

Russia, France agree to tighten cooperation against ISIS

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Moscow: The presidents of France and Russia agreed Thursday to tighten cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State group, although they remained at odds over their approach toward Syrian President Bashar Assad.

IS has claimed responsibility for deadly attacks against both of the countries' citizens in recent weeks: Nov. 13 shootings and suicide bombings in Paris which killed 130 people, and the Oct. 31 bombing of a Russian passenger jet over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula that claimed 224 lives.

French President Francois Hollande has been on a diplomatic drive since the Paris attacks to increase cooperation in tackling IS, which holds swathes of territory in both Syria and Iraq. He has met this week with President Barak Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi before flying to Moscow on Thursday for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Hollande and Putin agreed on increasing intelligence sharing, intensifying their airstrikes against IS in Syria and cooperating on selecting targets – two days after Turkey downed a Russian warplane near the Syrian border.

"We agreed on a very important issue: To strike the terrorists only, Daesh and the jihadi groups only, and not to strike the forces and the groups that are fighting against the terrorists," Hollande said after the meeting, referring to IS by its Arabic acronym. "And we are going to exchange some information about that: what can be struck, and what must not be struck."

But the two countries remain at odds in their approach toward Assad, with Hollande saying the Syrian head of state "does not have his place in Syria's future," and Putin stressing that "the Syrian president's fate should be entirely in the hands of the Syrian people."

Putin described Assad's army as a "natural ally" in the fight against IS – an essential force capable of battling the extremist group on the ground. He added that Russia was ready to cooperate with other groups ready to fight IS.

Russia has been Assad's staunchest ally, and has come under criticism for targeting some rebel groups who are fighting against both IS and Assad in Syria's multifaceted and complex civil war.

Obama, after meeting with Hollande, had said Russian cooperation in the fight against IS would be "enormously helpful." The U.S. has also insisted that a political transition in Syria must lead to Assad's departure.

"We view the U.S.-led coalition with respect and stand ready to cooperate with it," Putin said. "We believe that we would better create a single, united coalition as it would be easier, simpler and more efficient to coordinate our work that way."

However, he said, "if our partners aren't ready for that, OK, we are ready to work in a different format that is acceptable to our partners. We are ready to cooperate with the U.S.-led coalition."

Last week, Hollande called for the U.S. and Russia to set aside their policy divisions over Syria and "fight this terrorist army in a broad, single coalition." But his office acknowledges that "coordination" sounds like a far more realistic goal.

While pledging closer cooperation, Putin also harshly criticized Washington for failing to prevent the downing of a Russian warplane engaged in airstrikes in Syria by NATO member Turkey on Tuesday – an action which underscored

the complex military landscape in Syria, where a sprawling cast of countries and rebel groups are engaged on the battlefield and in the skies overhead, sometimes with minimal coordination.

Turkey said it shot down the Russian Su-24 bomber after it flew into its airspace for 17 seconds despite repeated warnings. Putin dismissed the Turkish claim of intrusion and held the U.S. responsible for failing to rein in its ally, saying that Russia had informed the U.S. about its military flights in the area in advance.

Putin denounced the Turkish action, saying it "thoughtlessly and rudely" destroyed friendly ties between the two countries. Russia will protect its warplanes from now on with long-range S-400 air defense missiles deployed at its air base in Syria, as well as escort fighters and electronic countermeasures, he said.

Hollande described the shoot-down as a "serious incident, obviously regrettable" that underlined the need for closer coordination between nations fighting IS.

"It is crucial in that period to avoid any risk, any incident, and prevent any escalation," Hollande said. "The only goal we must have is fighting Daesh and neutralize the terrorists. There is no other goal."

In Germany, Merkel's Cabinet decided to send reconnaissance aircraft, tanker planes and a warship to help in the fight against IS. Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said the government had also agreed to provide satellite surveillance.

During Merkel's visit in Paris on Wednesday, Hollande had said it would "be a very good signal in the fight against terrorism" if Germany could do more against IS in Syria and Iraq.

Von der Leyen said the warship would help protect France's aircraft carrier in the eastern Mediterranean and the tanker planes could help refuel French warplanes in the air. The satellite surveillance could provide important information on IS and also help protect civilians with precise information.

Germany currently provides weapons and training for Kurds fighting against IS in Iraq.

The decision still needs parliamentary approval, but it was expected to not meet much resistance by lawmakers.

Putin said Russia was mourning for Paris victims as well as those who were killed in the Russian passenger plane bombing, and praised Hollande's efforts to build an anti-terror coalition.

At least two known suspects of the Paris attacks are still at large, with a manhunt continuing in France and Belgium for their capture.

Belgian Justice Minister Koen Geens said Paris fugitive Salah Abdeslam was "likely" getting support from others, saying it was unlikely Abdeslam could hide despite a nearly two-week manhunt without help.

Belgian authorities carried out three raids linked to the Paris attacks Thursday outside of the capital, Brussels, but made no arrests. Five suspects are already in custody in Belgium on terrorism charges related to the attacks.

Hours later, Prime Minister Charles Michel announced the alert level in Brussels was being lowered one notch from the highest level, on which it has been since Saturday. Subways are to reopen fully on Friday.

Â Despite the reduction in alert level, Michel said an attack remained "possible and likely."

The lowering of the threat level came as a surprise, since the government had said it would likely keep the highest

threat level until Monday. Michel did not give a reason for the reduction.

- PTI