

# Turkey's Idlib Predicament

25-02-2020

**Authors**

Rudaw RC

## Hussein Omer-

### Syrian Affairs Expert |

The fight that took place on Thursday (February 20, 2020) in the town of Nirab (8 km southeast of Idlib's center), gave a clear indication of the Turkish military predicament in northwestern Syria. After the attack launched by the Islamic extremist armed groups, with direct Turkish participation, on the town, the Russian warplanes intervened and thwarted the attack, left casualties, including two Turkish soldiers were killed and three others wounded, and destroyed many military vehicles. This was a clear Russian message to Turkey that it would not stand idly by on any Turkish attack on the Syrian army.

The Syrian army in its operation which was launched about a month with the Russian support regained control of more than a third of Idlib governorate, entire south and west of Aleppo governorate, including the entire M5 International Road between Aleppo and Damascus, and Aleppo and Latakia which are part of those areas retaken by Syria army.

Turkey is continue in deploying its forces in the northwestern regions of Syria (in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib), which according to some reports amounted to 15,000 soldiers with all types of heavy and sophisticated weapons, spread over 39 locations, suggest a Turkish decision to wage war with the Syrian army . But is it easy for Turkey to wage this war?

#### A different Turkish battle

The three operations that Turkey previously launched in Syria under different names (the Euphrates Shield in the areas of Jarablus and Al-Bab, the olive branch in the Afrin region, the peace spring in Sari Kani and Gre Spi) were with a green light and understandings with Russia and an American approval or a green light and understandings with America and Russian approval. Whereas, any Turkish operation in Idlib and Aleppo provinces will be not only against the Russian will, but in direct confrontation with Russia, which not only controls the airspace of the region, but also directly supervises the Syrian army's battles. Certainly, Syria would not have launched this widespread operation in Idlib and Aleppo governorates if there was not Russian decision to do so, and statements by Russian officials confirm this. It is worth noting here that this Syrian-Russian military operation was about to be launched in September 2018, but the Sochi agreement on September 17, 2018 between Russian President Putin and Turkish Erdogan, on the proposal of Erdogan to establish a demilitarized zone with an offer ranging from Between 15 and 20 km along the seam line, starting on October 15, 2018. According to the agreement Turkey by October 10, 2018, had to expel all jihadi groups and disarm them from heavy weapons in that region, and then the demilitarized zone to be observed by the Russian and Turkish police units, and withdraw of all armed actors from the region, including Tahrir al- Sham (formerly al-Nusra Front) And work to open traffic between Aleppo and Latakia via the M4 road, and between Aleppo and Hama via the M5 road before the end of 2018. However after nearly two years this agreement was not implemented, mainly due to Turkey's lack of commitment, therefore this could have justified Syria and Russia to launch the operation. Now, there is a feeling in Turkey that Russia has betrayed it and wants to extract it from the gains has achieved in the north and northwest Syria after swapping it with other three de-escalation areas. And the armed Syrian opposition groups moved out from some of the Syrian regions, including the strategic city of Aleppo. Turkey also fears that Iran and Syria, in isolation from Russian approval, may go beyond the borders of the Sochi Agreements and seek to continue military operations to retake all areas are under control of Turkey-backed armed groups, and therefore Turkey requests Russia to either stop Iran and Syria from this or not prevent them from stopping it. Any Turkey's direct and open military operation against the Syrian forces will put it face to face with Russia, which cannot abandon its control over Syria, therefore without guaranteeing field success in this confrontation, this will threaten all Turkish understandings with Russia and its gains from those understandings, including about the areas of East Euphrates,

Afrin and even other regions of northern Syria. And this confrontation will also push Russia to isolate Turkish-backed Syrian opposition and strengthen the opposition that is far from it, including the SDF, which Turkey considers its only real opponent in Syria also, will limit and reduce the Turkish role in solving the Syrian crisis and in Syria's post-political solution. These developments may lead Turkey to consider turn on America. But, in this case, its turn is from a weak position. It was remarkable when Turkey asked America to install Patriot batteries on the borders with Syria, which America would most likely reject without that Turkey at least dismantle the Russian S400 system and converting it into scrap and stored in warehouses.

### **Turkey seeks NATO help**

Experts suggest that Turkey would seek support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) if a major confrontation occurred in northwestern Syria and Russia became part of it, by calling for the activation of Article Five of the NATO Charter. But most optimists in Turkey do not expect direct military engagement from the Alliance in the face of Russia, which most members of the Alliance do not consider Russia as strategic enemy. And they do not think that Turkey is not under attack that requires the intervention of its allies, but rather Turkey is launching an attack on a sovereign and member state of the UN. Even fight alongside of Tahrir Al-Sham (formerly Al-Nasr Front), which is designated a terrorist organization by resolution of the United Nations Security Council since May 31, 2013. Even America, which Turkey may bet on its support, is unlikely to enter into an armed conflict with Russia, and is likely that America go to pressure Russia to show greater flexibility in the file of a political solution in Syria, especially since there are American-Russian understandings at a certain level. And if we know the size of the efforts, concessions and pleas made by Turkey to Russia in order to avoid the consequences of shooting down one Russian plane (November 24, 2015), we will realize the difficulty of Turkey to confront Russia militarily in Syria. In the face of these facts, Erdogan may be forced to submit to a new settlement with Putin, instead of putting himself for a fatal blow on Syrian soil.

### **The risk of new Russia-Turkey settlement at the expense of the Kurds**

When there are talks about the possibility of new settlement between Russia and Turkey, for logical reasons that come to our mind the new settlement will be at the expense of the Kurds in the region of the East Euphrates. Russia understands that the main goal of Turkey is the eastern Euphrates regions and the eradication of self-administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces. and additional Turkish forces in coordination with Russia would be additional weakening of America's influence in that region and perhaps lead to more US-Turkish tensions, and this will reduce the possibility of Turkey's distance from Russia and rapprochement with America, and it will also put more pressure on the SDF and self-administration to push them to accept the Russian-Syrian conditions for dealing with the region's file. There is already information that Russia, during its talks with Turkey, has indicated its willingness to discuss formulas of understanding on Kobani, Ain Issa and the countryside of Tel Tamr, while Turkey has focused on the Derik region and eastern Qamishlo in order to reach its oil fields and cut off the communication between western and southern Kurdistan. However, Russia has informed Turkey that this region is under American influence and cannot take decisions on it.