

VOICES OF IDLIB

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TITWANE.

SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR IS ENTERING A NEW PHASE, AS THE REGIME CLOSES IN ON OPPOSITION-HELD AREAS. ONE REGION, IDLIB, COULD BE WHERE THE OPPOSITION MAKES ITS LAST STAND.

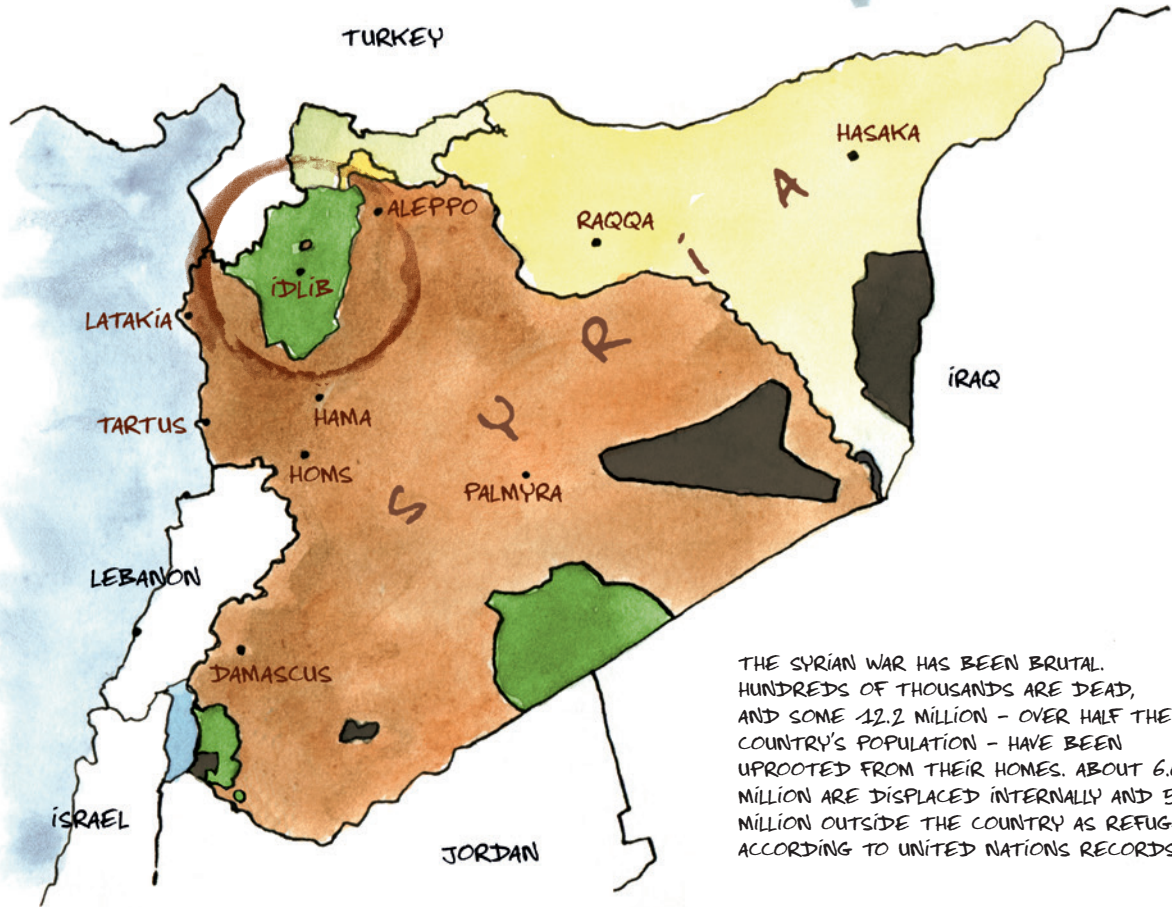
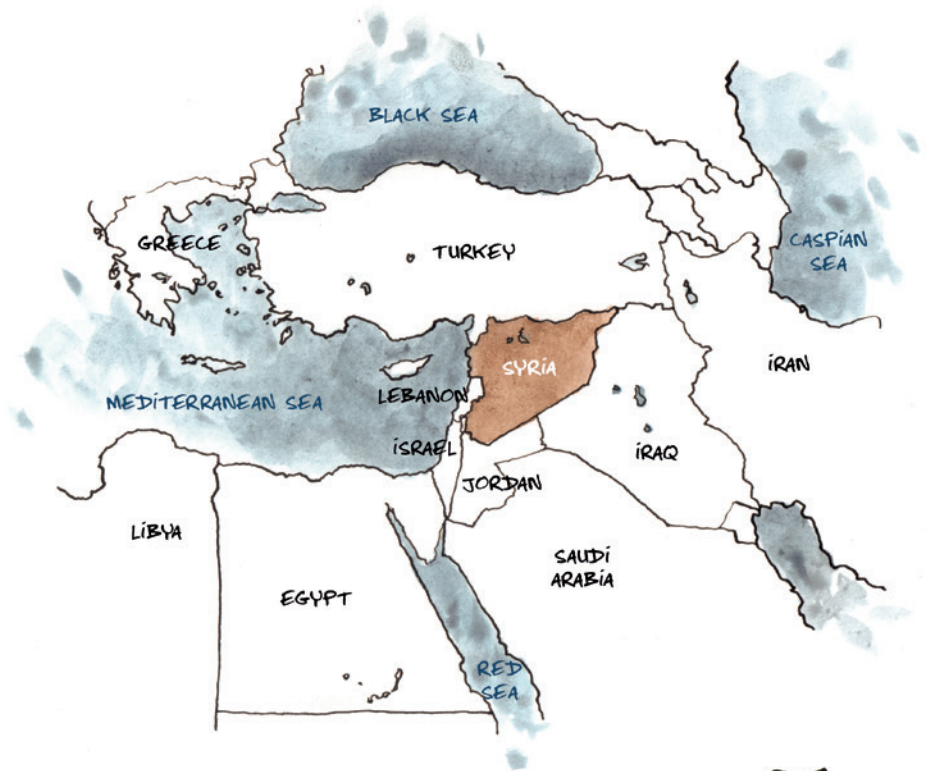


SOME 3 MILLION PEOPLE - ROUGHLY HALF OF THEM NATIVE RESIDENTS AND THE OTHER HALF DISPLACED WITHIN THE REGION OR FROM OTHER SYRIAN WAR ZONES - ARE STUCK IN IDLIB AND ADJACENT AREAS ALONG WITH REBEL FIGHTERS. A SHOWDOWN WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY CAUSE A HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS COULD FLEE IN DESPERATION TO TURKISH-HELD AREAS FARTHER NORTH OR ALL THE WAY TO THE TURKISH BORDER.

BEFORE 2011, WHEN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR BROKE OUT, IDLIB WAS THE "FORGOTTEN PROVINCE", A PLACE YOUNG PEOPLE WANTED TO LEAVE. TODAY, IT'S A REFUGE FOR SYRIANS OF ALL AGES AND PLACES OF ORIGIN - THE PRIME DESTINATION FOR THE COUNTRY'S DISPLACED. THE WAR-WEARY ARRIVALS HAVE NEARLY DOUBLED THE POPULATION.

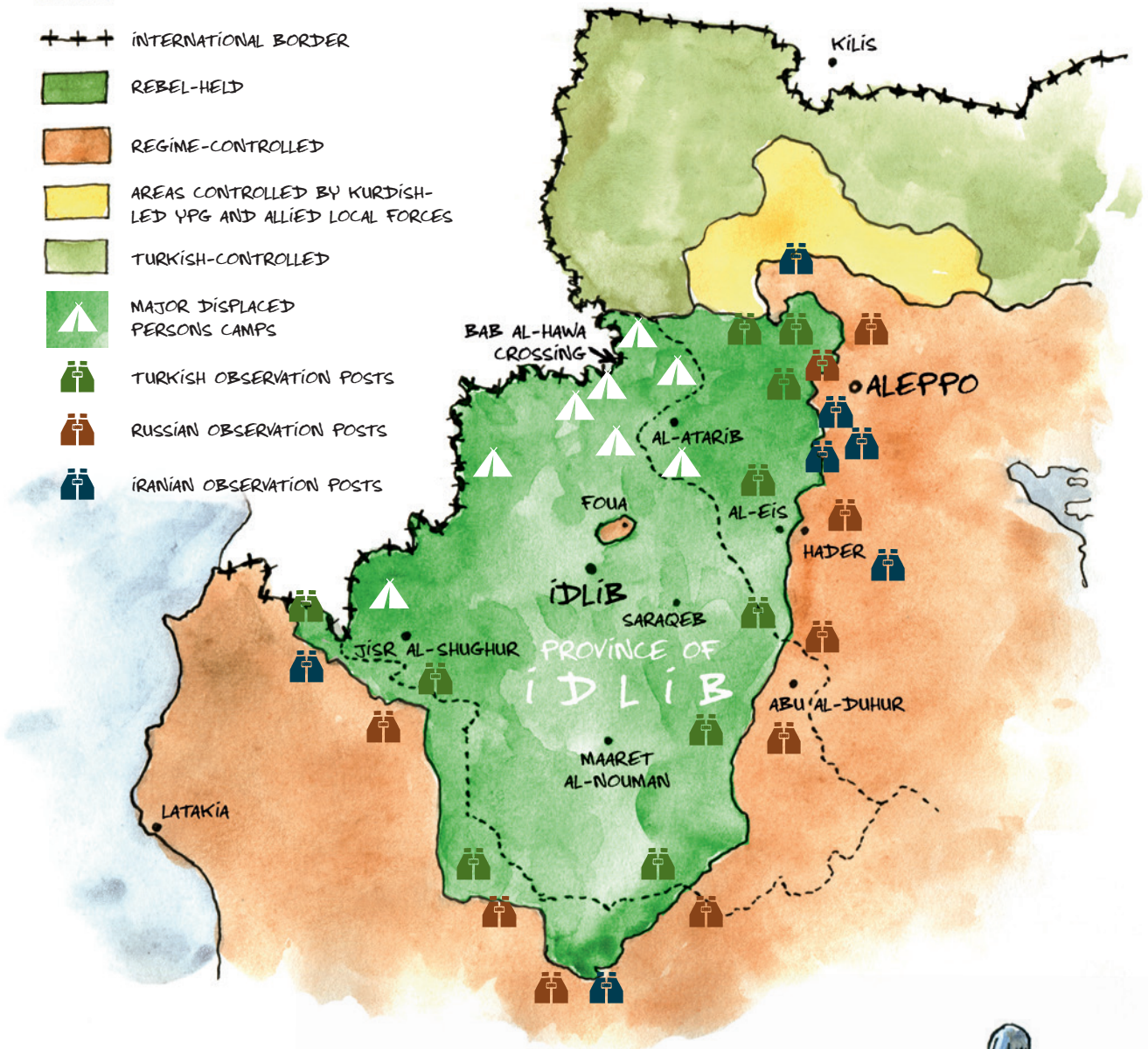
AND NOW BOTH THE NATIVES AND THE DISPLACED WISH THEY WERE FORGOTTEN: BY THE REBEL GROUPS THAT RULE THEM AND BY THE RESURGENT REGIME OF PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD. HAVING FINISHED OFF MOST REBEL ENCLAVES, THE REGIME IS VOWING TO RETAKE ALL THE TERRITORY STILL OUTSIDE ITS GRASP.



THE SYRIAN WAR HAS BEEN BRUTAL. HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS ARE DEAD, AND SOME 12.2 MILLION - OVER HALF THE COUNTRY'S POPULATION - HAVE BEEN UPROOTED FROM THEIR HOMES. ABOUT 6.6 MILLION ARE DISPLACED INTERNALLY AND 5.6 MILLION OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY AS REFUGEES, ACCORDING TO UNITED NATIONS RECORDS.

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|---|-------------------|---|---|
|  | REBEL-HELD |  | AREAS CONTROLLED BY KURDISH-LED YPG AND ALLIED LOCAL FORCES |
|  | REGIME-CONTROLLED |  | TURKISH-CONTROLLED |
|  | ISIS TERRITORIES |  | GOLAN (ISRAELI-OCCUPIED) |

- PROVINCIAL BORDER
- +++++ INTERNATIONAL BORDER
-  REBEL-HELD
-  REGIME-CONTROLLED
-  AREAS CONTROLLED BY KURDISH-LED YPG AND ALLIED LOCAL FORCES
-  TURKISH-CONTROLLED
-  MAJOR DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS
-  TURKISH OBSERVATION POSTS
-  RUSSIAN OBSERVATION POSTS
-  IRANIAN OBSERVATION POSTS



TIME AND AGAIN, THE REGIME ENGAGES IN COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT, REDUCING ENTIRE DISTRICTS TO RUBBLE BECAUSE REBELS ARE OPERATING THERE. IN FACT, IT'S A PILLAR OF THE REGIME'S MILITARY STRATEGY. THE REGIME REGULARLY BOMBS RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBOURHOODS - EVEN HOSPITALS - AND LAYS SIEGE TO REBEL-HELD TOWNS TO COMPEL THEIR SURRENDER.

OPPOSITION SYRIANS SAY THE REGIME DESTROYS AL-AKHIDAR WA AL-YABES.

LITERALLY, "THE GREEN AND THE DRIED-OUT" - MEANING, IT SCORCHES THE EARTH.



REBEL GROUPS ALSO USE INDISCRIMINATE VIOLENCE ON A SMALLER SCALE, WITH DEVASTATING RESULTS FOR CIVILIANS UNDER THEIR FIRE. THE REBELS IN IDLIB HAVE NO ANSWER FOR THE REGIME'S MILITARY STRENGTH, PARTICULARLY NOT ITS AIR POWER. IF THE REGIME ATTACKS, THEY WILL LOSE GROUND, AND THE HUMANITARIAN DISASTER TO FOLLOW COULD DWARF ANYTHING SEEN IN SYRIA TO DATE.

IN 2011, IDLIB'S RURAL ECONOMY WAS IN A TAILSPIN - LONG DROUGHTS HAD WIPED OUT WHOLE CROPS AND FARMERS COULDN'T AFFORD FUEL AFTER THE REGIME GOT RID OF SUBSIDIES. THE SLUMP DROVE MANY IDLIBIS TO JOIN THE POPULAR UPRISING AGAINST THE REGIME.

THE UPRISING WAS PEACEFUL, FOR THE MOST PART. BUT IN IDLIB, AS IN ALL RESTIVE REGIONS OF THE COUNTRY, THE REGIME HIT BACK AT THE PROTESTERS WITH AN IRON FIST.

SOON, THE OPPOSITION ARMED ITSELF, AND REBEL GROUPS SEIZED CONTROL OF TOWN AFTER TOWN. BLOODSHED WORSENER. REGIME FORCES ESCALATED ATTACKS ON AREAS FALLING OUTSIDE THEIR CONTROL, AND ASCENDANT REBELS SHOT OR THREATENED THOSE THEY PERCEIVED AS ACTIVELY SUPPORTING THE REGIME'S CRACKDOWN. AS OUTSIDE POWERS INTERVENED AND THE REGIME'S ENFORCEMENT OF CONSCRIPTION PUSHED MORE AND MORE LOCAL MEN INTO ITS MILITARY, MANY IDLIBIS FELT CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE.



HASSAN*, A GOVERNMENT SUPPORTER WHO IS NOW A REFUGEE IN MOROCCO, EXPLAINS WHY HE FLED:

"WE WERE LEFT WITH THREE OPTIONS: DEFECT TO THE REBELS, FIGHT FOR THE REGIME OR LEAVE".

IN THE SPRING OF 2015, NORTHERN REBELS OVERRAN REGIME DEFENCES IN IDLIB, MAKING IT THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT PROVINCE TO FALL ALMOST ENTIRELY UNDER REBEL CONTROL. IT WAS A LOW POINT FOR THE ASSAD REGIME - AND PROBABLY A PRINCIPAL REASON WHY RUSSIA INTERVENED IN THE WAR ON THE REGIME'S SIDE. EVER SINCE, RUSSIAN FIGHTER JETS HAVE HELPED THE REGIME TURN THE TIDE.

*IN "VOICES OF IDLIB" ALL FACES HAVE BEEN CHANGED, ALL NAMES ARE PSEUDONYMS, EXCEPT BASHAR AL-ASSAD.



MARYAM

IN THE FALL OF 2016, THE REGIME STARTED TO CLAW BACK CONTROL OF TOWNS THE REBELS HAD CAPTURED. WITH RUSSIAN SUPPORT, IT STEADILY BOMBED (AND IN SOME CASES STARVED) ONE REBEL-HELD AREA AFTER ANOTHER INTO SUBMISSION.

MARYAM IS FROM THE DAMASCUS SUBURB OF EASTERN GHOUTA. SHE DESCRIBES THE REGIME OFFENSIVE THERE:

"WE MOVED INTO BASEMENTS BECAUSE IT WAS SIMPLY NOT POSSIBLE TO STAY IN OUR APARTMENTS. THE REGIME SPARED NO ONE AND NOTHING".

"DURING THE BOMBARDMENT", MARYAM CONTINUES, "THE REGIME OPENED 'HUMANITARIAN CORRIDORS' TO ENCOURAGE RESIDENTS TO CROSS INTO GOVERNMENT-HELD TERRITORY".

"SOME PEOPLE LEFT BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD THREE OPTIONS: DIE UNDER BOMBARDMENT, DIE LATER DURING THE REGIME'S ADVANCE OR TAKE THE RISK OF CROSSING THROUGH THE CORRIDOR".

"MANY OF THOSE WHO LEFT THOUGHT, 'I HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING - NO FIGHTING, NO CIVIL ACTIVISM. WHY SHOULD I STAY HERE AND FACE CERTAIN DEATH?' THOSE WHO CHOSE TO STAY IN GHOUTA, LIKE ME, WERE 100 PER CENT SURE THEY HAD NO CHANCE OF STAYING ALIVE UNDER THE REGIME".

"WE KNOW PEOPLE WHO HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE UPRISING OR THE ARMED REVOLT. THEY WENT TO THE REGIME-HELD AREAS AND WERE IMPRISONED. SO IMAGINE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO AN ACTIVIST LIKE ME".

AS THE REGIME PUSHES REBEL FACTIONS TOWARD SURRENDER, IT OFFERS THEM AND BELEAGUERED RESIDENTS ANOTHER CHOICE: "RECONCILIATION" OR EVACUATION.

IN THEORY, ALL THOSE WANTED BY THE REGIME CAN CHOOSE TO "RESOLVE THEIR STATUS" AND REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES UNDER A "GENERAL AMNESTY" IF THEY SUBMIT TO VETTING BY THE SECRET POLICE. BUT IN PRACTICE THAT AMNESTY MAY OR MAY NOT BE REAL. THE ARRAY OF SECURITY AGENCIES AND MILITIAS ACTING IN THE REGIME'S NAME HAVE A TRACK RECORD OF ARBITRARY DETENTION, TORTURE AND EXTRAJUDICIAL EXECUTIONS.

"YOU CAN CLENCH YOUR TEETH, RESOLVE YOUR STATUS, AND LIVE IN REGIME-HELD AREAS", EXPLAINS MAHMOUD, FROM WADI BARADA, IN THE FOOTHILLS OF THE MOUNTAIN RANGE SEPARATING SYRIA AND LEBANON. "I KNOW MANY PEOPLE WHO DID AND ARE FINE. BUT IF YOUR NAME WINDS UP ON THE WRONG LIST, YOU'RE SCREWED".

EVEN IF CLEARED, MEN OF MILITARY AGE CAN EXPECT TO BE DRAFTED INTO THE ARMY OR AUXILIARY UNITS, MAYBE TO FIGHT REBELS AT THE REMAINING FRONT LINES.

MANY OPPOSITION SYRIANS CHOOSE EVACUATION. SINCE AUGUST 2016, AT LEAST 15 OF THESE SURRENDER DEALS HAVE BROUGHT THOUSANDS BY BUS TO IDLIB.

MARYAM WAS IN A CARAVAN OF 50 BUSES FROM EASTERN GHOUTA. SHE DESCRIBES THE TRIP:

"WE PASSED THROUGH [PRO-REGIME] VILLAGES ON THE COAST. PEOPLE GATHERED ALONG THE ROAD TO INSULT US WITH CURSES AND OBSCENE GESTURES. WE WERE AMONG THE FIRST TO EVACUATE, SO WE JUST GOT THE INSULTS, BUT LATER WE HEARD THAT THE WINDOW OF ONE BUS WAS BROKEN AND SOMEONE INJURED. AT A CROSSROADS, WE CHANGED BUSES AND ENTERED IDLIB. I CALL IT THE JOURNEY FROM HELL TO HEAVEN".



MAHMOUD

PARADISE IDLIB IS NOT.

SOME TWO THIRDS OF THE PEOPLE NOW LIVING HERE ARE IN NEED OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE. OVER HALF ARE CHILDREN, AND WIDOWS HEAD MANY HOUSEHOLDS.

THE INFLOW OF DISPLACED IS NEAR CONSTANT. OVERCROWDED CAMPS AND SHELTERS DOT THE COUNTRYSIDE AND ARE LARGER AT THE TURKISH BORDER. IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO MEET PEOPLE WHO HAVE FLED THE WAR THREE, FOUR OR EVEN FIVE TIMES.



AND THEN THERE IS THE WAR AND THE FORCES IT HAS EMPOWERED.

IN EARLY 2018, THE IDLIB ENCLAVE APPEARED ON THE VERGE OF COLLAPSE. REGIME FORCES WERE BEARING DOWN FROM THE SOUTH AND EAST. THEN IN FEBRUARY AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN RUSSIA AND TURKEY ALLOWED THE DEPLOYMENT OF TURKISH "DE-ESCALATION MONITORS" TO THE FRONT LINE. FIGHTING BETWEEN REBELS AND THE REGIME SUBSIDED.



DESPITE AID COMING IN FROM TURKEY, FOOD AND MEDICINE ARE IN SHORT SUPPLY. AID OPERATIONS JUST CAN'T KEEP UP: TO DATE, DONORS HAVE MET LESS THAN A THIRD OF THE COUNTRYWIDE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE FUNDING REQUIREMENTS FOR 2018.

TRADE (AND SMUGGLING) IS THE BACKBONE OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY, OUTPACING AGRICULTURE AND STATE EMPLOYMENT. SOME OF THE DISPLACED HAVE OPENED GROCERIES, JEWELRY SHOPS, CARPENTRY WORKSHOPS, MONEY EXCHANGES, IMPORT-EXPORT COMPANIES AND OTHER BUSINESSES. BUT FOR MOST PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY THE DISPLACED, LIFE IS HARD: MOST RELY ON HANDOUTS FROM HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES AND INCOME FROM WHATEVER ODD JOBS THEY CAN FIND.

INSTEAD, REBEL FACTIONS, THE STRONGEST OF THEM JIHADISTS, STARTED TO FIGHT EACH OTHER. AT TIMES, THESE FACTIONS ARE SQUABBLING OVER TURF; AT OTHERS, THEY'RE WAGING OPEN WARFARE, WITH CIVILIANS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE.

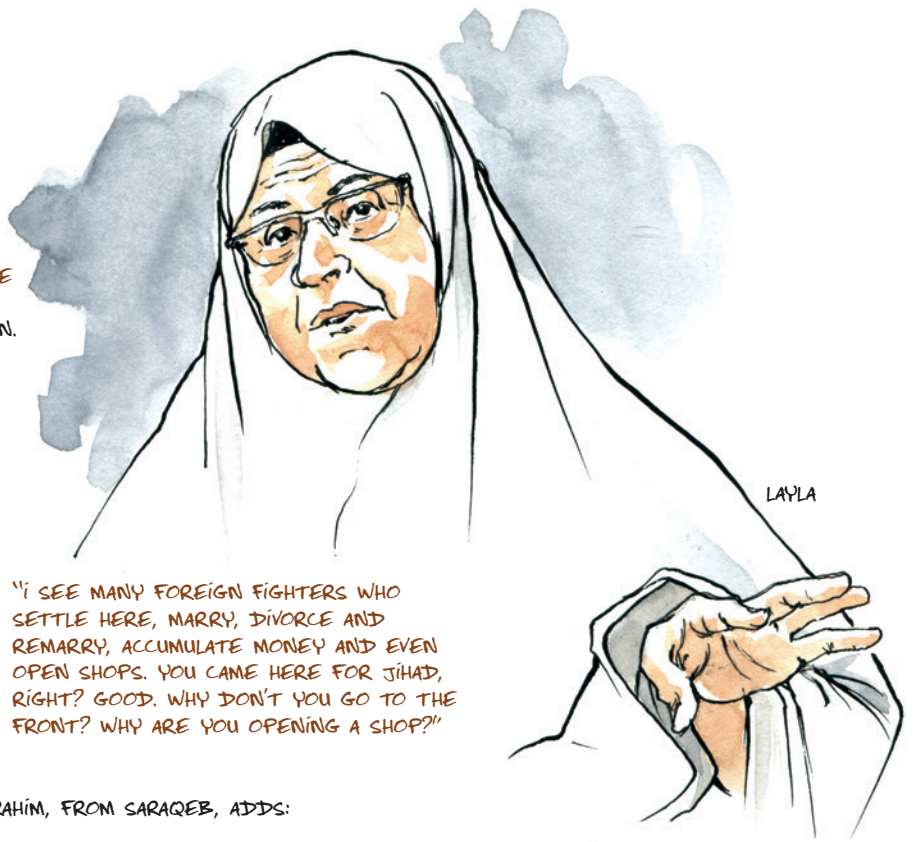
THE REBELS RANGE FROM PACKS OF LOCAL YOUTH WHO FLY A FLAG, TO FOREIGNERS HERE TO WAGE "HOLY WAR". SOME OF THE MORE HARDLINE FIGHTERS INTRUDE IN DAILY LIFE, INSISTING ON CONSERVATIVE DRESS FOR WOMEN AND GENDER SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS. BUT MANY IDLIB RESIDENTS DON'T CARE ABOUT THE IDEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS AMONG THE SYRIAN GROUPS - FOR THEM, THE ARMED YOUTHS ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST THEIR NEIGHBOURS AND COUSINS, EVEN WHEN THEY OVERSTEP.

CHIEF AMONG THE FACTIONS IS HEI'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM, THE LATEST REBRANDING OF THE NUSRA JIHADIST GROUP THAT UNTIL RECENTLY WAS AL-QAEDA'S AFFILIATE IN SYRIA. THE GROUP WAS ONCE UNDERGROUND, BUT NOW IT OPENLY SPONSORS A "SALVATION GOVERNMENT" COMPLETE WITH AN "INTERIOR MINISTRY" FOR WHICH ITS FIGHTERS SERVE AS COPS. SERVICES ARE KEY TO CAPTURING LOCAL SUPPORT - EVERYONE IN IDLIB NEEDS WATER FOR DRINKING, COOKING AND CLEANING, AS WELL AS ELECTRICITY FOR CHARGING PHONES. "AL-HEI'A", AS SYRIANS CALL IT, CHARGES FEES FOR THESE SERVICES, AND COLLECTS TAXES, TO WHICH THEY ADD ROAD TOLLS AND REAL ESTATE REVENUES.

MANY LOCALS DON'T CARE MUCH FOR THE REBELS' PRIORITIES.

"AL-HEI'A IMPOSED A LOT OF TAXES - ON WATER, ELECTRICITY, TRANSPORT. BUT THEY FAILED TO DELIVER GOOD SERVICES IN RETURN. IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THEIR TRUE AIM WAS TO EXTORT", COMPLAINS LAYLA, A DOCTOR IN THE TOWN OF MAARET AL-NOUMAN.

"LAST YEAR AL-HEI'A MEMBERS WERE STANDING AT SCHOOL GATES, MAKING SURE GIRLS AND BOYS WEREN'T MIXING, AT THE SAME TIME THAT BATTLES WERE RAGING ON THE FRONT LINE".



LAYLA

"I SEE MANY FOREIGN FIGHTERS WHO SETTLE HERE, MARRY, DIVORCE AND REMARRY, ACCUMULATE MONEY AND EVEN OPEN SHOPS. YOU CAME HERE FOR JIHAD, RIGHT? GOOD. WHY DON'T YOU GO TO THE FRONT? WHY ARE YOU OPENING A SHOP?"

IBRAHIM, FROM SARAGEB, ADDS:

"THEY LECTURE YOU ABOUT GOD AND THE PROPHET MOHAMMED, BUT COVERTLY THEY ARE MAKING A FORTUNE".

SINCE THE REBEL TAKEOVER, ACTIVIST "LOCAL COORDINATION COMMITTEES" TURNED "MUNICIPAL COUNCILS" HAVE TRIED TO FILL THE GOVERNANCE GAPS - HELPING SUPPLY WATER AND ELECTRICITY, CLEANING THE STREETS AND COLLECTING THE TRASH. AL-HEI'A HAS MUSCLED IN ON SOME OF THESE COUNCILS, BUT OTHERS HAVE RESISTED.



SHARIF

KHALED, FROM MAARET AL-NOUMAN, SERVES ON ONE OF THEM.

"AL-HEI'A'S 'SALVATION GOVERNMENT' TRIED TO EXERT INFLUENCE ON OUR LOCAL COUNCIL. BUT OUR PRESIDENT IS A VERY SMART GUY WHO NEGOTIATED WITH THEM ENDLESSLY WITHOUT REACHING AN AGREEMENT. THEY CUT THE GAS, ELECTRICITY AND WATER TO MAKE US KNEEL, BUT THEY FAILED. SOME ORGANISATIONS [FUNDED BY WESTERN GOVERNMENTS] HELPED US TO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES FOR THE PEOPLE".

FEW HAVE FAITH THAT THE REBEL GROUPS CAN RESIST A DETERMINED REGIME ADVANCE. SHARIF, A FORMER FREE SYRIAN ARMY FIGHTER, BELIEVES THAT AL-HEI'A AND THE OTHERS WILL FALL BACK IF THE REGIME ATTACKS. HE CITES WHAT HAPPENED IN ALEPPO IN 2016: A "REGIME-RUSSIAN AIR AND ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT CAN BE SO INTENSE THAT NO ARMED GROUP CAN HOLD ITS GROUND".





AND SO IDLIB IS IN A STATE OF SUSPENDED ANIMATION. THE TURKISH OBSERVATION POSTS BROUGHT A SENSE OF SECURITY - BUT ONLY FOR THE MOMENT.

AS LAYLA SAYS:

"WE FEEL SAFER AFTER THE TURKISH INTERVENTION. WE AREN'T BOTHERED DAILY BY FEAR THAT THE REGIME MIGHT ATTACK TO RETAKE IDLIB. BUT THE TURKISH PRESENCE IS NOT A 100 PER CENT GUARANTEE".

SOONER OR LATER, PEOPLE IN IDLIB WORRY THE REGIME WILL TURN BACK TO IDLIB. BASHAR AL-ASSAD HAS SAID AS MUCH:

"YOU HAVE TO CLEAN. YOU HAVE TO KEEP CLEANING THIS AREA TO PUSH THE TERRORISTS INTO TURKEY, BACK TO WHERE THEY COME FROM, OR TO KILL THEM".



UNCERTAINTY WEIGHS ON EVERYONE'S MIND. SOME DREAD THE MOMENT THEY HAVE TO GRAB THEIR BAGS AND RUN; OTHERS CAN'T DECIDE IF THEY SHOULD FLEE OR STAY PUT UNDER ATTACK. DURING THE LAST REGIME OFFENSIVE, OVER THE FALL AND WINTER, 300,000 PEOPLE WERE DISPLACED DEEPER INTO THE SHRINKING REBEL TERRITORY. IF AND WHEN A NEW OFFENSIVE COMES, THERE MAY BE NOWHERE TO RUN.

TURKEY, ALREADY HOME TO OVER 3.5 MILLION SYRIAN REFUGEES, IS LOATH TO RECEIVE MORE. ONE MOTIVE FOR DEPLOYING ITS SOLDIERS TO IDLIB WAS TO PRE-EMPT ANOTHER INFLUX - AND THE JIHADIST INFILTRATION IT FEARS WOULD COME WITH IT. THE TURKISH BORDER IS CLOSED TO ALL BUT COMMERCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN GOODS, AND PEOPLE WHO CROSS IT ILLEGALLY ARE SHOT AT. IT'S NOT EVEN CERTAIN IF TURKEY WOULD ALLOW NEW WAVES OF DISPLACED INTO THOSE AREAS OF NORTHERN SYRIA THAT IT CONTROLS.





JAMAL, A DISPLACED PERSON FROM ALEPPO, SAYS:

"PEOPLE SAY, 'IF YOU PUSH US OUT OF IDLIB, WHERE DO WE GO?' NEITHER TURKEY NOR EUROPE NOR ANYONE ELSE ACCEPTS REFUGEES. SO I WON'T KEEP IT FROM YOU: THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO SUPPORT A SCENARIO WHERE THE REGIME RETAKES IDLIB. THEY ARE TIRED. THEY WANT THE REGIME TO COME BACK SO THEY CAN GO BACK TO NORMAL LIFE".

ABOVE ALL, INDEED, PEOPLE CRAVE A RETURN TO STABILITY.

"SEVEN YEARS OF WAR HAVE DESTROYED US", REMARKS SHARIF, THE FORMER FIGHTER.

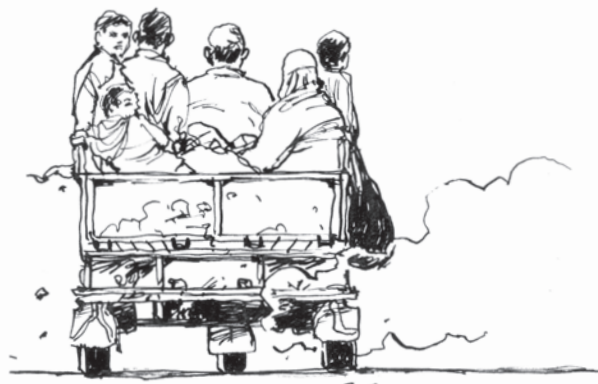
"WHAT I WANT THE MOST IS TO BE ABLE TO GO TO WORK AND NOT HAVE TO THINK, WHEN I HEAR A BOMB FALL, THAT IT HAS LANDED ON MY HOUSE AND MY DAUGHTERS".

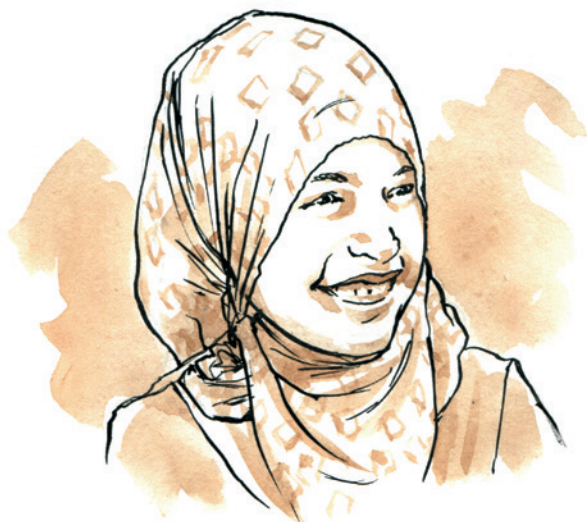
IT IS POSSIBLE THAT RUSSIA, AS PART OF ITS NEGOTIATIONS WITH TURKEY, WILL PUSH THE REGIME TO ACCEPT THE STATUS QUO IN IDLIB - FOR A WHILE. BUT MANY OF THE PROVINCE'S ORIGINAL RESIDENTS HAVE FLED ABROAD, OR ARE DISPLACED ELSEWHERE IN SYRIA, AND MAY NOT WISH TO RETURN. AT THE SAME TIME, MANY OTHERS DISPLACED IN IDLIB ARE LIKELY TO REMAIN IN WHAT AMOUNTS TO THEIR NEW HOME-AWAY-FROM-HOME. THE FACT THAT THEIR SETTLEMENT IS ROOTED IN OTHERS' DISPLACEMENT REFLECTS THE REALITY OF TODAY'S SYRIA: A SOCIETY LIKELY TO REMAIN DEEPLY DIVIDED EVEN WHEN THE CONFLICT DRAWS TO A CLOSE AT LAST.



"I BECAME INVOLVED IN THE REVOLUTION AND WILL CONTINUE ON THIS PATH", SAYS LAYLA, THE DOCTOR. "BUT SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE LEFT. IN FACT, THE MAJORITY OF PEOPLE WHO INVESTED IN THE REVOLUTION ARE GONE NOW. MANY OF THEM SAW THAT SYRIA'S FATE IS NO LONGER IN SYRIAN HANDS".

A FULL-SCALE REGIME ATTACK ON IDLIB WOULD KILL COUNTLESS CIVILIANS AND COULD FORCIBLY DISPLACE LAYLA, MARYAM, JAMAL AND MANY OTHERS YET AGAIN.





CRISIS GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

RUSSIAN-TURKISH DIPLOMACY ALLOWED THE TURKISH TROOPS TO DEPLOY ALONG THE FRONT LINES, BLOCKING A REGIME OFFENSIVE. BUT MORE MUST BE DONE TO AVERT A DISASTROUS BATTLE FOR IDLIB IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.

CONSOLIDATE THE CEASEFIRE. RUSSIA AND TURKEY - AND THE REGIME AS WELL - ARE ALL BEST SERVED BY EXTENDING THE CALM. THE REGIME WOULD PAY DEARLY FOR AN OFFENSIVE INTO THE HEART OF THE REBELLION, AND NOT JUST WITH ITS SOLDIERS' LIVES. AN ASSAULT COULD PUSH JIHADISTS TO INFILTRATE REGIME-HELD AREAS; FREE FROM THE DAILY TASKS OF RULING TERRITORY, THEY MIGHT START PLANNING ASYMMETRICAL ATTACKS ON THE REGIME OR ITS ALLIES.

ISOLATE HARDLINE JIHADISTS AND DEAL WITH OTHERS. BY DEALING WITH HEI'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM WHILE DEEPENING ITS OWN ENGAGEMENT IN NORTH-WESTERN SYRIA, TURKEY HAS WIDENED SPLITS IN JIHADISTS' RANKS. NOW HEI'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM'S MONOPOLISTIC HOLD ON THE NORTH WEST HAS BEEN BROKEN. TURKEY SHOULD CONTINUE TO WORK TO DEVELOP NON-JIHADIST ALTERNATIVES WITHIN THE NORTHERN ARMED OPPOSITION, AND SHOULD MAKE CLEAR TO ANY PRAGMATIC, POTENTIALLY RECONCILABLE ELEMENTS OF HEI'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM THAT THEIR CURRENT JIHADIST PATH IS APPROACHING A DEAD END. IN THE MEANTIME, TURKEY SHOULD PREPARE ITS OPPOSITION ALLIES FOR A CONFRONTATION WITH THE JIHADIST HARD CORE THAT MAY PROVE NECESSARY. RUSSIA AND IRAN SHOULD GIVE TURKEY TIME TO PURSUE THIS APPROACH. THE U.S. AND EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS COULD HELP BY WORKING WITH TURKEY TO ENSURE ITS APPROACH IS PROPERLY TARGETED, COORDINATED AND RESOURCED.