

## When it comes to Israel, is François Fillon friend or foe?

Written by Anouk

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An examination of statements by France's Republican presidential candidate on Israel, Middle East conflicts, and the Jewish community

BY GLENN CLOAREC November 29, 2016, 6:49 am



PARIS — This Sunday, some 4.6 million French voters at 10,228 polling stations across France paid two euros each and signed a "charter of right-wing and centrist values" to cast their ballots in a decisive French center-right presidential primary election.

**FREE SIGN UP!**By evening, François Fillon was declared winner with 66.5 percent of the vote, beating his rival, Alain Juppé, nearly two-to-one. Fillon is now the favored candidate ahead of the May 2017 French presidential elections.

During his tenure as minister and Prime minister, the current deputy of Paris expressed himself on many occasions on a variety of topics of interest to the greater Jewish world, including the French Jewish community, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the war in Syria. His statements

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could at times be described as hostile.

Though the austere man was sequestered from major controversy during the campaign, since winning the first round of primaries last week, he has been criticized in the press for past declarations.

On Wednesday morning, a new controversy broke out when Fillon, who was invited to speak to Europe 1 radio, compared the French Jewish community with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country.

"Fundamentalists are in the process of holding the Muslim community hostage. We must fight that fundamentalism in the way that in the past... we fought some forms of Catholic sectarianism and we fought the drive by Jews to live in a community that did not always respect all the values of the French Republic," he said. (It was unclear what precisely he was referring to.)

The Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (CRIF) soon responded on Twitter.

"The law of the land is the law: this Talmudic adage has been imposed on Jews since ancient history and requires them to respect the laws of the country in which they live," the organization declared.

The Union of French Jewish students (UEJF) asked the politician to clarify himself and wondered about "the relevance of his remarks, which compared three phenomena that occurred at three different epochs and which reduces Jews, Muslims and Christians to three compact and indistinct religious communities."

### **'The insularity that once existed was not the Jewish citizens' choice, but the consequence of French society not accepting their peers'**

Haïm Korsia, chief rabbi of France, had a phone interview with the former prime minister. The two men recently met at the Grand Synagogue of Paris where they paid homage to Shimon Peres after the Israeli politician's death.

"He insisted on reaffirming the French Jews' attachment to France and its national values, and their concern for integration into French society," explained Yaël Hirschhorn, his communications advisor.

"He also pointed out that the Jewish insularity that once existed was in no way Jewish citizens' choice, but the consequence of French society not accepting their peers at the time," she said. The chief rabbi "also recalled the role of the Great Sanhedrin, which was set up by Napoleon in 1806, which is none other than the proclamation of the guarantee of being able to practice Judaism in compliance with the laws of the Republic," she added.

However Fillion's spokesman Jérôme Chartier said on i24news that the candidate's words were misunderstood.

"François Fillon is very clear on the fact that sectarian aberrations can exist in any religious movement. Everyone knows it exists. But he always welcomed French Jews' integration, which is not a new phenomenon considering the Consistory dates back from the Napoleonic era. [...] French Jews are as French as French Christians who are as French as French Muslims —

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except those of course who take part in Islamic fundamentalism and totalitarianism and whom we have to fight against," he explained.

A few hours later, François Fillon reacted to the polemic on Twitter.

"Some people have been trying to interpret a sentence I voiced on Europe 1 this morning," he said. "I never meant to call into question the Jewish community's attachment to our common values and to the respect of the rules of the Republic. This attachment is old and sincere. I therefore regret that some people dared to twist what I said."

During the last broadcasted debate three days before the first round of the primary, the deputy of Paris denounced "the rise of a totalitarian phenomenon" — radical Islamism — more adroitly. It is the "rise of a political movement [...] which threatens world peace, which has genocidal ambitions and which wants to eradicate Christians living in the Levant and to oust Jews living in Israel," he declared.



A French soldier patrols in the Jewish quarter of the Marais district, Paris, January 12, 2015. (AFP/ Bertrand Guay)

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Last Wednesday was not, however, the first time François Fillon stigmatized the French Jewish community.

### **'Religions should reflect upon keeping traditions that don't have much in common with today's state of science'**

In July, when defending the postponement of some baccalaureate tests for Muslim students celebrating Eid-el-Fitr, he said on RTL radio that, "[Postponement of tests] has always been a French tradition. General de Gaulle is the one who amended that religious Jewish and Muslim French civil servants could choose not to work on important religious holidays.

"The main beneficiaries of this have never been Muslims, but French Jews, who are very intransigent on this issue. The truth is that very few Muslims ever took advantage of this amendment," he said.

He was also under heavy criticism in 2012 when he challenged the Orthodox Jewish custom of ritual slaughter. He was then Prime minister.

"Religions should reflect upon keeping traditions that don't have much in common with today's state of science, technology and health," he said on Europe 1 radio.

In addition to his polemical remarks about the Jewish community, Fillon has repeatedly provoked anger among French citizens sympathetic to Israel.

In November 2015, following the Paris attacks, he declared that he was in favor of a "global coalition" to fight against the Islamic State (IS) which would include Russian, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian governments, Kurdish movements and the Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah, whose senior officials he met in July 2013.

### **'We must support Iran, which is committed to combating IS'**

"We must support Iran, which is committed to combating IS," he said on France Inter Radio. "I know many will comment on this point of view, especially in Israel. But for a question of survival, Israel has always known how to ally with people who do not respect international morals. And no one can blame them."

When interrupted by journalist Patrick Cohen, who reminded him that "Hezbollah's vocation is to annihilate Israel," Fillon replied that "letting Hezbollah threaten the State of Israel is out of the question."

"Despite the fact that Hezbollah is a force that physically holds Lebanon and prevents it from acquiring the institutions necessary to continue its democratic march, the position I am defending is no longer isolated, it is also the position of the French government," he added.

Shortly after, in March 2016, François Fillon went to Iran, ostensibly to discuss the economic and social situation in the country and the Middle East.

According to the statement his campaign team published on his website, he insisted to Iranian officials about "the need to build a common international strategy to defeat the Islamic State and to establish the way for a peace process in Syria. He advocated for the Lebanese cause and against the internal divisions and the lack of viable institutions that are threatening the country. He also reiterated the French position vis-à-vis its ally Israel, which is entitled to security and whose existence cannot be challenged. The Palestinians would otherwise not be able to

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enforce their legitimate right to a state."

Last Monday, on Facebook, following Fillon's victory on the the primary elections' first round, Jewish legislator Meyer Habib — who supported the losing candidate, former president Nicolas Sarkozy — expressed some concerns about this rapprochement with Iran and Hezbollah.

"François Fillon has very solid experience and an ambitious program on economic and social matters," Habib wrote. "But I feel concerned about Israel's foreign policy and security, and he adopted some conflicting positions on this matter. Though François Fillon recently gave proof of friendship to Israel — he notably opposed the BDS movement and denounced the UNESCO vote — I remain concerned about his desire for an alliance with Iran, the Syrian regime and the Hezbollah organization to fight against the Islamic State."

As Member of Parliament Habib pointed out, Fillon vociferously opposed the recent UNESCO vote about the adoption of a controversial resolution on Jerusalem holy sites.

"The recent resolutions are unacceptable and I understand they shocked some people. France should have voted against these unbalanced texts that deny the historical reality of Jerusalem. France does not have to take a side and rewrite the history of others. We must maintain a moderate and objective position to help resolve the conflict," Fillon told Elnet website.

When questioned about the Paris conference, which was announced last June to prelaunch the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Fillon argued that "we should bring all sides back to the negotiating table so that everyone's interests could be heard."

'Organizing a peace conference in Paris without the concerned protagonists is nonsense'

"Palestinians have a legitimate right to a state," he added. "Israeli territorial integrity and security must also be respected. The negotiations over the past few years have been a failure.

Organizing a peace conference in Paris without the concerned protagonists is nonsense. I am against unilateral recognition, but for a dialogue and for the common will to reach a territorial solution. I will personally get involved on this matter. There is a need for a coordination between the European Union and the United States in order to restore some trust between the different sides."

During a three-day visit to Israel in January 2014, Fillon had already supported the country's right to security. During his speech at the Netanya French Campus, he adopted a very pro-Israeli position.



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