

New York Times peddles alibi for US bombing in Syria

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In a front-page article entitled “Errant strike impairs effort to calm Syria,” the *New York Times* Monday provided an unconditional alibi for the air strikes carried out by US and allied warplanes two days earlier that claimed the lives of some 90 Syrian army soldiers, while leaving over 100 more wounded.

“The United States’ **accidental** bombing of Syrian troops over the weekend has put it on the defensive, undercutting American efforts to reduce violence in the civil war and open paths for humanitarian relief,” reads the article.

In the second paragraph, readers are told that the “**mistaken** bombing” had “exposed the White House’s struggle to put together a coherent strategy in a multisided war.”

And in the fourth paragraph, the article states that the “**errant** bombing” had given “both the Russians and the Syrian government a propaganda bonanza.”

How does the *Times* know that Saturday’s bombing of the strategic Syrian army position, overlooking the Deir Ezzor Airport near the Syrian-Iraqi border, was “accidental,” “mistaken” and “errant?” It provides no evidence to support this conclusion, citing neither any investigation nor any new facts gleaned from its own reporting.

The air strike was an accident, a mistake and an error because the US government says it was. End of story. That is good enough for the three reporters with bylines on the article. They see no need to include any qualifiers, such as “US officials claimed that the bombing was accidental,” much less seek out any contrary opinions from those who firmly believe it was not.

Nor does the supposed newspaper of record raise the slightest doubt about how the US managed to confuse a military base, which the Syrian army has occupied for years, with an encampment of the Islamic State (ISIS); or, for that matter, why the Pentagon’s sophisticated military satellites and surveillance drones failed to provide accurate images of the intended target.

That ISIS forces were able to use the bombing as air support for their own assault upon, and overrunning of, the Syrian military base is also accepted as merely another “accident.”

The bombing, in which Australian, British and Danish warplanes participated alongside the US Air Force, has served to gravely undermine a week-old cease-fire negotiated by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov in Geneva.

Commenting on this connection, the *Times* article states: “Many American officials believe that the Russians were never serious about the deal that was sealed in Geneva. The officials argue that the Russians were looking for an excuse that would derail it and keep a status quo in which they have more control over events in Syria than any other power, with the possible exception of Iran. If so, the accidental bombing made that process easier.”

Citing unnamed “American officials,” the *Times* floats the perverse thesis that the real significance of an unprovoked attack, which killed and wounded nearly 200 Syrian government soldiers, in a country where US imperialism is carrying out military operations in flagrant violation of international law, is that it provided a pretext for Russia to abrogate a ceasefire agreement that Moscow, itself, had proposed. In other words, whatever evidence to the contrary, it is all Putin’s fault.

The *Times* article itself suggests a far more plausible explanation for Saturday’s bloody events. It notes that the ceasefire deal “faced many skeptics in Washington,” adding that “Chief among them was Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter,” who “feared that the accord would reveal too much to the Russians about American targeting intelligence...”

The article, however, does not indicate the intensity and depth of the Pentagon’s hostility to the ceasefire. It was not just a matter of Carter’s “skepticism.” Top US uniformed commanders openly called into question whether they would abide by an agreement that had been adopted by the president of the United States.

Lt. General Jeffrey Harrigian, commander of the US Air Forces Central Command, told the media in respect to the agreement: “I’m not saying yes or no. It would be premature to say that we’re going to jump right into it.”

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of the US Central Command, expressed similar views, declaring, “We have to see how this goes first of all ... see what direction it goes ... whether it actually pans out or not, I don’t know.”

Also unreported in the *Times* article is the fact that on Friday, on the eve of the US bombing, Obama convened a meeting of his security cabinet, including both Kerry and Carter, to discuss

the crisis gripping his administration over the Syria ceasefire.

Given these facts, the *Times*' parroting of the official US line that the air strike in Deir Ezzor was "accidental" has the unmistakable characteristics of an alibi and a coverup.

The opposition, which borders on insubordination to the ceasefire within the US military, suggests a more likely scenario: rather than being an accident, the attack was carried out with the deliberate aim of scuttling the agreement, either by the military acting on its own, or following a change in policy reached by the Obama administration, under intense pressure from the US military and intelligence apparatus.

The opposition stemmed, in the first instance, from the immediate practical implications of the agreement in Syria. Washington had committed itself to separating the so-called "moderate opposition," which it has armed and bankrolled, from the now renamed Al Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's longtime affiliate in the country. But this is a virtually impossible task, given the integration of the US-backed militias with the Al Qaeda forces, which form the backbone of the US-orchestrated war for regime change in Syria.

More decisively, the predominant layers within the military brass oppose any collaboration with the Russian military because they fear it could compromise US preparations for direct military confrontation with Russia itself, the world's number two nuclear power.

Moreover, the bombing fits a definite agenda, clearly articulated by top figures in the ruling establishment. Just last month, former acting CIA director Michael Morell advocated bombing Syria to "scare Assad" and "make the Russians pay a price," by which he meant killing them. Morell is a prominent supporter of Democrat Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy.

On a similar note, Human Rights Watch director Kenneth Roth, a proponent of the "human rights" pretexts used by US imperialism to justify its interventions in the Middle East, tweeted his approval of the US bombing raid: "As US kills 80 Syrian soldiers, is it sending Assad a signal for his deadly intransigence?"

In evaluating the alibi crafted by the *Times* in relation to the Syria bombing, it should be recalled that the newspaper provided nearly identical services a year ago, in the aftermath of the October 3, 2015 US airstrike on the Doctors without Borders (MSF) hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan. In the face of charges by the MSF and survivors of the attack that this was a deliberate slaughter, the *Times*, working with US government sources, concocted a story that the mass killing stemmed from "mistaken decisions" and inadequate intelligence.

What the response to the Syria bombing so clearly exposes is the degree to which the *Times* functions as a propaganda organ of the US government and a leading promoter of its militarist policies. The exposure of the newspaper's complicity in foisting onto the American people the illegal war of aggression against Iraq, prepared by the lying reports of its correspondent

Judith Miller on non-existent weapons of mass destruction, has done nothing to change this fact. If anything, the correspondence between government policy and *Times* coverage has only grown more seamless.

The concrete nature of this relationship is made evident by a closer examination of the first two bylines on the *Times* story. The first is that of chief Washington correspondent David E. Sanger. In addition to his 30-year career writing for the *Times*, Sanger has found time to teach as an adjunct lecturer in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, an academy for top political and military officials. The faculty has also included figures now playing a key role in executing US policy in Syria, such as Ashton Carter and Washington's ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power. Sanger is also a member of both the Council on Foreign Relations and the Aspen Strategy Group, think tanks that bring together senior government, military and intelligence officials, along with corporate executives, to discuss US imperialist strategy.

The second byline is that of national security correspondent Mark Mazzetti. In 2011, Mazzetti gained some notoriety by secretly "leaking" a piece on the Osama bin Laden assassination by *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd to the CIA, prior to its publication, along with a note reading, "this didn't come from me... and please delete after you read. See, nothing to worry about!"

In other words, these are figures completely integrated into the state and trusted defenders of its interests. The conception, dating back to the 18th century bourgeois revolutions, that the press represents a "Fourth Estate," functioning as a watchdog, with a critical and adversarial attitude toward the government and its officials, is a dead letter within these circles.

Among those presiding over this operation and its steady march to the right is the recently installed editor of the *Times* editorial page, James Bennet. His connections to the ruling establishment and the top echelons of the Democratic Party include a father who was a former head of USAID, a front for the CIA, and a brother who is the senior senator from Colorado.

Under the direction of such figures, the *Times* has become the premier conduit for US state disinformation and propaganda, and a key ideological instrument in the preparations for world war.



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