

## THE TICKING BOMB OF IDLIB

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## Key Takeaways

➤ Open-source pieces of intelligence suggest that the Syrian Arab Armed Forces have deployed its battle-hardened, elite formations in the area of operations for a robust offensive targeting Idlib and adjacent provinces. These units (*including, but not limited to the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, the Tiger Forces, detachments from the Republican Guard, and the Air Force Intelligence's operational segments*) are organized in a politico-sectarian basis in compliance with the Baath regime's foundations. Many of the principal unit commanders have acquired notorious records throughout the civil war due to several war crimes ranging from indiscriminate use of force to barrel bombings and employment of chemical weapons. Such a formidable buildup, coupled with a problematic military leadership, pose significant risks to Turkey's national security.

➤ The Syrian forces could seek provocations by sporadically targeting the forward deployed Turkish military personnel in Syria for counterterrorism and de-escalation missions. Both in Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, such provocations took place. The Syrian Arab Army advances with various paramilitary groups backing it. These paramilitaries cannot be fully controlled by strict rules of engagement like a regular unit. Thus, even if Damascus does not intend a deliberate escalation, armed provocations against Turkey's observation posts are likely once the ground incursion begins. Such escalatory moves would force the Turkish military to respond in kind. Ankara has already fostered its deterrent posture along the border areas. Should Damascus opt for further pushing into Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch areas of responsibility, an inter-state conflict may be triggered.

➤ The overture of the Idlib campaign suggests that the Syrian Arab Army has adopted a scorched earth operational concept including the use of heavy and indiscriminate firepower in urban areas.

➤ Due to demographic asymmetries, holding Idlib marks a bigger challenge for the regime forces than clearing it from the rebel groups. Simply put, the Syrian Arab Army does

not have the adequate manpower to run protracted stability operations for holding the ground in a densely populated, predominantly Sunni, and urbanized area adjacent to the Turkish border. Besides, Assad's military planners cannot afford stationing their most combat-capable units hundreds of kilometers away from the capital for a long time. Thus, from the regime's standpoint, the Idlib offensive should adopt a blitz operational tempo supported by robust firepower for delivering 'shock and awe' results.

➤ Repeating their previous operational record, Assad's forces will most probably opt for de-populating the province through terrorizing the inhabitants. To do so, the regime would need Russian airpower, along with the Syrian Arab Air Force's systematic barrel bombing and the Syrian Arab Army's indiscriminate shelling. In the meanwhile, a 'siege to starvation' campaign could be conducted in suitable locations. Militarily, an alternative to this overall strategy might be limited chemical weapons use to exacerbate mass displacements. All the abovementioned battle plans could bring about a menacing humanitarian challenge pushing into the Turkish territory.

➤ The decision to initiate or avoid chemical warfare remains a complicated issue. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces could employ chemical weapons in Idlib in case the regime's military planners aim de-populating the area of operations without totally destroying the infrastructure, something that cannot be achieved through heavy conventional bombardments. The chemical agent of choice would make a great difference in terms of persistence and lethality. Moreover, the regime's – and its Russian patrons' – threat perceptions emanating from a US-led punitive intervention could be a restraining factor.

➤ Although it is not widely discussed in public debates, the Turkish territory can be affected from a large-scale contamination in Idlib depending on weather conditions and the chemical warfare agent of choice. Throughout the civil war, Syria's several conventional weapons, such as ballistic missiles and air defense missiles, hit Turkey

many times. However, employment of weapons of mass destruction at Turkey's doorstep, which would pose the risk of contamination, would cross a very dangerous threshold. Ankara would then consider a robust response that can include striking the regime's strategic assets.

▶▶ Apart from the humanitarian challenges of a depopulating military campaign, the presence of various radical groups with links to al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations bring about additional security risks for Turkey. Clearly, a massive refugee influx could function as a vector conveying terrorist cells into the Turkish territory. Conducting background checks, investigations, and setting watch-lists for thousands of militants and their families, separating them from the local inhabitants of the province,

and more importantly, fulfilling these tasks under pressing armed conflict conditions remain beyond the capabilities of any intelligence apparatus around the globe.

▶▶ Already hosting more than 3,5 million Syrian refugees and shielding Europe, Turkey cannot tolerate further humanitarian problems exported from the civil war.

▶▶ In essence, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces' top chain of command, and their agenda of changing Syria's demographic makeup for the country's long-term reconstruction, remain the underlying reasons of the global problem of Syrian refugees and displaced persons. The forthcoming Idlib offensive represents a revealing example in this regard.

## Composition of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces' Military Buildup

Mimicking Hafez Assad's conduct to quell the Muslim Brotherhood's Hama uprising in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, contemporary Syrian Arab Army also follows a 'selective deployment' strategy. In this sense, politically reliable elite units, primarily manned by Alawite officers (in some cases both the officers and soldiers), are preferred to pioneer the offensives. This selective deployment strategy, coupled with the heavy attrition factor throughout the civil war, remain the underlying reasons of Assad's forces' inability to run multi-front operations. Notably, following the successful advances in the south, close to the Golan Heights, nearly the very same units are now deployed in the northwest of the country for the Idlib campaign.

A careful assessment of the available open-source evidences suggest that the regime deployed the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, the Tiger Forces, the Republican Guard, and the Air Force Intelligence, along with units from the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps in the area of operations<sup>1</sup>. Recently, the regime sources claimed that while the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division would be leading the offensive in the al-Ghaab Plain, the Tiger Forces would assault the Idlib-Hama axis<sup>2</sup>. A concentration of armored platforms and main battle tanks was also spotted close to the jump-off points shortly before the current, initial stages of the campaign. At the time of writing, open-source visual evidence from the battleground showed that the Syrian Arab Army has been also sending engineering units to the area of operations to compensate for the blown-up bridges.

In terms of military-geopolitics, the Idlib offensive could easily witness very high sortie rates generated by the Russian Aerospace Forces and the Syrian Arab Air Force thanks to the proximity of the Hmeymim Air Base and Abu al-Duhur Air Base to the target areas. Notably, it was reported that recently, the Russian Aerospace Forces contingent in

Latakia particularly targeted the drones and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) in the possession of the Idlib militants<sup>3</sup>. Besides, currently, the Syrian Arab Air Force focuses on barrel bombing in the peripheral areas. In the meanwhile, Moscow used the timing well to signal a firm hands-off warning to the West through its military exercises. At the time of writing, the Russian Navy deployed a formidable armada off the Syrian coasts for drills<sup>4</sup>, supported by robust air assets such as the Tu-160 strategic bombers and Tu-142M anti-submarine warfare aircraft<sup>5</sup>. Besides, the Russian Armed Forces are set to conduct massive Vostok 2018 Exercises with reportedly some 300,000 troops joined by the Chinese military.

Apart from the heavy buildup, the military leadership of the planned Syrian offensive is highly menacing.

Firstly, there is the Maher Assad (and his 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division) factor. The thuggish figure of the ruling clan was relieved from his commanding post and appointed to a secondary role in the General Staff back in 2016. Russian sources portray Maher as the critical conduit between Syria and Iran. Following his partial demise, in early 2017, it was even speculated that Maher Assad had attempted a coup to overthrow Bashar. In fact, given the similar record of Rifaat and Hafez in the past, brothers' quarrel for power was not alien to Syria<sup>6</sup>. Recently, Maher resumed his post at the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored as the commander of the dreadful formation. Maher Assad is known for his brutal conducts and violent nature<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the Syrian regime may not fully control his, and his notorious unit's, actions in Idlib. Thus, although open source intelligence alone cannot confidently prove or deny his presence close to Idlib now, Maher Assad's operational chain of command in the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division could bring about humanitarian catastrophes.

<sup>1</sup> Statement by the UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations, September 07, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eyes-on-idlib>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Al Masdar News, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-armys-4th-division-heads-to-northwest-syria-for-jisr-al-shughour-offensive/>, Accessed on: September 09, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Sputnik, <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201809051067767090-russian-warplanes-syria/>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/putin-erdogan-and-rohani-to-meet-hoping-avoid-bloodbath-in-idlib-1.6459463>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The Aviationist, <https://theaviationist.com/2018/09/03/heres-an-interesting-video-showing-some-of-the-russian-aircraft-deployed-to-syria-for-the-major-naval-exercise-in-the-med-sea/>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Kirill, Semenov. "Who Controls Syria? The Al-Assad Family the Inner Circle and the Tycoons", Russian International Affairs Council, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/who-controls-syria-the-al-assad-family-the-inner-circle-and-the-tycoons/>, February 2018, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-assad-brother/assads-brother-the-muscle-behind-the-throne-idNDEE86H08B20120718>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the Tiger Forces and its commander General Suheil Hassan were also deployed for the offensive. Coming from one of the central pillars of the Baath security apparatus, the Air Force Intelligence, and being a member of the ruling Alawite clan, General Hassan is considered to be a 'war hero' by pro-regime sources. At the outset of the civil war, he was at the critical Mezzeh Airbase. When he was transferred to Hama in 2011, he became one of the pioneers of the barrel bombs use and mass killings of the civilians<sup>8</sup>. While his Tiger Forces have started as a paramilitary group, they have gradually evolved into the regime's prestige unit. General Suheil Hassan has been swiftly promoted to the higher ranks. He was even personally rewarded by the Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov in 2017<sup>9</sup>. Although he seems to be very close to the Russian military leadership, which minimizes the risks of going renegade, General Hassan is sanctioned by the US and the EU for his brutal actions over the civilian population<sup>10</sup>. Besides, the Tiger Forces' operational record includes many problematic cases with barrel bombs and chlorine-based chemical warfare agents.

Other notable commanders in the campaign are General Aous Aslan, commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps detachments, and General Talal Makhoul, coming from the second strong Alawite clan of the country, happens to be the cousin of Bashar, and commanding the Republican Guard units<sup>11</sup>.

In brief, the very critical trait that these top military figures have in common is their long list of war crimes that put them at various sanctions lists, along with their ultra-sectarian worldview.

All in all, there is a very problematic military leadership overseeing the Idlib campaign. This leadership can cause a number of severe complications ranging from provoking a Turkish response through sporadic attacks to Turkey's de-escalation control posts to waging chemical warfare and systematic use of barrel bombs. Besides, the highly sectarian profile of the Syrian buildup in the area could easily commit mass killings and systematic violence on the Sunni inhabitants.

## Holding Idlib Remains a Challenge for the Syrian Arab Army

Although the current debates on the Idlib campaign focus on how the regime and its Russian patron would fight and clear the province from their adversaries, holding the ground and exerting effective control over the territory marks a much more challenging task for the Syrian Arab Army. Statistical studies in military sciences reveal that stability operations in counterinsurgency environments necessitate, as a minimum requirement, 20 troops per 1,000 inhabitants<sup>12</sup>. In this respect, Assad would need some 60,000 troops to decisively control Idlib and adjacent areas.

The regime, simply, cannot afford such a force allocation. The Syrian Arab Army is a heterogeneous entity. Many of its formations remain under-strength with only 500 to 1,000 personnel in regiments and brigades<sup>13</sup>. Although Assad enjoys some 100,000-strong manpower on the paper<sup>14</sup>, open-source intelligence pieces of evidence suggest that the regime has an estimated number of 20,000 elite and reliable troops for offensive operations<sup>15</sup>. In fact, this is why the Baath regime still needs Tehran's Quds Forces, Shiite militia harvested by Iran, as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah

<sup>8</sup> Lucas, Winter. "Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces". Small Wars Journal, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/suheil-al-hassan-and-the-syrian-army%E2%80%99s-tiger-forces>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCWYNFGtDCI>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> For the EU Sanctions List, see: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/124083/list-persons-entities-EU-restrictive-measures-Syria-30052017.pdf>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018; For the US Sanctions List, see: <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20170112.aspx>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Statement by the UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations, September 07, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eyes-on-idlib>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of force ratio in stability operations, see: R. Royce, Kneece, et al. Force Sizing for Stability Operations, Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> IISS, Military Balance 2018, Routledge, London, 2018, p.362.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Michael, Eisenstadt. "Has the Assad Regime 'Won' Syria's Civil War", The American Interest, May 2018.

which all together accounts for 30,000-strong, additional fighting power.

Capturing Idlib offers much to the regime and its allies. It hosts several choke points along the geostrategically key M5 highway that connects Aleppo and Damascus. Besides, armed groups of the province have acquired drone capabilities that threaten the Russian Hmeimim Base through asymmetric attacks. More importantly, forcing the inhabitants out of Syria would help Iran and the Baath regime in their quests to secure more favorable demographics in long term.

However, the campaign is also very demanding. Although the Syrian Arab Armed Forces can still execute a bold and tough offensive in Idlib, it lacks the required force generation capabilities for running large-scale, protracted stability operations over a predominantly Sunni population isolated from the Baath rule for years. More importantly, from a military standpoint, the regime would definitely opt for cutting the manpower resources for the non-state armed groups of Idlib which already enjoy thousands of fighters. In this regard, de-populating the province remains the core geopolitical aim of the campaign.

## The Core Objective of the Regime Offensive: De-Populating Idlib

De-population has been a key element of the regime operations through the civil war in Syria. This concept stems from a set of critical requirements and goals at tactical, operational and strategic levels.

At tactical and operational angles, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces used systematic barrel bombing, sieges to starvation, indiscriminate shelling, and even chemical weapons to spur large-scale, internal and external displacements. This concept minimized the available manpower and flow of economic activity in the opposition-held areas, exercised punitive actions on the local populace, and kept the surviving Syrians either in the regime-controlled territories under tight checks or outside of the country<sup>16</sup>.

At the strategic level, however, the regime's de-population understanding stems from a much more complicated and insidious agenda. Syria's ruling elite's design for the future of the nation was spelled out by General Jamil Hassan, head of the Air Force Intelligence which is a key pillar of the Syrian security apparatus. In July 2018, General Hassan starkly told that he favored a country of 10-million (nearly half of the current population) obedient people<sup>17</sup>. In fact, in the past, top Syrian generals even did not refrain from threatening the refugees, and warned them for not returning back<sup>18</sup>. In this respect, some experts conclude that from the Alawite Assad clan's –as well as Iran's– standpoint, the only way

to address Syria's internal security challenge was to alter the demographic conditions that led to the 1982 uprising and the ongoing revolt. Thus, the regime, encouraged by Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, deliberately seeks to turn the Sunnis, who already left their homes, into "permanent refugees" for changing the country's demographic makeup. In the meanwhile, Tehran continues to pour Shiite militias into the civil war-torn country<sup>19</sup>.

Idlib constitutes a major challenge for the regime's demographic roadmap in Syria. The province not only hosts a predominant Sunni populace through its some 3,5 million inhabitants, but also remains the last real military bastion.

For de-populating Idlib, the regime can opt for two possible conducts. The first and conventional one is to rely on the Russian airpower, barrel bombing, and mass atrocities to force the local populace out. In fact, at the time of writing, heavy barrel bombing and artillery shelling targeted Idlib and Hama provinces, and already led to the displacement of some 5,000 inhabitants within only 48 hours between September 07, 2018 and September 09, 2018<sup>20</sup>. As of September 11, 2018, 30,000 persons were displaced. However, although heavier conventional bombardment could even foster the present de-population trend, this course of action would destroy the infrastructure as well.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher, Kozak. *An Army in all Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria*, ISW, 2015, p.11.

<sup>17</sup> The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/30/we-cant-go-back-syrias-refugees-fear-for-their-future-after-war>, Accessed on: September 9, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_fw4Kg9hJQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_fw4Kg9hJQ), Accessed on: September 09, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Mordechai, Kedar. "The Ebbing Warfare in Syria will Spell Catastrophe for Europe", BESA Perspectives Paper No:584, September 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=102138>, Accessed on: September 09, 2018.

The second option of the Syrian Arab Army, and the riskier one, is to employ chemical weapons to terrorize the inhabitants. The chemical warfare option also has serious drawbacks. While it could de-populate the area faster than conventional bombardment with less damage to the infrastructure, it could also trigger international punitive action.

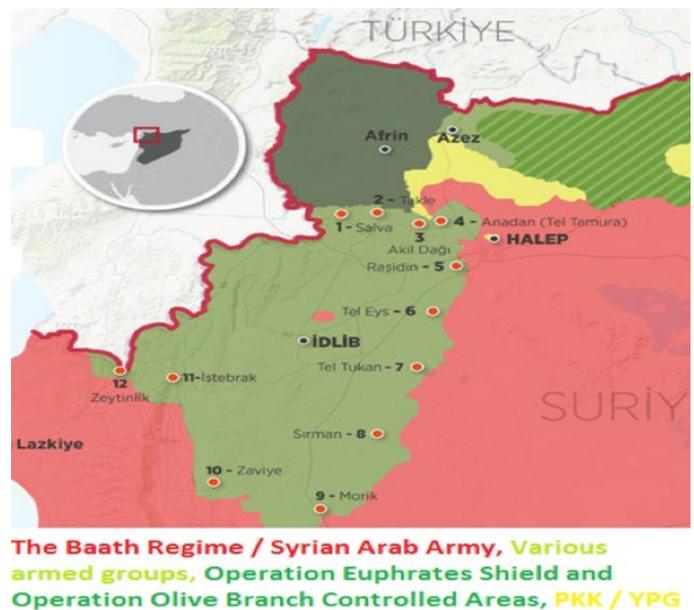
Chemical and biological warfare could best be described as the dark arts of military affairs that needs special expertise in both planning and execution. Chemical weapons (CW) can be used both in defensives and offensives as tactical game-changers. During defensives, the aim of the CW use is to halt or slow down the advancing adversary formations. In these situations, persistent agents with less vaporization, such as VX and Sulfur Mustard, are preferred since they can remain on contaminated surfaces for long time. With a good planning and suitable weather conditions, these agents

can deny terrain for days. However, since they would also affect friendly forces, they are not the chemical warfare agent of choice for rapid, follow-on offensives. In offensive planning, volatile, non-persistent agents (such as Sarin) are used to inflict heavy and surprise casualties on unprotected adversary units for setting breakthrough points<sup>21</sup>.

In case the regime opts for using chemical weapons in Idlib, the agent of choice could be a non-persistent, very lethal and rapid one resembling the April 2017 Khan Shaykun attack<sup>22</sup>. Alternatively, incapacitating agents, such as chlorine-derivatives, could also be used to terrorize the civilian population. Alarmingly, given the geographic proximity, and depending on weather conditions, a chemical contamination can affect the Turkish territory. In such scenario, the Turkish Armed Forces will have to give a very strong and deterrent response.

## The Risk of Escalation Between the Turkish and Syrian Forces Remains High

In compliance with the Astana de-escalation regulations, Turkey has established its 12<sup>th</sup> observation post in Spring 2018. At present, 12 Turkish outposts, each manned by company level (around 100–200 troops) contingents, surround the Idlib province in the southwest – northeast axis. Located in the southwestern tip of the Turkish control zone, the Zeytinlik Outpost is only 500 meters away from the Turkish border<sup>23</sup>. As shown below, Turkey's forward deployed observation posts remain highly vulnerable to the regime's possible advances and bombardment with mostly unguided munitions. Besides, offshoots of the PKK terrorist organization are also positioned in a critical area between the outposts and Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch controlled northwestern plains. Finally, the Shiite-populated villages of Nubl and Zahra, located a few kilometers north from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> observation posts shown below, host Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah controlled militia. In other words, if unchecked, the stage is set for escalation in and around Idlib that can trigger a wider regional conflict.



<sup>21</sup> Ernest T. Takafuji nad Allart B. Kok, The Chemical Warfare Threat and the Military Healthcare Provider, in Medical Aspects of Chemical and Biological Warfare, 1997, the US Army, pp.122-124.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed assessment of the 2017 Khan Shaykun chemical attack, see: Can, Kasapoglu, The Shayrat Connection, FRS, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/tsk-idlibde-son-ateskes-gozlem-noktasini-kurdu/1147979>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

Having seen the abovementioned mounting risks, Turkish defense planners beefed up the military posture in the observation posts area and the border units. Main battle tanks, mine-resistant ambush protected armored vehicles, and heavy artillery were spotted among the recent reinforcements<sup>24</sup>.

According to the Turkish press sources reporting from the hot zone, with its new reinforcements, the Turkish military has two contingency plans. The first one, considering a possible chemical warfare attempt by the regime, aims to link up the observation outposts and amass the forward deployed units to form an 18 kilometers-deep protected area<sup>25</sup>. In ac-

cordance, at the time of writing, it was reported that Turkey deployed CBRN (chemical-biological-radiological-nuclear) defense teams to the border areas<sup>26</sup>.

In doctrine, operations in CBRN environments is one of the hardest tasks for militaries with a huge workload ranging from hazard understanding and contamination mitigation to decontamination and medical CBRN missions<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, even with CBRN protection equipment, any contamination in the Turkish forward-deployed units' areas of responsibility would render sending new reinforcements and movement extremely slower and more pressing.



*Along with the military reinforcements, Turkey also deploys CBRN defense teams to the border areas<sup>28</sup>.*

<sup>24</sup> Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/hatay-sinirina-askeri-sevkiyat-suruyor-40951475>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Haberturk, <https://www.haberturk.com/iste-tsk-nin-idlib-plani-2136316>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Haberturk, <https://www.haberturk.com/hatay-haberleri/63174310-afaddan-sinirda-kimyasal-saldiriya-karsi-onlemadana-afad-ekipleri-olasi-kimyasal-saldiriya>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> For a comprehensive doctrinal work, see: The US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-11 Operations in Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear Environments, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The Turkish military's second contingency plan, reported by the press sources, is designed to address mass evacuation of civilians in Idlib in case heavy conventional fighting erupts. In this respect, Turkey aims to channel the inhabitants to the Olive Branch controlled area in the north through Jindires<sup>29</sup>. Although the latter scenario does not sound as catastrophic as the first one, it also brings about serious risks. Firstly, as illustrated in the map earlier, an evacuation in such scale – hundreds of thousands people fleeing – would put an unbearable burden on the northern observation posts of the Turkish military (numbers 1 to 4 as illustrated in the referred map). Secondly, due to these posts' proximity to the PKK / YPG-held areas as well as the Shiite militia control zones, any checkpoints and safe corridors would be extremely vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Thirdly, buffering the refugee flow within the Olive Branch (and if necessary Operation Euphrates Shield) areas, and preventing breaches into the Turkish territory would be nearly impossible once the Syrian Arab Army and the Russian Aerospace Forces commence pushing into Idlib at full capacity.

Strikingly, occurrence of non-sporadic armed clashes between the Turkish and the Syrian forces in the de-escalation zones framed by the Astana process could mark the dead-end for the Russian political efforts in Syria. Thus, Moscow is expected to mobilize its all leverages to prevent such an outcome. However, the core problem at this point would not be the Russian leadership's will to prevent such a

conflict, but its abilities to do so.

Above all, the Syrian Arab Army do not advance as a regular military in its campaigns. It is accompanied by many militia structures manned by ultra-sectarian Alawite and Shiite groupings. These units cannot be properly restricted by textbook rules of engagement, and will probably act as a war party rather than a well-disciplined and trained offensive force. Secondly, the Syrian Arab Air Force lacks high-end precision guided munitions. Thus, any air-ground bombardment, especially through barrel bombs delivering cluster sub-munitions, could hit one of the Turkish contingents. In fact, such a provocation does not have to be done by mistake. On November 24, 2016, for example, a Syrian L-39Z Albatros light attack aircraft, probably took-off from the Kuweires Air Base, carried out a strike on Turkish troops and caused four casualties amidst the Turkey's counter-terrorism campaign against ISIS in al-Bab<sup>30</sup>. Thirdly, in case the Turkish Air Force's combat air patrols (or the Army Aviation's rotary-wing platforms) enter the Syrian airspace for protecting the observation posts, the risk emanating from Syrian air defenses should not be taken lightly. Finally and more importantly, should the Turkish Forces suffer any casualties from the Syrian Arab Army's possible chemical warfare activities, even in an indirect fashion, this would cross a very critical threshold that could even trigger inter-state war that the Russian Federation may not be able to stop.



*A Syrian Arab Air Force Mi-8 Hip helicopter dropping an improvised barrel bomb on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. It was reported that this barrel bomb salvo destroyed a medical center in Hass, Idlib<sup>31</sup>. The Syrian military frequently uses barrel bombs causing heavy collateral damage.*

<sup>29</sup> Haberturk, <https://www.haberturk.com/iste-tsk-nin-idlib-plani-2136316>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed open-source investigation of the attack, see: Can, Kasapoglu. "The Stage is Set for an Escalation: The Meaning of Syria's Attack on Turkish Forces, War on the Rocks, November 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-stage-is-set-for-an-escalation-the-meaning-of-syrias-attack-on-turkish-forces/>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Bellingcat, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/09/09/battle-idlib-opens-bombing-medical-rescue-facilities/>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

## Opening Pandora's Box in Idlib

Notably, in either of the scenarios –be it a chemical blitz or a conventional shock and awe bombardment– massive refugee flow into Turkey, and possibly Europe, would be inevitable.

On September 07, 2018, the last round of the trilateral Astana talks in Iran revealed that the differences of opinion between Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran would hinder any viable efforts to ease the escalation in Idlib. Turkey's plan for the summit was to broker an immediate ceasefire which was turned down by President Putin<sup>32</sup>. Shortly after the summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed the international community through his op-ed, "the World Must Stop Assad", penned for the Wall Street Journal. Notably, in his article, President Erdogan highlights the Idlib conundrum to be "the last exit before the toll" that could lead to a tragic result if the international community fails to take action<sup>33</sup>. While the Turkish President was calling the world to stop the

bloodshed in Idlib, Turkey's primary partner in the Astana talks, Russia, bombarded Idlib while its client regime, was pounding the province with barrel bombs<sup>34</sup>.

Already hosting more than 3,5 million Syrian refugees and shielding Europe, Turkey, simply, cannot tolerate another wave from Syria. Besides, such a threat would also cause long-term domestic problems among the Turkish society, and would encourage the public opinion to seriously question the viability of the refugee deal between Ankara and its allies.

In fact, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces' top chain of command, and their agenda of changing Syria's demographic makeup for the country's long-term reconstruction, remain the underlying reasons of the global problem of Syrian refugees and displaced persons. The forthcoming Idlib offensive represents a revealing example in this regard.

## Geopolitical Anomalies of the Astana Trilateral Status Quo

The case of Idlib manifests the limits of the Turkish, Russian and Iranian trilateral efforts when facing solid geopolitical realities. After all, of the Astana talks partners, only Turkey borders Syria. Furthermore, it is only Ankara who opposes the Assad regime. Therefore, both Russia and Iran can easily minimize the risks stemming from potential spillovers, while backing the regime forces' advances. More importantly, while Tehran and Moscow joined the process due to their influences on Damascus, Turkey's *marge de manoeuvre* is based on its influence over several rebel groups.

The Astana partners strategic gains fundamentally differ from each other as well. From Iran's standpoint, for example, millions of Sunni refugees pouring into Turkey marks a window of opportunity to secure a demographic change in

Syria. On Turkey's end, such a development is tantamount to a nightmare scenario. In brief, the Idlib conundrum is a product of the structural anomalies of the trilateral de-escalation process.

The Astana Process pulled all the armed groups of the agreed ceasefire sectors into Turkey's doorstep, Idlib. Although opening up a route to the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch control zones could mitigate the tensions for some time, in the end, filtering the terrorist groups would be extremely demanding.

In sum, the Astana talks, in essence, functioned as a painkiller treating the symptoms but masking the spread of the infection up until today.

<sup>32</sup> BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-45444276>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> For the full text of President Erdogan's op-ed, see: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-world-must-stop-assad-1536614148>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-exercises-vostok/russia-starts-biggest-war-games-since-soviet-fall-near-china-idUSKCN1LR146>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

## The Idlib Conundrum: Marking the Spillover Risks

Apart from humanitarian consequences of the regime's de-population attempts, the presence of various radical groups with links to al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations bring about additional security challenges. A massive influx could function as a vector conveying terrorist cells into the Turkish and European territories. Conducting background checks, filters, deep investigations, and setting watch-lists for thousands of militants and their families, separating them from the local inhabitants of the province, and more importantly, fulfilling these tasks under pressing armed conflict conditions remain beyond the limits of any intelligence apparatus in the world. Boosting border security to prevent potential leaks to the West would be another concern.

In this respect, the presence of foreign terrorist fighters in Idlib, estimated around 10,000 militants, draws special attention<sup>35</sup>. Especially the ones coming from China and the former Soviet Union area would see no difference between fighting and dying in Idlib and returning back to their home countries waiting for their end. One should recall that the emergence of al-Qaeda was a product of the foreign fighters angle of the Afghan jihad. In tandem, the consequences of the Syrian jihad remains to be seen in coming decades. While Syria could be depicted as the second Afghanistan, there is also a prospect of witnessing the emergence of the 'next Pakistan'.

The current situation would probably force Turkey to strictly close its borders, and pay extra effort to distinguish between indigenous rebels and terrorist groups. Because, global terrorism trends make the risk of foreign fighter influx extremely dangerous than ever. In an audio posted in April 2017, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri addressed the extremists groups in Syria and called for a long, united battle against the Crusaders, Shiites and Alawites which would not be limited to the war-torn country<sup>36</sup>. Some analyses interpreted this move, along with other intelligence inputs, as an invitation to ISIS for a merger<sup>37</sup>. Thus, an uncontrolled dispersion stemming from Idlib could lead to a global contamination transiting the Turkish territory. What is worse, it should be underlined that many sensational and tragic terror attacks in Turkey, such as the 2017 New Year's Eve night club attack and the 2016 Istanbul Ataturk Airport attack, were perpetrated by foreign fighters at ISIS ranks coming from the former Soviet Union area. The nation was also targeted by al-Qaeda related groups several times in the past.

In result, Turkey cannot risk any terrorist groups entering its territory or the areas under its control in Syria. In addition, although these groups did not direct any violence to the observation posts so far, should they perceive any drastic change in Ankara's policies, there would be no reason to rule out such a possibility. All in all, the Idlib issue could go seriously nasty, and exacerbate an unforeseen terrorism wave.

<sup>35</sup> The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/30/syrian-war-un-warns-russia-iran-and-turkey-against-battle-in-idlib>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-qaeda-syria/al-qaeda-chief-urges-jihadists-to-use-guerrilla-tactics-in-syria-idUSKBN17P0WI>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Abdul, Basit. "An ISIS – Al Qaeda 'Frankenstein' could be on Its Way", the National Interest, May 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/isis%E2%80%93al-qaeda-frankenstein-could-be-its-way-20648>, Accessed on: September 11, 2018.

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<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/b63-saving-idlib-destruction>, Accessed on: September 10, 2018.



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## **THE TICKING BOMB OF IDLIB**

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