

Franco-Russian Relations in Crisis, Deep Military Tensions: President Hollande Cancels Paris Meeting with Vladimir Putin

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French President François Hollande's decision to cancel his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, amid deep military tensions between NATO and Russia, comes as Washington and its European allies escalate the pressure on Russia, threatening it with war in Syria.

The meeting between the two heads of state was slated for October 19, for the inauguration in downtown Paris of a "Russian Orthodox spiritual and cultural center" consisting of a church, a school, and cultural services of the Russian embassy. The meeting reportedly was confirmed by the Elysée presidential palace with the Kremlin during the September truce in Syria. As fighting intensified around Aleppo, however, and the NATO powers escalated their threats against Russia, the meeting no longer corresponded to Hollande's strategy.

To allow US- and European-backed Islamist militias to reinforce their positions around the strategic city of Aleppo, last week France tried to push through a UN resolution demanding a no-fly zone over Aleppo. This would have prevented Russian warplanes from supporting Syrian government troops against the Islamist militias. Predictably, the resolution was vetoed by Russia's delegation on the UN Security Council.

At the beginning of the week, French officials made clear that any visit by Putin to Paris would lead to an open confrontation over Syria.

On Monday, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said, "If the President of the French Republic decides that the Russian president is coming, it will not be to discuss pleasantries, but to speak truths." He added, "There are war crimes, it is the General Secretary of the United Nations that said so. Afterwards, one must determine who is responsible."

On Tuesday, the Elysée reported that Putin's visit had been postponed indefinitely: "There was a discussion between the Kremlin and the Elysée this morning to propose a working visit on Syria at the Elysée, but ruling out participation by the president in any other event. In response, Russia has just indicated that it prefers to postpone the meeting scheduled for October 19."

The Hollande administration's denunciations of war crimes in Syria are hypocritical lies. Hollande is proceeding ruthlessly with contempt for the Syrian people, as the main forces responsible for the war are the NATO imperialist powers.

The war in Syria is an attempt by the imperialist powers to bring down Assad as they did the Libyan regime in 2011, with Islamist proxy forces funded by the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms and armed by the imperialist powers. These Al Qaeda-linked militias have repeatedly carried out massacres against ethnic and religious minorities in Syria.

Above all, it is imperialist foreign policy, composed of pillage and massacres aimed at dominating the oil-rich Middle East, that constitutes a political crime. The NATO proxy war in Syria has caused the deaths of nearly a half million people and forced into exile over 10 million who are now living in refugee centers in Syria, trapped in refugee camps in neighboring countries, or desperately trying to obtain refugee status in Europe.

In this policy, France—the former colonial power in Syria, which it plunged into war twice in the 20th century in order to crush anti-imperialist uprisings—plays a particularly aggressive role. It pressed for a direct NATO intervention in 2013, although London, and ultimately Washington, both decided not to launch NATO troops in a war against Damascus.

Now, as it denounces Moscow and the Assad regime over the fighting in Aleppo, Paris is preparing France’s participation in the planned bombardment of Mosul, the main Iraqi city controlled by the Islamic State militia, that could force hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to flee. Hollande’s Socialist Party (PS) government has sent the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the region and is organizing the intervention of French special forces on Iraqi soil. This week, two French parachutists in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan were wounded by a booby-trapped drone.

NATO’s military escalation in Syria goes hand in hand with a rapid movement towards the right of the entire French political establishment.

Hollande has seized upon terror attacks in France and Belgium—carried out by the same Islamist networks that are working with NATO intelligence agencies to fight Assad—to impose a state of emergency, first used during France’s war against Algerian independence. The main target of this state of emergency is the working class, whose protests against the PS’ anti-worker labor law were met with repeated police crackdowns under the terms of the state of emergency.

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