

# Syrian Army's Offensive in Idlib Deepens Rift Between Russia and Turkey

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*Major strains are appearing in Russian-Turkish relations, particularly over the Syrian Army's latest offensive against Turkish-backed jihadists in Idlib and Russia's non-agreement with Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood government based in the Libyan capital of Tripoli. Last week Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a [massive outburst against Russia](#) that has since only escalated. At the heights of relations, according to a [November 2018 INR poll](#), 51% of Turks viewed Russia favourably. However, a poll published on Sunday by [Turkey's Daily Sabah](#) found that only 16% of Turks trust Russia with the so-called mistrust because of Moscow's Syria and Libya position.*

Ankara-based research company Metropoll's latest survey published on Monday found that Erdoğan's approval rating [dropped to 41.9%](#) in January from 43.7% in December. With Turkey's economy continuing to decline, Erdoğan is attempting to distract the Turkish public with ultra nationalist rhetoric with threats of invading Libya, more areas of Syria, the rest of Cyprus and Greece's eastern Aegean islands. However, the constant state of war threats is proving unpopular with the majority of Turks.

Although the aggression against the four aforementioned countries is related to the ambition of a [neo-Ottoman Empire](#), Erdoğan's growing frustration became evident when he said during his visit to Ukraine on Monday that Turkey does not recognize Crimea's reunion with Russia, and emphasized that his country is "closely" monitoring the situation of Crimea's Tatar Turks, who [Turkish-state run Anadolu Agency](#) claim are facing persecution under Russian rule.

Kremlin Spokesperson [Dmitriy Peskov hit back](#) at the claims saying "We can't agree with what is being said in this context. We have repeatedly said that any concerns regarding Crimean Tatars are groundless. President [of Russia Vladimir] Putin explained the real state of things [to the Turkish leader] more than once." Turkey uses Turkish minorities to serve its interests, whether it be by propping up the Muslim Brotherhood government in Tripoli that is led by [ethnic Turk Fayez al-Sarraj](#), supporting Turkmen jihadists in northern Syria, using the Turkish minority in Cyprus as a casus belli for invading 37% of the island in 1974, or using the Turkish minority in Greece's Thrace traditional region to make groundless claims of persecution - and it appears Erdoğan will use the Tartars to attack Russia's so-called treatment of minorities.

In a matter of days, polls have revealed a declining Russian popularity in Turkey, the Tartars to be used against Russia in soft power plays, and also, rising tensions over the Syrian

Army's operation against jihadists in Idlib. Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov said](#) at a joint press conference with South Sudan's Foreign Minister Avut Deng Achuil on January 28 that "Militants from armed groups should stop contacts with terrorists in any way, and the terrorists should give up because there will be no mercy for them." This quote of "no mercy" came with Erdoğan's anger as the terrorists are backed and supported by Turkey.

Events came to a zenith on Sunday when at least eight Turkish soldiers acting illegally in Idlib were killed and at least another dozen wounded by the Syrian Army. Although Erdoğan quickly stated that Turkey responded by killing at least 70 Syrian Army soldiers, the Russian military were quick to rule out that Turkish jets were used as Erdoğan had claimed and the Syrian military outright denied any Syrian soldiers were killed. A war of words also erupted between Turkey and Russia after Sunday's incident with Russia saying it received no reports from the Turkish military that it was moving its soldiers so that such an attack could be avoided, with Turkey claiming it had notified the Russian military.

Although U.S.-Turkish relations have been strained because of Turkey's continual defiance of Washington in favour of Russia, Secretary Mike Pompeo wasted no time to take opportunity at the emerging rift in relations between the two Eurasian countries by saying [on Twitter](#) that "The U.S. stands by our NATO Ally Turkey in the aftermath of the mortar attack by Assad regime forces on Turkish observation posts." With Turkey always closely aligning with the West for the entirety of its history except for the past three years, Pompeo is attempting to woo Erdoğan back into its fold.

The U.S. sees eye to eye with Turkey in overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and tolerates Erdoğan's threats of war against Libya. This could see Ankara improve its relations with Washington as Putin is refusing to withdraw his support for Assad. Although Erdoğan threatened war with Syria yesterday if it did not withdraw its military by the end of February to positions it held some weeks ago before the newest operation against Turkish-backed terrorists in Idlib began, the Syrian Army with Russian support is unlikely to relent to the threats. Could this be what brings a final fracture in the short-lived strategic Russo-Turkish relations? This remains to be seen, but this possibility can't be excluded.

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