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Turkey's interventions in its near abroad: The case of Idlib

The trigger for the Turkish Operation Spring Shield in northern Idlib in February 2020 was to prevent the Syrian conflict – especially extremists and refugees – spilling over into Turkey as the result of a new regime offensive. A deeper driver of the operation was Ankara's desire to draw a line against further regime advances that might jeopardise Turkish territorial gains across northern Syria. Millions of Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) were the main – although unintended – beneficiaries of the operation. Tactically, Operation Spring Shield was a success because of a surge in Turkish military resources in northern Idlib, Ankara's willingness to use them, and the speed with which Turkey acted. Strategically, it helped a great deal that Russia decided to stand aside for a few days. Russian-Turkish diplomacy resumed after battlefield conditions had shifted in Turkey's favour and Syrian regime forces were stopped in their tracks. In the short term, Operation Spring Shield can be considered as having brought a measure of humanitarian and geopolitical stabilisation by clarifying Turkey's red lines to Damascus, Tehran and Moscow, and by bringing about a new equilibrium between Russian-supported forces and Turkish forces in Syria. The operation did not negatively affect Turkey's relationship with its NATO partners, the EU or the US. This was in part because the operation highlighted the limitations of the Astana process – a diplomatic initiative in which Turkey, Iran and Russia pursue opposing aims vis-à-vis the Assad regime – from which these actors are excluded. In the medium term, the impact of Operation Spring Shield will depend on the permanence of the Turkish presence, the level of Turkish developmental investment and the evolution, as well as the place, of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the future governance of northern Idlib.

Situating Operation Spring Shield

After initial territorial losses, the Turkish counter-offensive, Operation 'Spring Shield', of February 2020 prevented a major offensive of the Syrian regime and some of its allies from advancing further into Idlib province.

It effectively turned northern Idlib into a Turkish protectorate for the duration of its military presence. Interestingly, the area is run in large part by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – an extremist religious group – and

its Salvation Government, which Turkey now 'protects'.¹ This brief examines the context, drivers, means and impact of the operation in the broader context of Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict.²

The origins of Operation Spring Shield can be traced back to the Astana agreements of May and September 2017 that created de-escalation areas in Syria, as well as to the subsequent Sochi memorandum on stabilisation of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area between Turkey and Russia of September 2018.³ Alternatively, the Astana process can be viewed as: a) an effort to develop a political compromise on the future of Syria between Iran, Turkey and Russia for subsequent endorsement via the UN-led – but deadlocked – Geneva process; b) a forum for establishing and balancing Russian, Iranian and Turkish spheres of influence in Syria; or c) a diplomatic tactic to create optimal conditions for winning the war battlefield for battlefield by means of the temporising concept of de-escalation areas.

Interpretation (a) is more reflective of the Turkish and Russian positions and interpretation (b) of the Iranian view. Russia and Iran have both used (c) as the means

to their preferred ends, respectively (a) for Russia and (b) for Iran. Turkey's view has arguably shifted from (a) to (b) over time. Today, the Astana process is largely defunct.

Enabled by Turkish-Russian rapprochement that began in April–May 2016 and accelerated after the coup attempt of July 2016, Ankara became part of the Astana process to be able to deal more effectively with the gains made by the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria and to ensure it would have a seat at the table where the future of Syria might be decided.⁴ Ankara concluded the Sochi memorandum because it pertained specifically to Idlib, which was the most relevant de-escalation zone for Turkey out of the four areas originally agreed in Astana.⁵

Effectively, the Sochi memorandum commits Turkey to create/maintain 12 military observation posts around Idlib province, establish a 15–20km demilitarisation zone in which extremist religious groups active in the governorate would no longer have a presence, and restore transit traffic (plus trade) along the M4 and M5 – all in collaboration with Russia.⁶

In essence, the Sochi memorandum bought everyone time. It enabled regime, Iranian and Russian forces to subjugate the other three de-escalation areas before getting into a potentially more serious scrap with HTS and

1 For the purpose of this analysis, I use Berger's definition of extremism, i.e. an in-group that believes its success or survival requires violent action against one or several out-groups. See: Berger, J., *Extremism*, Cambridge: MIT, 2018. On the level of HTS territorial control: Saban, N., *Analysis of territorial control in northwestern Syria and the HTS's role*, Ankara: ORSAM, 2020.

2 The brief benefited substantially from key informant interviews in March/April 2021 with a senior spokesperson of the Syrian National Army, an independent Syrian analyst based in Idlib/southern Turkey and a Turkish politician. Thank you. I would also like to thank Engin Yüksel, Latif Sleibi (both Clingendael), Joseph Daher (European University Institute) and Mohammad Kanfash (independent analyst) for their constructive review of this brief. Its contents naturally remain my own responsibility. The analysis reflects developments until June 2021.

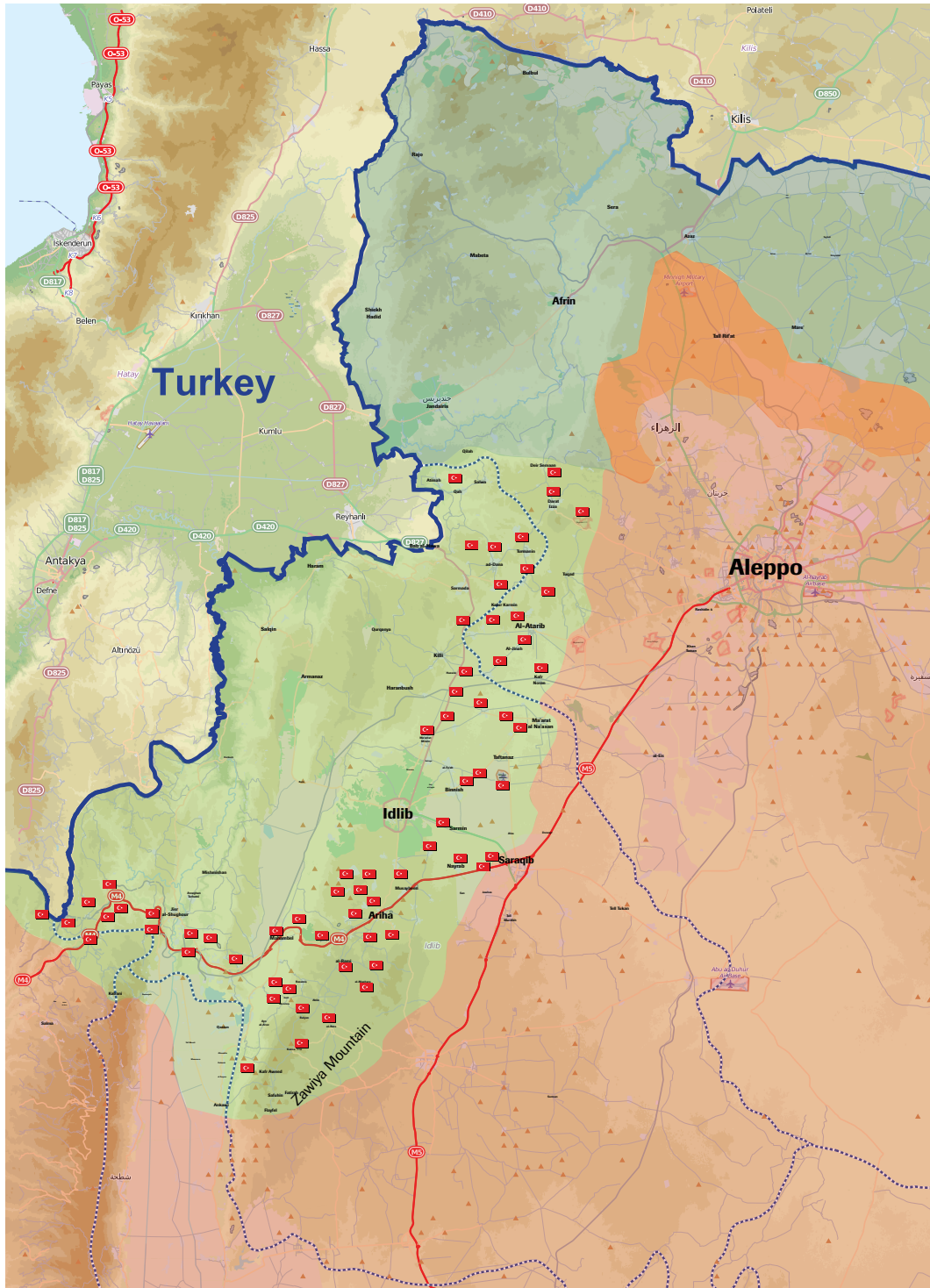
3 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-memorandum-idUSKBN1820C0>; <https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmaster/document/2169> (both accessed 28 April 2021).

4 On Operation Euphrates Shield: Yüksel, E. and E. van Veen, *Turkey in northwestern Syria: Rebuilding empire at the margins*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019. Further operations against the Kurdish YPG followed in 2018 (Operation Olive Branch) and 2019 (Operation Peace Spring).

5 Before the outbreak of war, Idlib was a medium-sized governorate in terms of size and population. It ranked below the national average in terms of human development. The other de-escalation zones were east Ghouta, parts of Homs governorate and parts of Daraa and Quneitra governorates close to the Jordanian-Syrian border.

6 Mostly Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, but at the time there were also the likes of Hurras al-Din, the Ansar al-Din Front and Ansar al-Islam to consider – all formations linked to Al-Qaeda. Partial control over transit and trade in the area generated useful revenues for these groups.

Turkish military presence in Idlib in November 2020



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Turkey, leaving Idlib as the last ‘bastion of the revolution’ to be conquered.⁷ Meanwhile, Turkey consolidated its gains from Operation Euphrates Shield, acted against the YPG in Afrin (2018),⁸ and gradually brought former Free Syrian Army (FSA) units, as well as various Islamist groups with a national agenda, into a newly constituted Syrian National Army (SNA). In addition, Ankara pursued a soft approach towards Idlib’s main extremist religious group (HTS) – seeking to split its most radical elements from its core with a view to co-opting the latter and isolating the former without entering into open conflict. This strategy arguably had mixed success. On the downside, HTS managed to establish firm control and governance over much of northern Idlib in 2018–2019, to the detriment of Ahrar al-Sham and other armed opposition groups that benefited from different degrees of Turkish support. On the upside, several hardcore factions broke away from HTS, HTS declared its willingness to work with Ankara and, initially, complied with key demilitarisation requirements.⁹ But Turkey’s soft approach to HTS also created permanent tension with Russia, which did not recognise gains such as those listed above as it wanted to see more aggressive action against the group.

In 2019, the inexorable re-conquest of Syria by regime, Iranian and Russian forces and the continued existence of a thriving HTS started to bring matters to a head in Idlib – the other three de-escalation areas having been brought back under regime control.

Regime and allied forces increased pressure on opposition-held positions, including Turkish observation posts, as part of their offensive to capture the M4 (Latakia-Aleppo) and M5 (Damascus-Aleppo) highways that had continued to feature a presence of extremist religious groups despite the Sochi commitments. As the southern parts of Idlib were gradually reconquered, starting with an offensive on Khan Shaykhun, a number of Turkish observation posts became untenable. Under pressure, Ankara withdrew from its observation post in Morek (on the Idlib-Hama border).¹⁰ This was followed by a rapidly shifting pattern of local regime offensives and Turkish counter-deployments intended to salvage as much as possible from the Idlib de-escalation area. Russian/regime bombardment of one such Turkish counter-deployment in the village of Balyun triggered a full-scale Turkish military response in the form of Operation Spring Shield. When the fighting was over and regime forces brought to a standstill, new frontlines had been established that turned the M4 into a boundary zone under HTS control, but also subject to joint Turkish-Russian patrols. The M5 came under regime control, including the key town of Saraqib where the M4 and M5 converge.¹¹ The size and nature of the Turkish military deployment made it clear that further regime offensives into the part of Idlib that lies north of the M4 (including Idlib city) would be blocked by Turkish forces and their Syrian auxiliaries.

Turkish strategic rationale and security interests

In the early days of the Syrian conflict, Turkey’s main strategic objective vis-à-vis Damascus was to promote governance reform in Syria that would include political

7 Since the YPG-run northeast never joined the revolution in the first place. See: Netjes, R. and E. van Veen, *Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021.

8 Operation Olive Branch also resulted in the forced displacement of about 150,000 (mostly Kurdish) residents of Afrin: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018> (accessed 1 July 2021).

9 See: Baresh, M., *The Sochi agreement and the interests of guarantor states: Examining the aims and challenges of sustaining the deal*, Florence: EUI, 2019. By way of a practical example of Turkey’s soft approach to HTS, Ankara accepted the group escorting its convoys, which maintained and supplied its observation posts.

10 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/syria-turkey-withdrawal-morek-observation-post-rebels.html> (accessed 28 April 2021).

11 For a detailed review of events: International Crisis Group, *Silencing the Guns in Syria’s Idlib*, Brussels: ICG, 2020a.

representation of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹² When Ankara's dialogue with the Assad regime on the issue went nowhere, Turkey recalibrated its approach and sought to coerce it into concessions, or even to overthrow the regime. Ankara deployed a mix of measures to this effect, some economic in nature (rescinding trade agreements and imposing sanctions), others military (increasing support for the Free Syrian Army as well as extremist groups fighting Assad – the latter initially tacitly via lax border and financial controls) and yet others political in character (hosting the Syrian political opposition – first the Syrian National Council and later the Etilaf as representative of the Syrian people).¹³

However, Ankara's anti-Assad policy was superseded at least in part in 2015 by a new focus on undoing the gains of the Kurdish YPG along the Syrian-Turkish frontier.¹⁴ AKP electoral setbacks, the failure of Ankara's negotiations with the PKK, and YPG expansion after the battle for Kobani with strong US support, caused the Kurdish dimension of the Syrian conflict to rise to the top of Turkey's political agenda. Ankara's main objective since then has been to create a buffer against the YPG and PKK (which it views as identical) in both Syria and Iraq. This has led to a number of operations in both countries that have been largely successful from a short-term military point of view.¹⁵ In Syria, for instance, Turkish forces and their auxiliaries captured the countryside north of Aleppo (2016), Afrin (2018), and

the area between Ras al Ain and Tel Abyad (2019). From this perspective, Ankara's incursion into Idlib protects such gains, as the re-entry of regime and allied forces into Idlib would be likely to put other Turkish-occupied areas under greater pressure over time.

Despite the relaxation of Turkey's anti-Assad policy between 2015-2019, a more moderate incarnation of this policy nevertheless emerged in 2017-2018 by creating the Syrian National Army from former FSA and other opposition forces, hosting the Syrian Interim Government (SIG; the Etilaf executive) in Azaz, and dealing pragmatically with HTS and its Salvation Government. From this perspective, Operation Spring Shield created another Turkish-held area that can be brought more fully under civilian control in the future (via the SIG or the Salvation Government) to serve either as a bargaining chip with the Assad regime, or to constitute another element in Turkey's efforts to establish a buffer zone along its southern border.¹⁶

Finally, Turkey pursued a third strategic objective in Syria beyond its anti-Assad or anti-YPG policies via its participation in the Astana process, namely securing a critical role in the determination of the future of Syria. However, the positions of Russia, Iran and Turkey on the matter are far from aligned. Russia and Iran view Syria as a client state that they wish to see fully restored to its former authoritarian self, possibly with a slightly more internationally acceptable gloss. Their difference is that Russia prefers to see a return to the unified and centrally-run authoritarian Syria from before 2011, while Iran appears to favor a zones-of-influence model under nominal control from Damascus. Turkey would like to carve out a greater role for groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkmen and the

12 This was part of a broader shift in Turkish policy towards the Middle Eastern region after 2011 from 'zero troubles with its neighbours' to active, pro-Muslim Brotherhood interventionism. See: Van Veen, E. and E. Yüksel, *Too big for its boots: Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East from 2002 to 2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

13 Sever, A., 'Regional Power Role and Intervention: The Turkish Case Over Syria in the 2000s', in: *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 2020, 7(2):143-164

14 Van Veen and Yüksel (2018), *op.cit.*; Sever (2020), *op.cit.*

15 For a critical discussion: Van Veen, E., E. Yüksel and H. Tekines, *Waiting for blowback: The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

16 As, for example, argued here: <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/it-s-time-to-strengthen-relations-with-the-syrian-interim-government-46067> (accessed 28 April 2021).

Kurdish National Council,¹⁷ at least in the governance structures of northern Syria, as well as to include the new networks it has created that consist of senior SNA commanders, local council loyalists, Etilaf members, local businessmen and war profiteers. It also intends to keep the Kurdish YPG down. Where Russia and Iran fought with the regime to restore its authority and control, developing their own mechanisms of influence in the process, Turkey has taken control of Syrian lands – in large part to deal with the security threat it perceives the YPG to be. These positions could be reconciled as long as they were premised on the (implicit) understanding that Turkish-held areas would eventually be returned to Damascus.

Operation Spring Shield (2020) made it clear that this assumption does not necessarily hold in the short term. The operation brought long-existing tensions into the open between, on the one hand, the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran, and on the other, Turkey. The first have ruthlessly waged war across Syria against any form of resistance to recover power and territory. The second pursued a selective agenda of its own across northern Syria,¹⁸ but was also faced with externalities primarily produced by the warfighting strategies of the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran. From this perspective, Operation Spring Shield was an inevitable tactical consequence of the strategic rift baked into the Astana process as Turkey sought to avoid a massive influx of Syrian refugees and extremist (foreign) fighters. The Turkish Minister of Defence, Hulusi Akar, implicitly recognised the conundrum by announcing that the purpose of the operation was to sustain a ‘permanent ceasefire’ brokered between Turkey and Russia in Idlib.¹⁹ He made clear that Ankara prefers to manage the problems of flight and extremism

that accumulated in Idlib during the closing phases of the Syrian conflict (including the thorny matter of HTS) over resolving them by force.

Based on the argument so far and interviews conducted, this brief arrives at the conclusion that Operation Spring Shield was driven by the objective of preventing conflict externalities from spilling over into Turkey and the objective of drawing a line to counter Assad – in that order. In other words, Operation Spring Shield was as much a tactical necessity emerging from the contradictions of Astana as it was a strategic effort to protect gains Turkey had made against the Kurdish YPG in Afrin and northeast Syria – with millions of Syrian IDPs and HTS also ‘benefiting’ from the operation in the sense of gaining Ankara’s protection against regime forces.

The means of intervention

Turkey’s intervention toolkit in Idlib before Operation Spring Shield consisted of a mix of diplomacy (Astana, Sochi), light military force (12 observation posts), and under-the-radar dialogue with HTS. In 2019, it was becoming clear that these resources were not adequate to complete the tasks that Turkey had committed to undertake in the 2018 Sochi memorandum within a time frame acceptable to its Russian co-signatory. As more Syrian regime and allied fighting forces became available due to the subjugation of the other de-escalation areas, greater political and military pressure was brought to bear on Turkey in Idlib in an effort to either incentivise it to act more decisively to deliver on the provisions of the Sochi memorandum pertaining to HTS, or to induce it to step aside in favour of the Syrian regime launching an offensive.

Instead, the Balyun airstrike triggered a massive increase in Turkish military resources in Idlib from Hatay (in Turkey) and their mobilisation against (mostly) Syrian regime units. During Operation Spring Shield itself, Turkish deployments reached up to

17 As a colleague quipped: ‘Instead of Turkey’s policy before the Arab Spring of having “zero problems with neighbours”, its policy in Syria is to create neighbours with whom Ankara has zero problems.’

18 Such as leaving HTS in relative peace or prioritising the fight against the Kurdish YPG over the fight against Islamic State.

19 Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar’s statement of March 2020, [online](#) (accessed 4 May 2021).

about 10,000 military personnel,²⁰ including: light-infantry, commando, armoured and mechanised battalions; Firtina artillery and multiple rocket launcher systems; HAWK, Korkut, Hisar and Atilgan air defence systems; Koral Electronic Warfare systems; and, especially effective, armed drones (Bayraktar TB2 and Anka-S).²¹ In addition, Ankara deployed approximately 10–15,000 Syrian National Army fighters as auxiliary forces.²² Using these force elements, Turkey created local military superiority over its adversaries. By acting quickly and with preponderant military resources, Ankara produced clear yet limited battlefield results in the sense of stopping the regime advance in its tracks after several days of intense fighting in late February and early March 2020.²³

On 5 March 2020, Presidents Erdogan and Putin met for high-level talks during which they agreed a cease fire that basically turned Idlib north of the M4 into a Turkish protectorate, maintained Ankara's obligation to deal with HTS and various extremist religious groups, turned the M4 into a joint patrol area between Russia and Turkey, and saw Turkey 'surrendering' southern Idlib, as well as the M5, to the Syrian regime.²⁴ In a sense, the 2018 Sochi memorandum was re-tailored to northern Idlib instead of covering the entire province as had originally

been the case.²⁵ The cease fire agreement prevented a direct clash between Turkish and Russian military forces and gave Turkey control over a small yet problematic (HTS) buffer area in the form of northern Idlib. Today, this area is guarded by about 70 Turkish combat-ready military posts located north of the M4 and west of the M5 with an estimated 2,000–2,500 Turkish military personnel.²⁶ As a further deterrent, Ankara made it clear that it is willing to use force in an offensive manner to defend its presence in Idlib against regime attacks.²⁷

At the tactical level, it was the surge in Turkish military resources, the willingness to use force and the speed with which Ankara acted that turned Operation Spring Shield into at least a short-term success. At the strategic level, Russia standing aside while Turkish and Syrian regime forces fought it out helped a great deal. Russia clearly prioritised its strategic relationship with Turkey over further incremental territorial gains by regime forces beyond the M5. Russian-Turkish diplomacy resumed after conditions on the limited space of the northern Idlib battlefield had shifted in Turkey's favour.

The impact of Operation Spring Shield

In the short term, Operation Spring Shield effectively retaliated for the Balyun airstrike. More importantly, it redrew and stabilised the boundaries of Turkish-held Syria (and inversely, of regime-held Syria). This stabilisation effect extends beyond Idlib as Turkey's defence of the north of the

20 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/turkey-syria-russia-regime-at-last-exit-before-all-out-war.html> (accessed 29 April 2021).

21 For a critical analysis of Turkey's drone use in Idlib: Crino, S. and A. Dreby, *Turkey's Drone War in Syria – A Red Team View*, *Small Wars Journal*, 2020, [online](#); Stein, A., *Say hello to Turkey's little friend: How drones help level the playing field*, *War on the Rocks*, 2021, [online](#).

22 <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/tsk-idlib-hava-sahasini-cembere-aldi-3542993> (accessed 29 April 2021).

23 See for instance: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/syria-spring-shield.htm> (accessed 29 April 2021).

24 For the literal text of the agreement: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4072593 (accessed 3 May 2021).

25 Balanche interpreted this compression of territory as a move towards a 'small Idlib' that he subsequently framed as a potential new 'Gaza strip'. See: Balance, F., *Idlib May Become the Next Gaza Strip*, Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2020, [online](#).

26 <https://www.suriyegundemi.com/tuerkiye-idlib-deki-askeri-varligini-yeniden-konumlandirdi> (accessed 29 April 2021).

27 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=malksk2k0pw> (accessed 29 April 2021).

province had a broader signalling function, including other parts of Syria held by Ankara. In surrendering the M5 to the regime and agreeing a joint patrol mechanism for the M4 (however poorly it functions), Turkey made sufficient concessions to Moscow and Damascus to ensure that the new status quo is tenable in the short to medium term.

However, this does not mean there are no potential escalators of violence present in the area. For example, Russia has consistently reserved the right to strike HTS where and when it pleases based on its UN-designation as a terrorist group.²⁸ Moscow in fact does regularly strike HTS targets inside northern Idlib. Also, the regime has not formally abandoned its intention to reconquer all of Syria and conducts regular attacks against HTS elements along the M4.²⁹ Conversely, extremist religious groups other than HTS do not adhere to the new Russian-Turkish ceasefire ('Sochi 2.0') and continue to carry out sporadic attacks against Turkish forces, as well as joint Russian-Turkish patrols, along the M4 highway.³⁰

It also does not mean that the security situation in northern Idlib itself is necessarily good. Even though it appears to be broadly stable, clashes between HTS and smaller extremist religious groups (such as Hurras al-Deen), as well as criminal/smuggling-related violence, continue to plague a vulnerable and swollen population of IDPs.³¹ But the present status quo does mean that large-scale violence resulting from a new military offensive by the Syrian regime against the area is not likely anytime soon despite the continuation of Russian / regime

bombardment and shelling of HTS and Hurras al-Deen elements south of the M4.

A knock-on impact in the short term is that northern Idlib has become a relatively safe zone from the Assad regime and its allies with the caveat that it is largely under HTS control, a group not known for its moderate views on the organisation of society. Protection against the regime, combined with the large-scale provision of humanitarian aid by both Turkey and Western countries, has been positive for the roughly 2.5–3 million Syrians currently residing in the province, even if Operation Spring Shield did not necessarily have their humanitarian needs at heart. They are safer and better taken care of today than if the regime had reconquered the entire governorate.³² Even though closure of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing to humanitarian aid was averted at the UN Security Council in July 2021,³³ it is safe to say that the Turkish intervention brought about an important complementary measure of humanitarian and geopolitical stability by clarifying Turkey's red lines to Damascus, Tehran and Moscow, and by bringing about a new equilibrium between Russian-supported forces and Turkish forces in Syria.

Finally, Operation Spring Shield avoided a showdown between regime and HTS forces, which could have led to a sustained, costly and bloody fight across northern Idlib. As the extremist religious group commands a large number of battle-hardened fighters who have nowhere to go and is well entrenched, it will be difficult to dislodge. Even a lengthy campaign of aerial bombardment – Russia and the regime's preferred method of softening up resistance – would be likely to lead to substantial collateral damage if the past is anything to go by, and of limited effectiveness in the area's more mountainous parts.

28 See: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13365.doc.htm> (accessed 3 May 2021).

29 For instance: <https://www.suriyegundemi.com/idlib-de-rejim-tarafindan-hedef-alinan-noktalar#gallery> (accessed 6 July 2021).

30 For example: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-attacks-turkey-military-idlib-regime-hts-jihadist.html> (accessed 8 May 2021).

31 See the 'Humanitarian Situation Overview in Syria (HSOS) for Northwest Syria of January 2021' for a detailed security overview (p. 10; [online](#)).

32 This must be understood in relative terms since the humanitarian needs in Idlib are large and face significant shortfalls. See for instance: <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/924/summary> – note that figures pertain to Syria as a whole, not just Idlib (accessed 3 May 2021).

33 See: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14577.doc.htm> (accessed 1 September 2021).

From a conflict prevention and mitigation perspective, the impact of Operation Spring Shield can be considered as positive in the short term. It stopped regime forces from advancing, created a new but fragile equilibrium between Russia and Turkey, and prevented bloodshed as well as a deepening of the existing humanitarian crisis. Such views are also reflected in the initial political responses of both NATO and the EU, as well as in those of the US.³⁴ None of these actors took a stance against Operation Spring Shield in their political discourse. Instead, they expressed general agreement. However, more concrete support has not been forthcoming, in spite of announcements to deploy more NATO military assets along the Turkish border.

Assessing the medium-term impact of Operation Spring Shield is a more difficult undertaking. To start with, the intervention put paid to the original Astana process by solidifying the divergent interests of Russia and Turkey with regards to the territorial integrity of Syria and their relationships with the Assad regime. While it was welcome news in Western capitals, this development will also prolong the Syrian conflict. Neither Geneva nor Astana offers a functional diplomatic platform that can work towards a negotiated resolution of the Syrian conflict. The result is likely to be a ‘frozen conflict’ in a partitioned Syria for as long as Turkish – and US – military forces maintain a presence. How ‘frozen’ the situation in northern Idlib will remain is likely to depend on three factors in particular: 1) the permanence of the Turkish presence, 2) the level of Turkish

developmental investment and 3) the evolution and place of HTS in the future governance of northern Idlib. In brief:

- If Turkey stays in Idlib for the long haul while maintaining an adequate and credible deterrence it can, all other things being equal, create a long-term stabilising effect by protecting the area from further aggression by regime forces. However, should doubt arise at any point regarding Ankara’s willingness or ability to deter further regime offensives against northern Idlib, instability could rapidly ensue. Long-term stability based on credible Turkish deterrence also assumes that Moscow will continue to prioritise its strategic relationship with Ankara over incremental territorial gains by the Syrian regime in Idlib. After all, without Russian support, regime forces cannot hope to retake northern Idlib.
- If Turkey invests in northern Idlib, Afrin and the northern Aleppo countryside³⁵ to develop the productive economy beyond the current focus on network-based trade and smuggling, and improves basic safety and governance as well as delivery of basic services like energy and water, a net positive development

34 During the North Atlantic Council (NATO) Article 4 consultation of 28 February 2020, members expressed condolences for the Turkish service(wo) men killed during the Balyun airstrikes and condemned the regime and Russia’s offensive (NATO, [online](#)); the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council statement of 6 March 2020 walked a fine line between condemning Ankara’s use of Syrian refugees as a political pressure tool on the EU and expressing understanding for the Turkish situation in Idlib (EU Council, [online](#)); the US State Department’s spokespersons recently pronounced solidarity with Turkey (US State, [online](#)) (all accessed 3 May 2021).

35 Note that northern Idlib, the northern Aleppo countryside and the area around Tel Abyad are fundamentally different from Afrin and the area around Ras al-Ain with regard to the local welcome Ankara enjoys. In the former areas, Turkey might be said to safeguard these areas from the regime to the general satisfaction of their inhabitants. In the latter areas, however, Ankara has pursued a forced displacement policy of Kurdish populations, expropriation of property and targeted anti-Kurdish violence with serious and lasting effects. See for example: Al-Hilu, K., *The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies*, Florence, EUI, 2021; Van Veen and Yüksel (2019), *op.cit.* It should be noted that in all cases, the Turkish intervention goes against international (humanitarian) law and amounts to a situation of (potentially temporary) occupation, a point that has also been made by the EU. See for example this [briefing note](#) to the European Parliament (accessed 19 July 2021).

effect could ensue.³⁶ In the northern Aleppo countryside, this would require consolidating the authority of the SIG over those SNA groups that operate with relative autonomy and a number of local councils. In Idlib, an economic recovery and investment strategy would require a form of co-optation of the HTS-linked Salvation Government. If Ankara does not engage in such a course, northern Idlib could also easily remain a forlorn area in which millions of extremely vulnerable Syrians remain stuck in a protracted humanitarian crisis.³⁷

As a longer-term variable to monitor, Turkey might seek to link Idlib with other areas under its control via a governance compromise / merger between the SIG (Etilaf), local councils, and the Salvation Government (HTS). In this manner, northern Syria could turn into a pro-Turkish centre of Syrian opposition governance alternative to the Assad regime. Whether this is feasible will depend on the extent to which HTS moderates itself (see below) and on how Turkey's policy towards the SIG develops.

- If Turkey successfully encourages further moderation of the more radical religious and militant aspects of HTS and brings the group more firmly into its orbit through a mix of carrots and sticks (so far, the latter especially have hardly been used), it could improve governance arrangements in northern Idlib and even lessen the frequency of Russian/regime airstrikes. Somewhat greater safety and more stability could ensue. If Turkey is not successful, or remains unwilling, the area will remain vulnerable to both regime aggression and HTS predation.

As to the possible evolutionary pathway of HTS, interviews conducted for this brief suggest that the group's strategy is to make itself amenable to Turkish interests, indispensable to the governance of northern Idlib, and to work hard to ensure it will be part of a future settlement that legitimises its position.³⁸ This has included at least a nominal break with Al-Qaeda, setting up a civilian government (the Salvation Government) that accepts humanitarian NGOs and opposition forces, and engaging in closer collaboration with Turkey. It is instead Hurras al-Deen that claims allegiance to Al-Zawahiri. In other words, HTS is moving towards becoming an Islamist group with a national agenda (as opposed to a transnational jihadi one) – more akin to Ahrar al-Sham than Jabhat al-Nusra. Should its professed moderation continue and its radical socio-religious views dialled down, it might enable closer governance arrangements with both the Etilaf and Turkey.³⁹

A final medium-term risk of Operation Spring Shield is that its success might tempt the AKP and MHP to seek a repeat performance by capturing, for example, the town of Kobani and its surroundings as this would

36 There is limited evidence of such investment in the form of the construction of ca. basic 25,000 housing units in northern Idlib through government backed charity organizations (projected to increase to 50,000), but it appears to be more humanitarian in nature. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT_Wpds5lQ (Note: TRT as source) (accessed 3 May 2021). For the overall level of Turkish economic effort in northern Syria: Hatahet, S., *The recovery of the local economy in northern Aleppo: Realities and challenges*, Florence: EUI, 2021 (/05).

37 The original population of Idlib province of c. 1.5 million inhabitants has doubled during the Syrian conflict to c. 2.5–3 million. Of this total, c. 2 million are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance while c. 1.6 million rely on food assistance to survive. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/10-things-you-need-know-about-idlib-province-syria-today>; for a detailed overview of the humanitarian situation in January 2021: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SYR_Factsheet_HSOS-NWS_January-2021_0.pdf (both accessed 3 May 2021).

38 This view of HTS strategy is supported by analyses such as: ICG (2020a), *op.cit.*; ICG, *The Jihadist Factor in Syria's Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani*, Brussels: ICG, 2020b; Hamming, T. and P. van Ostaeyen, *The True Story of al-Qaeda's Demise and Resurgence in Syria*, Lawfare, 2018, [online](#).

39 See also: Al-Hilu (2021), *op.cit.*

complete Turkey's buffer zone in Syria and deal another blow to the YPG. While, at the moment, this prospect is not realistic due to the presence of Russian forces around Kobani, it is nevertheless worth watching given the increasing political and economic pressure the AKP faces at home. Such a development would be likely to increase Turkey's strategic isolation vis-à-vis the US, EU and even the Gulf, however.





In sum, in the context of the Syrian war and Turkey's broader involvement in the country, Operation Spring Shield can be

considered as having had a positive short-term impact given the temporary measure of geopolitical and humanitarian stabilisation it brought about, as well as the future violence it prevented. In consequence, it did not negatively affect Turkey's relationship with its NATO partners, the EU or the US. In the medium term, the nature of the impact of Operation Spring Shield will depend on the permanence of the Turkish presence, the level of Turkish developmental investment, and the role of HTS in the governance of northern Idlib.

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