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## THE EVOLUTION OF FRANCE'S POLICY IN SYRIA

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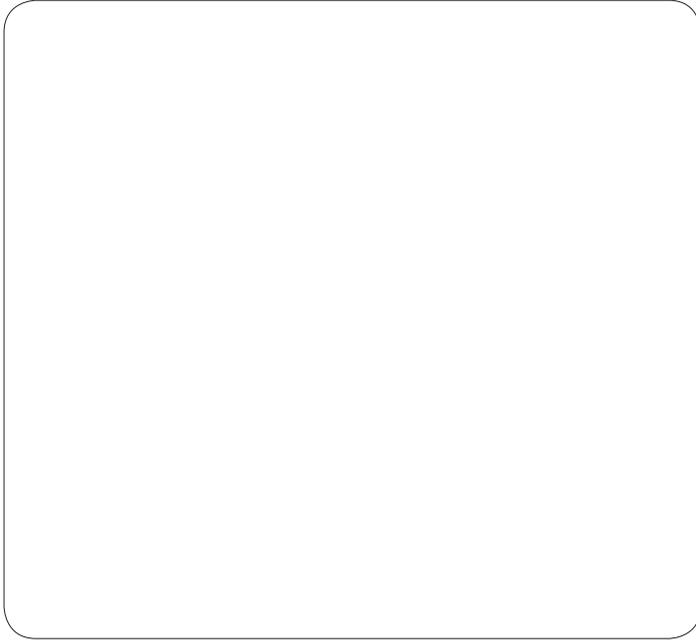
Jean Dufourcq & Olivier Kempf



# **THE EVOLUTION OF FRANCE'S POLICY IN SYRIA**

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**Jean Dufourcq & Olivier Kempf**



This report is part of the King Faisal Research Center's new initiative: The «Middle East Strategy Project». The aim of this project is to conduct in-depth research and analysis that falls within the scope of regional grand strategy of security and defence. In light of the recent events in the Syrian Arab Republic, the study will focus on examining the ongoing turmoil, study the resulting regional repercussions unfolding across the Levant, and analyze the policy objectives of the local, sub-state, and international actors.

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*«En Syrie, une solution militaire est improbable, une solution politique impossible.»*

*("In Syria, a military solution is improbable, a political solution impossible.")*

Henry Laurens\*

### **Introduction: France's New Arab Policy: Contrasts and Virtues**

Pundits have long debated France's Arab policy, which was launched by Charles de Gaulle and was seen as France's "third way" between the two main powers of the Cold War era. This foreign policy explained France's unique approach to the Palestinian question – which was, for decades, the only controversial issue in the Middle East – and then to the conflict in Lebanon, especially during the Civil War from 1975 to 1990.

The end of the bipolar East-West pattern and the New World Order, the two Gulf Wars, and the hopes and setbacks of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks are some of the factors that might explain why the French policy gradually became less clear and lost its consistency. It changed even more rapidly in the early 2010s because of two main elements: France's late support for the Arab Spring (which explains the country's tough stance on Syria) and France's quest for new alliances, especially with rich Gulf countries, beginning with Qatar and followed by Saudi Arabia. Following the brutal 2015 attacks in Paris – first the targeted Charlie Hebdo shooting in January and then the gruesome mass killings in November – France's perspective on Syria has suddenly shifted, deeply impacting France's Arab policy as a whole.

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(\*) In *Qui est Daesh?* [Who is Daesh?], ed. E. Fottorino (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2015).

## I- From History to Hurdles

### 1.1. Past and Context

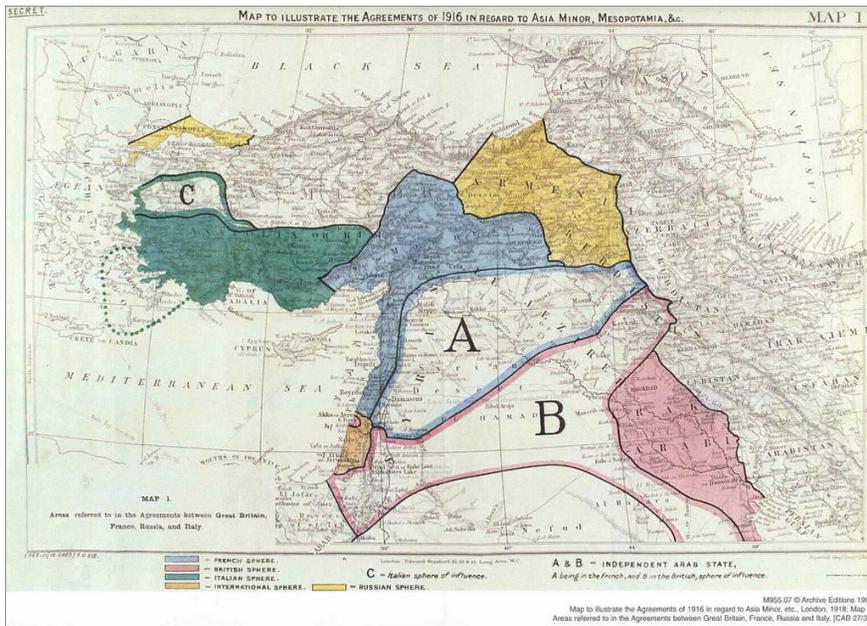
#### Origins

France's firm stand on Syria has deep historical roots. Looking back at history is always a good way to shed light on geopolitical issues. Regarding France-Syria relations, we could go back to the Crusades and mention King Francis I (François I<sup>er</sup>) and his strategic alliances, or focus on Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. Both of these historical episodes are related to Assyria. But let us stay in the nineteenth century, when France, alongside other European powers, was dealing with the "Sick Man of Europe," namely, the Ottoman Empire. French influence was further reinforced by the agreement signed in 1861 between French authorities and the Ottoman sultan, which stipulated that Maronite Christians in the empire would be placed under French protection.<sup>1</sup> At the time, no distinction was being made in the Levant between Lebanon and Syria, as the region was seen from a geographical standpoint. The Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916, which defined French and British spheres of influence and control over former Ottoman territories, was greatly influenced by this geopolitical perspective. (The legacy of Sykes-Picot has been debated widely over the past few months.)<sup>2</sup> The territory stretching from the coast to Mosul (with exceptions) was placed under French control, while Great Britain was allocated control of the

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1- The agreement followed a European military intervention in 1860, which Napoleon III described as a "humanitarian mission." Some might say that this was the first time the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds was invoked.

2- See P. J. Luizard, *Le piège Daech* [The Daesh trap] (Paris: La Découverte, 2015).



Map of the Agreements of 1916 to Asia Minor – the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Source: *The National Interest*)

area from Palestine to Mesopotamia (with the promise of establishing a future “home” for Jewish populations in the 1917 Balfour Declaration). These initial dispositions were slightly modified after World War I, when France and Great Britain were granted mandates over the two regions. Given France’s desire to protect the Maronite Christians, two countries were created: Lebanon (along the coast, from Mount Lebanon to the Beqaa Valley) and Syria, with a short Mediterranean coastline and territories from Damascus to the Euphrates Valley. France appointed a high commissioner for Syria. The country’s mandate relied heavily on minorities to wield control over the Sunni majority. The high number of different minorities (Alawites, Armenians, Turkmen, Kurds, Yazidis, and several Christian denominations) reinforced this central authority.

“Modern Syria” is thus a recent creation, even though its roots go back to the powerful kingdom and empire of ancient Assyria.

In 1939, the autonomous sanjak of Alexandretta, which until then had been under the French mandate of Syria, was given back to Turkey. During World War II, the French mandate in the Levant sided with the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain, which caused major fratricidal battles in 1941 when Free French forces crossed into Damascus alongside British troops. In 1943, Syria and Lebanon were both granted independence by France.

Several main factors have had a major influence on modern Syria. The first is the domination of the Ba’ath Party, originally founded by Michel Aflak in 1947 in Damascus and long led by Hafez al-Assad. The party’s initial secular pan-Arab socialist objectives were quickly replaced by autocratic rule by Assad and his Alawite minority. Nasser’s pan-Arabism led to a temporary union between Syria and Egypt in 1958. However, this political plan was short-lived and doomed to failure. Syria became increasingly preoccupied with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and after the civil war in Lebanon broke out, the country focused on another geopolitical objective: the inclusion of Lebanon into a modern “Greater Syria.” From 1975 onward, Hafez al-Assad pursued a political game of chess to gain an advantage over Syria’s smaller neighbor. By doing so, however, he was trampling on France’s views on the region. Paris continued to support the Maronite Christians and was in favor of Lebanon’s independence. France’s Lebanon policy has long been one of the main components of its Arab policy. The latent conflict between France and Syrian authorities thus dates back to this period.

### **Tergiversation about the fate of Bashar al-Assad**

Dissension between France and Syria has never really ceased, even when President Sarkozy – who wanted to establish a “Mediterranean Union” modeled on the European Union – invited the frequently reelected Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the son and political heir of the late Hafez al-Assad, to Paris in 2008. In addition, Assad was a guest of honor at France’s Bastille Day the same year. In spite of these diplomatic gestures and the relatively low importance of Lebanon for France, tensions between the two countries remained strong. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Assad had thwarted Western hopes in his timid liberalization process, which did nothing to improve the already tense relations with France.

In 2011, when civil unrest first broke out in Syria, France’s initial reaction should be seen in light of this long geopolitical history. The century of francophone influence and the potential minority strategy in Syria did not appear to be determining factors.

### **Arab uprisings**

The year 2011 was a key year for the “Arab uprisings” (rapidly christened the “Arab Spring” by the press). From a French standpoint, the revolts were entirely unexpected, and France’s initial reaction was mostly improvised. Until then, Paris had praised its good relations with the authoritarian Tunisian president, Ben Ali. Tunisia had even been described as “the Mediterranean dragon” because of its strong civil institutions and its promising economy. Its “Mediterranean-style” emergence was widely lauded and was considered to embody a successful economic model in the context of globalization. The sudden revolt and Ben Ali’s swift departure thus took Paris by surprise.

The Egyptian uprising against President Mubarak came as an-

other surprise for Paris. Analysts explained it as the result of a highly contagious domino effect. Autocratic regimes that had long been backed by Western powers appeared to waver one after another. Libya and Syria, it seemed, would be next. The ongoing struggle for human rights was in contradiction with Europe's support for autocratic governments, which were, from a *realpolitik* perspective, thought capable of holding back Islamist extremism. At the beginning of the uprising in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood was fairly discreet and did not appear to be the main force behind the revolution. Siding with the revolutionary democrats, who were to gradually become the new leaders of the Arab world (including Libya and Syria), presented itself as a wise option for Western powers. This explains French political and military activism during the early hours of the Libyan crisis: democrats had to be supported and the tyrant Gaddafi had to be prevented from clinging to power. This perspective led to a war that was at first intended to be limited but that quickly morphed into an actual regime change with the help of Western-backed military intervention. Moreover, the intervention allowed Western powers to take revenge unofficially on the Libyan leader for a series of mishaps and provocations on his part. Gaddafi, who had also been part of the "Mediterranean Union" project, had received an official invitation to Paris. People still remembered the Libyan Bedouin tents set up at Marigny Palace, right on the Champs-Élysées. Such psychological factors mainly explain the tough stance that France took on Libya. France's Arab policy had to be reinvigorated and renewed with universal aspirations and ideals *à la française*, as embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. France was also eager to be on the right side of history. A parallel was indeed drawn between the Arab uprisings and the 1848 French Revolution, also known as the "springtime of the peoples." Finally,

needless to say, the upheaval gave France the perfect opportunity to overthrow Arab leaders with whom diplomatic relations had been difficult. Both the recent context and long historical processes thus explain France's immediate reaction and its inflexible perspective on the regional conflagration at the time.

## 1.2. 1001 French Ways, 2011–2015

### ***A firm perspective, 2011–2013***

In Syria, the first demonstrations in March 2011 took place in Deraa, in the southern part of the country. The backlash by local authorities was immediate and brutal, backed by a government that showed no sign of willingness to compromise with the demonstrators. The protests then spread across the country to Damascus, Homs, and Banyas, and crackdowns became increasingly violent. As early as March 2011, France's foreign minister "condemned the use of force against protesters." In April, President Sarkozy denounced the "intolerable brutality"<sup>3</sup> of the government's repression, and in May, the European Union adopted the first series of sanctions against Damascus. In June and July, the crackdown intensified and took a harsh military turn. On August 18, 2011, President Sarkozy, along with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron, demanded that Bashar al-Assad step down. This was the first clear expression of a hard line against Assad, a line that would last four years. In their common declaration, the leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom called for Assad to leave power: "President Assad, who is resorting to brutal military force against his own people and who is responsible for the situation, has lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the

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3- *L'Orient-Le Jour*, "France's stance on Syria since the outbreak of the conflict", December 6, 2015, <http://goo.gl/GBlj19>.

country.” In the following years, France continued to harden its position on Syria. In October 2011, a United Nations Security Council resolution was vetoed by Russia and China (another attempt was vetoed in February 2012, and a third one in July of the same year).

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was created in fall 2011. At the same time, Jabhat al-Nusra announced its creation, and in January 2012, it pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. From February 2012 onward, Western and Arab countries cut diplomatic ties with Syria and, in the case of the United States and the Gulf countries, closed their embassies. On March 2, 2012, President Sarkozy closed the French embassy in Damascus to denounce the “scandalous” repression of Assad’s regime. However, the Syrian issue had no impact on the French presidential campaign. On May 29, the newly elected president, François Hollande, announced that the Syrian ambassador to France, Lamia Chakkour, was to be expelled over the Homs massacre that had taken place a few days earlier. In August 2012, the American president, Barack Obama, warned that the use of chemical weapons by Syrian authorities would be a “red line” whose crossing would provoke a military response. In November, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was created. On November 13, President Hollande declared that France recognized this new coalition as the “unique representative of the Syrian people” (the United Kingdom, Turkey, the United States, and the Gulf countries soon followed suit). Meanwhile, rebel forces were gaining ground in the southern part of the country, near Damascus, and in Aleppo. These forces were actively supported and discreetly armed by the West and Gulf countries. The first foreign jihadist battalions are documented to have arrived in Syria around this time. In April 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq transformed itself into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS), as the

group expanded its activities into Syria. Raqqa was captured by the group in March 2013 and became its stronghold. At the same time, Hezbollah's deployment in the Syrian conflict started to increase, its troops being backed by Iran. With Hezbollah's help, the Syrian regime was able to resist rebel troops and gain ground: in June, it managed to retake Qusayr and in July, part of Homs.

During the two years from 2011 to 2013, France remained aligned with other Western powers, rejecting the Syrian government – which it henceforth called the Syrian “regime” – and supporting the rebels, especially since jihadists, at the time, still appeared to be a minority and “moderate” groups seemed to have more of a chance to be on the winning side of the civil war. Of course, some subtle differences could be mentioned (especially regarding arm sales), but overall, France did not stand out, forming part of a united anti-Assad coalition.

In France, the shifts in power following the 2012 presidential election had no impact on the country's perspective on Syria. Paris's tough stance on the conflict was not exceptional at the time. However, this position would evolve from summer 2013 onward.

### **Tough stance and increasing diplomatic isolation**

At the end of August 2013, a major chemical attack caused the death of 1,400 people in a suburb of Damascus. This attack appeared even deadlier than previous ones. Even though it was not possible to establish the origin of the rockets and despite the controversy that consequently followed, the US government held the Syrian regime responsible for the attacks. (This perspective was not shared by Carla del Ponte, who said that there was evidence that the rebels carried out the attacks with the support of British, Turkish, and Saudi facilitators). President Obama was determined to

carry out a retaliatory military intervention, but he decided to seek congressional approval before launching any operation. This political strategy suggests a cautious approach to the “red line” in view of the controversy regarding the origin of the attack. British Prime Minister David Cameron also called for a military response in Syria and sought support in the House of Commons. The government’s motion was, however, rejected by the majority of MPs, who were reluctant to launch another war and replicate the Iraqi experience. France, by contrast, stood firmly by its decision to strike the Syrian regime. Washington then had to decide whether the United States would follow the French or the British path. Doubts were being raised about the prospects of congressional approval, and the outcome of the vote appeared far from certain. The suggestion of Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, that UN inspections should be carried out to monitor Syrian chemical weapons opened a diplomatic door and an alternative to military strikes against Damascus. This option was eventually chosen, and Assad immediately accepted the inspections.

France was caught off guard and became isolated on the diplomatic scene. The country’s hawkish aspirations were cut short. The hawk’s claws suddenly appeared too short. France’s Rafale fighter jets were ready to head to Damascus, but Paris could not act alone and needed the political and diplomatic support of its allies. From this point on, France’s uncompromising perspective became synonymous with its diplomatic isolation and contrasted with its limited influence and capacity to carry out the military intervention it desired. For many, France had become an inconvenient partner, especially since the country maintained the same tough stance on Iran’s nuclear program.

Divisions among the Western powers allowed Russia to get back

into the game by offering an astute alternative – despite its implications for the Ukrainian crisis. President Assad also returned to the diplomatic scene by signing the agreement on inspections of the country’s chemical weapons. At the same time, military gains on the ground by government troops helped turn the situation around. The Syrian regime, which had looked doomed to a quick collapse, began to appear more durable.

### *Moving lines, 2014–2015*

By the end of 2013, 2.3 million Syrians had taken refuge in neighboring countries (Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt). In January 2014, a first round of negotiations took place in Geneva: representatives of the Syrian government and delegates of the National Coalition were brought together by the United Nations special envoy for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi. However, no progress toward a political solution was made. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime continued its military advance on the ground, managing to retake the Lebanese border with the help of Hezbollah (capturing Yabroud in March 2014) and to regain almost full control of Homs in May. In June, the regime held elections in the areas it controlled and gained the expected electoral support. But in the meantime, ISIL had also gained ground in Iraq. After seizing Fallujah in January, the group took Mosul in June, which caused a political earthquake. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi soon became the self-proclaimed “caliph” and ISIL changed into the shorter IS, “Islamic State.” On August 19, the beheading of one of IS’s hostages, the American journalist James Foley, caused a major uproar and prompted the creation of a sixty-country coalition against IS. France joined the coalition but did not participate in strikes on Syria, only on Iraq. On August 28, President Hollande declared that Assad “[could] not be a partner

in the war against terrorism” in Syria and Iraq. The new developments had not altered France’s perspective, and its hostility toward Assad remained unchanged. The rise of IS did not appear to be a determining factor at the time. Paris nevertheless started to adapt its stance slightly by defending a moral equivalence between Assad and Daesh, as it calls IS: it rejects the denomination IS and instead uses Daesh to avoid any recognition of the group as a state. Daesh is, in fact, the Arabic acronym of IS, but that does not matter much to France.

However, France’s diplomatic posture enabled it to garner some political gains. Paris’s uncompromising behavior during negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue allowed diplomatic rapprochements with Israel and Saudi Arabia. With the latter, a new, fruitful cooperation was inaugurated and replaced France’s previous collaboration with Qatar. Closer political relations are also being established with Tunisia – Tunisia being the only case of a successful and democratic Arab Spring – and with Egypt, where Marshal al-Sisi has managed, with the help of Riyadh, to put an end to the Islamist rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Thanks to its Arab policy and its firm posture, France has thus been able to coherently coordinate its political principles (opposition to Assad, support of Tunisia) with business opportunities (arms deals with Saudi Arabia and Egypt; the latter bought French Rafales with Saudi funds). A new Middle East policy combining moral and economic imperatives has thus replaced the traditional French Arab policy.

On the domestic front, criticisms have nonetheless begun to surface, especially among right-wing parties. Many have denounced the rise of jihadism and called for a revision of the anti-Assad policy. On February 26, 2015, four French MPs even traveled

to Damascus and paid a visit to the Rais, an action that was predictably met by a firm reaction from Hollande, who “condemned” the visit and denounced the MPs’ meeting with a “dictator.” However, no major opposition to France’s political line and no substantial debates within France on this issue have been heard. Yet from summer 2015 onward, the existence of this delicate balance has been threatened.

### 1.3. A Sudden Change

#### ***First turning points (summer 2015)***

At the end of spring 2015, Moscow regained ground on the diplomatic front. In mid-August, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, met with his Russian counterpart Lavrov. Their common communiqué stated that Iran and Russia maintained a shared perspective and sought a political solution to the Syrian conflict without any preconditions regarding the fate of Bashar al-Assad. Subsequently, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, the king of Jordan, and the Emirati minister of foreign affairs all traveled to Moscow on August 25 on the pretext of an arms fair. There was no press release or official announcement. On August 26, Marshal al-Sisi also went to Moscow. Both Russia and Egypt called for a united front against terrorism in Syria, noting, in the words of the press conference report, “the essential importance of creating a broad anti-terrorist front involving key international players from regional countries, including Syria.”

These diplomatic actions can be explained through several factors: (1) the nuclear agreement with Iran, which opened a new era for the country back within the international community and ended the possibility of disregarding its diplomatic role; (2) the military status quo in Syria, since neither the Syrian regime nor

the opposition, nor the Islamic State, is gaining ground; (3) Saudi Arabia's subtle diplomatic reorientation as it discreetly reaches out to the Muslim Brotherhood while its Syrian protégés experience difficulties on the ground; (4) the deterioration of the situation in Lebanon, with the massive garbage crisis and a political gridlock in which no elections – whether presidential or legislative – can successfully take place; and (5) the vulnerability of Syrian government forces and the ruling Alawite minority, as suggested by the arrest of a member of the Assad clan following popular demands.

From this point on, Iran had the ability to be more discreet on the diplomatic front and let Russia have the winning hand. A relative consensus on Russia's role could be observed. A solution to the Syrian crisis would indeed allow more efficient action to be taken against IS. President Obama would then be able to pursue a low-cost, low-profile strategy while collaborating with regional powers. On the other hand, Russia's taking the lead of a large coalition would prove that it is far from isolated and that, to the contrary, Moscow is back at the diplomatic forefront in the Middle East.

Most experts disregarded these backstage negotiations.<sup>4</sup> Diplomats, however, noticed them and suggested a slight change in France's perspective. At the end of August, at the ambassadors' conference, the French president called for the "neutralization" of President Assad. "Neutralization" is weaker than "departure." Paris seems to have realized that its relative diplomatic isolation had some downsides and that the Americans would be at the negotia-

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4- An exception was an August 29, 2015, article in *La Vigie*; <https://www.lettrevigie.com/?p=892>.

tion table. On the other hand, Europe was becoming increasingly aware of the refugee problem, with an unprecedented flow of migrants flocking to its borders, many of them from Syria and Iraq. Numerous voices argued for the need to treat the “root causes” of the asylum crisis. By this stage, the European mood had changed, and many started to call for a revision in policy. Positions on the democratic opposition and on Assad’s departure had to be amended. For Paris, however, these changes were only minor adjustments, footnotes in the grand policy scheme.

Russia’s swift deployment to Latakia and its military support for the Syrian regime came as a big surprise to Europe. Russia sent reinforcements of fighter jets, helicopters, protective troops, and fire support to the Syrian regime. Neither the EU nor Germany or France had been warned.



Russian Su-30 fighter jets at the Khmeimim airbase in Latakia Governorate, Syria (Source: RT)

Vladimir Putin then called for a broad anti-IS coalition, but the Western powers faced a major problem: no army was willing to

fight IS, with the exception of Kurdish forces – which would fight only on their own territory. Putting boots on the ground was not a serious option for Western powers, since the outcome appeared uncertain – and according to the French military expert Michel Goya, more than 40,000 soldiers would need to be deployed.<sup>5</sup> To many, the Russian solution seemed adequate. Moreover, it was in sync with Russia’s long-held strategy: for at least the past 15 years, Moscow has been offering the West a joint anti-terrorism alliance. The issue had been put on the table as early as 2001: on September 12 of that year, Putin – then a newly elected president – had contacted George W. Bush about the terrorist threat, leading to a Russia-NATO agreement signed the same year.

This analysis enables us to understand why the Russians and the Americans are cooperating on Syria. Despite appearances, Moscow’s actual goal is probably not the war against IS but a relaunch of the political process, that is, the transition. From the beginning, Assad’s fate was the main dividing point between the two parties. While Russia has always openly supported him, some surprising changes have taken place on the NATO side: Secretary of State John Kerry hinted that Assad could help with the transition, and Turkey’s President Erdogan even declared on September 24 that Assad could be part of the transition process. Assad’s reelection was deemed probable at this time, which could explain these new developments.

Accordingly, France decided – once again – to modify its position. In September 2015, Paris reaffirmed its participation in the

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5- M. Goya, “Détruire Daech ou laisser vivre l’Etat islamique” [Destroy Daesh or let the Islamic State live], blog entry, *La voie de l’épée*, October 21, 2015, <http://lavoiedelepee.blogspot.com/2015/07/detruire-daech-ou-laisser-vivre-letat.html>.

international coalition and announced its plan to launch air strikes not only in Iraq, but also in Syria. However, France still insisted on characterizing the Syrian regime on a par with IS. On September 28, President Hollande declared that it would be “impossible to make the victim and the executioner work together” in Syria, thus excluding Assad from any political outcome.

Even though Assad was still depicted as the great tyrant at this point, many in France hinted that the strategy that had been in place for the past three years had led to a dead end. This conclusion gained support from the attacks in January 2015 and the refugee crisis. The mounting public pressure that ensued explains why Paris felt a need to modify the ethical posture that it had maintained until then. Since the story of Saul in the Bible, the road to Damascus has represented sudden conversions.

### **Rupture**

The year 2015 has not been one of unadulterated success for IS. The organization experienced many setbacks and seemed to be globally contained. In January, it lost Kobani on the Turkish border, its first great military defeat. In April, on Iraqi soil, Tikrit was recaptured by Iraqi government forces, and in June, IS was expelled from Tal Abyad in Syria. The capture of Palmyra in May was IS’s only successful operation (Syrian government forces then retreated into an Alawite stronghold). In fall 2015, IS changed its strategy and started to export the war out of the Levant by launching terrorist attacks in Tunisia, Kuwait, Yemen, Turkey, and Lebanon (44 people killed by two simultaneous suicide attacks on October 31), as well as against Russia (by downing a Russian passenger airplane over the Sinai Peninsula). Despite these attacks, terrorism continued to feel like a distant threat to European populations, since no

major attacks had recently taken place on European soil.

That is why the criminal attacks in Paris on November 13, which killed 130 and injured 350, sent shockwaves across the globe, and especially – and understandably – across France, where November 13 is perceived as a fundamental watershed moment. France had previously experienced terrorist attacks in its territory, but this time the country reacted differently. The authorities used the word “war.” This word had already been used by the French prime minister in January after the Charlie Hebdo shooting, but a state of war was not really felt by the general public at that time. In November, by contrast, everyone felt “at war” – the complexities of the term notwithstanding.<sup>6</sup> I will not go into the many debates that surrounded the attacks in France; I will focus on the impact that these terrorist acts on French soil had on France’s Syria policy. The ensuing changes were brutal, amplifying the subtle trends that could be observed at the end of the summer. This was no evolution, but rather an abrupt change. On November 16, President Hollande described IS as the number 1 enemy in Syria – though still mentioning that Assad could not be part of a “political solution”: “In Syria, we are resolutely and tirelessly seeking a political solution, one that does not include Bashar al-Assad. But our enemy in Syria is Daesh.” He thus put a definitive end to the equation “Assad = IS,” which had been guiding France’s policy on Syria. As a result, a broad international coalition was created. The French president then embarked on a series of diplomatic visits (Washington, Moscow), while increasing the country’s military deployment. French fighter jets struck IS targets in Syria and the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* left the Toulon naval base for the

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6- See also *La Vigie*, nos. 29 and 30.

Gulf. French Rafale jets would then take off from the carrier and conduct missions over Syria.

France's new diplomatic approach went even further. On his way back from Moscow, on November 27, the French foreign minister Laurent Fabius said he could foresee Syrian troops loyal to President Assad taking part in the fight against IS. The next day, he clarified his comments and claimed that he had meant "some Syrian troops," not the Syrian forces as a whole. France's changed tone – which stood in contrast to its initial tough stance – did not go unnoticed. On November 30, Fabius declared that cooperation with the Syrian army would be possible only if Assad were no longer in power. But on December 5, he announced that Assad's departure was no longer a precondition to a political transition. One cannot help but notice the change of posture.



French Rafale fighter jet (Source: Politico)

It is worth mentioning that this shift has been promoted by the president and his close defense advisers (Manuel Valls, Bernard Cazeneuve, and Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian). The French foreign minister seems to have been brushed aside, and he was left with no choice but to follow the new guidelines. This was the end of France's foreign policy à la Fabius. From this point on, France's policy in Syria entered a new era.

## II- Organizing Change: Negotiation Rounds

*« Aucune solution n'est possible avec Bachar el-Assad,  
mais aucune n'est possible sans lui. »*

*("No solution is possible with Bashar al-Assad, but none is possible without him.")*

Anthony Samrani\*

France's abrupt policy shift on Syria has been accompanied by intense diplomatic activity. On the domestic front, this activity has enabled the French president to complete his transformation and present himself not only as a respected chief of war but also as one of the world's great leaders and as a driving force on the international diplomatic scene. In the past, he tried to assume such a leading role in Mali<sup>7</sup> and in the conflict in the Sahel, for instance, as well as by fostering a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis (the "Normandy format" in the Minsk peace process) and by hosting the COP21 on climate change in Paris.

However, in the present case, the situation is different. A multilateral and bilateral framework needs to be put into place to organize this change of policy – involving the usual allies, but also with special attention to Near and Middle Eastern countries.

### 2.1. *Multilateral Framework: Which Legitimacy?*

#### **The UN framework**

As soon as the first air strikes were launched on Syria in September – before the November attacks in Paris – France tried to

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7- D. Revault d'Alonnes, *Les guerres du président* [The president's wars] (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

(\*)L'Orient-Le jour, December 7, 2015.

establish a legal framework for its actions. In Iraq, the Iraqi government had “requested” strikes by the coalition. In Syria, even though diplomatic ties with Damascus had been severed, the Syrian regime remained the country’s legitimate authority and therefore continued to maintain its seat at the United Nations. A foreign intervention on Syrian soil would not be without legal problems. This is why France said it would carry out the air strikes as an act of “collective self-defense” in accordance with the UN Charter.<sup>8</sup> But this legal strategy was contentious; it raised several questions and failed to convince most experts. (There are, indeed, several problematic aspects, including the fact that IS is not a state per se, whereas the UN Charter allows the use of force for self-defense against a state.) However, with this framework, France was hoping to keep up legal appearances.

The attacks on November 13 gave France the legitimacy to invoke the self-defense argument. This time, no one opposed France’s use of the “self-defense” clause – the US had also brandished the same article after 9/11.

Things did not, however, go that smoothly. Shortly after, on November 22, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2249 condemning IS’s terror attacks,<sup>9</sup> but unlike Chapter VII of the UN Charter, this resolution does not provide explicit legal authorization to act through military force. Instead, it stipulates only that “all necessary measures” can be taken against terrorist acts within

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8- On November 16, 2015, in his address to the Congress (joint session of Parliament), President Hollande announced: “This is the reason why the need to destroy Daesh is a challenge for the whole of the international community. So I have asked the Security Council of the United Nations to convene as early as possible to adopt a resolution which will express our joint resolution to fight against terrorism.” <http://goo.gl/vroLjl>.

9- For the English text of Resolution 2249, see <http://goo.gl/NkDSox>.



French president François Hollande addresses the Congress of the French Parliament in Versailles on November 16, 2015 (Source: *The Telegraph*)

a country's territory. This language, though vague, could provide a legal basis for the French intervention, while also garnering Russian and Chinese support. Both Moscow and Beijing were irritated by the broad interpretation of Resolution 1973 in Libya and had previously accused the coalition of overstepping the limits of the UN mandate. It is also worth mentioning that Russia had also called for an international coalition against terrorism and had tried to present its own resolution to the UN. The legal basis for France's "self-defense" argument was not perfectly guaranteed. However, the international outcry in the aftermath of the Paris attacks and worldwide solidarity with the victims enabled France to gain ground on two major issues: a legal basis for its intervention and the end of the country's relative diplomatic isolation caused by its initial overzealous stance. France remained firm, but its tough

stance on IS allowed consensus building, at least in principle. Only the practical aspects of this policy have caused some dissension.

### ***The European framework***

In his speech before the French Congress in November 2015, President Hollande announced that he would ask for support from France's European partners. Even though this request surprised no one, questions were raised regarding the nature of the requested support. Unprecedentedly, France invoked Article 42.7<sup>10</sup> of the EU Lisbon Treaty.

This article derives from an old article of the 1948 self-defense pact, which was the basis for the Western European Union (WEU). It had been recycled and adapted for incorporation into the EU treaty. According to experts, however, the article was more a declaration of principle rooted in the EU's historical heritage than an effective clause. European law specialists argued that Article 222 would be much more effective in furthering European defense. Article 222, commonly referred to as Solidarity Clause, mentions that "the union and its member states shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity if a member state is the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster. The Union shall mobilize all the instruments at its disposal, including the military resources made available by the

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10- Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty states: "If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States." See <http://goo.gl/SFk14k>.

member states.”<sup>11</sup> For Paris, invoking Article 42.7 was nonetheless a very promising approach. It was first and foremost a political and legal act, as it enabled France to call on European solidarity, military aid, and assistance. For many years, France had been requesting such support, especially in connection with its operations in Africa. Yet very little assistance had been forthcoming. By invoking this article, France wanted guarantees of such European mutual assistance. As we shall see, its efforts were not totally in vain.

A confirming vote on tightening security measures and extending the state of emergency was carried out by the French Parliament's lower house soon after the President's speech before the Congress. He announced that the security pact would have precedence over the stability pact. In other words, France was “at war” and no longer felt obligated to stick to its strict Eurozone budget-deficit reduction commitments. For several months prior to that speech, France had repeatedly been asking for the de facto exemption of its defense spending from its budget deficit, but other Europeans had turned a deaf ear to the request. However, the new situation and the vote requesting European solidarity enabled France to turn the tables and obtain some fiscal leniency from the EU: France's demand received a favorable response from the European Commission. Hollande, who had always been reluctant to bow to the EU's austerity pressures, finally obtained what he had long been wishing for. The geopolitical situation thus enabled France to obtain what the economy could not allow. In addition, invoking Article 42.7 instead of Article 222 had several other consequences: first, European institutions would not interfere with EU member states' decisions in the intergovernmental scheme; and second, in-

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11- See <http://goo.gl/DXmmEg>.

vocation of this article would garner political support for a European defense system instead of turning to NATO for help.

### ***Putting NATO aside***

For some years prior to that invocation, France had deliberately sought to marginalize NATO. This approach had not been ideologically motivated (like in the old days of de Gaulle and his successors), but rather a pragmatic choice in a post-Cold War context.<sup>12</sup> Since France's return to NATO, the organization had proven quite ineffective because of dissension among its European members, which had been a disappointment for Paris. Some allies saw Moscow as the greatest foe, whereas others were more concerned with southern security threats. In the Cold War era, NATO's inaction could be explained by its great power. In 2015, its inaction was due to its ineffectiveness, on both military and political levels.

Besides, Russia had always perceived NATO's intervention as a red flag. Since Russia was now a new potential ally for Paris, at least in Syria, turning to NATO would not have been a wise political choice. President Hollande's visit to Russia was scheduled for the week after his speech, and calling on NATO could have caused friction with his Russian counterpart. Moreover, Turkey is also a member of NATO, but it was not seen as a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism, because Ankara follows its own agenda in Syria. This was one more reason for Paris not to turn to NATO and to reduce its reliance on the organization. Article 5 of the NATO treaty was thus not invoked, and no meeting of the North Atlantic Council was called, sparking frustration among Atlanticists, who pointed out that despite initial reluctance, Article 5 had been in-

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12- O. Kempf, *L'OTAN au 21ème siècle* [NATO in the twenty-first century], 2nd ed. (Paris: Du Rocher, 2014).

voked in 2001 after the attacks on the United States. Their bitter assessment of the situation highlighted the fact that NATO was no longer the primary catalyst of European defense solidarity and that the alliance was paying a high price for its internal dissension. Bilateral dialogue with Washington was seen as preferable by European powers. The “greatest alliance in history” was politically helpless in the face of a major European security issue.

### *The Vienna process*

For Paris, multilateral agreements establish guidelines for action. Regarding the Syrian conflict, a specific framework needed to be put into place. France thus decided to support the Vienna peace process, which had been launched by Russia and included Arab countries and the United States, but also Iran. The first conference, co-organized by Moscow and Washington, took place on October 23, and a second one followed on October 30. France and a few other European states had not been consulted by Moscow and received only last-minute invitations to the event. Russia had a strong desire to emphasize “European isolation” in contrast with the “Russian isolation” that European diplomats had been trying to emphasize in the previous two years. No immediate, tangible results were achieved at the Vienna conference.<sup>13</sup> First, it is worth mentioning that the Syrian opposition had not been invited to the negotiation table, an exclusion that was deemed illegitimate. On the other hand, strong disagreements between the Saudis and the Iranians were evident. The two parties seemed to disagree, or “agree to disagree,” on ev-

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13- However, the text of the conference statement maintains the options that were previously adopted during the Geneva peace talks: a new government, including opposition forces, needs to be formed before the elections. The text refers to Declaration and Resolution 2118.

everything. This first meeting and direct dialogue at an international conference were, however, a breakthrough, as they opened the gate to a new “inclusive” political solution to the Syrian crisis.

As for the rest, two main conflicting perspectives hindered successful negotiations: first, establishing a list of opposition forces that could take part in the transition process was a challenge; and second, the fate of Bashar al-Assad remained controversial. In fact, the negotiations were based on the Geneva I protocol, which stipulated that a Syrian transition government “could include members of the present government.” This codicil, however, left room for interpretation, and its ambiguity had thwarted any positive political outcome for three years. Was Assad to be included in the transition government? Everyone thought so – at least temporarily – as it was difficult to differentiate Assad from the Syrian regime.

Even though France played only a minor role at the first conference, its involvement increased during the following rounds of peace talks. France’s goal was to promote a political framework for the transition, based on the recognition that the solution must be not only military but also political.

## *2.2. Bilateral Alliances: Uniting Coalitions?*

France learned a valuable lesson from its experience after September 2013, when it had had to face diplomatic isolation due to its willingness to strike at the Syrian regime: there is no effective strategy – either political or military – without alliances. Already existing alliances – NATO and the EU – could not, in the present situation, serve as a framework for action. An actual coalition had to be created. The problem, however, lay in the fact that one coalition had to be formed, but several were already in existence: the American, Russian, and French coalitions. The mission, then, was

to unite these coalitions by merging them into one. For that purpose, bilateral negotiations had to be conducted first.

### **The United States**

France's relations with the United States were not as easy as they seemed. Of course, the overall atmosphere was good, and France had certainly replaced the United Kingdom as America's most efficient European partner.<sup>14</sup> In Africa, for instance, cooperation between France and the United States was strong. Yet in the Middle East, the situation was not as clear. France's tough stance on Iran and on the nuclear talks was met by criticism in Washington. On the other hand, Paris's firm perspective on Assad appeared to be inconvenient, even though the two agreed in principle. President Obama has always faced two key difficulties: being accused of weakness on the domestic front and being reluctant to send in boots on the ground. For these reasons, he had to opt for an indirect strategy,<sup>15</sup> but also for compromise – with both the Russians and the Iranians. Finally, Washington feels that it has a historical responsibility in Iraq, which explains why the Americans are more concerned with the situation there than with Syria. All these factors may explain the conflict of views between Paris and Washington.

One day after the attacks in Paris, French Foreign Minister Le Drian contacted the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter. The Americans promised that they would share intelligence on Syria. Until then, despite being part of the coalition, France had had no

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14- Yet France is not part of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance and its information-sharing platform, which significantly hinders operational cooperation between France and FVEY members.

15- O. Kempf, “L’indirection de la guerre” [War’s indirection], *Politique étrangère* 80, no. 4 (2015).

privileged access to US intelligence data on the ground that could have helped Paris conduct air strikes in Syria and Iraq. This indicates a certain level of distrust toward Paris on Washington's part. However, from this point on, the French and the Americans increased their cooperation. They intensified air strikes, especially those targeting oil infrastructure, so as to cut off IS funding sources. The level of collaboration between the two countries thus improved, but its long-term durability remains to be confirmed. President Hollande's visit to Washington at the end of November had a real impact on the US political landscape: the Islamic State became an issue that could no longer be avoided in political debates.

On the political front, the two countries have also grown closer, especially on the political transition in Syria. Both the United States and France are still hostile toward Assad, but they no longer view his departure as a precondition for a political transition.

However, France still has a stronger interest in Syria, whereas Washington has its eye primarily on Iraq. Consequently, much still needs to be done on this front. Finally, in November, the two countries collaborated on a large military offensive against IS in Iraq to retake the town of Sinjar.

The situation could change further after the deadly shooting in San Bernardino, CA, at the beginning of December 2015, which left 14 dead. Even though the attack was not officially carried out by the Islamic State, the terrorists had pledged allegiance to IS. The war against IS was subsequently propelled to the forefront of the political stage in the United States, with President Obama promising, on December 6, to use all available resources to destroy IS. His strategy, which combines air strikes, Special Forces operations, and working with "local forces that are fighting to regain control of their own country," is likely to evolve over the coming months.

## *Russia*

Russia is a new major player in Syria and will likely remain so even after it announced a withdrawal of the bulk of its forces from Syria in mid-March 2016. From the beginning, it has supported Assad. Moscow is naturally standing by one of its only direct allies in the region, but it also strives to maintain the principle of state legitimacy – seen as preferable to chaotic degeneration. Moscow has always been suspicious of regime change because of the disastrous consequences that have followed such change in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

Since September 2015, Russia has pursued a massive military campaign alongside the Syrian regime. This help has enabled Syrian troops to regain control of some parts of Syrian territory, but no clear military advance has been observable. Destroying IS is undoubtedly not Moscow's only objective in the region. It sees other opposition groups – Jaysh al-Islam jihadists, Turkmen fighters between Latakia and Aleppo – as terrorist targets on an equal footing with IS. With Russian assistance, Syrian forces expelled IS from Kuweires airport, which had been besieged since November 2012.

However, following the downing of a Russian civil aircraft over Egypt on October 31, Russia slightly changed its priorities in the region. The attack was carried out by an IS-affiliated group, “IS in Sinai.”<sup>16</sup> Even though this IS branch claimed responsibility for the attack, Moscow initially remained silent on the subject, unequivocally acknowledging the terrorist act only after the attacks in Paris. On the domestic front, the attacks made military intervention in Syria more palatable to Russian public opinion. In addition, Moscow found a new ally in its war against terrorism: till that day,

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16- The organization was formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem), but it officially changed its name after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014.

Moscow's coalition plan had not been met with broad support.

During Hollande's visit to Moscow, Russia and France agreed to exchange military information, at least on a basic level. They had initially announced that the two countries would have common targets in Syria, even though they would not share intelligence. Even if an actual coalition was not formed, this operational coordination between Moscow and Paris is advanced enough to go beyond a simple "deconfliction" procedure – that is, the exchange of information on the flight paths of aircraft and weapons so as to avoid accidental collisions.

Although President Hollande continues to advocate Assad's departure, he has softened his stance on the matter and admits that this is no longer a precondition for any political transition process. Paris thus ensures operational cooperation between the two main alliances on the ground. France is part of the US coalition, but it is also collaborating closely with the Russian one. Paris insists on increasing the number of air strikes. Consequently, Russia started striking at a larger number of IS targets – especially IS oil infrastructure.

### Europe

As previously mentioned, Paris was able to trigger the EU's mutual defense clause and thus garner EU solidarity, at least in principle. However, whether this solidarity would be adequately implemented in practice remained an open question.<sup>17</sup> In terms of responses to the French call, three categories of European coun-

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17- For more details, see N. Gros-Verheyde, "La clause d'assistance mutuelle déclenchée par la France: Bilan un mois après" [The mutual defense clause invoked by France: One month later], blog entry, *Bruxelles2*, December 17, 2015, <http://goo.gl/AXbdT1>.

tries can be distinguished: those that followed France, those that refused to participate in a mutual defense scheme, and those that remained silent.

As expected, the countries that are most preoccupied with the growing Russian influence belong to the third category: Poland, the Baltic States, and Romania. These countries simply issued a nonbinding statement of principle.

Certain other countries, such as Italy, refused to participate. Even though Italy has often voiced concern over problems in the South – especially because of the impact of these problems on the migration crisis – the Italian prime minister ruled out the country’s joining a “war” coalition. It seems that he is more preoccupied with welcoming pilgrims, as Italy braces itself for Holy Year – the Catholic Church declared an extraordinary jubilee Holy Year to begin in December 2015. Consequently, Italian authorities are particularly keen to avoid the risk of being targeted by terrorist acts. Spain remained similarly circumspect, being mostly in a state of waiting prior to the legislative elections that were scheduled for December 6. Foreign policy issues can be embarrassing in Spain: in 2004, the then-dominant Popular Party lost the general elections because of the government’s mishandling of the Madrid train bombings – it had initially avoided naming al-Qaeda as the culprit for the attacks.

Some countries, such as Belgium and Sweden, did get involved. Their involvement consists variously of troops sent to Africa – either as part of UN missions or in support of local French operations in Mali or the Central African Republic – but also of logistical assistance, including tactical air-to-air refueling aircraft and military escort ships for the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier. However, no major direct assistance has been provided that could have enabled

France to effectively shift its military operations from Central Africa to West Africa, from the Sahel to Lebanon, and from Syria to Iraq.

This situation seemed, at first, embarrassing for Germany. Many factors can explain Germany's initial reluctance to join France, and the first of these is its structural and longstanding aversion to French interventionism. This did not prevent Germany from intervening alongside France in the Balkans or in Afghanistan, but in these cases the German role was defined by strict guidelines. Under the German constitution, Berlin cannot send troops abroad except as part of missions with an international mandate. The fact that UN Resolution 2249 does not invoke Chapter VII of the UN Charter is thus problematic. Moreover, on the domestic front, German public opinion appears divided over the refugee issue. Above all, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, fears that a parallel will be drawn between terrorists and migrants – a fear strengthened by the allegation that two of the Paris attackers took the migrant route to Europe. Yet because of the refugee crisis, Germans have also become more aware of the need to deal with the root causes of the crisis, which also implies solving the Syrian problem. Having carefully weighed the pros and cons, Germany thus decided to join France. Its involvement is, however, cautious: troops will be sent to Africa, but only under an EU or UN mandate. German aircraft will also be sent to Syria, but they will participate in reconnaissance missions only, not combat operations. Finally, Berlin has also slightly increased the number of its military advisors working side by side with Kurdish fighters.

Berlin's involvement in Syria is indeed significant, but the country is proceeding with caution so as to avoid being drawn onto the slippery slope of military intervention. As many analysts observed, this is Merkel's first war, her first military deployment abroad. As

the combat situation on the ground evolves, it is expected that Germany will have to raise the level of its military involvement. Germany's decision is nonetheless good news for Paris. Following President Hollande's diplomatic marathon, no one can denounce France as isolated.

France's diplomatic isolation was definitely put to rest once the British took the opportunity to regain center stage on the diplomatic scene. The United Kingdom had been very cautious, especially after September 2013, when a vote at the House of Commons had ruled out British air strikes on Libya. However, the British prime minister observed that the situation had changed in the wake of the Paris attacks when British crowds showed a genuine outpouring of emotion. The Labor Party was divided and did not follow its pacifist leader Jeremy Corbyn. David Cameron then decided to hold a vote on air strikes against IS in Syria and won. Right after the vote, British Tornado fighters headed to Syria. Cameron's political victory was well received by the French, whose diplomatic and military position it reinforced. The three major European countries – France, Germany, and the UK – are now involved in the conflict in Syria. Even though other European countries – Italy, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands – did not follow suit, the overall picture is positive.

### ***Paris is less isolated***

After three weeks of intense diplomatic efforts, France could declare success, despite some minor adjustments in the process. France is back in the game, and no one in Washington, Moscow, Berlin, or London can conceive of a diplomatic solution without France. On Syria, France is no longer isolated. Paris still maintains a tough stance on IS, but this common enemy compels everyone to rally around a common cause. However, beyond this common

objective, France and the other countries involved do not share the exact same agenda.

### 2.3. *Alliances in the Middle East*

In its diplomatic maneuvers, Paris has to include not only the major global powers but also regional actors. In this matter, France's efforts have been less visible.

#### *Difficult partnerships*

Paris must take into account a number of difficult partners. Among these, Turkey tops the list. There is no systematic opposition between Paris and Ankara, although everyone knows that France will hardly accept Turkey's membership in the EU. However, some of France's allies are experiencing tense relations with Turkey. After Turkey's downing of a Russian SU24 fighter jet over Syria on November 24, relations between Moscow and Ankara have cooled significantly. Shortly after, in response to Turkish actions, Russia deployed its S-400, one of the world's most advanced anti-aircraft defense systems, which stirred some concerns among the neighboring countries.

Russia then raised the stakes, as Moscow accused Ankara of supporting IS and of being actively involved in oil smuggling. Paris first remained discreet, but pundits have observed a certain opposition to Ankara's policy on the part of the French, even though this opposition has not been officially voiced, only hinted at.

Similarly, German negotiations with Turkey to control the influx of migrants must have attracted disapproval from Paris. However, out of European solidarity, no concerns have been made public. Paris has not tried to establish dialogue with Ankara, either, only made sure that Ankara allows France to use its airspace to launch its air strikes. Paris has left the United States to conduct

negotiations with this difficult partner.

Regarding Iran, Paris has also remained discreet. There were recent frictions between the two countries because of France's uncompromising stance on a nuclear deal. After the deal was signed, cautious contacts aimed at reestablishing trust were gradually made. Iran has, however, always voiced its support for the Syrian regime, both because of Syria's support during its war with Iraq, but also because of its strategic Shiite alliance with Hezbollah.

Tehran clearly maintains that Assad must remain in power, and Iran has deployed its troops, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), in Syria. Their purpose is to advise Syrian troops, modernize the regime's army, and even take part in combat operations.

Paris sees Iran's involvement as both a risk and a chance: a risk to weaken consensus on the necessity of Assad's departure, but also a chance to have more troops on the ground to fight IS. France's relations with Iran are thus complex but courteous. Avoiding any conflict with its ally Saudi Arabia, which is involved in strife with Tehran, is also key. It is nonetheless worth mentioning that Paris's new ties with Tehran have had a positive impact on France's relations with Iraq, Iran's protégé.

### **Arab countries**

For the past few years, France has strengthened its ties with Saudi Arabia. The situation has improved since Qatar – France's longtime ally – has begun to pursue closer cooperation with Riyadh. Moreover, France's firm stances – on Iran during the nuclear talks, but also on chemical weapons in 2013 and on Libya during the military intervention in 2011 – have been met with applause by Saudi Arabia. Riyadh appears to be in favor of France's activism both on the political and the military level, and numerous arms

deals have been signed between the two countries, including, for instance, a Saudi-funded arms deal with the Lebanese army. Saudi Arabia is, however, facing several challenges. In addition to Riyadh's structural opposition to Iran, the Islamic State has become a new and dangerous political foe: both systems are based on a rigorous interpretation of Islam, but IS accuses the Saudi regime of promoting an impure version of the faith. A few attacks by IS-affiliated groups have already been carried out in the Kingdom. At the same time, Riyadh follows its own agenda in Yemen. In summer 2015, Gulf countries that had sent military aircraft to support the coalition in Syria decided to withdraw from these missions so as to focus on the intervention in Yemen.

For all these reasons, Riyadh welcomes France's position, especially since both countries are in favor of Assad's departure. Yet it seems that Riyadh's perspective on Assad has evolved slightly, since



Saudi Arabia's King Salman and French president François Hollande at the Royal Palace in Riyadh, May 4, 2015 (Source: The Nation Company LLC)

it now appears that he will indeed be part of a negotiated transition.

At the beginning of December 2015, the Kingdom organized a peace conference to bring together opposition forces in Syria and to establish a united opposition front. The other Gulf countries are overall aligned with Riyadh's policy.

Egypt, however, has followed a different path. Even though the country is supported by Riyadh, Cairo is aligned with Russia and does not require Assad's departure as a precondition of the transition process in Syria. Indeed, Egyptian authorities are in favor of maintaining a legitimate state in order to avoid a dangerous Islamist takeover. In addition, since Egypt has been struck by a wave of IS attacks and is facing an IS-affiliated rebellion in the Sinai, the country welcomes military efforts aimed at destroying IS.

Egypt's perspective should also be seen in light of a significant warming of relations between Cairo and Paris. Over the past few years, Cairo has bought military equipment from Paris - which has now replaced Washington, since Egypt accused the United States of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, Marshal al-Sisi's political foe. France's stance on Syria has not prompted a negative reaction from Egypt, and it will certainly not endanger the recent warming of relations between the two countries.

### ***Syria's neighbors***

Syria's four neighbors have no objection to France's new political turn.

Lebanon is facing a longstanding political crisis, but the country has so far managed to withstand several problems: the refugee crisis (one million refugees are now on Lebanese soil), several terrorist attacks that struck the country, and Hezbollah's intervention in neighboring Syria.

Israel, on the other hand, is preoccupied with Russia's interven-

tion, as Moscow's military involvement has altered the geopolitical calculus in the region. At the start of Russia's intervention, Moscow and Tel Aviv agreed on deconfliction mechanisms to coordinate their respective military actions. Hezbollah remains a concern for Tel Aviv, but Israel is certainly relieved to see that the organization is involved in Syria: in the meantime, Hezbollah will not be focusing on attacking Israel. Finally, concerns are being raised in Israel over the rise of the jihadist threat, as some Arab Israelis have recently carried out attacks against Jews. IS propaganda is now being spread in Hebrew, and Tel Aviv appears concerned with this emerging threat. In Israel, French diplomatic activism is thus well perceived.

Paris recognizes the government in Baghdad and takes part in the coalition, but lets the United States deal with the Iraqi issue.

Finally, as far as Jordan is concerned, the country has found itself in the eye of the storm, welcoming hundreds of thousands of refugees and taking part in the anti-IS coalition (although Jordan stopped its air strikes a few months ago). Above all, Amman fears the rise of IS and therefore warmly welcomes the French initiative.

### ***A diplomatic turn supported by all major international actors***

In the wake of the Paris attacks in November 2015, France decided to embark on a fundamental shift in its Syria policy. It was risking diplomatic isolation, which would have rendered its actions ineffective. This diplomatic turn enabled it to build a wide consensus and to garner significant political and military support. Until that point, France had been quite isolated because of its firm stand on Syria. Defining IS as the new common enemy propelled the country back to the forefront of the world's diplomatic affairs. From this perspective, even though the shift came late, in the wake of massive criminal terrorist attacks, France's new policy has been a genuine success.

### III- Limits and Perspectives

#### 3.1. War and Politics

Many experts and politicians would like France to maintain its hard line. Some wish for an alliance with Assad, while others are calling for a firm stand on Saudi Arabia, as they denounce the Kingdom for its promotion of radical Islam, which gives birth to jihadism. Foreign policy is, however, rarely that simple, and diplomatic perspectives are seldom so clear-cut or impeccably coherent. Diplomacy is the art of the possible and all about compromise, negotiation, and trade-offs. Reconciling differences implies making compromises and changing initial viewpoints, which can sometimes bring contradictions and ambiguities. It is thus necessary to find a middle ground between cynical realism and stubborn idealism.

On Syria, France's diplomatic shift can easily be observed: there is an actual and very obvious turning point. The promotion of this turning point illustrates France's skillful and pragmatic diplomatic maneuvering.

France has managed to go beyond what de Gaulle called the "complicated Orient" – a well-known formula and until today an experts' favorite.<sup>18</sup> By identifying a common enemy and launching political maneuvers as well as military operations aimed at destroying this enemy, France follows the ambiguous path of the "neither-nor" logic: neither Assad nor IS. This is a conscious choice that rules out any full-fledged alliance with the Syrian regime.

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18- These experts quote Charles de Gaulle's *War Memoirs*: "Towards the complicated Orient, I flew with simple ideas." This formula remained, symbolizing a rational approach toward the Orient, which was seen as completely different and unfamiliar. It can also be considered as a program for France's Arab policy that is based on principles (French universal values) and geopolitical realism.

***Goals of war, goals in wars: An ambiguous distinction***

In France, the word “war” became widespread in domestic public debates after the attacks. If France is “at war” – the legal and strategic complexities of this “state of war” notwithstanding – military strategists must inquire about the difference between the “goals of the war” and the “goals in the war.” This is a matter of great importance, and it goes back to Clausewitz’s war theory and his distinction between the political goal (Zweck) and the strategic/military one (Ziel). While the former refers to the goal of a war, the latter deals with the goals in that war.

From a French perspective, what are these goals in the war against IS? Is the goal to “annihilate Daesh,” as President Hollande declared? Is it to strike Raqqa, as suggested by the French defense minister?

First, we should ask an important question regarding the goals of the war: is the aim to annihilate IS or simply to defeat the terrorist group? If the standards are set too high, the goal will appear unreachable. It is worth mentioning that IS is present not only in the Middle East but also in Libya and as far afield as Nigeria and Yemen. Annihilating IS is thus too broad a task to be successful. It is reminiscent of President Bush’s famous “war on terror”: we know all too well what happened with that mission. Once again, let us recall that terrorism is only a mode of action serving a political cause. The real enemy consists of several different groups clustered around one ideology: jihadism.

Putting things into perspective – political perspective, that is – here is the first task of a strategist, especially when he is also a decision-making authority.<sup>19</sup> Inaccuracies can be popular in the

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19- See the speech of French Defense Minister J.-Y. Le Drian, “Qui est l’ennemi?” [Who is the enemy?], December 1, 2015, available at <http://goo.gl/OoOTzx>.

media, but they add to the confusion when clear and rational thinking should be promoted. Let us not forget that the Taliban are still in power and that al-Qaeda is still present and sometimes gaining ground in Yemen, Syria, the Sahel region, and Somalia – even if its gains go unnoticed in the media.

Consequently, the complete destruction of Daesh is not achievable in the short or medium run. It should be remembered that it took Russia seventy years to get rid of communism. An organization such as IS could well disappear, but another one would replace it, take another form, and opt for a different strategy. Naming the enemy also means understanding what it stands for and grasping its political significance and its complex substructure. When defining the goals of the war, these factors should be taken into consideration to guarantee a durable success.

Defeating the enemy thus requires a military operation (to display willingness and determination) but also a political intervention (to target the causes of the crisis). These different objectives and political goals must be coordinated, as illustrated by France's actions in Syria. IS itself is not France's target, nor is IS in Syria and Iraq. Only the destruction of IS in Syria seems to be France's goal of war. As far as Iraq is concerned, Paris is leaving the Iraqi IS problem to the Americans, even though the cradle of the Islamic State is not in Syria but in Iraq, between Mosul and Fallujah.

Regarding Libya and the rest of Africa, Paris's mission is – at least for now – containment through Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region, in which more 3,000 troops are deployed. France is proceeding with caution, following the principle that “each day has enough trouble of its own.” Its short-term goal of war appears to be a reduction in IS's forces, which is an achievable goal.



France's anti-insurgent "Operation Barkhane" in Africa (Source: France 24)

As far as France's "goals in the war" are concerned, several can be identified: targeting the city of Raqqa in central Syria, but also striking oil smuggling routes so as to cut off the financing sources of this proto-state.

France's allies, meanwhile, are pursuing their own agendas in Syria, with specific goals that differ from those of France.

The Russians are helping the Syrian regime make progress on the ground by clearing a path to strategic military points, notably territories east of Aleppo and Palmyra. The Americans are mostly interested in the northern part of the country, which explains their support of the Kurdish-led offensive in Sinjar. Their goal is to cut the route between Mosul and Raqqa – or, more precisely, to hinder the flow of fighters and supplies along that route. The northern part of the Euphrates Valley remains under IS control, so the Americans are understandably eager to cut foreign supply lines, which implies closing part of the border with Turkey. This could also be a common goal with Russia, which is now trying to thwart Turkish influence in the region – the two countries are on markedly bad terms after the unnecessary downing of a Russian jet.

The question of Kurdish forces is a crucial one, too, because the Kurds are both on good terms with the West and willing to fight IS – and in this respect they are unique. Western powers refuse to put boots on the ground in Syria for many reasons. First, past operations have proven ineffective (especially Iraq and Afghanistan, even though Mali could be a counterexample to this observation). Westerners are also convinced that if they send in troops, local forces would team up against them. This is why everyone is looking for local troops on the ground, especially regular ones, that can fight a proxy war against IS.

The Russians are not facing these problems, because they are backing the Syrian regime, its official troops, and their allies (Hezbollah and other Shiite militias). Yet their goal is not to retake Raqqa but to loosen the noose around the regime in Latakia and Aleppo and help Syrian troops retake useful territories (which do not include the Euphrates Valley) in order to fight the jihadists as a whole – both IS and other groups. For Moscow, IS is no worse than

Jabhat al-Nusra.

The French and the Americans rely on the so-called “free” opposition, but this opposition has only scattered forces and is unable to fight IS in the eastern part of the country. The Kurds are thus the only forces on the ground in that area. However, they pursue their own agenda, and their goal is not to defeat IS but to retake control over Kurdish territories. From that perspective, the Arab city of Raqqa is not a priority target for them. On the other hand, pushing forward in the east so as to retake the last Kurdish pocket in the northwestern part of Syria would be a very valid goal.

It does not seem that there will be any global offensive against IS in the short run. Of course, the allies will intensify their air strikes, but these will not significantly hinder IS resistance. To inflict truly heavy blows on IS, cutting off their resources would be necessary – both their outgoing resources, such as oil and smuggled antiquities, and incoming ones, such as the influx of foreign fighters, financial support, ammunition.

Air power is not enough. This has been a known fact for more than fifteen years. The same goes for the blockade strategy, which has shown poor results in the short run. Closing the northern border is a medium-term goal, but it will not impact IS. Indeed, IS’s resistance capacity could then become a useful propaganda tool for the organization. We are thus far from achieving the initial goal of annihilating IS that was imprudently put forward by the authorities.

### Other players

If we cannot rely on either the Kurds or the moderate opposition, which forces can we count on? On November 27, French For-

eign Minister Fabius hinted at potential cooperation with “regime forces.”<sup>20</sup> His statement, made one day after the meeting between Presidents Hollande and Putin, did not go unnoticed. It represents such a major shift that we do not know whether it in fact reflects a principled decision or a mere communication mistake. If we pay attention to France’s recent declarations, it is obvious that the fate of President Assad is still a point of friction with the Russians and Iranians, who continue to maintain that Assad must remain in power until the end of the transition period, after which his fate ought to be determined by none other than “the Syrian people.” For Paris as well as for other Western powers, the transition period is synonymous with regime change and the departure from power of the Rais. Paris, however, draws a distinction between the regime as a whole, on the one hand, and President Assad with his close advisors, on the other. Yet after four years of civil war, the “regime” seems to be close-knit and solid enough to have withstood the conflict. Believing that Assad played a special role may be a mistake. After all, he is the symbol of the regime, but not its mastermind. Perhaps the prospect of a political transition will help negotiations regarding several key issues for the Syrian regime: the special status of the Alawites and the political integration of Syria’s other minorities that constitute a large majority of the Damascus upper class. This brings us back to the political solution. This issue

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20- According to Fabius, to fight IS, “two sorts of measures are required: the bombings, and there should be ground troops. The ground troops cannot be ours, because that would be counterproductive, but the ground troops could be at the same time Syrian Free Army forces, Sunni Arab forces and – why not – forces of the regime and, of course, Kurds.” As reported by AFP, Fabius then declared that “the cooperation of all Syrian forces, including the Syrian army, would only be possible in the framework of a political transition.”

is closely related to the question of the political goals of the war.

### 3.2. Which Political Goals?

#### **Political transition**

Despite all these difficulties, Paris has also shown interest in a political transition. The process is now based on the Vienna protocol – not the Geneva one – for the establishment of a political framework. The Vienna process was launched by Russia at the end of 2015, when Moscow was at the forefront of diplomatic negotiations regarding the Syrian crisis. The process was initially criticized, and France received only a last-minute invitation. However, the Vienna protocol became the frame of reference and provided a basis for negotiation.

The Vienna protocol involves all the main actors – including Iran, whose relations with Saudi Arabia have been tense. It brings together moderate forces, which is key in both political and military terms. The groups that are taking part in this negotiation process will avoid being bombarded by Russia on the ground. This explains Saudi Arabia's numerous diplomatic efforts in this matter.

In December 2015, the Saudi-led gathering of opposition forces enabled the creation of a united and representative front that could take part in the future negotiation process. Jordan's list of "nonterrorist" forces is supposed to complement this diplomatic initiative. Even if there is a consensus that IS and Jabhat al-Nusra – labeled terrorists – cannot be part of this list, disagreements have arisen over a certain number of jihadist groups.

Creating a list is thus a difficult task, as the various actors around the table – Iranians, Saudis, Americans, and Russians – all exert pressure, pulling the negotiation in different directions. The list must be comprehensive enough to represent all the different forces on the ground, but it must, at the same time, be strict

enough to have widespread credibility; any “terrorist organizations” must, therefore, be excluded.

The objective of the list is twofold: securing consensus among international players and convincing local forces to take part in a process in which they will not have the last word – especially if this process does not explicitly provide a framework for Assad’s departure from power.

In mid-December 2015, Saudi Arabia took another initiative, forming a “Muslim antiterrorism coalition” that includes Muslim countries from the Middle East, North Africa, Sahelian Africa, and Asia. Iran and Iraq are not part of the coalition, which is de facto a Sunni organization. Its goal may be to create an effective force on the ground that could lead the offensive against IS toward Raqqa and Mosul in order to establish a Sunni territory right in the middle of the “Shiite crescent,” which stretches from Tehran and Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut.

Saudi Arabia would then achieve its strategic objective, and the thorny problem of putting boots on the ground would be solved. However, the initiative entails the creation of a third coalition alongside the American- and Russian-led ones.

If realized, this third coalition would be good news for Paris and its goals of war, which are not only about defeating IS but also about supporting a peace initiative – without Assad – that would solve the Syrian conflict. However, in December, Paris remained quiet. The Russian-American duo is now leading the diplomatic activities with the Saudis – who may be liaising with Washington.

Indeed, John Kerry met with the Russian authorities in Moscow to negotiate a UN resolution, which was unanimously adopted by the Security Council on December 18, 2015. According to this resolution, Resolution 2245, the political transition based on the Ge-

neva protocol is scheduled to start as soon as January 2016.

France supports the initiative and thus no longer sets itself apart from the other players.

### ***Reshaping the region?***

However, some underlying thorny issues remain. The existing states of Syria and Iraq continue to be part of the negotiation framework. The Islamic State, straddling the border between these two states, thus challenges the concept of borders as we know them in the Middle East.

The principle of the inviolability of borders has been called into question by the Syrian crisis. This principle is upheld in Europe and Africa, and it constitutes a central pillar of modern international relations. The argument of the inviolability of borders was put forward by Western powers to oppose Russia's annexation of Crimea. The principle also explains China's presence in the South China Sea. Accepting the redrawing of borders would lead to a period of great uncertainty, not only in the Middle East but in the rest of the world as well.

France cannot disregard this issue. It has historically played a great role in drawing borders throughout the world,<sup>21</sup> and it was central to the creation of modern Syria. Two main factors explain France's role: (1) its signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 and its subsequent mandate over the newly created state, and (2) its profound influence on Syria's political equilibrium after independence. It is also worth mentioning that the secular ideology of the Baath Party was inspired by French values.<sup>22</sup> The party's lead-

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21- This role has inspired the French expression "grande traceuse de frontières"; see M. Foucher, *Fronts et frontières* [Front lines and borders] (Paris: Fayard, 1991).

22- Michel Aflak and Salah al-Bitar, the founding members of the Baath Party, both studied at the Sorbonne at the end of the 1920s.

ing theorists were educated in France and wanted to create a secular state that would overcome religious divisions.

Using the term “Syrian regime” or denouncing its numerous abuses should not obscure its French intellectual roots, which were a political inspiration to Hafez al-Assad and subsequently to his son.

Indeed, the Baathist ideology and its political legacy over several decades cannot be ignored. Of course, borders in the Middle East – and in Syria in particular – are artificial. But so are all other borders. The idea of natural borders is itself an ideological construct, promoted by France during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Any border is thus a political fiction forged by historical circumstances.

It is important to recognize that borders are part of a historical heritage. The depth and impact of this heritage can be debated. One must accept that borders are not necessarily eternal; rather, they emerged through a historical process, which means that they have a certain durability, solidity, and political identity. In contrast to the depictions of endogenous state-building theories, it appears that it is not nations that create states, but the opposite: state creates a nation through a dialectical mechanism that can shed light on many paradoxes throughout history.

From this perspective, we should be betting on the sustainability of the Syrian state regardless of its specific government. Ensuring the safety of its borders is thus a necessary political goal that should be strongly promoted. We should also reflect on the political framework of this future state.

Strangely, very few voices have raised concerns about the balance of power that would follow the Vienna peace process. An-

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23- O. Kempf, *Géopolitique de la France* [The geopolitics of France] (Paris: Technip, 2012), 38–39.

nouncing that all the major players have to discuss the situation is one thing; mapping out the actual power structure of the future Syrian state is quite another, and much more complex.

Some are in favor of establishing a Syrian federation, while others think that cantonization would be a better option. Paris needs to promote a solution that serves its own national interests first. To accomplish that goal, France must make sure that a sustainable equilibrium is preserved, not only in Syria but also in the neighboring countries, in particular in Iraq and Lebanon. Rather than promote a regime based on the Sunni majority, Paris should advocate a broader alliance among minority groups.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is a very delicate option, because it mirrors the present Alawite-led regime. This option would, however, be compatible with both France's national interest and its universal values.

## CONCLUSION

### *After IS*

France's policy on Syria has changed fundamentally over the course of 2015. Initially based on rejection of Bashar al-Assad's regime – considered the main cause of the civil war – the policy evolved as the Islamic State became the new principal enemy and target. This shift, however, had no significant impact on France's "new Arab policy," which it had pursued since the beginning of the millennium. The main axis of the policy was the creation of alliances with Gulf countries and reliance on a network of allies. The Arab uprisings caused some setbacks, but France managed to bounce back from them. However, the rise of the Islamic State, its aggressive attacks, its radi-

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24- C. Facci, "Anciens clivages et nouveaux enjeux en Syrie: Un défi pour les équilibres Sykes-Picot" [Former political divides and new stakes in Syria: A challenge for the Sykes-Picot equilibrium], RDN, January 2016.

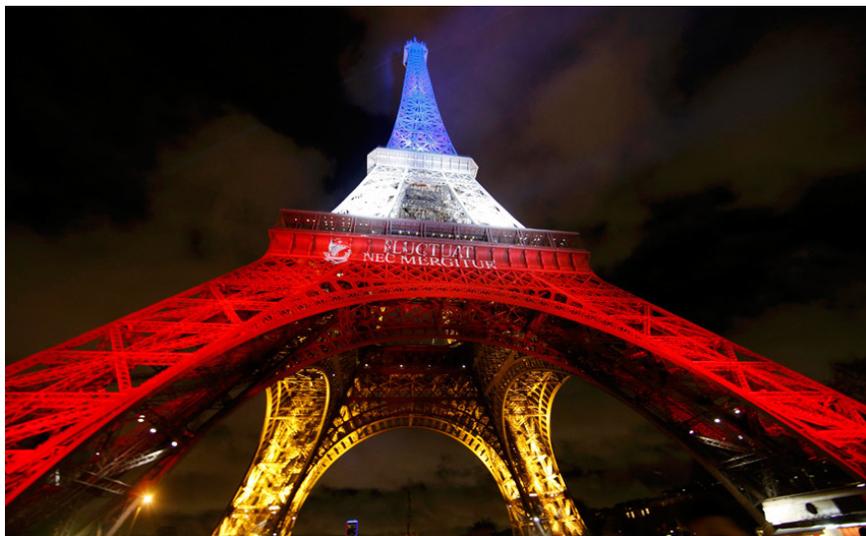
cal cruelty, and, most importantly, its military expansion on Syrian soil forced Paris to drastically amend its policy. After the Paris attacks on November 13, the moral equivalence between Assad and IS could no longer be a valid political argument and was de facto dropped. France, which had always taken the toughest stand on the Syrian crisis, had to modify its perspective. IS had become the main enemy, and even negotiation with the Syrian regime eventually seemed a possible scenario. The new goal, then, was to minimize these policy shifts so as to maintain strong military and political pressure on IS.

Defeating IS is now France's main goal. But how should we understand this desired defeat? Is France seeking to defeat IS in Syria only – assuming this is possible – or will its intervention be extended also to Iraq or maybe Libya, which has emerged as another option? These questions remain unanswered.

If the problems inherent in the goal of defeating IS were to be solved and if France – with the help of other countries – effectively managed to annihilate IS, what would be the consequences of this bloodshed? Seeing the whole Middle East miraculously transform into a Swiss-like zone of peace and stability seems improbable.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is far from being solved, and this issue will reemerge in the future. Another open question concerns the foreign fighters in Syria. How will this issue be tackled? How are refugees to be dealt with, and how is their return home after the end of the war to be organized? These problems cast a shadow over the future. For now, no concrete and specific solutions have been proposed.

Even if IS were eventually to be defeated by the various coalitions that are waging war against the organization, and even if the main powers intervening in the region – Moscow, Washington, Ankara, and Tehran – were to map out a new regional stability strategy (one that includes Israel), two key issues would remain



An illuminated Eiffel Tower in tribute to the victims of the assaults on Paris on November 13, 2015. (Source: *The Telegraph*)

on the table: borders and religion. How can territorial disputes be solved effectively in Western Asia, at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and Africa, given the region's historical legacy? Which states, for which people? In this mosaic, what is the future of the many religious communities in the region – the Shia and the Sunnis, the Arabs, the Turks, and the Persians?

Numerous geopolitical and geoeconomic factors serve as driving forces for change in the region: a determined Russia, Turkey being part of the equation, Iran entering a new post-sanction era, a very persistent Egypt, a new administration in the United States, and a slump in oil prices. All these factors have the potential to shape the future in the Levant in the medium term.

Finally, IS is a momentary problem and represents merely the tip of the jihadist iceberg. Jihadism has deeper and more complex roots that go well beyond the situation in the Middle East. European societies are also affected by religious radicalism and are vul-

nerable to the rise of Middle Eastern Salafist sectarianism.

Indeed, the attackers in Paris were French or French-speaking Belgian citizens, not fighters from Syria who belong to a jihadist rebel army. They had grown up on European soil but rejected Western values. Is the real enemy actually in the Levant, or is there a global pan-Islamist jihadist movement that has experienced rapid growth and is spreading further with the help of social media and networking platforms?

We thus face the issue of homegrown terrorism. First and foremost, this problem affects France's domestic policy before having any influence on its foreign policy. Would defeating IS abroad really help solve the terrorist problem on French soil? Could it prevent future terrorist attacks? Should we not fear the return of highly trained and now stateless jihadists seeking revenge and waging war against their former home countries after their military defeat?

There are many generations of jihadists, spanning Algerian fighters of the Islamic Salvation Front, Afghans, al-Qaeda members, and now IS adherents. Consequently, we must expect further new mutations in the future that will give rise to different jihadist organizations. In the face of this threat, France and Europe should not be caught off guard.

For all these reasons, it is now obvious that France's Syrian policy is only a partial and temporary answer to a much deeper crisis, a societal crisis that goes well beyond Syrian borders and is embedded in the heart of European societies.

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### La Vigie

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