

Growing disquiet in Washington over Russian-Iranian actions in Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Russian bombers used an air base in the northwest of Iran for a second day Wednesday to attack targets inside Syria described by Moscow as arms depots and command centers used to support jihadist militias fighting Syrian government forces for control of the city of Aleppo.

The air strikes, carried out by Tupolev-22M3 long-range bombers and SU-34 tactical bombers, mark the first time that Russia has used a base inside a third country to prosecute the bombing campaign that it began last September against Al Qaeda-linked militias and in support of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The long-range planes are too large to use the base that Russia occupies inside Syria. They had previously flown out of southern Russia. The use of Iranian bases cuts flight time by 60 percent and allows the aircraft to carry large amounts of bombs.

The move provoked expressions of disquiet within the Washington ruling establishment. It has grown increasingly concerned about the evident debacle confronting the five-year-old US-backed war for regime change in Syria, which has relied upon Islamist sectarian militias armed and funded by the CIA, the Pentagon and US imperialism's regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.

In addition to the State Department's official denunciation of the use of the Iranian base, there has been a rising tide of editorials and news articles indicting the Obama administration for failure to take more aggressive action in Syria, invoking the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo as the pretext for a stepped-up US intervention.

Responding to the reports of the Russian air strikes conducted from Iran, State Department spokesman Mark Toner criticized Moscow for a second day Wednesday declaring that the action was "not helpful because it continues to complicate what is already a very dangerous situation in and around Aleppo."

The "complication" which concerns Washington is the stalling of a "rebel" offensive meant to break the government's siege of eastern Aleppo, where a minority of the population has lived under the rule of the jihadi militias. The Al Qaeda-linked forces had boasted that they were on the verge of conquering the entire city through the offensive, which was prepared by the funneling in of massive amounts of arms, including heavy

weapons, by the US and its regional allies. However, Syrian government forces, aided by fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and backed by Russian air strikes, have apparently reversed the initial gains of the Western-backed Islamists.

This reversal has triggered the propaganda offensive over the catastrophe in Aleppo, which for the most part completely ignores indiscriminate shelling and gas attacks by the "rebels" against the vast majority of Aleppo's population living under government control in the west of the city. Washington is pressing for an immediate ceasefire and opening up of "humanitarian corridors" so that it can resupply its proxy forces.

The State Department has also over the past two days suggested that the Russian-Iranian action is somehow in violation of a UN Security Council resolution adopted a little over a year ago as part of the agreement over Iran's nuclear program. It included language barring the sale or transfer of any weapons systems that could be used to deliver nuclear weapons. This allegation is utterly spurious, given that Russia has not placed its warplanes under Teheran's control, but is only using the country's bases.

On both days, the State Department repeated charges that the Russian air strikes had hit "moderate opposition targets," while failing to provide any details as to the identity of these so-called moderates. The reality is that the dominant force on the ground is the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate that last month changed its name and formally disaffiliated from Al Qaeda, along with similar Salafist jihadi militias. While the US pledged that it would secure the separation of the "moderates" from the Al Qaeda affiliates, it is unable to do so because those armed and funded by the CIA are thoroughly integrated with these forces.

The real concern in Washington is the emergence of an alliance that could potentially act as an impediment to the 25-year-old US drive to militarily assert its unquestioned hegemony over the Middle East. The Russian-Iranian agreement marks the first time that a foreign military has been allowed to operate out of Iranian bases since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah's US-backed dictatorship.

The basing agreement was preceded by Moscow's provision

to Teheran of its advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile defense system, which had previously been held back during the tightening of UN sanctions over Iran's nuclear program. Components of the missile system have already been delivered, according to Iranian officials.

The situation is even more disagreeable for Washington as the Russian planes are flying from Iran over Iraqi territory with the permission of the US-backed government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Russian media have also reported that the Abadi government has given Moscow permission to fire cruise missiles from the Caspian and Mediterranean over Iraqi territory.

Further complicating the situation from Washington's perspective, the Chinese government announced on Tuesday that it is seeking closer military collaboration with the Assad government in Syria. Guan Youfei, director of the Office for International Military Cooperation of China's Central Military Commission, visited Damascus, meeting with top Syrian officials and promising increased military aid as well as training for Syrian government forces. Guan also met with a senior Russian general while in Syria. Chinese officials have cited the participation of Islamists from the Uighur population in China's Xinjiang region in both ISIS and the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate as one of their reasons for seeking increased involvement in Syria.

Perhaps even more concerning is the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey in the wake of last month's abortive coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which by all indications enjoyed the support of Washington and its European allies. In his first trip abroad in the wake of the July 15 military uprising, Erdoğan visited Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city, last week for talks with Putin. In the aftermath of the talks, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that a proposal was "on the table" for Turkey and Russia to carry out joint operations against ISIS.

This was followed Tuesday by a statement from a member of the Russian Federation Council Defense and Security Committee, Senator Viktor Ozerov, that "Turkey could provide the Incirlik base to the Russian Aerospace Forces for its use in counterterrorism operations [in Syria]." Incirlik currently serves as the base for thousands of US Air Force personnel and private contractors. Its status became a sensitive issue after it served as a base of operations for the abortive coup, which also called into question the safety of at least 50 US nuclear weapons stored there.

The unraveling of US policy in Syria was the subject of a paper issued Tuesday by the Center for Strategic and International Studies by its strategic analyst and longtime Pentagon adviser Anthony Cordesman.

Stating that the situation "seriously threatens the future of the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region and US strategic interests," Cordesman noted the lack of any serious public discussion over US war policy: "For the first time in its

national history, the United States may get through a Presidential campaign amidst multiple wars without seriously debating or discussing where any of its wars are going, or what their longer-term impact will be."

The developments in Syria, he added, represent "not simply a massive and lasting humanitarian nightmare, it is a strategic nightmare as well." He pointed in particular to the growing Russian and Iranian role in the conflict and the likely survival of the Assad government.

"So far, the United States seems to have done little to address these issues," Cordesman writes. "Secretary Kerry's negotiations with Russia seem to have done little more than give Russia freedom of action in backing Assad while the United States focuses on ISIS—choices that also empower Iran and raise critical questions about who will really win in Syria if the United States does defeat ISIS."

One indication that this same question is being asked in the US military command came with the report that after conquering the city of Manbij in northern Syria, US-backed forces, which are fighting with the support of American special operations troops, granted safe passage to a convoy of between 100 and 200 trucks and cars filled with ISIS members fleeing toward the Turkish border. The effect was to ensure that these forces lived to fight another day, presumably the Americans hope, against Assad.

While the Obama administration has sought to limit US engagement in Syria, preferring to concentrate its military efforts on the encirclement of and preparation for war against Russia, Washington is not prepared to accept the restabilization of the Assad government or the consolidation of any regime aligned with Russia in Damascus. The rising tensions over the coordinated actions of Russia, Iran, China and potentially Turkey pose the threat of a military confrontation with globally catastrophic implications.

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