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A new stage in the war in Syria proves a challenge for Turkey

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On 7th January the Syrian army launched an offensive against the Sunni opposition forces in the Idlib province. The forces of the Bashar al-Assad regime thus entered a de-escalation zone for which Turkey is responsible. The zone was established following agreements signed by Turkey, Russia and Iran in Astana in September 2017. The Syrian troops are backed by pro-Iranian militias and the Russian air force. Ankara treated their entry into Idlib as an infringement of previous agreements by Syrian government forces and summoned the Russian and Iranian ambassadors to its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss this. Furthermore, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu held talks on the phone with their Russian counterparts and demanded that the Astana agreements be observed. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım stated that the progress the Syrian regime forces are making in the areas controlled by the Sunni opposition may lead to the displacement of another wave of Syrians (there are approximately 2 – 2.6 million inhabitants in the province; since the present offensive began an estimated 70,000 – 150,000 people have fled the areas hit by military operations). Turkey has also toughened its rhetoric and intensified artillery strikes against the Kurdish positions in the neighbouring Afrin province.

The Idlib province, situated in north-western Syria, has been controlled by the armed Syrian opposition since 2011. At present the Idlib province is one of the two most important strongholds in the Syrian conflict. Turkey is responsible for this area. In practice the area is controlled by autonomous Islamic groups, among them groups which originated from Syrian al-Qaida and which are dependent on Saudi Arabia, with Turkey having only limited influence on them. On the other hand, the Afrin province, situated to the north-east of the Idlib province, is an enclave of the Democratic Federation of North Syria (Rojava) which is not recognised. It is controlled by the Kurdish forces affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which is considered to be a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US and the EU. There are US troops deployed in Rojava and a small Russian contingent is stationed in the Afrin province (see Map).

Commentary

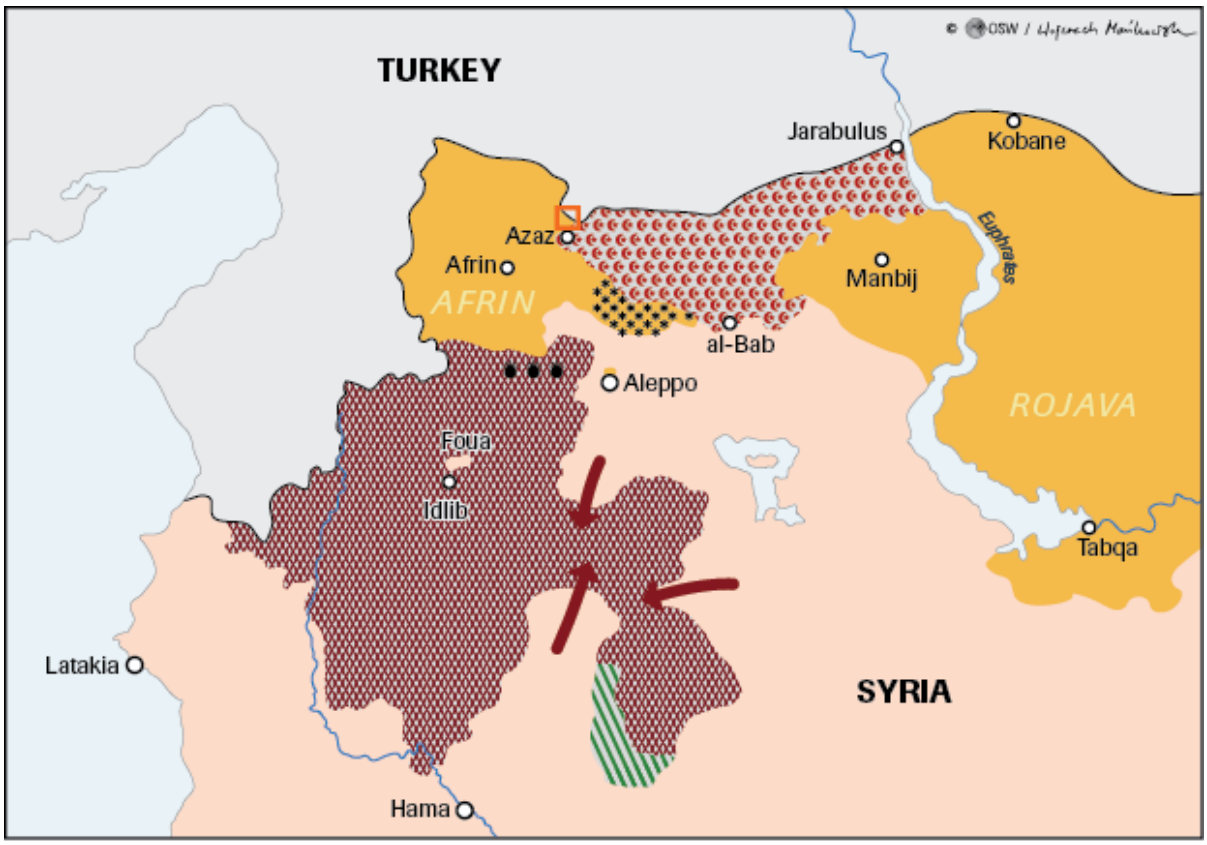
- The present offensive led by Syrian government forces proves that the conflict in Syria has entered a new stage: until autumn 2017 it was focused, in terms of military operations and politics, on fighting 'Islamic State'. After the US-supported Kurdish forces, and government forces, backed by Russia and Iran, had retaken the areas controlled by

'Islamic State', Russia formally announced the end of the operation in Syria and further US plans were called into question. Furthermore, the Syrian government forces previously involved in fighting 'Islamic State' became free to engage elsewhere. Their offensive against the Idlib province, which does not have strong external backing, is an optimal direction – when military and political aspects are taken into account – in order to regain control of the country. However, it is quite unlikely that Assad regime forces will retake the Idlib province swiftly and on their own.

- The development of the situation in Syria is extremely unfavourable for Turkey. Ankara has been aspiring to the role of the patron of the Syrian opposition and of a state which assures that the EU is safe from the consequences of the conflict (above all the influx of refugees) while also being a key player deciding on Syria's future. Turkey has failed to fulfil these ambitions. At present it is participating, alongside Russia and Iran, in the Astana process which is intended to phase out military operations and to start peace talks. As part of this process, Ankara will represent the Syrian opposition forces in the Idlib province and guarantee the ceasefire. Furthermore, since 2016 Turkey has controlled a small area in northern Syria that it captured during Euphrates Shield Operation (the objective of the intervention against 'Islamic State' forces was to prevent the consolidation of the areas controlled by the Syrian Kurds). However, in practice Turkey is participating in the Syrian political process on Russia's terms and its modest military engagement is limited by Russia (due to its control of airspace over north-western Syria) and the US (with regard to so-called Rojava). Given the present political situation, Turkey's political pressure on Russia (which supports the Assad regime) is ineffective and the possibility of the Turkish army becoming militarily engaged in the Idlib province is rather remote due to Turkey's limited resources (which was proved by the development of Euphrates Shield Operation) and the strength of its potential opponents (the government forces backed by Iran and Russia). Thus Turkey's political importance in the Syrian conflict is considerably decreasing while its dependence on Russia is constantly growing. Furthermore, Turkey's credibility in the eyes of its current and prospective clients, the Sunni opposition in Syria, continues to dwindle (as was the case with the besieged Aleppo in 2016). Therefore the prospect of a new wave of Syrian refugees arriving in Turkey is becoming real, as are terrorist attacks in Turkey, stemming from the Syrian conflict. The weakness of Turkey's political reactions to date, including limited and toned down comments in the media, indicates that Ankara is forced to come to terms with the present situation.
- While the issue of the Idlib province has been regarded in Turkey mainly in terms of prestige, the problem of the Kurdish 'state' is seen as a strategic security challenge and is met with wide understanding in Turkish society. Turkey considers the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to be an extension of the PKK and it sees its existing political project as a training ground for the organisation it has been waging war on for over 30 years. As for the Syrian Kurds, Ankara has been explicitly making threats of a military intervention. At present these threats are only rhetorical in the case of Rojava; the Kurds here have substantial military potential, they can additionally count on US political and military support (such as the deployment of US troops, supplies of weapons, training of Kurdish military personnel). However, also in the case of the Afrin province, Turkey is confined to limited artillery strikes since a larger-scale ground operation would be difficult due to the

need for considerable Turkish troops to be involved and the fact that it will be impossible to implement it without support from the air force, which is conditional on Russia's consent since it controls airspace there. Due to the strategic challenges posed by the Kurds, Turkish-US relations have continued to deteriorate and Turkey's dependence on Russia has been increasing.

Map. The situation in northern Syria.



Areas controlled by Bashar al-Assad's forces

Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Kurds)

'Islamic State'

Areas controlled by opposition Sunni forces

Areas directly controlled by Turkish forces (Operation Euphrates Shield)

Directions of military interventions led by Bashar al-Assad's forces

Turkish strikes against Kurdish positions

Turkish observation points in Idlib province

Russian military presence in Afrin province