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Trumps ‘No Fly Zone’ Escalates U.S. War Against Syria

By Jeff Mackler
June 29, 2017



The lie that the U.S. is fighting Islamic State (ISIS) terrorism in Syria was publicly exploded on June 18 when a U.S. F/A-18 “Super Hornet” fighter jet launched from the George H. W. Bush aircraft carrier shot down a Syrian government aircraft that had attacked ISIS and the Al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front forces in Raqqa. The last major “rebel”-held stronghold in Northern Syria and Syria’s sixth largest city, Raqqa is the capital of ISIS’s proclaimed caliphate.

State Department officials asserted that the downing of the Syrian jet was in accord with U.S. policy to operate under its unilaterally established “rules of engagement” that include the “collective self-defense” of its “Syrian partners.” Translated, the quoted phrases amount to a declaration that the U.S. and its imperial allies in Syria will attack any and all forces that seek to interfere with U.S. imperialist objectives.

In addition to its virtual “no fly zone” over the Raqqa region, U.S. generals have set up a similarly “protected” garrison at al-Tanf in southeastern Syria, where its “Syrian partners” and U.S., British and Norwegian advisers are based. Here too, U.S. military tops have warned pro-Assad forces to stay out, having tagged this region with the newly coined euphemism, “zone of deconfliction.”

After the June 18 downing of the Syrian jet fighter, U.S. officials cynically asserted that “The coalition does not seek to fight the Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend coalition or partner forces from any threat.”

In the same mid-June timeframe and with the same rationale, U.S. warplanes shot down several Iranian midrange missiles that were targeting the ISIS-controlled oil-rich Deir Al-Zour province in Eastern Syria where ISIS forces surround some 200,000 civilians. These Syrians, according to U.S. policy, are not to be freed from ISIS’s grip by anyone working with the Syrian government. Effectively, ISIS in the area surrounding Deir Al-Zour is *protected* by the U.S. and its “partners.”

U.S. Contemplates “Stabilization Lite”

This is now the public policy of the U.S., presented in bold outline by several U.S. officials and top imperialist planners and reported in the June 23 *NYT* under the headline, “U.S. Sends Civilians to Stabilize Recaptured Syrian Areas.” The referenced “civilians” include representatives from the CIA-directed Agency for International Development and representatives from the array of countries that are supporting the U.S. war in Syria. Billions of dollars are to be expended in this effort, not to rebuild Syria, but to insure the stability of the occupying force in the regions the U.S. seeks to establish under its control. A *minimum* of 1,000 U.S. troops would remain in these “recaptured” regions, according to *The Times* report, undoubtedly qualitatively more if the U.S. warmakers believe they can further leverage their intervention.

In the same article, Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation expressed a note of caution:

“Syria is not a country that we control. This is *stabilization light*. We do not have, nor do we intend to get, control of the place, which would enable us to move and do these state-building activities.” [My emphasis.]

She added, “What is also very important to understand is what is the tolerance of the Syrian government for the U.S. to go in and do these activities. There have been increasing tensions with the regime, with the Iranians and with the Russians and the possibility that we are backing into a war with the Assad government and its backers.” Needless to say, such a war has been underway for years despite the U.S. lie that its illegal, uninvited presence in Syria is to fight ISIS.

On June 8, ten days before the attack on the Syrian jet, U.S. warplanes obliterated an Iranian, pro-Syrian government convoy headed for Raqqa to attack ISIS, Al Qaida and other U.S.-backed forces.

The June 18 attack on the Syrian aircraft was not the first such overt assault since 2011 when the short-lived Syrian Arab Spring was quickly hijacked by covert U.S.-backed terrorist forces aimed at the same “regime change” operation in Syria that the U.S. had previously orchestrated in Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. Since the April 7 U.S. Tomahawk missile attack on the Syrian Shayrat air base – under the pretext of retaliation for the unproven claim that the Assad government used sarin gas U.S. threats and overt attacks on Syrian government forces and its supporters have become routine. [Note: As we go to press a June 25 detailed article refuting President Trump’s accusation that the Syrian government used sarin gas in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 has been published on the German online website *Welt N24 Politik*. Its author, Pulitzer Prize journalist Seymour Hersh, cites several top U.S. military advisers to President Trump as insisting that “This was not a chemical weapons strike.” With full knowledge of the facts that demonstrated that sarin gas was not used by the Assad government, or anyone else, the advisers, note that Trump proceeded to bomb Syria anyway. JM]

The longstanding covert U.S./NATO/Gulf State monarchy regime change war against Syria, wherein billions of dollars have been secretly extended to train and arm virtually all forces that aim to remove the Syrian government, has now become open. The notion that a civil war between competing Syrian factions prevails in Syria is a terrible fraud – one that is employed by both the U.S. government and its bi-partisan propagandists, but also, tragically, by sections of the U.S. left. Syria, as with all poor and oppressed nations is the undeniable victim of a U.S.-orchestrated imperialist attack, little different from the imperialist conflagrations that plague oppressed people and nations around the world – from the Middle East to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Hillary Clinton’s election time advocacy of a “no fly zone” in Syria – aimed at preventing Syrian and allied forces, including Russia, Iran and the Lebanese-based Hezbollah, from ridding Syria of U.S.-backed forces – has now become President Donald Trump’s official policy.

“Deconfliction” is the new U.S.-invented term to designate the ever-expanding and always changing U.S. “No-Fly zones,” that is, portions of Syria that the U.S. hopes to occupy now to maximize its leverage in a contemplated postwar Syrian negotiated settlement wherein Syria’s future is to be determined not by the Syria people or government but rather by the U.S.-established military relationship of forces on the ground.

As U.S. air war Middle East chief Lt. General Jeffrey Harrington stated, “Every war must come to an end and when it does there will be a negotiated settlement.” In this context, Harrington bragged to the *NYT* that his success in Syria resided in his efforts to increase the “space” controlled by U.S.-backed forces.

Establishing U.S. “No Fly Zones”

CBS News reported that on June 6 and again on June 8 when “27 [Syrian] regime vehicles drove within 18 miles of al-Tanf, which breached the [U.S.-declared] 34-mile radius of the army convoy’s operations, U.S. aircraft first attempted to buzz the regime, but when the convoy didn’t turn around, they [the U.S. forces] conducted a strike against some of the vehicles.”

“The rebels being trained at al-Tanf are from a number of Arab rebel groups, referred to by the U.S. as Vetted Syrian Opposition, or VSO, who oppose both the Assad regime and ISIS,” according to the liberal *BuzzFeed News*. They noted that, “U.S. Special Forces have been increasingly fighting alongside these rebel groups in Southern Syria.”

The *Wall Street Journal*’s Yaroslav Trofimov reported that, “The U.S. attack at al Tanf is significant not because the U.S. has once again struck Assad’s forces, but because it did so in defense of Syrian rebels.” The same report observed, “Once skeptical about U.S.-backed anti-Assad ‘rebels,’ Trump stated in a 2015 election debate that ‘we have no idea who they are.’” Trump had suggested that they may be ISIS and added that “We can’t be fighting ISIS and fighting Assad.” Today, the U.S. is indeed fighting Assad, directly and indirectly, but its focus on ISIS is more complicated.

A March 31, 2017 *NYT* article, for example, noted that U.S. forces in Raqqa were attacking ISIS from the North, East and West, but not the South – the implication being that ISIS forces driven in this direction might be useful in assisting the blockade of Syrian forces in the South, that is, in the Deir Al-Zour region. Indeed they were. ISIS forces were allowed to evacuate Raqqa, weapons and military gear in tow, heading south toward Deir Al Zour, near the Iraqi and Jordanian border.

Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis noted that “We should not take this U.S. strike [against Assad’s armed forces] as a sign that the U.S. is getting more involved in Syria,” an example of Orwellian doublespeak if ever there was one.

Syria’s Right to Self-Determination

With the Syrian government’s September 2015 request to the Russian and Iranian governments and Hezbollah forces in Lebanon to intervene on its behalf, Syria has retaken large parts of the country that were previously occupied by ISIS and other U.S.-backed forces. Some estimates put that previously occupied figure at two-thirds of the country. Syria, a sovereign nation, has every right to self-determination, that is, to defend itself from imperial attack and seek the support of allies to challenge U.S.-led war and regime change efforts.

Al Udeid is the U.S. Central Command headquarters in the Middle East – the nerve center of its air campaigns in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is from Al Udeid that the U.S. conducts its now 16-year war in Afghanistan and its current wars in Iraq and Syria. Al Udeid supplied the air and ground forces in the U.S./NATO “humanitarian war” that destroyed Libya’s infrastructure. U.S.-backed mercenaries from Qatar then proceeded to “liberate” Libya’s capital of Tripoli using the pretext that the Gadhafi government was about to exterminate 50,000 unarmed civilians in Benghazi. British authorities now admit that there was no such threat. Neither did the Sadaam

Hussein government have the “weapons of mass destruction” that the U.S. war makers insisted were about to be unleashed on the world.

U.S. General Espouses Policy Objectives

“If the Syrians were going to make a run at our guys, we were going to be in a position to defend them ourselves,” said Lt. General Harrington in a May 23 *NYT* interview. “Our intent was to be in position to support our guys and get back into fighting ISIS.” The reference to “our guys,” of course, includes NATO and U.S.-financed and abetted terrorist forces aimed at Assad’s removal. There are no other forces in Syria today that operate independently of U.S. imperialism and its coalition partners.

This May 23 article entitled, “Inside the Air War Over Syria: A High Altitude ‘Poker Game,’” offers what *The Times* calls “a rare glimpse into how the [U.S.] military plans and orchestrates the complex ballet of strike, surveillance and refueling aircraft that keeps the war going around the clock.”

This seemingly endless war has taken a terrible toll on the Syrian people. A respected polling organization – ORB International, which does polling for western nations, including the U.S. government – nevertheless demonstrated that support for the Bashar Assad government and its Iranian allies far exceeds support for the U.S. and its “coalition partners,” including the Free Syrian Army, Al-Qaeda and similar groups. Support for ISIS was miniscule.

Regardless, recognition and defense of Syria’s right to self-determination – an inalienable right of all poor and oppressed nations under imperialist attack or threatened by colonial occupation – is the critical dividing line in the U.S. antiwar movement today. While not taking any position on the Assad government itself, U.S. antiwar organizations like the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC) are staunch defenders of Syria’s right to self-determination. UNAC unanimously re-affirmed this stance at its recent June 16-18 national conference in Richmond, VA where over 300 activists from 31 states drew up plans for future coordinated, independent, mass mobilizations against U.S. imperialist wars. (See UNAC’s adopted Action Plan at UNACpeace.org.)

The principle of the right of self-determination of oppressed nations has its origins in the worldwide struggles of oppressed people to win their freedom from the world’s chief colonizing and imperialist great powers that had previously divided and re-divided the world and subjected poor and conquered peoples to their rule. The history of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Asia is in great part a history of the just struggles of the conquered and occupied nations for freedom and self-determination. Socialists and other democratically minded organizations have traditionally supported all such struggles against imperialist intervention, whether their leadership was socialist, bourgeois nationalist or even downright reactionary. This was the case, for example, when fascist Italy invaded feudal Ethiopia at the beginning of WWII, or more recently when the U.S. invaded Iraq and deposed the Sadaam Hussein government. (Hussein had previously been a U.S. ally and surrogate when he invaded Iran in 1980 in a six-year war that took the lives of one million Iranians and 800,000 Iraqis.) In all cases, the key criteria for opposition to imperialist war has been the understanding that, freed from direct colonial control,

the working masses of these oppressed nations have the best opportunity to deal with their own indigenous oppressors. The resultant weakening and defeat of the imperialist occupier upon its forced withdrawal is an added bonus that factors into any world balance sheet that measures the relationship of forces between imperialist subjugators and their victims.

The right of self-determination includes Syria's right to call for help from Russia, Iran and others as they see fit. Such support – however equivocal and for whatever opportunist reasons it may be given – can have a significant impact on thwarting U.S. imperialist objectives. As compared to late 2015, much of Syria today is free from the direct control of the forces let loose by U.S. imperialism. It is these forces that are overwhelmingly responsible for the estimated 500,000 Syrians killed, including 100,000 Syrian Army soldiers as well as the 1.5 million Syrian refugees that are today scattered across the Middle East and elsewhere.

This is not to say that the Russia's or Iran's primary objective is the liberation of Syria from imperialist control, and certainly not the establishment of a socialist or even democratic Syria. Vladimir Putin's objectives are simply to use Russian influence in Syria as a bargaining chip to negotiate with the U.S./NATO cabal and win some concessions with regard to NATO's threatening encirclement of Russia and its imposition of stinging sanctions arising out of Russia's opposition to the neo-fascist, US/EU-backed coup in Ukraine.

The recent widely televised two-part "Putin Interviews" with filmmaker Oliver Stone revealed Russian perspectives and politics in bold relief when Stone felt compelled to correct Putin's repeated assertions of friendship with his "U.S. partners." Stone asked, "How can you repeatedly call the U.S. your partner when it is ever surrounding you with NATO troops and imposing hurtful sanctions?" Putin could only smile and repeat his solidarity and claimed "partnership" with the U.S. while holding out his hopes that peaceful negotiated solutions of their differences would be forthcoming.

Putin, a spokesperson par excellence for a weak and isolated Russian capitalism, basked with Stone in the splendor of his ornate state-owned Russian dacha home, while praising the Russian Orthodox Church, expressing his solidarity with U.S. imperialism's "fight against terrorism," and ridiculing the great 1917 Russian Revolution. Putin, who supported the U.S./NATO war that reduced Libya to rubble, lacked the good sense to hide his reactionary social views as he disparaged women and LGBTQI people. No liberating friend of the Syrian masses, Putin seeks a negotiated accommodation with U.S. imperialism. This is similar to other lesser capitalist nations that are increasingly compelled to bend to the dictates of the world's sole superpower.

Yet Russia's role in forcing the U.S.-backed armed forces in Syria to retreat cannot be dismissed, if for the sole reason that, absent an overt imperialist conquest, opportunities for future struggle of Syria's working masses to advance their own interests will be that much greater. Tragically, history does not always offer a clear and straight path to liberation. Absent Russian and Iranian intervention in the Syrian conflict, the likelihood of US/NATO imperial victory would be virtually assured. The alternative to Russian and Iranian support for Syria can only be Syria's return to imperialist-imposed great power domination or perhaps formal division or incorporation into neighboring states.

Today, Syria's future rests less on the intentions of Russian or Iranian capitalists than it does on the future emergence of an independent anti-imperialist and socialist force inside Syria that champions the interests of the Syrian working masses *and* on capacity of antiwar forces in the U.S. and around the world to mobilize millions in the streets demanding "U.S. Out Now!," "Self-determination for Syria!" and "Money for Jobs, Not War!" These are the starting points for the mass antiwar movement that can best serve the interests of the Syrian people. In addition to marches, rallies and teach-ins, the economic might of the U.S. working class must be brought to bear. Indeed, the struggles against all U.S. wars abroad and the fight against the ever-intensifying wars against working people at home cannot be separated; in many ways it is the same fight. We must say no to the wars of the one percent both at home and abroad. Not one more dollar, not one more bullet for Washington's wars!