

The Manbij Agreement and Beyond

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- **What was the strategic importance of Manbij for the United States, the PKK/PYD, and Turkey?**
 - **What topics will be covered by the roadmap in Manbij?**
 - **How sincere is the U.S. with Turkey about its PKK/PYD policy? Will U.S. military activity in Sinjar Mountain jeopardize Manbij Agreement?**
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Few knew about Manbij before the rift between two NATO allies, Turkey and the United States over the disputes in Syria. Manbij is a small city which had a population of 100.000 in the 2012 census, which only included the city center.¹ Manbij is located 30 km west of the Euphrates River, 40 km south of the Turkish border, and 50 km north of the Syrian regime-controlled areas in eastern Aleppo. The city was controlled by the Moderate Syrian Groups until the DAESH surge in 2014 and then was gradually occupied by the PYD elements when the Turkish Forces were busy fighting against DAESH in Syria and the PKK in Turkish territory in 2015 and 2016.

The Manbij issue now plays a significant role in easing the Turkey-U.S. relations under a mutually agreed mechanism. Within the bilateral mechanism, several working groups are expected to reach solutions to a series of problems between the two countries such

as the extradition of FETÖ leader and other FETÖ affiliates; Turkey's purchase of air defense systems (S-400) from Russia; the U.S. covert sanction of Turkish defense procurement; and the case of Pastor Andrew Brunson. The first Working Group will focus on solving the Manbij issue and it is given special importance in the hope that its positive effects will spill over into the other realms of relations. Even though, there is still ambiguity concerning the implementation of the Manbij deal between Ankara and Washington, the strategic implications of the emerging understanding between the two countries might develop in multiple dimensions. However, it is too early to speak of future positive developments in other areas before the Manbij deal is implemented without any problems. Manbij is a small framework of complicated actions by multiple state and non-state actors in pursuit of their own interests. Therefore, the Manbij deal is expected to answer the question of whether the opportunity for cooperation can surpass the risks of conflict.

1. "PYD, Menbiç'te 'özerk yönetim ilan etti", *BBC Türkçe*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-39254648>

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WHAT WAS THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF MANBIJ FOR THE UNITED STATES, THE PKK/PYD, AND TURKEY?

Manbij was a threshold for combining the PYD-controlled areas in the eastern part of the Euphrates River with Afrin in the northwest of Syria in order to create an approximately 750 km long PYD controlled strip along the Turkish border. This strip would be 83% of Turkey's borders with Syria and would be occupied by the PKK/PYD elements which are considered a direct terrorist threat to Turkey's national security. Although the U.S. insisted that its relation with the PKK/PYD was tactical and temporary to defeat DAESH in the western banks of Euphrates River, no major offences were made against DAESH by PKK/PYD elements; instead, in 2016, in al-Bab, the Turkish military operations against DAESH were threatened by the PYD elements under the protection of U.S. forces. Moreover, the PYD presence in Manbij encouraged the PKK/PYD elements in Afrin to carry out attacks on Turkish territory and in the Turkish areas of Operation Euphrates Shield.

Turkey was first able to stop the westward advance of PKK/PYG elements with Operation Euphrates Shield and contained the PKK/PYD elements in the Manbij and Afrin enclaves in northwest Syria in 2016 and 2017. In early 2018, it wiped out the PKK/PYD presence in Afrin with Operation Olive Branch. Following the defeat of DAESH and the PKK/PYD on the western bank of the Euphrates, in early 2018, Turkey was able to strip Manbij of any strategic importance for the U.S. and the U.S. strategy of territorialization and investment only in the PKK/PYD collapsed in Syria and particularly in northwestern Syria. On the other hand, the Turkish defeat of DAESH in al-Bab exposed the irrationality of the U.S. excuse of fighting against DAESH on the western bank of the Euphrates. In this way, Manbij turned into a bargaining chip for the U.S. to ease relations with Turkey amidst the former's efforts to maintain the state of the PKK/PYD consolidation in the eastern part of the Euphrates.

WHAT TOPICS WILL BE COVERED BY THE ROADMAP IN MANBIJ?

Following a long period of mutual negotiations, which started last February, Turkish and U.S. authorities have agreed on a road map for the withdrawal of the PKK/PYD elements from Manbij and the establishment of a local administration in the city. The agreement was declared by Secretary Pompeo and Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu following the final meeting which took place in Washington, D.C. on June 4. Providing security and establishing local administration in accordance with the ethnic distribution of the population are two highlights of the agreed roadmap. On both issues, the population's ethnic distribution is expected to be considered during the roadmap's implementation. The risk in this matter is a possible discrepancy regarding the distribution of population; Manbij's demography has changed during the PKK/PYD occupation of the city and now tens of thousands of Manbij Arabs live in Turkey or other safe zones. However, the PKK/PYD is believed to have moved thousands of Kurds and Arabs who are PKK followers to the city, as it has done in the past in non-Kurdish populated northern Syrian cities.²³ The status of displaced Manbijians is expected to be the focal point of the roadmap.⁴

The first phase of the roadmap will revolve around the preparation activities. During a preliminary preparation period, Turkish and U.S. representatives will meet in Ankara in early July and decide the timing of the entry of Turkish soldiers; the structure of the force composition for the joint Manbij force; the distribution of the mission and the area of responsibility of the

2. "Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes", *Amnesty International*, October 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>

3. Rut Gutman, "U.S. Helps Drive 200,000 Syrians from Their Homes", *Dailybeast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-helps-drive-200000-syrians-from-their-homes>

4. "Turkey to Insist on Manbij Census Results in Resolution Mechanism with US", *Daily Sabah*, February 28, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/03/01/turkey-to-insist-on-manbij-census-results-in-resolution-mechanism-with-us>

joint Manbij force; the methodology of withdrawal of the PKK/PYD elements from Manbij; and the local administration's composition. This phase is expected to frame the technical requirement for the implementation of the agreed principles.

The second phase will cover the implementation of the withdrawal of the PKK/PYD elements from Manbij. In this phase there seem to be several risks for success. The first is to identify and calculate the number of PKK/PYD members who are supposed to withdraw from the city. Intelligence and the military institutions of both countries are expected to prepare lists of the individuals who must leave. A major deficit between the U.S. and Turkish authorities might halt the withdrawal process. The second risk is any aggression against the Turkish supervision process of the PKK/PYD withdrawal - any violent attacks against the Turkish soldiers by the PKK/PYD elements might trigger broader conflict in Manbij. Third is the risk of the manipulation of the withdrawal process by third parties. It is known that British and French special operation forces are also affiliated with the PKK/PYD elements in Manbij and they are not part of the Turkey-U.S. agreement in Manbij. Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu already warned that neither French nor British Forces will be involved in the withdrawal process.⁵

The third phase will cover the establishment of the local administration in Manbij. In this phase, a resistance from representatives of the Manbij Military Council and the pro-PKK Arab elements such as Burkan el-Furat (Euphrates Volcano) is expected to manipulate the governance formation to thwart the entire process. At first an interim administration is expected to govern the city and then following the return of the displaced Manbij people, local elections will define the governance structure. The determining factor in this process is again the identification and the timing of the returnees to Manbij.

5. "Dışişleri Bakanı Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: 'YPG'den silahlar alınacak'", *CNN Türk*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/disisleri-bakani-mevlut-cavusoglu-ypgden-silahlar-alinacak>

The U.S. side seems to intend to start the calendar of the implementation of the roadmap after the presidential elections in Turkey. Parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential elections will be held on June 24 and the possible second phase of the presidential election will be held on July 8, 2018. The U.S. reluctance to delay the start of the roadmap is understandable to some extent, but it appears that the U.S. intends to reconsider the agreement depending on the results of the election.. The implementation calendar is estimated to be completed within 3 months of the initiation of the process. However, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu also pointed out the uncertainty regarding the duration of the implementation. This is probably because of the unpredictable character of the U.S. foreign policy to be seen during Obama Administration.

Turkey has many concerns regarding the establishment of a security structure and a local administration in which PKK-affiliated persons or groups might be part of the process. The third phase is expected to face more risks and the chances of the protraction of the process are very high. Any delay in establishing a governance model in Manbij might problematize the cooperation between Turkey and the U.S. in other troublesome PYD-controlled areas in Syria.

HOW SINCERE IS THE U.S. WITH TURKEY ABOUT ITS PKK/PYD POLICY? WILL U.S. MILITARY ACTIVITY IN SINJAR MOUNTAIN JEOPARDIZE MANBIJ AGREEMENT?

The United States seemed to follow a dual strategy in northern Syria: cooperation with Turkey against the PKK presence in the western part of the Euphrates and insistence on consolidating the PKK/PYD in the eastern part of Euphrates. The PKK/PYD elements who are supposed to withdraw from Manbij will move into the PKK/PYD controlled triangle of Fays Khabur-Abu Kamal-Ayn al Arab (Kobani). Most of them are expected to reinforce the PYD elements along the Turkish border across from Suruç, Akçakale,

FIGURE 1: PKK/PYD-CONTROLLED AREAS IN SYRIA (COLORED IN YELLOW, SOURCE: SURIYE GÜNDEMİ)

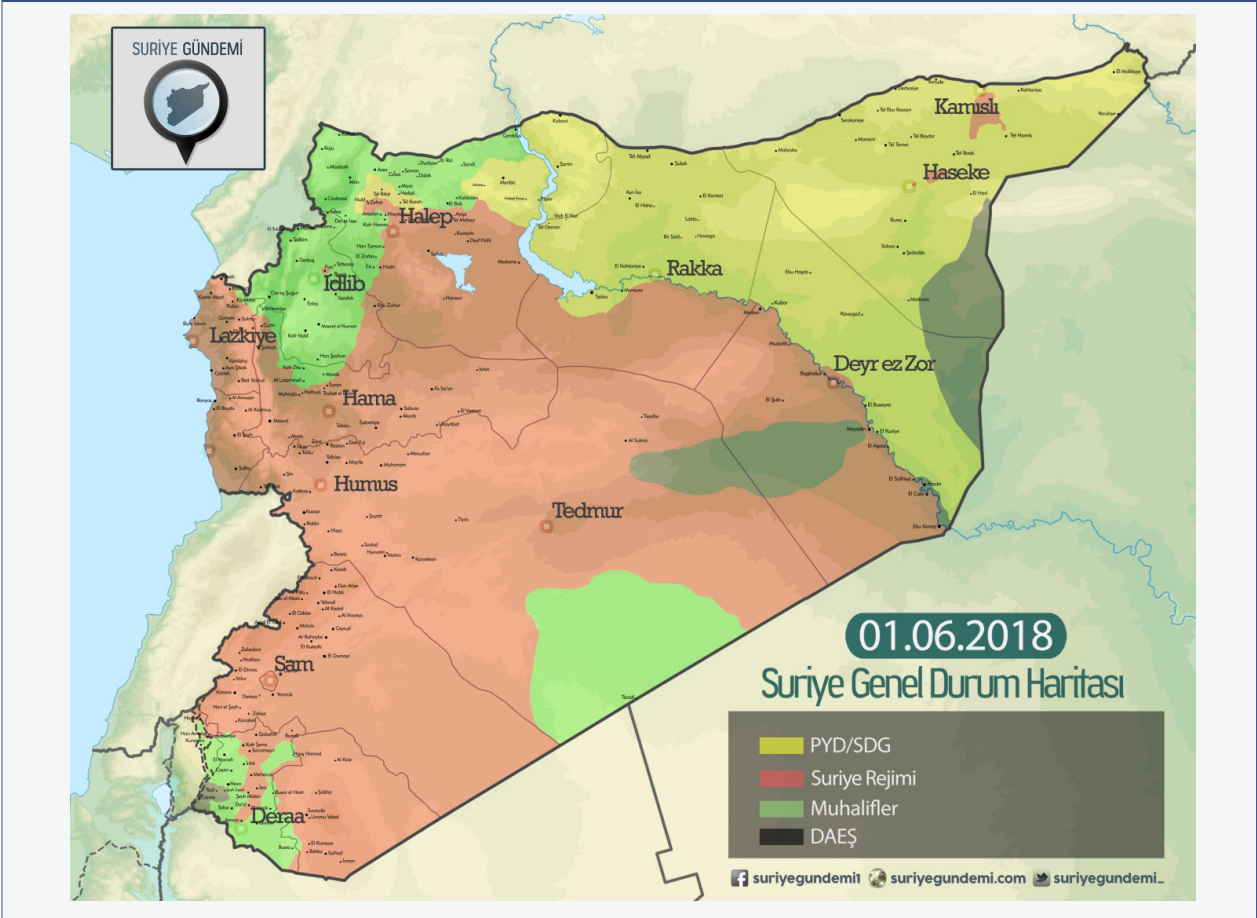
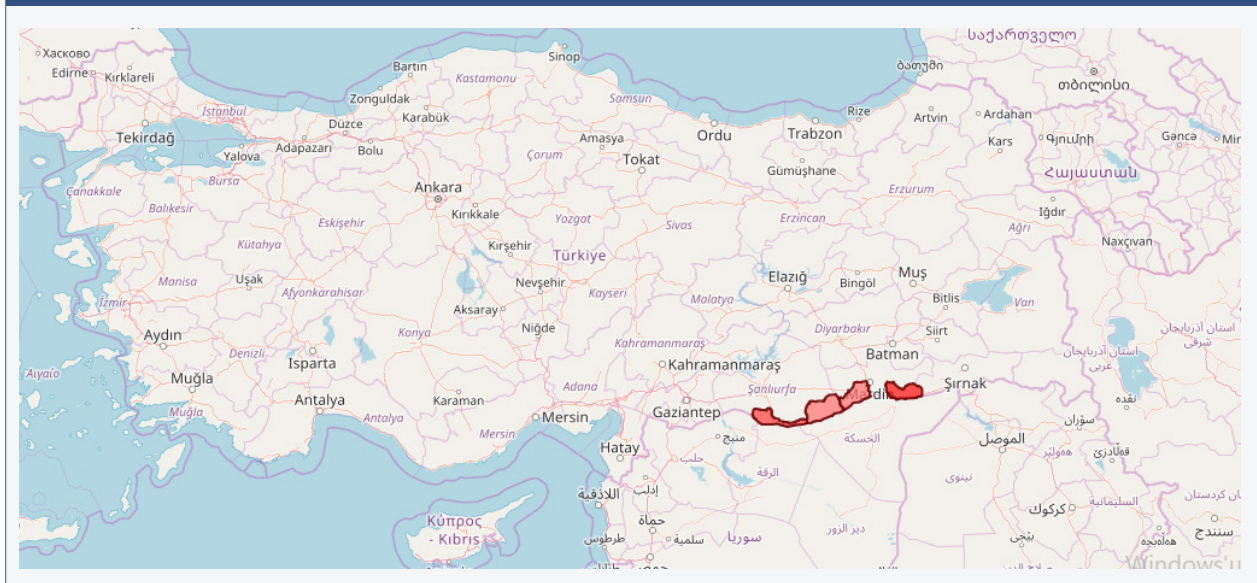


FIGURE 2: THE LOCATIONS OF PKK/PYD ATTACKS ON TURKISH SOIL CARRIED OUT FROM THE EASTERN PART OF EUPHRATES RIVER CONTROLLED BY THE U.S. FORCES AND PKK/PYD ELEMENTS. SOURCE: TERRORISM ANALYSIS PLATFORM



Ceylanpınar, Kızıltepe, Nusaybin and Cizre, and possibly carry out attacks against the Turkish border bases same as the the PKK/PYD did before.

The U.S. is understood to have given up PKK/PYD expansionism in northwest Syria but has an idea of turning its attention eastwards, into Iraq. Some of the U.S. military activities on Sinjar Mountain have indicated that the U.S. CENTCOM has plans to return the PKK/PYD elements to the area for gaining control of the transition hub between Syria and Iraq.⁶ Turkey also considers Sinjar Mountain as a strategic location for the survival and the control of the PKK in this area. However, the U.S. military decision to open a new space for PKK/PYD expansionism on Iraqi soil does not disturb Turkey alone - the future Iraqi government will also respond harshly. This will have no merit for the U.S. containment policy of Iran, either. It is better that the United States gives up nation creation/building efforts with terrorist organizations and works with its state allies. The U.S. military optimism

6. 'ABD askeri Sinca'rd'a', *Hürriyet*, June 3, 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/abd-askeri-sincarda-40856719>

of working with non-state military groups in Syria and Iraq has had no positive outcomes for the political decision-makers.

The fate of the Manbij agreement rests on how the two countries overcome the disagreements between the two capitals Both the U.S. and Turkey will not decide about the future of their relationship via the Manbij agreement, but the agreement will open a new page for dealing with imminent problems. The risks for the smooth implementation of the roadmap are considered to revolve around the identity of the PKK/PYD individuals to withdraw from Manbij; the identity and number of the returning Manbijians; the presence of pro-PKK/PYD individuals in the governance structure; possible provocation efforts by the PKK/PYD or third parties; the possible protraction of the roadmap calendar; and the possible U.S. intension of opening new spaces for the PKK/PYD in the eastern part of the Euphrates River and on Iraqi territory. The risks should not only be mitigated at the discursive level, but the completion of the roadmap should ensure both parties are satisfied with the end result.



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