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WILL FRANCE SHIFT ITS SYRIA POLICY?

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France was the first country in the West, and the quickest to recognise the Syrian National Coalition as the “unique representative” of the Syrian people thus breaking with Bashar al-Assad’s government. This was very much François Hollande’s decision after he was elected president in May 2012 and that of his Foreign Affairs minister, Laurent Fabius, whose other twin hatreds are Russia and Iran. This “moderate” opposition has failed to deliver and ended ever more marginalised by the growing strength of jihadi groups, including the so-called Islamic State which claimed responsibility for last Friday’s Paris attacks, the worse terrorist outrage to hit the French capital in living memory.

The French president has called for al-Assad’s removal again and again, followed by his peers in London and Washington, Laurent Fabius went so far of speaking of eliminating him. This hard line has slowly and surely come unstuck since August 2013 after the chemical weapons attack by Syrian government forces crossed the “red lines” established by Barack Obama. French planes were ready for taking off on a punitive expedition when the House of Commons, in a surprise vote, stopped the prime minister David Cameron from taking military action and Obama’s decision to consult Congress killed any chance of a quick response. Hollande felt betrayed, if not ridiculed and the Syrian president was free to pursue his murderous confrontation with his people, pushing millions of them to take refuge in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Vladimir Putin’s decision to enter the Syrian war game is the second game changer, which took both Paris and Washington by surprise. Choosing the moral high ground and refusing to be associated either with a murderous regime or with ISIS, Hollande was left with no practical option in a situation which involves choosing the least bad option rather than the best one.

The last three years have witnessed the transformation of a career politician who had virtually no knowledge of international affairs, in particular the Middle East, known for his dislike of confrontation, into a commander in chief who is not unduly worried by sending guided missiles or special forces to eliminate targets in far away lands. “*Vos guerre, nos morts*” was a much quoted slogan circulating on French social networks after last week’s attacks. The French constitution in no way obliges the French head of state to seek the approval of parliament before going to war.

The absence of any in depth discussion among deputies of France's foreign policy under François Hollande and his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy is nonetheless striking. All the more as any decision which affects the Middle East and North Africa has many domestic repercussions, the most recent of which is the recruiting by ISIS of "fighters" who are French, not always of Muslim confession. With the largest community of Muslims in Europe, French foreign policy should take into account possible reactions from its own citizens more than was the case a generation ago. Constant talk of fighting Islamic extremism, of bombing extremist groups in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Mali risks creating an atmosphere in which young Frenchmen might fear Islam itself is under attack.

The unease about French policy in Syria is not confined to social networks. It has been growing in recent months in the president's own Socialist Party and has been present from the start among some of France's most respected diplomats, people who were aghast at what they considered the lack of concern Sarkozy showed towards the chaos in Libya which they thought likely to follow the elimination of Muammar Gaddafi. A growing number are now calling for an alternative policy towards Syria as reports revealed that the terrorists have shouted comments about the war in Syria.

France's response has been to intensify its military involvement. The debate on western policy is bound to intensify but whether it will be clarified is anybody's guess but advocates of a change can be found in both camps. After a visit to Moscow, Sarkozy who has ambitions to return to power in the 2017 presidential election, advocated a shift in policy, following in the footsteps of Hubert Védrine, the respected former Socialist Foreign Minister, who made the analogy with the Second World War choice by democratic countries to ally with Stalin against Hitler.

A complete reversal of the anti Al-Assad policy seems unlikely in the short term but western policy may have, under the force of circumstance to focus of defeating ISIS while playing down subsidiary goals. Whatever his decision, François Hollande is going to have to explain his foreign policy to the French people in far greater clarity than he has deigned to do so far. If he fails to do so after last week end's carnage, he risks losing their trust.

Recent events also need to be set in a context where France's internal intelligence agency (DGSI) is having to shift from its police methods to an intelligence-led approach to get on top of what is a growing threat. French intercept capabilities come under the external intelligence service DGSE and are not as easily directed against terrorists. In London the two sides of intelligence learned to work much closer following the bombing of the underground system in 2005. The situation in France is aggravated by the lack of qualified personnel needed to investigate suspects, the bombastic statements of senior politicians and the decision to remove independent minded investigating magistrates who had specialised in terrorism from their jobs and hand more power to the intelligence service.

This sad state of affairs was criticised in a biting interview of France's top investigative magistrate, Marc Trévidic published on 30 September 2015 in the weekly Paris Match in which he warned of coming attacks and warns that "dark days lie ahead of us. The real war ISIS intends to carry to our land has not yet started." Coming from a technician of counter terrorism, these are prophetic words indeed, spoken just seven weeks before the 13 November attacks.

French politicians want to have powerful intelligence services which they can control. They have removed independent investigating magistrates from deciding, with the help of the DGSI, who and when to arrest suspects – by a new law voted by parliament last summer. By so doing, they have increased the

risk of extra judicial killings which would bring France in line with American practises. But years of extra judicial killing of hard line Islamists by US drones and security forces have done nothing to diminish the risk of terrorism, quite the contrary.

Under the leadership of François Hollande, France has become America's number one ally in its fight against ISIS, its cheer leader in chief. The President has put his country, which is much easier to hit than the distant US, squarely in the terrorist firing line. The next few months will tell whether Trévidic's fears come true. The fears of a major attack which he expressed in the interview came true six weeks later.