



# The US, British and French airstrike on Syria

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US, British and French aircraft have attacked three Syrian army targets. They claim that these were related to the chemical arms programme of the country. In another of his infamous tweets, Donald Trump proudly announced "Mission accomplished?". The repetition of George Bush's triumphant announcement of the "final victory" in Iraq in 2003 is not only cynical, given the continued barbarism of the Syrian civil war, the likelihood of another offensive against Idlib and the continued Turkish campaign against Rojava. It also includes a certain unintended irony. Bush's "mission accomplished" was followed by a humiliating series of retreats and defeats for US imperialism. It is clear that, in terms of the US strategic situation, its decline as the global hegemonic power and its objective, to reverse the Russian re-emergence as an imperialist rival in the Middle East, it has achieved next to nothing.

## A limited assault

Clearly, millions had been shocked by the danger of a longer, concerted US attack on Syria, when Trump issued his threats against Assad and his backers on April 11. In a tweet, Trump's version of a "diplomatic note", recalling Kaiser Wilhelm II's provocative speeches and interviews, he threatened a sustained attack on Assad, the "Gas Killing Animal", the Syrian army and its backers. On the same day, he also issued a warning to Russia: "Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and "smart!?"

Clearly, the White House, the US Defence Secretary, James Mattis, and the army were able to reinterpret this war-mongering tweet quickly. In cooperation with France and Britain, they agreed on another limited air-strike, similar to the one in 2017.

Throughout the preparation for the attack, and during the bombardment itself, they had been in contact with the Russian military in order to ensure that, despite the belligerent presidential tweets, the situation in Syria would not get out of hand. How much damage has been done to the Syrian army infrastructure, how many cruise missiles have been shot down by the Russian supplied defence system, are not the decisive questions. What is clear is that the attack did not alter the balance of forces in Syria itself at all, nor was it designed to do so.

Of course, this does not stop both sides presenting themselves as "victorious". The US, Britain and France, but also their other imperialist allies like Germany or NATO all justify and celebrate the "measured response". Turkey and Israel have also already welcomed the attack.

On the other hand, Russia, Syria and Iran not only branded it a violation of "international law", but also claim that, in military terms, the attack was a failure and that the Syrian air defence was very effective.

Whilst the latter claims are almost certainly exaggerations, the Syrian government and its allies do have one point. The Western aggression has been symbolic. The gains that Assad and, much more importantly, Iran, Russia and Turkey, have made in Syria cannot be reversed by limited air strikes or even a series of them.

For the time being, then, neither side has any interest in allowing the situation to get out of hand. It was rational that the Russian side would not retaliate and that the US and its allies would avoid violating "Russian" controlled airspace, not to mention Russian troops or bases. For its part, the Russian regime has politically limited itself to a mixture of firmness and moderation with regard to Trump's threats, trying to present itself as a voice of rationalism in an

irrational, US-dominated world.

This posture accurately expresses the relationship of forces on the ground; the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran, together with Turkey, are about to win and reorder Syria according to their interests. The Syrian revolution has been defeated, the Kurdish movement is on the retreat and betrayed by its 'allies'. They clearly do not want to endanger their gains, but rather want to 'stabilise' Syria in order to harvest the fruits of their victory.

### Looming contradictions

However, it would be fatal to underestimate the dangers that have been expressed in this confrontation. Currently, the US is not able to reverse the balance of forces in Syria or even to stop Iran's increased influence in Iraq. The Russian victory has once again revealed the relative decline of US imperialism; still the single strongest global power, but no longer the unchallenged hegemon and now unable to impose its order on the Middle East.

The current affair has to be seen in this context of a struggle for the re-division of the Middle East and, indeed, the world. The Syrian civil war has not only allowed the butcher Assad to maintain his rule, it has significantly strengthened Russian imperialism and also Iran, as a semi-colonial, but regionally ambitious, player not only in Syria, but also in Iraq. Turkey, whilst a NATO ally of the US and the European powers, is also cooperating with Russia and Iran, in other words, manoeuvring between the two sides.

If Turkey were now to side with the US and the western powers and the US abandoned its temporary Kurdish allies in 'exchange', this could change the balance of forces on the ground and lead to a direct confrontation between imperialist powers and their proxies in the country. But such a scenario includes many 'ifs' and Erdogan will not break with the 'Astana process' just for empty and completely ineffectual UN or Franco-German 'peace initiatives'.

Both the US and the European powers, in particular France and Britain, who have long-standing 'historic' interests in the region as former colonial empires, want to reverse the Russian gains. For this purpose, they have given Saudi-Arabia a free hand in the criminal war it is waging in Yemen and turned a blind eye to the Israeli massacres in Gaza. Nonetheless, the French and British contributions to the attack are significant primarily in giving some legitimacy to the US, their roles are ultimately determined by decisions and political objectives in Washington.

So, the Syrian regime and its backers will continue with their barbaric campaign to eradicate what is left of the 'opposition', whose leadership and armed units have largely degenerated into Islamist currents or Turkish puppets. While Assad and his allies have used chemical weapons repeatedly, they have used far more 'conventional' bombs, rockets, planes or artillery, depriving millions of their homes, making them refugees, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. Whether or not the Syrian regime launched the chemical attack on April 7 one cannot prove with certainty. Clearly, it has proven in the past that it recognises no moral or other restraints on its actions. For Assad, such an attack would not only have hastened the fall of Douma itself but sent a terrifyingly clear message to the refugees and opposition forces in Idlib; surrender or face similar attacks.

The West took the claims of the use of chemical weapons as a pretext for a limited strike but their "humanitarian" concerns are nothing more than a charade to deceive their public opinion. They also serve to justify a gross violation of the "international law" that Macron, Merkel and May still claim to value highly, as long as infringements of it are not committed by their Israeli or Saudi allies or, for that matter, through enforcement of the EU's racist and murderous policy against refugees from Syria and from their own military interventions.

However, in the longer run, the US and its imperialist allies, but also its Saudi and Israeli allies, want to reverse the gains made by Russia and Iran. They are the real target of the current campaign. All these factors point to the threat of direct clashes between the powers themselves and, thus, to open warfare. Whilst the current strikes have been limited and are not intended to go beyond that stage, such adventures always contain the potential for escalation not least because they presume that both sides are playing by the same rules.

The historic period in which we live is one in which the international order, that is the established relation of forces

between the global powers, has already been challenged and undermined. The impotence of the UN, the replacement of 'proper' diplomatic channels by tweets may appear as 'madness', but it is a 'madness' that reflects a real change in the world.

The constant decline of US-supremacy over the world and the rise of China as an imperialist power have led to a division within the US ruling class. Before Trump, the US tried to dominate the world via a multi-lateral system, through institutions like the WTO, the IMF, World Bank and NATO and even aimed to extend this in treaties like TTIP and TTP. However, the global crisis, the rise of China, the reassertion of Russia as a global power and the 'cost' of leading the Western alliance, have led a faction of US capital to opt for unilateralism. For them, "good deals" are not 'roundtable' agreements with all and everyone, but 'deals' imposed on weaker states. For the moment, the decline of the US has forced it to make a symbolic rather than a real intervention in Syria but, given the whole shaping of a new cold war, the gains of Russia in the Middle East will need to be addressed. The losses of the US in that key region of the world are much more significant for Washington than the struggle in the Eastern Ukraine or Crimea.

This situation also feeds adventurism. It may be a personal characteristic of Trump but, more importantly, it flows from the inner contradictions of the current period. The 'old', established relations between the nations are more and more undermined, gaining new, or lost, geo-political ground requires 'tougher' means, ultimately by all sides. The US president is not the only 'hothead' and the US is not the only power in which the inner contradictions point to adventures. Russian imperialism, but also Turkish, Israeli and Saudi policies, express such features.

The threat of a 'limited war' getting out of hand, the replacement of diplomacy by tweets or 'strong language' are a result of the current period. They will not go away by appeals to 'international law', to strengthening the UN or returning to 'professional diplomacy' as Madeleine Albright called for. Whilst this may sound 'reasonable', it is actually more out of tune with the current stage of capitalist development than Trump's 'madness'. It means calling for a return to an international political and institutional order, which was based on a relatively stable balance of force and relations. The development of the global economy undermined that order and, inevitably, it will continue to do so.

## The Left

It is not only the liberals or conservatives who look back to the 'good old days' who are out of tune. Large sections of the Left and the labour movement are also lagging behind.

Some downplay the danger of war or, like right wing social democracy and many union leaders, even advocate interventions or a 'tougher' policy towards Russia or China. German social democracy backed the US attack, just as the right wing of the UK Labour party will side with 'its' Tory government. Another part of the left, often from a Stalinist background, sees the opposing imperialist powers, Russia and China, as a lesser evil, or even potential allies.

Of course, for the workers' movements in the US, in Germany, Britain, France or other western states, the main enemy is their 'own' ruling class. They need to mobilise against every military or diplomatic intervention. They need to say No to all air strikes in Syria, to the deployment of troops or to economic or diplomatic sanctions. They need to call for the immediate withdrawal of all troops and military advisors from the entire region! They need to fight against any support for the Israeli and Saudi military machines! They need to call for the immediate withdrawal of Turkish troops and to defend the Kurdish people.

But the same applies for Russia, China and their allies. We call for the withdrawal of the Russian troops and allies from Syria. While it is certainly true that the Western powers, and the US in particular, want to contain China and have effectively opened a new cold war against Russia, this does not alter the fact that both are imperialist powers themselves. They, too, are fighting for equally reactionary aims and are the 'main enemy' of the Russian and Chinese working classes.

As the example of Syria shows, every form of imperialist intervention, in particular in such an important geo-political region, is not only reactionary in itself, but will threaten to get 'out of hand'. Even if the current threats ended with a

limited, symbolic attack, the build up of tensions between the powers, the formation of rival alliances and blocks and, not least, accustoming people to the existence of a "war threat", are all very real. The whole idea, spread for example by France and Germany, of a "return" to diplomacy and the restoration of "peace" is out of tune with the present realities. In any event, diplomatic manoeuvres are just another form of the struggle for the redivision of the world.

This needs to be the starting point for the creation of a new, global, anti-war movement that must be anti-imperialist and internationalist.

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