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Turkey and the Syrian Insurgency

Thomas Pierret

► **To cite this version:**

Thomas Pierret. Turkey and the Syrian Insurgency. Balci, Bayram; Monceau, Nicolas. Turkey, Russia and Iran in the Middle East. Establishing a New Regional Order, Springer International Publishing, pp.59-77, 2021, 978-3-030-80291-2. 10.1007/978-3-030-80291-2_4 . hal-03350628

HAL Id: hal-03350628

<https://hal.science/hal-03350628v1>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2021

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Thomas Pierret. Turkey and the Syrian Insurgency: From Facilitator to Overlord. In Bayram Balci and Nicolas Monceau (eds.) *Turkey, Russia and Iran in the Middle East. Establishing a New Regional Order* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 59-77.

AUTHOR VERSION

On October 26, 2020, Russian aircraft attacked a training camp run by Syrian insurgent faction Faylaq al-Sham (“Sham Corps”) in Kafr Takharim (Idlib), killing dozens. Faylaq al-Sham being the unofficial military wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) and Turkey’s chief partner in Idlib, it was speculated that the airstrike was a warning from Moscow to Ankara regarding the latter’s dispatch of a Syrian rebel contingent in support of Azerbaijan’s offensive against the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (Saad 2020). The incident testified to the depth of Turkey’s relationship with Syrian insurgents, and to the latter’s role in the recent militarization of Ankara’s foreign policy.

Turkey has been the single most important influential sponsor of the Syrian insurgency. It was home to the birth of the Free Syrian Army, then served as the rebels’ main back office. As the Gulf states and the US gradually disengaged after 2015, Ankara became the sole patron of Syria’s armed opposition. The latter was subsequently turned into a support force for Turkish military interventions against the Islamic State (IS) and the PKK-affiliated People’s Protection Units (YPG). In early 2020, Turkish soldiers and Syrian rebels jointly repelled a major loyalist offensive in Idlib. It was Ankara, too, that brought about the long-sought unification of northern rebel factions by engineering the creation of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in 2017.

Yet, Turkey only assumed this role gradually and reluctantly. It did not do so to pursue grandiose “neo-Ottoman” or “Islamist” ambitions, but in response to perceived threats that mainly pertained to domestic politics, namely Kurdish separatism and refugees. In this chapter, I analyze this process by identifying four main phases in the incremental deepening of Turkey’s role as a sponsor of the Syrian insurgency: between 2011 and 2013, Ankara mainly acted as a facilitator; in 2014-2015, it emerged as a patron in its own right; 2016 and 2017 were marked by Turkey’s direct military intervention and regimenting of Syrian rebels; since 2018, finally, the Turkish army has decisively stepped in as the protector of Idlib’s rebel enclave.

Playing the facilitator (2011-2013)

Turkey’s stance towards the nascent Syrian insurgency was initially hesitant. In July 2011, defector officers announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army from the Kilis refugee camp. Yet, although increasing regime repression soon convinced Ankara to give up its attempted mediation between Assad and the opposition, Turkish authorities did not provide Syrian insurgents with any significant logistical support. Ankara’s preferred scenario at that time was a US-led foreign military intervention that would swiftly topple the Assad regime, not support for a still fledgling insurgency in a protracted civil war which, as eventually happened, would undermine Syria’s territorial integrity and bolster Kurdish separatism. Moreover, Erdogan feared a backlash that would jeopardize the domestic stability and prosperity that characterized his first decade in power—proxy war comes with risks of retaliation, as was subsequently exemplified by the car bombs that killed seventy in the province of Kilis in early 2013 (Balci 2012; Stein 2015a).

It was in the spring of 2012, when Qatar and Saudi Arabia stepped in as the chief state sponsors of the rebellion, that Turkey effectively became the main logistical hub of support for the Syrian rebels. Freighters and airlifters departing from Libya, Sudan and later the Balkans brought in weapons that subsequently entered Syria through Kilis and Reyhanlı (Chivers 2013). In early 2014, the head of Turkish intelligence (MIT) Hakan Fidan would state in a closed meeting that his organization had supervised the passage across the border of 2,000 trucks transporting military equipment (Uslu 2016, 787).

Back then, Ankara showed limited interest in the rebels' internal affairs. This was, in part, due to a lack of Arabic-speakers within the Turkish military and MIT (Hokayem 118; interview with Turkish academic, Rome, 30 June 2013). This shortage was exposed when in August 2011, Arab Alawite MIT operatives from Hatay, who were in charge of linking up with Syrian army defectors in spite of their sectarian bonds with Syria's ruling minority, handed over runaway Syrian officer Hussein Harmush to the Assad regime (Aksalser 2015).

The AKP government's initial hands-off policy was also a function of its confidence in the appeal of its political model which, it was assumed, would inevitably bring pro-Turkish forces to power if Syria's regime was to fall. For sure, the AKP government identified the like-minded SMB as its foremost friend among the opposition. This was illustrated by Ankara's support for the July 2012 capture of Eastern Aleppo by the then SMB-aligned Tawhid Brigade, an operation the MIT reportedly facilitated by turning the head of the city's Military Security Gen Muhammad al-Muflih (Zaman al-Wasl 2014)

Among rebel factions, however, the SMB's influence was dwarfed by that of wealthier Gulf-based "activist" (*haraki*) Salafi networks which, fortunately for Turkey, were also sympathetic to the AKP government. By late 2012, these networks were funding the two largest rebel coalitions, namely, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front, which later merged into a single Islamic Front. These coalitions recruited factions like the Tawhid Brigade and Faruq Battalions, which cooperated with Ankara over the control of the Bab al-Hawa and Tell Abiyad border crossings after their capture by the rebels in 2012; as the **Faruq Battalions** proved corrupt and inefficient, they were ousted by Ahrar al-Sham, another activist Salafi-funded faction that subsequently remained one of Ankara's preferred partners among the rebellion forces (Pierret 2017; interview with members of the Syrian National Coalition, Gaziantep, 4 January 2014)

Engaging cooperative Islamist militants did not prevent Turkey from helping with Western and Saudi-backed schemes designed to curtail the rise of the very same factions. It was in Antakya that state sponsors met in December 2012 to appoint Lt Gen Salim Idris as head of the Free Syrian Army's Supreme Military Council. Simultaneously, Turkey opened its military infrastructures to a vast CIA program (later known as Timber Sycamore) designed to funnel weapons towards "moderate" rebels. In 2014, Turkey became home to the Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi ("Joint Operations Center", MOM), a CIA-led, multinational operation room which vetted factions that were allowed to receive salaries and weapons such as US-made TOW anti-tank guided missiles (Solomon 2017).

Tightening the grip (2014-2015)

In the meantime, several developments paved the way for a more assertive Turkish policy. The first, in 2012, was the decision by a faltering Assad regime to entrust the YPG with the administration of the Kurdish majority regions of Afrin, Kobane and Qamishli. The resulting shift in Turkish policy first appeared during the battle of Ras al-'Ayn (November 2012 to July 2013),

which opposed Kurdish fighters and rebels backed by Ankara until the latter were expelled from the border town (Shishani 2013). A second source of concern for Turkey was Assad's growing use of airpower, which entailed a steady rise in the number of Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey.

In mid-2013, Erdogan was still hoping that a US-led foreign intervention could solve his problems in Syria. In August, accordingly, the sarin massacre perpetrated in Damascus was met with Turkish calls for a large-scale campaign of airstrikes (Stein 2015a). However, the Obama administration's eventual decision to eschew military action put Turkey in a bind. Now freed from the prospect of Western intervention, the Syrian regime stepped up barrel-bombings of opposition-held areas. Refugees, whose number was about to exceed one million, became a vexing domestic problem for the Turkish government that was already grappling with the Gezi Park movement and a major corruption scandal.

In the run-up to the local elections of March 2014, Turkish decision-makers were eager to hasten the fall of Assad or, at least, to divert attention away from domestic issues. The resulting change of policy was exposed by Gülenist elements within the state apparatus as part of their feud with the AKP. In January 2014, most famously, the Gendarmerie intercepted MIT trucks loaded with arms destined for Syrian rebels (Yildiz 2021). Two months later, other shipments that made it to Syria were put to use in the capture of Kassab, north of Latakia. Not only did rebels operate from across the nearby Turkish border, but they reportedly received support from the Turkish artillery and a Syrian aircraft was shot down by a Turkish F-16 (Tastekin 2015). Fresh arms supplies also paved the way for another rebel onslaught against western Aleppo.

The spring 2014 rebel offensives also constituted a turning point regarding Turkey's readiness to partner with Jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra. In his founding statement two years earlier, al-Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani had virulently attacked Turkey (Pierret 2017, 140). Throughout 2013, however, bilateral relations eased somewhat: first, because the divorce between al-Nusra and IS rid the former of its most uncompromising elements; second, because Turkey was looking for effective partners on the ground at a time when mainstream factions seemed increasingly inept. The rebels' northern push of 2014 also revealed Turkey's cooperation with Chechen commanders, some of whom had sought refuge in Turkey during the Chechen wars and were thus known to the MIT (Ali 2014).

While in need of the hardliners' effectiveness, Turkey was faced with growing US emphasis on counter-terrorism in Syria. In May 2014, therefore, Ankara and Qatar co-sponsored the Revolutionary Covenant, a conciliatory document in which Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam asserted their rejection of the transnational Jihadis' maximalist agenda (Lister 2016, 225-226). In June, the Turkish government finally bowed to long-standing US demands to designate al-Nusra as a terrorist organization (Stein 2015a).

In the following months, however, similar circumstances produced similar outcomes. US military intervention against IS in September 2014 was yet another disappointment for Ankara, which failed to convince Washington to seize the opportunity to enforce a no-fly zone in the north. At the domestic level, anti-Syrian riots erupted in the weeks preceding the August 2014 presidential elections, and CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu promised to send Syrians back home if he won the June 2015 general elections (Hürriyet 2015).

This was the background to what would prove to be Turkey's last attempt at toppling Assad. In March 2015, a rebel commander recounted, "I could now get nearly all the weapons I wanted ... The Turks and their friends [i.e. Qatar] wanted this over with" (Chulov 2015). In the following

weeks, Turkish-backed rebels made some advances in the western suburbs of Aleppo, while they captured the city of Idlib and headed for the regime's strongholds of Hama and Latakia.

The spring 2015 offensives marked yet another shift in Ankara's handling of its Syrian rebel partners. First, the scale and quasi-overt character of Turkish-Qatari support for a coalition including al-Nusra—namely, Idlib's Army of Conquest—was unprecedented. In parallel, as a means to make its Syrian partners more palatable to the US, Turkey quietly supported Qatar's efforts to encourage al-Nusra to break from al-Qaeda, which came to fruition the following year (Stein 2015b).

In the months preceding the rebels' offensive in Idlib, the province had become a condominium of al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham after the former destroyed the main local US-backed FSA factions, namely, the Syria Revolutionaries Front and the Hazm Movement. In Aleppo, by contrast, the insurgency remained more mainstream and fragmented, a situation that granted Ankara greater clout over local rebel politics. In April 2015, Turkey had a Sham Corps member appointed as the commander of the Aleppo Conquest operation room that coordinated rebel operations in the area. In parallel, Ankara reportedly imposed the replacement of the founding leader of one of the most prominent local factions, namely, the Nur al-Din Zenki Movement. He was reproached for the kidnapping of Italian humanitarian workers by one of his aides ('Anjarini 2015).

In September 2015, of course, Turkish hopes of a rebel victory were shattered by the Russian intervention. In response, Ankara initially escalated its efforts, a trend that culminated in November 2015 when the Turkish air force downed a Russian bomber over the Syrian border. As late as October 2016, brand new Turkish-made weapons were seen in rebel hands during the last attempt at breaking the siege of Aleppo (Ahrar 2016). These were mere delaying tactics, however. After the November 2015 crisis, Ankara had found itself isolated and vulnerable to Moscow's economic sanctions and bombardments that drove refugees across the **border into Turkey(?)** (Sly 2015). The Obama administration negotiated a partnership with Russia throughout 2016, and in June 2017 Donald Trump put an end to Timber Sycamore. Saudi Arabia prioritized its military effort in Yemen and, as of 2017, Qatar was to be almost entirely absorbed by its dispute with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

By the summer of 2016, already, it was clear that the AKP government had to seek a modus vivendi with Vladimir Putin, who showed himself to be supportive of Erdogan during the July coup attempt. The soon-to-be lone sponsor of the Syrian insurgency would now focus entirely on its two priorities in the conflict, namely, rolling back the YPG, and preventing further inflows of refugees into Turkey.

Carving up a buffer zone, “building an army down there” (2016-2017)

Ankara's eagerness to put the rebel house in order in mid-2015 was driven by the need for credible partners if Assad were to fall, but also, more decisively, by the fact that Turkish decision-makers were planning to establish a buffer zone in the border areas then occupied by IS as a means to keep the YPG in check. As early as March 2014, Fidan had secretly proposed to wage a false-flag attack on the Turkish extra-territorial shrine of Sultan Suleiman Shah to justify the occupation of the surrounding areas controlled by IS, while “building an army [of Syrian rebels] down there”. (Moore 2014) When the US had extended the anti-IS Operation Inherent Resolve to Syria in September 2014, Turkish calls to rely on the rebels had gone unheeded. Instead, Washington chose to work with the YPG, which in 2015 started to expand southward and along the border. They captured Tell Abyad in June, thereby linking the Autonomous Administration's central and eastern

cantons, while in Turkey the armed conflict between Ankara and the PKK resumed after a two-year ceasefire.

For its buffer-zone plan to succeed, the AKP government needed the unwavering support of the Syrian rebels. Commanders who were deemed too close to the CIA (hence, potentially lukewarm towards Turkey's anti-YPG agenda) were sidelined or even arrested, while Ankara was reportedly pleased with al-Nusra's elimination of Idlib's US-backed factions in early 2015 (Solomon 2017; interview with civilian member of Syrian opposition, Istanbul, 15 April 2015). Even Islamist hardliners had to show support or, at least, acceptance of Turkey's intentions: while Ahrar al-Sham dismissed a handful of recalcitrant hawkish clerics, al-Nusra quietly evacuated the northern countryside of Aleppo so as not to stand in the way of the Turkish army (Eldorar 2015; Suwayd 2015).

Any discussion of Turkey's military intervention against IS inevitably raises the controversial question of Ankara's relationship to that organization in the preceding years. The first Turkish shells landed on IS positions in October 2013, when al-Baghdadi's men tried to seize border crossings from Turkish-backed rebel factions (Balci 2013). Internal records also show that early on, Turkish decision-makers feared that the Jihadi group might be "open to manipulation" (Moore 2014). Yet, IS's focus on northeastern Syria made it a stubborn enemy of the YPG, hence *de facto* it served Turkey's interests. Ankara's ambiguities, which provoked much discontent among its Western allies, found many illustrations: according to the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, the Turkish police wiretapped, yet tolerated, armed deals between ISIS and Turkish citizens; in 2014-2015, the Turkish press abounded with reports of medical treatment granted to wounded ISIS fighters in border towns (Uslu 2016, 787-788); throughout 2014, Turkish authorities were slow to act upon (themselves belated) Western requests to seal its border to foreign volunteers trying to enter Syria, and to stop oil smuggling originating from IS-held territories.(Stein 2015a).

There was more behind Turkish hesitations than a hope that IS would keep the YPG in check. Turkey feared IS retaliations in the form of terrorist attacks and hostage-taking—forty Turkish diplomats were kidnapped by IS in Mosul in June 2014, then released in exchange for IS members detained in Turkey (Sly 2014). Oil smuggling was also beneficial to Turkish buyers whom the AKP government was loath to antagonize (Uslu 2016, 788) More fundamentally, Turkey's uncooperative attitude was a function of its disagreement with the US's anti-IS strategy, which marginalized anti-Assad rebels to the benefit of the YPG. In order to bend Washington's approach to its own preferences, Ankara refused to put the Incirlik airbase at the disposal of Inherent Resolve until July 2015, after both parties finally agreed to include Syrian rebels in the anti-IS effort and to work for the establishment of a Turkish-held safe zone (De Young 2015).

Turkish pressures resulted in the creation of the Pentagon-run, overt Train and Equip program, whose first unit was disarmed by al-Nusra as soon as it crossed the border (Gutman 2015). The fiasco contributed to Washington's decision to sponsor the October 2015 establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic alliance placed under undisputed YPG leadership. For Turkey, another alarm bell rang in February 2016, when the YPG captured rebel-held Tell Rif'at, north of Aleppo, and advanced towards the border town of A'zaz. In the following months, Turkey's artillery and logistical support helped local rebels to deter the YPG while trying to move eastwards against IS. This met with little success, hence the US decision to support the SDF's capture of Manbij from IS in June in spite of Ankara's opposition to any Kurdish inroad west of the Euphrates. In the meantime, IS responded to Turkey's growing contribution to Inherent Resolve

through deadly suicide attacks inside Turkey, notably killing 45 at Istanbul's Atatürk airport in June 2016, while firing rockets at the province of Kilis (Stein 2016).

Starting in August 2016, after the AKP government finally obtained the green light from the US and Russia to enter Syria, the seven month-long Operation Euphrates Shield cleared Jarablus and al-Bab of IS. This was the first instance of on-the-ground cooperation between the Turkish army and Syrian rebels, who were now receiving such heavy weapon systems as ACV-15 armored combat vehicles (Baladi 2016). Euphrates Shield was followed in January-March 2018 by Olive Branch, which led to the capture of the YPG-held region of Afrin and the displacement of the majority of its Kurdish-majority population. In October 2019, finally, Peace Spring resulted in the capture of the mixed area of Tell Abyad and Ras al-‘Ayn. Apart from stifling YPG ambitions, the resulting buffer zone offered Turkey the opportunity to resettle displaced Arab communities originating from areas reconquered by the regime in the south, while promising to do the same later with Turkey-based refugees. This would help to address xenophobic sentiments at home, and hinder future attempts at establishing Kurdish rule along the border (Hilu 2021, 9-10).

During its operations in Syria, the Turkish army partnered with the Hawar Kilis operation room, which had been established in April 2016 by offshoots of the revived Train and Equip Program (e.g. Hamza Division and al-Mu‘tasim Division) and other northern Aleppo-based rebel units to coordinate anti-IS operations. This was the nucleus of the Syrian National Army (SNA) that was eventually established in December 2017, on the eve of operation Olive Branch. Although trained and funded, hence commanded, by Turkey, the SNA was theoretically subordinated to the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian National Coalition Interim Government. (Yüksel 2019; Özkiklik 2019, 14; Hilu 2021, 5) This (purely symbolic) assertion of Syrian sovereignty followed the same rationale as Turkey's refusal to formally annex the territories it administers across the border. Indeed, formal partition would set a precedent that Ankara regards as highly perilous for its own territorial integrity vis-à-vis Kurdish separatist desires.

By 2020, the SNA's first three corps (*fayaliq*) claimed c. 25,000 fighters grouped in 26 units of three main origins. A first category comprised local branches of factions such as the SMB-affiliated Sham Corps, Levant Front, and Ahrar al-Sham. The second was made up of fighters that had sought refuge in the northern Aleppo countryside in previous years: Ahrar al-Sharqiyya and Jaysh al-Sharqiyya were formed by rebels expelled from Deir ez-Zor by IS in 2014, while Jaysh al-Islam and Faylaq al-Rahman had withdrawn to the suburbs of Damascus following the regime's recapture of the area in 2018 (Özkicilik 2019, 10).

A third component of the SNA are Turkmen-led factions that are often recognizable by names that refer to Ottoman Sultans (Sultan Murad Bloc, Sultan Mehmet Fatih, the notoriously unruly Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade) or to Turkic civilization (Samarkand Brigade). Comprising 10% of the first three corps' manpower, Turkmens are largely overrepresented within the SNA considering that they accounted for less than 3% of Syria's prewar population (Özkicilik 2020, 24). This is due to the concentration of Turkmen communities in Northern Syria but also, of course, to Turkey's policies. From the onset of the war, Ankara valued Turkmen rebel factions for reasons of language, considering its aforementioned lack of Arabists. During the Kassab offensive, Turkmen intermediaries were reportedly tasked to send the coordinates of regime positions to the Turkish artillery. Partnering with Turkmen rebels was also a matter of legitimacy, the AKP government's support for ethnic brethren in Syria being spared the bitter criticisms formulated by the opposition against other aspects of Erdogan's strategy. In the MIT trucks affair, for instance, the authorities insisted that arms shipments were destined for Turkmens (Tastekin 2015).

Ankara convinced the Pentagon to make Turkmen commanders the mainstay of the Train & Equip program by highlighting their non-Islamist orientation (Erkuş 2015). After the establishment of the SNA, likewise, Turkmen-led factions enjoyed preferential treatment from Turkey, which enabled them to hire non-Turkmen fighters (Hage Ali 2017). Accordingly, such factions formed the backbone of the Syrian mercenary contingent deployed by Turkey in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 (Tsurkov 2020).

Ankara initially conceived of its Syrian rebel partners as a force that could undermine YPG dominance beyond the narrow limits of Turkish-occupied areas. In 2016-2017, in particular, Turkey tried, and failed, to foster the emergence of Arab and Kurdish insurgent groups within SDF-held territories (Enab Baladi 2016). The Ahfad Salah al-Din Brigade, the Kurdish component of the Hawar Kilis operation room, could have played a critical role in that endeavor, but it was disbanded by Turkey in 2017 because of its opposition to the planned operation against the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin (Ibrahim 2017). As for the SNA factions from Deir ez-Zor, which have been regarded by Turkey as a potential asset if SNA operations ever were to extend to eastern Syria, they have become the epitome of the SNA's rogue behaviour, which has materialized in looting and ransoming (particularly of Kurdish residents of Afrin), and infighting over spoils and other economic resources (Heller 2017; WhatsApp interview with Syrian analyst, 3 March 2018; Hilu 2021, 8).

Ironically, although Turkey initially opposed US insistence that Train and Equip units should not fight the regime, the same restraint was eventually imposed on the SNA. It was in Idlib, instead, that Turkey's military deployment would eventually lead to genuine military cooperation with the rebels against the regime.

Idlib: drawing a line in the sand (2018-2020)

Following the fall of eastern Aleppo to regime forces in December 2016, Turkey, Russia and Iran launched a series of meetings held in Astana, Kazakhstan (Heller 2017). Discussions initially focused on the establishment of a ceasefire, which Ankara sought for two main reasons. First, it needed to prevent regime advances that would provoke new population movements towards the border. Second, Moscow's acquiescence was required to prepare the offensive against Afrin. The Astana talks thus paved the way for Turkey's first military deployment in Idlib in October 2017. A dozen observation posts were established west of the Damascus-Aleppo railway in order not to stand in the way of the pro-regime forces that recaptured Idlib's eastern edges in the following months. Turkish positions also sealed Afrin from the south, thereby preparing the ensuing pincer move against the Kurdish enclave.

While Idlib's rebels had hitherto enjoyed greater independence from Turkey than their counterparts in Aleppo, they were now summoned by Ankara to comply with what they perceived as unholy bargains. The SMB's Sham Corps, whose representatives led the rebel delegation in Astana, emerged as the pillar of Ankara's influence among local insurgents. Yet, precisely because of Turkey's protection, the Sham Corps was spared aggressive moves by Jabhat al-Nusra (now renamed Hay'a Tahrir al-Sham, "Syria's Liberation Committee", henceforth HTS) against what the Jihadi group branded as the "Astana factions". Between 2017 and 2019, indeed, three main rounds of infighting brought c. 90% of the greater Idlib area under HTS's control (Khatib 2018). Several factions consequently sought protection by merging with the Sham Corps (WhatsApp interview with Syrian analyst, 19 February 2019).

In the face of al-Jolani's hegemonic ambitions, Turkey had few options. Mainstream rebel factions were too weak to contain the Jihadi group's power grab. A direct military confrontation with HTS would have been costly for the Turkish military, while bringing more refugees and terrorism onto Turkish soil. At the same time, it rapidly appeared that HTS's bombastic statements against the Astana process accompanied a pragmatic posture regarding Turkish interests. While HTS fighters escorted the Turkish military convoys that entered Idlib, the group's clerics legitimized cooperation with Ankara on the basis that a dozen outposts did not give the latter effective control over the region (Farghali 2017). In January 2019, while his men were dealing a decisive blow to their rivals from Ahrar al-Sham, al-Jolani even expressed support for further Turkish military operations against the YPG east of the Euphrates (Enab Baladi 2019). In parallel, HTS entrusted Idlib's governance to a nominally independent civilian administration, the Syrian Salvation Government, which met with low-level Turkish officials over technical issues such as health (Shaam 2017). Al-Jolani's embrace of realpolitik convinced al-Qaeda loyalists to split from HTS and, in early 2018, establish Hurras al-Din ("Guardians of Religion").

Turkey's cautious engagement did not preclude measures aimed at containing HTS. MIT was probably behind significant defections that befell the group on the eve of Turkey's 2017 military deployment (Erkoyun 2017). In parallel, Ankara pushed for the unification of Idlib's mainstream faction, which in May 2018 formed the National Front for Liberation (NFL) headed by Sham Corps' Col Fadlallah al-Hajji. In October 2019, the NFL officially joined the SNA, a move designed to deter further aggression from HTS while bolstering the position of the Interim Government (officially the SNA's supreme authority) within the Turkish-Russian sponsored committee in charge of drafting a new Syrian constitution. Although the merger brought the number of SNA corps from three to seven, and its manpower from c. 25,000 men to an alleged 80,000, it had limited practical implications because what was required in Idlib was cooperation with HTS in the face of advancing pro-regime forces (Özkicilcik 2019, 9-10).

Assad and his allies had only agreed to recognize Idlib as a "de-escalation zone" in order to focus their energies on the reconquest of southern rebel-held areas. As soon as this goal was achieved in the summer of 2018, loyalist forces prepared for a large-scale offensive against Idlib. Turkey's countervailing military build-up along the border convinced Russia to sign the Sochi agreement in September. This provided for the withdrawal of heavy weapons and HTS fighters from the rebel-held areas extending from the frontline to the M4 (Latakia-Aleppo) and M5 (Damascus-Aleppo) highways, and for the reopening of the latter to civilian traffic. Although HTS accepted the broad lines of the agreement, it undermined this in late 2018 by further expanding its own domain to the detriment of rival factions, while Russia subsequently added a demand to hold joint patrols with the Turkish military along the contentious highways. Consequently, pro-regime forces resumed their operations in the spring of 2019 and, by February 2020, had retaken most of the M5 (International Crisis Group 2020).

Loyalist advances resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands towards the border, and in the encirclement of several Turkish outposts that were eventually evacuated in early 2021. In the meantime, however, Turkey had drawn a line in the sand through unprecedented military support for the rebels. Liberal provisions of artillery ammunitions were handed over to the NFL which, conveniently (considering that Turkey officially considers HTS as a terrorist organization), was given the command of HTS's heavy-weapons regiments within the Fath Mubin ("Great Conquest") operation room (Hamawi 2019).

Indirect support proved insufficient, however, and by mid-February 2020, loyalists were only a dozen kilometers away from the city of Idlib. Turkish artillery and commandos equipped with anti-aircraft missiles assisted the rebels' successful pushback, which in turn prompted loyalist attacks against Turkish troops. After an airstrike killed dozens of Turkish soldiers in Balyun on February 27, Ankara launched operation Spring Shield: while its ground force in Idlib was brought to 20,000, its F-16 shot down three Syrian aircrafts, and armed drones destroyed dozens of loyalist vehicles. On March 5, Turkey and Russia agreed to a ceasefire that provided for joint Turkish-Russian patrols on the M4, while the M5 was definitively lost to the regime (International Crisis Group 2020).

Ankara's growing military footprint provided it with greater leverage over HTS, forcing it to display its goodwill by acceding to Turkey's demand to join a tripartite military council headed by representatives of HTS and the NFL's Sham Corps and Ahrar al-Sham (Barish 2020). Deepening Turkish involvement in Idlib also brought about new perils. From September 2020 onwards, Turkish soldiers were the targets of several attacks by previously unknown militant groups such as the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Company (Modon 2021). These groups were possibly front organizations for parties which, like Hurras al-Din, were attempting to sabotage the March 5 ceasefire and punish Ankara for prompting HTS to crack down on Jihadi hardliners.

Conclusion

Until 2013, Turkey acted as the facilitator of a proxy-war strategy that was primarily designed by the Gulf states and the United States. While it granted Syrian rebels and their sponsors access to its territory, it barely interfered in the rebellion's internal politics. However, as the rapidly growing number of Syrian refugees compounded popular discontent with the AKP government, the latter's policy shifted due to impatience with Obama's pusillanimity during the August 2013 chemical weapons attack crisis, and with the poor military performance of the moderate rebels. The battle of Kassab marked a turning point as the Turkish army provided near-direct support for an offensive led by hardline Islamist factions. One year later, it was once again dissatisfaction with the US (for its refusal to include an anti-Assad dimension in Operation Inherent Resolve against IS), and the Turkish opposition's escalation of its anti-refugee rhetoric as elections drew nearer, that convinced Ankara to fully back the northwestern rebel push that ultimately contributed to Russia's decision to enter the war on Assad's side in September 2015.

In parallel, Turkey's hold over northern Syrian rebels tightened in response to the rise of the YPG. Starting with the battle of Ras al-'Ayn in late 2012, Ankara used Assad's armed opponents as a proxy force against the PKK-affiliated group. From 2016 onwards, as the Turkish army carved up a buffer zone in IS- and YPG-held territories, and as other state sponsors disengaged, northern rebel factions were dealt with as an auxiliary force owing full obedience to its lone Turkish patron. This process culminated in the establishment of the Syrian National Army in 2017.

In HTS-dominated Idlib, Turkey has been chiefly concerned with the risk of a massive influx of refugees resulting from loyalist offensives. Because its light military deployment of 2017 proved insufficient to deter aggression, Turkish armed forces engaged pro-regime forces in 2020. Once again, direct military intervention turned from what had originally been designed as a cautious, arm's length management of the rebels' internal affairs into a more hands-on strategy. In the aftermath of Operation Spring Shield, indeed, Ankara pressured HTS into forming a joint military council with Turkish-backed factions.

Turkey initially proved willing to engage with whatever rebel faction showed pragmatic enough to work with, from FSA-banner moderates to Islamist hardliners. Ankara's more selective policy in subsequent years was not based on ideology but on the criteria of military effectiveness and loyalty. Likewise, Turkish preference for select factions should not be interpreted as part of a project to turn them into a hegemonic force within the rebellion but rather as a quest for—sometimes, literal—interpreters to help it navigate an alien, exceedingly complex factional environment. Such privileged intermediaries were chosen on the basis of ideological sympathies, as were the SMB and a broad range of other Islamist factions, but also for ethnic reasons, a pattern most clearly illustrated by the prominent role of Turkmen commanders within the SNA. Maintaining such special relationships without undermining its ties to other political and military forces among the Syrian opposition will undoubtedly constitute one of Turkey's main challenges in the future.

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