

UK and French forces on ground in Syria as US prepares wider war

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Yesterday saw British Prime Minister Theresa May and French President Emmanuel Macron indicate their readiness for coordinated action with the United States in Syria, including a possible military strike.

May linked action against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with denunciations of “its backers, including Russia.”

Macron rang US President Donald Trump to agree that chemical weapons had been used in Syria’s Eastern Ghouta region on April 7, issuing a statement with the caveat, “All responsibilities in this area must be clearly established.”

Macron has previously declared the use of chemical weapons to be a “red line” that would prompt French action.

Britain’s Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, speaking as Washington’s mouthpiece, earlier told his French counterpart, Jean-Yves Le Drian, that “a full range of options should be on the table,” including airstrikes against military targets.

The alleged chemical weapons attack in Eastern Ghouta provides an all-too convenient excuse for both countries to deepen their existing operations in Syria, including participating in a possible ground war that both governments have until now officially rejected.

In fact, France and the UK already have troops on the ground in Syria, though at this point limited to their special forces.

On April 6, representatives of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the self-proclaimed Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava), told Russia’s *Sputnik* news channel that French and British troops had been deployed in the region.

Rezan Gulo, the defense minister of the Kurdish canton of Jazire in Rojava, stated: “The military contingent of the US, Britain and France is located not

only in Manbij but also in Tell Abyad, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa and Tabqa, within the framework of the [US-led] coalition’s assistance [to the SDF]. The coalition forces are increasing their presence throughout northern Syria.”

On April 5, Turkey’s pro-government *Yeni Safak* reported that France had deployed 50 soldiers to Manbij to support the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), while the state-run *Anadolu Agency* said 100 French special forces’ personnel were deployed at five bases in YPG-controlled areas of Syria.

On April 3, America’s *Defense Post* had already reported that US and French troops were operating in northern Syria. It cited from Gulo’s interview with the Kurdish broadcaster *Kurdistan 24*, reporting: “Sometimes the NATO states deny the existence of their forces in the region to avoid any tension, but, actually, French and US troops are operating on the ground in our region.”

On March 30, Turkey’s state owned *Anadolu* news agency published a map detailing the locations of French special forces in northern Syria.

The wide range of reports of a French military deployment in Syria came after a meeting between Macron and a delegation from the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Paris on March 29.

Following the meeting, both Kurdish officials and the media reported that Paris was planning to send “additional French troops to Manbij,” the northern Syrian city occupied by the SDF, to accompany US troops. According to the French daily *Le Parisien*, the aim of the deployment was to block the advance of the Turkish army eastwards.

Having “declined to comment on whether Paris was sending troops,” Macron’s office stated that it was not planning any new military operation in northern Syria

and offered to mediate between Ankara and the SDF.

Ankara sharply criticised France's "wrong stance" and categorically rejected Macron's offer. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that his government had "no need for mediation," adding, "you can sit down at the table with terror organisations, but Turkey will continue its fight against terror."

Turkish Defence Minister Nurettin Canikli described any French military deployment in the region as "an illegitimate step that would go against international law and in fact, it would be an invasion."

Paris first admitted the existence of its special forces on the ground in Syria in June 2016, when Le Drian confirmed that France was providing weapons, air support and advice to the SDF during the battle to recapture Manbij from Islamic State. Nevertheless, there is no official information about the numbers involved and the missions they have conducted.

The same holds true regarding British troops. While being one of the main coalition partners of the US government in its predatory war for regime-change in Syria, the British government has no mandate for ground activities and gives no information about its dirty operations in Syria.

However, their presence could no longer be denied after reports of the killing of two coalition troops—one American and one British—on March 30, by a roadside bomb in Manbij.

The March 31 *Daily Mirror* reported the casualty as 33-year-old SAS member and sniper Sergeant Matt Tonroe, from Manchester. He died alongside Master Sgt Jonathan Dunbar of the US Delta Force.

On April 8, the *Sun* ran a bloodthirsty article detailing how the "ruthless" SAS had killed 12 "jihadis" in revenge for Tonroe. A Special Forces source was quoted saying, "The attacks have been unrelenting—assaults are being launched night and day... These are kill-not-capture missions... If they fight, they die."

Almost two years ago, in August 2016, the BBC obtained exclusive pictures showing, for the first time, British Special Forces operating on the ground in Syria. The Ministry of Defence refused to comment. It took several months for the British Defence Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, to announce the deployment of an "extra" 20 trainers in addition to some 500 British infantry in the Iraqi, Syrian and Kurdish regions,

purportedly "to help train moderate Syrian rebels engaged in the fight against Islamic State."

The deployment of British and French troops was publicly condemned by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as far back as March 18 as "illegal" and "a direct involvement in the war."

Lavrov said in an interview with the Kazakh state broadcaster: "There are special forces on the ground in Syria from the US—they no longer deny it—the UK, France and a number of other countries... Thus, it's not so much of a 'proxy war,' but rather a direct involvement in the war."

He added that the US coalition is "illegitimate" from the standpoint of international law and the United Nations Charter. "But we are realistic and understand that we wouldn't fight with them," he stated. "So, we coordinate actions at least to prevent unintended clashes. Our military always keeps in touch with the American commanders who lead the operation on Syrian territory."

Moscow, he explained, was in "a permanent dialogue" with the US General Staff officials, "who actually lead the operation on the ground."

No such dialogue occurred prior to yesterday's early morning air strike on a Syrian airbase in Homs that killed at least 14 personnel, including Iranians. This indicates that the US and its allies will also not give any warning of action they plan to take on the pretext of a reprisal for Eastern Ghouta. Britain and France would then be involved alongside Washington in a potentially direct confrontation with Russia, in an alliance with the very "jihadis" they claim to be opposing in Manbij.



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