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Week Five of the Russian Intervention in Syria: The Russians Are Digging in

THE SAKER

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Whether this tragedy was directly linked to the war in Syria or not, there is no doubt that the downing of Kogalymavia Flight 9268 was the main event of the past week. Since I have covered this issue **elsewhere**, I shall not return to it in detail again here. I will just repeat here my personal conclusion that this tragedy will not impact the Russian operation in Syria or affect the political situation inside Russia. As for the cause of the tragedy, there are increasing indications that both western and Russian security services have come to a tentative conclusion that it was, indeed, a bomb. On Friday, the head of the Federal Security Service has recommended canceling all flights to Egypt and the evacuation of all the Russian citizens in Egypt (roughly 70,000 people). Several EU countries have also taken similar measures.

There has, however, been another interesting but less noticed development this week in the Russian operation in Syria: the Russians are quietly but very effectively “digging in”.

For the first time, Russia has officially declared that air-defense units were also deployed with the Russian forces. Until now, the main burden for air defense had fallen upon the Russian Navy and, specifically, the ships equipped with the naval variant of the S-300 missile system. This was not an optimal solution not only because it put the burden of defending land based assets from the sea, tying down the Russian navy expeditionary force, but also because this solution only “covered” about half of Syria.



The use of the *Moskva* guided missile cruiser was a stop-gap measure designed to protect the Russian force in Latakia, but now **it appears that dedicated air defense units have been deployed**. These are most likely the land-based versions of the S-300 missile, possibly in combination with point defense systems such as the **Pantsir-S1** and other, shorter range, **MANPADs** such as the **9K338 Igla-S** and the advanced **9K33 Verba**.

There are also reports indicating that the Russians have deployed very sophisticated electronic warfare units **including top-of-the line Krasukhka-4 EW systems** which are amongst **the most sophisticated mobile EW systems ever built** and they are reportedly capable of jamming AWACS and satellites in space. Add to this the presence of SU-30SMs in the skies, and you have a force capable of controlling the Syrian skies.

When asked about this Russian officials gave a cute reply: they said that these air-defense systems were deployed in case of a hijacked being used to attack the Russian airbase in Latakia. Right.

The real purpose of these efforts is becoming obvious: Russia is trying to deny the US the control of the skies over Syria and, so far, there is very little the USA can do about it (short of starting WWIII). Furthermore, the Russians are also sending a message to Turkey, France and Israel – all countries which have, at different times and in different ways, indicated that they wanted to use the Syrian airspace for their own purposes.

There are now also **reports of Russian special forces being sent to Syria**. The **WSJ suggested** that these forces could be given the tasks of liaising with Syrian intelligence and acting as forward air controllers (FACs). I also personally see another important task for these units: to pre-position hidden fuel caches for the Russian helicopters should there be a need to send them to rescue downed Russian pilots in eastern Syria (Russian Spetsnaz units did create such fuel caches in southern Afghanistan during the war).



Take a look at the combat radius of Russian helicopters in Syria. Ideally, a search and rescue mission would employ both a dedicated attack helicopter such as the Mi-24 and a multi-role helicopter such as the Mi-17, the former provide cover and protection for the latter. It would also be possible to have SU-25s protecting Mi-17s, but the best possible version would be to have a covert refueling base somewhere deep inside nominally Daesh territory to extend the range of the rescue teams.

Some western sources believe that Russian special forces might also be given **direct action missions**. This is absolutely possible and such missions are well within the capabilities of the Spetsnaz GRU. Still, their primary mission is a **special reconnaissance** one and while they might be used to destroy a high value Daesh target (material or human), we will probably never hear about it.

What is certain is that the **Russians are steadily increasing their capabilities in Syria and that their presence is rapidly growing from a small and vulnerable force to a much more balanced and capable one.**

The Syrians, in the meanwhile, might be achieving their first real successes in their counter offensive. While the Syrian government forces have been slowly pushing back Daesh on many fronts, this progress had, until now, failed to yield an operational breakthrough. This might be happening right now with the much awaited **reopening of the highway to Aleppo.**

The main problem for the Russians remains the fact that the Syrian military has not been able to capitalize on the Russian intervention. This is due to a combination of factors including the fact that the Syrian military is over-stretched and unable to concentrate enough forces in one location to achieve a significant breakthrough and the fact that Daesh fighters are well dug-in and are, by all accounts, resisting with determination and skill. Still, the Russian air campaign is degrading the Daesh capabilities and it is possible that, eventually, this will result in a sudden collapse of the Daesh lines in a critical part of the front. For example, the Syrian army is, reportedly, only a few miles from liberating the Kuweyres military airbase and even though its progress is very slow it is likely that the Syrians will eventually break the Daesh siege of this crucial objective. Likewise, in the Djobar neighborhood of Damascus is gradually being cleared in, again, a slow moving but successful operation.

All in all, I am very cautiously optimistic and I keep hoping for an operational victory for the Syrians. If it does not happen, the Iranians and Hezbollah will have to move much larger forces in.