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## ***Syrian army prepares to retake Idlib province***

Damascus — Thousands of soldiers, elite units, heavy military equipment — the Syrian army is present in the south and west of Idlib province. The scenario is similar to what preceded the liberation of East Aleppo, the eastern suburbs of Ghuta, and the southwestern provinces of Dera'a and Quneitra.

Helicopters circle the province and drop leaflets calling on the combatants to surrender: “The war is about to end” and “Time to stop the bloodshed.” The people of Idlib should agree to reconciliation “as our people have done in other parts of Syria.”

Idlib has become a kind of “dumping ground” for all those armed combat groups who oppose a ceasefire and agreements with the government, and who want to capture Damascus and turn Syria into a religious state. Their motto is “God can defeat them.” They are close to al-Qaida or the “Islamic State” (IS) and are considered “terrorist groups.” In the framework of the “fight against terrorism,” Syria and its allies can continue to fight them despite agreements on ceasefires or “deescalation areas.”

The other category of fighting groups in Idlib is described and supported by the Western NATO countries, Turkey and the Gulf states as “moderate rebels.” This spectrum includes various militias and remnants of the “Free Syrian Army.” The motto of their struggle is “Stop tyranny.” As regards content and in their behavior, they hardly differ from the first category of [“terrorist”] fighters.

In May 2018, in order to better control them and separate them from the extremist combat units, Turkey urged the “moderate rebels” to form a “National Liberation Front.” So far, however, Ankara has not succeeded in gaining real control over that front. A few days

ago, its leadership called for an ongoing war against Damascus and wants to defend the province of Idlib in any case.

The “terrorist” combat groups are dominated by the successor organization to the Nusra Front, which is now called Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS, Alliance for the Conquest of the Levant). According to its own statements, the HTS has 37,800 fighters and controls Idlib. In a bloody power struggle with former allies, the organization prevailed in 2017. New reactionary groups had emerged at that time (Jaiah Al-Badia with 2,800 fighters and Al-Malahim with about 1,700 fighters). Remaining IS units are located in the southeastern border area between the provinces of Idlib and Hama. Their number is unclear. They are rejected by the other militias.

Whether “terrorist” or “moderate” — there is pronounced competition between all groups. Bloody power struggles among them have caused more victims in their own ranks since 2017 than in struggles with the Syrian army. Ammunition and food warehouses, bases, headquarters and convoys go up in flames. Two hundred and twenty leaders of various groups have been specifically murdered or died in shootings since the end of April.

Each combat group has imposed new “administrative structures” on its sphere of influence. Schools, courts, public institutions — if available — follow the Sharia, sometimes in a more, sometimes in a less, dogmatic interpretation. Professional qualifications are usually lacking, but corruption is flourishing. This has been reinforced by international aid deliveries distributed by private but state-funded aid organizations.

The U.S. organization USAID has now stopped financing three projects worth tens of millions of dollars in Idlib. It turned out that the names of HTS fighters were smuggled onto the lists of civilians [designated for aid]. Great Britain has announced that it will stop financing the “Free Syrian Police,” in which Germany also participated, and the “Local Councils.”

*Leukefeld has been covering events in Syria for at least the past decade for the German daily newspaper Junge Welt, which published this article on Aug. 30. This excerpt is translated by Workers World Managing Editor John Catalinotto.*