

US enforces its No Fly Zone over Rojava, leading to World War III...Or Not

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For the first time in the six-year Syrian war, the US shot down an Assadist warplane on June 18, in defence of its allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the US-backed military and political front dominated by the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG). Assadist warplanes had carried out the highly unusual act of bombing the SDF in the town of Ja'Din, near Tabqa in Raqqa Province.

For most of the war, the Assad regime and the YPG/SDF have largely avoided militarily confronting each other. While not allies, neither are they enemies, and have at times collaborated in parts of the country when it suited, including the YPG's assistance to Assad in the recent siege of rebel Aleppo.

In contrast, the YPG/SDF has become the largest and most strategic US ally in the conflict, as both the US and the SDF are focused entirely on defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) in eastern Syria. As neither have any interest in supporting the rebellion against the Assad dictatorship, a phenomenon overwhelmingly taking place in the more populated west of the country, they can get on with what is largely a parallel war elsewhere. Thus the US has provided the SDF with wall to wall air cover for all its operations since late 2014, has sent hundreds of US special forces to aid the SDF, and has set up a number of military bases in SDF-controlled territory.

The Obama administration announced its first and only No Fly Zone in Syria in the Kurdish-dominated parts of northern Syria known as 'Rojava', controlled by the YPG/SDF, in August 2016, when Assadist jets suddenly decided to do a little bombing of the YPG in Hassakah. Although the YPG had not done anything to provoke this attack, at times the regime likes to remind anyone outside its control who is boss.

While the regime pragmatically allows the SDF to run Rojava so that it can use all its resources to crush the Syrian uprising, it occasionally likes to remind the SDF that it is opposed to either any Kurdish autonomy, or to any 'democratic confederalist' project the SDF seeks to run in Rojava, and that as soon as the rest of the rebellion is crushed, it will come for them.

That time, last August, the US warned the Assadist warplanes to keep away or they would get bombed. They ran away fast.

Now they came back to test out the NFZ, so the US knocked a warplane out of the sky.

On the question of "World War III"

Last year during the US elections, Hillary Clinton, confronted with the daily genocidal slaughter carried out by the Assad regime against defenceless civilians throughout the length and breadth of rebel-held Syria, made some comments about examining the possibility of the US military – already involved in bombing enemies of Assad for two years at that point – also helping protect Syrian civilians against Assad’s warplanes through some kind of No Fly Zone.

Donald Trump opposed this idea and instead stressed his support for existing US policy, of only fighting ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. In fact, he went further, expressing the view that the US alliance with the Assad regime and Russia against the jihadists should be even more emphatic.

Much of the pro-Assad but allegedly “anti-war” movement, and even many genuine anti-war folk opposed to Assad, claimed that a vote for Clinton would be a vote for “World War III.” Two years of actual US bombing of Syria, which had already killed hundreds of civilians, was seen as no problem, and certainly not a cause for a single demonstration (as it was not directed against Assad); in contrast, imposing a No Fly Zone to protect civilians would mean shooting down Assadist warplanes, which could cause conflict with Assad’s Russian backers, and therefore “World War III.”

Even leftists well aware of how much of a far-right neo-liberal racist Trump was, how hard-wired he was into the entire global far-right, expressed the view that on this issue, Trump was, relatively speaking, the “peace candidate.” They said this despite the fact that Trump openly warned that he intended the sharply step up the bombing of anti-Assad targets in Syria; he was the “peace candidate” in comparison to “World War III” Clinton even though he promised to not just “bomb the shit out of” those he called the “terrorists,” but also to “kill their families.” Promises he has kept.

The soft-on-Trump left had not noticed that the US had already imposed a No Fly Zone over Rojava, which had not caused World War III. US airforce protection the YPG, who identify as leftists, was not considered an issue, but if the US were to protect ordinary Syrian civilians, and their schools, hospitals, markets, refugee camps and so on, living in rebel-controlled zones, from years of relentless massacre, that would have been considered the ultimate evil.

Thus, Old Left “anti-war” views on these issues had no relation one way or another with any principled opposition to US intervention anywhere; whether or not US intervention, bombing, special forces, military bases, slaughter of civilians and so on was a problem or not depended entirely on who the targets and/or the allies of the US intervention were.

It is the same again in this case. When the Assad regime, encouraged after the entire Trump cabinet made clear that even Obama’s tepid “opposition” to Assad was no longer US policy, went a little too far and dropped sarin on the north Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun in April, and so the US launched a relatively harmless “credibility strike” against Assad’s Shariyat airbase, angry mobs launched “anti-war” protests throughout American cities. The previous 8000 US airstrikes against non-Assadist targets had gone unnoticed, despite the significant civilian toll; one with a zero civilian toll, against a military airbase, from where chemical weapons had been launched, created a strange anger.

Others declared that Trump had now “changed his policy,” despite the fact that Trump, Mattis, McMaster, Tillerson and every other US leader of note went out of their way to declare that they were “not going into Syria,” that there was no change of policy, that the strike was only about sarin and not about any of Assad’s other weapons of mass destruction that he uses daily on a massive scale, that the only US interest remained the defeat of ISIS, and so on and so forth.

Yet when the US shot down its first Assadist warplane, we get a stunned, and confused, silence. Anti-imperialists are not sure whether to support the “anti-imperialist” Assad regime – which tortured

Islamist suspects for the US rendition program, joined the first US Gulf war against Iraq, invaded Lebanon at the behest of the Lebanese counterrevolution and carried out an enormous massacre against the Lebanese and Palestinian resistance at Tel al-Zaatar, kept Israel's stolen Golan "border" stone cold quiet for 40 years, and regularly massacred Palestinians and tried to extinguish their movement - or to support the "anti-imperialist" YPG/SDF, the strategic partner of the US in Syria.

If, in an alternative universe, the US were for once to knock down an Assadist warplane slaughtering civilians in a rebel-held town, then of course all hell would break loose, we would again have demonstrations, declarations, "anti-war" statements etc. #MilitaryAirfieldsLivesMatter, apparently.

The ongoing slaughter in Daraa and Raqqa

Meanwhile the Assad regime has been pummeling Daraa, the birthplace of the revolution, with literally hundreds of barrel bombs for weeks on end now. According to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and Mediciens du Monde already on June 7, "in recent days, the aerial bombardment campaign over Dara'a has intensified. According to reports from the ground, in the first five days of June, there have been approximately 330 direct fire activities, including air raids, explosive barrels, artillery, rockets, explosive cylinders, and explosive charges. These attacks have been carried out by the Syrian government and its allies, and represent a dramatic increase from the 165 aerial attacks which took place last month."

Yet there is no US gun or bullet landing in the hands of FSA and allied rebels in Daraa defending their people against this genocide, let alone a downed warplane. Daraa, its civilians, its infrastructure, its symbolism as a centre of the most democratic part of the revolution, its unbelievable suffering, and unbelievable heroism, can all go to hell, but obviously the US considers the SDF to be a red line.

The US, in any case, is doing virtually the same thing to the ISIS "capital" Raqqa. As the SDF advances on Raqqa, US airstrikes (and SDF artillery) are creating what UN war crimes investigators described as a "staggering loss of civilian life." The US is literally carpet bombing Raqqa, "destroying the town to save it." The death toll from US strikes on Raqqa and neighbouring Deir Ezzor - where the US has been openly bombing in collaboration with the Assad regime since November 2014 - is so high that, for two months in a row, the civilian death toll from US strikes has been higher even than that of the Assad regime (and even in the previous month, the US toll was already higher than either the Russian or ISIS civilian toll). The monitoring site Airwars estimates the US-led Coalition is responsible for over 3000 civilian deaths in Syria, the vast majority in the last four months under Trump. The US has even used white phosphorus in its war on ISIS in Raqqa.

The anti-ISIS, anti-Assad resistance group 'Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently' released a statement declaring that Syria as we once knew it is has been "forever changed by the relentless brutality taking place across the country. The horrors happening now in the cities of Raqqa and Daraa are only met with utter silence - both international and local. For months now, the city of Raqqa has been exposed to a campaign of systematic destruction perpetrated by the International coalition and its local allies who are using a scorched earth policy to take control of the city. All violations against civilians receive little to no condemnation, as they are committed under the pretext of fighting ISIS."

Calling RBSS "ISIS agents" simply won't cut it. ISIS hunts down and murders RBSS members, even outside Syria.

Yet this all appears to be a non-issue for the western anti-war movement.

Assad, Russia and Iran now decide YPG/SDF are “terrorists”

The Assad regime has sent out mixed signals about the YPG/SDF recently. One leader called them a branch of the so-called “Syrian Army”, while the recent declaration in the Russian state’s propaganda organ ‘Sputnik’ that the YPG/SDF are “terrorists like ISIS” quoted “Syrian expert” (ie, regime spokesperson) Husma Shaib, who explained that “we regard these forces as unlawful military formations which operate outside of the legal environment. They are the same as terrorist units like the al-Nusra Front and Daesh. The Syrian Democratic Forces do not coordinate their activities with the Syrian Army. We regard them as terrorists.”

Iran’s ambassador to Turkey, Mohammad Ebrahim Taherian Fard, also recently clarified to his Turkish counterpart that Tehran “describes the PKK, the PYD and the YPG to be terrorist groups” that Tehran and Ankara needed to jointly work against.

This turn seems to be caused by rivalry over the mopping up operation against ISIS in the east: with the US-backed SDF advancing upon Raqqa, the Assadist army, backed by Hezbollah, recently broke out from southeast Aleppo and began advancing east as well, in a way that was, unusually, threatening towards SDF positions.

US: No quarrel with Assad as long as you’re just bombing civilians

The US Centcom statement on the downing of the warplane emphasised, as usual, that its mission is only to defeat ISIS and that it has no interest whatsoever in fighting Assadist, Russian or pro-regime forces (as is well-known), but that it will defend itself or its “partner forces.”

As the tweeter ‘Northern Stork’ introduced this Centcom statement, this means “Back off you guys, go barrel bomb some civilians elsewhere, we are not here to fight you, leave us alone.”

While the regime claimed it was bombing ISIS – in Taqba, which the SDF had liberated from ISIS months ago – this was rejected by the SDF. SDF spokesperson Brig. Gen. Talal Silo accused regime forces of launching “large-scale attacks using aircraft, artillery, and tanks” on the SDF in the Tabqa area.

The SDF v ISIS and the issue of ethical dilemmas

Given the nature of the Islamic state tyranny – a pale, yet nonetheless horrific, reflection of the Damascus-based tyranny – there can be little doubt that the SDF can only be a vast improvement, regardless of one’s view of the reality of the Rojava revolution. Actually, even if one fully accepted the loftiest claims about Rojava in its heartlands, it is doubtful that such a vision can be brought about via such frightening terror launched by the US airforce; it would be a first in the history of revolutions. Yet still, whatever turns out can hardly not be a vast improvement on ISIS.

And while the hypocrisy and selective solidarity of much of the anti-war movement and sections of the western left are an obvious target here, the decisions of the SDF in a difficult environment are not. That does not mean that seriously incorrect decisions should not be criticized; but gratuitous condemnation of the SDF as “US proxies” merely for accepting any level of US support against the ISIS terror regime should be avoided (notwithstanding the fact that the PYD leaders themselves rarely give the same latitude to the forced tactical decisions of the FSA and Syrian rebels, despite the qualitatively greater pressure they have been under for six years; and their western backers, who include some with a strong streak of left-orientalism, are often considerably worse).

But at a certain point, quantity becomes quality. The massive US/SDF war to liberate Raqqa has turned into such an enormous massacre of the Raqqa citizenry that, no matter how much one hates

ISIS and naturally prefers the SDF to win, the severity of the political and ethical dilemma here can no longer be avoided with dishonest platitudes about the SDF “accepting some limited US aid” against ISIS and the like. It is difficult to see that much progressive content can survive this massive “military solution” and relentless, barbaric imperialist bombing. And to the extent that it does in some form, who is there to speak for the thousands killed, and their many thousands more relatives scarred for life as a result, and thousands more maimed?

Finally, as the SDF leaders are no doubt themselves aware, neither the Assad regime, Russia nor the US are ever going to be reliable allies, and so they will need to constantly watch their backs. Yet this means the only real ally of the Syrian Kurdish people are the Syrian Arab people. “Tactical” alliances by either Kurdish or Arab rebel leaderships that lead to significant bloodshed and betrayal between the two peoples have much more than “tactical” consequences. Neither side have been innocent on that score.

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