



REPORT WORLD

# Why Jihadist Advances in Idlib Should Revive the Syrian Peace Process

FEBRUARY 4, 2019 — KAREEM SHAHEEN

The guns did not fall silent for long in Idlib. Syria's last opposition-controlled province was spared a bloody campaign by forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad in September after an eleventh-hour ceasefire deal between Russia and Turkey. In addition to a demilitarized zone, the deal was meant to weaken Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the former al-Qaeda affiliate that holds sway in much of the province.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the new year began, however, clashes erupted between HTS and rival rebel groups who were routed in quick succession, cementing the jihadists' hold over the region.<sup>2</sup> The clashes erupted two weeks after President Donald Trump announced that U.S. troops would begin withdrawing from Syria, where they were fighting ISIL.<sup>3</sup> While it highlighted their power and the fickleness of what remains of Syria's armed opposition, HTS's gains pointed to a deeper reality—the peace in Idlib is unsustainable and will not hold for long, threatening the fate of three million civilians with nowhere to go. It bookended the crushing of the rebellion against the Assad regime, and saw its penchant for self-rule overcome by the myriad interests of competing regional and international powers.



IN THIS HANDOUT IMAGE PROVIDED BY HOST PHOTO AGENCY, RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN (L) AND PRIME MINISTER OF TURKEY RECEP TAYYIP ERDOGAN SHAKE HANDS DURING AN OFFICIAL WELCOME OF G20 HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT, HEADS OF INVITED STATES AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AT THE G20 SUMMIT ON SEPTEMBER 5, 2013 IN ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA. SOURCE: RAMIL SITDIKOV/HOST PHOTO AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

But the rebel infighting and the ensuing crisis also offer a way out of the quagmire, perhaps one that has some redemptive value amid Assad's military victory.

With the jihadists on the ascendant, the risk of a bloody assault by Assad's forces has risen, but its costs to Idlib's civilians and 1.2 million internally displaced people is unacceptably high. With the opposition's disintegration, it is imperative to resolve the crisis peacefully once and for all. The international community must revive the moribund Geneva peace

process, using reconstruction aid as leverage with Assad and Russia to introduce concrete reforms on strict deadlines. This is the only way out that could preserve a glimmer of the early demands of the uprising for dignity and political participation.

## A Tangled Web

Idlib is the last province under rebel control in Syria and one of three regions that are still not under the control of the Syrian government. The province is almost entirely held by two rival coalitions, one led by jihadists who were affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the other officially backed by Turkey. The first is HTS<sup>4</sup>, the latest iteration of Jabhat al-Nusra, which severed its ties with the global terror network led by Ayman al-Zawahiri,<sup>5</sup> as did a smattering of less powerful militias. The second is al-Jabha al-Wataniya lil Tahrir (National Front for Liberation),<sup>6</sup> an alliance of rebel groups including the powerful Faylaq al-Sham and remnants of the once-powerful Ahrar al-Sham and Nouredine Zinki<sup>7</sup> movements, and is backed by Turkey.

The National Front has a civilian arm known as the “interim government,” which administers the regions under its control and is nominally the opposition’s chief governing body, while HTS has a rival outfit called the “salvation government,”<sup>8</sup> which, after HTS’s latest territorial gains, effectively administers most of Idlib.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to most of Idlib, the Syrian government does not control northeastern Syria, which was liberated from ISIL by U.S.-backed Kurdish militias and remains under those militias’ control, as well as large tracts of northern Syria that are under the control of Syrian proxies of Turkey, collectively known as the rebel National Army. The latter controls Afrin, a Kurdish enclave that also borders Idlib.

Idlib fell in 2015 to an alliance of mostly Islamist militias called Jaysh al-Fateh (Army of Conquest) that included Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>10</sup> That alliance collapsed, but rival rebel groups remain enmeshed with each other throughout much of the province, complicating any efforts to target designated terror groups like Nusra.<sup>11</sup>

Idlib is home to three million people, nearly half of whom are internal refugees who fled from other parts of Syria.<sup>12</sup> The province became a dumping ground for the defeated opposition: in other parts of Syria that fell to regime control, rebels and civilians who did not wish to reconcile with the government were forcibly exiled aboard buses to Idlib, including people from eastern Aleppo, Homs, Daraa, and eastern Ghouta.

The humanitarian situation is dire for the tens of thousands living in makeshift tents and refugee camps along the border with Turkey. Torrential rains followed by freezing temperatures have damaged tents and homes, putting some 10,000 children at risk.<sup>13</sup> At least one girl died due to the cold, according to medical workers, in mid-December.<sup>14</sup>

Fear of violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of people in Idlib over the past year towards the closed Turkish border. An assault could spark the greatest humanitarian catastrophe in the war. Those concerns prompted a wave of shuttle diplomacy in September of 2018 aimed at preventing just such an offensive. Syrian government forces, fresh from battlefield victories in the south, were eager to seize the momentum and attack Idlib.

The Sochi memorandum, agreed to by Russia and Turkey, created a fifteen-to-twenty-kilometer-deep demilitarized zone, requiring radical groups like HTS to pull back from the area and tasking Ankara with ensuring the group's compliance. However, events over the last two weeks indicated that the group had not been weakened by the agreement, and instead has emerged ready to seize even more territory.

In early January, clashes erupted between HTS and Zinki, a battle that quickly engulfed other rebel groups and led to a swift rout of the Turkish-backed groups. HTS expanded its area of effective control over dozens of towns and villages, in addition to seizing the city of Atarib and exiling its local fighters.<sup>15</sup> Some rebel fighters disbanded or fled to Turkish-controlled regions. Ahrar al-Sham in the Ghab plain, the fertile gateway to Idlib from neighboring Hama, agreed to dissolve and handed over its territory to HTS.<sup>16</sup>

The group's gains four months into the ceasefire surprised many observers, who had assumed HTS would be either weakened or forced to co-exist with rival rebels under threat of Turkish intervention. But Ankara did not signal an imminent campaign against HTS or greenlight a retaliation effort by rebel groups. While Turkey has indicated that it seeks a united rebel front, HTS appears to have furthered its goal of forcing its own banner to the head of the column.

## What Happens Next?

The way things are going, it is difficult to see a way out for Idlib, or at least its civilians, in the long term without a violent resolution. However, in the short term there are three credible possibilities.



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The first is that Turkey will continue its aloofness, declining to involve itself or its proxies with the infighting in Idlib while it deals with more pressing concerns like Kurdish militias in the northeast,<sup>17</sup> at least until Moscow signals a desire for involvement. The second is that Russia and the regime will take HTS's expansion as *casus belli* for a campaign to reclaim Idlib, arguing that they were fighting terrorists all along, and launch an invasion of the province. The third and final possibility is that Turkey may decide to take the initiative and launch a military campaign spearheaded on the ground by its Syrian proxies to drive HTS out of the area.

None of these options are ideal for Idlib's civilians and vibrant civil society, which has continued to protest both the Assad regime and the extremists in their midst. But there are bad and worse options.



SYRIANS PROTEST AGAINST THE EXTREME IDEOLOGY OF HAY'AT TAHRIR AL-SHAM AT THE INTERNATIONAL RESCUE UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF MAARET AL-NUMAN IN IDLIB PROVINCE ON 23 JANUARY 2019. SOURCE: @INTELECTVOICES

Many of the activists, opposition members, and fighters who remained in the province from the outset, as well as those who fled from elsewhere, fear the prospect of retribution by government forces, security services, and auxiliary militias.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to assess the exact situation for the thousands who have chosen to reconcile with the government and remain in their homes in areas previously held by the regime, because many fear speaking out while they are under suspicion of harboring sympathies for the opposition. But whether there is any truth to sporadic reports of persecution,<sup>19</sup> Idlib's residents fear their punishment will be greater than other parts of the country that capitulated earlier in the conflict.

Moreover, such a fraught surrender would only come at the tail-end of a bloody campaign that would dwarf in its brutality the offensives that reclaimed Aleppo and eastern Ghouta for the regime, and which leveled civilian infrastructure, included chemical attacks, and led ultimately to thousands of civilian casualties.

The prospect of continued rebel rule is not attractive either. Rebel infighting has exhausted even the most ardent supporters of the uprising,<sup>20</sup> and the sense of insecurity has been heightened by a seemingly unending cycle of kidnappings and assassinations. HTS is unpopular, even if many must tolerate it by virtue of its strength, and both the opposition's official interim government and HTS's civilian arm, the salvation government, are seen as mere tools.

More importantly, though, continued rebel rule is unsustainable because the gap between government- and rebel-controlled territory will only grow wider with time. As services are restored and a degree of normalcy returns to life in government-held areas, and relations with regional powers, already on the mend, are fully resumed, the stark contrast with the ongoing humanitarian calamity in Idlib and the absence of services will increase. This will put pressure on local rebel groups who have neither the will nor the capacity to improve the lot of civilians or strike out in a renewed insurgent campaign against the regime and the Russian air force.

Finally, the predominance of HTS over other rebel groups means that the specter of a regime assault backed by Moscow is never too far off. The Sochi agreement that prevented an assault on Idlib back in September was predicated on Ankara restraining the jihadists, and their resurgence will remain a sword of Damocles that offers a ready-made excuse whenever Russia feels the moment is opportune for a military assault.

## Turkish Tutelage

The most acceptable option to many in Idlib is one that is convenient in the short term but also unsustainable: Turkish tutelage. While it is a bitter pill to swallow for communities that resisted Assad regime control and hardline jihadist excess, and who still cling to the ideal of an undivided Syria, control by Turkey, or at least by its proxies, seems to many like the most benign option.<sup>21</sup> The areas under the control of the rebel National Army, the moniker given to the forces under Turkish command that led the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations in northern Syria and the Kurdish

enclave of Afrin, are relatively functional and disciplined, not to mention safe, owing to their protection by Turkey's understandings with Russia.

Such a campaign would be advantageous to Ankara for multiple reasons. First, it would be an internationally popular offensive to disarm a group seen as a potential long-term threat to the West and which usurped the values of the Syrian revolution. Second, it would expand the territory under Turkish control on the border, potentially allowing the repatriation of tens of thousands of the nearly four million refugees hosted by Turkey, who have become a political hot-button issue for President Erdogan's government. One of the few points of agreement by political bases in his highly fractured country is the need for refugee returns.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, it would retain a land buffer with the Assad regime and eliminate jihadist control over a key border crossing.

The offensive would also be popular with the Syrian fighters who form the core of the troops that carried out Turkey's campaigns against Kurdish militias. In interviews during the Afrin campaign, officials and commanders stressed that they hoped Ankara would eventually green-light an offensive to reclaim Idlib.<sup>23</sup> Such a force would be capable, in the event of a peace deal, of taking on peacekeeping duties throughout the province.<sup>24</sup> Estimates of the size of the rebel National Army currently range 20,000–30,000 fighters, and individual commanders and officials have confirmed that Ankara trains and provides a monthly stipend to the troops.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, such a campaign appears to be a distant possibility, primarily because Turkey has repeatedly indicated it sees Kurdish militias on its border as the paramount national security threat emanating from Syria. Ankara has continued to defy American exhortations calling for the protection of Kurdish fighters who spearheaded the fight against ISIL and has declared its intention to take from them the city of Manbij, west of the Euphrates, as a top priority. Syrian rebels will have to join the fight.

Like in the Afrin campaign, Turkey will have to secure Russian approval to launch another ground intervention in Syria, which has raised the question of whether Moscow will demand concessions in Idlib, such as more territory under regime control and the reopening of the strategic M5 highway linking Aleppo and the coast. The fact that Ankara has not forcefully responded to the latest HTS advances, and that Moscow has not indicated a renewed appetite for violence, has sparked a debate among Syrians in the opposition on whether a deal is being concocted behind the scenes.

In fact, Turkey may be unwilling to immediately act to curb HTS's advances because the group's destruction is a point of leverage in peace negotiations that can be used to push for curbs on Kurdish and pro-Iranian militias. In addition, a deal that sustainably resolves the situation in Idlib is unlikely to pass muster without parallel compromises given to all the international parties to the conflict, including Turkey, Russia, Iran, and likely the United States as well, in addition to

the Europeans, who continue to hold the prospect of reconstruction aid and expertise.

Such a solution may take on various iterations but would form a circular transactional model, in which the fruits of a compromise would pass on to the next regional or international power in line, in order for it to work.

For example, Turkey would be allowed to invade Manbij in exchange for further inroads by Russia and the regime in Idlib. Russia could pledge to limit Iranian expansion in eastern Syria as the United States withdraws from the battlefield, exerting its own control over the resource-rich border with Iraq. A deal between Ankara and Tehran could touch upon the issue of Kurdish militias in both states and in their traditional strongholds of the Qandil Mountains, perhaps in an agreement whereby Iran would host Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leaders, removing them as a threat to Turkey but exerting more influence over the Kurdish struggle, an arrangement that is somewhat similar to the Islamic Republic's hosting of al-Qaeda figures for a time despite the enmity between the two.

These solutions are illustrative of a broader point, which is that the local actors in Idlib or elsewhere in Syria have little say over the outcome of peace negotiations. This is codified in the current forum for talks, which is the tripartite Astana process that includes Russia, Turkey, and Iran. In short, any negotiations are subject to the interests of global and regional powers, not the interests of the Syrian people.

But there is another way.

## Can Geneva Rise from the Ashes?

To many observers, the Geneva peace process is moribund. Stalled and powerless to enforce its mandate for a political transition, the United Nations and its Security Council have been hamstrung by Russia's repeated use of the veto to prevent even rhetorical condemnation of government brutality.<sup>26</sup>

With the disengagement of the United States, and military victories by the Syrian government, the prospect of a political transition is farther away than ever, and Assad's opponents have little leverage with which to extract concessions. The United Nations' Syria envoy, Staffan de Mistura, recently left his post with a final notch of failure in his belt, after his attempts to revive support for a committee that would draft Syria's post-war constitution ran aground, with a humiliating snub by Damascus adding insult to injury.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the conflict, the United Nations has repeatedly failed to secure consistent humanitarian deliveries to besieged areas, and has even been accused of collusion with the regime by funneling aid money through institutions controlled by members of its inner circle.<sup>28</sup>



And yet, a revived peace process is the only path forward for a sustainable peace deal in Syria that encompasses Idlib and



RUSSIAN DEPUTY UNITED NATIONS (UN) AMBASSADOR VLADIMIR SAFRONKOV CAST THE SOLE VOTE AGAINST A VOTE ON A DRAFT RESOLUTION DEMANDING THAT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT COOPERATE WITH AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SUSPECTED CHEMICAL ATTACK IN IDLIB PROVINCE ON APRIL 12, 2017. SOURCE: SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGE

prevents a bloodbath, offering a face-saving way out that brings some measure of peace to the country and prioritizes the needs of Syrians, as opposed to their international sponsors.

Consider the European Union and Russia, rivals who now have similar goals in Syria: it might be possible for them to agree on a sustainable peace deal that allows the former to create conditions for investment and the safe return of refugees, and lets the latter extricate itself from a conflict that is proving a drain on its economy while securing some deals in the process.

The European Union has tied reconstruction aid to a credible political transition in Syria, a prospect that today is as unlikely as it is ill-defined. However, the funds remain a point of leverage, one that to the Russians appears to be a genuine possibility given the quiet reopening of European diplomatic missions in Damascus in recent months, although with limited engagement.

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This confluence of interests between the European Union and Russia slowly developed in 2018, with the conspicuous participation of France and Germany in Syria summits alongside Turkey raising some eyebrows<sup>29</sup>. One of the signals

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belying these behind-the-scenes talks was the surprising delivery in July of 2018 of fifty tons of French humanitarian aid to Hmeimim air base, the main staging area for Russia's aerial campaign in the country.<sup>30</sup> The aid was meant for eastern Ghouta, which had just recently been captured by Assad and destroyed by Russia; the delivery came just as the regime was launching another offensive to reclaim all of southern Syria.

It is unclear whether the European Union secured any Russian concessions in exchange for the humanitarian aid gesture, but it is notable that, later that month, the Assad regime quietly acknowledged hundreds of deaths of detainees tortured in its prisons, sending notices to local civil registries asking them to update the status of many prisoners to "deceased."<sup>31</sup> The move was widely interpreted at the time as a sign of the regime's impunity in victory. But it also likely represented a concession by the government, which has historically refused to address the fate of detainees, or even to acknowledge holding them, under the persistent inquiries of their families, and least of all while it celebrates victory.

Two months later, Syria held its first municipal elections since the uprising began, a step forward though marred with the irregularities common to a police state.<sup>32</sup> That step was followed weeks later by a summit in Istanbul that brought together Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Angela Merkel, and Emmanuel Macron, with renewed calls for a political process and a revival of the effort to draft Syria's new constitution.<sup>33</sup> At the time there was a general feeling that this was all much ado about nothing, but viewed in the context of renewed engagement between Russia and the European Union, it seems pregnant with potential.

While the process seems somewhat stalled amid the renewed tensions in Idlib and those between Turkey and the Kurdish militias, both Paris and Berlin have continued their quiet engagement behind the scenes on the ground. Though the United States is in the early stages of a withdrawal, France maintains a force on the ground as part of the anti-ISIL coalition, and has said it will maintain it.<sup>34</sup> It set aside fifty million euros for "stabilization" efforts in areas liberated from the terror group, with a focus on Raqqa,<sup>35</sup> while Germany allocated 100 million euros for areas in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Continued European engagement obviously has an element of self-interest, with the prospect of new trade and investment deals and the return of some refugees blunting far-right critiques. But it now constitutes the only path forward. It would compel the introduction of political reforms by tying them to specific metrics such as the reining in of sectarian militias, security service reform, or constitutional amendments, which, if developed conscientiously and with an eye for real reconciliation, may meet some basic demands of the uprising and give Syrians a stake in the political solution. It would also arrest the realpolitik deal-making that prioritizes the interests of foreign powers with zero accountability.

# A Peace Process, with or without the United States

The war in Syria is winding down, with the opposition in shambles and Assad's victory assured through the support of his patrons in Moscow and Tehran. Only Idlib remains in rebel hands, and jihadists have made inroads and seized much of the province.

Now Idlib's three million civilians face a terrible predicament that will unfold this year: jihadist rule, Assad's return, or Turkish vassalage. But there is another way, one that is not a choice between foreign occupation and a bloodbath. While imperfect, a revival of the peace process will at least ensure some measure of the revolution's demands are met.

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Ultimately, a broader peace is the only way to "solve" Idlib in the long run. HTS control of the province will indefinitely delay a peace deal, slowly building up resentment and anger as government-held areas prosper. Turkey cannot hold Idlib indefinitely without annexing it or creating a protectorate in the vein of Turkish Cyprus, a prospect that seems to command little popularity. And an Assad regime offensive would inevitably end in massacre.

The only sustainable way forward is for Western powers, with or without the United States, to throw themselves behind a revived Geneva peace process that ties the lifting of sanctions and reconstruction aid to measurable progress on human rights, political reforms, and peace-building efforts, building up on the promises they've made over the course of the last few years.

Nothing else has worked, and nothing else is likely to.

**COVER PHOTO: A PEACEFUL PROTEST IN BINNISH, IDLIB, SYRIA ON JUNE 1 2012. SOURCE: SYRIAN REVOLUTION MEMORY PROJECT/FLICKR**

## Notes

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