

# The Crisis in Idlib

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The U.S. has an opportunity in Syria's Idlib province to ameliorate a devastating and dangerous humanitarian crisis while accomplishing broader American interests. The recent mass displacement caused by the recent military campaign waged by Russia, Iran, and the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad is the largest of the war to date. Roughly 1 million Syrians fled toward the Turkish border from the offensive from December 2019 – March 2020, overwhelming a border zone that was already saturated with internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>1</sup> The concentration of displaced Syrians is an unsustainable problem for Turkey, which refuses to accept more refugees and is instead trying to repatriate its refugees back into other parts of northern Syria. Turkey launched a major military intervention in late January to stop Russia, Iran and Assad and prevent further civilian displacement, significantly changing the military balance in northwest Syria.

Turkey's intervention in Idlib creates an opening for the U.S. to step in and change the trajectory of the conflict. Turkey needs help to mitigate the worst of the humanitarian crisis and to hold the line against further military advances by Russia, Iran, and Assad. The U.S. should provide Turkey with this support but should do so with serious conditions: it is time for Turkey to step away from its relationship with Russia and recommit to the NATO alliance.

## **Background: the 2018 Russia-Turkey Deal in Idlib Breaks Down**

Turkey and Russia are fundamentally on opposite sides of the war in Syria but have prioritized maintaining a positive strategic relationship in order to pursue a shared desire to constrain the U.S. Since Russia's intervention in 2015, they have engaged in a series of limited and iterative negotiations to reach interim agreements that balance their competing interests and sometimes align their efforts. It is a dynamic and confrontational process. Turkey and Russia each take military action in Syria to shape their negotiations. They have come to blows directly and indirectly multiple times since 2015. So far, they have always managed to de-escalate through new framework agreements for cooperation in the near term. Their success in doing so has precluded the U.S. from exploiting the underlying divergences between their interests. Their alignment has severely undermined America's interests in Syria, including by enabling Turkey's invasion of northeast Syria in 2019. In Idlib, their agreements have become increasingly fragile, however.

Idlib became a focal point for the Russo-Turkish relationship in late 2018 as Russia, Assad, and Iran pivoted northward to attack Idlib after seizing the opposition stronghold in Dera'a and Quneitra provinces in southern Syria. They attempted to advance into Idlib at minimal cost due to their combined manpower and financial constraints.<sup>2</sup> Russia attempted but failed to persuade Turkish-backed opposition groups in Idlib to surrender to the Assad regime, the tactic Russia had used to great success in southern Syria. Russia opted to reach a negotiated agreement with Turkey to de-escalate in Idlib rather than launch a major military campaign in the near term. Russia and Turkey agreed to a memorandum of understanding on Idlib titled the 2018 Sochi Agreement in September.<sup>3</sup> It committed Russia and Turkey de-escalate militarily and cooperate to reopen two key highways connecting Aleppo to the Syrian coast and Damascus, which pass through terrain held by Turkish proxies. Turkey and Russia both sought the limited but important economic benefit offered by renewed trade along these routes. Both actors have since violated the terms of the agreement, but both continue to reference it as the basis for their policy.

The key provisions of the 2018 Sochi Agreement were:<sup>4</sup>

- Establish a demilitarized zone of 15-20km depth from the front line. They did not establish agreed-upon boundaries, instead leaving it open to "further consultations."
- Remove all tanks, rockets, and artillery from the zone by October 10 and "radical terror groups" by October 15. They did not agree upon the classification of "radical terror groups"
- To conduct separate, coordinated patrols and UAV monitoring of the zone by the Turkish Armed Forces and Russian Military Police "with a view to ensuring free movement of local residents and goods"
- To reopen the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial trade. The de-escalation zone covered some but not all of the M5 Highway and none of the M4 Highway based on front lines at the time.

Turkey and Russia failed to implement the agreement, in part due to a spoiling role by al Qaeda affiliated groups who refused to withdraw from the demilitarized zone.<sup>5</sup> Assad was also not party to the agreement and remained committed to recapturing all of Idlib. The agreement was thus inherently weak because it failed to address the two largest spoilers and drivers of instability in Idlib. Nonetheless, it represented an attempt by Russia and Turkey to prioritize a shared objective, in this case limited economic rehabilitation, while mitigating (and in some cases ignoring) underlying unsolved obstacles. This approach to achieving limited and near-term goals amidst high complexity continues to define how Turkey and Russia negotiate over Idlib.

Russia opted to launch a pro-regime military offensive to advance north into Idlib up the M5 Highway from Hama in May 2019 after attempting but failing to reach a new agreement with Turkey to implement the terms of the original deal.<sup>6</sup> Russia claimed that its offensive constituted an implementation of that agreement. Turkey fought back, providing weapons and ammunition to its proxies to enable them to impose high costs on the advancing pro-regime forces. At the time, Turkey maintained a limited contingent of forces deployed to Idlib but did not engage militarily. Roughly 1,200 troops Turkish troops were scattered across isolated outposts as "observers," lacking the capabilities and authorities to intervene.<sup>7</sup> Pro-regime forces began besieging these positions along the way. After nearly a year of grueling fighting, Russia enabled a final major breakthrough push in January 2020 that seized the last three urban centers along the M5 Highway in quick succession, consolidated full control of the M5 Highway, drove a massive wave of refugees to the Turkish border, and besieged a fourteenth and final Turkish military position.<sup>8</sup>

## TURKEY'S 2020 MILITARY INTERVENTION

The January 2020 pro-regime push up the M5 Highway triggered a major change in Turkey's policy and involvement in Syria. As pro-regime forces advanced, Turkey deployed roughly a division of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) plus additional Special Forces units to Idlib from January 30 to March to establish a defensible front line west of the M5 Highway to prevent further losses.<sup>9</sup> The deployments brought the total of Turkish troops in Idlib to 20,000 and significantly changed the military balance.<sup>10</sup> Turkey also began sending ammunition and anti-tank guided munitions (ATGMs) to its Syrian proxies in order to enable them to fight more effectively against pro-regime forces.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, sought to use his military leverage to compel Russian President Vladimir Putin to accept a new deal in Idlib. On February 5, Erdogan threatened that Turkish forces would launch offensive operations if pro-regime forces did not "retreat from Turkish observation posts in Idlib" by the end of February.<sup>12</sup> To do so would require pro-regime forces to withdraw from multiple key areas it seized in its offensive from April 2019 – February 2020. Turkish and Russian officials began discussions over Idlib immediately on February 8 but did not make progress.<sup>13</sup> On February 10, Erdogan held an emergency security meeting with senior Turkish officials to coordinate and approve the next stage of a military response to add pressure on Russia.<sup>14</sup>

In the ensuing month, Turkish combat operations in Idlib successfully compelled Putin to accept a new deal. Erdogan applied this military pressure in phases, triggering a kinetic response from Putin each time but continuing to escalate nonetheless. In each phase, Turkey conducted a flurry of diplomatic engagements with Russia at different

echelons, attempting to reach an agreement. He finally succeeded on March 5 but only achieved a limited deal with Putin, as the next section will discuss.

The U.S. missed an opportunity in Idlib during this time. Erdogan reached out repeatedly to Europe and the U.S. for diplomatic and military support. He received little, due in large part to the resentment his behavior and alignment with Russia has generated in the West. U.S. officials engaged only the margins and without substantive new commitments, failing to make an impact on the outcome. Europe likewise did little, choosing to follow America’s lead. While these responses are understandable, it is a mistake on pragmatic grounds. Turkey has decided to own an extremely difficult problem in Idlib that deeply affects both Europe and American interests. The U.S. and Europe should not pass up this opportunity to make a difference.

### **THE NEW TURKEY – RUSSIA DEAL IN IDLIB**

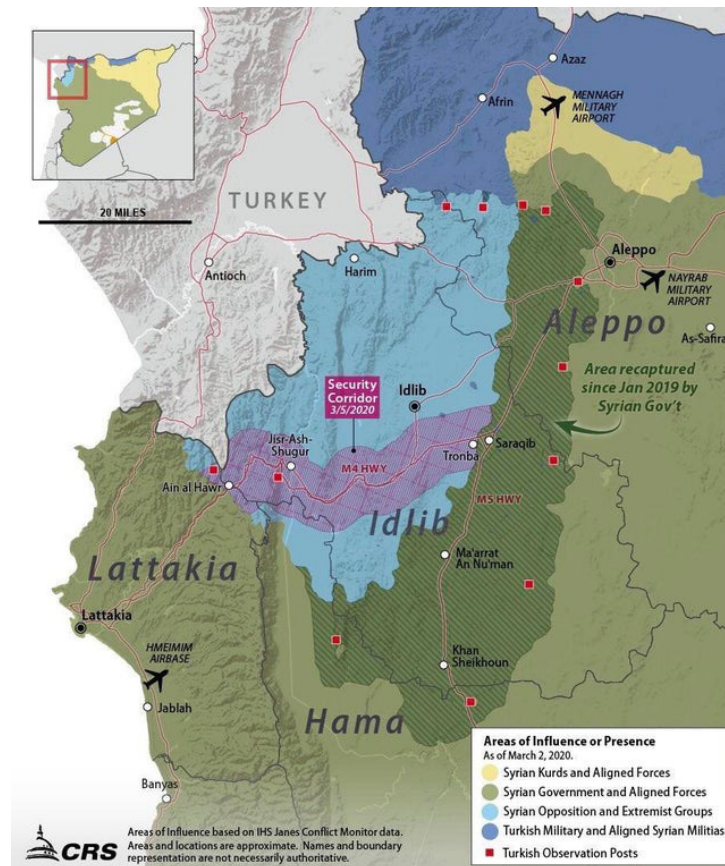
Erdogan and Putin reached a partial deal in Idlib on March 5, which they framed as an “additional protocol” to the 2018 Sochi Agreement.<sup>15</sup> It is a limited but important victory for Erdogan. It freezes front lines in Idlib, precluding further pro-regime offensive operations that would worsen the humanitarian disaster. It thereby accomplishes Turkey’s primary defensive goal. It will likely succeed in achieving a near – term de-escalation, which could last weeks or months. It will not stabilize Idlib, however.

The additional protocol stipulates:

- The “targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext”
- Russia and Turkey will “cease all military actions along the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation area” effective at midnight on March 6
- Russia and Turkey will establish a “security corridor” of 6km depth both north and south of the M4 Highway and for their respective defense ministries to agree on the “specific parameters of the functioning of the security corridor” within seven day
- Russia and Turkey will begin joint patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway on March 15

These terms are positive for Erdogan. The language regarding targeting civilians is an important concession from Putin. Russia is highly unlikely to refrain from targeting civilians as the deal requires or to compel Assad and Iran to do so. The ceasefire is also highly unlikely to hold for long. But the agreement bought Erdogan important time and a way to justify subsequent military operations if – but almost certainly when – pro-regime forces violate its terms. It also provides Erdogan an opportunity to re-approach the U.S. and Europe to gain support for resolving the humanitarian crisis.

In return, Erdogan agreed to enable Russia to extend its military presence in Idlib through the joint Russo-Turkish patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway. This concession exceeds the coordinated patrols previously agreed upon the 2018 Sochi Agreement. Turkey is taking a risk in granting it, as al Qaeda-affiliated groups have adamantly opposed joint patrols in the past.<sup>16</sup> The details of the “security corridor” north and south of the M4 Highway are not yet resolved, moreover, and could incur additional risks for Turkey. Russia will likely push for the exclusion of al Qaeda-affiliated groups from this zone, which Turkey may again fail to deliver. Russia could even insist on establishing Russian military positions in the area, undermining Turkish control.



Map: Situation in Idlib Province as of March 5, 2020<sup>17</sup>

Key issues that are not addressed in the additional protocol include:

- **The unsustainable refugee burden along the Turkish border.** Turkey is now perpetually responsible for the huge concentration of roughly 1.5 million displaced Syrians along its border. It is an unsustainable burden, even with the limited financial assistance provided thus far by the U.S. and UN. Turkey's options are: to accept the refugees into Turkey, which Erdogan will likely never do; to get international assistance to build up settlements with basic services for this population on the Syrian side of the border, which is Erdogan's desired outcome; to attempt to resettle these refugees in other Turkish-held zones in northern Aleppo or northeastern Syria; or to facilitate the travel of large segments of this population to Europe, legally or illegally.
- **Turkey's 14 besieged outposts in regime-held areas.** These forces remain highly vulnerable to attack by pro-regime force. They outposts are thus a source of leverage for Russia, the regime, and Iran. The outposts do enable Erdogan to retain the option of justifying future military operations to liberate these besieged soldiers, however. This unresolved issue will factor into subsequent rounds of negotiations and could become a focus of Turkish military operations.
- **The reopening of the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial traffic.** The regime and its backers will likely now open the M5 Highway from Aleppo to Damascus for commercial trade.<sup>18</sup> Erdogan and Putin did not reach an agreement on a new framework for economic activity between Turkish zones and areas under Russian/regime/Iranian control, however. It is a notable gap given the purpose of the original 2018 Sochi Agreement. The economic benefit of reopening the M5 Highway is limited without an agreement with Turkey to resume trade. The regime and its backers can now transit from Damascus to Aleppo and back but do not yet have access to Turkish markets or Turkish proxy areas.



- **Al Qaeda – linked groups.** The language of the additional protocol made a vague statement about fighting “all forms of terrorism” but included no new agreement regarding combatting al Qaeda-linked groups in Idlib. Russia will continue to use the presence of al Qaeda in Idlib to justify military operations and any departure from the agreed-upon de-escalation. Al Qaeda-linked groups may violate the deal first. Al Qaeda also poses a threat to Turkish forces deployed in Idlib, which will affect Erdogan’s calculus in subsequent phases.

## WHAT THE US CAN DO

The U.S. should provide financial, humanitarian, and limited military support to help Turkey establish a defensible zone of control on the Syrian side of the border in which international aid organizations can provide humanitarian relief for the vulnerable IDP population. The U.S. should:

- Provide Turkey Patriot missile systems to help Turkey establish a no-fly zone over Idlib. The U.S. should ask Turkey to identify additional military support it might need, and should evaluate the request
- Lead a new fundraising effort to generate a humanitarian assistance fund to provide basic relief aid to the displaced population for a period of multiple years
- Work with the U.N. and other humanitarian organizations to surge vital humanitarian aid into Idlib including necessary supplies and equipment to react to any outbreak of the coronavirus or other infectious diseases within the displaced population
- Provide necessary support to assist U.N. agencies in establishing additional and more durable IDP shelters
- Apply diplomatic pressure on Russia through the U.N. Security Council by submitting a resolution that specifies and condemns the war crimes in Idlib, including deliberate civilian displacement. Russia will veto the resolution, but forcing Russia to do so will set political conditions that strengthen Turkey’s defensive position

The U.S. need not do so alone. An American commitment in Idlib would likely generate substantial European support, given the significant risk Europe faces from another refugee wave. Germany and the Netherlands have already expressed timid support for such a “safe zone.”<sup>19</sup> More would follow a U.S. decision.

In return, The U.S. should demand that Turkey:

1. Return or destroy the Russian S-400 air defense system and do not bring it online
2. Leave the Russian-led Astana process for negotiations in Syria and recommit to the UN – led process
3. Agree to a new process of bilateral negotiations with the U.S. over the outcome of northeast Syria

These are big asks, but now is the time to make them. The scale of Turkey’s military intervention in Idlib demonstrates the priority Erdogan places on preventing a further worsening of the refugee and humanitarian situation on his border. He needs a solution. Putin has refused to grant him one. The U.S. should step in while the Russo-Turkish ceasefire agreement still holds to strengthen Turkey’s position and improve the humanitarian situation before Russia, Iran, and Assad resume operations.

The U.S. must be careful not to set unrealistic expectations for a Turkish-controlled zone in Idlib, however. Idlib is far too complex and volatile to stabilize in the near term. A Turkish-held border in Idlib will not be stable or secure. It will be penetrated by al Qaeda-linked groups, which will use it as a support zone to support military operations elsewhere. The U.S. should set limited objectives to mitigate the worst of the humanitarian crisis and to gain leverage over Russia, Iran, and Assad by driving a wedge between Turkey and Russia.

Al Qaeda’s presence along the Syrian-Turkish border is a large but unavoidable risk at this stage in the war. The U.S. and Turkey cannot exclude al Qaeda from a border zone without major military operations, which would likely spill over into Turkey. Conditions are not set for such a campaign. Instead, the U.S. should focus on setting longer-term conditions to dampen al Qaeda’s influence to make future pressure against al Qaeda more likely to succeed. Taking

action to protect vulnerable civilians in Syria is essential. Al Qaeda benefits from international inaction to stop the war crimes of Assad and its backers, which allow al Qaeda to portray itself as the defender of Syria's population.<sup>20</sup> Stepping in to save Syria's most vulnerable population in Idlib would dampen al Qaeda's recruitment and help preserve sources of social pressure against its ideology.

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