



## PERSPECTIVES

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### **The French Presidential Elections of May 2007: Implications for French-Israeli Relations**

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*Executive Summary: The election this week of Nicolas Sarkozy as President of France is unlikely to lead to a substantial shift in French policy towards Israel, although the tone of French-Israeli relations can be expected to improve. Even the most favorable French administration will continue to take into account France's traditional ties with the Arab world, France's significant Muslim population, and public opinion in France – which is not at all favorable to Israel. Sarkozy's promise to affect a transatlantic rapprochement does not necessarily mean a positive shift in French policy towards Israel. It is equally possible that tightened French-US (or EU-US) coordination regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (combined with a possible change in the American administration, if that occurs), may lead to enhanced diplomatic pressure on Israel. However, in spite of political disagreements, the existing dialogue as well as the gradual process of improving bilateral relations will most likely prevail.*

The presidential elections in France, and especially the run-off elections on 6 May 2007, attracted world wide attention. On one side of the political duel competed the attractive, determined Segolene Royal, the left-leaning candidate of the Socialist Party (PS). Royal is the first woman in France to come this far in an election. On the other side of the arena raced her opponent, Nicolas Sarkozy, of the right-oriented Union for a Popular Movement (UMP). The charismatic, goal-driven, experienced and well-informed Sarkozy, who won the election with 53 percent of the vote, provokes mixed reactions because of his clear cut opinions, his past harsh expressions regarding the November 2005 riots and his Jewish roots (his grandfather was an immigrant of a Jewish family). The two talented and ambitious candidates, who represent a new generation of leaders in France, contributed to the media's intensive focus on the campaign.

The weighty issues on the French public agenda might equally explain the passionate interest of the media in the elections and their results. At the heart of the public debate during the 2007 presidential campaign, there were crucial domestic social and economic issues, including; the public budget deficit, unemployment, scarcity of low priced lodging, low pensions, decreasing purchasing power of French salaried employees, uncontrolled immigration policy and deteriorating systems of education

and health. Above all, there was the looming apprehension of the loss of national identity.

The predominance of these issues was evident during the two and half hours of televised confrontation between the two finalists on 2 May 2007. During the debate, the candidates spoke mostly on domestic issues, referring only briefly to major foreign policy themes such as the European constitution, the adhesion of Turkey to the EU, the Iranian nuclear ambitions, the human rights abuses in China and the genocide in Darfur. Unexpectedly, the Middle East was not even mentioned. In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the crisis in Lebanon, issues which normally stimulate obsessive interest in France, were almost totally absent from the public debate during the presidential elections.

### **Middle East Policy Expectations**

Eventually, the Israeli public and the media tend to regard the French presidential campaign through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis in Lebanon. They often express their expectations for a change in French Middle Eastern policy which would hopefully lead to a more balanced French attitude towards Israel. Consequently, Sarkozy's victory was followed by positive reactions by Israeli media and public opinion.

The expectations for a change probably stem from the assumption that the end of Chirac's presidency will tremendously affect French policy in the Middle East. In this context, during Chirac's 12-year rule (1995-2007), he manifested an intensive personal implication in the formulation of French Middle Eastern policy. This implication was often marked by an anti-Israeli and pro-Arab attitude. The Israeli public remembers well Chirac's hostile attitude towards Israel as well as his massive one-sided support for Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, especially during the first stages of the second Intifada.

Israeli expectations for a change in French attitude are equally based on the friendly declarations of the newly elected Sarkozy regarding Israel as well as on his firm struggle against anti-Semitic aggressions in France. Additionally, Israelis often express their hope that Sarkozy's warm attitude towards the United States might serve Israel's interests as well.

Yet, the repercussions of these elections on French policy towards Israel should not be overestimated. Unless an extreme crisis occurs – which is not to be easily overruled in this turbulent region – no significant changes should be expected. The election results will probably lead to a more pleasant style and tone, as well as to a more balanced French attitude regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nonetheless, the main features of French current policy towards Israel will probably continue under the new French president.

### **Features of French Attitudes Towards Israel**

French policy towards Israel is characterized by two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is a gradual process of improving bilateral relations. On the other hand, there are deep political divergences of opinion between the two countries.

The improvement in bilateral relations was initiated at the end of 2002, as an intentional process based on French-Israeli common objectives. The amelioration of the French-Israeli bilateral relations became a formal policy in September 2003, with the signing of a detailed plan elaborated by a special high level French-Israeli committee. According to the agreement, mutual common projects in fields such as culture, economy, commerce and science were planned and executed. In addition, the agreement included the promotion of bilateral strategic cooperation.

Previously, the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000 caused a severe deterioration in Franco-Israeli relations, essentially due to French pro-Palestinian attitude. The French formal initiative to improve relations reflected their comprehension that their partial attitude towards Israel constituted a detriment to their aspirations to play an influential role in the mediation of the conflict. The French realized that in order to overcome Israeli's resentment to their diplomatic implication in the mediation, they had to demonstrate a more balanced attitude.

Additionally, the improvement of bilateral relations was based on common perceptions and objectives such as the fight against international Islamist terrorist movements and Iranian nuclear ambitions. The July 2006 war in Lebanon constituted a major test for the improvement of French-Israeli relations. At the same time, it accentuated other points of common concern: the stabilization of the democratic regime of Fouad Siniora, the prevention of the rearming of Hizballah and the limitation of Syrian and Iranian involvement in Lebanese affairs.

The process of improving bilateral relations did not erase the political disagreements characterizing French-Israeli relations, especially since the second Intifada. The divergences are essentially connected with basic perceptions: France still believes that the only solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the creation of a viable Palestinian state on the territories conquered by Israel in 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital. France claims that this solution is still relevant and feasible in spite of the increasing terror and chaos in the Palestinian Authority. On the contrary, Israel insists that as long as terrorism persists, a peaceful and long-standing solution is impossible.

Additionally, conspicuous Franco-Israeli disagreements have emerged in the context of the Lebanese crisis. Thus, French refusal to add Hizballah to the list of terrorist organizations provokes harsh Israeli criticism. Another bone of contention between the two countries stems from the flight of Israeli air force planes over Lebanese airspace. France claims the flights constitute a violation of UN Resolution 1701, while Israel maintains that the operations inspect and prevent arms smuggling through the Syrian border.

### **Conclusion: Will French Policy Towards Israel Change After the Election?**

The results of the May 2007 presidential elections in France will not substantially change the essence of French attitudes towards Israel. Thus, the process of intensive bilateral relations and cooperation, initiated in 2002, will not be interrupted since they are based on French-Israeli common interests, concerns and perceptions. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that France and Israel will strengthen their strategic cooperation as result of mounting terrorist threats against the two countries.

Similarly, the results of the elections are probably not going to drastically change French perceptions of its Middle East policy. Indeed, even the most favorable French administration will continue to take into account the weighty considerations such as French traditional ties with the Arab world, the significant French Muslim population and French anti-Israeli public opinion. Moreover, the French most likely will not modify their traditional perception regarding the creation of a peaceful Palestinian state as the only solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This perception will continue to constitute a source of political discord between France and Israel as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues and as long as Palestinian terror and chaos prevail.

Even Sarkozy's friendly assurances towards the US and the potential transatlantic "rapprochement" do not necessarily signify a positive shift in French policy towards Israel. On the contrary, tightened US-French (or EU-US) cooperation regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, combined with a potential change in the American administration, might produce joint pressures on Israel for painful and even dangerous concessions and compromises.

In addition, the precarious and explosive situation in Lebanon, the French traditional attachment to this country and their concern for the security of their 1,600 UNIFIL soldiers, who risk being targeted by Hizballah, might serve as further potential disagreements between France and Israel. The unstable and perilous situation in Lebanon produces a great amount of uncertainty as to various aspects of French policy regarding the Lebanese crisis. In the forthcoming period there will probably be a profound reassessment of French attitude regarding its future participation in UNIFIL (the present mandate expires in August 2007), as well as closer potential dialogue with the Syrians and the Iranians in the context of the Lebanese crisis. It seems, however, that a potential dialogue with Iran and Syria over the Lebanese crisis is not going to compromise the firm French attitude in the Iranian nuclear issue.

Lastly, the results of the forthcoming legislative elections to the French National Assembly in June 2007 might be crucial as to the capacity of the newly-elected president to carry out the main lines of his politics. They will probably have their impact on the composition of the next French government and hence on the French interior and foreign policy, including its attitude towards Israel.

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