



## New Jihadist Group Targets Joint Turkish-Russian Patrols in Idlib, Syria

**OE Watch Commentary:** Over the summer, the hitherto unknown jihadist group “Khattab the Chechen Brigades” claimed several attacks against Russian-Turkish patrols along Syria’s M4 highway. As of early September, they included at least two RPG attacks and a SVBIED that injured one Turkish and three Russian soldiers. As noted in the first accompanying article, from *al-Modon*, Turkey and Russia responded by conducting two impromptu training exercises to beef up patrol capabilities, the first on using drones to identify and target hostile forces along the M4 patrol route and the second focused on equipment retrieval, medical aid provision, and “joint fire targeting operations.” The article notes that the trainings were disclosed in a statement by the Russian Forces’ Hmeimim Air Base Headquarters, although there was no official comment from Turkey.

Based on their claimed attacks, the Khattab Brigades’ objective is to disrupt Turkish-Russian patrols along the M4 highway and, more broadly, put pressure on the tenuous status quo in Idlib Province. The group’s emergence remains murky and has become the object of intense speculation in Arabic-language media. The name alludes to a charismatic Saudi jihadist leader who gained fame leading Arab fighters in the Chechen Wars, until his death by poisoning in 2002. Various analysts refer to the group as the Khattab Brigades or the Chechen Brigades. The second and third accompanying excerpts, from *180post* and *al-Araby al-Jadid*, discuss several prominent hypotheses regarding the group’s origin. One interpretation sees the Khattab Brigades as the work of experienced jihadists seeking to benefit from the strategic opportunities available in Idlib, and more specifically the vulnerabilities or openings (تارغث) created by the Russian-Turkish patrols. The group released a video on its *Telegram* social media channel showing drone footage of the SVBIED attack and in which it refers to Turkish forces as the “NATO Turkish Army.” As ISIS proved in the past, the information domain can be a cheap and effective force multiplier in Syria. Based on the attention they have received, the Khattab Brigades have leveraged information effectively thus far, though it is unclear whether they are anything more than a temporary blip in the age of endless information.

The Syrian government, perhaps with Iranian assistance, is mentioned in both accompanying excerpts as a potential backer of the new jihadist group. The evidence is circumstantial, based largely on the idea it would benefit from greater disorder in the Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib. One of the articles mentions Turkish adversaries in the Gulf (i.e. the UAE) as potential backers of the Khattab Brigades. Jihadist-focused interpretations in the articles include one that considers the group a surviving ISIS kernel seeking a return to Idlib and another that sees it as a cell carrying out the dirty work for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Idlib’s dominant pro-status quo jihadist group. Whatever the case, the Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib signed last March appears to be coming under pressure and all parties involved in Syria are undoubtedly taking note.

**End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

***“...fighters who assessed the Idlib scene in light of external interventions and found, in the crowding of players, holes to exploit in order to change the strategic landscape and reshuffle its deck based on the conflict of interests and contradictory goals of these players...”***

**Source:** “إدلب: مجموعة سلفية جديدة تستهدف ‘جيش الناتو التركي’,” *al-Modon*, 2 September 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y56jylaa>

*On Wednesday, the Turkish and Russian forces in Idlib conducted a joint training on using drones, “with the aim of destroying targets determined by the two parties on the aforementioned international road,” according to a statement issued by the Russian Hmeimim Air Base. This is the second training of the Turkish and Russian forces in Idlib, after a first training took place on Monday on “joint fire targeting operations against armed groups that refuse reconciliation, withdrawing damaged military equipment, and providing medical assistance” according to the Russian base. There was no comment from Turkey on this matter.*



## Continued: New Jihadist Group Targets Joint Turkish-Russian Patrols in Idlib, Syria

Source: كتائب الشيشاني ... ولادة مشبوهة ورسائل متشعبة  
 “Chechen Brigades... Suspicious Birth and Divergent Messages,” *180post.com*, 18 August 2020. <https://180post.com/archives/12338>

*In this context, some did not rule out that the Chechen Brigades were the creation of Syrian and Iranian intelligence, which they argue has an interest in thwarting the Russian-Turkish agreement and returning to a military solution. Others speak of a plan led by Gulf countries, aimed at embarrassing Ankara and making it appear unable to abide by its agreements signed with Moscow. A third group opines that the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and his security apparatus, were the ones behind the formation of the Chechen Brigades in order to act as a ready-made tool to do the dirty work that al-Julani cannot publicly claim because it is inconsistent with the new image that he is working to market for himself, as a political leader leading a national liberation process against the Russian and Iranian occupiers.*

*In the midst of this, two possibilities remain. The first is that the Chechen Brigades are merely a new name for ISIS cells that for months have been the subject of jihadist tensions, in order to reintegrate them into the Idlib scene... The second possibility is that an elite group of foreign and Syrian fighters who assessed the Idlib scene in light of external interventions and found, in the crowding of players, holes to exploit in order to change the strategic landscape and reshuffle its deck based on the conflict of interests and contradictory goals of these players, allowing them to form a new faction. Such group could potentially inherit the roles played by some factions, headed by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.*

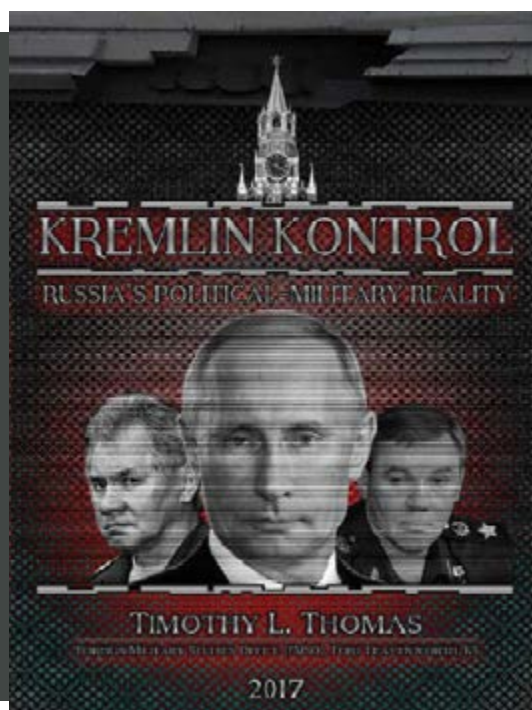
Source: تنظيم جديد يظهر في إدلب: ما حقيقته؟  
 “New Organization Emerges in Idlib: What’s the Truth?” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 15 July 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y4742j8s>

*Al-Mustafa elaborated his three interpretations in a conversation with al-Araby al-Jadid, noting that “the first of them lies in the desire of some sub-groups in larger organizations such as Hurras al-Din and the Turkistani Party to restart their military activity after a period of forced calm imposed on them by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkish army.”*

*The second interpretation relates to the struggle of these organizations with HTS, which came to the surface after the formation of the “Fathbatu” operation room, which included defectors from the Nusra Front, including its leader in Qalamoun, Abu Malik al-Tali, and which HTS defeated by force. In other words, it may be a message to HTS that the battle is not over, and that its presence as de-facto government in Idlib does not mean it controls the military scene.*

*As for the third interpretation, according to al-Mustafa, it revolves around “regime infiltration, especially since the organization is new and unknown, not to mention the regime’s desire to return to the military field in Idlib to temporarily cover the growing economic crisis, especially after the Caesar Act.”*

*Al-Mustafa leans toward the second interpretation, saying, “This is the norm of jihadist organizations in all fields.”*



**In 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov instituted sweeping changes that have reorganized the country’s security forces and reestablished the nation’s military prowess. This study, *Kremlin Kontrol*, aims to describe how control over the security services and the military have hastened those changes.**

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/ml/fmso-books/197266/download>