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The Tehran summit: Finalizing Syria's tripartite tutelage

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Friday's summit in Tehran brings together the Iranian, Russian, and Turkish presidents to settle Idlib's fate—and declare their tripartite tutelage over the country.

All eyes in the region are on Friday's tripartite **summit**

bringing together the Turkish, Russian, and Iranian presidents in Tehran, which is expected to play an essential role in determining the fate of Syria's Idlib, the last opposition-held province in the country, where an imminent military offensive by the Bashar al-Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian patrons is now widely anticipated. The three states meeting in Tehran, who are also the patrons of the so-called Astana political process, are now clearly the key to changing the military map in Syria, where the Assad regime has in recent months retaken the majority of populated territory.

The function of the Tehran summit, however, will also go beyond military planning, as the meeting would not be taking place to begin with without its participants having already agreed on the broad outlines of Idlib's future. The summit will attempt to diminish the fallout from the launch of the expected military campaign in the province, and to assuage Western fears about a new refugee crisis, dividing these tasks among the three members of the alliance.

Ankara's key task will be to make the necessary arrangements to transform Idlib's armed opposition factions into something resembling the factions operating in the Turkish-controlled "Euphrates Shield" zone along Syria's northwestern border, in terms of establishing their direct links and absolute allegiance to Turkey, and continuing to leave no significant margin for maneuver outside this framework. As for Moscow's role, it will be to bomb all the factions that attempt to stay outside this agreed framework, be they local factions seeking to continue the fight against the regime, or jihadist groups disregarding Ankara's will.

For its part, Tehran will be obliged to take a step backward in several parts of Syria, and refrain from appearing to be a principal player or driver of the forces in Syria during the coming period. This will not, of course, mean it won't continue to be a main partner in the pro-Assad axis, just as the operations room run by senior Iranian officers in Damascus will remain operational, and not up for discussion.

Looking beyond the details of the anticipated battle in northwest Syria, it appears Friday's meeting will also be a step forward (for its participants) on the political front, confirming that the political process is now under their control, with no margin in which the West might move and adjust the scales slightly. In the not-too-distant future, Western states such as Germany will be prepared to offer financial support in Syria under the cover of this tripartite coalition, and it will give the surging European right wing great pleasure to carry out its plan to provide "aid" to the countries exporting refugees. Vladimir Putin, one suspects, will not be unhappy to give such people the good news of these developments.

Moreover, after Idlib, there will be nothing left for this tripartite alliance to do next except work to push back the specter of American influence from the parts of east Syria controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Though direct military confrontation there is unfeasible at present, it will be possible to continue working on isolating this presence and removing its political effect, by putting pressure on the regional presence of the United States, weakening Washington's influence and that of its allies in east Syria, and preventing them from leaving the boundaries of that zone, while awaiting the appropriate time to direct a

physical blow, and make continuation therein near-impossible for the American administration.

Since the previous summit, which brought the three presidents together in Ankara in April, ties between them appear to have been strengthened considerably, as has their determination to end any independent Syrian presence capable of threatening the key accomplishment of Astana, which was to place the strings of Syria's future in the hands of the three states.

Given the **massacre** perpetrated by the Russian air force in Jisr al-Shughur on Tuesday, it would seem no miracle is coming to change what has been decided for Idlib, and all of Syria. Irrespective of the plan for the coming military operation and the related arrangements to be settled at Friday's meeting, and regardless of the scope and scale of the humanitarian catastrophe that unfolds, the key announcement of the Tehran summit will be that of permanent tutelage over Syria; tutelage with only one candidate, Bashar al-Assad.

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