

Russia responds to US threats with blunt warning over use of force in Syria

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Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova issued a stark warning to Washington Saturday, declaring that any move by the US to directly attack Syrian government forces could result in “total war” and produce “tectonic shifts” in the country and throughout the Middle East.

Russia’s warning came almost a year to the day after the Kremlin initiated air strikes against Islamist targets in Syria. Moscow intervened to prop up the Assad regime, which hosts Russia’s only naval base outside of the former Soviet Union. The intervention drew immediate condemnation from Washington, the country that bears responsibility for initiating the Syrian civil war in 2011 to bring about regime change in Damascus.

A year on, Zakharova raised the prospect of the eruption of a much wider war with incalculable consequences. Noting Washington’s preference to pursue its policy goals with the use of force, she stated, “It usually ends with one thing—a full-scale war.” She then proceeded to warn of the impact on the broader region, adding, “If the US starts a direct aggression against Damascus and the Syrian army, this will lead to scary, tectonic shifts not only on the territory of Syria, but in the whole region as well.”

These comments reflect the growing concern about Washington’s increasingly provocative and aggressive stance towards Russia over Syria, expressed recently in veiled threats to unleash CIA-sponsored terrorists against Moscow and a willingness among senior political and military circles to contemplate all-out war. At the same time, they show that the Kremlin’s attempt to defend the interests of Russia’s oligarchy by propping up its sole ally in the Middle East offers no counterweight to this war drive, but only exacerbates the danger of a military clash between the world’s two biggest nuclear powers.

Chief responsibility for this danger, however, lies with the United States. Zakharova’s comments were undoubtedly a response to the Obama administration’s ever more aggressive stance towards Moscow in recent days.

On Friday, the *New York Times*, which only a day earlier

branded Russia an “outlaw state,” released a transcript of a closed-door discussion it had obtained between Secretary of State John Kerry and a collection of US-aligned Syrian activists on the sidelines of last month’s UN General Assembly. In it, Kerry said he and many others in the Obama administration had pushed for military action and were frustrated by the adherence to diplomatic avenues with Russia and Syria. “I think you’re looking at three people, four people in the administration who have all argued for use of force, and I lost the argument,” Kerry told his audience, before adding, “You have nobody more frustrated than we are.”

Kerry’s remarks were released only two days after he threatened to end all bilateral cooperation with Russia over Syria and in the midst of a presidential campaign in which Russia is being routinely demonized. They provide yet more confirmation that the ceasefire deal he struck with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last month, which collapsed after the US bombed a Syrian army position, was nothing more than a tactical maneuver. The aim was to buy time for Washington’s proxy Islamist forces to regroup and rearm, while allowing the US to prepare for a major escalation of the Syrian war.

Zakharova’s comments also were a reaction to those of State Department spokesman John Kirby, who menaced Moscow last Wednesday with the potential unleashing of Islamist extremists against Russian interests, not just in Syria, but within Russia’s own borders.

“Extremist groups will continue to exploit the vacuums that are there in Syria to expand their operations, which could include attacks against Russian interests, perhaps even Russian cities. Russia will continue to send people home in body bags, and will continue to lose resources, perhaps even aircraft,” Kirby said. Given Washington’s long record in collaborating with Jihadi terrorist groups going back to the 1980s, the meaning of such comments was unmistakably clear.

Russian aircraft continued to support a brutal offensive by Syrian government forces over the weekend with repeated

air strikes on Aleppo. One of the city's main hospitals, known as M10, was struck for a third time in a week Saturday, killing two patients, injuring many more and putting the facility out of service. According to UN figures, at least 320 civilians have been killed in eastern Aleppo and hundreds more have been injured since the collapse of the ceasefire. Allegations of the use of bunker-buster bombs, cluster munitions and phosphorus have been made.

Pro-government forces gained control of northern districts of Aleppo Sunday and the Syrian military command announced that it was prepared to give safe passage guarantees to rebels who left the city. Up to 10,000 government soldiers and aligned militias from Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia fighters are reportedly preparing to launch an offensive on Aleppo's eastern districts.

The attempts by the US and its Western allies to seize on the casualties caused and destruction wrought by Syrian and Russian bombardments are utterly hypocritical. US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and his British counterpart Boris Johnson have all accused Russia of "war crimes" or "barbarism" while blithely ignoring the atrocities perpetrated by the so-called moderate opposition. Extremist militias shelled government-held areas of Aleppo over recent days, killing 18 and injuring over 60 on Friday and injuring a further 13 on Saturday. No outcry has been heard in the mainstream media on behalf of these civilians killed, likely by US-supplied munitions.

More fundamentally, US imperialism is to blame for fomenting the Syrian conflict through its systematic promotion and financing of forces aligned to al-Qaida, which have formed the backbone of the rebel forces since 2011. The Obama administration, its Gulf allies and Turkey have recklessly stoked the civil war with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus, even as the casualties have mounted and surpassed half a million by many estimates. Last month, chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Joseph Dunford explicitly told Congress that achieving the US goal of controlling air space over Syria and establishing a "no-fly" zone would require war with Damascus and Moscow.

This makes clear that Washington will stop at nothing to secure the consolidation of its hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East, a critical component of its broader strategy of establishing unchallenged domination over the Eurasian land mass.

In Syria, Washington has stoked ethnic and religious divisions by backing competing and even directly hostile groups in its desperate bid to secure its predatory interests. In northern Syria, the US is continuing to supply weapons to Kurdish fighters aligned with the People's Protection Units

(YPG) and Democratic Union Party (PYD), forces which have been coming under attack since late August from a Turkish incursion to which Washington has also provided assistance.

But there are indications that tensions between Ankara and Washington are growing. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized Washington last week for its latest shipment of arms to the YPG and suggested that Ankara's support in fighting ISIS was conditional on the US abandoning the Kurds. Referring to the future offensive to seize control of Raqqa, ISIS's capital, Erdogan said, "Of course, if the United States wants to do the Raqqa operation with the YPG and the Democratic Union Party, we as Turkey will not take part in this operation; but if they exclude the YPG and PYD from this affair, then of course we will conjoin this struggle together with the United States."

Senior Turkish military officials are reportedly discussing crossing the Euphrates River, which the US considers to mark the limit of Kurdish control. Reports have also raised the possibility of talks on a Turkish-Russian agreement on Syria when Russian President Vladimir Putin possibly visits Turkey October 11.

Erdogan noted last week that Turkish troops had already established a "safe zone" of 900 square kilometers in Syria, an area that could be massively expanded to 5,000 square kilometers.

One of the next targets identified by Turkey is the ISIS-controlled city of Al-Bab, which US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter has urged Turkey to avoid because Washington wants Kurdish control to be established there. Al-Bab is considered key for the offensive on Raqqa, meaning that whoever holds power there could significantly influence the operation to conquer the ISIS capital.



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