

# US-Russian tensions sharpen over Syria

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A report in the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday reveals the highly explosive geopolitical situation that persists in Syria, notwithstanding the Russian and Turkish-brokered ceasefire earlier this month. The article notes that US and Russian warplanes frequently threaten to collide with each other in the skies above Syria and cites unnamed US officials who describe the region as an “international incident waiting to happen.”

According to the *Journal*, between 50 and 75 planes and unmanned drones from various countries operate in and around the ISIS-controlled city of Raqqa, while up to 150 are regularly in the skies over Mosul in northern Iraq, where a US-backed offensive to recapture the city from ISIS has forced tens of thousands of civilians from their homes and led to large numbers of deaths.

While the *Journal* article attempts to pin the blame chiefly on Russia for a number of close calls between fighter jets, it is forced to acknowledge that the most serious incident over recent months was triggered by US warplanes. In mid September, during the first week of a ceasefire deal agreed between Moscow and Washington, US planes targeted a Syrian army position in Deir Ezzour in a move which effectively torpedoed the agreement. The air strike permitted Islamic State militants to attack the Syrian army position, which was well known to the US.

On Sunday, US forces conducted a rare ground raid in eastern Syria with the official aim of capturing ISIS operatives for interrogation. The special forces troops of the Expeditionary Targeting Force, which is based in Iraq, spent 90 minutes on the ground near Deir Ezzour, according to the *Washington Post*, and engaged in a fire fight with ISIS militants aimed at capturing unnamed leading personnel.

Reports diverged significantly on the number of casualties, with the US army claiming only two ISIS suspects were killed, while the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based group affiliated with the

anti-Assad opposition, alleged up to 25 ISIS militants had been slain.

Importantly, the article noted that the Pentagon normally keeps such operations secret and only confirmed the latest raid after a local activist web site reported on it. President Obama has substantially increased the numbers of special forces troops deployed to Iraq and Syria over recent months.

Washington’s deployment of ground forces demonstrates the readiness of the ruling elite to significantly intensify US involvement in Syria in a bid to uphold its predatory geopolitical and economic interests in the wake of the debacle suffered by the US-backed opposition in Aleppo. While incoming President Donald Trump has made vague pledges to improve relations with Russia so as to be in a better position to more directly confront China, the reality on the ground in Syria is that Washington and Moscow remain perilously close to a direct military conflagration that would quickly escalate into a broader regional war with the potential for the deployment of nuclear weapons.

The information on the US raid came to light the same day as it emerged that Russian aircraft have begun bombing Islamic State positions in northern Syria in support of a Turkish offensive near the town of al-Bab. Ankara is aiming to take control of the strategically-important location ahead of a coalition of Kurdish forces led by the YPG, which is backed by the United States and affiliated with the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD). Control over al-Bab would have broader significance for the impending assault on Raqqa, ISIS’ de facto capital in Syria.

A Monday article in the *New York Times*, which has assumed a leading role in the anti-Russian propaganda campaign, noted the increased cooperation between Moscow and Ankara with concern. “The deepening ties threaten to marginalize the United States in the struggle

to shape Syria's ultimate fate," the newspaper warned, before going on to point out that Turkey's recent offensive began without coordination with the United States and without assistance from US air strikes. The paper suggested that the Kremlin had decided to accommodate itself to Turkish advances in northern Syria, provided that Ankara does not openly confront the Assad regime.

In a move that sharply increases the likelihood of a clash in the area, Turkey reversed its initial opposition to US drones and aircraft flying over al-Bab to gather intelligence last week. This means American and Russian planes will now be flying in close proximity to each other over the town in pursuit of ever more explicitly conflicting goals. Even a minor mishap, let alone a deliberate escalation of the conflict from either side, could provide the trigger for a devastating expansion of the war with catastrophic consequences for the region's beleaguered population.

The US raid coincided with renewed criticism of Russia by outgoing Defense Secretary Ashton Carter. He blasted Russia for doing "virtually zero" in the fight against ISIS. He went on to declare that Russia's involvement in Syria "almost certainly made the ending of the Syrian civil war harder" because the Kremlin had failed to "help Assad move aside gently" and "bring the moderate opposition into the Syrian government."

Carter then went on to make clear what he expected of a Trump administration in relation to Russia. Citing as fact the unsubstantiated allegations of Russian hacking of the Democratic Party in the lead-up to November's presidential election, Carter said of the type of response that should be adopted, "I don't think it should be military or purely military response. There has to be a response, and I think the steps taken so far probably represent the beginning and not the end, the floor, not the ceiling... I believe the price should be more."

In truth, chief responsibility for the Syrian catastrophe lies with US imperialism, which systematically fomented the civil war with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus so as to strengthen its position in the energy rich Middle East against its geostrategic rivals. In the process, it actively encouraged Jihadist groups, with which the Obama administration cooperated in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Only when Islamic State

militants crossed into Iraq and seized territory did it become a concern for Washington.

The United States will not be prepared to stand aside and allow other countries to decide on the country's future, as Russia and Turkey have sought to do with the conclusion of a ceasefire covering a number of opposition groups and the Syrian government earlier this month. Peace talks are due to start in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, later this month.

On Monday, Assad pledged to be ready to negotiate everything at the talks, while insisting his government was seeking to assert its control over all of Syrian territory.

The ceasefire is already showing signs of faltering. In Wadi Barada, a valley which provides the capital its water supply, fighting has continued to rage between pro-Assad forces and opposition militias. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), a coalition of opposition groups, announced last week it was halting its participation in the ceasefire talks due to the attacks.

However, the Assad government states it is justified in attacking the opposition-held area. It accuses the opposition groups of deliberately tampering with the water supply for Damascus, leaving 5 million people with no access to water for three weeks. The government has also pointed to collaboration between the FSA and the al-Nusra Front, the extremist group formerly the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaida and not part of the ceasefire agreement, as justification for its attacks on Wadi Barada. The US-backed rebels in Aleppo similarly fought alongside jihadi fighters.



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