

Fighting in Idlib: crisis in Turkish-Russian relations

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On 19 February the Syrian armed opposition, supported by Turkish forces, attempted a counter-offensive against the Assad regime's army, with support from Russian air forces. In the first phase, these actions enabled the opposition to break through the front line, and inflict losses of men and equipment on the Syrian army. In addition two drones, most likely Russian, were shot down. However, the counter-offensive was halted as a result of Russian attacks which killed two Turkish soldiers. Neither Turkey nor Russia have publicised the clash between their troops, and negotiations between them have begun (including a conversation between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin on 21 February). So far a solution has not been found, and the talks will continue. Russia has suggested that Turkey formally reduce the size of the de-escalation zone in Idlib which it supervises to a border strip reaching 15 km into Syria, and that joint military patrols should be resumed; this offer has been rejected. Ankara has requested that the United States relocate its Patriot air defence systems (to which no response has been made), and on 24 February the Turkish-backed opposition resumed its activity, capturing the town of Nairab.

In view of the humanitarian catastrophe in the Idlib region, Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron proposed a meeting in a four-party format with Presidents Putin and Erdoğan in order to resolve the conflict; this proposal was devised during telephone conversations held jointly with the presidents of Turkey and Russia on 20 and 21 February. In addition, the European Council has issued a declaration calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Commentary

- Under the Astana agreements of 2017, the region of Idlib was designated as a de-escalation zone formally supervised by Turkey. Today, it is inhabited by over 4 million people, up to 2 million of whom are internally displaced persons. Idlib is the last bastion of the Syrian armed opposition (which numbers around 40,000 fighters, some of whom are foreign volunteers), which consists of the radical Hayat at-Tahrir ash-Sham organisation as well as pro-Turkish groups acting under the banner of the so-called Syrian National Army. Since December 2019 the Syrian army has been carrying out an offensive there with the aid of Russian aircraft. Its aim is to take total control of Idlib for the regime in Damascus. The Syrian army has taken over a large part of the zone's territory, cutting off the Turkish checkpoints, and has gained control of the M4 and M5 motorways, which are strategic communication lines linking Damascus and Latakia with

Aleppo. There has been a mass exodus of civilians as a result of the regime's offensive; at least 900,000 people are currently camped by the Turkish border. This humanitarian crisis could escalate to catastrophic proportions.

- For Turkey the survival of Idlib in its present form, as the last bastion of the opposition forces it supports, is of fundamental importance. Ankara sees the opposition as its only political partner in Syria. The possible collapse of Idlib would threaten the start of a new chapter in the refugee crisis, including the chance of militants entering Turkish territory. The country is already hosting around 3.6 million Syrian refugees, a situation which has already caused very serious internal tensions, compounded by the difficult economic situation and rising anti-Syrian sentiment in society. 14 Turkish soldiers have been killed in previous clashes with Syrian forces. All this means that Ankara has been forced to take decisive military action. In addition to bolstering its military presence (the number of Turkish troops in Idlib is estimated at between seven and eight thousand soldiers), Ankara has given Damascus an ultimatum, demanding that it withdraw its troops beyond the de-escalation zone's initial border by the end of February. Turkey is currently facing one of the biggest dilemmas in the history of the Syrian conflict: the failure to take any steps could lead to internal destabilisation, but the range of actions Turkey can take is limited by Russia, and confrontation with it could lead to unpredictable risks. The most likely scenario is that the dialogue with Russia will continue. Turkey wants to achieve a compromise which will allow it to reduce its military engagement while halting the offensive and preserving a reduced de-escalation zone. This would relieve the pressure from Russia, and the threat of the ultimate collapse of Idlib would be postponed. Open conflict with Russia is a less likely but still possible scenario.
- The European Union, and especially Germany, can primarily be expected to aim at minimising the effects of a potential new phase of the refugee crisis. For Berlin, one factor contributing to the worsening crisis in Idlib is the formal restriction on supplying humanitarian aid which has been introduced under pressure from Russia. Such aid can only be supplied through two border crossings, and after just six months it will require further formal approval from the UN Security Council. As part of its non-permanent membership of the Council, Germany will primarily continue to seek to provide humanitarian aid, also allocating its own financial resources to do so. Furthermore, Germany will continue to support Turkey, because concerns are rising in Germany about the destabilisation which a large number of new refugees would cause. Germany is taking the risk that such a situation could boost the migration to the EU very seriously. Another possible instalment of the refugee crisis would place a serious burden on the German presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020, and would adversely affect the functioning of the EU, which is primarily struggling with difficult budget negotiations. The internal political dimension would lead to a re-exacerbation of the debate on migration policy and the crisis of 2015; that would further weaken the ruling coalition, in particular the Christian Democrats.
- The Syrian army offensive in Idlib would not be possible without the approval and active support of Russia. Both the Russian air force and special troops are participating in the campaign (two Russian soldiers died in January 2020), as well as units of the government army which are being trained and directed by Russian advisors (i.e. not Shia

militias under the influence of Iran). Moreover, the Syrian army would be unable to conduct active combat operations without Russian supplies. Russia's diplomacy and media have offered full support for the Syrian offensive since it started, accusing Turkey of failing to comply with the provisions of the Russian-Turkish memorandum signed on 17 September 2018 providing for the creation of a demilitarised zone to separate government forces from the opposition. 'Radical terrorist groups' and heavy equipment were supposed to have been removed from this zone. However, the behaviour of the Russian air forces, which have so far avoided direct attacks on the Turkish army, together with the lack of an anti-Turkish campaign in the Russian media, suggest that Moscow is not interested in escalating the conflict with Turkey. This is because doing so could jeopardise the long-term effects of Russia's strategy towards that country, which is aimed above all at 'removing' Turkey from Euro-Atlantic structures and transforming it into a junior partner in building a non-US-centric ('multipolar') international order. One element of this strategy involves drawing Turkey into various formats having the character of a regional 'concert of powers' – either with Iran (as part of the so-called Astana process), or the Ankara-Moscow-Berlin-Paris format currently being proposed. In connection with this, Russia's policy in Idlib would seem to have three objectives. Firstly: using the threat of another wave of refugees to put pressure on Berlin and Paris. Moscow has deliberately taken action in Idlib which may result in a new phase of the migration crisis in order to boost the Franco-German trend towards seeking a normalisation of relations with Moscow, weaken trans-Atlantic ties, and sabotage any attempt to implement a policy of 'containing' Russia in Central and Eastern Europe. Secondly: restoring what Moscow sees as a proper balance in its relations with Ankara. By taking the offensive in Idlib and increasing its involvement in Libya, Russia is reminding Turkey of its ability to strike at Ankara's interests and that Turkey is the junior partner in the relationship. Thirdly: gradually extending the Assad regime's control over the territory of the last of the four so-called de-escalation zones established in 2017, and thus almost the entire territory of Syria. Moscow is thus continuing its policy of military pressure, while negotiating a political deal with Ankara, Berlin and Paris.

- Internationally, Turkey is still isolated; the West lacks the will to support Ankara. The Turkish-Russian clashes in the Idlib area will not bring about a response from NATO. Most of the alliance's members have in fact criticised Turkey's actions in Syria, in particular the operation against the Syrian Kurds launched in October 2019. It is therefore unlikely that the allies will want to see the Russian-Turkish clashes in Syria as a problem for NATO and a basis for launching Article 5 (on collective defence) or even Article 4 (on holding consultations in case of a threat to a member's territorial integrity, political sovereignty and security). We should expect that France above all, having openly criticised Turkey's actions in northern Syria, will oppose such a reaction from the Alliance.
- In addition to NATO's position, the reaction from Washington is of key importance; last week Turkey asked the US to deploy two batteries of its Patriot air defence system on the Turkish-Syrian border. Such a step would mean not only the US offering political support to Turkey in its confrontation with Russia over Syria, but would also increase the real likelihood of deterring Russia from continuing its air strikes in Idlib. So far Ankara has not received any reply from Washington, which is first of all assuming a gradual pullback of

its military involvement in the Middle East, including Syria, and secondly already has strained relations with Turkey, for reasons including its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system.

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