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Key Takeaway: *The ceasefire in Greater Idlib remains tenuous. Recent force disposition indicates that the Syrian Regime is preparing for a renewed offensive in Southern Idlib Province should the ceasefire break down, but both the timing and likelihood of the offensive's success remain uncertain and conditions dependent. A renewed regime offensive will require Russian support to sustainably seize territory from anti-Assad forces. However, Russian support will likely be contingent on a new negotiated agreement between Russia and Turkey, and the COVID-19 pandemic will likely delay such negotiations. The Syrian regime may attempt an offensive without Russian support despite the likelihood that it will be unsuccessful. Any regime offensive, whether Russian-backed or unilateral, will exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Greater Idlib.*¹

The current ceasefire in Greater Idlib Province remains tenuous despite the temporary cessation of hostilities. On March 5, Russia and Turkey established a Greater Idlib Province de-escalation deal that called for an indefinite ceasefire across the Idlib front, the creation of a “security corridor” along the M4 highway – which connects regime-held areas of Aleppo Province to regime-held areas of Latakia Province, and joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4. The agreement followed a multi-month offensive by pro-regime forces that displaced over 1 million people.² The ceasefire component of the deal has largely held. However, the establishment of the “security corridor” has been imperfect, and the implementation of the joint patrol mechanism specified in the deal has lagged due to security concerns. Local protests starting in al Qaeda-dominated areas of Idlib have disrupted some of the patrols.³ A recent al Qaeda raid on pro-regime positions in Northern Hama – which inflicted significant casualties on regime forces for the first time since March 5 – demonstrated the precariousness of the ceasefire.⁴

The Russo-Turkish ceasefire could break down and yield a major regime offensive if al Qaeda acts as a spoiler, if the Assad regime acts as a spoiler, or if Russia and Turkey broker an agreement that permits a renewed regime offensive. The most likely and dangerous outcome is a new Russo-Turkish agreement allowing a renewed pro-regime offensive. Al Qaeda attacks that inflict significant casualties on regime forces could provoke regime retaliation. However, it is unlikely that Russia would view the provocation as sufficient to lend its support to a large-scale, regime offensive. Pro-regime forces are heavily reliant on Russian air campaigns to soften anti-Assad defenses, eliminate infrastructure – such as hospitals servicing anti-Assad forces, and provide close air support to regime ground advances.⁵ As a result, while the regime may engage in limited response, al Qaeda attacks are unlikely to prompt a major regime offensive.

The Assad regime might spoil the ceasefire by unilaterally launching an offensive. Regime forces alone are certain to fail in overpowering Turkish defenses – which include over 20,000 soldiers, special forces, experienced infantry units, and advanced drone capabilities.⁶ However, the Assad regime may attempt to convince Iran to support an offensive; Iranian-backed forces, including foreign proxies like Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian forces like the 4th Division and Local Defense Forces, may be willing to participate in a regime offensive in order to consolidate their control over M5 highway between Aleppo City and Ma'arat al-Nu'man in order to exploit the future resumption of trade along this highway. Iran may attempt to exploit Russia's unwillingness to participate in an offensive to demonstrate their commitment to the Assad regime. Even with Iranian support, an offensive without Russian support would remain a high-risk move for the Assad regime.

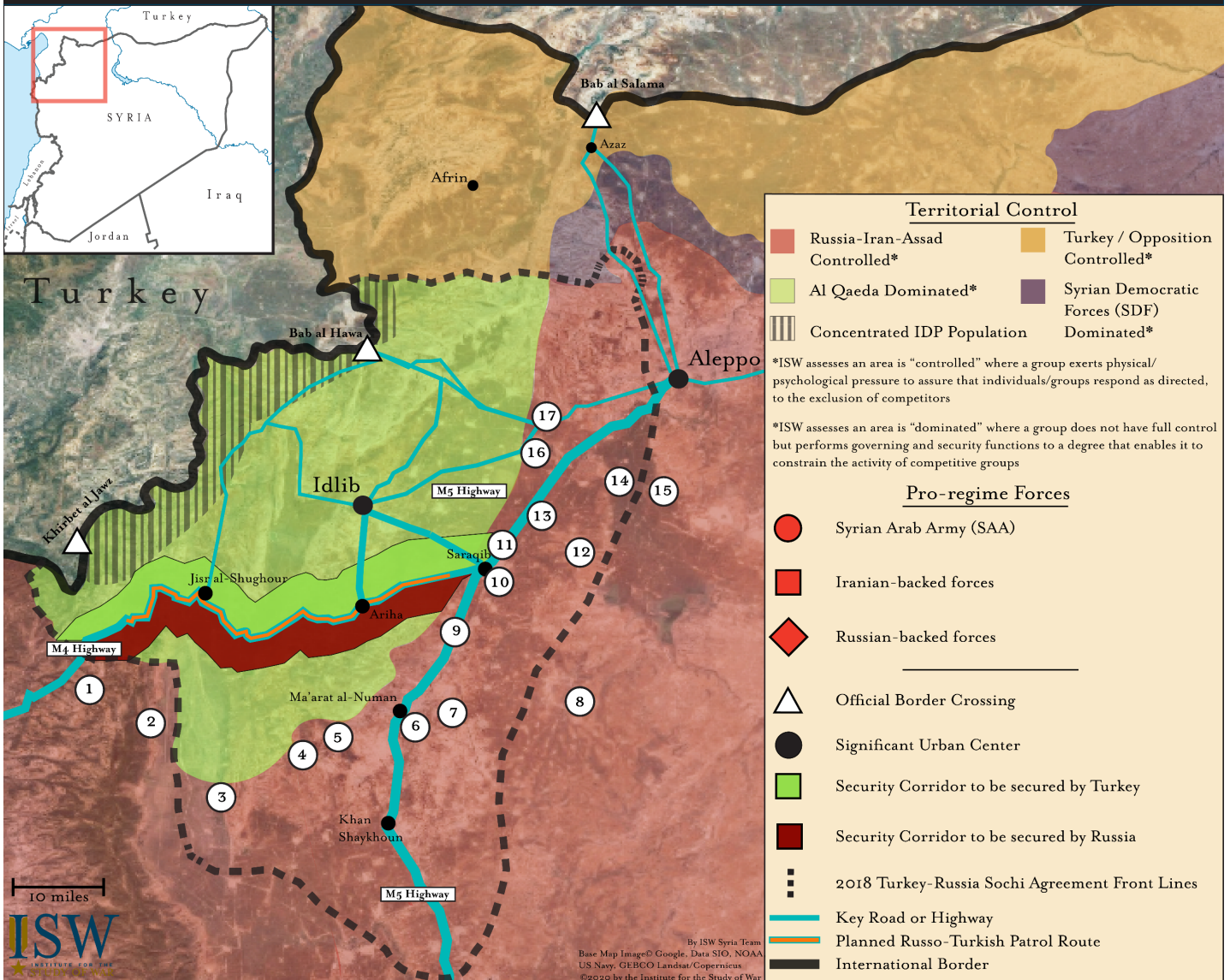
Russia and Turkey may negotiate mutually agreeable terms that could permit a regime offensive. Turkey has invested heavily in defending Greater Idlib Province, indicating it will require significant concessions to accept a resumption of the regime's offensive in Southern Idlib. These concessions may include allowing a Turkish offensive into Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-dominated Tel Rifaat area. Regime forces also maintain a presence in this pocket. Additional concessions could concern northeast Syria or any number of other areas where Russia and Turkey share overlapping interests, such as Libya or defense cooperation. Because Russia and Turkey do not have mutually incompatible interests and neither is eager for direct confrontation, such a deal is likely.

Despite its ultimate likelihood, a delay in a Russian-backed offensive is probable due the ongoing global pandemic affecting both Russia and Turkey and the need for a new round of negotiations. Russia and Turkey are factoring domestic challenges related to the outbreak of COVID-19 into their calculus on Idlib. These challenges limit both countries' ability to prioritize further negotiations over Syria therefore delaying a resumption of the offensive. Additionally, the Kremlin likely intends to exploit a United Nations Security Council effort to introduce a global ceasefire for the duration of the global COVID-19 outbreak to demand sanctions relief for the Assad regime and Russia.⁷ A Russian-approved resumption of the Idlib offensive would undermine Russia's larger geopolitical campaign for sanctions relief by exposing its lack of commitment to a global ceasefire.

Regaining control of Greater Idlib Province remains a military priority for the Assad regime. The regime has repeatedly expressed its commitment to consolidating control of "every inch" of Syria, including Greater Idlib Province and northeast Syria.⁸ Regime forces have conducted a series of offensive operations in greater Idlib over the past two years and made significant progress, seizing key terrain and major population centers, in the most recent round of fighting from November 24, 2019 to March 5, 2020.⁹ Pro-regime forces continued to reinforce positions along the Idlib frontlines from March 5 to May 15 in preparation for the resumption of active fighting.¹⁰

The southern Idlib front is the most likely focus for a renewed regime offensive. Pro-regime deployments since the March 5 ceasefire have concentrated along the Southern Idlib frontlines. The Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) Russian-backed 25th Special Tasks Division (formerly known as the Tiger Forces) increased its presence in the vicinity of Jabal Shahshabo and Ma'arat al-Nu'man throughout February, March, and April.¹¹ The 25th Division served as the lead offensive element in the previous phase of the regime offensive.¹² Iranian-backed groups, including Lebanese Hezbollah and the SAA's 4th Division, conducted similar deployments.¹³ The concentration of these deployments in two areas on either side of the anti-Assad forces in southern Idlib indicates the regime intends to encircle and collapse this pocket south of the M4 Highway. The regime's ability to achieve this objective will depend on Russian support due to the challenges presented by the terrain and Turkish force posture in southern Idlib.

This map provides an assessment of SAA and other pro-regime unit positions since the start of the ceasefire on March 5 to May 20 based on publicly-accessible information.



Pro-regime Forces at Select Locations

1. Kabani	■	7. Ma'ar Shoreen	■	13. Kusniya	■
2. Joureen	■ ◆	8. Karateen	■	14. al Eis	■
3. Jabl Shahshabo	■ ● ◆	9. Khan Sabil	■	15. Hader	■
4. Hizareen	● ◆	10. Saraqib	■ ● ◆	16. Kafr Halab	■
5. Kafr Nabl	■ ●	11. Afes/Duweir	■ ◆	17. Kafr Amah	●
6. Ma'arat al-Nu'man	■ ●	12. Maharim	■		

¹ Jennifer Cafarella with John Dunford, Michael Land, and Blane Wallace, "Turkey Commits to Idlib," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 18, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/turkey-commits-idlib>.

² "Syria War: Russia and Turkey Agree Idlib Ceasefire," *BBC*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51747592>; "Military Offensive in Syria's Idlib Province Creates Humanitarian Crisis," *NPR*, 2020 © Institute for the Study of War

February 25, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/25/809161907/military-offensive-in-syrias-idlib-province-creates-humanitarian-crisis>.

³ [“An Unknown Explosion and they Throw Eggs and Stones .. The Tenth Patrol on the M4 Falter,”] *Enab Baladi*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/383827>; “Idlib’s Turmoil | Explosion Rocks Ariha, While Turkish and Russian Force Patrolling M4,” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, May 12, 2020, https://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=164283&utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=idlibs-turmoil-explosion-rocks-ariha-while-turkish-and-russian-force-patrolling-m4.

⁴ [“Incite the Believers Withdraw from Sahl al-Ghab after an Operation Against Regime Forces,”] *Enab Baladi*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/383483>.

⁵ Evan Hill and Christian Triebert, “12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals. One Culprit: Russia,” *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html>.

⁶ Blane Wallace, “Turkey’s Military Buildup in Syria’s Idlib Province,” *Institute for the Study of War*, March 31, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey%E2%80%99s-military-buildup-syria%E2%80%99s-idlib-province>; Jennifer Cafarella with John Dunford, Michael Land, and Blane Wallace, “Turkey Commits to Idlib,” *Institute for the Study of War*, March 18, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey-commits-idlib>.

⁷ George Barros, Nataliya Bugayova, and Mason Clark, “Russia in Review: Kremlin Misdirection Continues amid COVID and Peace Processes,” *Institute for the Study of War*, April 29, 2020, <http://www.iswresearch.org/2020/04/russia-in-review-kremlin-misdirection.html>.

⁸ Maria Kiselyova and Vladimir Soldatkin, “Russia, Turkey Agree to Ceasefire Deal for Syria’s Idlib,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security/russia-turkey-agree-ceasefire-deal-for-syrias-idlib-idUSKBN20SI6I>.

⁹ Jennifer Cafarella with John Dunford, Michael Land, and Blane Wallace, “Turkey Commits to Idlib,” *Institute for the Study of War*, March 18, 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey-commits-idlib>.

¹⁰ “Syrian Army Reinforcements Roll into Southern Idlib with Heavy Weapons,” *Al-Masdar*, March 29, 2020, [https://www.almasdarnews\(.\)com/article/syrian-army-reinforcements-roll-into-southern-idlib-with-heavy-weapons/](https://www.almasdarnews(.)com/article/syrian-army-reinforcements-roll-into-southern-idlib-with-heavy-weapons/); [“The Regime and Iran are Reinforcing the Countryside of Idlib and Difficulties in a Prison for the SDF in Hasakah,”] *Baladi News*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/articles/58961/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%80-%22%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF%22-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A9>; “A Military Attacks Looms on the Horizon .. The 25th Division and Iranian Militias Gather South and East of Idlib,”] *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/122055/>; [“A Huge Operations Room and a New Headquarters for Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guard South of Aleppo,”] *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/122326/>; [“Iranian Militias Reinforce Their Positions in Idlib .. And Shooting Down Drones Near Hmeimim,”] *Al-Modon*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2020/3/24/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%88%D9%82-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85>; [“The Iranian Role Grows in Idlib: Messages and Points of Spread (Map)”] *Syria Call*, March 11, 2020, <https://nedaa-sy.com/reports/366>; [“The Regime Sends Military Reinforcements to the Saraqib and Kabana Fronts,”] *Qasioun News*, March 18, 2020, [https://www.qasioun-news\(.\)com/ar/news/show/218266/](https://www.qasioun-news(.)com/ar/news/show/218266/); [“Militias Reinforce Their Positions in Idlib and Exhume the Graves of Their Dead in Aleppo to Take to Tehran,”] *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/122196/>.

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- ¹¹ [“Multinational Armies and Militias Attack on Idlib .. An Account of the Latests Military Campagin,”] *Žaman al-Wasl*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/I23228/>; “Syrian Army Reinforcements Roll into Southern Idlib with Heavy Weapons,” *Al-Masdar*, March 29, 2020, [https://www.almazdarnews\(.\)com/article/syrian-army-reinforcements-roll-into-southern-idlib-with-heavy-weapons/](https://www.almazdarnews(.)com/article/syrian-army-reinforcements-roll-into-southern-idlib-with-heavy-weapons/); [“The Regime and Iran are Reinforcing the Countryside of Idlib and Difficulties in a Prison for the SDF in Hasakah,”] *Baladi News*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/articles/58961/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%B2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%80-%22%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF%22-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A9>; “A Military Attacks Looms on the Horizon .. The 25th Division and Iranian Militias Gather South and East of Idlib,”] *Žaman al-Wasl*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/I22055/>.
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