



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

The Future of Idlib after the Tehran Summit: Settlement or Confrontation?

Policy Analysis Unit | September 2018

Settlement or Confrontation on the Horizon in Idlib?

Series: Situation Assessment

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Introduction

The Tehran summit, which represented the third meeting of the guarantor Countries (Russia, Turkey and Iran), concluded on 7 September 2018 without reaching an agreement that would protect Idlib province from the fate of other de-escalation regions. The summit showcased a debate between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. During the previous two summits (Sochi in November 2017 and Ankara in April 2018), Turkey has insisted on the need to respect the agreement on Idlib, where more than three million civilians live - most of whom are displaced from other areas in Syria. Russia has rejected any call for a cease-fire or for more time to reach a political settlement. It seeks to cooperate with Tehran to return the region to the control of the Syrian regime and end the presence of military opposition there, before searching for any political solution to the conflict in Syria.

The Astana Maneuver and De-escalation

The Astana talks arose following a Russian-Turkish consensus, which ended the battle of eastern Aleppo in December 2016, and the evacuation of the opposition factions. Iran has joined this consensus, after initial attempts to obstruct it failed. In the spring of 2017, when the US-led battle of Mosul against ISIL appeared to be pushing towards a resolution, and the American focus would move to Syria, Russia became concerned about the US ability to seize the ISIL controlled land. The American preparations began, in cooperation with the Syrian Democratic Forces, to march on al-Raqqah and other areas controlled by the eastern Euphrates River. In the framework of Astana, Russia endorsed the idea of de-escalation that had previously been proposed by UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura as a means to a ceasefire in 2014.

Consequently, in May 2017, the three guarantors of the Astana process reached an agreement to reduce escalation or freeze the conflict in four main areas controlled by the opposition: Idlib and its surroundings in the north; the northern Homs countryside in the center; Eastern Ghouta and the Damascus suburbs; and the south-west, which includes Deraa, Quneitra and parts of Sweida. This proposal allowed Russia and its allies, who lacked the necessary human resources, to direct forces on various fronts against the opposition, focusing on fighting ISIL in the context of racing with the Americans to control ISIL territory. Then they could isolate one front after another against the Syrian opposition factions, who had taken the conditions of de-escalation seriously.

Once the war on ISIL was over, the Russian and US control zones, which were represented by the Euphrates River, became a natural barrier between them. Russia returned to focus on resolving the conflict with the opposition in the de-escalation areas. They begin with the Eastern Ghouta region, followed by the northern Homs countryside, and then the south-west, where the situation was resolved by an understanding with Israel. Tel Aviv agreed to the Syrian regime army's return to the occupied Golan border, in exchange for the removal of Iranian militias from the region, and the return of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement.

In all of these areas, Russia has followed the same operational pattern. It begins with heavy aerial bombardment of civilians in order to pressure the opposition factions to surrender. This is followed by an agreement to hand over the factions' heavy weapons, and then the deployment of Russian military police in the region, relocating those who reject reconciliation agreements with the regime to Idlib, where Russia is assembling all the opposition on the Syrian territory, pending its role in the settlement.

Three Scenarios

Idlib represented the last de-escalation area for Turkey and Russia to reach a detailed agreement about in September 2017. The focus finally shifted once the Russians had decided the fate of the other three regions. In light of the Tehran summit's failure to agree on the future of the region, three possible scenarios can be discussed:

The First Scenario

Turkey will successfully buy more time to consolidate its efforts to separate moderate and hardline factions and militants in Idlib, who include members of Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front), Guardians of Religion Organization (mostly non-Syrians), and The Turkistan Islamic Army in Syria (Uyghur Salafist jihadist organization). Russia has given Turkey a month to resolve this problem, in which it tried to persuade Tahrir al-Sham to dissolve itself, merge its Syrian elements with the moderate Syrian opposition factions and deport foreigners. But these efforts did not bear fruit, with the demands rejected by the organization; leading Turkey to classify Tahrir al-Sham as a terrorist group. Ankara is thus prepared to face off militarily if the organization doesn't start to bend¹.

Although this scenario seems unlikely in view of Russia's insistence that Turkey be given no additional time to continue its efforts to save Idlib from a bloody confrontation that is pushing

¹ "Turkey designates Syria's Tahrir al-Sham as terrorist group," *Reuters*, 31/8/2018, accessed on 11/9/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/cFGTd1>

hundreds of thousands of refugees towards the Turkish border, Moscow is nevertheless anxious not to blow up the Astana process. During the Tehran summit President Erdogan warned that a comprehensive attack on Idlib will inevitably lead to the collapse of Astana². Russia needs Turkey's support in any possible political process, given Ankara's influence on the Syrian opposition factions and considerable influence on local communities, especially in northern Syria.

The Second Scenario

Russia and its allies will launch a small-scale offense on Idlib to achieve its goals. The most significant objective is pushing Turkey and a coalition of opposition factions that have been united under the name of the National Liberation Front into an armed confrontation that crushes militant groups. Russia may also try, through a limited military operation, to send the opposition factions further north, so that it can secure the Khmeimim Air Base, which is occasionally attacked by drone aircraft from Syrian opposition sites in areas south-west of Idlib, near the border with Latakia. This is the area that Russia is currently bombarding.

The regime, through a limited military operation against parts of Idlib, may also seek to control the remaining part of the international road between Aleppo and Idlib. The regime's battles against opposition factions over the past two years have been along the international road extending from the Jordanian border in the south to Aleppo to the north for a length of approximately 450 kilometers. The regime, by the recent control of Deraa, was able to secure the part that reaches down to the Jordanian border, after securing the part connected to eastern Ghouta, then the passage through the northern countryside of Homs. This leaves only the part that connects between Idlib and Aleppo, in the areas of Khan Shaykhun, Maarat al-Numaan and Saraqib, where regime bombardment is currently concentrated, outside of regime control.

The Third Scenario

Russia and its allies will launch a comprehensive offense aimed at restoring the entire province of Idlib to regime control, imposing a settlement on opposition factions by force, and eliminating those who do not accept it. The regime has indeed begun to rally and disperse leaflets calling on the population to return to the fold of the regime, and on fighters to lay down arms³. However, such an attack seems unlikely at least at this stage. The regime does not have sufficient manpower to carry out a comprehensive attack on an area of approximately 10,000

² "Idlib offensive would cause of collapse of Syria's political process, Turkey's Erdogan says," *Reuters*, 7/9/2018, accessed on 11/9/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/SDQdKi>

³ "Syrian army urges people in Idlib to agree return of state rule," *Reuters*, 9/8/2018, accessed on 11/9/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/3m43eX>

km² and, according to many estimates holding 60-70,000 heavily armed opposition combatants⁴. Many of them have been fighting for many years and are considered some of the fiercest fighters, the most hostile to the regime, left with no choice but to die after Idlib became their last refuge. Therefore, a battle like this will be long and difficult, and launching a comprehensive battle with the presence of about three million civilians will create a bloodbath with unprecedented waves of displacement. This will put great pressure on Russia, and it will destroy its new strategy of repatriating refugees and attracting international efforts for reconstruction. The displacement of three million refugees compromises the Russian strategy to restore the political legitimacy of the regime for the sake of reconstruction and refugees.

There are 12 Turkish military observation points, established in agreement with Russia under the de-escalation agreement, while Turkish troops are moving in the direction of Idlib, threatening clashes between Turkish and offensive forces. This could send Turkish Russian relations spiraling back to the tensions that followed the Turkish downing of a Russian plane on its border with Syria in November 2015. Meanwhile, the work of the Constitutional Committee with De Mistura in Geneva shows that public opinion seems to believe that there is a prospect for a political process with the regime, while the tyrannical regime is being restored in newly reclaimed areas and the military prepares for the Battle of Idlib.

The US Position

Washington retains the most ambiguous position internationally. The absence of its role revealed the vulnerability of Turkey to Iran and Russia, having been abandoned by its US ally. Yet Washington did not show a clear position on developments in Idlib. Although President Donald Trump warned of an "irresponsible" military operation in Idlib without explaining what he meant by that, his military and civilian advisors only warned against the use of chemical weapons in the attack on Idlib⁵. National Security Adviser John Bolton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, appeared to not be opposed to a military operation in Idlib, where extremist organizations could be eliminated, provided that chemical weapons are not used.

⁴ Alia Choughtai, "Syria's war: Who controls what?" Aljazeera.com, 7/9/2018, accessed on 11/9/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/LAe5s9>

⁵ Victor Shalhoub, "Will Idlib be Washington's Gateway to bridge the Rift with Ankara?", The New Arab, 10/9/2018, accessed on 11/9/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/eqDxQw>

Conclusion

Idlib and its future represent a serious test of the relationship between the Astana partners. A major battle in this province will undoubtedly lead to the collapse of the Astana process, and the eventual removal of Turkey and its influence from the Syrian arena. But this will render a political solution, led by Russia, impossible. Excessive pressure on Turkey could push it back into the arms of the United States, although President Putin is counting on this not being possible due to the depth of the differences between Ankara and Washington. However, this could change if Washington decided to take advantage of Russia's pressure on Turkey and end any possibility of continued rapprochement with Russia, especially as Washington is now on the verge of deciding to stay in the areas of the East Euphrates after previously hinting at its desire to withdraw. In any case, the conflict over Syria does not seem to be coming to an end, but can rather be seen as entering a new phase.