

# US diplomat seen in Manbij amid Turkish threats

by Meghan Bodette - 21/10/2018 15:40



United States Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey met with the local civilian administration in Manbij as the city faces a renewed spate of Turkish threats, northeast Syria-based news outlet [Furat FM](#) [reported](#).

Earlier this week, Turkish-affiliated forces attacked Manbij Military Council (MMC) positions in Bogaz from Ulasha, just west of Manbij and along the border with Al-Bab, which is held by Turkish-backed rebels. The MMC responded immediately, and no casualties were reported.

[#MMC](#) positions in village of Ulasha, west of [#Manbij](#) came under attack. Fighters retaliated immediately.

— zana amed (@zana\_med) [October 16, 2018](#)

The United States and Turkey agreed on a "road map" for the status of Manbij after a meeting between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in June. The road map called for joint US-Turkish patrols along a 'demarcation line' north of Manbij city, and for Kurdish YPG forces to withdraw from the area.

The YPG announced its full withdrawal in July. Only a few YPG fighters had been present in the city at the time, serving as advisers to MMC forces, which are made up primarily of local Arabs.

Despite this, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan continues to threaten the city. The successful implementation of northeast Syria's political and military model in areas that are not majority-Kurdish, like Manbij, threatens Turkey's claim that the region has separatist and nationalist aims and does not offer a political solution that could appeal to all Syrians.

Salih Haj Mihemed, chair of the Future Syria Party in Manbij, recognizes that the threats are nothing new.

"We are used to his threats at this point. Erdogan constantly goes on television to say they will enter Manbij and 'rescue the people'. We are the people from Manbij, and we govern our own city. We won't let anybody enter our city," he assured in an interview with ANF.

Local military leaders assure that they will defend their city if necessary.

"The security and stability in our city is not available in the areas occupied by Turkey in al-Bab, Azaz, and Jarablus. These areas witness on a daily basis looting and bombings, so it is our duty and our natural right to maintain Manbij and its inhabitants," Abu Adel, the commander of the MMC, [told ANHA](#).

The MMC General Command issued a statement earlier this month, responding to Erdogan's claim that local forces were "digging their graves" in the city. "Recently, statements have been made by Turkish officials attacking the MMC because it is digging trenches and establishing earth mounds in the city, within a systematic media campaign that aims at misleading the public opinion and instigating unrest....We have taken all security and military measures to protect the city from the attacks of the terrorist organizations."

Mihemed Hiwêdî, a Syrian politician, believes the threats are meant to send a message to the United States, and may relate to a deal made to secure the release of American Evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson. "Turkey expects the US to greenlight the invasion of Syria after [Turkey] released the US citizen pastor they

arrested. The Turkish state thinks they may get to easily invade the areas liberated with blood from martyrs because they released the pastor," he told ANF.

If Turkey's messages to the United States over the status of Manbij are clear, American officials are sending mixed signals. When Erdogan, a week into the Turkish invasion of Afrin Canton, threatened to extend the operation to Manbij, a US military spokesman said that US forces in the area were prepared to "defend themselves" from "ISIS or any other threat." However, the US has been quiet on other threats, and agreed to the joint patrols mentioned in the 'road map' while asserting that they hoped to see further cooperation with Turkey in Syria.

The appointment of Jeffrey himself to the Special Representative position is also not one that the SDF may have hoped for. Jeffrey was a former ambassador to Turkey, and [suggested](#) a resolution to the bloody and destructive Operation Olive Branch—which he termed the "Afrin campaign"—that would "allow Turkey and local allies the run of Afrin province." In light of Erdogan's repeated comparison of the invasion of Afrin to his goals for Manbij, such a position is concerning.

Despite this, his presence in Manbij at this juncture shows that the US has not fully greenlit Turkish goals for the area, and that the latest round of Turkish and rebel provocations fit the pattern of threats without substance described by local officials.