

## Idlib in Syrian Civil War

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From the first weeks of Syrian Civil War Idlib has been a scene of mass protests, rise of armed rebel groups, military clashes. As Syrian conflict evolved, Idlib witnessed the emergence of extremist fractions, inter-rebel conflict, growing foreign influence and multiple unsuccessful attempts of government forces to retake the province. Nevertheless, with the government's military success in south and east of the country, Idlib started to have a greater importance for Syrian opposition. Taking into account Sochi and Astana agreements, inter-rebel conflict and Syrian government's current military offensive Idlib is once again in the epicenter of Syrian conflict. Therefore, it's coherent in the current situation to assess the history of Syrian conflict in Idlib taking into consideration to analyze latest events

In December of 2019, following the failure of peace talks (which concerned the future of Idlib) in Nur-Sultan, Syrian government forces and pro-government militias launched outright assault on Idlib and has been successful so far, despite suffering heavy losses. They managed to encircle several Turkish observation posts and capture key cities in south of Idlib (like Saraqib and Maarat al-Numan). Syrian government's northwestern offence caused negative reaction of Turkey, which accused Syria and Russia of violating Sochi and Astana agreements. Situation got worse due to death of more than thirty Turkish soldiers in Idlib due to Syrian government airstrike. Turkey not only retaliated by mass air campaign targeting Syrian government positions in Idlib and Latakia, but also launched new operation in Syria with aim to expel Assad's forces and its allies from Idlib and reinforce "Sochi lines". Turkish military forces which gained experience by conducting several military operations against ISIS and SDF in Syria before and by uniting Syrian rebel groups into new large fraction called National Front of Liberation, seem to have upper hand over Syrian government forces.

But putting military component of Idlib situation aside, it's important to mention how Idlib offensive affects the relations between different international actors in Syria. Idlib offensive pushed Turkey towards US, which supported Turkey's actions and even held negotiations with Turkish counterparts on Idlib. However, US' influence on Syria covers only south of Homs province (where it has Al-Tanf military base) and SDF controlled areas east of Euphrates. Although, there are some Idlib based rebel groups that got financial support from US, its real impact on Idlib matters is marginal at present moment. Syrian government offensive definitely negatively affected Russian-Turkish partnership in Syria, but the further escalation in Syria can be prevented through this same partnership. Russian-Turkish collaboration is essential in resolving situation in Idlib. Current events put at risk whole Astana peace process and if no compromise is found Syrian conflict can enter new phase. That is something that Turkey nor Russia wish, since it's a very high price to pay for a few hundreds of square kilometers. Thus, it's more likely that Turkey and Russia will try to find a compromise on Idlib, rather than battle over it. Moreover, such cooperation can have positive affects not only for preservation of Astana peace framework and well-being of civilian population, but also on future of extremists groups

in Idlib: It's a great opportunity to eliminate Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (ex-Jabhat al Nusra, ex-Al-Qaeda in Syria) since the alliance is clearly weakened now and lost its territories in south of Idlib.

From 2011 to 2019, Idlib has been one of the most active arenas in Syrian conflict: mass protests, widespread desertion from government forces, formation of different rebel groups, inter-rebel conflict, extremist activity, air bombings, government led military offensives with variable success, short lived alliances, foreign military presence, establishment of three different governments (government of Bashar al-Assad, opposition led Syrian Interim Government and extremist led Syrian Salvation Government) and so on. That said, the further fate of Idlib is still unclear: if Russian-Turkish partnership will be successful, the matters will get better for province, but if Russia and Turkey fail to reach any agreement, this unfortunate cycle of constant violence will get only worse.

### Источники и литература

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