



BULLETIN

No. 101 (554), 26 September 2013 © PISM

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France and the Syrian War Dilemma

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France has found it increasingly difficult to maintain its initial position on Syria. The political class is deeply divided over the question of France's involvement, and the means that should be used to bring the conflict to an end. French public opinion is hostile to the use of force. The Gulf countries, which support selected Islamist elements in the Syrian opposition, may try to influence the French stance on Syria to the detriment of European interests and attempts at an armistice. Despite internal rifts among Member States, this time and with French help the EU could foster a common European policy on the Syrian civil war.

France's Position on the War in Syria. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, France has tried to lead the European countries supporting democratic changes in Arab societies. This stance was partly driven by the need to repair France's image as a country that used to be the main European partner of authoritarian Arab regimes (for example, the corrupt president of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali) or their promoter (Bashar al-Assad was Nicolas Sarkozy's guest of honour at France's National Day in 2008). France could not let its political and economic clout wane in its former colonies and protectorates where there were to be new socially acceptable leaders. However, in the case of the prolonged conflict in Syria, this policy has proven problematic.

The fact that the Syrian conflict started during the Libyan military campaign partially explains the decision by the French authorities to adopt a similar approach towards Syria, aiming at regime change. Sarkozy was the initiator of the "Friends of Syria," a group of states supporting the Syrian opposition. Its goal was to provide the Syrian opposition with political and military aid in its fight with the Assad regime. France also became involved in the creation of a new institutional body, the Syrian National Council, to represent the opposition in the international arena. It was immediately recognised as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The French support was complimented by EU sanctions on the regime.

The victory of François Hollande in the May 2012 presidential elections did not bring about any change in the French policy towards Syria. Another meeting of the "Friends of Syria" group took place in July 2012 in Paris. France actively participated in the creation of a new representative body, the Syrian National Coalition in Qatar, and instantly recognised it as the sole representative of the Syrian people (as the Syrian National Council had lost significance). French diplomats, with their British counterparts, were also the main backers of military support to the rebels, blocking a decision in June 2013 on the renewal of the EU's ban on arms sales to Syria.

In light of the increasing radicalisation of the sides in the Syrian conflict and its transformation into a war amongst religious sects, France's policy has gradually become controversial. French media and experts have pointed to its seeming failure, given that the investment of much political capital in support of the Syrian opposition has not prompted the fall of the Assad regime. The leading French dailies have accused French diplomats of being unrealistic and facilitating the marginalization of the country in the international effort to end the conflict, especially after the Russian-American meeting in June 2012 in Geneva and the announcement of further talks about the "Geneva II" conference, in which France did not take part. The Syrian regime proved stronger than was initially assumed in Paris. Despite the long and costly diplomatic efforts of the "Friends of Syria," the Syrian opposition was unable to overcome internal feuds and the Syrian National Coalition became a political football between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These divisions did not allow for the effective isolation of the Syrian regime or for arms deliveries to the rebels. The radicalization of the rebel fighters as well as the growing ratio of extremist fighters in its ranks made any plans to

provide munitions to the opposition unpopular. The metamorphosis of the combat against the Assad regime into a form of jihad even motivated some French Muslims to join the rebellion in Syria (about 200 volunteers). Furthermore, following the use of chemical weapons in Syria on 21 August, President Hollande's declaration that France was ready to strike Syria along with the U.S. sparked another internal debate about the policy towards Syria. Eventually, this declaration proved premature as the international escalation of the crisis was averted by the U.S.–Russian agreement of 14 September.

Can France Change Its Mind? Hollande has found it increasingly hard to keep the initial bold line on Syria. The political class is deeply divided over the means that should be used to bring the conflict to an end. The Socialist Party, which holds the majority in the French Parliament, mostly supports the current policy of the government. The opposition, from the far left to the far right, is inclined to reject French military intervention in Syria. Traditionally vehement opponents (i.e., Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen) speak in unison on this matter. The majority of the French public also refuses to support any military intervention (64–68% according to *Le Figaro* and *Le Parisien*). The policy towards Syria has become so controversial that Hollande gave a primetime interview on the subject to the country's main TV channel on 15 September in order to brake his falling support. According to a subsequent poll, more than 80% of French were not persuaded by his arguments. However, French opinion has not always been anti-interventionist—the “Serval” operation in Mali in February 2013 was supported by 73% of poll respondents. In the case of the U.S.–French intervention in Syria, the public's hostility to the action dates back to 2003 and the U.S.–British intervention in Iraq. Then-President Jacques Chirac had threatened to use France's veto power at the UN Security Council, arguing that evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq presented by the Americans was insufficient. After several years, the French stance proved correct and the military intervention without UN approval was misguided.

Military intervention in Syria without UN backing is called for by Gulf countries Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which occasionally arm the Islamist factions that fight each other. This only causes political divisions among the opposition. The growing economic influence of the Gulf countries, especially Qatar, in France, and during the economic crisis in Europe, could create dubious dependencies in the foreign policy of France, which has already attracted 10% of Qatari foreign investment. The most important of these are companies listed on the CAC 40—EADS, Lagardère, Vinci, Veolia, and Total—as well as hotels, shopping centres and a football club. While Qatar's investments are higher only in the UK, the two countries are the recipients of roughly a quarter of Qatar's foreign investments. The situation in the Levant, including Syria, is of greater importance to the Gulf countries than it is to the European states. The Gulf countries, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have a direct influence on the people who have created and lead the Syrian National Coalition, which will probably participate in future power sharing in Syria. Therefore, these countries may be willing to seek political advantages in their attempts to shape French and European Middle Eastern policy, although the existence of these influences cannot be clearly proven.

Recommendations. Together with the UK, France's policy towards the Syrian civil war is the most outspoken in Europe, rightly emphasising its meaning for the security of the EU neighbourhood and the Middle East. However, France has so far donated less than half of its fair share of humanitarian aid in Syria, which is the most needed type of help (according to a 2013 Oxfam report). For the sake of Europe's credibility, the EU should make sure that the Member States have donated their fair shares of humanitarian aid to UN agencies.

The leadership of France (and the UK) on the Syrian crisis is in the common interest of the EU. France and the UK are permanent members of the UN Security Council and have a direct influence on the decisions taken by the organisation. However, in order for Europe to have a real impact on the easing of the Syrian war, France needs to develop cooperation between Member States by reorienting its stance to one focused predominantly on the search for a political settlement and devising a joint diplomatic initiative for the “Geneva II” summit, including a proposal for an international mechanism to oversee a future armistice. Unlike other regional conflicts (the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or the intervention in Libya), the Syrian issue, by its growing complexity and danger of destabilising the EU neighbourhood, does not allow individual European countries to pursue their own national political or economic interests. Thus, this time a common EU stance is needed, but only with French participation.

Eventually, the escalation of the conflict to the international level following the use of chemical weapons in Syria, as well as the real possibility of an American strike, have shed new light on the need to reform the UN. France, as a permanent member of the Security Council, together with other EU countries that do not enjoy this prerogative (i.e., Poland), should present a common proposal for urgent institutional reform of the UN (i.e., the Security Council could be enlarged to represent the G20). Given that the French authorities have formally supported the UN reform idea, and the role they played in refusing to bypass the UN in 2003, as well as the Polish proposal for UN reform in 2004, a joint initiative would have strong credibility.