

Designating Turkey's Security Concerns in Syria: Ongoing Conflict in Idlib

Latest developments in Idlib

Syrian opposition groups fighting mainly against ISIS terrorist in eastern rural Hama were attacked by regime forces in the last days of 2017. The attack has been gradually maintained along the train line in North-South direction to destroy all opposition groups



under the leadership of Hayat Tahrir el Şam (HTŞ) to reach out Abu Duhur military air base. After 2-weeks of heavy clashes, regime forces partially captured Abu Duhur airbase on January 11. Yet, it was not the endpoint but the territorial junction in which regime forces advancing also from East and North will meet. Opposition forces have been forced to withdraw from large portion of

territories they held in Southern Idlib at the end of 2017 by ever increasing Russia airstrikes. Nevertheless, some opposition groups like Feylaq us Sam and Nureddin Zengi Movement started a rebel counteroffensive against regime forces from West and are currently trying to dissolve regime forces to stop their advance.

Meanwhile, ISIS terrorists have doubled their area of control in eastern Hama due to the connivance of Syrian regime since November 2017. Regime forces advancing to the North implicitly benefited from the military power of ISIS terrorists existing in East since it is the ISIS fighting against opposition groups and bearing burden of regime forces to reach out Abu Duhur.

Why Idlib?

In the second half of 2017, regime forces and PYD terrorists were fighting against ISIS in Deir ez Zor, southeast Syria. Most of the ISIS-held territories were recaptured and terrorist were stalemated. The concentration of regime forces on Deir ez Zor caused people to think that any advancement towards Abu Duhur is not possible. Yet, when compared to Deir ez Zor, Idlib is much more crucial for all actors in the field. Idlib is a province of 1 million people where opposition groups are widely located. It is the last province whose control is largely under opposition and removal of them will probably mean a lot for Damascus. If Idlib, where de-escalation agreement does not prevail, is under the control of regime forces, opposition groups would be besieged from East, South and West. This will cause further migration waves towards Turkey and make Syrian regime relatively advantageous over Turkey during peace talks.



Possible Spill-overs into Turkey

Advance of the regime forces are expected to be limited only with territories under HTŞ control. Nevertheless, Turkish authorities stated concerns over any possible advancement towards Northern Idlib. If so, military conflicts will transferred up to Turkish observatory point in Darat İzza in North and even to Turkish-Syrian border. Turkey, as a guarantor state in Astana peace talks, has the right to establish observatory points along the western line of Idlib. What is important here is the evaluation of pros and cons such future military involvement will have.

Turkey have already stated that current attacks towards opposition groups are the violations of Astana principles and immediately be stopped. In this point, Turkey needs a proper risk analysis and act in line with it as soon as possible. It is known that HTŞ militants are not willing to accept Turkey's existence in West Idlib. But what Turkey needs to do is to measure whether the costs of confronting with HTŞ or conniving regime forces' advancement towards Turkish border will be higher.



Another issue regarding the clashes in Idlib is the humanitarian situation of people. It has been reported that around 120.000 people have been internally displaced during the operation towards Abu Duhur military airbase. Thousands of people escaping from brutality of ISIS and regime forces are coming close to Turkish border. Emergency squads are crucial to make immediate treatment and to provide shelter in relatively safer zones. The migration of people living in Idlib is expected to continue increasingly.

Overall Analysis

When analyzed all above-given factors together, large scale deployment of military troops along West Idlib seems to have more effective results by limiting regime forces with preventive intervention. Otherwise, the political and military crises, which could emerge after the fall of the last opposition-held stronghold, may risk the possible Afrin operation. Possible returns of Turkish military involvement can be arrayed as the following:

- Guaranteeing the existence of opposition groups in Astana and Sochi peace talks,
- Stopping regime forces' advancement to Turkish border by preventive intervention,
- Increasing opportunities for and the security of Afrin operation,
- Preventing possible migration waves towards Turkey.



With a military operation, all 4 issues can be realized. As such Turkey could eliminate its Idlib-related security concerns. Otherwise, it is clear that the number of people fleeing and migrating towards North will increase. This is why Turkey's actions are significant to prevent migration waves securitized both for Idlib and Turkey. Securing Idlib will also mean the securing of Afrin operation which Turkey have already started. Idlib is the south of Afrin where any future attack could come from towards Turkish military forces. And it is a place where there is no Turkish or Turkish-backed control around Afrin. Afrin is surrounded by Turkish controlled Euphrates Shield zone from east and opposition groups from west. Therefore, Turkey's involvement in Idlib could also secure the course of military actions towards Afrin.

