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Erdogan's Idlib: Humanitarian Crisis or Political Sticking Point?

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Brief Analysis

In his public remarks and positions, the Turkish president tends to divide the world into two sides based on his own understanding and self-interest: the world of good and the world of evil. Those who stand by him in his aspirations, both legitimate and illegitimate, fall into the former category. But any pushback, including against a tendency to dominate and oppress others are categorized as evil, and more specifically as terrorists.

In the aftermath of the battles for Aleppo and southern Damascus, along with the Turkish army's invasion and occupation of Afrin, it is clear that the battle of Idlib will bring with it important and complex changes in the Syrian crisis on both regional and international levels. The alliances and interests appear poised to shift as this new battle begins, and the Turkish state's outspoken stance on its role in these shifts requires some dissecting from its claim of humanitarianism.

Erdogan's intentions for Idlib must be read in this context. While Erdogan has recently been promoting an ostensibly clear position for the future of Northern Syria, those who monitor his internal, regional, and international positions on the Syrian crisis over the past years will find a broader range of acceptable actions based on self-interest. The international actors of Europe and the United States must not take these claims at face value, and the people of Syria would benefit were the international community to look past the humanitarian rhetoric of the Turkish state and base their understanding of and response to Turkish intentions in Syria on the state's past actions within its southern neighbor.

Erdogan presents a vision of Idlib designed to appeal to an international, and specifically Western, audience in his article "[The World Must Stop Assad](#)," published in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the article, Mr. Erdogan contends that the Al Nusra Front (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) represents "a fraction of Idlib's population," and that only Turkey's method of handling the counterterrorism efforts these pockets require can prevent unnecessary bloodshed. These have also been articulated by his foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to suggest that only a coalition that includes

Turkey to fight terrorists in Idlib can a massacre be averted.

By focusing on one individual terrorist group, this argument obfuscates the large number of branching extremist groups operating under a variety of names within Idlib. These groups, similarly motivated Al-Qaeda's ideology are estimated to number at least 10,000. Their continued ability to operate in Idlib presents a much larger threat both regionally and internationally than Erdogan's messaging would allow. The complicated and unsettling reality of Idlib is that—along with a significant civilian population—a variety of terrorist splinter groups pushed out of other areas of Syria have concentrated in Idlib, and the international community has limited information on the scope of their operations or overall integration into the general population of the area.

Consequently, the battle for Idlib will be complicated and challenging. However, Erdogan is only adding to the politicization of the situation with his selective perception of what 'terrorism' entails, and which actions are appropriate in the face of this threat. Moreover, Turkey's record in Syria does not suggest that their military forces will operate as a monitoring force to protect the citizens of Idlib from human rights abuses.

Rather, the Turkish state's own interests in its stance on Idlib must be taken into consideration just like the intentions of any other regional power involved in the conflict. Mr. Erdogan has regularly leveraged the humanitarian image of his country's significant refugee population for political ends. In contrast, Erdogan's actions have suggested little concern for Syrians in Syria for their own sake beyond their role in supporting his own goals as a regional actor.

Right now, Erdogan's strategy requires him to stand up to yesterday's allies—the Russians and the Syrian regime—in order to ensure that Turkey has a stake in the shaping of its southern border, where Idlib is located. However, Erdogan's usage of humanitarian justifications for this involvement should not be interpreted as reliable by any international body concerned in the preservation of human rights. Nor can he be allowed to blackmail the conscience of the international community to maintain his political agenda at the expense of what is ultimately best for the citizens of Idlib and Syria as a whole.

Afrin stands to mind as the foremost example of the Turkish state's involvement in Syria, and the contrast there between Erdogan's humanitarian rhetoric and the actions of the Turkish military on the ground cannot be forgotten. A number of international humanitarian organisations have reported on the variety of violations against civilians both during and after the battle, including strikes striking Afrin's main hospital and looting. The most recent report issued by the UN on 13/09/2018, titled, "[Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic](#)" documents the targeting of innocent civilians by the Turkish army in Afrin through hundreds of interviews. These air and ground attacks during the "Olive Branch" operations of early 2018 were also justified by claims that the Turkish state was fighting terrorism. Afrin, however, demonstrates that Turkish forces cannot be considered a trustworthy alternative to Russian or Syrian regime forces in Idlib.

Erdogan has also demonstrated limited interest in humanitarian concerns when the Assad regime's policies aligned with his own strategic goals. Erdogan failed to voice similar outrage when a large number of civilians were killed and displaced in Duma, Darya, and southern Damascus under the regime's ostensible campaign against terrorism. It is difficult to understand how these cases and that of Idlib differ except to the extent that it is not in Erdogan's interest to have the Syrian regime push towards the Turkish border.

The question of Idlib is an incredibly thorny one for any individual in the international community interested in preventing undue bloodshed. Yet the solution is hardly to ignore the reality that Idlib currently operates as a base for a number of extremist groups, and that many of the three million civilians of Idlib are also suffering under the rule of these groups. Nor can the international community take at face value the recommendations of an interested party such as Erdogan in light of his own actions. Rather, parties who do place humanitarian interests over political ones

must work to ensure that the rights of Syrian civilians are preserved, even as Idlib is rid of extremist groups. ❖



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