The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia is Waging 'Asymmetric Warfare' in Syria — Britain's Hammond

October 05, 2015



Britain's Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond

Russia is engaged in "classic asymmetric warfare" in Syria by using its military clout to prop up Syrian President Bashar Assad while saying it is attacking Islamic State militants, Britain's foreign minister said Sunday.

Russia last week began striking targets in Syria — a dramatic escalation of foreign involvement in the civil war that has been criticized by the West as an attempt to prop up Assad, rather than its purported aim of attacking the Islamic State.

"It looks like a classic bit of Russian asymmetric warfare — you have a strong propaganda message that says you're doing one thing while in fact you are doing something completely different and when challenged you just flatly deny it," Philip Hammond told Reuters in an interview in Manchester.

He said Britain had held discussions with Russia but kept on getting the same response — that

Moscow was attacking Islamic State militants in Syria.

"You try talking to the Russians," he said. "They just keep repeating their position — that is, by the way, also the Iranian position — and it is just incredible."

He said that Britain needed "absolute clarity" that Assad would not be part of Syria's future.

"That's not some random bee in the bonnet that I've got; it's that without that commitment we will never get the broad spectrum of Syrian opposition groups to sit down and agree around a table how we take forward the discussion about Syria's future," he said.

Hammond dismissed proposals put forward by Russia and Iran for elections, saying Syria was "a million miles away" from being able to hold a free and fair vote.

"In a country where 250,000 people have been killed and 12 million people have been displaced, half of them outside the country — how can you talk about free and fair elections?" he said.

Assad End Game?

Hammond said the key to ending the suffering caused by the four-year civil war was a managed transition to peace — even if it meant Assad retained power temporarily.

"If the price for doing that is that we have to accept that Assad will remain as titular head of state for a period of time, do I really care if that's three days, three weeks, three months or even longer? I don't think I do," he said.

But Hammond said that for such a transition, Assad should make a pledge not to run in any future election and that he would give up control over Syria's security apparatus.

He added that there was no agreement with Moscow and Tehran on such a transition.

"The key is that there must be a transition — at the moment there is no agreement with the Russians and the Iranians even that there should be a transition," he said.

Hammond also said Russia represented a threat to the international system upon which Britain's security depended, saying it had shown that it did not respect diplomatic norms.

He pointed to Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region last year as an example of Russian President Vladimir Putin's approach to international law.

But, he said that Moscow still had an important role to play in the Middle East and that Britain could not afford to ignore Russia's role in negotiating peace in Syria.

"It would not be in our own interests to say that we will not talk to the Russians about the situation in Syria because we object so strongly to what they are doing in Ukraine," he said.

"We have to compartmentalize these disputes," calling for Russia to re-engage with the international system.

"We just need a Russia that accepts there are rules in the system, and you can't throw your

toys out of the pram and resort to military force every time you don't get your way," he said.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/05/russia-is-waging-asymmetric-warfare-in-syria-britains-hammond-a50057