

# Putin's 'Chef' Preps Soldiers for Final Assault on Syrian Rebels

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Russia's military is incorporating mercenaries hired by a wealthy ally of President Vladimir Putin into its planned offensive to help Syria's army retake the last major stronghold held by jihadist rebels, according to people with direct knowledge of the matter.

Hundreds of freelance fighters who answer to Yevgeny Prigozhin, the businessman known as "Putin's chef" for his Kremlin catering contracts, are amassing near the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib for a full-scale assault that's expected to start within weeks, the people said.

Grouped into tank-equipped units of 50 men each and backed by Russian air power, the plan is for these soldiers to work with uniformed Syrian forces, first to establish escape corridors for civilians, one of the people said. Then they'll engage in the street-to-street fighting required to clear the heavily populated city of thousands of al-Qaeda-affiliated militants, he said. The operation, if it goes ahead, could take months.

Prigozhin didn't respond to an emailed request for comment via his Concord Catering company. Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said only that Russia will act in Idlib "on the basis of agreements" with neighboring Turkey, a leading critic of recent military action in the region.

Pacifying Idlib would allow President Bashar al-Assad to consolidate control over all but the oil-rich northeastern part of Syria, where U.S.-allied Kurds are seeking wide autonomy. Ending the worst of an eight-year civil war would also set the stage for reconciliation and reconstruction efforts to begin, according to Alexei Malashenko, senior analyst at Dialogue of Civilizations, a Berlin-based research group funded by a longtime Putin ally.

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"If Assad restores full control over Idlib, there won't be any more talk of his ouster," he said. "It would be a huge breakthrough — for him and for Russia."

After Russia entered the war at Assad's request in 2015, his army, also backed by Iran, clawed back vast swaths of territory from Islamic State and a hodgepodge of groups supplied by countries including the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Idlib and the eponymous region around it, an area twice the size of Luxembourg, is the last province still in jihadist hands.

The presence of 3 million civilians and fierce opposition from Turkey, which fears its already-teeming refugee centers being overwhelmed by a fresh wave of displacements, has so far deterred a full-blown offensive. But Syrian forces have stepped up advances under Russian air strikes in recent months, drawing UN and U.S. warnings of a looming humanitarian disaster.

The governorate's population has more than doubled since the start of a conflict that's forced 5.6 million people to leave the country and 6.6 million more to relocate internally, according to the UN. Idlib is now central to Putin-led efforts to push through a new constitution that's designed to give Syria's regions more autonomy and create the stability needed to begin reconstruction and lure refugees back from Turkey, Jordan and elsewhere.

It's not clear if the Kremlin is coordinating its military plans for Idlib with Turkey, which has erected monitoring posts in the region to help safeguard the Sunni majority. Russia, Turkey and mainly Shiite Iran are sponsoring Syria's post-war constitutional process.

The three countries have settled on the names of all but one of the 150 Syrians who will comprise the committee charged with drafting a new constitution and expect to finalize the list at a meeting in Ankara on Sept. 16, a senior Turkish official said on condition of anonymity.

Russia's Defense Ministry didn't respond to request for comment on developments in Idlib, while Turkey's government declined to comment. Officials at the U.S. State Department declined to comment.

Putin said last week that he and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had agreed on "additional" measures to "neutralize terrorist centers" in Idlib, but didn't elaborate.

Erdogan on Thursday repeated threats to allow more refugees to enter Europe if the European Union and the rest of the world don't do more to help Turkey alleviate the problem.

## **U.S. airstrikes**

An estimated 4,100 people, including 1,000 civilians, have been killed in the Idlib governorate since Assad's forces — with help from Russia and Iran — intensified their attacks on suspected terrorist groups in April, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based monitoring group. Russia declared a unilateral cease fire starting Saturday, the same day U.S. missiles killed dozens of al-Qaeda fighters at a camp in the province.

The strikes angered Russia's military, which said it didn't receive warning, prompting a phone call between Putin's top general, Valery Gerasimov, and his U.S. counterpart, Joseph Dunford, according to the Defense Ministry in Moscow.

During that call, Gerasimov and Dunford discussed ways to avoid "incidents during operations to combat terrorists," the ministry said.

Relations between the former Cold War foes reached a new low in Syria in February 2018, after U.S. missiles killed about 200 of Prigozhin's mercenaries during an attempt to seize Kurdish-controlled oil assets.

Still, his fighters, including veterans of the rebellion in Ukraine, have had notable successes in Syria. They played a pivotal role in the liberation of the ancient city of Palmyra, a World Heritage Site, from the Islamic State.

For Assad, who's been in power since his Kremlin-allied father died in 2000, an immediate goal in Idlib is to reopen the highway that links the agricultural hub to war-ravaged Aleppo, once Syria's commercial capital, said Nihat Ali Ozcan, a strategist at the Economic Policy Research Foundation in Ankara.

After that, Putin will help Erdogan push the refugees in Turkey back into Syria, according to Vladimir Frolov, a former Russian diplomat who's now a foreign policy analyst in Moscow.

"Putin will then use the reverse flow of refugees to shame the Europeans — Macron in particular — into providing reconstruction aid to Assad," he said.

French President Emmanuel Macon told a visiting Putin last month that it was "vital" for Russia and Syria to stop their bombing campaign in Idlib because "children are being killed."

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