

Trigger-happy or just proud?



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As an informal coalition against terrorism in Syria began to build, a single act suddenly transforms the situation to benefit regime change and more chaos.

At first, the logic seemed simple enough.

The United States, Russia and the rest of the civilisation had more than enough reason to join forces against the hideously brutal Da'ish ("Islamic State") terror group.

But seemingly petty differences kept governments apart, fuelled their disagreements and fed the propaganda machine of Da'ish.

The transnational terrorists boasted that it was immune to threats from the international community because of its divinely ordained invincibility.

When Russian forces hit terrorist targets in Syria, the West complained that they were bombing the wrong places; Israel complained that Russian troops were already in Syria; any role by Iran was ostracised by the West.

Sunni Arab governments insisted on regime change in Syria at all costs despite Syiah-linked President Bashar al-Assad's government remaining popular with Syrians, representing a sovereign nation state and a member of the United Nations and acted militarily as a bulwark against Da'ish.

Israel and the United States also wanted Assad out even after allegations of his chemical weapons use against the Syrian population were proven to be false, because of institutional memory and Syria's steadfast opposition to Zionism.

Misplaced understanding on CNN and elsewhere argued that Da'ish was active in Syria primarily because Assad was still in office, and support for him from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia only "proved" his culpability and guilt.

Thus, the status quo in Syria had to be obliterated, Assad himself toppled forthwith, and all efforts by Teheran and Moscow had to be blocked.

Meanwhile, Da'ish survived, thrived, and continued to claim that its success showed its strength, moral legitimacy and divine purpose.

The world's governments were hamstrung and gridlocked against one another while their common enemy roared all the way to its hapless victims' mass graves.

Then reality seeped in, a little at a time, despite the mystifying efforts of Western mainstream media.

Russia's bombardment of terrorist strongholds in Syria were no longer criticised or opposed but rather taken as a given. US-based Associated Press reported in late October that refugees fleeing to Latakia from Syria's civil war zones praised Russia's bombing campaign.

Voluntary groups like the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Russian jets had effectively pounded Da'ish camps. Syrian military forces testified to several defeats on the battlefield for the terrorists.

Days later, US officials announced that Iran had been invited to multi-party talks in Vienna on Syria's future, pending a response from Teheran. Iran's sectarian opponents Saudi Arabia and Syrian rebel groups seemed to take a back seat as diplomacy regained its purpose.

Then Assad's immediate removal was no longer the first or main priority. Suddenly it seemed to cease being an issue as all parties talked instead of a phased transition, no mention was made of regime change as a precondition, and Assad even considered running in the planned election.

President Obama's critics in Washington pounced. His administration was accused of losing the initiative to Putin's Russia again, succumbing to political correctness and forced into retreat on several fronts.

Nobody bothered to give Obama credit for tactical correctness and strategic realism. Conditions in Syria and elsewhere in the region were simply not conducive to the fantasies of US hawks.

If Moscow had indeed seized the initiative that had slipped from Washington's grasp, it was because Russian strategists had read the situation more closely and understood it better.

Essentially, this concerns the main common foe being Da'ish rather than Assad; all available forces against Da'ish had to be better coordinated rather than fighting one another; and Syria could not afford a power vacuum in Damascus as Da'ish continued to make advances.

It had already taken too long for the Obama administration and its allies to understand these essentials. It would take even longer to convince Republican hawks and their friends in Turkey, if they could be convinced at all.

But overall, the US and Russian positions began to converge. Da'ish for once really seemed threatened by the informal alliance now ranged against it.

Yet even as Russian forces rained bombs on rebel enclaves in Syria, neighbouring Turkey grew increasingly agitated. Ankara continued to support groups operating in border zones fighting to topple Assad.

For weeks Russian jets flew over the border zones, apparently entering then leaving parts of Turkish airspace.

The Turks complained, protested and seethed as not only was their sovereignty violated but even more crucially their rebel proxies in Syria were being smashed.

Last Tuesday, one Russian jet allegedly strayed into Turkish airspace and was promptly shot down.

It came as a shock to Russia and foreign observers as the jet posed no threat to Turkey, and Russia and Turkey were friendly nations as well as major trading partners.

Answers to a dozen vital questions would help to decipher the tense and difficult situation.

Have Russian warplanes recently violated Turkish airspace?

Apparently so, but in the common understanding that they were only in hot pursuit of targets in Syria near the border and not in targeting anything in Turkey.

Why were Russian warplanes operating so near the border?

Because rebels from such anti-Syrian groups like the Free Syrian Army, which some call terrorists and were supported by Turkey, were based there.

Were Russian jets ever a threat to Turkey?

The case has never been made by any party, not even Turkey. Ankara justified its action on the basis of a violation of sovereign airspace, which only made the action look excessive.

Was the Russian jet in question ever in Turkish airspace?

Turkey says so but Russia denies it. Another version has it that the jet strayed over Turkey for only 17 seconds before it was shot down.

What would be the standard operating procedure of a country like Turkey in such circumstances?

Turkey would have scrambled its own jets, which would then closely and firmly escort the intruding jet out of Turkish airspace.

Where did the Russian jet come down?

Moscow said the jet was in Syrian airspace 1km from the border when it was shot and crashed 4km from the border, suggesting that it was flying away from Turkey when it was brought down.

What happened to the two pilots of the stricken jet?

They ejected and parachuted down, only to be shot at by rebel groups on the ground – operating in Syria.

What has been the rebels' response?

Despite some disagreement over whether to shoot the pilots parachuting down, they were killed anyway – in violation of Article 42, Protocol 1 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions (1977 Amendment).

What has been Turkey's response?

Ankara has refused to apologise for the hostile action and insists on its right to act as it did.

What has been the response of Nato, of which Turkey is a member?

An Extraordinary Meeting was urgently called, reflecting the seriousness of the situation.

What has been Russia's response?

The Foreign Ministry cancelled a planned meeting in Ankara, issued a travel advisory against visiting Turkey, and sanctions were slammed on the country.

What are the other likely costs and consequences?

Jeopardised trade including Turkish consumption of Russian gas and Turkish returns from Russian tourism. The biggest beneficiaries are Da'ish and other rebel-terror groups.

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