Quagmire and fragile alliances in Northern Syria:

From Kurdish-held Rojava to the Idlib rebels' bastion

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The ongoing process of the "safe zone" establishment in Northeastern Syria and the management of the Idlib province further complicate and strain relations between allies, jeopardizing an already fragile and volatile state of affairs. The reconciliation of the incompatible aims of all parties involved therein is an uphill task. Both the US and Russia struggle to balance the colliding interests of their allies on the ground, whilst maintaining good ties with Turkey appears pivotal for them. For its part, Turkey, pressed by its domestic problems, is using the refugees and the jihadist threat as bargaining chips in negotiations.

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As the Syrian conflict has entered its ninth year, crucial developments are taking place in the North, in the last areas remaining out of the regime's control. In the West, the Idlib province is the opposition's last stronghold, as well as the jihadists' bastion, while in the East, Kurdish forces - backed by the US - control a large area known as Rojava or the Autonomous Administration of Northeastern Syria (AANES). The future of both regions seems to somehow interlink since in both areas Turkey cooperates – albeit in different contexts and as part of different alliances – with the US and Russia, which seek to establish control and safeguard their interests in post-conflict Syria.[1]

Indeed, agreements and efforts to manage the de-escalation zone in Idlib and to establish a so-called "safe zone" in Northeastern Syria have been taking place. Yet, colliding interests and contradictory aims, amid remaining jihadist threat, undermine these attempts in both regions. Both the US and Russia search how to balance the colliding interests of their allies on the ground, the Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian regime respectively, with those of Turkey without hurting the ties with each of them.

A "safe zone" or a second Afrin in Northeastern Syria?

The agreement over the establishment of a "safe zone" in Kurdish-held Northeastern Syria between Turkey and the US on the 7th of August came in order to address Turkey's concerns over the Kurdish forces' presence along its southern border and after its threat for a new military operation in the region.[2] The Kurdish-led SDF, the most important US ally in the battle against ISIS, are viewed by Ankara as "terrorists" affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – designated as a terrorist group by both NATO and the EU. Turkey has continuously expressed its concerns over the presence of Kurdish forces alongside its borders with Syria; besides, it has conducted two military operations in the past against strategic Kurdish-held areas which led to the capture of Al-Bab and Afrin in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Moreover, US-Turkey relations have been deeply strained due to the US-SDF partnership and lately by the deepening of the relationship between Ankara and Moscow, particularly following the Turkish purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system. Thus, the agreement over the "safe zone" could be viewed as a US effort to invigorate the relations with its NATO ally.

However, while a joint operation center has been established and several joint aerial and two ground patrols have been conducted, divergences over the size and the control of the "safe zone" remain unsolved. Moreover, despite the ongoing process regarding the "safe zone", the US continues to provide SDF forces with arms and vehicles within the framework of the battle against ISIS; it sends though a monthly detailed report to Ankara on the provided weaponry.[3]

In turn, Turkey warned during mid-September that if the issues related to the "safe zone" were not resolved within two weeks, it would proceed on its own, implying thus a military operation.[4] Additionally, echoing the shift on its migration policy and seeking to address its increasing domestic socio-economic and political problems, Ankara declared its purpose to relocate up to one million Syrian refugees in the "safe zone", all the while blackmailing the EU with a fresh refugee flow if the zone is not established soon.[5]

Turkey's plan for refugee resettlement in Northeastern Syria aims in fact at ousting the Kurds from their land and changing the demographics of the region. Moreover, this change would be followed by Turkification policies as it has already been the case in Turkish-controlled areas in Syria, namely in Afrin, revealing therefore a Turkish expansion project. Turkification policies, as largely implemented in Afrin, target mainly culture and education: the changes in street name' and landmarks, the imposition of the Turkish language and the Turkification of school curricula, the presence of Turkish flags etc.[6]

As for the Syrian regime, it has been opposed to the conducting of patrols which it views as a violation of its sovereignty, and blames the Kurds mostly for dividing the country. Interestingly, one day before the fifth Astana peace process summit, which took place on the 16th of September, the Syrian

regime labelled the SDF as a "terrorist organization" in a letter to the UN Secretary-General. The timing of the move reveals its aim to wink at the Astana participants. More importantly, during the summit, Iranian President Rouhani suggested to Turkey to cooperate with the Syrian regime within the framework of the 1998 Adana Agreement against their common enemy: the Kurds. In the same vein, Russia had suggested the same in an earlier summit.

Hence, a rapprochement between Kurdish forces and Damascus appears as unfeasible. Moreover, the Kurds seem to be at the worst possible position since the alliance with Turkey seems to matter the most for the US, while a scenario akin to Afrin and its demographics' change is bearing serious concerns. Yet, Washington appears as trying to buy time by not fully implementing the security zone according to Ankara's demands.

Although Russia shares the Syrian regime's concerns in Northeastern Syria regarding the "safe zone", Moscow appeared recently understanding also the Turkish ones over its southern borders' security, winking thus at the zone's establishment. Still, that does not translate to the renouncement of its line which consists in reasserting Syrian sovereignty over the country. It rather highlights the fact that Russia views its relationship with Turkey as critical. Therefore it moves deliberately so as not to jeopardize this relation and not to push Ankara to the US camp. In this vein, Kremlin seems to examine patiently the developments regarding the "safe zone" and might use it for its own profit in Idlib.[8]

From Northeastern Syria to Idlib

The Turkey-Russia relations are though under pressure in the Idlib province, which is currently home to 3 million people, half of whom are IDPs living in camps therein. On the one hand, Moscow has deepened, in military and diplomatic terms, its ties with Ankara, mainly after the Turkish purchase of the S-400, and despite US warnings. On the other hand, Ankara's stance in Idlib, not aligned with its commitments stemming from the 2018 Sochi agreement – triggers tension. That was evident in the Russia-backed regime's attack on a track of Faylaq al-Sham – Turkey's closest rebel ally and jihadist groups' partner - escorting a Turkish military convoy on August 19.

Since the 31st of August, a ceasefire came into force; yet, in practice it is violated by both sides, i.e. the regime and the opposition forces. However, it seems that all parties involved in Idlib have so far attempted to avoid an escalation in the region. Turkey, which is hosting 3.6 million Syrian refugees, understands that a conflict near its border would engender a new refugee wave towards it. Furthermore, concerns over jihadist threats are important to Turkey, as well as to Russia since, among the refugees fleeing a potential conflict, there would certainly be jihadist fighters who might launch attacks in both countries with serious economic and political impact.[9] The same concerns are shared by the US and the EU, both opposed to an escalation in Idlib which would translate to a regime's and, by extension, Russia's and Iran's victory.

Additionally, Turkey has been confronted with demonstrations held by residents of the Idlib province areas, controlled by Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) -Jabhat al-Nusra's direct descendant - and its allies, in late August. Demonstrators blamed Ankara as a "traitor" and Russia as a collaborator, while they claimed a softer Turkish policy border and military defense via Turkish observation outposts against regime offensives.[10] The rebels' resentment vis-à-vis Turkey, which dates back to Ankara's participation in the 2016 Astana peace process, has intensified after the Turkish inability to shield them. Considering the recent attack of one of the Turkish military outposts in Marek by the regime following the fall of Khan Sheikhoun, the role of the Turkish military presence has been seriously undermined in the rebels' eyes.

Overall, the more possible scenario is currently the continuation of the regime's advances backed by its allies, which has so far seized villages and strategic areas, such as Khan Sheikhoun, in the Idlib and Hama provinces, but under a new arrangement. That is to say, Russia, which appears reluctant to risk a tension with Ankara, could opt for a deal over Syrian access to the two major highways, M5

Aleppo-Damascus and M4 Aleppo-Latakia, and Turkish control over a safe zone along its border. That would lead to more than half of Idlib's territory under the regime's control whilst it would mark a crucial strike to HTS which controls North West areas and whose revenues highly depend on fees on commercial traffic through these crossings.[11]

In conclusion, finding a common ground in the Northern areas of Syria seems an uphill task given the contradictory interests and the growing mistrust among allies. Notwithstanding, apart from their use as bargaining chips, the humanitarian issue, including refugees, as well as the ISIS threat –which despite its territorial defeat, is reorganizing- should be taken into serious account by all parties since their impact goes undoubtedly beyond the Syrian borders.[12]

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