

US shoots down Syrian government aircraft

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In a marked escalation of the war in Syria, a US F-18 fighter jet yesterday shot down a Syrian government fighter bomber for the first time, claiming that it had been attacking pro-US rebel forces on the ground near Raqqa. While nominally fighting Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) forces, the US shoot-down makes clear that the real aim of American-led operations is the ousting of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The US military justified the provocative act by claiming that the Syrian SU-22 had been bombing near so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) troops. It cited fighting that had taken place hours earlier between the Syrian military and SDF forces holding the town of Ja’Din as showing “hostile intent” and declared that attacks on “legitimate counter-ISIS operations will not be tolerated.” The statement absurdly declared that it was not seeking “to fight Syrian regime, Russian or pro-regime forces partnered with them.”

There is nothing legitimate about the military activities of the US and its allies inside Syria, which, under the guise of the “war on terror,” are seeking to carve out areas that can be used to mount operations against the Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian backers. As ISIS militias in both Syria and Iraq are in retreat, the US preparations to move against Assad are coming increasingly into the open.

The Syrian army issued a statement saying that its aircraft had been on a mission against ISIS when it came under fire, accused the US of “coordinating” with ISIS, and warned that the incident would have “dangerous repercussions.” The pilot has not been found and is presumed dead.

The US attack follows its shooting down of an unmanned pro-Syrian government drone earlier in June after it allegedly fired on US-backed troops in southern Syria near the border with Iraq. The US military has unilaterally declared “a deconfliction zone” with a

radius of 55 kilometres around a training base at al-Tanf—a key border crossing between the two countries.

In effect, Washington has carved out an area of Syria where US and British special forces train so-called rebels—supposedly to fight ISIS, but in reality for its proxy war against the Assad regime. The US has already conducted air strikes against pro-Syrian government forces that have sought to regain control of the vital border area.

Last week, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov phoned US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and demanded that the US stop attacking Syrian government forces as they seek to drive ISIS militias out of the border areas. “Lavrov expressed his categorical disagreement with the US strikes on pro-government forces and called on him to take concrete measures to prevent similar incidents in the future,” the Russian Foreign Ministry reported.

The situation throughout Syria remains extremely fraught, with the Assad regime accusing the US-led forces besieging Raqqa of allowing ISIS fighters to escape to the south, where government troops are battling ISIS for control of the city of Deir es-Zor.

Over the weekend, Iran’s military fired ground-to-ground missiles for the first time from Iranian territory against ISIS positions inside Syria. While claiming that they were in retaliation for the June 7 ISIS attacks in Tehran, the missile attacks into the Deir es-Zor area were clearly aimed at bolstering the Syrian government forces.

The US proxy war in Syria is part of a broader confrontation which is aimed not just at the Assad regime, but more broadly against its backers—Iran and Russia. Trump’s trip to the Middle East last month was above all aimed at forging an alliance with Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf States against Iran and its allies in the region.

The immediate outcome was the imposition of an all-

out, Saudi-led economic blockade against Qatar—itself an act of war. Riyadh accused Qatar of sponsoring terrorism, but the real reason lies in Qatar's relations with Iran and its reluctance to join Saudi Arabia in its anti-Iranian war drive.

The Saudi monarchy, which has long regarded Iran as its chief regional rival, is deeply hostile to the Assad regime in Damascus, which it regards as part of a Shiite crescent that includes Shiite parties and militias in Iraq and Lebanon. Backed to the hilt by the US, Saudi Arabia is waging its own war in Yemen against Houthi rebels, who, it claims, are being supported by Iran and who ousted the US-Saudi puppet government in 2014.

The Trump regime signalled its determination to ramp up the war in Syria in April when it launched a barrage of cruise missile strikes against a Syrian government air base on the pretext of unsubstantiated claims that the regime had carried out a gas attack. The US military is determined to rebuild anti-Assad forces after the devastating blow suffered by these pro-US militias in being driven out of Aleppo.

The shooting down of the Syrian SU-22 is another demonstration that the US is prepared to resort to the most reckless means to defend its footholds in Syria and lay the basis for the broader war that is being prepared.

While proclaiming its own “deconfliction zones” or no-go areas, the US military reiterated last month that it will operate at will throughout Syria. “We don’t recognise any specific zone in itself that we preclude ourselves from operating in,” Lieutenant General Jeffrey Harrigan, commander of the US air forces in the region, declared.

As a result, the stage is set for a dramatic escalation of the Middle East conflict, where a relatively minor incident or clash involving US forces and their Syrian, Iranian or Russian counterparts could erupt into a war that draws in major regional and world powers.



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