

U.S., France Welcome Russia's 'Change of Course' in Syria

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and armed forces Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov attend a meeting on Russian air force's activity in Syria at the national defense control center in Moscow, Russia, Nov. 17, 2015.

Russia and key members of the Western anti-Islamic State coalition appeared to be moving toward a unified approach in Syria this week, with U.S. and French leaders praising Moscow for what they referred to as a change of course.

In an interview on the French TF1 television channel on Tuesday, France's Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said “Russia's stance on the Syrian question” had shifted, following Russian air strikes on Islamic State (IS) strongholds in Raqqa.

Le Drian added that an “expanded coalition” appeared necessary to stop IS.

His statement was echoed by French President Francois Hollande, who met with mayors of

French cities on Wednesday and repeated his pledge for a broad coalition that includes both Russia and the United States.

"I'm planning to discuss the necessary coordination of our actions with [the U.S. President] Barack Obama first, and then with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin, in order to achieve our goal faster," he was cited by the Interfax news agency as saying.

"We need to form a wide coalition to carry out vigorous strikes on the IS," Hollande added.

On Tuesday, Putin ordered the Russian navy to cooperate with French warships "as allies," following the Russian Federal Security Service announcement that a bomb had brought down the Russian Metrojet aircraft over the Sinai Peninsula on Oct. 31, killing 224 people.

"Life goes forward, things are changing, there are new challenges, new threats, new challenges that are difficult to solve alone ... [we] need to join forces," Putin said at a press conference following the G20 summit, the Interfax news agency reported Monday.

Following this week's talks in Vienna, U.S. President Barack Obama referred to Russia as "a constructive partner in trying to create a political transition," referring to diplomatic efforts to negotiate a ceasefire in Syria and free up resources to fight IS.

"We're going to wait to see whether, in fact, Russia does end up devoting attention to targets that are IS targets, and if it does so, then that's something we welcome," Obama said, CNN reported Wednesday.

Russia has previously been accused of targeting moderate opposition groups in a bid to shore up the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad — a longtime Moscow ally.

Even if the two countries' militaries cooperate in Syria, the United States is not ready to consider all issues with Russia resolved. An unidentified White House official told the Associated Press news agency that no matter what happens in Syria, the United States will not lift economic sanctions against Russia until it fulfills its obligations under a Ukraine peace deal reached in February.

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