

## *Conference: France in the Middle East – Past, Present, Future*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/1782>

ISSN: 2075-5287

**Publisher**

Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 15 October 2001

Number of pages: 128-130

**Electronic reference**

Dominique Trimbur, « *Conference: France in the Middle East – Past, Present, Future* », *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* [Online], 9 | 2001, Online since 26 February 2008, connection on 07 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/1782>

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## **France in the Middle East - Past, Present, Future**

Organized in conjunction with the CRFJ, the "France in the Middle East – Past, Present, Future" conference took place on April 29 - 30, 2001 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It is the first outgrowth of a similar encounter set up by the Truman Institute in the year 2000 on Germany (a similar conference on Great Britain is slated for the year 2002). The introductory and opening remarks by Professor Amnon Cohen, Head of the Truman Institute, and Mr. Jacques Huntzinger, the French Ambassador to Israel, pointed to both the wealth of subject matter and the difficulties of the theme: dating back to the time of the Crusades, the issues must also be approached within the context of the current crisis. The papers presented at this conference helped better grasp the heritage, the realities of the past (remote and recent) as well as the present.

During the first afternoon session, the speakers focused on origins. Exploring the mythical, if not mystical, connections between politics and religion in modern times, Yali Haran (Lycee Marc Chagall, Tel Aviv) provided a thoughtful analysis of the secular relationship between France and the Middle East. This original, perhaps contradictory alliance between the "elder daughter of the Church" and the Ottoman Sultan resulted in a highly politicized nineteenth century. This can be seen in nationalization of the Crusades, a view that slowly shaped French perceptions (Ronnie Ellenblum, Hebrew University). It was also illustrated by early investments in the Holy Land, which pitted eternal France (Monarchy, Republic, Empire) against a temporal and spiritual power, the Holy See (Yoram Shalit, Hebrew University). Diplomatic and religious maneuvers then led to the establishment in Palestine of Catholic and Protestant institutions, analyzed by Bertrand Lamure (University of Lyon, Centre Andre Latreille) which were active through charitable works. A predominantly Catholic vision, which dominated the French view of the Holy Land, nevertheless did not prevent other features from being taken into consideration. As Michel Abitbol (Hebrew University) showed, the Zionist movement was also one of the concerns of the Paris government. Although support in general came from private groups, the French administration in France and later on in Syria tended to show a certain degree of distrust towards the movement founded by Herzl. The historic encounter that created the honeymoon between France and Israel in the 1950s, resulting among other things in the ill-fated Suez campaign, was a fleeting moment. My own paper was designed to highlight the various actors in the Palestinian policies of France between 1900 and 1948. By analyzing a vast yet patchy network, attempts at adaptation to a changing context can be charted, but above all what emerges are the set concerns of French policy in an era of profound geopolitical upheaval.

The second day of the conference was devoted to a portrait of France, Palestine and Israel in modern times. The focus was on a number of important figures who made contributions to modernity and science: the diplomat and scholar Charles Gaillardot (Haim Goren, Tel Hai College), the pilots Vedrine and Bonnier, true pilgrims of the air, since the latter landed in the Holy Land in 1913 – 14 (Dov Gavish, Hebrew University). Politics was center stage in papers dealing with World War I, a fundamental turning point for the perception of the region. Through the analysis of influential groups, Eddy Kaufman (Hebrew University) outlined changes in opinion between 1908 and 1918, motivated by conservatism and colonial aims. Henry Laurens (INALCO, Paris) described the difficulties of establishing the French consulate in Jerusalem in the immediate post-war period, where Paris found itself torn between its vast ambitions and the need to adapt to reality; where Palestine was fully integrated into the Muslim policy of France, but where France was gradually shunted to the camp of passive observers.

The French presence in Palestine is also felt in technology. It has left a positive mark through the standardization created by the Baron de Rothschild, even though the Jewish presence tended to mask the French influence (Ran Aaronsohn, Hebrew University). France contributed an economic and commercial presence as well as regards the expansion of urbanization in Jerusalem: the water supply was a center of conflict among the western powers (Vincent Lemire, University of Aix en Provence). France's technological prowess was left untapped by its clientele and hence France was unable to fulfill its ambitious plans. In contrast, although many years later, France's scientific advances and a specific set of circumstances led to a brief but fruitful venture with the new State of Israel in its nuclear development (Andre Bendjebbar, University of Paris I, Institut Pierre Renouvin).

The last part of the conference dealt with France and the Arab world. In the historical section, analysis of the French mandate in Syria provided an eloquent picture of the complex relationships between the two entities. Although Arab nationalism in the absolute was viewed positively in France, because it coincided with its Muslim policy in North Africa, concrete measures received a mixed reception in France. These convergences and divergences emerged during World War I, in particular in its final hours, as shown by Dan Eldar (University of Tel Aviv). It was a difficult past, as exemplified by the French repression of the Druze revolt (1925-27). The negotiations followed violence and an attempt to find the instigators (Moshe Gammer, University of Tel Aviv). Nevertheless, politics cannot disregard the mutual fascination between France and the Middle East : the nationalism of the sacred hill has its counterpart in the sacred mountain (Asher Kaufman, Hebrew University). The division of the Middle East between France and Great Britain, more or less resolved after World War I was once again challenged during World War II. With the coming in France of the Vichy regime, there was no fundamental break in the *modus vivendi* between the two countries. However, after the Syria affair, there was an acceleration of the nationalization process begun in the 1930s (Catherine Nicault, University of Poitiers).

The issues involving France and the Arab world remain as critical in current times. In the Middle East these issues involve the preservation of a French heritage that is often strongly rejected. This is also true for Syria, where recollections of the French mandate are distorted: although France created modern Syria, it seeks its identity in the ancient Arab and pre-Arab past (Eyal Zisser, University of Tel Aviv).

For the French, the main concerns are developing an Arab policy consistent with domestic factors: as Gilles Keppel showed (Institut d'études politiques, Paris), this relationship has emerged since 1945 alternatively from both external and internal sources, depending on whether domestic or foreign concerns prevail. Although the French Arab policy is not based on community imperatives, the influence on policy of the Arab and Muslim presence in France should be taken into account.

These historical considerations were the basis for the final round table, enabling actors and observers of the current Franco-Israeli relationship to envisage their future. After a moving but relatively pessimistic introduction by Avi Pazner (former Israeli ambassador to France), Jacques Huntzinger chose to temporize. In his view, it is impossible to focalize on the brief honeymoon between the two countries (in the 50s): relationships between states are not based on friendship but rather on common interests, a feature that should leave room for positive criticism towards Israel, in a normalized vision of Middle Eastern politics. This pragmatism was shared by Uzi Arad (Herzlyia Interdisciplinary Center), former diplomatic advisor to Benyamin Netanahu, who noted that despite its periods of flagging friendship, French-Israeli cooperation has always remained active and will remain so, in particular within the European Union. Avi Primor (vice president of the University of Tel Aviv, former Israeli Ambassador to the European Community and Germany) stressed Israeli hypersensitivity towards France, and took the opportunity to balance this view by emphasizing the overlapping of foreign policies within the European Union that shape French policy. The final word was delivered by the great connaisseur of France Zeev Sternhell (Hebrew University). Decrying the stressful relationship between the two countries, he attempted to bring it into proper perspective. He emphasized that the "golden age" of Franco-Israeli relationships was a choice for the wrong reason since during the Suez campaign the two countries found themselves on the side of the colonial powers. From now on, fragmented Israeli society should seek values from French culture: secularism, rejection of consumer society, democratic socialism. A series of points that could be the basis for a normal relationship.

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