

## Report

# An Assessment of France's Assertive Mideast Policy

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France has been under a state of emergency since November after attacks in Paris [AP]

## Abstract

Even though it has been suggested that U.S. diminishing influence in the Arab world along with the rise of Iran as a regional power has enabled France to fill a vacuum by increasing its defense sales to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council allies, given the close diplomatic cooperation between Washington and Paris, there is no evidence to suggest that the two allies have conflicting and competing agendas for the Middle East. When it comes to commercial opportunities, Paris and Washington are bound to pursue their respective interests, but this has so far not come at the expense of each other's strategic interests be it on Syria, Iran or when it comes to fighting ISIS.

## Introduction

In wake of the Paris terrorist attacks, in which the ISIL, killed 130 people, the French government confirmed on February 10 that it would extend the country's state of emergency powers with an additional three months. That same day, the National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, voted separately on one amendment in a package that strips citizenship from some convicted terrorists. The amendment passed with a narrow majority of 162-148, indicating that President Francois Hollande faces strong opposition as he seeks to push all of the constitutional changes through the rest of Parliament(1).

Hollande's push for broader powers to fight terrorism domestically comes as the government is simultaneously stepping up its military offensive against ISIL by forcefully targeting its positions in Iraq and Syria. Days after the Paris attacks, France deployed its sole aircraft carrier, Charles de Gaulle, to the Persian Gulf from where its 18 Rafale fighter jets along with eight older Super Étendard jets carry out strikes against ISIL targets around the clock(2).

Amid the government's push to defeat ISIL, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced during a meeting with his U.S. counterpart, Ash Carter, his willingness to host U.S. aircrafts on Charles de Gaulle<sup>(3)</sup>. Le Drian's announcement on January 20 suggests that Paris is increasingly position itself to play a leadership role within the U.S.-led coalition against ISIL and may eventually use its assertive military role in the region to apply additional pressure on Washington to step up its own offensive against the terrorist organization. The Le Drian-Carter meeting also suggests that Paris and Washington will not only work in tandem on revitalizing a new strategy to defeat ISIL, but that the two allies are expected to exert additional diplomatic pressure on all members of the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition to double down on their respective efforts within a coordinated framework.

France's assertive commitment to lead on the fight against ISIL can partially be explained by Hollande's domestic considerations as his popularity has plummeted following the recent Paris attacks, the second of its kind since terrorists attacked the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a Jewish supermarket in Paris in early January 2015.

Unlike the president's push to pass a constitutional amendment that would strip citizenship from convicted terrorists, when it comes to deploying France's wide-range of military resources to fight ISIL, Hollande appears to enjoy broad-based political support even though his personal approval rating continues to fall<sup>(4)</sup>.

Beyond Hollande's quest to defeat ISIL, which clearly represents a major national security threat to his country, his assertive policies towards the Middle East also seek to boost France's position as a major arms supplier for its regional allies. Over the past few years, France has significantly boosted its military sales to Egypt and the Gulf Arab states as Washington's traditional allies are increasingly looking to diversify their respective defense procurement processes over widespread discontent with U.S. regional policies. During this period, the 80-year old U.S.-Saudi strategic alliance has suffered a number of crises over competing policies, including the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011 to the Syrian conflict and most recently the Iran deal.

While France is not capable of replacing the U.S. as the region's predominant power, nor does it seek to undermine Washington's strategic interests, Paris nonetheless aims to expand its commercial interests by deepening its already robust diplomatic and military relationships with the Gulf Arab monarchies and with Saudi Arabia in particular.

This strategy was crafted in 2008 by then President Nicolas Sarkozy amid increasing tensions over Tehran's controversial nuclear program as he sought to deepen defense

cooperation with Saudi Arabia as part of an orchestrated strategy to pressure Iran to come to the negotiation table. Hollande, for his part, not only adopted this strategy, but recognized it as an opportunity to help revitalize French influence across the region.

## **French Strategy towards Egypt and Saudi Arabia: Boosting Al-Sisi Regime**

The French Republic, whose ideals are based on democratic principles rooted in secularism, perceives political Islamist movements not only as a threat to regional stability but to its core national security interests. While France is cautiously supporting the unfolding democratic process in Tunisia, its interests in Egypt are governed by real political considerations through which it has chosen to actively bolster the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi despite his military coup against Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's first democratically elected president.

As part of that strategy, the French Defense Ministry announced in September of last year that it would sell Egypt two Mistral-class helicopter carriers for \$1.06 billion and that they would be delivered around March 2016. (The Mistral-class warships were previously contracted for Russia, but it was suspended in 2014 over Moscow's support for violent unrest in eastern Ukraine.) "The warships are powerful amphibious assault vessels equipped with six helicopter landing zones. Each of them can carry up to 16 heavy helicopters, along with tanks and about 500 troops," CNN reported at the time<sup>(5)</sup>. This comes as French shipbuilder DCNS had already signed a contract estimated at \$1.1 billion to supply four Gowind-class corvettes to Egypt. Talks focusing on a bid of two additional corvettes are ongoing, AFP reported in July of last year<sup>(6)</sup>.

In addition to enhancing its naval capabilities, in February last year Egypt took delivery of three of the 24 Rafale fighter jets it has bought from France in a 5.2-billion-euro deal from Dassault.

While all of these high-profile purchases have been made possible through Saudi financing as Egypt's economy continues to struggle over insecurity and political instability<sup>(7)</sup>, Paris and Riyadh's strategic outlook appear to converge on their opposition to regional Islamist movements.

French mistrust of Islamist movements, however, is not new nor is it limited to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Over the past decades, France has vigorously supported the Algerian government in its decade long-struggle against an Islamist insurgency by providing the necessary military and intelligence support<sup>(8)</sup>. Along with similar support for Morocco, which has also sought to keep its Islamist parties at arm's-length, France has stationed Special Operations troops in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and close intelligence cooperation with the three countries, according to a senior French Defense

Ministry official<sup>(9)</sup>. These Special Operations troops, along with reinforcements from France, were deployed to Mali in 2013 to prevent groups like al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) from overrunning the government in Bamako.

Between its Mali intervention and long-standing support for the Algerian government, France has come to see President al-Sisi as the only leader capable of preventing Egypt - and with it - the entire North Africa region from descending into complete chaos. With the emergence of ISIL in Libya, which has successfully been able to fill a vacuum over the failure of the competing tribes and political entities to form a national unity government following NATO's removal of the Muammar al-Ghaddafi regime in 2011, France rightfully fears that the entire region could fall to extremist groups.

### **The French, Egyptian and Saudi Nexus in Context**

Egypt, the most populous Arab state, is widely seen as the political, military and cultural center of the Arab world. Even if it is not stated publicly, there is an expectation by Saudi Arabia that in return for monetary aid, Egypt will make use of its military resources and political standing to help realize its interests.

With Egypt participating in the Saudi-led Arab military coalition, which aims to restore Yemen's President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi to power following widespread violence imposed by Houthi militants, which Riyadh considers to be an Iranian proxy, Cairo has indeed already made its military resources available to the Kingdom's regional initiatives.

Last December, Egypt announced that it would participate in Saudi Arabia's latest diplomatic initiative, which includes partaking in an international military alliance comprised of 34 Muslim-majority countries dedicated to fight terrorism.

All of the members of the newly formed coalition belong to the Jeddah-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation and include the following Arab League countries: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Tunisia, Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia, Palestine, Comoros, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Yemen.

According to Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman, who announced the formation of the new coalition, the coalition will tackle "the Islamic world's problem with terrorism and will be a partner in the worldwide fight against this scourge," he said while emphasizing that the new coalition aimed to "coordinate" anti-terrorism efforts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan.

With Saudi Arabia's unfolding war in Yemen, Riyadh is looking to enhance its naval capabilities within the Red Sea and has turned to France for assistance.

Last October, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls, Defense Minister Le Drian and King Salman began formal talks centering on purchasing French spy and communications satellites, patrol boats worth \$600 million for 30 patrol boats of 30 meters. Under the agreement reached in Riyadh that month, DCNS and King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology will set up a naval research center and a working group to study future naval projects as part of an effort to enhance cooperation on military exercises and training. According to Defense News, France hopes that the agreement would translate into Saudi purchase of four multimission frigates, a deal dubbed Sawari 3. Under the Sawari 1 and 2 contracts, France has already delivered Georges Leygues- and Lafayette-class frigates, all to be operated in Red Sea<sup>(10)</sup>.

Between Saudi quests for enhanced naval capability within the Red Sea and its commitment to finance the upgrade of Egyptian's navy, it can be argued that the Egyptian navy has for all practical purposes transformed itself into a proxy force for Riyadh. The increasingly close Egyptian-Saudi military cooperation not only benefit French commercial interests, but more broadly cements the Franco-Saudi-Egyptian diplomatic triangle as Riyadh and Cairo are growing increasingly depended on Paris for servicing, maintenance and diplomatic protection.

### **Rafale Sales to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates: Will Saudi Arabia Follow?**

On May 4 of last year, President Hollande and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar signed contracts for 24 Rafale fighter jets, including for MBDA missiles, training for 36 pilots and some 100 mechanics, worth \$7.1 billion<sup>(11)</sup>. While the first Rafale delivery is expected in March 2017<sup>(12)</sup>, the Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) could over time increase its purchase to 72 fighters as it is looking to replace its 12 Dassault Mirage 2000D fighters and 6 combat capable Alpha Jet light aircrafts<sup>(13)</sup>. As part of the QEAF's quest to upgrade its long-term capabilities, it is possible that will sell of its fleet of Mirage 2000D fighters. Any sale, is of course, subject to French export control regulations<sup>(14)</sup>.

Meanwhile, at the ceremony in Doha, Hollande directly attributed the high-profile defense sale to his regional policies while emphasizing that France is a "loyal" ally. "If we are present here in Qatar and the region it is because France is considered a reliable country which a partner country can give their confidence to," he said, adding that French "credibility" in the region helped with Rafale sales<sup>(15)</sup>. The timing of the agreement was also significant as Hollande departed the following day for Riyadh to participate in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit.

Ahead of the signing ceremony, Defense Minister Le Drian traveled to Abu Dhabi for talks centering on a potential Emirati purchase of the Rafale, two years after talks with the UAE on the warplanes stalled. Reuters attributed Le Drian at the time “as the architect of Rafale's recent successes”(16). That meeting proved indeed to have fruitful as the commander of the UAE Air Force, Major General Ibrahim Nasser Al Alaw, confirmed in an interview with Reuters last November that his government was “in the final stages” of negotiating the purchase 60 Rafale fighters worth an estimated \$10 billion(17). As of January 2016, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius expressed optimism about the sale going through following a meeting with Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi. “There are continuing talks, we are optimistic (French Defense Minister) Jean-Yves Le Drian and I ... things look positive”(18).

Adding to Dassault’s regional momentum, Chief Executive Eric Trappier announced in May of last year that Kuwait was considering whether to purchase the Rafale as well(19). Should Saudi Arabia decide to purchase the latest French jet, it will not necessarily be a reflection of discontent with U.S. regional policies, but rather an acknowledgement of the fact that the Rafale will be the most sophisticated fighter in the marketplace that Riyadh can acquire. Washington has, after all, confirmed that Lockheed Martin’s Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) won’t be sold to any GCC country in order to preserve Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge (QME).

Whether or not Saudi Arabia decides to purchase the Rafale remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that France has successfully established itself as an increasingly important guarantor for regional stability as Cairo, Doha and Abu Dhabi are growing increasingly depended on Paris for training, servicing, maintenance and spare parts pertaining to the Rafale. With this, France has also firmly established itself in the process as an indispensable ally of the GCC amid growing regional concern over a waning U.S. commitment to the Middle East.

## **Fighting ISIL**

The growing demand for increased air capability has been triggered by wider security concerns, especially by the rise of ISIL.

In tandem with the UAE’s concurrent efforts to upgrade its air force, Abu Dhabi is awaiting approval from French export control regulators to sell its fleet of 10 Dassault Mirage 2000-9s jets to the Iraqi Air Force, with the funds paid directly to Dassault as part of the down payment for the UAE’s Rafale deal. According to an unnamed senior French Defense Ministry official, France is expect to approve the sale to Iraq(20).

Presently, the UAE has “36 multirole Mirage 2000 fighters that have been in service since 1986, 30 of which have been extensively refurbished and then upgraded to the

same standard as the newer fleet of 32 Mirage 2000-9s delivered starting in 2003 by France's Dassault Aviation, Defense News reported”(21).

The pending sale to Baghdad appears to be part of a UAE contribution to the U.S.-led anti-ISIL coalition, which seeks to enhance Iraqi capabilities as part of overarching strategy that aims to defeat the terrorist organization by mobilizing Kurdish Peshmerga forces along with militias and Iraqi government forces. This comes as U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter recently received Iraqi government support for the coalition's objective to liberate Mosul and Kirkuk from ISIL, while he seeks additional military commitments from the alliance's partners. As part of that effort, the UAE and Saudi Arabia recently announced that they would dispatch Special Operations forces to Iraq to serve under U.S. command to help defeat ISIL.

### **Will France Rebalance its Policies Towards Iran?**

During the negotiations between Iran and the world powers over Tehran's controversial nuclear program, which ultimately led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the JCPA, then Foreign Minister Fabius became known for holding out tough conditions against the Iranians even though he ultimately helped push through the nuclear accord. During the announcement of his departure this February, Fabius defended France's increasingly assertive foreign policy towards the Middle East, including expressing disappointment with the U.S. record on Syria and Tehran's interference in the conflict. "Let's say that there were moments where we should have acted. But that is just a part of international politics. It isn't because France takes the right position that everybody aligns with her. Sometimes it is disappointing, but that is the way it is”(22). Although Fabius stepped down as part of a larger cabinet reshuffle, the government's position on Syria, notably that President Bashar al-Assad must step aside, remains in place as President Hollande reiterated this during a high-profile meeting with President Hassan Rouhani at the Élysée Palace this past January. Even though Rouhani secured major commercial agreements with French industry during his first visit to Europe following the JCPA agreement, Paris' positions on Syria and Iran's regional interference remains intact. The New York Times described in great details the various commercial agreements reached between French and Iranian industries during Rouhani's visit, including how "the carmaker Peugeot Citroën had signed a deal worth 400 million euros, about \$438 million, with the Iranian carmaker Khodro. The oil company Total said it would sign a deal for 150,000 to 200,000 barrels a day. Airbus will sell 118 planes to the Iranians”(23). Still, it should be noted that all agreements reached are exclusively commercial and France will not sell defense systems or other dual use technologies to Iran as it does not want to upset the regional balance of power, notably between Riyadh and Tehran(24).

These factors underscore that French interests towards the Middle East are indeed not driven by commercial interests, but rather illustrate that Paris considers its nexus with Riyadh and Cairo as pivotal for regional stability amid Iranian attempts to alter the balance of power.

France also appears to believe that maintaining strong defense and intelligence cooperation with Saudi Arabia, including a unified position on Syria, while seeking to enter the Iranian market does not present a conflict of interest.

If history can serve as a lesson, this will not be the first time that France has moved on from a hardline position against Tehran, which it did during the negotiations leading to the JCPA, while aligning itself with Iran's principal rival, Saudi Arabia, before moving to deepen commercial ties with Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-87), France initially sided with President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, which translated into a number of Iranian sponsored terrorist attacks on French soil. Following the Iran-Iraq war, however, Tehran sought to normalize relations with Paris and subsequently invited French energy conglomerate TOTAL to operate a number of its oil fields. It was at that point that Franco-Iranian commercial ties began to develop.

Drawing on these lessons, Paris believes that it has successfully overcome tensions over nuclear negotiations and everything that came with them, hence explaining why France does not consider having strong defense ties with Riyadh to be a conflict of interest.

## **Conclusion**

During the Hollande-administration, France has arguably transformed itself into the United States' principal military ally in the fight against ISIL and has reluctantly supported its positions on Syria. While negotiating the JCPA, France too has played an instrumental role as its hawkish positions arguably helped create a space for the U.S and Iran to reduce long-standing tensions, which eventually led to the agreement. Within this context, it is clear that Washington and Paris share a similar strategic outlook on the Middle East and its many proxy conflicts between Riyadh and Tehran.

Even though it has been suggested that U.S. diminishing influence in the Arab world along with wider security concerns fueled by the rise of ISIL has enabled France to fill a vacuum by increasing its defense sales to the GCC and to Saudi Arabia in particular, given the close diplomatic cooperation between Washington and Paris, there are no evidence to suggest that the two allies have conflicting and competing agendas for the Middle East. When it comes to commercial opportunities, Paris and Washington are bound to pursue their respective interests, but this has so far not come at the expense of each other's strategic interests be it on Syria, Iran or on ISIL. Amid a push to

recapture Mosul and Kirkuk from ISIL, Franco-American relations are only expected to increase.

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