



SYRIA: LIBERATING IDLIB

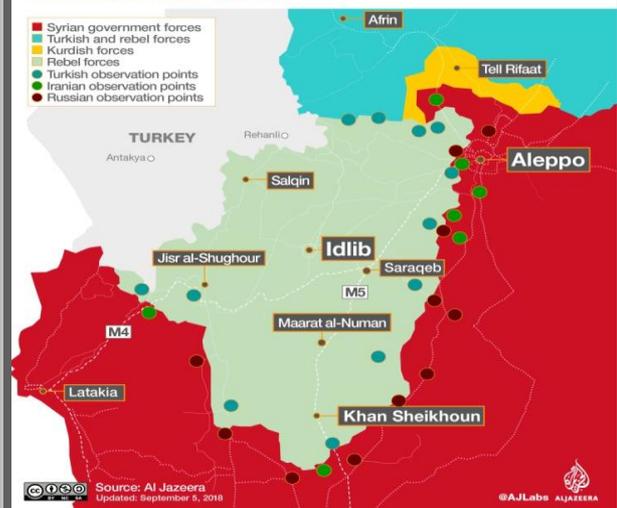
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Battle for Idlib



After successful offensives to retake Daraa and Quneitra provinces in August 2018, the Syrian Government announced that its main concern was now to “liberate” Idlib.¹ Simultaneously, Moscow emphasized that all rebels enclaves in Syria must be terminated since “the hotbed of terrorism that came to be there does not bode well if the current inaction continues.”²

The Syrian war has killed more than half a million people according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights,³ displaced more than 11 million since 2011⁴ and has divided the country into various splinter groups vying for areas of control. Idlib province is the last major rebel enclave in Syria. First seized from the government in March 2015, Idlib and the surrounding area is the last important piece of territory in Syria held by rebels. The province also borders Turkey to the north, and encompasses major highways running south from Aleppo to Hama and the capital, Damascus, and west to the Mediterranean coastal city of Latakia.

Following the announcement, the Assad regime increased airstrikes and shelling in Idlib and its surrounding areas and sent troops to the area.⁵ On September 4, hours after President Trump

¹ AFP, "Damascus Vows to 'liberate All of Syria' Regardless of Western 'aggression'," *France 24*, August 30, 2018.

² "Kremlin: Terrorism Hotbed in Idlib Does Not Bode Well," *TASS*, August 30, 2018.

³ "Syrian Observatory Says War Has Killed More than Half a Million," *Reuters*, March 12, 2018.

⁴ Gustavo Gonzalez, "How Do We Meet the Urgent Needs of 11 Million Syrians Fleeing Conflict?" *The Guardian*, January 21, 2017.

⁵ "Next Priority Is Retaking Idlib, Assad Tells Russian Media," *Arab News PK*, July 28, 2018.

warned against attacking Idlib⁶, Moscow pelted Idlib with fresh airstrikes after a 22-day pause. A summit regarding the situation was held in Tehran on September 7 between Presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey. Though this was seen as an opportunity for a diplomatic solution before a full assault on Idlib took place, it failed, rather dramatically, since none of the three parties could come to any agreement.

Meanwhile, the United States claimed that there was evidence that Syrian government forces were preparing chemical weapons ahead of an attack. Admonishing the accusation, Iran's ambassador at the UN, Gholamali Khoshroo told the UN Security Council that Syria's declared chemical weapons had been destroyed and this would only be "a fabrication to use force" and "further complicate the situation."⁷

A much awaited breakthrough came on September 17, 2018 when President Erdogan met President Putin in Sochi and agreed to create a demilitarized buffer zone in Syria's Idlib province to prevent a potential humanitarian crisis. The decision has been endorsed by all sides in the conflict. The Syrian Government welcomed the deal saying that it was the product of "intensive consultations" and "total coordination".⁸ The Iranian government called the agreement a "win for diplomacy."⁹

The two leaders agreed on a plan to clear Idlib of the former al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). According to the roadmap, both countries will create a 15-20 kilometre demilitarized zone between rebels in Idlib and Syrian government forces by October 15, 2018. Security in the area will be overseen by both Turkish contingents and Russian military police. Essentially, the agreement will put a check against military action in Idlib.¹⁰

Though wary of the Russians and Iranians, the National Liberation Front (NFL) rebel alliance accepted the deal¹¹. However, the Huras al-Din and Ansar al-Din Front factions rejected it.¹² There has been no response from the HTS as yet.

The province is not controlled by a single group, but rather by a number of competing factions comprising up to an estimated 70,000 fighters.¹³ The nucleus of rebels in Idlib is made up of the

⁶ "Trump Warns Syria, Russia and Iran against 'reckless' Attack on Idlib," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2018.

⁷ "The Latest: UN Chief: A 'Bloodbath' Must Be Averted in Idlib," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2018.

⁸ "Syria Welcomes Agreement on Idleb Announced in Sochi, Stresses That It Is Outcome of Intensive Consultations with Russia," *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, September 18, 2018.

⁹ "Iran Welcomes Turkey-Russia Deal over Idlib - Lebanon's Al-Mayadeen TV," *Reuters*, September 18, 2018.

¹⁰ *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, September 21, 2018.

¹¹ "Pro-Turkey Syria Militants Cautiously Accept Idlib Deal," *The Express Tribune*, September 23, 2018.

¹² "Jihadist Group Rejects Deal for Syria's Idlib, Main Faction Yet To Declare Stance," *Reuters*, September 23, 2018.

¹³ "Battle for Idlib: Who Controls What?" *GCC News | Al Jazeera*.

Syrian branch of al-Qaida, previously known as the Nusra Front and now called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. As the largest fighting group, they also form the backbone of resistance to the Syrian regime's offensive. The Turkish-backed NFL is the second most powerful alliance. It was formed by rebel groups wanting to counter HTS. It includes the big hard-liner groups of Ahrar al-Sham and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Brigades, as well as others fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army.

Idlib is home to 3.5 million people¹⁴. These people are already suffering from terrible conditions - many live in overcrowded camps lacking even basic facilities. The border with Turkey is closed since three years after Turkey built an 800-kilometer (500-mile) concrete wall along the frontier to "stop terrorists and smugglers."¹⁵ Officially, Turkey no longer takes in any refugees - it has already taken 3.7 million.¹⁶ So the only plausible route out of Idlib is to the Turkish-controlled strip in northern Syria. Essentially, the refugees have nowhere left to go.

While Syrians in Idlib and Hama wave anti-regime slogans, calling on the international community to overthrow the Syrian regime, the fall of Idlib will not mean an end to seven years of conflict; merely a new phase of instability, chaos and suffering. Each participant in the war is trying to secure their interests. But few of those interests align. Most are mutually exclusive. Turkey is keen to control much of northern Syria because this allows it to contain Kurdish power, as well as to create adjoining zones of influence that can hold Syrian refugees who would otherwise try and find refuge in Turkey. Russia has an important military airbase in the western province of Latakia and a naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus. Hence, it is understandable why Russian leaders support a peace deal with broad consensus among Syria's moderate factions. Iran supports the Assad regime because this ensures it as an ally against Iran's regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's larger goal is to create a land corridor extending from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Israel's problem is Iran - it is doing everything in its power to stop Iran from setting up a permanent military presence in Syria. For this it seems Russia has given them a free rein for now. All the while, the US has remained steadfast in trying to destroy the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. But inadvertently its problem is Russia and Iran.

Presently, the Syrian war is a conflagration of at least seven countries (America, Britain, France Israel, Russia, Syria and Turkey) and various rebel groups. At this year's meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, on September 25, heads of state and top diplomats were supposed to talk about how to end the Syrian civil war. However in his speech, President Trump blamed Iran for

¹⁴ "Global Conflict This Week: Idlib Offensive Looms," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 7, 2018.

¹⁵ "Turkey Finishes Construction of 764-km Security Wall on Syria Border," *Daily Sabah*, June 09, 2018.

¹⁶ Hannah Summers, "'Why We're Paying the Rent for a Million Syrian Refugees'," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2018.

the slaughter in Syria and stated that the US would respond if chemical weapons were used by the Syrian regime.¹⁷ In his turn, Iran's President Rouhani blasted Israel and said that Israel was "the most daunting threat to regional and global peace."¹⁸ Despite the speeches being marred by the habitual blame game, some level of rationality prevailed. Some leaders did call on for a "just and sustainable political solution" in Syria¹⁹ through "intra-Syrian dialogue".²⁰

But this does raise the question of what will happen if supposedly the Syrian war does end. What then of the enormous reconstruction and rehabilitation costs. In such a hypothetical scenario, no one will be willing to step up to the plate or clean up the mess. The Geneva process which was seen as a possible way to reach any agreement amounts now to nothing more than a farce. The cavernous trust deficit needs to be resolved for there to be even an impression of a sustainable political solution. Any miscalculation at this stage could result in a catastrophe.

¹⁷ "Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *The White House*, 25 September, 2018.

¹⁸ "Iran's Rouhani Says Israel 'the Most Daunting Threat' to World Peace," *The Times of Israel*, 25 September, 2018.

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, "UN General Assembly 2018: All the Latest Updates," *GCC News | Al Jazeera*, September 25, 2018.

²⁰ Hassan Rouhani, "From the Very Beginning of the Crisis in #Syria, We Have Warned against Any Foreign Intervention in the Internal Affairs of This Country and the Use of Unlawful Means and Have Consistently Emphasized That the Crisis Can Only Be Resolved through Intra-Syrian Dialogue. #UNGA," Twitter, September 25, 2018.