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Why the Israel-Hamas Conflict is Significant for France

Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

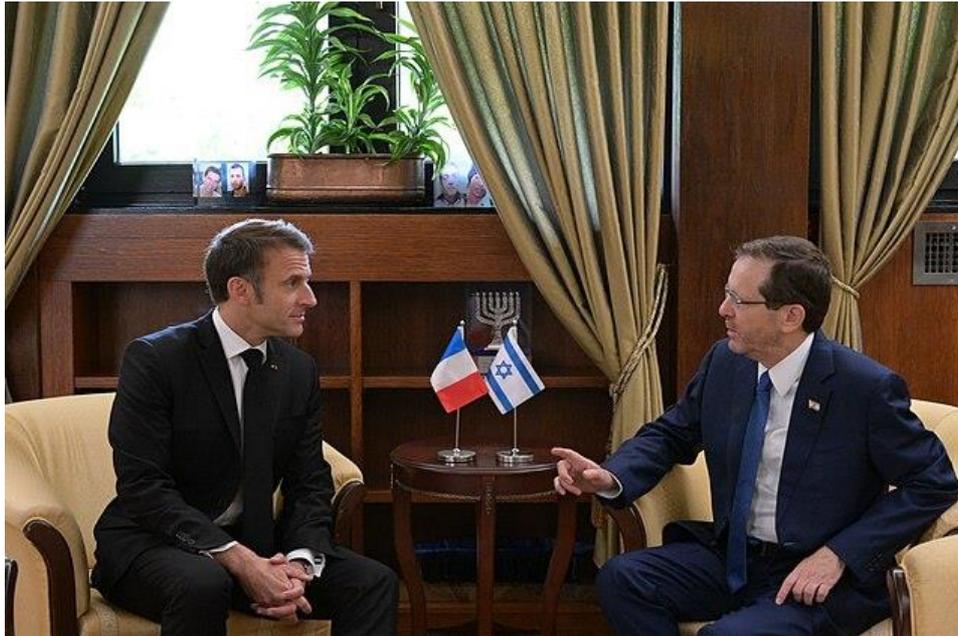
*Since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas conflict on 7 October, France has maintained a clear position in line with its traditional policy in the Middle East: supporting Israel's right to self-defence and its war against Hamas terrorism, while advocating for a two-state solution and an immediate humanitarian truce. **PACO MILHIET** notes that France will face challenges as a diplomatic player in the region as it navigates balancing international policies and domestic tensions resulting from the conflict.*

COMMENTARY

[Interviewed by the BBC](#) on 10 November, French President Emmanuel Macron exhorted Israel to cease the bombing of civilian population, called for a humanitarian pause, and urged a prompt ceasefire. While these statements have been widely [criticised in Israel](#), notably by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the French president maintains a consistent position since the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October.

The French peace initiative is based on three pillars: an immediate humanitarian truce, a collective response to the terrorist challenges posed by Hamas, and the paving of the way for a political solution by ensuring the creation of a Palestinian state, a necessary condition to ensure the stability and security of Israel.

As President Macron strives to maintain a clear international stance, the recent tensions in Gaza also has significant implications in France, where the conflict has sparked political debates.



French President Emmanuel Macron meets Israeli President Isaac Herzog in Hashvan, Israel, 24 October 2023 amid tensions in Gaza, prior to Macron's statement in November calling for a humanitarian pause. Since the Hamas terrorist attacks on 7 October, France has maintained a consistent position: supporting Israel's right to self-defence and its war against Hamas terrorism, while advocating for the protection of civilian population and a two-state solution. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Domestic Impact

The Hamas attack on 7 October resulted in the deaths of [30 French nationals](#), making it the deadliest terrorist attack on French interests since the Nice attacks in 2016. Five are still held in captivity, but three have been liberated by Hamas on 28 November following active diplomatic initiatives [undertaken](#) by Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu in Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The president expressed solidarity with Israel, stating, "[We are linked to Israel through mourning.](#)" France is home to the third-largest Jewish community globally, after Israel and the United States, with 600,000 citizens. It also has the largest Muslim community in Europe, with 6 million citizens.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict historically has had repercussions in France, and recent events are no exception. Some political movements have taken strong positions, with the far right "Reconquête" expressing [unconditional](#) support for Israel, while the far left "La France insoumise" [refuses](#) to label Hamas a terrorist group and condemns Israeli actions in Gaza as war crimes. The government is concerned that the Middle East conflict could fuel tensions in the country, especially given France's recent history of experiencing terrorist attacks and anti-Semitic incidents. Earlier this month, several dozen blue painted Stars of David symbols have been discovered on Parisian façade, associated to anti-semitic acts. The French government suspects an orchestrated [destabilisation operated from Russia](#).

To prevent potential escalation, the government has [banned](#) several pro-Palestinian demonstrations, but allowed those advocating for peace. A civic march against anti-Semitism gathered tens of thousands on 12 November in Paris, raising controversy as far-right movement participated.

A Singular Diplomatic Role

As a Mediterranean power, France has interests in North Africa and the Middle East. It has had a long history of diplomatic involvement in the Middle East, where it has often protected the interests of Arab Christians and holy sites in Jerusalem, calling itself the "[oldest daughter](#)" of the Christian Church. After the First World War, the League of Nations granted France the mandate to govern Lebanon and Syria, which lasted from 1920 to 1946.

Since recognising Israel in 1949, France has consistently supported the existence and legitimacy of the Jewish state and maintained a strong military and diplomatic partnership with Israel. This partnership was evident in the 1956 Franco-British-Israeli operation in the Suez Canal.

However, France's Middle Eastern politics is also based on strong defence, diplomatic relations, and cooperation with Arab states in the Levant and the Gulf. France has always supported the two-state solution in Israel/Palestine and had criticised Israel in 1967 following the Six-Day War that led to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. France has frequently adopted a divergent approach from that of the United States in attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and mitigate tensions in the Middle East. This contrast was particularly evident in 2003, when President Jacques Chirac opposed the US military invasion of Iraq and received significant support from Arab Muslim nations.

Is France Still a Key Player in the Middle East?

Balancing diplomatic relationships is challenging, particularly during a period of military escalation in Gaza. France's ability to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the conflict seems constrained, given the limited influence Paris has on Israeli stakeholders who defend a [non-negotiable "eradication"](#) of Hamas in Gaza amid what they define as an existential war against terrorism. Even the United States faced difficulties in shaping Israel's response in Gaza and identifying their war objectives.

Recent geopolitical developments have also challenged France's global influence in the region. In 2011, France led a western coalition to oust Muammar Gaddafi's regime, resulting in a decade of instability in Libya and sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, since 2012, France has severed all diplomatic ties with the government of Syria, a country where Paris previously played a significant role in shaping and influencing the political elite in Damascus. Also, in the wake of the 2020 Beirut port explosion, Macron's diplomatic attempts to help Lebanon did not unfold with the anticipated impact initially envisioned.

Ultimately, the primary success of Macron's diplomacy in the Middle East lies in its humanitarian proactivity. On 9 November, the French President initiated an international [humanitarian conference](#) for the Gaza population, bringing together 80 countries and organisations. France announced humanitarian funding of over 100 million US dollars, with over one billion committed by all the participants.

Moreover, with the deployment of a French military helicopter carrier [off the coast of Gaza](#) transformed into a hospital ship to support civilians, military assets were urgently

mobilised to transport humanitarian aid. [Four military aircraft A400M](#) conducted rotations between France and Egypt, delivering nearly 50 tonnes of humanitarian cargo.

Finally, 700 French soldiers are deployed at the border between Lebanon and Israel for observation and deconfliction missions within the framework of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). [France aims to position](#) itself as a pioneer and catalyst nation, urging other countries to undertake similar initiatives.

This is a salutary initiative in a period where the international community struggles to find a way out of the crisis and mediations are becoming increasingly delicate.

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