



Idlib: Sochi's Memorandum of Understanding

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This article assessed the Russian-Turkish Memorandum of Understanding on the Idlib question and provided a comprehensive understanding of the MoU, while also examining the different dimensions and challenges of its applicability. Notably, this approach paves a way for estimating how the MoU is perceived by the fighters in Idlib and discusses their potential responses towards it. Finally, the article takes stock of previous agreements that might help in understanding to what extent will present and future agreements be honored.

Russian President Vladimir Putin hosted his Turkish counterpart, President Erdogan, in an attempt to address Syria's North-Western contested periphery. In the Russian city of Sochi^[1], the meeting was held on the 17th of September after a 10-day margin following their what seemed as a futile meeting in Tehran with Iran's president^[2]. Notably, when comparing the two summits, Sochi's meeting delivered, to an extent, a more positive outcome than its predecessor.

The two leaders concluded a Memorandum of Understanding MoU^[3] that calls for restraint in Idlib and aims to prevent escalation between the regional and local actors involved. The MoU reiterated and adopted previous agreements between the Astana group in terms of maintaining a deescalation zone in Idlib which was set in last year's May meeting^[4]. Hence, the agreement was forwarded to Damascus and embraced by Tehran amid vigilant ambivalence from the international community on the applicability of the Memorandum.

In light of the above, this piece has set to assess the Russian-Turkish Memorandum of Understanding on the Idlib question. This is conducted through providing a comprehensive understanding of the MoU and examining the different dimensions and challenges of its applicability. Notably, this approach paves a way for estimating how the MoU is perceived by the fighters in Idlib and discusses their potential responses towards it. Followed by that, the article takes stock of previous agreements that might help in understanding to what extent will present and future agreements be honored.

Idlib: A Call for Restraint and De-escalation:

The MoU enunciated the necessity of deescalating Idlib and that the 'Turkish observation posts – surrounding the area- will be fortified'. Remarkably, Russia entrenched the agreement through adhering to 'take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be "avoided"'. Taken together, the two powers will collaborate in forming a '15-20 km' demilitarized zone through which 'all tanks, MLRS, artillery and mortars belonging to conflicting parties will be withdrawn and all radical terrorist groups will be removed' on the 10th and 15th of October respectively^[6]. In theory, the implementation of such measures certainly facilitates the provision of shelter and protection for the local population in Idlib. However, the question remains how feasible it is to apply such measures on ground. The theory vs. applicability burden is certainly one that causes concern for the country's north west. There are three main angles to take into consideration:

First, the Memorandum of Understanding discussed miscellaneous measures to be implemented in Idlib (as discussed in the introductory paragraph). However, as optimism increased following the outcome of Sochi's summit, concerns also increased on the methodology taken to reach its objective. In this sense, the MoU discussed quite a convenient 'what will be done'; however, it lacked a proportionally convenient 'how will it be done'. Hence, there seems to be not enough information on the framework that is to be followed for reaching this demilitarized zone.

Second, the discourse used in parts of the MoU is to a certain extent intriguing. As mentioned earlier, Russia entrenched the agreement through adhering to take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks 'on' Idlib will be 'avoided'. First, Russia's choice of words is not vivid as this could imply that its intervention is not motivated by the attack as much as it's by the nature of the attacker and its coordinates. Hence, does this indicate that Russia aims to intervene only in case an attack is conducted from the outside? In case of an outbreak of dissensions between armed groups inside of Idlib that exacerbate hostile actions, will the safety of the local population be subject to jeopardy? Second, Russia's choices of words are subject to more than a single interpretation. Using the term 'avoid' certainly reflects Moscow's ambitions to do what needs to be done in order to calm down escalations. However, one can also say that avoiding military operations doesn't imply preventing and/or deterring them.

Third, military capability by itself is a galvanizing incentive to bring Damascus and Idlib into belligerent actions. The MoU's 6th point clearly the withdrawal of all tanks, MLRS, artillery and mortars from the demilitarized zone. However, this doesn't include the Small Arms and Light Weapons SALW in the hands of the conflicting parties. Notably, such types of weaponry are in fact ones that were carried first in outbreak of the Syrian Crisis. With that being said, demilitarizing Idlib is an understatement that is subject to debate. Based on Sochi's agreement, the two powers negotiated 'semi demilitarization' that could pave a way for 'semi de-escalation'. However, this paper is not arguing that full demilitarization leads to full deescalation or, notably, vice-versa.

The Challenge of Differentiation:

As mentioned earlier, the MoU stated that "All radical terrorist groups will be removed from the demilitarized zone by October 15"^[7]. The status of radical terrorist groups, as the MoU chose to define them, is quite dubious. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Crisis, a consensus among actors involved in the Syria with regards to who is a terrorist and who is not doesn't seem to exist. Particularly in the context of the Syrian Crisis, both Russia and Turkey have reflected different approaches and definition of a terrorist throughout the course of the crisis. Moreover, Idlib's demographics was subject to various changes predominantly as a result of its geographical adjacency to the Turkish sphere of influence and the evacuation of civilians and combatants from the previous deescalation zones. With that being said, the two powers were not successful in delivering concrete statistics on

the 'radical terrorist groups' operating in Idlib as well as a coherent categorizing of the nature of armed groups and their political tendencies.

Thus, this approach will accumulate 3 major challenges on the shoulders of implementing the MoU and maintaining the regional stability. First, Idlib is approached as the final bastion for armed rebels. Hence, a compromise from the rebels' side on Idlib will not be easy and, therefore, a smooth withdrawal, as optimistic as it is, might be unprecedented. Second, and as previously discussed, 'radical terrorist groups' are transpiring in Idlib along with various fractions of armed militias.

In case such groups refuse to withdraw completely from the region, differentiating between the different armed groups will not be of an easy task. Third, 'radical terrorist groups' have the capacity to exploit the local population as a pressure card against the agreement made at Sochi's Summit. The usage of this card grants more leverage on the potential outcomes of Idlib's equation. Remarkably, this could also accumulate risks on the lives of the local population.

Will Damascus Comply?

As mentioned in our previous articles^[8], Damascus, in a consistent manner, has reflected that violation of truces is part of its creed. The Syrian Armed Forces has already breached previous de-escalation agreements, particularly in the country's south. Hence, a coherent indicator that Assad's regime will honor Sochi's MoU doesn't exist. Notably, the agreement should be accumulated over the bases of mutual trust and reciprocal responsibilities. The good-will of parties is an inherent condition for any regional stabilization ambitions. And in accordance with Damascus's belligerent tendencies throughout the course of the Syrian Crisis, a sense of mutual distrust looms in the air between forces loyal to Assad and opposition forces based in Idlib.

Conclusion: A Need for Political Inclusivity:

The MoU identified channels for collaboration between the two powers with regards to destabilizing the situation in Idlib, Syria's North Western province. As discussed throughout the content of this article, diplomatic and political means (under the umbrella of the international community) are certainly a good method of addressing regional disputes. In particular, the MoU is fundamental step in identifying the major disagreements faced in the past and, therefore, paves a way for a more coherent future agreement. However, this doesn't imply that it is the 'only' step.

There are two crucial challenges that could contribute to an overarching stability in Idlib. First, a comprehensive framework of applicability needs more vivid illustration in order to identify applicability challenges and how to address them. Second, since the outbreak of the Syrian Crisis, several peace initiatives were made to examine Syria's transition. However, these peace initiatives are held on different fronts, comprising different actors with a clear lack of political inclusivity. Hence, the question is not about delivering a peace initiative as much as it is about who participates in delivering it. Sochi's Summit reflects a clear notion of 2 parties discussing the future engagement of a 3rd party with a 4th party; however, with the exclusion of the concerned 3rd and 4th parties.

The role of conflict mediators essentially relies upon the tendency of bringing opinions closer. Straddling on opinions is quite similar to giving morphine to someone ill as the issue is not being cured but rather postponed. Hence, The BIC-RHR believes that more inclusive political and diplomatic channels need to be created that bring all disputed sides to the table of negotiations without certain exclusions based on certain tendencies.

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