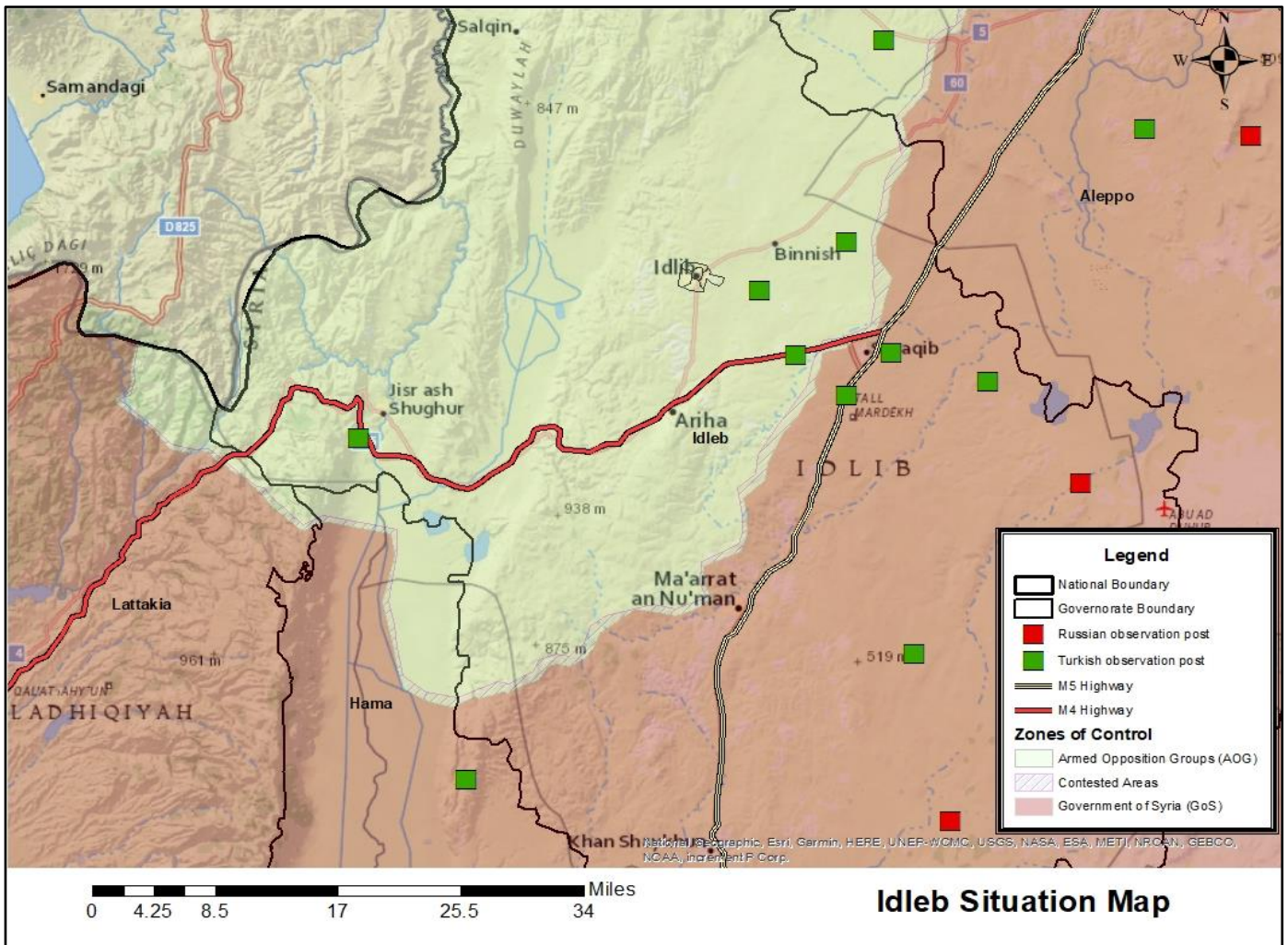


CHANGING DYNAMICS IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

SCENARIO PLAN

5 JUNE 2020

CURRENT SITUATION



On 5 March, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Turkish and Russian Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin in Moscow. The agreement provides for an immediate cessation of hostilities, the establishment of a 6km security corridor along the Latakia–Aleppo M4 highway, and the deployment of joint Russian–Turkish patrols along the road from 15 March. The agreement protects Russia’s (and Damascus) interests by securing key strategic highways while also preventing a loss of Turkish territory by halting any further offensives by the Government of Syria (GoS) and Russia.^{1,2,3,4} The EU and the US welcomed the Russian–Turkish ceasefire. Joseph Borrell, head of Foreign Policy, stated that increased humanitarian

1 The Guardian, ‘Putin and Erdoğan agree Syria ceasefire after last-ditch talks’, March 2020

2 On 15 March, the first Turkish-Russian joint patrol started along the M4 highway, starting from Tromba, Saraqab subdistrict. The patrol track was cut back due to the area residents’ protests at the highway refusing the Russian presence in the area. The Russians gave Turkey more time to find a way to implement the joint patrols. Turkish military continued solo patrols during the next few days.

3 On 11 February, GoS forces seized control over the Aleppo-Damascus M5 highway after advancing towards a number of strategic towns including Iss, Hadher subdistrict; Zarbah, Barqum, Jeb Kas, and Bawabiyeh, Zarbah subdistrict; and Kafr Aleppo, Mezanaz, and Qanater, in Atareb subdistrict.

4 On 27 February, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed during a GoS attack against the opposition-controlled area of Balyun, Ehsem subdistrict.

aid to the region is a prerequisite for the agreement's success. The US State Department also issued a statement welcoming the agreement, describing it as a "spark of hope" and considered that the commitment of the GoS to a ceasefire is an essential part of the deal.⁵

However, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Hurras Ad-Din, the two dominant militant groups in northwest Syria, issued two separate statements rejecting the agreement. In its [statement](#), HTS considered that the deal enabled Russia to establish control of the territories without a fight and stressed that the path of armed resistance and jihad must continue, no matter how high the cost. HTS thanked the Turkish government for its stance in support of the revolution and the locals of Idlib, and encouraged it to help displaced people to return to their communities. Hurras Ad-Din, a group strongly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, released a 23-minute audio recording of its leader, Abu Hummam al-Shami, describing the agreement as an international conspiracy of infidels against jihad in Syria. In his [speech](#), Shami called on the Mujahideen to continue the war against enemies of the religion, including [President Bashar al-]Assad and his followers, Jews, Christians, and Shiites.⁶

On 1 May, demonstrations against HTS erupted across several towns in Idlib governorate.⁷ The protests came after HTS suppressed civil demonstrations attempting to prevent the opening of a new commercial crossing with Government of Syria (GoS)-held areas in the western Aleppo countryside, killing one civilian and wounding seven others.

On 29 April, local sources reported that Turkish military forces in the area erected dirt barriers along the Maaret Elnaasan–Meznaz road to prevent HTS from opening the commercial crossing. The initiative came in conjunction with the dropping of Turkish reconnaissance plane leaflets on various regions of Idlib governorate, asking people to cooperate with the Turkish army in its quest to achieve lasting stability in the area. The flyers were dropped following confrontations between HTS and the Turkish forces during the latter's attempt to disperse local demonstrations (known as the Al Karama protests) aimed at preventing the deployment of joint Turkish–Russian patrols on the Latakia–Damascus M4 highway. The confrontation reportedly resulted in the killing of five protesters and the wounding of three members of the Turkish army. On 19 March, the Turkish Ministry of Defense announced the death of two Turkish soldiers and the injury of a third in an attack by extremist groups targeting a Turkish military patrol along the M4 highway.

5 Anadolu Agency, '[Washington: The Russian-Turkish agreement is a spark of hope to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib](#)', March 2020

6 Established in February 2018, Hurras Ad-Din extremist group is the official branch of al-Qaeda in Syria. The group is headed by Abu-Hummam Al-Shami and mainly consists of former HTS members.

7 Darat Azza, Daret Azza subdistrict; Maaret Atarib, Atareb subdistrict; Maaret Elnaasan, Maaret Elnaasan subdistrict; Idlib, Idlib subdistrict; Bennsh, Bennsh subdistrict; Teftnaz, Teftnaz subdistrict; Kafr Takharim, Kafr Takharim; and Haranbush, Maaret Tamsrin subdistrict.

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

The 5 March agreement is a revival of the Demilitarized Zone Agreement (DMZ) signed in Sochi, Russia, in September 2018.⁸ Through ten action points, the DMZ agreement stipulated a reduction of hostilities, establishment of a 15–20 km demilitarized zone free of extremist groups, restoration of cross-line civilian and commercial transit on the (Latakia–Aleppo) M4 and the (Aleppo–Damascus) M5 highways, and the deployment of joint Russian–Turkish patrols and unmanned aerial vehicles along the transit routes by the end of 2018. The Russian government continued to use Turkey's failure to implement these terms to justify military operations against opposition-held areas in Idlib to secure control over the M4 and M5 transit routes.

Unlike previous agreements, there are two main factors indicating that Turkey is determined to implement the 5 March agreement and remove the reasons that could lead Russia and the GoS to launch future attacks on opposition-held areas in northwest Syria. The first factor is related to Turkey's noticeable determination to deploy joint patrols along the M4 highway, despite reluctance from the extremist groups in the areas and local communities. On March 19, two Turkish soldiers were killed and a third wounded as a result of an attack by an unspecified radical group during their patrol on the M4 highway. Although the Turkish Ministry of Defense did not specify the group responsible for the attack, local sources indicate that Hurras Ad-Din is likely responsible for the attack. Moreover, the Turkish government took extreme measures to disperse local demonstrations that aimed to prevent the passage of the Russian patrols. On 13 April, the Turkish government deployed more than 500 riot police, carrying batons and shields, to break up a civilian sit-in on the M4 highway. On 26 April, during another demonstration, Turkish forces used live ammunition to disperse the demonstrators resulting in the death of five protesters and wounding three members of the Turkish army.

The second indicator of Turkey's intention to sustain stability in opposition-controlled northwest Syria is that Turkey has announced its intention to supply the remaining opposition-controlled territories in Idlib and western Aleppo with electricity from Turkey. On 24 March, the General Electricity Corporation of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) announced the signing of an agreement to deliver power from Turkey to Idlib and western Aleppo communities within three months. Local sources reported that an exclusive contract had been signed between an unidentified private Syrian company and the Turkish AK Energy company to extend the electricity line from the Turkish border to the nearest transfer station in Idlib governorate. Turk Telecom also provides internet services to SSG-held areas, and a privately owned Turkish company feeds internet to the SSG-owned Syria Connect.

Based on the above, if Turkey wants to maintain stability in the opposition-held northwest, it must remove the reasons that could lead Russia and the GoS to launch future attacks in the area. This report presents

⁸ Humanitarian Access Team, 'Demilitarized Zone Agreement', Dec 2018

three possible scenarios for Turkey to remove these reasons: The first scenario assumes that Turkey succeeds in dissolving HTS and integrating the SSG with the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG). The second scenario presumes that Turkey pursues HTS into deradicalization while the SSG remains intact. The third scenario presumes that Turkey fails to reach an understanding with HTS and launches a military offensive to eliminate HTS and the remaining extremist groups.

SCENARIOS

Scenario 1: The dissolution of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the merger of the Syrian Salvation Government with the Syrian Interim Government

Probability	X					
Impact				X		

This scenario assumes that Turkey is determined to remove all factors which could lead Russia and the Government of Syria (GoS) to launch future attacks on opposition-held areas in northwest Syria. In this scenario, Turkey sponsors the dissolution of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and promotes the full integration of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) with the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG) – thereby creating a coordinated force of Turkish and opposition governments in the northwest. In this scenario, the merger of the SSG with the SIG is aimed at uniting the two governments with Turkish backing. The SSG will then gain significant representation in aspects related to security, local administration, and service provision. The likelihood of this scenario remains low at present, while the impact is evaluated as high.

This scenario also assumes that after the dissolution of HTS, most of the group's components will join the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (NA). Remaining fighters will join other extremist groups in northwest Syria, such as Ansar Al-Islam, Jabhat Ansar Ad-Deen, Ansar al-Tawheed, the Turkistan Islamic Party and Hurras Ad-Din. Following integration of much of HTS into the NA, the NA will then play a vital role in combating these groups.

Context

This scenario depends on the capacity of Turkey and HTS to reach an understanding to remove pretexts the GoS and Russian government may have to launch new attacks on the area. Although it is difficult to predict how flexible the Turkish government is in concluding understandings with HTS, many facts indicate that the two parties were at least part of an indirect understanding to date as HTS has allowed Turkey to establish

observation posts across the northwest and send large numbers of military forces to the area.⁹ Several reports also suggested that HTS accompanied and provided protection during the establishment of the posts. In return, Turkey allowed HTS to be self-sufficient in its funding streams by allowing it to control the Bab Al-Hawa commercial crossing with Turkey which it has held since mid-2017, and therefore profit from imposing tariffs on trade and controlling fuel imports.¹⁰

This scenario also depends on Turkey's intention to enlist the military expertise of HTS to serve Turkey's interests in the region. Locally, there is a growing possibility that Turkey will use HTS fighters to eliminate the remaining extremist groups such as Hurras Ad-Din, Ansar Al-Islam, Ansar Ad-Din, and Ansar Al-Tawheed. This is based on the assumption that Turkey is aware of the growing enmity between HTS and these groups on the one hand, and that the NA is neither qualified nor trained to fight them on the other.¹¹ On a regional level, the scenario assumes that Turkey intended to deploy HTS fighters to join the fighting in Libya. Since December 2019, Turkey has been deploying members of the NA factions, including Al Hamza, Sultan Murad, and Sultan Suleiman Shah, and Mu'tasim to fight alongside the Government of National Accord (GNA) against the General's Khalifa Haftar forces. Although the conditions of the deployment are still not publicly disclosed, local sources reported that each fighter received \$2,200 upon deployment in addition to a monthly salary of \$1,200.¹²

Although there have been several failed attempts to merge the SIG and SSG, SSG's failure to gain legitimacy as a government body in areas under its control may prompt HTS to accept the merger.¹³ The growing local protests calling for the dissolution of the SSG demonstrates the increasing dislike of the government and its inability to provide essential services. In addition to the ever-increasing public dissatisfaction, the government has failed to consolidate control over local councils (several local councils have issued separate statements announcing their administrative division from the SSG government).¹⁴ As a result, there are indications that HTS has begun to tolerate the SIG government. On 26 February, the SIG President, Abdul-Rahman Al-Mustafa, and the head of the National Coalition, Anas Al-Abdah, visited the frontlines in Idlib and later visited the SSG's Minister of Defense in the ministry's office in Idlib city.¹⁵

9 On 30 April, the SOHR reported that a total of 6,100 military vehicles had entered Idlib through Kafr Luseen since the signing of the 5 March agreement. According to the SOHR, the total number of Turkish soldiers in Idlib governorate has reached 10,300.

10 The commercial taxation of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing remains one of the greatest sources of income for HTS and the SSG – reportedly approximately \$3-5 million per month is generated through commercial traffic.

11 Humanitarian Access Team, '[Scenario Planning: Northwest Syria](#)' October 2019

12 Earlier this year, Hurras Ad-Din published a statement that HTS had invited them to be part of a unified military council which would oversee the reopening of the M4 and M5 transit routes. The group rejected the offer and implied its willingness to fight HTS to prevent such a compromise.

13 The 'Sons of Syria Initiative' was launched in November 2017 to merge the SSG and the SIG into one body. The SIG refused to "cooperate with any government linked to terrorism" pointing to SSG affiliation with HTS. In March 2019, discussions between HTS, FSA and the National Coalition aimed to merge the two governments and the military factions in northern Syria within one body. These discussions did not witness any progress.

14 Between 8 and 11 November, local councils of Atareb, Atareb subdistrict; Ariha, Ariha subdistrict; Ma'arrat An Nu'man, Ma'arrat An Nu'man subdistrict and Saraqab, Saraqab subdistrict announced their administrative defection from SSG in protest of HTS practices

15 On 5 November 2019, local protesters in Kafr Takharim town expelled the SSG's 'Zakat' delegation and HTS members. The incident led to armed confrontation between residents and HTS members, later resolved after a reconciliation meeting between community leaders and HTS members.

Indicators

- Increased statements by the Turkish government about its commitment to remove extremist groups from northwest Syria, including HTS.
- The completion of the Turkish power supply project to Idleb and the western countryside of Aleppo and the launching of new Turkish-funded infrastructure projects in the area demonstrating Turkish investment.
- Turkey becoming more involved in Libya's conflict and its decision to deploy additional troops.
- The frequent appearance of Syrian Interim Government officials in the Idleb and the western countryside of Aleppo.
- Significant progress in the safe deployment of the Turkish–Russian joint patrols along the M4 highway.
- Increase in the hostile rhetoric of Hurras Ad-Din (and other extremist groups) against HTS's tolerance towards Turkey's presence in the area, in conjunction with a new wave of defections from HTS towards the remaining extremist groups.

Humanitarian Impact

Should this scenario transpire, it will have a significant impact on local and international humanitarian organizations working in opposition-controlled Idleb and the western Aleppo countryside. This scenario predicts that the government resulting from the merger of the SSG and SIG will be under the direct administration of Turkey. As observed in communities falling under the control of the SIG in the northern Aleppo countryside, local humanitarian organizations, INGOs, and other NGOs are required to register with Turkish authorities. Cross-border programming administered by I/NGOs not registered in Turkey will be complicated, and humanitarian operations throughout the area will be increasingly subject to restrictive regulations imposed by Turkey. This not only impacts local humanitarian partners, many of whom are registered in Turkey, but equally applies to INGOs.

As in northern Aleppo, expanding Turkish influence in the opposition-held northwest will therefore likely imply the reduction of individual I/NGO funding for local humanitarian organizations, close scrutiny of money transfers, and the application of pressure on local governance bodies and local humanitarian organizations to increase coordination with Turkish humanitarian and development agencies such as AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) and IHH (Humanitarian Relief Foundation). Indeed, there have been reports that the Turkish government has increasingly sought to impede the use of informal money transfer systems by local humanitarian organizations, including hawala.

Scenario 2: The deradicalization of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the survival of the Syrian Salvation Government

Probability			X		
Impact	X				

This scenario assumes that the Turkish government and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have reached an understanding to remove reasons which could lead Russia and the Government of Syria (GoS) to launch future attacks in northwest Syria. In this scenario, HTS takes drastic steps to remove extremism from its members and reintroduce itself as a moderate local armed group, while it prioritizes the survival of the SSG in exchange for eliminating the remaining militant groups.

In this scenario, HTS announces the dissolution of itself as an independent armed group in northwest Syria, and creates a unified military council with others including Faylaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Ahrar, and Jish al-Ezza. This scenario assumes that most of the group's components will join the new military council and only a limited number of fighters will defect to join the more extremist groups in northwest Syria. After the formation of the unified military council, the council will launch a military attack to uproot these extremist groups (including Ansar Al-Islam, Jabhat Ansar Ad-Din, Ansar al-Tawheed, and Hurras Ad-Din). The likelihood of this scenario is moderate while the impact is assessed as low.

Context

There are many reasons that may lead HTS to prioritize the survival of the SSG over protecting its own ranks. One of the most important of these is that the SSG was originally conceived as the political branch of the Civil Service Administration (formerly the primary administrating body of HTS), and unlike HTS, has been able to avoid classification as a terrorist organization.¹⁶ Since its establishment in 2013, HTS has always aimed to provide a system of governance in the areas under its control.^{17,18} Since its founding, the SSG has absorbed income generating streams that were managed by HTS and its previous Civil Service Administration, including tax collection, border-crossing management, civil registration, and electricity provision.

Given the fact that the SSG relies heavily on the military presence of HTS to govern, HTS is likely to seek deradicalization rather than a permanent dissolution. Several indicators have emerged recently which show

¹⁶ US Department of State, 'Foreign Terrorist Organizations', [Updated] January 2020

¹⁷ Humanitarian Access Team, 'Consolidation of Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham’s Control in Opposition-Controlled Northwestern Syria' September 2017

¹⁸ Humanitarian Access Team, 'Consolidation of Salvation Government’s Control in Opposition-Controlled Northwestern Syria.' March 2019

this could well be a possibility; in March 2020 James Jeffrey, US special representative for Syria engagement, and US Ambassador Kelly Kraft visited IDP camps in northern Idlib through the Bab Al-Hawa crossing despite HTS presence and control of the border. The visit came after Jeffrey stated that HTS is focused on fighting the Assad government and had not been a threat at the international level.¹⁹ Jeffrey's statement coincided with the sudden appearance of HTS leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani in an interview in which he stated that despite the group's association with al-Qaeda in the early days, the group pledged not to use Syria as a launching pad for external operations and would only focus on fighting the "Syrian regime."²⁰

As it seeks to eliminate extremism, HTS is likely to initiate an attack on al-Qaeda's local branch in the area, Hurras Ad-Din. The two groups are expected to enter into an open conflict across Idlib governorate. The fighting is likely to start in Jisr-Ash-Shugur subdistrict in southwest Idlib and later spread across the largest urban centers in the southern, central, and western areas of Idlib governorate. Furthermore, the overall security situation in the Idlib area is likely to deteriorate significantly as the frequency of security incidents are likely to increase. This may include assassinations and explosions targeting the HTS-affiliated SSG buildings in Idlib city.

Indicators

- The implementation of Turkish-funded infrastructure projects in cooperation with the Syrian Salvation Government, demonstrating cooperation
- The issuance of statements by HTS stressing the necessity of establishing a unified military council in Idlib and the western countryside of Aleppo
- The emergence of a new initiative to unify military actors in Idlib and western Aleppo countryside.
- Increased statements stressing the independence of the SSG
- Increased appearance of HTS leader, Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani in local and foreign media agencies.
- The repeated appearance of foreign journalists and news reporters in HTS-controlled areas.
- The repeated appearance of Turkish and foreign politicians in HTS-controlled areas.
- Increased hostilities between HTS and Hurras Ad-Din.

Humanitarian Impact

This scenario produces moderate effects for both humanitarian access and internal displacement. In this scenario, the intense fighting between HTS and the remaining radical groups is likely to disrupt movement for humanitarian aid and commercial commodities, causing temporary delays or suspensions of regular assistance, and may result in a limited number of internal but temporary displacements from southern

¹⁹ In a press conference in early February 2020, the American envoy, James Jeffrey, stated that his country still classifies HTS on the terrorism list, however added: [HTS] "focuses on fighting the Assad regime and has not been a threat at the international level for a period of time."

²⁰ International Crisis Group, 'The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani', February 2020

Idleb. Once the fighting subsides, humanitarian actors are expected to resume operations in the area and IDPs are expected to return to their homes. Therefore, humanitarian and local partner organizations should redirect resources from southern and central Idleb and the western Aleppo countryside to areas adjacent to the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing as security incidents such as assassinations and explosions are expected to increase as fighting spreads across southern, central, and western Idleb governorate.

Stability in the region will likely encourage the SSG to strengthen its governance within the area. Although the government is expected to continue to avoid confrontation with humanitarian actors, the administrative decisions that it imposes on local councils may indirectly affect the work of humanitarian organizations. Therefore, humanitarian and local partner organizations should implement additional research and vetting procedures for partners, service providers, hawalas, and vendors that include contextual and relational assessments before engaging in defined financial transactions. Such measures will help to ensure that none of the individuals or organizations with which NGOs enter financial transactions are ineligible or prohibited by the US, UK, EU, UN, and other governments.

Scenario 3: The elimination of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham and the Syrian Salvation Government

Probability		X			
Impact					X

This scenario assumes that the Turkish government and Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) have failed to reach an understanding to ensure the full implementation of the 5 March ceasefire agreement. In this scenario, Turkey launches a military operation to remove factors preventing Russian and Government of Syria (GoS) attacks on opposition-held areas in northwest Syria.

This scenario assumes that Turkey will remove extremist groups from northwest Syria in two main stages: first, imposing an economic blockade on HTS and the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) and removing key figures in their leadership. The Bab Al-Hawa commercial crossing would be closed, and an assassination campaign targeting prominent military leaders from HTS and other armed groups launched. Second, the Turkish government launches a military campaign led by Turkish military forces with the participation of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (NA), targeting the locations of these extremist groups across the region.

Context

This scenario is reliant on Turkey's determination to maintain stability in northwest Syria through implementing the 5 March agreement and removing any reasons which could lead Russia and the Government of Syria (GoS) to launch future attacks on opposition-held areas. The Turkish government has already taken steps towards this; unlike previous ceasefire agreements, it has made provisions at both military and political levels to halt military campaigns to protect the 5 March agreement. From a military perspective, Turkey has launched a counter-military operation to stop the progress of the GoS, deployed Turkish military forces on the frontlines to combat GoS forces, and launched direct air attacks on GoS positions. On the political level, Turkey has protested Article 4 of the NATO Treaty and called on world powers to impose a no-fly zone over northwest Syria.²¹ Turkey has also requested the US to deploy a Patriot missile defense system on its southern border to deter Russian attacks in Idlib, and even modified internal policies to encourage the influx of refugees to Europe.^{22,23,24}

To prevent the GoS and Russia from advancing in the northwest is one aspect of gaining control – Turkey also has to remove existing extremist groups (including HTS). Imposing an economic blockade as the first stage is more likely than a full military offensive, as the NA is neither qualified nor trained to fight extremist groups without Turkish air support (which is unlikely to be deployed in heavily populated areas of northwest Syria).²⁵ Civilians in opposition-controlled areas depend on fuel products coming through the Bab Al-Hawa commercial crossing – any interruption to the supply would lead to a fuel crisis, increasing the price of transportation, commercial goods, basic commodities and the provision of services including water and electricity.²⁶ This would undermine HTS power in the region, as families would find it more difficult to meet their basic needs. The closure of the commercial crossing and the loss of HTS' largest source of income may also affect its ability to continue providing financial incentives to its members, which could lead to a number of defections in favor of the NA. The monthly salary of a HTS fighter ranges from just \$50 to \$100, however additional benefits include free access to basic services such as water, electricity, fuel, firewood, winter clothing, blankets and in some cases housing.²⁷

21 NATO, [Official text: The North Atlantic Treaty](#), April 1949

22 On 26 February, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a statement announcing that Turkey is allowing refugees to cross towards Europe. In its statement, the ministry said: "In the event that the situation in Idlib continues to worsen further, the movement of asylum seekers and migrants westward will continue". Turkish media sources reported that Turkish police, coast guard, and border security forces were told not to prevent Syrian refugees from crossing into Europe. Other reports indicate that the Turkish government provided transportation to more than 300 Syrian refugees to areas along the Greek border.

23 Under Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, any ally can request consultations whenever, in the opinion of any of them, their territorial integrity, political independence or security is threatened.

24 Patriot missile-defense systems is a long-range, all-altitude, all-weather air defense system to counter tactical ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and advanced aircraft.

25 Turkey has direct authority over the Syrian National Army, also known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), which includes at least 25,000 fighters, mostly Arabs and Turks. 70,000 soldiers constitute the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Idlib, which has recently joined the TFSA.

26 Humanitarian Access Team, ['The fuel sector in northwest Syria: Untangling the web for humanitarians.'](#) December 2019

27 Local sources reported that the monthly salary of an HTS combatant ranges from \$50 to \$100, while the salary of a combatant in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army ranges from \$100 to \$150.

Indicators

- Increased Russian demands against Turkish inability to remove extremist groups from the area.
- Significant increase in GoS statements suggesting military campaigns in Idlib.
- Turkish government issuing warnings or threats against HTS and other extremist groups' presence in the area.
- Sudden increase of Turkish military reinforcement convoys to their observation posts in the Idlib governorate and reports of Turkish military mobilization toward Bab Al-Hawa border crossing.
- Increased reports of flow of Turkish proxy fighters from northern Aleppo countryside towards the northern Idlib countryside.
- The frequent shutdown of Bab Al-Hawa border crossing from the Turkish side.
- A noticeable improvement in the relationship between HTS and Hurras Ad-Din radical group.
- HTS release of repeated statements indicating the group's intention to fight any actor that jeopardizes its existence
- HTS continues to obstruct the joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the M4 highway
- Increased assassinations of HTS personnel including notable military commanders, notorious clerics, and Internal Security Forces members.

Humanitarian Impact

This scenario is likely to have a high impact for both humanitarian access and internal displacement. During the first phase of this scenario, frequent closures of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing are expected to affect the availability and cost of goods, fuel and services across opposition-controlled northwest Syria. The fuel shortages across the area will lead to increasing the price of transportation, commercial goods, basic commodities such as bread, and the provision of services like water and electricity. While it is still difficult to predict the duration or the frequency of the border closures, it is unlikely that flow of humanitarian assistance will be interrupted.

In the second phase of this scenario, the intense fighting between Turkish forces and the NA on the one hand and HTS and the remaining extremist groups on the other is likely to disrupt movement for humanitarian aid and commercial commodities. This would cause temporary delays or suspensions of regular assistance and could result in internal but temporary displacements from southern Idlib. Once the fighting subsides, humanitarian actors are expected to resume operations in the area and IDPs are expected to return to their homes. Therefore, humanitarian and local partner organizations should redirect resources from southern and central Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside to areas adjacent to the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing as security incidents such as assassinations and explosions are expected to increase as the fighting spreads across southern, central, and western Idlib governorate.

CONTACT

Nicholas Bodanac

Humanitarian Access Team

nbodanac@mercycorps.org

The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. Successful humanitarian and development interventions require a nuanced and objective understanding of the human ecosystems in which these interventions occur. To this end, the HAT's most important function is to collect, triangulate, synthesize, analyze and operationalize disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly nimble, adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the Syrian conflict.

