



DISCUSSION PAPER

Navigating Stormy Seas:

Russian-Turkish Interdependency and the Idlib Crisis

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

March 2020

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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Introduction

This paper argues that, despite the heightened tensions resulting from escalation in Idlib, Ankara and Moscow will continue their fragile relationship and avoid any direct military encounter. However, they are likely to approach the relationship with more skepticism in the near future. The Turkish-Russian rapprochement that took place in the last few years was substantially a result of the West's negligence towards Turkey's security concerns, such as backing the PKK's offshoot in Syria (the PYD/YPG) and inaction with regards to an unprecedented refugee flow in Syria. It also resulted from Turkey's search for a solution to the Syrian war on a regional level through presenting itself as a significant player in the region. Accordingly, this paper discusses the Idlib crisis and its impacts. In the following section, the nature of Turkish-Russian relations will be discussed in order to provide the necessary background. Finally, the West's role in shaping bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow will be explored.

The attack on a Turkish military convoy in Syria's Idlib by the Russia-backed Syrian regime on February 27 significantly increased friction in Turkish-Russian relations in the context of the now nine-year old Syrian Civil War and motivated Turkey to launch a military operation dubbed 'Operation Spring Shield.' Turkey caused heavy losses for Syrian regime forces in its first sustained

direct encounter since the beginning of the war. Despite the fact that Syrian airspace was closed to Turkish air forces, the use of armed drones appeared as a game changer and caught the regime by surprise. The armed drones were able to identify regime targets and carry out spot-on attacks with long-range rapid-firing artillery (Gatopoulos, 2020). In this way, civilian casualties were minimized while the taboo that any military action against the regime would lead to a greater disaster was effectively destroyed (Birgel et. al., 2020). In spite of Ankara's disappointment in Moscow's stance before and immediately after the February 27th attack, including statements that accused Turkey of helping the 'radical elements,' the two countries managed to pen a cease-fire deal on March 5th.

This cease-fire was important in terms of demonstrating the two countries' capability to come to an understanding even at the time of an ongoing escalation. According to the deal, a security corridor would be created along the M4 highway, the main road that encircles Idlib. In the second round of the cease-fire talks, the start and finish points of this corridor were determined. Accordingly, joint Turkish-Russian patrols started to be held as of March 15th. It is noteworthy that the regime preserved its territorial gains against opposition groups. However, Turkey also managed to stay on the ground through keeping its military posts inside Idlib, including those in regime-controlled areas.

The Idlib Crisis

Idlib remains as the last opposition-held stronghold. With the backing of Russian air power and Iranian-backed militias, the Syrian regime managed to regain most other areas of the country, except those controlled by the YPG. Opposition groups started losing ground to the regime in 2014 after Russian military intervention under the pretext of fighting against terror groups. However, the facts on the ground clearly indicated that Russia had two main goals. First, Moscow attempted to show its power and capability in bid to prove its emergence as a game changer in the Middle East. Second, the collapse of the Assad regime was interpreted as a disaster in Moscow lest their only solid Arab ally would be lost (İnanç, 2016). As a result of Russian support for the regime, which asserted its control in several parts of the country including the strategically important Aleppo, Idlib became a safe haven for civilians and opposition forces that was left by the Syrian regime until more recently for a number of key reasons. First, the regime concentrated its power on re-capturing the areas in the south close to the capital as well as the strategic city of Aleppo. The fact that the opposition groups had to cope with not only the regime forces, but also with the YPG and DAESH, accelerated the regime's comeback. For instance, in 2015 when DAESH was in its heyday, an encounter between the regime and DAESH ensured that the common enemy, namely the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) would be destroyed. To this end, the two parties would not attack each other in certain areas, such as Aleppo in which the FSA was in control (İnanç, 2015). Following DAESH's retreat from Syria's north to the east, the regime allied with the YPG in order for preventing the FSA to maintain its control in Aleppo's rural areas (İnanç, 2016). Second, the regime suffered from lack of manpower and so Iran-backed proxy groups, the most important being the Lebanese Hezbollah, were mobilized to come its help. Third and most importantly, Turkey has held several meetings with Russia and Iran to prevent an assault on the city.

Ankara was very sensitive on the Idlib issue as the city accommodates at least three million people. As part of the regime forces' displacement tactic, at least 1.4 million Syrians, who were previously living in other areas of the country, had fled to Idlib. Any assault on the city, besides ending the opposition groups' presence in the last opposition-controlled area, would lead to a new wave of migration towards the Turkish border.

Indeed, in less than a month, after the regime along with its backers Iran and Russia launched the assault, a reported 950,000 fled their homes and made their way to the Turkish border (IRC, 2020).

After the regime took Aleppo in 2016 with the support of Russia and Iran, the only major city under the opposition groups' control was Idlib. Until June 2018, the regime along with its allies carried out numerous attacks on the city despite the fact that Idlib was one of the de-escalation zones according the Astana talks. None of these attacks were large enough in scale lead to serious considerations of re-taking the city, however, the situation shifted after the regime captured Dara in July 2018 as regime forces were closer to Idlib than even before (Acun and Salaymeh, 2018). As of July 2018, regime and Russian jets relentlessly bombed Idlib, forcing a reported one million people to flee to Turkish border. According to a United Nations report, Idlib is home to around 3 million people, 2.1 million of whom are in need of humanitarian assistance. Millions of were forced to relocate to Idlib over the past years as a result of the regime's besiegement tactic across opposition-held areas (al-Jablawi, 2016). In 2018, under indiscriminate regime and Russian aerial attacks, civilians were killed while hospitals, schools and shelters were directly targeted (OCHA, 2018).

Russia and Turkey signed the Sochi Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in September 2018 as the guarantors of the cease-fire in Idlib. According to this agreement, Turkey would establish military posts in a 15-20 km de-militarized buffer zone to observe the situation and preserve stability. In this way, the regime would be discouraged to carry out an assault. However, the regime has repeatedly violated the MoU, and Russia has actively refused to stop them. The regime has violated the MoU terms also in other de-escalation zones (Kayyali, 2018) and signaled that it would go into an all-out war to assert its control throughout the country. In response to these violations, Turkey consolidated its military presence in Idlib while urging Russia to prevent the regime from launching attacks on Idlib. However, Russia, let alone holding the regime back, remained as the main backer of the regime's plan to recapture the region. As a result of the latest developments in the last two months, Turkey's military posts were surrounded by regime forces, paving the way for escalation.



Syrian families forced to flee their homes due to ongoing attacks carried out by the Assad regime are seen leaving the Daret Izze, Etarib region in Idlib on February 11, 2020. (Muhammed Said - Anadolu Agency)

Despite all diplomatic efforts and military warnings, the regime launched a major assault last December under the pretext of eliminating the previously al-Qaida-linked group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Despite the fact that certain parts of Idlib were under HTS' control, there were both moderate opposition groups and Turkish troops who were positioned in line with the Sochi agreement to create a buffer zone between regime forces and the opposition groups. Meanwhile, Turkey's military intervention in Idlib weakened HTS, whose presence was posing an excuse for the regime and Russia to carry out military operations in the province (Lister, 2017). In other words, the Turkish presence in Idlib did not aim to directly counter the regime or facilitate the opposition's march towards regime-controlled areas. Instead, the main aim was to ensure stability in Idlib for two reasons: first, a new migration wave had to be prevented (Hearst,

2020). Second, Turkey's main concern in Syria was with the YPG. Losing ground in Idlib would diminish Turkey's efforts to curtail the YPG in the country's north (Soylu, 2020). For instance, the YPG and the regime had made a deal immediately after Turkey launched a military operation last year against the YPG, named as 'Operation Peace Spring,' under the mediation of Russia (Sherwin, 2019).

As tensions continued to rise following the deadly airstrike against Turkish forces, the Russian Defence Ministry accused Turkey of failing to meet its obligations as part of the Sochi memorandum, accusing Turkey of providing support for 'terrorists' and adding that opposition fortifications in the province had 'merged' with Turkish observation posts (Reuters, March 4, 2020). Among the obligations were the elimination of the HTS

and withdrawal of heavy weapons from the conflict zone. Indeed, these obligations, in fact, were valid for not only Turkey but also for Russia. However, neither Russia nor the regime made any step to differentiate HTS from other opposition groups and to step back from the de-militarised zone. As discussed above, HTS has consistently opposed the Turkish presence in the region and Ankara has openly been supportive of moderate opposition groups that have themselves been party to the Astana discussions.

Violations of the terms of the agreement by the Syrian regime have been well documented since shortly after the agreement was signed, indicating an unwillingness on their part to uphold not only the terms, but also the spirit of the agreement (Al Jazeera, 2020). Repeated attacks by Syrian regime forces and their Iranian allies, backed by Russian airpower, not only paved the way for a new humanitarian crisis, but also undermined Turkish efforts to tackle the issue of the presence of HTS. Nevertheless, violations of the agreement emanating from groups in Idlib were minimal. While a tweet from Russian embassy in Damascus claimed that “Turkey has allowed its observations posts, established under 2018 Sochi deal, to virtually merge with terrorist bases in Idlib,” Turkey’s Defense Minister Hulusi Akar highlighted that Turkey, as one of the guarantor countries, therefore had the right to increase its efforts in Idlib for preserving stability. As regime attacks continued unabated, it became increasingly clear that the claim from both the regime and their Russian backers that their aim of was to rid Idlib of the presence of ‘terrorists’ was essentially nothing more than a public cover for their efforts to retake the entire province by not only eliminating all opposition elements, but also forcing millions of civilians to once again flee towards the Turkish border.

After the regime attack killed 34 Turkish troops, Turkey started targeting regime positions. In the course of a week, Turkish forces destroyed three regime warplanes, eight helicopters, three armed drones, 151 tanks, 47 howitzers, 52 multiple rocket launcher, eight air defense missile system, 60 military vehicles and 10 ammunition depots. In addition, 3138 regime troops were ‘neutralized,’ which is used to reference killing, wounding or capturing (Aydoğan, 2020). Since the beginning of the war, it was the first time that the Syrian army faced a well-equipped regular army. Moreover, Russia strictly avoided becoming involved in any of these military encounters since Moscow did not want Ankara to refresh its surging relations with the U.S. and

NATO and because it provided an opportunity to remind the regime that it would be crashed by a well-equipped army easily, thereby emphasizing its dependency on Russia (Ülgen, 2020). Moreover, the S-300 defense missile system in Syria remained deactivated while the regime has suffered major losses from Turkish drone strikes. Turkey has also targeted several military facilities, belonging to the Syrian regime while killing hundreds of troops, including pro-Iranian Hezbollah fighters. Turkey’s military operation was so effective that Bashar Assad took the unusual step of praising the historical and cultural ties between the two countries in an interview with a Russian TV channel.

Erdoğan and Putin held a meeting in Moscow on March 5th. Turkey and Russia had to retain their troubled partnership in Syria since there was arguably no other realistic option for either side, despite some calls from Moscow to impose sanctions on Turkey (Gall and Higgins, 2020). Erdoğan underlined that Turkey reserved its right to respond to any attack from the regime. According to the recent agreement, a security corridor would be created, and Turkish-Russian joint patrols would be arranged. In this way, a cease-fire was put into effect, the humanitarian crisis was, at least temporarily, prevented and Turkey preserved its foothold in the region. The solution reflected the complex nature of the Turkish-Russian relations, but also the complete divestment of responsibility by the West who could have had a say in the resolution of the conflict. Some had even called for a no-fly zone.

Ankara’s harsh response to the Idlib attack brought about a strong military campaign against the regime for the first time since the civil war broke out in 2011. Previously, Ankara preferred not to counter the regime directly, even after its jet was downed in 2012 by the regime in eight miles away from Syria’s coastal waters. Immediately after the Idlib attack, Erdoğan declared that “any regime position was a legitimate target for Turkey” (Dal and Turkey, 2020). Turkey gave the diplomatic track every chance and, in doing so, has opted to work with Russia on the de-escalation zone for Idlib as part of the 2018 Sochi Agreement. Considering the fact that any assault on Idlib would cause a humanitarian catastrophe, Ankara was ready to take any measure to prevent the regime’s assaults on the city. However, Damascus’ recklessness and restlessness to gain the last opposition-held area in the country ended up being costly for the regime.

Russia and Turkey: A Complex Relationship

The Idlib crisis sheds light on the nature of Turkish-Russian relations, which is best understood as a fragile friendship rather than either one of hostility or alliance. The history and current dynamics of the bilateral relations demonstrate that Ankara and Moscow compartmentalize their relations and feel themselves obliged to continue their cooperation on certain fields, such as economy, while adopting completely different stances on regional issues. It is unthinkable that the Syrian regime would target a Turkish military convoy without Russia's approval. Still, Ankara preferred to use balanced language towards Russia. The Russian side made several statements accusing Turkey of helping HTS and not sharing information about its soldiers' locations. Threats followed these statements, including the claim that more Turkish troops would be in danger in Idlib. In spite of this, Ankara remained calm and focused its attention on the Syrian regime.

Russia's stance after the Idlib attack was unsurprising due to the interdependency between the two countries. On the one hand, Russia has valued Turkey's friendship in the region for the fact that Ankara's military power is incontestably higher than other regional actors, like Iraq or the Syrian regime, and that any solution in Syria would not be possible without the assent of Turkey. Moreover, Turkey's NATO membership and relations with the Western powers elevate its strategic importance. On the other hand, Ankara realizes that Russia is Damascus' patron and is the power to be negotiated with instead of the Assad regime. Furthermore, the two countries have improved their bilateral ties in the recent past in the fields of economy, energy and politics. That said, relations remain fragile and there are significant barriers never turn into an alliance as the Idlib attack exemplifies.

Historically, Russia has been considered as a primary threat against Turkey. At the end of the Second World War, Russia claimed sovereignty over Turkey's lands in its east, which gave birth to Turkey's marriage with NATO in 1952. The fear of Soviet influence on Turkey motivated the U.S. to provide financial aid as part of the Marshall Fund. During the Cold War, Turkey and Russia maintained mild relations, but saw each other as potential threats. For instance, the Muslim population in Russia and Russia-controlled areas has always remained

in Turkey's interest while Moscow has supported the PKK financially (Bilge, 2012).

Over the last decade, Turkey and Russia have been at odds with each other in several conflict zones, including Ukraine, Libya and the South Caucasus. Turkey refused to recognize Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Instead, Ankara repeated its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Moreover, the fact that Crimea is the historical capital for the Turkic Tartar people, who have close historical, linguistic, religious and cultural ties with Turkey, makes Ankara a natural advocate of their cause. Erdoğan's latest visit to Ukraine came at the beginning of February, signaling that Turkey would seek to use the Ukraine conflict as leverage. To this end, Turkey and Ukraine signed a military deal, according to which Turkey would lend credit to the Ukrainian government to procure Turkish made armed drones, which proved their worth in the latest confrontation with the Syrian regime in Idlib (RFERL, 2020). Another disputed area between Turkey and Russia is Libya where the two countries support competing groups. While Russia has been backing General Khalifa Haftar, who is accused with committing war crimes in Libya, Turkey has pledged strong support for the UN recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) (Al Araby, 2020). Turkey and Russia attempted to reach a deal in Libya similar to the MoU in Syria, however, the talks failed after competing sides failed to agree on terms.

Since Russia's 2014 intervention in Syria, Ankara and Moscow have experienced several crises, while simultaneously enjoying considerable rapprochement. As early as 2014, even before the deployment of Russian forces, Erdoğan visited Putin to discuss regional issues. This meeting had come after the Geneva process failed to find a solution to the war in Syria. Ankara believed that increasing pressure on and maintaining dialogue with Moscow would be fruitful for preventing further escalation. However, Russia's recklessness, once again, put relations at risk. A Russian jet fighter violated the Turkish airspace in November 2015 and, as a result, it was shot down by Turkey. Russia claimed that its jet did not enter the Turkish airspace, and Putin referred to the incident as 'a stab in the back'. Following this incident, Russian claims that Turkey was supporting 'extremist'

elements in Syria were propagated at a dizzying pace. Russia suspended trade agreements, hardened visa requirements for Turkish citizens, vowed to retaliate for the downing of the jet, and intensified its aerial attacks on opposition groups in Syria. Yet, seven months after the downing of the jet, a meeting between Erdoğan and Putin decreased the level of the tensions.

Several reports indicated that Turkish officers, who had ties with the Fetullah Terror Organization (FETÖ), which orchestrated the July 15 coup in bid to take over the control in the country and oust the democratically elected government, would have been involved in the downing of the jet for undermining Turkish government's balanced policy between the West and Russia (Daily Sabah, 2016). A few months later, the Russian ambassador to Turkey, Andrey Karlov was assassinated by a FETÖ-affiliated Turkish policeman. Even so, Moscow declared that it understood that the assassination was carried out by a FETÖ member, who was killed by the police at the location of the assassination took place.

The two countries have been enjoying a rapprochement since the jet crisis, which has been interpreted by some as a shift of axis by Turkey (Stein, 2019). Besides the increasing cooperation between the two for finding a solution in Syria, the procurement of the S-400 system also alarmed the West. In fact, there are two dynamics that have been effective so far for determining Turkey's relations with Russia in the recent past. First, the interdependency between Turkey and Russia play a key role as Russia enjoys Turkish goods, food and construction materials while Turkey needs Russian natural gas. Turkey's Trade Minister, Ruhsar Pekcan, in a 2019 Turkey-Russia Joint Economic Commission meeting said "the trade volume between our two nations was \$25.7 billion in 2018. Enjoying dynamic markets that complement one another, Turkey and Russia have a bright future in commercial relations with immense potential" (Daily Sabah, 2019). Turkey has also been closely cooperating with Russia on the energy field, including the Turk Stream Project, which delivers natural gas from Russia pumped to Europe via a subsea pipeline through Turkey's waterlines in the Black Sea, and the construction of a nuclear plant by Russia in Turkey's south.

Western Influence on Turkish-Russian Relations

Despite the fact that Turkey continues to be at odds with Russia over regional issues, Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow is not arbitrary. Russia was on the opposite side of Turkey when it comes to the Syrian regime but was not interested in barring Turkey in its military operations against the YPG. Furthermore, Russia remained more sympathetic to Turkey after the July 15 coup attempt while the Western powers seemed more concerned with Turkey's efforts to purge FETÖ members. Beginning with the Obama administration, the U.S., along with the European Union, remained largely indifferent to the conflict in Syria, and allowed Russia's comeback to the region for the first time since the Cold War (Karaganov, 2020). Although the regime has repeatedly crossed so-called 'redlines' set by Europe and the US, including the use of chemical weapons, international efforts concentrated on eliminating DAESH, which involved giving substantial support to the YPG. Turkey also believes that the burden of the Syrian refugees is not shared

equally by the West, leaving Turkey alone to deal with the situation. It is in this context of limited options that Turkey started turning towards Russia in the hopes of finding a solution to the war in Syria.

The most alarming development during the war to Turkey was the emergence of the YPG as a local power with military capability. The PKK has been waging a war against Turkey for the last three decades and was offered a safe haven in Syria in 1990s to be kept as a permanent threat against Turkey. After regime forces withdrew from the country's north, the YPG and the regime concluded an alliance against Turkey. American aid to the YPG against DAESH deeply concerned Ankara and accelerated the rapprochement with Russia (Reynolds, 2019). As Russia's main concern was to keep the regime alive and secure its military positions, which are mostly established in the country's south and west, Moscow was seen as a restraining power against the YPG (İnanç, 2017).

Another move by the West, which put Turkey closer with Russia, is related to FETÖ, the biggest internal security concern for Ankara. FETÖ, which is led by a U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, killed more than 200 people in its coup attempt to seize power in the country. Immediately after the attempt, it was Russia that sent its condolences to Turkey first. On the contrary, the U.S. and the EU were reluctant to utter a harsh voice against the FETÖ and seemed more concerned about the way that the Turkish government sought to remove FETÖ members from the state institutions.

The refugee issue is also important for understanding Turkish-Western relations. Although Russia has nothing to offer in this issue since its military intervention in Syria is one of the main causes of the displacement of millions, Turkey believes that the West, besides remaining inactive against the regime, has not shared the burden of the situation. In the evening of the attack on Turkish troops in Idlib, Turkey decided to abandon the controls over the refugees, who were willing to cross the border and go to Greece or Bulgaria. According to Turkish officials, more than 100.000 migrants have already left Turkey for either Greece or Bulgaria. Similar to the mass flow in 2015, the refugees are determined to cross the border either via border gates or illegally. The E.U. seems paralyzed while Greece and Bulgaria employ brutal tactics to stop the migrants from crossing the border. Greek police, after stripping the refugees of their belongings, including passports, mobile phones and shoes with the aim of making their journey impossible, have reportedly been beating and sending them back (İnanç, 2020). Underlining the inhumane treatment of refugees, Amnesty International highlighted that Greece has been violating the 1951-dated Geneva Convention (Amnesty, 2020).

Instead of attempting to find a solution, the E.U. has repeatedly urged Turkey that its decision to allow refugees to cross the border was a violation of the refugee agreement signed between the E.U. and Turkey in 2016. According to this deal, Turkey was responsible for preventing the flow while the EU had to financially support Turkey. The E.U. promised to send 6 billion Euros for dealing with the refugees' needs. Yet, only half of the promised amount has been sent thus far. The E.U.'s seeming indifference towards refugees along with the looming migration wave from Idlib forced Turkey to take matters into its own hands, whilst simultaneously making the case for greater Western involvement (İnanç, 2020). The West was so

uncompromising on finding a solution to the potential refugees in Syria's north that Turkey's offer to resettle two million people in the Turkey-controlled areas was rejected on the grounds that Ankara was seeking to make a demographic change against the Kurds (Evans, 2019).

Turkey desires to follow a policy of balance between the West and Russia. On the one hand, being a NATO member and enjoying close cooperation with the West in several areas, reminds Russia that Turkey is able to mobilize - to an extent - Western powers in case its sovereignty is violated. As happened in Idlib, the U.S., the EU and the NATO pledged their supports for Turkey. It is claimed that this support was mostly rhetorical and did not have an echo on the ground. Yet, it is noteworthy that Turkey's previous military operations were not considered legitimate by these actors whereas Operation Spring Shield garnered vocal support from U.S. diplomats, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the US special representative for the region James Jeffrey (Hernandez, 2020). On the other side, through developing close relations and seeking a solution to the Syrian war with Russia, Turkey demonstrated to the West that it is a significant regional actor with the capability of maneuvering on its own. The procurement of the S-400 defense missile system from Russia despite the harsh criticism and threats of the West, was a signal sent to the West that Turkey wants to be recognized as a major regional power (Dalay, 2019). Moreover, the procurement was a demonstration that Turkey would act in its own interests way if its security concerns are ignored by its main military allies, i.e., the NATO and the U.S. Rather than being dragged into Russia's orbit, Turkey aims to increase its capability to ally with rival international powers on different issues.

Conclusion

Both historical and contemporary references indicate that Turkey and Russia are able neither to establish an unconditional, 'natural' alliance, nor remain hostile to each other. Instead, the two countries have developed relations, in which cooperation and dialogue are preserved, while rivalry over crucial issues continue. In the last five years, Ankara and Moscow have managed to overcome multiple crises. However, these developments do not suggest that a permanent alliance can be established, nor that other crises will not appear in the future. Instead, the relations seem to have been compartmentalized.

After weeks of direct clashes between the Russian-backed regime and Turkish forces, Turkey and Russia managed to agree to a cease-fire in Idlib. Not only has this halted the regime advance on the last significant opposition-held territory, it also has, for the time being, prevented another wave of refugees moving towards Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey has arguably managed to establish a deterrent as its military capabilities were put on display, sending a strong message to the regime and arguably to its Russian backers. As it stands today, the cease-fire seems to be holding with positive statements coming from both Ankara and Moscow. However,

there should be no illusion that the cease-fire will be permanent, as the core issues remain unresolved.

The West's stance towards Turkey, especially its negligence of internal and external security concerns, motivated Ankara to seek new avenues of cooperation. In this way, Ankara aims to create a balance between competing international rivals. While its decades-long relations with NATO, the U.S. and the EU empower Ankara against any Russian thoughts of pushing Turkey too far, cooperation with Moscow consolidates the argument that Turkey is capable of enticing other regional and international actors. Turkey is aware that it is the glue between the West and Russia. For instance, as Dalay underlines, the Astana and Sochi processes would not have gained international legitimacy without Turkey's participation. Similarly, European leaders would not have attended its meetings had it not been hosted by Turkey, a NATO member (Dalay, 2020). In other words, the Astana and the Sochi processes along with the recently signed cease-fire deal in Idlib allow Ankara to remain as a key player in the Syrian war as both military and diplomatic power, while the refugee issue increases its importance in the eyes of Europe.



The aftermath of Assad regime attacks in the Ma'arrat Misrin residential district in Idlib on February 25, 2020, which reportedly killed 17 civilians. (Muhammed Said - Anadolu Agency)

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