



(U) Syria: Sochi Agreement likely to collapse by end of November

(U) The Sochi Agreement is likely to collapse as multiple actors continue to violate the agreement, which is likely to worsen the humanitarian situation and subsequently undermine Turkey by the end of November. The Sochi Agreement was negotiated by Turkey and Russia regarding the Assad regime's potential offensive of Idlib, the last remaining rebel stronghold. The agreement stipulates the removal of all heavy weaponry, the withdrawal of extremist rebels such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The start of joint Turkish and Russian patrols is also included in the deal, all of which is occurring in a 15-20 km demilitarized/buffer zone.¹²³⁴⁵

- (U) By 8 October, HTS had pulled their heavy weaponry out in compliance with the Sochi Agreement but kept patrols within the demilitarized zone (DMZ) despite the threats from Russia/Assad/Iran.⁶⁷⁸ HTS was one of the only rebel groups besides the National Liberation Front (NLF) to pull their heavy weaponry out in compliance with the Sochi Agreement.
- (U) On September 22nd, the radical Islamist group Tanzim Hurras al-Din (HaD), which is probably al-Qaeda's new Syrian affiliate, rejected the deal.⁹ By October 14th, HaD joined together with three other jihadist faction to form an operation group named Wa-Harid al-Mu'minin (HaM).¹⁰¹¹ Since its formation, HaM has consistently violated the Sochi Agreement via shelling and small raids on regime targets.
- (U) Since the beginning of the war, Turkey has sought to eliminate some of the deviant extremist groups, such as HaD, to discourage an invasion into Idlib.¹² However, these efforts thus far have not succeeded as both pro-Assad forces and HaM have engaged in a wide variety of violence and conflict, including shelling, clashes, some raids, etc.¹³¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹²⁰²¹

(U) Multiple actors are likely to continue violating the Sochi Agreement given the experience with violations of past deals, recent statements and actions, and Russia's and Assad's strategic incentives favoring increased conflict. Since the start of 2018, ceasefire deals have often been violated during the war and multiple deals have been broken not long after their implementation.

- (U) In February 2018, Russia and Syria heavily violated a deal in Eastern Ghouta, as well as a deal regarding Daraa and Quneitra in June 2018, by continuing airstrikes in both regions and additionally using barrel bombs and mortar shells in Daraa and Quneitra.



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Many have said the ceasefire agreements only exist on paper, when in reality not much changes on the ground.^{22,23}

- (U) Within the past two weeks Syria has accused Turkey of failing to implement the agreement.²⁴ Additionally, Putin explicitly stated that continued terrorist attacks from Idlib may induce Russia to support an invasion by pro-Assad forces.²⁵ Although these statements would primarily be intended to intimidate, they still provide some evidence that conflict is likely to increase.
- (U) Since beginning of the conflict in 2011, Russia has sought to stabilize the Assad regime in order to have a more stable regional ally in the Middle East; violating the agreement and uprooting the extremists/terrorists would speed up the process of reconstruction and subsequent stabilization, allowing Russia to benefit from regained Syrian influence in the region.
- (U) Russia and the Assad regime likely view a potential victory in Idlib as a victory over the West and the United States, given that many rebel groups throughout the span of the conflict were supported in some capacity by the United States or its allies. This gives motivation for Assad to violate the Sochi agreement and eliminate the remaining threat in his country.

(U) A collapse in the Sochi Agreement and a rise in conflict is likely to significantly worsen the humanitarian situation and subsequently undermine Turkey.

- (U) Since the fighting began, the population of Idlib has practically doubled to 3 million due to the influx of displaced people, which has created an area where civilians are caught in the crossfire and fleeing to Turkey.²⁶
- (U) Estimates suggest that just some of the recent shelling in the region displaced tens of thousands of individuals; an invasion into the region is expected to displace hundreds of thousands (depending on the nature of the invasion)—in addition to killing many civilians.²⁷
- (U) Since early July, Turkey has been restricting Syrian refugees' access to Turkey because the refugee crisis has exceeded Turkish infrastructure capabilities, exacerbated their economic issues, and posed risks of militant movement covered by refugee flows.^{28,29} Such issues have led to a worsening in public opinion towards the refugees.³⁰



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