

A New Erdogan-Putin Deal in Idlib May Help—For Now

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Brief Analysis

Turkey, Russia, and Washington have compelling reasons to welcome a new ceasefire agreement, however imperfect, but they still need to address the longer-term dangers posed by the Assad regime’s murderously maximalist strategy.

Recent fighting between Turkish and Syrian regime forces in Idlib province has seemingly wiped away the last vestiges of the September 2018 Sochi agreement, brokered by Russian president Vladimir Putin as a way of pausing hostilities and dividing control over the country’s last rebel-held province. Beginning last December, renewed Russian and Syrian attacks against civilians sent a million residents fleeing toward the Turkish border, creating another humanitarian disaster. Then, on February 27, thirty-three Turkish soldiers were killed when their unit was attacked in Idlib—Ankara’s largest single-day loss in Syria thus far.

Turkey initially blamed Bashar al-Assad for the deaths, but eyes soon turned to his Russian patron as the more likely culprit, elevating tensions between Ankara and Moscow to a level not seen since Turkish forces shot down a Russian plane in November 2015. Meanwhile, the Turkish military and its local partner forces launched a string of attacks against the Syrian regime and its Iranian-backed militia allies.

On March 5, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with Putin in Moscow to discuss these rising tensions. If the two leaders reach another ceasefire deal, will it last any longer than the short-lived Sochi agreement? More important, what effect might it have on the latest refugee crisis threatening to wash over Turkey [and Europe](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/latest-battle-for-idlib-could-send-another-wave-of-refugees-to-europe) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/latest-battle-for-idlib-could-send-another-wave-of-refugees-to-europe>)?

WHY ANOTHER DEAL IS LIKELY—AND TEMPORARY

The September 2018 agreement gave Turkey and its local partners control over the majority of Idlib province, making them responsible for ensuring that anti-Assad rebel forces in the north complied with the ceasefire. Toward this end, the parties established a demilitarized zone along the periphery between rebel and regime forces, complete with Turkish military observation points.

Today, that arrangement is all but moot. After three months of Russian airstrikes and Assad regime offensives, Turkish-backed forces have lost their grip over large parts of the province, and at least eight Turkish observation posts are currently surrounded. Yet Erdogan and Putin have at least two compelling reasons to produce a new Idlib deal, even if it, too, is destined to fall apart at some point given Assad's persistent objections:

- **Erdogan does not want a rupture with Putin**. Erdogan has relied on Moscow diplomatically since Putin reached out to him following the failed 2016 coup, and his frayed international relationships have only made him more dependent on such support since then. Moreover, Russia's military capabilities and historical scorecard against Turkey make Erdogan wary of a major conflict.
- **Putin does not want a rupture with Turkey**. Moscow's Syria policy has helped drive a wedge between Turkey and the United States, and Putin aims to use such rifts as a means of undermining the NATO alliance. He also knows that pushing Turkey too hard on core security issues like the Syrian frontier and mass refugee flows may push Turkey right back into Washington's arms.

The United States has important stakes of its own in the Idlib showdown. At present, U.S. officials are divided on how much help to give Turkey. The Pentagon's attitude toward Ankara has soured in recent years due to policy differences over the Iraq and Syria wars, so it objects to providing more robust military assistance in Idlib, especially against Russia. In contrast, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Special Representative James Jeffrey have been rallying other elements of the U.S. government to support Turkey. U.S. officials have also encouraged NATO members such as Britain, Italy, Spain, and the Nordic countries to send additional military and political support—though Ankara has not yet gotten what it has requested the most, Patriot air defense systems.

Those in Washington who support these measures see them as the right response to the humanitarian crisis caused by massive new population displacements in Idlib. They also hope to push back against Assad and Russia while repairing America's broken relationship with Turkey.

The window for action may not stay open long. Following the February 27 attack on Turkish troops, Russia stood aside while Ankara conducted a heavy drone-centered offensive against the Syrian military and its Iranian-backed partners. In all, Turkish forces have reportedly shot down three Syrian planes, destroyed a number of tanks and helicopters, and killed hundreds of Syrian and militia personnel, including fighters affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah. Yet Putin ultimately supports Assad's goal of reestablishing control over most or all of Syria, so he will not allow Turkish attacks to continue indefinitely. Moreover, Assad's goal entails pushing out as many Sunni Arabs as possible, since they are the constituency that launched the 2011 rebellion. By default, then, Putin backs Assad's territorial and demographic vision for Idlib, not Erdogan's.

POTENTIAL SUMMIT OUTCOMES AND IMPLICATIONS

Given the current circumstances, Putin will likely offer Erdogan a new deal whereby Assad retakes the bulk of Idlib's territory while Turkey ends up with the fragment containing the bulk of the province's displaced civilian population. Erdogan may not accept these terms right away, but the two leaders will at least begin discussing the parameters of a new power-sharing agreement in Idlib.

Obviously, however, this arrangement will hardly resolve the broader Idlib problem. Assad is one wild card—if he continues to demand full control over all of Syria, Iran might encourage this stance in order to show him that

Tehran, not Moscow, is his true friend. In other words, even if the Erdogan-Putin meeting produces a compromise deal, Assad may soon seek to break it.

For his part, a new deal may help Erdogan meet his chief goal of averting another massive flow of refugees from across the border—but for how long is unclear. Turkey already hosts around 3.6 million displaced Syrians, and anti-refugee sentiments are on the rise throughout the country, creating significant political challenges for Erdogan. No ideal outcome is available at present, so he may reason that if his government must be responsible for taking care of additional Syrian civilians, he would rather have them across the border in a pocket of Idlib than inside Turkey.

Despite the longer-term challenges presented by this outcome, the U.S. government can take a relatively positive view of it, at least from the perspective of improving bilateral relations with Ankara. The debacle in Idlib has reminded Erdogan that with or without a deal, he cannot stand up to Russia alone, and that he is better off repairing ties with Washington. Ankara welcomed the intensive efforts that Ambassador Jeffrey and other officials put forth to muster support for Turkey's Idlib posture, suggesting that the freefall in bilateral ties may have been arrested for the time being.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East](https://www.erdogansempire.com/) (<https://www.erdogansempire.com/>). ❖

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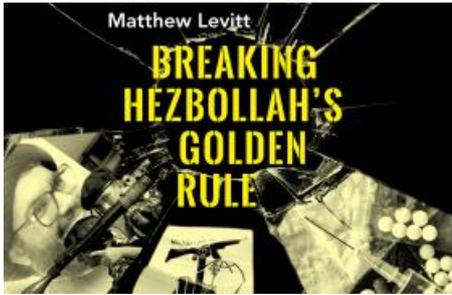
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