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Syria

# The looming massacre in Idlib

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV524 - September 2018 -

Publication date: Sunday 16 September 2018

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**The regime of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad is threatening to carry out a massive assault on the province of Idlib, including a potential chemical weapons attack, in a bid to crush one of the last strongholds of opposition. Such an assault would have a potentially devastating impact on civilians, many of them refugees from the civil war and the last seven years of Assad's attempt to crush a democratic uprising.**

Joseph Daher reports on what's behind Assad's threat and the impact such an attack would have on civilians in the region.

More than seven years since the beginning of the Syrian popular uprising, which has been gradually transformed into a deadly war with an international character, the situation in the country is catastrophic at all levels. The popular classes are the most affected with continuous suffering.

At the end of 2017, some 13.1 million people in Syria required humanitarian assistance. Of these, 5.6 million are in acute need due to their displacement, exposure to hostilities, and limited access to basic goods and services. More than half the population was displaced internally or outside the country, forced to leave their homes as a result of the war.

More than 920,000 people have been displaced in Syria during the first four months of this year, a record number since the conflict began. And life for Syrian refugees in neighboring countries means poverty, exploitation and discriminatory policies.

The World Bank estimated in June 2017 that about one-third of all buildings and half of all Syrian schools and hospitals have been damaged or destroyed. The gross domestic product, which in 2010 stood at \$60.2 billion, dropped to only \$12.4 billion in 2016. Over 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

## Assad's Regime Consolidating its Power

Bashar al-Assad's regime, with the help of its Iranian and Russian allies as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah, has continued to recover territory. Outside of Assad's territory, military offensives and bombardments against civilians have continued. In April 2018, regime forces, with the assistance of Russia and Iran, conquered Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus. The offensive included the use of chemical weapons against civilians.

In mid- to late July, following a military campaign and a series of so-called "local reconciliation agreements" — leading to a few hundred Syrian opposition fighters and their families who refused surrender terms to be taken on buses to opposition-held areas in the north — the Syrian regime, assisted by its Russian ally, had regained the control of Dara'a and Qunaytra provinces.

Idlib province, now home to between 2.5 and 3 million persons — of whom 1.5 million are internally displaced persons — is controlled mostly by the jihadist coalition Hayat Tahrir Sham (HTS, led by formally al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra), which has imposed its own institutions and violently repressed activist networks and civil society organizations.

Idlib province lies at a crucial geopolitical crossroads between encroaching pro-regime front lines around northwest Syria, Turkey to the north and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)-controlled enclaves to the east, as well as Turkish-occupied regions of neighboring Aleppo province. Each and every actor has a stake in Idlib's future.

The Idlib region has suffered deadly bombing campaigns by air forces of the regime and Russia, which have killed and wounded many, despite being part of a "de-escalation" zone agreed upon by Russia, Iran and Turkey last September in Astana, Kazakhstan.

It has also witnessed great instability with violent clashes between HTS and rival armed groups, including the coalition of Jabhat Tahrir Suria (JTS, with leading elements Ahrar al-Sham, Nureddin al-Zinki, groups close to the Muslim Brotherhoods and some small FSA units) sponsored by Turkey, provoking the rejection and hostility of local populations against these reactionary forces. These reactionary armed groups have also committed significant violations of human rights against local populations.

Despite these conditions, civilian resistance actions, in which women have played an important role, have continued against HTS's reactionary rule. Resistance has taken the form of strikes, public demonstrations, the establishment of women's centers and statements, but without consolidating into an organized democratic political opposition able to challenge reactionary jihadist and salafist forces.

Mass demonstrations occurred throughout villages and towns of Idlib province on September 8 to oppose the threats of a military invasion and for the overthrow of the regime. Members of HTS repressed the protesters in Idlib city by firing live ammunition to break up the demonstration.

## Turkey's Influence in Idlib

Turkish armed forces have established a significant presence in Idlib province, with 12 military observation posts. Deployment of Turkish forces is based on the Astana agreement with Russia.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been pressing Russian President Vladimir Putin to make sure that no military intervention occurs against Idlib, while trying to push HTS to disband itself and dissolve into the wider milieu of the opposition armed groups Syria, in order for local fighters to join the Jabhat Tahrir Suria and foreign fighters to be given safe passage out of Syria.

Turkey also increased the pressure on HTS by declaring the organization a terrorist group. Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, the leader of HTS, however, has refused these conditions and released a statement denouncing any form of reconciliation.

Turkish negotiations with HTS were made to try to deter or convince Moscow and Tehran not to launch an offensive operation into Idlib province.

Turkey would like to preserve a zone of control along his border where it can manage flows of internally displaced persons, repatriate refugees from Turkey, and attack the PYD and its Syrian Democratic Forces.

Erdoğan, however, failed to secure a pledge for a ceasefire from Russia and Iran at a trilateral summit in Tehran in September. At the time of this writing, Turkish officials were still in discussions with Russia and Iran for a diplomatic

solution to prevent a military offensive on Idlib.

Turkey deployed tanks on its border following these events, and reinforced and transferred extra forces to observation posts. Ankara has reinforced its border controls over the past few years to prevent the arrival of new Syrian refugees.

Turkey has also strengthened its military leverage and bolstered the defenses of loyal factions within the Jabhat Tahrir Suria coalition, with a massive shipment of munitions and GRAD rocket launchers reportedly arriving across the border in Idlib on September 12.

Erdoğan also wrote in an article in the Wall Street Journal that a Syrian regime's offensive on Idlib "would cause humanitarian and security risks for Turkey, Europe and beyond," as a way to pressure Western countries.

Turkey's government has warned the EU it would not stop the new refugees from heading toward Europe, and in an apparent effort to underscore Erdoğan's warnings and threats, a pro-government newspaper published a map in Arabic showing how Syrian refugees might pass through Turkey and into Europe. The map, published by the Daily Sabah, seemed meant to encourage Syrians to head to Europe and to focus the attention of the EU on a potential new wave of arrivals.

As this article was being written, the Turkish border remains officially closed to Syrian refugees hoping to flee to safety, with only those in need of emergency medical treatment allowed in. A wall of concrete slabs seals shut most of Turkey's 620-mile border with Syria.

At least six people were shot and killed while crossing into Turkey during August. Human rights groups have long documented abuses by Turkish border soldiers tasked with preventing refugees from entering the country.

In February 2018, a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the deaths of 10 people as they attempted to cross into Turkey from Idlib during the second half of 2017. In some cases, people who succeeded in crossing into Turkish territory were then rounded up by security personnel and deported back over the border into Syria, in violation of international "non-refoulement" laws that forbids the forced return of asylum seekers.

Turkey currently hosts more than 3.5 million UN-registered Syrian refugees. Ankara also administers a series of internal displacement camps along the Syrian-Turkish border, in an area of Syria's northern Aleppo province that is controlled by Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups.

## The Beginning of a Massive Military Campaign?

Assad's regime has amassed its forces on the borders of the province, while Russian and Syrian warplanes have resumed a bombing campaign in Idlib and in Northern Hama province, killing more than 25 civilians after weeks of quiet, in an apparent prelude to a full-scale offensive.

Damascus had already captured some villages on the southeastern outskirts of Idlib, thanks to an operation carried out at the end of 2017. Idlib also suffered 38 attacks against its medical infrastructure during the first six months of 2018, before the launch of the new bombing campaign, which already has targeted new medical infrastructure,

including at least two hospitals and two clinics.

At the same time, Russia has consolidated its military presence off the coast of Syria with its largest naval deployment since the beginning of the conflict.

The Russian Defense Ministry said more than 25 warships and support vessels and around 30 planes, including fighter jets and strategic bombers, would take part in the Mediterranean naval drills, which it declared would last from September 1-8.

They involved anti-aircraft, anti-submarine and anti-mining exercises and ships from Russia's Northern, Baltic and Black Sea Fleets took part, in addition to vessels from its Caspian Flotilla.

Following these naval drills, Russia began its biggest war games since the fall of the USSR on September 10 close to its border with China, mobilizing 300,000 troops in a show of force that will include joint exercises with the Chinese army.

Moscow also stated that the Syrian regime had every right to chase the "terrorists" out of Idlib.

Humanitarian organizations and NGOs are worried about a military offensive by the Assad regime against Idlib, which would threaten the lives of 900,000 displaced civilians, who are already in precarious conditions. Two million people depend on vital aid delivered from Turkey, and fighting could lead to a mass exodus.

More than 30,000 people have fled their homes in northwest Syria since the army and its allies resumed bombardment in the beginning of September, the U.N. Humanitarian Affairs Office (OCHA) said on September 10. About half of those displaced so far have moved to camps, while others went to informal settlements, stayed with family or rented housing,

This is despite official statements by Russian and Iranian officials claiming they were averting a potential catastrophe. Western states have been passive about the current developments, while only threatening a "much stronger response" to previous Western air strikes if Damascus uses chemical weapons.

In other words, a military campaign and mass civilian casualties by Assad's regime and its allies will be tolerated as long as they use "conventional weaponry."

## Oppose Assad and His Crimes

While affirming opposition to the jihadist coalition of the HTS and other reactionary armed groups in Idlib, progressives must oppose the shelling and threats of military offensive by the regime and its foreign allies against Idlib, where millions of civilians reside or have taken refuge.

As the popular demonstrations on September 8 proved, large sectors of the local population oppose both the regime and its Islamic fundamentalist opponents.

These protests expose just how wrong it is to equate the millions of people in Idlib with their jihadist oppressors.

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Doing so is one of the tricks enacted by Assad and his so-called “anti-imperialist” backers to justify his war against the Syrian popular classes.

Moreover, such an equation mimics U.S. imperialism’s “war on terror” and its attendant Islamophobia.

A blank check given to the Assad regime for its crimes would entail further betrayal of the Syrian popular classes and their heroic resistance, which would in turn increase the sense of impunity of the region’s authoritarian and despotic states, giving them the confidence and justification to crush their own people if they were to rebel.

*September 14, 2018*

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