

Putin and Erdogan agree to new Idlib ceasefire at Moscow summit on Syria

By Jordan Shilton
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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a new ceasefire for the Syrian province of Idlib following a six-hour meeting at the Kremlin yesterday. Despite both sides' efforts to smooth over the conflicts, the ceasefire does not resolve the broader NATO-Russia conflicts underlying recent Turkish-Russian clashes in Syria.

Erdogan traveled to Moscow for emergency talks after the eruption of sustained fighting over the past month between Turkish troops and Russian-backed Syrian forces. The latter are trying to reconquer the last region of Syria held by the Islamist opposition militias sponsored by Washington and the European imperialist powers since the beginning of the NATO proxy war for regime change in Syria in 2011.

At least 58 Turkish soldiers have been killed in Idlib since the beginning of February, including 36 in a strike launched with Russian approval on February 27. Turkey retaliated with a renewed offensive against Syrian government positions Sunday, killing dozens of pro-Assad forces with drone strikes and shelling.

The agreement reached in Moscow calls for a ceasefire as of midnight in the northwestern Syrian province. Putin and Erdogan also agreed to the creation of a security corridor for civilians fleeing military clashes to be jointly patrolled by Turkish and Russian troops from mid-March. The safe zone will extend six kilometres on either side of the east-west M4 highway.

Both leaders emphasized common interests and bilateral ties. Putin began the meeting by expressing his sorrow at the deaths of Turkish soldiers, adding that Syrian forces had not been aware of the Turkish soldiers' position when they launched the attack. This amounted to a tacit admission of Russian complicity, however, as Russian aircraft control the airspace over

Idlib.

Erdogan, for his part, described Turkish-Russian relations as being at a "high point," claiming he was happy to fly to Moscow in order to spare Putin the trouble of traveling in the midst of the Russian president's efforts to enforce constitutional reforms.

But such displays of solidarity cannot conceal the fact that Moscow and Ankara pursue rival interests in Syria, where NATO's support for various Islamist militias led to a nine-year conflict that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced tens of millions to flee. Now, the US-instigated imperialist war for regime change in Damascus is metastasizing into a broader war, drawing in regional and major powers alike.

While Moscow backs the Assad regime, which grants Russia a military foothold on the Mediterranean with two coastal military bases, Ankara opposes the reconquest of territory by the Syrian government. Firstly, it fears a new surge of refugees across its southern border under conditions in which 3.7 million refugees already live in Turkey. Secondly, it fears that if Turkish forces lose control of northern Syria, Kurdish YPG militias could consolidate a Kurdish protostate on Ankara's southern border, which could cause the war to spill over into Turkey itself.

These conflicts are exacerbated by the aggressive efforts of the imperialist powers, led by the United States, to exert their geopolitical and economic control over Syria and the broader Middle East. President Trump's abandonment of the Kurdish YPG militia and withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria, which triggered the latest Turkish invasion last October, in no way represented a retreat by Washington from the region. On the contrary, the Pentagon, which has kept some 500 troops occupying Syria's oil fields, is focusing its efforts on strengthening its anti-Iranian

coalition throughout the Middle East so as to back up Washington's economic campaign of "maximum pressure" on Teheran with preparations for war.

Discussions are underway within the Trump administration on whether to offer military aid to Turkey. "We believe firmly that our NATO partner Turkey has the full right to defend itself against the risk that's being created by what Assad, the Russians and the Iranians are doing inside of Syria," declared Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the State Department yesterday. "The Turkish government has asked us for a handful of things. We're evaluating all of those requests."

For their part, the European powers are no less determined to secure their share of plunder from the redivision of the Middle East. German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke to both Erdogan and Putin prior to Thursday's meeting to demand that they agree to a ceasefire and to the establishment of a "safe zone" in Idlib. German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer raised the prospect Wednesday of imposing sanctions on Russia if it refused to halt the fighting, while also urging Erdogan to accept that the Western powers could serve as more reliable partners than Moscow.

If the European powers failed to unveil plans for an immediate intervention, this was solely due to their currently weak military position in Syria, which they are working hard to build up and strengthen. As EU Foreign Policy High Representative Josep Borrell put it, in comments supporting the creation of a no-fly zone for Syrian planes over Idlib, "The European Union cannot decide to have a buffer zone in Syria. We would like to speak the language of power, but for the time being we cannot decide this by ourselves."

Thursday's agreement does not reconcile Turkey and Russia's diametrically opposed interests in Syria, but seems set to provide a brief breathing space before the next escalation of hostilities. Underscoring that this could be sooner rather than later, Erdogan remarked at Thursday's joint press conference with Putin that Turkish forces retain the right to strike Syrian troops if they come under attack.

The previous ceasefire deal, the 2018 Sochi Agreement, was never implemented in full and broke apart over the past few months. The deal provided for the creation of a buffer zone in Idlib as long as Turkish

troops separated the radical Islamist militias associated with Al Qaeda from so-called "moderate" rebels, and Russia prevented an offensive by Assad's forces to retake the province.

In fact, Al Qaeda-linked militias dominate the Islamist rebels in Idlib with whom Turkey is allied, making it impossible to establish fighting forces made up only of "moderates." Ankara not only refused to attempt to divide the militias, but also began sending contingents to Libya to fight on behalf of the Libyan government of Fayez al-Sarraj. While Turkey has aligned itself with the al-Sarraj government in the North African country's NATO-instigated civil war, with the twin aims of securing Turkish investments in the country and bolstering Ankara's claims to natural gas deposits discovered in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia has backed the opposition's Gen. Khalifa Haftar.

Under these conditions, Russia sanctioned and supported the long-planned offensive on Idlib by Damascus, the victory of which would result in the defeat of the US-backed Islamist rebels that have been waging war against the Assad regime since 2011. Since the beginning of the offensive in December, close to one million people have been displaced and some 300 civilians killed.

With the threat of the conflict escalating into a direct military clash with Russia, Erdogan appealed to NATO for solidarity last week before opening the Turkish borders to refugees seeking to flee to Europe in an effort to force the European powers to back his war aims. On Thursday, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu went a step further, announcing the deployment of 1,000 heavily-armed police to the Turkish-Greek border to prevent Greek border guards from forcing fleeing refugees to return to Turkey. Greek military and police have resorted to tear gas and live fire at defenseless refugees, fully endorsed by the EU. At least one refugee died from a shot to the head.

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