



Idlib, the final frontier

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Highlights

- The September 17 agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan to prevent an all-out attack on Idlib, the last major enclave held by anti-government militants in Syria, signals a major realignment of the power dynamics within the Syrian theatre.
- The agreement, according to which Russia and Turkey will establish a demilitarised zone along the line of contact between Idlib's militants and regime forces, has averted an imminent humanitarian crisis, but it also shows the increasing uneasiness in Russia's policy towards a conflict which has bogged it down.
- For months, war clouds were gathering over Idlib, which has been out of the Syrian government's control for over three years.
- The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has practically won the civil war.
- If it were on the brink of collapse in September 2015 when Russia made its intervention, the regime has recaptured most major population centres including Aleppo, Daraa and Eastern Ghouta, ever since.
- The areas that lie outside the government control can be divided into three: Idlib, which is run by militants, including thousands of jihadists; the Kurdistan area controlled by Kurdish rebels, who are not hostile to Damascus but want more autonomy; and border towns such as Afrin and Jarabulus, which are under Turkish control.
- Of these, the regime doesn't have any immediate plan to attack the Kurds, who also have the backing of the U.S. It can't afford to attack Turkey either and provoke a bigger war.
- So the obvious choice for the next battle, or perhaps the last of the Syrian civil war, was Idlib.
- Iran backed this plan as it wants Mr. Assad to re-establish his authority over the whole of Syria.

Turkey factor

- In the previous battles of the civil war, Russia fully backed the regime.
- The brute bombing that the Russian war planes carried out in Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta was vital for regime victories.
- But in Idlib, the situation is different. After the initial flare-up in ties, Russia and Turkey have warmed up to each other over the past two years.
- Last year, Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed on a de-escalation plan for Idlib which kept the province out of Russian-Syrian attacks.
- Under the terms of the agreement, Turkey set up 12 observation points on the front line.
- When rebels elsewhere struck surrender deals with the Syrian government, those who did not want to live under regime-held areas were bused into Idlib.
- At present, the province has some three million residents, half of them internally displaced people. Turkey, which already has 3.5 million of Syrian refugees, fears that an all-out assault

on Idlib will trigger another massive refugee flow.

- Idlib shares a border with Turkey, which is now shut. In the event of a war, refugees will flow into the Turkish border or to the neighbouring Afrin and Jarabulus areas, which are controlled by Turkey.
- Also, Idlib has a sizeable number of jihadists. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra which was the al-Qaeda arm in Syria, is one of the most powerful militant groups in the province.
- Turkey fears that an all-out attack could disperse them, prompting some of them to cross the border into Turkish land, posing new security challenges to the country, which is yet to recover from a series of terrorist attacks in 2016.
- So Turkey's interest lies in finding a non-violent solution to Idlib.
- Russia, on the other side, is in a dilemma. It wants Mr. Assad, who it calls the legitimate ruler of Syria, to win the civil war. But it also knows that the campaigns in Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta have spilled enough blood, and Idlib, given the size of its population, would be more disastrous.
- And a growing partnership with Turkey is vital for its force projection in the region as a hostile Turkey can shut Russia's access to Bosphorus and jeopardise its Mediterranean strategy.

What's next?

- To be sure, the Idlib deal has averted an all-out attack — for now, hasn't provided any realistic solution to the crisis.
- Part of the problem is the HTS presence in Idlib. Neither the Syrian government nor Turkey can allow an al-Qaeda-linked group to continue to have a safe haven in Idlib.
- According to the UN, there are about 15,000 HTS fighters in Idlib.
- The government's plan is to attack all militant groups, including HTS and the Turkey-supported rebels, and retake the province — the Aleppo model.
- Turkey, however, proposes using non-violent tactics to draw HTS fighters away from its organisational fold and also empower non-HTS rebels to take the jihadists on.
- Earlier they had fought with both the Syrian regime and other militant groups, including the Islamic State, and survived.
- Idlib has been their haven for a long time. If Turkey fails to honour its commitments, that will give an excuse to Russia to go back to the original plan — the Aleppo model.
- The Putin-Erdogan deal may have postponed a battle, but the war is far from over.

