

# Washington divided over Syrian debacle

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With more and more countries entering the battlefield in Syria, the US ruling elite is increasingly divided over how to continue its efforts to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad and its drive to assert hegemony over the Middle East.

The bitterness of the recriminations between the Obama administration and its congressional Republican critics, within both the Democratic and Republican Parties, and within the military-intelligence apparatus itself, is the hallmark of a mounting debacle for American imperialism.

The latest volley in Washington was touched off with the statement Thursday by former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination, that she favored the imposition of a “no-fly zone” to protect the US-backed Islamist forces fighting the Assad government.

Clinton issued her declaration one day after Russian warplanes began air strikes from their newly established base near the Syrian port city of Latakia, an Assad stronghold. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the air strikes were aimed at destroying Islamic State of Syria and Iraq and other Islamic fundamentalist groups which he branded “terrorist,” in keeping with the usage pioneered by the US government under George W. Bush and continued by Obama.

Those targeted for Russian bombs include both ISIS and the various Islamist groups that have received American weapons and other aid, either from the CIA directly or through US allies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Among the latter is the al-Nusra Front, a powerful group affiliated with al-Qaeda, which is part of the US-backed “rebel” military front fighting Assad.

Clinton had backed a more aggressive US intervention in the initial stages of the Syrian civil war, in 2011-12, but was overruled by Obama at the time. On Thursday she told the Boston television station WHDH-TV that if she still headed the State

Department, “I personally would be advocating now for a no-fly zone and humanitarian corridors to try to stop the carnage on the ground and from the air.”

The Russian military intervention, however, gives a new dimension to such a policy. A “no-fly zone” would have to be enforced, not merely against the shattered remnants of Assad’s air force, but against Russia, an advanced military power which has stationed sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons around its new base near Latakia. Any such operation would carry with it the danger of an immediate military clash between Russia and the United States, both nuclear-armed powers.

Obama publicly rejected Clinton’s advice at his press conference Friday, after first denouncing what he called “half-baked ideas” and “a bunch of mumbo-jumbo” from congressional critics of US policy in Syria. Asked whether he included Clinton among the “half-baked,” he said he did not, but went on to declare that he did not support a “no-fly zone” or other military action that would escalate the conflict.

“We’re not going to make Syria into a proxy war between the United States and Russia. That would be a bad strategy on our part,” Obama said. At the same time, he reiterated the goal of the administration to remove the Assad regime from power, dropping the pretense that ISIS is the main target of US intervention.

Clinton was only joining a growing drumbeat for escalation in Syria, which includes many congressional Democrats and most Republicans.

At a recent hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, former CIA Director and Iraq and Afghanistan commander David Petraeus recommended an ultimatum to Assad to stop dropping so-called barrel bombs—rudimentary ordnance far less powerful than the enormous bombs used by US warplanes every day in Syria—and the implementation of a no-fly zone if Assad refused.

Several Democratic members of the committee declared their support for a no-fly zone, including Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, former head of the Democratic National Committee, and independent Senator Angus King of Maine, who caucuses with the Democrats. Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, the minority whip, has also backed a no-fly zone.

Encouraged by this shift by the Democrats, leading Senate Republicans have intensified their attacks on the White House. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker announced he would summon Secretary of State John Kerry for an appearance next week on the US response to the Russian intervention in Syria.

He told MSNBC, “In the absence of leadership from the Obama administration, Putin continues to do what he wishes fearing no push back from the United States, and now Russia is conducting air strikes that are exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.”

The most prominent Senate war hawk, Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain, declared Sunday that the US was already engaged in a proxy war with Russia in Syria, despite Obama’s disavowal of such a policy.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was “treating the United States with disdain and contempt,” the former Republican presidential candidate fumed, in an appearance on the CNN program “State of the Union.” Putin was carrying out air strikes and “inserting himself into the Middle East in a way that Russia has not been since Anwar Sadat threw them out in 1973,” McCain said.

McCain was contradicted, however, by the current leader in the polls for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, billionaire Donald Trump, who appeared on several Sunday morning interview programs and called for a hands-off policy in Syria. It was in the interests of the United States, he said, to let the combatants in Syria kill each other off. “Let ISIS and Syria fight,” he said, “and let Russia take care of ISIS.”

The Obama administration is pursuing the interests of US imperialism in the region no less ferociously than its critics, albeit with tactical differences. It has relied on drone assassinations, air strikes, military training and supplies routed through proxies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Its predecessor relied on the direct intervention of hundreds of thousands of American

ground troops. Neither tactic has been successful in subjugating the Middle East to American imperialism, while inflicting horrific destruction, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands and creating tens of millions of refugees.

The fault lines created by the debacle in Syria (and Iraq and elsewhere) run not only through both of the political parties of the financial aristocracy, but through the military-intelligence apparatus itself. While Petraeus speaks for one faction of this apparatus, the current Pentagon leadership is adamantly opposed to a major additional commitment of US forces in the Middle East, because of the need to prepare for impending confrontations with Russia and particularly China.

According to a report Saturday in the *Washington Post*, there is a sharp conflict between the CIA, which is heavily committed in Syria and is devoting a reported 10 percent of its total budget to training Islamist forces for combat against Assad, and the Pentagon, which has conducted only a token effort at training Syrian “rebels.”

The *Post* reported: “A former senior U.S. intelligence official said the U.S. failure to respond to the strikes or bolster support for CIA-trained units is likely to anger CIA paramilitary teams in the region that have for several years chafed at White House-imposed limits on the level of support given to moderate rebel groups.”



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