

Growing Rebel Capabilities Press the Syrian Regime

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Brief Analysis

Given the major setbacks the regime has suffered over the past week, now is a good time to apply maximum pressure on Assad, whether to force genuine diplomatic negotiations or accelerate a full military defeat.

On April 22, a coalition of Syrian rebel forces launched a major operation, "The Battle of Victory," to drive Assad regime forces from the northern Idlib province. Conducted with jihadist elements in a leading but not exclusive role, the campaign follows the successful capture of the provincial capital at the end of March. The current operation is larger and broader in geographic scope; it has produced some of the most serious fighting of the war and could mark a turning point.

If the rebels can consolidate and exploit their latest gains, the regime will have suffered another major defeat in a string of setbacks since February -- a sequence of events that suggests failing capacity among government and allied forces. The rebels would then be poised for further offensive operations in the north, and the boost in morale would likely energize them on other fronts. Moreover, much of the credit for their success would accrue to Islamist factions, including those linked to al-Qaeda, further strengthening their military and political position in the north and likely boosting it elsewhere in Syria as well.

The regime may yet be able to stabilize the situation, however. If so, it would signal that it is still in the fight and capable of vigorous military action.

THE IDLIB CAMPAIGN

The current offensive encompasses the area between Jisr al-Shughour and Ariha in southern Idlib province, and the northern al-Ghab plain of Hama province. These areas make up a dogleg salient of regime-held territory extending from Latakia province to just south of Idlib city. Rebel strategy appears to center on exploiting the regime's highly vulnerable position there in order to break its hold on the province and create conditions for follow-on operations elsewhere in the north.

Planning for the campaign may have begun as early as December, and rebel forces initiated serious operations against the salient in late March with the storming of Idlib city (see [PolicyWatch 2396, "The Battle for Idlib: Military Implications"](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-idlib-military-implications) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-idlib-military-implications>)). This set the conditions for broader, ongoing operations in the salient and northern Hama.

Round two of the campaign has been a more complex event -- a major operation with multiple objectives requiring multiple coordinated actions. As in the battle for Idlib city, a number of different rebel groups are involved, including Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), the umbrella group that comprises al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Jaish al-Sunna, Sham Legion, Liwa al-Haqq, and Ajnad al-Sham. They are acting in cooperation with six other rebel groups: Jaish al-Islam, al-Sham Front, Suqur al-Sham, al-Ghab Plain Faction, Jabhat al-Sumood, and the First Coastal Unit, which launched operations on the al-Ghab plain. Three other al-Qaeda-affiliated foreign elements are fighting alongside them as well: Katibat Turkistani (a.k.a. the Turkistan Islamic Party or TIP), Jund al-Sham, and Jabhat Ansar al-Din (an umbrella group for smaller factions, including the Chechen-led Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar and the Moroccan-led Harakat Sham al-Islam).

The rebels have once again been able to achieve a significant concentration of forces and heavy weapons. Ten to thirteen thousand fighters have reportedly taken part -- a plausible figure given that sixteen different groups are involved. They appear very well armed with plentiful ammunition. Heavy weapons employed include T-55, T-62, and T-72 tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, rocket launchers, mortars, and vehicle-mounted heavy anti-aircraft machine guns (12.7, 14.5, and 23 mm). Several types of anti-tank weapons have been heavily used, including RPG-7s, RPG-22s, M79s, and TOW missiles. Rebel videos show numerous accurate TOW attacks on regime armored vehicles and positions.

Rebel tactics in the current campaign are similar to those employed in the battle for Idlib city. Fighters have isolated and assaulted regime strongpoints in the countryside, cutting lines of communication within the salient. Urban areas have been bombarded, infiltrated, and taken in close combat; locations posing strong resistance have been attacked by suicide-vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs).

Government-aligned sources provide some picture of the regime's order of battle. At the beginning of the offensive, its forces again comprised a mix of regulars from the 11th Division's 87th Brigade (already battered in the Idlib city battle), personnel from the National Defense Force, elements of the "Tiger Force" (one of the regime's most effective combat units), and possibly elements of the 54th Special Forces Regiment. Reinforcements sent to the battle area reportedly include elements of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party militia and the 106th Republican Guard Brigade, the 40th Tank Brigade, and Hezbollah forces.

Initially, the regime tried to maintain its hold on urban areas and the strongpoints spread throughout the salient. Some local counterattacks were conducted, at times successfully, but units at many positions appear to have fought alone until overrun; in certain cases, regime forces abandoned their positions rather than face destruction. The regime again attempted to use its air force to disrupt rebel operations but largely failed; poor weather early on probably played a role in this failure. The regime is now using airpower to heavily strike military and civilian areas seized by the rebels.

OUTCOMES

Jabhat al-Fatah and its allies have taken over Jisr al-Shughour city, the "brick factory" position east of Ariha, and a number of regime positions on the al-Ghab plain. Some positions resisted attack and had to be taken in close combat, and some were retaken by regime forces with local counterattacks. The brick factory strongpoint held off several determined pushes before falling to an assault assisted by several suicide attacks.

The offensive also appears to have imposed significant attrition on regime forces. Rebel videos show substantial regime casualties and the destruction or capture of tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, heavy antiaircraft machine guns, artillery pieces, rocket launchers, mortars, and ammunition. Given the war's attritional nature, the loss of men is especially damaging for the regime.

More broadly, the rebels have shown an improved level of operational skill, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. The offensive involved multiple coordinated battles over a broad area, and the emergence of such capabilities poses a serious threat to the regime. At least for the moment, the initiative in Idlib and northern Hama is in rebel hands.

For the regime's part, it still holds a reduced salient and some important positions, and the fighting has imposed attrition on rebel forces as well, including substantial personnel losses at some key points. Regime forces are attempting to broaden the salient in some areas and create an alternate supply route through it. How the battle develops in the coming days will depend on a number of factors, including:

- The rebels' ability to sustain momentum and unity of effort while dealing with regime counterattacks.
- The regime's ability to prevent further loss of important positions, move reinforcements to the area, and successfully press its counterattacks.

IMPLICATIONS

The rebels have the opportunity to conclude the Idlib campaign with another major victory, effectively destroying both the regime's position in the province and the forces involved in its defense. In doing so, they would acquire even more heavy weapons and ammunition, thereby energizing further operations -- especially, but not only, by Islamist elements.

Yet if the regime is able to hold on, prevent further serious losses, and retake more lost positions, the final outcome would represent something of a setback for the rebels. It would be an opportunity lost, and it would make the regime's position in Idlib secure for the time being, albeit reduced -- at least until the rebels could mount another major effort.

Whatever the case, the regime is in a very difficult situation. The scale and scope of the rebel campaign in Idlib and Hama pose a real challenge to its strategy and capabilities. The regime was unable to retake the provincial capital lost in March and now faces a serious threat to the core of its remaining military position in the area. This challenge also comes amid other setbacks in Aleppo, Quneitra, and Deraa provinces, where regime offensives have either stalled or lost ground, sometimes even when its normally dependable allied forces were involved. The overall situation points to potentially failing military capability after four years of attrition warfare. Even avoiding a major defeat in Idlib would not necessarily dispel the renewed sense of pending regime failure. Its forces are pressed on other fronts as well, even close to Damascus, and it does not have a "masse d' maneuver" to deploy to key points in the war. What Damascus needs is more (and more reliable) forces, but it is unclear where they would come from. Its Hezbollah, Iraqi, and Iranian allies may be reluctant to keep paying an increasing cost for a perhaps failing investment. The regime also needs to reassess its military and political strategies.

As of this writing, the Idlib campaign looks to be one of the more important developments of the war, possibly even

the elusive turning point that signals a clear shift in momentum against the regime after four years of inconclusive fighting. For those seeking a positive outcome in Syria, now is a good time to apply maximum pressure on the regime, either forcing it to genuinely negotiate a transition or causing its military failure.

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