

The French Intervention in Syria

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Ever since WWII, France insisted on maintaining a leading position in world politics, which it has been able to do with relative success. It has a key position on the United Nations Security Council, one of the strongest economies in the world, and one of the most powerful army in Europe. However, the current era is critical for France and its people. Two traumatic terrorist events in a single year in a city like Paris have shocked many around the world. Even though foreign non-state actors orchestrated these attacks, a clear understanding of France's foreign policy is essential to providing solutions to seemingly failing government policies. Indeed, the attacks of November 13th, 2015 were clearly linked to the tragic situation unfolding in Syria where France is now playing a major role. Syria, a former French colony, is today a failed state propitious to the ISIS nebula greatly threatening the economic interest in the region. This paper intends to showcase how France found itself in this situation and why the government is taking a certain approach to international relations in accordance with its colonial history. Finally, I will review the shortcomings of the current French constitution that affect the efficiency of the country's foreign policy.

Background

Beginning in 2010, a series of revolutions in the Middle East triggered a cascade of events, the ef-

fects of which would linger on for decades to come. Arab Spring was one of the most crucial moments defining the current century. It all started in Tunisia when Muhammad Bouazizi, a street vendor, died on January 4, 2011 after committing suicide by immolation a few days earlier. His tragic death sparked a nationwide revolution that effectively ended President's Ali rule merely a week later (Mckay 2011). With President Ali gone, other citizens of neighboring countries saw themselves toppling their own dictators. Millions in Egypt and Libya also took their anger to the streets to openly demand the deposition of their autocratic regimes which they ultimately obtained over the course of the year 2011. By that time, the revolution had already spread to Syria, a former French colony, where the protests took a more violent turn.

To this day, the sitting president Bashar-al Assad, is determined to retain power by driving his nation into a civil war. Out of all nation affected by the Arab Spring, Syria is also the only country where France has deeply invested itself through its military intervention. Unlike in Libya, France is not interested in helping rebel forces toppling the long time ruler (Trofimov 2015). The presence of ISIS changed its approach to the conflict as the groups poses a direct threat to its national security. Aside from security, France cannot afford to be ran by a terrorist organization that ambitions territorial expan-

sion and threatens French economic interest in the region. French military operation in Mali and Central African Republic has indicated France willingness to prevent its colonies to descend into chaos. Even though Syria has already gone into the abyss, France's intervention there follows a trend of military expedition intended to fight terrorism. The next section explores the evolution of France's relationship with Syria in recent history to better understand what motivated France to intervene.

Postcolonial Lens

Unlike the UK, France still retains a strong influence over its former African colonies, especially when it comes to defense policies and economic interests. Syria, which was formerly part of the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon (1923–1946), is no exception to this rule, given the recent events. In fact, their relations had been quite favorable since the presidency of Jacques Chirac (1995-2012), who was very close to president Hafez al-Assad, the late father of current leader Bashar al-Assad. President Chirac was the only Western leader to attend

Hafez's funeral, and one of the few to strengthen economic relations (Guler 2014). France remained close to Syria when the new Bashar administration came to power on July 7th, 2000 in a contested referendum. At one point, France was Syria's second biggest economic partner with a relationship centered heavily on weapons system contracts and gas deals (Guler 2014). However, Chirac became less supportive of Syria when rumors surfaced in 2006 of Syria's involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a dear friend of Chirac. This event deteriorated the diplomatic relations of the two countries up until the election of Nicolas Sarkozy.

Elected in 2007, Sarkozy sought to improve France's relationship with the Syrian government. At the time, he knew that Assad's regime could play an important role in addressing the Lebanese political crisis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and concerns over Iran's nuclear activities (Herscho 2008). Again, despite Bashar not being a big proponent of human rights, France had to maintain this relationship to increase its influence in the region. In realism, concessions with unusual partners are essential to securing



View from The Bund in Shanghai of the Pearl Tower lit up with the colors of the French flag in solidarity after the Paris bombings in November 2015. © Kirsiah McNamara

national interests. Sarkozy was determined to maintain a strong relationship with France's former colony of Lebanon by opposing Syrian involvement in Lebanese politics. However, when the Syrian Civil War erupted in 2011, he took a much different stance in comparison to the policies he undertook with regards Libya (Guler 2014). Sarkozy was very reluctant to intervene in Syria given that he was running for reelection in 2012, which he ultimately lost to socialist, Francois Hollande.

Sworn in as president in the midst of the Syrian Civil War in May of 2012, president Hollande has had a completely different policy regarding Syria. Within six months of taking office, he recognized "the Syrian National Coalition as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people" (Guler 2014). In August 2013, when reports of gas attacks perpetrated by the Syrian regime were confirmed, Hollande was the first to call for harsh punitive action against the Syrian government even though the UN also blamed the rebels for using chemical weapons (McElroy 2013). Ultimately, he was not able to go forward once it became clear that the U.S. and the United Kingdom would no longer bomb Assad forces. France could have potentially distanced itself

French Intervention

On 19 September 2014, France conducted its first airstrikes against ISIS positions in Iraq. This operation, named Operation Chammal, followed France's military involvement in the Sahel and Afghanistan. This latest clash was a continuation of France's determination to eradicate extreme religious groups that threatened the security of their allies and its interests (ICRC 2015). France has always proclaimed the security of its homeland as the number one factor in its fight against extremism, and in some cases rightly so. France's inability to fully integrate its population of Muslims or Africans into their own led many French nationals to turn into foreign fighters for ISIS". This situation has created a credible concern over potential homegrown terrorist activities as close to 1500 French citizens have either traveled to, or still remain inside Syria or Iraq (Belkin 2015). Given ISIS' vast amount of financial and military resources, these foreign nationals traveling to Syria and Iraq have been afforded the opportunity to receive military training amongst other things. Therefore, by combatting ISIS, France is attempting to stop the appeal the terrorist group has on many of its citizens, while attempting to address issues of

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from the conflict altogether but it felt the need to have a say in issues concerning its former colony just like it regularly does in Africa. However, taking such risky decisions can have irreversible consequences for the nation when terrorist organizations like ISIS decide to retaliate.

terrorist activities on their own soil (Archick 2015).

On November 13, 2015 and January 7, 2016, the world witnessed how a handful of French nationals turned ISIS fighters posed an undeniable threat to France's internal stability once they are able to return home. France had actually suffered from

a similar event in March 2012 when Mohamed Merah, a French citizen, murdered 7 people in the Toulouse area. He too had traveled to Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan to get military training and came back to France to complete his mission (Pontaut, Pelletier 2012). Therefore, when ISIS rose to power in 2014 the French army was quick to join the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq hoping to prevent the flow of its citizens to the region. This demonstrated the government's dedication to place itself on the forefront of the conflict given the presence of domestic terrorist cells with more than 3000 individuals showing signs of radicalization (Belkin 2015). Additionally, as a growing number of French nationals were traveling to Syria, Operation Chammal was extended to the war-torn nation with French forces hitting a command center on September 27th, 2015 just a few weeks before the Paris attacks (Hamud 2015). It is in its national interest to cease ISIS' influence and the attacks of November support this point of view.

National interest is a key aspect of realist international relations theory, which is precisely what France is pursuing when it chooses to intervene outside its borders. It could very well have adopted a policy of non-intervention and inaction like most of its European counterparts have chosen to take (Belkin 2015). Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, President Hollande and his government authorized foreign military actions. However, the current president clearly has a more offensive realist approach to foreign policy. Mr. Hollande has been adopting key features of the offensive realist theory, which is centered on power and security maximization (Mearsheimer 2001). John Mearsheimer, a pioneer of offensive theory, explains in his book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, how states must seek various opportunities to gain more power which will guarantee their survival (Mearsheimer 2001). That is precisely what the current French ad-

ministration has been doing since taking office in 2012.

As Jason Davidson points out, "realism stresses that states want others to believe they are powerful because this can serve as a means to survive and achieve other objectives" (Davidson p3 2013). Alongside its power driven motivations, France is also hoping that a friendly regime will govern the country, and more importantly, serve France's national interest. According to offensive realism theorists, potential economic gains are also crucial to the power maximization process. Internal economic prosperity increases the wellbeing of its individuals and largely provides the means for military expansion. John Mearsheimer notes that "wealthy states can afford powerful military forces, which enhance a state's prospects for survival" (p25 2001). Keeping in line with harnessing its potential economic gains, France has had economic ties with Syria up until recently and would certainly seek to reestablish that lost partnership while simultaneously looking to increase its power. Other Middle Eastern nations already have strong links with the French totaling over \$60 billion in trade deals. Approximately 42% of France's energy consumption is coming from oil and 40% of its oil imports are coming from the Middle East and North Africa region (Mikhail 2014). Therefore, it makes perfect sense that France chose to remain a player in the region in order to preserve the stability on the ground and protect its interests. A widespread destabilization of the region would have catastrophic repercussions for the French economy given that the MENA region represents close to 50% of its defense and military equipment industry revenues. This is certainly a clientele it cannot afford to lose at the expense of a stronger ISIS (Mikhail 2014). Consequently, the vast amounts of resources dedicated by the French to their operation against ISIS are a testament to France's firm commitment towards a more balanced Middle East.

In the operation in Syria and Iraq, France mobilized considerable equipment and personnel as the French Ministry of defense points out on one of its statements:

Launched September 19, 2014, the Chammal operation is mobilizing 3500 soldiers. Alongside the coalition, it combats the terrorist group Daech in Iraq and Syria. The Chammal strength ensures the training of Iraqi forces fighting in Iraq Daech; it strikes the terrorist organization with its air power in Iraq and Syria. The force is composed of twelve fighters of the Air Force (six Rafale, Mirage 2000D three and three Mirage 2000N), a maritime patrol aircraft Atlantique 2 and since November 23, 2015, the Battle Group (GAN) - PA Charles de Gaulle, FDA Chevalier Paul, MDTF La Motte Piquet PR Marne, Belgian frigate Leopold I - whose carrier air group consists of 18 Rafale, Super 8 standard modernized 2 Hawk-eye, and helicopters. On 26 November 2015, the furtive light frigate (FLF) Courbet joined the Chammal device in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Despite the fact that France is going through serious economic difficulties, it has dedicated the resources necessary to conduct a respectable military operation. Certainly, it is in no way close to what the U.S. is allocating to its own campaign with close to \$3 billion spent since the beginning of the campaign compared to \$240 million by France (PC, Jones 2015). It is nevertheless very high for an EU member (Weinstein 2015). Moreover, states with realist ambitions, like France, will take all the essential measures to reach their goals on the world stage. In its effort to eradicate ISIS, France is attempting to preserve the harmony of its society. Again, France has the largest population of Muslims in Europe, who are at the same time vulnerable to terror incitement. The French government would obviously have to implement efficient policies to fully integrate the Muslim community into its society (Belkin). In the meantime, it also has to stop the flow of its citizens going into Syria and suppress any radical cells

present on its soil. Although, only a few thousands have had some sort of a connection to ISIS or other radical groups, it is imperative to build France's counterterrorism efforts. If France were to witness frequent terrorist attacks, it could potentially create a situation of chaos where the Muslim population would be marginalized, which could lead to an increase in the recruitment of radical individuals. The survival of France, including the EU, is at stake if the government does not act to stop the expansion of radical Islam groups within its territory.

Finally, the fact that ISIS is not a state raises some concerns regarding the efficiency of French foreign policy when dealing with a non-state actor. International relations theorists do not include these nontraditional actors because they simply cannot present the characteristics of recognized states under international law. A new paradigm is certainly needed to address the emergence of non-state actors. At the same time, it would be wrong to assume that France is a pure realist because it does value international cooperation to achieve its goal given that it would be counterproductive to pursue expansionist behavior in the age of globalization. There are no clues pointing out to overt hegemonic ambitions in French foreign policies. On the contrary, some of France's actions exude liberalist tendencies like Francois Hollande's diplomatic tour aimed at finding a solution to the ISIS problem.

Reform of the French Republic

Ever since the establishment of the Fifth French Republic, the President has been granted full authority in the field of national security and foreign policy. Charles De Gaulle, the main architect of the current Republic, purposely crafted the Constitution in a way that expanded presidential powers. Born out of the collapse of the Fourth republic, which could not manage the Algerian crisis of 1958, De

Gaule blamed the weak position of the President as the main factor of internal turmoil (Kerrouche 2007). However, in the current Syrian context, several voices raised concerns over the efficacy of the President's actions. Under Article 15 of the current constitution, the president can take military action without consulting the legislative body, l'Assemblée Nationale and senate: "The President of the Republic shall be Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. He shall preside over the higher national defence councils and committee". However, the government still has to notify the Parliament (Assemblée Nationale and Senate) 3 days after the intervention, as stipulated in Article 35 of the constitution:

A Declaration of War Shall be Authorized by Parliament.

The Government shall inform Parliament of its decision to have the armed forces intervene abroad, at the latest three days after the beginning of said intervention. It shall detail the objectives of the said intervention. This information may give rise to a debate, which shall not be followed by a vote.

Where the said intervention shall exceed four months, the Government shall submit the extension to Parliament for authorization. It may ask the National Assembly to make the final decision.

If Parliament is not sitting at the end of the four-month period, it shall express its decision at the opening of the following session.

Still, the fact that the president does not need legislative permission to engage the nation outside its borders is quite alarming. De Gaulle succeeded in having a strong president, but many are concerned that the leader might be too powerful especially given the ambiguity surrounding the Con-

stitution. In Article 5 of the Constitution, the President is indeed given the role of an arbitrator: "The President of the Republic shall ensure due respect for the Constitution. He shall ensure, by his arbitration, the proper functioning of the public authorities and the continuity of the State." Does that mean that he is above the judicial system or even the political process altogether? (Elgie 1976). Francois Hollande has certainly been criticized for his adventures in Iraq and now Syria. ISIS made it clear that France is a primary target given its undisguised interventionism (Muro 2015). Could the attacks of January and November have been avoided had the president consulted with the members of the parliament at the onset of the crisis? Discussions regarding a potential constitutional reform that will strengthen the other political bodies is without a doubt a legitimate debate. Ultimately, the Constitutional Council needs to reform the Constitution in a manner that would prevent future presidents from taking any hazardous military actions. The president should be required to consult the French parliament prior to ordering any military intervention. Yet, a constitutional reform is not sufficient to prevent the president from taking uncertain actions, especially when his political party takes control of the parliament. In that case, the president is more likely to get the majority of votes required to pass a motion authorizing military force. The French government must also consider augmenting its dialogue with experienced scholars able to provide a critical input to France's foreign policy.

Conclusion

While the French people take pride in their history, the administrations that have led the nation certainly incorporate this notion of self-satisfaction into their foreign policies. However, this could be viewed as risky behavior as the events in January

and last November of 2015 have shown. France increased its exposure to stay at the forefront of world politics and to remain a powerful nation despite having limited resources. That is why we recognized a continuity among successive governments when it comes to policy making in their former colonies. France is also applying some of its policies to other nations to accentuate its power in other regions, especially in the Middle East. Today, ISIS has become a threat to its influence in the region that could potentially cause internal stability, harm its economic interest, and its own citizens. The President of France has declared war on a terrorist group that is not a state vowing to destroy it. France's fight against ISIS in Syria is not the first military actions Hollande has taken, which can be seen as irresponsible behavior given the various internal difficulties of France. Since, the current Constitution allows the President to take such actions, further discussions must occur to address the unchecked power of the President. In the meantime, France will continue to pursue its ambitions on the international arena and advance its interests to maintain its leading role as a strong European nation.