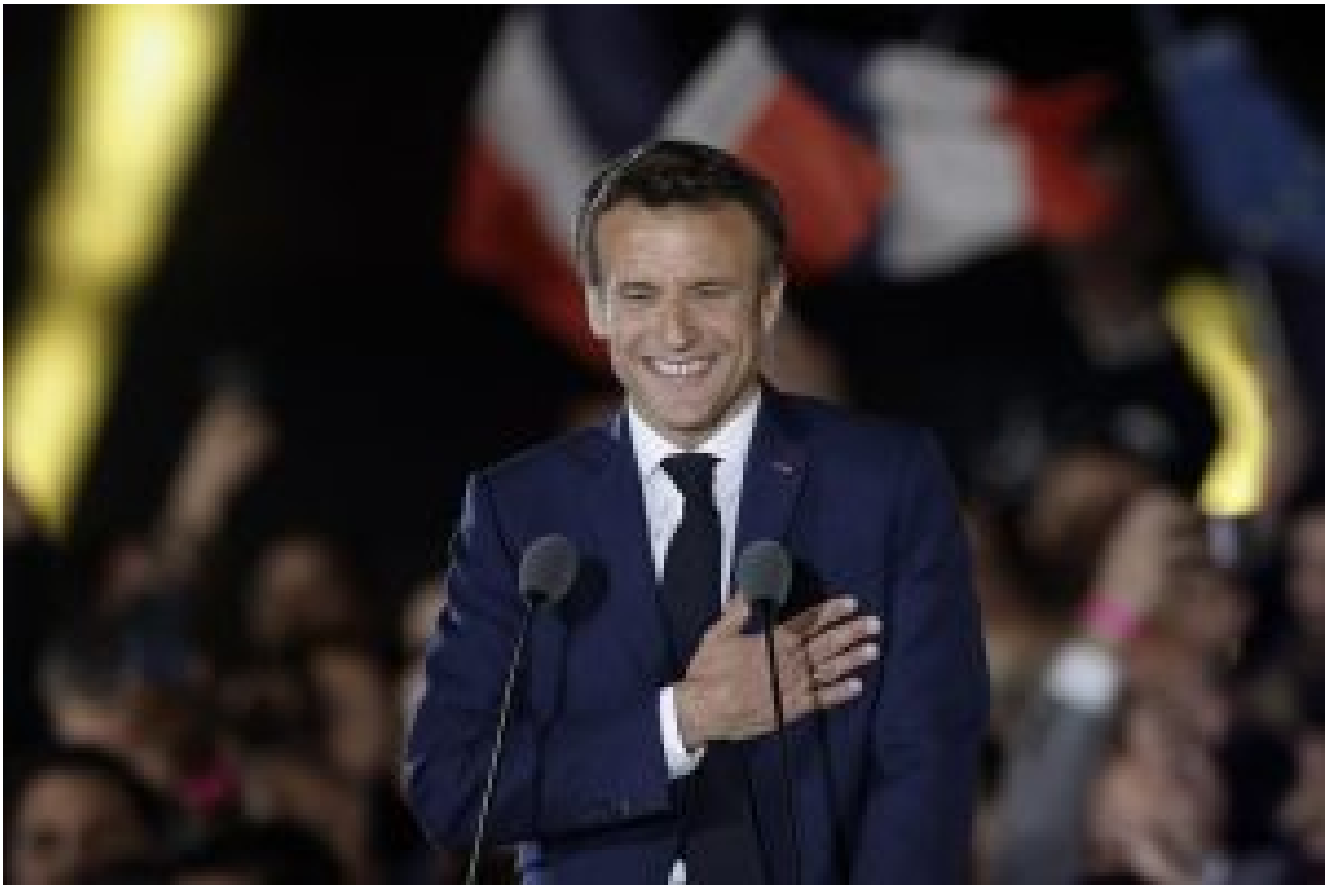
French Voters Re-Elect President Macron reject Populists

Discussion with Nidra Poller

by Jerry Gordon (May 2022)



French President Emanuel Macron speaks to supporters in Paris, 24/04/2022 (Reuters)

Despite a low turnout (28% abstention), French President Emanuel Macron won re-election on April 24, 2022, defeating second- round competitor, Marine Le Pen by a margin of 58.6 % to 41.4%. Macron's victory was the first re-election [without

previous cohabitation] of a French President in two decades. In 2017, the dark horse Macron won a major victory over Marine Le Pen.

During his first term in office, Macron reduced unemployment, polled well for his competent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. and was lauded for his diplomatic efforts in the current crisis over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He met with Russian President Putin in Moscow and was in constant phone contact with Ukrainian president Zelensky. French voters appear to support NATO alliance efforts to arm Ukraine to repulse the unprovoked attacks on a sovereign nation with EU membership aspirations. Macron is the current President on rotation of the European Union.

Le Pen had endeavored to airbrush her “extremist” positions and distance herself from her anti-Semitic father, Jean -Marie Le Pen, founder of the National Front. She changed the name of her personalized party to National Rally (NR). Le Pen, like populists Eric Zemmour on far-right and Jean-Luc Melenchon on the far-left espoused resigning from the NATO joint force command. The outgoing president accused Le Pen of promoting a disguised Frexit and nurturing a close alliance with Putin’s Russia. The NR owes more than 9 million euros to a Russo-Hungarian bank. We’ll ask our Parisian colleague what she thinks of the claim by Some British and US media that Le Pen had actually scored a victory while losing.

Macron has another “campaign” coming up shortly, as he seeks a majority for La Republique En Marche party in the June legislative elections. The trio of populist contenders, Le Pen and Zemmour on the far right and Jean-Luc Melenchon on the far left, will try to gain control of the National Assembly and stymie Macron’s second-term agenda.

Macron now has the politically daunting tasks of appealing to a broad cross section of French regional voters who might support the populists’ agendas.

Given this background, we held our seventh in a series of discussions with American ex-pat in Paris, *New English Review* contributor, who provides résumés from English-language media for *Tribune Juive*. We explore the implications of the French presidential election, the populist position on the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, Israel's need for Russia's blind-eye in Syria, Russia's gas blackmail, and much more …

Jerry Gordon: I'm Jerry Gordon, a senior editor at *The New English Review*. And we are here with Nidra Poller reporting on an interesting development with the second round of the French presidential elections. Nidra, what were the preliminary results of the second round?

Nidra Poller: The results reported tonight are approximately: Macron 58%, Le Pen 42%. It might change slightly when final results come in for the big cities.

Jerry Gordon: How does that compare to the 2017 election?

Nidra Poller: The difference was greater. That is essentially because Marine Le Pen, after losing miserably in 2017, did a sort of political Botox. She smoothed over everything in her real program, her real intentions, and went around with a big smile. By the end of the campaign, she was selling herself as "the mother of the nation." This blunted the previous reaction that the extreme right must not be allowed to win. But, as you know, my point is that it would have been better if commentators showed her to be a populist and explained populism. In any case, I'm proud that France did not elect a populist. That's the first thing. I wasn't particularly impressed by Macron before, but he's the president now, and this is where I live, and I want him to succeed.

It is interesting to note that the losers did not give dignified democratic congratulations. Well, I'm calling them the losers. Marine Le Pen lost to Macron. She phoned,

appropriately, to congratulate him. And then gave a speech that was a short version of her campaign, with insults and accusations, and blaming this and that, they didn't treat her right, they won't treat the French right, and so on. And then, the candidates that didn't even make it to the second round, also needed to put their faces in front of us. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whose new bright idea is that he should be elected prime minister, (I'll explain later), and Zemmour, who says he's going to unite the right. It was really quite sad. They just repeated … mumbling … just repeated their campaign arguments.

When candidates lose, they claim to love the country and the people. It's sad to see them give a speech, essentially saying that what the French want is what they had offered. But the French just voted, right? If people didn't vote for them, stayed home saying how wonderful they are, the fact is, they didn't vote for them. You know, this is the focus of my thinking at the moment: What we're living now is a sharp battle between democracy and tyranny. It's playing out in Ukraine with horrible brutality and suffering. And it's playing out in our democracies, with elections and, sometimes, this refusal to accept the verdict. I'm very hopeful. I think that the courage of the Ukrainians in the defense of democracy will play an important role in the strengthening of democracy in what we used to call the free world, So, as I said, what's most important to me is that we did not elect a populist.

But the idea that any intelligent, serious person could vote for Marine Le Pen, when the tyrant of tyrants is on the loose in Europe, and we are seeing violence unlike anything seen since the end of the second World War. This violence has worldwide repercussions. The idea that you could put a thoughtless, incompetent person, who goes around saying, "I've changed. I've changed" … It sounds like an alcoholic! "I've changed, I'm not going to do that anymore." You can't have a person with no stature as president of France! France is very

important in Europe. You know better than anyone— France is the strongest military power in Europe.

Jerry Gordon: Yes.

Nidra Poller: Along with Britain, right?

Jerry Gordon: Yes.

Nidra Poller: At a time when suddenly we know that we have to defend ourselves, you can't have… I mean, it would have been a terrible disaster for Europe if she had been elected. And I hope that Americans will wake up and give us credit, as Europeans, for this choice.

Jerry Gordon: I must tell you that if you were reading the American press during the run-up to the second round, it was: Oh, pity me, dire consequences, inflation is going to top, the NATO and the problems in Ukraine. And this result simply confirms about what you were just talking. It is, obviously, a pushback against a pretty reprehensible type of populism.

Nidra Poller: Yes. And when you have a great powerful country like the United States that elects an incompetent populist president with no sense of international relations … When Marine Le Pen spoke about international relations, it was laughable … if it weren't tragic. It's time for people to get serious. You can't elect incompetent people on a whim. So, as I said, this is a lesson for the free world. And I think it's a relief. I haven't had time to read the *New York Times* article you sent me, "Marine Le Pen Has Already Wo." … Isn't that a wonderful victory? When losers say they won. Well, I'm glad they lost, because their sense of reality is not very strong.

Jerry Gordon: What was curious to me was that the author of this *New York Times* piece was Rachel Donadio, a Paris-based contributor to *The Atlantic* and former Rome bureau chief and European Culture correspondent for *The New York Times*.

Nidra Poller: What strikes me, when I read about French politics in the American or English- language press, is how little specific information is given. At times, when I proposed articles to American outlets, they would say there was too much detail, readers can't find their way through all of it. But if you don't give specific details, there's no way to understand what's at play here. Which is what we try to do in our monthly conversation*, n'est-ce pas*?

Jerry Gordon: Does this send another message to people not unlike Marine Le Pen who had become allies of Putin in the context of the EU? And I'm talking about Victor Orban, who just won re- election in Hungary.

Nidra Poller: Yes. As you see with their earlier statements … In the old days, when people lied it was not easy to find proof of what they had said. Today, they lie, and two seconds later, the video pops up and the truth is out. Marine Le Pen was stumbling all over herself to say that the invasion was terrible, and she doesn't approve. But she had already printed campaign posters showing herself shaking hands with Putin. So, she had to trash them. But everybody knows.

Jerry Gordon: Are the people of France, notwithstanding domestic concerns, whether it's inflation or some other excuse, supportive of what Macron's position on the defense of Ukraine?

Nidra Poller: Yes, And they do it in the French way. For example, the idea that the French can speak to everyone, and that it was good that Macron could speak to Putin. And they appreciate his refusal to use the term "genocide." This appeals to French people. But another point that we'll keep our eyes on is that the legislative elections are coming up in June. And my prediction is that Macron's party will get the majority. Tonight, the bad losers immediately put on their battle gear and took an aggressive stance, "Well, he won the election, but we're going to knife it to him, because we'll

win the parliamentary election." I don't think so. Then, as the president says, he will have to consider all of the votes against him, from right and left. That's what you expect of a president. The bad losers are falling all over themselves, saying how much they love France, and love the French. But when it comes to defending Europe against Putin's aggression, you realize that it's empty words. Because they wouldn't dare to stand up to a dictator that would attack us. What he's doing in Ukraine, he would do anywhere else that he can. And, deep inside themselves, they won't stand up to it.

Jerry Gordon: Where does that place Mr. Zemmour who some people in the American press had said that he was the wind behind the sails of Marine Le Pen?

Nidra Poller: Yes and no. He acted so badly that she was able to do this Botox. Early on, he said she couldn't win. That stirred her up to prove she could. In that way, he did make her look good. On the other hand, if you do the arithmetic, you could figure out that he kept her from winning. After the first round, they took polls to see where his voters would go in the second. They went massively to Marine Le Pen. So, if they're all right with Marine Le Pen, why didn't they vote for her in the first round? She would have had a much better result. Fortunately, they didn't. Tonight, there were the three grouches, Marine Le Pen, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Zemmour. They didn't have the dignity of saying that Macron won, he's our President, we'll continue to express our positions, but he's our President and we want him to succeed. Zemmour gave a speech, he looked downcast, and he claimed he's going to unite the Right. It's comical.

Jerry Gordon: Nidra, you wrote a trenchant—and I mean trenchant in a positive sense—piece for *Tribune Juive*, effectively dealing with the whole problem of populism. What was the reaction to those who read it in France?

Nidra Poller: I have to talk to my editor to find out how

people are reacting to what I write, because TJ is not a site that attracts dozens and dozens of comments. Which is all the better, because most of the time they're not very enlightened and often they are quite cruel. Only one person posted a reaction to that text. She ignored every argument I had given to show that populism is no more for the people than communism is for sharing the wealth. She just gave back the same populist arguments: Macron is for the elite; the common people are ignored. And they're fed up with it all., She said she was going to vote for Marine Le Pen because of my article. I hope, by the end of the year, to publish a collection of those chronicles that I've been writing for *Tribune Juive*, because there's another dimension when you read them one after the other and see how they're related. That's what I did in the early 2000s. And maybe I'll try to do an English version of those essays. In the chronicle you're referring to, I said that they are populists and false nationalists. Populists never deliver what they promise. Why do people believe them? They never deliver what they promise. They hook on to a big problem in society that nobody manages to solve immigration, drug trafficking, violence against women, and … What else…

Jerry Gordon: Inflation?

Nidra Poller: Yes, cost of living. And Islamic jihad in all its ramifications. Populists click into things that are really problematic that nobody can solve. Their line is: you've elected one government after another and none of them has solved these problems. I will do it. In fact, they have no experience to be judged by. You remember, "We're going to build that wall and Mexico will pay for it." What they offer is pie in the sky. I'm proud and relieved that French voters did not fall for it. If Putin's Russia hadn't invaded Ukraine, the dangers that we're facing would have remained theoretical. Russia has been getting a pass for the last 20 years. But the danger has now materialized, and it's obvious that you have to have good leadership and responsible

citizens. We're not playing social media. This is a question of life and death.

Jerry Gordon: Nidra, did the French-Jewish organization endorse Macron.

Nidra Poller: No. That's not what happened.

Jerry Gordon: None?

Nidra Poller: No. This has been highly controversial. The heads of several organizations issued a warning: "Don't vote for the extremists, Zemmour, Le Pen or Mélenchon." To many Jewish people, people I respect, this was the unacceptable mixing of religion with politics. French Jews vote as French citizens. They shouldn't be told how to vote.

Jerry Gordon: Okay.

Nidra Poller: But I see that warning as similar to what I wrote in the *Tribune Juive* article you referred to. I find it appropriate for Jewish leaders to speak out and inform Jews of the dangers of populism. And don't forget, Marine Le Pen seriously intended, if elected, to prohibit kosher slaughter.

Jerry Gordon: Right.

Nidra Poller: I have to leave you now, because I'm going to listen to Emmanuel Macron's speech at the Champ de Mars.

Jerry Gordon: And I want to thank you for your observations on what appeared to be a resounding victory for President Macron.

Nidra Poller: Well, Marine Le Pen thinks it was a resounding victory for herself, but it was a resounding victory for democracy. And, as I said in that article you mentioned, now everything remains to be done.

Jerry Gordon: So, if I had to have a lead for this discussion, is it Macron's victory against populism?

Nidra Poller: I think it’s the French voters’ victory against populism. Now, Macron has to make good on that. He’s very intelligent, he knows it’s not a resounding victory for him. It’s a victory against the danger of electing an incompetent, dishonest person as President of France in one of the most dangerous periods of modern times. People on the right are going to be angry when he does things to please the voters on the left and vice versa. But that’s what he has to do, to govern. So, we’ll follow it from there.

Jerry Gordon: Nidra, following the Macron victory, the French Jewish community organization, CRIF, applauded the result, but expressed concerns over the minority populist vote. What does that tell us about divisions in France being a threat to democracy?

Nidra Poller: We’re dealing with a crisis in democracy. There is a division between those who are defending democracy and several varieties of populism. The populist candidates were disgracefully bad losers. Now there is the concern that they will mobilize their voters and the abstentionists and try to undermine the government.

Jerry Gordon: The US and France are supporting and arming Ukraine to combat Russia’s attacks in the critical Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. That was exemplified by the weekend meeting of both Secretary of State Blinken, and Secretary of Defense Austin, with Zelenskyy in Kiev. What message did that visit send to French populists in France, European EU members, and to us in the United States?

Nidra Poller: Political jockeying for the legislative elections is in the forefront at the moment.

As I mentioned, the bad losers will try by every means to put obstacles in front of the Macron government. They are determined to have enough deputies to block his program. On the question of arming Ukraine, though I can’t follow every

single angle or source, I would say that there is strong support across the political landscape. Little cracks appear: some bristling on the leading role of the Americans and the British. Are they getting too much attention, going too fast, endangering continental Europe? It's a slight crack, not a big division. What remains is a united front against the invading Russians.

The populists oppose giving heavy arms to Ukraine. Commentators—including many of our friends from the anti-Jihad movement—who were ahead of the curve on Islam, seem to be stuck in that position, confident of being ahead of the curve, now seem to be pro-Russian. They repeat Putin's talking points. Some call Zelensky a warmonger, mistrust the Americans and claim the whole story is a conflict between the Americans and Russia, with Ukraine as a proxy. This is geopolitically illogical. The populists put the interests of the French people first, caution against putting them in danger, going too far, etc.

Of course, if Marine Le Pen had won the election, we would be in a total crisis. Now it's just a question of some dissident voices and an ideological swing to populism by people we considered as right wing or conservative. They were part of an international movement. Today, we have the isolationist current in the United States. And the idea that we urgently need peace. If you took the same arguments to the Middle East, their position would be, "Hurry up with the two-state solution, get this over with, and everything should quiet down." This is peacemaking by submission to the aggressor. Surprising to see that coming from people that were in the forefront of anti-Jihad. They assume that Ukraine will have to surrender half of its territory. "Like North and South Korea." This means accommodating accepting Russia's domination in Europe. That's the position of the populists today.

Jerry Gordon: A troubling event occurred during the testimony of Secretary of State, Blinken, before the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee: the Republican, Rand Paul from Kentucky instigated a debate over whether or not the US was tantamount to violating law by supporting a “non-entity” called the Ukraine. Let me preface this by saying Ukraine fits every one of the classic definitions of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on what constitutes an independent self-governing state. Is Senator Paul another version of a neo-isolationist or a populist right here in America?

Nidra Poller: Yes. Definitely. think we can see this in Europe as well. The populists repeat Russia’s justifications. It started with Putin’s speech on the eve of the invasion. He said Ukraine isn’t really a country. Zemmour picked that up, explaining that Ukraine, in the west is Poland, it’s Galicia, and on the east it’s Russia. There’s this notion that if people speak Russian in a country, you have to carve out a region and give it to Russia. It would apply to France, right? You take certain neighborhoods where people speak Arabic and say they belong to Algeria. Rand Paul has been an isolationist ever since I ever heard of him.

Jerry Gordon: Let’s go back to a comment you made about the Left during the Second Intifada in 2000, that you and I remember very vividly. About contriving the basis for Palestinian victimhood in the Mohammed al Dura affair. Is that at the core of Palestinian terrorism going on in Israel on the final days of Ramadan in April 2022? We are seeing that in the sharp rise of Palestinian terrorism during what some called a “slow motion” Intifada in which there were Israelis as well as Palestinian victims of their own terrorism. What is your view on that?

Nidra Poller: Do you remember when we met at Harvard in 2002?

Jerry Gordon: Yes.

Nidra Poller: We were walking off the campus after my talk, Charles Jacobs was with us, and we were all saying that we

came from the Left. I think Rabbi Jon Hausman the only one was who was never a leftist. We broke with the left because of ethical questions and because of our defense of democracy. Today … if you consider I had been on the right … I don't know if that's accurate … I certainly am breaking with this whole movement, which has now abandoned its defense of democracy and is defending a new kind of aggression just because it's not the threat from Islam that they recognize when they were ahead of the curve. The threat from Islam has not disappeared. Jihad in all its forms goes on uninterrupted in Israel. It has its own rhythm that's not exactly connected to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The position from which you have to defend democracy is constantly changing. Today, in France, we had to defend democracy by being sure that Marine Le Pen didn't win the election.

A branch of the American conservative movement is telling us we should have voted for Marine Le Pen because she's the one that understands Islam. But the point I made about populism is that it's no more realistic than Communism. Communism promises to share the wealth… and destroys it. What's left goes to the nomenklatura. Populism doesn't solve any problem whatsoever. Populism takes the yearnings of the people and transforms it into power for the populist autocrat.

Today, we have a new international political landscape. That's what we'll be following in the coming months.

Jerry Gordon: Israel has a conundrum, a quandary with the Russian invasion of Ukraine trying to preserve its deconfliction arrangements with Putin giving them freedom to attack Iranian targets in nearby Syria. All while Israel was providing relief and defensive support for democracy in the Ukraine. How has that worked out?

Nidra Poller: There was a brief moment when Israel stood back quietly, and that was quickly followed by association with the entire free world in its defense of democracy. I read an

article… I’m sorry I don’t remember the author’s name… noting that Russian permission for air strikes in Syria was not so smooth and dependable. It’s comparable to the question of buying Russian gas: If we hesitate to support Ukraine democracy, the Russians will take the initiative. They’ll cancel it before we do. They’ve already shut off the gas supply to Poland and Bulgaria. At first, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid was more outspoken on support for Ukraine than Naftali Bennett. And the Germans want to send weapons, didn’t want to even think about giving up Russian gas. It didn’t take that long for people to recognize the unbridled brutality of Russia under Putin. The fact that, if we don’t stop them now, there will be no limits on how far it can go. One day there has to be an ultimate fight and a defeat of Putin’s Russia. Quite quickly, every country has fallen into line. It’s a life and death situation. That has become obvious.

Jerry Gordon: One aspect of Israel strategically is its offshore supply of natural gas and oil.

Nidra Poller: Yes. Wasn’t there a plan for a southern pipeline? I heard that the Biden administration was against it. Do you know about this?

Jerry Gordon: Yes. Foolishly, the Biden administration rejected the so-called East Med pipeline. It would have connected directly from the Israeli and adjacent Cypriot natural gas fields, through a submarine pipeline over to Greece and then to Italy. It was the “spine,” so to speak, of the Triple Alliance between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. There are ways by which the Israelis and Cypriots, without the long-term development of the originally EU-funded pipeline, could use other pipelines that are nearby, one of which is in Turkey, which is a problem. It connects to Europe via Bulgaria. Ironically, the easiest solution might be “compression natural gas.” That could be shipped into EU ports as an interim measure. That would help greatly to alleviate incidents where the Russians basically tried to bribe their

customers in Poland, Bulgaria, and other EU member states. But there was another development in Ukraine over the course of the last several days—the apparent destruction of the Russian gasoline pipeline to Europe.

Nidra Poller: That means the other producing powers would have to come in as an interim measure.

Jerry Gordon: The Poles and Lithuanians, I understand, had undertaken arrangements with the US to ship natural gas out of the Gulf Coast here in the US to their Baltic Sea ports.

Nidra Poller: It seems the Poles are saying they've got our arrangement to handle this disruption."

Jerry Gordon: Yes.

Nidra Poller: All the European countries have started scramble to find solutions. It was Lenin who said the capitalists will sell us the rope to hang them with. I think the Europeans don't want to do it this time. They don't want to be prisoners of the need for gas.

Jerry Gordon: Correct.

Nidra Poller: That's the least of it. When we in Europe see what's happening to Ukraine … I assure you, we walk around our European city and we see it in an overlay, bombed out, like a Ukrainian city. It's that close to us. So, the least of it is to find solutions for these energy problems. Of course, France has the advantage of nuclear energy. But I think there's an awareness … war has so been such a terrible destructive force in Europe bcause of the nature of Europe, with many small independent countries… There is a strong sense of history here. Europeans do not want war. Which is why some are pressing for a peace arrangement … major concessions. That's not going to happen. Ukrainians aren't going to give up on that.

Yesterday I watched the visit to Moscow of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. I followed the news conference with Lavrov, and a few hours later the one-on-one meeting with Putin, at that same long table he used for Macron. It looked like a scene from a Charlie Chaplin movie. The Russians provided the video-audio. I was able to hear Putin's speech. Then Guterres spoke. You couldn't hear what he said, I searched a variety of media today and couldn't find out what Guterres said to Putin. Maybe he'll tell the Ukrainians?

Jerry Gordon: Many of us consider Bernard Henri-Levy as an admirable example of proactive French Jews. He has been absolutely front and center on the defense of Ukraine, going back to the Separatist wars that began in 2014 and still are going on at this moment with the Russian invasion. He has a new movie out. It's called *The Will to See*. It starts with a horrible butchering of Christians in the border area with Muslims in Nigeria. The film is very gripping in many ways. He has a long record of accomplishment. He's defended women in Afghanistan, the Yazidis in Iraq, Kurdish women fighters in Syria, and he has a great comment in this film, "killers fear witnesses."

Because witnesses talk, and he's suggesting that his is the antidote in part for the collection of mass murderers, genocide, wherever that's occurring now. Whether it's Ukraine, Sudan, or other locations in Africa, and certainly by the Jihadists. He says there is a responsibility for Jews, you and I and our Jewish colleagues is to represent the afflicted. What are your views?

Nidra Poller: Let me put it in another way. Sometimes Bernard Henri Levy is criticized for grandstanding, for humanitarian globe hopping, for getting involved in things that are over his head and influencing international politics, especially in Libya. Some of that is true, and sometimes Bernard-Henri Levy with regard to Israel he is a bit *tikkun olam*, his idea of the Jews as shepherds taking care of everyone, including the

Palestinians. He has been very critical of Israeli leadership on this question. But sometimes he's truly admirable in his way of going beyond his role as a humanistic intellectual. He actually goes to trouble spots, gets involved with the people, and brings back their testimony. I'm going to see him in a panel discussion on Monday, organized by ELNET. So perhaps I'll be able to tell you more in next conversation. Of course, I've heard him speak many times and read many of his texts. There is no question about his sincerity. And on the issue of the invasion of Ukraine, many of us that have been rather skeptical in the past, find him to be a reliable voice

Especially because he's been visiting the region since 2014, at a time when most commentators were letting Russia get away with it. They weren't being critical, and you can see why: Once you try to block Putin's aggression, the Russians are absolutely merciless. Putin's Russia has been exerting this domination in Europe for the last 20 years.

Jerry Gordon: Particularly by the way in Germany, which has felt itself vulnerable for its energy supplies. Former German Chancellor Merkel in the wake of the Fukushima disaster in Japan, said, "No, we need all the natural gas to we can get for our economy and industry to remain productive."

Nidra Poller: Yes, and they also went back to coal. I lived in London in the early '60s when they burned coal. It was absolutely terrible. Angela Merkel was so greatly admired. Whereas Thatcher, even today, can be viciously criticized. With time, you can look back on political figures and can see where they went wrong and where they did well. This is why, personally, I'm not for any kind of overwhelming admiration, and certainly not for emotional attachment to political leaders. The more we can be rational and lucid, the better chance we have of getting good leadership.

Jerry Gordon: On that note, I want to thank you for what is our seventh monthly dialogue. It comes at a very significant

moment.

Nidra: So, I'll see you soon.

Jerry Gordon. Thanks.

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Jerry Gordon is a Senior Editor of *The New English Review*, author of *The West Speaks*, NERPress, 2012 and co-author of *Jihad in Sudan: Caliphate Threatens Africa and the World,* JAD Press, 2017. From 2016 to 2020, he was producer and co-host of *Israel News Talk Radio-Beyond the Matrix.*

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