



The War in Syria: Complex and More Dangerous

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Summary

Russian military intervention in Syria has expanded considerably over the past month and may accelerate further if the destruction of Metrojet Flight 9628 over Sinai is proved to be the work of Islamic State (IS). The US-led coalition against IS in Syria is meanwhile steadily losing its active members, even as the US escalates its bombing campaign and declares a greater willingness to deploy Special Forces units inside Syria. While the UK prevaricates on its involvement within Syria, Israel has launched new attacks on Hezbollah there and Turkey pursues its own interests against IS and Kurdish factions alike. The risks of accidental escalation between these disparate actors is rising as the complexity of the war grows.

Introduction

The [October briefing](#) reported a number of developments in the war in Syria, including the Russian intervention, a likely extension of the US-led air war and a change in US strategy towards arming opposition groups in preference to training them. Perhaps most significantly there were revised US intelligence estimates indicating that Islamic State (IS) was gaining new recruits in Syria and Iraq at a rate more than compensating for the heavy losses caused by the air strikes in both countries.

This briefing provides an updated analysis based on developments since mid-October as they apply to Syria in particular. Its main focus is on two developments early in November. One was the criticism of UK policy towards Syria by the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton, who argued that the UK was letting its allies down by not joining in the air strikes

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against IS in Syria. The second was the destruction on 31 October of a Russian charter airliner shortly after it began a flight from Sharm el-Sheikh in southern Sinai to St Petersburg, killing all 224 passengers and crew.

Military Criticism of UK Inaction

The comments of General Houghton caused some concern as they were paralleled by a more controversial expression of opposition to the views of the new Labour Party Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, over the Trident nuclear weapons system. There has been concern that General Houghton has strayed too far into the political dimension with his Trident-related comments, but this has been less the case in relation to his views on attacking Syria in that there is already cross-party opposition to that policy.

What General Houghton's comments have done is to focus attention on the nature of the air war in Syria which has involved nine coalition partners: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Morocco, Jordan, Canada and the United States plus, since September, Australia and France. Although the US has carried out around 95% of the attacks, the presence of a range of other countries has added weight to the idea of a united, broadly based and multinational coalition opposing IS in Syria.

The reality is actually quite different as six of the nine coalition partners have ceased undertaking air strikes in the past nine months, although some may still be involved in support operations. Bahrain ceased air strike operations nine months ago, the UAE and Morocco eight months ago, Jordan three months ago and Saudi Arabia just two months ago. These countries are all now more actively involved in their war in Yemen. The fifth country, Canada, under new

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, is withdrawing from all air strike operations over Syria and Iraq.

Of the remaining coalition partners, France is reported to have carried out just two air strikes over Syria with all of the rest of the 270 attacks being over Iraq. Finally, Australia's air force has undertaken 434 air strikes but up to 2 October had only undertaken two attacks in Syria before pausing in its operations when Russia started its intervention. Belgium and Denmark also pulled out their fighter-bombers from operations over Iraq in July and September respectively.

To all intents and purposes, the air war that has evolved over Syria is now a US operation with minimal involvement from western allies and no operations being undertaken by regional allies. There certainly is an increased intensity of air strikes against IS in Syria but this is entirely down to increased US operations, especially from the Turkish base at Incirlik, less than 30 minutes flight from IS-controlled territory in northern Syria. It is thus fast becoming an American war and this may explain General Houghton's concern, bearing in mind that it makes it far easier for IS propagandists to portray their role as being the guardians of Islam under persistent attack by the "far enemy" of the United States and its western allies.

Meanwhile, Russian air operations continue although at a lower level than those of the United States. The great majority continue to be against the opponents of the Assad regime and are serving to ensure that those areas of north west Syria that are strongly supportive of the regime are secure from opponents. There are occasional Russian air strikes against IS targets and, while these are of little military consequence, their political significance could be considerable following the destruction of the Russian airliner over Sinai.

The Metrojet Attack

In the immediate aftermath of the loss of Metrojet Flight 9628 on 31 October, both Egypt and Russia were deeply reluctant to even consider that paramilitary action was involved. For Egypt the consequences would be serious in two ways – potential loss of tourist revenue and the risk that it would be seen as a consequence of the Sisi government’s rigorous suppression of Islamist political parties. For Russia the concern was that it would cast a shadow over the otherwise domestically popular intervention in Syria.

Five days later British Prime Minister David Cameron ordered a cessation of all flights bringing British tourists back from Sharm el-Sheikh, based on British intelligence agencies’ belief that a bomb brought down Flight 9628. Despite initial Russian and Egyptian protestations, this is now the dominant theory for the aircraft’s mid-air disintegration. The most likely perpetrators are an extreme Egyptian Islamist group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, commonly known as the Sinai Province of Islamic State.

The concern for Cameron is that if a bomb had been placed from the secure “air-side” zone of Sharm el-Sheikh Airport and if the aircraft was chosen because of Russia’s military intervention in the Middle East, then a British airliner could just as easily have been the target, a view strengthened by the attack on British tourists in the Tunisian resort of Sousse in June. Furthermore, if those at large have not been apprehended then there is a continuing risk of another attack.

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis already had a record of successful infiltration of apparently secure organisations in Egypt, having been deemed responsible for penetrating tight security zones early in 2014 to assassinate a senior police

officer in his home outside Cairo and to bomb security headquarters in Cairo and Mansura.

By 12 November there was an emerging consensus that this group was responsible and that it was specifically directed against Russia in response to its involvement in Syria. Even though the great majority of Russian air attacks to date have been against non-Islamist regime opponents and these may have indirectly helped IS, from the perception of the IS leadership the Metrojet action would be an incitement to Russia to expand its operations.

While these might focus on IS in Syria, and possibly Iraq, there would also be expected to be a clamp down on Islamist groups within Russia, especially the North Caucasus, with both such actions resulting in increased anger among some Russian Muslims, helping to ensure a continued supply of recruits to IS, whether its nascent Caucasus branch or abroad.

Intensifying War

Both US and Russian militaries have expanded their operations in Syria since October. Following an announcement from the Obama administration that the United States would deploy small numbers of Special Forces to aid opposition groups, the Pentagon confirmed a willingness to expand this operation and also announced an increased tempo of US air operations. In particular the US Air Force made more use of powerful AC-130U gunships and A-10 ground attack aircraft, now operating from Incirlik.

Russia, meanwhile, has increased the logistical support for its forces in Syria, with nine landing ships and a naval dry cargo ship reportedly being used to move supplies during October. Russia is also buying two Turkish-operated cargo vessels. The overall Russian military presence in Syria is reported to have

doubled to approximately 4,000 personnel since the start of combat operations on 30 September and includes helicopter gunships as well as forward-based ground troops equipped with multiple rocket launchers and long-range artillery providing direct fire support for Assad regime forces.

A further complication is that Israel has resumed airstrikes against Syrian military targets that may be storing munitions intended for Hezbollah, the airstrikes on 30 October and 1 November being carried out by aircraft firing stand-off ground-attack missiles from within Lebanese airspace. There are reports that the United States and Russian military have worked out a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to avoid conflicts in air space but the presence of troops from both states on the ground may complicate this. Of greater concern is the lack of any coordination between Israeli and Russian military planners.

At a time of crisis when parties to a conflict have multiple and differing intentions, one of the greatest dangers is untoward and uncontrolled escalation. Even with the MoU between the United States and Russia, this should be a major concern, bearing in mind the AIM factor, the risk of Accidents, Incidents and Mavericks – events that suddenly lead to local escalations with much wider consequences.

Conclusion

The primary aim of US operations in Syria is to degrade and defeat IS with the secondary aim of supporting those more moderate elements of the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime. The primary aim of Russian operations is to support the Assad regime by blunting the capabilities of opposition to the

regime and a distant secondary aim is to undertake some attacks, largely symbolic, against IS. The aim of Israeli action is to damage Hezbollah.

From the perspective of the Assad regime, survival is paramount, with the Russian aid welcomed, but the regime does not currently see IS as the primary threat. Indeed there are reliable reports that the regime actually engages in economic exchanges with IS, not least through the purchase of oil products.

There is thus an extremely complex conflict evolving, made even more so by the entry of Russian forces and with the added uncertainty of periodic Israeli involvement. What is uncertain at the time of writing is how Russia will react to the loss of the Metrojet and, in particular, whether it will escalate its actions against IS in retaliation.

Meanwhile the humanitarian consequences become even more severe inside Syria and in neighbouring countries where several million displaced people face a miserable winter. The urgent need remains to provide far greater aid to support these peoples and there would certainly be an important role for a country such as the UK.

Even more important is the need to bring the major proxies together for sustained dialogue. Almost the only positive development to report over the past month has been the holding of preliminary talks in Vienna at the end of October. This process should be the diplomatic priority in the coming weeks.

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