

What Do the Winners in Syria Want?

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After the liberation of the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, the Syrian civil war entered a new phase. The available land that was up for grabs by any new liberator — without the need for negotiations with outside actors — was shrinking (one section of the desert under ISIL control does not count – it will soon be cleared out). Only Idlib is left, which is controlled (albeit only in spots and to a limited extent) by Turkey, as well as the environs of al-Tanf and the Kurdish regions located within the American protectorate. And their liberation must be preceded by diplomatic agreements with the protector states.

Decentralization without the Kurds

[Negotiations with Turkey](#) took place in Sochi at the very end of July. Those were conducted by Russia and Iran, because Damascus and Ankara have officially severed their diplomatic ties. The Syrian authorities emphasize that the territory of Idlib will eventually be returned to Damascus's jurisdiction.



No one's arguing with that. Turkey is not planning on an eternal occupation of Syrian territory, because any benefits from that would be completely outweighed by the financial, PR, and potential military costs Ankara would incur. At some point, the Turkish troops will be forced to quit Syria. But Erdogan has no desire to pull out for free and is demanding a number of conditions be met in return.

These conditions are obvious yet at the same time contradictory. On one hand, [Ankara wants to maintain its leverage over post-war Syria](#), so it is pressing for the local communities (some of which in northwestern and western Syria hold pro-Turkish sentiments) to be granted more rights and powers. On the other hand, the Turks do not want those rights and powers to be extended to the Syrian Kurds, whom Erdogan currently views as one of the biggest threats to Turkey's national security.

At present it is not possible to meet Turkey's demands – the constitutional committee is just now getting down to work, and no one understands [how to exclude the Kurds](#) from the decentralization process anyway. And ultimately the Iranians are not particularly eager to yield any zones of influence to the Turks — it is clear to everyone that for the foreseeable future, Tehran and Ankara will very likely be competing for the upper hand in the Middle East. In turn, the Turkish authorities are threatening that if Moscow and Tehran give Damascus the green light to conduct a military operation in Idlib without taking Ankara's interests into account, then Turkey will abandon its attempts to find a resolution under the auspices of the Astana negotiations and could potentially resume military and political

assistance to the militants, which might even include sending aid in the form of the Turkish army.

The weak link

As a result, a compromise was apparently reached in Sochi. Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow agreed to temporarily postpone the offensive in Idlib and give Turkey some latitude to handle the threats posed by certain terrorist groups in the region (for example, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, which is the latest reincarnation of the al-Nusra Front). In order to do battle against them, the Turks have already established [a coalition of militants under Ankara's control](#).

However, this compromise is not likely to last long. First of all, because Turkey has thus far been conspicuously unable to cope with the situation (as can be seen, for example, in the regular drone attacks on the Hmeimim air base that originate in Idlib), and there is no guarantee that the situation will change. Second, Damascus is already engaged in [a dialog with the Kurds](#) (who have finally become firmly convinced that the Americans will continue to sell them out to the Turks) over the idea of reconciling in exchange for the promise of decentralization. In this, the interests of Damascus and Ankara are partially aligned – the Kurds will not be granted any broad autonomy – but the Syrian authorities are prepared to concede some extremely limited autonomy. And if the Turks object, then – faced with the choice between compromising with the Kurds vs. satisfying the Turks, the Syrians are likely to choose the Kurds.

The Kurds will be chosen because — and this is the third reason — Turkey is the weakest link in the Syrian “triumvirate.” The end of the civil war is not far off, and if Iran and Russia are seeing their own positions strengthening as that day draws nearer, Turkey, on the other hand, is growing weaker. This is being expedited by the rapidly unraveling [relationship between Erdogan and the West](#), as a result of which the Turkish president has been left in a state of semi-isolation, and he cannot afford to damage his relations with Moscow and Tehran as well. Therefore, it is possible that once the desert enclave and the concentration of troops near Idlib have been cleared out in the autumn, the Syrian army will find some pretext for an offensive in the rebel province, and Turkey will remain on the sidelines. The best Ankara can hope for is to have some minor concessions granted.

Syria without Iran?

As for the US — it played no role in the talks in Sochi.

“We are sorry that our American colleagues chose to absent themselves from the work aimed at achieving a long-term political settlement in Syria,” noted Alexander Lavrentiev, Russia’s special envoy to Syria. “We remain confident that mutually acceptable solutions can only be worked out through an open dialog.”

However those can also be worked out through a “closed” dialog, which is something that is held regularly (including during [the meeting between Putin and Trump](#)). Washington’s position is easy to understand. Donald Trump is ready to pull American troops out of the environs of al-Tanf (in southern Syria), because now that Syrian troops have liberated Deir ez-Zor and the province of Daraa, that base of operations is no longer needed. Trump is

also prepared to entertain the possibility of abandoning support for the Syrian Kurds, because they are ill-suited for their role as a force to hold Iran in check and are also creating a host of problems with the Turks.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif meet with diplomatic representatives of Iran, in Tehran, on July 22, 2018

The only question is — [what does Washington want in return?](#) Some media outlets have been circulating the idea that the US and its partner Israel are demanding Iran's complete withdrawal from Syria. But everyone is well aware that this is unrealistic — the losers cannot order the winner to admit defeat. So it will most likely be an issue of the Iranians having to accept responsibility for pulling their troops and military bases out of the area near the Golan Heights, and Russia having to be responsible for ensuring that Tehran abides [by this condition](#).

So far the negotiations seem to be in their early stages, and one of the key obstacles is the uncertainty of the US and Israel that the Russians will be able to shoulder the responsibility for Iran's compliance with its obligations once the US troops have been gone from Syria for one, two, or three years. The West believes that Russia's continued presence in Syria will be on shaky ground, since Iran regards the country as its own domain and will push for outside forces to leave, even friendly ones.

Moscow partially shares this concern (despite being on friendly terms with Tehran), and that is precisely why it is trying to do all it can to use diplomacy to resolve the issue with the Turks themselves, while also pulling Europe into the process of [returning the Syrian refugees](#) and restoring the country's infrastructure. After all, the more outside actors there are in Syria, the less chance that the Iranian leaders in that country will become an undesirable dominating force (which would inevitably happen otherwise). And it makes it even more likely that the process of national reconciliation — which will take more than just a year or two — will culminate in not just an end to the civil confrontation, but also in the long-term peaceful coexistence of the varied peoples and religious sects within Syria.

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