



**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Discussion Paper (5)

***Perspectives on the future of Idlib***

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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.

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>:**

The situation in Idlib poses a challenge to the Assad government. Damascus has neither the forces nor the means to resolve the problem. Moreover, any operation conducted against the Syrian moderate opposition and the radical alliance “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” (HTS) concentrated in this region could be significantly problematic for the government. Turkey seeks to establish a protectorate or security zone in Idlib to accommodate those fleeing regime-held areas and prevent a new refugees flow into Turkey. The gains achieved by the Turkish operation in Idlib by the establishment of the security zone has potentially been lost as a result of the subsequent Russian backed Syrian government offensive, which has created a problem for Turkey with hundreds of thousands heading toward the Turkish border and threatening to exasperate what is already a costly refugee problem for Ankara. In order for Turkey to address issues in Idlib, including IDPs and economic problems, it first needs to deal with the HTS, ideally finding a way to dissolve the group. This could potentially be an area of cooperation for Moscow and Ankara. This may be necessary to prevent a deterioration in the security situation and long-term destabilisation of the area.

## **Russian-Turkish transactions to change the geography of Idlib**

Idlib’s prospects continue to be determined by Turkey’s willingness to oppose attempts of the Syrian government to establish control over this region. The return of certain parts of the de-escalation zone to Damascus’s power would be possible following a Russian-Turkish deal. As Ankara is able to exert the necessary influence on the Syrian opposition, it can force them to surrender certain parts of their captured territory. In return, Turkey would be able to conduct operations against units of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at the Syrian-Turkish the border.

The mechanism of such transactions was launched during the battle of Aleppo in the summer of 2016. At that time Ankara undermined the position of the Syrian rebels before they had the opportunity to successfully defend the city. Turkey convinced troops from the moderate opposition alliance, Fatah Halab, which defended the city, to participate in Operation Euphrates Shield. Turkey also urged those who remained in Aleppo to surrender the city as a condition for starting

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis was provided for a dialogue on Syria that took place in December 2019. The change in circumstances ever since should be taken into consideration.

the peace process. Thus, Turkey facilitated the transition of Aleppo to the control of the regime. In exchange, Ankara was able to ensure the creation of its own "protectorate" in northern Syria, in the area of the Azaz-Al-Bab-Jerabulus, due to the success of Operation Euphrates Shield.

The next "barter deal" between Moscow and Ankara was an exchange that occurred between January and March 2018 for the territories in the southeast of Greater Idlib (mainly the north-east of the Hama province and the south-west of Aleppo province) with the city and air base of Abu al-Dhuhur and the Aleppo-Homs railway to the Kurdish canton of Afrin. Afrin was annexed to the Turkish protectorate in northern Syria after Operation Olive Branch.

The Sochi accords on Idlib agreed in September 2018 between Putin and Erdogan<sup>2</sup> was a temporary solution before a new deal could be made. At this stage, it was unlikely that Ankara would adopt measures to destroy the HTS, as liquidation of the HTS in Idlib would not have removed the threat of new military operations from the Assad government and Russia.

The attempts by Damascus and Moscow to launch an offensive in Idlib between May and June 2019 ended in failure. The opposition's counter-offensive, supported by Turkey, allowed for the possibility of transferring parts of the Syrian National Army's (SNA) units to Idlib from the Operation Olive Branch and the Operation Euphrates Shield zones. These units were well equipped with anti-tank weapons and were able to provide substantial assistance to rebel factions in Idlib. As a result, attempts by Syrian government forces to recapture the cities taken by the opposition were unsuccessful. Only on the eve of the last "13th Astana" did Turkey influence the opposition groups to surrender these cities to the government. After the last round of negotiations of the "13th Astana", Assad's troops were able to occupy part of the Ghab Plain in the city of Khan Sheikhun, without encountering serious resistance from the HTS and the opposition. Later, a relative ceasefire was established in Idlib, and Ankara was able to freely prepare for Operation Source of Peace.

The surrender of Khan Sheikhun to the Syrian government allowed Ankara to launch Operation Peace Spring without the distraction of the problems in Idlib. Shortly after Khan Sheikhun's occupation by government forces, Putin and Erdogan met at the MAX-2019 air show, where the

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<sup>2</sup> They dealt with the creation of a 20 km demilitarized zone along the perimeter of Greater Idlib, where only moderate opposition factions would remain, and HTS forces and heavy equipment and weapons would be withdrawn.

Russian President announced that the creation of a security zone on the southern borders of Turkey with Syria would be a good way to preserve Syrian territory. Such a statement could be considered Russian consent to the Turkish operation in northern Syria (although later Russian officials tried to refute this).

The December 2019 Russian-backed offensive launched by the Syrian government against Turkish-backed rebel forces in Idlib province and previous Russian-backed offensives do not preclude the possibility of new deals with Turkey around Idlib's future. The US military presence, which made the SDF much less susceptible to Moscow's mediation efforts and less accommodating in dialogue with Damascus, had impeded the implementation of the Sochi memorandum. The situation was aggravated by the uncertain status of the presence of Syrian government forces and the Russian military police in the border strip to the west and east of the Turkish security zone and, as a result, may force the parties to make new deals in the case of conflict situations. This is even more significant if Turkey resumes its operation in response to provocations and attacks by SDF militants.

The expansion of the Turkish security zone in the northeast may be offset by new concessions to the Assad government in Idlib. On the contrary, Damascus (and Moscow) could take the first step towards Idlib and not wait for a defined deal with Turkey. In exchange for the capture of territories by the regime forces in Idlib, Ankara could increase the length of its security zone in the northeast.

At the same time, the IDP factor and the threat of a new wave of refugees into Turkey would force Ankara to make efforts to keep at least part of greater Idlib under the control of the Syrian opposition. This has become an imminent threat after the December 2019 Idlib offensive which resulted in more than 235,000 civilians being displaced and heading toward the Turkish border. For Turkey this has become a grave concern as it meant potentially resettling a large number of IDPs, including from those fleeing from areas under the rule of the Assad government as well as those fleeing Idlib after the offensive by the Syrian government.

### **A Turkish approach to the future of Idlib**

More than likely, Turkey would agree to draw a demarcation line in Idlib along the M4 and M5 highways. This would allow the Sochi accords on Idlib to be respected, which would allow for the

opening of traffic on these highways, and also lead to the restoration of the country's "transport unity". Indeed, it would be advisable for Turkey to turn the areas between the M4/M5 and the Turkish border into another Turkish "protectorate", that is, to create a security zone with the same status as the areas of operations "Euphrates Shield", "Olive Branch" and the "Peace Spring", which are protected from attacks by the Syrian forces and the Russian Air Force by Turkish security guarantees.

The formation of a single 30 km "security zone" from the province of Latakia, through Idlib, Afrin and Al-Bab to Jarabulus on the Euphrates was a significant step. This part of Idlib (to the M4 / M5 highways) has been completely protected by Turkish artillery. In this zone, residents of greater Idlib who refuse to return to areas under the control of the Assad government, could be accommodated. The preservation of this part of Idlib (between the border and the M4/M5 highways) with a Turkish "protectorate" and under the control of the opposition is perhaps the only scenario that would prevent a new wave of refugees into Turkey. A mass exodus from Idlib will inevitably occur in the case of attempts by the Syrian government to seize the entire territory of this region.

It may not be possible to move IDPs from Idlib to the security zone in the current configuration. There is currently a gap in the area between the "Peace Spring" security zone and territories controlled by the opposition in the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Idlib (Turkey and the opposition do not control the road between Jarabulus and Tell Abyad). Therefore, refugees would need to enter Turkey so that in the future they could move to the "Peace Spring" zone. Also, the flow of IDPs from Idlib to Afrin and the Euphrates Shield zone could be problematic. The number of IDPs at the first stage of a possible operation could be as high as 800 000, and in the case of Assad's advance towards the border, it could be twice this number.

The areas of greater Idlib, behind the M4/M5 routes and between these highways and the regime's forces, and controlled by the HTS and the opposition, could possibly be used by Ankara as the object of future deals between Moscow and Damascus. Therefore, Turkey has prevented the Syrian government from capturing these territories, in order for them to be used as a bargaining tool for future agreements. The same territories could be used to try to inflict maximum damage to the HTS, bringing the forces of moderate opposition (SNA) to enclaves closer to the Turkish border.

## **Damascus and Moscow's approach to solving the problem in Idlib**

The dilemma for the Assad government is to determine the best way address the situation in Idlib. On one hand, Damascus has promised to recapture "every inch" of Syrian land, and therefore it is extremely important for the government to regain control of Idlib. On the other hand, Assad's entourage is aware that there are between 2 and 4 million Syrians who oppose its rule in Idlib, and therefore can be a potential source of destabilisation if the area is conquered. Stopping these threats would require massive repression of the population, which would impact the government's already extremely low international image and may even complicate its relationship with Moscow. Therefore, Damascus is more likely to support the Moscow narrative for the gradual return of Idlib.

At the same time, it is not yet clear how Damascus would react to the fact that part of Idlib would become a "Turkish security zone" and whether the Assad government would agree or try to organise provocations that would threaten relations between Moscow and Ankara, and try to convince Russia to return the rest of Idlib to the full control of Damascus. Assad would probably turn a blind eye to the existence of such a "security zone", provided that the majority of the population from the rest of this region moves into this "security zone", allowing the regime to change the demographic balance in other areas of Idlib to its favour forcing those who oppose its rule to leave the area.

Such a desire is indicated by the strategy of conducting military operations in Idlib. The population from the frontline would be purposefully pushed deep into the region with massive artillery shelling and air strikes on civilian infrastructure. At the same time, the intensity of strikes in areas located on the border with Turkey has recently decreased (as in the capital of the region, Idlib). This has influenced the direction of migration flow within the framework of the Idlib de-escalation zone. As a result, cities and ghost towns, which have been deprived of any population, are being returned to pro-government forces, resulting in an increase of IDPs looking for refuge near the Turkish border.

Moscow's approach to the situation in Idlib is to balance between Damascus and Ankara. On one hand, Russia has no problem keeping part of Idlib under the control of the Syrian opposition until the end of the political process. The presence of a moderately strong opposition, though

incapable of threatening the power of the government, would also make Assad more susceptible to reforms, which Moscow realises is necessary. At the same time, Russia is interested in developing a strategic partnership with Ankara. Therefore, the Kremlin is ready for certain concessions. Yet, Russia cannot ignore Damascus's desire to recapture Syrian territory "to the last inch". Moscow could highlight to Damascus the advantages that agreements with Ankara would bring regarding the opposition's withdrawal from the M4/M5 highway, where it could take with it the entire "opposition element" of Idlib, and the rest of the "de-escalation zone".

### **Idlib and the IDPs population**

The population of greater Idlib and the IDPs located there<sup>3</sup> oppose the activities of radical segments of the HTS, and also do not support the Government of Salvation affiliated with the HTS<sup>4</sup>. Yet, they do not pledge loyalty to the Syrian government. The Syrians are prepared to endure the rule of the HTS, believing that the transition of Idlib to the control of the Syrian government would worsen their situation, especially in terms of security. Inhabitants of Idlib may perceive that it is easier to disagree with the HTS than with the Mukhabarat, hence their preference for the opposition rather than the Assad government.

Research conducted by independent activists demonstrate that the population of Idlib expect Turkey to provide a solution. They assume Ankara would protect the territory from bombing and shelling by the Syrian army and neutralise the HTS. Residents of Idlib expect that Turkey would eventually be able to consolidate the moderate opposition and discipline its factions, forcing it to protect them from the arbitrariness of the HTS and provide better security conditions, which would remain under the control of the opposition. It should also be expected that the majority, or a significant part of the population under Assad's control, would try to leave to avoid living in regime-controlled territories.

### **HTS and the moderate opposition**

The strength and significance of HTS in Idlib is currently exaggerated. It is the strongest faction in the region, as it was able to gain victory over the moderate opposition (represented by the

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<sup>3</sup> Numbering between 3 to 4 million Syrians.

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Policy "Idlib Faces a Fearsome Future: Islamist Rule or Mass Murder" 19 September 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/19/idlib-faces-a-fearsome-future-islamist-rule-or-mass-murder-syria-civil-war-hayat-tahrir-al-sham/>



National Liberation Front (NFO). However, although the HTS emerged victorious in the “inter-insurgent wars” against the moderate opposition in Idlib, defeating Ahrar al-Sham, when the HTS took control of the city of Idlib and more than 50 smaller cities and towns, moderate opposition forces were able to recover quickly from defeat.

At present, in Idlib there is a strengthened moderate opposition force and thus a gradual decrease in the influence of the HTS. This was especially pronounced after the summer military campaign of 2019, when SNA factions came to the aid of the NFO groups, and the joint command of these forces played a decisive role, first in repelling the offensive of the regime forces, and then in the counterattack and in the battles for Tell Malach and Jubane. The decision on the entry of NFOs into the SNA, adopted in early October 2019, should lead to the final demarcation of the moderate opposition and the HTS.

To address the HTS, a military solution is needed. This could lead to a split in their structure. One part would need to be eliminated by force, while the other could be dissolved (although one cannot exclude the possibility of the transition of certain "de-radicalised" HTS components to the composition of the SNA). Moreover, in order to effectively counter the HTS, the deployment of four SNA corps in Idlib is required. It would be desirable to concentrate them in enclaves controlled by Failag al-Sham and other groups of SNA near the Turkish border, withdrawing from areas of possible attacks by regime forces and Russia, leaving only HTS in these areas.

Ankara might only be able solve the HTS problem when the status of Idlib is finally resolved<sup>5</sup> and when the SNA forces deployed in eastern Syria are released as part of Operation Peace Spring. The mere presence of HTS in the security zone is expected to hinder a deal with Moscow. In any case, there are precedents when a dialogue is being conducted with terrorist groups and negotiations are ongoing. Nevertheless, if Ankara does not resolve the HTS problem, it would be difficult to implement any economic projects in Idlib or create fully-fledged IDP camps.

At this stage, cooperation between Russia and Turkey is possible. Russia and the regime’s forces could inflict the greatest losses and exterminate the HTS in the south and east of the M4/M5 highways where Ankara would deploy its observation posts, instead of the de-escalation zones that now exist around the perimeter. A buffer zone could be created along the M4/M5 in Idlib, which

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<sup>5</sup> For example, after agreements are reached on creating a security zone between the Turkish border and the M4 and M5 highways.

would force the HTS to retreat. SNA forces from the "Olive Branch" and "Euphrates Shield" could enter this buffer zone along the highway, which would first be secured by the presence of Turkish observation posts that would prevent possible attacks from the HTS. In turn, the forces of the Fourth Corps of SNA deployed in enclaves near the border could establish control and also occupy border crossings. Isolation of the HTS might encourage it to conduct a new military operation against the Fourth Corps of SNA if it is not possible to convince its leadership to disband this structure.

## **Conclusion**

This scenario seems the most likely, taking into account the current dynamics in Syria, the balance of power and interests of all major actors. At the same time, other less optimistic scenarios cannot be dismissed. It is possible that the Syrian government's military operations would take place in several stages and not stop on the M4/M5 highway but would continue towards the Turkish border. It is possible to keep the "security zone" under the control of the opposition, though with more limited capacity compared to the scenario presented. It is likely that there would be a resumption of full-scale offensive operations by government forces and Russia with the goal of a final and complete solution to Idlib. Of course, this would lead to enormous destruction in Idlib, civilian casualties and a mass exodus of civilians in the direction of Turkey, as well as significant loss of Assad's forces and the HTS going underground. In this case, even after the government formally establishes territorial control over Idlib, this region could become a zone of long-term permanent destabilisation for the whole of Syria, where guerrilla warfare against the government would take place, similar to the situation in Deraa and Kuneitra, though more intensely.