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The Ceasefire in Idlib: Turkey's Tactical Successes alongside Political Weakness

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The accords reached in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on March 5, 2020 regarding a ceasefire in the Idlib province are almost certainly temporary, and friction between the two countries over the region's future is likely to resurface in the not too distant future. However, Turkey's acceptance of the Russian terms (including Erdogan's visit to Moscow, while Putin ignored a previous invitation from Turkey) demonstrates its weak position. Moreover, although the Turkish government presented the return to the Sochi agreement of 2018 as its political and military goal, the accords reached in Moscow actually nullify them: the ceasefire in Idlib is another step toward the province's return to the Assad regime. Israel must be aware of Turkey's tactical success in the campaign in this province, but also of Ankara's political weakness vis-à-vis Moscow.

At a meeting in Moscow on March 5, 2020 that lasted about six hours, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed on an end to the fighting along the front lines in Idlib, creation of a 6 km security corridor south and north of the M4 highway, and joint patrols of Russian and Turkish forces along the highway. Following these understandings, Turkey halted Operation Spring Shield, launched on February 27, without achieving its objectives – the withdrawal of Bashar al-Assad's forces beyond the Turkish observation posts in Idlib to the lines drawn by Erdogan and Putin at Sochi in 2018. In effect, Ankara agreed to tolerate the Assad regime's renewed presence in the Idlib province. The future of the Turkish observation posts in the province is not assured, and Turkey will probably have to evacuate some of them soon.

After a period in which Turkey deployed its forces over a growing area in northwest and northeast Syria, the understandings achieved in Moscow could be a turning point, strengthening demands from the Assad regime for Turkey's withdrawal from Syria. Under the agreement between Erdogan and Putin in October 2019, the advance of Turkish forces in northeast Syria was halted; now, once again, the Turkish army is forced to renounce some of its achievements on the ground due to Russian diplomatic pressure. Apart from the ceasefire and the Russian promise to consider withdrawing the Wagner

Private Military Company from Libya (where the unit is supporting the forces of General Khalifa Haftar against the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, which is supported by Turkey), Ankara could not show any political achievements. This is despite the fact that it paid a heavy price for the current round of fighting in Idlib – dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed. The ceasefire even allows the Assad forces and their Iranian proxies to recover and make preparations for the final conquest of the Idlib province.

The fighting in Idlib in recent weeks highlighted the clear conflict of interest between Russia and Turkey in Syria, but also showed how both sides have no interest in protracted confrontation – which in effect enabled Russia to steer all the parties in line to promote its own interests. It is estimated that Russia allowed the escalation so that the Assad regime could retake control of parts of the region and deflect the rebels' fire from the Russian military command in the Khmeimim Base. On the other hand, in spite of hints about sanctions against Turkey, like those taken after Turkey downed a Russian fighter jet in November 2015, Russia has shown restraint in face of the extensive damage to the Syrian forces and some Turkish fire on Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies.

These developments are a reminder of the limitations of the Turkish position, in face of its attempt to adopt an independent foreign policy and to maneuver between Russia and the West. Notwithstanding claims of shared interests with Europe and the United States regarding Idlib, and notwithstanding the attempt to exert pressure on the European Union by moving thousands of refugees to the border between Turkey and Greece, Erdogan has been unable to recruit significant support from European countries or from NATO. Turkey's threats to open the border to refugees seeking to enter the European Union have been heard for some time, and they were presumed by Ankara to be leverage that will make it hard for European countries to refuse their demands. Nevertheless, so far the partial materialization of the threats has not been very successful, and Erdogan's visit to Brussels on March 9 did not produce any satisfactory outcomes for Ankara: the media reported that the EU was prepared to send Turkey only another half a billion euros for help with the Syrian refugees. The Europeans will likely use the coronavirus as justification for extreme moves to stop the flow of refugees at the border and turn a blind eye to the severe responses by the Greek security forces. Moscow is also apparently satisfied with the movement of refugees toward Europe, since for years it has been striving to present itself to the EU as steadfast in its ability to stem the tide of refugees from Syria and Libya, in return for European cooperation with Russian plans for a political settlement and economic rehabilitation in those countries. In that sense, Turkish pressure on Europe in this context helps Moscow to promote its goals.

In spite of its rhetorical support for Turkish military activity in Idlib, in the current round of fighting the United States has thus far failed to respond to Ankara's request to deploy

Patriot surface to air missiles batteries in southern Turkey. The administration's position should be understood in the context of the Turkish decision to purchase S-400 air defense systems from Russia. Unless Ankara changes its plans in spite of all its declarations, these systems are expected to be operational by April 2020, and they have already created severe tension between Turkey and its NATO allies. Moreover, the absence of practical US moves on the ground has strengthened the widely held view that, at least in the foreseeable future, Washington will play only a limited part in shaping Syria's future. Thus, Russia's central role compared to the more marginal role of the US restricts Turkish operational space against the Assad regime, and in effect increases Turkish weakness in its contact with Russia. It appears that at present, Moscow is the only international element that can restrain Ankara.

The challenge for Turkey following a future wave of refugees from Idlib, bringing an additional million people displaced by the current round of fighting to the over three and a half million refugees from Syria who are already in Turkey, remains, even if the border between Turkey and Syria stays closed. Public displeasure in Ankara with the presence of the refugees is increasing. The only way to prevent a further influx of refugees is to create an area in the north of Idlib for displaced persons, but conditions there are likely to be extremely difficult. Another possibility is to take them from Idlib to northeastern Syria, but this will likely not permit the return of the refugees from Turkey to Syria, if there was ever a real chance of doing so. In any case, Turkey will need assistance from international institutions or other countries in order to meet this challenge.

Also significant in this context is the ability of the Turkish army to make use of offensive drones. Even if there is some doubt regarding the figures presented by Turkey as to the high number of casualties suffered by the Syrian army, the Turkish forces have indeed caused serious damage to the Syrian army with the use of over 100 drones. Like Israel, the Turks have attacked the SA-22 Russian-made air defense systems possessed by the Syrian army, in order to demonstrate that they are not a threat to their military freedom of action and to embarrass Russia. Through widespread, coordinated reports of the results of these attacks in the media and on social networks, the Turkish government seeks to present itself as the only country that has caused significant damage to Assad's forces during the civil war, thus gaining support in Western countries. But so far this campaign has borne limited fruit. Here, too, Ankara has failed to turn a military victory into a political achievement.

For Israel, the latest round of fighting in Idlib could be a test case of a severe crisis with Russia regarding the "campaign between wars" it has been waging on Syrian territory. Russian disregard of a significant Israeli attack in Syria on March 4 (there were reports of

damage to a chemical weapons facility) supports the assessment that Israel has room to maneuver while Moscow is focused on other actors operating in Syria.

Turkey's political weakness and the growing tension with Greece could encourage a trend ongoing since December – a hint by Turkey of possible renewed normalization of relations with Israel, if only to avoid political isolation and draw Israel away from its Hellenic partners. Even without public normalization, there is room for specific cooperation between the two countries, if only for the assessment of the present situation in Syria. However, the prospects of success for such moves remain slim.