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Al-Tanf: The US stronghold in Syria and how it safeguards Israel

The US coalition's mission against ISIS quickly transformed into a broader strategy to occupy parts of Syria, with the Al-Tanf base being crucial for securing influence and supporting Israeli interests amidst increasing local resistance.

On 10 September 2014, the US announced the formation of an [international coalition](#) with the participation of 86 countries to eradicate the terrorist group ISIS, which had [declared](#) the establishment of a “caliphate” in late June.

The coalition's operations began in Syria and Iraq in early 2015. However, what unfolded was more than just a campaign against terrorism; it became a vehicle for advancing US strategic ambitions in West Asia – including the establishment of [illegal military bases](#) to secure influence and resources in eastern Syria, primarily to protect the interests of its key ally, Israel.

Exploiting the war for geostrategic gains

Washington leveraged the anti-ISIS campaign to pursue broader geostrategic goals, deploying roughly 2,000 troops into Syria – an occupation that violated international law and Syrian sovereignty. By 2016, US forces had established a presence at [Al-Tanf](#), a strategically important base located at the tri-border area between Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. This position, south of the Euphrates River, overlooks a critical supply route from Tehran to Damascus and Beirut, which the US views as significant for regional control.

The Al-Tanf base was originally established in 1991 before the Second Gulf War, reactivated during the 2003 Iraq invasion, and then closed after US forces consolidated control in Iraq. It reopened in 2016 after ISIS was driven from the area.

Since then, Al-Tanf has served not only as a training ground for fighters of the CIA-backed Maghawir al-Thawra but also as a cornerstone of broader US interests, as Colonel Daniel Magruder Jr. noted in a 2020 [Brookings Institution report](#) entitled *Al Tanf garrison: America's strategic baggage in the Middle East*.

According to Magruder, Al-Tanf was meant to facilitate the continued fight against ISIS, counter Iranian activities, and maintain leverage in negotiations over Syria's future.

However, the base's role went far beyond these stated goals. US occupation forces at Al-Tanf engaged in both offensive and defensive intelligence operations while also supporting armed groups against the Syrian government.

The base acted as a hub for the Military Operations Center (MOC), a joint effort with several states aimed at coordinating military activities in southern Syria, ultimately undermining Syrian sovereignty and its allies.

The real strategic goal: A buffer zone for Israel

Beyond its military role, Al-Tanf's strategic location supports plans for a controlled buffer zone involving the nearby Rukban refugee camp. Military expert Major General Muhammad Abbas told *The Cradle* that this buffer would help US and Israeli objectives by creating a physical barrier between Syria and Iraq.

The base also facilitates Israeli operations in Syrian airspace, providing a logistical advantage for air force missions that circumvent Syrian air defenses. The collaboration between the US and the occupation state has been well documented, with Al-Tanf serving as a launching point for Israeli air strikes deep inside Syria – attacks that would be far riskier from other approaches due to Syrian anti-aircraft systems.

A 2021 report by the [Washington Institute](#) highlighted how the US occupying presence at Al-Tanf has directly benefited Israel, supporting its “[battle between wars](#)” – a strategic approach aimed at minimizing risk and exploiting weaknesses in Syrian defenses.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, political analyst Bassem al-Shehawi notes that the US presence in Syria has always aligned with safeguarding Israel, whether by severing geographical links between members of the Axis of Resistance or by deploying advanced radar and air defense systems to protect Tel Aviv's interests.

Al-Tanf's importance for the US and Israel

Crucially, it also facilitates Israeli air force attacks on targets deep inside Syria – attacks that could not have been carried out from above Lebanon or the occupied Golan Heights due to the distance involved. Since 2018, when Syrian air defenses [shot down an Israeli F-16](#), Israeli forces have completely avoided entering Syrian airspace from the western side.

Shehawi adds that this base's importance comes from its buffer zone and air umbrella, which have a radius of 55 kilometers. These were established due to the non-conflict understanding between Russia and the US regarding Syria. The base also played a role in confronting drone and missile attacks launched by Iran during [Operations True Promise 1 and 2](#), whether by providing radar monitoring or attempting to shoot them down, similar to the role played by other US bases in Syria and the wider region.

A report published by *Al-Monitor* also confirms that Israeli fighter planes had previously used the corridor along the Jordanian–Syrian border and the airspace around Al-Tanf to penetrate Syrian airspace to launch strikes.

The significance of Al-Tanf was evident during the presidency of Donald Trump, who often spoke of pulling US troops out of Syria. However, the situation on the ground was more nuanced. Even as Trump made public declarations about [withdrawing troops](#), officials within his administration, including former National Security Advisor John Bolton, ensured that key positions like Al-Tanf remained secure. Bolton stated that any withdrawal from Syria would be conditional on an agreement with Russia to replace US forces at Al-Tanf, thereby ensuring that Israeli security interests were safeguarded.

The future of the US occupation of Syria

With Trump poised to return to the White House next month, questions have resurfaced about the future of American military involvement in Syria. The expectation is that despite any renewed rhetoric about reducing military involvement, Al-Tanf will remain a key asset in maintaining US influence in Syria and the region.

In 2023, former Chief of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley [visited](#) Al-Tanf, emphasizing its importance for Israel's security and confirming that there were no plans to withdraw. Al-Tanf will likely continue to play a key role in Washington's West Asia strategy, even if it reduces its presence elsewhere in Syria.

The base serves as a strategic card – enabling continued influence, fostering instability, and complicating the region's dynamics. Yet, a critical question remains: How sustainable is the US presence at Al-Tanf, given the growing resistance? With [Iraqi and local Syrian factions](#) increasingly targeting US positions, Washington's ability to maintain control over Al-Tanf may weaken.

In time, Syria might leverage its own “Popular Resistance” to apply pressure, forcing US forces to eventually leave Syrian territory, as indicated earlier in the year with the [tribal uprising](#) in Deir Ezzor.

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