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Lethal Shadows: Russian Su-35s Stalk German Tornado Jets Over Syria

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Russian Sukhoi Su-35S Flanker-E air superiority fighters have been confronting the German Luftwaffe’s Tornado reconnaissance aircraft over Syria—potentially heightening tensions and increasing the chances of a miscalculation.

Berlin has deployed six Tornado reconnaissance/strike aircraft to the region to support allied operations against ISIS, while Moscow has deployed a sizeable air expeditionary force to Syria’s Latakia province. According to Lt. Gen. Joachim Wundrak, commander of the Luftwaffe air operations center, Russian fighters always shadow Germany’s Tornado jets when operating over Syria. “These encounters happen in a professional way. There have been no incidents,” Wundrak told the *Rheinische Post*.

Wundrak explained in the German daily that Russia’s goal in confronting the Luftwaffe’s aircraft was relatively simple: It’s to remind Western powers “that they, in contrast to the international anti-IS [Islamic State] coalition, are at the invitation of the legitimate Syrian government.”

Nonetheless, while Russian fighters like the Su-35S and the Su-30SM are confronting coalition aircraft, the chances of an inadvertent collision have decreased in recent weeks. The U.S. and Russian militaries have established a hotline to deconflict their forces, Wundrak said.

However, despite the Russian military presence, Germany and Turkey are reviving the prospect of setting up a no-fly zone inside Syria. “In the current situation it would be helpful, if there could be such an area, where none of the parties are allowed to launch aerial attacks, that is to say, a kind of no-fly zone,” German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*.

Meanwhile, there seems to be little progress towards implementing a prospective cease fire in Syria, despite a tentative agreement that was reached last week among the major powers. The belligerents were not among those negotiating the agreement—as such, many of parties involved in the hostilities are skeptical about the prospect of a cease fire.

“We hear about them requesting a cease fire within a week. Okay, then who is capable of bringing together all these conditions within a week? No one. Who will speak to the terrorists if a terrorist organization refused to adhere to the cease fire, who will make them accountable? Who, as they say, will bomb them?” said Syrian president Bashar al-Assad told the official SANA news agency, according to CNN. Moreover, Assad doubled down on his definition of terrorist: “As a state, anyone who bears weapons against the state and against the Syrian people is terrorist, and this is indisputable.”

Meanwhile, potentially threatening to make a bad situation worse, Saudi Arabia and Turkey [8] seem poised to launch a ground invasion of Syria with a coalition of Sunni Muslim allies. A Turkish official, while ruling out a unilateral invasion, nonetheless told al-Arabia recently that it would be “impossible to stop the fighting in Syria” without a ground operation.

The consequences of a Saudi/Turkish invasion are unpredictable, but ultimately there are very few upsides to throwing gasoline on a fire.