

# Flight 17 Shoot-Down Scenario Shifts

**Exclusive:** From magazine covers to pronouncements by top politicians, Official Washington jumped to the conclusion that Ukrainian rebels and Russia were guilty in the shoot-down of a Malaysian passenger plane. But some U.S. intelligence analysts may see the evidence differently, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Contrary to the Obama administration's public claims blaming eastern Ukrainian rebels and Russia for the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, some U.S. intelligence analysts have concluded that the rebels and Russia were likely not at fault and that it appears Ukrainian government forces were to blame, according to a source briefed on these findings.

This judgment at odds with what President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have expressed publicly is based largely on the absence of U.S. government evidence that Russia supplied the rebels with a Buk anti-aircraft missile system that would be needed to hit a civilian jetliner flying at 33,000 feet, said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Despite U.S. spy satellites positioned over eastern Ukraine, U.S. intelligence agencies have released no images of a Buk system being transferred by Russians to rebel control, shipped into Ukraine, deployed into firing position and then being taken back to Russia. Though the Obama administration has released other images of Ukraine taken by U.S. spy satellites, the absence of any photos of a rebel-controlled Buk missile battery has been the dog not barking in the strident case that Official Washington has made in blaming the rebels and Russia for the July 17 shoot-down that killed 298 people.

Given the size of these missile batteries containing four 16-foot-long missiles the absence of this evidence prompted caution among U.S. intelligence analysts even as senior U.S. officials and the U.S. mainstream media rushed to judgment blaming the rebels and Russians.

In making that case, Kerry and other senior officials relied on claims made by the Ukrainian government along with items posted on "social media." These snippets of "evidence" included ambiguous remarks attributed to rebels who may have initially thought the shoot-down was another of their successful attacks on lower-flying Ukrainian military aircraft but who later insisted that they had not fired on the Malaysian plane and lacked the longer-range Buk missiles needed to reach above 30,000 feet.

If the U.S. intelligence analysts are correct that the rebels and Russia are

likely not responsible the chief remaining suspect would be the Ukrainian government, which does possess Buk anti-aircraft missiles and reportedly had two fighter jets in the vicinity of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 at the time of the shoot-down.

Some independent analyses of the initial evidence from the crash site suggest the jetliner may have been destroyed by an air-to-air attack, not by an anti-aircraft missile fired from the ground. Yet, the working hypothesis of the U.S. intelligence analysts is that a Ukrainian military Buk battery and the jetfighters may have been operating in collusion as they hunted what they thought was a Russian airliner, possibly even the plane carrying President Vladimir Putin on a return trip from South America, the source said.

The source added that the U.S. intelligence analysis does not implicate top Ukrainian officials, such as President Petro Poroshenko or Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, suggesting that the attack may have been the work of more extremist factions, possibly even one of the Ukrainian oligarchs who have taken an aggressive approach toward prosecuting the war against the ethnic Russian rebels in the east.

Obviously, a successful shoot-down of a Russian plane, especially one carrying Putin, could have been a major coup for the Kiev regime, which ousted Russian ally, President Viktor Yanukovich, last February touching off the civil war. Some prominent Ukrainian politicians, such as ex-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, have expressed the desire to kill Putin.

"It's about time we grab our guns and kill, go kill those damn Russians together with their leader," Tymoshenko said in an intercepted phone call in March, according to a leak published in the Russian press and implicitly confirmed by Tymoshenko.

### **The Shoot-Down Mystery**

The Malaysia Airlines plane, flying from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was not expected to be over the eastern part of Ukraine on the afternoon of July 17, but was rerouted to avoid bad weather. The plane was nearing Russian airspace when it was shot down.

Some early speculation had been that the Ukrainian military might have mistaken the plane for a Russian spy plane and attacked it in a scenario similar to the Soviet shoot-down of Korean Airlines Flight 007 in 1983 after misidentifying it as a U.S. spy plane.

In the two-plus weeks since the Ukrainian air disaster, there have been notable gaps between the more measured approach taken by U.S. intelligence analysts and

the U.S. politicians and media personalities who quickly rushed to the judgment blaming the rebels and Russia.

Only three days after the crash, Secretary of State Kerry did the rounds of the Sunday talk shows making what he deemed an "extraordinary circumstantial" case supposedly proving that the rebels carried out the shoot-down with missiles provided by Russia. He acknowledged that the U.S. government was "not drawing the final conclusion here, but there is a lot that points at the need for Russia to be responsible."

By then, I was already being told that the U.S. intelligence community lacked any satellite imagery supporting Kerry's allegations and that the only Buk missile system in that part of Ukraine appeared to be under the control of the Ukrainian military. [See Consortiumnews.com's "What Did US Spy Satellites See in Ukraine?"]

On the Tuesday after Kerry's Sunday declarations, mainstream journalists, including for the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post, were given a senior-level briefing about the U.S. intelligence information that supposedly pointed the finger of blame at the rebels and Russia. But, again, much of the "evidence" was derived from postings on "social media."

The Los Angeles Times article on the briefing took note of the uncertainties: "U.S. intelligence agencies have so far been unable to determine the nationalities or identities of the crew that launched the missile. U.S. officials said it was possible the SA-11 [the Buk anti-aircraft missile] was launched by a defector from the Ukrainian military who was trained to use similar missile systems."

That reference to a possible "defector" may have been an attempt to reconcile the U.S. government's narrative with the still-unreleased satellite imagery of the missile battery controlled by soldiers appearing to wear Ukrainian uniforms. But I'm now told that U.S. intelligence analysts have largely dismissed the "defector" possibility and are concentrating on the scenario of a willful Ukrainian shoot-down of the plane, albeit possibly not knowing its actual identity.

### **A Hardened Conventional Wisdom**

Nevertheless, even as the mystery of who shot down Flight 17 deepened, the U.S. conventional wisdom blaming Putin and the rebels hardened. The New York Times has reported Russia's culpability in the airline disaster as flat-fact.

On July 29, Obama prefaced his announcement of tougher sanctions against Russia by implicitly blaming Putin for the tragedy, too. Reading a prepared statement,

Obama said: “In the Netherlands, Malaysia, Australia, and countries around the world, families are still in shock over the sudden and tragic loss of nearly 300 loved ones senselessly killed when their civilian airliner was shot down over territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine.

“Since the shoot-down, however, Russia and its proxies in Ukraine have failed to cooperate with the investigation and to take the opportunity to pursue a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Ukraine. These Russian-backed separatists have continued to interfere in the crash investigation and to tamper with the evidence. They **have continued to shoot down Ukrainian aircraft** in the region. And because of their actions, scores of Ukrainian civilians continue to die needlessly every day.” [Emphasis added.]

Though one could argue that Obama was rhetorically tip-toeing around a direct accusation that the rebels and Russia were responsible for the Malaysia Airlines shoot-down, his intent clearly was to leave that impression. In other words, Obama was pandering to the conventional wisdom about Russian guilt and was misleading the American people about what the latest U.S. intelligence may suggest.

It’s also grotesquely deceptive to blame the Russians and the rebels for the indiscriminate shelling by government forces that have claimed hundreds of lives in eastern Ukraine. The rebels have been resisting what they regard as an illegitimate coup regime that, with the aid of neo-Nazi militias from western Ukraine, overthrew elected President Yanukovich in February and then moved to marginalize and suppress the ethnic Russian population in the east.

By presenting the conflict in a one-sided way, Obama not only misled Americans about the origins of the Ukraine crisis but, in effect, gave the Kiev regime a green light to slaughter more ethnic Russians. By pointing the finger of blame at Moscow for all the troubles of Ukraine, Obama has created more geopolitical space for Kiev to expand its brutal onslaught that now has included reported use of poorly targeted ballistic missiles against population centers.

Obama’s covering for the Kiev regime is even more outrageous if the U.S. intelligence analysts are right to suspect that Ukrainian forces were behind the Flight 17 shoot-down.

And as for who’s been responsible for destroying evidence of the Flight 17 shoot-down, an assault by the Ukrainian military on the area where the plane crashed not only delayed access by international investigators but appears to have touched off a fire that consumed plane debris that could have helped identify the reasons for the disaster.

On Saturday, the last paragraph of a New York Times story by Andrew E. Kramer reported that “the fighting ignited a fire in a wheat field that burned over fuselage fragments, including one that was potentially relevant to the crash investigation because it had what appeared to be shrapnel holes.” The shrapnel holes have been cited by independent analysts as possible evidence of an attack by Ukrainian jetfighters.

### **Accepting Reality**

Yet, given how far the U.S. political/media establishment has gone in its Flight 17 judgment pinning the blame on the rebels and Russia even before an official investigation was started, it’s not clear how those power-brokers would respond if the emerging analysis fingering Ukrainian forces turns out to be correct.

The embarrassment to high-level U.S. officials and prominent mainstream U.S. news outlets would be so extreme that it is hard to believe that the reality would ever be acknowledged. Indeed, there surely will be intense pressure on airline investigators and intelligence analysts to endorse the Putin-is-to-blame narrative.

And, if the investigators and analysts won’t go that far, they might at least avoid a direct contradiction of the conventional wisdom by suggesting that the Flight 17 mystery remains unsolved, something for historians to unravel.

Such has been the pattern in other cases of major mainstream mistakes. For instance, last year, some of the same players, including Secretary Kerry and the New York Times, jumped to conclusions blaming the Syrian government for an Aug. 21 sarin gas attack that killed hundreds of people in a Damascus suburb.

On Aug. 30, Kerry gave a bellicose speech filled with “we knows” but providing no verifiable evidence. A punitive U.S. bombing campaign against the Syrian government was averted at the last minute when President Obama decided to first seek congressional approval and then accepted President Putin’s assistance in working out a deal in which the Syrian government surrendered all its chemical weapons while still denying a role in the Aug. 21 incident.

Only later did much of Kerry’s case fall apart as new evidence pointed to an alternative explanation, that extremist Syrian rebels released the sarin as a provocation to push Obama across his “red line” and into committing the U.S. military to the Syrian civil war on the side of the rebels. But neither U.S. officialdom nor the mainstream U.S. press has acknowledged the dangerous “group think” that almost got the United States into another unnecessary war in the Middle East. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“The Collapsing Syria-Sarin Case.”](#)]

It may seem cynical to suggest that the powers-that-be in Official Washington

are so caught up in their own propaganda that they would prefer the actual killers of innocent people whether in Syria or Ukraine to go unpunished, rather than to admit their own mistakes. But that is often how the powerful react. Nothing is more important than their reputations.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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## Justifying Israel's Slaughter in Gaza

Mainstream U.S. politicians and press are engaged in their usual tolerance of Israel's slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza, hitting the usual talking points by condemning Hamas as "terrorist" and accepting the mass killings of civilians and children with a shrug, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar reflects.

By Paul R. Pillar

Applying a familiar label or phrase can be a substitute for good analysis, or for any analysis at all. The application activates a set of presumptions associated with the label or phrase while brushing aside any other relevant facts that may contradict those presumptions. The current conflict in Gaza has stimulated a surge in application of such rote phrases to one of the belligerents: Hamas.

Besides the familiar label of "terrorist group," which ignores other dimensions of Hamas as well as ignoring who is applying most lethal force against civilians, there also is the catchphrase that Hamas is "dedicated to the destruction of Israel." It is not just the Israeli government that keeps uttering that phrase, or even commentators seeking to justify Israel actions; one sees it in mainstream press in what are supposed to be objectively reported articles.

In assessing the validity of the phrase, let us set aside some related issues that also are very important in assessing what is going on today in the Gaza Strip. One concerns the origin of this conflagration, which began when [the Netanyahu government seized upon](#) a kidnapping and murder in the West Bank,

blamed it (falsely, we now know) on Hamas, launched large-scale raids and arrests, including detentions that reneged on a previous agreement with Hamas, and applied lethal force both in the West Bank and along the Gaza Strip that killed at least nine Palestinians, all before Hamas fired a single rocket or sent a single fighter through a tunnel in this round of fighting.

A second concern is how the slaughter of innocent civilians has reached wholesale proportions far beyond what can be justified by even the most nefarious intentions imputed to the adversary or by excuses about difficulties of targeting in close quarters.

A third involves how given the misery that had already been inflicted on Gazans in their open-air prison, it would be astounding if many did not hold intensely hostile attitudes toward Israel; if somehow Hamas could be made to go away it would just open space for groups more radical and unyielding than it.

Hamas does not have anything close to a capability to destroy Israel, and never will. The imbalance of strength is so lopsided as to make any talk of destruction of Israel, which has one of the most able military forces in the world, ludicrous. This is reflected in the results of the current fighting, and especially in the killing of innocent civilians, which is supposedly the chief focus of worries about Hamas. Hamas is probably giving everything it has got to the military effort, but the latest tally of civilians killed is three in Israel and probably more than a thousand in the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, Hamas leaders are certainly smart enough to realize their group will never have anything close to a capability to destroy Israel, even if they wanted to do so. Remember, these are the same leaders who currently are being given much credit for cleverness with regard to use of the tunnels. Hamas is not dedicated to something it knows it could never do anyway.

Most important, Hamas now has a substantial track record that contradicts the catchphrase. A [recent article by John Judis](#) reviews some of the relevant history. Hamas has repeatedly made it clear it will accept a long-term (meaning decades) *hudna* or truce with Israel, and who knows how much can change in decades, especially if there were such an agreed-upon peace.

Hamas has repeatedly made it clear it would accept a comprehensive peace accord with Israel if approved by a majority of Palestinians in a referendum. In its recent pact with Fatah (destruction of that pact evidently being the main purpose of the Netanyahu government's aggressive moves leading to the current fighting), Hamas agreed to surrender power to, and to support, a Palestinian government in which Hamas was given no portfolios and which explicitly accepts all the usual Western demands about recognizing Israel, adhering to all previous

agreements, and adhering to non-violence.

If this is the record of a group dedicated to the destruction of Israel, then the term *dedicated* has some new and unknown meaning. Hamas certainly does have a longer term goal, more attractive to it; that goal is to wield power over Palestinians in a Palestinian state.

Reference keeps getting made to extreme language in a party's charter (just as it was for years to the PLO's charter) and to Hamas leaders not uttering explicitly some phrase such as "I recognize Israel's right to exist." Why should they, when Israel clearly does not recognize any right of Hamas to exist, and has given no hints that it ever would?

Rather than saying Hamas is dedicated to the destruction of Israel, it would be closer to the truth to say that Israel is dedicated to the destruction of Hamas, although even that statement is not entirely true, because the current Israeli government implicitly relies on Hamas to police the Gaza Strip and explicitly relies on it as a bugbear and excuse for not negotiating seriously about Palestinian statehood.

Acceptance of statehood on the other side is indeed the critical comparison. In contrast to Hamas making it clear it would accept a two-state solution, the current Israeli government has not. Some members of the ruling coalition have been explicit in rejecting it and talking about their objective of an Eretz Israel from sea to river.

Netanyahu, who in many respects is one of the most moderate members of his own coalition, has given lip service to the idea of a Palestinian state but more recently, and evidently more honestly, has talked about Israel continuing a military occupation of the West Bank permanently.

In assessing barriers to a complete peace settlement, let alone to a truce to end the current hostilities, one question to ask is: which side's ambitions, or dedication to objectives, is the larger impediment? A second question is: which matters more, words (even if they are either empty promises to the other side, or high-flown rhetoric to one's own side) or deeds?

It will be hard enough to obtain even a short-term ceasing of the ongoing bloodshed, without feeding the fire with familiar but false phrases about who supposedly is dedicated to the destruction of whom. One of the main reasons it is hard is that Israel appears dedicated to giving Hamas no reason to stop fighting.

Part of the background to this problem, which [Nathan Thrall summarizes](#) in a new article, is the last Hamas-Israeli ceasefire agreement in November 2012, which



Hamas did its best to observe but Israel did not. Violent acts in the first few months after the agreement, including gunfire at farmers and fishermen, were almost all committed by Israel, which also did not fulfill a commitment to end the blockade of Gaza and to initiate indirect talks with Hamas about implementation of the agreement.

As Thrall observes, "The lesson for Hamas was clear. Even if an agreement was brokered by the US and Egypt, Israel could still fail to honor it."

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as [a blog post at The National Interest's Web site](#). Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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