

# TURKEY AND THE IDLIB CRISIS: LINGERING DILEMMAS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

*The military stalemate in the northwest governorate of Idlib remains one of the main challenges before Turkey's engagement in the Syrian crisis. Assad regime's offensive to reassert its control over the opposition-controlled territory earlier this year triggered a military intervention by Turkey. Although relative calm prevails since the 5 March 2020 Moscow deal, which prevented further military escalation and introduced a security mechanism, there remain many uncertainties about the humanitarian, political, and security risks surrounding the Idlib crisis. The deepening catastrophe in Idlib is definitely not a unilateral Turkish problem, as the transatlantic community has many stakes in its unfolding. Nonetheless, Turkey continues to shoulder the responsibility of managing the humanitarian, political, and security risks.*

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**T**urkey's Idlib challenge has been a product of the evolution of the Syrian crisis. In many ways, Idlib has emerged as a major stress test on Turkey's Syria policy, as several high-stake issues overlapped around the fate of the small territory. At its outset in 2011, Turkey, along with several western powers and regional actors, supported the Syrian uprising. While the opposition initially gained control in sizeable parts of the country, due to a myriad of domestic, regional, and international factors, it started to lose ground over time.

Meanwhile, the focus of Turkey's Syria policy had undergone a major transformation. Realizing the limits to the regime change policy, Ankara focused on minimizing the threats to its national security emanating from the civil war. Since 2016, it has carried out several cross-border operations to secure the border against the terrorist groups, ISIS and PKK/PYD. In the wake of these military incursions, Turkey created new administrative structures to ensure that the bordering areas of Syrian territory are governed by friendly elements. Meanwhile, it shut down its borders to further inflows, after over three million Syrian refugees emerged as a key issue of concern domestically. Experiencing divergence with Western allies, Turkey even undertook cooperation with the backers of the regime, namely Russia and Iran. Such cooperation was an important exercise in compartmentalization, given that they were Ankara's main protagonists in the Syrian crisis.

Parallel to the Syrian opposition losing territorial control during the course of the civil war, particularly after 2015, Idlib emerged as the last bastion to uphold the basic principles of the Syrian uprising, in which Ankara's Syria policy invested heavily.<sup>1</sup> Valuing the continuation of the status quo in Idlib, Turkey launched the Astana process with Russia and Iran in early 2017, which enlisted Idlib and its environs in one of the four de-escalation zones. However, the regime did not cease its operations, and eliminated the pockets of opposition-controlled areas in southern Syria and around Damascus, bringing Idlib increasingly into the international spotlight by the Fall of 2017.

As part of its strategy of reasserting sovereignty over the entire Syrian territory, the Assad regime gradually directed its efforts toward the military reconquest of Idlib and ending the opposition governance there. Likewise, concerned with the security of its bases on coastal Syria on the one hand, and the concentration of many radical elements including those from the former Soviet Union countries in the province on the other, Russia also supported the Assad regime's policy on Idlib. Russia, nonetheless, weighed

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of key turning points in the Idlib crisis, see International Crisis Group's timeline: "Idlib Between September 2015 and May 2020: A Timeline," 25 May 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/idlib-between-september-2015-and-may-2020-timeline>

its assistance to the Damascus regime against its nascent security cooperation with Ankara, and sought not to antagonize the latter altogether.

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### ***Turkey’s Objectives in Idlib***

Turkey’s main objective has been the continuation of the opposition control in Idlib, hence halting any territorial advance by the regime. The maintenance of the status quo was critical because of its implications for many overlapping issues. First, considering the evolution of its Syria policy, any regime recapture of Idlib would reverberate negatively on the other parts of northern Syria, which Turkey directly controls. As it has prioritized a security belt along its southern border, Ankara has come to attach enormous importance to the control of Syrian territory along the border by friendly elements. The opposition control in Idlib was treated as essential to the sustainability of the Turkish presence in other zones that were formed in the wake of the military incursions since 2016. The dominant thinking in Turkish strategic circles has come to embrace the idea that if Idlib were to fall to the regime, it would create a domino effect that would threaten the string of enclaves controlled by Turkey and its local allies, starting from Afrin, spreading to Azaz-Jarablus line, and further east.

Second, the Idlib quagmire relates directly to Ankara’s position on the political process in the Syrian civil war. Despite coming under domestic and international pressure to normalize its relations with the Assad regime, the Turkish government’s policy has remained predicated on political transition as per the Geneva Communique of 2012. Interestingly, while other fronts of Turkey’s engagement in Syria, particularly in eastern Syria, where it is positioned against the US-backed PYD/YPG, may have offered justification for Ankara’s normalization with Damascus, the Idlib case reminded why it should not. Along with its own security needs, Turkey also rests the legitimacy of its involvement in the Syrian crisis on its siding with the Syrian people, and continues to argue that the genuine demands of Syrian people should be represented in the political process. Therefore, Turkey values the continuation of the status quo until a genuine political settlement to the civil war is reached. Otherwise, the fall of Idlib and the governance model by the opposition would symbolize the collapse of its Syria policy, undermining its arguments internationally. Such a development would moreover deal a blow to its

credibility, considering how much Ankara invested in sustaining the Idlib experiment of self-governance.

Third, the Idlib quagmire also came to be intermingled with the twin—demographic— issues of how to deal with refugees and radical elements. In addition to its locals, who were predominantly against the Damascus rule, evacuation deals pertaining to other opposition-controlled zones in the conflict also produced a very problematic demographic reality. Idlib ended up hosting internally displaced persons as well as Syrian and foreign militants of different ideological backgrounds in a very narrow space, which dramatically aggravated the challenges over time. With regard to refugees, Turkey has argued that any further militarization on the ground would trigger a massive wave of refugee outflow, ultimately undermining the 2016 Turkey-EU refugee deal. Meanwhile, since many of the hard-core radical militants, particularly foreigners, were transferred to Idlib as a result of previous deals, their presence in the province also emerged as a major security concern both regionally and internationally. While the regime and Russia sought to capitalize on their presence to justify military action, Turkey instead argued for a more gradual approach. Turkey worked to transform the internal scene in Idlib gradually, which rested on the assumption that the radical groups, chiefly Nusra Front and its later reincarnations, especially Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), will give up their ties to the global Al Qaeda network and will be marginalized within the mainstream Syrian opposition.

### *The Unstable Equilibrium in Idlib as the Best Worst Option*

Such overlapping considerations have turned Idlib into one of the most difficult issues on Turkey's foreign policy agenda lately.<sup>2</sup> The unfolding catastrophe in Idlib was hardly a unilateral Turkish problem, as Western powers had many stakes in it. However, the responsibility of managing the humanitarian, political, and security risks had fallen on Turkey's shoulders. In its colossal endeavor to manage the Idlib conundrum, Turkey consequentially had to develop parochial solutions. On the one hand, it was hardly in a position to halt the Russian-backed regime advances on its own. On the other hand, it could not tolerate the end of opposition control in Idlib. Between a rock and a hard place, Turkey eventually deepened its already dependent relationship with Russia as part of the Astana process in late 2017. Through several deals between Ankara and Moscow, some of which also involved Tehran, new security mechanisms have been established to oversee the Idlib ceasefire and draw the lines of territorial control since then.

Turkey's conciliatory policy toward Russia was justified with a necessity to contain the situation to prevent a refugee wave and buy time to transform the radical groups

<sup>2</sup> Şaban Kardaş, "Turkey's Mission Impossible in Sustaining Idlib's Unstable Equilibrium," *GMF*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.gmfus.org/file/29222/download>

in Idlib. However, the shifting dynamics of the Idlib crisis and changing priorities of the local and outside stakeholders since the Sochi memorandum of September 2018 created a repetitive pattern. The regime used any pretext, particularly the non-implementation of the Sochi memorandum, to push forward militarily. In order to prevent regime attacks and further escalation, Turkey entered into new deals brokered by Russia, a practice that has been repeated several times. While these deals managed to uphold the joint security mechanisms, Turkey, in return, had to concede to the reconfiguration of the lines of control—at the expense of the opposition—as a result of the regime’s territorial gains.

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The situation in Idlib after the Sochi memorandum was essentially a very unstable equilibrium, whereby Turkey assumed a mission impossible to sustain the status quo and address the humanitarian, political, and security challenges. As a result of its owning of the Idlib issue, Turkey was exposed to frequent criticism, particularly regarding its gradual approach to the radicals. The Western powers could not present a more viable alternative and were particularly aware that an imminent regime control over Idlib would trigger a major humanitarian catastrophe, resulting in a new refugee wave. As a result, the West perform threw their support behind Turkey’s course of action as the “best of bad options.”<sup>3</sup>

This was very well reflected in some of the summit diplomacy that brought together Turkish leaders with their European counterparts. Nonetheless, as much as Turkey hoped to counterbalance the Sochi process by internationalizing the Idlib diplomacy, and to achieve a more desirable burden-sharing arrangement with its transatlantic allies, the returns from such initiatives remained limited. Despite their vested interests in preserving the stability in Idlib, Western partners could not substantively contribute to Turkey’s efforts to restrain the regime or bring the radicals under control. To the extent that the Idlib crisis loomed larger on the agenda at different junctures, Ankara fell back on the Russian option to sustain the unstable equilibrium.

### *The Crisis in Early 2020*

Idlib once again dominated the headlines in early 2020, reminding the world how it remains a controversial issue. The Damascus regime launched a new offensive in

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<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Best of Bad Options for Syria’s Idlib,” Middle East Report No:197, 14 March 2019, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/197-the-best-of-bad-options%20.pdf>

December 2019 to control the opposition-held territory, which put major stress on the unstable equilibrium forged since the Sochi memorandum. Realizing that indirect support to the opposition forces would be insufficient to halt this new offensive, Turkey opted for military escalation as a last resort to prevent the regime's total control over the province. Eventually, it was prompted to undertake a cross-border military operation, Spring Shield, which has seen the deployment of a sizeable military force. More remarkably, for the first time, the main target of Turkey's cross-border operation was the regime and affiliated Shiite militia forces backed by Iran. Russia's initial unwillingness, or inability, to mediate a ceasefire, mounting casualties, and mutual retaliatory attacks raised the risk of an uncontrolled spiral of escalation.

Further escalation of the conflict into an interstate war was prevented only through a meeting between presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin on 5 March 2020 in Moscow. Through an addendum to the Sochi memorandum agreed in Moscow, Turkey acceded to the regime's new territorial gains, particularly its control over M5 motorway, in return for freezing the conflict and preventing further advances. Turkey and Russia also formed a new joint mechanism to end the presence of militant groups around the Latakia-Aleppo (M4) motorway. The deal reiterated earlier commitments of Ankara and Moscow regarding fighting terrorists.

Since then, though a ceasefire arrangement continues to hold, Turkey and the regime have continued their military build-up, while a full implementation of the Moscow addendum is still far away. As of early July 2020, 19 joint Turkish-Russian patrols on the M4 motorway have been undertaken despite the militants' attempts to block their movement.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the presence of the radical elements south of the M4 and the HTS's resistance to fully give up its control to Turkey-backed opposition groups remain as major hurdles.

### *Future Dilemmas of Idlib*

The humanitarian, political, and security predicaments Turkey confronts in Idlib have been aggravated, pulling it militarily further into the quagmire. A couple of challenges are of particular relevance as to how Turkey's policy may evolve.

#### *Safe Zone along the Border vs. a Self-Governing Idlib*

The underlying problems, most remarkably the millions of entrapped civilians seeking to survive under dire conditions and the control exercised by the radical

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<sup>4</sup> See the interactive maps and infographics provided by [www.suriyegundemi.com](http://www.suriyegundemi.com)

elements, have been playing out in a more congested space than ever before. As it has underlined on many occasions, Turkey opposes a safe zone formula to host the civilians, since it may create a new Gaza on its borders.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Turkey believes that civilians in Idlib should have enough space to sustain their normal lives. Such a scenario, however, can be realized only through a viable territorial entity that is self-governing. Therefore, Turkey treats the current areas of territorial control—taking the M4 and M5 as a de facto border between the regime and opposition—as akin to red lines. Any regime advance beyond these lines will threaten the Idlib city center and trigger a massive population dislocation, potentially creating a huge refugee camp along the border. Given the military weaknesses of the opposition vis-à-vis the regime, as demonstrated in the recent conflict, Turkey has had to unleash its own military muscle to provide strategic depth to Idlib’s self-governing structures. Turkey remains under constant pressure to maintain the same cross-border military engagement, which comes with a host of unanswered questions, including but not limited to what a viable exit strategy will look like or what the rules of engagement in a hostile theater will be.

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### *Governing vs. Protecting*

The worsening humanitarian situation and new demographic and strategic realities force Turkey to rethink the degree and modality of its “ownership” over Idlib. One option might be to transform the status of Idlib into a similar structure to the other enclaves in Syria, where Turkey exercises direct control. At this point, Turkey may rather prefer to see the continuation of the existing self-governing mechanisms, since it will better resonate with its broader political priorities. Even in this case, Turkey has moved beyond merely defending Idlib, and is now assuming larger political and economic governance responsibilities. With governance, however, comes many liabilities, as other stakeholders expect Turkey to play a larger role in the enforcement of the ceasefire and the provision of order.

Consequently, the rationale for Turkey’s military engagement has undergone a major change. As part of the Astana-Sochi framework, Turkey was a guarantor of

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<sup>5</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, “A new Gaza: Turkey’s border policy in northern Syria,” *ECFR*, 28 May 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/a\\_new\\_gaza\\_turkeys\\_border\\_policy\\_in\\_northern\\_syria.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/a_new_gaza_turkeys_border_policy_in_northern_syria.pdf)

the de-conflicting mechanism, under which its military presence was confined to a monitoring mission. In addition to sustaining this role, the Moscow addendum implicitly recognizes Turkey's more robust military presence, which has been further emboldened since March 2020. Turkey has deployed troops on a rotational basis, which at times might have reached figures somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000, and stationed air and land combat capabilities. Owing to this military dominance, Turkey has been positioned as the ultimate arbiter over various groups in the rebel-controlled Idlib proper. Moreover, the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army has also made inroads into Idlib since the latest conflict. The resulting military dominance will be instrumental to both the protection of Idlib against future regime encroachments and the provision of internal order and governance.<sup>6</sup>

### *Gradual vs. Heavy-Handed Approach to HTS*

The most pressing security challenge concerns how to diminish the control of the radicals. Turkey has committed to ending the threats to the Russian and regime positions originating from within the opposition-controlled Idlib, and to addressing the issue of HTS and other extremists. As things stand, Turkey remains wary of a heavy-handed approach, which may be counterproductive. However, the strategy of buying time to manage this challenge may have reached its limits, as Turkey comes under pressure to take more decisive steps to address their presence. While it alters the military balance on the ground, Turkey's approach relies on a combination of counter-terrorism measures and de-radicalization. However, moderating radicals is a long-term process, and Turkey has moved to prioritize coercive measures. By increasing the pressure on the HTS and others, it hopes to instigate internal divisions, marginalization, and fragmentation, eventually forcing them to relinquish political control and give up their military presence. Such a move would definitely be in Turkey's best interest by eliminating one major spoiler to the ceasefire and thwarting the regime's efforts to use their presence to justify further offensives. Short of an alternative approach, currently, the United States and other transatlantic partners acquiesced to this approach, which may help ease the time pressure on Turkey.

### *Another Round of Conflict?*

The Moscow addendum to the Sochi memorandum effectively formalized a new reality by redrawing the lines of contact between the regime and the opposition. Are the current lines of control set by the Moscow addendum final? Or, similar to the fate of the past deals, will there be yet another round of regime military offensive? The answers to these questions will affect the fate of Idlib.

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<sup>6</sup> Oytun Orhan and Hamza Haşıl, "Moskova Mutabakatı Sonrası Türkiye'nin Tehdit Değerlendirmesi: Suriye Rejimi, YPG/PKK ve Radikaller [After the Moscow Memorandum of Turkey's Threat Assessment: The Syrian Regime, YPG / PKK and Radicals]," *ORSAM Bakış*, No.116 (April 2020).

Several factors are likely to limit the Assad regime's ability to launch a major military offensive in the short term. First, as a result of the US' economic pressures and sanctions, the regime faces serious constraints, which cannot be compensated by its main backers, Tehran and Moscow. As it seeks to put its house into order, the regime may not risk a major military confrontation in Idlib. Second, short of a major backing from Russia, the regime can hardly overpower the military superiority Turkey has established on the ground, which was demonstrated during its offensive earlier this year. Third, Russia may have its own reasons to eschew military escalation and maintain the status quo, due to its need to manage the delicate relations with Turkey, among others. Despite fundamental differences over the nature of the crisis, so far, both actors managed to find a modus vivendi through mutual concessions, and there is nothing to suggest that this pattern is totally broken. Fourth, the situation in Idlib in particular, and the Syrian crisis in general, have been intertwined with other regional conflicts, which may deter the parties from further military escalation.

### ***Endgame: Political Transition vs. a New Frozen Conflict?***

Although a conflict may not be on the horizon in the short term, the endgame in Idlib remains as elusive as ever. For its part, the regime continues its build-up to reassert full territorial control in Idlib and is willing to capitalize on any pretext offered by the non-implementation of the existing accords to launch another offensive. In contrast, while the unstable equilibrium has become more volatile, Ankara's need to sustain some form of ceasefire mechanism continues unabated, for the reasons mentioned so far. Turkey is no longer willing to tolerate the pattern of renegotiation at its expense and, therefore, treats the Moscow addendum as a durable framework until a final settlement to the conflict is reached. Until a political settlement in line with Geneva principles is achieved, Turkey remains bent on military engagement in Idlib and other areas of northern Syria. Should a renewed regime offensive materialize, Turkey is highly likely to militarily retaliate to sustain the current status quo. To the extent that this deterrence works, Idlib may interestingly evolve into a frozen conflict, which can further complicate the political process.