

'Russia kills US-backed Syrian rebels in second day of air strikes as Iran prepares for ground offensive'

Russian jets bomb rebel positions in Syria including rural areas near the north-western town of Jisr al-Shughour, a day after launching air strikes. Follow latest developments here

By Raziye Akkoc, and Roland Oliphant in Moscow

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- **Iran and Hizbollah in Syria 'for ground operation'**
- Russia launches more air strikes against rebels
- **Moscow denies yesterday's strikes killed civilians**
- Russia launches airstrikes in Syria - as it happened
- Vladimir Putin's catastrophic plan for Syria would deliver war without end

Latest

Here is our summary of events in Syria on Thursday, from Richard Spencer, Middle East Editor, Nabih Bulos in Beirut and Ruth Sherlock in Washington:

- Iran was on Thursday night moving up its ground forces in Syria in preparation for an attack to reclaim rebel-held territory under the cover of Russian air strikes, according to sources close to Damascus. Hizbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia which has come to the Assad regime's rescue in battle-fronts across

the country in the past two years, is being prepared to capitalise on the strikes, a Syrian figure close to the regime told The Telegraph

- Sources in Lebanon told Reuters that Iran, which is the main sponsor and tactical adviser to Hizbollah, was sending in hundreds of its own troops to reinforce them. Iran made no comment on the claims but Josh Earnest, the White House spokesman, said the move would be an "apt and powerful illustration" that Russia's military actions had worsened the conflict.
- A Hizbollah-backed advance would fit the pattern of Russian air-strikes, which have predominantly targeted those rebels not aligned to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant who currently present the gravest threat on the ground to core regime territory.
- The long-term aim would be to defeat or demoralise the non-Isil opposition, so that Isil became the regime's only enemy. That would force the West to back President Bashar al-Assad against it. "They want to clean the country of non-Isil rebels, and then the US will work with them as Isil will be the only enemy," the Damascus source said.

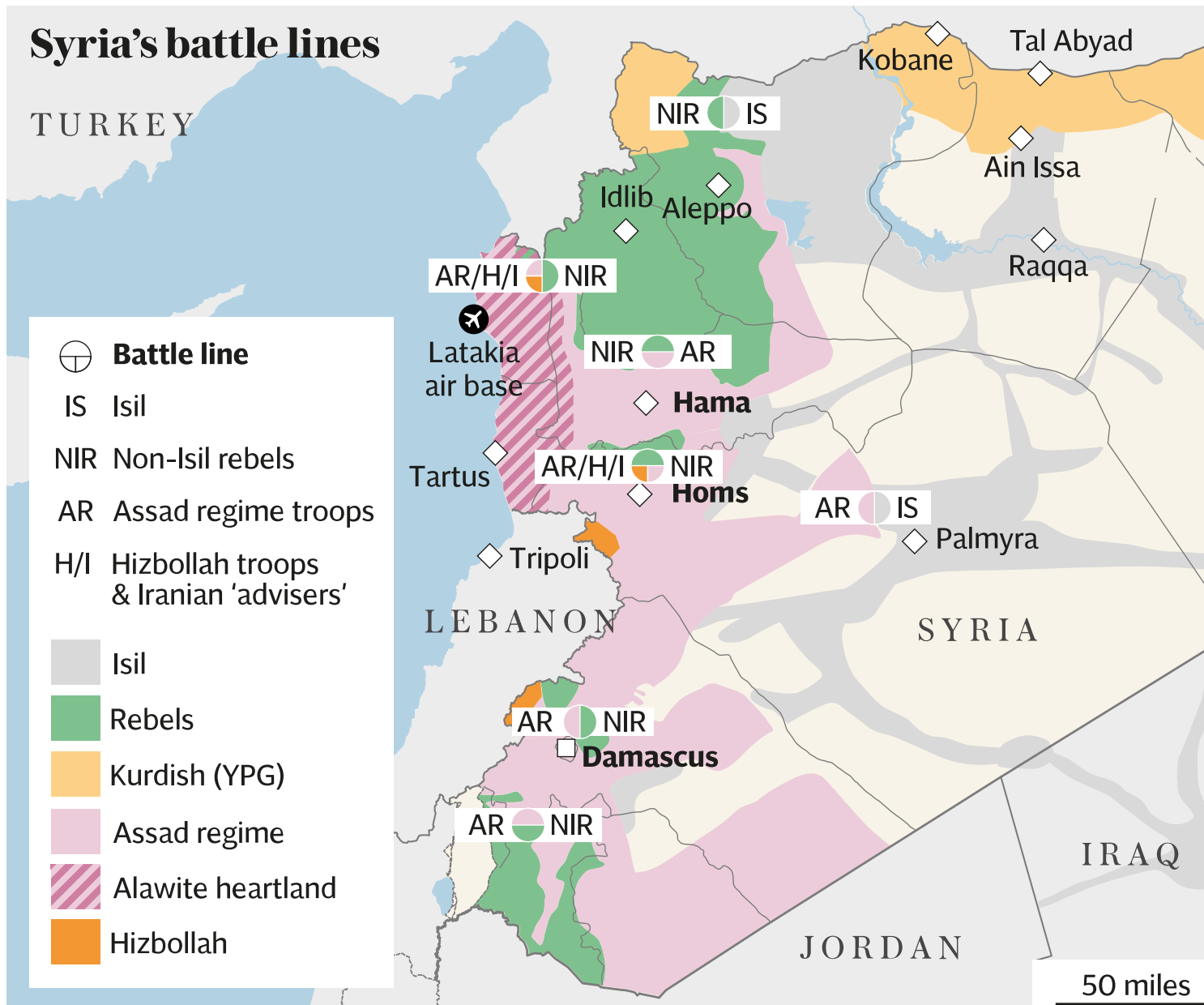


Smoke rises after airstrikes by military jets in Talbiseh, Homs province Photo: AP

- The Russians continued their aerial bombardment on Thursday. Targets included Jisr al-Shughour and Jabal al-Zawiya, areas under the control of Jaish al-Fatah, the Army of Conquest, an alliance of Islamist groups which have won significant victories against the regime this year. They also included Isil targets in Raqqa and Deir Ezzour provinces, including a Syrian Air Force base which fell to Isil earlier this year after a long siege.

- The Kremlin admitted on Thursday that targets included non-Isil targets - something it had previously denied - and that its aim was to shore the regime “in its weak spots”. The White House last night said the failure to discriminate between Isil and other rebel groups was a “grave miscalculation”.
- Among the dead from Wednesday’s strikes was said to be a prominent rebel leader in north Homs province, Captain Iyad al-Deek, a former regime officer who defected early in the uprising.
- The rebels have promised to take the fight to the Russians, some in blood-curdling comments online. “Is it not time for the knight to mount his steed? Is it not time to cut off the heads? What are we waiting for? What remains?” said one man, Mohammad al-Maghaweer, who claimed to be a front-line fighter with Jaish al-Fatah.
- The rebels also claimed there were a number of civilians among the dead. "The mosque was virtually destroyed, and there was a body under the ruins, and there were eight wounded, among them a child,” said Tareq Abdul-Haq, a media activist who visited Jisr al-Shughour after the Russian bombing. He said a “poor, civilian” neighbourhood had been hit.
- Russia is preparing both a United Nations resolution purporting to cover both its bombing campaign and that of the US-led anti-Isil coalition under one formulation, and a new round of peace talks.

22.11



21.30

US and Russian military officials spoke for a little over an hour on Thursday evening about how to improve the safety of air crews conducting simultaneous air strikes in Syria and agreed to consider each other's proposals, a Pentagon spokesman said.

"Both sides agreed to consider the proposals and provide feedback in the coming days," Peter Cook, the Pentagon spokesman, said in a news briefing.

Cook said Elissa Slotkin, an acting assistant secretary of defense who was on the call, had noted to the Russian officials US concerns that Russian strikes so far had not targeted strongholds of Islamic State militants.

19.28

Richard Spencer, Middle East Editor, has this handy Q&A of why Russia has launched Syrian air strikes.

Why would Russia bomb non-Isil groups?

The same spokesmen are sometimes vague - referring to Isil and terrorists in the same breath. By “terrorists” they mean the same as Bashar al-Assad - anyone part of the armed opposition. And it so happens that the gravest threat to the regime’s core areas - Damascus, and the central and western plains to the coast - comes from non-Isil rebels. Vladimir Putin, the Russian president has also said that he believes the survival of the Assad regime is very important, so it makes sense to target them first.

Has Russia not bombed Isil at all?

Reports are coming in that on Thursday morning there were strikes on a former regime air base near the Isil capital Raqqa and on Isil positions near Deir Ezzour city in eastern Syria. It is not quite clear whether there was any particular tactical purpose to these strikes.

If the regime is fighting Isil, surely anything that helps it is a good thing?

The Syrian war is a lot more complicated than that. The regime long ago gave up any hope of recapturing Isil-held areas in the near future. So the number of “live” battle-fronts between the regime and Isil are comparatively few. However, there is a fierce war going on between Isil and other rebel groups, so it may be that by bombing them the Russians are actually helping Isil. Russia denies that.

Its strategy may be that if it can help the regime defeat the non-Isil rebels, the world will gather round and help Damascus seize control of Isil-held areas too.

Are the non-Isil groups being bombed terrorists?

The groups they are bombing a spectrum of opposition groups from an alliance called Jaish al-Fatah - Army of Conquest - to brigades of “moderate” rebels backed and even, according to one account, trained by the US. Jaish al-Fatah made up of hardline groups that include Jabhat al-Nusra, which is aligned to al-Qaeda, so they are formally designated by the West and the United Nations as terrorists.

What will happen next?

The big question is whether these bombing raids are followed up by a ground offensive. A Telegraph source in Damascus said Hizbollah and the regime are preparing a major ground offensive on rebel-held parts of Homs following the Russian aerial bombardment while another report said Iranian reinforcements are arriving in Syria to assist in an attack also on rebel-held areas.

That will send a challenge to the rebels - and their backers in Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia: do they also want to escalate the conflict?

18.42

Turkey: Russia strikes are worrying and last thing we need

Feridun Sinirlioglu, Turkey's foreign minister, has said he is concerned by the Russian air strikes and described it as a "very worrying development".



We feel serious concern over the information that Russia's air strikes in Syria targeted opposition positions instead of Daesh (Isil) and that as a result civilians also lost their lives.

"If these reports are confirmed, then this is a very worrying development.

"This would escalate the crisis and is the last thing we need in Syria's tragic and chaotic environment.

"In this case... the problems will increase for the Syrian people."

Nations conducting air strikes against Isil

■ Other countries targeting IS in Syria ■ US-led coalitions targeting Isil in Syria and/or Iraq



18.14

John McCain, the US senator, said today that he could "absolutely confirm" that Russian air strikes had hit Free Syrian Army rebels who had been armed and trained by the US, writes **David Lawler in Washington**.

"Their initial strikes were against the individuals and groups that have been funded and trained by our CIA in an incredible flaunting of any kind of co-operation or effort to conceal what Putin's first priority is, and that is of course to prop up Bashar al-Assad," Mr McCain told CNN.

"I can absolutely confirm to you that they were strikes against the Free Syrian Army or groups that have been armed and trained by the CIA because we have communication with people there...this is an Orwellian experience."