

Deterring Russia's Horizontal Escalation in Syria

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Articles & Testimony

To dissuade Moscow from further provocations that endanger coalition forces, the West needs to demonstrate that it has other military and political options in Syria.

On 23 and 26 July, Russian military aircraft fired flares that damaged two American MQ-9 Reaper drones in Eastern Syria. The twin incidents followed on the heels of a 16 July altercation where a Russian Su-35 fighter manoeuvred so close to a US turboprop MC-12 that the “crew’s ability to safely operate the aircraft” was put at risk when it flew through the Russian aircraft’s jet wash.

In the last month alone, the US military has announced eight different instances of Russian military harassment in Syria. Tensions have reached such an extent that on 30 July, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the Russian state news agency TASS that “Russia is ready for any scenario, but does not want a direct military clash with the US” and referred the matter to the US-Russia military deconfliction mechanism in Syria.

The incidents are but the latest in a number of signs indicating Moscow is horizontally escalating its conflict with Washington from Ukraine to Syria. A direct indication is that the Russian aircraft that damaged the US drone on 23 July was painted with a “Z”—the mark Russian forces have used in their invasion of Ukraine.

July’s eight incidents come immediately in the wake of President Putin’s suppression of the mutiny in Russia of Wagner forces, whose operations in Syria reports indicate have been taken over (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/wagner-vs-russias-defense-ministry-middle-east>) by the Russian Ministry of Defence. While 2022 saw an uptick in incidents between US and Russian forces, the recent escalation in fact began in March when Russian aircraft violated the airspace above the US Al-Tanf Garrison (ATG) over 25 times in a single month.

Since the Russian military entered Syria in 2015, such issues were successfully handled via the US-Russian military deconfliction “hotline.” But unfortunately, as early as last September, Russia reportedly began calling only intermittently.

As to be expected, Russian officials claim it is in fact the US who is escalating—and even training Islamic State (IS) elements at the ATG. According to statements on 29 July by Rear Admiral Oleg Gurinov, the deputy head of the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, so far this year “the coalition’s aircraft made 23 dangerous close encounters with the aircraft of the Russian aerospace forces.” This includes 11 incidences where Russian aircraft were exposed “to weapons guidance systems which led to the automatic operation of onboard defence systems and the shooting of false thermal targets,” including “two such cases in April, one in May, four in June and five in July.”

Just what has led Moscow to decide to escalate with the US in Syria as its losses mount in Ukraine? In June 2022, US General Michael Kurilla attributed the Russian military posture to General Aleksandr Chayko’s return to Syria after his troubled tenure commanding forces in Ukraine. But how to account for Moscow’s more recent decision-making, as well as reports of increased collusion between Russian, Iranian, and Syrian-backed groups in Syria?

Counterproductive US Policy Decisions

American Syria policy decisions that have changed the political context in Syria certainly have not helped. Following a devastating earthquake on 6 February along the Turkish-Syria frontier, the US Treasury Department issued General License 23, which allowed for transactions outlined as “earthquake relief” under current US sanctions on Syria.

While the license was justified in the face of the scale of destruction and humanitarian need in Syria, the license language was particularly broad. No definition of what constituted “earthquake relief” was outlined—it permitted transactions with “the Government of Syria” (otherwise known as the al-Assad Regime) despite a horrific track record of diverting humanitarian aid away from its opponents and provided an extended duration of six months instead of the standard three.

Official US policy **[opposes normalisation with al-Assad \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-caesar-act-restricts-normalisation-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-caesar-act-restricts-normalisation-syria)**, but US regional allies read the license as permission to normalise relations with his regime, leading to Syria’s readmittance to the Arab League at its latest summit last May in Jeddah. With al-Assad once again being welcomed back to the Arab fold and Russia’s project of Turkish-Syrian rapprochement remaining an open issue, Moscow has read the license as not only permission for US allies to engage directly with al-Assad, but also as the latest indication that Washington cares little about Syria policy, and that the time is ripe to push US forces out of Syria. And as also witnessed last month, **[Russia is vetoing \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-aid-dont-bet-security-council\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-aid-dont-bet-security-council)** any United Nations Security Council resolutions concerning continuing cross-border aid.

Recent US statements stating that it is not leaving Syria, combined with calling out Russia’s escalation in Eastern Syria, have not been enough to deter Moscow. While military action is the best way to send messages to an adversary, it is laden with risk, which perhaps can explain the White House’s continued reticence to highlight that Russian aerospace damaged two US drones last week.

Best Way to Deter Moscow in Syria

The best way to deter Moscow from escalating with Washington over Syria is to change the political context there. Washington should show in deeds and not just words that it is opposed to the Kremlin’s client in Damascus.

An opportunity to do so involves the possible extension of General License 23, which is due to expire on 8 August.

While some kind of sanctions relief may still indeed be appropriate to deal with destruction in north-east Syria, the administration should focus on using pre-existing carveouts that predate the General License, waiver authorities under Syria Caesar sanctions, and working with banks on what transactions are permitted in Syria, allowing bona fide assistance to flow. If an extension is once again granted, the duration should be limited to the standard three months, “earthquake relief” should be clearly defined, and transactions with the al-Assad regime ended.

This would be an appropriate response to Russia’s recent refusal to renew the crossborder aid resolution, and allow Washington to build an appropriate Plan B with humanitarian NGOs in non-Assad-controlled areas of Syria. Only by showing Moscow that Washington and the West have options in Syria—militarily and politically—will Russia be dissuaded from further horizontal escalation that endangers US forces and partners there, and ultimately come to the peace table in Ukraine.

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