



Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. Predicaments and Priorities	5
A. The Syrian Regime, Russia and Iran	5
B. Turkey and the West.....	8
III. Unworkable Ceasefires	12
A. The Astana and Sochi Agreements	12
B. Why Idlib Ceasefires Have Broken Down	14
IV. The HTS Conundrum	17
A. Breaking from al-Qaeda.....	17
B. Controlling Idlib.....	20
C. How Genuine the Transformation?.....	23
V. A Way Forward.....	25
VI. Conclusion	28

APPENDICES

A. Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 6 May and 1 August 2019.....	29
B. Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 2 August 2019 and 26 December 2019	30
C. Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 24 January and 5 March 2020.....	31
D. About the International Crisis Group	32
E. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2017....	33
F. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	35

Principal Findings

What's new? A Russian-backed Syrian regime offensive against rebel-held Idlib halted when Russia and Turkey negotiated a ceasefire in March. Turkey is sending reinforcements, signalling a military response to what it deems a national security threat. For now, this step may dissuade Russia from resuming the offensive, but the standoff appears untenable.

Why does it matter? Successive Russian-Turkish ceasefires in Idlib have collapsed over incompatible objectives, diverging interpretations and exclusion of the dominant rebel group, Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is UN-sanctioned and considered by Russia and others a terrorist organisation. A Russian-backed regime offensive to retake Idlib likely would result in humanitarian catastrophe.

What should be done? All actors should seek a more sustainable ceasefire – optimally including HTS, notwithstanding legitimate concerns about the group – that avoids the high military, political and humanitarian price of another offensive. Turkey should push HTS to continue distancing itself from transnational militancy and display greater tolerance for political and religious pluralism.

Executive Summary

Idlib, the last redoubt of Syrian rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad's regime, presents an international political conundrum that threatens to become a far greater humanitarian tragedy. A Russian-backed regime offensive has squeezed the rebels and displaced hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians, many crowding at the Turkish border. Turkish-Russian ceasefires have broken down time and again. The latest one, in March, while holding, bears all the flaws of its predecessors and may therefore also erode. To prevent further escalation, Moscow and Ankara should negotiate a more durable ceasefire that goes some way toward addressing both countries' core concerns. This step is all the more urgent because of the possibly imminent spread of COVID-19 in Idlib, which can be contained only through concerted international action at a time of relative calm. Idlib's health care sector is all but destroyed as a result of the latest offensive, and an outbreak in this densely populated province could prove disastrous.

The failure of successive Russia-Turkey ceasefires, which were rooted in the trilateral Astana process launched with Iran in 2017, partly derives from the two sides' contradictory interpretations of their commitments. Those differences in turn reflect the two countries' opposing positions on Idlib's future. The latest deal suspends but does not address the differences: while Turkey seeks to keep the Syrian regime out of Idlib pending a comprehensive political settlement of the Syrian conflict, Russia supports Damascus in the objective of reclaiming all the country's territory – through negotiated deals if possible, or by force if the regime deems it necessary.

The Russian-Turkish deals also have recurrently stumbled over the question of Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a jihadist group that dominates the area and that is not covered by the ceasefires. Russia has made clear that it expects Turkey to contain, police and eventually eliminate the group. But Ankara may have concluded that HTS is too strong and locally rooted to eradicate militarily without incurring a large human toll and sending a new wave of refugees to the Turkish border. It may also be disinclined to weaken the most powerful armed group in Idlib, thereby enabling a regime offensive. Russia has pointed in particular to HTS's inclusion in the UN Security Council's sanctions list of entities affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, as well as its alleged drone attacks on Russia's Hmeimim air base on Syria's Mediterranean coast, as reasons for backing repeated offensives in Idlib. Because Russia enjoys the upper hand militarily over the rebels and could give the regime the kind of military support it would need to press for total victory, it has repeatedly been tempted to push in that direction.

Yet the political and military price of such an offensive for both Moscow and Damascus could be high. In addition to significantly worsening a humanitarian crisis, it could trigger even greater Turkish involvement: in the last three months, Ankara has stepped up both its own military role and its support for the main rebel alliance it backs in Idlib, the National Liberation Front, signalling its willingness to invest in Idlib in order to block regime advances and its ability to raise the cost of a new regime offensive. Developments earlier this year suggest that while the Syrian army, reorganised, re-equipped and backed by Russian airpower, in theory could overwhelm Idlib's rebels, it would face real obstacles now that Turkey has deployed advanced

drones and surface-to-air missiles. Ankara has qualitatively enhanced its Idlib intervention to preserve what it perceives as its interests and its ability to counter-attack regime forces. Even if a regime offensive achieved significant territorial gains, it would therefore likely come at a high cost in manpower and materiel to forces already stretched thin.

Perhaps most important for Moscow, a Syrian offensive it backs could jeopardise its relationship with Ankara, particularly if regime forces push into densely populated areas such as Idlib city, fomenting mass civilian flight toward the Turkish border. Moreover, a violent takeover of Idlib could bring new security challenges. A large portion of the thousands of fighters now bottled up there would likely flee; many might shift focus toward a broader asymmetric insurgency against regime forces, while some foreign jihadists might seek their way home, including to countries in the post-Soviet space.

There is an alternative scenario. Although it may not return Idlib to regime control in the short to medium term, it would both address Russia's interest in suppressing rebel capacity to strike Russian military assets from Idlib and preserve Moscow's strategically important relationship with Ankara. This scenario would require Moscow and Ankara to reach a more sustainable ceasefire and in particular address the role of HTS – which controls Idlib and therefore is pivotal to the success of any agreement – in a realistic and pragmatic way.

Since 2016, there have been signs that HTS is in the process of morphing from an al-Qaeda affiliate with a Salafi-jihadist orientation and membership (calling itself Jabhat al-Nusra) into a Syrian-dominated force that, despite having a hardline Islamist orientation, being regarded by many as repressive and intolerant and continuing to fight the Assad regime, is shedding its transnational goals in favour of a local state-building project. Whether HTS can transform itself into a primarily political actor that becomes part of Syria's post-conflict order in Idlib is far from clear.

Yet signs of pragmatism within the group, even if driven by tactical considerations deriving from military pressure, are worth testing. A shift by HTS away from transnational militancy would benefit foreign governments concerned about attacks emanating from Idlib, while the province's long-suffering inhabitants would gain were the group more tolerant of pluralism and dissent. HTS's transformation, however genuine, is unlikely to convince Russia or the regime, but its recent evolution does suggest that it may be ready to enter transactional ceasefire agreements that might at least address Moscow's concern about alleged attacks on Hmeimim air base. Turkey, potentially together with other foreign powers, could set conditions for HTS that, if met by the group, could enable HTS's inclusion in ceasefire agreements, even if indirectly.

The expected humanitarian catastrophe that would follow an all-out assault on Idlib, and the associated political costs, mean that exploring this alternative is the least bad option for all relevant actors. The additional threat that COVID-19 poses to Idlib's over three million inhabitants, and in particular to the tens of thousands of displaced civilians living in makeshift camps, underlines the urgency for all parties to achieve a more durable ceasefire that could allow for a coordinated international humanitarian response.

Idlib/Istanbul/Brussels, 15 May 2020

Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib

I. Introduction

Backed by Russian airpower, the Syrian regime has pursued an incremental military strategy for reclaiming the rebel-held north west. This effort escalated in April 2019, when regime forces launched what Russian officials described at the time as a “limited” offensive geared toward pushing back opposition-affiliated fighters from their positions in northern Hama and southern Idlib provinces.¹ By March 2020, it had left over a million Syrians displaced. Russian officials suggested that their immediate priority was to stop frequent drone attacks on Russia’s assets at the Hmeimim air base, on the Mediterranean coast south east of Latakia, by pushing rebel groups further northward into Idlib and restoring regime control over the area’s two major highways.² For its part, Damascus reiterated its intent to retake all the rebel-held areas, including Idlib.³

Regime forces first advanced eastward on towns and villages in northern Hama, including Qalaat al-Madiq, in May 2019. In August, they began pushing westward, capturing Khan Sheikhoun on the M5 Damascus-Aleppo highway. This manoeuvre allowed the regime to cut northern Hama off from the southern Idlib countryside, forcing rebels in the former to withdraw to avoid becoming encircled.⁴ Regime forces proceeded in December toward larger towns such as Maarat al-Numan and Saraqeb, and by late February had taken control of the full length of the M5, along with additional areas extending up to 12km west of the highway. The offensive’s direction, before it was halted by the 5 March ceasefire, implied that Damascus’ next objectives were likely the towns of Ariha and Jisr al-Shughour, allowing the regime to seize the M4 Aleppo-Latakia highway, which passes some 10km south of Idlib city.⁵ Were this move to succeed, the regime would regain control of more than half of the remaining rebel-held areas in north-western Syria.

Russian airpower has compensated for the regime’s relative weakness in ground warfare but has simultaneously significantly increased the human toll.⁶ The combined air and artillery attacks ravaged numerous towns and villages, including Qalaat

¹ See “Full-scale assault on Syria’s Idlib ‘not expedient,’ says Russia’s Putin”, *Moscow Times*, 27 April 2019. See also Bethan McKernan, “Idlib is a bargaining chip’: civilians brace as Assad air assault escalates”, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2019.

² Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Ankara, July 2019.

³ President Bashar al-Assad interviewed on Russian TV, as broadcast by CNN Arabic, 31 May 2018. At the time, a source close to the regime specified a narrower immediate objective, suggesting that the offensive would “probably be limited to just the 20km demilitarised zone defined in the [2018] Sochi understanding”. Crisis Group telephone interview, adviser to the regime, May 2019.

⁴ Some rebels refused orders from their commanders to evacuate and carried out attacks on regime forces. Crisis Group telephone interviews, rebels in Idlib, January 2020.

⁵ See Danny Makki, “Idlib Offensive: The View from Damascus”, Middle East Institute, 29 May 2019.

⁶ According to the UN, around 400,000 people were displaced in December 2019 alone. UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), “Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwestern Syria Situation Report No. 1”, Reliefweb, 23 December 2019.

al-Madiq, Kafr Nabudah, Khan Sheikhoun, Maaret al-Numan and Saraqeb, sending tens of thousands of civilians fleeing toward the northern parts of Idlib.⁷ Crisis Group's visits to the area showed the extent to which air and artillery strikes had targeted and destroyed hospitals, bakeries, schools and vital infrastructure in an apparent attempt to put pressure on the civilian population and the local administration.⁸ At least 1,700 civilians were reportedly killed in these strikes.⁹ The head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), Mark Lowcock, declared in mid-February 2020 that the fighting in the north had reached a "horrific level", estimating that 940,000 civilians had been forced to flee their homes since early December 2019.¹⁰

With nearly 3.5 million Syrians already in Turkey and popular resentment of the refugees on the rise, Ankara doubled down on its military presence in Idlib in early February, sending major reinforcements to its outposts there in an effort to stymie the regime advance.¹¹ But Turkish soldiers arrived in Idlib without a clear mandate to engage in combat, except in self-defence, and quickly became a target of Russian and regime attacks. By official Turkish accounts, Turkey lost 53 of its soldiers during February.¹²

Turkey responded swiftly and vehemently, with armed and unarmed drones, causing significant losses to regime manpower, armour and artillery. For the regime, it was the second highest toll in a single month since the war began.¹³ The counter-attack stopped the regime offensive in its tracks and even reversed some of its gains. It also appears to have contributed to bringing Russia back to the negotiating table, result-

⁷ Crisis Group observations and interviews, southern Idlib, June 2019. A media activist said: "The population of Maaret al-Numan was over 100,000 during the weeks before the regime entered the town. Now fewer than a thousand people are left there". Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2020. A Russian analyst who visited Khan Sheikhoun in September 2019 after the regime had captured it said some residents had started to return to their homes. Crisis Group interview, Moscow, February 2020.

⁸ Citing WHO and UNICEF, Mark Lowcock, head of UN OCHA, noted that 43 health facilities, 87 educational facilities, 29 water stations and seven markets had been damaged in April-August 2019. "Hospitals among seven health centres attacked in Syria's north-west", UN News, 2 September 2019.

⁹ UN OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria – Situation Report No. 10", Reliefweb, 12 March 2020.

¹⁰ Kristy Siegfried, "The Refugee Brief – 18 February 2020", UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 18 February 2020; and UN OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic: Recent Developments in Northwest Syria, Situation Report No. 11", 27 March 2020.

¹¹ A Turkish official told Reuters that over a thousand military vehicles entered Idlib in February, carrying tanks, armoured personnel carriers and other equipment. Orhan Coskun, "Turkey ready to act after reinforcing Syria's Idlib: official", Reuters, 9 February 2020. Turkish military analysts estimate that Turkey created ten additional outposts in Idlib in February. Crisis Group telephone interview, February 2020.

¹² On 27 February, an airstrike killed at least 33 Turkish soldiers in Idlib. The strike exacted the highest death toll on the Turkish military in a single day's action for more than two decades. Gul Tuysuz and Isil Sariyuce, "At least 33 Turkish soldiers killed in air attack by Syrian regime, Turkish governor says", CNN, 28 February 2019.

¹³ In February 2020, the regime reportedly lost at least 102 pieces of armour that were either destroyed or captured by the rebels. Tweet by Jakub Janovsky, contributor at Bellingcat, @Rebel44CZ, 8:05am, 1 March 2020.

ing in a Turkish-Russian summit that produced a renewed ceasefire in Idlib, albeit on terms more favourable to Moscow.¹⁴

On 5 March, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin agreed on a new cessation of hostilities in Idlib, establishing a “security corridor” extending 6km on each side of the M4 Aleppo-Latakia highway, an area under rebel control, to be monitored by joint Russian-Turkish patrols. The agreement froze the conflict along the new front line, giving the regime control over many areas it had retaken in the latest offensive.¹⁵ This outcome gave Turkey less than it hoped for, namely restoration of the demarcation line to outside the M4 as well as the M5 Damascus-Aleppo highways (ie, back to the initial lines set out in the 2018 Sochi Memorandum of Understanding, discussed below) and conclusion of a long-term agreement that would last until a political solution is reached. Still, Ankara achieved more than the situation on the ground had suggested it would a couple of weeks earlier, when the regime was advancing rapidly toward Ariha and the M4.

The first joint patrol took place on 15 March, but it had to be aborted midway through due to local protests.¹⁶ Subsequent attempts by Russian military police to take part in the patrols were also blocked by locals staging sit-ins, who let through only Turkish military vehicles.¹⁷

Idlib's fragile ceasefire remains at great risk of falling apart. As in the past, Russia's decision whether to provide air support and other backing to regime forces will determine a renewed regime offensive's viability. At the same time, Turkey has reinforced its own presence since the latest ceasefire came into effect, continuously injecting armour, artillery and personnel into Idlib.¹⁸ Turkish officials continue to publicly and privately state their readiness to re-escalate in response to what they contend is a national security threat.¹⁹ While a fortified Turkish presence may dissuade Russia from resuming the offensive, the current situation appears untenable as long as the two sides fail to address the ceasefire's weaknesses. A direct Russian-Turkish confrontation in this densely populated pocket of Syria is possible.

¹⁴ See Vladimir Soldatkin and Maria Kiselyova, “Russia, Turkey agree ceasefire deal for Syria's Idlib”, Reuters, 5 March 2020. Russian officials dispute the claim that Turkey's offensive brought them back to the table, arguing that talks between the two sides had been ongoing and that the two leaders ultimately had to intervene to close the remaining gaps. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2020.

¹⁵ The retaken zone includes areas such as Sahl al-Ghab in northern Hama and Jabal Zawiya in southern Idlib, as well as Saraqeb and the eastern Idlib countryside.

¹⁶ The first joint patrol took place on 15 March as planned but could proceed only a few kilometres along the highway before residents blocked the road with a sit-in. Crisis Group telephone interview, local activist, Idlib, March 2020.

¹⁷ Russia blamed “terrorists”, saying they used civilians as human shields. See Fehim Tastekin, “Mission impossible 2.0: Idlib plan stumbles at outset”, *Al-Monitor*, 18 March 2020. On 15 April, Turkey and Russia attempted another patrol along the M4, but the Russian forces were able to participate on only a 3-5km stretch at the route's eastern end. “Russia, Turkey hold fourth joint military patrol in Syria”, *Ahval*, 16 April 2020. On 26 April, Turkish troops fired tear gas canisters and live bullets to disperse protesters blocking the highway, reportedly killing two people and wounding others. “Activists: Turkish troops shoot dead 2 protesters in Syria”, *The New York Times*, 26 April 2020.

¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, rebels in Idlib, March 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Turkish officials, March 2020.

This report analyses the latest developments in north-western Syria. It addresses the risk of a ceasefire breakdown and renewed violence and proposes ideas for averting that scenario. In outlining the challenges local and external players face, it argues that what Russia and Turkey do next will decisively shape where the region is headed: toward a more sustainable ceasefire or toward a new round of brutal fighting that would provoke a humanitarian disaster. It is based on more than 100 interviews conducted in Syria, Turkey and Russia with Western, Russian, Turkish and Syrian officials over the past year, as well as with representatives of HTS and other rebel groups during visits to Idlib in 2019 and 2020. It also builds upon Crisis Group's previous reports and briefings on Syria's north west.²⁰

²⁰ See Crisis Group Commentary, "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani", 20 February 2020; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°197, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, 14 March 2019; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°56, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, 9 February 2018; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°63, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, 3 September 2018.

II. Predicaments and Priorities

A. *The Syrian Regime, Russia and Iran*

The violent standoff over Idlib presents a conundrum for all involved parties, yet in distinctly different ways. President Bashar al-Assad's forces are fighting a battle-hardened array of rebel groups embedded in a population that is deeply antagonistic to the regime and fears its return. The area has long been the last Syrian destination for civilians and rebel fighters who either fled regime advances elsewhere in the country or were forcibly displaced through so-called reconciliation deals with the regime – negotiated surrenders in besieged rebel areas about to be overrun, such as Deraa, eastern Ghouta and the northern Homs countryside.

More than three million people live in this pocket of territory, the overwhelming majority of them civilians, but also thousands of fighters in jihadist and armed opposition factions.²¹ The province's newly complex demography, the strength of its armed factions and the fact that those who fear regime retribution have nowhere else in Syria to go may present the regime and its backers with a difficult dilemma. In Idlib, they are running up against the logical result of their own policy of negotiated surrenders and evacuations in earlier battles elsewhere. Unlike in Deraa, Ghouta and other recaptured areas, there is no plausible prospect of pushing a significant part of Idlib's rebels into "reconciliation" deals.²² "Idlib is now a problem of our own making", a businessman close to the regime said.²³

Damascus' strategic priority has long been securing its strongholds in Latakia and Aleppo against rebel attacks and infiltration from Idlib, as well as restoring control over the two major highways that run through rebel-controlled areas, the M4 connecting Aleppo to the coast and the M5 to Damascus.²⁴ In theory, it could achieve these immediate objectives through a more durable ceasefire and security arrangements along the two highways.

²¹ Numbers may not be precise, because they refer to a combination of full-time fighters, occasional fighters and individuals who volunteer to defend their villages. A senior U.S. military officer estimated in 2018 that there were 20,000-30,000 militants in Idlib at the time. Phil Stewart, "Top U.S. general warns against major assault on Syria's Idlib", Reuters, 9 September 2018. In January 2019, the UN estimated that there were 20,000 fighters in Idlib associated with Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including many foreigners. "Letter dated 15 January 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals, groups, undertakings and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council", 15 January 2019. The main rebel groups in Idlib are HTS, the National Liberation Front (a Turkish-backed rebel alliance), Hurras al-Din (an-al-Qaeda offshoot) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP, a Chinese Uighur-dominated jihadist group). See Crisis Group Report, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, op. cit.

²² Additionally, HTS is reported to have carried out arrests of persons in Idlib it accused of promoting reconciliation deals. See Samir al Khalidi, "An arrest campaign targets those promoting reconciliation", *Al-Ayam Syria*, 10 August 2019 (Arabic).

²³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessman, Geneva, July 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Geneva, 2020.

Yet Damascus has given no sign that it is willing to budge from its declared intent to regain “every inch of Syria”, Idlib included.²⁵ While its backers may have financial and geopolitical considerations that could convince them to avoid a military showdown in Idlib, the regime has been keen to highlight its dissatisfaction with de-escalation zone and ceasefire agreements and its unwillingness to commit to any deal that will keep parts of Syria out of its control.²⁶ Since Damascus is aware it can probably achieve its larger objective only through military escalation, it has broadcast its intention to push deeper into Idlib.²⁷ “The military will not give up until it achieves total victory sooner or later”, Assad said in February 2020.²⁸ Whether the Syrian army can win a conclusive victory in Idlib depends primarily on Russia’s willingness to provide air support: without such backing the regime can rely only on its own troops, supported by allied non-Syrian militias, to regain and hold ground in Idlib. The Syrian army is much weakened by eight years of fighting and its morale is suffering.

In deciding how far to go, Russia must balance its interest in restoring regime control over all Syria against its interest in maintaining and deepening its ties with Turkey. As a Russian diplomat put it, “Moscow has ample incentive to avoid a blow to its relations with Turkey over Idlib”.²⁹ Russia has become a key supplier for Turkey’s arms market, and cooperation between the two countries extends beyond Syria to strategic industries that create mutual dependencies (albeit more favourable to Moscow). Joint projects include the TurkStream pipeline bringing Russian natural gas to Turkey, Russia’s construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant in Turkey’s Mersin province and Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system.³⁰ Russia’s geostrategic considerations include drawing Ankara closer to Moscow at Washington’s expense, thus driving a wedge in the NATO alliance and weakening U.S. influence.

An all-out assault on Idlib would put Russian relations with Turkey at risk. It would almost certainly put an end to the Astana process, the trilateral talks involving Iran that began in 2017, and in which Turkey’s participation has been critical for reaching previous ceasefires. Astana’s collapse or Ankara’s decision to downgrade its cooperation with Moscow would threaten Russia’s political project, not just in Idlib but in all Syria, and empower figures in the Turkish establishment who believe that Ankara needs to anchor itself more firmly in the Western camp.³¹

²⁵ See “President Assad’s interview given to al-Sourya and al-Ikhbarya TV”, SANA, 31 October 2019. See also “Syria: ‘Every intruder is an enemy’ – Al Assad”, Ruptly, 17 February 2019.

²⁶ When asked about Russian pressure to stop military operations as a result of special understandings with Turkey, Assad responded that while “pressure” is not the right word, sometimes his international partners adapt military operations to changing developments. “President al-Assad’s interview”, SANA, *op. cit.* Speaking in an interview on Syrian television, Assad described all ceasefire deals as “temporary” and vowed to reinstate the regime’s rule over all parts of Syria: “Our policy should be rational and gradual considering the facts, but the final goal is for sure the return of the Syrian state’s control”. “Assad warns of war if political means fail to secure Turkey’s pullout from N. Syria”, Xinhua, 1 November 2019.

²⁷ See “President al-Assad’s interview”, SANA, *op. cit.*

²⁸ “Assad: Aleppo will return as strong as ever”, VOA, 17 February 2020.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Geneva, June 2019.

³⁰ See Galip Dalay, “After the S-400 Purchase: Where Are Turkish-Russian Relations Heading?”, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 3 September 2019.

³¹ Russia seeks to ensure not just the regime’s military victory in Syria but its full political restoration through international re-legitimation at war’s end, as well as its economic recovery through

Russia has to weigh other considerations as well. Because the rebels in Idlib, battle-hardened and entrenched, believe they have no choice but to fight to the end, any offensive would result in significant regime losses. Such a confrontation would also spell great difficulty for Damascus in pacifying and holding on to any territory retaken, and might exacerbate the problems it is already having in eastern, central and southern Syria.³² Finally, Moscow could suffer diplomatically in the Middle East and globally from a humanitarian catastrophe it would have helped foment. Although this possibility does not seem to have played an important role in the Kremlin's calculations thus far, one Russian official said, "We realise that we are not immune to an international outcry over Idlib".³³

For Moscow, balancing these competing interests has meant having to slow down the military conquest of Idlib. On one hand, Moscow has placed the burden on Turkey to solve the jihadist problem and made clear that any ceasefire is merely a step toward recovering the territory for the regime.³⁴ Time and again, Moscow has enabled Damascus to chew off bits and pieces of Idlib and its environs through forward military thrusts followed by negotiations, in which it has demanded that Ankara roll back jihadists from areas adjacent to government-controlled territory in Aleppo and Latakia provinces.³⁵ On the other hand, Moscow repeatedly touts the agreement the two sides reached in September 2018 – the Sochi Memorandum (see below) – to signal to Ankara that it has not abandoned the Astana framework. It also has agreed to various versions of a ceasefire.

This dual approach may also reflect competing views of different actors within the Russian system. A senior Turkish official said: "It seems to us that there is a clear divide between Russian politicians, who are keen on their relations with Turkey, and the Russian military and GRU [foreign-military intelligence agency], which prioritise delivering a full military win in Syria".³⁶

The regime's other critical ally, Iran, which has been supporting Damascus with its own military advisers and fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere since 2012, is likewise performing a geostrategic balancing act. It has tried to avoid alienating Turkey or overtly working against Turkish interests in Idlib, an area that is of lesser importance to its strategic interests in Syria than others. Moreover, Iran has been leaning on Turkey as a partner to develop bilateral economic relations in the face of considerable pressures due to U.S.-imposed trade and financial sanc-

Western-supplied reconstruction funds. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, op. cit.

³² Regime forces continue to face frequent insurgent attacks in central, eastern and southern Syria. Gregory Waters, "A Force They Haven't Seen Before": Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria", Middle East Institute, 15 April 2020. See also Abdullah al-Jabassini, "Festering grievances and the return to arms in southern Syria", Middle East Directions, 7 April 2020.

³³ Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Geneva, March 2020. European governments have been discussing sanctioning Russia for its military actions in Idlib. Germany's defence minister said: "Germany has close economic ties with Russia and could use this leverage to pressure President Vladimir Putin over Moscow's involvement in Syria". Quoted in "German minister moots sanctions on Russia over Syria", Reuters, 4 March 2020.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Russian diplomats, Ankara and Moscow, 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, January 2020.

tions.³⁷ As such, Tehran initially did not participate in military developments in Idlib, except for providing logistical and advisory support to the Syrian army, and the militias it is backing generally stayed far away from the front lines. Only in January 2020, nine months into the offensive, when the fighting moved into the Aleppo countryside, close to areas Iran considers strategic, did Tehran scale up its military involvement in the offensive.³⁸

While Tehran professes support for the regime's desire to regain control over Idlib and secure its presence throughout Aleppo province, in other words, it is also generally keen to preserve and nurture its relationship with Ankara. In several cases it has tried to appease Turkey by publicly acknowledging the legitimacy of the latter's concerns over border security.³⁹ Whether these calculations would stop Iran from scaling up its military involvement in Idlib in case of renewed fighting is unclear.

B. *Turkey and the West*

Confronting the regime, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Iran in Idlib is Turkey. Ankara faces its own dilemma, trying to strike a balance between its interest in keeping Idlib out of regime control and thus preventing a flow of refugees – with jihadists mixed in – streaming across its border, on one hand, and its desire to maintain its relationship with Moscow and avoid a risky confrontation, on the other. A new wave of Syrian refugees would present serious political, economic and humanitarian challenges for a country that is already struggling with public discontent over the more than four million refugees it currently hosts.⁴⁰ Turkey also has a political interest in maintaining influence in Idlib, as that could enable it to affect the course of political talks over Syria's future.

For these reasons, Ankara has pursued a negotiated solution for Idlib within the Astana framework and repeatedly pushed for ceasefires in response to renewed regime offensives.⁴¹ Through regular meetings between Turkish and Russian negotiating teams comprising senior diplomats and military and intelligence officers, sometimes culminating in face-to-face meetings between the two countries' presidents, Turkey

³⁷ Iran and Turkey have been developing bilateral economic relations, aiming to raise the volume of annual trade from \$10 billion to \$30 billion. See "Turkey and Iran Commercial and Economic Relations", Republic of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

³⁸ Iran has reportedly increased the number of fighters, armour and artillery it has provided to the 4th armoured division of the Syrian army and Local Defence Force. Crisis Group telephone interview, rebel commander, February 2020. High-level Iranian commanders acting as military advisers may have been killed in the fighting. "Iran announces death of Soleimani's guard in southern Aleppo", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 4 February 2020. A senior Iranian official acknowledged greater involvement of Iran's forces during that period, but he claimed that they were focused on areas around Aleppo where, he said, rebels had intensified their operations. Crisis Group interview, December 2019.

³⁹ An Arab diplomat said: "Iran has recently been keen on keeping Turkey on its good side, which sometimes entails letting Turkey get away with things in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, January 2020. In early 2018, a former Iranian foreign ministry official suggested that Iran and Turkey could cooperate in eliminating jihadist fighters in Idlib. Crisis Group interview, Tehran, January 2018. See also "Rouhani: Turkey's security concern in northern Syria is legitimate", AA, 14 February 2019 (Farsi).

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul and Ankara, 2019-2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul and Ankara, 2019-2020.

has pursued a long-term political solution to its Idlib problem. Yet Turkish officials sense that Russia wants Turkey to view its refraining from an all-out assault on Idlib so far as a favour for which Ankara will have to compensate Moscow by continuing to accommodate Russian interests in Syria and beyond.⁴²

In response to repeated Russian/Syrian escalations throughout the last year, Turkey allowed rebel groups it has been supporting to establish a joint operations room with HTS in Idlib in June 2019 to coordinate operations against regime attacks. By mid-2019, it had started shipping anti-tank guided missiles to the main rebel alliance it supports, the National Liberation Front.⁴³ This support and increased cooperation between Turkish-backed groups and HTS enabled the rebels to jointly blunt regime advances during the offensive's first months, and even reverse some of its gains, as well as to collect abandoned weaponry and ammunition.⁴⁴

In December 2019, regime forces renewed their assault with the support of heavy Russian aerial bombardment targeting the densely populated towns in southern Idlib and south-western Aleppo. These attacks sent civilians fleeing northward, and advancing regime forces encircled several of Turkey's outposts in Idlib.⁴⁵ In response, in late January, Turkey sent reinforcements to both the rebels and its own observation posts, including battle tanks and armoured vehicles, as well as allied Syrian fighters from parts of western Aleppo it controls. On 27 February, an airstrike on a Turkish command headquarters killed at least 33 soldiers.⁴⁶ While initially hinting at Russian responsibility, Ankara publicly blamed the Syrian regime for the attack, thereby suggesting that it did not wish to get into a tangle with Moscow.

Turkey then took unprecedented retaliatory action against Syrian forces. Ankara says this action killed or injured more than 2,000 Syrian troops and destroyed regime fighter jets, tanks and other military equipment.⁴⁷ Turkey is aware that the assistance it provides rebels in Idlib may not balance Russian air support to the regime. But that assistance still signals the importance Turkey places on averting a regime offensive and the price to Moscow both politically – in its bilateral relations with Ankara – and militarily, in that Turkey can render a regime offensive very costly through its direct military intervention and by using advanced armed and unarmed (surveil-

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, senior Turkish officials, Ankara, July 2019.

⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, rebel and HTS commanders, joint military operations room, Idlib, June 2019.

⁴⁵ The 2017 Astana agreement between Turkey, Iran and Russia allowed Turkey to set up twelve observation posts in Syria. Turkey established several more such posts in response to a regime offensive starting in January 2020.

⁴⁶ "Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib", BBC, 28 February 2020, citing Turkish authorities.

⁴⁷ Dareen Khalifa, Nigar Göksel and Anna Arutunyan, "Deadly Clashes in Syria's Idlib Show Limits of Turkey's Options", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 February 2020.

lance) drones.⁴⁸ “Idlib is not only Turkey’s problem. Everyone would share the cost of a showdown in Idlib”, a senior Turkish official said.⁴⁹

In addition, in a bid to solicit diplomatic and even military support from the EU and U.S., Ankara followed through on a threat to open its borders with Europe, allowing migrants and refugees to pass through to Greece, thus sending the message that it would not shoulder a new refugee burden on its own.⁵⁰ Like Ankara, European capitals have a strong interest in averting a new mass influx into Turkey and potentially on to the continent. Turkey and the EU reached a deal in 2016 pursuant to which Turkey was to block migrants and refugees from crossing into Europe in exchange for financial support for hosting them in Turkey.⁵¹ Ankara’s latest gambit provoked harsh criticism in European capitals, but by using the refugee card Turkey suggested that it could yet drive up the cost of European inaction in Idlib.⁵² Indeed, it may have succeeded in heightening the EU’s attention to the crisis. European governments pledged additional funding for humanitarian assistance for Syrians in Turkey and Idlib, even as they refrained from offering military support to Ankara.⁵³

The U.S. remains a relative wild card. Ankara asked the U.S. for military support, in particular the MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile system to be deployed along the Syrian border. But U.S. policymakers are split between those who see the crisis in Idlib as an opportunity to coax Ankara back into the NATO alliance, and away from Russia, and others who remain suspicious of Turkey’s intentions and are particularly angry at what they see as Ankara’s wayward behaviour.⁵⁴

James Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, one of the most prominent members of the former camp, has argued in favour of providing

⁴⁸ Turkish drone strikes have reportedly caused significant losses to the regime in terms of manpower, armour and artillery. Turkish jets and MANPADs have also purportedly downed three jets and at least two helicopters. The most significant losses from the regime’s perspective are the aircraft and air defence systems (BUK and Pantsir-1). See tweet by Jakub Janovsky, contributor at Bellingcat, @Rebel44CZ, 8:21am, 1 March 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, January 2020. Also see David Gauthier-Villars, “Turkey shoots down two Syrian jet fighters, testing Russian resolve to support Assad”, *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2020. A senior U.S. official said: “Russia has 40 aircraft in Syria while Turkey has around 200 F-16s and around 10,000-15,000 ground troops”. Turkey Webinar, 17 April 2020.

⁵⁰ See Berkay Mandiraci, “Sharing the Burden: Revisiting the EU-Turkey Migration Deal”, Crisis Group Commentary, 13 March 2020.

⁵¹ The 2016 migration deal comprised a resettlement scheme for migrants to the EU; visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Turkish citizens; modernisation of the EU-Turkey customs union; acceleration of Turkey’s EU accession talks; and provisions for EU-Turkish cooperation to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria. See “EU-Turkey Statement and Action Plan”.

⁵² See Mandiraci, “Sharing the Burden”, op. cit. See also Kadri Gursel, “Why Ankara’s Syrian refugee threat has lost its impact”, *Al-Monitor*, 19 March 2020.

⁵³ On 17 March, French, German and UK officials met virtually with Turkish counterparts to discuss Idlib. A European official said afterward: “The EU announced 60 million euros in aid to Idlib after [EU High Representative Josep] Borrell’s visit to Ankara, but we realise this is far from enough and we are trying to push for more, especially now with the outbreak of COVID-19 and increasing need for international assistance to Idlib”. Crisis Group telephone interview, Western official, March 2020. Another Western official said: “NATO assistance to Turkey in Idlib hinges on Turkey providing reassurances to NATO and taking into account European interests in the region”. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2020.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. officials, February-March 2019.

greater backing to Turkey. In early March, Jeffrey visited Ankara to mourn the Turkish soldiers killed in Idlib on 27 February.⁵⁵ He issued statements of political support and, unprecedentedly for a senior U.S. official, crossed the border into Idlib along with the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft.⁵⁶ Afterward, he told journalists that “Turkey is a NATO ally. Much of its military uses American equipment, and we will make sure that equipment is ready and usable”.⁵⁷

But the latter, more anti-Turkish view also has powerful backers. Ankara’s anti-U.S. rhetoric, the belief among some that it has turned a blind eye to jihadists, its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system and unilateral moves against the U.S.’s Kurdish partners in north-eastern Syria have left it with few allies in Washington.⁵⁸ Tellingly, in response to a question on potential U.S. military support for Turkey in Idlib, U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien said: “I do not think we are going to intervene militarily in Idlib to straighten out that bad situation”.⁵⁹

Divided, the Trump administration has simultaneously expressed support for Turkey while holding back on its request for the Patriot batteries.⁶⁰ So far, it appears disinclined to review this decision unless Turkey accedes to Washington’s demand to render the S-400s inoperable – a change of heart that seems unlikely.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Tweet by Ragıp Soylu, journalist, @Ragipsoylu, 1:04pm, 11 February 2020.

⁵⁶ “America Announces New Humanitarian Assistance for the Syria Crisis Response”, U.S. Department of State, 3 March 2020.

⁵⁷ Ragıp Soylu, “Top US officials visit Syria’s Idlib and pledge aid as Turkey downs another jet”, *Middle East Eye*, 3 March 2020.

⁵⁸ See Crisis Group Alert, “Calling a Halt to Turkey’s Offensive in North-eastern Syria”, 10 October 2019.

⁵⁹ Tweet by Atlantic Council, @AtlanticCouncil, 8:24pm, 12 February 2020.

⁶⁰ Referring to stumbling talks between Ankara and Washington, a U.S. diplomat said: “There was a lot that wasn’t asked and that wasn’t given. But it was important for Russia to know that Turkey is not alone in Idlib”. On Turkey Webinar, 17 April 2020.

⁶¹ In March 2020, upon returning to Istanbul from talks with Putin in Moscow, Erdoğan said: “The S-400s are our property now. We’ve taken delivery of all of it. They will be made operational in April”. Quoted in Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, “Erdoğan risks sanctions with April date for activating Russian S-400s”, *Bloomberg*, 6 March 2020. A senior U.S. official said: “The S-400 is a massive obstacle to U.S.-Turkish cooperation. It’s a muffled problem because of COVID, but that problem has not gone away, and we haven’t seen a lot of give from Turkey on this”. On Turkey Webinar, 17 April 2020.

III. Unworkable Ceasefires

A. *The Astana and Sochi Agreements*

The recurrent cycle of violence in Idlib reflects the erosion of a series of agreements negotiated among Russia, Turkey and – to a lesser extent – Iran. These three countries reached an understanding in the Kazakh capital of Astana in May 2017, which established four de-escalation zones in Syria, including one in Idlib and adjacent sections of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo governorates. In September, the three Astana parties announced that they had demarcated the Idlib de-escalation zone and agreed to cease hostilities and deploy observer forces at points along its perimeter.⁶² Turkey would monitor the rebels' compliance through twelve military outposts located around the edges of rebel-held territory.⁶³ The arrangement effectively froze the front lines.

Divergences quickly emerged between Russia and Turkey over fundamental aspects of the agreements. The May 2017 Astana agreement stipulated that the signatories would ensure conflict parties' compliance with the ceasefire; take all measures to fight designated terrorist groups; and continue efforts to make armed opposition groups comply with the ceasefire. Pointing at HTS's continued presence in Idlib, Russia said Turkey had failed to take steps against HTS despite its UN listing as an organisation affiliated with al-Qaeda, while Turkey asserted that although HTS had moved toward ceasefire compliance, Russia and the regime had not – neither in Idlib (where strikes by pro-regime forces continued) nor in the other three “de-escalation” zones, which the regime recaptured in a series of offensives between February and July 2018.⁶⁴

In September 2018, Presidents Putin and Erdoğan negotiated a new deal in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi, which headed off a seemingly imminent Russian-backed regime offensive in Idlib and reaffirmed the earlier Astana agreement.⁶⁵ The Sochi Memorandum of Understanding broadly states that both sides “reiterate their commitment to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations”.⁶⁶ In addition, Russia agreed to “take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and the existing status quo will be maintained”. Turkey also committed itself to securing the withdrawal of heavy military equipment (such as tanks, multiple-rocket launchers and mortars) and removing “radical terrorist groups” from a 15-20km-wide demilitarised strip between rebel- and regime-held areas inside the Idlib de-escalation zone. In addition, Turkish mobile

⁶² “Press Release Regarding the Declaration of the Idlib De-Escalation Area at the Sixth Astana Meeting Held on 14-15 September 2017”, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 September 2017.

⁶³ For additional background on Idlib's de-escalation agreement, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Saving Idlib from Destruction*, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Other UN-listed groups, such as the Turkistan Islamic Party, are reported to have remained in areas including Jisr al-Shughour in the demilitarised zone. Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Geneva, March 2020. Turkey started referring to HTS as a terrorist organisation in August 2018, pursuant to the UN listing. Semih Idiz, “Does Turkey have the will to take on jihadis in Idlib”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 March 2020.

⁶⁵ UN Security Council, “Letter from the Permanent Representatives of the Russian Federation and Turkey to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council”, 18 September 2018.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

patrols and Russian military police units were to monitor the demilitarised zone, opening the M4 Aleppo-Latakia and M5 Aleppo-Hama highways to traffic before the end of 2018.

While the Sochi deal was successful in temporarily halting an apparently imminent regime offensive, Ankara and Moscow soon again accused each other of non-compliance. Russia asserted that Turkey had failed to remove from the demilitarised zone all “radical terrorist groups” – a category in which Moscow, like several other foreign powers, includes HTS. It also faulted Turkey for failing to separate “terrorists” from moderates in Idlib (while the Sochi Memorandum makes no mention of this obligation, both countries seemed to implicitly accept that Ankara would deal with the problem of HTS, even if they disagreed on precisely how). For its part, Turkey contended that Russia failed to “preserve the Idlib de-escalation area” and instead enabled regime attacks on Idlib to shift the status quo contrary to the agreement.⁶⁷

The Sochi truce gradually frayed. Russian airstrikes and regime air and artillery attacks continued, claiming to target HTS and other alleged terrorist groups not covered by the ceasefire agreement that they said had been attacking regime-held areas. Meanwhile, rebel units continued to fire on regime forces, claiming to be responding to regime ceasefire violations.

In February 2019, Russia resumed airstrikes on Idlib and surrounding rebel-held areas, and in late April backed a major regime ground offensive. In a series of forward pushes (interspersed with short-lived ceasefires negotiated by Moscow and Ankara), regime forces gained small chunks of territory between May and September, then achieved more dramatic gains between December and March of this year. As noted above, this latter phase displaced over 940,000 civilians and saw deadly clashes between Turkish and regime forces that left dozens of Turkish soldiers dead. The losses prompted Turkey to deepen its military intervention. It announced the launch of Operation Spring Shield, aimed at pushing back regime forces to the pre-offensive front lines outlined in the Sochi agreement. Through artillery support for the rebels, the downing of regime aircraft and drone strikes destroying regime heavy weaponry, Turkey raised the cost to the regime and enabled Idlib’s armed factions to regain some ground.

This counter-escalation may have been insufficient to reverse most regime gains, but it was instrumental in bringing Moscow and Ankara back to the negotiating table, as both parties seemed to fear an escalatory cycle that could have jeopardised their relationship.⁶⁸ After renewing contacts, they announced a cessation of hostilities on 5 March 2020.

The 5 March ceasefire agreement’s preamble states that both parties are committed to “combat all forms of terrorism” and to eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria as designated by the UN Security Council, while agreeing that “targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext”. Russia and Turkey have chosen to read these two phrases differently. While Russia insists that the cease-

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, 2019-2020; Russian officials, Moscow, 2019.

⁶⁸ Russian diplomats described the three rounds of consultations that took place in February between Russia and Turkey, and led to the ceasefire, as some of the most intense negotiations at any point in the Syria crisis. Divergences between the two delegations remained until, at the Kremlin’s invitation, the two presidents met in Moscow. Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian diplomat, May 2020.

fire is conditioned on the elimination of these groups, Turkey conditions their elimination on both preserving civilian lives and avoiding further destruction, and also argues that in the absence of a defined timeframe for taking such steps, it has the chance to allow HTS to isolate hardliners and regroup its more pragmatic members perhaps under a different banner.⁶⁹

B. *Why Idlib Ceasefires Have Broken Down*

Idlib ceasefires almost certainly will continue to break down as long as Russia and Turkey diverge in overall objectives and on the interpretation and implementation of ceasefire agreements.

While Moscow has acceded to temporary arrangements linked to the Astana framework since September 2017, it has made clear that these are not an alternative to the regime's eventual return to the north west. Its military moves coordinated with regime advances have shown that it can break ceasefires, press forward and, to some extent, dictate terms of the next ceasefire within the bounds of its interest in maintaining its relationship with Ankara.

Turkey, by contrast, has viewed these ceasefire agreements as a tool to keep the Idlib de-escalation zone out of regime control until the sides are able to reach a broader political settlement. The deals' language notwithstanding, it also has rejected the notion that HTS could be militarily subdued. In practice, Turkey has not provided the rebels with the kind of assistance they would have needed to hold on to the entire de-escalation zone or reverse successive regime offensives: since September 2017, the regime has recaptured some 40 per cent of rebel-held territory in the north west. But Turkey has shown that it is willing and able to increase the cost of a military offensive to Russia.

As seen, Moscow and Ankara maintain divergent views on the nature of HTS and what the Sochi agreement's requirement that the two sides combat terrorism means in practice. Some currents in Turkey, including non-Islamist nationalists and Eurasianists, are sceptical of any Turkish government engagement with HTS.⁷⁰ But Ankara mostly argues that HTS, despite emerging from an al-Qaeda affiliate, no longer has a transnational agenda, is fundamentally pragmatic, would abide by a ceasefire and could be a useful interlocutor capable of containing or eliminating transnational jihadists in Idlib, including remaining ISIS elements.⁷¹

Ankara also takes the view that, given how strong, locally rooted and entrenched HTS is, any attempt at defeating it militarily would come at a high human cost and

⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Turkish official, April 2020; Russian diplomat, March 2020.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, former Turkish official, April 2020. Some aligned with those currents argue that the idea of engaging with HTS is a U.S. plot, and that Washington plans to use HTS for its own ends, whether to drive a wedge between Moscow and Ankara or to destabilise Turkey. Crisis Group media monitoring, February 2020. A Turkish analyst sceptical of HTS's reported transformation said: "HTS is toeing this line for tactical reasons, as an appearance, and has in the past also made such deceptive shifts for self-survival". Crisis Group phone interview, April 2020.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, 2019-2020. In response to the 5 May ceasefire agreement, HTS issued a statement thanking the Turkish government for its efforts while stating that it would consider complying with any ceasefire that serves the interest of the region. See tweet by Dareen Khalifa, Crisis Group analyst, @dkhalifa, 11:38am, 7 March 2020.

might endanger Turkey's own presence in north-western Syria. Direct Turkish intervention against HTS, officials say, would entail a risky and costly military operation that could leave its forces vulnerable to asymmetrical attacks by jihadist militants in Syria and perhaps even in Turkey.⁷² Additionally, clearing the area of its strongest rebel group would pave the way for the regime to retake it at a lower cost, contrary to Turkish interests.

In relation to the Sochi agreement's implementation, Ankara argues that it contained rebel groups, including jihadists, and cleared the demilitarised zone of all heavy weaponry before the regime's April 2019 offensive.⁷³ As a result, Turkish officials say, Idlib was calm from September 2018 till April 2019, apart from minor skirmishes between rebels and the regime and the resumption of Russian and regime airstrikes.⁷⁴

Russia, by contrast, considers HTS strictly a terrorist group, consistent with the group's UN Security Council listing.⁷⁵ Moscow describes its compliance with the ceasefire outlined in the Sochi Memorandum as conditional on HTS's removal from the demilitarised zone defined in the agreement, and its separation from the armed opposition in Idlib as a step toward its eradication. Moscow has invoked HTS's UN listing and continued presence in Idlib to legitimise its assaults on the area.⁷⁶

Russia also questions Turkey's ability and willingness to rein in HTS, remove it from the demilitarised zone and separate it from supposedly non-jihadist rebels in the Idlib de-escalation zone. The Russian defence ministry claimed in September 2019 that Russian forces had shot down or disabled over a hundred rebel drones attempting to attack the Hmeimim air base over the previous two years.⁷⁷ The attacks failed, Russian officials say, but they cite them consistently as the reason for the intensified air campaign in and around the demilitarised zone beginning in February 2019 and the ground offensive launched in late April.⁷⁸ "We cannot take these attacks lightly", a Russian official said as late as March 2020. "They are putting our military under a lot of pressure".⁷⁹ It is unclear whether or how many drone attacks on Hmeimim have taken place. U.S. and Turkish officials say they have seen no evidence of them and assert that Moscow is mostly using its claim to justify the offensive; under that

⁷² A senior Turkish official said that the Turkey-backed factions were unable to contain HTS despite the support they received from Ankara, and that Turkish forces would have needed to confront HTS directly. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, January 2020.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, July 2019.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, July 2019.

⁷⁵ The UN Security Council first listed HTS's predecessor Jabhat al-Nusra on 14 May 2014, and it renewed the designation as the group became Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and then Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham. "United Nations Security Council Sanctions Consolidated List".

⁷⁶ "Russia: 'Syria has full right to fight terrorists in Idlib' – Lavrov", Ruptly, 28 February 2019.

⁷⁷ Russia also cites attacks on adjacent government-held areas. Defence Ministry Spokesman Major General Igor Konashenkov, quoted in "Russia's Hmeymim air base in Syria strikes over 100 terrorists' drones over past two years", TASS, 27 September 2019.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Russian diplomats, Ankara, July 2019; Geneva, March 2020.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Geneva, March 2020.

view, HTS's removal by Turkey would only improve the regime's prospects of regaining territorial control.⁸⁰

A return to the existing Sochi understandings therefore risks doing little to advance the possibility of a sustainable ceasefire unless Moscow and Ankara first address the gap between their respective positions, notably regarding how to deal with HTS. Not only is Turkey presently unable to credibly make commitments that involve eliminating HTS, but it also seems to have concluded that HTS may be the only local force capable of containing Idlib's remaining transnational jihadists and slowing the regime advance, thus preventing the refugee outflow that Ankara fears most.⁸¹

⁸⁰ A senior Turkish official said: "These claims of rebels attacking Hmeimim are a mere pretext. There is no evidence that these have taken place". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, July 2019. U.S. Ambassador James Jeffrey publicly stated that "the Russians use this as an excuse. ... [They] claim that they're being attacked, or that the Syrians are being attacked, in order to launch these massive attacks against the civilians". "Ambassador James Jeffrey on the Situation in Syria", U.S. Department of State, 5 February 2020.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, October 2019.

IV. The HTS Conundrum

Regime rhetoric vis-à-vis Idlib and its track record in dealing with its opponents, coupled with Idlib rebels' rhetoric toward the regime, make it hard to conceive of a peaceful middle ground between the two sides, at least for the foreseeable future.⁸² For HTS fighters, and thousands of other rebels who were forced to evacuate to Idlib in the past few years, capitulating to the regime is not a path they would contemplate. That the regime has infringed upon the terms of "reconciliation" arrangements in other parts of Syria, while portraying those who chose to go to Idlib instead of surrendering as irreconcilable terrorists, makes this route as good as impossible.⁸³

At the same time, HTS has shown at times that it might be willing to adjust its behaviour, while remaining bitterly opposed to Damascus. To some extent, its leadership has demonstrated an ability and willingness to adhere to ceasefires negotiated by others, even when doing so entailed political costs. In October 2018, the group issued a statement implicitly accepting the Sochi deal.⁸⁴ While its fighters stayed in the demilitarised zone (after rebels including HTS withdrew heavy weapons), HTS halted cross-line attacks as long as the regime did, and it did not interfere when Turkish soldiers deployed. The group increased security cooperation with Turkish-backed rebels through the joint operations room; silenced internal critics of its rapprochement with Turkey; and invited international journalists, analysts and humanitarian workers to Idlib, seeking greater world attention to the area's humanitarian plight.⁸⁵ These steps have been controversial. A senior HTS official said: "Each decision cost us waves of dissent from hardliners within the group who refused to understand broader developments around them".⁸⁶

Yet how far HTS will go and to what end is a matter of intense controversy. There is no agreement among close Syrian or foreign observers as to the drivers and extent of this transformation.⁸⁷

A. *Breaking from al-Qaeda*

HTS presents itself today as a local Islamist group independent from al-Qaeda's chain of command and with no transnational Salafi-jihadist agenda. In July 2016, when it was known as Jabhat al-Nusra, it publicly severed its organisational ties with al-Qaeda and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.⁸⁸ While the 2016 announce-

⁸² When asked about Syria's strategy toward Idlib, a senior adviser to Assad said: "We will not back down on pursuing a military strategy to eliminate all the terrorists". Crisis Group interview, Moscow, February 2019. See also "Syria: Assad vows to continue Idlib offensive in Damascus address", Ruptly, 17 February 2019. Crisis Group interviews, rebel commanders, Idlib, June 2019.

⁸³ "President Assad's interview", op. cit. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°196, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019; and "Breaking Ghouta: Post Reconciliation", Atlantic Council, September 2018.

⁸⁴ HTS, "Al-Sham's revolution will not die", Jihadology, 14 October 2018.

⁸⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Abdul-Rahim Attoun, Idlib, 23 June 2019.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Tsurkov, "Idlib faces a fearsome future: Islamist rule or mass murder", *Foreign Policy*, 19 September 2019.

⁸⁸ "Syrian Nusra Front announces split from al-Qaeda", BBC, 29 July 2016. For more details on the rationale behind the dissociation decision, see Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in

ment was widely viewed as a move partially coordinated with al-Qaeda's leadership instead of a genuine break, Jolani sought to cement the rupture in January 2017 by declaring a merger with other rebel groups in Idlib and calling the new alliance Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – a move that subsequently drew strong criticism from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁸⁹ Today, HTS claims that its break with al-Qaeda was part of a broader evolution from a Salafi-jihadist movement with transnational ties toward a Syrian conservative Islamist organisation focused on administering Idlib, which it has effected through a series of rebranding efforts and internal transformations.

In making the case for this evolution, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani has claimed that HTS “was influenced by a Salafi-jihadist milieu that emerged out of a desire to resist foreign occupation of Iraq after the U.S. invasion. But today our fight has become strictly a local one against a regime that lost its legitimacy in Syria”.⁹⁰ Some Western officials dispute that the group has permanently and definitively given up on its cross-border ambitions.⁹¹

Jolani has driven the group's apparent evolution, strengthening his grip through its ability to consolidate administrative control over Idlib and its relative capacity to hold ground against regime advances. HTS's highest religious figure, Abdul-Rahim Attoun (also known as Abu Abdullah al-Shami) has played a primary role in rationalising the group's ideas and decisions to HTS supporters. As Attoun put it: “It is important for us to keep our base informed, and on board with our decisions, and not to drift too far off from them the way other groups did”.⁹²

Syria Fuels al-Qa'ida's Evolution”, *CTC Sentinel*, September 2016; and Aymenn Jawad Tamimi, “From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future”, Al-Nahrain Centre for Strategic Studies, 29 June 2018.

⁸⁹ In January 2017, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham merged with rebel groups ranging from more mainstream movements to hard-core jihadists: Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Liwa al-Haq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jaysh al-Sunna, as well as defectors from Ahrar Sham who had formed Jaysh Ahrar. The first leader of the new alliance, Hashem al-Sheikh (“Abu Jabir”), issued a statement describing HTS as “an independent entity and not an extension of former organisations and factions”. “Tahrir al-Sham: Al-Qaeda's latest incarnation in Syria”, BBC, 28 February 2017. HTS leader Jolani described this step as part of HTS's attempt to distance itself from al-Qaeda and to “remove the pretext that external powers use to bomb Syrians”. Crisis Group interview, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, Idlib, 23 January 2020.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020. “Abu Muhammad al-Jolani” is a nom de guerre. Jolani's birth name is Ahmad Hussein al-Sharaa. The most senior religious figure in HTS said: “We are working toward entrenching traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*madhahib*) within HTS, but of course there is still a hint of Salafism inside the group”. Crisis Group interview, Abdul-Rahim Attoun, Idlib, 23 June 2019.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, July 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 June 2019. Other prominent HTS figures explained that they work hard to keep the base on board with the leadership's decisions in order to avoid mass defections or loss of credibility. Crisis Group telephone interviews, HTS officials, September 2019. In response to mixed reactions within HTS to Jolani's meeting with Crisis Group, Attoun issued a statement clarifying that the stances Jolani had expressed in the meeting were not new and were consistent with HTS's direction and policies. He added that military pressure had not forced these stances on the group. Attoun also mentioned that the Taliban in Afghanistan were able to overcome hostile relations with neighbouring states and emphasised the importance of avoiding maximalist positions. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Abu Abdullah al-Shami on meeting Western analysts”, Pundicity, 10 March 2020.

HTS leaders may have initially wanted a smooth – perhaps even perfunctory or symbolic – de-linking from al-Qaeda but ended up with what seems to be a real rupture.⁹³ By late 2016, Jolani appears to have concluded it was no longer in the group's best interest to pursue the kind of relation with al-Qaeda that isolated the group at best and made it a target at worst.⁹⁴ As he sought to present it: "I conditioned my allegiance to al-Qaeda on not using Syria as a launching pad for external operations and solely focusing on the internal fight against the Syrian regime and its allies. This has always been a constant pillar of our strategy".⁹⁵ A senior HTS figure went further: "Ayman al-Zawahiri advised us to prioritise our alliances with other Syrian factions over our ties with al-Qaeda if these became an obstacle to the former".⁹⁶ Zawahiri's subsequent furious reaction to Jolani's de-linking announcement does not support this claim.⁹⁷

Today, HTS leaders assert that the dissociation from al-Qaeda was both legitimate and vital to maintaining good relations with other rebel groups.⁹⁸ A senior HTS figure put it this way:

We prioritised the Syrian revolution over international jihad. This is a decision that did not appeal to top al-Qaeda figures, but it is both irreversible and necessary to maintain alliances with groups that would have not agreed to work under the banner of al-Qaeda.⁹⁹

Jolani initially may have pushed for Jabhat al-Nusra's dissociation from al-Qaeda mainly in the hope of escaping its UN listing and enabling it to merge with other re-

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, HTS leaders, Idlib, June 2019, January 2020. See also Tamimi, "From Jabhat al-Nusra to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: Evolution, Approach and Future", op. cit.

⁹⁴ HTS leaders say they perceived their ties to al-Qaeda as the reason why most other rebel groups refused to engage in a military alliance with them, as these groups became increasingly concerned that they would become targets of a U.S. military campaign because of HTS's designation as a terrorist group. At the same time, communication with al-Qaeda was sporadic. A senior HTS official said: "It would take months for us to get a response from Ayman al-Zawahiri on most urgent matters at a time when things were changing really quickly on the ground". Crisis Group interview, Idlib, June 2019.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020.

⁹⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020.

⁹⁶ He said al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's deputy, Abu al-Kheir al-Masri, came to Syria in 2016 and was supportive of Jabhat al-Nusra's request to distance itself from al-Qaeda in order to be better positioned to merge with local Syrian rebel groups. Abu al-Kheir's reported blessing clearly did not sway Zawahiri, who perceived Jolani's dissociation decision as a self-serving betrayal. Crisis Group interview, senior HTS official, Idlib, June 2019. Jolani explained publicly that al-Qaeda had mandated him to pursue jihad exclusively in Syria. "We were instructed to focus on jihad against the near enemy: the Syrian regime and its backers". "Al-Nusra leader Jolani announces split from al-Qaeda", Al Jazeera, 29 July 2016.

⁹⁷ Zawahiri also laid out conditions that HTS did not pursue, including establishing an Islamic government in all Syria. For Zawahiri's response, see his audio recording, on file with Crisis Group; and "Zawahiri attacks Jolani: 'We reject the delinking'", *Al-Modon*, 19 November 2017.

⁹⁸ In June 2018, HTS issued a public defence of its political evolution in response to the U.S. designating it a terrorist organisation, distancing itself from global jihad. See HTS, "The new American designation: the double standard against the Syrian revolution", *Jihadology*, 1 June 2018 (Arabic).

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Idlib, June 2019.

bel groups to form a stronger anti-regime coalition. Over time, however, HTS's break with al-Qaeda appears to have become more profound.

HTS's leaders have sidelined, silenced or expelled hardliners and non-Syrians who opposed its transformation, including some of its prominent figures like Abu Suhaib al-Masri and Abu Yaqzan al-Masri, seemingly rendering itself more Syrian and less externally focused in the process.¹⁰⁰ According to Jolani, "When we take a decision, everyone commits to it, and those who are unhappy with these transformations can leave".¹⁰¹ The dissociation decision and internal transformations led to months-long internal wrangling followed by the arrest and departure of many of the group's most uncompromising ideologues and their adherents. Many defected to harder-line jihadist outfits such as Hurras al-Din, a group led by prominent al-Qaeda loyalists.¹⁰² "We lost a number of our base when we severed ties with al-Qaeda and fought ISIS, and again when Hurras al-Din was created [in 2018]", a senior HTS religious figure asserted.¹⁰³ These decisions triggered strong criticism of Jolani among transnational jihadists, as well as military confrontations and tit-for-tat assassinations across the north west.¹⁰⁴

B. *Controlling Idlib*

Among the factors involved in HTS's break with al-Qaeda and other Salafi-jihadists, a core strategic disagreement stands out. The HTS leadership decided to prioritise holding territory and providing services to Idlib's population. It has proven willing to compromise militarily and ideologically toward those ends, for example by largely halting its attacks during Turkish-Russian ceasefires (to which it has not been a party) and facilitating the deployment of Turkish forces in Idlib (even though Salafi-jihadists view the Turkish military as a hostile institution).¹⁰⁵ In contrast, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, in addition to condemning HTS's decision to break from his organisation, has strongly criticised HTS for cracking down on al-Qaeda loyalists and distancing itself from transnational jihad; warned of a "Turkish invasion"; and advocated a different strategy: shifting to a guerrilla war of attrition aimed at "destroying the enemy's morale" by inflicting unsustainable losses, rather than prioritising

¹⁰⁰ Abu Suhaib al-Masri and Abu Yaqzan al-Masri are Egyptian hard-line clerics who moved to Syria, where they joined Ahrar al-Sham before shifting to HTS.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020.

¹⁰² See Crisis Group Report, *The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, op. cit.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, senior HTS official, Idlib, June 2019.

¹⁰⁴ See Haid Haid, "Who Is Assassinating Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's Leaders?", Chatham House, November 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Additionally, HTS has not implemented uncodified Islamic law (individual jurists' rulings based on the Quran and Sunna) and instead has been enforcing an amended version of the Unified Arab Code (a codified body of law derived from Sharia used by Syrian rebel groups in territories they control) through the Salvation Government's justice ministry. Crisis Group observations during visits to courts, Idlib, June 2019. In some cases, individuals within HTS have sought to provide ideological justification for the organisation's practical compromises. See, for example, Abu al-Fateh al-Farghali's description of HTS's position on the Turkish deployment, posted on al-Farghali's Telegram account (@farghalee), 31 March 2020.

territorial control.¹⁰⁶ Salafi-jihadist hardliners within Syria have voiced similar criticisms.¹⁰⁷

In late 2017, as it was attempting to achieve military dominance in the area, HTS used a mix of co-optation and coercion of existing opposition-affiliated governing structures to consolidate its administrative control. In September 2017, HTS endorsed the establishment of the “Salvation Government” in Idlib to see to the province’s day-to-day affairs. The Salvation Government was an alliance of opposition remnants and HTS associates, driven by necessity rather than ideology, and powered mainly by technocrats who enjoy a degree of autonomy from HTS. Only a few government ministers adhere politically to HTS, while the others are quasi-independent from it, coming from diverse Islamist backgrounds.¹⁰⁸ Jolani put it this way: “The Salvation Government did not morph from HTS. It is just as inaccurate for others to say we control it as it is for us to claim that we have nothing to do with it”.¹⁰⁹ Some Western governments and many Syrians see the Salvation Government merely as a tool by which HTS advances its political project. Reality is more nuanced.¹¹⁰

The Salvation Government has taken charge of the area’s economy, but one strategic economic activity it has not monopolised is Western humanitarian aid, apparently to avoid local and donor backlash. The scarcity of resources in Idlib and the area’s heavy reliance on Turkish and Western aid, coupled with the increasing numbers of displaced people, have made the group wary of imposing policies that could push donors to cease their support. A senior Salvation Government official said: “When we imposed a nominal tax on vehicles delivering aid across the border [in 2019], donors threatened to end their support. So we walked back our decision”.¹¹¹ Some Western governments do not buy HTS’s claimed hands-off approach, and some governments that feared their funds would fall into the hands of a group subject to

¹⁰⁶ See al-Zawahiri’s 32-minute audio address excoriating the HTS leadership, November 2017. On file with Crisis Group. See also Zawahiri’s April 2017 audio address advocating a guerrilla war strategy and warning against turning the jihad in Syria into a national (rather than transnational) or local issue. On file with Crisis Group.

¹⁰⁷ See, for example, criticisms of HTS by Sami al-Uraydi and Abu Yaqzan al-Masri, and broader disputes between HTS and Hurras al-Din. For analysis, see Tore Hemming, “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham’s internal conflict and renewed tensions with Hurras al-Deen”, *Jihadica*, 15 February 2019; and Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-al-Qaeda dispute: primary texts”, *Pundicity*, 6 December 2017.

¹⁰⁸ After its establishment, the Salvation Government absorbed many of those who had worked for HTS’s previous administrative organ, the Civil Administration for Services.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Abu Mohammad al Jolani, HTS leader, Idlib, 23 January 2020. Another senior HTS official echoed Jolani’s characterisation: “We didn’t create the Salvation Government as an HTS front. Nor do we claim that it’s an independent project. It is a manifestation of our approach to governance based on an alliance and merger with other local Islamist groups”. Crisis Group interview, HTS official, Idlib, June 2019.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Syrian opposition representative, February 2020; and Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Istanbul, March 2020.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Salvation Government official, Idlib, June 2019. Some humanitarian workers in Idlib and aid officers outside the area confirm that the Salvation Government has been relatively responsive to their demands, including by removing taxation on vehicles carrying aid and an insurance fee it levied on projects to ensure implementation. Crisis Group interviews, UN official, southern Turkey, January 2020.

UN terrorism sanctions decided to terminate their stabilisation assistance programs in Idlib in 2018-2019.¹¹²

While professing to take a relatively hands-off approach to day-to-day governance, HTS has consolidated its grip on administering Idlib and insisted that the Salvation Government reflect conservative Islamist political views. Close observers say HTS has a mixed track record when it comes to policing social norms. “They don’t force women to fully cover their faces, but they do impose gender segregation at schools and universities, and in the past they have tried to ban smoking, but they gave up when people pushed back”, one analyst said.¹¹³ Like other rebel groups, HTS excludes women from its leadership and political organs. It has not barred women from public life or professional practice, but in practice the gender segregation it demands appears to hinder women from working in a number of jobs.¹¹⁴

HTS has warded off more severe domestic criticism of these practices in Idlib by dint of its Islamist outlook, which many rebel groups share even if they do not share the group’s political project, and the fact that all face a common enemy that is directly threatening the whole area.¹¹⁵ Moreover, by ensuring a state of relative calm in areas it controls and outsourcing day-to-day governance to the Salvation Government, HTS has been able to generate a degree of buy-in from a critical mass of civil servants and technocrats.¹¹⁶

HTS does have vocal detractors among the opposition groups that it shunted aside, and ordinary citizens suffering from deteriorating living conditions have occasionally staged protests against rising fuel prices, inadequate services and increased taxes.¹¹⁷ Some Western-backed rebel groups remain bitter over HTS having used force against them to consolidate its military control and governance structures. As a commander of a rebel group previously operating in Idlib put it: “We won’t forget

¹¹² A Western official stated that France – in comparison to other bigger donors – provides only limited humanitarian aid to Idlib (19 million euros in 2019 and 25 million in 2020), and that Germany ceased all its assistance earmarked for governance and limited its education support. Idlib’s health directorate continues to receive funds because it remains independent of HTS. Crisis Group telephone interview, Western official, March 2019. A UN official said: “We attempted to mediate a palatable formula between the Salvation Government and Western donors. The Salvation Government was responsive, but some donors were just not willing to risk the legal consequences of support being hijacked by a listed group, and they ended their support”. Crisis Group phone interview, UN official, March 2020.

¹¹³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Syria analyst, March 2020. A local activist in Idlib said: “HTS has become too pragmatic to try and impose social norms on people”. Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2020. Moreover, dress codes preceded HTS’s emergence. A women’s rights activist from Idlib said: “When Jaish al-Fatah entered Idlib, most women were already wearing the niqab, but today fewer than half of them do”. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2020.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group observations, Idlib, 2019-2020. HTS’s intolerance of dissent has resulted in a double vulnerability for women journalists and activists. A Syrian woman opposition member said, “Al-Nusra shut down our civil society activities”, referring to actions taken by the group in its early years. Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, February 2020. In May 2020, HTS reportedly created an unofficial body to enforce gender segregation in all public facilities, including schools. Crisis Group telephone interview, local activist, Idlib, May 2020.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local activists, Idlib, June 2019-January 2020.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Salvation Government representatives, June 2019-January 2020.

¹¹⁷ Protests increased after the October 2019 Turkish incursion into north-eastern Syria, which resulted in shortages of fuel coming from the north east into Idlib and, as a result, increased prices.

how they prioritised going after us over fighting the regime".¹¹⁸ Civil society activists also figure among the main critics of the group's autocratic conduct, which includes arbitrary arrest and harassment of dissenters.¹¹⁹

C. *How Genuine the Transformation?*

It remains unclear whether HTS's shifting ideological and political stance is driven by a genuine change of heart or a tactical and temporary adjustment made in the face of growing military pressure, which necessitates soliciting outside help. The group's apparently less ideological and more pragmatic approach to its surroundings is gainsaid by the violence it has used against rival factions, including moderate opposition groups; its silencing of critics and detention of non-violent activists and opposition-affiliated civil servants; and its retention of foreigners with hardline stances within its senior ranks even as it has sidelined many others.¹²⁰ Of additional concern are its continued, albeit ambiguous, relations with harder-line groups.¹²¹ Moreover, HTS has yet to clearly define any concrete reforms it would be willing to undertake consistent with its declared course change. Like those of most other rebel factions, the group's position on the key features of a final settlement for the Syrian conflict is unclear, and its posture toward its opponents remains repressive.

Some claim that HTS's apparent transformation is no more than a charade.¹²² Scepticism of the group's intentions is merited given its ideological provenance, history of being affiliated with groups plotting transnational attacks and track record in dealing with others. But the steps it has taken so far, within the context of the near-defeat of Salafi-jihadism in Syria generally, suggest that the group may have started to move in a direction that could be more palatable to at least some outside parties: focused on battling the regime, governing Idlib, suppressing any transnational threat from its current or former comrades in arms, and seeking external support for a population in desperate need of assistance.

None of the group's statements should be taken at face value. Instead, the best way to assess the sincerity of the apparent change is to test it in practice – politically by examining HTS's willingness to deal peaceably with critics and dissenters; in the humanitarian field by the access it provides to outside help; and militarily by contin-

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, rebel commander, February 2020.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, civil society activist in Idlib, April 2020. See also "Idlib: Arrests of Civilians and Activists Mark First Three Months of 2020", Syrians for Truth and Justice, 13 April 2020.

¹²⁰ The HTS leadership sidelined figures such as Abu Yaqzan, Abu Shueib (both of whom had been part of Ahrar al-Sham before joining Nusra) and Sami al-Uraydi, Jabhat al-Nusra's mufti, who subsequently left the group. Others such as Abu al-Fateh al-Farghali, an Egyptian, and Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, an Iraqi, remain with HTS.

¹²¹ Jolani said: "We have been going systematically after ISIS cells in Idlib and this is why we haven't seen a single ISIS attack in Idlib in the past six months. We have also contained Hurras al-Din, with whom we have a convoluted relationship. We had them sign a commitment not to use Syria as a launching pad for external jihad". Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020. For more on HTS's positions, see Crisis Group Commentary, "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani", op. cit.

¹²² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Syrian civil society activists, February 2020.

uing to explicitly reject external operations, adhering to the terms of negotiated cease-fires and reining in hardline groups in Idlib.

If HTS were to fail to deliver on these points, whatever slim hope remains for a peaceful path out of the standoff in Idlib would almost certainly vanish. The group's chance to rise to the challenge of both protecting and governing the province's frightened population is now.

V. A Way Forward

The existence of a rebel-controlled enclave in Idlib is a thorn in the side of Russia and the regime in Damascus. Yet given the costs and risks of a broader offensive and HTS's apparent shift toward greater pragmatism, Turkish and even Russian interests may be better served by a scenario short of a renewed assault upon the area, namely an extended and strengthened ceasefire that does not exclude or target HTS. More importantly, this scenario could spare over three million Syrians and stop a humanitarian disaster from assuming even greater and more tragic proportions.

The 5 March Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement, like its predecessors, left the door open to continued Russian attacks against groups that are considered terrorist. In purely military terms, Russia likely could support the regime in crushing HTS and other rebel groups in Idlib if it so chooses and is willing to absorb the grave humanitarian, political, diplomatic and potentially even security costs of victory, including scattering thousands of jihadists across Syria and beyond.¹²³ If it hopes to spare itself those costs, however – and particularly to preserve reasonably good relations with Ankara that serve Moscow's wider geopolitical interests – its best option may well be to strike a new agreement with Turkey by which HTS would be incorporated in the ceasefire, at least for as long as it adhered to the deal's terms. More broadly, relevant external actors, such as Turkey and key Western stakeholders, should define clear thresholds and conditions for HTS which, if met, could enable its inclusion in a ceasefire agreement, even if indirectly.

To that end, HTS would need to take a number of steps that demonstrate a good-faith effort to seek a peaceful path out of the Idlib crisis. Among these, it should halt attacks on Russia's Hmeimim air base and other regime-held areas, if indeed they are behind these attacks, and also prevent smaller, harder-line jihadist factions from carrying out similar strikes.¹²⁴ As the dominant military group in Idlib and the power behind the local government, HTS should continue to work to contain or neutralise transnationally inclined jihadists, whether ISIS or otherwise.¹²⁵ Finally, HTS needs to comply with agreements Turkey and Russia reached over patrols on, and traffic along, the M4 highway in Idlib.

Beyond the ceasefire lies the broader question of HTS's policy orientation and identity. HTS leaders have hinted both publicly and privately that they would be willing to dismantle the group and merge into a new rebel alliance.¹²⁶ But such a

¹²³ A Turkish official warned that the military destruction of the HTS governance project in Idlib "could only lead to a splintering of the insurgent groups". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, January 2020.

¹²⁴ On 10 May, clashes broke out between Hurras al-Din and regime forces along Idlib's southern front, reportedly killing nine regime officers. Crisis Group telephone interview, activist, Idlib, May 2020.

¹²⁵ On 19 March, Hurras al-Din reportedly attacked a Turkish convoy in Idlib, killing two Turkish soldiers. In response, HTS launched an attack against the group. Crisis Group telephone interview, media activist, Idlib, March 2020. For HTS's position on Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party, see Crisis Group Commentary, "The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani", op. cit.

¹²⁶ Jolani said, "HTS is a project built from circumstance and it won't last forever". Crisis Group interview, Idlib, 23 January 2020.

move, in and of itself, is unlikely to change how key actors view the group; a simple name change would not suffice.¹²⁷ To change perceptions and stand any chance of avoiding listing as a terrorist organisation, HTS would need to demonstrate concrete transformations on key issues in a new iteration, such as denouncing al-Qaeda and its transnational agenda; pledging to block any transnational jihadist presence or activity in Idlib; removing all hardline individuals with links to al-Qaeda from its ranks; and committing to respect religious and political pluralism. On the last point, it should expunge sectarian rhetoric from its messaging (which HTS leadership says it has already initiated), broaden the scope of participation in the Salvation Government and expand space for independent civil society activism.

Such an evolution, even if genuine, is unlikely to matter much to Russia, let alone the regime. That Idlib is controlled by a UN-sanctioned pariah rather than a more palatable rebel movement arguably gives leeway for fresh efforts to recapture the province. Indeed, according to one Russian official: “The idea that HTS has become pragmatic enough to be tolerated is not something that would resonate in Moscow, and we would not be able to convince Damascus to accept an HTS enclave permanently”.¹²⁸ HTS’s inclusion in ceasefire deals, even if informally, could address Moscow’s concern about alleged attacks on Hmeimim air base or government-controlled areas. Were the group to take additional steps rendering it more acceptable to other powers, that might also have some marginal impact on Moscow’s thinking – though the West appears unlikely to warm to HTS any time soon. Further evolution by HTS may ultimately be necessary to avert a showdown in Idlib, but it will not in itself stave off a new offensive – decisions about which hinge mostly on Russia’s calculations about its ties with Turkey and the military costs.

Such an evolution would, however, bring other advantages. Given Idlib’s uncertain future, the group’s definitive rejection of global militancy would benefit foreign powers that fear external attacks emanating from the region – all the more so if HTS cracks down on transnational jihadists. Idlib’s inhabitants would gain were HTS less repressive and displayed greater tolerance for political and religious pluralism. This shift could also lead to increased, desperately needed, international support to the province beyond basic humanitarian assistance. Given the paucity of other options, it is worth Turkey’s while, with implicit or even more overt support from Western governments, to keep encouraging such a transition.

As for Russia, it should pursue an alternative to a military campaign in Idlib. The cost of such a campaign to its international position and notably its relationship with Ankara is likely to rise, given Turkey’s willingness to resist militarily. Russia should also acknowledge the pressing humanitarian imperative in Idlib and avoid contributing further to the destruction of civilian infrastructure as part of its intervention.

¹²⁷ The Russian foreign ministry declared, for example: “We hope that our Turkish partners will continue their efforts to separate moderate opposition from extremists and take measures to neutralise the latter. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the renaming of groups, changing their window dressing, does not change their essence as terrorists. There must be no illusions that we are talking about internationally acknowledged terrorists, regardless of whether they call themselves al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra or Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham”. “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 27 March 2020.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, March 2020.

Western countries might impose additional sanctions on Russia for its military actions in Idlib, and while as yet most distrust HTS, few are willing to buy into Moscow's counter-terrorism justification for the damage and suffering its air force has caused.¹²⁹

Even if Moscow attaches no great importance to more Western sanctions, other factors might enter its calculations. The cost to regime equipment and manpower would almost certainly also be immense, given the rebels' strength and insurgent capacity, their familiarity with the terrain and Idlib's rugged landscape. The regime, already stretched thin and struggling to contain mounting insurgent activity in formerly opposition-held areas, would be vulnerable to fresh rebellions in Idlib and elsewhere. Military success in Idlib could thus further threaten its capacity to maintain control across the full expanse of its territory.

Further pursuit of a military offensive in Idlib could also put at risk the rest of Russia's political project in Syria. Even if one accepts that Turkey has under-delivered on its counter-terrorism pledges in Idlib, it has contributed in important ways to Russia's other political efforts, both within the Astana framework and as part of the UN-led process, for example initial steps toward drafting a new Syrian constitution. An attack on Idlib could, in effect, render Astana meaningless. Cumulatively, all of these factors heighten the cost of a renewed offensive for Moscow.

For its part, Turkey, likely with U.S. support, should develop a counter-terrorism strategy for Idlib that prevents the area from becoming a staging ground for transnational jihadist activities while protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure. Turkey's increased military control in Idlib, and the military coordination that comes with it, gives Ankara more leverage over rebel groups, including HTS, and allows it to nudge HTS in the more palatable direction described above. Moreover, even as they deploy efforts to avoid another military onslaught, the EU and Turkey, neither of which wants to grapple with another influx of refugees, ought to prepare to address the humanitarian crisis in Idlib; indeed, this matter has acquired greater urgency given the spread of COVID-19, as a result of which a humanitarian time bomb on Turkey's border could explode at any moment. Ankara and Brussels should rush medical aid and supplies to the displaced.

Turkey has made clear that its capacity and tolerance for managing the humanitarian fallout in Syria is reaching its limits. The EU will need to do more to share the burden. It should offer additional assistance to civilians in Idlib, including support directed toward health and education, and thus test HTS's expressed willingness to keep its hands off of humanitarian assistance. The EU and its member states should also offer direct support to grassroots organisations working in Idlib and encourage EU-funded organisations to focus their efforts on that area. While there may not be an evident way to bridge the many gaps in EU-Turkey relations, Ankara and Brussels should use their renewed diplomatic engagement – triggered by the Idlib crisis – to preserve and strengthen an extended ceasefire in Idlib as an immediate priority.

¹²⁹ See fn 33 regarding Germany's threat.

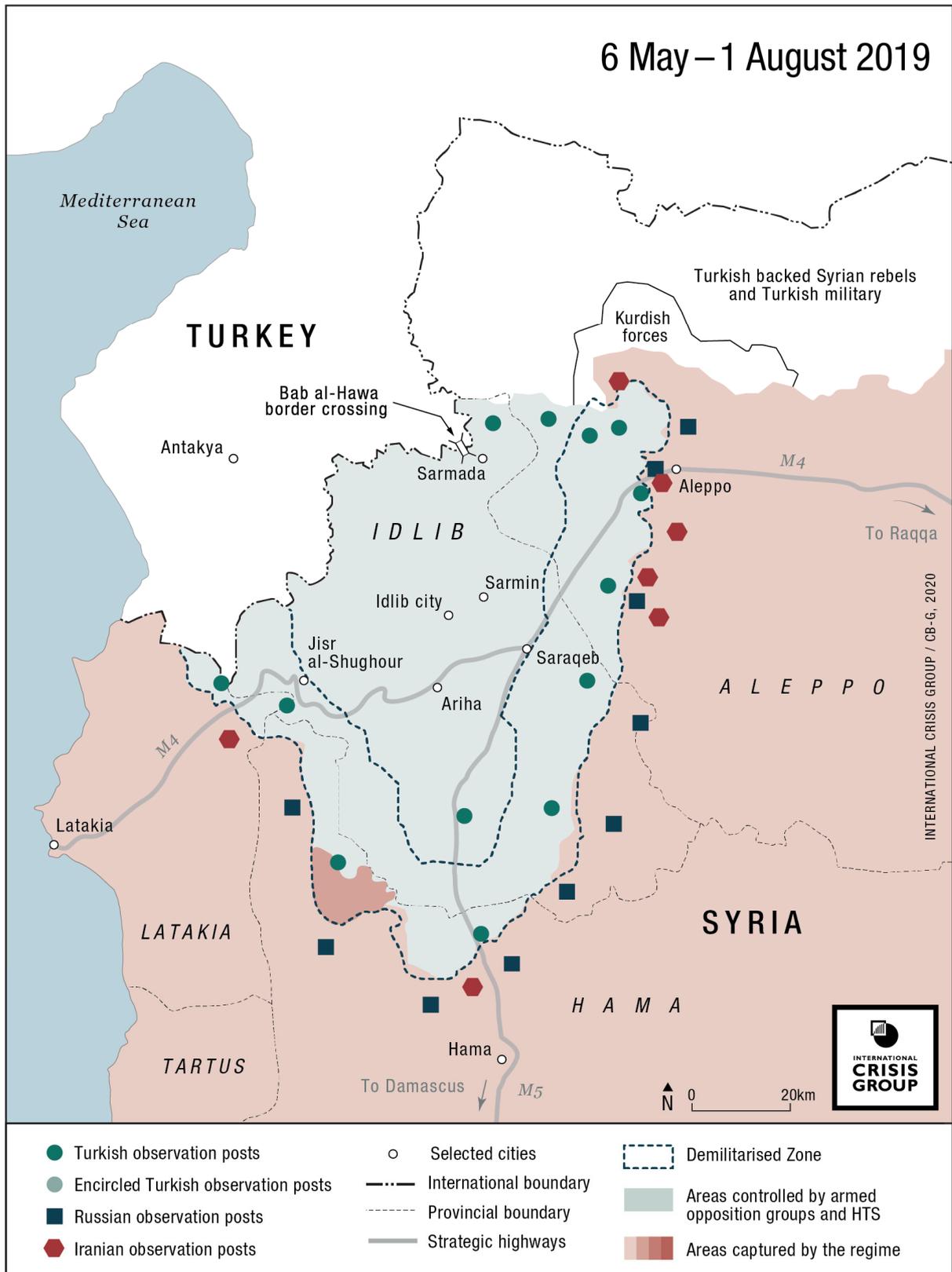
VI. Conclusion

A military takeover of Idlib would not end the Syrian war, or contribute to ending it, despite the extraordinary cost it would entail. The regime's capture of swathes of northern Hama, Aleppo and parts of Idlib has demonstrated that Russia can enable its advances through scorched-earth tactics and aerial bombardment that render areas at least temporarily unlivable. The decision about what comes next is thus primarily Russia's. If Moscow greenlights and provides air support for an all-out regime offensive, the rebels holed up in Idlib may well prove unable to stop it. Nevertheless, such an effort would be exceptionally harmful for all involved, Russia included. It would undercut Moscow's relations with Ankara. It could scatter jihadists in all directions, including into post-Soviet space, and worsen an already disastrous humanitarian situation. While Russia may not care too much about the latter, it has at a minimum been keen on preserving its relationship with Turkey.

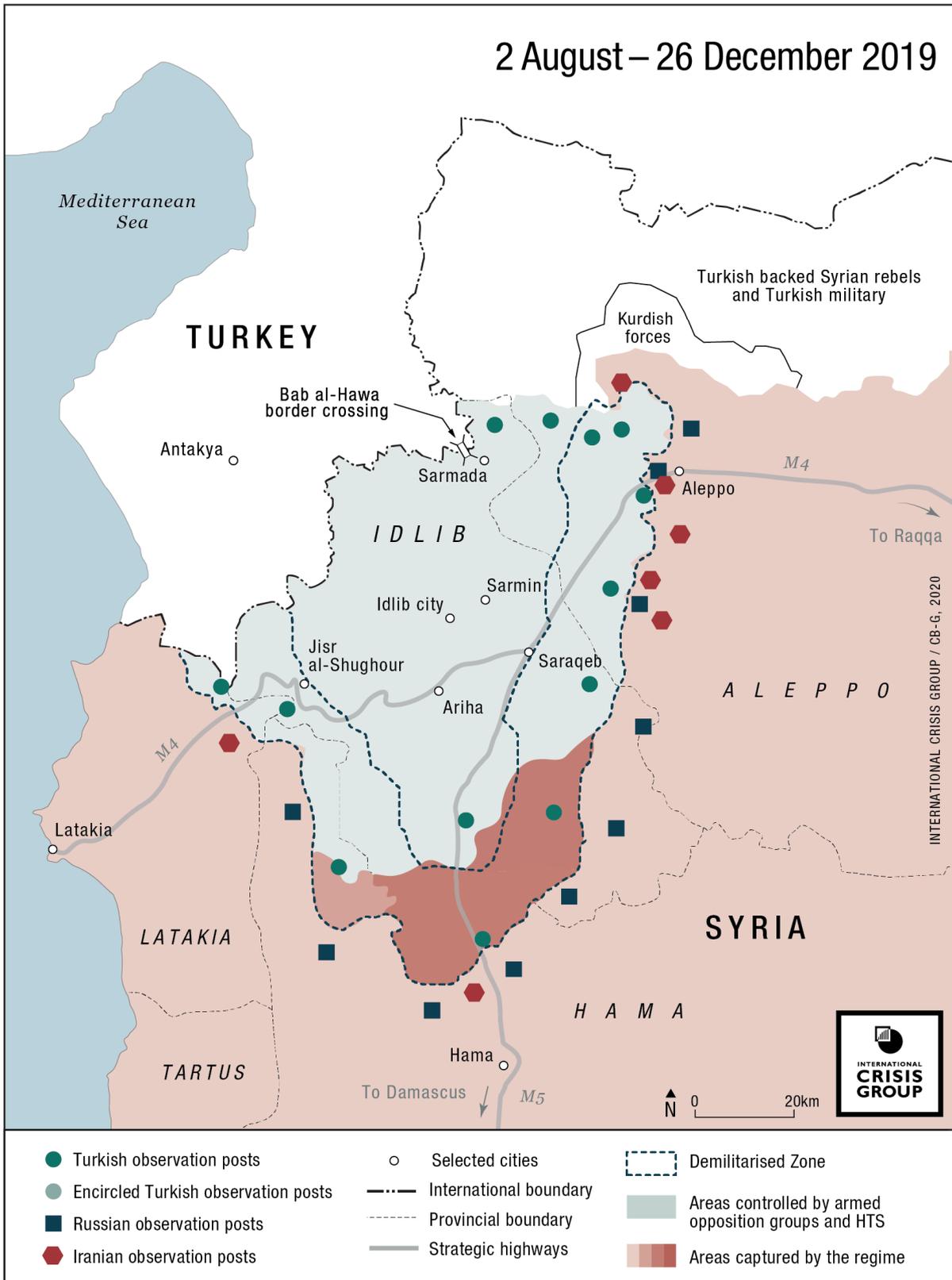
If Russia hopes to avoid such a damaging military victory, it should consider alternatives. A more sustainable ceasefire agreement negotiated with Turkey could meet Moscow's security needs while incorporating HTS, ensuring that whatever agreement emerges has a greater chance of being implemented. At a minimum, this option is worth exploring.

Idlib/Istanbul/Brussels, 15 May 2020

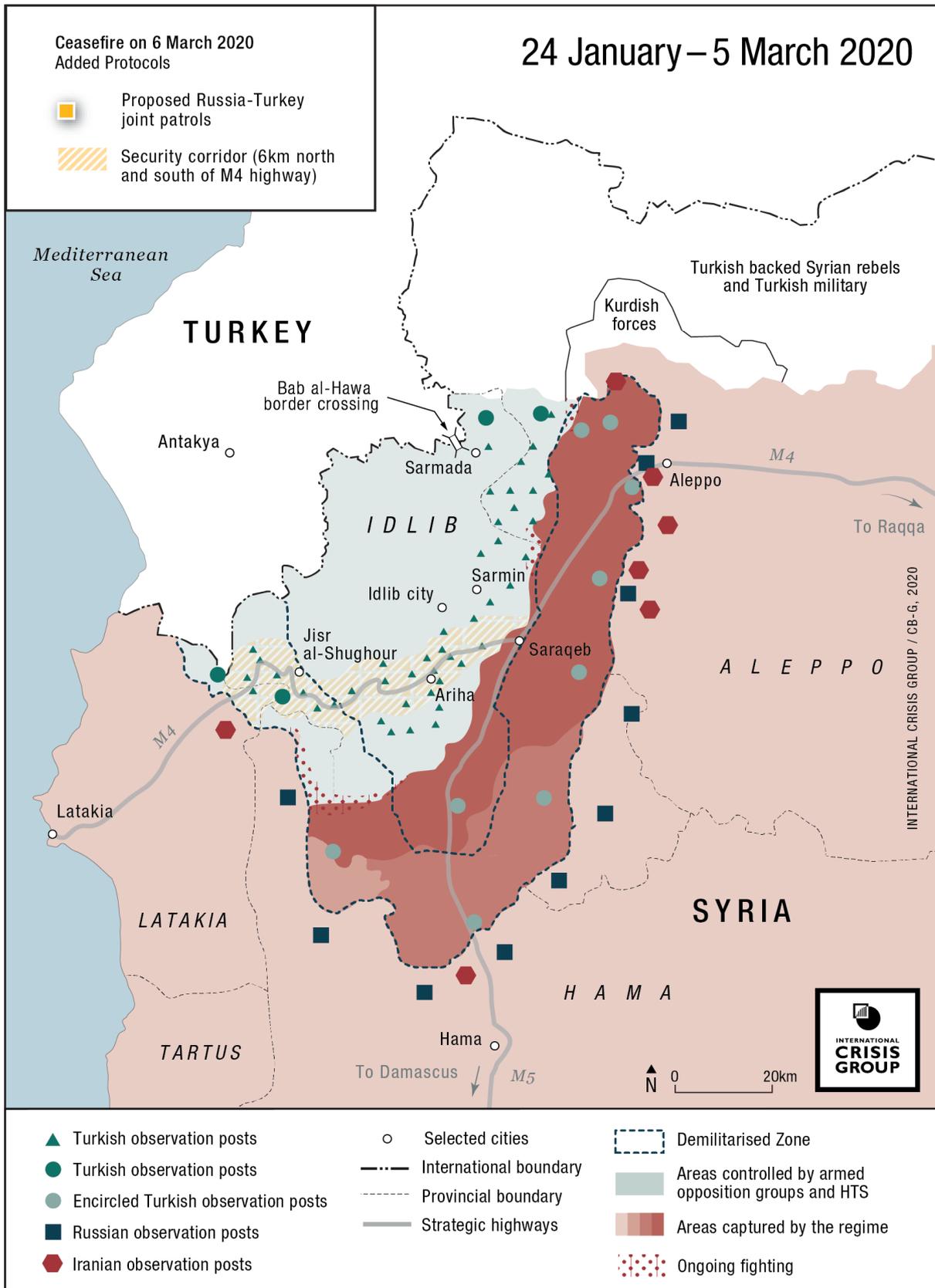
Appendix A: Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 6 May and 1 August 2019



Appendix B: Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 2 August 2019 and 26 December 2019



Appendix C: Regime Advances in North-West Syria between 24 January and 5 March 2020



Appendix D: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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May 2020

Appendix E: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

Israel/Palestine

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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