

Syria put troops in Lebanon ahead of Israeli drill - report

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A publishing house specialized in military matters reported that commercially available satellite imagery shows Syrian troops deployed on Lebanese territory along the border in early 2008, just ahead of Israel's largest ever military drill. The report, published in Jane's Defense Weekly earlier this month, said that images obtained through DigitalGlobe show Syrian troops being deployed in the remote and rugged hills north of the Lebanese town of Rashaya al-Wadi. The report added that these maneuvers took place just before Israel was due to hold a five-day nationwide response drill in early April.

According to the report, entitled "Middle ground: Lebanon plays buffer as Syria and Israel simmer," the Syrian bases are "aimed solely at creating a defensive line in the event of an Israeli military advance and are not conduits for weaponry" smuggled from Syria to Hizbullah.

Syria's reinforcement of troops ahead of the Israeli drill suggests a deep mistrust between the two states, despite recent peace overtures, according to Jane's.

"The deployment suggests mutual mistrust remains and hence peace negotiations will struggle to succeed," Jane's said about recent Turkish-brokered indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria.

"Both countries are negotiating from a position of domestic weakness and hence agreement is likely to be difficult," the publishing house said.

Jane's also said that Syria undertook a moderate increase in its equipment at its military bases between December 24, 2006 and March 12, 2008. The new equipment includes what appears to be towed and self-propelled artillery and a T-54/55 tank, it added.

"Human intelligence verification of the increase in activity is impossible," according to the report, which goes on to say that "in late 2005, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) sealed off the hills to the east of Kfar Qouk.

"An LAF checkpoint at the junction of the only road leading to Deir al-Ashayer bars all but local residents from reaching the village," the report said, adding that "The nearby village of Halwa is also sealed off by the army."

According to Jane's, the level of mistrust between Syria and Israel is reportedly rendering the Turkish-brokered peace talks much more difficult. That in turn has been reflected on the ground by Syrian deployment on Lebanese territory.

The "little-known presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon demonstrates that, despite the peace talks between the two sides confirmed in simultaneous announcements in Syria and Israel on 21 May 2008, mutual mistrust continues to characterize regional relationships.

"As a result ... negotiations are likely to be fraught while military preparedness will remain high," it said. - The Daily Star