

# Idlib, Syrian Decentralization and U.S. Withdrawal

**Leonid M. Issaev & Andrei Zakharov**

The end of 2018 was deeply eventful for Syria. Among other developments, in the wake of efforts by Russia, Turkey and Iran, the main guarantors of the negotiation process on Syria, to give renewed impetus to the work of the Constitutional Commission in Geneva, Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of American troops from Syrian soil. However, the first months of the new year also present us with a good opportunity to look at the situation in Syria from a different angle. In particular, we can look at it from the point of view of the Russian–Turkish agreement on Idlib, which was signed in September 2018 in Sochi.

## **Mutual Benefits**

First of all, from the point of view of the authors of this document, all necessary conditions had been created by the end of 2018 for Idlib to become finally a zone free from hostilities. It is appropriate to remember that following a meeting held on September 17, the defense ministers of Russia and Turkey signed a memorandum on stabilizing the situation in the de-escalation zone of Idlib. In this document, the two countries agreed to create by October 15 a demilitarized zone to a depth of 15–20 km along the line of contact between the armed opposition and government troops and to ensure the withdrawal of radical militants from the area. In addition, by October 10, both parties were to be obliged to carry out “the withdrawal of heavy weapons, tanks, rocket launchers, and mortars of all opposition groups from this zone”. At the same time, control over the demilitarized zone was supposed to be enforced by the Russian military police and Turkish patrols, and to fully carry out this task, the forces of the joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish Coordination Center were to be strengthened. The parties also agreed to restore transit traffic along the M5 Aleppo-Hama and M4 Aleppo-Latakia highways no later than the end of 2018.

However, the parties failed to achieve these anticipated results in a timely manner. The last time they were mentioned by Russian President Vladimir Putin was during a meeting with Turkish President Recep Erdogan on the margins of the G-20 summit in Buenos Aires in December 2018.<sup>1</sup> The Russian leader then once again noted that provocations against the Russian military were continuing from the territory of Idlib despite the fact that the agreements had been in place for several months.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the status quo established after the signing of the memorandum on September 17, in spite of all its flaws, generally suited both the Russian and the Turkish sides.

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The main beneficiary of the treaty is, of course, Ankara. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan not only managed to secure his own image as the only strong actor still able to defend the interests of the Syrian opposition, but Ankara has actually managed to maintain its influence in Syria, which was expected to significantly weaken with the start of a full-scale military operation in Idlib. At the same time, however, the results of the Sochi talks are fully in the interests of the Russian leadership which, despite the unrestrained bellicose rhetoric, is also interested in avoiding large-scale hostilities in the last rebellious province left in Syria.

The value of these arrangements for the Kremlin is determined by three circumstances. First, the agreements in Sochi have allowed them to avoid another Russian–Turkish clash in Syria. The risk of confrontation with Turkey had loomed given Ankara’s intention to go all-in if the decision to invade Idlib was made by the Russian side. This was indirectly confirmed by the permanent increase in the number of Turkish soldiers at observation posts in Idlib. Secondly, the beginning of a full-scale operation in Idlib would likely lead to another provocation using chemical weapons, as evidenced by warnings from both the regime and the opposition. If this had happened, Moscow would again have suffered reputational losses, regardless of who was behind the action. The Kremlin, which has still not recovered its reputation from the Salisbury scandal, is absolutely not interested in reviving the “chemical weapons” theme. Finally, given the underlying difficulties in the relationship between Moscow and Damascus, one must bear in mind that the Russian side is not too interested in the transfer of Idlib to the control of the Syrian regime. Of course, this would solve the problem of the security of the Russian military bases, which, according to Sergey Lavrov, are under constant attack by militants based in Idlib.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, the seizure of the rebellious province would be a big challenge to the Astana process – the loss of an effective instrument through which Moscow managed to impart at least some legitimacy to its actions in Syria. If Idlib fell, the Kremlin would lose its mediator role, and instead of discussing the military aspects of the crisis, the Russian leadership would have to deal with reconstruction issues, an area in which it feels extremely insecure.



The last visit of Bashar Al-Assad to Tehran in February 2019 may serve as indirect confirmation of this. According to a number of sources,<sup>4</sup> it should be interpreted as a response from the government of Syria and Iran to Russia's conciliatory position on Idlib in which, although it periodically strikes at the Syrian province, it is still interested in maintaining the established status quo. As a result, despite the Turkish–Russian agreements on the Syrian north-west, Iran and Syria are continuing to prepare for a military operation in Idlib.

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It is worth remembering that the president of the United States, Donald Trump, speaking at a meeting of the UN Security Council on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, thanked Russia, Iran and Syria for the fact that at his request, they had stopped their attack on Idlib province.<sup>5</sup>

### **Prologue to Decentralization?**

It is important to emphasize that the Russian–Turkish Idlib agreement entails not only a military, but also a political dimension. By negotiating a special status for the rebellious province, the leaders of Russia and Turkey involuntarily took another step towards the possible federalization of Syria. A federation as a form of government allows the existence of different political and legal regimes in the territory of the same state, authorizing individual territories to enjoy special powers and special rights within the framework of a federal union.<sup>6</sup>

As a rule, the status of a region within a federation is dictated by its ethnic, linguistic or religious profile. At the same time, there is no exhaustive list of such grounds, and this means that ideological and political differences may also serve as a criterion for federal disengagement. In other words, the signing of a memorandum on Idlib could lead to the establishment of a semi-autonomous political entity on the territory of Syria which, being extremely isolated, does not leave the structure of the Syrian state, but coexists with it inseparably. A solution of this type might be regarded as another step towards the forced federalization of Syria, which, based on the requirements of the moment, would rely not only on ethnic or religious, but also on political principles in forming constituent parts of a federal union.<sup>7</sup>

It is also significant that the situation mentioned above would strengthen the internal impulses towards decentralization, which are now most actively supported by the Kurds. Today, they remain almost the only force in Syria that is interested in the dispersal of power and that openly declares this interest. To impose federalization from the outside on Damascus, especially after its military victories in recent months, would be almost impossible, but the Kurds believe they are capable of forcing the regime to undergo such a transformation from the inside. They do not consider the option of complete independence due to a number of internal and external reasons: the possession of broad powers within Syria would suit them much more. This is confirmed by the latest negotiations between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian government regarding the creation of a “roadmap” for a future decentralized Syria.



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Despite the fact that the Syrian regime has de facto won the civil war, its resources (especially military) do not look limitless. This, in turn, requires entry into a process of negotiation with its opponents, and principally the Kurds. Of course, this does not mean that the chances of the Kurds to obtain a broad degree of autonomy (such as in Iraqi Kurdistan) are high. However, on a number of issues, the Kurds can rely on a redistribution of power between the center and the periphery.

There is, however, one question: is it all not too complicated? Wouldn't it be easier, instead of trying to "sew together" what seems incompatible, to accept the option of full political self-determination for everyone – that is, their independence? This option, however, is blocked for Realpolitik reasons. In the Syrian case, it is impossible to imagine the sovereign existence of not only Kurdish regions of the country, but also the opposition Idlib. However, this immediately leads to another question: is the Syrian experiment unprecedented and has something like this ever been tried in the world? We can answer this question in the positive.

Sophisticated federations of the type described above have formed after bloody civil conflicts, as evidenced, in particular, by the experience of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>8</sup>. After the bloody war of the 1990s, the international community imposed on this former fragment of Yugoslavia a regime in which the lines

of national, religious and political demarcation, intersecting each other, do not interfere with the preservation of a single state as a whole. The federal center in this structure has very narrow powers, but due to the complex configuration of interests and contradictions inherent to the participants of this association, as well as the preservation of elements of external control over it (above all, the unlimited mandate of the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina), its integrity has been effectively maintained.

A similar path seems to be open to Syria. The components of a future Syrian decentralization may differ from each other not only in ethnic or religious terms, but also politically, and the balance between them can be maintained with the participation of external actors interested in resolving the Syrian conflict. In view of the marked increase in the fortunes of the al-Assad regime and the position of Tehran in Syria, support from external forces will become a guarantee of survival for the remnants of the Syrian opposition, as well as for the Syrian Kurds. Despite the rarity of federative structures of this type, such a decision would keep Syria within its present borders and contribute to the harmonization of heterogeneous parts of a post-conflict state. Of course, for its implementation it will be necessary to solve many issues particular to the country, but with the political will, these obstacles would not be insurmountable.

### **External Players**

However, for the implementation of this scenario, the position of external actors – primarily Russia and Turkey – acting as guarantors of the de-escalation process in Idlib, is important. Despite the fact that the Russian and Turkish leaders are still interested in the implementation of



the Sochi Memorandum, its provisions still require further co-ordination. This is primarily due to the need to specify the details of this agreement. The leaders of Russia and Turkey spoke about this in Sochi in September 2018, immediately after the signing of the memorandum. At that time, Moscow and Ankara paid attention to the fact that, in its current form, the document first of all expresses the intention of the parties to solve the Idlib problem by diplomatic means, rather than proposing a detailed plan for resolving the situation in northwest Syria.

***How might the proposed withdrawal of U.S. troops affect this scenario? Unfortunately, we have to admit that it creates new risks, both for the situation around Idlib and for the project of Syrian federalism as a whole***

In this regard, the parties have yet to develop a concrete plan of action for the implementation of the provisions of the Sochi Memorandum. This is for example the disengagement of the opposition and the militants from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) or ensuring security on the M4 and M5 highways. Even if Turkey is able to convince HTS and other “radical” groups to withdraw from the demilitarized zone, it might have trouble securing the M4 and M5 highways. About 200 km of both roads run through opposition-controlled areas, which would not be included in the demilitarized zone.<sup>9</sup>

The need to develop a more detailed plan for resolving the situation in Idlib was also discussed during a meeting of the foreign and defense ministers of Russia and Turkey, as well as the heads of the intelligence services of both countries, held in Moscow on September 29, 2018. In terms of the outcome of this meeting,

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that “an understanding was reached on how the military representatives of Russia and Turkey on the ground will continue to coordinate their steps in the new conditions with a view to the final eradication of the terrorist threat in Syria.”<sup>10</sup> However, the further course of negotiations on Idlib, the reconfiguration of forces in the country, as well as the redistribution of power between the center and the regions will also be influenced by the decision of Donald Trump to withdraw American troops from Syria.

How might the proposed withdrawal of U.S. troops affect this scenario? Unfortunately, we have to admit that it creates new risks, both for the situation around Idlib and for the project of Syrian federalism as a whole. This is due primarily to the fact that the withdrawal of the United States from Syria will immediately entail the weakening of their main allies the Syrian Kurds, who now control more than a fifth of the country’s territory. Of course, a change in the strategic balance will open up new temptations for the Turkish leadership – and, succumbing to them, President Erdogan may launch a new military operation in Kurdish parts of Syria. With such a turn of events, Russia’s position regarding Idlib is likely to change, since giving unconditional license to the Turks is hardly included in its plans. It may abandon previous agreements on creating a special zone in Idlib, instead proposing to President al-Assad to solve the Idlib problem in his own way. But this, in turn, will be unacceptable for President Erdogan, who positions himself as the reliable patron of some of the moderate oppositionists. With certain nuances, such a scenario would in any case lead to a renewed escalation.



## Endnotes

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Leonid M. Issaev** (PhD in Political Science) is currently an Associate Professor at the Department for Asian and African Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Saint Petersburg. He is the Deputy Chair of the Laboratory for Sociopolitical Destabilization Risk Monitoring at the National Research University Higher School of Economics and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for African Studies, which is part of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He is a member of the Scientific Council of the Russian Political Sciences Association (RPSA). He teaches courses in Islamic political philosophy, Political culture in the Middle East, and political systems and political processes in the Arab World.

**Andrei Zakharov** (PhD in Philosophy) is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of History, Political Science, and Law at the Russian State University of Humanities. The area of his research is comparative federalism, on which he has published several books. He is an editor of “Neprikosnovenny Zapas: Debaty o Politike i Kulture” (Neprikosnovenny Zapas: Debates on Politics and Culture) magazine, one of the leading intellectual periodicals in Russia. From 1990–1995 he served as a Member of Russian Parliament.

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**Address:** Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6  
No:68 Postal Code: 34197  
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey  
**Telephone:** +902126031815  
**Fax:** +902126031665  
**Email:** info@sharqforum.org

**sharqforum.org**



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