



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 05 April 2022

The French Perception of Arab Issues on the Eve of the Presidential Elections

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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Today, Sunday, 10 April 2022, the first round of the 2022 French presidential elections will be held, which will see 12 female candidates compete in the race led, according to recent opinion polls, by current President Emmanuel Macron and his France Forward party with 27% of the poll vote.¹ Macron is followed by the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen, and her National Rally party, 22% of the vote. In third place, the hard-left candidate, Jean-Luc Melenchon, and his party France Proud, share 15% of the vote. The traditional right-wing candidate, Valerie Pécres, and her Republican Party are competing for the fourth place, with the far-right dissident candidate from the National Rally, controversial journalist Eric Zemmour, and his Recovery Party, with Zemmour scoring 10.5% and Pécres 10% in the polls. The Green Party's candidate, Yannick Gado, placed sixth with 5% of the vote; the threshold for being able to recover the costs of the electoral process from public funds. The polls indicate that the Communists, Socialists, Trotskyists, and other parties are expected to receive very low percentages of the vote, not meeting the threshold.

Arab Issues and French Elections

In the absence of accurate statistics on the percentage of French voters of Arab origin, where French law prohibits the inclusion of religion and ethnicity in statistic collection, estimates indicate that they make up approximately 2 million voters. On the other hand, the majority of the electoral platforms of the various candidates are clearly and specifically uninterested in this community. Muslims in France, who are of African and Asian heritage as well as Arab, seem to matter only to the hard-left candidate, Mélenchon, in general sense, and not to the electoral campaign specifically. While there is nothing, with a few exceptions, in a secular country like France to prevent candidates from presenting their electoral projects before the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions "Crif", in an effort to win the votes of Jews, who make up one of the smallest religious minorities, representatives do not do the same for other religions. Hence, this is reflected in the candidates' positions on Arab issues, away from the problems and complexities of the French domestic politics. The issues of Palestine and the Arab revolutions are the most basic measure for evaluating the Arab policies of each of the three most prominent candidates.

The Position of the Candidates on Palestine

The French position on the Palestinian issue has been distinguished from other Western countries since General Charles de Gaulle announced a clear position condemning Israeli aggression in 1967. After Israel won unconditional support to provide it with the technology to manufacture a nuclear bomb in France and the June 1967 war, De Gaulle began rapprochement with Arab countries, and supporters of Israel accused him of anti-Semitism. In 1974, France recognized the Palestine

¹ Arnaud Focraud, "SONDAGE JDD. Présidentielle: Marine Le Pen n'est plus qu'à 5 points d'Emmanuel Macron," *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 2/4/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3r1As97>

Liberation Organization as an observer member of the United Nations. In 1982, President François Mitterrand, before the Knesset, expressed his support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. France supported the State of Palestine's membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization "UNESCO" in 2011, and also voted for the Palestinian Authority's membership as an observer at the United Nations in 2012. Thus, despite repeated semi-compulsory support for the State of Israel and its security, French diplomacy has attempted to adopt a distinct position on the Palestinian issue.

The current president and the favourite for a second term, Macron, has on more than one occasion expressed his support for Israel, while maintaining a traditional French discourse, which verbally affirms the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to build an independent state. In a position consistent with the demands of "Crif", which shares similarities with the right-wing Israeli Likud party, Macron has repeated on more than one occasion that he finds no difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. On 20 March 2022, in the presence of Israeli President Isaac Herzog, Macron declared that "anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are aggression against the Republic."² His Prime Minister, Jean Castex, previously stated before the representatives of "Crif", at their annual dinner on 27 February 2022, that "Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the Jewish people."³ This contradicts the United Nations resolutions and the positions of the previous French government, which did not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel.

For her part, Marine Le Pen inherited her National Rally from the former National Front of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who she suspended from the party after he described the Nazi gas chambers during the Holocaust as "a detail of history."⁴ The dominant aspect of the extreme right-wing National Front, founded by her father, was anti-Semitism and xenophobia, before Le Pen transformed the party into the National Rally. The extreme right relies mainly on an umbrella base which is based on xenophobia towards foreigners, who it considers the source of all economic and security problems. But Marine Le Pen, since taking the helm of the party, and even before she changed its name, tried to remove the character she inherited from her father, who himself tortured members of the Algerian Liberation Army, when he was an officer in occupied Algeria. She has sought, with varied success, in recent years, to get closer to "Crif" and express support for Israeli policies in the occupied territories, on the grounds that those who resist it are "terrorists and Islamists."

In contrast, Mélenchon, the head of the hard-left La France Insoumise party, remains the most balanced on the question of Palestine among the leading candidates. Although the French Communist Party and the anti-capitalist New Party candidates are more inclined to stand up

² Béatrice Colin, "L'antisémitisme et l'antisionisme sont les ennemis de notre République", clame Macron à Toulouse," *20 minutes*, 20/3/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3j7yu2K>.

³ La république française, Le gouvernement, "Discours de Jean Castex au 36ème dîner du Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France," 25/2/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3J9EUsv>.

⁴ Pierre Lepelletier, "Les chambres à gaz, 'détail de l'Histoire': Jean-Marie Le Pen définitivement condamné," *Le Figaro*, 27/3/2018, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3J94bTP>.

boldly and explicitly for Palestinian rights, their meagre proportions in the polls render them irrelevant. On more than one occasion, Mélenchon has expressed his support for the Palestinian people to receive their legitimate rights, without going into details about the Israeli government's settlement policy, which he has frequently, if timidly, condemned. He tweeted in May 2021, after the prohibition of a demonstration in support of the Palestinian people on the occasion of the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, saying: "France is the only country in the world where demonstrations in support of the Palestinians and protesting against the policies of the Israeli far-right government are prohibited." This attitude angered the "Crif," which refrained from inviting him to the annual dinner for the leaders of the main French parties.

The Arab Revolutions and the Question of Democracy

With regard to the Arab revolutions, President Macron generally adopted the policies of his predecessors, with an inclination to what he dubbed "political realism" to deal with the various countries that witnessed revolutions or protest movements, such as Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. In Syria, where Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande had supported the Syrian opposition to varying degrees, President Macron stuck to the same line, but with less interest. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the end of February 2022, Paris, under pressure from the United Arab Emirates, almost reconsidered its boycott of the Syrian regime. France also joined the UAE in support of retired Major General Khalifa Haftar in Libya and the coup of President Kais Saied against the constitution in Tunisia, in addition to strengthening the strategic "partnership" with Egypt after the 2013 coup.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the unified international stance against it, halted, or at least postponed, this trend. The realist school adopted by Macron and laid out by the former Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine, who rejected the intrusion of values and human rights in international relations, had also begun to clearly influence some positions related to Syria and other Arab issues. The deterioration of relations with Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, contributed to directing French positions in the Near East, especially in the areas of political "engagement" with Ankara. The French government's support for the counterrevolutions, at least in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, is an indication of a re-production of the traditional model of Western sponsorship of authoritarian leaders in the Global South, on the condition that they provide the West with protection from terrorism and illegal immigration, and maintain the alleged stability.

Marine Le Pen has refrained from delving too much into foreign policy, but has declared support for the positions of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi against "political Islam" in Egypt and Libya. She also takes an extreme position towards the Arab revolutions, due to their organic link with the European extreme right, which has always supported the tyrants, led by Bashar al-Assad, in the Arab region. This current, based on a superior and racist view, adopts the proposition that the Arabs and Muslims are not ready for democracy, and therefore it is necessary to support their tyrannical rulers. In addition,

the far-right parties in Europe, led by the French National Rally Party, take positions similar to those of Russian President Vladimir Putin and have close relations with him, which were frozen with the invasion of Ukraine. But this probably won't last; Le Pen recently stated that "if the war in Ukraine stops, Russia can be an ally."⁵

Mélenchon, who was born in the Moroccan city of Tangiers, has espoused positions shrouded in ambiguity and clear contradictions in the issues of democracy in the Arab world. He admires the Moroccan experience despite its neoliberal policies; and is reluctant to comment on the violations monitored by human rights organizations with regard to freedom of expression and the arrest of journalists.⁶ He announced that he would visit Morocco, if elected president, on his first visit to a foreign country.⁷ In clear contradiction, he is close to the Tunisian left, especially the Popular Front Party and its leader, Hama Hammami, and adopts its positions regarding *Ennahda* and the indiscriminate exclusion of all Islamic components from the Tunisian political scene. On the Syrian issue, Mélenchon did not stop considering that the Syrian crisis had nothing to do with the principles of justice and freedom, but rather with geopolitical dimensions related to energy and its transmission lines. He supports the Kurdish armed factions and considers them to be the only Western ally in Syria. He also supported the Russian military intervention there, as it was directed against "Muslim terrorists." He argued that Putin "cleaned the city of Aleppo of terrorists" when his planes bombed it in 2016. And here Mélenchon and Le Pen share admiration for the same Russian role. Their recent distancing from Putin following the invasion of Ukraine, is only a translation of their efforts not to lose votes in the elections, and not at all from conviction.

Conclusion

All opinion polls indicate the likelihood that current president, Emmanuel Macron, will win the French presidential elections. If this happens, it is likely that his second term will be relatively smooth in dealing with difficult foreign issues, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the position on Russian interference in the Arab region, which he continues to turn a blind eye to. His recent positions in managing the Ukraine crisis have provided him with a comfortable margin, which will help him break away from his earlier attempts to establish a close cooperative relationship with Moscow. In the five-year term system in France, the first term is primarily dedicated to winning the second. This means the positions and policies related to internal and external issues are predominantly designed for re-election. Consequently, the president's second term is seen as the period in which they can demonstrate their "real politics" after being freed from electoral requirements.

5 Antoine Beau, "Pour Marine Le Pen, Poutine 'peut redevenir un allié' si la guerre en Ukraine prend fin," *Le Parisien*, 1/4/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/37INh7m>.

6 "Jean-Luc Mélenchon vante les mérites du Maroc, son pays natal," *Bladi*, 29/3/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3DGPpOR>

7 "Hama Hammami participates in the election campaign of Mélenchon in France", *hakaek online*, 21/3/2022, accessed on 5/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3DF8WDj>.