

Turkey-backed jihadist groups say ready to enter Manbij

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Turkey-backed militias said on December 29 they were readying to enter the Syrian town of Manbij, after the Syrian army said it had deployed its own forces.

Convoys of Turkey-backed insurgents, with armoured vehicles and machine guns, were moving towards the front line with the town.

"We have prepared our heavy and medium artillery at the PKK and YPG fronts, and we have prepared the forces, who received training before the battle, and we spread them out along the various points we will use to enter the upcoming battle," military commander with Turkey-backed militia group, Ahmad Jawdat said.

Government forces said they had sent troops to the northern Syrian town on December 28 after the Kurdish YPG forces asked for protection from Damascus against the threat of a major Turkish offensive.

"We are members of the National (Free Syrian) Army, and we are gathered at the

frontlines near the city of Manbij. God willing we will start work soon, despite what the regime media outlets have published - saying that the regime has entered the city of Manbij - our movement towards the city will continue, and God willing we will begin in a few hours," another military commander with Turkey-backed militia group, Abdelkarim, said.

The Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army was partially reorganized as the Syrian National Army by Turkey since 30 May 2017. It is an armed Syrian opposition structure mainly composed of Syrian Arab and Syrian Turkmen jihadist groups operating in northern Syria, mostly being a part of Operation Euphrates Shield, a cross-border operation by the Turkish military and Turkey-aligned Syrian groups in the Syrian Civil War which led to the Turkish occupation of northern Syria.

Manbij, which U.S.-backed forces captured from Islamic State in 2016, has emerged as a focal point of new tensions after U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. forces whose presence has effectively deterred Turkey.

After the Syrian army announcement, Turkey-backed Syrian rebels stationed in the nearby territory said they had begun moving together with Turkish forces towards the town in preparation for military operations.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based monitoring group, said the government forces had entered a strip of territory at the edge of Manbij, not inside the town itself, creating a barrier with Turkey-backed fighters nearby.