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The Calm Before the Storm in Idlib?

October 9, 2018 10:01AM EDT Dispatches

All Warring Parties Need to Protect Civilians

An eerie calm has descended on Syria’s Idlib governorate, the largest remaining part of the country where numerous armed groups ([https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/09/03/syrian-war-understanding-idlib-s-rebel-factions?](https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/09/03/syrian-war-understanding-idlib-s-rebel-factions?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=irinocial&utm_campaign=irinupdates)

[utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=irinocial&utm_campaign=irinupdates](https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2018/09/03/syrian-war-understanding-idlib-s-rebel-factions?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=irinocial&utm_campaign=irinupdates)) face the Syrian government and its Russian ally (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/b63-saving-idlib-destruction>). Gone are the Syrian and Russian fighter jets that were relentlessly bombing (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/10/tragic-irony-unlawful-attacks-civilians-syrias-de-escalation-zones>) the area, threatening to trigger a massive new refugee flow towards the sealed Turkish border manned by soldiers who have shot people trying to cross without permission.

But even as Idlib’s 3 million war-battered civilians (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20180912_northwest_syria_flash_update_final.pdf) breathe cautious sighs of relief, there’s a real risk that little will be done to protect them if fighting resumes, given Syria’s history of indiscriminate and targeted attacks on civilians in Idlib (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/31/russia/syria-deadly-airstrikes-trapped-civilians>) and elsewhere (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/22/syria/russia-airstrikes-siege-killing-civilians>).

After months of diplomatic and military maneuvers and persistent international pressure (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/27/russias-responsibility-syrian-reconquest-idlib>), Turkey and Russia signed on September 17 (<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>) a plan that suspended an impending Syrian and Russian assault (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45456045>) against Idlib’s armed groups.

They agreed to create a 15- to 20-kilometer wide “demilitarized zone (<http://www.digitaljournal.com/print/article/532644>)” that cuts mainly through Idlib and to identify (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-putin-erdogan-hope/russia-and-turkey-agree-to-create-buffer-zone-in-syrias-idlib-idUSKCN1LX1BU>) all “radical terrorist groups” there. Ankara is tasked with removing them from the zone by October 15, and removing all heavy weapons (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/opposition-heavy-weapons-removed-from-idlib-on-monday/1275717>) from the remaining groups. Syria initially welcomed the deal, but on October 8, President Bashar al-Assad pledged (<https://www.sana.sy/?p=825610>) to “liberate all areas that remain under terrorist control and return them to the auspices of the Syrian state.”

Even if Turkey meets its deadline, major questions remain. History has repeatedly shown that “safe zones (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/16/q-safe-zones-and-armed-conflict-syria>)” are rarely safe for civilians. Will the zone attract massive numbers of civilians desperate to avoid Syrian and

Russian attacks on the fighters Turkey relocates to the north of Idlib? If so, how will the already massively overstretched (<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/10-things-you-need-know-about-idlib-province-syria-today>) and increasingly cash-strapped (<https://bit.ly/2RILttt>) aid groups in Idlib cope? If the Syrian government and anti-government groups wage battle in the zone, will they let civilians flee and humanitarians in, or will civilians be trapped as the bombs rain down? And how will the Syrian-Russian alliance treat civilians who remain in areas in Idlib outside of the zone?

As Syria’s warring parties, including Russia and Turkey, jostle for influence, they need to commit to protecting civilians throughout Idlib and beyond.

ecoi.net summary:

Idlib governorate: Article on the security situation and situation of civilians



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