

US escalates war threats against Syria in response to downed plane

Niall Green
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The United States has sharply escalated its campaign against Syria over the weekend, in response to Syria's shooting down of a Turkish fighter Friday.

After speaking to Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton said on Sunday: "The United States condemns this brazen and unacceptable act in the strongest possible terms. It is yet another reflection of Syrian authorities' callous disregard for international norms, human life and peace and security."

UK foreign secretary William Hague echoed these threats, denouncing the incident as "outrageous." He added, "The Assad regime should not make the mistake of believing that it can act with impunity. It will be held to account for its behavior."

The Syrian government has said that the Turkish warplane had violated its airspace, with the SANA news agency releasing a chart of the plane's fight path over Syrian waters and the coastal city of Latakia.

A Syrian foreign military spokesman has said that the incident was "not an attack." The statement read, "An unidentified object entered our airspace and unfortunately was brought down. It was understood only later that it was a Turkish plane. There was no hostile act against Turkey whatsoever. It was just an act of defense of our sovereignty."

The Turkish government initially acknowledged that it was possible the jet had "accidentally" flown over Syrian airspace during a routine reconnaissance operation. However, by Sunday, apparently after discussions with the US, Ankara had shifted its position to insist that the warplane had been shot down over international waters.

"Our plane briefly violated Syrian airspace, but not during the time it was shot down," Davutoglu said. The Turkish government now claims that the plane only

"momentarily" entered Syrian airspace but was shot down 15 minutes later.

Turkey announced that it was calling an emergency meeting under Article 4 of the NATO treaty, which provides for consultations.

A decision could be made after the meeting to invoke Article 5, which provides for mutual military response of all NATO members to an attack on one. Such an action would provide the pretext for a full-scale military intervention.

Clinton's denunciation of Syria for "callous disregard for international norms," comes as the Obama administration is working deliberately to stoke a civil war in Syria in order to undermine the regime of Bashar al-Assad, a key ally of Iran and Russia. In doing so, Washington is working closely with Turkey. As well as providing a base for the opposition militants, Turkey has moved large numbers of its armed forces close to the Syrian border.

Washington is playing an increasingly open role in organizing the opposition militants. Speaking on the Charlie Rose program on PBS television, Clinton said that the administration was seeking to forge a more "unified force" from the roughly 100 disparate opposition groups.

"We're also working very hard to try to prop up and better organize the opposition," Clinton said Friday. "We've spent a lot of time on that. It's still a work in progress."

Fighting by opposition groups in Syria has increased in recent weeks, with militants apparently able to carry out more effective attacks on government forces thanks to the increasing flow of sophisticated weaponry and other supplies provided under the aegis of the CIA.

In Aleppo, Syria's main commercial center, which has until recently seen relatively little fighting,

militants and government forces engaged in a gun battle Saturday. There have also been several suicide bombings in and around Aleppo targeting government soldiers and civilian institutions, tactics that bear the hallmarks of the Sunni Islamist insurgents who waged a sectarian civil war in Iraq during the US occupation of that country.

“Rebel” fighters are carrying out increasingly coordinated attacks in the northeastern city of Deir al-Zor, close to the border with Iraq. Free Syrian Army forces battled government troops in the al-Hamidya district of the city on Saturday, while other opposition fighters launched attacks on army bases and checkpoints around the city.

As well as threatening the outbreak of full-scale sectarian civil war and a wider regional conflagration, the US-backed military intervention into Syria is causing a humanitarian crisis in the already impoverished country. Millions of Syrians go without food, medicines and other essentials on a daily basis. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported last week that 1.5 million Syrians are in urgent need of aid, up by 500,000 in just three months, as fighting in the country has intensified.



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