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Russians reported killed in US strikes in Syria

Multiple reports indicate that Russian military contractors were among the dead in air and artillery strikes launched Wednesday by the US military in the northeastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor against forces loyal to the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The Pentagon unleashed devastating firepower against the pro-government fighters on the pretext that they were mounting an attack against a headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the US proxy ground force that is dominated by the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. US special forces troops directing the activities of the Kurdish proxies were stationed at the headquarters in the zone of influence carved out by the US intervention in Deir Ezzor, northeast of the Euphrates River.

Bombs and missiles were rained down upon the force, which reportedly included between 300 and 500 infantry, backed by tanks and artillery. US F15 fighter jets, Apache helicopters, AC-130 gunships and unmanned drones were all called in to attack the force, along with US artillery units.

According to Pentagon sources, 100 of the Syrian fighters were killed in the barrage. The Syrian government reported “dozens” killed in what it described as an unprovoked “massacre” and a “war crime.”

Iran’s Tasnim news agency quoted Syrian sources as reporting that several Russian military advisors were killed in the attack, which took place in the Khasham gas field in Eastern Deir Ezzor.

In the *Washington Post*, the newspaper's columnist David Ignatius, who is well-connected to the US military and intelligence apparatus and is currently reporting from US-occupied areas in Syria, quoted a Kurdish militia commander working with the US special forces. The Kurdish commander, identified as General Hassan, told Ignatius that "the casualties included some Russians, apparently from the mercenaries fighting alongside pro-regime forces."

CNN, meanwhile, quoted Pentagon officials as saying that they were investigating reports of Russian casualties in the US strikes.

Moscow has insisted that it had no uniformed military personnel in the area, but Russian private military contractors have provided significant forces in support of the Assad government.

The attack, comes barely half a week after last Saturday's shootdown of a Russian Su-25 fighter jet over Idlib province. The plane was brought down by a shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, or MANPAD, most likely supplied by the CIA or Turkey to the so-called rebels dominated by Al Qaeda. A funeral for the pilot, Maj. Roman Filippov, who managed to eject but was killed on the ground fighting elements of the Al Nusra Front, was held in the southwestern Russian city of Voronezh Thursday, drawing some 30,000 people.

The two incidents have raised tensions in Syria between the two major nuclear powers to an unprecedented level.

The pretext for the illegal US military intervention in the country—the so-called war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—has evaporated, and its real motives emerged ever more openly. These include Syrian regime change, sought initially through the support of the CIA and the Pentagon for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias against the Assad government, and, more broadly combatting Iranian and Russian influence and continuing the bloody decades-old campaign for US hegemony over the oil rich Middle East.

The US defense secretary, recently retired Marine Gen. James Mattis, gave a press conference Thursday insisting that the US massacre of pro-government forces in Deir Ezzor was an act of "self-defense," a claim belied by the fact that the US and its Kurdish proxies suffered not one fatality in the incident and reported a single YPG militia member wounded.

“Obviously, we are not getting engaged in the Syrian civil war,” Mattis said, describing Wednesday’s massacre as a “perplexing situation” and insisting he could not give “any explanation for why” the battle had erupted.

The immediate explanation, however, is made obvious by the location of the attack. The pro-government forces were moving into gas and oil fields that had previously been controlled by ISIS and fell under the sway of the American proxies of the Syrian Democratic Forces. As an SDF commander told the *Wall Street Journal* last September, after the fields were taken, “Our goal is to prevent the regime from taking the areas of oil which will enable it to regain control of the country like it was before.” In this case, the word “our” refers to both Washington and its proxies.

US officials, most prominently Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have made it clear that the US military force, officially consisting of some 2,000 special forces troops, will remain in Syria after the defeat of ISIS with the aim of toppling Assad and imposing a US puppet regime. To that end, Washington is determined to continue its carve-up of Syrian territory and to deny Damascus strategically vital energy resources in Deir Ezzor that are needed to fuel the country’s reconstruction. This is why the attack was unleashed Wednesday.

The US announcement of an indefinite military occupation in Syria, along with its plans for deploying a 30,000-strong “border security force” consisting in large part of the Kurdish YPG militia, is the principal driving force of the renewed escalation of violence in the country.

The Turkish military has resumed its airstrikes against the northwestern Syrian enclave of Afrin following a four-day hiatus imposed by Russia after the shutdown of the Russian fighter jet. It seems likely that Moscow, which exercises effective control over airspace in the region, gave the go-ahead to Ankara as a means of ratcheting up tensions between the US and Turkey.

Mattis, Tillerson and national security advisor H.R. McMaster are now all scheduled to arrive in Turkey next week for urgent talks with the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan, who has denounced the US plans as tantamount to creating a de facto Kurdish state on Turkey’s border, has vowed to extend the Turkish offensive eastward into the town of Manbij, which is currently occupied by the YPG along with its US special forces handlers. This raises the prospect of an armed confrontation between the two ostensible NATO allies.

The British *Independent's* veteran Middle East correspondent Patrick Cockburn, citing sources in the region, reported this week that militia forces that are fighting alongside the Turkish army in the offensive in Afrin have been drawn almost exclusively from former ISIS fighters, who have been rebranded as the “Free Syrian Army.”

Washington, undoubtedly aware of this fact, has made no move to interfere with the Turkish operation in Afrin, so long as it does not continue eastward into US-occupied territory. There is ample evidence that the Pentagon has made its own use of the former ISIS fighters, thousands of whom were evacuated—along with their arms and ammunition—from Raqqa and other cities besieged by the US and its proxies, in order to redeploy them against Syrian government forces.

Both Washington and the French government of President Emmanuel Macron have issued protests and threats over civilian casualties caused by Syrian government and Russian airstrikes against areas of Idlib province and Eastern Ghouta, outside of Damascus, that are controlled by Al Qaeda-linked militias. Dutifully echoed by the corporate media, these protests are utterly hypocritical, given the slaughter of tens of thousands carried out by the US itself in cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq.

Unsubstantiated claims from Washington and Paris that the Syrian government, with Russian support, has carried out attacks using chlorine against the civilian population are being used to create conditions for a fresh military intervention against the Syrian government.

France’s Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly declared in an interview with the French broadcaster Inter on Friday that Paris had “potential evidence of the use of chlorine” by Damascus, but “no definite proof.”

This virtually echoes the statement made by US Defense Secretary Mattis, who threatened US military retaliation over unverified claims of chemical attacks, while acknowledging “we do not have evidence of it, but we are not refuting them.”

On Friday, the *New York Times* prominently carried an article by veteran propagandist Anne Barnard, depicting harrowing accounts of alleged atrocities by the Syrian and Russian militaries, beginning with the line, “Half a dozen newborns, blinking and arching their backs, were carried from a burning hospital hit by airstrikes”

Reflecting pressure within the US ruling establishment for a more aggressive US intervention against Syria—as well as Iran and Russia—the *Wall Street Journal* published an editorial Friday, criticizing the Trump administration for having “turned, almost Obama-like, to pleading with Russia to make Assad stop his latest assaults.” It insisted

that it was impossible to negotiate with Moscow, which “wants to keep Assad in power, maintain bases in Syria from which to threaten NATO, and thwart US goals in the Middle East.”

Insisting that Damascus has violated Washington’s “red line,” it called upon the administration to “send another” message to Syria, like the firing of the 59 cruise missiles against the country last April.