

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to take military action 'everywhere in Syria' if another Turkish soldier is killed or wounded

Direct clashes between [Turkish and Syrian troops](#) amid a Syrian government offensive in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib province are threatening to escalate into a full-blown conflict between the two neighbours and also shatter an alliance forged between Turkey and Russia.

Intent on halting the advance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to take military action "["everywhere in Syria"](#) if another Turkish soldier is killed or wounded. Earlier, he warned Syrian government forces that they have until the end of February to retreat to the limits of a previously agreed ceasefire line in Idlib.

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Turkey and Russia are simultaneously rivals and allies in different parts of the Middle East, including in Syria and Libya. Their interests align when it comes to gas supplies and weapons trade, even if they find themselves on opposite sides of proxy wars. And they both have a shared interest in defying U.S. influence in Syria.

Turkey and Russia had been working together to keep the calm in Idlib, negotiating cease-fires between the Moscow-supported Syrian government and the rebels, who are backed by Ankara. So far, talks between the two have failed to lift the impasse in Idlib.



Turkey & Syria on map/ Al Jazeera

As Syrian government forces advance with Russia's support, Turkey has refused to abandon its military posts in Idlib and has threatened to pressure Syrian forces to retreat. That has boxed Turkey into a corner and leaving it with few options but the possibility of a confrontation with both Syria and Russia.

The Idlib crisis comes as Turkey finds itself in the middle of an economic downturn and increasingly isolated internationally. In the eastern Mediterranean region, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel have reached agreements on hydrocarbon exploration that excludes Turkey. That has forced Turkey to reach widely criticized maritime and security deals with Libya's U.N.-recognized government.

Emre Ersen, an expert on Turkish-Russian relations at Istanbul's Marmara University, says Turkey and Russia were engaged in posturing, trying to "strengthen their hands" before they reach a new accord on Idlib, which he called "inevitable."

"Turkey would be loath to trigger a new crisis with Russia like in 2015," Ersen said, referring to punishing Russian sanctions after Ankara shot down a Russian warplane over Syria.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (R), and Syrian Armed Forces' chief of staff Ali Abdullah Ayyoub (L) inspecting a military parade in the Russian airbase in Hmeimim in the northwestern Syrian province of Latakia (AFP/Getty Images)

The U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War noted last week that “Russia has alternated between military and diplomatic phases in the campaign, slowing its progress, but facilitating Russian and pro-regime gains, both territorially and diplomatically.”

“Erdogan does not bluff,” said Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, director of the German Marshall Fund in Ankara. “Whenever he has threatened intervention in Syria, he has carried it through.”

Unluhisarcikli said he does not think Syria, even with its backing by Russian airpower, will be able to put up resistance against Turkey’s military, the second-largest army in NATO.

He added that Turkey may have been emboldened by recent statements from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who condemned Syrian attacks in Idlib, and James Jeffrey, the U.S.

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special representative for Syria, who visited Ankara on Wednesday and voiced Washington's support.

Erdogan's threat drew a quick rebuke from Moscow, where top officials blamed Turkey for the tensions.

It remains unclear, however, whether Turkey would risk using all its military might against Syria. Russia's military help has allowed Syrian President Bashar Assad to reclaim control of most of the country, and with the Kremlin's blessing, Assad now wants to extend his control to Idlib.

Russian officials have argued that the Syrian offensive in Idlib became necessary because Turkey has failed to honour its obligations to rein in al-Qaida-linked militants who have mounted regular attacks against the Syrian army there and also have launched raids against a Russian base in Syria.

"The exacerbation of tensions is rooted in coordinated attacks by terrorists on neighbouring regions of Syria that triggered retaliatory action by the Syrian government forces," the Russian Defense Ministry said. It charged that the militants in Idlib used civilians as shields, adding that Turkey exacerbated the situation by sending in troops and weapons.



Russian President Vladimir Putin with his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdogan

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Turkey's failure to "neutralize terrorist groups in Idlib" encouraged their attacks. "This is inadmissible," he said.

Turkey considers Idlib strategically important and is determined to maintain its military presence in the province to prevent a possible influx of refugees at its borders. The country, already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees, believes that Damascus is deliberately driving displaced Syrians toward the border as a way to punish Ankara.

There are fears that after it takes Idlib, the Syrian army will advance to Turkish-controlled "secure zones" along the border, where Turkey hopes to resettle some of the refugees.

A Turkish presence in Idlib also gives it leverage in talks on Syria's future that could potentially help minimize security threats from its southern neighbour. Turkey is also concerned that a Syrian government victory in Idlib would end U.N. and other diplomatic efforts for a political resolution of the conflict.

"Everything on the ground shows that the only obstacle in front of regime forces are the Turkish soldiers," wrote columnist Barcin Yincan in Hurriyet Daily News newspaper. "So, basically, Turkey is giving the message that it will not leave Syria, because if it were to leave Syria then it will not have a meaningful say for the future of Syria."

Assad's forces have been on an offensive for weeks to retake Idlib and parts of nearby Aleppo province, with backing from Russia and Iran.

The advance has unleashed a humanitarian crisis, with about 700,000 people fleeing their homes and surging north toward the Turkish border.

Two separate clashes between the Syrian and Turkish troops killed at least 13 soldiers on each side, including five Turkish soldiers who were killed Monday.

Pressing ahead with their advance, Assad's forces on Wednesday took the strategic M5 highway that runs through the rebel-held territory and links the capital to northern Syria, opening up supply routes.

For its part, Turkey has been massing troops in Idlib, rolling in armoured vehicles while repeatedly calling on Russia to intervene to halt the Syrian government aggression.

The Syrian army has said the Turkish threats “will not dissuade the (Syrian) army from continuing its operations in Idlib and western Aleppo province to cleanse them of terrorism.”

Turkey’s Defense Minister Hulusi Akar told The Associated Press this week that four out of dozen observation posts that Turkey set up in Idlib to monitor the cease-fire are surrounded by Syrian troops.

A Russian delegation arrived in Turkey for talks on the tensions but failed to reach an agreement on a new truce. Erdogan discussed the escalation in Idlib with Putin by telephone Wednesday, hours before he reiterated his threat to attack Syrian targets.

The Russian Defense Ministry said top military officers of Russia and Turkey discussed Idlib in a phone call Thursday. No details were released.

In his column, Yinanc said Erdogan is forcing Putin’s hand.

“Does he want to be the only power to call the shots in Syria’s future?” Yinanc asked. “The consequence of that might be a military confrontation with Turkey, which ironically currently stands as the most pro-Russian country among NATO members. Or will he accept a compromise solution whereby Turkey will continue to have a say in Syria’s future?”

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