

The retour: is France back to the Middle-East?

From Sarkozy to Hollande from Libya to Syria: how the French defense and security policies are affecting the region.

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The overall context

Historically, France (and the United Kingdom) used to be the kings maker of the region. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the protectorates, Paris and London divided the region according to their interest of the moment and alongside of “lines in the sand”. This regional architecture changed with the 1956 ‘Suez crisis. After the second Arab’ defeat, Paris and London were definitively relegated, by Moscow and Washington, to a second role in the regional play (under the American leadership).

However with the Obama’ presidency¹, Washington ‘attention seems to shift from the Middle-East to the Pacific region. This swing – compared to the warmonger of the previous Bush’ presidency – is illustrated by a military retreat of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as a reconciliation with Iran. It is in this particular situation (of semi power-vacuum or of an US announced retreat) that France might be willing – or pushed - to play a greater role in the regional ‘affairs’². This semi power-vacuum situation is also illustrated by the fact that, Washington seems to be less inclined to intervene directly into the regionals affairs and more willing to pass-on some of its responsibilities to certain Arabs states.

France

Under the regime of the 5th republic, the French President traditionally focuses on international issues while the prime minister concentrates on internal affairs. As such, it is quite difficult to apprehend French politics in the Middle-East outside this binary optic of international pressure and internal demand. With the current economic and social situation in France, the public opinion is mainly preoccupied by issues such as unemployment, migration or purchasing power. This explain why, the current President (and like many of this predecessor) pushes as much as possible his economic diplomacy; in order to gain contracts for the French enterprises. It should be noted that in France, the state has a major economical role³; either with its direct ownership or through its network of influence. As such, economic hardship is a major motivator which can explain some of the decision in the French foreign policy (but this is also true for several industrial nations as well). But besides winning contract it is also a matter of national and

¹ http://archive.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf , retrieved on 3/10/15.

² The same logic might be applied to Moscow and its military deployment in Syria; the first since the afghan ‘ war of the 80s.

³ For example the French state owns 84, 5 % of EDF (energy), 28,9 % of Areva (nuclear energy), 11 % of Airbus (plane manufacturer), 26,4 % of Thales (electronic and defense) and 18 % of Safran (systems and equipment for aerospace, defense and security), just to name of few <http://www.economie.gouv.fr/agence-participations-but-etat/Les-participations-publiques> , retrieved 16/10/15.

international prestige, especially for one of the least supported President of the 5th republic⁴. This very lack of internal support might explain why the current President is looking abroad for ‘public approval’; and also explain why the French army with 3000 to 4000 soldiers (during the Serval and Berkhane operations⁵), is supposed to secure a territory ten times the size of France⁶.

Others changes of direction in the French foreign policy are also explained by the fact the current and the previous president don’t share the same political ideology. Some examples might illustrate this fact: either the volte-face of President Sarkozy vis-à-vis the Libyan ruler Kaddafi who was invited to plant his tent in the Marigny’ hotel Garden⁷ in 2007 and then bombed four years later by the same president⁸, or with regards to the Assad regime invited to attend the 14th of July military parade by the previous president while the present president would have liked to replace the Alawite ruler.

As such the ‘country of the human rights’ is not sending the right message to all the authoritarian rulers and regimes of the region because it looks like contracts are more important than human right. Unlike Sweden (whose Prime minister decided to stop selling arms to the KSA⁹), France and the others major arms exporter, have this tendency to overlook human right records depending on how deep your pocket is. But to be fair, if arms were only exported to democratic countries, the Western defense industry would be endangered.

For the period – on which this paper focuses – 2011 to 2014: according to the SIPRI¹⁰, the French arms sell breaks down as follow: since the years 2015 is still not finished, this year has not been counted down.

France arms sales in US \$ m.	2011	2012	2013	2014
Algeria	26			
Bahrain	1	1	1	1
Egypt		4	41	
Lebanon	1		3	
Libya	1			

⁴ Only about 30 % of the French population has a favorable opinion of the current president (in February 2015), <http://www.sondages-en-france.fr/sondages/Popularite/Fran%C3%A7ois%20Hollande>, retrieved on 19/10/15.

⁵ Operations Serval and Berkhane are French military operations aimed at combatting Islamic militant in Mali.

⁶ <http://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/L-armee-francaise-en-lutte-contre-le-terrorisme-dans-la-bande-sahelo-saharienne-2015-03-05-1287581>, retrieved on 19/10/15.

⁷ http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/12/11/10-milliards-de-dollars-valent-ils-une-tente-dans-le-c-ur-de-paris_988513_3212.html, retrieved on 6/10/15.

⁸ Not counting the fact that Sarkozy volte-face might be also be attributed to his special links to certain oil-state such as Qatar for example.

⁹ <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/international/europe/2015/03/15/sweden-may-lose-gulf-allies-over-saudi-spat/70222682/>, retrieved on 20/10/15.

¹⁰ <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background>, retrieved on 21/10/15.

Morocco	718	35	24	533
Oman	14	82	82	68
Qatar		27	62	
Saudi Arabia	84	25	53	175
UAE	104	5	272	122

As the first table shows the volume of the French arm export is not constant over the year but the hexagon remains one of the primary weaponry provider to the Middle-East (which is one of the most armed region in the world). However, the majority of the Middle-Eastern states are already equipped with American systems as such it is very unlikely that France replaces the USA as the primary weapon provider.

What needs to be looked at here, is the tendency of certain states to over-look the US patron and look for others suppliers, a move which can be interpreted as a sanction against Washington for its refocus toward the Pacific region and/or the rehabilitation of Iran into the international community. But things must be put into perspective, especially with regards to the volume of US sales to the Middle East.

US arms sales in US \$ m ¹¹ .	2011	2012	2013	2014
Algeria	11			
Bahrain			66	9
Egypt	160	177	459	199
Iraq	432	341	246	272
Kuwait	36	22	47	576
Lebanon	1	31	21	5
Morocco	440	423	24	42
Oman		38	35	468
Qatar	150	280		
Saudi Arabia	398	216	288	1199
UAE	863	923	1080	551

As the second tables shows, it is quite difficult to speak of a real swing of allegiance, since for example in 2011, the KSA spend 398 million US \$ in US weaponry and 84 for France. In 2014, 1199 million US \$ for the US and only 175 million for the French purse. Beside France cannot offer the same range of military technologies as the USA, like anti-ballistic system such as the Iron Dome or the Patriot system, already sold to the KSA and Kuwait, as such Washington will hold its place as an irreplaceable suppliers for many years to come.

¹¹ <http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/background> , generated on 21/10/15.

The French latest Arms transfer in 2015:

The Rafale: is a multirole combat fighter which (has been produced since 2001) entered service in 2004. But after almost ten years of not being able to sell this fighter outside the French Armed Forces, it seems that Dassault Aviation 'luck took a more positive turn. Certainly selling such military platform is quite a long and difficult process but what we need to underline here is the timing. Indeed in less than two months¹² (around April 2015), three countries did purchase it: India, Egypt and Qatar. The timing of the sales is maybe even more important than the sales itself because it occurs in this context of American redeployment and after the Mali 'campaign during which the Rafale did prove its added-value in a real combat situation. Another analogy can be found in the purchasing frenzy of the oil-monarchies after the Gulf wars which were very profitable for the US defense industry. What better selling points to weaponry system than seeing it used in real combat situation?



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Since this paper focuses on the Middle-East, only the Egyptian case will be addressed¹⁴. Cairo has already one of the largest air force in the Arab world, with over 500 airplanes¹⁵, out of this 500 air plane 220 of them are F16s¹⁶. F16s and Rafale are both multirole airplane, assuming the same kind of military missions, as such Rafale and F16s are quiet similar platform. One could ask, what 24 additional Rafale, at the cost of 5.2 billion euros, could really achieve in terms of strategic deterrence or can the world's largest wheat importer¹⁷ really afford such 'luxury' purchase? Surely, the terrorist menace was one of the reason for the Egyptian purchase but again one could ask what the Rafale will bring to the war against ISIS that an F16s couldn't do?

¹² <http://www.usinenouvelle.com/editorial/les-5-raisons-qui-expliquent-pourquoi-le-rafale-se-vend-enfin.N327860> , retrieved on 19/10/15.

¹³ <http://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/defense/rafale/introduction/> , retrieved on 02/11/15.

¹⁴ Since the Qatari Air Forces are too small to play a significant role in the region, about 9 Mirage 2000 and 6 Alpha Jet, in Jane's World Air Forces, Issue 26-2007, pages 445 and 446.

¹⁵ Jane's World Air Forces, Issue 26-2007, pages 168 and 169.

¹⁶ http://www.f-16.net/f-16_users_article4.html , retrieved on 19/10/15.

¹⁷ <http://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=EGY> , retrieved on 20/10/15.

The Mistral: another example is the sale of the two Mistral vessels. Originally sold to the Russian Federation, this sale (approved by the previous French ‘president) was cancelled by the current president in light of the Russian intervention in Ukraine, then ‘resold’ to Egypt with apparently a significant Saudi contribution¹⁸. However, the very choice of the Mistral is significant. Since the Mistral vessel is a command and force projection vessel¹⁹ (“Batiments de Projection et de Commandement²⁰”), one could ask, what Egypt need the Mistral vessel for?



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The Mistral can only assume a very specific range of mission and more particularly “Mistral is flexible amphibious assault platforms that are ideal for the projection of force in littoral waters²²”, as such and unless ISIS doesn’t operate far inland and away from the coast line, Mistral is maybe not the most appropriate platform to fight the terrorist organization.

As a military asset, Mistral – a priori – is not really appropriate to Egypt security and defense needs. Since the Camp David Accord, Cairo is not directly threatened by any other regional states. It is very unlikely that their Israeli counterpart will denounce this peace treaty and move on again in Egyptian ‘territory. But are the Mistral vessels going to help Cairo to regain the control of the Sinai ‘peninsula or to combat ISIS in Libya? A quick answer will be no, unless Egypt is planning to play a greater regional role

¹⁸ http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/08/07/l-egypte-et-l-arabie-saoudite-candidates-au-rachat-des-mistral-4715520_3212.html , retrieved on 16/10/15.

¹⁹ This kind of vessel allows to send a small expeditionary force to secure a bridgehead. The Mistral can deploy 16 helicopters, 70 vehicles or 13 main battle tank and 450 to 700 troops.

<http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/world-naval-forces/west-european-navies-vessels-ships-equipment/french-navy-marine-nationale-vessels-ships-equipment/aircraft-carriers-a-amphibious-vessels/531-mistral-class-lhd-bpc-amphibious-assault-ship-force-projection-command-vessel-landing-helicopter-dock-batiment-de-projection-et-de-commandment-dcns-tonnerre-dixmude-vladivostok-sevastopol-french-russian-navy-datasheet-pictures-photos-video-specifications.html> , retrieved on 02/11/15.

²⁰ <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/russia-to-order-french-mistral-lhds-05749/>, retrieved on 16/10/15.

²¹ <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/odd-man-out-france-could-sell-russias-lethal-mistral-ships-13336> , retrieved on 02/11/15.

²² <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/saudi-arabia-and-egypt-covet-new-assault-ships> retrieved on 16/10/15.

and more particularly a more focused role in the security of the Middle-East sea lines which could explain the Saudi generosity. In this perspective, Egypt is at least in the Saudi 'eyes the counterweight of Teheran. But it is unlikely that Egypt has the real capabilities to play this role. How can we expect Egypt to play a significant regional role when Cairo is not able to secure its own territory? This question is even more important in light of the economic hardship which Egypt knows since the 'Arab spring' and the fall of the first democratically elected president: Morsi.

Military intervention from Libya to Syria.

The reasons of direct military 'intervention: the war against terrorism and human right abuses.

France did intervene in Libya to help bring down Kaddafi 'regime on the ground of his human right record but again it was limited to aerial attack. If Libya is a failed state (as the Iraqi' experience might have hinted), it is mainly due to the fact that once the ruler was gone no established authority could take over the destiny of this country. As such, Islamic 'organization, such as ISIS or related entities, could move in and prosper.

In terms of direct military intervention, France seems to stick to the 'American' new way of managing the regional affair: i.e.: from the airs. But the current French aerial campaign on its own will only prolong the length of the Syrian civil war. History has showed us that foreign intervention in a (Syrian) civil war usually complicate even more the conflict and shore away any kind of political solution.

The overall consequences of the French help:

Positive for France as selling weapon system (such as the Rafale or the Mistral) to the Arabs countries is benefiting the French economy but won't be enough on its own to overturn the precarious economy while suffering a significant blow to the French soft power.

Negative for France as this double standard (since Paris is fighting organizations who share the same ideology than some of its allies) might intensify either the direct threat to France (like the French jihadist coming back from Syria for example) or its interest abroad.

Positive for the Arab regimes since they have access to military technology and equipment which could help them to prolong their shelf-life.

Negative for the Arabs (and more particularly for Egypt who in the current economic situation have allocated around two billions US \$²³ for its last military purchase; for some this might not be the best usage for a cash-strapped Cairo. Maybe the Egyptian society might have chosen another usage for this cash, like investments in order to create jobs for example. The same logic might be applied to the KSA with the current level price of the oil barrel. For the others oil-monarchies, with far less inhabitant, a more pro-active foreign policy might result in the first terrorist attack in the sheikdoms. In an extraordinary combination of circumstances, so far cities like Doha or Dubai never had to suffer such attacks in a region where terrorist attack and car bomb are quiet common.

Overall, France arms supply might fuel the violence in the Middle-East but if France does stop exporting its weapons, regional states will probably look for other suppliers like Russia or China. Now if the funds (engaged for the military built-up) were initially allocated to development objectives (economic and social), the French arms sells could be perceived as undermining the raise of the living standards of the people living in the region; but again Arabs regimes tends to be more preoccupied by their own survival far more than the survival of their own population. As such, no French exceptionalism here since the UK and Germany have similar level of arms export to the same market.

²³ If we add the Rafale bill plus the 950 million US \$ for the Mistral (according to <https://www.rt.com/business/317023-france-mistral-sale-losses/> , retrieved on 21/10/15).