

A Turn Towards Idlib in Syria – Is the Goal to ‘Achieve Homogeneity’ in the Country?

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Brief Analysis

Like any other country, Syria has its fair share of local quirks; almost every region is at the receiving end of bawdy jokes or even outright mockery. The same holds true for Idlib, whose inhabitants enjoy the rather dubious reputation—at least in Damascus—of being stubborn, somewhat backwards, and receptive to extremism, among other things. The real-world repercussions of this longstanding resentment, of course, is of a much more serious nature in today’s Syria. In a country ravaged by war for over seven years, the Assad regime and its supporters have no qualms about bombing certain parts of the population into submission due to their ‘stubborn’ nature.

This dynamic may come to the fore sooner rather than later. The international coalition against the so called Islamic State and the coalition’s on-the-ground allies—the Syrian Democratic Forces—have declared victory after the last stronghold of the jihadist organisation fell. However, celebrations of victory over this joint enemy will not last long. Soon, with spring arriving and the ability for tank tracks to find better grips, the international community is likely to see escalation on another, far more complex battlefield—Idlib province, with both approximately 3 million, largely displaced (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm19208.doc.htm>) inhabitants and some of the country’s most hardened insurgent groups.

It seems that Russia, the Syrian regime’s protector and main military player, is not particularly comfortable with the idea of a major military campaign on the ground. But Turkey was assigned with the uphill task to keep control over Idlib during the tripartite negotiations with Russia and Iran. It may make concessions to forces looking to move into Idlib if, in exchange, it can expect some backing in its endeavour to ‘pacify’ the Kurdish-held Syrian Northeast. Moreover, it is important to remember that the Syrian regime has its own will and is not Moscow’s puppet, though it may sometimes be comfortable for the regime to create this impression and to put the blame for the stagnation of any political process on the quarrels of geopolitical rivals.

Forces inside the Syrian regime, and maybe the president himself, seem eager to go back to war in Idlib. While the regime may have lied and been deceptive many times, it’s been consistent in keeping its promise to reconquer every square foot of territory that was lost since 2011—both what the regime and its allies identify as the ‘useful’ Syria and

the ‘not so useful’ parts. An additional reason for the regime to prove itself both resolute and adamant has just emerged rather unexpectedly. President Trump’s unilateral decision to recognise the annexed Golan heights as part of Israel reminded Syrians of the fact that both Hafez and Bashar had lived rather comfortably with this ostensible national taint of annexation up until this point. These factors suggest a regime interest in escalating the situation in Idlib in the upcoming weeks.

If this is the case, international observers should recognize when dealing with Idlib that during the course of the war, its communities have time and again disproven the stereotype of a ‘radicalized’ people, repeatedly rising up against a succession of Jihadi insurgent groups. These groups have tried to gain a permanent foothold in the area but have failed to win over the hearts and minds of the population. Thus, Idlib has found itself between a rock and a hard place. Jihadi fighters kept trickling in, exacting terrible revenge on religious minorities. Captured rebel fighters from other areas were systematically bussed into Idlib and left to roam the province. Idlib was clearly not considered part of the ‘useful Syria’ during the war and has therefore become the regime’s junkyard. The regime has disposed of its ‘undesirable elements’ in this region in order to rebuild the rest of the country on its own terms.

This may also explain why Idlib, if the regime decides to conquer it and the battle escalates, cannot count on mercy. Even more than other provinces, Assad and his loyal circles have accounts to settle there, because Idlib and its populace have inflicted considerable casualties on the regime’s forces and because, in the eyes of many other Syrians, they are incorrigible, irreformable fanatics.

There is logic to the level of brutality that has shaped the war thus far. Its underlying features are rooted in mutual distrust, disdain, and hatred. Fanning those feelings, though, proved to be the crucial factor that escalated violence to unprecedented levels. Militias on all sides took part in that contest, purposefully blurring the line between civilians and combatants, meting out justice on a whim. But it was the regime that truly excelled in that exercise.

Among the Sunni majority, the hatred fuelled by extremists towards minorities festered. Rather than putting the blame solely on the Assad clan and its network of power and control, this hatred targeted the Alawites because they were perceived to squarely benefit from having one of their own rule the country—at the expense of all other groups.

The regime, for its part, feeds on minorities’ fears: of extinction, forced submission, or a total Islamist takeover. It’s both an unquestionable automatism and an easily spotted, deliberate method to manufacture loyalty, but the strategy has worked nonetheless. Alawites, Christians, and Sunnis loyal to the regime (who have come to see themselves a minority under attack as well), were thus forced into a battle of survival. There may be casualties on all sides. Still, in this war, those who felt their whole existence (and that of their communities) was on the line have come forward to claim a total victory.

Close to half the population, most of them Sunni Muslims, was forced to flee and leave everything behind—regardless of whether they had supported the uprising or not. But rather than lamenting this exodus as ‘collateral damage,’ an unfortunate by-product of a messy civil war, we should see it for what it also seems to be: an attempt to permanently alter the make-up of Syria’s population.

In 2011, Syrians took to the streets and took up the chant of the so-called Arab Spring: ‘The people demand the fall of the regime.’ The regime begged to differ and went to work to shape a new people instead—or in Assad’s words, more ‘homogeneous and authentic in the true sense’ [أكثُر صَدَّةً وَأكْثَر تَجَانِسًا بِالْمَعْنَى الْحَقِيقِيِّ], as he described it last year in an address (https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=181&v=SkK9KttSdQc) that drew considerable

attention.

There is no incontrovertible proof that—and, if yes, when—this had become a war objective in and of itself. Despots in the Middle East have been displacing, exiling, and resettling whole peoples since biblical times. But the Assad regime seems to have almost perfected the method of ‘demographic engineering,’ with the apparent ultimate goal of creating a ‘Syria of tomorrow.’

The regime’s core followers comprise of the Assad clan, a myriad of warlords, intelligence, and army officers, as well as a small but committed fraction of the populace. These groups have already convinced themselves that a return to the pre-2011 order is not an option. 20 million inhabitants

(<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>), so the argument goes, are already a sure sign for overpopulation. And a 75 per cent Sunni majority, which was bound to continue expanding, has always spelt trouble for peaceful coexistence. According to this view, Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State weren’t merely an aberration of Sunnism but rather embodied its true essence. Due to this narrative, their appearance actually helped the Syrian regime in the early stages of the war.

But what if the idea of just getting on with the status quo gains traction among those Syrians who remain in the country? In that case, those who didn’t take part in the uprising would get a bigger slice of the cake. The share of jobs, real estate, water and hydrocarbon resources are all at stake here. So far, this line of thinking might seem like a fascist fringe fantasy. But the fringe could become mainstream in Syria, as well.

The completion of the aforementioned demographic shift—making it an irreversible reality by actively keeping displaced Syrians from returning or dispossessing them—is truly a nightmare for many Syrians. This is especially the case for those who still cling to a vision of a post-war Syria similar to its pre-war situation or rather the early days of the Republic. But the implementation of such a demographic change would also spell trouble for all those in Europe who have put their careers on the line by betting on a solution to the migration crisis that would eventually see the majority of refugees return.

Incidentally, right-wing populist parties in Europe could see themselves embroiled in a conflict of interest. As staunch advocates of the Assad regime, they espouse the view that coexistence alongside a sizable Muslim population is close to impossible—which is the very reason they push for refugees’ return to Syria. They would be in for quite a surprise if they get the memo from Damascus arguing that hundreds of thousands of exiled Syrians should remain in Europe.

However, this scenario of profound demographic engineering is far from a done deal. There are still many Syrians—among all its ethnic and religious groups in and outside of Syria—who wholeheartedly reject this extremist line of thinking. Potentially, they are even still in the majority. These Syrians believe in coexistence and may see diversity as strength. This creed is much more than just a phrase to justify a concept of multiculturalism—it’s a living reality. For these Syrians, there is a genuine interest in reconciliation—no matter who is calling the shots in Damascus. And after all, the regime still interacts with its people. It still needs a critical part of the Syrian population to survive and to implement whatever plan it has in mind. Thus, the fate of Idlib lies in this relationship between regime and its people.

Bearing this in mind, Syrian society itself is emerging as a powerful player in a game that was supposed to be controlled by the Assad regime, Russia, Iran, and Turkey. And though ‘Syrian society’ is a vague term and hard to

grasp for political actors, it is in all probability the only force that can now prevent a fait accompli that would ultimately condemn a large part of Syria's population to permanent exile and spur a new round of total war in Idlib. ♦

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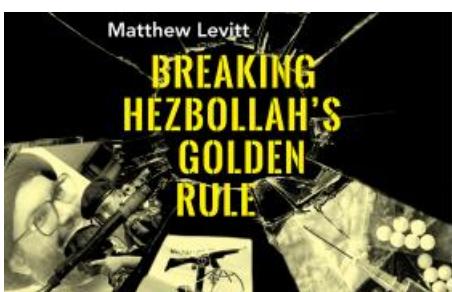
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