

The 2014 Israel-Palestine crisis has uncovered deep divisions within French society

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The offensive launched by Israel in Gaza in July prompted a range of diverse responses from states across the world. [Helen Drake](#) writes on the reaction within France, which saw a number of domestic protests and disturbances related to the crisis. She notes that France is still digesting the consequences of its colonial past, its post-decolonisation present, and the reality of persistent anti-semitic sentiments. This challenge presents to the world an image of a France ultra-polarised between its pro-Arab and pro-Jewish supporters.



On 8 July 2014 the Israeli government launched Operation Protective Edge against the Gaza strip. Its targets were rocket and mortar fire from Gaza as well as the tunnels supplying the territory, and its weapons were airstrikes and a ground invasion. One week after the outbreak of hostilities French President François Hollande, in his 14 July Bastille Day TV interview, [proclaimed](#) that “we cannot import the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict into France (...). I will not say that we are pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian: we are pro-peace”.

Hollande’s words were directed less at the parties to the conflict themselves than to those responding to it on the streets and in social media at home in France. Rallies and demonstrations had been organised in Paris and other French cities in which by far the greater number of protagonists expressed their solidarity for the Palestinians, especially the civilians killed, maimed or displaced by this third offensive by Israel on Gaza since 2008. On three occasions in Paris the demonstrations were accompanied by acts of menace or violence in the direction of France’s Jewish communities, with synagogues as specific targets, and the French authorities subsequently stepped in to ban a pro-Palestinian demonstration planned for Saturday 19 July 2014.

How far do these reactions to the Israel-Palestine crisis of summer 2014 hold up a mirror to contemporary France? In the foreground we see French policy itself towards the Israel-Palestine conflict. This response has for at least three decades been voluntarily ensnared in a web of collective multinational governance spun principally around the European Union, the United Nations and France’s key allies including the UK and the United States. From within this cocoon, the French voice emphasises Israel’s right to security, Israel’s right to defend itself when attacked, Israel’s duty to act proportionately, and the desirability of a political solution to the crisis crafted by the international community.

Observers of French politics including [Bronwyn Winter](#) contend that during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (2007-2012) the country took a more friendly line towards Israel than had become the norm in France where public opinion is nowadays more neutral than engaged on either side, and where the pro-Israeli

positions of half a century ago have long given way to a more nuanced navigation between France’s interests relative to the conflict. The events of 2014 have so far revealed a François Hollande cautiously endorsing his predecessor’s position at the same time as his Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has used tough talk to denounce the



Pro-Palestine demonstration in Paris, Credit: Alain Bachellier (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

bloody consequences of Israeli attacks on Gaza: the age-old friendship between France and Israel, [argued Fabius](#), does not justify the 'killing of children and the massacre of civilians'.

What lies in the background to this stance? Jeremy Jennings has [noted](#) how France today is a 'de facto multicultural society', and Christopher Hill [shows us](#) how this 'multiculturality', meaning 'ethnocultural diversity' complicates the 'national interest' in whose name foreign policy is conducted. In the French case, the religious heterogeneity of the population (it is home to the biggest populations of Muslims and Jews in Europe) has challenged an important pillar of French identity – the credo of *laïcité*, French state secularism – and this in turn has fissured the bedrock of national interest as an expression of a singular national identity.

According to *laïcité*, the state is neutral towards all faiths; all faiths, in turn, have a duty of fraternity towards each other; and in all cases public displays of faith, individual and collective, are discouraged by law (hence the banning of the Muslim veil and burqa from most of public life); this is the rejection of multiculturalism, in the sense of claims to group rights. In contemporary France, religious difference and reactions to these differences, especially from the political and intellectual classes, have come to operate as proxies for more entrenched cultural wars over the meaning of Frenchness, complicating the task of coherent and consensual responses to sectarian conflict far from home where it resonates with different communities in France.

Politicians such as former President Nicolas Sarkozy and leader of the French *Front national* Marine le Pen have notably come to legitimise an exclusionary discourse of national identity, stigmatising 'otherness' where it most visibly departs from the norm. Intellectual debate has diagnosed French society as afflicted by both 'Islamophobia' and 'Judeophobia', and what Pascal Boniface [calls](#) the 'media intoxication' around the Middle East crisis (including Syria) has certainly cast the summer's disturbances as an ultra-polarised stand-off between France's pro-Arab and pro-Jewish supporters.

France is still digesting the consequences of its colonial past, its post-decolonisation present, and the reality of persistent anti-semitic sentiments. As far back as 1995, French film director Mathieu Kassovitz memorably portrayed in *la Haine* a dystopia of street life in the notorious Paris *banlieues* where its characters are poisoned by injustices, real and imagined, metered out according to stereotypes and prejudices regarding the Arab and Jewish 'Other'. Nearly two decades later the actor Saïd Taghmaoui, who played the Maghrebi Arab Saïd in the film, participated in inflammatory Twitter exchanges on the subject of the Israeli-Palestine conflict of 2014: old fiction updated with new fact.

The quintessential vulnerability of France today – to the repercussions of its past on today's social peace; to the meaning of foreign wars for different groups within French society; to the geopolitical balances required in an interdependent world of nations co-existing under the nuclear threat – will continue to stress the Fifth French Republic, peace or no peace in the Middle East. French Muslim Mohammed Merah's killing of three soldiers and four Jews (three of whom were children) in Toulouse in 2012; the Franco-Algerian born Medhi Nemmouche's fatal attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum in May 2014; and the horrific beheading of French tourist Hervé Gourdel by Jund al-Khalifa jihadists in Algeria in September 2014 '[because he was French](#)' were each in their own way a deliberately gruesome and graphic message that there is and can be no 100 per cent secure firewall between the Hexagon and the rest of the world.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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