

Russia Puts Its Military Operations in Syria on Display

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Russian ground personnel members load a Su-30 jets with weapons at Hemeimeem airbase, Syria, Oct. 22, 2015.

HEMEIMEEM AIRBASE, Syria — Russian fighter jets streak into the sky from this base in western Syria for yet another day of the heavy bombing runs that have allowed Moscow to portray itself as a major global player, projecting military power far from its borders.

While support crews attached a missile to an Su-30 jet for a mission Thursday, helicopter gunships buzzed around the base to make sure there was no threat of a ground attack.

Russia has been conducting daily air strikes in Syria since Sept. 30 to back a government offensive by its longtime ally. Moscow says it is targeting militants, especially from the Islamic State group and other extremists. The United States and others have criticized the strikes, which they say are aimed primarily at groups fighting Assad's forces and likely only to fan the violence.

The Russian Defense Ministry flew Moscow-based reporters to the airbase early Thursday,

giving a few international news organizations their first inside look at its operations here.

The tour was organized Wednesday, the same day the Kremlin announced that Syrian President Bashar Assad had met in Moscow with President Vladimir Putin. Assad's visit Tuesday was his first known trip abroad since the conflict broke out in 2011 and raised intense speculation about their motives.

A diplomatic push also was under way. Russia said Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry would meet Friday in Vienna and would be joined by their counterparts from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both staunch critics of Assad.

Putin also talked on the phone with the leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan ahead of the Friday session, the Kremlin said.

Lavrov said Russia will brief its counterparts on its military and political efforts in Syria.

"I think other parties will be interested to get firsthand information from the Russian delegation about the steps that we take to fight the IS in Syria. We should also talk about the political process," he said.

Lavrov also said in televised remarks that Moscow is eager to invite other countries from the region to the talks, especially Iran — another supporter of Assad.

Although Lavrov said that Russia had agreed to meet with the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Turkey, he reiterated that Moscow "remained convinced" that a settlement of the Syrian crisis had no future without the involvement of Iran.

"It's vitally important in current conditions to include Egypt, Qatar, the Emirates and Jordan in the group," he added.

Journalists were shown well-organized operations at the Hemeimeem base, located near the coastal city of Latakia. The large base is protected by air defense systems, which can be seen deployed around its edges. Security forces with assault rifles guard key facilities, and rows of armored personnel carriers are parked nearby.

The combat missions by the Su-25s and Su-30s began early Thursday. A giant Russian cargo plane landed and two smaller Il-76 military transports also were seen on the tarmac. Russian servicemen in crisp uniforms were barred from talking to reporters.

Defense Ministry spokesman Major-General Igor Konashenkov said that in the past 24 hours, Russian planes made 53 sorties, hitting 72 targets — mostly weapons and ammunition depots and other infrastructure.

Konashenkov rejected Western allegations the Russian campaign has mostly targeted other groups opposing Assad instead of the Islamic State. He said it was striking facilities preparing for suicide attacks, in addition to going after other terrorist targets.

"I don't understand how terrorists could be divided into good and bad ones," he told reporters.

He also dismissed allegations that Russian planes are hitting civilians, calling it "sheer nonsense." Russian warplanes are not hitting populated areas and are only aiming at infrastructure such as depots and bunkers, he said, noting that air strikes are conducted only after their targets are verified using various sources.

In conducting the air campaign, Putin's apparent goals are to help cement the Syrian government's grip on the territory it still controls and to show that Assad cannot be unseated by force.

Russia also wants to foster political talks that could preserve the Syrian state and allow Moscow to protect its interests in the region.

Another Putin goal has been to bring Moscow and Washington together for a security dialogue in which Russia is treated as an equal. The hope is that this would improve ties with the West and end Russia's isolation that resulted from the crisis in Ukraine.

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