

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	880
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	Carnegie. Middle East Center
Titel:	The Meaning of Manbij
Udgivet:	5. oktober 2018
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	22. oktober 2018



Diwan

The Meaning of Manbij

Hadeel Al-Saidawi

Once the Idlib standoff ends, Syria's regime and its allies will turn eastwards where another complex situation prevails.

October 05, 2018

عربي

Comments (+)

The agreement over a demilitarized zone in Idlib between Turkey and Russia has momentarily frozen all major frontlines in Syria. However, an equally complex situation is developing elsewhere in the north of the country, one that will also have a bearing on Syria's future. In Manbij, the future will be defined by the contentious relationship between the United States, Turkey, and the Syrian regime, and by the tension on the ground between Arabs and Kurds.

A road map agreed in June 2018 by the United States and Turkey to remove Kurdish combatants of the People's Protection Units (YPG) from Manbij has not been fully implemented. For now the two sides have agreed only to operate joint patrols, after U.S. and Turkish troops have started training together.

This suggests that the agreement has stalled. Such an outcome is potentially dangerous at a time when the Syrian regime and its allies, once they finish with Idlib, are preparing to turn their attention eastward to areas under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose armed wing is the YPG. Indeed, on September 21 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described "independent and autonomous entities" under U.S. control as the "main threat to Syria's territorial integrity." His comments implied that a solution in Manbij could not be separated from one for the whole of northern Syria.

Manbij is a town that today finds itself straddling areas of control of the United States, Turkey, and the Syrian regime. A majority of the inhabitants welcome the stability provided by PYD rule after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-Arab coalition dominated by the YPG, pushed the Islamic State out of Manbij in August 2016. However, locals have been divided because of competition between the regime, the Americans, and the Turks over the town. Syrian opposition forces from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and backed by Turkey had controlled Manbij until January 2014, when the Islamic State's takeover of the town forced the FSA to redeploy to Azaz and Jarablus.

The expulsion of the Islamic State from Manbij by the SDF brought calm. Today, the inhabitants are wary of the security chaos in Jarablus, which is under Turkish control, where news of looting and abductions by FSA factions is spreading. Still, FSA supporters in Manbij do have grievances against the SDF, which has confiscated the properties of FSA-affiliated members and their families, accusing them of cooperating with Turkish military operations in Syria. This comes on top of a rift that had occurred between the FSA and the SDF, when the latter allied itself with former FSA military and tribal figures and used them to connect with Manbij.

As a result, Farouk al-Mashi from the Al-Bou Banna tribe became head of the SDF's Legislative Council in Manbij. The SDF also set up the Manbij Military Council with leaders of local armed factions, including the Shams al-Shamal, Jund al-Haramein, and Thuwwar Manbij groups. The multiethnic Military Council has received support from the U.S.-led coalition, which has a base in the area.

The United States has no interest in changing the status quo in Manbij. It views the situation there as a success story of stabilization in areas freed from Islamic State control. To the Americans the town's administration is functional and inclusive of the different ethnic groups present, even if Kurdish PYD dominance has continued to generate resentment among the Arab majority in the town.

This stability in Manbij is also attributable to its unique geographical location as an economic hub connecting Aleppo city with the area west of the Euphrates River, known as the Shamieh, and east of the river, known as the Jazira. Manbij remains a large market for merchants from Tell Abyad, Raqqa, 'Ain al-'Arab or Kobani, and Jarablus. The town is also highly dependent on remittances that have helped rebuild destroyed homes and revived the real estate market.

The Assad regime has long relied on networks of local intermediaries and agents throughout Syria, including Manbij, to enforce its authority. Manbij's social character has changed over time through the influx of Arab families from Aleppo city and Al-Bab, as well as the arrival of Kurds from Kobani. However, it is the migration to Manbij of tribes from rural areas that gave tribal leaders sway there. Through the presence of these migrants, tribal leaders, who had remained in their villages, gained influence in the town. The regime sought to coopt these tribal leaders by offering them positions in the Syrian parliament and privileges that guaranteed their loyalty.

During the war in Syria, there were divisions within the tribal structures of Manbij as different political groups took control of the town. These groups sought to replace traditional leaders loyal to the regime with others loyal to them, so as to gain access to particular tribes. This they did by organizing them into tribal councils or other bodies under their control. However, these councils, even if they were active in resolving conflict between branches of tribes, couldn't replace tribal leaders who had favored the regime. Although the war has eroded the influence of tribal leaders over their tribes, their authority today still exceeds that of tribal figures aligned with the FSA, the SDF, or, previously, the Islamic State.

The Syrian regime and Russia realize that they cannot capture PYD-controlled areas militarily because of the presence of U.S. forces in those territories. Nor has there been tangible progress in two rounds of negotiations between the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Council and the regime in Damascus to define the area's final status. This increases chances that the regime may search for alternative means to impose its preferred outcome in Manbij and beyond, such as mobilizing pro-regime tribal networks against the PYD order.

The lack of a clear political outcome in Manbij from the talks between Turkey and the United States could encourage the Syrian regime to take steps that further strain local power relations in the town. That is why a satisfactory outcome for Manbij is indeed closely tied in with a broader solution for the future of northern Syria.

More on:

SYRIA

Carnegie Middle East Center

Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon

Phone

+961 1 99 15 91

Fax

+961 1 99 15 91

Contact By Email

© 2018 All Rights Reserved

Share this selection

- [Tweet](#)
- [Facebook](#)
-