

Russia postpones Syrian offensive in Idlib as NATO threatens escalation

By Alex Lantier
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Moscow announced yesterday the postponement of a planned joint offensive by Syrian and Russian government forces against Islamist opposition militias in Syria's Idlib province, after growing threats from the militias' backers in Turkey and the NATO imperialist powers.

Before yesterday, Moscow and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime had made clear that they intended to crush the Islamist terrorist militias inside Idlib. The United Nations has estimated that there are 10,000 Al Qaeda-linked forces among the Islamist militias in the province, primarily from the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militia. They are the last bastion of opposition support in Syria, after the lack of popular support for the NATO-backed forces and Russian and Iranian military aid to the Syrian regime turned the tide of the war against NATO.

Over the last several days, however, US, European and Turkish officials blocked the Russian-Syrian offensive, at least temporarily, by drastically escalating military tensions in the region. They repeatedly threatened to strike Syrian forces and their allies, risking a direct military clash with nuclear-armed Russia, if the Syrian regime attacked Al Qaeda-linked forces in Idlib.

Yesterday, the *Times* of London reported that "Britain is preparing to join the United States and France in launching waves of airstrikes against Syria," identifying a long list of potential targets. It added, "The Pentagon has begun drawing up a list of chemical weapons sites inside Syria that could be targeted in a far wider campaign of retribution than the single night of strikes in April involving British, American and French warplanes, after a chemical attack near Damascus killed at least 40 people."

After conducting eight days of large-scale military

exercises with US troops in Syria, Colonel Muhanad al-Tanaa of the Pentagon-sponsored Maghawir al-Thawrah ("Revolutionary Commando Army") militia said US-backed opposition militias "are staying whether the Russians or Iranians want or not." He added that if they approached restricted areas of Syria the Pentagon considers to be its territory, "there is a big likelihood they will be hit" by US air strikes.

Yesterday, Turkey continued to send Special Forces troops, tanks and heavy artillery to reinforce its 12 military posts in Idlib. It also threatened to retaliate against any military attack on them. On Wednesday, a Turkish military source had told Reuters: "We have a military presence there, and if that military presence is damaged or attacked in any way, it would be considered an attack on Turkey and would therefore receive the necessary retaliation."

The official also threatened that if an offensive began, Turkey would close its borders to refugees fleeing fighting in Idlib. "The refugees ... will not be accepted into Turkey because previous experiences have shown that with such migrant waves, the entrance of radicals and terrorists into Turkey have been too much," the official claimed. "We will keep the refugees in Syria for the safety of both Turkey and European countries."

Amid this growing US and Turkish pressure, Russian, Turkish, German and French officials met yesterday for talks on Syria in Istanbul. Those present included Russian presidential adviser Yuri Ushakov, Turkish presidential adviser Ibrahim Kalın, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's foreign policy adviser Jan Hecker, and French presidential foreign policy adviser Philippe Étienne.

Afterwards, the officials indicated that Moscow and Damascus were postponing their offensive.

“I believe that this offensive, if an offensive ever takes place, will not happen for several weeks,” an anonymous high-level Turkish official told AFP (Agence France Presse) after the meeting. The official added that a compromise between Moscow and Ankara might take the form of Ankara agreeing to Russian air strikes targeting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham members, who control 60 percent of Idlib province and have attacked Russian forces from within that zone.

Kal?n told AP (Associated Press) that the four officials had agreed that “a solution for the rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib should be a political, rather than military one.”

The *Wall Street Journal* praised Turkey’s intervention in Idlib for blocking the Russian-Syrian attack. In an article titled “Syria’s Looming Idlib Offensive Is Stalled by Turkey,” it wrote: “The delay follows moves by Turkey to fortify its positions in Idlib province, the last major holdout for Syria’s armed antiregime opposition, with troops and tanks. Turkey has also gathered forces on its own borders to deter Syrian civilians fleeing the fighting. ... Those efforts, say Western and Turkish officials, have helped temporarily stave off an attack...”

Moscow and Ankara confirmed that Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet on Monday in the Russian resort town of Sochi, in order to discuss the Syrian crisis. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said, “Such a meeting is within the realm of possibility and is currently being prepared.”

Despite the temporary reprieve in the fighting in Idlib, it is ever clearer that the Syrian war is the expression of ultimately insoluble conflicts between the major powers.

Over the course of the past week, the war in Syria has balanced on a knife-edge, risking the eruption of a global war between the major nuclear powers. The NATO powers and Turkey are making clear that they will not accept defeat in the war, and are determined that their Islamist proxies will play a central political role in Syria.

They are thrusting aside the Kremlin’s attempts to signal that it views the NATO powers’ regime change policy as a threat to its fundamental national security interests. Moscow is organizing its largest military exercises since World War II in eastern Russia, as

Washington threatens nearby North Korea, and the Russian navy has just finished its largest naval exercises in the Mediterranean in decades. Yet the NATO powers are making clear that they intend to proceed with military action if needed, even against Russia, to secure regime change in Syria.

In this reckless and politically criminal policy, they are proceeding with contempt for public opinion at home as well as abroad. The previous chemical attacks in Houla, Ghouta or Khan al-Assal that the NATO powers used as pretexts for escalating their intervention in Syria, or bombing the country outright, all proved to be provocations organized by NATO-backed opposition forces in Syria.

Yet, even as Moscow has repeatedly warned that British and NATO intelligence are preparing chemical attacks as a new provocation in Idlib, the European powers are insisting that they will react to a new chemical attack by bombing Syria—as Washington, London and Paris did in April.

After the German Foreign Ministry confirmed that it is in discussion with Washington over potential Syrian chemical weapons use, the *Bild* paper wrote that Berlin could bomb Syria: “If Assad were to attack his own people with poison gas, then, besides the US being joined again by Britain and France (and possibly other new allies), armed Luftwaffe Tornados could fly missions against military infrastructure (barracks, air bases, command posts, ammunition depots, weapon depots, factories, research centres).”

On Tuesday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian indicated that Paris was ready to attack Syria again, declaring that “the use of chemical weapons is a red line for France.”

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