

US intensifies campaign against Russia following attack on aid convoy in Syria

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US and Russian representatives emerged from a meeting of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) held in New York on the periphery of the United Nations General Assembly session to declare that they were continuing to support a tattered ceasefire in Syria, despite the bloody events of the past few days.

The meeting was convened a day after an attack on an aid convoy in the northern countryside of Aleppo killed at least 20 people and destroyed 18 out of 31 trucks bearing food and other humanitarian relief supplies. Washington quickly blamed the attack on the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad and its principal international ally, Russia, both of which denied any role in the attack.

Similarly, the US Central Command said that American warplanes had not been involved.

This attack comes on the heels of the bombing by the US Air Force and allied warplanes of a Syrian army position overlooking the Deir ez-Zor Airport near the Syrian-Iraqi border, which killed as many as 90 Syrian soldiers and wounded another 100. The attack allowed fighters of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) to overrun the position.

Among the contending Syrian forces, the ceasefire has already been declared a dead letter, with Islamist fighters aligned with Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front launching a major offensive in Aleppo, backed by artillery and rocket launchers. The Syrian government, meanwhile, declared the ceasefire over after reporting 300 violations by the “rebels.” It renewed its airstrikes in an effort to counter attacks by the Western-backed forces in Aleppo and elsewhere in the country.

“The ceasefire is not dead,” US Secretary of State John Kerry said after leaving the hour-long ISSG meeting attended by 20 foreign ministers. He added that “specific steps” would be discussed in a subsequent meeting later this week.

His Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei

Lavrov, who co-chaired the meeting, made no public comment. Early on Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declared the chances for restoring the ceasefire “very slim.”

The UN Security Council is expected to discuss the ceasefire on Wednesday, but Washington has stonewalled any council vote on the agreement, whose terms it insists cannot be made public.

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura reported that all participants at Tuesday’s meeting, which included both Iran, which is providing military aid to the Syrian government, and Saudi Arabia, which has armed and paid Islamist militias fighting against it, had indicated continued support for the truce, despite its unraveling on the ground. “The ceasefire is in danger, is being seriously affected,” he said, but added that it continued so long as the US and Russia backed it. He described the attack on the aid convoy as a “game changer” in terms of demonstrating the necessity of bringing an end to the violence.

One thing that the attack, together with the previous strike on the Syrian troops, has definitely scuttled is the provision within the deal negotiated between Kerry and Lavrov on September 9 calling for the setting up of a joint US-Russian center to coordinate strikes on the ISIS and al-Qaida-linked groups. The center was supposed to be established after a seven-day cessation of hostilities and the delivery of aid to besieged populations.

The ceasefire as a whole, and this provision in particular, provoked heated opposition from the Pentagon, with Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter bitterly opposing it in cabinet meetings with President Barack Obama. Top uniformed commanders made statements bordering on insubordination, suggesting that they might not implement the deal.

Also hostile to the agreement were the so-called “rebels” and their handlers within the CIA. The ceasefire

called for the so-called “moderate opposition,” Islamist militias armed and paid by the US and its allies, to separate itself from the longtime Al Qaeda affiliate, the Al Nusra front, which recently renamed itself. There was no indication that any such separation was in progress, and given the close alliance between the US-backed forces and the Al Qaeda elements, which form the backbone of the armed opposition to the Assad government, it seemed impossible to effect.

Even more decisive from the standpoint of the US military’s opposition to the ceasefire deal is its hostility to any military collaboration with Russia under conditions in which the Pentagon’s strategic focus has shifted ever more directly toward the preparation for direct military confrontation with the nuclear-armed power.

Washington, without citing any evidence, immediately declared Moscow responsible for Monday’s attack on the aid convoy. “We don’t know at this point whether it was the Russians or the regime. In either case, the Russians have the responsibility certainly to restrain—refrain from taking such action themselves, but they also have the responsibility to keep the regime from doing it,” a US State Department statement issued Monday night said.

Meanwhile, according to CNN, a US official acknowledged that “there is no intelligence that specifically indicates that Syrian aircraft or helicopters were in position to attack this location when it happened.”

The aid convoy, one of the first to be sent into territory held by the Islamist militias, had been approved by and received permits from the Syrian government after several days of delays, largely over Syria’s insistence that Turkish officials not be allowed to accompany the aid shipments. From the standpoint of motive, it is less than obvious why Damascus would have decided to bomb a convoy that it had just approved, when it could have continued to prevent it from moving into the area.

For its part, the Al Nusra Front had vowed to block any aid shipments that came through territory held by the government, organizing demonstrations in Aleppo to announce this position.

Russia’s Defense Ministry pushed back against the charge by Washington and its allies that Russia and/or the Syrian government had bombed the aid convoy. Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said that analysis of video footage of the struck convoy displayed no bomb craters nor any damage to the vehicles consistent with aerial bombardment. He also noted that the attack on the trucks had coincided with the launching of a major Al Nusra offensive near Aleppo.

The Russian ministry also released a video showing a “rebel” truck towing a large-caliber mortar launcher accompanying the UN aid convoy into the Aleppo town of Uram al-Kubra. General Konashenkov said that the vehicle seemed to be using the convoy as a “cover” for redeploying the mortar.

“Most importantly,” he added, “where did the mortar disappear near the destination point of the convoy and what was the target of its fire during the convoy’s stop and unloading?”

Meanwhile, the United Nations Tuesday revised a statement issued the day before that, like the US State Department, had described the attack on the aid convoy as an airstrike.

In response to the evidence offered by Moscow, the UN replaced the references to “airstrikes” with the more general term of “attacks.”

UN humanitarian spokesman Jens Laerke described the earlier reference as an error. “We are not in a position to determine whether these were in fact airstrikes,” he said. “We are in a position to say that the convoy was attacked.”

Whatever the source of the attack on the aid convoy, it is clear that the US and its allies have seized upon it to further its propaganda campaign to vilify and prepare for military confrontation with Russia. Washington has also utilized the incident to bury any discussion of the attack two days earlier by American and allied warplanes on Syrian army troops who were confronting ISIS fighters, which raised questions as to whether the US was deliberately aiding the Islamist forces.

In a curious comment on the incident, Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters Monday that there should be no rush to judgment on the US airstrike and on the accuracy of US targeting.

“Maybe before we start going on a path of ‘what went wrong,’ let’s do an investigation and actually ensure that something did go wrong,” the general said. “It may be that ... when you do the investigation, the facts would tell you that we would have done what we did again.”



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