

Why Did Trump Give the Green Light to Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria? Framed by Russia?

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Displaying a stroke of genius, Russia has once again played the role of a peace-maker in Syria by concluding an agreement with Turkey to enforce a safe zone in northern Syria. According to the terms of the agreement, Turkish forces would have exclusive control over 120 kms. stretch between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn to the depth of 32 kms. in northern Syria.

To the west and east of the aforementioned area of the Turkish Operation Peace Spring, Turkish troops and Russian military police would conduct joint patrols to the depth of 10 kms. and the remaining 20 kms. safe zone would be under the control of the Syrian government which would ensure that the Kurdish forces and weapons are evacuated from Manbij and Tal Rifat to the west and the Kurdish areas to the east excluding the city of Qamishli.

In return for the generous favor of establishing a safe zone along Turkey's southern border to address its security concerns regarding the Kurds, Turkey would probably allow the Syrian government with the backing of Russia to occupy a few strategic areas in northwestern Idlib Governorate – particularly near the Alawite heartland Latakia, such as Khan Sheikhoun, which the Syrian government has recently liberated from al-Nusra Front, and Marat al-Numan and Jisr al-Shughour – though this hasn't been stipulated in the agreement and was most likely informally discussed in the Erdogan-Putin meeting.

In order to understand the reason why Donald Trump acquiesced in the face of Turkish onslaught against the Kurds in northern Syria, a Syria analyst Hassan Hassan came up with an intriguing theory in his [recent article](#) [1] for The Guardian.

He writes:

“Turkey received a clearance from Russia before intervention, framed by Russia as part of the agreement between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran about the Syrian conflict. According to a well-placed Syrian source, the intervention in the Kurdish areas was part of a Russian-Turkish understanding about the fate of Idlib in the north-west, the last stronghold of the rebels fighting the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

“Idlib is dominated by the group formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra and various stakeholders in the Syrian conflict have struggled to agree on how to deal with the challenge of having jihadists in charge of a significant swath of the country. The source claims that Turkey also reassured the Americans that the intervention would be followed by serious steps to deal with the dilemma in

Idlib, by enabling a Russia-led incursion and that any expected mass displacement from Idlib will move to the Turkish zones inside Syria, not to Turkey itself.”

Although far from being its diehard ideologue, Donald Trump has been affiliated with the infamous white supremacist “alt-right” movement, which regards Islamic terrorism as an existential threat to America’s security, unlike the ostensibly “pacifist” Obama administration that nurtured Islamic jihadist masquerading as “moderate rebels” in Syria to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Thus, the presence of al-Nusra Front’s militants in Syria’s Idlib poses an intractable dilemma for the Trump administration, and if the Syrian government could reassert its control over Idlib, it would eliminate a potential terrorist threat to Washington’s security.

Regarding the collusion between the jihadists of al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, at its peak in 2014, when the Islamic State declared its “caliphate” in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, the Islamic State reportedly used to have more than 70,000 jihadists.

Thousands of Islamic State’s jihadists have been killed in airstrikes conducted by the US-led coalition against the Islamic State and the ground offensives by the Iraqi armed forces and allied militias in Iraq and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria.

And due to frequent desertions, the number of fighters within the Islamic State’s ranks has evidently dwindled. But a question would naturally arise in the minds of perceptive observers of the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria that where did the remaining tens of thousands of Islamic State’s jihadists vanish?

The riddle can be easily solved, though, if we bear in mind the fact that although Idlib Governorate in Syria’s northwest has firmly been under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) led by al-Nusra Front since 2015, its territory was equally divided between Turkey-backed rebels and al-Nusra Front.

In a brazen offensive in January, however, al-Nusra Front’s jihadists completely routed Turkey-backed militants, even though the latter were supported by a professionally trained and highly organized military of a NATO member, Turkey. And al-Nusra Front now reportedly controls more than 70% territory in the Idlib Governorate.

The reason why al-Nusra Front has been easily able to defeat Turkey-backed militants appears to be that the ranks of al-Nusra Front have now been swelled by highly motivated and battle-hardened jihadist deserters from the Islamic State after the fall of the latter’s “caliphate” in Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

The merger of al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Idlib doesn’t come as a surprise, though, since the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front used to be a single organization before a split occurred between the two militant groups in April 2013 over a leadership dispute. In fact, al-Nusra Front’s chief Abu Mohammad al-Jolani was reportedly [appointed](#) [2] as the emir of al-Nusra Front by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State, in January 2012.

Regarding the dominant group of Syrian militants in Syria’s northwestern Idlib Governorate, according to a May 2017 [report](#) [3] by CBC Canada, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was formerly known as al-Nusra Front until July 2016 and then as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) until

January 2017, had been removed from the terror watch-lists of the US and Canada after it merged with fighters from Zenki Brigade and hardline jihadists from Ahrar al-Sham and rebranded itself as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017.

The US State Department was hesitant to label Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) a terror group, despite the group's links to al-Qaeda, as the US government had directly funded and armed the Zenki Brigade, one of the constituents of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), with sophisticated weaponry including the US-made antitank missiles.

Although after the report was published in CBC News, Canada added the name of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to its terror watch-list in May 2018, Turkey designated it a terrorist organization in August 2018 and Washington came up with the excuse that since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a merger of several militant outfits, and one of those militant groups, al-Nusra Front, was already on the terror watch-list of the US, therefore Washington, too, regards Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) a terrorist organization.

Nevertheless, the purpose behind the rebranding of al-Nusra Front, first as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) in July 2016 and then as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in January 2017 and purported severing of ties with al-Qaeda, was to legitimize itself and to make it easier for its patrons to send money and arms.

Washington blacklisted al-Nusra Front in December 2012 and persuaded its regional allies Saudi Arabia and Turkey to ban it, too. Although al-Nusra Front's name had been in the list of proscribed organizations of Saudi Arabia and Turkey since 2014, it kept receiving money and arms from its regional patrons.

It's worth noting that in a May 2015 [interview](#) [4] with Qatar's state television al-Jazeera, al-Nusra's chief Abu Mohammad al-Jolani took a public pledge on the behest of his Gulf-based patrons that his organization simply had local ambitions limited to fighting the Syrian government and that it had no intention to mount terror attacks in the Western countries.

Although al-Jolani announced the split from al-Qaeda in a video statement in 2016, the persistent efforts of al-Jolani's Gulf-based patrons bore fruit in January 2017, when al-Nusra Front once again rebranded itself from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which also included militants from Zenki Brigade, Ahrar al-Sham and several other militant groups, and thus the jihadist conglomerate that now goes by the name of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was able to overrun the northwestern Idlib Governorate in Syria, and it completely routed the Turkey-backed militants in a brazen offensive in Idlib in January.

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Notes

[1] Trump and Erdoğan risk a resurgent Isis thanks to their recklessness in Syria:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/13/trump-and-erdogan-risk-a-resurgent-isis-thanks-to-their-recklessness-in-syria>

[2] Al-Jolani was appointed as the emir of al-Nusra Front by al-Baghdadi:

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16689>

[3] Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate escapes from terror list:

<http://www.cbc.ca/beta/news/canada/terror-list-omission-1.4114621>

[4] Al-Jolani's interview to Al-Jazeera: "Our mission is to defeat the Syrian government":

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/nusra-front-golani-assad-syria-hezbollah-isil-150528044857528.html>

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