



## Russia's Intervention October 8, 2015

On September 30th, Russia began conducting airstrikes across central and western Syria, followed by cruise missile strikes on October 7th. The first strikes were reported by numerous sources, including the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syrian Civil Defense (or “White Helmets”), activists, opposition groups, and by video from the Russian Ministry of Defense. Despite Russian government assertions, these strikes, and the vast majority of subsequent strikes, which continue to present day, have largely targeted positions held by armed opposition groups near front lines with Syrian government and pro-government forces, and to a lesser extent ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham) positions.

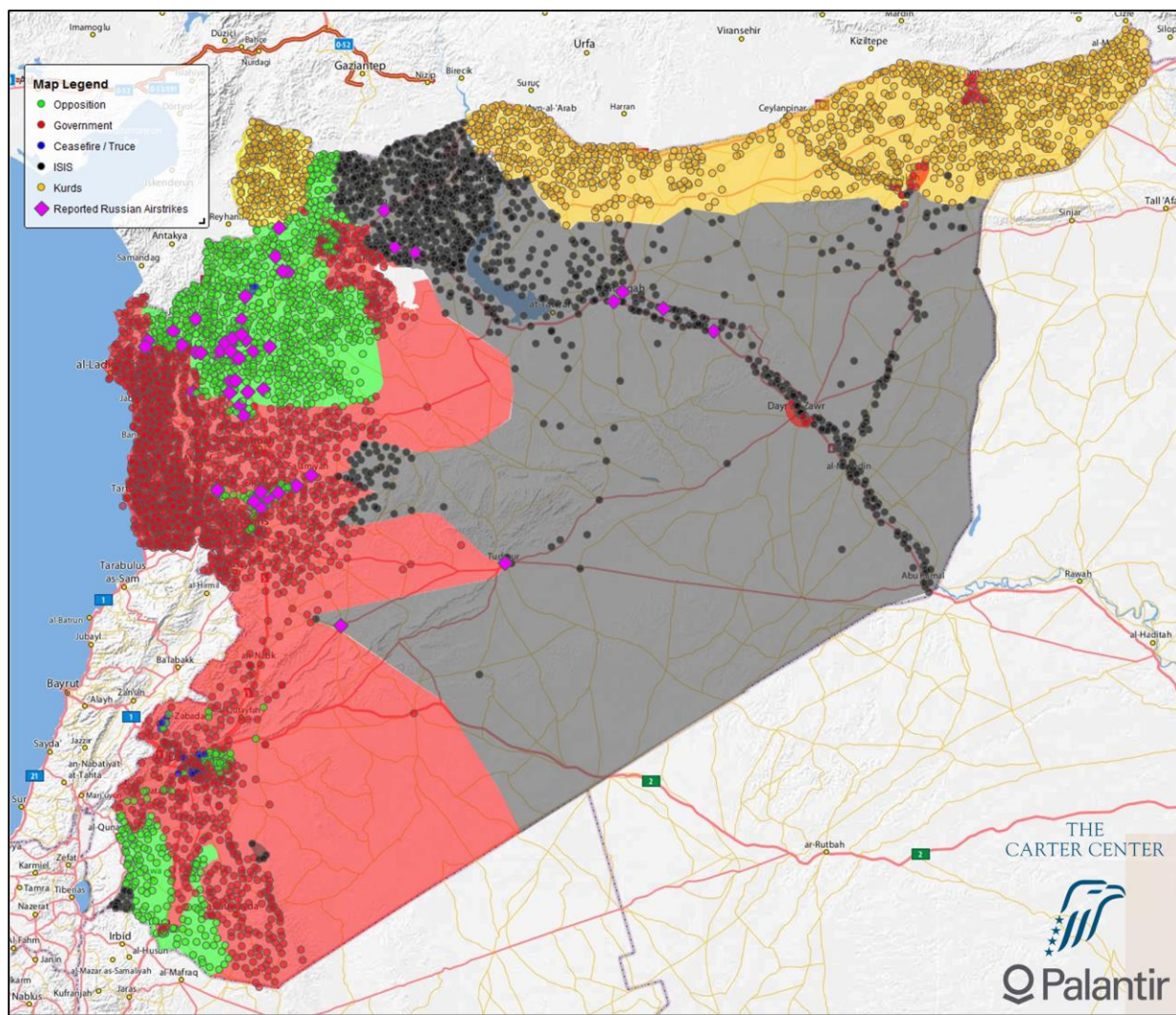


Figure 1: Reported Russian airstrikes and areas of control as of October 6, 2015. Each dot depicted above represents a city, town, or district of larger cities.

Sources have been quick to blame much of the reported bombing during the past week on Russia, making definitive tracking of the location of strikes difficult. Despite the high level of chatter, video released by the Russian Ministry of Defense has proven to be an invaluable resource for locating strikes, as it enables geo-location based on satellite imagery. Additionally, a list of all recorded airstrikes during the period in question shows fewer total strikes in ISIS controlled territory than Russia states to have conducted.

While it is difficult to determine the exact targets of all Russian air strikes, at least two groups who have received support from the “Friends of Syria” diplomatic collective have reported being hit - the [al-Izza Gathering](#) and the [Saqour al-Jabal Brigade](#), who both hold positions on front lines in southern Hama governorate. Both of these groups have been active in the areas targeted and have been supplied with U.S. manufactured BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missiles – weapons that have only been seen in the hands of those supported by the “Friends of Syria”. Additionally, a commander from Harakat Tahrir Homs, Iyad al-Deek, former commander of the Khaled ibn al-Walid Brigade, and one of the early defectors from the Syrian military, was killed in one of the first reported strikes. Many of the areas targeted also have a large contingent of fighters from Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, and Jabhat al-Nusra, who have been principle actors in the recent opposition advances against government positions in northwestern Syria.

A significant minority of reported Russian strikes have been reported on ISIS-controlled areas. These include at least three locations near the government-controlled Kweiris Military Airbase to the east of Aleppo city, an ISIS training camp near Raqqa city, and strikes on ISIS positions in central Syria near Tadmur (Palmyra) and the westernmost areas of ISIS control.

Given the emerging pattern of locations targeted, Russia seems to be focusing its airstrikes on the front lines in Lattakia, Hama, Idlib, and Homs, and to a lesser extent ISIS-held positions where doing so could enable an advance by Syrian government forces. These areas, which include central and eastern Syria, have the added appeal of being some of Syria's top oil and gas producing regions. If the Syrian government is able to capitalize on Russian air support with ground offensives, it stands to dramatically improve its standing in what was until recently a largely stagnant conflict. While ground offensives have begun, so far, they have been directed toward “Friends of Syria” supported opposition positions in Hama governorate.