

The Fight for Idlib: A Game of Chess, Syrian-Style

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Idlib province in northwest Syria remains the last significant stronghold of the rebellion against the Assad regime. The campaign that was revived recently in this area is marked by traits of the civil war now entering its tenth year: cruel and indiscriminate regime fighting backed by Russia and Iranian-run Shiite militias; a humanitarian crisis, manifested inter alia in displacement and potential refugees; a Russian effort, so far fruitless, to mediate between the sides; a danger of the situation deteriorating – militarily and diplomatically – given the multiple actors in the field. However, the campaign in the Idlib area reflects two significant changes in the balance of power between the sides: first, unusual military confrontations between Turkey and Assad regime forces, which so far have led to the downing of two Syrian military helicopters and fatalities on both sides. The second is linked to Iran's decision to send its proxies into the fight after previously abstaining from involvement in this war theater. These developments are shaking up the already fragile balance of power among the various involved actors.

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The Syrian Regime

After nine years of dogged fighting, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, with Russian and Iranian backing, has managed to retake control of most of Syria's territory. Idlib province remains the last significant rebel enclave, and is making it hard for Assad to declare the end – formally, at least – of the civil war. Similarly, this campaign makes it hard for Assad – insecure and beset by challenges – to announce himself as the unequivocal sovereign of the Syrian state.

After months of procrastination, Syrian military forces renewed the fighting in the area in December 2019, and for the first time, managed to seize the M-5 route connecting Damascus to Aleppo, as well as territories between the Syrian coastal region and districts in the east of the country that are vital for the central government's rule and economy. In recent weeks, the military has stepped up its drive to seize main cities in Idlib.

It seems that it was only a question of time before the regime's effort to reconquer Idlib clashed with Turkey's interests, which in accordance with the Sochi Agreement of 2018 had deployed forces to lookout points and serve as a buffer between Assad and rebel forces. On February 3, 2020, for the first time since the outbreak of the fighting, military confrontations unfolded between the sides after the Syrian military attacked a Turkish post near Idlib, killing seven Turkish soldiers. Turkish forces and Turkish-backed rebels responded by attacking Assad military targets, killing dozens of Syrian soldiers, and even shot down two Syrian military helicopters.

Although Assad is determined to restore his rule and consolidate his status over the area, and although he sees the presence of Turkish forces on Syrian soil as a gross violation of Syrian sovereignty, it is doubtful he can afford to open up an additional front – and this time with Turkey, not merely another local rebel militia.

Turkey

Alongside its continued struggle against the Kurds in northeast Syria, Turkey operates in the Idlib area and backs the rebel Syrian National Army, which includes elements from the former al-Qaeda proxy Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Turkish forces maintain 12 observation points in Idlib, as part of the Sochi Agreement, under which Ankara undertook to disarm the militias while Russia and Syria would abstain from taking military action against them.

Syria's military operation Idlib area, with Russian backing, has put Turkey in an uncomfortable position, with some of the observation points now in territory under the control of Syrian regime forces. The province's conquest unleashed a new wave of hundreds of thousands of refugees who are knocking at Turkey's doors. Ankara's plan to establish a security zone for some of the refugees now on its soil might be compromised, as might the military and political advantages of its ties to the rebels (it was recently reported that Turkey dispatched Syrian rebel forces to help the fighting in Libya). The escalating confrontations between the sides, including the death of 14 Turkish soldiers, is liable to spiral into direct fighting between the Turkish and Syrian militaries and exacerbate tensions between Turkey and Russia.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to the developments with aggressive rhetoric and even presented the Syrian military with an ultimatum: withdraw from Idlib by the end of February, or risk a Turkish military operation that would entail strengthened Turkish forces. However, it is clear that Turkey is not interested in military escalation that might undermine its position in Syria and would certainly imperil relations with Russia. Ankara is thus striving to resolve the crisis through diplomatic channels, and the Turkish belligerence can also be interpreted as a signal to Russia of its active quest for a ceasefire.

Iran

Contrary to other war zones in Syria, where Iran played an active and central role, Iran did not directly involve itself in the fighting in Idlib until recently; Tehran was cited mainly by virtue of its support for the Assad regime, and nothing more. Since January, however, Iran has reportedly been beefing up forces in the area, including with units from Hezbollah and other Shiite militias (Fatimion, for example). There are several explanations for this development. First, given the targeted killing of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani earlier that month, Iran wants to relay a message of "business as usual" and continued support for Bashar al-Assad, and thereby quash assessments that it intends to reduce its forces and intervention in Syria. It is even possible that Iran received a direct Syrian request to intervene, given the difficulty in ending the fighting. Second, it is possible that Iran wants to redeploy its forces, partially and in phases, to areas in northern Syria like Idlib in order to reduce potential harm to them from Israeli attacks. Third, the Iranian intervention in Idlib might be predicated on the assumption that completing the operation in the area will free up the regime to clean up the area in eastern Syria and thus accelerate the evacuation of American forces there – as suggested by the January 30 remark by Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: "The Syrian government and its allies from the resistance front will go from Idlib to the eastern Euphrates to expel the Americans."

Russia

As in other Syria war zones in Syria, so too in the renewed fighting in Idlib the Assad regime's main ally has been Russia, which has provided broad military and logistical assistance to Syrian military forces while at the same time spearheading diplomatic contacts on a solution to the crisis. Moscow, recognizing Ankara's lack of desire – and possibly ability as well – to make the Idlib militias disarm or emigrate to other countries, has begun exerting deliberate military pressure. The Russian interest is to end the war in Syria, reduce expenses, and hand full control of the country over to Assad. In addition, Russia has an interest in restoring control of Idlib to the Syrian regime due to the proximity to Latakia, site of the Russian airbase of Khmeimim, which has been hit more than once by fire from local rebels.

Thus far the frequent diplomatic talks between Moscow and Ankara, like past agreements, have failed to produce a solution, and there has been a rather unusual blame game between the sides. Yet Russia still views Turkey as an important ally in the Astana process, which was meant to bring about a political arrangement in Syria, and Idlib presents an important testing ground for the future of relations between the countries. This theater is also important in the context of the political campaign that Russia pursues vis-à-vis the United States, so Moscow will be compelled to maneuver cautiously among all parties.

The Syrian Population

Under the dust clouds of the Idlib fighting are the real victims of the vying regional and international interests – the Idlib population, which numbered some 3 million before the current campaign. Displacement since December 2019 is estimated by UN figures to involve some 900,000 people, among them around 500,000 children. Some have been displaced for the second or third time, as they previously fled or were expelled from other areas of Syria and ended up in the last rebel stronghold. The displaced of Idlib are compelled to move to tent encampments abutting the Turkish border and must contend with a dire shortage of food, water, and sanitary services, as well as with the region's harsh weather, including snowstorms. Alongside the videos that the regime has issued after liberating territory, showing jubilant residents, there have also been reports of inhabitants who opted to set their homes on fire before departing so as to ensure that they would not return to live in an area destined sooner or later to be controlled by the Assad regime.

Significance

The Idlib "chess game" demonstrates yet once more the complexity of the war in Syria given the host of involved players, and mainly reflects the interests changing in accordance with the circumstances and Iranian, Turkish, and Russian opportunism. Until recently, Russia and Syria were satisfied with the Iranian abstention from the campaign, given the interest in lowering the Iranian profile and the Assad regime's dependence on Iran. Yet this time, with the military campaign bogged down and with the growing need to restrain and counter-balance Turkey, the door has opened to Iranian involvement.

A major actor that has until now been absent from the scene is the United States, which has no interest in getting involved in western Syria and indirectly helping Salafi-jihadist organizations. However, Washington understands the potential inherent in the growing tension between Turkey and Russia, and of the possible negative consequences of the dynamic in the Idlib area for the United States – primarily for its forces that are still deployed and operational alongside the Kurds in eastern Syria.

The fighting in the Idlib area has returned Turkey to the position it adopted at the outset of the civil war, namely, that the Assad regime is illegitimate and should be ousted. This understanding is shared by Turkey and the United States. Israel too should perhaps reassess its policy of resigning itself to Assad, who is responsible for the murder of some half a million people and allows Iranian entrenchment in the country. At the same time, the more Turkey becomes mired in military intervention in Syria, the more it will be compelled to step up its forces' operations and presence in the aerial and naval theaters of the eastern Mediterranean. It would thus behoove Israel to examine the possibility of setting up a military deconfliction mechanism that would also involve the United States.