

France Takes the Lead on the Middle East

A political vacuum exists in the Middle East, and it is significant that France has stepped in to fill it in a principled way. It is a rebuke to the current Obama administration "reassessing" its options regarding Israel, and lacking a trumpet that sounds a clear call to get ready for battle.

The policy of the Obama administration is unclear. President Barack Obama, out of pique and against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is threatening to endorse a U.N. resolution calling for the creation of a Palestinian state and therefore a two-state solution. An ambiguous and anonymous White House statement is that the United States was continuing to "find a way forward that advances the interest we and others share in a two state solution."

However, in a seemingly conciliatory action, the U.S. in December 2014 voted against a resolution drafted by the Palestinian Authority that called for an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the establishment of a Palestinian state by the end of 2017. In addition, the U.S. did criticize on March 27, 2015 the U.N. Human Rights Council for once again "singling out Israel for criticism without acknowledging the violent attacks directed at its people."

French foreign minister Laurent Fabius has politely and indirectly reprimanded the U.S. for its reluctance to be involved in a Middle East solution. In the absence of a clear American policy on the Middle East, France, by both public and private diplomacy, is asserting itself as the major player and leading the international drive in an effort to end the Arab-Israeli conflict by a U.N. Security Council resolution in the

near future. France has already sometimes differed from U.S. policy on Middle East issues. It took the lead in 2011 in trying to help Libya recover from its disastrous situation. It has differed on the negotiations, supposedly among the P5+1 but essentially between the U.S. and Iran, on the nuclear issue.

The French proposal would suggest parameters to be defined by the U.N. Security Council, which the parties, Israel and the Palestinians, will have to discuss, to end the differences between the parties. The French suggestion is reminiscent of the Clinton Parameters of December 2000, the guidelines meant to be the basis for further negotiations for resolving the conflict. The Israeli government formally accepted those parameters, with some reservations that were acceptable to President Clinton.

France has proposed a new procedure that would be the basis of a negotiated peace between the parties. François Delattre, the French ambassador to the U.N., has suggested that the U.N. Security Council is probably the best venue to achieve this and has declared that France is committed to get a U.N. resolution, setting out guidelines for future negotiations as well as calling for a stop to new Israeli settlements.

France, in governmental and parliamentary rhetoric and action, has made its position clear. On December 11, 2014, the French Senate ratified an earlier decision by the National Assembly to recognize an independent state of Palestine, alongside Israel in its "1967 borders." In this the French parliament followed the similar decisions in Britain, Sweden, Ireland, and Spain. On January 2, 2015, France voted in the U.N. Security Council for a resolution calling for a Palestinian state, though the resolution did not receive the necessary 9 out of 15 votes to pass. In this case France asserted that it had voted positively in order to prevent the PA from going to the International Criminal Court to bring charges against Israel.

In November 2014, France had proposed a resolution of five parameters to be the basis for peace talks, but it was not supported by either Israel or the United States. It was put aside until after the Israeli election on March 3, 2015. In March 2015, France again proposed to lead the momentum to lead to a two-state solution. This would be done in consensual fashion, with the contending parties and major international players involved in the endeavor.

The French draft resolution, optimistically, envisages two independent, democratic, and prosperous states, Israel and a sovereign, contiguous, and visible State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security. The basis would be borders based on the June 4, 1967 lines with mutually agreed limited equivalent land swaps, and a fair and realistic solution to the refugee question. Probably, it would also entail a non-demilitarized State of Palestine, phased withdrawal of Israeli security forces, and prevention of terrorism.

No one can doubt the earnestness, the political desire, and the humanitarian concern of France in Middle East affairs.

France called for an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council that then voted for an agenda to help the embattled religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East. France has guided the effort to help the Assyrians, Yazidis, and other ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Among other things, this would mean safe zones in the Nineveh Plain of Iraq, the Sinjar region of Iraq, and the Kharbour of Syria.

France also has taken the lead in trying to protect Christians in Syria and Iraq. Again, France, according to the Middle East Christians Committee, took a step that the U.S. has not done, in trying to find a solution for the plight of Christians in those two countries as well provide aid for Egyptian Copts threatened by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS).

French optimism is encouraging, but some skepticism is in order as one witnesses the Palestinians observance on March 30, 2015 of the memory of six Arabs killed in 1976 rather than engage in less contentious behavior. International officials have been less than positive. The recently retired U.N. special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, the Dutch diplomat Robert Serry, pessimistically complained on March 15, 2015 that three previous rounds of negotiations had failed and that "we should not rush the parties back to the table."

Certainly the European Union has not helped the rush to the table. The EU is the largest provider of aid to the Palestinians, but it is also Israel's largest trading partner. In addition, Israel in June 2014 became linked with Horizon 2020, the EU's largest research and development fund, and has agreements on agricultural, industrial, and pharmaceutical products.

Yet, in a document of March 2015, the EU has proposed 22 suggestions on how to pressure Israel to enter negotiations, though none are proposed for Palestinians. A number of the suggestions are concerned with the viability of Jerusalem as the future capital of two states.

The French initiative is praiseworthy, but the parameters should make certain of a number of factors in the negotiations: there be no preconditions, that solutions will not be imposed on the parties, that the legitimacy of Israel be recognized, and that a state of Palestine be demilitarized.

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