

THE FRAGILE CEASEFIRE IN SYRIA'S IDLIB WAR

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called for warring parties the world over to cease fire in order to support the bigger battle against COVID-19. One such conflict is in Syria's Idlib province involving President Bashar al-Assad's military forces with support from Russia, and where Turkey's armed intervention and backing of anti-Assad militants, including Islamist terrorists, had been halted even before Mr. Guterres's appeal by a fragile agreement on March 5 between Russia and Turkey which no observer believes can endure long. In this imbroglio, described by many as the world's greatest humanitarian tragedy, it is necessary to disentangle the priorities of the several contestants.

To first summarise the ground situation, Idlib bordering Turkey is the last stronghold of jihadists funded by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a terrorist unit designated by the United Nations, and assorted Syrian anti-government elements evacuated from areas liberated by Damascus. The region was spared a Syrian offensive in 2018 on Turkey's plea that it could not suffer any further influx of refugees besides hosting some three-and-a-half million already. There are about 200,000 displaced persons on the Syria-Turkey border and 85,000 in refugee camps, in addition to nearly 400,000 people displaced by the Turkish offensive against Syrian Kurds.

Also read | [Pause international conflicts for 30 days, France tells UNSC members](#)

A [Turkey-Russia agreement of 2018](#) established a demilitarised zone (DMZ) with terrorists, including the HTS, leaving this zone, while so-called moderate rebels had to withdraw heavy weaponry. A chain of Turkish observation posts was established, and militants rejecting the plan were to be legitimately targeted by Mr. Assad's military. But Syria and Turkey accused each other of violations, with Russia increasingly agitated due to drone attacks against its airbase in Latakia from Idlib-based jihadists. With the rebels making territorial gains, Syria resumed its offensive in April 2019, retaking territory and targeting Saraqib that strides the M5 highway connecting Aleppo with Damascus.

The Syrian advances brought Turkey and Syria into direct clashes, with accusations by Damascus and Moscow that the Turks were supplying jihadists with weapons and shielding them by intermingling Turkish forces among them. The Turks denied this, objecting to their observation posts being encircled or bypassed by the Syrian army. Over 5,000 Turkish forces, with artillery and combat drones, have intervened and suffered 50 or more casualties, whereas Mr. Assad's losses in men and material have been much higher, despite being assisted by Russia controlling the airspace and denying the Turks the use of aircraft other than drones. Moscow has also used direct air power in support of Syria, though this is denied. The conflict seriously strained Turkey's relations with Russia to their lowest level since the 2015 crisis and the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey.

The latest Russo-Turkish agreement reaffirms their 'dedication to combat and eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria'. Given the fact that the majority of the anti-Assad forces are HTS cadres that have been weaponised by Ankara, implementation appears highly improbable. The agreement provides for safe passage along the M4 and M5 highways linking Aleppo with Latakia and Damascus. The Syrian Army had gained control of M5 and was about to take M4 when the Moscow agreement was concluded. Both highways are important for Syria for commercial and strategic reasons. The new DMZ will bestride the M4 highway with a 12-kilometre strip jointly

patrolled by Turkey and Russia.

Also read | [Israel fired missile on areas near historic Palmyra: Syria](#)

The Moscow agreement is destined to fail because the priorities of the countries concerned cannot be reconciled. Mr. Assad, recognised by the United Nations but not by the West, and openly supported by few of the nations that recognise him, now controls some 70% of his country and wishes to secure the remainder, but his forces remain dependent on Russia in the air and Iran and Hezbollah on the ground. He is in haste because his troops are exhausted by nine years of continuous fighting and he cannot count on Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah support much longer. Iran is in domestic turmoil apart from suffering U.S. sanctions and COVID-19, while the Hezbollah is deeply involved in Lebanon's complex domestic politics.

Turkey under President Erdoan, nominally a member of the western alliance against Russia, wishes to play a lead role in the Arab world, and has deliberately extended its reach in Syria and Libya to have a say in the futures of those nations. Upset with NATO for lack of support both during the failed coup of 2016 and his campaign against Syrian Kurds whom he regards as anti-Turkish terrorists, Mr. Erdoan has leveraged the refugee problem to extract €4.5 billion from the European Union and uses the refugees continuously as a bargaining counter. He also needs manageable ties with both Russia and the U.S. to play each off against the other. The confrontation with Moscow four years ago led to severe economic difficulties for Turkey after Russian curbs on trade and tourism, which Mr. Erdoan would not wish to have repeated. Both countries also have a vested interest in the TurkStream pipeline conveying Russian gas to southern Europe. Criticism of Mr. Erdoan has lately emerged domestically but his position is solid provided he retains his army's support by avoiding more casualties in Idlib.

Russia is now the country of first resort in Syria and its influence in the entire West Asian region has expanded remarkably in recent years. In principle it backs Mr. Assad exercising sway over the whole of Syria and has saved him from being toppled, but it now wishes to bring the Syrian conflict to an end with a negotiated settlement, avoid losses and more expenditure, while consolidating its naval and air bases in that country.

The Americans are content to be bystanders in the belief that they will be the gainers whatever the Idlib outcome. The Europeans have neither the will nor the means to affect developments, and the United Nations is continuing the thus-far futile enterprise of persuading the Syrian multi-party talks in Geneva to arrive at a new constitution to be followed by free elections.

Krishnan Srinivasan is a former Foreign Secretary

You have reached your limit for free articles this month.

Register to The Hindu for free and get unlimited access for 30 days.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper ,crossword, iPhone, iPad mobile applications and print. Our plans enhance your reading experience.

Why you should pay for quality journalism - [Click to know more](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

Subscribe to The Hindu now and get unlimited access.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

To continue enjoying The Hindu, You can turn off your ad blocker or Subscribe to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com