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Moscow Summit: Will the Ceasefire Hold in Idlib?

Unit for Political Studies

Moscow Summit?

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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Turkish and Russian Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin have reached a ceasefire agreement in Idlib following a meeting in Moscow on 5 March 2020. The agreement, which was presented as an appendix to the 2018 Sochi Agreement, came against a backdrop of escalation in Idlib following a regime assault aimed at taking control of the main roads in the province, which turned into direct confrontation with Turkish army units, of whom 33 were killed as of 27 February 2020.

Terms of the Agreement

The agreement, announced at the end of a six-hour meeting between Putin and Erdogan and read out by the foreign ministers of the two countries during a joint press conference, included three main conditions: a ceasefire from midnight on 6 March 2020, and the creation of a security corridor 6km (four miles) north and 6km south from Idlib's M4 motorway, which connects the government-held cities of Aleppo and Latakia, and the start of joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4 from the town of Tarnaba (west of Saraqib) to reach the town of Ain Hoor (located in the Latakia countryside) by 15 March.

In a special appendix, the agreement stipulated the commitment of the two countries to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, combating terrorist groups in Syria as defined by the United Nations Security Council, preventing the displacement of civilians and facilitating the safe and voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes, and on the priority of a political solution, in line with 2015 Security Council Resolution 2254.

The Road to Moscow

The Moscow agreement can be considered a Russian-Turkish attempt to salvage understandings reached by the two sides on Syria since the Astana talks were launched in early 2017, especially the Sochi Agreement for 2018. That agreement, in turn, came to salvage the recent de-escalation zone in Idlib, after the Syrian regime took control of the other three regions (In the vicinity of Damascus, Daraa, and Homs) in violation of an agreement reached in May 2017.

The Sochi Agreement provided for the establishment of a demilitarized zone between opposition fighters and the Syrian regime forces, in the southern countryside of Idlib and northern Hama, in a vicinity ranging from 15 to 20 kilometers.⁽¹⁾ It also stipulated the commitment of the Russian side to ensure that no military operations were carried out in Idlib, in exchange for the removal of “radical terrorist” groups from the de-escalation zone, and to work to ensure the free movement of the local population and goods, restore commercial and economic links, and restore traffic via the M4 (Aleppo - Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo - Hama) by the end of 2018.

The two parties also affirmed their intention “to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations” and to take “effective measures [...] for ensuring sustainable ceasefire regime

1 Press conference of Putin and Erdogan in Sochi, YouTube, 9/17/2018, accessed 10/3/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/3cE1iLA>



within the Idlib de-escalation area.” Turkey and Russia are conducting coordinated military patrols to monitor compliance with the agreement using drones, along the borders of the de-escalation zone.⁽²⁾ Under the agreement, Turkey will also establish 12 observation points for the Turkish army in the de-escalation zone in Idlib, to protect the ceasefire.

The Sochi Agreement lasted no more than a few months; in early May 2019, the regime and its Russian allies began a major military campaign to gain access to and control of international roads. The escalation came against the backdrop of the Astana talks at the end of April 2019, which failed to reach an agreement on the names of the members of the proposed Constitutional Committee in line with the Sochi Conference in January 2018, and their tasks and working mechanisms.

Russia then argued that the latest escalation came after attacks by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) that killed 22 regime forces. Russia has accused Turkey of breaching its obligations under the de-escalation zone agreement, claiming that it needs to secure the Hama military airport and its Hmeimim air base in the Latakia countryside, which Moscow also claims are being attacked by missiles and drones from the de-escalation zone.

During the battles that continued throughout the 12th and 13th rounds of the Astana talks (April and August 2019), the regime and its Russian allies managed to gain control of large areas of the de-escalation zone, which included large parts of the northern and western Hama countryside and its major towns, the most important Madiq Castle and Kafr Nabudah. The strategic city of Khan Shaykhun, on the Aleppo – Hama road, fell soon after. On the eve of Round 13, a new ceasefire was reached, initiated by the Russian-Turkish-Iranian Summit in Ankara in September 2019, which saw a shift in the Russian and Iranian positions on Ankara’s policies in the eastern Euphrates regions. The tripartite summit expressed its understanding of Turkish security concerns in the areas of eastern Euphrates in light of President Erdogan’s threat to launch a major military operation to remove the SDF, which represents the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, from the Syrian-Turkish border, and prevent attempts to establish a Kurdish enclave in Region. The summit also affirmed its respect for the August ceasefire and agreed on the details of establishing the Constitutional Committee after more than 18 months of negotiations and consultations.

The Russians and Iranians were motivated to accept the military operation launched by Turkey in the eastern Euphrates regions in October 2019, to drive out the Americans, the Europeans, and especially the French, who were holding about 400 members of their special forces to support the Kurds in the face of ISIS in northeastern Syria, as well as the Saudis and Emiratis, who established strong relations with the SDF – a huge blow to the Kurdish separatist ambitions in the region. This prompted the Russians and Iranians not to oppose the Turkish operation east of the Euphrates, to prove the ceasefire in Idlib remained in place, despite the regime’s limited attempts to escalate.

On 22 October 2019, the Russians and Turks reached a new agreement in Sochi, under which Moscow pledged to work to withdraw the Kurdish People’s Protection Units from the entire Syrian-

² “Syria: What are the terms of the agreement to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib?”, BBC Arabic, 9/18/2018, accessed 10/3/2020, at: <https://bbc.in/2PYORJF>.



Turkish border strip east of the Euphrates, and to conduct joint Russian-Turkish patrols to ensure implementation. In exchange, Turkey halted its “Spring of Peace” military operation, sanctioned by the US. However, once the Turkish military operation in the areas east of the Euphrates ended, Moscow returned to focus on Idlib in a major attack that began in December 2019.

Operation “Spring Shield”

During the attack that began in mid-December 2019, the Syrian regime forces and their Russian and Iranian allies managed to take control of large swathes of the eastern and southern countryside of Idlib, and Aleppo. Among the most important areas that fell to the regime’s hand in this latest attack were the towns of Maarat al-Numan and Saraqib located on the Aleppo-Hama road, where the regime bypassed and besieged a number of Turkish observation points set up by Ankara under the Sochi Agreement of 2018. With all the attempts made by Turkey to push Russia to abide by the agreement to establish the buffer zone and force the Syrian regime forces to withdraw beyond the Turkish observation points, Erdogan threatened to launch a military operation in Idlib if the Syrian regime forces did not withdraw by a deadline set for the end of February 2020 and intensified his threats to push thousands of his forces into the de-escalation zone in Idlib. Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, declared that the situation in Idlib could not be restored to what it was a year and a half ago, that is, when the Sochi Agreement was signed. Consequently, the Turkish forces, which were supporting the Syrian opposition factions in their attempts to retake the city of Saraqib, were attacked on 27 February, killing 33 Turkish soldiers in the town of Billion in the southern Idlib countryside. In response, Turkey launched “Operation Spring Shield”, targeting dozens of sites belonging to the regime forces and Iranian militias allied to it, which led to large losses in their ranks. It was notable that Russia refrained from interfering in favour of its allies in the confrontation with the Turkish army.

The Turkish process led Putin to accept a Turkish proposal to hold a Russian-Turkish summit to contain the situation that started out of control in Idlib, so he agreed to hold a summit in Moscow after being unenthusiastic about any meeting with Erdogan. All rounds of negotiations held by Russian and Turkish delegates in Moscow and Ankara had previously failed to reach an agreement to stop the fighting, as a result of Russia’s refusal to return to the borders of the Sochi Agreement and its insistence that the regime keep its gains on the ground.

Another Interim Agreement?

At current, the agreement does not meet any of the Turkish demands, in particular the return to the borders of the Sochi Agreement, which means the withdrawal of regime forces from the areas and towns they have controlled since the beginning of the attack on the de-escalation zone in early May 2019. The agreement also omits many details and makes no mention of M5 road from Aleppo



to Hama, which the regime has taken complete control of in recent weeks. The agreement also fell silent on the fate of the 12 Turkish control points that the regime is besieging, whether they will remain in place or be withdrawn, and Ankara has threatened to launch a military operation to expel the regime forces beyond the Turkish control points if the siege is not lifted. Although the agreement spoke about the return of the displaced to their villages and towns, it did not explain how this would be done, especially in the areas controlled by the regime. Finally, the question remains about the safe passage imposed by the Russians 6 kilometres north and south of the Aleppo-Latakia road, which is also currently a gain for the regime. These points suggest that the Moscow agreement may not be more than another interim agreement that will soon collapse, unless the Russians and the Turks are able to develop it into a more coherent agreement within the framework of a comprehensive political solution. Its structure is similar to the structure of other agreements that recognized the progress of the regime, the Russians, and the Iranians until they violated them with new advancements.

Conclusion

So far, all indications suggest that the latest round of fighting was aimed at bringing international roads under the control of the regime, and Russia was able to achieve this by force over the Aleppo-Hama road, as evidenced by the violent fighting that took place around Saraqib and Moscow's insistence on controlling it to turn into a *fait accompli* before the Moscow meeting, while the agreement stipulated the opening of the Aleppo-Latakia route to traffic and trade by establishing a safe passage in opposition-held areas and conducting joint Russian-Turkish patrols to ensure its implementation. But this also does not mean that the agreement does not reflect the balance of power on the ground in Idlib, as well as the political context. On the one hand, it indicates that Moscow is still interested in preserving the Astana talks as its only tool to impose its vision of a political solution in Syria. On the other hand, and within a broader strategic framework, Russia is still interested in keeping Turkey close and party to agreements on trade and energy, and even supplying it with the S-400 missile system, as evidenced by Moscow's reluctance to intervene to protect its allies from the broad Turkish attack that came within the framework of the Spring Shield military operation launched by Turkey to stop the progress of the regime and its allies in Idlib, which caused them heavy losses. Turkey, for its part, despite attempts to preserve its interrelated relationship and interests with Moscow, has also demonstrated the importance it attaches to Idlib through its support for the Syrian opposition forces and direct involvement in their battles, indicating a willingness to escalate to defend its role and interests in Syria.