RUSSIAN KAMOV KA-52 'ALLIGATOR' SEES COMBAT DEBUT IN SYRIA

News / Manufacturer



The expeditionary group of Russia's Air and Space Force (VKS, formerly the Russian air force) started using two new types of attack rotorcraft—the Mil Mi-28 "Night Hunter" and Kamov Ka-52 "Alligator"—in Syria. Previously, the service relied on two less capable, older types: the Mi-8 utility and Mi-24 assault helicopters. One Mi-8 was lost during a rescue operation in November to save the crew of a Sukhoi Su-24M bomber downed by a Turkish air force F-16C.

VKS Mi-28s were filmed flying combat missions in Syria when they participated in the battle of Palmyra, which was recaptured from the Islamic State on March 27. President Bashar Assad's Syrian Arab Army released videos showing Mi-28s shelling Islamic State positions with 80mm S-8 unguided rockets.

On March 31 the Russian ministry of defense released a cockpit video in which an Mi-28 destroys a BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicle (said to be operated by Islamic State forces in the Palmyra area) and a fortified position—both with 9M120 Ataka anti-tank guided missiles. The missile, developed by Kolomna-based KBM design house, is produced in three major versions, containing a cumulative charge effective against armored vehicles, a high-explosive (HE) against fortified positions and a thermobaric charge against buildings.

The Syrian army also released a video of the battle of Al-Qaryatayn, a town recaptured by the

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Syrians from the Islamic State on April 3. It depicts Ka-52s from the Russian VKS shelling Islamic State positions with unguided rockets.

The battle for Palmyra saw the first combat use of VKS Mi-28, but it was not the first action for the type. Earlier, Mi-28NEs of the Iraqi air force took part in combat operations against the Islamic State in both desert and urban environments. Iraq has ordered 40 Mi-28NEs, of which about half have been shipped already.

The first image of a Ka-52 at the Hmeymim air force base (formerly Bassel al-Assad International Airport) in Latakia province appeared on Russian television on March 16. It provided evidence to reports of VKS upgrading its earlier deployed rotorcraft fleet with more modern types. The Russian expedition force began flying combat missions in Syria on September 30, using up to a dozen Mi-8 armed utility helicopters and a similar number of Mi-24P/PN assault rotorcraft. In March, the group's inventory was reduced to four Mi-8s, with a handful of Mi-28 and Ka-52 helicopters added.

According to the Russian MOD, in the period from March 7 to 27, the VKS performed more than 500 combat missions in support of Assad troops fighting for Palmyra, during which 2,000 air strikes were conducted against the Islamic State. The ministry did not break out the number between fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters.

The older Mi-24P and its recent upgrade version—the Mi-24PN—have a limited night fighting capability. Deployment of the Mi-28 and the Ka-52 boosts VKS capability through the ability of these helicopters to operate at night using advanced thermal imagery. More than a hundred Mi-28s have been delivered to the VKS in the past three years. The Ka-52 has been in squadron service since 2011, with 140 on order.

Thus far there have been no confirmed cases in which Mi-24P/PNs and Mi-8s have used guided missiles, even though their typical combat load is four 9M114 Shturm anti-tank missiles (NATO AT-6 Spiral) in addition to fourB8M20A pods, each loaded with 20 S-8 rockets and a built-in NPU-30 twin barrel 30mm cannon. The recently released video depicting an Mi-28 firing Ataka missiles marks the first case in which VKS helicopters fired anti-tank guided missiles in Syria.

Meanwhile, evidence of Ka-52s using their missiles—notably, the 9M127 Vikhr from Tula KBP (NATO AT-16 Scallion), whose quantity shipments began late last year—is yet to emerge. This will likely happen, as Russia is using the Syrian campaign for the purpose of testing new weapons and labeling them "combat-proven" for sales campaigns in the Middle East and other markets.

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