French Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case of Syria

by Selin Güler

The Syria crisis was initially escalated by the chemical attacks on the suburbs of Damascus to the civilians on 21st August 2013, and consequently turned into an international crisis with the claims that the chemical attacks were made by the Assad regime. With the escalation of the crisis, the process of seeking solution to the crisis became a show of strength among the countries who wants to have a say on the problems in the Middle East.

Mostly related with its historical links, France showed its enthusiasm to regain power in the Middle East and North Africa and be an influential actor within these regions in the aftermath of the Cold War. The failure of the Barcelona Process which was led by France and the slowness of the international community to respond to the crisis appeared in frame of the Arab spring provoked a change of method by France which started to seek more interventionist and US led foreign policy instead of acting with the international community or finding the solution in frame of a platform such as the Union for the Mediterranean.

Following the Arab Spring, the escalated Syria crisis after the chemical attacks remained a second challenge or even an opportunity for a France who seeks to play an influential role in the region. Consequently, François Hollande desired to seize the opportunity by deciding to join the coalition formed by United States of America (US) and United Kingdom (UK) to intervene with Syria in name of maintaining security in the region. However, following the Kerry-Lavrov agreement, the intervention decision was shelved and a more political solution was sought for the Syria crisis. Yet, France as a Middle Power found itself bounded by the decisions made by the Great Powers in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the failure of the Geneva II conference proves the necessity of review of France’s foreign policy toward the Middle East.

This paperwork is aiming to discuss France’s Middle East Policy mostly toward Syria, particularly following the Syria crisis. To be able to discuss the subject, the first section includes a brief background on the French foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa. The second part focuses...
on the French foreign policy towards Syria until Hollande’s presidency. Finally, the last part examines Hollande’s foreign policy initiatives in order to conclude the Syria crisis.

**French Foreign Policy towards Middle East and North Africa**

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Middle East and North Africa had a particularly important role for France regarding bilateral interests and common security. The stability of the region is an essential aspect of things such as security vacuums in certain zones, which could threaten the whole Mediterranean and the southern European countries. Following the decolonization process in the Middle East, Charles de Gaulle brought up a new policy toward the region which called “politique arabe”. This new approach sought an exceptional role for France by building close ties with the significant Middle Eastern countries independently from US and Soviet Union within the context of the Cold War.1 However, at this period, France did not have any leadership claim in the region but only tried to build good relations. When the Cold War ended, France had to review its “politique arabe” in respect of the changing dynamics of the region. By refusing US leadership, France has the intention of being a leading power in the Middle East and North Africa with the consideration of some countries in the region as its natural sphere of influence by virtue of its historical presence. Jacques Chirac’s refusal for the participation to the US led military coalition in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in 2003 was the most important evidence of France’s independent Middle East policy. Despite Nicolas Sarkozy’s re-recognition of the US leadership on the Middle Eastern issues following Chirac’s independent “politique arabe”, France has an active foreign policy strategy and a leadership perspective through these countries in the post Cold War era.

France’s first project to regain its leadership status in the region was the initialization of the Barcelona Process. Based on the claim of the leadership of France in the Middle East and North Africa, and to balance Germany’s Eastern oriented policy with an active Mediterranean policy, in the early 1990s, France led an increase on the multilateral relations between the Mediterranean countries and the EU member states.2 The Barcelona Process started in November 1995, was renamed as the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 by the individual efforts of the Sarkozy in attempt to accelerate the process which had been deadlocked.3 Within the Union for the Mediterranean, there are 28 EU member states, the European Commission and 15 Mediterranean countries including Syria and Turkey. However, regarding Germany’s reluctance on a European southern neighborhood policy within the leadership of France and changes in the regimes in many countries in form of the Arab spring, the Union for the Mediterranean remained a dead platform.

Another attempt of France being an effective power in the region was the signature of the defense cooperation agreement between the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus and France in 2007. In frame of the agreement, France gained the right of the utilization of the Andreas Papandreu military base close to the Paphos in service of its military aircraft.4 Even before the signature of the agreement, France used the military base in order to provide logistical support during the 2006 Lebanon War. With this move, France gained a devoted ally at the heart of the East Mediterranean in a relatively secure area despite the reactions mostly coming from Turkey.

Moreover, France accelerated its efforts to deal with the Middle Eastern problems with the installation of the first French permanent military base in the Middle East, in Abu Dhabi on May 2009 not too long after rejoining the military command of NATO.5 France who has had a numerous military bases in the African continent, showed its enthusiasm to see the Middle East as its sphere of influence with the installation of this military base. However the first challenge of France within the region remained the Arab Spring following the installation of the military base.

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5 http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/world/europe/27france.html?_r=0
When the Arab Spring escalated, France found another way to regain its regional leadership status other than solely from the Union for the Mediterranean, and showed its enthusiasm by leading the NATO military intervention in Libya. In reflection of the realpolitik that France engaged in during and before the Arab spring, however, France was accused of acting hypocritically regarding its former foreign policy towards the region by collaborating with the authoritarian and corrupted regimes that now are being intervened. Apart from the Libyan intervention, in consideration of its former relations with the corrupted leaders in the region, the French approach towards the other countries remained limited with the cautionary discourses through regimes which had lost their legitimacy.

The French reaction from the beginning of the insurrection in Tunisia and Egypt was bounded with the “wait and see” approach despite the growing opposition toward the regimes. Libyan intervention was a show of strength of France who was criticized for acting passive against the former insurrections. With the success of the Libyan intervention, France found itself in an advantageous position to involve the Syrian situation among the privileged game makers.

**French Foreign Policy on the Syria: from Mandate to Arab Spring**

Syria has had a particular importance on the French foreign policy most notably from the historical links between the two countries.

The first confrontation between France and Syria was during the French mandate on Syria which was established following the share of the Ottoman territory by France and Britain as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement conforming to the League of Nations mandate system between 1923-1943. The Great Syria was divided into six states according to the sectarian divisions during the mandate regime. However, the Syrians were quite reluctant of the French mandate and the relations between two countries remained turbulent from the very beginning of the French mandate in 1923 until the departure of the French troops from the territory in 1946.

Following the French mandate, the relations between two countries remained tense related with the problems which affected the Middle East as a whole in the context of the Cold War and especially related with the Ba’ath Party that came into power in Syria. It was interesting that the ideologues of the Ba’ath Party which was the ruling party since 1963 in Syria as Michel Aflak, Zaki Al-Arzouzi, Salah Eddine Bitar completed their higher education in Sorbonne, France where they became interested in nationalism. However, despite the French inspiration, paradoxically, the Ba’athism, an Arab nationalist ideology, was developed to fight against the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon. Together with the came in to the power of Hafez Al Assad in 1970 and the radicalization of the Ba’ath regime, the French-Syrian relations got worse up to Chirac’s presidency.

Related with the review of the French *politique arabe* at the end of the Cold War, Jacques Chirac expended energy to fix the bilateral relations with Syria when he came in to power in 1995 and the relations between the two countries began to be more favorable. The relation between Chirac and Hafez Al-Assad were quite close, to the point that Chirac was the only occidental head of state that joined the funerals of Hafez Al-Assad in 2000. The countries’ relationship continued in its positive state when Bashar Al-Assad came in to power, with France protecting its privileged position for Syria. Bashar Al- Assad organized his first diplomatic visit to Paris apart from the Middle East on July 2001. Moreover, they developed important economic ties in 2002, and France was qualified as the second biggest commercial partner of Syria and the French government was selling weapon systems to Syria.

The breaking point of the French-Syrian relations was the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the former prime minister of Lebanon, in 2005, due to a suspicion of the support of the Syrian government to the assassins. France supported to set up an international court to investigate the responsible of the

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assassination and froze the diplomatic relations with Syria. Furthermore, during the 2006 Lebanon war, the French approach towards Syria became more negative and Chirac started to accuse the Syrian regime of supporting the violence by providing weapons for the Shiite organizations.10

When Nicolas Sarkozy was elected in 2007, he made an effort to solve the Lebanese problem and tried to search new bases to reconnect with Syria.11 It was not surprising that Sarkozy wanted to keep relations close when he became the president as during his ministry of internal affairs under the Chirac’s presidency, he had always kept in touch with the Syrian services despite the freeze of the relations. Sarkozy also focused on the economic relations between two countries by completing some commercial contracts between French multinationals and Syria.12

By virtue of much closer relations between France-Syria and Sarkozy’s pro-American foreign policy preference, France did not act independently on the Syrian issue at the beginning and limited itself with US point of view on the issue. Even Alain Juppé, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the period, declared that France shares the same vision with US concerning the solutions for the Syria crisis.13

In parallel with US point of view, when the uprisings started in Syria on March 2011, Sarkozy did not show the same enthusiasm to intervene as he did in Libya following the Arab spring and his discourses were bounded solely by alerting Bashar Al-Assad about his loss of legitimacy, despite the fact that Syria had been dragged into a civil war.14

Rupture or Permanence with François Hollande’s Presidency

François Hollande’s presidency, started in 2012, changed the French approach towards the insurrection in Syria and slowly became more punitive against the unlawful measures of the Syrian regime, due to the fact that France started to recognize the Syrian National Coalition15 as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people on November 2012.16 The tension between the two countries escalated with the closing of the French Embassy in Syria and the proclamation of the Syrian diplomats as persona non grata. Up to the chemical attacks on the suburbs of Damascus on 21 August 2013, however, France had no intention to intervene to Syria. As the chemical attacks were the turning point for France, the intervention idea arose in parallel with the international community.

After the chemical attacks, the international community in favor with the intervention decision was divided into two groups. Nonetheless, one considered that it should be proven that the Assad regime was responsible from the attacks following the UN report while France, United Kingdom and USA decided to build a coalition in order to intervene towards Syria against the forces of Bashar Al-Assad before the UN report on the issue.

Hollande declared France’s willingness to participate in such a military intervention together with US and UK towards Syria during his address before the French Ambassadors in Paris on 27 August 2013.17 Despite the rejection of the military intervention possibility before the UN report on the

10 Haddad, op.cit., 175.
11 Ibid., 175-176.
12 Ibid., p.177.
14 Mikail, op.cit., 6-7.
15 A coalition of opposition groups in the Syrian civil war.
issue by the Parliament of the UK, Hollande insisted on intervention instead of waiting for the UN report and without asking any permission from the French parliament, in line with the French constitution which allows him not to ask for.

While the discussion of whether the attacks were made by the Syrian government or the opposition forces was still ongoing, the French government published a document called the Synthesis of Declassified National Intelligence on the Syrian Chemical Program in order to convince the public of the obligation of the military intervention by putting forward the evidence proving that the attacks were led by the Assad regime on 2 September 2013.18

While Hollande was making effort to persuade the French public, a survey that was conducted by Institut français d’opinion publique (Ifop) in September 2013 proved that 64% of the French people were against the possible French military intervention when 36% of them were in favor.19 Yet, the lack of French public’s support did not change Hollande’s intervention decision. According to Hollande, despite the lack of the support of the French public and the critics of the opponents as the necessity to find a more diplomatic solution in line with the UN’s decision, the intervention should have materialized. Otherwise, he insisted that the weapons would start to threaten neighboring countries and destabilize the Middle East which was already turbulent. Hollande considered the intervention decision as a part of the values and principles which the international community were delayed in taking necessary measures to protect. Hollande tried to legitimate his decision with the words that although the public opinion was generally negative towards the intervention, French people would understand the importance of the military intervention decision in the same way that they eventually understood the intervention into Mali was necessary even though the public opinion was not really favorable before.20 However the reasons laid behind the intervention decision were different than Hollande’s discourse. According to Didier Billion, the deputy director of Institut des relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS), there were three main reasons that had an impact on Hollande’s intervention decision. The first one was the incorrect assessment on the power level of the Assad regime. Related with this incorrect assessment, France tended to underrate the Assad regime while evaluating that the intervention would evoke the collapse of the Assad regime easily. The second reason was the moral standing of the diplomats that encircled Hollande. These diplomats who pursued a moral approach toward the international crises had an influence on Hollande’s intervention decision. The last reason was the ongoing debate between the Gaullists and the Atlanticists regarding the French foreign policy decisions. The Atlanticists who defend a French foreign policy close to the US axis rather than seeking an independent foreign policy were more influential on the Syrian file.21 Then, when the US was searching for allies to intervene, France that wanted to have a say on the Middle Eastern issues did not hesitate to participate the intervention coalition.

With the intervention decision to Syria, on the basis of French military operation to Mali, there were discussions that Hollande was developing his own doctrine in order to tackle with the international crises which take part within the limits of French sphere of influence. “Hollande Doctrine” which was mentioned for the first time during the French military operation to Mali on January 2013 foresees the security assistance and humanitarian aid to the people who lived under an illegitimate regime in frame of the international community support and to encourage the opposition forces who shares the western values.22 However when we consider Hollande’s lack of foreign policy experience before his presidency, it can be said that Hollande is far from developing a doctrine on the French foreign policy affairs. According to Didier Billion, Hollande conducts the foreign policy as he conducts the domestic policy. He has a pragmatic approach but he does not have a global vision. Related with his lack of experience on the foreign policy, Hollande is under the influence of his advisors. Hollande tackles only

19 http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/2329-1-study_file.pdf
21 Interview with Didier Billion, 04 March 2014.
22 http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/05/france-central-african-republic-hollande-doctrine
with the popular policy issues while making plans only for short term without considering middle term or long term consequences. Based on these inferences, it can be said that the operation decision to Syria could be evaluated as an effort of Hollande to regain the popular support that he lost in France if the operation would be successful while being an effective actor in the French political scene with his active and successful foreign policy decisions.

However, following the Kerry-Lavrov agreement the intervention possibility was suspended. As a middle power, the capacity of France to pursue an effective foreign policy in the Middle-East was questioned. Despite French intention, it was proven by the Kerry-Lavrov agreement on the chemical weapons possessed by Syrian regime that Russia and USA would not leave the playground in the Middle-East to France. France who lost the chance to be a decisive power on the Syrian issue altered its approach and started to insist on handling the issue on an international platform, and that USA and Russia would not be the only decision makers. With this declaration, Hollande started to play the international community card instead of acting alone. Yet, the pro-American French foreign policy shaping was still influential on the issue.

As the military intervention possibility was shelved, the organization of a conference that bunched together both parties remained vital for the resolution of the Syria crisis. A political solution instead of a military intervention was sought. The decision on the organization of the Geneva II with the participation of both the Assad regime and the Syrian National Coalition with a red line as the formation of a transition government for Syria at the end of the conference opened a new chapter for the Syrian situation. However, also before the conference, the incorrect assessment of the French foreign policy makers was still ongoing regarding the resolution of the Syria crisis:

Firstly, even the French public found the success of the Geneva II unconvincing before the organization of the conference. According to the French public, the organization of Geneva II remained a futile initiative related with the decomposition of the opposition. Before the organization of Geneva II, there were many public discussions about the chance of success of the conference. Yet, most of the French people considered that the opposition movement remained rather fragmented to constitute a robust alternative to govern Syria in the aftermath of the crisis.

Secondly, it can be seen that France was evaluated hypocrite regarding its support to the secular opposition facts. As officially never delivered weapons to the jihadist opposition groups but supported the secular ones, France did not calculate the entwined structure of the opposition groups. However the reality was different and there was a mobility between the groups. Yet, the delivered weapons were also used by the jihadists. This aspect might damage the credibility of France.

Finally, France opposed to the participation of Iran to the Geneva II together with UK and US and took explicitly the side of the opposition. Moreover, France put pressure to UN that invited Iran to the conference. Eventually, mostly related with the rejection to attend the conference of the Syrian National Coalition in case of Iran’s participation, UN withdrew its invitation to Iran. As Iran remained an influential actor on the resolution of the Syria crisis, the explicit opposition of France undermined the success of the Geneva II and the sincerity of France concerning the settlement of the Syria crisis was questioned.

The negotiations ended up with a failure in Geneva II related with several reasons but particularly with the uncompromising manner of both sides from the beginning. The participating countries were far from mediating but taking their sides explicitly from the beginning of the conference. This disintegration damaged the process and led the re-legitimation of the Assad regime.

An Overview

France that sided with the opposition movement from the very early periods of the Syria crisis faced with the failure of its “politique arabe” policy especially in Syria. France’s initiatives oriented to the Middle East together with the arisen idea that the region was under its sphere of influence expired with the Kerry-Lavrov agreement and with the failure of Geneva II. The Great powers, USA and Russia, did not give the floor to France. Moreover, the incorrect assessment of
the crisis and the mentality of “save the date” contributed to the failure.

Considering this failure, France might review its “politique arabe” by respecting the proposals that are stated below:

1. France could engage to the political solutions instead of seeking an interventionist foreign policy toward the Middle East. Having a more constructive approach in lieu of taking an absolute side could contribute the peace process in Syria. In the aftermath of Geneva II, France could mobilize its energy to arrange the new cycle of negotiations.

2. France could analyze deeply the international crises before taking the action while looking for a more long term solutions. Having the long term solutions would increase the credibility of France in the region. For instance Sarkozy’s realpolitik actions as collaborating with the corrupted regimes and Hollande’s moralpolitik discourses during the military intervention possibility broke the persistence of French foreign policy. This situation damaged the credibility of the country while leading the questioning of France’s good will.

3. France could seek a more independent foreign policy toward region in return for the US led foreign policy decisions by respecting the international law and intergovernmental organizations as UN. Because taking the military intervention decision before observing the evidences that would soon presented by UN also damaged the reliability of the country.

4. When the conditions permit in the future, France could try to revive the Union for the Mediterranean which remained the sole political platform between the head of states of the Mediterranean countries in order to contribute the political solutions. However, France should not cooperate again with the corrupted leaders but only the legitimate and democratic ones in order not to accuse of being hypocrite in the future.

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Following graduating from Lycée Saint Joseph, Ms. Güler obtained her bachelor’s degree from Galatasaray University within the department of International Relations. In 2010, Ms. Güler studied at Université Catholique de Louvain in the framework of a student exchange program. Ms. Güler obtained her M.A. degree in European Political and Administrative Studies from College of Europe(Bruges). Since September 2013, Ms. Güler has been working as a research assistant at the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM).

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