

Sochi Agreement: Implications on the Ground and Upcoming Challenges

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- **What does the Sochi Agreement Mean for Idlib?**
- **What are the Implications of This Agreement?**
- **What are the Challenges Facing the Sochi Agreement?**

INTRODUCTION

Despite a speculated assault by the Assad regime on opposition controlled the Idlib region, Turkey and Russia have reached an agreement that averted the attack. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the *Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib's De-escalation Zone* was signed by Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and his Turkish counterpart Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar following the Sochi summit held, in the Russian coastal city of Sochi, on September 17, 2018.

In addition to its success in averting a humanitarian catastrophe, the Sochi accord will have several implications on the ground, and will further influence the future of the Idlib region and Syria in general. Yet, this accord would face several challenges in both short and long terms.

WHAT DOES THE SOCHI MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING MEAN FOR IDLIB?

The Idlib region, which consists of the Idlib province and narrow areas of northern Hama, western Aleppo

and northeastern part of the Latakia province, has been controlled by the Syrian opposition factions since mid-2015. Since then, the region has been the final destination of ten thousands of Syrians who have been displaced due to the Syrian regime's besiege-hunger-displace strategy. The Assad regime has besieged the opposition-held zones in several parts of Syria including eastern and western Ghouta (Damascus' suburbs), northern Homs, and southern Dara province. The severe blockage had worsened the humanitarian situation in the besieged zones, and with the Assad regime's blind bombing, including the use of barrel bombs, the Syrian opposition groups and their local supporters were forced to evacuate their areas and resettle in the Idlib province.

These forced transformations of armed men and civilian IDPs have not only made Idlib as the last castle for the opposition, but they also have accumulated several problems in the Idlib region complicating the current situation further. Thus, the Idlib region represents multidimensional and accumulated problems.

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Although a de-escalation zone was created in the region in May 2017, the Assad regime and the Russian Air Forces, on occasion, continued to shell the region that led to a limited escalation. However, following the Assad regime's taking control of the opposition-controlled areas in Dara in July 2018, all eyes turned to Idlib as the speculated possible regime assault on the region seemed inevitable. The attack could result with humanitarian devastation, and could end up with uprooting the opposition from its last resort.

Following the meeting of the two heads of state, however, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in Sochi on September 17, 2018, Turkey and Russia have signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on *Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib's De-escalation Zone*." Thus, the parties decided in favor of stabilizing the de-escalation zone and agreed upon avoiding the Syrian opposition-controlled Idlib region from a very much speculated military attack.

The agreement signed between Russia and Turkey came after intensive communications through diplomatic channels and firm moves of the Turkish side on the ground. It helps in saving the region, a home of more than three million Syrians, among them 1.2 million thought to be IDPs, who have been forced to resettle in Idlib due to the Assad regime's intense military operations. It also guarantees a living space for the Syrian opposition. An important step in untangling the multi-problematic Idlib node, the signed MoU will have various implications. Yet, it still faces many challenges as the devil still there in its details.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCHI ACCORD?

The de-escalation zone had been created in Idlib on May 7, 2017 as part of the Astana process launched by Turkey and Russia. Hence, the MoU is built on the idea of the stabilization of and emphasizes the need for maintaining the de-escalation zone and the preservation of the status-quo in the region. To do so, the two sides agreed on establishing a de-mil-

itarized zone preserved by joint patrols. The MoU, furthermore, states that the traffic on the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and the M5 (Aleppo-Hama) will be restored by the end of 2018. Hereby, the Sochi MoU does not only aim to avert the possibility of a military assault on Idlib and maintain the status quo, but also affects the future of the Idlib region by easing the congestion in Idlib and reconnecting the region to other parts of the Syrian territory.

Moreover, the Sochi MoU will prevent any possible assaults of the Assad regime, provide a living space for millions of Syrians and the opposition factions; marginalize extremist groups in favor of the moderates, normalize the Syrian opposition, and integrate the Idlib region to the Syrian territory in social and economic terms.

Despite of the speculated assault of the Assad regime on the Idlib region and regardless of the reported regime enforcement, the Sochi summit succeeded in preventing the attack and its catastrophic consequences. Had the speculated attack happened, it would have generated new waves of refugees; they would not have stopped on the Turkish borders but would have gone beyond to hit the European countries, which already have been suffering the refugee problem. Furthermore, the attack would have resulted in huge human casualties in an area which already experienced a lack of essential human needs and which its infrastructure and facilities including hospitals have severely damaged.

On the other hand, the speculated attack on the Idlib region would not only have had catastrophic humanitarian consequences, but also would have created serious political implications on the Syrian crisis –particularly on the Syrian opposition's role in the upcoming stages of the crisis. Being forced to gather in the Idlib enclave, besides its presence in the operation fields of the Euphrates Shield (Jarablus and al-Bab regions) and the Olive Branch (Afrin region), the Syrian opposition would have faced with an existential threat. Besides, if a possible regime assault had been supported by an intense Russian bombardment, it would have uprooted the opposition from its last resort. Apparent-

ly, the Sochi accord has successfully kept the opposition, as an actor, in the equation of the Syrian crisis.

On the ground, the MoU emphasizes the need for Turkish-Russian cooperation in combating terrorism in Syria and the determination of the two parties to do so. In plain language, the two parties have agreed that radical groups will be removed from the demilitarized zone in Syria. Turkey has already taken several steps to weaken radical groups in the Idlib region and bring moderate Syrian military opposition groups together under the same umbrella. In fact, the establishment of the Syrian National Liberation Front came in this context¹.

The weakening of radical groups and terrorist-classified organizations, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, will come in favor of strengthening the position of more moderate opposition groups, most of whom are backed by Turkey. However, this equation will work only if the ceasefire holds and the maintained security creates positive impact on local people. Otherwise, the escalating situation will strengthen public empathy towards radical groups and support their discourse. Thus, the demilitarization process will purport as a process in favor of the Assad regime only.

While contributing to weakening the position of radical groups in Idlib, the Sochi MoU and its consequences may also lead to downsize the opposition military faction, ‘normalize’ their position towards the Syrian regime, and the Syrian crisis as a whole. At the end of the day, the demilitarized zone between the opposition-held area and the regime side will operate as a buffer zone between the two sides. Hence, the opposition factions need to revisit their final goal and their political ambitions; take a step back from toppling down the Assad regime to preserve their position in the Idlib region; thus, maintain a say in the upcoming constitution drafting processes and elections afterwards.

This ‘normalization’ of the Syrian opposition comes in parallel with the ‘reintegration’ of the Idlib

1 Can Acun and Bilal Salaymeh, *Suriye Krizinde Yeni Safha: Idlib*, SETA Analizi, Ağustos 2018.

region within the Syrian context, as the Sochi MoU proposes. The MoU calls for the restoration of the main highways crossing the opposition-controlled Idlib region towards the areas under the Assad regime’s control by the end of 2018. The question of reviving M4 & M5 routes was already brought into discussion in the 9th Astana negotiation round in May 2018,² yet no concrete steps were taken to this end.

The reviving of M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) highways will reintegrate the region socially and economically to other parts of the Syrian territory controlled by the Syrian regime. The two highways have not been functioning since the opposition took control of the region, which has impacted the integrity of the Syrian territory and weakened the regime’s claims of sovereignty. Thus, restoring the two highways has been a demand of the Assad regime³ and would predictably follow with another request from the regime’s side to maintain the security of these two roads by the regime-affiliated security forces, and later, to restore the Syrian regime’s control on the border gates.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FACING SOCHI ACCORD?

The Sochi MoU will not only have an impact on the future of the Idlib region, but also on the entire Syrian equation, and therefore, the political process of the Syrian crisis. The MoU promises stability and safety of the region and the region’s inhabitants, but still facing several challenges in the short and the long terms.

In the short term, the establishment of the demilitarized zones and the question of the ‘de-radicalization’ seem to present the most serious and complicated challenge. Although Turkey managed to maintain the demilitarized zone⁴ on the ground by October

2 Al-Sharq al-Awsat, “*Fateh Tariq Halep-Dimashq ‘al Tawelet Astana 9*,” 13 May 2018, <https://goo.gl/JGeqRR>.

3 “*Fateh Tariq Halep-Dimashq ‘al Tawelet Astana*,”

4 Reuters, “*Demilitarized zone around Syria’s Idlib set up, Turkey says*,” 10 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/demilitarized-zone-around-syrias-idlib-set-up-turkey-says-idUSKC-N1MK1UP>.

10, 2018, challenges remain from then on. Among the very challenges will be the dealing with extremist groups, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Hurras al-Din (pro al-Qaeda HTS off-shoot) and the question of foreign fighters, which has a long-term impact as well. On the other side, Russia has to keep a tight rein on Shiite and pro-regime militias.

The pressure put on extremist group, such as HTS, and the 'de-radicalization' attempts have the risk of being counter-productive. Imposing military or political pressure on groups, HTS and the likes, could lead to uncontrollable breaking up of the group, and the emergence of more radical groups from within, as in the case of Hurras al-Din. The ongoing internal dynamics of the HTS would suggest such a possible result⁵.

Thus, this process of weakening and de-radicalization should be carried out slowly and gradually; otherwise, it will be a time-consuming process. However, this does not mean that Turkey would not apply limited military and security operations targeting spoiler extremist groups. The asking for a fast uprooting of the radical members in Idlib via military measures may lead to regeneration of new radicalized versions, the pattern which has been seen in the post-2003 Iraq and elsewhere.

On the other hand, the majority of foreign fighters have pocked one way ticket and 'currently' they have no chance to go back to their country of origin. Some of them have settled in Syria with their families constituting kind of community, e.g. the Turkistan Islamic Party and its followers. Hence, the attempt to uproot them via military measures would open doors for more radicalization trends and they would engage in long-term guerilla warfare that threatens the security of the region and jeopardizes any attempt to install any political regime. Thus, there is a need to have creative measures at the societal level to deal with those foreign fighters in order to rehabilitate them as much as possible.

5 Arabi 21, "*al-Jawlani be-ikhtibaren Sa'eb...*," 4 October 2018, <https://goo.gl/AQEXPq>.

Last but not the least remaining challenge of the Sochi accord is on the long term. It will continue to shape the developments on the ground. That is varying/differing intentions and continuously repelling interests of Turkish and Russian sides that affects both parties' perspectives and expectations from the MoU. What would foster this repelling on the ground is that the MoU is undetailed and open to various interpretations. For instance, the determination of exact lines of the demilitarized zones is kept for further consultations while radical groups were not defined as well. The question of how to deal with terrorist and extremist groups will be another matter of contest between the two parties.

The details, which beg further consultations and the ultimate purpose of the MoU may lead to disagreements that jeopardize the agreement in any stage. This uncertainty perceived with suspicions by the opposition factions, who recalled the previous agreements that neither the Assad regime nor Russia stays committed to. Therefore, genuine and trust-building steps are needed between the parties on the ground.

On the one hand, the Russian side seems to see the Sochi agreement simply as a step to reintegrate the Idlib region with the regime-controlled territory with the least military and political cost. Thus, Russia seems to hold in hand the option of a future assault on Idlib. This intention was clear with the statement of President Putin: "Russia reserves the right to help Damascus 'eliminate terrorists' in Idlib in case of provocations."⁶ The Syrian regime also shares this intention since Assad says that Idlib deal is a 'temporary measure.'⁷ On the other hand, the Turkish side sees the agreement as a guarantee for the Turkish role in reshaping the situation in Syria as well as a guarantee for the Syrian opposition and the demands of the Syrian people to have a place

6 Sputnik, "Putin: Russia Reserves Right to Help Damascus Contain Terror Threat in Idlib". 27 October 2018, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201810271069279009-purin-russia-syria-idlib/>.

7 Middle East Eye, "Syria's Assad says Russia-Turkey Idlib deal 'temporary measure,'" 7 October 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrias-assad-says-russia-turkey-idlib-deal-temporary-measure-1851857902>.

in the future Syria. Turkish position was very clear in President Erdoğan's statements on October 4, 2018: "We will leave Syria to its owners after they hold their elections."⁸

CONCLUSION

The Sochi agreement presents an important landmark in the unfolding Syrian crisis; its impact will exceed the Idlib region and go beyond; it will affect the whole

8 Reuters, "Turkey will not leave Syria until Syrian people have an election, Erdogan says," 4 October 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkey-will-not-leave-syria-until-syrian-people-have-an-election-erdogan-says-idUKKCN1ME250>.

course of the crisis. Despite the relative and current success of the agreement, mainly in averting a humanitarian catastrophe, the Sochi agreement may present various challenges in the short-term –particularly because of the spoilers on the ground and of the uncertainty in the details.

Yet, the main challenge of the agreement in the long-term could be varying Russian and Turkish perspectives on the future of the region; thus, the ability of the two parties to deal and manage their differences. Therefore, it is vital to bring more international shareholders on board to strengthen the Sochi agreement and minimize the possibility of its collapse.



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