

## Civilians' Fears of Escalation in Northwest Syria

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Civilian populations in the northwest region of Syria, which includes parts of three governorates, Idlib, Hama countryside, and Aleppo countryside have been suffering continuously over the years from violations by both the Syrian government and its allies.

### The general situation in northwest Syria:

Civilians in the northwest had pinned their hopes on the De-escalation Zone Agreement of the Astana process, to alleviate their suffering. The agreement did reduce the intensity of the shelling on the area at the start of its implementation in September 2018, but as the agreement was being implemented people began to fear that there could be widespread violations affecting the entire region.

Idlib's population ballooned over the years with the expulsion of civilian opponents and military factions to the province from Ghouta, Zabadani, Rural Damascus, and Daraa. These displacements increased the province's population to nearly three million (76% of them children and women).

Repeated military campaigns have been launched in northern Hama, Idlib and Western Aleppo's countryside across three periods:

- 1- First campaign: Started on October 7, 2017 and ended on October 2, 2018.
- 2- Second campaign: Started December 1, 2018 and ended on January 20, 2019.
- 3- Third campaign: Started on April 29, 2019 and ended on September 1, 2019.

The result of these three military campaigns was the takeover of 67 villages over 457 square kilometers targeting an estimated 244 civilian facilities (including schools, hospitals, mosques) and residential areas, resulting in significant destruction of infrastructure. The Syrian Civil Defense estimated that 600,000 people were displaced as a result of these attacks in addition to 1,455 killed including 405 children.

### Public opinion on the situation

Civilians have significant fears and concerns about their fate in the near future, particularly with the Syrian government forces edging closer towards their villages and cities. As a result of this people have started to migrate to the north. Some IDPs have purchased land on the Syrian-Turkish border to set up their own camp for their families.

*(AS) from Mount Zawiya says that after the fall of Khan Sheikhoun, the Syrian government threatened on social media to crush the area. His family raised money among family members to buy land to establish their own camp to ensure a safe place if the Syrian government attacks their homes.*

Others sold everything they owned and chose to travel abroad, where they paid huge sums to emigrate outside Syria. *A.F says: "My brother and 19 other young men emigrated from Mount Zawya, which cost more than 6,000 euros per person."*

The majority of civilians are poor people who have lost their homes and livelihoods after displacement. This has forced some to join militias as a source of livelihood as these groups provide payment as well as the hope to resist any military campaign targeting them and their families by the Syrian government and its militias.

Abu Abdel Hamid, who recently joined a military group said that he had no choice but to resist the Syrian government.

In parallel, Syrian civil activists mobilized to stop the Syrian government's threats to invade the region. They organized demonstrations on the border with Turkey to pressure the Turkish government to assume its responsibilities as a guarantor in the agreement to de-escalate the situation or open the border for civilians to flee, and they sent messages to European countries to do pressure the conflict parties and protect civilians.

### **Recommendations:**

Based on an analysis of the situation, the Syrian Civic Platform recommends the following:

- 1- The guarantors of the Astana process must assume their responsibilities, and work to stop any military campaign on Idlib, engage in dialogue to solve the situation, and protect millions of civilians in the region and resort to dialogue.
- 2- Accelerate the process of producing a political solution in accordance with the political process in Geneva and Resolution 2254.
- 3- The need to direct civil organizations to intervene quickly before the coming of winter to avoid a humanitarian crisis by accommodating IDPs living without shelter under trees, particularly women and children.