

Terrorism Monitor

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FIGHTING ESCALATES IN YEMEN'S PORT CITY OF HODEIDAH

Michael Horton

For months, the port city of Hodeidah has enjoyed relative calm compared with much of war-torn Yemen. This has changed over the last two weeks. The uneasy ceasefire between the Houthis and rival forces agreed to in late 2018 is breaking down. While ceasefire violations by all sides in the conflict are routine, during the first two weeks of October fighting escalated dramatically. In early October, militias loyal to Tariq Saleh began a concerted push into the southern and eastern outskirts of Hodeidah (see MLM, June 2). The Houthis responded by launching a counter-offensive in the district of al-Durayhimi where they attempted to position themselves behind Saleh's troops south of the city. At the same time, the Houthis reinforced their positions along the southern and eastern edges of the city.

The escalation of fighting in and around Hodeidah coincides with ongoing backchannel negotiations between Saudi Arabia, the Hadi-led government, and the Houthis, and fierce battles in the governorate of Marib (Arab News, October 11). There, the Houthis and their

allies are fighting forces allied with Yemen's internationally recognized government. Marib's powerful and well-armed tribes, especially members of the Murad tribe, are doing most of the fighting. The Murad, who are nominally allied with the internationally recognized government, are battling to defend their traditional homelands from the Houthis and those tribes allied with them. Some of the fiercest fighting of the whole war is currently taking place around Jebel Murad where all sides are taking heavy casualties. [1]

The outcome of the battle for Marib could fundamentally alter the trajectory of Yemen's wars. If the Houthis were to takeover large parts of the governorate, the Riyadh-based government of Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi will become more irrelevant. It is also likely that, after consolidating their gains and making new alliances, the Houthis will push on to the neighboring governorate of the Hadramawt. With Marib taken, little would be stopping them from doing this. At the same time, they and their allies will control the oil and gas facilities located in Marib.

Due to the deteriorating situation in Marib, Saudi Arabia, which backs Yemen's Hadi government, in coordination with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is trying to open a second major front against the Houthis in and

around Hodiedah. Tariq Saleh, the nephew of Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is leading this effort. Tariq Saleh, who led Yemen's Presidential Guard before his uncle handed power to Hadi, is a capable military leader who has formed a diverse and well-paid coalition of fighters. In contrast with those forces nominally allied with the Hadi government, Saleh's militias are consistently paid, enjoy something of a chain of command, and are well-supplied. [2]

None of this means that Saleh and those forces fighting with him will succeed in taking Houthi-held territory around Hodeidah. The terrain and internal political dynamics work against this. It is likely that Saleh and his backers, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, know this. However, the escalation of fighting in and around Hodiedah is increasing pressure on the Houthis at a time when they have been forced to redeploy large numbers of fighters to Marib. The Houthis also face growing financial pressure. The costs of supplying more fighters may pressure them to further "tax" Yemeni citizens and businesses. These taxes, the Houthis' inability to pay government salaries, and human rights abuses, drive discontent in those areas they control.

The escalation of fighting in and around Hodeidah could severely impact the already dire humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Ninety percent of Yemen's food is imported and most of this arrives via the Port of Hodeidah. While the port continues to operate, fighting outside the port and city is already disrupting distribution. The moves made by Tariq Saleh and his backers may well put additional pressure on the Houthis, but it is Yemeni civilians who will pay the price.

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Notes

[1] Interview with a Yemen-based analyst, October 2020.

[2] Interview with a former Yemeni government official, October 2020.

CAMP TURKSOM AND MILITARY TRAINING CELEBRATIONS TIES TO SOMALIA

John Foulkes

On October 3, a Somali National Army (SNA) convoy was ambushed in the southern province of Lower Shabelle province, resulting in a firefight that purportedly lasted several hours (Garowe Online, October 5). The convoy was escorted by 'Gorgor' (meaning 'eagle' in Somali) soldiers, elite troops who were trained by the Turkish military. Turkey has been building its ties with Somalia since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan first visited the country in 2011 to offer humanitarian aid during the height of the famine there. Since then, the relationship has grown dramatically, with military ties and counterterrorism training forming a fundamental section of the Turkish-Somali relationship.

The most notable representation of these military ties is Camp TURKSOM, a 400-hectare training base Turkey paid \$50 million to construct in Mogadishu. Construction took two years and the base officially opened on September 30, 2017. The camp represents Turkey's largest overseas military base, capable of training up to 1,500 recruits at a time (Al Jazeera, October 1, 2017).

Speaking to Anadolu Agency, the Turkish Ambassador to Somalia Mehmet Yilmaz said in August that, "Turkey's military cooperation with Somalia is of critical importance for this country. It contributes to Somalia's security and its fight against terror." The ambassador stated that 2,500 Somali soldiers have been trained thus far, with the training regime consisting of basic training in Camp TURKSOM followed by "commando training" in Isparta province, Turkey. Turkey projects that it will eventually train a third of the Somali military, or 5,000 soldiers of a total number of 15,000-16,000 personnel (Anadolu Agency, August 4). Yilmaz cited the decrease of 2,000 troops this year in the number of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces stationed in the country, saying that there is an immediate need for a large, well-trained national armed forces (Daily Sabah, August 4).

On August 24, Turkey donated 12 armored personnel carriers to Somalia for use by the Gorgor soldiers. The ceremony was attended by Ambassador Yilmaz, Somali Defense Minister Hassan Ali Mohamed and Somali Armed Forces Commander General Odawa Yusuf Rageh (Daily Sabah, August 28).

The first Somali troops trained by the Turkish military graduated in December 2017 (Anadolu Agency, December 23, 2017). Since then, the Turkish-trained Somali special forces have been actively engaged in the war against the al-Shabaab insurgency,

taking part in operations that liberated towns occupied in Lower Shabelle, as well as counterterrorism operations in Mogadishu (Somali Affairs, October 19, 2019).

The activities of the elite Turkish-trained units in the SNA have not been without controversy, however. In February, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) deployed Gorgor troops and another Turkish-trained unit, the Haram'ad (meaning 'cheetah' in Somali), to the Gedo region of Jubaland, near the border with Kenya, resulting in clashes with local forces loyal to the autonomous administration of the state. The clashes reportedly displaced 50,000 civilians, and drew . Haram'ad forces also took part in fighting in the Dhuusamaareeb region of Galmudug state, located in the center of the country, against the Ahl al-Sunna wal Jama'a (ASWJ) militia. The fighting, which took place on February 27 and 28, allegedly resulted in dozens of casualties and the surrender of the ASWJ leadership to the FGS (UNSC Report, May 15). Opposition figures accused Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, known popularly as "Farmajo," of using the Turkish-trained troops to stir internal conflict for his political advantage (Garowe Online, March 5).

These controversies within Somalia are unlikely to turn Turkey away from its continued military training programs and wide-ranging support for the FGS. Turkey's involvement in Somalia is at least partially motivated by the country's strategic location near the Bab al-Mandeb strait and as a byproduct of the growing rivalry between Turkey and its ally Qatar on one side, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on the other. The UAE has formed a close relationship with the autonomous state of Puntland, in Somalia's north, training and funding the state's maritime police force (Garowe Online, April 14, 2018). The UAE also plans on developing Berbera port in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, to the chagrin of Mogadishu who accuses Abu Dhabi of fanning internal division (see Terrorism Monitor, June 17).

Camp TURKSOM is Turkey's largest overseas military facility, located in a strategically placed country riven by internal conflict and a long-running Islamist insurgency. Turkey's growing influence in the country is emblematic of its recent active foreign policy, defined by rivalry with the Gulf States and an assertive pursuit of its interests. As more Somali soldiers are trained by Turkish military advisors and in Turkey itself, Ankara is likely to continue seeing its influence rise in Mogadishu.

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Turkey Makes New Advances in Land and Naval Warfare with Introduction of Aksungur ASW Drone

Can Kasapoglu

Turkish drone warfare capabilities have made a significant impression in operations against Russian-supported Syrian forces in Idlib, Syria in February and March, 2020, and more recently through the ongoing Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict in Karabakh. Recently, Turkey has unveiled a new unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) system that could play a critical role in anti-submarine warfare, potentially bolstering Ankara's influence in a volatile region.

Meet Turkey's Aksungur

The Aksungur unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), from TUSAS—the makers of the ANKA drone—will carry a 750-kilogram combat payload in the maritime patrol and strike package configuration, and 150-kilogram in signals intelligence (SIGINT) and electronic intelligence (ELINT) equipment (TUSAŞ, October 9). The drone will have satellite communications (SATCOM) features, which will make it more resilient in jammed environments, as well as advanced sensors such as synthetic aperture radar/ground-moving target indicator (SAR/GMTI), which enables it to strike mobile surface targets—like convoys and road-mobile launchers—in large spaces and under any weather condition (TUSAŞ, October 9).

TUSAŞ' Aksungur has showcased promising signs in recent tests. In September 2020, the UAV flew continuously for more than a day—28 hours to be precise—with a payload of 12 Roketsan-manufactured MAM-L smart munitions loaded (Anadolu Ajansı, September 17). Prior to the armed test-flight, the platform even scored an impressive 49-hour non-stop flying capability (Anadolu Ajansı, September 2).

The 750-kilogram combat payload will enable Aksungur to carry a broad-array of missiles. These include TEBER-82 bombs, which are modernized MK-82-class bombs with joint direct attack munitions standards by GPS/INS additions, and Roketsan's UMTAS anti-tank missiles with tandem warhead against reactive explosive armor (Roketsan, October 9).

Nevertheless, the real 'beauty' of Turkey's new UAV is something different. Of the Aksungur UAV's payload configuration, sonobuoy pod and magnetic anomaly detector (MAD) boom features are critical (TUSAŞ, October 9). Equipped with these systems, Aksungur would make an important anti-submarine warfare asset. The Turkish press already nicknamed the drone as 'the submarine hunter' (TRT Haber, September 4). With the anti-submarine warfare characteristics, it is likely that the Turkish Navy will be the Aksungur's first customer.

Dronization of the Turkish Navy

The Turkish Navy is also a part of the Turkish military's 'dronization' trend. As of August 2020, the navy operates at least four ANKA-variant UAVs with synthetic aperture radar (SAR)/inverse synthetic aperture radar (ISAR) sensors and electro-optical/infra-red cameras. The Turkish Navy primarily uses its TUSAS-made ANKA drones for intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR) missions. In this respect, the latest Otomatik Tanımlama Sistemi (Automatic Identification System, or AIS) upgrade enables the UAVs to identify surface vessels within hundreds of miles and share the findings with command and control hubs. Aksungur can be networked with the ANKA baseline through data-links and can use the same control stations (Anadolu Agency, August 24; TUSAŞ, October 9). The Turkish Navy also operates Baykar's combat-proven Bayraktar TB-2 drones, which were delivered last year (Milliyet, April 16, 2019).

The navy's drone warfare identity brings about new horizons to Turkey's unmanned military systems capabilities and concepts of operations. Back in April 2018, for example, the Turkish Navy's ANKA flights, close to the island of Rhodes, alarmed Greece and led to the scramble of F-16s by Athens (Milliyet, April 6, 2018). With Aksungur, Turkey's under-sea warfare capabilities will have an additional robotic angle. From a military planning standpoint, delegating some anti-submarine warfare tasks to unmanned systems will bring defense economics benefits due to lower operational costs. Unmanned systems will be able to relieve surface combatants and maritime patrol aircraft of added burdens, especially in high-risk areas (Defense News, April 13).

Aksungur Deployment Options

The new Aksungur line will be a force-multiplier to the Turkish naval deterrent in Ankara's chosen frontier. Turkey, a critical NATO nation, can employ its ASW drones to track Russian submarine activity in the Black Sea or

the Mediterranean. Alternatively, they can take part in the recent Turkish-Greek confrontation in the Aegean and track Greece's 11-piece submarine fleet (The Greek Navy, October 12).

A geopolitical game-changer, and a political-military signal that would deeply undermine Turkey's already troubled relations with the European Union, would be forward-deploying a few Aksungur UAVs to the Gecitkale military airport in Cyprus. Turkey already deployed unarmed variants of Baykar's famous Bayraktar TB-2 drones to Gecitkale, back in late 2019 (Baykar, December 16, 2019).

Another critical deployment alternative would be Libya. Open-source intelligence assessments suggest heated submarine activity in the Mediterranean, with approximately 20 to 30 pieces operating in the area at the time of writing (Defense News, June 22). Furthermore, Aksungur's potential deployment in Libya would not only change the naval calculus, but also the land warfare parameters of that conflict. Compared to Turkey's current combat drones, Aksungur will have a much larger payload that would allow for greater robust fire-power at a time and a higher operational tempo.

In any case, the Turkish Navy's dronization trend will gain a new edge with Aksungur, and wherever it is deployed, the new UAV will pose some trouble to a potential adversary's under-sea platforms.

Finally, one should note that Aksungur can make a lucrative export asset. For a long time, Turkey has eyed the Asian weapons market (Nikkei, October 7). Notably, drone warfare, submarine activity, and unmanned capabilities in sea warfare settings remain of high interest in that part of the world.

All in all, Turkey's drone proliferation has entered a new stage involving more advanced systems with higher payloads. The progress strategically translates into concepts of operations. While Baykar's Akinci is set to make a deep-strike asset, by carrying indigenous SOM air-launched cruise missiles with an approximately 250-kilometer range, Aksungur is readying to 'dronize' Turkey's anti-submarine warfare capabilities (Baykar, October 9). Turkey's *la belle époque* in unmanned systems is yet to come.

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The Battle for Baga Halts Return to Normalcy in Nigeria's Borno Province

Jacob Zenn

The town of Baga, Nigeria on Lake Chad's shorelines is where Boko Haram originally made its mark as one of the world's most lethal jihadist movements. In January 2015, when Boko Haram was conquering territory throughout northeastern Nigeria's Borno State, the group finally captured Baga and killed an estimated amount of 200 to even 2,000 civilians (Vanguard, January 17, 2015). Although Baga was soon retaken by the Nigerian army, the vast civilian casualties became a stumbling block in intra-Boko Haram relations.

In the weeks before Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau pledged loyalty to Islamic State (IS) in March 2015, Boko Haram's "official spokesman," Abu Musab al-Barnawi, issued a video on the IS-supported Twitter account for Boko Haram (Al-Urwha Al-Wutqha, January 27, 2015). He claimed civilians were spared in Baga and only pro-government militiamen who did not repent were killed. This represented a disconnect between al-Barnawi and Shekau, because the latter gloated in a video about the mass killings in Baga. The episode exemplified al-Barnawi's relative moderation compared to the more extreme Shekau (YouTube, January 20, 2015).

Eventually, in August 2016, al-Barnawi petitioned IS to remove Shekau from the leadership of Boko Haram's post-March 2015 successor group, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), because of Shekau's megalomania and killing of Muslim civilians (Al-Haqaiq, June 2018). Islamic State consented and al-Barnawi became the new ISWAP leader. Shekau, based in Sambisa Forest, southern Borno, revived Boko Haram in August 2016, which had been inactive since March 2015 (YouTube, August 8, 2016). Al-Barnawi, in contrast, made his base around Lake Chad, including near Baga.

After August 2016, ISWAP clashed with Boko Haram and became the stronger faction. ISWAP not only harassed the Nigerian army's military posts throughout Borno, but also incurred into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. The culmination of ISWAP's raids was its sacking of the multinational military base in Baga in December 2018. An ISWAP video later showed the group executing Nigerian soldiers, burning naval boats along Lake Chad, and

roaming free in municipal areas of villages surrounding Baga (Telegram, January 15, 2019).

ISWAP's Documentation of Baga Battles

While Nigeria's military eventually regained control of its base outside Baga, uncertainty about who actually controls the town itself has long been prevalent. In May 2020, ISWAP convincingly demonstrated that its fighters were in Baga by releasing staged combat photos of its fighters in the town, including around one of its main mosques (Telegram, May 18). At the same time, Baga's center appeared as a ghost town where ISWAP could roam free. Many Baga civilians, however, were able to escape ISWAP's authority by fleeing to displaced persons' camps away from the town.

ISWAP also released 'exclusive' reports that were featured in Islamic State's al-Naba weekly newsletter. On March 14, for example, al-Naba #225 discussed Lake Chad's strategic importance, including for the fish trade and because of nearby roads linking Maiduguri, Borno's capital, to Niger, Chad, and Cameroon (Al-Naba #225, March 14). Furthermore, the newsletter mentioned that ISWAP repelled the Nigerian army's attempts to retake the town and acknowledged that five "heroic Caliphate soldiers" and one "brave [ISWAP] commander" were killed. The clashes with ISWAP resulted in Nigeria's army being prevented from "regaining its grip" on Baga.

In addition, the April 3 al-Naba #228 newsletter eulogized ISWAP commander Abu Mukhtar al-Ansari from Mallam Fatori near Nigeria's "artificial border" with Niger (Al-Naba #228, April 3). He was seemingly an original follower of Abu Musab al-Barnawi's father, Muhammed Yusuf, who was the main Boko Haram leader from 2004-2009. Al-Naba, for example, noted al-Ansari studied Islam under a "well-known scholar who preached for monotheism and jihad" and then waged jihad to conquer Mallam Fatori and Garunda, Borno, Damatru, Yobe, and Bosso, Niger in Boko Haram's name once fighting broke out after Yusuf's death.

Ultimately, al-Ansari joined ISWAP's amniyat (internal security) and "Preaching Office" and fought around the group's farms on Lake Chad, including in Baga, until his death during the October 2019 global Islamic State campaign to avenge Abubakar al-Baghdadi and his spokesman's deaths in Syria. ISWAP was the most active Islamic State 'province' during that campaign (aymenn-jawad.org, December 31, 2019). According to al-Naba, the group has since named an Islamic center the "Modu Wali Center," referring to al-Ansari's birthname.

Finally, the April 10 al-Naba #229 edition featured ISWAP's reports to Islamic State about its "military engagements in Lake Chad," including in Baga (Al-Naba #229, April 10). Besides these al-Naba media releases, ISWAP also released a March 2020 video through Islamic State's Amaq media agency depicting its Baga-based fighters killing one Nigerian soldier and capturing two others, who presumably were soon executed (Telegram, March 10). This video came as Nigeria's military was reporting attacks on ISWAP around Baga and exemplified how ISWAP and the military were engaging in intense combat.

Revelations from Babagana Zulum's Missions

The big test for control of Baga occurred in July when Borno's governor, Babagana Zulum, attempted to visit the town to plan the resettlement of Baga civilians who had been living in displaced persons' camps. Although the military assured Zulum he could enter the town, shots were fired on his convoy once it reached the town's outskirts (Premium Times, July 31). This was enough to force Zulum to take cover and head back to Baga's military base with his convoy.

Although ISWAP presumably fired those shots, suspicion that the military itself may have sabotaged Zulum's Baga visit existed (Vanguard, August 9). Some military officials are suspected of running black market fishing trade businesses around Lake Chad, while ISWAP has its own fishing businesses in similar parts of the lake near Baga. Any military operation to decisively clear the town of Baga and its Lake Chad shorelines of ISWAP strongholds would not only meet significant ISWAP resistance, but also apparently undermine military officials' (and ISWAP's) black market businesses.

In September, Zulum again attempted to visit Baga to assess displaced persons' resettlement prospects. While Zulum flew by air, one of his ground convoys was ambushed by ISWAP just two kilometers outside Baga's military base. ISWAP subsequently released photos of more than 20 slain soldiers, police, and anti-ISWAP militiamen (Telegram, September 27). Zulum's own ground convoy was also reportedly attacked by a bomb attached to a donkey upon returning to Maiduguri (noblengr.com, September 28). Although there was no loss of life, sabotage was again suspected. Moreover, considering ISWAP and Boko Haram both operate around Maiduguri's outskirts either group could have been responsible for this attack.

These July and September attacks on Zulum's convoys, in addition to the previous months' newsletters, photo-sets, and videos depicting combat in Baga, demonstrate that the situation on the ground precludes any return of displaced civilians to their homes. Zulum nevertheless believes that until they return home, normalcy cannot return to Borno. He, therefore, is committed to securing Baga and other parts of Borno to facilitate their return.

The dilemma Zulum faces is that many of his programs involve non-military interventions, including rebuilding schools and developing medical, transportation, and other infrastructure in towns once lost to Boko Haram and ISWAP, but are now in tenuous government control. At the same time, he ultimately depends on the military to secure Baga and others towns so life can return to normal for civilians and rebuilding can continue. This is, however, yet to be accomplished not only in Baga, but in various other towns as well.

If Zulum waits patiently until towns are absolutely secure before returning civilians to their homes, it could easily be years, if not more than a decade, until this is accomplished. Therefore, Zulum is opting for a more expeditious approach to resettlement. As evidenced by ISWAP's attacks in Baga, the group knows what Zulum wants, and will do all it can to disrupt his plans.

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HTS Leader al-Julani's New Strategy in Northwestern Syria

Rami Jameel

Abu Mohammed al-Julani's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has recently escalated its crackdown on jihadist groups and figures in the Idlib province of northwestern Syria (Step News, October 5). The formation of HTS from al-Nusra Front in January 2017 was accompanied by a declaration that the group was severing its relationship to al-Qaeda and that it was no longer the Syrian branch of the global jihadist organization (Almodon, January 27, 2017). Al-Nusra's repeated claims that it was breaking with al-Qaeda did not convince many policymakers or analysts, and the group remained designated as a terrorist organization by both the United Nations and the international powers who have influence in Syria. [1]

Since the formation of Huras al-Deen group (HAD) as a new branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, HTS and its leader's claims began to hold some weight. After allowing HAD to operate with some margin of freedom in the area controlled by HTS, the latter made it clear to the former in June that its jihadist fighters could only operate under the full command of HTS. Al-Julani has also made unprecedented attempts in the last few months to appeal to the West by claiming that his group was a Syrian nationalist organization with no global jihadist agenda. [2] This statement was in stark contrast to convictions that he held, fought for, and preached for many years.

Al-Julani's new strategy is based on reinventing HTS, by changing the group from having a global jihadist outlook into a locally focused jihadist organization with an agenda that is entirely dedicated to Syria, and the Syrian local Sunni community in particular. He aims to secure a position in any future political arrangement and settlement. The new strategy comes in response to dramatic changes to the dynamics of the Syrian conflict that developed following the past two years of agreements between Russia, Iran, and Turkey to share influence and cease hostilities between each other (Turk Press, September 26, 2018).

Al-Julani's success will not come easily, as it will depend on convincing the major powers to make fundamental changes to their counterterrorism policies by accepting

Syria's largest jihadist group and allowing it to have a role in the future of Syria.

Idlib Roads

In March, Russia—the main backer of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad—signed a crucial agreement with Turkey, which has genuine interests and influence in northern Syria (Al Jazeera, March 5).

The agreement included a ceasefire in Idlib and the securing of transportation routes. The agreement came after the Syrian opposition, backed by Turkey, suffered a series of setbacks in Idlib following the advance of Assad's forces with significant aerial support from Russia. The Assad forces, which included the government's Syrian Arab Army (SAA), Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed Shia militias, took areas in southern and eastern Idlib and managed to seize control of the strategic M5 highway, which connects the capital Damascus in the south to the northern city of Aleppo (France 24 Arabic, February 7). More than 30 Turkish soldiers were killed in the fighting (Middle East Online, February 28).

In order to avoid being dragged into a larger regional military confrontation, Russia and Turkey signed the aforementioned Idlib agreement, which included operating joint patrols along the other vital highway in Idlib, the M4 (Sky News Arabia, March 13).

HTS calculated that it was in its interest to cooperate in the implementation of the agreement, as it became clear that a new stage in the conflict had begun. Neither Russia nor Turkey wanted further escalation in Syria. Russia was aware that pushing an advance of its allies into Idlib would cause a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Such a crisis would have angered both the United States, which made it clear that it did not want a massacre in Idlib, and Turkey, which would be directly affected by any humanitarian consequences through its borders with the province (Al Jazeera, February 17).

The province has become home to four million people, more than 40 percent of whom are internally displaced people who fled from other areas that have been retaken by the Assad forces and their Russian backers (Omrandirasat, October 3, 2018). They have no other refuge inside Syria to go if President Assad, Russia, and the Iranian-backed forces made a final push to take the province. A large exodus into neighboring Turkey would be the likely result of such a scenario (Enabbaladi, August 13, 2018).

Jihadists Arrested

Al-Qaeda's Huras al-Deen (HAD) and other jihadist groups decided to move in the opposite direction of HTS's locally focused policies over the past two years, especially since the Russian-Iranian-Turkish accords. However, HTS still allowed jihadists to operate freely for most of this time. After the March Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib, HAD formed a military alliance called Fath'botu (meaning 'remain steady') (Syria.tv, June 13).

In a sign of the seriousness of the recent changes in its policies and strategy, HTS responded decisively and made it clear that it would not tolerate such a move. HTS ordered HAD and the other groups to dissolve their new alliance and that they could only fight (or not fight) under their command (Alaraby.co.uk, June 27).

Before and after that ultimatum, al-Julani ordered the arrest of influential jihadist figures like Abu Malik al-Talli. Al-Talli was once the military commander of HTS, but joined HAD. His past history with HTS did not make him immune from the organization's strict new rules (Aawsat, June 23).

Foreign figures who refused to obey al-Julani's orders were also arrested. The arrest of the French jihadist Omar Omsen (a.k.a. Omar Diabi) was a significant development. He was a prominent European jihadist who came to Syria in 2013. He was believed to be behind recruitment efforts that drew most of the French jihadists currently in Syria (Enabbaladi, September 24). His arrest was viewed as a message to the West that HTS was ready and willing to cooperate on the thorny issue of Western jihadists.

In addition to arresting key jihadist leaders, HTS also came into conflict with HAD while imposing its new rules. The outcome was a decisive HTS victory that consolidated its control over the other armed groups (Alaraby.co.uk, June 27).

Conclusion

Al-Julani's quest to reinvent his organization has come to its highest point. His fate will eventually depend on the calculations of world and regional powers. Thus far, his group has remained fairly united and loyal to him. This unity is due to the group's continued ability to govern Idlib and profit from controlling border crossings with Turkey in the north and west and the Syrian government areas in the south and east (Harmoon, May 7). Al-Julani's power will always depend on holding abso-

lute military superiority over the other armed groups of the opposition.

Cutting ties completely with the jihadists would mean depriving HTS from the ethos held by al-Nusra, which ensured its initial rise. Al-Nusra managed to keep the Islamic State out of most of Idlib under the banner of al-Qaeda's perceived legitimacy over IS in the global jihadist community. It also defeated other Syrian opposition groups in the province. In many occasions, HTS used the accusation that those groups were cooperating with Turkey as a reason to attack them. HTS is now cooperating with Turkey and has even committed to an implicit ceasefire with Russia. Al-Julani does not seem to be willing to allow those other groups to restore their strength. That would jeopardize his main claim to Turkey and the world that his group is the only one capable of fighting the regime, seizing and protecting territory, and governing.

Instead of its past use of jihadist justifications it used to monopolize power in Idlib, HTS has recently turned to soft power and direct appeals to the public. The organization has secured better access to foreign journalists and built a new media arm that is open to communicating with news organizations. HTS' spokespeople are taking part in discussions with those who hold opposing opinions. Al-Julani himself began to appear in public in Idlib in order to socialize with ordinary people in arranged tours of public places. In a recording of the tour, al-Julani was not seen with his usual security detail.

The staunch refusal of the United States to allow a humanitarian crisis to break out in Idlib has meant that the Russians would not have a freehand to support the Assad forces and the Iranian-backed militias in an invasion of Idlib from the south. Russia also, for now, seems to be committed to its accord with Turkey. If this dynamic changes and al-Julani loses Idlib, the HTS will most likely return to being a diehard jihadist group, whether under al-Julani or new leadership. But as long as Idlib is not invaded by Syrian government forces, al-Julani will be the most powerful local leader in the area. How to deal with him and his group will remain a large question for the West and Turkey.

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Notes

[1] Counter Extremism Project, Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) Report, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-nusra-front-hayat-tahrir-al-sham>

[2] See al-Julani's interview with International Crisis Group (ICG) earlier this year: <https://www.crisis-group.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani> the interview, which was a rare of its kind, marked the significant change in al-Julani and his HTS's discourse and strategy.