

MANBIJ: DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE, DISTRIBUTION OF ARMED GROUPS AND SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE



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MANBIJ: DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE, DISTRIBUTION OF ARMED GROUPS AND SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

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PREFACE

The rising terror threat in Syria affected the priorities of Turkey's Syria policy. The strengthening of two terror organizations, namely DAESH and YPG, and their reclamations of sovereignty in the regions at the border with Turkey put forth the fight against terrorism in Turkey's Syria policy. In an environment where the state authority of Syria weakened, Turkey wanted to reduce/eliminate the security threats arising from Syria with unilateral use of force by paving the necessary diplomatic ground. Within this scope, Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations were launched respectively in August 2016 and January 2018. By this means, both DAESH threat was removed and YPG threat was restricted to the west of Manbij and the Euphrates.

However, it is seen that YPG still keeps under control both a geographically large zone and economically the wealthiest regions of Syria when we look at the current maps showing the control zones of the actors involved in the Syrian civil war. Therefore, YPG threat will maintain its presence even though it has been restricted. The USA being the ally of YPG in the field makes the situation more complex. Turkey insists on solving the YPG problem in cooperation with the USA but the USA searches for a formula that will not turn YPG, its ally in the fight against DAESH, adrift.

Turkey had already been expected to set Manbij as its next target after ending YPG control in Afrin. Turkey's military success in this operation led the USA to review its YPG policy. Within this framework, the USA felt the need to take a step in terms of Manbij, with Turkey's increasing pressure. After the meeting in which the Foreign Ministers of Turkey and the USA came together in early June 2018, it was declared that two countries agreed on a road map to follow in Manbij. The success or failure of the model to be applied in Manbij will be a development that will also seal the fate of the east of Syria. Manbij might even have significant effects on the course of Turkey-USA bilateral relations in general terms. In this regard, we believe that the issue of Manbij should be followed closely.

ORSAM Coordinator of Syrian Studies Oytun Orhan has carried out a field study in al-Bab, Cobanbey (al-Rai), Jarabulus and Azaz in the Euphrates Shield region in Syria as well as in Gaziantep and Sanliurfa, the cities bordering Syria in order to reveal a clear image in Manbij. The ORSAM analysis that you are about to read has been prepared completely on the basis of the information obtained in this field study. We hope that the study will contribute to the Manbij debates that will come to the agenda more frequently in the near future. Enjoy your reading.

Prof. Dr. Ahmet Uysal
ORSAM President

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 Prepared by: Oytun ORHAN, ORSAM Coordinator for Syria Studies

MANBIJ: DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE, DISTRIBUTION OF ARMED GROUPS AND SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

ORSAM carried out a field study in al-Bab, Cobanbey (al-Rai), Jarabulus and Azaz in the Euphrates Shield region in Syria as well as in Gaziantep and Sanliurfa, the cities bordering Syria, in order to determine the social structure of Manbij and the political-security environment there. Several meetings were held with the political, military and social leaders of Manbij during the field study. The prominent military figures of the Manbij Military Assembly, political activists and leaders of the largest Arabian tribes in Manbij were among the people attending the meetings. This report focusing on Manbij was prepared on the basis of the meetings held in the mentioned field study.

INTRODUCTION

Manbij is a city in the east of the Aleppo Governorate. The city is 35 km away from the Euphrates and 40 km away from the border with Turkey. Manbij is an important population center in eastern Aleppo. The city was demolished in the Mongol period and gained its importance again when the Ottomans settled the Circassian population in this region. Manbij is a large city both in terms of the population living there and in geographic terms. Manbij has a dense city-dwelling and educated population in the center even though the tribal structure is strongly felt across the city. It is possible to say that there is tolerance between different strata of society with regard to the social culture of Manbij. A social culture in which radical ideologies cannot find any ground is dominant in the city. Manbij also has economic importance for the reasons such as its natural resources, production and storage facilities and its role as a trade center extending from Raqqqa to Aleppo. The needs

of the region for electricity and water are met from Manbij's resources. Manbij can control the economic and natural resources as well as the trade in the geography between Aleppo and Raqqqa.

As of the beginning, Manbij city supported the civil uprising breaking out in Syria in 2011. Syrian opposition groups started the first manifestations in Manbij on 26 April 2011. Educated and city-dwelling population mostly took part in the revolutionary movement in Manbij but the people supporting tribalism did not support the revolution at first stage. An agreement was made between Syrian security forces and the opposition groups at that time and the regime did not allow civil manifestations. However, the security forces launched the intervention upon the increase in the manifestations. The armament process started after increasing regime pressure and the regime forces withdrew from Manbij without any con-

flict upon the siege of the city by armed opposition groups in the following process. Therefore, the control of Manbij was reclaimed by the opposition groups on 17 July 2012. A Revolutionary Council and a Military Council were established after the opposition took control of the city. Having started to be organized before the Assad regime had not yet left the city and representing 17 different groups, the Revolutionary Council included prominent population of the city such as lawyers, engineers, doctors. This structure played an important role in maintaining order and stability in the city and offering services after the removal of state authority. Security was ensured in the city with the formation of Revolutionary Police Forces. The regime officers continued performing their duties and trade was also sustained upon the preferences of the opposition groups. Therefore, the civil, administrative, security-related and economic system in Manbij continued to function successfully.

DAESH began to enter the city in April 2013 for the first time. It made efforts to take control of the administration in Manbij for six months. Certain problems arose between the opposition groups and DAESH in Manbij in this process. The groups in Manbij agreed among themselves to remove DAESH from Manbij in early 2014 with increasing reactions of the population to DAESH. Five opposition groups, namely Al-Tawhid Brigade, Islam Brigade, Ahrar Syria, Jund al-Harameyn and Security Brigade led by Abou Azzam compromised among each other to fight DAESH on 5 January 2014. The opposition groups besieged the headquarters of DAESH in Manbij on 7 January 2014, seized all its vehicles and removed DAESH from Manbij. The city remained

under opposition control for 15 days. The groups in Manbij went to al-Bab for help upon DAESH's reclamation of al-Bab and suffered serious losses there. DAESH attacked Manbij again in a stronger position later and Manbij was taken under full control of DAESH on 21 January 2014. The opposition groups had to withdraw to Karakozak. The most important feature of Manbij is that no conflict broke out when the city was taken under control by either the opposition groups or DAESH. Manbij constituted an example in terms of administrative and civil order and basic services since, thankfully, it never witnessed any destruction and passed the test quickly and successfully in terms of local organization. This situation accelerated the process of allowing the entry of immigrants from several regions inside Syria into the city.

There was no problem between the opposition groups and PYD/YPG until those times. However, the YPG attack targeting the opposition in Tal Rifat in 2015 was a milestone in the relations between the opposition and YPG. The USA and YPG tried to persuade the Arab opposition groups in Manbij to back the operation launched under the roof of SDF in the liberation process of Manbij from DAESH. In response to the support, the opposition groups demanded that YPG withdraw from Tishrin Dam, Tal Rifat and Manbij, the seized goods be delivered back and the tribes forced to migrate return to the regions where they used to live. When these demands were not accepted, YPG seized control of the city without the opposition groups in Manbij and established its civil-administrative and security structuring together with the representatives of the groups it could win over.

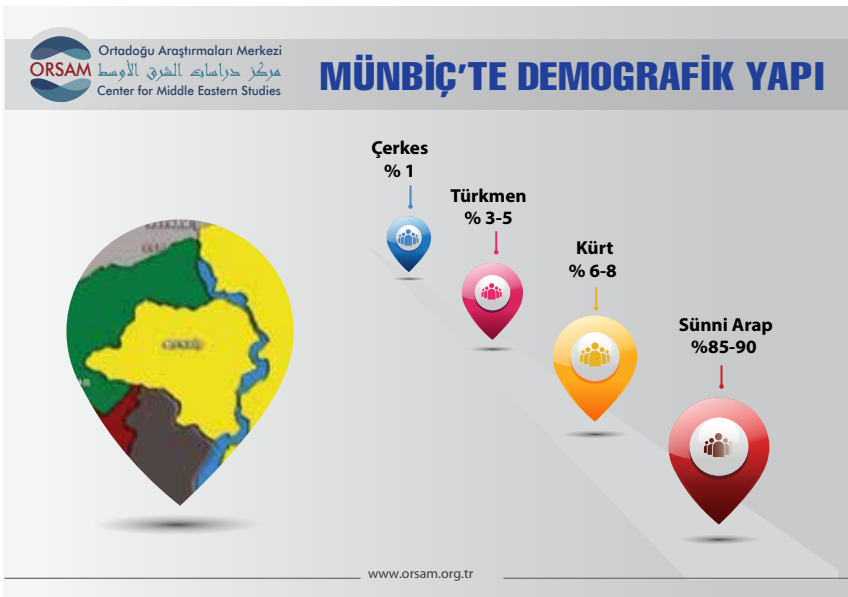
1. SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF MANBIJ AND POLITICAL POSITIONS OF THE STRATA OF SOCIETY

While Manbij is a city which comes forth with the Circassian majority settled by the Ottomans until the 1950's, it faced an intense Arab immigration especially upon the construction of Tishrin Dam. On the other hand, an important percentage of the Circassian population migrated to Russia. Manbij also received migrants from other social groups, notably the Kurds, due to the region where it is situated and its role as a trade center in the vicinity. It is possible to say that Turkmen population exists in the city at a historically significant rate.

Having regard to the demographic structure in Manbij, it seems to have a heterogeneous feature. As a result of the

demographic structure which has been changing in the last 50 years, Manbij is a city that comes forth with its Sunni Arab identity. While the population in the center of Manbij was almost 200 thousand before the public uprising, Manbij was a city that had a population of 500 thousand in total, together with the rural population. Manbij was subjected to intense internal migration during the civil war and it is estimated accordingly that the total population reached 600.000 in the city as of the end of 2017. Whereas there is no scientific study regarding the population rates of the ethnic groups in the city, the approximate population rates of the ethnic groups in Manbij are as follows according to the figures provided by local opinion leaders:

Graphic 1: Demographic Structure in Manbij



While there was a remarkable Armenian population living in Manbij in the previous periods, only one Armenian family remained in the city due to the immigration. Having regard to the distribution of religion of the Manbij population, it is seen that there is a homogeneous structure. 100% of the Manbij population is Sunni Muslim.

As indicated in the introduction, Manbij passed the test successfully in the process of public uprising and the order was maintained in the city. Accordingly, Manbij intensely received migrants after 2011 and the population in the city center reached 300.000 until January 2014 when DAESH took control of the city. The mentioned figure suddenly decreased to 50.000 after DAESH took control. On the other hand, no significant population change was registered in the rural areas of Manbij. While Manbij people migrated to Turkey the most, a certain part went to Aleppo and Afrin inside Syria. A backward immigration started with the control of SDF/YPG in the city and the population at the city center reached 300.000 as of today with the total population reaching almost 600.000 together with the rural areas.

Arab population lives heavily in each part of the city center and rural areas of Manbij. Therefore, it is not possible to limit the Arab population to a certain region while geographically distributing the ethnic groups in Manbij. However, it is still possible to say that Arab population densifies further in the south and west of the city. Kurdish population in Manbij has a six-percent rate in the city center. Kurdish population concentrates on the neighborhood known as Tarik al-Jazeera (al-Jazeera Road) in the city center. The Kurdish settlements in the rural areas are mostly situated in the west of the center. Arabs living in Manbij state that a considerable number of actual Kurds living in Manbij politically side with the opposition groups and keep away from the idea of PYD/PKK. As a sign to this, it is shown that there is

a high number of Kurdish civilians escaping PYD in Manbij. The Turkmen villages in Manbij are settled in the north of the city center. There are 8 Turkmen villages in the north of the city. Turkmens at the city center exist at a parallel rate with their population across the city.

Tribes come forth in the social structure of Manbij. It is even possible to say that Manbij is a city of tribes. There is a tribal system in all the rural areas and even in the center of Manbij. The largest tribe in Manbij is Bubenne and includes 7 tribes in total. There are 75 villages belonging to Bubenne tribe in Manbij. The Bubennes concentrate on the eastern and western rural areas of Manbij. The members of Bubenne tribe also live around Tishrin Dam. The largest tribe after Bubenne in Manbij is Beni Said. Arabs who are members of Beni Said tribe generally live in the settlements in the east of the Euphrates. Another large tribe is al-Walda. This tribe has 40 villages around al-Khafsaa. The other Arab tribes living in Manbij are as follows: Ghanayem, Bu Sultan, Demelka, Jaabra, el-Henadi, el-Amerat, al-Nayfad, al-Harraj (concentrating around the Sajur), Ajlan, al-Glaz, Bu Battush, Jays, al-Wardat, Busarra, al-Oun, Beni Ghilad.

There is a roof structuring called al-Hosh (Yard) formed by several tribes in Manbij. There are 7 tribes in total inside al-Hosh and the largest tribes inside it are al-Harraj and Ghanayem, notably Beni Said. The others are relatively small tribes. Apart from this, there is a great number of Arab Bedouins coming from outside Manbij and they are called al-Hadar. Turkmens are mostly in the form of families in Manbij but Arabs call them Turkmen tribe as a whole.

The following table is presented having regard to the political positions of different strata of society in Manbij.

Those who took part first in the anti-regime manifestations in Manbij were the

middle and upper class living in the center, well-educated and young population. The mentioned population still constitutes all the prominent political and military figures of the Arab opposition groups that have the largest grassroots in Manbij. All social groups are among these without making any ethnic discrimination.

The political positions of the tribes vary according to the balances of power. Besides, different branches and leaders of the same tribe may side with the actors that compete with each other at the same time. The tribes acted together with the regime that was the strongest actor at the beginning of the revolution as required by their

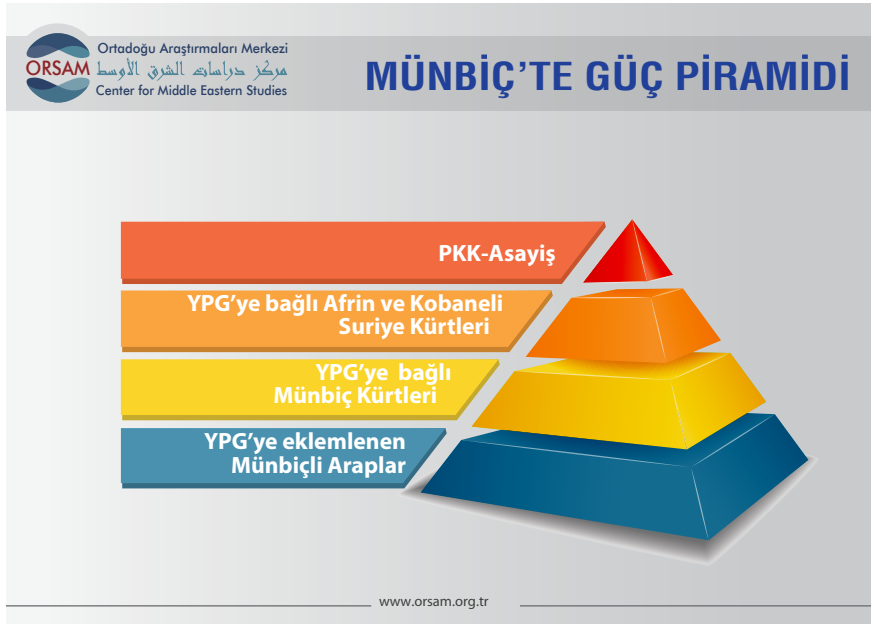
pragmatic attitudes and they did not take part in the public uprising. The Assad regime had already used the tribes in Manbij extremely effectively since the past in order to ensure the security of the regime. The tribe leaders in Manbij became deputies in the Syria Council and the tribes were granted authority and privileges on local level. On the other hand, it can be said that the tribes feel closer to the FSA. Indeed, a significant part of the tribes act together with the FSA. A branch of all the mentioned large tribes sided with the FSA. It can even be said that the tribes acting together with the regime and YPG might align themselves with the opposition groups so easily.

2. MILITARY STRUCTURING IN MANBIJ

The military authority is divided into two structures in Manbij. The first one is Manbij Military Council which is seemingly the most powerful military structuring and its affiliates. The second structure which is the essential decision-making power in Manbij is PKK/YPG structuring. Mostly people living in Manbij take part in the Manbij Military Council and Arabs and Kurds are mixed in it. On the other hand, Kurds coming from outside Manbij, notably from Turkey, Afrin and Kobani join PKK/YPG structuring.

A military power distribution can be made as follows in Manbij. Turkey-origin PKK members who come from Qandil and do not speak Arabic are at the top of the military hierarchy. Syrian Kurds who are YPG members coming from Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) are at the second step of the power pyramid while Kurds living in Manbij are at the third step. The Arab population that PYD/YPG tries to add to its structure from local resources is at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Graphic 2: Power Pyramid in Manbij



It is possible to roughly classify the military structure established by PKK/YPG into two major groups.

2.a. Manbij Military Council

Manbij Military Council was established as a result of the meeting held on 2 April 2016. Everyone in the Council comes from Manbij. While it constitutes a mixed power of Arabs and Kurds, both Arabs have a lower number of fighters and command posts are not granted to Arabs. The seemingly largest groups in Manbij is Manbij Military Council. “Border Protection Forces” are formed under the roof of Manbij Military Council.

The local militia affiliated with Manbij Military Council are as follows:

Jund al-Harameyn: It is formed by Arabs living in Manbij. Ibrahim al-Bannawi is the leader of this group. Al-Bannawi also

serves as Deputy Head of Manbij Military Council.

Shamsi Shimal Brigade: It is a mixed group of Arabs and Kurds coming from Manbij. Even though its fighters include Arabs, Kurds in Manbij undertake the commandship. The highest administrative level of Shamsi Shimal ideologically has a full PKK mindset. However, the limited number of Arabs and even some part of Kurds inside Shamsi Shimal keep away from PKK mindset.

Manbij Revolutionarist Company (Kataib Thuwar Manbij): The leader of Thuwar Manbij is Khafal Moustapha.

Shuhada al-Qubba: The fighters of this relatively small group are deployed in the east of the Euphrates. Although this group includes SDF, it is an Arabic group which fully protects its own villages.

It is also known that groups called Euphrates Brigades Community (Tajammu

Graphic 3: Manbij Military Council



Alwiyat al-Firat) which is relatively small, Al-Wiyat Tahrar al-Firat (Euphrates Liberation Brigades) and Qatain Khamza Zaza (Khamza Zaza Brigade) exist besides these groups.

It is doubtful whether especially Arab elements in Manbij Military Council are affiliated with SDF. It can be said that several groups and fighters have to act together with PKK/YPG since they stay in Manbij. Therefore, it is possible to say that SDF structuring in Manbij is a delicate structure and it can fall apart depending on the balance of power in the city.

2.b. PKK – Asayish forces

Although Manbij Military Council is in the visible part of the military structuring

in Manbij, the real powers and decision makers in Manbij are PKK and Asayish forces. All the military senior administration in Manbij is formed by Turkey-origin PKK members and none of them even speaks Arabic. Taking into consideration together with the members in Afrin, the number of PKK/YPG members is around 350-400 in Manbij. PKK has camps in Sirrin and Tishrin Dams within the boundaries of Manbij as well as its camp in the vicinity of al-Khafsa. The military power and camps of PKK are situated outside the center of Manbij and PKK's special forces, Asayish is at the center of Manbij. The most powerful figure in Manbij is YPG commander Jamil Mazloum.

3.

Graphic 4: Structuring of PKK/YPG in Manbij and Prominent Figures



3. MILITARY RIVALS OF PKK/YPG IN MANBIJ

It is possible to mention about two main blocs trying to end the control of PKK / YPG in Manbij. In this regard, it can be said that there are two main initiatives, one of which is launched by Syrian Regime/Iran and the other by Manbij Military Council. The efforts of Iran and the regime for military organization in Manbij still remain poor Iran-backed militia and the groups affiliated with this alliance might be expected to gain strength in parallel with the strengthening of the regime in the rural areas of Aleppo and in the vicinity of Raqqqa. The militia under the regime acts in coordination with PKK/YPG for the time being but there is high possibility of conflict between them in the future. Another alternative military structuring is Manbij Military Council formed by the fighters in FSA coming from Manbij.

3.a. The Regime and Iranian Military Activities in Manbij

Iran and the regime try to form local militia similar to al-Hashd al-Shaabi structuring in Iraq. These efforts are still at the beginning level and are not so efficient. The militia formed in Manbij region with the support of Iran Revolutionary Guards and al-Assad regime forces are as follows:

Militia Forces led by al-Mashi: Bubenne tribe is an armed unit led by Mohammed Khayr al-Mashi, a member of the tribe. It was established with the support of Syrian regime and Iran. It carries out activities in the region between Manbij and al-Khafsa. All its fighters are from Bubenne tribe. Total number of fighters is around

100. Even though Mohammed Khayr al-Mashi seems affiliated with the regime and Iran, it is stated that his only purpose is to protect his own regions. The relations between the group and Iran and the regime is associated with its interests and it is considered as a group which can easily change its position if necessary conditions exist.

Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi: It is a Manbij-origin local militia established with the guidance of Iran. Mouammar al-Dandan (Abou Fateh) assumes its leadership. Another name of this group is Fawj Asha'ir Manbij (Tribes of Manbij Regiment). Its leader had a Sunni Arab identity but is described as a Shiitized person. Although this group gives an image of Syria nationalist, its Shiite identity outweighs as understood from its name.

Syrian regime does not have its own military forces directly in Manbij. However, the regime officials, notably from the Intelligence unit, hold negotiations in Manbij from time to time. Even though the regime and Iran make efforts to establish an alternative military structure in Manbij, they are at a quite weak point for the time being.

3.b. b. Manbij origin fighters in the FSA

There is no group in the FSA which makes direct efforts regarding Manbij. However, Manbij citizens known for their good fighter identity are present in almost all FSA groups. Several FSA commanders and fighters that first cleared the city from DAESH and then had to leave them to

DAESH maintain their struggle in different opposition units. Manbij citizens even hold almost all the cadres of leaders and fighters of the group at hand in some FSA groups. Manbij-origin fighters sustaining the war in different groups established Manbij Military Council. This structure is an organization coordinating Manbij citizens in different groups under one roof and Manbij citizens take part of Military Council no matter which group they fight for. Manbij citizens in the FSA are mostly fighters in the Euphrates Shield region

and especially in Jarabulus. The groups formed by Manbij-origin citizens in the FSA are Liwa Shimal, Ahrar al-Sham, Sultan Murat Brigade, Faylaq al-Sham and Ahfad Army.

25 thousand Manbij-origin civilians live in total in the Euphrates Shield region in addition to armed Manbij citizens. They mostly live in Jarabulus and Azaz. Furthermore, it is known that there are also many Manbij-origin civilians in Turkey while the exact number remains unknown.

Graphic 5: Military Rivals of YPG/PKK in Manbij



4. SDF ORDER IN MANBIJ AND LEGITIMACY OF THE ORDER

Since DAESH did not have an appropriate order of administration for the social structure of Manbij, its legitimacy was quite weak among the public. As the pressure of the coalition forces and YPG on DAESH increased in Manbij, the pressure of the organization also concentrated on the public. With the increase in the problems with offering basic services and meeting the needs, Manbij citizens wanted to get rid of DAESH as quickly as possible. As indicated by a Manbij citizen in an interview during the field study, “DAESH loomed over Manbij like a nightmare.” Therefore, the only wish of the people under DAESH control was to be liberated from DAESH and Manbij citizens sided with whatever power that would liberate them from DAESH. That is why they did not object to YPG when it entered the city.

Manbij people started to change their approach to YPG administration in time. It can be said that there are a few reasons for this. First of all, Manbij people see YPG/PYD as part of PKK terrorist organization while they find Kurds close to themselves. Manbij citizens have not opened up to PKK since the past. Secondly, an important part of Manbij people sees Syrian regime as the biggest enemy. Manbij people show reactions to PYD/YPG due to its connections with the regime. Even several Manbij-origin interviewees do not discriminate between the regime and PYD/YPG. Another reason is that PYD/YPG really increases its pressure and acts with an understanding favoring Kurdish population while trying to give an impression of legitimate, fair administration. The last factor that negatively affects PYD/YPG legitimacy in the city is the increasing problems with basic services.

Forced migration was witnessed under PYD/YPG control even though it was seen in Manbij on a lower level than Tal Abyad. The most striking example of this is the displacement of the entire al-Tai tribe keeping the transit through the Euphrates under its control. PKK/YPG resorts to forced migration practice for the regions that it sees strategically important in Manbij but this does not turn into a general tendency including a significant part of the civilian society as in the example of Tal Abyad. YPG/PYD seizing the goods of Manbij citizens is a frequently witnessed situation. PYD has established an institution affiliated with Civilian Council under the name of “Public Goods” in Manbij. According to the decision taken in the regions under PYD/YPG control, if a house is used by DAESH, the latter is entitled to seize that house. Secondly, if a house is empty, this house can also be seized. However, it is increasingly seen that the goods are seized for political reasons apart from the abovementioned examples. It is indicated that PYD/YPG seizes the goods of Manbij citizens depending on three factors. Firstly, if a person is Arab or Turkmen, it is highly possible for that person to face problems. Kurds’ goods are not seized and Kurds who are taken from other regions might be settled in the seized houses if not to a great extent. Secondly, if there are Manbij citizens who carry out political activities in the Euphrates Shield region or Turkey, their goods or those of their relatives are seized. Thirdly, the houses and goods of all Manbij citizens and their relatives carrying out activities in the FSA are seized.

A Manbij Civil Council that it alleges to represent Manbij citizens has been

formed by PYD/YPG. This structure is responsible for all civil administration in the city. The co-chairs of Civil Council are Farouq al-Mashi and PYD member Sozdar Khalid (Sozdar Xalid). Ibrahim Kaftan serves as the Mayor. PYD tries to organize the people by establishing some nongovernmental organizations. “Ittihat Shabiba Rojawa” that is a youth NGO comprised of Arabs and Kurds can be given as an example of this.

It is possible to say that Manbij has an advantageous position in terms of offer-

ing basic services. Differently from the Euphrates Shield region, Manbij can meet the water, electricity and other economic needs of the city by means of its own resources. Despite this, there are signs showing that the problems regarding the basic services increase in Manbij. Manbij interviewees stated that electricity was provided for two hours in the city in the last period and the situation was much worse than the times under DAESH control in terms of water supply. PYD also collects taxes in Manbij. No electricity or water is provided if the tax is not paid.

CONCLUSION

PKK/YPG will not give up Manbij as long as the US protection continues. PKK signs that it will be permanent in Manbij. The organization has changed the name of Manbij as “Mabouq”. It has seized the goods of FSA members and political opposition groups. However, PKK/YPG is aware that it is almost impossible for it to maintain its authority in Manbij in an environment where the US protection ends. In such case, there are more powerful and higher number of actors that are ready to challenge PKK/YPG authority. The moment when the US protection ends, Turkey will fight and Syrian regime will compromise to enter Manbij. Secondly, the structure established by PKK/YPG in Manbij stands fully on the basis of power and interests, but not upon the consent. It is highly possible for this extremely delicate structure to fall apart in case of a slightest sign of weakness. Therefore, PKK/YPG is aware of the other possible scenarios although it plans to have a permanent position in Manbij and it makes preparations to this end.

If the possibilities for PKK/YPG to survive in Manbij become lower, one of the scenarios regarding the future of the city is the return of the Syrian regime forces to the city. However, there is low possibility for this scenario to come true due to the vital importance of the US protection for YPG. YPG’s engagement with the regime, thus with Iran, might bring the end of US-YPG alliance.

YPG has benefitted from the FSA pressure on the regime since the beginning of the civil war and it has gained authority in large areas almost without spending energy. With the weakening of the FSA

threat to the regime, this time Syrian regime wants to easily reclaim the regions it entrusted to YPG by using Turkey’s pressure on YPG. If the US protection over PKK/YPG becomes poorer, YPG might want to control Manbij in coordination with the regime or hand over the control of Manbij to the regime in return for the gains in other fields which are of more strategic importance to it. PKK/YPG is seen to keep the door open in terms of this scenario. The regime forces also carry out activities to return to Manbij. Even though the military efforts of the regime are at a poor level, it tries to be influential by means of the tribes and opinion leader in Manbij. In case of the entry of the regime into Manbij, it is expected that at least half of the population in Manbij will abandon the city.

In the statement that Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad made to the Russian media in June 2018, he indicated that “the regions under YPG control would be taken back through either negotiations or use of power” and gave the message that eastern Syria might be the next target. The USA gave a harsh response to the initiative of the regime forces to pass to the east of the Euphrates by killing more than Syrian soldiers, pro-Iran militia and hired Russian soldiers. Therefore, it is not realistic for the regime forces to launch a military operation in a region under US protection. The regime will look for the ways of returning to the east of Syria by resorting to compromise with YPG as the first option. The negotiations started for this purpose between the parties. However, it is highly possible that the regime will wage a “war of attrition” against the USA and YPG unless any agreement is concluded through

negotiations. In this very environment, 70 tribe representatives from Aleppo, Raqqa and al-Hasakah came together and declared that “they formed a new power in order to clear the east of Syria from the foreign powers”. Even though the formation of this pro-regime power does not mean a lot in military terms, it is meaningful in terms of showing what kind of method Syria may use in the fight against the USA, France and YPG at the following phase. The regime gives the message that it will spoil the game in eastern Syria by using local dynamics and will turn this region into an unsafe area for the USA. It might also determine a similar method for Manbij.

Despite these efforts of the regime, Turkey has also increased its pressure on Manbij in recent times. These pressures have forced the USA to find a common ground between NATO ally Turkey and terror organization YPG in Manbij. The USA wants to diminish Turkey’s pressure on one hand and does not want to turn YPG that it has formed alliance with in the fight against DAESH adrift on the other hand. These efforts brought results as of June 2018 and the USA and Turkey compromised on the route to be followed in Manbij. According to this, PKK will withdraw from the region, the US and Turkish armies will provide joint surveillance in the region, a new civil council will be formed for Manbij and the way for the civilians coming from Manbij will be opened to turn back home. Turkey demands that the same process be followed also for the east of Syria if Manbij model becomes successful.

Although the compromise reached with regard to Manbij does not seem sufficient for Turkey, it might be preferred due to the results that might be faced in the future since the skeleton of PKK at the top of the power pyramid in Manbij will abandon the city, as far as it is understood, but the SDF structuring under it will maintain its presence in the city. Besides, Turkish army will not enter the city but it will only join the US military points located on the

border with the Euphrates Shield region. Thirdly, Manbij Civil Council will not be abolished but some names will change. Therefore, the Manbij table emerging as a result of Turkey-US compromise is not a final image that Turkey wants to see. However, the mentioned steps that will be taken will trigger the developments that will strengthen the anti-YPG approach in Manbij in time. Above all, the elimination of the pressure of PKK skeleton in the city will change the internal balances of power. It might alter the positions of Arabs allying with YPG on local level. Turkey might change the balance with the names it will suggest for the civil administration of the city. Although the city is not under the control of Turkish soldiers, their presence around the city and the possibility of entering the city for supervision from time to time might be useful for the restriction of YPG activities. The most important change can be witnessed with the possibility for Manbij-origin civilians in Turkey and Euphrates Shield region to turn back home. In this case, the pressure of dense population will diminish in Turkey and Euphrates Shield region. Secondly, Manbij population turning back home will change the balances of power in the city to the detriment of YPG. A significant part of those who live outside Manbij are people who had to escape the city due to YPG pressure.

Turkey has to coordinate its activities and military engagements with Russia in the west of the Euphrates. On the other hand, the USA is the addressee of Turkey in the fight against YPG in Manbij and the east of the Euphrates. Turkey is not expected to end the fight due to the vital nature of the YPG-originated problem. Therefore, Turkey and the USA will come face to face unless an agreement is concluded in Manbij and the east of the Euphrates. In this case, Turkey will initiate a long-lasting struggle in which it will have to spend a lot of energy, time and sources in order to clear Manbij and the Euphrates from YPG. That is why the most favorable option for

Turkey is to solve the YPG problem in the mentioned fields by compromising with the USA. On the other hand, a compromise with the USA might risk Turkey's military engagements in the west of the Euphrates, the Astana process and its cooperation with Russia and Iran. Turkey-US compromise turning into a comprehensi-

ve cooperation might mean that Turkey will be open to regime-driven attacks in Idlib, Euphrates Shield and Afrin. Therefore, one of the greatest difficulties that Turkish foreign policy will face in the following period will be to dress the delicate balance between the USA and Russia.