

By Jennifer Cafarella and Elizabeth Teoman with Matti Suomenaro

Key Takeaway: Turkey is using a combination of military and diplomatic pressure to compel Russia and Iran to halt further offensive operations against Syria's al Qaeda-dominated Idlib Province. An Assad-Iranian-Russian conquest of Idlib is not in America's national security interest. The US should help Turkey block these operations but must do so without accepting Turkey's willingness to work with al Qaeda and without submitting to Russia's sham diplomatic track to negotiate an end to the Syrian war. The US must instead retain freedom of action and avoid the temptation to outsource American national security requirements to regional actors already at war in Syria.

Russia, Iran, and Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime launched a joint operation in northwestern Syria against the al Qaeda stronghold in Idlib Province in November 2017. Their operational objective is to seize the Abu ad Duhor airbase southwest of Aleppo City. Russian airstrikes [shifted to front lines](#) in Hama and Idlib Provinces in November 2017 to set conditions for a ground operation. Pro-regime forces including Iranian proxy militias have [reportedly seized](#) the base as of January 10, 2018, although conflicting reports indicate clashes are ongoing.

The pro-regime offensive violates the "de-escalation" zone in Idlib Province. Russia, Iran, and Turkey [agreed](#) to [deploy](#) monitoring forces to [enforce](#) the de-escalation zone in September 2017. Russian [military police](#) [deployed](#) to front [lines](#) on the southern outskirts of Idlib Province on September 13th. The deployment blocks further [al Qaeda-led attacks](#) against the regime's stronghold in Hama. [Turkish troops deployed](#) on the northern outskirts of Idlib Province along the front line between the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and al Qaeda-led opposition groups in mid-October 2017. Turkey's deployment opens a second front line against a pocket of YPG control northwest of Aleppo City. The pro-regime push to seize the Abu ad Duhor airbase strengthens the pro-regime front line in eastern Idlib by extending it to a more defensible perimeter. It also sets conditions for a possible subsequent offensive deeper into Idlib.

Turkey is using a combination of military and diplomatic pressure to compel Russia and Iran to stop their offensive at the airbase. An unidentified group conducted three attacks against Russia's Hmeimim airbase on the Syrian coast on December 27th & 31st, 2017 and January 6th, 2018. The first two attacks [included](#) rockets and [mortars](#) likely fired from al Qaeda-held areas on the outskirts of Latakia Province. The third [attack](#) was a complex [drone swarm attack](#). Al Qaeda likely conducted the attacks as retaliation against the pro-regime operation in Idlib, but has not claimed credit. It is possible that Turkey indirectly or covertly supported these attacks. Russia [demanded](#) that Turkish

intelligence increase its control over anti-Assad groups in northwestern Syria on January 10th, 2018, indicating that Russia intends to hold Turkey accountable for future attacks. The military threat to Hmeimim undermines Russian President Vladimir Putin's narrative of victory and military strength in Syria. Continued attacks could also increase the cost of Russian operations in Syria. Groups fighting with al Qaeda in Idlib have also used advanced weapons systems including reports of MANPADs and other guided missile systems against advancing pro-regime forces, possibly indicating Turkey is equipping these groups to defend against the offensive.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also applying diplomatic pressure. The Turkish Foreign Ministry told Russian Ambassador Alexei Yerkhov on January 8th to cease "violations" of the de-escalation zone ahead of the upcoming Syrian war diplomatic talks in Sochi, Russia on January 29. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu later called on Russia and Iran to "realize their duties" as guarantors of the de-escalation zone in Idlib on January 10th. Erdogan is leveraging European and American fears over a renewed migrant flow out of Idlib to rally support to pressure Russia and Iran to halt their offensive. The pro-regime operation has reportedly already displaced up to 100,000 Syrians. Cavusoglu stated that Turkey raised this issue with the US, France, Germany, and the UK in addition to Russia and Iran on January 10th.

Turkey is likely conditioning its support to the Russian-backed diplomatic process on a cessation of the Idlib operation. Cavusoglu stated on January 10th that Turkey supports democratic elections in Syria that maintain Syria's territorial integrity and that "We seek to integrate" the tripartite Russian-Iranian-Turkish Astana negotiations with the Russian effort to broker a deal between Syrian parties in Sochi on January 29th. Cavosoglu's statement puts Turkish support for Russia's Sochi talks on the table as part of a negotiation over Idlib Province. Erdogan had previously signaled Turkish opposition to Russia's diplomatic play on December 27, 2017. Erdogan called Assad a "terrorist" and stated it is "absolutely impossible" to move ahead in the Syrian diplomatic track with Assad in power.

Turkey is applying constraints on the diplomatic track in order to mitigate risks to its own interests in Syria, meanwhile. Turkey retains veto power at the negotiating table through its influence over Syrian opposition groups. Turkey claimed to receive guarantees in December 2017 that US-backed Syrian Kurds would not attend upcoming talks in Sochi, although Russia claims the attendee list is still under negotiation. Turkey also summoned the American chargé d'affaires in Turkey to protest US support for the YPG on January 10th. The meeting likely indicates Turkey seeks to pressure the US to block the YPG's participation in the political process.

It is unclear whether pro-regime forces will halt at the Abu ad Duhor airbase. The military threat to Russia's airbase on the Syrian coast could deter further operations in the near term. Putin likely intends to keep his losses in Syria low ahead of Russia's presidential election in March 2018 in order to avoid undue risk to his domestic support. Erdogan can also spoil Putin's effort to grandstand as a mediator in Syria by rejecting the upcoming Sochi talks. A halt to Russia's air support in Idlib would prevent further large scale pro-regime operations in Idlib, which depend on Russia's air campaign to advance. Pro-regime forces will likely take an operational pause in Idlib, at minimum, after they secure the Abu ad Duhor airbase.

A pro-regime campaign to seize Idlib Province is not in America's interest. The extension of Assad's control produces a corollary extension of Iran's military footprint and leverage in Syria. This outcome directly contradicts the Trump administration's stated Iran policy. Assad and his external backers remain the primary drivers of radicalization in Syria, moreover. Their operations drive support for al Qaeda and will likely trigger a widening escalation of the war in Western Syria. Al Qaeda retains significant combat power in Idlib and will launch a counter-offensive.

Neither Turkey nor Russia can deliver an outcome in Syria that supports US interests. The US should help Turkey block pro-regime operations that will cause further humanitarian catastrophe. The US must refrain from accepting either Russia's diplomatic play or Turkey's relationship with al Qaeda, however. The US must instead retain freedom of action and avoid the temptation to outsource American national security requirements to regional actors already at war in Syria.

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