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French Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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SUMMARY

Introduction by Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

Allow me to welcome you to a Palestinian house and thank you for coming here today. This roundtable meeting is not only important because of your attendance, that we appreciate very much, but also due to the subject that we will be talking about.

In the past, such events were attended by up to forty people and everybody had to fight to obtain a seat. Now, under the current circumstances, and since Israel closed Jerusalem in 1993, only a few of us can be present. Thus, we will be taking minutes for the ones that cannot attend today. And possibly, we will even publish them later in some form or the other.

In such a meeting, we appreciate your input, your ideas and we are interested in the assessment of the outside, of how Europeans view these issues. I also want to welcome the people from the media that we have here today. This is an open house and we will send a summary of the meeting to Wafa, the Palestinian News Agency. I would be glad if you could also give us some input, and I would like to ask you to spread the news about what is going on in Jerusalem to the people in Nablus, Tulkarem, Gaza, and the refugee camps so that they know they are not being left out, that they are not isolated, that they are not being forgotten.

Our society is in a state of transition. We are now developing from an Intifada society into a civil society. This poses many problems; for example, we have to close the gap between the outside and the inside. We need the help of the foreign community in this and we thank those members present for being here. And one of the questions that we will ask today will be: How can Europe help in this difficult stage that we are passing through right now? Is it possible to consider imposing sanctions upon Israel?

After Oslo, we thought we were going through a new chapter - a culture of peace. But Netanyahu and his right wing government have brought us back to a culture of fear. We are back to square number one. Where do we go from here?

We should be open-minded and speak frankly. Chatham House rules apply; no one will be quoted. Also the media people are here just to catch the spirit of the meeting. I would like to ask you to introduce yourself; who you are and what your interests are in being here.

Dr. Gilles Andreani:

Thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to speak. Let me first introduce myself. I am the head of the Planning Staff in the French Foreign Ministry. In view of the fact that I am mainly preoccupied with strategic issues, I have to admit that I am not an

expert in Middle Eastern affairs. My deputy, Dr. Dubertrand, is in charge of Middle Eastern questions in our department, and he is much more knowledgeable in this respect.

I have been thinking about what I can talk about. I will not talk about the Middle East as such or Middle Eastern politics because, as I said, I am not an expert in this field. I will present you with the French perception of the Middle East - what the French leadership have in their minds when talking about the region - and the relation of France with the Middle East. I first want to give you a fairly general overview and then leave it up to questions.

It is a difficult topic that I am going to talk about. Firstly, because it is a very emotional subject, and secondly, because it has been distorted so much by history, or what we can call, the "French Middle Eastern dream". Let me explain what I mean by saying this. When I was a child, I used to go to the Museum of French Monumental Art, where there was a section on the Middle East showing how the French built and shaped the region. This is a dream; it has never existed like this. The French have had a strong presence and influence, but the Middle East has not been shaped by the French. But the French leaders, until today, cultivate this Middle Eastern dream and spread this distorted history.

What do the French decision makers see today when they look at the Middle East? They see a range of countries from Turkey to Morocco, having all sorts of different bilateral ties with France. In addition, each of these countries is facing important transitions. France has a responsibility in this, from which it cannot walk away.

What do French decision makers *not* see? They do not see a threat diffusing from the Middle East, something like a rise of Islamic movements threatening France. They see the process of building post-colonial nation states with the armies having a strong role in this process. And they see that the countries of this region, although of course being very different, share common transitional features.

What do the French decision makers see when they look at their own country? They see one essential feature, and that is, a community of about 4.5 million people from the Middle East that came to France to stay. They are mostly Muslim. France has by far the greatest Muslim community in Europe and we face the challenge of finding a way to integrate this community into a secular state. The second facet French leaders see is the community of about 600,000 Jews that live in France. What do French leaders derive from this domestic situation? They have a particular sensibility when it comes to the peace process and a special interest in just outcomes.

The second main aspect is that, with the end of the Cold War, transition processes have started in many of the region's countries. How do they affect us? How can we help to make them go as smoothly as possible? When we look at our economic stakes in the Middle East, we see that they are high, but not as high as they were before. Only about 4-5% of our trade goes into the region, but the region is much more important when it comes to market access, investments, etc. Factors usually mentioned in that respect are dependency on energy resources and geographic proximity. Saudi-Arabia and Iran are France's main suppliers of oil, but there is no great dependence. In fact, France depends on its outside energy supply much less than might be thought. The geographic proximity to the region is, of course, a fact which becomes especially important due to what I told you about this Middle Eastern dream that drives the French attitude.

Now, what do French decision makers believe ought to be done? The key answer is that they think that France should act by shaping European politics for the region. France looks at the region as a whole; it looks at the problems that have much in common all over the

region. And it considers the economic aspects as being the most painful in the transition process. The "Marrakesh Agreement" provided for the countries of the Southern rim of the Mediterranean to open up their markets. This, of course, brings fiscal hardships to these economies due to the loss of tariff incomes and an inability to compete. We should try to combine economic and political approaches into a single process. In the Barcelona process, the EU tried to do this at three levels:

Trade - having bilateral trade agreements with the countries of the region;

Aid - compensating for the transition process on which the EU will spend 4.2 billion ECU over the next five years;

Political dialogue - so as to build partnerships and confidence and, eventually, a kind of informal security arrangement between the two regions. In this regard, a "Security Charter" will be discussed in Malta in a couple of days.

Now, this brings us back to the peace process. Supporting the peace process is an active policy of France and of Europe as a whole. We have always taken an active part in the peace process. This is symbolized by the recent appointment of the EU Special Envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos. Likewise, France is becoming increasingly credible. France has always been at the forefront of the peace process, but it is much more efficient now than it was fifteen years ago. And this is mainly because of the improvement in its relationship with Israel, which has enabled it to be heard from both sides.

Discussion:

Adnan Hussein: A few weeks ago, we had a visitor here at a PASSIA roundtable from the French prime ministry [Mr. Guy Sorman] who said very emotionally: "Israel is more important to France than Palestine." I do not know if you agree with him. Can you tell me whether this is the case and if so, why?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: You know, as an official, it is difficult for me, even under Chatham House rules, to disagree with the prime ministry. With respect to trade and economic relations, of course there is a difference in our relations with Israel and the Palestinians. But I believe that our position in the peace process is far more neutral than other countries. For us, it is not a case of who is more important, those with whom we carry out more trade or those who will bring in more votes during the French elections, i.e. the Palestinians or the Jews. We are in favor of just outcomes.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: I want to know your opinion about the peace process and especially about the issue of Jerusalem. How do you see things? We have a paramount interest in obtaining results in the peace process, but we think this is possible only together, not independently. There will be no peace if one side tries to exclude the other.

Dr. Albert Aghazarian: For me it has become clear that the Germans, French and British all have different positions on the Middle East. This has become particularly obvious in the light of the Cold War. I feel that the French leadership have always been allergic to others interfering in their policies towards the Middle East. I think a good example is the Iraqi experience, when France, in a unilateral diplomatic initiative, approached Iraq just before the outbreak of the Gulf War. Iraq then relied on France, but was deceived. What are your views on this? And then, I want to repeat an earlier question but from another angle. We

talked about Israel being more important to France than the Palestinians. Now, is France more important to Israel than Europe? Or, is France merely dismissing a European role in the peace process in an off-handed manner?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: Let me start with your last question. A political Europe is hopefully in the making; I am not totally pessimistic about it. Shared European politics are in the making, including European coordination and European funds. The initiatives for the Middle East have mainly been started by France, this is true, but the other Europeans agreed to join. There is a broad agreement on the basics of the peace process. Maybe there is a difference in style but not in substance among the Europeans. The British, for example, under the Conservatives, are reluctant to take a public stand against the US, but they supported Moratinos' appointment in the end. Also, Germany has had its problems with the latest EU actions. But, as I say, the basic parameters are the same in the European Union.

Let me tell you my reading of the issue concerning France and Iraq. Why did Mitterand then go and accept a confrontation with Iraq? He had in mind the Palestinian issue and wanted to state clearly that you must not invade other countries' territory like that. But there was no hostility in his attitude towards Iraq. If Saddam had offered to pull out unilaterally, Mitterand would have agreed to support Iraq. But I insist, there has never been a deal of the kind you mentioned between Iraq and France.

Adnan Hussein: We are against the ongoing sanctions against Iraq. Iraq has abided by all Security Council resolutions during the last two years. The Iraqi people are suffering from the consequences of the sanctions. It is time now to look after the Iraqi people, the Iraqi children, the future generation that is growing up now. We have to stop the tough measures of the UN. The Iraqis need humanitarian aid.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: In our opinion, Iraq has not yet fully complied with Security Resolution 687. It has changed for the better, and much has been achieved. We appreciate that, but not every demand has been fulfilled. In addition, if you talk to members of the Iraqi opposition, you will hear that they are not too happy about the partial lifting of the sanctions under the food-for-oil agreement, as they say this supports the regime. On the other hand, you have to see that it was the French that fought most ardently for Resolution 986 while others worked against it. I am sure the economic activities allowed under this resolution will lead to an improvement.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: You are totally consistent with what you said at the beginning of your presentation about the emotional nature of the subject and the French distorting History.

There were three main opinions in Palestinian society at the time of the Gulf War: one saying that occupation was always wrong, another that this was an Arab affair in which the US and the Europeans should not interfere, and the third, that of the youth saluting Saddam Hussein in the streets, saying it was time for Israelis to feel the suffering that we had faced under their occupation.

I want to ask something about the current situation. When your president came to Jerusalem, he was making it clear that the question of Jerusalem has not been solved until today. But where do we go from here? How can we build on this? You know that the heart of the problem, the symbol of the conflict is Jerusalem. What is the French policy on Jerusalem? Where do you stand?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: Legally, we stand on firm ground. We have a clear view on Jerusalem. We accept the international resolutions on Jerusalem and we think that the issue has to be solved in a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement. All the issues have to be

resolved in negotiations. We support positive outcomes to negotiations and we are trying to ensure that all the issues, including Jerusalem, are dealt with within this framework.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: Would you support the reopening and re-functioning of the Arab municipality in Jerusalem?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: As I said before, we think that negotiations are the only solution. The only thing that we can do right now is to criticize the decisions and actions taken by Israel to change the facts on the ground. But physically, there is nothing we can do.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: No, I mean would you support us if we were to respond to the Israeli actions with a civil society initiative?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: As I said before, as long as it falls within legal parameters - it is fine with us. But I do not know what you have in mind. Thus, of course, I cannot say yes or no to such a vague suggestion.

Dr. Riad Malki: I want to follow up on this last question. If the Israeli side continues to create facts on the ground in Jerusalem, we will be compelled to do the same. The reaction of the international community has so far only been condemnation, nothing more. Now, if we did the same, if we created facts on the ground, what would be your reaction? Would you also condemn such an initiative? Or would you see it as a kind of free competition?

In the second part of my question, I want to go back to the European Union, to the question of a political Europe. As far as I understand it, when it comes to full unity at a political level, to a collective European foreign policy, France has to give up its independent positions. Don't you feel that you would lose your independence in this process?

Then, the third question is about the transition processes that you mentioned. What is your interest in these transitions? What would you like to see at the end of these processes? It seems to me that you support the establishment of micro-French models everywhere. What about the Algerian crisis, for example? People say that this is not an Algerian crisis, but a fight between France and the US about their values.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: I want to skip the first question as it is too vague, too unclear. As I am a French government official, I can only say again that we will support initiatives that have a sound legal basis, but we insist that a solution has to be found through a negotiated process.

Concerning the politics of the European Union, I want to remind you that already since 1958, we have given away so many sovereign powers; we have transferred a variety of concerns to the Union. For example, none of the European countries has its own trade policy. We are able to live with this because what we received in return is a much more forceful position e.g. on the world markets. We hope that the same will happen in the field of foreign policy. The problem here is that foreign policy is usually more connected with action, and action is hard to reconcile with compromise. But having a united foreign policy will give us more weight, and EU positions will be more credible.

You tackled the issue of what we would like to see at the end of the transition processes. As I said in the beginning, the area covers a wide range of different countries, but I will give you one example: In Turkey, we would like a consolidated democracy and a sound market economy to develop.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: With the army still in place?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: Yes, you are right. That is a problem. The other main problem is whether the Refah Party will go the right way - or what we think would be the right way - and become a secular party, integrating itself into the secular Turkish system. But this is actually not a French problem.

Concerning Algeria, I want to emphasize that we know better than to fight with the Americans over Algeria. Yes, at some stage, the Americans bet on the Islamic Salvation Front whereas France never wanted to take sides in the conflict. There is no contest between France and the US in Algeria.

Dr. Mohammed Jadallah: I want to ask about the French policy towards the Palestinians, about Jacques Chirac's visit to Jerusalem and the French role in Lebanon, all of which raised high expectations from the Palestinians. We expect a much bigger role; an open door for Arafat is not enough. We want the French support to be translated towards our national rights. Also, it is important that each European country should back Moratinos, in order to enable him to fulfill his role properly.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: All these are key questions. What we do is that we pursue just outcomes. In the past, the French often took positions that were offensive to Israel. Today, these are more or less European positions, and they are more acceptable to Israel - to the Israeli government and the Israeli public.

Dr. Albert Aghazarian: I cannot follow you. Which positions are more acceptable to Israel? Excuse me for insisting on this, but it is not clear to me what you are talking about.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: I mean that the Israelis now, at least, accept to hear our positions and to think about them.

HE Stanislaw de Laboulaye: Let me elaborate a little on this. We try to play the role of honest brokers. Therefore, the improvement in our relations with the Israelis over the past fifteen years is important not only for us, but also for you. If we want to act as a broker, we need to be heard by both sides.

I think you need to ask the question yourself. Do you want an honest broker or do you want a protector? Do you want a protector such as France was during the Ottoman empire? You have to think about what you want. For our part, we want to play the role of an honest broker, not a protector.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: We can accept your taking the role of an honest broker. Now, at the moment, the gap between Netanyahu and Arafat is too wide; they cannot sit together, they cannot work together. The whole peace process is at stake. Something like the Washington initiative at the time of the tunnel crisis will not work again. We need to bring the regional partners, Cairo and Amman, back to the peace process. Are you, as an honest broker, ready to have the four of them together at a summit in Paris, for example? We cannot do this again the way we did it in Washington after the anger of last September. That was only crisis management, now we need to push the peace process forward.

Dr. Marwan Bishara: I think HE Stanislaw de Laboulaye is quite right in what he says. We need to ask ourselves: What can we, the Jerusalemites, do for Jerusalem? France has already done a great deal. For example, it has frozen the renewal of aid to Israel. We have to look at the problems that lie in our hands. Yes, there are a lot of things that France is not

doing, a lot of initiatives that need to be taken, but at least France is taking initiatives. We need to specify what we need, what we want from the French or the Europeans. The problem is that the Israelis just say no to the French initiatives and that we Arabs accept Washington as the mediator because of its influence on Israel. We should say "no", we need two brokers. We have to present ourselves as serious partners to France.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: But this is the subject for a different session. The question here is: Can France take an initiative?

Dr. Albert Aghazarian: No, but Marwan already answered this question in his statement. We first need to know what we want.

Walid Asali: The role of an honest broker is not enough. We need more support, but the question is: What is the alternative?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: This discussion has been going on in France for some time, but we are realistic - we cannot be co-sponsors at the same level as the US. We cannot play a symmetric role. For example, we cannot engage in the same military commitments as the US.

And you do not want to end up with Israel being supported by the US and the Palestinians by the European Union. It is only possible to have two co-sponsors, but not two protectors. There is a need for the two co-sponsors to work closely together, not to compete.

Dr. Riad Malki: I think this is clear. Only when we talk about a peace process different from Oslo can we expect a new role of the European Union. In Oslo, Russia and the US were installed as official sponsors of the peace process, although Russia has meanwhile dropped out. Moratinos has now reluctantly been accepted by Israel, but not by the US. It is true that the Europeans have to accept reality. They are not on the same level as the US. It is up to Moratinos now to upgrade the role of the EU in the peace process.

Dr. Nago Humbert: What I want to say is too sensitive for me to express in a foreign language, so please understand that I prefer to speak in French. I am not a Palestinian and I am not a Frenchman. My country has no foreign policy: We are always with the stronger side. I want to take advantage of your presence today and give you an insight into the situation, the current state of the peace process. The circumstances today are terrible, and the Palestinian territories are still occupied. I know what I am talking about since I have worked here all through the Intifada. For Palestinians it is hard even to obtain permission to receive treatment in hospital. Yesterday, when I came from Nablus to Jerusalem, I had to pass twelve checkpoints. What I want to say is that I am very concerned about the situation.

For the Palestinians, there is nothing left to negotiate over. They have already made all their concessions. A false assessment of the situation prevails in Europe, where it is believed that the Israelis and the Palestinians are at the same level, and that only some effort is needed to come to a negotiated settlement of the problem. The truth of the matter is that we have an occupying power that does not care about international resolutions and international law. Israel's settlement policy is a provocation. I had the hope that the European representatives would fill the gaps and take initiatives, but here they only try to appease. We see Clinton on TV saying that he is not pleased with the settlements, but then the US vetoes the condemnation of Israel's settlement policy in the Security Council. The US is not credible. The Europeans have to take the initiative, even if the US does not want this. But I do not see this happening. Therefore, my outlook is very pessimistic. I think this will end in terrible bloodshed.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: Thank you for your very emotional speech. I am not going to repeat what I have said before, but the EU cannot replace the US. This is obvious. But of course, there are things that we, as Europeans, can do.

Dr. A.W. Ata: As I am a psychologist, I want to ask a humanistic, rather than a political question. When Chirac was in Jerusalem, I was in Australia. The Australians were stunned at Chirac's reaction. A lot of people, for the first time, realized that the Europeans have to be more forthright concerning the Israelis. Seeing Chirac's visit to the Old City on television, it became clear that the Israelis are now pushing us even physically. Now, what I want to ask is: What was the reaction of the French public?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: My best guess about what the French laymen think is as follows: It has become clear - and I would say at least since the Intifada - that one people here has been wronged, and that is the Palestinians. This did not only become clear as a result of Chirac's visit to Jerusalem. But you also have to see that the European reaction to Chirac's behavior was not unanimous. It received a very bad press in Germany, for example, where France was accused of taking a special stand. So, there were pros and cons in Europe.

Adnan Hussein: If you imagined being in the position of Arafat, what would you do under the current circumstances to continue with the peace process?

Dr. Gilles Andreani: I cannot answer this question directly, but I want to tell you what an Israeli told me yesterday when I asked him the same question. He said - and this was right after the two suicide attacks in Gaza - that if Arafat wanted to take the first step now and unilaterally decided to resume cooperation with Israel, Netanyahu would be left with his back to the wall and would come back to the negotiation table. The problem is that Arafat might lose the support of his constituency by doing this.

Dr. Albert Aghazarian: This is an absurd situation. Arafat is always supposed to crack down on the opposition, on the Islamists. He does not gain anything out of this.

Dr. Gilles Andreani: I want to tell you what the reaction in the foreign press is. In the US newspapers, the focus has changed drastically since Arafat suspended the security cooperation with Israel. Now, the press is no longer talking about Har Homa, but only about the question of whether or not Arafat gave a green light for the bombings. You have to be aware of public opinion.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi: If you continue suppressing the Palestinian masses, you will have a civil war here.

But let us come to an end and thank Dr. Andreani and you all for coming here to this Palestinian house and sharing your views with us. I hope you will carry home a whole basket of ideas and information that you can share in the future.