

Europe's Role Grows in Syria, but Boots Unlikely

Aaron Mehta and Burak Ege Bekdil

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Votes by the British and German parliaments last week expanded Europe's role in the fight against the Islamic State group in Syria, but analysts believe that the addition of European forces is more symbolic than a game-changer — and that European boots on the ground remain unlikely.

On Dec. 2, Parliament authorized UK airstrikes in Syria in a 397-223 vote. Less than a day later, Royal Air Force Tornados began striking targets on the ground. Britain was already taking part in coalition efforts in Iraq to combat the Islamic State group.

Then on Dec. 4, German legislators voted 445-146 for six Tornado reconnaissance aircraft and a tanker, as well as support personnel, to assist in the efforts. The Germans will also send a frigate to accompany the French carrier Charles de Gaulle as it launches strikes into Syria.

From the United States perspective, it's a welcome addition, as the Obama administration has consistently called on allies in Europe and the Gulf to do more in Syria.

Speaking on Capitol Hill on Dec. 1, US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said that he hoped "that the Paris attacks galvanize all of Europe to do more, because they need to do more."

Specifically, he called out Germany, saying the European power appears to be "certainly capable of doing more ... we want them to do more."

Emma Ashford of the Washington-based Cato Institute said that Germany felt pressure to "look like they're responding in some way to these attacks" because of its role in the European Union and its ties with France. Similarly, Doug Barrie of the London-based International Institute of Strategic Studies said that the UK was almost guaranteed to become involved after Paris due to its ties with both France and the US.

But both agree the moves are more symbolic than game-changing, with Ashford noting that the US "wants to see more countries contributing to this coalition in a concrete way, but practically it's not going to resolve the ISIS problem ... it's a nice political gesture."

Still, Barrie said, the additional aircraft "flexibility, it adds more platforms, it helps take some of the lands off the countries that are already there."

Will other European nations join in?

It's unclear, and Ashford notes that aside from France, Germany and the UK, few countries in Europe have the capability to influence the fight much.

At least one nation has acknowledged political pressure to expand operations into Syria, with Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders saying on Dec. 3 that requests have been received from both France and the US to join the coalition in bombing the Islamic State group in Syria.

"The Netherlands is a small country that's been very active in the fight against IS," Koenders said. "But we can only make that decision once all military and political aspects in Syria have been properly weighed."

The risk now for Europe is that the NATO partners may be drawn into the conflict whether they want to or not, with tensions between Turkey and Russia at a new high following the shootdown of an Su-24 by a Turkish F-16 in late November – the first time a NATO member has downed a Russian or Soviet military aircraft since the 1950s.

As a result, Russia has issued a series of economic reprisals on Turkey and has moved its S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in Syria, which could hypothetically attack jets in Turkish airspace for a future response. It has also begun flying Su-30 air-to-air fighters with its bombing packages.

That creates an increasingly dangerous situation above Syria, Barrie said, with the US and Europe both looking for ways to defuse tensions between Moscow and Ankara — something reflected in comments from top diplomats in the region.

"We want to make sure that this gets diffused and does not become a NATO-Russia crisis, instead of a Turkish-NATO crisis," said one NATO ambassador in Ankara.

"We will not let Russia make the game in that region," added an European Union ambassador in Ankara. "They are explicitly abusing the incident."

Boots on the Ground

Following the Paris attacks, there was speculation that France could help provide the "boots on the ground" that the Obama administration has been reluctant to provide — which now appears unlikely.

"I think this is probably steady state stuff now," Barrie said. "There is a reticence to see any significant boots-on-the-ground involvement given past experience in the region."

Ashford noted that the UK may be willing to do small special forces deployments like the US.

"I don't think there's any potential for any of those countries to send larger scale troop deployments unless things change substantially," he said.

The US, meanwhile, is expanding its ground presence, with Carter using his Hill appearance to announce a "specialized expeditionary targeting force" that can launch unilateral operations into Syria, including to conduct raids, gather intelligence, rescue hostages and capture high-value Islamic State group leaders.

"That puts enemies on notice that they don't know at night who might be coming in the window," Carter said.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., characterized Carter's announcement of the deployment as "a belated step forward" and "yet another reactive and incremental step ... in a policy that has allowed the ISIL threat to metastasize to Libya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere across the globe."

McCain and Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-S.C., a week earlier called for for 20,000 troops — 10,000 to Iraq and 10,000 to Syria. Graham, who, too, serves on the SASC, is also seeking his party's nomination for the presidency.