



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
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# Security Review

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**The Idlib Crisis: Threats and  
Challenges**

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From the end of January 2020, combat operations in the Syrian province of Idlib have become highly active which has not only caused large numbers of casualties among the parties but also generated new streams of refugees.

The more active involvement of Turkey and Russia in the conflict, on the other hand, has created many threats (including the danger of the beginning of a direct military escalation) and challenges for the security of the region.

### **Importance of Idlib**

In the Syrian civil war, which started back in 2011, the opposition had strongholds in various parts of the country. One such stronghold was the Idlib province. The rebels who fought against the Assad regime were even close to a victory (toppling Assad). However, the involvement of Russia in the conflict in September 2015 not only saved the Assad regime but turned the situation around. Russia, its allied Iran and the Assad regime gradually, yet consistently, managed to overcome centers of resistance in various Syrian regions.<sup>1</sup> The fighters and populations of those regions sought shelter in the Idlib province.<sup>2</sup>

Official Damascus believes that they will manage to achieve a peaceful agreement with the pro-Kurdish forces currently fortified in the north-east of the country. Therefore, it is not the Assad regime's priority to conduct combat actions in this direction.

Due to the abovementioned reasons, at the outset of 2020, the Idlib province, home to about 3.5 million people and tens of thousands of fighters, represented the last stronghold of the opposition.<sup>3</sup>

### **Positions of the Parties**

It is in Moscow's interests for the Syrian civil war to be concluded as quickly as possible as this requires enormous time, energy and finances on the part of Russia. Also, the opposition forces entrenched in Idlib attacked the Russian military base on numerous occasions. Hence, Moscow needs to restore control of the Assad regime over the entire territory of Syria in order to eliminate such threats as well.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/will-russia-risk-conflict-turkey-idlib>

<sup>2</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201g8xd>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_idlib\\_chaos\\_the\\_latest\\_test\\_for\\_turkish\\_russian\\_ties](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_idlib_chaos_the_latest_test_for_turkish_russian_ties)

The Assad regime wants to restore control over the entire territory of the country,<sup>4</sup> ending the nine-year civil war that has exhausted and depleted both military and political elites as well as the whole country.

Iran and pro-Iranian forces are traditionally supporting the actions undertaken by Assad and Russia.

The main adversaries of the Assad regime-Russia-Iran axis are Turkey and the opposition (including the powerful Al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham). However, since Ankara sent thousands of opposition fighters to support the military actions conducted under the Peace Spring operation in Libya and north-eastern Syria at the end of 2019, a sort of vacuum was created on the Idlib front. Therefore, the adversary decided to utilize this chance and attack from this direction.

It must be noted that in this case Ankara's interests have moved to the forefront. There are two main reasons why the restoration of the Assad regime's control over the Idlib province is not in Turkish interests: 1. Turkey and the pro-Kurdish opposition will be weakly represented in all negotiations dedicated to the resolution of the Syrian conflict and 2. Turkey, which already houses up to 5 million refugees (for whom it has spent about USD 40 billion to date and who are creating numerous problems in the country<sup>5</sup>), will be hard pressed to accept 3.5 million more refugees and take care of them.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of refugees is also quite important for Europe which also does not wish to accept more of them. It is worth noting that the crisis connected to the movement of new masses of refugees over the Greek-Turkish border remains unresolved to date.<sup>7</sup>

The main interest of the United States in the region (including in Syria) is to destroy terrorist groups and contain Russia and Iran. Therefore, it has stationed its troops in north-eastern Syria. Washington mostly backs the pro-Kurdish forces in the Syrian conflict.

### **Attack on Idlib**

An intensive land offensive by the Assad regime and its supporters on the Idlib province started on January 27, 2020. This was accompanied by bombings by the Russian military air forces which produced large numbers of casualties (including women, children and the elderly). Air

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<sup>4</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201g8xd>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/idlib-test-erdogan-putin-relationship>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-05/turkey-s-erdogan-is-learning-why-nato-membership-matters>

<sup>7</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/04/turkey-west-european-union-idlib-syria-greece-border-refugees-erdogan/>

support provided by Russia made the land offensive of the Syrian government forces much easier<sup>8</sup> as a result of which they managed to occupy a significant part of the Idlib province.<sup>9</sup>

They also occupied the strategically significant M5 (connecting Aleppo with Damascus) motorway and directly threatened the city of Idlib which is home to a million people. They also surrounded several Turkish observation points there (in reality – military bases).

As a result of the attack on the Idlib province, about 1 million peaceful civilians had to flee their homes and move towards Turkey.<sup>10</sup> Ankara has, at this stage, managed to direct this first wave towards Afrin. However, it would have been hard pressed to stop a bigger wave of refugees.<sup>11</sup>

Given the situation, Turkey sent thousands of troops and military machinery (including tanks) to Idlib<sup>12</sup> aiming to halt the attack by the Assad regime.<sup>13</sup>

This military intervention took the lives of 58 Turkish soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Most of them died as a result of air strikes on Turkish military convoys. The February 27 attack was the bloodiest of them all as it killed 34 Turkish soldiers.<sup>15</sup> It is a noteworthy fact that the Russian side did not even permit Turkey to use Idlib airspace to evacuate wounded Turkish soldiers with helicopters.

The pro-Turkish opposition fighters also suffered heavy casualties. The number of casualties was even greater on the Assad regime's side which were bombarded not only by Turkish artillery but also Turkey-produced novel drones. Both sides experienced heavy losses in terms of the military machinery as well (including drones).<sup>16</sup>

Ankara addressed NATO for support. However, in this case, naturally, it was the fourth article of the treaty that was activated, not the fifth one. The United States and some European states made statements in support of Turkey; however, earlier Turkey was unable to get Patriot

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1029>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/russia-turkey-idlib-heated-rhetoric.html>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-turkey-talks-a-last-chance-to-avert-idlib-calamity/2020/03/05/8c97c0b6-5eb0-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-turkey-talks-a-last-chance-to-avert-idlib-calamity/2020/03/05/8c97c0b6-5eb0-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d_story.html)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/1029>

<sup>12</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/russia-turkey/will-russia-risk-conflict-turkey-idlib>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/scenarios-battle-idlib-200217090635717.html>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-turkey-talks-a-last-chance-to-avert-idlib-calamity/2020/03/05/8c97c0b6-5eb0-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-turkey-talks-a-last-chance-to-avert-idlib-calamity/2020/03/05/8c97c0b6-5eb0-11ea-ac50-18701e14e06d_story.html)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/eu-foreign-policy-meet-ankara-greek-border-refugee-crisis.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.cepa.org/battlefield-tomorrow>

missiles as a result of buying Russian-produced S-400s. Therefore, Ankara was left without actual military support from the West with regard to Idlib.<sup>17</sup>

### **Moscow's New Peace Agreement**

Since none of the parties of the conflict planned on conceding their positions, the number of casualties was growing and there was a threat of a greater escalation (including a direct confrontation between Russia and Turkey).

Hence, the parties needed to somehow de-escalate the situation for which purpose the technical level delegations of the two countries met numerous times but failed to reach an agreement. It became necessary to organize a Russian-Turkish meeting at the presidential level where the parties managed to agree on certain issues after six hours of intensive negotiations.

According to the signed document, Russia and Turkey expressed their support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. They also pointed out that they are prepared to fight against terrorism. The parties underlined that the Syrian conflict cannot be resolved through military means and that the refugees must return to their homes.

The parties also agreed to the following:

1. Ceasefire in the Idlib province starting from 00:01 of March 6, 2020.
2. Formation of the so-called "security corridor" which must cover the territories 6 km north and 6 km south of the M4 motorway connecting Aleppo with Latakia. The specific parameters and rules of the functioning of the so-called "security corridor" will be agreed upon between the defense ministries of Russia and Turkey within seven days.
3. Starting from March 15, 2020 the M4 motorway will be patrolled jointly by Turkey and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

Several days after signing the agreement, Ankara stated that the territories south of the so-called "security corridor" would be occupied by its adversary,<sup>19</sup> the Assad regime. It seems that during the negotiations in Moscow, Turkey was forced to make some concessions in its adversary's favor (including territorial ones).

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<sup>17</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-us/erdogans-next-steps-syria>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/russia-turkey-deal-idlib-important-putin-erdogan.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-patrol-north-russians-south-of-m4-highway-in-idlib-minister-152865>

At the same time, it is also worth noting that a number of important issues did not end up in the document. These issues are directly related to the escalation of the situation in Idlib and without addressing them the chances of peacefully resolving the conflict will be reduced. For example, the document does not provide for the mechanisms for fighting against terrorism as mentioned in the preamble. For Russia and the Assad regime, this creates the basis to renew their attack against the Al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist organization, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which controls the majority of territories in the Idlib province in a moment which is favorable for them.

### **What Did the Idlib Crisis Show Us?**

- Russia and Turkey have differing long-term interests in the region. Therefore, given their nature, they cannot be strategic allies.
- Russian-Turkish relations have their limitations. Ankara has clearly seen that getting close to Russia is neither secure nor beneficial for the country.
- However, this does not mean that Ankara can easily shift its course back towards the West. A number of fundamental differences on various issues still remain between Turkey and the West.
- Moscow and Ankara are cooperating especially closely in the fields of trade and economics and despite their differing interests in the military-political fields, are trying their best to maintain these relations (including a USD 25 billion trade turnover<sup>20</sup>) which are important for their economies. Therefore, they are more tactical (situational) allies for one another right now.
- Moscow has gained the military-political upper hand in this round of confrontation between Russia and Turkey.
- Even though Turkey's involvement slowed down the advance of the Assad regime and its allies by land, it nevertheless failed to fully halt the adversary due to the Russian control of the airspace.
- Russian military supported its allied Assad regime fully and was not even avoiding direct military escalation with Turkey.
- The West did not get actively involved in the Idlib crisis and limited itself to statements supporting Turkey.
- The usage of drones and unmanned airborne vehicles have become important in the contemporary stage of warfare. However, this has failed to replace the importance of air domination through military jets.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/scenarios-battle-idlib-200217090635717.html>

- The new peace agreement signed in Moscow between Turkey and Russia looks more like a temporary truce which the parties need in order to pause, regroup and buy time to acquire new allies.

### **Threats and Challenges**

The Idlib crisis and the situation around it causes numerous threats and challenges both globally and regionally:

- The latest peace agreement contains a lot of ambiguity. If we couple this with Russia's traditional attitude towards signed documents, it is definitely not excluded that this agreement will be violated just as the previous 13 agreements signed regarding Syria were. In such a case, the danger of a direct military confrontation between Russia and Turkey will once again arise which is not in the interests of Georgia.
- In the case of the activation of the conflict, new streams of refugees will appear, creating new threats and challenges for Turkey and Europe.
- Radical jihadist fighters could easily mix with the refugees, creating threats of terrorism in Turkey, Europe and other parts of the world.
- As the case of Chataev and his group showed, radical groups moving from Syria to Turkey and containing fighters with Caucasian origins could choose Georgia as one of their destinations. This will create additional threats and challenges for our country.
- With the combat operations taking place in Idlib, the Turkish lira depreciated. Georgian citizens working in Turkey get their wages primarily in this currency and later exchange it to more secure currencies, sending it to Georgia. Now they will be able to purchase smaller amounts of these secure currencies to send home.