

Netherlands to begin bombing Islamic State in Syria

By Josh Varlin
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Prime Minister Mark Rutte's announcement on January 29 that the Dutch cabinet had decided to begin bombing the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL) in Syria marks a dramatic escalation of the Netherlands' involvement in the US-led campaign.

Six Dutch F-16 planes based in Jordan started bombing IS in Iraq in October 2014, although only four are currently engaged in bombing runs.

Rutte's declaration comes after the Labor Party (PvdA), which is the junior partner in a coalition government with the Liberal Party (VVD), announced on Tuesday that it would support the bombing, ensuring its parliamentary approval. The cabinet has sent a letter to the Dutch parliament explaining the decision, and a vote—assured to pass—will follow in the next few days.

The bombing campaign will continue until July, at which point the Netherlands will withdraw from bombing Iraq and Syria. Belgium will take its place in Iraq, but has not yet announced if it will also conduct sorties in Syria.

In addition to the bombing, the Netherlands will “intensify” its support for the Iraqi army and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga, while funding “moderate” Syrian rebels.

The Dutch government had deliberated over bombing Syria in the summer of 2015, but had decided against it after Russia began its intervention in favor of the Syrian government in September, complicating the situation in the country. At the time, Labor MP Michiel Servaes commented to the *Volkscrant*: “Let us stop this fixation about using F-16s. I would like to move the discussion towards the role the Netherlands can play in finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict.”

In a December 2015 interview with the “Nieuwsuur” program on Dutch broadcaster NOS, Syrian President

Bashar al-Assad noted that any intervention in Syria without the permission of the Syrian government would be illegal. “This is against international law,” he said. “We are a sovereign country.”

When the interviewer asked Assad if anyone from the Netherlands had contacted him regarding Syrian authorization for anti-IS airstrikes or antiterrorism collaboration Assad said, “Not one of them.”

Despite earlier invocations of international law and diplomacy by the Netherlands, the Dutch government has decided to throw these out and begin brutal bombing runs, even as numerous factions involved in the Syrian Civil War meet in Geneva for peace talks sponsored by the United Nations. In fact, the announcement that the Netherlands would begin bombing Syria was issued the same day as the Geneva talks began.

The Netherlands had come under increased pressure from the NATO alliance and the European Union to intervene in Syria, particularly after the terrorist attacks in France in November.

The Dutch escalation is extraordinarily reckless. The Netherlands is a NATO member; any conflict between it and Russian or Syrian forces—even accidental—could result in a widespread catastrophe.

The United States, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar are all conducting airstrikes in Syria as part of the US-led campaign that the Netherlands is joining. In addition, Syrian and Russian planes are cooperating in their own air campaign against ISIS and other rebel groups.

Military intervention is controversial in the Netherlands. The first Dutch military action after World War II was the brutal but unsuccessful attempt to defeat the Indonesian National Revolution

(1945-1949), during which Dutch forces committed serious war crimes.

The Netherlands also participated in the imperialist carve-up of the Balkans in the 1990s. Dutch troops in the United Nations Protection Force were assigned to protect Srebrenica during the infamous massacre of about 7,000 Muslims. *Dossier Srebrenica*, the Dutch report on the failure, brought down the second Wim Kok cabinet—a largely symbolic gesture—and the resignation of the Royal Netherlands Army Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Ad van Baal.

During the Kosovo War, Dutch F-16s dropped cluster bombs in Niš, Serbia, Yugoslavia, killing 15 and wounding 28. The bombs had been aimed at Niš Airport but missed and hit the city center.

In 2010, the widely unpopular Dutch intervention in Afghanistan brought down the fourth Jan Peter Balkenende cabinet, which was composed of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Labor and the ChristianUnion (CU). When the government attempted to extend the mandate for the 2,000 Dutch troops supporting the NATO occupation of Afghanistan, the PvdA broke with the CDA and CU, fearing the complete collapse of its legitimacy in the face of popular opposition to the Afghan War.

The Netherlands' intervention in Syria will be coupled with increased xenophobia and attacks on the right to asylum.

With the start of 2016, the Netherlands took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. One of the central goals of the new presidency will be to reduce the number of refugees. “The numbers have to come down very much, very considerably,” said Rutte.

Rutte plans to work closely with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to strengthen the EU's border control agency, Frontex.

First vice president of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, a Dutch appointee and Juncker's right-hand man, claimed in a January 2015 interview with NOS, “More than half of the people now coming to Europe come from countries where you can assume they have no reason whatsoever to ask for refugee status.” An analysis of Frontex figures by Dutch publisher NRC found that, on the contrary, up to 90 percent of refugees arriving in Greece come from war zones in Syria and Iraq or from Afghanistan, which is

seeing a resurgence of violence.

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