

U. S. and Russia military came 'close' to fighting each other in Syria, Assad says

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said the U.S. and Russia have nearly come to blows over their separate military campaigns in his country, where Moscow supports the government and Washington works outside of it.

The U.S. has struck Syrian government targets in defiance of Russian warnings and killed Russian volunteer fighters, but the seven-year conflict has yet to see any direct confrontations between the U.S. and Russia. In an exclusive interview aired Thursday by Russia's state-owned RT news channel, Assad credited Russia with defusing what could have been a clash between the world's leading military powers as the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) was defeated and both local and international rivalries deepened.

"In reality, we were close to have direct conflict between the Russian forces and the American forces, and fortunately, it has been avoided, not by the wisdom of the American leadership but by the wisdom of the Russian leadership, because it is not in the interest of anyone, anyone in this world, and first of all the Syrians, to have this conflict," Assad told RT.

"We need the Russian support, but we need at the same time to avoid the American foolishness in order to be able to stabilize our country," he added.



U.S. Army soldiers conduct training drills and fire missions with M142 High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) at an undisclosed location in Syria between the months of August and September 2017. Two separate offensives waged by a U.S.-led coalition and the Russia-backed Syrian military mostly defeated ISIS across eastern Syria last year. MARINE CORPS SARGEANT MATTHEW CALLAHAN/DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

The U.S. was an early supporter of efforts to overthrow Assad as he faced a 2011 uprising also backed by Sunni Muslim monarchies and Turkey. As the Syrian

opposition became increasingly jihadi in nature and ISIS emerged from a post-U.S. invasion insurgency in Iraq, the U.S. formed a coalition to battle the militants as they spread across the two Arab countries in 2014. Iran, an ally of both the Iraqi and Syrian governments, helped fight the jihadis by mobilizing Shiite Muslim militias and, in 2015, Russia entered the fight in support of Assad.

Russian and Iranian support has helped the Syrian leader reclaim most major cities and provinces seized by rebels and jihadis, save for the territories now in the hands of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, a mostly Kurdish alliance that includes Arabs and ethnic minorities as well. Both factions have succeeded in nearly wiping out ISIS altogether, and Kurdish fighters have worked both alongside and against pro-Syrian government forces at times, but Assad warned Thursday he would not hesitate to use force to retake what they control if they refused to negotiate.

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In response to Assad's remarks, chief Pentagon spokeswoman Dana W. White told a press briefing Thursday that the U.S. mission "remains to defeat ISIS in Syria, our desire is not to get involved in the Syrian civil war." Assad rejected the term "civil war" in the RT interview, describing the conflict "as mercenaries, Syrians, and foreigners being paid by the West in order to topple the government"

Marine Corps Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. also weighed in on the potential of a conflict between U.S.-led coalition and the Syrian military during Thursday's briefing, saying "any interested party in Syria should understand that attacking U.S. forces or our coalition partners would be a bad policy."

The first confirmed incident between Syrian and U.S. forces took place in Deir Ezzor in September 2016, when U.S. airstrikes killed dozens of Syrian soldiers besieged by ISIS in what the Pentagon said was an accident. As President Donald Trump came to office, he called for the U.S. to focus on battling ISIS and quit funding anti-Assad rebels. This changed in April 2017, however, when he ordered a series of cruise missile strikes on a Syrian military airport in response to allegations of a chemical attack in Idlib.



Russian soldiers are seen as they guard a checkpoint near Al-Wafideen camp in

Damascus, Syria, on March 2. Russia warned that any U.S. attack that threatened the lives of its troops fighting alongside the Syrian military would face retaliation.OMAR SANADIKI/REUTERS

That summer saw a number of clashes between pro-Syrian government fighters, consisting of various militias, and the Syrian Democratic Forces. The U.S. unilaterally declared the southern border crossing of Al-Tanf to be a deconfliction zone and launched several aerial assaults on forces fighting on behalf of Assad, including the downing of a Syrian Su-22 that the Syrian Democratic Forces accused of bombing their positions. Following this June 19 incident, Russia warned it would treat U.S. aircraft flying in its designated area of operations as “targets.”

The most serious battle took place in February. Hundreds of pro-Syrian government fighters, including Russian citizens, were reportedly killed after the U.S.-led coalition claimed they launched a massive assault on Syrian Democratic Forces positions in Deir Ezzor. Russia said its nationals were not fighting on behalf of the armed forces, but Syria called for the United Nations to condemn the U.S.

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The U.S. struck a second time days later when it hit a Russian-built T-72 tank that reportedly approached Syrian Democratic Forces positions. Defense Secretary James Mattis said in March that a third incident was avoided through the use of a deconfliction line maintained between the U.S. and Russian militaries.

Two months later and shortly after he suggested he would soon withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, Trump again ordered military action against the Syrian government in response to an alleged toxic gas attack last month. Russia denied Assad’s culpability and some officials had even threatened to shoot down U.S. missiles along with the ships and aircraft firing them if Russians lives were put at risk.

The April 13 attack saw the U.S., France and the U.K. blast three Syrian state-run research centers suspected of developing chemical weapons. During his RT interview, Assad said that he had information suggesting Trump had planned “a comprehensive attack all over Syria,” but that Russia’s threat “pushed the West to

make it on a much smaller scale.”



People pass near a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad hanging in Damascus, Syria, on May 31. Assad warned U.S.-backed Kurdish forces, who have worked both alongside and against him at times, that he would not hesitate to use force to retake the third of the country they control. LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Despite the occasional hostilities, the U.S. and Russia have maintained regular contact in Syria, and U.S.-led coalition spokesman Colonel Ryan Dillon said last month that the coalition even provides Russia with information on potential ISIS positions on the western side of the Euphrates River that divides the two campaigns. The U.S. has called for Assad’s other ally, Iran, to withdraw.

The U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia are opposed to Iran’s growing influence in Iraq and Syria, where Iran-backed militias have grown increasingly powerful after working alongside government troops. Israel has launched airstrikes against Iranian and pro-Iran positions in Syria and has threatened to escalate its offensive. Iran has refused even Russian calls to withdraw, and Syria has said it continues to welcome both Russian and Iranian support in the conflict, while calling for the U.S. and Turkey to withdraw immediately.

As the resurgent Syrian military prepares for a new offensive in the south, near the Israeli and Jordanian borders, international powers have scrambled to prevent an all-out war. The U.S., Russia and Jordan are reportedly attempting to broker a deal between Iran, Israel and Syria that would see all Syrian and non-Syrian militias withdraw from the southern border region and allow for the Syrian military to regain control. Such a deal may also reportedly include the dismantling of the U.S. base at Al-Tanf, where Syria, Russia and Iran accuse the U.S. of supporting jihadi groups.

This story has been updated with remarks made by Pentagon spokeswoman Dana W. White and Joint Staff Director Marine Corps Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. during a press briefing.

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