

Syrian Emergency Task Force and the Center for American Progress present:

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SYRIA: THE WAY FORWARD

An off the record 12-part series on Syria



Voices from the Ground:

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TOPIC ONE:



Executive Summary:

The Biden administration will soon have to address the situation in Syria, and there is little doubt that Idlib will be one of the first tests the White House faces in this decade-long conflict. For several reasons, the resolution of the Syrian war hinges on protecting Idlib. Retaking Idlib would enable the regime of Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad to declare a complete military victory, annihilate any chance for a negotiated settlement or return of refugees, and impede international efforts to hold the regime accountable for its atrocities. Millions of civilians, including 1 million children, are trapped within an ever-shrinking space surrounded by the Assad regime and Russian and Iranian-backed forces, including Hezbollah. The regime and its allies are determined to displace, kill, or detain Idlib's population, including over 2 million internally displaced persons. The scale of previous, ongoing, and potential atrocities in Idlib constitutes one of the 21st century's worst crimes against humanity.

Beyond the humanitarian stakes, the crisis in Idlib threatens the interests of the United States and its allies. First, an Assad-Russian-Iranian offensive could double the number of refugees in Europe as a new flood of civilians flees the violence. Second, this offensive will serve to empower extremist elements in Syria and beyond. Violent extremist organizations use the international community's inaction in the face of mass atrocities in Idlib to feed their propaganda and recruitment efforts. Third, Idlib distracts the regime and its allies from focusing on northeast Syria, where U.S. troops are continuing the fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS. Retaking Idlib would enable Assad and his backers to refocus their efforts on pushing the United States out of Syria, potentially imperiling U.S. troops and their local coalition partners and enabling an ISIS resurgence.

Today, a tentative ceasefire in Idlib teeters on the verge of collapse. This ceasefire was established mostly thanks to NATO ally Turkey, whose military intervention in Idlib early last year stopped an unfolding humanitarian disaster. In contrast to its destabilizing actions in northeast Syria, Turkey's opposition to a further regime offensive aligns with U.S. and European interests. At minimal cost and without a direct U.S. military intervention or deployment, the United States can work with its European allies and Turkey toward the common goal of resolving the Idlib crisis and avoiding a humanitarian and national security disaster. The United States must lead in coordinating a multi-pronged strategy that incorporates diplomatic, economic, and military pressure to protect civilians in Idlib. The United States and its allies must establish a zero-tolerance policy on violence against civilians in Idlib. Washington should leverage the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and other targeted sanctions to deprive Assad's war machine of resources. The United States must engage directly with Turkey to support its military efforts to counter the military operations of Assad-Russia-Iran in Idlib.

^[1] United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, "An Estimated 1 Million Children across Idlib are at Risk," September 9, 2018. (https://www.unicef.org/mena/stories/estimated-1-million-children-across-idlib-are-risk)

^[2] Omer Karapsan, "The Internally Displaced in the Middle East and North Africa: Harbingers of Future Conflict?" The Brookings Institution, July 5, 2017. (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/05/the-internally-displaced-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-harbingers-of-future-conflict)

Policy Recommendations:

The United States must pursue and strengthen efforts for the immediate cessation of attacks on Idlib's civilian population. [1]

The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies continue to escalate military operations in Idlib, including by deliberately targeting civilians—a war crime and crime against humanity. Aside from Turkish efforts, aerial attacks by Russian and Syrian forces have gone unchallenged. The United States must act to stop the further slaughter and forced displacement of civilians in Idlib. The current precarious ceasefire in Idlib was made possible by Turkey's military action against regime and Iranian-backed forces including Hezbollah in northwest Syria. That action stalled further atrocities and mass displacement. The United States must work to support its NATO ally on the ground through logistical, intelligence, and diplomatic coordination. Through these efforts, coupled with continued economic sanctions under the Caesar Act, the United States can help protect Idlib without direct U.S. military intervention. Protecting Idlib is conducive to a negotiated settlement and bolsters U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

The United States must bolster its diplomatic efforts in Geneva. [2] The United States must push for the advancement of UNSCR 2254, which calls for "an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people."[3] The United States, as a significant donor to humanitarian aid in Syria, must use its diplomatic efforts to hold the United Nations accountable for ensuring the safe and adequate delivery of humanitarian aid to the region. Specifically, Washington must sway Russia and China to extend the UN authorization for cross-border aid through Bab al-Hawa, the only border crossing currently authorized for humanitarian aid. This authorization is set to expire in July 2021[4]. Washington should also push Russia and China to reopen the three border crossings that previously carried cross-border aid but were closed at Russia's behest: Al-Rathma and Al-Yaroubiyah, which have been closed since January 2020,[5] and Bab al-Salam, which has been closed since July 2020.[6] (See Figure 7) [7]



Figure 7: "August 2020 Monthly Forecast," Security Council Report

Furthermore, the United States must develop a diplomatic strategy to achieve the full implementation of UNSCR 2254. [8] The United States must reaffirm and emphasize its commitment to a red line regarding the use of chemical weapons. Washington should use its influence to push the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to suspend the Syrian regime's rights and privileges to holding the regime accountable for using chemical weapons against its own people. [9] Finally, the United States must send a strong message against the normalization of relations with Assad.[10]

The United States must step up support for existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib province. [11]

Existing civilian infrastructure in Idlib is not operating at full capacity, due to limited international support. The United States must engage with and support existing and additional civilian programming, including schools, medical facilities, and local governing councils to stabilize the region and develop a strong democratic civil society. Strengthening civilian infrastructure and civil society will help counter the influence of VEOs in Idlib by providing people with alternatives to, and the means to resist, VEOs such as HTS.

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The United States must intensify and broaden 2019 Caesar Act accountability efforts. [12]

Strict enforcement of Caesar and other U.S. sanctions are crucial for "limiting the resources available to the Assad regime for military offensives." According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, since the Caesar Act went into effect in June 2020, the departments of State and Treasury have imposed sanctions on 113 individuals and entities for supporting the Assad regime or preventing a resolution of the war in Syria. [13] The Biden administration must continue this effort and ensure that the United States will make no exception for allies or partners who evade sanctions. [14]

- [1] Virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice President at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.
- [2] Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.
- [3] United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, December 18, 2015. (https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf)
- [4] David Adesnik, "Syria," From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria)
- [5] United Nations, Meeting Coverage SC/14127, "Greater Cross-Border, Cross-Line Access Needed for Assistance to Syria, Emergency Relief Coordinator Tells Security Council," February 27, 2020. (https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14127.doc.htm)
- [6] United Nations, Press Release SC/14268, "Limited Cross-Border Access into North-West Syria Placing Strain on Humanitarians to Reach Many in Need, Aid Worker Tells Security Council," 29 July 2020, (https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14268.doc.htm); Jacob Kurtzer and Will Todman, "The Possible End of Cross-border Aid in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 6, 2020. (https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria)
- [7] "August 2020 Monthly Forecast," Security Council Report, July 31, 2020. (https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2020-08/in-hindsight-six-days-five-resolutions-one-border-crossing.php)
- [8] Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.
- [9]David Adesnik, "Syria," From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria)
- [11] Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020; virtual interview with Jim Hooper, chief commercial officer and corporate vice president at SES Government Solutions, December 19, 2020.
- [12] Virtual interview with Steven Heydemann, non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Center on Middle East Policy, December 16, 2020.
- [1]3 According a document provided by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan think tank focused on national security issues that has tracked the announcement of Caesar-related sanctions, there have been 119 Treasury and 34 State Department designations since June 17, 2020.
- [14] David Adesnik, "Syria," From Trump to Biden: The Way Forward for U.S. National Security, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, January 14, 2021. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/14/Syria)

