

IN PURSUIT OF A GRAND STRATEGY

France's diplomatic sojourns into the Middle East over the past quarter century have only yielded moderate success. Can the government of Emmanuel Macron reverse this slow downward spiral?

By Frédéric Charillon

As a former colonial power, an important member state of the European Union, and a Mediterranean country itself, France rightly considers the Middle East a case study for its foreign policy and global influence. Yet, its recent diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa have usually shown a fading of France's political clout in the region. The last two presidential mandates of Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–12) and François Hollande (2012–17) have been marked by several political and diplomatic setbacks. Soon after his election in 2017, Emmanuel Macron tried to take lessons from the past disappointments of his predecessors, mostly by taking new small-scale initiatives in Lebanon and Libya and planning a more ambitious regional stance. Yet, as the French republic is not in a position to impose region-wide transformational policies alone, France needs partners to propose a new agenda.

Diplomatic Setbacks

France has had only a moderately successful diplomatic history in the Mediterranean over the past half-century. The end of the colonial war in Algeria (1962) paved the way for a new “Arab policy,” whose heyday occurred after the Six-Day War (1967), when Charles de Gaulle supported the Arabs after Israel's attack. French support of Arab leaders in the 1973 October War while not a defeat was at best only a stalemate. The succeeding 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a more mercantile approach, as France developed new partnerships in arms sales—including with Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Saddam Hussein's Iraq—while obtaining privileged conditions after the two oil shocks of 1973 and 1979. François Mitterrand's

▷ French President Emmanuel Macron poses for selfies with Abu Dhabi students, United Arab Emirates, Nov. 9, 2017. Ludovic Marin/Pool/Reuters

presidency (1981–95) maintained broadly the same political line, in spite of better personal and political ties with Israel (especially due to Mitterrand's belonging to the Socialist International, along with the Israeli Labor Party).



Elected in 1995, Jacques Chirac tried to revive De Gaulle's legacy and called for a new Arab policy in a speech at Cairo University in April 1996. His closeness with several Arab rulers was widely known (namely with King Hassan II of Morocco, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Palestine's Yasser Arafat and especially Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, a personal friend). Still, the results of Chirac's Mediterranean policy were mixed. Chirac as an individual was popular in the Arab World, especially after 1996 footage surfaced on Arab television screens of Chirac's famous fight with Israeli security in the Old City of Jerusalem. However, Chirac's concrete diplomatic achievements were few and far between. In 1996, Paris participated (with the United States) in imposing a ceasefire in Lebanon after the Israeli bombing of the city of Cana (Lebanon), but the stability that followed proved temporary.

Years later Chirac led a coalition to oppose the neoconservative George W. Bush administration's war in Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Yet in leading this opposition, France managed only to voice its disapproval without being able to block the American invasion. Meanwhile, Chirac's good relationship with Arafat could not save the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Also, his personal friendship with Hariri could not stop Lebanon being bombed in 2006 during the Israel-Hezbollah War. Finally, Chirac's goal to create a new friendship treaty with Algeria (based on the model of the French-German relationship) remained unsuccessful.

Chirac's successors met with the same difficulties attempting to turn goodwill into political breakthroughs. Just like the 1995 Barcelona process (largely a French initiative) was ruined by dramatic regional events, Sarkozy's 2008 project of a union for the Mediterranean collapsed after Israel's war on Gaza in 2008-2009 and the Arab uprisings of 2011. As such, France's initiatives post-Chirac in 2007 were brave but unsurprisingly met many obstacles.

The Arab Spring deprived France of long-term allies such as Ben Ali and Mubarak and caught Paris off guard. France's attempt to take the initiative during the Arab uprisings led to its strike against Gaddafi in 2011, which was at first considered a success because of the operational military know-how and the last-minute rescue of Benghazi. However, the resulting regime change and Gaddafi's demise created a collapsed state, infuriated many emerging powers, and spread weapons and fighters throughout the Sahel. The operation is now considered a strategic mistake by Macron and by Barack Obama.

The Arab Spring deprived France of long-term allies such as Ben Ali and Mubarak and caught Paris off guard.

The biggest French trauma in recent times, though, remains the Syrian civil war. After the outbreak of the war in 2011, Paris quickly adopted a tough tone

and made the demise of Bashar Al-Assad a *sine qua non* or essential condition for any resolution of the conflict. However, Iran's support for Damascus, Washington's reluctance to strike the Al-Assad regime in 2013 after the use of chemical weapons against civilians, then the Russian intervention in 2015, were crucial game changers. As the civil war dragged on, the French position began to appear somewhat naive. Finally, with the advent of the Astana process—led by Russia, Iran, and Turkey—Western and Arab diplomatic efforts featuring the removal of Al-Assad were pushed aside.

After the outbreak of the Syrian war, Paris quickly adopted a tough tone and made the demise of Bashar Al-Assad a sine qua non or essential condition for any resolution of the conflict.

Macron's Ambitions and Obstacles

During his campaign, Macron had pleaded for an “independent, humanist and European power.” Shortly after he was sworn in, the new president issued several key speeches on France's international priorities, including one at the United Nations in New York, on September 19, 2017. Globally, the new French discourse would defend Europe, multilateralism, and a liberal agenda on the world stage.

The Middle East issue quickly came to the fore, since Macron hinted in an interview to *Le Point* in August 2017 that he would “put an end to ten years of importation of neoconservative ideas in France.” His criticism against the French 2011 operation in Libya had been harsh. When receiving Egypt's Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Paris in October 2017, Macron refused to talk down to and lecture his Egyptian counterpart on democracy and human rights. The fact that Macron would not impose French democratic mores on El-Sisi or other non-Western leaders triggered bitter reactions by some of the “French neoconservative” sect and displayed Macron's contempt for the French neocons.

All of this set off a debate regarding the existence of a specific “French neoconservatism.” According to some scholars and essayists such as B. Badie, France's diplomacy had in recent years begun to evolve toward a more Atlanticist or “Occidentalist” stance—meaning a harder line, closer to the American hawks, more favorable to Israel and more hostile to the South.

Hints of such an evolution, pundits argued, could be found in Paris's insistence on toughening the initial version of the Iranian nuclear deal, or its support of Israel after Israeli bombings of Gaza in the summer of 2014. The main reason for the neocon tilt, media onlookers argued, was the coming of age of a new generation of diplomats, mostly educated in schools like “Sciences Po” (Paris Institute of Political Studies), and influenced by Anglo-Saxon trends, norms, and think tanks. However, before Macron's presidency it was hard to measure the real influence of a group of “hardline” French diplomats who supported

rightist international stances as well as military intervention abroad. Whether or not these hardliners were influential before Macron, it is clear that French neocons' basic tenets hardly ever match Macron's vision of multilateral dialogue with all actors, or with his support of the 2015 Iranian deal.

Macron continued his resistance against conservatives in his open contempt of the Donald Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Macron said in March 2018 about Trump's decision that he

Macron continued his resistance against conservatives in his open contempt of the Donald Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

believed it was unfortunate and contravened international law. He has gone on to call the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal a mistake and refused to side with Saudi Arabia or Qatar when relations soured between the two countries in 2017. Meanwhile, Macron tried to be a deal-broker when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri was apparently held captive in Saudi Arabia in November 2017.

In the Libyan powder keg, Macron has increased French visibility as an arbiter between warring factions convening two meetings in Paris, the first one in July 2017 with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj, General Khalifa Haftar, President of the Libyan House of Representatives Aguila Saleh, and Khaled al-Mishri, head of the High Council of State. The second meeting was held in May 2018 which led to a fragile agreement over the planning of elections in December 2018. These were important initiatives that showed a French will to remain an actor in the Mediterranean region. These two Libyan meetings were not enough, however, to bring France back into the two most complex diplomatic processes of the moment: Syria and the Palestinian conflict.

Macron's diplomatic team, including Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and the Elysée diplomatic cell (headed by a seasoned diplomat, Philippe Etienne) had to cope with an impossible equation in Syria. The challenge facing French diplomats now is how to come back into the region post-Astana, while taking into account the new balance of power, and the likely political survival of Bashar Al-Assad without repudiating the ethical approach that once led Paris to deny the legitimacy of a mass murderer like Al-Assad? So far, and despite a substantial military presence in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), France has yet to solve the equation. Its diplomacy has to take Al-Assad's political survival into account, while continuing to state that Al-Assad cannot be the future of Syria.

Regarding Palestine and the moribund peace process, Paris can do little but pay lip service to its official support of the Palestinian cause and the two-state solution. Before the end of its term, Hollande's government had organized

two conferences on the Palestine–Israel peace process in Paris (June 2016 and January 2017), with no results, and in the absence of the main protagonists. With a U.S. administration now siding clearly with Benjamin Netanyahu and European partners unwilling to get involved in a viper’s nest, Paris’s room to maneuver remains narrow. Were Macron’s administration to propose a third international conference—probably without Israel and the United States—such a conference would be completely counterproductive. Simply criticizing Washington’s unilateral decisions while reaffirming its support for the two-state solution remains Paris’s only option for the time being.

Scenarios and Limits

Can Macron provide France with more diplomatic clout in the Middle East just because of his personal political voluntarism? Maybe, but three obstacles remain: relations with Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Interestingly there has been an absence of strong regional Arab partners in recent years following the demise of leading Arab foreign policy voices. As a result, Turkey, Israel, and Iran now have the upper hand across the region.

Each of the three leading Middle Eastern powers has complex relations with France. Turkey, because France was among the most skeptical countries about its application to become a European Union member, now worries about conflicts with France connected to Ankara’s alleged support of radical Islamic elements in Europe. Israel, because France’s former De Gaulle-ian policy (often deemed pro-Arab in Tel Aviv) harbors uncertainty about France’s ambitions in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. And Iran, because, as has been stated, Paris and Tehran have remained at bitter odds as far as the situation in Lebanon is concerned.

The Macron government must now deal with a foreign policy reality in which France’s traditional allies have grown weaker.

At the same time the Macron government must now deal with a foreign policy reality in which France’s traditional allies have grown weaker. In Lebanon, France supports the 14th March camp (Hariri’s allies), yet Iran effectively balances the equation and remains the main proponent of Hezbollah. Paris’s Arab traditional partners in the Middle East are too small to play a structural role (like Lebanon), have been weakened by recent turmoil (Egypt), undermined by a bad international image (Saudi Arabia), or are now more isolated than some years ago (Qatar). Importantly, one of France’s solid trade partners in the region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has of late developed a new and distinct diplomatic agenda apart from Paris.

The European and Atlantic context is hardly better. Among France’s more valuable partners in the region is Germany. Yet, Germany has a different strategic culture, remains cautious when it comes to the Middle East, and wary

of military interventions abroad. Britain, by far the best partner for France as far as defense and military interventions are concerned, is trapped in the Brexit debate and as such is hardly ready to get involved in Macron's Middle East agenda.

With Washington abandoning its traditional role as peace-broker and threatening to withdraw from the Syrian issue, France is now looking in vain for regional interests that could bring the old partners together again.

The ambition of a common European Union foreign policy has stalled, and the EEAS, or the European External Action Service (the European Union's diplomatic service) remains embryonic. The Washington–London–Paris axis (or “triumvirate,” as once hoped for by De Gaulle) is not operating anymore in the Middle East. With Washington abandoning its traditional role as peace-broker (to grant unconditional support to Israel) and threatening to withdraw from the Syrian issue,

France is now looking in vain for regional interests that could bring the old partners together again.

What Grand Strategy?

Major terrorist attacks carried out on French soil and supervised from the Middle East have overshadowed other foreign policy considerations since 2015. The efforts to rethink French relations with the Middle East after the Arab revolts have also been largely thwarted by the refugee crisis triggered by the Syrian civil war. Many European leaders now associate the region with domestic security issues more than with international strategic considerations. Paris is, unfortunately, no exception to this trend. Yet, despite the hardships ahead, the Middle East remains a key test for France's international influence and political capacity to defuse crises at its Mediterranean border. Also, there continues to be French vulnerability in connection with Middle Eastern upheavals, such as the Palestinian conflict and the Syrian civil war, all of which cause conflict in France with its migrant population.

Moving forward, crucial strategic questions remain unanswered. Does France have to stick to a two-state solution for the Palestinian issue, and how can France promote the two-state solution in a hopeless international context? With Egypt on an authoritarian course, Saudi Arabia and the UAE harboring unsavory views toward Iran or the war in Yemen, who could be France's allies or partners for a new regional agenda? Is it worth trying to revive the project of a Euro-Mediterranean framework, after two failures in 1995 and 2008? Should North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia) be dealt with in a global Mediterranean and “Arab” context, or should they be addressed as a distinct Maghrebi entity, in order not to associate them with the turmoil in the Middle East, specifically in the Levant and the Arab Peninsula?

Macron will have to propose new answers to these dilemmas if he wants to

restore France's Mediterranean regional policy. Although France remains one of the most pro-active European Union member states in the region, its political clout—akin to the West's clout in general in the Middle East—has faded. Any new regional strategy will need a coalition of the willing, probably with new associations between partners. France will probably be eager to participate, but first it has to find its navigation chart. 