

Sen. Lindsey Graham Warns U.S. Withdrawal From Syria Would be “Terrible” During Surprise Visit to Manbij

It remains to be seen how Graham plans to walk the fine line between his recently voiced support for Kurdish fighters and his desire to maintain a strong relationship with Turkey.

By [Whitney Webb](#)

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Featured image: Senator Lindsey Graham visits U.S.-trained and funded Kurdish SDF militia members in Manbij, Syria. YouTube | Screenshot

After meeting with Turkish leadership over the weekend, **Senators Lindsey Graham** (R-SC) and **Jeanne Shaheen** (D-NH) made a “[surprise visit](#)” on Monday to Manbij, where they met with members of Manbij Military Council (MMC), a Kurdish militia that operates as part of the umbrella group, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

After visiting a city market and speaking with militia members, Graham told MMC officials that

“I will tell President Trump that **it’s important we stay here** to help you. You are friends of the United States and if we leave it will be terrible.”

Graham has long been known for his hawkish stance on Syria, having criticized the U.S. strikes on three alleged Syrian chemical-weapons sites this past April for not going far enough, [calling](#) the strikes a “missed opportunity.”

US Senator Lindsey Graham in a visit to the SDF-held Minbej [#SDF](#) [#Minbej](#) [#Syria](#) [#USA](#)
[#LindseyGraham](#) pic.twitter.com/nL42linAka

— Hussein Akoush (@HuSiNAk94) [July 2, 2018](#)

The senators’ visit was warmly accepted by MMC members, who saw their appearance as proof that U.S. support to the group would continue despite the recent U.S.-Turkey agreement that would see Turkey jointly administer Manbij with the U.S. — an agreement that the MMC has [refused to accept](#). Despite the MMC’s high hopes, Turkish media [has reported](#) that Kurdish militia groups will begin leaving Manbij as soon as Wednesday as the U.S.-Turkish plan to jointly administer the area is set to come into full effect later this week.

Other observers of the senators' visit, however, took it as a sign that U.S. military involvement in Syria will not only continue but increase, [despite rumors](#) that Trump is planning to use withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria as a bargaining chip with Russian leadership at a U.S.-Russia summit scheduled for later this month in Finland.

Meanwhile, Syrian state media [reported](#) that the U.S. was planning to increase the deployment of its troops in and around Manbij after Graham's visit. As *MintPress* has [previously reported](#), Manbij is home to two U.S. bases that host American and British forces, as well as a French military base. The Western military presence has only increased in recent months, particularly after the Turkish government threatened to overtake Manbij after its successful offensive that removed SDF Kurdish militias from the city of Afrin earlier this year.

Graham walking a new fine line

However, Graham's statements during his visit to Manbij are unusual given that the senator has not always backed U.S. support for Syrian Kurds. Indeed, last year, Graham strongly criticized the U.S. alliance with Kurdish groups connected to the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), both of which are considered terrorist groups by the Turkish government but also form the backbone of the U.S.-allied SDF.

For instance, last May, Graham [criticized](#) the Trump administration's decision to provide heavy weapons to Kurdish groups, asserting that "cooperation with the YPG harms relations with Turkey." He also questioned whether it would be better for the U.S. to train more Arab fighters in lieu of Kurdish fighters in order to assuage Turkish concerns of U.S. support for the YPG.

Given that Graham described his recent weekend meeting with Turkish President Erdogan as "very good, respectful, and candid" and asserted that the U.S. needs Turkey as a "strategic partner," it remains to be seen how Graham plans to walk the fine line between his recently voiced support for Kurdish fighters and his desire to maintain a strong relationship with Turkey.

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