

The Idlib Crisis

How Did We Get Here?

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Introduction



his info-pack expounds upon a range of moving pieces related to the on-going conflict in Syria, with particular emphasis on the fallout from the Idlib crisis. Firstly, the reasons why Turkey is involved in Idlib are explained. Secondly, the Sochi Agreement concerning the Idlib region is de-

tailed, including the events prior to and resulting from Russian/regime abrogation of that agreement. Thirdly, the refugee crisis and its status as a litmus test for international order is discussed. Finally, the Russian role in Syria, and the question of exactly why Russia continues to back the Assad regime, is addressed.

Syria's Importance for Turkey

There was once a time when relations between Turkey and Syria showed promise, but the events of the 'Arab Spring' and Bashar al-Assad's crackdown put an abrupt end to all that. Syria, in general, and Idlib, in particular, are now of critical importance to Turkey for a number of reasons. Firstly, in response to the repression and deadly crackdown that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad met popular public protests for democratic change in Syria with, Turkey, alongside other Western nations, regional actors, and international organisations, called for the removal of Assad, and gradually sided with opposition groups. This came in the context of the wider series of Arab Spring uprisings, where Turkey declared its support for the forces of change. Turkey has gone on to provide political and material support to the moderate Syrian opposition groups now under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA and Turkey have partnered in earlier Turkish interventions that targeted Daesh and the YPG/PKK in the North-East and North-West of the country. Turkey's presence in Idlib had up till now been more limited in the form of observation posts as part of the 2018 Sochi memorandum agreed upon between Turkey and Russia.

Secondly, the emboldening of the PKK terrorist-linked YPG, who were subsequently rebranded as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) the Syria, alongside the growth of ISIS/Daesh, transformed the situation in Syria into one beyond the issue of the Assad regime into one of existential concern for Turkey, tied to the forty-year terror campaign waged by the PKK against the country, and the emergent threat posed by Daesh. Turkey is part of the global coalition to defeat Daesh and has suffered the most out of all NATO/Western partners from Daesh attacks. It is also the only NATO partner to directly engage the group on the ground and has been credited with neutralising more fighters than other parties to the coalition. In response to developments along its southern border, Turkey conducted a number of interventions against both the YPG/PKK and Daesh. The most recent operation in Idlib, dubbed 'Operations Spring Shield', is the first instance of Turkish forces mounting a sustained campaign directly against the Syrian regime and associated forces.

Thirdly, the relationship between Damascus and the YPG/PKK is of further concern. This dynamic is noth-

ing new. In Hafez al-Assad's Syria, the regime historically harboured and sustained the PKK presence in Syria in an effort to buffer Turkey and disrupt NATO's southern flank. Damascus' relationship with the PKK had brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war in the 1980s. In effect, Syria became a safe haven for the PKK to conduct attacks within Turkey. As it stands today, the YPG/PKK and the regime enjoy a strategic relationship in that they both turned on the Syrian opposition groups, the former perhaps doing so with the hope of gaining autonomy in the regions ceded to it by Damascus. This relationship has reportedly intensified following the launch of Turkey's 'Operation Peace Spring' launched in October 2019 against YPG-held territory in Syria's northeast.

Fourthly, the collateral damage of Assad's campaign to eliminate any and all opposition was the major refugee crisis that we witness today. The burden for the safety and future of these refugees has not been shared amongst the largely indifferent European states, but largely shouldered by Turkey. Effectively, this means that Turkey is left alone to deal both the

source and the effects of the "biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century". Beyond Turkey, the situation in Idlib clearly has implications for the region and beyond both terms of geopolitics and for the values that the European Union (EU) purportedly supports. In response to Western/European inaction over the crisis in Idlib, and following the death of 33 Turkish soldiers by Russian-backed regime airstrikes, Turkey announced that it would no longer require refugees already in Turkey to remain in the country; a commitment it had previously undertaken as part of a 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. Over 100,000 have since left Turkey for the Greek and Bulgarian borders. Greek border units have responded with people have, reportedly causing protestor deaths. Greece is in effect a transit country for refugees fleeing the horrors of Syria and beyond, and the EU continues to respond negatively at the prospect of assisting these people who seek the sanctity of life taken away from them in Syria.

September 2018 Sochi Agreement

Over the course of the Syrian Civil War, various agreements have been penned at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi. The 'Sochi Agreement' here refers to that which concerns the North-Western Syrian province of Idlib. The Sochi Agreement, agreed upon between Turkey and Russia in September 2018, envisioned the creation of a 15-20km de-militarised buffer zone around the last bastion of opposition resistance in North-West Idlib. A number of Turkish observation posts were constructed to observe the agreement, although a number of those installations are now surrounded by regime forces. Syria's former Al Qaeda affiliated-rebels such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS – formally known as Jabhat al-Nusra) were meant to withdraw. Russian and Turkish units were to patrol the de-escalation zone, akin to U.S.-Turkish, Rus-

sian-Turkish patrols in the North-East of the country. Four de-escalation zones had previously been agreed to, however the regime – backed by Russian airpower – has assaulted and absorbed three of them. The trouble with the Idlib region begins with the incessant Russian/regime aerial bombardment of the region which, under the pretext of targeting 'terrorists', instead focused on attacking civilian infrastructure in a scorched-earth tactic reminiscent of Russia's war in Chechnya, leading to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians and the displacement of hundreds of thousands towards the Turkish border.

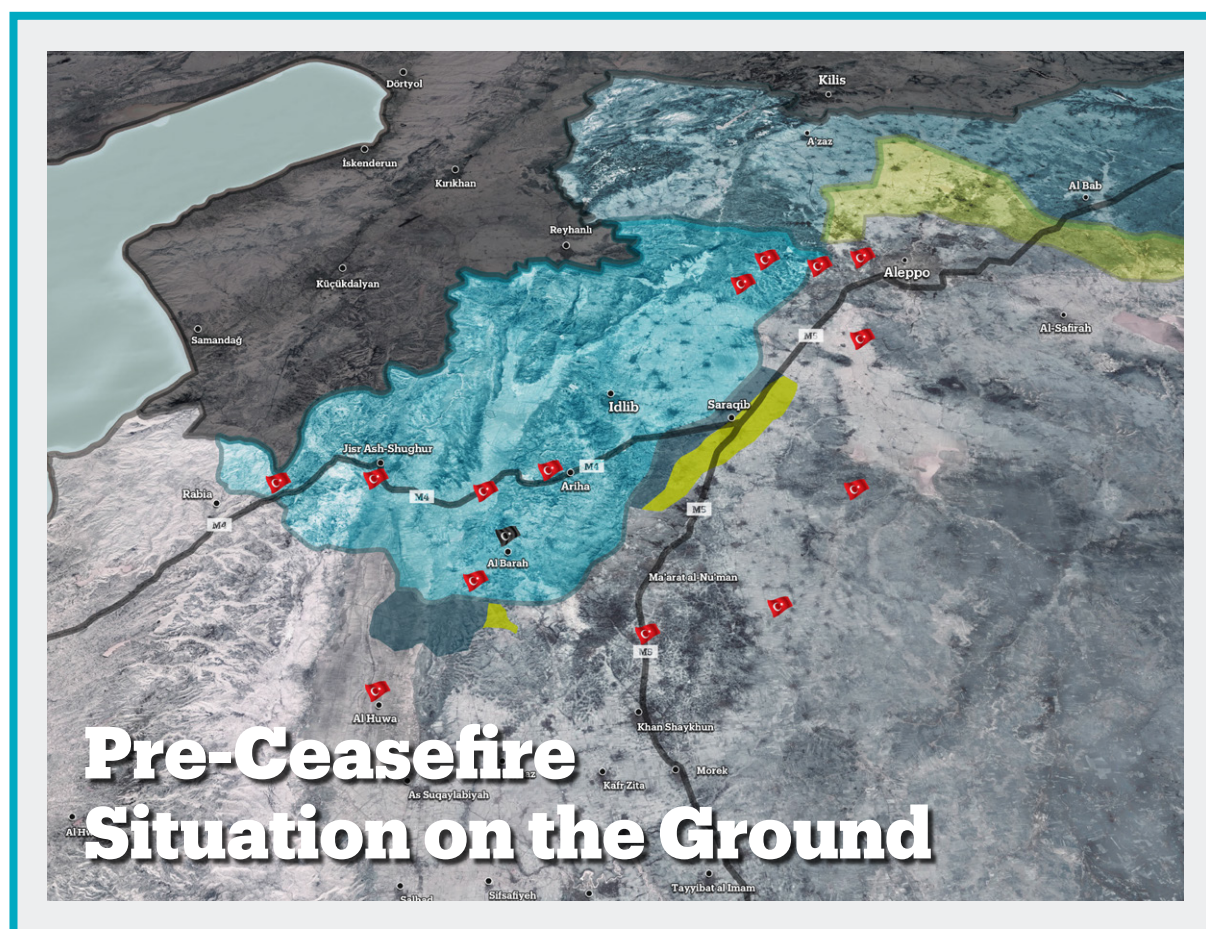
Furthermore, the wholesale looting of civilian properties, the desecration of graves in recently captured opposition territory, the regime's indiscriminate barrel-bombing, and the targeting of hospitals as un-

covered by the New York Times, and the double-tap airstrikes on those who seek to provide humanitarian assistance continue to demonstrate the disregard the regime and its backers have shown with regards to the Sochi Agreement. Gradually, these factors are being acknowledged in international forums, whilst a U.N. panel has directly accused Russia itself of war crimes. The Assad regime has clearly preferred the annihilation of its opponents, rather than reform or reconciliation. Even before the de-escalation agreement was reached, the Assad regime was signalling its intent to destroy any opposition in the region.

The regime offensive that began in December 2019 in Idlib is just the latest violation, in line with its track record of seeking to eliminate all opposition rather than political compromise and reconciliation. Since December, as much as 36% of Idlib's territory was lost to the regime. Turkey steadily began to bolster its mili-

tary presence in the region, backing the moderate opposition in the SNA (Syrian National Army) who had lost a large amount of territory to the regime, including their last presence in Aleppo.

Leading up to the most-recent crisis, a number of Turkish soldiers perished in Russian-backed regime airstrikes. However, it was the killing of 33 in an airstrike on February 28th that proved to be the final straw. In response, Turkey launched an unprecedented drone campaign against regime assets, in effect implementing a de facto no-fly-zone within hours. 900,000 would-be refugees had also moved toward the Turkish border, fleeing constant Russian-backed regime airstrikes into destitute conditions, bearing the winter-cold in roughshod temporary accommodation and limited humanitarian support. Turkey has struck the regime hard, and demands a return to terms set forth by the Sochi agreement for Idlib.



Source: TRT World Research Centre

The Refugee Issue

In a landmark deal struck in March 2016, Turkey and the EU reached a deal that would see the flow of refugees into Europe significantly reduced. In return, Turkey would get a €6 billion fund for refugees, visa-free travel for its citizens and a fast-tracking of Turkey's long-running EU membership bid.

Additional items agreed to at the summit on March 18, 2016 were:

- As of March 20, 2016 all the new irregular migrants who migrated from Turkey to the Greek islands would be returned to Turkey. Migrants arriving on the Greek islands would be duly recorded and their asylum applications will be processed individually in cooperation with the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees). The costs of irregular migrants' return transactions would be covered by the EU
- For each irregular Syrian refugee returned to Turkey, the EU would accept one regular migrant. In the first stage, 18 thousand people were to be placed, then an additional 54 thousand people to follow on a voluntary basis.
- Turkey would take all necessary measures to avoid the formation of new irregular migration routes and will work with the neighbouring EU states to prevent the irregular migration.
- The Voluntary Humanitarian Acceptance Plan, to which EU member states were to contribute to on a voluntary basis, would be put in place when irregular crossings come to an end or decreased significantly.
- Turkey would be given the exemption of visa facilitation and visa matters will be accelerated provided that all the criteria was met until the end of June 2016.

- The EU would accelerate the payment of 3 billion Euros to Turkey and the projects for the temporary protected before the end of March 2016 to be financed. The EU would launch an additional 3 billion Euro fund by the end of 2018 within the framework of the Refugee Financial Facility.

- The EU also confirmed its continued commitment to revive Turkey's EU membership process on fast-track.

Turkey stepped up coast guard missions in the Aegean with stricter measures that helped trigger a significant drop in the influx of refugees. To date, Turkey has received only half of the committed funds and the EU did not deliver its promise of visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and a fast-tracked EU membership review.

As the war in Syria has reached its 9th year, the refugee population in Turkey has reached 3.6 million. Regime attacks in Idlib have displaced millions more Syrians from their homes and with the current situation in Idlib another 1 million refugees are expected to flee towards the Turkish border.

Ankara has repeatedly pointed out that it has been left alone to deal with the burden of Syrian refugees. So far Turkey has spent a reported \$40 billion on the housing and welfare of Syrians while it has received only a minuscule portion of the promised monetary support from the EU.

Turkey recently proposed for a safe zone where Syrian refugees could voluntarily return and be protected from regime attacks. However, Turkey's plan did not receive the expected support from the US and the EU.

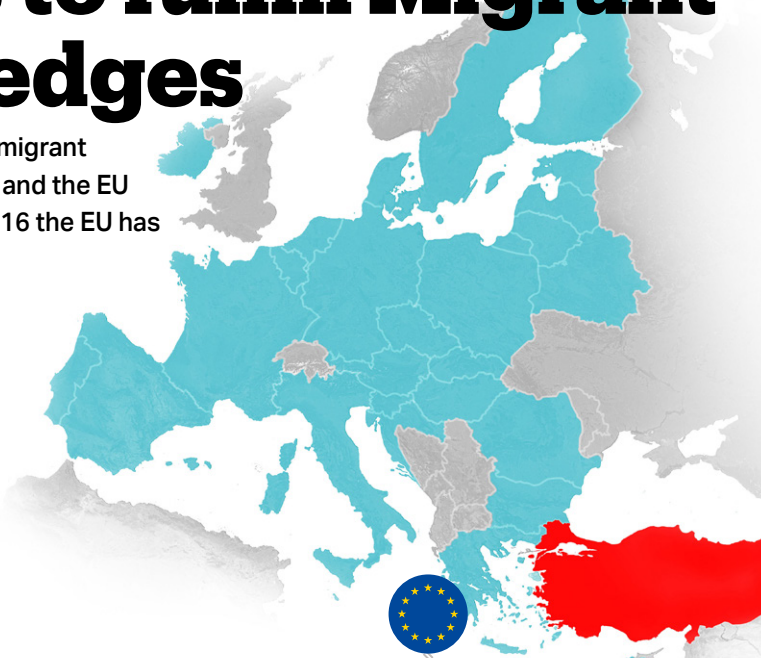
EU fails to fulfill Migrant Deal Pledges

Nearly four years since the migrant agreement between Turkey and the EU was signed on March 18, 2016 the EU has yet to fulfill its pledges

Not even €3 billion of €6 billion transferred

Brussels had promised to transfer a total of €6 billion in two installments by 2018

Turkey **has yet to receive from the EU even €3 billion of this amount to be used for** refugees in Syria



Customs Union not revised

Official negotiations on revising the Customs Union Agreement between the EU and Turkey were to begin after authorization by the EU Council. However, Brussels has yet to make substantial moves on this file.

The two sides have agreed on a report about the framework of the negotiations, but have been unable to advance the issue.

New chapters not opened

Since June 30, 2016, no new chapters have been opened on Turkey's EU accession process. The EU also suspended high-level meetings under the pretext of disagreements in the Easternn Mediterranean.

Visa Liberalization not Fulfilled

As part of the migration deal, the EU promised Turkey to liberalize visas for Turkish nationals by June 2016, but has so far not delivered.



MIGRANT FLOWS REDUCED BY 97%

Irregular migration via the Aegean Sea was largely kept under control as a result of Turkey's fulfillment **of its side of the migration deal**.

Irregular migrant crossings via the **Aegean Sea fell by 97%**

While 856,000 irregular migrants crossed to Europe via Aegean islands **in 2015, this number fell to 32,494 in 2018**

Voluntary humanitarian admission program dropped

The EU did not implement a voluntary humanitarian admission scheme to resettle some of the 3.5 million Syrians already living in Turkey.

Source: TRT World Research Centre

What is a Safe Zone?

Turkey has for years insisted that there should be a peace corridor to resettle Syrians who have been displaced by the conflict.

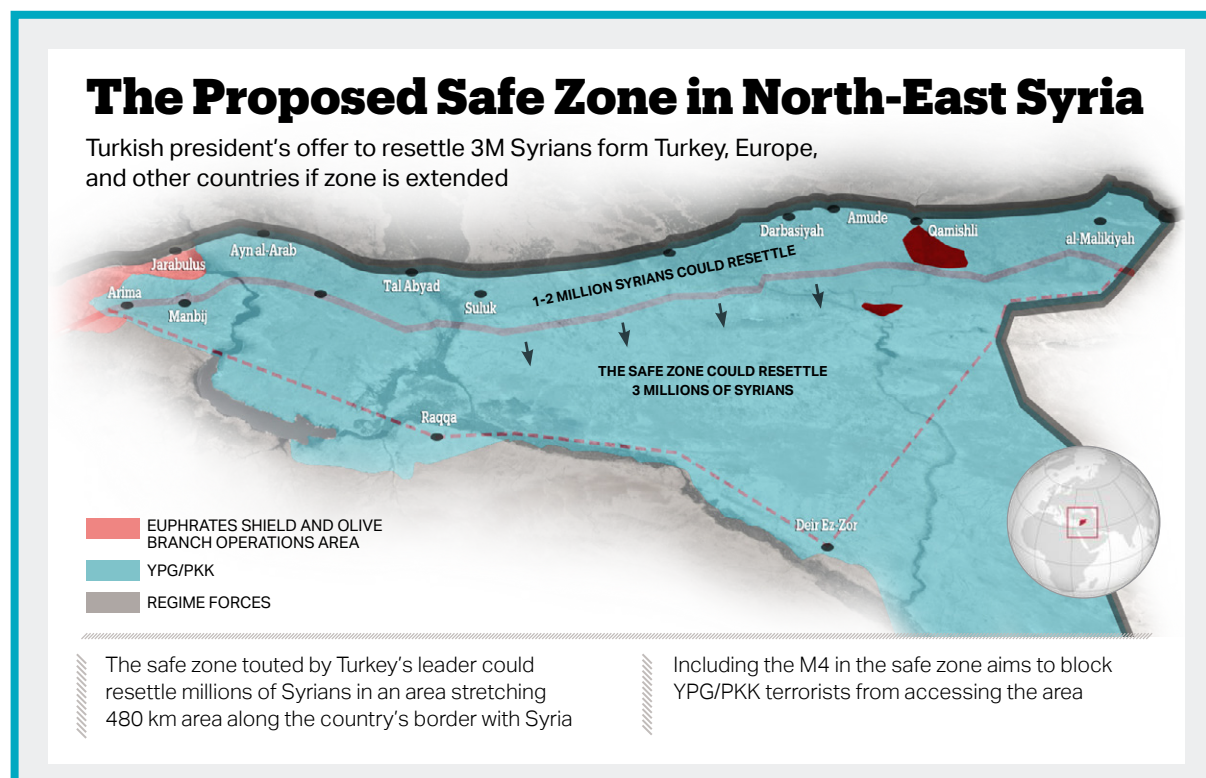
Turkey proposed a safe-zone where up to 3 million Syrians in Turkey and Europe could be voluntarily resettled. The 480-kilometre long safe zone extends along the Syrian border all the way to the Syrian border with Iraq.

Although, UN has attempted to increase its humanitarian aid mission in Idlib in December 2019, the proposal for opening of new routes for the delivery of aid was vetoed by Russia and China in UN Security Council. The resolution, drafted by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany, would have allowed cross-border humanitarian deliveries for a further 12 months from two points in Turkey and one in Iraq. Deputy U.N. aid chief Ursula Mueller had warned the council that without the cross border operations "we would see an immediate end of

aid supporting millions of civilians."

As for the EU, many member states share the opinion that that the Syrian problem cannot be solved by military means and the EU has so far restrained from playing an active role in the most recent escalation. The EU has repeatedly said that it does not want to be a party to an armed conflict and is trying to convince Moscow to cease its support to Assad regime through diplomacy. However, the number of politicians demanding sanctions against Russia is also increasing arguing that these calls by the EU have not been successful.

As the main supporter of the Syrian regime, Russia has closed Syrian airspace which has provided regime forces with the upper hand. The regime continues to attack civilian infrastructure in Idlib which has cost countless lives and triggered another refugee flow towards the Turkish border.



Source: TRT World Research Centre

NATO's Position

The latest developments in Syria represents a watershed moment for NATO-Turkey relations. Turkish authorities declared that they can no longer sustain the status quo in Syria and require NATO's support in the Syrian conflict.

Following the airstrike on Turkish troops in Idlib which killed 34 Turkish soldiers on February 28th, NATO held an emergency meeting at Ankara's request. The meeting took place in accordance with Article 4 of the North Atlantic Agreement. Article 4 of the alliance's charter indicates that "Any ally can request consultations whenever, in the opinion of any of them, their territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened."

After the meeting, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has acknowledged Turkey's importance to NATO and expressed full solidarity with Turkey and promised the necessary assistance to be given to Turkey.

Since the outbreak of war in Syria, Turkey has called NATO for a meeting three times under the framework of Article 4.

The first one took place in July 2012 after the Turkish plane was downed by shooting from Syria. The second happened in October 2012 as a result of artillery attacks on Akçakale. The third was related to terrorist operations against Daesh and the PKK in July 2015.

Presidential Communications President Fahrettin Altun, said that Turkey's priority expectations from NATO is the establishment of no-fly zone in northwest Syria.

President Erdogan also recently said that the biggest problem for Turkey is the use of airspace belongs to Russia and Syria and that Turkish warplanes and helicopters cannot provide support to ground troops in Idlib.

In this case, the patriots or SAMP-T anti-missile systems can be placed on the Incirlik air base or in the cities of Hatay and Kilis.

In the previous threat cases to Turkey, NATO has earlier provided the anti-missile batteries shipped from the US, the Netherlands and Spain to Turkey.

The Missile Shield radar in Malatya-Kürecik is currently protected by a Spanish Patriot battery. It was first sent to Turkey in the early stages of the war but was subsequently withdrawn. They will likely be re-dispatched in Turkey. Another possibility depends on the US 6th Fleet ships in the Mediterranean to give support to the electronic air protection to Turkey in Idlib-Hatay region.

NATO lists its approach and goals to Syria as follows: The first is to end the instability in the north of Syria among all the relevant international actors. The second is actively continuing the fight against terrorism in Syria. However, with regards to the "Russian threat", NATO member states have different perspectives on Syria.

The latest developments in Syria represents a watershed moment for NATO-Turkey relations. Turkish authorities declared that they can no longer sustain the status quo in Syria and require NATO's support in the Syrian conflict.

While Turkey considers Daesh and the YPG as terrorist organisations, other NATO members such as the US, France and Germany considers the YPG as their allies in the fight against Daesh.

As a result, in the London Declaration published after the December 2019 NATO Summit, although every member of the alliance has a different approach to the issues, a joint decision was made on “the threat of Russia” and the “Syrian issue”. The statement said that “we, as an Alliance, are facing distinct threats and challenges emanating from all strategic directions. Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security.” NATO considers Russia as a threat to European security, but stated that the path to dialogue with Russia should be open. Leaders tried to bring together the security interests of all NATO member-states by stating that “any form of terrorism and every method of terrorism will continue to be a threat to all NATO members.”

Most recently, it was reported that the US President Donald Trump told President Erdogan that the US will lobby NATO members to provide Turkey with Patriot missile systems.

Although Turkey’s relations with alliance members has been rocky in recent times, the situation in Idlib represents a test of the alliance’s resolve and ultimately its relevance. In order for NATO to not only maintain a deterrent capacity but also maintain the trust of its member states, it would be advisable to openly support Turkey both politically and militarily. The situation in Idlib is demonstrative of the fact that the Assad regime is not willing to negotiate and that Russia is unwilling to restrain it. Inaction from NATO is not a display of neutrality. In reality it provides Russia, Iran and the Syrian regime an opening to continue to impose a military solution to a conflict that is so often described as having none.

If the regime, backed by Russian airpower and Iranian-allied militias is allowed to continue, the potential atrocities may be on a scale not yet seen in the 9 year war. The only realistic way forward to prevent such an occurrence is for NATO to support Turkey to forcefully halt the Syrian regime advance.



Source: Dursun Aydemir - AA

Why did Turkey Open its Borders for Refugees?

Following the airstrike that killed at least 33 Turkish soldiers, Turkey announced that it would 'open its gates' for migrants and it would no longer stop refugees seeking to go to Europe.

Since 2012, Turkey has repeatedly warned of the risk of the refugee and migrant situations getting out of control. Despite Turkey's repeated warnings, the EU and the international community have not lent an ear to Turkey's calls, failing to support Turkey's buffer and no-fly zone proposals in Syria. Most recently, over one million people have been displaced following the launch of a Russian-backed regime offensive on Idlib in December, 2019.

Turkey's Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun stated that "we have said it, time and again, that we can no longer accommodate renewed refugee inflows if there is no serious burden sharing. We have called on the US & EU to create a safe zone, which we are doing on our own now. The lack of support by our allies has been disheartening!"

He further stated that "as our calls have been largely ignored, promises un-kept, and our forces targeted on the ground, we have no more patience for empty rhetoric and lack of tangible support. We can no longer accept the attitude that millions of IDPs and refugees are somehow our problem only!"

Turkey's presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin also stated that "many European countries seem to hold that as long as the refugees don't come to their cities, it's somebody else's problem. But this indifference doesn't solve the crisis. We will continue to do our best but there is a limit to how much more we can do."

Following these developments, thousands of refugees moved towards the Turkish-Greek border where they were confronted by Greek security forces.

The Greek army said it would conduct military exercises along the land border on Monday, with soldiers using live ammunition. A group of refugees has claimed that they were beaten by Greek security forces and were sent back to Turkey after the soldiers seized their money.

A greater escalation in Syria could spark another wave of Syrian refugees into Europe, potentially further stirring domestic political upheaval across the EU, particularly in Germany, Italy and Greece.

In response to the developing situation, the Greek Prime Minister tweeted that:

"Significant numbers of migrants and refugees have gathered in large groups at the Greek-Turkish land border and have attempted to enter the country illegally. I want to be clear: no illegal entries into Greece will be tolerated. We are increasing our border security."

Thousands of migrants are camped out at Turkey's western frontier trying to enter Greece. At the time of writing there more than 100,000 people waiting at the border.



Source: TRT World Research Centre

What are the Interests at Stake for Russia and the Syrian regime?

The Russian presence in Syria dates back to the Cold War. The Russian media has always referred to Syria as a “friend” and “partner”. At one point the Russian diaspora had a huge presence in Syria, which consisted of almost 100,000 people including military advisers to administration in Damascus and other professionals such as engineers, doctors and academics. More importantly, Syria - being a neighbour to NATO-member Turkey - plays a crucial role in demonstrating Russian military capabilities beyond its borders.

Russia's 2014 intervention in the Syrian war sent a clear signal to the world that the survival of the regime is in Moscow's strategic interest. The political, economic and military interests of Russia in the Middle East are strictly bound to the fate of the strength of the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime has been able to cling onto power and reverse the gains made by the Syrian opposition only with both Russian and Iranian intervention.

Russia continues to publicly blame Turkey for breaching the terms of the Sochi agreement. Furthermore, Russia has criticized assistance to groups in Idlib fighting against the regime and has accused Turkey of supporting 'jihadist' elements in the opposition-held province. For its part, the Syrian regime seems to have taken the Sochi process as a means to buy time before launching an operation to wrest control of the province. Russia justifies the aid to the regime by defining the groups in Idlib as “radicals”, “Islamists” or “terrorists” and argues that the elimination of these groups is essential for peace in Syria.

The Russians have invested heavily to keep the regime strong, authoritarian and, most importantly, dependent. An independent and democratic Syria could threaten Russian strategic interests in the country,

which has been maintained by Moscow for more than 40 years. The possible end to the Russian military, economic and political legacy in Syria would have also have been a major blow to the strongman image of Putin.

Moscow does not want another Western-style intervention in the Middle East. Russia constantly points out the failures and mistakes made in the transition period in Libya and Iraq to legitimize their presence in Syria. Considering the Russian supported war against the opposition, it is clear that Moscow would push the military and political boundaries to keep the Assad regime in Damascus in place.

The Syrian war has created an opportunity for the Russian Air Force to test their latest weapons. Khmeimim Air Base, which hosts SU-30SM and SU-57 fighter aircraft, not only gives support to the Assad regime in its advance towards Idlib, but it also provides a significant advantage to the Russians in the wider Middle East as well as a field to experiment with new military technologies. On the other hand, The naval facility in Tartus is the Russian Navy's only overseas base. The facility, which can accommodate medium-sized naval vessels, represents the Russian Navy's only secure warm water access point.

Syria is an important market for Russian natural resources and infrastructure investments, which are worth almost \$20 billion. The Syrian army is one of the biggest customers of the Russian military industry.

The main interest of the Assad regime is to regain authority over the whole of Syria without compromise. It is clear that without Russian economic, political and military support Bashar al-Assad would not be capa-

ble of continuing the war. The perception in Damascus is that this needs to be italicized in Idlib could resolve the war in its favour.

In the course of a war (where over half the population are now either refugees or internally displaced) that has led to the death of at least 500,000 people and a 75% reduction in GDP, the Assad regime desperately needs Russian support to rebuild the country. Mos-

cow has already declared that massive credits would be prepared for the reconstruction of Syria when the war is brought to a conclusion. Reports have made it clear that Assad and his inner circle will be in charge of rebuilding the country's infrastructure, while Russian contractors will gain advantages in the Syrian economy. Regime forces are depleted, dependent on Russian airstrikes, mercenaries and Iranian/Hezbollah militias.



Erdogan - Putin Summit

On March 5th, President Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart met in Moscow yesterday and agreed on a ceasefire to halt the latest round of fighting in Idlib.

Although expectations were high following the launch of Turkey's Operation Spring Shield, the ceasefire has effectively put an end to the latest assault by the Assad regime on the Idlib region, sparing millions of civilians from a continued onslaught. The question now is whether or not that ceasefire will last, but more so, what the international community can or will do to ensure that it moves towards a more permanent solution. President Putin described the deal as a "good basis for ending the fighting".

Turkey, as the only nation that meaningfully supported the Syrian opposition, acted to alleviate the dire humanitarian situation in the region and stood against the regime's latest assault. In the process, Turkey demonstrated that the Syrian regime can be dealt a severe military blow.

Briefly, terms related to the ceasefire and details available thus far are:

- A 6km-wide security corridor along the M4 highway in the south of the province to be jointly patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces within 10 days.
- Turkish and Russian Defence Ministries to agree on the exact parameters of the security corridor within a week.
- No mention of the fate of the M5 highway, or the Turkish observation posts left within now regime-controlled territory, for now.
- Territory captured by the regime, notably Saraqib, Khan Sheykhun, Ma'arat el-Nu'man, presumably to remain under regime control.
- No mention of Russian-backed regime airstrikes that wreaked havoc on the region despite previous de-escalation agreements. The agreement mentions that all military actions 'along the line of contact' with cease.
- Turkey reserves the right to respond to any regime attacks

