

French President Sarkozy visits Israel to broker regional realignment

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy traveled to Israel June 22-24 to reaffirm his commitment to the state of Israel and to keep diplomatic pressure on Iran and Syria, the current targets of the US in the Middle East. Sarkozy's visit was part of a continuing French diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, with visits by top officials to the former French colonies of Lebanon on June 7 and Syria on June 15.

Responding to a shift in US Middle East policy, Sarkozy is trying to obtain the maximum possible prestige and commercial benefit from his attempts to repair a regional political order destabilized by US-Israeli foreign policy.

Israel is currently engaged in a war of words with Iran, which it has repeatedly threatened with attack. It continues launching attacks on the Palestinian Hamas government in the Gaza strip. After launching a US-backed war against Lebanon in 2006, it is embroiled in a tense standoff with the well-armed Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, which fought Israel to a draw in 2006.

In his June 23 speech to the Knesset, Sarkozy made clear that his efforts to repair the situation would take place firmly within the parameters of what is acceptable to Washington and Tel Aviv.

He denounced Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program and reaffirmed France's commitment to Israeli security. On Iran he said: "Iran's military nuclear program calls for an extremely firm reaction from the entire international community. Israel must know that it is not alone! France is determined to pursue with its partners a policy allying the most severe sanctions with openness, if Tehran decides to honor its international obligations. But I want to say forcefully: a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable for my country!"

Describing himself as a "friend of Israel" and "intransigent" on its security, Sarkozy professed his "admiration" for the foundation of the state of Israel, 60 years ago—an event the Palestinian people refer to as "the catastrophe."

On Israeli-Palestinian relations, Sarkozy said, "Israel's security [...] will only be assured once, by its side, there

arises an independent, modern, democratic, and viable Palestinian state." He made a pro forma call for halting new Israeli colonization of Palestinian land. Israeli opposition leader and ex-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in his response to the speech, praised Sarkozy as a "true friend of Israel" and promptly rejected the call for a halt to colonization.

Sarkozy briefly met with Palestinian Authority (PA) Mahmoud Abbas on June 24 in Bethlehem, to sign an agreement establishing a \$21 million Franco-Palestinian industrial zone. He declined to place a wreath on the grave of Palestinian nationalist leader Yasser Arafat, sending French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie to do it instead.

The most substantive proposal in Sarkozy's Knesset speech was his reference to a July 13 Paris summit of Mediterranean countries, to which Israel, Syria, and Lebanon are invited. It is widely expected that the summit will provide a venue for negotiations between the three countries. Sarkozy limited himself, however, to expressing the vague hope that "the old dream of Mediterranean unity is not dead, but rather alive enough to raise the world" and that "Israel, the Palestinian authority, Lebanon, and Syria will all find their place in it."

Israeli officials apparently had pressed Sarkozy not to move too quickly on building diplomatic ties to Lebanon, and particularly Syria. On June 22, Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported, "France has pledged that it will slow down its rapprochement with Syria until Syria shows its willingness to distance itself from the extremist axis, particularly Iran." Citing anonymous Olmert advisors, *Haaretz* continued: "France is a very important element in Syria's disengagement from the 'axis of evil,' and therefore 'cards must be kept aside to be played in the coming moves.'"

The Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* wrote on June 24 that Olmert will "present Sarkozy with three conditions for the negotiations [with Lebanon]: direct talks between the two governments, the full implementation of UN Resolution 1701—including the cessation of arms smuggling by

Hezbollah via Syria—and the implementation of Resolution 1680.” Resolution 1860 calls for Syrian-Lebanese border negotiations, notably over the Israeli-occupied Sheba'a farms, the disbanding of Lebanese militias such as Hezbollah, and the extension of Lebanese army control over all of Lebanese territory.

Sarkozy is thus volunteering as a go-between to help Israel dictate terms in its negotiations with France’s former colonies, where France still has substantial influence. France is the largest foreign investor in Lebanon and Syria’s largest foreign trading partner.

On June 7 Sarkozy visited new Lebanese President Michael Suleiman, who was elected on May 25 after negotiations between Lebanese parties in Qatar’s capital, Doha. Sarkozy traveled with a massive delegation including leaders from nearly all the bourgeois parties of France: Prime Minister François Fillon, opposition Socialist Party (PS) leader François Hollande, Communist Party (PCF) leader Marie-Georges Buffet, MoDem party leader François Bayrou, and several ministers of Sarkozy’s government.

The French magazine *Le Point* quoted Sarkozy: “For too long, the crisis and political blockage in Lebanon prevented restarting dialog, [but] things may be changing. [...] I said I would re-establish contact with Syria only once positive and concrete developments had taken place in Lebanon to get out of the crisis. One must admit that the Doha accords, the election of President Suleiman, the maintenance of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora at his post, are all such developments. I’ve drawn the conclusions and called [Syrian] President [Bashar al-]Assad and told him that I would like to see an accord take shape.”

On June 10 Syrian Culture Minister Riyad Nassan Agha El-Qalaa visited Paris, and on June 15 French diplomatic counselor Jean-David Levitte and Presidential chief of staff Claude Guéant traveled to Damascus to meet with the Syrian President. In addition to scheduling talks with Syrian and Lebanese officials at the July 13 summit, the French government also invited Assad to attend the traditional July 14 (Bastille Day) military parade. Assad has reportedly not yet responded to the invitation.

These moves come amid signs of a shift in US policy in the region, as well as continuing negotiations between Israel and Syria. The Democratic Party’s presumptive presidential candidate, Barack Obama, has announced that if elected, he would consider negotiations with Iran. In a June 5 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, “It’s Time to Talk To Syria,” Senators John Kerry (Democrat of Massachusetts) and Chuck Hagel (Republican of Nebraska) called for Bush and Assad to open direct negotiations.

They wrote: “The recent announcement of peace negotiations between Israel and Syria through Turkey, and

the agreement between the Lebanese factions in Qatar—both apparently without meaningful US involvement—should serve as a wake-up call that our policy of non-engagement has isolated us more than the Syrians. [...] To support Israel and isolate Iran, President George W. Bush should offer direct support for the Israeli-Syrian negotiations.”

In the race for the prestige and advantage that comes from overseeing such negotiations, Sarkozy is to a certain extent competing with US imperialism, capitalizing on US unpopularity in the region and the US focus on its presidential campaign. *Haaretz* wrote on June 22: “During a time when a new administration is set to assume power in the United States, Sarkozy’s France can play the role of global superpower.” The French daily *Le Monde* echoed this sentiment: “[Sarkozy’s] particular relation with Israel [...] can only reinforce his influence and that of France, just when the US enters presidential campaign season.”

A higher profile has brought tangible benefits to French corporations. US financial magazine *Forbes* wrote on June 18 that, for the first time in its 23-year history, Dassault’s Rafale fighter jet was expected to receive purchase orders from abroad, with about 100 orders from across the Middle East. It quoted analyst Richard Aboulafia of Teal Group: “High-profile US weapons buys in the Middle East aren’t exactly the flavor of the moment,” and concluded: “Interest in the Rafale would be another sign that the US was being left in the cold.”

More broadly, however, French imperialism remains dependent on US imperialism to exert global influence. Sarkozy has generally adopted a pro-US line and is currently involved in discussions to reintegrate France into the NATO military command structure, from which France withdrew in 1966 under President Charles de Gaulle. Its supply lines to its new Persian Gulf military base in the United Arab Emirates pass through Indian Ocean waters dominated by the US Navy.

The *New York Times* also reported on June 19 that French oil firm Total was one of 5 major oil firms negotiating for a share of Iraq’s oil fields. Initially frozen out of Iraq due to France’s opposition to the 2003 invasion, Total was granted a share of the Majnoun oil field by US oil firms in August 2007, shortly after Sarkozy’s election as President.



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