

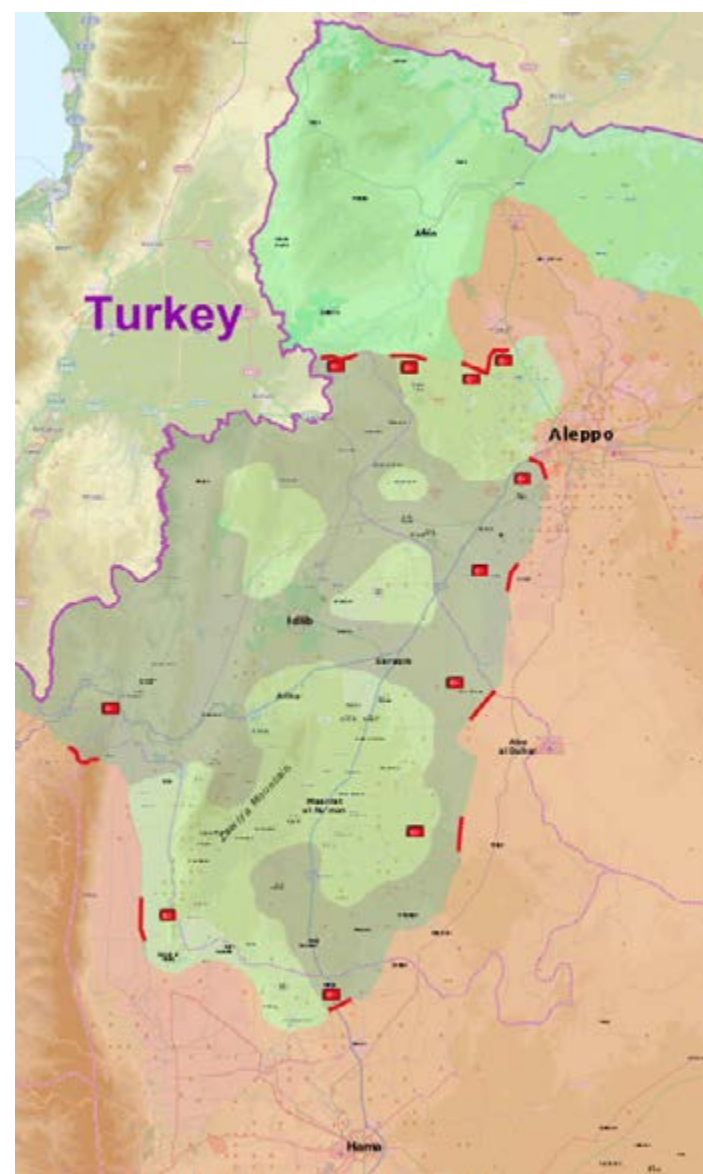


## Turkish Concerns Regarding Idlib

**OE Watch Commentary:** The northeast Syrian province of Idlib continues to pose a challenge to Turkey and its relations with Russia and Iran. Despite being on opposing sides of the Syrian conflict, Ankara and Moscow have generally managed to maintain a working relationship. In September 2018, the Turkish President had brokered an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin, promising to dismantle extremist groups in Idlib and prevent a military operation by the Syrian regime, but failed to deliver on this. In fact, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) with close ties to al-Qaeda, has almost completely taken over Idlib. As such, Turkish officials are concerned about a Syrian regime operation on Idlib (backed by Russia and Iran). The accompanying articles from Turkish daily *Hürriyet* shed light on Turkish concerns regarding the impact of such an operation on Turkey, including refugees, danger to Turkish troops and a potential influx of militants.

Russia and Turkey recently launched joint patrols to monitor the situation in Idlib. According to the first article, the developments in Idlib are at a tipping point because the Syrian regime has escalated its attacks with the support of Russian air strikes. The article points out statements made by Russian officials regarding the situation in Idlib. On 26 April, Alexander Lavrentiev, Russia's special envoy to Syria, stated that Turkey's failed efforts to neutralize HTS has disappointed Russia. As the author points out, this statement was not welcomed in Ankara. Two days later, President Putin stated that in response to terrorist attacks from Idlib, Russia always coordinates with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and provides air support. On 29 April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the activities of terrorists in Idlib and other areas could not be allowed to continue indefinitely and reaffirmed Russian support of the Syrian regime. On 30 April, the Turkish and Russian Presidents spoke on the phone and announced that they are working in coordination towards a solution in Idlib. The article points out that as of 1 May, with Russian air support, the Assad regime had launched a military operation on Idlib.

The second article is a follow up to the first article by the same journalist who is very familiar with the situation in Idlib. The author discusses that Turkey has established 12 military observation posts around Idlib and conducted military patrols as recently as 5 May. In a likely scenario where HTS weapons turn against Turkey, Turkish soldiers in those posts will be in a very dangerous situation. In addition, if the current Syrian regime's military operation in Idlib escalates, it is highly likely that this would cause an influx of refugees to Turkey. The author also raises the important question of "What will happen to the HTS militants in Idlib whose numbers are estimated to be at least 15,000 to 20,000? Where will all these jihadists who have adopted al-Qaeda ideology go?" While this question remains unanswered, it is almost inevitable that some will cross into Turkey (to transit or to stay), threatening Turkish national security. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gündüz)**



Turkish Observation Posts in Idlib.

Source: Derived from work by MrPenguin20 via Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkish\\_Observation\\_Points\\_in\\_Idlib.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkish_Observation_Points_in_Idlib.svg), CC BY-SA 4.0

*“The developments in Idlib have entered an extremely dangerous course... with the escalation of the military operation carried out by the Assad regime with the support of Russia.”*

**Source:** Sedat Ergin, “İdlib’de tehlike çanları çalıyor (Bells of danger ring in Idlib),” *Hürriyet*, 3 May 2019. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/idlibde-tehlike-canlari-caliyor-41201752>

*...The developments in Idlib have entered an extremely dangerous course concerning the entire international community, with the escalation of the military operation carried out by the Assad regime with the support of Russia.*

*Alexander Lavrentiev, Putin’s special envoy to Syria... “Our Turkish friends and moderate opposition have failed to carry out their efforts to destroy the remaining terrorists...”*

*Now let’s go to a more important explanation... Russian leader Putin...*

*“We always coordinate our actions with President al-Assad before we make any attempts. In fact, it is he who performs these initiatives, not us. All we do is to provide support mostly air support...”*

*Russian Foreign Minister Serge Lavrov in a statement made in Moscow... “We cannot tolerate a situation where terrorists are held safe as in a natural conservation zone... In Idlib and some other regions, the situation in which terrorists are somehow active cannot continue forever...”*

*After all these statements, a telephone call was made between Putin and Erdogan on Tuesday, April 30th. In the third paragraph of the read-out of this [phone call] put on the website of the Russian Presidency...:*

*“The two leaders emphasized the importance of Russia and Turkey maintaining close coordination in their efforts to stabilize the situation in Idlib and the need for effective measures to suppress terrorist groups.”*