

Russia Pledges to Step Up Air Attacks in Syria

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A civil defence member walks on the rubble of a damaged building next to a site hit by what activists said were airstrikes carried out by the Russian air force at Ehsim town in the southern countryside of Idlib, Syria October 3, 2015.

Defense officials in Moscow said over the weekend that Russia would broaden its air bombardment of Syria and claimed a five-day bombing campaign had already caused significant damage to Islamic State infrastructure and led to hundreds of militants abandoning their positions.

Russian jets have flown over 60 sorties against insurgents across broad swathes of northern and central Syria, with some targets under 20 kilometers from the Turkish border, according to the Defense Ministry.

"We will not only continue our air strikes but will increase their intensity," Andrei Kartapolov, deputy chief of the General Staff, told journalists Saturday, the Defense Ministry

reported on its Facebook page.

Russian air strikes in Syria have been condemned by the United States and its allies in Europe and the Middle East as causing yet more casualties in the country's bloody four-year civil war, and being aimed at propping up Syrian President Bashar Assad — long backed by Moscow — rather than destroying IS.

Continuing Sorties

"A Russian air group from air base Hmeymim continues to expand their air strikes with high-precision weapons," the Defense Ministry said in a statement Sunday. "Over the last 24 hours 20 sorties have been flown by Su-34s, Su-24s and Su-25s. There have been attacks on 10 IS targets."

Islamic State munition dumps and command posts in Jisr al-Shugur — about 14 kilometers from Turkey — and Maarrat al-Nu'man were destroyed overnight, the Defense Ministry said.

Despite the assertion by officials that Russia was increasing its attacks in Syria, the number of flights and targets actually appeared to be static. The Defense Ministry said in a similar statement Saturday that more than 20 sorties were flown in the previous 24 hours and nine targets hit.

In the first two days of Russian strikes on Syria just over 30 sorties were flown by Russian jets, according to data from the Defense Ministry.

Despite Russian military claims that they are using high-precision weaponry and based their choice of targets on multiple intelligence sources, the casualty rate from strikes appeared to be climbing.

At least 39 civilians have been killed in the Russian air raids since they began Wednesday, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — which has been attacked by state-owned Russian media as an unreliable source of information — said Saturday, the Reuters news agency reported.

International medical charity Doctors Without Borders confirmed that a hospital in the mountains of the coastal region of Latakia was hit by Russian air strikes but there were no casualties, The Associated Press reported Saturday.

Assad Optimistic

In an interview given to Iranian television Sunday, Assad warned that an alliance between Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria was the only way to save the whole region from collapsing.

"[A] cause of optimism is President Putin's initiative to form a coalition which includes Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria," Assad said, according to the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency, or SANA, and retweeted by the official Syrian Presidency Twitter account. "It must succeed; otherwise the whole region, not only one or two countries, will be destroyed."

The Syrian president said there was no agreed timeframe for the Russian bombing campaign

and that air strike targets were agreed in advance between Russian and Syrian officers.

And Assad praised the Russian approach, which he said differed from the U.S. because Moscow was not trying to interfere in internal Syrian affairs.

"We have old relations with the former Soviet Union and later with Russia, for more than six decades now. They have never tried to impose anything on us throughout the history of this relation, particularly during this crisis," Assad said, according to SANA. "There is complete transparency in this relationship."

Diplomatic Fallout

International criticism of Russia for its bombing campaign gathered pace over the weekend.

Turkish President Recep Erdogan slammed Russia's air strikes in Syria as a "grave mistake," Reuters reported Sunday citing the Turkish Hurriyet newspaper.

"Russia is at the moment making a grave mistake. This may be a sign of a step that will take it to loneliness in the region," Erdogan said, the Hurriyet Daily News reported, according to Reuters.

Erdogan, who held talks with Putin in Moscow less than two weeks ago, is the latest in a series of world leaders to call on Russia to halt its military strikes.

U.S. President Barack Obama said Friday that Putin's policy was a "recipe for disaster" and that it could lead to a "quagmire" in Syria, while British Prime Minister David Cameron said Saturday that Russia was "backing the butcher Assad."

'Panic and Desertion'

Russian officials claimed that air strikes are damaging the military infrastructure of the Islamic State.

"We have succeeded in playing havoc with the terrorists' material base and significantly lowering their fighting capability," General Kartapolov said Saturday.

"Our intelligence says that militants are abandoning the regions they control. Panic and desertion has begun in their ranks. About 600 mercenaries have left their positions and are trying to get into Europe."

The Defense Ministry claims — which cannot be independently confirmed — were repeated as fact by state-controlled media.

"The terrorists are running and surrendering en masse," a newscaster on Russia's Channel One told viewers in a Sunday news bulletin. Citing Arabic-language media in Lebanon, she added that Syrian government forces were preparing a counterattack and that IS fighters were also fleeing into Iraq.

Kremlin-friendly tabloid LifeNews reported Sunday that rebel leaders were hiding the fact of Russian air strikes from their men because if they knew about them they would start fleeing

in terror.

Hmeymim Base

Russian state-owned media have been given direct access to the Russian Hmeymim airbase outside Latakia in Syria, from which strikes are being launched.

A report from the Kremlin-sponsored English language channel, RT, said Friday that the security was very tight because IS fighters were believed to be less than 40 kilometers away. Photographs posted online by a reporter from the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper showed conditions in which Russian soldiers were living, including field kitchens, washing machines and a portable a Russian sauna.

Most missions flown by the Russian air force are at night, Russia's state-owned Channel One said in a report from Hmeymim.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin tweeted a photograph Saturday of a Russian pilot in Syria with the caption "polite pilot" — a reference to the popular nickname for Russian special forces troops that appeared in the Ukrainian region of Crimea prior to its annexation by Moscow last year.

Putin originally denied that the troops — or "polite people" — were Russian, before later admitting that they were part of a military operation to seize the Black Sea peninsula.

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