



TURKISH PROVISION OF MATERIAL SUPPORT TO AL-QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS IN IDLIB: VISUAL EVIDENCE



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1 INTRODUCTION

During the Syrian Arab Army's latest advance in north-western Syria, ongoing since 19 December 2019 and entailing the capture of over 2000km² of land to the south and east of Idlib city, international condemnation has focused on the immense humanitarian cost of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian bombing campaign and the displacement of up to a million civilian IDPs.

The context of the bloody war being waged by the SAA notwithstanding, it is important that Western policy-makers maintain a clear eye when scrutinizing the opposition in Idlib and in particular Turkey's increased involvement in co-ordinating, arming, fighting alongside and proliferating man-portable anti-aircraft defence systems (MANPADS) throughout territory controlled by al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), with potentially disastrous consequences for American and global security.

Turkey variously seeks to justify its actions in Idlib as support for the legitimate Syrian opposition; as humanitarian intervention; and even as an act of self-defence against the Kurdish forces which have no presence whatsoever in Idlib governate. The waters are further muddied by Russian disinformation efforts which, in effectively insisting that everyone in Idlib is a legitimate target, ironically make it more difficult for objective commentators to make their voices heard on the true situation in the province.

The reality is that no meaningful secular opposition remains in Idlib, now controlled by al-Qaeda offshoots of varying hue, and moreover that Turkey has little interest in either defending the civilian population of Idlib, or the secular values of elements of the original Syrian revolution.

Rather, Turkey is using the conflict in Idlib to advance its own interests, extending its geographical and military sphere of influence deep into Syrian territory through increasingly open and reckless collaboration with HTS – despite the fact that HTS are listed by the Turkish government themselves as a terror organisation. Thus we see jihadist militants sporting ISIS' Seal of Muhammad logo riding in US-made armored vehicles – not seized in war, but handed to them by the US' NATO partner, Turkey.



Fighters sporting ISIS insignia ride in an armored vehicle provided to them by NATO partner Turkey

This dossier will briefly examine the evolving relationship between Turkey and al-Qaeda offshoots and proxies in Idlib, in particular HTS, before compiling visual evidence of the proliferation of armored vehicles and heavy weaponry among these groups in Idlib province.

Turkey's current approach offers the worst of both worlds. While unlikely to make any significant impact on the Russian advance and inevitable recapture of Idlib, the provision of high-end military equipment to HTS will have devastating security consequences for the US and its partners across the world. As such, we will close with brief policy recommendations on how the situation in Idlib may be resolved to ensure a safe and secure existence for civilians and IDPs, the removal of the international security threat posed by HTS and the neutralization of Turkish moves to arm and support this listed terror group, and a process of accountability for the Syrian Government and its backers.

1.1 GROUPS PRESENT IN IDLIB

There are three main groupings of armed factions present in Idlib, namely:

- 1. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham** and associates, most notably the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), professedly independent though still understood to maintain ties with al-Qaeda;
- 2. Hurras ad-Din** and associates, al-Qaeda's direct proxy in Syria which itself works in coordination with HTS; and
- 3. Factions grouped under the National Front for Liberation (NFL)**, long under heavy Turkish influence and incorporated into the Turkish-controlled Syrian National Army as of October 2019¹.

We will examine each of these groupings in turn, giving a brief summary of their history and relationship to one another, before moving on to discuss their relationship with al-Qaeda, ISIS and Turkey.

¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/syrian-opposition-merger-into-national-army-battle-sdf.html>

1.1.1 HAYAT TAHRIR AL-SHAM (HTS)



During the latest operation, HTS fighters have filmed themselves with decapitated heads of rival combatants, and filmed themselves torturing captives

The dominant faction in Idlib is HTS, a Sunni Islamist group which is dominated by the former Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's original proxy force in Syria following their split from ISIS) and hardline elements from Ahrar-al-Sham². HTS can field a reported 15,000 to 30,000 fighters, a majority of whom are former al-Nusra fighters³.

Al-Nusra itself operated as the official Syrian branch of al-Qaeda from the outset and committed acts of torture, child abduction, and summary execution – including stoning to death women accused of committing adultery – as part of 'a strict interpretation of Sharia law... imposing punishments amounting to torture.'⁴ Al-Nusra also executed at least 20 members of the Druze minority who opposed a campaign of forced expropriation of their houses and destruction of their religious shrines⁵.

² <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/hay%E2%80%99-tahrir-al-sham>

³ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-defeat-al-qaeda-syria-grow-global-attention-islamist-terrorists-jihadis-un-us-west-iraq-raqqa-a7932881.html>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Nusra_Front#cite_note-72

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-druze/calls-for-aid-to-syrias-druze-after-al-qaeda-kills-20-idUSKBN0OR0NV20150611?irpc=932>

As of June 2013, al-Nusra Front had claimed responsibility for 57 of the 70 suicide attacks in Syria during the conflict, along with mass executions and other atrocities⁶. HTS itself claimed a 2017 twin bombing in Damascus that killed at least 40 people, the majority of them Iraqi Shia pilgrims⁷.

HTS describes itself as a military force, but retains tight control on civil society through its 'Salvation Government' and system of sharia courts, often staffed by individuals with no formal legal training or even training in sharia law. Much like ISIS, HTS conducts morality patrols, arresting young women for failing to follow religious dress codes; young men for shaving or listening to music; and civilian activists for any activity in opposition to HTS' de facto control of Idlib. HTS's religious police, known as 'Sawid Al Khayr', enforce dress codes and the segregation of males and females on buses and in the streets⁸.

HTS conduct public executions for witchcraft and heresy – as well as of ISIS members⁹. Human Rights Watch has documented consistent arbitrary detention and torture of civil society activists who sought to document HTS abuses or protest their rule, as well as assassinations and the restriction of humanitarian aid to civilians living under its rule¹⁰. Local human rights organisations have documented 184 such cases in the space of three months¹¹, while HTS has also conducted widespread confiscations of Christian property¹².

The US and Turkey designated the group a foreign terrorist organization affiliated with al-Qaeda in 2018, at which time it was also sanctioned by the UN¹³.

⁶ http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/suicide_bombers_kill_14_in_dam.php

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39250040>

⁸ <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/women-are-at-the-forefront-of-challenging-extremism-in-idlib>

⁹ <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=149003>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/28/syria-arrests-torture-armed-group>

¹¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/28/syria-arrests-torture-armed-group>

¹² <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-at-least-750-christian-houses-illegally-seized-in-jisr-al-shughur-idlib/>

¹³ <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>

1.1.2 TURKESTAN ISLAMIC PARTY (TIP)



In a still from a recent Turkestan Islamic Party propaganda video from Idlib, children in military uniform receive ideological indoctrination on the role of the mujahidin [Islamic warriors]

The TIP is an Uyghur Salafist-jihadist group which has spent decades fighting for an independent Sunni state in Xinjiang, western China. It has killed hundreds in its bombing campaigns and, since 2002, been sanctioned by the UN due to its ties to al-Qaeda^{14/15}.

Since 2015, the organization has sent fighters to Syria to participate in the conflict via front organizations based in Turkey, and currently fields around 5,000 fighters in Idlib¹⁶. They operated in close coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra, and continue to do so with HTS. As well as killing Christians and desecrating their churches, the TIP is notable for its extensive – and often openly advertised – deployment of child soldiers¹⁷.

Chechen Caucasus and Uzbek al-Qaeda proxy organisations are similarly present in Idlib, operating in coordination with HTS.

¹⁴ <https://apnews.com/79d6a427b26f4eeab226571956dd256e/AP-Exclusive:-Uighurs-fighting-in-Syria-take-aim-at-China>

¹⁵ https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/eastern-turkistan-islamic-movement

¹⁶ https://web.archive.org/web/20150618235954/http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews

¹⁷ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/turkistan-islamic-party-continues-to-train-children-in-syria.php>

1.1.3 HURRAS AD-DIN (HAD)

HaD are the official al-Qaeda proxy group in Idlib and Syria, breaking away from HTS in 2018¹⁸. As the group maintaining the most overt ties with al-Qaeda, they have faced targeted US airstrikes against their senior leadership, and former ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was being sheltered by HaD elements when he was assassinated by the United States in 2019¹⁹.

They field several thousand fighters and maintain military co-ordination with HTS, despite some disagreements (see below).

1.1.4 NATIONAL FRONT FOR LIBERATION (NFL) & SYRIAN NATIONAL ARMY (SNA)

There are also militant groups in Idlib under the direct command, control and influence of the Turkish government. The National Front for Liberation (NFL) incorporates a score or so of factions of varying size, with dominant forces including the Sham Legion, Ahrar al-Sham, Suqqour al-Sham, Jaysh al-Ahrar and Nour ad-Din al-Zenki Movement remnants.

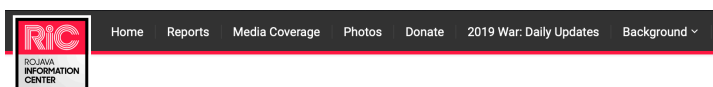
In October 2019, immediately prior to its invasion of North and East Syria, Turkey incorporated the NFL and the Syrian National Army (SNA) – another Turkish-armed, controlled and funded umbrella organisation which has its base of operations in Turkish-occupied regions of Syria including Afrin, Bab, Jarabalus and now Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad – into one command structure²⁰. SNA elements have entered Idlib to participate in the current conflict, while NFL elements have also passed via Turkish soil to participate in Turkish offensives against the SDF and territories controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Directly Turkish-controlled groups in north-west Syria are not ideologically homogenous, ranging from Salafist jihadists through to opportunists seeking to profit from the war, though they are united in their execrable human rights records.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-48353751>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/27/us/politics/baghdadi-isis-leader-trump.html>

²⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/syrian-opposition-merger-into-national-army-battle-sdf.html>



Database: over 40 former ISIS members now part of Turkish-backed forces

REPORT

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	A	B	C	D	
1	Name	AKA	Village	Town/region	Birth y
2	Isma'il Firas al-'Abbar		Sabikhan	Deir-ez-Zor	
3	Basil Nayef al-Shehab	Abu Zeid al-Tai	Qotorba	Tel Hamis	
4	Shawkat Khawaja Samawi		Shiyokh	Deir ez-Zor	

Rojava Information Center and Syrian Observatory for Human Rights have documented over 100 former ISIS fighters and commanders now part of Turkish-backed forces.

The militias Turkey has united under its control have been accused of war crimes by the UN and Amnesty International, including raping women, carrying out mass killings against Kurdish civilians, torturing, electrocuting, executing and parading caged civilians in the streets as a human shield²¹. Turkish-backed militias often worked alongside the al-Nusra Front, and together “applied a strict interpretation of Shari’a and imposed punishments amounting to torture or other ill-treatment for perceived infractions,” as well as torturing and disappearing lawyers and civil society activists²².

Turkey also used SNA and to a lesser extent NLF forces as its proxies during its 2018 and 2019 invasions of Afrin, Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, killing hundreds and displacing hundreds of thousands of civilians^{23/24}. Those who survived have faced summary rule by Turkish-backed militias imposing sharia law, kidnapping, torturing and executing civilians, and committing human rights violations possibly amounting to war crimes, along with an ongoing policy of forcible demographic change in regions formerly populated by Kurds, Yazidis and Christian minorities^{25/26}.

Per a 2020 UN report, Turkish-backed groups have committed war crimes across areas under their control, constituting “myriad violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by SNA fighters, using language comparing their “enemies” to “infidels”, “atheists” & “pigs” when referring to civilians, detainees & property...”, the displacement of the entire Yazidi population in Sere Kaniye and large swathes of the Kurdish population, the expropriation and looting of schools, businesses, bakeries, olive groves, vehicles, agricultural tools, “the war crime of murder and repeatedly the war crime of pillaging... hostage-taking, cruel treatment and torture... these violations may entail criminal responsibility for Turkish commanders who knew or should have known about these crimes.”²⁷

²¹ https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA_report.pdf

²² <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/07/syria-abductions-torture-and-summary-killings-at-the-hands-of-armed-groups/>

²³ <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=102951>

²⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/18/world/middleeast/afrin-turkey-syria.html>

²⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/19/who-exactly-is-turkey-resettling-in-syria/>

²⁶ <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2019/02/inside-rojava-democratic-province-trapped-between-turkish-forces-and-isis>

²⁷ https://twitter.com/UN_HRC/status/1234436461245673472

1.2 HTS AND OTHER GROUPS: LINKS TO AL-QAEDA



The US position on HTS is clear – yet NATO partner Turkey is now supplying HTS with heavy weapons

Though HTS insists it is independent from al-Qaeda, the UN, the US and Turkey all continue to regard it as associated with the international terror organization²⁸.

Internationally speaking, al-Qaeda’s use of proxy groups is on the increase. In 2018, it carried out a total of 316 attacks around the world, according to data collected by The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project²⁹. Its proxies have killed hundreds including an attack in Mogadishu in 2017 that left 600 dead, while as noted above HTS themselves have claimed terror attacks killing scores of civilians³⁰.

In brief, HTS emerged as a merger dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra (including its commander-in-chief, al-Qaeda operative Abu Mohammed al-Jolani), hardline Ahrar-al-Sham elements and other jihadist groups in Idlib. As Jabhat al-Nusra, the group openly declared allegiance to al-Qaeda³¹, while a subsequent rebranding to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham did not change the reality that senior al-Qaeda members are embedded throughout the group’s command structure.

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48056433>

²⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48056433>

³⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/15/truck-bomb-mogadishu-kills-people-somalia>

³¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2013/04/al-qaeda-jabhat-al-nusra-merge.html>

³² <https://sy.usembassy.gov/amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-al-nusra-front/>

As such, the establishment of HTS was widely seen as a rebranding exercise, with the US Embassy issuing a statement to the effect that “the United States is not fooled by this al-Qaeda affiliate’s attempt to rebrand itself.”³² Prominent al-Qaeda-linked individuals and designated terrorists joined the group following its formation.

More broadly, despite paying lip-service to reform and moderation in recent months, HTS continues to violently crush dissent and apply a strict interpretation of sharia law in the area under its jurisdiction (see above).

Per US think-tank Soufan, “HTS maintained links with al-Qaeda’s loyalists in northern Syria and even allocated areas and resources for its supposed rivals... While HTS proclaims that it is an independent entity not affiliated with al-Qaeda, the organisation grew out of al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, following a series of strategic rebrandings. Throughout its numerous iterations, HTS has not altered its ideology and is still widely thought to maintain links with al-Qaeda.”³³ Senior al-Qaeda figures embedded in the Syrian organization’s command structure have continued to be assassinated by the United States via strikes on Idlib^{34/35}.

It is important to note that al-Qaeda’s ‘official’ representative in Idlib and Syria is now HaD, and moreover that HaD and HTS have come into occasional, albeit limited, conflict. These conflicts, however, were resolved through dialog mediated by senior al-Qaeda figures, and the groups reconciled under the aegis of al-Qaeda³⁶. Practically speaking, HaD and HTS operate together on the battlefield against the SAA (see below), and HaD are only able to operate in Idlib as a result of HTS’ blessing, logistical support and coordination.

Recent conciliatory statements by Jolani towards the West do not change the reality that HTS and al-Qaeda at the least share a common ideology and history, that HTS leadership is full of known al-Qaeda elements, and that the groups engage in strategic and military coordination in north-west Syria.

³³ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190114-al-qaedas-shadow-still-hangs-over-syrias-idlib-analysts>

³⁴ <http://www.businessinsider.com/egyptian-al-qaeda-leader-killed-by-drone-strike-in-idlib-syria-2016-10?IR=T>

³⁵ <http://aranews.net/2016/11/us-drone-strike-kills-prominent-turkish-al-qaeda-leader/>

³⁶ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/02/analysis-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-huras-al-din-reach-a-new-accord.php>

1.3 HTS AND OTHER GROUPS: LINKS TO ISIS



Fighters wearing ISIS insignia are a common sight among the ranks of HTS and other groups which receive Turkish backing

Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq) both emerged as al-Qaeda proxy forces, in Syria and Iraq respectively. By 2013, Jolani's al-Nusra and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ISIS were clashing with one another, with Jolani swearing loyalty to al-Qaeda while Baghdadi attempted to subsume the Nusra Front into ISIS. There are significant strategic, tactical, and to a lesser extent theological differences between ISIS and what is now HTS. On the one hand, then, al-Nusra and its later incarnation HTS have been involved in armed conflict with ISIS. Open conflict between the two groups left hundreds dead in 2014, after which their spheres of influence coalesced in separate areas of Syria³⁷.

Until at least 2019, ISIS sleeper cells continued to operate against – and were captured and executed by – HTS, in HTS areas of control³⁸.

However, it must not be forgotten that both HTS and ISIS originated as al-Qa-eda proxies, that they subscribe to broadly similar Salafist ideologies, and that they have used similarly brutal methods both in enforcing these ideologies on populations under their control and in seeking to expand their sphere of influence³⁹. As such, it is unsurprising that many former ISIS members have travelled to north-western Syria to join HTS and Turkish-controlled groups there.

The Rojava Information Center has documented the names and biographies of over 40 former ISIS members now part of Turkish-controlled forces in north-western Syria, while the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights has similarly recorded the identities of over 70 former ISIS members now part of Turkish-controlled forces in their new zone of occupation east of the Euphrates⁴⁰. They include former emirs, commanders and those responsible for coordinating jihadist fighters with their handlers in the Turkish military intelligence services (MIT).

Turkish toleration of former ISIS elements in the ranks of factions under its direct control is an open secret. Just as we are seeing now in Idlib, their 2018 and 2019 invasions of Kurdish regions of northern Syria featured scores of identifiable former ISIS members making use of Turkish armor and heavy weaponry, in some instances while openly displaying ISIS insignia. Turkish-backed groups openly filmed themselves ‘liberating’ ISIS-linked detainees from detention facilities operated by the SDF, and hundreds of ISIS-linked individuals were able to escape from at least three secure facilities as a result of Turkey’s 2019 invasion east of the Euphrates⁴¹.

Idlib itself “also plays host to relocated ISIS fighters and dependents,” per a UN report published in February 2020⁴². The most notable instance is of course Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was able to cross into Idlib during ISIS’ demise as a territorial entity and was being sheltered by a HaD commander at the time of his assassination by the USA. More broadly, ISIS militants who managed to escape the final operation to eradicate their physical caliphate – or those able to pay smugglers to

³⁸ <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/hts-executes-rival-isis-sleeper-cell-fighters-in-idlib/>

³⁹ <https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>

⁴⁰ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

⁴¹ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-turkeys-war-against-civilians-1/>

⁴² <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/will-recapture-syrias-idlib-affect-islamic-state>



Turkey provided heavy weapons, including armor, to extremist SNA factions like Jaysh-al-Islam during their 2019 invasion of North and East Syria

flee SDF detention facilities – inevitably head for north-western Syria, either to Idlib or to Turkish-controlled regions. As can be seen below, ISIS insignia are on common display in Idlib, with an ISIS-style Seal of Muhammed in identical stylization and font often to be seen proudly sported by fighters using Turkish-supplied hardware.

Some pro-HTS commentators have sought to downplay the significance of this insignia, arguing it is a long-standing Muslim symbol not specifically tied to ISIS: but the layout and stylization used by mujahidin [Islamic warriors] in

Idlib is invariably a carbon-copy of ISIS’ black standard. No actors in the Syrian Civil War are unaware of its significance either locally or globally, and its omnipresence in Idlib provides the clearest visual indication possible of the ideological stance of those armed groups Turkey is backing, arming and funding in Idlib.

Indeed, former ISIS members are even more prominent among the supposedly less-radical groups which Turkey directly, openly supports and controls than they are among the ranks of HTS, their old rivals in jihad. The scores of former ISIS members identified by RIC and SOHR among the ranks of Turkish-backed factions are just the tip of the iceberg.



Turkish-backed fighters openly bragged in propaganda videos like the one pictured about using Turkish armor to ‘liberate’ ISIS-linked individuals from SDF detention facilities

1.4 TURKISH SUPPORT FOR HTS AND OTHER AL-QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS IN IDLIB

1.4.1 THE SITUATION IN IDLIB: CREEPING TURKISH CONTROL AND INFLUENCE

As outlined above, Turkey's relationship with jihadist groups in Idlib ranges from direct support, arming, funding and issuing commands through a deliberately opaque relationship with HTS to a relatively distant engagement with Hurras-ad-Din.

Simplest to define is the relationship between Turkey and those factions directly under its control – that is, the NLF in Idlib, now incorporated into the SNA command structure following their aforementioned merger in October 2019, and the SNA in Turkish-occupied regions to the north. A cursory investigation of the command and control structure of jihadist factions in the SNA, such as Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, Jaysh-al-Islam and Sultan Murad, shows that responsibility flows directly up to the TAF – and by extension their commander-in-chief, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

These factions are technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government, a Turkish-sponsored body which lobbies on behalf of the SNA in Geneva and other foreign capitals. In practice, they are trained, armed, funded and commanded by the Turkish government. The SNA number “at least 35,000 full-time fighters, all under the near-total control of Turkey's Ministry of Defense and National Intelligence Organization (MIT).”⁴³

⁴³ <https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner>

In areas under nominal SNA control, they are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population. But real power is retained by Turkey, through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies “dependent on Turkey’s political, economic and military backing for their survival.”

On the battlefield, likewise, the SNA take their commands directly from Turkey. A recent piece of in-depth research by Elizabeth Tsurkov, speaking to multiple

sources within the ranks of the SNA, confirmed: “All decisions, big and small, in the ‘National Army’ are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence.”⁴⁴



Less ideologically extreme than HTS, the Turkish-controlled SNA nonetheless committed multiple atrocities during their invasion of NE Syria, including this field execution.

While Turkey’s control of the Idlib-based NLF is less total than its control of the SNA, it has nonetheless been able to establish an “influential client-proxy relationship with the NLF by offering its groups a rear base, having them participate in Turkish operations in Afrin and in the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor, and providing them with equipment, training and salaries.”⁴⁵ The October 2019 merger constituted a further solidification of Turkish control over the NLF, illustrated by the participation of NLF elements – most notably Faylaq-al-Sham and Jaysh-al-Ahrar – in the execution of Turkish policy objectives against the SDF.

2018 saw clashes between NLF and HTS, with HTS objecting to the extension of Turkish control and influence into its zone of control in Idlib.

⁴⁴ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategies-of-turkish-proxy-warfare-in-northern-syria/4-key-characteristics-of-turkish-use-of-syrian-armed-proxies/>

HTS were the victors in that conflict, with NLF forced to sign a cease-fire agreement, but since 2019 the Turkish-backed grouping and HTS have operated together jointly to fight against the SAA under HTS' aegis.

Turkey's relationship with HTS, then, is a more complex question. As noted above, Turkey initially listed HTS as a terror group, but over the years their relationship has evolved into one of mutual co-dependency, with Turkey of course retaining technical and military superiority but at the same time recognizing HTS' territorial dominance in Idlib. HTS is too powerful, in other words, to merely be considered as a Turkish proxy: it has other sponsors and backers, and the jihadi organization is able to exert a certain influence on Turkish policy in Idlib, rather than merely following Turkish orders as in the case of the SNA. As such, Turkey's increasing trust in and cooperation with the Salafist-jihadist organization has alarmed observers who fear Turkey is handing power, influence – and lethal weaponry – to an organization it cannot expect to control.

The gradual extension of Turkey's military operation in Idlib began with occasional minor clashes with HTS, but as Turkey became entrenched in observation posts so they began a tacit relationship with the dominant grouping in Idlib. HTS guarded Turkish convoys as they entered Idlib and permitted Turkey to operate within its zone of control. By May 2019, HTS and the NLF were coordinating their attacks and the use of heavy weaponry, including anti-armor missiles, from a joint operation room. HTS' total control of Idlib means that Turkey's extensive operations in the region cannot take place without HTS' express knowledge, approval and coordination.

A Chatham House research paper summarizes this evolution well:

“Hostility between HTS and Turkey has turned into a form of peer-to-peer coordination. This was clear when HTS allowed Turkish patrols to enter territories under its control and protected Turkish observation points in northern Syria, despite previously expressing disapproval at their presence. This nascent coordination turned into wide-ranging cooperation, with HTS exclusively facilitating Turkish logistics and military operations in the north. The group prevented any other armed group being involved except with itself as an intermediary. Even Faylaq al-Sham, which had been very close to Turkey, cannot liaise with the Turks without the approval or agreement of HTS.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/reviewing-the-turkey-hts-relationship>

1.4.2 JOINT TURKISH-HTS OPERATIONS ROOM



لحظة انطلاق مجاهدي الفتح المبين نحو مواقع ميليشيات الاحتلال الروسي في بلدة
اليرب شرق إدلب



1022 المشاهدات

HTS upload images of Turkish-provided armor through their official channels – but refer to ‘al-Fatih al-Mubeen’ operations room as a figleaf.

From 2019 until the present day, Hurras-al-Din, HTS and Turkey’s NLF and SNA all coordinate their operations in Idlib, meaning that Turkey is in coordination with al-Qaeda’s appointed proxy in Syria, as well as al-Qaeda-linked HTS⁴⁷, through its Syrian proxies.

Since Spring 2019, the NLF and HTS have been operating together via an operations room known as “al-Fatih al-Mubeen”, thus uniting the Turkish-controlled and al-Qaeda-linked forces in a single fighting coalition⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ <https://t24.com.tr/haber/han-seyhun-idlib-in-kale-kapisi-nin-dusmesi-suriye-de-savasin-seyrini-ve-turkiye-yi-nasil-etkileyebilir,835771>

⁴⁸ https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/internal_conflict_in_north_west_syria.pdf

This operation room has not been prominently featured in either Turkish or al-Qaeda media, with neither HTS nor Turkey wishing to draw attention to the increasing extent of their cooperation. In particular, the NLF do not mention this operations room in their own propaganda published through their own channels.

It appears that Turkey's NLF units have been merged with HTS units. HTS media originally only covered HTS, and not NLF and other Turkish-backed units, but NLF and even SNA units now appear in HTS propaganda videos. It is likely for this reason that most of the combatants in footage released by HTS propaganda channels have now removed their patches, in order to disguise the extent of collaboration between Turkish-backed and HTS forces.

On HTS' behalf, meanwhile, the new operations room serves as a figleaf to cover Turkish supply of armaments to the al-Qaeda-linked group – presumably at Turkish request. That is, HTS still refer to their own units as the 'Mujahidin of [Hayat] Tahrir al-Sham' in videos without any Turkish armor or weapons pictured, but when Turkish armor is included in the shot they refer to the new operations room instead.

Hurras-ad-Din and other smaller, hard-line Salafist groups in Idlib have their own operations room, 'Incite the Believers'. As outlined above, this separate operations room operates in coordination with the dominant faction HTS⁴⁹, who in turn are in coordination with Turkey.



In videos where HTS' new Turkish supplies aren't visible, they continue to refer to themselves as 'the Mujahidin of Tahrir al-Sham'

⁴⁹ <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/05/al-qaeda-linked-operations-room-counterattacks-as-bombs-fall-northern-syria.php>

1.4.3 TURKISH PROLIFERATION OF ARMOR AND HEAVY WEAPONS AMONG AL-QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS



Turkey’s provision of armor to HTS and other extremist factions marks a serious escalation. Note the ISIS flag being worn by this HTS militant

Following the escalated SAA and Russian operation against HTS starting December 2019, and Turkey’s well-documented intervention alongside HTS, the extent of Turkey’s support for al-Qaeda-linked groups has dramatically increased. Turkey has both provided HTS with heavy weapons and armored vehicles for the first time, and proliferated high-end weapons systems throughout territory under HTS control.

The following section of this report will provide visual evidence of HTS fighters and members of other extremist organizations in Idlib – in some cases openly sporting the ISIS-style Seal of Muhammed – making use of Turkish-provided armored vehicles, fighting under the cover of Turkish grad salvos, and otherwise benefiting from Turkey’s deployment of tanks, armored vehicles, rocket launcher systems and special forces into the Idlib region.

Turkey has supplied its proxies with small arms, mortars and anti-tank guided missiles in large amounts. Despite protestations to the contrary from pro-Turkish propaganda channels, visual evidence clearly indicates that HTS and other al-Qaeda-linked factions including the TIP are making use of Turkish armor to launch their latest assaults, including American-made M113 personnel carriers sold to Turkey and then provided to the al-Qaeda offshoots.

Weapons systems such as ‘GRAD’ Multiple Rocket Launcher Systems (MRLS) may have not been handed directly to HTS, but are certainly being put to joint use by HTS and the NLF via their joint operations rooms⁵⁰. Again, HTS propaganda footage shows them advancing under the cover of GRAD fire, while at least one piece of propaganda footage shared by HTS shows fighters loading up Turkish-marked GRAD missiles. Even where these heavy armaments remain in the hands of Turkish-dominated groups in the NLF, they are being put to joint use with HTS, while their proliferation through HTS territory means they may well fall into HTS hands.

Finally, as a recent review from the Soufan Center thinktank noted, “While Turkey prefers to support rebels from the National Liberation Front and the Syrian National Army, HTS remains an effective fighting force. Turkey has supplied its proxies with a range of weaponry, including small-arms, mortars, and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs). There are growing concerns that the chaos in northwestern Syria is allowing the al-Qaeda-linked Hurras ad-Din to rebuild its network, one that could potentially seek to launch external operations against the West.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-idlib/turkey-sends-weapons-to-syrian-rebels-facing-russian-backed-assault-syrian-sources-idUSKCN1SV0FA>

⁵¹ <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-conflict-in-idlib-escalates-between-turkey-and-syria-while-civilians-suffer/>

1.4.4 THE MANPADS QUESTION

Perhaps most serious is Turkey's proliferation of man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) throughout the Idlib region. A MANPADS can be used to shoot down a helicopter, low-flying jet or civilian airliner, and these systems ending up in the hands of al-Qaeda-linked terrorists would be an unmitigated disaster⁵².

As such, Turkey is tightly controlling information about the proliferation of these systems in Idlib. In at least one incident in February, HTS claimed a MANPADS strike which took down an SAA helicopter⁵³. There is no visual evidence to date of MANPADS in HTS hands, and in those pieces of footage which have leaked out of MANPADS being used in Idlib it appears to be TAF commandos operating the systems.

Nonetheless, with the situation in Idlib highly volatile, Turkey's proliferation of these lethal systems into territory held by HTS means it is increasingly likely that al-Qaeda-linked groups will get their hands on these lethal weapons systems, capable of shooting down airliners.

⁵² http://www.iasa.com.au/folders/Security_Issues/manpadsthreat.html

⁵³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jFg_U6s4HU

2 VISUAL EVIDENCE OF TURKISH MATERIAL SUPPORT FOR HTS & OTHER AL-QAEDA-LINKED GROUPS

A)

Where:	Idlib
When:	29 February
Who:	HTS
What:	HTS fighters using a US-built M113
Equipment supplied:	M113
Source:	Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)



B)

Where: Idlib
When: 27 February
Who: HTS
What: HTS fighters wearing the ISIS patch using a US-built M113
Equipment supplied: M113
Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)





C)

Where: Kuffar Awid, Idlib
 When: 29 February
 Who: HTS
 What: Militiamen wearing the insignia of HTS militia Jaysh abu-Bakr al-Sidiq using a US-made built M113
 Equipment supplied: M113
 Source: HTS media operative Mohammed Othman



D)

Where: Idlib Governate
When: 20 February
Who:
What: HTS loading Turkish-marked MRLS (GRAD) missiles
Equipment supplied: MRLS missiles
Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)



E)

Where: Abin Selman
When: 13 February
Who: HTS
What: Advancing under cover of GRAD rocket salvo
Equipment supplied: GRAD launcher
Source: Video shot by Turkish-backed forces, supplied to journalist Lindsay Snell



F)

Where: Mayzanaz and Kafr Halab, west Aleppo
When: 16 February
Who: HTS
What: HTS fighters using US-made M113, fighter wearing ISIS patch visible in same video
Equipment supplied: M113
Source: HTS-linked Insight media



VISUAL EVIDENCE

G)

Where:	Idlib
When:	26 February
Who:	Turkestan Islamic Party
What:	Using Turkish-supplied armored vehicles
Equipment supplied:	ACV-15
Source:	TIP channel



H)

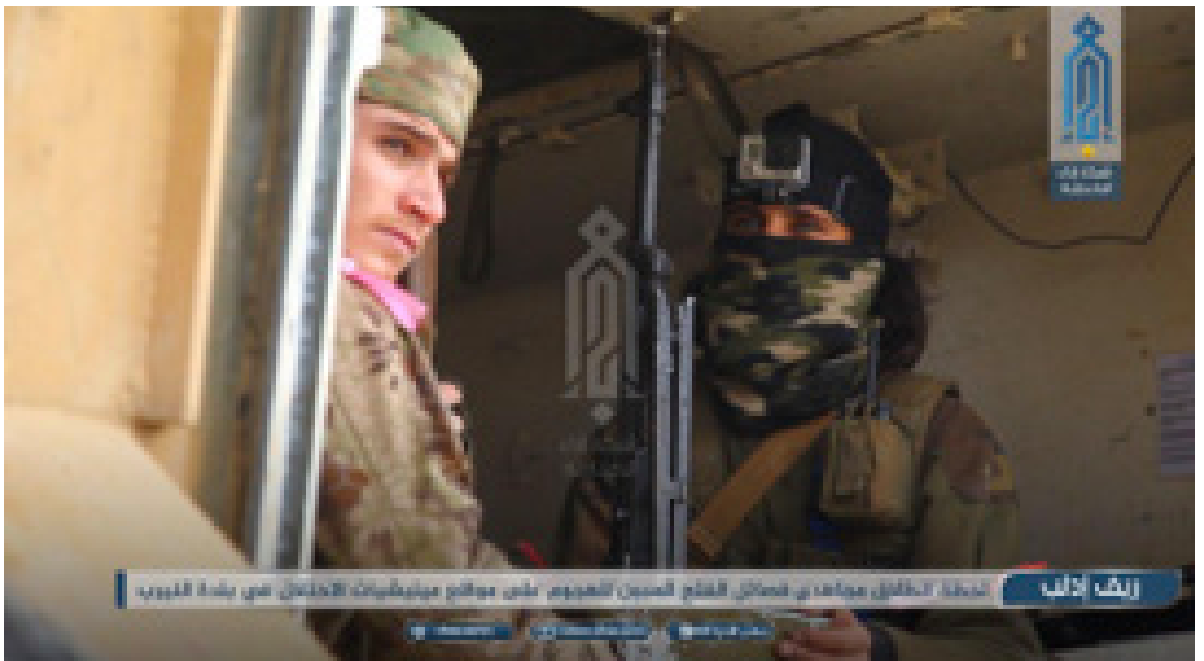
Where: Eastern Idlib
 When: 20 February
 Who: HTS
 What: Using US-made M113 and Turkish-supplied ACV-15
 Equipment supplied: ACV-15 (rear of first image), M113 (second image)
 Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)



I)

Where: Nayrab, Eastern Idlib
 When: 24 February
 Who: HTS
 What: HTS using US-made M113
 Equipment supplied: M113
 Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel); pro-NLF media





VISUAL EVIDENCE

J)

Where:	Idlib
When:	20 February
Who:	HTS
What:	HTS using Turkish-supplied ACV-15
Equipment supplied:	ACV-15
Source:	SNA channels



K)

Where: al-Narb, Idlib
When: 21 February
Who: HTS
What: HTS using Turkish-supplied M113
Equipment supplied: M113
Source: A24 News Agency



L)

Where: Idlib
 When: 26 February
 Who: HTS
 What: 'the mujahidin of HTS' in US-made M113
 Equipment supplied: M113
 Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)



M)

Where: Kafr Awaid, Idlib
 When: 29 February
 Who: HTS
 What: HTS fighters using Turkish-supplied armored vehicles
 Equipment supplied: ACV-15 and M113R
 Source: Ebaa News (Official HTS channel)



3 **CONCLUSION: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

For as long as the Syrian conflict in general – and Idlib in particular – is conceived in black-and-white terms, no solution will be found. This is equally true of the ‘regime vs. rebels’ and the ‘legitimate state vs. jihadis’ narratives propagated by Turkish and Western press on the one hand, and Russian press on the other. War crimes committed by HTS and Turkish-backed groups against civilians living in areas under their control do not excuse the Russian and SAA carpet-bombing campaign: but nor should Turkey’s intervention be misunderstood as anything less than a power-grab carried out in coordination with radical jihadist groups, which will have potentially disastrous security consequences for the West as Turkey recklessly provides these groups with heavy weapons and disseminates MANPADs through areas under their control.

Given that – as is clear by this stage in the conflict – NATO and the Western community are unwilling to proactively intervene in north-western Syria, Turkey’s intervention cannot prevent the eventual return of Idlib to Damascus’ control. On the basis of this reality, there are some concrete steps which can be taken towards reconciliation, while also ensuring Western security interests are protected and that lethal weapons systems are not handed to extremist groups who pose a threat to civilians in the USA, Europe and Middle East alike.

3.1 TAKING UP THE OFFER OF SUPPORT FROM NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

Though Turkey claims its intervention into Idlib is to protect Syrian civilians, Turkey's invasions of Syria have killed hundreds and displaced hundreds of thousands of ordinary Syrians. At the same time, Turkey's border remains closed to refugees fleeing the lethal Russian-SAA assault, and Turkish border guards have shot dead at least 422 civilians trying to flee into Turkey throughout the Syrian conflict⁵⁴.

Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has demonstrated its willingness to host up to a million IDPs from all over Syria⁵⁵. Most recently, the AANES opened its doors to IDPs fleeing Idlib, with at least 6000 IDPs from Idlib now being housed by the AANES. Loqman Ahmi, spokesperson of the AANES, recently spoke with the UN to reaffirm North and East Syria's willingness to partner with the UN to house IDPs from Idlib, relieving the burden on Europe and enabling these Syrian IDPs to remain in their own country⁵⁶.

As noted above, a 2020 UN report found that Turkish-backed groups have committed war crimes across areas under their control, constituting "myriad violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by SNA fighters, using language comparing their "enemies" to "infidels", "atheists" & "pigs" when referring to civilians, detainees & property...", the displacement of the entire Yazidi population in Sere Kaniye and large swathes of the Kurdish population, the expropriation and looting of schools, businesses, bakeries, olive groves, vehicles, agricultural tools, "the war crime of murder and repeatedly the war crime of pillaging... hostage-taking, cruel treatment and torture... these violations may entail criminal responsibility for Turkish commanders who knew or should have known about these crimes."

⁵⁴ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/syrians-at-the-turkish-border-humiliation-torture-and-death/>

⁵⁵ <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/2530>

⁵⁶ Rojava Information Center interview with Loqman Ehmi, 28 February 2019

The same report found no evidence of war crimes committed by the SDF, and on the contrary praised the AANES for its ground-breaking efforts towards democratic and gender equality in the regions under its control. Indeed, the AANES and SDF are the only actors in Syria which consistently strive to meet international humanitarian standards. Despite the US withdrawal which allowed Turkey to invade North and East Syria, the AANES and SDF have consistently proven themselves the West's best partners in Syria, and loyal custodians of US and international interests.

The fact that the AANES are welcoming IDPs from Idlib in their thousands once again demonstrates that there was no need for Turkey to invade and occupy North and East Syria to install Arab IDPs there. Nor is there any need for the UN and EU to bow to Turkey's use of refugees as a political weapon. Rather, NE Syria has always been open to receive IDPs from all over Syria, and as such a strengthened partnership between North and East Syria and the international community is fundamental to resolving the humanitarian crisis in Idlib.

The USA and Europe should also act to house refugees fleeing Idlib on their own account, rather than allowing Turkey to use refugees as a political bargaining chip. As well as opening routes to safe third countries in the EU and elsewhere, they should recognize that they have a loyal partner in North and East Syria willing and able to house these IDPs on Syrian soil.

3.2 SUPPORTING THE POLITICAL PROCESS TOWARDS A FEDERAL SOLUTION IN SYRIA

As outlined above, a military solution is not feasible in Idlib, with international intervention off the table and Turkey unable to seriously resist Russian aerial and military dominance. As such, rather than allowing Turkey to prolong the conflict in the hope of securing a larger slice of territory in North and East Syria, the United States and the international community should offer meaningful support for a political process and the vision of a federal Syria.

This will mean forcing Turkey to admit that it cannot – not does it seriously expect to – prevent Russia and the SAA from taking Idlib, and recognizing that despite recent flare-ups Turkey and Russia are taking great care not to engage one another militarily in the field of conflict. The pressure Moscow exerts on Ankara is too great, and Ankara likewise recognizes that NATO is not about to intervene on its behalf in a war it has brought upon itself as part of its efforts to seize land, influence and power in Syria.

In the words of analyst Aaron Stein, “The United States is Turkey’s ally, but has little interest in the Turkish armed forces being bogged down in an unwinnable war in Syria, taking casualties and being humiliated by Russian bombardment. A ceasefire makes sound strategic sense. It also would be preferable to an outcome in which more Syrians will die fighting for an unwinnable endeavor. Negotiations with Russia will not be easy, nor straightforward.

“Idlib is a massive humanitarian catastrophe and the Assad regime is almost certain to exact revenge on innocent civilians it accuses of being disloyal. The United States ought to work to prevent this, but the path to doing so is not continuing aid to an insurgency that will not win. The United States and Europe both should consider continuing — if not expanding — its humanitarian assistance to ease Turkey’s burden and support Syrian civilians.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ <https://warontherocks.com/2020/02/cleaning-up-turkeys-mess-in-idlib-and-ending-the-war/>

The more the USA and Western community play a role in this process, the more they can influence its outcome to ensure the best possible outcome for civilians in north-western Syria and in terms of their security interests in the Middle East. This means ensuring that all actors in Syria have a seat at the negotiating table, including the AANES and SDF who are the USA's most loyal partners in Syria but are currently excluded from this process, as well as representatives of the wider Syrian opposition.

The vision of a federal, devolved Syria being put forward by the AANES represents the best possible outcome for civilians in Idlib and across Syria, but for so long as the debate is polarized between hopeless investment in a lost war in Idlib on the one hand and Damascus' hardball demands on the other, the best interests of local civilians and the international community alike cannot be met.

3.3 BRINGING AN END TO TURKISH SUPPORT FOR AL-QAEDA-LINKED MILITIAS

The more the burgeoning humanitarian crisis in Idlib is resolved, the less Turkey will be able to use it as a figleaf to disguise its ambitions of territorial expansion. Curbing Turkey's proliferation of lethal weapons systems and heavy armor throughout territory controlled by HTS and other al-Qaeda-linked militias is not only a security prerogative, but a necessary step on the path toward an enduring reconciliation and resolution in Syria outlined above.

To achieve this policy objective, it will be necessary for the international community in general and the US and NATO partners in particular to exercise pressure on Turkey, which is currently acting as a rogue actor and supporting listed terror organizations, including HTS.

Even setting aside the fact that Turkey has aided and abetted the growth of ISIS in Syria and to this day shelters scores of high-ranking former ISIS members in the ranks of its militias, Turkey's current actions in Idlib alone warrant its formal listing by the US Treasury Department as a State Sponsor of Terror.

Taking decisive action against Turkey's open support for al-Qaeda-linked factions in Idlib today could prevent a civilian airliner being shot down by these same factions tomorrow.

4 APPENDIX

WHO ARE ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER?

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

RIC has assisted reporters and researchers from all leading international newspapers, websites and news sources with their work, including: BBC, CNN, ITV, NBC, Fox News, ABC and Al Jazeera; New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, LA Times; Die Welt, Die Zeit, El Pais, El Monde, Corriere Della Sera; TFI, France 24, ZDF, ARD, DW, ARTE; Associated Press, AFP, DPA, EFE, ANSA; Cambridge, Yale and Madrid Universities; Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations: and many other national and international news sources.



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