

Idlib: Syria's Operation Dawn Starts

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Syrian UN Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari declared on Sept. 7 that his government was determined to wipe out the rebels from the Idlib province. The next day, the Idlib Dawn Operation began, encircling a town 59 km. southwest of the Syrian city of Aleppo. As of Sept. 9, Russian aircraft have attacked the rebel positions in western Idlib, the mountains of the Latakia province, and the Sahl al-Ghab plain, with the goal of softening up peripheral targets and preventing a breakthrough or counterattack. Syria's forces are ready to move.

The Russian military warned that a false-flag chemical attack staged by the rebels could occur at any time and be used as a pretext for Western missile strikes. A massive Turkish military convoy, consisting of more than 300 vehicles, including tanks, armored vehicles, and MLRS launchers, has entered Idlib from the province of Hatay.

Syria needs Idlib – the last stronghold of the jihadists and the shortest route from Latakia to Aleppo. The M5 international highway crosses Idlib, linking Turkey and Jordan through Aleppo and Damascus. Control of the province would greatly facilitate the negotiations with the Kurds and strengthen Syria's position at the UN-brokered Geneva talks. If the negotiation process succeeds, the only territories left to liberate would be the zone controlled by the US, such as the al-Tanf military base and the surrounding area, the northern parts of the country under Turkish control, and small chunks of land still held by ISIS.

Turkey opposes the idea of an Idlib offensive. It wants assurances for the groups in Idlib under its control and it

doesn't want an influx of refugees. These controversial issues can be tackled with Russia as a mediator. Turkey, Iran, and Russia did not agree on everything at the recent summit in Tehran, but the West's hopes that they would go their separate ways, or even clash in Idlib, have been dashed.

President Erdogan has just said that he wants to meet the Russian president again after his Sept 28-29 visit to Germany. This means that the Turkish leader has ideas and proposals to discuss and Moscow can play a role in reaching a compromise, such as a more narrowly tailored counter-terrorism operation in Idlib. There is a divide, but it can be bridged. The parties have the will to get it done.

Ankara plans to organize a Turkey-Russia-Germany-France summit. The Russian presidential aide, Yury Ushakov, has confirmed that such a meeting is in the works. Moscow has just invited the Turkish military to take part in its largest-ever military exercise, Vostok 2018, which will be held in the Far East. China and Mongolia have also been invited. Obviously, Russia and Turkey are prepared to solve their differences over Idlib peacefully through negotiations.

In any event, the province cannot remain under the terrorists' control forever. They must be either surrender or be routed. Now that the operation to free Idlib has begun, many of them will lay down their arms. They know their resistance is futile.

Actually, victories over terrorists that pave the way to a negotiated solution of the conflict should be welcomed, but the US sees these things in a different light. Washington seems to be shifting gears on Syria again, despite the statements President Trump made earlier about the plans to pull out. Now the president has reportedly agreed to new objectives that will keep US troops on the ground in Syria indefinitely in order to ensure that the Iranian forces are driven out. The US military has just sent reinforcements to

al-Tanf to demonstrate its resolve to stay in that country. The Marines are holding a multi-day exercise there, using live ammunition.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, said on Sept. 7 that the administration viewed any government assault on Idlib as an escalation of Syria's warning that Washington would respond to any chemical attack by Damascus. Ambassador James Jeffrey, who served as a deputy national security adviser to President George W. Bush, has recently been appointed US Special Representative for Syria Engagement, and Joel Rayburn, the former senior director for Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, is now Special Envoy for Syria. The two appointments confirm the fact that the US has changed its mind and decided to remain in Syria, as both these officials had supported this policy before.

America's top military brass are studying the options for military involvement in Syria. But the real reason may not be Idlib or any other events in that country, but rather the situation creep in Iraq, where anti-Iranian and anti-government Shia protests in the south have turned violent and the prime minister may be compelled to step down. The protesters are armed and violent. They have attacked the Iranian consulate and the headquarters of Iranian-backed militias in the city.

Fighting has also been reported between Iranian forces and Kurds in Iraq's Kurdish region. Details have been provided of mortar fire in Baghdad, where protests took place in July. Something's cooking in Iraq. There is too little information available to obtain any deep insights into what's going on, but the situation is unpredictable and volatile. Iraq could soon implode. The US will not leave the region, and it needs every outpost it has there. A lot depends on how events develop in Iraq.

Idlib will ultimately be liberated. The status of the US-led

coalition forces in Syria will become a hot-button topic and be seen as the main stumbling block on the path to peace and reconstruction.