

The Putin-Erdogan Summit Will Influence the Syrian End Game

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Turkish President Erdogan's visit to Moscow on 27 August will see him and his Russian counterpart hashing out the details of the Syrian end game.

The kinetic (military) phase of the War on Syria is rapidly drawing to a close and being replaced by a potentially much more complex non-kinetic (political) phase of the conflict as evidenced by recent events pertaining to the the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) anti-terrorist operation in Idlib and the upcoming plans to finally form a long-awaited constitutional committee for reforming the country's founding document. All of these developments concern core interests of Turkey and Russia, especially since the SAA's liberation offensive succeeded in encircling a Turkish military outpost, so it's understandable why President Erdogan is rushing to Moscow to meet with his Russian counterpart to hash out the details of the Syrian end game.

There has been [speculation](#) swirling in the media that the Idlib operation was born out of a secret Russian-Turkish pact whereby Ankara would allow the SAA to liberate part or possibly even all of Idlib in exchange for Moscow agreeing to allow Turkish forces to establish a so-called buffer zone in the northeastern Kurdish-controlled part of the country in coordination with the US. It's certainly conceivable that something of the sort is in effect owing to the rapid gains that the SAA made, which would have been much more difficult to achieve had it not been for a political decision by the Turkish leadership to not directly resist their advances. After all, if it was this comparatively "easy" all along, Idlib would have been liberated long ago.

This suggests that some kind of agreement was probably reached with Russia behind closed doors, but also that the SAA might have even gone a bit further than either of them expected after it encircled the Turkish military outpost, something that maybe even Moscow was surprised to see happen. It should be stated that while Russia and Syria are close military partners, the former doesn't "control" the latter, and palpable disagreements have arisen between them from time to time. The Turkish military outpost in Idlib was established as part of the Astana peace process' so-called "de-escalation zones", which Damascus officially said that it supported at the time (irrespective of whether this was a sincere statement or done under duress).

Any SAA attack against the Turkish forces there could unravel the progress that's been made over the past couple of years in finally ending the military phase of the conflict, which is another reason why President Erdogan is racing to Moscow to directly discuss this urgent

issue with President Putin. Although Russia doesn't "control" Syria, it nevertheless exerts more powerful influence over its leadership than any other party, so it could either try to convince the SAA to retreat a little bit or broker the Turks' safe withdrawal in the "worst-case scenario". From a strategic standpoint, while Turkey would prefer to retain its "sphere of influence" in Idlib — possibly formalized through forthcoming constitutional reforms — it's much more concerned about the Kurds.

This brings one to discussing the other part of the speculative Russian-Turkish deal in Syria. Turkey's planned buffer zone in the northeast is located in the US' "sphere of influence" and beyond Russia's control, yet it's still important for Ankara and Moscow to coordinate their actions in the country in order to avoid any misunderstandings and so as to jointly advance their shared goal of bringing about a "political solution" to the conflict. With that in mind, the more pressure that's put on the pro-American Kurds, the more likely it is that they might finally "compromise" with Damascus, though again, that's far from guaranteed. The US and their Kurdish allies want nothing less than Bosnian-like "autonomy", something that the Syrian state is against.

Even in the event that Turkey's buffer zone is successfully established (whether or not this entails a full military withdraw Idlib or only a partial one), that might not be sufficient for getting the Kurds to "compromise" so long as the US provides them with military support against both Ankara and Damascus. Turkey would feel much more comfortable with the buffer zone in place, but it's still not the ideal solution to this pressing problem. Syria, meanwhile, could lose some important leverage on Turkey in that it wouldn't be able to threaten its neighbor's forces there like it does in Idlib and thus compel a Russian "diplomatic intervention" since the mighty Euphrates and the American military would be separating both possible combatants in that event.

In any case, the possibly connected "chess moves" of the Syrian advance in Idlib and the plans for a Turkish buffer zone in northeastern Syria alter the dynamics of the peace process that's progressively (albeit very slowly) unfolding in the country. The UNSC-mandated constitutional committee is supposedly very close to formation, and another summit between the Russian, Turkish, and Iranian heads of state is expected to be held in the middle of next month, so the timing of all these developments and their significance thereof shouldn't be lost on any observer. That said, while a "political solution" seems to finally be within reach, it shouldn't be forgotten that President Assad famously vowed to liberate "every inch" of Syria.

It's Damascus' sovereign right to do so, but it doesn't seem like any other player except perhaps Iran (which is becoming less influential there) supports this, thus making it much more difficult to pull off in practice. If the SAA's military gambit in Idlib succeeds and its diplomats somehow get Russia to strike a deal with Turkey for the latter's withdrawal from all areas west of the Euphrates, then Syria would still have to contend with the planned Turkish buffer zone in the northeast, the Kurdish "federalists", and the American military, neither of which Russia would have any tangible influence on. This makes President Assad's ambitions less than realistic no matter how grounded in principle and international law they may be.

Having said that, one shouldn't lose sight of the importance of Russian-Turkish military coordination in general, let alone at this very sensitive stage of the conflict given the Idlib operation, since the scenario is materializing wherein the possible full liberation of "Western Syria" (all of Syria west of the Euphrates) might one day occur, after which President Assad

might “settle” for ensuring “Eastern Syria’s” (all of Syria east of the Euphrates) “autonomy” through forthcoming constitutional reforms possibly proposed by the constitutional committee. The Turkish buffer zone might become a UN-enforced one, and the US might withdraw so long as the Kurds are allowed to keep their military forces intact. That outcome might not be ideal, but it’s also not unrealistic either.

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