

Macron Put Down, France in Crisis: Implications for Israel

Remi Daniel | No. 1613 | June 29, 2022

The results of the recent elections to the French National Assembly are a serious failure for French President Emmanuel Macron. Less than two months after he was reelected, he failed to achieve a majority – creating a political situation that had not occurred in many years. The new situation will require the political actors to change their behavior, and in particular to consider the possibility of forming a coalition. The results signal a deep political crisis in France that is liable to affect the country and its neighbors. The foreign policy pursued by Macron in the past five years was active and ambitious, but was not immune to failures. In many cases, there was a confluence of interests between France and Israel, without France adopting a strongly pro-Israel policy. No drastic changes in relations between Israel and France should be expected in the near future, but the political situation in Paris, which is likely to influence various areas of importance to Israel, mandates monitoring in Jerusalem, which should plan and prepare for scenarios of a possible change in the French presence and policy in these spheres.

The Political Crisis in France

Emmanuel Macron was reelected President of France on April 24, 2022. Less than two months later, his party and its allies suffered a severe defeat in the June 19 elections to the French National Assembly, the more important of the two houses of parliament in France, when they lost their former absolute majority. These results constitute a personal failure for Macron, who in recent years has managed affairs of state in a very centralized manner, and who will now have to look for supporters from other parties in order to continue his leadership. This is an exceptional situation in the French political landscape, where in recent decades the voters have always given a majority to one party, or to a bloc assembled before the elections. This situation will force the political actors to devise or revert to methods that have been all but forgotten in France. If no solution is found, Macron can also dissolve the National Assembly and hold new elections. Meantime, the parties that until now were in the opposition

announced immediately after the elections that they had no intention of serving as a lifeline for Macron.

The balance of power between and within the blocs in the National Assembly reflects developments that have also occurred in other Western countries. The traditional parties – the Socialist Party (center-left) and the Republicans (center-right) – which ruled France alternately from the 1980s through Macron's first electoral victory in 2017, collapsed, while the big winners were the extremist parties. The strongest party in the left bloc is now the party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which follows a populist socialist line. On the extreme right is the nationalist party of Marine Le Pen, which increased its representation in the National Assembly more than tenfold, making it the largest faction in the opposition.

The voters' decision to punish Macron less than two months after his reelection, the strengthening of the extremist parties, and the low voter turnout reflect a deep political and constitutional crisis in France, especially the split in French society, which manifested itself in the Yellow Vests movement, widespread demonstrations against the COVID-19 directives, and other disruptive developments. Issues of democratic representation, relations between different political camps, and adaptation of the constitutional structure to changes in society – issues that are also debated in other Western democracies – have become important topics in French public discourse, and are expected to continue preoccupying the French political establishment in the near future. In addition, the effects of the war in Ukraine, particularly the rise in prices, are likely to aggravate political tensions in France.

The crisis in France is also liable to affect the situation within the European Union (EU). At a time when the EU is beset with the consequences of the war in Ukraine and must deal with disputes between its members, and when the absence of a prominent European leader is palpable, the weakening of France and its President is also problematic for the country's European neighbors.

Great Aspirations, Modest Achievements

When he took office as President five years ago, Macron declared that he would strengthen France's role in the international arena, and to this end,

he tried to advance various proactive measures. He also strove to establish himself as an alternative to US President Trump, especially in progress on the climate issue, and sought to position himself as a European leader spearheading changes within the EU. In many cases, however, the foreign policy initiatives that Macron launched failed to achieve the expected results.

A number of events even undermined France's global role during Macron's first term. The President's attempt to engineer a solution in Lebanon, which he announced during his visit to Beirut following the explosion in the city's port, was unsuccessful, and highlighted the limits of France's power in the international arena. An even bigger problem for Macron was the weakening of France's standing in Africa, a region regarded as essential for the country in its struggle against jihad terrorism and a strategic asset for Paris. This weakening resulted from political changes in France's African partners and dissatisfaction with the French military operations in the region. The most outstanding example was Mali's decision to halt its military cooperation with Paris and turn instead to Russian mercenaries.

The French position on the war in Ukraine is also controversial. Macron was one of the European leaders who, in contrast to the United States and Britain, believed that Russia would not attack Ukraine. He tried to mediate between Zelensky and Putin in a series of conversations that failed to achieve anything. When the war erupted, France supported sanctions against Russia and sent military equipment to Ukraine, but Macron's stubborn and futile efforts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine and maintain a connection with Putin despite the situation on the ground, generated tension between Paris and Kyiv and its supporters.

These questions highlighted the growing gap between Macron's ambitious statements and the actual results of his policy. Macron's behavior, including his previous remarks against NATO, which he described as being in a state of "brain death," also raised questions about his capabilities in building personal relationships with other leaders, and about his view of the world, perceived as obsolete.

France-Israel Relations under Macron

During his first term, Macron promoted a policy consistent with Israeli interests. France stepped up its activity in the Gulf in close cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, and publicly supported Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman. On the Iranian question, France declared on a number of occasions its opposition to Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, but contended that an agreement was the best way to ensure this.

France is also close to Amman and Cairo. France sold military equipment to Egypt, and the two countries cooperated in the Libyan civil war. In the Eastern Mediterranean, France joined the East Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2020. When tension arose between Turkey on the one hand and Greece and the Republic of Cyprus on the other, Macron sided with Athens and Nicosia and signed a defense pact with Greece, thereby increasing the French presence in the region. On all these matters, France's views and actions matched Israeli interests.

The shared interests of Paris and Jerusalem also led to a certain degree of improvement in the bilateral relations between the two countries. Macron's personal view was usually positive for Israel: he welcomed the Abraham Accords, and noted his personal affinity for the country at various opportunities. In addition, cooperation between the two countries expanded in various realms, including military spheres. As a rule, however, France remained unfriendly to Israel in international organizations, and French representatives in UN institutions consistently vote against Israel, even in opposition to the views of other Western or European countries.

This stance results from internal French pressure. Public opinion in France is primarily pro-Palestinian, and the views of the French Foreign Ministry have traditionally exhibited a pro-Arab tendency. At the same time, recent regional changes, such as the Abraham Accords, also force the Foreign Ministry to reconsider the implementation of its pro-Arab stance, which does not automatically translate into opposition to Israel.

A Look at the Future

Foreign and security policy is one of the areas in which a French president has enjoyed relatively large freedom of action, regardless of his situation in

parliament. It is therefore expected that Macron will be able to continue guiding French foreign policy.

Macron begins his second term in a relatively weak position on the international stage. Given the new situation in parliament, France and its president are entering a period of uncertainty, with quite a few risks of paralysis in the political order, at least in the short term. Presumably this development will affect French foreign policy. On the one hand, Macron's attention will be directed to domestic issues. On the other hand, he will likely seek achievements in foreign policy, in which he enjoys freedom of action, in order to compensate for his domestic weakness. It is doubtful whether he will want to devote major efforts to the Middle East, in part because he will want to avoid creating friction on this issue with the movements having an anti-Israel bias, which became stronger as a result of the elections, particularly in the case of Mélenchon's party, which is highly critical of Israel.

While there remains unrealized potential in France-Israel relations, a significant improvement in the bilateral realm appears unlikely in the short term. Although Macron is one of the most pro-Israel actors in the current French political order, his domestic and external weakness has created conditions that are inauspicious for such an improvement. Furthermore, Israel is also entering a period of political uncertainty, and bilateral relations with France were not a high priority even previously. It is important for Jerusalem to monitor developments in Paris because the political situation there is liable to also affect various areas of importance to Israel: Europe, the Gulf, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel should prepare for scenarios involving some degree of change in the French presence and policy in these spheres.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen