



Netanyahu and Macron: Divergences and Convergences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Benjamin Netanyahu's June 2018 visit to Paris illustrated the complexity of Israel-France relations. On the one hand, there are significant divergences over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear agreement, exacerbated by the growing US-Europe gap. On the other, there are mutual respect, shared concerns, significant bilateral relations, and a strategic dialogue to help bridge the controversial issues.

Benjamin Netanyahu visited Paris on June 5, 2018 to inaugurate the events of the France-Israel “combined season” marking the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel. His visit highlighted the tight strategic, technological, economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation between the two countries. Netanyahu's and Macron's joint press conference following their meeting laid bare significant divergences relating primarily to the 2015 Iranian nuclear agreement and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – but it also pointed out shared concerns and convergences on strategically vital issues such as Iran’s military involvement in the region, particularly in Syria, and its ballistic missiles program.

Macron stressed his conviction, shared by other Europeans, that the 2015 nuclear agreement should be preserved as the best way to continue monitoring Tehran's nuclear activities. At the same time, he said he does not regard the agreement as entirely satisfactory. He admitted that the deal has flaws, and that it constitutes only a first stage to be completed when it expires in 2025. In addition, he underlined the need to deal with the issue of Iran’s ballistic missiles program as well as its destabilizing military presence in the Middle East, especially in Syria.

Netanyahu, in contrast to Macron, stressed that the nuclear agreement would not stop Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state. He presented the issue as a top

security priority for Israel, the region, and the world. He admitted that he had not asked Macron to withdraw from the nuclear agreement; nor had he asked France to cut its economic ties to Iran. This marks a change from earlier statements in which he demanded to “fix or nix” the nuclear agreement.

Netanyahu’s reference to French economic deals with Iran touched on a sensitive issue. Many international companies, fearing US sanctions, have cancelled deals with Iran – including major French companies such as the oil company Total, the car manufacturers Renault and PSA, and the aircraft manufacturer Airbus. The deals with Iran are important to Macron, whose top priorities include reforming France’s economy and balancing its budget.

Netanyahu drew attention to Tehran’s lies regarding its military nuclear plans, as can be seen in the Iranian nuclear archives exposed by Israel. It is to be noted that the French Foreign Ministry, in its reaction to the dramatic exposure of the archives by Netanyahu in May 2018, stressed that this exposure reinforces the importance of the Iranian nuclear deal.

Netanyahu further criticized the Iranian deal, stressing that Tehran used the money it received from the lifting of sanctions not for the welfare of its citizens but for subversive activities in the region, including its plans to destroy the Jewish state.

The two leaders converged in their concern for the stability of the Middle East as a result of Iran’s involvement in the region. Both said Tehran should stop its interference in Syria. Macron stressed what he views as three important principles required for a political solution to the Syrian crisis: full sovereignty for Syria, a legislative change, and the organization of free elections.

Another point of convergence relates to the importance the two leaders place on Russian influence in the promotion of a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Both leaders maintain a close dialogue with President Putin. Netanyahu visited Moscow in May 2018, reportedly to come to terms with Putin regarding Israel’s military struggle against Iran’s involvement in Syria. Later that month, Macron met with Putin in Saint Petersburg to find (*inter alia*) common ground on a political settlement of the Syrian civil war.

Netanyahu seemed to accept Macron's point of view regarding the need for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. However, he stressed Israel’s determination to prevent Iran from increasing its military presence in Syria and to continue its struggle against Tehran’s efforts to deliver sophisticated weapons to Syria and to Hezbollah, which, like its Iranian patron, has openly declared its wish to destroy Israel. Macron did not explicitly state that he opposes Israeli military interventions in Syria, but expressed concern regarding further destabilization of Lebanon’s fragile

political balance as a result of a potential military conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. French concern about Lebanon's stability was also reflected in Macron's condemnation of the Assad regime's decision to confiscate the property of people who fled Syria. Those who fled to Lebanon will have to remain there, further compromising its political and economic stability.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict emerged as a significant area of divergence between Netanyahu and Macron. The French president reiterated France's consistent position on what it perceives as the only solution to the conflict: two states living side by side in peace and security with West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Macron severely criticized the moving of the US embassy to (West) Jerusalem, defining it as contrary to international law and as a one-sided act that caused bloodshed and that undermines the peace process. Macron added that Paris is not going to launch a peace initiative in the near future, and he sees no pragmatic benefit in a unilateral French recognition of a Palestinian state.

Macron linked the bloody recent events in Gaza to the absence of a political solution and unequivocally condemned all forms of violence against civilians. At the same time, he emphasized the importance France attaches to Israel's security and condemned any form of incitement to violence, referring mainly to the Hamas. Macron also asked Netanyahu to address the acute humanitarian crisis in Gaza. He said France has already taken steps on this issue along with Jordan and the European countries.

It is to be noted that France, which is an influential permanent member of the UNSC, criticized Israel during UNSC deliberations on the Gaza riots, claiming that its responses to the violent "peaceful civil demonstrations" were disproportional. The French delegate to the UNSC called on Israel to remove the (supposed) blockade on Gaza and supported a proposed UNSC resolution condemning Israel and recommending the establishment of an international investigation committee. The resolution proposal failed as it was vetoed by the US.

Netanyahu, in contrast to Macron, pointed out the Palestinian responsibility in the impasse. He said the problem is neither the borders of Jerusalem nor the need to establish a Palestinian state but the refusal of the Palestinians to recognize the Jewish state. To illustrate this point, he noted the waging of political war on Israel by Mahmoud Abbas.

In addition, Netanyahu stressed that Hamas operates as an active terror organization. It has declared its wish to destroy the state of Israel with the support of Iran. Its demonstrations at the border were not peaceful: it used Gazan citizens as human shields with the objective of penetrating the Israeli border fence in order to

kidnap and kill Israeli citizens. Netanyahu underlined the obvious duty of the state of Israel to defend its citizens against Hamas terrorists.

In contrast to the Palestinians' belligerency, Netanyahu pointed out the improvement in Israel's relations with Arab countries in the region. He noted their wish to cooperate with Israel in the fight against radical Islamists as well as in Israeli technological innovations. He sees this development as a chance for peace in the region. These optimistic prospects likely appealed to Macron, who maintains close strategic and economic cooperation with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states.

Despite their divergences, both Macron and Netanyahu value the two countries' bilateral relations. They praised their intelligence cooperation and their joint efforts in the fight against terrorism. Netanyahu highlighted that many lives in Europe have been saved thanks to Israel's assistance in thwarting terrorist activities. The two leaders also praised their economic cooperation, with Macron citing Israel's high-tech industry as a model for the recovery of the French economy.

The two leaders also addressed their countries' scientific and cultural cooperation. Macron expressed the desire to further develop French language and culture in Israel and to increase the number of Israeli students in France. This reflects not only the French attachment to their cultural heritage but also French aspirations to promote the country's role on the international scene through massive investment in promoting the language. Indeed, one of the largest Francophone communities outside the borders of France lives in Israel. Netanyahu also expressed his respect for Francophone culture.

Both leaders proclaimed their personal friendship and mutual respect. Netanyahu thanked Macron for his fight against anti-Semitic violence towards French Jews, who constitute the biggest Jewish community in Europe. He also thanked Macron for his statements in which he equated anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism.

Despite significant divergences, the Netanyahu-Macron joint press conference and the inauguration of the France-Israel "combined season" reflected shared concerns, multifaceted cooperation between the two countries, and optimism regarding the prospects for French-Israeli relations.

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