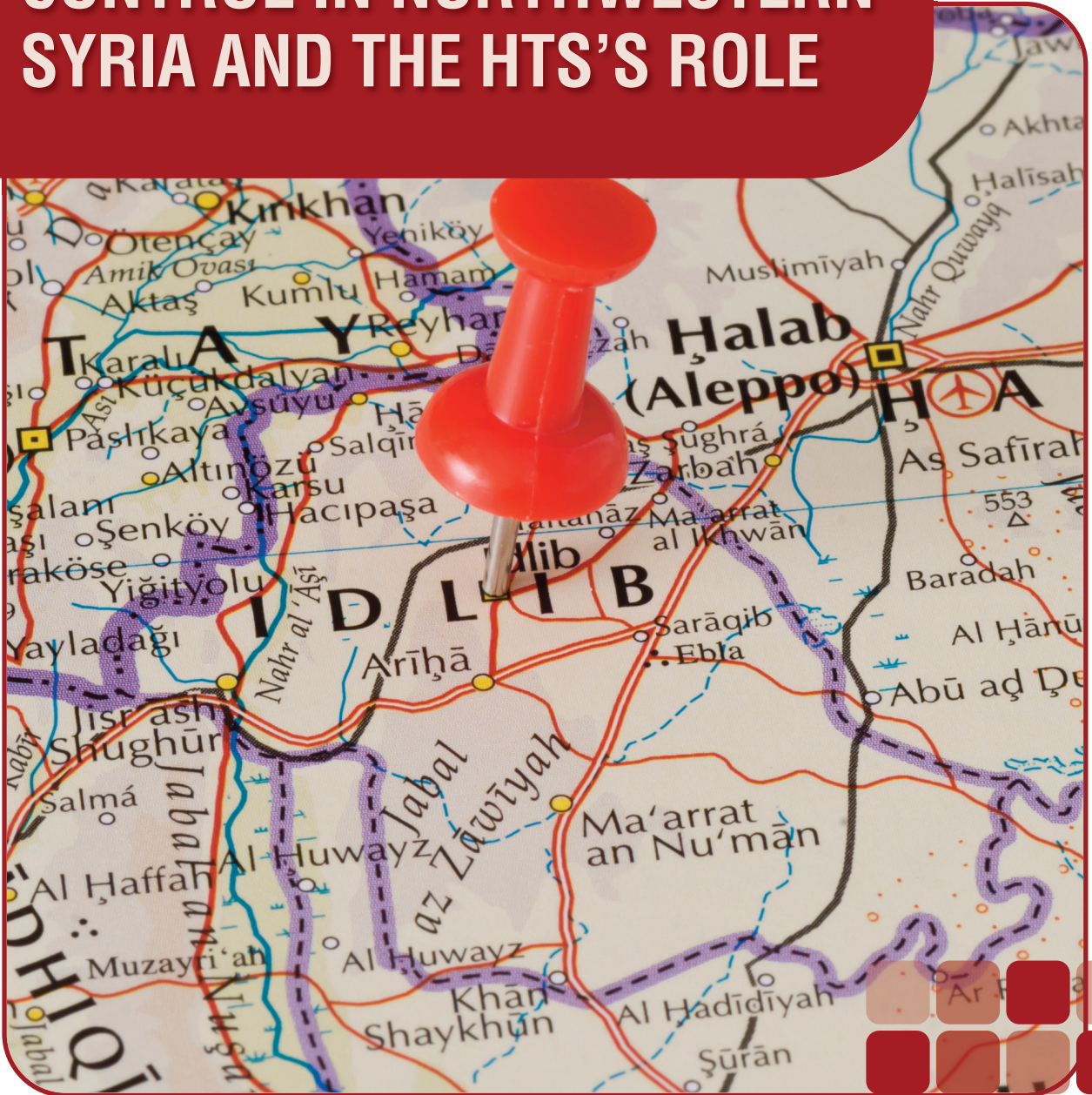




ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN NORTHWESTERN SYRIA AND THE HTS'S ROLE





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ISBN: 978-625-7219-10-5

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Photos : Anadolu Agency (AA)

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ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL CONTROL IN NORTHWESTERN SYRIA AND THE HTS'S ROLE

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November 2020

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Introduction

Recently, north western Syria witnessed many changes in the positions of control and influence, and these changes were usually linked to changes in the political and international reality regarding Syria. The current analysis will not clarify a date or timeline for these changes, but rather the current reality of the Idlib and Aleppo provinces and how control is distributed among the main international and local actors: Turkey, Russia, Iran, US, Turkish-backed opposition forces (SNA and NLF), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the regime forces and the YPG/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The report focuses in general on the areas of control and influences in the opposition-held areas in the Idlib and Aleppo governorates. The maps within the report show the controlling party over the most prominent residential communities and the most important roads and crossings in the two governorates, explaining the international role and influence in those governorates. The report also focuses in particular on the factional situation in the governorates of Aleppo and Idlib, also explaining the actual power of HTS and how it evolved, with reference to the administrative reality in Idlib and the role of the Salvation Government in managing the Idlib governorate. The report is the first of a series of reports that will discuss the military, security, and economic reality in the Syrian governorates.

In 2020, a large part of the Idlib and Aleppo provinces became the last strongholds of the Syrian opposition forces. By the end of 2019, the Syrian regime launched several operations to capture these areas with the help of local and foreign militias loyal to Iran on the one hand and the air support of Russia on the

other hand. The military escalation was halted in early March 2020, after the Russian-Turkish agreement, which included a ceasefire, and conducting joint patrols along the M4 road to establish a safe corridor. Based on these events, a new reality of control has been formed, which the report will clarify through the following map and tables.

The explanations of the abbreviations used in the file are as follows:

The Syrian National Army (SNA): The umbrella organization of armed opposition forces in the regions of Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring.

The National Liberation Front (NLF): The umbrella organization of armed opposition forces in Idlib.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF): The umbrella organization which the YPG/PKK establishes its backbone.

The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

The armed groups in the regions of Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring (SNA) merged with the armed opponents in Idlib (NLF) in October 2019 under the name of the National Army (Jays al-Wa'ani) and were attached to the Syrian Interim Government Ministry of Defence. However, in order to reveal the distinction between the armed groups in operation zones and the armed groups in Idlib, the SNA and the NLF are given as two separate structures in the study.

1. WHO ARE THE MAJOR LOCAL ACTORS IN IDLIB AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

In December 2018, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launched a large-scale operation against the National Liberation Front (NLF) affiliated group, al-Zinqi, in the sub-district of western Aleppo. Despite attempts by the NLF to de-escalate hostilities, the HTS persisted with its attacks and had finally succeeded in expelling the al-Zinqi forces from Darat Izzah city, Taqad, Basartun and several surrounding communities in western Aleppo.

Key members of the NLF coalitions, mainly Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham, deployed forces from southern Idlib to reinforce al-Zinqi in western Aleppo. Nonetheless, the HTS seized the opportunity to attack their position where they are the weakest.

On January 2019, HTS captured key NLF positions along the M5 highway, notably in Ma`arat al-Nu`man, Heesh and Saraqib sub-districts. With the HTS already in control of most sections of the M5 and M4 highways in the northwest, further NLF losses along both highways are theoretically offering the group control over all transit and trade routes in northwestern Syria.

1.1. Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)

Following the battle of Idlib in the spring of 2015, and confident of its growing authority in the province, al-Nusra made a significant shift in its known *modus operandi* and adopted governance in addition to military control to coerce the local population into submission. This tendency was accompanied by breaking allegiances to Ayman al-Zawahiri and re-

branding the group as a national movement. Al-Nusra which later became known as the as-Sham Liberation Committee (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-HTS) then initiated a slow process of casting a monopoly over trade and governance in Idlib and eventually established the Syrian National Salvation Government in November last year as the only governmental body in the "Liberated Areas".

The biggest challenge for HTS integrity is internal. The break of al-Nusra organization from al-Qaeda (AQ) and the rebranding of the group was not widely acclaimed by former foreign Jihadists who joined the group from 2012 to 2015. For many, it was perceived as a betrayal to the real call of jihad. This divergence was witnessed early on by the refusal of AQ cadres to swear allegiance to HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani and it was later confirmed by the defection of Jordanian and Egyptian nationals who felt increasingly marginalised in the newly formed HTS group.

The defection of an ultra-extremist cadre from HTS was announced on 23 August 2016, consisting of Iyad al-Tubaysi (Abu Julaybib al-Urduni), Samir Hijazi (Abu Hammam al-Suri), Bilal Khuraysat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni), and as of 8 February, Sami al-Uraydi (Abu Mahmud al-Shami), plus a half-dozen or so others.

This splinter has a formal, public bay'a (pledge of allegiance) to al-Zawahiri. For some, this is definitive evidence that HTS, is not loyal to AQ. Other interpretations are possible, however, since both HTS and al-Tubaysi's faction benefit from the existence of the other, as political foils and to deniably bring pressure on rivals and enemies. These defectors, later, joined forces and established a new AQ branch in Syria under the name of Hurras al-Deen.

Table 1: Main factions who were the core of HTS in the early stages

| Name | Area of Influence | Defected From | Russian AirForce | Artillery |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------|-----------|
| Al Haq Brigade | Idlib | Ahrar al-Sham | No | Yes |
| Jabhat Ansar al-Deen | W. Aleppo | - | Yes | Yes |
| Jabhat Fatih al-Sham | Aleppo – Idlib – Sahel al-Ghab – Lattakia | - | Yes | Yes |
| Assad al-Khlafa Battalion | W. Aleppo | Al-Mujahedeen Army | Yes | Yes |
| Part of Al-Tamkin Brigade | Idlib – N. Lattakia | Ahrar al-Sham | Yes | Yes |
| Part of Al-Sunna Army | Idlib | - | No | Yes |
| Al-Muhajireen and Ansar Army | Idlib – W. Aleppo | - | No | Yes |
| Syof al-Sham Brigade | Idlib | - | No | Yes |
| Saryat Osama Bin Zid | N. Lattakia | Ahrar al-Sham | Yes | Yes |
| Ansar al-Sham Battalions | N. Lattakia | Jaish al-Islam | Yes | Yes |
| Sarraya al-Nasr Brigade | Idlib | Faylq al-Sham | No | Yes |
| Al-Tawhid Battalion | Idlib | Ahrar al-Sham | Yes | Yes |
| Sothern Ahrar Battalion | W. Aleppo | Sham Front | No | Yes |

In the early stages, HTS is a coalition composed of 72 factions including Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, but some of these factions have minimal influence, and their presence is only justified by the legitimacy it provides to al-Jolani leadership. The following table lists the most influential groups within HTS; following are the main factions who were the core of HTS during the early stages of it(*The last 2 columns determine whether these factions have been targeted with Russian raids or Regime artillery since 2018*):

1.2. National Liberation Front (Jabhat Al-Tahrir Al-Wataniyya) NLF/JWT

On May 28, 2018, the opposition factions

that made up the Free Syrian Army announced the formation of a new military force under the name of the National Liberation Front (NLF). This new coalition was initially composed of Faylaq al-Sham, the Idlib Free Army, the 1st Coastal Brigade, the 1st Infantry Brigade, the 2nd Army, the Elite Army, the al-Nasr Army, the Shouhada al-Islam Brigade of Daraya, the Freedom Brigade, and the 23rd Brigade. Two months later, a day after the Astana 10 talks, the coalition expanded, with the Syrian Liberation Front (Ahrar al-Sham and Nur al-Deen al-Zinqi) and Suqur al-Sham joining the NLF.

The NLF has been particularly prominent for these reasons:

- Its core forces have remained moderate and have committed no violations of international humanitarian law.
- It is well represented abroad and within the political umbrella organizations of the opposition.
- It participated in the various rounds of the Astana talks.
- It has good resources and enjoys good relations with Ankara and other international players.

1.3. Hurras al-Deen

Hurras al-Deen (Guardians of Religion) is composed of approximately 2,000 people (as of its establishment) led by Samir Hijazi (Abu Hammam al-Suri), a veteran AQ operative. The main figures in his immediate circle include:

- Iyad al-Tubaysi (Abu Julaybib al-Urduni; defected from HTS, 2016)
- Sami al-Uraydi (Abu Mahmud al-Shami; defected from HTS, 2017)
- Bilal Khuraysat (Abu Khadija al-Urduni; defected from HTS, 2016), and

Table 2: Main factions who were the core of NLF/JWT in the early stages

| Name | Ideology | Area of Influence | Russian AirForce | Artillery |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| Faylq al-Sham | FSA | W. Aleppo - Idlib | No | Yes |
| Idlib Free Army | FSA | Idlib | No | No |
| 1 st Coastal Division | FSA | N. Latakia | No | Yes |
| 2 nd Coastal Division | FSA | N. Latakia | No | Yes |
| 1 st Infantry Division | FSA | N. Latakia | No | Yes |
| 2 nd Army | FSA | N. Latakia | No | Yes |
| Al-Nukhba Army | FSA | Idlib | No | No |
| Al-Nasr Army | FSA | N. Hama | Yes | Yes |
| Martyrs of Islam Brigade in Darya | FSA | Idlib | No | No |
| Huryya Brigade | FSA | Idlib | No | No |
| 23 Division | FSA | Idlib | No | Yes |
| Ahrar al-Sham | FSA | W. Aleppo-Idlib-N. Hama | Yes | Yes |
| Nur al-Deen al-Zinqi | FSA | - | No | No |
| Al-Ahrar Army | FSA | W. Aleppo | No | No |
| Suqur al-Sham | FSA | Idlib | No | No |
| Al-Islam Army | FSA | W. Aleppo | No | No |

- Khalid al-Aruri (Abu al-Qassam al-Urduni).

Following the rift between HTS and Global AQ, the two entities reached a non-aggression pact that prohibits AQ from recruiting or seizing any territory from HTS. It was formed when old guards from AQ came to feel that the movement had been betrayed by al-Jolani. The reasons behind this feeling of betrayal are mixed – partially a result of personal resentment towards Jolani after he proved to be too ambitious for their taste, and partially a manifestation of discontent with HTS's modus operandi. The rift can also be a split between Syrians and foreigners: many of the foreign AQ members felt they were being used, and that they were vulnerable and susceptible to elimination as a result of pragmatic calculations by the leadership.

Hurras al-Deen's command structure is mostly composed of foreigners. It is strategically located in the mountainous parts of western Idlib, a location which could prove to be useful for the newly rebranded AQ in terms

of protection and future insurgencies. During the latest confrontation between HTS and the Syrian Liberation Front (which includes al-Zinqi), al-Jolani asked Hurras al-Deen for assistance, but the latter declined and chose to remain observers – apparently out of revenge against HTS rather than because of any support or tolerance for the Syrian Liberation Front and al-Zinqi. Nonetheless, if HTS fails to recover entirely and the Syrian Liberation Front succeeds in chasing it from Idlib and from the border-crossing at Bab al-Hawa, al-Jolani will find himself in a fragile position. Such a position could trigger a new dynamic in relations between Hurras al-Deen and HTS, in which the former would be likely to absorb the latter rather than for the two to merge. Meanwhile, Hurras al-Deen would only be likely to intervene in favour of HTS if it feels that al-Jolani is facing a significant defeat.

1.4. Nusrat Al-Islam (NIA)

On March 8, 2018, some eighteen months after the jihadist organization Jund al-Aqsa

Table 3: Sub-groups and affiliates of Hurras al-Deen

| Name | Ideology | Area of Influence |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| Hurras al-Deen | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Turkistan Islamic Party | Jihadist | Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur) |
| Al-Khilafa Army | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Al-Badia Army | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Al-Sahel Army | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Kabul Brigade | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Saraya al-Sahel | Extremist | No actual control or influence |
| Al-Malahem Army | Jihadist | Idlib |
| Jund al-Shrye | Jihadist | Idlib |
| Ansar al-Tawhid | Extremist | N. Latakia |
| Imam al-Bukhari Battalion | Jihadist | W. Aleppo |
| Ajnad Kafkaz | Jihadist | Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur) |
| Jabal al-Islam Brigade | Jihadist | Idlib (Jisr al-Shughur) |
| Al-Osra Army | Jihadist | W. Aleppo |
| Mohammed al-Mohajer Army | Jihadist | Idlib |

(Garrison of al-Aqsa) dissolved, a splinter group of former Jund al-Aqsa members emerged in the city of Sarmin, 15 km (9 miles) southeast of Idlib, and announced the formation of a new faction called Ansar al-Tawhid ("Companions of Monotheism"). Local sources said that the faction includes hundreds of fighters led by Abu Diab, one of the founders of Jund al-Aqsa. Abu Diab is presumed to have taken over the leadership of the group after the death of one Abu Musab, and several reports name one of the field commanders of Ansar al-Tawhid as Abu Mohammed Zour.

The dissident elements in the Sarmin faction did not initially affiliate with any other faction, although it sought to attract elements of the Turkistan Islamic Party (see below) in the coastal region. Ansar al-Tawhid has remained in sharp disagreement with HTS, which not only refused to ally with them, but also harassed and disarmed some of its members and arrested many of their cadres, including Abu Hakim al-Jazrawi.

On April 29, 2018, however, Hurras al-Deen announced the formation of a new al-Qaeda alliance in Syria consisting of Hurras al-Deen and Ansar al-Tawhid, together with some other former fighters. The new umbrella group took the name of Hilf Nusrat al-Islam (the Nusrat al-Islam Alliance or NIA).

The goal of the NIA was described in the founding statement as "cooperation on righteousness and piety to prevent the unworthy from victory" a reference to ISIS. The latter called for the boycott of the NIA and asked its members to fight it. At the same time, the NIA declared that it disagreed with all the other factions in Idlib, which led to it being considered an extremist organization. HTS has criticized the new alliance but has ab-

stained itself from fighting it thus far, accusing it of further "dividing the ranks and trying to establish an al-Qaeda branch in Syria."

There is no consensus between the leaderships of the various factions loyal to AQ, as is reflected in the different names used by these groups, such as Jund al-Malahem and others, some of which are included in Table 3 below. There have been reports that Abu Jleibib (Julaybib) has withdrawn from Hurras al-Deen because of his opposition to certain "administrative" decisions, apparently because his dissatisfaction with the appointment of Abu Hammam as the leader of the new formation.

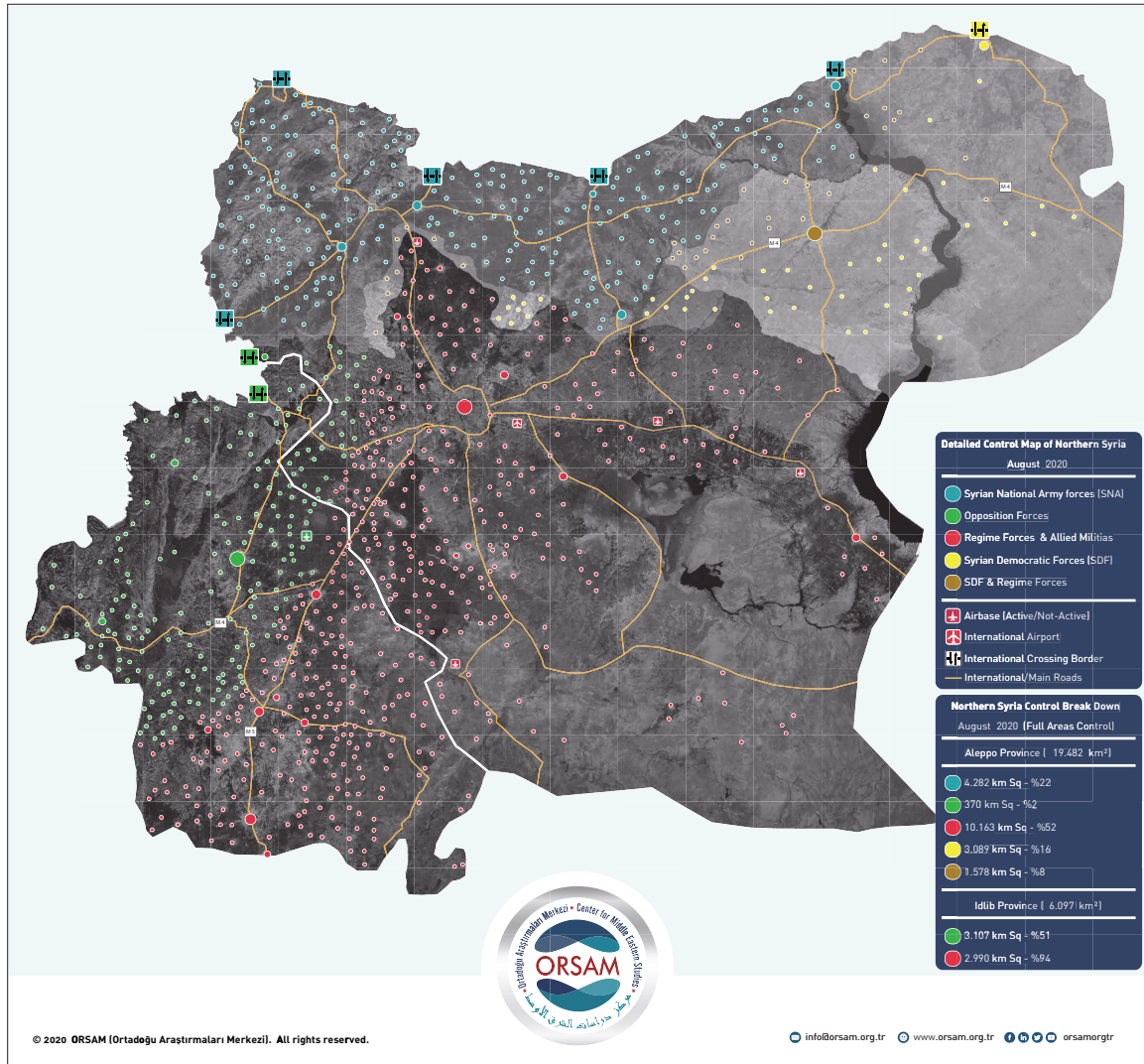
2. SUMMARY OF MILITARY CONTROL IN IDLIB AND ITS SURROUNDING INCLUDING (AFRIN AND EUPHRATES SHIELD AREAS)

The most significant of the opposition forces operating in Idlib and its surrounding are HTS and the NLF, with a smaller role for Turkistan Islamic Party, Huras al-Deen, and other small groups. The following table shows the approximate areas of influence or control for the local actors and the international powers.

Analysis of Territorial Control in Idlib and Aleppo

Table - 1 and Table - 2 shows the international influence and presence in Idlib and Aleppo. Their actual influence and presence were concluded based on the following points:

1. *Size of military presence:* The actual military presence based on the number of bases, checkpoints, and patrols.
2. *Size of humanitarian and administrative role:* Their role on affecting the administration power in the area, such as the

Map 1: Detailed Control Map of Aleppo and Idlib

Turkish role with the Interim Government in Euphrates Shield area.

3. The political role

4. Relationship with the local community

Grading ranging from 0-25 was made for each of the 4 dimensions listed above. A value of 25 for one dimension indicates that the effect is at the highest level and a value of 0 indicates that it has no role. The ratings are determined on interviews with local figures, data from open sources. Data collecting team led by Navar Saban in ORSAM conducted 9

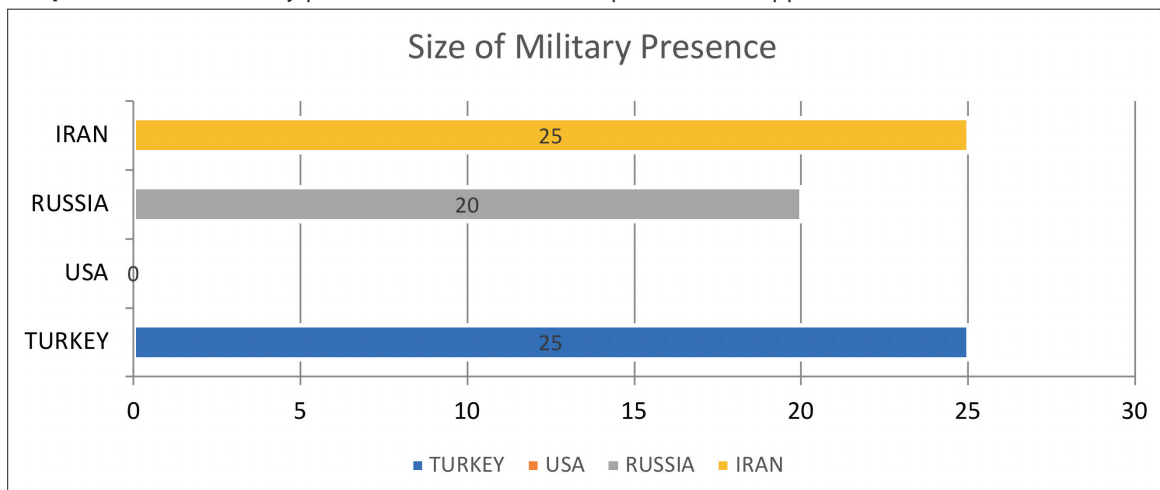
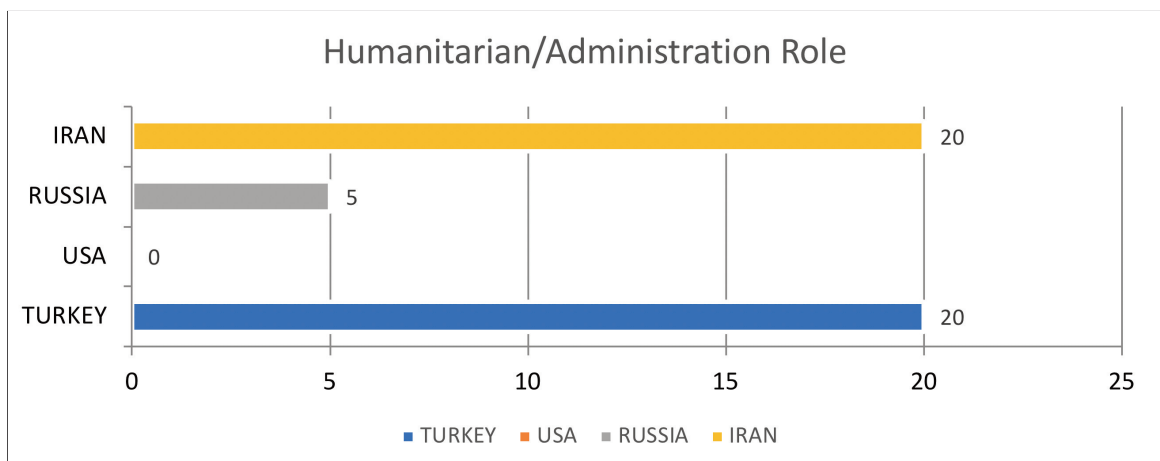
interviews in the opposition held areas and 3 interviews in the regime held areas in both Aleppo and Idlib. Those interviews targeted people with influence or role in their community.

In the opposition held areas: Local council, free police, White Helmets, local NGOs, National Army, local journalist.

In the regime held areas: Employee in the governance, ex-fighters in the LDF, local journalist.

Table - 4: International influence and presences in Aleppo

| Aleppo | | | | | | |
|---------------|----------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | Presence | Size of Military Presence | Humanitarian/ Administration Role | Political Role | Relationship with Community | Final Influence Result |
| Turkey | Yes | 25 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 90 |
| USA | No | 0 | 0 | 15 | 5 | 20 |
| Russia | Yes | 20 | 5 | 25 | 5 | 55 |
| Iran | Yes | 25 | 20 | 10 | 20 | 75 |

Graph-1: Size of military presence of international powers in Aleppo**Graph-2:** Humanitarian and administration role of international powers in Aleppo

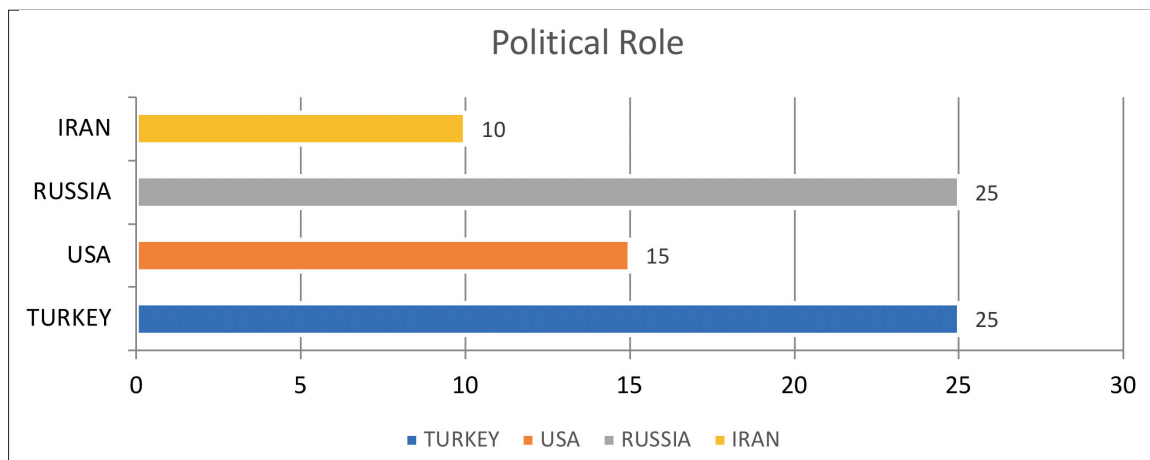
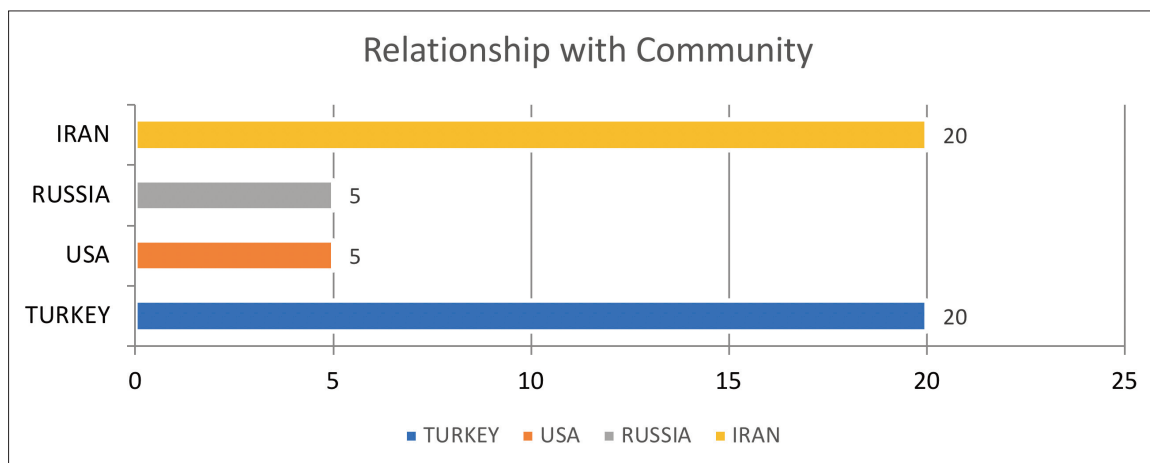
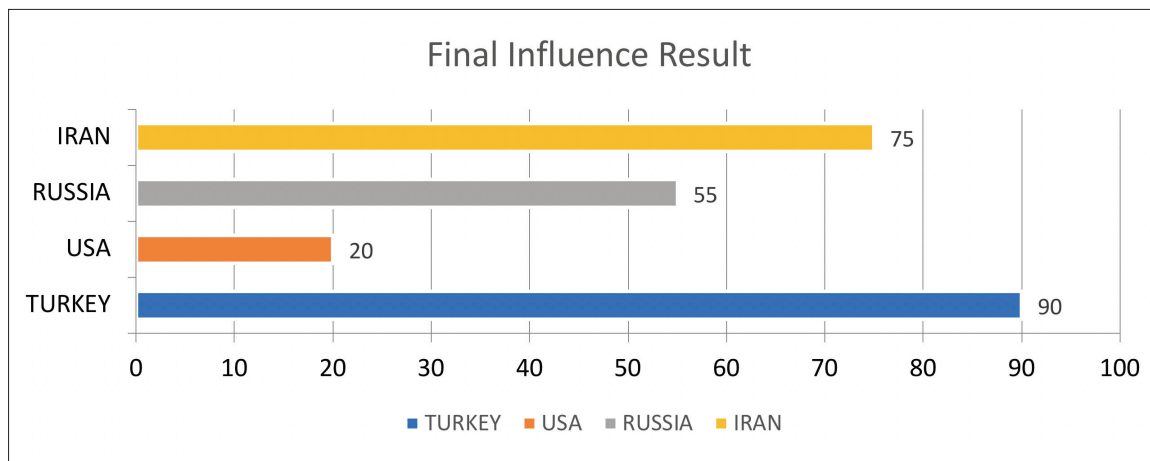
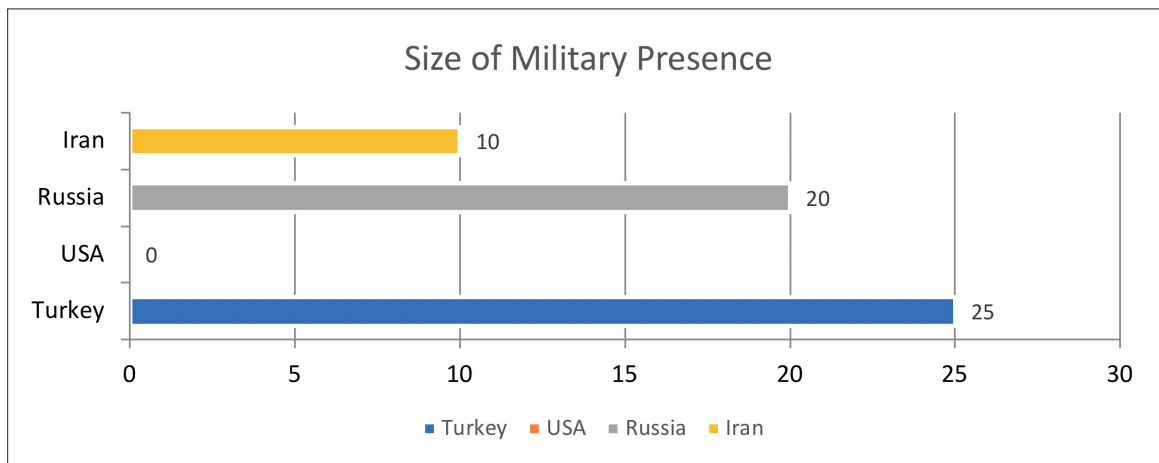
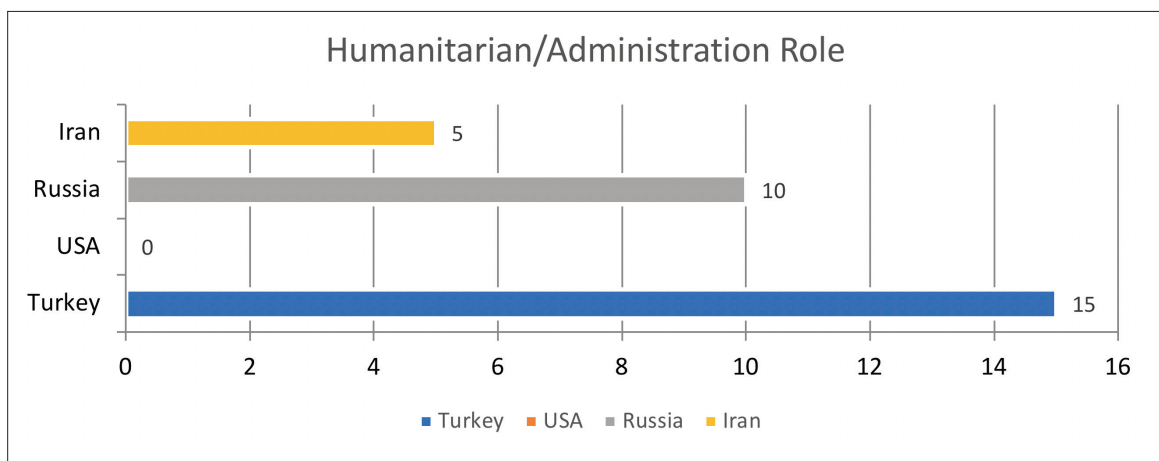
Graph-3: Political role of international powers in Aleppo**Graph-4:** Relationship of international powers with the community in Aleppo**Graph-5:** Final influence result of international powers in Aleppo

Table - 5: International influence and presences in Idlib

| Idlib | | | | | | |
|---------------|----------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | Presence | Size of Military Presence | Humanitarian/ Administration Role | Political Role | Relationship with Community | Final Influence Result |
| Turkey | Yes | 25 | 15 | 25 | 15 | 80 |
| USA | No | 0 | 0 | 10 | 5 | 15 |
| Russia | Yes | 20 | 10 | 25 | 5 | 60 |
| Iran | Yes | 10 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 20 |

Graph-6: Size of military presence of international powers in Idlib**Graph-7:** Humanitarian and administration role of international powers in Idlib

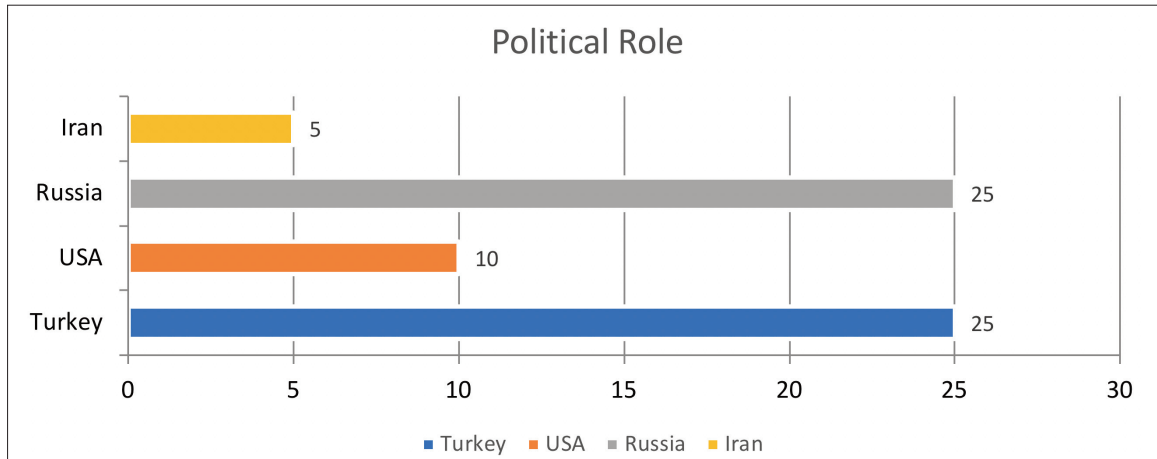
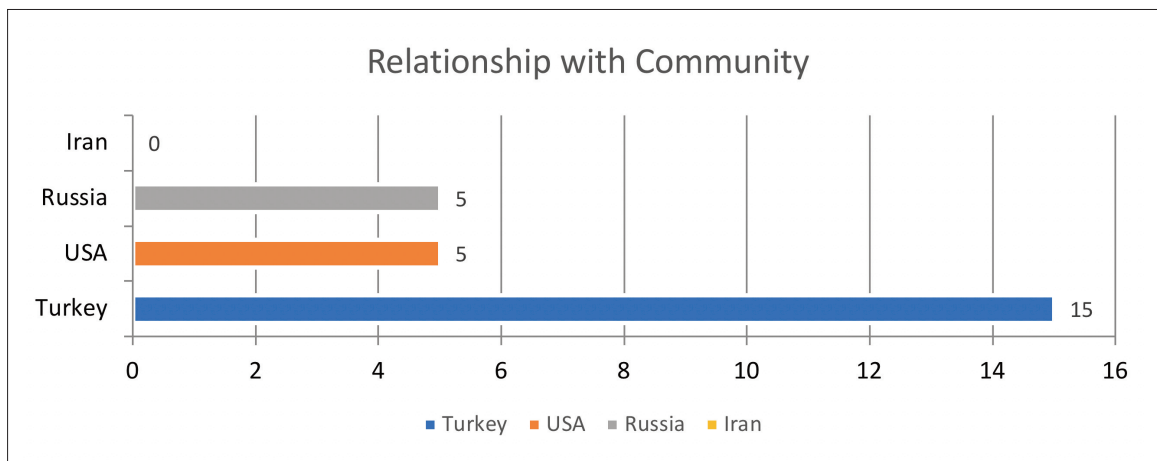
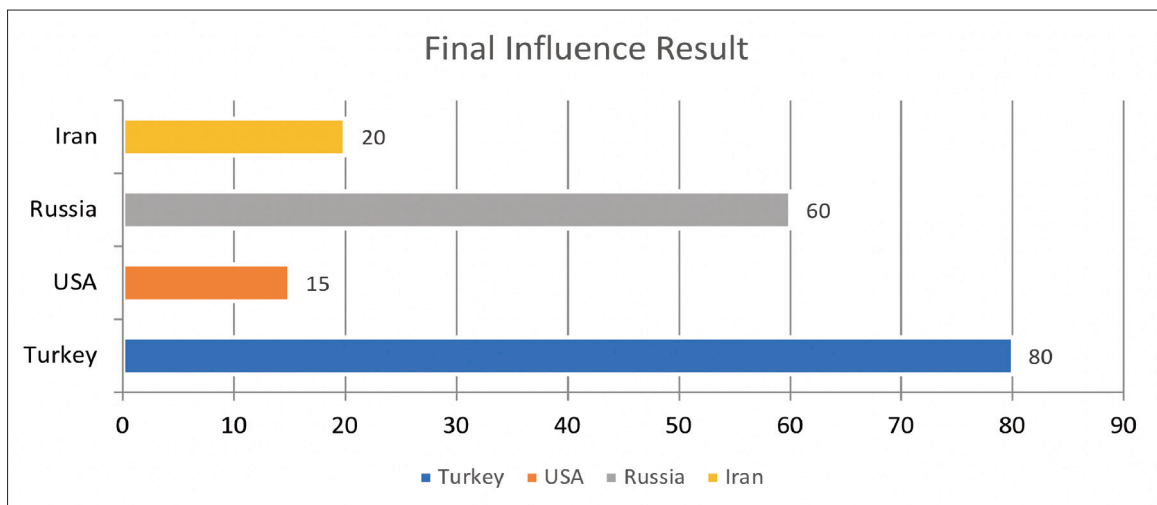
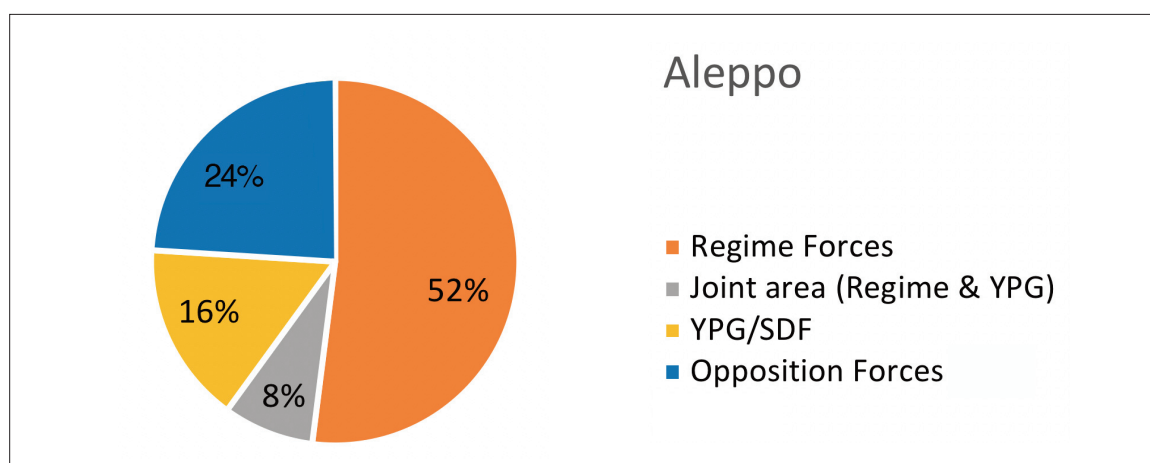
Graph-8: Political role of international powers in Idlib**Graph-9:** Relationship of international powers with the community in Idlib**Graph-10:** Final influence result of international powers in Idlib

Table - 6 give a general look on the local forces, which were able to secure their areas of control:

Table - 6: Local forces percentage of control in Aleppo and Idlib

| | Province Area km ² | Regime Forces | Joint area (Regime & YPG) | YPG/SDF | Opposition Forces |
|---------------|----------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------|---------|----------------------|
| Aleppo | 18.482 km ² | 52% | 8% | 16% | 24% |
| Idlib | 6.097 km ² | 49% | - | - | 51% |

Graph - 11: Local forces percentage of control in Aleppo



Graph - 12: Local forces percentage of control in Idlib

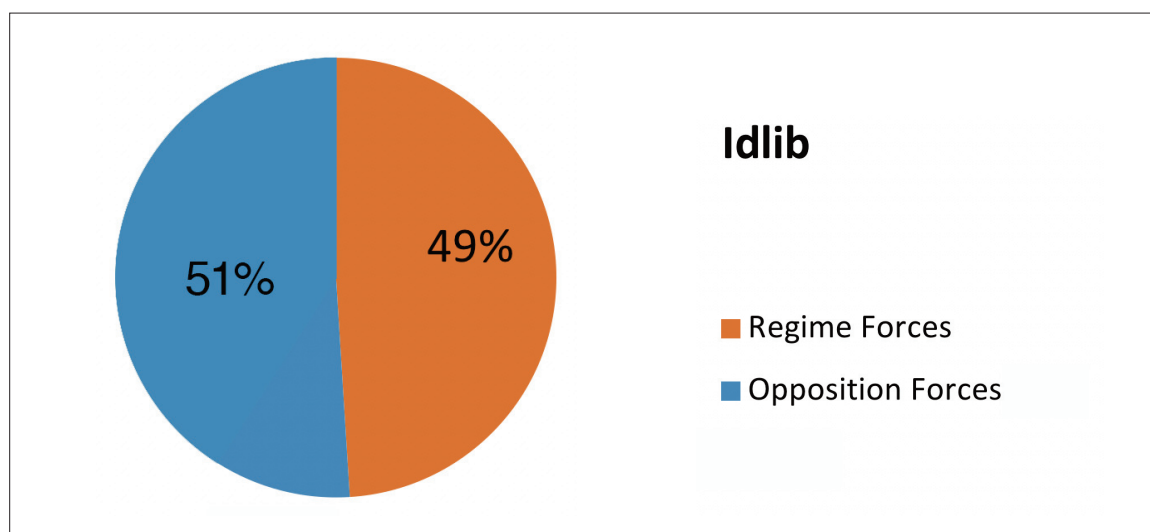
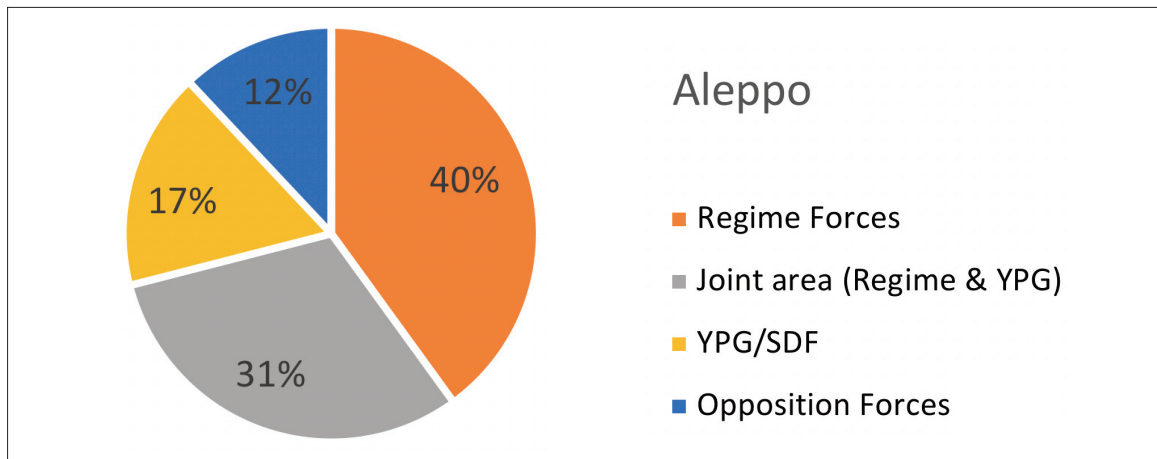


Table - 7 and Table - 8 shows the local forces which are controlling the M4/M5 in Aleppo and Idlib:

Table - 7: Who's controlling M4 international road in Aleppo and Idlib

| | Province Area (Km) | Regime Forces | Joint area (Regime & YPG) | YPG/SDF | Opposition Forces |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------|-------------------|
| Aleppo | 195 Km | 40% | 31% | 17% | 12% |
| Idlib | 73 Km | 20% | - | - | 80% |

Graph - 13: Local forces controlling the M4 in Aleppo



Graph - 14: Local forces controlling the M4 in Idlib

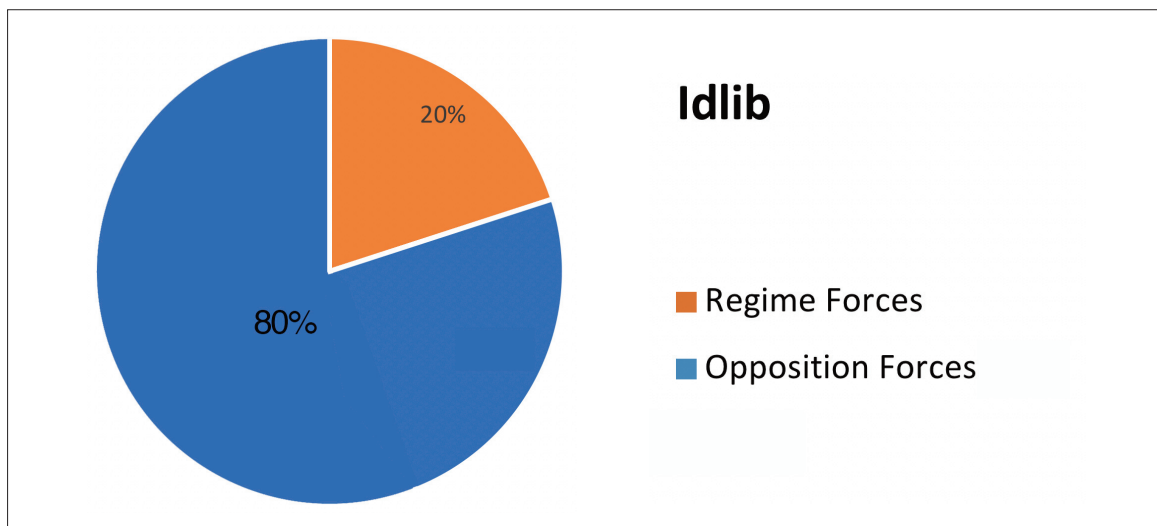


Table - 8: Who's controlling M5 international road in Aleppo and Idlib

| | M5 Length (Km) | Regime Forces | Joint area (Regime & SDF) | YPG/SDF | Opposition Forces |
|---------------|----------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------|-------------------|
| Aleppo | 88 Km | 85% | 1% | - | 14% |
| Idlib | 72 Km | 100% | - | - | - |

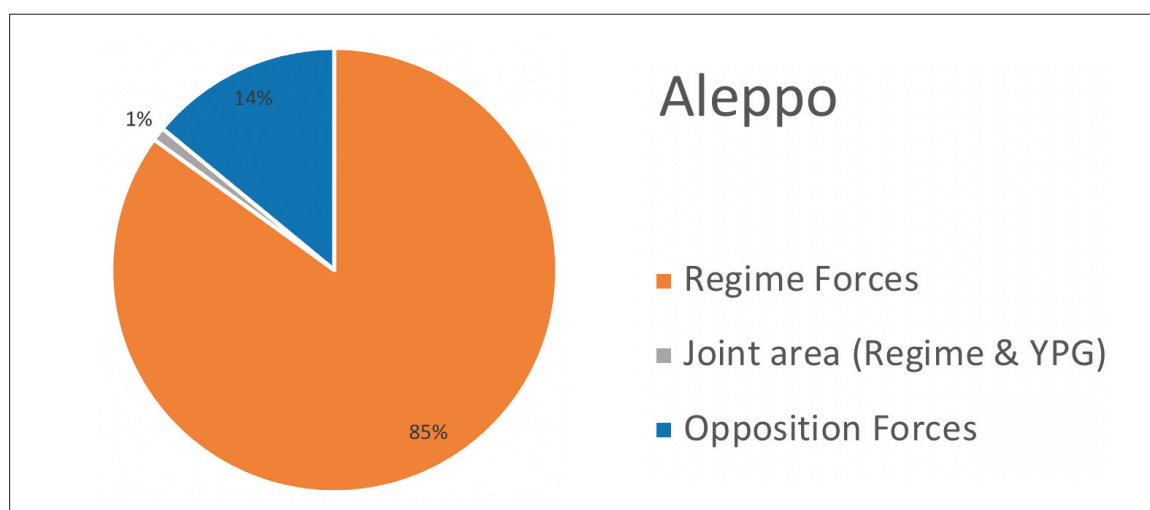
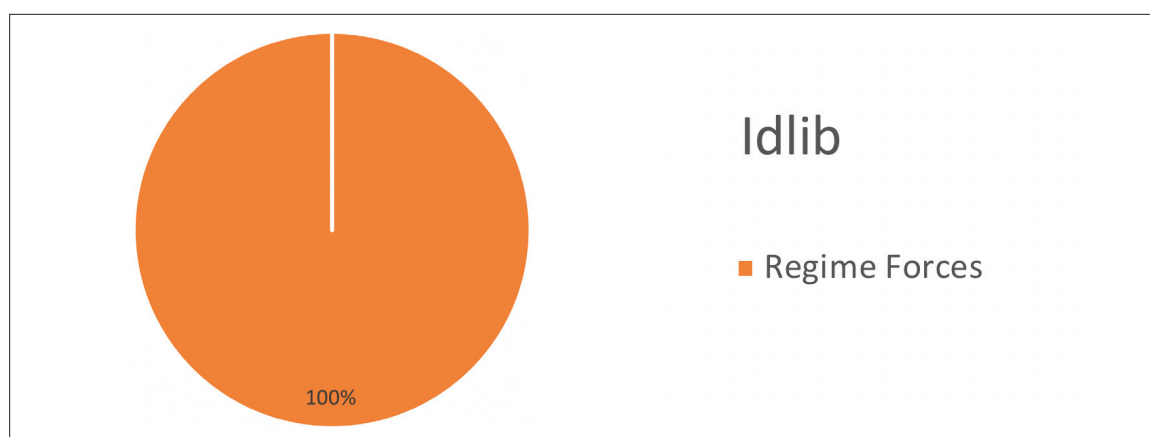
Graph - 15: Who's controlling M5 international road in Aleppo**Graph - 16:** Who's controlling M5 international road in Idlib

Table – 9 shows the current situation of the official crossing borders in Aleppo and Idlib, between Syria and Turkey:

Table – 9: Situation of the international crossing borders in Aleppo and Idlib, between Syria and Turkey

| | Province | Local Forces | International Influence | Humanitarian | Commercial | NGO Staff | Civilians |
|----------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
| Ayn al-Arab/ Mursitpinar | Aleppo | Joint Presence (Regime/SDF) | Russia/Iran | Closed | | | |
| Jarabulus/ Karkamis | Aleppo | SNA | Turkey | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Al-Ra'e/ Cobanbey | Aleppo | SNA | Turkey | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Bab al-Salam/ Oncupinar | Aleppo | SNA | Turkey | No | No | Yes | No |
| Meidan Ikbez/ Islahiye | Aleppo | SNA | Turkey | Closed | | | |
| Olive Branch/ Zeytin Dali | Aleppo | SNA | Turkey | Yes | No | No | No |
| Atma/Bukulmez | Aleppo | HTS | - | Closed | | | |
| Bab al-Hawa/ Cilvegozu | Idlib | HTS | - | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Kafr Losin/ Dostluk Koprusu | Idlib | SNA | Turkey | Used by the Turkish Army | | | |
| Darkoush/Sanlı | Idlib | HTS | - | Closed | | | |
| Khirbet al-Jouz/ Guvecci | Idlib | HTS | - | Closed | | | |
| Ayn al-Bayda/ Assagipulluyazi | Idlib | HTS | - | Closed | | | |

3. GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMY

About 4 million people live in the area controlled by the opposition factions and the HTS in Idlib, the Hama countryside and the Latakia

countryside. There are about 285 local councils in the area, most of which belong to the interim government (nominal) before the administrative map changes, the HTS expanded

at the expense of Nur al-Deen al-Zinqi and other JWT-affiliated groups and the Salvation Government became the main service and executive administration in the province.

Through its executive stool of the "Salvation Government" the HTS managed to put its hand in most of the local councils in the province through different tactics. The Salvation Government dissolved some of the existing councils and re-formed them and controlled their public property as in Zinqi-controlled areas.

The HTS also worked to gain administrative legitimacy in areas through the adoption of representatives of local prominent families in the local councils, which has received great acceptance in the areas considered as HTS social incubator such as Tlemens.

On the other hand, the Salvation Government avoided making any changes in areas where it has almost no support, only visited areas such as Ma'arat al-Nu'man and Ariha, and concluded an agreement to formalize these councils with the Ministry of Local Administration in the Salvation Government.

The Salvation Government was rejected by residents in areas such as Jirnaz and Ma'asran who are refusing to cooperate with the local council appointed by the Salvation Government or give any legitimacy by not paying the cleaning fees, or refuse to meet with the cadres of the local council appointed by the Government.

The HTS divided its areas of control into five military administrative divisions: Badia, Hama, Hodud (borders\frontlines), Sahel, and Idlib. HTS after its recent expansion, sought to strengthen the centrality of the sectors by linking the areas to which each sector belongs for example, those who want to work in the

local councils located in the Badia district submit an application in the village of Tal Touqan, which is the administrative center of the Badia district.

The Idlib Free Council suffers from a lack of funding and the ability to impose itself as an actor in the local administration after the expansion of the Salvation Government while sources indicate that it is disintegrating especially after most of its members only care about their private business and have not formed a meeting in long time.

These partitions enjoy the near complete administrative autonomy of the central administration represented by the Ministry of Local Administration of the Salvation Government, where the absolute authority to appoint or dissolve a council is maintained without reference to the center. The Board of Directors of the Center cannot appoint even a one member of the Council only by virtue of friendships or personal relations and not by administrative decisions, noting that the HTS and Salvation Government did not add new local councils to those that were affiliated to the Idlib Free Council.

As for the Idlib Free Council, the latter suffers from the lack of funding and the ability to impose itself as an actor in the local administration after the expansion of the Salvation Government while sources indicate that it is disintegrating especially after most of its members only care about their private business and haven't formed a meeting in long time.

4. DEFINING AND EXPLAINING THE HTS/SALVATION GOVERNMENT CONTROL OVER IDLIB AND WESTERN ALEPPO

Military control and governance are only part of the political power apparatus available to factional players within the Idlib region. For HTS in particular, a crucial part of its influence and control stem from its management of economic and essential infrastructure.

The Bab al-Hawa crossing: The international crossing point at Bab al-Hawa, 50 km (31 miles) west of Idlib, is of great strategic importance to the north of Syria, as it is the only outlet that can connect the opposition areas with the outside world. The Bab al-Hawa crossing generates high revenues as a result of the transport of goods by traders and from the flow of relief materials delivered by aid organizations, not to mention the transit of civilians through the crossing.

The Queue Office at Bab al-Hawa: The mission of this office is to organize the trucks carrying goods and humanitarian aid supplies from the Turkish side of the crossing to the Syrian interior on behalf of various traders and organizations. It also works to prevent any trucks from crossing the border other than through this office. The HTS has appointed one of its cadres to manage this office and imposes a charge of 6,000 Syrian pounds (c. US\$11.6) on each truck passing through. About 200 vehicles transit a day, meaning that the HTS stands to gain the equivalent of around US\$2,500 per day from this source alone.

The Watad Petrol Company and Fuel Monopolies: In early 2018, HTS operatives established a company called Watad Petroleum, giving it a monopoly over imports of fuel and

gas into its territories, whether through the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing or the internal crossing. When roads were shut down because of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in Afrin in March 2018, the HTS reaped major profits through its monopoly over fuel and gas in the rebel-held areas: it was able to import European fuels such as gasoline and diesel as well as gas through the Sadkoub checkpoint in Idlib city. It then sold and distributed these at prices it could impose on the market, since it had no competitors. Following the re-opening of fuel supplies through Afrin, the HTS set impossible conditions on traders to compel them to buy HTS fuel, in exchange allowing them access to gas supplies (which only HTS provides to Idlib thus far). The HTS cadres levied a fine of 50,000 Syrian pounds (c. US\$97) on traders who would not comply.

Taxes and fees: The HTS and its civil operation, the SG, impose taxes and fees on civilians in Idlib and the surrounding areas. These include taxes on cars and motorcycles, and levies on businesses and institutions such as pharmacies, restaurants, and hygiene, electricity and water facilities. The SG does not have a mechanism for disclosing its financial sources or expenditure – it did not even set up a Ministry of Finance when the government was first established – and most of the taxes and fees are believed to go to the HTS's Economy Office.

Water Stations: Many organizations supply fuel to the water plants in the de-militarized zone so that they can keep running, and these are sufficient for meeting at least the minimum needs of the local population. However, the HTS, through the SG's Ministry of Local Administration and Services, imposes water taxes on citizens, starting from a minimum of 2,000 Syrian pounds (c. US\$3.90) per month.

In fact, the organizations operating water facilities are responsible, according to the terms of their contracts with the local councils, for repairing all faults of different types and for maintaining supplies from the relevant water station in each area.

Financial investments: Financial investments are a key component in the HTS' economic profit structure. These are concentrated in the areas where the HTS has the greatest degree of control, and in areas close to border crossings in the north of Syria. They are especially prevalent in Sarmada and Aldana, where the HTS, through its local affiliates, has invested in various types of enterprises, most notably car sales and real estate companies, particularly those involving construction projects. Profits from these investments are estimated to amount to around US\$194,000, if not more.

The HTS is a pragmatic actor. Its leadership has realized that the de-militarized zone agreement reached by Turkey and Russia in March 2020 has provided it with crucial time and opportunity to address local issues and shortcomings surrounding its governance and control within the Idlib de-militarized zone and surrounding areas.

Another form of financial investments are the currency exchange offices that have been opened by HTS at various times. HTS expanded this network under the name of the al-Wasit Company, a new enterprise with capital of

more than US\$30 million. It has been opening branches in different areas and requiring local or small-scale exchange offices to deal with it or with similar offices run by affiliates.

5. HTS AND THEIR END-GOALS IN IDLIB

The HTS is a pragmatic actor. Its leadership has realized that the de-militarized zone agreement reached by Turkey and Russia in March 2020 has provided it with crucial time and opportunity to address local issues and shortcomings surrounding its governance and control within the Idlib de-militarized zone and surrounding areas.

Indeed, time is currently the best ally for the HTS, and it is clear that it plans to use it to further strengthen its future negotiating position with regional actors in Syria. It has three major strategic objectives, most of which are already partly in place:

- Firstly, it aims to get control all the major assets in the province, including transport routes, power supplies, and trade
- Secondly, it will gradually attempt to unify all governance and services under the Salvation Government
- Thirdly, it will slowly expel the foreign fighters associated with AQ in Syria.

The leadership of the HTS believes that achieving such ambitious goals will allow it to redefine its role from an insurgent group to a local security and governance actor. However, most importantly, it believes that such a new positioning will enable it to negotiate with Moscow with a view to settling on a sustainable arrangement in the north-west that would make a regime-led assault on Idlib un-

necessary and overly punitive in terms of costs and humanitarian consequences.

The U.S. decision to pull out from eastern Syria has now indirectly offered more time for HTS to address these issues. Indeed, as a result, the Russians, Turks and even the regime are now all focused on how to manage that region.

Nevertheless, the group faces two insurmountable challenges. First, it must find a way to deal with foreign fighters without causing further fragmentation to its jihadi base. It needs to do this without triggering confrontation with the most extremist groups, as that would invite the regime to take advantage of internal conflict and attack them both. Indeed, the HTS wishes to present itself to Moscow and Damascus as a frontline deterrence force against extremists. It therefore would prefer, if possible, to eliminate the most radical individuals through containment and assassinations.

Secondly, HTS must convince the Russians more than anyone else to recognize, at least in part, its future role as the primary authority in the area. This objective seems far-fetched, given the international consensus on the designation of the HTS as a terrorist organization. It is therefore difficult to envisage how the Russians could be persuaded to change their minds on this issue or to accept any proposition

from the HTS. However, as the situation develops in Idlib, and in Syria overall, the outcome cannot be predicted with any confidence.

Meanwhile, the HTS faces several challenges. The internal dynamics within the group could well lead to fraternal conflict with AQ affiliates in the region, which would weaken it and encourage the regime to launch a concerted attack on it, with the support of Russian airpower. As for the survival of the de-militarized zone, it depends on a Turkish-Russian entente which is vulnerable to influence by other international actors and by unexpected shifts in their positions, as has already been seen with the U.S. Thus far, Ankara has played a balancing role between its traditional allies and Moscow, but this has been largely enabled by Putin's willingness to accommodate Turkey's security concerns. An escalation in north-eastern¹ Syria, a spillover of refugees to Turkey, a premature withdrawal by the Turkish Army from Idlib, or rogue behaviour by the regime could torpedo the Astana-led de-escalation efforts in the north. In such a scenario, the HTS would be confronted with a concerted attack by both the regime and Russian forces, and in such a scenario, it would most probably lose. The only scenario for the HTS is therefore to continue its efforts to further consolidate its authority on the ground to buy itself more time in a desperate attempt to rehabilitate itself both regionally and internationally.

Conclusion

The reality of the influence and control at the Idlib governorate and its surrounding remains a clear example of the size and diversity of the military and administrative power in Idlib, especially in the opposition-held positions. Despite this diversity and many administrative difficulties, the local population deliberately adapted to the administrative reality there, and the quasi-coexistence with the security authority in the Idlib governorate. The Turkish intervention in the Idlib governorate helped limit the harm of the regime's military operations, and stopped its advance before controlling the M4 road, thus imposing its full fire-control on all the opposition-held areas.

In short, there are many internal and external factors that have formed or helped to shape the security and administrative reality in the opposition-held areas in Idlib governorate and its surrounding. And it is certain that there will be a new wave of new internal and external factors in the near future, which will have either a negative or positive impact on the region. Therefore, local actors, in coordination with international actors, should develop clear plans capable of dealing with any future changes that occur in the region.

When the area controlled by international actors in Aleppo and Idlib and the impact are analyzed, the following evaluations can be made. The outstanding external actors in Aleppo province in terms of military, political, administrative and social influence are Iran, Turkey and Russia. The interesting point here is that, contrary to the general opinion, Iran has more influence than Russia in the areas under the regime's control. While Russia and Iran have a close relation in terms of military and political roles, it can be seen that Iran

has a high social impact through its interaction with the people and activities in the cultural field however Russia's impact in this sense remains limited. Turkey has an impact through its military presence in al-Bab, Jarablus, Azaz and Afrin These are connected to Aleppo and its impact is on the administrative-political structures built in these regions and the humanitarian activities. In Idlib it can be seen that Turkey and Russia stand out. In Idlib it can be seen that Turkey and Russia stand out. This is not surprising because the course of development in Idlib is largely determined by the negotiations conducted and agreements signed by Turkey and Russia. The military presence of Russia in the regions under the regime control and Turkey in the regions under the opposition control in Idlib, have high power to impact military developments. Since the beginning of 2020, it has been observed that the presence of Iranian militias has increased in south Idlib and western Aleppo. Nevertheless, it can be said that Iran's military presence remained at low levels compared with Turkey and Russia. Idlib negotiations are carried out through Turkish-Russian bilateral discussion rather than Astana platforms. Accordingly, the political influence of Iran in Idlib is limited compared to Turkey and Russia. The fact that civil and administrative affairs are largely carried out by local powers in Idlib, limits the role of all external actors in this respect. It can be observed that the influence of the USA in Aleppo and Idlib is extremely limited. The main reasons for this situation are; the US focusing its attention mostly on the east of the Euphrates, gradually cutting its support to the Syrian opposition after 2014, and Turkey's withdrawal from Manjib, Aleppo before the Operation Peace Spring. However, as the USA is one of the effective actors in Syria in general, it has an

effect in determining the developments in Idlib and Aleppo. On the other hand, through some of its humanitarian aid and non-governmental organizational activities, the USA creates a political and social impact area although it is limited. An evaluation can be made as follows on the controlled areas of Syrian actors in Aleppo and Idlib. While the Aleppo city center is under the control of the regime forces, it can be seen that the control across the province is only 52%. As a result of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, the northern countryside of Aleppo is under the control of the Syrian opposition. While the regime makes its presence felt in Tell Rifat and Manbij, it has to share control of the area with the YPG/PKK. In Idlib, the city center is under the control of the opposition. It can be seen that the areas controlled by the regime and the opposition throughout the province are approximately equal to each other. In the case of the M4 and M5 highways, which are considered to be the life-blood of Syria, it can be said that the regime forces stand out compared to the opposition. Only the part of the M4

highway passing through Idlib is largely under the control of the opposition. According to the agreement signed by Turkey and Russia, a joint patrol task is carried out on the section of the M4 highway in Idlib, which is under the control of the opposition. Russia and the regime maintain their ultimate goal of controlling this line through military operations. However, Turkey considers this as a complete loss of Idlib in such a situation. For this reason, it aims to protect the status quo through diplomatic methods, if possible, but military methods, if necessary. In the regions of the M4 within the borders of Aleppo, regime control has largely been achieved. However, the regime forces have to share control with the YPG in regions such as Manbij. The opposition continues to control the part of the M4 extending from al-Bab to Arima. As a result of the operations of the regime forces in 2020, the entire part of the M5 highway passing through Idlib has been under the control of the regime forces. The part of the M5 passing through Aleppo and extending to Azaz is within the Euphrates Shield region and is under the control of the opposition.



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