

---

**Keynote Address:**  
**Syria's Tragedy, Our Lessons**

**Featuring:**  
**The Right Honourable David Miliband**

**March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**

*This event was made possible by generous support from  
the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).*

The situation today in Northwest Syria is beyond desperate. As I know from our own staff on the ground, life never mind livelihood is daily in doubt. Direct clashes between Turkey, Syria, and Russia show the dangers of a broadened conflict, while the wider diplomatic vacuum – notable for the absence of Europe and the US – piles on this sense of hopelessness.

My purpose today is in part to bring the humanitarian reality of Idlib to Washington, to speak up for our staff and the people they serve, in the hope that there is still room for humanity and principle in the corridors of power. There are few countries with the capacity to shift the dynamic in Syria, and the US is one of them, so I hope there is resonance in what I describe today, as well as brainstorming around what to do about it.

But I also want to make a wider argument. It is that the war in Syria is not just a disaster. It is that Syria will, dangerously, become a byword, a precedent, for a new normal of brutal, divisive, contagious conflict. Impunity on the battlefield. Stalling of diplomacy. The UN pulled from pillar to post. The aid system inadequate. Neighboring states creaking under the strain of refugees. Western policy befuddled by a mixture of dysfunction, division and denial. This is the reality of the Syrian story over nine years. So the lessons as well as the tragedy need to be discussed and debated lest Syria become a new blueprint for warfare around the world.

Here is what I am going to do:

- Summarize the current humanitarian situation across Syria, starting in Idlib;
- Explain how we see Syria as a warning for the changing nature of conflict;
- Set out some short-term imperatives to save lives today;
- Then draw some wider lessons for humanitarians and diplomats.

#### Idlib Today

The International Rescue Committee worked in Syria between 2008 and 2010. For reasons that have never been clear, we were required to leave at that point. However since 2012 we have been working in the areas of Syria beyond government control, in accord with our mission of helping those in need as a result of conflict or disaster.

The assault on Idlib is intended by the Syrian government to represent the grim climax of the nine-year-long war in Syria. 948,000 civilians have fled since December, with another 400,000 who still risk joining them – the largest civilian displacement since the war started nine long years ago. Every single day another 11,000 civilians join the hundreds of thousands on the run. Among those forced to flee are 19 per cent of our local IRC staff who attempt to persevere in their life-saving work despite relentless violence.

Over 80 per cent of those on the run are women and children. Many of them are out in the cold, braving freezing temperatures, freezing rain, and snow, which led to the death of seven children in the past month.[1] As a result, people are resorting to ever more desperate measures to keep warm – for example burning clothes, tires and plastic bags to generate what little heat they can.

Attacks on health facilities represent some of the most egregious war crimes – and are taking place despite specific calls in UN Security Council resolutions for them to be stopped. In the past three weeks alone, the IRC and the organizations we work with have had to suspend operations in a number of health facilities and relocate an entire fleet of ambulances. On February 25, Idlib Central Hospital was hit by airstrikes, injuring four healthcare workers and putting the hospital out of service. On January 26, an IRC-supported ambulance was damaged in an airstrike that hit a hospital, and the week before, an entire fleet of ambulances we support had to relocate from the area around Maaret an Numan because of the intensity of the hostilities. In total 84 health centers operated by us and other NGOs have had to suspend operations as a result of the current Idlib offensive.[2]

The situation has deteriorated so much that the Global Emergency Response Coalition, a humanitarian alliance made up of the leading US-based international aid organizations including the IRC, launched an emergency appeal to raise funds for just the second-time ever.

### Beyond Idlib

The fact that the exodus is the greatest since the war began is testimony to the virulence and brutality of the fighting. It speaks to the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire. But there are risks and needs beyond Idlib too.

In the northeast of the country, 70,000 people remain displaced and the region is still recovering from the consequences of the Turkish offensive against the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces five months ago.[3] The area is now thick with tension with overlapping and occasionally hostile US, Russian, Turkish, and Syrian military patrols crisscrossing the region. Just last month a US convoy exchanged fire with a pro-government militia while driving through a checkpoint.[4]

The Islamic State has been damaged but it has not been vanquished. After controlling one-third of Syria at its height, today the group no longer controls any part of the country. And while the group has not been nearly as deadly in the past year, it remains a persistent threat, carrying out regular IED attacks and shootings east of the Euphrates in places like Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zour and temporarily capturing villages and bombing oil and gas facilities west of the river in places like Homs.[5] The US Defense Intelligence Agency claims that the number of attacks claimed by the Islamic State had increased by 20 per cent since last October.[6]

In areas of previous opposition control which have since been retaken by the Syrian military, the end of formal fighting has not led to an end of the violence or an improvement in the humanitarian situation for the civilians who remain. Formal reconciliation between the local population and the government in Damascus has not meant an end to shootings at checkpoints, IED attacks, abductions or murders. Charles Lister at the Middle East Institute counts more than 350 attacks in the past twelve months in Deraa alone, including an attack last month that killed two Oxfam workers.[7] The situation resembles a frozen conflict rather than an emergent peace.

Meanwhile, the situation of the 5.6 million Syrians who have fled across the border should not be forgotten. The countries which continue to host the lion's share of refugees deserve much more support: 3.5 million in Turkey, 914,000 in Lebanon, 655,000 in Jordan (plus 567,000 in Germany).[8] 78 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan live below the poverty line, compared to 14 per cent of the national population.[9] Half of the 500,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are out of school.[10]

It is worth noting the continued shame for the United States that the country has made it so difficult for Syrian families to find refuge here. Just 563 Syrians were let in last fiscal year, and just 320 are on track to enter this fiscal year.[11]

The Syrian government has made no secret of the fact that Syrians who have fled to other countries as refugees are not welcome back. We've heard anecdotal evidence of refugees being persecuted or disappeared when they return to Syria. The government has levied a wide range of criminal charges against returning refugees, meaning that many of them risk imprisonment and torture if they try to return. The Syrian government has also used the infamous Law 10 to appropriate and redevelop land that once belonged to displaced families preventing refugees from having a place to come home to.

Finally, the conduct of the war will make reconstruction and attempts to recreate some sense of normalcy nearly impossible for decades to come as the country faces a destroyed economy, half the population displaced, and infrastructure and housing damaged beyond repair. Just 9 per cent of the population are served by functional wastewater treatment plants, 46 per cent of health facilities are not fully functional, more than one in three schools are damaged or destroyed.[12] Estimates for the cost of reconstruction range between \$250 billion and \$1 trillion.[13]

### Age of Impunity

The catastrophe in Idlib, and the wider consequences of the conflict, are symptoms of the utter failure of diplomacy and abandonment by the international community of Syrian civilians. But it also foreshadows an even darker trend towards an Age of Impunity – an era characterized by disregard for the rule of law and an equally grave deficit of international diplomacy, which allows the suffering of civilians to continue unabated.

Civilians in Syria have suffered brutal siege tactics, widespread air strikes on urban centers, abduction of journalists and aid workers, the recruitment of child soldiers, the use of chemical weapons, and public beheadings in town squares. These crimes are bad enough. But accountability has so far been non-existent, particularly as the UN Board of Inquiry into attacks on civilian infrastructure remains slow moving. The lion's share of the blame falls on the allied Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces. As the UN High Commission for Human Rights pointed out, of the roughly 300 civilian deaths in Northwest Syria this year, 93 per cent were caused by the Syrian government and its foreign allies.[14]

In the process of so blatantly violating the laws of war, they have spurred a race to the bottom. For example, in the effort to take back Raqqa from the Islamic State, the US-led operation destroyed or damaged more than 11,000 buildings in the city and has taken no responsibility for its reconstruction.[15] This can only undermine US calls for "restraint" from Russian forces in Idlib.

I believe that what we are seeing in Syria is not unique, and that it foreshadows a dangerous trend where the laws of war, so carefully established after World War II, become optional extras. There are four main drivers of this trend on the battlefield in Syria – and none are unique to Syria.

First, war is now urban, so the distinction between civilians and soldiers is eroded. Civilians are at risk not just from the direct harms of bullets and shrapnel, but from the indirect impacts of airstrikes and artillery attacks on health facilities, water and sanitation systems, bakeries, and housing. This is a major reason why the war in Syria has displaced more than 11 million people, and represents a significant shift

from wars of previous generations. According to Steven Feldstein at Carnegie, since 1945 an average of 5 people were displaced for every one person killed in conflict. In Syria that ratio has been 25 to 1.[16]

This higher rate of displacement may be a deliberate military strategy, with the goal of emptying out key cities and urban areas in order to make them easier to retake and reestablish control over.

Second, the battlefield in Syria is increasingly crowded, filled by non-state actors like the constellation of Free Syrian Army groups, extremist groups like the Islamic State and HTS, local partner forces like the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, and foreign militaries from Turkey and the US to Russia and Iran. The involvement of so many groups, more than 100 in Syria according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, has fractured the battlefield geographically, but also hierarchically given the often unclear chain of command structure within each group.[17]

For civilians living in Syria, this means fewer areas of stable control as groups compete and fight over territory, and a more complicated environment to navigate, with competing allegiances and constantly shifting alliances. Furthermore, the quantity of armed groups in Syria and their weak command and control limit the ability of commanders to ensure adherence to the laws of war and make it harder to identify perpetrators of the most egregious war crimes.

Third, the large presence of foreign militaries has made the war deadlier for civilians due to the increased firepower they bring, as demonstrated by widespread Russian air strikes on cities like Idlib. The issue is not just the imbalance of foreign forces in Syria. The evidence shows that the internationalization of national conflicts makes wars last much longer. It is unlikely either side of the conflict would have survived this long without the surge of support with arms, money, and sometimes direct support from regional and international powers. In total, 70 countries now contribute troops to conflicts in other countries according to the Peace Research Institute of Oslo, including more than half a dozen in Iraq, Somalia, and Mali.[18]

Fourth, there is the obvious point that was dramatized in the title of this year's Munich Security Conference: "Westlessness." The absence of the West in the Syrian end game is not only a military question (outside the northwest). Syria is low on the Western diplomatic priority list. And foreign policy is low down on the political priority list. In fact fear of entanglement largely outweighs commitments to halt the suffering. The roots of this absence are failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus the lingering effects of the financial crisis. But when liberal democratic countries committed to human rights are absent, then those who regard them as an inconvenience are given free rein.

Syria is the poster child for this Age of Impunity, but it is not alone. The impunity that drives war crimes in Syria has become the standard practice in Yemen, Afghanistan, Libya and beyond. 257 health facilities and health workers in Syria were attacked last year out of a thousand worldwide according to the NGO Safeguarding Health in Conflict.[19] 109 aid workers were killed last year, including 31 in Syria according to the Aid Worker Security Database.[20] There were 11 live cases of ethnic cleansing affecting over 30 million people from Myanmar to Xinjiang to South Sudan according to the annual Freedom in the World report.[21] And 140 million children were living in areas of high intensity conflict, including 70 per cent of all children in Syria according to Save the Children.[22]

Relief in Idlib

The immediate need in Syria is a ceasefire and increased, unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians in need. There is no chance of this happening without a strategic decision in Washington and European capitals that Syria matters enough to require all the costs that come with engagement. Once that decision is taken then ideas for action are not hard to find:

- Instead of UN member states and UN officials expecting each other to address the crisis, both need to step up. I have suggested Secretary General Guterres spearhead shuttle diplomacy between Idlib, Damascus, Ankara, Moscow, and New York. The UN Security Council should be meeting at the Ministerial level. For example the Presidency of the UN Security Council should convene a Ministerial session at which the Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry briefs members on human rights abuses and war crimes in Syria;
- There needs to be engagement by Western powers with the seriousness of the situation. A meeting was planned between Chancellor Merkel and Presidents Erdogan, Putin and Macron in the next few days. That makes sense. But where is the US?
- The widening of aid corridors and flows, the renewal of the cross-border aid resolution in July, and the reopening of the Yaroubiya crossing in the east are essential. Two border crossing points were closed to aid in January, and without action another two will be closed in July. Make no mistake, the humanitarian situation could deteriorate much more. This should be a priority for the Merkel and Macron-led negotiations later this week;
- We need accountability for crimes committed, following up on each of the media reports that contain such chilling footage and reports. It is surprising that there are no EU sanctions on Russia for their actions in Syria. Accountability needs to start with the report of the Board of Inquiry into attacks on civilian infrastructure in Syria, due to report next week. The inquiry is a litmus test for meaningful accountability and we should all judge the report accordingly. The inquiry must name perpetrators and its findings should be made public. But the Board of Inquiry only focuses on seven incidents in the northwest. There are many more war crimes that have gone uninvestigated and each one requires accountability. Every violent death of an aid worker or attack on an aid facility should prompt an immediate and independent investigation, with full publication of the results;
- The multilateral framework for political talks must be restored. The Astana Process between Turkey, Russia and Iran has become the only game in town for negotiations on Syria. But the Astana participants have proven unwilling or unable to improve civilian protections, reduce attacks on aid workers or improve the humanitarian situation in the country. The fact that there is a UN process should not fool anyone into thinking that it exercises real leverage over the actions of the parties. There won't be a solution until that changes.

## Lessons

In addition to these short-term measures, we also need a far more thoroughgoing discussion and debate about the precedent that the Syria conflict sets, and the dangers it portends, for the global system. The tragedy in Syria risks becoming the new blueprint for conflict around the world, setting off a race to the bottom for the rules of the international system unless we take the task of reflection seriously.

It is important to have some humility in this task. Hindsight is 20/20 and there has never been a clear or obvious path to resolving the war and preventing civilian suffering, but some things are obvious in

retrospect. “Assad must go” is not a strategy. Neither is “Keep the oil.” Red lines are not red unless they are enforced. Counterterrorism is a band aid, not a solution.

Other lessons are more complicated and therefore more difficult. I want to highlight four.

First, the lesson of Syria is that International Humanitarian Law will become optional unless it receives a surge of support.

Foreign Minister Lavrov of Russia rightly said at the UN General Assembly last year, “Attacks on international law are looming large.”[23] Many will see some irony in this given the situation in Syria. He has called out what he sees as an American philosophy of “I do as I please.” “I do as I please,” is precisely the problem. But it is certainly not confined to the US.

International humanitarian law was developed on the basis of the lessons of history. These laws do not judge the military mission, but they demand that it be pursued with necessity, proportionality and distinction. When appropriately applied, the laws of war limit harms to civilians in conflict zones and offers soldiers a roadmap to pursuing their mission with their honor and their valor intact. Now it is under siege.

Its defense needs, at least, a three-pronged effort from civil society. First, we need to strengthen the ability of people on the ground to safely record and document abuses. Technology companies have a key role to play here. Second, on the basis of that documentation, we need to use the laws that exist to push back against the perpetrators. That doesn’t just mean the International Criminal Court (to which Syria is not a signatory). It also means examples like the German NGO the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights which filed a criminal suit against Syrian generals on the principle of universal jurisdiction. And third, countries who support international humanitarian law should use the economic tools at their disposal, such as the Magnitsky Act and the newly passed Caesar Act, to target those who are responsible for violations.

The second lesson of Syria is that we need the independent, principled and loud voice of the United Nations more than ever – reporting on breaches of the UN Charter, exposing abuses of human rights, working furiously to overcome the obstacles that are put in the way of the fulfillment of basic UN principles.

The work of UN staffers around the world is committed and brave. But the gridlock in the Security Council and the need to gain support of national governments in countries where the UN works threatens the freedom of the UN agencies and their officials to speak out. This should be of widespread concern.

The ability to speak truth to power is one of the UN’s great strengths. When then-High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein condemned what happened in Myanmar in 2017 as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing,” his words rightly reverberated around the world.[24] Yet the powers to whom truth needs to be spoken to are precisely the people whose funds pay the bills, nominate officials and control agendas.

It is said that the UN is only as strong and principled as its member states, especially the powerful permanent members of the Security Council. But the UN Charter gives independent backing to the work

of officials. And on issues like climate change, the independent work of UN bodies has been vital to building the body of evidence necessary to urge the world to act. In matters of peace and security we cannot afford the power of the UN to bear witness to what is happening on the ground to be compromised.

The third lesson concerns the danger that military power renders diplomacy irrelevant. In Syria, Russia and Iran have shown how hard power still matters. However many times diplomats say “there is no military solution” it remains the case that military power can subjugate populations and win wars even where it cannot win the peace. The situation where a government is willing to kill its own people challenges diplomacy as well as law.

The contrast between Northeast and Northwest Syria is striking and instructive. In the former, there is a tenuous balance of power, sustained by American military decisions, and some scope for power sharing. In the latter, there is no similar balance, no constraint on the use of Syrian, Russian and Iranian power, and no prospect of power sharing as Turkey has proven both unable to deter Syrian aggression and unwilling to emphasize civilian protection in its military efforts.

We have to do far more serious thinking about what is meant by “a political solution,” the conditions that are possible to bring it about, and the consequences for diplomacy when those conditions are not present. While the presence of troops is insufficient on its own to resolve the underlying challenges of power-sharing and governance, their absence can make political reconciliation impossible.

The fourth lesson of Syria is that the regime of refugee support has never been more needed but has never been more inadequate. This certainly needs another lecture, but here are three obvious points:

- Countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have been sheltering millions of refugees, yet the main burden has been borne by their host populations. This is not a sustainable deal. Hosting refugees is a global public good and needs to be supported by the international system. The World Bank has made some steps in this direction, but it could go much further alongside the IMF and other international financial institutions to make the hosting of refugees over a long period more feasible and give the refugees themselves an opportunity to thrive and contribute to their host countries instead of remaining dependent on aid.
- Refugees have for a long time been assumed to be in greater need than those who are internally displaced. One lesson of Syria is that this assumption does not always hold true. The IDPs shepherded into Idlib are more at risk than their relatives who have made it out of the country.
- The loss of the United States as a champions of refugee resettlement and refugee rights is echoing loudly throughout the world. Though US resettlement will never match the numbers in refugee-hosting states like Lebanon or Jordan, the symbolic value of a robust resettlement program in the US made it significantly harder for refugee-hosting governments to step back from their legal obligations to refugee protection and support. The West can make no claim to help Syrian refugees when they refuse to take them in and can expect host-governments to pay no heed to calls for continued support.

The absence of an effective regime leads to the situation we face today: Turkey using refugees for leverage against Europe, and Europe not really knowing how to react. The boomerang effect of

neglecting refugee support for the nine years of the war now comes home to roost. Europe needs to be more than on the alert. It needs to be galvanized into action.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt the scale of the Syria fatigue that is felt outside the country. But what right do we have to be fatigued compared to the people of Syria? Those million people displaced from Idlib over the last three months have in many cases been displaced two, three or four times already. The population of the province has been doubled by the influx of those displaced from elsewhere in Syria.

But if we know anything is it this: what starts in Syria does not end in Syria. That should worry us all. And that is why this issue belongs at the top of the agenda of policymakers as well as humanitarians. Syria's trauma represents many sins of commission, but also sins of omission. That is what we must seek to put right lest this new decade becomes one of impunity.

#

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a member of the Global Emergency Response Coalition, who has launched an appeal to raise funds for the Syria crisis. The Global Emergency Response Coalition is a lifesaving humanitarian alliance made up of leading U.S.-based international aid organizations.

---

[1] Save the Children. (2020, February 18). Syria: Children dying in freezing conditions in camps as more than a quarter of Idlib displaced. Reliefweb.

[2] World Health Organization. (2020, February 28). Syria: Health workers describe mayhem as WHO urgently delivers medicine and supplies to ensure continued health services: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-health-workers-d...>

[3] United Nations Population Fund. (2020, January 18). North-East Syria Flash update #12, 05. Reliefweb.

[4] Aji, Albert & Wilks, Andrew. (2020, February 12). US troops clash with pro-government group in northeast Syria. AP News.

[5] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2019, December 21). Unidentified drones target Homs refinery and gas fields, after 24 hours of "IS" attack on Homs desert gas station.

[6] Khalife, Dareen & Tsurkov, Elizabeth. (2020, February 21). Has Turkey's incursion into Syria opened the door for an Islamic state comeback? War on the Rocks.

[7] Middle East Eye (2020, February 19). Oxfam aid workers killed in southern Syria during aid delivery.

[8] UNHCR. (2020, February 4). Syria Regional Refugee Response: Turkey. Refugee Situations Operational Portal; UNHCR. (2019, December 31). Syria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon. Refugee Situations Operational Portal; UNHCR. (2020, February 6). Syria Regional Refugee Response:

Jordan. Refugee Situations Operational Portal; UNHCR. (2019, February 15). Fact Sheet: Germany. UNHCR Fact Sheets.

[9] CARE International. (2017, June). 7 Years Into Exile: A Summary. CARE International in Jordan Amman.

[10] Human Rights Watch. (2016, July 19). Lebanon: 250,000 Syrian children out of school. Human Rights Watch News.

[11] Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center. (2020). Admissions and Arrivals: From October 1, 2018- September 30, 2019. Refugee Processing Center.

[12] P12. OCHA. (2019, March). 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic. Reliefweb.

[13] P3. Devadas, Sharmila; Elbadawi, Ibrahim; Loayza, Norman V. (2019, August). Growth after War in Syria. World Bank Group.

[14] UNHCR. (2020, February 18). UN human rights chief horrified by escalating humanitarian crisis in Syria. UNHCR

[15] Tamer El-Ghobashy (2018, April 19). How American neglect imperils the victory over ISIS. The Washington Post.

[16] P5. Feldstein, Steven. (2018, July 17). Rethinking the Impact of War: Elevating Protections for the Displaced. Retrieved from SSRN.

[17] P15. Kishi, Roudabeh & Pavlik, Melissa. (2019, January 11). ACLED 2018: The Year in Review. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

[18] P3. Strand, Havard; Aas Rustad, Siri; Urdal, Henrik; Mokleiv Nygard, Havard. (2019, March). Conflict Trends: Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2018. Peace Research Institute Oslo.

[19] P38. Safeguarding Health in Conflict. (2018). Impunity Remains: Attacks on Health Care in 23 Countries in Conflict. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition.

[20] The Aid Worker Security Database Team. (2019, February 19). The Aid Worker Security Database. Humanitarian Outcomes. [Database].

[21] Freedom House. (2019). Freedom in the World 2019: Democracy in Retreat. Freedom in the World. [Calculations by IRC based on sum of targeted populations in ethnic cleansing incidents identified by Freedom House.]

[22] P18. Graham, George; Kirillos, Miriam; Knag Fylkesnes, Gunvor; Salarkia, Keyan; Wong, Nikki. (2019). Stop The War On Children. Save the Children.

[23] P3. Lavrov, Sergey V. (2019, September 27). Statement at the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly. United Nations General Assembly.

[24] Ra'ad Al Hussein, Zeid. (2017, September 11). Opening Statement for Human Rights Council 36th session. UNHCR.

## Syria's Tragedy, Our Lessons

---

### Keynote Speaker Biography:

**The Right Honourable David Miliband** is president and CEO of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). He oversees the agency's relief and development operations in over 30 countries, its refugee resettlement and assistance programs throughout the United States, and the IRC's advocacy efforts in Washington and other capitals on behalf of the world's most vulnerable people. Mr. Miliband has had a distinguished political career in the United Kingdom. From 2007 to 2010, he served as the youngest foreign secretary in three decades, driving advancements in human rights and representing the United Kingdom throughout the world. His accomplishments have earned him a reputation, in former President Bill Clinton's words, as "one of the ablest, most creative public servants of our time." In 2016, Mr. Miliband was named one of the World's Greatest Leaders by Fortune Magazine. He holds an S.M. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a first class honors degree in philosophy, politics, and economics from Oxford University.