



Save the Children

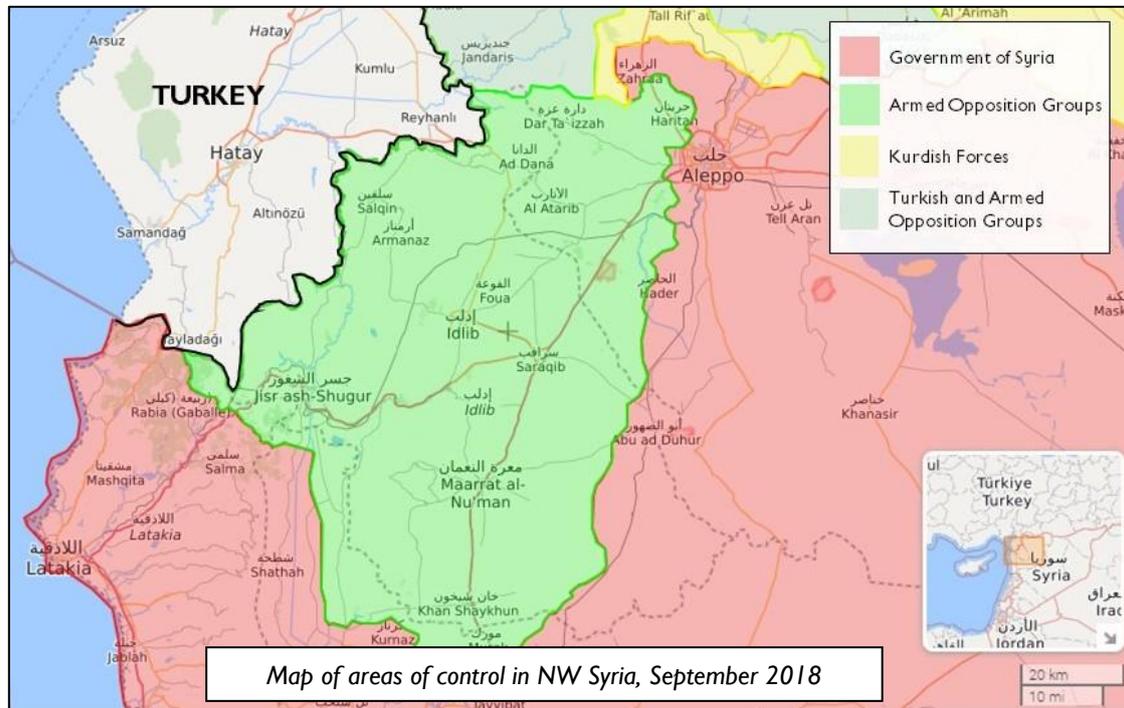


Briefing

IDLIB: CHILDREN'S LIVES ON THE LINE

October 2018

Idlib: Children's Lives on the Line



The North-West Syria province of Idlib is home to more than a million children. They are living in a precarious and volatile situation, hemmed in between armed actors amid regular bombardment and clashes. As displaced families have poured in to the relatively small area escaping violence and deprivation in other parts of Syria, basic services that children rely on like schools and hospitals are overwhelmed.

Recently, the governments of Turkey and Russia agreed to create a new de-militarised zone (DMZ) along the frontline in the south of Idlib, which forestalled an expected military offensive. Increased fighting and fears of an escalation had already led 30,000 to flee their homes in September to areas in the north of the governorate. Most have now returned following the DMZ agreement, which involves the removal of heavy weaponry and armed groups from the zone and is due to be implemented in mid-October.

It is vital that parties to the conflict commit to the peaceful implementation of the DMZ as a first step. The situation in Idlib is already extremely tough for civilians. Children are exhausted of war, fearful of uncertainty, violence and further displacement. Any further escalation in the conflict, whether an offensive by the Government of Syria and its allies or fighting between or against armed opposition groups, will have catastrophic consequences. Many more families will be forced to flee – at least 700,000 people are expected to be displaced in even a limited offensive - and the humanitarian response will be stretched beyond its limits¹.

The DMZ agreement should be implemented in line with International Humanitarian Law and must lead to a lasting ceasefire and negotiated settlement. At the same time, we need to invest in immediate support and long-term recovery for children in North-West Syria and the wider country. Unfettered humanitarian access to all areas must be maintained and increased. As this briefing sets out, millions of civilians in Idlib are already in urgent need of humanitarian support and basic services - children's lives are on the line.

¹ Turkey Health Cluster Bulletin MYR July 2018

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HUMANITARIAN CRISIS OVERVIEW

Today, an estimated 2.9 million people live in Idlib and the surrounding areas. At least 1.4 million of those are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who have already been forced to flee their homes at least once. Some children in Idlib have moved seven times² or more seeking sanctuary from the conflict, and children are estimated to make up over half of the displaced³. The province is home to one of the densest concentrations of internally displaced people in the world – in July, there were 317 active camps or shelters recorded by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster (CCCM), hosting 75,005 families (at least 375,000 people) in the area.⁴ Many others live in half-built buildings, temporary shelters, or with friends and relatives.

The combination of ongoing conflict, high levels of displacement and insufficient infrastructure has made Idlib's children some of the most vulnerable in the country.

Since November 2017, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in Aleppo and Idlib Governorates has increased by 600,000 to 4.2 million, half of whom are in acute need.⁵ That comprises almost a quarter of the total number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in the whole of Syria.

Many displaced families have arrived with almost nothing, having been forced to leave their homes, businesses and treasured possessions behind. Most IDPs now live in overcrowded camps and shelters in rural areas and many are reliant on aid for the basics required to survive - food, water and shelter.

The humanitarian community is facing huge challenges in responding to the needs of people in NW Syria, both newly displaced families and the heavily-burdened host communities.

An average of two million people in Syria are reached by cross-border humanitarian activity every month – however, with essential services stretched to the limit and new displacement happening all the time (2018 has seen the highest levels of displacement in the conflict so far, much of it in Idlib) not all humanitarian need is being met.⁶ The UN and humanitarian organizations have an unmet funding requirement of an estimated \$100 million to provide lifesaving assistance and services to people who were displaced to northern Syria.⁷ Ongoing instability and the presence of multiple, competing armed groups also makes access and operations challenging.



Displaced Syrian children a makeshift camp in south-west Idlib, January 2018.

Photo credit: Shafak Organisation

EDUCATION

Across Syria, education has been badly affected by the conflict - 1.75 million children inside Syria are out of school, with a third of schools damaged, destroyed or occupied.⁸

² [Press Release](#): "I can't describe to you what's happening here"- An appeal from the children of Syria, August 2018 (UNICEF)

³ Syrian Arab Republic: [Whole of Syria CCCM](#) Cluster Response Snapshot 2018

⁴ Food Security Cluster [Idlib Situation Report I](#), September 18th 2018

⁵ United Nations Security Council [briefing](#) by Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator 27th July 2018

⁶ [UNICEF](#): Syria Crisis Mid-Year 2018 Humanitarian Results

⁷ Turkey: Syria: [situation in North Western Syria](#), Situation Report No. 4 (as of May 2018)

⁸ [Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018](#)

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Poverty, displacement and insecurity are depriving children of their right to education. For those children who are able to attend school, the war has led to a significant decline in institutional education capacity and a subsequent decline in the quality of education, with around 180,000 teachers no longer in service.⁹

According to a recent assessment across 255 communities in North-West Syria, an estimated 330,000 IDPs are children of school age, and a further 270,000 IDPs are between 0 to 5-years-old.¹⁰ Since this assessment was done, thousands more children have arrived from areas under siege. Education needs in the area are huge – in addition to teachers having fled and schools being bombed or used for military purposes, many displaced children have arrived from areas under siege having missed years of proper education. Some do not even know how to hold a pen, let alone write their name.



Issa*, a 9-year-old boy in the 2nd grade, dropped out of school because he struggled to keep up with his peers. Issa's family is poor and his father is missing due to the conflict, and he has an impairment in his leg that makes it difficult for him to walk. He found it hard to learn and to interact with other children. He is now learning and making good progress in a school run by a Save the Children partner in Idlib. (March, 2018)

**names changed to protect identity*

Despite the availability of formal schools in the majority of assessed communities, IDP children in particular face a number of barriers to accessing education in addition to the schooling they may have missed - most commonly, the need for boys and girls to work or stay at home to support their families. Meanwhile, insufficient teaching and learning resources were reported in almost three quarters of assessed communities. In addition to formal school facilities, opportunities for supported home learning and emergency learning spaces need to be strengthened.

Continued attacks have interrupted regular education activities and increased drop-out rates as many parents prefer not to send their children to school due to fear of attack. The United Nations-led Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations against children in armed conflict verified 68 attacks on schools and education personnel in Syria between January and June 2018, the majority of which took place in Idlib, Rural Damascus, Aleppo and Dara'a¹¹. Unconfirmed reports indicate 30 attacks on schools and education personnel occurred during the first half of 2018, a vast majority of which took place in Idlib.¹²

HEALTH & NUTRITION

Health

Conflict and displacement have led to increased health needs in North-West Syria, while at the same putting considerable strain on health facilities. A recent report by the World Health Organisation found that all four of Idlib's public hospitals were not functioning¹³, making it the only governorate in Syria that had no fully functioning government-run hospitals.¹⁴ The lack of public provision of healthcare has meant that local (the Idlib Health Directorate and Syrian NGOs) and international actors have had to

⁹ [Syria Humanitarian Needs Overview 2018](#)

¹⁰ [Situation Overview](#): Idlib Governorate and Surrounding Areas: North-west Syria, May 2018 (REACH)

¹¹ Education: 2018 Mid-Year PMR Syria

¹² Education: 2018 Mid-Year PMR Syria

¹³ *Hospitals are out of service, "because it is either fully damaged, inaccessible, no available staff, or no equipment."* - [HeRAMS Summary Report](#) 1st Quarter 2018 (January – March) Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic (WHO)

¹⁴ [HeRAMS Summary Report](#) 1st Quarter 2018 (January – March) Public Hospitals in the Syrian Arab Republic (WHO)

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step in to fill the gap. However, rising needs and cuts in funding mean health facilities in the area are facing critical challenges to the continuity of their services.

At health facilities supported by Save the Children, some of the most common conditions we treat include respiratory tract infections, anaemia and illnesses which flourish in overcrowded and unclean living conditions such as ear infections, eye infections and Leishmaniasis (Aleppo Boil). A rapid needs assessment undertaken in May this year showed critical needs in the areas of non-communicable diseases and significant gaps in reproductive health care services for women and babies.¹⁵

A recent assessment across 255 communities in the North-West found almost a quarter of communities were reported to lack basic health facilities, and where they do exist IDPs face multiple barriers to accessing the care needed, including due to a lack of medical supplies, distances and cost.¹⁶



"The population here is very high and there are very few health clinics... we try to help children in all possible ways as [the conflict] deprived them of their childhoods." - Malek, Health Worker from Idlib

Photo: Triplets born in a Save the Children-supported maternity hospital in North-West Syria, February 2018

Malnutrition

Malnutrition and stunting are on the rise among children in Idlib. According to a recent needs assessment, malnutrition rates in Idlib have almost tripled since January 2018, with rates of Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) among the under-5s increasing from 1.5% in January to 4% in June.¹⁷

The increase is largely due to new arrivals of under-nourished displaced families fleeing from areas under siege and bombardment, such as Eastern Ghouta. At the same time, household poverty and a shortage of affordable food has compounded the poor nutrition status among the most vulnerable populations in Idlib, who tend to be mothers (including pregnant and lactating women) and children younger than five years. A survey conducted by the nutrition cluster in Idlib in 2017 revealed a stunting rate of 14.2%, which is expected to have increased in 2018.¹⁸ Stunting in early childhood has adverse, long-term physical and cognitive consequences on the child, affecting educational performance, increased risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases, and overall productivity in adult life.¹⁹

Even though malnutrition rates remain below the international emergency thresholds, the trend of deterioration is rapid and without proper and optimal interventions, malnutrition rates will hit and exceed international benchmarks. A rapid needs assessment undertaken in May this year showed a high percentage of infants were identified with feeding problems (53%) due to lack of Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) services.²⁰

¹⁵ Turkey Health Cluster Bulletin MYR July 2018

¹⁶ [Situation Overview](#): Idlib Governorate and Surrounding Areas: North-west Syria, May 2018 (REACH)

¹⁷ Whole of Syria Food Security Cluster Idlib Situation Report, September 2018.

¹⁸ Nutrition Cluster Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) Survey, July 2017

¹⁹ WHO: http://www.who.int/nutrition/healthygrowthproj_stunted_videos/en/

²⁰ Turkey Health Cluster Bulletin MYR July 2018

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SHELTER, LIVELIHOODS AND FOOD

There are critical shortages of adequate shelter for both IDPs and host communities in Idlib. The mass displacement seen in 2018 has put an unprecedented strain on local communities, leading to shortages of basic goods and IDPs forced to live in overcrowded shelters or stay in mosques and parks. As winter approaches, tens of thousands of families are living in poor quality tents or half-finished buildings and are in urgent need of shelter support.

As per Food Security Sector estimates, 37% of the population in the governorate are acutely food insecure and a further 30% are at risk of food insecurity. In addition to physical and financial access to food, displacement and conflict have been key drivers to food insecurity. Out of the 26 sub districts in Idlib 3 sub districts are classed as 'emergency' level and 19 are at 'crisis'.²¹

Displaced families in particular in Idlib governorate and surrounding areas face significant challenges in accessing livelihoods and meeting their basic food needs.

A key barrier to this is a lack of financial resources and access to employment opportunities. A recent assessment across 255 communities in the north-west found that the two most common reasons for IDPs in Idlib to leave their current locations were loss of income and high cost of living. There is a need for multi-sectoral, flexible cash interventions, including shelter, cash, relief items and food.

Many families resort to negative coping strategies, including reducing meal sizes, selling productive assets, sending children to work and marrying girls. In addition, many staple food sources are reported to be either unavailable or unaffordable for IDPs in several communities, with food markets not functioning entirely or only at certain times.²²



Displaced Syrian child in a makeshift camp in North-West Syria, December 2017
Photo Credit: Shafak Organisation

CHILD PROTECTION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Child Protection

Children in Syria endure multiple protection risks and violations of their rights on a daily basis. Grave Violations remain a critical concern, with many thousands of children killed and injured through persistent use of explosive weapons in civilian areas, recruitment and use of children by all parties to the conflict, torture, detention, abduction, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access. The UN Secretary General's most recent Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict found that 2017 saw the highest number of verified grave violations against children ever recorded in Syria, at 2,896.²³

The high rate of violence and instability in Idlib and the surrounding areas puts children at a particularly high risk of being killed or injured in the conflict. We have seen just in the last few months reports of children being killed in schools and a paediatrics hospital in the governorate, as well as in their homes and on the streets.

Beyond the violence, children in north-west Syria face a number of daily obstacles and protection concerns, right down to the basics of lack civil documentation to prove their existence and register for services. Poverty and insecurity has led to an increase in early marriage as families feel unable to support their daughters, and many children are withdrawn from school to work, often in dangerous conditions. An assessment of 582 communities across the Idlib governorate found that 82% reported child labour

²¹ Whole of Syria Food Security Cluster Idlib Situation Report, September 2018.

²² [Situation Overview](#): Idlib Governorate and Surrounding Areas: North-west Syria, May 2018 (REACH)

²³ [UN Annual Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict](#) 2018

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preventing school attendance was an issue of concern.²⁴ The crisis has also impacted on the wellbeing of parents and caregivers, meaning that often children's main source of support and protection are in need of help themselves.

A recent assessment across 255 communities in the north-west found that IDPs in particular Idlib governorate and surrounding areas faced a range of protection risks, with almost two thirds of assessed communities reporting that recently displaced families faced risks such as shelling, air strikes, sniper fire/gunfire, and landmines while travelling to their present locations.²⁵ During displacement, children are also at risk of being separated from families.

Mental Health

In addition to critical gaps in mainstream health services, the population in NW Syria has been reported to have higher needs in distress and mental health care,²⁶ exacerbated by the ongoing violence and high levels of displacement in the area.

More than 50% of Syria's population is in need of mental health support and one in four children is at risk of a developing mental health disorder, according to the World Health Organisation. Even before the war began, the country of 22 million had just 70 psychiatrists.²⁷

A survey²⁸ undertaken by DFID of over 1,400 primary school students across the north-west (Idlib, rural Damascus and Aleppo) found that over 80% of students in all governorates felt anxious, worried, or stressed, with the highest rate (92.5%) found amongst children living in Idlib. Over 60% of students had seen a shelling or bombing and nearly half of the students interviewed had seen people wounded in the conflict. Nearly 20% had witnessed people being killed during the war in Syria; one-third of whom reported having witnessed a 'massacre'.

In 2017, Save the Children and its Syrian partners interviewed more than 450 children, adolescents and adults across seven governorates in Syria – including NW Syria. 50% of the children interviewed reported that they never or rarely feel safe at school, while 40% said they don't feel safe to play outside, even right outside their own home²⁹. Experts say we are reaching a crisis point; if the war does not end soon and children do not receive the psychological support they need, it will be much harder to repair the damage when they reach adulthood.



"We see a lot of children suffering from involuntary urination and anxiety following a shock, particularly the sounds of explosions and bombs. A lot of the children have difficulty speaking and are stuttering, and some of them suffer from partial amnesia. We see children from six to 15 who are not able to remember. The psychology of children has changed – a child is always anticipating an attack now. Children have lost their childhood." - Tamara, an aid worker in Idlib

Photo: Displaced Syrian children in a temporary Child Friendly Space in a makeshift camp near Idlib in December 2017. Save the Children's partner provided psychosocial support. Credit: Shafak Organisation

²⁴ Whole of Syria [Idlib, "This is more than violence", an overview of children's protection needs in Syria](#)

²⁵ [Situation Overview](#): Idlib Governorate and Surrounding Areas: North-west Syria, May 2018 (REACH)

²⁶ Turkey Health Cluster Bulletin MYR July 2018

²⁷ World Health Organisation [statement](#) 27th March 2017

²⁸ Status of Early Primary Education in Syria: War Stressor Survey, September 2017 (DFID)

²⁹ Invisible Wounds: The impact of six years of war on the mental health of Syria's children, February 2017 (Save the Children)

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RECOMMENDATIONS

It is vital that the international community builds on the diplomatic progress made to avoid a military escalation in NW Syria and further displacement or risks to civilians. At the same time, aid and services to the population in this area need to be maintained and increased, particularly as we approach winter with hundreds of thousands of IDPs living in inadequate shelters.

Save the Children call on the international community and warring parties to take the following steps:

- Build on the recent Turkey-Russia-brokered agreement intensify diplomatic efforts to find a lasting solution to the crisis in Idlib and avert a military offensive that will inevitably harm civilians.
- Ensure that the de-militarized buffer zone (DMZ) is implemented and enforced in line with International Humanitarian Law. No civilians should be forcibly displaced in the process of creating the zone.
- Facilitate unfettered humanitarian access across Idlib and northern Aleppo, including in the new de-militarized buffer zone. With tens of thousands of people in NW Syria already reliant on humanitarian aid to survive, it is vital that cross-border humanitarian access into these areas is maintained and that the population is not collectively punished for the actions of armed groups. The UN Security Council Resolution mandating cross-border aid to Syria (2165/2393) should be renewed in order to support that process.
- Any further hostilities, including between or against Armed Opposition Groups, will have a devastating impact on civilians in Idlib and on aid agencies' ability to operate. Increased violence should be avoided at all costs, but where hostilities are already happening, every effort should be made to avoid the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and parties must comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law to spare civilians from the worst impacts of the fighting and to protect vital civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.
- Civilians who want to flee must be granted freedom of movement – including to Afrin and northern Aleppo and to Government of Syria-controlled areas. The right to seek protection across international borders must be upheld. However, no one should be forcibly displaced from their homes – particularly given the multiple displacements many families in Idlib have already experienced, and those who stay never become legitimate military targets.
- International donors should maintain and increase flexible funding for humanitarian interventions in North-West Syria, including for education, child protection and emergency relief.
- Syrian humanitarian workers must be protected and properly resourced to remain in Idlib and the surrounding areas providing emergency relief and vital basic services, regardless of any change in control of a particular area. Like other civilians, aid workers must not be targeted during conflict, nor should they be punished for undertaking life-saving humanitarian work.