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May 2019

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Refugees May Head to
Europe as Attacks on Idlib
Escalate

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By Khaled Terkawi

On February 10, clashes broke out between local Turks and some Syrians in the Esenyurt area in Istanbul. By the time Turkish security forces intervened, a number of shops owned by Syrians [were attacked and damaged](#).

This incident came amidst a notable rise in the hateful discourse targeting Syrians in Turkey. In the aftermath of the recent municipal elections, [the first announcement](#) of the new opposition mayor of "Bolu" was to cancel the aid for the Syrian refugees in his city, and stop issuing new licenses for commercial investments by Syrians, including opening new shops. This hostile attitude towards Syrian refugees was adopted during election campaign by hundreds of candidates who ran for the recent municipal elections across Turkey, reflecting a new trend towards Syrians emerging in some segments of the Turkish society.

At the same time, across the Syrian border, Russia unleashed a brutal bombardment of towns and villages in Idlib. Using a new type of high-explosive missiles for the first time in these areas, destroying buildings and killing people trapped inside them. Russian bombing spread fear and terror among the population, causing tens of thousands of civilians to head towards the Syrian-Turkish border, which they considered to be relatively safe from shelling. Thousands of families remain there in the open, sheltering under olive trees near the border and waiting for the bombardment to end.

In the first three days of the bombardment, the local organizations documented the arrival of 12,257 families to the Syrian-Turkish border. This figure is increasing every day. The Office of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations estimated the number of people displaced by the new wave of attacks to be more than [140 000 people](#). The UN confirmed the targeting of hospitals, bakeries, and schools, as well as targeting of the 'Civil Defense' vehicles that were carrying out medical rescue operations.

Trapped at the Syrian-Turkish border, the displaced are continuously looking

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for ways to enter Turkey via the smuggling networks. So far, more than three thousand people - according to sources close to the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) - managed to cross the borders this way. It is believed that these numbers will increase further with the escalation of bombarding and potential ground operation in Idlib. And they don't intend to stay in Turkey.

With the notable restrictions and delays in issuing temporary protection cards "Kimlik" for Syrians, and the rise in hostile rhetoric targeting Syrian refugees, a considerable number of Syrians entering Turkey these days, as well as some of those who have been living in Turkey for a while, is increasingly looking to try and make it to Europe.

On 3 May, the body of a Syrian doctor, named Mahmoud Al-Hasan, was found near the coastline of the Turkish city of Bodrum when a boat carrying him and other Syrians sank while they were trying to flee to Europe.

Doctor Al-Hasan fled from Daraa to the north of Syria a few months ago and paid smugglers to enter Turkey. He immediately proceeded to try to reach Europe. The day after Al-Hasan drowned, the Turkish border guards seized two boats trying to reach Europe [from the same place](#) with at least 10 Syrians on board.

Since the start of the Russian military campaign against Idlib, a group of Syrians has begun to organize a convoy which will try to reach Europe. The initiative builds on the idea of "[Convoy of Hope](#)" launched in February, which so far gathered support of some 50 000 people. The initiative is attracting attention of large numbers of Syrians currently displaced in Turkey and several gatherings in the Al-Fateh district in central Istanbul were held to discuss the organization of such a convoy. With the new influx of refugees from Idlib, such initiatives are bound to grow unstoppably.

Civil society organizations in Syria estimate that Idlib houses some four million people displaced from other areas of Syria. They are dispersed in various areas and villages in the province, enduring harsh living conditions and lack of basic supplies and resources, yet unwilling to return to Assad-held areas fearing persecution, detention and forced conscription. However, as the regime forces launch a full-scale attack on Idlib with the assistance of Russian bombers, they will have no other option but to try to make it to Turkey and from there to Europe.

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With such a large influx, Turkey will not be able to control the attempts of refugees to reach Europe by any means available, by sea or land. After eight years of suffering and this latest displacement in Idlib, and the lack of guarantees that they will ever be able to return to Syria without the threat of reprisals by the regime, detention, and forced conscription, people being displaced from Idlib don't have much to lose.