

Experts and Syrian Actors Discuss the Options in Idlib after the Ankara Summit

The Syrian Dialogue Center held a focus group in the Turkish region of Hatay on the borders with Syria, where a group of civil, political and military experts and activists discussed the available options in the Governorate of Idlib.

The focus group presented the military, service and political reality of Idlib, options that could help strengthen the region in the face of any future Russian campaign, and also discussed the repercussions the declaration of a constitutional committee could have on the field, The focus group also aimed to shed light on the human side and the situation of displaced persons, and the available means to confront the humanitarian crisis.

The focus group was attended by politicians and military commanders, in addition to the managers of humanitarian organizations working in the region.

This report presents snapshots of the most prominent topics discussed during the focus group under the following main titles:

The Military Reality and Possible Solutions:

A military commander, according to what he saw as the reality on the ground, pointed to how the steadfastness in the face of the Russian campaign during the last offensive was not impossible, despite the gap in possibilities and power. He also posited part of the losses that happened last August were partially political, as the fighters started to be distracted from their focus on the battlefield by the international negotiations and the possibility of reaching a ceasefire.

The commander asked all of the participants active on the ground to move to stop Russia from a conclusive military victory and to prevent their operations as much as possible, confirming that the loss of Idlib would necessarily mean the fall of the northern countryside of Aleppo and the Afrin region.

The commander was of the opinion that the best available options to confront the renewed Russian offensive was to simultaneously open several fronts, the first being in the Latakia countryside, the second in the southern countryside

of Idlib, and third towards the Aleppo governorate, considering that moving on several fronts would confuse Russia and the regime whose plans are not extensive, but rather connected to the ground reality and could be obstructed.

A military expert and former officer cautioned that Russia and the Syrian regime would complete their attack and want to reach to the border region with Turkey, which forces the military resistance to intensively work on engineering fortifications for future combat. He also pointed out that the control of Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham over the reality on the ground and sensitive points makes the situation more complicated and effectively results in obstructing several factions from fighting the regime.

The expert called for there to be a separation between the political maneuverings to delay the Russian offense and the military path to inevitable escalation.

The expert confirmed that what is now currently happening in Idlib has no relation to the Astana agreement, but rather the result of the agreement between the participants in the Sochi summit in 2018 and until today, as the agreements stipulated several conditions for Idlib to avoid war: the opening of international crossings, solving extremist organizations, and shared Turkish-Russian patrols.

The military expert advised the military factions and defense ministers in the interim Syrian government to work to create a foothold in Idlib, whether through entering new groups or by getting the “National Front for Liberation” to merge with the Ministry of Defense, as that would help out-manuever Russia.¹

Dealing with the Excuse of Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham:

The attendees all agreed that Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham represents a domestic and foreign predicament for the forces of the Syrian Revolution, and several ideas on how to deal with it were presented.

¹ The focus group was held before the Declaration of the Ministry of Defense in the Interim Syrian Government of the National Front for Liberation’s Merger with the Syrian National Army.

A number of those present were of the opinion to put off dealing with the issue until the future of the region became clearer, as the priority currently is to repel the Russian campaign, as it seems there is currently no international decision to finish off Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham.

However, some others were of the opinion that finding a solution to the issue of HTS strengthens the steadfastness of Idlib, considering a policy of shedding Russia of all justifications, and because internally HTS is an obstacle blocking the military efforts of the factions to stand against the campaign, as it controls all of the financial resources and is not employing them in the current battle, as well as executing a number of incomprehensible retreats from Tal Sakher, Hobait and Talat Al-Nimr near to Khan Sheikhoun, which allowed Russia and the Assad forces to advance forward.

From within the group that saw the priority of solving the issue of HTS was a military expert specialized in Jihadist groups, who confirmed the necessity of the military and negotiations tracks marching in symphony. He suggested making HTS fight the rest of the extremists such as Daesh and the Al-Qaeda affiliated Hurras Al-Din, as there is a Russian-American agreement that the danger existing in Idlib is represented in the “Incite the Believers” operations rooms that include Hurass Al-Din and Ansar Al-Tawhid, as Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham showed its responsiveness in the past in international summits in which Turkey took place in, except for a small current remaining inside it.

A researcher in Islamic groups suggested to prepare the environment to work on the Hayet Tahrir Al-Sham issue, which in his opinion, would be done through establishing a central and solid power with Turkish supervision and training which would be able to move without air cover to end the HTS issue, simultaneously with an attempt to merge the moderate Syrian elements in national formations and security deals with foreign leaders.

The Constitutional Committee and its Reverberations on the Ground:

There are diverse evaluations of the issue of the declaration of the Constitutional Committee, as a number of the researchers considered it have resulted from the Astana process which was founded to serve Russian military operations, and considered the recent Constitutional Committee to be similar

to the First and Second Vienna Peace Talks which only stunted a political solution and detoured the Transitional Governing Body.

During the seminar, a different opinion arose that the constitutional committee would, with the passage of time, turn into a national constituent body, or a transitional governing body specific to electing Syria's presidents and ministers with pressure from the international community with the United States at its head. The participants who held this opinion asked for the military factions in Idlib to not publish statement refusing the Constitutional Committee and punch above their weight as it an international decision.