The Status of Syria's Idlib Province:
De-escalation or Retaliation Zone?*

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February 2022

Abstract

Idlib was one of the four de-escalation zones established through the Astana peace process. However, with the support of the Russian air force, the Syrian regime seized the other three zones, forcing rebels and the local population to relocate to Idlib. Currently, an estimated 2.5 to 3.3 million people live under dire conditions in the region. In its latest offensives in 2019 and 2020, the Syrian regime captured nearly half of Idlib's extended territory.

Idlib is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has attempted to distance itself from al-Qaeda, alongside the National Liberation Front—comprising moderate groups—and several radical factions. Concerned about another large-scale refugee influx, Turkey has been striving to prevent the Syrian regime's complete takeover of Idlib. During the latest assault on the region, Turkey lost more than 50 soldiers due to deliberate Russian airstrikes. Without effective air defense systems, Turkish forces remain highly vulnerable to Russian and Syrian regime attacks.

Russia leverages Idlib as a pressure point against Turkey, retaliating for disagreements in other geopolitical arenas where the two nations find themselves on opposing sides. Moreover, Russia holds the potential to weaponize Idlib's displaced population as a means of exerting pressure on both Turkey and Europe. As the Syrian regime continues to regain strength, it may attempt a full-scale recapture of Idlib. Given Turkey's lack of air defense capabilities to deter Russian and Syrian aerial assaults, the region remains a geopolitical flashpoint. Without U.S. intervention to counter Russian influence and maintain the status quo, Idlib will continue to serve as a ticking time bomb, posing significant risks to Turkey and, to a lesser extent, Europe.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War has had a profound impact not only on neighboring states but also on the broader Middle East and Europe since its outbreak in 2011. It is estimated that more than 500,000 people have died, and half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million has been displaced—either internally or as refugees in other countries. Among them, more than five million have sought refuge, primarily in neighboring states.[1] The crisis remains unresolved, and it appears that achieving lasting peace will take decades.

As Syria's neighbor with the longest shared land border, Turkey has been one of the most affected countries, directly confronting the realities of the war. In 2016, Turkey's Syria policy shifted from a passive, risk-averse stance to active military engagement in border regions, aiming to counter the growing influence of non-state actors such as ISIS and the Kurdish PYD.

A comprehensive examination of Turkey's broader challenges in Syria is beyond the scope of this study. The Syrian conflict remains fluid, and any analysis risks becoming outdated due to ongoing developments in the region. With this limitation in mind, this paper focuses on a specific area: Idlib province in northwestern Syria, analyzing recent developments in that region.

This study argues that Idlib, with its potential to trigger new refugee waves toward Turkey and Europe, has become a strategic opportunity for Russia—one that Moscow can exploit as leverage against Turkey, particularly if tensions between the two countries escalate in other contested regions.

The article is structured as follows: The second and third sections discuss Turkey's involvement in Syria and the Astana Peace Process. The fourth section provides an overview of the rebel groups operating in Idlib, the latest offensive by the Syrian regime and Russian forces, and details of the Russian attack on Turkish soldiers. It also examines how Russia and the Syrian regime weaponize refugee flows. Finally, the last section explores the fragile and volatile situation in Idlib, assessing how it remains susceptible to further escalation by the Syrian regime and Russia, and forecasting potential future challenges Turkey may face.

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[1] AP news: Syrians in rebel-held Idlib mark 10 years since uprising, March 15, 2022.

II. TURKISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

With a 911-kilometer border with Syria and an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, Turkey has borne much of the burden of the Syrian crisis. During the pre-ISIS period, when the situation in Syria was relatively less volatile, Turkey refrained from military intervention and missed several opportunities to establish a buffer zone through a limited ground operation for its own security interests.[2] The Turkish military leadership was reluctant to conduct any military operations in Syria.[3]

Russian military involvement in September 2015 further complicated the situation for Turkey. The downing of a Russian jet near the border escalated tensions and contributed to Turkey's failure to take initiative in northern Syria. In 2016, ISIS rockets continued to strike Kilis, a Turkish border city, killing 21 Turkish citizens and wounding at least 88.[4]

This Turkish hesitancy and risk-averse policy created a power vacuum in the region, which was subsequently filled by both ISIS and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S., and the EU. With U.S. assistance, the YPG became the primary ground force for the U.S.-led coalition in the fight against ISIS in Syria. Supported by U.S. airpower, indirect fire, and special forces, YPG-led forces established control over territory stretching from the Syria-Iraq border to the Euphrates River, emerging as the most effective anti-ISIS force in northern Syria. When the YPG advanced toward Jarablus, a critical town near the Turkish border, Turkey decided to intervene to seize it from ISIS before the PYD could. Turkey's concern was the potential for U.S. support in establishing an autonomous Kurdish corridor along the Turkish-Syrian border, extending from Jazeera to the Mediterranean.[5]

The failed coup attempt in July 2016 reshaped power dynamics within the Turkish government, bringing the military under tighter civilian control. The Turkish military lost its monopoly over foreign and security policy, as well as its ability to resist political demands for military action. To prevent the PYD's territorial expansion and restore public confidence in the armed forces, senior military leaders aligned with the government's decision to intervene.

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[2] Grimaldi, S.G., and S. Koru, "Is the Islamic State Trying to Draw Turkey into Syria?"
War on the Rocks, May 13, 2016.
[3] Gürcan, Metin, Assessing the Post–July 15 Turkish Military: Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2019,p. 3.
[4] Grimaldi and Koru
[5] Gürcan, Metin: Turkey Reaches Critical Crossroads in Syria, Al Monitor, September 9, 2016.

Operation Euphrates Shield was conducted between August 2016 and March 2017, during which the Turkish military coordinated and supported Free Syrian Army (FSA) units against ISIS. The operation successfully secured the border region between Jarablus and Al-Rai and extended to Al-Bab, approximately 35 kilometers south. This military campaign eliminated ISIS presence along the Turkish border and thwarted the PYD's objective of linking Kurdish-controlled cantons east and west of the Euphrates River.[6]

Operation Olive Branch was conducted between January and March 2018 against the PYD in the Afrin region, successfully removing YPG forces from Afrin Canton. Operation Peace Spring took place in October 2019 along the northeastern Turkish-Syrian border, between the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, pushing PYD forces away from the border. These operations eliminated ISIS's presence in the region and prevented the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity along the Turkish-Syrian border.[7] Map 1 illustrates the Turkish-controlled areas and Idlib Canton in northern Syria.

Map-1. Turkey's Presence in Syria[8]

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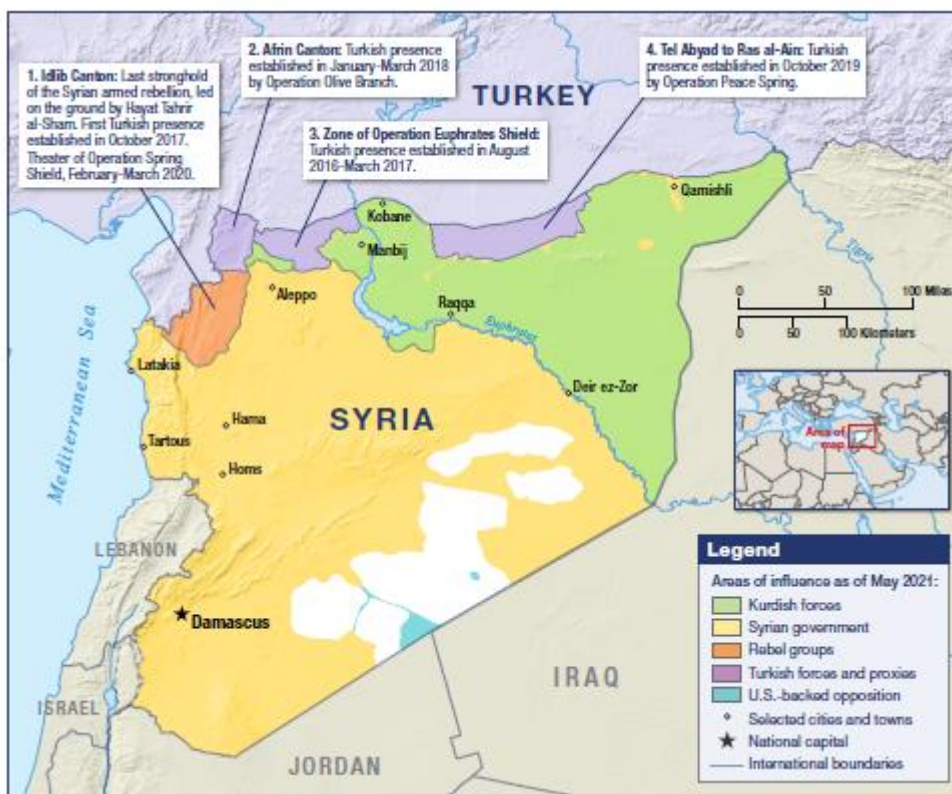
[6] Cantenar, Ö.F and Kozera, C.A.: Fighting ISIS in Syria: Operation Euphrates Shield and the lessons learned from the al-Bab Battle, Small Wars & Insurgencies, February 2021.
[7] Siccardi, Francesco: How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy, Carnegie Europe Working Paper, September 2021, p.5
[8] p.8

III. THE ASTANA PEACE PROCESS AND DE-ESCALATION ZONES IN SYRIA

After Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015, Turkey's strategic priority shifted from toppling the Assad regime to preventing attacks from the YPG and ISIS while blocking the formation of a unified YPG corridor in northern Syria.[9] Turkey conducted three cross-border operations with Russia's consent.[10]

During Turkey's first operation, Operation Euphrates Shield, which targeted ISIS, Turkey had to persuade local rebel groups to withdraw from Aleppo in order to gain Russian approval for the use of Syrian airspace. The regime's takeover of Aleppo became Russia's first major achievement and created political leverage for a peace process.[11] The most significant outcome of Russian-Turkish cooperation was the Astana Peace Process.

In the context of the Syrian civil war, previous local ceasefire agreements (such as those in Old Homs in February 2014 and Daraya in August 2016) did not yield positive outcomes for the rebel population. Upon closer examination, these ceasefires were rarely mere 'cessations of hostilities.' It has been argued that "ceasefires are specific types of order that can be used to renegotiate claims to property and citizenship rights."[12] The early ceasefires between the Syrian regime and the political and military leadership in the rebel-held communities of Old Homs and Daraya regions of Syria demonstrated that these agreements were used as political tools to reassert the Syrian regime's authority, rather than to address the demands of local communities.[13] In Old Homs, the dire situation compelled the rebel committee to negotiate an exit. The regime demanded the relocation of fighters from Old Homs to Idlib, a condition that subsequently became a consistent requirement in later local ceasefire agreements.[14]

The Astana peace process commenced in January 2017 and resulted in the establishment of four de-escalation zones by May 4, 2017. As depicted in Map-2, these zones encompassed Idlib, Homs, the Eastern Ghouta district of Damascus, and southern Syria, including Daraa and Quneitra. The agreement aimed to de-escalate tensions between the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition, facilitate humanitarian aid, and lay the groundwork for a

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[9] Köstem, Seçkin: Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria: geopolitical alignment with limits, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 2020, p.5.
[10] p.5
[11] Sosnowski, Marika: Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones, Small Wars & Insurgencies, 2020, 31:7-8, p.1400
[12] Sosnowski, Marika: Ceasefires as violent state-building: local truce and reconciliation agreements in the Syrian civil war, Conflict, Security & Development, 2020:2, p.273.
[13] p. 274.
[14] p. 280.

peaceful resolution to the civil war. These de-escalation zones were designated as areas free from armed conflict and airstrikes. In October 2017, Turkish armed forces entered the Idlib region and established twelve observation posts by May 2018.[15] These observation posts surrounding Idlib also enabled Turkey to effectively curtail the westward expansion of the PYD.[16]

Map-2 De-escalation Zones Agreed by Turkey, Russia, and Iran[17]
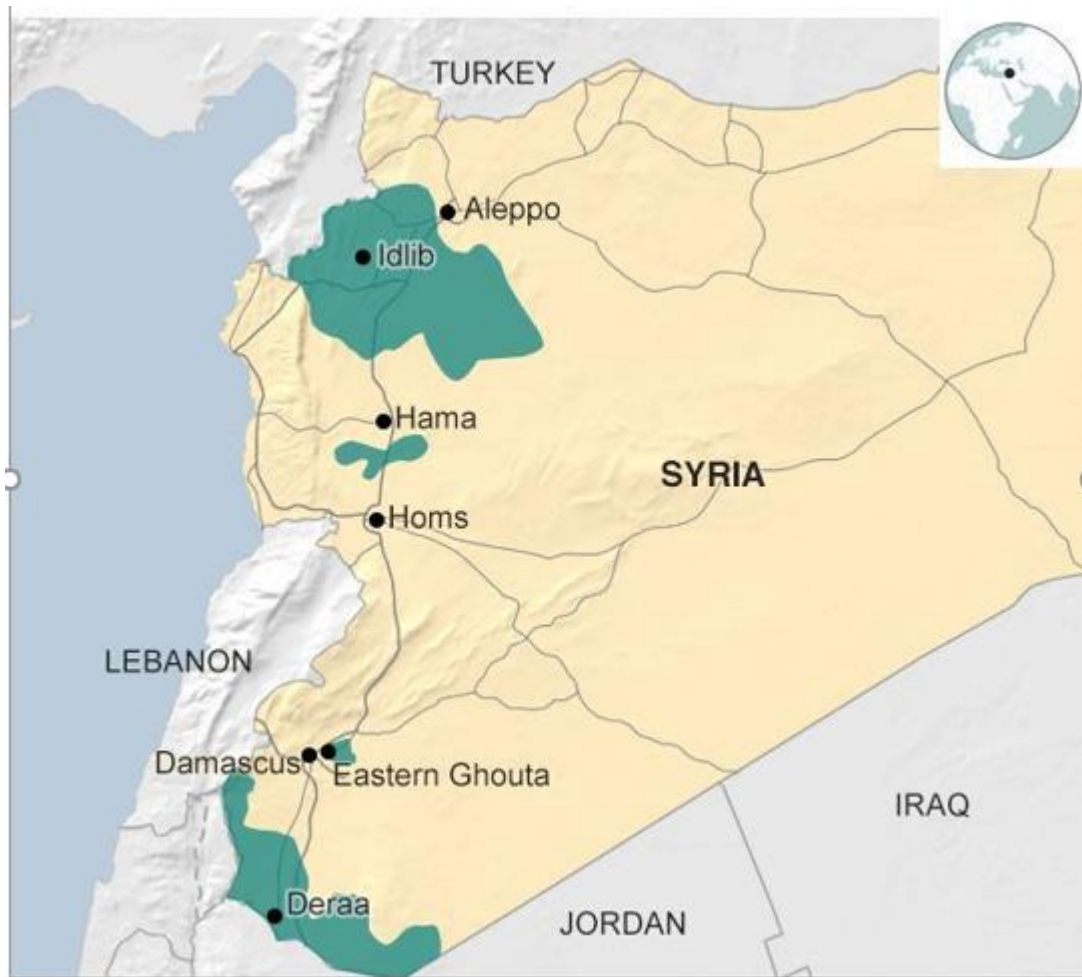
Since then, battlefield conditions had significantly shifted in favor of the Syrian regime and its supporters, Iran and Russia. While the Astana truce agreements were publicly presented as a series of negotiated agreements between the Syrian regime and armed groups, in reality, they were essentially vanishing ceasefires imposed on armed resistance groups. These

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[15] Köstem, Seçkin: Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria, p.10
[16] Eralp, Doga: The Safe Zone for Undesirables on the Turkey-Syria Border, Peace Review, 32:2, 2020, p.183.
[17] Ali, Zulfiqar: Who's in control of Idlib? BBC, February 18, 2020.

agreements resulted in two stark options: either integrating into the regime's counterinsurgency apparatus and accepting its legitimacy, or being evacuated to the Idlib region.[18]

After ISIS was defeated and the zones of influence between Russia and the US were established,[19] Syrian regime forces, with Russian air support, launched a significant campaign to dislodge Syrian opposition forces from three of the four de-escalation zones. Between April and July 2018, three zones, excluding Idlib, fell under regime control.[20] From an international perspective, the de-escalation agreements achieved their objective of isolating rebel, jihadist, and terrorist elements in a single pocket. For local actors, the creation of these zones offered various armed opposition groups a way to surrender without facing annihilation: relocation to Idlib or reconciliation with the Syrian state.[21]

IV. IDLIB: THE LAST DE-ESCALATION ZONE

Idlib city, located on the outskirts of Aleppo, served as an entry point between Turkey and Syria. Before the war, Idlib's estimated population was 750,000. Over the past seven years, Syrians have been forcibly displaced from various parts of Syria to Idlib province. They primarily settled throughout the countryside, leaving them vulnerable to regime attacks. The existing humanitarian crisis in Idlib worsened daily due to the increasing population.[22] Idlib currently hosts an estimated 2.5 to 3.3 million civilians, predominantly internally displaced persons. This large population was a primary concern for Turkey, as any attack by the Syrian regime and Russia would likely push them towards the Turkish border.[23]

As the last rebel stronghold in Syria, Idlib is a strategic area, not only due to its proximity to Turkey and the potential for new refugee flows, but also because of its high concentration of hardened rebel and Islamist fighters.[24] The M5 highway, which runs north to south across the country, and the M4 highway, which runs east to west, make the region particularly crucial. Capturing these highways was a key military objective for the Assad

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[18] Abboud, Samer: Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace, Peacebuilding, 2021, p.14.
[19] Kabalan, Mervan: Suriye'de Türk-Rus ilişkilerinin sınırları, Duvar, February 19, 2020.
[20] Markusen, Max: Idlib Province and the Future of Instability in Syria, Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 2018, p.3.
[21] Sosnowski, Marika: Negotiating statehood through ceasefires, p. 1405.
[22] Markusen, p. 6
[23] p.5
[24] Hokayem, Emile: The battle for Idlib: Q&A, March 5, 2020.

regime, as it would allow for the reconnection of links between Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia, representing an important step towards the regime's economic stabilization.[25]

The de-escalation zone agreement assigned Turkey the responsibility of eliminating jihadists and controlling non-state armed groups in Idlib. With the influx of opposition groups and residents from other regions, Idlib became a significant problem for Turkey.[26] Ankara assumed this role for several reasons: to control new waves of refugee flows to its border, to limit the activities of jihadist actors on its own soil, and to contain the Kurdish PYD in the Afrin region, north of Idlib.[27]

Idlib has been controlled by several rival opposition factions since government forces lost control of the province in 2015. The main armed groups include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a jihadist alliance), the National Liberation Front (a Turkish-backed rebel alliance), Hurras al-Din (a pro-al-Qaeda HTS offshoot), and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP, a Chinese Uighur-dominated jihadist group). [28]

a. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham- HTS

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is one of the strongest militant groups in northern Syria. It largely controls the provincial capital and the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. HTS has evolved over the years from the Al-Qaeda (AQ)-linked Jabhat al-Nusra Front (JNF). JNF was established in Syria with the support of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in July 2011.[29] Julani was the founder of JNF. After declaring its allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri in May 2013, it was designated a terrorist organization by the USA and the UN Security Council. However, JNF did not pursue a global jihad and consistently emphasized its autonomy, asserting that it was not under AQ command, made its own decisions, and was a local Syrian entity.[30]

JNF demonstrated its importance by successfully collaborating with a broad coalition of opposition forces to capture Idlib in mid-2015.[31] When the Syrian regime consolidated its power with Russian and Iranian military support, the AQ leader strongly advocated for a policy change and a shift to guerrilla warfare for JNF. Conversely, Julani aimed to establish an emirate

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[25] Ibid
[26] Sosnowski, Marika: Negotiating statehood through ceasefires, p. 1402.
[27] p. 1404
[28] Ali, Zulfiqar: Who's in control of Idlib?
[29] Lister, Charles: A self professed AQ Affiliate: Jabhat al-Nusra, 2013.
[30] Peter, Tom: Al Qaeda in Iraq and Syrian Rebel Group Jabhat al-Nusra Make it Official.
[31] Giustozzi, Antonio A Struggle for Power: Al Nusra and Al Qaida in Syria,
Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2021, 44:1, p. 4.

in Idlib. Faced with strong Russian military support for the regime, Julani opted for a more moderate approach and began portraying his organization as an ally of Turkey.[32]

Julani has chosen to maintain a low AQ profile in order to gain the leadership of the other opposition groups. First, in 2016, JNF rebranded itself and declared that it had severed formal ties with the AQ network and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS).[33] However, this change was considered a failure due to massive militant defections. One argues that the main reason for the failure was the weakness of the distancing from AQ.[34] Then, JFS merged with other groups under the name of Hayat Tahrir ash Sham (HTS). The formation of HTS was regarded as JFS's response to Astana talks and the formation of a rival nationalist alliance that was supported by Turkey.[35]

Al Zawahiri, the leader of AQ, was insisting on a return to guerrilla war, on the contrary Julani was supporting the idea of trying to defend Idlib at all costs and build an extensive governance system inside the city.[36] This caused a break-up in the organization, and AQ-linked group Hurras ad Din (HaD) left the alliance by gathering other small pro-AQ factions.[37]

b. The Other groups

The National Liberation Front (NLF), formed in 2018, is a Turkish-backed alliance that includes several groups fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Islamist groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham. It has since rebranded itself to become part of the Syrian National Army (SNA) under the command of the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Ministry of Defence. It is assessed that the NLF is a weaker force than HTS, lacking comparable armament, cohesion, logistics, and organization.[38]

The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which established a presence in northern Syria in the early years of the civil war, is composed of Uighur fighters, a Muslim ethnic minority from China's Xinjiang province, and frequently operates in conjunction with HTS. While other foreign jihadists, including Chechens, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, are present in Idlib, their numbers are likely smaller.[39]

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[32] p. 20
[33] Ali, Zulfiqar: Who's in control of Idlib?
[34] Giustozzi, p.7.
[35] p. 15.
[36] p. 9.
[37] p. 17.
[38] Ali, Zulfiqar: Who's in control of Idlib?
[39] Ibid

Despite past clashes between HTS and ISIS, and HTS's general opposition to ISIS presence in the Idlib region, the U.S. Delta Force conducted a raid on October 26, 2019, killing ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in an Idlib village. More recently, on February 3, 2022, al-Baghdadi's successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, killed himself during a U.S. Special Forces raid in an Idlib house. Therefore, it can be inferred that Idlib serves as a haven for jihadists and remains difficult to control effectively.[40]

c. Idlib Attack

The Syrian regime's success in other de-escalation zones motivated Assad to attack Idlib. During August and September 2018, Syrian government forces, supported by Russian jets, attacked Idlib. However, this offensive encountered Turkish troops stationed at observation points throughout the province.[41] This led to a new agreement between Russia and Turkey in September 2018 in Sochi. The Sochi memorandum introduced a "demilitarization mechanism to sustain the ceasefire, to be monitored by the signatories, as well as timelines for guaranteeing the safety of travel through the critical Latakia-Aleppo (M4) and Damascus-Aleppo (M5) motorways. It also reinforced previous commitments by the signatories to fighting radical elements, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham."[42]

Subsequently, Moscow increased its criticism of Turkey's failure to curb HTS activities in Idlib. In April 2019, regime forces, backed by Russian air power, launched an armed offensive to capture Idlib. The attacks intensified in the summer of 2019, placing Turkish troops on the ground at risk of confrontation with regime forces. In August 2019, regime forces captured the strategically located town of Khan Sheikhoun from HTS and later encircled a Turkish observation post south of the town.[43] According to UN figures, 500 civilians were killed and 400,000 displaced in this attack.[44] The fifth trilateral summit was held in Ankara in September 2019. At the summit, the three leaders (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) agreed to form a Syrian Constitutional Committee, but no progress was made on the Idlib issue.[45]

The regime initiated another offensive in December 2019, and the Syrian army retook major towns in southern Idlib and encircled several Turkish observation outposts. During this attack, an additional 900,000 civilians fled western Idlib. Turkey, concerned about another

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[40] International Crisis Group: A Death in Idlib
[41] Markusen, p. 7.
[42] Kardaş, Şaban: Turkey's Mission Impossible in Sustaining Idlib's Unstable equilibrium, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020.
[43] Köstem, p.15.
[44] BBC: Syria war: Why does the battle for Idlib matter?, February 18, 2020
[45] Köstem, p.15.

refugee influx, "gave the Syrian army until the end of February to withdraw behind the line of Turkish observation posts or face military action."[46] Air attacks began targeting Turkish soldiers, resulting in the deaths of thirteen Turkish soldiers within the first ten days of February.[47]

De-escalation talks between Russia and Turkey continued. There were three phone conversations between Erdogan and Putin on February 4, 12, and 21; and senior civilian and military aides held meetings in Ankara on February 7 and 10 and Moscow on February 17 and 18. All these attempts failed to resolve the issue. Meanwhile, Assad's forces captured additional territory near the strategically important M4 and M5 highways.[48]

While Turkey interpreted the Sochi ceasefire agreement "as a binding Russian commitment to preventing the Assad regime from attacking," Moscow instead focused on "Turkey's obligation to help combat terrorism by curbing 'radicals' in Idlib and to ensure transit access for the regime on the M4 and M5 highways long-controlled by the opposition." On February 23, a Kremlin spokesman reiterated that the Turkish side had not fulfilled its obligations regarding the elimination of radical groups in Idlib.[49]

The Turkish military attempted to deter Syria and Russia by deploying additional troops to its Idlib outposts. However, without adequate air defense support, increased troop presence meant heightened risk. President Erdoğan issued an ultimatum to the Syrian regime, demanding the withdrawal of its troops from captured areas by the end of February, and threatened that Assad's government would pay "a very heavy price" for the Turkish soldiers killed.[50] Although Turkey had purchased S-400 air defense systems from Russia, they remained idle in depots. Even if deployed, they would likely be ineffective against Russian aircraft. Thus, without establishing an "anti-access area denial" (A2AD) zone, high-level rhetoric would not deter a major power like Russia, and could instead provoke it.

Erdoğan also reached out to President Donald Trump on February 15, requesting diplomatic support in Idlib. Trump responded, "we spoke about Idlib, and we're working together on seeing what can be done." Another telling event underscored Turkey's desperation in Idlib: Turkey officially requested Patriot missile systems for deployment near the Syrian

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[46] BBC: Syria war
[47] DW: Turkey's options dry up in Syria as Russia backs Assad push, 11.02.2020.
[48] Alirıza, Bülent: Idlib Test for Erdogan-Putin Relationship, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 28, 2020.
[49] Ibid
[50] DW: Turkey's options dry up in Syria as Russia backs Assad push, 11.02.2020.

border, following Special Representative for Syria Engagement Ambassador Jim Jeffrey's visit on February 11 to discuss Idlib.[51] This attempt to create an A2AD bubble during the crisis was too late. It was implicitly understood that the S-400 missile system, acquired from Russia at a cost of $2.5 billion, was ineffective in deterring Russia. Regarding potential US support for Turkey, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien made it clear that the US was unwilling to intervene, stating, "President Erdogan and President Putin, who have an interesting relationship, sometimes they are the best of friends and sometimes they are not. It is really up to them to work that situation out. I do not think we are going to intervene militarily in Idlib to straighten out that bad situation."[52]

d. Russian Attacks to Turkish Soldiers: A NATO Army Under the Mercy of Russian Airforce

"On February 27, 2020, air attacks struck a Turkish convoy and a building in the village of Balyun, resulting in the deaths of 33 soldiers and injuries to more than 30, according to official figures.[53] Allegations suggested the death toll was higher. Turkish officials attributed the attack to the Syrian regime, creating the perception that Syrian jets were responsible. The Russians initially claimed they believed they had targeted Syrian opposition forces, and then denied any involvement. Later, the Russian defense ministry stated that Syrian pilots were misled by opposition forces in the area. This event marked the Turkish army's single largest loss of life in one day on foreign soil since the 1974 military operation in Northern Cyprus.[54] In February 2020 alone, Turkey lost fifty soldiers, with airstrikes being the primary cause of these casualties.[55]

At the emergency UNSC meeting on February 28, 2020, regarding the attack, the Turkish Permanent Representative to the UN, Feridun Sinirlioğlu, highlighted key facts indicating Russian involvement: "…that the precise location of the convoy was coordinated with the Russian military authorities in writing, ... that the attack continued for 5 hours despite calls ... that the traces from the radar show the Russian and Syrian crafts were flying on a mission configuration [that] the ambulances and ambulance staff were also targeted."[56]

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[51] Alirıza, Bülent
[52] Ahvalnews: Turkey not helpful in solving Idlib crisis in Syria, U.S. says, February 12, 2020.
[53] Middle East Eye: 33 Turkish Soldiers killed in Idlib, February 28, 2020.
[54] Kemal, Levent: Turkey blamed Syria for a deadly air strike. Its troops blame Russia, Middle East Eye, November 5, 2021.
[55] Alirıza
[56] Çitlioğlu, Ercan: A Turkish Perspective on Syria, Kondrad Adenaur Stiftung, 2020, p. 18

However, in the public sphere, the Turkish government maintained that the Syrians were responsible. Some government-aligned media outlets argued that since Turkey lacked the military capacity to retaliate against Russia, Ankara's response was justified. No Russian jet radar records were released, and no independent civilian investigation was conducted.[57]

This was not the first air attack against Turkish soldiers in Syria. During Operation Euphrates Shield, while Turkish army units were encircling al-Bab city, a Syrian L-39 aircraft attacked a Turkish forward base near Wakah village, west of al-Bab, on November 24, 2016, killing three Turkish soldiers. According to the Turkish side, "the [Syrian-]regime forces attacked for two reasons: to escalate the tension between Turkey and Russia on the anniversary of Turkey's downing of the Russian warplane in November 2015, and to push the OES forces behind the 20-kilometer (deep) line."[58] However, this was also interpreted as Russian retaliation one year after the downing of the Russian jet. The second incident occurred near al-Bab on February 9, 2017. A precise airstrike hit a Turkish base, killing three Turkish soldiers and wounding eleven. While the attack was presented as an accidental airstrike[59], it was, in reality, a Russian message to the Turkish side to coordinate its field activities with the Russian military operations center[60] and to avoid crossing the M-4 highway.

It should be noted that Idlib was not the sole testing ground for Russian-Turkish relations, as the two countries have supported opposing sides in Libya. Turkey has provided support to the Government of National Accord (GNA) against Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. After Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu received Haftar in Moscow, President Erdoğan met with GNA Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj on February 20, 2020, just before the attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib.[61] In a broader context, the Russian attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib was also interpreted as a message to the Turkish government not to overextend its influence against Russian interests in other regions and to underscore its vulnerability in Idlib.

In retaliation for the air attack, on March 1, the Turkish military launched Operation Spring Shield—an extensive drone-led air campaign targeting Syrian regime airbases, arms depots, heavy weapons, and air defense systems. Hundreds of regime fighters were killed

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[57] Kemal

[58] Yeşiltaş, M., Seren M., and Özçelik N.: Operation Euphrates Shield Implementation and Lessons Learned. Istanbul: SETA, 2017, p. 30.

[59] Kasapoğlu, Can: Turkey at the Gates of Al-Bab, EDAM Foreign Policy and Security Paper Series 2017/2, p. 10.

[60] Gürcan, Metin: "Turkey's Euphrates Shield Reaches Critical Juncture." *Al Monitor*, February 13, 2017.

[61] Alirıza

within days.[62] Russia had the capability to use airpower to counter the Turkish drone attacks. However, it initially allowed Turkey to conduct these operations, and only later resumed flying missions over Idlib, prompting Turkey to withdraw.[63] The Russian goal "has been to push the Syrian armed forces to the forefront of the fighting in Syria, with only Russian enablers and airpower to support offensive operations."[64]

Turkish drone strikes halted the Syrian regime's advance into Idlib, prevented further civilian massacres, and stemmed the influx of refugees into Turkey.[65] However, over 45% of the Idlib zone formerly controlled by the rebels had already been captured by the Assad regime.[66] On March 5, 2020, the presidents of Turkey and Russia agreed on a comprehensive ceasefire and the establishment of a secure corridor spanning six kilometers on the north and south sides of the M4 highway. This indicated that the 25-km strip of territory south of the M4, controlled by the opposition, was being abandoned by Ankara (Map-3).[67]

Turkey managed to halt the offensive but failed to regain the opposition's lost territory. This outcome was not a clear victory for Turkey, but online propaganda reinforced the idea of a decisive triumph. The Turkish government rapidly released video footage of its drone strikes, which spread across social media, creating an image of Turkish drones as a decisive tool in conflicts and symbolizing enhanced power status for Ankara.[68]

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[62] Lister, Charles: The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit, Middle East Eye, March 16, 2020.
[63] Hokayem
[64] Stein, Aaron: Say Hello to Turkey's Little Friend: How Drones Help Level the Playing Field, War on the Rocks, June 11, 2021.
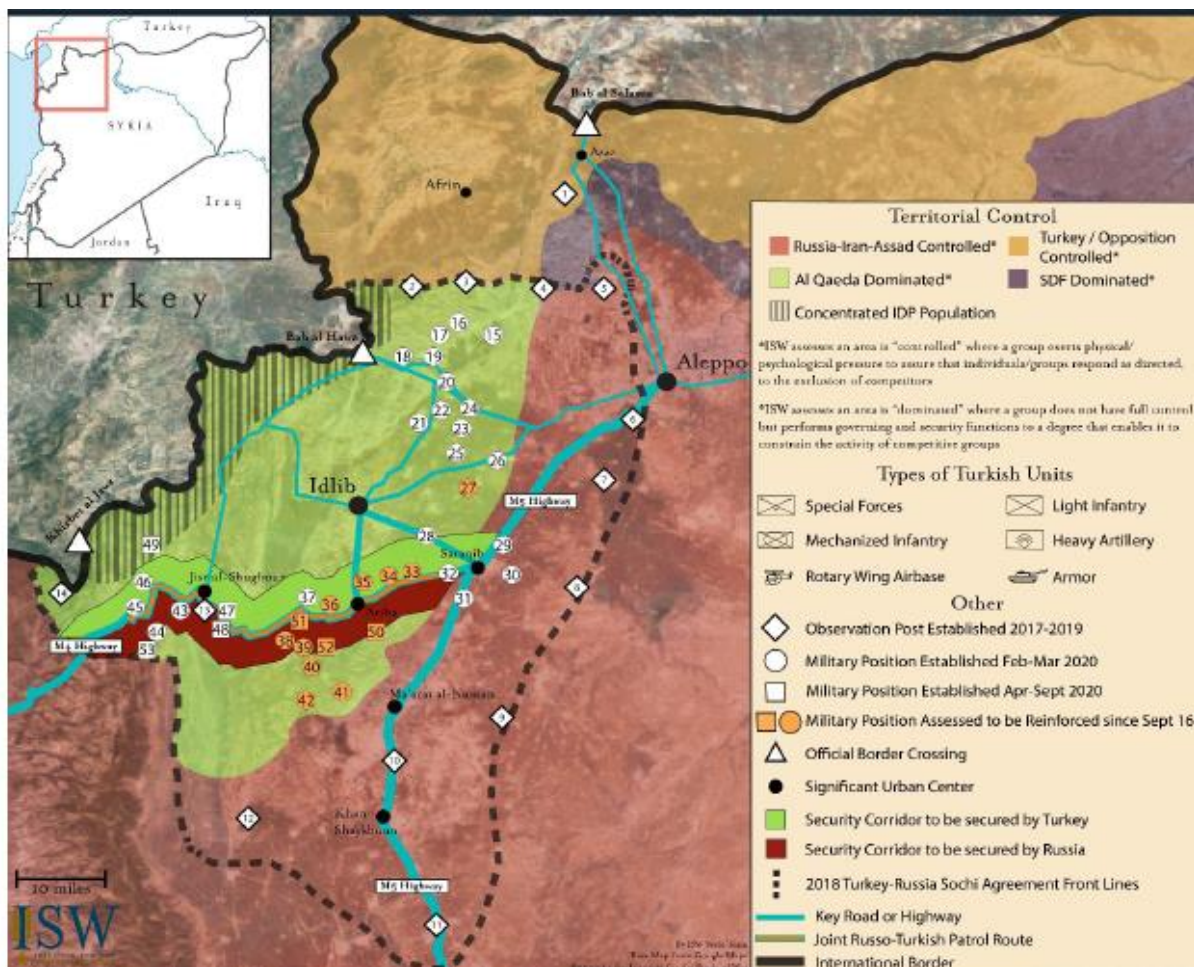[65] Siccardi, p. 6.
[66] Hokayem
[67] Lister: The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit.
[68] Stein

Map-3 The Syrian Regime's Territorial Gains in Idlib[69]

e. Idlib After Ceasefire

Syrian war observers largely agreed that the March 5 agreement in Moscow was fragile and would likely follow the pattern of previous failed ceasefire agreements. While the agreement temporarily halted the fighting and provided relief to the three million Syrians residing in the province, it did not offer a lasting solution to prevent future attacks by the Syrian regime and its allies. The deal also failed to resolve the status of HTS, despite Russia's repeated demands that Turkey address the group, a demand that has not been met. HTS's continued presence in Idlib province remains a significant point of contention between Moscow and Ankara.[70]

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[69] Greco, Andrew: Turkey Reinforces Positions in Greater Idlib to Pressure Russia into Negotiations, Institute for the Study of War, 2020.

[70] Dalay, Galip: How long will the Turkish-Russian deal on Idlib last?, Al Jazeera, March 16, 2020.

According to Dalay, "Given the vague, fragile, and precarious nature of this deal, both Russia and Turkey will use this period to consolidate their positions militarily in order to prepare for the next round of violence."[71] Middle East expert Charles Lister also concurred, stating that "the prospect of another phase of intense violence in Idlib is high and possibly imminent."[72]

On October 26, 2020, an airstrike targeted a rebel training camp near the border. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 78 fighters killed and nearly 90 wounded. The camp was operated by Faylaq al-Sham, an NLF faction. This was the deadliest attack on a Turkish-backed group by Russia.[73] Some analysts attributed the timing of the airstrike to Ankara's display of military power in the Middle East and the Caucasus. According to Charles Lister, wider geopolitical factors may have prompted Russia to send a message to Turkey. Particularly, in the Caucasus, where Ankara had declared support for Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region. Turkey had also deployed Syrian fighters to Libya and then Azerbaijan. Given Russia and Turkey's involvement on opposing sides in these ongoing conflicts in Libya and the Caucasus, the attack was interpreted as a Russian signal to Turkey regarding its actions in these regions.[74]

Air attacks in Idlib did not cease after the March 2020 ceasefire. Russia and the Syrian regime continued to bomb Idlib. There were 31 attacks in 2020 after the ceasefire, and 47 in the first six months of 2021. Attacks increased to 58 in just two and a half months—July, August, and mid-September 2021.[75]

f. Refugees as a Weapon

Syria's internally displaced population in Idlib poses a potential refugee crisis for Turkey, which could have serious implications for its domestic politics. Ankara has no intention of accepting more refugees.[76] Following the Russian attack on Turkish soldiers, Turkey leveraged its refugee card by unilaterally opening its borders with the EU, leading to thousands of migrants and refugees gathering at Turkey's border with Greece.[77]Although this action was short-lived, it was used as a tool of political pressure on Europe. By utilizing the refugee card, "Ankara wanted to push Europe to provide more support and to put more pressure

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[71] Ibid
[72] Lister: The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit.
[73] Independent: Turkey-backed fighters retaliate against Syria-allied troops, October 27, 2020.
[74] Najjar, Farah: Russian strike on Syria's Idlib fighters a 'message' to Turkey, Al Jazeera, Oct 27, 2020.
[75] Ekmen, Serhat: Don't forget Idlib: Russia has increased its air attacks, September 10, 2021, 9:51 a.m. Tweet.
[76] Hokayem
[77] Siccardi, p. 21.

on Russia to make some concessions on Idlib. It also hoped to create more international momentum for a safe zone/no-fly zone in Idlib."[78] The EU, however, appeared to commit only to rhetorical support, intelligence sharing, and potentially, some financial assistance and adjustments to the 2016 Turkey-EU refugee deal.[79] "While nobody wants a catastrophe in Idlib, the Europeans really see it as a border security and migration issue, and they are quite confident in their ability to contain that problem and they think they can basically resolve this by sending a lot of tents and locking down the border."[80] Turkey realized that it was largely isolated in Idlib.

According to Sean McFate, using refugees to destabilize targeted countries is a new method of warfare employed by Russia. Russian bombings have intentionally created refugee flows towards Europe, aiming to destabilize the continent. One contributing factor to Brexit was the refugee influx into Europe. Germany's acceptance of nearly one million asylum seekers resulted in over six billion euros in resettlement costs. The surge of refugees strengthened "Moscow-friendly Eurosceptics across the continent, weakening NATO and the pan-European dream. Putin achieved what the Soviets could not by weaponizing refugees rather than threatening firepower." This became a crisis for NATO. General Philip Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, stated that Russia and Syria had weaponized migration by deliberately bombing civilian centers. "Together, Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve."[81] By controlling the tension in Idlib, Russia holds the advantage of triggering a new refugee flow to destabilize both Turkey and Europe at will.

V. CONCLUSION AND FORECAST

Turkey has suffered consequences due to the events in Syria. It miscalculated the situation and international dynamics, focusing solely on the fall of the Assad regime. This oversight led to a failure to recognize the rise of ISIS and the YPG. Subsequently, its focus on the YPG resulted in a misunderstanding of the West's perception of ISIS. These

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[78] Dalay
[79] Ibid
[80] DW:Turkey's options dry up in Syria as Russia backs Assad push, February 11, 2020.
[81] McFate, Sean: New Rules of War, 2019, p.87, 88

miscalculations regarding enemies and the pursuit of a sectarian and ethnicity-driven policy in Syria had detrimental secondary effects.[82]

With Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian regime averted collapse. The de-escalation agreements ultimately benefited the regime, as three out of the four designated zones established in the Astana process were cleared and captured. Idlib, the last remaining de-escalation zone, became a collection point for rebel groups. Turkey expected that by facilitating these peaceful transitions, Idlib would be immune from attack. However, Assad was determined to capture the Idlib area. Turkey increased its deployment of armored and commando units to deter Syrian regime attacks. Without air support, this was a risky strategy. Creating an anti-access area denial (A2AD) zone over Idlib to deter Russia and Syria should have been the priority. However, using the Russian-made S-400 missile system against Russian planes made this too late. The Russian S-400 system proved ineffective in deterring Russia.

Turkish soldiers paid the price for the political missteps made in Idlib and Syria in general. Turkey had not invested in its air defense system, despite being surrounded by countries like Syria and Iran, which possess long-range missile capabilities. Had Turkey acquired a NATO-compatible long-range air defense system prior to 2018 (the year of the S-400 purchase decision), the acquisition of the Russian S-400 would have been unnecessary. The strategic decision to purchase the S-400 stemmed not only from seeking Russian consent for military operations in Syria but also from Turkey's growing distance from the US. This disengagement was driven by several factors. First, the Turkish government's singular focus on the fall of the Assad regime, while the US administration refrained from using force to topple Assad, even after the regime's use of chemical weapons. Second, the US's selection of the PYD as its ground force against ISIS in Syria, a group Turkey views as the Syrian branch of the PKK. This collaboration alarmed Turkish political and military elites. Third, the US's perceived silence during the July 2016 failed coup attempt and its harboring of the Gülen movement's leader, whom Turkey believes was behind the coup.

Consequently, the governing AKP party invested heavily in cultivating a positive perception of Russia among the public. Public criticism of the US and NATO fueled anti-American and anti-NATO sentiment in Turkey. The AKP collaborated with the Turkish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), forming the People's Alliance bloc. This nationalist

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[82] Kadercan, Burak: Making Sense of Turkey's Syria Strategy: A 'Turkish Tragedy' in the Making, War on the Rocks, August 4, 2017.

political direction was also supported by the pro-Russian, anti-American, and anti-NATO 'Homeland Party,' which has a limited electoral base of less than 1%. However, the Homeland Party and other proponents of pro-Russian views wield considerable influence within Turkish governmental institutions, particularly in the military and intelligence. The Turkish military's Atlanticist faction has been progressively replaced by a Eurasianist group, whose members consider Russia a viable strategic alternative to the United States.[83] In a documentary video, Doğu Perinçek, the leader of the Homeland Party and a long-standing public figure, declared, "We are not in the government officially, but we draw the route for the government."[84] The failure to hold Moscow accountable for the Idlib attack benefited the pro-Russian faction within the Turkish military and government. Their positive attitude toward Russia remained unchanged even after the attack on Turkish soldiers.

It was evident that Turkey's deterrence failed in Idlib, with serious repercussions for the country's regional standing and prestige.[85] However, Turkish drone attacks against Syrian regime forces and other militias created a "rally around the flag" effect, increased drone fetishism among the public, and masked the military catastrophe in Idlib.[86]

Putin allowed Turkish drone attacks on Syrian regime forces because he did not want to damage the positive Russian perception cultivated within the Turkish public over the past five years. Russia sought to avoid direct conflict with Turkey and instead manage their relationship, as Russia has been a significant beneficiary of Turkey's Syrian policies and the rising anti-Americanism and nationalism in Turkey. Firstly, the Syrian regime consolidated its authority in Aleppo after the withdrawal of Turkish-backed rebel groups, facilitated by Turkish consent. Secondly, Turkey cleared ISIS from the al-Rai, Jarablus, and al-Bab regions. Thirdly, Turkey assumed responsibility for Idlib, partially persuading jihadist groups to refrain from threatening the Assad regime and Russian bases. Fourthly, Russia used Turkey to discipline the PYD by allowing Operation Olive Branch in Afrin and Operation Peace Spring between the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn regions. Fifthly, Russia expanded its sphere of influence east of the Euphrates by establishing bases in Manbij, Raqqa, Haseke, and Kobane when Turkey compelled the US to withdraw and conducted Operation Peace Spring. Sixthly, by selling the S-400 air defense system, Russia not only received $2.5 billion but also prevented Turkey's acquisition of F-35 fighter jets and triggered US sanctions on weapon sales. Seventhly, Russia

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[83] Siccardi, p.14.
[84] 140 Journos, Kısmen İktidar, December 4, 2020.
[85] Alirıza
[86] Stein

undermined NATO's southern flank and solidarity by distancing Turkey from the Western alliance.[87]

Turkey-Russia relations in Syria are characterized by both cooperation and competition. The evolving relationship between Turkey and Russia in recent years has been described using various terms, including "cooperative competition or competitive cooperation," "a marriage of convenience," "adversarial collaboration," and "fire and ice."[88] The events in Idlib, and more broadly in northern Syria, align with Russian military doctrine. According to Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov, "In the 21st century, we have seen a tendency towards blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template."[89] Russian-Turkish cooperation/competition in Northern Syria has not fostered a long-term, stable relationship. The threat Turkey faces in Idlib is immediate, yet Turkey still fails to recognize it is engaged in an undeclared, new type of war orchestrated by Russia. "Russian military doctrine includes what some have called an 'escalate to de-escalate' strategy – a strategy that purportedly seeks to de-escalate a conventional conflict through coercive threats."[90]

By exploiting the situation in Idlib, Russia has gained leverage over Turkey. It has deliberately targeted the Turkish military and Turkish-backed local groups in Idlib. For Russia, Idlib, and the broader context of northern Syria, has become a venue for retaliation or deterrence against Turkey in disagreements over other regions. Both countries have conflicting interests in various areas, including Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia.[91]Another point of contention is Turkey's support for Ukraine in recent developments. Turkey has sold armed UAVs to Ukraine and collaborated in the defense industry. In a potential clash between Russia and Ukraine, Moscow would not hesitate to use force by attacking Turkish soldiers and its proxies in Idlib as a response to Turkey's activism in favour of Ukraine.

The Syrian regime aims to capture the strategic infrastructure of Idlib province, but not its population. "It would rather see the three million civilians become someone else's problem, be it Turkey, Europe or anyone else."[92] However, the regime cannot act independently without

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[87] Özpek, B. B.: How Russia exploited nationalism in turkey to expand its influence in Syria, Middle East Policy, 2021

[88] Siccardi, p.17.

[89] Schnaufer, Tad A. II.: Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West, Journal of Strategic Security 10, 1, 2017, p. 7.

[90] Episkopos, Mark: Russia's Crazy Nuclear War Strategy: Escalation...to De-escalate?, National Interest, March 21, 2021.

[91] Köstem, p. 12.

[92] Dalay

Russian consent. While air attacks alone are insufficient to seize Idlib, a ground assault would necessitate a protracted urban operation, risking significant casualties, and proving costly for both the regime and Russia, especially considering the determination of splinter jihadist groups (such as Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party) to engage in guerrilla warfare.[93]Additionally, Turkey has demonstrated its willingness to absorb casualties to prevent a ground offensive in Idlib, and the regime has witnessed the effectiveness of Turkish armed drones when Russia withholds air support.

Turkey does not intend to engage in combat with HTS to control Idlib. Instead, it seeks to rebrand HTS and steer it towards a more moderate stance. When Turkish and Russian soldiers began joint patrols on the M4 highway, they faced attacks from more radical groups. HTS subsequently increased pressure on these radical jihadists, effectively taking on a role that benefits Turkey's interests in Idlib.[94] HTS has recently detained the leader of AQ-linked HaD and curtailed its activities in Idlib.[95] There have also been signs of flexibility from the US towards HTS. Ambassador James Jeffrey stated that HTS had not posed international terrorism threats. During a press conference in Washington on February 5, 2020, he carefully distinguished HTS from other jihadist groups: "We have not seen them planning or carrying out international terrorism attacks. We have seen them focusing on basically maintaining their position in Idlib… They're on the defensive, they're just sitting there."[96] HTS is also reportedly providing intelligence on key Salafi-Jihadi operatives in Idlib, leading to U.S. drone strikes against these groups. HTS's willingness to confront HaD and other AQ-linked groups, coupled with its significant influence in Idlib, could prompt the West to engage with HTS in a manner similar to its engagement with the Taliban.[97]

Another consideration for Turkey is the control of three other regions in northern Syria by the Turkish military and local proxy forces: the Euphrates Shield pocket since 2016, the Afrin pocket since 2018, and the northeast pocket since October 2019. Turkey fears that conceding Idlib could trigger a domino effect, potentially leading Russia to compel Turkey's withdrawal from these regions, which Turkey intends to maintain control over for the foreseeable future, "because they are crucial for Turkey in terms of containing Kurdish (PYD)

[93] Markusen, p.1.
[94] Taştekin, Fehim: Is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham doing Turkey's job in Idlib? Al-Monitor, June 26, 2021.
[95] Kıvanç, Ümit: İdlib'de durulmayan su nereye akacak?, Duvar, February 13, 2022.
[96] Çitlioğlu, p.5.
[97] Erkmen, S, Heras, Nicholas A. and Semeno, K.: Security Scenarios for Syria in 2021-2022, Geneva Center for Security Policy, 2021, p. 4.

ambitions and they are regarded as potential safe zones for Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey."[98]

In summary, under current conditions, Russia aims to retain the refugee card in Idlib as a crucial tool to destabilize Turkey and Europe or undermine their interests when necessary. Additionally, it will continue to conduct bombings in Idlib, targeting Turkish military and moderate opposition positions, to retaliate or send messages regarding other international disputes.

Idlib will continue to pose a challenge to Turkey's Syria and regional strategy, as well as its goal of maintaining positive working relations with Russia.[99] Turkey requires a deterrent against Russia to prevent hostile actions in Idlib. It is too late for Turkey to deploy a Western air defense system to counter Russian air assets and protect Turkish soldiers. Only the US or NATO could provide such deterrence. However, given the strained relations between Turkey and some Western allies, and the presence of radical groups in Idlib, they are unlikely to risk confrontation with Russia on Turkey's behalf. On the other hand, recent developments in Ukraine may reduce Russia's motivation in Idlib and potentially alter the US stance. As James Jeffrey recently noted, "The United States has readjusted its focus in the Middle East from counterterrorism and combat reconstruction to great power competition . . . because the Middle East is one of the major theatres for such competition."[100] Much will depend on the United States' future actions in Syria.

In such a scenario, the most favorable outcome for Idlib might be the "Gazafication" of the province under Turkish protection.[101] While this would still constitute a humanitarian crisis for residents living on infertile land in extreme conditions without permanent housing,[102] it would offer better containment compared to the worst-case scenario: a continuous regime advance with Russian support towards the Turkish border.[103]

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[98] Hokayem
[99] Erkmen, S. and all, p. 4.
[100] McCurdy, Daphne and Brown, Frances Z.: Stabilization Assistance amid Geopolitical Competition: A Case Study of Eastern Syria, January 2021
[101] Lister: The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit.
[102] Hokayem
[103] Lister: The puzzling outcome of the Moscow Summit.

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