



SYRIA-OPERATION MANBIJ: A COMPLEX DECISION FOR US AND TURKEY

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On June 4, 2018, after a month of long negotiations, Washington and Ankara finally agreed on an alliance over a military operation against the Kurdish led-Syrian democratic forces in the northern Syrian region which borders Turkey.¹

On June 27, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the roadmap Manbij agreement between US and Turkey about power sharing in northern Syria would be “part of the political resolution”.² President Erdogan also made his intentions about Manbij clear when he said at an election rally that “We had said that terror organizations will leave Manbij.”³

The details of Manbij agreement have been released after long speculations and it seems like both parties have agreed over the withdrawal of the YPG (People Protection Units) group from Manbij. “Coordinated but independent patrols”⁴ in the region have already begun.

The operation will be conducted by following a roadmap devised by both sides, which is divided into three parts. The first two will include withdrawal and disarming of the YPG, while the third part will

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¹ Gall, Carlotta “U.S. and Turkey Agree on Kurds’ Withdrawal from Syrian Town”, *The New York Times*, June 4, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-kurds-manbij.html>

² “Manbij roadmap will be ‘part of political resolution’”, *hurriyetdailynews*, June 28 2018. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/manbij-roadmap-will-be-part-of-the-political-resolution-pompeo-133891>

³ “Turkish forces begin patrols in Syria's Manbij”, *AL Jazeera*, 18 Jun 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/turkish-forces-patrols-syria-manbij-180618135536167.html>

⁴ “Turkish, U.S. units begin patrols near northern Syria's Manbij”, *Reuters*, June 18, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkish-u-s-units-begin-patrols-near-northern-syrias-manbij-idUSKBN1JE1A3>

constitute the forming of a new ruling council based on the ethnic composition of the city. Arabs form the majority, followed by Kurds and Turkmen respectively.⁵

The Manbij agreement highlights the complex situation that America is embroiled in with regard to Syria. President Donald Trump's continuous claims over exiting the Syrian war are testament to this. Earlier this year in March, Trump had declared, "we're knocking the hell out of ISIS. We'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now."⁶ Yet try as they might, both the Obama and Trump governments have failed to limit their involvement in the war. Now, amid all the chaos, leaving is not an option at the moment.

At the start of 2015, ISIS held a significant amount of territory in Syrian regions bordering both Turkey and Iraq.⁷ The primary reason for US arming the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was to completely eliminate the threat of ISIS from Syria⁸, without having direct on-ground involvement. In March 2016, US-backed SDF forces had led the offensive to capture Manbij region⁹, which was important in preparation of future assault on the group's de facto capital, Raqqa. It was also not only used as pathway by foreign fighters who joined ISIS through Turkey, but also as a major supply line route to Raqqa. On October 17, 2017, SDF forces had led an offensive in Raqqa and pushed out most of the ISIS militants from the city. Only a small pocket remained in the region alongside the Euphrates river.¹⁰ The fact that the Kurdish led SDF took control of the areas bordering Turkey raised alarm bells in Ankara, since the group has ties with PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), an organization that Turkey claims has been causing insurgency in its territory.¹¹

Presently, the dilemma for America is how to keep a strong rebel ally presence in regions where they ousted ISIS. The US has about 2000 ground soldiers present in Syria, supporting them with ground

⁵ Khaled al-Khateb "Syrian opposition has high hopes for US-Turkish road map for Manbij", *al-monitor*, June 29, 2018. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/syria-manbij-us-turkey-roadmap-ypg-withdrawal.html>

⁶ Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "Trump says US will withdraw from Syria 'very soon'", *CNN*, March 29, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/29/politics/trump-withdraw-syria-pentagon/index.html>

⁷ Michal Kranz and Skye Gould "These maps show how drastically ISIS territory has shrunk since its peak", *Business Insider*, October 24, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/maps-of-isis-territory-2014-2017-10>

⁸ Syria conflict: US air drop for anti-IS forces in Hassakeh", *BBC*, October 13, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34509793>

⁹ "US airstrikes pave way for PYD, regime advance in northern Syria", *dailysabah*, March 30, 2016 <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2016/03/30/us-airstrikes-pave-way-for-pyd-regime-advance-in-northern-syria>

¹⁰ "U.S.-Backed Syrian Militias Take Back Raqqa From ISIS", *Reuters*, October 18, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa/islamic-state-defeated-in-its-syrian-capital-raqqa-idUSKBN1CM0VC>

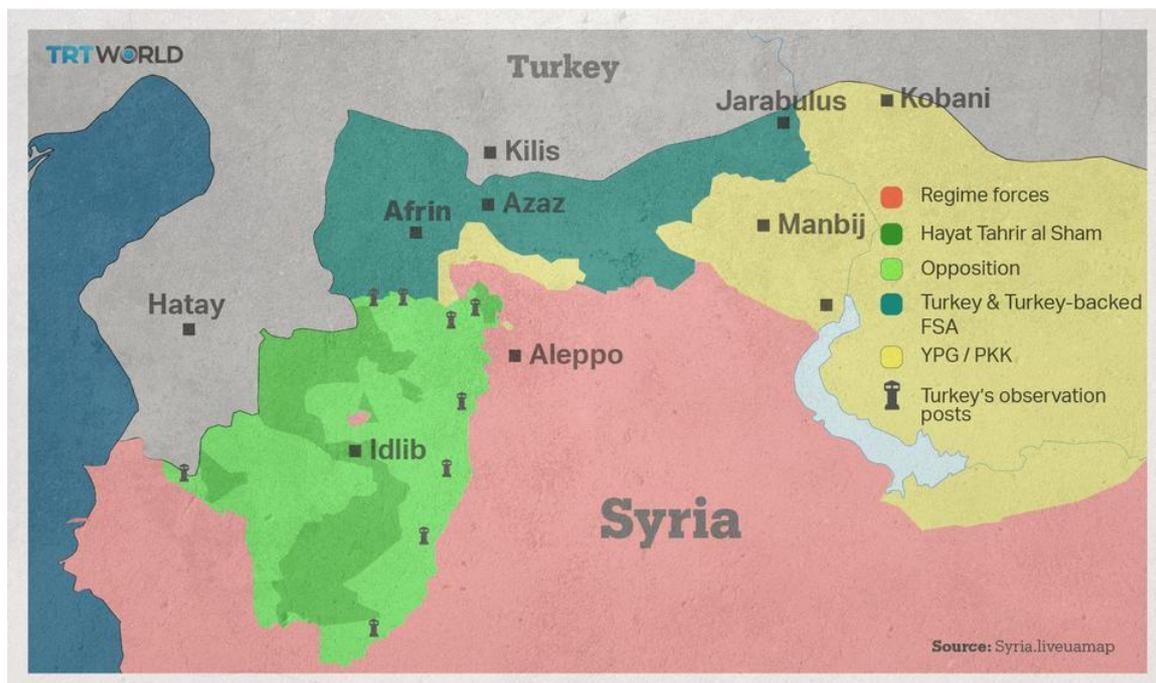
¹¹ Ensor, Josie, "Turkey's Erdogan calls for review of Nato over US arming of Kurds fighting Isis in Syria", *Telegraph*, June 26, 2017. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/26/turkeys-erdogan-calls-review-nato-us-arming-kurds-fighting-isis>

operation and air surveillance.¹² Some reports suggest that it would be much harder for the SDF to retain control of the captured region if US pulls out its ground support presence.

American support of SDF has been a major point of conflict between US and Turkey for over the past two years, but the former persisted on arming SDF despite Turkey's anger. However, given the growing influence of Iran and its backing of Hezbollah in Syria, and the possibility of Turkey forming new alliances (Turkey is close to finalizing the S-400 missile system deal with Russia¹³), the US cannot afford to lose the support of a major international player in the region.

The US also considers that ISIS is only concentrated in small pockets and is in an extremely weak state. This entails that the SDF, whose sole purpose was to defeat ISIS, has no major role left to play. At least they are not important enough to make an enemy out of Turkey. The Trump administration has more to gain by sidelining the SDF and getting on good terms with Ankara.

The map below shows the power play in Syria. By taking over the control of Manbij, Turkey will exercise absolute autonomy over not only this strategic region, but on the northern border with Syria as well.¹⁴



¹² "U.S.-led coalition helps to build new Syrian force", *Reuters*, January 14, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-led-coalition-helps-to-build-new-syrian-force-angering-turkey-idUSKBN1F300A>

¹³ "Turkey says Russian S-400 missile delivery brought forward to July 2019", *Reuters*, April 4, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-missiles/turkey-says-russian-s-400-missile-delivery-brought-forward-to-july-2019-idUSKCN1HB0IU>

¹⁴ <https://www.trtworld.com/mea/could-manbij-be-the-beginning-of-a-us-double-game-in-syria--18285>

It will be interesting to see how Washington will play out its relations with both the SDF and Ankara simultaneously. Reports suggest that US hesitancy in their support for SDF have halted the SDF hunting campaign against ISIS in the small pocket regions.¹⁵ This indicates that if US withdraws support for SDF completely, it will provide an opportunity for hundreds of ISIS foreign fighters to escape and regroup again. It is also important to note that in early 2013, US heavily armed Al-Nusra militants¹⁶ - a Salafist jihadist rebel group who formerly had ties with Al Qaida.¹⁷ If the US pulls out now, they will have left caches of unattended weapons- weapons which could restart another war altogether.

On July 8, 2018, Turkey and US completed their 11th round of patrols in Manbij, with operation proving to be successful and coming to its near end, it remains to be seen what the Trump administration would do after the conclusion of ongoing Operation Manbij. But with SDF still controlling significant territory, ISIS yet to be removed from those pocket regions, and loose ends such as Al- Nusra militants still present, pulling out of Syria at this point will only create a huge power vacuum and will have catastrophic implications such as prolonging a war that has already claimed more than 500,000 lives.¹⁸

¹⁵ Liz Sly "Kurds pull back from ISIS fight in Syria, saying U.S. 'let us down'", *Washington Post*, March 6, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kurds-pull-back-from-isis-fight-in-syria-say-they-are-let-down-by-us/2018/03/06/3fd2c2ca-2173-11e8-946c-9420060cb7bd_story.html

¹⁶ GARETH PORTER, "How America Armed Terrorists in Syria", *The American Conservative*, June 22, 2017 <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/how-america-armed-terrorists-in-syria/>

¹⁷ "Syrian Nusra Front announces split from al-Qaeda", *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36916606>

¹⁸ "Syrian Observatory says war has killed more than half a million", *Reuters*. MARCH 12, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M>