

Counter-Terrorism Operation against Al Qaeda's Stronghold in Northern Syria: The Liberation of Idlib

By [Firas Samuri](#)

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The successful actions of the Syrian Arab Army led to the almost total liberation of the country from various terrorist groups. The only exception is Idlib province, where militants who refused to lay down weapons and join nationwide reconciliation were transported along their family members.

Currently, the key actors in the province are **Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) (around 16,000 fighters)** (formerly Al Nusra) who control the major part of the region, including the provincial capital, and Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing, located not far from the Turkish border; Falaq al-Rahman (around 6,000 fighters); Nusrat al-Islam (2,500 fighters); Jaysh Al-Izza (approximately 6,000 fighters), and Ahrar al-Sham (about 1,500 fighters). There are also a lot of foreign mercenaries from across the Middle East, Northern Africa, Asia, and CIS of up to several thousand persons.

According to different sources, from 50,000 to 100,000 militants remain in Idlib, armed with from 300 to 400 units of various armed vehicles. At the same time, they also armed with European-made assault rifles, heavy machine guns, mortars, ATGMs and, which repeatedly fell into the hands of the government forces after clashes with terrorists.

Nowadays, the last preparations are being made for the beginning of the counter-terrorist operation. Its success will allow the Syrian government to move towards a full-fledged political settlement of the crisis. In late August, Syria's Defense Minister General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub stated that Damascus is determined to recapture Idlib and clear it from terrorists as a result of a large-scale military operation or by political means.

Syria's Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva **Hussam al-Din Ala** claimed that Syria is determined to liberate Idlib from HTS and other affiliated groups and to return it to homeland like other regions liberated from terrorism.

It's worth noting that the first precondition for the liberation of Idlib was created earlier in the year when the Syrian army units established full control over Abu al-Duhur airbase and hence deprive the jihadists of the only one landing strip and the opportunity to receive arms and weapons from the western sponsors. At present, the elite Tiger Forces headed by the legendary commander Suheil Al-Hassan, the 4th Armored Division and the units of the Republican Guard, led by **Maher Assad**, the younger brother of Syrian leader have already

been deployed near the borders of the province.

Moreover, the former militants who joined the Syrians troops to take part in Idlib offensive. Around 400 former Jaysh al-Ababil militants went over to the government forces during the battle for the Eastern Ghouta and would be fighting along Tiger Forces.

Besides the open hostilities, the Syrian army uses proven methods, like dropping leaflets calling militants to lay down arms and surrender. Such tactics worked well during the liberation of Damascus suburbs and southern provinces when thousands of militants were amnestied and returned to peace.

The similar actions have already given positive results in Idlib province. According to a source in Syria's high command, around 15,000 militants and their family members will soon leave the region through the humanitarian corridor in Abu al-Duhur.

Despite all the efforts of the Western State to destabilise the situation in Idlib by publishing false news on upcoming chemical weapons provocation and providing the jihadists with arms and weapons, the Syrian authorities have all the necessary to liberate the province completely. The courage of the Syrian army, as well as the support of the true allies, will let them to clear the province, and its liberation is just a matter of time.

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