

Australian aircraft involved in provocative US-led airstrike in Syria

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The direct involvement of the Australian air force in air strikes on Syrian troops on Saturday underlines the danger that Australia is being dragged into a US war not simply with the Syrian government but also its allies—Russia in particular. Some 90 Syrian soldiers were killed and more than 100 wounded in a sustained attack on a strategic government position near the Deir ez-Zor airport.

Following the cue from Washington, the Australian government and media have variously suggested that the air strikes were “a botched operation”, a blunder or a mistake. The Defence Department issued a statement acknowledging that Australian aircraft took part, adding that “Australia would never intentionally target a known Syrian military unit or actively support Daesh [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria].” The strikes briefly allowed ISIS fighters to capture Syrian government positions.

Speaking in New York, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made a perfunctory expression of “regret” over the loss of life and injury of Syrian troops, but declared that the situation was “very complex” implying the attack had been accidental. Defence Minister Marise Payne said that a blunder had taken place but reaffirmed Australia’s “absolute and continuing” commitment to the US-led war in Syria.

While nominally aimed against ISIS, the US-led air war in Syria, in flagrant violation of Syria’s national sovereignty, has always been directed at ousting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The claim that the killing of Syrian troops was a blunder is simply not credible. Even by the account of an unnamed US Central Command official, the attack lasted 20 minutes, destroying vehicles and gunning down dozens of people in open desert. Speaking to the *New York Times*, he acknowledged that the assault

continued for several minutes after a Russian official informed the US military that it was bombing Syrian troops.”

The attack has all but ended a ceasefire deal worked out between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that was opposed by US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter. In comments bordering on insubordination, top uniformed American officers openly called into question whether they would abide by the agreement.

Neither the Australian government nor the military has released any details of the Australian involvement in what appears to be a reckless provocation directed at undermining the ceasefire and inflaming tensions with Russia and the Syrian government. Danish and British forces were also involved in the air strikes.

The Russian defence ministry has stated that the attack was carried out by two F-16 fighters and two A-10 ground attack aircraft. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) has deployed F/A-18A fighters to the war in Iraq and Syria along with a Wedgetail command and control aircraft and an air-to-air refuelling tanker.

Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that his best estimate was that the command and control aircraft had been involved. “This is obviously sensitive because that is the asset which essentially is giving targeting information to the fighters,” he said.

Whether that was the case or not, Australian air force officials in the Middle East, along with the pilots, would have had to be briefed on the nature of the operation. The incident had the potential to rapidly escalate into a far broader conflict if Russian advisors had been killed or injured, or if the Syrian military had fired back and downed a US or an allied aircraft.

The Australian media and political establishment

have closed ranks to cloak details of what took place in secrecy. While the Greens and Senator Nick Xenophon have called for an independent inquiry, neither strayed from the official line that the killing of Syrian troops was a mistake, let alone demanded that withdrawal of all Australian forces from the Middle East.

In fact, in the name of fighting ISIS, the Turnbull government recently announced that it would amend legislation and loosen the rules of engagement for Australian forces in the Middle East to attack anyone considered to be an ISIS supporter or buildings far removed from any fighting. Australian involvement in last Saturday's attacks suggests that new unwritten rules are already in place. Opposition leader Bill Shorten has indicated Labor's support for the changes.

Behind the backs of the Australian people, Canberra is so enmeshed in Washington's proxy war in the Middle East against Russia that Australia could find itself on the frontline of a conflict between the two nuclear armed powers.

While shots are not being fired, at present, the Australian government and military is even more closely integrated into the US military build-up against China in the Asia-Pacific region. Since Obama announced his "pivot to Asia" in the Australian parliament in 2011, military bases in northern Australia have been opened to an expanding array of American forces, comprising Marines, warships and various military aircraft, including strategic bombers.

The scope of bilateral and multilateral war games has been expanded. In the name of improving "interoperability," Australian military personnel have been embedded into US forces in the region. Last year the *Australian* revealed that 42 senior Australian officers were part of the US Pacific Command, including Major General Greg Bilton who serves as the deputy commander of US Army Pacific.

It is, however, in the sphere of communication and intelligence that Australia plays the most vital role for the US military, hosting key bases that are central to US military operations stretching from Asia through to the Middle East. The Joint Defence Facility Pine Gap in Central Australia has been crucial to the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and is undoubtedly integrated into the Pentagon's planning for even more disastrous conflicts with Russia and China.

Whether the Australian government gave the green

light or not, the Australian military could be involved, virtually automatically, in any war with Russia or China.



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