

My name is Raed al-Saleh. I am the head of the Syria Civil Defence—popularly known as the White Helmets — an organization of 2,500 men and 300 women who have dedicated their lives to saving others. When the bombs rain down, we rush to dig life from under the rubble. Since our formation in 2013, we have saved more than 120,000 lives in Syria. 282 volunteers have been killed in the line of duty, deliberately targeted by the Syrian regime and Russia.

We rescue people regardless of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or politics. We have rescued our own family members, complete strangers, and Assad regime soldiers. Our motto and inspiration comes from the universal teaching found in the Qu’ran, that reads: “Whoever saves one life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity.”

Yet for all the lives we have saved, death is beating us. For every Syrian that we’ve saved, there are five that we’ve lost. If only we could stop the bombs, we could save almost every single one.

I am here today to represent the millions of civilians in Idlib who wake up everyday fearing death.

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Idlib, once an idyllic rural province known for its olives and cherries has been turned into hell on earth.

Since Russia’s intervention in 2015, the number of internally displaced people has doubled to 8 million; the relentless aerial bombardment and use of siege to retake areas like Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta has forced millions to “evacuate” to Idlib. Now there isn’t another Idlib, nowhere else left to flee to and so nearly four million civilians are trapped. The area is roughly the size of Rhode Island -- its pre-war population of 300,000 has increased by more than tenfold.

Since the beginning of the Idlib offensive the Syrian regime, backed by Russian airpower and Iranian proxy militias, has launched a systematic campaign targeting all civilian infrastructure: water points, hospitals, White Helmets centers, food markets, schools and bakeries. Nearly everything that can help civilians survive has been destroyed and the vast majority of people are struggling to access basic shelter, food and medicine.

I was in Idlib three weeks ago. There are no words to describe the apocalyptic horrors I

witnessed there. Numbers are no longer useful as the horror cannot be quantified so I will tell you two stories.

The first is of a father standing on the side of the road, with a sign reading: 'Will sell my kidney for a tent'. Can you imagine being so desperate to just provide shelter for your family?

The other is when I visited the thousands of families living under olive groves with no protection or facilities—many don't even have tents. I asked a grandmother what she needed most. She didn't say what you might expect: food, water, a blanket. She just asked for a toilet so she might have some dignity. How is it that the great Syrian people, the birthplace of civilization, the creators of the first alphabet from the fifteenth century BCE are now dreaming of a toilet? Abandonment has made our dreams very small.

I did not come here to talk about humanitarian needs. I want to be very clear in this hallowed institution: what is happening in Syria is not an earthquake or hurricane that can be solved with humanitarian aid funding. No amount of money can stop a single barrel bomb falling over a child's bed. No amount of money can return a single displaced family to their home.

We deeply appreciate the US Government's support to the White Helmets, and urge your support in making sure our needs are met, but more funding to us will not solve the problem either. The ambulances we purchase with your funding are being pursued by Russian drones, and deliberately bombed. Russia has destroyed millions of dollars worth of our US-funded equipment. When you give us more money, what you are telling us is that you will not stop the atrocities, and that instead we must purchase more ambulances to transport more injured civilians, order new cranes to lift collapsed concrete crushing entire families, and buy more protective clothing to deal with chemical attacks.

Raising funds to alleviate the suffering does not work any better than giving painkillers to a cancer patient. How much longer will the international community pursue this strategy before concluding it doesn't work?

What is needed is the political will to act to protect civilians.

The overwhelming majority of the suffering results from one cause: the absolute impunity with which the Syrian regime and Russia bomb civilians from the sky. Yes, we have other evils too: the thousands of Iranian proxy forces, known for their sectarian

brutality, and ISIS and Al-Qaeda who have similarly terrorized civilians. But it is the unimpeded aerial bombardment which is the primary cause of death, destruction, and displacement of civilians. The aerial bombardment is the primary cause of the refugee exodus to Europe which has empowered far right parties. The aerial bombardment, and the West's unwillingness to stop it, is the primary recruitment tool for ISIS and Al-Qaeda. So today I ask you to use your power to end the root cause of all this suffering by taking real action to clear the skies above Syria.

Since 2011 we have been told all the reasons why intervention to protect civilians is impossible. But who has considered the possibility of not acting? The costs of the world's inaction cannot be confined to Syria's borders. Meeting the most basic humanitarian needs will cost billions a month. Millions more refugees will flee Syria to Europe's safer shores; no border wall can contain them. An entire generation of children will be left uneducated. Extremist groups will ferment in the chaos, necessitating future global coalitions and trillions of dollars to defeat them. Does this sound more possible than acting to stop the atrocities being committed now?

Turkey's intervention last month shattered the myth that the use of force to stop hostilities might cause further escalation—in fact the opposite happened. After Turkey's brief military intervention last week, there was a complete stop in aerial attacks. But Turkey cannot do this alone. It needs your support.

The enforcement of a national ceasefire--by all means necessary--will help create the conditions for real, internationally-backed peace talks, including accountability for all perpetrators of mass atrocities and war crimes. For I still believe in the values that the Syrian Revolution called for in March 2011, the values of democracy practiced in this building every single day, and which can be practiced in Syria too. With support of people around the world, we Syrians can rebuild our country into a free, peaceful, democratic Syria that operates beyond the evils of the regime and extremists.

I do not wish to sit here in 2025 detailing the suffering of yet another unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, several hundred thousand more lives lost, the millions still without a home, and paying tribute to hundreds more White Helmets who have been killed saving lives.

As we enter the tenth year of war, the world has run out of words. Now is the time for action.