

Putin vs. Erdogan: Who's Going to Blink First?

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An explosive situation is developing in Idlib province where the Syrian army is conducting a major offensive that has triggered a harsh response from Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is threatening to attack Syrian forces anywhere in the country if the Syrian government does not stop all military operations in the so-called Idlib “de-escalation zone.” Aside from the fact that Turkey has no legal right to occupy Syrian territory, Erdogan’s threat pits Turkey against Russia in a showdown that could quickly escalate into a full-blown conflagration.

“I announce that we will strike the Syrian regime forces everywhere starting from today without being bound to Idlib or by the Sochi Memorandum, if our soldiers at the lookout posts or elsewhere suffer any harm,” said Erdogan addressing a meeting of his party’s members.

Legally, Turkey does not have a leg to stand on. According to the Sochi agreement that was signed by both Turkey and Russia in 2018, Turkey agreed that:

1. All radical terrorist groups will be withdrawn from the demilitarized zone by October 15, 2018
2. All tanks, artillery, MLRS and mortars of the conflicting parties will be withdrawn from the demilitarized zone by October 10, 2018.
3. In the interests of ensuring free movement of local residents and goods, as well as restoring trade and economic ties, transit traffic along the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) will be restored before the end of 2018

Erdogan has not made good on any of these commitments.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergie Lavrov explained what’s actually going on in a recent press conference where he said:

“As you know... A truce agreement was signed with the reservation that the terrorist groups blacklisted by the UN Security Council would not and may not be covered by the truce..

all those identified by the UN Security Council as terrorist groups herded together into the remaining de-escalation zone of Idlib.... President of Russia Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached special agreements on this zone. This issue was reviewed twice - in September 2018 and October 2019. In both cases Russia and Turkey adopted specific documents that included their commitments to oversee Idlib, primarily in terms

of civilian security and the distribution of humanitarian relief.

Regrettably, so far, Turkey has failed to fulfill a couple of its key commitments that were designed to resolve the core of the Idlib problem.” ([“Lavrov explains the Idlib agreement”](#))

Simply put, Turkey has not kept up its end of the bargain and cleared the area of al Qaida elements who still operate openly in Idlib and who still receive support from the Turkish state. After multiple warnings and delays, Syria and its ally Russia decided that they’d have to put an end to Erdogan’s subterfuge and take action themselves which is clearly permitted under international law. Since the operation began some two weeks ago, the Syrian Army has liberated a number of strategic cities in the area as well as the primary transport corridor, the M-4 and M-5 highways.

In response, Turkey has “joined al-Qaeda-linked militants in their attack on positions of the Syrian Army (in) Idlib. During the past few days, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other radical groups recently received a large number of military equipment and weapons from Turkey. On February 10, they launched an attack on the Syrian Army using weapons and equipment that they had received.” (“Turkish Troops Join Al-Qaeda-linked Militants In Their Attack On Saraqib, South Front)

Hours after the jihadist attack, the Syrian Army retaliated and (allegedly) killed 8 or more Turkish soldiers located in the vicinity of a Turkish observation post on Syrian territory. The unexpected escalation brought a swift response from Ankara where the Turkish defense minister warned that, “If the Syrian forces are not withdrawn by the end of February, we will take action.”

Turkey’s determination to annex large parts of Syria’s northern territory has not wavered since 2015 when the government first announced its support for a plan to impose “safe zones” (35 km deep) along the 911 km Syrian-Turkish border. The plan succeeded east of the Euphrates River when Turkish troops invaded earlier in the year claiming that the Kurdish militia, YPG, posed a threat to Turkey’s national security. The attempt to seize more Syrian land west of the Euphrates, invoking the threat of “humanitarian disaster”, suggests that Turkey will use any bogus pretext to achieve its strategic objectives. Fortunately, Putin has not been hoodwinked by Erdogan’s shifting justifications for the seizure of Syrian territory. The Russian-Syrian forces continue to move deeper into the province routing or killing the remaining pockets of armed militants in their path.

According to Iran’s Press TV: “The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a recent statement that Idlib-based militants had staged “more than 1,000 attacks in the last two weeks of January” from a Turkish-controlled de-escalation zone in the flashpoint province. It stressed that most of the attacks had been conducted by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militant group.

Syria has been gripped by foreign-backed militancy since March 2011. The Syrian government says the Israeli regime and its Western and regional allies are aiding Takfiri terrorist groups had been wreaking havoc in the Arab country.” (“Turkey warns of ‘Plan B’ amid Syria’s anti-terror operation in Idlib”, Press TV)

Putin is looking for ways to diffuse the situation and strike a deal with Erdogan, but it’s not going to be easy. Putin has already taken a minimalist approach to Syrian conflict, that is, he is committed to liberating areas that are vital to the preservation of the state, but he’s

not going to go out on a limb and undermine Russia's interests by launching attacks on US bases in east Syria or starting a war with Erdogan in the west. By the same token, Putin cannot allow himself to be manipulated by a scheming opportunist like Erdogan who wants to shrug off his agreements because they no longer serve his regional ambitions. Putin would like to meet the Turkish president halfway and allow him to maintain troops in a safe zone further north, but he won't cave in and give Erdogan everything he wants. Putin is reasonable, but he's no pushover as Erdogan is likely to find out.

Here's more background from a piece at the pro-government Daily Sabah:

"Idlib, as the opposition forces' last stronghold, also has a symbolic meaning in peace talks in Geneva: Whoever controls Idlib will obviously have a big influence on the last word on the future of Syria. Idlib is of great importance for the Assad regime, as well, as it would strengthen his hand at the Geneva talks at a time when the regime is taking on the insane risk of confronting Turkish forces in open warfare on the ground for the first time since the beginning of the civil war. Obviously, this would be fatal for the Sochi agreement.

Strictly speaking, the outcome of the Syrian regime attacks in Idlib is a matter of life or death for the opposition's role at the Geneva talks. The opposition will fight to the end to try to avoid weakening its position during its last chance at talks on Idlib." ("Turkey and Russia must find a path to a new agreement", Daily Sabah)

"A matter of life or death for the opposition"? "The opposition (jihadists) will fight to the end"?

The possibility is quite real especially in the present hyper-incendiary environment. Syrian president Bashar al Assad needs Idlib to reunite the country and to connect Latakia and Aleppo to Damascus. Putin needs Idlib to end his commitment in Syria and to provide a model for preserving threatened nation-states from destabilizing regime change operations. And Erdogan needs Idlib to extend Turkey's power to territories it once controlled but lost following the post-WW1 imperialist carve up. Add to this toxic clash of interests the recent announcements by Washington and NATO that they support Erdogan's efforts in Idlib, and the prospects for disaster increase exponentially. Here's what neocon Mike Pompeo said yesterday on Twitter:

"My condolences to the families of the soldiers killed in yesterday's attack in Idlib. The ongoing assaults by the Assad regime and Russia must stop. I've sent (special US envoy to Syria) Jim Jeffrey to Ankara to coordinate steps to respond to this destabilizing attack. We stand by our NATO Ally #Turkey.

Pompeo's comments were followed by reports that US bombers had carried out air-strikes on Syrian troops in Al-Qamishli. Hours later, Israel launched a missile attack on Damascus. Clearly, the western powers are eager to take advantage of the emerging crisis and stir up as much trouble as possible.

As for Turkey, an outspoken columnist for the Daily Sabah was honest enough to articulate the government policy without making any attempt to conceal Ankara's real motives. Here's what he said:

“Turkey, however, is determined to stop the regime offensive... Although the primary objective is to secure Turkey’s observation posts, it is obvious that the current deployment serves a broader agenda. **Going forward, Ankara needs to establish a safe zone with lasting borders.** In other words, Turkey has to conduct a comprehensive operation to combat terrorism, among other things. The aim of the operation must be to ensure the safe zone’s sustainability.” (“Regime violence must be stopped now”, Daily Sabah)

As the author makes clear, Turkey’s real objective is to annex Syrian territory in the north and expand its own borders to the south, a clear case of territorial aggression. We don’t think Putin is going to put up with this.

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