

Turkey's Links with HTS and Other Jihadi Militias in Syria



The most common [flag](#) of Jabhat al-Nusra, currently known as Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham



HTS flag

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Introduction

Turkey is perceived to be an extremely important country, geopolitically. As a member of NATO and bordering Europe and the Middle East, Turkey's internal and regional relations have a direct impact on transnational issues. Internally, Turkey has always been nationalist but is becoming increasingly Islamist. Regionally, it has forged links with jihadi militant extremists while defying international law and nation-state governments when conducting airstrikes and ground offensives in Iraq and Syria, the latest being Operation Olive Branch against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) in Afrin. In Afrin, it will be alleged that Turkey is using its own military as well as jihadi groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) or 'the Body for the Liberation of the Levant' to fight YPG/YPJ.

This report provides evidence based on media and think tank sources to show Turkey's alleged links with HTS and other jihadi militant extremists. The coalition known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or HTS was founded on January 28, 2017, by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly al-Qaida/ Jabhat al-Nusra, and also referred to as Jabhat al-Sham) to unite militias and bring down the Assad government after the opposition's devastating defeat in eastern Aleppo. Among the HTS coalition are militias supported by Turkey, including components of Ahrar al-Sham that defected to HTS. For more details [Click here](#) and [here](#).

Whilst HTS and Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham's immediate priority is to overthrow the Assad government, of more concern is their aim to replace the Assad government with a Sunni Arab emirate based on strict Sharia law, and conduct transnational jihad. Because of their transnational ambitions, both the US and Russia classify them as terrorist organisations.

Sources cited in this report indicate that Turkey's overt co-ordination with Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham's former incarnation, Jabhat al-Nusra, began in the Syrian governorate of Idlib in 2015, when a coalition dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham called [Jaish al-Fatah](#) or the Army of Conquest took control of Idlib. By 2017 the governorate had a population of about two million people, half of whom are Internally Displaced People (IDPs) from former opposition-held areas. At the first Russia-initiated Astana meeting in May 2017, Idlib was identified as one of four de-confliction zones, but in July 2017, HTS took control of most of the governorate by removing Ahrar al-Sham. To de-conflict Idlib, Russia, Iran and Turkey agreed to divide Idlib into three areas. Area 1, east of the railway, would be a demilitarised zone under Russian supervision, cleared of opposition militias and run by local councils. Area 3, west of the railway, and between the Aleppo-Damascus International M5 Highway and the Turkish border would be under Turkish observation. Inside Area 3 Turkey was to deploy 500 observers and establish at least 12 checkpoints including in Idlib city, Darat Izza, Jisr al-Shughur, Maarat al-Numan and Khan Sheikhoun. The plan was for Turkey-backed militias to secure the area so IDPs could settle, at least until there was a political transition. Area 2 was between the railway and highway, where HTS was to



be confined by Turkey and other stakeholders.

For this plan to work, Turkey was meant to confront HTS members who refused to lay down their arms. As reported by [Fehim Tastekin](#) in *Al-Monitor*, this was attempted when Turkey-backed Ahrar al-Sham fought HTS in Idlib in July 2017. An additional strategy was to split the group using various means, such as convincing HTS members to join the Turkey-backed militias, and in particular Ahrar al-Sham, in northern Aleppo, where Turkey is training opposition militants for a 'Syrian National Army'. Since the start of the civil war, Ahrar al-Sham has fought alongside and against Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham and, later, HTS, with fighters often transferring back and forth between groups. [Ruwan Rujouleh](#) provides further details on the relationship between these two jihadi militias. Like HTS, Ahrar al-Sham has yet to agree to a ceasefire with the Assad government and has not participated in the Astana or Geneva process. However, most Ahrar al-Sham militants that oppose HTS allegedly do not support transnational jihad, and consequently Ahrar al-Sham is not classified as a terrorist organisation.

When Turkey's attempts to defeat, split or reshape HTS in accordance with the Astana agreement did not produce significant results, it will be shown that Turkey decided to co-ordinate with HTS, although some HTS members continued to oppose Turkey's presence in Idlib, and between September and November 2017 unknown perpetrators assassinated more than 35 HTS leaders in the governorate. For instance, on 29 October [four HTS military commanders](#) were assassinated after voicing their opposition to Turkey's 'occupation'. They were Abu Talha Ordoni in Ma'ardabsah (eastern Idlib), Hassan al-Bakour nom de guerre Abu Abdurrahman [Hawan](#) and Abu Abdurrahman Hawan al-Mohajer in Khan Sheikhoun (southern Idlib) and Mostafa Zahri in Dana (northern Idlib). The [unknown perpetrators](#) could be from Turkey, and/or be other HTS members, and/or be foreign actors using local proxies.

To provide evidence of Turkey's alleged links with HTS and Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham, this report relies on articles published by think tanks (Atlantic Council, Chatham House, Institute for the Study of War and the Washington Institute) and international media sources (*AhlulBayt News*, *Al-Masdar News*, *Al-Monitor*, *Arab News*, *The Century Foundation*, *The Cipher Brief*, *Enab Baladi English*, *FarsNews*, *Foreign Policy*, *Hawar News Agency*, *The Independent*, *New York Times*, *Reuters*, *RT*, *South Front*, *Sputnik*, *The Strait Times*, *Syria Direct*, *Syria Deeply* and *TRT World*.) The scarcity of major western media outlets in the list reflects the silence of Western governments and media on these critical matters.



Map of Northern Syria, featuring Idlib

Allegations

1. Turkey supported Jabhat Al-Nusra / Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham taking control of Idlib in 2015.

As [Hassan Hassan](#) in *Foreign Policy* and [Kim Sengupta](#) in *The Independent* report, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia supported Jaish al-Fatah ([Army of Conquest](#)) – a loose coalition of militias dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham – to take control of Idlib at the end of March 2015. The Turkey-based [Syrian National Coalition](#), established in 2012, [publicly supported the take-over](#). The Army of Conquest established [156 local councils](#) controlled by different factions. To de-militarise the civilian administrations the Syrian National Coalition’s [Syrian Interim Government](#),

formed in Turkey in 2013, took over many councils, as they have since done in northern Aleppo.

2. HTS and Turkey negotiated Turkish Armed Forces entering Idlib under HTS escort in 2017.

In an interview published on October 10, 2017, [Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute](#)¹ describes how Turkish officials and HTS held a series of high level meetings including one on 7 October in which HTS agreed for the Turkish military to enter Idlib and establish observation posts. HTS agreed on the conditions that:

- Turkey would not launch a military operation against HTS in Idlib;
- Turkey would remain in northern Idlib along the border with Kurdish-controlled Afrin;
- Turkey would not interfere with HTS' interior affairs; and that
- Opposition militias affiliated with Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Aleppo would not enter Idlib.

In return, some factions in the HTS allegedly agreed to 'transform'. [Ahmad Abazeid](#) provides further details in an article published by the Atlantic Council.

Turkey's communication channels with HTS are aided by Turkey-backed Ahrar al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zinki having links with HTS, as outlined by [Sam Heller in Perspectives on Terrorism](#). These militias are part of the Turkey-backed 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA), which has contributed to the Turkey-trained and established 'National Army' in northern Aleppo. [Other FSA factions also have close ties with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and HTS](#).

[Reuters](#) (and other media outlets) report that on October 8, 2017, a Turkish reconnaissance team travelling in military vehicles crossed the Turkey-Syria border. Under HTS militant escort the convoy entered northern Idlib for the purpose of identifying suitable observation posts south of Afrin. [Reuters](#) and [Hawar News Agency \(ANHA\)](#) further report that on October 12, HTS escorted a Turkish convoy of 100 security force personnel, among them Special Forces, in 30 armoured vehicles including five tanks, through the Al-Bab al-Hawa border gate into Idlib, from where they travelled to Mount Sheikh Barakat, also known as Mount Darat Izzah, a hill overlooking Kurdish-controlled Afrin, Azaz in northern Aleppo and northern Idlib. HTS allegedly handed over Sheikh Barakat to Turkey. The hill became Turkey's first observation post.

[Reuters](#) journalist, Suleiman [Al-Khalidi](#), reports on October 15 that Turkish bulldozers were working around the clock to set up several observation posts overlooking Afrin, Idlib and Azaz. The operation was going smoothly in an area controlled by Tahrir

¹ <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/10/10/turkeys-operation-in-idlib-may-not-bring-all-out-war-with-al-qaida>

Jabhat al-Sham as a result of negotiations with Turkish Military Intelligence (MIT). In late October, additional Turkish forces travelling in convoys of 50 to 100 vehicles entered northern Idlib. [HTS militants escorted each convoy](#).

[TRT World](#) reports that between October 8 and November 17, Turkey set up three observation posts out of the 12 it was meant to establish in Idlib to secure a lasting ceasefire. All three overlook Kurdish-controlled Afrin in northern Idlib. It was not until February that Turkey established a fourth observation post further south.

3. *Turkey accommodates HTS militias and its Salvation Government in Idlib.*

[Sam Heller](#) writes for *The Century Foundation* in November 2017, ‘Turkey’s intervention is not a vehicle for Syria’s non-jihadist opposition to return to the northwest ... Turkey did not send in its rebel proxies from its northern Aleppo “Euphrates Shield” zone ... and it is not using a section of the northwest as an incubator for an anti-Tahrir al-Sham rebel force. Likewise, Turkey is not delivering the opposition’s Syrian Interim Government ... to power in Idlib.’ In the same article, Heller writes that HTS tolerates a Turkish presence in Idlib only if ‘the word of God’ remains supreme, and that ‘jihad’ against the Assad government continues.

Turkey has not made any attempt to dismantle HTS administrations, collectively called the Syrian Salvation Government, established in November 2017 after HTS took control of Idlib, including Idlib city, in the previous July. This is remarkable because the alternative is the Syrian Interim Government, which was established in Turkey in 2013, and between 2015 and 2017 was responsible for running many of Idlib’s local councils. It has also taken over border crossings and established local councils in the Turkey occupied Azaz – Jarablus – Al-Bab triangle of northern Aleppo. Yet, under Turkey’s watch, in January 2018, [Syria Direct](#) reported that the Syrian Salvation Government is forcing the Syrian Interim Government councils to shut down.

On October 31, 2017, [Charles Lister](#) concluded that Turkey’s failure to dismantle HTS administrations may not reflect Turkey’s collusion with HTS but be part of a ‘long game.’ That this ‘long game’ may include HTS fits with [Sam Heller](#)’s observation published on November 28, that Turkish official media has provided positive, uncritical coverage of the Salvation Government, with Turkey working closely with Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham’s pragmatic leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. This delay in dealing with HTS administrations could potentially strengthen HTS, despite its unpopularity with locals who object to its strict interpretation of Sharia Law.

On October 17, [Metin Gurcan](#) reports that the Assad government called Turkey’s deployment in Idlib and Aleppo ‘a blatant aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and a clear violation of international law and its principles.’ The Assad government has repeatedly condemned Turkey’s invasion of Syria since the start of Operation Euphrates Shield.

Al-Monitor journalist [Amberin Zaman](#) reports that Russia has rebuked Turkey for not doing more to confine and undermine HTS in Idlib. *Al-Monitor* further reports that Russia and Turkey are increasingly lining up on opposite sides in Idlib, with [Turkey gaining leverage](#) from its influence on HTS and other opposition groups. This leverage can be used on the US, Russia, Europe, NATO or in negotiations over the future of Syria and Iraq (Turkey long coveting Mosul and Kirkuk), i.e. the world stage.

[The Cipher Brief](#) reports that when speaking at Stanford University on January 17, 2018, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson acknowledged that HTS poses a major threat, particularly in north-west Syria, which the US must thwart. US intelligence officials Nicholas Rasmussen, former Director of the US National Counterterrorism Center, and Emile Nakhleh, former member of the CIA's Senior Intelligence Service, consider Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham/al Qaida is prioritizing ousting Assad and creating a regional government in Syria, but long term, its focus will be on transnational jihad and attacking the West.

4. Turkey helps finance HTS.

HTS appears to have no shortage of funds for its military and administrative requirements, unlike other opposition groups, including the Syrian National Coalition and its Interim Government. According to intelligence officials who spoke to [The Cipher Brief](#), 6 February 2018, HTS' main sources of revenue come from Gulf State - based donations, kidnapping for ransoms, smuggling, looting and imposing taxes, tariffs and fines on the local population. Not spelt out in *The Cipher Brief* is that these revenue sources need Turkey's acquiescence or facilitation. According to Yaya Fanusie and Alex Entz, who wrote a report on [HTS finances](#) for the Foundation For Defence of Democracies, foreign donations to HTS comes from Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, while HTS also profits from oil, flour mills and bakeries inside Idlib.

5. Turkey is training and amalgamating jihadi militias, other Free Syrian Army elements and Syrian Commanders-in-Exile to form a 'United Syrian National Army' in northern Aleppo.

Turkey's alleged links with jihadi groups goes beyond [ISIS](#) and HTS. [Khaled al-Khateb](#) writes in *Al-Monitor* that the co-ordinator of Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, Yahya Maho, claims that 44 of 62 militias in the FSA have joined the United Syrian National Army, which is being trained and structured by Turkey, but which comes under the mandate of the Turkey-based Syrian Interim Government headed by 'Prime Minister' Jawad Abu Hatab. The National Army includes fighters from Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Sham, Jabhat al-Shamiya(h) Front, the Sham Legion, al-Naser Union, Nureddin Zengi Brigade, the Free Idlib Army, the Sultan Murad Brigade, Lions of the East Army, Forces of Martyr Ahmed al-Abdo and Faylaq al-Rahman. Elements within the army are unsavoury to both the US and Russia. For instance, the Turkey-backed militia [Ahrar Al-](#)

[Sham](#) has been accused of tyranny and torture by Amnesty International. On January 4, [Menekse Tokyay](#) reports in *Arab News* that the army's estimated 22,000 fighters are meant to fight ISIS, the Assad government and 'PKK terrorists', i.e. YPG/YPJ and PYD in Afrin, and secure all Syrian territory under Turkey's control.

6. Turkey pays the salaries of the 'United Syrian National Army'.

On August 30, [Chris Tomson](#) wrote in *AMN (Al-Masdar News)* that Turkey's taxpayers pay the salaries of fighters in the (United) Syrian National Army. However, in August 2017, Turkey halved the salaries of fighters in response to the election of a Kurdish-backed figure, Riad Seif (a businessman, former parliamentarian and veteran dissident), to the position of president of the Syrian National Coalition.

7. Despite being part of the Astana process, Turkey provides tanks and advanced weapons systems to jihadi and other opposition militias fighting the Assad government.

[Fehim Tastekin](#) reports on February 3, 2018, that Turkey supplied tanks to opposition militias that were used against pro-Assad government forces on 11 January. The same opposition militias are involved in Turkey's Operation Olive Branch being conducted against the YPG/YPJ/PYD in Afrin since 20 January, 2018.

The [Institute for the Study of War](#) reports that Turkey provided armored vehicles and advanced weapons systems, possibly including (man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADs), to Syrian opposition forces fighting alongside HTS against the Syrian army and Iran-backed militias in southern Idlib from January 11 – 15. During this period, [Turkish support](#) enabled the opposition militias to inflict casualties and reverse some gains made by (pro) Assad government forces.

8. Despite being part of the Astana process, Turkey has been linked to attacks on Russia, the Syrian army and Iran-linked militias.

[Moscow suspects](#) that the 13 combat drones that accurately targeted Russian facilities in Khmeimim and Tartus on January 6, 2018, originated from areas controlled by Turkish-backed militias.

[Al-Monitor](#) reports that after HTS claimed responsibility for bringing down a Russian Su-25 warplane over Idlib on February 3, 2018, some officials in Moscow suspected Turkey of supplying the MANPAD that brought down the plane. The action could have been a warning to Russia to cease its intense airstrikes on Idlib. Russia controls the airspace over Idlib and Aleppo. Observers note that the last Turkey airstrike on Afrin occurred on February 4. Additional Syrian air defences and anti-aircraft missiles have been deployed to Idlib and Aleppo.

[Al-Monitor](#) and the [Institute for the Study of War](#) report that HTS escorted a Turkish convoy of 100 vehicles, including 15 transporters loaded with tanks, in its advance on Tel al-Ais in southern Aleppo on January 29. The convoy was stopped from reaching its destination when the Syrian army and Iran-backed militias fired warning shots and then targeted the convoy and the road in front of the convoy with over 30 artillery shells and missiles. It is thought that Russia most likely did not approve of this attack on the Turkish convoy, having approved the Turkey deployment so that Turkey could position additional observers in southern Idlib. The Turkish convoy pulled back to Kafr Kermin but when it resumed its advance it was attacked with an explosive-packed vehicle on the road into Atarib. The Turkish military blamed the attack on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), but Saudi-born Sheikh Abdullah al-Muhaysini accused his own wing of HTS of being responsible for the car bomb, saying, 'A Turkish convoy enters the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-controlled area as a result of an agreement. Then [HTS] attacks that convoy with a bomb-laden vehicle.' The [Arabic-language website of RT](#) claims that the explosion set fuel tankers ablaze, and later several military vehicles were damaged and a number of Turkish soldiers were killed or wounded.

By early February, Turkey had established an [observation post at Tel al-Ais](#), five kilometres from (pro) Syrian regime forces, which allows Turkey to block the Syrian army and Iran-backed militias from advancing to the key Aleppo-Damascus International M5 Highway. However, on February 5, [pro-regime forces shelled Turkey's position](#) in Tel al-Ais, killing one Turkish soldier. According to [Farsnews](#) the Turkish convoy then launched attacks on Syrian Army positions near Tel al-Ais.

From here, Turkey will need to choose a course of action. If it blocks the advance of (pro) Assad forces it could be acting outside the Astana agreement, but as [Sam Heller](#) pointed out on November 28, if Turkey chooses to comply with Russia's wish for Turkey to expand its observation posts to monitor a 'ceasefire' in southern Idlib, it will discredit Tahrir Jabhat al-Sham's leaders who claimed Turkey was only taking up positions near Afrin. While a Turkish-enforced ceasefire in Idlib could end the opposition's jihad against the regime, this opens up a number of possibilities. It could allow the Assad government to expand the territory under its control. It could also result in the creation of a Turkish-controlled jihadi enclave, with Turkey seeking a long term presence in Idlib, Aleppo, and possibly east of the Euphrates. Other more favourable alternatives would require action from the international community.

[Hamidrezda Azizi](#) writing in *Al-Monitor* reports that on January 21, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Bahram Ghassemi, expressed hope that Turkey's operation in Afrin would end immediately to prevent further instability in Syria. Ghassemi went on to underline the necessity of preserving the 'territorial integrity of Syria and respecting the national government of this country.' Similarly, the Kurdish media outlet, [Rudaw](#), reported that on 6 February Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called on the Turkish government to stop its military operation in Afrin 'at the earliest time', saying that the war has brought death and destruction to all the peoples, including 'Kurdish brothers', and 'Our main issue here is that the intervention of military forces of one country should be based on the consent of the host country.' While Iran's



mutated responses indicate that Iran may have accepted the alleged Idlib-for-Afrin deal between Russia and Turkey, these responses also express Iran's fear of Turkey's intentions to expand the Syrian territory under its controls, which Iran would oppose, and in doing so, potentially radicalise Kurds throughout the region.

9. Turkey is fighting Kurds instead of ISIS, HTS and other jihadi militant extremists.

[Turkish media](#) claim that 6,400 Turkish soldiers and 25,000 Syrian opposition fighters are fighting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) and ISIS in Afrin. [ISIS has no presence in Afrin](#). Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, said the ground offensive aims to secure a 20-mile-deep buffer zone inside Syria's border with Turkey.

In the Afrin offensive, Turkish soldiers are fighting alongside jihadi militias including [Ahrar al-Sham](#), [Faylaq al-Sham](#) and HTS. On 26 January, the HTS-associated Iba News Agency reported that HTS was willing to join Turkey's Operation Olive Branch against the Kurds in Afrin. According to [Hassan Hassan](#) writing in *The Independent* on February 4, 'BBC Arabic reported last week that Hayat Tahrir Al Sham, as Jabhat Al Nusra is now known, also attempts to benefit from the flow of arms to Afrin through the involvement of its operatives there.'

[Reuters Beirut](#) reports that the Syrian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on February 1 saying that the Turkish military operation in Afrin is a blatant aggression, and that the unauthorized presence of foreign forces represents 'occupation and will be dealt with on this basis.'

10. Turkey has repeatedly threatened to take military action against US forces in Syria, and may have already done so.

Turkey claims it wants to destroy the 'terror corridor' south of its border with Syria, with large parts of this territory controlled by Syrian Kurds and their allies. [Reuters](#) reported that on 25 January Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag said, 'Those who support the terrorist organization will become a target in this battle. ...The United States needs to review its soldiers and elements giving support to terrorists on the ground in such a way as to avoid a confrontation with Turkey'. Turkey has repeatedly claimed that it intends to [expand its military operations to Manbij and east of the Euphrates River to the border with Iraq](#). US troops are stationed in these areas. Unconfirmed reports claimed that on the night of January 25-26 Turkey conducted airstrikes on and around Manbij. *Sputnik's* Arabic service quoted media outlets that claimed two US military advisors were killed in the airstrikes on Manbij. [Other media sources](#) claim that the two US military advisors were killed in Afrin, [which the US categorically denies](#).



Reasons for writing this report

Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA) wrote this report to encourage members of the international community to use their resources to follow up the information and formulate appropriate responses. The evidence suggests that Turkey has been more consistent in its relations with jihadi militant extremists compared to its self-interested and often unilateral behaviour in regards to neighbouring countries, Russia and the US. As President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on October 14, 2017, of Turkey's actions in Syria, '[we will implement our own game plan](#), step by step... We are not bounded by just resistance or defence.'

Turkey's behaviour is:

- Further destabilising the region;
- Prolonging war in Syria;
- Defying the interests of the Syrian people, particularly Syria's ethnic minorities, (along with the people of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) and Syrians who are moderate or secular;
- Defying Russia, the US, the European Union and the UN; and is
- Posing a direct military threat to US and allied forces.

Internationally, Turkey's support of jihadi militant extremists could create a transnational security threat. Attempting to appease the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a dangerous undertaking, as appeasement could well escalate Turkey's rogue behaviour.