

Where worlds collide: Manbij and the future of Syria

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Last year, I had the opportunity to set foot in liberated territory across northern Syria which had previously been either governed under the darkness of the so-called Islamic State or which that faux caliphate had its eyes set on.

Most of the time I spent in the country was in the predominately Kurdish regions east of the Euphrates River. However, I was also fortunate enough to witness one city outside of 'Rojava' (western Kurdistan) which had also been liberated by Kurdish-led forces, but was majority Arab. That city was Manbij, which today commands the attention of the world for being the focal point of tension surrounding the future of the country as a whole.

Changing Administrations

Manbij was freed from Daesh in August 2016 by the Syrian Democratic Forces, the primary component of which is the People & Women's Protection Units (YPG & YPJ). However, keen to avoid the pitfalls of appearing like occupiers of Arab lands, the

Kurdish-forces took a back seat to the Arab components of the SDF, among them the Northern Sun Battalion and other formations that identified with the Kurdish movement's vision of a federal and multi-ethnic Syria. After liberation, the city's military affairs were to be overseen not by the YPG/J, but the newly formed Manbij Military Council (MMC).

By the time I set foot in the city about seven months later, there were few outward signs that there had ever been conflict here. A sense of normalcy seemed to reign, as the markets thrived and life went on.

Except nothing was quite 'normal', as the administration of the city had changed radically for the third time in a just a handful of years. The so-called Free Syrian Army had taken advantage of the collapse of the Ba'ath government in parts of the country to take control of Manbij in 2012. However, by 2014 the growing plague of the Islamic State had wrestled control of the city from the FSA faction that had governed it. Now the city was under the administration of the Manbij Civilian Council in league with the Military Council, which was attempting to bring about a grassroots and participatory governance for the first time.

In the Spirit of the Democratic Nation

Manbij has been significant to the Kurdish-led project in Syria, as it is a powerful example of an attempt to build unity between nationalities.

That goal is on display across northern Syria in regions such as the Kobane canton and Cizire canton. Previously, Arabic was the only language permitted under the Ba'ath government. Now, all road signs are written in Arabic, Kurdish, and Assyrian. School children and those in university learn in each of these languages, and diverse cultures now have the ability to thrive for the first time with being repressed as contrary to the interests of the homogenous state.

As an important step in attempting to overcome any narrow nationalism that may persist in the new society, the democratic self-administration in northern Syria have even done away with officially using the term 'Rojava' for being too Kurd-centric. Instead, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) is the term that is used today.

The movement build around these principles of a national liberation and unity had to proceed with caution when it came to how to administer Manbij. This was a different reality to places like Kobane, which had a majority Kurdish population. Even if Kurdish chauvinism and nationalism was combatted in the ranks of the SDF and civilian apparatuses, the propaganda of those opposed to the federal system would posit that the city was under the occupation of Kurds. This is precisely the problem

that the SDF has gone on to be confronted with in the aftermath of the freeing of Raqqa from the grip of Daesh in late 2017.

Turkey's Obsession With Manbij

Of course, it is Turkey that has been most obsessed with the idea that Manbij is under the control of not only Kurdish forces, but more explicitly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), since it considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of that organization. For years, Turkey has demanded that the Kurdish forces withdraw east of the Euphrates River.

However, the YPG have countered that in fact they have done so long ago. Turkey says they will be removed from the city by July 4 as part of an agreement with the United States. The YPG has refuted this, saying in a statement just days before Turkey's snap election on June 24, "We express to our people and the public opinion that the allegations of the Turkish state are far from reality. The Turkish state is uttering such allegations as part of their election propaganda. Our forces withdrew from Manbij after liberating it from ISIS in August 2016, handing the city over to Manbij Civil and Military Councils."

It is evident that for Turkey there is no difference between the MMC and the YPG, or any other components of the SDF. This has been made abundantly clear by how determined Turkey has been to find common ground with the U.S. in Manbij. Washington maintains military outposts in the region, and Ankara has been furious at its NATO ally for consistently refusing to drop its support for the SDF in its anti-Daesh operations.

Changing Dynamics: Turkey's Threats & Aggression

With the defeat of Islamic State in Raqqa achieved in October of last year, Erdogan's government went into high gear to extend its so-called 'anti-terror' campaign from Turkey and Iraq into Syria. Turkey turned threats into reality with the invasion of Syria in January, culminating in a re-branded outfit of Daesh and other Salafists taking control of Afrin under Free Syrian Army flags in March.

The U.S. turned a blind eye to the Turkish assault on Afrin, revealing how fragile and temporary their relationship with the Kurdish forces is. Although some used the word 'betrayal' to express their views toward the U.S., the Kurdish Freedom Movement was far from shocked, reiterating that they always knew U.S. support to be conditional and temporary.

Emboldened by Afrin, Turkey pushed for the agreement and implementation of a roadmap with the Trump administration, which was announced earlier this month

after Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu visited Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington. So far, this roadmap has seen four patrols take place around Manbij coordinated between Turkish and U.S forces. The next step is to be joint patrols.

Still, the future of Manbij's administration remains unclear and the main sticking point for Turkey. It's evident that Erdogan won't budge until the MMC are replaced by a local government of their choosing. To Ankara, Manbij still remains part of what they call a 'terror corridor'.

In addition, the Turkish government has made clear that it won't stop until a so-called 'safe zone' has been established in all of that 'corridor'. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim vowed that after Manbij, their forces would move on Kobane, Heseke, and Qamishlo, the de-facto capital of the Democratic Federation.

The People Won't Be Safe Under Occupation

What's clear from Turkey's history of genocidal policies toward its own Kurdish population, as well as recent events in Afrin, is that there will be nothing 'safe' about any occupation in the northern region of Syria. Such a catastrophic series of events would crush the most inspiring project of radical grassroots democracy we have yet to witness in the 21st century.

The battle for Kobane in 2014-15 was one of most tremendous battles for the soul of humanity that my generation has seen. It would be inconceivable to have to witness to another war over this city, one in which the aggressor this time isn't Daesh, but NATO's second largest army.

Those of us who have found profound inspiration for a revival of radical politics in the model employed by the revolutionaries of northern Syria understand what's at stake in resisting Turkey's fascist aggression.