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Dr. Said Elhaj



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64  
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: [info@eis-eg.org](mailto:info@eis-eg.org)



## Turkey's Complicated Calculations in Idlib

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Since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011 and over the past six years, the Turkish position from the Syrian issue has evolved and changed according to three factors: the situation on the ground in Syria, the international position, and the Turkish internal situation. In fact, the international community at first viewed the events in Syria as a 'popular movement', then as a 'revolution', and after that as an 'armed revolution'. However, the world have recently looked at the events in Syria as a 'civil war', and finally as 'war on terrorism'.

According to these factors and others, the Turkish approach to the Syrian issue shifted from calling for reforms during the first months of the Syrian revolution to calling Bashar Al-Assad to step down after he adopted a security solution against Syrian people, to accepting a political solution based on Al-Assad's departure, then to Operation Euphrates Shield, and finally to Astana peace talks.

### First: Changes in the Turkish position on Syria:

It is difficult to say that Ankara deals with the Syrian issue as one package. In fact, Turkey's approach in this regard is closer to dealing with semi-separate files, each with its own circumstances, factors, actions, weight and effects. For example, the Turkish government deals with the files of Afrin, Manbij, and Idlib separately but under a clear priority to confront the Kurdish political project in northern Syria, and also on the basis of a political solution within the framework of Astana peace talks and the agreement on de-escalation zones.

As for Idlib, Turkey has got several considerations:

- 1- Idlib is controlled by forces of the Syrian 'opposition' in principle.
- 2- It is home to about two million people, and it is adjacent to the Turkish border.
- 3- It is the focus of both the regime and the U.S.-backed Kurdish organizations.
- 4- It is the last important zone awaiting the implementation of the de-escalation zones agreement.



In fact, these factors complicate the Turkish calculations about Idlib to a large extent, especially under the U.S. reassuring signals. Brett McGurk, the senior US envoy to the international coalition for fighting ISIL has recently said that Idlib province had become “the largest Al-Qaeda safe haven,” suggesting that Ankara contributed to the rise of Al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria’s Idlib province. “And Idlib now is a huge problem. It is an Al-Qaeda safe haven right on the border of Turkey. So that’s something, obviously, we will be in very close discussions with the Turks on,” McGurk said. In fact, this was viewed as a signal that the United States might be arranging a military operation in Idlib after Raqqa, also through Kurdish organizations, which is a matter of great concern for Turkey.

Moreover, McGurk’s remarks refer to an implicit accusation to Turkey of supporting or at least tolerating "terrorism", although Washington later shyly backtracked on these remarks after Ankara's protest. Therefore, Turkey may need to do something in the face of the Levant Liberation Board, which has control over Idlib, to refute the suspicion of ‘supporting terrorism’, which, of course, has so many risks.

On the other hand, it is clear that Turkey's delay or postponement of its military operation in Afrin against the Democratic Unionist Party (PYD) was due to the lack of agreement with Russia on the whole operation or on some of its details. Hence, there were media reports that Moscow had asked Ankara to postpone Afrin military operation until the Idlib issue is solved, within the de-escalation zones agreement.

## Second: Turkish options on Idlib

Ankara appears to have three main options towards Idlib; each has its own challenges, obstacles and consequences.

### Option 1: Avoiding confrontation

To spare the region a wide-range military operation is a pure Turkish interest and Ankara's best option. Averting a military operation would protect the city and its inhabitants from a fate similar to Mosul or Raqqa. Moreover, this would also spare





Turkey a major wave of immigration, and keep the area away from the threat of being controlled by the regime or the Kurdish organizations.

This option requires the withdrawal of the Levant Liberation Board from the scene completely to refute the pretext of ‘counter-terrorism’, and transfer power in the province to a civilian administrative authority under Turkish auspices - or according to an agreed mechanism – similar to the model of the Euphrates Shield areas.

However, this option directly clashes with the possible response of the Levant Liberation Board, the fate of the organization its members in the future, as well as the U.S. and Russia’s conviction that this plan is effective enough to rule out any possibility of intervention, which is probably a matter of pre-decision, rather than a substantive conviction.

## Option 2: Turkey's intervention in Idlib

Turkey's intervention in Idlib could be helpful in refuting the suspicion of supporting "terrorism" and blocking any intervention by the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces or the Russian-backed Assad forces. Moreover, this would help to keep the region under the control of the Turkish-backed opposition ahead of any negotiated solution – where areas of control on the ground would be one of the most important strengths and determinants.

However, this option seems difficult and challenging due to:

- a) The province’s population density,
- b) The risk of putting Turkey under the threat of possible terrorist attacks in retaliation for targeting the Levant Liberation Board in Idlib,
- c) The mental image that could be shaped that Ankara intervenes in “opposition-controlled areas” upon a U.S. or Russian decision.

## Option 3: Swapping Afrin for Idlib

Allowing the U.S. to launch a military operation in Afrin is an option that Ankara could be prompted to activate - although it does not prefer it – to prevent a U.S. intervention in Idlib (through its allied Kurdish forces) – an option which could have disastrous consequences.



## Finally:

Although Turkey seems to have many options, yet these options are limited in reality, and largely linked to the positions of the major powers. However, when there are immediate and severe threats to its national security, Turkey makes its own decision in isolation from any understandings or coordination with the other parties, an option Ankara does not wish to be forced to adopt whatever its consequences were.

