

Decoy Maneuvers Near Syria

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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The Defense Ministry announced on Saturday that long-anticipated naval exercises had finally begun in the Black and Mediterranean seas. Plans called for ships from the Black Sea, Baltic and Northern fleets to gather in the Mediterranean Sea. These include the missile cruiser Moskva, the large anti-submarine ship Severomorsk, the escort ships Smetlivy and Yaroslav Mudry, and assorted landing ships and support vessels. Strategic and tactical aircraft were also reported to have taken part in the maneuvers.

What exactly is going on near the Syrian coast? The four large landing ships at the core of the naval grouping seem to leave no doubt that these are primarily landing maneuvers. But for some reason, the military is doing its best to confuse the situation. On Jan. 11, Interfax wrote that "a source within the General Staff reported that ships of the unified interfleet grouping of the Navy are practicing a sea landing on the Syrian coast during joint maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean Sea." According to the report, one of the key objectives of the grouping's maneuvers was to carry out scenarios for landing several units along with military equipment from four landing ships of the Baltic and Black Sea fleets."

I would like to believe that the author of the statement was either intentionally trying

to create a sensation or was simply careless in mixing up different elements of the maneuvers and that the warships are only pretending to prepare for a landing on the Syrian coast.

In reality, the real landing exercises will take place on Russia's Black Sea coast. That is why the large Kaliningrad and Alexander Shabalin landing ships were located in Russia's territorial waters at the start of the maneuvers. These exercises will likely take place within the next week.

After all, it would be crazy to conduct military maneuvers on Syrian territory, as the report went to great lengths to imply was happening. From a political standpoint, landing troops in a country crippled by civil war would be a clear demonstration of support for the ruling regime and would indicate that Moscow is prepared to provide military assistance to Syrian President Bashar Assad if necessary.

Such a move would be crazy from a military standpoint as well. Four large landing ships could place no more than a single armored battalion in Syria — clearly too small a force to conduct a large-scale military operation. If these are indeed only maneuvers, it would be interesting to know whether the troops will be carrying live ammunition or blanks. In either case, the Russian troops could easily fall victim to acts of provocation.

The only rational explanation that troops could land on Syria's shores is to take control of the airport and conduct a mass evacuation of Russian citizens. But the number of troops involved is barely adequate even for that relatively modest task. The media have already reported that a crisis team at the Foreign Ministry is planning such an operation. This may include plans to evacuate Assad and his inner circle. But if the top brass is really planning to send in Russia's troops this way, divulging their intentions beforehand only puts the whole operation at risk.

What's more, a second Interfax report quoted a military and diplomatic source as saying that sinister anti-Russia forces were recruiting "people of Slavic origin who are familiar with military service and air defense systems and who know how to handle a gun." These individuals reportedly had to present themselves as Russian mercenaries who were shipped in to fight for Assad and were supposedly taken hostage by Syrian rebel forces. In the end, Moscow is sending its troop to the Syrian coast despite the fact that the military is aware of this alleged provocation.

In this context, it all looks like elements in yet another meaningless propaganda game that Moscow has taken so much pleasure in playing recently. It appears as if the military has deployed its forces in the Mediterranean Sea on a vague mission shrouded in large doses of disinformation. The main goal of this propaganda campaign is to parade the Russian flag in a global hot spot and try to intimidate Syria's rebel forces.

Only a couple of months ago, I would have discounted my colleagues' insistence that the Russian authorities are engaged in yet another reckless endeavor. But in light of the recent "anti-Magnitsky act" and the new laws on foreign agents and treason, both of which are steeped in a desire to hurt the U.S. in any way possible, any form of madness on Moscow's part now looks less surprising — including troop-landing maneuvers near the Syrian coast.

Alexander Golts is deputy editor of the online newspaper Yezhednevny Zhurnal.

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