

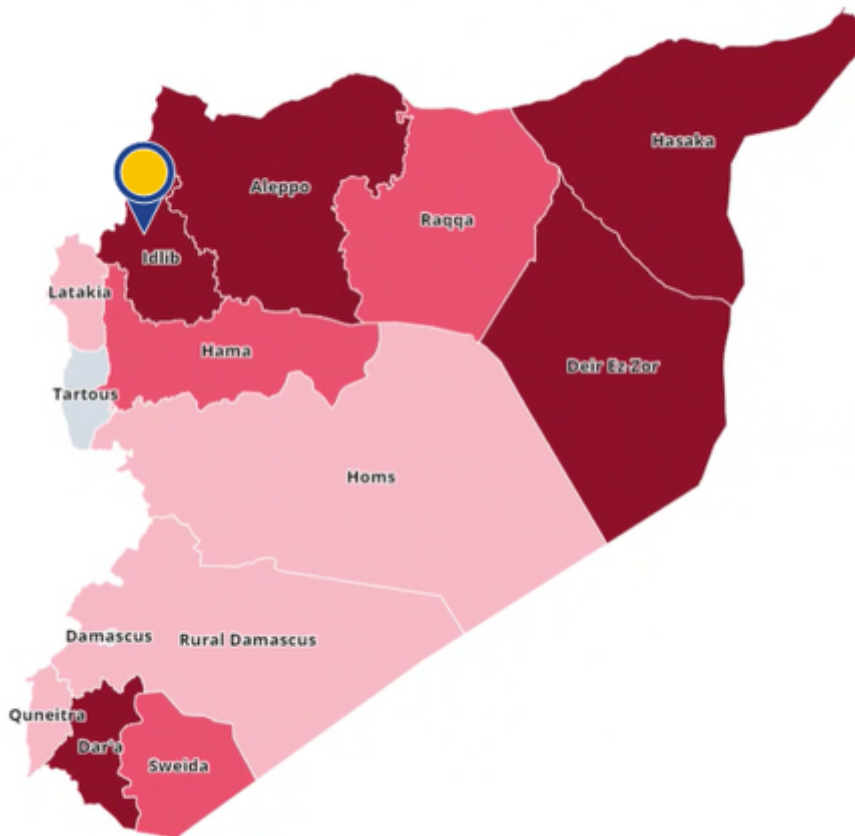
# Idlib

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

## COMMON ANALYSIS

Last update: April 2024

[Main COI reference: [Security 2023](#), 2.1, pp. 49-60; [COI Update 2023](#), 2, pp. 3-10]



## General information

Idlib is located in north-west Syria, bordering Türkiye to the north, Hama governorate to the south, Aleppo governorate to the east, and Latakia governorate to the west. The governorate is divided into five districts: Idlib, Ariha, Jisr-Ash-Shughur, Harim and Al Mara. Idlib city is the capital of the governorate and in 2011 had a population of over 2 million inhabitants. The city is located on the strategic road between Aleppo and Damascus governorates. From 2014 to 10 July 2023, the Bab Al-Hawa crossing with Türkiye was the only UN authorised border crossing in Syria open to cross-border humanitarian aid destined for areas controlled by antiGoS armed groups in north-west Syria. As of May 2022, UNOCHA estimated the population of Idlib

governorate at 2 927 392 inhabitants, of whom 1 899 350 were IDPs. Population estimates vary greatly due to the majority of IDPs in the governorate and regular IDP movements.

### **Background and actors involved in armed confrontations**

Idlib was among the first governorates to join the 2011 uprising against the Assad government. Control over Idlib city fluctuated for several years between GoS forces and anti-GoS armed groups, until anti-GoS armed groups managed to gain full control in 2015.

Idlib became the refuge for Syrians fleeing from GoS forces, including activists and fighters from areas recaptured by the SAA. Between 2016 and 2018, tens of thousands of opposition fighters and their families from southern Syria and Homs city, were transferred to Idlib after refusing the terms of the so-called reconciliation agreements with GoS.

Following an agreement between Russia, Iran and Türkiye in May 2017 which stipulated the cessation of hostilities and improved humanitarian access, Idlib governorate became a ‘deescalation’ area. However, GoS forces continued military operations in the area, and recaptured half of the de-escalation area by mid-2018. In September 2018, a deal between Russia and Türkiye created a demilitarised zone in parts of Idlib governorate. By April 2019, the so-called Sochi agreement collapsed following military escalation by GoS, supported by Russia, further advancing the positions of the GoS forces. The military offensives that extended through March 2020 resulted in one of the worst displacement crises throughout the conflict [[Security 2021](#), 2.1.2, p. 65].

After the Turkish military deployment and/or incursion into areas controlled by anti-GoS armed groups in Idlib governorate (Operation Spring Shield) in early March 2020, a ceasefire was mediated by Russia and Türkiye between GoS and anti-GoS armed groups. The major frontlines have, since then, remained ‘stagnant’.

Since March 2020, Idlib governorate has been divided into areas controlled by the GoS and allied militias and areas controlled by anti-GoS armed groups. Anti-GoS armed groups control the western and northern parts of the governorate, which cover virtually all the areas north and immediately south of the M4 highway. The largest change regarding control was noted between Idlib and Aleppo governorates, where HTS briefly seized territory from armed groups allied with Türkiye. These clashes did not, however, lead to a formal redrawing of internal boundaries between opposition factions.

HTS has almost complete control over the wider Idlib de-escalation area, including most border crossings with Türkiye and is considered as the dominant armed group in the governorate.

The Idlib de-escalation zone has been described as ‘safe haven and holding pen’ for other Islamist and/or jihadist groups, including some made up of foreign fighters. HTS has ‘subdued’ the various jihadist groups previously present in Idlib. Some independent jihadist groups unreconciled to HTS, remained but with very limited military capacities.

The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), centred in northern Aleppo governorate, had also presence in Idlib governorate. The SNA-affiliated National Liberation Front (NLF) is part of the Fath al-Mubin Operations Room and fights alongside HTS on the Idlib frontlines. Turkish forces have also been present along the border regions between Idlib and Aleppo governorates.

The GoS and allied militias control the southern and eastern parts of Idlib governorate, including the Damascus-Aleppo highway (M5) and its immediate surroundings.

ISIL cells and leaders remain present in Idlib despite HTS' 'counter-terrorism' efforts to render them entirely inoperable, and ISIL continues claiming attacks against HTS targets. However, ISIL's position in Idlib has been 'severely weakened' by HTS suppression of the group.

#### **Nature of violence and examples of incidents**

Security incidents remained regularly reported around frontline areas and caused civilian casualties, especially including in areas south of the M4 highway in Idlib. 'Widespread breaches' of the post-March-2020 ceasefire continued to occur in the second half of 2022 and the first half of 2023. Beyond Russian air raids, these consisted primarily of mutual shelling, rocket fire and limited clashes between opposition armed groups and GoS forces and allied militias across contact lines, causing civilian casualties.

Frequent alleged Russian airstrikes were the primary cause of documented civilian deaths. Airstrikes were notably recorded in September 2022 when they reportedly killed 14 civilians in two separate incidents and five air raids. Such strikes further stepped up from October 2022, with Russia reportedly killing at least nine civilians and injuring over 70 in a bombing of IDP camps near Idlib city on 6 November.

Raids by HTS on GoS forces and allied militias positions in September-October 2022 were followed by several months of escalation. In December 2022, HTS raids notably targeted GoS and allied militias positions in eastern Idlib. In January 2023, for 'the first time' groups within the HTS-led Fath al-Mubin coalition joined these HTS raids, drawing GoS and allied militias shelling of towns in Idlib.

Among the deadliest incidents in the second half of 2022, shelling, airstrikes and clashes taking place in November 2022 in the vicinity of Idlib City destroyed the homes of hundreds of displaced families in three IDP camps supported by humanitarian organisations. At least nine civilians were killed and 75 were injured, including children. More than 400 families were displaced. In the deadliest single incident for civilians documented by the UNCOI in the second half of 2022, cluster munitions struck on 6 November 2022 the densely populated Maram displacement camp near Kafr Jalis, close to the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing, and impacted six other nearby camps. This use of cluster munitions was reported in Kafr Jalis, Murin and Kafr Ruhin in western rural Idlib and Sina'ah and Ariha areas in southern rural Idlib. According to the UN Security Council, violent incidents continued throughout the first five months of 2023, causing civilian casualties.

Clashes between HTS and GoS forces in North-west Syria, including southern Idlib governorate were reported in August and September 2023. In the aftermath of a drone strike on the Military College in Homs governorate in October 2023, which reportedly resulted in hundreds of casualties, GoS and Russian forces stepped up attacks on the HTS-controlled areas in North-west Syria, including in Idlib governorate. GoS and Russian forces used intense ground shelling and airstrikes, while HTS and allied groups responded with artillery. The use of cluster munitions by the GoS forces in an attack on a town in Idlib governorate which led to civilian casualties was also reported.

Idlib was the governorate hardest hit by the 6 February 2023 earthquake that 'devastated' Syria's northwest in particular. In the immediate aftermath of the February 2023 earthquake in the Idlib de-escalation area, violent incidents decreased as HTS ceased attacks on GoS and allied militias positions in Idlib. Following renewed GoS forces and allied post-earthquake shelling, however, HTS attacks also resumed. Clashes across contact lines in Idlib swiftly resumed, with civilian casualties recorded. In February and March 2023,

frontlines in Idlib remained among the most affected by hostilities. In late May 2023, Russian airstrikes on antiGoS-held areas in Idlib rose to a level unprecedented in 18 months causing civilian casualties. This included the bombing in June 2023 of a vegetable market in Jisr Ash-Shughur that killed at least nine and injured dozens more. Anti-government groups reportedly also mounted on 26 August 2023 the first tunnel bombing on SAA positions since 2016, killing at least 11 GoS soldiers.

#### **Incidents: data**

Idlib recorded the second highest number of security incidents out of all governorates [[Security 2023](#), 1.5.2, pp. 37-38]. ACLED recorded 1 837 security incidents (average of 35.6 security incidents per week) in Idlib governorate in the period from 1 August 2022 to 28 July 2023. Of the reported incidents, 1 569 were coded as ‘explosions/remote violence’, 187 as ‘battles’, and 81 as ‘violence against civilians’. In the period 1 August – 30 November 2023, 1 030 security incidents were recorded in Idlib representing an average of 59.6 security incident per week.

#### **Geographical scope**

Security incidents were recorded in all governorate districts, with the highest number being documented in Ariha and al Ma’ra districts.

#### **Civilian fatalities: data**

Between August 2022 and July 2023, SNHR documented 91 civilian fatalities in Idlib governorate. In August – November 2023, the SNHR recorded 84 civilian fatalities. Compared to the figures for the population as from May 2022, this represented six civilian fatalities per 100 000 inhabitants for the whole reference period.

#### **Displacement**

As of May 2022, there were 1 899 350 IDPs in Idlib governorate.

In 2022, Idlib governorate recorded the highest number of IDP movements in Syria by a considerable distance to other governorates. The UN cited a combination of ‘push and pull factors related to changes in the security and economic situation in the place of origin and/or area of displacement’ as the main reason for IDP return movements in 2022.

According to UNOCHA, between January and December 2022, approximately 13 000 persons were displaced from Idlib, as well as 105 000 within the governorate. Approximately 18 000 persons were displaced from other governorates to Idlib.

In the first six months of 2023, there were approximately 2 600 IDP movements from Idlib governorate, 68 200 IDP movements within the governorate and 25 800 IDP movements to the governorate. The majority of IDP movements were recorded in February 2023 when over 34 000 persons were displaced mostly within the governorate following the earthquakes. IDP movements recorded during the period January to June 2023 were mostly motivated by ‘access to services and livelihoods’.

In terms of IDP returns, UNOCHA recorded in 2022 approximately 11 000 IDP returns to Idlib and 1 000 returns from Idlib to other governorates. In the first six months of 2023, 10 000 IDP returns were recorded into Idlib and about 680 returns from Idlib to other governorates. The highest return numbers were recorded in February 2023 and were attributed to the earthquakes.

## Further impact on civilians

Idlib is one of the governorates where sources reported the highest percentage of widespread explosive ordnance contamination during the reporting period. UXO contamination was identified most often on ‘agricultural land, roads and private property, followed by schools, other public infrastructure and hospitals’ and particularly affected Idlib governorate. Civilian casualties, including of children, as a result of ERW were reported in Idlib in 2022 and 2023. Insecurity and the presence of ERW has also impeded access of farmers to agricultural land.

Notably, attacks on crops and agricultural land were commonly reported, with such attacks in Idlib making up 18 % of the total between 2017 and 2022, second only to the percentage recorded for Hama governorate. The UNCOI reported on numerous instances of attacks on agricultural fields in the second half of 2022 that led to civilian casualties.

Looking at the indicators, it can be concluded that in the governorate of **Idlib**, indiscriminate violence reaches such a high level that substantial grounds are shown for believing that a civilian, returned to the governorate, would, **solely on account of their presence on its territory**, face a real risk of being subject to the serious threat referred to in Article 15(c) QD.

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