

# Fighting flares in Damascus as US escalates air war in Syria

By Jordan Shilton  
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Some of the heaviest fighting in Damascus since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 has occurred over recent days. A collection of Islamist and other opposition forces, including a considerable number of fighters from the former al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front, launched a surprise attack on eastern neighborhoods of the city on Sunday, gaining some ground.

Even the *New York Times*, which has championed the overthrow of Assad and the installation of a puppet regime in Damascus, hypocritically noted “political concerns” about the “alliance between a spectrum of rebel groups and hard-line Islamists” which conducted the attack.

Forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad launched a counter-attack on Monday and recaptured much of the territory taken by the Islamists the previous day, according to Syrian government sources. But a second offensive was initiated yesterday by the rebels with the aim of breaking the government siege of the rebel-held Qaboun district.

Other assaults on government-controlled territory were reported in Hama Province and in western Aleppo.

Syrian and Russian aircraft have launched heavy bombardments of rebel-held areas, with reports of 143 airstrikes since Sunday’s surprise attack began. The rebels have indiscriminately targeted civilians, including with a recent suicide bombing at a court house in Damascus which killed 30.

While it remains unclear whether the collection of Jihadi forces and other opposition fighters can sustain their attacks and push further into Damascus, the escalation of fighting demonstrates that the ceasefire brokered in December by Russia and Turkey is a dead letter. Observers almost unanimously anticipate that planned peace talks beginning tomorrow in Geneva chaired by the UN’s special Syria envoy will produce no concrete progress. Mohammad al-Alloush, designated the

head opposition negotiator in the Geneva talks, is also leader of the Army of Islam, one of the groups leading the attack on Damascus.

The fighting also underscores the highly unstable and explosive situation into which the Trump administration is preparing to send a further 1,000 US marines as part of a vast expansion of American participation in the war in Syria and Iraq.

The brutal US-instigated war for regime change in Syria, which entered its seventh year last week, has already claimed the lives of upwards of half a million people and driven a further 11 million from their homes.

Airwars, a group monitoring US and coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, recently noted that since Trump took office, civilian casualties in both countries had undergone an “unprecedented” increase. Local sources in the Iraqi city of Mosul, currently the target of a US-backed assault to retake control of it from ISIS, reported to Airwars that in the first week of March alone, between 250 and 370 non-combatants were killed by US-led airstrikes.

Over the past three years, Airwars calculates that airstrikes conducted by the US-led coalition have claimed the lives of some 2,590 civilians in Syria.

The latest atrocity reportedly occurred Tuesday in the de facto ISIS capital of Raqqa, when an alleged airstrike struck a school building housing hundreds of civilians. If confirmed, the strike will be the second over the past week to claim a large number of civilian lives, following the partial destruction of a mosque in Idlib province which the US claimed was being used by al-Qaida as a base. At least 42 people were killed in that attack, although reports spoke of many more still trapped in the rubble.

Confronted with a growing number of photos, video footage and eye witness accounts detailing the devastation following last Thursday’s strike, US military officials told CNN yesterday that an official investigation

into the strike was being launched.

The increased targeting of civilians is part of the Trump administration's drastic escalation of the Syrian war. Trump has given the CIA authorization to carry out airstrikes and requested that the rules of engagement for US forces be loosened to permit targets to be struck even if civilian casualties could result.

The stepping up of the US intervention takes place under conditions of rising regional tensions. Last Friday, Israel launched one of its most provocative air raids in Syria, striking a site near the government-held city of Palmyra. The Assad regime alleged the Israeli strike hit a government military position and fired air defense missiles at the planes, prompting Tel Aviv to shoot one missile down with its Arrow air defense system. Israel claimed it was targeting a weapons shipment destined for Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Russian officials subsequently stated that a number of Russian military personnel were in close proximity to the attack. Moscow summoned the Israeli ambassador for an explanation for the strike.

Israeli politicians have gone on the offensive, vowing to expand similar strikes in the future. Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman told Israeli Public Radio on Sunday, "The next time the Syrians use their air defense systems against our airplanes, we will destroy all of them without thinking twice."

Israel has also sought to justify its intervention with allegations that Iran is attempting to strengthen its influence over Damascus by establishing a permanent military presence in the country. Tel Aviv's hardline stance towards Teheran enjoys the full backing of the Trump administration.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, during a trip to China, dismissed any talk of tensions with Russia, but insisted that strikes would go on. "If there is a feasibility from an intelligence and military standpoint—we attack and so it will continue," he said.

Assad, in response to the Israeli airstrike, called on Russia to prevent future attacks. "Russia can play a role so that Israel no longer attacks Syria," Assad stated to Russian journalists. "I think Russia can play an important role in this regard."

The Kremlin, which intervened in the Syrian conflict in September 2015 with the aim of propping up the Assad dictatorship, is responding to the expansion of US involvement by extending its own presence on the ground. On Monday, a Kurdish spokesman confirmed that the Kurdish YPG militia, the armed wing of the

Democratic Union Party (PYD), had struck a deal with Moscow to establish a military base in northwest Syria where Russian soldiers will train Kurdish fighters. Troops and armored vehicles have already arrived in the town of Afrin, Redur Zelil said. Russia stated that it had no intention of establishing an additional military base on Syrian territory, claiming it already had a presence in Aleppo province.

The YPG is also being supported by Washington, with US troops imbedded with the Kurdish militia to direct the offensive to retake Raqqa from ISIS.

The news of the Russian training initiative prompted a hostile rebuke from Turkey, which intervened into northern Syria last August with the primary goal of preventing the establishment of a contiguous territorial area on its border controlled by Kurdish forces. Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus declared that Ankara would not tolerate a "region of terror" in Syria and added that the ethnic structure of the region had to be kept intact.

Turkish forces have repeatedly clashed with the YPG, which Ankara designates as a terrorist organization. Earlier this month, Turkey threatened to attack the town of Manbij if YPG militia did not withdraw. However, it was compelled to back down in the face of opposition from the US and Russia.

The increase in US troops on the ground in this contested region, and the broader escalation of the conflict being pursued by the Trump administration throughout Syria and Iraq, is adding fuel to the fire of a conflict that could rapidly spiral out of control. Even an unintended clash between any combination of the myriad competing military forces operating in Syria would be sufficient to draw in regional and global powers, with catastrophic consequences for the long-suffering population of the Middle East.

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