

# US Risks Wider War by Downing Syrian Plane

Another U.S. military strike inside Syria – this time, shooting down a Syrian bomber – has escalated tensions with Russia, even opening the possibility that Russian anti-aircraft missiles will target U.S. warplanes, reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The Pentagon's announcement that the U.S. military had shot down a Syrian warplane inside Syrian territory merited only inside-the-paper treatment at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on Monday, but it became the featured article on the Russian version of Google News citing a Moscow newspaper reporting a warning from Russia's Federation Council that "the USA can receive a return blow in Syria."

The article in Moskovsky Komsomolets and several similar accounts in other leading Russian print media recounted the warning issued by the Deputy Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs in Russia's upper house, Vladimir Jabarov, that the shoot-down of the Syrian SU-22 bomber on Sunday by the U.S.-led coalition can lead to "a major conflict." The Senator noted that Syrian air space is protected both by a Syrian operated S-300 ground to air defense system and by Russian-operated state-of-the-art S-400 missiles.

Jabarov called for diplomats of the interested parties to meet as soon as possible to discuss the incident. And he warned, in dark tones, that the plane's destruction could lead to a return attack from the Syrian armed forces. The article also quotes the first deputy chairman of Russia's Committee on Defense and Security in the upper chamber, Frants Klintsevich, describing the shoot-down as "a provocation directed against Russia."

The Syrian government said its bomber was operating against Islamic State forces near Raqqa, though the U.S. coalition claimed Syrian forces and the plane had attacked rebels, called the Syrian Democratic Forces and operating under the guidance of U.S. Special Forces.

It perhaps should go without saying that under international law the Syrian government has the right to operate inside Syrian airspace and that the U.S. military has no legal right to have personnel inside Syria (since they lack the Syrian government's permission) let alone to attack the Syrian military or its allied forces. Another curious feature about this situation is that the U.S. mainstream media sees nothing illegal or unusual about the U.S. military

operating inside another country uninvited and shooting down government aircraft.

That assumption that the U.S. military has the right to intervene in any conflict of its choosing was reflected in the decision by the Times and Post to minimize coverage of the shoot-down of the Syrian bomber and accept uncritically the Pentagon's explanation that the shoot-down was in response to Syrian government attacks on U.S.-backed forces. (The Wall Street Journal did lead its Monday's print edition with a story about the shoot-down of the Syrian plane, but also acted as if the U.S. military was within its rights in doing so.)

Given the potential for a dangerous U.S. military showdown with Russia, whose forces have been invited into Syria by the internationally recognized government, the Kremlin initially tamped down concern about the clash. Russian state television on Sunday night and into Monday paid almost no attention to the shoot-down, apparently awaiting a decision on a suitable response to the American "provocation."

That response came on Monday when the Russian military command once again declared that the deconflicting hotline between U.S.-allied and Russian forces on air movements over Syria has been severed. That is to say the Russians reinstated the response they made following Donald Trump's Tomahawk missile attack on a Syrian air base in April. In effect, this Russian action halts all flights into the area from the U.S. aircraft carrier that launched the plane that shot down the Syrian bomber. In line with that decision, the Kremlin warned that all allied air operations near where the Russian air force is flying will be targeted and destroyed.

### **U.S. Reactions**

Only then did *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* begin to react to the seriousness of the confrontation. The former produced an analytical article entitled "Russia Warns U.S. After Downing of Syrian Warplane," published Monday at its Web site. The Post did the same under the heading "Russia threatens to treat U.S. coalition aircraft as targets over Syria."

These articles are unusual in one respect: they quote extensively from official Russian sources, including the accusation that the U.S. actions in Syria are in violation of international law. They also mention the dynamism of the Syrian armed forces in bringing the fight to the east of the country even if this means pushing against U.S.-assisted rebels.

What these newspapers do not explain is how and why the Syrian army has been energized to pursue national unification: namely it is the direct result of

freeing up Syrian forces, which had been tied down in the west, through the implementation of “deconfliction” settlements that Iran, Turkey and Russia hammered out in the so-called Astana talks earlier this spring. Those settlements never received U.S. approval, though Moscow hoped they would become a platform for a broader U.S.-Russian understanding regarding possible areas of cooperation before the first meeting between Presidents Putin and Trump.

Instead, the U.S. shoot-down of the Syrian bomber, the first direct U.S. attack on a Syrian aircraft in the six-year conflict, signals a return to the Pentagon’s actions undermining the accommodating policies of a U.S. president in Syria. Last September, when Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reached agreement on a partial cease-fire in Syria with the support of President Obama, a U.S. air attack killing Syrian troops in the besieged eastern outpost of Deir Ezzor scuttled the arrangement.

Now it appears that the Pentagon may be sabotaging another possibility of accommodation between Putin and Trump by escalating the U.S. military intervention in Syria at a time when the Syrian government has been consolidating its control over large swaths of Syria. The latest clash also heightens the possibility that Russian air defenses may shoot down a U.S. warplane and push tensions to even a higher level.

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## Trump Complies with War-Hawk Wishes

President Trump is plunging ahead with expanded Mideast wars, with emerging escalations in Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere, building on the bloody policies of his predecessors, as retired Col. Ann Wright explains.

By Ann Wright

The militarization of U.S. foreign policy certainly didn’t start with President Donald J. Trump; in fact, it goes back several decades. However, if Trump’s first 100 days in office are any indication, he has no intention of slowing down the trend.

During a single week in April, the Trump administration fired 59 Tomahawk

missiles into a Syrian airfield, and dropped the largest bomb in the U.S. arsenal on suspected ISIS tunnels in Afghanistan. This 21,600-pound incendiary percussion device that had never been used in combat – the Massive Ordnance Air Blast or MOAB, colloquially known as the “Mother of All Bombs”—was used in the Achin district of Afghanistan, where Special Forces Staff Sergeant Mark De Alencar had been killed a week earlier. (The bomb was tested only twice, at Elgin Air Base, Florida, in 2003.)

To underscore the new administration’s preference for force over diplomacy, the decision to experiment with the explosive power of the mega-bomb was taken unilaterally by General John Nicholson, the commanding general of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. In praising that decision, President Trump declared that he had given “total authorization” to the U.S. military to conduct whatever missions they wanted, anywhere in the world – which presumably means without consulting the interagency national security committee.

It is also telling that President Trump chose generals for two key national security positions traditionally filled by civilians: the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor. Yet three months into his administration, he has left unfilled hundreds of senior civilian governmental positions at State, Defense and elsewhere.

While President Trump has not yet enunciated a policy on the subject of political assassinations, there has so far been no indication that he plans to change the practice of relying on drone killings established by his recent predecessors.

Back in 1976, however, President Gerald Ford set a very different example when he issued his Executive Order 11095. This proclaimed that “No employee of the United States government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination.”

President Ford instituted this prohibition after investigations by the Church Committee (the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, chaired by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho) and the Pike Committee (its House counterpart, chaired by Rep. Otis G. Pike, D-New York) had revealed the extent of the Central Intelligence Agency’s assassination operations against foreign leaders in the 1960s and 1970s.

### **Permitting Assassinations**

With a few exceptions, the next several presidents upheld the ban. But in 1986, President Ronald Reagan ordered an attack on Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi’s home in Tripoli, in retaliation for the bombing of a nightclub in Berlin that

killed a U.S. serviceman and two German citizens and injured 229. In just 12 minutes, American planes dropped 60 tons of U.S. bombs on the house, though they failed to kill Gaddafi.

Twelve years later, in 1998, President Bill Clinton ordered the firing of 80 cruise missiles on al-Qaida facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan, in retaliation for the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Clinton administration justified the action by asserting that the proscription against assassination did not cover individuals whom the U.S. government had determined were connected to terrorism.

Days after al-Qaida carried out its Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush signed an intelligence "finding" allowing the Central Intelligence Agency to engage in "lethal covert operations" to kill Osama bin Laden and destroy his terrorist network. White House and CIA lawyers argued that this order was constitutional on two grounds. First, they embraced the Clinton administration's position that E.O. 11905 did not preclude the United States' taking action against terrorists. More sweepingly, they declared that the ban on political assassination did not apply during wartime.

The Bush administration's wholesale rejection of the ban on targeted killing or political assassinations reversed a quarter-century of bipartisan U.S. foreign policy. It also opened the door to the use of unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct targeted killings (a euphemism for assassinations).

The U.S. Air Force had been flying unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), since the 1960s, but only as unmanned surveillance platforms. Following 9/11, however, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency weaponized "drones" (as they were quickly dubbed) to kill both leaders and foot soldiers of al-Qaida and the Taliban.

The United States set up bases in Afghanistan and Pakistan for that purpose, but after a series of drone attacks that killed civilians, including a large group gathered for a wedding, the Pakistani government ordered in 2011 that the U.S. drones and U.S. military personnel be removed from its Shamsi Air Base. However, targeted assassinations continued to be conducted in Pakistan by drones based outside the country.

### **The Obama Approach**

In 2009, President Barack Obama picked up where his predecessor had left off. As public and congressional concern increased about the use of aircraft controlled by CIA and military operators located 10,000 miles away from the people they were ordered to kill, the White House was forced to officially acknowledge the

targeted killing program and to describe how persons became targets of the program.

Instead of scaling the program back, however, the Obama administration doubled down. It essentially designated all military-age males in a foreign strike zone as combatants, and therefore potential targets of what it termed “signature strikes.” Even more disturbing, it declared that strikes aimed at specific, high-value terrorists, known as “personality strikes,” could include American citizens.

That theoretical possibility soon became a grim reality. In April 2010, President Obama authorized the CIA to “target” Anwar al-Awlaki, an American citizen and a former imam at a Virginia mosque, for assassination. Less than a decade before, the Office of the Secretary of the Army had invited the imam to participate in an interfaith service following 9/11. But al-Awlaki later became an outspoken critic of the “war on terror,” moved to his father’s homeland of Yemen, and helped al-Qaida recruit members.

On Sept. 30, 2011, a drone strike killed al-Awlaki and another American, Samir Khan – who was traveling with him in Yemen. U.S. drones killed al-Awlaki’s 16-year-old son, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, an American citizen, 10 days later in an attack on a group of young men around a campfire. The Obama administration never made clear whether the 16-year-old son was targeted individually because he was al-Awlaki’s son or if he was the victim of a “signature” strike, fitting the description of a young military-age male. However, during a White House press conference, a reporter asked Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs how he could defend the killings, and especially the death of a U.S.-citizen minor who was “targeted without due process, without trial.”

Gibbs’s response did nothing to help the U.S. image in the Muslim world: “I would suggest that you should have had a far more responsible father if they are truly concerned about the well-being of their children. I don’t think becoming an al-Qaida jihadist terrorist is the best way to go about doing your business.”

On Jan. 29, 2017, al-Awlaki’s 8-year-old daughter, Nawar al-Awlaki, was killed in a U.S. commando attack in Yemen ordered by Obama’s successor, Donald Trump.

### **Weddings and Funerals**

Meanwhile, the media continued to report incidents of civilians being killed in drone strikes across the region, which frequently target wedding parties and funerals. Many inhabitants of the region along the Afghan-Pakistan border could hear the buzz of drones circling their area around the clock, causing psychological trauma for all those who live in the area, especially children.

The Obama administration was strongly criticized for the tactic of “double-tap” – hitting a target home or vehicle with a Hellfire missile, and then firing a second missile into the group that came to the aid of those who had been wounded in the first attack. Many times, those who ran to help rescue persons trapped inside collapsed buildings or flaming cars were local citizens, not militants.

The rationale traditionally offered for using drones is that they eliminate the need for “boots on the ground” – whether members of the armed forces or CIA paramilitary personnel – in dangerous environments, thereby preventing loss of U.S. lives. U.S. officials also claim that the intelligence UAVs gather through lengthy surveillance makes their strikes more precise, reducing the number of civilian casualties. (Left unsaid, but almost certainly another powerful motivator, is the fact that the use of drones means that no suspected militants would be taken alive, thus avoiding the political and other complications of detention.)

Even if these claims are true, however, they do not address the impact of the tactic on U.S. foreign policy. Of broadest concern is the fact that drones allow presidents to punt on questions of war and peace by choosing an option that appears to offer a middle course, but actually has a variety of long-term consequences for U.S. policy, as well as for the communities on the receiving end.

By taking the risk of loss of U.S. personnel out of the picture, Washington policymakers may be tempted to use force to resolve a security dilemma rather than negotiating with the parties involved. Moreover, by their very nature, UAVs may be more likely to provoke retaliation against America than conventional weapons systems. To many in the Middle East and South Asia, drones represent a weakness of the U.S. government and its military, not a strength. Shouldn't brave warriors fight on the ground, they ask, instead of hiding behind a faceless drone in the sky, operated by a young person in a chair many thousands of miles away?

### **Insider Attacks**

Since 2007, at least 150 NATO personnel have been the victims of “insider attacks” by members of the Afghan military and national police forces being trained by the coalition. Many of the Afghans who commit such “green on blue” killings of American personnel, both uniformed and civilian, are from the tribal regions on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan where U.S. drone strikes have focused. They take revenge for the deaths of their families and friends by killing their U.S. military trainers.

Anger against drones has surfaced in the United States as well. On May 1, 2010,

Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad attempted to set off a car bomb in Times Square. In his guilty plea, Shahzad justified targeting civilians by telling the judge, "When the drone hits in Afghanistan and Iraq, they don't see children, they don't see anybody. They kill women, children; they kill everybody. They're killing all Muslims."

As of 2012 the U.S. Air Force was recruiting more drone pilots than pilots for traditional aircraft – between 2012 and 2014, they planned to add 2,500 pilots and support people to the drone program. That is nearly twice the number of diplomats the State Department hires in a two-year period.

Congressional and media concern over the program led to the Obama administration's acknowledgment of the regular Tuesday meetings led by the President to identify targets for the assassination list. In the international media, "Terror Tuesdays" became an expression of U.S. foreign policy.

To many around the world, U.S. foreign policy has been dominated for the past 16 years by military actions in the Middle East and South Asia, and large land and sea military exercises in Northeast Asia. On the world stage, American efforts in the areas of economics, trade, cultural issues and human rights appear to have taken a back seat to the waging of continuous wars.

Continuing the use of drone warfare to carry out assassinations will only exacerbate foreign distrust of American intentions and trustworthiness. It thereby plays into the hands of the very opponents we are trying to defeat.

During his campaign, Donald Trump pledged he would always put "America First," and said he wanted to get out of the business of regime change. It is not too late for him to keep that promise by learning from his predecessors' mistakes and reversing the continued militarization of U.S. foreign policy.

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**<http://www.afsa.org/killer-drones-and-militarization-us-foreign-policy> ]**

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# Blaming Bernie Sanders for a Shooting

The mainstream media usually won't blame non-violent political speech for a crazed gunman's shooting spree, but made an exception linking Bernie Sanders to the GOP-baseball-practice shooting, notes Norman Solomon.

By Norman Solomon

It's routine for right-wing outlets like Fox to smear progressive activists under the guise of "news" coverage. But why the New York Times? And why the special venom for Bernie Sanders?

After the horrific June 14 shooting of Congressman Steve Scalise and three other participants in a Republican baseball practice, the media floodgates opened for slimy innuendos. Before the day was done, a major supplier of the political sewage was the New York Times, which prominently published a left-blaming [article](#) that masqueraded as news reporting.

The media watch group FAIR [pointed out](#) that the Times piece "started with a false premise and patched together a dodgy piece of innuendo and guilt-by-association in order to place the blame for a shooting in Virginia on 'the most ardent supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders.'"

It would be a mistake to think that the Times story was only the result of bias inflamed by the grisly shooting spree. A few days earlier, the newspaper had front-paged another "news" [story](#) hostile to grassroots political forces aligned with Sanders – a de facto editorial masquerading as news

coverage, headlined: “Democrats in Split-Screen: The Base Wants It All. The Party Wants to Win.”

In a bizarre disconnect from electoral reality, the article portrayed a party establishment that had lost election after election, including a cataclysmic loss to Trump, as being about winning. And the article portrayed the party’s activist base as interfering with the establishment’s winning ways.

Such Times stories are now operating under a heightened sense of journalistic impunity since the newspaper [abolished](#) its 14-year-old ombudsperson position of “public editor” more than two weeks ago – further insulating its reporters and editors from accountability. More than ever, calling the shots at the Times – the most influential news outlet in the United States – means never having to say you’re sorry, or even justify what you’ve done.

## **Media Hostility**

Corporate-owned media hostility toward Sanders and the progressive base has been conspicuous and well-documented. That hostility [started early](#) in his [campaign](#) and never let up, sometimes manifested as giving him [scant coverage](#). When the momentum of the Bernie campaign gained powerful traction as a threat to the corporate order, big media efforts to trash him went over the top.

At a key political moment last year, as FAIR analyst Adam Johnson [wrote](#), “the Washington Post ran 16 negative stories on Bernie Sanders in 16 hours, between roughly 10:20 PM EST Sunday, March 6, to 3:54 PM EST Monday, March 7 – a window that includes the crucial Democratic debate in Flint,

Michigan, and the next morning's spin." The day after this onslaught, Sanders stunned the elite pundit class by winning the Michigan primary.

Now, in mid-2017, with no presidential election in sight, why is the corporate media hostility toward Sanders so prone to surface?

Consider, as an example, this structural reality: Jeff Bezos, the owner of the Washington Post, has just unveiled plans for his company Amazon to buy Whole Foods. And Bernie Sanders, the [most popular](#) politician in the United States according to polls, is strongly opposed to allowing such huge consolidations of corporate power.

For good reasons, media powerhouses like the New York Times and Washington Post are averse to Donald Trump. At the same time, they remain quite cozy with Hillary Clinton's political orientation and especially with the sectors of the corporate-military establishment that she represents. Like so much of the mass media, those outlets see Sanders as dangerously anti-corporate and way too willing to challenge Wall Street, big insurance companies, the fossil fuel industry and the like.

On a political level, the Clinton wing of the party has been running on the equivalent of dumpster-fire fumes since the disastrous loss in November. The party's establishment, entwined with Wall Street and an agenda of continuous military intervention overseas, was just barely able to shoehorn its handpicked choice, Tom Perez, into becoming the new chair of the Democratic National Committee.

In a classic [joint interview](#) with MSNBC two months ago,

Perez and Sanders showcased just how different their politics are. Perez mumbled platitudes, Sanders was forthright. Perez spoke about victims of an unfair economy, but he refused to denounce or even name their corporate victimizers – while Sanders was glad to do so.

The U.S. media establishment often conflates “populism” of the right and the left, as though Trump and Sanders are somehow symmetrical as anti-establishment figures. And, as in the case of the New York Times article that appeared hours after the GOP baseball tragedy, the Times has sometimes jumped at the chance to draw far-fetched parallels between Trump’s violence-tinged, pseudo-populist messaging from the right and Sanders’s humane, inclusive messaging from the left.

Like it or not, the battle over the future of the Democratic Party – including what kind of presidential nominee the party should have in 2020 – is already underway. Overall, the top echelons of corporate media are oriented toward promoting the Clinton wing while denigrating the Bernie wing. The forces that brought us the disastrous 2016 Clinton campaign are not about to give up.

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