

# THE LARGER BATTLE FOR ALEPPO

THE REMOVAL OF US TROOPS FROM  
SYRIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PROVINCIAL ALEPPO

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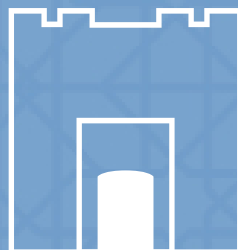
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U.S. Soldier near Manbij, Syria. Source: U.S. Department of Defense. Staff Sgt. Timothy R. Koster, June 2018.

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aleppo city has fallen. The Assad Regime has re-imposed its authority over eastern Aleppo. However, the relevancy of the Aleppo Governorate is no less diminished. As the war enters its eighth year, the majority of fighting has shifted north where the many actors have gathered to determine the fate of their claimed territories. Under the control of various militaries, both foreign and domestic, the nearly six million inhabitants of the region are left with little control over who governs them and how.

This paper initially served as a response to US President Donald Trump's announcement that American troops would be removed from Syria. Since then, it has grown into a larger project examining the many actors at play in the governorate, their motives and positions, and the effect US withdrawal will have on the existing balance of power. This paper attempts to detail the reality on the ground and provide insight into the complex nature of a war with shifting alliances and foreign proxies that provides little voice for the civilians who suffer most. Any lasting peace will have to guarantee the free return of all displaced people and equal political representation of all communities in the Governorate of Aleppo, including Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen.

# THE LARGER BATTLE FOR ALEPPO

## THE REMOVAL OF US TROOPS FROM SYRIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PROVINCIAL ALEPPO

As the United States mulls its withdrawal from Syria, it is easy to be consumed by the ongoing debate over America's role in the Middle East and the necessity (or legality) of its presence there. Often lost between the cracks is the reality on the ground; regardless of the desire in Washington, US troops are operating in Syria and their impromptu withdrawal will have a significant effect on the country as regional actors work to fill the power void. Within the Aleppo Governorate, the north of the province is a tinderbox set to be lit by these changes. As it stands, there are four power blocks which hold significant territory in the region. Turkey and its supported Arab and Turkmen militias (known as the Syrian National Army, part of the Free Syrian Army) occupy the north. Below this region is the rebel-held west, an extension of the rebel-held Idlib governorate. The forces here operate independently but are still influenced by Turkey who controls the border and thus dictates who may enter and leave. In an area in the east are the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of the unrecognized Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES), dominated by ethnically Kurdish militias, but with a mix of ethnically Arab militias and the support of a few thousand US troops. Regime forces, loyal to Assad, and supported by Russia, are in the south. Assad now holds Aleppo city, the largest metropolis in Syria and the industrial heart of the Governorate, but without the countryside his hold on the region remains unconsolidated. (See Figure 1 for a map of the territories held by each faction as of the end of 2018).

Dec 2018



- Kurdish forces
- Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish military
- Syrian government
- Jihadist forces
- Syrian rebels
- Islamic State group

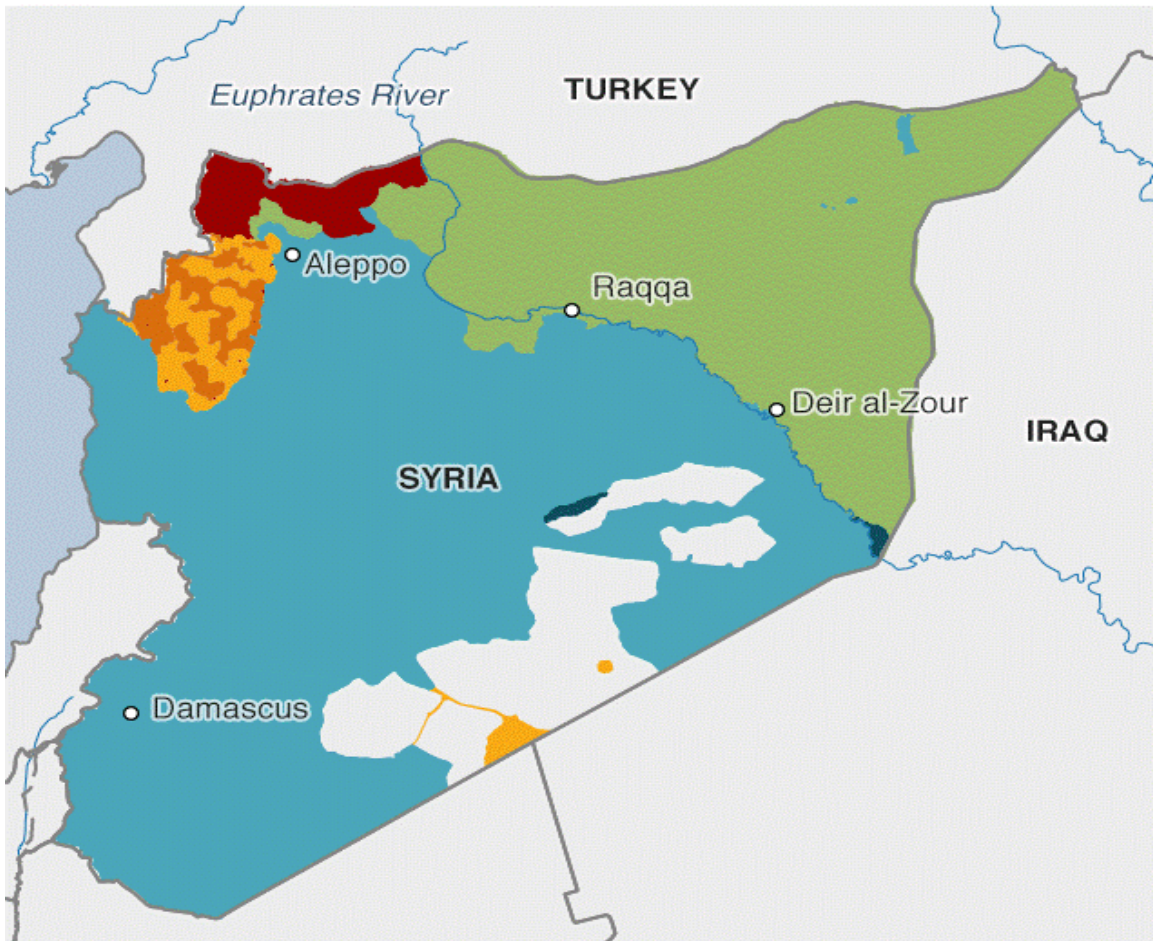


Figure 1. Areas of control in Syria. December 2018. Source: Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, 17 December 2018, BBC

This northern region includes not only political units, but also a diversity of ethnic groups whose political preferences are often out of sync with those of the troops who hold de facto jurisdiction over them. Manbij and Tell Rifaat are cities whose position is particularly precarious; these are Arab majority cities subsumed into the Kurdish dominated NES. The fate of Afrin is similar. Since falling to Turkish forces and their supported rebels, its Kurdish majority population has been subjected to expulsion and human rights violations. Part of what keeps both Turkish and regime forces at bay has been the presence of US troops in Manbij and the political commitment they represent. Though the Trump administration appears to have backpedaled on his demand for immediate US troop withdrawal, with National Security Advisor John Bolton and Senator Lindsay Graham making statements that US forces will remain to fight ISIS and support the Kurds within the NES state, the ripples of Trump's initial statements have still had a destabilizing effect. On May 8, 2019 Turkish President Erdogan delivered a speech to military cadets promising military action against Kurdish forces in Manbij and east of the Euphrates river.<sup>1</sup> As the Turkish army is emboldened to advance into Kurdish held territory, the SDF appears to have turned to the Regime for help with Russian troops entering the surroundings of Manbij at their invitation. The situation is tense and complex; threatening to grow worse as the epicenter of the Syrian Conflict settles in the north where the forces of all sides meet.

## Demographic Profile of the Aleppo Governorate

While the siege of Aleppo and the fallout of its abdication to Regime forces received an extensive amount of media and academic attention, the complicated role of the Aleppo Governorate at large in the Syrian conflict has been neglected. The Aleppo Governorate, an administrative unit encompassing the northwest of the country that runs along the Turkish border and encompasses a section of the Euphrates, is heavily populated; the governorate includes roughly 25 per cent. of Syria's total population, with just under 6 million people in 2011.<sup>2</sup> This population is reflective of a diverse region, with 70 per cent. Sunni Arabs with significant minority communities of Christians, Kurds, Armenians, and Turkmen.<sup>3</sup> Aleppo itself has roughly 3 million inhabitants. While Sunni Arabs are the majority, the Christian community is concentrated in the city and is less present in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 2 for location and major cities of the Aleppo Governorate in Syria)

In the northwest and northeast of the Governorate are the Kurdish majority cities of Afrin and Kobani (known officially by its Arabic name Ayn al-Arab). Between these cities is a large region of territory inhabited primarily by Sunni Arabs, with other minorities such as Turkmen and Circassians comprising a small minority in some areas. These statistics all come with the caveat of time, as a thorough census has not been performed since 2004, and the high volume of IDPs in the region since 2011 has likely altered demographics.<sup>5</sup> While the Aleppo Governorate was once seen as a place of sanctuary compared to Dara'a, Hama, Homs, and Idlib, this changed after mid-2012.<sup>6</sup> As we enter the final stages of the conflict in Syria, the Aleppo Governorate has become the focal point for all sides that still continue to struggle.

## Assad's Grip Weakens in the North

During 2011 and 2012, cities like Daraa in the south, Homs in the west, and even the Damascus countryside were subjected to intensive government crackdowns. In comparison, the north of the Aleppo Governorate seemed to silently slip away. As Tell Rifaat was taken by the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) opposition

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1 Anadolu Agency, "Expect Move against Terrorists Soon: Erdoğan - Turkey News," Hürriyet Daily News, May 9, 2019, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/expect-move-against-terrorists-soon-erdogan-143272>

2 Syria Needs Analysis Project, "ALEPPO - Governorate Profile," ACAPS, March 20, 2013, 4, <https://www.acaps.org/country/syria/special-reports>

3 Syria Needs Analysis Project, "ALEPPO," 4

4 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC and UN-HABITAT, "City Profile Aleppo Multi Sector Assessment," <https://unhabitat.org/> May 2014, 6.; Syria Needs Analysis Project, "ALEPPO," 4.

5 Syria Needs Analysis Project, "ALEPPO," 3.

6 Ibid, 1.



Figure 2. Map of Aleppo Governorate with major cities. Source: Google Maps.

forces after six months of fighting, the cities of Manbij, Kobani, and Afrin, along with great swaths of northern Syria, were simply abandoned by Regime troops.<sup>7</sup> In July 2012 an offensive was launched against Damascus by opposition forces, spreading the civil war to Assad’s doorstep and killing four members of his inner circle in a bomb attack. The immediate threat against his capital resulted in the Regime withdrawing Syrian forces from most Kurdish regions aside from Qamishli and redeploying them to the fighting around Damascus.<sup>8</sup>

In their place, the FSA and Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) set up their own local government councils. In this early period of the war, YPG operated predominantly in historically Kurdish majority regions, while the FSA primarily took control of Arab majority settlements. Despite their close proximity, the relationship shared by the two groups was not a friendly one.<sup>9</sup> As YPG-held territory grew, it actively worked to keep the FSA from entering what it considered Kurdish territory. Hostilities turned to violence in the Fall of 2012 when Kurdish and FSA forces came to blows near Afrin and around the Kurdish district

7 “Tel Rifaat Residents Hail Rebels for Control of Town - World News,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 06, 2012, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/tel-rifaat-residents-hail-rebels-for-control-of-town-27230>; Christoph Reuter and Abd Al-Kadher Adhun, “The Manbij Experiment: Rebels Make a Go of Governing in Liberated City,” *SPIEGEL ONLINE*, October 02, 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/rebels-make-a-go-of-governing-in-liberated-city-in-syria-a-859007.html>

8 John Caves, “Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (Pyd),” *Institute for the Study of War*, December 6, 2012, 1-2, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syrian-kurds-and-democratic-union-party-pyd>

9 Rudaw, “More Kurdish Cities Liberated As Syrian Army Withdraws from Area,” *Rudaw in English*, July 20, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120721142617/http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/4978.html>

of Ashrafiya in Aleppo city.<sup>10</sup> For most of the war, fighting between the two groups has been sporadic, while there have been instances of cooperation against more radical militias such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Hostilities increased in 2016 when Kurdish forces began advancing into Arab majority areas.

Despite the importance of the FSA as an opposition force, it was far from the only militia group operating in the Aleppo Governorate from 2011-2014. These early years of the conflict saw an explosion of different militias entering the field, and many of them carved out their own sections of the governorate. These militias were not always independent, with many forming factions to coordinate military actions, and some of them even operating as branches of the FSA. The Syrian Islamic Front (which dissolved to become the Islamic Front in 2013), the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (dissolved in 2013), and Al-Nusra (rebranded Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in 2016) are some of the largest opposition affiliations that have operated in the Aleppo Governorate, though their ideologies and that of their members can vary wildly. Among these groups, Al-Nusra emerged as an effective fighting force, seizing much of the territory north of Aleppo city. Formed in 2011, the group was an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq's (ISI), an Al-Qaeda affiliate, that attempted to found a new wing in Syria.<sup>11</sup> However, in 2013 this alliance fell apart when Al-Nusra leadership, who pledged direct loyalty to Al-Qaeda, rejected an announcement of a merger between ISI and Al-Nusra to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.<sup>12</sup> Al-Qaeda and ISI would split in February of 2014.<sup>13</sup>

ISIS has since formed from breakaway groups of Al-Nusra and soldiers crossing the border from Iraq.<sup>14</sup> Throughout 2014 ISIS launched a brutal assault on the north of Syria. Its advance pushed other opposition rebel groups from much of the Aleppo Governorate, and pushed Kurdish forces back into their cities and enclaves. Throughout this time the FSA, YPG, and even Al-Nusra cooperated to combat the extremist tide of ISIS. Despite this, ISIS was able to take much of the upper governorate along the Turkish border, ensuring the continued split between Afrin and the rest of Kurdish territory, and pushing the FSA and other militias into the Idlib Governorate in the northwest of Syria.

## The Kurds in Northern Syria: 2011 - 2014

As law and order dissolved across southern and central Syria in 2012, the Assad regime withdrew what forces it had from Kurdish majority areas in an effort to concentrate troops around Damascus and other Regime strongpoints. In the preceding months, many Kurdish cities had refrained from joining the revolt at large, fearing that organized protests would bring a heavy response from the Regime as it had in 2004 in the wake of Kurdish protests that year. In addition, many Kurds may have felt a lasting mistrust of the Arab population due to their perceived complicity in those same events of 2004.<sup>15</sup> The anti-Regime protests that did occur in Qamishli and Ras al-Ain were mainly geared towards furthering the Kurdish goal of independence. The relatively light response of security forces to these protests, as well as those in Afrin and Amuda, may indicate the Assad regime saw Kurdish independence movements as beneficial to keeping the opposition fractured.<sup>16</sup> There were even instances of cooperation between the Regime and the PYD, who were focused on their goal of Kurdish independence and refused significant cooperation

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10 Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," The Washington Institute, February 2018, 17. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sectarianism-in-syrias-civil-war>

11 Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat Al-Nusra Li-ahl Al-Sham Min Mujahedi Al-Sham Fi Sahat Al-Jihad. A Strategic Briefing," Quilliam International, <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing>

12 Rania Abouzeid, "The Jihad Next Door," POLITICO Magazine, June 23, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214>

13 Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq," The Washington Post, February 03, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.30e980ec20f5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html?utm_term=.30e980ec20f5)

14 Erika Solomon, "Factbox: Syria's Rebel Groups," ed. Giles Elgood, Reuters, January 09, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-rebels-factbox/factbox-syrias-rebel-groups-idUSBREA080SW20140109>

15 Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 13, 16.

16 Ibid, 16

with Arab rebel groups between 2011 and 2012.<sup>17</sup> These instances, and the general nature of Kurdish protests, should not be used to characterize all individual protestors of Kurdish, Arab, or other descent. Videos of protests in Amuda and Qamishli show instances of opposition flags being flown.<sup>18</sup> While we can speak to the general aim of protests, it is important to clarify that individuals engage in protests for different reasons, and that those attending the protests in majority Kurdish regions often did so for a variety of reasons.

Left to their own devices and surrounded by an authoritarian Regime with historic antagonism towards them, existing underground Kurdish political entities such as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (the military arm of the PYD, known by the acronym YPG) seized the Kurdish majority cities of Afrin, Kobani, and Amuda without a fight and began organizing militias to defend Kurdish majority territory.<sup>19</sup> Qamishli, the largest Syrian city with a Kurdish majority, was an exception to this with violence breaking out between security forces and protesters.<sup>20</sup> Located outside Aleppo Governorate in the east of the country, it would become the de facto administrative center of the burgeoning Kurdish region. With political and military momentum on their side, the PYD struck an awkward balance with the FSA. They participated in the opposition's coordination committee and jointly regulated military operations in some cases, but the YPG also engaged in sporadic hostilities with the FSA while avoiding confrontation with regime forces.<sup>21</sup>

As Kurdish holdings were consolidated in northern Syria, Assad's forces in the Aleppo Governorate were quickly crumbling under the combined weight of civil dissent and rebel groups. By early 2013, these factors had resulted in over 300 anti-government groups taking control of a sizable chunk of land.<sup>22</sup> Many of these groups operated under the purview of the FSA but others operated under a more radical ideology such as that of Al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. By 2014, the lands surrounding the Kurds and much of eastern and northern Syria had fallen to ISIS expansion, effectively surrounding existing Kurdish enclaves throughout the country.

## The Kurds in Northern Syria: 2014 - Present

With several successful offenses and defensive actions against ISIS attacks, as well as public claims of support for democratic and multi-ethnic representation within their territory, Kurdish forces gained support from the US which viewed them as an effective and ideologically-aligned fighting force against IS.<sup>23</sup> Particularly impressed by the YPG defense of Kobani, US policymakers determined the organization could act as the reliable partner in Syria the nation sought.<sup>24</sup> With the extensive assistance of US and Coalition airstrikes, the YPG and PYD were immensely successful in beating back ISIS attacks on Kobani, and soon took the offensive. In 2015, the YPG successfully defeated ISIS militants in Tal Abyad, thus securing a strip of land along the Turkish border that allowed the YPG to territorially link the Kurdish majority enclave of Kobani with the Qamishli canton. The success of this operation was viewed by the PYD as vital to the security of Kobani. Tal Abyad had served as both a major crossing point of militants

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17 Ibid, 16

18 Snnenglish, "Syria Al-Qamishli Amuda 4/22/2011 Great Friday Demonstration P.1," YouTube, April 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul75a1lXRYM> KRGPesmerge, "Kurdish Protest Qamishli, Syrian Revolution 2011," YouTube, April 28, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nj2tubl3bPk>

19 "Girke Lege Becomes Sixth Kurdish City Liberated in Syria," Rudaw in English, July 24, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121129100410/http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4992.html>

20 "Armed Kurds Surround Syrian Security Forces in Qamishli," Rudaw in English, July 22, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120724224808/http://www.rudaw.net/english/news/syria/4984.html>

21 Mohammad Ballout, "Syrian Kurds Trade Armed Opposition for Autonomy," Al-Monitor The Pulse of the Middle East, April 11, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/06/syrias-kurds-oppose-the-regime-y.html>

22 Syria Needs Analysis Project, "ALEPPO," 11.

23 Sherko Kirmanj, "8 Reasons Why America Supports the Syrian Kurds," The National Interest, September 13, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/8-reasons-why-america-supports-the-syrian-kurds-22290>

24 Ibid.

from Syria and as a launching point for IS attacks.<sup>25</sup> Tal Abyad is an Arab majority town, as is the bridge between the two Kurdish cantons.<sup>26</sup> This marked an evolution of ethnic composition of PYD held territory, as their control began to expand outside of Kurdish majority areas as they continued their offensive against ISIS.

It is important to note the nature of US support for the PYD and its effects on the Syrian conflict at large. Initially in 2011, international support for the Kurds rested mainly with the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a union of 15 Kurdish political parties in Syria.<sup>27</sup> The KNC is supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, making it less politically problematic for international actors than the YPG who is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group listed as a terrorist organization by several countries including Turkey and the US.<sup>28</sup> Initially the KNC had a relatively equivalent level of support amongst the Kurdish population as the YPG and enjoyed stronger international support due to their distance from the PKK.<sup>29</sup> The KNC's relevancy began to wane in 2012. The power vacuum left by the Regime's retreat from northern Syria was quickly filled by YPG forces nearly exclusively. The KNC lacked a significant military wing in 2012, so the PYD quickly established a near monopoly on military force and administration in Kurdish areas. Despite the 2012 Erbil Agreement, which established a power-sharing arrangement between the YPG and KNC through a newly established Kurdish Supreme Committee (DBK), the YPG continued to enjoy greater influence over the movement for Kurdish autonomy and grew to encompass much broader popular support.<sup>30</sup> The KNC's fall from relevancy was further compounded by its ineffective decision-making processes and the concentration of ruling members operating outside of Syria. In contrast, the PYD was better organized under a unitary administration within the party and wielded greater discipline due to PKK training and arms. Despite its success, the US and its allies continued to exclude Kurdish opposition groups, refusing to recognize the KNC and the PYD as legitimate parts of Syria's opposition.<sup>31</sup>

Starting in 2013 the US focused its efforts on supporting the Arab opposition against Assad through Operation Timber Sycamore, a CIA program initiated to provide ammunition, small arms, grenade launchers, and anti-tank weaponry to thousands of moderate opposition forces. The operation also provided training and money for salaries to allow the recruitment and continued employment of fighters.<sup>32</sup> Operation Sycamore resulted in some success against Regime forces in northern Syria but suffered after the Russian intervention in 2015. The operation did not deliver anti-aircraft weaponry, which left opposition forces vulnerable to Regime and Russian airstrikes, resulting in their being pummeled from above.<sup>33</sup> Charles Lister of the Middle East Institute described this dearth of weaponry: "They never gave it the necessary resources or space to determine the dynamics of the battlefield. They were drip-feeding opposition groups just enough to survive but never enough to become dominant actors."<sup>34</sup> A parallel program run by the Pentagon to train a moderate rebel force of 15,000 met an even worse fate. It only succeeded in training a few dozen fighters who were routed and captured by al-Nusra almost immediately upon entry into Syria, and some members of another group sent to Syria reportedly surrendered or

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25 Yvo Fitzherbert, "YPG's Greatest Challenge: Kurdish-Arab Relations in Syria," Middle East Eye, April 6, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/ypgs-greatest-challenge-kurdish-arab-relations-syria>

26 Carl Drott, "Arab Tribes Split Between Kurds And Jihadists," Carnegie Middle East Center, May 15, 2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55607?lang=en>

27 Caves, "Syrian Kurds," 1

28 Ibid, 6.

29 Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East," Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, July 2015, 13 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/impact-syrian-war-kurdish-politics-across-middle-east>

30 Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics," 13.

31 Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics," 12.

32 Faysal Itani, "The End of American Support for Syrian Rebels Was Inevitable," The Atlantic, July 21, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/trump-syria-assad-rebels-putin-cia/534540>

33 Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria," The New York Times, August 02, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>

34 Ibid



defected to al-Nusra after entering the country.<sup>35</sup> The Pentagon's operation was cancelled in 2015 and Timber Sycamore ended in 2017. Before 2014, US support efforts extensively excluded cooperation with Kurdish forces.

The battle for Kobani was immensely important in altering US policy in Syria. Additionally, it was also a formative event in igniting Syrian Kurds' national sentiment that helped reverse the tide of ISIS' advance. As ISIS forces pushed Kurdish forces and refugees further and further into a shrinking enclave, the US began launching airstrikes against ISIS positions. While the US and its allies may have resisted intervening for fear of political fallout from Turkey, when the intervention did arrive it continued to escalate in intensity as the US became further invested in its success.<sup>36</sup> Until 2014 ISIS had been undefeated in Syria, and the defense of Kobani came to symbolize collective resistance, a signal that ISIS could in fact be beaten. ISIS had also invested a significant quantity of its manpower and equipment into the assault, turning it into a valuable target for Coalition airstrikes.<sup>37</sup> The final victory of Kurdish YPG, with the assistance of some Arab militias, proved to be a turning point in the conflict against ISIS.<sup>38</sup> The US began to cooperate with the YPG further, sharing intelligence, providing training programs, military aid, and eventually embedding US soldiers.

In 2016 the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was declared (known as NES or the name Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria since 2018) and the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces, comprised primarily of the YPG) was made the official military wing for its defense. That same year, the SDF launched two major offensives into Arab majority areas. While both were to be against ISIS, one would be aimed west and the other south. The eastern operation was dubbed Operation Martyr and Commander Faysal Abu Layla and was intended to dislodge ISIS from Manbij, effectively cutting off their supply routes from Turkey and preventing their withdrawal across the border.<sup>39</sup> To the south was Operation Wrath of Euphrates, a campaign to assault and retake Raqqa, the de-facto ISIS capital in Syria.<sup>40</sup>

The steady success of SDF ground offenses with the widespread support of Coalition airstrikes, as well as the successful completion of both campaigns against Manbij and Raqqa left the Kurdish majority SDF in control of a vastly expanded territory, double the size of what they held in 2014.<sup>41</sup> As of October of 2017, this was roughly 25 per cent. of Syria. With the occupation of the Euphrates Valley around Manbij, the Kurdish population of the NES has fallen below 50 per cent. for its total population.<sup>42</sup> Even ethnically Kurdish regions have been expanded far beyond their demographic roots. The newly-minted Kobani canton within the NES is much larger than the city itself, and its population is 55 per cent. Kurdish.<sup>43</sup> The formation of the NES and the SDF was in many ways a response to this democratic shift. The rebranding attempted to distance the organization from its Kurdish nationalist roots and bring it in-line with PYD pluralist discourse.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, accusations of Kurdification persist, and Arab militias within the SDF continue to be treated as token forces.<sup>45</sup> Government is generally decentralized enough within the NES to allow a wide degree of self-governance for Arab communities within it, and steps have been taken to work with local Arab leaders. Still, the defection of many Arab tribes and soldiers to Turkey with the start of their offensive was a blow, and the loyalty of some Arab militias appear to be bought through the

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35 Mazzetti, Goldman, and Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death,"; J. Dana Stuster, "U.S.-Trained Rebels in Syria Surrender Weapons to Terrorist Group," Foreign Policy, September 23, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/23/u-s-trained-rebels-in-syria-surrender-weapons-to-terrorist-group>

36 Gunes and Lowe, "The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics," 12.

37 Ibid, 13.

38 Ibid, 12.

39 Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S.-backed Syria Forces Launch Offensive for Manbij Pocket," Reuters, June 01, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-offensive-idUSKCN0YN377>

40 Agencies, "US in 'close Contact' with Turkey over Raqqa Assault," Al Arabiya English, November 6, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/11/06/US-backed-Syrian-forces-begin-Raqqa-offensive.html>

41 Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 17.

42 Ibid, 51

43 Ibid, 51

44 Ibid, xv

45 Ibid, xv

SDF's status as a repository of US weapons and hardware.<sup>46</sup> Despite some cooperation within the NES, conflict continues between the Kurdish and Arab groups. PYD expansion from Afrin has pitted them against moderate opposition forces such as the FSA, culminating in the takeover by YPG of the majority Arab city of Tell Rifaat.<sup>47</sup> Internal accusations of human rights violations against Arab civilians also continue to mar relations.

In 2015 Amnesty International reported the expulsion of Arab and Turkmen populations and the razing of Arab majority towns by the YPG in northeastern Syria. However, the 2017 United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic found no evidence to substantiate claims of ethnic cleansing, although it did find instances of looting and forced conscription.<sup>48 49</sup> Despite these UN findings, reports persist of unfair treatment, forced conscription, and the Kurdification of Arab and Turkmen regions by Kurdish authorities, and In 2016, reports circulated of Kurdish militia intentionally burning documents in Manbij to prevent Arab residents from returning to their homes.<sup>50</sup>

The situation in Tal Abyad is an example of why many Arabs feel anxiety towards SDF and YPG presence in their communities. Support by some local Arab and Turkmen tribes for Al-Nusra and ISIS respectively during their occupation, and the Kurdish expulsion that resulted from it, has led to harsh treatment and poor relations between them and the YPG.<sup>51</sup> Tough conscription policies have been imposed which discourage Arab IDP's (Internally Displaced People) from returning to the region and has also led to Kurdish crackdowns on local tribes. A tight grip is kept on Turkmen communities as well, as the Kurds view them as natural allies of Turkey. Unlike in other predominantly Arab areas, there is no civil council to represent them in Tal Abyad. It appears the goal of the YPG is to fully annex the town into Kurdish territory, an objective which stokes fear of ethnic expulsion.<sup>52</sup> While the SDF is responsible for the ousting of ISIS in the region, a Kurdish dominated government comes with its own dangers for the Arab and minority populations under their control. (See Figure 3 for a map of areas held by the SDF and Turkish/Turkish-backed rebels).



Figure 3. Map of areas held by the SDF and Turkish/Turkish-backed rebels as of January 2018. Source: IHS Conflict Monitor (as cited in the Economist, January 2018).

46 Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 64-65

47 Nick Paton Walsh, "Syria War near Aleppo: Huge Impact on Sunni Moderates," CNN, February 16, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/16/middleeast/syria-battle-north/index.html>

48 United Nations, Human Rights Abuses, 20

49 Amnesty International, "'We Had Nowhere to Go' - Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria," October 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2503/2015/en/>; United Nations, Human Rights Council, Human Rights Abuses and International Humanitarian Law Violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016- 28 February 2017\*, by Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 20.

50 Mahmoud Eskaf, "Syria: Kurdish Militias Plan a Demographic Change in Manbij," Middle East Observer, August 14, 2016, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2016/08/14/syria-kurdish-militias-plan-a-demographic-change-in-manbij/>

51 Fabrice Balanche, "Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel of the Syrian Kurdish Belt," Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel of the Syrian Kurdish Belt - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 21, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tal-abyad-achilles-heel-of-the-syrian-kurdish-belt>

52 Balanche, "Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel."

## The Role of Turkey in Northern Syria

The entry of Turkey into the Syrian conflict can be best explained through two factors: its own domestic unrest and its desire for influence in the Middle East. Prior to the war in Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Assad enjoyed a relatively warm relationship with prospects of economic cooperation and even open borders. This reciprocity came as Erdogan sought to reassert Turkish hegemony in the Arab world, increasing his nation's influence in the region.<sup>53</sup> When the war in Syria began, a new method for achieving this goal presented itself. Erdogan cut ties with the Regime and began supporting the Sunni opposition in Syria. As Turkey called for Assad to step down and encouraged the opposition to establish a democratic regime, it also hosted the original commander of the FSA Riad al-Asaad and used the Turkish Military Intelligence to arm and train opposition fighters.<sup>54</sup> Turkey has also taken steps to support militia groups formed by Syria's Turkmen minority in Aleppo Governorate. Viewed as their ethnic kin, Turkey has repeatedly justified its engagement in Syria by citing its duty to defend the Turkmen community from aggression.<sup>55</sup> This policy has resulted in accusations of "neo-Ottomanism," a resurgent belief in Turkey that the previous borders of the Ottoman Empire (Turkey's predecessor state) should fall back into the country's sphere of influence.<sup>56</sup> Turkey's interest in Syria began to shift through 2014 and 2015 as the Kurdish state took shape in Northern Syria.

Since 1984 the Turkish government has battled a Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>57</sup> The Kurdish nationalist philosophy espoused by the PKK is viewed as a threat to the unity of the Turkish state, as are related Kurdish movements along the Turkish border in neighboring countries. The Assad Regime once allowed the Kurdish PKK to operate from Syria and launch operations into Turkey, though that came to an end after Turkish threats of military action.<sup>58</sup> In 2011, Assad re-established relations with the PKK.<sup>59</sup> This action was intended to minimize the number of forces arrayed against the regime by both placating Kurdish opposition forces and countering Turkish support for Sunni opposition forces. Assad's normalization of relations with the PKK had the intended effect of bolstering Syrian Kurdish groups affiliated with the Turkish organization.<sup>60</sup> For these reasons, Turkey sees the NES, SDF, and YPG as Syrian extensions of the PKK and, thus, a security threat.

Turkish forces officially entered Syria in 2016 with the initiation of Operation Euphrates Shield, a military operation composed of Turkish regular troops and Turkish-backed militia in Syria which sought to seize regions of northern Syria from what Turkish president Erdogan described as, "Daesh (ISIS) and PYD terror groups that threaten our country in northern Syria."<sup>61</sup> The operation was in many ways a response not only to the successful SDF operation to take Manbij, but also to its continued march west through the greater Manbij area towards Jarablus, a city near the Turkish border composed of ethnic Arabs and Turkmen. The objective of Euphrates Shield was threefold: to defeat ISIS in the North of the Aleppo Governorate, remove SDF from the area around Jarablus to prevent the territorial linkage of the Kurdish majority Afrin enclave with NES proper, and to push the SDF from Manbij back across the Euphrates. However, only the first two of these objectives were achieved. Turkey stated that Russian and US support for the SDF in the city were reasons for its decision to halt military operations.<sup>62</sup> The operation primarily succeeded in supporting Arab

53 Joost Hiltermann, "Turkey Made a Bet Against Assad-And Lost," *The Atlantic*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/turkey-syria-war-assad-erdogan-isis-kurds-pkk/568561>

54 Jonathon Burch, "Turkey Tells Syria's Assad: Step Down!" *Reuters*, November 22, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-idUSL5E7MD0GZ20111122> Haytham Manna, Syria's Opposition Has Been Led Astray by Violence," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/syria-opposition-led-astray-by-violence>

55 Mohanad Hage Ali, "Turkey's Men," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, November 15, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/74726>

56 Ibid

57 "Who Are Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Rebels?" *BBC News*, November 04, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>

58 Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 55.

59 Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 61

60 Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War," 61

61 AFP, "Erdogan Says Syria Operation Aimed at IS Jihadists, Kurdish PYD," *Daily Mail Online*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3756119/Erdogan-says-Syria-operation-aimed-IS-jihadists-Kurdish-PYD.html>

62 Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Turkey May Give up on Manbij after Russian and US Intervention: Turkish PM," *ARA News*, March 07, 2017, <http://aranews.net/files/2017/03/turkey-may-give-up-on-manbij-after-russian-and-us-intervention-turkish-pm>

opposition in combating ISIS. The majority of land Turkey seized in the operations was formerly under ISIS control and YPG territorial losses represented only a small portion of Turkish gains. The presence of Turkish troops also meant that, for the first time in four years, civilians were safe from the Regime's aerial bombardments which had operated unobstructed in the airspace above ISIS and opposition held territories.

In January of 2018, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, a military operation against the Afrin enclave and Afrin city proper. Though the operation was successful for Turkey, the desperation of the SDF defense was displayed through a deal cut with Assad to allow reinforcements and statesmen from NES proper to travel through regime held territory to bolster and assist in the fighting.<sup>63</sup> The realities of Turkish and Turkish-backed militia control has been harsh for the Kurdish majority in the region. Reports that Kurdish homes in Afrin have been filled with Arab IDPs by Turkish forces hint at a policy of ethnic expulsion from the historically Kurdish region. Reports also persist that some Turkish backed rebel groups may be religious radicals, with evidence showing extensive threats of massacre and annihilation against the Kurdish and Yazidi population if they do not subscribe to more radical interpretations to Sunni Islam.<sup>64</sup>

The success of this operation has pushed the SDF into a new enclave called the Tell Rifaat pocket, an area encompassing the city of the same name and its surrounding area. Surrounded on all sides by aggressive forces, the SDF faced the prospect of not only defending the region without assistance from the US or its allies, but also defending an Arab majority region without a substantial local population. As it stands, the situation in Tell Rifaat is confused, with conflicting reports over who holds the region. Some reports from 2018 claim the city is now under the control of Regime and Russian forces.<sup>65</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported in June of 2018 that an agreement had been reached for Kurdish forces to withdraw from the city and for Russian and Turkish forces to take their place.<sup>66</sup> As of April of 2019, reports by Syrian State News show Tell Rifaat under Regime control.<sup>67</sup> (See Figure 4 for a closeup of the frontlines in the Aleppo Governorate)

## The City of Changing Hands

The city of Manbij first fell from Assad's influence in July 2012 when local protests, combined with a small FSA group, overwhelmed security forces and expelled the Regime from the city. That same month, the Revolutionary Council (RC) took administrative control. Members of the RC included doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers, and a few Muslim scholars who had previously helped organize and facilitate protests.<sup>68</sup> While ties existed between the RC and the FSA, the city of Manbij remained relatively demilitarized and free of military presence. Local security was handled by fifty popular committees the RC established to prevent looting and keep the peace. The era of the RC did not last long. By 2013 the city had become increasingly invested in the armed opposition movement, with over 70 FSA groups operating out of Manbij by 2013.<sup>69</sup> In February of 2013, al-Nusra established a headquarters in the city and soon ISIS began to foster a presence in the city, questioning the RC's authority and seizing control of vital institutions.<sup>70</sup>

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63 Haaretz and Reuters, "Why Assad Quietly Aids Syrian Kurds against Turkey," Haaretz.com, February 12, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/why-assad-quietly-aids-syrian-kurds-against-turkey-1.5807846>

64 "Syria's War of Ethnic Cleansing: Kurds Threatened with Beheading by Turkey's Allies If They Don't Convert to Extremism," The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 12, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=86584>

65 Andrew Illingworth, "Video Confirmation: Tal Riffat under Control of Syrian Army Republican Guard and Russian Army," Al-Masdar Al-Arabi (The Arab Source), March 30, 2018, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/video-confirmation-tal-riffat-under-control-of-syrian-army-republican-guard-and-russian-army>

66 "After Consensus with Russia...the Turkish Forces Prepare to Enter Tel Rifaat with Residents Displaced from the Area after a Pledge by the Iranians and the Kurdish Forces to Withdraw," The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, accessed June 19, 2018, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=95715>

67 Alikhbaria, "YouTube, April 10, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=24&v=5Nj9TaB4jQ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=24&v=5Nj9TaB4jQ4)

68 Yasser Munif, "Participatory Democracy and Micropolitics in Manbij," The Century Foundation, March 24, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/participatory-democracy-micropolitics-manbij/?agreed=1>

69 Ibid

70 Munif, "Participatory Democracy."

RC and opposition control lasted until January 2014 when the Islamic State forced the city's capitulation, integrating it into their own self-proclaimed caliphate. The brutal occupation came to an end with a two-month siege of Manbij by the US-backed SDF who brought the city under the control of the SDF. This has been the status quo of the city, though the events of the war have whirled around it. Soon after Manbij's release from IS control by the SDF, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield. President Erdogan has made it clear that his intention is to prevent the territorial linkage of the North Eastern Kurdish enclave of Afrin and the majority of SDF controlled territory in the Northeast through a majority Arab stretch of land separating the two.<sup>71</sup> A major objective espoused by Erdogan was the seizure of Manbij, an action prevented by the presence of American troops in the city.

Turkey is of course not the only player in Syria with eyes on Manbij. Assad and his regime have long sought to consolidate their control over northern and eastern Syria, land held by the SDF that includes agricultural land and oil reserves valuable to the regime.<sup>72</sup> Thus far, US forces fighting ISIS in these regions have prevented a major Regime offensive through fear of direct confrontation. Times have changed rapidly, however, as the withdrawal of US troops would leave Kurdish forces alone against two antagonistic forces. Since the December 19th, 2018 announcement, Turkey has been increasing its military activity near SDF positions. This is in addition to the active engagements of Turkey and its allies in Afrin.

The political situation has put the people of Manbij and their NES administrators in a difficult position. US troops have served as a sort of security shield for SDF in the city, and their withdrawal has forced a "lesser of two evils" decision for the SDF. In a surprise move, YPG forces in Manbij have turned to the regime for assistance against Turkey. Though Assad has refused any form of special autonomy for the Kurdish regions of Syria, the YPG has asked Regime forces to defend Manbij and prevent attacks on the city by Turkish forces. Despite protests from some American officials, Regime forces took up positions in the areas surrounding Manbij. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that they later pulled out to avoid friction with US troops, but as of January 8th, 2019 Russian troops have begun patrolling the Manbij countryside.<sup>73</sup> While some reports have suggested Regime forces had entered the city, this appears to currently not be the case.<sup>74</sup>

## Manbij and those who call it home

An article published by The Guardian on December 28, 2018 appeared under the following headline, "Syrian troops mass at edge of Kurdish town threatened by Turkey." The issue is that Manbij is not a Kurdish town, it is overwhelmingly Arab, although the Kurdish YPG are one of its primary defenders. In fact, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies reported Manbij to be 85-90 per cent. Sunni Arab and only 6-8 per cent. Kurdish. That begs the following question: who are the YPG defending against? This is an important question for the residents of the city. For the SDF and YPG occupiers of the city, confrontation and occupation by Turkey is the worst outcome. The Turkish military objective is clear, to secure its borders from what it views as the Syrian branch of Turkish PKK. Turkish advancement means a dimming of the Kurdish independence dream and the possibility of further reprisals across the Euphrates against Kobani and ethnic Kurdish space. Given the Turkish treatment of Kurds in Afrin and the accusations of Arabs being resettled in historically Kurdish settlement, Kurdish elements of the NES have a lot to lose if Turkey doesn't stop at Manbij.

In contrast to the desires of the NES, the Arab majority may not be as keen on Regime and Russian troops entering the area. During the ISIS occupation of Manbij, relations between opposition groups and the YPG

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71 "Syria War: Government Forces 'enter Manbij' amid Turkey Threats," BBC News, December 28, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46701095>

72 Ben Hubbard, "Syria's Kurds, Feeling Betrayed by the U.S., Ask Assad Government for Protection," The New York Times, December 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-kurds-turkey-manbij.html>

73 "Syria Conflict: Trump Slows down Troop Withdrawal," BBC News, December 31, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46723603>; "Syria: Russia Military Police Begin Patrols around Manbij," The Defense Post, January 08, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/08/syria-russia-military-police-manbij-patrols/>

74 "Syria Army Enters Kurdish-held Manbij: State Media," Syria News | Al Jazeera, December 28, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/syria-army-enters-manbij-state-media-181228092705808.html>

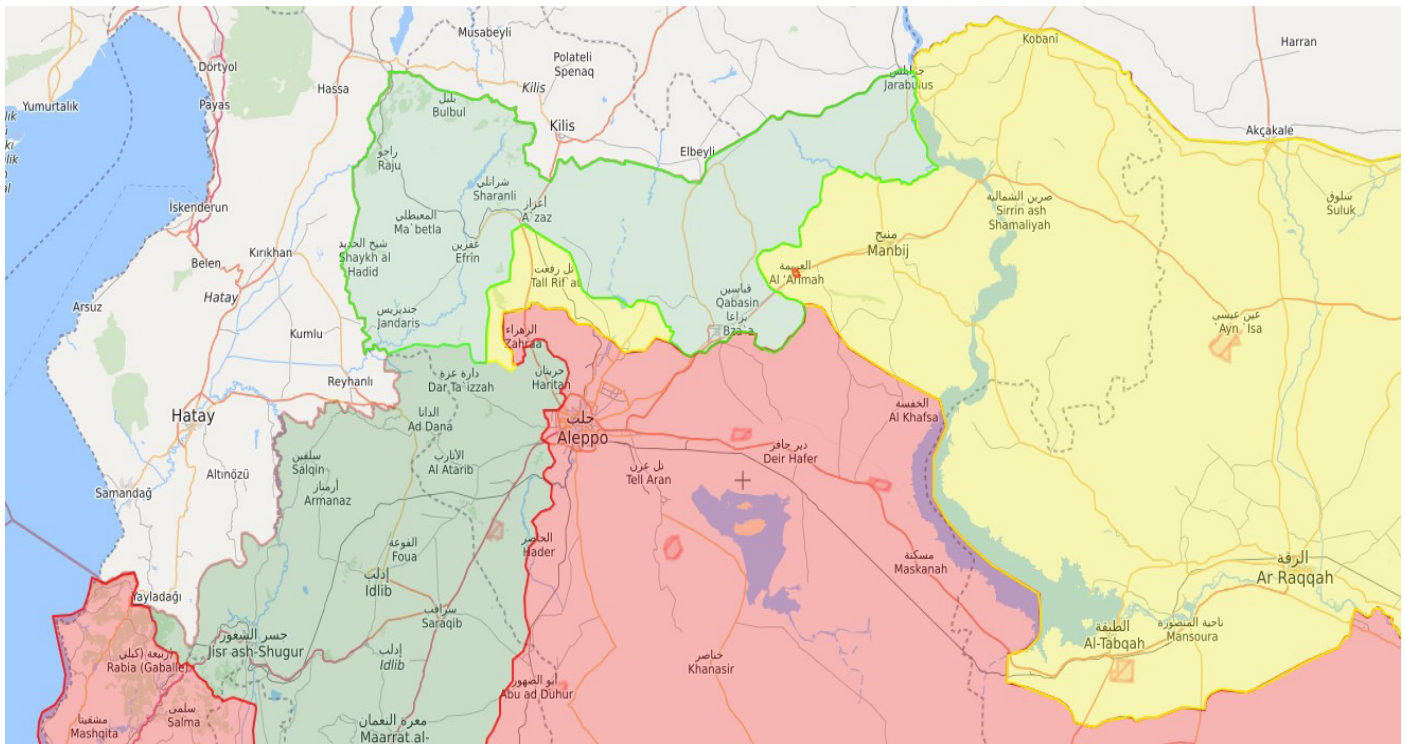


Figure 4. The borders of conflict as of May 2019. Source: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>. Key: Turkey- Light Green, Opposition- Dark Green, NES- Yellow, Assad Regime- Red.

began to sour over the latter’s attacks on opposition positions in Tell Rifaat in 2015.<sup>75</sup> Many opposition fighters from Manbij now serve in the FSA and other militia groups which Turkey supports and deployed in both Operation Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch.<sup>76</sup> This has led to a situation where the arrival of Turkey would be as much a “returning home” of local Arab fighters and IDPs as much as it would be an occupation by a foreign military. The Arab residents of Manbij also view the Regime as their greatest threat now that ISIS has been expelled. The Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies based in Turkey reported in June of 2018 that distrust of the YPG by locals was amplified by their perceived connection with the Regime.<sup>77</sup> The report also claimed problems with basic services within the city and policies of property seizure were causing discontent within the city. These factors push the Arab and Turkmen residents of Manbij to potentially favor the presence of the FSA and Turkish troops over those of the YPG and SDF.

## Looking Ahead

The implications of a sudden US troop withdrawal on the situation in the northern Aleppo Governorate are difficult to determine. Further hindering any prediction is the futility of establishing a timeline of US troop presence given the erratic nature of US foreign policy under the Trump Administration. As of March 29, 2019, four months after President Trump declared victory in Syria and the withdrawal of troops, US soldiers remained in Manbij. The New York Times quoted military officials as saying, “the withdrawal timetable remained fluid and that final force levels were subject to change given a range of factors, from allied troop contributions to new directions from Mr. Trump.”<sup>78</sup> While the Obama administration was also lacking in transparency and consistency in its Syria policy, most famously in the “red-line” speech that suggested military action if Assad employed chemical weapons, this level of ambiguity has reached a new level under

75 Oytun Orhan, “MANBIJ: DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE, DISTRIBUTION OF ARMED GROUPS AND SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE,” Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies, June 2018, 8, <https://orsam.org.tr/en/manbij-demographic-structure-distribution-of-armed-groups-and-scenarios-for-the-future>

76 Ibid, 15-16

77 Ibid, 17

78 Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Troops Leaving Syria, but Some May Stay Longer Than Expected,” The New York Times, March 29, 2019, accessed May 09, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/world/middleeast/us-troops-syria-isis.html>

President Trump.<sup>79</sup> Inconsistency and unpredictability leaves the fate of Manbij and the northern portion of Aleppo province at a crossroads. Should the SDF and NES continue to invite Russian and Regime forces into the region, they risk further alienating the majority of civilians under their charge in Aleppo Governorate. In April 2019 protests broke out in the province of Deir Ezzor against SDF oil sales to the Regime, as well as perceived anti-Arab bias within the NES.<sup>80</sup> There is also the risk of spillover, that cooperation with the regime in Manbij will increase discontent in Arab majority regions throughout their precariously overextended de facto state. In addition, they also risk further antagonizing other opposition and rebel groups still fighting the regime. Without Russian or Regime support, however, the SDF would be incredibly vulnerable without a US troop presence.

The Turkish military doesn't need to engage SDF forces directly but could instead use its own Arab majority militia (including individuals from Manbij) as a proxy to assault Manbij. Given the ethnic composition of the town, this would be sufficient to push the SDF while limiting international outcry. This strategy is similar to one The Washington Institute has warned could be used by Turkey to take the town of Tal Abyad, the Arab majority town that was taken by YPG forces to link Kobani with the Qamishli canton. The article explains how Turkey could use Arab militias formed from Tal Abyad refugees to assault the town and liberate it under the guise of local militia retaking their homeland. Local distrust towards the YPG by Arab tribes and civilians aid in the legitimization of such a plan.<sup>81</sup> The same plan was employed in Afrin with successful results, though the local population was majority Kurdish. The success of this strategy may embolden Turkey to employ it in other Arab regions of the NES in the future, and the encroachment of Turkish forces may even set them on the road to take Kobani. NES regions in Arab majority areas such as Tell Rifaat, Marea, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, and even smaller parts of Hasakeh province. If the Turkish strategy is truly to cripple the fighting ability of the Kurds along its border, such an outcome may result in significant displacement or even ethnic cleansing in Kurdish regions.

Though the status quo may be untenable for all parties involved in the long term, the presence of US troops in Manbij for the moment does prevent the Aleppo Governorate from plunging further into chaos and keeps the guns of the frontlines cool. Their withdrawal may be supplemented by Russian troops that play a similar role, but eventually a decision will have to be reached regarding the state of the NES. Turkey's objective is to secure its borders by stopping cooperation between the PYD and the PKK, but this is at odds with Assad's position to collaborate with the SDF and PKK and balance power in the region against Turkey and other opposition forces. Still, it is unlikely that Assad will accept an autonomous state in the north outside of his control, and equally unlikely Turkey will tolerate a Kurdish autonomous region (even one modeled after Iraq).

While predicting an outcome is impossible, some basic stipulations are necessary for any lasting peace in Aleppo Governorate outside of Regime control: (1) The free return of displaced Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen, to their communities; (2) the protection of Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen populations in Manbij regardless of who controls the city; (3) the safe return of Kurds to Afrin with guarantees of equal rights; (4) and political representation for all Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen residents of the governorate without Turkish or other foreign domination that might further entrench ethnic divisions in the Syrian north. The communities of the Aleppo Governorate need policy approaches based on the rights of its local population (remaining and displaced) that enable true political representation. Only time will tell who in the end will hold Manbij and the greater expanse of territory in northern and eastern territory, but for the moment the sad truth is that soldiers and politicians, not the civilians of the region, will determine its fate.

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79 Ben Rhodes, "Inside the White House During the Syrian 'Red Line' Crisis," *The Atlantic*, June 03, 2018, accessed May 09, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887>

80 Zouhir Al Shimale, "Syrians in Deir Ezzor Protest against SDF Oil Sales to Assad Government," *Middle East Eye*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/civilians-vow-continue-protest-against-sdf-sale-oil-syrian-government>

81 Balanche, "Tal Abyad."

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