

# Russia and Turkey Fail to Implement Ceasefire Deal in Idlib

Featuring Nicholas Heras and John Dunford



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*The December offensive launched by Russian-backed Syrian Regime forces in Greater Idlib Province produced an unprecedented humanitarian disaster. Turkey responded to the offensive with major military deployments to Idlib and a series of escalations against pro-regime forces. In this episode of Overwatch, Middle East Security Program Manager Nicholas Heras and Syria Research Assistant John Dunford discuss the Turkish campaign, the current ceasefire deal, and what to expect next.*

## **Kim Kagan:**

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

## **Nicholas Heras:**

Thank you for joining us for today's episode. My name is Nicholas Heras and I am the Middle East portfolio manager, at the Institute For the Study of War, joining me today is one of our Syria analysts, John Dunford. John will discuss Turkey's evolving campaign in Syria's North Western province of Idlib and what Turkey's campaign means the future of the Syrian conflict. John, thank you for joining us.

## **John Dunford:**

Thank you, Nick. The current situation in Idlib province is an unmitigated and unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. The recent pro-regime offensive has displaced over 1 million people who are now living in tents and other makeshift shelter along the Turkish border. Despite Turkish efforts to deescalate the situation and provide support to this population, the situation is only going to get worse without increased humanitarian support from the US and Europe. The US has provided some humanitarian aid, but that aid alone is unlikely to resolve the massive humanitarian crisis playing out in Idlib right now. The current ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Russia provides Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan with much needed time. The ceasefire is unlikely to hold in the long term, however, as it left several key issues unaddressed. The ceasefire did succeed in temporarily stemming the flow of displaced people to the Turkish border. With this pause in the fighting, Turkish president Erdogan is preparing for a potential next military escalation through continued deployments of new Turkish forces to Idlib and establishing new positions in Idlib. This time is also allowing her to want to engage with the US and Europe to secure both support for the IDP population and Idlib as well as secure potential military support to stem the pro-regime offensive.

## **Nicholas Heras:**

Thank you very much, John, for that decisive opening. How did we get here in Idlib? What actions did the pro Assad regime forces take that necessitated a Turkish intervention in Idlib?

## **John Dunford:**

The situation in greater Idlib province has significantly deteriorated over the past several months. Pro-regime forces launched a new offensive to retake the remaining section of the M5 highway under anti Assad forces control in December, 2019. The M5 highway runs North to South connecting the regime's political capital of Damascus to its prewar economic capital of Aleppo city. The regime's economy is currently in its worst position since the start of the war and the regime likely views the reopening of the M5 highway as a way to boost trade for the economy.

**John Dunford:**

Russian-backed Syrian regime forces, including the 25th Special Task Division, formerly known as the Tiger Forces led the offensive with support from elements of the Russian backed Syrian Arab Army Fifth Corps and other pro-regime units. A number of Iranian backed groups, including Lebanese Hezbollah also participated in the offensive initially around Aleppo City and the Western Aleppo province front. Pro-regime forces succeeded in taking large swaths of terrain along the M5 in December and January, which led to the mass displacement of civilians toward the Turkish border.

**Nicholas Heras:**

Thank you very much, John, for that rundown. In response to this pro-regime campaign in Idlib, how did Turkey structure its campaign and what forces did it bring to counter Assad, Russia, and his other allies?

**John Dunford:**

After pro-regime forces regained control of large areas along the M5 highway in late December and January, Turkey launched its fourth major military intervention into Syria. The intervention intended to prevent the fall of greater Idlib province to pro-regime forces and intended to prevent further mass displacement towards the Turkish border. Turkish president Erdogan issued an ultimatum on February 5th, stating that Turkish forces would launch an offensive if pro-regime forces did not retreat from their positions surrounding Turkish observation posts in Idlib by the end of February. Turkey had established 12 observation posts around Idlib beginning in October, 2017.

So there were around a thousand Turkish soldiers deployed across these 12 observation posts prior to the regime's offensive. During the offensive, the regime surrounded multiple of these observation posts. So to coincide with Erdogan's ultimatum, the Turkish armed forces launched a new military campaign and established a series of new positions throughout greater Idlib starting around late January. Turkey dramatically increased the number of its forward operating base or FOBs in Idlib, and in total created around 40 new military positions. Turkey, at this time deployed around a division, about 20,000 soldiers, into Idlib. These forces spread out to a new forward defensible line along the M4 and M5 highway, the M4 highway runs East to West, while the M5 highway runs North to South. The Turkish forces included elements of different mechanized and armor brigades, special forces and commando units with previous experience fighting in Syria. They included elements of different Turkish armies from various Turkish provinces and the reuse of some of these units with past experience fighting offensively in Syria signaled that Turkey was preparing to potentially enforce Erdogan's ultimatum. In addition to deploying new forces and establishing new positions, Turkey also increased material support for its proxies inside of Idlib.

**Nicholas Heras:**

John, what was the most effective measure that Turkey took and its campaign? And what did it in, in regard to the dynamic between Turkey and Russia and a cessation in the pro-regime campaign in Idlib?

**John Dunford:**

Sure. So the situation in greater Idlib significantly escalated after Turkey chose to use some of its drone capabilities over the skies of Idlib. A Russian air strike killed 34 Turkish soldiers in Southern Idlib on February 27th. Turkey blamed the Assad regime for the strike and then began to leverage its drone capabilities to inflict large casualties on pro-regime forces and target regime armor capabilities. Turkey used drone strikes to target, both Russian-backed Syrian forces and Iranian-backed forces as well as regime armored units, Russian provided air defense systems and to support anti-Assad forces' counter attacks on pro-regime positions.

**John Dunford:**

Turkey coupled its drone strikes along with other capabilities to enforce a defacto no fly zone over Idlib. This included Turkish F16s downing Syrian regime planes from inside Turkish airspace. Turkey's use of drones marked significant escalation that drove up the cost for Russia to continue to support the regime's offensive. While Turkey did not directly target Russian forces, the scale of Turkish targeting of regime armor, regime forces, and air defense systems placed a requirement on Russia to replace these systems. This escalation, which Turkey carried out after the February 27th Russian airstrike led to Russian president Vladimir Putin to agree to hold a sit down summit with president Erdogan in the beginning of March.

**Nicholas Heras:**

John, can you give us more details about the deal and did it actually accomplish what Turkey sought to when it began its military campaign?

**John Dunford:**

So, President Erdogan and President Putin met on March 5th and at that meeting reached a limited agreement for a ceasefire for greater Idlib province. The deal itself stipulated that Russia and Turkey would cease military activity beginning on March 6th. Turkey and Russia would conduct joint patrols along a section of the M4 highway beginning on March 15th. Now, since the deal was agreed upon, the ceasefire itself has largely held in terms of limiting the active frontline fighting that is going on. The subsequent negotiations on the deal led to an agreement that Turkey would patrol North of the M4 highway and Russia would patrol South. However, these patrols so far have been disrupted on multiple occasions through protests and other activity, likely organized by some of the active Al Qaeda affiliates that are operating inside of Idlib province. This has included a likely hard line Al Qaeda group detonating, an IED that targeted a Turkish patrol that ended up killing two Turkish soldiers on March 19th. So while the deal succeeded in limiting the flow of IDPs to the Turkish border, it has also opened up Turkey to a new series of risks that includes having to defend themselves both from a potential pro-regime offensive, as well as managing the Al Qaeda problem that exists inside of Idlib.

**Nicholas Heras:**

Thank you, John. It does seem as if Turkey is in a difficult situation in Idlib, although it has achieved some effect with its campaign. Like you to give us your forecast of what happens next and Idlib and what does that mean for the future of the Syrian conflict in that region?

**John Dunford:**

Sure. So, as I mentioned, the deal itself did not address a number of issues that were on the table ahead of the March 5th summit. The first, as I just mentioned, is the presence of Al Qaeda in Idlib and who will be responsible for managing that problem. The second being the displaced population that is now living near the Turkish borders, that will require a massive increase in humanitarian support to help manage the inherent problems, including getting shelter, getting medicine and other medical supplies, as well as providing food and water to. There's also the issue of, as I mentioned before, the surrounded Turkish observation posts and what will happen to the Turkish forces in those. Turkey has indicated that it has no intent to withdraw from those. And those will likely be the center of future conversations between Russia and Turkey about Idlib. Now Turkey has demonstrated an intent to abide by the March ceasefire agreement. Turkey has not withdrawn any of its forces that it deployed into Idlib province and the Turkish Defense Ministry has made it clear that it does not intend to withdraw. Turkey is also moving new forces into Idlib province to establish new forward operating positions and to reinforce existing ones. These deployments will allow Turkey to continue to hold its defensive line along the M4 and M5 highway, should the ceasefire fail to hold.

**John Dunford:**

It will also allow Turkey to go on the offensive, should the ceasefire break down. If the ceasefire breaks down, the risk of Turkish-Russian conflict in Idlib increases, particularly if Turkish units are used to conduct offensive activity against Russian-backed Syrian units inside of Idlib.

Turkey is also continuing to engage diplomatically both with NATO and the EU to gain increased support, both militarily and humanitarian support for the IDP population. This outreach provides an opportunity for the US and the West in general to become more active in the Idlib problem and to provide necessary and lifesaving support. One of the potentially many dangerous outcomes in Idlib, particularly with the displaced population is a potential outbreak of COVID-19 inside of the displaced population along the Turkish border. This outbreak would strain the already minimum resources that exists to support this population and could significantly and dramatically increase the loss of life in this area. All of these factors and the problems that Idlib presents require a thought out and well put together a response and require the US and the West to take an active role in ensuring that we can limit this humanitarian catastrophe.

**Nicholas Heras:**

Thank you very much, John, for the excellent discussion and assessments of current events in Idlib province. This will continue to be a flashpoint in the Syrian conflict and an area of interest, not only for the international community, but also for US policy towards the Middle East. Thank you, John. And thank you all for joining us for today's discussion.

**Kim Kagan:**

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