

Using Russia's cover, Iran starts sending fighters to Syria

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Beirut: Iran has sent hundreds of troops into northern and central Syria in the first such open deployment in the country's civil war, joining fighters from its Lebanese ally Hezbollah in an offensive against rebels and taking advantage of cover from Russia's air campaign, a regional official and Syrian activists said on Wednesday.

Their arrival is almost certain to fuel a civil war in Syria which has already claimed the lives of more than 250,000 people and displaced half of the country's population. It also highlights the far-reaching goals of Russia's military involvement in Syria.

Russia began carrying out airstrikes in Syria on Sept. 30, and Syrian troops and allied militiamen began a ground offensive against rebels in central Syria a week later. Russia says its airstrikes are meant to weaken the Islamic State group and other terrorists in Syria, but Western officials and Syrian rebels say most the strikes have focused on areas in central and northern Syria where extremist group does not have a strong presence.

The arrival of Iranian troops fighting under the cover of Russian air power further strengthens the view that Russia's main goal is to shore up Syrian President Bashar Assad's embattled government.

"Sending more troops from Hezbollah, and Iran only increases the shelf life of the Syrian regime, which is destined to end," Maj. Jamil Saleh, the leader of Tajammu Alezzah, a CIA-backed Free Syrian Army faction, told The Associated Press. "It will only add more destruction and displacement."

He said their presence on the ground is not new, but was kept quiet. "Now they are taking cover behind Russia since it is a super power and strengthens their position," Alezzah said.

The official, who has deep knowledge of operational details in Syria, said the Iranian fighters— currently numbering around 1,500— began arriving in Syria about two weeks ago, after the Russian airstrikes began, and have accelerated in recent days. The Iranian-backed Hezbollah group has also sent a fresh wave of fighters to Syria, he told AP.

He said the Iranian fighters were arriving at Damascus airport and transported to a military base in the coastal town of Latakia from where they were deploying on the ground— mainly in the northern provinces of Idlib and Aleppo province.

He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss military affairs.

The official said the Iranian troops and their allies were building up for a huge offensive against insurgents in Aleppo province, which would be announced in the coming days.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also reported Wednesday that Iranian troops were arriving in Syria and were transported to the military base in the town of Jableh.

Iranian and Syrian officials have long maintained that Iran has advisers and military experts in Syria, denying any ground troops. Wednesday's news is the first confirmation of Iranian fighters taking part in combat operations in Syria.

- AP