

# A Turkish Perspective on Syria - Part II: **Silence Before the Storm**

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## 1. Introduction

While recent developments that took place in Syria in the ten months following the publication of our first report, titled "[A Turkish Perspective on Syria](#)" (September 2020), have attracted relatively little public attention in Turkey, and inadequate coverage in the media (barring some isolated incidents, including YPG's infiltration attempts into the Euphrates Shield Region, harassing fires, suicide attacks with car bombs and motorcycles, attacks with IEDs), they nonetheless indicate some important changes and contractions in Ankara's position towards the region.

It may be recalled that in the conclusion part of our report (Appendix: 1), Russia was identified as the most important actor in resolving the problem that seems to stem, for the large part, from Turkey's wishes and preferences in Idlib, and that by keeping various disagreements in separate compartments, Turkey and Russia appeared keen to avoid a catharsis in their bilateral relations. Our report also concluded that solving the Idlib problem would not be limited to Syria only.

Further highlighted in the report was the fact that several vexed issues, including but not limited to: Turkey's close contact with the HTS (even though there has been some distancing now); competing interests in Libya; Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's remarks during his visit to (Greek) Cyprus, which opened up for discussion the Turkish guarantees on the island (stemming from the London and Zurich agreements) to support the Greek Cypriot arguments; Deputy Foreign Minister Borisov's statement on the signing of contracts between Russian energy companies and the Syrian government by reaching an agreement on oil exploration in the Mediterranean; Russia's manoeuvre that resulted in the indirect inclusion of the PYD in the Geneva talks; and Turkey's support for the Syrian National Army, were all hanging over the relations between Ankara and Moscow like the sword of Damocles in relation to Syria in general and in Idlib in particular.

And yet, considering the sword metaphor; the state of the bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow, but also the relations of the other players on the Syrian chessboard, notably the United States, with Turkey, and their competing designs regarding the future of Syria, do not offer the Kremlin and Ankara with a sword that can cut the apparent Gordian's knot.

Moreover, various areas of disagreement between Ankara and Moscow, which were highlighted in our September report and briefly mentioned above, are now exacerbated further with the addition of new disagreements including those over Ukraine, Crimea, Karabakh, the S-400 missile systems, drones exported by Turkey (to Ukraine, Poland and Azerbaijan), the decision taken at the NATO Leaders Summit in Brussels relating to the Black Sea security and Montreux debates, and the fact that the election results in Syria were not recognized by Turkey.

The conclusion part of our report (Appendix: 2) also stressed that Turkey was faced with an urgent task to determine its course of action and policy in view of the US presence in the west of Syria, which became permanent through cooperation with the PYD, and in the event that the PYD is legitimized in the post-conflict restructuring process (de facto) or is integrated into the new administration following the possible transformation of the Syrian state into a federal structure (de jure).

One of the two main problems which faces Turkey in Syria, that is becoming more pressing with each passing day, relates to its support of various groups under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army that both the Assad regime and Russia consider terrorists, and the future status of these groups in Syria. The other, and more distant one relates to the normalization process. In this regard, our report also highlighted several suggestions in relation to tackling threats that the YPG would pose to Turkey's

national security and how to fill the gap that may arise, when Turkish withdrawal from the areas it now controls enters the agenda.

Since a significant part of the problems that were highlighted in our report persist throughout Syria and have become more diversified and aggravated by the recent developments, they were summarized above in order to offer the reader a more thorough evaluation and comparison between the recent past and the current situation.

Before looking at the current situation in more detail below, it is important to note several important developments that have taken place since September. In this regard, the joint patrols carried out by the Turkish and Russian troops in Idlib were initially suspended on August 13, (Maria Zakharova - briefing on August 13, 2020<sup>1</sup>) and ended as of August 25, 2020, followed by the cessation of joint patrols in the Peace Shield region. In the meantime, a certain part of the M4 highway connecting Aleppo to Latakia, which is of vital importance for Russia, remains under the control of opposition groups (*Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - Hurras al Din* - Turkistan Islamic Party – *Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani*), and PYD's presence continues in Tell Rifaat and Manbij, which are under the control of Russian forces. Moreover, all the observation posts that Turkey had established in Idlib pursuant to the Astana agreements (March 5) have been evacuated, and the existing troops, equipment and weapon systems are relocated to the temporary base areas dotted around to the south and southwest of Idlib.

## 2. Latest Situation in Idlib

As it is well-known, seven of these observation posts established by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) in Idlib were in the regime region as a result of the forward operation of the Syrian army, and the Zawiya Observation Post was right on the border.

The main purpose of the observation posts established by the TAF in accordance with the Astana agreements was to prevent clashes between the parties (i.e., the Syrian Army and the Armed Opposition Groups), but this mission had lost its functionality due to the fact that seven stations remained in the regime zone.

This situation also meant that, providing logistical support to the observation posts in the regime region and maintaining the needed supply lines for the exchange of troops required coordination with Russia, and Russia's insistent demands for the posts to be evacuated by the TAF, and taking into account the risks these difficulties caused, Turkey ultimately decided to evacuate all its posts, starting with the ones remaining in the regime's zone.

Another important reason for taking this decision is underlined in the statement of the Turkish Ministry of National Defense issued by in their twitter account, on September 16, 2020, stating that the observation post No. 7 in Tell Tukan was attacked by so called civilian groups under Syrian government's orders.<sup>2</sup>

The same statement also pointed out that there were preparations for subsequent attacks on the observation stations and that these were to be carried out by the regime militias (as opposed to HTS and the YPG, which lacked the needed manpower in the said areas, the statement said) and with Russian blessing.

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1 „Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, August 13, 2020“ ([https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4284195](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4284195))

2 Turkish Ministry of National Defence (@tcsavunma) September 16, 2020

Russia's position regarding Turkish posts were also confirmed by the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya*, reporting that Russia actively stopped some Turkish observation posts from being supplied. In a similar vein, BBC Turkish service, citing the Russian press, reported that in the meetings held between Russian and Turkish officials on September 15-16, 2020, Moscow brought to the table its demand for some observation posts to be evacuated, and that no deal was reached because the conditions put forward by Ankara were not accepted.

The decision to withdraw from the observation posts in Idlib, though interpreted by some sources as a concession, or a weakness, can be considered a pragmatic move, considering the impossibility of maintaining the existence of the stations under the current conditions.

On the other hand, Turkey's initial reluctance to withdraw from these posts and strong messages to the contrary, despite knowing that they had lost their functionality after Syria took the south of Idlib and the M5 highway, can be explained with a temptation to hold onto them as a bargaining chip for as long as possible. As a matter of fact, shortly after the evacuation of the said observation posts, Turkey has established two new temporary base areas in the south of Idlib on Qoqfin Hill, two in *Jabal al-Zawiya* and one in *Jabal al-Arba'in*.

The following section looks at various groups in Idlib whose names were relatively unknown so far, and that had refrained from targeting Turkish presence in the area but appear to have recently given up this stance.

### **3. New Groups in Idlib**

#### **Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani**

The first attack of this relatively little-known rebel group took place on 16 June 2020 in Idlib with an improvised explosive device (IED) on the Turkish-Russian joint military patrol. This attack was followed on 14 July 2020 by a suicide car bomb attack that injured three Russian soldiers, and another attack targeting a Turkish armoured vehicle on patrol duty on 17 August. Subsequently, those familiar with *Hurras al-Din's* actions around the M4 were introduced to *Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani*, a group founded by a Chechen faction whose name was circulating in a video that circulated right after this attack as the *al-Shishanis*. The group also targeted *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, which it described as "apostate" with reference to a jihadist discourse, along with Russia and Turkey.

In the video released by *Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani* on July 14, Russian soldiers are described as "crusaders", while Turkish soldiers and the HTS members who cooperate with them are attacked for being "Apostates".

*Kata'ib Khattab al-Shishani* was founded and led by Abu Omar al-Shishani (born, Tarkhan Taymurazovic Batirashvili), born in 1986, of Chechen origin, who came to Syria from Pankisi region of Georgia in 2012 via Istanbul. He was injured during a US air strike on 4 March 2016 and died from his injuries on March 14.

Abu Omar al-Shishani worked together with another Chechen origin jihadist Sayfullah Shishani, who founded the organization known as the *Muhajirin wa-Ansar* in Syria and acted under allegiance to Abu Muhammad al-Jolani (al-Nusra) and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ISIS). It is also known that Sayfullah Shishani was the emir (commander) of a group called the Islamic Caliphate Army.

Radical armed groups (except the PYD/YPG, ISIS and the *Hurras al-Din*) while raising strong criticism from time to time, usually avoid openly attacking the Turkish troops stationed in Syria, but the attack carried

out by the *Khattab al-Shishani* Brigade on a joint patrol on the M4 highway, directly targeting Turkish troops and vehicles may nonetheless indicate an important change in fact that deserves attention.

This may also be the case for the HTS. Indeed, at a meeting in February 2020, one of the HTS's hardliner leaders, Abu al-Fath Yahya al-Farghali, reportedly described the Turkish army as an 'infidel force' claiming later in a statement in March 2020 that the Operation Euphrates Shield was an invasion." He added that they would fight any "occupation" because they don't "expend their blood to replace one occupier with another."

But a closer look at three other relatively unknown groups that have recently attacked Turkish troops, is needed to better ascertain such changes in position among these groups toward Turkey.

### **Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron**

The first of these groups calls itself the *Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron*. Their first attack was carried out with a car bomb, targeting the Turkish base located near the village of Sallet az Zuhur in the Hama countryside. The same group made a second attack on the Turkish base in the village of Ram Hamdan on December 7, 2020, followed by an attack on the Turkish unit near the village of Maarrat Misrin in the north of Idlib on December 31.

A statement released by the group after the attack read that: "*Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron* units targeted the Turkish-NATO army convoy on the main supply road in Idlib-Sarmada, near the village of Maarrat Misrin, in the north of Idlib, on Wednesday evening, with an IED."

Another statement on January 4, 2021 released by "*Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron*", declared that the group targeted a Turkish military convoy near the village of Kafraya in the north of Idlib. A further statement released on the same day added that Turkish troops in charge of protecting the convoy were attacked in a landmine blast near Kafraya.

On January 16, 2021, the same group claimed in a statement that a sniper attack was carried out against Turkish soldiers in the north of Idlib. The statement read: "Our sniper team attacked the NATO-Turkish army headquarters in the village of Batabo with thermal sniper systems on Saturday evening. Three people were shot in the attack." This was later confirmed by independent sources in Syria that three Turkish soldiers were injured in the attack.

Another sniper attack was carried out in the town of Binnish in the eastern countryside of Idlib on the evening of January 25 which, the group claimed, was aimed at avenging the person who was crushed by an armoured vehicle belonging to the TAF in Kafr Lusin.

Announcing that on February 24, 2021, a Turkish military convoy was attacked with a IED in the Ma'arrat Misrin region in the north of Idlib, the group reported that another Turkish convoy was targeted near the Idlib centre on March 13. The group, which also circulated the footage from the attack, claimed that it was carried out to avenge a Syrian boy named "Ahmed Yasir al-Abid", who died as a result of fire opened by Turkish soldiers. The group which attacked an oil tanker belonging to the Turkish Armed Forces with an IED near the industrial zone of Idlib on March 15, also circulated the footage from this attack.

The subsequent attacks which took place on 23 March, 8, 15, 28 April 2021 in Jabal Zawiya, Al Corniche, Matoumah respectively, against the Turkish troops and convoys which the group describes as the *Jaish al-Sawwar* or "Pagans Army" have been carried out in the city centre and countryside of Idlib.

In one of its statements, *Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron* directly targets Russian and Turkish troops, claiming that: "And we say to them that the lands of Damascus have rebelled against you, O' enemies of Allah. We will not allow you to extinguish the Jihad on the land of Damascus." Such expressions not only reveal the jihadist ideology of the group, but also evokes its commitment to ISIS.

## Abdullah bin Unais Group

It is thought that the group, which proclaimed itself in Idlib on March 20, 2021, is linked to the *Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq* Squadron and the *al-Shishanis* or is a group organized by one of these groups under a different name.

In a statement following its first ever attack, against the HTS (the dominant power in Idlib), the Unais Group claimed: “we warn those who join this apostate group (HTS). This group is in war and will wage jihad against all those who have harmed Muslims, handed over the battlefield to its apostate friends (read TAF), abandoned sharia, and all other invaders who sold their religion [...] to drive them out of these lands”. While HTS is identified as the primary target, others that the HTS cooperates (including the TAF) are also included in the same category of “apostates” and “invaders”.

### at-Talia al-Mujahid:

The group which calls itself at-Talia al-Mujahid (“Leading Jihadist”), has several similarities with another (now dormant) group al-Tali`a al-Muqatila that was founded by Marwan Haddad and Adnan Ukla against the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. Though there is scant information regarding its leadership and organizational structure, it is affiliated with the ISIS ideology.

## 4. New Groups and ISIS

The fact that all these groups named above are radical jihadists with ties to ISIS/Al Nusra, and that they use a common language in their statements and are based in Idlib further highlights the need for a sound evaluation on their status, ideology, capabilities, and future course of action.

In other words, the targeting of Turkish and Russian forces and the HTS by these obscure groups that emerged in the past year in Idlib, their aims and connections, if any, are closely related to the future of Syria in general, and Turkey's future presence in the country, in particular.

It can be that these groups may have been formed by those who broke ranks with the existing jihadist groups who do not want to confront Turkey directly, or that they are terrorist cells affiliated with ISIS/Al Nusra, which often use front/dummy names, as terrorist organizations often do, in order not to turn themselves into targets.

Another strong possibility is that ISIS members, who were held in camps and prisons under the control of YPG/PKK in north-eastern Syria, estimated to be in their thousands according to various sources, moved to Idlib after they were released, joined the dormant ISIS cells and begun their operations under various names.

Indeed, a statement released by the Syrian Democratic Council (affiliated with the YPG) on October 5, 2020, noted that 25,000 Syrians in al-Hol camp would be released in accordance with a general amnesty. As a matter of fact, 631 people from a camp in the Qamishli region and 290 people from the al-Hol camp on October 19 were released and were handed over to the “Raqqqa Civilian Council” established by the YPG in Raqqqa.

According to various sources (among them, the Voice of America, Syrian Democratic Council, ORSAM, Institute for the Study of War, Washington Institute, Centcom)<sup>3</sup>, there are more than 10 refugee camps

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<sup>3</sup> “YPG/PKK releases Daesh/ISIS terrorists in NE Syria”, Anadolu Agency, 6 January 2020, (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/ypg-pkk-releases-daesh-isis-terrorists-in-ne-syria/1693698>)

and more than 20 prisons in the areas under the control of the YPG. ISIS members and their families (here, it should be noted that members of radical religious organizations take their families with them wherever they go and continue to live together. Indeed, Baghdadi and Osama bin Laden were with their families when they came under attack), together with Syrians fleeing the conflicts and approximately 2,000 foreign fighters who were not accepted into their country are kept together in al-Hol and Roj camps in the YPG region. It is stated that the al-Hol camp hosts 65-73,000 people.

As a result of the YPG's incompetence or connivance, the al-Hol camp especially in the last two years has come to be known as the "ISIS incubator" and has turned into a base where those under the age of 18 are indoctrinated with jihadist ideology.

And while the 25,000 people would be released by the YPG within the scope of the general amnesty, the exact figures on how many people have been released and how many of them are ISIS members remain unknown.

However, what is clear is that starting with the days following the release of many ISIS members, new groups have emerged in Idlib, and attacks on the HTS (that cooperates with Turkey and described as relatively moderate), Turkish, and Russian forces have intensified.

It can be recalled that the attacks on Turkish targets by the new groups started in December 2020, intensifying in January and February 2021, and reaching their peak in March and April.

In the action graph, the upward curve correlates with the time required for the released ISIS members to move to Idlib, organize themselves by joining the dormant cells, developing their action capacity, and obtaining logistical support. The fact that the new groups use ISIS rhetoric in their discourse also strengthens the probability that they are affiliated with ISIS, and that ISIS is indeed behind their actions and operations.

It is important to stress too that ISIS fighters, who were released from the al-Hol refugee camp by the PYD, not only create new threats and dangers for Syria, but the same concerns also apply for the European countries.

Indeed, as Hans-Jakob Schindler, director of the Counter Extremism Project, emphasised in his statement in October 2020 some of the refugees released from the camps may want to move to European countries and that while there were a significant number of non-radical refugees in the al-Hol camp in Syria, "there is a significant [number] of Syrians in al-Hol who did not de-radicalize — if anything they re-radicalized and will come out with a new furor in their ideological thinking [...] this would pose a major threat to Europe."

At the information meeting held in Moscow on October 22, 2020, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova noted as:<sup>4</sup>

*"Last week's decision by the self-proclaimed autonomous administration of North and East Syria to release about 600 ISIS fighters from prisons gives rise to many questions. Obviously, the Kurds could not make this decision without U.S. prompting.*

*The dangerous consequences of this hard-to-explain move were revealed shortly afterward. There are incoming reports of the stepped-up activities of the Islamist radicals that are penetrating regions controlled by the lawful Syrian authorities and engage in local armed clashes with the Syrian military."*

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4 „Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, August 13, 2020“ ([https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4401503](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4401503))



US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., at a press conference held on February 8, 2021, gave the following answer to a question about ISIS militants imprisoned in camps and prisons in the SDF region:<sup>5</sup>

*"I am also deeply concerned about two long-term challenges to stability that are products of the D-ISIS fight. The first is the substantial number of ISIS fighters, including third country nationals, detained in SDF-run detention centres [...]"*

*Today, the SDF detains approximately 10.000 ISIS fighters, including approximately 2.000 foreign fighters in more than two dozen makeshift detention centres across northeast Syria [...]"*

*I'll use the al-Hol camp in Syria to provide an example. As of last month, about 62.000 people, mostly women and children, were living in the al-Hol camp under difficult, even dangerous conditions [...]"*

*The longer-term risk is the systemic indoctrination of this population to ISIS's ideology. This is an alarming development, with potentially generational implications."*

As it can be seen from the statement, while CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie voiced his concern over the indoctrination of ISIS members held in camps in north-eastern Syria, he appears to indirectly support the SDF's action by not mentioning the dangers of the uncontrolled release of ISIS members. More remarkably, he suggests that releases should be accelerated, emphasizing the squalid and dangerous living conditions in the camps.

Nonetheless, Zakharova's announcement to the press of the reports that the released ISIS militants had crossed into the regions controlled by the regime seems to confirm the suggested link between the ISIS and the new groups that have recently emerged in Idlib.

An important point in Zakharova's statement is its emphasis of the fact that the release of ISIS militants by the PYD could not have taken place without consent from the United States and McKenzie's statement regarding the need for speeding up these releases.

Considering that a renewed and increased danger of ISIS in Idlib, which is already a ticking time bomb in terms of the current balance of power, will create the pretext for the United States to justify its long-term presence in Syria under the guise of the D-ISIS fight, Zakharova's informed statement appears more noteworthy.

On the other hand, the anti-Turkish rhetoric of the Salafi jihadist groups together with ISIS, conceiving Turkey as "pagan", "anti-Islamic", "blasphemous" and "apostate" is a clear sign which confirms the strong opposition of these group to Turkey.

While the diverging views of the Chechen jihadists towards Turkey had in the past kept these groups away from anti-Turkish actions, the loss of the control of the M4 highway connecting Aleppo to Latakia to Syria and Russia — synonymous with the collapse of the jihadist front in Syria — seems to have emerged as a reason for the change in their attitudes toward Turkey in the face of an existential dilemma.

Another reason supporting this change of attitude is that the HTS, which controls a large part of the city centre and countryside in Idlib, fought against the "Rouse the Believers Operations Room" (formed by such radical groups as *Jabhat Ansar al Din*, *Tansiqyet al-Jihad*, *Ansar al-Islam*, *al-Mukatilin al-Ansar*, *Hurras al Din*) with Turkish support.

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<sup>5</sup> "General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. Middle East Institute Engagement Feb. 8, 2021" (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2497526/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-middle-east-institute-engagement-feb-8-2021/>)

## 5. Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)

It is well-known that Turkey, reluctant to directly confront the jihadist groups that it has promised to eliminate pursuant to the Moscow and Sochi agreements, has so far tried to keep this promise through the HTS. But the fact that the HTS is considered a terrorist organisation not only by Russia and Syria but also the UN, has created a serious dilemma for Ankara which has consistently argued that the group (that is now faced with the jihadist backlash) as “moderate and reasonable”.

While the HTS has been loosening its ties with Turkey in recent days because of pressure from Russia, the Syrian army and the radical groups named above, it nonetheless continues to feel the need to remain pragmatic in the face of the strong and deterring presence of the TAF in Idlib. At the same time, and in a more political vein, the group also feels the need to maintain its ties with Ankara in order to remain a relevant actor in Syria's future that the Turkish support, not least in terms of the revenues it receives from the border crossing points it is allowed to control.

In terms of rhetoric too, the HTS has undergone a serious transformation in recent years, moving away from the jihadist discourse it subscribed to in the past, and adopting a moderate rhetoric in its statements.

This attitude can be summarised as a new policy that, in addition to its military power, prioritizes the political direction and characteristics of the HTS, in order to consolidate the segments that support it, but also to promote to other, external actors present in Syria, especially the USA and Russia, its new, moderate identity, to gain political and societal legitimacy.

In February 2020, the then US Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey's statement that the HTS did not pose an international threat, that they were defending themselves and that they were a patriotic opposition group, and the US's attacks on the anti-HTS *Hurras al-Din* leaders, were the result of attempts in this direction. Although there are other reasons, they nonetheless show that HTS's new identity was 'bought' and supported by America.

As a matter of fact, Ambassador Jeffrey's response to a question about Idlib and the HTS at a press conference he held in Washington on February 20, 2020, was a clear indication of this renewed interest regarding the HTS on the part of the US.<sup>6</sup>

As Jeffrey put it: “[...] in terms of HTS, the HTS has not - we have not seen them planning or carrying out international terrorism attacks. We have seen them focusing on basically maintaining their position in Idlib [...] Basically, they're on the defensive, they're just sitting there.”

And in another meeting, 5 days before this statement on February 15, 2020, Ambassador Jeffrey said the following:

*“We recognize that there are terrorist groups in Idlib. There is also a very large group, the al-Nusra or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham group, HTS, that is an al-Qaida offshoot. It is considered a terrorist organization, but it is primarily focused on fighting the Assad regime. It itself claims - we haven't accepted yet, but they do claim to be patriotic opposition fighters, not terrorists. We have not seen them generate, for example, international threats.”*

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<sup>6</sup> “Ambassador James Jeffrey on the Situation in Syria, Special Briefing” February 20, 2020 (<https://2017-2021.state.gov/ambassador-james-jeffrey-on-the-situation-in-syria/index.html>)

Considering that the US is seeking groups that will cooperate with it in Idlib, and its relations with the *Nour al-Din al-Zenki* Movement and the *Faylaq al-Sham* in the past, Jeffrey's exoneration, and efforts to legitimise the HTS are understandable.

It can be recalled that, a group, including high-ranking members of the al-Qaeda-linked *Hurras al-Din* and some tribal leaders, was hit by a UAV (reaper) attack on 22 October 2020 at 22.20 while they were meeting in the village of Jakara, Salkin region of Idlib. According to the statements released by CENTCOM on 24 October 2020 and SOHR on 24 October 2020, 17 jihadists 11 of whom were commanders, and 5 civilians were killed in the attack.

This attack which followed Jeffrey's statement and targeted *Hurras al-Din*, a group that defies HTS's authority, can be seen as another sign of indirect support. It is noteworthy too, however, that the attack was carried out with a drone despite the Russian forces controlling Idlib airspace, which does raise important questions. The first of these relates to whether there are some gaps in Russia's radar network that controls the Idlib airspace, and the second is whether Russia, which is at least as much against the *Hurras al-Din* as the United States, if not more so, deliberately turned a blind eye on the attack.

It should be clear that the recent rebranding and transformation of the HTS, which was categorized as a terrorist organization by the UN in 2018, relates to the group's desire of being removed from the list of terrorist organizations, and its survival, to be able to play a role in Syria's future as a key, local actor.

As a matter of fact, HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani's frequent visits to refugee camps and powerful tribal leaders in Idlib recently, and his frequent meetings with members of the press for interviews and briefings, his Lebanese Hezbollah-inspired public displays of distributing food and other necessities to locals can also be considered as a marketing strategy to portray the image of a political leader, as opposed to the leader of a terrorist organization.

However, despite these signs of moderation in recent months, the findings of the report, prepared by the UNSC's "Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team", published on February 3, 2021, and covering the second half of 2020 are worrying. The report underlined that "HTS has a monopoly in the import and distribution of gasoline and diesel and has a monthly income of 1 million dollars through a front company called Watad Petroleum, based in Bab al Hawa (the border gate on the Syrian side of Cilvegözü), which is thought to be linked to Al-Culani. According to the report, Al-Culani also supervised the distribution of humanitarian aid in Idlib through an organization called *Maktab Sho'oun Al-Munathamat*, and prevented aid from reaching oppositional groups, seizing it from time to time to distribute it to those close to him, and collected taxes from it.

Considering the latest developments and the increasing attacks from the new groups, it is safe to say that the fragile structure in Idlib continues, and such moves that can radically change the status-quo are not yet on the horizon.

This also relates to the fact that such altering of the existing balance does not depend only on the attitudes, policies and future plans of the local actors in Syria, limited only to Syria; in fact, attitudes and the demands of primary actors such as Russia, Iran, the US, and secondary actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, France, Kuwait and Egypt from Turkey will also determine the future course of action in the region, which makes Idlib ever the more important for the future of Syria.

For Turkey too, considering the fact that many primary and secondary actors in and outside Syria will want to use their means of directing and manipulating the developments in this country as a bargaining chip against Turkey, and will use them when the time comes; Idlib introduces many unknowns for Ankara, which may vary according to regional and global dynamics.

At this point, it seems rather impossible for Turkey to formulate a one-dimensional policy solution toward Syria, independent of the developments in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Iraq, Eastern Mediterranean,

Ukraine, Crime, the S-400 missiles, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, and of course, the PYD/YPG, and the future relationship with the US.

## **6. Change of Direction in Russian policy towards Syria**

As of October 2020, a radical change is discernible in the attitude of the Russian forces stationed in Syria.

Indeed, while Russia maintained a long pause in air operations in Idlib and did not intervene militarily in the Euphrates Shield region under the control of Turkey, it then struck, on 23 October, a fuel market in Turkish-controlled Jarabulus with ballistic missiles fired from a Russian warship off Tartus.

Several days later, on October 26, 2020, warplanes of the Russian Space Forces stationed in Syria took off from the Khmeimim airbase and targeted a training camp belonging to *Faylaq al-Sham* in Jabal Duwayli (Jebel al-Dwelia), Haram town, near the Turkish border, in the north of Idlib where 43 militants died and 90 were injured in the attack.

Since *Faylaq al-Sham*, which started its operations in 2014 and assisted by the USA in its early years, is an armed group under the umbrella of the SNA that Turkey supports, and since the new recruits were trained in the camp that was hit, it is unthinkable that the Russian intelligence would not have this information. The attack can thus be considered a direct message to Ankara, signed, sealed, and delivered by Russia.

Indeed, the shooting of an area where fuel tankers were parked in the city centre of Idlib by Russian planes right after this attack, indicates a new Russian practice in Syria.

In the days following this attack, on November 17, Russian planes once again took off, to hit the bases of radical groups in Jabal al-Zawiya, south of Idlib, followed by a strike carried out by the Syrian Air Force (SyAF) on Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham targets, again in Jabal al-Zawiya.

These attacks, which were carried out in October and November 2020, were followed by subsequent strikes on the oil refinery, filling facilities and markets in Al Hamran, near Tarhin and Jarabulus, in the Turkish-controlled Al Bab region on 5 and 13 March 2021. In the attacks which were carried out with ballistic missiles fired from Khmeimim Air Base and Kuweires Air Base, located 30 kilometres east of Aleppo, hundreds of oil tankers were destroyed.

That Russia struck first in Idlib, targeting *Faylaq al-Sham* affiliated with the SNA, which Turkey trained and equipped, and then in Al Bab and Jarabulus in the Euphrates Shield region under Turkey's control is a clear message to both Turkey and the US.

In order to understand what these messages are and why Russia felt the need to convey them, we need to briefly recap the main features of the fuel traffic in Syria and the oil-related revenues first.

As it is well-known, oil wells in Syria are mostly located in areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, or the SDF (Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor), where the YPG is the dominant power, under US protection, or to use Pentagon's words, under a "local partnership".

Some of the crude oil extracted in the regions under the control of the US-YPG alliance is brought to the west of the Euphrates, where the Syrian National Army (formerly FSA) is located, where it is processed in primitive refineries and sold as gasoline and diesel. At this point, it is seen that the rival groups (PYD-SNA, SNA-HTS) in Syria converge and work together on issues relating to financial gain and maintaining daily life, and that they cooperate by postponing their disagreements.

Although it is relatively well-known that a similar trading relationship exists between the Syrian regime and the YPG in the south, the US disrupts this traffic from time to time with reference to the sanctions it imposes on Syria (under the CAESAR framework) but ensuring, at the same time, that not all the income sources that the YPG needs are cut off.

In this regard, by striking the fuel markets in the west of the Euphrates, Russia is trying to make it difficult for the rebel groups to survive, and to hammer home the message that it will not allow the SNA to further strengthen its image as the dominant group in the Euphrates Shield region, that it has the final say in Syria, and that other actors can only exist in their given playing fields so long as they don't threaten Russian interests.

In a similar vein, the targeting of the oil markets is also a message to the US that Russia will not allow the PYD to become economically stronger through the oil revenues, that the PYD is not the sole owner of the oil fields in the areas it controls, and that Russia also has a say and right in the oil extracted in the PYD-controlled areas.

Indeed, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a meeting of the Moscow-based think tank Valdai Discussion Club on March 31, 2021 said:<sup>7</sup>

*"In principle, Russian-Turkish relations are very rich...sometimes the positions differ quite seriously, but we value our relations because we can find solutions with our Turkish colleagues that suit both sides"*

, also adding that:

*"They [US] want to stay in Syria [...] They are operating hydrocarbon fields, selling locally produced grain, and using the proceeds – the money rightfully owned by the Syrian people – to pay for the separatist actions of some Kurdish organisations and to block the dialogue between the Kurds and Damascus, and they are doing their utmost to prevent this dialogue from ever taking place.*

*They are creating local authorities there, using the proceeds from selling their loot such as hydrocarbons, grain, etc. They are also insisting that Syria's Arab neighbours invest in those territories. The open pursuit of this kind of policy naturally raises serious questions."*

It should be clear in this context that the targeting of Turkish-controlled areas, and a group affiliated with the SNA in Idlib, is a strong message to Ankara that Russia has the final say in Syria.

In addition to such assertions, Moscow's attention has also begun to shift to the west of the Euphrates with the reinforcing of its forces and their relocation to the western regions.

In this regard, according to the private sources Russia has recently (2021) sent two fighter jets and 6 attack helicopters from its base in Khmeimim to the airbase under the control of the Syrian regime in Qamishli and has started to strengthen its military presence in Haseke and its surroundings, deploying around 1000 soldiers there.

Russia, which sent hundreds of armoured personnel carriers and armoured combat vehicles to Latakia (Khmeimim) with transport planes throughout December 2020, also started to provide military training to a total of 1200 people selected from the local population (in groups of 300) at Qamishli airport.

Settling in some of the bases evacuated by the USA in the west of the Euphrates, Russia also increased the number of its bases and outposts in the east of the Euphrates; 18 bases were set up in Hasakah,

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<sup>7</sup> Valdai International Discussion Club, Moscow, March 31, 2021 ([https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4660109](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4660109))

Raqqa, West of Aleppo, Manbij and Kobani, and the elite 156th Brigade to the Kawkab mountains, a strategically important location.

By increasing its military presence in the regions under the control of the YPG/SDG, Russia is sending a message to the US, but also to the PYD/YPG that a solution in Syria without Russian blessing is not possible.

### Russia/ Syrian Kurds and the YPG

It is well-known that Russia does not consider either the PKK or the PYD/YPG as terrorist organizations; in fact, both groups are allowed to maintain offices in Moscow, and have direct and high-level relations with the Russian officials.

At the same time, given that Russia does not want the PYD/YPG (which is the backbone of the SDF), to be completely under the control of the US, and opposes a permanent US presence through this group which controls the West of the Euphrates, rich in natural resources, such contacts are understandable. In other words, though condemned by Ankara, Russia uses such contacts to derail any prospects of this group attaining legal autonomy or de facto statehood, in line with its national interests regarding Syria's future planning.

This suggestion is also supported in an article titled "Moscow's Game with Syrian Kurds" published in the Russia Monitor (20 October 2020), which summarises Russia's views on Syrian Kurds as follows:<sup>8</sup>

*"Russia's policy towards the Syrian Kurds has its clear-cut goal: to convince them to sign a peace deal with the regime in Damascus and force the United States to quit Syria. Moscow officials are trying to convince Kurdish circles to cooperate albeit these are hoping to forge an alliance with the United States. Gaining influence over Syrian Kurds is of key importance as the Kurd-controlled regions of the country hold the lion's share of its crude oil reserves and crop fields...The Russians are trying to serve the role of defenders of Syrian Kurds against Turkey's aggression [...]"*

*An element of the deal between the Kurds and al-Assad that Russia wants to see is to incorporate the SDF into Syrian government army. Once brokered, the agreement would make U.S. forces-which support the SDF- leave Syria [...]"*

*Russia seeks to restore the trust of the Kurds they had lost by allowing Turkey to invade Afrin in 2018, at the cost of cooperating against Jihadist insurgents in Idlib [...]"*

*Both Russia and al-Assad are doing their utmost to weaken the Kurds and push them into talks by sparking frictions between SDF and some local Arab tribes [...]"*

*In late August, the U.S. backed Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the pro-Russia Popular Will Party (PWP) reached an agreement in Moscow. What Syrian Kurds need to be aware of is that Moscow will give Turkey the green light for new military operations."*

At this point, it is important to recall that a month before these views were published on the Russia Monitor on October 20, the US Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey made further remarks when he met with the representatives of YPG and ENKS during his visit to Syria's SDF-controlled Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor provinces on September 21, 2020.

Allegedly, in that meeting Jeffrey reassured YPG and the ENKS representatives that Turkey would not launch a new operation in the region, and that an agreement should be reached as soon as possible.

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<sup>8</sup> "Moscow's Game with Syrian Kurds" Russia Monitor, 20 October 2020 (<https://warsawinstitute.org/moscows-game-syrian-kurds/>)



While Jeffrey's statement has not been confirmed or denied until today, the fact that Turkey has not carried out a large-scale operation against PYD/YPG targets in northern Syria, and that the developments in Syria have lost their place at the top of the agenda, since the date of this statement suggest that there could indeed be a certain element of truth behind the reported remarks.

Also raising important questions is the fact that apart from the small-scale actions that took place in the areas under its control (a daily occurrence), Turkey's response to YPG's attack on an oil tanker in Idlib's central market place on April 28, 2021, which killed 40 people, including 11 children and its subsequent attack on the Syrian American Medical Association Private Al-Shifa Hospital in Afrin city centre on June 12, 2021, by firing Grad missiles from Tell Rifaat, which killed 13 people and injured 27, was rather muted.

In this context, it is important to note too, however, that despite a statement from Ankara that the attack on Afrin's Shifa Hospital was carried out by the YPG, SOHR (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) stated that the attack was carried out by pro-Iran militias, and that Tell Rifaat, the starting point of the attack, was under the control of the Russian military police.

As a matter of fact, it can be recalled that after this attack, Turkey did bring the issue to the attention of the Russian authorities (Ministry of National Defense).

Yet, an interview with the then US Special Representative for Syria Ambassador James Jeffrey by the Will Christou on October 30, 2020 (published by Syria Direct, November 02.2020, Amman) still suggested a deal with Turkey, not to hold a new large-scale offensive in the area:<sup>9</sup>

*"[...] we have issued a statement pointing out that we have an agreement with the Turks and that any military movement would violate it. We make it clear all of the time privately to the Turks [...] We have seen these statements before.*

*We have seen no sign of a Turkish preparation for a military movement, nor have we seen any actions or provocations or alleged provocations by the Syrian Democratic Forces that would justify any Turkish reaction. So, for the moment, we think that the situation is very likely to continue as it has been." (Syria Direct, November 02.2020, Amman).*

On the other hand, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, when asked about the dangers of the current status quo in Syria, addressed to him on March 31, 2021 at the Valday Discussion Club in Moscow, responded that:

*"It could lead to the disintegration of the country, which would be tragic, including, in part, due to the Kurdish factor, which will immediately become a regional issue. The consequences are unpredictable. We are trying to avoid this scenario. [...]"*

*When Donald Trump announced the pull-out from Syria, the Kurds immediately asked us to try to help them build bridges with Damascus. Two days later, Trump changed his mind, or someone said he had changed his mind. And the Kurds immediately lost interest in contacts with Damascus and reinstated contact with the Americans as the main 'guarantors' of their well-being."*

And added that:

*"We have contacts with Mazloum Abdi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces. We are ready to help. But love cannot be forced, and they are still hesitating between working out long-term and stable agreements with Damascus and hopes that the Americans (who decided to stay after all) will help somehow."*

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<sup>9</sup> „US Envoy to Syria: 'No change in troop presence in Syria' whether Biden or Trump wins" Syria Direct, November 2, 2020 (<https://syriadirect.org/us-envoy-to-syria-no-change-in-troop-presence-in-syria-whether-biden-or-trump-wins/>)

The expectations and hopes of the Syrian Kurds from the US, mentioned by Sergey Lavrov, reminds the following section in the PIKE report presented to the US House of Representatives by the research commission established to investigate the covert activities of the CIA on January 19, 1976:

*"[...] The President of the United States [Gerald Ford] and Dr. Kissinger [US Secretary of State] does not want a victory for the [Iraqi] Kurds. They can only hope to ensure that the insurgents [Kurds] will continue to engage in enough conflict to consume Iraq's resources." (EIR, The Hot Autumn, August 1983, Frankfurt)*

In this regard, the US, which mobilized Iraqi Kurds 41 years ago through the CIA to overthrow the Baath regime led by Saddam, now supports the PYD/YPG and integrates it with other Kurdish groups (ENKS). In other words, the same scenario continues to be staged, with different actors, albeit slightly modified, in line with the conditions of the day and the conjuncture.

Naming YPG's Mazloum Abdi as the SDF Commander-in-Chief, Mr. Lavrov made the following remarks regarding the Syrian Kurds and Turkey in the same speech at the Valdai Discussion Club on March 31, 2021:

*"It is a challenging issue. Apart from Syria, there is also a regional dimension to it. A year and a half ago, I was in Erbil. The Iraqi Kurds, the Barzani clan expressed concerns about how the Kurds situation in neighbouring Syria could develop, and were eager to share the experience of coexistence, cohabitation within one state if they were given some authority, somewhere between cultural and national autonomy. It is a complicated topic. It is painful, too, also because there is no unity within the Syrian Kurds [...]"*

*There are groups there that do not hide their cooperation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party. There are other groups that the Americans are trying to reconcile with various movements that are friendly to them. Turkey is giving a hostile reception to everything that is happening.*

*As far as I understand it, they are in a dialogue with the Americans to find compromises. The Americans are trying to convince them not to dismiss everyone as terrorists. But for us, it is fundamentally important that we, together with Turkey, firmly advocate Syria's unity and territorial integrity."*

It can be suggested from the rather cautious language Lavrov used in his statements, that Russia will continue to align with Turkey to maintain Syria's unity and territorial integrity but will continue its efforts to create a reconciliatory ground between Turkey and the SDF that is mutually acceptable to both sides.

The extent to which Russia will pursue these efforts will continue, however, to depend not only on developments in Syria but on the direction of the overall Turkish-Russian relations and the extent to which other areas of conflict/divergence intensify.

## **7. Tension between Turkey and Russia**

Various speeches delivered by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in which he refers to Moscow's relations with Ankara, offer a good starting point to understand how Moscow perceives the disagreements and convergences that exist in its bilateral relations with Turkey.



In this regard, at a joint interview with Sergei Lavrov on October 14, 2020 with Sputnik, Komsomolskaya Pravda, and Govorit Moskva, he underlined two important points regarding Syria and Libya, when asked the following question:<sup>10</sup>

*“The current war in Nagorno-Karabakh, if we call a spade the spade, has been inspired by Turkey. In general, we regularly “run into” Turkey, in Libya, as well as in Syria, where Ankara is emerging as a military opponent to us rather than an ally.*

*At the same time, we regularly declare that it is our strategic ally. How will all of this work today in the light of the current developments? Where do we, and Turkey, stand? What are we in relation to each other?”*

In his response, Lavrov stated that:

*“Turkey has never qualified as our strategic ally. It is a partner, a very close partner. In many sectors, this partnership is of a strategic nature. In fact, we are working in Syria, and we are trying to help settle the Libyan crisis. Turkey is also seeking to promote its interests in this region. In what Syria is concerned, I think that these transparency and legitimacy have been ensured, despite the fact that the Turkish military are present on Syrian territory without an invitation from the legitimate authorities.*

*The Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, and his government have accepted and supported the establishment of the Astana format. They are cooperating in the implementation of all those initiatives that have been advanced by the threesome of the Astana guarantors. In this sense, the Russia-Turkey-Iran partnership plays a very important role [...]*

*In Libya, we are also collaborating with Turkey. Diplomats, the military, and secret service officers have met on numerous occasions to use the capabilities of each of the sides. We are in contact with everyone. I am referring to both eastern Libya, where the parliament has its seat, and western Libya, where the Government of National Accord (GNA) is based.*

*The Turks, as you may know, are supporting the GNA, but they are well aware that it is necessary to look for compromises between the approaches of all regions and all Libyan political forces.”*

Lavrov's remark regarding Syria underlines the fact that the Turkish military presence in this country is not based on an invitation made by the Syrian government, as is the case for Russia (the Russian military presence is based on the existing bilateral agreements between Syria and Russia, the Iranian military presence is based on the invitation of the Syrian government), hence lacks a legal basis. Touching on the fact that what justifies the Turkish military presence today is the Astana format, Lavrov has hinted that the presence of Turkish soldiers in Syria can be opened to discussion when this agreement is terminated, and Syria starts the normalization process.

Criticizing Turkey's failure to reach out to the Libyan Parliament and by extension, General Haftar, while supporting the GNA when it comes to Libya, Lavrov argued for establishing relations with all parties in Libya. In another speech, he made it clear that Russia was on opposite sides with Turkey in Libya.

At the same meeting, the question of whether Turkish President Erdogan is playing his own game in Syria and Libya, but also in Cyprus, the Eastern Mediterranean and in the South Caucasus, in this case, and

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10, „Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with radio stations Sputnik, Komsomolskaya Pravda and Govorit Moskva, Moscow, October 14, 2020“ ([https://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset\\_publisher/zwl2FuDbhjx9/content/interv-u-ministra-inostrannyh-del-rossijskoj-federacii-s-v-lavrova-radiostanciam-sputnik-komsomol-skaa-pravda-i-govorit-moskva-moskva-14-oktabra-2020-?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_zwl2FuDbhjx9\\_redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mid.ru%2Fen%2Fdiverse%3Fp\\_p\\_id%3D101\\_INSTA NCE\\_zwl2FuDbhjx9%26p\\_p\\_lifecycle%3D0%26p\\_p\\_state%3Dnormal%26p\\_p\\_mode%3Dview%26p\\_p\\_col\\_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p\\_p\\_col\\_pos%3D2%26p\\_p\\_col\\_count%3D6](https://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwl2FuDbhjx9/content/interv-u-ministra-inostrannyh-del-rossijskoj-federacii-s-v-lavrova-radiostanciam-sputnik-komsomol-skaa-pravda-i-govorit-moskva-moskva-14-oktabra-2020-?_101_INSTANCE_zwl2FuDbhjx9_redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.mid.ru%2Fen%2Fdiverse%3Fp_p_id%3D101_INSTA NCE_zwl2FuDbhjx9%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dnormal%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26p_p_col_id%3Dcolumn-1%26p_p_col_pos%3D2%26p_p_col_count%3D6))

whether there would be an “adjustment” in Russia's policies towards the Turkish leader and Turkey, Lavrov's response was short but clear:

*“Of course, some adjustments can be kept in mind, but our policy in the Turkish or any other direction should be based on reality and avoid the “war is an extension of policy” principle. This is what I firmly believe. Naturally, there could be situations when there is aggression against you, and you must strike back.”*

And when the reporter remarked that “as we say, if you don't listen to Lavrov, you will listen to Shoigu [Russian Minister of Defence], Lavrov was blunter: “yes, it's about that.”, indicating that military options may indeed arrive at the table in such cases where diplomacy does not yield the expected results.

During his visit to Athens, Sergey Lavrov also sent a clear message to Ankara by mentioning that they had also discussed Syria and Libya issues with his Greek counterpart in the joint press statement he made with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias on October 26, 2020.

Mr. Lavrov stating that:

“we also talked about Syria and Libya. We shared some information on how we are working with other external actors to promote a settlement, including Russia's cooperation with Turkey and Iran as part of the Astana format for the Syrian settlement. We also discussed measures that are being taken to fulfil the agreements between Russia and Turkey on the Idlib de-escalation-zone, primarily regarding eliminating what remains of the militants from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham”,

Lavrov reminded Ankara, via Athens, of its commitments regarding Hay'at Tahir al-Sham.

As it is well-known, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is recognized as a terrorist organization by both the UN, Russia, and Syria, and the Astana agreement penned that the group would be eliminated together with other terrorist organizations, with Turkey assuming responsibility in this regard.

The fact that an agreement reached directly between Russia, Iran and Turkey is reminded by Lavrov through a third country, such as Greece, which is not a party to the issue, becomes even more striking when considered together with the serious disagreements that exist between Turkey and Greece.

Moreover, when responding to a rather provocative question during an interview with the Argumenty i Fakty newspaper on May 24, 2021, that:<sup>11</sup>

*“President Erdogan recently welcomed President Zelensky to Istanbul. The Turks have once again pointed out that they do not recognise Crimea as part of Russia. They are supplying weapons to Ukraine, including UAVs, one of which has allegedly killed a six-year-old boy in Donbass. Turkey was a country that stoked the fire of war in Nagorno-Karabakh. We also remember the downed Russian aircraft in Syria. Aren't our “Turkish partners” allowing themselves a bit too much?”;*

Lavrov asserted that:

*“Indeed, Russia and Turkey have major differences with regards to a number of international issues. However, this does not prevent us from maintaining a productive political dialogue with our Turkish partners and developing mutually beneficial cooperation across various spheres ranging from energy to tourism.*

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11 „Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the newspaper Argumenty i Fakty, Moscow, May 24, 2021“ ([https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4741307](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4741307))

*Let us also not forget that as a NATO country, Turkey despite heavy pressure from Washington, has not only become interested in buying advanced military equipment from Russia, but has already implemented a major contract for purchasing modern S-400 Triumph air defence system.*

*Regarding Ukraine, we strongly encourage our Turkish colloques at all levels to analyse the situation in depth and to stop feeding Kiev's military sentiment. We have been very clear that leniency towards Ukraine's aggressive initiatives in Crimea is tantamount to an encroachment on Russia's territorial integrity. We hope that Ankara will adjust its approach to accommodate our legitimate concerns."*

While expressing very clearly that Moscow is uncomfortable with Turkey's efforts toward furthering its relations with Ukraine, especially in the military field, and its stance on Crimea, and that he expected a change in attitude from Turkey, Lavrov also reminded Ankara of the second regiment of S-400 air defense system as part of a deal signed by Ankara, to either recapitulate the latter's liability, or as a bargaining chip regarding existing disputes.

Considering that Russia has always used a rather contradictory language regarding its current problematic relations with Turkey, and that Moscow has used its cards from time to time despite risking angering Turkey, the existing disagreements on the Ukraine and Crimea that have special importance for Russia, are likely to have negative repercussions in Syria.

In Karabakh too, although it appears that there is no conflict between Turkey and Russia on the issue, it is unlikely that this relative tranquillity will continue over time.

In addition to the Russian troops in Armenia, responsible for the protection of the Armenian borders, the fact that Russian troops are stationed here as well, in accordance with the agreement reached over Karabakh, has created a new border between Turkey and Russia, not geographically but physically, through Nakhichevan. While there is a common understanding and cooperation between Turkey and Russia in relation to peacekeeping in Karabakh, it is difficult to exclude the possibility that problematic developments beyond Syria and Libya, especially in Ukraine, Crimea, and the Black Sea, may somehow lead to negative repercussions in Karabakh.

Reports in the foreign press during the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict, that Turkey sent around 2,000 militias affiliated to the Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Brigade from Syria to Karabakh (described as 'mercenaries' by the foreign press) — which was strongly rejected by both Turkey and Azerbaijan (IW News, 20 October 2020) — is indicative of one such issue which carries the potential to spark up a conflict between Russia and Turkey in Karabakh.

And when it comes to the S-400 issue, it would be misleading to think that Turkey, which seems to be stuck between Russia and America and, by extension, NATO, has completely run out of room for manoeuvre and options.

In fact, opting for coercion in Syria and Libya in order to resolve its current disagreements with Turkey and to rise to an advantageous position, Russia may well accelerate the rapprochement between Ankara and Washington, and risk its position and gains over Turkey in recent years. It is understood that Russia will only resort to such practices as a last resort.

At the same time, taking the S-400 batteries out of Turkey or storing them in Adana/Incirlik or Malatya/Kürecik air and radar bases and allowing their inspection by the USA, NATO, or independent observers in view of the US's strict stance and the CAATSA sanctions approved by the Congress, are both likely to attract a certain diplomatic ire from Kremlin, let alone causing a political fallout domestically, in terms of convincing the Turkish public.

Perhaps the most important of these repercussions will be the damaging of President Erdogan's credibility, especially in the eyes of Putin, in fulfilling his promises and commitments, that will also impact lower-level relations.

Regarding the S-400s, which create/seem to carry the potential to create problems not only with the US but also with Russia, there are several formulas that could satisfy all three sides (USA-Russia-Turkish public opinion), albeit not in equal measure, and in a rather "face saving" fashion (such as not activating the S-400s by storing them instead of being deployed in critical places, or introducing certain guarantees), but the prospects for reaching that sort of compromise is directly related to the possible demands of the relevant actors from Turkey.

In this sense, the risks the S-400s present for Russia are also relevant for Washington. In other words, if the US continues to maintain its distant attitude towards Turkey and intensifies the existing sanctions (CAATSA), this will inevitably accelerate the rapprochement between Ankara and Moscow, leading to possibly greater cooperation in military terms. Such rapprochement has the potential to adversely affect not only US-Turkey relations, but also the latter's relations with NATO.

It is likely that these vexed issues that beset Turkey-Russia relations will remain on the table with varying intensities, and unless there is an extraordinary and unexpected development, the two sides will seek to maintain the current status quo.

## **8. US Priorities in Syria**

As it can be seen from the developments following the election of Joe Biden as the new president, there will be no radical changes in the US policy toward Syria and that it will maintain its presence in Syria through its alliance with the PYD/YPG.

At the same time, it is clear from the names that are now in charge of US's Syria policy, that the administration has a team with significant experience in Syria and the Middle East, and with a thorough understanding of the region and the regional balances, under their belt.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is an experienced politician who served as Assistant Secretary of State between 2015-2017, and on the White House National Security Council (1994-2001), with significant expertise on the fight against ISIS and global migration.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin (four-star army general) was appointed to the CENTCOM Command in 2013 where he retired in 2016. Austin is well known for his opposition, in the past, to US withdrawal from Iraq and for his strong remarks in the US Senate regarding the US-Turkey "train-equip" programme to train selected Syrian opposition forces to combat ISIS, that the programme 'did not work', and is an experienced soldier with a good understanding of Iraq and Syria, that was further accentuated during his time as the CENTCOM Commander.

White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan served as Vice President Biden's National Security Advisor during the Clinton administration. Sullivan, who also worked with Hillary Clinton during her time at the State Department, is an experienced expert who has worked as the chief negotiator for the US in nuclear talks with Iran and has an extensive knowledge of the region.

CIA Director William Joseph Burns is an experienced diplomat who served in Jordan (1998) and Moscow (2005), and as the Deputy Secretariat of State between 2011-2014.

Special Envoy for Syria Joel D. Rayburn is a former soldier and diplomat. He is the author of the two-volume "The U.S. Army in Iraq", has been appointed as the Special Representative for Syria while serving as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Levant Affairs. Rayburn, who is responsible for the execution and coordination of the sanctions imposed on Syria under the Caesar Act, also served as a member of the National Security Council in the past and is very familiar with Syria and the wider region.

It can be seen from this short overview of the Biden' foreign policy team that almost all of them are experienced diplomats who have worked directly in the formation and implementation of US foreign and security policies toward the region. This also shows the significance the Biden administration continues to attach onto the region.

This was also stressed recently by the US Centcom Commander General Kenneth McKenzie on February 8, 2021 at a press conference

*"[...] the stability of the Middle East still remains of vital importance to us. Since 1947, when the U.S. developed the foundations of its foreign policy in the Middle East, the security of the region has remained vital to U.S. national security interests."<sup>12</sup>*

At the same time, it is important to recall that General McKenzie visited Mazloum Kobani (Mazloum Abdi) in northern Syria on April 11, 2019, whom the Centcom's official website described as the "commander of Syrian Democratic Forces".<sup>13</sup> More remarkably perhaps, the photos of the visit were also published on the website with the following subtitle: "During the meeting, McKenzie reaffirmed the U.S commitment to security and stability in the region".

McKenzie, who visited northern Syria on 20 July 2020 as part of Centcom, went to northern Syria once again in May 2021 to meet with Mazloum (described once again as the SDF General Commander). It is important to note that in his latest visit, McKenzie was also accompanied by the British General Richard Bell, the Deputy Commanding General of the Combined Joint Task Force (Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) in Iraq.

During his visit, General McKenzie, who visited 4 US bases in eastern Syria, one of which is close to the Turkish border, but whose names are not disclosed, repeated his previous views on the need to reduce the number of detainees in the al-Hol camp, posing in front of the M-2 Bradley armoured vehicles at an unknown American base and saying: "Look at the Bradleys, look at the base we're sitting in right now, I think it's a pretty strong testament to our commitment."<sup>14</sup>

It can be recalled that in 2020, when Russian forces interfered with American and SDF patrols in north-eastern Syria, McKenzie requested more soldiers and armoured vehicles from the Pentagon according to the Russian Sputnik News Agency on 26 May 2021.

More recently, on 16 May 2021, a delegation led by Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Joey Hood and including Deputy Envoy for Syria David Browstein and White House National Security Council Director for Iraq and Syria Zehra Bell, travelled to northeast Syria for meetings with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), ranking council members and tribal leaders from Raqqa.

SDF General Commander Mazloum Abdi released a statement by his twitter account, on May 18, 2021 after the meeting to note that the parties had discussed economy, security, and the continuation of the fight against ISIS in northeast Syria, adding that "the international coalition forces will remain in the region to achieve a complete victory against ISIS, to support stability and strengthen the Autonomous Administration."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. Middle East Institute Engagement Feb. 8, 2021"

(<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2497526/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-middle-east-institute-engagement-feb-8-2021/>)

<sup>13</sup> „USCENTCOM commander's AOR tour" (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/IMAGERY/igphoto/2002115959/>)

<sup>14</sup> "ABD'li generalden YPG'ye destek pozu: 'Arkamdaki Bradley'lere bakın" Sputnik News Agency, May 25, 2021 (<https://tr.sputniknews.com/20210525/abdli-generalden-ypgye-destek-pozu-arkamdaki-bradleylere-bakin-1044579264.html>)

<sup>15</sup> Mazloum Abdî عبيد مظلوم (@MazloumAbdi) [May 18, 2021](https://twitter.com/MazloumAbdi/status/1393111111111111111)

It is clear from these statements that the US continues to maintain its high-level contacts with the SDF in the military and diplomatic fields and continues to provide logistical/military support to the YPG despite Ankara's objections, and the already tense relations between the two countries.

Another indication of US's intentions to establish a permanence in the SDF region and the protection it provides to the YPG in this direction, is the building of a new base in the village of Ain Dewar, just 600 meters from the Turkish border, across Çavuşköy in Şırnak's Cizre district.

According to the London-based Sarkul Avsat newspaper, Arab News and SOHR (Syrian Human Rights Observatory) (18.02.2021)<sup>16</sup>, the aid materials and military equipment that reached the region through the al-Walid border crossing via Iraq has been used in the construction of the base, with local resources further suggesting that UAVs will also be stationed there.

Although Nicholas Heras, Director of the US Institute for the Study of War, said that the base, which is being set up in Ain Dewar, will "play a very important role in the fight against ISIS"<sup>17</sup>, the fact that there was virtually no ISIS presence in the region until now, indicates that the main purpose of the base is to secure the transition between the Iraq's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (IKYB), and the YPG, to ensure the safe use of the Faysh Khabur (Semalka) border crossing, and to limit Turkey's pressure on the YPG.

## 9. Conclusion

In a recent statement to the press, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby stressed that the US continued to work with the local Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria and that "this has not changed."<sup>18</sup> This is a clear indication that there will be no change in the Biden administration in their relations with the PYD/YPG, considered a "local ally" by the Pentagon and the US State Department.

Indeed, this was a point reiterated in an interview given by the former US Special Representative for Syria, James Jeffrey. Before leaving his post, Jeffrey underlined that regardless of the outcome of the presidential election between Trump and Biden, there would be no change in US priorities in Syria. Ambassador Jeffrey on October 30, 2020 in Amman put it as:

*"We want to see the PKK cadre leave Syria. That is a major reason why there is tension with Turkey in the northeast, we want to reduce that tension because in all other areas other than northeast, as I said, we have an agreement with Turkey in terms of military movement. But Turkey has real concerns about the makeup of the SDF and the presence of PKK. So, the solution is to work to reduce and eventually eliminate that presence".<sup>19</sup>*

When Jeffrey's statements regarding the PYD are read together with those of Lavrov, it can be seen that both the US and Russia are trying to create a ground for reconciliation between the PYD and Turkey, that they hope could somehow materialise if the PKK elements, which they admit exist in the PYD, leave Syria.

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16 „US-led Int'l Coalition to Establish New Military Base at Iraq-Syria-Turkey Triangle" London- Asharq Al-Awsat, 15 February, 2021, (<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2806101/us-led-int%E2%80%99l-coalition-establish-new-military-base-iraq-syria-turkey-triangle>)

17 „Anti-Daesh coalition to set up military base along Turkish-Syrian border" February 16, 2021 (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1810576/middle-east>)

18 „Pentagon Press Secretary Updates Reporters on DOD Operations, Pentagon Press Secretary John F. Kirby", Feb.17, 2021 ( <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2507332/pentagon-press-secretary-updates-reporters-on-dod-operations/>)

19 „US Envoy to Syria: No change in troop presence in Syria'whether Biden or Trump wins" Syria Direct, November 2, 2020, (<https://syriadirect.org/us-envoy-to-syria-no-change-in-troop-presence-in-syria-whether-biden-or-trump-wins/>)



However, this failure to acknowledge the organic ties between the PKK and the PYD, with the latter being a subsidiary of a terrorist organisation but subscribing instead to the view that there are some PKK elements within the PYD, is unlikely to entice Ankara for a deal under the current conditions.

As underlined by Jeffrey previously in various statements, US and Russia are likely to focus efforts toward continuing to persuade Turkey not to carry out a large-scale military operation in the northeast of Syria, whilst ensuring that the PYD does not provoke Ankara that would justify a military operation. In the longer term, it is likely that these efforts will be geared toward putting in practice a northern Iraqi-style solution.

This suggestion rests on the fact that the local alliance relationship with the PYD will continue in line with US priorities regarding Syria's future and that Washington will continue to solidify its presence and permanence in the northeast of Syria through strengthening of the PYD. It can also be safely assumed that the US is unlikely to welcome any large-scale Turkish operation in the region.

In a similar vein, Russia also wants to improve its relations with the PYD, and it is trying to restore the trust of the Kurds that was damaged following Moscow's consenting to Turkey's Afrin operation (Russians now describe this as an 'invasion'), and even committing to defend the Syrian Kurds.

In this regard, there is an apparent convergence in Washington's and Moscow's stance regarding the PYD. However, it is important to note that this convergence does not extend to all areas, and in particular the desired end-result.

To that end, the US believes that the PYD should, sooner or later, be legalized as an autonomous organization or a state, and be brought together with the IKBY.

Russia, on the other hand, wants to neutralize Turkey's reservations by integrating the YPG, the military wing of the PYD, into the Syrian National Army, whilst isolating Washington to force it leave Syria by taking away its main prop.

However, a second and more implicit Russian reasoning here is that if the YPG is integrated into the Syrian National Army as part of a deal with Damascus, the *raison d'être* for Turkish presence in north-eastern Syria will also disappear.

Overall, it seems that the PYD is now propped and protected by both the US and Russia against Turkey, and that they are both keen to "purge it of PKK elements", instead of accepting the fact that the two are the sides of the same coin.

## **Appendices**

### **APPENDIX A**

It goes without saying that Russia holds the key in Idlib in relation to reaching a settlement that Turkey favours.

While a costly battle for the province — set to weaken the Russian but also Syrian presence — does not appear to be Moscow's priority, it is nonetheless likely that the latter will, sooner or later, play the "Astana card" regarding Turkish pledges.

In addition, while the two countries have so far managed to avoid a cliff-edge in the relations by compartmentalizing disagreements that exist on multiple issues, but it seems that the resolution to the Idlib conflict is likely to depend on other developments outside Syria.

The situation in Libya is relevant here. As it is well-known, Turkey and Russia stand on opposing sides of the battle line in Libya. Turkey appeared as a “game changer” in Libya with a robust support for the GNA and a strong military presence in Trablus, al-Watiya and Misrata. Russia on the other hand has backed the Haftar forces by sending Wagner militias and war planes (via Syria), with a long-term interest in acquiring bases in al- Jufra and Sirte. In this sense, it is likely that the trade-offs in Libya will also have implications for the negotiations regarding the situation in Idlib.

## APPENDIX B

In this regard, the future viability of the Turkish foreign policy toward Syria, and the ways in which it can be altered — without jeopardizing its national security — to reflect the changing dynamics once the dust begins to settle and normalization follows (with the eventual settling of the dispute in Idlib, the drafting of the new constitution, and holding of fresh elections) is an important line of inquiry that requires further attention.

The history of international relations provides ample evidence of pragmatic alterations in foreign policy in line with national interests. Indeed, while a major transformation usually takes time, it is by no means a taboo. As Lord Palmerston put it more succinctly: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.” Palmerston’s message of “no friends or permanent enemies” continues to ring true today.

For Turkey, the main sticking point regarding the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria is the legalization of the PYD, the offshoot of PKK, to become a state actor (de facto) or take part in the governance of Syria under a federal regime (de jure). Concerned by both prospects, Turkey has been working on the parameters of a detailed action plan to counteract each scenario as part of its national security calculations.

Indeed, recent developments especially since 2016, have shown that the PYD has made significant progress — with backing from Russia, the US, France but also the UAE and Saudi Arabia — toward territorial autonomy or sharing power under a new federal system of government (as a “fallback” option). Under these circumstances, Turkey’s plans to counteract such prospects have taken on even greater significance.

Another issue, from a Turkish perspective, relates to the future status of the armed opposition groups that it trained and brought together under the Syrian National Army (the Free Syrian Army). In this regard, the stance of the Assad regime (or its future extension) toward these groups will depend on a political deal which will ensure their safety and security.

In a similar vein, a third issue concerns the areas that remain under Turkish control. Regardless of how long it takes, Turkey — which has consistently pledged to respect Syria’s unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity — will have to withdraw from these areas once normalization begins. Ankara will thus be keen to secure clear commitments that once it pulls back from the areas adjacent to the Turkish border that it controlled following subsequent military operations (“Euphrates Shield”, “Olive Branch”, “Peace Spring” and “Peace Shield”), including Afrin, Azaz, Tell Abiad and Al Bab, the PYD will not be allowed to return to these areas to threaten Turkish national security. In view of the ongoing Kurdification efforts led by the YPG in areas it controls, discussed in detail earlier, this issue will remain a highly sensitive issue for Turkey.

Last but not least, the safe return of at least some of the displaced Syrians that have been generously hosted by Turkey so far — free from fear of regime retaliation — and their peaceful integration into the Syrian society as full and equal citizens, remain key priorities for Turkey.



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