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US military enters Syria in what looks like deal with Russia

US, Russian forces converge on city of Manbij as talks in Turkey indicate linkage between both armies

By SAMI MOUBAYED

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arly this week US military vehicles, all hoisting the American flag and in broad daylight, rumbled across the increasingly diluted borderline with Iraq into the strategic Syrian city of Manbij.

From January 2014 until August 2016, Manbij, 30 kilometers west of the Euphrates River, was held by the Islamic State until they were forced out by a powerful US-backed Kurdish force, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF.

Hours before the US military headed for Manbij, the SDF had handed entire chunks of the city's countryside to the Russian-backed Syrian Army.

The rest of the city, the SDF indicated would soon be handed over to Syrian authorities. While some reports suggested the move on Manbij was to prevent it becoming a flashpoint between Turkish and Kurdish forces, it also implies that without a word in public the Russians and Americans seem to have finally reached a deal to outline roughly who controls what on the Syrian battlefield.

During his US presidential campaign, Donald Trump frequently said that he would be willing to do business with Moscow to put an end to ISIS in the Middle East and beyond.

This led to speculation it would mean cooperation in the rebel-held city of Idlib in the Syrian northwest, followed by the Russians and Americans jointly moving on al-Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS on the east bank of the Euphrates.

By sending troops into Syria this week, the US seems to be saying: Manbij is first on the list, not Idlib, and al-Raqqa will follow.

The US had seemingly taken a backseat in the Syrian political process to Russia.

The two rounds of ceasefire talks in Kazakhstan were attended by a diplomat from the US Department of State — more as observer than active participant — while discussions in Geneva were skipped completely by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Since Tillerson took office he has kept mum about Syria.

Attending Geneva on his behalf was Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Ratney, who left early. Meantime, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov was prominent throughout the negotiations.

Syrian affairs are now being handled directly by officers in the Pentagon, rather than State Department officials.

Days after the US vehicles rumbled into Syria, a meeting was held in the southern Turkish province of Anatalya with the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, his Russian counterpart Valery Gerasimov, and the Turkish Army Chief-of-Staff Hulusi Akar.

They were discussing joint combat in Syria as a contingent from the US Rangers were taking up their positions in Manbij, under the watchful eye of the Russian Air Force.

The Rangers are no joke — an elite force trained in air assaults and direct action raids, temporarily charged with keeping the peace in Manbij and perhaps going further toward al-Raqqa — signalling just how seriously Trump wants to be seen in the war on terror.

The Rangers were used before in special operations in Kabul, Baghdad, Ramadi and Mosul, and will likely leave their mark in Manbij and al-Raqqa.

Last week, another important move took place when US officers at the CIA-led Military Operation Room in southern Turkey met with moderate Syrian rebels, giving them two weeks to unite or lose any future US military aid.

The ultimatum

The ultimatum, which was music to the ears of the Russians, was delivered to powerful groups like the Sham Legion — composed of former members of the Muslim Brotherhood and active in

the Aleppo countryside — and Jaysh al-Nasr, which operates in the countryside around the central city of Hama.

All of this will basically determine who will survive the Syrian war and what the final patchwork map of spheres of influence will look like: The Turks holding the three border cities of al-Bab, Jarablus, and Azaz; while the Kurds get their share east of the Euphrates River in places like al-Malkieh, Ra's al-Ayn, al-Hassakeh, and al-Qamishly.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had dreamt of a large buffer zone of approximately 5,000 square kilometers that includes Manbij and al-Raqqa, hoping that this would end the Kurdish threat on his border and provide sufficient space to relocate the 2.3 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey since 2011.

Neither al-Raqqa nor Deir e-Zour will be part of the Turkish enclave, but neither will they be given to the Kurds. The SDF, which still has the blessing of the Trump administration, might be invited to help liberate the cities like they did with Manbij last August, but never to rule them.

Ethnic Arabs, especially the powerful tribes among them, would never hear of it, after all.

Both cities would provide powerful symbolism for whoever reaches their gates first and gets the honors of ejecting ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. It now seems that, contrary to what most people expected, it is the Americans who are edging forward in the race to al-Raqqa, very much in line with the Russians.