

الجزيرة

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Three ways of looking at Idlib's future

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The Assad regime has signaled it may soon begin a large military offensive in Idlib, the last province remaining in opposition hands—an offensive likely to have devastating humanitarian and political consequences for Syria, its neighbors, and even Europe.

In the ongoing conversations about the fate of Syria's Idlib

Province, and the areas surrounding it, more than three million people's lives are at stake. The region is home to all the forcibly-displaced residents of other parts of the country who refused an accommodation with the Bashar al-Assad regime via so-called "settlements" or "reconciliations," as well as the locals who fear the reprisals customarily carried out by the regime in every area it re-occupies. International and regional diplomatic maneuvers have failed to alleviate even a portion of these pressures that fall first and foremost on the shoulders of these Syrians. This is partly a result of the uncertain nature of agreements in Syria, where even major powers such as the United States have not upheld their red lines, as witnessed most recently in southern Syria.

What, then, is to stop Idlib sharing the same fate as Daraa, Eastern Ghouta, and Aleppo before it? In truth, the answer is not a simple one.

So far, there are numerous ways of looking at the situation in Idlib. The first is regional; seeing in Idlib the last piece of territory remaining under direct opposition control, without direct foreign tutelage. The area—much of which is dominated by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham; the last jihadist formation, which seems to be holding together for now—also falls on the international highway extending from Turkey to Jordan, the takeover of which would go beyond economic objectives, pointing to the extent of Moscow's grip on events in Syria. On the ground, Ankara may be the greatest economic beneficiary of the return of this road, which would ease and simplify trade with the Gulf states and the Middle East overall.

The second level on which to consider Idlib's situation is the

relationship between the local and international players in the area. Despite the announcement by major opposition factions of their unification under the name al-Jabha al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir (“the National Liberation Front”)The new group’s members include Faylaq al-Sham, Jaysh al-Nasr, Jaysh Idlib al-Hurr, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Harakat Nur al-Din al-Zenki, Alwiyyat Suqoor al-Sham, and various other local factions. following Turkish pressure, this new formation currently lacks the hard power needed to confront the latest developments effectively, and the fighting power of its members may be much less than the numbers declared in the media. By the same token, this new group lacks the means to confront the jihadists of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, whom, if they don’t opt to dissolve themselves, will leave Ankara with two choices: either a direct confrontation with them via the National Liberation Front; or a withdrawal from the area. The latter would amount to a handover to the Russians, assuming Russian pressure continues in the same manner witnessed in the recent Sochi meetings, which, while they didn’t produce clear statements about Moscow’s intent regarding Idlib, whether military or political, nonetheless hinted at giving Turkey a limited time period in which to act, intensifying the pressures on the area, the complex internal relationships of the factions within which may push the situation therein to a highly critical point.

The third level of this lethal equation surrounding Idlib lies in the international field, which plays within very small margins, contrary to the norm. In spite of the potential threat posed to the European Union by an all-out battle for Idlib, we have not seen serious efforts at containment by influential states in the Union, such as France and Germany. A Russian military operation in Idlib would likely

push hundreds of thousands of civilians to the Turkish borders, as those who opted to be displaced from their homes rather than “settle” with the Assad regime will have few qualms about doing the same from Idlib. This is not to speak of the province’s original inhabitants, whose fierce clash with the regime renders them unlikely to prefer life under it, at least for the vast majority.

The result of this will be refugees crossing the Turkish borders, heading thence toward the European Union. This will bear dangerous repercussions for the Union itself, especially after the recent rise of the populist right across the continent. Despite these possibilities, it doesn’t seem the Europeans are truly concerned about attaining any stability in northwest Syria; on the contrary, the French aid sent to Ghouta via Moscow last month had the appearance of a reward to the Assad regime for its re-occupation of Daraa.

Bringing these three levels together may offer an indication of Idlib’s future. In spite of the lack of decisive evidence pointing to the probability of any particular scenario, the continuation of the international retreat from Syria, and the non-resolution of the internal disputes within Idlib, may well lead to a military operation larger than a merely partial takeover of the province’s cities, and areas such as Sahl al-Ghab, Jisr al-Shughur, and the Turkmen Mountain.

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