



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (12)

Is the “New Normal” in Idlib Different from the “Old Normal”? : How the COVID-19 Pandemic has Affected Idlib

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

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How did Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other armed groups operate in the “new normal”?

Measures taken by the administration and the population against COVID-19 in Idlib have been insufficient. Although local health authorities were aware of dangers, they lacked the capacity to influence political and military decision-makers. Therefore, COVID-19 did not have a considerable impact on the daily life of the population and training of military groups. People still convened in open spaces and held closed meetings; markets were crowded and without adequate protection measures; mosques were crowded during the month of Ramadan and celebrations were performed as usual. As escalation and new political/social dynamics now dominate Idlib’s current agenda after the Moscow agreement, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a priority for the actors on the ground. This contribution aims to examine the activities of HTS in the context of the pandemic.

Reorganising administration and Idlib’s economy

In March and April 2020, two main developments pushed HTS to seek workable and immediate solutions for the economic situation in Idlib. Losing control of the M5 highway has caused considerable loss of income for HTS and the Syrian salvation government as both profited from this lucrative trade route.¹ In addition to losing the M5 highway, critical towns such as Ma`arat al-Nu`man and Saraqib were also captured by Syrian government forces causing a deterioration of the finances of the local government affiliated with HTS. Most of those who had lived in these towns fled to the north. The internal displacement from one town to another caused an increase in food and rent prices and the cost of services. Turkey also closed the Bab al-Hawa border-crossing to stop the spread of COVID-19, preventing Idlib from receiving any goods and international aid. The devaluation of the Syrian Pound against international currencies also led to inflation and caused discontent among the inhabitants of Idlib. This meant that finding basic goods became harder and more costly. Therefore, HTS was forced to open a trade gate to the government-controlled areas of Aleppo² and price commodities in Turkish Lira or USD. In many places, local people became discontented with the administration’s performance and HTS’s limited capacity to address economic problems.

¹ Charles Lister, Is Idlib set for internal strife?, The Middle East Institute, 1 May 2020 (accessed in 14 June 2020). <https://www.mei.edu/publications/idlib-set-internal-strife>

² Syrians in Idlib protest opening of trade link with regime, AFP, 2 May 2020 (accessed in 14 June 2020). <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/5/1/idlib-residents-protest-opening-of-trade-link-with-regime>

Averting the reclaim of National Liberation Front (NLF) groups in Idlib

The biggest disaster for HTS would be losing its control over Idlib, as maintaining its grip has been an arduous task. Its most significant opponent was neither the Assad government nor the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but other armed opposition groups. Conflicts in 2019 showed that without the assistance of moderate armed groups and Turkey's strong stance against Damascus, it was impossible for HTS to resist the Syrian army and its allies. In other words, the narrative of "HTS is the strongest faction and the only capable force fighting against the Syrian regime" has collapsed. This was especially evident as it was the Turkish army that stopped the Syrian army and pro-government militias rather than local armed groups. Turkey has deployed more troops to build a "new Idlib" in accordance with its strategic and tactical priorities. This led to the return of many moderate groups that had been sent into "exile" by HTS after many battles.³ Also, other groups that have lost their influence gained power because Turkey has refused to work with pro-HTS institutions. The groups in "exile" were the NLF groups who became part of the Syrian National Army (SNA). HTS has openly showed its unwillingness to welcome them in Idlib and has placed this issue at the top in its agenda.

Engaging some elements inside HTS

HTS has faced a dilemma over the past two years. It has claimed that it has abrogated its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and has become more moderate. This has resulted in the departure of many groups; some became independent and others joined Tanzim Hurras ad-Din (THD). However, HTS's claims of becoming more moderate have not convinced Syria or the international community. As HTS claims it has become more moderate and removed radical elements, controlling some of its allies who had Al-Qaeda roots has become more difficult. After losing two battles, many small groups consisting of few hundred militants had threatened to leave HTS. Some of these joined THD and others remained independent but in opposition to HTS. In this transition period, Abu Mohammad al-Julani needed as many allies as possible. HTS is not only trying to gain the upper hand over other groups in Idlib, but also to control their own activities.

HTS plays the good cop against radical groups

HTS is not only concerned about SNA's activities, but also the operations of "Incite the Believers" (ITB) [وحررض المؤمنين] which means "mobilise the believers". ITB consists of THD,

³ Engin Yüksel, Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria: Back with a vengeance, Clingendael Institute, November 2019 (accessed in 14 June 2020), 9. <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategies-of-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria/3-turkey-and-the-armed-syrian-opposition-salafi-jihadist-groups/>

Ansar al-Tawhid, Ansar al-Islam, and Ansar al-Din groups,⁴ which are radical Al-Qaeda rooted organisations. HTS has a complicated relationship with these groups. On the one hand, they are rivals and have caused problems for HTS. Sometimes, they attack Syrian government forces and Russian positions near Idlib. They have also conducted a few attacks against Turkish troops patrolling the M4 highway. HTS wants to use these rouge elements as leverage against Turkey and the international community. For HTS, by pointing out that these groups are radicals, it claims that it is the only actor that could deal with these “troublemakers.”

It seems that HTS is playing a good cop/bad cop routine. Yet in fact, HTS has no control over these groups. If a new operation were to begin, these groups would be supported by the local population since they have been against the ceasefire. Their attacks against Turkish troops have caused a dilemma for HTS. The latter opposes Turkish patrols, but it does not want to be embroiled in a conflict with Turkey. Therefore, HTS is trying to manipulate other military groups.

1- Organising protests against the Turkish-Russian deal

HTS is not happy with Turkish-Russian patrols of the M4 highway for economic reasons and has organised many protests against the patrols. Losing the highway may lead to HTS’s economic collapse.⁵ Moreover, many towns and villages on the M4 are HTS strongholds. If the Moscow-Ankara deal were to be implemented, HTS would have to leave these towns and would lose its control in southern Idlib.

2- Preparing its forces for short- and long-term battles

HTS’s military academies continued to train militants. While COVID-19 might have an impact on military activities elsewhere, this was not the case for Idlib. HTS has graduated more militants in the last two months than any time in the past.

Turkey’s Priorities and Measures

Turkey has taken many measures against the spread of COVID-19 among its troops. These are no different from those taken by other armies in the world. Wearing masks, limiting access to military complexes by locals, increased hygiene in both missions and military outposts and deploying more cabins to allow for social distancing were the main measures taken by the

⁴ Caleb Weiss & Joe Truzman, ‘Incite the Believers’ continues to fight Assad regime in southern Idlib, The Long War Journal, 27 January 2020 (accessed in 14 June 2020). <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/01/incite-the-believers-continue-to-fight-assad-regime-in-southern-idlib.php>

⁵ Fehim Tastekin, The not-so-sacred profit bonanza of Syria’s jihadi groups, al-Monitor, 15 May 2020 (accessed in 14 June 2020), <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/turkey-syria-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-idlib-profit-motive-rebels-hts.html>

Turkish Armed Forces. However, these measures did not prevent Turkey's military expansion in Idlib. Turkey built at least 18 new military outposts after 5 March (according to open-source information). Moreover, Turkey deployed hundreds of new troops to different bases and military outposts. The organisation, location, capabilities of these bases, outposts, and troops show that Turkey's current military capabilities are significantly greater than pre-February 2020. Turkey has constructed 12 military observation points in the context of Sochi agreement before the second operation of Syrian army.⁶ After the last Syrian army offensive, Turkey increased its capability to deter all military attacks.

Currently, Turkey's priorities can be summarised as follows: 1) preventing a new escalation caused by both the Syrian government and HTS; 2) building "safe and secure" areas to accommodate civilians; 3) taking measures to stop the inflow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) towards Turkey and other areas controlled by Turkish backed groups in Syria; 4) implementing the deal reached with Russia.

Therefore, Turkey's presence in Idlib can be described as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it aims to prevent any assault from the Syrian army. On the other hand, it acts against armed groups or terrorist organisations that could provoke conflict in Idlib. In the short term, Turkey focuses on conducting military patrols on the M4 highway and cooperates with Russia to prevent another offensive. In the long-term, Turkey may have to organise a region where Syrian refugees and IDPs who cannot live in government-controlled areas can find safety. Turkey has many rivals in this mission; not only do the Assad government and paramilitaries affiliated to it oppose this plan, but also terrorist organisations in Idlib.

As keeping Idlib safe is dependent on Turkish-Russian cooperation, the COVID-19 pandemic does not have a significant impact on Turkey's handling of the Idlib issue. Therefore, despite the problems in conducting patrols, both countries insist on its continuation.

Can the ceasefire be sustainable?

The ceasefire is based on Turkish-Russian cooperation. However, this is very complicated. The factors that can influence the ceasefire can be summarised as follows:

- 1) Local factors: intra-Idlib dynamics may play a role in sustaining the ceasefire. As HTS feels that it loses control, it will allow groups that are dissatisfied with the ceasefire to increase their activities.

⁶ Ahmed al-Burai, Will Sochi 2.0 produce a lasting solution in Idlib?, The Daily Sabah, 12 March 2020 (accessed in 14 June 2020). <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/will-sochi-20-produce-a-lasting-solution-in-idlib>

- 2) Failure on holding the M4 highway: the main reason for the eruption of conflicts in 2019 was the failure of the Sochi agreement. If the current solution in the M4 fails, it is highly likely that there will be another round of conflict in Idlib.
- 3) Disappointment of Turkey in the east of the Euphrates: Turkey and Russia converge on many areas in Syria. There is an ongoing process in the east of Euphrates that aims to legitimately bring PYD to the negotiation table. The efforts uniting the Syrian-Kurdish National Council (known by its acronyms KNC and EKNS) and the Democratic Union Party (the PYD) into a new body will disappoint Turkey. If Turkey feels betrayed by the PYD's integration into a Syrian political settlement, it may sabotage the process from east of Euphrates to Idlib.
- 4) Power struggles in the Syrian government's inner circle: as the power struggles in Assad's government increase, the capability of the Syrian army to launch another operation in Idlib decreases.
- 5) Libya: Turkey and Russia have different perspectives on many issues in international politics. So far, these differences have not prevented the two countries from cooperating in Syria. However, areas of disagreement between both sides in Syria and Libya are becoming more inter-linked. If Russia and Turkey oppose each other over Libya, this may also feed disagreements in Syria.