

US air strike kills 20 civilians in Syria

Jordan Shilton
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A US B-52 bomber carried out an air strike in Idlib province in northern Syria last week, which claimed the lives of 20 civilians, according to Russia's Ministry of Defense.

Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov said at a news conference that the attack, launched against Sarmada in Idlib, took place without Russia being notified. He compared it to the strike against Syrian army units in September, which killed over 60 Syrian soldiers near Deir Ezzour, enabled Islamic State fighters to launch an offensive and torpedoed a US-Russian brokered ceasefire deal.

The Russian report contradicted initial US claims that its bombing raids on Idlib last week killed a senior al-Nusra Front commander and around 20 al-Nusra combatants. The US has not responded to Russia's allegations of civilian deaths during the airstrike.

It is widely recognized that the US has vastly undercounted the civilian death toll resulting from the thousands of air strikes it has carried out in Syria since the fall of 2014. In October, Amnesty International estimated that the US-led coalition had killed at least 300 Syrian civilians and warned that more would follow in neighboring Iraq as the Mosul offensive got under way. Since then, tens of thousands of civilians have been forced from their homes in and around the Iraqi city of 1.5 million people as a result of the US-backed attack and an unknown number have lost their lives.

Amnesty's death toll is comparatively low in relation to estimates provided by other rights groups, with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights suggesting that between 600 and 1,000 civilians have died from US-led coalition air strikes.

In one incident near Manbij in northern Syria last July, the US military belatedly acknowledged that it had killed two dozen civilians several months later. But estimates from Syrian human rights groups put the

number of dead from anywhere between 75 to over 200.

This record demonstrates once again the utter hypocrisy of the US political establishment and its media lackeys, who raised a hue and cry about atrocities carried out by Russian and Syrian forces during their assault on the rebel-held areas of eastern Aleppo during the latter half of 2016. While Syrian and Russian air strikes undoubtedly killed substantial numbers of civilians and were brutally conducted, they pale in comparison alongside the crimes of US imperialism, which fomented the Syrian civil war with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus and bears chief responsibility for its more than 400,000 casualties.

The incessant propaganda focusing on Russian war crimes was used to stampede public opinion behind a campaign for a military escalation against Russia that carries the danger of triggering a wider war between the major powers.

The debacle suffered by the US-backed rebels, which were dominated by the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front, has only intensified the demands from the corporate-controlled media and significant factions of the political and military establishment for a more aggressive policy towards Russia. *The New York Times* reported Monday with concern on renewed Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria, which it feared threatened to sideline the United States in determining the outcome of the civil war.

On Sunday, US special forces were deployed in a rare ground operation in eastern Syria, ostensibly with the aim of capturing a mid-level ISIS operative. The troops, based in Iraq, spent around 90 minutes on the ground and killed up to 25 in a firefight, according to independent estimates disputed by the US military.

The Pentagon refused to provide more details on the operation, but the comments of spokesman Captain Jeff

Davis were significant. Referring to the ground operation and providing an indication of the support within the military for a substantial escalation of the Syrian war, he told the press, “We have done them before and we will do them again.”

The real target of the US’ military intervention in Syria is the Assad regime in Damascus, which Washington has been seeking to remove for almost six years. With its strategy of backing Islamist militias now in tatters, and with Russia aligning with Turkey to establish a peace deal that could see the US excluded from talks due to commence later this month, the option of a more direct military intervention is being considered.

A more frequent presence of US special forces on the ground would add yet another combustible element to the already explosive situation in Syria. US and Russian warplanes have repeatedly been involved in near misses in the crowded skies over the conflict zone, any one of which could have supplied the spark for a major escalation between the two nuclear-armed powers. While all of the major imperialist powers, including Germany, France and Britain, are part of the US-led coalition against ISIS, they are all pursuing their own predatory interests in Syria and the broader region.

One area where US special forces could be deployed in the immediate future is in the northwest near the town of al-Bab, where Turkish troops are trying to seize the strategically-important location from ISIS. Control of al-Bab would give Turkey significant influence over the subsequent push to take the ISIS capital of Raqqa.

Speaking anonymously to the *Washington Post*, US defense officials confirmed that work was underway to lift restrictions on US special forces personnel supporting the Turkish operation. Currently, US support troops only operate ten miles inside the Syrian border. Turkish officials said they are pushing for the US to break off ties with the Kurdish YPG, which Ankara views as a terrorist group. Washington continues to supply the YPG with arms via Iraq and is deliberating on providing the militias with more direct support.

US warplanes are also increasing their presence in the area, bringing a greater risk of a direct clash with Russia, which has been bombing ISIS locations around al-Bab in support of Turkey for several weeks.

“Flying anywhere in Syria is complicated. Flying up in that area where everyone seems to be flying would require some work,” a defense official told the *Post*. “I wouldn’t say we aren’t worried about it.”

This highly explosive situation is being further exacerbated by the push of substantial sections of the US political establishment for more punitive measures against Russia. US senators from both the Republican and Democratic parties tabled legislation Tuesday calling for stepped up sanctions on Moscow. The bill was sponsored by Republican Senator John McCain and Democrats Ben Cardin and Robert Menendez. According to Reuters, the legislation would impose visa bans and asset freezes on individuals who engage “in significant activities undermining the cybersecurity of public or private infrastructure and democratic institutions.”

There are unconfirmed reports that Russia has responded to the anti-Russian campaign in the US and the push for a more aggressive stance on Syria by increasing its own military deployments to the country.

The Kremlin publicly announced the withdrawal of its only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, from the Eastern Mediterranean last week. But according to the satellite imaging firm ISI, Iskander ballistic missile systems have been detected at Russia’s Latakia airbase in Syria. These systems would make it possible for Russia to fire nuclear-capable weapons throughout Syria and beyond.



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