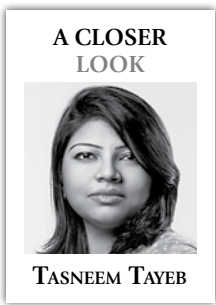


# The Syrian civil war

## Confused battle-lines and countless lives lost



**A CLOSER LOOK**

TURKEY and the Russia-backed Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad are in a tight jostle for full control of the north-western Syrian province of Idlib. The province—the last of the four de-escalation zones agreed by Turkey, Iran and Russia in 2017, which is yet to be taken over by the Assad government—is important to all the warring actors for diverse and awkward reasons.

For Turkey, Idlib represents its last stronghold in the war in Syria that it has almost lost. Turkey has been a staunch ally of the rebels—read anti-Bashar elements—from the onset of the war nine years ago. Over the years, Turkey has supported and aided the rebel forces, including the Tahrir al-Sham, still the strongest anti-Bashar element in the Idlib region.

While Turkey has watched the fall of the three other de-escalation zones—Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, the Rastan and Talbiseh enclave in Homs province and Deraa and Quneitra provinces in the south—before Syrian aggression with zero effective effort to salvage the situation, it is not in a position to allow the Syrian forces to capture Idlib, because that would mean a total defeat of Turkish interests in the war. This would also mean that Turkey will have little to no role or say in the post-war reconstruction discussions on Syria—and nine years of efforts and investments will end up in vain.

But with the Russians backing the Syrian government, there is not much the Turks can do. The 2015 Russian response to Turkey downing a Russian fighter jet near the Syrian-Turkish border has been a tough lesson for Turkey to digest—Russia banned import of Turkish goods that significantly affected the Turkish economy.

It took a public apology from the Turkish president himself to appease the Kremlin. And over the last couple of years, Turkey has tried to strengthen its ties with Russia, even with regard to Syria: case in point, the Sochi talks late last year where Russia brokered a peace deal between Turkey and the Kurds in the face of Turkish aggression in northeast Syria.

And in the aftermath of the US slapping trade sanctions on Iran last year, Russia is now the main oil and gas supplier for Turkey. Bilateral trade between the key trading partners exceeds USD 25 billion annually.

And the US is yet to clarify its stance on the situation in Syria, leaving Turkey confused.

With the Assad regime’s advancement against the Turkish-backed opposing forces in Idlib aided by Russia, Turkey now finds itself in murky waters, unable to decide if it should prioritise its stakes in Syria over its precarious relationship with Russia.

For Russia, the situation is much more lucid and priorities straighter: all out victory for the Syrian government in this war. Since September 2015, the Kremlin has been a staunch supporter of the Assad regime and has backed the Syrian government with its aerial forces even in the most trying situations. With the US missing from the scene, the

Syrian government forces dependent on Russia for support, the master of Iranian intrigue abroad, Qassem Soleimani, gone, and the position of Turkey weakened, Russia stands to gain the most from the Syrian government’s victory in the civil war.

Bashar al-Assad perhaps has his own agenda in Idlib. Hundreds and thousands of civilians, from various parts of Syria that had been taken

to differentiate between the civilian population of Idlib and the rebel fighters: he sees them all as one and the same—the opposition, his enemies.

The situation is so dire in the province that Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, as quoted by VOA News recently, said regarding the Assad government’s approach to the Idlib attack that the presence of rebel fighters in

can be wiped out in one go? Only time will tell.

The three million population of Idlib now face a real and literal existential crisis: with Turkey fortifying its shared border with Syria, especially in the region, the people of Idlib are left with nowhere else to go. If they go towards the Turkish border, they are most likely to be shot; if they stay in Idlib, they are vulnerable to Russian bombardment or attack by the Syrian ground forces.

Although UN estimates suggest that around 800,000 residents of Idlib have been displaced by the Syrian attacks, the people, already internally displaced multiple times, have little to no option to relocate.

Amidst the deafening sound of bombs exploding and smothering the air—with healthcare centres, schools and other public infrastructure destroyed, and most basic utility services inaccessible—the living conditions in Idlib are a nightmare. And with road connectivity being destroyed by Russian bombardment, aid distribution among the helpless civilians has become a challenge.

But in a digitally connected world where news travels as fast as light, would Turkey or Russia, or for that matter Syria, be willing to have innocent blood on their hands?

Thousands of miles apart, in the comforts of our cosy homes, for now, we can only witness the bloodbath that is being unleashed in Idlib, like silent spectators at a macabre movie screening. Only this time, the gore is real.



PHOTO: OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A Syrian man comforts another in the rubble of a building after a Russian airstrike on a popular market in Idlib province on December 7, 2019.

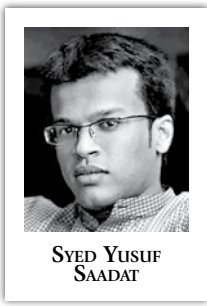
over by the Syrian government, who would not compromise with the Assad regime, had been bussed to Idlib, along with all opposition fighters, over the last few years. And Assad might be seeking revenge on them for not being aligned to him. Thus, the indiscriminate bombing of civilian sites in the province. Assad is unable

the province “does not justify the indiscriminate bombardment of the civilian population.” If anything, the Assad’s government’s ruthless brutality in Idlib brings into question the intention behind the mass transportation of opposing forces and civilians to Idlib. Perhaps, to use it as a dumping site where all oppositions

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## IMPLEMENTING SDG 6

# Watering the seeds of development



**NOTHING** is more useful than water. Ironically, hardly anything can be obtained in exchange for water. On the other hand, diamonds have little use, but a large amount of other goods and services may be obtained in exchange for diamonds. This apparent contradiction, known as the “Diamond-Water Paradox”, was discussed by Adam Smith in his magnum opus titled “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”. Smith stumbled upon the Diamond-Water Paradox whilst attempting to formulate his theory of value. He decomposed the word “value” into two parts: “value in use” and “value in exchange”. Water has a high value in use, but a low value in exchange; diamonds have a low value in use, but a high value in exchange. Carl Menger and William Stanley Jevons later showed that value in exchange, or market price, depends not on the total usefulness of a commodity, but rather on its additional usefulness. The total usefulness of water is greater than that of diamonds. However, the usefulness of each additional glass of water is less than the usefulness of each additional diamond. This is because we consume so many glasses of water that each additional glass does not seem to matter much to us. On the other hand, we do not purchase as many diamonds, and so each additional diamond means a lot to us.

Although the Diamond-Water Paradox has been largely resolved, there are serious implications of a beautiful rock being more expensive than an indispensable liquid. This is because market price affects our

perception of relative importance, and our perception of relative importance ultimately influences what we save and what we squander. Thus, diamonds are highly prized in society, but water is often wasted. While it may be common to exchange diamond rings during marriage, an exchange of glasses of water for the same purpose would be utterly inconceivable. We tend to feel at ease exchanging ornamental diamonds while allowing life-giving water to go down the drain.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledge the importance of water in human development. SDG 6 calls upon countries to

trip. The percentage of the population using at least basic drinking water services in Bangladesh increased from 95.60 percent in 2005 to 97.32 percent in 2015. Unfortunately, there was almost no improvement in access to safely managed drinking water, over the same period of time.

Apart from access to drinking water, SDG 6 also emphasises the importance of sanitation. SDG target 6.2 aims to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030. Access to “at least basic sanitation” refers to the availability of sanitation facilities such as flush or pour flush to piped sewer systems,



“ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” by 2030. Access to “at least basic drinking water” refers to the availability of drinking water from sources such as piped water, boreholes or tube-wells, protected dug-wells, protected springs, and packaged or delivered water, whose collection time, including queueing, does not exceed 30 minutes for a round

septic tanks or pit latrines, ventilated improved pit latrines, and composting toilets or pit latrines with slabs, which are not shared with other households. According to data from the global database of the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, the proportion of the total population in Bangladesh with access to basic

*In 2005, the percentage of the population practicing open defecation was 11.91 percent nationally and 14.96 percent in rural areas. However, by 2015, the percentage of the population practicing open defecation fell to 0.10 percent nationally and 0.16 percent in rural areas.*

sanitation services increased from 25.3 percent in 2000 to 46.9 percent in 2015. Additionally, the gap between rural and urban sanitation access also narrowed over the years. For example, in 2000, rural areas had 20.16 percent less access to basic sanitation compared to urban areas, but in 2015 this difference was reduced to 10.26 percent. In terms of geographic differences, Chattogram division had the highest and Barishal division had the lowest access to basic sanitation in 2015. Improvement in access to basic sanitation means that open defecation has been virtually eliminated from Bangladesh, even from rural areas. In 2005, the percentage of the population practicing open defecation was 11.91 percent nationally and 14.96 percent in rural areas. However, by 2015, the percentage of the population practicing open defecation fell to 0.10 percent nationally and 0.16 percent in rural areas.

Despite the progress made in improving access to water and sanitation in Bangladesh, a number of key challenges still remain. These include, inter alia, widespread inefficient use of water, lack of sustainable management of surface

and ground water, low wastewater treatment, high levels of water pollution and poor quality of water. Additionally, lack of drinking water and sanitation facilities are reducing the efficacy of education and healthcare services where they are needed the most. Furthermore, inequalities are present in access to water and sanitation between urban and rural areas, as well as between slums and formal urban settlements. The existing pricing scheme used by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) is based on a single water meter for an entire building, and so does not create incentives for economical use of water by individual households. The poorest households in the capital city have limited access to water, and are often compelled to obtain water from illegal water vendors at exorbitantly high prices. In order to achieve SDG 6 by 2030, these challenges need to be tackled urgently by adopting sustainable integrated water management practices that consider both current and future needs of water and sanitation.

Syed Yusuf Saadat is Senior Research Associate at Centre for Policy Dialogue.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 26, 1815  
**Napoleon's Escape from Elba**  
*Forced to abdicate as French emperor in 1814, Napoleon escaped from exile on the island of Elba this day in 1815 and, gathering support en route, retook power on his return to Paris on March 20, ushering in the Hundred Days.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 Bottled up  
7 "Like that'll ever happen!"  
11 Carry too far  
12 Pump, for one  
13 Bike pair  
14 Volcano shape  
15 Coot  
17 "Memory" musical  
20 Like bar beer  
23 Paris pal  
24 Famed box opener  
26 Sizable  
27 Rink material  
28 Performed  
29 Takes a breath  
31 German article  
32 "That's a lie!"

33 Cruise stop  
34 High regard  
37 George Jetson's wife  
39 Mideast peninsula  
43 Says further  
44 Hardships  
45 Terrarium growth  
46 Play parts

**DOWN**  
1 Bunny move  
2 Cain's mother  
3 Blazed a trail  
4 Pulls along  
5 Not active  
6 Face feature  
7 Climb  
8 Almost even

chance  
9 Charged particle  
10 Clinic cost  
16 Map areas  
17 Plane part  
18 Acid type  
19 Some footballers  
21 "The Tempest" sprite  
22 San Diego player  
24 Series test  
25 Star pitcher  
30 Rate  
33 Pol's concern  
35 Corn units  
36 Idle on film  
37 Toast spread  
38 Hubbub  
40 "—voyage!"  
41 Rage  
42 Cart puller

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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BEEBLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott