

# François Hollande and the Mediterranean Region

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In office since May 2012, François Hollande is the second left-wing politician after François Mitterrand to hold the position of President of the 5th Republic. His programme, actions and style differ greatly from that of his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, who was in power from 2007 to 2012. Though this is particularly true in the realm of internal affairs, it is also the case in matters of diplomacy and foreign relations, especially with regard to the Mediterranean Region. Changes can be observed, which in any case come within a fragile European context and a period marked by new strategic concerns in the Mediterranean.

## **The French and Europe First and Foremost**

President Hollande is dealing with a national situation that can be described as sensitive, to say the least. Public finances are deteriorating and France has not been spared the unemployment problem, a central concern in the Mediterranean Region. The country's economic recovery is one of Hollande's priorities. In foreign policy, European issues are pre-eminent. Rescuing the single currency, preserving solidarity between Member States (in particular Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal) and maintaining common policies such as those in the agriculture sphere constitute the main lines of ac-

tion for Paris. Insofar as the Franco-German pair, so essential for the construction of the European Union, the terms of fiscal austerity to be applied are the object of genuine debate. Beyond European borders, Hollande has above all become known for his action in Mali, when he decided to undertake a military intervention in early 2013 in this Sahel State beset by Islamist terrorism. Taking up his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he managed to grasp the geopolitical gravity of the situation, although the question of the withdrawal of the French troops remains at issue. The intervention lends the Sahel region a prominent strategic role on the French diplomatic agenda. This reclassification is made at the expense of a Mediterranean area where President Hollande seems to have made certain choices of a geographical nature and where France remains sometimes helpless in the face of the ongoing popular uprisings.

## **Special but Less Multilateral Relations with the Mediterranean Region**

The Mediterranean area is a focal point of French foreign policy. It is a constant that goes beyond electoral contingencies and obliges each decision-maker. For French interests, France's domestic stability and preserving the country's international influence, the Mediterranean remains indispensable. Even if the proximity of relations has declined over time and certain economic positions are eroding, France remains tied to Mediterranean countries through its geography, commerce, society and culture. The francophone community still finds itself significantly reflected in this region. Many local authorities in

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France have built long-term relations with cities and regions along the Mediterranean shores. Many French companies invest in the area, which is also a growing market in certain consumer segments. Human flows are, moreover, very dense between France and the southern and eastern Mediterranean Countries for family, tourist or professional reasons. On the geopolitical level, Paris played an essential role in the European Union's proposing the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995. In 2008, France put forth the idea of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Finally, with regards to conflict management, if it is not decisive, France's voice is still heard even if it may often seem to lag behind the United States, especially in the Middle East.

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Since his accession to the presidency, François Hollande has, naturally, continued this long-standing, passionate and particular relation with the Mediterranean Region. A number of new directions have been undertaken, however. The French President is aware of the disappointment arising from the failure of the UfM launched by Sarkozy. He likewise knows that the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Syrian revolutions have seriously transformed the geopolitical landscape of a Mediterranean Basin that is more atomised than united, more differentiated than homogeneous. The result is that multilateral action in this socio-politically agitated region has become highly complex. The differences between countries are heightened. Extra-regional actors are dominating trade, as for instance, China; getting involved in the military sphere, as for instance, Russia; or deploying economic and religious diplomacy, as for instance, Qatar or Saudi Arabia. The stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Syria and non-integration of Maghreb people in France are additional parameters

handicapping the development of multilateral relations between Mediterranean States. It is thus not surprising that France, like the EU, lends precedence to the bilateral dimension to conduct its Mediterranean policy. In the spring of 2011, Brussels reactivated its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) by reorientating it towards sectoral priorities while confirming the principle of differentiation. This trend has been identical or nearly identical in French policy.

### **Hollande and the Mediterranean Region: The Heart or the Mind?**

Since his election, François Hollande has thus been facing the need to define a French Mediterranean policy that will take into account the *acquis*, fit within the EU approach and carry new impetus. He must likewise deal with the dividing line in France, extant among both the left and the right, between partisans of an Atlantic/Western alignment, turned towards Washington, and those advocating a De Gaulle-Mitterrand approach, more willing to listen to countries of the south and emerging countries, and who uphold maintaining a certain strategic independence. The President has shown great caution. He knows that the position of France has been disappointing at the time of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, that its intervention in Libya had gone too far, that its voluntarism with regards to the Sahel crisis is risky and that France is obliged to support the American's strategy in the Middle East. To differentiate himself from Sarkozy, the President should not confuse speed with haste. By advocating support to the transitions underway in countries having experienced political upheaval, Hollande is taking a pragmatic approach. Insofar as the new governments established in south Mediterranean countries, he uses a positive, open and confiding tone, though certain sensitive points are closely scrutinised (respect for opposition parties, women's rights and minority rights). In this manner, France seeks to maintain relations with the ensemble of the political forces in these countries, in particular in Tunisia, a country the French government considers the laboratory of the transitions underway and of democratisation in the Arab world. Concerning the Maghreb, Hollande cultivates good relations with Morocco, where he made a successful

state visit in April 2013. However, he is seeking to rebalance French Policy in Algeria where he went on a state visit in December 2012 while the country quietly supported the French operation in Mali for the first time since its independence. The French President also went to Tunisia on 4 and 5 July 2013, applauding the “transition” and the “movement” in that country, in contrast to the messages delivered to its two Maghrebi neighbours, where Hollande had placed greater emphasis on “stability” and “continuity.” Consolidating French presence and pursuing partnership with Maghrebi countries are even more necessary now that the terrorist threats in the Sahel and the risks associated with the intervention in Mali have become factors.

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On the other hand, France's silence on Libya persists and contrasts sharply with the posture of his predecessor vis-à-vis Tripoli. Moreover, the further east the pointer moves, the less clear and coherent President Hollande's actions seem. With regard to Egypt and its turmoil, France displays an expectant attitude. In the case of Syria, bungling predominates, illustrated by the idea of delivering weapons to the insurgents. This operation, fleetingly considered by Paris, was quickly suspended in the spring of 2013. The militarisation and sectarianisation in Syria are sowing a great deal of doubt in France insofar as the outcome of the conflict, which has been ongoing for two years now. Hollande, like so many other European leaders, condemns the violence, dreads the collateral effects in the region (in particular in Lebanon), but proves unable to influence the course of events, which one can assume clearly depends on true consensus among all stakeholders, including

Russia, China, Iran, etc. In addition, Paris has the constraint of following American positions on the Middle East after having received Washington's manifest diplomatic and logistic support in Mali. France could thus be conducted to support an American operation that is far-removed from its own interests. On the Israeli-Palestinian question, the French President is not venturing beyond the perimeter set by the Western line, which consists of expressing the wish to re-establish dialogue between the two parties in order to relaunch the peace process, currently at a standstill. In neglecting certain campaign promises on the recognition of the Palestinian State, Hollande regularly disappoints human rights activists and those who advocate that Paris take a strong position on the Middle East capable of providing an alternative to the current deadlock. In the eastern Mediterranean Basin, relations are warming up with Turkey, though one cannot speak of veritable enthusiasm. Improving relations with Ankara and boosting trade with this growing market constitute some of the goals of the current administration, which intends to put into practice the President's will to promote “economic diplomacy,” a concept with which Mediterranean countries will have to contend henceforth.

### **Hollande and the Mediterranean Region: Circumstantial Pragmatism**

Despite this growing bilateralisation of French policy in the Mediterranean Region, François Hollande is attempting to nurture the conventional discourse on multilateral co-operation in the region. On 27 August 2012, in that inevitable annual exercise, the President established the framework for French foreign policy in his speech to ambassadors. He recalled the country's ambition with regard to the Mediterranean, where situations are changing, which in his opinion requires that France adapt and prove itself capable of listening to the different aspirations being expressed. Committed to the mobilisation of the UfM Technical Secretariat's capabilities, Hollande brandished the leitmotiv of this initiative again in advocating a “Mediterranean of projects” and creating on January 2013 an inter-ministerial delegation for the Mediterranean (DIMed). This is an interesting national signal sent in the direction of partner coun-

tries in the region, as is the emphasis placed on youth, civil society and training.

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It is too early to judge Hollande's actions with regard to the Mediterranean Region. This said, a number of trends can be identified and several certainties emerge. The President wishes to rebuild confidence in the region and restore France's image, at times deteriorated, before the civil society of certain coun-

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tries. He is advancing in this direction with his administration, prudently yet professionally. He is making geographical choices by strategic priority. In any case, too much orientation towards the Maghreb could be negatively perceived by certain Middle East States and would be vulnerable to rivalries among the different North African nations, still guided by notorious antagonisms. Suffice it to consider the extreme sensitivity of Sahrawi affairs to perceive the diplomatic dangers on the horizon. The thorny question of the Sahel will also serve as a test to ascertain how far France will go in its expression of influential power in regional affairs, and free itself from so much pressure from the U.S and other pressure related to the strategies of the Persian Gulf countries. And finally, we must consider whether Paris will manage to durably cultivate its multilateral discourse on the Mediterranean policies of an economically weakened Europe that tomorrow will prefer to speak of a "neighbourhood" where it formerly spoke of a "partnership"; for to remain a prominent power, France needs Europe as much as it does the Mediterranean.