

Informal EU summit steps up Middle East war threats, attacks on migrants

By Alex Lantier
24 February 2018

Yesterday, European Union (EU) heads of state met for what was billed initially as an informal, technical summit in Brussels on EU financing and election procedures. The content of the meeting was very different, however, and far more ominous. EU Council President Donald Tusk's report makes clear that the summit's chief business was to discuss EU preparations for major wars.

"We agreed that the EU will spend more on stemming illegal migration, on defence and security, as well as on the Erasmus+ programme," Tusk declared. This reference to the EU international study program was simply tacked on, however, to give a false veneer of popularity to a summit whose militarist and anti-refugee agenda has no popular support whatsoever.

It discussed military interventions in the Middle East and Africa, and stepped-up measures to keep refugees fleeing these wars from reaching Europe. This highlighted that the plans laid out at this weekend's Munich Security Conference—devoted to the EU's attempts to develop as a militarist power increasingly independent from Washington, and led by a Berlin-Paris axis—dominate the EU's agenda.

Coming after US and Israeli strikes in Syria have killed Russian and Syrian troops and put the entire region on the brink of all-out war, Tusk attacked Moscow, Tehran and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. He said, "The Assad regime is brutally attacking innocent men, women and children. Its backers, Russia and Iran, are allowing this to happen. We urge them to stop this violence."

This came just a week after President Emmanuel Macron of France, the former colonial power in Syria, called for restoring the draft in France, and bombing Syria over allegations of Syrian use of chemical weapons.

On Thursday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel echoed Macron's threats in a debate at the *Bundestag*. "What we see at the moment, the terrible events in Syria, the fight of a regime not against terrorists, but against its own people, the killing of children, the destruction of hospitals, all this is a massacre which has to be condemned," she said. Despite the rising danger of war between the major powers in the region, Merkel added that the EU should step up pressure on Assad's main backers, Russia and Iran.

The summit started, however, with a minute of silence for two French officers killed in Mali on Wednesday and a discussion of EU support for France's neocolonial war in that country. Emilien Mougins and Timothé Dérnoncourt were killed and Colonel François-Xavier Héon was wounded when their armored vehicle hit a roadside bomb near Gao and the border with Niger. In response, French Defense Minister Florence Parly boasted gruesomely that French operations had killed 450 people since the war began in 2014.

EU and international donors, mainly Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, gave €414 million to the so-called G5 Sahel force—made up of troops from the former French African colonies of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—that Paris uses as cannon fodder in the war and to keep refugees from reaching Europe.

To deny refugee fleeing their right to seek asylum in Europe, the EU is also helping Italy finance the construction of prison camps in Libya. In these camps, as a recent Amnesty International report found, refugees are tortured, sexually assaulted, and even sold into slavery. Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou, who attended the summit, praised it for the financial aid and pledged that his government and states across the region would try to block immigration. "The Sahel

is one of Europe's frontiers. The Sahel is a shield, a dike that must never burst," he said.

The EU summit also discussed growing border tensions with Turkey, including with Cyprus over gas exploration off its shores, and with Greece after Greek and Turkish vessels collided off an Aegean Sea islet on February 12. Disputes over the islet, known as Imia in Greek and Kardak in Turkish, nearly led the two countries to war in 1996. The Brussels summit heard reports from Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and unambiguously sided with Cyprus and Greece against Turkey in the disputes.

Tusk declared, "On behalf of all the EU leaders, I would like to express our solidarity with Cyprus and Greece, and urgently call on Turkey to terminate these activities." He also threatened to call off a planned summit meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan next month in Bulgaria if Turkey did not cease its activities: "We are ready to cooperate with Turkey and will assess at our March European Council whether the conditions are there to hold the Leaders Meeting with Turkey in Varna on 26 March."

The summit also discussed Brexit. Tusk bluntly warned that the EU was preparing an ultimatum to Britain over EU-British relations after Brexit, declaring: "I will present the draft guidelines on the future EU-UK relationship at the March summit. Our intention is to adopt these guidelines, whether the UK is ready with its vision of our future relations, or not."

Conflicts are also rising inside the EU over how to resolve the budget shortfall that will result after Brexit and the loss of Britain's contribution to the EU budget. Several smaller states including the Netherlands and Austria insisted that the shortfall not be made up and demanding that the EU slash subsidies to agriculture and to poorer regions of Europe.

This summit exposes yet again the bankruptcy of the EU. It is already widely unpopular, due to its role in enforcing austerity since its foundation in 1992, and particularly since the 2008 Wall Street crash. Now, after a quarter century of imperialist wars across the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa have turned tens of millions of people into refugees, it is emerging as a militarist Fortress Europe, that responds to growing conflicts across its periphery by preparing major wars with Syria, Iran or even nuclear-armed Russia.

Expectations that the EU could unify capitalist Europe have collapsed after Brexit, moreover, and the escalating international conflicts are tearing the European powers apart. Nor do leading EU officials bother to maintain the fiction that they seek to maintain European unity. Remarkably, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel decided to host a separate meeting with selected heads of state the evening before the summit, snubbing other EU states including Britain.

At the Château de Val-Duchesse, Michel invited leaders from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Bulgaria, Finland, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia. In the more informal setting with fewer countries represented, one Belgian official told *Express*, heads of state "can really speak freely and discuss whatever is on their minds."

Premier Boyko Borisov of Bulgaria, which holds the rotating EU presidency, told journalists the Château de Val-Duchesse gathering was a "regional leadership" meeting. He said they had spoken on a range of Eastern European conflicts, "ranging from Greece through Macedonia, from Serbia to Kosovo, Turkey, Russia, to the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia about the Piran Bay border delimitation."

He said the Varna summit with Erdogan would be "heavy," declaring: "If anybody imagines that it's only a pleasant task to host [EU Commission President Jean-Claude] Juncker, Tusk and Erdogan for dinner, he is probably a newcomer to politics or has no clue. This is an extremely difficult meeting, extremely loaded with expectations and with tensions... I'm far from imagining that we would find agreement on the questions raised, on all of them or on part of them."

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