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‘France will not give in to terrorism’¹

Almost three weeks have passed since France’s first contribution to US-led air strikes over Iraq. With no sign of the imminent (or otherwise) eradication of Islamic State/Daesh² in Iraq or Syria, France’s formal military commitment to the international campaign is increasing.

The apparent contrast between France’s reluctance to intervene in Iraq in 2003, and the current status as the first of the US’ major western allies to join air strikes in 2014, has not been lost on observers. Direct linkage between the two, however, is misleading. President Hollande’s decision of 18 September to commit to air strikes in fact reflects two different features. The first is the longer-term appreciation of the increased terrorist threat facing France. The second is France’s stance under Hollande’s presidency over protracted problems in the Middle East and North Africa region, not least of which is Syria. However, despite the determination to act against IS/Daesh and to combat the dangers of terrorism, questions arise from France’s actions which are not easily answered.

The increased perception of terrorist threat

Hollande’s decision to contribute to US-led air strikes over Iraq was explicitly linked to threats of terrorism. This was partly a matter of responding to requests for assistance against terrorist advances from the legitimate Iraqi government, thus preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the legitimate Iraqi state. It was also a matter of preventing the extension of the threat posed by Islamist terrorism to France, and Europe. Echoes of the intervention in Mali from January 2013 are not coincidental.

The perception of French vulnerability to terrorist attack is not new, dating back at least to the 1970s.³ By the 1990s, the principal threat to French security and interests emerged from the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) linked to the ongoing civil war in Algeria.

The events of 11 September 2001 accentuated the perception of threat, which was further exacerbated in 2002 by a bomb attack in Karachi which killed eleven French naval engineers, and an attack on the French oil tanker *Limburg* off the coast of Yemen. Both attacks were claimed or attributed to Al Qaeda affiliates. By 2005, the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat – formerly the GIA) had designated France its principal enemy, at least in part in reaction to the passage of France’s law on secularism in 2004;

¹ Formal statement by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic (New York, 24 September 2014) at <<http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2014-09-25.html>>.

² The French government refers to Islamic State as Daesh, deriving from the acronym ISIL in Arabic and in common with certain opponents of IS in the Arab world. This is on the grounds first that the group is not a state and has no legitimacy as such, and second that it has no claim to represent all Muslims. This piece will refer throughout to IS/Daesh, reflecting the use of both terms.

³ See Rachel Utley, ‘At War with Al Qaeda: France and International Terrorism, 2001-2011’ in R. E. Utley, ed., *9/11 Ten Years After: Problems and Perspectives* (Aldershot; Ashgate, 2012) pp. 45-64.

and following the GSPC's affiliation with Al Qaeda in 2006, threats against France were explicit. By 2008 President Nicolas Sarkozy maintained that 'the most immediate threat is that of a terrorist attack';⁴ while in 2010 Prime Minister Fillon insisted 'We are at war with Al Qaeda...'⁵.

Moreover, the threat emanates as much from within as outside France. GIA terrorism in the 1990s was effective at least in part due to the existence of pre-positioned cells in France. In the period since 9/11, a succession of terrorist plots against targets in France are said to have been thwarted, recently including threats against Jewish targets, the national nuclear power infrastructure, and high-profile tourist attractions. Not all attacks have been averted. In 2012 for example, the gunman Mohamed Merah killed seven and injured two others, having apparently claimed links to Al Qaeda and travelled to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. And in 2013, a soldier was repeatedly stabbed at La Défense on the outskirts of Paris; the radicalisation of the perpetrator was already known to police. Indeed radicalisation within France (as elsewhere) is a considerable problem. By autumn 2014, Foreign Minister Fabius argued that almost one thousand French citizens or residents had joined or sought to join IS/Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and the topic was also on the agenda when Prime Minister Valls visited UK Prime Minister David Cameron in London earlier this week.⁶

Consequently the rapid progress of IS/Daesh over the course of 2014, the rate of its territorial expansion and ambition, the scale of its challenge to existing states in the region and those beyond, alongside the depth of threats to France, all weighed on Hollande's decision to commit to air strikes against targets in Iraq.

The problem of Syria

However, France has specifically not made the same commitment to date in respect of targets in Syria. In some ways, given the strength of French rhetoric against Assad, and the will to reinforce that rhetoric with military intervention after the use of chemical weapons in August 2013, this might seem to jar.

Both Hollande and Fabius have been undiplomatically outspoken against the Assad regime since Hollande came to office.⁷ The logical corollary was the decision that France would work to unify the more moderate opposition forces in Syria, offering political, financial and humanitarian support, as well as undertaking bilateral and multilateral

⁴ 'French defence to counter terror,' *BBC News Online*, 17 June 2008 at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7458650.stm>>

⁵ 'France's War on Terror: Paris takes the fight to al Qaeda in Africa,' *Wall Street Journal Online*, 30 July 2010 at

<<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703578104575396912437173940.html#articleTabs%3Darticle>>

⁶ 'PM Meeting with Prime Minister Valls of France: October 2014,' at

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-prime-minister-valls-of-france-october-2014>>

⁷ See for example 'Interview given by M. Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the newspaper *Le Monde* (excerpts),' Paris, 29 May 2012 at <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org> accessed 8 March 2013; and '67th United Nations General Assembly – Speech by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic,' New York, 25 September 2012 at <http://www.ambafrance-uk.org> accessed 8 March 2013.

diplomatic initiatives to garner international backing for the anti-Assad forces. Military support and equipment were also made available, and special forces were covertly engaged in Syria within months of Hollande's election.⁸ After the 2013 chemical weapons attacks, France was at the forefront of pressures for international military intervention against the Assad regime.

In contrast, the reasons for French reluctance one year on are inherently linked to the rationale for intervention against IS/Daesh in Iraq, namely the significance of the threat, and the salience of sovereign state legitimacy. Explicitly for France, and notwithstanding the threat posed, the Assad regime does not have legitimacy. Thus Hollande and his government are particularly averse to the prospect of intervention in Syria with the logical outcome that if IS/Daesh is weakened, the hold of Assad over his territory and peoples may be strengthened. Moreover, there is a strong sense that had intervention occurred a year ago, the present problems with IS/Daesh would be less acute. For these reasons the French government has robustly endeavoured to square the circle. 'France cannot do everything,' said Fabius⁹; for Hollande, 'We want to weaken [IS/Daesh]. We want to quash it, but we also know that as long as there is no resolution to the Syria crisis, all of our efforts may be undermined, so the challenge is not only to act against Daesh but also to achieve a political solution. We, France, support the Syrian opposition, the democratic opposition. We consider it the sole representative of the Syrian people.'¹⁰

More questions than answers?

The difficulties with this position are numerous.

In military terms, France's contribution to US-led air strikes is very small, and its limitation to targets in Iraq reduces its military impact still further. The promise to enhance the operational tempo of the French contribution through additional deployments currently under way is of little use given the consolidation of IS/Daesh in Syria, and the extent of its continuing operations there.

In strategic terms, the effective identification of a two-front battle against IS/Daesh and the Assad regime is not entirely helpful, when the means to address the problems have not been forthcoming. But it may be significant that recent statements by Fabius and Defence Minister Le Drian have been equivocal on this matter, testing the water perhaps in respect of an extension of operations to targets in Syria. 'Mission creep' would be neither welcome nor necessarily sustainable in view of the already extended nature of France's military engagements.

⁸ Rachel Utley, France and the Arab Upheavals: Beyond Sarkozy,' *RUSI Journal*, vol. 158, no. 2 (2013) pp. 68-79.

⁹ Statements by M. Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development, to the Council on Foreign Relations (New York, 22 September 2014) at

<<http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2014-09-23.html>>

¹⁰ Speech by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic (New York, 24 September 2014) at <<http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2014-09-25.html#Chapitre3>>

Recognising that military resources are not the only ones with relevance, it is also likely that France is positioning for a stronger diplomatic role as the conflict progresses. The international conference on Iraq held in Paris in September, like previous international meetings held over Syria, would emphasise this view. But it is difficult to perceive of France as a credible broker, either in Iraq where there are still fences to mend given previous French relations with that country, or in Syria when French aid in all forms to the opposition hardly makes for a disinterested party.

And as Hollande and his ministers point out, threats to France are also to be found closer to home. While there are some questions about capacity to affect the external situation, the same can be said of the internal challenges. Weaknesses of policing, intelligence and coordination have all been recently exposed. And dealing with radicalisation at source is problematic, not least in a society whose secular legal frameworks have the perceived effect of disproportionate discrimination against the Muslim population in France.

‘We will continue to fight against terrorism wherever it may be, and in particular against the group we call Daesh...’¹¹

In these terms, after the murder of the French hostage Hervé Gourdel in retaliation for French air strikes against IS/Daesh in Iraq, President François Hollande insisted that France’s participation in the US-led campaign would continue. To date, public opinion has been supportive. The difficulty arises that these measures as implemented so far are unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes, and may even stoke the problems they are intended to address. At this point, the challenges of IS/Daesh in Syria, and the ongoing problem for France of the continuation of the Assad regime, are unmet. The potential contradictions of French policy to date in addressing the multiple facets of this broader problem are very exposed.

¹¹ Formal statement by M. François Hollande, President of the Republic (New York, 24 September 2014) at <<http://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/vues/Kiosque/FranceDiplomatie/kiosque.php?fichier=baen2014-09-25.html>>.