

## FRANCE, ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

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#### France Promotes the Palestinian Cause

France was the first Western power after the 1967 war to support the Palestinian cause. French policy toward Israel and the Palestinians since then is not always well-accepted or well-understood outside France, but it is important to understand the main elements as well as the major drawbacks of this policy, without trying to justify it.

Until 1958, under the Fourth Republic, there were very strong links between Israel and France, and between 1954 and 1958 France sold military material to Israel. There were also strong links between the two chiefs of staff at the time. These links weakened somewhat with the coming to power of Charles De Gaulle in 1958, but remained more or less in place between 1958 and 1962, at a time when France was still involved in the war in Algeria. After 1962, however, De Gaulle thought it was important for France to reenter the Arab world

and this required a more balanced approach between Israel and the Arab world.

The breaking point was reached with the Six-Day War when De Gaulle changed not only his appreciation of France's links with Israel but also his whole reading of the establishment of the State of Israel.

In 1967, just before the outbreak of the Six-Day War, De Gaulle met with Abba Eban and told him that France was neither for Israel nor for the Arabs but would condemn the first side who went to war. He felt personally disappointed when he saw Israel strike first. Of course, in geopolitical terms De Gaulle was wrong because Israel had no choice at the time, but this was his view. He also thought, wrongly, that the war would lead to a major confrontation between the United States and the USSR.

In November 1967 at a famous press conference, De Gaulle offered a rereading of the

Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, and for the first time stressed the fact that Zionism had created a problem which had not yet been resolved, that of the Palestinians. He further stated that he saw this problem as becoming more and more important and leading to a strong Palestinian national identification. De Gaulle also said that in the territories which Israel had taken it will try to impose its will through oppression, repression and expulsion. This process will generate a new resistance that Israel will call terrorism.

After the departure of De Gaulle and the arrival of Georges Pompidou as president in 1969, the French government's stress on the Palestinian question became more and more important. Pompidou, for instance, was the first to talk about the rights of the Palestinian people, and after him Valery Giscard d'Estaing, who took power in 1974, had even stronger words, speaking for the first time of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to get a homeland. In October 1974, France was unique among the Western powers in approving the invitation to Yasser Arafat to address the UN General Assembly. At the time France was also the first Western government to grant official recognition to the PLO. After the French Foreign Minister met with Arafat in Beirut, the PLO was given the right to open an office in Paris in 1975.

### **Mobilizing the EEC**

As we see, the years following the Six-Day War were marked by increasing moves toward French political recognition of the Palestinians, with France being the initiator of political change in Western Europe in support of the Palestinian question. During the 1970s this policy also began to be promoted within the framework of the European Community.

In a way, the Middle East was chosen as a testing ground for this newly-emerging European political cooperation. The first instance was after the Yom Kippur War in 1973 when for the first time the nine European powers spoke about the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Afterwards, in 1977 in London, the European Council spoke about the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people

to give an effective expression to their national identity. Three years later in Venice the European prime ministers and presidents spoke about the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and that the PLO had to be associated with any negotiations. The significance of the declaration was its recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In this, French policy was not alone but operated within the framework of European political cooperation.

One of France's calculations behind these efforts was its hope to push the PLO toward a more moderate line. The thinking was that by giving some political concessions to the Palestinians, by saying that they have rights and that the PLO is their representative, the PLO would then stop its terrorist actions and choose diplomacy. In fact, looking closely at events at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, this proved not to be a wise calculation. The PLO greeted this recognition with satisfaction, which for it was a political benefit, but it did not stop terrorist actions against Israeli civilians in Israel.

The election of Francois Mitterrand to the presidency in 1981 brought a change in style but not really a change in substance. Mitterrand was the first president of France ever to visit Israel, in 1982, to show that France was close to Israel and thought that Israel had a right to exist as a Jewish state. But that same year, during the Lebanon War, Mitterrand worked to save the PLO under the framework of a multinational force with the Americans. It was important for France to salvage the PLO because it was seen in the eyes of Mitterrand and the French leadership as relatively moderate. Mitterrand believed that if the PLO was completely destroyed, a more radical Palestinian nationalist organization would take over, be it an Islamic one, or a more radical trend, such as that of Hawatmeh or Habash.

France sent vessels to save the PLO twice: once in Beirut in 1982 and the second time in Tripoli in 1983 when Arafat was threatened by the Syrians in northern Lebanon. Also during the 1980s, meetings between French foreign ministers and Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the PLO leadership outside, became more

and more frequent.

This attitude was strengthened with the beginning of the intifada in 1987-1988. France became very critical of the behavior of the Israeli army against the Palestinians in the territories. Mitterrand called the repression by the Israelis in the territories the actions of "the aggressor and the victim; of the one who kills and the one who dies." Mitterrand invited Arafat to Paris in May 1989 because he thought that the PLO had definitely chosen the diplomatic path in November 1988 (with its proclamation of independence of the "State of Palestine").

### Impact of the Gulf War

French policy suffered a heavy blow with the Gulf War. As we know, Iraq was well-equipped by French industries and was lent generous credits by the COFACE, a public institution which guarantees military and other purchases by foreign governments in France.

France, therefore, had a real difficulty in accepting the fact that it had to fight a state which it had so generously supplied. This explains France's hesitation during the crisis in the summer and fall of 1990, especially because in the Socialist ruling party there is a left-wing, Third World-oriented group who thought that even after the invasion of Kuwait, Iraq was still acceptable as a secular state in contradistinction with Kuwait which was a medieval monarchy. So there were several people in the Socialist party who thought that the French government should be very cautious toward Saddam Hussein.

Mitterrand himself understood very quickly that there was no alternative but to fight against Saddam Hussein with the Americans, but since the French authorities had been building up a network of special relations for fifteen years, they tried to save what they could. This explains the last-minute plan of French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, presented just two days before the start of the war in January 1991. The plan was not so much to save Saddam Hussein as to save French policy.

After the Gulf War the cards were completely redistributed and the French leaders had to take

this into consideration. Mitterrand understood quite well that he had no alternative but to follow the Americans and their peace process because, as he saw during the Gulf War, all the calculations he had made about moderating the PLO were negated by the PLO's statements of support for Saddam Hussein.

The 10,000 French soldiers sent to Saudi Arabia were seen, by Mitterrand, as an "entry ticket" for the future negotiations. However, on this point there has been disappointment because France and Europe have not obtained much of a role in the negotiations as yet.

### France Views the Peace Process

When the American peace process started, French policy became one of wait-and-see. Their message to the Palestinians was that France and Europe had no alternative strategy other than to work with the U.S. But they also thought that the peace process could be advanced if there was a change in the Israeli government and the Labor party took charge.

The French were skeptical of the American-sponsored peace process. They thought first of all that it could lead to nothing concrete because the Israeli government was not willing to make territorial concessions. French analysts also believe that Syria, as a leader of the nationalist camp and a Ba'athist country, had no direct interest in promoting real peace with Israel, especially since Israel did not want to give the Golan Heights to Syria.

The French think the current peace process will lead nowhere but, as they cannot offer an alternative, they will try to play a small role through the mediation of Europe. As we know, the Israeli government did not want Europe to play a role at the Madrid conference and afterwards. But France and other countries in Europe believe Europe has a role to play if the Israelis ask them to participate in the different multilateral forums, such as for economic development.

However, Europe will be seeking to tie assistance on the economic level to Israeli concessions to Europe on the political level. This will affect the three main Israeli requests directed to the EEC: first, that the EEC help Israel stop the Arab boy-

cott; second, that Europe foster regional cooperation; and third, that Israel receive European cooperation for its economic development. If Israel wants European cooperation on these three issues, it will have to give a political role to Europe, which also means to France because France is, with Germany and Great Britain, one of the political leaders of the EEC.

There is a paradox in this situation. In order to gain a role for France and Europe, France now has to take a more centrist attitude and improve its relations with Israel. One recent step in this direction was the visit to Israel of the French Minister of Industry, who offered 500 million francs in order to develop Israeli industry. Mitterrand himself is planning to visit Israel at the end of this year. These two events and perhaps others are indicators that France has understood that it has to appear more centrist and less pro-Palestinian than in recent years and to show some goodwill towards the Israelis in order to become acceptable to them.

### Principles of French Policy

Over the past twenty-five years one clear theme may be seen to guide French policy. France recognizes two national rights in the former Palestine Mandate, those of the Jews and those of the Palestinian Arabs living there. These two people claim the same land and the French solution is to divide the land. Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state, but the Palestinians also have the right to self-determination in a state of their choice.

Of course there are also economic considerations underlying French policy as well. Pompidou started in 1969 to sell arms to Libya, and afterwards to Iraq in the beginning of the 1970s. He saw quite clearly that if he wanted to sell arms and other goods to the radical Arab regimes, he could not be too lenient with the Israelis.

French policy has sometimes suffered from a certain rigidity because it was not always related to the political circumstances of the hour. For example, Giscard d'Estang thought Camp David

would lead nowhere and that it was useless to try that path. In fact, while perhaps not exactly what was expected, it was better than nothing (peace with Egypt). French policy was also out of tune with political circumstances during the Gulf War, at least at the beginning of the crisis, and it was only reluctantly that France accepted the fact that one could not have any discussion with Saddam Hussein.

France often feels misunderstood. When France stressed political principles, it was not understood by the Israelis. But when France tried to be more pragmatic, it was not understood by the Arabs. This was quite clear during the Gulf War, during which France was widely criticized in the Arab world. This kind of ambivalence shows the constraints on a middle-weight power that has no real political capacity to put its ideas or wishes into practice. Therefore, the only solution for France could be to construct a wider European power which would have real political power. The prospects for such a development are not promising, however, especially in light of the lack of European political cooperation over the crisis in Yugoslavia, just 1 1/2 hours from Paris. Therefore, while such European political cooperation is still in the process of developing, it appears that an effective role for France and Europe in the Middle East is not to be expected tomorrow.

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