

The American Presence in Syria

A Limited or Long-term Mission ?



Assessment Report
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Jusoor for Studies
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Preface

In March, the United States deployed military forces and vehicles in the Syrian city of Manbij, northeast of Aleppo. The city is under the control of Manbij Military Council which pertains to the Syrian Democratic Forces, Washington's main ally in Syria. Jeff Davis, the official Pentagon spokesman, said in a news conference on March 6 that the goal of deploying these troops is "the deterrence and keeping focus on fighting ISIS".¹

This US military action came with Turkey's increasing pressure to force the People's Protection Units, which is a Kurdish-Syrian militia that is affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, to leave Manbij. The militia entered the city in June 2016 and expelled ISIS after one month under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces and with an aerial as well as military support from the US-led International Coalition.

On March 9, Washington revealed the US military deployment of the "artillery" unit of the US marines near Raqqa. In the same context, the Washington Post explained that the new force is a "marines 11" unit equipped with an artillery battery that can fire 155-millimeter shells from howitzer artilleries. The force also included a rapid intervention unit and a first regiment Landing Team.²

The new US administration has also given the US forces more flexibility in their operations in Syria, which led to a dramatic increase in civilian casualties as a result of the Coalition strikes over the past months. In fact, the rules of engagement of the US air operation in Syria used to require a precise identification of targets and the need to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible.³

The change in the adopted rules of engagements indicates a change in the US strategy in Syria. This is what the present report attempts to extrapolate

¹The US military deployed troops in Manbij in a deterrent signal, Reuters, 6/3/2017: <https://goo.gl/9YAGVp>

² Marines have arrived in Syria to fire artillery in the fight for Raqqa, Washington Post, 8/3/2017: <https://goo.gl/5ike4C>

³ Pentagon review of ISIS strategy will lay out options to accelerate fight, ABC News, 23/2/2017: <https://goo.gl/sS7oP6>

through presenting data and determinants, as well as extrapolating the expected scenarios of this strategy.

The American Presence in Syria

The Beginning

In late October 2015, the United States announced, for the first time, sending troops to Syria as part of the war against ISIS. The administration of the former US president, Barack Obama, later announced sending 50 Special Forces soldiers as a first batch that will work on providing advice, training, and logistical support, as well as to facilitate coordination with the International Coalition Forces. On December 10, 2016, the former US Defense Secretary, Ashton Carter, announced the arrival of another 200 soldiers to Syria.

Before the deployment of additional troops in March, the number of soldiers reached 503, which is the previously agreed-upon official limit. However, the military officials have the authority to exceed this limit. Thus, in March, the number of troops deployed reached 400.⁴

Areas of Deployment and Partners

The American forces are deployed in a number of Syrian areas. Their deployment is concentrated on the areas controlled by the parties that are considered as US partners in the war against ISIS, which are mainly two:

- The first is the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is led by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), and includes other small Arab groups. They are spread over the areas known as "self-administered" areas, a civil authority established by the YPG in their areas of control in northern Syria.
- The second is a faction of the Free Army, called "New Syrian Army", which operates in the area near the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian border triangle in south-eastern Syria and which controls the border crossing.

Later on, some press reports revealed that the US army established an air base in Rmelan area in al-Hasakah, in the far north-east of Syria,

⁴ U.S. Is Sending 400 More Troops to Syria, The New York Times, 9/3/2017:
<https://goo.gl/uR9Hsr>

what has not been denied by Washington⁵. Moreover, other reports revealed that the US is using other bases, but this was not confirmed. However, the fact that the number of American soldiers who reached Syria is around 900 can confirm these allegations.

Change of Missions

Before the last developments, the US troops' roles were limited to providing advice, military planning, training and coordination between the International Coalition and the partner forces. However, the recent deployment in Manbij and Raqqa carried new missions. While in Manbij the mission of the deployed forces was "deterrence," in Raqqa their mission consists of actively participating in the expected battle to expel ISIS.

In general, the US military forces mission consists of:

- Supervising and directing the forces affiliated to them, especially the Syrian Democratic Forces, in their battle against ISIS.
- The use of special weapons, which cannot be given to allied forces, especially anti-aircraft and jamming devices.
- Securing the firepower of the allied forces, as the howitzers can hit targets that are 30 km away.

In addition to combat and military tasks, once the US forces are in Syria, they act as a deterrent and separate the allies from each other. Despite the announced partnership between the US and the Syrian Democratic Forces, this does not mean that the latter is a strategic partner which will make the US abandon its strategic relationship with Turkey. At the same time, the American project to defeat ISIS in Raqqa does not allow Ankara to target Syrian Democratic Forces, at least for the time being and before the completion of its mission.

The US presence in the region is a guarantee for both parties, the Turkish and the Kurdish, as they will not target each other's interest. It will also represent a guarantee for the local Arab and Kurd citizens from any revenge operations or targeting on the basis of ethnicity.⁶

⁵ America ends the construction of a military base and other uses in Syria, Al Jazeera Net, 27/7/2016:

<https://goo.gl/gmCT0X>

⁶ U.S. Is Sending 400 More Troops to Syria, The New York Times, 9/3/2017:

<https://goo.gl/uR9Hsr>

THE AMERICAN PRESENCE IN SYRIA



AMERICAN FORCES MISSIONS IN SYRIA



DETERRING AND SEPARATING ALLIES FROM EACH OTHER



USE OF SPECIAL ADVANCED WEAPONS



PROVIDING FIRE SUPPORT FOR THE ALLIED FORCES



DIRECT PARTICIPATION IN THE UPCOMING BATTLE AGAINST ISIS



COORDINATION BETWEEN THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION AIR FORCES AND THE PARTNER FORCES



MILITARY PLANNING AND TRAINING



PROVIDING MILITARY ADVICE

Commenting on the deployment of US Special Forces in Manbij the spokesman of the Pentagon confirmed this clearly. He considered it is a “clear sign of deterrence” and that these force will seek to “reassure and deter the parties from attacking other parties, other than ISIS”.⁷

Manbij Crisis

YPG East of Euphrates

Since the YPG entered Manbij, Turkey, which considers YPG as a terrorist organization, demanded the People’s Protection Units to leave and return to the east of the Euphrates River. It also demanded the US to fulfill its pledges regard this issue. Before this, Ankara considered the YPG moving to the west of the Euphrates as a red line, out of fear of a potential geographical connection between Afrin Canton, which is under YPG control, and Ayn al-Arab Kobani Canton. This may pave the way for the emergence of a hostile Kurdish entity that would separate Turkey from its Arab surrounding and hit its social unity. However, Turkey overlooked the crossing of the Kurdish forces under pressure and promises from the US to oust the Kurdish forces from the city right after defeating ISIS. Nevertheless, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces did not leave Manbij and formed rather what was known as “Manbij Military Council.” The Forces said that it handed the Council over to the city and it withdrew from it, which Turkish officials denied.

Euphrates Shield

Turkey responded indirectly to this procrastination through the Euphrates Shield operation that was launched by the Turkish army on August 24, 2016, in Syria, in partnership with a number of factions of the Free Syrian Army and under the cover of the international coalition to fight ISIS, starting from Jarabulus in order to achieve two announced goals. The first is to oust ISIS from northern Aleppo, and the second is to oust the YPG from Manbij and the areas surrounding it to the east of Euphrates River. After liberating al-Bab on February 23, the Turkish forces headed towards Manbij, but Ankara announced on March 29, 2016, the suspension of the

⁷ The US has troops in Syria, and here's what they're doing, ABC News, 12/4/2017: <https://goo.gl/cG4TnM>

Euphrates Shield, one day before the arrival of the US Secretary of State to Ankara.

Controlling al-Bab

Al-Assad forces tried to reach al-Bab from the southern axis before the Euphrates Shield forces. The Syrian Democratic Forces formed a military council for al-Bab and launched an operation from the eastern axis to liberate it, with the aim of thwarting the Euphrates Shield and preventing it from shifting to Manbij. However, the failure of the two parties made them focus their efforts, after al-Bab became held by the Euphrates Shield, on securing Manbij and working on blocking the Turkish invasion, especially that Ankara announced that the next goal of the Euphrates Shield is Manbij.

Entry of Al-Assad Forces

Al-Assad forces have moved towards Manbij through taking over the lands held by ISIS and that are close to the lands controlled by the Euphrates Shield, in the area between al-Bab and Manbij. Al-Assad forces did not face any resistance from ISIS which quickly withdrew. This helped al-Assad forces to reach the outskirts of Manbij from the south-east and allowed it also to communicate geographically with the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Giving Villages to al-Assad Forces

The "Democratic Syria" handed over several villages, separating Manbij from the forces of the Euphrates Shield, to al-Assad forces. In a press release dated March 2, Manbij military council announced that it had handed over the area to the "Border Guards Force", which are affiliated to al-Assad forces under an agreement with Russia, in order to avoid "the woes of war" and "to prevent Turkish forces from taking over more Syrian territory".⁸

Even though the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, denied his country's awareness of this agreement, the Turkish Prime Minister, in a press release dated March 5, did not express his country's

⁸ Manbij Military Council delivers villages to the Syrian Army, Russia today, 2/3/2017:

<https://goo.gl/IwlIyW>

refusal of al-Assad forces' control over Manbij. He only demanded that the YPG forces leave in anyway.⁹

Deployment of US Forces

Meanwhile, on March 6, the Pentagon announced the deployment of a small US military force in the city of Manbij and around it. These forces lift the US flag over its vehicles to prevent parties in the region from attacking each other. The Pentagon spokesman, Jeff Davis, said "we have deployed additional troops in a mission of reassurance and deterrence". He added that the US forces were clearly deployed "to confirm that the enemy ISIS was ousted from Manbij and that there is no need for other forces to liberate the city."¹⁰ This was a clear message to Ankara and to the Euphrates Shield. Given that the process of handing over lands from Manbij to al-Assad forces was a result of an agreement with Russia to protect the YPG from the Euphrates shield, the Russian position seemed to be consistent with the American position of deploying a ground military force and raising the American flags in Manbij and its surroundings. This indicates a Russian- American agreement to prevent the forces of the Euphrates Shield from expanding eastward.

Antalya Summit Without any Result

After the announcement of the presence of the American force in Manbij, a triple military summit was held in Antalya, Turkey, which brought together the Turkish, Russian and American chiefs of staff on March 7, in an attempt to coordinate their forces in Syria, according to announcement by officials from the participating countries. Yildirim considered, in a commentary at the beginning of the meeting, that his main objective was to seek coordination and to target terrorists, who constitute a common threat, in order to prevent undesirable clashes.

In a statement to soften the firm Turkish tone on Manbij, Yildirim said that his country would not launch a military operation in Manbij "except in coordination with Russia and the United States."¹¹ The statements probably

⁹ Yildirim: The Syrian land is for the Syrians and we are not against the imposition of Syrian Army control on Manbij, Russia today, 5/3/2017:

<https://goo.gl/I58dnb>

¹⁰ US military deploy forces in Manbij in a deterrent signal, Reuters, 6/3/2017:

<https://goo.gl/9YAGVp>

¹¹ Yildirim: Turkey does not plan a unilateral military move in Manbij Syria, Reuters, 6/3/2017: <https://goo.gl/z3JxKp>

aimed at conciliating Washington and forcing a resolution through an agreement on Raqqa as it faces the dilemma of satisfying the Turkish and Kurdish allies together.

The official Turkish statements that accompanied the Antalya military summit and its aftermath indicate that the meeting did not lead to any outcome, with regard to Manbij, or even Raqqa since Washington has not yet decided on the Ground Forces it will rely on to control the capital of the “Islamic State” organization. On March 9, the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, renewed his country's intention to target the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Manbij, stressing that the Turkish Armed Forces will move towards Manbij¹². Turkish Prime Minister, Ben Ali Yildirim, also said that the United States “apparently decided to seek help from the YPG forces in the Raqqa battle,” adding that “this will have repercussions on Turkish - American relations.”¹³

Determinants of American Military Presence

In order to understand the dimensions of the new US military deployment in Syria, whether in Manbij or Raqqa, it is necessary to review the files that may be influential in the White House decision to deploy more troops in Syria and to give them a new mission within a new political and military strategy.

The United States is currently working in Syria on three files regarding to the priority of each for the Trump administration. The files are the battle of Raqqa and forcing the “Islamic State” organization to abandon its strongholds as well as the safe areas and the “Ceaser” law, and completing the sorting out of the Syrian Armed Opposition either as camps of moderation or of terrorism, also in addition to the file of the relationship with Russia, and sharing political influence with it in Syria and the region.

¹²Çavuşoğlu renews his country's intention to target YPJ Forces in Manbij, Turk Press, 9/3/2017: <https://goo.gl/kQ7Y8t>

¹³Turkish sources: America apparently decided to use the Kurds in the campaign of Raqqa, Reuters, 7/3/2017: <https://goo.gl/5FSgwU>

1. Battle of Raqqa

The current US administration gives a top priority, regarding its policy towards Syria, to fight the “Islamic State” organization and to militarily defeat it. The most important step in this regard is the battle of Raqqa, which is being prepared in full swing, but Washington has not yet decided on the identity of the ground forces that will participate in the battle with a cover and a wide support of the International Coalition.

After entering the White House, Trump asked the Pentagon to develop a plan to fasten the war on the “Islamic State” organization in Syria and Iraq and granted it one month delay. During that period, military officials spoke of the need to change the old strategy, which was based on full reliance on local ground forces and was limited to providing advice, coordination and air cover, to a new strategy based on the deployment of US Ground Forces to actively participate in the battle. The CNN Network reported on February 16 that the Pentagon is considering the deployment of US forces in Syria to participate in the battle of Raqqa¹⁴. The deployment of the Marines' artillery unit in Raqqa came as an evidence of the Pentagon's inclination towards this strategy and its adoption by Trump.

Trump needs mainly the defeat of ISIS in the city of Raqqa and then in city of Mosul, since this defeat will grant him the principal achievement that will mark his political era. This will be the easiest achievement when compared to his internal electoral promises which, it seems, he will face real internal difficulties in achieving all or even parts of them.

2. Attitude Towards Turkey

Even if the US administration has decided on the deployment of its ground forces to accelerate the expulsion of the “Islamic State” organization from Raqqa, it has not decided yet on the choice between the participation of the Turkish Army troops in the process or the forces of "Democratic Syria," since neither side accepts fighting together with the other. Although both US Secretary of Defense and State Department have visited Ankara in the past two months, Washington and Ankara have not been able to reach an agreement on this issue.

The participation of the Turkish forces appeared to be a likely American scenario at first regarding the influx of security and military leaders to

¹⁴Officials to CNN: Pentagon considers sending conventional Ground Forces to Syria, CNN, 17/2/2017: <https://goo.gl/3IHt9U>

Ankara to discuss how to cooperate on the battle, but Turkey stipulated the exclusion of "Democratic Syria" from the battle. This was not approved by the United States and even seems to be an undesirable alternative in Washington. Although Washington has repeatedly stated that it is still considering its options in this regard, the deployment of ground forces in al-Raqqa suggests the idea of relinquishing the Turkish role.

3. Safe areas

On November 16 of the last year, the US Congress passed a law on the protection of civilians in Syria known as "Caesar", which is an act that recognizes al-Assad's committing of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The new US president calls for the establishment of safe zones and an air embargo zone to protect Syrian civilians and to punish al-Assad and his supporters. It also gives the White House a period of three months to develop a plan for the establishment of safe areas and in case of exceeding the deadline Congress will draw up the plan.

Trump has rapidly implemented the legislative law by commissioning the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs to draw up the plan within a three months period and it is still under preparation. If the White House decided to establish the safe areas, it is expected that the American Forces operating in Syria will have other functions related in one way or another to imposing these areas.

4. Relationship with Russia

The direct US presence on ground in the eastern region represents a confirmation of the shared influence between Moscow and Washington in Syria. Although United States Air Forces move freely in this region and continued in doing so even after Moscow announced the suspension of the joint agreement between the two parties in this regard after targeting the Shayrat airbase, the military presence on ground, even in its symbolic form, confirms US control there. It also confirms the American options for finding a solution and distributing power in this part of Syria.

The roles of the US military presence in Syria are directly connected to the relationship with Russia. These roles could be expanded to the west and the south in case of reaching an agreement with Moscow. The future roles of US Forces in Syria will also be linked to the type and outline of the agreement that could be reached by the US and Russia concerning Syria.

Possible Scenarios

The US military presence in Syria is relatively short since it does not exceed two and a half years. However, its gradual escalation, the remarkable changes in its roles, and the overlap of files that Washington gives special attention to in Syria, in addition to with this military presence open the door for the expectation of 3 possible scenarios that we mention as follows:

1. Fighting Only the “Islamic State” Organization

In this scenario, the role of the American Forces will be limited, in terms of time and period, to fighting the “Islamic State” organization. The Forces currently deployed and those which will join later will perform clear and specific tasks related to the war on the “Islamic State” organization. Their role is to expel it from Raqqa and then from Deir -ezzor and other areas under the control of the “Islamic State” organization, such as Eastern Homs, Palmyra and the south of Al-Hasakah. They are series of battles, the most important of which will be take place in the city of Raqqa, because of its symbolism to the “Islamic State” organization and consequently to the battle on the organization.

Then, it is expected that the battles in other areas, after the decline of Raqqa, will be easier. These battles are not expected to end unless at least one year before the Battle of Raqqa begins. It is obvious that the US Forces should not leave or be reduced before the “Islamic State” organization is completely removed from Syria. The US military then withdraws its combat units and maintains a specific number for advisory missions.

Although it is still not certain that the operation of Raqqa and what is after will proceed smoothly if the US administration fails to manage the partners’ crisis and to make the choice between Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces, and despite the blurred progress of political compromise, which means the lack of clarity in the expectations, this remains an expected scenario but is unlikely.

2. New Missions

In this scenario, the US Forces add new missions after eliminating the “Islamic State” organization in Syria. In this scenario also it is likely that supervising the fighting of the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant” and the groups close to it will be the following objective.

However, this scenario is linked to the rest of the variables on the Syrian scene. The organization, from its side, is trying to race against time to avoid such targeting. Further, the targeting of the organization and its allies will not be possible until a general political solution is reached, which does not seem to be possible in current time.

3. Long-term Presence with Varying Missions

This scenario consists of the US Forces building more military bases and expanding as well as equipping them for long-term missions that are not related to the “Islamic State” organization’s leaving the map. The current situation in Syria is characterized by the sharing of power among the countries involved in the political scene, and is influenced by the traditional Republican view in Washington that dictates the need to retain a persistent and concrete American influence all over the world. Also, the entitlement of the safe areas and the air embargo, which could enter into force in few months, is not related to the “Islamic State” organization or even to the “Organization for the Liberation of the Levant.”

A permanent US military base in the region can give Washington a strategic position in the long term, as it will be used in those missions that the nearby Incirlik Air Base cannot perform because of the internal and external Turkish policy determinants. It will also give Washington a direct presence at the heart of the Syrian political scene, which will help it to manage its interests in the entire region directly.

All these factors predict the likelihood of US Forces presence in Syria for a long time, in addition to other missions that are not necessarily determined but rather change depending on unexpected changes in the whole Syrian file and at all its levels.



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