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THE "ARAB SPRING" IN FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract: *The Greater Middle East has traditionally played a major role in French foreign policy. Following WWI, the 3rd French Republic acquired Syria and Lebanon which created a foundation for political, economic and cultural ties between France and the Arab world. In the post-Cold War era, French diplomatic activity in the region was split into several main priorities which gravitated around being a solid mediator between Israel and the Arabs for the construction of a durable peace – via treaty – while supporting Arab and French regional interests. This work explores the dynamics of French foreign policy in the Middle East with particular emphasis on the most recent set of transformations brought about by the Arab Spring. This work seeks to reveal the level of preparedness (or lack thereof) of France for such eventualities as well as reveals the role France may play in the future.*

Keywords: France, Middle East, Arab Spring, Foreign Policy, Revolution

Thematic Introduction

The Middle East plays a major role in French foreign policy. After WWI, the 3rd French Republic acquired territories formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire: Syria and Lebanon; creating a foundation for strong cultural bonds between France and the Arab world. The end of WWII reinforced French interests in the region. Despite the rising challenges in its colonies, especially in Algeria, Paris – in the 1940s and 1950s – struggled to retain a presence and French attempts to suppress Algerian independence created widespread distrust among the Arabs. This was strengthened during the Suez Crisis (1956) and close cooperation with Israel; the 4th French Republic (1950s) developed a robust military alliance with Israel including the latter's nuclear weapons development programme.[1]

When de Gaulle assumed power (1958), French foreign policy fundamentally changed. De Gualle reduced military cooperation

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with Israel and began to support the Arab cause instead. He also agreed to establish an independent Algeria which helped overcome a major hurdle between France and the Arab states. Both decisions were welcomed in the Maghreb and Mashriq. The real breakthrough however took place in 1967 as a reaction to the Six-Day War. Despite causing US anger, France officially supported Arab and Soviet policies during the conflict. Symbolically, de Gaulle adopted an arms embargo against Tel Aviv in what became a turning point for French diplomatic activity in the Middle East. Since then, France's foreign policy has been widely perceived as "pro-Arab." Subsequent presidents – until Sarkozy – remained somewhat loyal to the approach adopted by de Gaulle; a point reflected in French cooperation with Hussein's Iraq and arming Qadaffi's Libya.[2]

The Gaullist perception of the Arab world remained mostly unchanged, even after the Cold War. Traditional French diplomatic activity in the Middle East (post-1991) may be broken down into four priorities. Firstly, the 5th Republic attempted to gain the status of mediator between Israel and the Arab states. This goal was based on the assumption that France could play a major international role because of its unique value system. Additionally, this priority may have been perceived as a result of the traditional *politique de grandeur*. [3] Such convictions became an important element of French political culture. As Zeldin notes, France has unique capabilities to act as 'a mediator between the West and the Muslim world.' [4] It certainly attempted to utilise its position.

Secondly, and connected to the first, France prioritised a general peace agreement between Israel and the Arab states. Such an agreement could be achieved *only* through diplomacy, with mutual respect for the interests of both sides. This goal was summarised by Chirac during an official visit to Jordan. He remarked that the 'new Middle East [should be] reconciled or coexist, [with a] peaceful and prosperous Palestinian state, widely accepted and free of Israeli terrorism, Jordan as an example of democracy and development, Syria in possession of all its territory, at peace with its former enemies, a free, sovereign and dynamic Lebanon and strong and healthy Egypt, being a pioneer of peace.' [5]

Thirdly, France maintained support for Arab interests. While this priority was not officially admitted, French goals in the region tended to favour the Arab position; a point visible in the declaration

of Chirac (April 1996) in Cairo. He listed four main goals for France:

1. ensuring the right of self-determination for the Palestinians,
2. ensuring the security of Israel,
3. establishing long-lasting peace between Israel and Syria, based on Lebanese independence and regulating the status of the Golan Heights and,
4. the full sovereignty of Lebanon. [6]

These goals benefited the Arab states rather than Israel, although it is noteworthy that Israeli security was mentioned. Such an approach should have allowed for French interests to have been achieved and secure its political influence in the region.

Finally, in regards to the Maghreb states, despite the end of French colonisation, North Africa (after 1991) was considered by many as *Francafrique*; part of its traditional sphere of influence, a point underscored by Pascallon's suggestion that the 5th Republic wanted to play a role of a *gendarme* in North and Central Africa. [7] Influence in the Maghreb was regarded as an important attribute of French status. These priorities were fundamental for France's activities in the Middle East since 1991.

The beginning of the 21st century produced new challenges for France in the region. Due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the political and security situation fundamentally changed. However, despite new problems (re: Iraq 2003 and Iran's nuclear programme), French policy stayed focused on maintaining friendly relations to Arab political elites. In particular, Chirac based his activities on contacts to a number of African and Arab politicians from Tunisia, Syria and Lebanon. For several years this approach went unchanged since it allowed France to secure its national interests. However, it also caused multiple tensions in relations to Israel (and the US) and, owing to the enduring pro-Arab strain of French foreign policy, Tel Aviv strongly opposed the involvement of France in peace mediation. [8]

Only after 2007 did French diplomacy in the Middle East change. Sarkozy maintained the traditional French support for Arab dictators however he also improved relations with Israel. Unlike his predecessors, Sarkozy no longer clung to unconditional support for the Palestinians, a point visible during his visit to Israel (June

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2008), when he accepted the logic behind the construction of the wall dividing Israel from Palestine. His critical approach to Hamas and friendly gestures towards Tel Aviv resulted in success, as the 5th Republic finally became a key mediator in the Middle East peace process. It was a great accomplishment; the 5th Republic maintained friendly relations with Arab states and Israel for the first time. [9]

From this initial historical context, it is important to fast forward to more contemporary issues since the unfolding set of revolutions sweeping the wider Middle Eastern region have undermined an assortment of relations while producing new opportunities and challenges. The remainder of this work is based on evaluating the way France has dealt with regional transformations; how it has reacted to the Arab Spring and sought to carve an appropriate niche to fulfil its enduring national interests. To achieve these goals, this work evaluates four Arab states regarded as central to France's international engagement. These are: Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya. The subsequent evaluation considers these one at a time though attempts to construct adequate bridges between these cases and the attempted fulfilment of French foreign policy objectives in the region.

Tunisia, France and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, ostensibly, began on 18 December 2010 in Tunisia following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a series of demonstrations following that ultimate act of defiance and, in typical fashion, the attempted suppression of such demonstrations by the police forces of Ben-Ali. Over the span of several weeks of street battles and the abandonment of the regime by Tunisia's armed forces, a transitional government succeeded the exiled Ben-Alis. Overlapping the events in Tunisia, demonstrations erupted in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen while lesser street activities occurred in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait and Lebanon (among others).

While each of these had its own reason for combustion; some based on legitimate demands, others on sectarianism and external agitations, and others still rooted in tribal power imbalances, together they produced an acute set of challenges for France (among others). Yet, since this work is concerned with the manner in which

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France's foreign policy reacted to the Arab Spring, analysis will remain fixed on it.

Several factors produced the clear impetuous for change to France's foreign policy. First, as noted in the introduction of this work, France's regional engagement was based on personal relations with several Arab dictators and hence, when Tunisia (especially) began to agitate for democratic reforms France found itself in a serious dilemma. On one hand France was officially a champion of democratic movements around the world and therefore should support, if not openly encourage civilian thrusts against authoritarian regimes. Alternatively however, supporting such movements would undermine a foundation of France's regional influence. Second, since it was impossible to predict the scope and results of the Arab Spring, France was caught in suspended animation waiting for – rather than shaping – policy responses. Third, the unfolding revolutions produced general instability, a point which further underscored France's seeming momentary disengagement since one of the key reasons Paris had supported authoritarian regimes was due to the perception that they were more predictable and stable. Finally, regional instability could boost illegal immigration to the EU, and hence France was keen to avoid such spill-over effects. So, when the first demonstrations in Tunisia erupted, France remained silent.

There was also a degree of embarrassment. Since France kept close political, business and personal relations with the political elites of Tunisia, it was soon revealed that many French political elites – no matter the colour of their affinity – paid homage to the Ben-Ali clique; vacationing in the country and making personal and official visits with great frequency. Indeed, in 2008 Sarkozy travelled to Tunis and piled praise on Ben-Ali for 'expanding the liberties' of his people. That same year leading member of the Socialist opposition – the now defamed former IMF managing director – Strauss-Khan also visited Tunis and congratulated Ben-Ali for being a 'model' for other emerging countries around the world. Such visits were not novel, they were merely a continuation of Chirac's policy; a policy which specifically targeted Ben-Ali as a stabilising and modernising regional power.

Such examples are typical of France's style of engagement in the Middle East. The bonds between Paris and Tunis, coupled with

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fears of instability drove France to muted reflection in the early days of demonstration. As one European diplomat suggested, France positioned itself according to the logic that it is better to deal with 'the dictator you know than the dictator you don't.' Such sentiments are not the material of policy; they reflect outmoded biases and worked to confuse France foreign policy orientation to the external international environment as much as within France itself. Just as the EU and many states around the world were looking to France for policy guidance in Tunisia, Paris could do nothing but retreat from centre-stage to better gauge the situation.

Such visible inactivity of the French government provoked internal political tensions, which reached fever-pitch as the first foreign policy announcement, with any substance, came in the form of a 'call to arms.' Minister of Foreign Affairs, Michèle Alliot-Marie, at the beginning of January 2011 suggested that France should dispatch its security forces in support Ben-Ali's regime; a shocking testament to the depth of the internal crisis the external crisis provoked. Indeed, opposition member Pierre Moscovici, commented – in response to Alliot-Marie's bizarre suggestion – that 'We [France] really have diplomacy without courage and without dignity. I am ashamed of what I have seen.' Such feelings were widespread; among the opposition and deep within French civil society. Three days later Alliot-Marie did an 'about face,' retracted her statement and clearly announced that France's foreign policy in the Maghreb is based on the principle of non-intervention. Additionally, and in contrast to the manner France had sought to re-emerge as a legitimate regional power Henri Guiano (a ranking official in the Sarkozy government), declared that France was not seeking the role of a *gendarme* in the Mediterranean. [11]

As noted above, assuming the role of *gendarme* was precisely what French foreign policy aimed to achieve and therefore the retracted statements sought to allay public and opposition-based criticism and were not truly policy statements (a point highlighted when, in March 2011, France fires the first salvos in the NATO campaign against Qadaffi). Alliot-Marie became a scapegoat for a dysfunctional policy approach and was forced to resign from office. On 18 January, she candidly admitted her, and the nation's, failures announcing: 'Let's face it, we were all of us – politicians, diplomats, researchers, journalists – taken by surprise by the Jasmine Revolu-

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tion,'[12] hardly the inspiring words of a senior member of the cabinet and rather the dumbfounded sentiment of one who had cozied too closely to the Ben-Ali regime and had to bear the consequences of its demise.

Ultimately, with growing public concern, France's policy to Tunisia changed and the crutch Ben-Ali had hoped to continue to prop him up was withdrawn. France now actively worked to support political transformations in Tunisia and in February 2011 Prime Minister Francois Fillon presented a new plan aimed at supporting democratic reforms.[13]

Approaches to Egypt

As noted, Egypt's chapter of the Arab Spring overlapped with the events unfolding in Tunisia and demonstrations erupted on 25 January 2011 around the central Tahrir Square in Cairo. What began as a series of haphazard demonstrations aimed to show solidarity with Tunisia quickly transformed into a more organised protests against the inhumane deployment of force by Egypt's security forces, limits to freedom of speech, manipulated national elections and serial, widespread corruption. Such expressions were wrapped up in the language of deposing Mubarak who had come to be regarded as *the* barrier to modernisation and obstacle to reform. Predictably, Mubarak's government called up security forces to suppress the Tahrir demonstrations through the severing of lines of communication (the internet and mobile networks) mass arrests and the deployment of rival sub-national groups loyal to Mubarak. Despite such measures, or perhaps due to them, the raw alienation of the ruling clique from the Egyptian masses was revealed, ushering in a period of sustained violence and general instability. Following a series of stammering speeches which bordered on the delusional, Mubarak – his support from the military waning – ceded power to the Supreme Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces (11 February). [14]

By the time demonstrations were in full swing, and having learned (the hard way) from its mistakes in dealing with Tunisia, France opted to engage in a more active policy approach to Egypt since the country has long been regarded as a linchpin for regional stability. Additionally, any civil war in Egypt – especially one with definite Islamic overtones – would likely undermine Israeli security

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and damage European political and economic interests. Swift action was required. So, on 28 January, just three days after the commencement of demonstrations, Alliot-Marie (who had not yet been forced to resign) issued France's first statement expressing 'deep concern over the demonstrations which have rocked Egypt for the past few days ... [France] deplores the casualties and calls for restraint.' Stressing France's friendship with Egypt, she called for dialogue between all parties in order to meet expectations of greater freedom and democracy. [15] In other words, France would not blindly support Mubarak; different priorities were being sought. France then took the initiative to bring EU states to develop a common position, which bore fruit on 29 January, when Sarkozy, Merkel and Cameron declared – in the subtle language of diplomacy – that they are

> deeply concerned about the events that we are witnessing in Egypt. We recognise the moderating role President Mubarak has played over many years in the Middle East. We now urge him to show the same moderation in addressing the current situation in Egypt.

They demanded that violence against civilians cease and human rights be respected, particularly rights connected to the freedom of speech and of assembly.[16] The trickle of concern turned into a torrent and France issued an assortment of demands ranging from the responsibility to protect journalists to pushing for a rapid transition of power in Egypt; essentially regime change from within. Then, on 11 February, Sarkozy rounded off his government's public pressure against Mubarak with a welcoming of his resignation and hope that the new Egyptian authorities would establish democracy and the rule of law. [17]

This is not to suggest that France simply weighed in against Mubarak without pause for reflection on who would replace him. Instead, Sarkozy was acutely aware of the dangers that lay ahead and the potential for abuse of the unfolding situation in the country. Therefore, France repeatedly cautioned over the future of Egypt going so far as to call of the full rejection of any kind of religious dictatorship, stressing that Western democracies had a moral responsibility to help Egypt (and Tunisia) avoid systems than would be worse than the previous dictatorships.[18] Such an orientation indicates that France was not fully swept-up in the seeming euphoria

in Tahrir (and beamed around the world); instead it was happy to see the end of the Mubarak era and with it the end of dictatorships in Egypt though attempted to take baby-steps towards full engagement with the country's new power-brokers.

Nonetheless, Foreign Minister Juppé travelled to Cairo in March (2011) where he personally congratulated Morsi and sought to convey France's interests in the region's return to stability. While there, Juppé announced (06 March) that 'In Egypt this movement is conducted in an admirable manner (…) The attitude of the armed forces and protesters, gathered in the Tahrir Square, are exemplary.' He also promised augmented financial assistance from France and the EU, underscoring the importance of the Union for the Mediterranean for Egypt. It is noteworthy however, that France rejected the suggestion that it cancel Egyptian debt.[19]

France's treatment of the Egyptian demonstrations was multipronged and contained several features worth exploring. Firstly, France openly supported the protesters and developed an anti-regime orientation. Learning from errors in Tunisia, Sarkozy expended tremendous energies attempting (partially successful) to promote France as an unflinching, unapologetic champion of democracy and inalienable human rights in the region. In doing so, Sarkozy exposed a policy inconsistency since it had, in the not-too-distant-past stated a principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Arab countries. Secondly, Sarkozy began to cooperate closely with his European allies, particularly Great Britain and Germany. This multilateral cooperation aimed at boosting the French position in the region and was not meant to construct an EU policy as such, rather it intended to legitimate France's position through the nods of approval of the UK and Germany. Thirdly, during the Egyptian demonstrations – coupled with the seeming inability of Mubarak to offer any tangible reforms – France recognised that the Arab Spring (more generally) was widespread and persistent and likely to last for some time. To better secure its interests, France undertook a series of initiatives to quell hostilities against it for its previous support of Mubarak (among others) and generate support among the so-called Arab street. Finally, France continued to harbour anxieties that the momentum of change would result in a purely Islamic revolution and subsequent state. This was a well-grounded fear since the Muslim Brotherhood – while initially taking a back-seat in the

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revolution – was the most disciplined and organised opposition group in Egypt and once it began to mobilise quickly emerged as the single strongest political force in the country. To prevent the rise of a theocratic Egyptian state France set a new – if unrealisable – goal; supporting democratic reforms as *the* avenue to suppress Islamist fundamentalism. France – like many others – expected the new authorities to respect democracy and human rights, particularly related to women and religious minorities. It has been disappointed.

The Syria Conundrum

In contrast to the short lived revolutionary zeal – though certainly not the long and arduous period of transformation – attached to both the Egyptian and Tunisian episodes, Syria's is one of phases, of demonstrations leading to suppression, suppression to insurgency, insurgency leading to a full-fledged civil war and the civil war seems likely to start a regional conflict. France, like many others, was overwhelmed attempting to deal with the unfolding regional fluctuations. As a result, it either underestimated the dedication of demonstrators to pursue a regime change strategy or overestimated the regimes ability to suppress the revolution. Additionally, – and perhaps most importantly – France was on good terms with the al Assad regime (especially during Chirac's presidency)[20] and was using its leverage in the country to balance some of the interests of Iran, Russia and China.[21]

Therefore, initially, France's reaction to the outbreak of violence in Syria was one of muted criticism and weak condemnations.

Similarly to its Egypt policy, France initiated a multilateral dynamic based around the EU, which itself only reacted to Syrian bloodshed with a limited-in-scope sanctions regime against 13 Syrian officials; adopted four months into the conflict. However with each passing day, as the death toll mounted, the EU adopted a sharper tone. On 20 June 2011, the Foreign Affairs Council of the EU took a proper stance and condemned

> in the strongest terms the worsening violence in Syria. The EU deplores that the Syrian authorities have not responded to the calls to immediately stop the violence and engage in meaningful reforms. The EU considers that the ongoing violent repression

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> in Syria constitutes a threat to internal and regional stability (…) Stressing that the current crisis can only be settled through a political process, the EU reiterates its calls on the Syrian authorities to launch a credible, genuine and inclusive national dialogue and meaningful political reforms without delay.[22]

Expectedly, the regime's reaction was rhetorical and was not reflected in policy changes. The same could not be said of the EU, which thanks largely to French initiative, imposed personal sanctions against a wider web of Syrian representatives. These sanctions were again extended on 23 June. A third wave of European sanctions was adopted at the beginning of August.[23] These measures proved ineffective; they did not force Syrian authorities to end bloodshed. However, if seen through a more symbolic lens, they mark a milestone in the EU's foreign policy as they may be regarded as foreign policy in motion rather than in retrospect.

In addition to pursuing EU options, France also commence several unilateral initiatives. In April 2011, Juppé listed four priorities to end regime repressions. First, France pledged to use all possible diplomatic means to end strife in Syria. For example, Syria's ambassador was summoned to Quai d'Orsay to provide explanations and listen to French demands. Second, Juppé announced more robust cooperation in the UNSC to get both sides to agree to an immediate ceasefire. Third, France imposed its own sanctions against the regime. Fourth, tactic communications lines were opened to the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Fifth and finally, France was set to initiate actions within the Human Rights Council (HRC), becoming the initiators of the Council's 29 April resolution which placed blame squarely on al Assad and his regime.[24] France also supported the withdrawal of the Syrian candidature from the HRC.[25]

Libya: French Style

Ultimately, France's engagement to Tunisia, Egypt and Syria pales in insignificance compared to the active role France assumed in Libya. Domestic pressure mounted against Qaddafi in February 2011 as members of Benghazi's tribes, learning from the experiences of Tunisia and sensing an opportunity, agitated for greater control over Libya's economic and political future. The Benghazi-centric

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demonstrations resembled less of a series of political gatherings and more as a rallying cry to mobilise the country against Qaddafi's rule. The Benghazi crowd drove west to Misarata, was stopped dead in its tracks and then pushed back to an inch of its life, that is, until NATO intervened and threw it a life preserver. Indeed, NATO's support was so vital, many doubt whether the revolution would have survived even an additional 24 hours more on its own. NATO's actions were largely driven by French interests and, in fact, warplanes.

The Sarkozy Factor

Sarkozy was driven by many factors. Despite Tripoli's geopolitical position beyond France's North African 'sphere of influence' (the so-called *pre carré*), [26] Qaddafi was perceived in Paris as a key actor in the Mediterranean littoral. Secondly, as suggested by Willsher, owing to very low approval ratings, and facing presidential elections (2012), Sarkozy was desperate for a political boost to reinvigorate his administration and reintroduce the *Super Sarko* nickname to the public domain. [27] These points converge with a third; Sarkozy was trying to salvage his reputation following idleness as the Arab Spring unfolded.

Indeed, the ambiguous policy during Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution coupled with cautious support for both the Egyptian and Syrian revolts, heightened French discontent. France retains the self-perception as a defender of universal values and thus the French public holds to account its leaders who are seen as undermining such values. Failing to clearly and unambiguously denounce regime-stoked violence in Tunisia, giving tied-support to demonstrators in Egypt alienated Sarkozy from his electorate and prodded him, in Libya, to apply a core element of French foreign policy: *politique de grandeur* to win over the French public.

France Libya policy was hashed in March 2011, during a decisive summit in Paris devoted to the crisis. According to Erlanger, Sarkozy announced that

> France decided to assume its role, its role before history. The decision to lead the military intervention was also explained by the humanitarian need, another important aspect of traditional French foreign policy. Muammar Qaddafi's actions against the

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rebels were considered by France as a "killing spree" against citizens wanting to "liberate themselves from servitude."[28]

Sarkozy later added that 'if we intervene on the side of the Arab nations it is because of a universal conscience that cannot tolerate such crimes.'[29] Such rhetoric marked a significant departure from the reaction to the Tunisian and Syrian crises.

Also, France must consider the foreign policy preferences of its sizable – and growing – Muslim community and balance these against the dangers of illegal immigration to Europe. When faced with having to strike such a balance, Sarkozy decided that intervening in Libya would produce three tangible results: 1. it would stem the tide of immigration since it would deny would be immigrants a reason to leave Libya; 2. it would show its Muslim population that France was also concerned with what occurred in the Muslim world; and 3. it would allow France to demonstrate its regional influence and international significance. Regarding immigration France's Minister of European Affairs Laurent Wauquiez warned of some 300,000 would-be-immigrants to Europe, adding that France regarded Libyan immigrants as a 'real risk for Europe that must not be underestimated.'[30]

Finally, Libya played into another key aspect of French foreign policy; Sarkozy's transatlantic embrace. One of Sarkozy's 2007 campaign promises was to establish a clear delineation (or intersection when needed) of responsibilities between NATO and the EU, and re-entered the Alliance (2009) to do just that. The idea was for NATO and the EU to cooperate in managing political and military problems of a transnational manner; NATO to deal with pressing conventional and asymmetrical military actions – while retaining the Alliance's deterrence capability – while the EU would focus on less defined security challenges. Cooperation would be based on greater involvement of European powers in NATO's decision-making process.[31] War in Libya provided an ideal opportunity to demonstrate how this new transatlantic security system could function.

France's Libyan Campaign

As noted above, France assumed an assertive role throughout

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the duration of upheaval in Libya. However, its first salvos were purely of a political nature as Sarkozy built the case for intervention through public appeals and consistent assigning of responsibility to Qaddafi and the tribes and military units loyal to him. This played out over nearly six-weeks in a clear attempt to heightening awareness of the situation and therefore gain a degree of legitimacy for any action that may be necessary in the future.

Once Qaddafi's forces had pushed rebels back to Benghazi, France took the lead in demanding the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya. This was not to be a standard no-fly zone that would limit the ability of Qaddafi to deploy the air-force against rebel fighters; it implied controlling the air in order to control the ground.

French officials rushed to the UNSC to plead the case for intervention in Libya, which was initially rejected as both Russia and China remained loyal to their Libya ally. Undeterred by the initial setback at the UN, Sarkozy unilaterally recognised 'the LTNC as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people,' adding, that France would send an ambassador to Benghazi. Soon after, the UK joined in the chorus and together *la entente cordial* published a joint statement emphasising the legitimacy of the LTNC and suggesting that other EU countries consider them as 'political interlocutors.'[32]

On 11 March France initiated an EU summit in Brussels devoted to the Libyan crisis. It was, however, postponed; Sarkozy's decisions produced a confused policy. According to media reports, Juppé and Fillon were unfamiliar with Sarkozy's recognition of the LNTC.[33] Such recognition also surprised several members of the EU. For instance, Merkel regarded Sarkozy's unilateralism as being against the spirit of European solidarity. Despite these problems, France was determined and pushed ahead with an emergency meeting on Libyan. Some 20 world leaders heeded the call (including the US, UK, and Germany) and ventured to Paris on 19 March to discuss possible solutions. Intervention in Libya was decided.[34]

This assembly was only last minute window-dressing however. Having passed UNSC resolution 1973 (approved on 17 March), the meeting of the 19th was surely intended to develop an enforcement strategy rather than provide Qaddafi the chance to exit Libya. Indeed, 1973 imposed the no-fly zone over Libya, called for an immediate ceasefire, and strengthened the arms embargo and an assets freeze against the regime. It also authorised the international

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community to use 'all necessary means' to protect Libya's civilian population.[35] While much of the events between 17 and 19 March 2011 remain shrouded in mystery, it is clear that France assumed a leadership role in NATO and that NATO assumed a leadership role in enforcing UNSC resolution 1973.

The Intervention

It comes as no surprise that on the 19th, while the assembly was still in session, the intervention commenced over Benghazi. French warplanes scrambled to secure the airspace above Libya. Surprisingly, the US played only a supportive role while the UK and France took the lead with the later contributing some 50 military aircraft – *Rafale*, *Mirage* and *Super Etendard* – which conducted hundreds of strikes against Qaddafi air and ground assets. It also provided helicopters, *Tigre* and *Gazelle* along with a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the *Charles de Gaulle*, the destroyer *Forbin* and the frigate *Jean Bart*.

Five months later and French aircraft had conducted roughly 4500 missions; nearly a solid third of all NATO sorties. The cost of engagement was estimated at some $2 million (USD) daily. French activities were not limited to air operations, its territorial army was also involved and providing significant material support to the rebels. Consider, for example, that by late May France was airlifting both small arms (and ammunition) and auxiliary equipment to areas south of Tripoli and the Djebel Nefousa Mountains.[36] This support was sufficient to tilt the scales of victory and from summer 2011, rebel units had turned the tide. Just as France had shot the first, so it is fitting that French forces were responsible for an air strike on Qaddafi's convoy near Sirte, which led to his capture and death at the hands of a lynch mob. Officially, NATO's Libya operation drew to a close on 31 October 2011.

Libya represents an important milestone in the history of France's international military engagements after WWII since it was the first time the 5th Republic participated in a NATO operation on such a large scale. According to Bumiller, this intervention changed the perception of French military capabilities in Washington[37] and, above all, this operation symbolise Sarkozy's vision of a new transatlantic security system where greater equality between

the US and European members of the alliance exists.

Conclusion

"Arab Spring" in French Foreign Policy

The Arab Spring has gone down in modern history as an important turning point for French foreign policy in the Middle East. For decades, France had hedged its bets by supporting dictators in the Maghreb and Mashriq. Yet, within a short period of time – essentially from the end of 2010 until early 2011 – a series of regime-shattering protests in many Arab states produced new challenges and set France on a new trajectory. Interestingly, despite its self perception as the prototypical example of a just state, France initially perceived Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution as a threat, fearing both the rise of Islamic parties and sharp increases in European immigration.

Policy change reflected the heavy public criticism lobbed at Sarkozy for allying with Ben Ali instead of the demonstrators. So, mid-demonstration and Sarkozy did an about-face and opted to support the Arab Spring. Caution was thrown to the wind during the Libyan crisis since Sarkozy recognised a chance to reaffirm French commitments to democratic values while pursuing its regional policy of power aggrandisement. France took advantage of the conflict to test the new division of responsibilities between NATO and the EU with itself at the helm; an excellent way to improve both France's and Europe's image in the eyes of the US.

Although not noted in the above rendition, it may be noted that the conflict in Libya provided economic opportunities to France in the region as well. In September 2011 media reports revealed that Libyan rebels had promised France some 35% of their national crude oil for military assistance.[38] This point certainly requires deeper evaluation; though this work defers to others' explorations owing to spatial constraints.

Equally important, it should be remembered that France's regional role since 2010 is inconsistent since attention is paid to mostly to Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, largely ignoring other episodes of political violence such as a Shia insurgency in Bahrain and a strange-brew of tribal and religious conflict in Yemen.

Finally, the French-led intervention in Libya led to a number of controversies. First, France only supported the rebels in their bid to conduct a regime change against Qaddafi. This ran counter to the letter (and spirit) of UNSC resolution 1973 which theoretically

obliged the international community to use all means necessary to force both sides to adhere to a ceasefire, which was never attempted. Additionally, NATO's operation raised doubts in Russia and China. Indeed, Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Lavrov stated that

> Members of the international community, first of all our Western partners, have chosen the path of supporting one of the sides in the civil war – probably the party that represented the Libyan people's legitimate aspirations, but this still increased the number of casualties among the civilian population.'[39]

Multiple other problems such as the circumstances of Qaddafi's death, France's oil deal and the supposed infiltration of many rebel groups by al Qaeda and other Islamist extremists have tarnished the original reasons for and outcomes of the Libyan campaign. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that democracy and human rights, despite occupying a central tenet of France's declared foreign policy goals, were rather instrumental and played minor roles in French decision-making.

Notes to Pages

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