

Report

Avoiding Chaos Post-Liberation of Idlib City

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Opposition fighters from the Suqoor al-Sham Brigade, one of the factions which took part in the Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest) alliance to liberate Idlib city from regime control on 28 March 2015 [Reuters]

Abstract

While the Syrian revolution is at an internationally-imposed stalemate, Idlib city has now been liberated, and this raises several questions about the gains and risks for the revolution's supporters now that Idlib city has fallen to the opposition. After more than four years of inaction, the liberation of Idlib city should be the external opposition and international community's cue to at least attempt to review their position in the face of Assad's continued atrocities. This report outlines the pro-revolution factions involved in the battle for Idlib city and its strategic importance in the overall battle to free Syria from the Assad regime. The report concludes by weighing the gains and risks of a free Idlib city for the opposition as well as for the international community.

Introduction

When the city of Raqqa was liberated from the Assad regime March 2013, pro-revolution activists rejoiced, declaring it was the first major city to fall out of the regime's grip. Those celebrations quickly turned to dismay as citizens became disgruntled with who came to rule the city after its liberation: Daesh, or the so-called Islamic State (IS), took over as Jabhat an-Nusra (JaN) retreated from the city to the nearby town of at-Tabaqa. However, that was only the beginning of the bad news for residents. Syrian citizens who were government employees in the surrounding towns and villages could no longer collect their salaries from Raqqa, and local councils did not have the resources to keep up with healthcare needs for local residents. Most importantly, youth, journalists,

doctors and activists became targets for Daesh, meaning that the freedom they had fought for was once again stifled.

The recently-finished battle for Idlib, which ended in the favour of pro-revolution forces, again raises the question of how this will impact not only the city's residents, but also the opposition's ability to manage liberated areas. This report includes an overview of the opposition factions involved in the battle for Idlib city, their goals and the tactics they used to blaze their way into the city. It concludes with the gains and risks of a free Idlib city for the opposition and the international community's responsibility now that the city is liberated.

The goal, the factions and military tactics

Operating under the banner of Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest) as a "command centre", Ahrar al-Shaam and Jabhat an-Nusra (the Nusra Front) have been at the forefront of the battle to free Idlib city. Other participating military factions include Faylaq ash-Sham, Suqoor al-Sham, Jund al-Aqsa, Jaysh al-Sunni, Liwaa al-Haqq Taftanaz and Ajnad ash-Sham.(1) On Tuesday, 22 March 2015, the Jaysh al-Fath command group released a statement addressing "their families" in Idlib as well as Sunnis fighting with the regime.(2) In the first part of the statement, the group directed "glad tidings" to their "families" in the city, writing,

"We are on the outskirts of this almighty city of Idlib, we have not betrayed you and we have not forgotten how the regime oppresses you. [We have not forgotten] your screams calling for the fall of the regime, and we promise that our minds will not be at ease and we will not rest until we uproot the oppressor and replace him with merciful and just Islamic rule".(3)

The second part of the statement specifically addressed the Sunnis fighting with the regime, chiding them for their part in "Alawite atrocities" against Sunnis across Syria, and promising amnesty to all pro-regime soldiers who "lay down their weapons and keep to their homes" so as to avoid fighting the approaching opposition factions.(4)

According to Abu Omar from the Jaysh al-Fath media office, the first and foremost goal was to liberate the city from the regime's presence, which frees the city's residents from the regime's stifling occupation over the last few years.(5) Furthermore, the military factions intend to target the regime's military and security headquarters south of the city, weakening regime forces' ability to attack the liberated villages and towns in the Idlib province.(6)

On 24 March 2015, the battle began to intensify, with several regime checkpoints falling to the opposition that evening, signalling a shift from prior battles. Furthermore, that evening, some opposition forces reported entering the city, while Jabhat an-Nusra reported one suicide operation and Jund al-Aqsa two on regime-held checkpoints, something unprecedented in previous offensives on the city, which had been limited to the city’s outskirts.

By the next afternoon (25 March 2015), Abul Yazeed from Ahrar al-Sham’s media office reported that a total of at least a dozen significant regime checkpoints had been liberated.(7) He also stated that most of the checkpoints were taken by targeted shelling on these checkpoints and subsequent invasion.(8) The table below divides the liberated checkpoints based on their geographic frontline, as of 25 March 2015:

Liberated Checkpoints by Frontline as of 25 March 2015 (9)		
Southern Frontline	al-Qalaa'	Jund al-Aqsa and Ahrar al-Sham
	Ain Sheeb	
Northern and Western Frontlines	al-Ram	Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham
	al-Qalaa'	
	Sabah Qatee'	
	al-Sakan al-Shabaabi	
	al-Jam'aa	
Eastern Frontlines	Old Ghazl	Ahrar al-Sham and Liwaa al-Haqq Taftanaz (embedded with Jabhat al-Nusra)
	New Ghazl	
	al-Manshara	
	Mu'askar al-Insha'at	
	Sadco	
	al-Sawame'	

By Thursday, 26 March 2015, al-Kinsirwa, al-Kahrabaa’, al-Madajin, al-Thalatheen, Ghassan Abboud, al-Maslakh, Deir al-Zughb, Sihr al-Sharq and Ma’mal al-Barkat checkpoints had also been liberated. While some outlets advertised the complete liberation of the city by Friday night (27 March), both Abul Yazeed and Abu Omar denied these claims, saying that while fighters had made it into the city, it was not yet fully liberated.(10) The table below indicates the gains that were made within the city as of late Friday evening:

Liberated Areas Within Idlib City as of 27 March 2015 (11)		
Western Quarter	Thawra Street	Jund al-Aqsa and Ahrar al-Sham
	Jaami' al-Sa'ad	
Northwestern Quarter	Agricultural Roundabout	Jund al-Aqsa
	Agricultural Faculty	
Eastern Quarter	Museum	Ahrar al-Sham
	Souk al Haal	
	Mihraib Roundabout	
Northeastern Quarter	Ma'aret Misreen Roundabout	Jabhat al-Nusra

Overnight and into Saturday morning, the opposition fighters made further gains, capturing the central prison, the famous Clock Tower Square, the Traffic Department and the central court. By Saturday mid-afternoon, the regime's security compound was captured and the city was declared completely free.(12)

Geographic and strategic significance

Protests in the city of Idlib were quickly suppressed by the regime early on during the revolution, and the regime's army occupied the city starting March 2012.(13) It is the capital of the northern Idlib province, with the city of Aleppo to the northeast and the Latakia province to the southwest. There are currently over 200,000 people living in the city, and this number is a result of displacement from surrounding areas during the last few years.(14)

According to Abu Nadir al-Idlibee,(15) a student and previous resident of the city who left a few months ago, the people who currently live in Idlib are comprised of three groups: original residents, internally displaced people from nearby villages and cities and regime supporters who left liberated areas in the countryside.(16) He says that ever since the regime occupied the city, it is impossible for citizens to leave their home without passing through at least one regime checkpoint, each of these checkpoints "an independent entity, arbitrarily questioning residents as they please".(17) Thus, the city's liberation would be strategic given that it would loosen the regime's grip on civilian life and movement through the city.

On another level, since most of the countryside is already liberated and under opposition control, a free Idlib city is significant for opposition fighters geographically speaking, because it will pave the way to Mastoomeh, a key command centre for the regime on the

city's southern border.(18) Furthermore, freeing Idlib means the regime's supply line between the coastline (Latakia) and regime-controlled al-Foo'a and Kafraya villages is permanently disrupted. Al-Foo'a and Kafraya are major military strongholds for both the regime and its supporting Hezbollah forces and are located northeast of the city.(19) Al-Qardaha, where the Assad family is from, is located in the Latakia province, and the city of Salma, which is northwest of al-Qardaha, is already in the hands of the opposition, and has already caused the regime serious worry over the last few months.(20) Perhaps most importantly, this liberation will now allow the opposition to move on to liberating the regime's last strongholds in the Idlib province, namely, Jisr al-Shughoor, Ariha and the aforementioned Mastoomeh.

A risky gain

Of course, when a major city falls, this is at least a symbolic blow to the Assad regime's morale and to that of its army and its foreign supporters such as Iran and Hezbollah. During the battle, there have been multiple reports of regime soldiers fleeing as the opposition entered their areas. State-run television has continued to deny that Idlib is no longer under regime control. However, one of the key issues that the opposition and international community must address is how to defend the city and its civilians should nearby military and air bases remain under the regime's control. The large civilian concentration within the city is a major concern that cannot be discounted.

This section of the report discusses the risks associated not only with a free city, but also the risks experienced during the battle in general and the risks of post-liberation. The most commonly-mentioned risk among military representatives and media activists has been that the Assad regime would retaliate by intensifying air strikes on the surrounding areas, something which has already occurred in Binnish, Saraqeb and Sarmin (towns in close proximity to the city), where regime air forces have dropped both chlorine-filled barrels and barrel bombs, in the days following the start of the battle to free Idlib.(21) These areas are opposition-held and mere kilometres away from the city, and there is fear that these attacks will intensify within the city as well as the surrounding areas, where many refugees have fled.

A second risk is contingent on the advances that the opposition factions are able to make on the ground. According to Mohammed Aloush, an official from the political body of the Revolutionary Command Council based on the Turkey-Syria border, says that freeing the city is not sufficient – if surrounding military and security bases remain under regime control, this will spell the destruction of Idlib.(22) Days before the battle started, Ahmed Zaidan, AlJazeera's Pakistan bureau chief (who is of Syrian origin) tweeted that one of

the regime's goals was to destroy the city of Idlib, and that if the surrounding regime bases, as well strongholds on the coastline and in Damascus, were not addressed, it would spell the end of the city.(23)

Third, there is a risk that has also already presented itself, and it is the further displacement of the city's residents. Because many who are leaving are heading for regime-controlled areas and are doing so because they can afford it, Ibrahim Zaidan, a media activist from Idlib, says that those who remained are the "poor as well as those who refuse to leave their homes and property".(24)

A final, smaller risk is associated with government employees from the surrounding towns and villages who were still collecting their salaries from the city of Idlib. Zaidan says that the reality is that the number of people who continue to rely on the government's resources is actually quite small.(25) Other services that might be interrupted, given patterns seen in Raqqa, include healthcare, education, official government document processing, and passport renewal.

Avoiding chaos

Liberations on a large scale come with large responsibilities. The liberation of Idlib is no different, and the opposition cannot take this lightly and risk another Raqqa-like scenario, in which the city would fall into Daesh's hands. However, the responsibility cannot be theirs alone.(26) Should opposition fighters gain control of the city, the external opposition (namely, the Etilaf) and international community also bear the responsibility of stepping in to help with city management and protecting civilians by at least implementing a repeatedly called-for no-fly zone over northern Syria.

There are several possible scenarios. The opposition fighters could hand the city over to local councils in a smooth transition of power, only playing a security role until a civilian police force is formed. The second scenario could be that the city remains under military control for a prolonged period of time, opening up the door for further attacks by not only regime air forces, but also the international coalition against Daesh, which has already struck civilian areas of Syria with the excuse that Jabhat al-Nusra was present in those areas. Under the second scenario, there would also be the risk of increased military infighting. Another scenario could be that the local councils are able to form themselves quickly and efficiently, and, with support, continue to run the city's institutions with little interruption. None of these scenarios, however, can discount that Assad forces will continue to attack the city from the air, and that this is the biggest dilemma which must be addressed in order to allow for not only a smooth transition to

power but also pave the way for the opposition fighters to move on to other strategic targets.

Aloush says that to date, there has been no tangible support for the battle from external bodies, such as the Syrian interim government.(27) Evidence of this is that the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (Etilaf) has thus far played a more symbolic, political role, establishing an "operations room" to follow the news of the battle and issuing statements on the battle's progress to residents of the city.(28) As the battle was ongoing, they could not even provide aid to residents who remained in areas of the city still controlled by the regime.(29)

Once the city is liberated, the regime will still have access to airspace over northern Syria. Since international coalition air forces have managed to fly through northern Syria air space to conduct strikes on what they claim are Daesh and Nusra strongholds, the international community obviously has access to this airspace. The US alone is spending nearly eight million dollars a day to take part in this coalition against Daesh,(30) but when Syrian citizens began an international campaign for a no-fly zone, US officials such as Joint Chiefs Chairman General Martin Dempsey balked, saying that it could cost them nearly a billion dollars a month to maintain a no-fly zone in Syria and it would mean ground troops might be forced to enter the country.(31) However, continuing to refuse imposing a no-fly zone now that most of the Idlib province is liberated will mean that Assad's air force can effectively pummel the city to the ground, as it has done in areas like liberated Douma in the Damascus countryside.

The reality is that particularly at this time, the international community will likely express even further resistance to a no-fly zone now that Idlib is liberated, given the battle's major players. Similar to the liberation of Raqqa, Jabhat al-Nusra is a key player in the current battle to take Idlib city. Jabhat al-Nusra is designated as "al-Qaeda in Syria" and is thus on the US State Department's terror list.(32) Any support from the US or its allies, in the form of a no-fly zone or otherwise, to protect the city of Idlib, could be seen as contradictory policy which will also jeopardize the Obama administration's war declaration on Daesh and the alliances it has formed for that purpose, particularly with Iran. Any no-fly zone would likely be delayed until the city is turned over to civilian leadership.

Furthermore, the Etilaf (the umbrella opposition group) does not coordinate with any factions on the terrorist list, meaning that it did not have any direct contact with Jabhat an-Nusra during the battle or even in the coordination leading up to the battle. However, Nagham Ghadri, the Etilaf's vice president, says they received assurances from all

factions participating in Jaysh al-Fath's operations that they would hand administration of the city over to civilian rule should it be freed.(33) This includes the local coordination committees (LCC) of both Idlib and the Idlib countryside (located on the city's outskirts for now).(34) Adnan Rahmoun, the Idlib province's LCC representative to the Etilaf, backed this statement and added that none of the fighting factions have expressed any intention to try to run the city.(35)

Ghadri added that while the regime has been preventing people in their areas of control from leaving the city, several opposition factions have actively opened the door for people to leave areas that they control if they wish.(36) Several videos have been posted to YouTube (the only media outlet for many Syrian activists) showing opposition fighters helping civilians escape their homes during the battle, including fighters from Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra.(37)

One thing is certain: the weeks after the liberation of Idlib will demonstrate whether the military and political roles will indeed be separate spheres in the city. This will depend on both the military and political opposition's ability to maintain existing institutions as well as security in the city. However, to do this, both external opposition and international community support is necessary, otherwise, the country will remain in stalemate mode.

Conclusion

Opposition forces blazed through Idlib city, liberating it in record time; however, now that the city is free, there are very real security and administration issues that must be jointly addressed by the liberating forces, the external opposition (Etilaf) and the international community. A free Idlib city is the international community's chance to reverse their four years of inaction on Syria. This report has outlined the battle thus far, arguing that the liberation of Idlib city will actually be a loss should the city be mismanaged and left on its own post-liberation, particularly if Assad's air force continues to have unfettered access over northern Syria and other liberated areas.

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33. Nagham Ghadri phone interview, 26 March 2015.
34. Ibid.
35. Author phone interview with Adnan Rahmoun, Idlib Province's Local Coordination Committee representative to the Etilaf, 28 March 2015.
36. Nagham Ghadri phone interview, 26 March 2015.
37. See the following YouTube links [Arabic] which show opposition fighters in Idlib helping civilians make their escape:
Ahrar al-Sham: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGfy2qZoxs8>
Jabhat al-Nusra: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqQtvlp7Fao>