



# ALONE IN THE DESERT? HOW FRANCE CAN LEAD EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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# SUMMARY

- The Middle East is a key stage for France's foreign policy, one where it bids to prove its credentials as an international power, punching above its weight and demonstrating the independence that is so important to the French sense of place in the world.
- In this context, the Arab uprisings and their subsequent upheavals have been a particular challenge, to such an extent that France attempted to recalibrate its strategy. Despite this, France soon settled back into its traditional realism by adopting an approach based on "reassurance".
- Under this approach, France sought to foster stability by reassuring its partners against their perceived anxiety in the face of domestic instability, regional changes, and international uncertainties. But "reassurance" did not deliver and France still faces key challenges in the region.
- France also feels increasingly 'alone in the desert', with little European support. Even with armed conflicts, terrorism, and migration flows across

the region, France has failed to rally its European partners around strategic purpose.

• Emmanuel Macron's ardent pro-Europeanism presents an opportunity for France, and for Europe. But France must move on from its "reassurance" approach and better embed its leadership in concerted European cooperation.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region holds a special place not only in France's foreign policy, but also in its society, politics, history, and culture.[1] This was evident in the 2017 presidential campaign, when the debate about the region was sharply polarised. Since his eventual victory, Emmanuel Macron has only confirmed this, giving a central role to the Middle East in both his early foreign policy speeches and his specific initiatives.

The ongoing, intertwined, nature of the relationship was lately further confirmed by Macron's impromptu trip to Saudi Arabia to find a solution to the crisis sparked by the Lebanese prime minister's resignation in Riyadh. But the Middle East has shaped as well as supported France's international ambition for over 200 years. And, in turn, France has been continuously active in the region. As a consequence, it has strong political ties, close economic relations, and a major military presence throughout the MENA region.

At times, France's relationship with powers in the region has been intensely close. It is no surprise, then, that the challenge that the Middle East always presented to France's ambitions has only heightened since the Arab uprisings. France is deeply concerned at the instability in the region, and not only when it spills over. As a consequence, since 2011 France has struggled to adjust its traditionally realist approach to the region and its problems.

In particular, despite an initial turn during the late phase of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency and the early part of François Hollande's term, France has mostly sought

to bolster Middle Eastern governments with "reassurance": providing its partners with reassuring responses to what it perceived as their anxiety in the face of domestic instability, changes in the regional balance of power, and international uncertainties. Cooperation on security, especially against the backdrop of severe terror attacks on French soil, proved a key ingredient cementing the relationship still further.

But these dynamics have failed to gain France the influence and even the kind of stability that it aims for. The unpredictable local dynamics, in conjunction with Russia's return to big power politics in the region and American disengagement (now complicated by the destabilising Trump factor), have challenged France's pursuit of its interests.

Due to its ambition to have a significant role in the region, France has maintained its traditional insistence on leading in Europe itself when dealing with Middle East matters. Doing so has the added benefit of reinforcing its leverage. But France's European partners remain, for the most part, unwilling to follow its lead. Even in recent years, when massive refugee flows and terrorist attacks have amply demonstrated how instability in the region threatens all of Europe, France has often felt alone in the Middle East.

Still, Europe would be foolish to rely upon outside powers – whether a self-absorbed United States or a more assertive Russia – to secure its interests in the MENA region. Rather, Europeans have to take responsibility for their own ability to pursue their interests, project their principles in the region, and protect their own homeland. France, in turn, must find a better way, beyond the pressure of events, to find a common direction and lead on that renewed basis. The truth is that if other Europeans do not follow it, this is at least in part the result of a French unwillingness to Europeanise its Middle East policy.

The election of Macron and his clear ambition – on behalf of both France and Europe – create an opportunity for Paris to take the lead in forging a European strategy. But Macron will seize this opportunity only if he can understand that France has failed in this endeavour partly because it allows itself to bypass the European level when convenient. The president's first steps have already opened a debate about how 'European' his policies really are, and how much renewal he is bringing to French policy.[2] In this regard, it is still not clear how much substance there is to Macron's effort to distance himself from his predecessors, and how differently he will address the regional instability and threats to security that remain his key priority.

Accordingly, this paper examines France's approach to the Middle East and North Africa. It takes a look at what drives its behaviour in the region and assesses why this current realist approach has failed in recent years. It also explores the reasons other Europeans have largely left France 'alone in the desert'. Finally, it offers recommendations on how France can encourage Europeans to unite around a common approach to promoting stability in the region and, by extension, to protecting their own interests.

# What is the reassurance approach?

France's policy in the MENA goes back several hundred years, with some scholars dating it to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But its postwar features took shape in the wake of the Suez crisis and the Algerian War, when Charles De Gaulle sought to restore France's role and influence with the newly independent Arab countries, from a situation when, in 1962 (at the end of the Algerian War) France had diplomatic ties with almost no Arab states. What subsequently became known as the "Arab policy" has since attained mythical status in French foreign policy.

The reality is that France never held a homogenous policy with all Arab states and it also included Iran, Israel or the Kurds as key interlocutors in many instances. This policy evolved over time too, incorporating a clearer commercial slant in the 1970s, even before the 1973 oil shock, and a stronger multilateral tone from the end of that decade. Still, recurring patterns are indisputable in France's realist approach to the MENA region, especially in terms of methods: placing particular importance on personal relations at the level of head of state; a paternalistic approach to regional partners; explicit pride in maintaining "dialogue with all" stakeholders; a certain complacency in working with authoritarian regimes; and an ambiguous relationship with the political role of religions, where France's history of secularism explains its difficulty with political Islam in particular yet coexists with a strong specific concern over the defence of Christian minorities.[3]

### Major French military presence in the MENA region since 1975

Since 1978: **Lebanon**, through the UN (UN Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL)

1982-1984: **Lebanon**, through the ad hoc Multinational Force (MNF)

1990-1991: **Kuwait** and **Iraq**, through a US-led coalition (Operation Desert Storm)

Since 1991: **Western Sahara**, through the UN (UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara, MINURSO)

1991-1998: **Iraq**, through an ad hoc US-FR-UK coalition (Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch)

Since 2009: **United Arab Emirates**, through two permanent military bases (navy and air force)

2011: Libya, through NATO (Operation Unified Protector)

Major French military presence in the MENA region since 1975

Since 2014: **Iraq**, through the US-led coalition against IS

Since 2015: Libya, through special forces

Since 2015: **Syria**, through the US-led coalition against IS

Since 2015: **Mediterranean Sea**, through the EU (operation EUNAVFOR Sophia)

But, more importantly, the key to understanding France's foreign policy on the Middle East is that the country sees the region first and foremost as a stage for foreign policy and great power politics – namely, an opportunity for France to punch above its weight. In this view, this is a place where it can display and take advantage of its much-valued (to France) "independence", ie. its freedom of manoeuvre.

# The "Arab Springs" as a challenge to French MENA policy

This realist strategy faced a major challenge with the advent of the Arab uprisings, at that time described as the "Arab Spring", and then even further with the new and unstable regional environment that ensued. A late move to support revolutionary governments and political movements lasted for only a short period, and eventually a reassurance approach has come to dominate the French response to this challenge. This approach represents the newest form of France's long-term realist positioning in the region.

The onset of the Arab uprisings shook France's traditional approach to its core,

exposing long-standing, previously quietly ignored, tensions between its hard-headed willingness to dealing with states as they are and the need to recognise that civil society matters, even for regional security.

This is not just about the disappearance of the Middle East as France knew it. Following the changes wrought by the Arab uprisings, there emerged a much more threatening environment that demanded dramatic readjustments. For example, although France initially stuck with the regime in Tunisia, it belatedly rallied behind the revolution after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fell. Elsewhere, Sarkozy had opened his term with high-profile rapprochements with Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad, but then moved to help overthrow the former and actively supported a transition that aimed to push the latter out of power.[4]

These sudden changes appeared to call for a wholesale transformation of French policy on the region. Alain Juppé signalled this in 2011 in a major foreign policy speech kicking off his second stint as foreign minister, making clear that France had previously succumbed to "complacency" about working with authoritarian regimes and needed to do more to support the democratic and economic aspirations in the region.[5]

# Reassurance as France's response

And yet, eventually, France's preference for its realist tradition prevailed. This was not just because Juppé was replaced (by Laurent Fabius) after the May 2012 presidential election. Nor was it only because, with lofty ambitions undermined by limited means, France eventually felt it needed to maintain effective relations with the region's governments. Instead, the collapse of most of the Arab uprisings into either chaos or authoritarianism created a dire situation in the region, generating a sense of crisis among French officials.[6]

This was not due only to the conflicts as such – although these quickly proved a legitimate source of concern. It was also due to less visible aspects of a deep and broad regional turmoil, with polarisation along geopolitical, ideological, sectarian, and

ethnic faultlines dividing the MENA region. There was even a sense that the role and survival of states – challenged in their ability to fulfil their population's expectations, including meeting basic needs – were at stake. In Iraq, in Libya, in Lebanon, in Tunisia and in other places, France saw a "systematic attempt to destroy states".[7]

As a consequence, France's eventual priority was not going to be governance and democratisation, as suggested by Juppé's speech. Rather, its goal quickly became not just the avoidance of further destabilisation in the region, but also reassuring governments there that France would factor their preoccupation with stabilisation in its own decisions. From a controversial revision of the bilateral agreement on judiciary cooperation with Morocco, to put an end to bilateral tensions after a judge briefly interviewed the head of Rabat's counter-intelligence, to the close relationship with Saudi Arabia on major issues such as Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon, France has more than often taken its partners' concerns on board.[8]

Of course, French reassurance has not always been consistent. Like other actors, events have often taken France by surprise, inspiring its governments to various flights of fancy. For instance, Hollande and Fabius' France initially had tough reactions against the military seizure of power in Egypt in July 2013, before they became one of the closest partners of the new Sisi government the very next month. But overall, France followed such an approach in many situations, especially when security concerns were at stake.

For instance, France's firm negotiating position on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear programme, finalised in July 2015, stemmed from its traditional concerns about nuclear weapons proliferation.[9] But it also came out of the need for the agreement to be robust enough to tackle (at least in part) the concerns of key regional powers such as Israel and Saudi Arabia – which, at the time, worried that the US administration was ready to yield to Iran.

The same regional concerns informed France's fight against the Islamic State group (IS) – for instance, its strong reluctance on (ill-fated) US attempts to cut a deal with Russia in Syria at the end of the Obama administration, attempts seen as increasing

concerns throughout Syria's oppositions and Sunni neighbours, that in turn swelled the jihadists' ranks and regional complacency towards these.

Even Syria, on which Sarkozy adopted an early aggressive position, that Hollande then continued, fits with this reassurance approach. Not just as the exception that proves the rule, as the saying goes. But more importantly because French officials saw Syria as an exceptional crisis, calling for an exceptional policy: the absence of an international response to the Syrian government's horrific violence was seen as contributing to the rise of extremist groups (and to the migration crisis), and as a strong incentive to regional players to step in themselves, feeding further the rise of regional tensions, all trends that eventually threatened Europe.

# Three types of reassurance

One limit on the notion of a consistent MENA policy is that the region is too broad and diverse for this. But it is not too difficult to distinguish between three sub-regions where France has followed distinct but still converging strategic paths (see map).

# The Maghreb

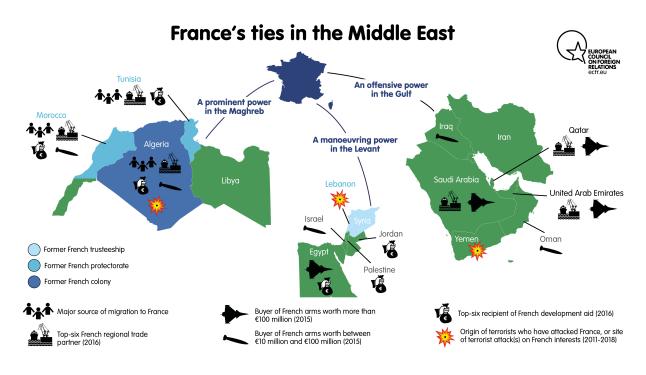
France has close and dense ties with the countries of the Maghreb, which include strong economic and migration elements. Due to this degree of interdependence, some commentators suggest the Maghreb should be France's priority in the MENA. [10] However, the fact is that the current trend is one of normalisation, with France's centrality slowly eroding if only because of the waning of the 'decolonisation generations', as well as of the rise of other trade partners, including non-Western ones, and also declining French resources invested in the region. Yet, despite the (many) complications still arising from the post-colonial context, and the continuing mistrust between Algeria and Morocco, France remains a prominent power in the Maghreb.[11] The Arab uprisings turned Tunisia and Libya upside down, but mostly bypassed Algeria and Morrocco. In this context, France has favoured reform on occasion. But it has mostly abstained from applying pressure that could further regional instability, and reassured its interlocutors on key tenets of their relations, as demonstrated by France's unwavering support for Morocco on the Western Sahara.[12] France has clearly prioritised the enhancement of its security cooperation, mostly at the bilateral level (for instance on counter-terrorist intelligence, which has proven key in crucial instances).[13] This cooperation also exists at the regional level: in Mali, where it has had a military presence since January 2013 to fight terrorist groups, France is working closely with both Algieria (where the inter-Malian peace agreement was negotiated in 2015) and Morocco, which holds significant influence in the region too).

### • The Levant

In the Levant, existing historical ties are not as decisive as they are in the Maghreb. Still, France usually positions itself as a power able and willing to manoeuvre autonomously if need be, including vis-à-vis the US – as shown by the consistent French nuances on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and France's support for Lebanon's stability. It maintains a traditional balancing act between the various local, regional, and international actors in order to wield political influence and leverage. Since the Arab uprisings, France's aggressive stance on Syria may have stood out as stepping away from this balancing act. But, as explained above, this has mostly been an exception meant to preserve broader stability. France has more often tried to balance its usual quest for settling regional conflicts or at least avoid further destabilisation, such as in its support in shielding Lebanon from the flames of the Syrian conflagration, with maintaining good relations with incumbent governments. In particular, France has strongly backed the so-called Baabda declaration (2012) that aims to rally Lebanese parties around a common position of disassociation from and non-interference in external conflicts and led the intenational support to Lebanon, as exemplified by the recent Cedre conference held in Paris.

## • The Persian Gulf

France has fewer historical ties to the Gulf than to other parts of the MENA region. But since shifting its strategic focus from Iraq to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) powers after the first Gulf war, France has increased its political, military, economic, and cultural investments in these relations, especially those with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. This is despite the fact that it has reaped less benefit from them than press reports about arms sales seem to suggest (see below). Since 2011, France has continued to step up its game, including by trying to take advantage of the tensions between the Gulf powers and the Obama administration, be it on Syria or on Iran – with some success, as shown by Hollande being the first foreign leader invited to a GCC summit, in May 2015.



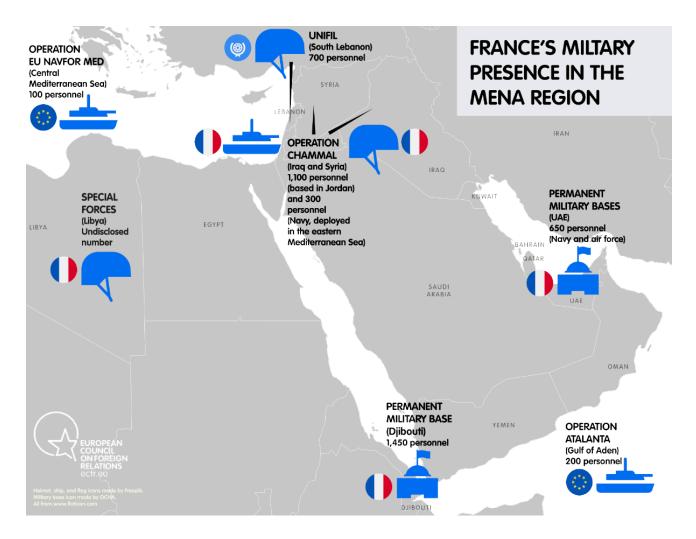
# What drives the reassurance approach - and why it has failed France

Overall, France's policy under the reassurance approach has remained firmly 'realist'. The country has on occasion shown its ability to place other factors above its usual concern for maintaining the status quo. But the story of the Arab uprisings is that France inclines towards a preference for stability, with the added benefit, as it perceives it, of maintaining familiar intergovernmental relations. The core of French policy, with only occasional deviation, is to focus on reassuring government partners in the region that their positions of power are not open to challenge. Given France's often high profile on key issues affecting the region, the drivers behind its approach often find themselves under scrutiny.

### France's traditional drivers and how they play under reassurance

National security concerns, both at home and abroad, are the key driver of French policy in the Middle East. Since the end of the cold war, if not earlier, French governments have consistently identified the MENA region as a major security concern, on issues ranging from armed conflict to non-proliferation to terrorism.[14] For this reason, although its image in the region is often that of a peace-monger, due to its opposition to the war against Iraq in 2003, France has often supported, participated in, and even led military action in the region. In 2017, one-third of French forces engaged in overseas operation were deployed in the MENA region (see map). [15] And the role of the French military is significant enough for the defence minister to sometimes play a key role beyond defence cooperation and arms sales: under Hollande, Jean-Yves Le Drian rather than Fabius was often the key interlocutor with Egypt and Gulf countries, including on regional crises and the fight against terrorism.

That said, France is traditionally more at ease when military action fits within a broader political strategy. For instance, Hollande refused to join strikes against IS in Iraq until prime minister Nouri al-Maliki was replaced (by Haider al-Abadi), as part of his commitment towards a more inclusive political process in Baghdad. And since the extension of these strikes to Syrian territory, France has consistently been more worried about post-IS stabilisation plans both in Iraq and in Syria, including their political dimension, than the US has been.



Notwithstanding this, latterly terrorism has affected the France's traditional approach to the use of force. For instance, France was long reluctant to strike IS in Syria, for political reasons more than legal ones. [16] But the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris eventually changed the government's mind. At the end of Hollande's term, French politics was also divided on Libya, with sharply divergent views on the merits of supporting the independent military effort led by General Khalifa Haftar at the risk of jeopardising United Nations-led mediation there.[17] More broadly, the terrorist threat has raised the stakes in counter-terrorist cooperation (with the police, intelligence agencies, and the judiciary) – a reality only reinforced with the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters.

Observers also often seek to explain France's approach in the Middle East through the prism of mercantilism – a desire to secure lucrative export contracts. This impression

only grew following renewed efforts of "economic diplomacy" under Hollande and Fabius and, more importantly, the winning of some major contracts, especially in the military area (such as the sale of Rafale jets to Egypt and Qatar, and Egypt's repurchase of two Mistral vessels using Saudi money). And indeed, officials admit that the recent reassurance approach is conducive to securing economic "dividends" from the region. Even if they were not "fooled by the fact that partners like Riyadh are using France to express discontent with Washington", they saw "no reason not to take advantage of it".[18] But policy is not devised only or even mostly for economic purposes. Trade interests rarely outweigh foreign policy goals. On the last steps towards the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, for instance, France's hardline position went against its economic interests, and actually against active lobbying from French companies.[19]

Domestic factors also drive France's policy in the Middle East. Preventing an "import" of the conflict between Israel and Palestine into French society has been a growing concern contributing to France's position on the MEPP for several decades.[20] But in the new regional environment, other sensitive topics, such as migration and Islam, have taken on a growing role. Domestic concerns with terrorism, which appeared consistenly among the top concerns within the French public according to polls in the recent period, has also been central in French policymaking. In particular, at the end of Hollande's term, the January and November 2015 attacks in Paris were instrumental in shifting France's policy on Syria from Fabius's "Neither Bashar, nor Daesh" towards Le Drian's "The threat for France is Daesh. Bashar is his own people's enemy".[21]

Finally, France's policy is sometimes suspected of being driven by a degree of anti-Americanism, a sentiment that some saw emerging again during the most recent presidential campaign.[22] Such a suspicion exists in the US, but also among some of France's EU partners, and as such it may have obstructed closer foreign policy cohesion within Europe. This may have been the case even more once France adopted its reassurance approach. Indeed, under the Obama administration, French officials pointed to US responsibility in the regional turmoil on various occasions. Fabius argued that US policy was causing "a strategic vaccum [...], mainly in the Middle East". [23] And Hollande himself repeatedly lamented the 2013 US (and UK) decision to forgo airstrikes against Syria after the regime used chemical weapons.[24]

It is true that France's obsession with foreign policy independence has a lot to do with the MENA region – and actually stems from the 1956 Suez fiasco.[25] But in France, both Sarkozy and Hollande have been accused of being too aligned with the US.[26] The fact is that taking the opposite view to the US is not Paris's compass. And reassurance does not boil down to reflexive anti-Americanism. Hollande opted for a number of different policy options from Obama's, both more hawkish (on issues such as Syria and Iran) and more dovish (on the MEPP and Hezbollah) depending on the issues. But US-French cooperation has mostly worked out these difficulties, and both countries have cooperated closely on as central an issue as the fight against IS.[27] France's reassurance approach meant that, even before Donald Trump entered the White House, it was seeking to work with the Americans wherever possible, while preserving the capacity to operate without them when needed.

### How the reassurance approach has failed France

France's reassurance approach is a strategy meant to secure various French interests under the circumstances in place since the failure of the Arab uprisings. To achieve its goals, France needs to remain a player, and even a leader, in the region, particularly on the various security crises that have erupted across the Middle East. Not only does France have direct interests in the region, in addition it can also leverage the centrality of the Middle East in global affairs to maintain its relatively high diplomatic profile. In that context, reassurance has probably been a reasonable short-term adjustment to the current turmoil. But it does not seem able to meet to France's ambition.

To begin with, reassurance has brought France little loyalty in the rough and tumble of the Middle East. On Syria, many actors France considered to be its closest interlocutors – especially in the Gulf –quickly sought to accommodate Russia while Paris was holding a hard line, supposedly in their defence. France's continuing exclusion from key negotiation formats have shown that neither Russia, nor Middle Eastern powers, really see France as an indispensable player.

Threaded through the French preoccupation with reassurance is the paternalistic idea – or perhaps 'avuncular wishful thinking' is a better description – that Arab powers need to feel that their status is not being challenged so they can eventually make the right choice. But while Egypt sat on the UN Security Council in 2016 and 2017, it often proved an unreliable partner for France, as demonstrated by its votes at the Council on key issues for France such as the MEPP, Syria, and Libya.

Even on the economic front, reassurance has not really paid off. France's trade ambitions in the region remain mostly frustrated (see table 1), as illustrated by the fact that contracts announced by the government do not always materialise, by any stretch.[28] France's traditional trade surplus with the MENA region exists alongside a "relatively modest trading volume",[29] as well as significant deficits with key partners such as Saudi Arabia, and a weaker trade position overall than that of Germany, Italy, or Spain. In 2016, France recorded its first trade surplus ( $\in$ 348m) with Saudi Arabia since 2010, due to the conjunction of a major Airbus contract and the fall in oil prices. In contrast, 2014 had been the year of the highest trade deficit ever (above  $\notin$ 4 billion), and 2015 was among the five worst years since 2002. [30]

# **MENA TRADE RELATIONS WITH FRANCE (2016)**

Countries	Ranking as a trade client (in MENA)	Total trade volume (€m)	Balance of trade (€m)	Ranking as a trade client (worldwide)
Algeria	1	8,068	2,093	15
Morocco	2	8,522	25	20
Saudi Arabia	3	7,916	371	21
UAE	4	4,664	2,567	28
Tunisia	5	7,401	-928	29
Qatar	6	2,042	1,591	42
Egypt	7	2,017	1,042	44
Israel & OPT*	8	2,596	102	48
Lebanon	9	933	<mark>8</mark> 38	52
Iran	10	2,106	-662	58
Kuwait	11	757	-10	72
Jordan	12	370	308	75
Iraq	13	476	157	78
Oman	14	332	291	79
Libya	15	683	-331	94
Bahrain	16	208	42	106
Yemen	17	110	108	111

\*This source does not distinguish between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

A related problem is that reassuring one ally may foster instability elsewhere. The Yemen conflict is a good example of an issue on which France contradicts key principles it has backed in the Syrian war. In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition continues to pursue a military solution rather than a political one, with little hope of victory, and the war fuels sectarian tensions that have spilled over into the wider region. The coalition's military operations – and its major violations of international humanitarian law – are clearly a key factor in the constant aggravation of the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Finally, the Saudi-led coalition's focus on fighting the Houthis insurgency has helped al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (a group directly responsible for the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015) and IS to grow.

France's role, although less prominent those of the US and the UK, is at last facing growing questions, whether on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,[31] or on the need for an independent inquiry into international humanitarian law violations.[32] Yemen is not just an example of French inconsistency. It shows how French reassurance for Saudi Arabia eventually risks superseding concerns for the region's stability. But, for all its support for the peace efforts in Yemen, and even if Le Drian recently made clear he sees the war there as "absurd", Paris has remained cautious and reluctant to confront Riyadh, sidestepping questions about whether it should end weapons sales.[33] French policymakers argue that, "Yemen is as sensitive for Saudi Arabia as its domestic politics, precisely because it is a domestic issue."[34]

Recurring doubts in Paris about the Gulf powers' behaviour in the Sahel region are another case in point, as highlighted by the crisis in Mali. Beyond Qatar's initial criticisms of the French intervention in December 2012, Paris has not always perceived the influence exerted by several Gulf countries through money and madrassas as stabilising. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's recent decision to join French-led efforts to politically back and financially support the G5-Sahel force is certainly meaningful, but is also likely to have more to do with the extension of the competition between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar for influence in sub-Saharan Africa.

France's reassurance approach has also seen human rights issues dealt with - at best

- through "quiet diplomacy" or private advocacy for some individual cases. It has also often led France to be accommodative, especially in the context of the fight against terrorism. On Jordan, a key ally for France's actions in Syria, Paris departed from its usual practice when it uttered barely a word in public as Amman lifted its moratorium on capital punishment for terrorists. Quiet diplomacy may have merit in some instances. But in Egypt, for example, the deterioration of the situation has moved well beyond the handful of individual cases French officials say they raise during bilateral meetings – as on Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's most recent visit to France.<sup>[35]</sup> It now pertains to fundamental policy issues such as media freedom, due process, and the right to non-violent protests. This, as well as the country's heavy-handed counter-terrorism policy hardly promote long-term stability.<sup>[36]</sup>

In sum, France has not tackled the strategic challenge identified by Juppé in 2012 on engaging with Islamist opposition forces, and more broadly with the issue of democratisation as a key to long-term stability. As a result, the reassurance approach has only reinforced France's traditional failure to protect the democratic and secular rights groups that are always among the first victims of political suppression. There is a risk that eventually opponents of such authoritarian regimes will see Islamist groups as their only credible options – and that these groups will perceive violence as their only means of accessing power. Besides, this repulsive alternative is exactly what those authoritarian regimes seek.

### **Reassurance continued under Macron?**

During the 2017 presidential election campaign, Macron tried to distance himself from his predecessors' policy – making specific criticisms of Sarkozy for the consequences of the intervention in Libya, and of Hollande for his focus on Assad. Referring to De Gaulle as well as François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, Macron hinted that he would adopt a more classical approach to the Middle East.[37] But the single most important argument with which he criticised his predecessors – which was widely shared by the other main candidates in that presidential election, notwithstanding the big differences between them – was that France had ended up marginalised on the Middle Eastern stage. This line of argument was excessive, as befits an electoral campaign. Still, it was substantive enough to ring true, even beyond the issue of Syria.

That said, Macron's aggiornamento has in practice been quite limited. The president's first steps on the international stage have underlined that France's concerns with instability, and its hard-nosed realist policy, will not be overridden easily. The fact that Macron appointed Hollande's minister of defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, as his minister for foreign affairs speaks volume in this regard. As minister of defence, Le Drian was very well regarded, and for good reason. Still, he is a good example of how French policymakers have a sombre view of the situation in the Middle East ("in crisis, and maybe imperilled", "sustainable chaos or wider conflagration", as he put it), and point in particular to the fact that "what we are witnessing today in the Middle East is a systematic attempt to destroy states".[38] Under Hollande, he certainly leaned in favour of security-driven realism, be it in supporting Haftar in Libya, dealing with Sisi in Egypt, or advocating a focus on IS in Syria.

All in all, there is much continuity between the end of Hollande's term and the Macron era – such as on the defence of the Iran nuclear deal or the relationship with Egypt. On the MEPP, if Paris confesses a lack of immediate appetite for taking on the mantle of peacemaker, Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital offered the opportunity to show disapproval of Trump's decision and to confirm that France's position on the need to find a settlement and the parameters of it was unchanged from Hollande's time.[39] And although Paris's rhetoric on Syria has certainly changed, it was Hollande who had de facto accepted the need for negotiations with Assad's government since 2012, and had shifted its priority in the country to fighting IS since 2015 (notably through Le Drian). Indicating further continuity, Macron and his foreign minister still insist that Assad cannot possibly be part of the political solution that Syria needs.[40]

The analysis on which the reassurance approach is based shows through in Macron's first steps, irrespective of his differences with his predecessors. It is explicit in various statements in which he identifies "failed states" with the "worst risk in that region",[41]

insists that "the fight against Islamist terrorism" is France's foreign policy's first priority,[42] and stresses that, while supporting the JCPOA, there is a need to tackle Iran's policy in the region which, in Macron's words, "destabilises the region – or at least contributes to sustaining strong elements of tension".[43]

Of course, looked at through the lens of wanting to appear an important player, this policy helps France to meet its aim of having a stage on which to perform, and partners to work with. Yet, as stressed above, there was already little at the end of Hollande's term to suggest that this approach is a long-term solution to the questions of stability and security that the French profess concern about.

As the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen all demonstrated, authoritarian rule in the MENA region often builds up tensions that suddenly explode into crises. Moreover, political, demographic, social, and economic trends in the Middle East are converging to make the current status quo unsustainable. The argument in favour of adjusting to these trends, and to the aspirations set forth by the Arab uprisings remains valid, even if it is hard to realise this shift in the short term. As one European diplomat said, "today's challenge is to foster a status quo that will be more durable and more stable than the previous one".[44]

# From player to leader? Why France fails to lead Europe

The limitations of France's reassurance approach have not only revealed themselves in the Middle East. Perhaps more importantly, the strategy has also failed to rally France's European partners, who, among other doubts on the MENA region, wonder if France is really able to move beyond an apparently self-interested reassurance approach.

# French and European frustrations

Since before the end of the cold war, France has been a strong advocate of Europe playing a more assertive role in the region. Paris has long sought to give the European Union a distinct place in the MEPP: it was French diplomats who led the drives for the historic 1980 Venice Declaration and the 1999 Berlin Declaration, both of which sanctioned the goal of a Palestinian state. France has also sought to equip the EU with a southern neighbourhood policy, from the 1985 creation of a European commissioner in charge of "Mediterranean policy and north-south relations" to the 1995 establishment of the Barcelona process, intended to foster shared prosperity in the Mediterranean.

But over the last decade France has taken its foot off this particular pedal. It is as if policymakers believed that the investment needed to motivate European partners was not worth the very limited returns. Overall, Paris is glad to take advantage of EU assets – such as development aid, reforms support, migration policy instruments and trade arrangements – that come with few political costs. But it is in much less of a hurry to see the EU play a political role, where French preferences and interests do not accord with others'.[45]

Part of this has to do with the way in which the EU itself has changed over the years. In private, French diplomats complain that successive enlargements have made the EU cumbersome to work with and less interested in the Middle East.[46] Most of the newer EU members are more focused on the eastern neighbourhood and more deferential to the US on the Middle East.

Still, from the French perspective, the situation is not much better with older members. Even before Brexit (see Box), the UK preferred bilateralism in the Middle East when possible, opting for benign neglect the rest of the time.[47] Germany, for all its growing international assertiveness, remains extremely cautious in the Middle East, even more so on security matters. Italy and Spain have often been helpful supporters of French initiatives, but only rarely shown leadership. And when the EU high representative for foreign and security affairs has taken advantage of this situation to take the lead and assert her own positions, such as on taking a more proactive role on the reconstruction in Syria, Paris has often seen them as rather unhelpful.[48]

#### What now after Brexit?

The Middle East has long been a theatre for traditional Franco-British rivalry, even when both countries were allied, such as during the two world wars. This competition is still visible in the Gulf, as much on trade issues as on defence. But it has not prevented both countries also proving key partners. Issues on which they have found themselves at loggerheads (like Iraq in 2003) should not hide those on which they worked closely (such as Iran since 2003, Libya in 2011, or Syria since then).

A post-Brexit Britain should focus even more on its traditional MENA partners (and confirm its neglect for others, such as in the Maghreb). It should also prioritise short-term goals such as trade and counter-terrorism – at the expense of other traditional interests. The uncertainty – reinforced by Donald Trump's victory in the United States – lies mostly in whether a post-Brexit United Kingdom will try to insert itself into some sort of collective framework – and what place it will give to the European Union – or play a less internationalist game.

French diplomats already perceived a UK "retreat" since the Iraq catastrophe. In particular, Britain was a limited partner in Brussels, with rare initiatives and scarce contributions to collective action. But at least it did weigh in significantly in the diplomatic process, pushing in favour rather than against the EU paying more attention to its southern neighbourhood. In addition, without the UK it is clear that the Middle East will look on the EU as a diminished interlocutor.

For France, prospects for close cooperation with the UK after Brexit remain strong. Whatever their degree of competition, both countries complement each other well in terms of their respective zones of influence and cooperate well in many key diplomatic formats (United Nations, NATO, G7, Quint, E3+3, and more). Since Brexit, key domains of cooperation such as Iran, Syria, or counter-terrorism have remained areas of broad agreement. But this cooperation may be hampered by the absence of the UK in Brussels decision-making processes, and become more difficult to implement without full British access to the EU toolbox.

European diplomats find it similarly easy to point to French deficiencies. France has too often looked like it had ambition for Europe if, and only if, European partners accepted the French position. To some European partners, France can seem obsessed with initiatives that promote French visibility rather than address substantive issues. Brussels observers also note a French inability to work with and exercise influence in Brussels, particularly within the European External Action Service (EEAS).[49] Even after Macron's win, it is not clear that France has taken many, or any, great steps to Europeanise its policy and its approach to its EU partners: rather, its solitary mediation between factions in Libya or its continued interest in a big power format for negotiations on Syria point to the usual pattern.[50]

# The need for Europe to act geopolitically

Whatever the history, the main problem facing any French bid to lead in the region is that, for all their growing interest in their southern neighbourhood, Europeans continue to lack strategic purpose. The EU acts like something more akin to a service provider whose job is to give economic, technical, or humanitarian assistance to alleviate or solve the problems of the region. It does not assert and defend direct interests so much as values.[51]

As a consequence, the EU tends to position itself as neutral on political issues, in the manner of the United Nations. Indeed, the EU's success in the Iran nuclear deal seems to have convinced European officials that it is best suited to the role of facilitator between powers rather than as a geopolitical power in its own right. France would not dispute that the EU played a crucial role in that major success, but it thinks that there was room to defend its own vision of a good deal and of regional stability, and actually, France did seize that role.

MEPP provides another demonstration of this dynamic. Europe is the Palestinian Authority's biggest donor and Israel's largest trading partner. Yet it has not been able – or more accurately, not been willing – to translate this position into significant influence on settlements, the humanitarian situation, Palestinian reconciliation, or peace process parameters. It even has trouble abiding by its own "differentiation" language which seeks to avoid economic support for the Israeli settlements.[52] As per the words of Pierre Vimont, Europeans "have not given any impression that they

# are willing to tackle the problem directly".[53]

Syria is also a good example of Europe's inability to act geopolitically. Most EU members initially ignored the crisis in Syria (and Iraq). But then its consequences spilled over into Europe in the form of refugees and terrorists. Regardless of what one thinks of France's policy, Paris's insistence that the crisis in Syria is of strategic importance for Europe has proven correct. But disagreement among EU members on the appropriate strategy results in them perceiving the EU as, at best, an apolitical donor to the reconstruction of Syria.

### France's vain quest for alternatives

In part because of the EU's lack of a political approach, French policy in the Middle East has never relied only on Europe. The UN, for instance, plays a big role in France's strategy, with the Security Council offering better prospects both for French initiatives and for access to US policy (and its dialogue with Russia) – not to mention the importance Middle Eastern countries attribute to France's permanent seat on the Security Council. Other formats also play a role. In 2011, France used the (then) G8 to set up the "Deauville Partnership" in response to the Arab uprisings. Paris also supports specific formats with EU partners, such as the initial E3 effort on the Iran nuclear crisis and the "5+5 dialogue" which unites western Mediterranean Europe and the Maghreb.[54]

This diversity of formats was traditionally meant to complement and reinforce a strong EU approach. But under Sarkozy, some of these efforts were quite obviously meant to circumvent the EU, such as in 2007 when he initially laid out his vision for the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) without consulting Brussels, Berlin, or Madrid and outside the framework of the EU. This was not just disastrous – most of France's partners reacted vigorously – but also untenable: after Berlin simply blocked the project until it was revised, the UfM was eventually folded into the EU framework in 2008.

Hollande avoided making such frontal assaults on the EU. But French interest in ad

hoc formats with only marginal European participation persisted during his tenure. For instance, France managed to establish an International Support Group on Lebanon in 2013, built around a P5 format and initially without Germany, Italy, or Spain. In 2015, it then advocated in vain for a similar group on the MEPP to replace the sterile Quartet format. The most vocal opponent of the latter seems to have been ... the EU high representative for foreign and security affairs: while she seemed mostly focused on protecting her own position in the Quartet, France argued that as long as the EU does not have a single (but only a common) foreign policy, key member states can still legitimately aspire to take part in such formats.

### The inescapable need for a more European approach

Over the last decade, the French habit of ignoring the EU persisted even as developments in the region clearly called for an increasingly European approach. Sarkozy and Hollande had many differences in style and substance, but their similarity in pursuing a less European approach in the Middle East produced a similar lack of results. Dire prospects for better cooperation with the US under Trump and the UK's absorption with Brexit, as well as current challenges in the region (demography, economy, ideological polarisation, geopolitical tensions, failing states), only reinforce the case.

France has to come to terms with the inescapable fact that, to have influence in the Middle East – be it to weigh in on the Syria crisis, uphold the two-state solution, manage the crisis in Libya, or sustain the Iran nuclear deal – it needs the EU and its European partners. It should treat as a precedent, rather than as an exception, the fact that one of its most important recent achievements in the region – leading the way to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal since 2003 – came about through close cooperation not just under the E3 format with Berlin and London, but also with the close involvement of the EU – if only through its sanctions and its institutions (with Javier Solana, Catherine Ashton, and Federica Mogherini successively leading the negotiations).

All in all, France's key European partners and the EU often carry less political (colonial) baggage than France, and possess relevant instruments to foster exchanges and capacity-building with local civil society. They also have the resources to provide the necessary levels of development and humanitarian assistance, something which is clearly beyond France's capacity alone – even if Macron succeeds increasing the French budget for such activity from 0.38 percent of GDP. Multilateralising parts of its policy through the EU could also help France develop bolder policy on more sensitive issues such as human rights. In short, France needs the EU's diplomatic leverage, its international credibility, and its financial resources. As France's call for European military solidarity after the November 2015 attacks in Paris made clear, even on the military side, going it alone is no longer a sustainable option.

# How France can lead Europe in the Middle East

What works, then, is a combination of French leadership embedded in concerted European cooperation. It is this formula that France must seek to reproduce. Strangely enough, the debate during the French presidential election remained focused on narrow French security interests and whether they should trump other concerns, or inspire a rebalancing of French alliances, including towards those with Sunni Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Overall, it lacked any substantive reconsideration of Europe's role in the region. Macron himself, although campaigning on a clearly pro-European platform, was much more specific about intra-EU affairs, such as eurozone governance and migration policy, than he was about his European ambition on foreign policy.[55]

Since the election, quite a few opportunities have slipped by already.[56] Macron's proposal for a Syria format based around the P5 illustrates France's desire to get a seat at the big powers' table without having made the prior effort to rebuild a stronger EU position. On Libya, the mediation between the Sarraj government and Haftar, confirmed with the La Celle-Saint-Cloud agreement, took place without including or even consulting with Italy. On substance, the preference for 'stability' is

still very much present, and Macron's reluctance to use force seems to be more about French military power itself rather than that of local actors', whether in Yemen, Egypt, Libya, or elsewhere.

Still, Macron's victory in May 2017 was the best available outcome for both new thinking on the Middle East and a more European approach to the region. Macron has a number of assets with which to do this. His pro-European record is a major advantage, although he has made little use of it so far. Key patterns in his approach to foreign policy – an insistence on "dialogue with all" stakeholders, expressed scepticism about the use of force, self-professed pragmatism, and interest in a mediation role – should play well to his partners' ears. And he should certainly be able to use the international environment to unite EU member states, with Trump, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and others acting as foils.

The window for change is still open. After almost a year in power, Macron's foreign policy is slowly coming to terms with some of the limitations and contradictions identified in this paper. On Yemen, Macron's call to Riyadh to lift the blockade is probably short of a major policy revision, but is still a welcome step.[57] On Syria, he is already faced with the lack of results of his change in tone and in substance[58] and is looking for other paths: after the adoption last February of UN Security Council resolution 2401 on humanitarian access in Syria, Macron reached out to Angela Merkel to engage with Putin on the resolution's implementation. On Iran, he knows that, without a strong and united EU policy, there is no way to address of the challenge to the JCPOA the Trump administration has thrown down.

Overall, Macron's interest in mediating or facilitating positions – in, for example, the resignation of Saad Hariri, the negotiations between parties to the Libyan conflict, as well as in support of Kuwait to ease the tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia – also shows an understanding of regional dynamics different to that of his predecessors.

France has a decisive role to play in creating a bolder, more strategic MENA policy for

Europe that brings its partners along with it. And its partners will have to respond to this opportunity. In this context, the following recommendations could help broaden the European conversation and gain some traction, both in the Middle East itself and in Europe.

### A renewed French strategy

France's MENA policy has to move on from the reassurance approach, both to draw lessons from the previous period, and to make it more attractive to and more compatible with the preferences of its EU partners. Such a policy change does not mean ignoring the importance of stability or the pressing nature of current security threats to France and Europe. But, in a nutshell, France needs to strike a better balance between its desire for stability and the need for some transformation in the region. In particular, this new balance needs in particular to distinguish more carefully between the stability of a regime and that of the region, and to address longterm issues and challenges so as to move beyond immediate security interests.

## France should:

• Reinforce its strategic approach to security: France needs to stop its de facto firstcall reliance on the use of coercion and military force, whether by itself or by its regional partners, including against terrorist groups.[59] In particular, a major challenge will be to find ways to be more effective when insisting on the political track in Syria, especially in areas liberated from IS. France will need to be as insistent in Libya, and in Yemen.[60] After all, on the latter, Le Drian recently stated that "it is probably the crisis in the region that would be easiest to resolve if there was the political will on all sides".[61] In order to make a stronger case for this political and inclusive approach, France could start by relying on its current investment in Iraq, a country where France enjoys some influence (including with the Kurds), and where the greater international consensus on the need to support the current authorities should help make it a test-case for a more inclusive and decentralised settlement. France could then apply this approach to various other crises across the region.

- Walk the walk on averting regional polarisation: France has been insisting on "inclusive" political processes for some time now. Under Macron, France has gone further and explicitly disagreed with its allies' strategy where it fears this may feed into further polarisation, especially in the context of the tensions around Iran.<sup>62</sup> But it must now walk the walk, and adjust its positions accordingly – on, for instance, Yemen, or on Egypt. To move ahead, France could more broadly build upon its positions on the MEPP, its favourable relations with all sides within the GCC, and its role on the Iran nuclear deal. It could also propose an initiative to create inclusive collective security mechanisms. A regional security architecture similar to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe seems out of reach, given the level of antagonism between key states in the region. But regional mechanisms that include Iran would play a helpful role; they would aim to minimise the risks of unwanted escalation, encourage respect for international law (including international humanitarian law in conflict situations), foster stronger cooperation in the fight against terrorism, move beyond a zero-sum game mentality, and perhaps even facilitate discussions on broader regional security issues. Due to the current level of tensions, just putting new ideas on the table and challenging regional powers to engage with them would be a welcome development.
- Use principles consistently: The problem with raising principles and norms inclusive governance, humanitarian access, international law, and support for the UN – as France often does is that it makes the case for framing inconsistency as simple pragmatism more difficult. The situation in Yemen is making this increasingly clear. But France could certainly be more coherent on a number of fronts, as its interactions with the Egyptian leadership showed during

Sisi's visit to Paris last October.[63] Increasing France's limited contributions to international humanitarian assistance, but also its minimal – though recently increased – contribution to taking in and resettling refugees from the region, would be welcome first steps. Being more clear-eyed about the shortcomings of quiet diplomacy on human rights would also help. After all, Le Drian himself has stressed that "political frustrations", "the absence of democracy", and human rights violations are playing into the current regional crises.[64] This does not imply less engagement with authoritarian regimes, but it does imply the risk of a more critical and contentious attitude towards them. In this regard, France should seek better coordination with like-minded states and rely more on the EU's strengths.

- Tackle the root causes of the current turmoil: As far back as 2008, the French White Paper on Defence and National Security judged that the "risk of destabilisation [in the Maghreb] deriving from internal factors (political successions, social movements, unemployment, terrorism, and so on) is real. Fifteen years from now and beyond, only economic, political and social development can protect the region against such risks."[65] But France's policy in this regard still underwhelms. Addressing political repression alongside issues affecting the future of the region's youth (such as access to education, jobs, and healthcare) are key in this regard. Macron has begun to move in this direction, with a greater effort on development assistance, and a stronger focus on education in this context.[66] Still, these issues should appear more at the centre of French policy initiatives – and be supported by a better resourced and more adapted cooperation policy.
- **Support civil society more directly**: Finally, France should enhance existing efforts to open up its diplomacy towards social actors. Despite its long tradition in so-called cultural diplomacy, France remains more comfortable with government-

to-government relations than working with local civil society. This explains much of the difficulty France faced in Tunisia soon after Ben Ali's fall in 2011.[67] Macron seems personally insistent on engaging with the local populations, as he did not only in Tunisia in February 2018, but also in the most sensitive context of Algeria in December 2017. [68] But France needs to reach out more systematically to unfamiliar interlocutors such as women, young people, and civil society, and to engage with new topics like professional training and regional inequalities. And it especially needs to do this in countries where these actors face repression. Such engagement beyond the president's visits requires both sustained political will and integration into the mainstream of French foreign policy, rather than relegation to specialised services.[69] France also needs to diversify its aid policy, with French development instruments currently more focused on public capacity-building and infrastructure projects than on supporting bottom-up initiatives and community organising efforts. In that spirit, it would certainly benefit from fostering its own civil society institutions and their activities overseas. This would, in turn, open up the opportunity to cooperate further with key EU partners, who often benefit from stronger and more dynamic actors in this area.

### A more consistent European approach

While getting its own house in order, France will also need to reinvest in European policy in the Middle East. Renewed effort to create a more assertive European policy here should centre on both new initiatives and on a different approach to European coalition-building.

This implies that France should:

• Support more political discussion on the Middle East within the EU: France has to

engage in an earlier and more strategic dialogue on the region with its partners, both in Brussels and in national capitals, in order to build the coalitions it needs within the EU. A consequence of the recent upsets in the Middle East is that more EU members are looking south and willing to contribute to solutions. France's unparallelled role and importance over the last few years gives it clout, but also a burden of responsibility to lead the way to a strong, unified European position, especially on the key crises in the region: Syria and Iran, of course, but also Iraq, Yemen, the MEPP, and Libya. This means not only that dialogue is key, but also that France has to be ready to make concessions, both on substance (Macron has yet to complement his new pragmatism on Syria with an effort to forge a stronger EU position) and on methods (as shown by Italy's reaction to Macron's solitary mediation summit in La Celle-Saint-Cloud last July). Especially in view of Brexit, France needs to see the merits of succeeding in building a collective EU approach rather than the drawbacks of having to compromise.

• Make the most of European diplomatic capacity: France also has to invest more in the Brussels mechanisms for Middle East diplomacy – it needs to use the EEAS more effectively (and to build a better relationship with Mogherini). Its investment in the limited formats (E3, Quint, Big Six, and the 5+5) is still necessary but no longer sufficient, and it cannot continue at the expense of smaller states. France's handling of its 2016-17 initiative on the MEPP is a good example of an improved way to proceed, especially given that this is a topic on which small differences often trump general agreement. On top of taking the time to consult European partners, including in their capitals, special envoy Pierre Vimont insisted on coordinating closely with the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy (including on how to take the Quartet's role into account) and associated key member states via working groups.[70] France should persist with this approach.

- **Push for strategic coherence**: There is clearly a lack of strategic agreement in Europe on the MENA region. The EU Global Strategy Mogherini put forward last year provides a framework, but it will not make the EU's Middle East policy more coherent. Germany's sensitivity to the refugee crisis and now to migration issues, and the priority France gives to fighting terrorism, offers an opportunity to propose a broader *quid pro quo*, and a more comprehensive strategy, as the two phenomena are only different aspects of the same crisis, in both Syria and Libya. This can then be expanded to other key partners. More generally, the need to step up to the plate collectively (including with the UK) if Europe wants to have a say in the management of the crisis in Syria could also act as a catalyst. The necessity to develop its own autonomous strategy in the context of the Trump administration's policy on Iran, or the MEPP, should also help in this regard.
- Make good use of Germany's new foreign policy posture: in last few years, Germany has been more present and active in the Middle East. French and German postures still differ quite significantly, on security, trade, and development. But they could complement each other rather than diverge, especially given that the coincidence of France and Germany's regional interests has grown more obvious. France's more pragmatic stance on Syria creates the prospect for closer cooperation which could materialise via a joint review between the two new governments, and eventually a joint special envoy. Some have also argued in favour of a joint special envoy for the Maghreb, as well as joint visits by ministers; the expansion of the 5+5 format to Germany has also been suggested.
  [71] In any case, Paris would be wise to coordinate with Berlin as it failed to, for instance, before proposing an international contact group on Syria. Other topics Turkey in the Middle East, Kurds, the Iran nuclear deal, Tunisia are topics suited to joint initiatives. Finally, even if flexible formats are probably key in a

more assertive European presence in the Middle East, Franco-German cooperation should avoid being exclusive and ensure that it is able to serve as a springboard for broader European participation.

- Preserve and consolidate Tunisia's success: France should build upon a growing
  interest from other member states (such as Germany and Sweden, in addition to
  more traditional actors such as Italy and Spain) in bringing about improvements
  in Tunisia. It should seek to enhance Europe's support for this lone success story
  of the 2011 Arab uprisings. Current EU initiatives focused on processes and
  generic instruments, such as the Mobility Partnership and the Deep and
  Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement are not commensurate with the
  fragility of the situation. Bolder support for the Tunisian economy and on
  security, as well as political backing and broader assistance for democratic
  reforms, are key.
- Lead the revision of the EU's southern neighbourhood policy: the current stalemate on the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) does not correspond to Europe's urgent need to deal with the numerous key challenges caused by the chaos and instability in the MENA region. Despite announcements to the contrary at the beginning of his term, Hollande never followed through on his plan to revamp the EU's neighbourhood policy on the region – a sign of the difficulties that lie ahead, and which are not all due to tensions over the MEPP. In true Macron fashion, this initiative could focus less on processes, tools, and institutions, and more on goals. In that spirit, France should consider a number of options to reenergise the Barcelona Process: more flexibility in the formats (currently under discussion within the EU); more support for economic and democratic reform programmes; a local government track for Mediterranean cooperation; a shift from a securitised migration policy to development and broader legal pathways for migrants to work in Europe; and a greater focus on long-term challenges

(such as those relating to demography, education, economic diversification, and south-south integration).[72]

# Conclusion

The much-needed renewal of France's policy in the Middle East region is only one aspect of a broader challenge for Paris. France is seeking to match its ambition to punch above its weight and shape global politics within a more competitive, more fluid, less state-centric, and more fragmented world. Given the centrality of the Middle East as a stage for France and a place of heightened interest for Europe more generally, the region provides a key test case for realising this ambition.

Yet any renewed European endeavour by France will succeed only if its fellow EU member states come to terms with the need for Europe to play a growing and more assertive role in the region. Direct spillover from the crises there has already roiled European politics, and threatened some of the key policies and principles on which the EU is built. And yet a consistent and coherent European strategy remains glaringly absent. Despite understanding the Middle East's importance to their security and political interests, European countries still appear to be under the illusion that they can shield themselves from their southern neighbourhood.

Accordingly, the EEAS needs identify what is at stake for Europe, and it needs to protect and promote direct interests that other powers will not take on board. Rather than taking advantage of the lack of direction and consensus among member states to pursue its own agenda, the EEAS needs to focus on building a more meaningful compromise within the EU, encourage "the use of ad hoc groupings of member states on specific issues" in conjunction with a "EU representative", and "avoid relying too much on technical and short-term toolboxes."[73]

Other key European states also need to support a more assertive, more comprehensive and more strategic European policy in the Middle East. These states

include Germany, Italy, Spain, and even the UK – in spite of Brexit – as well as other partners that understand the importance of what is at stake in the region, from Sweden to the Netherlands. Germany in particular needs to continue its current evolution toward greater activism in the region, and to recognise that its interests cannot be defined only through commercial ties or refugee containment.

Such a revised approach would allow Europe to become a truly geopolitical actor. And it would allow France to step up to the challenges that it claims it wants to tackle.

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However, as with all European Council on Foreign Relations publications, the arguments, conclusions, and recommendations of this policy brief represent only the views of its author.

[1] "MENA" and "Middle East" are used throughout this paper in the broader sense of the region stretching from Morocco to Iran (Maghreb, the Levant, and the Gulf sub-regions).

[2] See James McAuley, "Macron touts Europe's interests, but early action put France first", the *Washington Post*, 5 August 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/macron-touts-europe-but-early-actions-put-france-first/2017/08/03/03fca30c-779a-11e7-8c17-533c52b2f014\_story.html (hereafter, McAuley, "Macron touts Europe's interests, but early action put France first").

[3] Camille Lons, "Une compassion très politique pour les Chrétiens d'Orient", *Orient XXI*, 26 April 2016, available at https://orientxxi.info/magazine/une-compassion-tres-politique-pour-les-chretiens-d-orient,1300,1300.

[4] Gaddafi was invited for five days in Paris in December 2007, and Assad was one of the guests at the Bastille Day military parade on 14 July 2008.

[5] "Colloque 'Printemps arabe': Discours de clôture", remarks by Alain Juppé at Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 16 April 2011, available at http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/113000969.html.

[6] "La stratégie de défense française à un tournant. Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire 'Grands enjeux stratégiques'", Speech by Jean-Yves Le Drian at Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 18 January 2016, available at https://www.pantheonsorbonne.fr/fileadmin/chairestrategiesorbonne/Discours\_Ministre.pdf (hereafter, Le Drian, "La stratégie de défense française à un tournant. Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire 'Grands enjeux stratégiques'").

[7] Le Drian, "La stratégie de défense française à un tournant. Leçon inaugurale de la Chaire 'Grands enjeux stratégiques".

[8] Ghalia Kadiri, "L'accord controversé d'entrainde judiciaire entre la France et le Maroc adopté par les députés", *Le Monde*, 23 June 2015, available at http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/06/23/le-tres-critique-protocole-judiciaire-france-maroc-soumis-a-l-assemblee-nationale\_4659727\_3212.html.

[9] France has been a proliferating nuclear power in the past, supporting Israel or Iraqi programmes, respectively in the 1950s and 1970s. But it has since shifted to a firm non-proliferation commitment.

[10] Hakim El Karoui, "Nouveau monde arabe, nouvelle 'politique arabe' pour la France", Institut Montaigne, August 2017, pp. 140 ss,

available at http://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/nouveau-monde-arabe-nouvelle-politique-arabe-pour-la-france, (hereafter, El Karoui, "Nouveau monde arabe, nouvelle 'politique arabe' pour la France").

[11] Bart Hesseling-Zarouri, "Macronism in Algiers", Medium, 13 December 2017, available at https://medium.com/@bhesseling/macronism-in-algiers-22035dabe24e.

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