

# France launches bombing campaign in Syria

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On Sunday, the Elysée Palace released a statement from President François Hollande declaring that French fighter jets had bombed targets inside Syria.

Initial media reports suggested that the targets were training camps of Islamic State (IS) militia near Raqqa, and that the strikes were an extension of the bombing campaign launched by the NATO powers, including France, against IS targets in neighboring Iraq. Six Mirage-2000 jets based in Jordan and six Rafale jets based in the United Arab Emirates reportedly carried out the attacks.

The government did not release any concrete details as to the targets of the strikes or the casualties they caused. The Elysée communiqué declared that the bombing mission was “based on intelligence collected during aerial operations launched over two weeks ago, respecting our autonomy of action and in coordination with our coalition partners.”

In an apparent threat to attack Syrian government forces, the communiqué declared that the air campaign aimed to protect civilians not only from IS, but “also against the deadly bombings of [Syrian] President Bashar al-Assad.”

France’s bombing of Syria, a former French colony, is an act of war that comes amid a broad intensification by all the major imperialist powers of the proxy war for regime-change they launched in 2011, utilizing Islamist militias which they armed and financed. The escalation will increase the bloodshed in Syria and heighten the desperate crisis facing millions of Syrian refugees fleeing to countries in the Middle East and Europe.

The arguments presented to the public by France’s Socialist Party (PS) government to justify this aggression, claiming it is part of a “war on terror” against Al Qaeda-linked Islamists in Syria, are a pack of lies. Referring to IS by its Arab acronym, Daech, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared: “We are striking Daech because this terrorist organization is

preparing strikes on France from Syria... We are therefore acting in self-defense.”

The argument that France is exercising its right to self-defense in bombing Syria, a country whose government has not attacked France or any French ally, is false on its face. As for the claim that France is fighting terrorism in Syria, it is directly contradicted by the official positions of the French government, which has used Islamist terrorist militias in pursuit of its broader agenda: to topple Assad and install a neo-colonial, pro-NATO regime in Syria.

Last year, as France bombed IS positions within Iraq, French officials refused to target IS forces in Syria, claiming that damaging IS in Syria would reinforce the Assad regime. The inescapable conclusion from this statement is that Paris, in line with the Persian Gulf oil sheikhdoms and influential policy circles in Washington, was backing IS as a proxy force to destroy the Assad regime.

French officials have switched to targeting IS forces within Syria after last month’s foiled terror attack on a Thalys train in northern France by a reportedly IS-trained gunman. But Paris continues to support Islamist terror groups in Syria. Yesterday, *Le Monde* cited off-the-record official assurances that though French jets will now attack IS positions, they will not bomb the al-Nusra Front, which Paris and Washington view as an ally despite its having been classified by the US government as an Al Qaeda-linked group.

On September 18, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian made clear that France would accept strikes on IS targets only as long as this did not harm the PS’ broader agenda of regime-change against Assad. He said air strikes on IS could be considered, as “the perimeter controlled by forces loyal to Bashar [al-Assad] has shrunk and today, striking Daech no longer means militarily aiding Bashar.”

The proposals for a renewed military escalation in

Syria by European and US officials testify to the callous disregard of the ruling elites for the suffering of millions of Syrian refugees and the recklessness of the major imperialist powers, which are risking all-out war in the Middle East.

In February, Hollande warned that France and its NATO allies risked a military clash and “total war” with Russia. At that time, he backed a peace deal championed by Germany between the NATO-backed government in Ukraine and Russian-backed separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. Despite this warning, which raised the specter of a nuclear Third World War, Hollande finds himself only a few months later pursuing a policy that threatens to provoke a military conflict in Syria with Russia, the Assad regime’s main international backer.

Moscow has been reinforcing an air base near the Syrian port city of Lattakia, reportedly deploying at least 30 fighter jets and preparing to carry out its own air strikes against IS targets in support of the Assad regime. With the Assad regime reportedly continuing to carry out air strikes against IS targets near Raqqa, it appears that French jets will be fighting in air space patrolled by Syrian and Russian warplanes.

Hostilities could easily erupt between Russian planes and jets from France, the US or other imperialist powers that are bombing Syria. At the same time, both NATO and Russian forces have escalated their military strength and alert level across Eastern Europe since the eruption of the civil war in Ukraine triggered by last year’s NATO-backed coup in Kiev.

In this explosive international context, French officials and media are taking aggressive positions threatening Russian and Syrian forces. Speaking to *Le Monde* yesterday, Defense Minister Le Drian pledged that there would be no exchange of information between French, Russian and Syrian officials regarding actions by the French Air Force in Syria. *Le Monde* commented, “Russian, like Syrian, fighter jets will not be selected as targets as long as they do not carry out attacks against anti-IS coalition aircraft.”

The implications of this statement are staggering. With the support of its NATO allies, France is launching military operations knowing they could lead to combat between French fighters and Russian and Syrian aircraft. No one has asked the PS government whether French fighter jets are prepared to start a war

with Russia by firing on their aircraft, or how far French and NATO officials anticipate the resulting conflict with Russia would go.

In recent weeks, there have been a series of high-level discussions between US, European, Russian and Israeli officials in an attempt to coordinate their policies and avoid firing on each others’ forces as they all intensify their military operations in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who will hold talks with US officials at the United Nations today and visit Paris for talks on Syria and Ukraine later this week, has signaled that Russia may consider a peace deal with Syria’s Islamist opposition that would see Assad ultimately step down.

Such cynical talks provide no assurance against the eruption of a catastrophic conflict. In 1999, when Russian and NATO troops jointly intervened in Kosovo during the NATO bombing of Serbia, the NATO commander, US General Wesley Clark, ordered an attack on Russian forces arriving at the Pristina airport. Only the decision of Clark’s European subordinates to disobey his order averted a war in the Balkans between the major powers. As Hollande’s statements show, it is far less clear that European officers would refuse such an order today.



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