

Facts Back Russia on Turkish Attack

Turkey claims its Nov. 24 shoot-down of a Russian warplane along the Syrian border was justified – and the Obama administration is publicly siding with its NATO ally – but a review of the evidence supports Russian accusations of an “ambush,” writes Gareth Porter for Middle East Eye.

By Gareth Porter

The United States and its NATO allies offered a ritual of NATO unity after Turkish officials presented their case that the shoot-down of a Russian jet occurred after two planes had penetrated Turkish airspace. The Turkish representative reportedly played a recording of a series warning the Turkish F-16 pilots had issued to the Russian jets without a Russian response, and U.S. and other NATO member states endorsed Turkey’s right to defend its airspace.

U.S. Defense Department spokesman Colonel Steve Warren supported the Turkish claim that 10 warnings had been issued over a period of five minutes. The Obama administration apparently expressed less concern about whether Russian planes had actually crossed into Turkish airspace. Col. Warren admitted that U.S. officials have still yet to establish where the Russian aircraft was located when a Turkish missile hit the plane.

Although the Obama administration is not about to admit it, the data already available supports the Russian assertion that the Turkish shoot-down was, as Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted, an “ambush” that had been carefully prepared in advance. The central Turkish claim that its F-16 pilots had warned the two Russian aircraft 10 times during a period of five minutes actually is the primary clue that Turkey was not telling the truth about the shoot-down.

The Russian Su-24 “Fencer” jet fighter, which is comparable to the U.S. F-111, is capable of a speed of 960 miles per hour at high altitude, but at low altitude its cruising speed is around 870 mph, or about 13 miles per minute. The navigator of the second plane confirmed after his rescue that the Su-24s were flying at cruising speed during the flight.

Close analysis of both the Turkish and Russian images of the radar path of the Russian jets indicates that the earliest point at which either of the Russian planes was on a path that might have been interpreted as taking it into Turkish airspace was roughly 16 miles from the Turkish border meaning that it was only a minute and 20 seconds away from the border.

Furthermore according to both versions of the flight path, five minutes before the shoot-down the Russian planes would have been flying eastward – away from

the Turkish border.

If the Turkish pilots actually began warning the Russian jets five minutes before the shoot-down, therefore, they were doing so long before the planes were even headed in the general direction of the small projection of the Turkish border in Northern Latakia province. In order to carry out the strike, in fact, the Turkish pilots would have had to be in the air already and prepared to strike as soon as they knew the Russian aircraft were airborne.

The evidence from the Turkish authorities themselves thus leaves little room for doubt that the decision to shoot down the Russian jet was made before the Russian jets even began their flight.

The motive for the strike was directly related to the Turkish role in supporting the anti-Assad forces in the vicinity of the border. In fact, the Erdogan government made no effort to hide its aim in the days before the strike. In a meeting with the Russian ambassador on Nov. 20, the foreign minister accused the Russians of “intensive bombing” of “civilian Turkmen villages” and said there might be “serious consequences” unless the Russians ended their operations immediately.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was even more explicit, declaring that Turkish security forces “have been instructed to retaliate against any development that would threaten Turkey’s border security.” Davutoglu further said: “If there is an attack that would lead to an intense influx of refugees to Turkey, required measures would be taken both inside Syria and Turkey.”

The Turkish threat to retaliate not against Russian penetration of its airspace but in response to very broadly defined circumstances on the border came amid the latest in a series of battles between the Syrian government and religious fighters.

The area where the plane was shot down is populated by the Turkmen minority. They have been far less important than foreign fighters and other forces who have carried out a series of offensives in the area since mid-2013 aimed at threatening President Bashar al-Assad’s main Alawite redoubt on the coast in Latakia province.

Charles Lister, the British specialist who was visiting Latakia province frequently in 2013, noted in an August 2013 interview, “Latakia, right up to the very northern tip [i.e. in the Turkmen Mountain area], has been a stronghold for foreign fighter-based groups for almost a year now.” He also observed that, after Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) had emerged in the north, al-Nusra Front and its allies in the area had “reached out” to ISIL and

that one of the groups fighting in Latakia had “become a front group” for ISIL.

In March 2014, the religious rebels launched a major offensive with heavy Turkish logistical support to capture the Armenian town of Kessab on the Mediterranean coast of Latakia very close to the Turkish border. An Istanbul newspaper, Bagcilar, quoted a member of the Turkish parliament’s foreign affairs committee as reporting testimony from villagers living near the border that thousands of fighters had streamed across five different border points in cars with Syrian plates to participate in the offensive.

During that offensive, moreover, a Syrian jet responding to the offensive against Kessab was shot down by the Turkish air force in a remarkable parallel to the downing of the Russian jet. Turkey claimed that the jet had violated its airspace but made no pretence about having given any prior warning. The purpose of trying to deter Syria from using its airpower in defense of the town was obvious.

Now the battle in Latakia province has shifted to the Bayirbucak area, where the Syrian air force and ground forces have been trying to cut the supply lines between villages controlled by Nusra Front and its allies and the Turkish border for several months. The key village in the Nusra Front area of control is Salma, which has been in jihadist hands ever since 2012. The intervention of the Russian Air Force in the battle has given a new advantage to the Syrian army.

The Turkish shoot-down was thus in essence an effort to dissuade the Russians from continuing their operations in the area against al-Nusra Front and its allies, using not one but two distinct pretexts: on one hand a very dubious charge of a Russian border penetration for NATO allies, and on the other, a charge of bombing Turkmen civilians for the Turkish domestic audience.

The Obama administration’s reluctance to address the specific issue of where the plane was shot down indicates that it is well aware of that fact. But the administration is far too committed to its policy of working with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to force regime change in Syria to reveal the truth about the incident.

Obama’s response to the shoot-down blandly blamed the problem on the Russian military being in part of Syria. “They are operating very close to a Turkish border,” he declared, and if the Russians would only focus solely on Daesh, “some of these conflicts or potentials for mistakes or escalation are less likely to occur.”

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Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare. [This article originally appeared at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/real-turkeys-shoot-down-russian-jet-1615790737>]

How Gaddafi's Ouster Unleashed Terror

Exclusive: Hillary Clinton still sees the 2011 Libyan "regime change" as a feather in her cap as Secretary of State, but the violent ouster of Muammar Gaddafi turned Libya into a badlands for Islamic terrorists who have spread their killing sprees far and wide, just as Gaddafi warned, says Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The bloody terrorist attacks in Paris had their genesis not only in the poor Muslim suburbs of France and Belgium, and on the battlefields of Syria, but also in NATO's operation to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The Libyan strongman gave the West fair warning at the time that his ouster would give an enormous boost to radical jihadists. Because no one in power listened, thousands have died in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Mali and now France.

Among the many extremist groups running wild in Libya today is the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh). Headquartered in the city of Sirte, the late Col. Gaddafi's hometown on the central Mediterranean coast, the ISIS colony now hosts as many as 3,000 foreign fighters who enforce their iron rule over a 150-mile stretch of the country's coast. ISIS also has a strong presence in northeastern Libya, around the towns of Derna and Benghazi.

Since Gaddafi's fall in 2011, Libya has exported thousands of its own extremists to support jihad in other countries. In Syria, one group of Libyan supporters of ISIS went by the name of Katibat al-Battar al Libi. One of its leaders was none other than Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected organizer of the recent Paris attacks.

His connection to those Libyan fighters in Syria was first established back in January, before the killings in Paris, by Belgian researcher Pieter van Ostaeyen. On Jan. 15, Belgian police killed two members of the radical organization in the town of Verviers, where they were said to be planning a major terrorist attack.

“After the foiled attacks in Verviers in Belgium,” van Ostaeyen wrote, “it became clear that the main suspect Abdelhamid Abaaoud can be linked directly to this group. His little brother Younes (aged 14 and hence probably the youngest foreign fighter in Syria) has been portrayed multiple times in the ranks of Libyan fighters in Syria.”

Photos posted on van Ostaeyen’s blog show grinning, bearded Belgian fighters posed for group portraits in Syria, as if on holiday. He recently observed that many Belgian jihadists were attracted to Katibat al-Battar because they emigrated from eastern Morocco, where they speak a dialect similar to that in Libya.

Last year, Washington researcher Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi called the group “the Libyan division of the Islamic State of Iraq.” He added, “Libya itself has been a big source of muhajireen in both Iraq and Syria over the past decade, so the fact that there is a battalion devoted to recruiting Libyan fighters should come as no surprise. The existence of Katiba al-Bittar al-Libi as a front group for ISIS perhaps reflects a wider pro-ISIS trend across central North Africa.”

Spreading Violence

A subsequent report by two members of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commented on the role of Libyan jihadists who returned home from Syria to commit atrocities on behalf of ISIS, including car bombings, attacks on hotels and embassies, and a brutal slaughter of Egyptian Copts. The analysts traced much of the violence to veterans of Katibat al-Battar, who were active in Derna and Benghazi:

“Libyans had already begun traveling to fight in Syria in 2011, joining existing jihadi factions or starting their own. In 2012, one group of Libyans in Syria declared the establishment of the Battar Brigade in a statement laden with anti-Shia sectarianism. The Battar Brigade founders also thanked ‘the citizens of Derna,’ a city in northeastern Libya long known as a hotbed of radical Islamism, for their support for the struggle in Syria.

“Later, the Battar Brigade fighters in Syria would pledge loyalty to the Islamic State, and fight for it in both Syria and Iraq, including against its al-Qaeda rivals. . . . In the spring of 2014, many Battar Brigade fighters returned to Libya. In Derna, they reorganized themselves as the Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC). In September, an Islamic State delegation . . . arrived in Libya. After being received by the IYSC, they collected pledges of allegiance to the Islamic State’s self-appointed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, from . . . fighters in Derna. They then declared eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State.”

The estimated 800 Battar Brigade veterans in Derna proceeded to execute local judges, journalists, army officers and anyone else deemed un-Islamic. They sent suicide bombers to Tobruk, the temporary headquarters of Libya's national parliament, to Benghazi, and to the embassies of Egypt and United Arab Emirates in Tripoli.

New Yorker correspondent Jon Lee Anderson reported that "a rival militia loyal to Al Qaeda" wrested control of Derna from the Battar Brigade veterans this summer. "The victors are said to have marched the captured ISIS commander through the streets naked before executing him. ISIS lost Derna, but in the past few months they have taken Qaddafi's home town of Sirte and surrounding areas in Libya's 'Oil Crescent,' and have begun attacks on the outer defenses of the city of Misrata."

Back in March 2011, while battling foes of his regime, Col. Gaddafi warned that such mayhem could follow his defeat. He told a French newspaper, "I am surprised that nobody understands that this is a fight against terrorism." If his opponents prevailed, Gaddafi predicted, "There would be Islamic jihad in front of you in the Mediterranean." He was right.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy chose to ignore such warnings and, with British Prime Minister David Cameron, dragged a reluctant President Barack Obama into supporting NATO strikes against Gaddafi in the name of humanitarian motives.

But in blatant violation of the United Nations Security Council mandate approving the use of force only to protect civilians, Sarkozy, Cameron, and Obama admitted in an op-ed article on April 14, 2011, that their real agenda was to oust Gaddafi "for good" so that "a new generation of leaders" could take over.

Hillary Clinton's Boast

NATO leaders were triumphant after opponents murdered Gaddafi on Oct. 20, 2011. In the infamous words of then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, echoing Julius Caesar, "We came, we saw, he died."

With the release of Hillary Clinton's emails, we now know that she had learned from an adviser that France was stoking the uprising to impose a "new government of Libya to favor French firms and national interests, particularly regarding the oil industry in Libya." France used humanitarian flights to shuttle executives from leading oil, construction and aerospace firms into the country to negotiate with the opposition so they could profit from the new order.

To this day, Clinton remains unapologetic about her strong advocacy of U.S. intervention. Yet Libya has become a lawless land fought over by 1,700 armed

groups and militias. At least a third of the country's population has been affected by the fighting and lacks adequate access to health services, according to the United Nations.

"Libya today, in spite of the expectations we had at the time of the revolution, it's much, much worse," one Mideast expert told PBS Frontline. "Criminality is skyrocketing. Insecurity is pervasive. There are no jobs. It's hard to get food and electricity. There's fighting, there's fear. I see very few bright spots."

Outside of Libya, the result of Western intervention was to spread jihadism and deadly weapons all over North Africa and the Middle East. Al Qaeda's North African affiliate obtained vast stores of rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades, heavy machine guns, explosives, and even shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles from Gaddafi's armories.

Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, said Islamist militias in the region became "armed almost to the extent of a small army" after the collapse of Libya.

In Mali, an affiliate of Al Qaeda used their new firepower to occupy the northern half of the country, impose strict Shariah law, and seize and destroy much of the historic city of Timbuktu. In November, Al Qaeda fighters stormed a luxury hotel in Mali's capital, killing more than two dozen captives before French and Malian troops dislodged the terrorists.

Elsewhere in North Africa, reported Jon Lee Anderson, "Gunmen who trained with ISIS in Libya were involved in the murder of twenty foreign tourists at a Tunis museum in March, and thirty-eight more tourists, most of them British, at a seaside resort in Tunisia in June."

And then there is Syria, where Libyans flocked to hone their fighting skills. In 2012 the Defense Intelligence Agency, which predicted the rise of ISIS in Syria, noted that after Gaddafi's downfall, jihadists shipped weapons from former Libyan military stockpiles to Syria to arm Salafist rebels.

Indeed, one of the main jobs of the CIA station in Benghazi, before the devastating Sept. 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. mission there, was to track those arms shipments. The group behind that attack, Ansar al-Sharia Benhazi, was blacklisted by the United Nations in 2014 for "links to Al-Qaeda and for running camps for the Islamist State group," according to the *Daily Telegraph*.

First Iraq, then Libya, now Syria: Western leaders, along with their allies in the Arab states and Israel, have created multiple monsters that will threaten our societies for years to come. By all means, let us condemn those terrorists' crimes against innocent civilians, wherever they live. But let us not forget our

leaders' complicity in helping to unleash them against us.

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Ben Carson and the 'War on Christmas'

An absurd but popular complaint on America's Christian Right is that Christmas is under attack despite the nation's extraordinary month-long birthday party for Jesus. But, ironically, one Christian Right favorite, Ben Carson, may oppose this celebration of Christmas, as Nat Parry notes.

By Nat Parry

Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon turned Republican presidential contender, may have a skeleton in his closet that could disqualify him from leading the United States of America in the eyes of millions of his supporters.

No, it's not the fabrications of significant chunks of his life story that [he's told](#), nor his [opposition](#) to Muslims being president, nor even his [reprehensible views](#) on keeping Guantanamo open into perpetuity. No, it's something much more serious than that at least, more serious as far as the average Fox News-loving Republican voter is concerned.

As a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, there is a strong possibility that he does not support the month-long birthday party for Jesus known as Christmas.

What's that, you ask? How could a leading figure in the Republican Party one who was [pulling ahead](#) of frontrunner Donald Trump in support from the key demographic of Christian evangelicals possibly be an opponent of the so-called "sacred Christian holiday" of Christmas? Well, it turns out that the religious camp of Seventh-day Adventism to which he belongs not only insists on [observing the Sabbath](#) on Saturday, but also, perhaps more controversially, rejects the celebration of Christmas.

As [explained](#) on their website, "Seventh-day Adventists do not celebrate Christmas or other religious festivals throughout the calendar year as holy

feasts established by God.” As strict adherents to the teachings contained in the Bible, they correctly point out that the “historical reason for adapting December 25 as the birthday of Jesus has no biblical foundation, but is due to the change of year from darkness to light, which happens in the midst of the winter in the northern hemisphere.”

In fairness, although Adventists do not celebrate Christmas, they go to great pains in explaining that they don't oppose the Christmas holiday *per se*. In fact, numerous articles written by members of the Church offer rather thoughtful, nuanced and historically informed analysis on this controversial topic, emphasizing that while Adventists should not personally engage in this pagan tradition, the Christmas season is nevertheless a useful opportunity for adherents to the Church to “speak with other people about the gospel.”

But considering the lack of nuance or historical understanding on this topic among many Republican voters who are all too eager to pounce on any perceived slight to their Christmas celebration as evidence of religious persecution, it is not clear how the Adventists' anti-Christmas narrative will go over with the GOP base.

After all, entire websites are devoted to documenting an alleged liberal-secularist conspiracy to rob conservatives of their God-given right to say “Merry Christmas” and force their religious views on everyone else for the whole month of December every year.

Glenn Beck's TheBlaze, for example, has a “War on Christmas” page with horror stories of Nativity scenes being banned from public spaces, and Fox News' War on Christmas blog has led the charge this year against Starbucks' red and green holiday cups, which have been deemed insufficiently Christmassy by many right-wing Christmas warriors.

So, will we be seeing denunciations of Ben Carson and his Church in the conservative blogosphere any time soon?

There is a wealth of material for the self-appointed defenders of Christmas to choose from, such as the Adventist Biblical Research Institute's totally factual claim that “that Christians adopted and adapted a pagan feast,” designating Dec. 25 as Jesus's birthday and ensuring that Christmas would be forever “connected with the Roman cult of the Invincible Sun.”

According to this account, this was done partially because “God, in His providence, chose not to preserve for us a record of the day of Jesus' birth.” (The lax record-keeping of Roman officials in First Century Judea apparently had nothing to do with it.)

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Carson expounded on his religious beliefs and responded in particular to Trump's efforts to paint him as part of an unconventional faith, i.e., not a true religious conservative deserving of evangelical support. During a rally last month in Florida, Trump noted that as a Presbyterian, his religious views are "middle of the road." He then added, "I mean, Seventh-day Adventist, I don't know about."

Unfortunately, Carson's views on celebrating Christmas did not come up in the AP interview, but he did address the issue of an end-of-the-world prophecy held by many Adventists. Ellen White, who together with husband James helped found the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1844, predicted that the government, with the help of Christians who observe the Sabbath on Sunday, will eventually persecute Seventh-day Adventists for their Saturday worship, leading somehow to the End of Times.

"I think there's a wide variety of interpretations of that," said Carson. "There's a lot of persecution of Christians going on already in other parts of world. And some people assume that's going to happen every place. I'm not sure that's an appropriate assumption. If you look at what's going on today with persecution of Christians, particularly in the Middle East, I believe that's really more what's being talked about."

Regarding the Adventists' perceived anti-Catholic prejudice, which White expressed in her Nineteenth Century writings, Carson rejected that claim. "I love Catholics. My best friend is Catholic. I have several honorary degrees from Catholic universities," he said.

One wonders, however, what he might think of the recent comments of the world's pre-eminent Catholic, Pope Francis. In a powerful sermon at the Casa Santa Maria, the Pope told churchgoers that, although the holiday season is nearly upon them, now is not a time for celebration.

"We are close to Christmas. There will be lights, there will be parties, bright trees, even Nativity scenes, all decked out, while the world continues to wage war," Pope Francis said. "It's all a charade. The world has not understood the way of peace. The whole world is at war."

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Avoiding the Trap of Retaliation

The Paris terror attacks brought demands for retaliation against the Islamic State, which claimed responsibility, but by lashing out against the group in Syria and Iraq the West may be falling into a trap that will only strengthen the terrorists, writes John V. Whitbeck.

By John V. Whitbeck

For French President François Hollande, the attacks in Paris on Nov. 13, carried out by French and Belgian citizens with the Islamic State claiming credit, changed maybe not everything but certainly his tone and emphasis. He has dialed down his oft-repeated “Assad must go” mantra. Defeating and destroying the Islamic State has become France’s urgent priority.

Hollande set out to pull together a “grand coalition” of all concerned states to achieve the defeat and destruction of the Islamic State a worthy goal if it were possible. But Hollande’s peripatetic travels this past week and his meetings with David Cameron, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Matteo Renzi and Vladimir Putin have made clear that the attacks in Paris have not changed the priorities of some potential allies in the fight.

For the Sunni Gulf states, the priorities remain “regime change” in Syria (regardless of what might replace the regime), keeping Shiite Iran down and fighting perceived “Iranian proxies” (most notably now in Yemen).

For Turkey, the priorities remain “regime change” in Syria (regardless of what might replace the regime) and keeping the Kurds down, both in Turkey and in Syria.

For the United States and the United Kingdom, the priorities remain “regime change” in Syria (with little regard for what might replace the regime), keeping Russia down and keeping the Sunni Gulf states happy.

For Russia and Iran, the priorities remain preventing another Western “regime change” in the region (after the Western “successes” in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya) and preserving the Syrian state, their long-time ally, and its state structures (with or without Bashar al-Assad).

For other countries without strong views on the merits or demerits of “regime change” in Syria, the Islamic State does not appear to be cause for undue concern. Their governments may also recognize that even modest or token involvement against the Islamic State would, without having any constructive impact, raise the risk of retaliation against their own people perhaps, as in

Paris, by “their own people.”

For many Sunnis living in the Islamic State’s “caliphate” covering parts of Iraq and Syria the organization’s harsh, austere and often savagely brutal rule appears preferable to restored rule by what are widely perceived by Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis to be Shiite-dominated or even Iranian-dominated governments.

As for outside pressure, regional Sunni states currently show no interest whatsoever in deploying their own ground forces against fellow Sunnis. Western “boots on the ground” beyond being a politically hard sell after the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan is an avidly sought boon by the Islamic State, which would present itself as Islam’s defender against Western “Crusaders.” And it is widely recognized that aerial bombardments alone cannot defeat and destroy the Islamic State. So, what are Western states to do?

Perhaps, the best (though emotionally unsatisfying) option is to resist succumbing to hysterical calls for yet more and intensified Western violence in the Muslim world and for more restrictions on civil liberties at home, which are certain to stimulate more conversions to jihadi militancy while diminishing the quality of life for all.

Perhaps, the best course is for Western states to relax and accept that the Islamic State is an ugly reality that is here to stay, at least for some considerable time, that containment is the best that can be hoped for and achieved in the near term and that containment can best be achieved by the Iraqi and Syrian governments and their own military forces.

Perhaps, if the West’s sits back and waits, the Islamic State’s aura of excitement will wear off, it will become just one more failed state like so many other regional states in which the West has previously intervened and the peoples of the region might then be able to sort out their own problems in their own way.

Since, through its ill-conceived experiments on the Muslim world, the West has played the role of Dr. Frankenstein in creating the monster now called the Islamic State, it can be argued that the West has a moral responsibility to do everything in its power to right its wrongs in the region.

It would take a level of wisdom and courage rarely attained by Western politicians to recognize that, in the current circumstances and notwithstanding their moral responsibility, Western states can now achieve more by doing less and to act accordingly.

John V. Whitbeck is a Paris-based international lawyer who writes frequently on the Middle East.

Is Assad Part of a Solution?

A favorite talking point of Official Washington is that Syrian President Assad is “a magnet for terrorism” who thus must be removed, but that’s a line not stuck on other leaders who are attacked by terrorists. A more sober assessment would see Assad as a necessary part of a solution, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Here is the situation in Syria as *I see it*: Russia is taking a long-range view and wants stability in post-ISIS Syria. France and the United States are taking the short-range view and really have no achievable plans for Syria’s future stability. Turkey appears to have given little thought to Syria’s future. Ankara may be willing to see indefinite chaos in Syria if it hurts the Assad regime on the one hand and the Kurds on the other.

The Russians may be the only party interested in the long-term political stability of Syria. There is certainly no doubt that President Vladimir Putin is more determined than Western leaders to act on the fact that the various so-called “moderate” parties standing against the Assad regime cannot work together and that this fault cannot be corrected by enticements from the United States. For the Russians, this fact makes the Damascus government the only source of future stability.

This understanding, and not Soviet-era nostalgia, has led Russia to support President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, which possesses a working government, a standing army, and the loyalty of every religious minority group in the country.

Some might object that both Assad and Putin are “dictators” and “thugs” (by the way, “thugs in suits” in the U.S. government are all too common). But this cannot serve as a serious objection. The only alternative to Damascus’s victory is perennial civil war fragmenting the country into warlord zones. With the possible exception of Israel, this scenario is in no one’s interest, although it seems that the leaders of in Washington and Paris are too politically circumscribed to act on this fact.

U.S. and France

Thus, it would appear that neither the U.S. nor France really cares about Syria as a stable nation. Once the present military capacity of ISIS is eliminated, Washington and Paris may well clandestinely continue to support a low-level civil war against the Assad regime. In this effort they will have the help of

Turkey, the Kurds and Israel. The result will be ongoing decimation of the Syrian population and fragmentation of its territory.

As if to justify U.S. strategy, President Barack Obama, with French President Francois Hollande by his side, recently boasted that the United States stood at the head of a “65-country coalition” fighting terrorism in Syria. But this is a hollow claim. Most of these countries are coalition members in name only and some of them, like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf state governments, play a double game. And then Obama dismissed Russia and Iran as “outliers” and “a coalition of two.” Yet those two countries are the Syrian nation’s best hope for future stability.

The fact is that U.S. policy in Syria has been a losing proposition from the beginning just because of its hostility to the Assad government. Despite its air campaign against ISIS, Washington has no ground component nor any answer to the political vacuum in Syria. Both missing parts are to be found in an alliance with Damascus.

Refusal to make that alliance has also opened Washington to building neoconservative political pressure to increase U.S. military presence in the area. But American “boots on the ground” in Syria is both a dangerous option as well as an unnecessary one. Syrian government boots can do the job if they are properly supported. The support has come from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. It is the United States and its coalition who are the “outliers.”

The Turkey Connection

It is not easy to explain Turkey’s animosity toward Damascus. Prior to the civil war in Syria, the two countries had good relations. Then something changed. It may have been something as foolish as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s taking personal offense against President Assad because the latter chose to heed the advice of Iran rather than Turkey at the beginning of the war. Whatever happened, it sent Ankara off on an anti-Assad crusade.

That anti-Assad mindset is probably the back story to the recent reckless Turkish decision to shoot down a Russian warplane operating in support of Syrian government troops close to the Turkish border.

The Turks say the Russian jet strayed into Turkish airspace. The Russians deny this. The Turks claim that they tried to communicate with the Russian plane to warn it away. When it did not respond, they destroyed it.

Of late Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has said Ankara “didn’t know the nationality of the plane that was brought down until Moscow announced it was Russian.” This statement is frankly unbelievable given that Davutoglu followed

it up with an admission that Turkey had complained to Russian about military flights in this exact border area. He also asserted that both Russian and Syrian operations in this region of northern Syria should stop because ISIS has no presence there. This assertion makes no sense, since Damascus's aim is to reassert government authority by the defeat of armed rebels regardless of their organizational affiliation.

It is hard to say whether the Turks are telling the truth about an incursion into their airspace. Most of their evidence, such as recorded Turkish warnings to the Russian plane, is easily fabricated. However, in the end it does not really matter if the plane crossed the border. There was no need to shoot it down.

If the Russian jet strayed into Turkish airspace, there would have been a range of options. The Turks could be very sure that the Russian plane had no hostile intention toward their country, and they should have assumed, for the sake of minimizing any consequences, that no provocation was meant on the part of the Russia.

In other words, the Turks should have acted as if the alleged over-flight was a mistake. The Turks could have then shadowed the Russian plane in a way that coaxed it back into Syrian airspace and followed the incident up with a formal protest to Moscow. Instead they made the worst possible choice and shot the plane down. Now both Ankara and Washington are shouting about Turkey's right to defend its territory despite the fact that the Russian plane never posed any threat.

In all of the bloodshed, population displacement and terror that has accompanied the Syrian civil war, the least-considered party has been the Syrian people and their future. ISIS, or at least its present infrastructure, will ultimately be destroyed. However, while that destruction is necessary, it is an insufficient outcome because it fails to provide long-term stability.

Right now that vital ingredient can only be supplied by the reimposition of order by Damascus. The folks in Washington, Paris and Ankara might not like that, but they are not the ones facing a future of anarchy. And indeed, the more they stand in the way of Damascus, the more chaos they will help create.

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The Collision Course in Syria

Exclusive: President Obama's continued insistence on "regime change" in Syria and his support for Sunni jihadists not called ISIS have escalated tensions with Moscow, especially after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane along the Syrian border. This division may help only the extremists, writes Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

With Turkey downing a Russian Su-24 warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border this week, dire predictions about the dangers of escalation in the Syrian conflict are coming true. Events are spinning out of control as Syria turns into a happy hunting ground for military forces locked on a mutual collision course.

Up to 50 U.S. Special Operations troops are due to enter Syria shortly in support of a hastily assembled Arab-Kurdish coalition that could easily come under Russian or Turkish attack. The U.S. is stepping up its bombing raids, destroying another 238 ISIS fuel trucks in eastern Syria last weekend. Russia is targeting tankers plus an ISIS training camp in Idlib in Syria's far north, while France has also upped its bombing campaign since Nov. 13 in response to ISIS claiming credit for the terror attacks in Paris.

If Turkey seemed to be holding back from joining the fight against ISIS, the fact that ethnically-related Syrian Turkmen villagers have come into Russia's line of fire as part of Moscow's broader attack on Islamic militants seeking to overthrow the Syrian government may have been a significant factor in persuading Turkey to enter the fray by shooting down the Russian plane.

So, Turkey is fighting the Russians and Kurds, who are fighting ISIS, which is fighting the Syrian government plus Hezbollah and Iranian forces. ISIS has also blown up a Russian tourist flight over the Sinai, set off suicide bombs in Beirut and shot up civilians in Paris. It's a three- or four-way brawl that grows more chaotic by the week.

The day before the Paris attacks, President Barack Obama told ABC *This Week's* George Stephanopoulos that ISIS has been "contained" in its caliphate in northern Syria and Iraq. But now it is clear that ISIS has not been contained at all. Along with Al Qaeda, which claimed credit for a bloody assault on an upscale hotel in Bamako, Mali, ISIS is metastasizing across half the globe while many of the world's leading powers throw themselves into the maelstrom.

A lot of people have had a hand in creating this perfect storm, but there is no question who has played the leading role, i.e. the United States. From the

moment Obama declared in August 2011 that “the time has come for President Assad to step aside,” the “indispensable nation” has played an indispensable part in helping Turkey and the Arab Gulf states turn Syria into a bleeding wound.

Obama claimed to be seeking a democratic solution to Syria’s growing civil war, and initially the claim did not seem implausible. After all, he had a lot of important forces on his side. One was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, hailed by not only the White House but the Washington Post and New York Times as living proof that Islamism and democracy could be successfully combined.

Another was Saudi Arabia, a country synonymous with “moderation” as far as official Washington is concerned, plus the other Gulf states as well. Economically flush after oil had stabilized at \$100 a barrel, the petro-sheiks promised to help with “regime change” in Syria, so how could Obama go wrong?

One Wrench?

From this viewpoint, there was one wrench in the works Iran. A key backer of the Assad government, it was a regional threat that many Western experts agreed had to be put in its place. Never mind that these same experts had almost unanimously backed George W. Bush’s disastrous invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq – their arguments carried the day regardless.

Thus, Obama’s Syria policy all but wrote itself. Overthrowing Assad in order to curtail Iranian influence would be the chief goal, while funding would come from the Gulf states. Working with Syrian exiles in southern Turkey, the C.I.A. would see to it that the arms and money reached the right rebel groups.

It all seemed so simple. Tinkers to Evers to Chance: with so many “moderates” playing ball, “moderation” would surely emerge triumphant.

But the effort soon encountered bumps in the road. With mobs chanting “Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin,” Syrian opponents of Assad soon turned out to be less democratic than previously believed. With Syrian minorities not just Alawites, but Christians, Druze, Yazidis, and others huddling in fear over the prospect of a militant Sunni victory, growing numbers threw their support behind Assad. So did Sunnis appalled at the prospect of returning to a mullah dictatorship that the Baathist government had successfully overthrown.

The local forces working with the C.I.A. in Turkey turned out to be members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the militant fundamentalist outfit whose longtime slogan declares: “Allah is our objective; the Qur’an is the Constitution; the prophet is our leader; jihad is our way; death for the sake of Allah is our wish.” Erdoğan turned out to be an authoritarian drawn to ever more extreme forms of

Sunni Islam while the Gulf states turned out to be autocratic, no surprise for anyone remotely familiar with their political structures. Instead of democrats, they therefore channeled money to Sunni extremists eager to drown Shi'ite resistance in blood.

Although the White House did its best to avert its eyes, Al Qaeda was also a growing force among the rebels, as was ISIS (also known as Islamic State, ISIL or Daesh). Rather than "moderation," such forces stood for sectarianism, bigotry and jihad.

Massive Miscalculation

A quarter of a million people would eventually die as a consequence of Obama's miscalculation, 7.6 million would be displaced, and another four million would be driven abroad, all this in a country of just 22 million prior to the onset of civil war.

To put this in perspective, it is as if 3.6 million Americans had died as a result of a foreign-financed civil war, 110 million had been driven out of their homes, and another 58 million had been forced to flee abroad to Canada, Mexico or whatever other country would take them, where they would have no choice but to beg or perhaps sell ballpoint pens to passers-by in hopes of scratching out a living.

Instead of democracy, the U.S.-led push to overthrow Assad put Syria on the path to catastrophe. Obama could have hit the pause button at any point once it became clear where the effort was going.

The period following the August 2013 Ghouta poison gas attack, when it became clear that the rush to blame Assad had nearly led to an all-out NATO assault, would have been a good moment for a reappraisal. But the timing was wrong. The Saudis, Turks, and Israelis were all uneasy that Obama was seeking a rapprochement with Iran, and they would have been doubly spooked if Obama had backed off from his vow to overthrow Assad. Hence, Obama felt he had no choice but to double down. Destroying Syria was easier than disrupting key Middle Eastern alliances.

Something similar would later occur in Yemen. As U.S. and Iranian negotiators edged closer and closer to a deal on Iran's nuclear program, the Obama administration had to be ever more sensitive to its allies' concerns. This was especially the case with Saudi Arabia, the dominant power in the region, which was alert for the slightest indication that Washington was tipping in favor of its archenemy.

After pouring "hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of

military weapons" into the anti-Shi'ite struggle in Syria, as Joe Biden would put it; sending troops to put an end to democratic demonstrations into Shi'ite-majority Bahrain, and then savagely repressing Shi'ite protests in their own Eastern Province, the Saudis decided that the time had come to suppress yet another Shi'ite force.

This was the Shi'ite Houthi tribesmen in Yemen who had risen in revolt against a rising tide of Saudi-funded Sunni-Wahhabist radicalism. Claiming that the Houthis were nothing more than a cat's paw for Iran, the Saudis, backed by most of the other Gulf states, commenced nightly bomb raids that quickly reduced the already impoverished country to ruin.

This would have been another appropriate time to hit the pause button. After signing on to the anti-Shi'ite crusade in Syria, Obama might have decided that one jihad was enough. But instead he ordered the Pentagon to provide technical backup for the Saudi war machine, selling the kingdom \$1.29 billion worth of smart bombs to replace those used to flatten Yemeni neighborhoods and sending airborne tankers to refuel Saudi fighters in mid-flight so they could reach their targets.

By Nov. 13, U.S. tankers had flown some 471 refueling sorties, delivering more than 17 million pounds of fuel. As a result, more than 2,500 civilians have died, according to UN estimates, while health, water, and sanitation services have all been brought to the brink of collapse.

"The reason the Saudis are there conducting these airstrikes," State Department spokesman Mark Toner said earlier this month, "is because of the ongoing violence stoked by Houthi rebels." If translated into straight talk, he was saying that the Saudi Wahhabists are right because they are an essential ally of the United States while Shi'ites are wrong because they are not. The importance of maintaining the Washington-Riyadh axis trumps all other considerations.

Worsening Violence

The upshot has been widening waves of sectarianism and violence. Although few Western observers will admit it, Assad has done the world a service simply by hanging on. If he hadn't, a path would have been cleared for an ISIS takeover in Damascus, the consequences of which are all but incalculable.

With Islamic State's black banners flying from the presidential palace, there would not be a million refugees pounding on European doors, but three, four or maybe five times that number. Instead of 130 dead in Paris, there would be thousands as ISIS used its control of an entire nation-state to launch more and more attacks.

The Saudis wouldn't care since they have all but closed their doors to the refugees, few of whom want to live in bizarre and brutal theocracy in the first place. But the resultant tidal wave would all but swamp Europe, pumping up xenophobia to ever higher levels.

Since the Paris attacks, the ultra-right has been on the march from one end of the Continent to the other. In France, where Marine Le Pen is surging in the polls, the possibility of a National Front victory in the 2017 presidential elections can no longer be dismissed. In Germany, the anti-immigrant Pegida movement is drawing record crowds. In Prague, Czech President MiloÅi Zeman recently addressed an anti-Muslim rally.

In the Polish city of Wroclaw, nationalists chanting "God, honor, and Fatherland" recently burned an orthodox Jew in effigy at an anti-immigrant demonstration in the Polish city of WrocÅaw. (Go to 3:30 for footage of the burning.) The twisted thinking apparently is that since international forces are seemingly flooding Poland with refugees, Jews must somehow be responsible.

In Ukraine, ultra-rightists told a crowd of 500 people in Kiev that their country was in the "grip of the world Zionist conspiracy."

All this is without ISIS seizing state power in Syria, so imagine what would happen if it did. Obama should be careful what he wishes for since he just might get it.

Turkey's downing of a Russian Su-24 is yet more good news for ISIS. All at once, French President FranÅois Hollande's dreams of a united front with Russia against Al Qaeda and ISIS have been dashed. Obama's told-you-so tone at his press conference with Hollande on Nov. 24 was revealing.

The incident, Obama told reporters, "points to an ongoing problem with the Russian operations in the sense that they are operating very close to a Turkish border, and they are going after a moderate opposition that are supported by not only Turkey but a wide range of countries. And if Russia is directing its energies towards Daesh and ISIL, some of those conflicts, or potentials for mistakes or escalation, are less likely to occur."

In other words, if Russia doesn't want to lose more planes, it should cooperate with the West's strategy of avoiding attacks on Sunni jihadists not directly connected to ISIS.

"The challenge," Obama went on, "has been Russia's focus on propping up Assad rather than focusing on ISIL. It's difficult because if their priority is attacking the moderate opposition that might be future members of an inclusive Syrian government, Russia is not going to get the support of us or a range of

other members of the coalition.”

This is the “moderate” opposition that on Monday appealed to Al Nusra to sever ties with Al Qaeda and cooperate with the rest of the rebel movement. “I call on the honorable Syrian revolutionaries in this group” said Khaled Khoja, leader of the Syrian National Coalition, the main opposition body, “to return to the broad umbrella of the Syrian revolution and spare the country further destruction.”

If Khoja regards the head-choppers of Al Nusra as honorable revolutionaries, then what does it say about the rebel opposition as a whole? Isn’t it yet another example of expanding the definition of “moderate” to include Sunni sectarians who want to turn Syria into an Islamic state?

Patrick Cockburn, the London *Independent’s* estimable Middle East correspondent, recently pointed out that ISIS can only be defeated “when its many enemies are more united.” But with Turkey shooting down a Russian plane and Obama refusing to cooperate with Russia as long as it cooperates with Assad, those claiming to oppose ISIS have never been more splintered.

Thanks to this continued U.S. insistence on “regime change,” extremist prospects are looking up.

Daniel Lazare is the author of several books including *The Frozen Republic: How the Constitution Is Paralyzing Democracy* (Harcourt Brace).

In the Dark on the ‘Dark Side’

The “War on Terror” now more than 14 years long has trapped the U.S. and other nations in the “dark side” of human behavior, a dilemma that is both moral and practical because the continued use of brutal methods has only made the crisis worse, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

France and Russia’s military responses to mass murders in Paris and Egypt echo the United States’ response to mass murders in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania in 2001. As Oxford University researcher Lydia Wilson told Democracy Now on Nov. 17, Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) is “seemingly delighted” by this warlike response to its latest atrocities.

In several interviews, Lydia Wilson has cited Abu Bakr Naji’s *The Management of*

Savagery as a “playbook” that ISIS appears to be following closely. Naji called for mass murders in foreign cities and tourist destinations as part of a strategy to draw foreign powers into unwinnable wars that would spread chaos, fuel jihadism and leave Muslim fundamentalist groups in control of more and more of the Muslim world.

This builds on Al Qaeda’s original strategy, which counted on an aggressive response to the 9/11 attacks to expose the iron fist inside the velvet glove of U.S. “soft power” and the hollowness of the U.S. government’s commitment to civil liberties, human rights and the rule of law. Al Qaeda astutely turned its enemy’s military superiority into a liability by provoking the U.S. to unleash disastrous wars on Muslim countries.

The U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the concentration camp at Guantanamo became the most valuable assets in Al Qaeda’s propaganda and recruiting campaigns, now complemented by the terror of drone strikes and bombing campaigns in Syria and Iraq.

As the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Prince Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein of Jordan, told the Council on Foreign Relations on Nov. 16, “it seems that the defenses against chaos and bloodshed that states erected at the close of the Second World War, the laws they wrote and swore to abide by, the agreements and treaties they signed, are giving way to increasing action bound by no principle or any foresight. ... Much of the Middle East and North Africa is gripped in deadly conflict with constant, now almost routine, violations of the norms that should protect civilians, and even proxy warfare with greater powers engaged in combat rather than in making peace.”

To briefly take stock of 14 years of war, which our leaders launched and continue to justify as a response to terrorism:

–The U.S. and its allies have conducted over 120,000 air strikes against seven countries, exploding fundamentalist jihadism from its original base in Afghanistan to an active presence in all seven countries and beyond.

–The U.S. and its allies have invaded and occupied Afghanistan for 14 years, Iraq for over eight years, and destroyed Libya, Syria and Yemen for good measure.

–By conservative estimates, U.S.-led wars have killed about 1.6 million people, mostly civilians. That is 500 times the number of people killed by the original crimes in the United States. Disproportionate use of force and geographic expansion of the conflict by our side has ensured an endless proliferation of violence on all sides.

–War, occupation and human rights abuses have driven 59.5 million people from their homes, more than at any time since the Second World War.

–Since 2001, the U.S. has borrowed and spent \$3.3 trillion in additional military spending to pay for the largest unilateral military build-up in history, but less than half the extra funding has been spent on current wars. (See Carl Conetta’s 2010 paper, “An Undisciplined Defense”, for more analysis of the Pentagon’s “spending surge.”)

When U.S. support for Muslim fundamentalist jihadis in Afghanistan led to the most catastrophic blowback in our history on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. government declared a “global war on terror” against them. But less than a decade later, it once again began recruiting, training and arming Muslim fundamentalists to fight in Libya and Syria.

The U.S. also made the largest arms sale in history to Saudi Arabia, which is already ruled by a dynasty of Muslim fundamentalists whose role in the 9/11 crimes remains a closely guarded secret. It was only when ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014 that the U.S. government was finally forced to rethink its covert support for such groups in Syria. It has yet to seriously reconsider its alliances with their state sponsors: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and other Arab monarchies.

Throughout the past 14 years, whenever the fear of terrorism has temporarily receded, the U.S. government has quickly redirected its threats and uses of military force, covert operations and propaganda to a completely different purpose: destabilizing and overthrowing a laundry-list of internationally recognized governments, in Venezuela, Iraq, Honduras, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and around the world.

In these operations, the U.S. government has never balked at allying with violent groups whom it would be quick to condemn as “terrorists” if they were on the other side. The American people are being treated to a new version of President Ronald Reagan’s comical division of violent groups into “terrorists” and “freedom fighters” based on their relationship to U.S. policy.

In more recent years, patriotic Iraqis who resisted the illegal invasion of their country were “terrorists” and armed neo-Nazis in Ukraine were first noble “protesters” and are now part of a new “National Guard.”

Each new U.S. military operation is justified as a response to some new crisis, while the U.S. role in creating these crises in the first place is obscured (with increasing difficulty) behind funhouse mirrors of secrecy and propaganda.

This pattern of opportunistic uses of force was exactly the strategy outlined by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld within hours of the mass murders on Sept.

11, 2001. CBS News obtained a copy of Undersecretary Stephen Cambone's notes from a meeting amid the ruins of the Pentagon at 2:40 p.m. that day. Cambone quoted Rumsfeld saying, "Judge whether good enough hit S.H. (Saddam Hussein) at same time – not only UBL (Usama Bin Laden) ... Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not."

In a recent article about the record U.S. military budget, I explained that President Obama's annual military budgets have (on average and after adjusting for inflation) been higher than George W. Bush's, 60 percent higher than President Bill Clinton's and 2½ times what bipartisan experts recommended to the Senate Budget Committee at the end of the Cold War. The U.S. military is now more generously funded than the rest of the ten largest militaries in the world combined.

Investing our nation's wealth in military forces and deadly weapons and deploying them all over the world is not just a tragic waste in terms of all the unmet human needs in our country and the world. It's dangerous. By building a global war machine designed to fight anybody anywhere, while rejecting all legal and political constraints on how it may be used, U.S. leaders have set the stage for endless, unwinnable, global war.

As Prince Zeid suggested, the U.S. government has turned its back on the legitimate infrastructure of collective security enshrined in the UN Charter and international law, and reverted to something more primitive: the law of the jungle or "might makes right."

By fostering the dangerous illusion that illegal threats and uses of U.S. military force can replace the collective will of humanity and the rule of international law as the ultimate arbiter of international affairs, U.S. leaders have set us on a collision course with history.

When the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia and China remained on the sidelines. Their oil companies even bid for contracts on new oilfields in Iraq, and Russia allowed the U.S. to ship war supplies through its territory to Afghanistan. In 2011, Russia and China both abstained from a UN Security Council resolution for a "no fly zone" supposedly to protect civilians in Libya when they could have simply vetoed it.

But when the U.S. and its allies abused that resolution to depose and butcher Muammar Gaddafi and plunge Libya into chaos, then transitioned quickly to launch an even bloodier proxy war in Syria, China and Russia finally accepted that the U.S. war machine was really out of control. The U.S. was treating their efforts at appeasement as a green light for aggression that would sooner or later threaten them directly.

In 2012, Russia increased its military budget by 15 percent, the largest annual increase since Vladimir Putin was elected President in 2000. After the destruction of Libya, Russia concluded that it was essential to face down U.S. aggression and that the catastrophic failures of U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya provided an opening for Russian diplomacy to start pushing back.

The U.S. responded to Russia's support for the Syrian government by engineering a coup against an even more strategic Russian ally in Ukraine. The Western-backed coup threatened to roll NATO expansion right up to Russia's border and sail NATO warships into its most strategic naval base at Sevastopol.

Russia responded by accepting Crimea's request to restore its 230-year-old ties with Russia (94 percent of Crimeans had already voted for independence from Ukraine in 1991). Russia also supported the "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics" in their resistance to the new Western-backed government in Kiev.

U.S. allies in Europe initially supported the U.S. campaign to isolate and sanction Russia over the chaos in Ukraine, but now France and Germany are working with Russia and Ukraine to implement the Minsk agreements, which are gradually restoring peace to Ukraine.

Until recently, Russia played a deft diplomatic hand without being directly drawn into combat in Syria or Ukraine. But now Russia has joined the free-for-all bombing of Syria. ISIS has responded by blowing up a Russian airliner over Egypt's Sinai. Russia has in turn escalated its aerial bombardment of jihadist targets inside Syria. Last week, Turkey shot down an Su-24 warplane along the Syrian border.

It seems that Russia is being drawn into the same escalating cycle of violence as the U.S. and its allies. Much depends on the results of the diplomatic process in Vienna and on the willingness of all the external powers involved in the war in Syria to allow the people of Syria to decide their own political future. That includes the U.S. and its allies just as much as Russia and Iran.

On a larger scale, it is vital for us to recognize that the United States, by authorizing the use of military force in 2001, became a party to this open-ended conflict and shares the responsibility for escalating or resolving it. Demonizing America's "enemies" is not a responsible or legitimate pretext for endlessly escalating an ill-defined war that has killed far more civilians than combatants.

But by declaring that we are at war with "terror," "Muslim extremism," "associated forces" or whoever our leaders decide we're at war with from one week to the next, the U.S. government has foreclosed many of the ways that wars

are usually brought to an end. We cannot meet “terror” at the negotiating table.

The international military competition to “destroy” ISIS at whatever cost in civilian death and destruction, is an irresistible chance for the U.S., Russia, France and the U.K. to display and market their latest weapons technology. But it will not end the “war on terror.” Even a superficially successful military campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq will instead hasten the next mutation of jihadism and drive even more Muslims from around the world into its ranks.

Even President Obama has acknowledged that there is no military way out of the trap that he and other U.S. officials have unwittingly collaborated with the “terrorists” to set for us. Yet he still soldiers on blindly as if there are no non-military alternatives either.

But there are and always have been specific policy changes that the U.S. government could make if it were serious about ending this horrific cycle of violence:

–Repeal the 2001 and 2002 Congressional Authorizations for the Use of Military Force, which have become blank checks for endless war. Reps. Lee (D), Amash (R) and Massie (R) have introduced bills in Congress to do that: HR 1303 (to repeal the 2001 AUMF) and HR 1304 (to repeal the 2002 AUMF).

–Close the U.S. concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Every prisoner must either be released or be granted a free and fair trial in a real court.

–Stop threatening, bombing and attacking Muslim countries – and other ones too.

–Stop destabilizing and overthrowing internationally-recognized governments.

–End drone strikes and comply with long-standing executive orders prohibiting assassination as an instrument of U.S. policy.

–Shut down the “rat-line” of U.S. weapons to jihadi groups everywhere.

–Enforce existing U.S. laws that prohibit arms sales to governments that commit war crimes or human rights abuses, with no exceptions for U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia, Israel or Iraq.

–Stop using the U.S. veto to block majority decisions of the UN Security Council on Israel and Palestine.

–Publicly recommit to full compliance with the UN Charter, the Geneva Conventions and the rule of international law.

–Restore command accountability under U.S. law for war crimes ordered or sanctioned by senior U.S. military and civilian officials.

If these steps seem radical or “politically impossible,” that is only a measure of how far the United States has strayed from the basic standards of international behavior that we and other countries are committed to. But if the U.S. government refuses to take such steps, then we must recognize that we share the responsibility for perpetuating the horrors of this conflict.

As the late historian and former U.S. Air Force bombardier Howard Zinn wrote in a letter to the *New York Times* in 2007, “The terrorism of the suicide bomber and the terrorism of aerial bombardment are indeed morally equivalent. To say otherwise (as either side might) is to give one moral superiority over the other, and thus serve to perpetuate the horrors of our time.”

On the other hand, if we can restore some legitimacy to U.S. policy, we can begin to regain the moral and legal ground from which to respond effectively to terrorism. If or when there is another mass murder like the ones in the U.S. in 2001 or the recent ones in Egypt, Lebanon and France, we must respond to it as a heinous crime rather than as an act of war, as former Nuremberg prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz insisted in the aftermath of 9/11.

Those responsible must be identified, pursued, arrested and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, with only as much help from the military as is needed to bring them to justice. But as Ferencz warned in 2001, their crimes must not be allowed to become a pretext for wreaking misdirected vengeance on other countries and innocent lives.

This is how we will defeat terrorism – theirs and ours.

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

The Real Thanksgiving Day

From the Archive: On Thanksgiving Day, the United States celebrates the tradition of Pilgrims and Native Americans sitting down together in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621 to celebrate each other as friendly neighbors. But the reality was not so pleasant, as historian William Loren Katz recalled.

By William Loren Katz (Originally published on Nov. 12, 2009)

Thanksgiving Day remains a most treasured holiday in the United States. Work comes to a halt, families gather, eat turkey, and count their blessings. A presidential proclamation blesses the day. But we must never forget that the holiday pre-eminently serves political ends.

Remember in 2003 when President George W. Bush flew into Bagdad on Thanksgiving Day to visit and celebrate with U.S. troops. He stayed a few hours and brought in a host of media photographers to snap his picture bearing a glazed turkey. No one ate the turkey, of course. It was cardboard, a stage prop.

However, this exploitation of joyous thanksgiving began almost four centuries ago, with a mythology that dates back to the first Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving Day memorializes the Pilgrims' survival of their first winter in New England. One hundred and forty-nine people had arrived in November 1620 aboard the *Mayflower* and were saved from starvation and disaster because the Wampanoug nation brought them corn and meat and taught them wilderness survival skills.

This truly was an effort worthy of gratitude. And in 1621, Governor William Bradford of Plymouth proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving not to the Wampanougs but to his fellow Pilgrims and their omnipotent God. In Bradford's view, the Christians had staved off hunger through their devotion, courage and resourcefulness. And to this day American politicians, ministers and most educators would have the people see it this way.

Bradford's fable is an early example of "Eurothink" a grotesque lie encased in arrogance. To Europeans, native people and other humans who were neither Christian nor white no matter how much they helped were considered undeserving of recognition. The heroic scenario of determined and righteous European settlers overcoming hardships and travails had no room for the others.

Bradford's tale has his Pilgrims inviting the Native Americans as guests to celebrate the Europeans' victory over famine, an act of Pilgrim generosity as the settlers and their Wampanoug friends sat down to dine on bread, turkey and other treats. Since the colonists classified their dark-skinned, "infidel" neighbors as inferiors, they were asked to bring and serve not share the food.

As the English pursued their economic goals in the 1620s, they increasingly turned to outright aggression against their Native American neighbors and hosts. Matters came to a head one night in 1637 when Governor Bradford, without provocation, dispatched his militia against his Pequot neighbors. With the Pilgrims seeing themselves as devout Christians locked in mortal combat with

infidels, the officers and soldiers made a systematic assault on a sleeping Pequot Indian village.

Bradford described the night of fire, pain and death: "It was a fearful sight to see them frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same and horrible was the stink and stench thereof. But the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice and they [the militiamen] gave praise thereof to God."

The colony's famous minister, Reverend Increase Mather, rejoiced and called on his congregation to give thanks to God "that on this day we have sent six hundred heathen souls to hell." Mather and Bradford are still celebrated in school texts as colonial heroes.

The 1993 edition of the authoritative *Columbia Encyclopedia* states of Bradford, "He maintained friendly relations with the Native Americans." [p. 351] The authoritative *Dictionary of American History* states of his rule: "He was a firm, determined man and an excellent leader; kept relations with the Indians on friendly terms; tolerant toward newcomers and new religions." [p. 77]

The views of Native Americans were not recorded, but can be imagined.

The *Mayflower*, renamed the *Meijbloom* (Dutch for *Mayflower*), continued to make notable voyages. In May 1657, it carried a crucial message to Amsterdam that the new Dutch colony of South Africa needed supplies as Europeans sought to gain control of another piece of the world. Along coastal Africa, the renamed *Mayflower* also became one of the first ships to carry enslaved Africans to the West Indies.

For these and other reasons, those opposed to oppression and favoring democratic values in the Americas have little to celebrate on Thanksgiving Day. It stands as an affirmation of barbaric racial beliefs and actions that soon shaped the world's most unrelenting genocide. What is worth giving thanks to is the alliance between Native Americans and Africans that sprang forth to resist the English, Spanish and other foreign invaders.

In 1619, a year before the Pilgrims' arrival in Massachusetts, 20 Africans were unloaded in Jamestown, Virginia, and traded for food and water. They were sent out to work in the colony's tobacco fields as unpaid laborers.

Enslaved and persecuted together, people of color fought back together, and often united in armed maroon colonies beyond the white settlements that dotted the coastline. But above all, this alliance initiated an American tradition of resistance to tyranny, a demand for self-rule and equality. Those ideas would appear centuries later written on a parchment celebrated on July 4, 1776.

In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in October focused on the deepening crisis in Syria, continued corruption in Ukraine, the frustrating presidential campaign, and the enduring mystery over the MH-17 shoot-down.

["Should US Ally with Al Qaeda in Syria"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 1, 2015

["Obama Tolerates the Warmongers"](#) by Daniel Lazare, Oct. 2, 2015

["US Tax Dollars and Ukraine's Finance Minister"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 3, 2015

["Afghan Doctor Slaughter Pulls Back Curtain"](#) by Nicolas J S Davies, Oct. 4, 2015

["The Hope Behind Putin's Syria Help"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 4, 2015

["Rupert Murdoch: Propaganda Recruit"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 5, 2015

["Obama Boots Syrian Peace Chance"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 6, 2015

["Reflections on 'Deep Poverty'"](#) by Lawrence Davidson, Oct. 6, 2015

["The Second Amendment's Fake History"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 7, 2015

["What Are the Syrian Options?"](#) by Graham E. Fuller, Oct. 8, 2015

["CNN's Double-Standards on Debates"](#) by Jeff Cohen, Oct. 9, 2015

["Collateral Damage/Stuff Happens"](#) by David Marks, Oct. 9, 2015

["How Do-Gooders Can Do Bad"](#) by Coleen Rowley and Diana Johnstone

["Obama's Two-Faced Foreign Policy"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 10, 2015

["How CNN Shapes Political Debate"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 11, 2015

["Needling Obama for More Wars"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 12, 2015

["Ronald Reagan's Bloody 'Apocalypto'"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 12, 2015

["MH-17: The Dog Still Not Barking"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 13, 2015

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Turkey Provokes Russia with Shoot-down

Exclusive: Turkey appears to have deliberately shot down a Russian warplane as a provocation designed to escalate tensions between NATO and Russia, a ploy that seems to have sucked in President Obama as he tries to look tough against Russia to appease his neocon critics, writes Robert Parry. (Update: Russia says one airman saved.)

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama always sensitive to neocon criticism that he’s “weak” continues to edge the world closer to a nuclear confrontation with Russia as he talks tough and tolerates more provocations against Moscow, now including Turkey’s intentional shoot-down of a Russian warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Rather than rebuke Turkey, a NATO member, for its reckless behavior or express

sympathy to the Russians Obama instead asserted that “Turkey, like every country, has a right to defend its territory and its airspace.”

It was another one of Obama’s breathtaking moments of hypocrisy, since he has repeatedly violated the territorial integrity of various countries, including in Syria where he has authorized bombing without the government’s permission and has armed rebels fighting to overthrow Syria’s secular regime.

Obama’s comment on Turkey’s right to shoot down planes – made during a joint press conference with French President Francois Hollande on Tuesday – was jarring, too, because there was no suggestion that even if the SU-24 jetfighter had strayed briefly into Turkish territory, which the Russians deny, that it was threatening Turkish targets.

Russian President Vladimir Putin angrily called the Turkish attack a “stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists.” He warned of “serious consequences for Russian-Turkish relations.”

Further provoking the Russians, Turkish-backed Syrian rebels then killed the Russian pilot riddling his body with bullets as he and the navigator parachuted from the doomed plane and were floating toward the ground. (Update: On Wednesday, the Russian defense minister said the navigator was alive and was rescued by Syrian and Russian special forces.)

Another Russian soldier was killed when a U.S.-supplied TOW missile brought down a Russian helicopter on a search-and-rescue mission, according to reports.

But Obama, during the news conference, seemed more interested in demonstrating his disdain for Putin, referring to him at one point by his last name only, without the usual use of a courtesy title, and demeaning the size of Putin’s coalition in helping Syria battle the jihadist rebels.

“We’ve got a coalition of 65 countries who have been active in pushing back against ISIL for quite some time,” Obama said, citing the involvement of countries around the world. “Russia right now is a coalition of two, Iran and Russia, supporting [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad.”

However, there have been doubts about the seriousness of Obama’s coalition, which includes Sunni countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which have been covertly supporting some of the jihadist elements, including Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham.

Syrian rebels, including jihadists fighting with Ahrar al-Sham, have received hundreds of U.S. TOW anti-tank missiles, apparently through Sunni regional powers with what I’ve been told was Obama’s direct approval. The jihadists have

celebrated their use of TOWs to kill tank crews of the Syrian army. Yet Obama talks about every country's right to defend its territory.

Obama and the U.S. mainstream media also have pretended that the only terrorists that need to be fought in Syria are those belonging to the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh), but Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and its ally, Ahrar al-Sham, which was founded in part by Al Qaeda veterans, make up the bulk of the Turkish-and-Saudi-backed Army of Conquest which was gaining ground with the help of those American TOW missiles until Russia intervened with air power at the request of Syrian President Assad in late September.

The SU-24 Shoot-down

As for the circumstances surrounding the Turkish shoot-down of the Russian SU-24, Turkey claimed to have radioed ten warnings over five minutes to the Russian pilots but without getting a response. However, the New York Times reported that a diplomat who attended a NATO meeting in which Turkey laid out its account said "the Russian SU-24 plane was over the Hatay region of Turkey for about 17 seconds when it was struck."

How those two contradictory time frames matched up was not explained. However, if the 17-second time frame is correct, it appears that Turkey intended to shoot down a Russian plane whether over its territory or not to send a message that it would not permit Russia to continue attacking Turkish-backed rebels in Syria.

After shooting down the plane, Turkey sought an emergency NATO meeting to support its attack. Though some NATO members reportedly consider Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan a loose cannon, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared that the allies "stand in solidarity with Turkey."

Further increasing the prospect of a dangerous escalation, NATO has been conducting large-scale military exercises near the Russian border in response to the Ukraine crisis.

Erdogan's government also appears to have dabbled in dangerous provocations before, including the alleged role of Turkish intelligence in helping jihadist rebels stage a lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, with the goal of blaming Assad's military and tricking Obama into launching punitive airstrikes that would have helped clear the way for a jihadist victory.

Obama only pulled back at the last minute amid doubts among U.S. intelligence analysts about who was responsible for the sarin attack. Later evidence pointed to a jihadist provocation with possible Turkish assistance, but the Obama administration has never formally retracted its allegations blaming Assad's forces.

One motive for Erdogan to go along with the sarin “false flag” attack in 2013 would have been that his two-year campaign to overthrow the Assad government was sputtering, a situation similar to today with the Russian military intervention hammering jihadist positions and putting the Syrian army back on the offensive.

By shooting down a Russian plane and then rushing to NATO with demands for retaliation against Russia, Erdogan is arguably playing a similar game, trying to push the United States and European countries into a direct confrontation with Russia while also sabotaging Syrian peace talks in Vienna all the better to advance his goal of violently ousting Assad from power.

The Neocon Agenda

Escalating tensions with Russia also plays into the hands of America’s neoconservatives who have viewed past cooperation between Putin and Obama as a threat to the neocon agenda of “regime change,” which began in Iraq in 2003 and was supposed to continue into Syria and Iran with the goal of removing governments deemed hostile to Israel.

After the sarin gas attack in 2013, the prospect for the U.S. bombing Syria and paving the way for Assad’s military defeat looked bright, but Putin and Obama cooperated to defuse the sarin gas crisis. The two teamed up again to advance negotiations to constrain Iran’s nuclear program an impediment to neocon hopes for bombing Iran, too.

However, in late 2013 and early 2014, that promising Putin-Obama collaboration was blasted apart in Ukraine with American neocons playing key roles, including National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman, Sen. John McCain and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland.

The neocons targeted the elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich, recognizing how sensitive Ukraine was to Russia. The Feb. 22, 2014 coup, which was spearheaded by neo-Nazis and other extreme Ukrainian nationalists, established a fiercely anti-Russian regime in Kiev and provoked what quickly took on the look of a new Cold War.

When the heavily ethnic Russian population of Crimea, which had voted overwhelmingly for Yanukovich, reacted to the coup by voting 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the neocon-dominated U.S. mainstream media pronounced the referendum a “sham” and the secession a Russian “invasion.” Cold War hysteria followed.

However, in the nearly two years since the Ukraine coup, it has become increasingly clear that the new regime in Kiev is not the shining light that the neocons and the mainstream media pretended it was. It appears to be as corrupt

as the old one, if not more so. Plus, living standards of average Ukrainians have plunged.

The recent flooding of Europe with Syrian refugees over the summer and this month's Paris terror attacks by Islamic State jihadists also have forced European officials to take events in Syria more seriously, prompting a growing interest in a renewed cooperation with Russia's Putin.

That did not sit well with ultranationalist Ukrainians angered at the reduced interest in the Ukraine crisis. These activists have forced their dispute with Russia back into the newspapers by destroying power lines supplying electricity to Crimea, throwing much of the peninsula into darkness. Their goal seems to be to ratchet up tensions again between Russia and the West.

Now, Turkey's shoot-down of the SU-24 and the deliberate murder of the two Russian pilots have driven another wedge between NATO countries and Russia, especially if President Obama and other NATO leaders continue taking Turkey's side in the incident.

But the larger question indeed the existential question is whether Obama will continue bowing to neocon demands for tough talk against Putin even if doing so risks pushing tensions to a level that could spill over into a nuclear confrontation.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). 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](#).
