

Washington accuses Russia of bombing US-backed forces in Syria

By Jordan Shilton
2 March 2017

Washington accused Russia Wednesday of targeting US-backed opposition fighters in northern Syria in air strikes carried out a day earlier. Lieutenant General Steven Townsend, commander of US forces in Syria and Iraq, stated at a press briefing that Russian planes targeted the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters which enjoys US support.

Townsend noted that Russia immediately halted the strikes when they were informed by the US. US special forces, imbedded with the Arab and Kurdish fighters which are advancing on the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa, were just two miles away from the alleged location that was struck.

The Russian defense ministry swiftly rejected Townsend's allegations, declaring in a statement, "Not a single air strike on the regions specified by the US side was conducted by Russian or Syrian air forces."

Whatever the truth of these latest claims, the potential for similar incidents to occur is only increasing. President Donald Trump is expected to unveil a vast escalation of US military involvement in Syria and Iraq, including the possible creation of "safe zones" that would require significant military enforcement to maintain them.

Townsend added at the press briefing that he had submitted recommendations to the Trump administration on how to combat ISIS, but refused to disclose them.

The area in northern Syria where the alleged air strikes took place is increasingly crowded with aircraft and troops from countries with competing and often conflicting agendas. The location given by Townsend is close to the town of al-Baab, which Turkish forces seized from ISIS last month. The Turkish incursion into northern Syria, begun last August under the pretext of combatting ISIS, is above all aimed at preventing the US-backed Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) from expanding their territorial control in an area close to the Turkish border.

Russian aircraft have been supporting the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad as it seeks to target ISIS territory. On Wednesday, government forces and their allies, supported by Russian air strikes, advanced into the historic city of Palmyra, which has been held by Islamic State since December.

Pro-government forces have also advanced on the region controlled by the Kurds and their Arab allies from the south, resulting in fighting near al-Baab. As General Herbert Carlisle, head of US Air Combat Command, recently remarked, "As we continue to squeeze ISIS and continue to take more territory away from them, it becomes more complex."

The Free Syrian Army, a coalition which has collaborated with the Turkish army during its operations in Syria, said Tuesday that it would attack government forces from its positions in al-Baab. The FSA also vowed to take on the Kurdish-dominated SDF. The Turkish troops and FSA are now encircled by government troops and SDF fighters to the east, preventing them from making any advance on Raqqa as Turkey had pledged. Ankara is opposed to the YPG, which it designates as a terrorist organization, leading the offensive on Raqqa.

Chief responsibility for inciting the explosive Syria conflict, which could rapidly escalate into a direct clash between nuclear-armed powers, lies with US imperialism. The Obama administration instigated a regime change operation in 2011 by backing Islamist extremists to topple the Assad regime, which it viewed as an obstacle to the projection of the United States' geostrategic interests in the energy-rich Middle East. The conflict has claimed an estimated half a million lives and forced millions to flee their homes.

Russia joined the conflict in the fall of 2015 to prop up Assad, Moscow's closest ally in the region. Its air power enabled pro-government forces to rout US-backed militants, made up predominantly of the al-Nusra Front,

the former al-Qaida affiliate in Syria, in Aleppo. The offensive claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians.

The defeat was a major setback for US imperialism, which was largely sidelined in two rounds of peace talks held in the Kazakh capital of Astana in January and February. United Nations-chaired peace talks between government and opposition representatives are currently under way in Geneva, with another round of discussions led by Russia, Iran and Turkey planned for Astana on March 14.

The US media and political establishment are continuing to seek to exploit the reports of atrocities committed by Assad's forces to step up pressure for his removal. On Tuesday, Washington and Moscow clashed at the UN Security Council over a resolution proposing a new round of sanctions against Damascus over its use of chlorine gas bombs during the Aleppo offensive. Russia was joined by China in vetoing the resolution, which was proposed by Britain and France, and endorsed by the United States.

"It is a sad day on the Security Council," commented US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley. "When members start making excuses for other member states killing their own people, the world is definitely a more dangerous place."

Haley's pose as a moral guardian of world peace is nauseating. As the Security Council met, Iraqi forces continued to wage their brutal assault on the city of Mosul with US air and artillery support. The offensive to take back western Mosul from Islamic State has left upwards of 750,000 civilians stranded in the city with virtually no escape routes. Iraqi and US-led coalition air strikes have killed an unknown number of civilians, with even the UN acknowledging that more than half of the deaths in Mosul have been non-combatants. Reports from aid organizations have accused the Iraqi forces, many of whom are US-trained, of human rights abuses and war crimes, including summary executions of villagers.

US imperialism, which has waged virtually uninterrupted war in the Middle East over the past quarter century, bears responsibility for death and destruction on a vast scale. The estimated death toll from the illegal war in Iraq in 2003 has been put at 1 million, while the 2011 air war in Libya to topple the Gaddafi regime killed tens of thousands and destabilized the country, enabling Islamic extremist groups to flourish.

United Nations investigators stated in a report released Wednesday that both sides in the Syrian conflict have committed war crimes. It accused the government of

deliberately targeting a UN aid convoy in Aleppo last September, beginning by dropping barrel bombs, before rockets were fired from aircraft. The Syrian air force then reportedly opened machine gun fire on the survivors. The attack killed 14 aid workers.

This finding is in contrast to a previous UN inquiry in December, which said that it was not possible to attribute blame in the attack. The Assad regime has persistently denied its involvement, placing responsibility instead on the rebels. UN investigators said they were able to place responsibility on the Syrian government after viewing satellite images of the area.

The report also alleged that the Russian and Syrian bombardment of Aleppo, which included the use of unguided munitions, killed 300 people in the first four days of last September's offensive, including 96 children. It accused Russian aircraft of joining the Syrian air force in attacking hospitals, water distribution centers and other facilities, but lacked the evidence to accuse Russia of being involved in any of the war crimes described in the report.

The investigation also criticized US-backed rebels for their indiscriminate shelling of residential areas of western Aleppo, resulting in dozens of casualties. Rebels also blocked attempts by civilians in areas under their control to flee the fighting, using them as human shields against government attacks. Rebel groups favored supporters during the distribution of food and other aid supplies, and launched an attack on a Kurdish residential area of Sheikh Maqsoud, both acts described by the UN as war crimes.

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