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Russia Accuses Turkey Of Preparing Syria Invasion

By The Moscow Times

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Russia suspects Turkey may be secretly preparing to invade northern Syria after Ankara denied a Russian military plane access to its airspace as part of a treaty-mandated surveillance flight on Feb. 3, the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement posted on its Facebook page Thursday.

By denying the Russian surveillance flight access to airspace along the Turkey-Syria border, Moscow claims that Ankara has violated an international treaty known as Open Skies. The treaty aims to prevent military tensions by allowing nations to observe military deployments within a nation's border.

"The Russian Defence Ministry regards these actions of the Turkish party as a dangerous precedent and an attempt to hide the illegal military activity near the Syrian border," the statement said. "[We have] reasonable grounds to suspect intensive preparation of Turkey for a military invasion to the territory of Syria."

Relations between Russia and Turkey deteriorated dramatically in November when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter-bomber after it allegedly violated Turkish airspace. Russia is bombing Ankara-backed rebels in northern Syria, which may have provoked Turkey's downing of the aircraft.

These tensions appear to have spilled over into Open Skies compliance. The Russian Defense Ministry said it had pre-approved the flight, which would have been Russia's first Open Skies mission in 2016, but Turkey at the last minute denied the Russian aircraft access.

“Turkish Defense Ministry officials refused the Russian specialists to perform the observation flight over the areas adjacent to Syria, as well as over the airfields with concentrations of NATO aviation without any specific explanation,” the ministry statement said.

Previous Russian flights above Turkey were due to take place in October 2015 but at Turkey’s request the flight were postponed and but ultimately not carried out.

This is not the first time an Open Skies flight has been denied by a signatory of the treaty, but usually these are done to protect sensitive military technologies. Military expert Viktor Murakhovsky told news site Gazeta.ru that Turkey's refusal does not qualify as protecting technological secrets.

“During the conflict in Ukraine, we allowed similar flights along the Russian-Ukrainian border and nobody found anything... Therefore we have a strong apprehensions that Turkey has deployed forces on the border with Syria and so they have refused our flights,” Murakhovsky explained.

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