

Syrian General Says Russian Strikes Aid Ground Offensive

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A frame grab taken from footage from a camera under a plane, released by Russia's Defense Ministry shows a Russian military jet dropping bombs, as a miniature screen (L top) displays the territory moments before the airstrikes, near Idlib in Syria.

DAMASCUS — Syria's top general on Thursday said Russian strikes had helped government forces launch a "wide-ranging" offensive in central and northwestern Syria, where al-Qaida's affiliate as well as other insurgents had advanced toward key government strongholds in recent months.

General Ali Ayoub said in a rare televised statement that the Russian strikes have facilitated an expanded military operation to eliminate "terrorists" — a term the Syrian government uses to refer to all armed opposition to President Bashar Assad.

The Syrian ground push got a boost after Russian warships launched cruise missiles into Syria

from the Caspian Sea on Wednesday, bringing new military might into the nearly five-year civil war. The strikes have alarmed the U.S. and its NATO allies, particularly Turkey, and on Thursday the alliance signaled its readiness to defend Turkey if needed (see story, page 1).

Russian officials say the 26 cruise missiles hit the provinces of Raqqa and Aleppo in the north and Idlib province in the northwest. The Islamic State group has strongholds in Raqqa and Aleppo, while Syria's al-Qaida affiliate, the Nusra Front, has a strong presence in Idlib.

Russia says its intervention is aimed at helping the Syrian government defeat the Islamic State group, but local activists and U.S. officials say the strikes have also targeted Western-backed rebels.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Russian air strikes in Idlib killed at least seven civilians on Wednesday. At least 40 civilians were killed on the first day of the Russian air strikes last week, according to activists and a human rights group.

"After the Russian air strikes, which reduced the fighting ability of Daesh and other terrorist groups, the Arab Syrian armed forces kept the military initiative," Ayoub said, using the Arabic acronym for the IS group.

"Today, the Syrian Arab armed forces began a wide-ranging attack with the aim of eliminating the terrorist groups and liberating the areas and towns that suffered from their scourge and crimes."

Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told state TV that the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, an umbrella group for dozens of local battalions, is no different from other militant groups.

"There is no difference between Nusra Front, Daesh and the Free Syrian Army — if it still exists," he said. "They started [the armed opposition] and taught Daesh and Nusra all these crimes committed against Syria now."

The heavy fighting was concentrated in the rural areas of Idlib, Hama and Latakia provinces, where the Army of Conquest, a coalition of rebel groups that includes the Nusra Front, operates. The Free Syrian Army also has a presence in the area. The IS group has a limited presence in western Hama, away from where the clashes erupted.

Syrian TV showed footage of Syrian soldiers loading and firing artillery, as helicopters flew over rural Hama and Idlib. It also showed tanks and air strikes. Syrian state news agency SANA said joint Syrian-Russian air strikes hit 27 targets belonging to Nusra Front, including positions and training camps.

The Observatory and other activists said a military helicopter was downed in Kfar Nabouda, in northern Hama. A local media group said the helicopter belonged to the Syrian government. The Observatory, which relies on a network of activists across Syria, said Russian jets bombed areas near Kfar Nabouda.

The fighting is concentrated in an area adjacent to the heartland of Assad's family and the Alawite minority — an offshoot of Shiite Islam — to which it belongs.

Syria's conflict, which began as an uprising against Assad in March 2011 but descended into a full-blown civil war after a fierce government crackdown, has so far killed 250,000 people, according to UN figures.

The Violations Documentation Center, a Syrian rights group, said at least 43 civilians, including nine children and seven women, were killed in the first day of Russia's air strikes in the central Homs province. The group, relying on witness testimonies and videos, said the strikes hit predominantly civilian areas in three villages and towns, including homes and a bread distribution center. One air strike hit a Western-backed rebel group based in northern Hama.

The group said it documented the dropping of at least two vacuum, or thermobaric, bombs, "which are entirely indiscriminate in nature and impossible to evade, even when taking shelter."

The group said the attacks constitute a "grave violation of international humanitarian law and, as a result, a war crime."

The Russian intervention is supported by an intelligence sharing center set up in Baghdad to coordinate the efforts of Russia, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Mekdad said China is also assisting the Syrian government in fighting terrorism, but declined to elaborate.

Russia's intervention has strained ties with NATO, particularly Turkey, which shares a long border with Syria and has been a leading backer of the Syrian rebels. Turkey and its allies say the Russian strikes have mainly targeted moderate Syrian rebels.

Turkish President Recep Erdogan warned that Moscow's military action in Syria is endangering trade ties with his country, saying Ankara could look elsewhere for gas supplies and cancel the construction of its first nuclear power plant, which is being built by Russia. Russia supplies 60 percent of Turkey's gas needs.

"Losing Turkey would be a serious loss for Russia," Erdogan said, in comments published Thursday in the Hurriyet newspaper.

Over the weekend, Turkey reported back-to-back violations of its airspace by Russian warplanes. Russia called its penetration of Turkish airspace a minor incident that was unintentional.

Vladimir Putin's spokesman said the Russian president had been informed about Erdogan's remarks but hoped they would not affect relations between the two countries.

"We sincerely hope that these relations will continue to expand according to the plans mapped out by Putin and Erdogan because this cooperation is genuinely mutually beneficial and is in the interests of both our countries," Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Thursday.

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