

France's Role in Syrian Reconstruction, and the Implications for Israel

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After almost eight years of brutal violence, the Syrian civil war is nearing a conclusion. The ultimate outcome of this conflict and the subsequent reconstruction of Syria are of utmost importance to Israel, which will need to rely on the actions of other parties in the arena with interests similar to its own. France is one such party. The French strategic interest in Syria spans decades, and since the outbreak of the civil war and the rise of the Islamic State, France has paid renewed attention to Syria. France now has now the largest Western military presence in Syria and is one of the leading providers of humanitarian aid. With the end of the war in sight, France also needs to evaluate how it can play a role in Syrian reconstruction. This article investigates the possible French involvement in the reconstruction process, focusing on the challenges President Macron will face in Syria, particularly in terms of coordination with key allies such as the United States and the European Union. Finally, the article discusses the implications of French involvement in Syria for Israeli security.

Keywords: France, Syria, reconstruction, civil war, Israel, European Union, United States

France and Syria have maintained close ties over many years. Their cultural and historical connection was formalized following the end of World War I, when France assumed a League of Nations mandate for Syria (and Lebanon). Between 1920 and 1946, France had control of economic and educational institutions that affected the lives of most Syrians. Since the end of the Mandate, however, Franco-Syrian relations have gone through numerous upheavals. In 2000, for example, French President Jacques Chirac attended

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Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's funeral, the only Western leader to do so.¹ However, relations soured in 2005 after Chirac blamed Syria for the assassination of Chirac's close friend, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.² Syria then entered a phase of isolation, and efforts to re-integrate it into the family of nations were only launched following the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who proposed that Syria join the Union for the Mediterranean – a platform for enhanced regional cooperation and dialogue involving the European Union and 15 countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.³ However, Syria suspended its membership in December 2011 following the outbreak of the civil war and the imposition of sanctions by the EU.

French Involvement following the Outbreak of the Civil War

Since the beginning of the civil war, French leaders have made it clear that the removal of President Bashar al-Assad is a top priority. France was the first country to join the United States-led coalition against ISIS, and in that context, supplied anti-Assad opposition forces with logistical support and military aid. Throughout the conflict, France has continued to insist that President Assad must resign in order for the war to end.⁴ The United States, by contrast, realized earlier on that viable alternatives to Assad's leadership had been exhausted and announced in 2017 that it would agree to Assad's remaining in power until the next scheduled election in 2021.⁵

France has also firmly articulated its staunch opposition to the use of chemical weapons. Following the deadly strike in 2013 in the area of Ghouta, President François Hollande called for military intervention, and in 2015, France began small scale airstrikes on Assad's chemical weapon facilities. After the deadly November 2015 attacks in Paris, France justified its intensified intervention against the Islamic State by citing self-defense and invoking Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and Article 42.7 of the European Union.⁶

Due to its strong opposition to the Assad leadership and its determination to fight against the Islamic State, France has repeatedly declared its support for the rebel opposition forces. By 2014, President Hollande confirmed the delivery of arms to the Syrian rebels, based on the conviction that only the non-Islamist rebels were committed to a democratic process in the country.⁷ France's tough stance in the Syrian conflict enhanced its self-perception as a great power and justified its involvement in security operations with Western allies.⁸

Challenges Facing President Macron

Like his predecessors, Macron has two main goals in Syria: to defeat the Islamic State, and to install a fair political process in Syria. France is a key partner in the global coalition against the Islamic State, which works to retake territories held by the Islamic State and ensure stability in those areas. A residual challenge for France is posed by French citizens who fought with the Islamic State and are returning home with their children. Of the European citizens who enlisted with the Islamic State, the largest contingent is French (about 42 percent of all European foreign fighters). However, of the 1,910 French foreign fighters, only 225 (12 percent) have returned to France.⁹

France's role in the coalition has become even more vital following President Donald Trump's announcement in December 2018 of the planned withdrawal of US troops from Syria. When this occurs in 2019, Macron will become commander of the largest Western force in Syria. Although there are no precise numbers of French troops actually present, Turkish media reported in March 2018 that there were 70 French soldiers serving as advisors to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria and an estimated 200 special forces operating in the country.¹⁰ As the United States withdraws, the SDF and the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YGP) will become more vulnerable both to residual Islamic State forces and to Turkish and Turkish-supported Arab Islamists. Macron's commitment to the SDF and YPG, therefore, becomes even more critical. France has provided arms and training to the YGP-led militia, which has been an essential partner in the fight against the Islamic State, and in late March 2018, he welcomed a delegation of SDF officials to the Elysée Palace. There he reiterated his commitment to the Kurds by providing French troops to support them, and expressed his hope for an inclusive and balanced leadership in northeastern Syria within the appropriate framework.¹¹ After Trump's announcement, the Kurds urged France to play a bigger role in Syria.¹²

Ultimately, the only kind of true economic influence that France and the EU have over Syria is through the sectoral sanctions. These are hardly powerful enough to convince Assad to step aside, but they may persuade him to make smaller compromises.

The French government has also provided significant humanitarian assistance packages. In April 2018, the Secretary of State to the Minister of Europe, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, announced that France's contribution in 2018-2020 would be over 1 billion euros

(250 million euros in grants and 850 million euros in loans).¹³ France has also been an active member of the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF), which provides assistance in projects ranging from water and sanitation to electricity, education, and waste management.¹⁴ Over the course of the civil war, France has contributed 20 million euros, making it the second largest donor (after Germany) among the European countries involved.¹⁵

Insofar as political outcomes are concerned, Macron's government has repeatedly stated that it wants a stable and legitimate solution to Syria, with free and fair elections.¹⁶ As part of the international community, France agreed to the adoption of the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, thus stipulating that the reconstruction of Syria should be agreed among Syrian factions under the supervision of the United Nations Special Envoy. In a speech in August 2018, Macron told his ambassadors that having President Assad remain in power would be a major mistake but that it was not up to France to appoint the future leaders of Syria. That said, Macron also emphasized that the removal of Assad was not a precondition for sending foreign aid to Syrian society, and that France would continue to do so.¹⁷

Like Israel, France has become increasingly worried about Iranian influence in Syria.¹⁸ While Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Macron may not see eye to eye regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement (JCPOA), Macron has been vocal on Iranian influence in the region and has strongly condemned it. Furthermore, in October 2018, the French government froze the assets of specific Iranian intelligence officials directly linked to a foiled bomb plot in Paris.¹⁹ French authorities had reportedly been alerted to suspicious activity by the Mossad and took

significant steps against the Iranian regime.²⁰ On the other hand, France, together with Germany, has tried to set up a back channel to maintain trade with Iran and bypass US sanctions.²¹ This channel may possibly provide France with some leverage over Iranian behavior in Syria.

Although Macron has been vociferously critical of Assad's leadership, he has also shown that he can work with other leaders involved in the conflict. In July, for example, he met with Russian President

Apart from the JCPOA, French and Israeli interests with respect to Iran and the Iranian presence in Syria overlap, and there is room for productive consultation between the two countries.

Vladimir Putin to discuss a joint humanitarian aid initiative. This initiative has been seen as a test of the French President's negotiating skills in dealing with Russia, which has a clear interest in maintaining President Assad in

power. After the meeting, France and Russia announced that they had reached a deal to deliver 44 tons of humanitarian cargo to the population of Eastern Ghouta. France gave the Russians a chance to see if they were as committed to the needs of the Syrian civilians. Although the two leaders agreed to send the aid under UN auspices, the UN denied that it was ever involved. Instead, Russian aircraft delivered the cargo into the hands of the Syrian regime, and it cannot be demonstrated that it went to meet the needs of civilians.²² For Macron, this proved that Russia's priority is maintaining the Syrian regime rather than helping civilians in need.

With the end of the civil war in sight, France must consider its role in Syria's reconstruction, which the United Nations estimates will cost \$250 billion.²³ Macron too will have to accept that for the foreseeable future, the only real alternative to dealing with Assad is abandoning any pretense at contributing to the reconstruction of a more stable Syria. This reality has implications for Israel.

President Macron's Challenges with the United States and the European Union

The cooperation of France and the United States in Syria is of high importance, but the planned withdrawal of the United States will leave France as the only Western power with "boots on the ground" in Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that the withdrawal of US troops will not affect Israeli policy, which will continue to act against Iran's attempts to entrench itself in the region.²⁴ Although that may well be the case, Israel would clearly prefer to coordinate actions with others. For Israel, there may be no true substitute for partnership with the United States, even absent a direct American military presence in Syria, but in the new reality following American withdrawal, the value of Franco-Israeli consultations will clearly be enhanced.

Of course, France will also want to coordinate closely with the European Union. The Syrian civil war has affected many EU member states, not least because of the influx of refugees seeking relief from the violence and depredations of both ISIS and the Assad regime. The EU has provided massive humanitarian assistance to those in need and has mobilized over 10.8 billion euros from its member states, making the EU the leading supplier of international relief. Furthermore, in 2011, the EU suspended its cooperation with the Syrian government and began implementing sanctions. These sanctions target the oil sector in particular, but the EU

has also frozen assets of individuals with the Syrian central bank. In total, 259 individuals and 67 entities are targeted by an EU-wide travel ban, due to their role in the violent oppression of Syrian civilians.²⁵

At the same time, divergent perspectives on Syria clearly exist within the EU. When the United Kingdom, the United States, and France conducted airstrikes on regime facilities in April 2018, the EU took its time to react and then released a statement to the effect that it “understands” the actions the three countries took but called for the urgent resumption of peace talks that could finally end the civil war.²⁶ The Union then organized the Brussels II conference in which all participating countries agreed to maintain the flow of financial assistance. However, participants produced no new ideas regarding a political solution to the conflict, instead merely restating their support for Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué and their position that the only viable solution was to implement a fair political process.²⁷ The event proved to be simply another gathering of countries reaffirming their humanitarian promises, and it highlighted how most European countries have very little desire to participate in the political rehabilitation of Syria. Indeed, some have questioned whether the reconstruction of Syria constitutes a genuine national interest. These inhibitions have left France as the only EU member with a militarily and politically significant role in Syria.

In October, Macron met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul to discuss solutions to the civil war. As expected, however, no significant result emerged from these discussions. All four leaders agreed that the best solution would come from a political process, not from military action.²⁸ Meanwhile, Assad’s forces, backed by Russian airpower, have recaptured significant stretches of Syria. Only the northern Idlib province remains in rebel hands. Russia and Turkey agreed earlier to de-escalate there because intensified fighting could well produce a humanitarian disaster.

France and Germany are keen to see a political solution that reduces the pressure of refugees seeking asylum in Europe.²⁹ And as the post-war stage of rehabilitation approaches, Russia has called on European nations to help. However, many European countries do not have the available funds or the direct interest driving them to participate in Syrian reconstruction. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has stated that Germany is willing to help with reconstruction on condition that Assad is removed from power. France too wants to see a diplomatic solution. And since Russia itself cannot

afford to repair all of the damage in Syria, the appeal for financial assistance from France and Germany gives the latter some potential leverage over Moscow. France, together with Germany, might also have some influence over Iran via the back channel on trade. Ultimately, however, the only kind of true economic influence that France and the European Union have over Syria is through the sectoral sanctions. These are hardly powerful enough to convince Assad to step aside, but they may persuade him to make smaller compromises.

Implications for Israel

Given the impending departure of US troops from Syria, France seems likely to become the Western country with the greatest influence in Syrian affairs and the greatest potential to limit Iranian presence in Syria. France's promotion of a back channel for trade and investment with Iran in an attempt to mitigate US sanctions potentially gives the French some direct leverage on Tehran. France is also apprehensive about Iran's attempts to create a Shia land bridge over the Middle East (and about Iranian involvement in French internal affairs). For all these reasons, French and Israeli interests with respect to Iran (apart from the JCPOA) and the Iranian presence in Syria overlap, and there is room for productive consultation between the two countries.

Conclusion

France's role in Syrian reconstruction is potentially significant. Given French history and foreign interests, President Macron will want to be involved. Nevertheless, to do so constructively, Macron will first have to reconcile himself to Assad's remaining in power, even at the expense of France's commitment to a peaceful and fair resolution of the conflict and the institution of a democratic process. If that happens, then French sanctions on Syria may give Macron some leverage over Assad, as does the trade channel with Iran, which provides some potential influence in Tehran. The impact of these tools should not be overestimated, but neither are they negligible. This means that a continued French presence in Syria can be compatible with Israeli security interests.

Notes

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