

Introducing François Fillon (Part III)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



On the matter of Israel, French Jews, and the “Palestinians,” Fillon has made various remarks, some of which have disturbed, and some of which have pleased, France’s Jews. He did say at one point that Muslims in France were being held “hostage” by fundamentalists, who wanted Muslims to ignore French laws whenever they conflicted with the laws of Islam, and that in the past, Catholics, and Jews too, had obeyed their own laws and not those of the Republic, but then, Fillon noted, they had come round, and he hoped that Muslims could, too. He was quickly answered by the Representative Council of French Jews (CRIF), that explained that his assertion was not true, that Jews in France had *always* obeyed the laws of France: “*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. Fillon claimed he had been misunderstood. “I never meant to call into question the Jewish community’s attachment to our common values and its 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.”

There have been other remarks, worrisome at the time. Last July, Fillon said in support of letting Muslim students postpone their baccalaureate exams, to avoid a religious conflict, that “the main beneficiaries of this [allowing such a postponement] 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.” Why mention the Jewish attitude as “intransigence” at all? This

comes close to the old charge of being “stiff-necked.”

Another remark by Fillon that worried French Jews was his soft-pedaling of Hizballah’s ties to terror, so eager has he been to support Hizballah in Syria in its fight against the Islamic State. In November 2015, following the Paris terror attacks, Fillon declared that he was in favor of a “global coalition” to fight against the Islamic State (IS), which would include the Russian, Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian governments, Kurdish movements and the Shiite terrorist organization Hizballah, whose senior officials he had met in July 2013. And similarly, he has been perfectly willing to work with the country that is at present the greatest threat to Israel: “We must support Iran, which is committed to combating IS,” he said on France Inter Radio. (It is also, and mainly, committed to destroying Israel.) “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.” This is surely a bizarre remark, and one wonders which allies of Israel he is thinking of – the U.S.? – that “do not respect international morals.” But at least he ends on what appears to be a pro-Israel note: “no one can blame them” for the allies they sometimes need. Still, one is left distinctly uneasy.

It should be said that Fillon has spoken out forcefully against the viciously anti-Israel BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions) movement, and he has also denounced the anti-Israel votes over Jerusalem in UNESCO. He has insisted that the two parties – Israel and the “Palestinians” – negotiate directly, and that no attempt be made to force Israel into negotiations. That also put him at odds with the official French position, and in agreement with the Israelis. But more recently, he has sounded as if he does want pressure put on Israel to negotiate; it’s hard to know exactly where he stands.

Fillon is willing to ally with Hizballah, but “only” for its

war against ISIS; it's a limited forbearance. When journalist Patrick Cohen 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." Apparently he thinks that Hizballah can be supported, but "only" in Syria as part of a Shi'a coalition against ISIS, and without at the same time strengthening it for its endless war against Israel. How exactly this strict compartmentalization of support might be achieved is entirely unclear. If Hizballah is supplied with weaponry for use in Syria, there is no way to prevent that weaponry from also being used against Israel.

In January 2014, Fillon paid a three-day visit to Israel. His remarks were heartening, and heartfelt:

"I feel very honored to be your guest and to talk to the Israeli youth who are the soul of your amazing nation," he said. "Israel's fate and the region's stakes have always fascinated me. This is where the earliest and the most intense pages of humanity were written. I trembled for Israel during the Yom Kippur War. All nations have had to overcome issues to exist and to unite, but Israel is not a nation like any other."

After referring to the Holocaust, he explained that "the French Republic is and will always be uncompromising with anti-Semitism, as was recently the case with that antisemitic 'humorist' [Dieudonné M'Bala M'Bala] who has made offensive remarks. In France, anti-Semitism is not an opinion, it is an offense. Things are very clear for me: opponents of French unity and rapists of memory cannot exploit freedom of speech."

"Because Israel has strong historical and moral ties with France and Europe, what affects you, affects us, and what torments you, torments us," he continued. "The existence of Israel is not debatable and its security is therefore not negotiable. Israel is our friend and ally and whoever threatened its existence would expose itself to our toughest

response. To have peace, you need to know that France will always be on your side regarding your safety. Israel is the gateway to our own history. It is old Europe's friend and confidant," he concluded.

This sounds very good, and yet, in November 2014, Fillon took quite a different tone on BFM TV. He explained that Israel was "threatening world peace [!] because it was delaying the creation of a Palestinian state" – a state that Fillon had expressed his desire to create since 2011.

"I am telling the Israelis that if they do not accept and if they do not understand that the creation of the Palestinian state is a sine qua non condition for peace in Middle East, they are not only taking risks for their long-term future, but they are also creating instability for the whole world. I think the situation in the Middle East is a threat to our own country's internal security," he said. In other words, Fillon wants France to always be on the side of Israel when it comes to "security," but at the same time Fillon believes that a "Palestinian" state will make Israel more secure and safe, not whet, Arab Muslim appetites. He does not understand that such a state would promote the very instability he claims to deplore, and the risks Israel now runs in preventing such a state are far less than those it would be taking if it allowed its creation, even with Arab promises – easy to break – of "demilitarization."

And is Fillon suggesting that in not yielding on this matter, Israel is endangering French security ("the situation in the Middle East is a threat to our own security"), presumably because the Arabs and Muslims in France will be deeply dissatisfied if a "Palestine" is not created and will express that dissatisfaction through unrest on French streets, or even by acts of terrorism in France? This is surely a terrible accusation to make against Israel. And haven't the Muslims in France shown they need no act by Israel to attack French Infidels, at Charlie Hebdo, Hyper Cacher, Bataclan, Toulouse,

the promenade in Nice? Isn't it dangerous to presume to dictate to Israel what it must do, on the preposterous grounds that if it doesn't, it will endanger "world peace"? While Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Libya, all burn, and a dozen other Muslim countries simmer, and Muslim terrorism affects non-Muslims from Myanmar to India to Nigeria, is it really Israel that "threatens world peace? Isn't the best keeper of the peace in the whole Middle East the IDF?

At the same time, however, as Fillon made these disturbing statements, he announced that he would oppose a referendum proposed by ecologists and socialist leaders who wanted the French government to recognize the state of Palestine. He considered that this "would have no effect, except perhaps to complicate the situation in the Middle East." He wants Israelis, of their own free will, to recognize that a "Palestinian state" is in Israel's best interests. But many in and out of Israel do not agree. What if the Israelis decide differently from what Fillon thinks is best for them?

So which is the real Francois Fillon? He seems to understand that Israel is a special case, with special needs. He recognizes the historic links of Israel to France, of Israel to the Western world. He is against BDS, against the blatantly biased UNESCO votes on Jerusalem. His sympathy seems genuine for Israel's difficulties; he doesn't want France to simply recognize a "state of Palestine" which he thinks would be a useless gesture. He wants to convince the Israelis that they will be better off with a "Palestinian state" whose borders he refrains from delineating, so we can assume he understands that those borders will have to be different from the pre-1967 armistice lines. But he cannot conceive of Israel's safety being best achieved by preventing, rather than allowing, a "Palestinian" state. He is so used to the received idea that of course a "solution" exists, which will require that Israel give up most of the territory it won in 1967 that he does not allow himself to consider that a better outcome – instead of a

will-o'-the-wisp "solution" – would be to support the current situation between Israel and the Arabs, that is an absence of major war or threat of war, and terrorism brought to a low level (lower than in Western Europe), a situation which can be maintained only if the IDF remains strong and continues to exercise military control of the "West Bank."

In October 2015, on a television program, Fillon renewed his call for Israel to make peace with Palestinians, as if Israel hadn't been trying to do that for decades. Israel "is not going to be safe from the chaos that is taking hold of the Middle East," he said. "The idea that Israel could remain a peaceful and prosperous islet in the midst of this chaos is a crazy and false idea." Really? Actually, at this very moment Israel is precisely that, an island of comparative peace and high-tech prosperity in the midst of Arab Muslim chaos all around it. "We have to put pressure on Israel to resume the negotiation process and to let Israel liberate occupied territories. There will never be peace in Palestine if they are not willing to do this. Some settlements were established in total contradiction with commitments which were stated in previous agreements." Which settlements, and which commitments, is Fillon thinking of? Any commitments made by Israel depended on reciprocal commitments by the Arabs and "Palestinians," commitments that the Arabs never met. And what about the still-relevant Mandate for Palestine? Having for so many years maintained that Israel should not be forced to negotiate, but should come to the table of its own free will, Fillon now says precisely the opposite, that "we have to put pressure on Israel to resume the negotiation process," and he even talks about Israel "liberating" (!) "occupied territories."

What shall we make of this? Fillon's statements are contradictory; it is hard to figure out exactly where he stands. Quite possibly he does not know himself. But at least Fillon needs to be made aware that Israel has a perfect legal

right to build settlements on “waste and state” lands in all the land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean, according to the Mandate for Palestine, and that it has a perfect right, too, to territorial adjustments in the “West Bank” that would give it “secure and defensible borders” as required by U.N. Resolution 242. If Israel decides not to fully exercise those “rights” in the light of other considerations, that is for Israel, and no other party, to decide. Fillon might also be asked, too, if he is aware that the “Palestinian people” for whom he has such solicitousness were invented, for obvious reasons, after the Six-Day War, to present the Arab and Muslim war against Israel as a struggle “between two tiny peoples, each wanting its own homeland.” Finally, he ought to be asked if he really thinks, if Israel were to disappear tomorrow, that the observable behavior of Muslims in the West, including acts of terrorism, would change for the better.

In November 2015 on Radio Monte-Carlo, Fillon again declared that “I am not against Israel but I am committed to the creation of a Palestinian state. I want peace. There is a tendency to be tougher with Israel because it is a strong, organized and powerful country.” (But this is dangerous praise – is Israel stronger than a coalition of several dozen Arab and Muslim states? Aren’t we expecting too many miracles of Israel?) And in the very same interview, he also declared he was now opposed to the labeling of Israeli products, which is one of the main weapons of the BDS movement.

In short, Fillon wants “security” for Israel, but also wants a “Palestinian” state. This is the position of a great many people who insist that there must be a “solution” to the Arab Muslim war against Israel. They cannot allow themselves to believe that there is no solution, and that the best one can hope for is to manage the conflict, by maintaining Israel’s military superiority sufficiently to deter an Arab attack. Starting with the U.S. Joint Chiefs in 1967, military men have largely agreed that from Israel’s point of view, “security”

requires continued control of the West Bank, whether or not Israel decides to formally incorporate part or most of that territory into the Jewish state, or to continue with the current arrangement. Fillon needs to see the military challenge on the ground, needs to stand at Qalqilya, in the pre-67 lines, and perhaps even walk the eight miles that separate that Arab village from the Mediterranean, and to scale the heights of the Judean and Samarian hills, in order to have brought home to him how command of those heights is necessary to block, as a military matter, the invasion route from the east. Fillon needs to understand that the soothing words of Mahmoud Abbas to Western visitors, and what he says to his own people, are quite different. A "peace treaty" is not the same thing as "peace," and may indeed get in the way of, even make more difficult, a long-term peace. The surest guarantor of peace between Arabs and Israelis is the IDF, able to ensure that the Arabs will not engage in another attack, like that of October, 1973. For deterrence to work it is not enough for Israel to be strong; it must also be perceived by the Arabs as strong enough to defeat any conceivable coalition of enemies.

Francois Fillon needs to realize that Arab leaders, even when they do not want war, can not always withstand pressure put on them to join a conflict. One example of this was hapless King Hussein of Jordan, forced into the Six-Day War by the Egyptians who assured him, in a famous phone call from Marshal Amer that the Israelis recorded, that Israel was being defeated, that Egyptian planes ruled the skies and Egyptian troops were marching into Israel (in reality, the Egyptian Air Force had been wiped out while still on the ground). King Hussein had no excuse not to join in if Israel was really on the ropes; the only valid excuse for not going to war would have been the certainty of an Arab loss. The principle of "*Darura*," or Necessity, could then be invoked to justify not joining in. If Israel were to give up control of the West Bank to a "Palestinian state," it would then be appear to be much

more obviously vulnerable, and Arab leaders would have no excuse to invoke "Darura"; war would be more, not less, likely.

If Francois Fillon wants, as he claims, real "security" for Israel, he must come to understand that a "Palestinian state" would lessen that security, and serve as a launching pad for future Arab attacks on a much-reduced Israel. Fillon needs to return to Israel, walk its valleys and hills, feel keenly how small it is, and what, as a military matter, that little country must continue to control. And he might re-read both about Israel's rights under the Palestine Mandate (1922), and U.N. Resolution 242, which the U.N. seems to be forgetting, and also study the Palestinian National Charter (1964) and the Hamas Covenant (1988) as well, which clearly show a determination never to accept the Jewish State. That might lead Fillon to change his mind about the wisdom – not to mention the morality – of a "Palestinian state."

In the meantime, Jews in France, and in Israel, will just have to hope that when the real Francois Fillon, having cleared his head, finally stands up, that he stands up for the only state in the whole Middle East that helped to create, that continues to contribute to, and that stands in the first line of defense for, the now-threatened civilization of France, and of the West – that is, Israel.

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