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Purposeless Death in Syria

By David Swanson
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won't have time to list all the reasons I want U.S. military planes and drones out of Syrian skies much less all the reasons people have noted in comments on our petition, but there's no question what my first reason is, although it's not a reason always given much weight here in Washington.

These planes kill a lot of people. The U.S. military's casualty figures have such a record of error that I would trust them about as far as I could throw a Pentagon contract. Airwars identifies thousands of civilian deaths from U.S. and allied planes (4,734 to 7,337 in Syria and Iraq). And such counts generally turn out to be many times under the counts that comprehensive post-war studies arrive at. On top of which we have the problem of all the people killed who are not counted by virtue of not being labeled civilian — always an empirically and morally iffy labeling process. Then there are the injuries that almost always outnumber the deaths, the homelessness, the extremely longterm effects of the U.S. use of depleted uranium fired from some of those planes we want removed, the starvation that could have been prevented for a fraction of the cost of the planes, and of course the top killer of U.S. troops: suicide.

The primary reason that what would otherwise be considered mass murder is given little heed is that it is understood to serve some higher purpose in both the moral and legal senses. But what purpose is served by U.S. planes over Syria? If longer than most major wars of the past isn't long enough to figure that out, how about a purpose served by bombing Afghanistan or Iraq or Pakistan or Libya or Yemen? Apart from selling weapons and creating more enemies for the next war, what has been accomplished? Former CIA Bin Laden Unit Chief Michael Scheuer says the

more the U.S. fights terrorism the more it creates terrorism. The CIA's own July 7, 2009, report "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," says drone killing is counterproductive. Admiral Dennis Blair, a former director of National Intelligence, says the same. Gen. James E. Cartwright, a former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says drone strikes could be undermining long-term efforts: "We're seeing that blowback. If you're trying to kill your way to a solution, no matter how precise you are, you're going to upset people even if they're not targeted." That's true whether or not the plane has a pilot.

Maintaining the momentum of permanent war is obviously not a high moral purpose. Jodi Rudoren in the *New York Times* on September 6 reported that "For Jerusalem, the status quo, horrific as it may be from a humanitarian perspective, seems preferable to either a victory by Mr. Assad's government and his Iranian backers or a strengthening of rebel groups, increasingly dominated by Sunni jihadis. 'This is a playoff situation in which you need both teams to lose, but at least you don't want one to win — we'll settle for a tie,' said Alon Pinkas, a former Israeli consul general in New York. 'Let them both bleed, hemorrhage to death: that's the strategic thinking here.'"

This endless war for war's sake may be done in the name of democracy. And you may be able to get television viewers to cheer momentarily for missiles launched from a ship — which have almost all the same problems as those launched from the air — but people in the very same polls that cheer for those missiles say the U.S. should get out of the war. Public pressure was key to preventing the start of a U.S. air war in Syria in 2013. Never has the public or the Congress advocated for or authorized this war. It is a war destructive of the rule of law. Nowhere does the UN Charter or the Kellogg-Briand Pact permit this action, from air, ground, or water. Special Operations Command chief Army General Raymond Thomas two weeks ago admitted it was illegal. Claiming to defend U.S. troops in Syria against aggression by Syria is not a legal argument for defensiveness but a declaration of imperial lawlessness.

President Obama's decision to arm and train proxies was against the law, dramatically against public opinion, and against the report he had commissioned from the CIA on whether such efforts had ever succeeded in the past. President Trump's announcement that he will cease those efforts and henceforth fight on only one side of this war is a nod to reality, law, and possibly decency — given the account of his decision having followed his viewing a video of CIA-backed fighters killing a child. But the war continues to kill children.

This is all before mentioning the risk of apocalyptic nuclear confrontation with Russia as a result of Russia also fighting an immoral, illegal, and counterproductive war in Syria. That alone is reason to remove every U.S. plane or drone.

This is also without considering the environmental damage done to Syria and to our atmosphere. You can drive your car all year and not pollute the sky like one flight of one military plane.

And then there's the financial cost. National Priorities Project puts the cost of war on ISIS at \$16 billion and counting — more than the UN says would be needed annually to have clean drinking water everywhere on earth, and more than half what the UN says it would take to end hunger, not just in Syria, but globally. And this war serves as the top public justification for military

spending that adds up to about \$1 trillion a year in the U.S. That choice of how to spend our resources kills more people than all current wars put together because of where that money is not spent.

A fraction of that spending could be invested in diplomacy, aid, disarmament, and unarmed peacekeeping to far better effect. These alternatives have been available since day one and still are. The United States spent years sabotaging UN attempts at peace in Syria. According to Former Finnish president and Nobel peace prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari, the United States dismissed out of hand a Russian peace proposal for Syria in 2012. The U.S. ruined last year's ceasefire by firing on Syrian troops.

Nothing is going to quickly bring peace and prosperity to Syria. But continuing to do what we know makes matters worse has to end. We have to give peace a chance.