

## Video: Caliphate in Miniature: Rift Between Turkey and Al-Qaeda in Idlib

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*In the second half of April and early May, the Syrian province of Idlib became the epicenter of a military political drama developing between Turkish forces and their al-Qaeda-linked allies.*

The escalated tensions even led to a military incident on the M4 highway, near the town of Nayrab, when the Turkish Army and militant groups directly controlled by Ankara clashed with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its supporters. At least 11 members and supporters of the al-Qaeda-linked group were killed by live fire from Turkish troops and strikes by Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicles.

This incident happened during a failed attempt to remove the camp of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham supporters, which had been established to block the highway and prevent the movement of joint Russian-Turkish patrols in the area. The creation of a security zone along the M4 highway, the withdrawal of radical militant groups from the zone and joint patrols in the area were among the key provisions of the Idlib ceasefire deal reached by the Turkish and Russian presidents in Moscow on March 5. Since the start of the implementation of the deal, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkistan Islamic Party and other radical groups have been working to sabotage them. Seven joint Russian-Turkish patrols took place in a small area between Saraqib and Nayrab, as the situation in southeastern Idlib was moving closer to conditions in which the resumption of full-scale open military hostilities there would become inevitable. The number of ceasefire violations increased and both the Syrian Army and Idlib radicals were blaming each other for the apparent collapse of the de-escalation deal.

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However, by May 5, the situation had changed. The protest camp near Nayrab disappeared. The Russian Military Police and the Turkish Army held their first extended joint patrol along the M4 highway passing the location of the former camp. On May 7, the sides held their second extended patrol, which became the longest one since the signing of the ceasefire deal in March. For the first time, the Russian Military Police reached the eastern entrance to the town of Ariha. These extended patrols became an important breakthrough in Turkish-Russian cooperation over the situation in southeastern Idlib despite the fact that the security zone agreement was still far from its full implementation.

The interesting fact is that this step forward was not due to Ankara's anti-terrorist efforts in Greater Idlib, but came as a result of a deal reached by Turkey and the leadership of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The terrorist group de-blocked the M4 near Nayrab. In turn, Turkey

reportedly agreed not to oppose Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's decision to open a commercial crossing between the militant-held part of Idlib in western Aleppo near Maaret Elnaasan. Earlier, Ankara and militant groups directly controlled by it had sabotaged this initiative. Turkey seeks to control all economic and social life in northwestern Syria. Meanwhile, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham sees the commercial activity between Greater Idlib and the rest of Syria as an important source of income through various fees and trafficking of goods.

Neither Turkey nor Hayat Tahrir al-Sham are interested in military operations by Syria, Russia and Iran in Idlib. Therefore, in face of the threat of the new Syrian Army advance and the resumption of the Russian air bombing campaign, they reached a tactical agreement to prevent this scenario. However, this did not annihilate their mid- and long-term contradictions.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham enjoys the direct protection of the Turkish Armed Forces and indirectly receives financial support from Ankara. But the group is too large and too influential to be an ordinary Turkish puppet. In fact, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham leadership and its close allies are working to turn Greater Idlib into their own ISIS-style emirate. While publicly they make loud statements about the goals of the so-called Syrian revolution and the need to 'liberate' Damascus from the 'bloody Assad regime', in fact, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has long since abandoned any plans of major expansion through direct attacks on the Syrian Army. They have been tightening their military, security and political grip over the militant-held part of Greater Idlib. If the situation develops in this direction, Idlib will have every chance of becoming a foothold for international terrorist groups operating all around the world, primarily in Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East. A network of training camps, weapon trafficking and financial flows for terrorist organizations recruiting new members and planning terrorist operations will all contribute to the growing influence and wealth of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Some global and regional players would be happy to use this opportunity to pursue their own geopolitical goals.

Turkey, which controls the border and is a key regional player keeping ties with Idlib militant groups, may become one of the main beneficiaries of this scenario and the Erdogan government could have agreed on this if the world were the same as it was back in 2011. However it is not.

The weakening of US influence in the Middle East, the shrinking global economy, the fragmentation of global markets and the collapse of the remote chance of Turkey joining the European Union as well as Turkey's own diplomatic and political pretensions towards regional leadership turned Moscow into its key economic, diplomatic and security partner. Therefore, Ankara is forced to consult the interests of Moscow in its policy because without the military technological, diplomatic and economic cooperation with Russia Turkey has no chances to turn its own geopolitical ambitions into reality.

The current agreement between Turkey and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is rather a result of the tactical convergence of interests rather than a solid alliance. Even if they are able to prevent the resumption of the Syrian Army advance on Idlib, the tensions between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Turkey will increase because they have different strategic interests. It is likely that within the next half year, Ankara will increase pressure on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and their allies in order to undermine their influence and bring most of the political, administrative and military influence in the Greater Idlib region to ethnic Turks and representatives of groups directly controlled by Ankara.

All of this would be done under the pretext of restoring peace and stability as well as securing democratic elections to form the 'legitimate' local authorities. In the event of success, Turkey will consolidate control over northwestern Syria and form a controlled group of persons that will represent the militant-held area in negotiations with the Damascus government. This group must have no links to radicals. The goals of these possible negotiations are to reach a peace agreement and guarantee a wide autonomy for the militant-held part of northwestern Syria in the framework of the comprehensive agreement between Ankara and Damascus. The characteristics of this autonomy will depend on the military political situation in the country at that moment. However there is no doubt that control of the Syrian-Turkish border will be among the key points of contradictions.

On the other hand, Ankara and Damascus may reach no comprehensive agreement because of the complicated military political situation in Syria. This could happen if the security situation deteriorates in the government-controlled part of Syria and Damascus starts losing control over particular regions; for example, due to the increasing activity of ISIS. In these conditions, Ankara will return to the idea of a direct annexation of the northwestern part of Syria. It will justify this move by the need to protect civilians and claiming that Damascus is not able to effectively battle the international terrorism.

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