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## The Real Reason for Turkey's Shoot-Down of the Russian Jet

By Gareth Porter  
November 30, 2015

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 F16 pilots had issued to the Russian jets without a Russian response, and US and other NATO member states endorsed Turkey's right to defend its airspace.

US 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 US 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 US F111, 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 20 November, 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 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 (IS) 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 pretense 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 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.”