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Russia to Build Unified Military Base in Syria, Says General

By Matthew Bodner

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Russian commanders are now looking to create “a single base, which would include sea, air and land components,” said Colonel-General Andrey Kartapolov.

Russia's Defense Ministry is planning to create a single unified military base in Syria, a member of the General Staff said Friday.

Russia began air strikes against militant groups in Syria on Sept. 30. Moscow claims it is targeting terrorist groups, though Western analysts say Moscow's real aim is to defend Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia's operations in Syria have so far been conducted using two bases along the Syrian coast — a small naval station at Tartus through which supplies are funneled, and a larger military and airbase near Latakia some 90 kilometers to the north, from which air raids are launched.

Russian commanders are now looking to create “a single base that would include sea, air and

land components," said Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov in an interview with the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper published Friday.

Kartapolov did not explain why a new base would be necessary, but it could signal greater Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict. The two bases currently in use have been adequate for bringing in troops, hardware and supplies to Syria, and to conduct air missions in the region, but neither is equipped to host a large ground force.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, asked Friday if Russia was planning to build a new base or expand its current ones, dodged the question, asking the reporter if they were suggesting "that the Russian General Staff makes decisions without [Putin's] knowledge," according to the Interfax news agency.

Kartapolov, who heads the General Staff's operations directorate, which plans missions, spoke at length about Russia's military campaign in Syria, including the lack of coordination between Russia and the U.S.-led international coalition.

Both sides claim to be battling the extremists of Islamic State, the jihadist group. But the U.S. has supported so-called "moderate" rebel groups fighting IS and the Assad government, while Russia appears to have labeled all groups opposed to Assad as "extremist," and therefore acceptable targets for bombing raids.

"In the West they talk about 'a moderate opposition,' but we do not see anything like this in Syria. You can call them different things — moderate or immoderate opposition — but anyone taking up arms against legitimate authorities, are they moderates?" Kartapolov asked.

He also placed the size of the Islamic State force — using the term as a catch-all for anyone fighting against Assad in Syria — at anywhere from 30,000 to 80,000 combatants, but said "as usual, the truth is somewhere in the middle, let's say 40,000 to 50,000."

Asked about the possibility that insurgents fighting in Syria might have obtained shoulder-mounted surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS) — which could threaten Russian aviation — Kartapolov said there were rumors that they might have the weapons, but that Russia had not yet seen them in action.

Kartapolov openly mocked the U.S.-led bombing campaign in Syria, saying the Western allies did not understand what they were shooting at but were too embarrassed to admit it.

He also recounted the words of a Syrian general, who allegedly told Kartapolov that "the activities of the Russian air force have returned the smiles to the faces of Syrian children."

Kartapolov's criticism of the U.S. campaign was echoed by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in an interview to the state-run Rossia channel over the weekend in which he talked mostly about Syria.

The interview came days after the U.S. turned down an offer from Russia to send a delegation headed by Medvedev to Washington to hold talks on Syria.

The White House isn't interested in talks "as long as Russia is not willing to make a constructive contribution to our counter-ISIL effort," said White House spokesman Josh

Earnest, using another name for the Islamic State terrorist organization.

When asked about the rejection, Medvedev said the U.S. administration was demonstrating "weakness, indecisiveness and incompetence" in its handling of the crisis.

"The Americans appealed to us, they said: 'Let's fight this evil [terrorist organization Islamic State] together,' and we said 'yes, we consider it the right thing to do, we're ready to do it,'" he said.

"[Now] the Americans are unhappy, they tell us the strikes are hitting the wrong targets," said Medvedev.

"In response to our legitimate request to show us the targets we should be working with ... they say: 'No, we're not showing anything.' OK, we say, then show us the targets our armed forces aren't suppose to aim at ... They say, 'No, we're not showing them either.' What kind of collaboration is that?" he said.

The prime minister said Russia is fighting terrorists in Syria, not supporting Assad, though he said that Assad is the country's legitimate leader right now.

"The Syrian nation should decide who will run the country. ... It's a question of people's choice. Currently we base [our decisions] on the premise that Assad is the legitimate president," and the legitimate president asked Russia to intervene in the conflict, said Medvedev.

It doesn't matter who the president of Syria is, he added, as long as it's not an Islamic State member. "But it should be a civilized, legitimate leadership," the prime minister said.

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