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Northwestern Syria Scenario Plan

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Northwestern Syria Scenario Plan

Executive Summary 4

Current Status 5

Government of Turkey Strategic Concerns 6

Local Actors and Relationships with Turkey 6

Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham 7

National Liberation Front 8

Extremist Jihadist Groups 10

Current Humanitarian Situation 11

Scenarios 12

Overarching Assumptions 13

Scenario 1 14

Armed Opposition Infighting 14

Description 15

Key Assumptions 16

Indicators: 16

Impact of Scenario 1 17

Scenario 2 18

Government of Syria Offensive 18

Description 19

Key Assumptions 20

Indicators:. 20

Impact of SCenario 2 21

Scenario 3 22

Negotiated Agreement/Limited Offensive 22

Description 23

Key Assumptions 24

Indicators:. 24

Impact of Scenario 3 25

Executive Summary

Following the conclusion of conflict in southern Syria in July 2018, the Government of Syria set its sights on the northwest. Indeed, the Government achieved many of its key strategic priorities in 2018, and northwestern Syria remains the last region not under the direct control of an international actor. In September 2018, the Astana guarantor states of Russia, Iran, and Turkey implemented a joint agreement to enforce a disarmament zone in northwestern Syria. Like the previous de-escalation zone agreement, the disarmament agreement was designed as a temporary measure aimed at providing the Government of Turkey time to resolve the primary political and military impediment in northwestern Syria: the presence of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

As of January 8, considerable inter-armed opposition conflict is ongoing throughout much of northwestern Syria. On January 1, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham launched a major offensive against the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front-affiliated Noureddine Al-Zinki in western rural Aleppo. By January 4, Noureddine Al-Zinki had been militarily defeated and effectively dissolved; remaining combatants fled to Turkish-held southern Afrin, and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham enlarged its area of military control. The defeat of Noureddine Al-Zinki appears to have emboldened Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham to attack several of the other smaller National Liberation Front-affiliated groups; further conflict is expected in Ariha, Ma'aret An-Numan, and northern Hama in the near term. It is unclear why The Government of Turkey did not take immediate action to defend Noureddine Al-Zinki. The Government of Turkey may have 'permitted' Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham to eliminate Noureddine Al-Zinki, as they reportedly did not trust the group. It is equally possible that Turkey did not wish to risk confronting Haya't Tahrir Al-Sham until a time of its choosing. However, despite the recent tactical shifts on the ground, control of the trajectory of northwestern Syria remains solidly in the hands of the Government of Turkey.

This report is structured as a scenario plan; it will describe three scenarios assessed to be most likely to occur in northwestern Syria over the next three to six months. Scenario 1 details intense internal armed opposition infighting; Scenario 2 details a major Government of Syria offensive; Scenario 3 details a negotiated agreement between the Government of Turkey and Russia to isolate Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and formally divide northwestern Syria into areas of influence. Each scenario will forecast the most likely series of events, explore key assumptions, identify indicators, and assess associated humanitarian impacts.

Northwestern Syria
Current Status

The northwestern Syria disarmament agreement, negotiated between the Governments of Turkey and Russia in September 2018, was intended to delay an impending Government of Syria offensive into northwestern Syria. The disarmament agreement is an inherently unstable and unenforceable agreement. Like previous de-escalation zone agreements, local truces, cessations of hostilities, and ceasefires that have occurred throughout the last seven years of conflict in Syria, the disarmament agreement was never intended to be a long-term solution. Rather, it was a temporary measure aimed at buying the Government of Turkey time to shape the ground situation to one more favorable to its longer-term strategic interests. In this way, the current status quo in northwestern Syria is poised to change decisively, likely within the next six months.

Despite finding itself in the crosshairs once again, northwestern Syria has not traditionally been an area of key importance to the Syrian state. There are no easily extractable or inherently valuable natural resources in Idleb or western rural Aleppo, and the population is both predominantly agrarian and poor, with few strong linkages to either the Ba'ath party or the ruling elite. For this reason, as well as the significant presence of extremist armed groups, the Government of Syria has not prioritized retaking this area. However, northwestern Syria does have one critical strategic dimension: the presence the M5 and M4 highways. The stretches of the M5 and M4 highways in northwestern Syria link Damascus and coastal Syria to Aleppo city, and establishing control over sections of these highways is critical for both trade and military mobility. With the fall of southern Syria in July 2018, the Government of Syria has secured nearly all of the remaining stretches of the M5 highway in the country. Recapturing northwestern Syria would thus once again link the major cities of western Syria to each other for the first time since the start of the conflict. For this reason, recapturing the remainder of the M5 highway is currently one of the top strategic priorities for the Government of Syria.

Indeed, the current phase of the Syrian conflict is nearly over, with only northern Aleppo, northeastern Syria, and northwestern Syria remaining outside Government of Syria control. However, there remains one crucial obstacle preventing discussions of a national level Syrian peace agreement (or more structured end to the conflict): Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. As noted, the trajectory of the Syrian conflict and the associated post-conflict space is no longer driven by local actors, but rather by regional and international powers. In northern Aleppo, the armed and political opposition are under the aegis of the Syrian Interim Government, and thereby under the indirect but functional control of the Government of Turkey. The Syrian Interim Government could easily be brought to the negotiating table at Turkey's behest. While the Kurdish Self Administration remains in control of much of northeastern Syria, their longer-term independence was in many ways determined by the presence of U.S. forces, and the recently announced U.S. withdrawal is expected to rapidly accelerate negotiations between the Kurdish Self-Administration and Damascus. However, in northwestern Syria, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, an armed group that is internationally considered to be a terrorist organization, is the largest component of the armed opposition. So long as Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham remains a major armed opposition actor negotiating a national peace agreement that encompasses all of Syria's territory will remain impossible.

The Government of Syria is certainly militarily capable of retaking northwestern Syria, so long as it has Russian support. However, the Government of Russia is clearly unwilling to provide this support in order to preserve its relationship with the Government of Turkey. Turkey has the most sway in determining the ultimate outcome in northwestern Syria due to both Turkey's own strategic concerns and its existing relationships with armed actors in northwestern Syria.

Government of Turkey Strategic Concerns

The Government of Turkey has three narrow but critical interests in northwestern Syria; these three interests indicate that the Government of Turkey will continue to attempt to prevent a Government of Syria military offensive into northwestern Syria. First, the Government of Turkey will seek to protect its investments in northwestern Syria, as part of its broader geopolitical strategy to present itself as the champion of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East. Turkey has already invested considerable resources into various armed groups and political bodies in northwestern Syria, which has given Turkey popular support throughout much of Idleb. The funding Turkey has provided, and the relationships that is has cultivated, would be lost or irreparably damaged if the Government of Syria retook control of opposition-held Idleb and northern Hama. Indeed, abandoning northwestern Syria could also negatively impact relations with Turkey's other client armed groups and populations in northern Aleppo.

Second, Turkey will seek to maintain control and influence over northwestern Syria as a means of gaining leverage over the entire Syrian peace process. Ironically, Turkey's main strategic concern is not northwestern Syria, but rather the northeast, where Turkey continues to have real concerns over the future of the PYD in Syria. Turkey thus wants to maintain influence and control in northwestern Syria in order to maintain its role as a stakeholder in any final agreement in Syria. Turkey likely will seek to leverage its ability to act as a broker in northwestern and northern Syria in order to have a say in determining the ultimate fate of northeastern Syria, and by extension, the PYD.

Third, the Government of Turkey has humanitarian concerns related to possible large-scale displacement. Northwestern Syria has a fairly large population of almost 3 million people, which includes 1.2 million IDPs. As Turkey already faces considerable challenges with respect to refugees, a vast displacement to its immediate border region in northeastern Syria would not be an ideal outcome. Turkey is also disinclined to accept additional Syrian refugees. A unilaterally coordinated Government of Syria-led armed offensive would likely result in both of these outcomes.[1] Thus, the Government of Turkey will seek to shape any armed offensive so that such displacement is contained and limited.

Local Actors and Relationships with Turkey

In order to ensure that an offensive does not take place, the Government of Turkey will need to leverage its relationships with the major local actors in northwestern Syria; most critically, it must somehow find a solution to the problem of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. With its international identification as a terrorist organization, there is little to no possibility of a place for them in a future Syrian state.

There are nominally three major local armed opposition umbrella groups in northwestern Syria: Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, The National Liberation Front, and a collection of extremist jihadist groups.[2] Each of these actors has their own unique relationships with the Government of Turkey and with one other; understanding these relationships is key to identifying how Turkey will use these groups to shape the future trajectory of northwestern Syria. It is also worth noting that, while there are areas that these actors do directly control, there is considerable 'marbling' and intermixing of these groups geographically throughout northwestern Syria. Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham

1 Importantly, massive displacement is likely in every scenario detailed below. However, a full scale Government of Syria offensive would certainly see the largest displacement numbers.

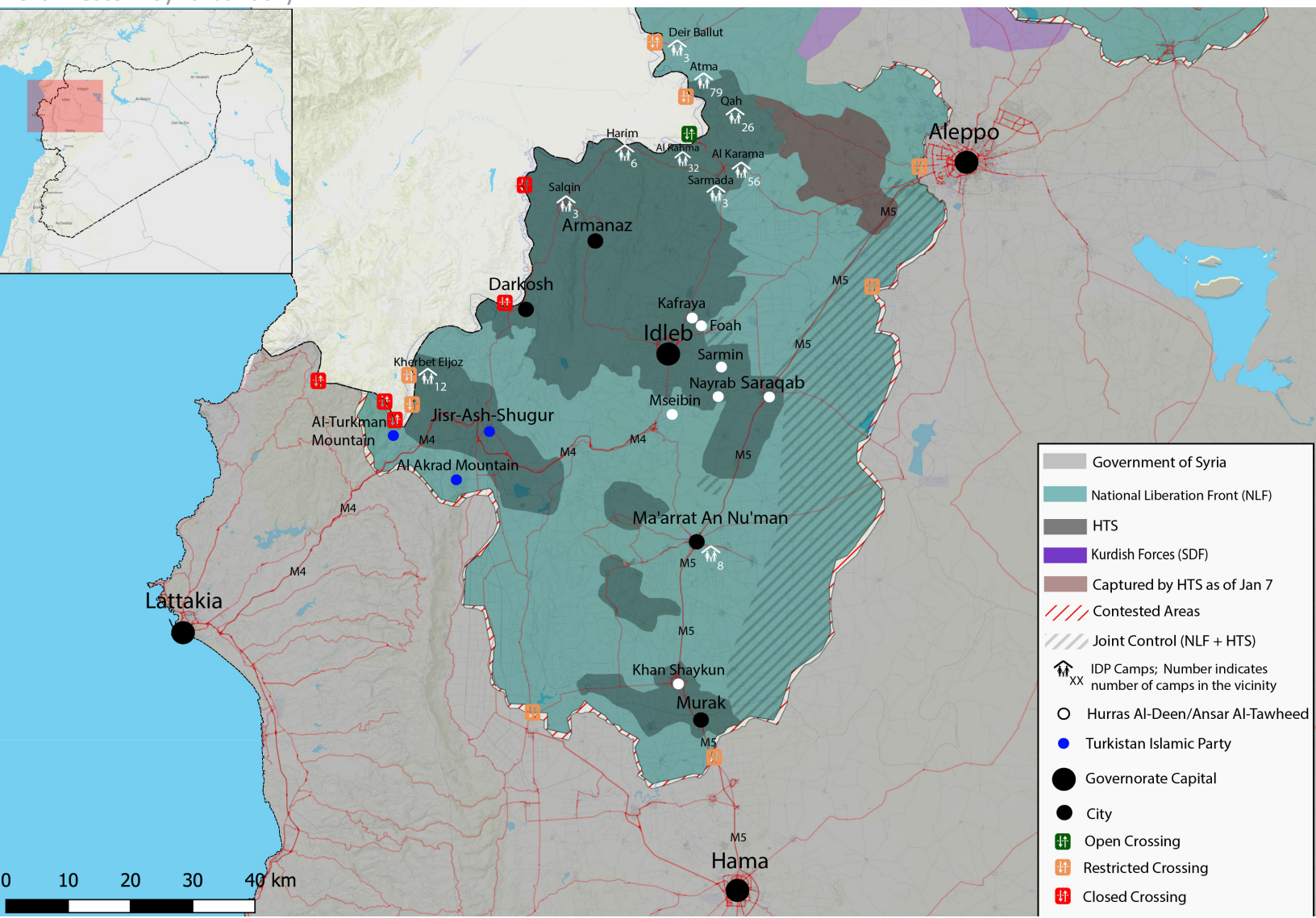
2 Jaish Ezza, a group based in northern Hama governorate, has not been included as a major actor. Most of the members of Jaish Ezza are defectors from the Syrian military. Since its formation in 2012, Jaish Ezza has remained independent from the numerous mergers between different armed opposition groups in northwestern Syria. Jaish Ezza was previously a recipient of U.S. military support; however, when this ceased in 2017, Jaish Ezza formed a much closer relationship with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Therefore, while Jaish Ezza is nominally independent, they have a cooperative relationship with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and generally share territory with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham

Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham was formed in January 2017 following a merger between Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra), Ansar Al-Din, Noureddine Al-Zinki, and Jaish Al-Sunnah. Since its formation, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham has denied affiliation to Al-Qaeda. As of December 2018, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham is in control of many of the major communities in northwestern Syria, namely Idleb city, Saraqeb, Jisr Ash-Shughur, Murak, Khan Sheykhun, Dana, and Sarmada. The group is also in control of many major crossing points, to include Murak (cross-line on the M5 highway) and the Bab El Hawa border crossing with Turkey. In addition to direct military control, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham also formed a governance body in November 2017, the Salvation Government, to manage and coordinate local councils, civil services, and general administration in the areas they control in northwestern Syria.

Relations between Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham and the Government of Turkey are generally limited to coordination. While the Government of Turkey does not control or direct Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, it does exert considerable financial leverage over the group through the Bab El Hawa crossing. Bab El Hawa is the primary border crossing in northwestern Syria, and is used for humanitarian, commercial, and civilian purposes; control over this crossing affords Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham considerable taxation revenues. Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham also provides protection to Turkish forces in Idleb at the 12 Turkish observation points in northwestern Syria. It is also worth noting that the Government of Turkey has used Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham in the past as means of threatening armed groups in northwestern Syria that refuse Turkish orders. For example, according to local sources, when Ahrar Al-Sham refused Turkey’s orders to attend the first rounds of the Astana conference in January 2017, Turkey reportedly

Northwestern Syria: January 7



messaged to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham that they would not oppose an attack on Ahrar Al-Sham.

It is important to mention that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is not necessarily a monolithic organization. According to local sources, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is currently split into two camps. The first is led by Abu Mohammad Julani, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's general commander, and mainly consists of Syrian combatants. This group includes two other prominent commanders: Abu Ahmad Hdoud, who is responsible for controlling the border areas of Dana, Sarmada, and Harem and Abu Maria Al-Qahtani,[3] who is generally considered to have the strongest support amongst combatants within Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. The second camp largely consists of foreign jihadist fighters and is headed by Abu Malek Al-Talli, who is Syrian, and also includes prominent Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham commanders such as Abu Yaqzan Al-Masri, an Egyptian. The divisions within these camps may be overstated; indeed, many analysts believe that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is far more unified than it is divided. However, the fact that these divisions exist is important. There is a strong likelihood that once real conflict begins in northwestern Syria that the more pragmatic, largely Syrian component of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham will be compelled to dissolve itself, merge with Turkish-backed groups, or reconcile with the Government of Syria. Whether they will be permitted to do any of these actions is open for debate.

National Liberation Front

The National Liberation Front was formed in May 2018, by a collection of ten opposition groups in northwestern Syria at the behest of the Government of Turkey.[4] These ten groups were joined by four more armed opposition groups in August 2018.[5] Of these groups, the most important is Faylaq Al-Sham.[6] Faylaq Al-Sham[7] is one of the largest armed opposition groups in northwestern Syria. Some National Liberation Front groups, to include Faylaq Al-Sham, are also part of the National Army, the primary Turkish-backed armed opposition coalition in Turkish-held northern Syria, which exists under the aegis of the Syrian Interim Government.

Thus, in theory, the National Liberation Front is considered to be close to the Syrian Interim Government and the National Army. In practice, the disparate armed groups that currently fall under the banner of the National Liberation Front differ greatly in terms of ideology and local interests and are only unified by their collective reliance on direct Turkish support, which is provided to each of the groups individually, not as part of a centralized body.

In fact, it is this lack of collective unity which led to the events of early January 2018, which are noted in the executive summary. Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's takeover of western Aleppo, and their subsequent defeat of Noureddine Al-Zinki, a formerly key component of the National Liberation Front, can be directly attributed to both the lack of unity within the National Liberation Front and Turkish mistrust of numerous National Liberation Front groups. While Noureddine Al-Zinki was nominally supported by the Government of Turkey, according to local sources Turkey never fully trusted Noureddine Al-Zinki due its reputation as an unreliable partner.[8] There are

3 Al-Qahtani was formerly a member of the Shura Council in Jabhat Al-Nusra. Local sources noted that it is likely in the long-term that Abu Maria Al-Qahtani and his group of combatants will defect from Abu Mohamad Julani and rebrand their armed group.

4 Faylaq Al-Sham; Sahiliya First Group; Sahiliya Second Group; Jaish Nasr; Idleb Free Army; Jaish Nokhba; Group 23; Al-Horiya Brigade; Islam Daraya Martyrs; and Jaish Thani.

5 Jabhat Tahrir Sourya, Suqour Al-Sham, Tajammo' Dimashq, and Jaish Al-Ahrar; Jabhat Tahrir Sourya was formed in February 2018 between Ahrar Al-Sham and Noureddine Al-Zinki following the latter's defection from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

6 The formation of the National Liberation Front left Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and Jaish Ezza as the only two major armed opposition groups in northwestern Syria that did not join the National Liberation Front.

7 Faylaq Al-Sham serves as the backbone of the National Liberation Front and its leader, Fadil Allah al-Hajji, has been appointed as the commander of the National Liberation Front.

8 Indeed, Noureddine Al-Zinki has had a longstanding reputation as an unreliable partner and ally. Noureddine Al-Zinki is a highly local group, and ultimately their concerns are local. For that reason, at multiple points in the conflict Al-Zinki has abandoned its allies or switched its allegiances when their interests did not align. The most recent case was Al-Zinki's defection from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in July 2017

thus two potential interpretations of the 'abandonment' of Noureddine Al-Zinki: the first is that the Government of Turkey 'permitted' Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's defeat of Noureddine Al-Zinki; the second, is that Turkey and Turkish-backed groups were powerless to stop Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's offensive due to their preoccupation with northeastern Syria.[9] The Government of Turkey provides the National Liberation Front groups with weapons and funding, and, in turn, the National Liberation Front serves as the primary proxy umbrella group for the Government of Turkey inside northwestern Syria. The National Liberation Front groups have extremely tense relations with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. While some coordination does occur, for example with regard to control over major crossing points, there are also regular clashes and targeted assassinations.[10] Indeed, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and the National Liberation Front recognize one another to be key adversaries, largely due to the (likely accurate) perception that the Government of Turkey will eventually use the National Liberation Front to eliminate or marginalize Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.[11]

Image of gun store in Idleb City'. Photo courtesy of Al-Arabi Al-Jadid



9 Turkey ordering its proxies to intervene in a conflict with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham would have necessitated a massive deployment of National Army forces from Afrin and would likely have sparked an Idleb-wide conflict which could have lead to the end of the entire northwestern Syria disarmament agreement. Turkey and the Turkish-backed National Army are clearly preoccupied with events in northeastern Syria, especially in Menbij; a major conflict in northwestern Syria, eventually leading to a potential Government of Syria offensive, would certainly distract from Turkey's more immediate objectives.

10 Ahrar Al-Sham and Noureddine Al-Zinki have regularly engaged in heavy clashes with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. In July 2017, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham launched an attack on Ahrar Al-Sham and nearly expelled them from Idleb governorate. Additionally, Noureddine Al-Zinki engaged in numerous clashes in western Aleppo following Noureddine Al-Zinki's defection from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in July 2017, after having joined in January 2017.

11 Faylaq Al-Sham, the largest armed group within the National Liberation Front, maintains generally cordial relations with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. Faylaq Al-Sham reportedly acts as a mediator following clashes or tensions between Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and the National Liberation Front. That said, Faylaq Al-Sham is ultimately a Turkish proxy group; they will follow Turkish orders to attack Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, should the order be given.

Extremist Jihadist Groups

The remaining armed groups are considered to be extremists, with the most significant being Hurras Al-Deen and the Turkistan Islamic Party. Hurras Al-Deen is largely comprised of groups and individuals that previously fell under the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham umbrella, but defected following Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's 'official' disassociation with Al-Qaeda. In April 2018, Hurras Al-Deen merged with another local armed opposition group, Ansar Al-Tawheed,[12] to form the Nusrat Al-Islam coalition. Reports indicate that the Nusrat Al-Islam coalition is directly affiliated with Al-Qaeda, with several Al-Qaeda-linked former Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham commanders playing central roles in Hurras Al-Deen, particularly those that had rejected Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham's initial shift away from Al-Qaeda in 2016. Hurras Al-Deen also includes a significant number of foreign fighters, particularly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the UK, and France. Despite their defection, members of Hurras Al-Deen retain close relationships with certain members and factions of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, particularly Abu Malek Al-Talli's faction.

The Turkistan Islamic Party is an Islamic extremist terrorist organization founded by Uyghur jihadists in western China. The Turkistan Islamic Party has participated in numerous offensives in Syria, most notably the Jisr-Ash-Shughur offensive in 2015. They are mainly located in Jisr-Ash-Shughur, Jabal Turkman, and Jabal Akrad. Local sources have noted that the Turkistan Islamic Party is comprised of two camps: one that coordinates with the Government of Turkey and the other that coordinates with Hurras Al-Deen. However, in the event of a major conflict in Idleb, all of the extremist Jihadist groups in northwestern Syria are far more likely to closely coordinate and associate themselves with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham than the National Liberation Front.

An IDP camp adjacent to the Turkish border in Idleb. Photo courtesy of Reuters.

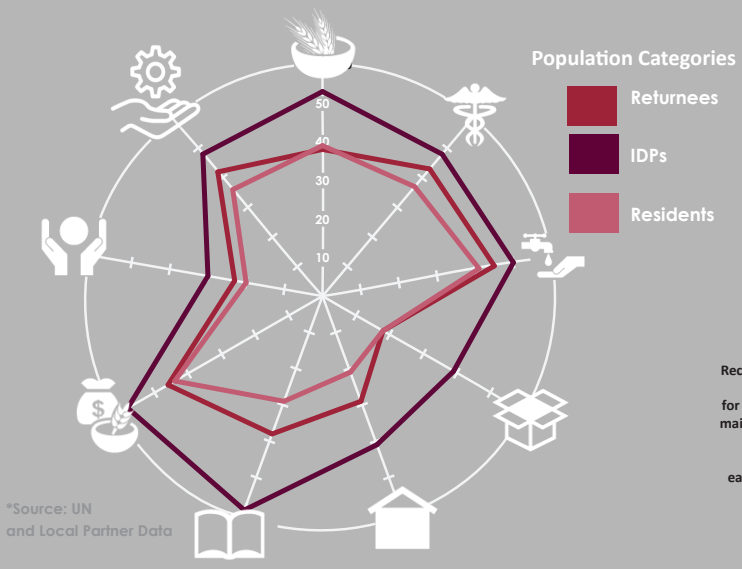


12 Ansar Al-Tawheed is a splinter group comprised of Jund Al-Aqsa defectors that left the organization in March 2018. Ansar Al-Tawheed is certainly the junior partner in the Nusrat Al-Islam coalition and so Hurras Al-Deen is usually how Nusrat Al-Islam is colloquially referred to.

Current Humanitarian Situation in Northwestern Syria

Priority of needs for the population of northwestern Syria, as of October 2018

Numbers represent the percentage of people who prioritized the need for service/sector per population category.



*Source: UN and Local Partner Data

Population Numbers in the Opposition-Controlled Northwestern Syria - as of Novemeber 2018

Total Population 2,998,000

Total IDPs 1,269,000

Total Residents 1,560,000

*Source: UN and Local Partners

IDPs in Camps

248,000 Individuals
45,000 Families
13 Clusters of Camps

*Source ACU

Population Movement During Late 2018

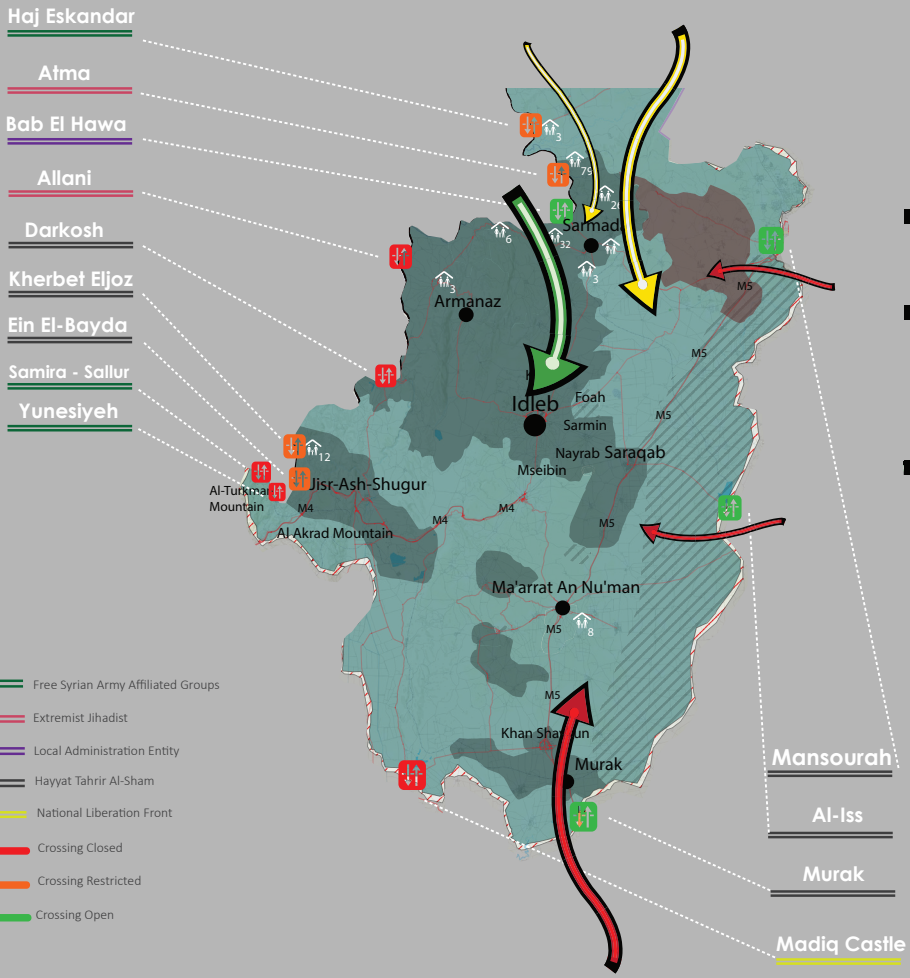
Recent displacement occured due to the potential for a Sep 2018 GoS offensive, mainly from Jisr Ash-Shoghor, northern Hama, southwestern Aleppo, eastern and southern Idleb.

460,000

168,000

Since the Sep 2018 disarmament zone limited returns have taken place, particularly to Jisr-Ash-Shughur, northern Hama, southwestern Aleppo, and eastern/southern Idleb).

*Source UN and Local Partners



Manually-filtered fuel, primarily used for heating due to poor quality,is sourced from SDF-controlled areas, through Afrin, and into northwestern Syria via Daret Azza and Atma crossings (the primary crossing points for fuel into northwest Syria).

No monopoly over the Afrin-Daret Azza/Atma route before HTS took control of Daret Azza.

GoS filtered fuel and gas canisters are traded through crossings indicated by the red arrows. The GoS side is typically controlled by a local GoS-affiliated militia; however, Russia is the decision maker in terms of access through these crossings.

Fuel trade through Bab El Hawa is monopolized by WATAD, a Turkish-registered company that imports fuel products, reportedly from Ukraine through Turkish ports. WATAD also monopolizes fuel trade through HTS crossings with GoS.

Market activity in NWS is linked to the functionality of the crossings with the GoS, as commodities transported via the GoS crossings are cheaper than commodities imported via Bab El Hawa. Crossings are also essential for local businesses and farms, as markets in GoS-controlled areas are the main destination for locallyproduced goods.

The HTS-affiliated Salvation Government is the only service provider and tax collector in HTS-controlled areas. Neigboring areas, even if not controlled by HTS, may also be linked to services provided by the HTS/Salvation Governmet via agreements with local councils.

*Information, including the control, status, and naming of border crossings is according to OCHA
TURKEY | SYRIA: Border Crossings Status 19 December 2018

Northwestern Syria Scenario Plans
January 2019

COAR Center for Operational Analysis and Research

Population | Return | Displacement | No. Camps in the area | Crossing | Commerical Trucks | Markets | Fuel | Water | Food Security | Basic Services | Protection | Aid | Shelter | Health | Livelihood | Education

Scenarios

The following section details the three most likely scenarios to occur in northwestern Syria. In short, they are: a prolonged series of armed opposition infighting between the National Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham; a full-scale Government of Syria offensive; and a negotiated agreement between the Government of Turkey and the Government of Russia, with a more limited Government of Syria offensive. As noted, the ultimate objective of the Governments of Turkey and Russia is the eventual dissolution, or extreme marginalization, of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in northwestern Syria in order to pave the way for substantive peace talks covering all of Syria's territory. However, it is important to note that these scenarios do not exist in isolation; indeed, elements of these scenarios are certainly likely to occur in tandem. This is especially true for 'Scenario 1: Armed Opposition Infighting.' Conflict between National Liberation Front groups and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is already ongoing and will likely be a factor in the other two scenarios. For each scenario below, the general trajectory of events will be detailed supported by key analytical assumptions underpinning the assessed likelihood of each scenario, a set of relevant indicators will be given, and the accompanying humanitarian impact of the scenario will be assessed.

Overarching Assumptions

All three scenarios below are built on three overarching assumptions. The first assumption is that the future trajectory of northwestern Syria will be implemented through agreement and coordination between the Governments of Turkey and Russia. The second assumption is that 'reconciliation' will necessarily be a component of the future trajectory of northwestern Syria, though notably this does not necessarily refer to the reconciliation of only armed opposition actors. The third assumption is that the Government of Syria, with Russian aerial support, is militarily capable of securing whatever territory it is permitted to capture.

The future of northwestern Syria will unfold with the complete coordination of the Governments of Turkey and Russia, largely due to the fact that their alliance is the cornerstone of a final Syrian peace agreement. The Governments of Turkey and Russia began to closely coordinate following the Turkish shootdown of a Russian military jet in November 2015. The Governments of Turkey and Russia have since shown that they are an unified force in the Syrian conflict, despite their backing of the armed opposition and the Government of Syria respectively.[13] Indeed, the Turkey-Russia relationship, partially due to their coordination in Syria, is now an important global alliance by which both states have major economic and trade linkages that are far more significant than disputes that might arise in arguably marginal parts of Syria. It is thus it is unlikely that northwestern Syria will be resolved without general agreement and cooperation between Turkey and Russia, whatever the outcome.

Second, given that reconciliation has been a major component in every Government of Syria offensive, or potential offensive, in armed opposition areas, **reconciliation will likely remain a key component of all the three scenarios for northwestern Syria.** It is worth mentioning that reconciliation is not limited only to armed opposition combatants, but also includes local businessmen and tribal leaders. Indeed, the Government of Syria has employed reconciliation negotiations prior to armed offensives in other parts of northwestern Syria, using a range of diverse actors as entry points, and there remains some indication and likelihood that certain elements of the armed opposition in northwestern Syria could be co-opted.[14] While evacuation has been a component of past agreements, so too has incorporation into the ranks of the Syrian military. Elements of the National Liberation Front, and even Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, could conceivably join the ranks of Government of Syria security forces, especially were the Government of Turkey to shift the nature of its support.

Finally, **the Government of Syria, with Russian support, is militarily capable of launching a successful large-scale offensive.** Though many analysts disparage the military capabilities of the Government of Syria, past cases indicate that with sufficient Russian support, the Government of Syria can secure armed opposition areas with little difficulty, as was proven in Eastern Ghouta and southern Syria. While Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is an undeniably powerful military force, it is nonetheless unlikely to be able to repel a concentrated Government of Syria ground offensive with Russian aerial bombardment.

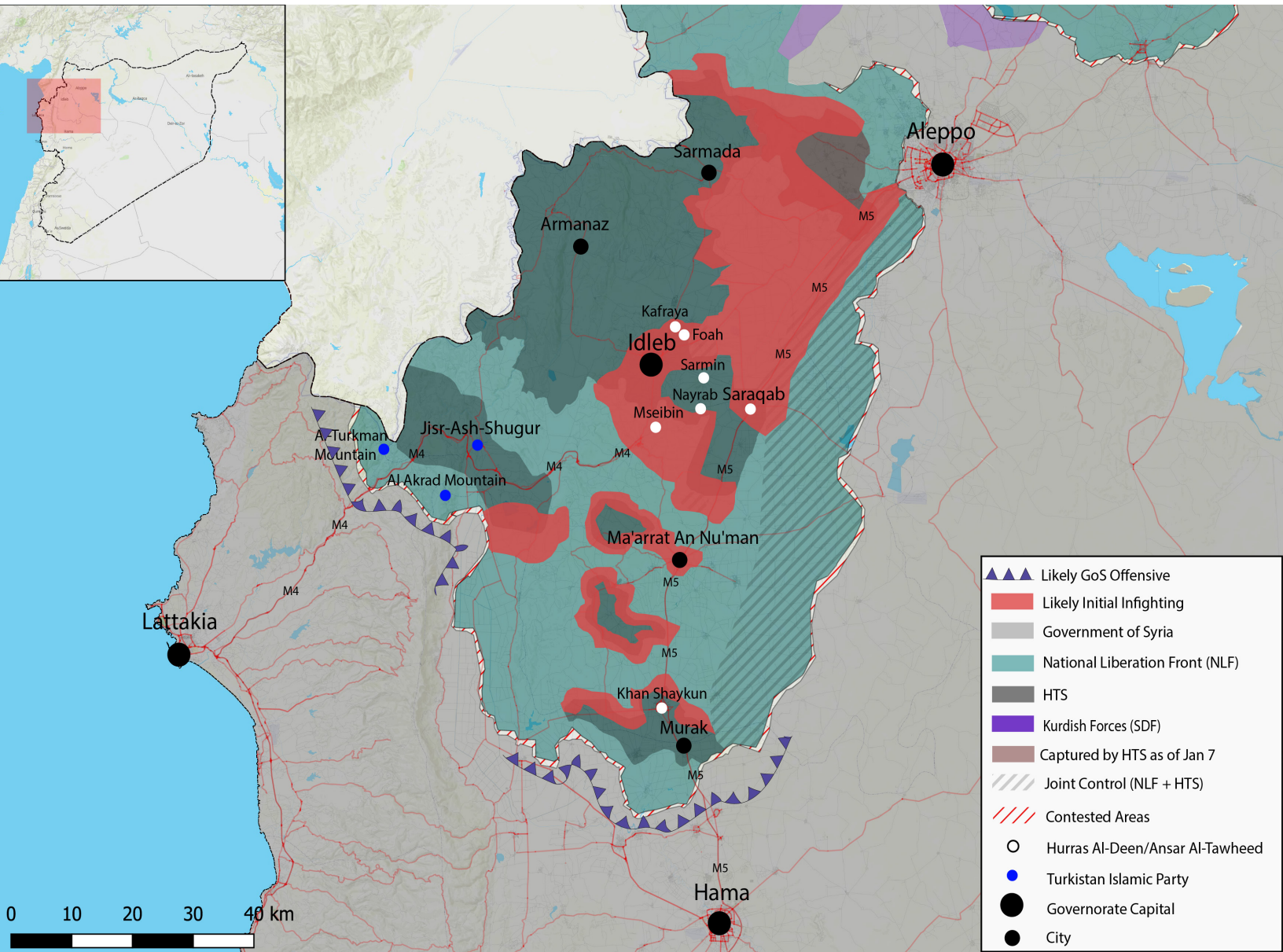
13 The disarmament zone agreement, the de-escalation zone agreements, and the Astana conferences are only three examples of the Turkish-Russian working relationship.

14 For example, the Al-Mawali tribe reconciled with the Government of Syria following the Abul Thohur offensive in December 2017. The Al-Mawali tribe is one of the largest tribes in southeastern Idleb and its presence spans Abul Thohur and Abu Dali. The Al-Mawali were informally aligned with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham; however, they maintained ties with the Government of Syria and the Syrian Arab Army.

Scenario 1

Armed Opposition Infighting

Likelihood 4/5



Description

In this scenario, armed opposition group infighting increases in intensity and in frequency throughout northwestern Syria. Nearly every community in northwestern Syria will be impacted to some degree as the Turkish-supported National Liberation Front engages in heavy clashes with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham. The clashes are likely to center around several different axes. First, National Liberation Front-affiliated groups will likely engage with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham in the vicinity of Daret Azza[15] and Atareb, in western Aleppo governorate, as well as in the vicinity of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham-controlled Dana, Sarmada, and Termanin. National Liberation Front-affiliated groups in Al-Mar'a are also expected to clash with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants on the front lines in Telamnas and Hamdieh. Clashes will also likely take place on front lines in Mastumeh and Jabal Zawiya. However, the most intense infighting is expected to be in areas where armed opposition groups share control, particularly in Idleb city, Kafr Nobol, Heish, areas east of Idleb governorate along the M5 highway, and Skik. Infighting is also likely to take place on the front lines in Khan Sheykhun and Zayzun, in Hama governorate. Notably, infighting is perhaps less likely to initially take place in locations that are prominent front lines with the Government of Syria, such as in eastern Idleb. Extremist groups, including Hurras Al-Deen[16] and the the Turkistan Islamic Party, are expected to engage in clashes alongside Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, due to their similar ideology and relatively closer relationship.

It is also worth noting that the Government of Syria will certainly attempt to capitalize on armed opposition infighting. The most likely locations for a limited Government of Syria offensive are in northern Hama, and in Jisr-Ash-Shugour. Northern Hama, especially Murak, is likely to be targeted due to its proximity to the M5 highway, while Jisr-Ash-Shughour is likely to be targeted due to its symbolic prominence and strategic value to the Governments of Syria and Russian.[17]

In this scenario, prolonged infighting will likely result in the articulation of clearer territorial control and influence with respect to armed opposition groups in northwestern Syria, particularly along front lines and in areas presently jointly controlled by Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and the National Liberation Front. While Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is certainly the more capable and cohesive group, it is unclear precisely which armed group coalition would emerge victorious; in practice, the ultimate outcome will likely be determined by whether, to which degree, and which armed groups under the National Liberation Front umbrella Turkey elects to support.[18]

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15 This is especially the case following Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham seizure of Daret Azza on January 1.

16 On April 29, 2018, Hurras Al-Deen, an armed group which defected from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, and has openly declared its affiliation with Al-Qaeda, joined the Nusrat Al-Islam coalition alongside Ansar Al-Tawhid.

17 Symbolically, the city was the last city to fall to the armed opposition in Idleb Governorate in the spring of 2015, and once hosted a sizeable Christian population. Tactically, the capture of Jisr-Ash-Shughour would enable the Government of Syria to further insulate northern Lattakia governorate from opposition attacks and would help protect the Government of Russia's Hmeimim Airbase from the numerous drone attacks it has suffered since 2017, most of which are believed to have originated in Jisr-Ash-Shughour.

18 As noted, Turkey has poor relations with several members of the National Liberation Front (especially Noureddine Al-Zinki) and may choose not to support certain groups in a prolonged conflict.

Key Assumptions

- **The long-standing grievances and tensions between the National Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham cause small scale, localized clashes to expand into larger scale clashes across Idleb.** Following the establishment of the disarmament zone in northwestern Syria, armed groups affiliated with the National Liberation Front have clashed with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants on several occasions.[19] However, these clashes were generally mediated through local negotiations largely at the urging of the Government of Turkey. However, should the Government of Turkey cease to play a role as a mediator, or should local mediation fail, small conflicts will quickly spiral into a larger conflict spanning the entire northwestern Syria region, especially considering the degree to which the National Liberation Front and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham are intermixed in many communities.
- **The Government of Turkey EITHER: takes a definite stance that it will directly command the National Liberation Front, and potentially the National Army, to confront Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham OR effectively halts support to the National Liberation Front, and allows Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham to secure nearly all of northwestern Syria.** Prior to the establishment of the disarmament zone in northwestern Syria, the Government of Turkey had been attempting to resolve the threat of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham by requesting that the group dissolve or disarm itself; however, that possibility is becoming increasingly less likely. Thus, Turkey now has two options: either to abandon most of the National Liberation Front and leave Idleb entirely to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, or through its support to the National Liberation Front and the National Army attempt to end the presence of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and other Al-Qaeda affiliates, and assume full control of northwestern Syria.
- **The Government of Turkey successfully lobbies the Government of Russia to postpone an offensive**, in order to allow the National Liberation Front to either take full control of Idleb, or at least clearly delineate Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham-controlled areas from National Liberation Front areas. As noted, a full Government of Syria offensive on northwestern Syria would require massive aerial support from the Government of Russia, and would naturally involve targeting areas held by Turkish proxy groups. However, provided that the Government of Turkey disapproves of a full-scale offensive, it is likely that the Government of Russia will be reluctant in providing support to the Government of Syria, particularly considering the close partnership between the Governments of Russia and Turkey.



Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants stepping on the Syrian Revolutionary flag in Idleb. Date and location not confirmed. Photo courtesy of ELijah Magnier

Indicators:

- **A dramatic increase, or decrease, in Government of Turkey support to the National Liberation Front, including financial support.**
- **Reports of mounting Government of Turkey-supported National Army military reinforcements deploying to the border with Idleb.**
- **Increased rhetoric from the Government of Turkey against Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham; this includes in Turkish media, such as Daily Sabah and Yeni Şafak.**
- **Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham taking control of all of the major crossing points in northwestern Syria, to include Qalaat Al-Madiq**
- **A major deterioration of the security situation in Idleb, to include assassinations, armed opposition clashes and increased IED attacks.**

19 In early October 2018, Hay'at Tahrir Al-sham combatants clashed with the National Liberation Front-affiliated Noureddine Al-Zinki in western Aleppo. On December 4, clashes between Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and National Liberation Front-affiliated Ahrar Al-Sham in northern Hama governorate resulted in Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham taking control over Zayzun.

Impact of Scenario 1

Armed Opposition Infighting

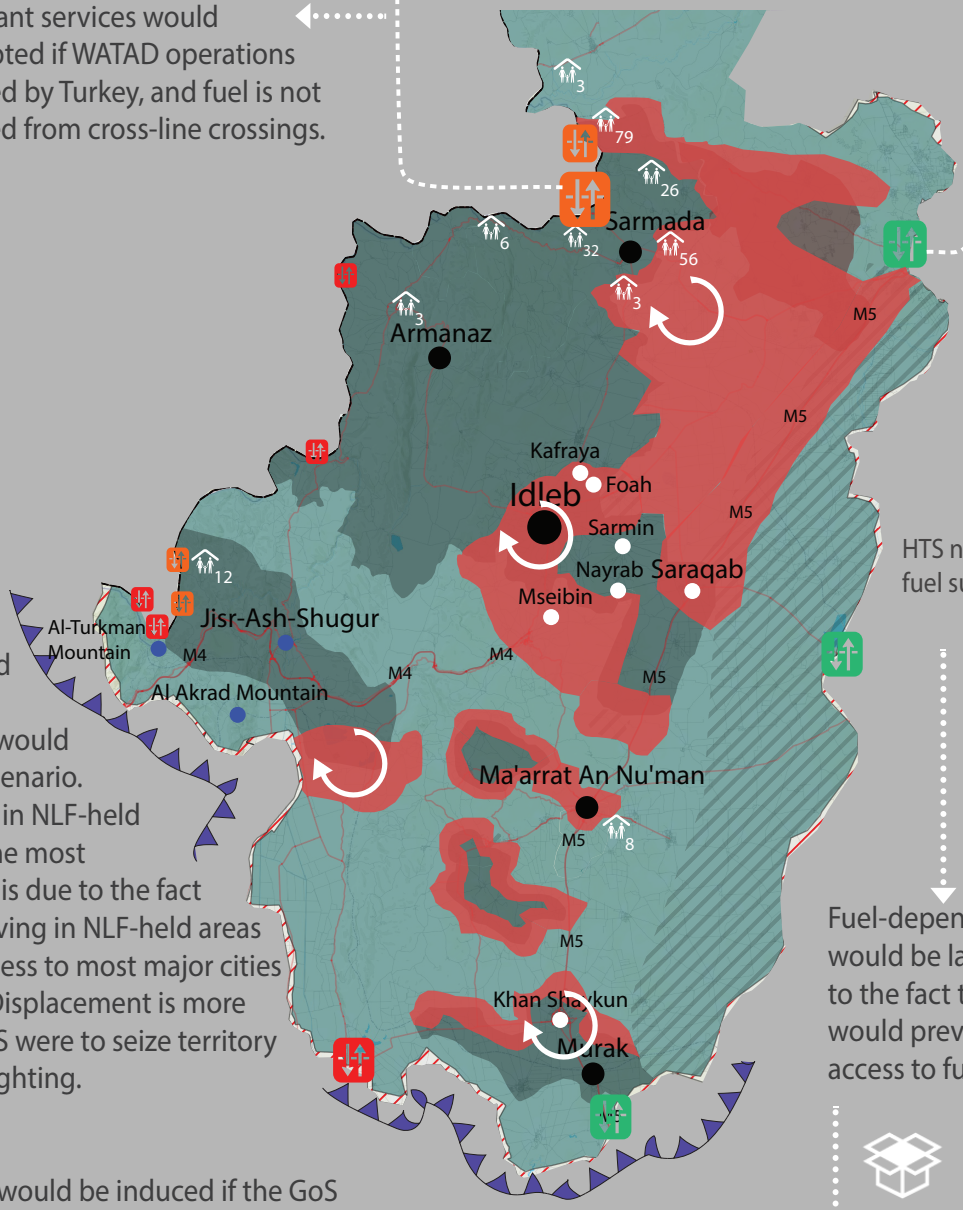
Likelihood: 4/5

Bakeries affected by the lack of flour

Turkey closes or restricts the Bab El Hawa border crossing.

Fuel-dependant services would largely disrupted if WATAD operations are suspended by Turkey, and fuel is not supplemented from cross-line crossings.

The Government of Syria may attempt to bolster HTS by allowing cross-line crossing points held by HTS, such as Murak, to remain open. This would benefit HTS, and thus prolong any infighting with the NLF.



HTS now controls all fuel supply lines.

Small-scale and localised displacement would occur in this scenario. Civilians living in NLF-held areas will be the most impacted; this is due to the fact that civilians living in NLF-held areas would lose access to most major cities and markets. Displacement is more likely if the GoS were to seize territory during the infighting.

Fuel-dependant services would be largely disrupted to the fact that the HTS would prevent NLF areas access to fuel.

Displacement would be induced if the GoS were to attempt to seizev territory during the infighting.

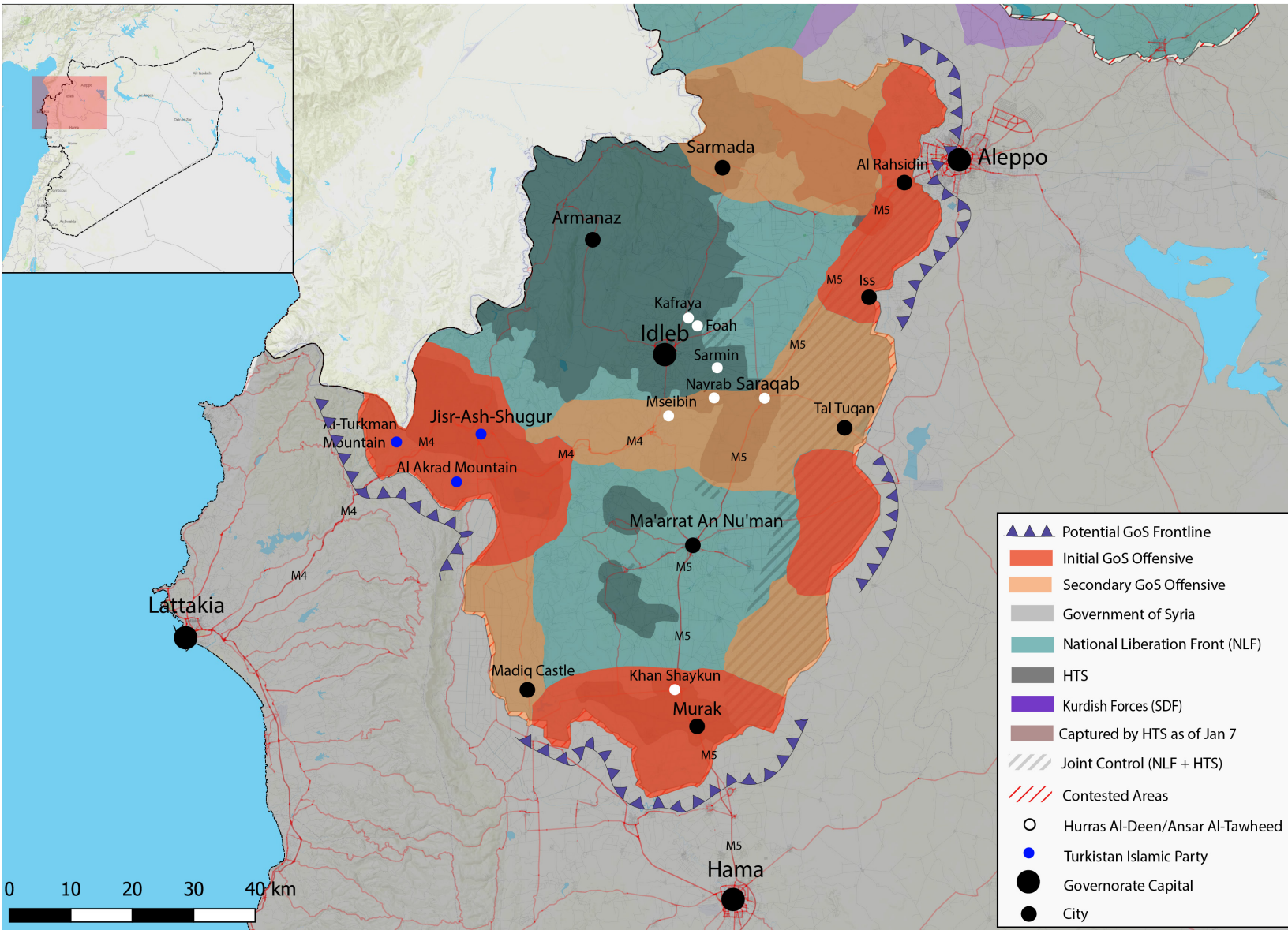
HTS might restrict humanitarian cargos from Turkey to NLF areas.

Market activity will also be disrupted. The prices of essential commodities will drastically spike due to HTS monopoly of access and trade.

Scenario 2

Government of Syria Offensive

Likelihood 2/5



Description

In this scenario, a full-scale Government of Syria military offensive on armed opposition groups takes place in northwestern Syria, with the goal of retaking all of opposition-held Idleb and northern Hama. Initially, the areas most likely to be targeted are along the M5 highway. Additionally, the Government of Syria will likely target areas in northern Hama, northern Lattakia and Sahel Al-Ghab. It is expected that the Government of Syria will advance into armed opposition-controlled northwestern Syria from four front lines, likely simultaneously, with the ultimate goal of isolating northwestern Syria into distinct and isolated pockets. The first front line lies along Government of Syria positions in western Aleppo governorate, to include Aleppo city, Hadher, and Zyare Semaan, into armed opposition-controlled Kafr Hamra, Iss (a major crossing point), Skik, Tal Tufan, and Al-Rashideen. The second front line will likely be from Government of Syria positions in Abul Thohur, in eastern Idleb governorate, into Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham-controlled Saraqeb. The third front line will be from Government of Syria forces positioned in Suran, Halfaya and Muharda, and will aim to securing opposition-controlled areas in northern Hama, particularly Murak (a major crossing point), Latmana, Kafr Zeita, Khan Sheykun, and Madiq Castle (also a major crossing point). The fourth front line will likely be from northern Lattakia into Jisr Ash-Shughour, Jabal Turkman and Jabal Akrad.[20] In this scenario it is expected that the Government of Turkey will withdraw from the observation points in northwestern Syria.

Following that, Government of Syria forces are expected to move to the second phase of the offensive, which entails advances from the initial front lines deeper into Idleb governorate. It is likely that the Government of Syria forces will advance from the front lines in western Aleppo, eastern Idleb, and Jisr Ash-Shughour concurrently into Saraqeb and the M4 highway, thus separating northwestern Syria into two pockets. Additionally, the Government of Syria forces are likely to secure western Aleppo governorate in the second phase of the offensive, thus securing the entire current borders of opposition-controlled northwestern Syria.

As noted in the assumptions below, a full scale Government of Syria offensive will likely give the Turkish-supported National Liberation Front three possible options; these options will likely be dictated by Turkish policy and priorities. First, the National Liberation Front could withdraw their forces further to the center of Idleb governorate and thus avoid major clashes with Government of Syria forces in the aforementioned front lines. However, this option will likely lead to clashes with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, as Idleb city is considered one of the latter's most significant strongholds. Second, the National Liberation Front could withdraw to Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria secured by the Turkish-led operations Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield operations.[21] Third, elements of the National Liberation Front may reconcile with the Government of Syria, either on their own or with Turkish facilitation.[22]

20 In this scenario, the Government of Syria forces will likely deploy the Fourth Armoured Division, the National Defense Forces and the Tiger Forces, led by Suheil Al-Hassan, to the front lines. Additionally, Government of Russia aerial support will focus on areas in northern Hama and northern Lattakia. The front lines in Abul Thohur will likely include the participation of Iranian-supported militias, including Hezbollah and the Islamic Republican Guard Corps due to Iran's interest in securing the predominantly Shiite villages of Foah and Kefraya, northeast of Idleb city.

21 Ahrar Al-Sham and Faylaq Al-Sham, both within the National Liberation Front, are also in the Turkish-Supported National Army in northern Syria.

22 This would not be unprecedented. In the southern Syria offensive in June 2018, many Southern Front armed groups backed by the Government of Jordan reconciled with the Government of Syria. However, Jordan still maintains influence with the former commanders and combatants in these groups, and has leveraged this influence in negotiations with the Government of Syria; for example, Jordan is reportedly negotiating with the Government of Syria to ensure that reconciled Southern Front combatants be made responsible for controlling the Jordanian border.

Key Assumptions

- **The disarmament zone agreement established between the Government of Turkey and Russia collapses.** As noted, the disarmament zone agreement is inherently unstable. Several terms of the agreement are unclear, or have clearly not been implemented. The most significant unmet term of the agreement is the removal of all extremist armed groups, namely Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, from the disarmament zone.[23] Additionally, there are still regular clashes and mutual shelling between armed opposition groups and the Government of Syria.[24] A series of extended clashes between the Government of Syria and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham could weaken the disarmament zone agreement to the point that it becomes impossible for Turkey to diplomatically maintain the agreement.

- **Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham defeats or marginalizes the National Liberation Front.** The National Liberation Front is not the most important Turkish proxy group; the National Army in northern Aleppo is certainly more important to the Government of Turkey's critical strategic interests in northern and northeastern Syria. As noted, the National Liberation Front is also not a unified entity. It is certainly possible that the Government of Turkey will pull its support from the National Liberation Front, and either merge its constituent groups and combatants into the National Army in northern Aleppo or tacitly accept their reconciliation with the Government of Syria as a means of maintaining long-term influence within the Government of Syria.[25] This would mean effectively ceding almost all of northwestern Syria to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (as a component of Scenario 1), and thus remove the pretext for preventing a Government of Syria offensive.

- **The Government of Syria sees unilateral control of the M5 highway as a strategic imperative.** As noted repeatedly, securing the M5 highway has been amongst the Government of Syria's primary main strategic priorities throughout the Syrian conflict, and, having secured the majority of the highway elsewhere,[26] it is now very likely to seek to unilaterally control the sections of M5 and M4 that remain outside of its control in northwestern opposition-held areas.

Indicators:

- **The withdrawal of Government of Turkey forces from the 12 observation points in northwestern Syria.**
- **The resumption of Governments of Russia and Syria airstrikes, particularly on Idleb city, Jisr Ash-Shughour, Al-Ma'ra, Saraqeb, and Murak.**
- **Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham launches an attack on Government of Syria positions in Hadher, Aleppo city, Muharda and Suran.**
- **Statements or reports from the Government of Russia announcing their participation in the Government of Syria-led offensive on northwestern Syria.**

23 Rumors of Government of Turkey meeting with Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham commanders have emerged since the establishment of the disarmament zone. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham is rumoured to have submitted a list of terms to the Turkish government, which reportedly state that the group is prepared to retreat 7km from the M5. However, this has certainly not been implemented.

24 Since the establishment of the disarmament zone, Government of Syria airstrikes and shelling continued to target areas within the boundaries of the disarmament zone, namely: Murak, Latmana, Jarjnaz, Jisr Ash-Shughour, Kafr Zeita, Lahaya.

25 As noted in footnote 17, this is not without precedent; the Government of Jordan pursued almost exactly this policy in southern Syria.

26 Following the termination of southern Syria offensive in July 2018, the Government of Syria recaptured the southern part of the M5 Highway in Dar'a governorate, and reopened Nasib border crossing with Jordan on October 15.

Impact of Scenario 2

Government of Syria Offensive

Likelihood: 2/5

All international crossings are expected to be closed to refugees. Extremely strict measures across the borders might be applied to prevent a large-scale influx of refugees into Turkey.

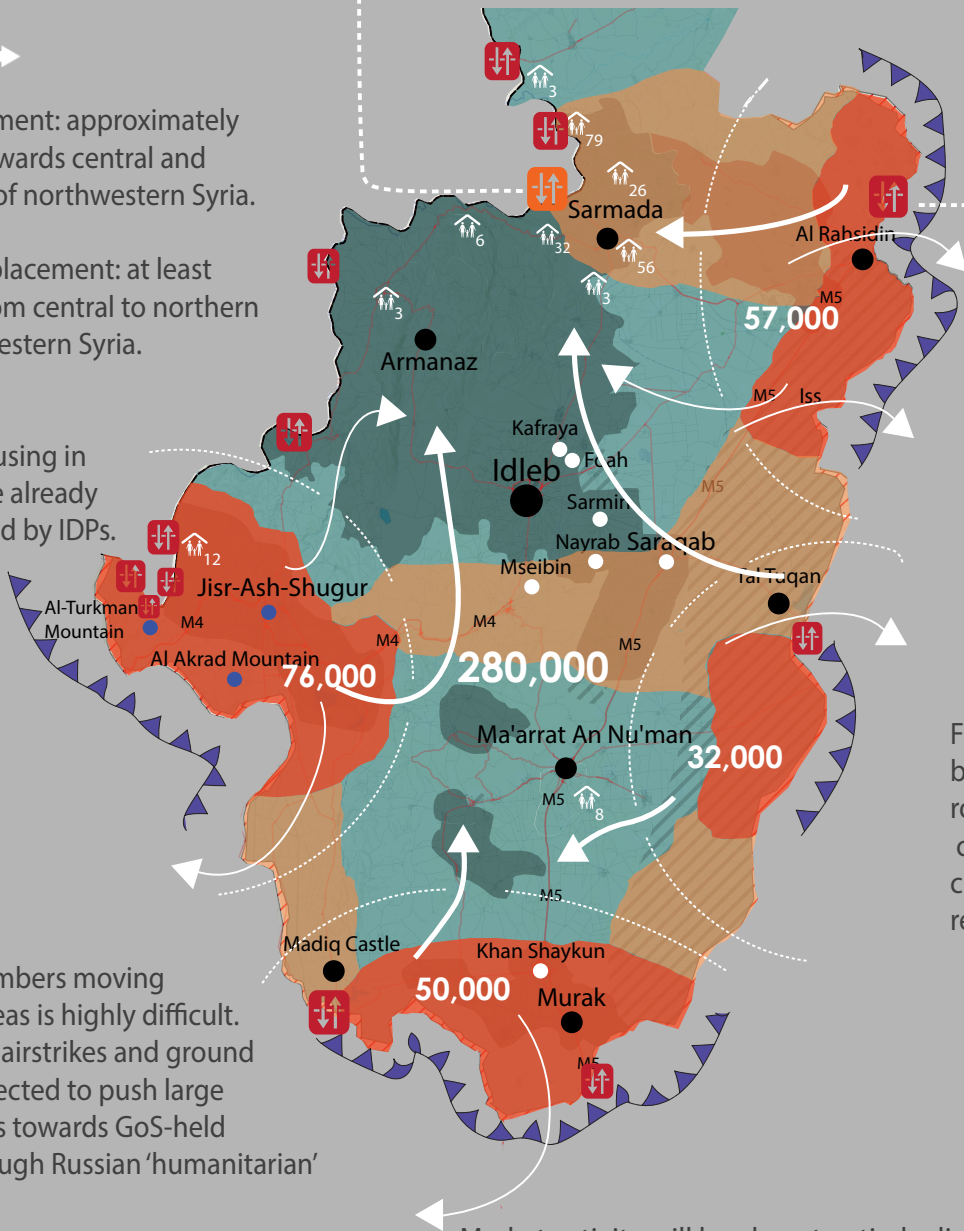
The functionality of the humanitarian response, and the humanitarian situation in general, will be heavily dependent on the status of the Bab El Hawa border crossing; this in turn depends on Turkey's response to a GoS offensive.

If Turkey is supportive of the offensive, then Bab Al-Hawa will likely remain open only for humanitarian operations. If Turkey is not fully supportive of the offensive, commercial access will likely continue through the crossing as well.

-Initial displacement: approximately 215,000 IDPs towards central and northern areas of northwestern Syria.

-Secondary displacement: at least 280,000 IDPs from central to northern areas of northwestern Syria.

-Camps and housing in border areas are already highly populated by IDPs.



All GoS crossings would be closed for commercial goods.

Fuel-dependant services will be disrupted; fuel supply routes will likely be quickly cut due to the closure of crossings and potential restrictions on Bab El Hawa.

- Estimating numbers moving towards GoS areas is highly difficult. The intensity of airstrikes and ground offensive is expected to push large numbers of IDPs towards GoS-held areas,likely through Russian 'humanitarian' crossings.

Market activity will be almost entirely disrupted, except the locally produced dairy, livestock and vegetables. The prices of essential commodities will drastically spike due to military advances, displacement, and high levels of destruction in markets, bakeries and health facilities.

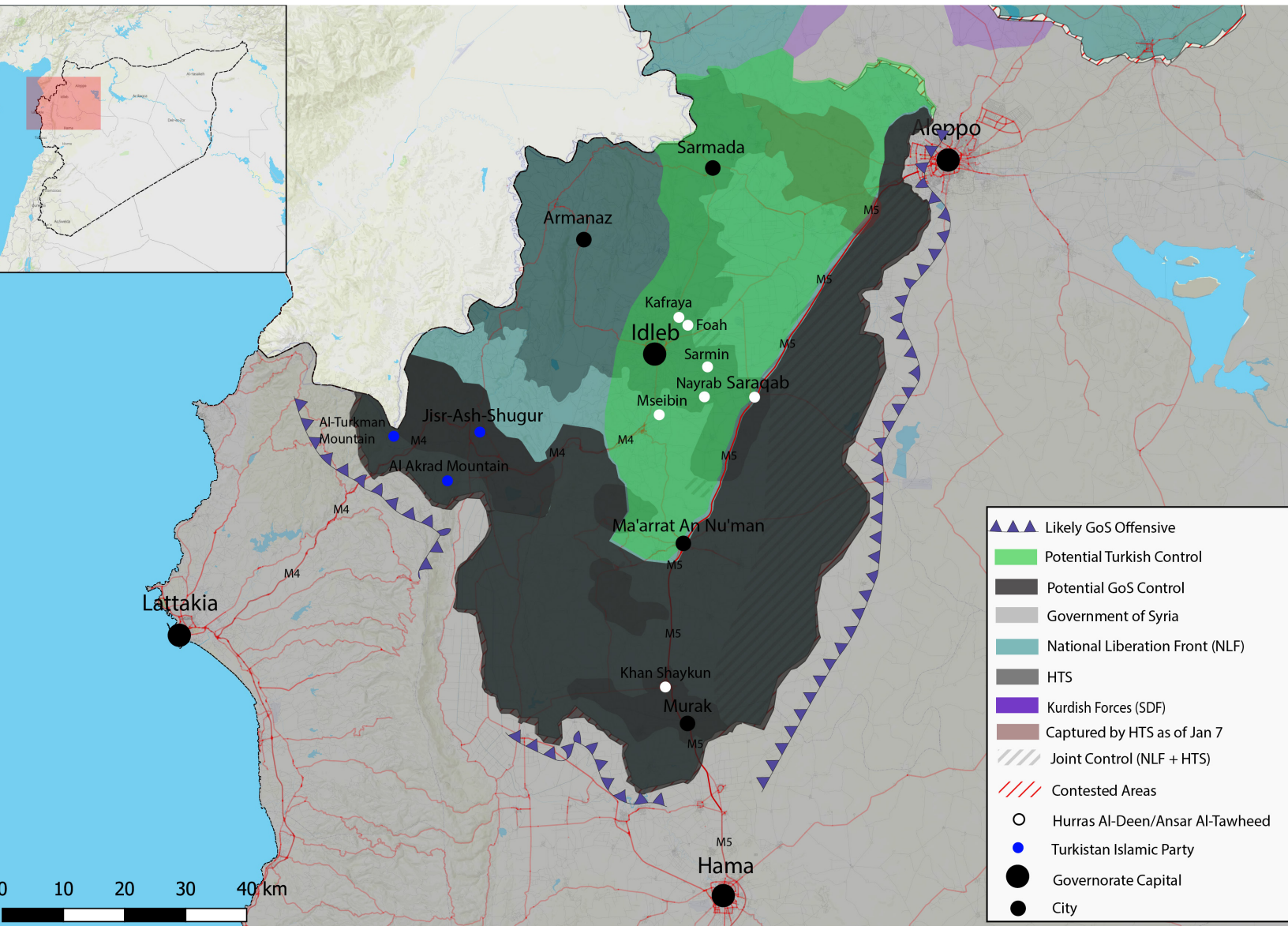
-Turkish border region would most likely witness a critical humanitarian crisis, especially considering that up to 1.5 million people are already living between the Turkish border and Idleb City in northwestern Syria.

COAR Center for Operational Analysis and Research
Northwestern Syria Scenario Plans
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Scenario 3

Negotiated Agreement/ Limited Offensive

Likelihood 3/5



Description

In this scenario, the Government of Turkey and the Government of Russia reach a negotiated agreement to divide northwestern Syria into zones of influence. The new agreement will likely stipulate the joint administration of the M5 highway by both the Government of Turkey and the Government of Syria. Following the establishment of the agreement, the Government of Turkey will likely expand their areas of influence from the M5 highway further into central Idleb governorate. The Government of Turkey will seek to secure key communities including Idleb city, Dana, and Sarmada, that link northwestern Idleb with Turkish-held northern Aleppo governorate. As in the Turkish-held Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch regions, Turkish-controlled areas will likely closely adhere to Government of Turkey policy.

In this scenario, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants will face two options with respect to their presence and areas of control in northwestern Syria. First, the Government of Turkey is extremely likely to request the group disband or for elements of the organization to merge with and under the leadership of the National Liberation Front.[27] Those elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham that refuse to dissolve will be forced to withdraw and evacuate from areas of current control to areas outside of Government of Syria and Government of Turkey control in the northwest. In this case, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants are expected to withdraw to Salqin, one of their most prominent strongholds in Idleb. The Government of Turkey's demand that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham disband will certainly exacerbate differences between moderate and extremist fractures of the group. Pragmatic combatants will likely agree to defect from Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham, particularly if the Government of Turkey sought to secure their entire areas of control in northwestern Idleb. Extremist factions will likely remain and attempt to fight Government of Syria forces or the Government of Turkey proxy forces, to include the National Army.

Meanwhile, the Government of Syria is expected to take control over the eastern part of the M5 highway, as per the agreement with the Government of Russia. It is likely that Government of Syria forces will secure areas west of Aleppo city, and the entire opposition-controlled areas east of the M5 highway. Additionally, with Russian support, Government of Syria forces are expected to launch a limited-scale offensive on the remaining Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham combatants that refused to evacuate or disband. The offensive will likely focus on three front lines; first, the Government of Syria is expected to target areas in eastern Idleb governorate. Second, the offensive will target areas in northern Hama, and as a result, Government of Syria forces will likely secure Murak, Khan Sheykhun and Madiq Castle. Finally, Government of Syria forces will likely launch an offensive and secure Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and the Turkistan Islamic Party-controlled Jisr-Ash Shughour, Jabal Turkman, and Jabal Akrad.

27 The Government of Turkey has been requesting that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham dismantle itself since at least May 2018, which has caused numerous defections within the ranks of the group.

Key Assumptions

- **The Government of Turkey and the Government of Russia seek to jointly maintain influence in northwestern Syria.** The Government of Turkey is unlikely to approve a full-scale Government of Syria offensive on northwestern Syria for many of the reasons listed above. However, also as noted, Turkey likely does not have extremely critical strategic priorities in much of northwestern Syria. By allowing a limited offensive on northwestern Syria, the Government of Turkey would be able to maintain its influence in the most critical parts of Idleb governorate, while simultaneously isolating the more extremist elements of the armed opposition geographically. Additionally, by creating well-defined and delineated lines of control, the Governments of Turkey and Russia will effectively isolate Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham geographically.[28] Finally, the joint administration of the M5 highway with the Government of Syria will give Turkey a major political card to play in the broader Syrian peace process.

- **The internal fractures within Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham become more pronounced, to the point of causing an internal divisions within the organization.** Local sources indicate that there are persistent, ongoing rumors that the National Liberation Front and elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham have held negotiations regarding a merger between the Salvation Government and the Syrian Interim Government. A merger between the two political bodies is unlikely; however, the fact that these negotiations were rumored is itself an indication that there may be some willingness on the part of elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham to moderate themselves and attempt to become a more mainstream opposition group. Exacerbated tensions between the more pragmatic and ideological fractions within Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham would eventually lead to defections, fragmentation, and shifts in allegiances, which would be facilitated by more clearly delineated geographic separation between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' groups.

- **There are plans in place to isolate, but not entirely destroy, the extremist elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.** In this scenario, elements of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham which do not dissolve or defect will eventually be pushed into northern and northwestern Idleb, especially in the vicinity of Salqin. This pocket of Syria would thus consist of the most extremist elements of the Syrian opposition, all concentrated in a small region bordering both Turkey and Government of Syria-controlled areas. While this would seem to be unacceptable to the Government of Turkey, in fact this may be an important point of leverage. By controlling access into, and out of, this region, both the Governments of Syria and Turkey would hold a valuable piece of leverage: contained jihadists, who pose a threat not just within Syria but also globally. The existence of this zone would allow the Governments of Syria and Turkey to extract political and economic concessions, while also framing themselves as front-line actors in the war on jihadist terrorism.

Indicators:

- **Government of Turkey military reinforcements to the observation points, particularly along the M5 highway, Eastern Idleb and western Aleppo.**
- **Reports of large scale Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham withdrawal from their major strongholds, including Idleb city, Khan Sheykhun, and northern Hama.**
- **Increased rhetoric from the Government of Turkey on a National Army presence established in northwestern Syria.**
- **Reports of Government of Turkey-supported National Army deployment to southern Afrin district.**
- **Reports of an agreement between the Government of Syria and Government of Russa agreement on the final status of the disarmament zone.**

28 There are already indications that Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham is operating under the assumption that it will not remain in control of some areas. Local sources noted that recently, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham dug out the oil pipeline between Saraqeb and Iss and sold the pipes; if Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham was planning on remaining in the area for the long term, they would have likely sought to monopolize shares of the oil passing through the pipeline instead of selling the pipes themselves.

Impact of Scenario 3

Negotiated Agreement/Limited Offensive

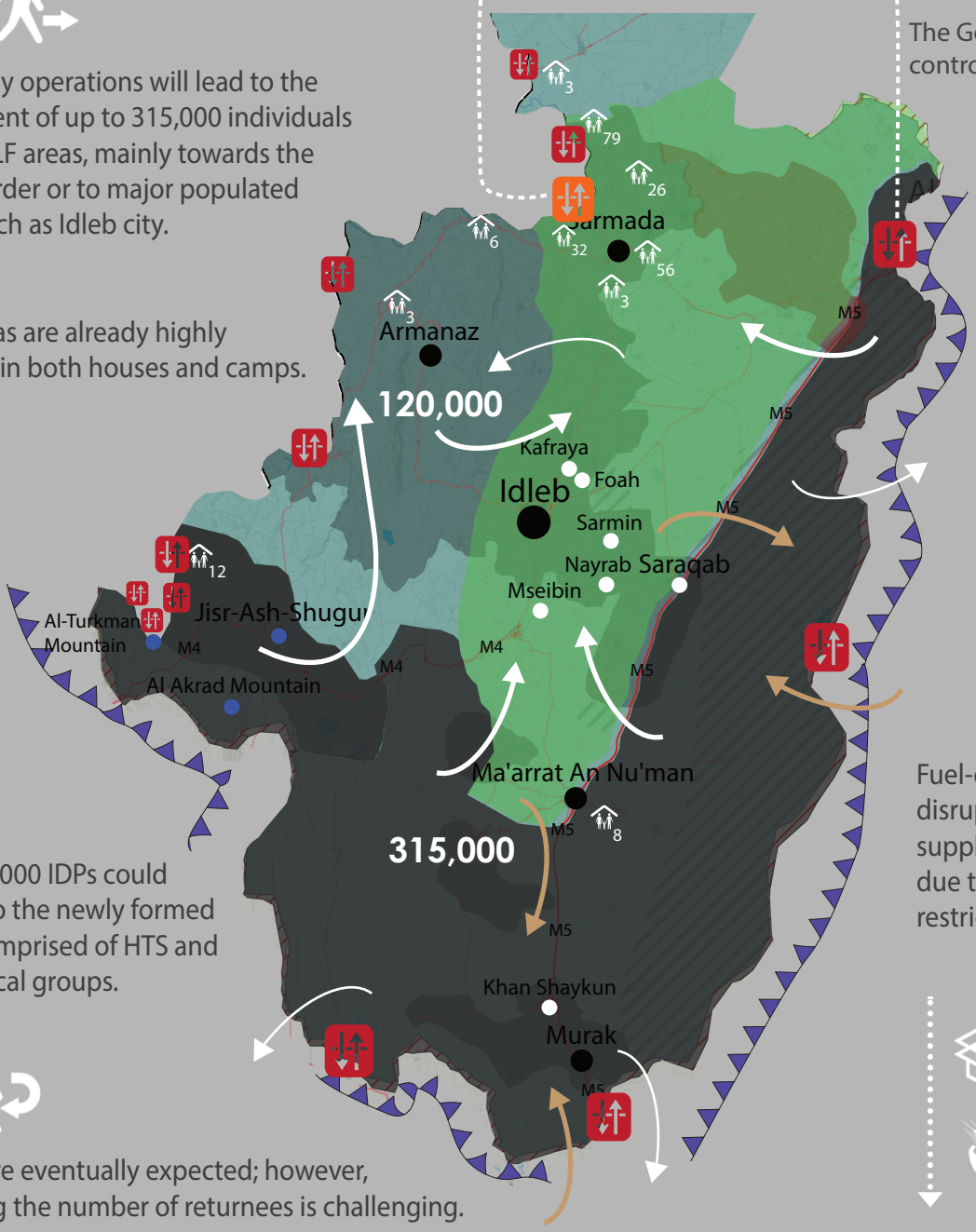
Likelihood: 2/5

All international crossings are closed to refugees by Turkey.

Government of Turkey would temporarily restrict economic activities via Bab Al-Hawa, limiting them to exclusively humanitarian activities. Government of Turkey may also ban fuel imports to HTS-held areas, eliminating a crucial source of income and legitimacy.

GoS military operations will lead to the displacement of up to 315,000 individuals towards NLF areas, mainly towards the Turkish border or to major populated centers, such as Idleb city.

Border areas are already highly populated in both houses and camps.



Up to 120,000 IDPs could displace to the newly formed pocket comprised of HTS and other radical groups.

Returns are eventually expected; however, estimating the number of returnees is challenging.

The GoS would likely close HTS-controlled crossings.

The Government of Turkey may restrict or diminish ongoing large-scale Turkish-led humanitarian activities to pressure the Salvation Government.

Fuel-dependant services would disrupted due to the fact that fuel supply routes will be quickly cut due to the closure of crossings and restrictions on Bab El Hawa

Market activity will also be almost entirely disrupted, except for the locally produced dairy, livestock and vegetables. The prices of essential commodities will drastically spike due to military advances, displacement, and high levels of destruction in markets, bakeries and health facilities.

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