

Erdogan warns attack on Idlib will send Syrian refugees heading to Europe



The Turkish president said a new wave of refugees could head to Europe in the wake of an attack CREDIT: AREF TAMMAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A full-scale Syrian regime attack on Idlib would lead to a flow of refugees to Europe and “serious humanitarian and security risks” to the continent, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned.

The Turkish leader has been mounting a public campaign to focus the world’s attention on the dangers of an attack on the rebel-held province, where around three million people are bracing themselves for an assault by Bashar al-Assad’s forces.

In an article in the Wall Street Journal, Mr Erdogan said the international community “must understand their responsibilities as the assault on Idlib looms”.

“A regime assault would also create serious humanitarian and security risks for Turkey, the rest of Europe and beyond,” he said.

Turkey is already sheltering more than three million Syrian refugees within its borders and has repeatedly said that it cannot take any more.

Ankara has warned the EU it would not stop the new refugees from heading towards Europe, raising the prospect of a repeat of the 2015 refugee crisis.

In an apparent effort to underscore Mr Erdogan's warnings and threats, a pro-government newspaper published a map in Arabic showing how Syrian refugees might pass through Turkey and into Europe.

The map, published by *The Daily Sabah*, seemed meant to encourage Syrians to head to Europe and to focus the attention of the EU on a potential new wave of arrivals.

Around 30,000 people have already been displaced by fighting in Idlib and the neighbouring province of Hama since Sept 1, the UN said.

"There needs to be ways of dealing with this problem that don't turn the next few months in Idlib into the worst humanitarian catastrophe with the biggest loss of life in the 21st century," said Mark Lowcock, UN undersecretary for humanitarian affairs.

The UN has said around 800,000 people could be displaced if a full-scale attack is carried out.

Russian and Syrian regime jets have already carried out intensive airstrikes while Assad's forces have shelled the edges of rebel-held areas. At least two hospitals and two clinics have been put out of service by strikes.

Meanwhile, the US-led coalition against Isil said it had launched the final phase of Operation Roundup, an offensive by Western-backed fighters to push the jihadists out of northeastern Syria.

Ground troops from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led force, began moving against Isil remnants in the province of Deir Ezzor, the coalition said.

The SDF fighters were supported by coalition airstrikes and artillery fire. Several SDF casualties were reported.

Isil's so-called "caliphate", which once stretched through Iraq and Syria, has now been reduced to few small pockets of control around the Euphrates River.

However, the jihadists are expected to continue waging insurgent attacks in both Iraq and Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 21 pro-regime fighters had been killed in an Isil ambush on Monday in southern Syria.

Source: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/11/erdogan-warns-attack-idlib-will-send-syrian-refugees-heading/>

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