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## Turkey's plans in Idlib

As we approach the eighth year of the Syrian war, it seems that stability—not peace—prevails in most parts of the country. Compared with the first years of the war, the level of violence and brutality has relatively decreased. It could be said there is some sort of order in big cities.

The Ba'ath regime increased its control over in cities like Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo with the help of Russia. Recently, the United States claims to have cleaned ISIL territory east of the Euphrates. Turkey ended the control of the YPG and ISIL in Afrin and al-Bab last year.

Thanks to the Moscow Declaration of Dec. 20, 2016 signed by Turkey, Iran and Russia, de-escalation zones have been established and Astana talks are ongoing in the political field.

These developments have helped Turkey underline its advantageous position in Northern Syria. Unlike Iran and Russia, being a neighbor makes Turkey a key actor in this war.

Turkey is also a balancing actor when we consider its diplomatic ties and history in world politics. Having invested a lot in the idea of removing the Assad regime, Turkey wants Western countries to be part of the solution as a balance against Russia. Turkey invited Germany and France to the Istanbul Summit of Syria in October last year for this reason.

In addition to this, Turkey is trying to continue dialogue and cooperation with the U.S., despite deep disagreements, conflicting messages from Washington, and the persistence of an unsustainable policy of supporting the YPG and the illegal PKK in Syria.

Ankara is waiting for the moment that the U.S. will act rationally. But the attitude of Western leaders is still indecisive.

Under these circumstances, there are two open issues important for the stability of Syria: Idlib and the status of the eastern Euphrates.

In Idlib, Turkish and Russian positions are close. The main problem there is the presence of the HTS terrorist organization and the inability to disarm them. Last September, when Russia was preparing for a major attack against Idlib, Turkey convinced the Russian leader not to do so and prevented a major catastrophe.

An operation against the 20,000 men-strong HTS means a new wave of refugee influx to Turkey and the creation of a new black hole at the border. Turkey convinced Russia and delayed the matter for the good of civilians in Idlib.

If Turkey is going to become involved, Ankara believes the priority for its national security must be the east of the Euphrates.

The major goal of Turkey is to prevent the PKK/YPG, which have been trying to start an ethnic war in the country for the last 40 years, killing thousands of people, to earn a new base in

northern Syria under the protection of the U.S. and others.

With this perspective, Turkey removed the threat of terror organizations in Afrin and al-Bab with historic military operations last year. Turkey repelled a geo-strategic attack, which could cut off Turkey's ties with the Arab world and could sideline Turkey regarding energy trade with these steps. Ankara now wants to carry out these operations east of the Euphrates. Therefore, having a calm situation in Idlib and the de-escalation of violence is important for Ankara.

For Russia, the existing HTS military power is a permanent threat against their military bases and the organization has the potential to ignite a new wave of rebellion in cities controlled by the regime.

In Sochi last February, Turkey and Russia agreed to contain the HTS in the area via inner Turkish periphery posts and Russian outer posts surrounding the province.

Although Iran is unhappy with Turkey's growing and deepening influence in Syria, they have little option to change this course. Turkey has an advantageous position. For Iran, Syria is becoming an increasingly costly initiative. Tehran is also busy in Yemen and Iraq.

Growing U.S. pressure, sanctions, economic hardship and discontent of the Iranian public are putting more pressure on Iran. Furthermore, American control of eastern Syria means more trouble for Iranian logistic lines.

Israel has also made it difficult for Iran to continue its operations in Syria. For these reasons, it is very hard for Iran to be effective in the west of the country.

As the whole world has witnessed in the first years of the war, it is very hard to operate in northern Syria against the will of Turkey.

Turkey has the capacity to shape events, and deepen the chaos with its military capacity and influence over the Syrian opposition, with the huge Syrian population residing in the nation as a benefiting factor.

Russia, who is aware of this, prefers to work with Turkey because it can deliver its promises. Iran is reluctantly fine with it.

The other open issue in Syria is about U.S. withdrawal. When, how or if are the floating questions. The American president has declared ISIL has been completely destroyed. But CENTCOM is shuffling and trying to slow down the process.

Simultaneously with Trump's statement, facts about YPG/PYD actions against civilians have started to surface. A United Nations report mentions the violence against civilians and kidnapping of children in YPG controlled areas.

Given this situation, the U.S.' insistence on its YPG policy against its strong NATO ally Turkey, will not only determine the future of Syria but also the future of long term American goals in the region.