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Islamists Destroy 7 Planes at Russia's Syrian Airbase, Media Report

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TASS

Russian media have reported that a deadly Dec. 31 rebel mortar attack on an airbase in Syria destroyed up to seven Russian warplanes.

Russia has maintained the Khmeimim airbase since 2015 as part of its military campaign in support of the forces of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. The Syrian government signed an agreement last year that extended Russia's lease on the base until at least 2066.

Related article: Two Russian Troops Killed in Syria on New Year's Eve

The Kommersant business daily reported on Wednesday that radical Islamists from an unnamed group shelled the base on New Year's Eve, citing two anonymous military diplomatic sources.

They said that at least four Su-24 fighter-bombers, two Su-35S multi-purpose fighters and one An-72 military transport plane were destroyed in the attack.

Russia's Defense Ministry denied the accuracy of the report on Thursday.

"Kommersant's report about the 'virtual destruction' of seven Russian warplanes at the Khmeimim airbase is fake," the ministry was cited as saying by the Interfax news agency.

The ministry said that two servicemen were killed in a rebel mortar attack on the air base on New Year's Eve, but that no planes had been destroyed.

Meanwhile, independent investigators at The Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), who monitor the Ukrainian and Syrian wars, expressed doubts about the accuracy of the Kommersant report in a Twitter post on Wednesday. The open-source investigators said that Syrian rebels do not have the military capability to penetrate the airbase.

Earlier on Wednesday, CIT investigators reported that two Mi-24 helicopter pilots were killed in a separate incident on New Year's Eve that was caused by "a technical malfunction." That incident was confirmed by Russia's Defense Ministry.

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