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Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province

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What happened? The de-escalation zone in north-western Syria is on the brink of collapse. Boosted by Russian air support, Syrian regime troops are advancing toward the Idlib region. Amid obstruction by the Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias, Turkish troops took up positions near the front lines in early February.

Why did it happen? The area is controlled by the jihadist alliance Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which until now has rejected de-escalation. Russia, Iran and Western powers consider HTS an irreconcilable terrorist organisation that must be defeated militarily. Turkey has a more nuanced view, but it has been preoccupied with its fight against Kurdish forces.

Why does it matter? A regime offensive into the heart of Idlib may be imminent. It would likely involve aerial bombardment and a battle against thousands of militants in densely populated areas, creating another humanitarian catastrophe and prompting an exodus toward the Turkish border, further straining Turkey's ability to cope with large numbers of Syria refugees.

What should be done? Turkey should deploy along the front line in cooperation with Russia, which should press the Syrian regime to delay, or even desist from, its assault. This would buy time for renewed Turkish efforts to curtail transnational jihadist influence within HTS in favour of militants more open to de-escalation and compromise.

I. Overview

Idlib, a province in north-western Syria, together with slices of territory in adjacent provinces, is the country's largest remaining rebel stronghold. It is also a humanitarian catastrophe waiting to happen, if the Syrian regime and its allies launch an all-out assault to retake it. Tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters, including many jihadists, are entrenched in a densely populated area. Tackling the militants head on will come at a massive human cost. Regime advances further east and Russian bombardment of infrastructure in the area have already led to significant displacement. If fighting reaches towns along the Aleppo-Hama highway and further west, the outcome will be many times worse. All options for Idlib are bad, but cooperation between Ankara and Moscow might permit Turkish troops to deploy further along the front line between rebels and regime forces. For Ankara, it is a risky last-minute gambit,

but almost certainly the only means of averting an assault on Idlib that, as in Aleppo, would wreak havoc upon the inhabitants and propel an exodus toward the Turkish border.

On 14-15 September 2017, at the sixth round of the Russian-led Astana talks geared toward ending or at least containing the Syrian war, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to demarcate a “de-escalation zone” in Idlib and adjacent slices of territory in other provinces. Yet the three “guarantors” of this accord faced an immediate conundrum – the domination of the area by the armed movement Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the core of which is al-Qaeda’s former Syria affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. Russia and Iran (as well as Western countries) consider HTS a terrorist group that must be destroyed. While Turkey has a more differentiated view of the group, it nevertheless signed up to the “joint statement” that commits all parties to fight the jihadists. In turn, HTS rejected the de-escalation scheme. The dilemma is particularly acute for Turkey, which reportedly agreed to take charge of the de-escalation zone’s western sector, where the bulk of its population lives. Turkey also is concerned that fleeing civilians and fighters will head toward its border if the situation deteriorates.

In mid-October, Turkish forces deployed near the rebel-held area’s northern fringe. That limited engagement, which was facilitated by an understanding between Ankara and HTS, allowed Turkey to address its principal objective in Idlib: containing a potential southward advance of PKK-affiliated Kurdish fighters in the enclave of Afrin, further north. But if Turkey wants to achieve its secondary objective – preventing a new intensification of the Syrian refugee crisis – it will need to influence events across the front separating the HTS-dominated rebels and the Syrian regime. To this end, Ankara needs to deploy deeper into rebel-held territory.

In late January 2018, it ramped up efforts to do just that. In an attempt to replicate the October agreement with HTS, Ankara ordered a large military convoy to take up positions just beyond the Aleppo-Hama highway, right at the front line separating rebel and regime forces. The troops were twice forced to turn around, however, by regime shelling of the road ahead. Another convoy dispatched a week later did reach its destination; it returned fire when it came under attack, reportedly from Iranian-backed militias.

The deployment of Turkish forces, which ideally would continue down the front line, now offers the only – albeit slim – hope of averting a no-holds-barred regime offensive. It incurs significant risks for Ankara, requiring it to strike tacit deals with HTS leaders, on one hand, and Russia, on the other. The former would have to accept Turkey’s deployment (which they appear to have done), prevent HTS dissidents or other militants in Idlib from attacking Turkish forces (which could prove harder), and deter similar attacks on the regime (which is likely to be harder still). It is unclear whether HTS leaders could enforce such an understanding with Turkey without the movement fracturing. But the alternative for HTS is clear: a regime offensive will mean the loss of its territorial control and the death of many HTS leaders. For those in the movement who may aspire to some form of political role in the post-conflict dispensation – there are signs that some do – it would also be the end of such ambitions.

In return, Russia and regime forces would put the offensive on hold. The regime, bent on recapturing the whole country, will likely show little enthusiasm for a pause in combat. Moscow, on the other hand, might be keen on the prospect, particularly if it meant extending Turkish backing for the Astana process. Russian pressure, com-

bined with Turkish forces' presence along the front line, might dissuade the regime and its allies from an immediate assault. Ankara would need some form of Russian pledge along these lines. Turkish deployment also could provide civilians and civilian infrastructure with a modicum of protection from airstrikes.

Taken together, these developments could avoid a military showdown and gradually reduce the scope and intensity of confrontations between rebels and the regime. It would also buy time for Turkey to accelerate efforts, already underway for some months, to encourage shifts within HTS by isolating factions loyal to al-Qaeda and transnational jihadism from those that might be amenable to compromise. As yet, those efforts have progressed slowly, if at all, partly because Turkey has been preoccupied with its fight with the Kurds in Afrin, partly because it has hedged amid the lack of international buy-in and probably, too, because HTS leaders can only go so far without jeopardising their grip on the movement. Were the Turkish deployment to bring diminished levels of violence, that could create popular pressure in Idlib that might shift calculations within HTS further.

With regime forces encroaching on rebel-held areas, Turkey's deployment represents a long shot at saving the de-escalation plan and one which for Ankara is fraught with perils. Reorienting HTS would likely prove a tougher challenge still. But given the suffering and displacement the alternative would entail, any option, however slim its prospects, is worth pursuing.

II. Turkey's Gambit

According to the final communiqué of the sixth round of the Astana talks, the three guarantors – Russia, Iran and Turkey – were to deploy “de-escalation control forces” to a “security zone” in Idlib and surrounding areas, based on an unpublished map agreed upon in Ankara the week before.¹ The statement remained silent on how exactly these forces would fulfil their mandate, or how the guarantors would deal with the fact that the territory in question is under near complete HTS control.² But the statement reiterated the guarantors' commitment to continue the fight against Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front) and other groups associated with al-Qaeda (along-

¹ “Kazakhstan welcomes outcomes of the sixth round of the Astana Process on Syria”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 15 September 2017 (includes text of the “Joint statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in Astana”). Reportedly, each of the three countries was supposed to deploy 500 personnel. “Turkey, Russia, Iran agree on Idlib safe zone”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 15 September 2017. A senior Turkish security official put the number closer to 1,000. Crisis Group interview, September 2017.

² Some reports say there are as many as 50,000 HTS fighters in Idlib and its immediate environs. See, for instance, Ibrahim Hamidi, “Syria at a Crossroads: ‘A Peace to End All Peace’”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 14 December 2017. In July 2017, HTS moved against its last remaining rival in Idlib, Ahrar al-Sham, taking over most of the latter's positions and absorbing some of its fighters. “Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham take control of Syria's Idlib”, *Al Jazeera*, 24 July 2017. They have pushed hard to control local governance and created an elaborate administrative structure (see “The Role of Jihadi Movements in Syrian Local Governance. A Case Study of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib”, *Omran for Strategic Studies*, 14 July 2017; Arabic original published 23 June 2017), but have also experienced infighting and numerous defections. “Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) militants are infighting and defecting”, *Al-Shahid*, 21 September 2017.

side the Islamic State, or ISIS). Since HTS is an alliance of Nusra's successor organisation and other groups,³ the implication appeared to be that the guarantors, including Turkey, had resolved to dislodge it by force. Even before the end of the Astana meeting, media outlets close to the Syrian opposition and the Turkish leadership published maps that suggested a division of the Idlib de-escalation zone into three sectors, with the western part (extending from the Syria-Turkey border to the Aleppo-Hama highway) assigned to Turkey.⁴

Shortly after the Astana meeting, media reports about a Turkish military build-up near the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Syria, and the arrival there of Turkish-sponsored Syrian rebel groups from areas north of Aleppo, sparked speculation that Ankara was indeed getting ready to confront HTS.⁵ For their part, HTS leaders made it clear they did not intend to cooperate with any de-escalation scheme.⁶ On 7 October, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that a "serious operation in Syria's Idlib" was underway.⁷ When the Turkish army began demolishing fortifications on its side

³ In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra officially renamed itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS) and renounced its prior allegiance to al-Qaeda. "Al-Nusra Front cuts ties with al-Qaida and renames itself", *The Guardian*, 28 July 2016. On 28 January 2017, JFS and four smaller groups formed HTS. Mattisan Rowan, "Al Qaeda's Latest Rebranding: Hay'at Tahrir al Sham", Wilson Center, 24 April 2017. Opponents of HTS tend to dismiss these steps as purely tactical and often express this rejection by referring to JFS, as well as to HTS, which it dominates, as "al-Nusra". Other evidence suggests that the split is genuine, even if not originally intended as such. See Cole Bunzel, "Diluting jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", Jihadica, 29 March 2017, www.jihadica.com/diluting-jihad.

⁴ "The Approaching Battle for Idlib and the National Challenges Connected to It", Omran Centre for Strategic Studies, 14 September 2017 (Arabic); "25 thousand soldiers to Idlib", *Yeni Şafak*, 15 September 2017 (Turkish), www.yenisafak.com/dunya/25-bin-askerle-idlibe-2794655. Within days of the Turkish deployment in October, a website considered close to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) published a map projecting a three-stage Turkish deployment to the west of the Aleppo-Hama highway and a parallel regime advance east of it. "Everything you need to know about the future of Turkey's operations in the Idlib province of Syria", ISWNews.com, 15 October 2017, www.english.iswnews.com/682/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-future-of-turkeys-operations-in-the-idlib-province-of-syria-map.

⁵ "Turkey deploys 80 military vehicles near Syrian border", Al Jazeera, 18 September 2017. According to Charles Lister, rebel groups that have been cooperating with Turkish forces in areas north of Aleppo were preparing for a substantial role in the Turkish Idlib operation in early October, but they ended up being left out. "Turkey's Idlib incursion and the HTS question: Understanding the long game in Syria", War on the Rocks, 31 October 2017.

⁶ For instance, on 19 September 2017, HTS launched an operation against the regime in the northern Hama countryside in a declared challenge to the Astana process. Pro-HTS sources explicitly stated that this operation was "a message to those who participated in the [6th] Astana [meeting] that we are continuing our Jihad". "What are the motives for launching the Hama countryside battle?", *Enab Baladi*, 19 September 2017 (Arabic), www.enabbaladi.net/archives/173732. A member of the Free Lawyers Association in Idlib commented: "HTS fears stability, and by launching this new operation they are back to jihad. They operate better amid war and chaos". Crisis Group Skype interview, Idlib, 7 October 2017.

⁷ "Turkey's Erdogan says major operation in Syria's Idlib", Reuters, 7 October 2017.

of the border the next day, provoking artillery duels with HTS,⁸ it prompted premature reports that an invasion by the Turkish army and allied Syrian rebels had begun.⁹

Yet, that same day, HTS fighters were seen escorting a small Turkish reconnaissance party that had crossed the border, and surveying terrain near Daret Izzat, an elevation overlooking Afrin district to Idlib's north, which is controlled by the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey.¹⁰ On 12 October, a convoy reportedly including 30 armed vehicles followed the same trajectory, again protected by HTS fighters.¹¹ Turkish troops took up positions in a sliver of territory bounding about half the front that separates rebel/HTS-held from YPG-held territory.

These developments and subsequent debates on jihadist social media suggest that HTS acceded to Turkish demands for access to positions overlooking the front with the YPG on condition of non-interference in HTS's local affairs.¹² On 18 October, Turkey reopened the Bab al-Hawa border crossing it had closed in July after HTS had taken over the Syrian side, providing the movement with a first "cooperation dividend" in the form of customs and transit fees accruing to the local civil administration, which is under the group's control.¹³

Between mid-October 2017 and late January 2018, Turkey made no attempt to deploy anywhere close to actual fighting between Syrian rebels (mostly HTS) and regime forces. With the fight against ISIS in eastern Syria all but over, the regime could turn its attention and manpower to other areas outside its control. Since late October 2017, its forces have borne down on sections of the front in southern Aleppo and northern Hama.¹⁴ By late December, the offensive yielded the first significant

⁸ "Syria-Turkey border clashes as Ankara prepares for Idlib intervention", *The New Arab*, 8 October 2017.

⁹ "Erdogan: Turkey backing FSA rebels in new Idlib push", *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2017; "Syria war: Turkey-backed rebels launch offensive on Idlib", *Euronews*, 7 October 2017. Among residents and activists in Idlib interviewed by Crisis Group, the expectation – expressed in terms of certainty – was that Turkey would enter Idlib to destroy HTS. "People welcome the Turkish intervention. It would mean no more Russian or U.S. strikes, expansion of humanitarian work, better services and improvement of security in the liberated areas". Crisis Group interview, lawyer and trader, Sarmada, 15 October 2017. On the other hand, at the time of Erdoğan's announcement, the Turkish state news agency Anadolu already suggested a much less confrontational approach. "5 questions on Turkish military's plan in Syria's Idlib", Anadolu, 7 October 2017.

¹⁰ "Turkish army surveys Syria's Idlib before deployment: Sources", Reuters, 8 October 2017; "Turkish delegation enters Idlib accompanied by HTS", *Orient News*, 8 October 2017 (Arabic), http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/141272/0/-إلى-ريف-مصادر-ل-أورينت-دخول-وفد-عسكري-تركي. HTS security reportedly arrested an Egyptian member who attempted to attack the convoy. "HTS arrests an Egyptian member who targeted cars transporting Turkish soldiers", Smart News Agency, 8 October 2017 (Arabic), <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/243400-تحرير-الشام-تعنقل-عنصر-مصري-استهدف-سيارات-تقل-الجيش-التركي>.

¹¹ "First Turkish military convoy enters Syria's Idlib", Reuters, 12 October 2017.

¹² "How Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is describing the purpose and extent of Turkish intervention to its own base". Tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, quoting HTS Shura council member Abu Fateh al-Farghali on the Telegram channel Qanat Masail wa-Fatawa Shamiyyah, 11 October 2017, https://t.me/fatawa_shamia/2030.

¹³ Crisis Group observation, Sarmada, 18 October 2017; "Ankara reopens Idlib border crossing as Turkish soldiers build presence in northern Syria", *Syria Direct*, 18 October 2017.

¹⁴ "Confrontations between HTS and the regime in south of Aleppo", *Smart News*, 13 November 2017 (Arabic), <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/246830/-مواجهات-بين-قوات-النظام-و-تحرير>.

gains, when rebels lost Abu Dali and adjacent areas to the north of Hama.¹⁵ After this breakthrough, a three-pronged attack from the north, east and south won back further territory for the regime. It prompted the Turkish president to ask his Russian counterpart to rein in his ally, lest Astana collapse, and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım to implicitly threaten that Turkey would withdraw support for the Russia-sponsored talks.¹⁶

At the end of January, with its offensive against Afrin further north in full swing, Turkey finally moved to deploy observer forces near the reported de-escalation line east of Idlib. On 24 January, a Turkish reconnaissance party reached the area of al-Eis, some 7km east of the Aleppo-Hama highway, and only 3km from the front.¹⁷ Five days later, on the first day of the Russian-sponsored peace conference in Sochi, a convoy of around 100 Turkish vehicles travelled toward the area in an apparent attempt to set up an observation post. Yet, some 10km before reaching the presumed destination, the line of vehicles was halted by regime shelling targeting the road ahead.¹⁸ Another sortie the next day met with the same result, after which the convoy turned around and headed back to Turkey.¹⁹

On the way back, the convoy was hit by a car bomb while passing through the town of Atareb. The attack claimed the life of one soldier and injured a second, in addition to a civilian employee. Authorship of the (unclaimed) attack remains unclear: the Turkish general staff blamed the YPG, while discussion on jihadist channels suggest that the perpetrators may have been HTS dissidents aiming to sabotage the group's cooperation with Turkey.²⁰

Presidents Erdoğan and Putin reportedly discussed the incidents the next day, when both agreed "to speed up establishing observation posts in Syria's Idlib".²¹ A week later, on 5 February, a second Turkish convoy finally managed to reach al-Eis, but was soon fired upon from regime-controlled territory, reportedly by Iran-backed militias.²² This time, Turkey returned the fire, reportedly with missiles launched

الشام-جنوب-حلب"; "Three battles for a 'new map' in south Idlib", *Enab Baladi*, 27 December 2017 (Arabic), www.enabbaladi.net/archives/191818.

¹⁵ "The Syrian army reaches 'Abu Dali' in the Idlib countryside", *Al-Akhbar*, 29 December 2017 (Arabic), www.al-akhbar.com/node/288617.

¹⁶ "Turkey warns Russia that Syria peace process could collapse due to regime attacks", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 13 January 2018.

¹⁷ "Turkish military convoy enters Idlib and Aleppo countryside", *Enab Baladi*, 24 January 2018 (Arabic), www.enabbaladi.net/archives/201187.

¹⁸ Facebook page of the General Command of the Syrian Armed Forces, 30 January 2018 (Arabic), www.facebook.com/General.Command.Armed.Forces963/posts/1571897286263358; "While the aggression against Afrin continues, the army targets a Turkish convoy and pushes it back from al-Eis in southern Aleppo", *Al-Watan*, 31 January 2018 (Arabic), <http://alwatan.sy/archives/137695>. A Russian Middle East expert pinned responsibility for the shelling on Assad's forces, claiming they meant to send a message to participants in the Astana process meeting in Sochi. Crisis Group interview, February 2018.

¹⁹ Crisis Group WhatsApp communication, Syrian journalist connected to non-jihadist rebel groups, 31 January 2018.

²⁰ "Ankara-Moscow dealings still tangled as Idlib smoke clears", *Al-Monitor*, 31 January 2018. Also see fn 38 below.

²¹ "Turkey, Russia agree to speed up establishing observation posts in Syria's Idlib: Source", Reuters, 31 January 2018.

²² Tweet by Riam Dalati, 5 February 2018, <https://twitter.com/Dalatrm/status/960561542163988481>.

from its own territory, and the skirmish died down by the evening. One soldier lay dead and another four, as well as a civilian employee, were injured.²³

III. Idlib's Importance to Turkey

For Turkey, securing Idlib is important for several reasons. As its war with the PKK continues,²⁴ Ankara views the ascendance of the organisation's Syrian affiliate, the YPG, as a strategic threat. Turkey aims to limit or roll back the YPG's expansion.²⁵ From Afrin, the YPG could have exploited turmoil or a power vacuum in Idlib by spreading its control further south. By positioning Turkish forces in the hills overlooking these areas, Ankara could block such advances and prepare for its military campaign against the enclave. The move also provided a convenient economic pressure point against the YPG: until the Turkish offensive, Afrin's population enjoyed access to Idlib's HTS-dominated thriving market towns, resulting in commerce which benefited the YPG and HTS alike.²⁶ From the positions it took up in October, Turkey was able to sever this economic lifeline at will. It promptly did so once the attack was launched.²⁷

The deployment at the northern fringe of Idlib, perhaps augmented at a later point by buffer zones along other parts of the border, may also help address what

²³ "Turkish soldier killed setting up military post in northwest Syria", Reuters, 6 February 2018.

²⁴ Berkay Mandiracı, "Turkey's PKK Conflict Kills almost 3,000 in Two Years", Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Commentary, 20 July 2017; Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°243, *Managing Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Case of Nusaybin*, 2 May 2017.

²⁵ Crisis Group Middle East & North Africa Report N°176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017. Given the deep organisational links between the PKK and YPG, a key concern in Ankara is that combat experience and weaponry gained in Syria have been (and will continue to be) used against Turkey inside its borders. Another worry is that that power and acclaim accrued by the YPG in Syria will enhance the PKK's allure and international legitimacy. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, 2015-2017.

²⁶ Daret Izzat, where Turkey took up positions in mid-October, controls the trade route between Afrin and Idlib. Until July 2017, the latter was vital for both Afrin, which is otherwise surrounded by Turkish territory and Turkish allies, and the Syrian regime. The flow of trade was reversed in July 2017, when HTS took control of the Bab al-Hawa crossing that serves Idlib. In response, Turkey closed the border to commercial traffic, forcing traders to re-route merchandise through Bab al-Salameh (northern Aleppo province, under the control of Turkish-affiliated Syrian rebels) and Afrin to reach Idlib. Ironically, by trying to punish HTS, Turkey turned the Kurdish-controlled area into a vital supply line for Idlib, putting transit fees in the pockets of its Kurdish enemies. HTS, which in July 2017 assumed full control of Daret Izzat as well, profited anyway the trade flowed. Crisis Group Skype interviews, former local council president from Idlib, Istanbul, 23 November 2017; humanitarian worker and activist, Gaziantep, 24 November 2017. See "What happened in Idlib after Turkey banned the import of construction materials?", *al-Iqtisad*, 27 August 2017.

²⁷ Despite the Turkish presence in the area, the trade route remained open until the start of the Turkish offensive against Afrin on 20 January, with HTS operating the crossing between rebel- and Kurdish-held areas. On 18 November, the Turkish military established a third observation point in Sheikh Aqil, some 15km east of Daret Izzat, thereby assuming a presence along the entire length of the line of control that divided the Afrin enclave from Idlib. "Turkey builds third 'observation spot' inside Idlib", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 24 November 2017; "Turkish convoy enters Syria to establish third observation point in Sheikh Aqil in Aleppo countryside", Ebaa News Agency, 18 November 2017 (Arabic), <https://ebaa-agency.com/news/2017/11/3337>.

Turkish officials identify as Ankara's second major concern with regard to north-western Syria: preventing a new wave of refugees – among whom could be thousands of jihadists – from reaching Turkey.²⁸ By controlling areas adjacent to the border, the Turkish armed forces could accommodate displaced people, guarantee their physical safety and provide access to humanitarian agencies on Syrian rather than Turkish territory.²⁹

Yet it is unlikely that this deployment would be sufficient to deal with the humanitarian consequences of an all-out regime assault on western Idlib.³⁰ Almost half of the estimated 2.65 million people currently living there are internally displaced persons (IDPs), who came to Idlib to escape regime attacks in other parts of Syria or as the result of evacuation deals. These people have reason to fear falling under regime control again.³¹ Prior experience – such as the Aleppo siege in 2016 – suggests that such an attack will be accompanied by a ferocious bombing campaign. If so, many local residents, who might otherwise let the offensive roll over them, are also likely to flee. All told, as many as one million people could pour toward the Turkish border, creating a humanitarian emergency that will make it difficult, if not impossible for Turkey to maintain its current policy of containing a new flow of refugees inside Syria.³²

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Turkish security official, Ankara, 26 October 2017. "Turkish PM says Idlib operation aims to prevent migrant wave from Syria", TRT World, 10 October 2017.

²⁹ Already, in areas adjacent to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, some 200 informal IDP settlements have sprung up, hosting some 220,000 IDPs, many of whom depend primarily on humanitarian aid for their livelihood. The biggest camp is Atmeh, with about 66,000 residents, located within the area of the current Turkish deployment. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), IDP Sites Integrated Monitoring Matrix (ISMM), October 2017. A journalist said: "IDPs in Idlib who cannot afford to rent a place move into the camps". Crisis Group Skype interview, *Enab Baladi* journalist, Gaziantep, 24 May 2017.

³⁰ The stark scenes in a 7 February 2018 Australian Broadcasting Corporation television news report could be harbingers of even worse to come. See the story at: www.abc.net.au/7.30/theres-another-humanitarian-crisis-in-syria-that/9406482.

³¹ The 2.65 million figure is the most recent UN tally. "Recent Developments in North-western Syria", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 3 January 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/turkey-syria-recent-developments-north-western-syria-03-january-2018>. Some Turkish sources quote much higher numbers. For instance, the Turkish Office for Public Diplomacy speaks of an overall population of about 4 million. "What are Turkish troops doing in Syria's Idlib", TRT World, 10 October 2017. Since the fall of 2016, more than ten separate evacuation agreements have been concluded whereby rebel-held areas in Aleppo, Homs and the Damascus countryside besieged by the Syrian regime were handed over to the latter, while fighters and civilians were evacuated, in most cases to the rebel-held areas in the north west. "Timeline: Syria's 13 'people evacuation' deals", Al Jazeera, 16 May 2017.

³² Since mid-December, the fighting in the relatively sparsely populated areas east of the highway (around 300,000 out of the overall population of 2.65 million in all of the rebel-held north west according to UN figures) has prompted more than a quarter of a million to flee toward areas further to the north and west, and thus toward the Turkish border. "Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria (Idlib Governorate and Afrin District)", OCHA, 30 January 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Latest_Developments_in_North-western_Syria_20180130.pdf. Reports indicate that the situation at the border is already critical. "Turkey/Syria: Border Guards Shoot, Block Fleeing Syrians", Human Rights Watch, 3 February 2018.

IV. (De-)Escalation Scenarios

When and according to which scenario such an assault will come remains difficult to assess. With its recent gains, capped by the 20 January capture of Abu Duhur, which has an air base and sits at a strategic crossing of roads leading further west to Saraqib and Maaret Nu'man, the Syrian regime now controls most of the formerly rebel-held areas that the September Astana agreement reportedly assigned to Russian/Iranian control. The crucial question is whether the advance will continue toward the perimeter of the sector reportedly assigned to Turkey (the Aleppo-Hama highway). Taking the fight further west would quickly affect population centres: that moment is when casualties and displacement could be expected to spiral.

Russian air cover would be critical to such an advance. Russian Syria experts interviewed in mid-December 2017 saw no appetite in Moscow for another campaign that could rival the siege of eastern Aleppo in terms of length, destruction and humanitarian fallout. Facing re-election in March 2018, President Vladimir Putin declared victory in Syria on 11 December and announced a partial withdrawal of Russian forces.³³ Yet recent statements from high-ranking Russian officials, and the increasing pace of Russian air attacks on civilian infrastructure, suggest that Moscow's patience has been taxed by Ankara's apparent reluctance to take charge west of the highway.³⁴

Even beyond a deliberate regime assault on rebel-held Idlib, an escalation could take other forms. Successful rebel operations targeting regime forces or allies, such as the 3 February 2018 downing of a Russian fighter jet, or high-profile jihadist attacks elsewhere will provoke responses that could set off an escalatory dynamic drawing in Russia and generating momentum to crush militants in the north west and restore the area to regime control, regardless of the human toll.³⁵

From the positions the Turkish "de-escalation control forces" were holding until late January, some 30-60km from the front lines, they were unable to exert a real effect on the trajectory of such scenarios, much less arrest or reverse a slide into open conflict. To achieve de-escalation and consolidate a ceasefire, Turkey would need to deploy much deeper into the zone assigned to it – as it finally started to do on 5 February.³⁶

Its deployment along the length of the Aleppo-Hama highway³⁷ required, first, some form of agreement with HTS. It is inconceivable that Turkey would have posi-

³³ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, 13 December 2017.

³⁴ "Primary anti-terrorist objective in Syria is defeating Jabhat al-Nusra, Lavrov says", TASS, 27 December 2017; "Jabhat al-Nusra militants in Syria to be wiped out next year: Russian general staff", TASS, 27 December 2017.

³⁵ "Russian jet shot down in Syria's Idlib province", BBC, 3 February 2018. New attacks on the Russian Hmeimem air base (as in early January) or capture of Russian personnel (as nearly occurred in September) could be other triggers. "Who is attacking Russia's bases in Syria? A new mystery emerges in the war", *Washington Post*, 10 January 2018; Mark Galeotti, "Not-so-soft power: Russia's military police in Syria", *War on the Rocks*, 3 October 2017.

³⁶ According to a Turkish security official interviewed by Crisis Group in late October, the plan is for a total of twelve observation points along the perimeter of the Turkish sector, the Aleppo-Hama highway. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, 26 October 2017.

³⁷ According to Turkish understanding, the western perimeter of the regime-held area should be the Aleppo-Hama railroad, which runs between 10 and 20km east of the highway. Crisis Group inter-

tioned its troops at close quarters with HTS without receiving assurances, at least in private, from HTS leaders that they would do what they could to halt offensive action in the area, either against Turkish forces directly or against the regime, which would risk putting Turkish forces in the crossfire. Already the first attempt to deploy in late January took place with an explicit security guarantee, setting a precedent for further steps.³⁸

Moscow's consent appears likely to have been a second prerequisite. Already the first attempt, on 29 January, was made in coordination with Moscow,³⁹ which however proved unable to deliver the cooperation of its Syrian ally.⁴⁰ The shelling that occurred during the second, eventually successful attempt on 5 February, highlights the challenge Moscow faces in ensuring the compliance of the Syrian regime and its other allies, whose decision-making does not always appear to be coherent.

The risk of clashes likely remains, due to the lack of internal cohesion on both sides and the limited leverage that Turkey and Russia, respectively, have over each. Yet, if things do heat up, the physical presence of Turkish troops near potential zones of conflict and targets of attacks might at least militate against rapid escalation and improve the chances for mediation. It could buy time for advance warning to the civilian population. It could help deter regime/Russian military strikes on vital civilian institutions unrelated to the jihadists, such as hospitals and schools, which Turkey could protect implicitly by deploying in their vicinity. Turkish presence also signals to Moscow that Ankara is willing to play its part in the "shared responsibility" that reportedly underpins Russia's understanding of the Astana agreement.⁴¹ Russian leaders would thus be less likely to sign off on a regime campaign to reconquer the entire rebel-held area any time soon, particularly if that meant risking direct confrontation between regime and Turkish forces, as well as prompting Turkey's exit from Astana.

view, Ankara, February 2018. In early February, the front line between rebels and regime forces ran several kilometres to the west of the railroad, and roughly parallel to it.

³⁸ Several prominent, Idlib-based jihadist clerics independently confirmed that the Turkish convoy proceeded with an escort and explicit security guarantees from the HTS leadership, based on a decision by the group's Sharia council. Telegram channel of Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi, 30 January 2018 (Arabic), <https://t.me/abdarrazaqm2018/4619>; Telegram channel of Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini, 30 January 2018 (Arabic), <https://t.me/mhesne1/3402>.

³⁹ The coordination was confirmed by a Russian Middle East expert. Crisis Group interview, February 2018. Turkish fighter jets eventually joined the fray (*Russia Today Arabic*, 30 January 2018, <https://goo.gl/gZzfXs>), without being intercepted by the advanced air defence systems that Russia installed in the area following its 2015 military intervention. See also "Turkey Escalates Against Pro-Assad Forces to Protect Afrin Operation", Institute for the Study of War, 31 January 2018.

⁴⁰ A Russian foreign policy analyst specialised in Middle East issues, who agreed with this assessment, offered the following explanation: "[The] Syrian government is not rock-solid and there are several factions fighting for influence: one is hawkish and also closely tied to Iran, another is more dovish and closer to Russia and another is in between This is why, in my opinion, despite general operational coordination between Moscow and Damascus, some factions of the SAA [Syrian Arab Army], Iranian and pro-Iranian forces, Shia militia, might not act within the lines agreed officially between Moscow and Damascus. As a result, there are confusing situations like this". Crisis Group email correspondence, 1 February 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Russian Syria expert, Moscow, 13 December 2017. A leading Russian foreign policy expert described a "condominium" arrangement including Turkey, Jordan, Russia and the U.S. as the most likely middle-term scenario for Syria. Closed event address, Moscow, December 2017.

Were the Turkish troop presence to become reliably connected to an end to or at least substantive reduction in airstrikes, popular pressure could mount in Idlib for HTS to accept Turkish deployment in additional areas, along the entire length of the Aleppo-Hama highway that bisects the de-escalation zone. While often acting with unrestrained violence against competitors, the groups now constituting HTS have in the past sometimes shown a preference for engaging with local populations through incentives, persuasion and alliance-building to establish control before resorting to violent imposition. On occasion, they have even retreated in the face of civic resistance.⁴²

A growing popular demand for the de-escalation forces' extended presence might alter the calculus of HTS's leadership and strengthen the position of those prepared to cooperate with de-escalation, notwithstanding their public rhetoric to the contrary. If regime attacks abate, the combination of popular pressure and Turkish prodding could strengthen the position of those factions, enhancing their ability to enforce respect for the ceasefire in the ranks. Moreover, Turkey would enjoy an additional form of leverage over HTS: respect some form of de-escalation or lose Turkish protection, which would precipitate a regime offensive.

V. Dealing with HTS

By the letter of the Astana agreement, Turkey should be attacking and disarming HTS, rather than coordinating its deployments, as it did in October 2017 and again during the latest deployment to al-Eis. Yet it is doubtful that Ankara ever seriously considered such a move. Its reluctance was rooted not only in its focus on containing the YPG but also in the human and other costs of attempting to confront the militants.⁴³

True, a Turkish operation backed by allied Syrian rebels might not inspire the unified resistance that is sure to greet a regime offensive backed by Russian airstrikes. Some groups that have become part of HTS did so because it is the strongest player in Idlib, as well as an important source of income and employment.⁴⁴ They would likely part ways with the movement the moment they believed it faces defeat by a superior – non-regime – force. Others may stand down or switch sides because

⁴² Haid Haid, "Resisting Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. Syrian Civil Society on the Frontlines", Adopt a Revolution, November 2017. During the infighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017, the former took over Saraqib, but had to withdraw temporarily under pressure of peaceful protests. Crisis Group Skype interview, protest organiser, 26 July 2017; Sadek Abdul Rahman, "Chronicle of four days in Saraqeb", *al-Jumhuriya*, 19 July 2017 (Arabic).

⁴³ According to the Turkish state news agency Anadolu, "Turkish troops in Idlib will not engage in combat mission. Confrontation with local or Assad regime forces is not the objective". Anadolu, 7 October 2017. An official at the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs called direct military confrontation with the group "a very bad idea". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, October 2017.

⁴⁴ In addition to an estimated 15,000 fighters, HTS's Civil Service Administration employs 7,000 people across Syria, the overwhelming majority in Idlib. Crisis Group interview, general director of Civil Service Administration and HTS member, Idlib, 31 August 2017. According to a source close to the non-jihadist opposition, HTS fighters are paid a salary of around \$250, about twice the amount received by non-jihadist armed factions, while civilian employees earn the equivalent of \$100. According to this source, HTS has fallen behind on salary payments over the past three months. Crisis Group email correspondence, 7 January 2018.

they do not consider Turkey an enemy.⁴⁵ Yet if only a few thousand of the 10,000-15,000 fighters that HTS currently boasts decide to make a stand, the human toll of confronting them would be enormous, particularly if fighting breaks out in Idlib city and other densely populated parts of the western sector, where residents would effectively become hostages and human shields.

Reports suggest that foreign fighters would resist any Turkish action against HTS particularly fiercely. These militants already expressed hostility to the limited Turkish deployment in October.⁴⁶ Many are likely motivated by ideological commitment, but also by fear that a Turkish intervention would force them out of their Idlib sanctuary; unlike Syrian fighters, they cannot blend into the local population. Whereas ISIS militants whom Turkey fought north of Aleppo in late 2016 and early 2017 were able to withdraw eastward down the Euphrates valley,⁴⁷ HTS fighters from Turkmenistan, Tunisia, Egypt or Jordan, for example, have no obvious escape route and would likely face persecution, detention and perhaps death.⁴⁸ Furthermore, while a full-scale Turkish intervention might succeed in wresting territorial control from HTS, this development would risk inaugurating a stage of asymmetrical warfare that could boomerang on Turkey and reach its own cities.

Rather than confronting the jihadists, the Turkish military foray in late January and early February 2018 unfolded after Ankara received explicit security guarantees from the HTS leadership.⁴⁹ It thus replicated the deal that made the October deployment possible, and was likely based on at least some of the terms that applied then, such as non-interference with HTS's governance.⁵⁰ That may turn out to be a high price to pay, as it could turn Turkish forces into unwitting accomplices of HTS's abusive rule. It also appears highly unlikely that the organisation would agree to hand over its heavy weaponry any time soon, as that would mean relinquishing its single bargaining chip for future relevance.

On the other hand, facilitating a Turkish deployment to an active front does indicate tacit acceptance from HTS leaders that offensive action in the respective areas

⁴⁵ Charles Lister, "Turkey's Idlib Incursion", op. cit. Throughout the intra-rebel conflicts in Idlib, many groups repeatedly switched sides when the power balance shifted. A former opposition fighter residing in Saraqib said he expected that "if Turkey intervenes, many armed groups/people who are officially affiliated with HTS will break away once they see that there is a stronger power on the ground. Take Ahrar al-Sham fighters in the Saraqib Sharia Court: the day HTS won, they flipped sides. When HTS weakens they will be the first to shift alliances again". Crisis Group Skype interview, Saraqib, 9 October 2017.

⁴⁶ "Split within HTS between those who support and those who reject the Turkish operation", Halab TV, 14 October 2017, <https://youtu.be/kmZBCus3CFM>; "The Turkish intervention between 'loyalty to infidels' and 'the necessity of the forbidden'", *Al-Modon*, 9 October 2017 (Arabic), www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/10/9/نار-لثة-التدخل-التركي-بين-الولاء-للكفار-و-المضطر-لار-تكاب-المحظور.

⁴⁷ "ISIS is withdrawing from al-Bab, Turkish military claims", *Rudaw*, 27 January 2017.

⁴⁸ A source close to the non-jihadist Syrian opposition estimated the number of foreign fighters currently present in the north west at around 5,500. Crisis Group email correspondence, 7 January 2018.

⁴⁹ See fn 38 above.

⁵⁰ Local residents contacted by Crisis Group in early January confirmed that this was still the case. Crisis Group WhatsApp communications, 2-4 January 2018. The justification provided by leading HTS cleric Abu Fateh Al-Faghali for cooperating with the January/February deployment confirmed this point, and closely resembled the reasoning he had offered during the first phase in October (see fn 12 above). Tweet by Ibn Nabih, 2 February 2018, <https://twitter.com/IbnNabih1/status/959515106953584642>.

must be halted, as regime retaliation would put the Turkish troops right in the line of fire. Despite public statements to the contrary, its top leaders must be aware that a consolidated presence of Turkish forces in areas it controls will affect its margin of manoeuvre.

Yet a major risk remains: hardliners who reject the scheme, within or outside HTS, could attempt to undermine it by attacking Turkish troops, as may very well have happened when the convoy returned from its abortive first mission to al-Eis. HTS is a motley crew including al-Qaeda loyalists. While no incidents were recorded during the first phase of the Turkish deployment since October, it is not clear that HTS leaders enjoy sufficient control to prevent those who refuse further compromise from taking potshots at Turkish monitors in the much larger, more sensitive area where the organisation faces off against the regime. Sustained attacks with many casualties could well force the Turkish leadership to either withdraw or launch precisely the kind of full-fledged military invasion that officials say they would rather avoid.⁵¹ Turkish deployment should therefore proceed gradually, in close communication with HTS security and with an eye toward ensuring the local population sees a benefit in Turkish troops being there.

VI. The Evolving Jihadist Landscape

Internal resistance to cooperation with an extended Turkish deployment will not be restricted to HTS hardliners. The group's clerics defended limited cooperation in early October 2017 as a tactical concession in areas abutting the territory of "the atheists" (ie, the YPG). They categorically rejected the idea that cooperation amounted to tacit acceptance of the Astana process.⁵² But sustaining such an argument while Turkish troops are taking up positions along the lines agreed upon in Astana will be difficult. Defections from HTS can be expected, and internal challenges to the leadership of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and his lieutenants may mount. It is unclear whether Jolani could hold HTS together in such conditions.

Nevertheless, HTS leaders apparently have seen compelling reasons for acquiescing in a deeper Turkish deployment. For one, Turkey's current accommodating position could change, in particular as its relations with Russia evolve, if it reaches its goal of recapturing Afrin from the YPG or if Ankara concludes that only by invading first – and attempting to manage itself any resulting displacement – can it pre-empt an all-out regime assault that would foment a graver refugee crisis. With the recent military setbacks, HTS factions invested in building a society governed by their own interpretation of Islamic law and values may have realised that without an accommodation with Turkey their project is doomed. A third consideration also may have helped sway the decision: HTS's desire to preserve its current power as the basis for a role in a post-conflict political order.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul and Ankara, October 2017.

⁵² "Tahrir al-Sham official on Turkey's intervention to implement Astana: 'That's not the reality'". Tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, quoting the Telegram channel of HTS media official Muhammad Nazzal, 15 October 2017, <https://t.me/mohammednazzal/1526>.

For their part, Turkish officials express a clear preference for exploiting HTS's inner contradictions, aiming to split off more pragmatic, mostly Syrian elements more open to cooperation, from what they view as a harderline jihadist minority dominated by foreigners.⁵³ Cleavages run deep: since September, there have been at least three dozen unclaimed and unattributed assassinations of the group's foremost religious scholars and military leaders, many of foreign extraction.⁵⁴

On 27 November 2017, HTS detained several senior leadership figures considered loyal to al-Qaeda. Others have defected. Indeed, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has made a number of statements implicitly disapproving of the direction Jolani has taken HTS, notably rejecting the dissociation of HTS's precursor Jabhat al-Nusra, also led by Jolani, from al-Qaeda that occurred in July 2016.⁵⁵ Veteran jihadist ideologue and al-Qaeda supporter Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi has been equally critical.⁵⁶

The latest decision to cooperate with a Turkish deployment to parts of the front suggests that the current within HTS that sought to distance itself from al-Qaeda and is more open to cooperation with Ankara has the upper hand, at least for now. On 26 January, the assassination of Atiyat-Allah al-Shami, the commander of HTS's Aleppo front, removed yet another prominent opponent of such cooperation. Yet such an overt deal with Turkey could strengthen centrifugal forces in a movement that already appears divided and could cause it to fall apart, as well as infighting and a further deterioration of conditions for civilians.

Even if a more pragmatic wing of HTS was prepared to permit some form of Turkish deterrence role along front lines, serious adjustment in jihadists' ideological posture and behaviour would be required before any group or leadership emerging from the debris of HTS/Nusra could sell itself as a local interlocutor willing to play politics.⁵⁷ Russia and Western powers will look in particular for credible evidence that Idlib will not become a safe haven and operational base for planning operations outside Syria. Russia would probably also expect Turkish efforts in Idlib to bolster the Astana process; yet the likelihood of militant leaders attending any form of peace talks any time soon appears a remote prospect. For Idlib inhabitants, HTS would have to moderate its behaviour locally, too.

⁵³ Turkish officials noted that Ankara has received numerous signals from HTS expressing openness to shifting the group's focus toward local governance, and express confidence that the large majority of Syrian HTS members could be channelled into this direction. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara and Istanbul, October 2017.

⁵⁴ Haid Haid, "Who Is Assassinating Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's Leaders?", Syria from Within (Chat-ham House), November 2017. Charles Lister identifies Turkey as the side directing and funding the assassinations, citing Syrian opposition sources. "Turkey's Idlib Incursion", op. cit.

⁵⁵ "الظواهري يهاجم الجولاني: لم نقبل بفك الارتباط", Al-Modon, 29 November 2017. Telegram channel of Sheikh Abu Mohamed Al-Maqdisi, <https://t.me/SHMaqdese/1772>.

⁵⁶ See Bunzel, "Diluting jihad", op. cit.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, U.S. State Department officials, Washington, 14 November 2017. In October 2017, a State Department official said that "in Idlib, the presence of al-Qaeda must be dealt with... We can't have Turkey and Russia freezing the situation in al-Qaeda's favor. It must be eliminated". A U.S. National Security Council official, in contrast, expressed concern over the methods he feared Moscow would apply to this end: "There is a tension between counter-terrorism and taking sides in a civil war. Counter-terrorism is not supposed to cause extensive damage; it is not supposed to be about recapturing cities". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 15 November 2017.

VII. Conclusion: Limited Options for Idlib

There are no good options for addressing the deteriorating situation in Idlib. Military campaigns to subdue or dislodge HTS are likely to trigger an uncontrollable escalation with a devastating human cost, in particular if launched by the regime and its allies, causing rebel groups that are often at each other's throats to unite against the common enemy.⁵⁸

Even if successful in defeating these groups militarily and ending their armed control over territory, such operations are unlikely to resolve the jihadist challenge. The result may well be a prolonged phase of asymmetrical warfare, in Syria and perhaps beyond, as remnants of the defeated groups retreat to ungoverned areas and weak states across the region or return to Europe, Russia and Central Asia. Top al-Qaeda ideologues already for months have argued that HTS should abandon its attempt to hold territory and shift to an asymmetric campaign.⁵⁹

Turkey's deployment near the front line reduces the danger of escalation, but comes with high risks, as the difficulties in late January and early February demonstrated. If that first step of deploying along and holding the front line is likely to continue to prove challenging, the second – decoupling militants willing to contemplate a political role from al-Qaeda loyalists, as Turkey has been trying to do for some time – is likely to prove more difficult still. But with regime troops inching toward core rebel-held areas, those are the only options left for dissuading Moscow from supporting a regime offensive, and for averting the humanitarian disaster that would follow.

Besides the risks involved, one major factor that deterred Turkey from investing fully in efforts to shift the internal balance within HTS was concern about the lack of international buy-in. Already, the unofficial, territorially limited, deal with HTS that made the first Turkish deployment back in October possible was met with apprehen-

⁵⁸ The regime offensive in southern Aleppo and northern Hama since the fall of 2017 has partly confirmed this expectation, seeing rival groups that had been locked in a fight with HTS joining the fray against the regime. "Ahrar al-Sham joins the northern Hama battles", *Enab Baladi*, 14 December 2017 (Arabic), www.enabbaladi.net/archives/191408; "Opposition and HTS: resetting relations", Al-Modon, 14 December 2017 (Arabic), www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/12/14/. Leaders of major rebel groups, including HTS, Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, held meetings in December 2017 to discuss the creation of a joint operations room to repel the regime offensive. "A meeting attended by al-Jolani... reconciliation and attempts to revive 'Jaish al-Fatah'", *Zaman al-Wasel*, 12 December 2017 (Arabic), www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/83334/. "Factions in the north establish a new joint operations room", *Orient News*, 4 February 2018 (Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2FTX4hE>.

⁵⁹ The debate between these competing approaches has been going on for a while. It overlaps with the rifts between al-Qaeda loyalists and those factions of HTS pushing for a more independent agenda. In an audio message released in April 2017, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri urged jihadists in Syria to shift toward a guerrilla war of attrition focused not on holding territory but on "destroying the enemy's morale" by inflicting unsustainable losses. "Syria only submits to God", 23 April 2017, <https://videopress.com/v/fOXrEFx6>. The Jordanian scholar Sami al-Uraydi, one of the figures detained on 27 November (and subsequently released), recently berated HTS leaders for succumbing to the "intoxication" of pretences to statehood and control over territory, while compromising on religious and ideological principles in their pursuit, urging a shift to guerrilla warfare instead. Telegram channel "Supporters of Dr. Sami al-Uraydi", 29 December 2017, https://t.me/ahmad_ahmad_12/2552.

sion in Western capitals.⁶⁰ An expanded, even less deniable understanding with what a broad international consensus still designates as a terrorist organisation will expose the Turkish leadership to new accusations of covert collusion with jihadism both at home – where elections are due in 2019 – and abroad, potentially deepening the estrangement with its partners in the West.⁶¹ The latter, and in particular the U.S., currently appear too preoccupied elsewhere, such as with the south east and areas east of the Euphrates controlled by the YPG-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces, with the competing international negotiating tracks (Geneva and Astana), and with controlling the damage of the Turkey-YPG confrontation, to expend effort on the apparently intractable situation in the north west.⁶²

Yet the longer the situation festers, the more the perception will solidify that a military showdown is unavoidable. As the events in late January and early February suggest, HTS might be brought to cooperate with arrangements that reduce violence. Turkey's partners in the West, as well as the Astana powers, should give Ankara time – even an implicit green light – to explore to what extent the organisation can be brought to accept arrangements on the ground that reduce the danger of escalation and lead to a gradual decline in fighting.

Whether Russia, whose constraint on the regime would be critical, would accept such a scheme remains unclear. Notwithstanding Moscow's pragmatism with other Islamist and Salafi rebels – some of which it long labelled terrorists before accepting their participation at Astana – the Russian position on Nusra and HTS has been consistent (as, indeed, has that of the U.S.). But for Moscow, the alternative to giving Turkey more time to pursue a diplomatic track is an ugly fight in Idlib, further international opprobrium at the inevitable devastation and a likely deterioration of relations with Ankara, even perhaps the end of the Astana process if the regime's offensive provokes another refugee crisis in Turkey. Conversely, were Turkey able to nudge parts of HTS toward de-escalation, remnants of the movement that are genuinely irreconcilable would likely be easier to deal with.⁶³

⁶⁰ A U.S. State Department official expressed his apprehension: "We are not sure what the Turks think they are doing in Idlib. It looks like they may be making deals with some really bad people". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 14 November 2017.

⁶¹ A Turkish security official identified mistrust and lack of buy-in from Western allies as a significant deterrent for the Turkish approach to dealing with HTS. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, October 2017.

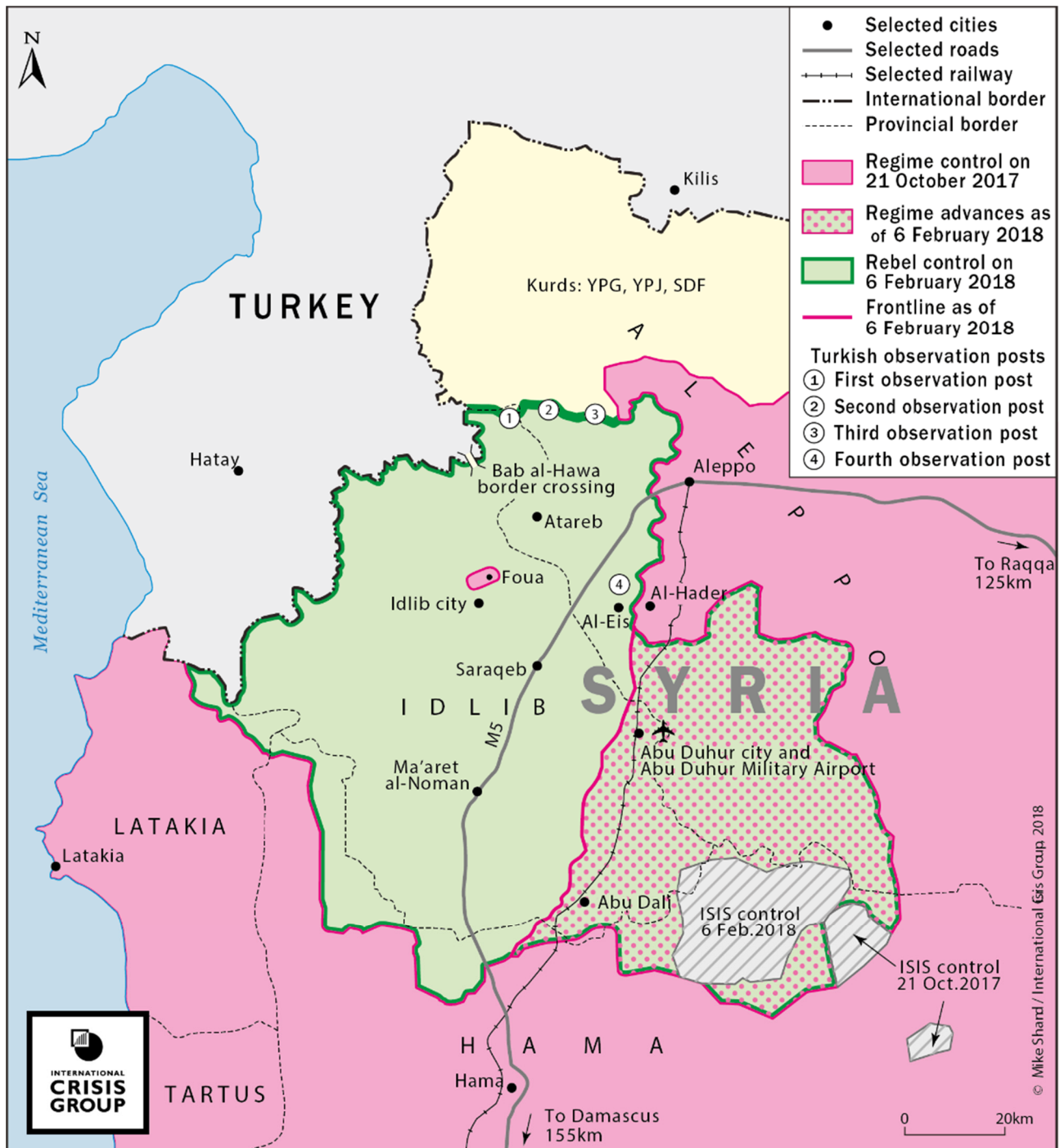
⁶² A senior State Department official said: "We started with the de-escalation zone in the south because there we had good leverage over the rebels.... The Russians are in the lead there [Idlib]. They took it on, so let them handle it". Crisis Group interview, Washington, 14 November 2017. A Russian Syria expert said she expected Moscow to take a pragmatic stance: "The reason why we are cooperating with Turkey in Idlib is that we know they can talk to these people [the jihadists]". Crisis Group interview, Moscow, 13 December 2017.

⁶³ Russia's military role, in particular that of its air force, clearly puts Moscow in the driver's seat in Idlib, and makes it the most important partner for Turkey in northern Syria. Iranian influence, on the other side, would also appear to be critical for inducing the compliance of the Syrian regime. Yet, despite being "guarantors" of the de-escalation zone, Iran and Turkey do not see eye to eye. An Iranian diplomat said: "Astana legitimised the Turkish presence in Syria, which is now stronger than before. We are okay with the Turkish presence in the de-escalation zone, but it is not comforting. HTS is al-Qaeda; it's like ISIS. We have to confront them. The Turks are not being logical [by working with HTS]. [Turkey] wants to control groups in Idlib in order to draw a security line and annex Idlib to Iskenderun. And it wants to use Idlib as a card in negotiations. Refugees are only a justification". Crisis Group interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Tehran, January 2018.

Certainly, a scheme along these lines would carry enormous risk. Even if it meets with a measure of success in terms of reducing violence, groups currently in control of Idlib are unlikely any time soon – if ever – to transform themselves into a variant of the “moderate Islamist rebels” that some supporters of the Syrian rebellion have attempted to cultivate before. Yet a Turkish deployment along the front and limited Turkey-HTS engagement should be seen as the best of the dismal options on offer. These steps would buy some time, remove the threat of an all-out regime offensive that would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences and create conditions for a more durable ceasefire. Few in Idlib would be satisfied with such stopgap measures, but at least in the coming months, they are better than the probable alternatives.

Beirut/Brussels, 9 February 2018

Appendix A: Syrian Regime Offensive Toward Idlib,
21 October 2017-6 February 2018



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.

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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.

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