

# Threat of wider war mounts as Russia continues airstrikes in Syria

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2 October 2015

A second day of Russian airstrikes in Syria against Islamist anti-government forces heightened the danger of Washington's four-and-a-half-year war for regime-change triggering a clash between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

With Moscow's move, aimed at frustrating the US-led drive to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia's sole Arab ally in the Middle East and host to its only naval port outside the former Soviet Union, three of the world's most powerful militaries are now carrying out uncoordinated combat missions within the country's restricted borders: the US, France and Russia. Britain is preparing to enter the fray in the coming weeks.

Russian officials announced early Thursday that Russian planes had struck targets in the northwestern Syrian provinces of Homs, Hama and Idlib, following strikes in the same general area on Wednesday. Russia modified its earlier claim to be exclusively bombing Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) forces, adding al-Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, to its list of terrorist targets. At the same time, Moscow denied US allegations that it had attacked the Free Syrian Army, a so-called "rebel" force that is openly described by the US media and American officials as "CIA trained and funded."

Speaking to reporters at the United Nations in New York, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the Russian airstrikes "do not go beyond ISIL, al-Nusra or other terrorist groups recognized by the United Nations Security Council or Russian law." He went on to say that Russia did not consider the Free Syrian Army to be a terrorist group, adding, "We believe the Free Syrian Army should be part of the political process."

The Obama administration adopted a sharper tone in response to Russia's entry into the Syrian fighting. While on Wednesday, White House spokesman Josh

Earnest had played down the significance of Russia's move, on Thursday, however, he denounced Russia's "indiscriminate military operations against the Syria opposition" and warned that they were "dangerous for Russia."

At his Thursday briefing, Earnest also announced that American and Russian officials had held hour-long "deconfliction" talks earlier in the day in an effort to avert a clash between the two countries' aircraft.

The overriding responsibility for the destruction of Syrian society and the transformation of the country into the flashpoint for a possible nuclear war rests with US imperialism. Following the overthrow and murder of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi as the result of a US-led air war, carried out in tandem with jihadist forces, in many cases linked to Al Qaeda, the US stoked a sectarian civil war in Syria aimed at toppling the Assad regime.

As in Libya—and Afghanistan and Iraq—the aim of the Syrian intervention was to install a US puppet regime to facilitate the establishment of American hegemony over the Middle East and domination of the region's vast energy resources.

The war for regime-change in Syria, carried out in alliance with the Sunni Gulf monarchies and Turkey, has reduced Syria to a state of endless bloodletting and anarchy. An estimated 300,000 Syrians have been killed, 11 million out of a population of 23 million have been displaced, and some 4 million have fled abroad, including hundreds of thousands desperately seeking entry to Europe.

The Russian bombing campaign has further exposed the fraud of Washington's so-called war against terrorism, both in Syria and more generally. The region targeted by Moscow is controlled by a coalition of militias, mainly Islamist, called Jaysh al-Fatah. Last

April, the group overran the provincial capital of Idlib, and the following month it seized the strategic town of Jisr al-Shaghour, close to Assad's Alawite heartland of Latakia.

The dominant force in Jaysh al-Fatah is the al-Nusra Front, the Al Qaeda branch in Syria. The other major militia is Ahrar al-Sham, also linked to Al Qaeda. Fighting either as part of the coalition or alongside it is the CIA-backed Free Syrian Army.

As the British *Telegraph* newspaper remarked on Thursday, Russia, by targeting "the local affiliate of Al Qaeda" made it "hard for the West to criticize these attacks or quibble at the Russian description of the targets as 'terrorist.'"

None of this alters the fact that Russia's intervention is wholly reactionary. It is an attempt by the regime of President Vladimir Putin, who represents criminal capitalist oligarchs who dominate post-Soviet society, to defend Moscow's sphere of influence in the Middle East and the financial interests of Russian oil and gas monopolies.

Russia hopes to strengthen its position in Syria in order to work out a deal with the US for a transition to a new government, with or without Assad, that will retain elements of the current regime and protect Russian interests. While its actions have a defensive character—seeking to avert the installation of a US puppet government in Damascus that will pave the way for an escalation of Washington's drive to militarily encircle and ultimately dismember Russia—they only increase the danger of a far wider war.

US policy in Syria was already mired in crisis prior to Russia's airstrikes. More than a year of bombing had failed to weaken ISIS' control over vast swaths of Syrian territory. A \$500 million Pentagon program to train non-Islamist forces to fight both ISIS and Assad had ended in fiasco, with the head of the US Central Command admitting to Congress that a total of "four or five" troops had been deployed. Washington had been unable to block Moscow's military buildup in western Syria, forcing President Obama to break his freeze on talks with Putin and hold a meeting with the Russian leader at the UN on Monday to discuss a possible political settlement.

Washington's initial response to the Russian airstrikes has reflected the disarray within American ruling circles over Syria. Some voices, a minority, are

calling for the administration to backtrack from its insistence that Assad leave office. Urging "cooperation" with Moscow, Dianne Feinstein, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said, "The key is to defeat ISIS, and then there can be an election in Syria and the chips fall where they may. There is no immediate, obvious successor to Bashar al-Assad."

Republican Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma said the US would have to give up on ousting Assad "at least for a while." He was seconded by Georgia Republican David Perdue, who said that until the US came up with a strategy to defeat ISIS, "it's going to be difficult to deal with the Assad issue."

More prominent are voices calling for an even more reckless US policy of escalation against both Assad and Putin. They speak for powerful sections of the foreign policy and military-intelligence establishment that are implacably hostile to the nuclear deal with Iran and bent on war with Russia and China.

John McCain, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, spoke for this faction Wednesday. He declared from the Senate floor, "Into the wreckage of this administration's Middle East policy has now stepped Putin. As in Ukraine and elsewhere, he perceives the administration's inaction and caution as weakness, and he is taking advantage."

On Thursday, McCain told CNN that he could "absolutely confirm" that the initial Russian strikes were "against our Free Syrian Army or groups that have been armed and trained by the CIA..."

McCain is implicitly—and sections of the media are explicitly—pointing to a change in the Pentagon's rules of engagement in Syria announced by the Obama administration last spring that allows US forces to combat Syrian government forces or any other group or country that attacks US-backed "rebels." This is meant to put pressure on the White House to initiate attacks not only against Damascus, but also against Moscow.



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