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Tu-214R Deployed to Syria: Displaying Enhanced Intelligence Capability

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On July 29, a Russian Tu-214R – the most modern Russian ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) aircraft – arrived at Khmeimim airbase, southern Latakia, to control ground and air situation, and also boost the electronic warfare capability. There are two of Tu-214Rs in operation; one is currently on a mission in Syria. The conflict there accelerated the completion of these winged superspies.

In July, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and Kazan Aircraft Production Association (KAPO) signed a contract on the delivery of the third Tu-214R. The talks are underway to launch serial production.

The Tu-214R made its public debut in August 2013 at Moscow Air Show MAKS and was heralded as a platform for conducting surveillance of the US, to monitor compliance with the Treaty on Open Skies.

This is the second deployment to Syria. One Tu-214R operated there in February-March 2016. Experts say it was important to check if the sophisticated aircraft could be serviced at Khmeimim away from Kazan home base. Everything went smoothly. According to a Russian newspaper Izvestia's report, Russia's Defense Ministry experts say the aircraft has successfully fulfilled all the missions in Syria and is fully operational.

The Tu-214 plane has a maximum takeoff weight of 110.7 tons, a length of 46.1 meters, a cruising speed of 830-850 km/h (516-528 mph), a service ceiling – 12,100 meters (39,700 ft), a maximum speed – 900 km/h (560 mph) and an operational flight range of about 7,000 kilometers (4,349 miles). Maximum fuel capacity – 35,700 kilograms (78,700 lb). The aircraft can be furnished with additional fuel tanks to perform flights within a distance of up to 10,000 kilometers (6,214 miles).

The plane is a special mission version of the Tu-214 commercial transport aircraft, developed under the codename 'Project 141', to replace the Il-20 Coot ELINT platform.

Tu-214R can be distinguished from its civilian counterparts by the typical bulges under the front of the fuselage and tail and drop-shaped fairings on the side of the hull in which powerful radars with phased arrays for circular and lateral observation are located. These radars are the eyes and ears of the aircraft: operators receive information in active and passive (without revealing their location) mode and can also intercept enemy radio conversations.

Destined to loiter in a friendly or uncontested airspace at high altitude and at safe distance from targets or along the border of a country under surveillance, the Tu-214R is configured to carry sensor packages to perform ELINT (Electronic Intelligence) and SIGINT (Signal Intelligence) missions. The MRC-411 multi-intelligence payload also includes side-looking Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) and other Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Communications Intelligence (COMINT).

The twin-engine medium-range aircraft can intercept signals from cell phones, planes, military vehicles, radios, etc. This helps pinpoint enemy locations as well as provide indications as to what kind of electronic capabilities the enemy is employing and what is the size of an opposing or rebel force. The all-weather radar systems and electro-optical sensors produce photo-like imagery of large parts of the ground. The SAR makes it possible to track moving ground targets at distant ranges (active mode – 250 km, passive 400 km at altitudes of 9-12 km) providing targeting data to aircraft and ground-based missile systems. In effect, the Tu-214R is the airborne component of the “reconnaissance-strike system” that allows enemy land movements to be detected and interdicted practically in real time. The multi-spectral electro-optical Fraktsiya system receives real-time, high-precision images of the terrain in the visible and infrared ranges. It can build the electronic order of battle providing information on location of enemy forces, the equipment used and, by eavesdropping into their radio/phone communications, what kind of activities the enemy is engaged in and what kind of action is to be expected.

The main feature of the Tu-214R’s radars is ground-penetrating radar (GPR) scanning. Actually, the aircraft can see through the surface. Any objects hidden underground, covered with snow, sand, or wood, will not escape detection. The Tu-214R will make the object’s radar image and immediately transmit the information to the command post.

The deployment of Tu-214R will greatly increase the intelligence capability and situational awareness of Russian forces in Syria. Day and night, each and every step the militants make will be closely monitored. There is no escape from the watchful eye. If information exchange agreement is reached with the US, Russia will be able to share valuable data on the terrorists’ activities. The Tu-214R testifies to the impressive improvements within Russia’s conventional forces arsenal, especially its signals intelligence (SIGINT) and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.