

Russian Jets Pound Assad's Enemies in Syria

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Smoke rises from a base controlled by rebel fighters from the Ahrar al-Sham Movement, that was targeted by what activists said were Russian airstrikes in the southern countryside of Idlib, Syria, Oct. 1.

Russian air strikes in Syria continued for a second day Thursday as evidence grew that the Kremlin was targeting more moderate opposition groups fighting against President Bashar Assad, rather than just the Islamic State, in a rapidly escalating proxy war.

Upward of 50 Russian jets and helicopters based in Syria flew 32 sorties in a day and a half of bombardment, according to Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov, Russian news agency Interfax reported.

Growing evidence on the ground, however, as well as statements from the Kremlin and Syria's ambassador to Russia, suggested that Russian jets were not only targeting Islamic State positions as Moscow initially indicated.

Russia was hitting IS militants as well as a “list” of other groups, President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Thursday, The Associated Press news agency reported. “These organizations are well-known and the targets are chosen in coordination with the armed forces of Syria,” he said, without giving specific names.

The Kremlin has backed Assad since the beginning of the country’s bloody civil war four years ago, and experts have said Moscow is using air strikes to prop up the Syrian regime, which has suffered a series of defeats at the hands of rebels in recent months.

‘They Are All Terrorists’

Syrian ambassador to Moscow Riad Haddad told reporters Thursday that Russian aviation was supporting the Syrian army in its fight against “terrorist groups” which included Islamic State as well as other more moderate opposition armed formations backed by the United States such as the Free Syrian Army.

“They all have terrorist aims and the aims of Islamic State ... They are all terrorists,” Haddad said of the Free Syrian Army and Islamist rebel grouping al-Nusra.

Haddad, whose words were translated into Russian from Arabic, added that the Russian strikes, closely coordinated with the Syrian army, were much more effective than those carried out by a U.S. coalition that has been bombing IS positions for almost a year.

“I want to thank Russia, the Russian people and President Vladimir Putin,” Haddad said.

Reports from the ground in Syria on Thursday suggested that a variety of Syrian rebel groups had suffered at the hands of Russian jets.

Western media outlets quoted U.S.-backed rebel groups in Syria saying that they had lost men and equipment in the Russian attacks. One rebel commander told The New York Times that the air strikes were more than 100 kilometers from known IS positions.

Russian warplanes bombed a training camp for rebels run by the CIA, the Reuters news agency quoted rebel commander Hassan Haj Ali, head of the Liwa Suqour al-Jabal rebel group, as saying Thursday.

The widened scope of the Russian air strikes comes after Putin said Wednesday that IS would be the only targets.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov repeated denials late Wednesday evening in New York, according to the TASS news agency.

“The rumors that the targets of these strikes were not ISIS positions are not based on anything,” Lavrov said, using another name for Islamic State, TASS reported.

Idlib, Hama and Homs

In a statement Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry said air operations had continued overnight after they began on Wednesday morning. State-controlled television channels showed Russian jets taking off in the dark and Russian soldiers in desert fatigues.

“The headquarters of a terrorist group and an ammunition dump near Idlib and also three-story reinforced command point for fighters near Hama were destroyed,” the Defense Ministry said.

A factory to the north of the city of Homs was also destroyed, according to the Defense Ministry.

Idlib and Hama are both outside IS controlled areas, according to details from the Carter Center, a U.S. rights organization, cited by The New York Times.

Soldiers from Iran, another backer of Assad, have arrived in Syria to take part in an offensive that will be coordinated with Russian air strikes and push towards Idlib and Hama, Reuters reported Thursday citing two unidentified military sources in Lebanon.

U.S. Coordination

The start of Russian air strikes Wednesday raised the alarming specter of Russian fighters on combat missions encountering U.S. warplanes, which are also conducting strikes on IS targets in Syria.

But Washington and Moscow said their militaries would coordinate with each other.

“We have created contacts to avoid any incidents. Our militaries should have them up and running soon,” Lavrov said in New York late Wednesday evening, Interfax reported.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said the first consultations were expected to take place Thursday, according to Interfax.

The military coordination comes despite U.S. criticism of the Russian attacks. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said Wednesday that the Kremlin’s actions were equivalent to “pouring gasoline on the fire” and warned that Russian strikes had hit non-IS targets, according to media reports.

U.S. regional ally Saudi Arabia criticized Russia on Thursday over the attacks, with a senior Saudi diplomat saying the air strikes were wrong and demanding that they “stop immediately,” Reuters reported.

Iraq Next?

Moscow appeared to be considering widening the scope of its military presence in the Middle East on Thursday, as a senior official at the Foreign Ministry said that Russia would be ready to carry out air strikes against IS in Iraq.

Russia would consider the “political and military advisability” of air strikes in Iraq if a formal request for assistance was submitted by the Iraqi government, according to Foreign Ministry department head Ilya Rogachyov, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Lavrov said Thursday that Russian air strikes would “not take place outside the boundaries of ISIS and “al-Nusra” and other terrorist groups,” the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

IS has a strong presence in Iraq, where it controls significant swathes of territory.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Thursday he would welcome Russian air strikes against IS in his country and had been receiving information from both Syria and Russia on the militant group, the Reuters news agency reported.

Russia announced on the weekend it had set up an information center in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad to coordinate with the government of Iraq, Iran and Syria.

A mandate received by Putin on Wednesday from the Russian parliament for the use of military force outside the country's borders reportedly does not specify that such action must take place only in Syria.

Military Details

Russian jets carried out 20 sorties during daylight Wednesday, four overnight and eight during daylight hours on Thursday, according to Defense Ministry spokesman Konashenkov, Interfax reported.

New information of the makeup of the Russian air forces in Syria emerged Thursday. The attack group of over 50 aircraft is made up of Su-24M and Su-34 bombers, low-flying ground attack Su-25CM jets, multi-role Su-30CM fighters as well as Mi-24 attack helicopters and multi-role Mi-8 helicopters, the Kommersant newspaper reported Thursday citing an unidentified defense source.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Wednesday in a statement that the planes were based at the Hamim air base, located in Assad-controlled territory just outside the Syrian coastal city of Latakia. Russia leases its only Mediterranean naval base from the Syrian government in Tartus, about 90 kilometers to the south.

The Syrian Defense Ministry has a military presence at the Hamim base to help coordinate air strikes, the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement Thursday.

A marine battalion — usually between 400 and 800 soldiers — was stationed at Hamim to protect the facility, Defense Ministry spokesman Konashenkov said Thursday, Interfax reported.

“The local authorities are only providing help through the supply of fruit and vegetables,” Konashenkov added.

U.S. officials have said that Russia also deployed tanks and anti-aircraft weapons to Syria, which could be used to defend its bases and military hardware if they were attacked.

A total of 1,500 military personnel will be needed on the ground in Syria to support Russia's air mission, the Vedomosti newspaper reported Thursday citing an unidentified defense source. Russian officials have said that conscripts will not be sent to Syria.

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