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Saving Idlib from Destruction

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What's new? The Syrian regime and its allies look on the verge of attacking the country's north-western governorate of Idlib, the last remaining stronghold of the armed rebellion, saying they must root out the jihadist militants who are dug in there.

Why does it matter? The Idlib region is home to nearly three million people, mostly civilians, more than one million of them displaced from war zones elsewhere in Syria. These people would have nowhere to flee in the event of an all-out regime assault. The death toll could thus be massive.

What should be done? Turkey and European countries should tell Russia it will compromise its political objective in Syria – the regime's full rehabilitation – with an assault on Idlib. Turkey, Russia and Iran should resume negotiations to find less dangerous means of neutralising the most hardline jihadists.

I. Overview

The Syrian regime and its allies seem poised to launch an offensive in the country's north-western governorate of Idlib, citing as reason the contingents of jihadist militants present in this last major redoubt of Syria's armed rebellion. But the area also is home to nearly three million people, mostly civilians. An all-out attack would likely have devastating human consequences and must be averted. Turkey and Europe must impress on Russia the political cost of such an offensive, and Turkey, Russia and Iran should return to the negotiating table to reach a compromise. This deal could entail ending rebel drone attacks on Russia's Hmeimim air base, reopening key highways to regular commercial traffic and suspending a regime offensive in Idlib to give Turkey a further chance to find a solution to the province's jihadist challenge. Western countries should make clear to Moscow that a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib will mean that they cannot work with Russia toward a political resolution or re-engage Damascus. They should further insist they will not rebuild Syria over the bodies of Idlib's civilian population.

For almost a year, Idlib has been protected by a partial ceasefire under a May 2017 "de-escalation" agreement among Turkey, Iran and Russia. It is not clear whether the apparently imminent offensive, and the maximalist rhetoric accompanying it, suggest an all-out attack to retake the entire area from the rebels, or a bid to press Turkey into a compromise that would satisfy Russia's bottom-line demands: intensified Turkish efforts to rid the area of jihadists, an end to drone attacks on Russia's air base and regime control over Idlib's key highways. Turkey, too, would like to see

the end of jihadist dominance in Idlib. If Turkey tries to attack Idlib's jihadists head on, however, it risks chaos on its border and jihadist reprisals in Turkish cities. Yet the threat of a regime offensive – even an initially limited one – would force Turkey's hand. Turkey would need to prevent its second nightmare scenario: a massive new flow of refugees into Turkey, likely including jihadist militants.

Russia has reason to seek an accommodation with Turkey; ongoing talks between Moscow and Ankara suggest that both sides are pursuing such an option. They are doing so because an all-out regime offensive could not be accomplished without significant political cost to Moscow. The Syrian regime's reconquest of Idlib would effectively mark its victory over the country's rebellion, but Russia's 2015 military intervention also had a political objective: Russia seeks to ensure not just the regime's military victory in Syria but its full political restoration through international re-legitimation at war's end, and its economic recovery through Western-supplied reconstruction funds. Turkey is integral to achieving those political ends, including as a co-sponsor of the talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana that originally yielded the Idlib de-escalation agreement. Turkish officials have warned that an attack on Idlib would gut the Astana process. Astana's collapse or Ankara's decision to downgrade political cooperation with Moscow would threaten Russia's political project in Syria.

Likewise, a regime victory in Idlib that kills many civilians and displaces hundreds of thousands would shock the same European countries Russia is now courting to re-open diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime and invest in reconstruction. Russia has enabled brutal regime victories before, in Aleppo and elsewhere, and trusted that other countries would eventually reconcile themselves to reality. But an Idlib offensive would come as Russia is arguing that Syria's war is winding down and involve humanitarian suffering on a scale likely unprecedented in the war – straining talks between Russia and the European Union (EU) regarding reconstruction aid to the breaking point.

There is no obvious solution for Idlib, given the large number of jihadist militants entrenched there and the unacceptably high cost of any attempt to remove them. But the answer is not for the regime and its allies to kill a large proportion of Idlib's population, or for Russia to strong-arm Turkey into acquiescing. For Damascus and its allies, military victory is in sight in Idlib. But by backing an all-out offensive, Russia risks undermining its long-term political objectives in Syria. Better for Astana's three guarantors to return to negotiations on an alternative with buy-in from all sides, and for Turkey and Western donors to make clear that a military victory by the regime in Idlib could put political victory for Russia out of reach.

II. Astana and Idlib's De-escalation

Turkey, Russia and Iran originally announced four de-escalation zones in the Kazakh capital in May 2017, including one in Idlib.¹ At the sixth round of Astana talks in September 2017, the three guarantors agreed on the demarcation of the Idlib de-escalation zone, which also includes sections of neighbouring Latakia, Hama and

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Memorandum on the Creation of De-escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic", 6 May 2017.

Aleppo governorates.² The Astana process allowed Damascus and its Russian as well as Iranian allies to manage Syria's civil war, selectively freezing active fronts to better allocate their military forces. It also provided Russia with an opportunity to move procedural issues such as constitutional reform and national elections outside the purview of stalled UN-sponsored talks in Geneva.³

For its part, Turkey has attempted to use the Astana process to secure a stake for itself and the Syrian opposition in a political solution, and, to date, to keep relative calm in Idlib. On 8 October 2017, Turkey sent its first units across the border into Idlib to scout observation points along the zone's northern perimeter, followed by a full convoy four days later.⁴ In January 2018, Turkish troops deployed along the Idlib zone's eastern edge, halting a month-long Syrian regime advance that had seized much of eastern Idlib and adjacent parts of Aleppo and Hama. Turkish forces were hit by a roadside bomb (perpetrator unknown) and then by shelling as they set up observation posts, leading to the death of one Turkish civilian government employee and one soldier, and several wounded.⁵ Turkey nonetheless persisted in establishing the posts, returning fire after its forces were again shelled from regime-controlled territory.⁶ After stabilising Idlib's eastern edge, Turkey continued to deploy forces around the zone's perimeter. It built its twelfth and final observation post outside the western Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour in May.⁷

Of the four de-escalation zones declared in May 2017, Idlib is the last one standing. Between March and July of this year, Russia helped the Syrian regime recapture the other three, using a mix of overwhelming military force and negotiated surrenders.⁸

None of those three areas had a tripwire deployment of foreign observer forces, however, nor did any have a state guarantor as deeply invested as Turkey is in Idlib. For Ankara, the area is a matter of national security. Turkey fears a huge new wave of would-be refugees rushing toward its border, either creating a humanitarian crisis on its doorstep or, if Turkey allows them in, magnifying its already massive refugee

² Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Release Regarding the Declaration of the Idlib De-Escalation Area at the Sixth Astana Meeting Held on 14-15 September 2017", 15 September 2017.

³ For an explanation of Russia's approach, see Sam Heller, "Geneva talks will not salvage U.S. Syria policy", The Century Foundation, 12 December 2017.

⁴ "Turkish army in Syria to support Idlib operation", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 October 2017. "First Turkish military convoy enters Syria's Idlib", Reuters, 12 October 2017.

⁵ Turkey blamed the roadside bomb incident on the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian Kurdish organisation it regards as indistinguishable from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey, the EU and the U.S. designate the PKK as a terrorist group. "YPG terrorists attack Turkish military convoy in Idlib with car bomb, kill 1 civilian, injure 2 others", *Daily Sabah*, 30 January 2018. On the shelling, see "Turkish civilian killed, two injured in Idlib", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 31 January 2018; and "Two Turkish soldiers killed in Syria's Afrin, Idlib", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 February 2018.

⁶ For a more complete account of the January-February deployment, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°56, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, 9 February 2018.

⁷ "Turkish forces establish observation point number twelve in northern Syria ... and warplanes target Jisr al-Shughour" (Arabic), *Nedaa Suriya*, 16 May 2018.

⁸ For a window into how Russia enabled regime victory, see Obeida al-Hamawi, "Northern Homs: The story of 'reconciliation' with Kinana Hweija and the Russian officer" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 3 May 2018; Khaled al-Zouabi, "Daraa: Individual agreements with unclear terms" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 17 July 2018.

burden.⁹ A new influx of refugees inevitably would include some of Idlib's jihadist militants, who could threaten Turkey's domestic security or travel on to third countries. As a consequence, Turkey's aim in Idlib has been to avoid a new, destabilising conflict on its border. Ankara has argued for a strategy of containment, giving it more time and space to separate Idlib's so-called moderate opposition from transnational jihadists and to bring the region closer to a negotiated political solution.¹⁰

There have been occasional clashes on the edges of the de-escalation zone, as well as bombing sorties by Syrian or allied aircraft.¹¹ Likewise, jihadists in the area have periodically launched raids on regime positions outside the de-escalation zone.¹² Russia has also accused militants inside the Idlib de-escalation zone of launching drones that have attacked Russia's Hmeimim airbase in coastal Latakia governorate.¹³ But, by and large, Idlib's de-escalation zone has held.

Yet time may be running out. As part of the de-escalation agreement, Turkey committed to guarantee Idlib's ceasefire and deal with its jihadist militants. Citing lack of progress on this front, however, Russian officials have substantially escalated their rhetoric, threatening an imminent "anti-terrorist operation". Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued it was unacceptable for "terrorists" to use civilians as human shields and launch attacks from inside the de-escalation zone, in addition to forcibly preventing other opposition groups from negotiating local settlements. Referring to Idlib, he said: "This abscess must be eliminated".¹⁴ For its part, the Syrian government said that "war on any remaining terrorists, including in Idlib", and "saving" the

⁹ According to the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team's June 2018 population data, 2,936,672 people live in the region comprising the Idlib de-escalation zone, including opposition-held areas of Idlib governorate, neighbouring Latakia and Hama governorates and Aleppo's Jabal Samaan district. Of that population, 1,285,396 are internally displaced people. Humanitarian Access Team, <https://humanitarianaccess.org/population-data>. The UN has warned that as many as 800,000 people could be displaced by an offensive. "UN fears 800,000 could be displaced in Syria's rebel-held Idlib", France 24, 29 August 2018. Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees, according to Turkish government statistics. Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior – Directorate General of Migration Management, "Distribution of Syrian Refugees in the Scope of Temporary Protection by Year", at http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, August 2018. "Turkey wants Idlib to be as quiet as possible. They want no waves, because a storm would touch [Turkey's] Hatay [province]". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Turkey, August 2018.

¹¹ For example, see "Assad forces bomb Jisr al-Shughour and its surroundings in Idlib countryside" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 30 July 2018.

¹² For example, see "Raid on points adjacent to Nuseiri village of Jourin" (Arabic), Tanzim Hurras al-Din, Jihadology, 3 August 2018, <https://jihadology.net/2018/08/03/new-statement-from-%E1%B8%A5uras-al-din-raid-on-some-points-adjacent-to-the-nu%E1%B9%A3ayri-village-of-jurin>. "In support of Daraa" (Arabic), Jama'at Ansar al-Islam, Jihadology, 9 July 2018, <https://jihadology.net/2018/07/10/new-video-message-from-an%E1%B9%A3ar-al-islam-support-for-dara>.

¹³ For example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu, Moscow, August 24, 2018", 24 August 2018.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir, Moscow", 29 August 2018; "Lavrov says terrorists' use of Idlib for attacks on Russian, Syrian troops unacceptable", TASS, 30 August 2018.

area's civilians are "the government's unavoidable duty".¹⁵ Regime forces, including former rebels recruited from Syria's centre and south, have been massing along the north west's front lines.¹⁶ Now they seem to be waiting for the order to attack.

III. The Jihadist Dilemma

Nearly a year after the establishment of the Idlib de-escalation zone, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest iteration of former Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, remains the single strongest armed faction in Idlib. Other, smaller jihadist factions also operate in the area, in addition to mixed non-jihadist Islamist and nationalist factions.

HTS seized almost total control of Idlib and the north west in July 2017. Ahead of Turkey's October 2017 deployment of military forces inside the Idlib de-escalation zone, it seemed possible that Turkey and Syrian rebel partners would attack the group's fighters, who had assembled along Turkey's border with Idlib. Instead, Turkey avoided a costly confrontation and coordinated the deployment of its observer forces inside the Idlib zone with HTS. The jihadist group justified its cooperation with Turkey as an uncomfortable but necessary step to protect Idlib's residents, and one the group conditioned on maintaining its own autonomous Islamic rule and continuing the "jihad".¹⁷

HTS subsequently was weakened in battles with rival rebel factions in February-April 2018, and the group ceded control of a number of peripheral areas. But it remains the dominant force in Idlib, with control over the governorate's most strategic, lucrative locations, including its provincial capital and its border with Turkey, from which it can levy taxes and fees and extract resources from flows of humanitarian assistance and trade.

Rather than a head-on confrontation with Idlib's jihadists, Turkey has advocated using political engagement and economic entanglement to widen intra-jihadist splits, disaggregating more pragmatic Syrians from uncompromisingly ideological transnational jihadists. Turkey has also pressed for narrowing the set of jihadists who need to be isolated and eliminated, saying that a smaller, more manageable group of committed jihadists are the real problem, and not necessarily HTS in full. Ankara prefers to focus on a mostly non-Syrian hard core, among them Hurras al-Din, a small al-Qaeda loyalist splinter of HTS that rejects the latter's political compromises, especially its dealings with Turkey.¹⁸ "I'm sympathetic to the Turks' strategy with HTS", said a

¹⁵ "Foreign [Ministry] responds to spokesperson for UN Secretary-General: counterterrorism is responsibility of Syrian state and war on remaining terrorists, including in Idlib, is unavoidable duty" (Arabic), SANA, 30 August 2018.

¹⁶ "'Settlement factions' from Daraa to Idlib: a demonstration of loyalty" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 24 August 2018.

¹⁷ Sam Heller, "Tahrir al-Sham official on Turkey's intervention to implement Astana: 'That's not the reality'", 15 October 2017, <https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2017/10/15/tahrir-al-sham-official-on-turkeys-intervention-to-implement-astana-thats-not-the-reality>. "HTS on ISIS, Turkey and more", video, YouTube, 1 November 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zra-8V_DqPg.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, August 2018. HTS has apparently broken from al-Qaeda organisationally, even if it has not renounced its commitment to jihadist militancy. Jabhat

Turkey-based Western diplomat. “It’s a gamble, but it’s not like anyone else has a better idea, other than killing everyone in Idlib”.¹⁹

Yet Turkey has not eliminated Hurras al-Din and others it has identified as irreconcilable. And it has no apparent solution for HTS itself, other than appealing to its mostly Syrian leadership to dissolve the organisation or make other concessions – calls that HTS has rejected, describing them as an enemy ploy to weaken the north-western insurgency.²⁰

HTS is seemingly unassailable militarily by the north west’s other rebel factions. Certainly, it would now seem suicidal for these rebels to throw themselves against the strongest force inside Idlib at a time when a Russian-backed regime offensive appears imminent.²¹ Instead, these factions have come together in a joint operations room with HTS to coordinate their defence of the north west.²² To the extent that a successful military defence of Idlib is possible, the group’s contribution would be indispensable.

A Turkish military intervention, either directly or in support of “National Army” rebels trained in Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo, could conceivably dislodge HTS or force its dissolution. But it is likely this undertaking would be risky and messy; it could invite retaliatory jihadist attacks against targets inside Turkey, crippling the country’s tourism industry and dealing a blow to its already weakened economy.

Russia will largely determine Turkey’s course of action in Idlib. Indeed, as with previous regime offensives in de-escalation zones, Russia’s decision whether to provide air support and other backing to regime forces effectively will dictate if an offensive is viable.²³ Turkey has reportedly reinforced its observation points, which might discourage an attack, but Russia could likely make Turkey’s deployment in Idlib unsustainable.²⁴ What exactly Russia expects from Turkey and the Turkish-backed

al-Nusra’s initial July 2016 break with al-Qaeda was a ruse, by the admission of Nusra’s own leadership. Even after a seemingly more substantive break with the January 2017 announcement of HTS, the group remained in contact with top al-Qaeda leadership. “So let us fight them with solid foundations” (Arabic), Ayman al-Zawahiri, Jihadology, 28 November 2017, <https://goo.gl/dS7CGN>. Abdurrahim Attoun, Jihadology, 29 November 2017, <https://goo.gl/2Bnd1B>. The U.S. considers HTS to be a continuation of Jabhat al-Nusra, but also has legal incentives to carry over Jabhat al-Nusra’s existing terrorist designation rather than sanction HTS independently. U.S. Department of State, “Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusrah Front”, 31 May 2018. On 29 August, Turkey added HTS as an alias to its existing terrorist designation of Jabhat al-Nusra, with unclear implications. “Presidential Decree 50” (Turkish), Turkish Official Gazette, 29 August 2018.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Turkey, August 2018.

²⁰ “HTS emerges from its silence and reveals the truth about dissolving itself” (Arabic), Shabakat Iba al-Ikhbariya, 28 August 2018. “Felicitations on a Blessed Eid al-Adha, 1439 AH” (Arabic), HTS, Jihadology, 21 August 2018, <https://goo.gl/Mgsyyz>. On talks with HTS, a member of the opposition delegation to Astana said: “We’re trying to find a way out. No force can convince HTS to dissolve. So we’re trying to find a solution”. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2018.

²¹ A representative of a rebel faction said: “Nobody rational starts two battles at the same time, from the front and the rear If I open a battle to the rear, I will be attacked from the front”. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2018.

²² “Felicitations on a Blessed Eid al-Adha, 1439 AH” (Arabic), Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham, op. cit.

²³ For more on how Russia’s position on Syria’s south-western de-escalation zone evolved, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°187, *Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria*, 21 June 2018.

²⁴ “Turkey confirms it is staying in Idlib Military vehicles arrive at observation points” (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 29 August 2018. Turkey’s ability to reinforce its observation points is constrained by

Syrian opposition to avert such an offensive remains unclear.²⁵ Indeed, it is not obvious that even the elimination of HTS – which, as seen, Ankara is unlikely to undertake – would satisfy Russia and thus head off a Syrian regime offensive on Idlib.

In the last round of Astana talks in August (this time held in Sochi), Russia's sole specific request of Syrian opposition attendees was to halt violations of the de-escalation agreement, including drone attacks on Hmeimim.²⁶ Russia has since alleged multiple new drone attacks on the airbase.²⁷ It is now threatening a broader "anti-terrorist" action. In Russia's view, such an action would not necessarily contravene the de-escalation agreement; Moscow has argued that previous offensives have actually fulfilled de-escalation agreements insofar as they have satisfied their counter-terrorism provisions.²⁸ In short, if Russia is looking for a counter-terrorism rationale to support an attack on Idlib, the continued presence of HTS makes it readily available.²⁹

IV. Victory – at a Cost

For the regime, a battle for Idlib backed by Russian air power probably would be winnable. But it would be neither clean nor easy. It necessarily would entail violence and death on a huge scale, in an area with a population many times larger than those in rebel-held eastern Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta and, unlike those enclaves, no clear way out: there is no other Idlib to be evacuated to.³⁰

supply lines that run through jihadist-controlled territory and Russian dominance of north-western Syria's airspace, should Turkey need to provide air support to its forces or evacuate them by air. The points are an expression of Turkey's commitment to the de-escalation agreement but seem to have limited defensive use in the event of a large-scale offensive. On the vulnerability of Turkish observer forces, see Metin Gurcan, "Turkey's de-escalation efforts around Idlib come with risks", *Al-Monitor*, 21 May 2018. A rebel faction representative said: "I tell our men: Politically, the Turks are with us. To the end of the line, politically. But if there's a military clash, they're not with us. They'll only defend us politically". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2018.

²⁵ A rebel faction representative said: "Since the Soviets were in Afghanistan until now, they've been fighting terrorism. Now they expect that with the press of a button, we end terror. It's not fair". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, opposition attendees of Astana meetings, Turkey, August 2018.

²⁷ For example, see "Five militants' drones downed near Russian airbase at Syria's Hmeimim", TASS, 13 August 2018. HTS has denied that at least some drone attacks were launched from the rebel-held north west, saying that Russia was fabricating justifications for an attack on Idlib. "Russia invents false excuses to attack Idlib" (Arabic), Shabakat Iba al-Ikhbariya, 22 August 2018.

²⁸ For example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 5, 2018", 5 July 2018.

²⁹ A Western diplomat said: "Look at what happened in the south. The Russians said it was awash with HTS, because this served their interests. The Turks can have the most effective strategy ever. But if the regime and Russia want Idlib, they will always say it's awash with HTS". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018.

³⁰ The populations of rebel-held eastern Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta seem to have been systematically overestimated before their fall. Yet even if the north west's population is similarly inflated and is only half the estimated roughly three million, that number would still be roughly ten times larger than in eastern Aleppo (approximately 157,000), and more than five times larger than in Ghouta (approximately 278,000). Estimates per Aron Lund, "Eastern Aleppo under al-Assad", *IRIN News*, 12 April 2017; UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic:

And a fight for Idlib would endanger Russia's relationship with Turkey, as well as Russia's efforts to effect a political process for which Turkey's help would be critical. These are reasons why Russia should hesitate before encouraging Damascus to launch an all-out attack.³¹ Russia is unlikely to succeed in reaching settlements with opposition elements in Idlib as it did in the south.³² HTS was a marginal force in other opposition enclaves that were overrun or that surrendered. Not so in the north west, where the group is large, organised and effective. HTS itself cannot be reintegrated into an Assad-led system, and much of its membership will fight to the death, as will many jihadist foreign fighters inside and outside the group. Its size and reach in the north west will also stiffen the backbone of surrounding rebels, shoring up resistance by others who might otherwise agree to deal or surrender. HTS and other rebels have advertised their arrests of individuals in contact with the regime and Russia.³³

Non-jihadist rebels have their own existential fears. Islamist rebels belonging to Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham and Feilaq al-Sham cannot survive under the Syrian regime, which is implacably hostile to Islamist groups.

Whether by accident or design, Russia has helped turn the north west into something indigestible. It facilitated the regime's "reconciliation" deals, under which militants and civilians who refused to live under the regime, or whom the regime rejected, were bused north – mainly to Idlib, concentrating Syria's most reliable, motivated oppositionists there.³⁴ They cannot safely surrender, and they have nowhere else to

Response to the East Ghouta Crisis in Rural Damascus Situation Report No. 5 (19 April – 1 May 2018)", 1 May 2018.

³¹ U.S. military intervention seems not be one of those reasons. In a 21 August statement, the U.S., the UK and France jointly warned of action if the regime again uses chemical weapons. They expressed concerns over a possible Idlib offensive but did not threaten any response. U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Statement of the United States, the United Kingdom and France on the Fifth Anniversary of the Chemical Weapons Attack in Ghouta, Syria", 21 August 2018. Barbara Starr, "US on alert as Syrian regime prepares for assault on final rebel stronghold", CNN, 28 August 2018. U.S. and allied warnings against new chemical weapons use have prompted a rhetorical counter-escalation by the regime and Russia, who have warned of a "false flag" chemical attack by Idlib rebels to invite Western military intervention.

³² Russian officials have been saying in public and in private that they plan to reach settlements with opposition elements inside Idlib, as they did in northern Homs and Syria's south west. In the south west, Russia managed to accommodate neighbouring Jordan and Israel and insulate them from a regime offensive by brokering rebel surrenders. "Russian defence minister says in talks with armed groups in Syria's Idlib to reach peace – RIA", Reuters, 28 August 2018.

³³ For example, see "HTS arrests several leaders for treason ('reconciliation') with the Nuseiri regime in Ma'arat Misrin" (Arabic), *Shabakat Iba al-Ikhbariya*, 19 August 2018. "Hama: 'National Liberation Front' arrests those calling for 'reconciliation'" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 6 August 2018.

³⁴ For perspectives of some of those displaced to Idlib, as well as Idlibis themselves, see Crisis Group Commentary, "Voices of Idlib", 11 July 2018. A Syrian coordinator of humanitarian assistance said: "I talk to civilians and local councils. They have a harder stance than the military men. They reject surrender. So it's a popular position, more than a military one". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, August 2018. A former member of Idlib's city council said: "In Idlib city, there are about 700,000 people – that is, [in English] 'overload'. People all are afraid. The situation is bad. And there's no longer anywhere to run. These are people who were forcibly displaced – from Daraa, Ghouta, Aleppo. They have no other last resort". Crisis Group interview, Antakya, August 2018.

go, other than the already overburdened Turkish-controlled area north of Aleppo, or Turkey itself.³⁵

The scope of a possible regime offensive, and whether it would seek to retake part or all of the Idlib zone, remains unclear. But even a limited attack on Idlib would be costly, and something more total would cause a humanitarian catastrophe.³⁶ “A worst-case scenario in Idlib will overwhelm capacities and has the potential to create a humanitarian emergency at a scale not yet seen through this crisis”, senior UN aid official John Ging told the UN Security Council on 28 August.³⁷

Russia has only just launched a major initiative to coordinate the return of refugees to Syria, which it seems to be trying to leverage into Western political normalisation with Damascus and investment in reconstruction.³⁸ The spectacle of hundreds dying under Russian bombs and hundreds of thousands of people fleeing bombing inside Syria, or rushing across Syria’s border into Turkey, would make it impossible for Russia to argue the time has come for safe, organised refugee return to Syria.

An offensive on Idlib would also threaten the rest of Russia’s political project in Syria. Even if Turkey has under-delivered on counter-terrorism in the Idlib zone, it has contributed in important ways to Russia’s other, non-Idlib efforts in Syria.³⁹ It is not only the Astana process that depends on Turkey. Turkish support – and Turkish encouragement for Syrian opposition participation – is of great importance to Russia’s Sochi national dialogue conference and the constitutional committee stemming from it. That committee will be key to linking Russia’s process to the UN-sponsored Geneva process, reorienting Geneva talks away from political transition toward constitutional reform, per Russia’s agenda.

³⁵ According to the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team’s June 2018 population data, there are 796,623 people in Turkish-controlled sections of Aleppo, less than a third of the population of opposition-held Idlib and its surroundings. Only 46,043 internally displaced people have already overtaken these areas’ humanitarian infrastructure. Conditions in some camps are harsh enough that buses of evacuees have opted to return to areas of regime control. An additional million or more displaced people, likely including Idlib militants, would seem certain to destabilise these areas. Humanitarian Access Team, <https://humanitarianaccesssteam.org/population-data>. For an account of conditions in a northern Aleppo camp, see Osama Moussa and Tom Rollins, “Assad’s evacuation deals leave bitter taste for displaced Syrians”, *The National*, 10 June 2018.

³⁶ An ally of Damascus told Reuters that the Idlib offensive would proceed in phases. “Syrian army preparing phased Idlib assault – source”, Reuters, 29 August 2018. European diplomats have been told in Damascus that the offensive will ultimately encompass all of Idlib. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, August 2018.

³⁷ “UN Security Council urged to act against ‘worst-case scenario’ in Syria’s war-battered Idlib”, UN News, 28 August 2018. Jan Egeland, senior adviser to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, has warned a battle for Idlib would be a “bloodbath”. “Syria: UN warns of ‘bloodbath’ in Idlib”, BBC World Service, 9 August 2018.

³⁸ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, “Joint Coordination Centre of Russian Defence Ministry and Russian Foreign Ministry for refugees returning to Syria holds planning meeting in Moscow”, 20 July 2018.

³⁹ The Turkish-Russian bilateral relationship also encompasses many critical non-Syria issues, as does Turkey’s relationship with Astana’s other guarantor, Iran. For more on Russia and Turkey’s multidimensional bilateral relationship, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°250, *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, 28 June 2018. In July, Turkey lent rhetorical support to Russia’s push for refugee return. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Final statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria, Sochi, July 30–31, 2018”, 31 July 2018.

Turkey's leadership has warned that an attack on Idlib would effectively render Astana meaningless and undermine Turkish-Russian relations.⁴⁰ If Russia and Iran deliver an outright loss to Turkey in Idlib, rather than a negotiated compromise, it is hard to see how Turkey could continue to contribute actively to Astana and other processes – even if Ankara still felt compelled to deal with Russia to secure areas under its control in Aleppo, and on Kurdish issues.

There would be inevitable implications for members of the Syrian opposition participating in Astana and other Russian-backed processes. Many among them understand their attendance in part as a trade for Idlib's safety. They have no obvious future in a Syria ruled by the regime themselves, but they can at least negotiate for the sake of Syrians inside the country. They will have little incentive to lend their credibility to Russian-sponsored constitutional reform or national dialogue if the regime carries out a full-scale Russia-backed offensive on Idlib. "If there's an attack on Idlib, there's no reason to continue with negotiations", said a member of the opposition's Astana delegation.⁴¹ At least some Western governments are ready to acquiesce in a pro forma political outcome in Syria.⁴² But without participation by a minimally credible opposition, Russia will struggle to deliver a political resolution with even a veneer of inclusion and consensual legitimacy.

To convince Russia of the need for restraint, the costs of an offensive need to be made clear. Turkey should continue to stress to Russia the political consequences of a broader offensive on Idlib, which would hit Turkey's bottom-line interests: preventing a new refugee flow and a potential jihadist threat inside Turkey. Europeans should support the Turkish position and tell Moscow that a massacre in Idlib, a new flow of refugees to Turkey and then onward to Europe, and the hollowing out of Syria's political process, would be a huge problem for European cooperation with Russia on a political process, let alone reconstruction assistance or re-engagement with Damascus.

There is an alternative to a military offensive: the three Astana guarantors should return to trilateral negotiations and jointly agree to a roadmap for Idlib. This plan could entail:

- ❑ An end to Idlib militants' repeated violations of the ceasefire and to drone attacks on Russian personnel in Hmeimim, potentially by pulling back Turkey's observation points in south-western Idlib and Hama and withdrawing the de-escalation zone's protection from specific problem areas.
- ❑ A shared formulation to safely open the Aleppo-Damascus and Aleppo-Latakia highways to trade, either under Syrian state control or some combination of Turkish and Russian stewardship.

⁴⁰ Ali Kemal Akan, "Erdogan, Putin discuss energy projects over phone", Anadolu Agency, 14 July 2018. Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu warned previously that an attack on Idlib would end Astana and the Syrian political process. "Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: YPG's withdrawal will begin on 4 July" (Turkish), CNN Türk, 21 June 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2018.

⁴² A European diplomat said: "We've been looking for a different way. We no longer talk about regime change. We no longer talk about opposition-held areas, or even the 'opposition', if we can help it. We talk about 'political change'. Everyone is looking for an exit, in a good way. But we need progress on the political track. It can be made-up more than real – so, for example, elections". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, July 2018.

- Reinvigorated Turkish efforts to deal with Idlib's jihadists by its preferred, less disruptive means.⁴³ On this point, Russia will have to be realistic and not invoke Ankara's inability to meet this high benchmark as a pretext for a future military operation.

V. Conclusion

There is no obvious solution for Idlib or how to neutralise its jihadist militants. But the answer cannot be for Syria and Russia to launch a destructive offensive in Idlib. While it would achieve their primary objectives – destruction of the jihadists, if not all rebels, and restoration of regime control over more Syrian land – it also would exact a terrible toll in Syrian lives and be attained at a high political cost to Russia. Turkey and the West should make those costs as clear as possible to Moscow. And Moscow should be persuaded that its interests would be better served by intensified talks with Turkey about how to achieve a workable compromise in Idlib.

Beirut/Brussels, 3 September 2018

⁴³ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.

Appendix A: Map of Idlib



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, European Commission, Directorate General for Neighbourhood Enlargement Negotiations, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Korea Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

September 2018

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

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Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth, Middle East and North Africa Report N°165, 3 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

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International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

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