
Erdogan Threatens to Use Force Against Syrian Military in Idlib

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Erdogan has accused Russia of not fulfilling its obligations under the Sochi agreement that proposed the creation of a safe zone in northwestern Syria.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to use force against the Syrian military if they do not withdraw their troops from the vicinity of Turkey's observation posts in Syria's Idlib province.

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The Turkish leader warned the Syrian military that if they choose to ignore his call, he will authorize the use of force against their troops inside the Idlib province.

Shelling by Syrian government forces killed eight Turkish military personnel on Monday, prompting Turkish forces to strike back. The escalation raised concerns over future collaboration between Ankara and Moscow, which have backed opposing sides in the war despite joint efforts to ease the violence.

Erdogan said two of Turkey's 12 observation posts, set up around a "de-escalation zone" in northwest Syria's Idlib region as part of a 2017 agreement with Russia and Iran, were now behind Syrian government front lines.

“We hope that the process of the regime pulling back behind our observation posts is completed in the month of February,” he told members of his AK Party. “If the regime does not pull back during this time, Turkey will have to do this job itself.”

He said the Turkish military would carry out air and ground operations in Idlib, when necessary.

Erdogan has said Moscow, which supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Ankara, which has backed rebels who tried to topple him, should resolve the conflict “without anger” and agreed with Russian President Vladimir Putin to improve coordination of their countries’ actions in Syria.

The Idlib governorate is the last large stronghold of anti-government forces in Syria. It was proclaimed a de-escalation zone under the Russia-Turkey agreements. Turkey, which has influence with several armed groups there, is supposed to help deescalate the armed conflict and assist with a transition to political dialogue and a peaceful resolution. It has 12 observation posts that are meant to monitor the situation.

Syrian troops have been gradually capturing some parts of the Idlib governorate, pushing militant groups – who continuously violated the ceasefire – closer to the Turkish border.

Russia blamed Monday’s incident on miscommunication with the Turkish side. Erdogan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, took part in an emergency phone call following the clashes in an effort to deflate the tension, and agreed to reinforce coordination in Syria.
