



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on June 20, 2017

## Is U.S. in Syria to Fight ISIS – or Assad?

Following the shooting down of a Syrian government jet on June 18 by a U.S. F-18 fighter jet dispatched from the aircraft carrier USS *George H.W. Bush*, the Pentagon released a statement saying: “The coalition’s mission is to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend coalition or partner forces from any threat.”



However, within a day of that statement’s release, a number of writers for publications spanning the political spectrum have expressed the view that the U.S. mission in Syria is aimed at toppling the regime of Bashar al-Assad instead of defeating the ISIS terrorists.

A June 20 article in *The Hill*, a Washington-D.C.-based political journalism newspaper, while not delving deeply into the ultimate objectives of the U.S. military presence in Syria, observed: “The United States is inching closer to involvement in the Syrian civil war.”

The article quoted Robert Ford, the U.S. ambassador to Syria from 2010 to 2014, who said there is real danger of the United States becoming enmeshed in the Syrian civil war.

President Assad has vowed to recapture all Syrian territory lost during the nation’s civil war, Ford noted in an e-mail. “There is, therefore, a real risk of escalation, especially if, unlike in western Syria, the Americans insist on backing up their Syrian allies on the ground and there is no deal with Assad,” Ford said.

Previous (and continuing) U.S. interventions in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that whenever our military is dispatched abroad, escalation almost always occurs and our presence in the country becomes almost never-ending.

Another recent article in *The Atlantic* asserted that President Trump’s anti-interventionist rhetoric during last year’s presidential campaign was insincere. The writer, Conor Friedersdorf, apparently had Trump pegged as but one more interventionist in non-interventionist clothing last September 29 in an article entitled “Donald Trump Is Often More Hawkish Than Washington Elites.” Among the statements that Friedersdorf made last September:

- “If you’re a voter who believes that Donald Trump is against foreign wars and regime change, unlike the globalist elites in Washington, D.C., you have been misled.”
- (In response to Trump’s statement during a GOP primary debate, when he said: “I am the only person on this dais ... that fought very, very hard against us [going into Iraq] ... because I said going into Iraq — that was in 2003, you can check it out, check out — I’ll give you 25 different stories.”) Friedersdorf said, “Trump did not fight ‘very, very hard’ against the invasion of Iraq. There is no public record of him fighting at all.”
- “Trump’s instincts are hawkish, he has done much more to publicly urge military action than to



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restrain it, he says even now that he will ask U.S. generals how to defeat ISIS in 100 days and give them whatever they need — a recipe for a massive invasion of Syria — and he says we should take ISIS's oil, which would require American boots on the ground."

In this week's article, Friedersdorf said: "The push for escalation is a particular betrayal for Trump voters who supported the candidate based on rhetoric about quickly defeating ISIS and otherwise eschewing war. Here is what Trump had to say back when President Obama was contemplating a greater U.S. role in Syria: "What I am saying is stay out of Syria... AGAIN, TO OUR VERY FOOLISH LEADER, DO NOT ATTACK SYRIA — IF YOU DO MANY VERY BAD THINGS WILL HAPPEN & FROM THAT FIGHT THE U.S. GETS NOTHING!"

Another article in Britain's *Independent* on June 20 carried the headline: "The US seems keener to strike at Syria's Assad than it does to destroy Isis."

The article begins:

The extraordinary destruction of a Syrian fighter jet by a US aircraft on Sunday has precious little to do with the Syrian plane's target in the desert near Rasafa — but much to do with the advance of the Syrian army close to the American-backed Kurdish forces along the Euphrates.

The writer believes that the U.S. shoot-down of the Syrian jet was "more a warning to the Syrians to stay away from the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces — the facade-name for large numbers of Kurds and a few Arab fighters — since they are now very close to each other in the desert."

The conflict stems from the intentions of both the Syrian government and the anti-Assad forces to occupy and control as much of the territory formerly occupied by ISIS as they can — once ISIS is driven out. In this conflict, it is apparent that the United States has now taken on itself a new role, in addition to the stated one against ISIS — it is to keep Assad's military away from the rebel forces attempting to remove him from power.

The article asks:

But what is America doing attacking first Assad's air base near Homs, then the regime's allies near Al-Tanf and now one of Assad's fighter jets? *It seems that Washington is now keener to strike at Assad — and his Iranian supporters inside Syria — than it is to destroy Isis.* [Emphasis added.]

Another article in *National Review* for June 19 observed: "As ISIS crumbles, the chances for conflict with the Assad regime increase."

The writer, David French, traced the history of the fighting in Syria in a conflict that involved Syrian forces, anti-Assad rebels, including Kurdish and Arab militias, ISIS and other players. He continued his summary:

As ISIS began to crumble and Assad triumphed in the south and west, it became clear that instead of a potpourri of armies and militias and conflicts, the civil war was moving toward a climax where just two distinct forces held the balance of power — the Russian-allied Syrian regime and the American-allied forces holding the north.

Following the shoot-down of the Syrian jet, the Pentagon insisted, "The Coalition's mission is to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The Coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them."

However, said *National Review's* French:



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Let's put this in plain English. American forces and American allies are not only taking territory from ISIS, they're holding that territory against regime forces. There's a word for what happens when a foreign power takes and holds territory without the consent of the sovereign state — that word is "invasion." In many ways, current American policy is a lighter-footprint, less ambitious version of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. We're using local allies, but our own boots are on the ground, and we're directly defending our forces and our allies from threats from Syria's own government.

French concludes: "The Constitution cannot be discarded when it's inconvenient, and inertia is no substitute for strategy. America's necessary war against ISIS is evolving into a Syrian invasion."

*The New American* just posted an article by the veteran conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan, noting very different takes on the U.S. shoot-down of the Syrian jet reported by American and Syrian sources, with Washington saying the Syrian plane was bombing U.S.-backed rebels, and Damascus stating that its plane was attacking ISIS. It is impossible to confirm the veracity of either claim.

Beyond that, Buchanan wrote about a more potentially serious development — that conflict between U.S.-backed anti-Assad forces and Russia-backed Syrian forces may lead to what he calls a "US-Russia Collision."

Buchanan writes:

Assad's and his allied forces opposing ISIS are now colliding with the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces opposing ISIS, which consist of Arab rebels and the Syrian Kurds of the PYD.

But if America has decided to use its air power to shoot down Syrian planes attacking rebels we support, this could lead to a confrontation with Russia and a broader, more dangerous, and deadly war for the United States....

If, after the fall of ISIS in Raqqa, we are going to use U.S. power and leverage to solidify the position of Syrian rebels and Kurds, at the expense of Damascus, we could find ourselves in a collision with Syria, Russia, Hezbollah, Iran and even Turkey.

As our non-interventionist writers have noted in these pages for years, none of these conflicts would matter if we were not sending forces into a region that is not part of our national defense perimeter. It is not part of the constitutional role delegated to our government to defend our nation from invasion to use our military to intervene in regional conflicts abroad.

Photo of U.S. soldier: [U.S. Army](#)

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