



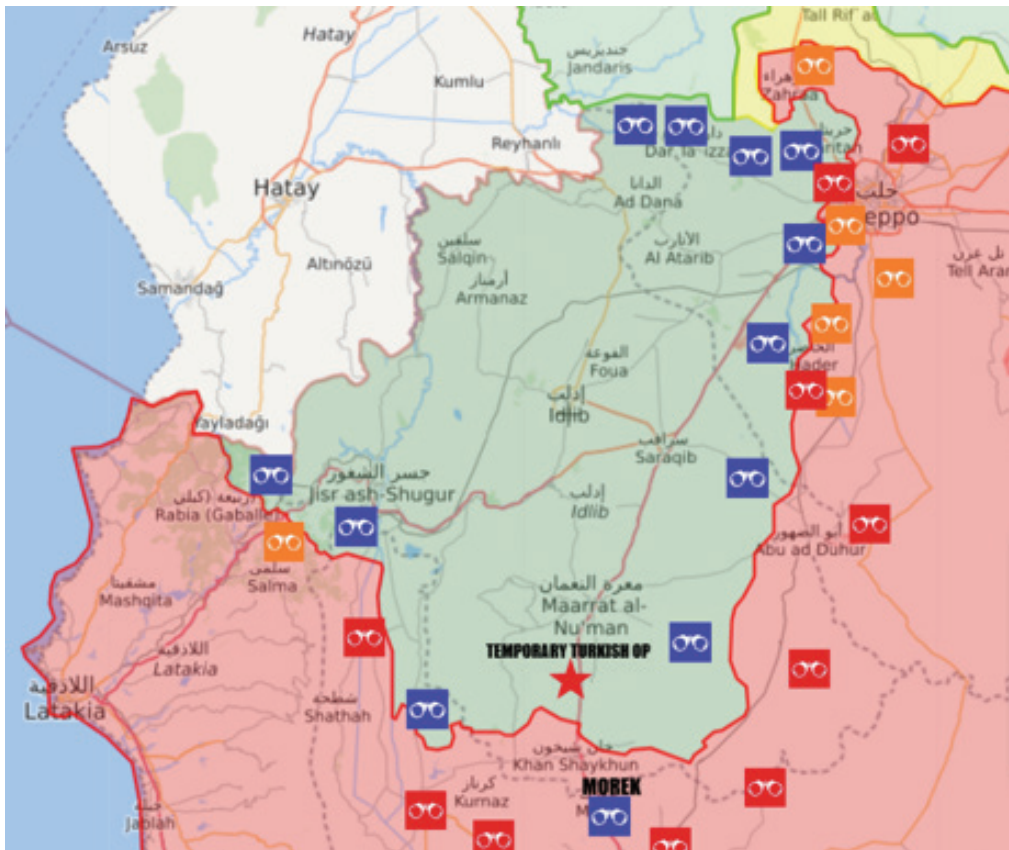
August 2019

EDAM DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE SENTINEL: IDLIB ON THE VERGE OF IMPLOSION

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Greater Idlib Region and the Turkish (Blue), Russian (Red) and Iranian (Orange) observation posts - Modified map, original from Liveuamap.com

What Happened?

On August 19th, 2019, the Syrian Arab Air Force launched an airstrike, halting the Turkish military convoy that was heading to the 9th observation post in Morek. (The observation posts around Idlib were established as an extension of the Astana process brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran). The attack took place along the M5 highway, north of Khan Sheikhun, a critical choke-point. Subsequently, Assad's forces have boosted their offensive and captured the geostrategically critical town. At present, the regime's military activities

have intensified around Maarat al-Nu'man, another M5 choke point. In the meanwhile, the Syrian Arab Army's maneuvers have effectively isolated the Turkish observation post. Furthermore, the Turkish convoy, which had been en route to Morek in the beginning, has set defensive positions in a critical location between Khan Sheikhun and Maarat al-Nu'man. The Syrian Arab Army, supported by Russian airpower, is preparing for a robust assault in greater Idlib that could exacerbate troublesome humanitarian problems.

Significance:

- The regime offensive could displace millions of people in Idlib and overwhelm Turkey's security capacity to keep Europe safe.
- Turkish forward-deployed contingents and the Syrian Arab Army's elite units are now positioned dangerously close to each other. With one mistake at tactical level, small units could escalate into an armed conflict.

Military-Geostrategic Assessment:

- As the events unfold swiftly, several tactical flashpoints have emerged in the northwestern Syrian battleground. The Turkish observation post in Morek deserves attention in this respect. Turkey's observation posts – twelve small contingents, each manned with a company-level unit, surrounding Idlib¹ – arise from the Astana process brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Thus, these contingents are essentially different from Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch control zones. The observation posts are predominantly intelligence and surveillance nodes.
 - The Syrian Arab Army has cut-off Morek's lines of communications and isolated the Turkish military contingent.
- While the troops manning the outpost have not come under any attack so far, keeping the logistics route open and the forward-deployed unit safe could pose enormous problems for Ankara. Besides, the Syrian Arab Army elements are now positioned in dangerous proximity – as close as a few hundred meters – to the outpost. At the time of writing, a small Syrian Arab Army detachment was passing by the Turkish observation post in Morek². Without a doubt, such blurring lines of contact and very dynamic battlefield parameters could translate simple mistakes or misunderstandings at the tactical level into complex political-military escalations at operational and strategic levels.



A Syrian Arab Army soldier filming himself before the Turkish observation post, Morek.³

¹ Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/info/infografik/10062>, Accessed on: August 23, 2019.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijUk4Q4eHBM>, Accessed on: August 23, 2019.

³ <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2019/23-august-syrian-army-with-the-turkish-observation-point>, Accessed on: August 23, 2019.

➤ Open source intelligence suggests that the Russian-backed Tiger Forces (Qawat al-Nimr)⁴ have carried out the Khan Sheikun offensive. This is a highly combat-ready, elite unit operating in league with Russian military advisors and close air-support. Furthermore, Turkey's official news agency (Anadolu Agency) reported that Russian private military companies Wagner and Vega have been operating alongside the Syrian Arab Army units in the Hama and Idlib campaigns⁵. In other words, the regime's attack on the Turkish convoy may not simply be a sporadic provocation, but a political-military move approved by Moscow.

➤ Having captured Khan Sheikun, the Syrian Arab Army and the Russian Aerospace Forces contingent in Syria have focused on another M5 checkpoint, Maarat al-Nu'man. However, the Turkish convoy, which was on its way to Morek at the outset of the ongoing crisis, is now stationed in Ma'ar Hattat along the M5 highway, between Khan Sheikun and Maarat al-Nu'man. Thus, notably, the Turkish convoy stands

on Assad's forces' assault route. The small Turkish military detachment dug defensive positions, while the Russian Aerospace Forces and the Syrian Arab Air Force have been carrying out airstrikes nearby.

➤ Overall, the situation is tense and can lead to an escalation. So far, the Syrian Arab Army's conducts have revealed that the operating ground units' rules of engagement (ROE) avoid direct confrontation with the Turkish forward-deployed elements. However, especially at the small unit level, flawlessly compliance with the ROE is not guaranteed at all times. The Baath regime intends to use escalatory patterns and de facto sieges to impose a *fait accompli* on Turkey's military presence in Syria. This is why Ankara signals no step back in Morek and does not voice any intention to evacuate the isolated outpost. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's hurried Moscow visit is likely to shed light on the present conundrum.

Key Judgements and Policy Recommendations:

➤ The Syrian Arab Army's Idlib offensive, especially at its later stages, significantly jeopardizes the Astana process.

➤ Assad's forces have relied on a selective deployment strategy (deploying battle-hardened, sectarian and *praetorian* formations) in critical areas of operations throughout the civil war. Considering mathematical models in military sciences⁶, it is obvious that the regime lacks the required manpower to permanently control a pre-dominantly Sunni populated province as large as Idlib. Thus, it is highly likely that the Syrian Arab Army's offensive would pursue a de-population strategy, triggering a massive influx into the Turkish territory.

➤ Airspace control is a key parameter in Syria. As the Russian Aerospace Forces contingent is in control in the west of the Euphrates, the Turkish Air Force lacks the required *marge de manoeuvre* to provide close-air-support (CAS) to the observation posts when needed. In the meanwhile,

with the Morek outpost being surrounded by Assad's forces, albeit with no direct harm to the Turkish troops, we anticipate that the Baath regime would opt for imposing a *fait accompli* on Ankara to encourage withdrawal. More critically, the regime might be after setting a precedent in Morek that it could later extend to the overall Turkish military presence in Syria.

➤ Moscow strongly backs the Baath regime's Idlib offensive which remains in line with the Russian geopolitical stance in the Syrian conundrum, namely, restoring complete territorial control over the entire civil war-torn country. EDAM's monitoring of open-source inputs concerning military activities in the province shows meaningful synchronization between the Russian airstrikes and the Syrian Arab Army's advances.

➤ Given the present situation explained hitherto, our main policy recommendation for the Turkish government is

⁴ For a detailed assessment, see: Can, Kasapoglu. Syria's 'Shogun' in the Making: Russian-Backed General Suheil al-Hassan and Future of the Syrian Arab Army, EDAM, 2018.

⁵ Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/rusyanin-astana-sureciyle-sinavi/1561160>, Accessed on: August 24, 2019.

⁶ Statistical studies in military sciences reveal that stability operations in counterinsurgency environments necessitate, as a minimum requirement, 20 troops per 1,000 inhabitants. For a comprehensive assessment of force ratio in stability operations, see: R. Royce, Kneece, et.al. Force Sizing for Stability Operations, Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010.

to effectively internationalize the Idlib crisis to prevent the Baath regime and its military from igniting a humanitarian crisis that could lead to an uncontrollable refugee influx into Turkey. Ankara should pursue diligent diplomatic efforts at the United Nations, and make it very clear (especially to the

West) that Turkey would not have any capability to digest another massive wave of refugees from Syria. Likewise, an unforeseen clash between the Turkish contingents and the Syrian Arab Army elements should be carefully averted.

Dawn Of Idlib - Timeline

- Until April 30, 2019, the Baath regime's forces and the Russian Aerospace Forces had limited their military activities in greater Idlib to airstrikes and heavy artillery shelling. Despite the demilitarized zone agreement, the presence of groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the DMZ has provided the regime with an excuse to intensify its assaults.
- On April 30, 2019, after days of heavy shelling and airstrikes, the Syrian Arab Army has staged a ground offensive in northern Hama and northeastern Latakia. The effort fell short of overcoming a chronic stalemate for about three months. Several ceasefires have been initiated by the regime, usually coinciding with high-level diplomatic talks between Ankara and Moscow. None of the ceasefires lasted long.
- On August 2nd, 2019, the regime has initiated yet another ceasefire and demanded the full implementation of the DMZ agreement. The Russian Defense Ministry specified that Turkey had 24 hours to clear the area from armed non-state groups.
- While some artillery shelling and fire exchanges were monitored, there was no heavy airstrike during the ceasefire. On August 3rd, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham announced that it would not withdraw.
- On August 5th, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces, have picked up the offensive from where they left-off. The assault was planned to simultaneously advance in both northern Hama and northeastern Latakia. However, limited gains in Latakia has inevitably shifted the focus to Khan Sheikhun and northern Hama.
- After several days of combat, the regime forces captured the village of Sukayk, east of Khan Sheikhun. In the meantime, the Syrian Arab Army continued to advance from Kafr Nabudah towards the village of al-Habit. The village seen as the last obstacle before Khan Sheikhun fell the same day.
- Having monitored the developments, on August 12th, 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces sent reinforcements to its 9th observation post in Morek.
- In the following days, the Baath regime's territorial gains continued around Khan Sheikhun. Despite some attempt from different opposition groups to counterattack, the Syrian Arab Army's offensive has carried on uninterruptedly. On August 18th, the Tiger Forces were at the western entrance of the town.
- To end the use of the M5 highway by Turkey for sending reinforcements, the regime forces stormed the hilltop of Tal Nimr on August 19th. The same day, a Su-22 attack aircraft of the Syrian Arab Air Force halted the Turkish convoy. By the end of the day, Assad's forces took control of the Tal Nimr checkpoint.
- On August 20th, 2019, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu announced that Turkey had no intention of withdrawing from its observation post in Morek.
- On August 20-21, following the withdrawal of HTS, Assad's forces have entered the town of Khan Sheikhun and seized control of its perimeters. Thus, the towns of Morek, Kafr Zayta and Al-Lataminah, as well the Turkish observation post, were encircled by the Syrian Arab Army.
- Having isolated Morek, the regime started to shift its attention to other Turkish observation posts. The Surman (the 8th outpost) observation post's perimeter was hit by airstrikes twice, on August 22nd and August 23rd.
- On August 23rd, Assad's forces have captured the towns of Kafr Zayta, Al-Lataminah and lastly Morek. Images of Syrian Arab Army elements passing by the Turkish observation post leaked to the social media.



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