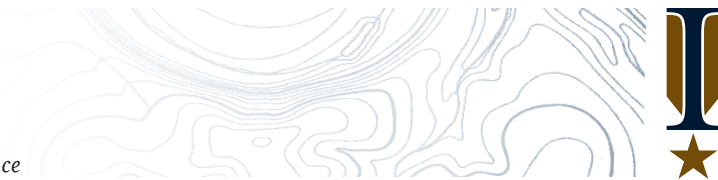


# Turkey Commits to Idlib

By Jennifer Cafarella with John Dunford, Michael Land, and Blane Wallace



MARCH 18, 2020

**Key Takeaway:** *The U.S. has an opportunity in Idlib to exploit the largest rift between Turkey and Russia in Syria to date while addressing a grave and dangerous humanitarian crisis, which will worsen in coming months without a robust international response. Turkey's intervention in Idlib Province changed the military balance in northwest Syria and created an opportunity for the U.S. and Europe to engage at relatively low cost. Turkey has compelled Russia to enter a new de-escalation agreement, but that agreement is unlikely to hold. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups began to spoil the implementation of joint Russo-Turkish patrols on March 15. The U.S. should step in and offer to support Turkey in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and deterring renewed pro-regime attacks in return for a realignment of Turkey with NATO.*

The situation in Syria's northwest province of Idlib is not only the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the Syrian war but also an important geopolitical theater that will affect the trajectory of the entire region. The renewed pro-regime offensive forced one million Syrians to Turkey's border between December 2019 and February 2020 in what remains the largest mass displacement of the war to date. Much of this displaced population is living outdoors without shelter or basic humanitarian supplies. Syrians, mostly women and children, will start dying in large numbers without robust and sustained assistance. Many will become desperate enough to risk climbing Turkey's border wall or taking smuggling routes out of Syria at great personal risk. Many of those will travel onward to Europe, possibly with help from the Turkish government, which refuses to accept more refugees. The likelihood and risk of an outbreak of COVID-19 among this vulnerable population is extremely high.

Turkey and Russia have agreed to de-escalate militarily in Idlib but have not addressed the humanitarian crisis and are unlikely to uphold de-escalation for long. They retain opposing goals and have each prepared for new rounds of military escalation. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan succeeded in compelling Russian President Vladimir Putin to accept a ceasefire agreement on March 5, 2020, by applying significant military pressure. Erdogan applied this pressure in phases, each time triggering a kinetic response from Putin, attempting to negotiate, and then conducting a new military escalation when diplomacy failed. Erdogan reached out repeatedly to Europe and the U.S. for diplomatic and military support but received little. U.S. officials had limited engagement with Turkey and without substantive new commitments. Europe followed America's lead. Erdogan finally succeeded in compelling Putin to a new deal on March 5, but the details are limited and the deal is unlikely to hold for long. A new phase of escalation is likely in the coming weeks and will follow the pattern established before March 5.

## Russian-Enabled Offensive Triggers Turkish Intervention

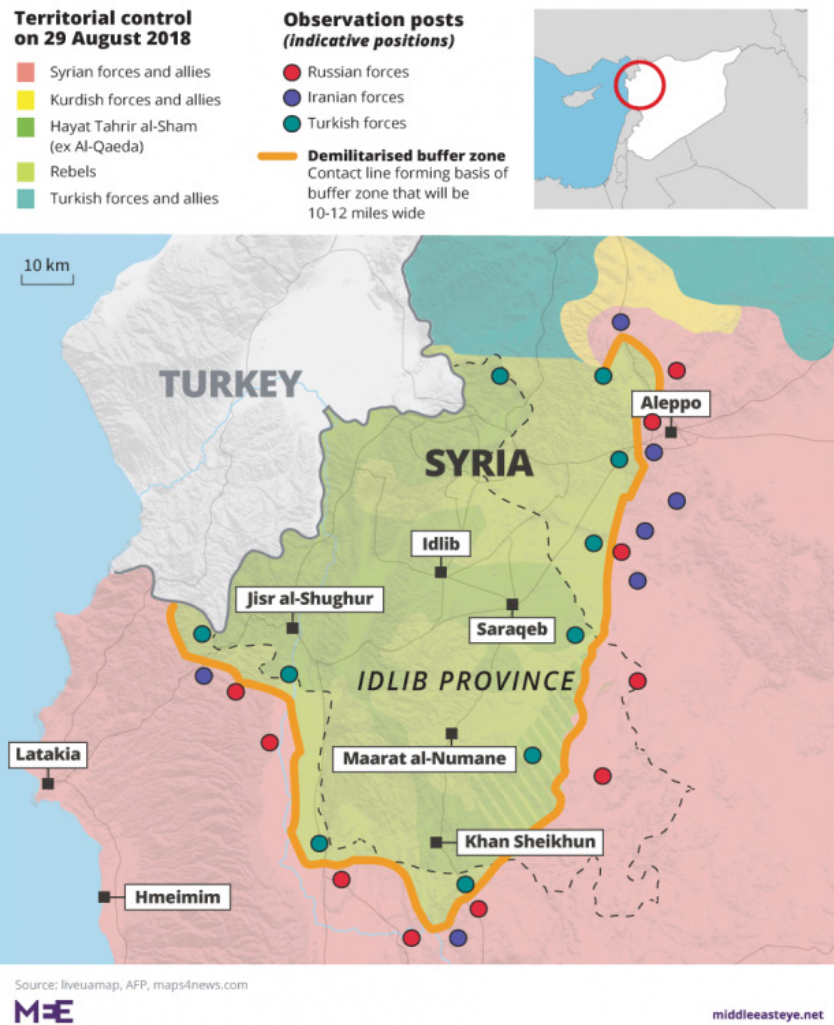
January 30–February 10

Russia enabled a major pro-regime military offensive that seized three key urban centers along the M5 Highway in Idlib Province beginning in January 2020.[1] The offensive was the last phase of a grinding and nearly year-long campaign to seize control of the highway after a framework agreement between Russia and Turkey over Idlib broke down in early 2019.

Russia opted to de-escalate in Idlib in September 2018 after attempting but failing to compel Turkish-backed opposition groups to surrender.[2] Erdogan and Putin signed the 2018 Sochi Memorandum of Understanding, committing to de-escalate militarily and cooperate to reopen two key highways connecting Aleppo to the Syrian coast and Damascus for trade.[3] Its key provisions were to:[4]

- Establish a demilitarized zone of 15-20 km depth from the front line. Russia and Turkey did not establish agreed-upon boundaries, instead leaving it open to “further consultations.”
- Remove all tanks, rockets, and artillery from the zone by October 10 and “radical terror groups” by October 15. Russia and Turkey did not agree upon the classification of “radical terror groups.”
- Conduct separate but coordinated patrols and UAV monitoring of the zone using the Turkish Armed Forces and Russian Military Police “with a view to ensuring free movement of local residents and goods.”
- Reopen the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial trade. The de-escalation zone covered some but not all of the M5 Highway and none of the M4 Highway based on front lines at the time.

## Turkey and Russia agree demilitarised buffer zone around Idlib



Pictured: Unofficial Map of the 2018 Sochi Agreement[5]

Russia and Turkey failed to implement the agreement, due in part to spoiling actions by al Qaeda-affiliated groups and regime forces.[6] The agreement was also vague enough to allow Russia and Turkey to use different interpretations of its terms to justify their own actions. Russia began enabling a pro-regime push northward up the M5 Highway in May 2019 after multiple rounds of negotiations with Turkey failed to produce consensus for how to implement the deal.[7]

The final phase of the pro-regime push up the M5 Highway triggered a major change in Turkey's policy and involvement in Syria in January 2020. As pro-regime forces advanced, Turkey deployed roughly a division of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) plus additional Special Forces units to Idlib from January 30 to March 5, bringing the total of Turkish troops in Idlib from roughly 1,000 to 20,000.[8] These forces established a defensible front line west of the M5 Highway to prevent further losses as pro-regime forces consolidated control over the final portions of the M5 Highway outside Aleppo City. Turkey also began sending ammunition and anti-tank guided munitions (ATGMs) to its Syrian proxies in the Syrian National Army to enable them to fight more effectively against pro-regime forces.[9]

Erdogan sought to use his military leverage to compel Putin to accept a new deal in Idlib. On February 5, Erdogan threatened that Turkish forces would launch offensive operations if pro-regime forces did not "retreat from Turkish observation posts in Idlib" by the end of February.[10] To do so would require pro-regime forces to withdraw from multiple key areas they seized in their offensive from May 2019 – February 2020, not merely the terrain they took beginning in January. Turkish and Russian officials began discussions on February 8, but made no progress.[11] On February 10, Erdogan held an emergency security meeting with senior Turkish officials to coordinate and approve the next stage of a military response.[12]

## **Turkey's First Escalation: Limited Disruption of Idlib Airspace and Pressure on Saraqib**

*February 11 – 26*

Turkey began a limited campaign to disrupt the airspace in Idlib on February 11 while Turkish military forces continued to flow into the province.[13] Turkey's Syrian proxies claimed multiple strikes against Syrian warplanes and helicopters using man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) beginning on February 11.[14] Turkey likely supplied these MANPADS and instructed its proxies in their use. It is also likely Turkish forces directly fired the weapons.[15] These strikes disrupted the Syrian regime's air campaign and forced Russian jets to fly at a higher altitude, reducing their effectiveness.[16] Turkey's decision to use MANPADS to contest the airspace in Idlib was consistent with previous thresholds of Turkish escalation in Idlib from 2017-2019.[17]

Turkish forces also supported a counterattack by Turkish proxies and al Qaeda-affiliated forces against the key city of Saraqib in northeast Idlib on the same day, February 11.[18] Saraqib sits atop the intersection of the M4 and M5 Highways, making it strategic terrain for both military and economic purposes and therefore a valuable source of leverage in negotiations with Putin. Turkish forces provided artillery support for the attack, which added pressure on pro-regime forces and boosted the morale of anti-Assad civilians and armed groups.[19] However, the attack failed to make substantial progress between February 11 and 26.

Turkey conducted a second, longer flurry of diplomatic activity February 12-26, again without success. Erdogan spoke to Putin on February 12, the day after beginning military operations.[20] A Turkish delegation then traveled to Moscow and met with Russian counterparts February 17-18.[21] According to Turkish media, the Turkish delegation rejected a Russian proposal for a new distribution of control in Idlib.[22] The next day, Russia publicly demanded a trilateral Astana summit in Tehran with Turkey and Iran.[23] The statement reflects a Russian counter, pressuring Turkey to partake in negotiations on Russia's terms.

Instead, Turkey turned to Europe for support in negotiating with Russia. Erdogan called French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on February 20; Macron and Merkel then called Putin to propose a summit in Istanbul that would include France, Germany, Turkey, and Russia.[24] Erdogan followed up with Putin on February 21 and then announced the "Istanbul Summit" was scheduled for March 5.[25] Putin later rejected the summit and again insisted on an Astana summit between Russia, Iran, and Turkey.[26] Two days of additional ceasefire negotiations between Turkish and Russian delegations failed to make progress on February 26.[27]

Russia began a new ground offensive against Turkey's vulnerable southern flank in Idlib while the Russo-Turkish negotiations were ongoing. Russia redeployed its most capable Syrian proxy force, the Tiger Forces, from the front line in Aleppo to attack the Jabal al Zawiya area in southern Idlib Province on February 23.[28] Syrian and Russian aircraft both reportedly conducted airstrikes against nearby Turkish military positions on February 24 to enable the offensive, killing at least 10 Turkish soldiers.[29] The ground offensive seized the symbolic opposition-held town of Kafr Nabul on February 25 and then a cluster of additional villages over the next two days.[30] Kafr Nabul had long been a hub of prominent anti-Assad protests and activity; its loss was a meaningful setback for Turkey and its proxies.

## Tit-for-Tat between Turkey and Russia

### *February 27*

Turkey and Russia conducted their most significant mutual escalation in a rapid tit-for-tat series of strikes on February 27. Turkish forces conducted an aggressive campaign of drone strikes to enable their Syrian proxies to seize Saraqib on February 27 while those forces lost terrain in Jabal al Zawiya.[31] According to a Russian journalist, Turkish drones struck every visible target in the city, including motorcycles, completely overwhelming regime defenses.[32]

Putin counter-escalated hours later. A Russian airstrike hit a nearby Turkish military position in Southern Idlib and killed at least 34 Turkish soldiers.[33] It was the deadliest attack on Turkish forces in Syria to date and appeared to surprise Erdogan's government, which immediately blocked social media in Turkey to prevent widespread coverage of the incident.[34] The strike was precise and occurred at night – typical of Russian operations but beyond the capability of the Syrian air force.[35] Turkey's defense minister told reporters he had disclosed the locations of Turkish soldiers in Idlib to Russian officials, indicating Russia had the necessary intelligence to conduct a precision strike against that base.[36] After the strike, Russia denied Turkish helicopters access to Syrian airspace to transfer casualties, requiring Turkey to evacuate by ground and thereby driving up the casualty count.[37]

Turkey made a strategic decision not to retaliate against Russian forces for the February 27 attack. Instead, Turkey blamed the Assad regime and conducted a new wave of artillery and drone strikes against regime military targets the same evening. Turkey's defense minister said that Turkish forces struck over 200 "regime targets," including dozens of military vehicles and systems, and killed over 300 "regime forces." [38] Casualty reports indicate Turkey's strikes also targeted Russian and Iranian proxy forces. [39]

Erdogan again engaged diplomatically with Russia and the U.S. following the strikes on February 27. He spoke to Putin shortly after the Russian strike as Turkish forces were preparing to retaliate. Erdogan then spoke to U.S. President Donald J. Trump the following day on February 28, reportedly stressing that he needs "actual" support from the U.S. instead of rhetoric. [40] Erdogan also began attempting to coerce the EU into supporting him in Idlib. He sent a new wave of Syrian refugees to Greece in an attempt to compel EU countries to support a Turkish safe zone in Syria. [41] By February 29, Greece reported an influx of 13,000 new refugees and migrants but shut its borders and refused them entry. [42] Turkish state media heavily distributed video and photos showing Greek National Guard ships attempting to sink Syrian refugee boats in order to add political pressure on Greece and the EU. [43]

## Turkey Expands Aggressive Campaign of Strikes against Pro-regime Forces

*February 28– March 4*

Turkey scaled up its campaign in Idlib even further on March 1 and imposed unprecedented costs on the pro-regime coalition. Turkey's defense minister announced the start of "Operation Spring Shield" as Turkish forces began imposing a defacto no-fly zone over Idlib. [44] Turkish jets inside Turkish airspace shot down multiple regime planes and helicopters in Idlib. Turkish forces also conducted an expanded campaign of drone strikes against regime airbases and other targets that included Russian and Iranian proxies but not Russian forces. [45] Turkey's Defense Ministry claimed on March 4 to have killed a total of over 3,000 "regime" soldiers; shot down three Syrian jets and eight helicopters; disabled numerous airfields, command posts, weapons production facilities, and Russian-provided anti-aircraft missile systems; and destroyed over 200 tanks and other military vehicles. [46]

Turkey's response indirectly but significantly weakened Russia's military position in Idlib. The casualties and equipment losses badly depleted the ability of pro-regime forces to launch further offensives. These losses also weakened the pro-regime coalition's defenses and enabled Turkey's proxy forces to break through the front lines in western Aleppo and in southern Idlib to recapture multiple villages. [47] Turkey's destruction of Russian-provided anti-aircraft systems damaged Russia's reputation and could reduce its subsequent arms sales. Turkish drones, likely using electronic jamming technology, evaded attack from and destroyed at least three Russian-made Pantsir S1 air-defense systems. [48] Turkey's targeting of regime aircraft and airbases also forced Russia to face even greater material and manpower costs to sustain an air campaign, either by expanding its own air campaign or offsetting the regime's losses. Finally, Turkey's targeting of the regime's air force also delivered a significant morale victory for the Syrian opposition and the displaced Syrian populations who have suffered years of unmitigated aerial bombardment.

In response to the Turkish strikes that began February 28, Russia deployed additional naval assets to the Mediterranean Sea. Two Russian Navy frigates equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles prematurely left naval exercises in the Black Sea to sail to the eastern Mediterranean Sea on February 28.[49] At least three Russian amphibious assault ships later followed between February 28 and March 4.[50] The exact cargo of these vessels is unclear from publicly available sources. However, they likely contained military equipment to replace Assad's losses, including armored vehicles and possibly reinforcements from Russian private military contractors such as Wagner. The cruise missile-equipped ships also posture Russia to scale up a campaign of strikes against Turkish proxies or Turkish forces without immediately expanding the Russian air assets in Syria.

Russia again used its Syrian proxy forces to retaliate for Turkey's air campaign, redeploying the Tiger Forces and recapturing Saraqib from Turkish proxy forces on March 2.[51] Lebanese Hezbollah also participated in the attack, which Russia likely coordinated.[52] Russia deployed military police to Saraqib to deter subsequent Turkish attack, and the Tiger Forces leader, Suheil Hassan, conducted a publicized tour of the city.[53] After seizing Saraqib on March 2, Putin agreed to an in-person meeting with Erdogan to take place in Moscow on March 5.[54] Turkey did not attempt to retake Saraqib before Erdogan's meeting with Putin, but a Turkish drone strike targeted a meeting in Northern Hama that included leaders from the Tiger Forces on March 4. The strike may have wounded Suheil Hassan.[55]

U.S. officials belatedly engaged with Turkey but again declined to offer substantive support. U.S. Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffrey and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft traveled to Ankara, Turkey, for meetings with Turkish officials on March 3 and committed roughly \$110 million in humanitarian assistance.[56] Jeffrey made public comments that the US would provide ammunition to Turkey in Idlib, but this was later walked back by the U.S. administration.[57] The U.S. support provided only a fraction of the estimated \$500 million necessary to sustain the displaced population in Idlib for six months.[58]

## Turkey and Russia Agree to De-Escalate

### March 5

Erdogan and Putin agreed to de-escalate in Idlib on March 5. Their framing of this limited deal as an "additional protocol" to the 2018 Sochi Memorandum of Understanding indicates they will both continue to refer to the 2018 framework as the basis for diplomatic and military action.[59] The "additional protocol" is a limited but important victory for Erdogan. It freezes front lines in Idlib, precluding further pro-regime offensive operations that would worsen the humanitarian disaster. It thereby accomplishes Turkey's primary defensive goal. It will likely succeed in achieving a near-term de-escalation, which could last weeks or months. However, it will not stabilize Idlib in the long term.

The additional protocol stipulates:

- The "targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext" Russia and Turkey will "cease all military actions along the line of contact in the Idlib de-escalation area" effective at midnight on March 6

- Russia and Turkey will establish a “security corridor” of 6 km depth both north and south of the M4 Highway; their respective defense ministries will agree on the “specific parameters of the functioning of the security corridor” by March 12.
- Russia and Turkey will begin joint patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway on March 15



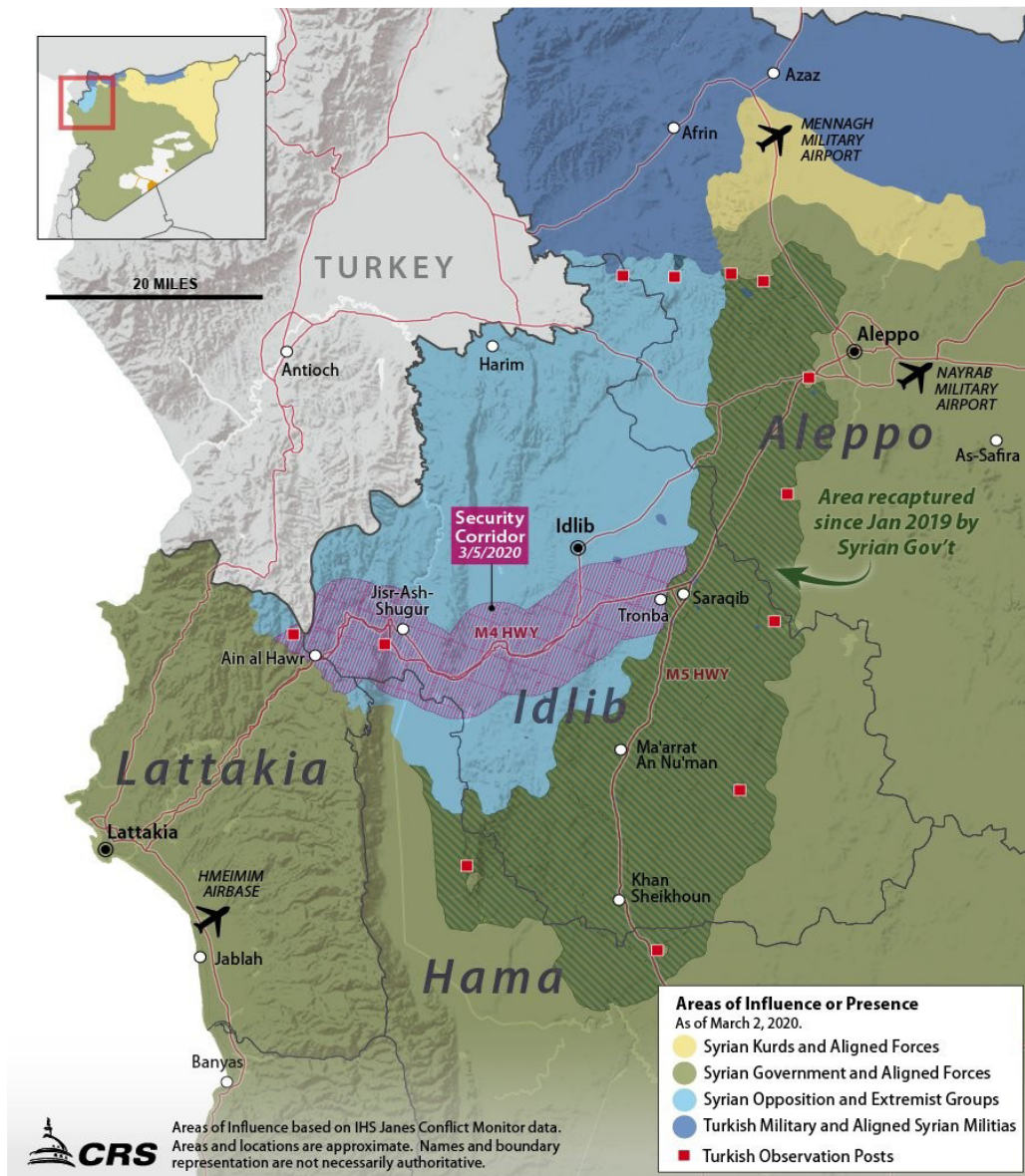
Map: Russian-sourced Security Corridor[60]

These terms are positive for Erdogan. The language regarding targeting civilians is an important concession from Putin. Russia is highly unlikely to refrain from targeting civilians as the deal requires or to compel Assad and Iran to do so. The ceasefire has been successful thus far, but it is also highly unlikely to hold for in the long term. But the agreement bought Erdogan important time and a way to justify subsequent military operations if pro-regime forces violate its terms, which they almost certainly will. It also provides Erdogan with time and an opportunity to re-approach the U.S. and Europe to gain support for resolving the humanitarian crisis.

Russia and Turkey took risks in their agreement to establish a “security corridor” north and south of the M4 Highway, which is likely to unravel. A finalized agreement announced on March 13 established that Russian forces are responsible for securing the area south of the M4 Highway while Turkish forces are responsible for securing areas to the north.[61] Publicly available details of the agreement do not specify how or to what extent Russia will secure its zone. The area south of the M4 Highway contains anti-Assad civilian populations, Turkish proxy forces, and al Qaeda-affiliated groups. Russian forces that patrol the area will be vulnerable to attack in this zone, which al Qaeda-affiliated groups can also use to threaten the security of the M4 Highway.

Erdogan also took a risk by agreeing to joint Russo-Turkish patrols along a portion of the M4 Highway, which exceeds the coordinated patrols previously agreed to in the 2018 Sochi Memorandum of Understanding. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups adamantly oppose such patrols and released a statement opposing the new agreement. [62] Anti-Assad actors in southern Idlib Province protested the expected patrols and set up roadblocks to deter military vehicles from passing. [63] Al Qaeda-affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) is likely responsible for protests in Ariha and other nearby towns that prevented the first joint Russo-Turkish patrol from occurring as planned on March 15. [64] Russian and Turkish patrols were only able to travel 2.5 km along the M4 Highway before abandoning the patrol. [65]

Turkish forces are preparing for a possible resumption of violence in Idlib. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar confirmed on March 13 that Turkey will not withdraw any Turkish forces or weapons from the region. [66] At least 1,000 Turkish military vehicles, including armored vehicles and tanks, entered northern Idlib Province since the start of the ceasefire on March 6 to reinforce existing military bases. [67] The continuously increasing Turkish military presence in Greater Idlib Province signals to Russia that Turkey is prepared to resume military operations if the de-escalation agreement breaks down.



Map: Situation in Idlib Province as of March 5, 2020 [68]



Key issues that are not addressed in the additional protocol include:

- **The unsustainable refugee burden along the Turkish border.** Turkey is now perpetually responsible for the roughly 1.5 million displaced Syrians along its border. This burden is unsustainable, even with the limited financial assistance provided thus far by the U.S. and UN. Turkey's options are limited. Erdogan's likely preferred outcome is to obtain international assistance to build up settlements with basic services for this population on the Syrian side of the border. Alternatively, Turkey could resettle these refugees in other Turkish-held zones in northern Aleppo or northeastern Syria. Turkey could also facilitate the travel of large segments of this population to Europe, legally or illegally. Turkey could accept the refugees into its territory, but Erdogan is highly unlikely to allow this.
- **Turkey's 14 besieged outposts in regime-held areas.** These forces remain highly vulnerable to attack by pro-regime forces. The outposts are thus a source of leverage for Russia, the Syrian regime, and Iran. However, the outposts also grant Erdogan potential justifications for future military operations to liberate these besieged soldiers. The status of these outposts will factor into subsequent rounds of negotiations and could become a focus of Turkish military operations.
- **The reopening of the M5 and M4 Highways to commercial traffic.** The Syrian regime and its backers have opened the M5 Highway from Aleppo to Damascus for commercial trade.[ However, Erdogan and Putin did not reach an agreement on a new framework for economic activity between Turkish zones and areas controlled by Russia, the Syrian regime, or Iran. It is a notable gap given the purpose of the original 2018 Sochi Agreement. The economic benefit of reopening the M5 Highway is limited without an agreement with Turkey to resume trade. The regime and its backers can now transit from Damascus to Aleppo and back but do not yet have official access to Turkish markets or Turkish proxy areas.
- **Al Qaeda-linked groups.** The new protocol made a vague statement about fighting "all forms of terrorism" but included no new agreement regarding combatting al Qaeda-linked groups in Idlib. Russia will continue to use the presence of al Qaeda in Idlib to justify military operations that depart from the agreed-upon de-escalation. Al Qaeda-linked groups may violate the ceasefire first as they are not party to the agreement, giving Russia an excuse to resume operations against such groups. Al Qaeda also poses a threat to Turkish forces deployed in Idlib, which will affect Erdogan's calculus in subsequent phases.

## Implications

The U.S. must engage in Idlib. The West's tepid response so far is due in part to exhaustion with the Syrian war but also resentment of Erdogan's behavior in northeast Syria and his alignment with Russia since 2015. The response is understandable but misguided. Through its intervention in Idlib, Turkey has decided to own an extremely difficult problem that deeply affects both European and American interests. However, Turkey cannot adequately mitigate the humanitarian crisis or prevent it from worsening without help.

The United States should require Turkey to recommit to the NATO alliance and reduce cooperation with Russia in return for American humanitarian, military, and diplomatic support in Idlib. The U.S. should require Turkey to return or destroy the Russian-made S-400 air defense system, leave the Russian-led Astana process, and commit to new negotiations with the U.S. over northeast Syria. If Turkey does so, the U.S. should work with its European allies to provide robust humanitarian support in Idlib, apply diplomatic pressure against Russia, Iran, and Assad, and bolster Turkey's military leverage in Idlib by providing the Patriot missile system Turkey has requested.

## Endnotes

**Parts of this report are adapted from Jennifer Cafarella’s Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism for the hearing titled “The Crisis in Idlib” on March 11, 2020.**

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