

Viewpoint

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Manbij offers US and Turkey division and resolution

The city of Manbij in northern Syria is a source of severe political tension between the United States and Turkey. It might, however, be the key to normalising relations.

The regime of Bashar Assad withdrew from Manbij in July 2012, making it one of the first large cities in Syria freed from the rule of the government in Damascus. Over the next months, the population of Manbij engaged in one of the more notable rebel efforts: an attempt at self-government.

However, in late 2013, under pressure from the regime's annihilation tactics and Manbij officials' mismanagement, space opened for the Islamic State (ISIS). In January 2014, as the rebellion went on the offensive against ISIS, the jihadists consolidated in eastern Aleppo and took over Manbij.

The US-led coalition intervened in Syria against ISIS in September 2014. By early 2016 the United States and its partner force, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), had cleared ISIS from northern Raqqa province and were at the gates of Manbij.

Turkey was furious at US support for the YPG because the group is, as US intelligence has conceded, the Syrian department of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organisation that has been at war with Turkey since 1984.

This is the equivalent, as Faysal Itani, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, phrased it, of asking Israel to accept the United States fighting ISIS by installing Hezbollah on the Israeli border.

Still, Turkey supported the May 2016 US-YPG operation to take Manbij from ISIS. Ankara had been promised that the YPG would withdraw east of the Euphrates once it was over and the Arab inhabitants of the city (helped by Turkey-aligned rebels) would be able to govern in the aftermath.

This was, the Wall Street Journal noted, a "meaningful shift for Turkey," which had "previously threatened to shell [the YPG] if it advanced close to Manbij." A threat Turkey had followed through on before.

The YPG did not withdraw from Manbij after it fell in August. Instead, it established the Manbij Military Council (MMC) and moved west to link with Afrin, triggering Turkey's Euphrates Shield operation.

Almost immediately upon the YPG capturing Manbij, "the regime took over the schools and paid the salaries of civil servants," resident Muhammad Noor said in an open letter to the Daily Beast. In exchange, the regime was allowed to target those who had risen against it.

This model, in which Assad pays for public services and in exchange controls key security nodes, is seen elsewhere in the Rojava territory and is part of a broader trend of increasing integration between the YPG-held areas and Assad's system.

In March 2017, the YPG openly handed over a belt of territory west of Manbij to pro-Assad forces to protect the YPG from Turkey. Days later, the United States very publicly deployed troops to Manbij to deter Turkey, setting up an odd situation in which one NATO country jointly deployed with Russia to protect a listed terrorist group from another NATO member.

The United States' reliance on the YPG has been problematic and the situation has established Manbij as a running sore in US-Turkish relations.

The US attempt to run a narrow counterterrorism war without getting entangled in Syria's broader war failed and created a fragile, potentially explosive, situation. All others focused on the post-ISIS order and the United States' bet on the YPG left it in the untenable position of being opposed by Iran, Russia and Turkey.

To normalise relations with Turkey, the United States would have to rebalance relations with the YPG, starting with some kind of joint oversight of Manbij, which US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has offered Ankara, as well as support for Turkey controlling the Afrin border, the Washington Post reported.

Will the US follow through and would it reset relations?

Michael Stephens, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and Robert Ford, a former US ambassador to Syria, agreed the United States acceding to Turkish demands over Manbij would significantly improve relations but that it was unlikely to occur.

Stephens said Manbij "wouldn't be the end of the story" and Ford said a "buffer strip" in Manbij would go a long way to mollifying the Turks. "I don't think the Turks insist on all of Rojava being dismantled, at least not right now," said Ford, noting he has not heard that from Turkish officials.

Syria's truce likely to go the way of other ceasefires



Scorched earth strategy. Members of Syrian government forces stand at the Wafdeen checkpoint on the outskirts of Damascus near the rebel-held Eastern Ghouta region, on February 27. (AFP)

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“Wishful thinking” is probably the best way to describe the 30-day Syrian ceasefire adopted by the United Nations. It will be no better or more binding than all other ceasefires reached and breached in the Syria war since 2012, all of which failed.

None of the major stakeholders were serious about UN Resolution 2401. They waited three days to put it in place while the death toll in Eastern Ghouta and Damascus totalled more than 500 people, Doctors Without Borders said.

Planes continued to pound towns and cities in the Damascus suburbs while, in the Syrian capital, 35-60 mortar shells landed on civilian neighbourhoods daily, with a non-combatant death toll as high as 11 a day.

Resolution 2401 was stillborn, with no clear timetable for implementation, no information on what to do with any violation should it happen and no committee for its technical supervision.

The Syrian opposition said it had a big loophole as the ceasefire excluded the Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), giving the Russians a legal pretext to strike at anybody on the ground, accused or suspected of either being a past or present member of ISIS.

As a result, hours after the ceasefire was announced, Turkey said it did not apply to its military operations in Afrin, west of the Euphrates River. An aerial blitz was conducted against Eastern Ghouta early February 25, killing 20 people, and mortars were fired at Damascus.

Neither the Assad regime nor the opposition were very enthusiastic about the ceasefire, explaining why it collapsed so rapidly.

The armed opposition had decided to fight, refusing a negotiated settlement with the regime that ended on February 21. The Russians played along under pressure from the international

community, more interested in a peace process than actual peace on the battlefield.

By excluding ISIS and HTS, Moscow was giving itself ammunition needed to play along with the presumed ceasefire, arguing it had abided by the will of the international community, with good intentions.

The fight for Eastern Ghouta, the last enclave still fully in the hands of the armed opposition, was floated as the last battle of Syria. Approximately 11,000 troops have been shipped to Eastern Ghouta and Russian and Syrian media termed it as the “Mother of all Battles.”

The Syrian regime started a ground invasion of Eastern Ghouta, surrounding the town of al-Nashabiya, near Damascus International Airport. From there they hope to lay siege to Douma, the principal town in Eastern Ghouta, which is held by Jaysh al-Islam led by Mohammad Alloush.

The plan is to lay siege to Douma and force its militants to surrender or die. The belief is that should Douma fall, the rest of Eastern Ghouta would crumble.

Damascus-based analyst Amer Elias, a member of the Ba’ath Party, said: “The ceasefire is not a surrender – far from it – and a military victory is not an easy task, achievable within days. In

politics, there are colours different from black and white. The ceasefire doesn't mean that the mortars (fired at Damascus) will stop nor will the military operations (in Eastern Ghouta). It will lead to defections among the military groups of Eastern Ghouta and quarantine its middle sector (where the militants are heavily placed).”

● **Neither the Assad regime nor the opposition were very enthusiastic about the ceasefire, explaining why it collapsed so rapidly.**

Jennifer Cafarella, a senior intelligence planner at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, disagreed, saying: “The Assad regime and its backers have shifted their main military effort from Idlib (in north-western Syria) to Damascus after Turkey intervened in Idlib to block their offensive. The goal of the pro-regime forces is likely to force the surrender and withdrawal of civilians and opposition groups in the besieged Eastern Ghouta area.”

“The absence of significant international condemnation of the pro-regime campaign reflects the absence of coherent policies towards Syria in the West. It also reflects the naivety of the US approach to ‘de-escalation’ in Syria, which has always provided the regime and its backers with time and space to prepare and conduct their next military operation.”

She was referring to the “de-conflict zones” agreement reached last May, which called for a ceasefire in the countryside of Damascus and Homs, Idlib and throughout southern Syria to the border with Jordan.

Cafarella warned: “The US should expect a major violation of the de-escalation zone in Daraa, south of Damascus, next.”

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of “Under the Black Flag” (IB Tauris, 2015).



Uniforms and a smile. US Army Major-General Jamie Jarrard (L) and Manbij Military Council Commander Muhammed Abu Adeel shake hands during a visit to a small outpost near Manbij, last February. (AP)