

US seeks casus belli

Downed Turkish jet pretext for new provocations against Syria

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Led by the United States, the major powers have issued a series of bellicose statements and threats after Syria shot down a Turkish F4 Phantom jet that had entered its airspace. Backed by the Obama administration, the Turkish government has taken actions that mark a major step in the direction of all-out war.

Representatives of NATO countries will participate today in a meeting called under Article 4 of the alliance convention, which provides for discussion between members on joint action against a threat.

While the meeting is not being held under Article 5, which calls for military action of all NATO members, Turkey said on Monday it would press NATO to consider Article 5 at the meeting. It is also the first time Article 4 has been invoked since Turkey did so against Iraq in February 2003—one month before the US-led invasion.

After speaking with the US over the weekend, Turkey shifted from its initially more measured tone. “It was an act of war,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Selcuk Unal said Monday. Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc added that Turkey will use “all rights granted under international law until the end. This also includes self-defense. This also includes retaliation many-fold.”

Behind the scenes, the United States is employing a well-tested *modus operandi*: engage in a series of provocative measures that amount to acts of war, then reply with extreme belligerence to any response, using it to justify even more provocative measures.

For months, the US has been engaged in stoking civil war in Syria, funneling arms with the help of several Gulf monarchies. Over the weekend, Saudi Arabia announced, with the approval of the US, that it would begin paying the salaries of members of the opposition Free Syrian Army, effectively bankrolling (with payment in dollars or euros) anyone fighting against the Syrian government of

Bashar al-Assad.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has openly declared that it is US policy to help unify opposition forces into a more effective fighting body. This includes militia forces that have carried out massacres against Shiite and Alawite communities in Syria and terrorist attacks against Syrian government institutions. In a sign of the extent to which the conflict has turned into a civil war against a well-armed opposition, Syria announced that it had buried 112 members of the military over the weekend.

Syria is the latest target of a campaign to undermine or overthrow governments that the US deems, for one reason or another, to be a hindrance to its control of the Middle East and Central Asia. It has led wars against Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and has rained drone missiles down on Pakistan and Yemen. At the same time, it is involved with Israel in a covert program of assassination and cyber warfare against Iran.

Under these conditions, the response of the US to the downing of the jet expressed the cynical hypocrisy and aggression that are the defining features of American foreign policy. Secretary of State Clinton called the act “brazen and unacceptable,” declaring, “It is yet another reflection of Syrian authorities’ callous disregard for international norms, human life and peace and security.”

British Foreign Secretary William Hague declared that the shooting was “outrageous” and called for action in the UN. Other EU powers have responded more cautiously, but slapped additional sanctions on the Syrian regime.

In fact, the details of the incident are still highly murky and disputed, and there are many inconsistencies in Turkey’s statements about the mission and location of the fighter jet.

On Monday, the Syrian government repeated its

assertion that the plane was in Syrian airspace at the time it was shot down. “The plane disappeared and then reappeared in Syrian airspace, flying at 100 meters altitude and about 1-2 kilometers [0.6-1.2 miles] from the Syrian coast,” said Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi. “We had to react immediately, even if the plane was Syrian we would have shot it down.”

Countering claims that the plane was shot down 24 kilometers from the Syrian coast, Makissi added that the plane was downed using an anti-aircraft machine gun, which has a maximum range of only 1.2 kilometers. Makissi said that Syria would be able to confirm from the wreckage that only machine-gun fire was involved, not a longer-range missile.

In its initial response, Turkey appeared to acknowledge that the plane was in Syrian airspace at the time it was shot down, and that it plunged into the sea about 13 kilometers from the Syrian coast. According to international standards, Syrian territorial space extends 12 nautical miles (about 22 kilometers) off the coast. Later, however, Turkey said the plane was actually 13 nautical miles off the coast (about 24 kilometers).

Turkey now claims that the jet only briefly incurred into Syrian airspace, and that it was hit 15 minutes later by a missile, as it was heading in a “different direction” from Syria. However, according to Turkey’s own account, the jet was near Syrian airspace when it was shot down, meaning that at the very least, it was traveling very close to the border for much of this 15 minutes, not headed in a “different direction.”

Moreover, initial reports from Turkish media reported that wreckage from the fighter jet had been located in Syrian waters, appearing to confirm Syria’s version of events. Indeed, Turkey continues to acknowledge that the plane crashed into Syrian waters. It is not clear how a plane that was hit 2 kilometers outside of Syrian airspace while traveling away from Syria could crash in Syrian waters.

The purpose of the jet’s mission is also unclear. Turkey has claimed that it was testing out Turkish radar. Several commentators have suggested that a far more likely explanation is that it was seeking to test Syrian air defense systems, including its radar systems recently acquired from Russia. Any outside military incursion into Syria would have to take out these systems. The air defense systems also hinder the arming of opposition forces and surveillance support.

“What all this tells us is that there are a lot of ‘fishy’ tactics and strategies going on in the region, with

numerous players behind many curtains,” Hayat Alvi, a lecturer in Middle Eastern studies at the US Naval War College, told Reuters. “The Syrian military has reason to be jumpy, given these circumstances.”

Syria upgraded its air defense systems after jets invaded the country in two separate incidents. First, in 2006, four Israeli jets flew over Assad’s summer palace, prior to Israel’s brutal war against Gaza. Then, in September 2007, Israel carried out an unprovoked bombing raid against an alleged nuclear energy site near the Turkish border.

Turkey is already working closely with the United States in its operations against the Assad government, including the arming and hosting of opposition forces. It has also moved significant military forces close to the Syrian border.

Any response to the downing of the jet will become the basis for more aggressive measures later. “I’m not of the opinion that Turkey will immediately respond militarily,” commented Beril Dedeoglu of Galatasaray University in Istanbul. “But if there is another action, then there will certainly be a military response, there is no doubt.”

One possible action from today’s NATO meeting will be to beef up Turkey’s air defense and surveillance aircraft with NATO supplied planes, which is what happened in 2003. The aircraft were deployed in February, and remained through early May, more than a month after the invasion of Iraq.

The deployment of NATO aircraft could easily become the basis for carrying out further provocations, aimed ultimately at justifying the bombardment of Syrian air defense.



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