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## US-Russia tensions mount after ISIS's defeat in Syria

Washington and Moscow have traded fresh charges of provocative actions by each other's warplanes in the skies over Syria's Euphrates River valley, even as their supposed common enemy, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, appears to have been routed on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

The Pentagon's statements directly hinted at the prospect of rising tensions in Syria spilling over into a direct military confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers, with incalculable consequences.

"It's become increasingly tough for our pilots to discern whether Russian pilots are deliberately testing or baiting us into reacting, or if these are just honest mistakes," Lt. Col. Damien Pickart, spokesman for the US air command based in Qatar told the *New York Times*. "The greatest concern is that we could shoot down a Russian aircraft because its actions are seen as a threat to our air or ground forces."

The *Times* article published Saturday was written as a brief for the US military intervention in Syria and a more aggressive American confrontation with Russia for dominance in the Middle East. The Pentagon recently acknowledged that over 2,000 US troops are presently deployed inside Syria—more than four times the number previously admitted—and indicated that there is no intention of withdrawing them after their ostensible mission of defeating ISIS is completed.

The *Times* parroted Pentagon allegations of a Russian SU-24 fighter jet having "nearly collided" with two US A-10 close air support warplanes east of the Euphrates River, and

of other Russian aircraft flying directly over the US proxy ground forces and their American special forces “advisers” for over 30 minutes, actions which US officials told the newspaper had escalated “tensions and the risk of a shootdown.”

Quoting the same Pentagon officials, the *Times* reported that Russian warplanes were violating as many as a half a dozen times a day a deal supposedly reached between Washington and Moscow to keep their aircraft on opposite sides of the Euphrates.

“There’s a risk there,” Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigan, the commander of the US air war in Iraq and Syria, told the newspaper. “Their desire is to set this up for the end state for Syria. We’ve got to be clear-eyed. The Russians are here to support the Syrian government.”

Unstated by the general or the *Times* is that Washington has intervened in Syria with the diametrically opposed objective of continuing the drive for regime change that it began in 2011 by fomenting a sectarian-based insurgency relying on Sunni Islamist militias funded and armed by the CIA, Turkey Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf oil sheikdoms. With the defeat of these Al Qaeda-linked elements, US imperialism has backed a new proxy ground force, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is wholly dominated by the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. This in turn has heightened tensions in the region, particularly with Turkey, which regards the YPG as an extension of the Turkish Kurdish PKK, against which Ankara has waged a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for decades.

While forces loyal to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russian airpower and aided by Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and other Shia militias, have succeeded in restoring its control over most of the country, Washington is determined to carve out its own zone of influence in order to continue military operations aimed at countering Russian and Iranian regional influence and pursuing its original aim of regime change.

Regional tensions have been further stoked by the recent announcement of an agreement between Moscow and the Egyptian regime of Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to allow Russia to base warplanes in Egypt, long a client state of US imperialism.

Following the publication of the *Times* article, the Russian military issued a sharp response that included its own charges of US warplanes threatening its aircraft in the same area of eastern Syria. A spokesman for the Russian armed forces accused the US intervening to obstruct Russian airstrikes against ISIS positions.

“Specifically, for example, on November 23, a pair of Russian Su-25 attack aircraft were on a mission to destroy a terrorist stronghold when a US F-22 appeared in the sky,” Russian military spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov told the media. “It started to fire

off flares and deployed its air brakes as it simulated a dog fight. It was not until a super-maneuverable Su-35S fighter jet appeared that the American withdrew.”

The Russian general mocked the Pentagon’s pretension that it had control over designated airspace in Syria, noting that the American forces were operating in the country illegally, without either United Nations authorization or the permission of the Syrian government. He urged the US military “to concentrate on the elimination of terrorists in Iraq rather than provoke air incidents [in Syria].”

The Russian Defense Ministry charged that US operations in Syria “focused on impeding [activities of] Syrian government troops,” and that their major result had been that of “destroying Raqqa along with the civilians.”

In the midst of the charges and counter-charges between Washington and Moscow over military operations in Syria, the former official spokesman for the SDF, Talal Silo, who defected to Turkey late last month, told the Reuters news agency that the US had approved the evacuation of thousands of ISIS fighters from the besieged city Raqqa in October. He said that some 4,000 people were bused out of the city, all but about 500 of them ISIS fighters.

Silo’s account confirmed an earlier report by the BBC, which quoted sources who participated in this exodus as stating that the convoy transporting the ISIS members, along with large quantities of arms and ammunition, was some four miles long, including 50 trucks, 13 buses and 100 ISIS vehicles.

Silo told the news agency that the claim by the Pentagon and its proxy forces that a fierce battle was taking place inside Raqqa “was all theater,” designed to keep journalists away from the city during the evacuation.

He said that Washington’s support for the evacuation was driven by its determination to quickly end the Raqqa siege and redeploy the Kurdish militia and its US special operations “advisers” to Deir Ezzor province, the center of Syria’s oil and gas reserves as well as the country’s border with Iraq. The US aim was to cut off the border and thereby disrupt Iranian influence by blocking its land access to Syria.

In a separate interview with the Turkish media, Silo said that according to the US plan, “the [ISIS] terrorists would go to Al-Bukamal [near the Iraqi border] and prevent the regime’s advance.”

The former SDF spokesman said that Raqqa was not the first time the US and its proxies had facilitated the escape of ISIS forces, but rather the third. In the capture of Manbij in northern Aleppo province in 2016, he said, 2,000 ISIS members were evacuated. “The

SDF, the U.S. and Manbij Military Council provided security for Daesh [ISIS] members and allowed them to go towards Jarablus. This was the first agreement,” he said.

Subsequently, during the siege of Al Tabqah, on the Euphrates River, the US and its proxy force negotiated the evacuation of 500 ISIS fighters. In both cases, the Islamists were allowed to leave with their weapons and ammunition.

The testimony of Silo, who collaborated closely with top US officials and military commanders in Syria, is another damning exposure of the “war on terrorism.” ISIS, itself a product of Washington’s intervention in the Middle East, has served as another instrument of American military aggression aimed at asserting US imperialist dominance over the oil-rich region.