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Disarm or Withdraw: Russia and Syria Issue Ultimatum to Rebels Near Damascus

By Reuters

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Kremlin Press Service

Russian and Syrian military officers have told rebels in a besieged area northeast of Damascus they must accept state rule or leave, the spokesman for one rebel group said on Tuesday.

The ultimatum to the rebels of eastern Qalamoun was served to civilians from the area during a meeting with a Russian colonel and an officer from the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, rebel spokesman Said Saif of the Martyr Ahmad Abdo told Reuters.

The area is 40 km (25 miles) outside Damascus and separate from eastern Ghouta, which is directly adjacent to the capital and where Russian-backed government forces have wiped out rebel resistance.

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"A clear message was sent to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups in the area: either reconciliation and disarmament — handing weapons to the Syrian government as the Russians describe it — or departing eastern Qalamoun," Saif said in separate comments to al-Hadath TV.

The Syrian military could not immediately be reached for comment.

The Syrian government is seeking to crush the last few rebel enclaves near Damascus after routing insurgents in eastern Ghouta, which was the last big opposition stronghold near the capital.

The eastern Qalamoun rebel enclave includes a few towns and an expanse of desert territory.

Saif said a proposal had been made under which rebels would withdraw from the towns into the mountains and civilians would stay, andRussia's response was being awaited. He said the aim was to avoid the "forced displacement" of people that had occurred in other areas recovered by the Syrian government.

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