**Russian Airstrike in Syria Targeted CIA-Backed Rebels, U.S. Officials Say**

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By Dion Nissenbaum

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Russia launched airstrikes in Syria on Wednesday, catching U.S. and Western officials off guard and drawing new condemnation as evidence suggested Moscow wasn’t targeting extremist group Islamic State, but rather other opponents of Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

One of the airstrikes hit an area primarily held by rebels backed by the Central Intelligence Agency and allied spy services, U.S. officials said, catapulting the Syrian crisis to a new level of danger and uncertainty.

Moscow’s entry means the world’s most powerful militaries—including the U.S., Britain and France—now are flying uncoordinated combat missions, heightening the risk of conflict in the skies over Syria.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Russia’s approach to the Syrian war—defending Mr. Assad while ostensibly targeting extremists—was tantamount to “pouring gasoline on the fire.”

“I have been dealing with them for a long time. And this is not the kind of behavior that we should expect professionally from the Russian military,” Mr. Carter said at a Pentagon news conference.

Secretary of State [John Kerry](http://topics.wsj.com/person/K/John-Kerry/7196) met with Russian Foreign MinisterSergei Lavrov and said he raised U.S. concerns about attacks that target regime opponents other than Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. In Syria’s multi-sided war, Mr. Assad’s military—aided by Iran and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah—is fighting both Islamic State and opposition rebel groups, some of which are supported by the U.S. and its allies.

Speaking alongside Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said Wednesday that the United States and Russia have agreed to hold a military meeting as soon as possible to avoid any direct collisions or exchanges of fire in Syria, where both the U.S. and Russia are now conducting airstrikes.

Mr. Kerry said the U.S. and Russia need to hold military talks as soon as possible and Mr. Lavrov said he agreed.

The U.S. and its allies were angry at the Russians on many scores: that they are supporting Mr. Assad; that they aren’t coordinating their actions with the existing, U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition; that they provided terse notice only an hour before their operations; that they demanded the U.S. coalition stay out of Syrian airspace; and that they struck in areas where anti-Assad rebels—not Islamic State—operate.

“It does appear that they were in areas where there probably were not ISIL forces, and that is precisely one of the problems with this whole approach,” said Mr. Carter, the U.S. defense chief.

U.S. officials said it was unclear if Moscow directly targeted a location held by the CIA-backed fighters in western Syria because of their association with the U.S.’s covert program to fund, arm and train the rebels.

Officials said it was also unclear if any U.S.-backed fighters were killed in the strike. A CIA spokesman declined to comment.

Russia said its initial strikes inside Syria on Wednesday were aimed at Islamic State targets. But senior U.S. officials cast doubt on those claims.

The U.S. spy agency has been arming and training rebels in Syria since 2013 to fight the Assad regime. Rebels who receive support under a separate arming and training program run by the Pentagon weren’t in areas targeted by Russia in its initial strikes, the officials said.

The combination of unpredictable, unilateral action that flouted Western exhortations posed an unmistakable resemblance to Ukraine, where Mr. Putin moved to annex the Crimea region and has defied international demands to halt its support for separatists.

Mr. Putin’s decision-making in Syria mirrors the way he has approached Ukraine, said Andrew Weiss, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

“He deliberately tries to do things to throw opponents off balance and he’s always trying to get some sort of element of surprise and tactical advantage over people, that’s sort of what keeps him going is this constant springing surprises and flipping events in his favor,” said Mr. Weiss, who worked on Russia policy in the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations.

Russia is also playing a greater military role in Iraq, which is threatened by Islamic State and aided by the U.S.-led coalition. Iraq agreed this week to share intelligence with Russia, the Syrian regime and Iran to counter Islamic State.

Iraqi Prime MinisterHaider al-Abadi said he would welcome Russian airstrikes against Islamic State in Iraq as long as they are coordinated with the U.S.-led coalition.

“If the Russians are prepared to join the international coalition, which is helping Iraq, they’re welcome,” he said in a PBS interview.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the first indications he had on the Russian strikes is that they didn’t target areas controlled by Islamic State. At a United Nations summit in New York, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said the targets were still unclear.

“They are the first Russian airstrikes as far as we’re aware, so the selection of targets won’t have been accidental or random,” he said. “If they are clearly ISIL targets far away from any regime activity, that will send one signal,” he said. “If they are targets that look more like defense of regime forces than attack on ISIL forces, that will send a very different signal.”

American officials were taken aback by Russia’s decision to announce the strikes by sending a three-star Russian general to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad on Wednesday. The general gave U.S. officials an hour’s notice before he arrived, delivered the message that Russia was going to start bombing, said American aircraft should get out of Syrian airspace and left, American officials said.

One defense official called it “unprofessional.” Another called it unproductive.

U.S. officials said they didn’t alter their airstrike and surveillance missions over Syria as a result of Russia’s attacks. But the lack of coordination makes it more challenging to avoid potential confrontations.

U.S. defense officials said they are still trying to set up meetings with their Russian counterparts to discuss ways to prevent a direct conflict between the two global military powers. But Wednesday’s attacks cast a shadow over the hopes for the discussions.

“You’ve got to have a willing partner to come to the table and tell you the truth,” said a senior military official.

Russia has built up its military presence in Syria in recent weeks to support Mr. Assad after he suffered a series of battlefield setbacks and acknowledged publicly that he could no longer hold on to all of the country after more than four years of war. During the buildup, Moscow said its intent was to fight Islamic State and conflated opponents of the regime with terrorists.

U.S. defense officials said that Russia now has 32 planes stationed at an airfield near the Syrian coast. Along with jet fighters, Russia has 16 helicopters, nine tanks, at least two surface-to-air missile defense systems and enough housing for up to 2,000 people, U.S. officials said.

Moscow and Syrian state media claimed Russia’s initial strikes hit areas under Islamic State control. The Syrian state news agency said the targets were in the central provinces of Homs and Hama. However, most of the areas that state media listed as targets aren’t known to be Islamic State-held territory.

Airstrikes on Wednesday also struck the ancient city of Palmyra and the nearby village of Qaryatain in Homs province, both held by Islamic State. However, it wasn’t immediately clear whether they were Syrian regime or Russian bombings. Syrian state media claimed they were carried out by Mr. Assad’s air force. Anti-Assad activists on the ground said they were more powerful than any regime airstrikes until now, leading them to believe they were Russian.

Among seven areas that Syrian state media listed as targets of Russian strikes, only one—an area east of the town of Salamiyah in Hama province—has a known presence of Islamic State fighters. The other areas listed are largely dominated by moderate rebel factions or Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front.

Defense officials criticized Russia’s decision to hit Homs instead of somewhere like Raqqa, the de facto Islamic State capital in northeastern Syria.

“This is not downtown Raqqa,” one senior defense official said of the areas Russian planes hit. “This is not an ISIL stronghold.”

Syrian activists said the town of Talbiseh, about 10 miles north of the city of Homs, along with several surrounding villages bore the brunt of the bombardment. The area has been besieged by regime forces for several years.

At least 27 people, including six children and five women, were killed in the strikes on Talbiseh, opposition activists said.

The dominant factions in Talbiseh and the nearby town of al-Rastan are tied to the Free Syrian Army, the Western-backed rebel umbrella group that includes many Syrian army defectors.

The commander of one FSA faction named Tajamu al-Ezzeh said Russian warplanes targeted his fighters in Hama province, according to a video statement released by the group. It wasn’t possible to independently verify the claim.

Video filmed by people affiliated with local rebel groups and posted on YouTube showed the aftermath of the airstrikes in Talbiseh. In one video, rebels and citizens are seen rushing down a street as thick black smoke and fire engulfed heavily damaged buildings. Then they are shown attempting to rescue those trapped under the rubble. A dazed man covered in blood was lifted up from the ground and taken outside.

“Is there anyone here?” a voice is heard shouting. “I don’t know, I don’t know but lots of people live here!” answers a panicked man.

In another video a naked child covered in blood and shrapnel is shown crying on a bed at a local field hospital.