



France and MENA Region: Shaping New Engagement under President Macron

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Amid the fast-changing scenario and the emergence of new geo-political dynamics in the Arab world, the advent of new dispensations in the US, France, the UK and other European nations have further added to the prevalent anxieties and uncertainties. US President Donald Trump has come up with a new blueprint of the country's policies in the Arab world and choosing Saudi Arabia as his first foreign destination after becoming president, He has exhorted the Muslim world to unite against Iran - an ideological and strategic rival of the Saudi Arabia. Similarly, new French President Emmanuel Macron has shown his keenness to engage in the Arab world, which in some ways appears similar to that of his predecessor. In other places, it looks contrary to what his predecessor advocated.

Outlining his foreign policy approach in the Ambassadors' Week 2017, President Macron stated, "...I have chosen the path of a France regaining its position among the nations in Europe, addressing the challenges of today's world and clearly making its viewpoint heard." In the same ambassadors' gathering, he said, "ensuring our fellow citizens' security makes the fight against Islamist terrorism the top priority of our foreign policy,"² and he also announced organization of the conference on 'mobilization against terrorism financing'³ in Paris in 2018.⁴ He was candid when he said that France should restrain from choosing sides between two rival camps in the region and emphasized that the strength of French diplomacy is that it speaks to everyone.

President Macron was vocal on the Iran nuclear deal when he underlined French adherence to the deal signed in 2015.⁵ He has already indicated that his government's policies in the region would not be guided or affected by the visible rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. He made this clearer by announcing his visit to Iran in early 2018, the first by a French head of state after 1971.⁶

President Macron's policies in the region indicate a robust activism reflecting France's desire to re-establish itself as a decision-maker or at least a partner at the negotiating table. He showed first signs of a new French engagement in the region when he invited the leaders of the warring factions in Libya, Prime Minister Al-Sarraj and Colonel Haftar in Paris to resolve the lingering political crisis there. He was able to facilitate the first ever issuance of the 10-point joint declaration calling for immediate ceasefire between the two rivals. He did not shy away from according a parallel status to Colonel Haftar when he said that political legitimacy is in the hands of Al-Sarraj while military legitimacy is in the hands of Colonel Haftar.⁷ The French President noted that these talks were important not only for France but also for Europe because Libya is a transit point for migrants and refugees from Africa. France sees Libya through the prism of the refugee crisis and rising Islamic radicalism and terrorism in Sahel and other parts of African continent.⁸ President Macron succeeded in his efforts to bring the two leaders face to face while a similar effort on the part of Egypt had failed in the past. Finally, it became only possible when the UAE had pitched in and both leaders met in the capital town of Abu Dhabi. This unilateral effort by France angered Italy which accused Paris of overriding and snubbing Rome.

Former French President Francois Hollande's policy was not to support the continuation of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. He had told the UN General Assembly that the Syrian situation was a "disgrace" to the international community. President Hollande was the only major European country head to support strikes against President Assad in 2013. Unlike his predecessor, President Macron has revisited French foreign policy towards Syria and in the early days of his presidency announced that removal of President Assad should not be a prerequisite for a political solution there.⁹ He has accepted that Syria has become an issue between Russia and the US. He seems more interested in securing a place for France at the negotiating table instead of letting the US and Russia shape the course of action. He also sees "no legitimate successor" to President Assad in Syria. He pointed out that France's priority was fighting terrorist groups and ensuring Syria did not become a failed state. Further political instability and persistent chaos would have security implications for Europe. He also questioned the opposition's credibility. Perhaps, he knows well that France's capacity to alter the facts on the ground in Syria is strictly limited. He believes that his predecessors overplayed their rhetoric and let everyone know their inability to follow through, and this is the trap he wants to avoid."¹⁰

France has now opened a channel to the Syrian opposition as well. President Macron had confirmed to the opposition leader, Hijab that France supported the HNC in the Syrian peace talks being held under UN auspices. An official statement said, "The [French] president assured Hijab of his will to engage fully and personally to achieve an inclusive political solution in the Geneva framework."¹¹

Undoubtedly, Europe was the 'linchpin' in concluding the Iran nuclear deal as well as in its future.¹² Although France had taken a hard position during the negotiations with Iran, it has steadfastly stood for its implementation but meanwhile expressed some concern along with the US over Iran's missile programme and its test. It is worth mentioning here that President Trump

considers it “the worst deal ever.” President Trump desires the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) to be amended and stricter conditions be imposed on Iran. President Trump did not issue compliance certificate in October 2017¹³. He said, “Based on the factual record I have put forward, I am announcing today that we cannot and will not make this certification. We will not continue down a path whose predictable conclusion is more violence, more terror and the very real threat of Iran’s nuclear breakout.” He criticized Iran’s ballistic missiles programme. In addition, he also wants that the restraints on Iran’s nuclear programme under JOCPA to be made permanent, and sanctions to be re-imposed immediately if those restrictions were violated.¹⁴ Reportedly, it is considered to be highly unlikely that the President will issue compliance certificate in January 2018 as well.¹⁵ France has been consistent in its stance as far as the implementation is concerned. European nations, including France, have supported the deal and maintain that it is not renegotiable. The European Union (EU) considers, “the deal was a huge prize for peace and stability in a troubled region.” The EU also argues that Iran has come back into the international community and “getting Iran back to the diplomatic table to solve those conflicts is a crucial part of what this new strategy can achieve.”¹⁶ The EU also lifted ‘all nuclear-related economic and financial’ sanctions against Iran.¹⁷ Subsequently, the EU member states have been expanding their business linkages with Tehran. In addition to trade and investment opportunities, the EU and Iran are engaging on cooperation on human rights and fight against international terrorism.

France-Iran economic relations were affected by sanctions. After the nuclear deal, there has been a substantial increase in economic exchanges. French officials were among the first foreign delegations to visit Iran after the deal. They signed many long-term agreements that include a multi-billion dollar agreement to buy 118 passenger planes from Airbus,¹⁸ the biggest-ever car deal worth several hundred million dollars with Renault and Total SA, & a Chinese oil company has signed a \$5 billion agreement with Iran to develop the country’s massive offshore natural gas field.¹⁹ Like Europe, it would be reductionist to state that French policy is the driven by trade and investment alone. French President seems to be equally concerned about expanding regional role of Iran. During his visit to Riyadh, President Macron said that there would be a serious talk on the Iranian ballistic missiles programme.

The new president’s activism was not confined to Libya, Syria or Iran but also extended to interest in mediating the Qatar crisis which erupted after four Arab nations (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) boycotted Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of abetting terrorism. French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian undertook a two-day four-nation visit to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE in July 2017 to ease the crisis in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). During his visit, the minister had said that France did not want to be a substitute to the current mediator but it would be a facilitator by joining the efforts of other mediating nations.²⁰

Another sign of France’s desire to be an important actor in the political turmoil of the region came in the Lebanon-Iran-Saudi Arabia spat after Prime Minister Saad Hariri of Lebanon resigned while he was in Saudi Arabia in first week of November, 2017. President Macron paid an

unscheduled visit to Riyadh not only to meet Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and the King in addition to other senior official but also extend an invitation to Hariri to visit France who travelled to Paris despite all sorts of political speculation. During his surprise visit to the Kingdom, he had reiterated the importance France attaches to Lebanon's stability, security, sovereignty and integrity.²¹ He played a proactive role in defusing the crisis there and his government was instrumental in putting Hariri's resignation on hold. The return of Saad Hariri and his continuation as prime minister is a diplomatic victory for France. France also led the international efforts to prevent the upending of the country's delicate, sectarian political order.²² President Macron's move was seen as taking sides in the Lebanese crisis and rebuffing Saudi Arabia to offset its regional influence. President Macron has pushed a new strategy in the region to establish France's position as major player indicating that in near future it might go along with Iran despite its early claim that France will never take side in the ongoing strategic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Lebanese crisis erupted after the sudden resignation of Prime Minister Hariri, which was an outcome of power rivalry rooted in the ongoing complex geopolitical dynamics of the region. Saudi Arabia appears to be more concerned about the influence of the Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Hezbollah wields influence in Lebanon and has close linkages with Iran. It is a partner in the coalition government formed by Prime Minister Hariri. Historically, France has been closely associated with Lebanon. France is considered as a 'nurturing mother' of Lebanon because of its old colonial and religious associations where a large number of people who profess Christianity have remained an indissoluble part of the political dispensation in country. Political and economic stability of Lebanon is a part of broader French Middle East strategy. In addition to strong economic linkages between the two, France has been supporting the military in Lebanon. Therefore, France aims to protect Lebanon from regional power struggles and being plunged into any political instability and crisis.²³ In the recent past, Lebanon enjoyed relative calm when the entire region was unstable.

President Macron's visits to Algeria and Qatar in the first week of December can be seen as another step in the direction of bolstering French strategic and diplomatic presence in the region. In his visit to Qatar, he first visited the headquarters of the US's military central command,²⁴ which is home to 10,000 US soldiers apart from a French contingent engaged in combating the ISIS. This visit was a reciprocal visit to Emir Tamim's visit to France in September, 2017. Both sides held political consultations on a wide range of issues. President Macron said that the US and French forces that France wants to avoid the partition of Syria and avoid the dominance of certain elements whose ideological and political interest do not resonate with those who are committed to establish peace and stability.²⁵ France has already invited Qatar to participate in the conference on terrorism, which would be organized in 2018.

His visit to Algeria in the same leg further demonstrated a new will on the part of the new government to expand its strategic imprint in the region and evolve common views on terrorism and mobilize a consensus on mechanisms to combat terrorism. The most pertinent issue dominating the conversation was economic cooperation and coordination in the fight against

terrorism in the African continent and other pressing issues affecting the region. France considers Algeria a bridge between the continents of Europe and Africa.

The French foreign minister's visit to Egypt to participate in the World Youth Forum in November 2017²⁶ can similarly be seen as indicative of France's new priorities in the region. It was the French minister's second visit in two months, which shows Africa as a new focal point of France's foreign policy.

Similarly, France, after Macron came to power, has taken a more serious and divergent view of Iraq and its militias which had been fighting the ISIS and other groups of miscreants there. During his conversation with the Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of Kurdish regional government when the latter was in France in early December, President Macron called on Iraq to disband the militia (Hashd al-Shaabi) which was termed by Iraqi government as an intervention in the internal affairs of the country.²⁷ Reportedly, he had also offered to mediate between Iraq and Kurdish groups during his meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister when the latter visited France²⁸ after a new crisis erupted in the country following the referendum in KRG region where voters overwhelmingly voted for independence from Iraq. President Macron said dialogue between Baghdad and the Kurds "is the only path", and his country is "ready to contribute actively to mediation."²⁹ He warned against any further escalation and asked that the two sides to remain united to defeat ISIS and stabilize Iraq. President Macron said in a statement, "All escalation should be avoided."³⁰

On the Arab-Israel conflict, he has remained consistent on a two-state solution and believes that any move for unilateral recognition of Palestine would antagonize Israel and cause instability in the region. The President reiterated several times that France would like to see both Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security, and France is against settlement on disputed lands.³¹ He lost no time in condemning the recent move of President Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the new capital of Israel and he joined the league of Arab leaders on the issue. In a statement, the French government said that the status of Jerusalem must be resolved through peaceful negotiations between Israel and Palestine.³² The Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, urged President Macron for greater role in the peace process. He, reportedly, told French President, "We have trust in you. We respect the efforts made by you and we count heavily on your efforts."³³ However, France seems to move cautiously and would not take any fresh initiative. President Macron has put national security on top of his regional and global policies in his diplomatic and strategic arena. He has taken multiple measures at home such as enacting a new terrorism law as well as socio-economic development of the poorest neighborhoods. He maintains that all nature of radicalisms rise when the state retreats from its social responsibility. On the external front he is extending all diplomatic cooperation to combat international terrorism. In the framework of fighting Islamic State, France provided military and financial support to Iraq.

An assessment of the policies of the new French President in the Arab world points out that he desires "stronger, more unified, more open" and perhaps more vocal policies in the

region.³⁴ If emerging trends in the US policy towards the region are considered selective engagement or a retreat, French policies can be seen as full engagement. France seems to be trying to establish a new imprint on the changing political and strategic horizon of the region as whole where no power would like to see a vacuum because it might be usurped by the forces which could push the region to the brink of a catastrophe. Moreover, President Macron has inherited an Arab region in which rapid changes and ever denser interconnections are the only reality and he cannot ignore and avoid the political and strategic changes swirling in the region.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

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