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Kerry: Russian Aircraft in Syria Consistent With 'Force Protection'

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. military has assessed that the type of Russian aircraft in Syria is consistent with protecting their own forces, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on Tuesday and called on Russia and Iran to be helpful in ending the four-year conflict.

"For the moment it is the judgment of our military and experts that the level and type represents basically force protection," Kerry told reporters.

However, depending on Russia's long-term decisions, the presence of Russian aircraft in Syria could raise some questions about Moscow's intentions, he added.

Kerry said while both the United States and Russia want the Islamic State defeated in Syria, Washington believed Moscow's support for Syrian President Bashar Assad was attracting foreign fighters who want Assad to go.

Still, Kerry repeated that Russia's intentions in Syria were unclear and called on both Moscow and Tehran to help with diplomatic efforts to end the crisis.

"If [Russia is] there to shore up Assad and to certainly provide Assad with the continued sense he doesn't have to negotiate, then I think it's a problem for Syria, and it's a problem for everybody who wants to bring an end to this conflict, which has gone on for too long," he added.

Kerry said the United States was ready to immediately begin discussions on a political solution for Syria.

UN-led peace talks on Syria have failed to bring the opposing Syrian sides together to agree on a transitional government body that would take over from Assad.

But the increased presence of the Islamic State, Russia's military build-up and an exodus of Syrian refugees into Europe have added urgency to finding a political settlement in Syria.

Kerry will meet with counterparts from Europe and the Middle East, including Russia and Iran, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly next week to discuss ways to launch peace talks on Syria.

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