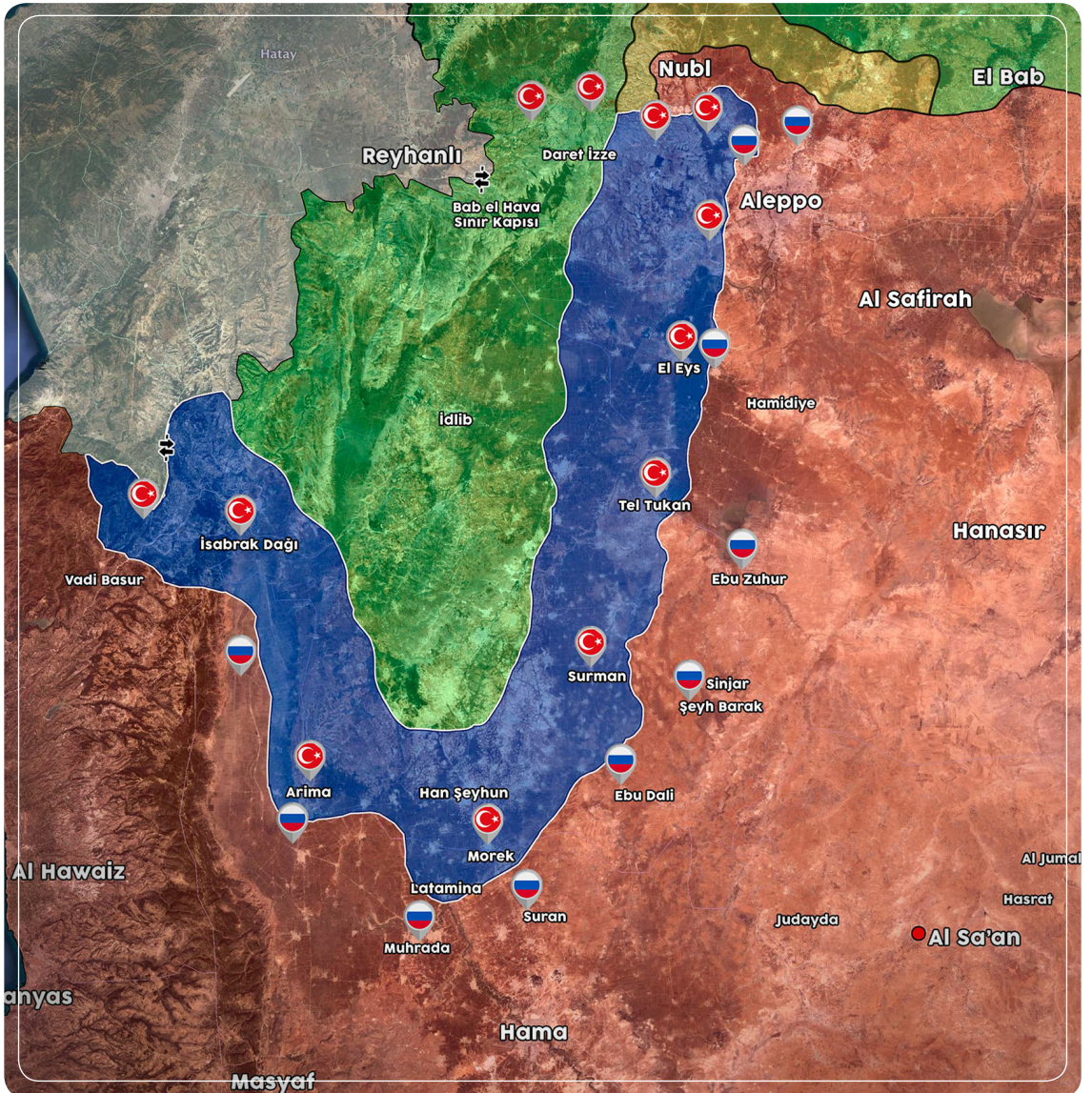


# INTERFACTIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE FUTURE OF IDLIB

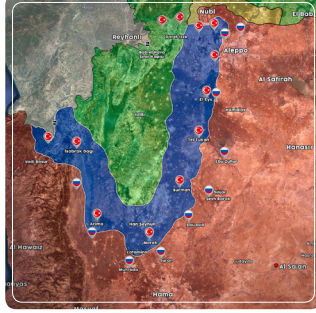
MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ, ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

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MURAT YEŞİLTAŞ, ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK



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## ABSTRACT

This analysis offers an array of possible scenarios of how Turkey and Russia might adjust the Sochi deal in order to counter the violent extremist group in Idlib and prevent a humanitarian crisis.

Since the planned wide-scale military operation by the Assad regime in July 2018 against the different military factions, Idlib has been the center of the Syrian conflict. On January 1, 2019, renewed clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the former Al-Nusra Front, and the Nureddin Zengi Movement brought Idlib again at the epicenter of the Syrian conflict. Now, HTS has become a dominant power in the region in terms of controlling territory, and has become capable of transforming Idlib. This paper aims to give a brief overview of the recent battle and the dynamics inside Idlib which led to the fighting between the Nureddin Zengi Movement and HTS. Furthermore, the dynamics which enabled HTS to win the battle will be analyzed. Based on the implications for the interfacational dynamics in Idlib, the Sochi deal between Turkey and Russia has to be adjusted given that certain of its terms couldn't be implemented on the ground. The paper also offers an array of possible scenarios of how Turkey and Russia might adjust the Sochi deal in order to counter the violent extremist group in Idlib and prevent a humanitarian crisis.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the planned military operation by the Assad regime in July 2018, Idlib has been the center of the Syrian conflict. On January 1, 2019, renewed clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the former Al-Nusra Front, and the Nureddin Zengi Movement, which is part of the Turkey-backed National Front for Liberation, brought Idlib again at the center of the Syrian conflict. As a result of these clashes in western Aleppo, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) managed to expel Nureddin Zengi and crushed Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham who joined the battle to help Nureddin Zengi against HTS. As HTS emerged victorious from the battle, militants managed to take control of strategic areas in Idlib and to enforce the handover of the administration of almost all areas inside Idlib to the HTS-backed ‘civil government’ called the “Salvation Government”. Now, HTS has become a dominant power in the region in terms of controlling territory and has become capable of transforming Idlib.

This paper aims to give a brief overview of the recent battle and the dynamics inside Idlib which led to the fighting between the Nureddin Zengi Movement and HTS. Furthermore, the dynamics which enabled HTS to win the battle will be analyzed. Following the discussion of these dynamics, the implications of the clashes for the internal dynamics of Idlib will be addressed and emphasis will be given to HTS’s new leading

role. Based on the implications for the internal dynamics of Idlib, the Sochi deal between Turkey and Russia has to be adjusted as certain terms of the deal couldn’t be implemented on the ground. As a result, the paper offers an array of possible scenarios of how Turkey and Russia might adjust the Sochi deal.

## THE FEUD BETWEEN HTS AND THE NUREDDIN ZENGI MOVEMENT

The Nureddin Zengi Movement led by Sheikh Tawfiq Shahabuddin is a major actor in western Aleppo, controls the Darat al-Izzah crossing to the Afrin region, and has a direct supply route to and from Azaz, Jarablus, and Al-Bab. Areas controlled by the Nureddin Zengi Movement are closed to other factions, which require special allowance to enter.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, the Nureddin Zengi Movement created its own pocket inside Greater Idlib where other actors like today’s Hayat Tahrir al-Sham cannot interfere.

Over the years, the Nureddin Zengi Movement proved itself a pragmatic actor that prioritizes the faction’s benefit and is able to enter and withdraw from alliances both with Syrian and foreign actors. During the battle for Aleppo in 2016, the faction allied with the Aleppo-based Free Syrian Army factions and took part in the Aleppo Operation Room. The Nureddin Zengi Movement enjoyed the support of the MOM operation room, which was a joint project of the ‘Friends of Syria’ to arm the Syrian opposition, but later on lost this support.<sup>2</sup> After doing so,

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1. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

2. Charles Lister, “Most vetted units in #Aleppo share external supplies. Zinki has at times done this since losing military vetted status in 15.”, Twitter, July 20, 2016, [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/755805081581125632](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/755805081581125632).



the Nureddin Zengi Movement reached out to the former Nusra Front after the faction officially cut ties with the Al-Qaeda central leadership.<sup>3</sup> This outreach by Nureddin Zengi resulted in the formation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in which Nureddin Zengi was a founding partner.<sup>4</sup>

During the period of the partnership between the former Al-Nusra and the Nureddin Zengi Movement, the parties solidified their personal connections and relationships; for example, figures like Husam Atrash and Muhammad al-Jolani met in each other's homes. As a show of trust, former Al-Nusra parked several tanks and armored vehicles in the depots of Nureddin Zengi and figures from Nureddin Zengi were appointed to the intelligence and communication department of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>5</sup> However, the warming of the relationship also accentuated their differences. While former Al-Nusra Front members had a militant Salafi understanding of Islam, fighters and leaders of Nureddin Zengi followed ideas of classical Islam and were open to Sufism. For example, fighters and leaders of Nureddin Zengi prayed at the graves of lost fighters, friends, and families, while former Al-Nusra figures rejected this behavior as *bid'ah* in Islam.<sup>6</sup> In this period, religious actors like Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini and Sheikh Abdurrazzaq al-Mahdi tried to mediate between the different religious interpretations of the two poles inside the new Hayat Tahrir al-Sham formation.<sup>7</sup>

3. Interview with an anonymous senior member of Festeqem Kema Umirt.

4. Can Acun, Bünyamin Keskin & Bilal Salaymah, "EL-Kaide'den HTŞ'ye: Nusra Cephesi", October 17, 2017, <https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2017/10/NusraCephesi.pdf>

5. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement; interview with an anonymous senior member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

6. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement; interview with an anonymous senior member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

7. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

The statement of Husam Atrash for the need of a united military body under the leadership of the Syrian Interim Government to protect Idlib from a fate like that of Raqqa led to harsh criticism and debates inside Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>8</sup> While the first major test could be overcome, the battle between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham resulted in the full withdrawal of Nureddin Zengi and figures like Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini and Sheikh Abdurrazzaq al-Mahdi from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>9</sup> Nureddin Zengi declared the end of any fighting between the former Al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham as a condition to join the new formation.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, intercepted communication between former Al-Nusra figures showed that the aggression came from former Al-Nusra, not from Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>11</sup> Even Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini would have been targeted if Muhammad al-Jolani didn't restrain the chief of its Idlib faction.<sup>12</sup>

After Nureddin Zengi broke its alliance with HTS, the faction refused to hand over former Al-Nusra's tanks and armored vehicles, and openly criticized former Al-Nusra for attacking Ahrar al-Sham. The leaked audio tapes which proved former Al-Nusra to be the aggressor in the latest fight against Ahrar al-Sham, led to high tension

8. Gregory Waters, "Hay'at Tahrir al Sham's Gamble: The Failure of Blood", Open Democracy, July 26, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/gregory-waters/hayattahriralsham-syria-idlib-turkey-AhraralSham-FSA>.

9. Patrick Hoover & Omar Kebbe, "After Raqqa: The Next Jihadist Stronghold in Syria", James Town, September 22, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/after-raqqa-the-next-jihadist-stronghold-in-syria/>

10. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

11. TNTreports, "#HTS has proven to be untrustworthy, liars and masters in creating fake statements. #HTS\_Leaks Burning flags is a minor issue in compare with all the rebels and civilians HT\$ mercenaries killed.", Twitter, January 6, 2019, <https://twitter.com/TNTreports/status/108205022055411456>.

12. "Abdallah al-Muhaysini", Counter Extremism Project, date is not available, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abdallah-al-muhaysini>.

between former Al-Nusra and Nureddin Zengi as the latter was accused of being behind the leak.<sup>13</sup> As Abu Jaber resigned from his position, Muhammad al-Jolani became the formal leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.<sup>14</sup>

Against possible HTS aggressions, the Nureddin Zengi Movement took the countermeasure of forming an alliance with Ahrar al-Sham called “Jabhat Tahrir al-Suriyah.”<sup>15</sup> In the time of Operation Olive Branch carried out against the PKK/YPG in Afrin, HTS prepared itself for a major assault on Nureddin Zengi to capture Darat al-Izzah and gain control over the crossing to the Afrin region and the Euphrates Shield areas. By doing so, HTS wanted to prevent any reinforcement of Turkish-trained factions to Idlib. With the start of the assault, HTS succeeded in initial gains, but later lost many territories as Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham attacked HTS from the southwest territories of Idlib upwards towards areas controlled by Nureddin Zengi. In this period, HTS faced a setback and even lost the Atmah border crossing to Turkey. HTS could only recapture some lost areas with the help of the Turkestan Islamic Party.<sup>16</sup> On April 26, 2018, the parties signed a new ceasefire agreement but tensions remained high.<sup>17</sup>

13. Interview with an anonymous member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

14. “HTS Announces Resignation of Leader, Appointment of Julani as Current Replacement”, Site Intelligence Group Enterprise, October 1, 2017. <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/hts-announces-resignation-of-leader-appointment-of-julani-as-current-replacement.html>; <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/hts-announces-resignation-of-leader-appointment-of-julani-as-current-replacement.html>.

15. Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda Again Addresses Factional Infighting in Syria”, FDD’s Long War Journal, March 24, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/al-qaeda-again-addresses-factional-infighting-in-syria.php>.

16. Ömer Özkizilcik, “İdlib’te Muhaliflerin Güç Savaşı”, Suriye Gündemi, March 2, 2018, <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/03/02/idlibte-muhaliflerin-guc-savasi/>.

17. “Terms of JTS and HTS Cessation of Hostilities Agreement”, Al Shahid, April 26, 2018, <https://alshahidwitness.com/jts-hts-hostilities-agreement/>.

The dispute between HTS and Nureddin Zengi evolved into a personal conflict between the figures of the two factions. For example, the family of Usama al-Turki, the commander of the HTS’s artillery units, was targeted by units of Nureddin Zengi which gave rise to his continuous animosity towards the faction.<sup>18</sup> The feeling of many HTS figures that Nureddin Zengi betrayed them is also a lasting factor. On the other hand, figures in the Nureddin Zengi Movement see HTS as a threat to their own enclave in western Aleppo. Nureddin Zengi also argues that they have seen the ‘real face’ of former Al-Nusra.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the ceasefire agreement several clashes have occurred between Nureddin Zengi and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham; these all ended, however, with a new ceasefire agreement. During this period, the Nureddin Zengi Movement expanded its alliances and joined the Turkish-backed umbrella of the National Front for Liberation. On May 28, 2018, Turkey gathered rebel factions in Idlib under one banner in order to counterbalance radical groups. The new National Front for Liberation included eleven Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army factions, including Faylaq al-Sham, Jaysh al-Nasr, the Free Idlib Army, the First and Second Coastal Divisions, the First and Twenty-Third Divisions, the Second Army, Jaysh al-Nukhba, Shuhada al-Islam Darayya, and the Al-Hurriyat Brigade. Later, they were joined by JTS, Jaysh al-Ahrar, and Suqour al-Sham.<sup>20</sup>

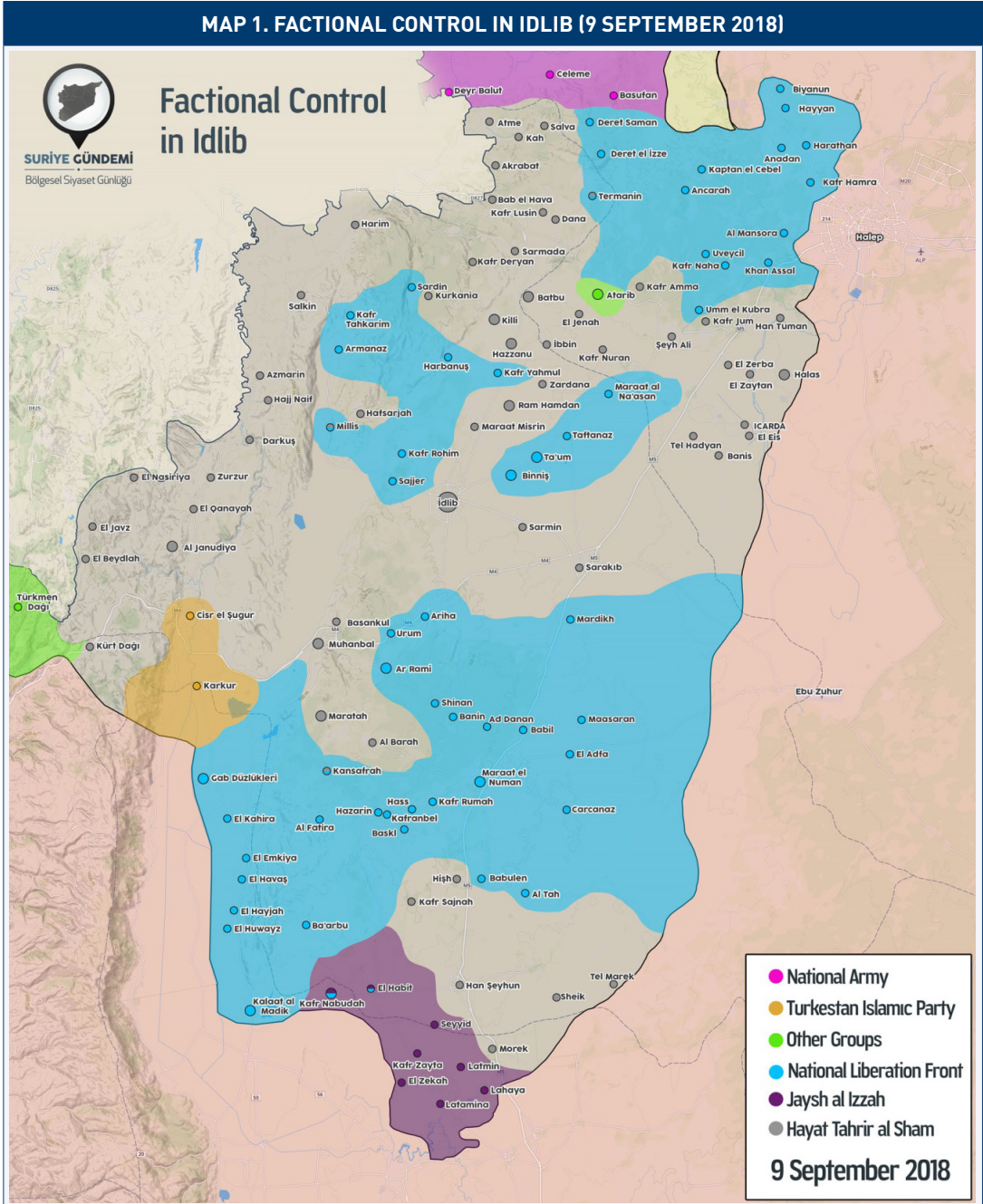
On November 3, 2018, Nureddin Zengi formed a new special unit called ‘Jaysh Zengi’ which was supplied with Turkish-produced

18. Interview with an anonymous senior member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

19. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

20. Ömer Özkizilcik, “Russia, Turkey, and the Fate of Idlib”, *Carnegie SADA Journal*, August 7, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76999>.

MAP 1. FACTIONAL CONTROL IN IDLIB (9 SEPTEMBER 2018)



Sarsilmaz SAR-308 rifles.<sup>21</sup> While all bigger factions like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, and Faylaq us-Sham are divided in central units and non-central units, Nureddin Zengi is able to mobilize all of its units in case of clashes with other factions which gives the faction a stronger position in the internal dynamics of Greater Idlib than its actual fighting force numbers would imply.

## THE FIRST PHASE: ELIMINATING THE NUREDDIN ZENGI MOVEMENT

On the first day of the new year, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham started a wide-scaled military operation against the Nureddin Zengi Movement in western Aleppo with the aim of disbanding the latter. To justify its actions, HTS put forth the killing of five of its fighters by alleged Nureddin Zengi members and the alleged refusal of Nureddin Zengi to implement the reached deal to hand over the suspects to a court. While Nureddin Zengi sources and the leader of Ahrar al Sham refused HTS's claims that Nureddin Zengi hadn't handed over the suspects, HTS had already started its military operation and accused HTS of misusing the incident to gain control over strategic areas.<sup>22</sup>

After HTS started its assault on areas held by Nureddin Zengi - primarily strategic Darat Izzah which links western Aleppo to Afrin - the

latter put up a strong resistance and Ahrar al-Sham threatened HTS with joining Nureddin Zengi if HTS did not stop its aggression.<sup>23</sup> As Nureddin Zengi was defending Darat Izzah, the faction was supported by certain individuals of the 9th Brigade which is part of the Turkish-trained National Army<sup>24</sup> and originates in western Aleppo. However, as Nureddin Zengi lost the strategic hill at Sheikh Barakah, the town of Darat Izzah was captured by HTS on January 2. Abu Yaqzan al Masri - a religious scholar of HTS who called the Turkish Army "secularists," prohibited to fight alongside the Turkish Armed Forces against the YPG/PKK, and threatened those who join the expected operations in the east of the Euphrates with hellfire -<sup>25</sup> was seen in Darat Izzah celebrating<sup>26</sup> the capture of the strategic town from Nureddin Zengi.

After the loss of the strategic town, Ahrar al-Sham's leader Ali Jaber Pasha declared war on HTS in support of Nureddin Zengi,<sup>27</sup> and the Ahrar al-Sham-allied Suqour al-Sham faction publically sent convoys to attack HTS.<sup>28</sup> On the

23. Ibid.

24. Ömer Özkizilcik, "Also the 9th Brigade which is part of the Turkish-trained National Army and is originated from western Aleppo is fighting together with Nureddin Zengi #NLF against #HTS extremists.", Twitter, January 1, 2019, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1080111564886368257>.

25. "أبو اليقظان المصري الشرعي في تحرير الشام يحرم القتال في معركة شرق الفرات", Halap Today TV, December 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSk1F0w-dJk>.

26. "Exchanged and continuous attacks between the National Front and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the countryside of Idlib and Hama, and more casualties raise to about 100, the number of casualties in 3 consecutive days of bloody fighting", SOHR, January 3, 2019, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=111342>.

27. Ömer Özkizilcik, "War declaration by Ahrar al Sham: Ali Jaber Pasha, leader of Ahrar al Sham, explained the events between Zengi and HTS in detail stating that they showed huge patience to HTS in order to not split blood. He end with saying that they will intervene as HTS hasn't stopped", Twitter, January 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1080460807480197121>.

28. Ömer Özkizilcik, "Suqour al Sham, part of the Turkish-backed #NLF started to send convoys against #HTS from its stronghold in Jabal Zawiyah. Pro-HTS sources were claiming that Suqour al Sham attacked them in the region.", Twitter, January 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1080469294582882306>.

21. Ömer Özkizilcik, "Very interesting development. Turkish-backed National Liberation Front soldiers are using a Turkish produced rifle Sarsilmaz SAR-308. It is more interesting as it is firstly seen in the hands of Nureddin Zengi fighters who are in constant animosity against HTS h/t @ssysfakb", Twitter, November 3, 2018, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1058803182040739841>.

22. "Jaber Ali Pasha: We Will Not Allow the Shedding of the Blood of Any Revolutionary Faction", Nedaa Syria, January 2, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/10804>.

same day, the General Command of the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation declared a general mobilization against HTS and called upon all elements of the umbrella to fight against it.<sup>29</sup>

However, the call by the General Command of the National Front for Liberation wasn't answered by the umbrella's factions - with the exceptions of Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham - despite all factions publishing the general mobilization statement on their media channels. Meanwhile, a subunit of the Free Idlib Army, the 13th Division, joined the fight near its stronghold in Marat al Nouman,<sup>30</sup> and a media worker of the 2nd Army also claimed that the 2nd Army, Jaysh al-Nasr, 1st Infantry Division, and Jaysh al-Nukhba joined the fight against HTS after the latter captured 14 villages in Jabal Shasho.<sup>31</sup>

As a senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement confirmed, the reaction and support by the factions belonging to the National Front for Liberation was too weak. Except for Suqour al-Sham, no faction joined the fight in full scale.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, a member of Ahrar al-Sham confirmed that bigger factions like Faylaq al-Sham and Jaysh al-Ahrar haven't joined the fighting.<sup>33</sup> According to the claims by a foreign fighter of a small Turkestan faction in Idlib that remained independent, Ahrar al-Sham hasn't joined the fight fully out of fear it will become weak in its strongholds against attacks by HTS.<sup>34</sup>

For example, the Free Idlib Army hasn't joined any fight against HTS. After the step down of its former leader Lieutenant Colonel Fares al-Bayoush, its new leader Suhayb Layoush is said to be under the influence of HTS. Many senior members of the Free Idlib Army, which is a union of certain Free Syrian Army factions, are trying to exchange the current leadership.<sup>35</sup> As the general mobilization call was not very effective among the factions of the National Front for Liberation, the factions that joined the fight were only capable of recapturing the 14 villages lost in Jabal Shasho, and gaining control over some villages near Marat al Nouman.

On January 4, HTS succeeded in capturing all areas held by Nureddin Zengi in western Aleppo;<sup>36</sup> remnants of the latter fled to the Afrin region leaving tanks and other heavy weapons behind.<sup>37</sup> During the fighting between HTS and Nureddin Zengi, some sporadic clashes erupted between HTS and the Turkish-trained National Army in which HTS reportedly used a TOW missile.<sup>38</sup> During the night of January 4, the Russian air force bombarded areas captured by HTS in western Aleppo.<sup>39</sup> With the defeat of Nureddin Zengi in western Aleppo, the areas captured by the National Front for Liberation around Marat al Nouman were handed over to local councils that hadn't put up fight against HTS but surrendered to the extremists.

29. "National Liberation Advance on the Account of 'Tahrir Al-Sham' in Rural Idlib and Hama", Nedaa Syria, January 3, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/10823>.

30. Cody Roche, "#FSA Division 13 announces the liberation of Tal Minnis East of the city of Ma'arat al-Nu'man and is now working on combing all the headquarters of #HTS in the region #دحر البغداد", Twitter, January 4, 2019, [https://twitter.com/badly\\_xerxed/status/1081204548620955648](https://twitter.com/badly_xerxed/status/1081204548620955648).

31. Interview with an anonymous media worker of the 2nd Army.

32. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

33. Interview with an anonymous member of Ahrar al-Sham.

34. Interview with an anonymous member of a small independent Turkestan faction.

35. Interview with an anonymous media worker of the 2nd Army.

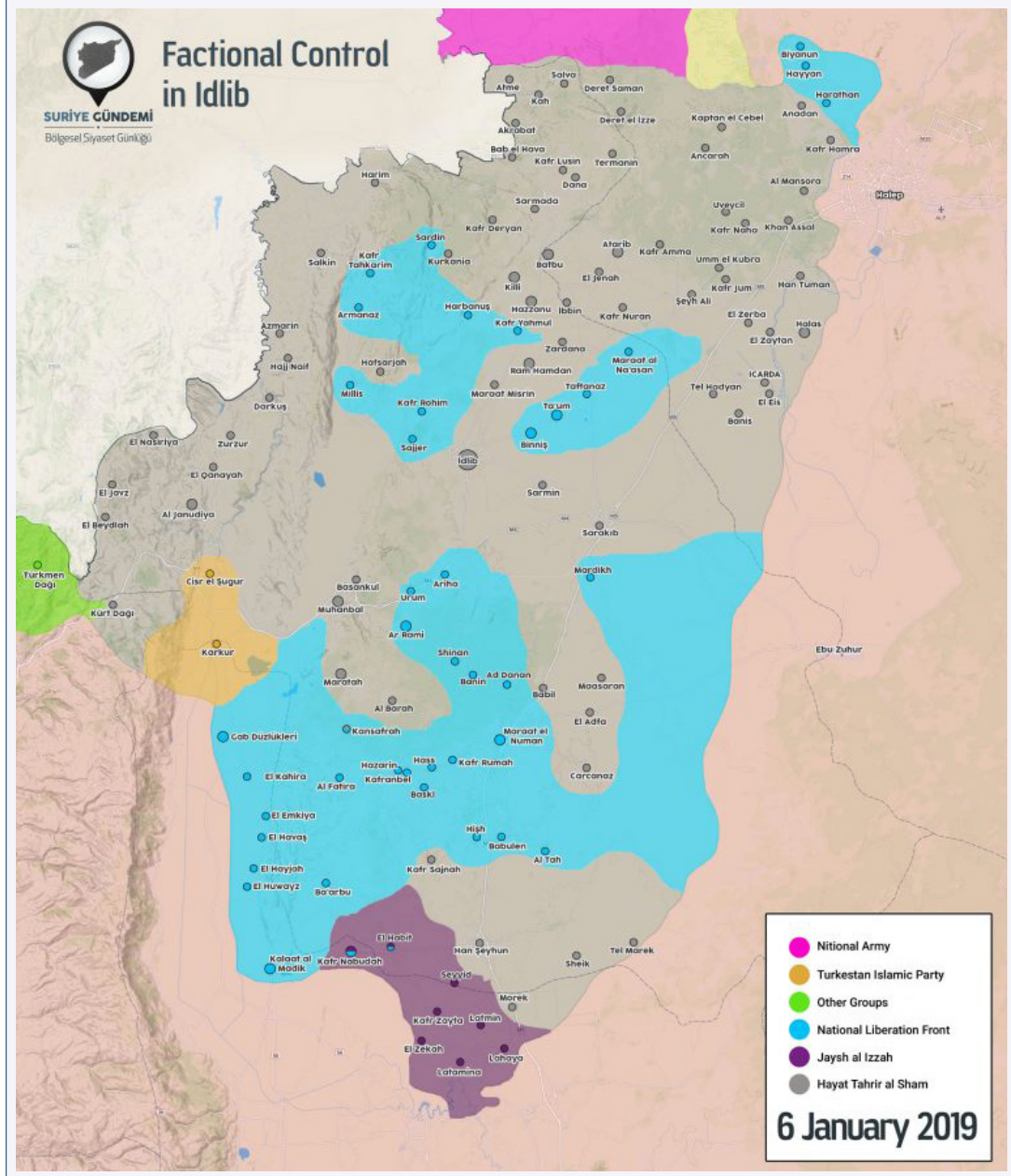
36. "Radical Fighters 'Capture 20 Towns and Villages' from Rebels in Western Aleppo", Middle East Eye, January 5, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hts-take-complete-control-west-aleppo-countryside-syrian-opposition-1030874890>.

37. "#Nour\_al\_Din\_al\_Zenki's tanks captured by #HTS.", Twitter, January 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Goverstraeten/status/1081598658355871744>.

38. Cody Roche, "#HTS [#US/#Turkish designated terrorist organization] | TOW #ATGM strike from yesterday posted to - 8,000 member @telegram group that has since been deleted claiming to target 'Firqa al-Hamzaat' [i.e. #FSA al-Hamza Division]", Twitter, January 5, 2019, [https://twitter.com/badly\\_xerxed/status/1081481217550286849](https://twitter.com/badly_xerxed/status/1081481217550286849).

39. "Russia kills 3 civilians in airstrikes on Syria's Aleppo", Daily Sabah, January 5, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2019/01/05/russia-kills-3-civilians-in-airstrikes-on-syrias-aleppo>.

MAP 2. FACTIONAL CONTROL IN IDLIB (6 JANUARY 2019)



On January 5, HTS put pressure on the independent town of Atarib, known for its fierce resistance against HTS and the former Al-Nusra Front. As Nureddin Zengi was defeated, Atarib was surrounded by HTS and representatives of the town made a deal with HTS to hand over the city to the extremists. According to the agreement, people who were wanted by HTS were allowed to leave the area towards Afrin.<sup>40</sup> The loss of Atarib is important as the city was a role model of non-violent resistance towards HTS.<sup>41</sup>

After the loss of its areas in western Aleppo, Nureddin Zengi members and its leadership fled to Jinderes in Afrin and started to regroup in the Turkish-protected region. While the leadership of Nureddin Zengi allegedly has found refuge in Jinderes, its leader, Tawfiq Shahabuddin, is believed to have entered Turkey.<sup>42</sup>

## SECOND PHASE: CRUSHING AHRAR AL-SHAM

After HTS secured its gains in western Aleppo, the militants focused on Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham, its close ally. The second phase of the operation launched by HTS on January 6 targeted a stronghold of Ahrar al-Sham in the Ghab Plains. While the region is a stronghold of Ahrar al-Sham, the topography of the region is not suitable for defensive warfare as attackers had the advantage of fighting downwards.

40. Abd Allah Al Darwesh, "HTS and representatives from Atarib, Aleppo reach agreement", Smart News, January 6, 2019, <https://preview.smartnews-agency.org/en/wires/356640/hts-and-representatives-from-atarib-aleppo-reach-agreement>

41. Haid Haid, "Local Community Resistance to Extremist Groups in Syria Lessons from Atarib", Chatham House, June 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2017-06-01-local-community-resistance-syria-atarib-haid.pdf>.

42. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

HTS started the second phase of its operations to crush Ahrar al-Sham in the Ghab Plains. While the latter put up resistance, the faction received small support from other elements of the National Front for Liberation. In addition to the support of Suqour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Nasr declared its support to the faction<sup>43</sup> and also Jaysh al Nukkba fought alongside Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>44</sup> The 2nd Army reaffirmed that they are part of the National Front for Liberation and will abide by its decisions and statements.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, subfactions of Faylaq al-Sham officially refused to fight against HTS<sup>46</sup> and Jaysh al Ahrar kept silent. Meanwhile, subfactions of many groups belonging to the National Front for Liberation declared their refusal to fight against HTS.<sup>47</sup> However, an anonymous senior member of Nureddin Zengi stated that all of these statements were just a media show without any real-life implications.<sup>48</sup>

On January 7, HTS managed to take control of Al Abideen, Suth Al Deir, Araniba, Al Naqeer, and Termala, and pushed into the Ghab Plains. After several advances in the northern

43. Cody Roche, "#FSA Jaysh al-Nasr statement declares their full commitment to all the decisions of the General Command of the National Liberation Front as one of its main components and is ready to repel any aggression including the advancing of the #Assad regime's forces on any axis #Hama", Twitter, January 8, 2019, [https://twitter.com/badly\\_xerored/status/1082598513316368385](https://twitter.com/badly_xerored/status/1082598513316368385).

44. Interview with an anonymous member of Ahrar al-Sham.

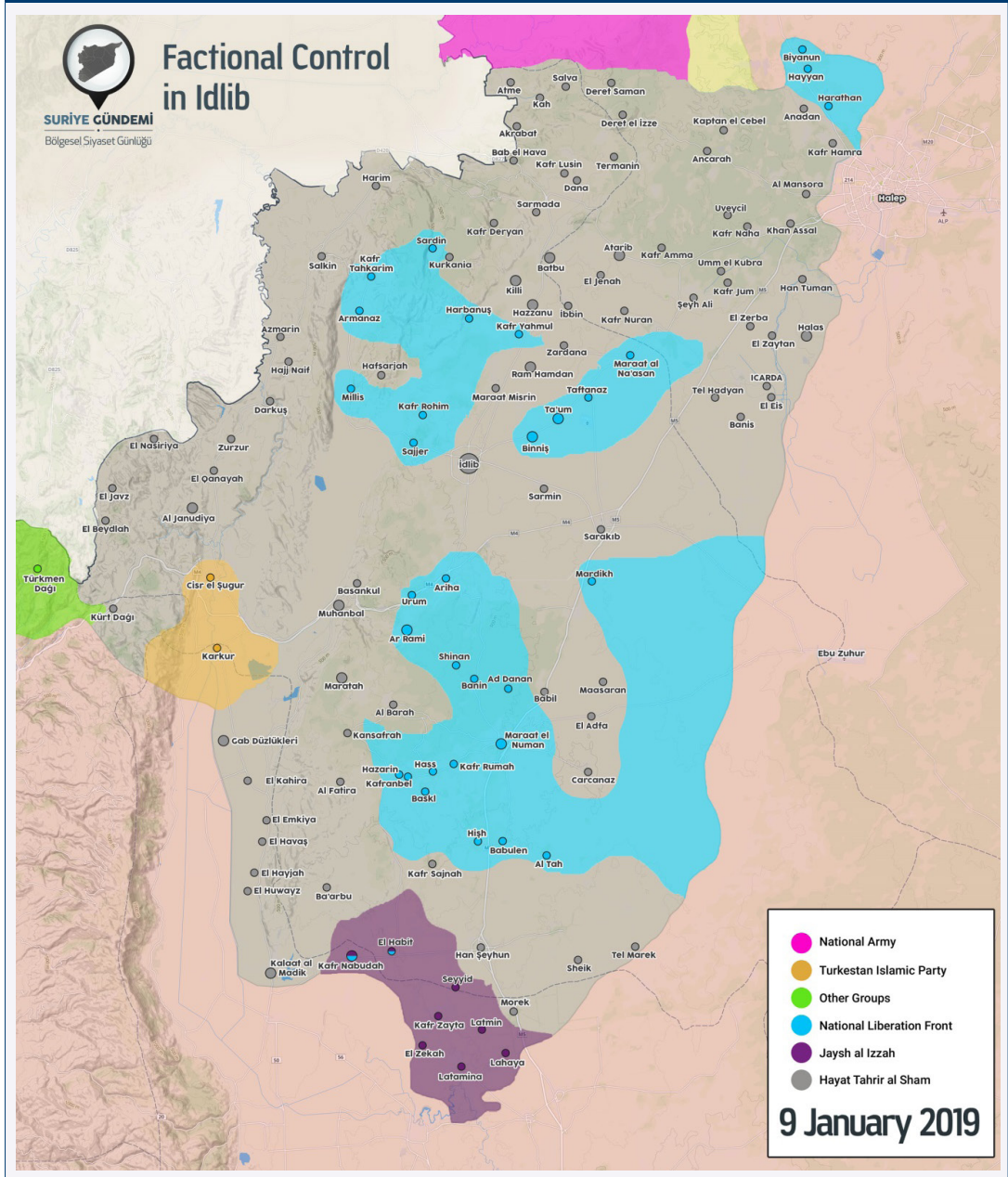
45. Cody Roche, "#FSA 2nd Army fires Captain Alaa Qateeni for making an individual decision without referring the matter to the leadership, and reaffirms that they're part of National Liberation Front and will abide by their decisions and statements #Hama", Twitter, January 7, 2019, [https://twitter.com/badly\\_xerored/status/1082283979192045568](https://twitter.com/badly_xerored/status/1082283979192045568).

46. "#Syria #Idlib Faylaq al-Sham (part of #NLF) says it will dissolve unit 'Fawj 111' because it refused to obey its commander.", Twitter, January 7, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Kyruer/status/1082356216700039175>.

47. Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Multiple sub-factions of the National Liberation Front, the conglomeration of anti-HTS rebels (Islamists and Free Syrian Army), publicly declared their neutrality to avoid being wiped out. Statements here from units of Jaysh al-Ahrar, Suquour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Nasr & Second Army.", Twitter, January 9, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1083032013265883137>.

48. Interview with an anonymous senior member of the Nureddin Zengi Movement.

MAP 3. FACTIONAL CONTROL IN IDLIB (9 JANUARY 2019)





part of the Ghab Plains and in Jabal Shasho, HTS and the local Ahrar al-Sham units signed an agreement according to which all regional Ahrar al-Sham units had to hand over the region and their heavy weapons to HTS and, in return, would be allowed to flee to Afrin.<sup>49</sup> With this gain, HTS managed to isolate the presence of Ahrar al-Sham in Ariha and Marat al Nouman - both of which are strategically located on the M4 and M5 Highways.

After the loss of its areas in western Aleppo, Nureddin Zengi members and its leadership fled to Jinderes in Afrin and started to regroup in the Turkish-protected region.

On January 10, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham together with Suqour al-Sham signed a ceasefire agreement. The deal provides for an immediate cessation of hostilities, an exchange of detainees, the lifting of all checkpoints inside the region, and its unification under the authority of the Salvation Government.<sup>50</sup> This effectively means that the administrative duties will be under the control of the HTS-backed “civil government.” On the same day, 1,000 fighters in the Ghab Plains and Jabal Shasho prepared to leave their areas and move to Afrin, in line with the signed agreement with HTS.<sup>51</sup>

49. “حصار مزودج يُجبر مقاتلي «أحرار الشام» في منطقة سهل الغاب على حلّ تشكيلهم”, Nedaa Syria, January 9, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/news/10939>.

50. “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over Idlib After Ceasefire Deal”, Al Sharq al Awsat, January 10, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1540261/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-takes-over-idlib-after-ceasefire-deal>.

51. “The Fighting Fronts of Hama Countryside about to Lose Hundreds of fighters of the ‘National Liberation Front’”, Nedaa Syria, January 13, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/11036>.

## A SMALL HTS GOVERNMENT IN IDLIB?

The defeat of Nureddin Zengi and Ahrar al-Sham by the hands of HTS will have strategic implications. As extremists were already controlling the entire Turkish border strip with Idlib, the capture of areas in western Aleppo will put the extremists in a new position of controlling the last direct supply route from Turkey to the Syrian opposition via Afrin. This new development not only put HTS in a strong position against its rivals to control and check any possible supplies in Idlib, but also enables the faction to secure economic income from all kinds of shipments into Idlib as it collects payments at the crossings into the latter. A stronger economic position together with the ability to control any supplies into Idlib will position HTS in the de facto role of controlling Idlib seeing that its militants have gained control over all crossings into the Idlib region. Furthermore, the capture of the Ghab Plains led to the control of the unofficial Qalaat al Madiq crossing to regime-held areas which will also provide the extremists with an additional income source.

In regards to administration, the HTS-backed Salvation Government has expanded its control to western Aleppo and the Ghab Plains,<sup>52</sup> while HTS signed a deal with Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham that the Salvation Government will control their areas in Idlib.<sup>53</sup> With the backing of HTS, the Salvation Government might take control of the last remaining territories in Idlib. HTS might be able to enforce any other local council in Idlib to cooperate with the Salvation

52. “حصار مزودج يُجبر مقاتلي «أحرار الشام» في منطقة سهل الغاب على حلّ تشكيلهم”, Nedaa Syria, January 9, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/news/10939>.

53. “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Takes Over Idlib After Ceasefire Deal”, Al Sharq al Awsat, January 10, 2019, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1540261/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-takes-over-idlib-after-ceasefire-dea>.

Government as the extremists are capable of blocking any supply to the local councils in Idlib. Surrounded by the regime in the south and HTS in the north, all local councils in southern Idlib may be forced to cooperate with the HTS-backed Salvation Government. Non-HTS civil structures may weaken soon and suspend their work inside Idlib. For example, the organization Free Idlib Police has announced a temporary suspension of its work and the handing over of its equipment and headquarters to the local councils.<sup>54</sup> The weakening of the Free Idlib Police will create a vacuum which will likely be filled by the HTS's Sharia Police.

Added to the above, the checkpoints of Jaysh al Ahrar near the Turkish-Syrian border were handed over to HTS after an agreement. According to the same agreement, the administration of areas under the control of Jaysh al Ahrar will be handed over to the HTS-backed Salvation Government.<sup>55</sup> A suggestion made by the former leader of HTS who defected<sup>56</sup> from the faction plays into this line. According to his proposal he made on his private 'Telegram Channel',<sup>57</sup> the HTS-backed Salvation Government should

54. Mais Noor Aldeen & Farah Nassif, "Free Police in Idlib announces suspension of its work until further notice", Smart News, January 10, 2019, <https://smartnews-agency.com/en/wires/357356/free-police-in-idlib-announces-suspension-of-its-work-until>.

55. Nagwan El Ashwal, "#JaishalAhrar (Ahrar Army/Abu-Saleh al-Tahan)& #HTS reportedly signed an agreement: checkpoints of Jaish al-Ahrar will be handed out to #HTS (note: those checkpoints are on Syrian-Turkish borders).Moreover, Jaish al-Ahrar accepted its areas will be run by #SalvationGovernment.", Twitter, January 10, 2019, <https://twitter.com/NagwanElashwal/status/1083620925474516992>.

56. "Hashim Al-Sheikh" Reveals Personal Differences with 'Al-Julani' and Clarifies His Position on 'Tahrir al-Sham', Nedaa Syria, January 14, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/11052>.

57. Hashim Al-Sheikh, "الحمد لله الذي تتم بعمته الصالحات، الحمد لله على توفيقه إخوانه الثورة للإلتحاق، وتحكيم لغة المصلحة العامة، والإعراض عن لغة السلاح التي لن تكون بلذن الله إلا لغة التقاهم مع النظام وأعدائه. وبهذه المناسبة أجد من الواجب على تجاه إخواني الإشارة والنصح لما يُنجز المرحلة القادمة، فإن الحفاظ على المكتسبات لا بد له من (عقل وتوكل)، ومن الإعتدال والحكمة إشرارك الأخوة في الجبهة الوطنية للتحريير في الهيئة التأسيسية مشاركتنا فاعلة تلحق بمكثنتهم وبحجمهم، وتمكينهم من حمل حقائب وزارية ضمن حكومة الإنقاذ ليشرع الجميع بأنه شر يكسو هو حقائبر يكسو ليس يتابع مغلوب، وليكون الجميع شر كاء في صنع مكتسب من مكتسبات الثورة فهم أصحابها بتابع مغلوب، وأهلها. #علم الجماعة #03bersh/171.

include the Syrian opposition and become a government of all for all.

Moreover, the defeat of Nureddin Zengi and Ahrar al-Sham will come at a price for the factions that haven't supported them in their fight against HTS. Every faction in Idlib will be forced to learn how to live with HTS supremacy or will become one of its targets.

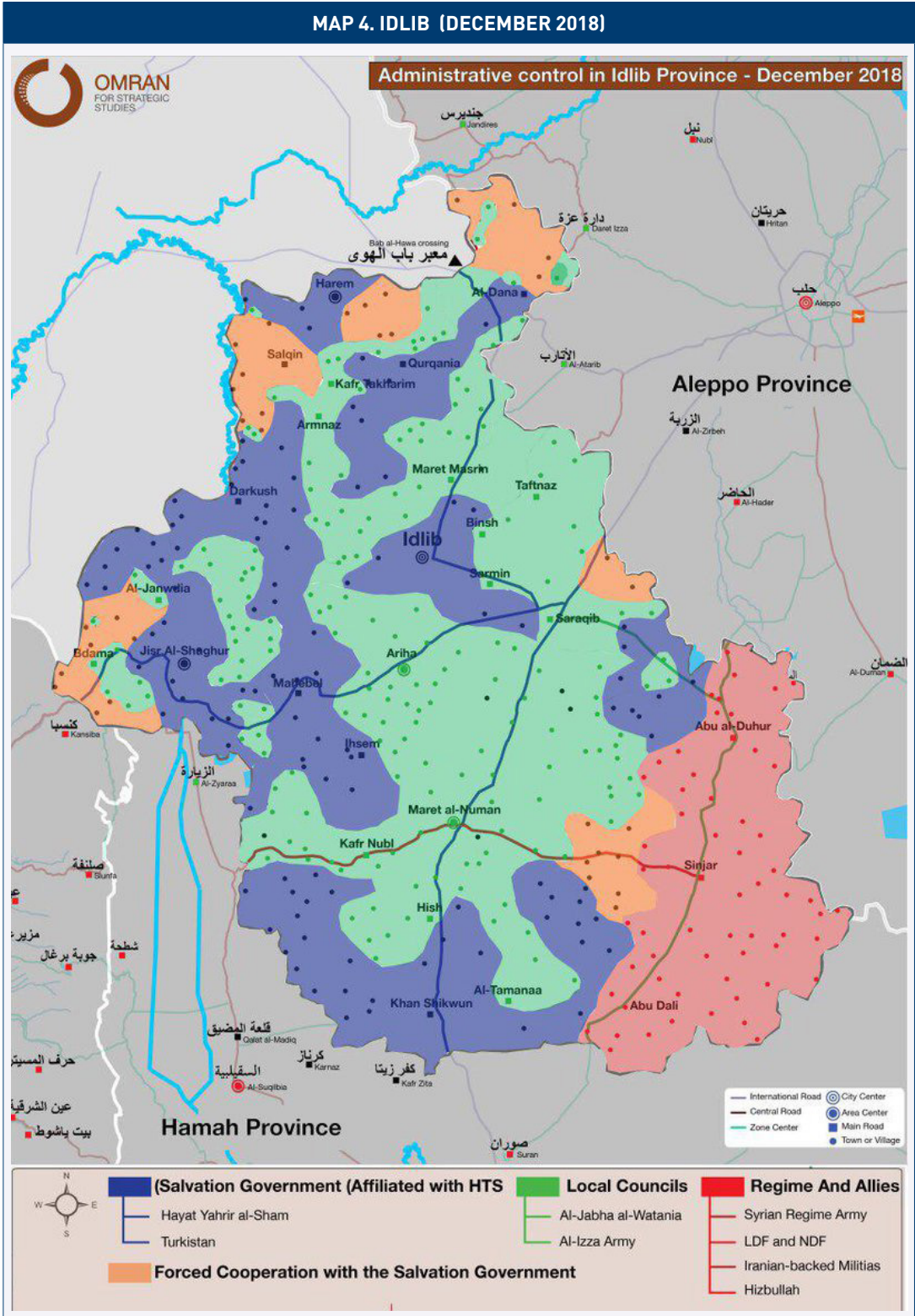
Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham who signed a ceasefire with HTS to save their last remaining areas are under permanent threat. HTS will easily find a pretext to launch an assault on Suqour al-Sham and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham, in the chaotic situation inside Idlib. It is certain that HTS will try to gain full control over M4 and M5 Highways. To do this, the extremists need to capture Ariha and Marat al Nouman from Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham. As claimed, HTS might have already demanded these two towns.<sup>58</sup> HTS has long played the role of a wolf in sheep's clothing;<sup>59</sup> however, with its recent superiority it will act more aggressively against anyone rejecting its newfound position of power.

Between January 14 and 15, several small brigades and battalions operating in villages of Idlib and western Aleppo joined Faylaq al-Sham. According to the faction, the following factions joined them: "Shohadaa Kafarnaha, Al-Huta, Anjara, Thwuar Al-Sham and Bayraq Al-Islam in addition to the Brigades of Jund Allah, Ansar al-Haq, Soqour Al-Islam, Ahrar Awijal, Qassam Battalion, Saad bin Moaz Martyr Yaman Ghayath and Ahel Sunnah and Jamaa." The importance of this development is even greater

58. Jens Hittrien, "Negotiations ongoing between HTS & NLF, with Faylaq al-Sham moderating. HTS demands NLF to retreat from all areas captured during Zenki offensive, control of Maarat al-Numan, Jarjanaz & Ariha, dissolution of Suqur al-Sham. Impossible demands. HTS is playing though.", Twitter, January 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/JensHittrien/status/1081588657449066496>.

59. Charles Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria", Combating Terrorism Center, September 2015, <https://ctc.usma.edu/al-qaida-plays-a-long-game-in-syria/>

MAP 4. IDLIB (DECEMBER 2018)



when one considers that the factions listed above are either former subfactions of the Nureddin Zengi Movement or Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>60</sup> With these new mergers, Faylaq al-Sham may evolve into a counterbalancing actor against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham inside Idlib.

After Turkey's decisiveness in preventing a new humanitarian disaster in Idlib and diplomatic pressure from western countries on Russia, Russia and Turkey signed the Sochi agreement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOCHI AGREEMENT

Developments on the ground in Idlib and a stronger HTS presence will have serious implications for the international context and the Sochi agreement signed between Turkey and Russia. After Turkey's decisiveness in preventing a new humanitarian disaster in Idlib and diplomatic pressure from western countries on Russia, Russia and Turkey signed the Sochi agreement. According to the agreement, a demilitarized zone should have been established along the frontlines of Idlib. This demilitarized zone had to be cleansed of radical elements such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the heavy weapons of the Syrian opposition faction. As a second step, the strategic M4 and M5 Highways, which link Latakia and Damascus with Aleppo, should have been opened to free trade.<sup>61</sup>

60. "Brigades and Battalions of Aleppo & Idlib Announced Joining 'Sham Legion'", Nedaa Syria, January 15, 2019, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/11075>.

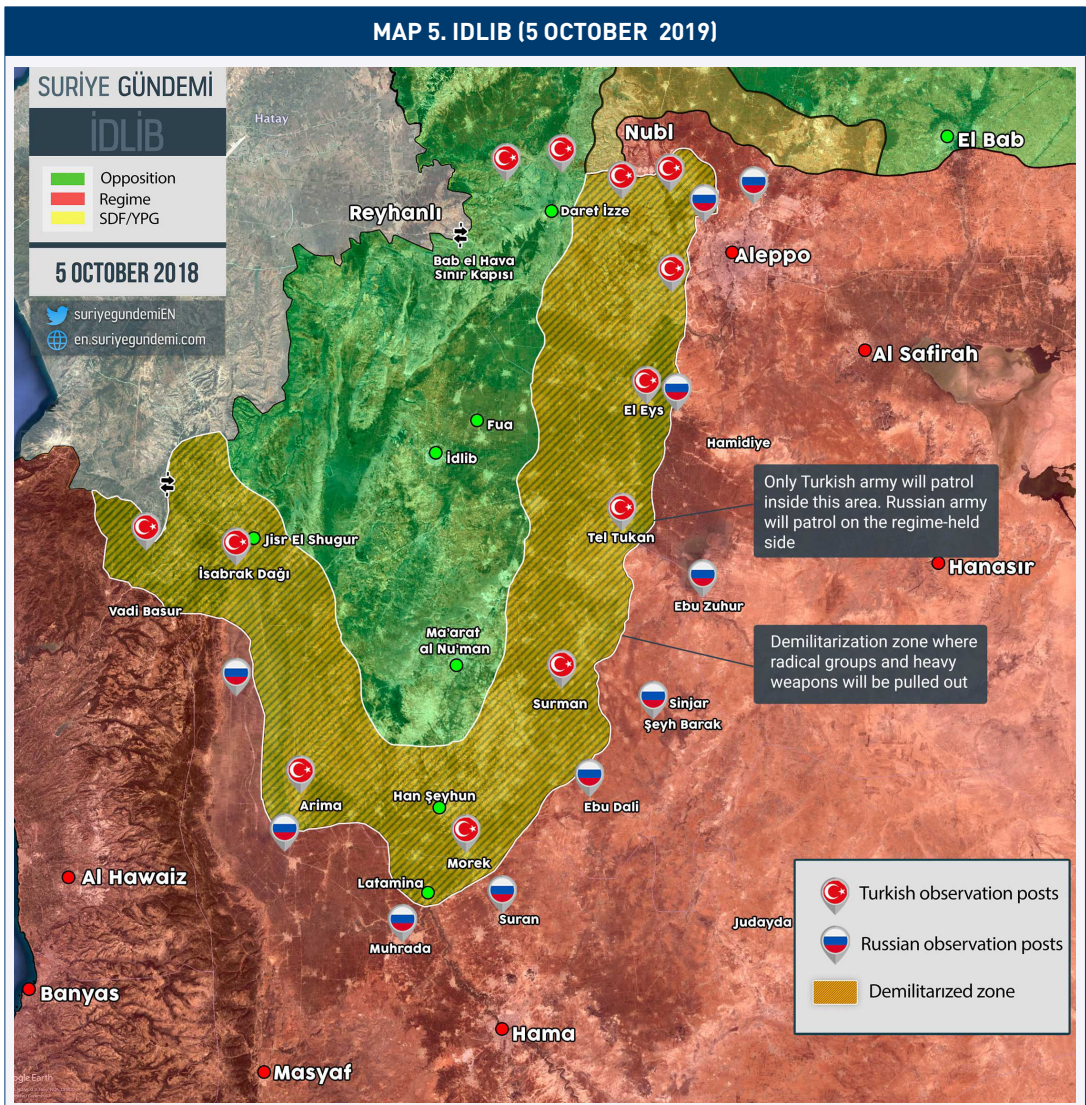
61. Richard Hall & Joyce Karam, "Idlib Agreement a Victory for Assad Regime as Trade Routes to Reopen", The National, September 19, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/idlib-agreement-a-victory-for-assad-regime-as-trade-routes-to-reopen-1.772011>.

With the newest HTS campaign against the Syrian opposition, militants gained control over two strategic areas which are located inside the demilitarized zone. This development is in contrast to the plans to erase the HTS presence inside the demilitarized zone. Additionally, if HTS manages to take control of the strategic towns of Ariha and Marat al Nouman, the group will control the entirety of the M4 and M5 Highways. HTS's efforts to sabotage the Sochi agreement will not only cause Turkey to be confronted by a new challenge but will also empower Russian, Iranian, and regime demands on Idlib.

Currently, HTS seeks to sabotage the Sochi agreement seeing that the agreement would end its presence in Idlib. With its newest operations, HTS puts itself into the position of being the only actor inside Idlib and forcing Turkey and Russia to accept it as their contact for Idlib affairs. Knowing Turkey's concerns about a new humanitarian disaster at its border and the dangers of a new refugee flow for Turkey and the European states, the faction has created a hostage situation. If the regime launches a Russian-backed military operation into Idlib, a new refugee crisis will occur which is an unacceptable scenario for Turkey. As President Erdogan said in the Tehran Summit, Idlib is not only important for Syria's political future, but is also "vital" for Turkey's national security, and for regional peace and stability.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the faction will try to use the almost 3.5 million civilians in Idlib as a human shield to force Turkey to continue to prevent a full-scale military operation into Idlib.

From the Russian perspective, the current situation in Idlib is an outcome that is far removed

62. "Protection of Civilians Is of Utmost Importance, Erdoğan Says at Idlib Summit", *Daily Sabah*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2018/09/08/protection-of-civilians-is-of-utmost-importance-erdogan-says-at-idlib-summit>.



from what Moscow had in mind by pressuring Turkey to separate the Syrian opposition from the radical elements. The fact that certain terms of the Sochi deal could not be implemented will likely result in new pressure from Russia towards Turkey to lay down its resistance against military measures. The immediate Russian airstrikes in western Aleppo after its capture by HTS<sup>63</sup> also held a message to Turkey. The phone call between Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and his Russian counterpart Sergey Shoigu to discuss the recent developments in Idlib<sup>64</sup> hints towards the expected start of renewed negotiations over Idlib. However, the public was not informed about the content of the conversation.

Renewed negotiations about Idlib may replay the entire dynamic before the Sochi Summit in which Turkey and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding. All of the arguments put forth during the Tehran Summit would be repeated but with two differences. Firstly, the Syrian opposition in Idlib will be less important as it was crushed by HTS. Secondly, the U.S. withdrawal decision will lead the parties to discuss Idlib in a broader context including the east of the Euphrates.

Regarding the fate of Idlib, there are four different scenarios for Turkey. These are:

1. Starting a Turkish military operation into Idlib to cleanse the area of HTS.
2. Approving a Russian-led military operation by the Assad regime while establishing a humanitarian safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

3. Rebranding HTS as an acceptable structure.
4. Freezing the dispute over Idlib and gaining time.

The first scenario seems to be the most unlikely among the ones listed. With the U.S. withdrawal declaration, Turkey's focus is on east of the Euphrates and Manbij. In this regard, Turkey will likely not seek to refocus and miss the opportunity to eradicate the PKK/YPG which is a long-term Turkish national security threat. Additionally, Turkey's military has to focus on the Aegean and the Black and the Mediterranean Seas while fighting terrorists inside Turkey. Therefore, Turkey's military will most likely not want to get involved in another major fight in Idlib. The Turkish Foreign Minister stated, "Radical groups are attacking the Syrian opposition, and we have taken the necessary measures to halt these attacks, despite minor delays in the implementation of the Sochi agreement." The minister also noted that the Idlib agreement has been successfully implemented in general.<sup>65</sup>

The second scenario which is to approve a Russian-led military operation in Idlib is the worst case scenario for Turkey. The much-feared humanitarian disaster would occur and Turkey would see millions of refugees trying to cross into its borders. As Turkey already hosts over 4 million<sup>66</sup> refugees, and social tensions arose over the huge refugee population inside Turkey, this scenario would have a catastrophic outcome for Turkey. The burden of this scenario might be eased by a humanitarian safe zone along the Turkish border; however, this would not be effective enough for Turkey to green light a Russian-led military assault towards Idlib. The

63. "Russia Kills 3 Civilians in Airstrikes on Syria's Aleppo", *Daily Sabah*, January 5, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2019/01/05/russia-kills-3-civilians-in-airstrikes-on-syrias-aleppo>.

64. "Defense Minister Akar, Russian Counterpart Shoigu Discuss Syria in Phone Call", *Daily Sabah*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/01/09/defense-minister-akar-russian-counterpart-shoigu-discuss-syria-in-phone-call>.

65. "Moderate Opposition, HTS Agree on Cease-Fire in Idlib", *Daily Sabah*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/01/11/moderate-opposition-hts-agree-on-cess-fire-in-idlib>.

66. "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey", UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>.

idea to relocate civilians in Idlib to Afrin and northern Aleppo isn't doable as these regions are already overpopulated with returned refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from all of Syria. What is more, such an operation would be very costly for Russia,<sup>67</sup> making it a very difficult decision for the country.

As a third theoretical scenario, Turkey could try to change HTS internally into an acceptable structure to ease Russian pressure and initiate the transition process in Idlib. Turkey has already worked towards separating the HTS's dogmatic and pragmatic wings, strengthening the latter.<sup>68</sup> The current HTS is very different from the former Al-Nusra Front. After the former Al-Nusra Front cut its ties to Al-Qaeda, it rebranded itself as "Jabhat Fath Sham" and later formed HTS together with other factions in Idlib. After the formation of HTS, former Nusra subfactions that refused to cut ties with Al-Qaeda formed Hurras Eddeen as a separate faction in opposition to HTS's evolution. With the defection of the Al-Qaeda core, HTS's pragmatic wing was strengthened within the faction. However, this scenario does not seem to be realistic. It is highly unlikely that the international community will accept a rebranded HTS. Also, it is questionable how much Turkey can change HTS as the faction's ideology is a strong obstacle. Abu Yaqzan al Masri, an important religious scholar of HTS, for example, made clear that HTS views Turkey as a secular/apostate state. Other links inform us that an HTS mufti considers Turkey as a nation of disbelievers.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the high cadres

of HTS are all figures who were embedded in the international Al-Qaeda network. Notably, Muhammed al-Jolani, its leader, was not only the official leader of Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, but also a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. In other words, neither is HTS willing to change nor is the international community ready to accept them.

Finally, Turkey may seek to freeze the situation in Idlib in order to win as much time as possible. By doing so, Turkey may risk HTS becoming more entrenched in Idlib, but this option will allow Turkey to act in a time of new dynamics. Postponing the time of the solution for Idlib and its implementation may help Turkey find a new window in which to act. For example, if the situation east of the Euphrates and Manbij becomes clear and the dust settles down, the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition might return to Idlib, or during this time, Turkey might become able to relocate IDPs in northern Aleppo and Afrin to their hometowns, enabling these regions to take new IDPs from Idlib which might ease the risks of a humanitarian disaster. Meanwhile, for the Russian side, a military operation in Idlib would be very costly and come with many risks. The Russians would need the active support of Iran-backed Shia militias to advance on the ground to the highly fortified region of Idlib. Russia is also aware that such an operation would take several months at least, and it would have to deal with HTS guerilla warfare in captured areas. All in all, to freeze the situation in Idlib might be an option for Turkey and Russia, but it would also mean to enable a de facto HTS government in Idlib. Such a government could have many unexpected long-term results. A safe haven for Al-Qaeda-affiliated radicals might become a breeding ground for global terrorism. To prevent this, Turkey and Russia could agree on extended intelligence sharing which would allow Russia to

67. Ömer Özkizilcik, "Double Edged Sword: Idlib", RIAC, September 3, 2018, <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/double-edged-sword-idlib/>

68. Ali Özkök & Ömer Özkizilcik, "Turkey Seeks to Expand Its Influence in Syria", RUSI, October 24, 2017, <https://rusi.org/commentary/turkey-seeks-expand-its-influence-syria>.

69. TNTreports, "SERIES OF MASS TAKFIR BY HTS MUFTIS", YouTube, January 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm2MkMF1Mew&feature=youtu.be>.

conduct airstrikes against specific targets so as to eliminate such threats. Also the U.S. might join efforts with Russia in these operations.

## CONCLUSION

Recent developments in Idlib have reshaped its internal dynamics. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham managed to eliminate or contain its rivals and to gain administrative control over nearly all of the sections of Idlib that were not held by the regime. While before HTS was the stakeholder in Idlib, with its two-step military campaign, it has now become the de-facto ruler. As Idlib's administration is going to be under the control of the HTS-backed Salvation Government, foreign humanitarian aid organizations might cut their humanitarian support for Idlib as most of these organizations might fear being labeled supporters of the small de facto emirate of HTS in Idlib. In addition, civilians, the Syrian opposition in Idlib, and their fighters may become disillusioned as many of them will refuse to cooperate or live under HTS. This may lead civilians and other figures to reach out to the Assad regime as many may see the regime as the less evil of the two. As is known, Syrian society hasn't risen up against the Assad regime demanding a Salafi emirate, but a free and democratic Syria. On the other hand, this new situation in Idlib may also strengthen the presence of the Syrian opposition in Afrin and northern Aleppo. As some fighters already have been evacuated to these areas, many others may prefer to join the Turkish-trained National Army boosting its human capacity before the planned military operation east of the Euphrates. Civilians may start to flee HTS-controlled areas to the already overpopulated areas in Afrin and northern Aleppo. Such developments will weaken the military strength in Idlib, making a possible Russian-led regime assault easier.

On the international level, the current situation in Idlib will weaken the Turkish position against Russia that will argue that the Turkish strategy failed and pressure Turkey into withdrawing from Idlib in order to allow a Russian-led regime assault or to cleanse Idlib by military means. As such an operation would have devastating results for Turkey, such as a new refugee crisis, it can be expected that Turkey and Russia will try to negotiate a solution with which both sides can be satisfied. Turkey will surely try to gain time which may open a window for both sides to find a better solution than the ones at hand. As Russia is aware of the huge costs of any military operation towards Idlib, it also might want to win time, while it finds a way to contain HTS in Idlib. In this regard, Turkish and Russian intelligence may work together to keep the presence of HTS in Idlib under control. This cooperation may also include Russian strategic and limited airstrikes - in contrast to Russia's vast airstrike campaign since its intervention in the Syrian war.

However, as it is important for the common benefit of the international community to prevent a safe haven for an Al-Qaeda-affiliated structure and the onset of a new refugee crisis, it would be better if the international community including European countries should support Turkey's stance in Idlib to counter possible new humanitarian crisis. Therefore, Turkey and Russia should expand their cooperation network including more actors who could help solve the complex situation in Idlib. All in all, Idlib remains a tremendous opportunity for Russia, Turkey, and the international community to find a common ground for the future of Syria.<sup>70</sup>

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70. Murat Yeşiltaş, "Does Turkey's Idlib Resolution Work?", *The New Turkey*, September 14, 2018, <https://thenewturkey.org/does-turkeys-idlib-resolution-work>.









# INTERFACTIONAL DYNAMICS AND THE FUTURE OF IDLIB

MURAT YEŐILTAŐ, ÖMER ÖZKIZILCIK

## SETA | ANALYSIS

Since the planned wide-scale military operation by the Assad regime in July 2018 against the different military factions, Idlib has been the center of the Syrian conflict. On January 1, 2019, renewed clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the former Al-Nusra Front, and the Nureddin Zengi Movement brought Idlib again at the epicenter of the Syrian conflict. Now, HTS has become a dominant power in the region in terms of controlling territory, and has become capable of transforming Idlib. This paper aims to give a brief overview of the recent battle and the dynamics inside Idlib which led to the fighting between the Nureddin Zengi Movement and HTS. Furthermore, the dynamics which enabled HTS to win the battle will be analyzed. Based on the implications for the interfactional dynamics in Idlib, the Sochi agreement between Turkey and Russia has to be adjusted given that certain of its terms couldn't be implemented on the ground. The paper also offers an array of possible scenarios of how Turkey and Russia might adjust the Sochi agreement in order to counter the violent extremist group in Idlib and prevent a humanitarian crisis.

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