

Video: Prospects of Turkish-Russian Military Conflict in Syria

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The region of Greater Idlib remains the main source of tensions in Syria.

The March 5th ceasefire deal reached by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow allowed an end to be made to the open military confrontation between the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian Army. However, as of mid-April, the main provisions of the deal have yet to be implemented. Members of al-Qaeda-linked groups still enjoy freedom of movement across Greater Idlib and keep their positions with weapons and heavy equipment in southern Idlib.

The safe zone along the M4 highway, the creation of which was agreed, has not been created. All Russian-Turkish joint patrols have been conducted in a limited area west of Saraqib and have just been a public move needed to demonstrate that the de-escalation deal is still in force.

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

Ankara turns a blind eye to regular ceasefire violations and other provocative actions by militant groups and their supporters. Additionally, it has continued its military buildup in Idlib. The number of Turkish troops in the region reportedly reached 7,000, while the number of so-called 'observation posts' exceeded 50. Meanwhile, Turkish-affiliated media outlets ramped up a propaganda campaign accusing the Assad government of killing civilians, of ceasefire violations, of using chemical weapons and of discrediting the de-escalation agreement by calling it the surrender of the goals of the so-called Syrian revolution.

On the diplomatic level, neither Turkey nor Russia demonstrate open antagonism, but statements coming from the top military and political leadership of Turkey regarding the conflict in Syria demonstrate that Ankara is not planning to abandon its expansionist plans or aggressive posture towards the country.

These factors set up a pretext for and increase the chances of a new military escalation in Idlib. However, this time the conflict is likely to lead to at least a limited military confrontation between the Turkish and Russian militaries. Both sides have troops deployed in close proximity to the frontline, including the expected hot point of the future escalation - Saraqib.

Possible phases of escalation are the following:

1. Without the full implementation of the Moscow de-escalation deal and neutralization of radicals, the military situation in southern and eastern Idlib will continue to deteriorate. Militants, inspired by their impunity and the direct protection of the Turkish Army, will increase their attacks on the positions of Syrian forces and their Russian and Iranian allies. These attacks will gradually increase in scale until they provoke a painful military response from the Syrian Armed Forces. Militants, surprised at this blatant ceasefire violation by the bloody Assad regime, will continue their attacks, now justifying them by the right of self-defense. G_4 (A) Turkish diplomats and media outlets will immediately accuse the Assad government of violating the word and spirit of the de-escalation deal and will claim that the “unjustified aggression of the regime”, which is supported by the Russians, led to the killing of dozens of civilians and will film several staged tear-jerkers from Idlib to support this. The so-called ‘international community’ led by the Washington establishment and EU bureaucrats will denounce the aggression of the Assad regime and its backers.
2. In the face of the continued and increased attacks from Idlib armed groups, the Syrian Army will have two options:
 - To retreat from their positions and leave the hard-won, liberated areas to the mercy of Turkey and its al-Qaeda-affiliated groups;
 - To answer the increased attacks with overwhelming force and put an end to the ceasefire violations by radicals.

It’s likely that the Syrians will choose the second option. The military standoff in Idlib will officially re-enter a hot phase. The previous years of conflict have demonstrated that militants cannot match Syrian troops in open battle. Therefore, if the Turkish leadership wants to hold on to its expansionist plans, it will have no choice but to intervene in the battle to rescue its proteges. Syria and Turkey will once again find themselves in a state of open military confrontation.

1. As in previous escalations, the Turkish military will likely opt to start its military campaign with massive artillery and drone strikes on positions of the Syrian Army along the contact line in southeastern Idlib and western Aleppo. Special attention will be paid to the area of the expected confrontation between Syrian troops and Turkish proxies: the countryside of Saraqib, Maarat al-Numan and Kafr Nabel. Turkish forces will not be able to stop the Syrian Army advance without taking massive fire damage to their infrastructure and to the forces deployed in these areas. Such strikes will also result in further escalation because they will pose a direct danger to the Russian Military Police in Saraqib and Maarat al-Numan, and to Russian military advisers embedded with the Syrian units, which are deployed in southeastern Idlib.
2. If Turkish strikes target Russian positions and lead to notable losses among Russian personnel, Moscow will be put in a situation where they will be forced to retaliate. Since the start of the military operation in Syria in September 2015, the Russian Armed Forces have concentrated a capable military group in the country protected by short- and long-range air defense systems and reinforced by Bastion-P coastal defense and Iskander-M ballistic missile systems. Additionally, the Russian Black Sea and Caspian Fleets and Russian long-range aviation have repeatedly demonstrated that they are capable of destroying any target on the Syrian battleground and thus also in any nearby areas.

The Russian retaliatory strike will likely target Turkish military columns in close proximity to the frontline as well as Turkish depots, positions of artillery, armoured vehicles, and material and technical support points in Greater Idlib.

If, after the Russian strike, the Turkish leadership does not halt its aggressive actions and its forces continue attacks on Russian and Syrian positions in Syria, the escalation will develop further.

The second wave of Russian retaliatory strikes will target Turkish military infrastructure along the border with Syria. HQs and logistical hubs in the province of Hatay, which were used to command and supply its Operation Spring Shield, will immediately be destroyed. The decision to deliver strikes on other targets along the border will depend on the success of Turkish forces in their expected attempt to attack Russia's Hmeimim airbase and put it out of service.

Another factor to consider is that should Turkey appear to be too successful in their attack on the Hmeimim airbase, they risk losing their entire Black Sea fleet. While theoretically the Turkish naval forces deployed in the Black Sea are superior to the Russian ones in numbers, the real balance of power there tells a different story. The combined means and facilities of the Russian Black Sea fleet, the Caspian Sea fleet, air forces and coastal defense forces deployed in the region would allow Moscow to overwhelm and sink the entire Turkish Navy. On top of this, Russia, unlike Turkey, is a nuclear power.

Turkey's NATO allies have already demonstrated that they are not planning to risk their equipment or personnel in order to support Erdogan's Syrian adventure. Furthermore, a new round of complaints to the UN or demonstrative sanctions will be no help to any destroyed Turkish airbases or to a fleet resting deep underwater.

Ankara will have to find a diplomatic way to de-escalate the confrontation before it gets to this point. The format of this diplomatic solution and the consequences, which Turkey will have to suffer for its military adventure, will depend only on the moment, when the Erdogan government understands that it's time to stop.

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