



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (29)

Security, Stability, and Counter-Terrorism in Idlib: A Turkish Perspective

Serhat Erkmen, Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 53 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

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

Tamer Badawi, Research Assistant

Author

Serhat Erkmen

Serhat Erkmen's research focuses primarily on Iraq and Syria examining jihadist groups and foreign terrorist fighters. He is currently an Assistant Professor at the International Security and Terrorism Department of the Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy in Turkey. Previously, he was research fellow at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies, senior fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies and head of Middle East and African desk at the 21st Turkey Institute. Dr Erkmen has conducted extensive research in Iraq and Syria on the security situation, regional/local politics and social dynamics under for the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other institutions. He received his Ph.D. from the Social Sciences Institute of Ankara University.

The ideas expressed are of the author's not the publisher or the author's affiliation

Published in October 2020

All rights reserved to GCSP

In Idlib, armed groups can be categorized under three conglomerates: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian National Army (SNA), and radicals led by Hurras al-Deen (HaD). Among these three anti-government groups, HTS is the strongest one. Though the SNA's Idlib branch has more manpower than other groups, HTS has superiority in terms of discipline, organisation and weaponry.

So far, HTS has been mainly evaluated as an armed militant group (categorised as a terrorist organisation by governments). However, in the last two years, it transformed from an armed group to a complex organisation (armed structure, civilian government, private companies, etc.), mimicking a state structure with many paramilitaries in the region. Currently, HTS aims to be the backbone of a potential semi-autonomous region in Idlib and nearby areas. To achieve this, the old structure based on local and foreign rebel leaders and their bands has been replaced by a new structure led by Abu Muhammed Julani and his close associates. In addition to its armed body, this new structure includes a media branch, intelligence, and security institutions. It also has indirect agents such as non-governmental organisations, the Syrian Salvation Government, business companies, and key figures in local administrative bodies. Until two years ago, HTS was the *primus inter pares* among the other groups. It controlled some towns and villages mainly in the heartland of Idlib and its western countryside. Now, HTS's hegemony can be felt in most of Idlib except southwest and some southern villages on the M4 highway where radicals still have implicit influence.

The second strongest military force after HTS in the region is the SNA. In fact, the SNA's branch in Idlib is the old National Liberation Front (NLF) formed in May 2018. The NLF merged with the SNA in October 2019 and currently operates as the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Corps of the SNA. This group is mainly comprised of moderate armed factions whose ideologies differ from each other. Among them, Faylaq al-Sham (FaS or the Sham Legion), Ahrar al-Sham (AaS), Suqur al-Sham and the First Coastal Division are stronger than smaller groups. Even though some claim this alliance has more than 50,000 fighters, these numbers are thought to be exaggerated. It seems that this alliance has local support in some towns and villages in the north eastern part of Idlib. However, it is clear that the glory days of "moderate armed groups" is almost over. In other words, old moderates may be replaced by the "new moderate group."

The third group is the loose alliance of radicals who are under attack by both HTS and the coalition led by the United States (US). This alliance is led by (HaD) which is Al-Qaeda's *de facto* branch in Syria. This alliance has formed two operation rooms so far. The first one, called "Incite the Believers" (ITB), included HaD, the Ansar al-Din Front, Ansar al-Islam, and Ansar al-Tawhid (the latter left the room in May 2020). After the failure of the first alliance, another operation room,

“So Be Steadfast” (SBS), was formed which included the same groups in ITB except Ansar al-Tawhid, and some other newly formed radical groups that had left HTS in the last few months. This highly dangerous but small alliance fought against HTS in late June 2020 but was defeated. After HTS’s relative victory, the SBS operation room was disbanded. Ironically, most of the groups’ leaders and their members are still fighting against the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and allied forces under the HTS-led Al-Fateh al-Mubin operation room.

Organizational Structure of the groups

Each of these groups has different organisational structures and income sources. As previously explained, HTS has been forming a highly centralised organisation assisted by loose alliances to expand geographically. The predecessors of HTS, namely Jabhat al-Nusra and the Levant Front, were less centralised. Both were mainly composed of a small core of Al-Qaeda ideologues, in alliance with protagonist armed groups and small radical armed formations all over Syria. However, as HTS broke away from Al-Qaeda’s central leadership, HTS changed its leadership, organisational model, and local alliances. In fact, it is very hard to say that the current HTS is an alliance of different groups. It became a highly centralised organisation led by Julani’s close associates. This new network of leadership in HTS is based on old friendships, kinship ties, tribal ties, economic interests, and old rivalries.

The distance from al-Qaeda did not mean complete Syrianisation. Many reports argue that HTS has a policy of Syrianisation; however, close examination of the current leadership shows that this claim is only partly true. One can count many Jordanian, Iraqi, Lebanese and even Gulf Arab citizens in the current high-level structures of HTS. In addition to nationalists mentioned above, Central Asian jihadists have close connections with HTS. However, it is clear that more Syrians undertake key positions in mid-cadres than non-Syrians.

Unlike HTS, the SNA is loosely linked to its central command. One could even claim that moderate groups in Idlib only changed their titles and became part of the SNA due to HTS’s threats against them. The loyalties of strong factions inside NLF are not broken to the benefit of the merger with the SNA. Instead, leaders of FaS, AaS, and some others make their own strategic decisions parallel to the SNA. Still, their biggest enemy is the government in Damascus and the SAA. However, HTS’s growing power also makes NLF factions anxious. Ever since the formation of HTS, there has been significant tension between HTS and NLF groups. Sub-units of NLF still remember suffering defeats from various HTS attacks against AaS, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement in early 2019, and others.

Finally, HaD-led groups are small independent units assisting each other in case of a fight against the regime and HTS. These groups are comprised of small bands led by powerful local leaders. In HaD, old school Al-Qaeda leaders (mainly foreigners coming from Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab countries) are the figures that have the say in the battlefield even though Syrian citizen Abu Humam al-Shami is HaD's military leader. However, allies of HaD include both foreigners and locals. HaD-led groups are weaker than HTS and the NLF, though they cannot be underestimated due to their strong ideological commitment, superior military training, and some localised support.

Among all of the main armed groups, HTS is the wealthiest. Its primary stream of income comes from newly formed monopolistic companies in key sectors such as oil, construction materials, foodstuff, vehicles, automotive spare parts, internet services, and electronic devices. In addition to these sectors, HTS also controls trade with areas under the control of Damascus and the Olive Branch Operation Area and levies taxes through this trade. HTS therefore acquires the lion's share of Idlib's economy. In comparison with HTS, the other two have smaller income streams. The SNA is dependent to its central leadership for salaries and HaD has small income from trade in the south west region.

Turkey's position on the armed groups in Idlib

All groups mentioned above are moved by different motivations and drivers. While HTS's motivation is building its hegemony in Idlib, the SNA is motivated by survival instincts. HaD groups are motivated by avoiding Turkey, whom they perceive as the biggest threat to their existence, more than Damascus and the SAA.

In parallel with their motivation in Idlib, HTS does not pose a big threat to Turkey unless Turkey leaves the area or significantly challenges HTS's hegemony. However, HTS sometimes uses local people's grievances against Turkey to achieve its long-term plans for expansions and consolidation. Unlike HTS, the SNA needs Turkey's protection. The last two years of fighting in Idlib show that if no external power intervenes, HTS or other radical armed groups can easily win against the SNA in Idlib. Therefore, the SNA is Turkey's best ally on the ground because it serves as a buffer with the other groups.

HaD poses a serious threat to Turkey's national security. Beginning in April 2020, HaD (and the fronts it established to disguise itself) have attacked Turkish troops multiple times. In August and September 2020, HTS fronts such as Khattab al-Shishani Brigades and Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigades conducted many attacks on Turkish troops including car bombs, suicide attacks, ambushing military convoys, and attacking patrols using rockets.

Turkey's policies on the armed groups in Idlib

After the second Sochi deal signed on 5 March 2020, Turkey continues to address security concerns in Idlib. The first and biggest threat to Turkish security is the inflow of hundreds of thousands of new Syrians to Turkey. Some claim this threat is so significant that all security measures, including the Turkish military presence in Idlib, are designed to pre-empt such a scenario. To this end, Turkey is focusing on controlling the spread of Coronavirus throughout Idlib, stabilizing the regional economy, and building safe settlements in remote areas from the battlefronts.

Through local agencies, Turkey has helped Idlib's health administration fight the pandemic. However, so far, the Coronavirus pandemic has had a relatively small effect in Idlib compared to other regions. The pandemic's arrival to northern Syria was relatively late since Turkey closed its border crossings when the coronavirus proliferated in Turkey. When the pandemic arrived in Azaz, it spread to other areas gradually. Surprisingly, the effect of Covid was not as disastrous as it was expected with only a low number of cases disclosed by local authorities. However, it should be noted that the number of tests is very insufficient and may hide the actual numbers. Currently, it is very rare to see anyone wearing masks in public places.

The second problem is economic instability in the region and northwest Syria. Sanctions imposed by the US on Syria not only effect the economy in areas under the control of Damascus and its elites, but also the rest of the Syrian economy that is beyond government control. Almost all prices doubled, and unemployment skyrocketed. Agricultural production has also been negatively affected due to war conditions. Most of the agricultural areas are controlled by Damascus. Lands that cultivate olives and fruits, beyond government control, are near the battlefront in the south of M4. Villagers left their homes and thus cannot maintain the productivity of these lands. Other basic foodstuffs coming through Turkey are expensive for local consumers. In addition to this, internally displaced people are squeezed into small camps and can hardly find jobs. Rental rates have become very high. High inflation and high unemployment continue to keep Idlib's economy fragile and encourage people to depart for the Turkish borders.

Another major security concern is Turkey's belief that another Russia-backed SAA offensive will destabilise Idlib. As the latest clashes show, Turkey is clearly determined to stop such a big scale military operation that may lead to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people to either Turkey or other opposition-controlled areas. A ceasefire was agreed by Turkey and Russia in Sochi on 5 March 2020 and until a few weeks ago, Turkey and Russia continued patrols on M4 as agreed in Sochi. However, because of continuous protests and attacks to patrols, Russia declared

that it will not hold joint patrols until security is fully provided. Tensions in Idlib are consequently growing and a possible SAA offensive is becoming more likely. Nevertheless, Turkish-Russian cooperation in other areas slows such a prospective offensive.

Finally, Turkey's security stance includes a clearer posture against radicals. There is a growing tension between Turkey and Al-Qaeda-connected groups. In order to protect its troops from radical groups, Turkey increased its military presence and changed its rules of engagement against any potential threat. If the attacks grow, there may be surprising operations against Al-Qaeda-connected groups inside Idlib in the foreseeable future.

Turkey, Russia, and US's Counter-Terrorism Efforts in Idlib

No well-planned international cooperation to counter terrorism seems to exist in Idlib. In the last few months, there has been a considerable increase of attacks against mid- and high-level leadership figures in Al-Qaeda-connected groups of the US-led coalition in Idlib. Some very key figures including Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni, the key operative for Al-Qaeda in Syria, who was killed by a US drone attack. Analysts, military leaders, journalists, and politicians in the Syrian opposition have strong suspicions that there is a covert agreement between US bodies and HTS for hunting well-known Al-Qaeda leaders or their operatives in Idlib. So far, US-led coalition forces proved many times that they have a high intelligence capacity and operational capabilities in northern Syria to detect and track terrorist leaders. However, targeting only HaD that are connected to Al-Qaeda members increased suspicions among the local community about potential softened relations between the West and HTS.

On the other hand, Russia and Turkey have different paths to tackle the radical elements in Idlib. Both sides understand that the growing threat of radicalism in Idlib is a long-term threat. However, Russia's indiscriminatory approach towards all armed groups in Idlib – defining all of them as terrorists – does not help Turkey's operations on the ground. As the SAA attacks the civilian population and moderate groups, radicals gain more ground. They incite the people with radical rhetoric that tries to convince them that if they aim for peace, they will still be killed by the SAA and Russia. If Turkey and Russia can develop better cooperation in terms of countering terrorism in Idlib, the threat of another offensive on Idlib can be taken off the Russian agenda. Such a turn can help uproot terrorist groups in a sustainable way with the cooperation of local people. As civilians will continue to live under persistent bombardment, convincing them to avoid what outsiders consider as an unpeaceful path becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

Finally, all proactive members of the international community should keep in mind that Al-Qaeda-styled radical ideology has found a safe haven in areas in Idlib that are quite small and

controllable. Al-Qaeda-connected groups have a few hundred ideologically driven militants from different countries. The current economic situation, fueling mass-scale marginalisation is paving the way for radical groups' empowerment and long-term entrenchment in northwestern Syria. Idlib should not be isolated and defined as terrorist nest. If peaceful and honourable solutions cannot be achieved, long-term radicalisation will be inevitable.