

EU foreign ministers and MEPs slam Russian intervention in Syria

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News

Russian involvement in Syria 'unhelpful' and a 'major concern'.



A meeting of the EU foreign affairs Council has condemned Russian involvement in Syria and said Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should not be seen as an ally in the fight against the Islamic State (Isis).

The statement comes as Russia doubled the number of strikes launched in Syria over the weekend. It was accused of targeting areas of Syria known to be controlled by anti-Assad groups other than Isis.

Foreign ministers from all 28 member states released a joint statement saying, "recent Russian military attacks that go beyond [Isis] and other UN-designated terrorist groups, as well as those on moderate opposition, are of deep concern, and must cease immediately."

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EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called the Russian intervention a "game changer," saying it is "much more complicated than just saying positive or negative" and that any intervention needs to be "coordinated, otherwise it risks being extremely dangerous."

The Council also warned that Russian military action will "escalate the conflict, aggravate the humanitarian situation and increase radicalisation."

The criticisms reflect growing efforts by EU institutions to stop Russia intervening in the region. MEPs on the Parliament's foreign affairs committee (AFET) also strongly condemned Russian action in the area, arguing that the root cause of the problem needs to be solved instead.

Afzal Khan, a Socialist and Democrat member of the AFET committee, deemed Russian attacks "unhelpful" with the bombings "likely to lead to more and prolonged suffering for the Syrian people."

In line with the EU council, Khan called for a policy centred on stemming the killing in Syria, reducing the humanitarian impact, combating extremism and finding a political solution. However, judging from comments Khan made during plenary, any political solution is unlikely to include Assad, whom he labelled as 'brutal' and accused of being responsible for the majority of deaths occurring in Syria.

Charles Tannock, the European Conservatives and Reformists foreign policy spokesperson, labelled the recent Russian military attacks as a "major concern."

Citing reports suggesting Russia will provide Assad loyalists with troops along the recent Russian violations of Turkish airspace, he added, "we can only begin to comprehend the many effects and potential conflagration that Russia's latest moves can have."

On Assad, he offered a more conciliatory response describing him as "the lesser of two evils" compared to ISIS. However, in his full statement he only went so far as to mention a "transitional role for Assad."

This is something Mogherini has refused to rule out. Speaking following the council meeting yesterday, she said, "I don't exclude that. In the near future, UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura and myself might have joint meetings with some of the actors in the region... the UN are talking with the Syrian regime, this is something we can support."

Moving forward, the EU has announced plans to increase financial support for Syrian refugees mobilising up to €1bn as part of the EU-Turkey action plan.

This is over and above the €4bn already provided for relief and recovery assistance to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

About the author

William Louch is an editorial assistant for the Parliament Magazine

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