

Video: Towards The Liberation of Idlib City

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Global Research, February 19, 2020

[South Front](#) 18 February 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Syrian government forces did not stop their operation in Greater Idlib with the success in the western countryside of Aleppo city, and continued making gains in the province. During the past 24 hours, they took control of over 10 settlements.

Furthermore, they forced members of the mighty Idlib rebels to retreat from Sheikh Aqil, besieged another Turkish observation point, and set a foothold for a possible offensive on the city of Darat Izza.

This town, located 30km west of Aleppo, had an estimated population of approximately 42,000 in 2013. In the modern Syria, it is most-widely known as the stronghold of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham that hosts its key forces and facilities in this part of the province.

The fall of Darat Izza into the hands of government troops will also disrupt a link between the Turkish-occupied Afrin region and armed groups hiding in the countryside of Idlib city. Thus, Ankara will not be able to freely redeploy its proxies from one part of northwestern Syria into another. On the same day, **President Bashar al-Assad** congratulated the Syrian people and the Syrian Army with the victory in western Aleppo.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/IMR_18_02_2020.mp4

However, he said that this achievement “does not mean the end of the war” and declared that the military will continue combating terrorism in the provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. Turkish threats to launch a war on Syria if its forces do not stop their anti-terrorism campaign, al-Assad described as empty words. The televised speech of the president came amid reports that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham started evacuating its remaining weapon depots in the Mount Simeon District of Aleppo province towards the region of Afrin, and the border with Turkey west of Idlib.

These developments indicate that the group does not really believe that it is able to defend Darat Izza in an open battle with the Syrian Army. It is interesting to note how the public rhetoric of pro-militant media outlets changes depending on the military successes of the Syrian Army.

During the previous stages of the conflict, they preferred to call the Damascus government a bloody dictatorship that is killing peaceful moderate rebels all around Syria. Then, it evolved into the regime fighting against the ‘Syrian revolution’, while ‘Assad sectarian militia’ evolved into ‘Assad forces’. After the deployment of the Syrian Army in the vicinity of Idlib city, ‘Assad forces’ started slowly becoming ‘government troops’. It seems that when the army enters the city itself, Idlib grant-eaters will welcome the internationally-recognized government. Taking into account the recent developments on the frontline, they probably

should start preparing posters featuring great leader Bashar al-Assad immediately.

Therefore, the main hope of Idlib groups and their supporters is the Turkish diplomatic efforts in the framework of the Astana format. On February 17, Moscow and Ankara started a new round of negotiations on the situation in Idlib. The Turkish leadership's current main goal is to stop the Syrian advance and to consolidate its own influence in the scraps of the militant-held part of Idlib. In turn, it will likely have to surrender a part of its lovely moderate rebel groups that are publicly linked with al-Qaeda.

If Russia and Turkey find no understanding on the situation, Ankara will continue making attempts to protect Idlib groups with a variant of military and diplomatic measures. This will likely lead to a further escalation of the conflict.

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