

Syria - Erdogan Is Afraid of Entering Idleb

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The Turkish President Erdogan announced the start of a Turkish operation in Idleb province of Syria. Idleb has been for years under the control of al-Qaeda in Syria, currently under the label Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

In the talks in Astana, Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed on a deescalation zone in Idleb to be supervised by all three of them. But the fight against al-Qaeda, aka HTS, would continue. Turkey is supposed to control the western part of the province including the city of Idleb. But the Turkish government is afraid to go there.

During the last days there have been many reports and lots of pictures of Turkish force movements along the north-western Syrian border. But Turkey made no attempt to enter the country and it is doubtful that it will.

Erdogan's [announcement](#) needs some parsing:

"There's a serious operation in Syria's Idlib today and it will continue," Erdogan said in a speech to his AK Party, adding that Turkey would not allow a "terror corridor" on its border with Syria. "For now **Free Syria Army is carrying out the operation there**," Erdogan said. "Russia will be protecting outside the borders (of the Idlib region) and we will handle inside," he said.

"Russia is supporting the operation from the air, and our armed forces from inside Turkey's borders," he added.

"[F]rom inside Turkey's borders" means of course that the Turkish army will not (again) enter Syria. At least not now.

Turkey has transferred some 800 of its "Turkmen" mercenaries from the "Euphrates Shield" area north-east of Aleppo [green] to the western border next to Idleb. "Euphrates Shield" was a fight against the Islamic State with the aim of interrupting a potential Kurdish "terrorist" corridor from north-east Syria to the north-western Kurdish enclave Afrin [beige]. Turkey lost a bunch of heavy battle tanks and some 70 soldiers in that fight. Erdogan was criticized in Turkey for the somewhat botched operation.



The Turkish proxy fighters now sent into Idlib belong to the Hamza Brigade, Liwa al-Mutasem and other Turkish “Free Syrian Army” outfits. They will have to go in without tanks and heavy weapons. Some Turkish special forces with them might be able to call up artillery support from within Turkey. But no Turkish air support will be available as Syria and Russia insist of staying in control of the airspace.

A recent video [shows](#) a group of HTS maniacs attacking an outpost like professional soldiers. They are equipped with AT-4 anti-tank missiles, 60mm mortars, light machine guns and Milkor grenade launcher. They have good uniforms, fairly new boots and ammo carrier belts. This is not equipment captured from the Syrian army or second hand stuff from some former eastern-block country. It is modern “western” stuff. These folks still have some rich sponsor and excellent equipment sources.

Russia has in recent weeks extensively bombed al-Qaeda positions in Idlib. Turkish intelligence may have helped with that. But AQ still has a very decent fighting force. The Turkish supported forces are likely no match for well equipped and battle hardened al-Qaeda fighters.

Turkey had for nearly six years supplied and pampered al-Qaeda in Syria. The group has many relations and personal within Turkey. The Astana agreement now obligates Turkey to fight HTS. Erdogan sits in a trap he set up himself. Should it come to a conflict between HTS and Turkish forces in Syria, the fight would soon cause casualties in Ankara and Istanbul.

Erdogan might still believe that he can somehow domesticate HTS. The government controlled Anadolu agency [does not](#) even mention the al-Qaeda origin of the group nor its long control of the area. It is trying to paint a somewhat rosy picture of HTS as an anti-American outfit:

Tahrir al-Sham, an anti-regime group, has come to the forefront with increasing activity in Idlib recently. Tahrir al-Sham has not made a direct statement against the deployment of Turkish troops to the region. On the other hand, the group and some opponents oppose the entry of various Free Syrian Army groups to Idlib, which are prepared to come from the Euphrates Shield Operation Area.

The group justifies the opposition, saying that other groups expected to arrive in the region get support from the United States.

The Turkish paper Hurriyet is [less sensible](#) with Erdogan's needs:

Idlib is largely controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), spearheaded by a former al-Qaeda affiliate that changed its name last year from the Nusra Front. HTS is not party to a deal brokered by Russia, Turkey and Iran for the safe zone in the province, one of four such "de-escalation" zones nationwide.

Ousting HTS forces from the area will be needed to allow the arrival of Iranian, Russian and Turkish forces to implement a de-escalation zone.

In Astana Erdogan was given the task to clean up the mess he earlier created in Idlib by supporting the Jihadis. Erdogan does not like the job but has no choice.

If the de-escalation fails because HTS stays in control, Syria and its allies will move into Idlib. Turkey will then have to cope with thousands of battle seasoned Jihadis and a million of their kinfolk as refugees. If Erdogan moves Turkish forces into the Idlib area it will become a very costly fight and he will soon be in trouble in his own realm. Making peace with HTS is not an option. HTS rejected all offers to "change its skin" and to melt away. Iran, the Astana agreement and a number of UN Security Council Resolutions also stand against that.

It will be difficult for Turkey to untangle that knot.

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