



## At What Cost? The Human Toll of Turkey's Policy at Home and Abroad

**Hearing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**  
(The Helsinki Commission)

Testimony of Eric Schwartz, President, Refugees International  
*Thursday, October 31, 2019*

Chairman Wilson, Chairman of the Commission Hastings, Co-Chairman of the Commission Wicker, and distinguished commissioners,

Thank you for holding this hearing to examine human rights developments in Turkey.

My name is Eric Schwartz, and I am president of Refugees International. I have also served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration (between 2009 and 2011), as the senior international human rights and humanitarian official at the National Security Council between 1993 and 2000, and in human rights and humanitarian-related roles at the House Foreign Affairs Committee, at the United Nations, and at Human Rights Watch.

Refugees International is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people in parts of the world impacted by conflict, persecution, and forced displacement. Based here in Washington, we conduct fact-finding missions to research and report on the circumstances of displaced populations in countries such as Somalia, Iraq, Bangladesh, and Syria. Refugees International does not accept any government or United Nations funding, which helps ensure that our advocacy is impartial and independent.

I am here today to discuss the effects of Turkey's policies on vulnerable, displaced populations in northern Syria and Iraq, as well as within Turkey's own borders.

Refugees International has been reporting on Syrian and Kurdish-related issues for many years on topics such as host country conditions, protection measures for women and girls, and humanitarian and human rights considerations.

This work has continued in earnest over the last year. In June 2019, a Refugees International team traveled to Turkey to research the impact of the Syrian regime military offensive on Idlib and its surroundings in northwest Syria, and the unfolding humanitarian crisis. A Refugees International team also conducted a mission inside Turkey in July 2019 to investigate the situation of refugees and their access to the country's labor market. Currently, a Refugees International team is on mission at the border between northeast Syria and Iraq to witness the effects of the Turkish incursion into northeast Syria.

### **The Turkish Military Offensive**

On October 9, 2019, Turkey commenced a military offensive into northeast Syria with support from the Syrian National Army (SNA) rebel coalition. The operation began with intense Turkish air and artillery strikes against targets on border towns followed by a ground-assault led by SNA fighters backed by Turkish tanks. As the attacks continued, reports of significant human rights violations by advancing Turkish forces have multiplied, including displacement, looting, extrajudicial executions, and targeting of civilians.

### **The Humanitarian Situation and Response in Northeastern Syria**

Less than a month after Turkey launched its offensive, some of our worst fears regarding the humanitarian consequences of the incursion have been realized: thousands of civilians are newly displaced across an area experiencing severe crisis, international relief groups have been forced to evacuate just when they are most needed, and there have been reports of grave human rights abuses and wars crimes committed against civilian populations.

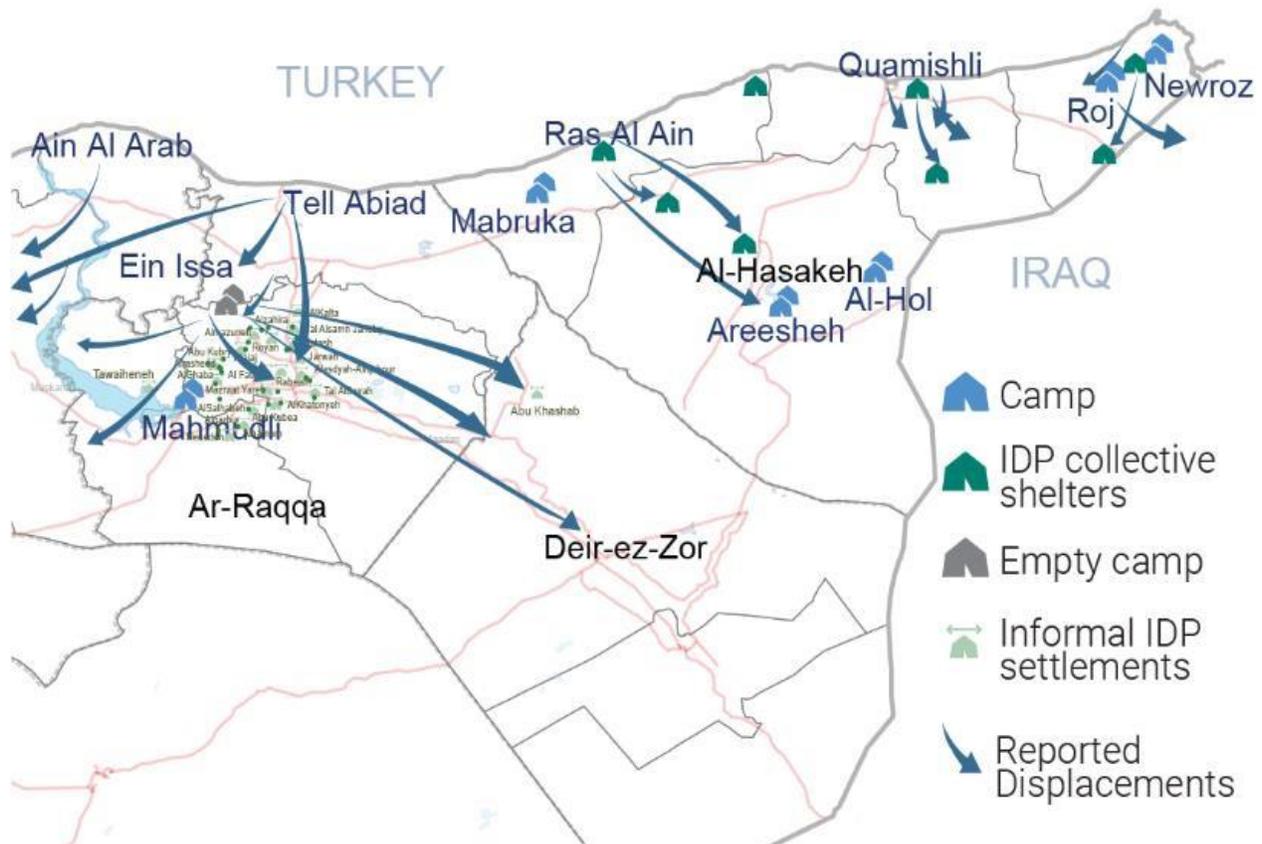
When the Turkish offensive began, 2.2 million people were living in territory controlled by the Kurdish-led SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces). According to the UN, this included 1.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and 700,000 who were already internally displaced prior to the outbreak of hostilities on October 9. Since then, air strikes, shelling, and fighting on the ground has reportedly killed dozens of civilians and forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes. Aid agencies report being overwhelmed with displaced people in need of assistance.

The highly volatile security situation has hindered the delivery of vital humanitarian aid. Supplies are cut off, and aid workers are either evacuated or themselves displaced. Space is limited in the region's camps for the displaced, and new camps or services will need to be established. There are urgent needs for emergency shelter, food and NFI distributions,

fuel, and repairs for water stations. The health sector is facing extreme strain. Hospitals require support, and there is a need for ambulances and mobile clinics.

### **New Internal Displacement**

Since fighting began earlier this month, tens of thousands of people have been displaced. In the wake of an October 22 ceasefire and Russia-Turkey agreement, some 60,000 displaced people have returned home, including to areas now under the control of Turkish Armed Forces in Tell Abiad and Ein Issa. However, more than 139,000 people remained displaced inside northeast Syria, including around 58,485 children and 35,500 women. The vast majority of the displaced are residing in host communities and shelters in Hasakeh, Raqqa, and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. Almost all of the shelters are in schools. Local authorities in Hasaka have reported that the city cannot absorb anyone else.



*Displacement Flows between October 21-24, 2019. Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*

### **Evacuation of International Humanitarians**

Following the Turkish intervention, there has been a near complete evacuation of international humanitarian staff from northeast Syria. This resulted in a significant and immediate disruption to relief efforts and other programming. International NGOs sanitized their offices, destroying paperwork and other materials that could be used to identify beneficiaries or their local staff. The evacuation was triggered by the Turkish offensive, but it was also driven by the October 12 MOU between the SDF and the Assad

regime that allowed for the return of the Syrian army to the northeast. International NGOs operating in the northeast are considered illegal and labeled terrorist organizations by Damascus. International staff feared arrest if they remained.

International NGOs emphasize that they have been able to relaunch many of their activities through a system of remote management that relies on Syrian staff to lead implementation in the field. Some areas and communities are receiving less attention as a result, and some non-essential services like livelihoods and education programming have been deprioritized in favor of life-saving activities. Nonetheless, local authorities and civil society groups inside northeast Syria are deeply concerned over what they perceive to be a significant drop in the humanitarian response just when they are most needed.

### **Refugees in Iraq**

So far, some 12,000 Syrian refugees have crossed into Dohuk governorate of Iraq seeking safety. Nearly 75 percent of all registered refugees are women and children. More than a quarter of refugee families are female-headed households. Arrivals also include unaccompanied children. The pace of arrivals is accelerating rapidly. Syrian refugees were first sent to Bardarash camp, which has now reached capacity at 11,000 residents. Other nearby sites have been identified, and at least one new camp opened to shelter more refugees. Most Syrian refugees arrive with little more than the shirts on their backs. Aid workers say that many of the children are traumatized.

Most refugees with whom Refugees International spoke say they fled bombardment by Turkish airplanes and artillery. However, others fled the arrival of forces loyal to the Assad regime. Aid officials across the border in Iraq are bracing for some 50,000 to arrive in the coming weeks and months. International humanitarians say that number could easily surpass 100,000 with a new round of fighting. Kurdish officials in Iraq told Refugees International that, in a worst-case scenario, a quarter million Syrian refugees could flood over the border. It should be noted that, prior to the October 9 incursion, Dohuk governorate was already hosting more than 230,000 Syrian refugees and over 700,000 internally displaced Iraqis. Local officials say they are already stretched to capacity.

### **Abuse of the Civilian Population**

Human rights groups have accused Turkish military forces and Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups of carrying out serious human rights violations and war crimes over the course of the offensive. These include summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians. Amnesty International has gathered evidence of indiscriminate attacks in residential areas, including attacks on a home, a bakery, and a school, carried out by Turkey and its Syrian proxies. Witness testimony and verified video footage confirm that Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish female politician and Secretary General of the Future Syria political party, was pulled from her car and executed on October 12 on the international highway linking Raqqa to Qamishli.

In addition, Turkey, a NATO member, has reportedly used munitions containing white phosphorus against civilians in northern Syria. Multiple sources have reported that the munitions are believed to have been dropped in the border town of Ras al-Ayn, after images and video surfaced of civilians, including children, suffering gruesome burns associated with the chemical.

### **Turkey Says It Plans to Resettle Syrian Refugees in the “Safe Zone”**

Turkey has indicated that it plans to establish a “safe zone” in Syria’s northeast to resettle more than a million of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey. Resettling large numbers of people in this way would violate international law and would cause huge demographic changes to the region. It would heighten antagonism between Arab and Kurdish populations with likely grave and lasting consequences. It should be noted that American officials in the region assess that Turkey is sincere in wanting to repatriate one million Syrian refugees to the safe zone in northeast Syria.

### **A Growing Hostile Environment for Refugees in Turkey**

Turkish officials might see this repatriation as a solution to the growing discontent toward Syrian refugees at home. Turkey is home to the largest Syrian refugee population in the world. Initially, Ankara took important measures to integrate the Syrian refugees. It adopted a non-camp approach that allowed the vast majority to live in local communities. It is estimated that less than 10 percent of Syrians in Turkey live in refugee camps. Ankara has also put in place a temporary protected status, which allows most Syrians to receive public services, including health care and education.

However, nine years into the Syria crisis, with Turkey’s economy in decline and unemployment on the rise, the climate for Syrians in Turkey has reached a critical juncture. Turkey’s initial open-door policy and society’s hospitality has now largely given way to an increasingly antagonistic environment.

Keen to prevent additional refugees from reaching its territory, Ankara has built a wall nearly 500 miles long on its southern border with Syria. Turkish military forces have even shot and killed Syrians attempting to cross into the country. Turkey kept its border closed even as the Syrian regime backed by Russia launched a brutal offensive on Idlib and its surroundings in northwest Syria this year. In a few months, the Syrian-Russian offensive killed more than 1,000 civilians and displaced more than half a million people. However, international actors—and European countries in particular—adamant about avoiding fresh waves of Syrian refugees reaching their shores through Turkey, refrained from criticizing Ankara’s decision to keep its border closed.

In Turkey, Syrians often bear the blame for the country’s economic downturn. As a result, discrimination and hostilities against them are alarmingly on the rise. For example, a wave of attacks against Syrian-owned businesses occurred in Istanbul in late June 2019.

In July, Turkish authorities conducted widespread identity checks in Syrian neighborhoods and subway and bus stations. These checks were followed by a wave of deportations of Syrian men to Idlib province, at a time when the military offensive was at its worst. Turkish authorities denied these reports. However, NGOs including Refugees International and the international media extensively documented the forcible return of Syrian men, many of whom had been coerced into signing voluntary repatriation forms.

In July 2019, the office of the governor of Istanbul ordered Syrians living in the city who had registered in other Turkish provinces to relocate to those areas. Since, additional deportations have largely stopped. However, the future of many Syrians remains uncertain as an October 31 deadline to leave the city is reached today.

In addition, refugees are struggling to survive economically. Although Turkey introduced a work permit system for Syrians in 2016, access to the labor market remains challenging. Most Syrians are still forced to find jobs in the informal economy where exploitation is common. The United Nations estimates that more than 64 percent of Syrian households in cities live close to or below the poverty line. Syrian NGOs are similarly affected by the decreasing access to work permits. Turkey serves as a base of operations for most humanitarian organizations carrying out cross-border assistance into Syria. However, Syrian relief workers have been increasingly denied the renewal of their work permits, which has deeply affected organizational efficiency and staff morale. Several Syrian NGO staff told Refugees International that Turkey has refused to renew their work permits. Others are forced to work from home for fear of raids by the police. As a result, like many of their fellow citizens, Syrian relief workers live in constant fear and uncertainty.

### **Exploiting Europe's Migration Fears**

President Erdoğan has threatened to send millions of Syrian refugees to Europe's doorstep in an attempt to dissuade EU member states from imposing sanctions due to the Turkish intervention, but also to negotiate additional financial support to help resettle refugees in the so-called "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the border. "If Turkey's plans for the return (of the refugees)... is not supported, we will have [no choice but to open our borders](#). We would open the borders, they can go to Europe," Erdoğan told lawmakers from his AK Party on October 10.

In March 2016, the EU signed a refugee agreement with Turkey to limit the flow of refugees arriving into Europe from Turkey. In return, Turkey was promised €6 billion in financial aid, in addition to waiving the Schengen visa for Turkish nationals. Refugees International was harshly critical of the deal, which gave short shrift to protection concerns, but the deal did significantly reduce the number of refugees arriving on the Greek Islands from Turkey. Now however, Turkish President Erdoğan has been

increasingly exploiting Europe's fear of a renewed refugee flow to reap political and financial gains.

Before I turn to recommendations, it is important to mention—however briefly in testimony focused on Turkey—the implications of tragic policy blunders and omissions by Washington that have only contributed to great suffering. To be sure, few expected the very small contingent of U.S. troops to remain in northern Syria indefinitely, but nearly all policy experts understood that a carefully calibrated withdrawal over time could promote stability in northern Syria, permit critically important economic rehabilitation activities, avoid humanitarian suffering, and ultimately promote a political dispensation for the region that would preserve these fragile gains. President Trump's indefensible decision to quickly withdraw U.S. troops has put all those objectives in grave peril and has led to the suffering of hundreds of thousands. In addition, the administration's utter failure to make refugee protection a priority either at home or abroad has emboldened Turkey—not mention other governments around the world—to limit and even disregard rights enshrined in the Refugee Convention and Protocol, among other international treaties.

## **Recommendations**

- **Increase humanitarian support to local NGOs.** This is an effort which should have started years ago and something that Refugees International has [repeatedly recommended](#). These local civil society groups are and will be on the frontline of the humanitarian response for months to come, regardless of who controls the terrain.
- **Surge resources for refugees in northern Iraq.** Surge funding to UNHCR, international NGOs, and local authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq who are responding to the refugee situation along the border with Syria. Increase U.S. resources in Erbil to provide additional support for relief efforts and additional capacity to process Syrian refugees for resettlement to the United States.
- **Pass preemptive sanctions against Turkey to forestall a resumption of its offensive.** Congress should pass additional sanctions against Turkey to be implemented if the Turkish Army or its Syrian proxies renew their offensive against the SDF or engage in other activities that displace people from their homes.
- **Hold Turkey accountable for human rights violations and war crimes.** The United States should hold Turkey accountable for human rights abuses and war crimes that have been committed by either the Turkish Army or its Syrian proxies.
- **Resettle Syrian refugees in the United States.** The United States should step up efforts to resettle not only Syrian refugees with family members who are U.S.

citizens or permanent residents, but also expand resettlement to cover a broader class of Syrians to include those recently forced across the border into Iraq as a result of the Turkish offensive. Frankly, this is the least that the United States could do in light of the role played by the Trump administration in greenlighting the Turkish operation. To be sure, the president's 2020 refugee ceiling is only 18,000 worldwide. But nothing prevents members of Congress from pressing the president to augment those numbers or even to legislate an increase. Of course, the prospects for enactment of such legislation may be very limited, but the effort could send an important signal of congressional interest.

### **Conclusion**

I want to thank the commission once again for holding this hearing and placing your focus on the humanitarian crisis unfolding along the Turkish-Syrian border. President Erdoğan's actions, including his intention to use a so-called "safe zone" to return up to a million Syrian refugees are shockingly irresponsible and have put lives at grave risk. However, as we have seen over the last few weeks, there are many in Congress willing to take action to protect civilians and displaced populations.

Thank you for opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your further questions.