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France in the Eastern Mediterranean: Rushing to Save Beirut, Losing in Libya, and Standing Alone against Erdogan

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French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Beirut following the massive explosion that rocked the city reflected the trend of growing French activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially in the context of the Libyan civil war and the conflict involving Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. This activity represents an attempt to curb the weakening of French influence in the region in the face of mounting competition from other actors. Following the wave of terrorism that France suffered over the past decade, the Mediterranean has also become an essential region in France's struggle against the jihadist movements. However, despite certain advantages in terms of both hard and soft power and its strong rhetoric, France has still not succeeded in changing the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean, largely due to the lack of political planning, ineffective use of the tools at its disposal, and tactical errors. It is now perceived as one of the losers of the Libyan conflict and finds itself in the midst of a head-on confrontation with Turkey, without having been able to mobilize the support of European powers or allies in NATO. Despite the complexity of their relationship, Israel and France have common interests in the different arenas in the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, the French failures thus far should also concern Israel.

French policy in the Mediterranean region is based on national interests and *realpolitik*. France views itself as a first-tier power in the region with a number of advantages. It is the only Mediterranean country with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, and it maintains the strongest army of all the countries in the region. Although in recent years France has given priority to military deployment in Africa, French forces are also deployed in a number of key points in the Eastern Mediterranean and are involved in its own operations, as well as the operations of the European Union and NATO. In addition, France can rely on soft power in the region based on its historic ties with many regional actors, complex though these ties may be. French is a spoken language among different Mediterranean populations, and the broad French diplomatic and educational network in the region also serves Paris as a means of influence. France has recently displayed increasing involvement in the region, which, although consistent with its ongoing interest

in the region's developments and trends, also reflects the personal desire of French President Emmanuel Macron to play a more significant role in these processes.

However, France has exhibited some ineffectiveness in the use of the tools at its disposal. Despite its standing in the UN, it has not managed to sound an influential voice within the organization with regard to the Mediterranean; it appears hesitant to use its military power; and French institutions in the region suffer from under-budgeting. France also has not found a balance between its desire to work in conjunction with other European countries and its aspiration to defend its own freedom of action. In tandem, its actions have drawn criticism from its partners in Europe. France's regional status has been negatively affected by developments related to the growing Russian and Chinese presence in the Middle East, and the increasing influence of regional powers, such as Turkey and the Gulf states. Despite a number of successes of individual French companies, France lags behind Germany and Italy in terms of trade in the region and has difficulty maintaining its economic standing, even in countries where it dominated economically. In addition, French soft power in the Eastern Mediterranean is now in direct competition with the more effective activity of countries such as England and to some extent, Germany as well.

The instability in the Eastern Mediterranean can also harm France. The wave of immigrants reaching Italy from the shores of Africa, who then proceed to other countries in Europe, worries the French, who are also highly concerned with the jihadist activity in the region, particularly after the serious terrorist attacks they experienced in 2015 and 2016. Therefore, France is trying to develop a strategy that will interface with its military action in Africa to help "push" the terrorist groups far from its territory.

Accordingly, French policy in the region is based on two principal goals. First, France wants to maintain and, if possible, also improve its status in the Mediterranean. Second, Paris is trying to strengthen the regional actors whom it regards as effective in the fight against Islamic terrorism.

Macron's visit to Beirut on August 6, 2020 reflected this policy. The French President was the first international leader to travel to the site of the disaster. He promised to help Lebanon, based on the special relationship between the two countries, and said that France would coordinate the international assistance for the country. Macron spoke with citizens, mostly in French, who implored him to rescue them; met with Lebanese leaders, including a Hezbollah representative; demanded a new political order in Lebanon; and promised that he would return to Beirut in September. The visit constitutes a short-term success for Macron, at least in the realm of public relations: he placed himself at the heart of events and expressed his country's aspiration to play a central role in reconstructing

Lebanon. Still, it is not certain whether this success will continue in the long term. The August 9 online meeting of donor countries presided over by Macron demonstrated the centrality of France, but at the same time reflected its limitations. Although Macron succeeded in assembling around him representatives of more than 30 countries, including US President Donald Trump, regional leaders, and a representative of China, representatives of Russia, Turkey, and Iran – although all three countries promised to assist Lebanon – were blatantly absent. It is still too early to know whether the local actors will agree to cooperate with the old colonial power, or whether France will convince the other powers to allow it to play the central role it seeks in Lebanon's reconstruction. Consequently, a gap may emerge between the impressive French declarations and France's actual ability to establish facts that reinforce its regional status.

This was the pattern in the two main arenas that have recently seen increased French activity, Libya and the Turkey-Greece-Cyprus triangle. In Libya, French governments have regarded General Khalifa Haftar as an essential actor for removing the jihadist groups. On this basis, France has remained Haftar's main supporter in all stages of the conflict. In the showdown between Turkey and its Hellenic neighbors, Paris has expressed its distinct support for the Greek and the Cypriot position, while viewing itself as the guardian of the interests of the European Union in the region. France provides outside support for the EastMed Gas Forum and has issued a large number of joint statements denouncing Turkish activity there. It has also increased its military presence in Cyprus. Following the latest Turkish moves in the Eastern Mediterranean in early August, Macron expressed his full support for Greece, condemned Ankara's stance, and announced the reinforcement of French military presence in the region. However, French policy in both of these arenas has thus far borne no fruit. The French support was insufficient to bring about Haftar's victory, and he has suffered difficult losses at the hands of forces of the Government of National Accord of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. These defeats have also been perceived as tactical French losses. In tandem, French assertiveness in matters of Mediterranean natural gas has done nothing to restrain Turkish activity on the region.

These events have led the French government to a complicated place, especially vis-à-vis Ankara. The French stance in the Libyan conflict has positioned France on the front line against Turkey, which is an ally of Sarraj. Similarly, France's support of Greece and Cyprus has led to an open conflict between Ankara and Paris. This conflict, which has many roots, worsened recently when, after years of Macron and Erdogan exchanging verbal attacks, a maritime incident on June 10 further increased tensions between the two countries. France maintains that Turkish vessels threatened a French frigate when, within the framework of NATO, it sought to check the cargo of a ship bound for Libya based on concerns that it was engaged in arms smuggling. Turkey, for its part, claims that the

French frigate harassed the Turkish ships, which were escorting humanitarian cargo, and demands an apology from Paris.

France's isolation was highlighted by this incident, as NATO members preferred to respond with significant moderation instead of supporting France's position against Turkey, and the inquiry conducted by NATO concluded that it was impossible to know who bore responsible for the incident. In the European arena, although on the sidelines of the last European Council Italy and Germany agreed to a joint statement with France against weapons smuggling to Libya, cooperation between the three countries remains minimal. Rome supports Sarraj in Libya as part of a more balanced foreign policy, and Berlin is trying to prevent escalation in the region, for example, by serving as a mediator between Turkey and Greece. As the tensions between the two countries increased in the last weeks, France found itself once again isolated, and unable to mobilize any significant support from either its NATO allies or its European partners.

French policy in the Eastern Mediterranean can have a significant impact on Israel. Even if Jerusalem keeps its distance from the Libya conflict, the camp of Haftar supporters includes most of the countries in the region toward which Israel has moved closer in recent years or with which it has maintained good relations, specifically Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. As such, Jerusalem and Paris share at least some interests regarding the Libyan arena. Even closer interests exist between the two regarding the issue of natural gas in the Mediterranean. Israel is part of the EastMed Gas Forum, is still committed to the idea of building the EastMed pipeline, and has developed close relations with Greece and Cyprus at a time when its relations with Turkey are at a nadir. As Turkey has adopted an aggressive approach in the Eastern Mediterranean, the entry of a significant actor into the balance of power on the side of the Hellenic states could have a positive impact for Israel, even if it is still difficult to know the extent to which France is willing to act in order to defend its position regarding Ankara, or whether it will be able to change the regional balance of power.

Despite the complexity of relations between France and Israel, mutual interests can serve as a basis for closer relations between them. At the same time, France's limited ability to shift the regional balance of power in its favor is bad news for Israel too. Israeli decision makers can also learn from France's experience, which presents a model of ineffective policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, despite relative advantages, France's assertive conduct – without in-depth political planning, consistency, or cooperation with its allies – has thus far resulted in its failure to promote its interests in this tempestuous region.