

Russia Begins Air Strikes in Syria

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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President Putin said on Wednesday the only way to fight terrorists in Syria was to act preemptively.

The Russian air force began to launch air strikes in Syria against the Islamic State and other opposition groups on Wednesday, in a move that President Vladimir Putin described as an anti-terrorist action conducted in accordance with international law.

"Russia's participation in anti-terrorist operations in Syria is being carried out on the basis of international law and in accordance with an official request from the Syrian president," state news agency RIA Novosti quoted Putin as saying at his Novo-Ogaryovo residence outside Moscow.

"The only true way to combat international terrorism ... is through pre-emption, [by] fighting and destroying terrorists in territories that they already occupy, instead of waiting for them to come to our homes," Putin said.

Air strikes began just hours after Putin received a fast-tracked authorization to use force in Syria from the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament. The authorization

came after weeks of Russian military buildup at two bases in Syrian territory controlled by President Bashar Assad.

The Kremlin's stated political objectives are to fight terrorism and prop up Assad's embattled government after a series of setbacks against the Islamic State and Western-backed opposition groups.

However, though the Russian rhetoric was aimed against Islamists, U.S. officials on Wednesday said Russia's initial targets were located far from any Islamic State territory.

Russian aircraft have in recent weeks been deployed to an airfield in the government stronghold of Latakia, while ships from the Black Sea Fleet have ferried men and hardware to a small Russian naval station at Tartus, some 90 kilometers to the south.

Following the vote by the Federation Council, the head of the presidential administration, Sergei Ivanov, said the request for authorization to deploy force in Syria came after "[Assad] asked the leadership of our country for military assistance."

"We are talking only about the operation of the Russian air force. As our president has said, the use of ground forces is excluded, and the military purpose of the operation is limited to providing air support to the Syrian government forces in countering the Islamic State," Ivanov said, the Interfax news agency reported.

The Defense Ministry on Wednesday said that air strikes would be coordinated with Syria, Iraq and Iran via a recently established intelligence center in Baghdad.

Unidentified Defense Ministry sources told Interfax that only Russian officers and soldiers who volunteer for duty in Syria would be sent. The head of Russia's General Staff, Colonel General Nikolai Bogdanovsky, said no conscripts would be deployed, Interfax reported.

Support at Home

The Kremlin's announcement that it was taking the fight to the Islamic State, which has around 2,400 Russian citizens reportedly fighting for it — mainly from the predominantly Muslim-populated republics of Chechnya and Dagestan — drew strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Church's head, Patriarch Kirill, said a "responsible decision" had been taken "for the protection of the Syrian people from calamities inflicted by the iniquity of terrorists," according to a statement published on the Church's website.

A spokesman for the Moscow Patriarchate, Vsevolod Chaplin, was quoted by the Interfax-Religion news service as calling the fight against Islamic extremism "a holy war."

Likewise, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, a bombastic and outspoken supporter of Putin and his policies and himself a Muslim, said he was happy to see Russia intervene in Syria, but was disappointed ground operations were ruled out.

Kadyrov promised to join the first wave of ground forces, if they were deployed. Chechen fighters loyal to Kadyrov and Putin are believed to have taken part in fighting in eastern

Ukraine, where Kremlin-backed rebels have been fighting Ukrainian government forces.

The last time the Federation Council authorized Putin to use force abroad was in March 2014, just before Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The authorization was revoked in late June 2014, at Putin's urging.

Putin's request for permission to use force in Syria was unexpected and passed through the Federation Council quickly, and with no dissenting votes. 162 of the 170-member body voted yes, while eight legislators were not present for the vote.

The chairman of the Federation Council's defense and security committee, Viktor Ozerov, told the Russian News Service on Wednesday that Putin submitted his request to the legislative body on Monday while in New York attending the United Nations General Assembly.

In his address to the UN, Putin proposed the creation of a broad international coalition to fight the Islamic State in Syria. Later, Putin met with U.S. President Barack Obama behind closed doors to discuss Syria, among other things.

A Russian official in Baghdad notified the U.S. just one hour before Moscow launched air strikes in Syria, and requested that U.S. aircraft avoid Syrian airspace, U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday.

Limited Action

The announcement that the Russian air force would begin air operations in Syria sparked a stream of comments on social media comparing it to the Soviet Union's 1979 decision to send troops to Afghanistan to support a struggling socialist regime there.

The Afghan war, which lasted more than nine years, saw around 15,000 Soviet troops die, and prompted the rise of virulent and violent Islamist extremism in the region.

Russian officials of all stripes were adamant Wednesday that the country's military actions in Syria would be limited to air strikes and that no Russian soldiers would be deployed to fight alongside Assad's army against the Islamic State or Western-backed opposition forces.

"We won't enter a risk zone, where we would be dragged into a long-term conflict or when our servicemen's lives are at stake," the head of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee, Konstantin Kosachyov, told the Rossiya-24 television channel, according to a transcript by the Sputnik news agency.

However, there is already some indication that Russian forces are on the ground fighting for Assad's survival. Videos appeared online earlier this month reporting to show Russian equipment operated by Russian soldiers engaging in combat in Syria.

Following the strikes, U.S. officials said that the Russian warplanes had hit targets in the Homs region, an area contested by anti-Assad rebels, but not the Islamic State.

Analysts polled by The Moscow Times on Tuesday about what Russia's so-called "red line" might be for a full-scale open intervention in the four-year-old Syrian civil war said that operations were likely to be restricted to air strikes.

However, Yuval Weber, an assistant professor of international relations at Moscow's Higher School of Economics told The Moscow Times on Wednesday that by declaring limited involvement in Assad's war, Russia was repeating U.S. mistakes early in the Vietnam war.

"By committing to an ally facing a determined and indigenous foe, President Putin is putting himself in a similar position to President Johnson regarding South Vietnam in late 1964, early 1965," Weber said.

Weber said that when nations commit limited military force, and stake their prestige on the outcome of the conflict, the incentive becomes to increase their military commitment to protect their reputation.

Though Russia's move might simply be a bid to save an embattled ally, it might also be a bid to reverse Moscow's status as a global pariah after its actions in Ukraine. "The larger strategic issue is whether [this] is an attempt to create issue linkage with Ukraine: genuinely help the U.S.-led coalition in the Middle East to gain concessions in Europe," he said.

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