



Russian Airstrikes Update

January 29, 2016

As of the date of this publication, a full four months will have elapsed since Russia began its air campaign in Syria. During that time, Russia has conducted raids throughout Syria aimed overwhelmingly at weakening the non-ISIS armed opposition. The following brief provides maps of documented Russian airstrikes, examines the evolution in areas and groups targeted, and discusses the effects of the campaign so far.

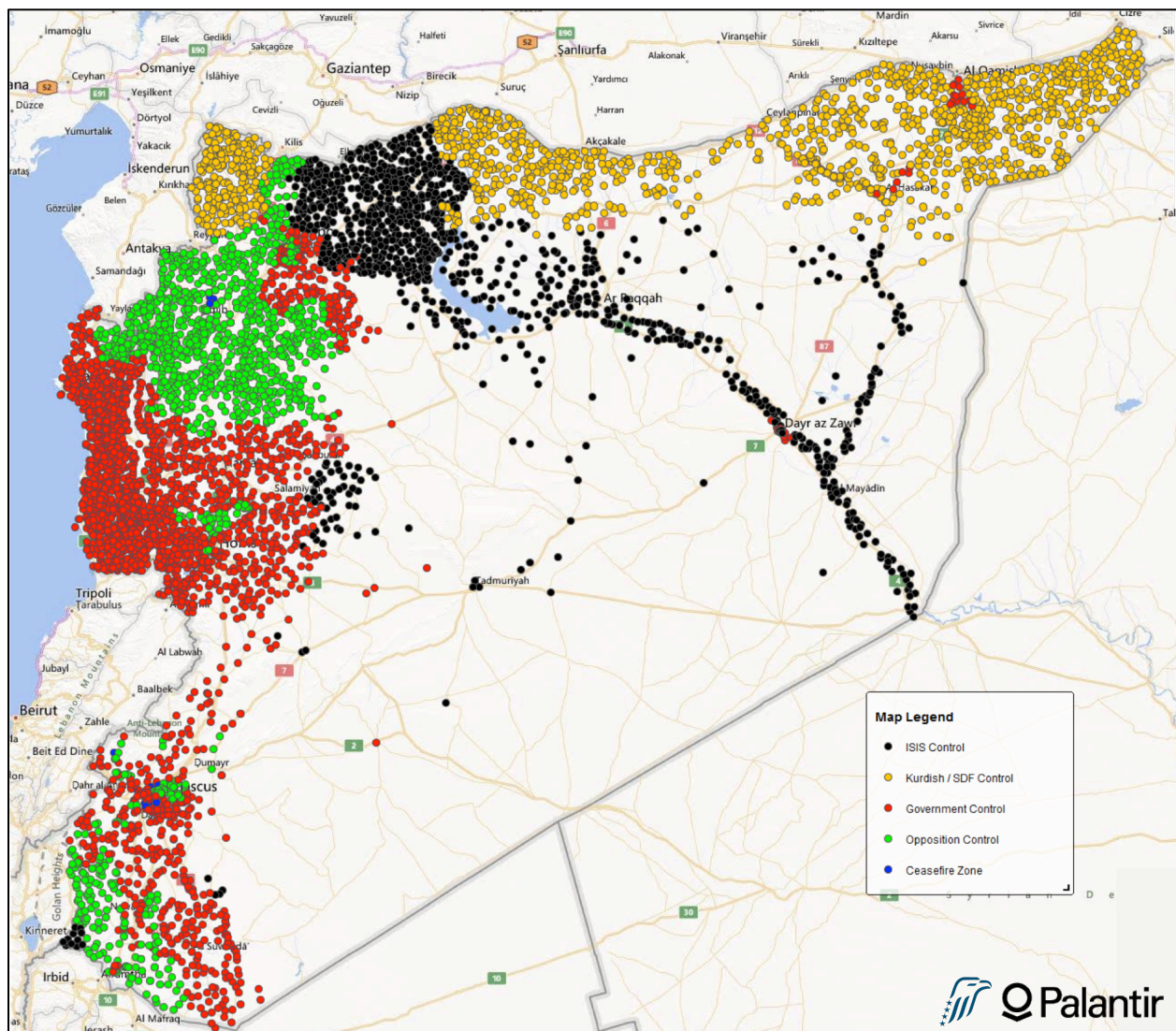


Figure 1: Areas of control in Syria as of late January, 2016. Each colored dot represents a city, town, or district of larger metropolitan areas.

Progression of Strikes

Russia’s initial foray into Syria focused on the Northern Hama and Idlib governorates along the front lines between opposition and government forces. As seen in the heat-map in Figure 2, areas north of Hama city have been targeted more frequently than any other area in the country. Shortly after these initial bombings, however, the focus of strikes changed in mid-October to focus on the southern Aleppo battlefield. This shift coincided with a ground offensive that saw pro-government forces press westward toward the besieged pro-government towns of al-Foah and Kafraya on the outskirts of Idlib city.

The third phase of Russia’s ongoing air campaign began following Turkey’s downing of a Russian jet on November 24th. Immediately after this event, Russian bombing raids expanded to target opposition groups in the mountains of Lattakia governorate (where the plane was downed) and in northern Aleppo governorate along front lines with Kurdish forces.

The fourth and present focus of Russian aerial bombardments is on the southern Syria front lines around Sheikh Miskeen in Daraa governorate. As in southern Aleppo, this shift in focus coincided with a pro-government ground offensive to retake the city. With major ground operations and aerial bombardments beginning at the end of December, the offensive ultimately succeeded in capturing the city on January 26th.

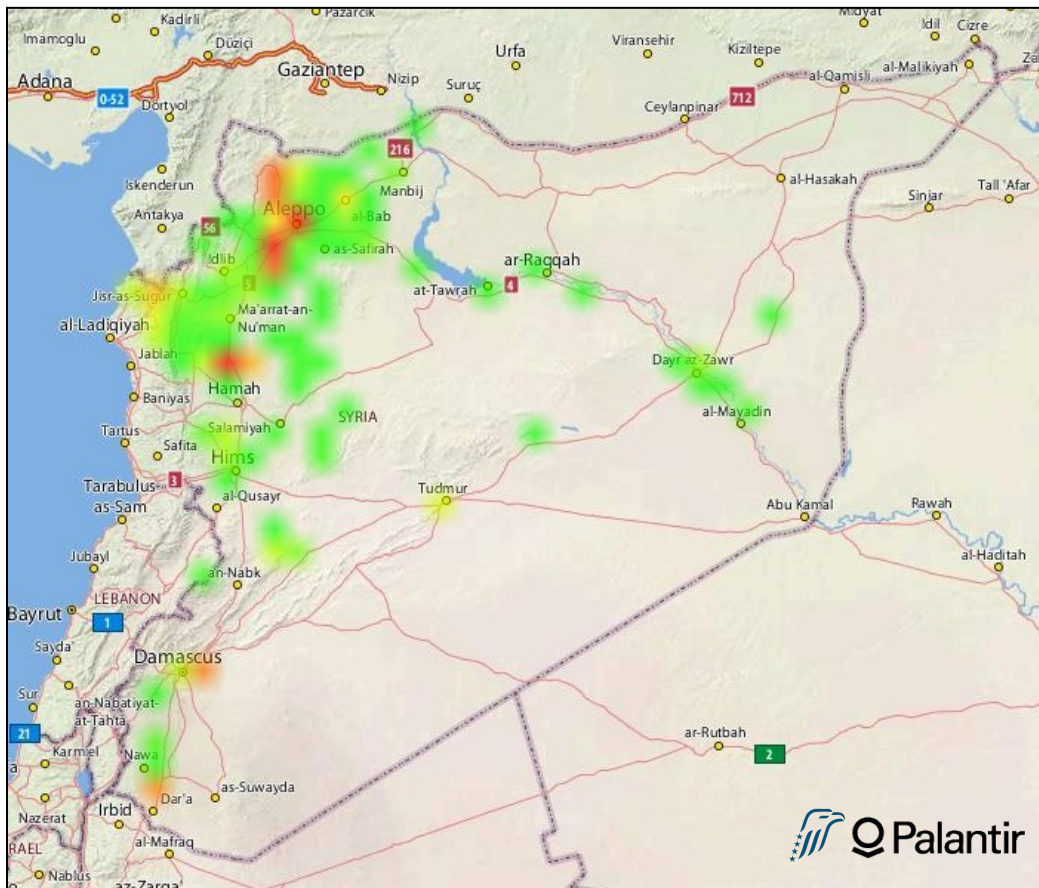


Figure 2: Heat-map of documented Russian aerial bombardments since September 30, 2015 through January 25, 2016. Red indicates highest frequency of attacks.

Groups Targeted

The overwhelming majority of groups targeted in Russia’s bombing campaign so far have been members of the non-ISIS opposition. Russia only appears to have conducted consistent attacks against ISIS positions in two areas – east of Aleppo city in support of a government advance to relieve the besieged Kweiris military airbase, and in eastern Homs province against ISIS positions in Tadmur (Palmyra) and the towns of Mehin and Qariyatein. Since late December, however, Russian strikes on ISIS positions east of Aleppo city appear to have increased in consistency. These attacks could be conducted in defense of newly gained territory near the airbase, or in preparation for an eventual expansion of the ground offensive in the region towards the ISIS stronghold of al-Bab.

Areas targeted by Russia’s air campaign stand in stark contrast to those targeted by the US-led International Coalition, which has focused its strikes in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)¹ along front lines with ISIS, and against other ISIS strongholds throughout.

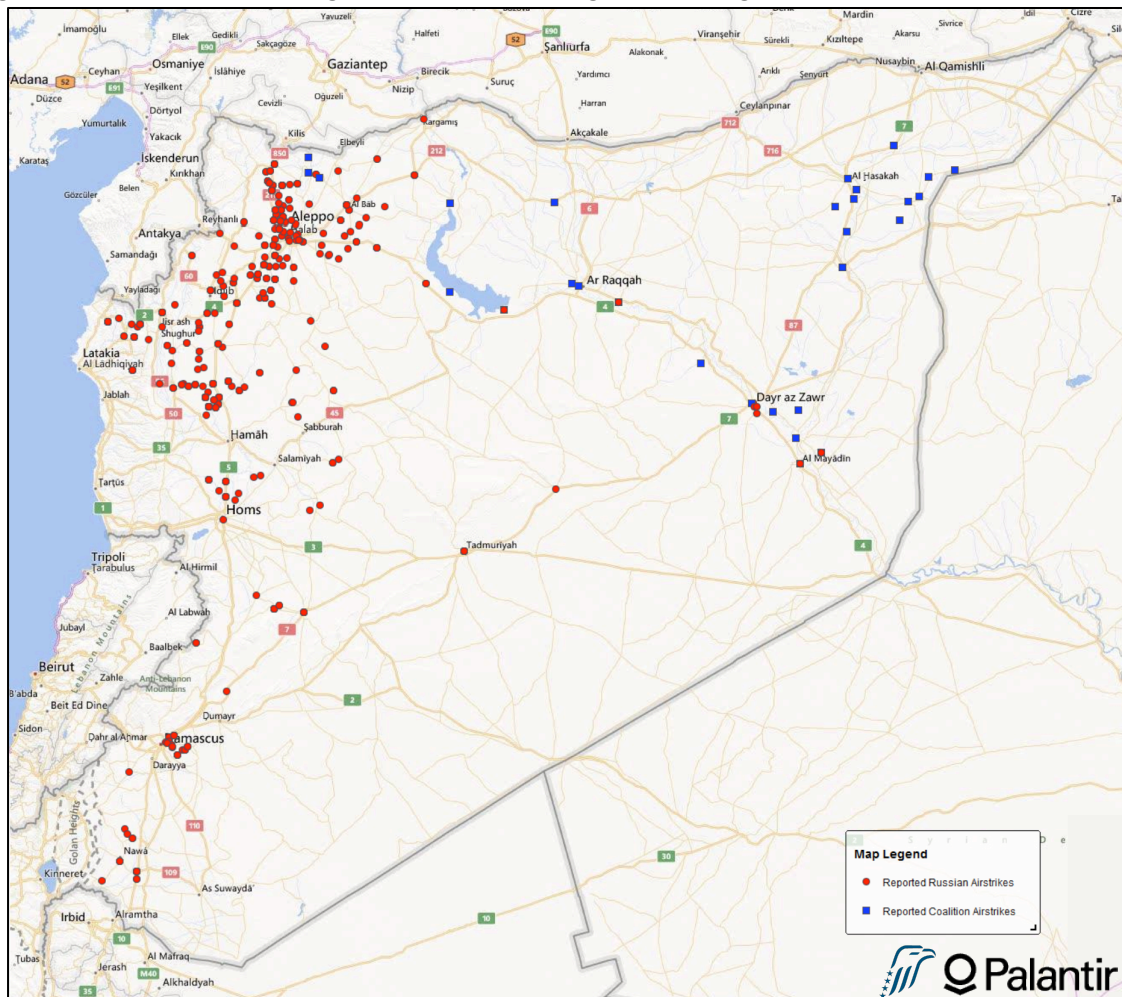


Figure 3: Locations targeted in airstrikes by Russia (red circles) and the International Coalition (blue squares). Sources include publicly available material from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Russian Ministry of Defense (videos), the US Department of Defense, and activist reporting networks.

¹ The SDF is an alliance of the Kurdish YPG/YPJ and over a dozen Arab, Assyrian, and Syriac units.

Effects of the Campaign

Russia entered the conflict at a time when the front lines were relatively stagnant. Government forces had lost significant amounts of territory in the northwest during the first half of 2015, but front lines had largely stabilized by late July. Russian air support has allowed pro-government forces to gain territory in southern Aleppo, eastern Aleppo surrounding the Kweiris military airbase, and limited gains in Latakia and Daraa governorates.

The most significant impact of the air campaign, however, has been on Syria’s civilians. The combination of aerial bombardments and ground offensives has led to the internal displacement of over a quarter million people since September 30th, 2015.² As can be seen from the map in Figure 4, civilians are fleeing away from areas targeted by high concentrations of aerial bombardments and clashes to areas primarily located within the central Idlib corridor that are far from active front lines. These movements represent a worrying increase in civilian displacements that, when combined with the added hardships of winter and increasing fuel prices as ISIS fuel production facilities are targeted, may soon translate to a substantial increase in refugees fleeing the country.

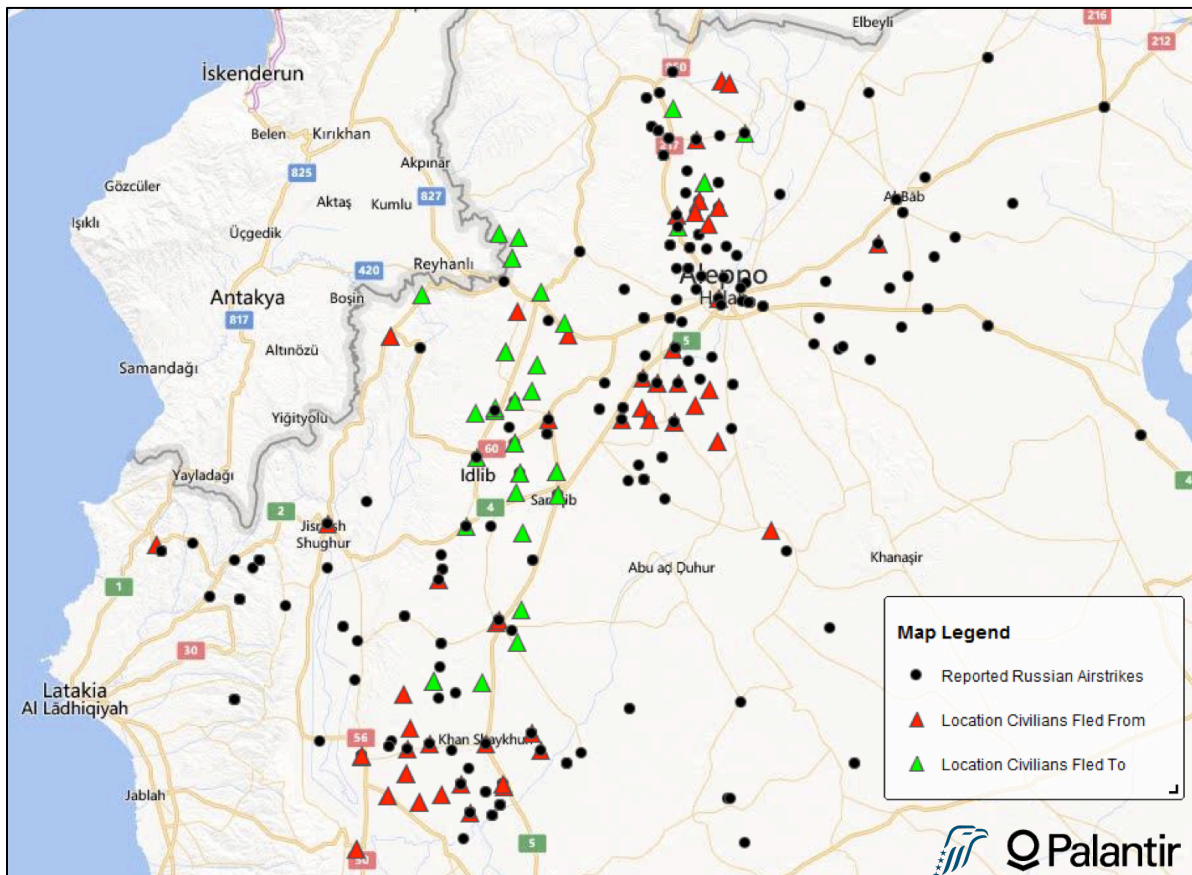


Figure 4: Russian airstrike locations and civilian displacements in northwestern Syria.

² The Carter Center contracts researchers from Humanitarian Research Services Inc. (HRSI) to collect data related to civilian displacements and has worked to corroborate information received with humanitarian organizations operating in the same areas.

Conclusion

Russia's involvement in Syria has expanded gradually over the past four months. Efforts that initially aimed at shoring up pro-government front lines and breaking the sieges on isolated pro-government areas have expanded to support Kurdish groups poised against opposition front lines and new government offensives such as the one in Sheikh Miskeen. Russia's growing role, combined with expanded airbases along Syria's coast, suggests a long-term Russian presence in Syria.

Russia's expanded role has also granted it expanded influence at the negotiating table, which it has used to build the influence of what it considers to be "acceptable" opposition figures and organizations. Despite Russia appearing to be positioned to stay in Syria for a long time, it is unlikely that they wish to remain at conflict indefinitely. The Russian government's limited engagement with opposition groups already appears to be more progressive than that of the Syrian government, which is rumored to have arrested at least one Damascus-based opposition figure who has met with Moscow.

However, by the choice of targets, the Russian intervention is antagonizing the part of the opposition prepared to accept reasonable political compromises with Damascus and eventually join the fight against ISIS. By losing the hearts and minds of these groups and their majority Sunni supporters, the fight against ISIS becomes more challenging if not impossible.