

US Airstrike against Syria: More to the September 2016 'Mistake' Than Originally Thought

If Australia was to blame, why are we no more informed on the Syrian airstrike since the September 2016 attack at Deir ez-Zor? James O'Neill reports.

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ON 18 SEPTEMBER 2016, warplanes belonging to the American “[coalition](#)” carried out air strikes on Syrian government soldiers defending the [Deir ez-Zor](#) airfield in northeastern Syria.

More than 100 Syrian soldiers died in the attack and many more were wounded. Australia’s [Department of Defence](#) admitted its involvement in the attack, although it gave no details of precisely what role the [RAAF](#) played.

I wrote an [article](#) on Independent Australia in September last year doubting whether the attack was a “mistake” as claimed by the Americans and the Australians, and, indeed, whether Australia was actually involved at all.



The basis for the skepticism in respect of the “mistake” claim was the established fact that Syrian troops had been in position defending the airfield for several months from attacking ISIS troops.

The scepticism about Australian involvement arose out of Syrian and Russian reports that the attack, over more than an hour, was carried out by [F-16](#) and [A-10 fighters](#) — neither of which are part of the RAAF's arsenal. The Department of Defence declined further comment as they wished to maintain the "integrity" of the U.S. review of the incident.

Since then, there have been a number of developments that [raise further questions](#) about the RAAF's role and indeed the whole basis of the September attack. These questions have not been answered by the [release of the U.S. report](#) on their investigation of the incident, nor by the Australian media's unwillingness to question the alleged explanation or explore wider issues about Australia's involvement in the Syrian war.

In order to avoid clashes between Russian forces, legally, in Syria at the request of the Syrian Government and American and "coalition" forces operating in Syria in violation of international law, there exists a communication system, referred to as the "[deconfliction line](#)". Under the protocols governing this system, the Americans notify the Syrians and Russians where and when their forces will be operating.

In respect of the attack on Deir ez-Zor, it appears the Americans did advise the Russians of an impending attack but, in this case, gave false information as to exactly where the attack was to occur.

After the attacks started and Syrian soldiers were being bombed and strafed, the Russians tried urgently to contact the Americans on the deconfliction line. They were unable to do so because for the whole of the attack period the American end of the line was left unattended. This is unlikely to have been a coincidence.



The American report also acknowledged that [U.S. Central Command](#) headquarters in Qatar, which was responsible for the carrying out of the attack, had precise intelligence as to the exact location of the Syrian troops and their ISIS opposition.

Which is where the RAAF comes in. At the time of the attack on 18 September, the RAAF was operating its [E-7A Wedgetail aircraft](#) above the battle.

[According to the RAAF's own website](#), the E-7A provides Australia with

'... one of the most advanced battle space management capabilities in the world.'

The aircraft is an airborne early warning and control platform that can

'... gather information from a wide variety of resources, analyse it and distribute it to other air and surface assets.'

Given that the RAAF had the intelligence data as to the exact location of the respective forces on the ground – which as noted were long term fixed positions for the Syrian defences – and that they had sophisticated observation, analysis and transmission capabilities, why is it that the attack continued on the Syrian Army for over an hour?

It is not a question answered by the American report and, beyond the initial statement admitting culpability for the “mistake”, the Australian Department of Defence has refused to provide further comment or explanation.

The suspicion that it was not a “mistake” but rather a deliberate attack on Syrian forces is reinforced by a number of other facts that have emerged. The Australian media has not thought it fit to comment or analyse any of these factors. The default position is always a variation on “we meant well”, “we regret any mistakes” and “any further information is inappropriate on grounds of national security”. International law is a wilderness never to be explored.

The first piece of additional information is that, within seven minutes of the U.S.-led attack commencing, ISIS ground forces commenced a well-organised attack on the Syrian defensive positions that were severely compromised by the air attacks.

The nature of the ISIS attack and its timing are among the strongest possible evidence that, far from being a “mistake”, this may have been an attack coordinated between ISIS and the Americans.

This view is reinforced by the further revelations that the ceasefire then in place (albeit imperfectly) was strongly opposed by [U.S. Defence Secretary Carter](#), as well as [Lt General Harrigan](#), commander of the U.S. Air Force Control Command that authorised the attack. The planned U.S.-Russian joint integration centre to co-ordinate attacks against ISIS was sabotaged by the attack. Carter and Harrigan had the means, motive and opportunity to sabotage a plan of which they both disapproved.

Deir ez-Zor is important for two other reasons. It is the centre of Syria's largest oil and gas deposits. ISIS has been selling oil from captured sites in the area by transporting it over the border into Turkey.



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Moscow and Damascus cited the attacks as the reason for declaring an end to the ceasefire in Syria

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Both the Americans and the Australians must have been aware of this [cross-border trade](#) through ground intelligence, satellites and the aforementioned E-7A's capabilities. This trade has also been widely discussed in a number of Internet sites. Yet this traffic had continued unhindered by American or Australian air power for months.

The second reason for Deir ez-Zor's importance is that it lies on the route of the proposed Qatari gas pipeline to Europe. Replacing Europe's reliance on Russian gas with Qatari gas is a major U.S. geopolitical goal. It was Syrian [President Assad](#)'s refusal in 2011 to permit Syria to be used for the transit of Qatari gas that is the direct origin of the war presently being waged in that country.

It will come as no surprise to note that the Australian mainstream media never contemplates the geopolitical significance of the events in which Australia is involved — unless it is to laud the U.S.'s contribution to allegedly advancing peace and stability around the world.

ISIS was and is an instrument of U.S. geopolitical policy in the same way the [Mujahideen](#) were used in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s, the [MEK](#) in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and al Qaeda in its various manifestations in the Russian Caucasus, the "[stans](#)" around the Caspian Sea and in China's Xinjiang province.

Far from being a "mistake", the Deir ez-Zor attack was simply another manifestation of the

U.S. policy of perpetual war for perpetual profit. The tragedy for Australians is that they are forever the willing pawns.

The contempt [shown to Turnbull by Trump](#) on the former's current visit to the U.S. is a small illustration of the price we pay for unquestioning obeisance. Other and more serious costs will inevitably arise unless Australia develops a foreign policy that places Australia's national interests first and places that policy in the context of respect for international law that we profess to follow but increasingly disregard.



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