

The Battle for Idlib: Military Implications

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Brief Analysis

Although not the catastrophe it could have been, the defeat holds major implications for the regime's strategy in Idlib province, its willingness to hold precarious positions elsewhere in Syria, and its dependence on foreign forces.

The Syrian regime suffered an important defeat over the past few days, losing the long-held capital of Idlib province to a coalition of rebel forces dominated by Islamist fighters. This event has major implications for the course of the war in Syria, likely affecting operations on other key fronts while creating new opportunities for the rebels and new challenges for the regime. The battle was an important test of the regime's ability to execute its military strategy, and the test was failed. Bashar al-Assad's forces are left with immediate tactical and operational hurdles in Idlib province, such as reorganizing their defenses and forces, maintaining their line of communication, and perhaps mounting a counterattack to retake the city. As for the rebels, they now have the opportunity to exploit their success through offensive operations in other provinces with potentially strategic effects, assuming they can maintain unity of effort and purpose.

Although the battle's full effects will be unclear for some time, the ground has evidently shifted, especially around Idlib. This suggests that all parties will need to reassess their plans going forward.

IDLIB'S STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Since 2012, the regime's military position in the province had eroded to the point that it controlled only a narrow dogleg salient extending approximately thirty miles from Hama and Latakia to Idlib and two Shiite towns (Kefraya and al-Fua) just to the north. Numerous battles had been fought for control of the roads leading to Idlib city as well as key towns and military strongpoints within the salient (Jisr al-Shughour, Ariha), but for some time the rebels had left the city itself alone.

From a military standpoint, it would have made sense for the regime to abandon Idlib and the salient, shorten its

lines, and use the forces and resources involved in its defense in Latakia and Hama provinces instead. But controlling the city and salient was strategically important for the regime. Politically, it supported the goal of maintaining a grip on provincial capitals while disputing rebel efforts to establish control over the provinces. Militarily, it gave the regime a base for attacking rebel forces in Idlib province, extending its area of control northeast toward Aleppo city.

For the rebels, Idlib had to be a tempting target given its political and military significance and its vulnerability. A combination of local developments over the past several months likely contributed to the operation's development and execution, including the reduction of rebel divisions through the elimination of moderate elements, largely by al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, the acquisition of heavy weapons in this process (e.g., tanks and antitank guided missiles), and the formation of the Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) operations room for coordinating efforts against the city. These developments gave the rebels the manpower, firepower, and coordination capabilities they needed to conduct a major offensive.

THE BATTLE

The operation's main objective was to take Idlib city. Follow-on operations against the salient may yet unfold, but the initial actions aimed to isolate and seize the capital.

The rebel forces involved were largely a coalition of Islamist units, with some more moderate elements playing a lesser role. Jabhat al-Nusra was a significant participant but not the only one. Other units that seemed to play prominent roles included Ahrar al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haqq, and Failaq al-Sham. Reports from opposition sources indicate four to five thousand personnel took part, supported by a significant concentration of heavy weapons (tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery/mortars, and anti-aircraft weapons in a direct-fire role). These forces reportedly fought with determination.

To take the city, rebel units conducted concentric attacks against the outer defenses, including the reduction of regime strongpoints and seizure of key terrain features. They then penetrated the city along multiple axes, seizing the inner city and so-called "security core." Supporting operations were carried out to pressure the Shiite towns to the north and prevent reinforcement from the south. These operations culminated quickly with the fall of the city; the most intense fighting was for the outer defenses.

REGIME DEFENSIVE OPERATIONS

Most of the regime forces defending Idlib reportedly consisted of elements from the irregular National Defense Forces and the army's 11th Division. Some regime-associated sources reported that army special forces and additional 11th Division elements were sent as reinforcements, but if so they had little effect on the outcome. Regime forces apparently fought hard to hold the city's outer defenses but were unable to stop the accelerating rebel advance, and at times they risked another catastrophic defeat like those suffered by regime forces in Raqqqa province last summer. Air and artillery units conducted numerous strikes against rebel areas around the city, inflicting casualties on fighters and civilians, but they were unable to turn the tide.

What is surprising about Idlib's fall is the regime's relatively flaccid response to the rebel offensive. Assad's forces had at least a few days of advance warning, relied on airpower for an active response, carried out limited (if any) reinforcement, and conducted an essentially passive defense. They may have withdrawn some weapons and personnel once the outer defenses were breached, perhaps preventing an even larger defeat.

IMPLICATIONS

Although rebel forces achieved an important success at Idlib, the ultimate consequences will likely remain uncertain for some time. Many ballyhooed offensives by both sides have run out of steam once initial advantages

dissipated and defenders mobilized to meet the threat. Nevertheless, some initial outcomes are already clear.

Most notably, the provincial capital has changed hands, with all of the political and military effects that implies. The rebels have significantly improved their military position in Idlib province and perhaps more broadly in northern Syria, while the regime's remaining position in the province is in danger.

Both sides have also suffered attrition in personnel and materiel, though the losses do not appear grievous. The regime lost some heavy weapons and ammunition, but post-battle videos have not shown much of this. Perhaps the most significant personnel losses were among rebel commanders, a number of whom were reported killed.

For the regime, the implications are not good. Even if it did manage to withdraw some forces and proves capable of holding the rest of the salient, this is a clear and public political loss and a strategic military failure. The regime will need to reassess its concept of holding exposed positions and potentially give up on some areas it has chosen to defend until now -- a potentially major change in the war's course. In particular, it will have to look at its positions in Deir al-Zour and Deraa provinces, where both capitals are at the end of long salients into territory controlled by the "Islamic State"/ISIS or the rebels.

Damascus is likely also troubled by the failure of its forces at Idlib. This was a fight by regime personnel -- not Hezbollah, not Iraqis, not Iranians -- and they were not up to the task. This raises doubts about their ability to hold other places that are not bolstered by allied forces, once again demonstrating Assad's dependence on these allies for effective ground units.

For the rebel groups involved in the battle, Idlib tested their ability to mount a serious operation against a key position that the regime wanted and tried to hold. The Islamist factions in particular committed significant manpower and material resources to the operation, and they put themselves in position to inflict a strategic defeat: namely, effective destruction of the regime's position in Idlib province, loss of the capital city, and loss of the forces involved in its defense. They have at least partially achieved these goals.

Moreover, the fact that Islamist groups led the victory will help them consolidate their position in Idlib and may give them an Islamist capital to rival that of ISIS in Raqqa. Their resultant increase in support and recruitment could further diminish the prospects for moderate rebels.

NEXT STEPS

The rebels have acquired some additional heavy weapons and probably ammunition from defeated regime forces, and this could energize further offensive operations. They may choose to move against the remaining portions of the Idlib salient, and they will have options on other fronts as well.

But sustaining an offensive is not so easy. To do so, the rebels will need to:

- consolidate their gains in Idlib;
- deal with the pocket formed by the Shiite towns north of the city;
- reorganize and resupply their forces; and
- decide on their next objectives while keeping their fighting coalition intact.

Many past rebel offensives have ended due to loss of focus, lack of initiative, and political infighting. But if they can keep it together, they seem to have three options beyond Idlib province, each of which would pose serious problems for Assad: (1) they could strike regime forces threatening Aleppo to relieve pressure on that city and eliminate regime centers of resistance at Nubl and Zahra; (2) they could move into Latakia province to threaten the regime's heartland; (3) they could move in the direction of Hama city and its key military airfield.

CONCLUSION

Operations around Idlib continue as of this writing: the rebels are pushing against regime positions south of city and interdicting/harassing the line of communication to Ariha (now the tip of the salient), while the regime is reportedly preparing a counteroffensive to retake the city. So the final word on this battle has not been written. Indeed, four years of war in Syria have demonstrated that the effects of even dramatic developments can attenuate over time. The rebels are often too fractious for long-term continuity of effort, and the regime has proven capable of adjusting to setbacks. In a war of attrition, no one battle is decisive.

Key questions for the future include:

- How will the regime adjust to the defeat strategically, operationally, and tactically?
- The failure at Idlib suggests that the regime will become still more dependent on its foreign allies, so will Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shiite militias increase their involvement in Syria?
- How will the rebels exploit their victory, and which of the three options outlined above will they choose, if any?
- How will the outcome affect the balance within the opposition and between the rebels and ISIS?
- How will it affect Washington's position on Syria, U.S. operations against ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked elements in the country, and the Obama administration's plans to train and equip a moderate rebel force?

However these questions are answered, the battle's outcome indicates that some of the strategies employed before and during the fight may no longer be appropriate -- not in Idlib province, and perhaps not in the rest of Syria either.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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