

THE LAST BATTLE: ON THE IDLIB CRISIS

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

The large-scale mobilisation of troops by the Syrian government and its allies around the northwestern Idlib province, the last major opposition-held enclave, has led to speculation about an imminent attack as well as calls to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. Russia, the Syrian regime's main backer, has launched military manoeuvres in the Mediterranean region, while Syrian troops and Iran-trained militias have mobilised in the Idlib region. The government of President Bashar al-Assad says its forces will go "all the way in Idlib" to fight the jihadists. The regime, which had been on the brink of collapse in September 2015, is now firmly in control of most of the territory. Only Idlib and the Kurdish-held eastern region are outside its grasp. The Kurds, however, seek a political solution for autonomy and are not inclined towards an armed rebellion. This essentially makes the fight for Idlib the final battle of the Syrian civil war. But there are no easy solutions to the Idlib crisis. The province is mostly run by jihadists of the Tahrir al-Sham, formerly al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. There is a high concentration of foreign fighters in Idlib, including an estimated 10,000 terrorists. An all-out attack against these groups inside the province, which is home to about three million people, including a million refugees displaced from war zones elsewhere in Syria, could well trigger another humanitarian crisis.

Last-ditch talks to avert battle for Syria's Idlib

Abu Mohammad al-Golani, the former al-Qaeda leader who commands Tahrir, has said his group is prepared for war and warned rebels against any surrender deal with the regime. Besides, unlike Aleppo or Eastern Ghouta, territories which the regime recaptured using brute force, Turkey is deeply involved in Idlib. It backs one of the rebel groups and has observers on the ground. Turkey, which fears a massive refugee influx from Idlib in the event of a war, is firmly opposed to an attack. As for Mr. Assad and his Iranian backers, they cannot carry this out without Russia's help. They want Russia to offer its superior air power as well as fight diplomatic battles on behalf of Damascus. This is something Russia has done in the past. But in Idlib, Russian President Vladimir Putin faces a dilemma — he wants Mr. Assad to win, but he doesn't want to lose Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoan. The middle path is to exhaust other options before going to war. As the United Nations has suggested, the government troops should first open humanitarian corridors for civilians to move to safer locations. The UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has offered to mediate between the regime and the rebels. Moscow should give it a chance and also get Turkey involved in the process. The goal should be not just a military victory, but also a political win. After the war, Russia would want the full rehabilitation of the Syrian regime, with political and financial help from other countries. More bloodshed and atrocities against civilians will only complicate that process.

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