



The Syrian-Turkish Conflict and its Implications for Russia – A Follow-Up

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On February 15th, 2020, we published a [commentary](#) referring to the situation in the Syrian Idlib province. It was developing very quickly at that moment due to the offensive of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and subsequent forceful intervention of the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* – TSK). The latter was supporting local rebel forces comprising mostly of the Salafist jihadist militia known as *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). The Turkish side has also deployed many units of *al-Jayš al-Waṭani as-Sūrī*. This term officially translates as the Syrian National Army, better known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army – TFSA (commonly referred to as FSA). It is the rebel grouping, organized, trained, armed, and financed by Turkey. On the other side, the Syrian government was heavily supported by the Russian Air Force. In this short commentary we would like to refer to our predictions stated in the commentary mentioned above.

The review of our predictions

First of all, we would like to remind readers that a month ago we described several possible future scenarios, plus made an “educated guess” outlining the most likely, according to our views, short-to-medium-term outcome. As of today, March 18th, 2020, we can assess that these predictions have been confirmed thus far.

As we had foreseen, the Turkish forces [did mount](#) a skilful and robust opposition to the advancing SAA. The TSK did not only manage to stabilize the frontline creating a reasonable buffer zone away from the Turkish border. The firepower delivered by its units also allowed the

FSA and HTS to stage major counteroffensives south of the M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) highway, and around the strategic village of Saraquib at the crossroads of the M4 and M5 (Damascus-Aleppo) highways. The latter location has been subsequently lost in fierce battles with the SAA, but the overall rebel/TSK positions have been [solidified](#). In turn, these developments facilitated the Russian-brokered negotiations that we also expected to happen. And so, Moscow rushed to propose the cessation of hostilities and was genuinely interested in upholding it this time. The talks concluded at the highest level in Moscow by the Turkish and Russian presidents on March 5th, led to the ceasefire which holds well, thus far.

It is worth noticing that resolute action undertaken by Ankara changed the face of this war, exactly as we had predicted. First of all, the second-largest army of NATO brought into the battlefield precise heavy artillery fire, combined with [missile strikes](#) executed by armed drones. It largely disrupted advancing forces and targeted units behind the lines taking out numerous tanks and other pieces of equipment. Next, portable anti-aircraft systems were also deployed, bringing down several SAA planes and helicopters. Thus, the sky over Idlib is no longer a free-fire zone for the Russian, and particularly for the Syrian, Air Forces. TSK also conducted several long-range strikes against the Syrian military installations of strategic value, such as airfields and [factories](#). All this changed the conflict substantially, meaning that the SAA met the opposition in a much stronger manner than any before, and was able to deploy various modern tactics and armaments. In short, the support which TSK has given the rebel forces allowed them to defeat the SAA for the first time in years. The Syrian government could have continued with its offensive only with full-scale Russian support directed specifically against the Turkish forces. But Moscow was unwilling to do so, which we also predicted.

Our predictions for the next months

We reiterate our position that stabilization on the Idlib front is relatively beneficial to both major sides of the conflict, Russia and Turkey. Moscow still wants the conflict in Syria to remain unresolved and frozen, so it is interested in prolongation of every kind of division of the country. By effectively giving the part of Idlib to Turkey, Russia has solidified Ankara's presence in Syria, cementing the division of this state. It is, however, an imperfect solution, because it may lead to a long-lasting, relative calm; Syria could possibly remain quiet for years. This way, Russia would be deprived of its most significant, military leverage in Syria, which would contribute to the overall diminishing of Moscow's influence there. We have explained how this may happen in one of the [previous commentaries](#). For the Turkish side, the current solution is also imperfect, because many of the TSK observation posts have remained behind the lines. Furthermore, the political rationale of the Turkish intervention was to keep the whole Idlib de-escalation zone intact – this has not been achieved. However, Ankara has shown its own public the resolution of the government, and it has also created an important buffer zone, preventing the next wave of displaced people from pouring into Turkey.

For the Syrian government, the outcome of the March 5th Russo-Turkish agreement seems much less advantageous. The offensive in Idlib was designed to conquer the last significant pocket of armed resistance in the country, which would be a major victory for the Syrian president

Bashar al-Assad. Damascus had also hoped to diminish Ankara's influence in Syria. Instead, the offensive was broken after approximately half of the previously rebel-held territory was "liberated", which sounds like a defeat. Particularly, because it is quite unlikely at the moment, that Russians would allow another major offensive in Idlib. Therefore, we may expect al-Assad's forces to become a sort of spoiler of the current deal. The SAA or affiliated militias may stage some major provocations in certain areas of the frontline, counting on an opportunity to escalate conflict again and trying to draw Russia into it. It is, however, difficult to predict how likely such a scenario is. It depends mostly on the level of control Russia executes over the SAA and its proxies, which is very difficult to assess.

Summing up, we can picture the following elements of the current situation in Syria and beyond, which refer to the evolving conflict between Syria and Turkey with special attention to its ramifications for Russia.

1. Ankara seems to have decided to remain an important actor in the Syrian conflict. Internal politics appear to be the main driver behind this strategy, as we have already explained in our previous commentary. Currently, we can add another primary concern – the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, which is [rapidly expanding](#) in Syria, could spill-over to Turkey; therefore, it is more important than ever to make Syrians stay within their own country. On the international stage, the Turkish strategy in Syria represents a part of the broader policy of expanding influence in the Middle East pursued by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It is also a part of a multifaceted [game](#) with Moscow in which Turkey has a lot to gain in economic, political and military terms.
2. As Turkey entered the Idlib province with a large combat force, it has automatically become much more deeply involved in the local politics than before. This development means that Turkey must deal with restive jihadist forces, which have their [own goals](#), not necessarily parallel to those Ankara pursues. Therefore, the greatest challenge for Turkey will be the stabilization and [control](#) over occupied Idlib. It is not going to be an easy task; we may even witness clashes between the Turkish forces and HTS or other jihadist forces.
3. For Moscow, the game in Syria remains burdensome, expensive and not as rewarding as it was a year or two ago. Currently, it looks like Vladimir Putin is preparing another major shift concerning the legitimization of his power. The threat from outside as a mobilization factor in Russian internal affairs is no longer sufficient in rallying the weary Russian society around the leader. Therefore, it seems that the Kremlin is launching a [new campaign](#) of social welfare projects intended to at least halt declining living standards. Undoubtedly, Russia is not going to come to terms with the West; the Cold War 2.0 will remain [a useful instrument](#) for foreign and internal policy. It is, however, supposed to be supplemented by the economic and social policies as the primary source of legitimization of power. All of this means that the Syrian front will become less and less important for Russia, especially in light of declining revenues from oil exports which form the basis of financing the country's budget.
4. For Syria, the current situation means the prolongation of a division of the country, but its character changes. The period of struggle with highly motivated but poorly equipped rebel movements is over. Civil war, mostly internal conflict, has turned international, with Turkish forces present in large swaths of Syrian land, the American presence in some of the Kurdish held

semi-autonomous areas and the ongoing Israeli-Iranian war developing on and above the Syrian territory. What is more, the clash between the US and Iran, which has escalated in recent months is also taking place in Syria.

5. Finally, it is, of course, difficult to assess if the current ceasefire is going to be a lasting solution. For a short-term perspective, it will probably hold as far as Turkey and Russia want it to. But those major players are far from being in absolute control over the situation in their respective spheres of influence. Their grip may also loosen as time passes and local forces and the central government strengthen. The epidemic is also a wild card in this equation, so we are ready only to make another “educated guess” that the ceasefire will generally hold at least for several months. We do not dare to make any longer-term predictions.

Citation: Marek Czajkowski, ‘The Syrian-Turkish Conflict and its Implications for Russia – A Follow-Up’, *KBN Commentary* 2020, no. 6 (61), 20 March.