

Idlib: The battle that terrifies the U.S. & Turkey

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As the Syrian government prepares for what it calls its “last major battle against terrorism” in the country, the western mainstream press says that Idlib is preparing for slaughter.

The headlines and front pages that speak of impending doom and a humanitarian disaster are reflective of the positions of the U.S. and European powers who are ratcheting up their anti-Syrian state rhetoric in a seemingly last-ditch attempt to prevent Damascus from taking control of the last major ‘rebel’ pocket – that of the al-Qaeda linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Of course, a human catastrophe is possible. The Syrian government and Russia will label the deaths as “collateral” or manipulate the numbers to avoid any Western intervention against the Idlib operation when Russia-Syria-Iran trio want to put an end to the civil war with the “liberation of Idlib”.

However, the hypocrisy of the West; US and the western media, in particular, is that

they turned a blind eye to the occupation of Afrin by Turkey and its jihadist allies. Thousands of civilians killed by airstrikes, 400 thousand people forced to flee, schools and hospital were bombed, Turkey-backed jihadists called for ethnic cleansing... Despite their “great concerns” for Idlib, none of what happened in Afrin were reported by the mainstream media, or condemned by the U.S..

Also panic stricken at this time is the Turkish state, which has spent the past seven years betting on the victory of a multitude of ‘opposition’ formations, from those under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, to the Salafists of the so-called Islamic State. For President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, his Ottoman ambitions appear to be crumbling as a final attempt to stop the Idlib operation was rejected by both Russia and Iran.

For Syria, exhausted by more than seven years of war, the clearing of al-Qaeda elements from Idlib could very well be decisive and pave the way for the legitimate prospect of a negotiated settlement between the Syrian state and the Kurdish-led forces who control about a third of the country. However, it would certainly appear that the United States has other plans.

Trump & the Pentagon Threaten New Attacks

For Washington, peace in Syria at this juncture would be far from profitable, and the least ideal scenario for a country that has been attempting to facilitate regime change against the Ba’ath regime for decades.

As the Syrian government and their Russian and Iranian allies prepare to launch the assault on Idlib, Donald Trump has once again attempted to become ‘presidential’ by towing the line of the Pentagon in regards to using military force to prevent the fall of al-Qaeda.

With the midterm elections in the U.S. just around the corner, Trump understands that his approval ratings -- at least in the eyes of the establishment – rely heavily on how willing he is to go along with the tradition of U.S. militarism that unites Republicans and Democrats.

Sitting next to the emir of Kuwait at the White House days ago, Trump said of Idlib that, “I think it's a very sad situation in Idlib, the province, what's going on there. If it's a slaughter, the world is going to get very, very angry. And the United States is going to get very angry, too.”

It's of course deeply ironic that Trump considers what's ‘sad’ to be the prospect of Salafists, who hold a strangely similar ideology to the Islamic State that he has claimed to loathe so much, being routed and the population able to return to some

semblance of a dignified life.

If Trump and the U.S. are genuinely concerned about the prospect of human life being lost en masse in the upcoming battle, they are absolutely the last ones with any moral high ground on this question.

It has become rather predictable throughout the course of the war that the go-to argument for U.S. intervention or even proposed intervention is the use of chemical weapons – always allegedly by the Syrian government. These allegations almost led to the Obama administration going to war against Bashar al-Assad in 2013, and pushed Trump to bomb Syrian state targets both in the Spring of 2017 and this April.

A White House statement from this week reaffirmed that the United States is ready to yet again launch attacks, saying “Let us be clear, it remains our firm stance that if President Bashar al-Assad chooses to again use chemical weapons, the United States and its Allies will respond swiftly and appropriately.”

Turkey Loses Its Mind Over Idlib

For Turkey, a country that has attempted to play out its twisted neo-Ottoman fantasies in Syria during the course of the war, it is on the precipice of a major defeat.

Ankara referred to a tripartite meeting with Iran and Russia this week in Tehran as the “last chance to avoid a massacre”. The Turkish attempt failed when the other two countries said the operation would push forward regardless of Erdogan’s supposed concerns over the humanitarian situation, which is a deeply laughable idea given the massacres Turkey has been party to in Syria in recent years, most notably in Afrin.

Turkey ostensibly doesn’t support the former al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) that controls Idlib, but rather the ‘rival’ National Liberation Front which aims to position itself as a more ‘moderate’ force. Yet the ideology of Turkey’s governing AKP has shown itself adaptable to supporting any number of ‘Islamist’ or ‘moderate’ forces in Syria throughout the conflict.

Turkey and its proxies losing a foothold in Idlib would spell doom for the Erdoganist forces in Afrin, a city they have occupied since this March. Although the Kurdish militants of the People’s and Women’s Protection Units (YPG & YPJ) withdrew in order to prevent a bloodbath and an even more systematic ethnic cleansing than what ended up taking place, Turkish and Salafist groups have not known a moment of peace since then. The YPG/J pivoted to a campaign of guerrilla warfare that has left any Turkish ambitions to govern Afrin shakily at best.

Erdogan has put forward grand objectives for the rest of northern Syria, namely

pushing the U.S.-Turkey roadmap for Manbij that would expel any Kurdish-linked fighters from west of the Euphrates River, and eventually clear the Turkey-Syria border from what he has called a 'terror corridor' (i.e. Rojava). Yet, these objectives now appear more elusive than ever.

Writing in *The Atlantic*, Joost Hiltermann says of Turkey's bet against Assad, "With impulsive and mercurial leaders in both Washington and Ankara, no one can say how Turkey will navigate the gathering storm. It may count itself lucky if it emerges with mere scrapes from its lost gambles in Syria and the wider region, and does not find itself shipwrecked, with enemies surrounding it."

The Future of SAA-YPG Relations

As the war winds down, it is apparent that there are two principle victors from the brutal proxy war that has suffocated the country. With the smoke clearing, the Syrian state – in tandem with its Russian and Iranian allies – have proven resilient. All notions of Assad stepping down or being pushed aside have been proven false.

On the other hand, the chaos of the war has allowed the Kurdish-forces of the YPG/J to develop its project of radical grassroots democracy, creating an autonomous region that now spans a third of the country and incorporates Arab, Assyrian and other ethnic groups.

At this moment, the U.S. military has outposts in the northern part of the country controlled by the YPG/J and their umbrella Syrian Democratic Forces that have been set up as part of the coalition's anti-Daesh campaign. However, this doesn't mean that the YPG/J-U.S. relationship is as durable as some would posit. The Kurdish forces have always referred to their partnership with Washington as 'tactical', and have made no secret of the fact that their visions of future governance are worlds apart ideologically.

Of course, the United States would like to maintain influence and a foothold in Syrian territory. However, if Washington wants its Kurdish 'allies' to fight against Assad, it clearly has the wrong partners.

The lack of U.S. support for the YPG/J in Afrin earlier this year led to an opening in the relations between the Kurdish militants and the Ba'ath government, with Syrian Arab militias joining in defense of the city in limited numbers.

In recent months, the diplomatic door has opened further, with the Syrian Democratic Council (MSD) of northern Syria visiting Damascus for talks on a possible political settlement. Turkey has been obsessed with attempting to sabotage these talks, but

to date, these efforts have appeared unsuccessful.

Over the past month, Turkish state media has been in a frenzy over the prospect of the YPG/J participating in the Idlib offensive.

On August 12, Anadolu Agency reported that “around 1,300 YPG/PKK terrorists have been transferred to Aleppo to support Syria's Bashar-al Assad regime's possible operations against the opposition, as part of their collaboration.”

This week, the agency reported that camps in Latakia were being used to train the YPG and other ‘far-left’ militants: “A group of nearly 200 terrorists joined the camps from Afrin, Manbij, Tal Abyad and Raqqa The terrorists use a fire brigade building and military positions as camp areas in Gabara town. Backed by Assad regime forces, YPG/PKK, far-left DHKP-C and United Freedom Forces (UFF) terror groups plot terror attacks against Turkmens and Turkey, sources said.”

An article in The Guardian on September 7 confirmed that fighters from the SDF has indeed been transferred to Syrian government territory to fight in the Idlib operation, with an anonymous Kurdish leader being quoted as having said, “It’s symbolic on one level and strategic on another. This means we need the regime. There is a partnership growing, but we need to get our pound of flesh from them.”

Prospects for an End to the War

What that pound of flesh will look like is as of yet unclear. Negotiations are still at their preliminary stages, and rhetoric from both Damascus and Rojava officials toward each other is often vague and inconsistent.

There are a host of unresolved issues that need to be hammered out before Syria can move forward to a peaceful and more pluralistic future (namely what autonomy and pluralism actually look like, as well as the status of the U.S. and other coalition forces), but the signs at this point are positive.

For Turkey and the United States – locked in a brotherly fight that brought relations to an all-time low – Idlib just might be the battle to bring them closer together yet again. Erdogan has moved away from the sphere of the U.S. toward greater cooperation with Russia and Iran, but the fact remains that when it comes to Syria, Ankara remains fundamentally opposed to the vision of Moscow and Tehran.

When Trump chose to launch airstrikes against Syrian government targets in April, Erdogan was the first to applaud him. We can rest assured that the same outcome will manifest this time around if the U.S. again decides to point the finger at Assad over a calamity in Idlib.