

Syria, A Frozen Conflict: The Final Push for Idlib Will Come Soon

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The situation in Syria is that of a frozen conflict, following the agreements made between Russia, Turkey and Syria on the demilitarized zone created around Idlib. Except for some sporadic terrorist attacks, the truce seems to be holding up over the last few weeks, even though it has become clear to everyone what the next step is for the province.

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has been busy eradicating Daesh in the southern part of Syria in recent weeks, concentrating its efforts on securing all areas that have been liberated from terrorist control but which still remain vulnerable to sporadic attacks, as occurred in [Sweida](#) at the end of July 2018. In that incident, there were dozens of victims and numerous [abductees](#) who remained in the hands of Daesh for months. This caused the Syrian population in neighbouring areas to clamor for protection, forcing the SAA to undertake an anti-terrorist campaign that has been ongoing since August.

This effort by the SAA has slowed down in part due to subsequent events, with an agreement reached between Erdogan and Putin to create a demilitarized zone in the province of Idlib. From October 15, an area spanning 20 kilometres and guarded by Turkish and Russian troops guarantees a separation between the SAA and terrorist groups in the province.

Russian and Syrian efforts have been moving in two very specific directions over the last few weeks. While Moscow supplies Damascus with new equipment in preparation for the future advance on Idlib, Putin and his entourage continue diplomatic efforts to draw more of Syria's enemies closer to the Russia-Iran-Syria axis. The meeting that brought about the demilitarized zone included Macron and Merkel, the Europeans having evidently come to terms with the impossibility of overthrowing the legitimate government of Syria. Macron and Merkel were offered a [way out](#) of the Syrian conflict, decoupling themselves from the belligerent stance of the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The intention is to usher Paris and Berlin towards the same direction Qatar, Turkey and Jordan have been progressively gravitating. Certainly, these are not countries to be considered friends of Damascus. Rather, they are parties with whom a constructive dialogue needs to be entered into in order to advance common diplomatic interests.

Moscow has often found it possible to reach an agreement or start unpublicized negotiations with each of these parties. Erdogan seems to have preferred an agreement with Putin rather than waiting for the liberation of Idlib by the SAA, thus being able to postpone the natural conclusion of the war that will find him sitting at the table defeated. At the same time, Erdogan wants to concentrate on the Kurds in order to secure the border between Syria and Turkey controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and to prevent any partition of

Syrian territory that would favor other parties. Jordan has even [reopened](#) the border crossings with Syria, appearing to be the first country in opposition to Damascus that is now taking practical steps to mend fences.

The case of the participation of the two European countries at the [summit](#) with Erdogan and Putin is more complex. The rift between Washington and the other European capitals is wide and well documented, even more so after the events in Paris commemorating the end of the First World War. Macron and Trump seem to be [diverging](#) further in terms of policy and [ideology](#), while Trump and Merkel have always had their differences. Trump's choices in the Middle East, in the wake of the [destructive actions](#) of Israel and Saudi Arabia, marked a profound point of difference and mistrust with the European allies. Macron and Merkel have a huge problem dealing with refugees flowing from areas in North Africa and the Middle East destroyed by US-led wars. The prospect of working with Erdogan, and indirectly with Damascus, to bring back hundreds of thousands of refugees currently in France and especially Germany, seems to have been Putin's winning argument during the talks in Istanbul.

This slow diplomatic approach has been accelerated as a result of Israel's [downing](#) of a Russian electronic-surveillance aircraft. The need to avoid a direct conflict between Moscow and Tel Aviv allowed the Russian missile forces to deploy to Syria an advanced model of the S-300 in addition to the existing S-300/400 systems on the ground. The presence of these advanced systems, and Moscow's threats to use them, together with American concerns over the possibility of an [F-35 being shot down](#) by Soviet systems dating from the 1970s, forced the Zionist entity to halt its attacks on Syria.

This situation has helped to create a frozen conflict in the country. Together with the agreement of Idlib, this gives the SAA plenty of time to rest, regroup, and receive supplies needed for future campaigns.

The current truce is a strategic pause that has all the appearance of what has happened in the past in the provinces of Homs and Aleppo. The need to free Idlib from terrorists goes hand in hand with the promise of Assad and the government of Damascus to liberate every inch of Syria from terrorists. The diplomatic efforts of Moscow serve to prepare the ground for what will happen in the coming months, with the SAA set to advance on Idlib. In this sense, the deployment of advanced systems in Syria serves as a deterrent against possible responses from countries like Israel and the United States, anxious to defend their jihadists, but continuing to have [minimal influence](#) on the ground.

Russia and Syria's moves therefore seem to be in preparation for the battle for Idlib, to be the longest and most difficult yet. The liberation of the province is inevitable but requires all the necessary political, diplomatic and military preparation in order to [ensure success](#) and limit potential escalation. As is often the case, Moscow and her allies approach complex issues with simple and pragmatic solutions, even offering exit strategies to their (geo)political opponents, which contrasts with their demonstrated tendency to [rush heedlessly towards war](#).

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