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SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Ankara Intervenes in Idlib: Turkish Operations and their Objectives in Northern Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | October 2017

Turkish Operations and their Objectives in Northern Syria

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Introduction

Turkish President Recep Tayipp Erdogan delivered a speech during the opening of a new legislative session in Ankara, October 7, in which he promised to create a secure zone in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib. A few days later, Turkish tanks ripped through a border fence dividing Turkish and Syrian territories. Turkish military fighters accompanied Syrian opposition units within the “Euphrates Shield” grouping into the territory. The Syrian opposition units are now tasked with deploying observation posts and the creation of a “de-escalation zone” in the Idlib Governorate.

Implications of Turkish Military Intervention

This is Turkey’s second direct military involvement in Syrian territory, and it comes on the heels of the seventh round of negotiations on the Syrian crisis held in the Kazakh capital of Astana this September. The deal chiseled out in Astana includes detailed plans for the deployment of Turkish troops in designated zones within the Idlib Governorate, while Russian forces would be deployed to points on its perimeter.

The deal to form de-escalation zones in Syria was agreed by the three international sponsors of the Astana talks—Turkey, Iran and Russia—dates back to May, when it was agreed during the fourth round of negotiations. The plan covers parts of eight governorates in western Syria. Consequent negotiations between the international parties to the Astana talks failed to produce any outcome other than agreement on the zones, which would be divided between Russia, Iran and Turkey. Turkish forces would be stationed in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Aleppo and Latakia while Iranian and Russian forces would be deployed across portions of the governorates of Quneitra, Deraa and Suwaida. Following a meeting between the Russian and US presidents on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Hamburg in July of this year, Iranian forces were left out of the final equation while Jordan became a party to the oversight and implementation of the deal as it was affected the southern governorates of Deraa and Quneitra.

By the end of September, the sections of this agreement concerning Idlib were finalized in a further meeting between Erdogan and Putin, paving the way for its military implementation; the Turkish military then stepped in, and brought to an end the influence of Tahrir Al Sham

forces in the region¹. Before embarking on its latest military venture, Turkey also increased the level of its coordination with Iran. In fact, Turkish President Erdogan, accompanied by a large military delegation, visited Tehran only days before the intervention in Idlib. This followed Iranian Chief of Staff's visit to Turkey during August—at the time, the first such visit by a senior Iranian military officer since 1979. Growing Kurdish assertiveness, supported by the United States, has played a significant role in bringing Tehran and Ankara together in the Syrian and Iraqi theaters of operations.

Turkish Objectives in Idlib: Securing Peace and Security through Military Intervention

While legitimized by the Astana talks as part of the process of bringing peace to Syria, Turkey's intervention into northern Syria will also facilitate underlying Turkish foreign policy objectives. These include:

- The containment of an increasingly prominent Kurdish enclave near the town of Afrin on the Syrian-Turkish border. The new positions of Turkish forces will cut this particular enclave off from the Mediterranean coast. Turkish forces are particularly worried about a replay of an earlier turn of events when the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces—largely composed of members of the Kurdistan Workers Party, which Turkey designates as a terrorist organization—forced ISIL fighters out of towns such as Raqqa and Minbaj, and in turn strengthened the Kurdish group's position. This is in fact the second occasion on which Turkish military forces intervened directly in Syrian affairs, specifically to prevent the rise of an independent Kurdish state. In August 2016 Turkey used its increasingly close relations with Moscow—forged in the wake of the failed coup attempt a month earlier—to support an attack by Syrian opposition forces within the Euphrates Shield grouping on the town of Jarabalus. Equally, Turkey had imposed a three-day ultimatum on the fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces to leave the town of Manbij after they had driven ISIL out of that town under air cover provided by the international anti-ISIL coalition. In this way, Turkey was able to fashion a 2,000 square kilometer secure zone through the Euphrates Shield forces, stretching from Jarabalus through Al Baba and Azaz.

¹ Turkey forces clash with Tahrir ash Sham in Syria, *Al Jazeera*, 8 October, 2017, available online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/turkey-forces-clash-tahrir-al-sham-syria-border-171008071742937.html>

- Ankara has a further interest in preventing the Syrian regime from seizing control of the Idlib Governorate. Over the years, the regime has turned the governorate into a safe haven for all opposition factions whom it had overpowered but refused to conclude local truces. This gave the media apparatus loyal to or allied with the regime the opportunity to depict the region as an Islamist hotspot. This depiction was further heightened by July of this year, once Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS), a radical Islamist faction, wrested control of large swathes of the governorate from more moderate factions, mainly the Ahrar Al Sham. The Syrian regime adopted the strategy of pushing all these fighters, together with their families, into one location in preparation for their later liquidation. All the while, Damascus assumed that the international community would find the presence of these Islamists intolerable, and side with the regime in the battle against them. Turkish military intervention has now ended the possibility of a regime military operation backed by Iran and Russia to quash the rebels entirely, following two years during which the opposition groups have been pushed back. In effect, Ankara's intervention in northern Syria has protected the single governorate that remains under opposition control. For Syria, this means protecting the possibility of an eventual peaceful settlement.
- By creating a "de-escalation zone" in the Idlib Governorate, Turkey will reduce the chances of massive refugee inflows into its territory, particularly as Idlib already shelters nearly 1 million Syrian displaced persons from other regions (roughly equivalent to the number of Idlib Governorate residents to begin with). In previous incidents where the Syrian regime and its allies managed to crush rebel strongholds, such as in the Raqqa and Aleppo Governorates, Turkey had been overwhelmed by the influx of fleeing Syrian civilians. Turkey already successfully implemented a secured "de-escalation zone" in the Jarabalus region on its border, in 2016, with the cooperation of Syrian opposition groups within the Euphrates Shield.

Obstacles to Turkish Military Advancement

Turkish military success in Idlib is contingent upon the extent of effective resistance they face from the HTS. Earlier, the group had issued a communique in which it described the Syrian opposition forces taking part in the operation to secure Idlib for the Turkish government as traitors, and accused them of aiding Moscow and the Syrian regime².

² "Turkish military enters Syria's Idlib province," *Deutsche Welle* English online edition, 13 October, 2017: <http://www.dw.com/en/turkish-military-enters-syrias-idlib-province/a-40936157>

Instead of looking for a head-on confrontation with the HTS, the Turkish military plans on leveraging internal divisions within the well-armed and fierce group, which some estimate to control as many as between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters. Any fully-fledged conflict in the Idlib Governorate would serve only to increase the likelihood of the type of situation that Ankara wants to avoid in the first place. One approach that the Turkish government has attempted is undertaking direct negotiations with HTS. It has suggested that the group disband and evacuate the main urban centers of the governorate, handing over the border crossings with Turkey to Syrian opposition fighters loyal to Ankara. In return, Turkey offered to turn the city of Idlib into a no-fly zone protected from Russian and Syrian regime aerial bombardment³.

To date, there is no indication that the HTS will accept Turkish proposals to avoid combat in the governorate of Idlib. This throws doubts on the success of the Turkish strategy. Until the final outcome of talks between Turkey and the HTS become clear, Ankara's own military forces will focus on the borderlands between Afrin and the Idlib Governorate, cutting off a potential southward expansion for the primarily Kurdish forces in Syria.

Conclusion

Turkey's latest military incursion into northern Syria forms a part of its overall "Euphrates Shield" operations, aimed squarely at the rise of an autonomous Kurdish enclave⁴. Ankara will further be able to both create a safe zone that prevents the flooding of refugees into its own territory from Syria, as well as to reduce the presence of HTS, which the regime in Damascus would otherwise be able to use as a pretext to crush the final opposition stronghold in northern Syria. Finally, by advancing Turkish-Iranian coordination on the Kurdish question, the latest operation makes the possibility of a political settlement over the Syrian question, negotiated by the main international actors involved, more likely⁵.

³ See reports in the Arabic language press.

⁴ "Turkey to extend military presence in Syria, says Erdogan," *The New Arab*, 6 August, 2017, available online: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/8/6/turkey-to-extend-military-presence-in-syria>

⁵ See, for example: "Syria war: Turkey, Russia, Iran agree Idlib 'ceasefire' zone," BBC News Online, 15 September, 2017: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41279686>