

Russia Increases Pressure on Islamic State in Syria

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Massive airstrike on ISIS objects in Syria carried out by long-range bombers of the Russian Aerospace Forces.

Strategic bombers belonging to the Russian air force have conducted bombings and rocket strikes on Islamic State positions, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said at a meeting with President Vladimir Putin, the Defense Ministry reported on its website Tuesday.

“The number of flights has been doubled, which allows [us] to make powerful, precise strikes against Islamic State militants throughout the depth of Syria,” Shoigu said.

During the course of the air strikes, Russia has been using Tu-160 supersonic bombers and Tu-95 propeller strategic bombers which fired 34 rockets to the objects in the Aleppo and Idlib provinces.

These strategic bombers were designed in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1980s and

haven't been part of any conflict before, RIA Novosti reported.

On Tuesday, Russia used 12 Tu-22M3 strategic bombers in the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor provinces. These bombers participated in the Soviet Union campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s and, according to some reports, in the war in South Ossetia in 2008.

The intensified response came after the head of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov said that an examination of the Russian Airbus A321 wreckage and passengers' belongings revealed traces of explosives, and announced that the plane crash of Oct. 31 was the result of a terrorist attack.

Putin vowed to hunt down those responsible for the downing of the Russian passenger plane "wherever they are hiding," according to a transcript released by the Kremlin on Tuesday.

While the FSB offers a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of those responsible, Russian security officials have convened for a flurry of meetings to plan Moscow's response to the downing that killed all 224 people aboard.

Egypt, however, insisted it was too early to call the downing a terror attack.

Egyptian Civil Aviation Minister Hossam Kamal said that while the investigation was ongoing, so far there has been no proof of a "criminal act" behind the crash, Egypt's Ahram Online news website reported Tuesday.

"If Russia has evidence that the plane was downed by a bomb, why didn't they show it to the Egyptian authorities?" Mahmoud Qasqosh, a researcher for the Regional Center for Strategic Studies, was cited as saying by Ahram Online.

Lavrov Critiques U.S. Military Operation

Russia has increased its air campaign, France is hitting Islamic State militants in response to a series of terrorist attacks in Paris and the U.S.-led coalition continues its bombing campaign.

While the three-pronged assault increases pressure on Islamic State, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has expressed skepticism over the aims of the U.S. military operation.

Lavrov accused the U.S.-led coalition of using the Islamic State to weaken the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, according to an interview that was broadcast on Rossia television late Tuesday night. The interview had been recorded on Nov. 2, according to the Foreign Ministry.

"The problem with the United States and the coalition it has created is that even though they have announced that the coalition has been created exclusively to fight the Islamic State and other terrorists, and would not carry out any military action against the Syrian army – and practice shows they have made good on those words – but the strikes they have made against terrorists' positions and an analysis of those strikes over the period of one year allow to reach the conclusion that they have struck selectively — I would say, sparingly — and in the majority of cases did not touch those units of the Islamic State that could have seriously push back the Syrian army," Lavrov said.

U.S. officials and analysts had previously accused Russia of using its air strikes, which began on Sept. 30, to bolster Assad's government by targeting his political opponents.

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