

France in the Process of Change: Law, Reform and Society

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This morning I visited the Yad Vashem Memorial to pay my respects, and for me this will remain one of the most striking moments of my visit to Israel. True, I had a guide who gave me detailed explanations of everything, and I was unable to say anything throughout the entire visit. I said to my guide that words are superfluous, explanations are superfluous: the pictures, the objects, all these stories, all these lives that were destroyed speak for themselves. In the Children's Memorial, I asked myself many questions about our world, and it is true that to hear the children's names and their ages read out was difficult—I did not spend very long in there. But I thought of the Shoah, of the Jewish people, of its suffering, of its martyrdom, and it is also at such moments that one weighs up the responsibility of becoming involved in political affairs. Generally, people become involved in politics because of values, because of their views, their convictions, in order to build a better world, a world of peace, and in this region of the world, this word is very meaningful. A world of justice, but also a world of brotherhood. It is this message of hope that I have come to deliver.

I have come here to speak to you of France—of the France that is a friend of Israel, of the France which, since the election of Nicolas Sarkozy, has been changing, undergoing reforms, modernizing, adapting to the challenges of the twenty-first century: of the France that is becoming stronger at home, in order to work all the better for peace in the world. For the last eighteen months or so, France has been in flux, France is changing. For many years—too many—France remained unchanged. There was talk of reforms—but they were constantly rejected. There was talk of bringing the French closer to each other—instead, *communitarisme* was allowed to take hold. There was talk of solidarity—and social exclusion became ever stronger.

Nicolas Sarkozy has breathed new life into France. He has helped it find its real values again: its universal values, which have always been France's outstanding asset—values that are also the glory of the State of Israel. Over the years, the centuries, the French nation has taken shape, as a result of the courage of the

men and women who were its offspring. It has also welcomed, in the name of freedom and human rights, those who sought protection throughout the world. Today, France has a thousand faces; it is multifaceted, and I say to you, with great emphasis: this diversity is my country's outstanding asset. France is full of talent, full of ideas, full of energy, all that remains is for them to be given free rein.

Some choose to close ranks, to adopt an inward-looking approach—in what we call communitarisme, rejecting the integration that is characteristic of the French Republic. There are also those who reject the “other” and that which makes him or her different. This is not France—it certainly is not the France that I love. That is why Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to introduce a new policy and a new political order—one in which our Republic's values are firmly in the middle, one in which work is encouraged, where there is freedom to undertake things, where a spirit of enterprise and initiative is valued; an approach which sets points of reference, rules, a social environment. An approach in which everyone, irrespective of race, of religion, skin color, can find a place for themselves. We have to make sure that we have a society in which we have respect, equality, solidarity with all, including the humblest and the most vulnerable members of that society. We must always stand up for open-mindedness, a humanist outlook and freedom. You exemplify this. Creativeness must be promoted, together with inventiveness and tolerance. This starts at school. Today schools are again becoming a place of knowledge, of culture, of thought—a place where children learn to love France, to respect authority, to live together while respecting the “other.” This also involves reforming our universities, establishing more efficient public services and being more environmentally conscious; this new brand of politics is also reflected in the reform of the French legal system.

Justice is not only one of the mainstays of democracy, but also of the constitutional state. Today I had quite a long talk with the Israeli minister of justice and with the president of the Supreme Court. We talked about the concept of justice, and I know that you Israelis set great store by your country's justice—and you are right. As minister of justice, I wanted justice to protect—for the right to security to be the paramount right. This is the reason why we set up special centers that make it possible to keep the most dangerous criminals off the streets, even after they have finished serving their sentences. This is also why we have introduced a minimum-sentence system for repeat offenders. I also wanted justice to have a more humane face, to pay more attention to the victims, and I am thinking in particular of those who experience antisemitism, racism and discrimination on a daily basis. In a democracy, everyone has the same rights. They are laid down by the law, and are not dependent on a person's origins, beliefs or way of life. In France, discrimination is a criminal offense, but the penalties for it were not sufficient. Over a year ago, I wanted to introduce a prosecutor in charge of combating

antisemitism and discrimination. For a long time, people said, “Antisemitism is a behavioral problem.” It is not a behavioral problem. My role is not to change behavior: it is to penalize—to penalize offenses. I would remind you that for me, antisemitism is an offense. And the Criminal Code says that it is an offense. So I have applied the Criminal Code accordingly. And it is true that we have tripled the number of sentences passed. Antisemitism, discrimination—these deny the principle of equality, the principle of dignity, of humanity. One cannot express one’s difference if one is not respected. One cannot open up to others if one feels humiliated. It is true that discrimination can give rise to hatred. Nothing can ever be constructed on hatred.

Yesterday I was in Ramallah, where I met young Palestinians. They spoke of their suffering, of their feelings of injustice; they spoke of their anger; they also spoke to me of their feelings of being prisoners behind walls and checkpoints. But I also told them that they must give up, not life, but violence. And I spoke to the parents, and told them that this was their responsibility as well. And if a mother—if the parents—do not make their children want to live, but want to die and put an end to their lives through violence, then that is their responsibility as well.

France loves and respects Israel. I love Israel and I love Israelis. Israel is a great democracy, and it is familiar with suffering and injustice. The Israeli people must be able to live in peace and within secure and recognized borders. This will only be possible when the Palestinian people also has the feeling of being respected and related to with justice. It is injustice which foments violence, the feeling of humiliation which propels people to take refuge in fanaticism and extremism. There will be no peace in the Middle East without equality between peoples. This is a principle that we wish to defend.

France wishes to contribute to peace in the world. It has always sought to defend freedom, human rights, and democracy. For too long, France stood back from the international arena, without ambitions, without involvement. Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to put an end to this policy, which often gave rise to misunderstandings, as Israel knows only too well. Today, France is back in Europe, and since July 1, France has held the rotating presidency of the European Union. This is an opportunity to revitalize this institution, to provide it with a new ambition: the Union for the Mediterranean.

I remember that during the presidential campaign, but also well before then, because I was working with Nicolas Sarkozy, he was thinking of the Union for the Mediterranean, thinking of Israelis and Palestinians. This is a priority for the president of the Republic. This is something which is desperately needed by all the peoples in the region. It is a generous project, designed to serve friendship

and confidence. During the historic summit in Paris on July 13, practically all the leaders from Arab countries were sitting next to your prime minister. This is an indication that it is possible to hold discussions and extricate the Middle East from the crisis afflicting it. France is finally back in the world: Nicolas Sarkozy speaks to all world leaders, regardless. Together with its allies, it has committed itself together with the US and NATO in Afghanistan. This is a difficult struggle; ten French soldiers were killed in August 2008, in an ambush. But it is a fight that is necessary, which is just—combating terrorism, fighting for our values, fighting for freedom.

In 1986 and 1995, France was a victim of terrorism. These are tragic and painful moments in a country's life. I say this here, on Israeli soil, which has been so greatly affected and ravaged by terrorism. Like me, you know there is no excuse or justification for terrorism. There must be no holding of discussions with terrorists. They must be fought against. France supports the Israeli people when its security and wholeness are threatened. And I reminded the Palestinians of this yesterday.

The Israeli people has the right to live in peace and security. The Palestinian people has the right to have a state and to exercise its sovereignty in that state, in peace and while respecting its neighbors. The security of the Israeli people must necessarily involve dialogue with the Palestinian people. Without this condition, there will be no peace in the Middle East. It is necessary to open up to dialogue, to exchange; it is necessary to go beyond one's own wounds; it is necessary to look at what brings people closer, and not at what separates them. The power balance must disappear and give way to law and justice. Peace can be achieved by mutual, simultaneous efforts, as the German and French people managed to do following World War II.

France is changing, this is a reality—this development is taking place in a calm atmosphere, and with the determination of the government. France displays its special relationship with Israel very clearly, but it does not hide its ties with the Palestinian people. We are pursuing a transparent, evenhanded, open-minded policy. We speak out clearly, with one voice, as President Sarkozy did, in the Knesset and in Bethlehem, speaking of peace. The situation in the Middle East is always uncertain: many events are intertwined, as now, with the coming of a new government, upcoming elections in the Palestinian territories, the election of the future American president—these are major turning points. I would hope that they will bring about peace, but in any case that they bring hope to the peoples of Israel and Palestine. The future of the world is at stake here. The security of the world depends on it, and on peace in the Middle East.