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The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib

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Headquarters
International Crisis Group
Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Principal Findings

What's new? An agreement between Turkey and Russia that protects Syria's rebel-held Idlib governorate from a regime offensive is under increasing stress. Clashes between jihadists and other militants inside Idlib and regime forces have escalated. Newly launched Turkish patrols mark progress toward implementing the bilateral deal, but more has to be done.

Why does it matter? The Idlib area is the Syrian opposition's last main bastion, and home to nearly three million people. There is no obvious way to neutralise Idlib's jihadists without exacting a terrible human toll. A regime offensive would send waves of refugees toward the Turkish border and potentially scatter Idlib's jihadists globally.

What should be done? Turkey and Russia should recommit to their Idlib agreement, staving off a disastrous military confrontation and containing the area's militants. Turkey should expand its patrols inside the area, as both Turkey and Russia push the regime and rebels to halt violence. Lastly, they should secure Idlib's major highways for trade.

Executive Summary

Syria's north-western governorate of Idlib and surrounding areas have avoided an all-out military assault – for how long, though, is unclear. This last opposition-held stronghold in Syria is home to nearly three million people, mostly civilians. It also hosts thousands of jihadist militants, alongside some of the Syrian regime's most committed oppositionists. Russia and the Syrian regime have indicated they are keen for Damascus to retake the area at the earliest opportunity. But a Russian-backed regime offensive would create a humanitarian catastrophe, driving out huge numbers of refugees that could destabilise neighbouring Turkey and scatter militants who could wreak havoc globally. Turkey and Russia should instead recommit to their jointly guaranteed ceasefire in Idlib. Turkey should demonstrate more progress on the terms of the agreement, including by bolstering its military presence and expanding its patrols inside Idlib to discourage violations of the ceasefire, and by reopening the area's major highways to trade.

Since September 2017, a partial ceasefire under a "de-escalation" agreement among Turkey, Iran and Russia has protected Idlib. A September 2018 deal between Turkey and Russia, announced in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, headed off a seemingly imminent regime offensive and reinforced the earlier deal. Importantly, however, the original "de-escalation" agreement committed all sides to isolating and combatting jihadist groups, and the Sochi deal specified further measures to clear "radical terrorist groups" from a demilitarised zone inside Idlib. The burden of implementing the Sochi deal falls mostly on Turkey, which so far has fallen short in discharging its responsibilities. Meanwhile, mutual attacks between Idlib militants and regime forces have escalated. A Turkish patrol of the demilitarised zone on 8 March marks new and significant progress, but the Sochi deal requires more.

Inside Idlib, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest iteration of Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, is the dominant armed faction. After rebel rivals broke HTS's monopolistic control of Idlib in early 2018, it reconsolidated its grip over the entire Idlib area in January 2019. Aside from HTS, some of Idlib's other armed groups are jihadists with global ambitions, but most are only vaguely Islamist and are better understood as popular, armed manifestations of Idlib's local communities. As for HTS, what exactly it represents today is unclear. With military victory in Syria out of reach, the group has instead invested in a local Islamist governing project. Its leading figures publicly voice commitment to "jihad", but, in practice, they have demonstrated some pragmatism and flexibility. HTS has repeatedly reached accommodations with Turkey that violate jihadist orthodoxy but, for the time being, ensure the group's survival.

A military assault on Idlib does not seem imminent. A Russian-backed regime offensive would be hugely costly, both militarily and, given an offensive's likely humanitarian toll, politically. Russia seems inclined instead to prioritise its relations with Turkey and to sustain Syria's political process.

But the Sochi deal is nonetheless under strain, as clashes intensify on the ground. Turkey needs to do more in Idlib if the ceasefire is to last. Turkey should expand its patrols inside the Idlib area to cover the entirety of the demilitarised zone and rein-

force its static observation points, thus discouraging violence by both Idlib's militants and the regime. Turkey and Russia should push both sides to stop their back-and-forth attacks. In addition, Turkey should press HTS to relinquish control of Idlib's major cross-cutting highways and, together with Russia, secure the roads for trade.

Avoiding a disastrous military confrontation in Idlib and containing the area's militants does not constitute a lasting solution. For now, though, it is the best, most life-saving choice available.

Beirut/Brussels, 14 March 2019

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The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib

I. Introduction

Early in Syria's 2011 rebellion, the north-western governorate of Idlib and its surroundings were among the first areas nationwide to take up arms against the regime.[1] The conservative governorate, historically marginalised economically and politically, was also a stronghold of Islamist and jihadist militants among opposition groups.[2] After Russia's 2015 military intervention in support of the regime uprooted the rebels from other parts of the country, Idlib gradually became the opposition's last real bastion.

The regime was willing to quarantine its staunchest opposition in Idlib, perhaps calculating that, when it came time for an offensive, the opposition's international backers would be unenthusiastic about defending an area increasingly controlled by jihadists. Beginning in 2014, the regime began to bus residents whom its security services deemed unacceptable or who refused to "reconcile" with the state to northern Syria.[3] These transfers increased in 2016, and most of the displaced were sent to Idlib. Also in 2014, Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, reeling from losses elsewhere to its rivals in the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), regrouped in Idlib and began to liquidate local rebels. Syria's jihadists and most unyielding oppositionists thus concentrated in Idlib, as did hundreds of thousands of civilians fleeing deadly conflict and retribution from the regime. The Idlib area's population is now swollen to almost three million, nearly half of them people displaced from elsewhere in Syria.[4]

[1] In June 2011, local men massacred Syrian security forces in the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour, the first instance of large-scale militant violence in what was then still a mostly peaceful nationwide protest movement. Mariam Karouny, "Syria to send in army after 120 troops killed", Reuters, 6 June 2011. Rebels later congregated in Idlib's countryside and areas such as Jabal al-Zawiya from which the regime's forces had been expelled. See Ben Hubbard, "Syria rebels divided, at times violent", Associated Press, 21 June 2012.

[2] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012.

[3] "Reconciliation" is the regime's euphemistic term for insurgent-held areas' negotiated surrender and the restoration of state control. In addition to evacuations north, it also entails the return of state institutions and services and the vetting of residents by the regime's various security services to normalise their legal status. "Reconciliation" has often followed extended sieges and involved the regime's threat or use of military force, including extensive bombardment of civilian neighbourhoods and infrastructure.

[4] According to the Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team's November 2018 population data, 2,829,580 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 governorate's Jabal Samaan district. Of that population, 1,269,377 are people internally displaced from elsewhere in Syria. Humanitarian Access Team, "Population Data", accessed 1 January 2018. According to a Syrian government estimate, 1,464,000 residents lived in Idlib governorate at the end of 2010. Estimates are not available by district, making it impossible to combine that figure with estimates from what are now opposition-held areas of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia governorates. Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, "Statistical Abstract 2010".

For now, Idlib and its civilian population are shielded by a partial ceasefire agreed mainly between Turkey and Russia. Yet Turkey and Russia's agreements on Idlib also require them to combat its jihadists. Inside Idlib, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra, is clearly dominant. Defeating it in any way that would not precipitate a humanitarian disaster or a substantial outflow of jihadist militants to other countries is unlikely.

This report surveys Idlib's jihadist groups and other armed factions. It is based primarily on research in Turkey, as well as interviews with Syrians inside the north west contacted remotely. After mapping these factions, the report offers policy recommendations for stabilising the Idlib ceasefire while managing the threat Idlib's militants pose locally and internationally.

II. Idlib's De-escalation and the Sochi Memorandum

Since May 2017, Idlib has been subject to a "de-escalation" agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran, supplemented by a memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Russia announced in September 2018. Originally, Turkey, Russia and Iran announced the creation of four Syrian "de-escalation" zones, including one covering Idlib and adjacent sections of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo governorates, at a summit in Astana in May 2017.[5] The de-escalation agreement stipulated the cessation of hostilities in the four zones and terms for improved humanitarian access. It also committed the Astana guarantors to combat Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist militants and to "separate" the armed opposition from those "terrorist groups".[6]

In September 2017, the Astana troika announced they had demarcated the Idlib de-escalation zone and would deploy observer forces at observation points along its perimeter.[7] Turkey mobilised Syrian rebel allies and its own forces along its border with Idlib, seemingly portending a military intervention to dislodge HTS. HTS also massed on the border, preparing for a confrontation. Ultimately, though, HTS allowed Turkish troops to enter Idlib and establish the first observation points in October 2017. Turkey's deployment stalled once it had set up its first three outposts, on the Idlib zone's northern edge. Between October 2017 and February 2018, however, HTS lost a large section of the eastern Idlib countryside to a Russian- and Iranian-backed regime offensive. With the regime bearing down on the populated centre of Idlib, HTS accommodated a swift Turkish deployment opposite the front line with the regime and then, through May 2018, around the rest of the Idlib zone. In parallel, Russia and Iran established their own observation points in Syrian regime territory surrounding the de-escalation zone.[8]

Between March and July 2018, Russia helped the Syrian regime recapture the other three de-escalation zones, in some cases justifying its actions as fulfilling the agreement's counter-terrorism provisions.[9] The regime then turned its attention to Idlib. Russian officials had already voiced anger over attacks by drones on Russia's Hmeimim airbase in Syria's coastal Latakia governorate, which they alleged were launched from inside the Idlib zone, as well as attacks by Idlib militants on sur-

[5] The other three zones were in south-western Syria, Damascus's East Ghouta suburbs and the northern Homs countryside. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Memorandum on the Creation of De-escalation Areas in the Syrian Arab Republic", 6 May 2017.

[6] The three guarantors announced their agreement on the precise demarcation of the Idlib de-escalation zone and on the deployment of observer forces at the sixth round of Astana talks in September 2017. 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. For additional background on Idlib's de-escalation agreement, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°56, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, 9 February 2018; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°63, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, 3 September 2018.

[7] 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", op. cit.

[8] Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, op. cit.

[9] 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.

rounding regime-held areas.[10] In August 2018, Moscow substantially sharpened its tone, threatening an "anti-terrorist operation" in Idlib to eliminate this remaining "abscess" of "terrorist" control.[11] By September 2018, a regime offensive on the Idlib de-escalation zone seemed imminent.

That offensive was forestalled, however, by a memorandum of understanding reached by Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russia's Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on 17 September 2018.[12] The Sochi agreement reinforced the Idlib de-escalation agreement by stipulating a partially demilitarised zone between 15km and 20km wide inside the Idlib de-escalation area, which was meant to be cleared of heavy and indirect-fire weapons and "radical terrorist groups" by mid-October. The memorandum also required coordinated Turkish and Russian patrols and monitoring along the boundary of the demilitarised zone, as well as the opening of the Latakia-Aleppo and Damascus-Aleppo highways crisscrossing Idlib by the end of 2018.

Russia's rhetoric cooled after the Sochi agreement. On paper, the Sochi deal's terms – including the demilitarised buffer zone, which would diminish the threat to Hmeimim and areas such as Aleppo city – satisfied Russia's minimum demands.[13] For its part, Damascus publicly emphasised that Russia had coordinated with it.[14] In private, it was reportedly disgruntled at having to postpone an offensive.[15] Though the memorandum did not specify which party was responsible for satisfying these conditions, it was implicitly clear that the burden of implementation fell on Turkey.[16]

The Idlib de-escalation agreement was further buttressed by a four-way summit in Istanbul in October, at which the leaders of Turkey, Russia, Germany and France stressed the importance of a "lasting ceasefire" in Idlib.[17] They also praised progress

[10] 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.

[11] 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, August 29, 2018", 29 August 2018.

[12] UN Security Council, "Letter dated 18 September 2018 from the Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation and Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council", 18 September 2018.

[13] Though Russian officials threatened a broader counter-terrorism offensive before the Sochi deal, since the agreement President Putin has identified the security of Aleppo city and Hmeimim as Russia's immediate priorities. See President of Russia, "Press statement following Russian-Turkish talks", 17 September 2018; "Russia and Turkey fulfilling their agreement on Syria's Idlib – Putin", TASS, 4 October 2018.

[14] "Syria welcomes agreement on Idlib announced in Sochi and emphasises it was product of intensive consultations between it and Russia" (Arabic), SANA, 18 September 2018.

[15] Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Beirut, September 2018.

[16] Russian officials have since made clear that Turkey is responsible for the Sochi agreement's implementation inside the Idlib zone. For example, see President of Russia, "News conference following the meeting of the leaders of Russia, Turkey, Germany and France", 27 October 2018.

[17] President of Russia, "Joint Statement by the Presidents of the Republic of Turkey, the French Republic, the Russian Federation and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany", 27 October 2018.

toward creating the Sochi deal's demilitarised buffer, while repeatedly emphasising the need to continue fighting "terrorism".

Yet, on the ground inside Idlib, the Sochi deal's implementation remains incomplete. In October, rebels reportedly withdrew some heavy weapons from the demilitarised buffer zone, but the jihadists remained. Idlib's highways are not yet reopened to normal traffic.[18] Instead, HTS controls them and collects duties on commercial trucking. In January 2019, HTS eliminated the group known as Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, one of its main factional rivals, and asserted its dominance over the entire Idlib area. Tit-for-tat attacks between the regime and Idlib rebels have escalated, and various jihadist factions have advertised raids on neighbouring regime-held areas, launched from what is supposed to be a demilitarised zone free of "radical terrorist groups".[19] In an important step forward, Turkey launched its first patrol of the demilitarised zone on 8 March.[20] Still, Turkey has so far patrolled only one section of the zone, and violence has continued elsewhere around Idlib.[21]

The Istanbul summit more tightly linked the continued Idlib de-escalation with higher-level political issues, including the creation of a constitutional committee and reconstruction.[22] Turkey and Russia also continue to invest in their multidimensional bilateral relationship, of which cooperation on Idlib is only one aspect.[23] Spreading the engagement of Turkey, Russia and secondary players such as France and Germany across these various files likely reduces the focus on Idlib specifically and the pressure for a literal implementation of the Sochi memorandum. Still, Russia emphasised to its interlocutors in Istanbul that when it comes to Idlib's ceasefire, "lasting" does not mean "forever".[24]

[18] Crisis Group interviews, rebel commander, activist and former local governance official inside the Idlib area, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[19] For example, see "Ansar al-Tawhid claims attack on Assad positions in north Hama" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 3 March 2019.

[20] According to Turkey's Anadolu Agency, the patrol route passed from Kafr Lousin/al-Dana, in the northern Idlib countryside; through al-Atareb, in the western Aleppo countryside; to Qammari, al-Qanater and al-Eiss in the southern Aleppo countryside. Selen Temizer et al., "Turkish military completes patrols in Syria's Idlib", Anadolu Agency, 8 March 2019.

[21] "New Russian measure towards Idlib one day after Turkish patrol" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 9 March 2019.

[22] Diplomats differ on whether the Istanbul communique's reference to "humanitarian infrastructure" represented a substantive concession from France and Germany on support for reconstruction or "stabilisation". According to a diplomat from one of the participating countries at the Istanbul summit: "There has to be something for the Russians. So how do we find that red line? Between reconstruction, and below humanitarian aid. That was the compromise we accepted". Crisis Group interview, November 2018. In their November 2018 meeting, the three Astana guarantors elaborated on the definition of "humanitarian infrastructure", which they said included "water and power supply facilities, schools and hospitals". Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in Astana, 28-29 November 2018", 29 November 2018.

[23] See Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Report N°250, *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, 28 June 2018.

[24] Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Turkey, November 2018.

III. Idlib's Rebel Scene

As Idlib has grown more important, conditions in the region have become more opaque. As the anti-Assad revolt's last major redoubt, Idlib is the opposition's territorial claim to political relevance. It houses over three million civilians – original residents and people displaced from elsewhere in Syria – concentrating humanitarian need that requires international donor support. And as ISIS's international threat has receded with the group's territorial defeat, Idlib has also emerged as a major global counter-terrorism concern. In 2017, Brett McGurk, then the U.S. envoy to the coalition against the Islamic State, called Idlib "the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11".[25]

Idlib has frustrated outsiders' attempts to understand it since the start of the war, even before 2013-2014, when kidnappings became so frequent that most foreign journalists and aid workers stopped entering. Events in Idlib and its surroundings are shaped by local dynamics and personal relationships known mainly to residents themselves.[26] As external actors scaled back their involvement in Idlib over the past year, their contacts and information from inside Idlib have disappeared, and the area has grown even less transparent.[27] Even for Syrians, the north west is unpredictable and dangerous.[28]

The map of armed factional control inside Idlib has always been mottled and complex.[29] Despite the deployment of Turkish forces at observation points around the de-escalation zone, Turkey does not manage Idlib as it does with more directly Turkish-controlled sections of Aleppo governorate to the north.[30] Idlib is controlled by its residents and armed factions, who are themselves composed mostly of local men. Among Idlib's factions, HTS's role is most important.

[25] See minute 59:03 of "Assessing the Trump Administration's Counterterrorism Policy", Middle East Institute, 27 July 2017.

[26] In one example, NBC News was obliged in 2015 to revise the account of its correspondent Richard Engel's 2012 abduction in Idlib after it became known that the rebels who had ostensibly liberated Engel from what were supposedly pro-regime "shabiha" thugs had in fact conspired with the kidnappers to stage Engel's rescue. The rebels' commander was related by marriage to one of the kidnappers. Ravi Somaiya, C.J. Chivers and Karam Shoumali, "NBC News alters account of correspondent's kidnapping in Syria", *The New York Times*, 15 April 2015.

[27] Covert military assistance to north-western rebels provided jointly by the U.S., UK, Turkey, Gulf states and other allies concluded at the end of 2017, and much Western civilian "stabilisation" assistance for governance and service provision was phased out over 2018. With fewer activities inside the north west, Western governments receive less and lower-quality information on the area's "atmospherics". Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, May-November 2018.

[28] A Syrian businessman said: "Inside, you don't know who your enemy is. There are kidnapping gangs, political issues, factions. Today the threat from HTS is easy. But you don't know who the threat is. Especially for people who are well-known, or who have capital". Crisis Group interview, Antakya, August 2018.

[29] According to an Idlib activist: "In Idlib, you can walk a kilometre from a town that's HTS, to the next that's controlled by Suqour al-Sham.... There's a lot of mixing". A former local governance official inside Idlib said: "There are also lots of areas where HTS is 'present', but it's only two members, or a home". Crisis Group interviews, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[30] Crisis Group interviews, Syrians inside Idlib and Western diplomats, Turkey and remote via messaging app, September-November 2018.

A. *Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham*

HTS is the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, and the prevailing armed faction in north-western Syria.[31] Per its name, Jabhat al-Nusra initially introduced itself as a group of Syrian militants returning from foreign jihadist battlefields to support the Syrian people in the face of bloody repression.[32] With time, though, its auxiliary support to Syria's insurgency became more domineering, particularly in the country's north.[33] Early in Syria's war, Jabhat al-Nusra distinguished itself among Syria's factions for being particularly effective militarily, because of both its fighters' capability and discipline and their readiness to carry out potent suicide bombings in support of conventional attacks.[34] HTS also retains a reputation for being better organised than its rivals.[35]

[31] In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra announced it would become Jabhat Fath al-Sham, which it said "has no relationship with any foreign party", thus implicitly breaking with al-Qaeda. As Jabhat al-Nusra officials later acknowledged, the split was a pretence; HTS apparently attempted to maintain its allegiance to al-Qaeda in secret pending a merger with other Syrian rebel factions that would have made the decoupling real and complete. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership nevertheless rejected the move. Jabhat Fath al-Sham split more substantively with al-Qaeda in January 2017 when it combined with several other rebel groups to form HTS, although HTS's leadership remained in communication with senior al-Qaeda figures. In November 2017, HTS detained several senior al-Qaeda loyalists and former Jabhat al-Nusra leaders who had split with the group. That apparently prompted the release of an audio message from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri himself condemning HTS and its break with al-Qaeda, as what had been a private dispute spilled into public. Jabhat Fath al-Sham, "Announcing the formation of Jabhat Fath al-Sham" (Arabic), Jihadology, 28 July 2016; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "So let us fight them with solid foundations" (Arabic), Jihadology, 28 November 2017; Abdurrahim Attoun, untitled testimonial, Jihadology, 29 November 2017. HTS has claimed it is a new, independent entity, not a continuation of a prior organisation. After the successive defections of the groups that formed HTS alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, however, HTS and its leadership seem to consist mostly of Jabhat al-Nusra figures, even as some original Jabhat al-Nusra leaders have broken away. For an example of HTS's position, see HTS, "Clarifications and responses regarding the statement of U.S. envoy Michael Ratney" (Arabic), Jihadology, 12 March 2017. For previous Crisis Group reporting on Jabhat al-Nusra, see Crisis Group, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°63, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014.

[32] "Nusra" means "support" or "aid". The group's full original name literally means "The Front to Support the People of al-Sham from al-Sham's Mujahideen in the Arenas of Jihad".

[33] The key turning point came in mid-2014, when a leaked speech by Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani seemingly heralded the establishment of an "emirate" in Syria's north. Though the group denied it had declare an "emirate" per se, it executed the substantive measures Jolani outlined in the speech, including establishing a network of Islamic courts and eliminating criminal and foreign-backed elements within the armed opposition. Untitled speech by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, July 2014; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Clarification regarding what has been rumored about Jabhat al-Nusra's announcement of an Islamic emirate" (Arabic), Jihadology, 12 July 2014.

[34] For more on Jabhat al-Nusra's unique contribution on the battlefield, see Crisis Group, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°163, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, 2 September 2015.

[35] According to a Syrian researcher in Idlib familiar with HTS, the group benefits organisationally from factors including the past experience and institutional legacy of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Qaeda, its rigorous training, its fighters' ideological motivation and those fighters' discipline and obedience to commands. Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, August 2018. On the other hand, a Syrian activist in Turkey's Hatay province said: "HTS makes fewer mistakes than others, if you compare it to Ahrar [al-Sham]. It's more organised than Ahrar and [Harakat Nour al-

With the January 2017 announcement of its creation, HTS assumed the leading role in northern Syria's insurgency.[36] Then, in July 2017, HTS defeated Ahrar al-Sham, its one-time ally and main rival.[37] Defections and internecine fighting with other factions reduced HTS's size and territorial dominance in early 2018, but it resurged in January 2019, defeating its erstwhile rivals and expelling recalcitrant fighters to the Turkish-controlled northern Aleppo countryside.[38]

Although HTS ceded some peripheral areas in its early 2018 battle, it held onto its core territory: the north west's most strategic, densely populated and profitable areas.[39] Those include the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey; the length of the north west's border with Turkey, which holds the area's displacement camps; Idlib's eponymous provincial capital; and internal trade crossings between rebel- and regime-held territory. The group also retained some presence, if not outright control, in many areas outside its core territory.[40] Since January, it has extended its formal authority to the edges of the Idlib zone but is still in the process of imposing more effective control, including assimilating local governance bodies and establishing a military and security presence.[41]

HTS's original stated mission is "to unify [Syria's rebels] to preserve the gains of the revolution and the jihad" and to realise the rebellion's aims – as HTS regards them – of toppling the Syrian regime and instituting Islamic law.[42] The group also made clear that part of its aim in establishing HTS was to position itself as a credible and necessary negotiator opposite foreign powers.[43]

How the group intends to bring down the regime, or whether it takes that goal literally, is not specified. HTS continues to clash periodically with regime forces on Idlib's margins, and it emphasises its vital role in defending the opposition-held north west.[44] Yet its last major battle with the regime was its losing fight for the east-

Din] al-Zinki, and more disciplined, which lets it control and influence more. So it's more organised, but organised compared to them. It's not 'organised'… tt's a relative thing". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018.

[36] Aron Lund, "The Jihadi Spiral", Carnegie Middle East Center's *Diwan*, 8 February 2017.

[37] Ahmed Abazeid, "How did Ahrar al-Sham collapse" (Arabic), Shaam News Network, 10 August 2018.

[38] Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki split from HTS in July 2017, while Ahrar al-Sham splinter Jeish al-Ahrar left HTS in September 2017. Several jihadist units also split from HTS between late 2017 and early 2018, only to later join al-Qaeda loyalist faction Hurras al-Din (see below). For the terms of HTS's ultimate victory in January 2019, see "Tahrir al-Sham and National Liberation [Front] reach final agreement… These are its terms" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 10 January 2019.

[39] "HTS works to reposition in Syria's north" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 28 February 2018.

[40] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, researchers and humanitarians, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August 2018.

[41] Crisis Group interviews, former local governance official and rebel commander, remote via messaging app, January 2019.

[42] HTS, "Announcement of the formation of HTS" (Arabic), Jihadology, 28 January 2017.

[43] In another early statement, it said its founding principles included the rejection of a "capitulatory" political process, "balanced relations with influential parties" (that is, foreign powers) and a refusal to bargain over foreign fighters. HTS, "Learn about Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham", Jihadology, 14 February 2017. For a full account of HTS's formation and its underlying logic, see Sam Heller, "The Strategic Logic of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 11, no. 6 (2017).

[44] HTS, "Congratulations on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Adha 1439 H" (Arabic), Jihadology, 21 August 2018.

ern Idlib countryside between October 2017 and February 2018.[45] Still, the group's aims are not solely military. Increasingly, it has turned its attention inwards, focusing on an Islamist governing project that doubles as an economic enterprise.

1. HTS's administrative and economic project

The centrepiece of HTS's project is the "Salvation Government", formed in November 2017.[46] The Salvation Government's writ receded along with HTS's territorial control in early 2018, but, in its January 2019 takeover, HTS imposed Salvation Government control over the whole of the north west.[47] In his first interview since then, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani made clear he considered a single civilian administration governing the north west a priority.[48] After the "General Conference for the Syrian Revolution" held in February 2019, the Salvation Government may be replaced by another nominally civilian body.[49] It seems unlikely that HTS will dismantle the Salvation Government's administrative apparatus, however; after its establishment, the Salvation Government itself absorbed HTS's previous service body, the "Civil Administration for Services", including its electricity utility.[50]

[45] Amjad Media Production, "The railway" (Arabic), Jihadology, 23 November 2018. Crisis Group, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.

[46] "'Salvation Government' formed in northern Syria" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 2 November 2017. The Salvation Government was formed by the "Constituent Assembly of the Syrian General Conference", which continues to play an oversight role and whose head, Bassam al-Sahyouni, remains active and prominent. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian, Turkey, August 2018; "Constituent Body for the General Syrian Conference approves ministerial statement for Salvation Government in its second term" (Arabic), Iba News Network, 10 December 2018.

[47] HTS attached enough importance to the Salvation Government to include it in the terms of surrender agreements in the western Aleppo countryside as fighting was still ongoing, and to make Salvation Government control the sole substantive concession it extracted from Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham in their agreement to yield to HTS control. "HTS neutralises town of Aweijil and joins it to Salvation Government" (Arabic), Iba News Network, 4 January 2018; "Tahrir al-Sham and National Liberation [Front] reach final agreement… These are its terms", Nidaa Souriya, op. cit. The extent to which the Salvation Government will directly manage local governing bodies after January 2019 is unclear. Idlib's health and education directorates, which operate from HTS-controlled Idlib city, have previously been formally independent of the Salvation Government. Both bodies are resource- and skills-intensive to operate; their margin of autonomy allowed them to receive foreign donor support. Crisis Group interviews, local governance officials, humanitarians and diplomats from Western donor countries, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August, September and November 2018.

[48] Amjad Media Production, "The Dialogue: Infighting and the future of the arena" (Arabic), Jihadology, 14 January 2019.

[49] On 10 February 2019, a "General Conference for the Syrian Revolution" ostensibly organised by activists and civil society figures recommended the establishment of a new civil administration to replace the current Salvation Government. The conference and another preliminary event were convened in areas of HTS control and publicised by HTS media. The Salvation Government's top leadership participated actively in the conference. Tweet by General Conference for the Syrian Revolution, @GCofSyrianRevol, 9:30 pm, 10 February 2019. Syrian Salvation Government, "Prime Minister's speech during General Conference for the Syrian Revolution" (Arabic), 11 February 2019.

[50] "Tahrir al-Sham hands its service institutions over to the Salvation Government" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 7 November 2017. The "Civil Administration for Services" was seemingly a new alias for Jabhat al-Nusra's Public Administration for Services. See Heller, "Syrian Jihadists Jeopardize Hu-

The Salvation Government's ministers are a mix of nonpartisan technocrats and HTS-linked figures.[51] Some officials responsible for revenue-generating branches of the government have appeared to work autonomously, as least under first Salvation Government Prime Minister Muhammad al-Sheikh. Salvation Government Economy Minister Muhammad "Abu Taha" al-Ahmed, who also headed HTS's prior service body, is particularly independent and influential.[52] The government's ministry of justice maintains a network of sharia courts, which is key to HTS's claim that it is instituting God's law.[53] HTS's security apparatus ostensibly answers to Salvation Government courts and targets critics of the group, in some cases torturing them.[54] As part of HTS's religious project, HTS or the Salvation Government has intervened to enforce gender segregation in schools, conservative dress for women and restrictions on their movement.[55] The group excludes women from its own leadership and from its political bodies, but it has not barred them from all professions or from public life.[56]

For HTS, the Salvation Government seems to be both a political project and a moneymaking tool. HTS's finances are difficult to disentangle from those of the Salvation Government – donors consider the two linked – and the group does not transparent-

manitarian Relief", op. cit.; Sam Heller, "Keeping the Lights on in Rebel Idlib", The Century Foundation, 29 November 2016.

[51] Crisis Group interviews, local governance officials, Syrian humanitarians, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August-October 2018. The Salvation Government's first prime minister was Muhammad al-Sheikh, a civilian academic. His successor is Fawaz Hilal, a businessman who also served on the opposition Aleppo Provincial Council and Assistance Coordination Unit. Salwa Abdurrahman, "New Salvation Government announced, with Fawaz Hilal as President" (Arabic), Hibr Press, 10 December 2018.

[52] According to a Syrian humanitarian: "Muhammad al-Ahmed is everything". A former Syrian local governance official said: "Abu Taha is the de facto president". Crisis Group interviews, humanitarians and local governance officials, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August, October and November 2018. For the Salvation Government's second term, Ahmed's ministry of economy absorbed the ministry of agriculture, and Ahmed was reportedly elevated to deputy prime minister for economic affairs. The minister of local administration and services was also made a deputy premier. "Fawaz Hilal named head of Salvation Government in Idlib", *Enab Baladi*, 11 December 2018; "Constituent Body for the General Syrian Conference approves ministerial statement for Salvation Government in its second term", Iba News Network, op. cit.

[53] Iba News Network, "Iba Network speaks with Salvation Government Minister of Justice Ibrahim Shasho about the spread of courts belonging to the Government in the liberated [areas], their effectiveness and implementation of Islamic shari'a, and their most recent accomplishments" (Arabic), 9 September 2018.

[54] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Arrests, Torture by Armed Group", 28 January 2019.

[55] One Idlib woman complained, "While there were battles on the front lines, HTS members were manning positions in front of schools to make sure girls and boys didn't mix". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, May 2018. A woman in an area newly under HTS's nominal control expected the group might impose a dress code for local women, but was otherwise optimistic: "HTS cannot radically change society. Those who want to wear the *abaya* [a conservative robe-like dress] would do it by themselves. Those who don't want to might wear it to cope with HTS's presence but won't change their minds". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, February 2019.

[56] Crisis Group interviews, remote via messaging app, 2018-2019. For example, see the apparent absence of women at the General Conference for the Syrian Revolution: Iba News Network, "A look at the activities of the General Conference for the Syrian Revolution" (Arabic), 10 February 2019.

ly disclose its funding.[57] Still, in combination with the Salvation Government, HTS's economic apparatus is diversified and lucrative. The Salvation Government provides utilities such as electricity, water and other public services, for which it collects fees.[58] In addition, HTS or the Salvation Government rents out properties seized from the Syrian state or absentee owners.[59] HTS allegedly controls a company with a monopoly on fuel imports from Turkey.[60] It is also suspected of profiting from kidnapping for ransom, although the extent of its involvement in abductions inside the north west is unclear.[61] But HTS's main revenue source is thought to be tolls on commercial traffic through the Bab al-Hawa crossing and internal trade crossings between rebel- and regime-held territory.[62]

[57] A Syrian humanitarian said: "Donors won't deal with [the Salvation Government]. They consider it the civilian wing of HTS". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018. Even informed Crisis Group interviewees discussed HTS and Salvation Government revenue sources, such as trade crossings, as if they were interchangeable. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian local governance officials, Turkey and remote via messaging app, September and October 2018.

[58] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, local governance officials, humanitarian, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August-November 2018. A diplomat from a Western donor country said: "It made it difficult to deliver some services. Electricity was the classic example. We'd ask beneficiaries what they needed, and they'd say they needed a more stable power source. But it was a sector where HTS or the Salvation Government had such a heavy presence. It probably could have been done, but if you dug, or there was an audit, it probably would have benefited HTS… Colossal profiteering". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, November 2018. The Salvation Government has portrayed these fees as a way of putting local governance bodies on a financially sustainable footing. "Watch: How has the Salvation Government succeeded in solving local councils' lack of capacity?" (Arabic), video, YouTube, 3 February 2019.

[59] See Ammar Hamou and Avery Edelman, "Property seizures by hardline rebels stoke fears among Idlib province's fading Christian community", *Syria Direct*, 13 December 2018. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activist, humanitarian and local government official, Antakya and remote via messaging app, August and October 2018.

[60] Opposition-leaning Syrian media have claimed that HTS figures established and control the Watad Petroleum Company. "Idlib: Watad Petroleum exploits fuel crisis?" (Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 7 November 2018. In November 2018, Watad issued a non-denial in response to claims that it belonged to HTS, saying that it was a "civilian company". "Watad Petroleum" (Arabic), Facebook, 8:52 am, 7 November 2018. Watad Petroleum signed a memorandum of understanding with the Salvation Government in March 2018. Syrian Salvation Government, "Local Administration and Services Ministry signs memorandum of understanding with Watad Petroleum Company" (Arabic), 15 March 2018.

[61] See United Nations Security Council, "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities", 27 July 2018, p. 9; Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activist and Syrian politician, Antakya and Istanbul, August and November 2018.

[62] The Bab al-Hawa administration is officially independent but is widely thought to be controlled by HTS. Humanitarians, Syrian activists, local governance officials, northern rebel, Crisis Group interviews, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August-December 2018. Monthly profit from Bab al-Hawa alone is estimated to be in the millions of dollars, according to Crisis Group interviewees. Muhammad al-Ahmed described Salvation Government management of crossings with regime-held areas and toll collection in a January 2019 interview. "Salvation Government holds Idlib crossings" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 6 January 2019.

HTS also controls the corridor from Bab al-Hawa to the town of Sarmada, which serves as the rebel-held north west's financial and commercial hub.[63] The Bab al-Hawa-Sarmada corridor is vital to the humanitarian response in north-western Syria. In September 2018, after the U.S. government discovered that the Salvation Government was collecting fees on trucking via Bab al-Hawa, both the U.S. and UK briefly halted their humanitarian aid through the crossing.[64] After HTS's January takeover, some donors suspended assistance to the north west, but at least humanitarian aid resumed with tightened vetting standards.[65]

HTS evidently understands the necessity of humanitarian aid in Syria's north west and the functioning of humanitarian organisations.[66] Still, the group has endangered relief by interfering with aid organisations in some instances.[67] Local humanitarians are reluctant to speak openly about aid diversion for fear of jeopardising assistance to the area's vulnerable residents.[68] "Northern Syria would die without these

[63] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian journalist, Syrian activists and humanitarian analyst, Beirut and remote via messaging app, April and May 2017, August and November 2018. Over the course of Syria's war, Sarmada has become the economic nerve center for the rebel-held north west's trade and manufacturing, as well as its money changers and transfer offices. See also Sam Heller, "Syrian Jihadists Jeopardize Humanitarian Relief", The Century Foundation, 1 June 2017.

[64] In September 2018, USAID and Britain's aid agency DfID ordered NGO partners to stop using Bab al-Hawa over concerns that HTS was "likely incurring financial benefits from Syrian trucks accessing the [Bab al-Hawa] crossing". Both the Bab al-Hawa crossing administration and the Salvation Government responded with dual Arabic/English-language statements. The Bab al-Hawa crossing denied taxing humanitarian shipments, while the Salvation Government acknowledged collecting fees but promised they would stop as of October 2018. Ben Parker, "US and UK halt key Syria aid shipments over extremist 'taxes'", IRIN News, 2 October 2018. UN OCHA communicated the need to lift the fees to the Salvation Government, and after the Salvation Government gave its commitment, the U.S. and UK allowed their NGO partners to resume using Bab al-Hawa. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian and Western diplomats, Turkey and remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[65] For example, see Ammar Hamou and Justin Clark, "After cuts, German aid agency reinstates funding to health directorates in rebel-held north with 'strict conditions'", *Syria Direct*, 25 February 2019.

[66] After HTS's takeover of the north west and seizure of Bab al-Hawa in July 2017 and as humanitarians were meeting in Turkey to discuss safe, principled access to Idlib, HTS issued a statement in which it echoed humanitarian discourse and committed to ensuring principled humanitarian action. Tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 4:50 pm, 31 July 2017, originally from messaging app Telegram. According to a humanitarian analyst: "In the same breath, [HTS would] say, 'We won't violate your neutrality, but also, now is a good time to share your beneficiary lists'. As if they didn't realise the contradiction. Then they said: 'We'll support you with local recruitment'". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2018.

[67] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian, remote via messaging app, November 2018. The USAID Office of the Inspector General found that "under the threat of [HTS]… an NGO's employees knowingly diverted thousands of USAID-funded food kits worth millions of dollars to ineligible beneficiaries (including HTS fighters) and submitted falsified beneficiary lists", and that "staff of a USAID-funded implementer were affiliated with or sympathetic to known terrorist groups". USAID Office of Inspector General, "Top Management Challenges: Fiscal Year 2019", 13 November 2018, p. 5. See also, Ben Parker, "Syrian militants served American food aid: US watchdog", IRIN News, 23 August 2018.

[68] According to a humanitarian: "[Syrian humanitarians] would try to stall [HTS] – tell them they have to speak to their leaders in Gaziantep [Turkey]. It would put them under increasing pressure. [HTS's Organisations Office] would tell them they shouldn't be sharing info to the office in Gaziantep – 'Just tell them whatever they want to hear; don't tell them what's being discussed here. You'll

NGOs", said a Syrian activist. "If they stopped work for one day, you'd have a famine".[69] (While this is an exaggeration, a cut in cross-border humanitarian aid would have a grave impact). Tightened counter-terrorism regulations and pressures to eliminate diversion have added pressure on humanitarians working to help civilians in Idlib.[70] Still, humanitarians have had some luck convincing HTS and the Salvation Government to respect their independence.[71]

Exactly how HTS spends these revenues is unknown. The group has obvious expenses, including salaries, arms and the cost of operating its governing apparatus. But how those expenses compare to HTS's income, and whether there is a cash surplus that could be put to other ends, is a mystery. HTS's rivals argue the group is a sort of mafia, interested mainly in money.[72] Yet HTS's economic activity has also created a network of Syrians throughout the north west dependent on the group and vested in its survival.[73] HTS's self-funding also seems to provide it with a degree of independence in dealing with foreign powers such as Turkey, whose financial support and other assistance give it leverage over other northern armed factions.

2. HTS's ambiguous identity

The mission of Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra seemed clear: even as it sought to topple the Syrian regime and institute Islamic rule, it did so as part of al-Qaeda's unlimited, globe-spanning war. Less obvious is what HTS stands for now in addition to its own survival.

HTS's top leadership is composed of veteran militants. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani is HTS's official leader and public face, and most informed sources believe Jolani is no mere puppet but central to the group.[74] Similarly informed sources say that HTS

be responsible if assistance is cut'. They would play these games with NGO workers in Syria, and put people in a difficult situation". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[69] Crisis Group interview, Antakya, August 2018.

[70] Crisis Group interviews, former Syrian local governance official and international humanitarians, Amman and remote via message app, November 2018. Ben Parker, "US tightens counter-terror clampdown on Syria aid", IRIN News, 21 September 2018. An international humanitarian noted that many of those most in need are in IDP camps in border areas under HTS control: "If a donor tells an NGO not to work in an HTS-held area, that NGO, by definition, is not complying with humanitarian principles. Especially if the people most in need are in HTS-held areas". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, October 2018.

[71] A Western diplomat said: "Clear communication of our red lines via humanitarian actors that talk to [the Salvation Government] has had a positive effect on reducing interference". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, March 2019. See also footnote 64, on UN OCHA's role.

[72] A former local governance official said: "Jabhat al-Nusra, in sum, is an organisation to collect money – to steal. They only formed the 'Salvation Government' as a cover for their thievery". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[73] Crisis Group interview, Abdullah Dib, researcher at Jusoor Center for Studies, Istanbul, November 2018.

[74] Crisis Group interviews, rebel leaders, Syrian activist and Syrian politicians, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August, September and November 2018. A representative of a rebel faction said: "Two years ago, you couldn't deal with Jolani. He was too hard-line. But today he's not the same Jolani. He isn't the Jolani of three years ago, or six years ago, in terms of the way he thinks and engages with matters. People change. They mature as a result of their experiences". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, November 2018.

is a predominantly Syrian organisation, as is Jolani's inner circle.[75] Many Syrians – whether or not informed – believe that HTS is divided internally between rival currents of pragmatist "doves" and hard-line "hawks".[76] Still, there is no agreement among observers on how these currents break down.

Nor is it clear what drives old and new recruits. Some Syrians believe that HTS's mostly Syrian rank-and-file are basically non-ideological, living in a rebel-held north west deprived of a normal civilian economy and motivated to join the organisation to gain money or status.[77] Still, there is reason to suspect the opposite, at least for some HTS fighters. New HTS recruits reportedly go through extended ideological instruction.[78] The group's religious officials – akin to commissars – are said to prepare fighters ideologically to face their next target, whether regime or rebel.[79] Young fighters who have spent years out of school may be particularly impressionable.[80]

[75] According to a rebel commander, HTS's influential leaders alongside Jolani include "Abu Ahmed Hudoud", Myassar al-Jubouri ("Abu Mariya al-Qahtani"), Abdurrahim Attoun ("Abu Abdullah al-Shami") and Hussam al-Shaf'i/Zeid al-Attar. The rest are "shadow puppets", he said. A Syrian politician who met with HTS leaders said that Jubouri, Attoun and Shaf'i/Attar are part of HTS's inner circle, along with Mudhar al-Weis, "Abu Muhammad Shuheil", "Abu Obeidah Shuheil", "Abu Ahmed Ahrar", Yousef al-Hajar ("Dr. Abu al-Baraa", HTS's official political chief), and Jamal Zeiniya ("Abu Malek al-Talli"). Crisis Group interviews, September and November 2018. In both lists, nearly all these figures are Syrian. Weis and Attoun can be seen in Sam Heller, "'Frogs' and 'Geckos': Syria's Jihadists Speak the Language of Rebellion", *War on the Rocks*, 22 October 2018. According to another former rebel commander: "Before, [I] definitely wouldn't [say HTS was 'local']. There were lots of foreign fighters in their leadership. But what's happened today is that approximately two-thirds of their leaders are Syrian. The majority of their commanders are Syrian, from the first rank, second rank, and third… Overall, approximately 90 percent of HTS is Syrian". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[76] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian opposition politicians and rebel commanders, Turkey and remote via messaging app, October-December 2018. A commander in the north west said: "There's confusion inside HTS. It's not announced publicly, but on the ground, you see it". For their part, HTS members deny the group has "currents". See "Abu al-Fateh al-Farghali's channel" (Arabic), Telegram, available via tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 1:44 pm, 15 November 2018.

[77] According to a Western diplomat: "If you're a teenager in a camp, relying on a water truck and a food basket, and someone offers to put you in charge of security – it's about money, it's about status, and it's about the feeling you have a job. Syrians in this part of Syria just rely on humanitarian aid. It's not a dignified way of living. So it's about money, but also more – social status, plus family links, and so on". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, November 2018. A Syrian activist said: "Now it's just about money. [HTS's] creedal conviction is gone. Its men are just mercenaries now. People say, 'I just want to work, damn it'". Crisis Group interview, Antakya, August 2018.

[78] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activist and Syrian researcher in Idlib familiar with HTS, Antakya and remote via messaging app, August 2018.

[79] Before HTS moved against its rebel rivals in January 2019, a former rebel commander in northwestern Syria said: "HTS deals with its members according to the phase it's in. Before this phase, it said to its members, 'We need to fight Hurras al-Din, because their al-Qaeda project will bring disaster on the north'. So they prepared to fight Hurras al-Din. That's information that's confirmed. Now they're preparing to fight [rival rebels among the] National [Liberation] Front factions because they control the international highways, so [HTS] can implement the second clause of the Sochi agreement [i.e., opening the highways]. Now they're convincing their members, 'If the National Front is on these roads and implements this clause, that will be a disaster for the Islamic nation and the arena. But if we expel them and seize the roads, we can implement that clause, but with our conditions.' So they're preparing their members to target the factions on the roads". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018. Many observers have claimed that HTS pre-

Whether that ethos now equals ideological Salafi-jihadism or just clannish loyalty to HTS, particularly in light of the group's repeated departures from jihadist orthodoxy, is also uncertain. Time and again, HTS has demonstrated that it has a pragmatic streak, although it is debatable whether that pragmatism represents a genuine ideological shift or merely a temporary, tactical adjustment.[81] It allowed Turkish observer forces to deploy around the entire de-escalation zone; those forces have since held their positions and rotated in and out mostly unmolested by Idlib militants.[82] When the U.S. explicitly designated HTS a terrorist group in June 2018, HTS protested that it "isn't an organisation that threatens the outside world or represents a danger to it".[83] Also in June, the group's General Sharia Council issued a public defence of its political pragmatism and international relations.[84] The persistent drone attacks

pares its fighters ideologically before moving against rival rebel factions. For example, see "Learn the reasons for Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki's evacuation of its positions, and what is its fate?" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 5 January 2018.

[80] Crisis Group interview, Antakya, August 2018. A former Ahrar al-Sham leader said: "When Jabhat al-Nusra formed [central strike force] Jeish al-Nusra, they recruited young men, 17 or 18 years old, with no background. They set up training camps and prepared them ideologically. And they prepared them to protect their leader; their loyalty was to Jolani. They worked on creating a Republican Guard". Crisis Group interview, Reyhanli, August 2018. Asked whether HTS's young foot soldiers could be reformed, an activist in Hatay province said: "No, they're done. They're ideological now. In contrast with Da'esh [ISIS], which was only in control for a short period of time, HTS, as Jabhat al-Nusra, has been around since 2012. These people have no familiarity with any culture, even with Islam. They don't know anything, even how to read". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018.

[81] According to a Syrian opposition politician who has met with HTS leaders, "HTS, in its current iteration, is different from al-Qaeda. It's not that ideological. They talk about the future a lot. And their military strength is increasing; their ability to exert control is increasing; and their political experience is increasing". The group is heavily influenced by the Taliban, the politician said, including how it navigated politics and established international relations. "They're trying to do the impossible – to secure acceptance for them moving on to the next stage". Crisis Group interview, September 2018. HTS has had to fend off jihadist critics who see the group as impermissibly "diluting" jihadist orthodoxy. For example, see Cole Bunzel, "Diluting Jihad: Tahrir al-Sham and the Concerns of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", Jihadica, 29 March 2017.

[82] Turkish forces were hit by shelling from regime positions and a roadside bomb as they initially deployed in the southern Aleppo countryside in January 2018. Turkey blamed the roadside bomb 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. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.

[83] HTS, "The new American administration… Double standards against the Syrian revolution" (Arabic), Jihadology, 1 June 2018. Prior to the group's break with al-Qaeda, leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani said in 2015 that Jabhat al-Nusra was under instructions from al-Qaeda's Zawahiri not to launch international attacks and endanger Syria's "jihad". He implied the choice was tactical, though, saying the group's "options might be open" if U.S. bombing of the group continued. "Jolani: Hizbullah is on its way out… And we have a vendetta with the Alawites" (Arabic), "Without Borders", Al Jazeera, 27 May 2015.

[84] HTS, "The jihad and jurisprudential policy, between constants and variables", Jihadology, 8 June 2018. In the statement, HTS's Shari'a Council insisted that shari'a remained the group's non-negotiable reference and that it remained committed to jihad as a path to change. Yet it also said the group's capability is variable, and any course of action has to take that into account. It said the group's relations with foreign countries were based on how those relations served the interests of Syria's revolution and jihad, within the scope of the religiously permissible.

on Russia's Hmeimim Airbase ahead of the Sochi deal – seemingly launched or allowed by HTS – were hard to comprehend.[85] These attacks have stopped after the Sochi agreement, however. In October, the group issued a statement implicitly accepting the Sochi deal, which the group has since partially respected.[86] Turkey's first patrol per the Sochi agreement passed safely through HTS-controlled territory.[87]

The group's leadership has pointedly refused to deny rumours it may merge into a rebel collective that might be more palatable internationally, or that it will satisfy the Sochi deal's terms by securing Idlib's major highways.[88] The recent "General Conference" seems to be a step toward the former objective.[89] More broadly, HTS has maintained a running dialogue with Turkey, either directly or through Syria mediators.[90] At each stage, the group and its representatives have justified its compromises.[91] HTS remains explicitly committed to "jihad" but less obviously to al-Qaeda-style transnational Salafi-jihadism.[92] A former rebel commander said:

> [HTS] changes colours according to the stage they're in. Then they instruct their men and those with them, their popular base: "Things are like this now, because of such-and-such interest". So what is HTS? Previously, they had a project, and I could answer: "It's one, two, three, four". Now, no one knows.[93]

Some Syrian opposition politicians and other members of the opposition point to HTS's cohesion and Jolani's evident sway to argue for dealing with the group as it is, under its current leadership, to negotiate a settlement for Idlib. The alternative could be chaos, they warn, or unconstrained jihadist extremism.[94] HTS's practical deci-

[85] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, op. cit.
[86] HTS, "Al-Sham's revolution will not die", Jihadology, 14 October 2018.
[87] Temizer et al., "Turkish military completes patrols in Syria's Idlib", op. cit.
[88] Abdurrahim Attoun, "The six issues" (Arabic), 5 February 2019, available at Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi's blog.
[89] In addition to the formation of a new civilian government, the General Conference also endorsed the creation of a military council including all of Idlib's armed factions. Tweet by General Conference for the Syrian Revolution, op. cit.
[90] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian politicians and representative of a rebel faction, Turkey, August-September 2018.
[91] For example, HTS figures justified Turkey's military deployment as a necessary evil in order to avoid a larger military confrontation, but one that did not compromise the rule of Islam or end the "jihad". See "HTS on ISIS, Turkey, and More", video, YouTube, 1 November 2017.
[92] Within Salafi-jihadism's intellectual firmament, HTS is understood to be closer to theorist Omar Othman ("Abu Qatada al-Filistini"), who has endorsed some of HTS's pragmatic moves. See Cole Bunzel, "Abu Qatada al-Filistini: "I am not a Jihadi, or a Salafi", Jihadica, 26 October 2018. For more on the definition of Salafi-jihadism, see Sam Heller, "Rightsizing the Transnational Jihadist Threat", International Crisis Group, 12 December 2018; Cole Bunzel, "Jihadism on Its Own Terms", Hoover Institution, 17 May 2017.
[93] Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018.
[94] According to a Syrian opposition politician: "Jolani is the easiest one to deal with to find a solution. He's ready for it". Crisis Group interview, November 2018. A Syrian researcher in Idlib familiar with HTS said. "The disaster is if a large section of these soldiers moves [from HTS] to factions that aren't open to compromise. Dissolving HTS won't solve the crisis, it will extend it. It's important that HTS remain as it is for the sake of any peaceful solution in this arena, because it's open to an understanding, and it's the only [party] capable of containing this Sunni ideological force". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, August 2018.

sions – including the orders broadcast across the organisation and the group's more conciliatory statements – are evidently being made at the most senior level. Whatever the group's internal differences, when it has faced key tests such as Turkey's deployment and troop rotations inside the de-escalation zone, it has moved as one. More provocative HTS figures who have diverged conspicuously from the group's positions have been sidelined.[95]

B. *Other Jihadists*

Other jihadist groups also operate in the Idlib area, some of which are more objectionable internationally than HTS. Insofar as countries like the U.S., Russia and China are convinced these groups pose a global threat, their presence could strengthen the case for an attack on Idlib. They are smaller than HTS and theoretically could be dealt with more simply than HTS itself. Nonetheless, while they are officially separate from HTS, they often have an ambiguous or symbiotic relationship with the group, and there is no obvious way to untangle them.

1. Hurras al-Din/Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen operations room

Aside from HTS, Hurras al-Din (the Guardians of Religion) is the most visible jihadist faction in the north west, if not the most militarily significant. Hurras al-Din is led by prominent al-Qaeda loyalists who split from Jabhat al-Nusra over the course of its metamorphosis into HTS.[96] The group initially surfaced in February 2018 and attracted pledges of allegiance from various smaller jihadist factions, including defected HTS units.[97] In October 2018, it joined with several other jihadist factions to announce the "Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen" (And Spur on the Believers) operations room.[98] Its members reject so-called capitulatory solutions such as the

[95] The clearest example is former HTS religious official Abu al-Yaqadhan al-Masri, an Egyptian. In a sermon released on 30 December 2018, Abu al-Yaqadhan forbade participation in or granting legitimacy to a Turkish military intervention in Syria east of the Euphrates River. He said Turkey's battle with the Syrian wing of the PKK was one between two infidel parties, in which Muslims had no stake. Balagh Media Foundation, "Ruling on participation in the battle east of the Euphrates" (Arabic), Jihadology, 30 December 2018. In an interview several weeks later, HTS's Jolani contradicted Abu al-Yaqadhan and gave his tacit approval for Turkish action. Amjad Media Production, "The Dialogue: Infighting and the future of the arena", op. cit. In February 2019, Abu al-Yaqadhan resigned from the group after reportedly receiving multiple warnings for deviating from its jurisprudential line and facing disciplinary action. "Confirming what Nida Souriya published about disputes between Tahrir al-Sham's leadership and the Egyptian current… Abu al-Yaqadhan leaves the organisation" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 2 February 2019.

[96] Among the group's leadership is overall leader Samir Hijazi ("Abu Hummam al-Shami", "al-Farouq al-Souri"), Jabhat al-Nusra's former military chief and longtime al-Qaeda veteran; and Jordanian Sami al-Oreidi, a top religious official and Jabhat al-Nusra's former supreme religious official. Crisis Group interviews, former jihadist and rebel commander, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August and October 2018.

[97] For example, see Jeish al-Malahim, "Statement by Jeish al-Malahim" (Arabic), Jihadology, 4 March 2018.

[98] Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen operations room, "Statement establishing the Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen operations room" (Arabic), Jihadology, 17 November 2018. The operations room also includes Ansar al-Din, a jihadist collective that originally joined HTS and then split from it in January 2018; and Ansar al-Islam, the Syrian wing of the defunct Iraqi jihadist faction of the same name.

September Sochi deal.[99] Their rhetoric embraces an uncompromising global jihadist worldview.[100]

Hurras al-Din has a significant media profile but less relevance on the ground.[101] As part of "Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen", it has publicised attacks on regime positions, which involve rocket fire, sniping and surreptitious raids that are sometimes deadly but limited in scope.[102] It appears to possess only light weaponry and does not hold territory outright. Estimates of its numbers mostly hover around 700.[103] That said, conventional measures of military strength or territorial control may not be the most relevant if the group is focused on waging insurgent warfare, if it wants to maintain a symbolic foothold for al-Qaeda in Syria, or if its members are already looking beyond Syria.[104]

Hurras al-Din is commonly seen as an HTS rival, but their relationship seems more complicated. Their leaders attack each other in public statements, yet some evidence suggests Hurras al-Din actually operates under HTS's auspices and that HTS provides Hurras al-Din with material support.[105] If HTS does in fact support Hurras al-Din, it may be a way of keeping the latter group under its control.[106]

[99] Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen Operations Room, "Statement establishing the Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen operations room" (Arabic), Jihadology, 17 November 2018.

[100] For example, see "New Ops Room Fights Through 'Ceasefire'", video, YouTube, 22 November 2018.

[101] According to a former jihadist familiar with Idlib's militant scene: "They've been blown out of proportion". Crisis Group interview Turkey, August 2018. More recently, another rebel commander said: "Hurras al-Din is basically finished. It's an empty name. Today, the names are HTS and Turkistan [i.e., Turkistan Islamic Party]... It's all lies. Just media". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, November 2018.

[102] For example, see Wa-Harridh al-Mu'mineen operations room, "Raid of 'the chargers at dawn'" (Arabic), Jihadology, 27 November 2018.

[103] Crisis Group interviews, former jihadist, Syrian politician, diplomat and humanitarian, Turkey, August and September 2018.

[104] Al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri has urged jihadists in Syria to give up on holding territory and instead prepare to wage insurgent warfare. The so-called "Khorasan Group" is one example of an entity that seems not to have existed as a conventional, visible military force in Syria's civil war, but nonetheless posed what U.S. officials considered an imminent threat. Ken Dilanian and Eileen Sullivan, "Al-Qaida's Syrian cell alarms US", Associated Press, 13 September 2014.

[105] Reconciliation talks between HTS and the al-Qaeda loyalists who would later form Hurras al-Din ran through January 2018. "Jihad wa-Wifa" (Samir Hijazi), Telegram, 8 January 2018; "Sheikh Abdurrahim Attoun", Telegram, 9 January 2018. On 5 January 2018, HTS leader Jolani and a pre-Hurras al-Din Hijazi reportedly reached a working agreement. On 1 February 2019, the purported judge of HTS's military wing published what he said was the minutes of the meeting and the two leaders' agreement, which committed HTS to providing areas of operation for what would become Hurras al-Din and equip the group's units. "Al-Zubeir al-Ghazi", Telegram, available via tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 6:34 pm, 2 February 2019. The binding status of the agreement is unclear; after Hijazi signed on, his group reportedly demanded further amendments that HTS refused. Despite this ambiguity, multiple sources suggest key agreement terms – including the provision of material support to Hurras al-Din – have since been respected. "Al-Zubeir al-Ghazi", Telegram, available via tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 10:09 pm, 24 October 2018; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Interview", 10 January 2019. On 10 February 2019, HTS and Hurras al-Din reached a new agreement to settle outstanding disputes and define terms of cooperation. "Sheikh Abu Malik al-Shami", Telegram, available via tweet by Sam Heller, @AbuJamajem, 9:40 am, 11 February 2019. The two groups are commingled geographically. Crisis Group interviews, activists and former rebel commander, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August, November and December 2018.

In some respects, Hurras al-Din is useful for HTS. It represents no obvious threat and allows HTS to shed some of its most intransigent members, making a clear distinction between a mostly Syrian HTS and another, formally separate group of transnational jihadists. Even if that contrast helps divert attention from HTS, however, HTS has so far proved unwilling to break fully with the smaller group.

2. Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) in Syria is a mostly Uighur Chinese militant faction active in western Idlib. The group is the Syrian wing of the international Turkistan Islamic Party, which is devoted to establishing an Islamist state in China's western Xinjiang province, or "East Turkistan".[107] TIP in Syria fights against the Assad regime, but with the professed aim of eventually turning its guns on China.[108]

TIP's Syrian faction originally coalesced in 2013, drawing on Uighur exiles and an existing Uighur diaspora population in Turkey.[109] The group emerged into public view when it participated in the 2015 capture of the Idlib city of Jisr al-Shughour, seizing major weapons stocks during the battle. It has been one of north west Syria's most militarily powerful factions ever since.[110] Its members have occupied a number of towns in the Jisr al-Shughour area, which are closed to outsiders.[111]

TIP in Syria is a close HTS ally.[112] Some allege that it secretly has pledged allegiance to Jolani, although the group ostensibly maintains an oath to the leader of Afghanistan's Taliban.[113] The group espouses Islamist militancy and employs suicide attacks, but by some accounts, it is not technically "Salafi-jihadist".[114] Rather, it is devoted to a

[106] On Hurras al-Din, a Syrian politician who has met with HTS leaders said: "They're independent [of HTS], but monitored". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, September 2018.

[107] For the UN sanctions listing of TIP in Syria's mother organisation, see UN Security Council, "Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement", 7 April 2011.

[108] Interview by Crisis Group researcher in a previous capacity, Syrian politician who met with TIP leadership, Istanbul, March 2017. See also, Gerry Shih, "Uighurs fighting in Syria take aim at China", Associated Press, 23 December 2017. In an interview with the group's Arabic-language magazine, the TIP's deputy head says the group's Syrian branch was established for goals "both public and secret", among them producing cadres of trained, battle-hardened Uighur fighters and publicising the Turkistani cause. TIP, "Turkistan al-Islamiya no. 24" (Arabic), Jihadology, 6 October 2018. See also Mohanad Hage Ali, "A Different Type of Jihadi", *Carnegie's Diwan*, 30 August 2017.

[109] Humeyra Pamuk, "Turkish help for Uighur refugees looms over Erdogan visit to Beijing", Reuters, 27 July 2015. Syrians and other non-Uighurs also fight with TIP in Syria, including foreign fighters whom the group has advertised in its media releases. See TIP in Syria, "Hijra to Allah", Jihadology, 21 May 2018; TIP in Syria, "Our martyred heroes", Jihadology, 9 July 2018.

[110] Interview by Crisis Group analyst in a previous capacity, Syrian activist from Idlib, Antakya, May 2016.

[111] Crisis Group interview, humanitarian, Turkey, August 2018. See also "Undercover in Idlib", video, Youtube, 15 May 2017.

[112] TIP has sided with HTS in the latter's clashes with rebel rivals. See Iba News Network, "The Turkistan Islamic Party: In one foxhole with Tahrir al-Sham" (Arabic), 25 February 2018.

[113] For example, see tweet by Muzamjar al-Sham, @MzmjerSh, 1:20 pm, 27 February 2018. A Syrian opposition politician who met with TIP leadership said the group had an oath to the head of the Taliban. Interview by Crisis Group researcher in a previous capacity, op. cit.

[114] Interview by Crisis Group researcher in a previous capacity, Syrian politician who met with TIP leadership, op. cit. For examples of TIP's use of suicide bombings, see Caleb Weiss, "Suicide bombings detail Turkistan Islamic Party's role in Syria", FDD's Long War Journal, 3 May 2017.

geographically specific Islamist nationalism and focused on its Chinese enemy.[115] Nomenclature aside, TIP is obviously dangerous internationally, and a security concern for China and others.[116] HTS seems unlikely to turn against the group, which would contravene its promise not to bargain away foreign fighters.[117] TIP was among a number of mostly foreign groups and prominent individual foreign fighters inside and outside HTS that voiced solidarity with the latter group in February 2019.[118]

3. Miscellaneous jihadists

A number of smaller or underground jihadist groups are also present and active in Idlib. For example, some remnants of hard-line Jabhat al-Nusra splinter Jund al-Aqsa have resurfaced around the towns of Saraqeb and Sarmin as "Ansar al-Tawhid".[119] There also seems to be some clandestine ISIS presence in the north west, although HTS and other rebels have evidently driven the group back underground and degraded the group's capabilities. ISIS cells were responsible for a wave of bombings and assassinations in Idlib in 2018, which escalated into overt attacks on other rebels in June.[120] HTS and other rebels then cracked down, apparently successfully. HTS launched raids on known ISIS havens, followed by an ongoing series of well-publicised security sweeps and detentions of alleged ISIS members.[121] A December 2018 press conference by Lebanese Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk illustrated the impact of rebels' counter-ISIS campaign.[122]

[115] The Syrian regime has highlighted TIP's role to Chinese government interlocutors, who evidently remain interested in the group. Bassem Mroue and Gerry Shih, "Chinese jihadis' rise in Syria raises concerns at home", Associated Press, 22 April 2017. Ben Blanchard, "China envoy says no accurate figure on Uighurs fighting in Syria", Reuters, 20 August 2018. In September 2016, China alleged that TIP in Syria directed an attack on China's embassy in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek, for which it received financing from Jabhat al-Nusra. Olga Dzyubenko, "Kyrgyzstan says Uighur militant groups behind attack on China's embassy", Reuters, 6 September 2016.

[116] Crisis Group interview, Asian diplomat, Beirut, January 2019.

[117] See footnote 43.

[118] "Al-Idrisi – official", Telegram, available via tweet by Sam Heller, 10:41 am, 6 February 2019.

[119] Crisis Group interviews, activist, rebel commander and humanitarian analyst, remote via messaging app and Beirut, October-November 2018.

[120] "The State Organisation's threat to Idlib reaches its peak… And the armed factions hit it twice" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 22 June 2018. For one ISIS claim of responsibility, see "15 Awakening elements felled in security operations in Idlib province" (Arabic), *Al-Naba*, no. 139, Jihadology, 12 July 2018.

[121] For example, see Iba News Network, "Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham storms nests of Baghdadi's gang in town of Tal Manas in south-eastern Idlib countryside" (Arabic), 10 November 2018. It is unclear if individuals with whom HTS has other, unrelated grievances have also been detained in sweeps of alleged ISIS members.

[122] Machnouk described how Lebanese intelligence ran a double agent in contact with ISIS cadres inside Idlib, as those ISIS members directed the agent to carry out terror attacks in Lebanon. Machnouk's presentation was intended primarily to illustrate Lebanese security's success in pre-empting terror attacks inside Lebanon, but it also showed how, inside Idlib, these ISIS members were being detained and killed by HTS. After these ISIS members in Idlib initially coordinated attacks with Lebanese security's double agent, they became less communicative as they went into hiding or were detained as part of HTS and other rebels' summer 2018 crackdown. Machnouk identified one ISIS handler in an HTS video, in which HTS executed several ISIS members. "Mashnouq reveals Operation 'Deadly Cheese' that saved Lebanon" (Arabic), video, YouTube, 10 December 2018.

C. *Non-jihadist rebels*

To the extent there was any hope that Syrian opposition rebels could weaken or even combat HTS and the Idlib area's other jihadists, it rested with Idlib's non-jihadist factions. Especially after January 2019, however, it is clear they cannot challenge HTS from within Idlib; rather, all they can do is exist alongside or align with more powerful jihadist factions.

At one point, these other factions had better-defined ideological and political identities. With time, these distinctions have receded in importance. Now these groups represent no specific political project, other than general commitment to the Syrian opposition's cause and the defence of the rebel-held north west.[123]

1. National Liberation Front

The "National Liberation Front" *(*al-Jabha al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir*)* is the Turkish-backed alliance that now encompasses most of the north west's non-jihadist opposition.[124] The Front apparently reflects more of a common brand than a real merger of its member factions, however.[125] In addition to the major factions below, the Front's members also include smaller "Free Syrian Army" factions and Jeish al-Ahrar, an Ahrar al-Sham splinter group.

Feilaq al-Sham is Turkey's closest rebel partner and the backbone of the National Liberation Front.[126] When Turkey carried out its first patrol of Idlib's demilitarised zone on 8 March 2019, those Turkish forces were escorted by Feilaq al-Sham units.[127] The group was founded by figures linked to Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, although characterising it as the Brotherhood's armed wing seems inaccurate.[128] The group is

[123] A former rebel commander said: "In terms of their project, they're basically all the same… The goal of all Free [Syrian] Army factions in the National Liberation Front is to protect what's left of the liberated areas and to work to form a united army to lead the north". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018.

[124] Turkey provides weapons and salaries to the National Liberation Front's factions, although rebels say Turkish support is paltry. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian opposition politician and rebel commanders, September, November and December 2018.

[125] Crisis Group interviews, rebel commanders, Turkey and remote via messaging app, September, November and December 2018.

[126] Many members of the opposition and foreign officials regard Feilaq al-Sham as an arm of Turkish policy. According to a rebel commander: "The National Liberation Front, as Feilaq, is moved by Turkish orders, 100 per cent". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, November 2018. When the Turkish government wanted to demonstrate the implementation of the Sochi agreement 10 October 2018, Turkish security forces escorted international journalists into the western Aleppo countryside alongside "National Liberation Front" rebels who were evidently from Feilaq al-Sham. Carlotta Gall, "Syrian Rebels Withdraw Heavy Weapons to Spare Idlib From Assault", *The New York Times*, 10 October 2018. Feilaq al-Sham's Col. Fadlallah al-Hajji is the National Liberation Front's overall leader, with other positions divided among the NLF's member factions. "Get to know the NLF's most prominent leaders" (Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 1 August 2018.

[127] Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and political representative of a rebel faction, remote via messaging app, March 2019.

[128] A Syrian Muslim Brotherhood official said: "Some of those who founded [Feilaq al-Sham] were from the Brotherhood. But it doesn't belong to the Brotherhood; its decisions are its own. Now, if Feilaq al-Sham is operating in a given area, some local Brotherhood people may join. But you can't consider it Muslim Brotherhood". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, September 2018. For back-

present throughout the Idlib area as well as in more directly Turkish-controlled areas of Aleppo governorate.[129] It has previously partnered with Jabhat al-Nusra and HTS and maintains working relations with HTS.[130] It has stayed out of clashes between HTS and other rebel factions.[131] After HTS ran Nour al-Din al-Zinki out of the western Aleppo countryside, Feilaq al-Sham absorbed many of the smaller local factions left behind.[132] Hurras al-Din's leaders have claimed that HTS plans to install a defected Syrian military officer, likely from Feilaq al-Sham, as nominal commander of some merged military grouping.[133]

Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham were among the early leaders of north-western Syria's armed rebellion and were the local factions with the most defined Islamist ideological character.[134] For years, Ahrar al-Sham vied with Jabhat al-Nusra for dominance of the Idlib area.[135] Along with Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham were the Idlib area's last major armed factions meaningfully opposed to HTS. Together, they fought HTS in early 2018, disrupting its hold on the north west. In January 2019, conflict again flared up between HTS and Nour al-Din al-Zinki. HTS overran the latter's home areas in the western Aleppo countryside, seemingly ending the group in practical terms.[136] Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham briefly joined the fighting, but, after Nour al-Din al-Zinki's collapse, yielded

ground, see Raphaël Lefèvre and Ali El Yassir, "The Sham Legion: Syria's Moderate Islamists", Carnegie's *Diwan* (blog), 15 April 2014.

[129] Crisis Group interviews, former local governance official, Syrian activist, representative of rebel faction, Turkey and remote via messaging app, September and November 2018. The Syrian activist said: "Feilaq [al-Sham] is the common denominator, between Idlib and Olive Branch-Euphrates Shield. Feilaq will be the future. Anyone who takes over civil administration, government or politics will for sure belong to Feilaq".

[130] Feilaq al-Sham participated in the "Jeish al-Fateh" operations room alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and other groups in 2015. According to a Syrian opposition politician: "Feilaq's relationship with HTS isn't tense. HTS hasn't been hostile to people who participate in Astana and who are liked by the Turks, because they've become convinced the Turks are defending Idlib's stability". Crisis Group interview, August 2018.

[131] On Feilaq al-Sham's abstention from HTS-rebel fighting in early 2018, a Syrian activist said: "If you want to know how the Turks are thinking, watch how Feilaq al-Sham is moving". Crisis Group interview, September 2018.

[132] "Battalions and brigades in the Aleppo and Idlib countryside announce their joining Feilaq al-Sham" (Arabic), Nidaa Souriya, 15 January 2019.

[133] Abu Hummam al-Shami and Sami al-Oreidi, "And in anything on which you disagree, its ruling belongs to God" (Arabic), Jihadology, 30 January 2019. A former Islamist rebel commander said Feilaq al-Sham was "grey" and "obscure" from the start: "It was created not to clash with anyone, and then to absorb everyone in the end". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018. Others likewise speculated that Feilaq al-Sham was meant to survive the winnowing of the armed opposition and be the last group standing. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, Syrian opposition politician and Western diplomat, Turkey, August and November 2018.

[134] Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.; Sam Heller, "Ahrar al-Sham's Revisionist Jihadism", *War on the Rocks*, 30 September 2015.

[135] See Sam Heller, "The Home of Syria's Only Real Rebels", *The Daily Beast*, 17 June 2016; Heller, "Keeping the Lights on in Rebel Idlib", op. cit.

[136] Noufal and Clark, "HTS seizes key Aleppo province town as group continues to assert itself over rebel-held northwest", op. cit.

to HTS.[137] Some fighters left for the northern Aleppo countryside whereas others remained in place under HTS tutelage.[138] Today, the two groups mainly represent the local communities they control in the southern Idlib and northern Hama countryside.[139] In areas where they overlap geographically, they are mostly indistinguishable.[140] They no longer pose a meaningful threat to HTS.

2. Jeish al-Izza

Jeish al-Izza is a local armed faction that holds a section of the northern Hama countryside that regularly flares into open conflict.[141] It is not a member of the National Liberation Front, and it has an arm's-length relationship with most of the opposition's international backers, including Turkey.[142] The group has no obviously defined ideological character, but it operates alongside jihadists, many of whom are themselves natives of the area.[143]

Regime media reports clashes between the Syrian military and Jeish al-Izza on a near-daily basis.[144] If a larger confrontation erupts in Syria's north west, Jeish al-Izza seems likely to be at the centre of it.

[137] "Tahrir al-Sham and National Liberation [Front] reach final agreement… These are its terms", Nidaa Souriya, op. cit.

[138] Waleed Khaled a-Noufal and Barrett Limoges, "With evacuations of Turkish-backed rebels ongoing, hardline coalition HTS cements control over majority of Syria's northwest", Syria Direct, 17 January 2019; "Tahrir al-Sham reaches new agreement with other factions" (Arabic), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 20 January 2019.

[139] Suqour al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham are concentrated in Jabal al-Zawiyah; the Jabal al-Arbaeen area, including Ariha; and around Maaret al-Nouman. Ahrar al-Sham was also strong in Hama's Ghab valley, the group's birthplace, although HTS partially dissolved the group there in January 2019. Crisis Group interviews, former rebel commander, Syrian opposition politician, former Syrian local governance official, Syrian activists, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August, November and December 2018.

[140] According to a former rebel commander: "There's no difference besides the name, when it comes to Ahrar and Suqour". Crisis Group interview, remote via messaging app, December 2018. Between March 2015 and September 2016, Suqour al-Sham was formally part of Ahrar al-Sham.

[141] A Syrian activist said clashes in Jeish al-Izza's home area had an intercommunal character, with towns pitted against each other: "Everyone there sleeps among the olive trees. You know why it's bombed so much? Because in that area, you have one Alawite village and next to it a Sunni village". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018.

[142] Jeish al-Izzah was cut off from support by the U.S.-led joint international operations room before that body's dissolution. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and rebel commander, Turkey and remote via messaging app, November 2018 and January 2019.

[143] Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activist and rebel commander, Turkey and remote via messaging app, August 2018 and January 2019.

[144] For example, see "The Army destroys mortar cannons and rocket platforms of terrorist groups that attacked safe areas in northern Hama countryside" (Arabic), SANA, 1 March 2019.

IV. No Good Options for Idlib

HTS's dominance of Syria's rebel-held north west is not obviously nor easily reversible. There is seemingly no solution that will satisfy all parties, or that comes without a substantial cost.

A. *Interested Parties*

Russia and Turkey are the two countries most directly involved in managing Idlib. Russia's decision whether to provide air support and other backing to Syrian regime forces will determine whether an offensive on Idlib is viable. At the same time, Russia has not clarified its intentions in Idlib or its hard, bottom-line requirements for any solution.[145]

Some aspects seem relatively clear: Russia is committed to delivering victory to its Syrian ally and restoring its sovereignty over the whole of Syria; Russia's interest in Idlib also appears to be driven in part by the presence of fighters from the Caucasus and Central Asia.[146] Since January 2019, Russian officials have taken an increasingly negative tone regarding HTS's takeover of Idlib and continuing violations of the ceasefire.[147] Russia wants Turkey to deliver on its promises to deal with Idlib's jihadists and stop militant attacks on Hmeimim and Syrian military positions.[148]

Yet Russia's interests go beyond Idlib. Winning in Idlib militarily could mean jeopardising the Syrian political process it wants to complete its victory in Syria, and of which Turkey is a key co-sponsor. The quadrilateral Istanbul summit in October also gave Russia an opportunity for diplomatic engagement with Europeans that Moscow could sacrifice if it backs an offensive in Idlib.[149] Most importantly, an offensive would risk endangering Moscow's broader bilateral relationship with Ankara, which has become strategically critical for President Putin. Russia is very reluctant to do anything that could push President Erdoğan more squarely in the U.S. camp.[150] Russian officials say that other bilateral issues, including Turkey's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defence system, are more important than Idlib.[151] In the same interview Turkish Minister of Defence Hulusi Akar used to announce the start of Turkish patrols in Idlib's demilitarised zone, Akar also said buying the S-400 was "not a choice,

[145] A Western diplomat asked: "What does Russia expect concretely? Does it expect Turkey to kill all the guys in the Islamic Turkistan Party? All the Chechens? It's not clear". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018.

[146] According to a Western diplomat: "Some of that is self-serving, insofar as [the Russians are] interested in re-tethering their near-abroad. But it's not all fake news". Crisis Group interview, Washington, January 2019.

[147] For example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 31, 2019", 31 January 2019.

[148] Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, February 2019.

[149] On the Istanbul summit, a Western diplomat said: "Now the stakes are higher [for Russia], in terms of going back to a confrontational approach. By that logic, even as a photo op, it was still worthwhile, to make it more difficult for Russia to invade Idlib". Crisis Group interview, November 2018.

[150] Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, February 2019.

[151] Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, February 2019.

but a necessity".[152] Dismissing U.S. pressure to abort the S-400 purchase, President Erdoğan has said that it is a "done deal".[153]

As a result, and while Russian officials have told foreign interlocutors that eventually Idlib will be finished militarily,[154] Turkish officials believe their Russian counterparts are more flexible than their rhetoric suggests. They emphasise that producing a solution in Idlib is not simple, and that, privately, Russia makes clear it understands that.[155]

For its part, Turkey has been interested mainly in avoiding a destabilising conflict on its border. A battle for Idlib would send a new wave of refugees toward Turkey, obliging Ankara to force them back, try to channel them to Turkish-controlled areas of northern Aleppo or allow them in and add to Turkey's already huge refugee population.[156] A large, uncontrolled influx of refugees into Turkey would most likely include some of Idlib's jihadist militants. Turkish officials warn some of them could manage to travel onwards from Turkey, including to Europe.[157] They might also reach the post-Soviet space. If Idlib's jihadists felt Turkey had betrayed them, they might launch attacks inside Turkey, which could strike a blow to Turkey's tourism industry and threaten the country's weakened economy.[158] Even a large flow of displaced people north to more directly Turkish-controlled parts of neighbouring Aleppo governorate would likely overwhelm humanitarian capacity in those areas.

Turkey's preferred solution for Idlib is containment and enforced calm. Turkish officials argue that open warfare in Idlib will only fuel further radicalism. Conversely, they claim, if the de-escalation is sustained, Idlib's militants could grow increas-

[152] Ali Murat Alhas and Beyza Binnur Donmez, "Turkey, Russia starting patrols around Idlib, Syria", Anadolu Agency, 8 March 2019.

[153] Ali Murat Alhas and Sibel Morrow, "Turkey buying Russian S-400s a done deal: Erdogan", Anadolu Agency, 6 March 2019.

[154] A Western diplomat said: "If you talk to Russia or Hizbollah, they'll tell you there will be an offensive in the end. But it's hard to tell: Are they just trying to keep the pressure on? Or is that really their intention?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, November 2018.

[155] Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, November 2018. According to a Turkish official, speaking in November: "What matters most is there's strong joint political will, from both Turkey and Russia, to preserve the deal, to ensure calm, and to allow actors to focus more on the political process. Unless there's calm on the ground, it's difficult to sustain talks. Now efforts on the political process can intensify".

[156] 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". Ahead of the Sochi agreement, the UN 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", AFP, 29 August 2018. Even that huge figure was based on a scenario in which the regime launched a geographically limited offensive for specific sections of the Idlib zone. An offensive for the entire north west would displace many more. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian, remote via messaging app, September 2018.

[157] Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, November 2018.

[158] Syrians in Turkey's border areas and involved in Idlib's armed opposition told Crisis Group that Idlib militants could turn against Turkey if the country normalised relations with the Syrian regime or if a new Turkish government distanced itself from Syria's opposition. Crisis Group interviews, Reyhanli, April 2018. A Russian official speculated that a reason Turkey did not want to turn against HTS was that there currently was an implicit bargain that the jihadi movement would not target Turkey as long as Turkey did not target it. Crisis Group interview, Moscow, February 2019.

ingly distant from their jihadist ideology and instead be drawn deeper into compromise. As Turkish officials see it, the real problem in Idlib is a smaller subset of mostly foreign extremists, one that includes Hurras al-Din but not necessarily the whole of HTS. They point to the split between HTS and Hurras al-Din as potentially useful, insofar as it highlights the distinction between militants ready to deal and hopeless irreconcilables; they add that many Syrian "jihadists" are more pragmatic and prepared to participate in some sort of solution. These Syrians purportedly are invested in their governing project and their own survival. Given enough time, they could potentially be convinced to quash internationally dangerous radicals.[159]

Europe may not be fully convinced by Turkey's proposed solution for HTS, but, at least for now, their objectives parallel Ankara's. Europe too is keen to avoid a humanitarian disaster in Idlib and wants to prevent a new flight of refugees that might upset the fragile EU-Turkish bargain on migration and displace yet more refugees to the continent.[160] The U.S., meanwhile, opposes an offensive on Idlib that would deny the Syrian opposition its last main foothold and prove a boon to the regime. In September, the U.S. discouraged a regime attack on Idlib that it warned would be a "reckless escalation", raising the possibility of U.S. military action.[161]

Russia must balance all these varied interests and perspectives in deciding whether to support an offensive. It must also consider the views of its Syrian ally, which remains determined to retake Idlib. For the Syrian regime, an insurgent-held Idlib constitutes a persistent threat that prevents Damascus from reasserting its control over the entirety of the country; in particular, it stands in the way of a unified security regime over northern Syria and its Turkish border.[162] There are also more immediate, practical concerns: the Idlib area's militants continue to kill Syrian soldiers and civilians in neighbouring areas of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo. Syrian official media report daily on clashes with militants inside the Idlib area or infiltration attempts by militants.[163] Insurgent control of Idlib disrupts the economic coherence of Syria's north west by cutting off Syria's pre-war industrial centre Aleppo from its surroundings and trade arteries. Damascus also views Idlib as another foothold for unwelcome Turkish interference.

Particularly after the relocation of various so-called irreconcilables to Idlib from elsewhere in the country, the area has become the locus of what the regime considers "terrorists" nationwide. Given Damascus's deep hostility to Islamists of all stripes, its definition of "terrorist" is expansive and may include a substantial proportion of

[159] Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, November 2018. Turkish officials point specifically to Jordanian and Egyptian militants as provocateurs and troublemakers and suggest they may be foreign intelligence assets.

[160] A political representative of a rebel faction said: "It's not easy [to find a solution for Idlib]. The Turks don't have a solution – what solution? And the Europeans don't have a solution, so they have to just support Turkey. It's not as if we're talking about Mozambique. If these people dive into the water, they're in Europe". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, September 2018.

[161] For example, see White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary", 4 September 2018.

[162] The regime would not be alone in that thinking. According to an Iranian official: "As long as Idlib is not solved, Syria is not solved. It's a terrorist threat". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, January 2019.

[163] For example, see "Terrorist groups attack Sauran city in the Hama countryside with mortars" (Arabic), SANA, 1 March 2019.

Idlib's militants and even civilians.[164] A regime solution for Idlib seems likely to be far-reaching. As President Bashar al-Assad said in a 2016 interview:

> [Idlib's] link [to Turkey] can't be cut, because Idlib is adjacent to Turkey. It's right on the Syrian-Turkish border. For that reason, the area can't be cut off. Instead, it needs to be cleaned. We need to continue cleaning this area and pushing the terrorists into Turkey so they return where they came from, or else kill them. There's no other option.[165]

A September 2018 interview with Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem suggested Damascus' view of Idlib has changed little. Moallem said Idlib's "terrorists" had entered through Turkey, and they would leave through it: "When you take a road from one city to another and you want to go back, you take the same road".[166]

B. *A Military Solution?*

As bad as Idlib's status quo is, all military solutions would be worse. Turkey could in theory attack and defeat HTS and Idlib's other jihadists, or at least intervene in a way that might split the movement from Idlib's non-jihadist rebels and force defections from HTS itself. Some civilians might actually welcome a Turkish operation to assert control. Yet such a move would be risky and costly. Turkish observer forces already inside Idlib would be vulnerable to jihadist attacks and jihadists might resort to slower-burning asymmetric tactics against Turkish troops, or even launch attacks inside Turkey.[167] Turkey would take on a difficult occupation to little clear end. All in all, Turkey has so far evinced no willingness to tackle HTS head-on or participate in a joint intervention.

A Russian-enabled regime offensive on Idlib would be even more devastating.[168] Elsewhere, Russia and the regime have sorted residents of rebel areas into those who will "reconcile" with the Syrian state and a more manageable number who will not, or cannot, do so and are bussed elsewhere. Russia and the regime almost certainly would be unable to accomplish the same in Idlib. Idlib's armed opposition is qualitatively different from the opposition in other areas the regime has retaken. In areas such as Damascus's eastern Ghouta suburbs and the south west, HTS was a comparatively minor player; the regime could defeat some non-jihadist rebels, cut deals with others and then deport the remainders – including all of the local HTS force, every time – to northern Syria.

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[164] Ahead of the Sochi deal in September 2018, diplomatic sources said they had heard estimates of 50,000, 60,000 and 150,000 fighters inside Idlib, with the latter figure provided by regime officials. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, August 2018.

[165] "President Assad to Russia's *Komsomolskaya Pravda*: There's no contradiction between Israel, Nusra and Daesh" (Arabic), SANA, 14 October 2016.

[166] "Moallem: The American presence in Syria is illegitimate… And the Idlib agreement is a positive step towards imposing the state's control on the entirety of its territory" (Arabic), SANA, 30 September 2018.

[167] HTS officials have evidently thought about how they would resist a Turkish presence in Idlib's interior, if they had to. See "Tahrir al-Sham official on Turkey's intervention to implement Astana: 'That's not the reality'", Abu al-Jamajem (blog), 15 October 2017.

[168] See Crisis Group Briefing, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, op. cit.

In Idlib, by contrast, HTS is dominant, which means other rebels lack the autonomy to deal independently with Russia or the regime. Ahead of the Sochi deal, Russia and its ex-rebel partners from Syria's south west reached out to some of Idlib's rebels and local leaders to broker deals that could enable a less violent advance.[169] They made little headway. HTS and other rebels carried out sweeping arrests of so-called "frogs" suspected of being in contact with the regime, denying Damascus and Moscow interlocutors inside Idlib.[170]

For HTS and Idlib's foreign fighters, dealing with Damascus is not an option. Even for non-jihadist Islamist rebels, there seems little possibility of "reconciliation" with a Syrian regime that is ferociously anti-Islamist and for whom Idlib's militants spoil Syria's newly "homogeneous" national character.[171] Damascus seemingly regards Feilaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham and Jeish al-Izza as "terrorists" as much as it does HTS. The fact is that there is no precedent for the regime re-assimilating Idlib-type rebels; indeed, in Damascus' eyes, even civilians who have refused "reconciliation" in other parts of the country (or been refused by the security services) and been bussed to Idlib are now, by definition, irreconcilable. It is hard to imagine these individuals safely living under regime control.

If Russia and the regime attack, some of Idlib's residents may shelter in place or flee into regime areas. But most of Idlib's rebels and civilians seem likely to concentrate on Turkey's border, in areas that are both HTS strongholds and home to the north west's displaced persons' camps. If they cannot flee into Turkey or Turkish-controlled Aleppo, these densely packed areas will become a bloodbath. Even a geographically limited offensive risks swamping northern Idlib and Turkish-controlled sections of Aleppo with needy displaced people, overwhelming humanitarian capacity and destabilising these areas.

A military solution for Idlib is also no solution in counter-terrorism terms, at least internationally. True, a jihadist safe haven in Idlib is an obvious counter-terrorism worry: jihadists might use Idlib to plot external attacks, and some countries are sceptical of Turkey's ability and willingness to keep Idlib's fighters penned in.[172] To date, however, there is little evidence of such plotting taking place. Veteran militants such as those in Hurras al-Din raise international security concerns, but mainly as a

[169] Crisis Group interview, former southern rebel, Amman, October 2018. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°196, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019.

[170] "Frog" is a Syrian opposition moniker for someone in surreptitious contact with the regime and prepared to "jump" to the other side. See Heller, "'Frogs' and 'Geckos': Syria's Jihadists Speak the Language of Rebellion", op. cit.

[171] For President Bashar al-Assad's remarks on Syria's hard-earned "homogeneity" of creed and vision, see "President Assad: [We] continue to combat and crush the terrorists… Everything related to the fate and future of Syria is a Syrian topic, 100 per cent, and the unity of Syrian territory is among the basics that aren't up for talk or discussion" (Arabic), SANA, 20 August 2017, www.sana.sy/?p=610816.

[172] An Arab diplomat said: "Do we have guarantees that Turkey won't allow [Idlib's militants] out? What people say is that part of Turkey's tools to affect these people is to offer them escape from Idlib and a haven outside". Crisis Group interview, November 2018. Emirati and Russian officials have complained that Turkey already has allowed some militants out of Idlib. Crisis Group interviews, Emirati, Russian and UN officials, Washington, Geneva and Moscow, February 2019.

result of their profiles and capabilities, not, reportedly, because of positive indications they are planning attacks abroad.[173]

An attack that drives Idlib's militants out, whether into Turkey or elsewhere, would represent the more significant global terrorist threat. Idlib's jihadists are now inside Idlib; an offensive could scatter them worldwide.[174] Even with veteran militants, the most immediate danger is not that they will threaten foreign countries from inside Idlib but that they will do so after escaping from it.[175]

[173] Western diplomats report few pressing concerns about external attack plotting from inside Idlib. A Western diplomat said about Hurras al-Din: "I've seen nothing to suggest they're currently plotting …. Not like it was with [the] Khorasan [Group]". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, August 2018.

[174] According to a European diplomat: "It seems generally that Turkey is quite capable of controlling the border …. The big concern is if there's a big push towards the border, and Turkey is pushed to open the borders without control. But as long as it's controlled, it's okay". Crisis Group interview, Turkey, November 2018. If conflict erupts in Idlib, the area's militants might also slip through Syria's interior to other countries. A Lebanese official said: "The imminent threat [to Lebanon] is that anything happens to Idlib or other terror pockets in Syria. The Syrian regime holds 65 per cent of Syrian territory, but it doesn't have 100 per cent control over that territory. The fear is that if [something happens,] individuals or small groups try to leave and illegally infiltrate into Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2019.

[175] According to a Western diplomat: "All the focus has been on mitigating outflows. The concern is that there are some people in [Idlib] with demonstrated exops [ie, external operations] capabilities, whom their leadership would like to move elsewhere. So the exops problem there is huge and hideous …. When [the regime attacks Idlib], they're going to kick over a hell of an anthill …. To the extent [bad actors in Idlib] get out and make it to ISIS affiliates or al-Qaeda affiliates elsewhere, they could become an accelerant zfor a metastasising global threat". Crisis Group interview, January 2019.

V. The Best Worst Option: Return to Sochi

Russia's interest in cultivating its relationship with Turkey seems likely to spare Idlib for the time being. Still, if that is to last, Turkey needs to demonstrate to its Russian partner that it is making real progress implementing the Sochi memorandum in Idlib. Turkey's 8 March patrol of the demilitarised zone was an important step toward fulfilling Sochi's terms, but only the first step of many. Both Turkey and Russia should recommit to the Sochi deal, and Turkey should do more to deliver on some of the agreement's key terms.

Turkey's 8 March patrol covered only one segment of the northern Idlib and southern Aleppo countryside.[176] In coordination with Russia, Turkey should expand its patrols to cover the entirety of the demilitarised zone around Idlib, even as it reinforces its static observation points. Russia should patrol outside the zone in parallel. Russia can also monitor the demilitarised area via drones overhead. As Turkey expands its presence inside Idlib, it should prevail on HTS and other rebels to halt attacks against regime forces in neighbouring areas in Latakia, Hama and Aleppo. Russia should likewise urge the regime to halt its bombing of rebel-held Idlib, including civilian population centres; many rebel assaults are framed as retaliation for regime attacks, embroiling both sides in reciprocal violence. This sort of de-escalation of violence would not be unprecedented. Turkey and Russia have previously cooled tensions; a combination of persuasion and coercion seemingly halted drone attacks on Russia's Hmeimim airbase. That effort should be repeated.

Turkey and Russia should also take steps to open Idlib's major highways, as required by the Sochi memorandum. HTS currently controls the roads that cross the area, and it is poised to control revenues from through traffic. Turkey should press HTS to loosen its grip on the highways and instead have its own forces secure the roads with overhead Russian drone surveillance. HTS would likely be reluctant to lose the revenue it earns from its checkpoints on these highways, but Turkey should emphasise to HTS that the alternative is a Russian-backed offensive it would be in no position to stop. In that scenario, HTS would be left to fight a battle with the regime and its Russian ally that it inevitably would lose.

Such steps would not displace HTS outright. They would also leave Idlib's civilians under HTS's effective and repressive control. The organisation imprisons dissidents, enforces conservative social codes on Idlib's women and propagates its hard-line philosophy. For Idlib youth who have already spent years out of school, extended jihadist control might produce growing numbers of Idlib residents who know little other than militancy and violence. Still, even these dire consequences for civilians would seem to pale next to those of a regime offensive, which could entail mass displacement, detention, sexual violence and death.[177]

Based on its past behaviour, HTS would seem prepared to accept a solution that averts a regime offensive, even one that further constrains its ability to operate and raise funds. It may also be possible to enlist HTS's help in suppressing international attack plotting, which it might offer if only to ensure its own survival. For Russia,

[176] Temizer, "Turkish military completes patrols in Syria's Idlib", op. cit.
[177] UN Human Rights Council, "'I lost my dignity': Sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic", 15 March 2018.

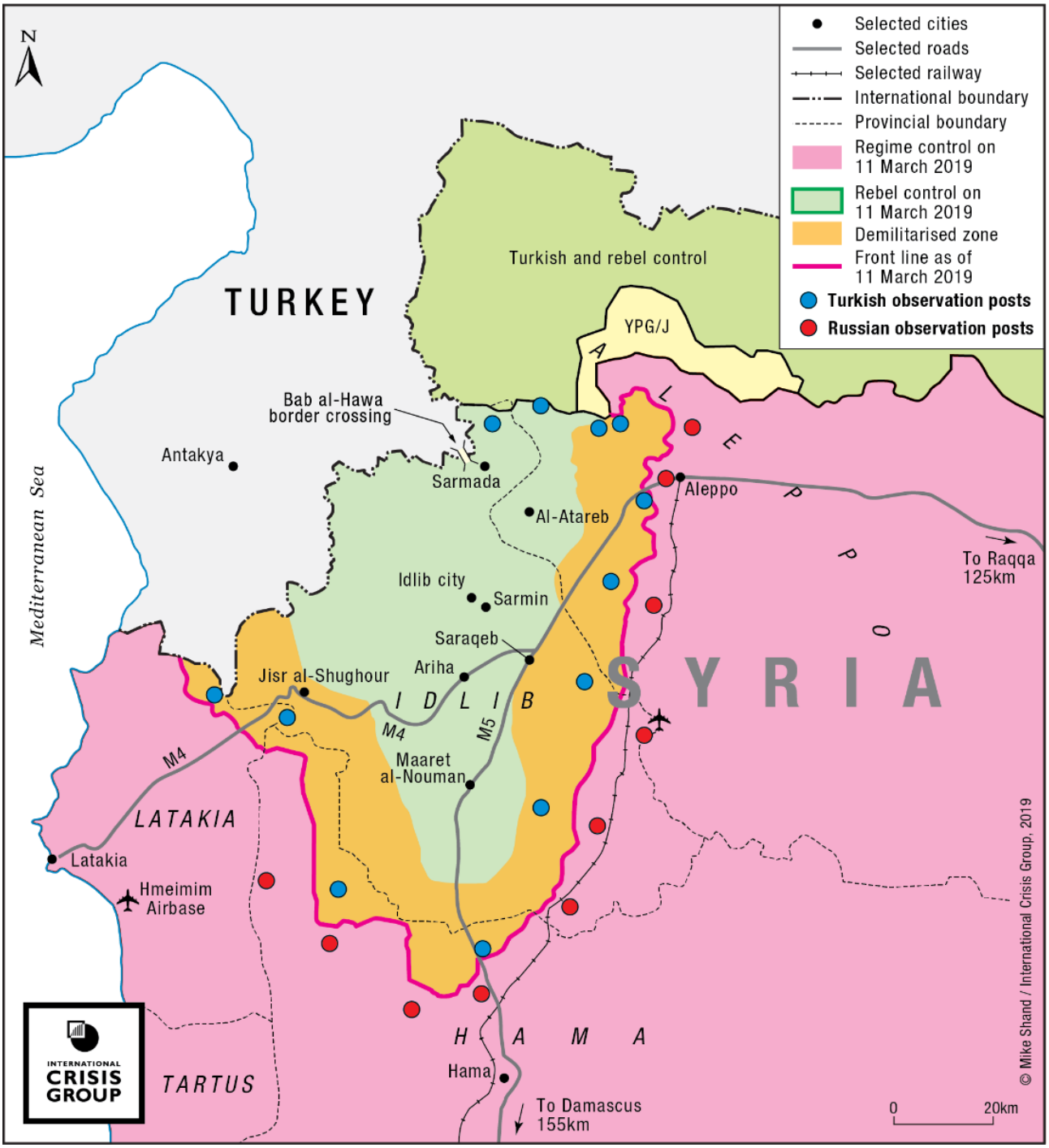
this sort of arrangement would at a minimum address its immediate, substantive security concerns more effectively than a military offensive that pushed jihadists out of Idlib and, via Turkey, into Europe and the post-Soviet space.

VI. Conclusion

A reinvestment in the Sochi memorandum is far from ideal, whether for Idlib's civilian population, for a Syrian regime that wishes to reassert full territorial control, or for a Russia that shares that goal. Still, for now it is almost certainly the best option available. The alternative – a joint regime/Russia military offensive on Idlib – would mean mass death and displacement, destabilising waves of refugees and a new jihadist diaspora globally. In other words, it would be worse for all parties. Renewed calm in Idlib, by contrast, would serve both Turkish and Russian interests, including in their developing bilateral relationship. Most importantly, it would spare the lives of civilians caught in an area from which there is no escape.

Beirut/Brussels, 14 March 2019

Appendix A: Map of Idlib



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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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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.

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