

The Crisis in Idlib

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Articles & Testimony

Given the near-certainty that conflict will erupt again in northwest Syria, the United States should start planning for how it might leverage that next outbreak to push the parties toward a political process.

The following are prepared remarks submitted to the House Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism.

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this critical issue. The war in Syria enters its tenth year this month and Idlib is the crucible of the conflict. The outcome of this chapter of the war has implications for virtually all strategic challenges to U.S. interests: Russia's role in the Middle East; counterterrorism threats; Iran's projection of power; the Syrian refugee and IDP crisis; and the war crimes committed not only by Assad and Iran, but also by Russia—a member of the United Nations Security Council.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Trump administration's Syria policy ostensibly remains focused on three goals: (1) defeat ISIS, (2) remove all Iranian and Iran-backed boots from Syria, and (3) support a viable political process to end the war under the auspices of the UN. All of these objectives are unachievable if the regime regains control of the province.

- *Counterterrorism.* Assad's symbiotic relationship with Al Qaeda is well-established, and there is every reason to expect that if his regime regains control of Idlib, extremist elements there will be coopted and weaponized by Assad as leverage against Arab neighbors, Europe, and the U.S. ISIS is already regrouping in regime-held areas, and a Russia-Iran-Assad victory in Idlib will fan the flames of extremism in Syria, the heart of the Middle East.
- *Iran.* A regime victory in Idlib will enable continuity in Iran's strategy for entrenching long-term influence in Syria.

Tehran is working to minimize disruption in its bid for long-term influence through proxies and weak governments after the death of Commander Qassem Soleimani. Given Iran's goal of expelling U.S. forces from the region and Assad's goal of retaking all Syrian territory, it will be an easier shift from northwest Syria to northeast by the Russia-Iran-Assad axis in order to counter the U.S. military still active east of the Euphrates River.

- *Political process.* A return to conflict will prompt all stakeholders to seek military solutions rather than a political outcome at the negotiating table. The path to a negotiated, durable solution to the war in Syria would effectively be over if Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, continues to resist any concessions under the UN process. Assad's strategy of mass terror and his weaponization of refugees is designed to force Europe and Arab governments to reintegrate him into the international community and fund reconstruction of the Syrian state, absent any changes in his regime.

These outcomes threaten U.S. interests in the Middle East, the security of NATO ally Turkey, and stability in Europe. Yet Syria has not been prioritized in Washington, and resources continue to be taken off the table, from stabilization funds to U.S. military boots on the ground. Local, regional, and European partners question U.S. commitment, and are looking to Moscow for leadership in Syria.

BACKGROUND

Idlib has long held strategic importance of the province to all the stakeholders involved in hostilities there. Idlib's population was an estimated 1.5 million in 2011. The UN estimates it has more than doubled over the course of the Syrian war, as the Assad regime methodically relocated waves of Syrian civilians and opposition fighters there from other parts of the country following local ceasefires and "reconciliation agreements." Essentially, Syrian civilians and fighters faced a choice after the latter lost on the battlefield, presented to them by Russia and Assad: submit to the regime or relocate to Idlib. These agreements were designed to bring opposition-held areas under Assad regime control and cleanse them of the largely Sunni population. Rather than face the likelihood of conscription, forced disappearances, and the daily humiliations and deprivations of regime-controlled life, hundreds of thousands of Syrians moved to Idlib.

Concurrently, non-ISIS terrorist groups made Idlib the center of gravity for their activities. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Huras al-Din are both extremist groups that have resisted Al Qaeda's attempts to unify them despite overlapping ideological affiliations/bents. Huras al-Din continues to plan external attacks and is thus considered a high priority threat by the United States, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham established an Islamist government in Idlib whose practices have led to the flight of humanitarian actors, violent suppression of civil society activists, and forced conscription of children.

As part of the effort to forestall a broader Turkish military incursion into Idlib and prevent another humanitarian crisis on Turkey's border, President Putin agreed with President Erdogan in September 2017 to a "de-escalation zone." Putin and Erdogan followed up in September 2018 with the "Sochi agreement," whereby Turkey would remove 'extremist elements' and Russia committed to prevent further offensive operations by the Assad regime. But the Assad regime—supported by Russian air power and Iran-aligned ground forces—launched an offensive to retake Idlib in early 2019. Assad and his backers initially achieved only minimal progress, largely due to push back from Turkish-supported opposition forces and Al-Qaeda linked fighters. Turkey, already under tremendous domestic strain from hosting 3.5 million Syrian refugees in its territory, views an additional influx of refugees as an existential threat given its domestic economic downturn and rise in anti-refugee sentiment.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

The Assad-Russia-Iran offensive kicked into high gear in the past three months, causing the most severe humanitarian crisis of the entire nine-year war and violating the terms of the Sochi agreement. The fighting reached its boiling point on February 27, when Turkish forces were attacked with precision munitions leading to 33

Turkish deaths and 60 injured. Though Assad's forces were initially blamed for the attack, the precise nature of the operation, at night, indicates Russian Air Force—Assad regime forces lack the capability for such a strike, especially at night. Turkey responded decisively, destroying Assad aircraft, ground vehicles, and artillery pieces; targeting regime personnel; and attacking the Assad's Russian-provided air defense system. There are also reports of Lebanese Hezbollah casualties in Idlib. The Turkish counter-offensive, at least temporarily, shifted the military balance on the ground against Assad and his backers Russia and Iran.

Assad regime losses and Turkish willingness to use military force prompted Putin to seek a ceasefire agreement, rather than risk additional losses on the battlefield. Putin is also motivated to keep Turkey oriented toward Moscow, and not push Turkey back toward the U.S. and NATO after years of tension. Despite Erdogan's demonstrated willingness to use military force, the agreement negotiated with Putin favors Assad's territorial gains. While it provides a temporary respite for terrorized Syrian civilians, it is unlikely to hold and there are already reports of Assad regime violations.

The Russia-Turkey ceasefire agreement will not prevent further violence in Idlib, fails to address the humanitarian catastrophe, and does nothing to address the underlying causes of the Syrian civil war: the Assad regime's brutality toward its own people. It has already been rejected by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Huras al-Din, and enables a "Gaza Strip"-like situation on Turkey's border with Syrian civilians and Al Qaeda-linked groups pushed up against the Turkish border. Syrians cannot return to their homes under this agreement, which perpetuates the human suffering and instability.

The question is when—not if—violence will reignite in Idlib. Russia is both unwilling and incapable of compelling Assad to adhere to any ceasefire or de-escalation agreement. Although Assad should recognize the devastating losses to what remains of his military should he restart the offensive in Idlib, Putin is undeterred in ensuring the regime's survival.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Given the near-certainty of return to conflict in Idlib, the U.S. should start planning now for how it might leverage that next outbreak of violence to move all parties toward a political process. Aiming for a ceasefire—which is the administration's current objective for Idlib—is critical, but too narrow a goal given the strategic risk to broader U.S. interests.

This opportunity for a strategic pivot will present itself given the following factors:

- Assad's forces suffered significant material and personnel losses at the hands of the Turkish military in Idlib. They will be constrained in their ability to launch new operations in other parts of Syria not under regime control. Russian and Iranian operational support may be more tenuous given a set of black swan events—the coronavirus, which is sweeping through Iran, and the spectacular Russia-Saudi OPEC feud, which has collapsed oil prices—both of which are likely to hammer the oil-dependent economies of Assad's backers.
- Assad is constrained in his ability to maintain control over areas of Syria currently under regime control. Anti-regime opposition is stirring again in southern Syria. This is another example of failed 'reconciliation' agreements with the regime, which lacks the resources and manpower to counter the rising insurgency in the south, and is unwilling to deliver on the commitments it made under the terms of the reconciliation deal.
- Syria's economy continues its downward spiral, accelerated by the economic crisis in next door Lebanon as well as the impact of the U.S.-led sanctions regime. Additional sanctions from the Congressionally-mandated Caesar Civilian Protection Act will come online soon, and the U.S. and Europe are still standing together in denial of any reconstruction aid to Syria absent meaningful reforms. The regime is economically starved, and Russia and Iran cannot bail Assad out.

The convergence of these developments offers the United States, in concert with the United Nations, and European and Arab governments, an opportunity to use the economic pressure and battlefield realities inside Syria to refocus on the political process. The leverage if the U.S. remains opposed to using military force in Syria other than to defeat ISIS is the ongoing political and economic pressure on Assad, and increasing sanctions on his backers in Tehran and Moscow. Easing of sanctions and discussion of reconstruction assistance should only be on the table if the regime credibly changes its behavior, including meaningful participation in the Geneva political process.

Leveraging this strategic window, however, will require confidence-building and coordination with Turkey. The goal should be rapprochement on Syria policy and driving a wedge between Ankara and Moscow. The bilateral discussion should be expanded beyond a narrow focus on the Patriot missile defense system. It should focus on reaching a mutually beneficial consensus with Turkey on the way forward in Syria, including how to complete the anti-ISIS mission in northeastern Syria. It will be counterproductive to U.S. efforts in Syria if the aperture with Turkey is widened to encompass every problematic policy of the Turkish government, but a pragmatic solution on Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 system should be part of the consultations.

Other efforts that the U.S. should undertake before the Russia-Turkey ceasefire collapses altogether include:

- U.S. diplomacy at the United Nations Security Council should be supercharged with like-minded Council members to renew full cross-border access for humanitarian aid delivery. In January, Russia and China vetoed renewal of Resolution 2449, which enabled cross-border humanitarian aid delivery at four points without Assad regime approval, and the current reduced mandate expires on July 10. With reduced cross-border access, the UN has struggled to reach Syrians in need. According to Interaction, 70% of the population of Idlib are women and children, and the cross-border system is the only way to deliver urgent humanitarian assistance including food, shelter, and healthcare. The U.S. signaled support for mitigating the humanitarian crisis in Idlib by pledging an additional \$108 million. That aid is meaningless without viable mechanisms to deliver it in a timely manner, free of manipulation and intervention by those responsible for the conflict.
- The U.S. should sanction Russian individuals for the commission of war crimes in Syria, and should coordinate with European allies to do the same as one step toward accountability. The recent report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry specifically assigns culpability to the Russian Air Force for the war crime of launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas. Executive Order 18394, issued on October 14, 2019, provides significant latitude to the administration to impose sanctions on Russian persons, and those that work directly or indirectly on behalf of Russian persons, who have committed serious human rights abuses in Syria as well as prevented efforts to promote a political solution.
- Begin consultations with Ankara on various options for support in defense of Turkish security when the Idlib ceasefire collapses. The Turkish military clearly defended its interests in Idlib, but Ankara will seek diplomatic and operational demonstrations of U.S. and NATO support. Options for assisting Turkey should be on the table—such as intelligence support but broadened to address the unstable situation in both northwest and northeast Syria.

Dana Stroul is the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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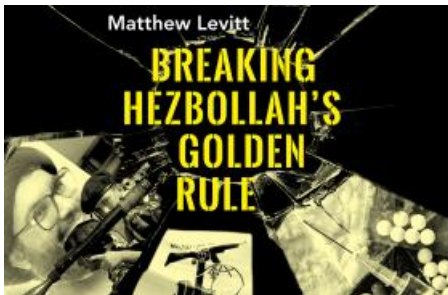
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