

Russia puts its air operations in Syria on display

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Hemeimeem Air Base, Syria: Russian combat jets streak into the sky from this base in western Syria for yet another day of the heavy bombing runs that have allowed Moscow to again portray itself as a major global player, projecting military power far from its borders.

While support crew attached a missile to an Su-30 jet for its sortie, helicopter gunships buzzed around the vicinity of the base to make sure there was no threat of a ground attack.

The Russian Defense Ministry flew Moscow-based reporters to the air base early Thursday, giving a few international news organizations their first inside look at its operations here.

The tour was organized Wednesday, the same day the Kremlin announced that Syrian President Bashar Assad had met in Moscow with President Vladimir Putin. Assad's visit Tuesday was his first known trip abroad since war broke out in 2011 and raised intense speculation about the two leaders' motives.

In a sign that a diplomatic push is underway, Russia also announced that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry would meet Friday in Vienna. They will be joined by their counterparts from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both of which are staunch critics of Assad.

Russia has been conducting daily airstrikes in Syria since Sept. 30 to back a Syrian government offensive. Moscow says it is targeting militants, especially from the Islamic State group and other extremists. The United States and others have criticized the strikes, which they say are aimed primarily at groups fighting Assad's forces and likely only to fan the violence.

Journalists were shown well-organized operations at the Hemeimeem base, located near the coastal city of Latakia. The large base is protected by air defense systems, which can be seen deployed around its edges. Security forces armed with assault rifles guard key facilities, and rows of armored personnel carriers are parked nearby.

About a dozen warplanes — Su-25s and Su-30s — took off for combat missions early Thursday. A giant Russian cargo plane landed and two smaller Il-76 military transport planes also could be seen on the tarmac.

Russian servicemen in crisp uniforms were barred from talking to journalists.

Putin's apparent aims in launching the air campaign were to show that Assad could not be unseated by force and to help cement the Syrian government's grip on the territory it still controls.

The greater objective, however, seemed to be to foster political talks that could preserve the Syrian state and allow Moscow to protect its interests in the region.

One of Putin's other goals with the Syrian military intervention has been to bring Moscow and Washington together for a security dialogue in which Russia would be treated as an equal. The hope is that this would go a long way toward improving ties and ending the Western isolation that resulted from the crisis in Ukraine.

State-owned pollster VTsIOM on Thursday released its latest survey on Putin's approval rating, which it said had reached an all-time high of nearly 90 percent. VTsIOM, which in the past has reported higher approval ratings for Putin

than independent agencies, said the survey of 1,600 people was conducted Saturday and Sunday, and had a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

- AP