



March 13, 2020



© Women Now

#SaveIDLIB

Syria: Escalating “Humanitarian Horror” Must Be Countered by International Community

The resumption of hostilities in Idlib province and the threats of further escalation present grave risks for the civilian population. Since the beginning of [February 2020](#), at least 100 civilians, including 35 children, have been killed and numerous others injured due to the military operation carried out by the Syrian-government and its allies. More than [900,000](#) people have been displaced from their homes or shelters in Idlib as a result of the fighting this year. Compounded by the freezing winter conditions and inadequate and overcrowded makeshift shelters, the civilians of Idlib are facing a humanitarian horror. [Children](#) are dying because of the freezing temperatures and the substandard conditions in the camps for the displaced.

As the Syrian and Russian military operation to retake [Idlib](#) continues, a simple condemnation of violations and abuses is not enough, as the past eight years have tragically proven. Much of the Idlib province remains under the control of [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, while other groups maintain control in [other areas](#). Idlib is in the midst of a worsening man-made humanitarian crisis, which has already led to serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law that will exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and further destabilize the region. The ongoing intentional terrorizing of the civilian population in Idlib, in an effort to [depopulate and capture](#) territory, may constitute a war crime, warned Mr. [Hanny Megally](#) of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. Any ceasefire agreements between the parties to the conflict must not result in further forced displacement.

However, it is not too late for the international community to take action and save lives. The international community must insist on an immediate cease-fire adhered to by all state and non-state parties to the conflict and exert pressure on the Syrian and Russian governments, and non-state armed groups, to allow and facilitate the unrestricted access of international humanitarian agencies to affected areas, in accordance with their international obligations to protect civilians. The international community must also continue to pressure the Syrian and Russian forces to meet their international obligations at long last, and respect international law to protect civilians in armed conflict.

The civilian population is facing continued indiscriminate bombing attacks and targeted attacks against civilian infrastructure, including [schools](#) and [hospitals](#). Meanwhile, armed rebel and jihadist [groups](#) based in Idlib have attacked border villages under Syrian government control, also placing civilian lives at risk. In a recent [incident](#), intercepted radio communications revealed that Syrian government forces deliberately fired upon and killed a group of elderly women. Turkey's use of [drones](#) to target Syrian military sites in Idlib marks a dangerous escalation of hostilities that puts civilian lives at risk.

The international community's repeated failure to take meaningful action to protect the civilian population has emboldened the Syrian and Russian forces in perpetuating systematic war crimes and other violations of international law, which include targeted attacks against civilian infrastructure and medical facilities, and widespread indiscriminate attacks in populated areas. Since 1 January, [10 medical facilities](#) have been either directly hit or affected by nearby attacks. According to UN human rights spokesman [Rupert Colville](#), "We can't determine if every single attack is deliberate but the large scale of these attacks..."

strongly suggests that [Syrian] government-affiliated forces conducting these strikers are, at least partly, if not wholly, deliberately striking health facilities.”

We are also concerned regarding reports of the use of excessive force by Greek border guards along the border with Turkey and [at sea](#), which has resulted in the [death](#) of one Syrian refugee, following Turkey’s [decision](#) to open its border with Greece in an effort to [pressure the EU](#) to support Turkey’s military in Idlib. Greece has also [suspended](#) asylum applications for at least one month.

The countries hosting the vast majority of the 5.6 million refugees are facing significant strains on capacity and public support, and we call on the international community to increase support to these countries to meet the heavy demands placed upon them. We call on all states to refrain from using excessive or disproportionate force against refugees and asylum seekers, to maintain systems for processing asylum requests in an orderly manner, and to refrain from refoulement in line with their international obligations. Moreover, we urge neighboring countries and all member states of the European Union to broaden admissions and to do their utmost to facilitate relocations, so that Syrians fleeing the violence can reach safety. The Turkish government should also cease its use of refugees as a pawn for political gain.

In this context, we recommend the following:

1. All parties must cease the targeted attacks and killing of civilians, and ensure their protection and access to necessary humanitarian assistance. The international community must take immediate actions to urge Syria, Russia, and Turkey to immediately end their offensives in Idlib and northeast Syria and uphold relevant ceasefire agreements.
2. State and non-state actors should share any and all evidence of serious crimes committed in northwestern Syria with the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria. These bodies should continue to conduct urgent investigations and collect evidence with regards to the recent attacks in Idlib and northwest Syria. All State and non-state actors should fully cooperate with investigative bodies. The international community must pursue accountability through criminal proceedings for any crimes committed in all available venues;
3. The UN Secretary General should publicly release the findings of the internal UN Headquarters [Board of Inquiry](#) into the destruction of civilian, name the perpetrators, and highlight the systematic targeting of healthcare in Syria. We, also, call on the Secretary General to expand the scope of the inquiry to comprehensively address the widespread and systematic targeting of these facilities by the Syrian military, the Russian air force, and militant groups.
4. The EU and the wider international community must continue to monitor, and sanction relevant private business actors linked to gross human rights violations against the Syrian people, and expand the EU restrictive measures to include all relevant perpetrators regardless of their affiliation;

5. The Office of the UN Secretary General should carry out a visit to Idlib and the Turkish border crossing and continue to urge all parties to adopt an immediate ceasefire and ensure the protection of civilians.
6. The United Nations Security Council should take immediate steps to implement its numerous resolutions calling for the cessation of hostilities in Syria by all parties and should prioritize measures to protect the civilian population in and around Idlib.

Signatory organizations:

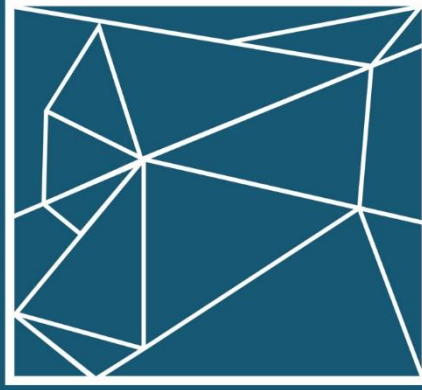
- Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies
- Dawlaty
- SCM – Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression
- Syrians for Truth and Justice

Background:

The horrors in Idlib are perpetrated in the context of nine years of conflict, during which the Syrian people have suffered greatly from the actions of all parties to the conflict, primarily those of the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian civil war has created [5.7 million](#) refugees and internally displaced an additional [6.2 million](#) people. As a result of the Syrian civil war, Idlib’s population has increased from 1.5 million to approximately [four million](#) people, and half of this population has already been displaced at least once. Some [80 percent](#) of newly displaced are women, children, and the elderly.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة

Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

-
- 🌐 www.stj-sy.org
 - 📘 [syriaSTJ](https://www.facebook.com/syriaSTJ)
 - 🐦 [@STJ_SYRIA_ENG](https://twitter.com/STJ_SYRIA_ENG)
 - 📷 [Syrians for Truth & Justice](https://www.instagram.com/Syrians_for_Truth_Justice)
 - ✉ editor@stj-sy.org