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Pentagon claims confrontation with Russian warplanes over Syria

Tensions between Washington and Moscow have escalated again following claims by Pentagon officials that two US F-22 stealth fighters confronted two Russian Su-25 close air support jets Wednesday in the skies over Syria's Euphrates River Valley.

According to the US military's account, the US fighter planes fired warning flares at the Russian jets and one of the US F-22s flew close enough to a Russian plane that it was forced "to aggressively maneuver to avoid a midair collision."

The alleged incident follows charges last week by the US air command based in Qatar that in the month of November, Russian planes had been violating six to eight times a day a supposed "deconfliction line" corresponding to the Euphrates River and restricting Russian air operations to the west of the river and US operations to the east.

In its statement to the media last week, the Pentagon warned that Russian pilots could be "deliberately...baiting us into reacting," and that this could result in a "shootdown" of a Russian jet, an action that could trigger a direct military confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

Russia's Defense Ministry denied the US account of the incident, which closely resembled the account that Moscow had given of a previous confrontation that took place on November 23, with a US F-22 firing flares at a Russian Su-25.

The ministry issued a statement that said: "On December 13, a pair of Su-25 attack aircraft escorted a humanitarian convoy near Mayadin [on the western bank of the Euphrates River] at an altitude of 3,300 meters. They were approached by a US F-22 fighter jet on

the east side of the river. By firing off decoy flares, the F-22 interfered with the flight of a pair of Russian Su-25s. A Russian Su-35 fighter jet, performing an air cover mission at an altitude of 10,000 meters, swiftly approached the F-22 from the rear, forcing the American aircraft to leave the area.”

While Moscow insists in this instance that the Russian planes were flying west of the Euphrates, the Defense Ministry last week called into question Washington’s claim to control the airspace east of the river, calling it “puzzling.” It pointed out that the US intervention in Syria has not been authorized by the United Nations and is opposed by the Syrian government. A spokesman suggested that the US military should “concentrate on the elimination of terrorists in Iraq, rather than provoke air incidents [in Syria].”

Russia has accused the US of deliberately intervening to prevent Russian planes from striking targets linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Euphrates River valley.

Both the Russian and Syrian governments have charged the US military and its proxy ground forces organized in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is comprised largely of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, of intervening to protect and evacuate ISIS from besieged Syrian towns. These charges have been substantiated by a BBC investigative report, which confirmed that some 4,000 ISIS fighters and family members, along with tons of arms and ammunition, were bused out of the city of Raqqa in a four-mile-long convoy at the end of October. The former chief spokesman of the SDF, Talal Silo, who defected to Turkey at the end of November, also testified to this evacuation, stressing that of the 4,000 evacuated from Raqqa, all but about 500 were ISIS fighters.

The Syrian government addressed two letters to United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres Thursday, denouncing the US military for protecting and transporting ISIS and other Islamist militias from one part of Syria to another and condemning Washington for carrying out air strikes that have claimed a large number of civilian lives.

Just the day before, a predawn air strike in the village of al-Jurze Sharqi on the eastern bank of the Euphrates killed 23 civilians. According to the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the dead included at least eight children and six women.

While the Iraqi, Syrian and Russian governments have all declared victory over ISIS, the Pentagon issued a statement Wednesday insisting that it is “still a threat” and that “terrorists are lurking” in the Euphrates River valley.

The reality is that Washington is already shifting to a post-ISIS intervention in Syria. As Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis made clear recently, the US has no intention of withdrawing the more than 2,000 troops it now has on the ground in the country.

In the first instance, this strategy appears aimed at countering the influence of Iran, which Washington views as a principal obstacle to its quest to assert US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

As the *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday, citing senior administration officials, “US officials are wrestling with where and how to repel what they describe as a significant Iranian military expansion across the region, a development of increasing concern in Washington, Tel Aviv and Riyadh.”

Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, President Donald Trump’s national security advisor, is considering delivering a speech early next year announcing the new strategy, according to the *Journal* report, which added that the key question was “whether to make confronting Iran an explicit new goal for the more than 2,000 American forces currently in Syria.”

McMaster made clear the virulently anti-Iranian character of US foreign policy during an appearance together with his British counterpart Mark Sedwill at a conference Tuesday hosted by the UK think tank Policy Exchange. Outlining US imperialism’s war aims, the active-duty Army general labeled Russia and China as “revisionist powers” seeking to subvert the Washington-dominated international order, while lumping Iran together with North Korea as “rogue regimes” that “support terror and are seeking weapons of mass destruction.”

Significantly, he also condemned both Turkey and Qatar—the first, a NATO ally, and the second, the site of the headquarters of the US Central Command—as principal promoters of Islamist extremism, which “is obviously a grave threat to all civilized people.” He acknowledged that Saudi Arabia had previously been guilty of the same offense, but now gave the House of Saud a clean bill of health.

The cynicism is breathtaking. Turkey and Qatar are now singled out because they have failed to line up with the anti-Iranian axis being forged by US imperialism, together with the Saudi monarchy and Israel. The truth is that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the CIA itself were all sponsors of the Islamist extremist groups that were used as proxy forces in the wars for regime change in both Libya and Syria. And there is little doubt that Washington will make use of the ISIS forces that it rescued and evacuated in Syria, turning them once again against the Syrian government and Iran.

In a further ratcheting up of US provocations against Iran, Washington's ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, staged a press conference Thursday at a military base outside the US capital in front of singed wreckage she claimed was proof that Iran had supplied a missile fired by the Houthi rebels in Yemen against Saudi Arabia. "It's hard to find a conflict or a terrorist group in the Middle East that does not have Iran's fingerprints all over it," Haley declared.

Iran denounced the stunt as "irresponsible, provocative and destructive," comparing the "evidence" to similar claims made about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the 2003 US invasion.

"These accusations seek also to cover up for the Saudi war crimes in Yemen, with US complicity, and divert international and regional attention from the stalemate war of aggression against the Yemenis that has so far killed more than 10,000 civilians, displaced three million, crippled Yemen's infrastructure and health system, and pushed the country to the brink of the largest famine the world has seen for decades," the Iranian mission to the UN said in a statement.

Haley's unfounded claims about Iranian terrorist ties were also undercut by the release of a study by Conflict Armament Research, funded by the European Union and Germany, proving that weaponry funneled by the CIA into Syria, supposedly to arm antigovernment "rebels," had "significantly augmented the quantity and quality of weapons available to [ISIS] forces."