

Policy Alert

Initial Russian Strikes in Syria Are Not Targeting ISIS

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The first wave of Russian airstrikes seemed to focus on rebel areas that threaten the Assad regime's Alawite heartland, showing that Moscow is more focused on seizing the mantle in Syria's war than fighting terrorists.

Earlier today, the Russian air force, in cooperation with the Syrian army, led its first bombing runs in three of the country's provinces. According to a Syrian security source who spoke with Agence France-Presse, "The Russian and Syrian planes have conducted several raids today against terrorist positions in Hama, Homs, and Latakia, in the northwest and center of the country."

Although the AFP source did not specify the exact points that were struck, one of the "terrorist" targets has nevertheless been clearly identified: Talbisah, a village ten kilometers north of Homs, in the rebel pocket of Rastan. There are no Daesh (a.k.a. "Islamic State"/ISIS) fighters in this area -- local brigades have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra or rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, or remained independent. The strategic goal of the Russian strikes is to help the Syrian army and Hezbollah eliminate this rebel enclave and better protect Homs. The action could also push the 1,500 rebels still occupying the Waar district on the outskirts of Homs to seriously negotiate their departure, as they did when leaving the city center in April 2014.

Meanwhile, Russian strikes in Latakia province have hit Jabal al-Akrad, the mountainous area around Salma held by rebels since 2012. After the fall of Jisr al-Shughour last April, Jabal al-Akrad was directly connected to the large northwestern territory occupied by the rebel umbrella group "The Army of Conquest" (Jaish al-Fatah). The stronghold constitutes a direct threat to Latakia city, located less than thirty kilometers away and within range of occasional rebel rocket fire from the mountains. Russia will need to erase this rebel area if it hopes to secure the northern edge of the Assad regime's Alawite heartland -- which Moscow hopes will be the headquarters of its present and future military bases in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Another target struck today was located near Mehardeh, a small Christian city in Hama province that is under threat from Jabhat al-Nusra. Mehardeh is loyal to Assad because its Christian population is surrounded by large Sunni-majority communities. The city is also a key point in the Hama frontline near the Aleppo highway, which the Syrian army has been trying to reopen for three years without success. More broadly, a robust Russian military intervention in the Aleppo area could place Moscow at the center of the Syrian chessboard.

In short, the first wave of Russian airstrikes was aimed at securing territory controlled by the Syrian army. Yet this goes far beyond the simple bunkerization of the Alawite heartland. Russian strikes have been coordinated not only with regime forces, but also with Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran. The Shiite militia has a heavy presence around Homs due to the many Shiite villages in the area and its proximity to Lebanon's Beqa Valley. For those who oppose the Assad regime, the message is clear: the new "antiterrorist" coalition of Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Damascus has just swung into action. Moscow has entered Syria to hit not just Daesh, but all groups it regards as terrorists, including those supported by the Gulf monarchies and Turkey.

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