



A Syrian man pushes a wheelbarrow past collapsed buildings 14 August 2016 in the northern Syrian town of Manbij as civilians returned to their homes after Syrian Democratic Forces and U.S. special operations forces liberated the town from Islamic State control. (Photo by Delil Souleiman, Agence France-Presse)

Civil Authority in Manbij, Syria

Using Civil Affairs to Implement Stabilization Activities in Nonpermissive Environments

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Author's note: The following is based on personal experience while serving in the Civil Affairs Operations Division (CAOD), J3 Operations, Headquarters U.S. Central Command, and on operational reporting from the lead-up to the liberation of Manbij, beginning in July 2016 to the present. During this time, the CAOD was responsible for creating briefings for the Central Command commander and briefing coalition senior national

representatives on the development of the civil authorities in northeast Syria, for coordinating with the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development on humanitarian aid, and for working with the Special Operations Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve civil affairs team charged with providing humanitarian assistance and mapping the civil domain in northwest Syria.



Background

“Providing security, maintaining basic public order, and providing for the immediate needs of the population” are core Department of Defense (DOD) stabilization tasks as defined in DOD Directive (DODD) 3000.05, *Stabilization*.¹ In most cases, these activities occur in nonpermissive environments during and immediately following combat operations. Due to the insecure nature of these environments, the Department of State (DOS), the overall lead for stabilization activities, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the lead for stabilization activities implementation, may not be able to lead stabilization activities on the ground. In these types of environments, if directed and given the authorities required, DOD can assume the lead for implementing stabilization activities until it is feasible to transition lead responsibility back to other U.S. government departments and agencies. However, for this to be effective, there must be a shared stabilization plan developed collectively by DOS, USAID, and DOD. And when practical, planning should include coalition and regional partners, partner forces, and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). In cases where DOD is required to lead stabilization activities, civil affairs teams are an excellent asset to employ in order to consolidate military gains and enable the transition back to civil control.

The chairperson of the Social Services Committee of the Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij discusses plans for dealing with the return of residents displaced during Islamic State (IS) occupation at a 9 August 2018 meeting in Manbij, Syria. People began returning home to Manbij after Syrian Democratic Forces liberated the area from IS in 2016. (Photo by Sgt. Nicole Paese, U.S. Army)

Recently, this is exactly what occurred in northeastern Syria, as Special Operations Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve, with the assistance of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partner forces, fought to defeat the Islamic State (IS) and liberate the towns and cities from IS rule. The liberation and subsequent stabilization of Manbij, Syria, highlighted numerous gaps between the entities involved with stabilization activities and provided important lessons on the planning effort required among local civil authorities, DOD, DOS, and USAID in nonpermissive environments following combat operations, as well as on the consequences of a lack of joint planning.

Liberation

In August 2016, the military arm of the Syrian Democratic Council—the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—with the assistance of U.S. special operations advisors, conducted operations to liberate portions of Aleppo Governorate (specifically, Manbij and

surrounding areas). IS had occupied and governed Manbij since 2014, replacing its leadership, overseeing essential services, and conducting religious and ethnic cleansing to conform to its religious views. As the SDF approached the final phases of liberating

the city, special operations forces (SOF) civil affairs (CA) teams from the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) that were a part of the U.S. advisory package were tasked with consolidating operational gains in Manbij and its environs. Due to the potential for



Members of the Syrian Democratic Forces discuss further operations 12 August 2016 in the Syrian city of Manbij shortly after a fierce fight to liberate it from Islamic State control. (Screenshot of video courtesy of Voice of America)



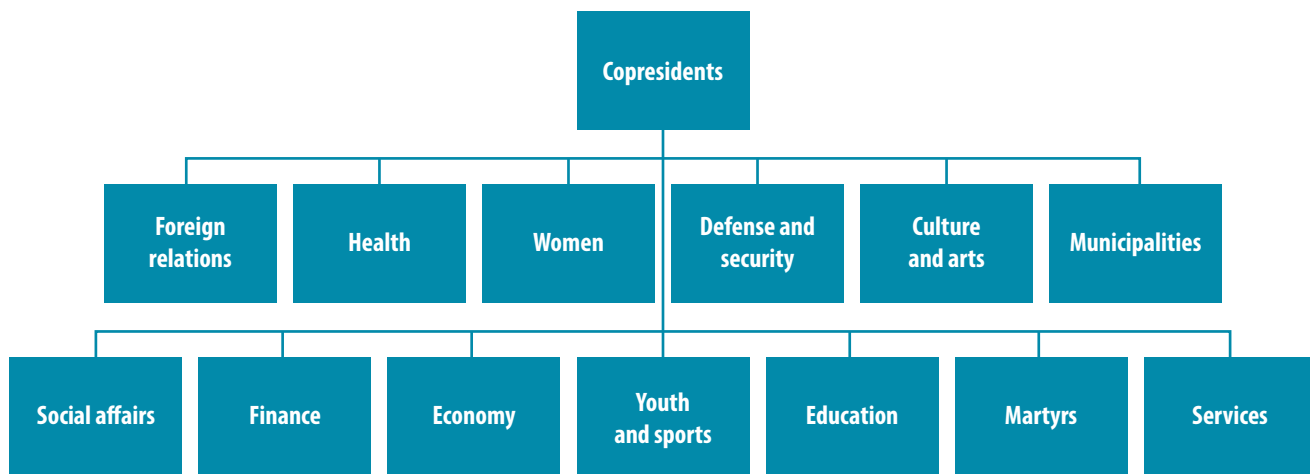
Manbij is located near Syria's border with Turkey and close to Aleppo and Raqqa, the two key northern Syrian cities that Islamic State jihadists used to control the territory they had seized in an attempt to establish the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. (Map courtesy of BBC)

IS sleeper cells to be operating in the area and high numbers of improvised explosive devices left behind by IS defenders throughout the area, the environment was considered nonpermissive, preventing DOS and USAID from deploying people to the city.

As a result of the nonpermissive environment, there emerged growing disconnects between what USAID implementing partners (for the most part local NGOs hired to provide immediate humanitarian assistance) were reporting back to USAID’s Syria Transition Assistance and Response Team (START) located in Ankara, Turkey, and the reports from SOF CA teams that were on the ground in the city. The NGOs reported no issues within the city, even though they had not been able to operate close to the city, and initially

Civil Council Formation

As liberation operations progressed, the local population self-organized and, with assistance in the form of advice and mentoring from SOF CA teams, established a governance entity in the form of the Manbij Civil Council (MCC)—later renamed the Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij and its surroundings (see figure 1).² The MCC was created with the support of local tribal elders and support of the SDF who liberated the city and enjoyed a high level of popular support. To help assuage Turkish concerns over perceived influence by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the People Protection Units (YPG)—who are considered terrorists because of their affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)—the SDF commander,



(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij and Its Surroundings, 12 March 2017

numbered fewer than five NGOs in the entire Manbij District of the Aleppo Governorate. Conversely, the SOF CA teams inside the city reported an absence of medical support, a shortage of food, no electricity, a lack of drinkable water, decomposing bodies of dead IS fighters in the streets, increasing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the vicinity, and increasing levels of garbage throughout the city. This growing disconnect would lead to a sharp difference between START and the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) in perceived humanitarian support requirements for the residents of the city during the first few months of U.S. operations in the Manbij area.

Gen. Mazloun Kobani, ensured he clearly communicated his intent to allow the MCC to govern the region free of SDF influence while it moved operations forward to continue its offensive to defeat IS east of the Euphrates.

The MCC was formed along the lines of the Kurdish form of government common in northeast Syria with male and female copresidents (one Arab, one Kurd) overseeing up to thirteen committees (also overseen by male and female cochairs) with various subcommittees and membership levels under them. In addition, one of the precepts of this organization was ensuring all ethnicities were represented in proportion to their respective percentage of the population to



Men repair a road 11 July 2018 in a village outside Manbij, Syria. Reconstruction and maintenance efforts are a sign of the safety and stability that has returned to the region since the Syrian Democratic Forces liberated it from the Islamic State. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Timothy R. Koster, U.S. Army)

ensure a truly representative governing body. While not democratically elected, personnel were selected by a representative vote conducted by tribal elders who voted on behalf of their respective tribes.

While popular with the Kurds and enjoying strong Arab support at the time, the MCC did not receive favorable views from either Turkey or START (because of its remote location in Ankara and possible influence from its association with the government of Turkey). The Syrian regime for its part did not support the MCC, but it was not in a position to actively work against it due to the ongoing civil war in much of the country and its existential fight against IS in other areas.

The creation of the MCC occurred without much fanfare in a city desperate for a return to normalcy after years of enduring civil war and IS rule. However, it was not without concern. With competing international and ethnic agendas (from the Syrian regime, Russia, Turkey, Arabs, Kurds, IS, and the United States, to name just a few) and tribal

allegiances (some tribes in the area strongly supported IS, others were strongly against IS, and still others treated governance in the region on a very transactional basis, switching allegiance to whoever was perceived to be the strongest at the time), the MCC was desperate for international support and sponsorship. There was, and still are, no salaries provided to the members of the MCC who hold leadership roles in a volunteer status. There is also no funding for essential services or government operations as of this publication, though some taxation has begun to help provide subsidies for basic essentials and fuel. Because the MCC is not recognized by the international community, there cannot be any official funding of their operations (or to any civil council in northeast Syria) from the United Nations or other international governing bodies. It relies instead on funding provided by donors—the vast majority of which is limited in scope as to what donations can be spent on or what project the monies can support (versus paying



Larry Bartlett, senior advisor for the Syrian Transition Assistance Response Team, and Ambassador William V. Roebuck meet with members of the Democratic Civilian Administration of Manbij to discuss the safety and stability of the city on the two-year anniversary of its liberation from the Islamic State 9 August 2018 in Manbij, Syria. The group discussed topics such as education, civil affairs, and media. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Izabella Sullivan, U.S. Air Force)

salaries or using as a budget to pay for rebuilding the essential service infrastructure).

Competing Interests—the Beginning of the End Game

It is important to understand some of the underlying dynamics in the region that heavily influenced the initial support for and against the MCC, as these contentious points continue between Turkey, the Kurds, the United States, and the Syrian regime.

The last pre-IS civil council that governed Manbij fled to Turkey when IS took control of the city. It became known as the Azaz Council, named after the city of Azaz, Syria, where some of its members operated from while the remainder of the council fled to Turkey. Overwhelmingly Arab in composition, the Azaz Council enjoyed an enduring relationship with USAID's START and the international community prior to the liberation of Manbij due to their close ties to Turkey and the ease with which they could communicate with START.

USAID, the lead federal agency for humanitarian aid (and potential community rebuilding), created START as a platform to further U.S. foreign policy

goals with regard to northern Syria. START leadership initiated a major push to reinstall the Azaz Council, as, from START's perspective and the council's close ties in Turkey, this entity was the legitimate governing body of Manbij. However, the Azaz Council's poor reputation amongst the populace, its inactivity as it related to contributions from the international community, and its close connections to Turkey led to reticence by the population of Manbij to reconcile with the Azaz Council. The Manbij populace, by and large, considered the Azaz Council and the Azaz leadership as being comprised of corrupt politicians and thieves, largely due to a common perception that they fled the city with considerable amounts of public money. Some residents continue to call for a trial to address this violation of the public trust. The self-organized and indigenously staffed MCC claimed to have no communication or ties to the Azaz Council, although the MCC has encouraged them to return to Manbij and take roles in the reconstruction of the city while setting early on the expectation that returning members would not be given leadership roles until they had reintegrated themselves and proven themselves to the people who lived in the city.

The Push for Humanitarian Aid

Evident immediately after the liberation of Manbij was a gap in the delivery of humanitarian aid and the slow return of essential services to the city's residents. This aid gap came to last over three months, and it became a point of contention between START and USCENTCOM, as well as a looming humanitarian disaster. The NGOs locally contracted to provide aid to residents of Manbij were reporting back to their START counterparts that aid was being delivered; however, where and to whom was in dispute. Civil affairs teams in the city reported there were no NGOs operating in the city limits and watched for weeks as the humanitarian situation continued to decline. Finally, the issue came to a head when Gen. Joseph Votel, USCENTCOM commander, approved the issuance of humanitarian aid without concurrence from USAID. It was not until Special Presidential Envoy Brent McGurk visited the city personally, saw the crisis, and directed USAID/START to "fix it immediately" that START (1) began accepting civil affairs teams' reporting as factual and (2) set up START-FWD as a forward element working inside northeast Syria to get a better view of what the ground truth was.

One of the MCC's committees formed a volunteer group that became known as the Manbij Organization for Relief and Development (MORD). Upon Manbij's liberation, the MORD assumed the lead role as the implementer of the \$1.5 million Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) program created by the SOF CA teams operating in Manbij.

The MORD was comprised of young activists educated at Aleppo and Raqqa universities who were motivated to strengthen their hometown through a civil society that stood on its own and proved to be an effective implementing partner. Prior to any distribution of assistance to the local population, the MORD deconflicted with other aid agencies, coordinated with the MCC, and coordinated for security. This set the conditions whereby they could unilaterally retrieve and transport payloads of aid from an OHDACA-utilized warehouse and subsequently distribute it to the people of Manbij and elsewhere. This nearly immediate distribution of humanitarian assistance following Manbij's liberation (prior to the ability of NGOs to act) was vital in meeting basic human needs and replicating essential service shortfalls, which was critical in

securing the victory and setting conditions to prevent the reemergence of IS.

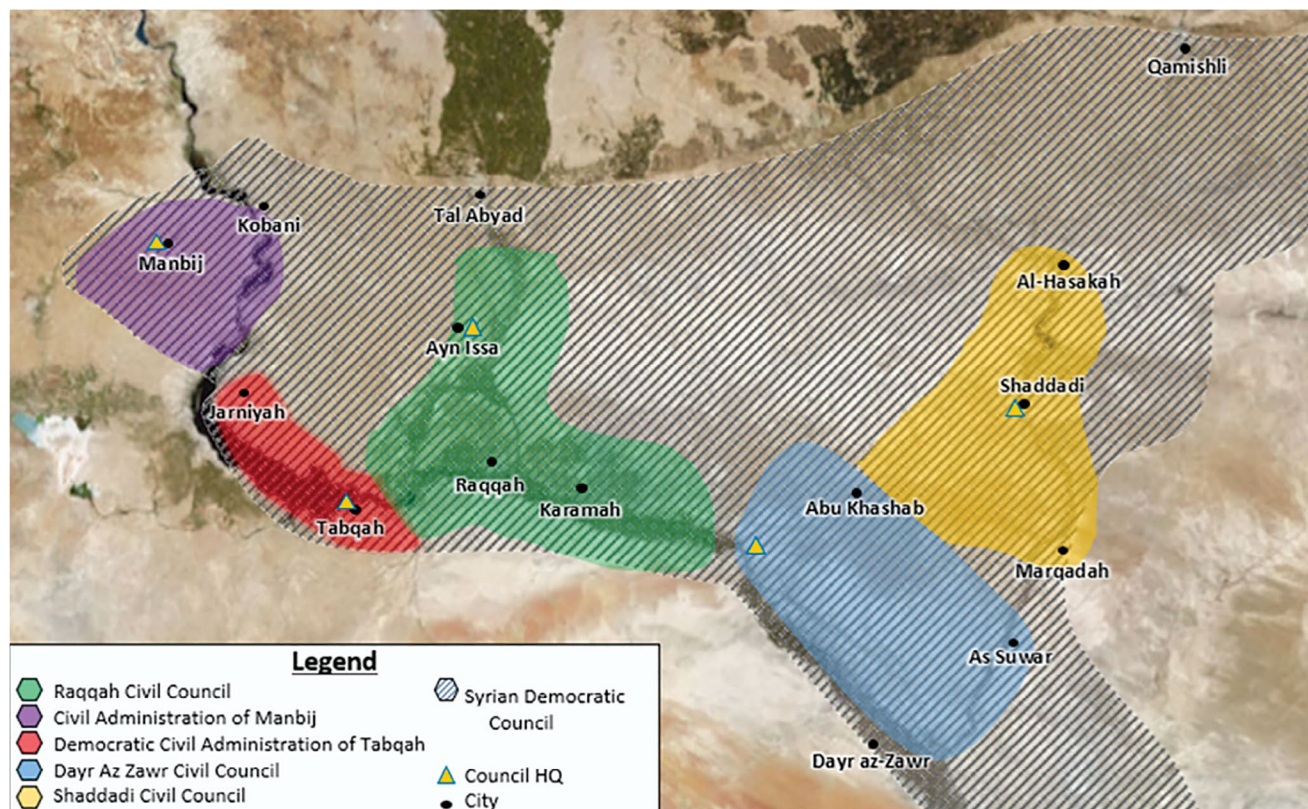
Even with the MORD assisting in the coordination and collaboration with NGOs, there was a constant pull between the MORD and NGOs who operated outside their construct. These NGOs in many cases were providing the same types of essentials as those working with the MORD, but because they were distinctly separate, those NGOs began to have influence that pulled from the legitimacy of the newly formed MCC. One of the lessons learned early was the MORD could not force NGOs to work with them—every NGO has its own mission, restrictions, and operations. Instead, the MORD had to engage and build those relationships first and then attempt to deconflict efforts.

MCC Compared to Other Civil Councils

As the SDF continued its advance against IS and liberated other cities in northeast Syria, there quickly followed the creation of additional civil councils using the same framework as the MCC (see figure 2, page 8). Much of the same euphoria met these new civil councils because they represented hope and freedom from IS. But because the organization of the civil councils followed a Kurdish model, the farther southeast the SDF pushed, the more easily these civil councils were challenged, as the Arab minorities became Arab majorities, even though in practice Arabs held as many, if not more, positions of leadership in the inclusive Kurdish governance model.

Raqqa Civil Council. As the SDF crossed the Euphrates and began its approach to Raqqa, several of the lessons learned from Manbij were applied. The aid gap evident after the liberation of Manbij was acknowledged, and civil affairs provided additional OHDACA funding; key infrastructure points were identified that would need immediate rebuilding or refurbishment; NGOs operating in the region stockpiled humanitarian assistance in the form of food, hygiene products, and nonperishable items (e.g., blankets, heaters, and fuel); and several IDP camps were preplanned for the expected civilians fleeing the city. START was intimately involved and eager to avoid a repeat of the gap in provision of the humanitarian aid that had followed the liberation of Manbij.

Similar to the MCC, the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC) developed from internal pressures to identify civil leaders who had remained behind in the city



(Figure courtesy of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (SOJTF-OIR J9) Human Terrain Analysis Branch at the request of the author)

Figure 2. Assessed Civil Council Areas of Influence as of January 2018

through the civil war and subsequent IS occupation. The RCC organizers refused to consider allowing previous civil leaders who had fled to Turkey an opportunity to assume previously held leadership positions. The RCC's stance was to welcome back any previous resident of the city and incorporate them as volunteers into one of the committees; only then, after having proven themselves, could they begin working their way back into leadership positions.

The largest hurdle the RCC would face would be the move from Ein Issa (north of Raqqah), where it operated preliberation, to the city itself once Raqqah was cleared of IS fighters. The level of devastation was well beyond that experienced by Manbij or Tabqah (a city fifty-five kilometers west of Raqqah), approaching apocalyptic levels seen in West Mosul as whole neighborhoods had been destroyed. To this day, there are only a few neighborhoods with running water, no electricity, and minimal medical services outside the least damaged areas of the city. While schools have started

again, many are underserved, lacking running water for students and only serving primary-age children. Children in secondary school (grades 6-12) are without schools across almost the whole of the city. The initial euphoria that came from the liberation of the city has worn off, and many residents are increasingly resentful of a civil council that has been unable to make faster and wider improvements (although arguably, without international funding, any council would find the job of reconstruction insurmountable).

Other regional civil councils. Civil councils were formed across northeast Syria in Tabqah, Shaddadi, Deir ez-Zor, and other villages along the same civil council construct. For the most part, these civil councils still enjoy the support of the local population but increasingly are frustrated by the slow return to normalcy with working essential services, as the international community refuses to provide any assistance that could benefit Assad's regime in the long term. As a result, most improvements provide bandages to systemic

problems that can only be solved through a large influx of reconstruction monies.

Understanding the Elephant in the Room—Opportunity Lost?

Fast forward two years and the civil council in Manbij has developed and become a magnet for displaced persons looking for an area where stability has taken hold. Essential services are available. Health services are present. Markets are thriving. Normalcy has returned—but maybe not for long.



A young man and a girl browse at a market 12 July 2018 in Manbij, Syria. Residents of Manbij and the surrounding areas have the freedom to visit markets and stores without the threat of the Islamic State since the city's liberation. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Timothy R. Koster, U.S. Army)

After Operation Euphrates Shield, in which Turkey secured its border area west of Manbij and east of Afrin, and its subsequent seizure of Afrin during Operation Olive Branch, Turkish-supported civil councils were convened, for the most part made up of refugees located in Turkey who had previously held office but fled IS and who Turkey assessed as being pro-Turkey and not part of the PKK/PYD/YPG. These Turkish-supported civil councils replaced existing councils, even though local residents were firmly against them as they considered these new council members illegitimate and not representative of the people who had remained behind under IS rule.

With President Donald Trump's announcement of the pullout of U.S. forces from Syria in December

2018, the future of the civil councils and the stability they have brought are in question. Turkish forces have massed on the border, determined to create a buffer zone free of PKK terrorists (Turkey sees the PKK, PYD, and SDF as all versions of the same organization). The SDF is looking for a safe partner to replace the United States and its coalition partners as a counterweight to Turkey—and a deal with the Russians and the Assad regime is looking more realistic. This is reminiscent of what happened when Turkish forces approached Manbij during Operation Euphrates Shield and the United States faced a potentially tense situation with its NATO ally. The MCC handed over five villages to Assad regime control to create a buffer between approaching Turkish forces and Manbij, and the regime and Russians were able to intervene and stop the Turks and Turkish-vetted Syrian opposition forces.

It is quite possible if the SDF and U.S. forces could have foreseen the Turkish government's continued acrimony toward these new civil councils, they could have advised the Manbij Civil Council from the beginning to include more representation

from the Azaz council, or they could have assisted in mentoring the foreign relations committee in designing a strategic communication plan that assuaged Turkish concerns. This might or might not have had the effect of calming the Turks and precluding Turkish operations along their border. Regardless, including Azaz council members would have been a bitter pill for the residents who remained behind and who did not want people they considered traitors or corrupt to regain positions of authority.

In hindsight, with U.S. policy indicating it would remain until a peace settlement was reached, it was the right call at the time. However, knowing what the situation has devolved into today, there may have

been other actions that could have been taken. Understanding local customs and networks is key to civil affairs, but maintaining a view of the strategic environment and potential issues with bordering countries is just as important.

Final Thoughts

Despite scant resources and marginal international support, the MCC demonstrated its capability to return Manbij to normalcy, and distanced the city and its residents from the era of IS control. What resources that were available were consumed at an even faster rate than normal due to Manbij serving as an example of stability throughout the region and causing IDPs to gravitate toward the city. The MCC's well-publicized inclusive governance, security, and administration of basic services attracted four hundred to five hundred IDPs daily as they escaped from other IS-occupied areas, increasing the IDP population to over sixty thousand in the city and its immediate environs.

The key to achieving stability in conflict-affected areas is to conduct early and adequate planning with our DOS and USAID partners for stabilization activities, not only during Phase IV, Stabilization, but across all phases of military operations.³ When the operating environment precludes the presence of DOS and USAID, DOD must be prepared to step in and lead the execution of these plans. The stabilization of Manbij following its liberation displayed the importance of employing SOF CA teams to work with and through the indigenous population. Employing civil affairs units that are trained to properly target humanitarian assistance and governance programming, as in the case of Manbij, allowed for real-time, on-site observations of the human domain, which supported the organization of the interim civil government and allowed it to develop and sustain itself through its most vulnerable period immediately following liberation from IS. The Manbij example also illustrated that good governance will have a much greater chance of success through support to local entities that are inclusive, vice attempting to force the locals into accepting what they perceive as an outside and corrupt entity (as with the Azaz Council).



Shervan Derwish, spokesman of the Manbij Military Council, gives a press briefing 4 June 2016 regarding operations to liberate Manbij from Islamic State control. (Photo courtesy of Cahida Dersim, @dersi4m via Twitter)

Excerpt from the *New York Times*,

"The Safe Zone Northern Syria Needs"

By Shervan Derwish

Spokesman for the Manbij Military Council

Manbij, Syria—23 January 2019

Whether the United States and the international coalition against the Islamic State will protect Manbij and areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Syria from an unknown future is a significant test of their credibility. I am writing from Manbij, a city of 700,000 people in northern Syria governed by a civilian administration made up of Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Circassians. Thanks to the Kurdish fighters who liberated Manbij in 2016, we have been able to enjoy freedoms unimaginable under either the Islamic State or the Syrian government. In Manbij, where women were once bought and sold as slaves by the Islamic State terrorists, now they run economic cooperatives, serve in the Manbij Military Council and have equal representation in elected councils. For the first time in Syrian history, we have held free local elections. We have reopened or built several hospitals and 350 schools attended by 120,000 students. We have given 2,000 licenses to factories and flour mills. The physical reconstruction of our city has been slow but steady. Most important, people are living without fear. Our civilian administration has given people the courage to rebuild their lives and, for the first time, participate in building democracy. We formed the Manbij Military Council, a security force composed primarily of local Arabs, to hunt down terrorists and sleeper cells, fighting to ensure that terrorist groups can never again threaten the people of Syria. Without international support, none of this might have been possible.

However, this example also points out the need for improved planning between DOS, USAID, and DOD. The lack of an existing plan, interagency skepticism of civil affairs reports, and the need to convince our interagency partners and the international community to support the in-place MCC wasted valuable time. If support to the MCC had been readily given by START and their implementing partners in a timelier manner, the transition to postliberation normalcy and stability throughout the region (extending beyond the city of Manbij) would have been accelerated. However, lessons from Manbij were used to create a template for success in producing stability in nonpermissive areas in Tabqah after the removal of IS and for Raqqa's stabilization following its liberation by the Syrian Arab Coalition with the support of the SDF.

Finally, it's important to understand the local dynamics but also to remain mindful of the regional strategic issues that might arise from neighboring countries. While executing the best option at the time is always desirable, when looking to develop long-term stabilization of a region, the end goal must always be kept in mind. The U.S. position in Syria has always been a one-Syria policy that would prevent a breaking up of the country (meaning whatever civil councils were put in place would have to make peace with the regime), and Turkey's categorization of the PYD as a terrorist organization, and by default the SDF (or major portions of it) similarly categorized as terrorists would have major implications. After all, the United States has been in Afghanistan for seventeen years and in Iraq almost as long, fighting for the same reasons as Turkey is looking to create their buffer—security of its citizens against terrorist networks within and across its borders. The United States

refused to acknowledge the name changes from the Al-Nusrah Front when the terrorists in Syria rebranded and disavowed previous relations with their previous organization—it should not have been as hard to understand why Turkey would refuse to do the same thing with the PYD/YPG and SDF when they disavowed their ties to the PKK and announced they were only conducting operations in Syria and had no hostile intent toward Turkey.⁴

On 16 January 2018, four Americans including two service members, a DOD civilian, and a contractor were killed in a suicide bombing in Manbij. Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. While President Trump and Vice President Pence have declared victory over IS in Syria—a symbolic victory over the physical caliphate—ISIS still remains a large and active threat in the region. ■

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Notes

1. Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, *Stabilization* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 13 December 2018), 4.

2. Figure 1 is based on information found in "Manbij Democratic Civilian Administration Council Takes Office," ANF News, 12 March 2017, accessed 22 January 2019, <https://anfenglish.com/news/manbij-democratic-civilian-administration-council-takes-office-18957/>, and on reporting by the special operations forces civil affairs teams on the ground at the time.

3. Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, October 2017), 1-12. Joint operations are delineated into five phases: Phase 0 (Shape), Phase I (Deter), Phase III (Seize Initiative), Phase IV (Stabilize), and Phase V (Enable Civil Authority).

4. Office of the Spokesperson Media Note, "Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of al-Nusrah Front," U.S. Department of State, 31 May 2018, accessed 22 January 2019, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/282880.htm>.