



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (11)

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Military Dynamics in Northern Syria

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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From a Russian perspective, the outbreak of COVID-19 in May 2020 in Syria will not significantly impact the conflict. International perceptions that this epidemic would force external powers and warring camps to refocus their attention on public healthcare issues turned out to be unrealistic. So far, the main parties to this conflict seemed ready to continue their policies. However, Russia is interested in a ceasefire.

Russian reaction to the pandemic's spread in Syria

Russian officials believe that the Syrian government does not have the resources to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, the situation in government-controlled areas is not considered to be alarming. Yet, the risk of infection for Russian military personnel deployed in Syria is assessed to be high. All servicemen who return to Russia from Syria are subject to quarantine and additional testing. The greatest threat, according to the Russian military's assessments, is posed by the internally displaced persons who arrive from areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, since healthcare infrastructure in these areas is deficient. In Idlib, all Turkish vehicles that enter Syrian army-controlled territories are disinfected by Russian military personnel.¹

Initially, the outbreak of COVID-19 was perceived by the Russian military to pose a serious threat. In March, emergency measures were taken to prevent mass infection of military personnel.² Medics, specialists, and medical supplies from biological defence units were dispatched to Syria. New internal service regulations have also been introduced to prevent the spread of the virus. All military personnel are always required to wear masks and carry hand sanitizer. All equipment and vehicles returning to bases are disinfected. Russian troops also regularly disinfect airfields, barracks, and planes that return to Russia from Syria. Due to the pandemic, contact with the local civilian population in Syria has been prohibited. The distribution of humanitarian aid has been temporarily halted, although patrols, monitoring, and mine-sweeping operations continue.

The strict preventative measures undertaken combined with good physical shape of Russian military personnel has meant that the mortality rate is low. Currently, the COVID-19 epidemic is perceived by the Russian military as a nuisance, rather than a serious obstacle to their regular activities.

The complicated relationship between Russia and Turkey in Idlib and northeast Syria

The security situation in Idlib is viewed as tense, primarily because the province remains under the control of Islamist armed groups that receive support from Turkey and pose a serious

¹ Russian army disinfects Turkish vehicles that entered gov't-controlled territory in Syria, Duvar English, 12 May 2020 (accessed in 9 June 2020). <https://www.duvarenglish.com/diplomacy/2020/05/12/russian-army-disinfects-turkish-vehicles-that-entered-govt-controlled-territory-in-syria/>

² Mathieu Boulegue, How is the Russian Military Responding to COVID-19?, War on the Rocks, 4 May 2020 (accessed in 9 June 2020). <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/how-is-the-russian-military-responding-to-covid-19/>

threat to Russia. The probability of a new escalation is assessed to be high, since the militants are still very aggressive and remain uncontained by Turkey, despite the Turkish promises to Russia to neutralise the extremist groups.

Joint Russian-Turkish patrols³ do not provide enough security and do not deter the militant groups. The only importance of joint patrols is that they are a demonstration of Turkey's goodwill to continue cooperation with Russia. However, there is, so far, no open criticism by Russia about the performance of the Turkish military. The Russian military is currently satisfied with the functioning of the incident-prevention mechanism and mil-to-mil communication channels with Turkey.

For the Russian-Turkish agreement to be maintained, Turkey must demonstrate that it is able to control its proxies and suppress the more radical groups in Idlib. The minimum requirement for Moscow is that all armed Islamist groups in the Turkish controlled areas comply with the ceasefire. The Russian military privately contends that none of the agreements with Turkey prohibits fighting international terrorist groups in Idlib. However, Russia hopes that Ankara will fulfil its obligations and uproot the radicals.

According to sources close to the Russian military, Turkey only pretends to fight the Islamist militants. The Russian military does not believe that Turkey is unable to defeat the Islamist militant groups, as Ankara had previously demonstrated its military capabilities during the March fighting episode in Idlib and even threatened to destroy the Syrian army. Turkey could easily cripple the militants in Idlib, if it simply closed the border, and the problem would be solved in a period of six months. Such a closure would dry up the finances of the field commanders who would be unable to pay salaries to mercenaries. The general perception in Moscow is that Ankara is interested in protecting the Islamist groups because it can use them to leverage the situation in Syria.

Currently, Russian strategy in Idlib is not shaped by the dynamics induced by COVID-19, but rather by relations with Turkey and Europe. Russia seeks to avoid a new conflict with Turkey, so it is trying to restrain the ambitions of the Syrian government, which wants to regain Idlib by force.

The northeast of Syria is perceived to be more stable and predictable than Idlib. There are no expectations of an outbreak of hostilities. The main source of concern for Moscow and Damascus is the continued presence of the US military. Therefore, measures are being taken to stimulate the withdrawal of the American troops. Another source of concern for Russia is the

³ Turkey Rejoins Joint Russian Patrols in Syria, The Moscow Times, 18 February 2020 (accessed in 9 June 2020). <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/18/turkey-rejoins-joint-russian-patrols-in-syria-a69324>

behaviour of Turkish proxies, which were deployed in the buffer zone along the border. Russia is especially concerned with the regular disruption of the water supply to the towns and villages in Kurdish-controlled territories. Despite this, Moscow seems to be satisfied with the status quo in the northeast.

Potential scenarios for Idlib and the northeast Syria

The pessimistic scenario for Idlib involves⁴ the resumption of hostilities within a few months. The timing would depend on how long the Syrian army takes to prepare for the new campaign. The escalation may be caused by the activity of extremist groups and the unwillingness of the Turkish government to fulfil its obligations under the March 2020 agreement. However, Russia is determined to avoid a new confrontation with Turkey, therefore if Ankara enforces an efficient ceasefire, there will be no new escalation. In the northeast of Syria, Russia has adopted ‘a wait and see’ attitude. The Americans, not the Turks, remain the main target for pressure and criticism. If the situation in Idlib remains stable, and Turkey controls its proxies in the buffer zone, escalation in the northeast is unlikely within the next six months.

⁴ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, Turkish-backed group, again, cuts water supply to 460,000 people in northeastern Syria, Kurdistan 24, 22 March 2020 (accessed in 9 June 2020). <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/5fdd9539-d4c9-4219-af1a-aa73f4a3434b>