

US Air Strikes in Syria, Just the Beginning

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Following yesterday's massive air attacks inside Syria, the Pentagon made clear that the operations were just the start of a protracted war. Lieutenant General William Mayville, director of operations for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the media the strikes were "the beginning of a credible and sustainable, persistent campaign" against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias. Asked about the length of the campaign, he said: "I think it would be in terms of years."

The scope and extent of the air strikes underline that fact that Syria, rather than Iraq, has been the primary target all along. A senior American military official told the *New York Times* that the US and its allies "dropped as many bombs in one night as the United States had during all its previous operations against Islamic State in Iraq." The cruise missiles and bombs rained down on Syria were not directed simply against ISIS, but also against Al Qaeda affiliates—Jabhat al-Nusra, and the hitherto unpublicised "terrorist" organisation, Khorasan.

While Mayville disclaimed any knowledge of civilian casualties, the first reports from inside Syria indicate substantial death and destruction. The *Los Angeles Times* cited a video from the north-western province of Idlib showing residents picking through the rubble of bombed houses with a voice over of an anti-government activist, declaring "mass destruction of the civilian homes [as] a result of the strikes of the Western alliance." The article explained that one of five US missiles in the area had hit a residential neighbourhood in the village of Kafar Daryan, killing up to two dozen civilians, including children.

Yesterday's assault consisted of three waves of strikes. The first was a volley of cruise missiles directed against targets around Syria's largest city, Aleppo. The second involved US fighter jets and drones, along with war planes from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Jordan, attacking ISIS compounds and vehicles in northern Syria. The third round, which also included Arab countries, targeted ISIS positions in eastern Syria.

The fact that the first set of missiles was not directed against ISIS, but against Khorasan targets near Aleppo, is particularly significant. In justifying the attacks, US officials claimed that the small, obscure group of "seasoned Al Qaeda veterans" was in the "advanced stages of some type of terrorist attack against a European or US-based target."

Pentagon spokesperson Rear Admiral John Kirby provided no evidence that a terrorist attack had been imminent. Unnamed counter-intelligence officials provided the media with lurid details about the group's experiments with "next-generation undetectable bombs" to be smuggled onto international flights, including explosive devices inside toothpaste tubes and clothing dipped in liquid explosives.

This new terrorist scare serves to further intensify the climate of fear and suspicion being cultivated by the media and political establishment in the US and its allies as a means of blunting opposition to new US-led war in the Middle East. It lays the basis for further police-state measures and the suppression of dissent.

At the same time, the Obama administration seized on the “imminent threat” to the United States to bolster its threadbare justifications for a war of aggression in flagrant breach of international law. In a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, the US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, added the Khorasan “terrorist threat” to the absurd claim that the attacks on Syria were legitimate because they were undertaken on the request of the US puppet regime in Baghdad.

The attacks around Aleppo appear to be out of all proportion to any danger posed by Khorasan, which, according to US officials speaking to ABC News, consisted of “about 50 or so hardened fighters.” Most of the 47 Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from US Navy vessels in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf were directed at targets around Aleppo.

The real purpose of this assault was revealed in a *Wall Street Journal* article, which pointed out that the strikes were coordinated in advance with pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA) militias in Aleppo. Syrian opposition spokesman Oubai Shahbandar told the newspaper that the CIA recently provided the FSA with fresh military supplies, “including American-made, heat-seeking anti-tank weapons known as TOWs, arms and communications equipment.”

The *Wall Street Journal* claimed that the US attacks were not directed against Syrian army positions, but rather were aimed at reinforcing the FSA against its various Islamist rivals, including ISIS. However, the intervention of US war planes in this hotly-contested area signifies Washington’s direct involvement in Syria’s protracted civil war. The primary US target is not ISIS, but the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Any threat or incident, real or concocted, involving the Syrian military can be turned by Washington into the pretext for the postponed air war on the regime that was planned last year and called off at the last minute.

Confronted with the threat of war, the Syrian government is attempting to manoeuvre by offering to collaborate with the US in its attacks on ISIS—an offer that Washington has flatly rejected. Instead of condemning yesterday’s devastating air assault on Syrian territory as illegal, the regime boasted that it had been given advance notice of the attacks. As deputy US national security adviser Benjamin Rhodes told the media, the only US notification was a menacing warning “not to pose a threat to our aircraft.”

The Assad regime’s main backers—Iran and Russia—issued cautious and conditional criticisms of the US air strikes. In comments to NBC News, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani complained that the attacks were launched without UN authorisation or the permission of the Assad government, but did not condemn them outright. The Russian foreign ministry made similar comments. Both governments are seeking to avoid a confrontation with the US, even though they are well aware that the US war in Syria is aimed against their strategic interests in the Middle East.

The Pentagon declared that yesterday’s attacks were not a repetition of the “shock and awe” bombardment that began the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. But there is no doubt that the raw display of US military might, including the use of some of the latest and most sophisticated weapons systems, was aimed at intimidating and threatening. The US military

used the opportunity to test out its F-22 Raptor stealth fighters and the latest versions of the Tomahawk missiles, sending an unmistakable warning to US rivals in the Middle East and beyond.

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