

Amid refugee crisis in Europe, NATO powers prepare war escalation in Syria

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Even as hundreds of thousands of refugees stream into Europe from the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans, the NATO powers are preparing to escalate the war in Syria, which has already driven millions to flee their homes. On Monday, Paris and London both announced plans to step up the bombing of Syria, with French President François Hollande calling for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Speaking at a nationally televised press conference, Hollande announced that French fighters would begin flying surveillance missions over Syria. While these missions will ostensibly target Islamic State (IS) militia forces, the central aim of the escalation is the overthrow of Assad.

The Elysée presidential palace let it be known that Hollande's plan was to "neutralize" Assad. During the press conference, Hollande insisted that Assad's departure from power was "necessary," and that "Syrian rebels must play their role" in a post-Assad government.

As the "rebels" are anti-Assad Sunni Islamist militias funded by the CIA and Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, one must assume that the fate Hollande intends for Assad is similar to that of Muammar Gaddafi after NATO-backed Islamists toppled his regime in Libya in 2011. He was tortured and murdered by militiamen in the bombed-out remains of his hometown of Syrte. Libya has since sunk into a horrific civil war between rival Islamist militias.

British Prime Minister David Cameron advanced similar policies to those of Hollande in his address to the House of Commons a few hours after Hollande's press conference. He announced that British drones had already struck inside Syria, murdering two Britons, Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin, who were allegedly fighting with IS units.

In Orwellian fashion, Hollande justified a military escalation that will wreak havoc with the lives of millions of Syrians by claiming he was trying to help the refugees streaming into Europe. He blamed the refugee outflow both on IS atrocities and Assad, whom Hollande denounced for "shooting his own people."

The main responsibility for the current refugee crisis, the greatest since the end of World War II, lies not with Assad, but with the criminal foreign policy of the NATO powers. They have not only financed and armed Sunni Islamist militias in a proxy war to install a puppet regime in Syria, but have pursued other wars around the world that forced tens of millions to flee their homes. The refugees arriving in Europe are drawn from millions of Syrians, Iraqis, Ukrainians, Afghans and Pakistanis fleeing bloodshed and social collapse resulting from these neocolonial wars.

Hollande's pose of sympathy for the refugees who have fled these countries, many of whom have died en route to Europe, is a fraud. He is seeking not to shelter, but to deport them. Over 350,000 migrants have fled to Europe in 2015 alone. However, Hollande announced that France would host just 24,000 as part of a European Union (EU) plan to grant asylum to only 120,000 refugees over two years.

Hollande touted the importance of "processing centers," i.e., concentration camps, which the EU would build in Italy, Greece and Hungary to imprison migrants without giving them access to legal protections and asylum rights guaranteed under international law and the laws of these countries. The ultimate goal, as the figures cited by Hollande make clear, is to reject and deport the vast majority of refugees.

While they trample on the right to asylum, the European powers are moving toward launching a

military escalation with unpredictable, potentially catastrophic consequences. The threats from France and Britain come amid discussion of renewed conflict between Russia and the United States, two nuclear-armed powers, over the fate of the Assad regime.

Washington asked Greece to block Russian flights to Syria through Greek airspace yesterday, Greek officials said, after US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Moscow this weekend that Russia's longstanding support for Assad could lead to a confrontation with NATO forces in the region. US and Turkish forces are planning to seize a section of Syrian territory near the Turkish border and help anti-Assad militias hold it as a "safe zone."

After Russian President Vladimir Putin announced last week that he was trying to assemble an "international coalition" including Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to fight the Islamic State (IS), reports emerged of stepped-up Russian military activity in Syria. Putin indicated, however, that he might consider a "political process" incorporating some factions of the Islamist opposition into the Syrian government.

Citing Syrian sources, the *As-Safir* daily in Lebanon reported that Russia had launched "a qualitative initiative in the armament relationship for the first time since the start of the war in Syria, with a team of Russian experts beginning to inspect Syrian military airports weeks ago." The article continued, "They are working to expand some of their runways, particularly in the north of Syria."

At his press conference, Hollande dangled a quid-pro-quo in front of Putin. He proposed that Moscow accept not only the ouster of Assad, but also autonomy accords specifying that eastern Ukrainian separatists backed by Russia accept the authority of the pro-NATO regime in Kiev that was installed in the February 2014 coup. In exchange, he said that France could support the lifting of international financial sanctions imposed on Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

Hollande said that he did not support sending French ground troops into Syria, but preferred NATO talks with the Gulf state sheikhdoms, Russia and Iran to obtain their consent for Assad's ouster. Asked if such a policy did not threaten to provoke war with Russia, Hollande replied that Russia would not be an "unshakable supporter" of Assad.

The NATO powers' war policy, which threatens

mass social dislocation and potential conflict with nuclear-armed Russia, testifies to the political bankruptcy of European capitalism. But TV journalists discussing Hollande's performance generally applauded him, praising his capacity to ignore his rock-bottom poll ratings on domestic policy and instead project an image as a "war chief."

The use of this term to define the head of state testifies not only to the degeneration of France's bourgeois democratic institutions, but also to the internal class contradictions driving the militarist hysteria of the European powers. Incapable of offering any tangible improvement to masses of people at home or abroad, governments rely increasingly on militarism and war as the only basis for making right-wing appeals and rallying support in the media and the ruling elite.

As an anonymous member of the Elysée presidential palace staff recently told Victor Nouzille, a journalist investigating France's targeted killing program, "If he cannot be popular or get results at home, Hollande at least wants to build the image of a real war chief. He is principally influenced by a few neoconservative diplomats and warmongering generals."

The only substantial domestic initiative Hollande discussed was a reactionary attack on the Labor Code. His proposal would allow employers to negotiate company-level or industry-level agreements with union officials violating terms of the Labor Code and national legislation. This would create the conditions for a virtual bosses' dictatorship. Any firm could evade the Labor Code and change working hours and conditions at will, as long as it could obtain the agreement of a few union bureaucrats.



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