

# **Are Syrian Rebels preparing southern offensive with Western support?**

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Rumors circulated over the weekend that Syrian rebel forces backed by Western support were planning a major offensive in southern Syria in the area of Dara'a and Quneitra near the Golan. The offensive would likely relieve pressure on Syrian rebel factions in eastern Ghouta, which Damascus has been trying to conquer for the two weeks.

"According to information obtained from reliable sources near Syria-Jordan, the US has increased its military presence in the South of Syria in recent weeks," the Turkish-based Anadolu Agency news service reported on March 9. The coalition has denied that there have been recent movements of significant numbers of troops to the Tanf location.

According to the claims, the US had sent more than 200 troops to its Tanf garrison located in Syria near the Jordan-Iraq border. Two Syrian rebel groups were being trained at the Tanf base, which was created to support anti-ISIS operations in late 2016 and early 2017. The Anadolu report inferred that the US troop increase was related to Iranian forces being deployed in southern Syria. It named Kanair, Tel Adas, Deyr Makir and Sanamayn as sites of Iranian influence, all of which are not far from the Golan Heights.

The report also claimed that Hezbollah is active in Ba'ath City and Khan Arnabah, just a kilometer from Israeli forces.

So what is the Turkish report really about?

According to Middle East Monitor, the Syrian rebels are planning a major offensive in the South. "Preparations coincided with the arrival of about 200 US officers and soldiers at the Al-Tanf base near the border with Jordan and Iraq, including a joint operations room for the Free Army factions and the American troops. A number of British officers have also apparently arrived at the Syria-

Jordan border.”

Other reports from the regime side have now indicated that Damascus has sent reinforcements to Dara’a City and other areas it controls. Another pro-Syrian rebel account sought to highlight stories saying the regime was preparing for battles in the South, particularly around Izra City.

The stories that are circulating come as rebels in the South are being pressured to do something to relieve pressure on eastern Ghouta, where the regime is trying to destroy the last rebel enclave near Damascus. However, there has been a functioning cease-fire in most of southern Syria for years and no real changes on the ground. Any disruption of that status quo would affect not only Israel but also Jordan.

The coalition’s public affairs office responded by saying the US does not control the Al-Tanf garrison in Syria, which they refer to as “At Tanf” and describe as a coalition facility.

“Furthermore the report is inaccurate,” it said. “Due to operation security concerns, we do not discuss current operations, nor do we divulge specific number and disposition of our troops.” However, they noted, “There have been no recent movements of any significant number of coalition troops into At Tanf [sic]. We position the appropriate number and type of forces in the right place at the optimal time to ensure we accomplish our primary mission: the lasting defeat of Daesh [ISIS].”

The coalition maintains that its focus is “rooting out the last pockets of Daesh from the Middle Euphrates River Valley. It is there that we are working with our SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] partners to kill or capture the remnants of Daesh terrorists.”

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Source: <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Are-Syrian-rebels-in-the-south-preparing-offensive-with-western-support-544763>

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