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US Hawks Advance a War Agenda in Syria

Exclusive: The U.S. government, having illegally sent American troops into Syria, is now threatening to attack the Syrian military if it endangers those troops, an Orwellian twist that marks a dangerous escalation, explains Daniel Lazare.

By Daniel Lazare

8/21/2016

War, like politics, is filled with surprises. While the focus in Syria has been on a U.S.-backed rebel offensive in Aleppo that has succeeded in turning tables on Bashar al-Assad's government, a new and unexpected flashpoint has developed 200-plus miles to the east where U.S. jets are engaged in a dangerous showdown with Syrian warplanes near the city of Hasakah.

The trouble began on Wednesday when, according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Kurdish forces advanced on the pro-government National Defense Forces that controls portions of the city. When the NDF responded with arrests, the fighting took off.

This is not the first time that Kurdish and government forces have clashed in Hasakah, which is divided among Kurds, Arabs, Aramaic-speaking Assyrians, and a small number of Armenians. But what makes the latest confrontation so serious is that the U.S. quickly upped ante by scrambling two F-22 fighters to intercept a pair of Syrian Su-24s bombing Kurdish positions.

NBC News reported that the jets came within a mile of one another on Thursday and were in visual contact before the Syrian aircraft left the scene. U.S. jets chased away two more Su-24s the next day as well.

Noting that the Kurdish units are part of a U.S.-backed coalition known as the Syrian Democratic Forces and that U.S. Special Operations forces were in the area at the time, Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis, a Navy captain, said that the U.S. was resolved to protect the safety of both.

“We view instances that place coalition personnel at risk with the utmost seriousness” he declared, “and we do have the inherent right of self-defense when U.S. forces are at risk.”

“As we’ve said in the past,” he added, “the Syrian regime would be well-advised not to interfere with coalition forces or our partners.”

Such statements are little less than Orwellian since the United States has essentially invaded Syria by inserting military forces without Syrian government permission in violation of international law. What Davis was saying, therefore, is that the U.S. will prevent Syria from protecting its own forces on its own soil, which was rather like the Wehrmacht condemning Poland for daring to defend its own territory in September 1939.

A Pro-War Establishment

The upshot is the latest example of how Washington’s vast pro-war foreign-policy establishment continues to get its way despite President Barack Obama’s efforts to limit military involvement in the Middle East. Establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Syria has long been a neocon priority. Indeed, Hillary Clinton, a neocon favorite at this point, reiterated her call for a no-fly zone as recently as April during a televised debate with Bernie Sanders.

Obama has opposed a no-fly zone because it would draw the U.S. into a direct conflict with the Assad government and likely its Russian and Iranian backers as well. But now with the U.S. promising to continue patrolling the skies over Hasakah, he finds himself backing into a no-fly zone regardless.

The confrontation begs the question of who is really calling the shots with regard to Syria, the President or well-placed hawks whose specialty is maneuvering the White House into doing their bidding.

It also raises the question of the role of the Clinton presidential campaign. The White House is obviously coordinating closely with Clinton’s campaign headquarters, and with prospects of a landslide victory that will give Democrats control of both houses of Congress plus the presidency, the stakes couldn’t be higher. But since a quick and easy victory over Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies would vindicate the neocon position, the issue is whether pro-Hillary forces are pulling strings to make events in Syria go her way as well.

This is not conspiracy mongering but simply the way policy in Washington is made. Hawks and doves are constantly jockeying for advantage with Obama standing haplessly in the

middle. Moreover, the hawks seem to be winning since U.S. foreign policy has turned distinctly more robust since the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in late July.

Around the time that retired four-star Marine General John Allen was warning America's enemies, "You will fear us," and Gold Star parent Khizr Khan was telling Trump to go home and read the Constitution, Obama gave Ashton Carter, his interventionist Secretary of Defense the go-ahead to bomb ISIS positions in Libya.

On July 31 – three days after Clinton gave her acceptance speech – Syrian rebels led by Al Nusra, the local Al Qaeda affiliate, launched its powerful offensive in Aleppo.

Whether or not Washington OK'd the offensive – citing reports of massive arms shipments to the rebels, the well-informed Moon of Alabama website argues persuasively that it did – there is no doubt that it encouraged and helped coordinate a powerful propaganda campaign that has followed in its wake.

Omran Daqneesh, the dazed and dirt-encrusted five-year-old boy who has become "a symbol of Aleppo's suffering," according to *The New York Times*, is one example of how the campaign has borne fruit. Lina Sergie Attar's powerful Aug. 13 *Times* opinion piece, "Watching My Beloved Aleppo Rip Itself Apart," was another, while the rabidly anti-Assad *Guardian* has hardly let a day go by without running a heart-rending tale about this or that horror that Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin have visited on Syria's civilian population. (Examples here, here, and here.)

U.S. Media on the Bandwagon

Context, balance, and plain accuracy have fallen by the wayside as various media outlets hop on the pro-war bandwagon. Why, for example, focus on one the fate of one child in rebel-held eastern Aleppo when the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the mainstream media's favor go-to source for Syrian casualty figures, reports that virtually the same number of civilians have died from random rebel shelling of government-held western Aleppo as from Syrian or Russian aerial bombardment in the east, i.e. 163 versus 162?

While trumpeting the fate of Omran Daqneesh, who was shaken but apparently not seriously hurt, why has *The New York Times* failed to report the plight of 12-year-old Abdullah Issa, whose throat was slit last month by members of a U.S.-backed rebel force known as Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki because he had allegedly fought on the government side?

"We are even worse than ISIS," the fighters bragged before finishing the boy off. Yet even though the entire gruesome image was caught on video, the "paper of record" has refused to report a single word.

The same goes for Lina Sergie Attar's stirring *Times* op-ed. Although it invokes the infamous 2013 Queiq River massacre to describe the suffering that Assad has heaped upon the people of Aleppo, it fails to mention that the slaughter was most likely the work of Al Nusra. Why spoil a good story with the facts?

Much the same can be said for Hasakah where *The Wall Street Journal* blandly reported that “Syrian government bombers had been striking Kurdish positions near the city of Hasakah, where the U.S. has been backing Kurdish forces in the fight against Islamic State,” also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daesh.

Since the U.S. is battling the Islamic State, the quintessence of evil, its role must be above reproach while the Syrian government is plainly up to no good.

Nonetheless, the questions continue to multiply. If U.S. military personnel are helping the Kurds battle ISIS, why are the Kurds fighting with pro-government forces instead? Since the Syrian Observatory says they started the fight, did the Americans do anything to restrain them or call them off? Or did they encourage them to attack in order to provoke a wider conflict? What, moreover, happens if the U.S. ends up downing a Syrian plane? Clinton will cheer. But what happens if Russia decides to join in the fray?

Making Clinton Happy

A happy romp in the skies over Hasakah would serve the Clinton campaign well. It would show that toughness pays, as Clinton has repeatedly argued. But the trouble with war is that it is rarely goes according to plan.

Indeed, the Syrian conflict grows more complicated by the day. Syria and Russia are battling ISIS, Al Nusra, and other Islamist groups while the U.S. is battling ISIS as well while indirectly aiding Al Nusra by channeling arms to allied Islamist groups with which it shares weaponry and coordinates battlefield tactics. The U.S. has so far steered clear of conflict with Assad, although Hasakah may signal a change of heart.

Turkey’s megalomaniacal President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, opposes ISIS but supports Al Nusra outright – “it should not be considered as a terrorist organization” since it opposes Islamic State, he declared in a recent interview – but reserves his real enmity for the America’s Kurdish allies.

The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) are battling Assad in Hasakah but at the same time fighting alongside Assad’s forces against U.S.-backed rebels in Aleppo. China has declared its support for Assad and has even sent military advisers to help his regime in its fight with the rebels, thereby introducing yet another explosive element into the mix.

This is more intervention than one small country can handle, and tripwires are therefore multiplying. Obama’s aggressive actions in Hasakah may help Clinton against Trump but they could all too easily blow up in the administration’s face. War, indeed, packs just as many surprises as politics.