



The Syrian-Turkish Conflict and its Implications for Russia

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The Syrian government's offensive against the last important rebel stronghold in the Idlib province has resulted in skirmishes between the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* – TSK) present in the area and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) with its affiliated forces. The situation on the ground is still in development, but we believe that it may contribute to important changes in the landscape of the Syrian war, which most probably is drawing to the end of its current phase. We may also be witnessing a pivotal point of the Russian intervention in Syria. This commentary is intended to briefly assess the current events and present some possible future scenarios of the conflict, with special attention to the role of Russia.

Background

Since the beginning of the Russian open intervention in the Syrian internal struggle in 2015, [we have observed](#) that it was a part of a broader Russian strategy. It was motivated mostly by internal reasons: a controlled conflict with the West was supposed to replace waning economic growth and slowing social development as the main source of legitimization of power of the Russian ruling regime. Inflated external threats and active military policy posing as preemptive and defensive actions were supposed to rally the nation around its leaders. The other reasons for the Russian Middle Eastern adventure were, of course, hope for economic benefits and a presumption that the situation there is a perfect opportunity to gain a large amount of influence with the use of relatively limited resources.

Therefore, Russia first acted to secure the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's authority and then began to strengthen their position. We often argue that the Kremlin's main goal in Syria has not been to "liberate" the country and restore its unity. If this were the case, Moscow's influence would inevitably diminish, as it does not have much to offer to Syria, save the firepower,

intelligence, and other military assistance. When the conflict finally ends, a post-war, united Syria will require vast economic resources and huge money for reconstruction, together with large quantities of foot soldiers to sweep restive areas and control the territory. These are resources that Russia cannot provide. Therefore, [we maintain](#) that keeping Syria in a state of partition and permanent conflict has been Russia's preferred option since the beginning of the conflict. It seems quite clear that this was the best strategy if they wanted to maintain a high level of influence there without making serious investments.

But the strategy of “frozen conflict”, perfected by Moscow in the post-Soviet space, cannot be fully implemented in the Middle East. In places like Azerbaijan, Georgia or Tajikistan, Russia has managed to ensure the conflicts stayed unresolved for decades, thus preventing those involved from developing their respective countries. The weakness of these nation-states has allowed Moscow to exert influence with minimal cost, particularly with relatively limited economic commitments. However, in all those instances Moscow relied on its centuries-long presence and on the fact that for the parties involved in the conflicts, Russia was both an overwhelming power and geographically close. Moreover, in the last three decades, there have been no serious external competitors ready to commit large resources and political weight to vie for power with Russia in these areas. All those characteristics are absent in Syria, as Russia is geographically distant, much less historically connected, and faces the existential interests of strong countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel, not to mention the United States. It is therefore much more difficult for Russia to control the numerous participants in the conflict, let alone the Syrian government. Damascus is anything but an obedient client; it wants to unify the country, restore the ruling elite's control over it, and lessen its dependence on external actors. Therefore, the most important long-term goals of Al-Assad are the exact opposite of the ones pursued by the Kremlin.

Current Developments in the Syrian Idlib Province

In January and February 2020, an offensive of the Syrian government in the Idlib province has yielded several major victories. SAA units, [reportedly](#) with the support of Hezbollah and other Iranian affiliated militias, have conquered one-third of the previously rebel-held enclave established by the Astana accords of March 2017. By the 12th of February, 2020, the government forces have reached a position as close as 15 km from the centre of the province's capital. They have also completely secured the M5 highway, the most important strategic route in Syria, leading from Damascus along the Lebanese border, via Homs and Hama to Aleppo.

The single most important consequence of these developments is that Turkey has been dragged deeper into the conflict in Syria, as Ankara's vital interests are at stake. According to the de-escalation agreements, Turkey was responsible for this enclave and has been allowed to establish twelve military observation posts around the rebel-held areas. It has also provided military assistance to some of the anti-government factions there. The control over the Idlib province is also very significant from the political point of view as one of the important examples of Turkey's active and supposedly effective policy in Syria. Ankara was also afraid that in the case of hostilities, the next wave of refugees would flee to neighbouring Turkey.

The government started the offensive against the Idlib enclave on the 30th of April, 2019. It was rather slow and largely ineffective and, until the end of August, it resulted only in “liberation” of the southernmost part of rebel-held areas. During this operation, the SAA encircled one of the Turkish observation posts. Another phase of government assaults [started](#) in December 2019 and has continued until now with varying intensity along the eastern border of the rebel enclave. It resulted in the encirclement of another three Turkish posts established according to the Astana accords, along with another one hastily constructed in August 2019. Additionally, in the last days of January, Turkey set up another four observation posts around the strategic town Saraquib, but they also did not prevent the government forces from taking over this location. This way, [according to](#) official announcements, currently there are nine Turkish military outposts in Syria surrounded by governmental forces. The rapid advance of the SAA has also led to direct military confrontations between the Syrian army units and the TSK. On the 3rd of February, 2020, the Turkish convoy was hit what resulted in the death of [eight](#) Turkish servicemen and civilian contractors. Subsequently, the Turks opened fire at the Syrian government’s positions from numerous locations in Syria and Turkey. The reports regarding the death toll from this counterstrike vary from [13](#) to [76](#). Since then, more incidents with casualties on the Turkish side have been reported. In every instance, the Turkish artillery responded with the shelling of the Syrian positions resulting in numerous fatalities.

In the last days of January 2020, and in February, Turkey has sent heavy reinforcements to the areas surrounding Idlib. There are some media updates about significant quantities of tanks, artillery, and special forces units, supposedly establishing defensive positions. [According to](#) the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights between the 2nd and the 9th of February alone, some 1250 vehicles with 5000 soldiers crossed the Syrian border. These military moves correspond with [defiant rhetoric](#) by the Turkish authorities, and specifically [by President](#) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Ankara not only demands Syrians cease the offensive in Idlib but also to remove the siege of the TSK observation posts. There are also intensive talks between Russia and Turkey, but until now, they have yielded no visible outcome, despite phone conversation between the Russian and Turkish presidents. Meanwhile, [the humanitarian crisis in Idlib](#) is quickly deepening, as 520,000 people, [according to](#) the United Nations, have already been displaced. Many of them are [heading for Turkey](#), the only available destination for them to seek refuge from the atrocities of war.

The Turkish Entanglement

The most important complications caused by the developments mentioned above are related to Ankara’s policy in Syria. There are several important drivers behind the Turkish involvement in Syria and they largely determine Turkey’s current posture, along with its immediate goals and aims. These drivers may be summarized as follows:

1. The long-standing position maintained by Turkey is that Bashar Al-Assad and his ruling elite have no legitimacy to govern Syria and should be replaced. That is why Ankara has supported numerous opposition groupings there.
2. Turkey currently hosts an estimated [3.6 million](#) Syrian refugees. The government’s offensive in Idlib will result in hundreds of thousands more internally displaced persons, for whom Turkey

is the most obvious destination. The Turkish economy has already been strained as a result of these migrations, and it is an increasingly important political problem for the state and the public.

3. The engagement in Syria has become a very important vector of Turkish foreign policy. Turkey has allocated vast resources to increase Ankara's capability to exert influence there and has expressed solemn political commitments on numerous occasions. Turkey is therefore deeply involved, and its prestige as a significant regional power is also at stake.

4. The engagement in Syria increasingly affects internal affairs, as it has become subject to public attention and a matter of national pride.

5. And finally, Turkey perceives the Kurdish quasi-autonomy in north-eastern Syria as an existential threat. Ankara considers it a spawn of the Kurdish terrorist organizations which threaten the very integrity of Turkey as a country. The perception of the Kurdish threat is also used for internal purposes as a rallying factor.

All in all, for Ankara, the situation that is emerging due to the SAA's Idlib offensive is difficult. If pushed out of the province, Turkey would, firstly, suffer a huge political setback and momentous humiliation. It would also mean the major defeat of its army, which would have to withdraw with possible losses in equipment and casualties among the servicemen – it would be another aspect of the overall humiliation. Moreover, the government forces' assault in Idlib would likely cause the next, probably huge waves of refugees. The Turkish presence in northern Syria, where Turkey controls large swaths of borderland in Afrin and Al-Bab areas, along with the zone established in October 2019 in al-Raqqa governorate, will also be endangered.

Predictions

Currently, it is very difficult to predict further developments in Idlib province, but the situation is very tense. The Turkish forces are fortifying their positions with tanks and artillery so they [look more like](#) defensive lines than observation posts. On the other hand, the SAA seems determined to take advantage of its recent gains and push for Idlib. Thus, both sides seem to drive headlong against each other. It is extremely difficult to predict what is going to happen in the next days or weeks, but it will surely be very important for the future of the conflict in Syria. The difficulty of projecting the course of further events stems mostly from the fact that the determination of both sides is difficult to gauge. Specifically, the question of whether they would risk a direct confrontation or not remains open. Furthermore, the developments on the ground may spiral out of control, resulting in an unwanted escalation. The other important question is: can Russia manage the situation, in particular, can they order the SAA to stop its advance? On the 20th of January, Russia [brokered a ceasefire](#) at the request of Turkey but it has never come into effect, as shown on the maps dated the [21st](#) and [22nd](#) of January. We believe that this is evidence of the growing inefficiency of Russian deal-making in Syria.

Moscow's situation has become increasingly precarious recently since Turkey and Syria have gotten on the collision course. On the one hand, Russia has assisted al-Assad's forces, and they have vowed to help "liberate" all the country. Russian aerial units have also taken part in the

current offensive. But on the other hand, Russia has many important common interests with Turkey in the political, military and economic spheres. To put it plainly, since Russians have been openly backing both sides of a possible all-out war, can they continue to remain neutral if the hostilities escalate? What could they do? Withdraw military support for the SAA? Target the TSK? Continue with attacks, but try to avoid casualties among the Turkish personnel? We do not dare to answer these questions decisively but we can propose several scenarios of the development of the current crisis in Idlib for further consideration.

1. Syria and Turkey will go to war. Despite the Russian mediation, the clash around Idlib will turn into a regular conflict, which will swiftly escalate. It may happen due to Damascus' decision to seize the opportunity at any cost, but the situation may also spiral out of control resulting in unwanted escalation. It is rather difficult to predict the course of such a conflict, but anyway, it would have very serious consequences for the course of the Syrian conflict and the situation in the Middle East as a whole.

2. The Syrian Army will push forward, as in the previous scenario, but the Turks will offer no significant resistance. This would mean that Ankara's relatively high military profile in Syria was nothing but a bluff. More Turkish positions will be encircled, and some units will flee across the border. It would be an immense humiliation for Turkey and a total disaster for Ankara's foreign policy. It could also result in vast internal political upheaval in Turkey. This kind of scenario may also happen should the Turkish units not manage to establish good combat positions in Idlib and become outflanked by rapid SAA advance. As of the 12th of February, it [seemed](#) that the SAA was attempting to execute such a manoeuvre, heading for the crucial Syria-Turkey highway M45.

3. The Syrian Army will probe the Turkish positions around Idlib and elsewhere, but well-prepared TSK along with rebel groupings will repel them decisively. The SAA will not decide on an all-out attack, at least for the time being. A situation of this sort would probably lead to a Russian-brokered cease-fire and the division of the Idlib province. Turkey would occupy its western part along the borders of the Turkish province of Hatay. As of the 15th of February, this scenario seemed to be validated, as the TSK resisted the abovementioned advance of the SAA with heavy artillery fire. Furthermore, two helicopters belonging to the Syrian Air Forces were shot down, [allegedly](#) by the surface-to-air missiles fired by the rebels. If it is confirmed that they were supplied with MANPADS, this will be another strong evidence of Ankara's resolve.

4. Both sides will agree on the division of the Idlib enclave without further fighting, with a result similar to the one in the previous scenario. As of the 15th of February, this scenario is still possible, as Russo-Turkish [talks](#) on various levels are underway. However, their current status is difficult to assess.

We reiterate our belief that it is currently impossible to predict which of the abovementioned scenarios will actually materialize – it is even possible that something unpredictable will happen. This is because the situation on the ground is in a state of flux and uncertainty; many units and organizations are uncontrolled on both sides. Quick changes on the frontline may negate all peacemaking efforts, and some emotional decisions may also make the situation more difficult to control.

Nevertheless, it is worth offering an educated guess as to which of all those possible outcomes is most likely to happen. We believe that scenarios 3 or 4, or maybe something different, but similar are the most conceivable as a future course of action. The argument behind this conviction is twofold.

Firstly, we suppose that the Syrian government will not dare to seriously challenge the military of NATO member states in what would have unpredictable, but surely dire, consequences. Furthermore, Russia would almost certainly refuse to provide any assistance in the case of such an offensive, which would place the SAA alone against a superior enemy. Iran, which has backed al-Assad until now, would also not dare to move against Turks; they have already achieved their main goals in Syria, so they do not have to take additional risks.

Secondly, Turkey will likely do whatever it takes to avoid a total disaster in Syria. What is more, Ankara surely understands that in the case of a head-on confrontation with Turkey, Syria would probably be left alone by its allies. That is why Turks may rather safely bet that if they only manage to set up reasonable defensive positions in Idlib and show a will to keep them, the SAA will give up their assault.

Russia, which has already rushed to mediate, will certainly take advantage of the attitudes of both sides. They will probably succeed in brokering a deal similar to the one which allowed Turkey to retain the part of Syria it invaded in October. This will be an imperfect solution, but probably relatively stable.

The Ramifications for Russia

In our earlier assessments, we outlined how Moscow's situation may change due to the declining intensity of the conflict in Syria. We reiterate our position concerning that – Russian influence is [poised to diminish](#). Of course, as we repeatedly argue, it is very difficult to make predictions concerning the conflict in Syria, so our cautious estimates may not be correct. But if we are right, if the abovementioned scenario, or a similar one, comes to pass, Moscow will face a difficult situation in Syria and the Middle East as a whole. Of course, Russians are there to stay, but probably the moment they had the greatest influence in the region has most likely already passed. In short, we can summarize the problems the Kremlin faces in Syria as follows.

1. Russia [lacks funds and resources](#) to help with the post-war reconstruction of Syria. It also cannot afford to provide the vast security forces necessary to control the territory, which will surely remain restive, at least in parts. The Russian firepower, intelligence and logistics necessary to wage war will not be so important.
2. Syria will remain divided and partially occupied by Turkey and affiliated local forces for the time being. From Ankara's point of view, the areas held in northern Syria are so important that it seems highly unlikely that they would abandon them in the foreseeable future.
3. The nature of the division of Syria will change with the liquidation of the last stronghold of independent rebel groupings. Its main characteristics will be as follows. The Kurdish Rojava will probably remain quasi-autonomous for some time, as Damascus will not need to risk

disarming the Kurdish forces; furthermore, the regime will need these forces as a part of the screen against further possible Turkish incursion. The areas controlled by Ankara will be out of reach for the Syrian government, at least for the time being, because any serious attempt to retake these territories would mean the risk of an all-out war against a superior enemy and without allies.

4. The new division of Syria will most likely be rather stable. Large hostilities will cease for the time being. Instead, we will probably witness a painful process of stabilization of Syria. The areas directly controlled by the government will remain restive, especially if the grievances of the impoverished nation are not addressed quickly. Rojava will most probably remain under the rule of the local Kurdish authorities who have proven capable of governing effectively. The Turkish held areas will be restive as well, but the presence of the TSK will prevent any serious invasion from outside. In these relatively stable conditions, the Russian presence will not be as important as during open hostilities. The stability will be maintained by all the actors involved, not by Russian pressure or manipulation. Damascus, Ankara and Tehran, together with the Kurdish leaders, will all try to make use of relative peace for their own goals, which are not necessarily compatible with the Russian intentions.

5. Bashar al-Assad will not require immediate Russian military support, so he will most likely become a less co-operative client. That is because, without the necessity to use its firepower, the Kremlin will have much less ability to discipline its partner. He will pursue his own agenda more independently meaning that Russian economic interests in Syria would also suffer to a degree.

All in all, the Russian influence in Syria has passed its peak. It is, however, difficult to ascertain in full how much it will diminish. Russian diplomatic skills, together with some economic incentives and military assistance, will surely allow Moscow to retain the status of an important player in the Middle East. But the overall influence will be rather limited.

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