



**ESCALATING BODY COUNT:**  
Dead bodies loaded in the back of a truck tell the grim tale of an out-of-control war that has ravaged Syria for years

# **SPECIAL REPORT: Death Toll Rises as HTS and Turkish-led NLF Fighters Battle Russian-backed Syrian Government Forces**

**— The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says 236 civilians have been killed since April 30, 2019**

by Lindsey Snell, May 29, 2019

## SPECIAL REPORT

## Death Toll Rises as HTS and Turkish-led NLF Fighters Battle Russian-backed Syrian Government Forces

**According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 236 civilians have been killed since April 30, 2019; hundreds more have been killed in recent months**

On September 12, 2018, Turkish President Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a deal declaring Idlib, Syria, and its surrounding areas a de-escalation zone and implementing a cease-fire. The swath of land in the northwest of Syria is the last opposition stronghold in the country; it is largely under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the group previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate. The region is home to more than three million civilians.

One of the provisions in the agreement stipulated that Turkey would disarm and remove the thousands of HTS fighters in and around Idlib, a promise that has yet to come to fruition.

Citing this as a violation of the agreement, in late April 2019, Russian-backed Syrian government forces launched a major ground and aerial offensive on Kfar Nabuda, a village northwest of Hama. Government forces succeeded in capturing the village, creeping closer to what many fear will be an inevitable bloodbath as the Syrian government fights to capture greater Idlib. In just the past two days, Syria Civil Defence has reported dozens killed by Syrian government air strikes in and around Idlib.

On May 21, 2019, fighters from HTS and the National Liberation Front (NLF), a group of opposition factions directly supported by the Turkish government, successfully worked together to drive out Syrian government troops in a short-lived victory and claimed to have regained control of Kfar Nabuda.

*Al Jazeera* quoted Mostafa Maarati,<sup>1</sup> spokesman of the Al-Ezzah Army (one of the factions fighting under the NLF umbrella) as saying "our goal is not only Kfar Nabuda... we will keep moving until we

topple the tyrant Bashar Assad and liberate all our land."

But fewer opposition fighters accepted this rhetoric. "That's just talk for the media," Ziad Ibrahim explained in a WhatsApp interview.<sup>2</sup>

Ibrahim is a former member of several Syrian opposition factions, most recently the NLF. "We have lost the war, and we all know this." He was not surprised when, on May 26, 2019, Syrian government forces recaptured Kfar Nabuda from the Syrian opposition after eight hours of heavy bombardment — an attack that killed at least 12 civilians.<sup>3</sup>

Ibrahim has been fighting since 2012. A dedicated freedom fighter, he has vowed to continue fighting until the war reaches its bitter end, even while many of his fellow freedom fighters have simply quit. "For me, it seemed like death would be easier than stopping fighting. But here I am, in Syria as a civilian," he said.

In January 2018, Ibrahim participated in Operation Olive Branch, a Turkish-led operation targeting Afrin, a city on the Syrian border with a large Kurdish population. The operation pitted Syrian opposition fighters backed by Turkey against Kurdish forces. Ibrahim was disgusted when he saw his fellow soldiers looting the city, stealing cars and homes.

"But it was more than just that. I was a mercenary,

nothing else. [Operation Olive Branch] was not for our revolution. It was Turkey using us against the Kurds for their own reasons," Ibrahim reflected.

Ibrahim left Afrin and joined the opposition faction Nour al-Din al-Zenki in al-Atareb, a city on the outskirts of Idlib. In January 2019, HTS overran many of the territories held by other opposition factions. They effectively dissolved some of the factions, including Nour al-Din al-Zenki. Some of the remaining members of Zenki, Ibrahim included, were then folded into the ranks of the NLF.

“

**We have lost the war, and we all know this... that [fighting talk] is just for the media”**

—Ziad Ibrahim (face blurred), opposition fighter



## WAR BUSINESS, AS USUAL:

People in the street walk and drive past bombed-out buildings in downtown Idlib, Syria, Saturday, May 25, 2019. The following day, the city and surrounding areas were subjected to eight hours of heavy bombardment (REUTERS)



## Collaboration Between Factions

Despite the hostile takeovers and subsequent clashes between HTS and NLF groups, there has been constant military collaboration between the various groups jointly fighting against the Syrian government, most recently in the battle for Kfar Nabuda. The NLF portrays these partnerships as rivals putting aside their conflict to fight a more insidious common enemy in the Syrian government; meanwhile, the Turkish government maintains that it opposes HTS.

Ibrahim explained that in reality, the NLF and HTS are both fighting on Turkey's behalf in Syria: "This is why I stopped fighting," he said. "HTS is as bad as the regime, and there is no chance we [can] win this war. Why should we fight for Turkey to control parts of Syria and Bashar [al-Assad, President of Syria] and Russia the rest?"

Ahmet Yayla, who served as chief of counter-terrorism police in the border city of Sanliurfa, Turkey from 2010–2013, commented that Turkey unequivocally supports HTS. At his former post, Yayla worked to document the movement of ISIS fighters in and out of Syria, landing him on an ISIS hit list. After fleeing Turkey and becoming a university professor in the US, Yayla co-authored a book<sup>4</sup> detailing ISIS defectors' claims that Turkey had supplied them with weapons and logistical support.<sup>5</sup> This caused him to be added to the Turkish government's enemies list as well.

Yayla says that Turkey has never truly opposed HTS or its previous iterations, and that Turkish Intelligence has been in close contact with the group since their inception. He believes that while Erdoğan announces to the

international community that he will disarm the jihadist group and force them out of Idlib, he is actually using the group to further Turkey's goals in Syria.

"HTS cannot counter Turkey, and Erdoğan wants to control Northern Syria. So it's a win-win situation," Yayla said. "The question is what the Russians will do. [Erdoğan] has been playing the Russian and American cards very skillfully, but eventually, he will have to decide."

When the first Turkish military convoys entered Idlib province in October 2017, they were escorted by fighters from HTS. According to Ibrahim, every time he has seen a Turkish convoy in Syria, they have had HTS escorts.



## SPECIAL REPORT

## Impact on Civilians

Civilians in Idlib and surrounding areas are suffering as a result of HTS's presence. According to the Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets), the ground and aerial offensive led by the Syrian government has resulted in more than 100 civilian deaths during the months of April and May 2019 alone. And because HTS is designated as a terrorist organization by the UN and many other countries, the territories they control have become off-limits to many aid organizations.

Mohammed Assah, a schoolteacher near al-Atareb, said in a phone interview that the aid deliveries to his village has been drastically reduced. "About 80% of what we were receiving is gone. Some because [HTS] has refused to let some organizations deliver it. But most is because now that they completely control the area, the organizations do not want to support anything in their areas."

The international NGO providing financial support to Assah's school completely stopped. None of the teachers at his school have received a salary in months. He added, "We are all volunteers here now. All but two of the teachers stayed, and we teach anyway. Our children are all we have."

Aid to area hospitals has also slowed, creating supply shortages. "And we are lacking food...more and more, we are missing the essentials. HTS has everything they need, of course. But the civilians are suffering," Assah said.

While help from international organizations has dwindled considerably, some Turkish organizations are still able to move freely within Syria's HTS-controlled territories. The International Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), is one such organization. Yayla explained this is because the group

**DIE ANOTHER DAY:**  
A young boy killed by air strikes in Kafr Halab



**About 80% of the aid we were receiving is gone... because they [HTS] now control the area"**

—Mohammad Assah, schoolteacher near Al-Atareb

is actually allied with al-Qaeda, and has been since long before the Syrian war began: "At the end of the day," he said, "IHH is a semi-governmental organization that is actually run by intelligence behind the scenes."

While he held the post of chief of counter-terrorism police in Sanliurfa, Turkey, Yayla says IHH's affiliations were well known. He cited a 2014 anti-al-Qaeda operation in which Turkish police raided an IHH office in Kilis, Turkey, and detained an IHH staffer for alleged al-Qaeda ties. Shortly after the raid, a senior police officer was fired. IHH was quickly deemed untouchable by the Turkish law enforcement.

## SPECIAL REPORT

## Supposed Humanitarian Aid Used to Bolster Al-Qaeda

Since leaving Turkey, Yayla has extensively researched IHH.<sup>4</sup> He found that the group formed in 1995 with the stated mission of providing aid to battle zones in Chechnya and Bosnia Herzegovina. However, in the context of the Syrian war, it appears that in addition to delivering much-needed aid to Syrian civilians, IHH has provided arms, and logistical support to both ISIS and HTS, as well as transporting injured fighters across the border.

In 2012, a ship registered to IHH members that was carrying weapons for Syrian opposition fighters docked in Syria. In 2016, Vitaly Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the UN, sent a letter to the UN Security Council that included detailed accounts of IHH's activities in Syria, among them arming HTS and opening several Turkish bank accounts to finance terrorist activity.

In the course of his research, Yayla has also uncovered reports showing how IHH was working to facilitate the movement of suspected

foreign ISIS and HTS fighters in and out of Syria.

Mohammed Shakiel Shabir, a British veteran aid worker from Birmingham, had been working for IHH for several years in Syria before reportedly being kidnapped and held for ransom by an armed group and dramatically rescued by another al-Qaeda-linked group.

Shabir told *Middle East Eye* in an interview published on May 21<sup>5</sup> that after he had spent four years in Idlib, the UK government had informed him they were stripping him of his British citizenship due to his alleged ties with an al-Qaeda-affiliated group.

To date, the UK has revoked citizenship from more than 150 people accused of engaging in terrorist activity abroad. Shabir says he has been an employee of IHH for the past 15 years, but denies any affiliation with HTS.

In a WhatsApp interview, Ahmad Khaled,\* a former member of HTS, said he was aware IHH was delivering aid to HTS while he was

with the group in Idlib.

"No one would see IHH give directly to [HTS]. There are smaller Syrian aid organizations. IHH would deal with them, and the Syrian organizations would give to [HTS]," he said. It's worth noting that after leaving HTS to resettle in Turkey, Khaled was hired to do computer work for IHH on several occasions.



**No one would see IHH give directly to [HTS]. There are smaller Syrian aid organizations. IHH would deal with them, and the Syrian organizations would give to [HTS]."**

—Ahmed Khaled\*, a former HTS member (\*pseudonym)

### CASUALTIES OF WAR:

Air strikes are visible in the distance in Kafr Halab city



## SPECIAL REPORT

## Aerial Terror Continues in Idlib

On Monday, May 27, Syrian government forces targeted several towns inside the de-escalation zone with air strikes. Syrian opposition activists say the strikes targeted predominantly civilian areas, killing at least 11 people in Ariha City in Idlib alone. On Tuesday, May 28, the bombings continued and expanded to new areas, including Kafr Halab in the Western countryside of Aleppo, where Ziad Ibrahim lives.

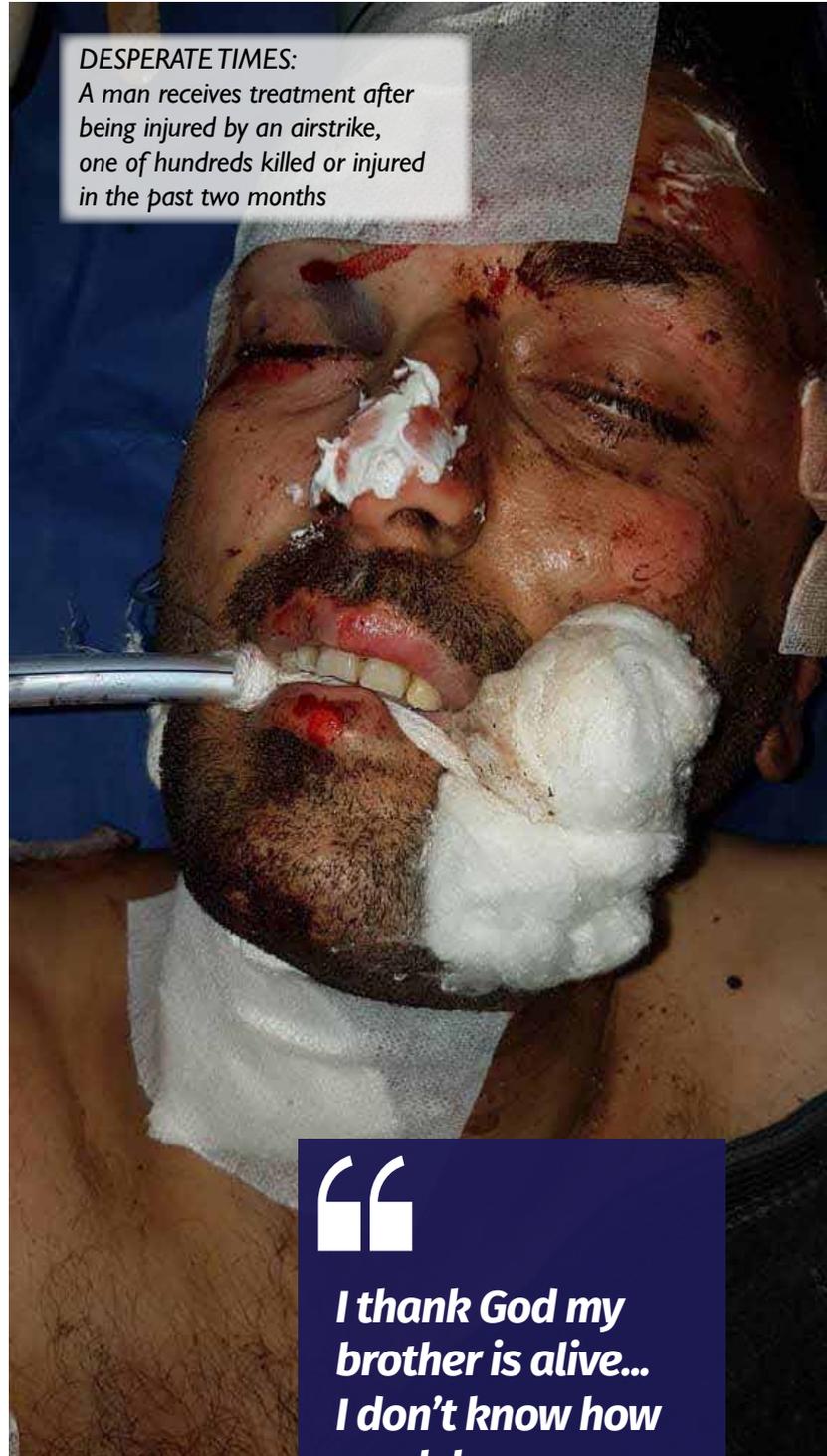
Ibrahim's older brother was walking home from the market with food for his family's *Iftar* (a celebratory meal after a day of fasting during the Muslim month of Ramadan) when the strikes began. The busy street he was on was hit, and he was seriously injured. As many as 11 others were killed as they shopped for food. "I thank God he is alive," Ibrahim said. "I don't know how much longer any of us will be."

\*(a pseudonym)

**Note:** All interviews were conducted by the author during the week reported on (May 22–29, 2019).

## REFERENCES

- 1 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/syrian-forces-pound-rebel-targets-northwest-syria-190526184701969.html>
- 2 Lindsey introduced Ziad Ibrahim in her first report for *The Investigative Journal*; see: <https://investigativejournal.org/kidnapped-by-al-qaeda-jailed-by-turkey-journalist-lindsey-snell-tells-it-all/>
- 3 <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/regime-bombardment-kills-12-civilians-in-northwest-syria-27009>
- 4 Ahmet S. Yayla and Anne Speckhard, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*, Advances Press LLC, July 2016.
- 5 Ahmet Yayla commented on Abdullah Bozkurt's report, "Wiretaps Expose Turkey's Support of Terrorists Entering Syria" for *The Investigative Journal* — see <https://investigativejournal.org/interview-with-ahmed-yayla-filmed-in-washington-d-c/>
- 6 <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2397/IHH#gsc.tab=0>
- 7 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-birmingham-aid-worker-syria-stripped-uk-citizenship>



### DESPERATE TIMES:

A man receives treatment after being injured by an airstrike, one of hundreds killed or injured in the past two months



***I thank God my brother is alive... I don't know how much longer any of us will be"***

—Ziad Ibrahim, Syrian opposition fighter



## Lindsey Snell

Lindsey Snell is a print and video journalist specializing in conflict and humanitarian crises. She has produced documentary-style videos for MSNBC, VICE, Vocativ, ABC News, Ozy, Yahoo News, and Discovery Digital Networks. Her print work has appeared in *Foreign Policy*, the *Daily Beast*, *al Araby* and others. One of her pieces, on Aleppo schools hit by airstrikes, won an Edward R. Murrow award in 2016.

Her first report for *The Investigative Journal* details her first-hand account of being kidnapped by al-Qaeda while filming in Syria.

NB: *All of the images in this report are her own, unless otherwise credited.*





**THE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNAL**

TRUTH IN JOURNALISM