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A Costly Mistake in Syria

By Daniel Larison
September 19, 2016

The U.S. bombed ^[1] a Syrian army position and reportedly killed dozens of their soldiers over the weekend:

The U.S.-Russia deal to bring peace to Syria seemed near collapse late Saturday, as the two countries publicly accused each other of double-dealing and atrocities in the wake of an apparently mistaken U.S. airstrike that killed dozens of Syrian soldiers.

The U.S. Central Command acknowledged the strike, in eastern Syria's Deir al-Zour province, saying it was "halted immediately" when U.S. forces were informed by Russia "that it was possible the personnel and vehicles targeted were part of the Syrian military." Central Command said the intended target had been Islamic State forces in the area.

A U.S. Defense official said the strike "appears to be an intelligence failure."

Assuming that this was done by mistake, it is a damaging and embarrassing error, and it shows the dangers inherent in running a bombing campaign in Syria in the midst of a multi-sided civil war. It is even more embarrassing because the strike hit Syrian forces that were fighting ISIS. Because the error effectively benefited ISIS, the strike has provided Syria and Russia with a ready-made story to use as part of their propaganda that ISIS is either backed or created by the U.S. Coming on the heels of the ceasefire agreement with Moscow, the timing of this incident couldn't have been worse.

Max Boot is annoyed ^[2] that the U.S. is sorry about this debacle:

This was the first time that the U.S. had ever bombed Bashar Assad's forces, which have been responsible for crimes against humanity, causing the vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of deaths in Syria's civil war. But instead of justifying the bombing on the grounds that it is necessary not just to protect civilians but also to end the civil war which has fueled the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS, the U.S. has de facto apologized for the bombing! And to Russia no less, which has been providing the air cover for Assad's forces to take back ground from the rebels.

In a nutshell, Boot wants the U.S. to justify bombing soldiers that were fighting against ISIS. In other words, he wants the government to defend publicly a mistaken action that worked to the benefit of jihadists. That is the deranged position some Syria hawks end up taking because of their obsession with starting a war with the Syrian government. Fortunately, this was a mistake and the administration responded to the error as it should have. Had the administration acted as Boot wanted, Syria and Russia would have had to conclude that the strike was intentional, and that would have sharply raised tensions and absolutely doomed any chance of reaching a diplomatic settlement.