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**IDLIB, THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

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**Abstract:** After seven years of conflict, the future of the Syrian civil war may come down to the battle for Idlib. Syrian leader Bashar Assad has already taken back control of much of the country, and this northwestern province is the last remaining rebel stronghold. But taking back Idlib won't be easy. In fact, it'll be harder and more complicated than many of the other recent campaigns in the south for two reasons. First, it is a much larger region than the areas in the south, such as Daraa, Eastern Ghouta and Quneitra, that the Syrian army seized in recent months. It is, therefore, also more heavily populated with rebels, in part because many of the cease-fires brokered by Russia in the south allowed rebels safe passage out of these areas and into Idlib. Second, Turkey has a military presence in Idlib. This complicates the situation for all parties involved because Turkey and the Syrian regime have conflicting interests in this region. Russia supports the regime but doesn't want to go to war with Turkey, a country with which it needs to maintain good relations. For this reason, the Syrians are afraid the Russians may abandon them. Meanwhile, Turkey wants room to maneuver in relation to the U.S., and having hostile relations with Russia would limit its options. A battle over Idlib would therefore pose a threat to all parties involved in the conflict. In the wider power struggle among countries in this war, Idlib may be little more than a distraction, but it's a dangerous one. Winning a military battle here may cost far more than anyone is prepared to pay. This article will consider another option: a deal among these countries to oust the rebel group that controls much of the province. All of these parties have an interest in eliminating this group – one of the most extreme in Idlib – and so it's the one area where they can cooperate. For now, though, the most likely next phase in Idlib and the Syrian civil war is a concerted effort to eliminate HTS (and its offshoots like Hurras al-Din), and an acceptance of a more permanent Turkish presence in northwest Syria. A deal to eliminate HTC would, therefore, be in the interest of all these parties. But it could break down in two ways. The first would be through insurgent groups' refusal to accept Turkish control. The second possible breakdown would involve Assad making moves to take back control of Idlib. This would, however, largely depend on how much support the regime could count on from its other stalwart ally, Iran. A solution to the struggle over this pocket of the country is less important than the relations among the big players in this war. It would therefore have to involve some sort of balance among them, perhaps with intermittent and indecisive small-scale combat but without a full-blooded attempt to win. They may not get everything they want out of such a deal, but they will all benefit in some way. And at this point, that may be the best they can hope for.

**Keywords:** Syrian civil war, geopolitics, security implications, power struggle

**THE BATTLE FOR IDLIB**

In early 2015, Assad looked to be losing the Syrian war. Russia, one of Syria's key allies, couldn't let that happen, and later that year it decided to join the fray to keep Assad in power. Its intervention, especially its air support for Syrian troops on the ground, began to turn the tide in Assad's favor. Now, after having retaken much of the south, Assad is setting his sights on Idlib.

He'll likely try to enlist the help of Moscow, but for Russia, Idlib has little consequence. Sure, taking back the province would be a big victory for the Syrian regime, but even with Idlib under its rule, there will still be areas of rebel-held territory in the north controlled by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. But for Turkey, the province has substantial strategic significance. Ankara sees it as a place from which it can launch attacks against Syrian Kurdish groups, including the People's Protection Units, or YPG, which it considers a terrorist organization. (Gardner, 2018). Turkey also sees Idlib as a buffer area, positioned as it is on the Turkey-Syria border, from where it can limit refugee flows, which have been a growing problem for Ankara. Turkey has therefore been fortifying its "observation posts" – military outposts sanctioned by the Astana accords in late 2017 – with anti-air defenses and concrete walls, and building hospitals and a helicopter field.

Russia knows that attacking Turkish positions in Idlib will be seen as an act of war against Ankara, which it wants to avoid. Turkey is a regional power and a NATO member, and an assault on Turkish forces may draw in other NATO members in Ankara's defense. This would unite Turkey and the West just when cracks in the relationship between Ankara and Washington are growing. (Although, if NATO were to refuse to intervene on Turkey's behalf, that would deepen the divide in the alliance.) Even an attack on Turkish proxies would likely push Turkey closer to the West. Russia, therefore, is looking for a way out of this quagmire (Collins, 2018: 34).

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Currently, much of Idlib is controlled by one group: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. HTS arrived on the scene in July 2017, roughly three months before Turkey's military entered Idlib. At that time, Turkey had already been cooperating with militias there, including, most importantly, Ahrar al-Sham, which effectively controlled Idlib prior to July 2017. But a split in Ahrar al-Sham started to grow between two factions: pragmatists, who wanted to establish an Islamist party that could gain international legitimacy and even seek support from the West, and hard-liners, whose approach was more akin to al-Qaida's and who wanted to establish an Islamic state. This division weakened Ahrar al-Sham and gave HTS (and its spinoff, Hurras al-Din) an opening (Collins, 2018: 47 - 48).

HTS is the product of a merger between al-Qaida's Syria affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, and several other rebel groups. Jabhat al-Nusra wanted to establish an Islamic caliphate and was among the most ideologically rigid groups active in Syria at the time. HTS was thus able to attract hard-liners from other groups, including Ahrar al-Sham. The two groups became fierce enemies as HTS' power in Idlib grew and Ahrar al-Sham's faded. The leader of HTS, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, publicly declared the group's independence from al-Qaida, and in May 2017, al-Qaida announced it had severed all ties with HTS (Chulov, 2018).

When Turkey was preparing to enter Idlib, it had two options: try to crush HTS by force, or cooperate with a staunch rival of its main proxy in the province. Turkey chose the latter. It was a partnership born of necessity – one that Turkey would rather not have made, all things being equal. But its focus at the time was on establishing a presence along the Turkey-Syria border that would enable it to exert pressure on the YPG and manage cross-border refugee flows.

But now, Turkey has a stronger hand to play. It invaded Afrin – a province in northwest Syria that was controlled by the YPG – in January 2018 and through this conquest now has command over a significant piece of Syrian territory in the north. It can thus turn its attention to HTS, a militia group that it never really trusted and couldn't control.

Turkey has since established relations with other rebel groups in Idlib. In February, what remained of Ahrar al-Sham joined forces with another group called Nour al-Din al-Zenki to form the Syrian Liberation Front, which was meant to balance HTS' presence in Idlib. HTS began launching attacks on the SLF, and for three months, the two fought for control of the province. Given Turkey's ties with Ahrar al-Sham and its distrust of HTS, Turkey likely encouraged the formation of SLF to either counterbalance HTS, weaken it or, at least, figure out where HTS forces were most strongly positioned (Chulov, 2018).

In July, Turkey helped form the National Liberation Front, a coalition of rebel groups in Idlib that included the SLF. Estimates suggest the NLF has some 85,000-100,000 militants. Turkey reportedly invited HTS to join the NLF, but it refused, proving that Ankara still couldn't control the group. HTS continues to attack Syrian army positions around Idlib – which could provoke Assad into launching an assault on the province. Turkey would rather not face off against the Syrian regime there, but it can't stop HTS from attacking regime forces in southern Idlib and northern Hama. Partnering with HTS may have helped Turkey in the short term, but if Assad were to invade Idlib, it could prove costly in the long term.

### **WHAT A DEAL WOULD LOOK LIKE**

Idlib is one place where all the parties involved in the war have a common interest: They all want HTS gone. So what would a deal among these countries look like? One of the more likely scenarios is that they would agree – either formally or informally – to join forces to eliminate the group from the province. After HTS is forced out, Turkey would be allowed to remain in the province but would cede portions of southern Idlib – where HTS has a strong presence – to the Assad regime. Russia would support Assad in southern Idlib but would stop short of providing air support to any offensive that risks bringing it into direct confrontation with Turkey. Turkey would be allowed to stay, so long as it could control its proxies and keep them from attacking the Syrian regime. In effect, this would amount to a semi-permanent territorial acquisition by Turkey, even if no party would be willing to admit as much (Collins, 2018: 51).

In such a scenario, Turkey would end up administering portions of Idlib and Afrin, and in exchange, it would protect these areas from the Syrian regime, which would have to put up a much more powerful offensive than it did in the south if it wanted to challenge Turkey and its proxies. Insurgent groups that disobeyed Turkey and continued to attack the regime would either be forced out of Idlib by Turkey's proxies or, should they leave Idlib to continue the assault on the Syrian army, be dealt with by Assad.

This arrangement would lead to a greater balance of power between the principal players in the broader war and possibly even a respite in the fighting. It may not be a permanent solution, but it could usher in the next phase of the conflict. Why would each of these parties agree to cooperate to get rid of HTS?

**TURKEY**

Turkey would prefer not to have to deal with HTS at all. The group is unpredictable and could threaten its position in Idlib. HTS' forces are concentrated in southern Idlib, so a deal would likely require Turkey to withdraw from that part of the province, which would then be controlled by the Syrian army, with Russia's support. In other parts of Idlib where Turkey has a presence, it would be up to Turkish proxies to eliminate the remaining HTS forces.

But it's hard to imagine that Turkey would withdraw from Idlib entirely. Its primary concern remains the YPG in the north, and it wouldn't want problems in Idlib to threaten its position in Afrin. Ceding Idlib to the Syrian regime would leave Turkey exposed and the Turkish province of Hatay vulnerable to massive refugee flows that would result from a regime offensive. It would also give the momentum in the conflict to the regime, which could then focus on taking back the Kurdish-held territories. This would be unacceptable to Turkey, since it would lose the ability to keep military pressure on the YPG in Syria. A full withdrawal from Idlib could lead to a full withdrawal from northern Syria, and at that point, Turkey would have to trust the Syrian regime to control the Kurdish population in the north in a way that's consistent with Turkey's interests. Turkey therefore is more likely to stand its ground in northern Idlib with the help of its proxies (Luveluck, L. (2018).

**TURKEY'S PROXIES**

Turkey's proxies are also eager to get rid of HTS. The group's approach has resulted in conflict and division among other rebel groups that would rather focus on their battle against Assad. They're concerned that the lack of unity against the regime could create a power vacuum, which could be filled by the Islamic State (Macaron, 2017).

The groups that make up the NLF would cooperate with a deal that focuses first on dismantling HTS, but they wouldn't want to be held back from continuing their fight against Assad. Some of these groups could choose to break off from the NLF, but they would do so at the risk of being targeted by Turkey, Turkey's proxies and the Syrian government. The other pro-Turkey groups that choose to abide by the deal would accept Turkey's control of the region in exchange for protection from regime forces. These forces could then bide their time, waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of a potential dissolution of the agreement.

**SYRIAN REGIME**

Assad likely wouldn't feel completely comfortable with a deal that leaves a fairly large area protected by Turkey. But he would nonetheless be inclined to accept it since it would eliminate arguably the least controllable and most extreme rebel group remaining in Idlib, and would probably help him retake more territory in southern Idlib. For Assad, it's a step in the right direction.

Even absent a deal, Assad is unlikely to launch an assault on the province for three reasons. First, he couldn't rely on Russian air support in the areas where Turkey is entrenched. Second, he would have to confront a far greater number of militants there than he did in battles in southern Syria, making the fight bloodier, costlier and far less predictable. This is partly because the deals brokered by Russia in the south allowed rebels to flee and guaranteed their safe passage to Idlib in exchange for handing over territory to Assad. In many of the areas Assad retook, he didn't actually eliminate the militants fighting against him; they simply relocated to another part of the country. Third, and relatedly, even though Assad has recently reconsolidated his hold over large portions of the country, a substantial segment of his army isn't capable of carrying out offensive operations, since it's mainly used for garrison duties. This means that the heavy casualties the Syrian army is likely to incur will be among Assad's most experienced and well-trained contingents – which may encourage rebels to challenge the regime in other territories, knowing its resources will be stretched to the limit. It is safer for Assad to accept the presence of Turkish forces and their proxies, for now, while he rebuilds his country and secures his prior conquests. Assad could benefit from a period of stability to refortify his military (Brodsky, M. & Barabandi, B. 2018)

**RUSSIA**

Russia would also support a deal on Idlib because it would bring Assad one step closer to securing rule over the entire country. But Russia doesn't actually need Assad to control all of Syria. On the contrary, Russia is more than happy to play the role of broker for the various entities fighting each other in Syria – most notably, Turkey, Assad, the Syrian Kurds and Iran. Letting Turkey keep a chunk of Syria under its control would constrain Iran in Syria and limit its expansionist aims throughout the region. Russia has an interest in preventing a regional hegemon from emerging in the Middle East that could also set its sights on the Caucasus, which would threaten Russia more directly.

A deal that would at least temporarily end hostilities would also bring Russia closer to being able to claim some sort of victory in Syria. The last thing Russia wants right now is for Assad to drag it into a confrontation with Turkey

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that would end the gradual warming of relations between Moscow and Ankara, and push Turkey into cozying up to the West. A Russia-backed offensive in Idlib could do just that (Reuters, 2018).

### **THE U.S.**

The United States' involvement in Idlib has been limited, but it would welcome the defeat of an al-Qaida-linked group there. Signing on to a deal that would allow Turkey a more permanent presence in Idlib could also help smooth over relations between Washington and Ankara, which have been strained of late. It would also limit Assad's reach and ensure that, for now at least, he doesn't have complete control over all of Syria (Talov, & Flatley, 2018).

### **HOW THE DEAL COULD BREAK DOWN**

A deal to eliminate HTC would, therefore, be in the interest of all these parties. But it could break down in two ways.

The first would be through insurgent groups' refusal to accept Turkish control. Even rebels that are part of the Turkey-backed NLF may grow tired of the status quo and want to break from the coalition to continue fighting Assad. Weakening Turkey's hold over the coalition would require a substantial number of rebels to leave the NLF at once. But if it were to happen, Assad would have to respond regardless of whether he would have Russian air support. Moscow would prefer to stay out of it, but even if it did offer Assad some assistance, it would be limited and wouldn't target Turkish positions directly.

Over time, this could result in a gradual withdrawal of Turkey from other areas of northern Idlib, as the weakening of its proxies would force it to either increase its own military involvement or retreat back to Afrin. Turkey would be insistent on standing its ground in Afrin and Manbij, but its ability to devote additional manpower and resources anywhere in Syria would be, like Iran's, partially contingent on its economic situation back home, which is currently in flux.

The second possible breakdown would involve Assad making moves to take back control of Idlib. This would, however, largely depend on how much support the regime could count on from its other stalwart ally, Iran. Given the recent instability in Iran, especially with the looming imposition of more sanctions in November and talks in the U.S. to sever Iran from the SWIFT banking network, it's difficult to predict how involved it will be in Syria and where it will concentrate its efforts. It won't pull out of the war completely – it couldn't take the risk of Assad's regime collapsing – but if massive protests, similar to those that erupted at the beginning of this year, flare up again, it may be forced to reduce its spending on adventures abroad and instead invest in keeping its own economy running (O'Grady, 2018).

In this case, it would have limited leverage in Idlib. It would be in favor of eliminating rebel groups that challenge Assad's power, and so would support a deal to get rid of HTS, though Shiite-majority Iran wouldn't welcome the ongoing presence of Sunni-majority Turkey in Syria. Nevertheless, Iran doesn't want to push Turkey further into the Western orbit – in part for its own economic reasons. The chances that Turkey will continue to purchase natural gas from Iran even after November are stronger now that ties between Washington and Ankara have frayed. (Indeed, Turkey would be loath to have to depend more on Russia for natural gas than it currently does, so it has an interest in buying energy from other suppliers.)

If Iran reverses course and becomes stronger than it is now, however, it may after some time encourage Assad to take more aggressive action in Idlib regardless of Turkey's presence there. (Collins, 2018: 34). Iran's goal would be to eliminate the Sunni insurgent groups in Syria that can challenge its own position in the country. This scenario would also bring Turkey and Iran closer to confrontation, which we have predicted will happen at some point.

For now, though, the most likely next phase in Idlib and the Syrian civil war is a concerted effort to eliminate HTS (and its offshoots like Hurras al-Din), and an acceptance of a more permanent Turkish presence in northwest Syria. A solution to the struggle over this pocket of the country is less important than the relations among the big players in this war. It would therefore have to involve some sort of balance among them, perhaps with intermittent and indecisive small-scale combat but without a full-blooded attempt to win.

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