

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

Firas Samuri

24.02.2019

Turkey dangerous games causing Idlib catastrophe

The meeting of the heads of Russia, Turkey and Iran dedicated to the Syrian settlement was [held](#) in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on February 14, 2019. Vladimir Putin, Hassan Rouhani and Recep Erdogan discussed possible ways of the political resolution of the Syrian crisis, joint steps that would help to calm the situation in Syria and seriously advance the peace process by showing respect for international law and the agreements undertaken by the parties concerned.



The leaders of Iran, Russia, and Turkey in Sochi on February 14, 2019

Speaking of the peaceful settlement in Idlib, the sides have agreed to continue working on the implementation of the Sochi summit. The certain adjustments on [transferring](#) Idlib's largest part under Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (former Al-Qaida terrorists or HTS) control would be made. As of yet, it is not clear whether the hostilities against terrorists would open. The detailed answer could be given only after having analyzed the Turkish activity on implementing all the points of the Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib as well as after having studied the development of the situation since the document had been signed.

Details of the Memorandum

The Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in Idlib was [signed](#) in mid-September 2018. The document lists a ten-point plan to avoid an offensive in the northwestern Syrian province. Aside from the demilitarized zone, which would go “15-20 km deep in the de-escalation area”, the document grants the Iranian-Russian-Turkish coordination centre a role in implementing the ceasefires. That also said that Russia is responsible for outside security environment. And, Turkey is liable to take the security measures inside the zone.



The map of Idlib demilitarization zone

According to the second point, Russia will take all the necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and the existing status quo will be maintained. Also, Turkey has taken some adjustments.

5. All radical terrorist groups will be removed from the demilitarised zone by October 15.
6. All tanks, MLRS, artillery and mortars belonging to conflicting parties will be withdrawn from the demilitarised zone by October 10, 2018.
7. Turkish Armed Forces and the military police of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will conduct coordinated patrols and monitoring with UAVs along the boundaries of the demilitarised zone.
With a view to ensuring free movement of local residents and goods and restoring trade and economic relations:
8. Transit traffic on the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) will be restored by the end of 2018.
9. Effective measures will be taken for ensuring sustainable ceasefire regime within the Idlib de-escalation area. In this regard, the functions of the Joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish Coordination Center will be enhanced.

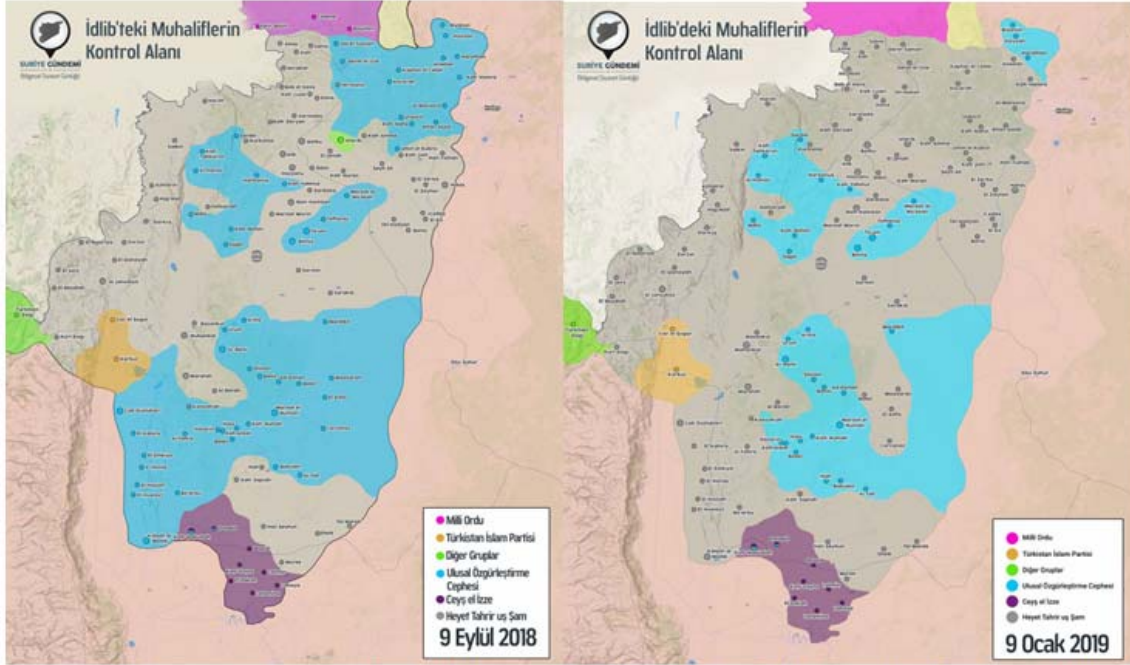
Some points of the Memorandum published by the National

The main complaint to Turkey is linked to points 5, 6, 8 and 9 of the Memorandum. The effective measures on ensuring ceasefire by Ankara have not been taken yet. Besides, Erdogan's determination on fighting terrorists in Syria has not also been recorded. What is going on in Idlib with the direct complicity of Turkey?

Map Changing

Not only inaction but also silent endorsement of Turkey allows the radicals to seize power in the province.

The picture below clearly demonstrates HTS and the affiliated groups including Jaysh al-Izza control over the frontlines in Northern Hama, Western Aleppo, and Southern Idlib.



Territorial control in Idlib as at 9 September 2018 and 9 January 2019

<i>Legend</i>	
●	<i>Turkish Armed Forces</i>
●	<i>Turkistan Islamic Party</i>
●	<i>Various pro-Turkish groups</i>
●	<i>National Liberation Front</i>
●	<i>Jaysh al-Izza</i>
●	<i>HTS</i>

Map changings in Idlib since Memorandum has been signed

HTS militants officially [rejected](#) the terms of the Sochi agreement. The fulfilling of the deal by Erdogan is even less likely under the current circumstances.

In this regard, the [statement](#) of the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, regarding the HTS attacks in Idlib looks quite ridiculous. “Radical groups are attacking the Syrian opposition, and we have taken necessary measures to halt these attacks”. On the one hand, this statement looks genuinely, but on the other hand, the Minister exaggerated the measures taken by Ankara, especially if we look at the map.

Cavusoglu rushed to improve the situation but did nothing better than [blamed](#) Assad for a redeployment of militants across the country to Idlib. It’s very amusing to hear that now when HTS has established control over the whole province. Why was everything all right for Ankara earlier when the terrorists flooded the region?

Has the process of establishing Islamic control over Idlib passed on silent approval of Turkey?

The [defeat](#) of Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Ahrah al-Sham concessions, [dissolution](#) of Free Idlib Police (the branch of Al-Qaida in Syria) played a crucial role in changing the balance of power.

Jaysh al-Ahrar acknowledged the power of Salvation Government controlled by HTS. Its leaders [agreed on](#) handing over its territories along the Syrian-Turkish border as well as strongholds and checkpoints to HTS.

Besides, in early January, HTS successfully captured National Liberation Front positions and turned over control of them to the Salvation Government. It was done following the peace agreement [signed](#) between the sides. After that, all the health facilities in Idlib stopped operating due to the suspension of supplies by the EU and international organizations. So, the situation in the province has [turned into](#) a humanitarian catastrophe.

Moreover, HTS reached an agreement on redeployment of 1,700 Jabhat al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir militants from Al-Gab to Afrin.



Talks on Jabhat al-Wataniya lil-Tahrir militants' redeployment

The other illegal armed groups concluded, without any resistance, an agreement with Al-Nusra on territorial transfer to the Salvation Government (linked to HTS), and the remnants of the moderate opposition joined the ranks of the terrorists. Thus, the atmosphere in the region became tenser. All the efforts to sort out the moderate opposition have failed.

By the way, the lack of Turkey's and its pawns' counteracting demonstrates the direct involvement of the Turkish special services in [strengthening](#) HTS in Idlib. Moreover, that is evidenced by the statement of HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani, who has declared the support for the Turkish plan against Kurds in the northeastern Syria.

HTS “disciplines” Idlib

According to the representatives of other groups, a large number of former [Free Syrian Policemen](#) is unemployed, and now there is no one left to fight against corruption, robberies, assassinations and lootings (these indicators are slightly higher in Idlib than in other parts of Syria). And now, Idlib would be patrolled by “Islamic Police”, consisting of militant groups belonging to HTS instead of “Free Syrian police”.

Hiding behind the fight against the [Islamic State](#) (ISIS) the new authorities activity results in illegal arrests, prompt investigations, mass executions, murders of [activists](#), kidnappings, terrorist attacks and indiscriminate shooting on the streets. First of all, it should be classified as dispatching of rivals, as well as establishing a single rule of the jihadists instead of securing the locals.

The residents gradually turned into al-Julani hostages. The radical elements managed not only to get inside and a foothold in the Syrian revolutionary movement, but also to lead it.



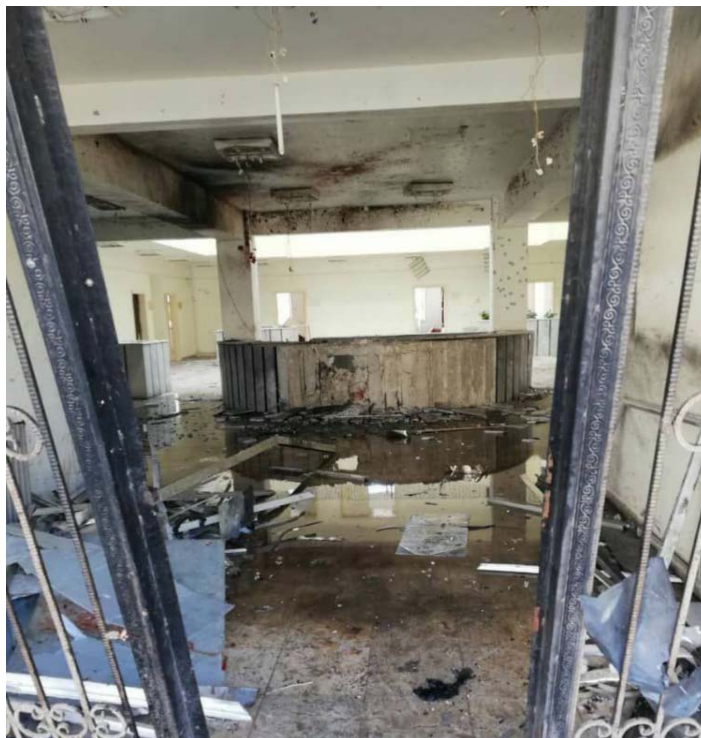
A car bomb blast at HTS’ checkpoint in Idlib

Maybe, that is why the leaked voice recording of a conversation between HTS militants, discussing rich man from [Saraqib](#)’ abduction is no longer surprising. During the incident, a woman was killed, and a child was severely wounded. HTS commander involved in the kidnapping, Abu Ahmad, offered to shift the responsibility for the woman killed onto an Idlib ISIS cell through the controlled propaganda media.



HTS militants executed 12 people responsible for a terrorist attack and allegedly linked to ISIS

The people of Idlib reasonably express fears for their own lives and lives of their loved ones as the cases of abduction have become more regular. That's why the locals try to resist to the radicals.



Female suicide bomber destroyed the Salvation Government PM's office

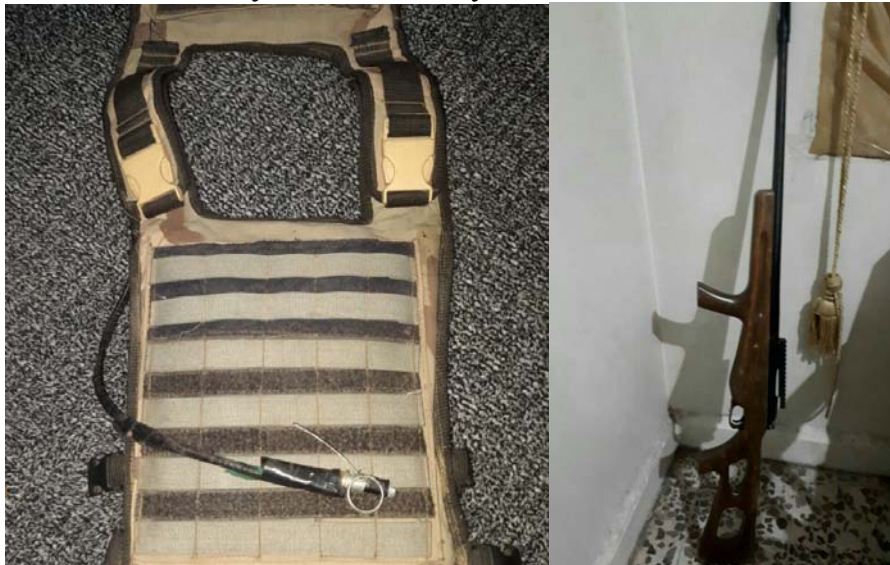
Is the arms trade in line with the Memorandum?

Apart from repressions, HTS initiated the [arms trade](#) in the province. Underground gun shops offer rifles at a special price of \$600 apiece. Anyone can easily buy a sniper rifle that looks like Romanian PSL DMR with a scope.



Rifles on the black market of Idlib

One can even purchase a suicide vest that is quite valuable on the black market. The ad says the vest contains 4 kilos of C4 explosives and old Soviet-made detonator. Meanwhile, you can also buy a homemade Mosin rifle.



A suicide vest and homemade Mosin rifle

All this indicates that HTS influence zone has expanded much. It turns out that Turkey violates the tenth point of the Memorandum obliging Ankara to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations.

Road-blocking and the eighth point of the Memorandum

Due to the expansion of HTS influence zone, the eighth point of the Memorandum on the restoration of traffic along the M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) highways is also not implemented.

Notably, in late January, HTS radicals blocked traffic at Afrin-Idlib highway arguing that they are afraid of ISIS infiltration in the province. And since January 29, they have [blocked](#) all the roads from rural Aleppo to Idlib.



The road closed by barriers

Now the entry to Idlib is [restricted](#), and each driver has to pay a \$100 fee. Currently, the control is carried out by HTS militants.



M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) routes controlled by HTS

The situation is also critical with food supplies. The occupation of a highway running to Bab al-Hawa border crossing by the radicals has resulted in higher prices of goods. According to The Guardian, the locals are afraid of the lack of money to buy food and to pay for fuel. This fact is especially critical

when there is a virtual absence of jobs and people can't even receive the minimum wage.

Under the current circumstances, the [EU Council's appeal](#) to ensure unimpeded access of humanitarian aid to Idlib sounds more relevant than ever. And Turkey as a guarantor state must provide this opportunity.

Therefore, it can be stated that Erdogan failed to fulfill another point of the Sochi agreements related to the opening of the two key transport routes. On the contrary, the situation with communications in Idlib during the validity of the Memorandum has deteriorated. The various armed entities that had controlled the checkpoints were replaced by HTS jihadists who established their own rules.

For sure, these circumstances provide the preconditions for claims to Erdogan from Moscow, Tehran and Damascus.

Demilitarized zone issue

To remind, the fifth and the sixth points of the Memorandum envisage the withdrawal of the radical armed groups from the demilitarized zone till October, 15, 2018. Tanks, artillery units, MLRS and mortars had to be withdrawn till October, 10, 2018. Turkey has failed this issue too.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham militants are strengthening their positions. They are regularly shelling the nearby settlements and building up their forces close to the frontline.

The largest part of Idlib demilitarization area is occupied by the terrorists. The local activists report that around 70% of the territory is seized by radicals. HTS is [attacking](#) the Syrian Army positions and human settlements.

HTS artillery fire is never interrupted in the al-Tah region, the southern Idlib. Thus, Turkish forces seem to have deliberately violated the Memorandum by not withdrawing the militants out of the province.

There have also been fierce clashes between the jihadists and SAA units on the frontline north-west to Aleppo. During the last one, the government forces succeeded to repulse HTS attack west to Abu Douhur in Idlib.

Sources from SAA say that the militants once used prohibited chemical weapon, which resulted in the [hospitalization](#) of two servicemen.

Will chemical weapon be used?

According to the available information, the terrorists' leaders are getting ready to carry out [chemical provocations](#) on the eve of an offensive operation. With the aid of European specialists arrived via Turkey, the jihadists have set up chemical weapons depots at 30 towns near Idlib de-escalation area.

It may be indirectly confirmed by the fact that White Helmets are causing a stir around Idlib. Civil defenders have intensified their activity in Idlib lately. They have appeared in the town of [Maarat al-Nouman](#) right after it [has been captured](#) by HTS, the residents report. Moreover, several hospitals already host

equipment the White Helmets have prepared for staged shooting of a chemical attack allegedly conducted by Damascus.

Operational coordination of Islamists

Under the leadership of HTS, a joint command and control organization, the so-called Military Council was created. This body is an operational headquarters with all groups involved, including such former opposition forces as the 1st Coastal Division, Jaysh al-Izza, Suqour al-Sham and a few others.



Combat training of Jaysh Abu Bakr al-Seddiq affiliated with HTS

Down to Aleppo, Hama and Latakia, the terrorists are forming offensive groups, armed with artillery and tanks. HTS is regularly recruiting mercenaries, training them and guiding their operational coordination. The forced mobilization is conducted among the youth aged 15 to 22. All this is happening in front of Turkish soldiers' eyes while they do absolutely nothing to prevent destabilization. Thus, the whole idea of a demilitarization zone and diplomatic settlement of the situation in Idlib has been compromised.

Besides, the first Islamic private military contractor (PMC), called Malhama Tactical, has intensified its activity, which foremost consists of training of jihadists from different groups located on the HTS-held territory. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham itself funds the training. Mercenaries are in charge of forming militants, from machine gunners to snipers.



Islamic PMC Malhama Tactical



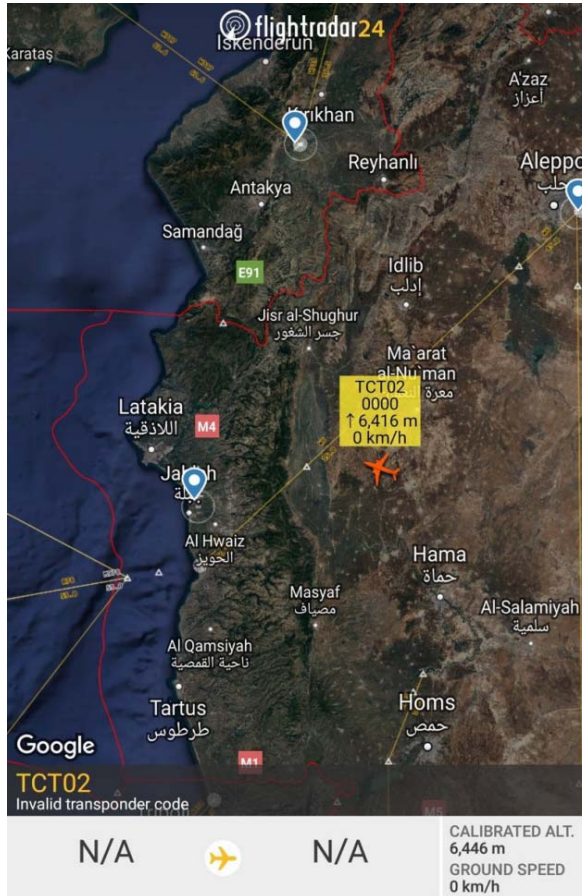
Allegedly one of the PMC chiefs

At the same time, the Malhama Tactical leadership has been caught in crowdfunding through social networks and in supporting jihadists. To get further on Malhama Tactical activity, read the article at Foreign Policy.

And what is Turkey's role?

It would be nonsense to say that Ankara has no accurate information to implement the agreements on Idlib for some groups remain under Turkey's control.

Ankara is still active in the northern part of Syria, where it conducts surveillance and aerial survey by drones above the Idlib province.



*Turkish drone
allegedly Bayraktar TB2
2/19/19*



*Turkish drone over Idlib province
1/22/19*

Turkey has its strategy on the situation in the de-escalation zone of Idlib hardly complying with the Memorandum.

Former U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State Brett McGurk said, Ankara was [supporting](#) many opposition groups and creating friendly conditions for them. He considered the province of Idlib as a zone of Turkey's influence where groups affiliated with al-Qaida prevail. According to McGurk, all the guarding points on the border are controlled by al-Qaida, which is a serious aggravating issue in the settlement process in Idlib.

Is there a possibility of a military operation in Idlib?

Turkey is supposed to respect the Sochi agreement but it can't due to the largest part of Idlib being held by HTS. The scenario of bargaining, like it was in the case of the Afrin deal, may be advantageous for Ankara. In exchange of an operation against Kurds of Rojava, Turkey is ready to accept not to interfere with the SAA units while it will clean up Idlib.

The possible scenario is a joint operation, during which pro-Turkish groups would move from the north and the border while Syrian-Iranian troops would start from the positions alongside the de-escalation zone.

In any case, Turkey is fully responsible for undermining the joint Memorandum. Moreover, the current situation demonstrates Turkey's negligence to guarantee the withdrawal of heavy weapons and radical jihadist groups from Idlib. And while the Turkish leader is turning a blind eye to what is going on in the province of Idlib things are getting only worse.