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**Syrian Army Enters Manbij as YPG Withdraws, Asks for Protection**

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Syria's state media reported the army has entered the city of Manbij, hours after the YPG urged the government to protect the city of a Turkish "invasion."

The Syrian army deployed forces to the city of Manbij in northwest Syria Friday, after the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) retreated from the area and urged Damascus to protect the town from the threat of a Turkish "invasion."

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According to state media SANA, Syrian forces raised the national flag in Manbij, while authorities expressed their commitment to guarantee "security for all Syrian citizens and others in the area."

The announcement was made hours after YPG forces "invited" the Syrian government to assert control over the territory that lies only 30 kilometers away from the border with Turkey.

"We invite the Syrian government forces to assert control over the areas our forces have withdrawn from, in particularly Manbij, and to protect these areas against a Turkish invasion," the [YPG](#) said via Twitter.

Russia has welcomed the move.

"Of course, this will help in stabilizing the situation. The enlargement of the zone under the control of government forces ... is, without doubt, a positive trend," Dmitry Peskov, a Kremlin spokesman, said.

With the YPG at its forefront, the Syrian Democratic Forces alliance (SDF) seized Manbij in 2016 from Islamic State, a milestone in the battle against the group.

United States President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria has alarmed the Kurdish-led fighters who played a crucial role in fighting the Islamic State group. U.S. military support for the Kurdish fighters has infuriated Turkey, a fellow member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO alliance, which sees the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) movement that has sought greater political autonomy within Turkey for decades.

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Turkey, which deems the YPG a threat to its own territory and has vowed to crush it. In mid-December, Turkey threatened a military operation against Manbij to remove the YPG. Turkey and its allied fighters have been amassing troops around the city in recent days.

A Turkish-backed rebel official, Major Youssef Hammoud, said the plan to attack SDF territory remained in force. "There is no Syrian soldier inside Manbij town from the regime's forces." He said his forces were waiting for Washington and Ankara to agree on how U.S. forces would leave Manbij.

On Friday, Turkish President Recep Tayipp Erdogan said Turkey will have no reason to be in Manbij if the "zone is purged of terrorist organizations." Erodgan also said during the same press conference that reports of Syrian troops in Manjib were unconfirmed by Turkey's intelligence. "There is nothing certain," he said.

Russian and Turkish authorities will discuss and evaluate the situation in Syria during a meeting in Moscow, scheduled for Saturday.

A senior Kurdish official, Ilham Ahmed, reportedly told the Associated Press that government troops have arrived but have not entered the city. According to her, Turkey-backed fighters have not withdrawn from Manbij. Ahmen added that an agreement is being worked out between the Russian and Syrian governments to allow Syrian to take over if the U.S. follows through with the announced withdrawal, for which there is no set timeline.

"The aim is to ward off a Turkish offensive," she said. "If the Turks' excuse is the

(Kurdish fighters), they will leave their posts to the government."

Bashar al-Assad's government has said it welcomes the Kurdish group returning under the central government's authority but it has also warned they will not consider the possibility of a Kurdish autonomous area.

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