

## Video: Great Idlib “Rebranding” and Al Qaeda “Turkish Victories” over Russian Air Defense

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*Terrorist groups operating in Idlib are preparing for a new rebranding under Turkish patronage. According to Syrian sources, Hayat Tarir al-Sham (formerly the official Syrian branch of al-Qaeda), the Turkistan Islamic Party (an al-Qaeda-linked group), the National Front for Liberation (a coalition of Turkish proxies friendly to al-Qaeda) and several smaller groups are going to create a united command center and even declare a formal merger.*

The idea is to shuffle well-known al-Qaeda terrorists with their supposedly moderate Turkish-backed counterparts, and give them a new name and logo. So, Ankara will have a formal reason to claim that there are no ‘terrorists’ in Idlib and the current situation in the region fully corresponds with the agreements reached with Iran and Russia. These agreements exclude terrorist organizations, which control up to 90% of the militant-held part of Greater Idlib, from the ceasefire and allow military actions against them. The issue is that the same agreements declare that Turkey must separate so-called ‘moderate rebels’ from ‘terrorists’. This is hardly possible because there is little difference between them. Therefore, the Turkish leadership opted to unite them painting them as the ‘moderate opposition’ once again violating the word and spirit of the de-escalation agreements.

Earlier in the conflict, various terrorist groups already employed this approach. For example, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was previously known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. The group changed its name in an attempt to distance itself from al-Qaeda and present itself as part of the moderate opposition that is brutally oppressed by the Assad regime, Iran and Russia. This plan failed because terrorists, even if they change their flag and wear new hats, remain terrorists and continue acting like terrorists.

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On March 15, Turkish and Russian forces are set to start conducting joint patrols along the agreed security corridor on the M4 highway in southern Idlib. On March 10, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that the patrols will start from the settlement of Trumba – 2 km west of Saraqib – to the settlement of Ain al-Havr. Additionally, Cavusoglu repeated threats that his country will attack Syrian forces if they do not comply with the ceasefire. How this ceasefire will survive with no real anti-terrorist fight in Idlib remains another big secret. According to pro-Turkish sources, the Turkish Army and its proxies will control the part of the security corridor north of the M4, while the Russians will present south of the highway. However, so far, there have been no indications that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other terrorist groups are withdrawing means and forces from the area. This situation creates an apparent pretext for a military escalation.

The public behavior of the Turkish leadership and Turkish media outlets does not help to de-escalate the situation either. Since March 5, Ankara has been doing its best to paint the failed Operation Spring Shield as a major victory. After tiring the audience out with unrealistic numbers of supposed Syrian Army casualties, Turkey moved on to mocking the military capabilities of the Russian air defense systems. On March 10, Turkish President Recep Tayip Erdogan claimed that his forces had destroyed 8 Pantsir air defense systems in the Idlib zone. This number goes contrary to data provided by the Turkish Defense Ministry which claimed that 8 air defense systems of various types were destroyed during Operation Spring Shield. It seems that the amount of supposedly destroyed military equipment of the Syrian Armed Forces continues to grow.

The Russian Defense Ministry called Erdogan's claims "more than overestimation" and noted that apparently the data, which the Turkish leader receives about the results of the operation, is not very precise. The military said that a total of 4 Pantsir systems were deployed in Idlib and only 2 of them were damaged. It recalled that most of the Syrian air defense means and measures are deployed in the area of the country's capital, Damascus.

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