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Russia Launches Major Airstrike Offensive Against Syrian Rebels

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Russia has launched a "large-scale operation" against armed opposition fighters in the embattled Syrian provinces of Homs and Idlib, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday.

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"Today at 10:30 and 11:00 we launched a large-scale operation against the positions of Islamic State and Al-Nusra in the provinces of Idlib and Homs," Shoigu said during a meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin.

The top military official added that for the first time in its history, Russian armed forces are using the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier, the flagship of the Russian Navy.

Sukhoi Su-33 fighter jets have been launched from the deck of the carrier with strikes targeting factories and arms depots operated by the rebels in the two Syrian provinces.

The Kremlin also said the operation does not include the city of Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, which has been the scene of fighting between Syrian government forces and armed groups that Russia says are sponsored by the United States.

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Last week, the Russian government accused the U.S.-backed rebels in Aleppo of using chemical weapons, charges the opposition rebels denied.

Moscow started its military campaign in Syria on September 30, 2015, following a request from the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

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Washington and its regional allies have been carrying out airstrikes against what they call Islamic State group positions in Syria and neighboring Iraq since 2014. The war in Syria, which started in early 2011, has killed more than 400,000 people and displaced millions.

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