

ANALYSIS: How Security and Diplomacy Intersect in Russia and Turkey's Idlib Deal





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By mid-September 2018, the Bashar al-Assad regime was poised to launch a military campaign on the last major opposition stronghold in Idlib, Syria. With considerable military buildup, it seemed that a wide-scale operation to retake the province—one that would have threatened the estimated 2.5 million residents of Idlib—was imminent.

On 17 September, Russian President Vladimir Putin brokered an agreement with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Sochi that seems to have spared Idlib—at least for now. The agreement stipulates that Russia and Turkey establish a 15-25 kilometre buffer zone separating regime forces and opposition fighters and that the zone be jointly patrolled by Russian and Turkish troops. The agreement also stipulates that the opposition's heavy weaponry be removed from this zone by 10 October and that "radical terrorist groups" be removed by 15 October.¹

With this, a handful of questions emerge: What drove Turkey and Russia to broker the deal? How does the agreement—one that stands to prevent Assad from retaking territory from fighters who threaten Russian interests—fit into Russia's agenda for post-conflict Syria? Can parties uphold the agreement? And, if not, what can the agreement actually accomplish?

Why Does Turkey Need the Agreement?

Turkey was on the back foot as it pushed for an agreement on Idlib. As the opposition's last major backer and guarantor, and concurrently as a major participant in Russia's diplomatic agenda that has favoured Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Turkey's position in Syria has been highly perilous for some time. First, Turkish troops are stationed along the edges of opposition-held Idlib—indeed, there for the purpose of deterring a regime offensive.² If the regime launches a major campaign, it would risk confrontation with Turkish troops—even if it attempted to avoid them. This could easily rope Turkey into an even more complex situation.

Second, a major offensive would result in a new wave of refugees—many of whom would try to enter Turkey. Turkey would either need to use unpalatable tactics on the border to keep these refugees in Syria, or it would need to take on a major new economic burden amid the Lira crisis it is already facing.

Third, if Ankara is seen as complicit in a regime offensive on the province, Syrian opposition groups—including ones Turkey supports—could easily conduct retaliatory attacks on Turkey. Such attacks could be directed against Turkish troops deployed to Syria in Idlib and northern Aleppo, or against targets on Turkish soil. One rebel put the ultimatum to Erdoğan succinctly in a video purportedly shot

¹ Joyce Karam, "Full Text of Turkey-Russia Memorandum on Idlib Revealed," *The National*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>.

² Metin Gurcan, "Turkey's De-Escalation Efforts Around Idlib Come With Risks," *Al-Monitor*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/turkey-syria-de-escalation-efforts-around-idlib-risky-1.html>.

on the Turkish border: “If you sell out Idlib, this is your wall and that’s our tunnel. We’ll be in Reyhanli in less than two hours.”³ A large-scale Assad regime offensive on Idlib would create conditions such that Turkey would lose control of an already precarious situation.

Why Does Russia Want the Agreement?

Moscow has a freer hand when it comes to Idlib, and as such, it can pursue a more ambitious agenda. Despite Turkish and Western protestation, Russia could have supported a regime offensive to recapture the province, and it may well do so in the future. But for now, Russia is prioritising its broader diplomatic efforts. Since January 2017, Russian-led talks on Syria in Astana and Sochi have overshadowed the United Nation’s diplomatic track in Geneva.⁴ Russia pursued this parallel track with Assad’s other major backer, Iran, but more importantly, with Turkey, the latter serving as the opposition’s “guarantor” state to give Russia’s agenda more credibility. With Turkey at the table, Russia has been able to frame its initiatives as compromises with pragmatic elements of the opposition, attempting to give the regime’s military gains a veneer of diplomatic legitimacy.

In May 2017, Russia took the lead brokering regional ceasefire initiatives—de-escalation zones in Idlib, northern Hama, Eastern Ghouta, and Dara’a.⁵ As Moscow hoped, the UN and the international community cautiously welcomed the Russian initiative.⁶ Though these ceasefires made way for regime offensives and, as such, failed to accomplish their nominal objective, they did more to impact facts on the ground than any of the UN’s attempts at a national ceasefire.⁷ In January 2018, Russia began work on another one of the issues on the UN’s agenda—a new constitution for Syria. Russia began with a constitutional conference in Sochi and has since been able to migrate these efforts back to Geneva, bringing the UN’s agenda closer in line with that of Moscow and Assad.

From this, an often-overlooked question follows: Why has Russia expended time, capital, and leverage prioritising this diplomatic agenda? Why could it not instead simply help Assad overwhelm the opposition and take the country by force without juggling its efforts in Astana, Sochi, and Geneva?

³ “مسلح يهدد أردوغان بلاستيلاء على الریحانية مقبل ادلب” YouTube, September 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtSNHsfPjGA>.

⁴ Patrick Wintour, “Russia in Power-Broking Role as Syria Peace Talks Begin in Astana,” *Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/22/russia-syria-talks-astana-kazakhstan->

⁵ “Russia, Turkey, Iran Set Up Syria De-Escalation Zones for at Least Six Months: Memorandum,” Reuters, May 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-memorandum/russia-iran-turkey-set-up-syria-de-escalation-zones-for-at-least-six-months-memorandum-idUSKBN1820C0>.

⁶ “U.N. Envoy Says Syria Safe Zones Plan a Step in the Right Direction,” Reuters, May 4, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-talks-zones-idUSKBN1801PT> and Heather Nauert, “Statement on Russia, Turkey, and Iran’s De-Escalation Zones Plan for Syria,” *U.S. Department of State*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270647.htm>.

⁷ See Hashem Osseiran, “How De-Escalation Zones in Syria Became a War Management Strategy,” *News Deeply*, February 6, 2018, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2018/02/06/how-de-escalation-zones-in-syria-became-a-war-management-strategy>.

Russia has its sights set on winning Western funding for Syria's post-war reconstruction.⁸ While Damascus can go to China and other countries to fund reconstruction (and it is indeed exploring such opportunities),⁹ Russia would likely prefer European and American funding in order to position itself as an indispensable interlocutor between the West and Damascus and thereby elevate itself on the international stage. As of now, Western countries' current terms are quite unfavourable to Moscow, as they continue to demand a UN-sponsored political transition to replace Assad prior to providing any reconstruction assistance.¹⁰ But Russia wants to change these terms.

Putin hopes that if he can secure a political settlement that comes up short of regime change but still has UN backing, the West will acquiesce. Such a settlement would likely include a constitution and perhaps elections in which Moscow and Assad can dictate, or at least heavily influence, parameters. It is far from clear that the United States and Europe would accept such a settlement in lieu of a political transition, but, hoping to capitalise on Europe's fears of a new migrant crisis and festering instability in Syria, Russia is still invested in its gambit to change Western calculi. But for a political settlement to have any credibility, it will need the seal of approval from opposition negotiators, and for this, Turkey's continued participation is vital.

Russia's agreeing to a deal to prevent the regime from attacking Idlib is aimed at keeping Turkey engaged in these diplomatic efforts. Though Russia could likely manage the security aspects and blowback of a large-scale operation in northwestern Syria, it knows that Turkey cannot. As such, to keep Turkey at the table, Russia had to yield.

Will Turkey and the Opposition Uphold the Agreement?

Turkey and its favoured opposition groups' ability or willingness to uphold the Idlib agreement is dubious. Removing groups from the agreed-upon buffer zone will be a difficult undertaking. For one, the language in the agreement that refers to "radical groups" is vague. There is no guarantee that if Turkey removed more overt hardliners seen to be affiliated with al-Qaeda—Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; the most powerful faction in Idlib province), Hurras al-Din, and the Turkistan Islamic Party—that the regime or Russia would be sated. Moscow and Damascus could easily use the presence of other hardline factions such as Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, with which Turkey works more closely, as a pretext to terminate the deal.

⁸ Kathrin Hille, Andrew England, and Demetri Sevastopulo, "Russia Seeks Western Support for Postwar Syria," *Financial Times*, July 26, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/61ed036e-8f52-11e8-b639-7680cedcc421>.

⁹ Robert W. Anderson, "Chinese Companies Poised to Help Rebuild War-Torn Syria," *Asia Times*, December 19, 2017, <http://www.atimes.com/article/chinese-companies-poised-help-rebuild-war-torn-syria/> and "Syrian Ambassador Invites Indian Companies to Rebuild War-Torn Country," *Times of India*, August 1, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/syria-invites-indian-companies-to-rebuild-war-torn-country/articleshow/65234190.cms>. Also see Paul Cochrane, "After the War: Who's Going to Pay for Syria Reconstruction," *Middle East Eye*, November 12, 2017, updated November 29, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/after-war-who-is-going-pay-syria-reconstruction-russia-iran-assad-china-871238355>.

¹⁰ John Irish and Yara Bayoumy, "Anti-Assad Nations Say No to Syria Reconstruction Until Political Process on Track," Reuters, September 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-syria/anti-assad-nations-say-no-to-syria-reconstruction-until-political-process-on-track-idUSKCN1BT1WP>.

But even if the definition of radical groups is restricted to the al-Qaeda-linked groups, Turkey will face considerable difficulty actually removing them—certainly by 15 October. These factions have already refuted the Idlib deal and refused to withdraw their fighters, seeing the deal as a step toward curtailing their power and eventually eliminating them.¹¹ If these fighters remain intransigent, Turkey would need to use force to oust them, but its track record on confronting hardline groups is less than promising.

When Turkey deployed troops to Idlib in October 2017, ostensibly to reinforce the de-escalation zone that it had established with Russia, it was initially expected to fight HTS and other hardliners in the province.¹² Not only did Turkey instead direct nearly all of its energies to fight Kurdish factions in Afrin; it was only able to operate its limited military presence in Idlib by coming to agreements with the al-Qaeda faction.¹³ Turkey later supported the umbrella group Jabhat Tahrir al-Souria (JTS) to challenge HTS's control over the province in early 2018. JTS is a collection of fighters led by non-al-Qaeda hardliners Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, powerful factions that have a longstanding relationship with Turkey and were close allies of HTS when it had branded itself Jabhat al-Nusra earlier in the war.¹⁴ JTS and HTS clashed with one another into the spring, but exactly who controls what territory in Idlib today is murky.

If Turkey aggressively ramps up efforts to fight HTS and other more overt hardliners and push them out of the buffer zone—either directly or by pressing JTS and other Turkish-aligned factions to fight them—it could face severe consequences. Beyond attacking Turkish troops in Idlib, hardliners could easily convert to cell-based tactics and set their sights on targets inside Turkey. Turkey can send more troops to the buffer zone to try to intimidate these groups into leaving, but if they resist, Turkey will be hard pressed to force them out.

Without Turkey or the Turkish-backed JTS forcing them out, the only means to oust al-Qaeda affiliated groups would be Russian or regime bombardment. If other opposition groups count this as a violation of the deal and respond in turn, the entire arrangement could collapse.

¹¹ "توصيات الندوة الشعبية لمناقشة مخرجات سوتشي" Final outcomes of a symposium held by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, September 23, 2018, <https://twitter.com/AbuJamajem/status/1043953795535908865> and "بيان حول اتفاقية سوتشي الأخيرة (دايتون ٢)" Statement no. 9, Hurras al-Din Organization, September 22, 2018, <https://twitter.com/lbnNabih1/status/1043589433902223360>.

¹² "Turkey Advances into Syria's Idlib in Major Offensive Against Jihadists," *Deutsche Welle*, October 8, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-advances-into-syrias-idlib-in-major-offensive-against-jihadists/a-40861176>; Fehim Tastekim, "Turkish Deployment May Redraw Battlelines in Syria's Idlib," *Al-Monitor*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/turkey-syria-idlib-move-may-trigger-fresh-rifts.html>; and Ece Toksabai and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Turkey Backs Syrian Rebels for 'Serious Operation' in Idlib," *Reuters*, October 7, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-backs-syrian-rebels-for-serious-operation-in-idlib-idUSKBN1CC07Q>.

¹³ See Bulent Aliriza and Zeynep Yekeler, "Understanding Turkey's Afrin Operation," Center for Strategic & International Studies, January 25, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-turkeys-afrin-operation> and Akil Hussein, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Deal with Turkey Further Alienates it from Other Jihadists," Chatham House, November 2017, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/hayat-tahrir-al-shams-deal-with-turkey-further-alienates-it-from-other-jihadists>.

¹⁴ Waleed Khaled a-Noufal and Tariq Adely, "Two of the Largest Factions in Syria's Northwest Merge, Challenge HTS Dominance," *Syria: Direct*, February 22, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/two-of-the-largest-factions-in-syria%E2%80%99s-northwest-merge-challenge-hts-dominance/>.

Will Russia and Assad Uphold the Agreement?

Russia and Assad have different calculi from one another as they approach Idlib. Whereas Russia, for now, is trying to avoid a large-scale conflict in order to ensure that its efforts in Astana, Sochi, and Geneva remain relevant, Assad is less invested in these diplomatic machinations. Assad still seems intent to make good on his claims that he will recapture “every inch” of Syria—a claim that is at odds with the Russian-Turkish Idlib deal.¹⁵ Moreover, Assad may well be skeptical at the prospects of Western reconstruction assistance and prefer countries such as China that have refrained from demanding his ouster—even if the terms of their assistance may be worse in the long run.¹⁶ If Assad is forced to choose between reclaiming the country and holding out for potentially securing Western support, Assad will opt for the former.

Nonetheless, Russia can likely restrict Assad's forces from egregiously violating the agreement if it commits sufficient troops to the buffer zone and signals that it will not provide air support for a major ground offensive. But Russia will need progress in Geneva to keep Assad at bay. The less Moscow can show for its efforts to justify delaying an Idlib offensive, the less likely Assad will be to comport with its agenda. Also, if Turkey fails to remove sensitive groups, the regime will have more cause to launch artillery strikes and airstrikes on positions in and beyond parts of the buffer zone, jeopardising the agreement.

Beyond differences between the agendas in Moscow and Damascus, a potential internal inconsistency in the Idlib deal itself could seriously undermine its viability. In addition to establishing a buffer zone, the 17 September agreement also stipulates that regular transit traffic be restored on the M5 highway, which links Aleppo to Hama, and the M4 highway, which links Aleppo to Latakia, before the end of the year. Both of these routes lie well beyond the buffer zone in areas where sensitive opposition groups could be even more difficult to remove. If the regime or Russia decide to read the agreement as requiring that they recapture these highways, they would need to violate the buffer zone to do so. Perhaps this can be averted if Turkey is able to credibly guarantee that traffic can transit between opposition- and regime-held territory unimpeded—a guarantee that would require even more Turkish troops in country. But even if Ankara can offer such guarantees, Assad is unlikely to remain satisfied with the M5 and the M4 out of his hands in the long term—with or without the buffer zone in place. Whether Assad launches operations and risks confrontations with Turkish troops to rectify this remains to be seen.

¹⁵ “Assad Vows to Retake Raqa and ‘Every Inch’ of Syria,” Agence France Presse via *Al-Monitor*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/02/syria-conflict-politics-france.html#ixzz5S6eKXAqc>.

¹⁶ For information on the disadvantageous debt structuring of Chinese development loans and financing, see John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, *Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective*, Policy Paper 121 (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, March 2018), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>.

What Can the Agreement Accomplish?

While parties may or may not faithfully enact and enforce the buffer zone, and while the broader deal may contain potentially self-sabotaging language, the Idlib agreement does stand to have some impact. While Turkey certainly will not be successful in removing all of the various hardline factions from the agreed-upon buffer zone, it may be able to convince some to leave, or at least obfuscate their presence and restrict their activities, such that Russia will be inclined to uphold the agreement for longer.

Perhaps more important, the agreement changes the facts on the ground by inviting Turkey to send significantly more troops to the perimeters of Idlib province. Whereas Russia could easily withdraw its troops should dynamics change, Turkey is in a quagmire in Idlib. As noted earlier, if Turkey removes its troops and is seen as selling out Idlib, it could be subject to attacks by an array of opposition groups. Moreover, Turkey would lose a foothold in Syria and, as a result, lose what leverage it has to press Damascus to curtail Kurdish autonomy in the northeast—arguably Ankara's primary concern.

But even if Turkish troops can be expected to remain in Idlib for now, the province's future will be an open question if Russia takes the reins off of Assad. The trajectory the conflict would then take depends on Assad's risk calculus as he deals with Turkey. If Assad remains averse to risking direct confrontations with Turkish forces—as he was in his late 2016 and early 2017 campaigns to take territory from the Islamic State in Aleppo countryside, where regime forces, Turkish troops, and opposition fighters were all in close proximity¹⁷—then Turkey may well entrench its position. Idlib could thus effectively become a quasi-Turkish statelet in Syria, out of regime hands for the foreseeable future.

If Assad instead undertakes an operation on Idlib despite the Turkish troops present there, he risks creating a highly complex and unpredictable environment—one that would not only see fighting between the regime and the opposition but might also see clashes and incidents between regime forces and Turkish troops, Turkish troops and Iranian-backed militias, and Turkish troops and opposition groups. Moreover, if Turkey, as a NATO member, comes under direct fire by the regime or Iranian-backed militias, the situation could easily result in involvement by the United States—perhaps launching strikes on pro-Assad positions.

Conclusions

The Russian and Turkish Idlib deal is far from sound. Just like Russia's previous ceasefire initiatives, there is a real question as to how the guarantor states—Russia and Turkey—can bring into force components of the agreement. Turkey will face considerable challenges if it actually attempts to

¹⁷ Kim Sengupta, "Syria Civil War: All Eyes on Strategic Town of Al-Bab, Marking a Crucial New Phase in the Conflict," *Independent*, November 29, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-al-bab-turkey-kurds-free-syrian-army-assad-raqqa-a7443411.html>; Laila Bassam and Humeyra Pamuk, "Syrian Army Dash to al-Bab Risks Turkey Clash," Reuters, February 1, 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-albab-idUKKBN15G5DK>; and "Turkey Coordinates Al-Bab Campaign With Russia to Avoid Clashes With Damascus," *Sputnik*, February 8, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201702081050467072-turkey-syria-military-campaign/>.

remove hardline factions from the buffer zone, and Assad is likely not as inclined as Russia to adhere to the agreement and refrain from attempting to take the major highways and other important territory in Idlib.

While pitfalls in the deal threaten to undermine it, this agreement is different from Russia's previous ceasefire attempts. Russia's prioritising its diplomatic agenda in a bid to secure Western funding for reconstruction and the increased presence Turkish troops in the buffer zone—ones that Ankara would face considerable difficulty withdrawing—both make it more likely that this agreement could have at least some staying power. At the very least, this agreement reflects a change in the way the regime needs to approach Idlib. With an increased presence of Turkish forces on the ground, any regime attempts to recapture the province will be far more complicated. The battles to come over the province stand to be far more bloody and far riskier than any of the regime's campaigns to take opposition territory over the past year.



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