



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Macron's Presidency Heralds Nothing New in Israel-France Relations

by Dr. Tsilla Hershco

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 681, December 12, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Emmanuel Macron's presidency heralds no new era in Israel-France relations, particularly on issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Like other French presidents before him, he condemns Palestinian terrorism and Israeli settlements in the West Bank as if they are moral equivalents. His response to US President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital was to reassert the traditional French subscription to the two-state solution and to stress that Paris does not approve of the American move.

The election of French President Emmanuel Macron aroused hopes in Israel for a new era in Israel-France relations, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During his visit to Israel in September 2015, as economy minister in President Hollande's government, Macron presented himself as an enthusiastic friend of Israel. During his presidential election campaign, Macron expressed opposition to unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state, claiming it would harm France's role as mediator in the conflict. He argued that a peace agreement must be signed with the consent of both sides. He has also expressed his opposition to the BDS campaign, claiming it violates French law and is not only anti-Zionist but also anti-Semitic.

During his election campaign, Macron visited the Paris Holocaust Memorial in commemoration of the 76,000 French Jews murdered by the Nazis and their French collaborators. He declared "Never again," conveying the French position – official since 1995 – of assuming responsibility for the fate of French Jewry during the Holocaust as well as his determination to fight anti-Semitism. During the ceremony in July 2017 commemorating the Vel d'Hiv roundup, Macron reiterated that anti-Zionism is equal to anti-Semitism and said he would fight both with determination. Prime Minister Netanyahu, who attended the ceremony, praised Macron's equation between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

These positive statements notwithstanding, it is doubtful whether Macron will initiate any significant change in France's position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This issue is a major bone of contention in French-Israeli relations, particularly on the issues of Jerusalem and settlements. Former French presidents Sarkozy and Hollande also declared their friendship towards Israel during their presidential tenure but pursued traditional French pro-Palestinian policy. This stemmed mainly from Paris's ties with the Arab and Muslim world, its significant Muslim population, and substantially anti-Israeli public opinion in France and Europe.

Macron has said he will embrace France's traditional policy of support for the two-state solution with East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. He has also adopted the longstanding position of condemning the settlements as damaging to the peace process as well as "not helpful" to regional stability. During a visit by Jordan's King Abdullah to Paris in July 2017, Macron condemned a Palestinian terrorist attack perpetrated three days earlier that had resulted in the killing of an Israeli policewoman – but in the same breath condemned Israeli "continuing settlement expansion."

Macron would like to believe this kind of language reflects a balanced approach. What it accomplishes, however, is to make a specious analogy between Palestinian terrorism/incitement on the one hand and Israeli communal development (e.g., building homes, nurseries, health centers etc.) on the other.

Israel contests the French assertion that its West Bank neighborhoods undermine regional stability. It considers this notion not only false but dangerous, as it appears to condone and encourage terror attacks. In Israel's view, the assertion is puzzling in light of Macron's declared commitment to the fight against terror.

Another central disagreement between Israel and France relates to the status of Jerusalem, which is not recognized by France as Israel's capital. During the 1947 deliberations on partition at the UN, France pressed for the internationalization of Jerusalem and the holy places (the Corpus Separatum). This was due to the importance it placed on the city's numerous religious and welfare institutions, a concern that is still manifest today.

On December 5, 2017, Macron held a phone conversation with President Trump to try to dissuade him from recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel. The Elysee also published a statement underlining that the status of Jerusalem must be settled in the context of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, aiming in particular at a two-state solution.

Trump went ahead and made the declaration of recognition the next day. In response, Macron reasserted France's and Europe's attachment to a two-state solution and stressed that Paris did not approve of the American move, which he labeled as contrary

to international law as well as to UN resolutions. He called for calm and restraint, though his statement contained messages that may well fuel further incitement and violence among extremists such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Macron appears to have entirely ignored the part of Trump's statement in which he made clear that his decision regarding Jerusalem would not involve immediate significant action, would not harm the two-state solution, and would not affect the future borders of the city.

The Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France (CRIF) does not share Macron's position and calls on him to adopt Trump's "courageous" decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish state.

Macron's statements come at a time when Saudi Arabia has reportedly proposed a new peace initiative to the Palestinians, a proposal that includes the establishment of Abu Dis as their capital. The Saudi proposal includes a non-contiguous state in the West Bank and Gaza without full sovereignty. It would not evacuate the majority of Jewish settlements and would require the Palestinians to renounce their demand for the right of return.

Though diverging significantly from Israel on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Macron appears determined to promote the process, initiated by his predecessors, of strengthening France's bilateral cooperation with Israel. He appreciates Israel's experience and know-how in areas such as counterterrorism, cyber defense, and technological innovation. These are areas Macron aspires to promote in France as part of its economic recovery and in the context of the fight against terrorism.

The two states also maintain defense cooperation. Though that element of the relationship is largely discreet, the Quai d'Orsay acknowledged the participation of French warplanes in a huge military international exercise in Israel following its recent disclosure in the media. It even underlined that Israel is a friendly country that maintains longstanding cooperation with France in all fields, and that joint military exercises are held regularly by the two countries.

At the end of the day, Macron's presidency does not herald a new era in Israel-France relations, particularly not on issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet despite their political divergences, both countries benefit from the tightening of relations. They share core democratic values as well as common concerns, such as Iran's ballistic missile program, its expanding influence in the region, and the weakening of partners Jordan and Egypt. They also have common objectives on counter-terrorism, cyber defense, and the development of high-tech projects.

Dr. Tsilla Hershco, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, specializes in Franco-Israeli and EU-Israeli relations.