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# WALKING A FRAGILE PATH: ASSESSING THE IDLIB DE-MILITARIZATION DEAL

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## Key Takeaways

**Sochi Agreement is not an Open-Ended Process:** The Idlib roadmap set by Turkey and Russia is a highly pressing one in terms of the agreed timeline. While the withdrawal of all heavy weapons (tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems, artillery and mortars) and armed groups is scheduled for mid-October 2018, transit traffic on the M4 and M5 highways is expected to be re-opened by the end of 2018. In the meantime, the de-militarization area will be closely monitored by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Russian military police. The goals and the deadlines of the plan are very clear, and leave little room for further diplomatic maneuvering.

**Managing Intra-Rebel Dynamics Remain Key for Success:** At the time of writing, while some radical groups, such as Hurras al-Din that has undeniable ties with al-Qaeda, openly rejected the Turkish – Russian deal, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkestan Islamic Party, who have not declared a clear position, remain the wildcards of the de-militarization process. Intra-group splits, divisions, factionalism, and intra-rebel fighting have always been common practices throughout the civil war. Therefore, the most risk-aversive way-out would be encouraging relatively 'acceptable' factions within these groups to disband, and integrate into the recognized opposition umbrella by renouncing their allegiances to al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.

**The Syrian Arab Army's Military Buildup is Continuing:** Following the de-militarization deal brokered by Turkey and Russia, the Syrian Arab Army's robust military buildup around Idlib remains intact. As explained in detail in the previous EDAM report, the Syrian regime deployed its praetorian, battle-hardened formations in the area of operations. The underlying military rationale for keeping the heavy deployment could stem from the need of monitoring the M4 and M5 highway openings in the coming months, as well as putting pressure on the dissident armed groups that refuse to withdraw from the de-militarization zone. At present, there is no major front in Syria that necessitate Assad's military planners to re-deploy most of these combat-capable units in any other corner of the country. Thus, current indicators suggest that the Syrian Arab Army would keep its deployments, at least some of them, until the de-militarization deal is fully realized.

**Emergence of a Risky Line of Contact Could Lead to Provocations:** As the regime's Idlib campaign unfolded with the support of the Russian airpower, Ankara has reinforced its observation outposts with heavy armor and artillery. Open-source pieces of evidence suggest that while Turkey's 12 de-escalation observation posts were initially manned by company-level contingents, at the time of writing, the Turkish Armed Forces boosted its posture to ensure the security of its forward-deployments. At this point, the Syrian regime's military buildup close to the Turkish formations could produce problematic results, especially if Russia cannot fully leash the regime forces some of which are under heavy Iranian influence. These units are established in a politico-sectarian fashion, mostly commanded by hardliner generals, and accompanied by irregular militia, all of which could lead to unforeseen provocations.

**Turkey Needs to Use the Syrian Airspace in Any Scenario:** The de-militarization roadmap can follow one clear trajectory in two phases: First, by using an efficient intelligence toolbox, the entire armed groups of Idlib will have to be convinced to withdraw from the decided 15-20 km territory and the area should be thoroughly monitored. Second, the dissenting groups will have to be eliminated by using military

means. For the monitoring process, Turkey's unmanned aerial capabilities would be indispensable. And in case dissident factions are determined to resist de-militarization efforts, the Turkish military's close-air support and joint air-ground operations would be crucial to support a ground campaign. For accomplishing all these tasks, Turkey will have to use the Syrian airspace in any scenario. Russia's control over the Syrian air defenses and de-confliction in the skies will be critical. Besides, low-altitude air defense capabilities of the dissident groups should be carefully eliminated, especially in case the Turkish military opts for employing rotary-wing platforms of the army aviation.

# Introduction: A Cautious Optimism in Idlib

On September 17, 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met his Russian counterpart, President Vladimir Putin in Sochi for exploring their options to avoid a massive bloodshed in Idlib. After the fruitless Tehran Summit earlier, it came as a surprise that no Iranian official was present in Sochi[1]. The two leaders have agreed on the establishment of a demilitarized zone. The details of the roadmap were framed by the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib's De-escalation Zone brokered by Turkish and Russian defense ministers[2]. The Sochi agreement seeks to establish a 15 to 20km-deep Demilitarized Zone freed from heavy weapons, armed opposition groups, and terrorist entities[3]. Under the terms of the MoU, Turkish and Russian troops will conduct patrols in coordination to separate the Syrian regime and the opposition forces. This study assesses key political-military parameters for the success of the Idlib roadmap.

The Idlib deal is, by all means, a success for the Turkish diplomacy in preventing an uncontrolled violence spiraling into Turkey as a humanitarian catastrophe. Although the Sochi agreement sparked high expectations, the realities on the ground illustrate the complexity of the situation. Firstly, armed clashes between several opposition groups, as well as with the Syrian Arab Army, continue in the area. Secondly, already present intra-rebel tensions in Idlib are now facing the most significant breakpoint, and might even turn into widespread conflicts[4].

The one group in particular that Turkey and Russia have agreed to tackle is Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (the HTS) which remains the strongest armed faction in Idlib[5]. At the time of writing, the province witnessed intra-opposition fighting – mostly between the HTS and the National Front for Liberation factions – as well as sensational assassinations of some prominent HTS figures[6].

The Idlib deal is fragile, even after the de-militarization deadline, as it is strictly related to intra-rebel dynamics, and remains open to third-party provocations and false flag operations. On the one hand, the dissident factions and terrorist entities at the opposition camp, some of which directly rejected the Turkish – Russian joint plan, could undermine the process. On the other hand, hardliners within the ranks of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and Iran-backed Shiite militia can sabotage the Turkish efforts. Notably, as the de-militarization agenda unfolded, Turkey's Euphrates Shield control zone has come under several regime provocations. On September 21, 2018, Assad's forces even targeted al-Bab in the Operation Euphrates Shield area. The provocative attack triggered a Free Syrian Army response at the regime positions in Tadef[7]. These are dangerous signs.

So far, the progress in Idlib offers hope and caution at the same time. On October 08, 2018, Turkey's Anadolu Agency reported that the opposition groups withdrew their heavy arms from the agreed zone[8]. Russian press sources also confirmed the news of the withdrawal, and told that even some factions belonging to the HTS were removing[9]. Pro-regime sources, however, noted that the HTS and the Turkestan Islamic Party groups were remaining in the southwestern part of the de-militarized zone while other opposition groups withdrew[10]. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also confirmed that the Turkestan Islamic

1 Bruce Mabley , Australian Institute of International Affairs, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/averting-disaster-in-syrias-idlib-pocket/, Accessed on: September 28, 2018.

2 Kremlin, Press statement following Russian-Turkish talks, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58574. Accessed on: September 28, 2018.

3 Daily Sabah, https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/09/17/turkey-russia-agree-on-demilitarized-zone-in-idlib-to-avoid-humanitarian-tragedy, Accessed on: September 27, 2018.

4 Syria Direct, https://syriadirect.org/news/after-idlib-agreement-hints-of-hts-nlf-tensions-in-one-rebel-held-town/, Accessed on: September 28, 2018; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=103686, Accessed on: October 1, 2018.

5 Murat Yetkin, Hürriyet Daily News, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/murat-yetkin/turkeys-new-proposal-to-russia-on-idlib-136734, Accessed on: September 24, 2018.

6 Hurriyet Daily News, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syria-rebels-jihadists-clash-near-planned-idlib-buffer-monitor-137583, Accessed on: October 10, 2018.

7 https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2018/21-september-aleppo-in-response-to-saa-shelling-on-albab, Accessed on: October 01, 2018.

8 Anadolu Ajansı, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/idlibde-agir-silahlarin-cephe-hattindan-cekilmesi-tamamlandi/1275525, Accessed on: October 08, 2018.

9 Sputnik, https://tr.sputniknews.com/ortadogu/201810081035564728-idlibde-muhalifler-agir-silahlarin-cekilme-sureci-tamamlandi/, Accessed on: October 08, 2018.

10 Al Masdar News, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/rebels-withdraw-from-northern-hama-part-of-idlib-buffer-zone-monitor/, Accessed on: October 08, 2018.

Party has still not removed its heavy weapons located less than 10km to the regime forces[11]. On October 14, 2018, the HTS released a statement that gave mixed signals. While the terrorist network appreciated the efforts to protect Idlib from direct military action, it adopted a harsh stance against Russia and the Syrian regime. Besides, the statement highlighted the group's unwavering will to continue the jihad[12]. Some sources interpreted the statement as a face-saving, tacit acceptance of the de-militarization deal[13]. In the meanwhile, Hurras al-Din reportedly formed a joint 'operation room' with other dissident armed groups[14]. This new operational accord remains important to monitor since the al-Qaeda affiliated Hurras al-Din and its newly formed coalition recently launched some provocative attacks on the regime forces in Hama[15]. However, Moscow seems to be satisfied with the progress in Idlib although a full withdrawal could not be reached so far. In result, the Russian Aerospace Forces have not supported the regime's sporadic shelling in the de-militarization area[16].

Overall, monitoring the dynamic situation on the ground is daunting since a concentration of many armed stakeholders in a narrow confine along with rapidly changing political-military stances is witnessed. Therefore, the de-militarization efforts will not end by mid-October 2018, rather the deadline will mark the beginning of new phases shaped by further uncertainties.



*Opposition groups within the National Front for Liberation withdrew their heavy arms from the de-militarized zone agreed by the Sochi deal[17].*

[11] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=104159, Accessed on: October 08, 2018.

[12] Syria Direct, https://syriadirect.org/news/idlib-buffer-zone-deadline-passes-amid-bombardments-lack-of-hardline-withdrawals/, Accessed on: October 16, 2018.

[13] Orient News, https://orient-news.net/en/news_show/154988/0/HTS-signals-acceptance-of-Idlib-deal, Accessed on: October 16, 2018.

[14] https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2018/15-october-syria-alqaeda-affiliated-hurras-aldinansar-altawheedansar, Accessed on: October 16, 2018.

[15] SITE Intelligence Group,https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/jihadi-coalition-involving-pro-aq-hurras-al-deen-claims-attacks-on-syrian-military-positions-in-hama.html, Accessed on: October 16, 2018.

[16] The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=104762, Accessed on: October 16, 2018.

[17] Anadolu Agency, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/silahtan-arindirilmis-bolgeden-agir-silahlarin-cekilmesi-sureci-tamamlandi/1278108, Accessed on: October 10, 2018.

# Taming the Hardliners: Turkey's Need to Deter, Disrupt and Disband Dissident Organizations in Idlib

Preparing the 'human terrain' for complete de-militarization in Idlib requires a set of interrelated efforts ranging from using the intelligence capabilities for eroding and disbanding the dissident groups to employing military power when necessary for protecting the diplomatic rapprochement with Russia. In doing so, Turkey will have to face serious risks emanating from the hardliners in Idlib – including terrorist organizations– rejecting the de-militarization process.

Following the Idlib deal, internal splits emerged within several groups. These splits have particularly affected the HTS, being the most combat-capable armed entity in Idlib. The HTS, successor of the Salafist-jihadist al-Nusra Front –a group with strong ties to al-Qaeda– was already divided before. The division led to the establishment of an even more hardliner splinter group called the Guardians of the Religion, namely Hurras al-Din that now openly challenges the de-militarization agreement. Hurras al-Din attracts the foreign fighters at the HTS ranks. Some predict that such divisions could grow bigger as Turkey puts more pressure on the dissident groups[18]. In other words, one cannot rule out an internal break and disband within the HTS. However, this scenario comes at a price.

Firstly, of some 16,000 militants of the terrorist organization, for about one-fourth are estimated to be foreign fighters[19]. According to open-source reports, these foreign terrorists, who prove to be effective in the top decision-making structure, are the ones that firmly oppose the Turkish – Russian deal[20]. In fact, while Hurras al-Din openly shunned the de-militarization agreement, the HTS remained relatively silent – despite the shady October 14 statement– at the time of writing[21]. Therefore, the HTS' ambiguous stance could be explained by the abovementioned internal differences of opinion. If this is the case indeed, then the prospects of a major split, especially amidst such a critical turning point, should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, terror cells with strong al-Qaeda ties, and some foreign fighter factions will probably need to be addressed militarily.

Secondly, although the HTS could indeed split, the fate of its top leadership – especially Abu Muhammad al -Joulani– remains problematic. An Al Jazeera story published in September 2018 claimed that the HTS would agree to integrate into other moderate opposition groups if Joulani assumes the military command *(amir al-harb)* in the new structure, and if the foreign fighters at the HTS ranks were guaranteed their safety[22]. The impossibility of the latter condition was explained earlier in this report. When it comes to the fate of Joulani, possible way-outs also seem limited. When the al-Qaeda in Iraq was on its way of transforming into ISIS, Joulani himself was sent to Syria for building a foothold. There, Joulani first established Jabhat al-Nusra. Then, when ISIS began its march and terrorized the region, a power struggle erupted between the two groups. Joulani and his Nusra Front pledged their loyalty to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name (with some mergers and splits) to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in 2016 and to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in 2017[23]. The US State Department's Rewards for Justice Program offers $ 10 million for Joulani who is recognized as a high-ranking terrorist[24]. Thus, 'accepting' Joulani and his entourage into the secure areas in northwestern Syria would not be practically feasible. Clearly, while many splinter factions from the HTS and the Turkestan Islamic Party could denounce terrorism and even integrate into the National Front for Liberation (a coalition of

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[18] Mariya, Petkova. "After the Sochi Agreement HTS is Facing Internal Division", Al Jazeera English, September 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

[19] Mariya, Petkova. "After the Sochi Agreement HTS is Facing Internal Division", Al Jazeera English, September 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

[20] Ibid.

[21] https://twitter.com/orsamtr?lang=de, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

[22] Mariya, Petkova. "After the Sochi Agreement HTS is Facing Internal Division", Al Jazeera English, September 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/turkey-idlib-180924191442969.html, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

[23] Yaya, J. Fanusie. Al Qaeda's Branch in Syria: Financial Assessment, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2017.

[24] https://rewardsforjustice.net/english/muhammad_al_jawlani.html, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

moderate Syrian rebels with no hostility towards Turkey), for the top-leadership, who are placed in high-priority terrorism watch lists, there is little safe option, if any.

In brief, accession to the de-militarization process will most probably function as a litmus test filtering hard-liners at the HTS ranks as well as the cohesion of the group. Notably, a similar trend was visible during the 2016 transition from Jabhat al-Nusra to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. During this shift, an important proportion of Joulani's *shura council* either left the organization to pursue their direct ties with al-Qaeda, or rejected top posts in the renewed organization[25].

Overall, since the HTS' top leadership and other al-Qaeda affiliates will probably be left out in the cold, protecting the Turkish forward deployments from terrorism now becomes a high-priority. In fact, as the Syrian regime was preparing for the Idlib offensive, the HTS leader Joulani posted a video stating that "weapons of the revolution and jihad" could never be put on the negotiations table. More importantly, in his speech, Joulani said that Turkey's de-escalation posts could not be relied on for protecting Idlib[26].

Turkey's establishment of its observation posts in Idlib through the Astana de-escalation framework was a tricky issue for the HTS. Some assessments reveal that the HTS military leadership did not challenge the Turkish outposts because Turkey, in their view, carefully avoided interfering in the administration of the "liberated areas" (in the terrorist organization's parlance); and secondly, these outposts were not in direct contact with the bulk of the Turkish Armed Forces, therefore, they did not pose any threat. In addition, since Turkey did not directly interfere with the intra-rebel clashes in Idlib, the HTS had not perceived an existential threat from the Turkish presence in the province[27]. Without a doubt, Turkey's robust military capabilities and the geopolitical risk

of being caught between the Syrian Arab Army, Russian airpower, and a Turkish incursion also intimidated the HTS leadership.

The fact that foreign fighters remain one of the biggest problems in the Idlib roadmap is not limited to the HTS. Although the withdrawal of heavy weapons progressed well in many areas, Russian press sources note that some Chechen detachments, which cause one of the biggest concerns in Moscow, remain in the southern outskirts of the province[28]. Turkish sources also confirmed the dissidence of some Chechen groups[29].

Apart from the Caucasian foreign fighters, the Turkic militancy is another issue. Although the Turkestan Islamic Party constitute a small proportion of the overall armed factions in Idlib, these militants are battle-hardened. More importantly, they could easily exacerbate critical international fault lines and cause major headaches for Turkey.

The case of Uighur and other Turkic foreign fighters is a major security concern for China. At the time of preparations for the Idlib offensive, Qi Qianjin, the Chinese Ambassador to Damascus, told the Syrian pro-regime newspaper al-Watan that China was ready to join the Idlib campaign. In his interview, the Chinese Ambassador openly highlighted the Uighur fighters in Syria[30]. Although Beijing later tried to fine-tune the assertive diplomatic rhetoric used by the ambassador[31], recent analyses suggest that China has developed increased commitment in its relations with the Syrian regime[32].

Traditionally, Turkey carefully refrains from provoking China in the Uighur issue. In August 2017, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu paid a visit to Beijing, and stated that Turkey has seen China's security as its own, and would

25 For a detailed work assessing al-Qaeda's Syria campaign, see: Aaron, Y. Zelin [ed.], How al-Qaeda Survived Drones Uprisings and The Islamic State, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2017.

26 Middle East Eye, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-hayat-tahrir-sham-leader-slams-turkey-and-defends-evacuations-new-video-91127761, Accessed on: October 04, 2018.

27 Ayman, Jawad al-Tamimi, From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution Approach and Future, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, pp.19-20.

28 Sputnik, https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201810091068731960-idlib-weapons-withdrawal/, Accessed on: October 10, 2018.

29 Ömer, Özkizilcik, "Soçi Mutakabatı Sonrası Beklentiler", ORSAM, October 08, 2018, http://orsam.org.tr/tr/soci-mutabakati-sonrasi-beklentiler/, Accessed on: October 10, 2018.

30 Al-Watan, http://alwatan.sy/archives/161055, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

31 https://www.memri.org/reports/chinese-ambassador-syria-two-countries-have-golden-opportunity-strengthen-their-ties#_edn1, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

32 Logan, Pauley and Jesse Marks. "Is China Increasing Its Military Presence in Syria", The Diplomat, August 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/is-china-increasing-its-military-presence-in-syria/, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

never allow any activities, in Turkey or in the region, that could threaten China. The Chinese CCTV reported that Ankara then recognized the Turkestan Islamic Party as a terrorist organization[33]. However, current conditions are very pressing. On the one hand, operational-level military parameters of Idlib make the de-militarization deal the only way-out from a bloodshed that can trigger a massive refugee influx into Turkey. Ankara simply cannot allow the Turkestan Islamic Party or any other group to sabotage the one and only way to protect Turkey from a refugee influx and a tragic humanitarian crisis. On the other hand, as reported by the Human Rights Watch, *"the Chinese government has long carried out repressive policies against the Turkic Muslim*

*peoples in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwest China"* including *"mass arbitrary detention, torture, and mistreatment"[34].* Thus, at such a critical time, launching a direct military campaign to eliminate the Uighur militancy in Syria would not be the best of the choices for Ankara.

The most risk-aversive option for Turkey is to decisively encourage 'acceptable' factions within the Turkestan Islamic Party to integrate into the moderate umbrella opposition structure, to leave any affiliations with terrorist entities, and to properly comply with the de-militarization deal's conditions. In fact, this goal remains difficult but not impossible.

## Exploring the Military Option

Idlib's militancy landscape is complex in nature. Recently, the HTS militants began targeting the National Front for Liberation controlled territory. Besides, intra-rebel fighting erupted in the areas located along the western rural Aleppo and eastern Idlib[35]. Many radical, violent groups with terrorist affiliations have already refused to comply with the de-militarization process. Thus, Turkey, being the only NATO nation that has not adopted a 'no boots on the ground' restraint in Syria, may exercise military power after exhausting its intelligence-driven efforts. One thing is clear, once Ankara initiates the military option, there is no return back without decisively defeating the dissident groups.

In an ideal situation, Turkey's next military campaign in Idlib would involve the National Front for Liberation as the principal warfighting force while the Turkish airpower, land-based fire-support, and a limited number of army formations would back the moderate armed opposition.

Idlib is geographically at Turkey's doorstep, bordering the city of Hatay. In terms of military geopolitics, this proximity brings about key advantages and handicaps at the same time. In case Ankara opts for a military campaign, the Turkish Air Force can generate very high sortie rates in short time. Logistical capabilities would also suffice for prolonged ground operations. Moreover, the theater falls under the Turkish 2nd Field Army's area of responsibility.

The units of the 2nd Field Army along the border have been beefed-up for a long time. Thus, the Turkish military enjoys a high degree of troop concentration in the possible area of operations. Besides, according to the Turkish press, Ankara has amassed land-based fire-support elements (heavy artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems) in Hatay. These assets, in particular, proved to be very efficient in Turkey's previous Syria campaigns, especially when supported by unmanned aerial systems' ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) capabilities. Thus, the Turkish military can deliver some 30 – 40km deep robust and accurate salvos when needed. Finally, Idlib has a predominantly lowland topography –except for the western belt– which makes it suitable for armored and mechanized units' advances in many areas.

On the negative side, however, Ankara's military options will have to overcome serious drawbacks. Firstly, the success of such a campaign would be strictly related to the coherence of 'the anti-deal camp'. In case the dissident groups manage to keep the bulk of the HTS on their sides, along with many other battle-hardened factions, the National Front for Liberation could suffer heavy blows. Such a possibility would bring about a serious mission creep factor for Turkey since the Turkish Armed Forces would need to deploy much larger formations in Idlib. Secondly, a Turkish land incursion into Idlib would be much more dangerous and demanding

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[33] CCTV+, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDhxU4gwfzs, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

[34] Human Rights Watch, Eradicating Ideological Viruses: China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims, 2018.

[35] https://syria.liveuamap.com/, Accessed on: October 05, 2018.

compared to Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. As a reference, one should recall that at the peak of the Euphrates Shield, the Turkish Armed Forces deployed some 8,000 troops from the elite units[36]. At the overture of the Olive Branch, the Turkish Air Force assigned about 25% of its total fighter aircraft inventory to combat missions[37]. In other words, in case the moderate opposition faces serious setbacks against the radical groups, the Turkish military's force generation requirements might be much higher than estimated. And thirdly, deploying a multi-brigade level offensive force close to the Syrian elite formations could lead to highly complicated outcomes that may not be mitigated by the Russians. One should recall that during the Euphrates Shield, Turkish troops were targeted by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces' light-attack aircraft on

November 24, 2016[38]. Likewise, Operation Olive Branch witnessed serious provocations attempted by the pro-regime militia. More importantly, the Baath regime's *praetorian* units were deployed in other parts of the country during the abovementioned Turkish cross-border campaigns. This time, however, the Syrian Arab Army's most combat capable units, commanded by hardliner generals, operate very close to the Turkish border.

On a final note, an operation to crack on the dissident groups would potentially be a Turkish – Russian joint campaign that would inevitably resonate in the broader international community, marking the first NATO nation to launch such a joint military effort with Moscow.

## Turkey Need to Use the Syrian Airspace in Any Scenario:

The de-militarization roadmap in Idlib is a simple yet very demanding one. The trajectory could go both ways, between a peaceful transition and a nastier one necessitating the military toolbox more intensively than anticipated. In either of these scenarios, Turkey would need to use the Syrian airspace that adds more complexity to the situation.

For the monitoring process, Turkey's unmanned aerial capabilities would be key. Turkish defense sector greatly benefited from the lessons-learned from Operation Olive Branch in this respect. The indigenous inventory is well capable of running prolonged reconnaissance and intelligence missions over Idlib. When it comes to the hard way, namely a military operation to tame the dissident

opposition factions, the Turkish military's close-air support and joint air-ground capabilities would be very important to support the campaign.

Russia's control over the Syrian air defenses and de-confliction in the skies will be equally important to prevent unforeseen incidents.

If using lethal force to enforce the de-militarization agenda becomes inevitable, Turkey should carefully eliminate low-altitude air defense capabilities of the dissident groups for protecting the rotary-wing platforms of the army aviation. A captured pilot scenario and a follow-on combat search & rescue mission in high-risk environment should be avoided.

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[36] Milliyet, http://www.milliyet.com.tr/son-dakika-8-bin-turk-askeri-el-gundem-2373357/, Accessed on: October 05, 2018.

[37] For a detailed assessment of Operation Olive Branch, see: Can, Kasapoglu and Sinan Ulgen. Operation Olive Branch: A Political-Military Assessment, EDAM, 2018.

[38] For a detailed assessment of the incident, see: Can, Kasapoglu. "The Stage is Set for an Escalation: The Meaning of Syria's Attack on Turkish Forces", The War on the Rocks, November 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-stage-is-set-for-an-escalation-the-meaning-of-syrias-attack-on-turkish-forces/, Accessed on: October 09, 2018.

# The Syrian Arab Army's Military Buildup Remains Unchanged

Although Russia and Turkey secured a local demilitarization deal, the Syrian Arab Army continues to operate around Idlib. Open-source pieces of intelligence suggest that a large area, ranging from the western outskirts of Aleppo to northern Latakia and rural Hama, has been witnessing the regime's heavy military activity[39].

As analyzed in detail by EDAM's previous Idlib report, prior to the Turkish – Russian deal, these units were already deployed around possible jump-off points to launch a massive incursion into the rebel-held areas. Notably, by still keeping some of the battle-hardened formations in the northwest of the country – and by using them in tactical assaults and sporadic shelling – Assad remains capable of putting pressure on the armed opposition as well as the forward-deployed Turkish forces. Another reason that motivates Assad's military planners to insist on keeping the heavy buildup is logistics. As the outer ring surrounding Idlib will be de-militarized –at least according to plan–, choke points along the M4 and M5 highways connecting Aleppo to the Mediterranean gateway and the rest of the country are expected to be re-opened before 2019. Thus, the Syrian regime would need its elite units to monitor these key lines of communications and secure the normalization process. In brief, the Syrian Arab Army have opted to keep its offensive position in Idlib until the regime, and its Russian patron, are convinced that the de-militarization deal works well in practice. Nevertheless, the regime's barrel bomb salvos, having displaced thousands at the outset of the Idlib campaign, so far have not resumed which marks an achievement in Ankara's diplomatic scorecard.

Some armed opposition groups could consider the Syrian Arab Army's buildup to be a motivating factor to withdraw. After all, it is obvious that Turkey would not stand anymore between a Syrian and Russian joint annihilation campaign and any group that intentionally undermines Ankara's diligent diplomatic efforts with Moscow. In other words, this is the last exit before the toll for all the armed groups operating in the province. However, the regime's pressing military presence could also encourage some hardliner factions to keep their heavy weapons at the front-lines. In fact, through the military buildup, pro-regime sources noted that the 4th Armored Division, an elite unit established on a sectarian basis and commanded by Maher al-Assad, assigned to spearhead the offensive in the al-Ghaab Plain[40]. Notably, at the time of writing, the 4th Armored, along with the Syrian Republican Guard, launched heavy offensives in Jisr al-Shugour[41] where Uighurs and other jihadist fighters from China and the former Soviet Union, most of which under the banners of the Turkestan Islamic Party, are concentrated. In other words, the Syrian Arab Army targeted these groups in the planned de-militarization zone deliberately[42]. Such regime operations complicate the efforts of disbanding the radical factions.

Another escalatory factor that the regime's continuing military buildup could trigger is inter-state tensions. The Turkish Armed Forces' forward-deployments and the Syrian Arab Army's elite units are now stationed dangerously close along a *de facto* line of contact separated by the Russian de-escalation observation contingents. Turkey has significantly beefed-up its military posture in Idlib to provide a firm protection to the observation outposts established in compliance with the Astana talks. As the regime has started amassing troops around Idlib by late summer 2018, the Turkish military reinforced the observation posts by concrete protection walls[43]. According to the Turkish press, prior to the top-level negotiations between President Erdogan and President Putin in Sochi, Ankara had already commenced sending armor and artillery units to Idlib[44]. Of these reinforcement efforts, the largest one was conducted on September 16, 2018 when Turkey sent a 50-piece convoy consisting of main battle tanks and fire-support elements[45].

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39 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=103673, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=103653, Accessed on: October 01, 2018.

40 Al Masdar News, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-armys-4th-division-heads-to-northwest-syria-for-jisr-al-shughour-offensive/, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

41 Al Masdar News, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-military-attacks-jihadist-rebels-in-southwest-idlib/, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

42 Ibid.

43 Gulf Times, https://www.gulf-times.com/story/604243/Turkey-reinforces-military-posts-inside-Syria, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

44 Hurriyet, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/idlibin-guneyine-takviyeli-tsk-kalkani-40957526, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

45 Hurriyet, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/tskdan-cisr-es-sugur-50-araclik-takviye-40958279, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

Operational-level command of the regime's offensive buildup is highly problematic due to the hard-liner and ultra-sectarian generals[46]. Besides, several Shiite militia groups surrounding Idlib, including the Lebanese Hezbollah militants, accompany the Syrian Arab Army[47]. Such a force composition could easily attempt provocations against the Turkish deployments. Ankara has the means to give a strong military response. Notably, a Syria – Turkey clash would not only end the Idlib de-militarization plans, but also the Astana de-escalation process.



*Turkey sent concrete protection walls to reinforce the observation posts in Idlib[48] as the Syrian regime boosted its troop concentration in the vicinity of the province.*



*Turkey's Anadolu Agency reported heavy armor deployed along the border as the situation in Idlib became tense[49].*

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[46] For a detailed study about the regime's operational command structure in the area, see: Can, Kasapoglu. The Ticking Bomb of Idlib, EDAM, August 2018.

[47] For a detailed mapping of the Shiite militancy in Syria, see: FSA Platform Map of Foreign Shia Militia across Syria, http://fsaplatform.org/foreign-shia-militia-map, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

[48] Hurriyet, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/idlib-onlemi-turk-gozlem-kulelerine-beton-blok-40939810, Accessed on: October 03, 2018.

[49] Anadolu Ajansı, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/pg/foto-galeri/idlib-sinirina-askeri-sevkiyat-suruyor-/2/651699, Accessed on: October 10, 2018.

# Conclusion

Al-Qaeda, which terrorized the world in the very beginning of the 21$^{st}$ century through the 9/11 attacks, was, at large, a product of the Afghan jihad of the 1980s. Similarly, the real impact and strategic results of the Syrian jihad remain to be seen. Besides, the Syrian Civil War has attracted incomparably more foreign fighters from a much broader geographic scope.

More importantly, the Afghan jihad caused irreparable repercussions in Pakistan at its doorstep. Geopolitically speaking, Turkey should do everything to mitigate the risk of 'Pakistanization'.

At present, Ankara has no optimistic political-military options in Syria. Not only did the regime-change objective fail, but also the Syrian regime has retained strategic weapons capabilities through a combination of ballistic missiles and non-nuclear WMD capacity. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces have gained an invaluable warfighting experience, and were supplied with advanced weaponry by their Russian patron. The Assad regime retained its strategic relations with North Korea and Iran. Furthermore, Russia has managed to establish a robust A2/AD node at NATO's southern flank. On the opposition camp, al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS plagued the armed opposition terrain, playing into the hands of the Baath rule. And Turkey hosts for about 4 million Syrian refugees with no viable return-back plan in the foreseeable future.

Overall, at present, Turkey has three critical political-military objectives left in Syria, in fact, much more feasible and realistic ones when compared to the initial agenda at the beginning of the civil war. Firstly, Ankara's top security agenda is to prevent the emergence of a PKK/PYD-driven autonomy in the northern belt of the civil war-torn country. Indeed, such a development could vector a separatist terrorism threat spiraling into the Turkish territory. Operation Olive Branch was based on this key calculus. Secondly, Turkey strived to sweep ISIS from its borders, which led to Operation Euphrates Shield, and in particular, the al-Bab offensive. And thirdly, hosting some 4 million Syrian refugees, Ankara aims to protect itself from further waves that could be triggered by the Syrian Arab Army's retaliatory warfare. In addition, Turkey wants to re-build the moderate opposition-controlled areas of Syria and keep these places away from the Syrian Baath's –and Iran's– sectarian violence, to at least have an alternative to address the refugee problem at home. The Idlib deal resulted from the third strategic objective.

Without a doubt, the Turkish – Russian deal remains an achievement for Ankara's diplomatic scorecard. A regime assault could have triggered a massive refugee wave pouring into Turkey. However, the de-militarization roadmap is highly fragile with too many wildcards. At some point, the military option could become inevitable leading to higher security risks for Turkey.

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# WALKING A FRAGILE PATH: ASSESSING THE IDLIB DE-MILITARIZATION DEAL

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