



Overview and Key Judgments

(U) With pro-Assad forces turning their focus to Idlib, the last major bastion of extremist rebels, the situation in Syria has significantly escalated: capturing Idlib would represent one of the last major milestones in the Syrian civil war but an outright invasion would probably result in a humanitarian catastrophe of its own, given the population size (including internally displaced people) and number of combatants in the region. Recently, various actors agreed upon a demilitarization plan which briefly reduced tensions, but the full outcome and effects of this agreement is yet to be seen.

- **(U) *The Assad Regime.*** Assad is likely to attempt to gradually encroach and attack rebels in the Idlib area, rather than openly invading, over the next month. However, if Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) largely resists demilitarization then Assad and his allies will likely engage in full invasion within the month.
- **(U) *Extremist Opposition Forces.*** HTS is unlikely to engage pro-Assad forces and is likely to withdraw from the Turkish-Russian demilitarization zone by October 15th due to loopholes in the demilitarization agreement and increasing pressures from Turkey.
- **(U) *Turkey.*** Turkey is likely to expand its negotiations, monitoring, and military presence in the region as the Syrian government and its allies continue to encroach on opposition-held territory.
- **(U) *Russia.*** Russia is likely to still make attempts to dislodge rebel groups from Idlib province through usage of special operations forces, despite the agreement reached with Turkey.
- **(U) *The Kurds.*** At least hundreds of fighters from groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and YPG are very likely to unofficially support Assad militarily in an Idlib offensive, but the groups are likely to maintain official distance or deniability as they balance options/goals such as negotiations with Assad and US relations.
- **(U) *The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).*** ISIS is unlikely to mount a significant resistance to the Assad regime in the potential offensive in Idlib, but would rather likely attempt to bolster their recruiting efforts in Syria should such an offensive occur.



The Assad Regime

(U) Assad is likely to attempt to gradually encroach and attack rebels in the Idlib area, rather than openly invading, over the next month. However, if Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) largely resists demilitarization then Assad and his allies will likely engage in full invasion within the month.

- (U) Assad has declared and demonstrated his intent and capability to reestablish authority over the entirety of Syria, especially through the significant progress he has made in recapturing territory over the past few years.¹² Although some of these victories were aided by evacuation agreements (which are not as likely/applicable in Idlib), pro-Assad forces still have demonstrated their capacity to fight opposition forces and retake territory.³
- (U) Assad had favored invasion until the recent demilitarization agreement was passed. During the past two months, Idlib has seen significant military buildup along its borders, as well as numerous battle-line incidents such as indirect fire and direct skirmishes, which has drawn concern from the United States and Turkey who emphasized that an invasion would cause a significant humanitarian catastrophe.⁴⁵
- (U) Assad's has used loopholes or cover action, such as indirect fire and special operations, to achieve short-term objectives, which suggests that pro-Assad forces are likely to continue to use loopholes or covert action.⁶ Assad would likely use any noncompliance of HTS as a justification for direct invasion and escalation, which if unmatched by Assad would likely lead to damage of his image and momentum against the group

¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/deal-or-no-deal-idlib-showdown-looms-1781912166>

² <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-damascus-syrians-dare-to-hope-that-wars-end-may-be-near/>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/13/asia/syria-daraa-capture-flag-intl/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/escalations-and-military-build-up-what-is-happening-in-idlib>

⁵ <https://twitter.com/qalaatalmudiq/status/1040506746354188289>

⁶ <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-urgency-of-idlib-the-impending-regime-offensive-and-the-delicate-balance-in-syrias-northwest/>



Extremist Opposition Forces

(U) HTS is unlikely to engage pro-Assad forces and is likely to withdraw from the Turkish-Russian demilitarization zone by October 15th due to loopholes in the demilitarization agreement and increasing pressures from Turkey.

- (U) On September 17, Turkish and Russian leaders agreed to create and maintain a 9-12 mile wide demilitarization zone surrounding Idlib to separate the Syrian opposition from the Iranian and Assad forces, but the fine print of the agreement allows for continued counterterrorism operations against radical militants, allowing the forces to target groups like HTS while avoiding full escalation.⁷
- (U) Since early August, Turkey has increased its outward disapproval for HTS and other Islamic extremist groups, designated HTS as a terrorist organization, and has called for its dissolution and reformation within the National Liberation Front (NLF).⁸ The National Liberation Front is now Turkey's main ally in the region.
- (U) Recently, HTS has developed a pattern of de-escalating violence in Idlib while distancing themselves from fundamentalist groups that are more likely to engage pro-Assad forces. It is unlikely that HTS will submit to the reformation requests; however, the group is increasing its cooperation with Islamist members of the NLF like Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Ahrar al-Sham through treaties that have focused on unity and de-escalating violence.⁹

⁷ <https://www.apnews.com/88c6ac9ace264d59acc6a0bec2da229/Turkey,-Russia-agree-on-demilitarized-zone-in-Syria%27s-Idlib>

⁸ <https://www.memri.org/reports/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts-prepares-fateful-battle-idlib>

⁹ <https://eldorar.com/node/126275>



Turkey

(U) Turkey is likely to expand its negotiations, monitoring, and military presence in the region as the Syrian government and its allies continue to encroach on opposition-held territory.

- (U) In mid-September, Turkey stepped up its military presence along its borders by deploying military convoys to Turkish outposts near the town of Morek, they also began deploying dozens of soldiers to Hatay near the Turkish-Syrian border.¹⁰
- (U) On September 21, Turkish President Erdogan, along with Russia, announced a plan to establish a demilitarized buffer zone into opposition held-territories in an effort to expand military and political involvement in the Idlib region and contain the Syrian refugee crisis within the region, suggesting Turkey will continue to have deeper military and political involvement in the Idlib region.¹¹ Turkey already hosts millions of Syrian refugees, and it is very likely that they are worried about another wave entering as the crisis in Idlib continues.
- (U) Turkey continues to be pressed by Russia to help in fighting terrorist groups, and has attempted to undermine HTS in Idlib for many months through actions such as combat, alleged assassinations, propaganda, and negotiations.¹² Turkey also continues to deepen its involvement/presence in Idlib, suggesting it will increase HTS clearing operations out of the area or attempt to integrate them into the NLF. This would likely lead to more conflicts in the area as more involvement and collaboration between Russia and Turkey begins to create, monitor, and build upon the demilitarization zone.

¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/turkey-deploys-reinforcements-syrian-border-180913150006393.html>

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html>

¹² <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/who-is-assassinating-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-leaders>



Russia

(U) Russia is likely to still make attempts to dislodge rebel groups from Idlib province through usage of special operations forces, despite the agreement reached with Turkey.

- (U) On September 17, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish a 9-12 mile wide demilitarized zone in the province where all “radical” fighters and heavy weapons must be pulled out, which is likely to eliminate opposition forces which may affect the stability of the Assad regime.¹³
- (U) Russia likely fears the potential blowback resulting from an invasion of Idlib, and large scale military action against rebel forces in the area would likely cause a massive humanitarian crisis, with the majority of displaced people being pushed north into Turkish territory.¹⁴ It would also seriously undermine the negotiating power that Russia holds currently, as a majority of the international community does not support an offensive into Idlib province. It is likely that Spetsnaz or similar units will be used to continue to pressure the leadership of groups such as HTS.¹⁵
- (U) Despite the agreement, it is very likely that Russia and the Syrian Arab Army will continue to take steps against rebel forces, but short of a full offensive on the province. Spetsnaz forces have been a consistent player in the conflict and would be a likely means of eliminating opposition to the Assad regime. Spetsnaz operators have been spotted across Syria directing airstrikes and operating in conjunction with BTR-80 APCs.^{16 17}

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45554188>

¹⁴ <https://thenewsrep.com/108531/major-global-conflicts-dmz-in-idlib-ukraine-vies-for-nato-membership-promising-afghanistan-talks-mexico-drug-wars/>

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/syrias-idlib-spared-attack-turkey-to-send-in-more-troops-idUSKCN1LY0T9>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1043890294851358721>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/nanoflako15/status/1044451884982030336>



The Kurds

(U) At least hundreds of fighters from groups such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and YPG are very likely to unofficially support Assad militarily in an Idlib offensive, but the groups are likely to maintain official distance or deniability as they balance options/goals such as negotiations with Assad and US relations. As the Syrian war progresses towards a plausible end in sight, the Kurdish people, various local councils, the SDF, and various other organizations in northern Syria (Rojava) face a difficult spectrum of choices, ranging from resisting Assad to accepting Assad's rule while negotiating for more autonomy.

- (U) Groups, such as the SDF-affiliated Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), have already tenuously begun negotiations with the Assad government regarding postwar politics, although one of the main SDC negotiators reported that the discussion was not yet favorable for the Kurds because of disagreements regarding self-administration.¹⁸¹⁹ Overall, various issues, such as general commitment problems and Assad's stated goal of regaining authority over Syria, have made it difficult for normal negotiations to succeed.²⁰²¹²²
- (U) Several members of these groups have reportedly joined pro-Assad forces that are standing by to attack/pressure Idlib in an unofficial capacity as they pursue other options and goals.²³ Multiple actors have leveled accusations that groups such as the YPG struck deals involving military cooperation with the Assad government, but these claims have been strongly denied by YPG officials.²⁴
- (U) Several groups have moved their cooperation underground given the U.S.' express disapproval for such cooperation. Barring deeper U.S. pressure, some groups are very likely to see unofficial cooperation combined with public distancing as an effective way to cooperate with the Assad regime and also weaken Turkey without significantly undermining relations with the West.
- (U) A recent deadly clash between Kurdish militants and Assad troops in Qamishli has highlighted some of internal divisions regarding strategy among the Rojava groups while also threatening Rojavan-Assad relations, although the negotiations are expected to

¹⁸ <http://www.rudawnet./english/middleeast/syria/280720181>

¹⁹ <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2018/08/14/kurds-meet-with-syrian-government-to-discuss-self-rule-as-assad-demands-us-troops-withdraw/>

²⁰ https://asp.mercatus.org/sites/default/files/mercatus_wille_-_final_mgpe_5-31_pp_ce_2-2-2018_4-13-2018.pdf

²¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/will-syrian-regime-strike-deal-kurds-1019797361>

²² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/deal-or-no-deal-idlib-showdown-looms-1781912166>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/07/kurds-renew-their-claim-for-idlib-as-final-battle-draws-near>

²⁴ <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/51abdb8b-ecfd-4516-a141-47a3c99d53ac>



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continue.²⁵ Additionally, the SDF is not entirely Kurdish, making such divisions even more likely.²⁶ Ultimately, the general trend has been a slight mix of approaches resulting in a balancing act overall which very likely will involve a moderate amount of unofficial military cooperation with the Assad regime.

²⁵ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/10092018>

²⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/future-syrian-democratic-forces-171124110417741.html>

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The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

(U) ISIS is unlikely to mount a significant resistance to the Assad regime in the potential offensive in Idlib, but would rather likely attempt to bolster their recruiting efforts in Syria should such an offensive occur. With all but 1% of ISIS' original territory remaining, ISIS is in a poor position heading into the potential offensive.²⁷

- (U) Since August of 2017, ISIS has lacked sufficient manpower in northwestern Syria to launch an effective opposition to a potential Assad attack. Now, as the group's focus is turned to defending its remaining territory in Deir ez-Zoir and eastern Homs from attacks by a coalition of SDF, Arab, and Kurdish fighters.²⁸²⁹
- (U) ISIS has commonly used sectarian strife, especially during the Iraqi civil war, as a platform for its recruitment efforts. With the potential offensive occurring in a majority Sunni province, carried out by a regime headed by a Shia Alawite, ISIS is very likely to exploit the suffering in Idlib and the sectarian divide in the country to aid their recruiting in Syria.³⁰
- (U) ISIS is currently the most adept terrorist organization in recruitment through social media usage with such platforms providing ISIS a wider audience than other means of communication. Their messages can be easily translated into other languages broadening their potential audience and only 20% of accounts promoting ISIS propaganda get suspended from twitter, making it a successful medium of communication.³¹³² Their successes in recruiting suggest the group will continue their online recruiting in order to maintain relevance amid ISIS' continual territorial loss.

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/middleeast/isis-syria.html>

²⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/24/politics/syria-us-troops-numbers/index.html>

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/31/isis-dreams-of-caliphate-gone-now-deadly-new-strategy>

³⁰ <https://www.vox.com/cards/things-about-isis-you-need-to-know/maliki-sunni-shia-tension>

³¹ http://snap.stanford.edu/mis2/files/MIS2_paper_23.pdf

³² <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-114shrg22476/pdf/CHRG-114shrg22476.pdf>