

Strategies of Turkish proxy warfare in northern Syria

Back with a vengeance

CRU Report

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Cover photo: Turkish Army units and Free Syrian Army forces conduct joint operations in northwest Syria (Afrin) in January 2018 © Sözcü (a Turkish online and print media outlet)

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Executive summary

After the failure of its strategy to overthrow President Assad between 2011 and 2015, Turkey has become a more significant player in the Syrian civil war from 2016 onwards. It has effectively resurrected the Syrian armed opposition as viable fighting force by gradually establishing centralised control over, and professionalizing, many Syrian National Army (SNA) as well as National Liberation Front (NLF) groups, on occasion even going as far as partnering with 'pragmatic' Hey'at Tahrir al-Sham elements (HTS; a former Al-Qaeda affiliate) (see Figure 1) in order to establish a Turkish sphere of influence in northern Syria.

Key variables that have influenced the effectiveness of Turkey's engagement with different sets of armed Syrian opposition groups include: a) the possibility of obtaining influence by providing significant material support, such as training, salaries and equipment; b) the extent to which it could partner such groups with its own military (based on shared culture, perceived enemy and ideology); c) the level of centralised control it was able to achieve; d) geographic proximity; and e) clever divide-and-rule tactics, which, alongside relative neglect of ideological differences, proved useful in tipping these variables in Turkey's favour.

The main effect of Turkey's proxy warfare strategy is that it has effectively resurrected the 'revolutionary' cause (toppling Assad) of Syria's civil war, albeit now under strong Turkish influence and with a powerful undercurrent of national Islamism. This will ensure long-term Turkish influence in northern Syria via an array of 'secular revolutionary armed groups' and 'nationalist Islamist armed groups' (see Figure 1). Such influence is currently being expanded east of the Euphrates river. While Turkey's strategy was successful in Afrin (north-west Syria) and the Al-Bab - Jarabulus area (north Syria), it remains work in progress east of the Euphrates river, and limited in Idlib (north-west Syria) by HTS's historical affinity with Al-Qaeda, the group's independence and the personality of its leader.

Introduction

In June 2019, the Turkish city of Reyhanli hosted the funeral of Absul Baset al-Sarout, a complex opposition figure in the Syrian civil war. For many, he was a popular icon of the Syrian revolution, even though he called for the extermination of Syria's Alawites in 2012. Later, he desperately pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) for all intents and purposes,¹ and met his end fighting for a nationalist Islamist group that nevertheless cooperated with Hey'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate. Turkey's official news agency and the Syrian National Coalition's General Assembly² paid tribute to Al-Sarout as a revolutionary hero, while the Turkish province of Hatay, where Reyhanli is situated, went so far as to drape its coat of arms over his green coffin. The funeral ceremony was, however, harshly criticised by one of Hatay's Turkish left-wing parliamentarians³ and proved controversial among Reyhanli's mixed population of Arabs, Turks and Alawites. For the purpose of this brief, Al-Sarout's life and funeral offer a useful example of how interwoven secular/Islamist, national/transnational as well as moderate/radical armed opposition groups in Syria have become, and of how Turkey supports a broad range of such groups regardless of their ideological orientations.⁴

More precisely, this brief analyses Turkey's strategic relations with Syrian armed opposition groups with a focus on recent events in northern Syria, especially the areas of Idlib, Afrin and the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor. It seeks to understand why Turkey supports certain groups, what it expects in return, and what its support is likely to mean for the course of the war and the prospects for peace.

1 Lucas, Scott, *Syria Feature: Hope and Tragedy of an Uprising – An Interview with Abdul Baset Sarout*, EAWorldview, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 14 October 2019).

2 See: <https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/general-assembly-concludes-46th-meeting-in-memory-of-abdul-basset-sarout.html> (accessed 7 October 2019).

3 See: <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/baris-atay-reyhanlida-eski-isisli-icin-yapilan-cenaze-torenini-meclise-tasidi-5094176/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

4 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syrian-revolution-hero-martyred-after-hama-clashes/1499280> (accessed 1 July 2019); Tastekin, Fehim, *The Syrian funeral that divided Turkey*, Al-Monitor, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 1 July 2019).

At the outset of the Syrian civil war, Turkey advocated for the peaceful inclusion of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the Assad regime. When that strategy fell on deaf ears in Damascus, Ankara shifted its focus to overthrowing President Assad by supporting the Syrian armed opposition.⁵ After 2015, the poor battlefield performance of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the rise of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), including its People's Protection Units (YPG), that Turkey views as a PKK franchise, caused a second strategic shift in Turkish foreign policy, namely a refocusing on containing and reducing the gains of the PYD-led Syrian Kurds.⁶ This strategy has been operationalised through a hybrid warfare approach that combines regular Turkish military forces with irregular capabilities in the form of Syrian armed groups acting as Turkish proxies.⁷ The approach has been relatively effective in carving out substantial areas of Turkish influence and/or control along the Turkish/Syrian border and in disrupting the emergence of a continuous area controlled by the PYD-led Syrian Kurds.⁸

Box 1 A broad overview of armed Syrian opposition groups

Despite the linkages and regular changes of allegiance between many groups in the Syrian civil war, the armed opposition can be divided roughly into three main categories:

(1) Secular revolutionary groups – Starting with the Free Syrian Army that was founded in 2011 in Turkey by Sunni-Arab defectors of the Syrian Arab Army, this category contains groups that do not have an overt religious agenda (which is not to say their members are not religious) and that were formed early on during the protests and 'revolution' against the regime. This category includes Turkmen proxy groups represented by the Syrian Turkmen Assembly (STA) based in Al-Rai (northwest Syria, earlier in Istanbul). The FSA was an umbrella term for a network of mostly decentralised and irregular armed groups but in 2017 Turkey gradually turned it into a centralised organisation with clearer command and control structures. These FSA groups, which participated in Turkey's military operation Euphrates Shield, were effectively rebranded as the Syrian National Army (SNA).

5 Van Veen, E. and E. Yüksel, *Too big for its boots, Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Hoffmann, Frank, *Conflict in the 21st century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*, Arlington: Potomac Institute, 2007.

8 Van Leeuwen, J. and E. van Veen, *Turkey in north-western Syria: Rebuilding empire at the margins*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

(2) Nationalist Islamist groups – The historical antecedent of the nationalist Islamist groups can be traced back to 2013 when seven FSA-aligned armed groups set up the (Syrian) Islamic Front (IF). While it officially sought to establish a Syrian Islamic state in which governance was supervised by religious scholars and based on sharia law, it distanced itself from Salafi-jihadi doctrine. The result was a Syrian-focused agenda with religious – but not radical extremist – overtones. This distinction resulted in the groups being labelled by some as ‘moderate Islamists’ (note a). In 2014, 19 moderate Islamist groups united in the Faylaq al-Sham (Sham Legion). Largely replacing the IF, Faylaq al-Sham consisted of Islamist groups of all shades (from conservative and Salafi-oriented to Muslim Brotherhood inspired) that viewed both the Assad regime and extremist groups as their enemies. Complicating things further, in 2018, several influential nationalist Islamist and FSA-affiliated armed groups in Idlib united to form the National Liberation Front (NLF). The NLF is a nationalist-Islamist formation in Idlib that operated under Turkish auspices. In October 2019 it merged with the Syrian National Army, which technically operates under the direct command of the Syrian Interim Government but in reality, it takes orders from Turkey.

(3) Salafi jihadist groups – This category is limited to Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN). Initially formed as the Syrian branch of IS, JAN switched its allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2013. In mid-2016, the group rebranded itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and distanced itself from Al-Qaeda by limiting its area of action to Syria in the hope of avoiding US and Russian attacks and sanctions (note b). With its presence gradually reduced to Idlib, the group renamed itself Hey’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in early 2017. The creation of HTS produced a split between those who prioritised a jihadist vision of Syria (the ‘black’ faction) and those who prioritised the Syrian revolution’s vision from a conservative Islamic perspective (Nationalist Islamists, the ‘green’ faction). When HTS started to pursue policies that were not in line with the doctrine of Al-Qaeda’s leadership, jihadist elements of HTS broke off to form Tanzim Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion).

Note (a): It paid off in the sense that the US, UK and France blocked a Russian initiative in the UN Security Council in May 2016 to label Ahrar-al Sham – the leading ‘moderate Islamists’ member – as a terrorist organisation. See: Jonsson, Michael, *Biding Its Time: The Strategic Resilience of Ahrar al-Sham*, Stockholm: FOI Swedish DRA, 2016.

Note (b): The US continued to view the group as a terrorist organisation nonetheless and HTS as an Al-Qaeda affiliate. See: U.S. Department of State, Foreign Terror Organizations, [online](#); Amendments to the Terrorist Designation of al-Nusra Front, 2018, [online](#) (both accessed 6 July 2019).

Source: Al-Khateb, K., *Syrian Turkmen groups return from Turkey to support opposition*, Al-Monitor, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 07 August 2019); <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2017/09/20/suriyeli-muhaliflerden-milli-ordu-catisi-altinda-birlesme-hamlesi/>; <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/osoya-bagli-yaklasik-30-alt-grup-milli-ordu-adi-altinda-birlesti/1018935> (both accessed 2 July 2019); Sen, A., *Suriye Askeri Muhalefeti*, Ankara: ORSAM, No. 202, 2015; Lund, A., *Say Hello To Islamic Front*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013; Lund, A., *The Politics of the Islamic Front*,

Part 1: Structure and Support, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014; Lund, A., *The Levant Front: Can Aleppo's rebels unite?*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014; Lund, A., *The End of the Levant Front*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015; Lister, C., *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, Washington: Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, No:24, 2016; *Backgrounder: Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham*, Center for Strategic Studies, 2018, [online](#); Tastekin, F., *İdlib'deki silahlı gruplar kimler? Aralarından 'ılımlıları' ayırmak mümkün mü?*, BBC, 2018, [online](#) (accessed 4 July 2019); Lefevre, R. and A. El Yassir, *The Sham Legion: Syria's Moderate Islamists*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014; Lund, A., *The Syrian Jihad: An Interview with Charles Lister*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015; Lister, C., *Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding The Long Game in Syria*, War On The Rocks, 2017, [online](#) (accessed 9 October 2019); Joscelyn, T., 'Wanted al Qaeda leader warns of Turkish influence on Jihad in Syria', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 2019; <https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/sig-announces-merger-between-national-army-national-liberation-front.html> (accessed 9 October 2019).

This brief is part of Clingendael's [Levant research programme](#) that analyses 'hybrid coercive organisations' (armed groups that simultaneously compete and coordinate with the state) in the context of the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars. The author is grateful to Thomas Pierret (University of Aix-Marseille) and another reviewer (who prefers to remain anonymous) for their feedback, and to several experts on Syria's myriad of armed groups for reviewing Figure 1. Responsibility for the content of the brief remains with the author.

1 Turkey and the armed Syrian opposition: From Free Syrian Army to Syrian National Army

Throughout the Syrian civil war, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been the armed opposition group mostly aligned with – and most dependent on – Turkey. Turkey hosted the FSA's initial military headquarters, facilitated collaboration among FSA field commanders, welcomed supportive Western/Gulf representatives in the early stages of the war,⁹ and launched a 'train and equip programme' in 2014 for vetted fighters to accelerate the overthrow of the Assad regime, together with the US.¹⁰

After 2015, when Turkey shifted to its strategy of containing the PYD-led Syrian Kurds by creating buffer zones in northern Syria, it used FSA groups as irregular forces in its hybrid military operations: Operation Euphrates Shield, 2016; Operation Olive Branch, 2018; and Operation Peace Spring, 2019.¹¹ These groups were renamed as the Syrian National Army (SNA).¹² Turkey supplies the SNA with training, salaries and weapons in exchange for its participation in Turkish military operations in and outside of its buffer zones.¹³ On balance, it is fair to say that Turkey has come to control the SNA after a period of centralising and restructuring the force.

9 Sen, A., *Suriye Askeri Muhalefeti*, Ankara: ORSAM, No. 202, 2015.

10 Blanchard, C. and A. Belasco, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and issues for Congress*, Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2015, [online](#) (accessed 7 July 2019).

11 See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/suriye-milli-ordusu-firatin-dogusu-icin-hazir/1604677>; Tastekin, Fehim, *Who are the Turkish-backed forces in latest Syria incursion?*, Al Monitor, 2019, online (both accessed 14 October 2019).

12 Özkizilcik, Ö., *Ozgur Suriye Ordusu Nedir, Ne degildir?*, Ankara: Suriye Gundemi, 2018 [online](#) (accessed 8 July 2019).

13 See: <https://tr.euronews.com/2018/08/12/-suriye-milli-ordusu-maasimiz-ve-gerektiginde-silahimiz-turkiye-den> (accessed 8 July 2019).

The ease of collaboration between Turkey and the SNA in northern Syria, as well as Turkish-supported consolidation of the SNA, can be explained partially by the presence of considerable ethnic (Turkmen) and/or religious (Sunni Arab) elements on both sides. These elements are compatible in their socio-cultural views and have a shared perception of who constitutes the enemy (regime forces and, more recently, Syria's Kurds in the form of the PYD and YPG).¹⁴ Collaboration and consolidation are, however, recent characteristics of the SNA-Turkish relationship. From the outset of the war, the FSA was fragmented and subject to geopolitical politicking, with a number of Gulf states competing for influence.¹⁵ Operation Euphrates Shield (2016) boosted the FSA-Turkish partnership substantially when FSA groups performed adequately as part of the Turkish-military led operation. The 2017 centralisation of several FSA groups into three corps (the 3rd corps, 4th corps and special forces) and a new hierarchical structure for the SNA gave Turkey an even tighter grip on the organisation's composite groups, although these technically continue to report to the Ministry of Defence of the Syrian National Council and its Chief of Staff, General Salim Idris.¹⁶ This new SNA structure recently became the core of the Turkish proxy architecture in Syria by integrating Idlib's National Liberation Front (NLF, see Box 1) groups into it. In addition, selected armed groups of Syrian Turkmen are said to execute special operations and covert tasks on behalf of Turkish intelligence (MIT) as part of a separate arrangement between these groups and Turkey.¹⁷

14 Özkizilcik Ö., *Türkiye'nin Hareket ettigi Milli Ordu Bilesenleri*, Ankara: Suriye Gundemi, 2018, [online](#) (accessed 8 July 2019).

15 Lister, C., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, London: Hurst & Company, 2015.

16 See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/12/12/turkiyenin-destekledigi-ve-firatin-dogusuna-yonelik-olasi-bir-operasyonda-ger-alacak-yapilanma-milli-ordu/> (accessed 9 July 2019).

17 Based on an interview with a Turkish military officer who worked in Al-Bab with FSA armed groups in the second half of 2017. The interview took place on condition of anonymity.

2 Turkey and the armed Syrian opposition: Nationalist Islamist groups

Ankara attempted a similar ‘control-through-centralisation’ approach towards nationalist Islamist armed groups¹⁸ in northwest Syria (particularly Idlib), albeit with less success. Between 2013 and 2016, Turkey acted as a silent partner – along with Saudi Arabia and Qatar – in the provision of direct and indirect financial assistance to such Islamist armed opposition groups. Despite limited evidence of direct state involvement, donations gathered in Saudi Arabia and Qatar found their way unhindered to nationalist Islamist armed groups via Salafi support networks in Kuwait,¹⁹ hawala agents, and middlemen in Turkey.²⁰ Turkish, Qatari and Saudi political and military support resulted in Ahrar al-Sham, the leading coalition of nationalist Islamists and Salafi jihadists in the Islamic Front, becoming arguably ‘the most powerful armed opposition group’ from 2015 onwards.²¹ In addition to Ahrar al-Sham, Turkey also supported Faylaq al-Sham (the Islamic Front’s ‘successor’) presumably because of the affiliation of its

18 ‘Nationalist’ refers to such groups limiting their Islamic principles and doctrine to Syria. Nationalist Islamist groups can also be revolutionary in nature (i.e. fight against Assad)

19 Lund, A., *The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1: Structure and Support*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014.

20 Dickinson, Elizabeth, *Follow the Money: How the Syrian Salafis are funded from the Gulf*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013, online: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54011?lang=en> (accessed 19 August 2019).

21 Between 2014 and late 2015, the label of ‘moderate’ enabled Syrian generally non-Islamist members of the moderate opposition groups to be supplied with US anti-tank weapons through the creation of operation rooms in Turkey and Jordan. See: Bender, J., *There are a lot of CIA-vetted Syrian rebel groups taking it to Assad*, *Business Insider*, 2015. online: <https://www.businessinsider.com/cia-vetted-syrian-rebels-fighting-assad-2015-10?international=true&r=US&IR=T> (accessed 21 August 2019). Furthermore, see: Lund, 2015, *op.cit.* and Pierret, T., ‘States Sponsors and the Syrian Insurgency: The Limits of Foreign Influence’, in: Narbone, L., A. Favier and V. Collombier (eds.), *Inside Wars. Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, European University Institute, 2017: 22-28. While the label ‘moderate’ qualified several non-Islamist opposition groups for receipt of US anti-tank weapons via operation rooms in Turkey and Jordan, most Islamist groups did not receive any. See: Bender, J., *There are a lot of CIA-vetted Syrian rebel groups taking it to Assad*, *Business Insider*, 2015. online: <https://www.businessinsider.com/cia-vetted-syrian-rebels-fighting-assad-2015-10?international=true&r=US&IR=T> (accessed 21 August 2019); Pierret, 2017, *op.cit.*

top leadership with the ideology of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.²² After 2016, once Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham became involved in the Turkish military Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey acknowledged and increased its financial and military support for these groups.²³ Through this support, Turkey sought to merge and consolidate those Islamist groups aligned with its own agenda and enhance its influence. As ideological and leadership differences made integration into the SNA problematic, Turkey constructed a new organisational umbrella in May 2018: The National Liberation Front (NLF). Although this organisation consisted initially of 15 armed groups – of which six were ‘moderate’ nationalist Islamists and nine FSA-affiliated – it was led by the commander of Faylaq al-Sham (see Box 1).²⁴

The strategic, long-term plan behind the Turkey-sponsored consolidation of several ‘moderate’ nationalist Islamist and FSA-affiliated armed groups into the NLF was to expand Turkey’s influence in Idlib, to create a counterweight to more extremist Islamist groups, and to attract fighters away from them. The idea was that this would subsequently ‘force’ the armed groups operating in Idlib to align their views with the revolutionary objectives of the Syrian National Coalition and accept Turkish sponsorship.²⁵ With time, this might have paved the way for a deal with the Assad regime, enabled the NLF to undertake an auxiliary security role in the area and reassured Russia of Turkey’s ability to manage the concentration of ‘moderate’ and extremist Islamist armed groups in the province of Idlib. In the short term, creating the NLF to weaken Idlib’s Salafi-jihadi groups (like HTS²⁶) allowed Turkey to honour its commitments under the September 2018

22 Özdemir, Ö. Behram, *Ahrar’u Şam-Türkiye İlişkisi: Güvenlik ve Gelecek*, ORSAM, Ankara, 2015 [online](#) (accessed 8 October 2019).

23 See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2016/08/30/firat-kalkani-operasyonuna-katilan-gruplar/>; see also: <https://www.stratejikortak.com/2017/02/firat-kalkanina-katilan-orgutler.html> (both accessed 21 August 2019).

24 Görücü, K., *Ulusal Özgürleştirme Cephesi’ne Katılan Gruplar*, Suriye Gundemi, 2018, [online](#); Lefevre, R. and Al El Yassir, *The Sham Legion: Syria’s Moderate Islamists*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2014, [online](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55344): <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55344> (both accessed 8 July 2019).

25 See: Tastekin, F., *Turkey amasses force of Syrian rebel factions at Idlib*. Al-Monitor, 2018, [online](#) (accessed 8 July 2019).

26 The US Treasury alleges that Turkish, Qatari and Kuwaiti individuals have been financially supporting Jabhat al-Nusra since 2014. Although this does not necessarily mean that those states are involved, it is worth noting that they did not take much interest in the matter either. For example, Turkey remained indifferent to HTS’s global jihad narrative and its extremist activities in Idlib until 2018, when it finally officially designated the group a terrorist organisation. See: http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/dunya/1071084/Turkiye_idlib_operasyonu_onesi_Heyet_Tahrir_Sam_i_teror_listesine_aldi.html; Lister, C., *Turkey’s Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding The Long Game in Syria*, War On The Rocks, 2017, [online](#) (both accessed 9 October 2019).

Astana agreement. In parallel to the NLF undermining the Salafi jihadist groups from the inside, the construction of 12 Turkish military posts was intended to constrain them from the outside, in effect cordoning off Idlib.²⁷

Initially, Turkey's approach worked. The NLF assembled around 55,000²⁸ to 70,000²⁹ fighters. It expressed both a commitment to resist Syrian regime expansion into Idlib and to defend the area against the PYD.³⁰ The NLF also proved willing to collaborate with the Turkish-backed SNA during Turkish military operations in northwest Syria, as well as with the Syrian National Coalition.³¹ Despite a strong presence of nationalist Islamists in its ranks, the NLF leadership stuck to a secular-revolutionary – rather than Islamic – discourse, describing the organisation as 'the formation of FSA elements under a single roof in Idlib'.³² Accepting such rebranding enabled the Islamist factions of the NLF to benefit from closer association with Turkey, as well as from Turkish protection against Russian-backed Syrian regime attacks. In exchange, NLF groups undertook tasks aligned with shared Turkish-NLF priorities in north-western Syria.³³ Ahrar al-Sham worked mostly to support deradicalisation in Idlib by counter-balancing HTS and other Al-Qaeda affiliates, while Faylaq al-Sham and many other NLF groups participated in Turkey's anti-YPG operations in Afrin in 2018.³⁴

But while Turkey has been able to temporarily 'buy' NLF loyalties by paying salaries and providing appreciable amounts of military equipment, the armed groups that united under the NLF umbrella were nevertheless not (yet) full Turkish proxies (as was and is the case for the SNA).³⁵ In an interview, the head of the political bureau of the NLF,

27 Tastekin, 2018, *op.cit.*

28 See: <https://medium.com/suriye-g%C3%BCndemi/ulusal-%C3%B6zg%C3%BCrle%C5%9Firme-cephesine-kat%C4%B1lan-gruplar-23caac0f6ee3> (accessed 9 July 2019).

29 See: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-45191811> (accessed 9 July 2019).

30 Osman, T., *Armed factions join forces to counter Syrian regime gains*, Al Monitor, 2018, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2019). Turkey considers both the PYD and PKK to be terrorist groups and, for policy purposes, as interchangeable.

31 Tastekin (2018) *op. cit.*; also: Lund, A., *The End of the Levant Front*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015.

32 See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/05/31/ulusal-ozgurlestirme-cephesi/> (accessed 21 August 2019).

33 See: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/hts-ile-ahrar-el-sam-masada-2536133> (accessed 7 October 2019).

34 See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/02/18/zeytin-dali-harekatina-katilan-suriyeli-muhalif-gruplar-18-subat-2018/> (accessed 7 October 2019).

35 Tastekin (2018) *op. cit.*; also: <https://thearabweekly.com/developments-shift-erdogans-priorities-syria> (accessed 7 August 2019); Özkizilcik, Ö., *Uniting the Syrian Opposition: The Components of the Syrian National Army and the Implications of the Unification*, Setav, 2019, online: <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf> (accessed 11 October 2019)

Hussam Tarsha, expressed the organisation's full support for Turkey 'as the most significant ally [*but not the only one* – author's note] of the NLF, after God'.³⁶

On balance, Turkish-NLF collaboration is perhaps best described as a mutually beneficial, pragmatic alliance that is reinforced by compatible political and ideological outlooks. Commanded by groups close to the Muslim Brotherhood (Faylaq al-Sham), Kuwaiti Haraki/political Salafists aligned with Turkey and Qatar (Ahrar al-Sham),³⁷ and nationalists (Jaysh al-Nasr), the NLF shares Turkey's antipathy towards the Salafi jihadists and Syria's Kurds.³⁸ Domestically, the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented views and policies of the Turkish government (AKP, to be precise) have enabled key Turkish leaders to build bridges between Muslim Brotherhood-inspired NLF groups and the Turkish community.³⁹ Many NLF groups also have an historical affinity with the FSA and view the Syrian regime as their main enemy. All these elements have stimulated pragmatic forms of Turkish-NLF collaboration.⁴⁰

Broadly speaking, Turkish-NLF collaboration increased Turkey's influence in Idlib by means of power projection via the NLF's irregular forces and provided Turkey with an additional ally in its fight against the PYD-led Syrian Kurds. In return, the NLF has its back covered and benefits from a sizeable package of material support. This collaboration was for example apparent when a Turkish convoy to reinforce its military post in the Khan Sheikhoun area was escorted by an armed pickup truck of Faylaq al-Sham in August 2019.⁴¹

Once NLF had been re-established in Idlib after prolonged NLF-HTS clashes in 2018 and early 2019 (discussed in the next section), Turkey persuaded the NLF to merge with the SNA in the course of 2019. The SNA technically operates under the direct command of the Syrian Interim Government's (SIG) Ministry of Defence, but is in reality controlled by

36 See: Özkizilcik, Ö., *Ulusal Ozgurlestirme Cephesi Siyasi Buro Uyesi Hussam Tarsha ile Raporaj*, Suriye Gundemi, 2018, [online](#) (accessed 10 July 2019).

37 Pierret, Thomas, *Salafis at War in Syria. Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment*, HAL, 2018, [online](#).

38 Lister, (2017), *op.cit*.

39 This is evident in influential Turkish clerics publicly complimenting the leader of Ahrar al-Sham's, in the assistance of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation to Ahrar al-Sham in northern Syria and in the praise of President Erdogan for one of the commanders of Faylaq al-Sham. See: <http://www.sanalbasin.com/nurettin-yildizdan-ahrarin-sehit-liderine-mektup-6416269>; <https://www.nawartpress.com/inside-the-turkish-field-hospital-where-syrian-islamist-fighters-are-patched-up-and-sent-back-to-war>; <https://www.internethaber.com/iste-erdoganin-bahsettigi-o-oso-komutani-1861871h.htm> (all accessed on 29 October).

40 Lister, (2017), *op.cit*.

41 See: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/air-strike-hit-near-turkish-military-convoy-idlib> (accessed 18 September 2019)

Turkey.⁴² Despite ideological and leadership differences between the NLF and the SNA, the strategic priority of ‘defending the liberated territories and regaining lost ground in Northern Hama and Idlib’ against Russian and Syrian Regime attacks incentivised sceptical NLF commanders to come to terms with Turkey’s pressure to merge.⁴³ The unification has generated a more centralised force that comprises seven corps and about 80,000 fighters.⁴⁴ During the announcement ceremony in Sanliurfa (Turkey), SIG’s defence minister, Salim Idris, announced the intention to crack down on terrorist groups such as HTS and the PYD/PKK.⁴⁵ In sum, Turkey’s ‘control-through-centralisation’ strategy ultimately achieved consolidation of the major proxy elements of its hybrid warfare strategy – SNA and NLF – in Afrin, Al-Bab/Jarabulus and in parts of Idlib.

42 See: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-milli-ordusu-kuruldu-433956.html> and (accessed 9 October 2019).

43 See: Lister, Charles, *Turkish-backed Syrian armed opposition groups to unite under one banner*, Middle East Institute, 2019, [online](https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-milli-ordusu-kuruldu-433956.html); also: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-milli-ordusu-kuruldu-433956.html> (both accessed 20 October 2019)

44 See: <https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/sig-announces-merger-between-national-army-national-liberation-front.html> (accessed 9 October 2019).

45 See: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-milli-ordusu-kuruldu-433956.html> and (accessed 9 October 2019).

3 Turkey and the armed Syrian opposition: Salafi jihadist groups

Yet, the NLF represented only about half of Idlib's varied cast of Islamist groups. The other half – united in HTS that originated from Jabhat al-Nusra and was inspired by Al-Qaeda's doctrine of global jihad – turned down the 2018 Turkish offer/push to merge into the NLF. While Turkey's NLF-based consolidation strategy was initially effective, before long HTS successfully moved against several Turkish-backed NLF groups in Idlib and defeated them in an inter-factional struggle through a mix of co-optation, intimidation and coercion. When it was over, HTS controlled about 90 per cent of Idlib.⁴⁶ It also established the Salvation Government as a rival of the Syrian Interim Government. Its success once more contrasted an extremist vision of the Syrian civil war with a revolutionary one.⁴⁷

However, the HTS leadership does not hold a uniform view on the war in Syria. On the one hand, it features more pragmatic factions. These are led by Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, and comfortable with collaboration with Turkey, including supporting Turkish operations against the PYD east of the Euphrates river⁴⁸ in exchange for Turkey's support in 'fortifying and defending' north-western Syria.⁴⁹ Collaboration between these pragmatic HTS elements and Turkey became apparent when Turkish Army units were escorted by HTS fighters (rather than NLF groups) in the initial phase of the Turkish de-escalation deployment into Idlib in October 2017.⁵⁰ This 'hybrid operation' prevented a direct Turkish clash with the group but did not draw HTS into the Turkish-backed NLF alliance.

46 See: Tastekin, Fehim, *Jihadists of Idlib splitting under Turkish pressure*, Al-Monitor, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 6 July 2019).

47 Lister, (2017). *op.cit.*

48 See: <https://aawsat.com/turkish/home/article/1547086/hts-turkiye-nin-kurt-gruplara-yonelik-operasyonunu-destekliyor> (accessed 18 September 2019).

49 This is Jolani's 'new' objective. See: https://www.itct.org.uk/archives/itct_terrorist_net/hayat-tahrir-al-sham (accessed 26 August 2019).

50 Stein, Aron, *Turkey's presence in Afrin changes the Syria equation (again)*, Atlantic Council, 2017, online; Lister, (2017), *op.cit.*; also: Mcdowall, Angus, *First Turkish military convoy enters Syria's Idlib*, Reuters, 2017, [online](#) (accessed 20 October).

On the other hand, the HTS leadership also features more dogmatic elements, i.e. the Tanzim Hurras al-Din (Religious Guardians' Organisation), which reject cooperation with Turkey. After a bloody inter-factional fight within HTS between March 2018 and February 2019, both factions forged an agreement to cooperate against their common enemy: the Syrian Regime.⁵¹ Despite this truce, Al-Qaeda veterans within Tanzim Hurras al-Din have continued to criticise HTS's disassociation from Al-Qaeda and its alignment with Turkey's strategy in Idlib.⁵² Furthermore, by rejecting Turkish-Russian agreements, Tanzim Hurras al-Din jeopardised the status quo in Idlib when it carried out several attacks on Syrian regime and Russian positions. This has been highly problematic for Turkey because it undermines Russia's confidence in Turkey's ability to establish informal control over Idlib and to defuse the Salafi-jihadi threat as per the terms of the Sochi and Astana agreements. Despite HTS arguing that its attacks were preceded by hostile acts on the part of the Syrian regime, its activities gave Russia and the Syrian regime the perfect pretext to advance against Khan Sheikhoun and conquer it.⁵³ If this offensive is continued, it will endanger Turkey's Idlib strategy because it would trigger large numbers of refugees heading towards Turkey and increase the pressure on Turkey to vacate the parts of Syria it controls.

In response to HTS influence, Turkey switched to a subversion campaign against it.⁵⁴ More precisely, Turkey initiated a *divide-and-rule* policy that sought to separate *dogmatic* HTS groups (Al-Qaeda affiliates) from *pragmatic* ones (i.e. those receptive to cooperation with Turkey on the basis of the revolution against the Syrian regime).⁵⁵ In August 2018, the Turkish foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, summarised this

51 Ali, M. Hage, *Guarding the Al-Qaeda Flame*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2018, [online](#); Joscelyn, Thomas, Analysis: *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din reach a new accord*, FFD's Long War Journal, 2019, [online](#); Tastekin (2019) *op.cit.*

52 Joscelyn, Thomas, *Al Qaeda-linked operations room counterattacks as bombs fall in northern Syria*, FFD's Long War Journal, 2019, [online](#) (22 October 2019).

53 When the offensive resulted in several Turkish casualties, Turkey reinforced its military posts and helped create a joint operation room uniting HTS, NLF and SNA fighters, while also providing a generous supply of anti-tank and Grad missiles. These interventions notwithstanding, the Syrian regime offensive conquered Khan Sheikhoun in August 2019 and laid siege to a Turkish military post, in large part enabled by the ongoing rivalry between HTS and nationalist Islamists (especially Ahrar al-Sham). See: <https://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKCN1TS32A-OCATP> (accessed 9 July 2019); Tastekin, F., *Turkey's risky route in Idlib*, Al-Monitor, 2019, [online](#); Özkizilcik, Ö., *A way out for Russia and Turkey from Idlib's spiral of violence*, Washington, Middle East Institute, 2019, [online](#) (both accessed 27 July 2019); Al Nofal, W., *What happened in Khan Sheikhoun?*, *Syria Direct*, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190823-syria-army-surround-besieged-turkish-soldiers-in-idlib-observation-point/>; <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/4/27/hts-kills-over-20-syrian-regime-fighters-in-aleppo>; Russian Foreign Ministry Lavrov's announcement, [online](#) (all accessed 13 October 2019).

54 Lister (2017) *op.cit.*

55 See: Özkizilcik, Ö., *HTS ile mücadele nasıl olabilir?* Ankara: Suriye Gundemi, 2018, [online](#); Lister (2017) *op.cit.*

policy as ‘separating the moderate opposition from the terrorists’.⁵⁶ Arguably it was because of Turkish support and pressure from armed groups linked to Turkey in Idlib that the pragmatic wing of HTS re-established its dominance within the organisation after its dogmatist wing, Tanzim Hurras al-Din, had been marginalised via repression and aforementioned brokered truce.⁵⁷ Yet, despite the dominance of the pragmatists, the leader of the HTS, Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, continued to preserve the group’s autonomy. But he also agreed to form a [joint] operation room (Feth’ul Mubin)⁵⁸ with the NLF, SNA and Tanzim Hurras al-Din factions to better resist the Syrian regime offensive(s) in Idlib.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Turkey gained a pledge from Al-Jolani to help fight the PYD in exchange for Turkey’s acceptance of HTS territorial control in Idlib.⁶⁰ Taken together, HTS continues to operate independently of the NLF and only collaborates with Turkey pragmatically on a peer-to-peer basis.

As a result, Turkey’s ‘control-through-centralisation’ policy in Idlib, which seeks to bring three groups (HTS, NLF and SNA) under a single organisational structure, remains vulnerable. The reality is that HTS and the nationalist Islamists do not see eye to eye, while Turkey has no control over Tanzim Hurras al-Din, which from a Turkish perspective acts as a spoiler through its ability to escalate violence that can provoke Russian and Syrian regime responses. A final problem for Turkey’s proxy strategy is that the Russian-Syrian assault on Khan Sheikhoun has put Turkey in the role of facilitator-cum-operator of Idlib’s assorted array of armed Syrian opposition groups rather than that of guarantor of the demilitarised zone around Idlib or that of the ‘nemesis’ of HTS.

On the upside, recent battlefield developments provided Turkey with a good opportunity to return to Idlib the NLF groups that had been chased out by HTS earlier in the year.⁶¹ It is conceivable that Turkey’s future strategy will consist of increasing its military observation posts, strengthening the recently restructured NLF forces (merged with the SNA), isolating HTS, and undertaking joint action with the US and Russia against Tanzim Hurras al-Din.⁶²

56 See: <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/disisleri-bakani-mevlut-cavusoglu-brunsonun-durumunda-bir-degisiklik-yok-380106.html> (accessed 10 July 2019).

57 Özkizilcik (2018) *op. cit.*

58 See: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/han-seyhun-idlib-in-kale-kapisi-nin-dusmesi-suriye-de-savasin-seyrini-ve-turkiye-yi-nasil-etkileyebilir.835771> (accessed 21 October 2019).

59 Lister, Charles, *The Urgency of Idlib: the Impending Regime Offensive and Delicate Balance in Syria’s Northwest*, War on the Rocks, 2018, [online](#).

60 Tastekin (2019) *op. cit.*

61 Özkizilcik (2019) *op. cit.*

62 See for example: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/09/turkey-military-posts-syria-idlib-russia-violations.html> or <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190903-in-bombing-idlib-the-us-is-trying-to-pull-together-its-syria-policy/> (both accessed 23 September 2019).

4 Key characteristics of Turkish use of Syrian armed proxies

Since 2016, Turkey has put well-tailored, adaptive and effective arrangements in place with different categories of Syrian armed opposition groups. The SNA has been instrumental in the realisation of Turkey's buffer zone strategy as a core irregular force under almost full Turkish control via the provision of training and equipment, salary payments and the creation of new organisational structures. No longer a fragmented and decentralised proxy, the SNA is becoming an integrated, although irregular, element of the Turkish army. In terms of policy objectives, SNA forces greatly facilitated the realisation of two semi-autonomous Turkish protectorates in Afrin and around the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor (west of the Euphrates) and a new buffer zone between Tell Abyad en Ras al-Ayn (east of the Euphrates).⁶³

In respect of the NLF, Turkey developed a lighter version of the same control-through-centralisation approach. Its first phase (2018) sought to merge NLF and FSA groups in Idlib, but this was only partially successful due to differences between these groups and suffered setbacks due to clashes between HTS and NLF. The second phase of Turkey's approach (2019) ended up uniting SNA and NLF forces under Turkish command. While Turkey could not establish SNA-type levels of control during the first phase, it nevertheless established an influential client-proxy relationship with the NLF by offering its groups a rear base, having them participate in Turkish operations in Afrin and in the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor, and providing them with equipment, training and salaries.

Since their unification with the SNA, the former NLF groups Faylaq al-Sham and Jaysh al-Ahrar have been involved in Turkey's recent 'Peace Springs' incursion east of the Euphrates River.⁶⁴ In terms of policy objectives, the NLF helped expand Turkish influence in Idlib, counterbalanced Salafi jihadist groups in the area, and strengthened Turkey's proxy forces against the YPG.

63 See: Van Leeuwen and Van Veen (2019), *op.cit.*

64 Tastekin, F., *Who are the Turkish-backed forces in latest Syria incursion?*, Al Monitor, 2019, [online](#) (accessed 14 October 2019).

Although Turkey's approach encountered strong resistance from HTS that initially led to the defeat of Turkey-aligned NLF forces, Turkey managed to overcome this setback by switching to a *divide-and-rule* approach that saw the more pragmatic HTS factions emerge dominant from the group's internal power struggles. Figure 1 below provides a summary overview of key relations between Turkey and various sets of Syrian armed opposition groups over the course of the civil war. It does not aspire to be fully inclusive of all developments – there are simply too many – but captures key shifts and relations.

Figure 1 Overview of the relations between Turkey and Syria's armed opposition groups



Note: By 'secular revolutionary groups' we mean groups that have no intention of creating an Islamic state in Syria. 'Nationalist Islamist groups' can also be revolutionary in nature (against Assad).

On the upside, Turkey's collaboration with HTS (covert cooperation with pragmatic elements), NLF (ideological partnership) and SNA (centralised control) have strengthened the Turkish military position in Idlib, improved its negotiation position regarding the future of the province, and created a fighting coalition against the PYD. The downside of these different forms of collaboration between Turkey and Syrian opposition groups has been that they have reduced Turkey's strategic credibility with Russia, maintained HTS as a (partially) Al-Qaeda-linked international terrorist group and created strong links between Turkey and range of Syrian Islamist armed groups, in part Salafi, that may present Turkey with a domestic security challenge in the medium-term.

Key variables that have influenced the effectiveness of Turkey's engagement with different armed Syrian opposition groups include: a) the possibility of obtaining influence by providing significant material support, such as training, salaries and equipment; b) the extent to which it could partner such groups with its own military (e.g. shared culture, perceived enemy and ideology); c) the level of centralised control it was able to achieve; d) geographic proximity; and e) clever divide-and-rule tactics, which, alongside relative neglect of ideological differences, proved useful in tipping these variables in Turkey's favour.

Conclusion

Since the failure of its strategy to overthrow Assad between 2011 and 2016, Turkey has become a more significant player in the Syrian civil war. First, bringing a fragmented FSA under its command, reorganising these forces into a centralised SNA and partnering with the NLF enabled Turkey to exercise greater control over two key sets of Syrian armed groups in Idlib, Afrin and the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor. This enabled Turkey to establish two semi-autonomous protectorates west of the Euphrates and to expand its influence in Idlib province. Secondly, these arrangements have secured the commitment of a range of Syrian armed groups to operate as irregular forces in Turkey's recent military operation against the PYD-led Syrian Kurds east of the Euphrates. Thirdly, the Turkish-supported 'alliance-of-convenience' of HTS-NLF-SNA in Idlib lost ground after the recent Syrian regime/Russian offensive that captured Khan Sheikhoun and it remains susceptible to internal (Tanzim Hurras al-Din) and external (Russian-regime offensives) disruption.⁶⁵

In sum, Turkey's vision of resurrecting the 'revolutionary' cause in the Syrian civil war for its own benefit, has been effectively executed through growing institutionalised control over, and partnership with, a wide range of SNA and NLF groups.⁶⁶ Turkish influence in Idlib remains limited, however, by HTS's historical affinity with Al-Qaeda, the group's independence and Abu Muhammed al-Jolani's personality. Nevertheless, this brief suggests that Turkey's proxy warfare strategy has effectively merged and centralised many Syrian opposition groups under its own vision of nationalist Islamist governance that will ensure long-term Turkish influence in northern Syria, which is currently being expanded east of the Euphrates river.

65 Note that this is in part due to the absence of Iran-affiliated militias on the battlefield. Such forces have consistently been behind, or in front of, successful Syrian regime offensives, such as the battles for Aleppo and Qusair. Iran's disengagement, which might be the result of its desire to avoid conflict with Turkey while its standoff with the US deepens, also enabled Syrian armed opposition groups in Idlib to regroup and recover from the August 2019 regime offensive that captured Khan Sheikhoun.

66 This vision can be traced back to the AKP's own ideological development over the past few years.