

Russian aircraft shot down during Israeli missile attack on main Syrian government port

By Bill Van Auken
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Latakia, Syria's major port city and a stronghold of President Bashar al-Assad's government, came under a missile attack on Monday, apparently downing a Russian military plane with 14 military personnel aboard.

The strikes came within hours of Russia and Turkey announcing a joint agreement to forestall a Russian-backed government offensive in the northwestern province of Idlib that had threatened to trigger a major Western intervention and a potential confrontation between the world's two major nuclear powers, the US and Russia.

The state-owned Syrian news agency SANA said that the missile attacks were aimed at the Technical Industries Corporation, which is connected to the Syrian defense ministry and is reportedly involved in the production of missiles.

Syrian government sources said that the attacks came from the Mediterranean Sea, where both the US and Russia have built up naval forces in recent weeks amid rising tensions in Syria.

The missile strikes apparently took place near a major Russian airbase at Hmeymim.

Syrian sources claimed that the country's air defense systems brought down a number of the missiles, which they said had been fired by Israel. Russian sources attributed the attacks to four F-16 fighter jets that had apparently flown over Lebanon and the Mediterranean to attack the port city.

Israel's *Jerusalem Post* speculated that "Russian-Israeli coordination may have been involved." The Russian and Israeli military commands have established close "deconfliction" ties, and it is widely believed that Israeli strikes on Iranian assets in Syria have been cleared in advance with Moscow.

But there were reports that Russian air defense systems were involved in shooting down the missiles fired at Latakia.

The Russian Defense Ministry also reported that one of its Il-20 aircraft with 14 people aboard had gone off the radar

screens during the attack, raising the prospect that it had been shot down by the Israeli warplanes. Personnel at the Hmeymim airbase have organized a search and rescue operation.

Moscow also reported that the French Navy frigate FS Auvergne had fired missiles from the Mediterranean at the same time as the Israeli F-16 strikes.

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Commander Sean Robertson, told Voice of America that he could "unequivocally say this is not us." The US is insisting that a Syrian government anti-aircraft battery was accidentally responsible for bringing down the Russian Il-20.

The strikes were accompanied by a power outage, but there were conflicting reports over whether it was caused by incoming missiles, or the result of a deliberate decision to shut down the electrical system to conceal possible targets. Electricity was restored shortly after the attack.

The attack on Latakia comes just two days after Israel launched airstrikes on the Damascus International Airport, destroying hangars that reportedly contained weapons, as well as, according to some accounts, an Iranian Boeing cargo plane.

Earlier this month an Israeli military official broke with Tel Aviv's traditional "no comment" on strikes against Syria and acknowledged that Israel has struck at least 200 targets over the past 18 months with some 800 munitions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared on Saturday, just hours after the attack on the Damascus airport, that Israel is enforcing "red lines" in Syria, that include driving Iranian forces out of the country.

The White House and the Pentagon have enunciated the same foreign policy aim, justifying the permanent presence of US troops, over 2,000 of whom are currently deployed in Syria, in the name not just of combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but of countering Iranian influence in Syria and the wider region.

The strike on Latakia undoubtedly had the support of

Washington, whatever the direct role played by US forces, given US interests in keeping the Syrian conflict boiling.

It came in the immediate wake of Monday's meeting in the Russian Black Sea resort city of Sochi between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, where the two heads of state announced an agreement to establish a jointly-patrolled "demilitarized zone" between Syrian government troops and the Western-backed "rebels" concentrated in Idlib province.

Predominating among these forces is Tahrir al-Sham, a coalition of Islamist militias led by the group formerly known as the Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Putin told a press conference that the agreement provided for the withdrawal from Idlib of "all radical fighters," including Al Nusra, and the removal from the demilitarized zone of all "heavy weaponry."

Erdogan said that the deal "will prevent a humanitarian tragedy that could happen as a result of military action" and that the agreement between the two countries would bring "hope to the region."

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu told reporters that there would be no offensive against Idlib, which had been predicted as imminent for the past weeks.

Washington and its NATO allies, including France, Britain and Germany, had all threatened a major assault on Syria, invoking supposed plans by Damascus to stage a chemical weapons attack in Idlib. The Russian Defense Ministry, meanwhile, had claimed evidence that the "rebels" had prepared to stage such an attack by releasing chlorine, thereby providing the pretext for a US-NATO onslaught.

Recent statements from Washington had broadened the threat to include a military response not just to a chemical attack, but to any Russian-backed Syrian offensive that involved civilian casualties. This from a US government whose own operations in Syria and Iraq over the past two years have claimed tens of thousands of lives and turned millions into refugees.

Turkey, meanwhile, had moved its own forces into Idlib, with the daily *Hurriyet* reporting on Monday that tanks and some 50 military vehicles had crossed the border and headed toward the Jisr al-Shughour region in the south of the province, which had been targeted by Russian and Syrian government airstrikes.

When Putin, Erdogan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met in Tehran on September 7, Putin had rejected Erdogan's proposal for a ceasefire in Idlib, and both Moscow and Damascus had affirmed their determination to drive Al Nusra out of the province and re-establish government control.

It would appear that, faced with a direct threat that an offensive would lead to a clash with Turkey, a NATO

member, and a sustained military assault by the US and its allies, the Putin government decided to seek an accommodation with Ankara.

It is by no means clear how this agreement will be realized, particularly in terms of the separation of the Al Nusra-led forces from the supposedly "moderate" Islamist militias backed by Ankara. These forces are unlikely to accept relinquishing their "human shields"—a term used freely by the US media when talking about Washington's enemies, but never in relation to its Al Qaeda-linked allies. Reports from Idlib indicate that Al Nusra has set up gallows in the province to hang anyone supporting a peaceful settlement with the Syrian government.

Erdogan, meanwhile, told the press conference in Sochi that the biggest threat to Turkish interests in Syria was the presence of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which serves as the main proxy ground force for the US military in taking control of the country's strategically important oil fields in the eastern part of the country.

While the agreement in Sochi may have constituted a diplomatic coup for Erdogan, it is by no means viewed in the same light by Washington. The US and Turkey have been at increasing loggerheads over the US alliance with the Syrian Kurds, Erdogan's rapprochement with Moscow and the imposition of US sanctions that have deepened Turkey's economic crisis.

Whether Monday's assault on Latakia is only the beginning of a broader US-led escalation of a war of aggression against Syria will become clear over the coming hours and days. What is certain is that the explosive geopolitical conflicts concentrated in the struggle in Syria are threatening to erupt into a far wider regional and even world war.

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