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Offensive against the Syrian City of Manbij May Be the Beginning of a Campaign to Liberate the Area near the Syrian-Turkish Border from ISIS

قوات سوريا الديمقراطية تسيطر على أحد الميادين الهامة في منبج



Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters at the western entrance to the city of Manbij (Fars, June 18, 2016).

Overview

1. On May 31, 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-dominated military alliance supported by the United States, initiated a campaign to liberate the northern Syrian city of Manbij from ISIS. Manbij lies west of the Euphrates, about 35 kilometers (about 22 miles) south of the Syrian-Turkish border. In the three weeks since the offensive began, the SDF forces, which number several thousand, captured the rural regions around Manbij, **encircled the city and invaded it**. According to reports, on June 19, 2016, an SDF force entered Manbij and occupied one of the key squares at the western entrance to the city.
2. The declared objective of the ground offensive is to **occupy Manbij**. However, the objective of the entire campaign may be **to liberate the cities of Manbij, Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Al-Rai**, which lie to the west of the Euphrates and are **ISIS strongholds near the Turkish border**. For ISIS, the loss of the area is liable to be a severe blow to its **logistic links between the outside world and the centers of its control in eastern Syria (Al-Raqqah), Iraq (Mosul)**. Moreover, the loss of the region will **further**

weaken ISIS's standing in northern Syria and strengthen the military-political position and image of the Kurdish forces leading the anti-ISIS ground offensive.

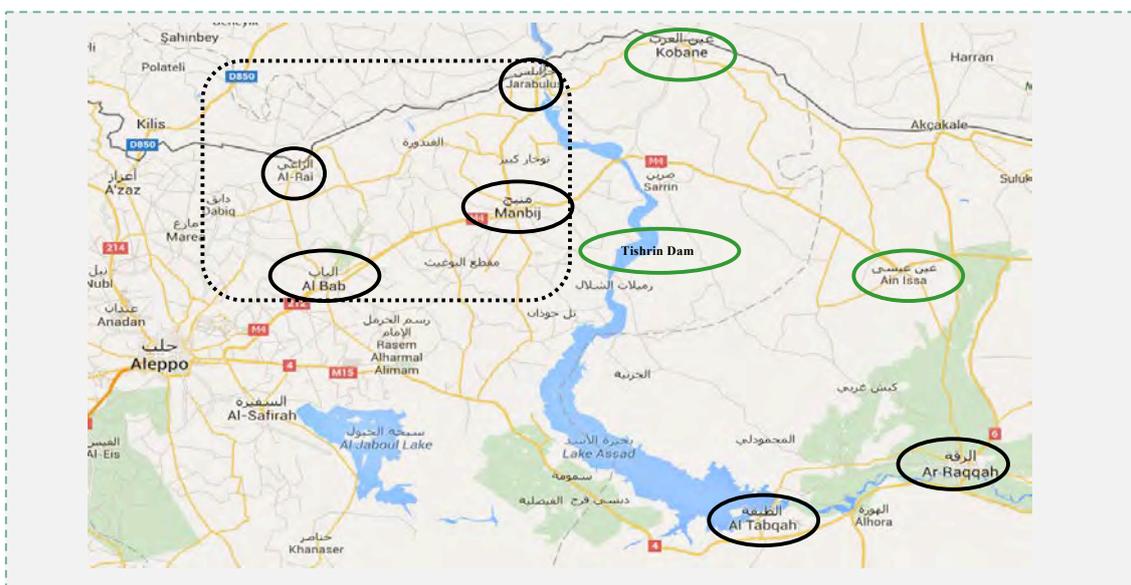
3. Before the SDF offensive against Manbij ISIS suffered a series of defeats in eastern Syria. That included the occupation of **the areas of Palmyra and Qaryatayn** (Homs Province) by the Syrian army and **the Syrian army's current advance towards Al-Tabqah, with Russian air support**. ISIS's defeats in recent months in Syria **have harmed its military capabilities and may also harm its ability to provide governance for the population under its control**. In addition, ISIS's defeats in Syria have come at a time when **strategically it is on the defensive in both Iraq and Libya**, and it faces a real danger of losing important strongholds. In **Iraq** the Iraqi army occupied the center and extensive areas of Fallujah. In **Libya** there is fighting in neighborhoods near the center of Sirte, ISIS's Libyan "capital," whose loss may lead to the collapse of ISIS's territorial control in the Libyan arena.

4. The recent developments may indicate a new stage in the campaign against ISIS, in which the organization can be expected to regroup its forces more and more in the two centers of its power, Al-Raqqah and Mosul. The local and foreign forces participating in the campaign will prepare to occupy both cities and ISIS's power base in Syria and Iraq. There will most likely be military and political problems, because ISIS can be expected to present stubborn resistance; and because for the most part the fundamental political and social conditions that allowed ISIS to come into being and thrive still exist. That may make it difficult to enlist the Sunni Muslim population to participate on the final stages of the campaign against ISIS and moreover allow ISIS to survive even after having lost regions of territorial control.

The City of Manbij and the Area West of the Euphrates

5. **Manbij** lies west of the Euphrates about 35 kilometers (about 22 miles) south of the Syrian-Turkish border. Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war it had a population of about 100,000 Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Circassians. It also has a small minority of Armenian Christians. After the city fell to ISIS in 2014 the population declined to about 40,000 (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, June 11, 2016). According to an American estimate, the current population is between 35,000 and 40,000 (Website of the American Department of Defense, June 3, 2016). **Manbij is the largest depository of wheat and grain in northern Syria**, and therefore control of the city supports ISIS's ability to provide governance for the Syrian areas under its control.

6. **Manbij fell to ISIS in 2014, the year of the organization's greatest success and expansion.** Other cities west of the Euphrates fell as well: Jarabulus and Al-Rai, near the Turkish border, and Al-Bab¹, which lies about 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) northeast of Aleppo. Control of Manbij, Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Al-Rai **enables ISIS to wield its influence in the rural area northeast of Aleppo and along a section of the Syrian-Turkish border** (the distance between Jarabulus and Al-Rai is 55 kilometers (about 34 miles, direct aerial distance)). **That enables ISIS to maintain a logistic channel with the outside world and facilitates the passage of its fighters, weapons, equipment and merchandise through the Syrian-Turkish border.**



The area of ISIS's control west of the Euphrates near the Turkish border. Its main strongholds are Manbij, Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Al-Rai (Google Maps).

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

7. **The SDF, the alliance of forces carrying out the ground offensive, was established around October 2015 with American support.** The dominant group in the SDF is the Kurdish force in Syria (the YPG, the People's Protection Units). There are also local organizations and militias, most of them Arab (urban or tribal), and some are ethnic-religious, belonging to minorities living in northeastern Syria.²

¹ Al-Bab means *gate* in Arabic, and the city was apparently so named because it was regarded as the gateway to Aleppo.

² According to the RT (Russia Today) website, the SDF includes the following forces: the YPG, the YPJ (Women's Protection Units), the Syrian-Arab Coalition, the Rebel Army, the Euphrates Volcano Operations Center, the Hero Forces (composed of Shammar tribesmen), the Al-Jazira Divisions Grouping and the Syriac Military Council (RT website, October 13, 2015).



The SDF logo (Facebook page of the SDF, March 11, 2016). The upper inscription is in Arabic, the middle in Kurdish and the lower in Syriac.

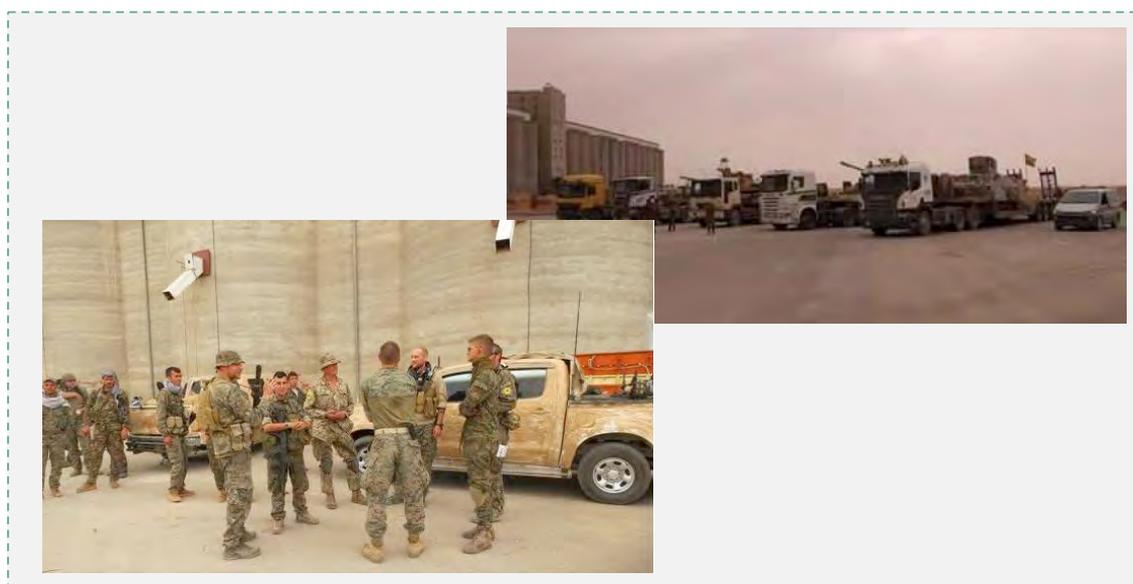
8. The SDF's first achievement was **the takeover of the Tishrin Dam** on the Euphrates, accomplished with air support from the United States and other coalition countries (December 26, 2015). The dam is a key installation and close to an important northern Syrian power plant. **The region now serves the SDF as a deployment zone for the offensive against Manbij and the general area west of the Euphrates.** At the end of May 2016, a short time before the offensive against Manbij began, the SDF, with American air support, took control of the region around **the town of Ain Issa**, about 50 kilometers (31 miles) north of Al-Raqqah. While the Arabic media reported the SDF was planning to advance south towards Al-Raqqah, but in retrospect **the offensive has been directed, at least for the present, towards Manbij.**



Left: Adnan Abu Amjad, commander of the Manbij Military Council, during an interview where he said his forces were two kilometers (about 1.2 miles) from Manbij (YouTube, June 20, 2016). Right: SDF soldiers from the Manbij Military Council on the outskirts of Manbij (Twitter account of Newroz Kobani, June 10, 2016).

The American Aspect

9. **The SDF is a military alliance supported by American advice, weapons and equipment and aerial support during ground operations.** In ITIC assessment, the **SDF matches the American concept of the local forces receiving American support in Syria** Those forces are expected to be "Syrian" and "democratic," as the name "SDF" implies. For that reason, the central place of the **Kurdish YPG is played down** while **Arab-Kurdish alliance is given prominence** (as a possible response to the strong Turkish objection to Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria). Thus the SDF is represented as an alliance of various ethnic groups and different communities, both including Arab local fighters collaborating with the Kurds.



An SDF force and American soldiers near the grain silos in the region of Ain Issa (Facebook page of Yehya Mohammed and Twitter account of Taha Alhlo, May 26, 2016).

10. On **May 21, 2016**, ten days before the ground offensive on Manbij began, **General Joseph Votel, commander of the United States Central Command**, secretly went to northern Syria. It was the first visit of a senior American army officer since the American campaign against ISIS began. General Votel spent 11 hours in northern Syria, met with the American military advisors stationed in Syria (who reportedly number about 200), and **conferred with SDF leaders** (CBSnews.com, May 21, 2016). In retrospect, **one of the reasons for the visit may have been to coordinate possible moves for the SDF's ground offensive to liberate Manbij and the region west of the Euphrates.**

11. **To provide a political response to expected Turkish objections the Americans are playing down the central role of the Kurds.** Air Force Colonel Pat Ryder, a spokesman for the US Central Command, said 3000 "Arab fighters" and

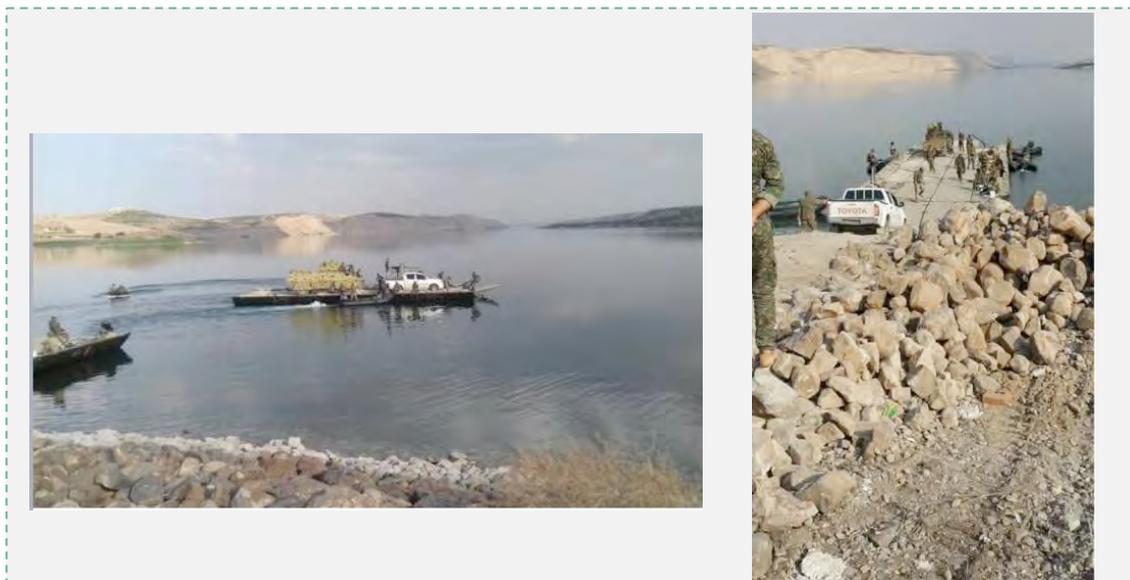
between 450 and 500 YPG fighters would participate in the campaign to liberate Manbij. He also claimed the coalition directing the fighting would clear the area of ISIS's presence and later transfer the region to the control of the Arabs (Timeturk.com, June 7, 2016). On June 3, 2016, the website of the American Department of Defense quoted Colonel Ryder as saying that **the attack was directed by the Manbij Military Council**, a local Arab force "seeking to reclaim [its] hometown."

12. However, it is unlikely that such declarations will mitigate Turkey's concerns because **the Kurds clearly completely dominate the SDF**. However, **current campaign in Manbij and other locations west of the Euphrates may be the first real test case for the SDF's unity and functioning**. The campaign will also show to what extent the Americans can mitigate Turkey's concerns in view of the coming challenges for the SDF, especially in **the campaign for Al-Raqqah, ISIS's "capital" in Syria**.

The Campaign to Liberate Manbij

13. **On May 30, 2016**, the SDF, with American air support, began **a campaign to liberate Manbij and the surrounding area from ISIS**. The **initial objective** was to occupy the city and its surroundings. In ITIC assessment, the intention will **apparently be to advance northward and westward to liberate the area controlled by ISIS west of the Euphrates, including its strongholds in Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Al-Rai near the Turkish border**.

14. According to the Arab media, the launching ground for the offensive was **the region of the Tishrin Dam** (over which the SDF gained control on December 26, 2016). Apparently, part of the attacking force was deployed east of the Euphrates and crossed on rafts. During the first five days of the campaign **American and coalition aircraft carried out more than 55 airstrikes** in support of the SDF forces (Website of the American Department of Defense, June 3, 2016).



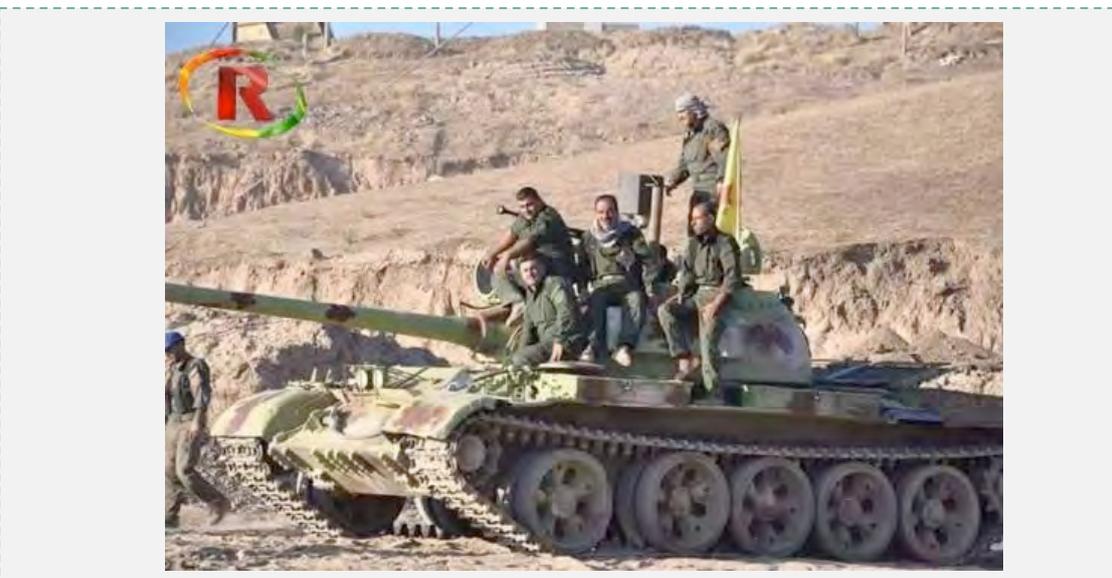
SDF fighters and equipment cross the Euphrates on a raft at the beginning of the offensive for Manbij (Twitter account of Newroz Kobani, June 1 and 2, 2016).

15. During the first days of the ground offensive, an SDF force moved along the the shore of Lake Assad and cleared ISIS forces from its western bank. Another force moved westward and cut off the main road leading south from Manbij. After about a week of fighting SDF forces had advanced to within a few kilometers of the city. They then took control of a section of the main Manbij-Al-Bab road, occupied the region to the west and **in effect surrounded Manbij**. In the three weeks since then **the SDF has expelled ISIS from the rural areas around Manbij and established its control of the region**. According to reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), **since the beginning of the campaign the SDF have taken control of about 105 towns and villages around Manbij**.

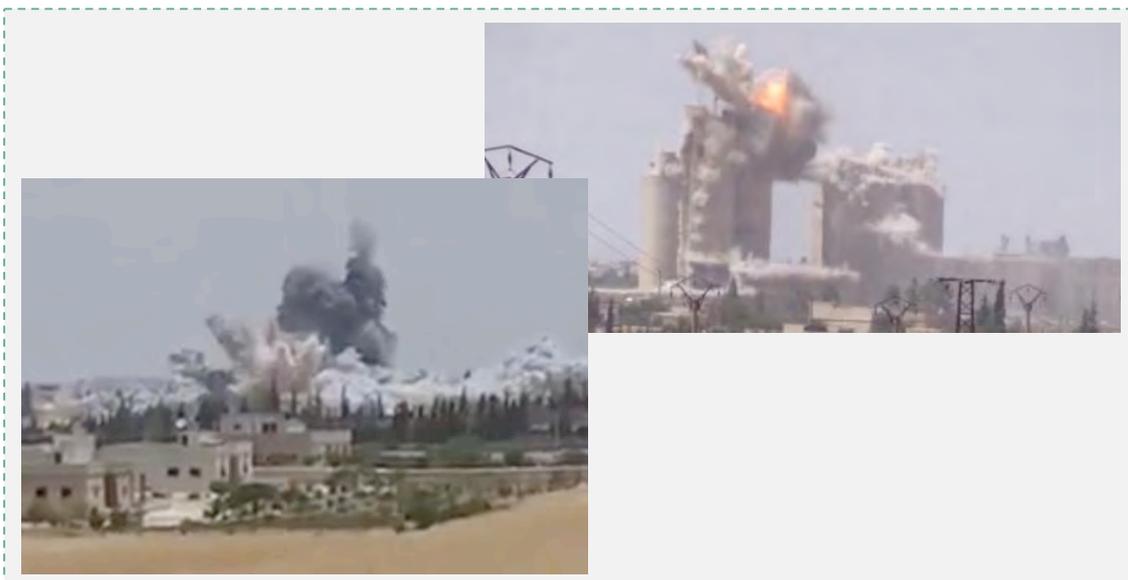
16. On **June 19, 2016**, according to reports, **fighters of the Manbij Military Council entered the city from the west**. They occupied Al-Kitab Square, a key site, on the western outskirts of the city, with American and coalition air support (Ananews, June 19, 2016). Fighting in Manbij continues (as of June 22, 2016).



Left: An SDF armored vehicle that participated in the the attack on Manbij (Facebook page of the SDF forces, June 21, 2016). Right: SDF forces enter a village near Manbij (Facebook page of Yehya Mohammed, June 4, 2016).



An SDF tank, part of a force that took control of the region of Al-Siraj, which controls the road leading to Manbij from the south (Facebook page of Yehya Mohammed, June 4, 2016).



Left: Coalition airstrike on targets in Manbij (Twitter account of Newroz Kobani, June 19, 2016).
Right: Airstrike on Manbij's grain silos (Facebook page of Manbij Mubashar, June 16, 2016).

ISIS's Defense of Manbij

17. **ISIS, in the meantime, has been waging defensive warfare for Manbij.** Its forces use tactics of guerrilla warfare and **have detonated a number of car bombs in the east and southwest of the city and attacked SDF positions near the Tishrin Dam.**

18. Inside Manbij ISIS prevents residents from leaving and attempts to swell the number of its operatives by hastily recruiting local youths (which may indicate the organization is suffering from a general lack of manpower). The young men were recruited with the slogan, "Jihad is an obligation" (Damascus al-Aan, June 18, 2016). It was also reported that ISIS operatives in Manbij sent a letter to the Kurdish forces by means of local Kurdish leaders, asking them to open a route enabling ISIS operatives to leave the city (Damascus al-Aan, June 17, 2016).



Right: Local Manbij youths stand in line to receive flak jackets and weapons (Haq, June 4, 2016).



ISIS attacks SDF forces with a car bomb southwest of Manbij (Haq, June 18, 2016)

The Significance of the Liberation of Manbij

19. **So far SDF forces have not entered the city itself.** It is unclear if that is because of ISIS's strong military resistance, the SDF's desire to complete its military preparations before it enters, or because of political pressure exerted by Turkey to halt the SDF's advance. **If the campaign does in fact end with the liberation of Manbij, there are several possible implications:**

- a. **The fall of Manbij will endanger other ISIS strongholds along the Turkish-Syrian border west of the Euphrates:** once Manbij falls **ISIS will be in danger**

in **Jarabulus and Al-Rai** (close to the border)³ and **Al-Bab** (northeast of Aleppo). **The fall of those cities is liable to weaken ISIS's military power in the rural areas of northern Syria and strengthen the other forces operating in the region** (especially the SDF and the Syrian army).

b. **It will be increasingly difficult for ISIS to maintain its logistic links with the power centers in Al-Raqqah and Mosul with the outside world:** logistics are currently maintained through a limited area along the border, which is liable to reduce even more as ISIS's (it currently extends 55 kilometers in a direct line between Jarabulus and Al-Rai). **Any disruption of ISIS's logistic links will make it difficult for the organization to transfer operatives, weapons and equipment from abroad and to export and sell its merchandise (especially petroleum products).**

c. **Enlarging the area of Kurdish control along the Syrian-Turkish border will lead to strengthening the political position and prestige of the Kurdish Autonomy in northeastern Syria.** Moreover, taking control of ISIS strongholds west of the Euphrates may give the Kurds a **political appetite** (reinforcing their separatist aspirations, the demand for a Kurdish role in any talks for a political arrangement in Syria). It may also increase their **military-territorial appetite** (uniting the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in western Syria with the Kurdish regions in the east). Should the area west of the Euphrates controlled by ISIS fall into the hands of the SDF, **a narrow corridor (in which lies the city of Al-Azaz) will remain, north of Aleppo** (under the control of the Syrian army and rebel organizations hostile to ISIS).

³ Al-Rai, very close to the border, was wrested by ISIS from other rebel organizations at the beginning of April 2016. The Free Syrian Army is now trying to retake the city.



A map in the Turkish media of the region of Kurdish control along the Syrian-Turkish border. It shows the area controlled by ISIS where Manbij is located. To the west is a narrow corridor leading from Aleppo (Halep) to the Turkish border (under the control of the Syrian army and rebel organizations). To the west is the Kurdish enclave of Afrin (DikeM.com.tr, the website of a Turkish opposition newspaper, June 2, 2016).

20. **The series of military achievements of the Kurds and their American support will increase the political-military challenge for Turkey, which strongly objects to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity along its border with Syria. Turkey is hostile to the YPG (the dominant force within the SDF), considering it a branch of the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish organization considered a terrorist organization. In the past Turkey called the creation of a territorial continuum under Kurdish control along its Syrian border "crossing a red line." However, the political and military options facing Turkey in view of the Kurdish military achievements are problematic (using the Americans to exert pressure on the Kurds might not be effective, and increasing its military involvement in Syria, to the point of creating a buffer zone inside Syrian territory, is liable to cause problems with Russia, and possibly also the United States).**

