

Situation in Syria's Idlib Province



ISSUE



SYRIA

SUMMARY:

Syria's northwestern Idlib province represents one of the last remaining territories where President Bashar al-Assad's regime has failed to regain control. Idlib has emerged as a hub for a variety of groups and institutions that include some of the country's most robust and independent secular civil society but also a militarily dominant jihadist presence. Roughly half of the three million current inhabitants of the Idlib province are internally displaced from other regions, while the remainder of the population consists of Idlib's original residents and armed groups. Idlib's civil society and governance structures are threatened by the potential resurgence of conflict, which has been kept tenuously at bay through a recently negotiated cease-fire, the deterioration of which may result in humanitarian disaster and give rise to a new wave of jihadist activity.

POLITICAL CONTEXT:

Militarily, Idlib represents the opposition's stronghold in Syria since the jihadist-led Jaish al-Fatah coalition first **assumed control** over the territory in March 2015. Turkey remains a key backer of the opposition and has been tied to the National Liberation Front (NLF), a coalition of armed opposition groups that formed in May 2018, and **previously** the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which has about 10,000 members and is now in opposition to the NLF. Al-Qaeda loyalists Huras al-Din also operate out of Idlib, with a force of about 2,000.



The presence of these groups have made Idlib a focal point for **Russian and Syrian** air strikes—and **civilian casualties**—ever since. In addition to deadly conventional bombardment, Idlib was the site of an April 2017 sarin attack and a February 2018 **chlorine attack**. Following the 2017 attack, fearing Western intervention, the Russian-led peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, began to gain more traction and the sixth round of the Astana talks in September 2017 **demarcated** Idlib as one of

four de-escalation zones. Although the de-escalation zones were originally intended to protect civilians, the Assad regime leveraged them to **concentrate** its forces in other parts of the country. In September 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan **agreed** to establish a demilitarized zone (DMZ) in the Idlib province and to abstain from military action in the area as of October 15, 2018, requiring groups to have ceded heavy weaponry by October 10, at which time the Iranians forward deployed some units in preparation to conduct offensive operations. To date, both the **Turkish** and **Russian** governments have been satisfied with adherence to the agreement, despite the regime's sporadic **shelling** of Idlib's eastern suburbs and the **maneuvering** of HTS in the province's south.

In terms of governance, **local governance structures** have emerged throughout Idlib province, enabling civil society practices and institutions to thrive while also providing **essential services**. The Idlib province's 156 local councils exist in a wide range of sizes and serve as an experiment in the type of participatory politics that were unavailable before the war, although there is great **variation** in their selection process. Some nominees are selected by larger or smaller councils or by consensus of local families and organizations through indirect elections, and sometimes seats are won through wealth, nepotism, and influence, rather than merit. Unfortunately, many of these councils are unable to raise revenue outside of international aid, meaning that council members often work on a volunteer basis and public services

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are unsustainable. Furthermore, international actors are hesitant to provide funding to some of these local organizations that may be affiliated with militant groups. The **Service Administration Commission**, for example, was founded by a member of Ahrar al-Sham (now part of the NLF) to coordinate local councils and public services. Likewise, the Public Service Administration founded by Fatah al-Sham (now part of HTS) **manages** service provision or cooperates with local councils to strengthen

the group's position of influence and relationship with the populace. Bodies such as these are larger in size and scope than local governments, and some local councils are often unable or unwilling to decline the militants' resources and protection.

Although Idlib was once regarded as one of Syria's more traditional provinces socially, wartime conditions and a shrinking male population have empowered women with **increased opportunities** such as participation in civil defense, job training, and education. **Law** and **teachers'** organizations have withstood the war and, through lapses in fighting, **peaceful protests** take place on a weekly basis. Strengthening civil society has **enabled** Syrians to more actively oppose not only the regime but also the presence of HTS in their communities. These activities come with great **security risks**, as was recently highlighted by the assassination of activist Raed Fares and photojournalist Hamoud Juneid, who had reported facing threats from both the Syrian government and extremist groups.

LEGAL CONTEXT:

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the U.N. Security Council can legally “authorize the use of force when there is a threat to international peace and security” Russia and China, however, have **hindered** the Security Council from taking any real action against the Assad regime; Russia has **vetoed** 12 separate resolutions on Syria, including resolutions on the use of force, the application of economic sanctions, and International Criminal Court referrals.

In the fall of 2013, Syria **acceded** to the Chemical Weapons Convention and declared its chemical weapons stockpile to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. While the declared stockpile was announced to have been destroyed by January 2016, most international observers doubted that Syria's entire stockpile had been fully disclosed. The Syrian regime has continued to commit chemical weapons attacks in violation of the convention and international law.

From a legal perspective, Syria is currently **engaged** in a number of armed conflicts, during which provisions of international humanitarian and human rights law apply. Despite this, the U.N., citizen journalists and reporters, and rights organizations have documented a number of mass atrocities, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, including but not limited to the use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate air strikes, the targeting of civil centers and hospitals, forced displacement of civilians, and the torture of dissidents; the vast majority of violations have been committed by the **Assad regime** and its allies, though rebel groups have also been implicated.

TREND ANALYSIS:

The standoff in Idlib marks the latest theater of the regime's offensive to retake Syria, and Assad himself has declared that establishing a DMZ is but a temporary measure before he reasserts control. An immediate breakdown in the DMZ resulting in conflict between Turkish proxies, jihadist actors, and regime forces will likely fail to be decisive, further escalating the conflict in the medium term. Whether or not the DMZ holds, looking farther out, eastern Syria will likely serve as the **next point of contention** as the regime sets its sights on the United States-backed Kurdish zone of control.

IMPLICATIONS:

Groups that have **complied** with cession of heavy weaponry (which include the NLS and HTS) are placed at disadvantage militarily and position factions that **reject** the DMZ (possibly including the remnants of the Islamic State or Huras al-Din, among others) as the strongest opposition forces.

Changes in the security dynamics stand to be accompanied by disastrous humanitarian fallout. Mark Lowcock, head of the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), predicted that fighting in Idlib could displace up to another 800,000 people—many of whom have been displaced by earlier violence in the war—and **has** the potential to become “the biggest loss of life of the twenty-first century.” Additionally, and in the areas that the Assad regime has reclaimed elsewhere in Syria, the government has resorted to punitive measures, including forced conscription, detention and torture, and extrajudicial killings of those perceived to be even peaceful dissidents. Should Idlib fall, similar human rights abuses are expected to follow.

▶ TIMEP COVERAGE:

- “ISIS Is Poised to Make a Comeback in Syria” (external commentary by TIMEP Senior Fellow Hassan Hassan)
- “Mapping Attacks on Women and Children’s Healthcare in Syria” (report by Alessandria Masi, Tomás Pfeffer, and Ella Pfeffer as part of Syria Deeply partnership with TIMEP)
- “For Many Syrian Women, Healthcare is a Matter of Geography” (report by Florence Massena and Youmna al-Dimashqi as part of Syria Deeply partnership with TIMEP)