



Turkey's Military Observation Posts in Idlib

OE Watch Commentary: Turkey has completed its 12th military post around the rebel-held Syrian province of Idlib to prevent ground attacks as part of the Astana deal with Russia and Iran to create de-escalation zones in Syria. The Turkish Armed Forces built the first post in October 2017 and eventually completed 12 posts, encircling all of Idlib. Each of these posts has one mechanized infantry company reinforced with armor. The accompanying excerpted passage, which was written for the daily newspaper *Hürriyet* by a veteran Turkish foreign policy journalist, sheds light on these posts and the role they may play in the power dynamics in Syria.

The author states that as it was agreed upon in Astana, Turkey was to build these posts on the rebel held side of the border areas and Russia and Iran were to build on the al-Assad regime-controlled side of the territory. These observation posts were to function as a security buffer zone between the rebels and the al-Assad regime forces. According to the author, this is the riskiest cross-border operation Turkey has undertaken to date, since it increases the possibility of a face-off between the al-Assad regime and the Turkish forces if al-Assad decides to go after opposition forces in Idlib. Having Iran and Russia also establish de-escalation zones could prevent a possible face-off between the Turkish army and Syrian regime forces.

According to the author, after making serious advances against the opposition in and around Damascus, and in northern Syria, the possibility of al-Assad staging an attack on Idlib cannot be taken lightly. Under the Astana accord, Russia and Iran have to prevent the al-Assad regime from staging such an operation. The author argues that “it is still useful to note, however, the possibility that the Assad regime may defy pressure from Russia and act on its own.” Since Russia and Iran have shown interest in maintaining good relations with Turkey, the possibility of al-Assad regime acting without Moscow and Tehran’s consent carries a greater risk for al-Assad. Besides, risking a potential confrontation with the Syrian Regime, the presence of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), pose challenges to Turkey. If Turkish relations with the HTS, which has been designated as a terrorist group by the United States and Russia, sours, the Turkish observation posts will be the nearest targets for the HTS and Salafists groups. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gunduz)**

“It’s possible to say that the mission of the Turkish Army in Idlib is the riskiest cross-border operation it has undertaken to date.”

Source: Sedat Ergin, “Türkiye’nin İdlib sınava asıl şimdi başlıyor, (Turkey’s actual Idlib test starts now),” *Hürriyet*, 18 May 2018. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/turkiyenin-idlib-sinavi-asil-simdi-basliyor-40840399>

Turkey with the establishment of the 12th observation post the other day in the deconfliction zone in Idlib has completed its obligation of the responsibility it took on as part of the Astana process that it started with Russia and Iran.

...TAF [Turkish Armed Forces] after establishing the first one in October [2017], within seven months has created 12 small scale military bases in this region, each of which is estimated to be in the size of an infantry unit. As we can see on the map, besides three observing posts in the north adjoining Afrin, we see that the remaining nine draw an arc coming from the north to the south, then curving southwestward to reach [the Turkish town of] Yayladağı.

According to the tripartite agreement, Turkey is to set up observation posts within the border separating the regime and the opposition. Within the framework of the agreement, Russia and Iran also have to establish similar observation posts on the side of the regime-controlled areas.

As a result, these observation posts facing each other from the two sides will form a “green zone” -like security corridor between the opposition and the al-Assad regime forces...The Russian forces also are expected to be deployed to the regime side of deescalation zone... Iran is expected to build observation posts as well...

It’s possible to say that the mission of the Turkish Army in Idlib is the riskiest cross-border operation it has undertaken to date.

A responsibility of such a scale brings a series of problems...One of the first ones is the possibility of al-Assad regime’s attack on opposition in the Idlib region....Such an operation carries the potential of a face-off between Turkish and al-Assad forces.

...a fight between the regime and opposition in Idlib will trigger a wave of migration towards Turkey.

Under the Astana agreement, Russia and Iran have to prevent the Assad regime from mounting such an operation. It is still useful to note, however, the possibility that the Assad regime may defy pressure from Russia and act on its own

...The main problem in Idlib is one of the opposition actors al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).... The responsibility undertaken by Turkey in Idlib inevitably brings up the question of how relations between Turkey and the HTS will develop.