

Syria, Turkey, and Russia, When What's to Come is Still Unsure

by Hugh Fitzgerald



It was not even two months ago, at the beginning of January, that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan and Russian President Putin seemed to be best friends forever. Turkey had continued to insist, against the wishes of the United States and other NATO members, on buying the Russian S-400 missile defense system, even if that infuriated the Americans (which also meant that Turkey would not be allowed to buy the American F-35 stealth fighter jet). At a meeting in Istanbul on January 8, the two leaders inaugurated TurkStream, the dual natural gas line connecting their countries, opening up a new export path for Russian gas into Turkey and Europe. Both Erdogan and Putin were beaming, promising ever greater cooperation in trade and diplomacy. That was then.

But this is now. At the very end of February, Turkey was threatening to destroy the advancing Syrian army in Idlib, and also wanted to make sure that Russia would keep out of any direct involvement on the Syrian side. Furthermore, Turkey is demanding that NATO back it up in any clash with Russia,

apparently still laboring under the illusion that NATO members will come to Turkey's aid, and enforce a no-fly zone in Idlib Province, against both Syrian and Russian planes. NATO is a mutual defense pact that is supposed to be invoked when a member state is the object of aggression. But in Syria, Turkey moved its forces uninvited into Idlib province, and could well be considered not the victim of aggression, but the aggressor. Further, Erdogan's many anti-Western statements and acts, including his plans for a pan-Islamic military force to destroy Israel, and his remarks about a possible war "between the crescent and the cross," leaving no doubt as to which side in that conflict Turkey would be on, have made many NATO countries most unenthusiastic about taking Turkey's side in a dispute of its own making.

[Here](#) is the latest news about the recent attack on Turkish troops by the Syrian army in Idlib, and its possible consequences.

At least 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an air strike by Syrian government forces in northwestern Idlib province as Turkey vowed "to respond in kind" with attacks on "all" their positions.

The rapid escalation of the conflict on Friday [February 28] also threatened another refugee crisis as media reports cited Turkish officials as saying they "opened the gates" for Syrian refugees to transit unimpeded to Europe.

Despite warnings after the first strike, the Syrian regime unfortunately continued its attacks, even targeting ambulances," Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said on Friday, adding retaliatory attacks killed "309 regime troops".

Turkish forces destroyed five Syrian regime choppers, 23 tanks, 10 armored vehicles, 23 howitzers, five ammunition trucks, a SA-17, a SA-22 air defense system as well as three ammunition depots," Akar added.

Russia said Ankara failed to inform it that Turkish troops were fighting alongside rebels in Idlib – comments denied by Turkey.

Turkey has claimed, on the contrary, that the Russians had been fully informed as to where Turkish troops were located. And one may wonder why Russia would have raised the issue at all, unless it had been the Russians who, not having been properly informed by the Turks as to where their own troops were, had in turn misinformed the Syrians that Turkish troops were not in the area that the Syrians planned on bombing and did, in fact, bomb, killing 33 Turkish troops.

“Turkish soldiers who were in the battle formations of terrorist groups came under the fire of Syrian troops,” Russia’s defence ministry said in a statement.

The Russians continue to blame the Turks who, by mimicking “the battle formations of terrorist groups [i.e., Syrian opposition forces]” misled the Syrians into taking them for those “terrorists.”

Russian state television reported Turkish military specialists were using shoulder-fired missiles to try to shoot down Russian and Syrian military aircraft over Idlib.

The deaths were the largest number of fatalities suffered by Turkey in a single day since it first intervened in Syria in 2016. In response, Turkey warned it will attack “all known targets of the Syrian regime.”

Having made such a threat, Turkey will now have a hard time climbing down. It is boxing itself into a corner where it will have to massively retaliate against the Syrians, or lose face, and if the Turks do as much damage as they intend, Syria will call on Russia to retaliate in turn, which would lead to an escalation that cannot possibly benefit Turkey.

“The Assad regime represents a threat to our national security, the region and Europe since it began acting like a criminal network terrorising its own citizens,” Fahrettin Altun, the head of Turkey’s presidential communications department, told Al Jazeera.

The Assad regime does not represent a threat to the national security of Turkey, the region, or Europe militarily. It is a threat, however, because its actions in the civil war have led five million Syrians to flee, and these refugees have strained the resources of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan² the countries that have taken in almost all of them. Not a threat to national security, in a military sense, but definitely a threat to the financial and societal well-being of the host countries.

“The regime has taken advantage of the international silence in the face of its crimes for years.”

The Syrian regime has been denounced at the U.N. in many resolutions, for its use of chemical weapons, its deliberate attacks on civilians, and its preventing humanitarian aid from reaching civilian areas. There has been “no international silence” about Assad’s flouting of all the rules of war.

Retaliatory drone and artillery strikes hit Syrian army positions in southern and eastern parts of the province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said.

Fighting took place during a Russia-backed Syrian government offensive to seize the war-torn country’s last opposition-held stronghold, which is home to more than three million people.

The ferocious bombing campaign and ground assault have displaced nearly one million people since December, more than half of whom are children. The Syrian offensive has also

engulfed many of the 12 military observation posts Turkey has in Idlib.

Rhami Dogan, the governor of Turkey's Hatay province bordering Syria's Idlib region, said 32 wounded troops were being treated in hospitals. Turkey has had 54 soldiers killed in Idlib since the beginning of February.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov offered condolences to Turkey on Friday, saying "such tragedies" can be averted.

President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke by phone on Friday to discuss the crisis and both "expressed serious concern" over the escalation, the Kremlin said.

Russia and Turkey are worried about different "escalations" of the conflict. Russia is worried about massive retaliation, at 200 sites all over Syria, as promised by Turkey against the Assad regime, which Moscow supports. Turkey is worried about the Syrian attacks on its own forces in Idlib, and on the possible involvement of Russia in helping the Syrian forces, aiding them, for example, in the targeting of Turkish troops, or possibly themselves bombing the Turkish positions if the Syrian bombings prove ineffective.

In a statement, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed "grave concern" of an escalation of violence and called for an immediate ceasefire. He said "the risk of even greater escalation grows by the hour" without urgent action.³

As fighting raged, the United Nations said it was having "catastrophic" humanitarian consequences, with at least 134 civilians, including 44 children, killed in February, and schools and hospitals destroyed.

Seven children were among 11 people killed when an air strike hit a school in northern Idlib on Tuesday, according to the

UN.

Through his spokesman, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg issued a statement condemning the "indiscriminate" air strikes by the Syrian regime and Russian forces. He urged de-escalation by all parties of "this dangerous situation."

NATO nations will meet on Friday [February 27] to address the crisis.

Following the air attack, Erdogan held a two-hour emergency security meeting in Ankara that was attended by ministers and military officials.

Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Turkish commanders directed operations in Syria at the Turkish border, state-owned Anadolu news agency said.

Syrian state news agency, SANA, carried a brief report saying Turkey acknowledged its forces were killed "in operations of the Syrian Arab Army against a terrorist organization", adding Syrian troops were repelling attacks by "terrorist groups backed by Turkey." Turkey has sent thousands of troops and heavy military hardware into Syria and Erdogan has warned Turkey would launch a full-scale offensive to repel Syrian forces unless they pulled back from Turkish observation posts in the region.

Assad's regime is monstrous, but in the Idlib battle, Turkey has been the aggressor against Syria. Turkey invaded Syria, not vice-versa. Article 4 of NATO's founding document allows a member to request help if it feels its territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened. None of those apply to the situation here, unless the Turks argue that their security is threatened because of the millions of Syrian refugees they now have within their borders, and they worry about possibly a million more to come from Idlib. Those

refugees are an expense, no doubt, but let's remember that Europe has contributed billions of dollars to Turkey for their upkeep. Those refugees do not threaten Turkish security. NATO members are clearly unwilling to take actions, such as establishing a No-Fly Zone over Idlib, that might bring them into direct conflict with Russia. That's a decision they should stick to.

Vladimir Dzhubarov, a senior Russian lawmaker, said on Friday any full-scale Turkish military operation in Idlib would end badly for Ankara, the Interfax news agency reported.

That is certainly true. The Russians cannot possibly allow the Turks to push the Syrian army back in Idlib; if the Turks look like they are succeeding, or still worse, managing to push the Syrians completely out of Idlib, and even further back toward Damascus, the Russians will have to intervene or be seen as a feeble friend and ineffective ally. The perception of Russia as a superpower has to be maintained, and the Turks will either be defeated by a Russian -backed Syrian army or, more likely, by Russian fighters who have been ordered by Moscow to engage directly with the Turks, of course, insisting that they had been attacked first.

In Idlib, the killing of 33 Turkish troops, by Syrian or possibly, though less likely, by Russian troops, has led to a situation of high tension that will certainly lead to much greater clashes between the Syrian army and the Turkish forces in Idlib, and might lead to a direct conflict between Turkish and Russian troops.

Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, who plays a senior role in foreign affairs, spoke about the situation to US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien.

"We stand by our NATO ally Turkey and continue to call for an immediate end to this despicable offensive by the Assad regime, Russia, and Iranian-backed forces," the US State

Department said in a statement.

As long as NATO confines itself to words in support of “our NATO ally Turkey” – a far-too forgiving description of Erdogan’s virulently anti-Western regime – that is okay. The worry is that Turkey will follow through on its pledge to attack 200 Syrian military sites, all over Syria, that the Syrians will not be able retaliate to the degree necessary to avoid total humiliation, , and that Russian troops might then become directly involved against Turkish troops.

What should NATO do in such circumstances? Nothing. Turkey should long ago have been expelled from NATO, given Erdogan’s hostile attitude toward the West, his annihilationist threats against Israel, his neo-Ottoman claims to lead the Muslim world in its conflict with non-Muslims (Erdogan’s “war between the crescent and the cross”). There is no reason for NATO to come to Turkey’s aid. The Turks are the ones who, without consulting NATO, invaded Syria in order to drive out or kill the Kurds in northern Syria. Turkey should be told by NATO that its members will not be drawn into a conflict that Turkey could have easily avoided by not sending troops to Syria, and that Turkey should now withdraw those troops unless it wishes to risk a clash with Russia, which Turkey cannot possibly win.

NATO members could offer to help alleviate the problem of more refugees fleeing Idlib. It could offer to help Turkey on guarding its side of the border with Syria, preventing refugees from entering. In return it would expect President Erdogan not to “open the floodgates” into Europe for the refugees now in Turkey. The NATO members could even help Turkey to repatriate some of the refugees it is already harboring. Save in Idlib, the civil war in Syria is over; the refugees may not like the result, but at least they can return to a country that is no longer convulsed by war. Some may even return to the very houses they left behind, a far better outcome than continuing to live in squalid camps in Turkey.

What if Turkey, angry at NATO's failure to support it against the Russians, were to decide to leave NATO? That's exactly what NATO members should welcome. For years Turkey has been the unhelpful and hostile odd man out in NATO. Under Erdogan, the country is out of place as a member of that alliance of Western, democratic, non-Muslim nations.

Turkey got itself into a mess of its own making in Syria. It began with an attack on Syrian Kurds, with Erdogan falsely claiming that the Kurdish forces, that had been America's most trustworthy and effective allies against the Islamic State, were actually allies of the PKK, a Kurdish terrorist group inside Turkey; the Americans have flatly denied that connection. Thousands of Turkish troops were sent into Idlib Province, in northwestern Syria. Erdogan's commanders may have thought the Syrian army would stay back, fearful of coming up against the Turkish military. It turned out quite otherwise. The Syrian regime has continued its steady march through Idlib, undeterred by the Turkish presence, and perfectly ready to take on the Turks, as they did on February 26, when they bombed Turkish positions and killed 33 Turkish soldiers and wounded 32 more. The Syrian army, far from being fearful of the Turks, has had no intention of pulling back, but have continued their offensive in Idlib. That is bad news for Turkey, which insists that it will not retreat one inch. But still worse for Turkey is the sneaking suspicion that their soldiers may have been bombed not by Syrian, but by Russian planes, though Moscow of course denies it. And Turkey may wish to accept that denial, even if it doesn't believe it, in order to avoid a direct military conflict with Russia, and to keep open those "channels of communication" with Moscow that it knows are necessary.

For now the conflict remains one between Turkish and Syrian forces. The Turks have avoided hitting Russian forces, and the Russians have supported the Syrians but apparently have not attacked the Turks directly. The Syrians continue with their

relentless offensive, and the Turks have said they will not budge from Idlib. This suggests there will be more violence unleashed between the two. If Syrian forces are mauled, and forced back, could Russia allow Assad, whom they have always supported during the nine years of civil war, to endure such a defeat, or would it feel compelled to bomb the Turks to underscore its value as a military ally?

And what happens if Erdogan makes good on his threat to let loose upon Europe many of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees who are currently in Turkey? Western European nations should not wait for that, but right now send troops to guard the land borders of Greece and Bulgaria with Turkey. Bulgaria has already sent 1,000 extra troops to guard its borders, but will need many more, and NATO members should step in to prevent an invasion of Arab Muslims into Bulgaria, and through Bulgaria, into Western Europe. Greece, too, will need to have its territory, including many islands, kept free of an invasion of still more Muslim migrants. Already on many Greek islands, where there once hung posters proclaiming "Solidarity with the refugees and migrants!"

There is now among the indigenous Greeks fear, fury, and frustration. Those refugees have turned out to live off the state, engage in criminal activities, and do little or nothing to improve their lot except keep their hands out for ever more aid. The islands of Lesbos and Samos seem particularly affected by the disorder and disruption these Muslim migrants have caused.

Naval vessels from the NATO members should be sent to patrol the eastern Mediterranean in order to prevent boatloads of Syrians, let loose from their confinement in Turkey, from landing on European shores. Their boats should be turned away, prevented from approaching land, in return-to-sender fashion. However, if those vessels are deemed unseaworthy, their human cargo should be transferred to Western ships and then delivered, on those ships, to Syrian ports. The tens of

millions of Muslims the Western countries have already welcomed into their midst have not integrated into their host societies, and a much harder line has to be taken if the West is to survive. Those Muslim migrants, from many different Muslim lands, have become a colossal economic burden on their hosts, who have lavished every sort of benefit on them – free or heavily-subsidized housing, free medical care, free education, unemployment benefits, family allowances – and at the same time, they threaten the wellbeing and physical safety of their hosts. The Europeans need to stand firm on keeping out more Muslims, by listening less to Angela Merkel and Pope Francis, and more closely to, such East European leaders as Viktor Orban in Hungary, who refuses to admit a single Muslim, much to the relief of the Hungarian people.

What if Turkey or Russia miscalculates, and they end up in a war? It would be complete madness for NATO to risk a conflict with Russia for the likes of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Besides, NATO's interest is in deepening the enmity between Turkey and Russia, both of which are enemies of the liberal democracies of the West. Turkey would end up the sure loser to Russia, and without the support either of NATO or of fellow Muslims whom Erdogan has deceived himself into thinking he can count on. The Arab League – even though its own members hate Assad – has already furiously denounced Turkey for having invaded Syria, a “brother Arab country.” Erdogan appears not to have gotten the message: “We remember how the Ottomans lorded it over us. There is no love lost between us, the Arabs, and Turkey.” As for NATO, its members have demonstrated that they do not intend to go beyond some pro-forma verbal support for Turkey, a wise decision.

In Turkey itself, Erdogan's gross miscalculations, first in sending Turkish troops into Syria, and then in stumbling into a conflict with Russia, will lower his appeal, already on a steep decline, as the last elections showed, with his AK Party being defeated in June 2019 in the three largest cities in

Turkey, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, all of which are now in opposition hands.. But worst of all for Erdogan's future prospects are the humiliation he will be blamed for having brought upon the Turkish military, as it cannot possibly withstand a Russian assault. Even after the great purges by Erdogan of his perceived secularist enemies and "Gülenists" in the universities, the judiciary, the newspapers, and the military, there remained many in the army who are hostile to his project of undoing Kemalism. And Turkish generals, if their forces are defeated decisively by the Russians, and still smarting from such a humiliating defeat, they rightly blame Erdogan, might succeed with a coup to overthrow him. Ideally, they would revive the project of secularizing Turkey – Kemalism – that Erdogan had done so much to undo.

That is a result devoutly to be wished. Meanwhile, in Syria, the Assad regime will at long last finish the conquest of Idlib. Assad will finally have recovered the whole country, but much of that country has been physically devastated, and the Western estimates for its reconstruction to its antebellum state begin at \$250 billion dollars.. Syria is broke; the Gulf Arabs will have nothing to do with Assad; the Americans and Europeans, too, will not be in any mood to help the Assad, who is correctly seen as a war criminal. Russia, too, though it was willing to help Assad's military effort, would not be forthcoming with billions of dollars it needs for its own citizens. Assad does have one friend – Iran – that would help out financially if it could, but Iran, is strapped for cash because of the sanctions that the Americans have re-imposed. Tehran may come up with some billions, but not anything like what Assad needs. Even for those billions, the Iranians will want something in exchange. They will want Assad's continued assent to Iran's building bases on Syrian territory. Iran has been giving Assad money and arms during the civil war, and has during the last few years been building those bases. But unfortunately for Teheran, the Israelis have been spectacularly successful in locating, and then destroying,

those bases. Building those bases runs into money, and their destruction by Israel is taking a heavy financial toll on the Iranians.

That's the messy state of affairs in Idlib as of the beginning of March. But if the West keeps its powder dry, and NATO offers only words by way of support for the Turks, it should find that its frequent nemesis, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, will lose his grip on the army, and then on Turkey, without NATO firing a shot. That's a good outcome.

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