CIVILIANS IMPERILED: HUMANITARIAN IMPLICATIONS OF U.S. POLICY SHIFTS IN SYRIA

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Introduction

In a surprise move, the Trump administration announced on February 21, 2019, that 400 U.S. troops would remain in Syria beyond a previously set April 2019 deadline for a full withdrawal. While the details remain to be worked out, the move marks a reversal of U.S. President Donald Trump’s sudden decision in December 2018 to pull all U.S. forces out of the country. That decision was only the latest installment in the series of dramatic twists and turns that have characterized U.S. policy toward Syria over the past year.

The public debate surrounding this policy whiplash has focused on its implications for the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and for regional power dynamics. Largely absent from that discussion has been the impact a drawdown of U.S. military presence would have on a humanitarian situation that continues to deteriorate in many parts of the country. Indeed, this past year was marked by widespread displacement and renewed conflict. In the first eight months of 2018 alone, nearly 1.4 million people were displaced, according to official UN numbers. That is a staggering average of 5,598 people per day.

Until last week, the specter of abrupt U.S. disengagement had promised to further destabilize areas inside Syria that provide refuge for millions of people. Northeastern Syria, home to about 2 million Syrians, faced the suddenly real possibility of a major Turkish military operation. In the south, an abandoned U.S. base at Tanf would have left the more than 40,000 Syrians huddled in al Rukban, a makeshift camp along the Jordanian border, at the mercy of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The new policy could buy a reprieve for vulnerable civilians in both the northeast and at al Rukban. However, there is still cause for significant concern. The plan for the stay-behind force remains vague, as do plans to mobilize additional NATO troops to create a so-called safe zone in the northeast. The Trump administration should move aggressively to clarify the nature and scope of its continuing engagement. It should also increase efforts to help communities in the northeast to stabilize and recover and ramp up diplomatic pressure to find solutions for those trapped along the Jordanian border.

Meanwhile, millions of Syrians trapped in Idlib province once again stand on the brink of disaster. An agreement reached last year between Russia and Turkey to de-escalate tensions in Idlib is beginning to fray. Last fall, that agreement forestalled what appeared to be an imminent regime offensive to retake the province. Idlib hosts almost 2 million displaced Syrians. Over three-quarters of the population are already in need of life-saving assistance.

If the de-escalation deal collapses, the humanitarian catastrophe that would follow could be the largest of the war. Despite this backlash, the administration announced in early February 2019 that withdrawal was slated to be completed in April 2019.

These announcements raised deep concerns among humanitarians, as any resumption of hostilities precipitated by a U.S. withdrawal would have negative repercussions for communities in northeast Syria. An estimated 2 million Syrians live in the region, and many have been displaced multiple times. As previously reported by Refugees International, waves of displaced Syrians now living in the region fled from ISIS and subsequent counter-ISIS operations, particularly from the urban centers of Raqqa and Deir-ez-zor. Many expected that if the United States were to move forward on withdrawal, Turkey would launch a military operation to secure territory along the northern Syrian border to limit the influence of Kurdish militias. Indeed, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly expressed his intention to do just that. Turkey considers the Kurdish militias operating in the area to be

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Source: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised December 17, 2018. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Notes: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces. This map does not depict all chemical attacks reported in Syria.
terrorist groups and has already carried out military operations to combat them. And while U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton indicated that the safety of the Kurds would be a condition of withdrawal,⁸ a Turkish commitment to refrain from attacking the Kurds remains elusive.

A full U.S. withdrawal would have also impacted the Syrian regime’s calculations. President Assad aims to return the northeast to government control. A vacuum in the area would have made that goal more attainable for Damascus. Indeed, after December 2018, Syrian regime forces and their Russian allies increased their patrolling near Manbij – a strategic location along the border with Turkey.⁹ With U.S. withdrawal, regime forces in the Euphrates valley would have been well-positioned to cross the river and recapture many of the oil-rich areas in Deir-ez-zor. The future of Raqqa – the former capital of the Islamic State – would also be in play. Regime re-establishment of control may already be an inevitability. But an unplanned and precipitous U.S. withdrawal would have only increased the likelihood that such re-establishment will be without safeguards for civilians.

A major new conflict in northeast Syria could put many of the region’s 2 million civilians at risk.¹⁰ This includes 400,000 to 500,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) in areas in the northeast currently controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a U.S.-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters. As previously reported by Refugees International, waves of displaced Syrians now living in the region fled from ISIS and subsequent counter-ISIS operations, particularly from the urban centers of Raqqa and Deir-ez-zor.¹¹ Others fled there during Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, Turkish offensives in northwest Syria.

The 380,000 civilians living in Manbij are especially vulnerable.¹² Further north, a sizable concentration of IDPs live in more than 40 camps clustered in the Manbij countryside on the front lines of SDF-controlled territories and Turkish-administered territories. A U.S. withdrawal would encourage Turkey to enter Syria through any one of the heavily populated urban centers along the border, including Kobani, Tal Abyad, Ayn Isa, Hasakeh, and Al-Qamishly. A Turkish incursion from the north or by the Assad regime from the south could force international NGOs to pull out, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis for the many people across the area who depend on lifesaving assistance from these relief groups.

A Safe Zone?

The U.S. announcement that 400 U.S. soldiers will now remain in Syria represents a change in the U.S. approach with potential humanitarian implications. Some 200 troops will be positioned in the northeast for a prolonged – but as yet undefined – period. This has the potential to discourage renewed fighting. The residual forces were originally described by White House officials as peacekeepers,¹³ though it is unclear how such a small deployment would assume responsibilities shouldered by contemporary

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¹⁰. REACH, “Northeast Syria, October 2018, Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS).”
peace operations, including protection of civilians at imminent risk.

Senior Pentagon officials have begun to outline a two-fold mission for this residual force in the northeast. One group of troops could remain in Manbij to conduct joint patrols with the Turkish military. A second group may be stationed near the Euphrates River Valley to support SDF fighters as they secure territory liberated from ISIS’ self-proclaimed caliphate. These troops would also presumably serve as the U.S. contribution to a proposed multinational force that could number between 800 and 1,500 — mostly drawn from Britain, France, and possibly other NATO countries. In theory, the multinational force would be reportedly responsible for establishing a “safe zone” designed to deter fighting between the Turkish military and Kurdish forces in Syria, as well as to keep ISIS from re-emerging.

However, the plan clearly remains a work in progress. The nature and scope of the mission should be spelled out and a number of questions must be answered. A force of 200 U.S. soldiers spread across one-quarter of the country is a very small presence. Whether it will focus on counter-terrorism or on deterring large-scale military operations by Turkey and, presumably, the Assad regime, is unclear. So, too, are the responsibilities it will have for stabilizing areas liberated from ISIS.

In addition, neither the United Kingdom nor France has publicly committed additional troops to Syria since the February 21, 2019 announcement by the White House. It is therefore unknown how many NATO troops will be mobilized to join the multinational effort and against what timeline. Nor is it known how long the U.S. and the rest of the multinational presence will remain deployed. All these questions will need to be answered before the humanitarian implications of the new policy can be properly assessed.

Stabilization and Recovery

Certain pockets of northeast Syria, particularly areas once occupied by ISIS, have suffered greatly over the course of the Syrian war. Life under ISIS rule was brutal, and the liberation of urban centers like Raqqa and Deir-ez-zor came at a steep price. In January 2019, some 25 children who fled ISIS-held areas died due to exposure to the harsh winter conditions at an IDP camp. In Raqqa, nearly 80 percent of the city was damaged or destroyed, and thousands of civilians were killed. Mass graves are still being discovered. Nevertheless, 2018 witnessed some slow progress in stabilization. Nearly 350,000 Syrians returned to their homes in Raqqa and Deir-ez-zor governorates to rebuild their lives. On the other hand, many are residing in their destroyed former homes and lack access to basic services.

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15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
Against this backdrop, at the end of 2018, the U.S. State Department evacuated all U.S. civilian personnel working on stabilization from Syria. In addition, the Trump administration cut almost $230 million in aid allocated for Syria’s stabilization and recovery. As Joel Charny, director of the Norwegian Refugee Council USA (NRC USA), has argued, “Somewhere between the insane numbers that we [the United States] had in Iraq and $200 million, there’s a happy medium that would allow a more robust reconstruction effort...” Now that the United States will remain in northeast Syria beyond April, the administration should move quickly to restore this assistance and redeploy civilian personnel to assist with implementation.

IDPS IN PURGATORY AT AL-RUKBAN

Of the remaining U.S. force in Syria, 200 soldiers will be stationed at the Tanf garrison in a U.S.-controlled 55-kilometer operational zone in southeastern Syria. To date, their presence has effectively provided a security umbrella for the more than 40,000 inhabitants of the Rukban IDP camp. However, none of the key players in southern Syria have assumed direct responsibility for the needs of the beleaguered IDP community. Jordan has portrayed the camp as a security threat, and the United States has avoided taking on greater duty of care for its inhabitants.

The United Nations has repeatedly attempted to provide services to the displaced population at Rukban. Attempts to reach the camp via Jordan have been complicated by the government’s security concerns over ISIS cells allegedly operating in or near the camp.\footnote{Mina Aldroubi, “Rukban residents running out of food days after UN aid delivery,” The National, November 15, 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/rukban-residents-running-out-of-food-days-after-un-aid-delivery-1792175.} Since a deadly string of ISIS attacks against its border forces in 2016, Jordan has restricted any movement between Jordan and Syria at the Rukban border crossing, except for emergency medical cases.\footnote{Mina Aldroubi, “Jordan denies entry for Syrian refugees trapped in Rukban camp,” The National, December 30, 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/jordan-denies-entry-for-syrian-refugees-trapped-in-rukban-camp-1.807852.} As a result, UN convoys have had extremely limited access to the camp from the Jordanian side.\footnote{UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “Aid convoy offers brief respite for Syrians at Jordan border,” November 6, 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2018/11/5be1b06f4/aid-convoy-offers-brief-respite-syrians-jordan-border.html.}

On the Syrian side, UN relief workers have struggled to secure the necessary permissions from the Assad government to deliver aid via convoy from Damascus. Indeed, the UN has delivered assistance only twice since 2014.\footnote{Ibid.} What little food enters the camp has traditionally been supplied by smugglers who sell the food for inflated prices. One IDP at Rukban told Refugees International that, “many families wake up daily without any food. Even infants do not have access to milk...We often go without food for three days.”\footnote{Author interview with Syrian resident at Rukban, January 18, 2019.}

While a residual U.S. presence at Tanf will keep Russian and Syrian forces away from the camp for the time being, U.S. troops will not be tasked with or equipped to reverse the deterioration of conditions at Rukban. As things worsen, Syrian residents may be forced to return to areas under the control of the Assad regime in search of the most basic commodities or humanitarian assistance.\footnote{Author interview with Syrian resident at Rukban, January 18, 2019.} However, this scenario is a source of great anxiety for camp residents. As one IDP expressed, “Return [to regime areas] would be tantamount to suicide.”\footnote{OCHA, “Syria: Largest ever humanitarian convoy brings life-saving aid to 40,000 displaced people in Rukban,” February 6, 2019, https://www.unocha.org/story/syria-largest-ever-humanitarian-convoy-brings-life-saving-aid-40000-displaced-people-rukban.} Many of the camp’s residents have advocated for their safe relocation to northern Syria, instead of to government-held areas, fearing what might happen if forces at Tanf eventually leave.\footnote{Author interview with Syrian resident at Rukban, February 15, 2019.} However, refuge in Jordan still remains the most desirable option for some at Rukban.\footnote{Author interview with Syrian resident at Rukban, January 18, 2019.}

In a welcome development, the United States has taken a more active diplomatic role in pushing for open, sustained humanitarian access to the camp’s population and for a process that is “…free from coercion and allows for safe, voluntary, and dignified departures for those wishing to leave Rukban.” In the first week in February 2019, Damascus allowed the United Nations to carry out its “largest ever humanitarian convoy to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance” to Rukban.\footnote{Author interview with Syrian resident at Rukban, January 18, 2019.} Still, each family received only a one-month supply of food.\footnote{Ibid.}

Going forward, it is imperative that the United States maintain diplomatic pressure at the UN Security Council to ensure that aid deliv-
eries be allowed to continue. If the regime in Damascus blocks further aid convoys, the United States and donor countries should seek to improve UN access to Rukban from the Jordanian border. In addition, the United States should work with Jordan and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to increase options and funding for Rukban’s residents to seek refuge in Jordan; to resettle to third countries; or to relocate safely, voluntarily, and in dignity to their area of choice in Syria, without fear or coercion.

**Collapse of the De-Escalation Agreement in Idlib**

Developments in Idlib are also of priority concern for humanitarians. In 2018, Syrian government forces were poised to attack the province, which is dominated by the Al-Qaeda-linked Hay’at Tahrir al Sham (HTS). A flurry of political and diplomatic activity ensued until, in September 2018, Turkey and Russia brokered a deal to establish a new demilitarized zone in Idlib province. However, the deal has begun to fray, increasing concerns that a
humanitarian crisis might be on the horizon. In January 2019, a violent power struggle resulted in HTS securing control over the majority of Idlib. Russia renewed its airstrikes in response. In addition, Syrian forces intensified residual shelling against urban areas in southern Idlib, where thousands of civilians have sought shelter. Russia has accused Turkey of failing to live up to the Idlib deal. Now, the Assad government may resume major combat operations as well. If this occurs, widespread displacement is likely.

Idlib’s Displacement Profile

An estimated 3 million civilians currently reside in northwest Syria. The most recent authoritative assessment found that nearly 1.8 million internally displaced Syrians reside in Idlib and the surrounding areas. Some were relocated to Idlib as part of “reconciliation” agreements between government forces and opposition fighters. More often than not, these agreements were secured by the surrender of opposition fighters following long periods of besiegement at the hands of regime forces in population centers like Eastern Ghouta, Hama, Quneitra, and Dara’a. The majority of IDPs in Idlib largely rely on humanitarian relief to survive, but humanitarian organizations deliver this aid only every 90 days.

Civilians are effectively trapped in Idlib. Crossing into Turkey is now impossible for most IDPs. The only avenues for escape lie through two Russian humanitarian corridors into government-held territory – Morek and Abu Duhur. But the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that very few civilians use these routes. As one IDP in Idlib told Refugees International, “very few people flee to territory controlled by the system [the Syrian government]. The vast majority fled to border towns.”

The Sochi De-escalation Agreement

In September 2018, Turkey and Russia signed the Memorandum on the Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area (the Sochi Deal). According to the memorandum, Russia and Turkey will take steps to avoid military operations in Idlib and cement the status quo by reinforcing a Turkish presence at 12 military outposts in Idlib. Under the deal, Turkey is also responsible for the removal of terrorist groups from the 15-20 km demilitarization zone (DMZ), which includes territory controlled by various extremist factions in Idlib.

The agreement’s implementation has proved challenging. According to monitors, all tanks, artillery, and mortars belonging to both sides have been removed from the zone since October 2018. Still, the withdrawal has yet to produce a meaningful ceasefire. The Syrian military has repeatedly pounded southern Idlib with artillery strikes, resulting in significant civilian casualties and small-scale displace-
ment. For its part, Turkey failed to convince terrorist groups to leave the demilitarized zones by the October 15, 2018 deadline. Those groups now control the majority of Idlib.

In a positive development, OCHA reported improvements in its access to at-risk populations—reaching nearly 2.1 million people in the northwest. But the recent HTS takeover may threaten this progress. In December 2018, the UN Security Council approved an extension of cross-border aid deliveries in Syria. However, Russia’s UN representative stated that such deliveries must “avoid the participation of armed groups in humanitarian activities” – a clear reference to HTS. The remarks could foreshadow future Russian efforts to restrict cross-border humanitarian efforts on the grounds that such actions finance terrorism.

Preventing Collapse

There are strong indications that the Syrian government, with support from Russia, is preparing to move against Idlib. In January 2019, pro-regime media reported a buildup of Syrian and Russian forces in Idlib. In February, Russia renewed its demand that Turkey do more to confront HTS. As some monitors have noted, a recent extremist takeover of Idlib might provide Assad with “justification” to invade, producing a scenario as “devastatingly bloody as the battle for Aleppo.”

At a minimum, the Assad regime and Russia are likely to resume sustained bombing and shelling of targets. The humanitarian consequences would be particularly catastrophic because massive IDP inflows have rendered Idlib Syria’s most densely populated province. Shelling is already displacing Syrians across the province, pushing them closer to the Syria–Turkey border or northward into Turkish-controlled Syrian areas of Afrin, Azaz, and Jarablus. Worse, the regime could launch ground and air offensives to take control of Idlib, collapsing the entire deal. Indeed, the Syrian government has constantly indicated that it will restore its control over the entirety of the country’s geography.

The UN currently estimates that a Syrian military operation in Idlib could affect as many as 900,000 civilians, of whom 700,000 are expected to flee toward the Turkish border, Turkish-held northern territories, or government-held territory. In the event of a government offensive, international pressure must be brought to bear on Turkey to open its borders to potentially hundreds of thousands of fleeing Syrians. Displaced communities would likely cluster around border crossings, principally at Khirbet al-Joz, Atmeh, and Bab al Hawa, with the highest concentration in northern Idlib around Atmeh and Bab al Hawa. Indeed, many already have. UN agencies and humanitarian organizations should move now to pre-position enough aid and relief for those seeking shelter and assistance.

50. REACH, IDPs in Informal Sites, Northwest Syria: Aleppo and Idlib governorates, May-June 2018.
While the border is currently closed for entry into Turkey from Syria, Turkey uses the Atmeh and Bab al-Hawa border crossings to move military personnel in and out of Syria. According to OCHA, both crossings are also used to evacuate emergency medical cases. It will be critical for Turkey to continue to allow Syrian medical cases to cross into its territory. It should be prepared to respond to an influx of Syrian cases at medical facilities in Reyhanli and to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to those who flee into Turkish-held areas of Afrin and north Aleppo. Turkey must also ensure that humanitarian workers have access to displaced persons. Finally, Turkey should also be prepared to open its borders to Syrians fleeing renewed fighting. For its part, the donor community will need to step up its support for cross-border relief and assistance.

In short, if the Idlib agreement collapses, the reality for Syrian civilians will be dire. With displaced Syrians unlikely to flee to government-held territory, the responsibility will fall largely on Turkey and the humanitarian community operating from Turkey to respond to the crisis.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

In response to the current humanitarian crisis, and to prevent the situation from worsening in light of the U.S. drawdown and looming collapse of the Idlib deal, the following actions must be taken:

**In Northeast Syria:**

- The Trump administration should clarify the nature and scope of the U.S. stay-behind force, its mission, and the deployment timeframe. This should include its responsibilities for stabilizing areas liberated from ISIS and deterring major Turkish or regime military operations. This will be key to preventing further humanitarian suffering.
- The Trump administration should secure troop commitments from NATO countries before drawing down U.S. forces to ensure that the multinational force can deter renewed fighting and thereby prevent further humanitarian suffering.
- As part of any exit plan, the Trump administration should secure a credible agreement from Turkey that its forces will not target or threaten Syrian Kurdish communities in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal in line with commitment set out by U.S. National Security Advisor Bolton. Such an approach could avoid the risk of much greater humanitarian suffering.
- The Trump administration should restore the $200 million funding previously earmarked for stabilization in northeast Syria and fully fund the international organizations and local NGOs that provide essential humanitarian aid to the region’s numerous IDPs and civilians.

**In Rukban:**

- The Trump administration should maintain diplomatic pressure at the UN Security Council to ensure that the United Nations can make additional deliveries of humanitarian assistance and

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be granted unrestricted access to Rukban camp.

- The Trump administration should condition the U.S. withdrawal from Tanf on a Russian guarantee that residents of Rukban be given safe passage to locations where their lives or freedom will not be threatened. As part of this scheme, Russia should guarantee the safety of these IDPs during transit.
- Jordan should reopen its border to allow in the displaced at Rukban who have no other options for a durable solution due to probable threats to their safety if they return home.
- The United States and other major donors should provide financial assistance to Jordan to cover the costs of absorbing displaced Syrians from Rukban as refugees and commit to resettling a significant number of these displaced persons themselves.

**In Idlib:**

- The Trump administration should launch a concerted diplomatic effort to press Russia and the Assad regime to refrain from military operations that could displace civilians.
- In areas covered by the Sochi Deal, Russia and Turkey should guarantee freedom of movement for Syrian civilians within the DMZ and allow them to relocate outside of conflict areas.
- The United Nations should be involved in any relocations to ensure that they are voluntary and that individuals are not relocated to places where their lives or freedom would be threatened.
- Donors should increase financial support for cross-border aid deliveries and the ongoing humanitarian response in Idlib.
- If the Sochi Deal collapses, Turkey should provide protection to IDPs in areas under its control. Turkey should also open its borders to Syrians fleeing renewed fighting.
- Humanitarian workers should preposition non-food items, medical and shelter supplies, and other forms of aid in Reyhanli, Turkey, in anticipation of an influx of Syrians needing assistance.
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ABOUT
REFUGEES
INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We are an independent organization and do not accept any government or UN funding.