



France and the Syrian Civil War: From Diplomacy to Military Intervention?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: France has changed its view that conflicts can be resolved only through diplomacy. This explains the country's recent military activism in Libya, Mali, and perhaps soon in Syria, as well.

French President François Hollande has been almost the only Western leader to express straightforward support for a US-led punitive military strike against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

This support raised some eyebrows, since in the past France was usually opposed to military interventions that lacked a United Nations Security Council mandate. That was the case with former president Jacques Chirac's opposition to the 2003 US military intervention in Iraq, which he labeled as unilateral and immoral.

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, France has provided consistent humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic support for the Syrian opposition. Paris has also made considerable efforts to unblock the dead-end at the UNSC – caused by a Russian veto – in order to reach a consensus decision to act against the Assad regime. In December 2012 it hosted an international conference to raise money for the insurgents and help them restore civil life to areas held by the Syrian opposition. France was active in urging the various factions of the Syrian opposition to unite and create an alternative government to the Assad regime, and was even the first Western country to recognize it once it was formed.

At the same time, however, France has displayed an ambiguous stance regarding a potential military intervention in Syria. Initially it was

firmly opposed to any military intervention – such as creating a no-fly zone or supplying weapons to the Syrian opposition – unless it received a UNSC mandate.

French resistance to the arming of the Syrian opposition became more flexible in May 2013, when France and Britain expressed support for the lifting of the arms embargo on the moderate Syrian opposition. However, France immediately reversed its position, claiming the need for caution as a result of the involvement among the insurgents of the terrorist group al-Nusra Front, which aligns itself with al-Qaeda.

The allegations regarding the Assad regime's responsibility for the disastrous results of its use of chemical weapons against its own citizens on August 21, 2013 have produced a less ambivalent French position. President Hollande announced that his country would join the US in a military operation against Assad – despite the opposition of Britain, Germany, and other EU member states to a military intervention, and in spite of the strong criticism in France. He conditioned his support, however, with an ambiguous demand that the military intervention be proportional.

France's persistent engagement on behalf of the Syrian opposition, regardless of its ambivalence, reflects its traditional aspiration to play an influential role on the international scene. France defines the Middle East, particularly Lebanon, as a region of top priority for its interests.

Hence, France is tremendously concerned by Hizballah's involvement in the Syrian civil war and by the spillover of the war into Lebanon. France is equally concerned by the spillover of the bloodshed in Syria to other neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, and even to its own territory. In addition, France is concerned by the alarming prospect of Assad's non-conventional weapons falling into the hands of terrorist groups, thus endangering the world's security.

France sees itself as an important actor on the international scene in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and it therefore believes that a strong message must be sent to Syria in order to deter any future use of chemical weapons. Accordingly, Iran's increased involvement in Syria also constitutes a significant source of concern for France, since Paris considers the Iranian nuclear project as a major threat to world security.

As evident in Hollande's recent declarations, France has changed its perception that conflicts can be resolved only through diplomacy. Accordingly, France has reached the conclusion that diplomatic action is not

sufficient in stopping the Syrian bloodshed – with all its disastrous repercussions – and that diplomacy has to be backed by French military capacities, thus ensuring France’s own vital interests.

French willingness to join the US in a military intervention against the Assad regime is thus consistent with the French military activism demonstrated in its military operations in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). Apparently France views all three conflicts as “zero-sum games,” with all-or-nothing outcomes, and not as “win-win situations,” which leave room for diplomatic mediation and compromise. In addition, the three conflicts have occurred in places defined by France as affecting its top priority national security.

Finally, with all the problematic aspects of predictions, there is a high probability that despite the strong opposition to a military intervention within the French public opinion and political class, France will join the US when it takes the crucial decision on a military intervention in Syria.

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