Pentagon advances coverup for September bombing of Syrian army

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US-led airstrikes that killed and wounded as many 200 Syrian government troops in the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor on September 17 were carried out in "good faith" and were the result of "human errors," according to a report released by the Pentagon's Central Command (Centcom), which oversees ongoing US military operations.

The report, which has been made public only in a redacted version, has all the earmarks of an official coverup, riddled with contradictions and containing a number of facts that point to a deliberate massacre carried out in pursuit of definite political and military aims.

The airstrike, which involved US as well as British, Australian and Danish warplanes, saw 34 guided weapons and 380 rounds of 30mm ammunition unleashed against a longstanding Syrian Army position on al-Tharda Mountain, overlooking Deir ez-Zor Airport. The bombings effectively provided air cover for the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), the supposed target of US military operations in Syria, to overrun the strategic position, which links Syria's ISIS "capital" of Raqqa with ISIS forces in neighboring Iraq.

According to the Syrian government, 62 Syrian soldiers were killed in the attack and another 100 wounded. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the death toll at 90.

The Pentagon report claims that the US military mistook the Syrian government troops for ISIS fighters. "We made an unintentional, regrettable error, based on several factors in the targeting process," Brig. Gen. Richard Coe, the Pentagon's investigating officer, told reporters Tuesday. He insisted that all those involved in the murderous attack were "doing their best to do a good job." No one has been reprimanded for the supposed "error." The conclusion was merely that the bloody attack raised "a number of lessons to be learned and potential areas for improvement."

Among these "lessons" was the acknowledged fact that the US Air Force's own intelligence units had raised "concerns" both before and during the airstrikes that the forces targeted, which included tanks and armored personnel carriers, could not possibly have been ISIS, but somehow, this assessment "was not communicated" to those who ordered the attack.

The most significant revelation in the report is that the September 17 attack saw the first--and only--use of the so-called "Hotline" linking the US military and Russian forces, which are operating in support of the Syrian government, for the purpose of warning of an impending attack. This was supposedly in the interests of "deconfliction," avoiding an unintended aerial confrontation between the US-led strike force and Russian warplanes.

Curiously, however, the information relayed to the Russians as to the location of the intended target was by the Pentagon's own admission "incorrect," with the coordinates supplied off by as much as five miles. Had the correct coordinates been relayed, the Russians would have known that the plan was to strike their Syrian allies.

Once the Russians became aware that the airstrikes were being carried out against the Syrian Army and not ISIS, they attempted to contact the American military, but for unexplained reasons were unable to reach the officer in charge of manning the Hotline for 27 minutes, during which the US-led strike force carried out 15 of what the report states were 37 planned strikes.

The combination of "human errors" that supposedly led to the first direct US assault on Syrian government troops, five years into a war for regime change orchestrated by Washington, is extraordinary.

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Military “decision makers” ignored warnings from their own intelligence officers that the target being hit could not possibly be ISIS. The US command gave the Russians false information as to the area they were targeting, preventing them from learning that the Syrian government forces were about to be hit. And when the Russian military learned of the real target and attempted to use a Hotline set up to prevent a military confrontation between the world’s two largest nuclear powers, they were kept on hold for half an hour.

This preposterous attempt at a whitewash points to the attack on the Syrian military having been planned in cold blood and executed to achieve definite objectives. While the report asserts that the attack was carried out in accordance with the “law of armed conflict,” the bombing campaign by the US in Syria has been launched without any United Nations authorization and in flagrant violation of Syrian sovereignty. The slaughter of government troops that are engaged in no hostilities with the US is by definition a war crime.

The effect of the airstrike, evidently intended, was to contribute to the fatal undermining of a Syrian cease-fire agreement brokered a week earlier between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

The September 17 attack was accompanied by wholesale violations of the ceasefire by the Islamist militias that have served as Washington’s proxy troops in the war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. And it was followed within days by an attack on an aid convoy north of Aleppo, for which Washington and the Western media immediately blamed Russia and Syria, despite evidence that the real culprits were the US-backed “rebels.”

From the outset, the cease-fire agreement was bitterly opposed by both the Pentagon’s civilian leadership and the US military brass because of its provision establishing a “Joint Implementation Group” that would coordinate US and Russian military operations in Syria against both ISIS and the Al Nusra Front, which served as Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate. The strike against Deir ez-Zor came two days before the center was to begin operations.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter bitterly opposed the deal within the Obama administration. As the *New York Times* reported, he “feared that the accord would reveal too much to the Russians about American targeting intelligence.”

Top uniformed commanders, meanwhile, publicly questioned whether they would abide by the terms of the cease-fire deal in statements that bordered on open insubordination.

Within the US military command, the principal concern was neither prosecuting a war against ISIS nor bringing a halt to the bloodbath in Syria. Rather, its central strategic orientation was and remains preparations for a military confrontation with Russia, raising the prospect of a nuclear third world war.

It was to this end that the decision was taken to slaughter the Syrian troops at Deir ez-Zor.

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