



Erdogan irate as Putin tears up Turkey's Syria blueprint

JIHADISTS RELATIVES APPEAR IN ANTI-RADICALIZATION ADS



In this photo made from the footage taken from Russian Defense Ministry official web site, a Russian navy ship launches a cruise missile in the Caspian Sea. — AP

SYRIA GROUND ARMY LAUNCHES OFFENSIVE
 RUSSIA INTENSIFIES AERIAL, WARSHIP STRIKES

BEIRUT: Heavy Russian aerial bombing and cruise missile strikes launched from warships in the Caspian Sea yesterday provided cover for a major Syrian army ground offensive in a coordinated attack on rebels. Amid a dramatic escalation in its air war over Syria, Moscow said it was ready to establish contacts with Western-backed rebels, which the United States and its allies accuse Russia of targeting in bombing raids.

But the announcement came as Russian President Vladimir Putin said Moscow had begun synchronizing its strikes with the Syrian army's ground movements. Putin, who celebrated his 63rd birthday yesterday, also announced for the first time that four Russian warships had struck IS targets with 26 cruise missiles. A video map released by Russia's defense ministry showed the missiles launched from warships in the southern Caspian Sea and flying close to 1,500 kilometers through Iranian and Iraqi airspace before hitting targets in Syria.

A Syrian military source told AFP that government troops had begun a broad ground operation yesterday near the village of Latmeen in Hama province, aided by Russian air cover. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Russian planes had carried out at least 37 strikes yesterday in Hama and neighboring Idlib

province, which is controlled by the powerful Army of Conquest alliance that includes Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front. The rebel alliance has sought to expand into Hama from Idlib and seize high ground to target the neighboring regime stronghold of Latakia province.

Rebels targeted in Hama

"The Syrian army in its latest operations is working on cutting off the southern parts of Idlib province from the northern parts of Hama province," a military source in Hama told AFP. He added that the operations were also intended to begin securing the major highway between Aleppo and Damascus.

In Moscow, Putin said Russian strikes would "be synchronized with the actions of the Syrian army on the ground" to support the regime's offensive operations. AFP has concluded after a careful reading of Russia's video map that at least one cruise missile struck near the IS-held city of Al-Bab in Aleppo province, while several others appeared to head towards targets in Idlib province.

Russia has said its forces have hit 112 targets since its operations in Syria—which it insists target IS and other "terrorist groups"—began on September 30. But Syrian rebels and their backers say a range of opposi-

tion fighters, not just jihadists, have been hit. The ground operation in Hama targets rebels from a range of groups, including moderate and Islamist opposition fighters as well as Al-Nusra. And yesterday the US-backed Suqur Al-Jabal rebel group in the northern province of Aleppo said its arm depots had been destroyed in Russian raids.

US denies cooperating with Russia

Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu alleged that just two out of 57 Russian strikes examined by Turkish intelligence had hit IS. The Russian campaign has raised hackles in Ankara, which accuses Moscow of violating its airspace from Syria on at least two occasions over the weekend. It also reported a violation by a MIG-29 jet of unknown nationality on Monday. Turkey has protested the violations, backed by the NATO alliance to which it belongs, and warned Russia against losing its friendship with Ankara, which has been tested over Syria.

Ankara backs the opposition, while Russia has been a staunch regime ally throughout the conflict that began in March 2011 and has so far killed more than 240,000 people. Tensions between Russia and the United States also escalated yesterday, with Defense

Secretary Ash Carter insisting that the US is not cooperating with Russia over Moscow's air campaign. "I have said before that we believed that Russia has the wrong strategy—they continue to hit targets that are not ISIL. We believe this is a fundamental mistake," Carter told a press conference in Rome, referring to IS by an alternative name.

Meanwhile, French President Francois Hollande warned that failure to act in Syria risked "total war" in the Middle East. "If we leave these religious clashes between Sunnis and Shiites, they will grow. Don't think we will be sheltered, this will be a total war," he said in a speech to the European Parliament. Putin yesterday said Hollande had proposed "to at least try to unite the efforts of the government troops of President Assad's army and the so-called (rebel) Free Syrian Army," but a member of Hollande's entourage quickly rebutted the claim.

Moscow's foreign ministry also said it was ready to make contact with the FSA, a group it previously claimed did not exist. "At the president's request, the foreign ministry informs our partners in countries that have links to the Free Syrian Army of the Russian side's readiness to establish contacts with the leadership of this structure," the ministry said. — AFP

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KURDS SAY TESTS SHOW IS USED MUSTARD GAS

ERBIL: Islamic State fighters fired mortar rounds containing mustard agent at Kurdish peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq during clashes in August, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, which oversees Kurdish armed forces there, said yesterday. Blood samples taken from around 35 fighters who were exposed in the attack southwest of the regional capital Erbil, along with an examination of wounds, showed "signatures of sulfur mustard", the ministry said in a statement.

It did not say if any of the peshmerga had died as a result of the attack or how severely they had been wounded. Mustard gas, which can burn skin and mucus tissue and cause severe respiratory problems, is banned under the Chemical Weapons Convention, an arms treaty intended to stop the use of chemical weapons.

The samples were sent to a laboratory outside of Iraq for analysis with the help of members of the "Global Coalition against ISIL," the statement said, citing an acronym for identifying Islamic State. It also called on countries fighting Islamic State to give Kurdish peshmerga fighters equipment for protection against chemical attacks. The United States is among a handful of countries who are giving military assistance to Kurdish forces in northern Iraq. — Reuters

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