

Russia said to deploy artillery, helicopters to Syrian fronts

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[1 image](#)

Russian artillery and attack helicopters are operating from bases deep inside [Syria](#) as part of a widening military operation in support of pro-government forces, according to [US](#) officials.

The deployments appear to demonstrate [Russia's](#) willingness to risk the lives of its personnel to maximise the amount of fire support its contingent in [Syria](#) can provide to pro-government forces fighting on the frontline.

Victoria Nuland, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 4 November that "[Russia](#) is fielding its own artillery and other ground assets around Hamah and Homs, greatly increasing their soldiers' vulnerability to counterattack".

The same assertion was made by an unnamed [US](#) defence official who told Reuters on the same day that Russian multiple rocket launcher (MRL) crews and long-range artillery batteries are operating in the field. "They have a lot of people outside the wire," he said.



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An armed Mi-8 helicopter seen flying at Humaymin Air Base on 22 October. Russian helicopters are now said to be operating out of three other bases in [Syria](#). (PA Photos)

The artillery systems were not identified, but satellite imagery from October showed 12 towed artillery pieces (probably 122 mm D-30 howitzers) deployed at [Russia's](#) Humaymin Air Base in Latakia province.

The MRLs could include TOS-1A systems that are capable of launching a salvo of 24 rockets carrying thermobaric warheads. The type was first spotted in [Syria](#) on 9 October, when one was seen on a low-loader being pulled by a commercial Volvo tractor rather than a Russian military transporter.

A video released by the National Defence Forces - a pro-government militia organisation - on 22 October showed one firing rockets, purportedly in northern Latakia province. It is unclear if it was operated by Russian or Syrian personnel.

The [US](#) defence official added that [Russia](#) has deployed helicopter gunships to Hamah, Al-Shayrat, and Tiyas, while all of the 34 fixed-wing aircraft remain at the Humaymin Air Base in Latakia province. Satellite imagery has shown that [Russia](#) has at least 35 fixed-wing aircraft at the base. He said that Russian helicopters started operating out of Tiyas sometime after 1 November.

Reuters cited [US](#) security officials and independent experts as saying that the Russian military presence has roughly doubled to 4,000 since 30 September.

The Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF) has also increased the number of airstrikes it is carrying out, a senior [UK](#) defence official has told *IHS Jane's*. "We have seen regime air force's offensive air operations ramp up by 40% since the beginning of October", he said. "The Russians have ramped up deliveries of spares and munitions to the Syrians, allowing them to put more jets in the air."

There have also been signs that [Russia](#) has provided additional T-72 tanks to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). A Russian television news report on 2 November showed an SAA force on the move in Homs province with what was described as new tanks.

The footage showed a T-72 with explosive reactive armour fitted directly to the front of its turret like that on [T-72B](#) tanks, not in the arrowhead arrangement that was retrofitted on to SAA T-72s. The [T-72B](#) is better armoured than the SAA's existing T-72 variants.

Photographs emerged in October showing a consignment of armoured vehicles waiting to be loading on to a transport vessel at [Russia's](#) Novorossiysk naval base. It included what appeared to be [T-72B](#) tanks - an older variant that would not be deployed by Russian expeditionary forces - as well as BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles.

ANALYSIS

Video footage began to emerge soon after Russian airstrikes began on 30 September showing Mi-24s in Russian Air Force colours carrying out low-level attacks in Homs and Hamah provinces.

This prompted speculation that the Russians had moved helicopters to SAAF bases closer to the frontlines: a move that would allow them to increase the intensity of their operations, but would also expose personnel to more danger, complicate logistics, and stretch the available force protection assets.

Airbus Defence and Space satellite imagery acquired by *IHS Jane's* shows no sign of a Russian presence at Hamah Air Base on either 4 or 17 October, even though Mi-24s were seen flying numerous strike sorties in the Murak area 30 km to the north around that time.

If Russian helicopters were using Hamah Air Base, then it may have been just for brief stops to rearm and refuel, thereby minimising their exposure.

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