Idlib Province and the Future of Instability in Syria

By Max Markusen

THE ISSUE
While some claim that an end to the conflict in Idlib marks the final stage of the Syrian war, there are three major factors that will shape the future of instability in Syria:

- An estimated 70,000 opposition militants with legitimate grievances against the Assad regime are positioned for a low-level insurgency that could last for years to come. Moreover, an estimated 12 million displaced Syrians offer a potential pool of recruits for this insurgency.

- Humanitarian and economic costs totaling an estimated $200–350 billion will require serious outside investment. A failure to address these conditions will almost certainly result in continued instability and a future relapse into civil war.

- The presence of outside and non-state military forces—including Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, Hezbollah, Syrian Kurds, and others—will continue to pose an obstacle to stability in Syria and exacerbate ethnic and sectarian tensions.

On September 18, 2018, Russia and Turkey announced an agreement to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib province, delaying any immediate operations on the province that in recent months has seen Syrian military mobilization, Russian airstrikes, Turkish military reinforcement, and attempts to unite the Syrian opposition—including al Qaeda-linked factions—under a single banner. While the immediate offensive looks to be on hold, any discussion of Idlib province raises three sets of issues for Syria more broadly:

First, while some claim that the Idlib offensive marks the “final stage” of the Syrian war, it’s far from clear whether any offensive will take place, whether the Syrian opposition would be willing to surrender and return to life under Assad. Some figures estimate that Idlib hosts up to 70,000 militants ranging from moderate opposition forces to radical elements with former and current links to al-Qaeda. With seven years of animosity pent up against the Assad regime and its allies, many of these militants may use the Turkish-Russian agreement to withdraw further and may try to wage a low-level insurgency with support and even sanctuary in Turkey. More radical elements, including Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), have expressed the willingness to defend Idlib until the end, but in the case of a major regime offensive, are equally likely to move underground just as Islamic State militants have done throughout Iraq and Syria, raising questions for the next iteration of both the Syrian opposition and the Salafi-jihadist movement in Syria.
Second, Idlib hosts an estimated 2.5 to 3.3 million civilians, most of whom are internally displaced from other regions of Syria. A long, drawn-out battle in Idlib will badly exacerbate the current humanitarian crisis, which is estimated at a staggering 6.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria, and 5.6 million Syrian refugees in the surrounding region. Any outcome in Idlib must address the economics of post-war reconstruction estimated at $200 to 350 billion, an annual GDP per capita of roughly $2,900, and the task of returning over 12 million civilians to their pre-war homes. Failure to address these issues will almost certainly result in continued instability and the possibility of a future relapse into civil war.

Third, the presence and role of outside forces in the Idlib offensive raise questions for these forces in Syria more broadly. While it appears Turkey and Russia intend to avoid conflict escalation in Idlib, there are serious doubts about the levels of control Putin has over Assad, Assad’s forces, or their Iranian allies. There is the distinct possibility that Assad will soon solidify gains and call for the withdrawal of foreign forces including Turkey and the United States, which raises the question of whether Assad can effectively reassert control of Syria without the assistance of Hezbollah, Iranian, and other Shia militias. Lastly, the Syrian Kurds control nearly all of the Syrian territory northeast of the Euphrates river, but it’s unclear whether they will negotiate a political settlement with the Assad regime in return for autonomous territory. This report addresses these questions, as well as policy implications for the United States.

THE LAST SYRIAN DE-ESCALATION ZONE

On May 4, 2017, four so-called “de-escalation zones” for Syria’s civil war were brokered by the international community at peace talks in Astana. Overseen by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, these zones were meant to de-escalate tensions between the Syrian regime and the Syrian opposition, provide humanitarian corridors, and lay the groundwork for a peaceful end to the civil war. These de-escalation zones included the creation of Turkish, Russian, and Iranian observation posts in and around Idlib province, which can be seen in Figure 1.

Within six months of the May 2017 announcement, Syrian regime forces—including with the help of Russian air support—began a serious campaign to oust Syrian opposition forces from three of the four de-escalation zones. The first zone fell in April 2018, which included battles in Eastern

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**Figure 1: Map of Turkish, Russian, and Iranian “Observation Posts” in & around Idlib Province**

Source: Open source data compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.
Ghoutta and Douma; the second fell in May 2018, which included a battle for northern Homs; and the third zone fell in July 2018 when the Assad regime rooted out the Syrian opposition from the southern provinces of Der’ra along the Syrian-Jordanian border and Quenitra, near the Golan Heights.

Throughout much of the Syrian civil war, Idlib province has served as a relocation point for both moderate and radical Syrian opposition fighters and rebel groups defeated militarily by the regime in other parts of the country but not yet willing to give up on the revolution. In December 2015—one of the earliest uses of Idlib as a relocation point for the Syrian opposition—rebels from several villages around Homs withdrew under a ceasefire agreement and were bussed to Idlib.5 Throughout 2016, as the Assad regime consolidated control around Damascus, thousands of rebels surrendered and were bussed to Idlib.6 From March to July 2018, thousands more evacuated pockets of resistance throughout the country, including eastern Ghoutta,7 Homs, Der’ra, and Quenitra near the Golan Heights. Many were put on buses and sent to Idlib.8

**AN ESTIMATED 70,000 OPPOSITION MILITANTS**

Some figures estimate that the fourth and final de-escalation zone—Idlib province—hosts up to 70,000 militants from various rebel groups, including both moderate forces and radical elements. Figure 2 includes data from a report by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project that show the high and low estimated numbers of Salafi-jihadi fighters in Syria are at near-all-time highs in 2018. Note that the data below does not include tens of thousands of additional armed opposition militants in Syria or the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who are susceptible to radicalization by Salafi-jihadist ideology.

Positioned along the Turkish-Syrian border, the remaining opposition forces pose a challenge to the Assad regime, not only because of their numbers, but also because of their support from Turkey. Turkish support could allow the opposition forces to withdraw into other Turkish-held Syrian territory, prolonging the conflict. However, Turkey does not exert control over the more radical elements of the Syrian opposition—namely the al-Qaeda-linked HTS (formerly Jabhat al Nusra, or Al Nusra Front)—which are likely to defend Idlib to the end or opt to move underground, presenting a new set of challenges to the Assad regime.

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The rest of this section outlines the numerous opposition elements in Idlib province. The map in Figure 3 shows the locations of armed groups in Idlib, including HTS and the Turkish-sponsored, National Liberation Front (NLF). The map also includes locations of Assad forces, and Turkish military.

**National Liberation Front**

(30,000-45,000 militants): The National Liberation front (NLF) was formed in May 2018 when Turkey sponsored the consolidation of approximately 10 Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, totaling around 10,000 militants.9 In August 2018, the NLF forces were joined by the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), also known as Jabhat Tahrir al Souria (JTS), which included the Salafi-jihadi groups of Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki (an estimated 28,000 militants).10 The

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**Figure 2: High & Low Estimates for Total Number of Salafi-jihadi Fighters in Syria**

Source: Open source estimates compiled by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project.
NLF also inherited smaller groups such as Suqor al-Sham, Jaish al-Ahrar, and Tajamu Dimashq, totaling around 7,000 militants. The NLF and the consolidation of the Syrian opposition were reportedly a strategic objective of Turkey, which wanted a stronger command and control structure over the militants, and the added benefit of blocking further expansion by the Syrian Kurds. Turkey encouraged the al-Qaeda-linked HTS to join under the NLF umbrella, though HTS ultimately refused. The NLF is estimated to have approximately 500 foreign fighters, who are mostly congregated under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham.

**Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham** (7,000-12,000 militants): Led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, HTS has undergone several rebrands throughout the war, and has formally distanced itself from its al Qaeda roots, though there are questions of motivations and intentions, and HTS remains a U.S. Department of State designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Focused predominantly on establishing Islamic rule within Syria strategy—not globally—several groups have split off from HTS, seeing closer ties with Al Qaeda. As of September 2018, HTS controlled over 60 percent of Idlib province and has also cooperated closely with Turkey, which has several observation points in HTS-controlled territory. Notably, HTS has refused to officially align itself as part of the NLF and does not seem confident in Turkey’s commitment to the defense of Idlib province, and the creation of an Islamic system of governance in Syria. As of September 2018, HTS has been the target of major statements by Russia, Iran, the Assad regime, and even the Turkish government, all calling for HTS’s ouster from Idlib province. HTS is estimated to have approximately 3,000 foreign fighters.

**Hilf Nusrat al Islam** (2,300-3,300 militants): In April 2018, the two groups Hurras al-Din (translated as Guardians of Religion) and Ansar al Tawhid (Companions of Monotheism) were formed by several HTS defectors. Around the same time, they merged to form an umbrella group called Hilf Nusrat al Islam. It includes factions such as Jaysh al-Malahim, Jaysh al-Badiya, and Jaysh al-Sahel. The group is more “overtly pro al Qaeda,” allegedly run by Al Qaeda veterans, and somewhat focused on global Jihad. Hilf Nusrat al Islam operates separately from HTS control and is made up of HTS defectors and members of a former affiliate of HTS known as Liwa al-Aqsa, (previously known as Jund al-Aqsa) which was shunned for its pro-Islamic State views and savagery against fellow Muslims. Hilf Nusrat al Islam is estimated to have approximately 1,000 foreign fighters, allegedly under the control of Hurras al-Dine.

**Jabhat Ansar al Din** (Unknown): There are many other small groups in Idlib, not all of which are mentioned here. One of which is Jabhat Ansar al Dine, also referred to as Ansar al-Din Front, or the Fair al-Sham Movement. Jabhat Ansar al Dine was formed in 2014 and is reportedly operating as an independent jihadist group Idlib. Jabhat Ansar al Dine joined HTS in January 2017 but split from the group in February 2018. No reliable size estimates are known, and very little has been written about this group.

**Turkistan Islamic Party** (2,000-3,000 militants): The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is present in Idlib and is comprised of Uighur and Uzbek jihadists which have traditionally sided with HTS in Idlib province. However,
unlike HTS, TIP has identified more overtly with al Qaeda’s global vision. This may be due, in part, to their connection to Central Asia. TIP in Syria is estimated in the thousands, all of whom would be classified as foreign fighters.

**Islamic State** (Unknown number of militants in Idlib; an estimated 10,000–14,000 Islamic State militants remain in Syria): While largely on the decline in terms of control of Syrian territory, the Islamic State is by no means defeated. While most of these fighters are in Deir Ez-Zour Province in Syria’s southeast, the Islamic State retains serious sleeper cell capabilities in Idlib, which are mainly focused on assassinations and general disruptions. Recent reporting by the Pentagon suggests that the Islamic State has roughly 14,000 fighters remaining in Syria, though the number is likely to be lower. Notably, Islamic State cells may be used in Idlib as they were in used by the Assad regime and its Russian backers in Suweyda—deployed to terrorize minority populations and perceived opposition, while justifying its broad counter-terrorism mission.

**BROADER HUMANITARIAN AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS**

Before the war, Idlib was home to an estimated 750,000 civilians. Idlib city was an outskirt of Aleppo, a gateway between Turkey and Syria known for its archeological sites and as a production center for olives, wheat, cotton, and fruit. Today, Idlib is currently hosting an estimated 2.5 to 3.3 million civilians, most internally displaced from the civil war. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees also estimates another 3,570,352 Syrian refugees in Turkey, 300,000 of whom are in Hatay province, on the border with Idlib. Turkey has not created a straightforward path to citizenship for Syrian refugees, and many refugees may desire to return to Syria if and when the conflict comes to an end. To work around the issues of integration, citizenship, and ethnic or demographic impacts, Turkey has begun to transfer Syrian refugees into Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, including an estimated 150,000 Syrian refugees in 2018.

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Figure 4 above shows the before and after satellite images of the Apaydin refugee camp along the Turkish-Syrian border in Hatay province. The before image shows the first signs of construction on June 25, 2011, at the start of the Syrian war. The after image shows the camp on June 17, 2016. This refugee camp is one of 22 camps in Turkey; however, only 10 percent of all refugees in Turkey live in camps. The other 90 percent of refugees in Turkey live in urban and peri-urban areas, which poses a challenge to the Turkish government if it does attempt to enact a widespread relocation policy. Moreover, if a conflict in Idlib were to break out, it could force tens, if not hundreds of thousands...
of Syrians across the border into Turkey. As of September 2018, there have been videos of Syrians crossing the Turkish-Syrian border wall with makeshift ladders.\textsuperscript{32}

Syrian refugees in Turkey aside, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been forcibly displaced from within Syria to Idlib province over the past seven years. As discussed earlier and illustrated by these satellite images, these informal IDP communities are tenuously positioned throughout the countryside, and any blunt approach by the regime to oust the Syrian opposition from Idlib, including barrel bombing, scorched-earth campaigns, or intense urban fighting, could all exacerbate the existing humanitarian crisis. Figure 5 shows the before and after photos of an informal Syrian IDP camp in near the village of Qah in Idlib province. In the 2004 census, Qah was home to an estimated population of 2,262.\textsuperscript{33}

As can be seen in the photos taken on October 5, 2011, and June 10, 2016, the countryside surrounding Qah ballooned to host some 13,000 individuals by November 2016.\textsuperscript{34}

Nearby, another informal IDP camp in Atma, Syria, houses an additional 65,000 IDPs.

If and when the fighting ends in Syria, the Assad regime will also have to deal with the realities of post-war reconstruction of an estimated $200 to 350 billion,\textsuperscript{35} creation of economic opportunity from an annual GDP per capita of roughly $2,900,\textsuperscript{36} and the task of returning over 12 million civilians to their pre-war homes. This post-war reconstruction is particularly important in Idlib province, which long has been home to Salafi-jihadi and other extremist ideology. Without providing opportunity and inclusion for IDPs and resettled refugees in this region, it’s entirely possible that these extremist ideologies will find new hosts, making this region of Syria a problem for the Assad regime for years to come.

THE ROLE OF RUSSIA, TURKEY, AND NON-STATE MILITARY FORCES

The presence of outside military forces in Idlib and more broadly in Syria has implications for how the battle for Idlib will play out and complicates the challenges Assad faces in consolidating victories across Syria. This section provides an overview of those outside military forces.

Russia: Throughout the Syrian civil war, Russia has used a wide range of foreign policy tools, including military, diplomatic, cyber, information, and unconventional capabilities to support the Assad regime. Initially, these tools were deployed to weaken the Syrian opposition and to stem the tide of the civil war. As they proved to be effective—particularly its air capabilities—Russia systematically partnered with Syrian government forces, Shia militias, and Russian private military contractors to retake territory for the Assad regime. During August and September 2018, Russian air support has played a key role in targeting Syrian opposition forces, just as it has in previous campaigns in Aleppo, Homs, rural Damascus, and Der’ra. Unlike these other campaigns, however, Russian support for an Assad offensive in Idlib has faced a new
challenge—the presence of Turkish troops at “observation points” throughout the province.

Escalation between Russia and Turkey in Idlib has massive opportunity costs. The two countries are fostering a relationship on several levels that may prove to be too valuable to undermine by an escalation of hostilities in Idlib. In April 2018, Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that they had agreed to accelerate the Russian sale and Turkish procurement of the S-400 Triumph ground-based air defense system. Moreover, Turkish energy company Unit International, Russian energy company Zarubezhneft, and Iran’s Ghadir Investment Company announced a $7 billion oil deal in August 2017, and Turkey’s first nuclear power plant—a $20 billion project—is being built by the Russian builder Rosatom. This relationship could become even more important given the recent U.S.-Turkish diplomatic spats and the August 2018 drop in the value of the Turkish Lira.

Several flash points have threatened their relationship at several points during Syria’s civil war, including the Turkish downing of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M attack aircraft in November 2015, the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey by a Turkish nationalist in December 2016, and a Russian airstrike on Turkish soldiers in February 2017.

On September 17, 2018, the two countries signed an agreement to a demilitarized zone, delaying any operations on Idlib. However, moving forward, there are serious doubts about the levels of control Putin has over Assad, Assad’s forces, or their Iranian allies.

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**Turkey:** Turkey has an estimated 1,300 troops on the ground in northern Syria. While most of these troops are stationed under the auspices of Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016) and Operation Olive Branch (January 2018), the Turkish observation points in Idlib are part of Turkey’s Operation Idlib De-escalation Control Force. Under these auspices, Turkey has also delivered aid and support to both the moderate Syrian opposition, as well as with Salafi-jihadi rebel groups in Idlib, and has succeeded in consolidating most of the opposition—an estimated 45,000 militants—in Idlib under the NLF, with the notable exception of HTS which has retained its independence, despite having coordinated with the Turks and the NLF on several occasions.

In the short-term, it appears as though the Syrian opposition in Idlib will retain significant materiel and financial support from Turkey’s Operation Euphrates Shield. Even if Turkish forces and the Syrian opposition are eventually forced to leave Idlib, it’s possible that Turkey could support the Syrian insurgency from other areas it controls in Syria such as Afrin, or even from Turkish territory. If the Turkish military draws down its assistance to the NLF or withdraws from Idlib altogether,
however, it is much less clear what will happen to the Syrian opposition. Abandoning the rebels would have its own consequences given the proximity of the Syrian rebel groups to the Turkish border, and large Syrian diaspora and Salafi-jihadi cell structures distributed across Turkey. A third option would be for Turkey to facilitate the withdrawal of Syrian opposition forces into other Turkish-held Syrian territory. This option calls into question what would happen to these militants after they leave Idlib, and whether this move would simply further prolong the conflict.

**Other Forces**: Figure 6 shows the military presence of Russian, Iranian, Hezbollah, and U.S. forces across Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdish armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) have recently withdrawn from Manbij in northern Syria in accordance with a US-Turkish “roadmap” agreed upon in June 2018. The YPG, who Turkey considers to be the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)—a terrorist-designated organization by Ankara and the United States—controls nearly 100 percent of the territory northeast of the Euphrates River. In August 2018, Kurdish representatives met with Assad to discuss self-rule. Reports have cited Kurdish presence on behalf of the Assad regime in Idlib, and it’s likely that the Syrian Kurds are taking a political gamble with Assad to set conditions for how Kurdish-held territory will be treated in the years to come. Depending on any number of agreements that could be brokered between Assad, Russia, and Turkey, the Syrian Kurds could either retain control over their territory, hand over control to the Syrian government or reach some sort of deal in return for political recognition or autonomy.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces have played a key role in supporting the Assad regime’s survival in a number of key battles, including Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and most recently, in Der’ra. While the IRGC has observation points around Idlib, Hezbollah’s presence in Syria’s northwest has been less clear. As a CSIS Transnational Threats Project report mapping Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah targets show, however, there are Hezbollah forces in Syria’s north, and there’s the possibility that Hezbollah will be involved, at least on a train, advise, and assist capacity. U.S. Department of State estimates put Hezbollah fighters in Syria around 6,000; though the actual figure is likely to be much lower. Hezbollah has also faced significant domestic pressure to withdraw from the Syrian battlespace. Rather than remaining in Syria to help Assad retain control of territory, it’s more likely that Hezbollah-trained Shia militias would play a role in assisting Assad in policing parts of Syria—but these forces number in the low thousands and are mostly relegated to villages in Homs province near the Lebanese-Syrian border.

**Turkey’s abandonment of the Syrian opposition would have its own consequences given the proximity of the Syrian rebel groups to the Turkish border, and large Syrian diaspora and Salafi-jihadi cell structures distributed across Turkey.**

In December 2017, it was reported that Chinese Army forces arrived in Syria, ostensibly to fight Uyghurs foreign fighters, a group of Muslim Chinese who showed up in Syria to fight on behalf of the Salafi-jihadist opposition. The vast majority of the remaining Chinese Uyghur foreign fighters in Syria are located in Idlib as part of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), and many Uyghur dissidents reside in Turkey. While the Chinese government denied the deployment of Chinese special forces to Syria, China has become more belligerent in their efforts to track and exterminate Uyghurs outside its borders, even in the United States. While the numbers of Chinese Army forces in Syria should not be overstated, it does represent a serious development in Chinese foreign policy—a drift away from its five so-called “principles of peaceful coexistence.” If China continues in the direction of providing financial support for Assad in post-war reconstruction, it will almost certainly pursue some sort of operational component to this engagement, seeking a longer-term presence in Syria.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

In Syria, the United States faces no good policy options, only less bad options. Even in the unlikely scenario that the battle for Idlib does not end with an Assad victory, the United States and the international community must come to terms with an Assad regime that has secured nominal control of nearly the entire country southwest of the Euphrates River. Bolstered by recent victories and with support from Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime may soon call for the withdrawal of U.S. military, intelligence, diplomatic, and humanitarian presence in the country—including an estimated 2,200 U.S. troops stationed in Syria.
on a revolving basis and an unknown figure of additional State Department, humanitarian, and contracting officers, who also rotate in and out of the country.

The United States still retains interests in Syria—albeit limited—that must be addressed before considering a withdrawal of these forces. Up until August 2018, the United States has been rightly focused on a counterterrorism mission in Syria. However, while some policymakers have been quick to declare an end to the Islamic State using words like “defeated” and “crushed,” the United States’ counterterrorism interests in Syria will not end with the defeat of the Islamic State’s physical caliphate. The Islamic State has already shown the ability to adapt, “go-to-ground,” conduct suicide bombings, and kidnappings, and operate in cell structures that marked the pre-Caliphate period in Iraq and Syria. These challenges will continue in Syria, and the United States must remain committed to denying safe haven for Islamic State leadership and to preventing the further spread of Islamic State militancy and ideology. Moreover, while the impact and reach of HTS and other al-Qaeda-linked Salafi-jihadi groups in Idlib may be limited with an Assad victory in Idlib, it is highly unlikely that these groups will be eliminated entirely.

From a counterterrorism perspective, the United States retains interests in the regions of Syria it has fought to clear of Islamic State militants, including the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV). Without proper humanitarian, development, and reconstruction efforts, both Idlib province and the MERV will be vulnerable to further radicalization for years to come. In August 2018, President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal of $230 million in stabilization funding for water systems, rubble cleanup, and ordinance removal in Syria. While a complete lack of stabilization funding can foster conditions favorable to terrorist recruitment and further instability, they should not be offered unconditionally. If the United States does offer stabilization support in the MERV, or elsewhere in Syria, they should be tied to measurable conditions. Without continued U.S. support in the MERV, others will try and fill the funding and development void required to rebuild this area.

The United States and the international community must shape a new approach to Syria that is focused on the trends that will destabilize Syria far beyond the battle for Idlib. Counterterrorism priorities, humanitarian concerns, economic growth (or lack thereof), and the presence of non-state military forces will determine the levels of future instability and conflict in Syria for years to come. The United States and the international community should take note.

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