

## Idlib and Future Unknown Scenarios

September 15, 2018

Idlib is the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition. It is a place that hosts millions of civilians who are both residents and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other towns and cities such as Ghouta, Daraa, Aleppo, and others.

Following the massive offensive in Daraa and its countryside, the Government of Syria (GoS) has turned its attention to Idlib where it has launched a media war and explicitly threatened to invade the province. The GoS has mobilized its military forces in areas adjacent to Idlib. This has been accompanied by aerial and ground bombardment targeting the towns of Jisr al-Shughur and its villages in northwestern Idlib and Hama's northern countryside as well as the southern countryside of Idlib. This has led to the displacement of more than 5,400 people from the province of Idlib to border areas. Furthermore, more than 60% of the population of Hama's northern countryside, especially the towns of Qalaat al-Madiq, Bab al-Hawa and Hawija, has been displaced. The GoS rocket attacks have resulted in severe food shortages as well as poor humanitarian conditions, especially with regard to women and children.

*"The village has been shelled for more than three years and the shelling has returned, forcing us to flee to town of Khan Sheikhan,"* said M.M, a father of seven children from the town of al-Tamanah, in Idlib's Maarat al-Numan district.

The bombings have targeted not only schools but also hospitals. The GoS has targeted more than nine hospitals as well as civil defense centers in the countryside of Idlib and Hama; in al-Tamanah, al-Lataminah, Khan Sheikhan, Hass and Hbit, putting these civil facilities out of service.

*"Following the shelling of Jisr al-Shughur, my family and I fled to an area near the Turkish border. We lack basic materials, and we are always afraid that the military offensive against Idlib will continue,"* said M.A, from the town of Jisr al-Shughur.

### Humanitarian Situation

The population of Idlib suffers from a low standard of living due to the lack of employment. The population is also facing a deteriorating educational system, especially with respect to displaced children and youth because of their instability and constant movement to escape death. In addition, there is a severe shortage of medicines and medical staff, especially after the shelling of hospitals by the GoS and its Russian ally. Furthermore, many non-governmental organizations have stopped operating such as Tatweer, ACTED, Adam Smith, Creative, and Chemonics. The remaining NGOs have reduced their activities by an estimated 40%, such as Goal and Violet.

## Public Opinion in Idlib

Civilians had counted on and hoped that the Astana process would result in a peaceful solution for Idlib. However, the parties concerned haven't reach any agreement yet and uncertainty looms on the future of the province.

A large section of Idlib's residents are still pinning their hopes on the Astana de-escalation zones agreement, which according to them has improved the situation in the cities covered by the agreement, despite its unpleasant political results. Others, particularly those who have good ties with the Turkish, believe that there must be a Turkish intervention to end the suffering and restore stability to the region.

*"We hope that the political agreement will lead to the cessation of hostilities as well as the restoration of normal life to Idlib,"* said Jihad al-Khatib, a member of the political authority in Idlib.

However, there are still those who believe that resistance is the best option due to the loss of confidence in all external parties, while others oppose this view and see no benefit from such fighting, as the combined power of the GoS, Russia, and Iran outmatch any other force on the ground.

## Recommendations:

1. The international community must exert more pressure on the GoS and Russia to stop the bombing immediately.
2. Open humanitarian corridors to Turkey and not to the GoS-held areas. Humanitarian corridors were opened in the GoS towns of Abu al-Duhur and al-Suqaylabiyah and many families and young people were killed and arrested by the GoS forces.
3. Provide adequate support to humanitarian organizations providing relief aid, medical assistance and services to improve the humanitarian situation.
4. Rapid and urgent response to the needs of newly displaced people.