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Will U.S.-Turkish Progress on Manbij Lead to Wider Cooperation in Syria?

by [James Jeffrey](#)

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Brief Analysis

The feuding NATO allies have apparently agreed on a concrete roadmap for rolling back the Kurds, but broader strategic cooperation would require them to overcome tall political obstacles.

By all reports, the June 4 Washington meeting between Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made significant progress on resolving a thorny bilateral issue: what to do with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), America's local Syrian ally in the fight against the Islamic State. Ankara understandably sees the Syrian Kurdish group and Washington's arming of it as a threat, since the PYD is tied to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the insurgent organization that has battled the Turkish government for more than three decades.

The specific problem is the area around Manbij, Syria, where U.S.-backed PYD forces first advanced west across the Euphrates River in 2016, stepping over Turkey's repeatedly stated redline in the process. Like the Obama administration before it, the Trump administration has committed in principle to move PYD cadres out of the area and back across the Euphrates. Yet the group's refusal to pull out—coupled with the exigencies of America's still-incomplete fight against Islamic State remnants in northeastern Syria, which requires PYD cooperation—has torqued U.S.-Turkish relations dramatically, at one point spurring the two NATO allies to threaten each other's military forces.

The situation was calmed somewhat earlier this year when former secretary of state Rex Tillerson met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and committed in principle to a solution. Turkish and U.S. officials have since been working on a roadmap to remove the PYD from the Manbij area, which is largely Arab in population (though possibly not the 90 percent proportion the Turks claim). Once the group withdraws, security is to be provided by a joint U.S.-Turkish presence and local authorities.

Yet the main roadblocks—the PYD’s refusal to leave, and the U.S. military’s need to continue operating in the northeast—persist, and various [other bilateral disputes](#) have further darkened the relationship, from Erdogan’s demand that Washington extradite alleged 2016 coup mastermind Fethullah Gulen, to Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400 air defense systems. Tough anti-U.S. rhetoric from Erdogan in the run-up to Turkey’s June 24 national elections has raised hackles as well, spurring U.S. politicians, media outlets, and analysts to speculate that Ankara is straying into the Russian camp.

But yesterday’s discussions in Washington may represent a big step toward dissipating these tensions. After the meeting, Cavusoglu tweeted that he and Pompeo had agreed on a Manbij roadmap, later telling reporters more about the “concrete results” emerging from the “fruitful and successful” summit. According to various U.S. and Turkish sources, the plan is to start moving the PYD back across the Euphrates, possibly within ninety days if conditions permit. U.S. and Turkish forces will then take over patrolling the area, working with local security and governance organs.

The Turks and some Americans also see this plan as the first step in a new kind of bilateral cooperation on Syria, after similar efforts failed during the Obama administration. Cavusoglu hinted at this broader cooperation in his tweet. According to sources in both governments, the idea is to jointly press the Assad regime, Iran, and ultimately Russia to accept a political solution through the UN-sponsored Geneva process, an important long-term Turkish goal that the United States agrees with, albeit less vigorously. When Turkish officials speak generally of “pressuring” the Assad camp, what they usually mean is Turkish and U.S. forces occupying almost all of northern Syria, which encompasses over 40 percent of the country’s territory, tens of thousands of well-armed local allies, and millions of Syrian citizens either resident there or displaced by the war, including many across the border in Turkey.

Until such plans are actually set in motion, Turkey has felt compelled to engage with Russia and Iran on limited military deconfliction in Syria, much like the U.S. and Israeli militaries have done with Moscow. Yet the Turks seem to believe that Damascus and Tehran are still bent on achieving military victory throughout the rest of Syria—a scenario that only U.S.-Turkish cooperation can forestall.

Turning a tactical bilateral success on Manbij into a strategic front is an interesting concept, but several serious challenges would need to be overcome. First, the United States would need to remain militarily engaged in northeastern Syria at the very least, and perhaps elsewhere. Yet that requires cooperation with the PYD in their homeland east of the Euphrates—a thorny prospect given that Turkey is technically still at war with the group. Although Turkish and PYD forces have maintained a de facto ceasefire along the northeastern border, Turkey has crushed the group in the northwestern Afrin canton and is apparently gearing up for a similar operation against its PKK “cousins” in northern Iraq.

Second, Washington has apparently not yet secured PYD acquiescence to the Manbij roadmap. If the Kurds balk, the local U.S. military command responsible for coordinating with them against Islamic State remnants will likely balk as well.

Third, U.S. strategic goals in Syria remain opaque. President Trump’s expectation that American forces will pull out within six months is not compatible with the Turkish approach. Meanwhile, some officials in the United States, Jordan, and Israel seem to be putting all their Syria eggs into another basket: Russia, which they see as the key to

making Iran pull out. In Ankara's view, however, any solution that leaves an unfettered Assad regime in charge will not produce an Iranian withdrawal; rather, it will pose greater dangers to everyone.

As for Turkish domestic considerations, Erdogan will likely try to use the Manbij deal to burnish his nationalist credentials in the upcoming elections. Facing strong competition in the polls, he may cast the roadmap's proposed PYD withdrawal east of the Euphrates as a victory against the PKK, despite the fact that the pullout is unlikely to precede the vote even under the best of circumstances.

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