

Tensions Mount in Syria Regarding the Ongoing Crisis in Idlib

Tensions have escalated between Syria and Turkey in the province of Idlib, home to the last enclave of rebel fighters in the long-running Syrian revolution. Syrian government forces have recently increased their attacks on targets in Idlib, which has resulted in casualties to both combatants and civilians. Most recently, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an attack by Syrian forces. In response, Turkey struck 200 Syrian government targets, and inflicted 309 casualties on Syrian soldiers. 15 civilians were also killed when an air attack targeted a poultry farm on the outskirts of Idlib city center that was serving as a place of refuge for displaced Syrians. The airstrike was carried out by Russian forces who are in Syria to provide support to the government of Bashar al-Assad. Despite siding with Syria in its war, Russia also has close ties to Turkey, and Vladimir Putin is meeting with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Moscow this week to discuss a cessation of hostilities.

In addition to being the last bastion of rebel fighters in Syria, Idlib is also home to thousands of displaced people who fled their homes elsewhere in Syria as government forces recaptured territory. There are over 200 refugee camps in Idlib, with dozens along the Turkish border. Over 81% of the displaced people are women and children, and the camps are in poor condition due to overcrowding and suboptimal weather conditions. Many civilians who live in Idlib are now being forced out of their homes as well, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the province. Since December alone, over 950,000 Syrians have been forced to flee their homes in Idlib as Syrian forces advanced. The Syrian government broke agreements signed in 2017 and 2018 that designated Idlib as a “de-escalation zone” and civilians are now paying the price.

Turkey was being dragged back into the Syrian conflict slowly, but after its soldiers were targeted unprovoked by Syrian government forces, it has escalated its involvement. Turkey has deployed thousands of soldiers into Idlib to stem the Syrian advance, and has called for its NATO allies to help enforce a no-fly zone over the province. Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also called for a safe zone to be created along Turkey’s border for displaced people to take refuge. So far, direct confrontation between Turkish and Russian forces has not occurred, but Senator Marco Rubio warned in a tweet that the likelihood of that was “increasing by the hour.” Turkey has been reticent to be drawn into a direct battle with Russia, as the two work closely on other initiatives, and Russia’s military is much stronger. President Erdogan is due to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow this week to discuss their strategies moving forward.

The United States has verbally sided with Turkey over their stance in Idlib. Kay Bailey Hutchinson, the American Ambassador to NATO, reiterated the United States’ commitment to its NATO allies, saying she wanted to make clear that Turkey were the ones who had American support. Senator Rubio also said that President Erdogan was “on the right side” and Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Syria. Senator Lindsay Graham also supported Turkey’s plan for a no-fly zone in Syria, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo condemned the Syrian government’s attacks in Idlib. Moving forward, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin announced they had reached a “mutual understanding” on the way to move forward in Syria. In the short term, minimizing civilian casualties should be of the highest priority, and countries around the world will be watching the situation in Idlib carefully.