

## Video: Human Shields: Turkish Forces Suffer Casualties in Syrian Army Attack on Idlib

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Global Research, February 04, 2020

[South Front](#) 3 February 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)  
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*Turkey and the United States are employing active diplomatic, media and even limited military measures to contain the Syrian Army offensive against terrorists in Greater Idlib.*

On January 31, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened the Damascus government with a military action if the Syrian Army does not stop its anti-terrorism operation in Idlib. The official Turkish rhetoric says that the operation against rebels (i.e. al-Qaeda—linked radicals) put the region on the brink of the humanitarian crisis and displaced hundreds of thousands people that started fleeing to Turkey. This stance corresponds with the position of the US State Department that also accused the Assad government and its allies of violating the ceasefire regime and causing civilian casualties. Both Ankara and Washington did not address the fact that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other groups linked to al-Qaeda were excluded from all ceasefire deals that have ever been reached on the situation in Idlib. Turkey and the US are not interested in the defeat of terrorists by the Syrian Army because this would strengthen the positions of the Damascus government. At the same time, they contributed no efforts to defeat al-Qaeda by themselves.

On February 1 and 2, the Turkish military established several positions near the militant-held town of Saraqib, located on the crossroad of the M4 and M5 highway. On February 2, Turkish troops and equipment arrived in Idlib city. Local sources say that a Turkish observation post will soon be established there. These observation posts are intended to shield these key areas from the Syrian Army offensive into the region. The irony of the move is that both these towns, as well as most of Idlib province, are controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham that Ankara officially considers a terrorist group. This may appear to be not enough taking into account the scale of clashes between al-Qaeda and pro-Damascus forces.

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On January 31 and February 1, government forces liberated over 8 villages, including Ain al-Ban, Muqah and Amiriyah, in southeastern Idlib. However, the army did not attack Saraqib and the main hot point moved to Aleppo.

On January 31, the army cleared the town of Rajm Judran, Khirbat Kharas and Tulul al-Hazmr, al-Khalidya from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham forces in western Aleppo. At least 17 militants were captured and a dozen of others were killed in the clashes. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham responded to this advance with a fierce counter-attack involving suicide bombers. The first suicide bombing took place in al-Sahafyeen. Then, the area was recaptured by militants.

On February 1 and 2, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham continued attacking army positions reportedly recapturing the area of al-Zahraa. At least 3 suicide bombers were employed to break the army defense. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham leader Abu Mohamad al-Julani personally arrived on the frontline in order to motivate the so-called moderate opposition. Despite these efforts, the army backed up by Russian air power and special forces contained the militant attack, and even liberated Humayra and Halisah. Pro-militant sources reported that 4 Russian service members were killed during the February 1 clashes. If these claims are confirmed, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leadership will likely try to exploit this to draw attention of militants' supporters from the recent military setbacks.

An escalation also took place near al-Bab, where Turkish-backed forces attacked positions of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Army on February 1. The main clashes took place at Kharabishah, Tell Rahhal and the Sha'alah RADAR Base. Early on February 2, five airstrikes by unknown warplanes hit positions of Turkish proxies in al-Bab. After this no clashes erupted in the area.

Pro-militant sources release multiple contradictory reports on the supposed army casualties in Aleppo and Idlib clashes. Summing up them, militants claim that over 150 soldiers were killed and at least 15 units of military equipment were destroyed. The Syrian side provides no official reports on militant casualties. Photos and videos from the ground show tens of vehicles belonging to militants that had been captured or destroyed by the army.

If the situation continues escalating and further, the ongoing battle may become Aleppo 2.0 for foreign-backed radical groups. The arrival of al-Julani to the frontline is a rare development showing the importance of the ongoing clashes. If militants fail to break the army defense in Aleppo and continue losing ground west and southwest of the city, government forces could develop advance along the M5 highway and reach Saraqib from the northern direction. In this case, Turkish observation posts will not help them to keep control of this town. The liberation of Saraqib will mark the total collapse of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's defense. The road on Idlib city will be opened.

On February 3, the Turkish Defense Ministry reported that at least 6 Turkish personnel were killed and 7 others were injured in a Syrian Army shelling in the Idlib zone. According to the defense ministry, Turkish forces responded with attacks on Syrian positions. President Erdogan said that between 30 and 35 Syrian soldiers were killed. Ankara calls the incident a 'treacherous attack', forgetting to note that it itself put own troops in a grave danger by using them as human shields to protect al-Qaeda.

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