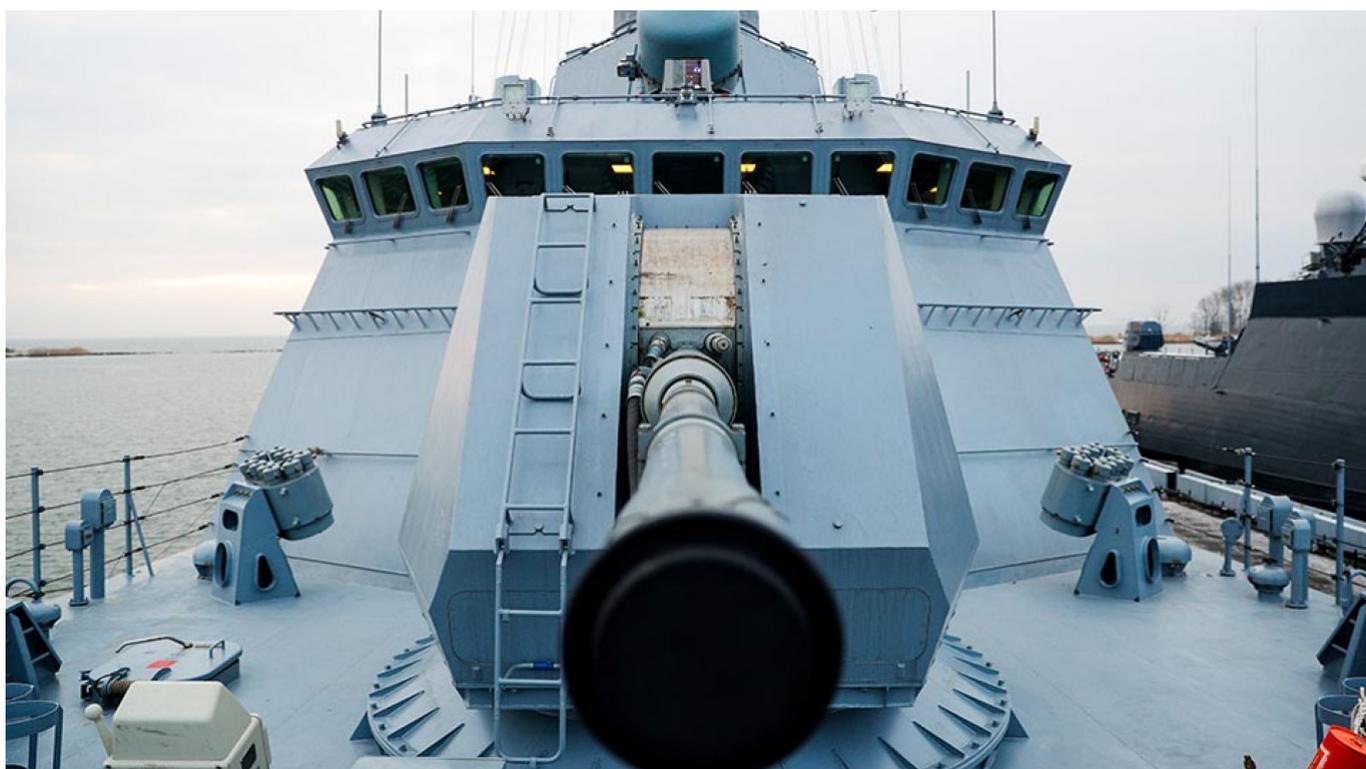


Russia Sends Warships as Turkish Troops Killed in Syria

February 28, 2020



Turkey said Syrian government airstrikes backed by Russia killed 33 Turkish soldiers Thursday. **Vitaly Nevar / TASS**

Russia is sending two warships equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles to the Mediterranean Sea toward the Syrian coast amid mounting tensions between Russia, Turkey and Syria over the Syrian province of Idlib, the Russian Navy said Friday.

Turkey said Syrian government airstrikes killed 33 Turkish soldiers Thursday, bringing the death toll in Idlib to 54 Turkish soldiers this month. Turkey has sent thousands of troops and military hardware into Syria as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned of a full-scale offensive unless Russia-backed Syrian forces pulled back from Turkish observation posts in the region.

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Turkish air and land support units fired on “all known” Syrian government targets in retaliation, Turkey’s communications director said.

Russia’s Black Sea Fleet has dispatched the Admiral Makarov and Admiral Grigorovich frigates to the Mediterranean, its spokesman Alexei Rulev [said](#). A third frigate, the Admiral Essen, has been in the Mediterranean since December 2019, Rulev added.

Russia's Defense Ministry [said](#) Friday that Turkish troops hit by shelling should not have been in the Syrian area where they were and that Ankara had not informed Moscow in advance about their location.

The ministry said, however, that Russian warplanes had not carried out strikes in the area where Turkish troops were. It added that Russia had done everything to ensure the Syrian army ceased fire to allow the troops to evacuate.

Turkey will no longer stop Syrian refugees from reaching Europe, a senior Turkish official said Friday, a move that would reverse a pledge Turkey made to the European Union in 2016 and could draw Western powers into the standoff over Idlib and stalled negotiations between Ankara and Moscow.

Video published Friday [showed](#) anti-Russian protests taking place outside the Russian Embassy in Ankara. The Kremlin later said that Moscow hoped Turkey would do everything to protect Russian nationals and Russia's diplomatic facilities in Turkey.

President Vladimir Putin met Russia's Security Council on Friday to discuss Syria and said that Turkish troops should not be positioned outside their observation posts in Syria's Idlib, the Kremlin was quoted as saying.

The U.S. State Department said it is very concerned about the reported attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib and it stands by its NATO ally Turkey.

"We... continue to call for an immediate end to this despicable offensive by the Assad regime, Russia and Iranian-backed forces," a State Department representative said in a statement Thursday.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres voiced "grave concern" about the escalation in northwest Syria and repeated his call for an immediate ceasefire, a spokesman said.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, supported by relentless Russian air strikes, have pushed hard in recent months to retake the last large rebel-held region in northwest Syria.

Turkey has been sending troops to back the rebels it supports against the offensive.

The war in Syria has displaced millions and killed hundreds of thousands.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg [announced](#) plans for the North Atlantic Council to meet Friday on the latest tensions in Idlib on Turkey's request.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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