

SACD | Analysys

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If the West Leaves Idlib to Russia and Assad, It Won't Be Only Syrians Who Pay the Price

When in 1995, the leaders of the US, UK, and France decided to give Bosnian Serbs a green light to enter Srebrenica, some of them, and Bill Clinton in particular, saw it as a necessary element of the endgame of the Bosnian war. It was seen as a part of the strategy to end the conflict which saw the worst atrocities on European soil since WWII. All will later claim they did not expect what was to unfold after the fall of the enclave housing some 40 000 Bosnians: Ratko Mladic's forces proceeded to commit genocide by killing more than 8000 boys and men who surrendered. As I write this, a comparable scenario is looming over Idlib, only on a much larger scale. And, contrary to Srebrenica, nobody can claim they were not warned about what is likely to take place.

Idlib shelters more than three million people, many of whom have been displaced several times by Assad's forces and its Russian and Iranian allies from elsewhere in Syria. The enclave is subject to the so-called "Sochi Agreement" between Russia and Turkey, which was supposed to create a "de-escalation zone" (language has evolved since Srebrenica) where the millions of civilians would be protected from violence. However, since February last year, Assad's forces, backed by Russian aviation and mercenaries, as well as Iranian militias and Hezbollah, have launched a campaign against Idlib which intensified in December 2019. As a result, more than a million people have been displaced towards the border with Turkey (which closed its border, so they can't enter), entire cities such as Mara'at Al-Numan, Saraqeb, Ariha, have been reduced to rubble and emptied of its people, more than 1700 civilians, many of whom children, have been killed in bombardment, people are freezing to death in makeshift camps.

All this under an indifferent gaze of the world and the powers capable of reigning Assad and the Russians in. Turkey has deployed troops under a declared intention to push Assad's forces back to the Sochi lines, but they remain vulnerable to Russian airpower. The United States remains on the side-lines, limiting its support to a NATO ally to diplomatic statements and intelligence, while the EU has not moved beyond "strongly worded statements". Turkish president Erdogan has sought a summit with Putin, Macron and Merkel to discuss the situation, but it is unclear whether it will happen or what the outcome would be if it did.

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The main reason for such deadly indifference is in the flawed understanding of the situation by many western policymakers, some of whom behind the closed doors speak of the current slaughter of people in Idlib as a “tragic but unavoidable part of the Syrian endgame.” If Assad conquers Idlib, a certain number of innocents will die, yes, but the conflict will be as good as over we will finally be able to turn towards reconstruction, the return of refugees and normalization of Syria (and its murderous regime). A key element to this thinking is the fact that HTS, a former Al Qaeda affiliate is in control of part of Idlib and therefore Russians and Assad are given a free hand in “dealing with the terrorists”. The fact that three million people (who themselves never called for HTS to take power and have consistently demonstrated against it) are going to be the collateral damage to the Russian “anti-terrorist” slaughter draws nothing more than a shrug or a cut-and-paste statement about “respect for international humanitarian law” by most with the power to act.

The consequences of such flawed thinking are going to be catastrophic, and not only for the Syrians. What is in fact likely to happen if Assad and the Russians are not reigned in and are allowed to conquer Idlib, with more than three million people trapped there?

Idlib as new Srebrenica

It is important to note that the main reason for Russia’s precipitated decision to attack Idlib with such ferocity is the fast demise and disintegration of the Assad regime at the economic, social and security levels. Russia realized that it cannot cement its military victories into permanent political gains through diplomacy within the projected remaining lifetime of the regime. Instead, it decided to employ the “Grozny doctrine” of complete annihilation of people who stand in the way of its strategic goals and bring the conflict to an end before the regime collapses.

As is evident from the relentless and indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas in Idlib, especially with highly inaccurate and destructive barrel bombs, beheadings of captured rebels, summary executions of civilians who did not flee, or the barbaric desecration of graveyards in towns which fell to Assad’s and Russian forces, the people of Idlib are dehumanized in their eyes to the point where large-scale executions of military-age men are likely to take place as soon as Idlib falls.

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This applies primarily to those who chose to remain under the regime's control under some sort of a "reconciliation agreement" as we have seen after the fall of Daraa, Eastern Ghouta or Aleppo. They would be likely to be taken initially to "refugee shelters," as was done in Homs and elsewhere with returnees from Rukban and other refugee camps. The men would be separated from women and children and arrested under the accusation of terrorism or rebelling against the regime. As was the case with tens of thousands of other Syrians arrested by Assad's security services under the same charges, they would likely never be seen again.

Importantly, the recent poll conducted by the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity indicates that only less than 10% of the people displaced by Russian and Assad's onslaught would be willing to remain under Assad's rule. Even if we increase this number to one third, it means that more than two million others would head to the border with Turkey and try to force their way across a closed border.

In the immediate, this would likely result in a significant loss of life as Turkey attempts to keep the border closed since it already hosts some four million Syrian refugees and it has repeatedly indicated it cannot take any more. It would ultimately have to relent and open the border, likely trying to force large numbers to the areas of Aleppo and the northeast of Syria under the control of the Turkish Army. This would further fuel tensions in those areas, already burdened by the simmering tensions with Kurdish militias and the presence of the regime and Russian patrols.

Additionally, most of the displaced Syrians have indicated that their aim would be to try and reach the safety of Europe. Turkey is unlikely to try and stop large numbers of Syrians arriving from Idlib on their way to trying to reach European shores. Beyond the horrors that Greek islands would see as the immediate impact of a new wave of at least a million Syrians streaming across the sea (Lesbos already providing a glimpse of such future), it is not hard to imagine the devastating impact on European political dynamics of such large scale movement of refugees.

These are only the immediate, short term consequences we are likely to see in the first few months following the fall of Idlib. The medium and long term impact would be more devastating.

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Death of the political process and Europe in turmoil

Assad's "victory" in Idlib would completely destroy and chances for a political solution to the conflict in Syria and a significant return of refugees. Assad is already disinterested in reaching any genuine political settlement and with this would become completely dismissive of any concessions asked from him in the political process. More importantly, who in the Syrian opposition would ever have a mandate from the Syrian people to enter into any kind of political discussion with Assad and the Russians after such a scenario? The political process as such would be dead in the water and displacement of Syrians would become a long-term, if not a permanent situation.

The collapse of the political process would see the cementing on Russian and Iranian control over Syria. The US economic sanctions targeting the regime and its sponsors would likely intensify, which would likely collapse an already destroyed economy in Syria, increasing the economic despair of people in areas under Assad's control. This would, in turn, lead to an increase in migration from these areas to Lebanon and Jordan and onwards from Lebanon to Europe.

The economic, political and social turmoil in Lebanon and Turkey, which would result from the influx of fresh waves of Syrian refugees and migrants would provide for an explosive mix in the political dynamics of these countries. If they attempted to force the return of a large number of Syrians, they would be met by a "victorious" Assad's regime, which has already demonstrated the intent to exert revenge on any returnees it sees as anti-regime through detentions, forcible recruitment, enforced disappearances and discrimination over the property and human rights. Should such forced return of large numbers of refugees to Assad's rule happen, it would inevitably lead to new cycles of violence inside Syria, as evident from the current low-intensity conflict in areas such as Daraa.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg of horrendous consequences which would befall us all should Idlib be allowed to fall to Assad and the Russians. The worst and the most dangerous impact of a blatant dereliction of responsibility to the people of Idlib, who have already suffered more than can be described in a text like this, would be in the nihilism and radicalization of its children and youth.

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What narratives would 1.5 million children of Idlib grow up on? How could they ever be expected to buy into the notions of justice, law, and human rights after having witnessed what they have already been exposed to and what they would witness if Idlib was to fall? What prospects would they have to recover from their traumas in the circumstances I laid out above? How would anyone be able to prevent them from falling prey to the merchants of radicalism and nihilism who would welcome them into open arms? It is the Syrian youth that must be the engine of political, social and cultural change if Syria is ever to become a stable, peaceful country. If we lose them now, we will lose our future, and the region any chance for stability for decades to come. The displacement and the resulting rage will become inter-generational.

This is if Idlib falls. Hopefully, it is clear to any sane person that this simply must not be allowed to happen, as it would impact horrifically and likely permanently the affected Syrians, the countries in the region, Europe and likely beyond. It has to be prevented by any means necessary.

But the alternative – in which the three million people of Idlib are crammed into a sliver of land along the border with Turkey - which seems to be on the table in the ongoing discussions, would not have less drastic consequences.

Russian ghetto proposal: the same effect only delayed

There seems to be a concerted effort by the Russian forces deploying along the lines to sea off the newly conquered areas around the M4 and M5 highways. Last week a map was circulated, according to which Russia is "offering" a strip of land that is less than 10% of Idlib territory where more than three million people would be crammed. According to this "solution", Assad's gains from the onslaught would be cemented, while the remainder of Idlib territory would be patrolled by Russian and Turkish forces. Although any measure that would stop the ongoing slaughter and allow for the badly needed aid to reach the displaced people sheltering in makeshift camps and in the open in freezing, unforgiving conditions which have already killed scores of children, this cannot be a lasting solution.

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In such a scenario, the majority of displaced people would flock to the areas near the Turkish border in search of safety. Turkish border would remain closed, and many likely would die trying to cross it. The entire population of more than three million, crammed into this shrunken area, would remain vulnerable to sporadic, deadly attacks from Assad's and Russian aviation, now far deadlier due to the density of populated areas. These people would all become entirely dependent on aid for survival, likely living in makeshift, non-permanent accommodation unfit to withstand harsh weather conditions. The inhumanity of this "solution" is such that it doesn't warrant a serious discussion. Much of the implications of the fall of Idlib I described above would still apply, only with a delayed and more devastating long-term effect.

It is clear from the details of these scenarios that the urgency for European and other powerful states to act on Idlib does not come from a moral imperative, Syrians have long abandoned such illusions, but from clear political and security interests. The immediate priority is to pressure Assad and Russia into a ceasefire and provide urgent aid to the displaced people. Once the killing and the suffering of civilians is stopped, there must be a strong, concerted and unrelenting push to secure a meaningful political solution that will guarantee a safe environment for all Syrians, under a robust international presence and guarantees. The humanitarian catastrophe that is Idlib has shown that the lessons from the advent of the Second World War still apply – appeasement of dictators willing to kill massive numbers of people to achieve their dreams of grandeur never works. If you fail to heed those lessons, it will not only be the Syrians who pay the price.



Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

SACD is a civil rights popular movement established by Syrians for Syrians. It works to promote, protect and secure the rights of displaced Syrians.

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