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Is the Sochi Agreement on Idlib on the Brink of Collapse?

Unit for Political Studies

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The demilitarized zone in the Idlib governorate in north-west Syria, which was established by the Sochi agreement,⁽¹⁾ has been exposed to a violent attack by the regime's forces and militias, supported by its Russian allies since the beginning of May 2019. The assault has so far killed hundreds of civilians, destroyed dozens of health centers and schools, most of which are used as shelters, and displaced more than half a million people. It threatens to destroy the Sochi deal and with it the entire process of Astana, opening the door wide to a full-scale confrontation between the opposition forces backed by Turkey and the regime backed by Russia.

Reasons behind the Latest Escalation

The Russian escalation followed the failure of the last round of Astana talks in late April 2019, in which Russia, Turkey and Iran participated. The parties were supposed to reach a final agreement on the names, tasks and working mechanisms of the Constitutional Committee to draft a new constitution; in preparation for its adoption and holding elections. They claim that the latest escalation came after attacks by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front) and resulted in the deaths of 22 members of the regime forces in late April 2019. Russia accuses Turkey of responsibility for breaching its obligations under the demilitarized zone agreement, of having to secure the Hama airport and its Hmeimim Air Base in the Latakia countryside, which Moscow also claims is being attacked by rockets and aircraft from the demilitarized zone.

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The Sochi agreement stipulates the creation of a demilitarized zone between the opposition fighters and the regime forces in the countryside of South Idlib and Northern Hama, extending about 15 - 20 kilometers wide.⁽²⁾

The agreement also stipulated the Russian side's commitment to ensure that no military operations against Idlib were carried out in exchange for the removal of "extremist" groups from the demilitarized zone. It also required them "to ensure the free movement of local people and goods, restore trade and economic ties, and restore transit traffic along the M4 (Aleppo - Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo - Hama) by the end of 2018." The two sides also affirmed their "determination to combat terrorism in Syria in all its forms" and to take "effective measures to ensure a sustainable ceasefire within the demilitarized zone in Idlib". Turkey and Russia are conducting coordinated military patrols to monitor compliance

1 The agreement was signed at a summit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin on 17 September 2018 in the Russian city of Sochi on the Black Sea.

2 "Press conference of Russian President Putin and his Turkish counterpart Erdogan in Sochi", YouTube, 17/9/2018, accessed on 11/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2RdnUsh>



with the agreement by using drones along the demilitarized zone.³ Under the agreement, Turkey will also complete the construction of 12 control posts for the Turkish army in the Idlib demilitarized zone in order to protect the ceasefire.

The escalation comes after the failure of a Russian-Turkish understanding, under which Turkey allows the regime “civil” or “non-military” control of areas of the southern Idlib countryside. These include state roads, and the city of Jisr al-Shughur, in return for allowing Turkish control of the Tell Rifaat area, where the Kurdish People’s Protection Units are present and from which attacks were launched on the area of Afrin, which is controlled by Turkey under the framework of “operation olive branch,” killing a Turkish soldier in early May 2019. Turkey, through its control of Tell Rifaat, hopes to open the international route between Gaziantep and Aleppo, and then penetrate the Syrian market that it lost when the war broke out. But negotiations with Russia have not yielded any results because of the opposition of Iran and the Syrian regime to Turkish control of Tell Rifaat. This has prompted Russia to move forward alone in the latest campaign, in an attempt to take over the areas overlooking the Khan Shaykhun — Ma`arat al-Nu`man — Sarakab road between Hama and Aleppo and the Jisr al-Shughur — Arihah — Sarakib road between Latakia and Aleppo.

Relations between Moscow and Ankara have become increasingly tense after Turkish Foreign Minister Mouloud Gawish Oglu announced, in early May 2019, that Turkey and the United States were close to reaching an agreement to create a buffer zone 20 - 25 km deep along the Syrian-Turkish border, in areas east of the Euphrates where the Turkish People’s Protection Units are in control. This suggests a breakthrough in the relations between Ankara and Washington after years of tension because of Washington’s alliance with the Kurds and its neglect of Turkey’s security concerns. Washington hopes that the establishment of this zone will help resolve the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds. This zone will meet Turkey’s security needs with the establishment of a buffer zone along its southern border with Syria without a Turkish attack on Kurdish militias in areas East of the Euphrates far from the Turkish border.

Russia is believed to be trying to pressure Turkey from the gate to Idlib to prevent US pressure to cancel the deal on the S-400 missiles Turkey has contracted to buy from Russia, because of the difficult conditions set by Washington on Turkey to supply Patriot missiles.

Field Data

As soon as the Astana talks ended in late April 2019, the Russian air force intensified its bombardment of the demilitarized zone in preparation for an attack by the regime forces and allied militias. In a month of fighting, the Israeli forces took control of 18 opposition-controlled towns and villages in the northern and western Hama areas, most notably Qalaat Al Madiq and Kafr Nabudah.

During the first weeks of the attack, there was a Turkish silence about the Russian violations, with reports of Turkish security meetings with the Syrian regime, some of them in Tehran. But the

³ “Syria: What are the Terms of the Agreement to Establish a Demilitarized Zone in Idlib?”, BBC Arabic, 18/09/2018, last accessed 11/6/2019 at: <https://goo.gl/VgDH2f>



situation changed as the Russian bombardment persisted deep into the demilitarized zones, and the campaigns caused mass displacement of the population, bombing the perimeter of the Turkish observation points in the northern Hama countryside.

Accordingly, on June 6, 2019, a coalition of opposition forces launched a counterattack that resulted in the recovery of some of the areas seized by the regime and the control of areas formerly controlled by the regime in the northern Hama countryside. The Turkish sponsored National Front for Liberation forces participated in the battles. The opposition's use of new anti-armor weapons also indicated Turkey's commitment to support the opposition and the importance of Idlib's battle to Ankara, as well as the appearance of anti-aircraft weapons, which the opposition says helped somewhat to reduce the impact of aerial bombardment during the fighting, after hitting the regime's Sukhoi 22 aircraft.

So far, Russia's attempts to create new facts on the ground by imposing its control over the Al-Ghab Plain to Jisr al-Shughur and also in the northeast and southeast of Idlib — the state routes of Latakia-Aleppo and Hama-Aleppo, have failed, but this has not led to a ceasefire agreement.

Prospects for Escalation and Settlement

Despite the huge escalation seen in the demilitarized zone, the reasons behind its establishment continue to exist for the Russian and Turkish parties. Moscow is aware that a major military operation in Idlib will necessarily lead to the collapse of Astana, which is under intense pressure as the United States continues to try to restore the Geneva track and increase pressure on Iran to get out of Syria.

The Idlib agreement is Moscow's only hope of saving the future of Astana, which Turkey threatens to withdraw from if Russia undertakes major military action against Idlib. This would undermine the chances of the Russian envisioned political solution in Syria, based on the dual constitution and elections. In a broader strategic context, a major military operation in Idlib will push Turkey back into rapprochement with the West and will inevitably dispel all Russia's efforts to extract Turkey from the bosom of the United States. These ongoing efforts started following the failed coup attempt of July 2016, and include efforts to link Turkey to Russia with trade and energy agreements, and even supply Turkey with the S-400 missile system, which aroused widespread concern in the West, and among NATO members.

Turkey has succeeded in clarifying the importance of Idlib by pushing large numbers of Syrian opposition forces, including those in the Euphrates, to help repel the Russian attack on Idlib and providing them with high-quality weapons, which helped restore parts of regime controlled areas and also contributed to gaining control of new areas.

The fierce resistance shown by the opposition forces in the defense of its last stronghold led to an important Turkish message to Russia that the battle of Idlib, if Russia decided to fight it, would not



be like other battles, especially with the advent of anti-aircraft weapons. This resistance also showed Turkey's keenness to preserve the opposition factions' control over Idlib, as an important card to use in a political solution.

International pressure is likely to play a role in preventing a bloodbath in Idlib or large waves of displacement in the event of an all-out Russian military offensive. Some four million civilians in the province, most of them displaced from other parts of Syria. The United States has warned that it will not stand idly by in the case of using chemical weapons in the attack on Idlib. All of these reasons reduce the likelihood of a full-scale confrontation in the city and conflicts are likely to remain confined to specific areas of strategic or economic importance.

Conclusion

Despite their different interests and the different vision of each of the agreements that have been implemented so far, Russia and Turkey still have a joint interest in maintaining the demilitarized zone agreement in Idlib. Turkey will seek to impose a cease-fire in the region and return to the previous status-quo, which preceded the military campaign launched by the Syrian regime in early May 2019. Russia will try to compel Turkey to implement parts of the demilitarized zone agreement, in particular the relocation of opposition factions to the north. This will protect the Hmeimim air base from missile and helicopter attacks, opening the international route between Latakia and Aleppo and between Hama and Aleppo, the main trading artery needed by the regime to begin economic recovery. But this will not happen without understandings about the future of Tell Rifaat and the Kurdish presence in the western Euphrates. A fresh round of Turkish-Russian negotiations is likely to begin. Washington will not be far from these negotiations in view of its association with the Kurds and its military presence in Manbij, the status of which has not yet been resolved.

In any case, maintaining the Sochi agreement is in the interests of both Turkey and Russia given the impossibility of resolving Idlib's situation, pending the emergence of regional and international understandings on a political solution in Syria and how to reach it. This does not mean that Russia and the regime will not take advantage of any progress on all fronts if such an opportunity arises.