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Half a Century of French Political Intervention in Lebanon: Syrian and Iranian Occupations as Threats to Lebanese Statehood (1975–2025)

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the evolution of French policy toward Lebanon from the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 up to the highly dynamic period of 2020–2025. It addresses a gap in the scholarship by examining France not episodically, but as a consistent actor across four phases: the Lebanese wars, the Pax Syriana, the period of Iranian and Hezbollah ascendancy, and the most recent era marked by regional escalation, the Gaza war, Israel-Hezbollah clashes, and Lebanon's prolonged presidential vacuum. Using a comparative-historical approach combined with process tracing, the study draws on UN documents, French statements, press archives, and secondary literature to map both continuity and change. The findings reveal a recurring pattern, in which France prioritized a state-centric and institution-oriented strategy, advancing sovereignty, reform, and accountability through legal and multilateral instruments rather than coercion. This approach, recalibrated in response first to Syrian and later Iranian leverage, proved most effective when political principles and instruments aligned, and ambitions were adjusted to regional constraints.

KEYWORDS: History, French foreign policy, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Middle Eastern politics, Hezbollah, diplomacy, international relations

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STRESZCZENIE

Pół wieku francuskiej interwencji politycznej w Libanie: Okupacje syryjska i irańska jako zagrożenie dla państwowości libańskiej (1975–2025)

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano ewolucję polityki francuskiej wobec Libanu od wybuchu wojny domowej w Libanie w 1975 r. aż do niezwykle dynamicznego okresu 2020–2025. Wypełniono lukę w dotychczasowych badaniach, analizując rolę Francji nie w ujęciu epizodycznym, ale jako spójnego podmiotu w czterech fazach: wojen libańskich, Pax Syriana, okresu dominacji Iranu i Hezbollahu oraz najnowszej epoki, dla której charakterystyczne są eskalacja napięć w regionie, wojna w Strefie Gazy, starcia między Izraelem a Hezbollahem oraz przedłużająca się próżnia prezydencka w Libanie.Wykorzystując podejście porównawczo-historyczne w połączeniu z analizą przebiegu wydarzeń, w niniejszym opracowaniu, opierając się na dokumentach ONZ, oświadczeniach francuskich władz, archiwach prasowych oraz literaturze przedmiotu, nakreślono elementy zarówno ciągłości, jak i zmiany. Wyniki badań ujawniają powtarzający się schemat, w ramach którego Francja priorytetowo traktowała strategię skoncentrowaną na państwie i zorientowaną na instytucje, promując suwerenność, reformy i odpowiedzialność za pomocą instrumentów prawnych i wielostronnych, a nie środków przymusu. Podejście to, przyjęte najpierw w odpowiedzi na wpływ Syrii, a później Iranu, okazało się najskuteczniejsze wtedy, gdy zasady i instrumenty polityczne były ze sobą spójne, a ambicje dostosowano do ograniczeń regionalnych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: historia, francuska polityka zagraniczna, Liban, Syria, Iran, polityka Bliskiego Wschodu, Hezbollah, dyplomacja, stosunki międzynarodowe

Introduction

The Lebanese Civil War, which erupted in 1975, represented a critical rupture in the modern history of the Middle East. What had once been a country regarded as a symbol of regional pluralism was rapidly transformed into a theater of prolonged conflict and foreign intervention. The outbreak of violence—fueled by mounting regional tensions, particularly the armed Palestinian presence both inside and outside refugee camps—triggered a complex, multi-factional war in which several Lebanese groups received direct support from Palestinian militias. In 1976, Syria intervened militarily, ostensibly under the pretext of stabilizing Lebanon as part of an Arab military force. However, this intervention soon evolved into a long-term occupation that profoundly reshaped Lebanon's sovereignty, political life, and security for nearly three decades. France, tied to Lebanon through the legacy of its colonial mandate and a longstanding tradition of cultural diplomacy, also played an important—albeit often ambivalent—role throughout these transformations.

Despite the extensive scholarship on Lebanon's wars and on Syrian and Iranian influence in the country, the specific trajectory of French policy toward Lebanon across five decades remains under-theorized as a coherent historical continuum. This article addresses that gap by posing the question: How and why did French policy toward Lebanon evolve from the civil-war era, through the Pax Syriana, into the period of Iranian (Hezbollah) ascendancy, and finally into the post-2020 crisis environment? The analysis is significant for political science, history, and security studies because France is simultaneously an EU power, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a major troop-contributing country to UNIFIL. French policy therefore illuminates both the constraints and the possibilities of middle-power statecraft in a fragmented regional order.

The study pursues a twofold aim. First, it reconstructs and explains the evolution of France's policy across four phases—(1) the Lebanese wars (1975–1990), (2) the Pax Syriana (1990–2005), (3) the Iranian/Hezbollah challenge (2005–2020), and (4) the highly dynamic period after 2020. By doing so, the article connects French policy inflection points to shifts in the regional balance and in France's own strategic calculus. Second, it argues that a recurring pattern can be identified: French policy has consistently displayed a state-centric, institution-oriented approach tempered by considerations of realpolitik. Normative commitments to sovereignty, reform, and accountability have typically been pursued through legal-institutional instruments (UN resolutions, UNIFIL, the STL, conditional assistance) rather than coercive measures and have been repeatedly recalibrated in response to Syrian or Iranian leverage.

Methodologically, the article adopts a comparative-historical design with process-tracing across the four periods. It triangulates (i) primary sources, including UN documents and resolutions; French presidential and ministerial statements; parliamentary debates; official communiqués; and press archives; (ii) authoritative secondary literature in political history and Middle Eastern studies; and (iii) event data on deployments, aid pledges, and diplomatic initiatives. Discourse analysis is employed to trace shifts in French justificatory frames (sovereignty, stability, reform), while institutional analysis links these frames to policy instruments (UNIFIL mandates, STL support, LAF assistance, donor conditionality). The scope of the study covers the years 1975–2025, with the unit of analysis being French policy toward Lebanon, contextualized by Syrian and Iranian involvement.

France and the multiple wars of Lebanon, 1975–1990

In a Middle East still imbued with nostalgia for General de Gaulle's Arab policy, the year 1975 marked a decisive turning point for Lebanon. It was the beginning of a civil war that divided Beirut into two zones: an eastern sector

dominated by Lebanese Christian militias, and a western sector controlled by Muslim groups and Palestinian fighters. Within the broader context of the Cold War, right-wing militias, largely Christian, confronted left-wing forces composed mainly of Muslim Lebanese and Palestinian combatants. The Lebanese Army, itself an institution composed of both Christians and Muslims, was paralyzed by sectarian divisions and remained confined to its barracks, unable to intervene in the absence of a clear political mandate. From that point onward, periods of violent confrontation alternated with fragile truces, until the Arab League summit of 1976 decided to deploy an Arab Deterrent Force to restore order in Lebanon (Fisk, 2006, pp. 45–60).

Syria quickly seized upon this opportunity to formalize its military presence in the country, deploying troops under the cover of the Arab Deterrent Force, known as the "green helmets," of which Syrian soldiers constituted three-quarters (Kassir, 2003, pp. 511–513). Gradually but decisively, Damascus sidelined all other Arab contingents. By 1978, what had begun as a multinational force effectively became an exclusively Syrian presence, inaugurating a long chapter of Syrian domination in Lebanon. That same year, Israel launched a major invasion of southern Lebanon, devastating numerous Shiite villages in an effort to drive Palestinian fighters away from its northern frontier (Rabinovich, 1985, pp. 75–78). Throughout the conflict, Syria adopted a consistently duplicitous strategy. On one hand, it worked to weaken pro-Palestinian and pro-Soviet Muslim factions sufficiently to avoid provoking a direct confrontation with Israel. On the other, it continued to extend support to these same factions in their struggle against the pro-Western Christian camp, which categorically rejected Syrian occupation and managed to maintain control over certain areas, often referred to as the "free regions," beyond Damascus's reach (Khalidi, 1981, pp. 3–21).

In 1978, French Foreign Minister Louis de Guiringaud, serving under President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, publicly advanced what he termed a "Syrian solution" to the Lebanese crisis (Tuquoi, 1993, pp. 34–37). He openly criticized what he described as the "adventurism of the Lebanese Christians," whom he blamed for dragging the Syrian Army into destructive battles on Lebanese soil. While conceding that "the Syrians reacted very harshly," de Guiringaud insisted that he did not believe Damascus sought to annex Lebanon, and further argued that if the Christians abandoned what he called their "unrealistic and suicidal" objectives, conditions for peace could be restored (Le Monde, 1978).

The French policy toward Syria during the Lebanese war was thus shaped less by an abstract commitment to principles than by pragmatic considerations of French national interest and by fear of Damascus's capacity for disruption. Although official rhetoric frequently expressed sympathy for Lebanon's Christian factions, actual policy rarely translated into concrete support. In practice, despite the bombings, blockades, and assassinations carried out by Palestinian,

Syrian, or allied militias, Paris limited its involvement to issuing appeals for calm and calls for negotiations, abstaining from any decisive action. This cautious stance became particularly evident following the assassination of French ambassador Louis Delamare in Beirut on 4 September 1981. Despite the widespread suspicion that Syria was directly responsible, the French government refrained from any form of retaliation or meaningful diplomatic escalation (Pons, 1994, pp. 92–95). A similar pattern of restraint marked French reactions to events inside Syria itself. In February 1982, when the Syrian Army violently suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama, leaving an estimated 20,000 people dead (Pierret, 2011, pp. 103–108), President François Mitterrand deliberately avoided condemnation in order to escape the perception that France was siding with Islamist forces (Filiu, 2015, p. 165).

Later that same year, between June and August 1982, Israel launched a full-scale invasion that reached West Beirut, subjecting the city to intense bombardment. Under the supervision of a multinational force that included French troops, Yasser Arafat and the PLO were evacuated by sea from the Lebanese capital, symbolizing both the severity of the Israeli offensive and the fragile role of international intermediaries (Khalidi, 2006, pp. 159–164). Events reached another turning point on 23 August 1982, when Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Christian resistance, was elected president of Lebanon. His tenure lasted only three weeks; he was assassinated by pro-Syrian operatives before consolidating his power (Fisk, 2006, p. 270). In retaliation for his death, Christian militiamen perpetrated the massacres of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps between 16 and 18 September, killing hundreds, while Israeli forces stood by. The atrocities shocked international opinion and plunged Lebanon even deeper into turmoil, highlighting once more the devastating intersection of foreign intervention, sectarian conflict, and local vendettas (Khalidi, 2006, pp. 159–164).

In the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, launched under the banner of Operation Peace for Galile, and the subsequent siege of Beirut, the international community sought to prevent the country's further descent into chaos. This led to the deployment of the Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF), an international peacekeeping mission tasked with stabilizing the Lebanese capital, ensuring the safe evacuation of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters, and lending support to the fragile Lebanese government amid the ongoing civil war. The MNF was formally established through a US-brokered agreement and initially comprised contingents from three countries, the United States, France, and Italy. The United Kingdom joined later, in 1983, with a smaller deployment. At its height, the force included approximately 1,800 to 2,000 US Marines, 2,000 French paratroopers and infantry, around 1,400 Italian soldiers, and roughly 100 British personnel primarily engaged in medical and logistical roles. The first deployment began in August

1982, focusing primarily on overseeing the withdrawal of PLO fighters from West Beirut and seeking to limit the likelihood of renewed Israeli-Palestinian clashes on Lebanese territory. Yet the MNF quickly became a target for newly emerging militant groups aligned with Syria and Iran. Tehran in particular perceived the mission as an opportunity to retaliate against both France and the United States for their support of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). The vulnerability of the mission was soon laid bare in one of the deadliest episodes of the Lebanese conflict (Gerges, 2005, pp. 72–75).

In the morning of 23 October 1983, at approximately 6.20 a.m., a suicide bomber drove a truck laden with explosives into the Drakkar building in Beirut, which served as the French headquarters within the MNF framework. The explosion killed fifty-eight French paratroopers, primarily from the 1st and 9th Parachute Chasseur Regiments, making it the most devastating single attack on French forces since the Algerian War. The loss profoundly shocked France, dramatically shifting public opinion against continued military involvement in Lebanon and highlighting the extreme risk of engagement in such a volatile environment. Strikingly, the Drakkar bombing occurred only minutes after a similar attack targeted the US Marine barracks at the Beirut International Airport, where another suicide truck bomb detonated at around 6.00 a.m. The near-simultaneous assaults demonstrated both the coordination and the lethal capabilities of pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian actors in Lebanon. They also exposed serious deficiencies in the security arrangements of the MNF, underscoring the peril faced by foreign troops deployed into the fragmented landscape of Lebanon's civil war. The devastating bombing of the US Marine barracks on 23 October 1983 claimed the lives of 241 American servicemen, including 220 Marines. It was the deadliest single-day loss for the US Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. The attacker drove a yellow truck through the perimeter barriers, entered the building's lobby, and detonated an explosive device estimated at the equivalent of more than 10,000 pounds of TNT. Widely attributed to Hezbollah or affiliated groups operating with Iranian support, the attack revealed the particular vulnerability of the multinational peacekeeping mission. It also triggered a fierce political debate in Washington regarding America's role in Lebanon. Within months, President Ronald Reagan ordered the withdrawal of US forces, marking a profound shift in US engagement in the Middle East and signaling the limits of Western willingness to absorb casualties in such volatile environments (Friedman, 1989, pp. 224–227).

For France, which maintained approximately 2,000 troops at the height of the mission, the attacks of 1983 and their aftermath profoundly altered the perception of the intervention in Lebanon. The consequences were felt not only on the battlefield but also in the domestic and diplomatic arenas. In November 1984, only a year after the bombings, President François Mitterrand traveled to

Syria, becoming the first French head of state to make an official visit to Damascus. Despite widespread feelings of betrayal and disillusionment over Lebanon in France, Mitterrand declared upon his arrival: "Nothing can be achieved in the Near East without Syria's cooperation" (Mitterrand, 1984). This statement captured the essence of French realpolitik: fear of Syria's disruptive potential and the conviction that accommodation with Damascus was necessary to safeguard broader French interests. French losses in Lebanon were severe. The assassination of Ambassador Louis Delamare in 1981, the kidnappings of French diplomats, journalists, and priests, and even the shelling of the French embassy in August 1982, which killed three soldiers, underscored the risks of entanglement. Moreover, France itself came under direct attack at home, experiencing a wave of terrorist incidents in the 1980s variously attributed to Palestinian groups or to pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian networks (Péan, 1990, pp. 12–30). Intelligence services in France and among Christian Lebanese factions consistently pointed the finger at Damascus and Tehran, yet Cold War calculations prevented any decisive response. Neither France nor the United States was prepared to confront Syria directly, for fear of destabilizing relations with Moscow, Syria's key ally. Responsibility for Lebanon's tragedy, however, extended beyond one actor. Syria's role was certainly heavy. Since Lebanese independence in 1943, Damascus had consistently interfered in the internal affairs of its smaller neighbor, refusing to recognize its sovereignty in full. President Hafez al-Assad famously asserted that "Lebanese and Syrians are one people living in two states," signaling his desire for annexation. His successor and son, Bashar al-Assad, would later attempt to exercise remote control over Lebanon when outright domination was no longer possible (Van Dam, 2011, pp. 220–225).

Syrian intelligence systematically fanned sectarian tensions, presenting Damascus to Western observers as the indispensable arbiter while, in reality, acting as both arsonist and fireman. It alternately supported Palestinian factions, Iranian Pasdaran, and later Islamist fighters transiting between Iraq and Syria. State terrorism through assassinations, car bombs, and kidnappings was not incidental. It was a deliberate strategy, as noted by the scholar Michel Seurat before he himself fell victim to the violence To be sure, Syria was not alone in fueling Lebanon's descent into conflict. Israel, the PLO, Libya, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Iran all armed rival Lebanese factions and perpetuated the war. Yet France's posture throughout this turbulent period remained one of cautious accommodation. Realpolitik dictated restraint: despite heavy French losses in Lebanon, Paris consistently avoided directly accusing Damascus, as symbolized most vividly by Mitterrand's seemingly triumphal visit to Damascus in 1984.

To analytically sum up the first examined period between 1975 and 1990, France's engagement in Lebanon was shaped by a complex mixture of historical ties, geopolitical calculation, and strategic caution. Although the French rhetoric often emphasized solidarity with Lebanon's Christian communities,

in practice Paris pursued a pragmatic line that avoided direct confrontation with Syria and acknowledged Damascus's dominant role in Lebanese affairs. The assassination of French diplomats, the deaths of soldiers during the 1983 bombings, and terrorist attacks against French targets at home highlighted the risks of entanglement, yet did not alter the fundamental orientation of French policy: restraint, accommodation, and reliance on diplomacy rather than military escalation. Several key patterns emerged during this period. First, the French policy consistently balanced symbolic gestures of support for Lebanon with an unwillingness to translate that support into decisive action. Second, France demonstrated an acute awareness of Syria's disruptive capacity and adjusted its strategy to avoid direct confrontation with Damascus, even at the cost of credibility among Lebanese allies. Third, the 1983 bombings underscored the vulnerability of Western military deployments in fractured civil wars, marking a turning point in French and American strategic thinking about intervention in the Middle East. Finally, realpolitik considerations linked to the Cold War shaped every decision, limiting France's willingness to name or punish perpetrators and reinforcing a pattern of cautious accommodation.

France and the Pax-Syriana, 1990–2005

In October 1989, after fifteen years of civil conflict, the Arab League sought to bring the Lebanese war to a close by convening a tripartite committee composed of Morocco, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. The committee invited members of the Lebanese parliament to the Saudi city of Taif to draft an agreement that would address the concerns of Lebanon's deeply divided communities. The outcome, known as the Taif Agreement, fundamentally redefined Lebanese politics and the nature of Lebanese-Syrian relations. Politically, the agreement redistributed power more equitably between Christians and Muslims, reducing the traditional dominance of the Maronite presidency in favor of a stronger Council of Ministers. It reaffirmed Lebanese sovereignty over the country's entire territory and mandated the disbanding of militias — a task placed under the supervision of the Syrian Army, whose continued presence in Lebanon was thereby indirectly legitimized (El Khazen, 2000, pp. 270–275).

Taif further called for the repositioning of Syrian forces to the Bekaa Valley within two years, though in practice this provision was never fully implemented. It also bound Lebanon's economic, cultural, and foreign policies more closely to Syria's orbit. Hezbollah was uniquely recognized as a legitimate "resistance" movement against Israeli occupation and was permitted to retain its weapons, while Christian and Druze militias were compelled to disarm. To consolidate this framework, Lebanon and Syria signed a "Treaty of Brotherhood" on 22 May 1991. For many Lebanese, particularly among the Christian population, the

Taif Agreement represented less a genuine peace than the institutionalization of a Syrian protectorate. For Western powers, however, it provided the most expedient mechanism for imposing stability, even if that stability came at the high cost of consolidating Syria's hegemony. France, which historically saw itself as a protector of Lebanon's Christians, largely stood by as Syrian forces, with tacit approval from both the United States and Israel, subdued the last remaining free Christian areas. What emerged was a "Syrian peace" that marginalized France while simultaneously rewarding Damascus for its participation in the coalition war against Saddam Hussein. At the 1991 Madrid Conference and again during the Oslo peace process of 1993, France found itself similarly sidelined. Hopes for the creation of a Palestinian state quickly dimmed, as recurrent outbreaks of violence underscored the fragility of the Oslo framework and revealed it as a tool of pressure against the weaker Palestinian side (Péladeau, 2001, pp. 198–205).

A notable change occurred with the presidency of Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), who reasserted French engagement in Lebanon. A close personal friend of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Lacroix, 2010, pp. 45–50), Chirac initially sought to maintain constructive relations with Syria's new leadership. He became the only Western leader to bow at the coffin of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and subsequently embraced his son and successor, Bashar al-Assad. Chirac hosted Bashar in Paris and visited Damascus in 2002, despite widespread criticism of Syrian abuses during the occupation. In 2001, France went so far as to award Bashar al-Assad the Grand Cross of the Légion d'honneur, a symbolic gesture of recognition and legitimacy (Gresh, 2002). During Hafez al-Assad's state visit to Paris from 16 to 18 July 1998, President Jacques Chirac spoke warmly of the "indestructible friendship" between France and Syria, emphasizing his conviction that peace in the Middle East could not be achieved without Damascus (Gresh, 1996). The personal bond between the two leaders was underscored in Chirac's later writings, where he recalled that, shortly before his death, Hafez al-Assad had asked him to "watch over Bashar like a son" (Chirac, 1998). Yet Chirac's subsequent reflections reveal certain contradictions in this relationship. While he acknowledged the trust Hafez had placed in him, Chirac later asserted that he had no doubt about Bashar al-Assad's responsibility for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. Though, as he admitted, he lacked conclusive proof (Chirac, 2006, pp. 345–350). According to Chirac, tensions between Bashar and Hariri had escalated in August 2004, when the Syrian president allegedly threatened him with the words: "If Chirac wants to drive me out of Lebanon, I will break Lebanon. Either you do what we say, or we will get you and your family wherever you are" (Chirac, 2006, pp. 365–368).

Bashar's international debut occurred on 7 November 1999 at the Élysée Palace, symbolizing Chirac's willingness to offer him early recognition and legitimacy. A year later, following Hafez al-Assad's death in June 2000, Chirac was the only Western head of state to attend his funeral—another clear demonstration of

France's readiness to cultivate close ties with the new Syrian leader. This posture, however, shifted dramatically in 2004. In response to Damascus's decision to impose the extension of President Émile Lahoud's mandate in Lebanon, an act widely interpreted as blatant interference, Chirac joined forces with US President George W. Bush to sponsor United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559. The resolution called for the withdrawal of Syria's 15,000 troops from Lebanon and demanded an end to Syrian interference in the country's internal political affairs (United Nations Security Council, 2004).

For France, this examined era was marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, Paris accepted Syria's hegemony as the price of stability, particularly in the early 1990s, and was effectively sidelined both regionally and in wider peace processes such as Madrid (1991) and Oslo (1993). On the other hand, under Jacques Chirac, France reasserted itself as a central actor in Lebanese affairs, relying on close personal ties with Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and engaging directly with both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Several trends emerge clearly from this period. First, France oscillated between accommodation of Syria and gradual confrontation. While Chirac initially sought to cultivate a strong relationship with Damascus, by 2004 the relationship had soured to the point of open opposition, culminating in France's sponsorship, alongside the United States, of UN Security Council Resolution 1559. Second, the personalization of French policy became evident: Chirac's friendship with Hariri, as well as his symbolic gestures toward the Assad family, deeply shaped France's positioning, blending diplomacy with personal networks. Third, France's shift from acquiescence to resistance demonstrated the limits of realpolitik once Syrian interference reached a point where it clashed with France's own strategic and normative red lines. These dynamics highlight a broader pattern across the French role in Lebanon. In contrast to the first period (1975–1990), when France was hesitant and reactive, the Pax Syriana years show Paris moving from passivity to re-engagement, only to face the inherent contradictions of supporting a Syrian-controlled order while simultaneously seeking to protect Lebanese sovereignty. This ambivalence, oscillating between pragmatism and principle, forms a key trend that will be critical to compare with the third period, when Iran, rather than Syria, emerged as France's central concern.

France and the Iranian (Hezbollah) challenger, 2005–2020

The assassination of Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005 once again placed the spotlight on Syria, swiftly blamed by the international community for orchestrating the attack. In the immediate aftermath, President Jacques Chirac worked actively to isolate Damascus, using his personal ties to Hariri as both political leverage and moral justification. Yet this hard line proved short-lived.

Under President Nicolas Sarkozy, French policy shifted toward a cautious rehabilitation of Syria. Between 2007 and 2008, French envoys visited Damascus to re-establish dialogue, and Bashar al-Assad was invited to Paris for the 2008 Union for the Mediterranean summit. His presence in the official stands during the Bastille Day parade of 14 July symbolized the extent of this rapprochement (Gresh, 2008). After decades marked first by Israeli occupation (1978–2000) and subsequently by Syrian domination (1976–2005), after 2005 Lebanon entered a new phase defined by what many observers have described as a Syro-Iranian condominium, exercised primarily through their common proxy, Hezbollah. This Shiite movement, legitimized after Taif as "resistance" against Israel, evolved into a central political and military actor, simultaneously binding Lebanon's fate more tightly to regional rivalries. The sectarian dynamics inside Lebanon became increasingly reflective of the broader regional struggle between the Syria-Iran axis and the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia. Despite these pressures, Lebanon retained, albeit in a fragile and contested form, its status as the Arab world's last major democracy.

Yet the regional events and domestic non-state armed actors played the crucial role in the situation in Lebanon and French attitude towards it in this era. The 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war compelled France to shift from juridical activism to crisis management. Paris worked in New York to pass UNSCR 1701, which ended active hostilities and mandated a substantial reinforcement of UNIFIL ("UNIFIL II"), to which France contributed significant ground and naval assets and, for a time, played a leading role in the mission's early reinforcement and coordination. A total of 1,600 French troops arrived in late August 2006, UN and media reporting record France's prominent presence in the enlarged force and the early recognition of French contingents for service. The peacekeepers were also providing humanitarian assistance to the local population. This includes medical aid and the distribution of educational tools as well as help with reconstruction. In addition, French engineers destroyed around 1,500 unexploded devices (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, 2007). Determined to prevent a relapse into civil strife, Paris also tried to broker intra-Lebanese compromise during the 2007–2008 political crisis. Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner convened rival leaders at La Celle-Saint-Cloud in July 2007 to relaunch an initiative that foreshadowed the Doha Agreement (May 2008), which formally ended the eighteenth-month standoff by electing Michel Suleiman and granting the opposition a blocking minority in cabinet (Reuters, 2007). Yet, even as France invested in mediation, President Nicolas Sarkozy simultaneously pursued a controversial rapprochement with Damascus. Bashar al-Assad was invited to Paris for the Union for the Mediterranean summit and seated in the official tribune at the 14 July 2008 parade, a move intended to ease Syria out of isolation but widely criticized given Lebanon's unresolved sovereignty dilemmas (France24, 2008).

As Hezbollah's political-military centrality deepened after 2005, France sought to balance deterrence and engagement through European instruments and Lebanese state-building. At the EU level, member states (including France) declared Hezbollah's "military wing" as a terrorist organization in July 2013. This was a response to the Bulgarian Burgas bus bombing and the group's role in Syria (Reuters, 2013). In parallel, Paris backed the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) as the keystone of state authority. In November 2014, France and Lebanon signed a Saudi-funded $3 billion package to equip the LAF against spillover jihadist threats from Syria, though Riyadh suspended the program in 2016 amid regional frictions and dissatisfaction with Beirut's stance (Reuters, 2014).

Another attitude was brought by the new French president Emanuel Macron. Under his leadership and influence, the French policy combined muscular crisis diplomacy with economic statecraft. When Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation from Riyadh in November 2017, Macron intervened. He invited Hariri to Paris facilitating his return to Beirut. This episode was later portrayed by Paris as defusing a potentially destabilizing intra-Sunni and Saudi–Iranian confrontation played out on Lebanese terrain (Al-Jazeera, 2017). The following year, France convened the CEDRE conference (April 2018), securing about $11 billion in loans and grants conditioned on structural reforms—an attempt to leverage international finance in support of Lebanese state resilience, though implementation soon stalled as the crisis of governance worsened (CEDRE, 2018). France sought to counter Iran's entrenchment in Lebanon by fostering multi-party dialogue and advocating for the reduction of foreign interference from both Iran and Saudi Arabia. France held international conferences supporting Lebanon's sovereignty, engaged directly with Lebanese elites, and attempted to galvanize regional actors toward consensus government formation. France's rivalry with Iran extended to the regional level, particularly after Sarkozy shifted the French policy closer to American and Israeli interests, and more confrontational toward Iran, in lockstep with efforts to block Iranian nuclear progress and exert pressure through diplomatic channels (Izadi, 2009).

The denouement of this period came with the Beirut port explosion of 4 August 2020. The site of the explosion conveyed a paradoxical sense of stillness, as the morning light pierced through the lingering smoke above the seaport and starkly illuminated the scale of the devastation. The harbor was severely damaged; its grain silos, once imposing, appeared as symbols of collapse. Approximately 300,000 residents were rendered homeless overnight, with many injured and left to wander in search of shelter and assistance (Mawad, 2023). The explosion paralyzed not only the city but also the functioning of the entire state. In addition to the dead, the injured, and the direct damage to property, it dealt a severe blow to Lebanon's already fragile economy. The Port of Beirut represented one of the country's most vital gateways, through which goods flowed in and out as part of foreign trade. Macron arrived two days later, pledged emergency assistance, and

launched what became known as the "French initiative": a donor mobilization paired with a reform roadmap and a push for a competent, time-bound government, an effort that briefly re-centered Paris as Lebanon's principal external steward even as entrenched elites and regional constraints limited traction (France24, 2020). Despite these efforts, French influence often faltered due to entrenched sectarianism and Iran's strong ties to Hezbollah and the March 8 political alliance. France's approach was rooted in soft power, such as cultural, economic, and diplomatic pressure, but lacked the coercive leverage that Iran wielded through militancy and patronage. Ultimately, France remained a legitimate player through its UNIFIL peacekeeping presence and convening power among Western, European, and Arab states. However, it found itself frequently stymied in its ability to induce substantial political reforms (Macaron, 2020).

Across 2005–2020, then, France's Lebanon policy moved along three consistent axes: (1) legal-institutional anchoring (backing UN investigations and the STL; supporting UNSCR 1701 and UNIFIL); (2) state-centric stabilization (security assistance to the LAF; donor conferences to sustain the economy); and (3) pragmatic crisis management (maintaining channels to all relevant actors, including those aligned with Iran, while seeking to contain their influence through multilateral frameworks). The oscillation between normative objectives (sovereignty, accountability, reforms) and realpolitik (engagement with Damascus before 2011, calibrated contact with Hezbollah's political environment, and de-escalation diplomacy with Gulf partners) produced incremental gains without resolving the core problem: Lebanon's embedding in a wider Iran-Gulf confrontation that repeatedly instrumentalized its institutions. By comparison, France's economic and security contributions during this period offered Lebanon a visible alternative to Iranian patronage. While Iran's investment may have been deeper in ideological affinity and militia infrastructure, France's was broader, targeted publicly toward the resilience of state structures and anchored in international legitimacy. These differences help explain why France could plausibly present itself as a partner for Lebanese sovereignty, even as it negotiated a delicate balancing act with regional dynamics dominated by Iranian (or Syrian) interests. This pattern, legalism plus state-building, accompanied by bounded engagement plus multilateralism, set the baseline against which France's subsequent posture can be compared in the post-2020 phase.

High dynamics of recent history and current situation

After the Beirut Port Explosion, president Macron visited Lebanon on two occasions. His first was perceived to be an expression of solidarity with the opposition, protestors, and victims. The second visit was associated with supporting and negotiating with Hezbollah's candidate for Lebanon's presidency. Many

Lebanese reacted with surprise, and in some cases with indignation, when France appeared to lend support to Hezbollah's favored presidential candidate, Sleiman Frangieh (Sallon, 2023). To large segments of the Lebanese population, this was perceived as a betrayal by France. For Hezbollah's supporters, by contrast, French diplomacy was simply acting in continuity with its long-standing pragmatism, guided by economic self-interest above all else. Critics of Hezbollah argued that President Emmanuel Macron's openness to Frangieh's candidacy was motivated less by concern for Lebanon than by the desire to safeguard French strategic and commercial interests in Iran. For many Lebanese, this interpretation was deeply troubling, as it implied the final surrender of Lebanon's sovereignty to Tehran's clerical establishment, which had never abandoned its ambition of exporting the Islamic Revolution. The task of navigating these sensitivities has since been entrusted to France's special envoy, Jean-Yves Le Drian, nesting his efforts within the US-France-Saudi-Qatar-Egypt "quintet." The hinge finally turned on 9 January 2025, when Lebanon's parliament elected General Joseph Aoun as president and by that ending a two-year stalemate that had immobilized fiscal adjustment, security administration, and diplomacy (France Diplomacy 2025). Paris had telegraphed its preference for a consensus, state-anchored outcome and welcomed the vote, while Le Drian attended the session at Speaker Nabih Berri's invitation. In short order, President Aoun designated Nawaf Salam as prime minister, and by 8 February 2025, a government was formed.

French diplomacy and Lebanese politics have been profoundly shaped by the highly dynamic context of developments in the Middle East after 2020. A number of significant regional events directly affected the situation in Lebanon, while others exerted a more indirect yet still decisive influence. Among the most consequential are the continuation of the Syrian civil war and the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, the war in the Gaza Strip, and the subsequent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, as well as between Israel and Iran. These remain unresolved and historically open issues, meaning that their comprehensive analytical assessment will only be possible with the passage of time.

From late 2023, the Gaza war reframed that reformist agenda within a kinetic regional theatre. As hostilities spilled northward, daily exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah threatened to upend the fragile equilibrium established by UNSCR 1701 and the UNIFIL presence to which France remains a core troop and budget contributor. Paris moved from exhortation to design: it tabled a written de-escalation proposal in February 2024 (circulated to Beirut and coordinated with Washington) calling, inter alia, for the withdrawal of Hezbollah's elite Radwan units roughly 10 km from the Blue Line, a reinforced Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) posture in the south, and a monitored process to address land disputes. Macron then brought Prime Minister Najib Mikati and LAF commander Joseph Aoun to the Élysée to build Lebanese ownership under a state-centric rubric (Reuters, 2024). The French

plan migrated into a broader Franco-American roadmap and, after months of shuttle diplomacy and Security Council consultations, underpinned a ceasefire arrangement announced in late November 2024. The deal paired an Israeli withdrawal timetable with a staged deployment of the LAF and UNIFIL, constraints on Hezbollah's military footprint in the border belt, and an implementation mechanism involving the United States and France. However, it arrested escalation along the northern front and created political space for Lebanese institutional repair (more details in Security Council Report, 2024).

The regional arc was complicated further by Iran's direct attack on Israel (13–14 April 2024), a first in the long shadow war. Paris publicly described the strike as a dangerous escalation and confirmed that French forces intercepted Iranian drones over Jordanian airspace at Amman's request. This episode crystallized France's dual register: oppose Iranian power projection when it risks regional conflagration, while preserving channels to stabilize Lebanon via UNIFIL and the LAF rather than by militia brokerage (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Throughout this period, Paris coupled security diplomacy with resource mobilization. It convened an international conference on 24 October 2024 that raised roughly $1 billion in humanitarian and security support, explicitly linking relief to border de-escalation and LAF effectiveness. In parallel, France cultivated "reconstruction carrots" as political leverage (Corbet, 2024). For instance, a technical blueprint to rebuild Beirut port tabled in March 2024 by French engineering firms with governmental backing to support the concept of economic normalization rewarding state institutions rather than factional patronage. These instruments echoed, at a new scale, the post-blast conditionality and earlier CEDRE logic (Sallon, 2024).

As a parallel game with the similar actors, the Syrian civil war and the collapse of Bashar al-Asad's regime has taken its part. For decades, Syria had maintained a pivotal role in Lebanese affairs, anchoring the so-called Syro-Iranian condominium that, through Hezbollah, subsidized militia dominance and compromised state sovereignty. With the regime's disintegration, France confronted the dissolution of its traditional interlocutor in Lebanon-area politics. Paris swiftly reoriented its strategy toward multilateral coordination with the US, Saudi Arabia, and the EU, abandoning the triangular Damascus-based engagement model in favor of regional institutional alignment. In the wake of Assad's downfall, France placed renewed emphasis on consolidating Lebanon's internal governance and institutional integrity. The above mentioned $1 billion support (assistance) explicitly linking this support to the enforcement of Lebanon's sovereignty and the empowerment of the Lebanese Armed Forces strengthened by Macron's visit of Beirut and personal support of for new leadership in Lebanon. Macron, who critical of Lebanon's leadership in the past, said during a joint news conference with president Aoun that France will be supporting Lebanon and expressed hope that the country's new government will open "a new era, that of a change in political behavior, the return of the state to the benefit of all" (Mroue & Corbet, 2025).

These developments recast France's Lebanese engagement under the rubric of state-centered stabilization, combining conditional reform, institutional backing, and strategic disengagement from long-term Syrian dominance.

Conclusion

This article has reconstructed and interpreted the evolution of French policy toward Lebanon across four phases: the civil war (1975–1990), the Pax Syriana (1990–2005), the period of Iranian and Hezbollah ascendancy (2005–2020), and the highly dynamic years following 2020. Across these decades, French engagement reveals a striking consistency. At its core stood a state-centric, institution-oriented strategy, tempered by the pragmatism of realpolitik. France's declared commitments to sovereignty, reform, and accountability were rarely enforced through coercion. Instead, they were pursued through legal and institutional mechanisms, such as UN resolutions and mandates (UNIFIL/1701, the STL, UNSCR 1559), support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, and conditional financial assistance. Even as the regional balance shifted, from Syrian dominance to the consolidation of Hezbollah and Iranian influence, Paris relied on the same repertoire, privileging institutions and multilateral frameworks over direct confrontation.

During the Lebanese civil War, the spread of terrorism and the entrenchment of proxy warfare revealed the limits of Western force projection, steering France toward cautious diplomacy and accommodation. During the Pax Syriana, Paris oscillated between acquiescence to Syrian hegemony as the price of stability and selective resistance once Damascus crossed French strategic red lines. Personal networks, such as Chirac's ties to Rafic Hariri or gestures toward the Assad family, expanded French influence but also revealed the contradictions of this approach. After 2005, Lebanon entered a Syro-Iranian condominium that forced France to recalibrate between deterrence and engagement. Paris rooted its response in law and institutions, advancing UNSCR 1701 and UNIFIL II after the 2006 war, backing the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, mediating political deadlock in 2007–2008, and mobilizing conditional finance through the CEDRE conference. Under President Emmanuel Macron, this pattern acquired a more activist dimension, visible in his intervention during Hariri's 2017 resignation and his leadership after the Beirut port explosion in 2020. Yet the underlying logic remained the same: placing the Lebanese state, not militias, at the center of crisis management.

The post-2020 period confronted France with overlapping crises that tested this model: the Gaza war and Israel–Hezbollah clashes on the northern border, direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, and Lebanon's prolonged presidential vacuum, resolved only with the election of General Joseph Aoun. Paris responded by applying its established tools in a more integrated fashion, pursuing de-escalation through coordination with Washington, reinforcing

the LAF and recalibrating UNIFIL's mandate, mobilizing resources through donor conferences and reconstruction plans, and facilitating political compromise through a special envoy. These measures did not deliver structural transformation, but they contained escalation, reopened institutional channels in Beirut, and reaffirmed the long-standing French conviction that Lebanon's stability depends on state institutions rather than militia brokerage.

More broadly, France's long and often ambivalent role in Lebanon underscores the tension between normative rhetoric and strategic calculation. Behind appeals to sovereignty, democracy, and reform lay persistent considerations of security and economic interest. From tolerating Syrian domination in the name of stability to engaging with Hezbollah-linked presidential candidates under Iranian pressure, Paris has repeatedly opted for pragmatism over principle. In doing so, it often contradicted the very values like liberty, republicanism, and human rights that it claimed to defend. For many Lebanese, this produced a paradoxical perception—admiration for France's cultural and diplomatic legacy mixed with disillusionment at its political compromises.

The above findings carry implications beyond the Lebanese case. They illustrate how a European middle power can sustain influence in a landscape dominated by proxy actors, not through coercion, but by embedding leverage in legal frameworks, investing in the state's security core, and coupling these with multilateral finance and UN mandates. For policy, the lesson is pragmatic. Durable stabilization depends on linking border de-escalation to institutional gains in Beirut, and on converting external assistance into incentives that strengthen state capacity rather than reinforce factional patronage. However, limitations to this analysis still remain. They include biases present in elite discourse, the lack of transparency in external financing, and the unpredictability of regional shocks. Yet, when viewed longitudinally, the evidence indicates that France's most effective contributions occur under specific conditions. These moments arise when principles (sovereignty, accountability, and institutional resilience) are aligned with instruments such as UN frameworks, support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, and conditional assistance. They also depend on ambitions being carefully calibrated to the realities imposed by Syrian and Iranian veto power.

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