault. The province is of strategic value for its proximity to major [highways](#) (i.e. the M4 and the M5) that connect Damascus to Aleppo, the latter city having now entirely fallen to the regime in its latest offensive. The Russian-operated Khmeimim airbase nearby is surely also of particular value to the regime and its backers. Turkey has time and again advocated for such ceasefires, which have been repeatedly violated by the regime. The fate of three of the four other previously agreed de-escalation zones being case and [point](#).

In the latest cycle of violence, the Assad government purports that it responds to 'terrorists or extremists' within the Idlib region. Yet the weight of evidence across entire span of the catastrophe that has been the Syrian Civil War strongly suggests that such an accusation is mere pretence and blanket accusation to violently enforce regime control across the entire country on their terms only. The disproportionate violence the regime and its backers have employed throughout the conflict, the continuous aerial bombardments (well-documented for either its indiscriminateness in the form of barrel-bombs, or its deliberateness in the targeting of hospitals as uncovered by [The New York Times](#)), despite all previously agreed ceasefires, coupled with the regime's long track-record of vanquishing rather than negotiating with its opponents, does not bode well at all for a peaceful resolution of the crisis in



A view of a damage after Assad regime attacks in Maarrat Misrin residential area in Idlib, Syria on February 25, 2020. 17 civilians were killed after Assad regime forces' ground and air attacks in Idlib, a de-escalation zone in northwestern Syria. (Muhammed Said - Anadolu Agency)

Idlib, let alone a political, compromise-based resolution of the wider conflict. The murdering of opponents and those who refused to fight alongside the regime, the grave desecrations, the systematic looting of property and burning of homes, and the systematic torture<sup>1</sup>, are the tips of the iceberg abstracted from the years-long devastation the regime has enacted. The regime has also deliberately targeted Turkish [observation posts](#).

More so, the presence of any extremist groups does not detract from the extremism of the regime. To extrapolate from the few and define the many millions of Syrian civilians who have courageously risen-up against decades of suppression and authoritarian rule as terrorists, extremists, or traitors even, is a dangerous misnomer that fundamentally dehumanises the millions who oppose Assad, whilst at the same time, allows the regime to whitewash itself as a secular 'liberation force'. In reality, Assad is seemingly deified [by his supporters](#), and the continuation of the regimes deadly monopoly on power apotheosised, as indicated by the popular chant by regime fighters: "[God, Syria, Bashar al-Assad](#)". Informed Western observers may incorporate the broader track-record of Assad, coupled with a nuanced appreciation of the dynamics in Idlib, into their analysis. Others, unfortunately, but also hopefully in an inadvertent manner, parrot regime, Iranian, and Russian, propaganda on the issue, such as the recent comments by a Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) [spokesperson](#). Syria has been designated a 'State Sponsor of Terrorism' by the U.S. Department of State since 1979.

What is often assumed is that extremist groups are utterly resistant to adaptation and change. This is certainly not the impression given in a [Crisis Group International](#) interview with Muhammed al-Jolani of the HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), the latter of whom asserted that the group was adapting to realities on the ground, that it has "forsworn transnational jihadist ambitions", and that HTS' single goal is to fight the regime in Damascus. The presence of HTS is clearly a major liability (to say the very least), for both local Syrians and international actors who have wanted to aid the more moderate expressions of Syrian opposition. International actors are perhaps more content with the devil they know in Assad. The extremist factor, and the opposition of local Syrians to such extremism as well as that of the regime, is nothing new. A released CIA document from 1982 noted then that the Syrian people "would prefer a moderate, Sunni Muslim controlled government and are unwilling to support the [Muslim] Brotherhood's attempt to seize power", whilst another reported dated 1986 argued that "[...] Syria's secular traditions would make it extremely difficult for religious zealots to establish an Islamic Republic", though of course the latter remains in the realm of the possible and so must be curtailed. *Crisis Group* asserts that the transformation of such groups is a narrow avenue that must be explored, lest a total humanitarian catastrophe and large-scale refugee fallout thereon, occurs. The exploration of such a possibility would come at a time when the U.S. is in [peace talks with the Taliban](#) in Afghanistan. An in-depth examination of the nature of HTS is beyond the remit of this paper, although the idea of HTS' genesis and evolution is a crucial part the Syrian Civil War that deserves further attention. The following [TRT World article](#) being only one such starting point.

<sup>1</sup> See La Caisne (2018).

## The Nature of the Regime

As opined by the author [elsewhere](#), the seeds of future discontent and the enormous repression the regime will need to exert to quash it are already in play. The latter is perhaps why the regime prefers extermination rather than the reconciliation it knows it cannot possibly ever earn, nor has it ever had the heart and spirit for. In a similar vein, “the grudge against the regime is so great that I hardly see any possibility for reconciliation”, argued Dutch diplomat [Nikolaos van Dam](#), adding that “it may take many generations” before reconciliation could even be discussed. It remains that the Assad government’s actions have instigated both radicalisation and refugee flows, and it may very well be the case that the regime knowingly wishes to capitalise on the radicalisation it generates.

At a recent U.N. Security Council meeting, Turkish Ambassador to the U.N. Feridun Sinirlioğlu argued that the regime was not interested in a political solution, that the establishment of the most concrete U.N. – sponsored outcome to date (the ‘Constitution Committee’), had taken approximately two years to establish due expressly to regime’s feet-dragging throughout the process. Sinirlioğlu further expressed that Turkey provides care and protection to more than nine million Syrians both within the borders of Syria and abroad, which is more than the population found in regime-controlled areas. Turkey’s footprint in Idlib had thus far been limited various observation posts as a means to stabilise the situation and preserve the de-escalation zone. The

Russian-backed regime airstrikes within Idlib have continued throughout. At the time of writing, Turkey maintains an end-of-February [deadline](#) for the regime to withdraw to the previously agreed de-escalation zone boundaries. Turkey has steadily committed men and materials into the region, and has supported the moderate opposition in the form of the FSA (Free Syrian Army), itself part and parcel of the broader [Syrian National Army](#) (SNA). The opposition has lost territory to the regime, but as of late has recovered some districts it had previously lost such as the strategic town of [Saraqib](#).

In Syria, reform would almost certainly spell the end of the regime as it is, and so too may reform spell the end of the more radical opposition groups, if ideology can be tapered against the realities on the ground. The sectarian nature of the civil war between a hyper-empowered Alawi/Nusayri minority ruling through violence, versus a disenfranchised Sunni majority driven to violence, is by no means the only driving facet or precursor to the war and is by some measure a reductionism. However, the sectarian subtext of the country is clearly a guiding element of the country’s political history that will have to be addressed (see Ibish, 2011). More so, it remains to be seen just how Damascus’ relationship with YPG/PKK hastily rebranded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that has usurped large swathes of Syrian territory far beyond where Syrian Kurds may have ever formed a majority, will play out, particularly amidst the extent and nature of U.S. influence on the group.

## The Cost of International Inaction

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, [Filippo Grandi](#), recently asserted that “thousands of innocent people cannot pay the price of a divided international community”, though it seems that what is occurring is exactly that. In its latest aggression, Assad forces mounted an assault across the province, driving back opposition forces and beyond far beyond the de-escalation zone and surrounding numerous Turkish observation posts. There is now a growing responsibility on behalf of Turkey to secure those installations, as expressed by Defence Minister Hulusi Akar. A regime airstrike that resulted in the deaths of Turkish personnel heightened the gravity of the situation and sowed

the seeds for further Turkish intervention, whilst the Turkish public were incensed at the regime’s actions. On February 20th, reports emerged that TAF and FSA forces advanced toward Saraqib town immediately east of Idlib, which triggered an upsurge in the already near-continuous Russian airstrikes on local settlements. Prior to that, Syrian opposition forces downed two government barrel-bombing government helicopters; an act many on the ground considered, though delayed, just recompense. The rhetoric from the Turkish side strongly suggests that a partial withdrawal from the regime will not suffice, that what had been agreed to in prior agreements must be adhered to, namely the

boundaries of the de-escalation zone under the auspices of the Sochi Agreement.

The approach of the international community and supra-national organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union toward the Syrian Civil War generates vexing questions regarding the willingness and capacity for such institutions to act when faced with the very political situation that they had been created to address, or developments of which are driven by the antithesis of values that supposedly underpin them. Only a few months ago, and in light of the [controversial remarks](#) made by the current French President of NATO's 'brain death', the meaning and purpose of NATO had come under some scrutiny. Now, the dearth of collective international action as the situation in Idlib continues to devolve is surely more than enough reason for that same critical spotlight to now also shine on the United Nations itself, as also recently advocated by former U.K. politician David Miliband in a CNN interview. "The pictures and stories are telling of a dehumanisation that shames everyone", explained Mr Miliband. With "politicians and governments turning away to focus on other matters [...], this question is now of fundamental importance to the meaning and purpose of the United Nations". U.N.-member states need to be "urged, driven, and shamed, in order to live up to the most founding elements of the U.N. Charter of 75 years ago", he argued. Relatedly, the documentation on the regimes war crimes exceeds that which had been recovered from [Nazi Germany](#).

Amidst all the rhetoric related to the cessation of 'endless wars' and, in particular, the French President's desires for a more geopolitically assertive Europe, the question remains; why the brutal indifference to the suffering of the Syrian masses? Is there a sell-by date upon this pain as the suffering becomes normalised? Has regime propaganda been swallowed-up wholesale without a moment's thought? There are those frozen into inaction, lest the help they extend becomes obsessively misconstrued as "Erdogan's bidding". Perhaps the suffering of millions of Syrians warped and contingent upon otherwise wholly unrelated external developments such as the S400/Patriots issue? [The Washington Post](#) described the satisfaction that some have derived from the predicament the Turkish President (as opposed to Turkey), ostensibly finds himself in as a 'perverse satisfaction'. For all the vacuous clichés of Turkey 'turning away from the West', from the very start Turkey and Russia had been on opposing ends of this conflict, as they have in other developments around the world such as the situation in Crimea. For all the friction that Turkey and the EU have witnessed, it is Turkey that almost acts as a vanguard against a possible fallout that might adversely affect the European continent, and is the only defender of the [desperate people](#) in Idlib. The "Turkish neighbourhood is also the European neighbourhood", the Head of the E.U. Delegation to Turkey [Christian Berger](#), stated only a few months ago.

## Future Outlook

Beyond Syria, some commentators have made a connection between Turkey's stance in Idlib vis-à-vis other regional developments, such as the situation in Libya and even the evolving 'sea grab' in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Duran (2020), for example, has made the point that Turkey is under pressure to withdraw from all three. In response to the escalation of other parties to the above disputes, such as warlord Haftar's march on Tripoli, or the Assad regime's advance on Idlib, it remains that Turkey has gradually become more involved on the side of those who have vied for democratic change, despite the various issue the country itself faces. If such brutal leaders are allowed free reign, what example does that set for the status of the global international order? If the situation in Idlib is not reason enough to act, then what is? If only the prospect of refugees penetrating an otherwise indifferent mindset, then where has virtue disappeared to?

In 2016, after the fall of Aleppo to the regime, John McCain tweeted that the words "never again" ring hollow, and that after the infamous 'red line' policy of former U.S. President Obama, U.S. credibility had been eroded around the world. There are voices in the 'West' who rightly denounce the inaction over Idlib and beyond, but do little to reign in Assad on the ground. [Tobias Ellwood](#), Chairman of the U.K. Commons Defence Committee, stated that "A bloodbath is about to unfold. I'm ashamed to see how cowardly the West's become". Charles Lister of the *Middle East Institute* asserted that the U.N. is hesitant to assert itself against the Damascus regime for apprehension over [loosing influence](#). It should be harder to reconcile an institution such as the U.N. with such impotence and fear. As for the immediate outlook, much will depend on the nature of a deal, if any, hammered out again between the international parties to the dispute. A summit between Turkey, Russia, France, and Germany,

touted for March 5th now seems unlikely, but the scene is set for further Russian-Turkish contacts. For those in Russia who may want to widen the gulf between Turkey and its Western allies, the violations and brutality of the Damascus regime may serve to [increase scepticism](#) in Turkey with regards to strategic cooperation with Moscow.

If the populist fears of refugee inflows or uninformed accounts of the full nature of the Syrian opposition can be abated, the 'West' may unshackle itself and act in a meaningful way. For the most part, Turkey seems left alone against Russia to thrash out yet another settlement. In the meantime, it is quite probable that Turkey will become further engrained on the ground in Syria. The constant Russian aerial bombardment inhibits the safety, security, and development of Idlib province. If Assad overruns the region, not only will the humanitarian disaster exacerbate, but the cause of this contemporary Syrian revolution will be irreparably damaged. This would further disincentivise Assad on any future compromise, and the pattern of appeasement followed by unilateral abrogation of ceasefires, will most likely continue. Hence, it is quite likely for Turkey continue to push back against the regime in the region, and increase the cost of Assad's aggression. The areas under the control of other factions bolstered by the U.S. are in a better position to negotiate with the regime,

as Russian-backed regime action would incur a U.S. response, [as it has done before](#). However, the SDF (rebranded from the YPG/PKK) may be prepared to accept Assad in the rest of the country in return for a measure of regional autonomy.

Erstwhile, with the prior agreements in Sochi and Astana compromised, greater international condemnation may mean that an opportunity could emerge for the Geneva process (initiated in 2012 with the landmark Geneva Communiqué that envisioned the creation of a transitional government), to take greater hold, provided that Assad is made to take negotiations seriously. The Constitutional Committee first proposed by Russia in 2018 in Sochi had identified 150 various delegates and was seen as a positive step that would assist the process although Assad has elsewhere distanced himself from its delegation, as reported in [Foreign Policy](#). To this end, and in light of all that has been said above, the very last thing that should happen is any form of sanctions relief or unconditional development funds channelled to the regime. Whilst these divisions and calculations across the geopolitical chessboard go on, perhaps the message that one brave Syrian recently shared on social media from inside Aleppo, touches at the sentiment that survives within Assad's Syria: "Aleppo did not get rid of terrorism yet. Terrorism is the bloody Assad regime that is marketing its legitimacy at the expense of our blood..."



Turkish Armed Forces' soldiers continue to conduct fortification and transition activities in Idlib, de-escalation zone in Syria on February 20, 2020. (Ibrahim Hatib - Anadolu Agency)

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