

## **US asks Russians to focus airstrikes on Islamic State in Syria**

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**Washington:** Pentagon officials urged the Russian military on Thursday to focus its airstrikes in Syria on Islamic State fighters rather than opponents of Syrian President Bashar Assad, U.S. administration officials said.

Tensions between the U.S. and Russia are escalating over Russian airstrikes that apparently are serving to strengthen Assad by targeting rebels — perhaps including some aligned with the U.S. — rather than hitting Islamic State fighters it promised to attack.

"What is important is Russia has to not be engaged in any activities against anybody but (the Islamic State group)," Secretary of State John Kerry said. "That's clear. We have made that very clear."

White House press secretary Josh Earnest described Russia's air operations, which began Monday, as "indiscriminate military operations against the Syrian opposition." Elissa Slotkin, who represented the U.S. side in Thursday's talks, said as much during the hour-long videoconference call, according to Earnest. Slotkin is the acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs.

"She pointed out that the Russian military operations we've seen so far raise some concerns, because Russia is targeting areas where there are few if any ISIL forces operating," Earnest said, using an Islamic State acronym.

Of further concern is the prospect of the U.S. and Russia getting drawn into a shooting war in the event that Russian warplanes hit moderate Syrian rebels who have been trained and equipped by the U.S. and received promises of U.S. air support in the event they are attacked. Russia's planes are based inside Syria; those of the U.S. and its coalition partners are flying from various countries in the region, including Turkey and Jordan.

Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook declined to say how the U.S. would respond in the event that U.S.-trained rebel groups are attacked by the Russians, describing it as a hypothetical question.

Cook said both sides in Thursday's talks presented proposals and ideas for avoiding conflict between U.S. and Russian aircraft. He said these would be studied further before deciding whether to hold further talks. He called the talks "cordial and professional."

At United Nations headquarters in New York, Secretary of State John Kerry said he foresees further consultations with the Russians about air operations.

"We are not yet where we need to be to guarantee the safety and security" of those carrying out the airstrikes, Kerry said, "and that is the discussion that is taking place today," referring to the US-Russia military talks. "And it will take place even more so over the course of the next few days depending on the outcome today."

Cook said the U.S. side proposed using specific international radio frequencies for distress calls by military pilots flying in Syrian airspace, but he was not more specific about that or other proposals.

Russia's defense ministry said that over the past 24 hours it had damaged or destroyed 12 targets in Syria belonging to the Islamic State fighters, including a command center and ammunition depots. A U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, Col. Steve Warren, said he had no indication that the Russians had hit Islamic State targets.

Lt. Gen. Robert Otto, the deputy chief of staff for intelligence and surveillance for the Air Force, said Thursday that even as the U.S. tries to make sure Russian airstrikes don't conflict with ongoing coalition operations in Syria, he does not believe there will be any real intelligence-sharing with Moscow.

"I have a low level of trust in the Russians. It's trust but verify," he said. "It's easy, then, to exchange factual data where you're going to operate. I would not envision a relationship where I would share some of my intelligence with them."

Otto added that the Russians have been dropping 'dumb bombs,' a reference to munitions that are not precision-guided. And the use of such indiscriminate targeting, he said, could kill innocent civilians, which could have the unintended consequence of creating more terrorists than they kill.

Warren, the U.S. spokesman in Baghdad, said any agreements reached in the Pentagon talks would be reflected in the U.S.-led coalition's air operations, which including daily strikes on Islamic State targets in both Syria and Iraq.

"While there is always danger of conflict, of inadvertent contact" between coalition and Russian warplanes, "we are continuing with our operations," Warren told reporters at the Pentagon. He said there was only one U.S. airstrike in Syria over the past 24 hours, compared to an average of eight strikes per day, but added that this had nothing to do with the start of Russian airstrikes Wednesday.

- AP