In recent days, we’ve been witnessing a noticeable deterioration of the security situation in Syria. Hostilities are being reported both in Idlib and Aleppo governorates, where radical militants are desperately trying to regain control of sections of the M5 highway they had to surrender. Gunfights are being reported near the village of al-Rashidin to the west of Aleppo.

It’s clear that there’s a massive build up of Turkish troops and military equipment taking place in northern Syria. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Turkish media sources, from February 2 to 10, almost 1,500 Turkish trucks and tractors carrying tanks arrived to the above-mentioned governorates, with the number of Turkish servicemen on the ground reaching nine thousand.

On February 10, one of the largest armed clashes between the Turkish Armed Forces and the troops of Syria’s president Bashar al-Assad was reported in Idlib. According to the Turkish Ministry of Defense, Turkish troops managed to take kill over a hundred Syrian soldiers, destroy three tanks, two artillery guns and one helicopter as a result of a massive missile and artillery strike against a grand total of 115 targets in northwest Syria.

The militants of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorist group which happens to be a wing of the well-known Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist front have recently launched a missile attack against the positions of the Syrian army in western
Aleppo, where government forces are actively engaging terrorist formations. After this attack when the Ebaa News Agency released pictures of this event on social media, its readers began pointing out immediately that it was obvious that the attack was supported by M60 tanks of the Turkish Armed Forces, with Turkey having a massive military presence in this part of Syria. It is clear that Turkey is amassing its armored vehicles in this region.

The Syrian Armed Forces General Staff did not provide any figures regarding the outcome of these attacks. Some journalists on the ground claim that Syrian artillery units opened fire in retaliation, striking advancing Turkish military columns. The fiercest strikes were reported on the Turkish convoy traveling by the overrun Syrian air base Taftanaz in the Idlib and the Turkish stronghold near the city of Atareb in Aleppo.

In addition, near Qamishli in northeastern Syria on February 12, there was a clash between US-led forces and pro-government Syrian units. As follows from media reports, the Americans opened fired on the local population near the village of Khirbet Ammu when they blocked the way of a US military convoy, killing a local resident. This resulted in a firefight between the US military and the villagers in which one US soldier perished.

Additionally Ankara is delivering missile systems to its observation posts in Idlib. According to the Turkish news agency Anadolu, over a dozen trucks carrying the equipment necessary for launching missile strikes have arrived so far. In addition, Ankara deployed special forces across the Idlib de-escalation zone. The same agency claims that armored vehicles carrying special forces operatives are arriving from various parts of Turkey to Syria, moving through the Reyhanli region of the Hatay Governorate.

The Turkish Armed Forces command has also deployed multiple missile systems along the Syrian border, demonstrating its intention to escalate this armed confrontation with Damascus. At the same time, Turkish authorities chose the path of voicing groundless accusations against Russian and Syrian politicians, accusing them of escalating the situation in Idlib themselves.

Against this background, Moscow has for the first time directly accused Turkey of its inability to successfully implement the Sochi agreements, drawing Ankara’s attention to the fact that a successful offensive by Syrian forces adds to the establishment of a real security zone in Idlib and Aleppo, which Turkey itself failed to create. At the same time, it was emphasized that the offensive launched by Syria is primarily directed against the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorist group which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda, together with its allies on the ground. Among those are the militants of the pro-Turkish National Liberation Front militant group. It is precisely due to countless provocations in the Idlib de-escalation zone that radical militants find themselves capable of escaping the return fire of Syrian government troops, using the local population as human shields. The situation is further escalated by the fact that these regions are being flooded with weapons and ammunition across the Syrian-Turkish border, together with the
fact that Turkish military leaders continue amassing armored vehicles and troops in Idlib.

It should be recalled that in May 2017 in Astana, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to create four de-escalation zones in Syria. Three of them came under the control of Damascus in 2018. The better part of the fourth zone that consists of the territories of the Idlib, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia governorates (also known as the Greater Idlib region) has so far been controlled by the militants of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorist group.

In September 2018, Russia and Turkey signed an agreement in Sochi regarding the establishment of a demilitarized zone in Idlib, which implied that Ankara was responsible for ensuring the separation of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham terrorists from “moderate” militants represented by the National Liberation Front, supported by the Turkish government. However, Turkey has not just failed to fulfill its obligations, it has effectively jeopardized the attempts undertaken by Syrian forces to inflict significant damage upon besieged terrorist formations. And now Ankara finds itself openly supporting what it describes as the “resolute Syrian armed opposition” in its battles against Assad’s troops in Idlib. Against this background, the presence of Turkey's so-called observation posts in Syria loses all practical meaning, as it has failed to fulfill its obligations under the Sochi memorandum. And those demands that Ankara has put forward regarding Moscow abandoning its fight against terrorists entrenched in Idlib will not be accepted under any circumstance.

Under these conditions, Russian-Turkish relations, just like in 2015, have come under a severe “stress test”, primarily because of the exorbitant foreign policy ambitions of the ruling Turkish elites. Moscow believes that the prime cause of the rapid deteriation in Syria is Ankara’s chronic failure to fulfill its obligations under the Sochi memorandum and Ankara’s continuous transfer of so-called moderate armed opposition units to northeast Syria and Libya, an official spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova noted. She emphasized that Russia is committed to abiding by the agreements signed and is prepared to work together with all sides involved in Idlib. Moscow’s primary objective in this situation is the reduction of the level of violence on the ground, ensuring the safety and security of military personnel of the guarantor countries located inside and outside of the de-escalation zone, as well as preventing further armed confrontations resulting from ill-conceived military actions. In the event of further escalations, the memorandum of September 17, 2018 may be terminated by Moscow.

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