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Erdogan meets Putin, and fate of Syria's Idlib is at stake

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on Monday. The talks are set to focus on the fate of Syria's Idlib as it risks turning into an international crisis.

Syria's northwestern Idlib Province, bordering Turkey, is the last major stronghold of anti-government militants. The militant-held region is surrounded by the Syrian Army, aided by the Russian airstrikes. For Syrian President Bashar Assad, the liberation of Idlib will effectively mean the end of the devastating seven-year long civil war.

According to the Russian military, around 70 percent of the province is [controlled](#) by terrorist groups, with the largest being the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Al-Nusra Front). The terrorists have heavy weaponry and thousands of fighters concentrated in Idlib and ready to conduct attacks and raids, Moscow has warned.

Despite the presence of extremists, NATO nations have urged Russia and Syria not to launch offensives in the last remaining militant enclave. US President Donald Trump had called on Moscow and Damascus not to *"recklessly attack"* Idlib Province, warning that the operation could lead to *"a grave humanitarian mistake."*

@realDonaldTrump President Bashar al-Assad of Syria must not recklessly attack Idlib Province. The Russians and Iranians would be making a grave humanitarian mistake to take

part in this potential human tragedy. Hundreds of thousands of people could be killed. Don't let that happen!

US envoy to the UN Nikki Haley voiced similar concerns, warning that Washington will consider *"any assault on Idlib to be a reckless escalation of the conflict"* that will have *"dire"* consequences.

@nikkihaley RT [@USUN](#): "We consider any assault on Idlib to be a reckless escalation of the conflict. If Assad, Russia, and Iran continue down the path they are on, the consequences will be dire. The world will hold them responsible."

The crisis around Idlib puts Turkey in a particularly uncomfortable spot. Its recent relations with its chief NATO ally, the US, have been marred by a series of diplomatic rows. At the same time, Ankara doesn't wish to lose the foothold in Idlib to its rival Assad.

Read more ['Hope they come to their senses': Tehran summit ends with call for Idlib terrorists to lay down arms](#)



President Erdogan expressed optimism before the Sochi talks, commending Putin's positive approach at the meeting the two had in Tehran 10 days ago. *"I hope he [Putin] will continue the positive stance also going forward,"* Erdogan said, the Daily Sabah [reported](#).

But in an apparent warning, the Turkish leader also made it clear that the situation in the embattled province will deteriorate and spiral into a new wave of the crisis, if the parties fail to seal the deal.

*"If the situation in Idlib continues as is, the results will be heavy. We have to find a solution with Russia and [the US-led] Coalition forces without letting this happen."*

Aside from losing allies among the local militants, whom Ankara considers *"moderate opposition,"* Turkey is concerned with the possible humanitarian impact. Erdogan had called for a ceasefire in Idlib province, warning of a high civilian death toll and a massive refugee influx into Turkey in the event of a large-scale government offensive.

Vladimir Putin had earlier stressed that the *"terrorist pocket"* in Idlib poses serious danger to the whole region, as the militants attack Russian and Syrian troops and civilians alike.

*"The terrorists are making attempts to undermine the ceasefire. Furthermore, they conduct various provocations, including those using chemical weapons,"* the Russian president said, noting that the terrorists in Idlib launched several drone attacks against the Khmeimim air base,

which hosts Russian jets.

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