The Idlib Conundrum and Turkey in the Syrian War

Although there is still no end in sight for the war in Syria yet, it is possible to see that the positions of actors intervening in the region externally and internally have already been determined to a large extent. On the other hand, the Southern Front, Daesh's redesign of Iraq, PYD in Northern Syria, the Assad regime in fertile Syria, and the status of actors in Idlib point to a complete uncertainty about the future of the country. Particularly, Idlib, which is close to the Turkish border, is now a territory accommodating different opposition groups and a population of 2 million. This region will constitute the most important intersection point of the fragile fault line between Syria and its neighboring countries in the coming period.

In Syria, the opposition supported by the USA and Jordan on a limited scale at the Southern Front has been stuck in Daraa Province without making significant progress since the beginning of the revolution. This example is an important indicator in terms of comprehending the real support provided by the USA to the Syrian opposition from the beginning.

There is no doubt that PYD, the PKK's Syrian branch, was the one using and getting the most out of the popular uprising in Syria. With the support of the USA and Western world, as well as Russia, the PYD sets its eyes on and is occupying not only lands where Kurdish people live, but also Arab lands. It is seen that the PYD and its allies who are trying to take Raqqa, a city mostly inhabited by Arabs, back from Daesh at the moment have chosen Deir ez-Zor as their next target. It is not hard to forecast that the PYD's next target after Deir ez-Zor which has most of Syria's energy, agricultural and other economic and social facilities, will be Idlib, as one of the last places of resistance remaining under the control of the opposition.

There are two important armed groups in Idlib at the moment. The first is Ahrar al-Sham which receives partial support from Turkey and adopts the Free Syrian Army's green, white and black flag with three stars, and the other is the large coalition consisting of such groups as Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as Al-Nusra Front), Jund al-Aqsa and Nureddin Zengi. This coalition named Tahrir al-Sham is the largest and strongest group in Idlib. Although the conflict between groups in question seems to have ceased for now, the deep hostilities of the past may well cause re-occurrence of disputes between these groups in the future. Apart from the reasons behind these conflicts and the problems faced, the striking aspect with regard to them is the silence of Western powers, particularly the USA, and the Western media against these developments. The silence of the Western world, which considers Tahrir al-Sham the successor of Al-Qaida and has declared it a terrorist organization, is a meaningful and an important indicator in terms of reading the West's intentions in the region.

It is not hard to predict that the PYD, which wants to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea, will try to reach its goal with the support of its biggest ally, the USA. We are currently receiving news from the region that there is conflict in Idlib, while the Raqqa operation is still continuing, and that many people have lost their lives in these conflicts. Idlib is currently populated by thousands of foreign soldiers who came to Syria with different motivations, then joined various opposition groups and are now staying in the city. The status and future of these soldiers who came from different countries also raise significant concerns.

On the other hand, conflict in Idlib is also a particular concern for Turkey. There are around 2 million people living in this city, which is just next to the Turkish border. Moreover, Idlib and its surroundings constitute the most important shield against the Mediterranean belt that the USA is trying to open up to the PYD.

As we know from the previous period, the most significant leverage proposed to open up space for the PYD was the discourse of the threat of terrorism. You will recall that so far Daesh has been forced to give up the regions it was occupying to the PYD, which receives air support from the USA. During these operations, Turkey has also faced strong pressure in terms of the media, politics and its economy. The classic method has been to tie the Turkish government's hands by protesting that they are "supporting Daesh" while continuing to redesign the region to their wishes.

While everybody is aware of the above experiences and examples, now people's minds are occupied with the following question; "Will the same thing that happened in Raqqa happen in Idlib?" It is very likely that the USA and its Western allies will implement a similar policy if they consider Tahrir al-Sham a terrorist

organization and increase the pressure. In such a case, media and politics may be used to put pressure on Turkey to stop its aid to the people of Idlib.

Consequently, the possibility to enter the combat in Idlib for the USA, together with the PYD with the excuse of eliminating terrorist organizations and occupying the region arises as an issue that should be evaluated closely. Therefore, for Turkey, it is very important to quickly come up with a solution in defining the status of Idlib by reaching an agreement with regional and international powers. Otherwise, it is certain that this process will terrorize the region and this situation will affect Turkey significantly in the upcoming periods. Besides, it would be accurate to say that current agreements and border lines in Syria will completely be determined according to military dominance in the field rather than political dialogues as in Geneva and Astana. As a matter of fact, the main decisive factor concerning the status of Syria will be the balance of military power on the field, rather than international legal processes being carried out in Geneva and Astana.