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Syrian war: Understanding Idlib's rebel factions

Nazeer al-Khatib/AFP

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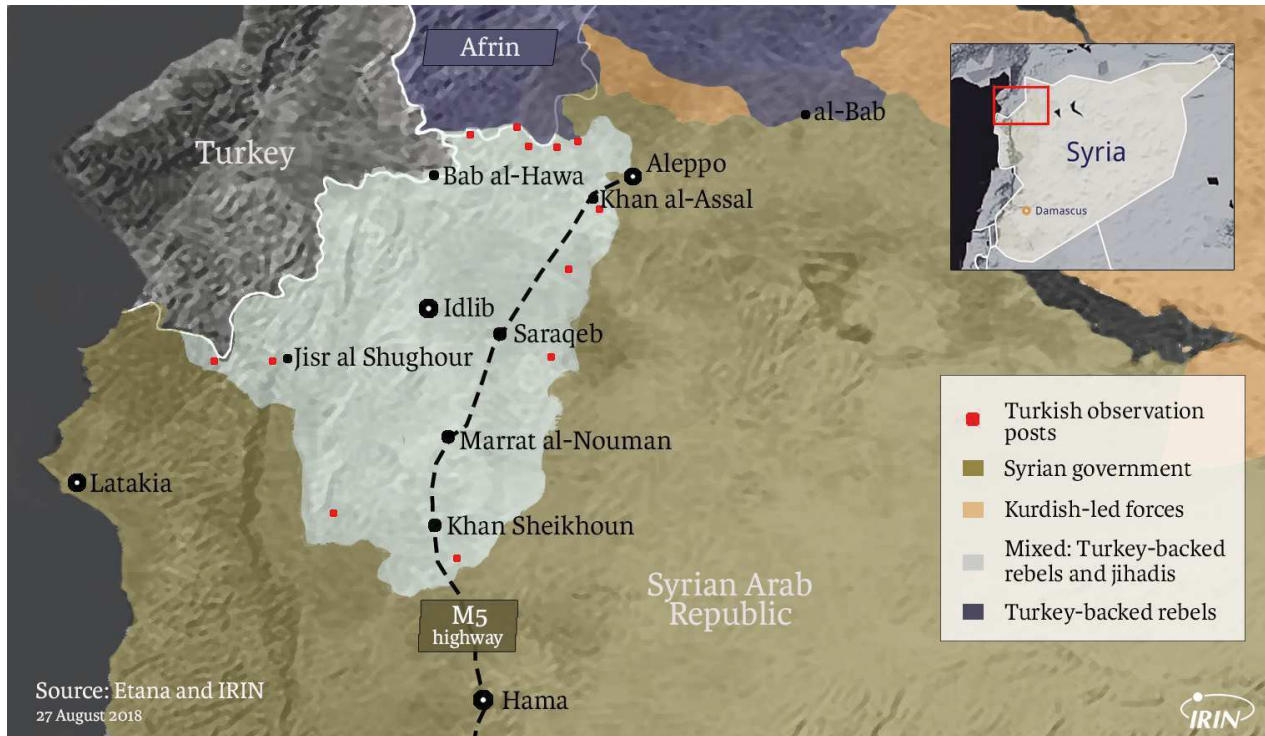
As the Syrian government prepares for an offensive on the rebel-held province of Idlib, rebel factions are divided in their loyalties and outlooks. Here's a look at who would be fighting President Bashar al-Assad's forces in what could become the last major battle of Syria's war.

While Turkey controls the rebels in nearby Afrin and al-Bab, the landscape in Idlib is more complex. Two major factions dominate – the National Liberation Front and Tahrir al-Sham – and they differ on their positioning towards Ankara.

Turkey's favourite is the NLF, which is led by Fadlallah al-Hajji, a Muslim Brotherhood ally. The NLF includes Turkey-friendly Islamists like Ahrar al-Sham, the Nouredine al-Zengi Brigades, Failaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Ahrar, and groups that fought under the Free Syrian Army banner, like the Victory Army and the 2nd Coastal Division.

Big but brittle, the NLF is held together by Turkish sponsorship and shared enemies: al-Assad's government, Syrian Kurdish groups, and hardline jihadists.

The NLF's main rival in Idlib is **Tahrir al-Sham**, a jihadist group that controls the provincial capital, the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey, and other key areas in Idlib.



Led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani, Tahrir al-Sham grew out of what used to be the Nusra Front, Syria's official al-Qaeda franchise. It is classified as a terrorist group by the **UN** as well

as by the **United States**, **Turkey**, and many other nations. Moscow and Damascus typically point to the group's presence when launching new military offensives.

Tahrir al-Sham has a murky relationship to Turkey. Al-Golani appears to engage pragmatically with Turkish intelligence but refuses to fully submit to Ankara's diktat.

To his dismay, Turkey keeps pushing for control over the entire Idlib insurgency. Turkish officers tell rebels the only way to appease Russia and keep al-Assad out of Idlib is for Tahrir al-Sham to dissolve and let its members join the NLF.

Some Tahrir al-Sham members seem to agree. Syrian analysts, including Ahmed Aba-Zeid, a well-connected Syrian researcher who supports the non-jihadist opposition, told IRIN that Turkey now **dominates** one wing of the group.

Al-Golani is also under pressure from jihadist hardliners who portray him as a Turkish tool and a sellout.

"Al-Qaeda leaders in Syria tend to see Tahrir al-Sham, and Abu Mohammed al-Golani in particular, as unprincipled and treacherous," Cole Bunzel, a research fellow in Islamic Law and Civilisation at Yale University, told IRIN. Bunzel said hardliners view Tahrir al-Sham as "having disobeyed the al-Qaeda emir [leader] in breaking off from the organisation, and since then persecuting al-Qaeda members in Syria."

Some of al-Golani's jihadist critics, many of whom are Jordanians and Palestinians, have gathered in a pro-al-Qaeda splinter faction known as Hurras al-Deen. The group is small, but its religious criticism stings and adds to al-Golani's challenges. He must now simultaneously fend off further defections to Hurras al-Deen and prevent his other flank from being peeled off by Turkey, whose "good cop" attitude is backed up by the threat of a regime offensive.

A Tahrir al-Sham official again **rejected** calls for the group's dissolution on 28 August, but added that it seeks "a salutary solution in the liberated north that spares our people the

expected aggression.” Behind the scenes, the group appears to be negotiating with Turkey, while Turkey negotiates with Russia.

In Aba-Zeid's view, how Tahrir al-Sham evolves in the future will depend on Ankara and Moscow.

“If Turkey reaches an understanding with Russia to let Turkey handle the jihadist file in Idlib, one can expect to see Tahrir al-Sham split” between members who join the Turkey-backed block and hardliners who draw closer to Hurras al-Deen, he said.

Minor factions and Chinese jihadists

Complicating the picture in Idlib are several second-tier rebel factions.

On the jihadist side, Hurras al-Deen is accompanied by a number of small foreign-led factions close to Tahrir al-Sham, including the Chechens of Junoud al-Sham. The so-called Islamic State also operates clandestine cells in the area, hunted by both the NLF and Tahrir al-Sham.

Jaish al-Ezzah, a Free Syrian Army-flagged faction based near Hama, has not joined the Turkish-backed NLF like many of its former comrades. Some see the group as a covert Tahrir al-Sham ally, while others say their base is simply too far from Turkey for joining the alliance to make sense, so they are surviving by ducking out of intra-rebel rivalries.

In the western part of the enclave, Jisr al-Shughour has emerged as a stronghold of the **Turkestan Islamic Party**, TIP, a group of Uyghur Chinese jihadists. The TIP's presence in this strategic area (it's near the border with Turkey and government-controlled Latakia) plus its links with both Tahrir al-Sham and Turkey could give this group a pivotal role in any upcoming battle.

TIP has worked closely with Syria's jihadist factions in the past, but also seems well acquainted with Turkish intelligence. After

staying out of intra-rebel clashes for years, the group shed its neutrality policy this spring to help Tahrir al-Sham beat back a surprise attack by Turkey-backed Islamists.

Aba-Zeid, who follows intra-rebel conflicts in Idlib closely, said TIP helped swing that battle in al-Golani's favour. But, he still believes that "Turkey's influence on TIP remains greater than the influence of their alliance" with Tahrir al-Sham.

If all of this sounds complicated, it is. But to the Syrian government, Idlib's rebels are all terrorists pure and simple – and the Idlib fighters themselves also see al-Assad as their primary enemy, transcending factional divides. Aba-Zeid insisted that if Russia green-lights a Syrian government offensive on Idlib, no matter how the various groups view Turkey or each other, they would all "prioritise repelling the attack".

Mustafa Sejari, a leader in the Ankara-backed Moutassem Brigade, agreed. "This is the last fortress of the Syrian opposition and preserving it is everyone's obligation," he said.

(TOP PHOTO: A Syrian rebel fighter from the recently formed "National Liberation Front" rests against a wall along the front line near the village of Abu Dali in Idlib province on 1 September 2018. CREDIT: Nazeer al-Khatib/AFP)

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