

Press Releases: Senior State Department Officials on the U.S.-Turkish Working Group on Syria

Special Briefing
Senior State Department Officials
Via Teleconference
June 5, 2018

MODERATOR: Good morning, and thanks so much for joining us for today's background call on the U.S.-Turkish working group on Syria. Joining us today we have [Senior State Department Official One]. He'll be referred to as Senior State Department Official One. Also joining us is [Senior State Department Official Two]. He'll be referred to as Senior State Department Official Number Two. As a reminder, the call is on background and the contents of the call are embargoed until the call ends. With that, I'll hand it over to our Senior State Department Official One. Hi, [Senior State Department Official One], go ahead.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Thanks, [Moderator]. Yesterday the Secretary of State and the Turkish foreign minister endorsed a roadmap which is a broad political framework designed to fulfill the commitment that the United States had made to move the YPG east of the Euphrates and to do so in a way that contributes to security and stability of Manbij and in a fashion that is mutually agreed between the United States and Turkey in every aspect.

It's important to note that this is a broad political framework, and the implementation of this will require details that remain to be negotiated – and as I said, they will need to be mutually agreeable – and that the implementation will be timed based on developments on the ground.

Let me leave it there and turn it over to Official Number Two.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Thank you. So I thought – just put this into a little bit of context. There's obviously a lot going on in Syria, in this particular area of Syria, kind of the northeast portion of Syria. Secretary Pompeo issued a statement earlier this morning welcoming the launch of new operations against ISIS in eastern Syria, led by the Syrian Democratic Forces, and this is to clear ISIS out of an area called Dazisha, which they – has been a stronghold of theirs for nearly three years, right on the Iraq-Syria border. These operations have been planned for months in very close coordination on both sides of the border, and the Secretary welcomed that and also emphasized in a statement that we are focused on the phase that comes

after ISIS, so that's on the Iraqi side of the border, ensuring the Government of Iraq – and the new Government of Iraq as it forms its new government following its recent elections – has the support it needs to fully secure its borders against ISIS and other threats pursuant to the Strategic Framework Agreement we have with Iraq, and also in northeast Syria, where U.S. forces have been working with partners to fight ISIS, work to ensure that all the diverse people of northeast Syria – Arabs, Kurds, Christian, Turkmen – have an appropriate say in their future under UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

So the Manbij roadmap kind of plays into this “what is the phase after ISIS.” And just to put Manbij in a little bit of context and why this has been such an important city, back in 2015, as you'll recall, when ISIS was launching major attacks in the streets of Paris and Brussels, they would train teams in Syria; they would organize in Manbij to infiltrate and carry out these attacks in cities of our partners. So this was a major threat coming out of Manbij from ISIS – a threat to our partners in Europe, a threat to Turkey. And we looked at a number of ways, obviously, to clear ISIS out of Manbij. We looked to move from the west to the east with opposition groups supported by us and Turkey, and those operations wound up being quite difficult. It was after the attacks in Paris that we worked with the Syrian Democratic Forces. They crossed the Euphrates River and over about a three-month period in the summer of 2016 – a very difficult fight; they lost about 300 people in that battle – were able to clear ISIS out of Manbij. And since then, we have not seen those types of directed attacks in which combat terrorist teams come out of Syria to kill people on the streets of our partner nations.

At the same time, after the Manbij battle, Turkey launched its operations in that area, called the Euphrates Shield, in which Turkey backed opposition forces and, with U.S. advise-and-assist support, cleaned ISIS out of this area called the Manbij pocket, and really kind of sealed – it kind of put a cork on the bottle of where ISIS was trying to infiltrate in and out of Syria, a significant development in the counter-ISIS campaign.

Since then, there has been a fairly tense standoff between certain opposition forces north of the Manbij area and the Syrian Democratic Forces south, and we have helped patrol the demarcation line to try to make sure that tensions remain low and de-escalated. The situation got a little more complicated with operations in Afrin a few months ago, and a couple things happened there. Refugees from Afrin came into Manbij and also some armed opposition groups from other parts of Syria came into the Euphrates Shield area, which increased some tension on that demarcation line.

So in light of that, we launched a very vigorous diplomatic effort with Turkey and with our partners on the ground to try to de-escalate the tensions. And so the broad political framework that was agreed yesterday is part of that process. This will be an ongoing process, and the implementation will be quite critical, with every step, as Senior Official Number One said, having to be mutually agreed. But we're confident that in reinforcing the demarcation line and working closely with our NATO ally, Turkey, and working closely with all the opposition parties on the ground, closely with the Syrian Democratic Forces, we can continue to reduce tensions. And within the

context of this broader political framework, I think you'll see certain elements moving east across the river, and we'll have a more sustainable outcome in Manbij over the long term, well beyond the post-ISIS campaign.

So with that, we're happy to take questions.

MODERATOR: Okay.

OPERATOR: And again, ladies and gentlemen, if you have any questions or comments, please press * then 1.

We have our first question from the line of Michael Gordon, *Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: [Senior State Department Officials One and Two] just quickly, how many YPG are in Manbij at this point in time? Do you – will U.S. forces continue to patrol there with those large American flags flying?

And from the Secretary's statement and recent events, it's clear that the SDF is picking up the fight against ISIS, and that suggests, while you haven't nailed down all of the details, there is some confidence that Turkey is not going to widen its attacks in northern Syria, such that the Kurds feel confident enough to focus more on ISIS. Is that the case? And what sort of – what is giving the Syrian Kurds the confidence to focus more their efforts on ISIS? It must reflect some of your diplomatic efforts.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Thanks, Michael. It's a great question. I'd say on number one, on the demarcation line – so I think, yes, the – obviously we will continue to be there. And we hope to have our NATO ally Turkey military forces can also help patrol that demarcation line to give confidence to both sides of the line and continue to reduce tensions, and that's about the patrols on the demarcation line.

Second, you're absolutely right. So since the events of a few months ago with Afrin, we did an awful lot of diplomatic work with Turkey and with the SDF to try to provide some reassurances and to ensure the SDF can continue the campaign against ISIS, which they have now done and are doing so quite effectively. And I think by having a broad political arrangement, leading to a sustainable outcome in Manbij, we can further reduce tensions and also continue to focus on the counter-ISIS campaign. This roadmap was briefed to elements, of course, in Syria with the Syrian Democratic Forces, and we'll need their cooperation in the implementation. And we're confident that with a lot of work – this won't be easy, but with a lot of work – that we can gain the cooperation from all the sides. We'll have to work closely together here.

QUESTION: How many YPG are in Manbij?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Again, I'm just hesitant to put numbers on these sorts of things, but it's limited.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: That question comes from Josh Lederman, AP. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey. Thank you guys for doing this. Just a few on the nitty-gritty of this. Who will govern Manbij? Will it still be the Manbij Military Council? Will the U.S. keep troops in Manbij as a deterrent? I wasn't sure if that's what you were referring to when you were talking about patrols on the demarcation line. You said timing's based on events on the ground. So was Cavusoglu incorrect when he lays out a six-month timeline for this? And what exactly do the Kurds get for agreeing to take this step? Thanks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, let me address the timeline and the governance issues. We have estimated timelines – and I don't want to get into the details of that – but we have several phases. And the idea behind this is that we move to the next phase when the previous one is completed. The completion will depend on conversations, negotiations, and the physical disposition on the ground in the Manbij area. So for example, we can't – until we get joint patrols going, we can't move to the next phase that foresees changes that would take place after the patrols are up and running.

On the governance, the agreement is that the YPG cadre that are involved in governance will withdraw and move, and they can be replaced by locals who are mutually agreeable.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah. I would just – to the question – so Manbij has been stable. We are in and out of the city. It's been a stable area, and the agreement is to keep it that way. We also want to make sure that there are no threats in Manbij emanating against the people of Syria or us from ISIS and also – or that could possibly emanate from Turkey. And so we want to provide Turkey the confidence in that regard in providing them full transparency.

And again, the arrangements will have to be mutually agreed. So these are things that we will have to agree on and Turkey will have to agree on. But we want to make sure that we maintain – it was in the statement yesterday – maintain the stability that we've seen in Manbij just because that is quite critical. It's a very complicated terrain in which you have opposition forces north of Manbij; you have regime forces and some Russian forces just south. And of course within the city itself, primarily with the Manbij Military Council and others, they've been able to provide stability, and we want to make sure that that continues. That's a key element of the arrangement.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: And just to wrap up the timing issue, we're committed to doing this as quickly as we can, but we can't attach a specific timeframe to it. Our NATO ally is also committed to implementing this as quickly as possible, and we'll work hard with them to put the arrangements in place that allow them to be operationalized.

And just when we say conditions on the ground, getting back to a previous question, the idea here is that we dramatically de-escalate tensions by working together in a cooperative arrangement so this is not being done under threat of force from any side. And in that de-escalated arrangement, it makes – it sets the conditions for the outcome that we all seek. So the de-escalation will be quite important and a key condition for moving forward.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: That question comes from the line of David Clark, AFP. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, yes, sorry, I understand that you – earlier you said that you don't want to get into the details of the timing, but I'd just like to give you an opportunity – and if the Turkish numbers are way out – to say so. The joint Turkish military and the (inaudible) authority patrols will begin in 45 days, say the Turkish Government, and the next phase will be 15 days after that, with the formation of the new Manbij Council. So I mean, two questions. Is that – is that your understanding roughly even if you don't want to put a precise number on it? And secondly, why are the Turks so keen to nail down – nail down numbers if you're not, given that you met yesterday and you say this is a mutual agreement? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We'll have to let the Turks speak for themselves on the – on why they want to attach numbers. But there are elements of the framework that could be implemented quickly, and we already have started military discussions about some of the military-to-military aspects. There are other elements that will take considerably longer. So I don't think that the timeframes that I've seen reported in the press reflect anything concrete. I would say that the overall timeframe is more or less in the ballpark, but the specific details of it I wouldn't want to put any weight behind a number.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: But it's a conditions-based arrangement, and that was agreed in the negotiations. So it's a conditions-based arrangement.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Kylie Atwood from CBS News.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) for doing this. Quick question as to how you would describe who is on the ground in Manbij right now, kind of what the – what it looks like there. And then second question, just looping back to a previous one that I didn't hear an answer to. What are the Kurds getting in return for this agreement? Thank you.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So I think in Manbij now – and again, we have Americans' eyes on the ground quite a bit – it is significantly locally based. It is stable and fairly bustling, and that's something that Syria can't take for granted. So we want to make sure that that continues. And the locally based nature of the governing and security structures are the critical element that I think all sides agree upon.

In terms of – I think the benefit to everybody here would be a sustainable, long-term solution for Manbij. So the situation we have now, which is relatively stable but also very tense, because we are patrolling a demarcation line, is not something that is sustainable over the long-term. I think everybody recognizes that. So we want to find a sustainable, longer-term solution within the context of a broad political framework. It'll be conditions-based, step-by-step. It won't be easy; the implementation will be

difficult. But the benefit to everyone is that you have a stable environment, and you don't have a threat of pending military offenses or military action, and that's what we want to get off the table.

MODERATOR: Okay. Time for a couple more questions. Jonathan Landay from Reuters.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) doing this. So just to catch up, I take it that what you're outlining is a basic agreement to have the YPG withdraw from Manbij back across the Euphrates. But when you say a conditions-based arrangement, that would mean that they would have – I take it – first have to have accomplished the current offensive, and then agree – then you would work out a – work out procedures for them not only to withdraw militarily but to be – but to have themselves replaced by some other local elements, non-Kurdish perhaps or a mix of the different ethnic groups. Is that basically what you're outlining here?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I would say not quite. So it's not –

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So it's not – there's no tie to the operations in the east.

QUESTION: Okay.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: De-escalating the overall tensions has been critical to the work we did to encourage the SDF to reinitiate offensive operations against ISIS, which, again, has been quite successive and are now ongoing with a new phase launch just 48 hours ago.

The structures in Manbij overall – locally based, locally routed, Arab – are the structures that remain, but we want to make sure that the – our NATO ally, the Turks, and other residents of Manbij who may have been displaced in the fighting have confidence in those structures and can return, and that any reforms in those structures that have to be made, I think we can work out through the implementation phase.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question goes to Michel from Al Hurra.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) doing this. The YPG has just announced in a statement that they have started to withdraw their military advisors from Manbij. Are you aware of that and is it part of the roadmap?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, thanks. So I would say, again, we worked this very hard with every – all the interested parties, and the fact that we've managed to de-escalate some tensions, we believe, with this arrangement, is one of the conditions on the ground that is important for removing the core YPG cadres – those advisers largely there to ensure that if there was a military offensive, they would be there to defend the city. Without the threat of a military offensive, the situation's different. So obviously, we encourage that announcement and will continue to work with all sides to implement the roadmap as it was agreed yesterday by the Secretary

and foreign minister.

MODERATOR: Okay. Conor Finnegan from ABC.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the team in Manbij about three weeks ago, and a lot of the local residents told our reporters there that they were very adamant that they didn't want U.S. or Turkey to take control of this city. So can you go back to – if the Manbij Military Council, which is majority Kurdish, loses those Kurdish members, who takes control of the city? Some of the residents had said to us that they weren't opposed to some sort of reconciliation with the regime. Would the U.S. be opposed to that as well?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah, thanks. I think the – again, we want to maintain the stability – you've seen it with your own eyes – that's in Manbij now – that's critical; I think everybody agrees on that – and find a longer-term arrangement that's sustainable that everybody can agree upon. So – and that'll be done in the implementation phase step-by-step, but this will not be U.S. forces stabilizing the streets in the city of Manbij. That's not what's envisioned here. We want locally rooted forces to continue to provide the stability and security in Manbij. And the Manbij Military Council is significantly – significant majority Arab and local, and so obviously, critical elements of those structures we would anticipate would remain in place, and we'll work this through with the Turks to make sure that they are comfortable with the long-term arrangements, as has been laid out in the roadmap.

MODERATOR: Okay. And our –

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: [Moderator] if I can add one more thing: The idea behind this is not for the U.S. or Turkey to take over Manbij. The idea is for the people of Manbij to reassert their leadership over both governance and security structures there.

MODERATOR: Thank you. And our last question goes to Karen DeYoung from *The Washington Post*. Hey, Karen.

QUESTION: Thank you. Just going back to the – one of the previous questions and something you mentioned about the Russians being in close proximity, the regime has declared its intention to take – to retake, basically, all of the country. Do you feel like there's a possibility that there might be some offensive from that quarter? Do you have an arrangement with the Russians that they won't allow that to happen? And again, what if people in Manbij do want some kind of relationship with the regime?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Yeah. Thanks, Karen. I think we have, obviously, discussions with the Russians all the time through de-confliction channels. I think that story's been covered quite well. And some of those boundaries and the de-confliction lines are obviously south of Manbij. Those have remained very stable and we'd intended – intend to keep it that way.

I think what Senior Official Number One said is the most important thing here. The outcome everyone seeks is an arrangement in which the people of

Manbij govern and secure their city over the long term without these military tensions in the area. So this'll be an ongoing discussion between us and our NATO ally, Turkey. Turkey, of course, also is in regular discussions with the Russians and other actors, and we'll remain coordinated with that through our – through Turkey.

So this'll be an ongoing process and implementation. It'll be difficult, but we have a broad framework that I think both sides have confidence in. And so – and we look forward to working through it here over the coming weeks.

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: The other kind of broad overarching theme of yesterday is that the United States and Turkey are committed to going forward in our cooperation in Syria as partners, as befits allies.

MODERATOR: Okay. Everyone, thanks so much for joining us. A reminder that this is – the call was on background, Senior State Department Official Number One and Number Two. The embargo has now been lifted. Have a great day, and we'll see some of you later today at our State Department briefing. Thank you so much.

The Office of Website Management, Bureau of Public Affairs, manages this site as a portal for information from the U.S. State Department. External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.