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Idlib Crisis: New Refugee Influx at the Doors of Europe

Since April the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib is under heavy assault by Assad's forces backed by Russian air support. The developments further escalated when on the 19th August regime forces attacked a military convoy of the Turkish Armed Forces and besieged the Turkish observation post in Morek where 200 Turkish soldiers are stationed, marching further to the key town of Kahn Sheikhoun and cutting the M5 highway. On 16 September the three guarantor-states of the Astana Process Turkey, Russia and Iran will hold a trilateral summit on Syria to discuss the recent developments. Thereafter, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will head to the United Nation General Assembly's opening session in New York to elaborate the topic with his American counterpart Donald Trump.

The enduring military campaign caused a new humanitarian crisis which might have far-reaching security implications, especially for Europe. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) over 567.000 people in Syria's northwest were displaced since the outbreak of the recent spiral of violence. On the 29th of August, 13 boats filled with 547 refugees landed on Greece's Lesbos island – the biggest arrival since the height of the crisis in 2015-16. In August alone over 6.000 refugees arrived in Greece, the highest in three years.

According to the Director of the German Institute for Economic Research (IFO) a new refugee influx from Idlib to Turkey would lead to the collapse of the EU-Turkey readmission agreement from 2016. According to the agreement Turkey agreed to take back Syrian refugees arriving on the Greek islands in exchange for €6 billion in European aid and visa-freedom for Turkish citizens. Ankara is not satisfied with the agreement due to outstanding payments by the EU and the pending implementation of the visa-freedom.

Turkey links the situation in Idlib with its demand to establish a safe zone in northern Syria which shall be a safe haven for over 1 million Syrian refugees. Turkish officials and media openly state that in case of a new refugee wave Ankara might open up a transfer corridor to Greece and Bulgaria. *"You either*

support us to have a safe zone in Syria or we will have to open the gates”, Erdoğan said. According to the worst-case scenario, the EU could be confronted with a refugee crisis similar to the one from 2015.

Being forced into a corner by the two great powers Russia and US in Syria with the total collapse of the strategic Idlib city being a matter of time, and with regards to the rampant anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkey which led also to major losses for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the last mayoral elections, Erdoğan’s threats should be read not as a mere bluff but as a serious warning. Being internationally isolated on many fronts, playing the refugee card is the most effective bargaining chip for Ankara – not only on Syria.

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