

**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (18)

***Russia and Issues of HTS and Tanzim Hurras ad-Din***

Anton Mardasov, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)

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## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

### **Editor:**

Abdulla Ibrahim, Project Lead Researcher

### **Author**

#### **Anton Mardasov**

Anton Mardasov is a non-resident military affairs expert at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) focusing on Syria, Iraq, and extremist organisations. He is the author of numerous articles in the Russian media, several studies and chapters of books on Russian strategy in Syria and the Syrian opposition, as well as Moscow's relations with Iran, Lebanon, and Egypt. His articles and commentary have appeared in Al-Monitor, Al Jazeera, Asharq Al-Awsat, and others. In the past, Anton has been a consultant to the analytical departments of the security services of two oil companies.

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Moderate Syrian opposition includes some natives from Russia's North Caucasus, although they are a minority. Caucasian and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) natives were, in large part, members of the Islamic State (IS) or in some way linked to the forces formally led by Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and later by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Those who went to Syria and Iraq to fight can be roughly divided into two generations. The first one includes Caucasus Emirate members who responded to the call of Salafi sheikhs from Arab-Islamic centres. Natives of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirghizia, and Turkmenistan (migrant workers, for the most part) were mainly recruited for jihad in Russia or within various diasporas across Europe.

In 2014, the declaration of a Caliphate split jihadists fighting on the side of Syrian revolutionaries, and many citizens of Russia and Central Asia defected to IS, while others remained within the armed groups that made up or were affiliated to JaN. The second jihadist generation emerged at that time, largely involving ethnic Dagestanies or natives of Central Asia, primarily residents of large cities who had been drawn to Syria and Iraq by online propaganda. However, this situation changed recently, as many Caucasian and CIS natives were killed on the battlefield or during bombing. However, there is still a threat that militants may return to Russia from Syria and Iraq, with the potential to link international financial networks sponsoring extremism to radical groups inside Russia. Meanwhile, their countries of origin are aware of such militants, and it is common practice for the Russian Federation and CIS countries to exchange detainees – a practice that fills the gaps in the pre-war extradition of Chechens from Syria following the request of Russian security services.

The threat posed by such groups is traditionally evaluated based on the number of their members. However, official data of Russian agencies vary, and the calculation method is obscure. It is not clear, for instance, whether these statistics include those who left their native countries before the Syrian war and permanently resided in Syria, Turkey, or Europe. This factor is leveraged by security services and politicians to manipulate their countries' population. The terms of extremism legislation in Russia and Central Asia are ill-defined, which leaves much room for local abuses, when Muslims are kidnapped, have drugs or weapons planted on them, and are sentenced to long-term imprisonment. Thousands of Muslim civilians emigrated from Russia (preachers, mosque imams, community leaders, several former muftis of Russian regions, Islamic activists, and journalists), fearing for their lives and freedom, with the departure of many of them triggered by Russian security services in the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. They live within diasporas and have not been involved in the Syrian war; nevertheless, their native country can launch an international manhunt for them on the grounds of their alleged affiliation with armed underground cells or international terrorism.

It is important to note that the majority of Chechens actually came for jihad from Europe and Turkey, where they had moved following the First and Second Chechen Wars or had been forced to move by security services. Previously, Chechens preferred to form separate groups and stay independent for as long as possible. They fought against al-Assad's troops and Shia militias to avoid clashes between the groups. Chechens were even appointed to command positions within IS or grouped into separate units. Today, Muslims who undertake an in-depth study of Islam and do not see war as their only way of self-fulfilment are sometimes unable to find any suitable Jamia. For instance, Islamists are unlikely to join the Syrian National Army (SNA). Salafis believe SNA leaders are "democrats" who accept democratic elections and ruling in Syria instead of advocating the "true Islamic rule".

Nevertheless, a range of perturbations in the opposition raised concerns by Russian law-enforcement agencies about the activities of all groups in Idlib that are armed at least to some extent. According to Moscow's rationale, there are no acceptable or unacceptable factions with Russian or CIS natives. It would be better if such members never come back at all. Russian security services are, for instance, concerned about the activity of Ajnad al-Kavkaz (Khalifat Battalion), an armed group established in 2015 and composed mainly of Chechens, which operates in Idlib together with the Malhama Tactical PMC. Another example is Liwa Ansar al-Khalifah, a little-known group founded in 2012. All sources state that it was linked to JaN, but, according to the group itself, it is a combat unit of Hizb-ut-Tahrir (although its members formally handle nothing but propaganda issues), thoroughly monitored by the Russian Federation.

Moscow was also monitoring Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar's activity before its split in 2015, when its most effective combat groups joined IS. HTS-affiliated [Imam Bukhari Jamaat](#) remains the only large formation to comprise CIS citizens and have no links with IS. As for the threat posed by Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani's attacks against Russian patrols, some Russian experts doubt its actual existence. While other Russian experts generally agree that this group is active in the areas of HTS presence and Turkish military observation points. This activity can thus be used as a formal excuse for holding operations to the south of the M4 highway, in the areas that should ultimately come under Assad's control according to the agreement between Presidents Putin and Erdogan.

### ***The Radical Nature of HTS***

Russia's state media publicly declared that Idlib opposition issues are within Turkey's remit. Turkish President Erdogan agreed, [stating](#) that "Russians are maintaining security outside Idlib and Turkey will maintain the security inside Idlib region." However, Moscow, which presents itself as a guarantor of Syria's territorial integrity and the main fighter against terrorism while

constantly discrediting the United States in this respect, cannot openly acknowledge that Idlib has now become a Turkish-controlled area and, hence, Russia is not concerned about the fate of radicals.

Moscow officially mentioned HTS for the first time in August 2017, just six months after it was established, when Colonel General Igor Korobov, head of the Main Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defence (military intelligence agency), stated that a new formation with over 25,000 members had emerged in Syria and had to be combated too. Since then, anti-HTS operations have become the main justification for military operations and bombing across all de-escalation areas. Moscow officially blamed HTS for an [attack](#) on Russian military police in Hama province and for the [downed](#) SU-25 fighter jet in Idlib; however, Moscow's seemingly intransigent stance against the HTS alliance apparently stems from its unwillingness to get more involved in the Syrian conflict. According to mass [media](#), Russian military directly negotiated with HTS in Abu Dali, Hama province.

The Moscow–Ankara [deal](#) is obviously aimed, in the first place, at besieging the province capital and nearby areas controlled by HTS or Tanzim Hurras ad-Din. Moscow actively demonstrated its opposition to a military operation in Idlib, which would require its concentrating extensive forces there. Russia would probably be open to carrying out a range of sporadic attacks to make the opposition and Turkey move their forces deeper into Idlib, but Turkey is clearly opposed to this option. Accordingly, Ankara can recede only in the case of specific arrangements or another exchange of territories.

### ***Turkey is in charge of Idlib***

Turkish plans no longer depend on agreements with Russia. Instead, they are based on the overall state of affairs in northwest Syria. The status quo was achieved in Idlib primarily as a result of Turkish military activity rooted in negotiations between Presidents Putin and Erdogan, with attempts at cooperation, such as the Adana Agreement, timely recalled by Moscow in order to avoid awkward questions, only a secondary factor. Turkey's widespread use of drones in February–March 2020 was unprecedented in its magnitude and tactics, as UAVs became the key operational element for fire support, surveillance, and reconnaissance not only for the Turkish army, but also for its allies from opposition groups during their offensive and defensive operations. It was the first time in military history that drones became a form of direct air support, which was so efficient and extensive that they replaced combat and reconnaissance aircraft. Paragraph 7 of the Sochi Memorandum (2018) authorised Turkey to use its drones in Idlib; therefore, Russian anti-aircraft warfare and airborne forces could not be used against them.

Turkey demonstrated to both Assad's regime and Moscow that it is ready to escalate the conflict to secure its own interests. Meanwhile, Russia, who is not ready for such an escalation, has leveraged its role in the conflict to reach a compromise with regional partners. Ankara also noticed the Kremlin's attempts to advance contacts with the UAE, its traditional opponent as far as both Libya and Syria are concerned. Turkish state institutions made a great effort and expended many resources to develop and organise northwest Syria. The problem is that Turkey has no distinct political formula acceptable to Moscow to keep its presence in these areas. Buffer zones with returning population and armed units beyond Damascus's control create a political "master card", which strengthens the opposition, while Russia seeks to weaken its position. This is a strategic task with seemingly no specific solution. Nevertheless, from a tactical perspective, HTS will later face disbandment, have to abandon radicalism, and drift towards factions similar to the Free Syrian Army units.

### ***Transformations of HTS and its relationship with Hurras ad-Din***

However, we need to clearly understand that Russian academic society and media have actually made the topic of fighting HTS and Tanzim Hurras ad-Din taboo. A neutral approach to this subject can be perceived as justification of terrorism, as Moscow has many sensitive issues here. Russian experts tend to avoid public discussions about the fact that pro-government airstrikes and operations have helped the local population to cooperate with HTS, posed by its leaders as a force combating President Bashar al-Assad's regime and protecting the "Syrian Revolution". Experienced Al-Qaeda agents organised their military and economic presence in Idlib based on the organisation's own strategy on other "frontlines of global jihad". However, a lack of administrative experience prevents them from taking control of large cities in the province. They have tried [to fill this gap by assigning Syrians in place of foreigners](#) to administrative bodies controlled by HTS.

HTS and Tanzim Hurras ad-Din leaders have also needed to recruit more members to make up for their losses and have even cancelled the special "test" for enrolled candidates who previously had to demonstrate their belief in "fidelity" of ideas, methods used to achieve goals, and religious baselines. It means that both organisations became more open to Syrians as they stopped requiring any profound knowledge, which significantly augmented the number of Syrians in the armed groups. HTS leaders attempt to use this Syrian component to propose/impose an agenda to "legalise" the movement and further merge with the Syrian opposition. Meanwhile, HTS has maintained its power by keeping control over the smuggling routes and checkpoints, which allows them to attack humanitarian and military aid convoys intended for the moderate opposition groups going through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. Smuggling still generates HTS's income, but

Turkey has [put](#) much effort into gradually cutting the group off from this source of finance, manpower, and supplies.

There had not been any serious confrontation between HTS and Tanzim Hurras ad-Din until recently, when Ankara (and the US drones) pressured HTS to demonstrate its readiness to arrest Tanzim Hurras ad-Din affiliates. These groups resemble two sides of the same coin, as they are ready for tight cooperation, and any disputes between them are highly exaggerated by their militants. Arrests and public execution of IS (banned in Russia) members held by HTS should be viewed as reprisals against competitors rather than an attempt to ensure the population's security. Terror established by Al-Julani goes beyond the organisation itself, within which alleged agents of Al-Qaeda, IS, or the al-Assad regime are often hunted out. It also extends to HTS-controlled areas, where HTS militants are implicated in murdering activists and kidnapping civilians for ransom. This results in turning the local population into the hostages of HTS- and Al-Qaeda-affiliated units, except for some enclaves still controlled by the moderate opposition. Not only did radicals manage to penetrate and consolidate themselves in the Syrian revolutionary movement, but they finally took the helm, which is convenient for propagandists who state that the Arab Spring was inspired by western security services, and that all Syrian events are allegedly a form of collusion and a struggle by Damascus against terrorists.

However, Al-Qaeda may finally have a chance to establish some "safe haven" in opposition-controlled areas, given Ankara's focus on weakening the Kurdish YPG unit, mistrust between the Astana process members, and the regime's attempts to weaken the moderate opposition as much as possible. However, if moderate rebels strengthen their position and their vote is recognised in the political process, this "safe haven" will end up with extremely limited resources to extend its power beyond Syria.

Since late 2017, HTS's policy has been aimed at diminishing its radical ideology. Apparently, the organisation intentionally sent radical units committed to Al-Qaeda to their death – a fact that fostered a rather sceptical attitude towards HTS leaders. Some radical groups that are still in contact with HTS (for instance, Katibat al Ghuraba or smaller units of Bosnians) receive orders directly from Al-Qaeda, but are bound to HTS only by their oath to take part in the fighting. It is widely known, for instance, that the Turkistan Islamic Party is subordinate to its emir in Afghanistan. Such units remain with HTS for fear of arrest or extermination.

This results in a lack of unity within HTS, which may split even further. One part of the organisation still pursues Al-Qaeda's ideology and wishes to become an independent organisation of "global jihad", if not to completely restore ties with it. This group adheres to an approach

exercised by Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi, the jihadi ideologue from Jordan, and his “jihad al-nukhba” [Elitist approach to Jihad] concept, although his reputation has dwindled recently. Another HTS faction (conventionally “Syrian”, or local) intends to move away from radicalism and gradually “become legal” by turning into something like the “Syrian Taliban”. It is linked to the ideology of Abu Qatada al-Filistini, another jihadi theoretician, and his concept of “jihad of umma”, which makes it possible to sign peace agreements with rivals. This means that this part of HTS, for instance, can focus on the acknowledgement of the Salvation Government, promise to expel notorious leaders, and rebrand the group and make it a military unit as part of the civil administration. Meanwhile, HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani is unlikely to agree to leave the network given that it has constantly transformed and adjusted to his rule.

### ***Turkish–Russian cooperation on de-radicalisation***

It is extremely difficult to mop up HTS in the region. A multitude of resources and units of security services will be required to eliminate armed groups and to keep the underground organised. Therefore, the Idlib issue can be resolved by some joint Russian–Turkish operation involving the establishment of a humanitarian safety zone along the Turkish border, but it may also be necessary to put things on hold for some time, during which HTS can try to morph into some “acceptable” organisation and set up a kind of “safe haven” in Syria. The Arab Spring showed that the experiment when “jihadists establish a state” is doomed if their military presence and ideological influence in the area becomes too extensive.

The problem is that such “havens” can be used later for smaller units affiliated with international jihadist groups. One solution that would satisfy Turkey and keep the frontline of resistance to al-Assad includes drone attacks against notorious leaders and targeted operations carried out by security services disguised as some armed group within HTS or some non-existent faction (like [Kata’ib Khattab al-Shishani](#)). On the one hand, Moscow is concerned about the US-led international coalition’s airstrikes against Tanzim Hurras ad-Din militants, as this undermines Russian propaganda about the role of Washington in the Syrian conflict and fosters American–Turkish interaction, which Moscow would prefer to complicate. On the other hand, this makes it possible for Russia to hold a substantial and meaningful dialogue with the United States on combating terrorism and to identify itself as a part of the global coalition against international terrorism. Russian military does not officially have any combat drones; therefore, its aircraft strikes will always seem forced, and any exchange of coordinates between the Turkish and the Russian military will be perceived as sharing information with al-Assad. A possible solution would be to establish an Operations Room involving Turkish and Russian security services, which could set targets and eliminate them “online”.