

# The U.S. Role in Idlib and Beyond: Perspectives from Syria

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Brief Analysis

## How can the United States mitigate the worsening humanitarian crisis in Idlib, and what do Syrian activists on the ground want from Washington?

*On March 12, Raed al-Saleh, Omar Alshogre, Rajaa Altalli, and Naomi Kikoler addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Saleh is chairman of the Syria Civil Defence, aka the White Helmets. Alshogre is the director of detainee affairs for the Syrian Emergency Task Force and a former prisoner of the Assad regime. Altalli is co-founder of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy, a Syrian NGO. Kikoler directs the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their*

*remarks.*

## **RAED AL-SALEH**

On the ground, Syrians are at the mercy of Russian warplanes; at the UN Security Council, they are at the mercy of Russian vetoes. If Moscow blocks or fails to extend humanitarian resolutions that provide international access to Syria from Turkey, it would leave 4 million Syrians at risk of starving. Further aid distribution would then be in the hands of Syrian intelligence authorities. Internally displaced persons would suffer the same fate as those previously besieged, and their resources would likely be limited to mosquito nets—and coffins. The Assad regime has made efforts to rebuild areas of East Ghouta and Aleppo from which Syrians have been expelled or fled, but not many IDPs are able to go back there, and those who attempt the trip run the risk of being kidnapped.

In short, humanitarian aid from the UN is being shamefully politicized, even though international law obligates states to deliver such assistance regardless of the veto process. Russia and the Syrian regime have never abided by ceasefires or international law during the past nine years, and Moscow is deceiving the world by using different excuses—it justifies bombing civilians and hospitals by claiming to fight terrorism.

The White Helmets operate differently when it comes to distributing humanitarian aid. We disguise our presence instead of communicating overtly with one another. To avoid being targeted by the regime, we are forced to camouflage our ambulances with mud and build underground hospitals—and even these measures are not enough to prevent us from being hit.

When the UN asked hospitals to provide coordinates to Russian forces so they would not get bombed, those locations were attacked immediately after sending the information. The UN responded by merely establishing a board of inquiry to launch a secret investigation. Since the ongoing Russian military campaign began in April 2019, 100 hospitals and 62 schools have been bombed. In one case, 8 schools were bombed in a single day. Additionally, the Russians and the Syrian regime targeted 15 IDP camps and about 9,000 civilian homes with an estimated 100,000 airstrikes, using tens of thousands of barrel bombs and rockets. Around one million civilians fled during the campaign's first six months, and another million have fled in the past seventy days alone. In sum, the campaign was designed to target critical civilian infrastructure.

Regarding Idlib, administration of the province's military and security sectors is currently distributed between parties such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front, the main local power. Their main goal is to halt regime military advances on the ground. Yet allowing potent armed factions to hold sway indefinitely can undermine civil society. A ceasefire is needed to curtail their power and involvement in civilian affairs.

Dealing with the de facto authorities is another area of focus for the White Helmets. Around 25,000 Turkish soldiers are currently deployed in Idlib. Given their NATO pedigree, they are fit to deal with the situation in Syria while abiding by human rights standards. If the international community is not willing to deploy peacekeepers to this conflict, they can at least support the NATO Turkish forces.

At present, thousands and thousands of IDPs in Idlib are suffering tremendously because they have no shelter. For those who do, one might see around thirty people living in a 4x4-meter tent. Some "shelters" consist of just blankets under olive trees. The humanitarian response is meeting just 25 percent of the people's needs.

In all, the long border area between Turkey and north Syria used to be populated by some 35,000 people but now holds around 5 million. In 2015, the arrival of 1 million refugees in Europe nearly broke the EU, so how can Syria be expected to deal with nearly 5 million IDPs, especially when diseases tend to surge here during summertime?

## **OMAR ALSHOGRE**

Official estimates suggest there are some 250,000 prisoners in Syria, but the numbers are certainly higher. As a former prisoner myself, I recall seeing as many as fifty executions in one day. When photos and recordings of such atrocities circulated online and the world was exposed to the problem, the regime—which regularly monitors foreign news outlets—decided to hold back from some of its more extreme measures, at least for a time.

Previously, for instance, prison guards were known to provide hopeless inmates with very small amounts of food in order to provoke them into fighting over it. Once public attention was brought to bear, however, we suddenly noticed a change. Guards brought us lots of food for a while, and the security forces stopped torturing and executing prisoners. For that month, at least, we were sufficiently fed and not subjected to torture.

Outside the prisons, the regime has continued to implement its sectarian politics by displacing various ethnic and religious communities (e.g., forcing Christians to settle in Muslim-majority areas). Yet it fails to consider that people of all backgrounds are united in prison.

Meanwhile, unlike Turkey, most regional and Gulf Arab states have seemingly been trying to normalize relations with Bashar al-Assad. These regional actors are concerned that uprisings in one country can spread to many others. For the Syrian people, however, reconciliation with Assad is not an option. The people cannot simply forget the atrocities committed by his regime and its affiliates, who murdered some fifty people in my own home and burned my father's corpse. We no longer have faith in the regime and therefore cannot maintain peace with it. We did not launch this revolution and lose family and friends just to reconcile with the regime.

## **RAJAA ALTALLI**

Since 2011, the Syrian people have been demanding justice and basic human rights. In return, Syrian security forces have shot at civilians, shelled towns, and used tanks and chemical weapons against them. Every story we hear at the Center for Civil Society and Democracy and other organizations deserves to be heard by the world and acted upon. It is imperative to document what the survivors have to share, similar to what was done for World War II atrocities. With the help of the international community, we need to end the crimes committed by the Syrian regime. We advocate holding those in charge accountable through international law.

It is also crucial for the UN to help Syrians achieve a political solution that transitions the country toward democracy. In contrast, normalizing relations with the regime would just postpone a solution. Even if foreign governments achieve such normalization, the Syrian people will still demand freedom and peaceful distribution of power.

Observers should also keep in mind that women have been playing a fundamental role in Syrian political dynamics since 2011. In some areas, women are more involved in negotiations. Their participation is essential, not just because they constitute half of the population, but also because they can bring a different perspective to the table.

Regarding the ongoing displacements, many Syrians remain trapped inside and outside Syria due to the regime's policies. Most IDPs lack even have basic sanitizing equipment, so they are hardly prepared to battle the coronavirus or other epidemics.

## **NAOMI KIKOLER**

Although establishing a ceasefire is critical, it is not a long-term solution to the crisis. Russia continues to complicate the process and endanger civilians by blocking a broader peace resolution.

The Simon-Skjoldt Center and the Holocaust Memorial Museum focus on protecting civilians, but currently there is no international or U.S. strategy to fulfill that crucial mission. Similarly, there were no strategies to save Jewish lives during the Holocaust. Although a few thousand lives were saved through various individual acts, millions perished. Today, there are numerous ways to save lives in Syria, and a lasting ceasefire can facilitate the means to prevent more civilians from dying. Regardless of where U.S. policymakers may fall on Washington's overall Syria policy,

crimes against humanity are a nonpartisan issue.

*This summary was prepared by Jonathan Sameyach. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖*

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