

Jens Stoltenberg: 'Differences' between NATO allies on Syria response

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News

The NATO Secretary General has conceded that there are “differences” between NATO allies on how to resolve the current bitter conflict in Syria.



Jens Stoltenberg | Photo credit: Press Association

Speaking at a news briefing on Wednesday, Stoltenberg said, “It would be meaningless for me to hide the fact that there are differences between allies on Syria. We see this every day on our TV screens and elsewhere.”

He added, “It’s always difficult when allies disagree.”

The NATO chief also said he was “concerned about consequences” of the Turkish operation in Syria and “the risk of escalating tensions” in the region.

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But he added, “Turkey has got legitimate security concerns because it is on the frontline.”

This was why he supports efforts to “find a political solution” to the current conflict.

Stoltenberg went on to say that a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels on Thursday was an opportunity to discuss Syria and help resolve current discord in the western alliance.

Turkey’s military incursion into Syria to attack Kurdish forces, launched after US President Donald Trump pulled American troops out of the way, caught NATO’s strongest European powers - France, Germany and Britain - by surprise.

“We have seen that it is possible to move towards a political solution. The first requirement though is to stop the fighting” **Jens Stoltenberg**

France’s president last Friday decried NATO’s inability to react to what he called Turkey’s “crazy” offensive into northern Syria and said it was time Europe stopped acting like a junior ally when it came to the Middle East.

Macron and French government officials have in the last week warned that the 28-nation European Union risks falling into irrelevance on foreign policy unless it finds a stronger and more coherent way to respond to what they see as unpredictable allies.

Despite some differences on how to respond to the Syrian crisis, EU states have agreed to stop arms sales to Turkey over its invasion and have also agreed to impose visa bans and asset freezes over its gas drilling in Cypriot waters.

Stoltenberg declined to comment on Tuesday’s Russia-Turkey deal in Sochi but said the ceasefire in north-eastern Syria brokered by the United States is a basis for a political solution to the conflict.

He told reporters, “We have seen that it is possible to move towards a political solution. The first requirement though is to stop the fighting. Then we need to move on, building on that, and have a real, negotiated, political solution in Syria.”

Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria, a stronghold of Kurdish forces who had fought alongside a European and US coalition trying to destroy Isis has incensed the EU.

Stoltenberg, who last week had talks on Syria with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, said, “The best way to resolve any differences on how to deal with the situation in Syria is to sit together and

find a way forward but I am encouraged by the recent joint statement between the US and Turkey which shows there is at least some agreement on the way forward in some critical areas.”

“Yes, there are some disagreements on Syria in the Alliance but we have the ability to talk” **Kay Bailey Hutchison, US Permanent Representative to NATO**

There has, he said, since been “progress” and a “significant” reduction in violence in the region “compared with where we were.”

“We are now in a better place but there are still many challenges and problems ahead of us and that’s why we need frank and open discussions.”

These were also necessary to ensure allies “do not jeopardise the gains we have made in the fight against Islamic State.”

“This fight is not over although at the same time, in terms of the physical califate, IS has lost control over territory and the people it controlled and that is a great achievement.”

“We were able to achieve this only through the US-led coalition of which NATO played a full part.”

Speaking at the same news conference at NATO headquarters in Brussels, US Ambassador Kay Bailey Hutchison, the country’s permanent representative to the Alliance, said, “Yes, there are some disagreements on Syria in the Alliance but we have the ability to talk.”

“A lot has happened in northern Syria in the last few days, but it is important every country takes responsibility for their foreign fighters in Syria. It is not stable for them to remain in Syria so countries need to take back their citizens and I hope they will.”

We need to continue to ensure IS does not rise again and this is still very much a US-led effort.”

She also called for an investigation into claims at the weekend by US defence secretary Mark Esper that Turkish forces had committed war crimes in Syria, saying, “There have been reports of war crimes. We cannot stand for this and this must be addressed under the auspices of the appropriate international body.”

She added, “We also have to be very watchful of the increased Russian footprint in Syria. Equally, we have to consider if Russia is turning a corner in being a stabilising force as opposed to what has happened in recent years.”

“I am both hopeful and watchful of the new role Russia seems to be playing. We should hope for the best but prepare if this does not happen.”

About the author

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