

SYRIA

MARCH - MAY 2019 BRIEFING



Humanitarian Figures

11 million

People need humanitarian assistance. The impact of present and past hostilities is the primary driver behind humanitarian needs in Syria, according to [OCHA](#).

3 million

People are currently at risk in Idlib Province, where the escalating situation and continued attacks by Syrian and Russian-backed forces is on the verge of creating an [unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe](#).

200,000

People were displaced between 1 and 16 May, while 20 health facilities, three IDP settlements, and one refugee camp were reportedly affected by hostilities. This number is in addition to those people displaced prior to that date, [OCHA reports](#)

70,000

Children out of the 200,000 recently displaced are in immediate need of education support as the hostilities continue, [OCHA](#) confirms. 250,000 school-aged children in Idlib are currently affected by the situation.

Highlights

- > Under new law, British nationals to be banned from visiting '[terror hotspots](#)' in Syria
- > Jihadist rebels [attempt an attack](#) on Russia's largest airbase in Syria
- > UN says "[worst fears are coming true](#)" as 3 million people are trapped in Idlib

Key Developments

- > The European Union has called on Turkey, Russia and Iran to [protect civilians in Idlib](#). "We expect the Syrian regime and the Astana guarantors to fulfil immediately their responsibilities and commitments, and ensure the immediate protection of civilians," the EU's top diplomat Federica Mogherini and its humanitarian aid chief Christos Stylianides said a statement.
- > In March, Russia attacked the rebel-held province of Idlib in the first [major assault](#) in months. Heavy bombardment on the last rebel-held enclave by Russian and Syrian planes has been described as a "full-scale assault", threatening the lives of three million people who live in Idlib province. [The attack comes as foreign ministers in Brussels pledged £3.8 billion](#) to support neighbouring countries continuing to accept Syrian nationals as refugees.
- > On May 14, at [least ten people were killed and thirty injured](#) by a rocket strike on Neirab camp close to the city of Aleppo, the UN confirmed in a statement. As families gathered to break their fasts during Ramadan Iftar meal, several rockets hit the "[densely populated](#)" camp. Four children were among the fatalities, the youngest aged just six years old.

Context

Now in its ninth year, the Syrian conflict has caused devastation to thousands of families and reduced much of the country to rubble. Roughly half of the country's 22 million population has been displaced, both internally and seeking refuge in neighbouring countries as well as Europe. Millions are in need of humanitarian assistance. In 2011 peaceful protests in Daraa, inspired by the Arab Springs in neighbouring countries, campaigned for a pro-democratic government, however, these were soon quashed by President Assad and a full-blown civil war ensued.

The conflict is further complicated by the lack of a clear-cut opposition versus Government scenario. Instead, there is the Sunni majority, the President's Shia Alawaite sect, Syria's Kurds and extremist groups, namely the so-called Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda. Government backing is mainly from Russia and Iran, while the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia back the rebels. The international community has condemned the use of chemical weapons, which have often been used alongside missile attacks and air strikes that have led to significant civilian casualties. Continued military operations and rebel insurgencies have resulted in the gradual migration of people to the north-western province of Idlib as the government regains control of Syria's major cities. The impending humanitarian crisis remains as Idlib becomes the target for potential military operations.



Political map of Syria

Starting in Daraa in the south, the conflict has gradually moved northwards through Damascus and its suburbs, to Hamas (Hamah) via Homs and incorporating Aleppo and Raqqa.

HART partner St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC) is currently running a project in Maaloula; a town about 50km northeast of Damascus.

Latest Developments in Syria

New Law Passed to Ban British Nationals from Terror Hotspots in Syria

In April, a law was passed under the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act that will make it a criminal offence for British nationals to enter or remain in designated areas, [according to a report by the Guardian](#). A person convicted of entering or staying in Idlib and north-eastern Syria could face a jail term of up to [ten years, a fine, or both](#). British Home Secretary, Sajid Javid commented: "I have asked my officials to work closely with the police and intelligence agencies to renew the case for exercising this power in relation to Syria." However, campaigners for press freedom and human rights agencies have [raised several concerns about the new legislation](#), warning that the "vaguely defined crime of hostile state activity would give border guards wide ranging powers to stop, search and detain" people in the designated areas.

UN Warns Syria at Risk of Worst Humanitarian Tragedy of the 21st Century

At an emergency UN Security Council meeting, the escalation of events in Idlib province were raised as a severe concern amid fears that an [all-out assault could lead to a humanitarian catastrophe](#) in Syria. On May 10, at the Security Council meeting, UN Humanitarian Affairs Coordinator Mark Lowcock said that there had been concern about the situation in Idlib for months. Lowcock expressed that last September, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, declared "it was absolutely essential to avoid a full-scale battle in Idlib, and he warned that it would unleash a humanitarian nightmare unlike any other we have seen in Syria." [The UN has warned that three million civilians are currently at risk](#) in Idlib as Government forces, aided by Russia, have launched an offensive which is targeting hospitals and schools.

UN Fears Realised as Attacks Escalate

The [latest bombardment comes after the UN warning of an imminent humanitarian disaster](#) which would affect three million people trapped in Idlib, [Al Jazeera reports](#). In May, 229 civilians were killed, and 727 others were injured in a month of intensive fighting and bombardment. Nine children were among the 21 killed in government offensives in several towns in Idlib and neighbouring Aleppo, said the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights War Monitor. A Hospital in Kefranbel in Idlib, was hit by military fire, adding to the total of at least 20 health facilities that have been hit by escalation of fighting in the region, 19 of which are currently out of service as a result. Ursula Mueller, UN Secretary-General [Antonio Guterres's](#) top humanitarian affairs official, criticised the UN council on its history of inaction in Syria, and consequent failure to take "[concrete action](#)" on a situation that should be sparking outrage.

Human Rights Watch Report: Detention and Harassment in Taken Areas

A Human Rights Watch Report, released on May 21, has [documented 11 cases of arbitrary detention](#) and disappearance in Daraa, Eastern Ghouta, and southern Damascus. Syrian intelligence branches are [arbitrarily detaining, disappearing and harassing people in areas retaken from anti-government groups, according to the report](#). In all cases, the people targeted are former armed and political opposition leaders, media activists, aid workers, defectors, and family members of activists and former anti—government fighters. Local organisations, including Syrians for Truth and Justice and the Office of Daraa Martyrs, have documented 500 of these cases since August. [HRW has reported that in at least one case](#), authorities transferred the individual to Sadnaya prison, which is known for torture and extrajudicial executions.

March

[Russia Attacks Idlib in first major assault in months](#)

April

[Law passed making it a criminal offence to remain or enter designated areas in Syria](#)

May

[EU calls on Turkey, Iran and Russia to protect civilians in Idlib](#)

[10 Killed and 30 injured as rocket hits Neirab Camp near Aleppo](#)

[Jihadists attempt an attack on Russia's largest airbase in Syria](#)

[Fears for 3 million civilians in Idlib raised at UN Security Council Meeting](#)

[229 civilians killed, 727 injured during intensive month of fighting](#)

[Human Rights Watch documents cases of detainment and disappearance](#)