



# Turkey's Mission Impossible in Sustaining Idlib's Unstable equilibrium

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The advances by Syria's regime against the opposition-controlled territory in the northwest governorate of Idlib triggered yet another cross-border military operation in the country by Turkey in February. Further escalation was prevented only through a meeting between Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin on March 5 in Moscow. However, the unstable equilibrium in Idlib is more fragile than ever, and Turkey urgently needs to sustain it.

The fate of Idlib has become a Gordian knot for Turkey. The Assad regime focused its attention on regaining control of the territory as part of its strategy of settling the civil war from a position of strength. For Turkey, preventing this and sustaining the opposition's control were essential, because many important issues are at stake in Idlib: the future of its Syria policy, the political process in the civil war, relations with Russia, and the 2016 Turkey-EU refugee deal.

## Forging an Unstable Equilibrium

With the opposition gradually losing control of territories since 2015, Idlib emerged as the last bastion of the Syrian revolution. In addition to its locals, it hosts internally displaced persons as well as Syrian and foreign militants of different ideological backgrounds. Unable to stop the regime advances on its own and unwilling to see the fall of the opposition, by early 2017 Turkey had accommodated itself to the Astana process led by Russia and Iran, which listed Idlib one of four de-escalation zones. However, the Assad regime eliminated the other three, bringing Idlib increasingly under the international spotlight by fall 2017. As part of evacuation and repatriation deals between the opposition and the regime, militants and civilians from other zones continued to pour into Idlib, aggravating the challenges there.

In September 2017, the Astana partners agreed to enforce the de-escalation zone in Idlib through a new demarcation agreement and the creation of Turkish and Russian observation points. Further erosion of the de-escalation regime and an imminent regime offensive forced Turkey to sign the Sochi memorandum with Russia in September 2018. This introduced a demilitarization mechanism to uphold the ceasefire, to be monitored by the signatories, as well as timelines for ensuring safety of travel through the critical Latakia-Aleppo (M4) and Damascus-Aleppo (M5) motorways. It also reinforced previous commitments by the signatories to fighting radical elements, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Through a conciliatory policy toward Russia, Turkey hoped to contain the situation to prevent a refugee wave and to buy time to transform the radical groups in Idlib. By arguing for a transformative approach as opposed to the heavy-handed military one advocated by Russia, Turkey argued that these groups could cut their ties to the global Al Qaeda network and merge with the Syrian opposition. However, it could not control the internal scene in Idlib because Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other radicals refused to relinquish political control or give up their military presence. Nor could it control other dynamics in the conflict because the regime insisted on reclaiming Idlib.

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The incompatible positions of the different stakeholders in the Idlib situation set in motion a repetitive pattern, rendering any deal inherently unstable. The less-than-full-implementation of the Sochi memorandum created excuses for the regime to undertake military action, backed by Russia. Any further escalation could then be averted only through subsequent Russia-brokered deals to uphold the existing mechanisms. This required Turkey to accept new territorial gains by the regime in order to postpone a takeover of Idlib and an exodus of refugees. The repetition of this pattern several times throughout 2019 not only underscored the transitional nature of the ceasefire mechanism but also deepened Turkey's dependence on Russia.

Effectively, the Sochi memorandum created a very unstable equilibrium and left Turkey with an impossible mission to sustain the status quo. Since the alternative of a regime offensive would have created a major humanitarian catastrophe and triggered a new refugee crisis, Western powers, especially European ones, also invested their hopes on Turkey's ability to sustain the Sochi memorandum as the "best worst option." Since Western allies failed to help it restrain the regime or bring the radicals under control, however, Turkey further drifted toward Russia as the Idlib crisis loomed larger.

### **The Context of the Latest Crisis**

The latest crisis triggered by the offensive launched by the Syrian regime in December has new and old elements. The regime remained bent on reasserting full territorial control in Idlib and willing to capitalize on any pretext offered by the non-implementation of the Sochi memorandum. Turkey was concerned by this development for obvious reasons, and some game changers alarmed it further. First, the rapid regime advance and the collapse of the opposition lines ran counter to earlier predictions that Assad's troops would face difficulties in a ground offensive. Second, the pattern noted above appeared to be broken, as Russia this time seemed uninterested in restraining Assad. The conditions were ripe for a doomsday scenario for Turkey.

At the same time, there was a nascent element in Turkey's strategic thinking. Emboldened by its earlier military incursions, particularly the Peace Spring operation last fall, a glorification of putting "boots on the ground" came to shape Syria policy, because it was argued to yield political dividends in the diplomatic negotiations with Ankara's interlocutors. Some circles even operated on the assumption that Turkey enjoyed escalation dominance over the Assad regime and Russia in Idlib.

In this context Turkey concluded that military escalation would be the only way to avert the worst-case scenario of a total military victory for the Syrian regime. This led to the decision to deploy a sizeable military force in

Idlib in support of the opposition's counteroffensive. Thus, unlike in its previous military incursions, for the first time Turkey's main target was the regime and affiliated Shiite militia forces backed by Iran. Moreover, Turkey also dispatched air-defense and electronic-warfare systems to challenge Russia's air dominance over Idlib, which risked triggering an escalation spiral. The high number of casualties as a result of direct attacks on Turkish units, particularly on February 27, triggered Turkey's launch of its fourth cross-border operation, Spring Shield, upgrading the ongoing military activities into a self-standing operation. It dealt a heavy blow to the regime military assets, thanks particularly to its employment of drone capabilities. The failure of Russian mediation to prevent direct confrontation between Turkey and the regime forces, rising casualty figures, and mutual retaliatory attacks threatened to draw Turkey into an uncontrolled spiral of escalation, giving rise to speculations about an all-out interstate conflict.

However, the Russian emergency brake eventually was applied once again. In Moscow on March 5, Erdoğan and Putin agreed an addendum to the Sochi memorandum. This requires Turkey to accede to the altered lines of territorial control in return for freezing the conflict and preventing further regime advances. In addition to recognizing the regime's de facto control over the Damascus-Aleppo motorway, Turkey also committed to a mechanism to create a safe zone around the Latakia-Aleppo (M4) motorway, to be jointly enforced with Russia. The deal also reiterates earlier commitments of the two partners regarding fighting terrorists.

### Implications for Turkey

The recent crisis in Idlib has several implications for Turkey's Syria policy. First, while the unstable equilibrium became more volatile, Ankara's need to sustain some form of ceasefire mechanism continues unabated. The Moscow addendum to the Sochi memorandum effectively formalized a new reality by redrawing the lines of contact between the regime and the opposition. The root causes of the crisis—the millions of trapped civilians in Idlib threatened by further regime advance and the continuing military and political power of radicals there—remain but now play out in a narrower space and under more time pressure. Relieved of the pressure of fighting on other fronts, the regime has focused its remaining resources on Idlib and wants to see a military solution to achieve full territorial control there sooner rather than later. It therefore continues its military build-up along the narrower contact line. In contrast, Turkey is no longer willing to tolerate the pattern of renegotiation at its expense and therefore treats the Moscow addendum as a durable framework until a final settlement to the conflict. The current lines of territorial control are red lines for Ankara since any regime advance beyond them will threaten the Idlib city center and trigger a massive refugee outflow. Therefore, Turkey continues to reinforce its positions, which turns the province into a tinderbox. Should a renewed regime offensive materialize, Turkey is highly likely to retaliate militarily to sustain the deal reached in Moscow in March.

Second, given the imperative of sustaining the status quo, Turkey is being drawn deeper into the opposition-controlled zone. The worsening humanitarian situation there and new demographic and territorial realities force it to assume larger political and economic governance responsibilities. Turkey may consider transforming the status of Idlib into one similar to that of the other enclaves in Syria where it exercises direct control. Meanwhile, the rationale for its military engagement has undergone a major change. Under the Astana-Sochi framework, Turkey was a guarantor of the de-conflicting mechanism, under which its military presence was confined to a monitoring mission. In addition to upholding this role, the March Moscow deal implicitly recognizes Turkey's more robust military deployment. In the new context, all stakeholders

expect it to play a larger role in the enforcement of the ceasefire and the provision of order. More specifically, buying time to manage the challenge of radical groups is not a sustainable strategy anymore, and Turkey has come under pressure to address their presence. But, given that there is bigger time pressure to manage the Idlib situation, moderating the radicals will hardly be possible, and Turkey may move to employ coercive measures to reduce, if not eliminate, their military presence. Such a move would be definitely in Turkey's best interest by eliminating one major spoiler to the ceasefire and thwarting the regime's efforts to use their presence to justify further offensives. However, as has been the case so far, transforming the internal scene in Idlib may remain an impossible mission for Turkey.

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Third, the crisis demonstrated the limits to Turkey's recent strategic thinking that is centered on the utility of force. The assumption that it commanded escalation dominance in Idlib produced mixed results. Turkey has inflicted heavy damages on regime troops and affiliated militias. However, in the face of Russian retaliation and its limited capabilities, it could not sustain further escalation. Nor could it get political dividends from its tactical victories against Assad's forces as it had to accommodate to the latter's territorial gains. Nonetheless, the reliance on force paid off to some extent, for it helped avoid a doomsday scenario. At the end of the day, the military escalation remained controlled and calculated, and Turkey stepped back from the brink of total inter-state war. Overall, Turkey has managed to preserve the status quo in Idlib in return for some tactical concessions—but the unstable equilibrium remains.

Finally, the recent crisis in Idlib confirmed the dependent strategic relationship between Turkey and Russia in Syria. The initial Russian mediation failed to prevent a rapid escalation while the risk of direct confrontation between the two countries appeared imminent. Many Turkish and foreign observers attributed the crisis to a strategic divergence between Ankara and Moscow, while others treated it as a timely opportunity to remake the Turkish-U.S. partnership. However, eventually, Turkey returned to upholding unstable equilibrium as its modus operandi, due to the underlying fact of Russia's superior leverage in Syria compared to the weak commitment of Western actors. Without a major shift in the fundamentals that forged Turkish-Russian cooperation in the first place, the crisis ended up consolidating Ankara's strategic dependence on Moscow and drawing it deeper into the Idlib quagmire. Therefore, Turkey will look to maintain the joint security mechanisms with Russia in Idlib and beyond.

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