

Syria after the caliphate: Manbij poised between conflicts

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Derek Henry Flood reports from Manbij in northern Syria, charting the city's power dynamics and precarious situation as the fight against the Islamic State has given way to competing interests

Key Points

- The northern Syrian city of Manbij has become a post-conflict security laboratory where violence-fatigued Arabs and Kurds are earnestly working together to secure a shaky peace despite repeated threats of an impending Turkish assault on the city.
- Once an unremarkable trading hub on the M4 highway from Aleppo to Qamishli, Manbij has been thrust into the spotlight as the scene of power struggles between Iran, Russia, Syria, Turkey, the United States, and local militant groups.
- Although *Jane's* was told by a high-level source that there may indeed be remaining Islamic State sympathisers inside the city owing to an autochthonous minority of militant Islamist sympathisers, local residents are mostly content with the current security apparatus modelled after those in Rojava.

On 25 March 2018 during a speech in the Black Sea city of Trabzon, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told audience members that the United States military must transfer the security of the northern Syrian city of Manbij from the Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units-YPG) to the city's "real owners", according to the state-run Anadolu Agency. President Erdoğan, along with the bulk of Ankara's political establishment, considers the YPG an entirely undifferentiated force from Turkish Kurdish group the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party: PKK), which began an insurgency in Turkey's southeast in August 1984.

The Islamic State controlled the city of Manbij from 23 January 2014 until mid-August 2016 after the city was besieged and ultimately liberated by the US-backed Qiwaat Suriyya al-Dimoqratiyya (Syrian Democratic Forces: QSD), which is dominated by the YPG alongside smaller, local Sunni Muslim groups and Syriac Christians. The formation of the QSD was partly an overt rebranding effort by the Pentagon to counter the barrage of Turkish assertions that the US was arming the YPG, which Ankara considers to be the PKK under a Syrian label.

However, the QSD was also formed due to unavoidable shifting social dynamics within the Syrian battle space. Turkish nationalist commentators and Western sceptics insist that the YPG is a façade for the expansion of PKK hegemony in northern Syria, but this sweeping generalisation ignores local grievances within Syria itself. The forcible implementation of the PKK's rigid ideology across the entirety of northern Syria's ethnic and religious mosaic is likely to be an unsustainable enterprise in the long term. The reality of the security environment in and around Manbij belies reporting that the area is a hotbed of YPG activity and influence.



Vehicles of US-backed coalition forces driving in Manbij on 3 April 2018. (Delil Souleiman/Getty Images)

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The local roots of the Manbij Military Council

As such, the QSD was created in part to broaden out the demographic composition of US-backed ground forces operating against the Islamic State in northern Syria, as well as to contain Russian and Iranian military and economic interests. However, as the QSD steadily defeated the Islamic State along the Euphrates River Valley with the US providing substantial air support, its mission became more complex and it came to require the military and civil co-operation of more diverse communities, such as Manbij, owing purely to Syrian ethno-linguistic political realities.

When the YPG/QSD effort to roll back the Islamic State's territorial control advanced far beyond the political periphery of the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited northeast of the country, known to Kurds as Rojava, and deep into the predominantly Arab-inhabited urban centres of Manbij, Raqqa, and later Deir al-Zour, the Kurdish ethno-nationalist precepts had to be adapted to include non-Kurdish groups that were formed to participate in a combined fight against the Islamic State. A particularly crucial such force has been that of the Majlis Manbij al-Askari (Manbij Military Council: MMC), which was formed on 3 April 2016 to critically engage in battling the Islamic State as part of the QSD's operation to capture the city of Manbij from the Islamic State, code named "Operation Martyr and Commander Abu Faisal Abu Layla", named after the charismatic MMC leader who was killed in the early days of the offensive in June 2016.

Under the rule of the Islamic State, Manbij was a vital hub for mujahireen (literally emigrants, but a term more commonly used to refer to foreign fighters) travelling south from Jarabulus on the border with Turkey to be further indoctrinated and assigned positions in the hisbah (vice and virtue police),

inghimasi (suicidal fighters) or other Islamic State entities, before being relocated to territories controlled by the group across the nearby Euphrates River to the southeast in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour governorates.

When it was first established, the MMC was led by Adnan Abu Amjad, an Arab from Manbij. He had previously been the deputy commander of Kataib Shams al-Shamal (Northern Sun Battalions) until he was killed during the QSD's Raqqa offensive in August 2017. In his address regarding the formation of the MMC, Abu Amjad stressed the multi-ethnic character of Manbij. Before its occupation by the Islamic State, Manbij was populated by Arabs, Cherkess (Circassians), Kurds, and Turkmen, who "coexisted peacefully". Abu Amjad stressed that the fighters of the MMC, whose origins lay in rebelling against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, would be of Manbij provenance regardless of ethnicity. The MMC is a pragmatic, localised military force that coalesced from once disparate anti-government factions to evict the Islamic State from Manbij, rather than to enforce the idolization of the PKK's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan.

Abu Amjad was succeeded by Muhammad Mustafa Ali (alias Abu Adel), a fellow local from Manbij. Abu Adel has pledged to defend Manbij from Turkish-backed Syrian militants operating as part of the Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield or any other threats that may arise as the MMC has transitioned from an offensive force posture aimed at ousting the Islamic State to a dual stabilisation and defensive posture. As the threats from Erdoğan and his foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu have been repeated continually, the MMC is much more concerned with the Sajur front line in northern Syria where it directly faces Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed Islamist militant group Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya.

From collective trauma to threatened progress

Beneath the façade of what had been one of the most prominent hotels in Manbij, *Jane's* observed a group of local labourers rolling batches of white latex paint over walls painted black by the Islamic State as, more than 18 months after its liberation, this small city is currently undergoing a massive, rapid rehabilitation. In a concrete warren strewn with rubbish and walls covered in graffiti by then forlorn captives and their absolutist Salafist tormentors, the site foreman stated to *Jane's* that at its peak the cramped, foetid space had held approximately 123 prisoners, as well as slogans espousing the version of tawhid (indivisible monotheism) promoted at gunpoint by the Islamic State.

In one section, men were confined to boxes 110cm high by 50cm wide aimed at atrophying their musculature in a form of excruciating humiliation. Other captives were chained to walls to look down helplessly on those crying out from the confinement boxes arrayed on the floor below. In a twisted metal scrap heap in the car park of the improvised prison lay a rusting makeshift electric chair that the Islamic State had enlisted a local welder to forge.

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