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A Win-Win-Win Situation in Northern Syria

A rare agreement has reportedly been reached by the United States and Turkey, with the Syrian Kurds stuck in the middle.

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By Xander Snyder

It seems as though an agreement has been reached over Manbij, the city in northern Syria that has at times confounded the on-again, off-again relationship between the United States and Turkey. The city is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is led by the People's Protection Units, a Syrian Kurdish militia known more commonly as the YPG. But as it does with many Kurdish groups, Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist organization. So it's little wonder that the deal between the U.S. and Turkey involves the removal of the YPG, or so says the government in Ankara.

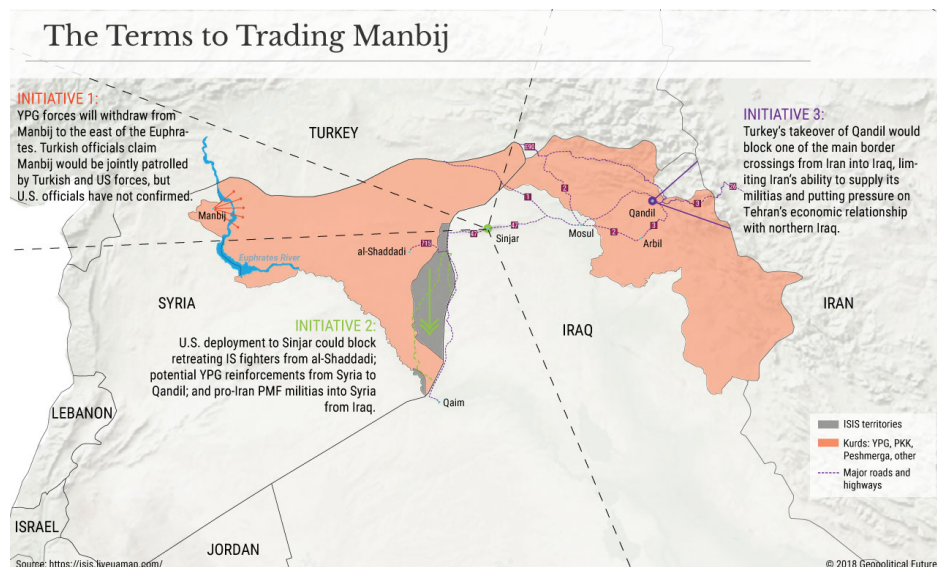
The thing is, the U.S. and Turkey have agreed to terms before, and when they have, the government in Ankara would announce it to the world, only to see the government in Washington deny it outright. But this time is different: The U.S. government has yet to issue a denial. The New York Times has reported that two U.S. officials have even confirmed the rumors, and the U.S. State Department has issued a press release endorsing the road map.

Details are scarce, but there's a strategic logic to the agreement whereby all sides would get something they want. And anecdotal evidence suggests the deal is moving forward. Kurdish and pro-Turkey media are reporting that the U.S. is deploying 150 troops to the Iraqi region of Sinjar, an area with a known Turkish military presence. Meanwhile, the SDF is launching a new offensive against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria, and according to unverified reports on social media, special operations forces from the U.S, France and Italy are participating in the attack. In Iraq, the Turkish military is advancing on Qandil to dislodge the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, according to Turkish media.

What Turkey Gets

The agreement serves a few purposes for Turkey, which wants to eliminate what it sees as a Kurdish threat emanating from northern Syria. Short of fully eliminating the semi-autonomous area the Kurds have carved out for themselves – something the U.S. would likely not allow – Turkey will settle for a retreat from Manbij. Manbij is the last major city held by the SDF west of the Euphrates, so if Turkey can take it, the military will be able to draw a defensive line against any threats from east of the Euphrates.

The agreement also permits Turkey to attack Qandil with greater force than it has yet been able to muster – effectively, with U.S. cooperation. Taking Qandil would help Turkey in two major ways. First, it would dislodge the PKK from one of its Iraqi strongholds. It would have the added benefit of severing or at least obstructing an important PKK supply line. The Rezan-Shanedar-Irbil road is one of the few major roads in northern Iraq that passes through part of the Zagros Mountains and ultimately leads to southern Turkey and Kurdish-held territories in northeastern Syria. The road runs parallel to the Great Zab River, which carves a valley through the mountains, providing some defense from a flanking attack, as well as sporadic roads leading into the mountains that can be used to escape the valley if necessary. (The U.S. deployment to Sinjar helps here too. Without the U.S. there, the YPG wouldn't be able to reinforce the PKK.)



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Second, it would go a long way in achieving a Turkish security imperative: establishing as much buffer space as possible between Turkey and Iran. Turkey would much rather have a military presence close to Iran's borders than have Iran so close to its own.

What the U.S. Gets

The agreement solves several problems for the U.S. First, it ends the standoff between the U.S. and Turkey over Manbij, over which Ankara threatened to eject the U.S. from the strategically important Incirlik air base.

Second, with its deployment to Sinjar, the U.S. will block the retreat of any IS fighters fleeing the SDF offensive. Fighters will be forced to travel south along a road that runs perpendicular to Highway 47, one that is completely surrounded by the SDF, which will attack IS on its western flank.

Third, the U.S. presence in Sinjar also prevents Popular Mobilization Forces – militias operating in Iraq, some of which are backed by Iran – from moving into Syria. Over the past two weeks, there have been reports that Iraqi PMF militias have been launching attacks against the Islamic State in al-Hasakah, a province in southern Syria. (Specifically, these militias reportedly attacked IS positions in Syria at a town called Shaddadi, which can be reached along the same road leading from Mosul, through Sinjar, into the northeastern territory still held by IS.) Iraqi-nationalist factions within the PMF gain nothing from launching cross-border attacks into Syria, since their focus is on Iraqi domestic security. It's safe to assume, then, that the PMF militias conducting these attacks are pro-Iran ones serving Tehran's interests beyond Iraq's borders. (That the story about the attacks was covered by Iran's pro-regime Fars news agency also supports this conclusion). In short, a U.S. presence in Sinjar will make it difficult for Iran to move its militias into Syria, especially as the U.S. coordinates with Israel to minimize Iranian influence in southwestern Syria too.

What the YPG Gets

The YPG comes out the worst in this deal, but not completely empty-handed. In exchange for giving up Manbij and carrying out a new offensive in northeastern Syria, the U.S. would likely need to provide a guarantee to the YPG that a greater Turkish presence in Iraq would not threaten the YPG's eastern flank along the Iraqi-Syrian border. U.S. forces placed at Sinjar, again, accomplish this by acting as a deterrent to any Turkish operations along Highway 47 into Syria.

Still, the YPG's hand is weak. If the U.S. were to withdraw all its support, the group would be left with few allies, surrounded by threats on all sides. The YPG has to take the deal, no matter how little it benefits the YPG, no matter how much it calls U.S. credibility (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/conversation-u-s-credibility/>) into question. After all, the U.S. promised the YPG it would protect Manbij, and now it is giving it up. How long will it take Washington to renege on its promise to protect the YPG's eastern flank from Iran?

The agreement between the U.S. and Turkey is perhaps most notable as an expression of their shared interest to counter Iran in Iraq and Syria. Turkey's taking Qandil puts greater pressure on Iran in Iraq, since it cuts off (or at least threatens to cut off) one of the few border crossings from Iran into northeastern Iraq. This prevents Iran from reinforcing its militias and endangers Tehran's economic relationship with northern Iraq. Ever since pro-Iran militias helped Baghdad expel Kurdish forces from Kirkuk, Iran has been awarded commercial prizes, most recently an oil swap deal in which oil is exported from northern Iraq to Iranian refineries and refined oil is exported back into southern Iraq. This came at the expense of Turkey, which is eager to reclaim some of the business activity it lost.

In this instance, Turkey's interest aligns neatly with the United States', and Washington can get what it wants at a relatively low cost. Giving up Manbij in exchange for greater pressure on Iran – provided by Turkey, no less – is well worth the exchange, since Manbij doesn't serve any strategic purpose. That's likely no comfort to the YPG, but there is precious little they can do about it.

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