



*An Su-34 strike jet releases a weapon near Aleppo early in Russia's Syrian campaign. Despite the painted-over insignia on this and other aircraft, Russia enthusiastically covered the action through state media. Below, an Su-34's target in Aleppo, described as a factory for improvised explosive devices.*

Screenshots via Russian Defense Ministry



# Russian Roulette



Russia's air force launched a dangerous, uncoordinated campaign in a complicated battlefield where USAF is already operating.

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**R**ussia deployed dozens of combat aircraft to Syria in late September, promptly launching an air campaign not coordinated with the US-led coalition air war against ISIS and throwing a dangerous new element into an already maddeningly complex conflict.

The US and its coalition partners in Operation Inherent Resolve said they had no advance warning of Russia's deployment of about 40 aircraft, and less than two hours' notice of Russia's first attacks on ground targets in Syria. On multiple occasions in the ensuing two weeks, coalition and Russian aircraft came within "10 to 20 miles" of each other, a US Central Command spokesman said, although unconfirmed press reports—not denied by the Pentagon—put some close encounters as near as 500 feet.

Moscow said the deployment was aimed at combating what it called "terrorism" in Syria, specifically mentioning the so-called Islamic State.

The initial two weeks of Russia's air strikes, however, chiefly targeted forces near the major western cities of Syria, such as Homs, and Aleppo, where forces of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad were having trouble pushing back anti-regime forces. The strikes were not in areas where ISIS is generally operating.

The attacks indicated Russia's real aims: to help Assad retain power, prop up its only remaining Middle East client state, preserve access to its sole remaining Mediterranean naval base at Tartus, and maintain its influence in the region.

Assad flew to Moscow on Oct. 20, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to thank him for the deployment and campaign of air strikes. "I wanted to express my huge gratitude to the whole leadership of the Russian Federation for the help they are giving Syria," Assad told Putin, according to a transcript of the meeting released by Russia.

Putin told Assad he hoped for a political solution to the conflict in Syria, but also suggested there is yet another reason for the intervention. There are "about 4,000 people from the former Soviet Union—at a minimum—fighting government forces with weapons in their hands," Putin said. "We, it goes without saying, cannot allow them to turn up on Russian territory after they have received battlefield experience and undergone ideological instruction."

Through state media, the Russian air force said it had carried out 700 sorties and struck 690 targets in Syria through Oct. 20. However, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman US Army Col. Steve Warren told reporters on Oct. 21 Russia had conducted 140 strikes in Syria.

A week into its Syrian air campaign, Russia also launched a volley of 26 SSN-30 Kalibr cruise missiles from its Caspian Sea flotilla. The missiles overflew Iran and Iraq before hitting targets in Syria, after a flight of more than 900 miles.

Given that Russia was already operating strike aircraft in the areas where the cruise missiles struck, Western analysts viewed the missile raid as tactically unnecessary and therefore actually intended to demonstrate Russia's cruise missile prowess.

The Kalibrs demonstrated a capability similar to that of the American Tomahawk cruise missile, with a range well beyond what they were thought to have and an accuracy within several meters. Only the US and Britain had previously used such long-range precision guided cruise missiles in combat.

Not all of the missiles performed as expected, however: Four of the Kalibrs were reported to have crashed in Iran.

International airlines immediately changed air traffic routes around the area to avoid being hit by any further missiles. Coincidentally, the same day as the Kalibr volley, a Dutch inquiry board confirmed that a Russian-built Buk missile had downed Malaysia Airlines MH17 in July 2014 over eastern Ukraine, killing 298 people.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said Russia's intervention was like "pouring gasoline" on the regional conflict, where there are already dozens of separate military factions at war and where the US-led coalition is carrying out combat strikes against ISIS daily.

At an Oct. 9 press conference in London alongside his British counterpart, Michael C. Fallon, Carter said Russia's strategy in Syria is "illogical and self-defeating."

In the first 24 hours, Russia flew about 60 sorties and struck some 55 targets. Daily Russian strikes through mid-October varied from a dozen to 88.

By taking Assad's side, Carter said, the Russians "inflame the civil war, therefore extremism, [and] prolong the suffering of the Syrian people. They're going to have the effect, also, of turning everyone against Russia itself. So this will boomerang, in a very direct way, on Russian security."

Carter said he could not confirm reports that Russian ground forces had been attacked in Syria, but said, "by taking the side of Assad against all opponents in Syria"—at least some of which will have to form the nucleus of a post-Assad government—"Russia has, as we have said repeatedly, made itself a target, and so I expect that Russian forces will come under attack." Two rockets, presumably

**An Su-25 Frogfoot takes off on a mission from Latakia loaded with dumb bombs. Most Russian strikes have not been made with precision munitions.**



launched by anti-regime forces, hit Russia's embassy in Damascus on Oct. 13.

#### **COLD WAR MINDSET?**

China's state-run media warned that Russia and the US were now fighting a proxy war and chided the two powers for their "Cold War mindset."

Putin criticized the US-led coalition for not sharing its intelligence with Russia, saying "some of our partners simply have mush for brains," and lack an understanding of the situation in Syria or "the goals they are seeking to achieve."

Lt. Gen. Robert P. "Bob" Otto, Air Force intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance chief, told defense reporters Oct. 1 he has "a low level of trust in the Russians," and "I would not envision a relationship where I would share some of my intelligence with them. I'm not saying it couldn't happen, I just don't envision it" based on "their demonstrated intent."

President Obama said Russia has miscalculated by "doubling down" on Assad.

At an Oct. 2 White House press conference, Obama said Putin's effort to "prop up" Assad risks "alienating the entire Sunni world."

Putin's coalition consists of just Assad and Iran, Obama said, while the US-led coalition has 65 nation members, and no one seems to be "lining up" to join Putin's approach.

"This is not a smart, strategic move on Russia's part," Obama said. Supporting Assad means the rest of the Middle East will view Russia as complicit with "barrel bombs landing on kids, at a time when Russia has a significant Muslim population inside of its own borders that it needs to worry about." Barrel bombs are improvised bombs made by filling a barrel with explosives and shrapnel, then rolling it out of a helicopter.

Obama stated flatly that "we're not going to make Syria into a proxy war" between

Screenshot via Russian Defense Ministry





Screenshots via Russian Defense Ministry

**Russian Su-30s on the flight line, their distinctive red star insignia erased. The Flanker mission was not clear, given that the Syrian rebels have no air force.**

the US and Russia. This would be “bad strategy on our part.”

The conflict “is not some superpower chessboard contest. And anybody who frames it that way isn’t paying very close attention to what’s been happening on the chessboard,” Obama said. All the Russian action has achieved is to boost Putin’s domestic approval—something Obama said is “easier to do when you’ve got a state-controlled media.”

The Russian deployment began in early September, according to a Pentagon spokeswoman. Russia sent “military equipment and personnel to the Bassel al-Assad air base outside Latakia, Syria,” near the Mediterranean coast. “This includes modular housing for personnel, fighter and attack jet aircraft, helicopters, anti-air missile systems, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and support equipment for airfield operations.”

Commercial satellite imagery previously showed apron extensions and area clearing at the Latakia base, in preparation for the Russians’ arrival.

Satellite imagery obtained after the deployment revealed 12 Su-25 Frogfoot attack jets, 12 Su-24 Fencer strike aircraft, four Su-30 SM strike aircraft, and up to a dozen Mi-24 Hind attack-assault helicopters, as well as a pair of Mi-17 Hip utility helicopters. Pentagon officials estimated about 500 support personnel came with the combat aircraft, transported by some 20 flights of An-124 Ruslan (NATO name Condor) giant airlifters, similar to the US C-5 Galaxy.

The fact that only nine tanks, 36 armored personnel carriers, and two air defense missile systems were part of the deployment lent credence to Russia’s claim that the ground forces are there to protect the Russian contingent, not carry out significant ground operations.

Videos appearing on Russian media of the aircraft on the ground and in actual combat over Syria showed the aircraft had their Russian national insignia painted over.

### PRECISION MATTERS

Though Russian media touted the attacks as “precision” strikes, Pentagon spokesmen described the bombings as often “indiscriminate” and lacking in true precision. Internet videos apparently taken through Russian targeting pods showed weapons exploding well away from the crosshairs, sometimes in open areas when a building was clearly the target.

“Those aren’t precision weapons. Those are dumb bombs guided by the pilot,” Otto noted. Asked how he could be sure of this, Otto said, “We determine it based on what we see being brought in. ... With imagery, we can tell what’s hanging off the airplane.” He also said that unclassified imagery of the results of the strikes “was representative of what you’d expect from dumb bombs being dropped from airplanes at medium altitude, which was not that impressive.” That poses a danger, Otto said, because “precision matters. And I think when you hit things that you’re not intending to hit, you create second- and third-order consequences.”

Assad’s campaign “has not been successful,” Otto said. “I believe that’s why the Russians went in, because they recognize that Assad is losing.”

**A Russian jet closes within a few hundred feet of an MQ-9 Reaper. After a number of close encounters, a local US-Russian “hotline” was set up to avoid midair conflicts.**

Russian combat aircraft also violated Turkey’s airspace on several occasions, for extended periods. Turkey said it shot down a small Russian remotely piloted aircraft that crossed the border. Attacks within Turkish territory by Russian aircraft could trigger a full-scale NATO response under Article 5 of the NATO treaty. It states that an attack on one member of the alliance will be construed as an attack on all.

“We’d certainly like to avoid” a direct confrontation between coalition and Russian jets, Otto said, and “the best way to avoid that is to be in consultation for deconfliction.” Something between a Russian short-notice heads-up and “sharing of ATOs”—air tasking orders—“is where we want to be,” he said.

He noted, though, that Russia’s aircraft deployment includes four Su-30SM air superiority aircraft. These aircraft have no role in anti-ISIS operations over Syria’s friendly airspace. This air superiority presence has to be taken into account, with the aircraft’s movements closely monitored, Otto said.

OIR spokesman Warren told Pentagon reporters Oct. 13, “It is dangerous, right? ... It’s dangerous if two sets of aircraft come into the same ... airspace without very clear, laid-out protocols for [the] safety of all involved,” which was why the US was having meetings with Russia to establish deconfliction rules.

Warren said that aside from close encounters between manned aircraft, Russian



Screenshots via Russian Defense Ministry



pilots have diverted to “take a look at our UAVs,” or unmanned aerial vehicles.

“Maybe they’re flying a pattern of combat air patrols somewhere where ... one of our UAVs will sort of come nearby and the Russian will break his pattern and come over and take a close look,” Warren said, describing a scenario that has been repeated several times. He did not say whether the unmanned aircraft had been targeted.

### SAFE DISTANCES

Only on one occasion has a coalition aircraft “changed course and decided to approach a bombing run from a different direction simply because there were ... Russian aircraft” operating nearby.

The deconfliction talks bore fruit on Oct. 20, when the Pentagon announced a deal had been struck to “minimize the risk of in-flight incidents between coalition and Russian aircraft operating in Syrian airspace.”

Spokesman Peter Cook said a memorandum of understanding—the details of which he would not disclose, at the request of Russia—established a baseline frequency for aircraft-to-aircraft communication, as well as “the establishment of a communication line on the ground” between the two forces in the event that coalition and Russian aircraft have a close encounter. He would not reveal what entities would be connected by the communications line, but insisted that the deal should not be construed as a partnership in any way.

“The MOU does not establish zones of cooperation, intelligence sharing, or any sharing of target information in Syria,” nor does it “constitute US cooperation or support for Russia’s policy or actions in Syria. In fact, far from it,” Cook said. “We continue to believe Russia’s strategy in Syria is counterproductive and their support for

**Russian pilots “walk through” an upcoming mission. This informal rehearsal is the last stage of mission planning before taking off.**

the Assad regime will only make Syria’s civil war worse.”

He declined to say what would constitute a “safe distance” between the aircraft, but if Russia follows the protocols, “we should not have the risk of engagement with Russian aircrews over Syria.” The deal was specific to Syria and did not cover Iraq, where Russian aircraft were not operating at the time. However, elements of the Iraqi government have publicly called for adding Russian jets to the anti-ISIS mix in their own country.

Deliberate close calls between Russian and coalition aircraft—including close proximity between remotely piloted aircraft from the two factions—“would not reflect the professional airmanship that ... this understanding now calls for,” Cook said. Such “activities” could “lend themselves to misunderstanding and to miscalculation.”

Cook added that “anything that could be deemed as threatening or hostile” action on the part of Russian aircraft toward coalition aircraft “would represent a violation of this agreement, and it is very clear to our aircrews what constitutes that right now, and they’re able to identify right away when another aircraft has ... crossed that line.”

The deal is unambiguous about proper protocols, Cook insisted.

Moreover, “our aircrews always have the right to defend themselves,” Cook said. While the US hopes to eliminate any dangerous confusion, “our crews, no matter where they’re flying, have the ability to defend themselves if they feel threatened.”

Warren, in an earlier press conference, maintained that US and coalition aircraft were not in any danger, even before the

deconfliction arrangement. They have “extraordinary situational awareness based both on our capabilities as fliers and on our capabilities for information. ... Everyone knows where everyone is, for the most part.”

Warren called the Russian bombings and missile launches “reckless and indiscriminate,” and also counterproductive, as they had allowed ISIS forces “to make progress ... in the northwestern corner of Syria.”

He also noted “the UN recently announced that they’ve had to cease humanitarian operations in Syria because of the danger posed by these Russian air strikes.”

Secretary of State John F. Kerry told National Public Radio on Oct. 15 that he hoped his personal conversations with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov—which led to the deconfliction MOU—would also “lead to a broader set of understandings about where the targeting ought to be and what is truly helpful and what is not.” If Putin’s goal is to prop up Assad, “and fake it with respect to the extremists and terrorists, that’s a serious problem,” Kerry said.

In public statements, Moscow defines all armed militias in Syria—whether they be Islamists, al Qaeda, ISIS, or secular groups seeking the ouster of Assad—as terrorists, and all fair game for strikes. Some of the forces targeted by Russia include those backed by the US—such as the so-called Free Syrian Army—who have received US weapons and materiel support in recent months.

Asked about Putin’s likely intentions, Otto said, “His stated intentions and what I saw” from the first rounds of air strikes “are not congruent.” The areas where the strikes took place “were not anti-ISIS strikes,” and there’s a mismatch between Putin’s statements and what his forces are doing.

One consequence of Russia’s air campaign has been to compel the US to con-



**Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (l) visited Russian President Vladimir Putin (r) to thank him for Russia's air attacks, primarily striking non-ISIS anti-regime groups.**

duct military-to-military discussions with Russia, abruptly stopped after Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014. The situation put Carter in the awkward position of explaining how there will be conversations with Russia regarding one conflict but not the other.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee—who has been advocating sending US ground forces to Syria for several years—described Russia's new air war as a “disastrous turn in the Middle East.”

Writing an op-ed for CNN, McCain said, “A few weeks ago, the Administration warned Russia not to send its forces to Syria. Russia did it anyway. The Administration then tried to block Russia's access to airspace en route to Syria. It failed.”

The consequences, McCain said, are “humiliating” for the US—forced to enter a deconfliction agreement—and a statement from Kerry that the situation represents “an ‘opportunity’ to cooperate because we agree on ‘fundamental principles.’”

Russia's response to that has been “bombing US-backed opposition groups in Syria,” he said.

McCain argued that the US “cannot shy away from confronting Russia in Syria, as Putin expects the Administration will do,” and he urged President Obama to order US aircraft to “defend civilian populations and our opposition partners in Syria.”

He recommended creating “enclaves in Syria where civilians and the moderate opposition” to Assad “can find greater security,” and that these safe zones be protected by US forces on the ground.



Screenshot via Russian Defense Ministry

“If Assad continues to barrel-bomb civilians in Syria, we should destroy his air force's ability to operate,” McCain said, without specifying how the US would go about doing this.

### **NO REHABILITATION**

Former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates told the Senate in 2011 that a no-fly zone would require strikes on command and control centers, air defense radars and missiles, airfields, and all the other sinews of Syria's air defenses. Establishing such a no-fly zone would effectively be a declaration of war on Syria, he said at the time. Strikes on Russian assets would likely start a war as well.

Russia announced in 2013 it would veto any UN Security Council measure to authorize a no-fly zone over Syria.

Obama said Russia's air strike campaign “is not particularly different from what they had been doing in the past; they're just more overt about it.”

He reported that when he met with Putin the week before, he put forward a plan for a “political transition” in Syria, one that “keeps the state intact, that keeps the military intact, that maintains cohesion,” but demands Assad give up power.

“You cannot rehabilitate him in the eyes of Syrians,” Obama said of Assad.

“An attempt . . . to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them [Russia] stuck in a quagmire. And it won't work. And they will be there for a while if they don't take a different course.”

Bombing non-ISIS moderates who “have to” be part of any successor government, able to “pick up the pieces and stitch back together a cohesive, coherent country,” is “a recipe for disaster, and it's one that I reject,” Obama said, adding, “we're not going to go back to the status quo ante.”

**An Su-24 lights the burners as it takes off on a night mission. Besides shoring up its last Mideast ally, Russia is gaining combat experience for its aircrews.**

Obama further explained that he has no plans to put large-scale US ground forces in Syria, saying, “Unless we can get the parties on the ground to agree to live together in some fashion, then no amount of US military engagement will solve the problem.”

The US would “find ourselves either doing just a little bit and not making a difference—and losing credibility that way—or finding ourselves drawn in deeper and deeper.”

He dismissed calls for greater intervention as “half-baked ideas” that offer no solutions as to “what exactly would you do, how would you fund it, and how would you sustain it?”

While many analysts wondered aloud how long the Russian intervention in Syria would go on, state media on Oct. 13 began reporting that the air campaign was running out of meaningful targets—potentially setting the stage for an exit. By that point, according to the Russian Defense Ministry, their aircraft had destroyed “the majority of ISIS ammunition, heavy vehicles, and equipment,” plus weapons plants and field camps.

The state media further claimed that in 10 days, the Russian campaign had done more damage than the US-led “halfhearted campaign” had done in 18 months—a claim met with high skepticism by Western analysts.

Then, on Oct. 31, an ISIS bomb brought down a Russian airliner on a flight from Egypt to St. Petersburg. The attack triggered a new wave of Russian air strikes within Syria, this time clearly against ISIS targets. ✪