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## Syria and the US: More Truths Emerge

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On 17 September 2016 aircraft of the so-called ‘coalition’, led by the United States, bombed Syrian Army troop positions at Deir Ez-Zor. Aircraft from the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark and Australia took part in the attack. Between 62 and 90 (reports vary) Syrian troops were killed and more than 100 injured. The attack allowed ISIS forces to take control of what was a vital area protecting the airport.

At the time, the attack was labeled a “mistake”. Australia’s Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull apologized, saying he regretted the loss of life and injury to Syrian personnel.

A spokesman for the Syrian government said that the attack was “intentional”, a view shared by Syria’s ally, Iran. The US military ordered an inquiry into the incident. It is usually the case with such inquiries that little is done, nothing other than “regrettable mistakes” are admitted, and no one is sanctioned.

Often, some reason is found to attribute the “error” to the enemy’s actions, as with the bombing of the Kunduz Hospital in Afghanistan.

Two recent developments however, cast some new light on that “mistake” in September 2016.

The first is the release of the report into the investigation by the US Central Command based in Qatar on 29 November 2016. As is almost invariably the case, the report found “no evidence of misconduct.”

The report did acknowledge however, that the US did mislead the Russian military command about where the strike was to occur.

Further, the report acknowledges that the US Command ignored both actual information and intelligence analysis that the positions targeted were occupied by Syrian government troops and were not ISIS terrorists.

The third revelation was that the air strikes shifted from the strategy of “deliberate targeting” to one of an “immediate strike.” This violated usual US Air Force operational procedure. No explanation was given for this violation of normal procedure.

The fact that the Russians were misled, the ignoring of their own intelligence and factual information, both electronic and human, and the abrupt change in operational procedure without a good reason, all reinforce the conclusion reached at the time by the Syrians; that the attack was not a “mistake” but in fact deliberate.

The bigger question is why the attack occurred in the way that it did. The pivotal event, not traversed in the report, was that a ceasefire agreement had been brokered on 9 September 2016 between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov.

That ceasefire agreement was known to be strongly opposed by elements within the US Department of Defence and in particular by the Secretary of Defence, Ash Carter. The latter has maintained an unrelentingly belligerent attitude towards Russia. Carter opposed any cooperation with Russia, including, in this context, strong antipathy to the setting up of a “Joint Integration Centre” (JIC) that was a key component of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement.

The JIC was to be formed seven days after the ceasefire was scheduled to take effect, that is, on 19 September 2016. The air strike on the 17th immediately killed off the ceasefire and the setting up of the JIC.

The timing of the attack, two days before hand, was highly unlikely therefore to have been a coincidence.

The attack also reinforced the image that US foreign policy in the Middle East was not being directed by the President, but rather by the military. The Russian view that this was the case was made explicit in the press interview given by Russia’s UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin following an urgent Security Council meeting that followed the attack.

Mr Churkin asked: ***“Who is in charge in Washington. The White House or the Pentagon?”*** The facts rather suggest the answer to Mr Churkin’s question and if that is the case it is a cause for serious concern.

The other recent development is directly related to the issues raised by the US attack of 17 September. It helps us to understand more about US conduct in the Middle East. In particular, it illustrates why the US was spectacularly unsuccessful in preventing the rapid spread of ISIS control over large swathes of Iraq and Syria.

It was not until the Russian intervention of August 2014 at the request of the Syrian government that significant progress was made on halting the relentless advance of ISIS.

At the beginning of 2017 Wikileaks released the audio of a meeting that Kerry had with members of the Syrian Opposition on 22 September 2016 at the Dutch UN Mission. This was less than a week after the Deir ez-Zor bombing.

The New York Times and CNN both reported the fact of the leak, but suppressed information about its most significant parts. As far as I have been able to ascertain, no mainstream Australian media outlet has even reported the fact of the leak, let alone its contents.

The audio discloses three key facts about US policy in Iraq and Syria. For those familiar with the history of the region and US policy therein, the revelations will not be a total surprise. It is however, confirmation from a very high official level of what critics of US policy have been saying for a considerable time.

The first fact confirmed by the audio was that Kerry admitted that the Obama administration's primary goal in Syria was regime change. The reasons for this are not difficult to ascertain.

The US wanted a compliant regime in Damascus that would allow, inter alia, the Qatari pipeline to supply Europe with natural gas. That would seriously damage the Russian economy. A further benefit accruing to the Americans would be the closure of Russia's Tartus naval base on Syria's Mediterranean coast.

The second fact from the audio was that to accomplish the goal of regime change, the White House allowed the rise of ISIS. Here, Kerry is being too modest. The US did a great deal more than "allow" the rise of ISIS. With its Qatari, Saudi, Turkish, Jordanian and Israeli allies it financed, trained, armed and supported (both militarily and politically) ISIS.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and displaced as a direct result of this policy. It is part of the propaganda barrage directed at the Syrian government that these deaths are the results of the "Assad brutal dictatorship" rather than an inevitable outcome of US policy.

This callous indifference to the impact of the war on civilians can be seen in the current ISIS campaign to deny Damascus' five million inhabitants access to clean water supplies. The western media barely mentions this war crime and its coverage implies that the shortages are attributable to Syrian and Russian bombing.

Thirdly, Kerry admitted that not only did the US arm ISIS, it carried out military operations that were of direct assistance. The "mistake" at Deir ez-Zor, only two days before this conversation occurred, would have been uppermost in Kerry's mind.

Three days after the release of the Pentagon report (2/12/16) the Danish government announced that it was suspending the military operations of its F-16 fighter jets in Iraq and Syria. Denmark was thus the second country, after Canada on 22 February)

Australia, not for the first time, seems untroubled by questions of international law in its unswerving allegiance to the United States. In an interview with State broadcaster ABC on 7 July 2016 former Prime Minister John Howard gave what is probably the major reason why Australia so willingly involves itself in the US's illegal wars of choice.

Referring to the Iraq War decision of March 2003 he said: *“given our shared history and values, it was in our national interest to stand beside the Americans.”*

If that is indeed the benchmark of Australia's foreign policy, then Australia is in for a long history of endless wars where ascertaining Australia's true national interest is at best incidental.