

At US outpost in Syria, US general backs Kurdish fighters

By SUSANNAH GEORGE and SARAH EL DEEB

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MANBIJ, Syria (AP) — On the ground in Syria, the top U.S. general in the coalition fighting the Islamic State group pledged on Wednesday that American troops would remain in the northern Syrian town of Manbij despite Ankara's demands for a U.S. pullout.

"We're here to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS is maintained in this area," Lt. Gen. Paul E. Funk said during a visit to U.S. forces in Manbij. ISIS is an alternative acronym for the Islamic State group.

The U.S.-backed opposition Syrian Democratic Forces, led mainly by a Syrian Kurdish militia which Turkey is now fighting in Syria, liberated the town of Manbij from the Islamic State group in 2016.

Manbij was hailed as an early success story in the American-backed fight against IS, but is now the scene of escalating regional tensions on the heels of military victories against the extremists.

Funk's visit came amid rising tensions between Turkey and the United States — NATO allies that have ended up on opposing sides in some aspects of the multi-layered war in Syria.

Today, a small U.S. base near Manbij — a cluster of a handful of tents, prefab housing units and American armored vehicles — reflects deepening American involvement in Syria. Since the ouster of IS from the border town, the U.S. has maintained a military presence there and regularly conducts patrols in the area.

The U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish militia, known as the People's Protection Units or YPG, made up the backbone of the fight against IS in Syria. But Ankara considers the Syrian Kurdish fighters "terrorists" and allied with Kurdish insurgents within Turkey, the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. The YPG.

Funk told reporters in Manbij that the U.S. would continue to support the SDF allies, despite tensions with Turkey and that a continued U.S. presence in Syria's north is aimed at deescalating tensions.

"I don't worry," Funk said when asked about recent Turkish threats, "It's not in my job description to worry, my job is to fight."

On Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on the U.S. to withdraw its troops from Manbij and renewed a threat to expand Ankara's military offensive in Syria to this town.

"Why are you staying there (in Manbij)? Leave," Erdogan said, referring to American troops. "We will come to return the lands to their real owners."

On Jan. 20, Turkey launched a cross-border offensive into the northwestern enclave of Afrin to drive out the Syrian Kurdish militia from there and subsequently threatened to extend its operation to Manbij, over 100 kilometers (62 miles) to the east.

"I'm very confident in the (Syrian Democratic Forces) leadership," Funk said.

"When nobody else could do it they retook Raqqa," Funk added, referring to the former capital of the self-proclaimed IS caliphate in Syria. "I think that has earned them a seat at the table."

The U.S.-backed forces retook Raqqa last October. The defeat marked a major blow to IS and was followed by a string of swift territorial victories in Syria that retook nearly all the territory the extremists once held. Pockets of IS fighters, however, remain in eastern Syria between the Euphrates River and the Iraqi border.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the U.S. would maintain a military presence in Syria after the conclusion of the fight against IS there, pledging that

the Trump administration would not to repeat former President Barack Obama's "mistake" when he withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011.

"There's no way to tell" how long U.S. troops will need to remain in Syria, said Army Maj. Gen. James Jarrard, who heads the U.S.-led special operations task force fighting IS in Syria and Iraq.

"Right now the military role is clearly defined and right now that's to support the SDF," said Jarrard, who gathered with other American troops and commanders at the Manbij outpost.

American and Syrian Kurdish commanders in Manbij said that low-level clashes between Turkish-backed forces and the U.S.-backed fighters were a regular occurrence. "Every 10 or 15 days there are some shots fired," said Judie Ibrahim, an 18 year old fighter with the Manbij Military Council stationed at the outpost alongside American troops.

"But the clashes are very small, it doesn't scare us," he said, then added why the troops are not afraid: "It's not because of the American presence ... it's because we have God with us."

Funk also downplayed the significance of the attacks, describing them as just "harassing."

El Deeb reported from Beirut.