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# THE SOCHI AGREEMENT AND THE INTERESTS OF GUARANTOR STATES: EXAMINING THE AIMS AND CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINING THE DEAL

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# **The Sochi Agreement and the Interests of Guarantor States: Examining the Aims and Challenges of Sustaining the Deal**

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## **Acronyms**

HTS Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

LC Local Council

MOM Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi, Turkish for Joint Operations Centre

NLF National Liberation Front

SIG Syrian Interim Government

SSG Syrian Salvation Government

TIP Turkistan Islamic Party

## Executive Summary

Russia has opted to put pressure on Turkey regarding the future of Idlib, holding it largely responsible for untangling the region's complex and interlocking issues. By striking a deal in Sochi in September 2018, Russia delayed the decision to launch a military offensive that would have negatively affected its relationship with Turkey and thwarted its envisioned solution to the Syrian conflict through the Astana process and the constitutional committee.

The Sochi Agreement has represented an area of consensus among a number of states. The United States' main interest in the deal is disrupting the growing Russian influence over the Idlib governorate. If matters were to be resolved swiftly in Idlib, it would allow Russia more room to mobilize its efforts towards the sphere of American influence east of the Euphrates.

Russia has secured a new bargaining chip vis-à-vis the European Union, which has become increasingly concerned that a military operation in Idlib would lead to the outflow of hundreds of thousands of refugees, many of whom would make their way towards EU countries. Russia insists on linking the issue of refugees with that of reconstruction, an attempt to goad the EU into contributing to the reconstruction under the pretext of supplying housing for returnees.

Ankara has assumed the task of satisfying both Russia and Iran, securing their interests in the agreement while tackling the difficult task of persuading Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to evacuate the demilitarised zone. Turkey has also suffered attacks by extremist armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Restoring transit traffic on the international highways, M5 (Aleppo-Hama) and M4 (Aleppo-Lattakia), constitutes Turkey's main challenge in the agreement, as it is linked to the consent of all the armed groups concerned. Turkey has obtained the consent of the National Liberation Front (NLF), while HTS remains the main potential spoiler. At the same time, HTS seems to be the only actor which has the capacity to restrain the remaining extremist armed groups and prevent them from attacking these international roads.

Turkey has failed to coerce HTS into self-dissolution, but it still exerts considerable pressure on the organisation. This influence has been leveraged towards further isolating fundamentalist elements within HTS and dividing it into small and dysfunctional groups. In the event that HTS is not responsive in implementing the terms of the Sochi Agreement, Turkey could press for a war of elimination against HTS before the agreement falls apart, pre-empting a Russian-led military solution. Ultimately, Turkey could not object to assigning HTS the responsibility for securing the international roads.

Donor states are refraining from implementing projects in most parts of Idlib as they consider them areas linked to the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), the authority backed by HTS which controls much of the area. This has adversely impacted local and provincial councils affiliated with the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and posed immense challenges due to the suspension of aid to the hundreds of thousands of Syrians residing in these areas.

## Introduction

The Sochi Agreement, signed by the Russian and Turkish Presidents on 17 September 2018, and the US president's subsequent decision on 19 December 2018 to withdraw from Syria constitute political and military turning points, particularly for Syria's northern and eastern regions. The US decision is likely to reinforce the normalisation of the Sochi Agreement in the near and medium terms. It is expected that the US withdrawal will not commence for six months, assuming President Trump sticks to his decision. In this case, Russia and Iran could pivot towards filling the vacuum in the region east of the Euphrates caused by the withdrawal of American forces.

With this agreement, Turkey has reduced the likelihood of military operations in Idlib and some of its surrounding areas in the countryside of Aleppo, Hama and Lattakia for some time. The Sochi Agreement stipulates a demilitarised zone 15-20 kilometres deep within the already demarcated de-escalation zone, the elimination of all radical terrorist groups from the demilitarised zone by 15 October 2018, the restoration of transit traffic on the M4 (Aleppo-Lattakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) by the end of 2018 and a commitment by the two signatories to counter terrorism within Syria (see the full text of the agreement in Annex 1).

The agreement can be seen as a slightly amended version of the agreement reached earlier by the three guarantors (Russia, Turkey and Iran) in Astana on 6 September 2017,<sup>2</sup> which gave Russia the green light to begin military operations isolating each of the de-escalation zones. This resulted in the ultimate defeat of the Syrian opposition forces in eastern Ghouta, the northern Homs countryside and Daraa. This prompted justified fears by the Syrian opposition, in both its political and military arms, and conjured a sense of peril among the nearly 3.5 million Syrians living in the Idlib governorate.

Among them, a million are internally displaced persons (IDPs). As of writing (8 January 2019), Idlib hosts the largest number of civilians in areas outside the control of the regime and also tens of thousands of fighters who refused reconciliation and were relocated to northwest Syria. Further compounding the situation in Idlib is Russia's proclaimed goal of reinstating Syrian 'state' authority in the region, whereas Turkey insists on maintaining Idlib as an area of Turkish influence. Moreover, Idlib is also an area where HTS and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups are present. Finally, the large number of fighters and their lack of discipline constitutes the most substantial challenge to any possible settlement in Idlib.

Moreover, the Sochi Agreement lacks a clear timetable for the implementation of its provisions and is compromised by the absence of enforcement mechanisms, leaving the question of buffer zone boundaries open-ended. All this raises numerous questions, the most essential of which relates to the sustainability of the agreement. This requires an understanding of the three guarantor states' interests in keeping the agreement alive.

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<sup>2</sup> The Astana talks, sponsored by Russia and Turkey, started in January 2017 in Kazakhstan's capital as negotiations between the Syrian government delegation and representatives of opposition armed groups. They aimed at consolidating a countrywide ceasefire. This process is separate from the UN's Geneva process. Starting with the fourth round of Astana talks in May 2017, representatives from Moscow, Tehran and Ankara agreed to set up four so-called de-escalation zones within which there would be a halt of hostilities between opposition armed groups and regime forces.

Analysis is also required of the impact of the agreement on armed groups and local governance structures. Can the agreement be considered to provide Turkey with a mandate to resolve the Idlib dilemma as it sees fit, thereby sparing the region a major battle whose repercussions would even impact the EU? Will Russia resort to a limited military operation in Idlib after the expiry of the deadline at the end of 2018, or will it extend the deadline to grant Turkey more time and not upset it? Will Iran prefer not to engage in the Idlib battle and seek to otherwise reap its political and economic gains? What is the feasibility of implementing the agreement on the ground? How have the armed groups, and mainly HTS, reacted to the agreement? How may these changes on the ground impact on the policies of the international donor community?

This study first provides an overview of the prevailing international and regional factors that underpin the agreement. It tackles the agreement's implementation mechanisms, its phases and the gains each of the three guarantors are set to make should it succeed or fail. It also explores the prospects for the sustainability of the agreement in the light of local and regional challenges that persist in undermining it. The study then analyses the trajectory of the armed groups and the position of HTS regarding the agreement and its political reaction to it. The state of lawlessness in the Idlib region, its causes and the impact that the Sochi Agreement has had on the situation will also be examined. Finally, the study explores the Turkish approach to civil administration in Idlib, Ankara's relationship with the SIG (the headquarters of which is in the Euphrates Shield area), the reactivation of local councils (LCs) in the areas controlled by moderate factions and the ramifications of the agreement on the possibility of operationalizing LCs in the demilitarised zone.

The research for this study relies on information provided by the author's private sources, field and media monitoring of stakeholders, exclusive and unpublished documents and statements and interviews with leaders of armed groups, ministers in the SIG and representatives of the Free Idlib and Aleppo provincial councils, LCs and health and education directorates.

## 1. The Positions and Strategies of the Three State Parties to the Sochi Agreement

### *The Pre-agreement Climate: Military Reinforcements in Northwest Syria*

After the security situation in the south had broken down and direct negotiations between Russia and the Southern Front leaders in Daraa led to the surrender of armed rebel groups in July 2018, the Syrian regime and its allies began sending reinforcements from the regular army to Idlib in August. In particular, these included the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division led by Maher al-Assad, the Syrian President's brother. The Tiger Forces, a special forces unit of the Syrian Arab Army led by Brigadier General Suhail al-Hassan, was also deployed to the frontlines of northern Hama to confront the armed groups in control of northwest Syria.

Iran also sent 23 militias into northwest Syria.<sup>3</sup> These included the Local Defence Regiments,<sup>4</sup> Iraqi militias,<sup>5</sup> Lebanese Hezbollah, Afghan Liwa Fatimiyoun and the Pakistani Liwa Zainebiyoun. In addition, purely Iranian forces including the 65<sup>th</sup> Airborne Special Forces Brigade and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps were also deployed. In early September 2018, Idlib was cordoned off by some 223 military outposts in which these militias were based.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Turkey has coerced a two-stage merger of moderate opposition and Islamist factions that are close to it and not classified as terrorist organisations in international and US lists. The first stage involved 11 rebel groups, including ten Free Syrian Army groups formerly backed by the 'Joint Operations Centre' (*Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi* in Turkish, or MOM) along with Faylaq al-Sham (or Sham Legion), another formerly MOM-backed armed group that is viewed as the military arm of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a close ally of Turkey. This merger was achieved after intensive meetings beginning in Ankara in mid-July 2018 to which the leaders of armed groups were summoned by Turkish authorities.<sup>7</sup> These meetings were then concluded at the leadership level inside Syria, resulting in the establishment of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in early August 2018.<sup>8</sup>

During the tenth round of the Astana talks, which were held at the end of July 2018, Moscow, through its presidential envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, repeatedly threatened to carry out a limited-scale military operation in Idlib. This came after discussions between the Russian and opposition delegations on the dangers posed by HTS-launched drone attacks targeting the Russian Hmeimim Air Base.<sup>9</sup>

After the regime and its allies moved their military units to the region, the Idlib

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<sup>3</sup> Nawar Oliver, "The Buffer Zone Agreement in Idlib: Context, Current Reality and Trends" (in Arabic), *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*, October 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2TQr4lF>.

<sup>4</sup> These include Al-Baqir Brigade, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Quwwat al-Ghadab, al-Ghaliboun Battalions, Asadullah al-Ghalib and the Nubl and al-Zahraa Battalions

<sup>5</sup> These include the Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Khorasani Battalions, the Ammar Ibn Yasser Brigade, Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, Sayed al-Shuhada Brigades, and the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.

<sup>6</sup> Anadolu Agency, "Syria's Idlib under Foreign Terrorist Siege" (in Arabic), *Anadolu Agency*, 20 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2COvcNt>.

<sup>7</sup> Manhal Baresh, "Pressure on Idlib's Rebel groups and Intensive Meetings to Integrate them into NLF" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 28 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RbDPuj>.

<sup>8</sup> See the NLF founding statement, Twitter (in Arabic), 1 August 2018, <https://twitter.com/alwataniaTahrer/status/1024704375644667904>.

<sup>9</sup> Manhal Baresh, "So that the scenarios of Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and eastern Ghouta don't happen again" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 11 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Qm6veQ>.



governorate sustained aerial bombardment focused on Khan Shaykhun, south of Idlib, and Jisr al-Shughur, in the far west of the governorate. Syrian and Russian warplanes targeted several schools, markets, centres of civil defence (White Helmets) and civil infrastructure. The military escalation, including the use of rockets and artillery against all the areas, continued throughout the proceedings of the summit.

### *The Diverging Interests of Turkey, Russia and Iran*

The joint Russian-Turkish-Iranian working groups, conceived in the Astana agreement through intensive meetings in Ankara and Moscow, failed to develop a sustained mechanism to maintain a de-escalation zone in Idlib. Turkey's foreign minister, defence minister and chief of intelligence were unable to persuade the Russian president to change his decision to launch a battle in Idlib. Ankara then intensified undisclosed contacts with Tehran in an attempt to win it over, or at least neutralise it in the dispute over Idlib. The day before the Tehran trilateral summit on Syria on 7 September 2018, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu arrived in Tehran and convinced the Iranian side not to press for a military operation alongside Moscow. Çavuşoğlu also managed to have the summit broadcast live, which Putin did not object to despite his surprise.<sup>10</sup>

The Turkish diplomatic strategy sought to convey two messages by broadcasting the conference live. The first related to gaining more popularity within the Idlib governorate, showcasing the positive impact of Turkish efforts after much doubt had begun to shroud Turkey's role following developments in other de-escalation zones and in the areas east of the Hijaz railway. The second message targeted Washington and the EU states, implying that Turkey remains a NATO member and that its relationship with Russia is tactical, characterised by disputes and not evolving into a strategic partnership.

Furthermore, Turkey fortified its outposts in Syria with heavy artillery, and it equipped the NLF with artillery munitions, tanks and large shipments of arms.<sup>11</sup> The Turkish-backed National Army, a constituent of Euphrates Shield, declared its readiness to defend Idlib.<sup>12</sup> Turkey also managed to definitively halt the HTS drone attacks targeting Hmeimim Air Base before the Tehran summit, preventing any further attacks on the base.

At the Tehran summit on 7 September 2018, Russia realised that the mounting pressures and lack of agreement with Turkey on Idlib put its relationship with Ankara at stake, especially with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan warning that "the future of Idlib is not about the future of Syria, but that of Turkey."<sup>13</sup> Russia then considered that the outcome of any large-scale military operation would leave an imprint on the conflict-resolution path set by Moscow in Syria. It would prompt Ankara and the opposition rebel groups to withdraw from the Astana process, hindering the already faltering formation of the constitutional committee in accordance with the Syrian National Dialogue Conference that took place in Sochi in January 2018.

In addition, Moscow considered that a new military operation would lead to the flow of

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<sup>10</sup> One of the researcher's special sources, quoting the Iranian Foreign Minister, 10 September 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Nawar Oliver, *ibid.*, and the researcher's sources in the NLF.

<sup>12</sup> Manhal Baresh, "As Battle Approaches: Euphrates Shield Willing to Defend Idleb" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 1 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QnjMUq>.

<sup>13</sup> Sham Network, "Launch of Guarantors' Summit. Erdoğan: The Future of Idlib is not only About Syria's Future but Also That of Turkey" (in Arabic), *Sham Network*, 7 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Fcclyl>.

hundreds of thousands of new refugees into Turkey, effectively hindering Russian attempts to seek a European role in the reconstruction of Syria. This issue appears to be the reason behind the quadrilateral Ankara summit (France, Germany, Russia and Turkey) which was announced by Erdoğan in early October and held on 28 October 2018. In fact, Moscow sees the return of refugees as a key to reconstruction, luring some European states into this effort through the prospect of reducing the number of Syrian refugees in Europe and the burdensome consequences they are having on European domestic politics.

Tehran seized the opportunity of the 7 September summit to accelerate the inactive parts of the 'four-towns agreement'<sup>14</sup> to mitigate its own losses in the event of a battle in Idlib. Its aim was to not have the status of two towns (al-Fouaa and Kefraya, besieged since March 2015) constitute a liability against it. Tehran therefore sought to spare the two towns any reprisal assaults. It revived the 'four-towns agreement,' this time with a Russian-Turkish-Iranian mutual understanding, while offering a concession to HTS by evacuating its fighters from Yarmouk camp. The new deal stipulated the evacuation of residents from the towns of al-Fouaa and Kefraya, together with the remaining fighters of Hezbollah and other local militias. The deal also stipulated the release of 85 Alawite civilian detainees, all of them women and children who had been kidnapped in 2015 near Jisr al-Shughur.<sup>15</sup> In return, HTS demanded the evacuation of its besieged fighters and their families from Yarmouk camp south of Damascus. The agreement between Iran, Turkey and Russia also included the release of 137 HTS members detained by Iranian militias in the Sayyidah Zaynab area south of Damascus and three others in al-Fouaa and Kefraya<sup>16</sup> in addition to 1,500 civilians detained by the Syrian regime.<sup>17</sup>

Following the US President's 8 May 2018 announcement that he would end the US participation in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iran nuclear deal, Iran reconsidered its options with regard to Idlib, opting to win over Ankara. Ankara had always had reservations over sanctions against Iran and expressed opposition to the announcement of the US re-imposition of these sanctions.<sup>18</sup> Iran sought to avoid agitating its neighbour. And, like Russia, Iran avoided antagonizing Europe, which opposed the potential military operations in Idlib, opting to maintain improved relations with it following US President Trump's announcement.

In this sense, the Tehran summit on 7 September 2018 indicated what could be seen as a clear official Iranian position: to pull back from the large operation in Idlib. President Hassan Rouhani emphasised two main issues: a refusal to withdraw his country's

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<sup>14</sup> The agreement commonly known as the 'four-towns agreement' was related to Madaya and Zabadani – two regime-encircled towns 40 km northwest of Damascus mainly inhabited by a Sunni population – and Al-Fouaa and Kefraya – two rebel-encircled Shiite towns in Idlib governorate. In late March 2017, a final agreement was reached whereby, amongst other provisions, evacuations from the 'four towns' would be carried out.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Akhbar, "Agreement in Yarmouk Includes Kefraya and Al-Fouaa: Through the Moscow Meeting" (in Arabic), *Al-Akhbar*, 30 April 2018, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/249143>.

<sup>16</sup> Enab Baladi, "HTS Reveals the Articles of the Kefraya and Al-Fouaa Agreement," *Enab Baladi*, 18 July 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/241555>.

<sup>17</sup> Most of them are new detainees in the areas they control, while the regime has refused to release any of the detainees from 2011 and 2012, or from 2016 (700 of them preferred to return to regime-controlled areas and not to enter rebel-held areas).

<sup>18</sup> Daily Sabah, "Turkey sees US resumption of oil, gas sanctions on Iran as wrong, destabilizing," *Daily Sabah*, 6 November 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/economy/2018/11/07/turkey-sees-us-resumption-of-oil-gas-sanctions-on-iran-as-wrong-destabilizing>.

legitimate presence in Syria, and the obsolescence of the US military presence east of the Euphrates following the elimination of Islamic State (IS).

The convergence of the interests of the three states rendered Russia and Iran in favour of halting the military operation so long as the primary gains were achievable without a battle, including opening broad avenues for the Syrian regime to return to Idlib.

### ***The Sochi Agreement: Implementation and Various Interpretations***

Ten days following the Tehran summit, Erdoğan communicated an offer which was agreed on by Putin and which facilitated the Sochi Agreement. According to the Russian president's statement at the conference announcing the Sochi Agreement, the offer mainly provided for the removal of heavy weapons from the demilitarised zone, driving extremist armed groups out of it and opening international highways. The agreement also enabled Ankara to successfully halt the HTS-launched drone attacks on Hmeimim Air Base and prevent other rebel rocket attacks on Aleppo city, in accordance with its commitments at the Tehran summit.

Interpreting the demarcation of the demilitarised zone was the first point of contention between the opposition and the Syrian regime, despite article three of the agreement clearly stating that the buffer zone would be within the 'de-escalation zone,' that is, inside opposition-controlled territories. Initially, the Turkish side informed the leaders of the armed groups that the specific area would be divided into regime-controlled and opposition-controlled territories, as the regime would also pull its troops back a similar distance. Two weeks after the agreement was signed, however, a secret meeting took place in Hatay, southern Turkey, in which Turkish government officials in charge of the Syrian file told the leaders of the rebel groups that the demilitarised zone would be restricted to opposition territories.

Among the most notable articles in the agreement is the one providing for the departure of terrorist organisations from this 20-km zone. This stipulation severely tests Turkey's capacity to enforce the agreement. Bound by the date of 10 October 2018, the removal of heavy weapons was the only result that was achieved during the first phase of the implementation of the agreement. Moderate armed groups, composed of the NLF and Jaysh al-Izza,<sup>19</sup> removed their heavy weapons from the demilitarised zone (20km within opposition-controlled areas).<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, HTS and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) reacted to the withdrawal of heavy weapons in the same way the moderate armed groups did, also removing their heavy weapons from the area. They did so under cover of night and without a declaration.<sup>21</sup>

The moderate armed groups had already transferred all their tanks to the area of Uqayribat and Atmah near the Turkish border so as not to be targeted by Russian air strikes. They had also communicated all of their coordinates to Turkey, which in turn passed them on to Russia with the initiation of the Astana process in January 2017. The

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<sup>19</sup> Jaysh al-Izza (or the Army of Glory), formerly the Union of Glory, is a Syrian rebel group affiliated with the Free Syrian Army active in northwest Syria. Its main centre is the town of Latamna. It has previously received support from MOM. It is led by Jamil Al-Saleh.

<sup>20</sup> Aljazeera, "Syrian Opposition Withdraw Heavy Weapons from the Buffer Zone in Idlib," (in Arabic), *Aljazeera*, 7 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2R87d4y>.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Hayat, "Al-Nusra to Withdraw Its Heavy Weaponry from Idlib Frontlines," (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 10 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Fc65Xc>.

sharing of coordinates was intended to ensure they would not be bombed.<sup>22</sup>

What remains unclear and unsettled is article seven of the Sochi Agreement, which relates to patrols along the border of the buffer zone. Ankara informed the leaders of the armed groups that Russian military police would not enter the area at all and that Russian monitoring of the entire area would be limited to reconnaissance aircraft, with a focus on the areas east of the M5 road.

After the removal of heavy weaponry from the area, Moscow's efforts focused on reopening access to transit routes.<sup>23</sup> This was prioritised over the removal of extremist armed groups from the demilitarised zone and over the implementation of other provisions in the agreement. This prioritisation came despite an insinuation by the Russians that such extremist groups were indeed present in the area.<sup>24</sup>

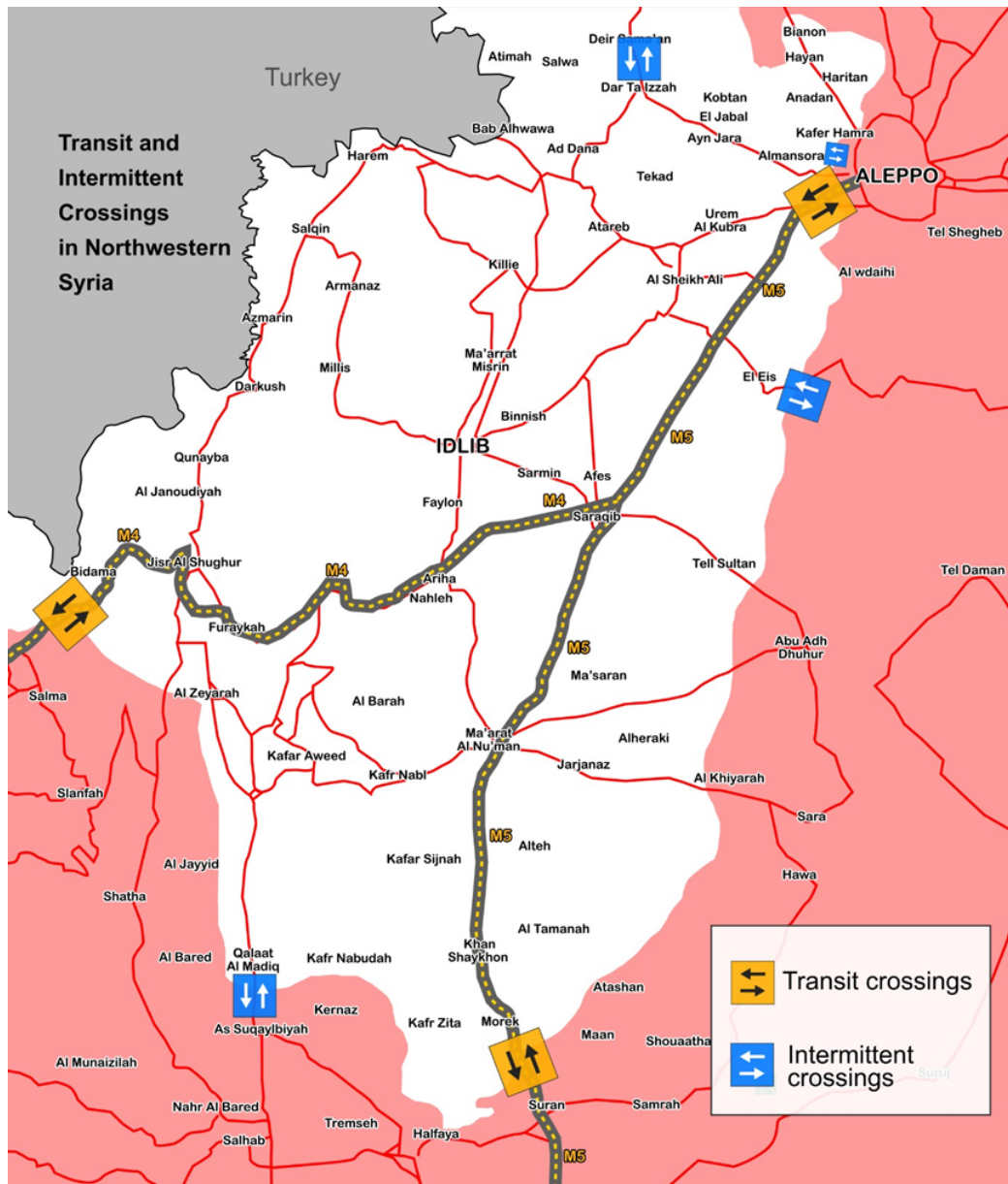
The text of the agreement mentioned the restoration of transit traffic on international roads. It did not, however, specify the mechanisms with which the two roads – M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) – would operate, despite the HTS control over long stretches of them. Specifically, HTS have control over the Morek crossing point, which is run from the other side by Russian military police. HTS also control al-Rashidin district, which is the endpoint of the M5 road near the city of Aleppo.

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<sup>22</sup> One of the researcher's special sources, a military rebel group leader in Idlib, 12 November 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Jalal Talal Silmi, "Beyond Reopening International Roads in Syria" (in Arabic), *Geiroon*, 4 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FeTilQ>. See also Dia Audi, "Idlib Economically: Agricultural Resources and Commerce Lines Reviving Them," (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 13 December 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/257332>.

<sup>24</sup> Sputnik News, "Moscow: Demilitarised Zone in Idlib Faces Difficulties Despite Turkey's Efforts," (in Arabic), *Sputnik News*, 22 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2scC0hI>.



**Figure 1:** Transit routes and crossings agreed upon and temporary crossings between regime-controlled and rebel-controlled areas, 8 January 2019 (created by the author and designed by Hazem Al-Nayef).

### *Turkey's Challenges*

Turkey has expended much effort on avoiding losing its sphere of influence in Idlib, choosing to defend it on the basis of several security and political considerations. Ankara has formulated a strategy of long-term presence in Syria. According to President Erdoğan, Turkey “will leave Syria to its owners after they hold their elections”<sup>25</sup> If we concede, for the sake of argument, that Iran and Russia have mandated Turkey to untangle the complexities of Idlib, then Turkey faces several challenges which can be summarised as follows.

<sup>25</sup> Reuters, “Turkey will not leave Syria until Syrian people have an election, Erdoğan says,” *Reuters*, <https://reut.rs/2QBp9W>; Aljazeera, “Erdoğan conditions the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Syria” (in Arabic), *Aljazeera*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/international/2018/10/4>.



First, Ankara appears unable to curb the frequent and major breaches of the agreement by the regime and Iran.<sup>26</sup> The most notable violation was an infiltration by Iranian special forces and Hezbollah that led to the killing of 23 fighters from Jaysh al-Izza on 9 October 2018. This incident began to raise public concerns over the utility of the agreement and over Turkey's ability to protect civilians in Idlib.

Second, it is extremely difficult for Turkey to control the sheer number of fighters amassed in Idlib, which are estimated at around 60,000.<sup>27</sup>

Third, Turkey faces a challenge in coercing extremist armed groups such as HTS and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to withdraw from the demilitarised zone. Their removal, which initially had to be completed by 15 October 2018, has apparently not been completed, further jeopardising the agreement. Indeed, the headquarters of HTS and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups have remained open, just as they were before the agreement. More importantly, these breaches of the agreement come as al-Qaeda-affiliated groups which have publicly denounced the agreement continue operations against the regime in some areas (see part 2).

Finally, the economic conditions have significantly deteriorated in the Idlib governorate. This has put indirect pressure on Turkey. The growing number of IDPs, the dwindling American and European support and the paucity of resources and employment opportunities have underlined the inability of any local structure to secure minimal basic services in education, health and energy utilities. This accentuates the economic and administrative voids Turkey will have to fill in the areas falling within its sphere of support and influence.

## 2. The Trajectory of the Armed Groups in Idlib

Some armed groups with allegiance to al-Qaeda did not accept the Sochi Agreement and formed a military operations room in opposition to it in western Idlib. As of writing, HTS has silently abided by the agreement and withdrawn its arms. HTS remains the most important variable in the equation for implementing the agreement, and Turkey has resorted to curtailing HTS influence by continuing to pressure it and fracture it into groups. The Sochi Agreement arrived at a time of insecurity, infighting and division of spheres of influence between opposition armed groups and HTS.

### *A Counter-Operations Room*

The Sochi Agreement was not met with approval by all the armed opposition groups. Three jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda – the Hurras al-Din Organisation, the Ansar al-Din Front and Ansar al-Islam – publicly denounced the agreement and considered it a manifest renunciation of 'jihad.' On 15 October 2018, they formed a military operations room named 'Encourage the Believers,' which continued to carry out operations against regime outposts. These groups breached the terms of the agreement on several occasions, the most prominent of which was an attack on 16 November 2018 against the

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<sup>26</sup> Al-Modon, "Al-Latamneh: Successful Infiltration by Regime Militias" (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 9 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Faqknb>.

<sup>27</sup> Other authors estimate the number of fighters at around 90,000. Fabrice Balanche, "Round One of Idlib Campaign May Target Turkish-Backed Rebels," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2x9W3zz>.

Sirmaniyah axis west of Idlib, which resulted in the killing of 23 soldiers.<sup>28</sup> In another attack on 28 November 2018 which was carried out in Jabal al-Akrad in the countryside around Lattakia, all the attackers were killed and the number of regime losses remained unknown.

Hurras al-Din is the most prominent faction publicly opposed to the agreement. Officially founded in late February 2018, it emerged against a backdrop of defections by the al-Qaeda-affiliated wing within HTS represented by the former al-Nusra Front *shar'i* (chief religious authority) Sami al-Oraydi and the former leader of al-Nusra Abu Juleibib al-Urduni (Iyad al-Tubasi, the brother-in-law of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi). This wing split from HTS after Abu Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of HTS and previously of the al-Nusra Front, arrested al-Oraydi and al-Tubasi and held them for several days.<sup>29</sup>

The two Jordanian leaders (Sami al-Oraydi and Iyad al-Tubasi) in opposition to al-Julani's decision to authorise the entry of Turkish forces, sought to form an organisation unifying them. Along with Abu Hammam al-Shami (Samir Hijazi, a contemporary of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri), they formed Hurras al-Din, which also included extremist factions such as Jund al-Malahim, Jund al-Shari'ah and the remnants of Jund al-Aqsa. Sami al-Oraydi was nominated as its leader and the organisation is estimated to have 1,800 operatives, the majority of whom are Arab and foreign fighters.

The Ansar al-Din Front is one of the groups that defected from HTS in early February 2018. Citing al-Julani's unilateral decision-making and disrespect for the Shura Council, the current leader of Ansar al-Din, nicknamed Dr. Abu Abdullah al-Shami, resigned from the Council.<sup>30</sup> The operations of Ansar al-Din are concentrated in the southern suburbs of Aleppo and the northern al-Ghab plain. Ansar al-Din is the smallest of the three groups, and most of its fighters hail from the Turkmen Mountain, making it a largely local fighting force.

### *How to Resolve the HTS Dilemma?*

In August 2018, Ankara presented a plan to address the HTS dilemma, beginning with the organisation's self-dissolution and the incorporation of its Syrian fighters into the NLF.<sup>31</sup> The next part of the plan included "finding a mechanism" for foreign fighters to "depart from Syria after providing guarantees." These processes of "isolation,"

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<sup>28</sup> Facebook, Salhab Online page, which is close to the regime; and a video interview with Abu Abdullah al-Sahili, the spokesperson of the Said operations room.

<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri intervened in a video recording, criticizing HTS/al-Nusra and saying: "The *bay'ah* (oath of allegiance) has not yet been dissolved, not by the al-Nusra Front nor any other faction. And I did not approve of al-Nusra Front's bay'ah being surreptitious." See Alaadine Ismail, "HTS Arresting Two al-Qaeda Leaders Inflames Conflict Between al-Zawahiri and al-Julani" (in Arabic), *Asharq al-Awsat*, 30 November 2017, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1099011>. In the aftermath of this statement, al-Julani released the two leaders, who were then followed by Abu Khadija al-Urduni (Bilal Khreisat), the security and shar'i leader of the al-Nusra Front in southern Syria, and Abu Hussein al-Urduni (Mohammed Salim al-Khateeb), the former commander of *Jaysh al-Nusra* (or the 'central force' within the former al-Nusra Front). These were hailed by the Jordanian-Palestinian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Issam al-Barqawi), the most prominent ideologue of Salafist jihadism. Manhal Barish, "Idlib Complex Between Foreign Fighters and States Refusing the Return of Their Prodigal Sons," (in Arabic), *Syria-TV*, 25 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Fad4ix>.

<sup>30</sup> Enab Baladi, "Ansar al-Din Defects from HTS, Three Factions Remaining," (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/205568>.

<sup>31</sup> Hasan Abu Haniya, "Idlib Battle, Illusions Around HTS" (in Arabic), *Arabi 21*, 9 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QrlbcD>.

“neutralisation,” or “elimination” included foreigners fighting with Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party. After HTS rejected the plan and the ultimatum given by Ankara expired, Turkey carried out its threats and designated HTS as a terrorist organisation by presidential decree on 31 August 2018. Despite this designation, a hotline was maintained, and both sides succeeded in not upsetting each other. According to observers, Ankara welcomed the removal by HTS of heavy weapons without an overt announcement.

Furthermore, HTS issued a statement a few hours before the expiry of the deadline for its withdrawal from the 20-km demilitarised zone.<sup>32</sup> Without explicitly naming Turkey, the statement thanked Turkey for its role in preventing an invasion of the region and the massacres that would have been likely to ensue. This was an attempt by HTS to confirm its acceptance of the agreement, albeit indirectly, and renew its eligibility to participate in the second phase pertaining to the reopening of international roads.

After lengthy and arduous negotiations, Ankara still failed to persuade HTS to dissolve itself and integrate into the NLF. In August 2018, as Turkey was pressuring HTS to dissolve, some of the organisation’s leaders made strong public statements against this project. “Whoever talks about dissolving Tahrir al-Sham must first dissolve the delusions and obsessions in his sick mind,” commented the former *shar’i* and leading HTS figure Mazhar al-Wais on Telegram.<sup>33</sup> He warned that HTS armaments are a “red line,” and threatened to sever the hand which reaches for them. A similar position was echoed by prominent HTS leaders such as Abu al-Yaqdhan al-Masri, the *shar’i* of its military wing and one of the organisation’s hawks (he had previously issued a fatwa to kill Ahrar al-Sham fighters), in addition to Abu Mariah al-Qahtani, former commander of al-Nusra in the eastern region, and Abu al-Fath al-Farghaly, a member of the HTS Shura Council.<sup>34</sup>

These statements underline the internal consensus within the ranks of HTS on protecting the organization's armaments. They also dispel the possibility of any serious divisions within the HTS leadership with regard to the agreement, contrary to what some media sources have reported. The most radical camp had splintered off in summer 2017 in protest against the entry of the Turkish army into Idlib and the installation of Turkish observation checkpoints.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, some analysts suggest the presence of a hardline Egyptian camp led by Abu al-Yaqdhan al-Masri in opposition to al-Julani. However, they probably underestimate the influence wielded by al-Masri, who is the *shar’i* of the HTS military arm and whose role is limited to propaganda and the mobilisation of fighters in battles.

Turkey has constantly increased its pressure on the HTS leadership to trigger decisive transformations within the group, thus seeking to continue using its presence in Idlib for its own national interests. These pressures resulted, as mentioned above, in HTS consenting to the entry of Turkish forces into Idlib in October 2017. This followed previous threats of military action against the organisation and a subsequent deployment of thousands of Turkish soldiers and hundreds of vehicles and tanks to the

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<sup>32</sup> El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, “HTS Breaks its Silence and Announces its Position on Sochi” (in Arabic), *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya*, 14 October 2018, <https://eldorar.com/node/126884>.

<sup>33</sup> Manhal Baresh, “So That the Scenarios...” *ibid.* See note 5 above.

<sup>34</sup> Enab Baladi, “Three Figures Emphasize Jihad and Refuse the HTS Dissolution” (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/248603>.

<sup>35</sup> Manhal Baresh, “Idlib Complex...” See note 30 above.



bordering Hatay region.<sup>36</sup> At that time, Turkish forces were being targeted by HTS militants in the Kafr Lusin area north of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing. However, the targeting did not escalate further and negotiations continued for several days between the Turkish military-security delegation and the political arm of HTS. In the end, HTS agreed to the entry of Turkish forces provided that no members of Euphrates Shield rebel groups entered the area and that HTS accompanied the Turkish troops to their 12 observation checkpoints, oversaw the process of securing their outposts and escorted their backup and supply convoys. These conditions were accepted by Ankara, whose main concern was to install the checkpoints with minimal possible damage and to firmly and swiftly establish its presence on the ground, lest it appear unable to fulfil its commitments made to Russia and Iran.

The Turkish policy of sowing division in the ranks of HTS has succeeded on several occasions. For example, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement and Jaysh al-Ahrar both defected from HTS following the infighting between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in July 2017. Many *shar'i* such as the Saudis Abdullah al-Muhaysini and Musleh al-Alyani and the Syrian Abdul Razzaq al-Mahdi also defected at this time. Most recently, the majority of Zawahiri-aligned militants have defected in response to the entry of Turkish troops into Idlib and the approval of this by al-Julani and his inner circle.<sup>37</sup> The Turkish plan has therefore partially succeeded, as the most radical elements (al-Zawahiri camp) were expelled and the largest proportion of foreign fighters left to join the Hurras al-Din organisation. The camp that remained can be described as the 'sharia-politics' camp established by al-Julani.

It is clear that, under extreme Russian pressure, Turkey would not object to mandating HTS with the responsibility for securing the international roads, as was the case in the test of Turkish observation checkpoints. Turkey's priority remains the implementation of the bare minimum terms of the agreement in order to appease Russia, which considered the agreement to be transient and expired as of the end of 2018. Meanwhile, however, the agreement has provided Russia with steady and quiet gains, mitigating the dangers posed by rebel groups and consolidating regime control over new territories in the northwest (as occurred east of the Hijaz railway in late 2017 and early 2018).

### *The Sharia -Politics Camp*

HTS has intensified the sharia courses given to its fighters in order to justify its political manoeuvring with Turkey. These courses begin by emphasizing the sharia-legitimised interest in averting a confrontation with Turkey. This appeared to have crystallized in two major experiences: first, Turkey opted not to close the Bab al-Hawa border crossing after its takeover by HTS on 23 July 2017, and second, it gave great support to the formation of the Salvation Government.

These developments convinced al-Julani, the pragmatic leader Abu Maria al-Qahtani and the political wing represented by Yousef al-Hajar that HTS can deal with Turkey and cooperate with it. Several prior experiences have proven that Turkey has not objected

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<sup>36</sup> In addition, Turkey mobilised hundreds of Syrian fighters from Euphrates Shield territories to engage in the battle against HTS back in late September 2017. Turkish troops then began opening ingress points in the separation wall built along its borders with Syria. BBC Arabic, "Turkish Army Vehicles Enter Idlib, North of Syria" (in Arabic), *BBC Arabic*, 8 October 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-41545850>.

<sup>37</sup> Alaadine Ismael, "Alaadine Ismail, "HTS Arresting Two al-Qaeda Leaders..." See note 20 above.

to HTS behaviour since the beginning of its war on rebel groups at the end of 2014 and throughout 2015. Instead, the HTS leadership detected Turkish exasperation with Ahrar al-Sham, due to the latter's refusal to attend the first Astana summit on 23-24 January 2017.<sup>38</sup> HTS then immediately began plotting a war against Ahrar al-Sham, which enabled HTS to control the entire border strip by late July 2017. This increased HTS's confidence in its ability to manoeuvre its way through the Turkish involvement to preserve itself and curtail the ambitions of Faylaq al Sham, a close Turkish ally and proxy in Idlib.

The Shura Council held intensive meetings to finalise a vision for the sharia-politics frame of reference that would allow HTS to engage politically without violating Islamic doctrine. As long as the goal is to preserve HTS's capacity for jihad, its cohesion and the retention of its weapons, the Shura Council members concluded that political engagement is legitimate. These discussions led to the authoring of the book *Principles and Checks of Sharia-Politics*, which was overseen and forwarded by Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu al-Harith al-Masri.<sup>39</sup>

This policy was part of an HTS campaign to justify engagement with Turkey from a sharia-compliant perspective. In an audio recording, the London-based HTS-affiliated jihadist preacher Abu Mahmoud al-Filistini appeared to debate with Hurras al-Din leaders.<sup>40</sup> Al-Filistini denied that HTS had withdrawn from Idlib. He also warned of a confrontation between 'al-mujahideen' (not Turkish-backed fighters) and Turkey that would be fatal and would enable the Russians to wipe Idlib off the map à la Raqqa and Mosul.

### *Insecurities and Demarcation of Local Spheres of Influence*

After the first round of Astana talks in January 2017 and the cessation of battles between the opposition and the regime, the surplus of power held by rebel groups was directed to internal score-settling and a conflict over resources. This was evident in the HTS war against Ahrar al-Sham. This aimed at seizing control of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, which was the Ahrar al-Sham major source of revenue, along with all of its assets (large arms depots, the electric grid in opposition-controlled areas and grain and feed warehouses). HTS then succeeded in securing the crossing and the large depots in July 2017.

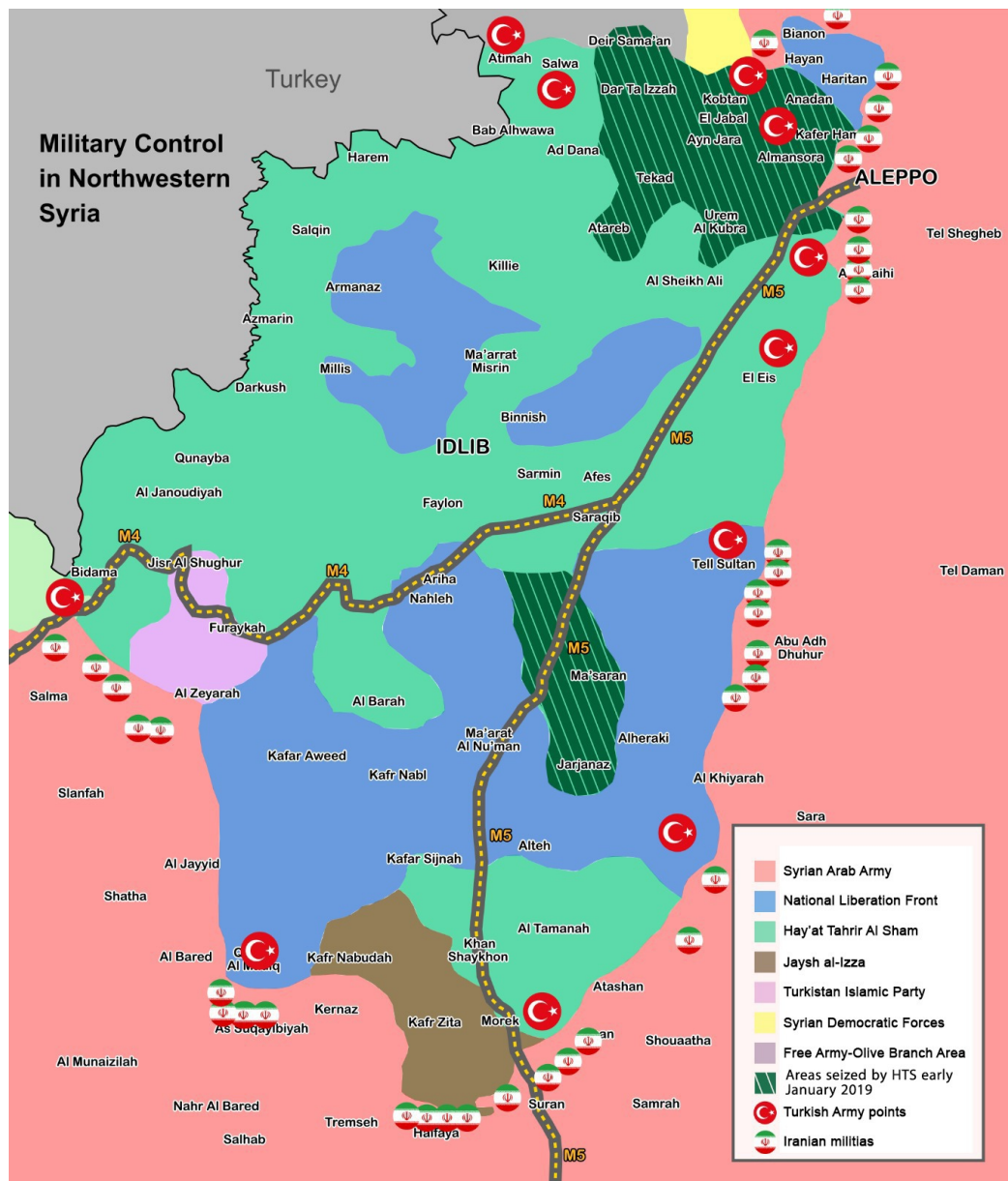
In March 2018, infighting broke out again, on this occasion between HTS on the one hand and Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham on the other. The result was the expulsion of HTS from Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Ariha, the two largest towns in the Idlib governorate, while al-Zenki extended its control over the western Aleppo countryside. HTS was expelled from Darat Izza, the southern gateway to Afrin and the link point between the al-Zenki-controlled western Aleppo countryside and the Turkish border. In addition, Ahrar al-Sham also seized control over a vast area in the al-Ghab plain northwest of Hama, which is one of its main strongholds.

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<sup>38</sup> Meetings between the author and those present at the Ankara meeting, including a number of faction leaders, ahead of the first and second rounds of the Astana talks in January and February 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Abu al-Fath al-Farghali (HTS Shura Council member), *Principles and Checks of Sharia-Politics* (in Arabic).

<sup>40</sup> Manhal Baresh, "Two Thirds of the Opposition Territory is Without Heavy Weapons, Russia Imposes its Interpretation on Sochi Agreement" (in Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RdlEnS>.



**Figure 2:** Map of military control in northwest Syria, 8 January 2019 (created by the author and designed by Hazem Al-Nayef).

Most moderate armed groups abstained from entering this fight against HTS alongside al-Zenki, Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham in the two rounds of fighting (the first in November 2017 and the second in March 2018). They were waiting for Ankara's decision to begin the battle, especially as the latter saw in this infighting a threat to its ability to stabilise the situation in Idlib on its own terms. Moreover, Turkey did not prefer al-Zenki to emerge as a victor because Ankara considers it an undisciplined faction which does not owe allegiance to Ankara. Turkey thus prevented Faylaq al-Sham and other rebel groups from interfering in this battle, allowing the conflict to go on as it would in practice lead to the exhaustion of all the participating armed groups. Al-Zenki already received no munitions support from Turkey, while Ahrar al-Sham had lost most of its strategic

weapons depots in its first war with HTS.<sup>41</sup>

According to field monitoring by the author, there has been a surge in assassinations between the various parties to the conflict, beginning in May 2018 and continuing to the time of writing. This phenomenon reached an unprecedented peak in September 2018 in conjunction with the signing of the Sochi Agreement. Assassinations have persisted and continued to occur regularly for the past two years. They have typically targeted security and military leaders in different areas, with the exception of the western Aleppo countryside, which did not experience any notable security breach in the past few years until 31 December 2018, owing to the tight control imposed by the al-Zenki security arm.

In December 2018, there was a significant degree of stability in the towns of Ariha and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man following the expulsion of HTS earlier in the year. Meanwhile, instability no longer takes the form of score-settling among military actors but also among civilians, especially those with wealth or high incomes.<sup>42</sup> The health sector has been subject to systematic targeting. Dozens of doctors have been kidnapped and only released after exorbitant ransoms were paid.<sup>43</sup> Kidnapping has turned into a self-sustaining economy. Traders, money exchangers and goldsmiths are particularly vulnerable to kidnapping. Such incidents are often carried out by gangs believed to be affiliated with HTS.<sup>44</sup> As for assassinations, they have primarily targeted smugglers along the Turkish border who are mainly licensed by and work in partnership with HTS border security chiefs, according to documents leaked by border security insiders and obtained by the author.

On 2 January 2019, HTS fought another battle against the al-Zenki Movement in al-Zenki's stronghold in the western Aleppo countryside. This battle resulted in the defeat of al-Zenki and its relocation to Afrin. HTS took control of the entire western Aleppo countryside, along with the al-Mansoura crossing-point – which had been opened by al-Zenki – and the regime-controlled areas in Aleppo. HTS also took control of the strategic town of Darat Izza, effectively eliminating al-Zenki's control over the Aleppo-Hama road near the town of Khan al-Asal. In order to complete its control over the transit routes, HTS threatened to destroy Suqour al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, which still control the towns of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Ariha. If it succeeds in controlling the entire M4 and M5, these international roads are likely to be reopened under Turkish auspices.

HTS has engendered public resentment due to its repeated attacks against other rebel groups, its unilateral formation of a salvation government, its crackdown on activists, civil society organisations and relief workers, its strict interference with the dress code in schools and the imposition of the *jilbab* (a long and loose-fitting coat) on girls and its control over the universities of the SIG. A decision to eliminate HTS would have been widely welcomed by these affected communities, which constitute a large proportion of

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<sup>41</sup> HTS had suffered heavy personnel losses, especially in the western Aleppo countryside. This coincided with the HTS campaign in the east and west of the Hijaz railway, which lasted four months in late 2017 and early 2018 and resulted in 700 casualties and 1,600 injuries, according to a recent statement by al-Julani. El-Dorar Al-Shamiya, "HTS Reveals Regime's Heavy Losses East of Hijaz Railway," (in Arabic), 23 November 2018, <https://eldorar.com/node/128352>.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Modon, "Idlib: Chaos and Anticipation," (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 21 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2RfGJ1e>.

<sup>43</sup> Sham Network, "Amidst Continued Insecurity, Unknown Men Kidnap Doctor Khaled Daqsi from his Clinic West of Idlib City," (in Arabic), *Sham Network*, 10 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QmUwO9>.

<sup>44</sup> Northern Syria Observer, "Syrian-Turkish border, random killing and smuggling mafias dealing with HTS," *Northern Syria Observer*, 13 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Qu35qh>.

the Idlib population.

### 3. The Future of Civil Administration Under the Sochi Agreement

After the consolidation of its control of the Turkish-Syrian border in northwest Syria and the expulsion of Ahrar al-Sham from the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, HTS called for a Syrian General Conference, which was held in Idlib in September 2017. This conference elected a constituent committee as a foundational authority for a newly formed Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) on 2 November 2017. The General Conference was facilitated by Turkey allowing several Syrian opponents close to Ankara to enter and exit Syria.

The departure of extremist groups from the demilitarised zone could have been an opportunity to break the HTS hegemony over LCs in the southern countryside of Aleppo, the Idlib governorate and the countryside around Lattakia. The departure of HTS from Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Ariha in May 2018 had previously reflected positively on the efforts to restore the cohesion of LCs and to reclaim local and civil society initiatives. It is certain, however, that LCs and their effectiveness hinge on the implementation of the agreement, especially as HTS has circumvented it, withdrawing only its heavy weapons while maintaining its fighters and control over the same territories.

#### *The Failure of the Project to Form a New Civil Administration*

Ankara sought to form a new civil administration in Idlib in which both the SSG and the SIG would have merged. This project was supposed to be limited to the de-escalation zone in Idlib while maintaining the status quo in Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas. Through a new administration, Turkey aims for direct control of Idlib. As of late December 2018, this Turkish proposal still faced rejection by HTS, which demanded that either the SSG be maintained or a sizable share of the new administration be reserved for itself.<sup>45</sup>

Negotiations between HTS and NLF to establish a new civil administration have faltered. HTS has not succeeded in convincing Faylaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqour al-Sham or Jaysh al-Ahrar to join the SSG. HTS named Fawaz Hilal as head of the SSG on 10 December 2018. Hilal is a figure considered independent of all the armed groups, a former member of the Free Aleppo Governorate Council and an active figure in the Governorate of Aleppo. By choosing Hilal, HTS sought to appease all the parties concerned.<sup>46</sup> However, the rebel groups close to Turkey rejected the SSG framework, prompting HTS to proceed with its project and appoint the remaining ministers without awaiting the consent of others. It appears that HTS's unilateral action and its lack of response to Turkish pressure are aimed at securing a large share in any administrative structure to be put in place through direct Turkish intervention.

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<sup>45</sup> Russia Today, "HTS Delivers Its Idlib Deal Terms to Ankara," (in Arabic), *Russia Today*, 27 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2zrF4ut>.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Modon, "Second Version of SSG: HTS Government," (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 12 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2FaqPi9>.



Turkey has been ignoring SIG activity in Euphrates Shield areas,<sup>47</sup> undermining the SIG's role and keeping it as just a facade with little financial and logistical jurisdiction or capacities. This policy has also hindered the work of many international organisations and obstructed the work of other local ones. Following the recent HTS takeover of new areas in the western Aleppo countryside and east of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, it is unlikely that HTS will accept any change to the SSG.

In fact, Turkey prefers to form a weak administration that neither opposes Turkey's role nor objects to the escalating Russian demands imposed on Turkey in the de-escalation zone. These demands include the return of some Syrian regime institutions to the city of Idlib. Ankara could partially accept this demand if it was allowed to retain its military observation checkpoints, offered a guarantee that the Syrian regime's army and intelligence services would not return to the region and if it took charge of the security and operationalisation of the international highways.

### ***Local Councils Before and After the Sochi Agreement***

As the SSG has consolidated its grip on Idlib and begun closing down the offices of the SIG and assuming control of its facilities, the administrative situation in the de-escalation zones has deteriorated significantly. In a survey of local councils conducted in April and May 2018, the Omran Center for Strategic Studies reported the presence of 140 local councils (LCs) in Idlib, 59 percent of which were affiliated with the SIG.<sup>48</sup>

The lack of support, insufficient resources and HTS control over the nascent civil administration have led many LCs to abandon their allegiance to the SIG. Slowly, between May 2018 and December 2018 the rate of LC affiliation with the SIG decreased from 59 percent to 35 percent, or a mere 49 LCs out of the total number of councils operating in the Idlib governorate.<sup>49</sup>

The division of spheres of influence following the round of rebel infighting between March and May 2018 and since then the expulsion of HTS from the western Aleppo countryside, the al-Ghab plain and the towns of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Ariha has made it abundantly clear that the LCs are occasionally able to make independent decisions. In the case of Ariha, for example, the LC announced its secession from the SSG and held elections on 12 May 2018. The Ma'arrat al-Nu'man LC also began preparations for a new general election process to be overseen by the SIG-affiliated Idlib Provincial Council,<sup>50</sup> as did the LC of Binnish, which had also been free from HTS control.

Until the end of December 2018, the LCs of the western Aleppo countryside had also maintained their association with the SIG, owing to al-Zenki's support for and welcoming of the SIG in its areas of control. This was evident both in the relocation of several ministerial headquarters to the al-Zenki-controlled town of Darat Izza and in the recent elections held in the towns in Aleppo's western countryside, with women unprecedentedly running in independent lists in Anjara Council. One of the four female

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<sup>47</sup> Jusoor for Studies, "Third Syrian Interim Government: Review and Evaluation," (in Arabic), *Jusoor for Studies*, 13 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2zCin9b.8>.

<sup>48</sup> Sasha Alo, "Idlib Agreement in Profit and Loss Accounts," (in Arabic), *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*, 10 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Rspg4T.8>.

<sup>49</sup> Interviews by the author with the head of the council of Idlib governorate and the directorate of Local Councils in the council of Idlib governorate, 25 and 27 November 2018.

<sup>50</sup> "Free Idlib Provincial Council Forms Electoral Committee to Oversee Elections in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man," (in Arabic), *Facebook*, 20 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2C00LSI>.

candidates was elected as a council member. However, with HTS control over new areas in the countryside of western Aleppo, especially in Darat Izza, the SSG began exerting direct control over the LCs in the area.

Indeed, the main determinant of the affiliation and loyalty of LCs is the military actor in control of the area. Other less important factors relate to the power assumed by the LC and its ability to challenge dominant rebel groups, together with civil society attitudes towards it. Additionally, resources are considered a major factor determining the independence of the LCs, and a defining element of their relationship with the SIG or the SSG.

Indeed, one of the most important incentives for LCs to join forces with the SSG, albeit reluctantly, is financial support, which remains largely inadequate and limited to paying the salaries of employees and the provision of minimal basic services. Conversely, the SIG-affiliated Free Idlib Provincial Council has failed to provide any support for these LCs, not even the most basic operational costs. In addition, the security threat posed by HTS against members of dissenting LCs is also another important reason for their capitulation.

### *Cessation of Aid and its Implications*

The cessation of US and British aid<sup>51</sup> and the decline in European support since early 2018 have led to a remarkable decline in the role and efficiency of LCs, forcing a considerable proportion of them to join the SSG in pursuit of their livelihood.

The same situation has also driven scores of international workers in Syria into unemployment, with thousands of civil activists feeling abandoned at the mercy of HTS and its executive arm (SSG). This has caused public frustration, forcing many to illegally cross the border with Turkey, await asylum opportunities or make their way to Europe illegally. In particular, the northwest region of Syria has been emptied of local civil capacities. Civilians have consistently attempted to establish local governance institutions and stood against extremist groups.

The interruption of aid has steadily led to the erosion of local governance – represented by LCs independent of the SSG – especially with the lack of substantial resources supporting the immense responsibilities and services shouldered by these LCs. The void left by diminishing local administrative capacity after the suspension of Western aid may be filled by Turkey, either directly or through local intermediaries. This will lead to increased allegiance to Turkey and it will facilitate Ankara's ability to steer the situation and impose hybrid models, gradually normalising the return of Syrian regime institutions and authorities while nullifying any resistance to the Russian path.

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<sup>51</sup> The UK took a decision at the end of 2017 and began its implementation in January 2018. With its withdrawal from "Stabilisation and Early Recovery" programmes, which had covered governance programmes, policy programmes, and police support programme, the programmes were finally stopped by the end of 2018. British support became limited to humanitarian assistance. In May 2018 the US also stopped supporting its "Early Recovery" projects, which had provided support to independent media, and education and governance-oriented organisations. The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to stop its direct support of local governance structures, shifting to a community resilience approach in north-west Syria by the end of 2017. The Netherlands officially informed its partners that it was to suspend its work in Syria on 17 December 2018.

### **Reopening the Roads**

Turkey has exerted much effort to implement article eight of the Sochi Agreement, which stipulates “the restoration of traffic access through the M4 (Aleppo-Lattakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) highways by the end of 2018.” Ankara is well aware that reopening the roads is one factor that will avert the war Russia has threatened to launch in Idlib.

Russia has been aware of the importance of the M5 (Aleppo-Hama) highway since the ninth Astana summit in May 2017, whereas Turkey secured approval to deploy one observation checkpoint in Idlib. Today, after the elimination of opposition pockets in the other three de-escalation zones (Daraa, Ghouta and northern Homs), reopening the road has become a top priority for Russia.

Restoring transit traffic on the M4 and M5 roads is the most prominent point of convergence of the current Sochi framework, as it is linked to the preservation of the interests of each of the three international parties. It facilitates the movement of regime actors but it also ensures HTS influence by maintaining its presence on the road, which must first be approved by Russia with Turkish guarantees. Alternatively, HTS may secure the road by resorting to the SSG police force, who are mostly its loyalists. Such a scenario would serve to spare Russia and Turkey the embarrassment of deploying an extremist organisation along the transit routes.

Any delays in the reopening of the highway could agitate Russia and push it into a limited campaign whereby regime forces and Iran-backed militias would advance with Russian air cover from the east of the Aleppo-Hama road to regain control and secure it from the west. This would mean the loss of such large towns as Khan Shaykhun, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and Saraqib in addition to dozens of other towns and villages along both sides of the road. Ankara would therefore prefer to solve the issue with minimal losses and to pressure HTS into accepting the reopening of the highway.

### **Conclusion**

The convergence of interests between the three guarantor states does not conceal the fragility and transience of the Sochi Agreement. It is not unlikely, however, that Idlib will become a playground and a venue for the exchange of political messages,<sup>52</sup> especially between Russia and the US or between the US and Iran. The momentary stability is liable to implode if Ankara were to slow down the implementation of the agreement terms or put military pressure on one of the axes of the fourth de-escalation zone in Idlib, as occurred east of the Hijaz railway in late 2017 and early 2018.<sup>53</sup> Such an escalation could evolve into a limited battle should Ankara fail to fulfil its responsibilities under the agreement, for instance if it fails to restore the M4 and M5 transit roads. Reopening these roads, which remains the priority for Russia, seems today the only guarantee to keep the Sochi Agreement alive. It would bring temporary stability, which in turn would allow Ankara to regain its leverage and keep the Sochi Agreement from collapsing.

At the same time, the recent attack by HTS on the western Aleppo countryside in January 2019 suggests that Turkey might be in cahoots with what is happening. Having remained

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<sup>52</sup> Ziad Majed, “Idlib Between International Intervention and the Syrian Crisis Equations,” (in Arabic), *Aljazeera Institute*, November 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2TvatDP>.

<sup>53</sup> *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya*, “HTS Reveals...” See note 33 above.



neutral and even prevented its ally the National Army, based in the Euphrates Shield area, from supporting al-Zenki in Darat Izza, Turkey may wish to hand over responsibility for the security of the transit roads to HTS. This is reminiscent of its deployment of Turkish Army observation checkpoints in Idlib in October 2017. In Ankara's view, HTS is the faction most capable of guaranteeing safe traffic on the transit roads and tackling potential attacks from other jihadist organisations. While this requires approval from Russia, the latter still wishes to make the Sochi Agreement a success. Such a situation would limit the choices of the international donor community.

Following the HTS takeover of the countryside west of Aleppo, the SSG began exerting direct control over the LCs in the area. Meanwhile, the LCs of Ariha, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man and their HTS-free surroundings, in addition to vast areas in the al-Ghab Plain and Jabal Shahshabu, are all still affiliated with the SIG.

Providing support to opposition institutions and focusing on the SIG-affiliated LCs has been critical to the ability of local government structures to reject HTS control and stand up to it. Priority may be given to the LCs along the transit roads, where HTS power is in certain decline due to the NFL presence. The efficiency of such councils is likely to increase in the second phase of the agreement, which relates to the reactivation of transit access and may involve Russian military police. The implementation date for the second phase was initially set as the end of 2018.

Even if the roads were reopened under HTS auspices, the latter's authority over the LCs in cities and towns located along these roads will remain fragile given the commercial and social movement and the soft power HTS will need to manage transit access. This means that security efforts will be concentrated on caring for travellers rather than governing towns, which will push local dynamics to develop new forms of local governance. These include the possibility of opening up to the regime in one way or another, given the additional services the latter will provide to these councils and to the citizens of these towns.

Meanwhile, the health and education sectors are two major challenges that need to be addressed in these areas. To mitigate deteriorating conditions, there is a need to expand the network of beneficiaries, providing logistical support and advanced health equipment that are generally unavailable in northern Syria, and restoring hundreds of partially destroyed schools and providing appropriate school equipment, especially in IDP camps near the borders with Turkey.

Another effort needed is to pay closer attention to supporting community-based organisations and partnership programmes with SIG-affiliated LCs and stimulating coordination committees and youth initiatives whose engagement can stem the encroachment of extremist armed groups. One crucial element in addressing future challenges, whether regarding the extremist groups or the breakdown of the agreement and the commencement of a battle for Idlib, is a unification of the efforts of political, military, local governance and civil society actors in the NFL-controlled areas.

## Annex 1

The Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation, as guarantors of the observance of the ceasefire regime in the Syrian Arab Republic,

Guided by the memorandum on creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic as of May 4, 2017 and arrangements achieved in the Astana Process,

In order to stabilize the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area as soon as possible,

Have agreed on the following:

1. The Idlib de-escalation area will be preserved, and Turkish observation posts will be fortified and will continue to function.
2. The Russian Federation will take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and the existing status quo will be maintained.
3. A demilitarised zone 15-20 kms deep in the de-escalation area zone will be established.
4. The delineation of the exact lines of the demilitarised zone will be determined through further consultations.
5. All radical terrorist groups will be removed from the demilitarised zone by October 15.
6. All tanks, MLRS, artillery and mortars belonging to conflicting parties will be withdrawn from the demilitarised zone by October 10, 2018.
7. Turkish Armed Forces and the military police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will conduct coordinated patrols and monitoring with UAVs along the boundaries of the demilitarised zone, with a view to ensure free movement of local residents and goods and restoring trade and economic relations.
8. Transit traffic on the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) will be restored by the end of 2018.
9. Effective measures will be taken to ensure a sustainable ceasefire regime within the Idlib de-escalation area. In this regard, the functions of the joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish Coordination Centre will be enhanced.
10. The two signatories reiterate their determination to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations.

Done in Sochi on 17 September 2018 in two copies, both in English and Russian having equal legal force.

Signatures:

For the Republic of Turkey

For the Russian Federation

**Source: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/full-text-of-turkey-russia-memorandum-on-idlib-revealed-1.771953>**

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