



Russia Has Proof: Vladimir Putin Threatens to Publish Details of Secret NATO, Belgian Bombing Raids in Syria

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One of the strangest incidents of the Syrian conflict took place on 18th October 2016.

According to the Russians two Belgian F-16 aircraft, after having taken off from an air base in Jordan, and after having been refuelled in the air over Syria by US aircraft, carried out a bombing raid on the Kurdish village of Hasajek in Syria's northern Aleppo province, killing 6 civilians.

On the same day there were [reports](#) that the 'Syrian Defence Forces' - an umbrella organisation dominated by the Kurdish militia the YPG - has captured this village from ISIS.

The Russians say that they were not told of this bombing raid by the US led anti ISIS coalition despite the agreement between the US and Russian militaries that they would inform each other of such raids.

The Belgians categorically deny that the raid took place. In order to lend force to their denials, they summoned the Russian ambassador to the Belgian Foreign Ministry to complain personally to him about the Russian claims.

Given the routine way allegations go continuously backwards and forwards in this conflict, this Belgian reaction in a situation where a mere denial would have sufficed, looks hyper-sensitive and strange in itself.

The Russians have responded to the Belgian denials by claiming that they have radar data which proves conclusively that the raid took place, and that it was carried out by the Belgian F16s as they say.

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I do not know the truth about this affair. I would however say that it is not on the face of it implausible that NATO aircraft, whether from Belgium or from some other NATO country, carried out a raid on Hasajek on 18th October 2016.

Hasajek is located in territory contested in a bitter three-cornered fight by ISIS, the Turkish military and the YPG. On 20th October 2016 the [Turkish air force also carried out bombing raids on Kurdish militia in this area](#), provoking threats from Damascus to shoot down Turkish aircraft intruding into Syrian air space to carry out such raids.

It is certainly possible that Belgian aircraft forming part of the anti-ISIS coalition might have carried out a bombing raid in this area. Possibly the raid was carried out to support the attack on Hasajek by the YPG, with NATO wanting to avoid disclosing the fact so as not to anger the Turks, who are in conflict with the YPG.

Assuming that the raid actually took place, that still does not explain why the Russians are making such a fuss about it, when it was by the standards of the Syrian war only a small raid, and one which did not involve the Syrian army. Nor does it explain why the Belgians in turn are reacting so strongly.

A guess is that the Russians want the West to know that with the advanced radar and surface to air missiles now they now have in Syria they can track the movement of all NATO aircraft flying there. In that way the Russians are able to show the extent of their knowledge of what is going on – and by extension the extent of their control – of Syrian air space. Indeed General Igor Konashenkov, the Russian Defence Ministry's spokesman, has actually [said](#) as much

“Russia has effective air defence measures capable of round-the-clock monitoring of the sky above almost all of Syria. In addition to ours, the airspace is also controlled by Syrian air defences, which have been restored during the past year.”

That however may not be the only or even the major reason for the Russian action.

Russian disclosure that they are able to track the movement of every NATO aircraft in Syrian airspace may be intended to show to the West that the Russians can disprove Western claims of Russian responsibility for civilian deaths when these were actually caused by raids carried out by NATO aircraft.

Importantly the Russians are now saying that they know of many raids carried out in Syria by NATO aircraft which have gone unreported, and which have caused civilian casualties. This is what Konashenkov is reported to have said about that

“I'd like to stress that this was not the first time when the international coalition conducted airstrikes against civilian targets and later denied responsibility for them,” he said. “Coalition warplanes have hit weddings, funerals, hospitals, police stations, humanitarian convoys and even Syrian troops fighting Islamic State [IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL] terrorists.”

This is a strong clue of what this incident is probably all about. It looks like a warning to NATO that the Russians will in future start publishing details of NATO bombing raids, and will start identifying the nationality of the aircraft carrying them out, if blanket attributions of Russian responsibility for civilian deaths in Syria and of Russian war crimes continue.

Moreover if both the Russians and the Belgians know of unreported bombing raids carried out by Belgian aircraft in the past which resulted in heavy civilian loss of life, that might explain Belgium's sensitivity, and the strength of the Belgian reaction.

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