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Russia Warns U.S. Not to 'Play With Fire' in Syrian Conflict

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(Bloomberg) — Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the Trump administration not to "play with fire" as he lashed out at the U.S. over what he described as its "provocative" support for autonomy-seeking Kurds in Syria.

"The U.S. should stop playing very dangerous games which could lead to the dismemberment of the Syrian state," Lavrov said at a Middle East conference in Moscow on Monday, alongside his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif and a top adviser of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. "We are seeing attempts to exploit the Kurds' aspirations."

An armed clash earlier this month in which U.S. strikes may have killed more than 200 Russian mercenaries attacking American-backed forces inflamed a standoff between Moscow and Washington in Syria. Russia's Foreign Ministry said it knows of five Russian deaths and the incident is still being investigated. While the U.S. accepted Russian assurances that it had nothing to do with the failed attack, the clash was the deadliest between citizens of the former foes since the Cold War.

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After seven years of war, Assad has managed to reassert control over a large part of his country. But the conflict is entering a dangerous new phase as outside powers confront each other, with tensions sparked by Iran's growing influence and Turkey's bid to crush Kurdish forces it says are linked to separatists inside its borders.

The U.S. is setting up a 30,000-strong Kurdish-led border protection force in the northeast of Syria, which Assad's backers Russia and Iran have condemned as an attempt to carve out an American zone of influence.

'New Wave'

Zarif said Iran is concerned about a "new wave" of foreign intervention in Syria led by the U.S. after the defeat of Islamic State. He accused the U.S. of trying to capture Syrian territory by making use of proxies.

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Turkey is pursuing an offensive against Kurdish fighters in northwest Syria. Israel this month launched its biggest strikes in Syria since the 1982 Lebanon war after one of its warplanes was shot down in the wake of the destruction of an apparent Iranian spy drone inside Israeli territory.

Israel's prepared to act "not just against Iran's proxies that are attacking us, but against Iran itself," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Sunday at the Munich Security Conference.

The Syrian government has a "right to self-defense" and Israel should stop its "acts of aggression," said Zarif. He said Turkey has no right to intervene in Syria, amid reports that Kurdish forces have asked the Syrian army to help them fight Turkish troops.

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