

*Milestones: Commentary on the Islamic World*

**Operation Al Aqsa Flood: Islamic Resistance in Palestine and Its Precipitation of French Ruin in the Muslim World**

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Operation Al Aqsa Flood surprised the entire world, shattering fallacious assumptions that Islamic resistance in Palestine lacked political efficiency and latitude. Remarkably, the operation exposed the hostile political agendas operating behind prior diplomatic pretenses, precipitating the downgrading of what was previously considered supreme colonial force to a negotiated space given Islamic vigilance. This latter phenomenon can be found in France, where the operation definitively destabilized French imperial ambition in the Muslim world.

**Geopolitical Ambitions and French National Identity**

After De Gaulle's return to power in 1958 during the Algerian Liberation Struggle, France pursued an original diplomatic agenda partially distinguished from its main ally, the United States. Its foreign policy aimed at maintaining France's independence by securing its leadership position in Europe and creating opportunities and collaborations with powers overtly hostile to US hegemony. General De Gaulle presented the features of a mediocre military mind: uncreative, obtuse but at times realistic; he was nostalgic for the era during which his country resembled an invincible empire. His vision was based on what he believed France needed to remain despite the first decolonial losses: a global power whose influence spanned over continents, second yet not servile to the United States. French national consciousness had been nurtured by a century of domination and conquest. Being French was—and needed to continue to be—part and parcel of a nation whose might, influence, and attraction were to persist as singular and unquestioned. In other words, French imperialist strategic objectives were the main columns upon which national identity stood.<sup>1</sup> Any disruption of France's strategy in this sense implied a collapse of its political and civilizational identity, an eventuality synonymous with a humiliation the nation could not bear.

Accepting American hegemony might have been a humbling pill to swallow, but France positioned itself as an ally to the US while maintaining relative autonomy. Both nations endeavored to uphold the structure of white supremacy, allowing for the continued domination of the Global South, particularly the Islamic world. After being shaken by WWII

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and the Algerian Liberation Struggle, the French psyche and system of governance accepted and protected an insecure yet narcissistic sense of self in dire need of constant reassurance.

**France’s “Arab Policy” and Palestine**

This psychopolitical rationale is symptomatic of the republic’s diplomacy to this day. Despite its continued efforts to act as a balancing power, France’s decline quickly appeared inevitable. As De Gaulle himself stated after leaving office, “[g]reatness is over.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, even in its demise, one specific page from this French diplomatic booklet was cleverly written and continued to function reasonably well for a few decades—its so-called “Arab Policy.”

After the nation’s ruthless opposition to Algerian independentists, in which France indulged in one war crime after the other, the republic was regarded as the archnemesis of the Muslim world. Its feral tactics against Algeria were uncovered on the international stage by the clever internationalization of the conflict: France’s anti-Arab and Islamophobic nature was revealed in a peremptory manner. As a result, an entire region of the world regarded France as a brutal enemy to be vigorously opposed. French governors, and De Gaulle in particular, realized the danger of this insecure position. A sane dose of realism entangled with traditional imperial ambition led to the development of the “Arab Policy.” The plan was meant to whitewash France’s antagonistic reputation through the adoption of a seemingly neutral approach to the Palestine conflict and through the offer of a collaborative hand toward the newly independent Arab nations. A battle for hearts and minds, the policy aimed at seducing the Muslim masses and convincing them of France’s benevolent disposition toward their political development. If successful, France could overturn its political misfortune and recuperate its influence, protecting and projecting its interests in a geography otherwise impervious to its diplomatic efforts due to its colonial legacy.

In the early 1960s, the plan began to take form. In 1960, when Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion came to France, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made sure the trip was not regarded as an official friendly state visit. And in 1962, De Gaulle instructed his ambassador in Cairo to adopt “a more liberal attitude toward Nasser.”<sup>3</sup> As diplomat Jean Chauvel, highly influential and respected by De Gaulle, wrote in 1963, greater collaboration with Arabs was “desirable” as the Franco-Israeli partnership “in no way gain[s] France any credit in Arabia.”<sup>4</sup>

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France's "Arab Policy" finally came to maturity during the 1967 Six-Day War run-up when France embargoed the delivery of weapons to the Middle East, a decision exclusively affecting Israel. De Gaulle went even further, announcing that he wouldn't support Israel if the Zionist state initiated the conflict. In a famous press conference held in November 1967, De Gaulle severely blamed Israel as it "was organizing an occupation in the occupied territories that could not go ahead without oppression, repression, expulsion."<sup>5</sup> Remembering the propagandistic scheme used against Algerians, he even declared that the Palestinian resistance would be codified by the Zionist regime as "terrorism." These spectacular moves left a decisive impression. France's diplomatic metamorphosis was complete. The analyst Pascal Boniface writes,

While all Western countries supported Israel, France was the only one to take up the cause of the Arab countries. France thus became the most popular Western country in the Arab world. Champion of the denial of peoples' self-determination by opposing Algerian independence, [France] became the champion of the same cause by criticizing the Israeli occupation.<sup>6</sup>

From 1967 onward, France persistently advocated for a two-state solution in Palestine and condemned Zionist colonial settlements. The policy remained pertinent with various degrees of inflection (and at times coexisted with conflicts with some Arab States like Syria).<sup>7</sup> It culminated in the famous opposition to the war in Iraq by President Chirac. Importantly, the policy cemented France's reputation as a sincere Arab friend.

### **An Embraced Islamophobic Antagonism**

Since 2003, France's "Arab Policy" has gradually lost its relevance. The War on Terror led by the United States required a complete alignment, and France slowly followed the giant footsteps of its unrivaled ally. This adjusted diplomatic position, however, should not be analyzed as the simple result of a power dynamic between two partners of unequal strength. This adjustment was also a political choice. The new century witnessed the rise of an Islamic resurgence claiming fidelity to its own political, legal, and moral traditions, which opposed the liberal order promoted by the US and its allies, including France. Therefore, the republic led its own war opposing the rise of a new political consciousness in the Muslim masses.

Domestically, France adopted draconian levels of Islamophobia to stifle expressions of Muslimness. It outlawed the hijab in public schools and the niqab from public squares, engaging in a widespread and ongoing effort to subdue Muslim civil society. Since 2018, using artificial legal means, it monitored and harassed 28,000 Muslim-led establishments (including mosques, Islamic schools, organizations, and businesses). The French state shut

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down over 900 of these and seized 54 millions euros,<sup>8</sup> impoverishing an already precarious Muslim community. To silence political dissent, Muslim organizations opposing systemic Islamophobia were forcibly dissolved.<sup>9</sup>

Internationally, the republic has faced notable setbacks in the last two decades. In North Africa and the Sahel region, where France exerted a covert yet deep influence despite decolonization, its position has been progressively subverted,<sup>10</sup> as even the French language is being replaced with English.<sup>11</sup> Its military operations in Mali and Niger ended in disaster.<sup>12</sup>

French diplomacy has reacted to these challenges through a two-pronged tactic, gradually undermining its own “Arab Policy” and the tenuous results it had achieved. On one hand, France adopted part of the American playbook increasing its ties with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt as their regimes mercilessly repressed dissenting voices, weakening its hard-gained popularity amongst the Muslim population. It also became a diplomatic accomplice of the most symbolic case of injustice of the War on Terror—Guantanamo—as it endeavored to avoid any condemnation of it at the UN.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, it still maintained a façade on Palestine inspired by its traditional policy (promotion of a two-state solution and condemnation of the settlements) to counterbalance its support of tyranny and to avoid losing a privileged status.

This provisional response to a deepening disrepair was swept away on the 7th of October.

Operation Al Aqsa Flood brought to light the delusion of this tactic and announced future major shifts in the way the republic will position itself. Departing from its earlier “Arab Policy” and in accordance with the first dimension of its new plan in the near-East, France firmly sided with the Zionist regime, becoming complicit with genocide. After October 7th most political parties—including the far-right and the ruling coalition—marched in the streets of Paris “for the Republic and against antisemitism,” a frame used to depoliticize the conflict in Palestine. France labeled Hamas—a legitimate and dominant grassroots political movement—as a “terrorist” organization, criminalizing Muslims’ dissent to the most dangerous extent.

These actions rendered its previous “neutral” diplomatic façade on Palestine untenable and therefore precipitated the loss of the diplomatic advantage it acquired with its now-defunct “Arab Policy.” Despite some minor humanitarian announcements and a late call for a

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ceasefire, France's self-acclaimed credibility in the Muslim world as a trusted champion was overcome by its true nature: that of a secular, pro-Zionist nation whose strategic well-being fundamentally opposes, once and for all, Islamic resurgence in the world.

Thus, it is the Islamic resistance in Palestine that definitively closed down the window De Gaulle opened in 1967, demolishing French ambitions in the Muslim world. Of course, French ties with corrupt governments will serve as a temporary breathing apparatus, fueling the state's treasury with fresh money used to buy military weaponry. Nonetheless, France's past influence and reputation have lost their means of existence—dealing the republic's decline a decisive push.

As its international strength weakens significantly, not only is France's sense of self compromised and humiliated; national identity's claim of grandiosity is also here, once more, eroded. White supremacy, like any form of narcissism and corrupted pride, rests on insecurity, constantly requiring reassurance and material proof of its reality. A master does not exist without slaves. The French government's natural reaction will lead to the use of additional tyrannical powers over its Muslim subjects and to the opposition of foreign Muslim actors responsible for its strategic ruin. It will fully embrace a reinvigorated anti-Islamic antagonism. By way of this unfurling vendetta, Islamophobia—both domestic and international—will be strategically stoked to protect an irreparably wounded identity.

While in the long term this insecure reaction is unlikely to be successful, having lost most of its peculiar strategic worth it seems unwise even in the short term for France to adopt a hawkish policy it cannot afford. As historian Benoit Bréville writes, “At a time when many states aspire to a multipolar world order, France should be seeking new alliances and renewing its status as a mediating power, rather than alienating a large part of the planet.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, as France rediscovers a mediocrity it refuses to acknowledge, political movements rooted in Islam continue to refine a new language and a new grammar of struggle fundamentally positioned against the world as such.

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<sup>1</sup> Sadri Khiari, *The Colonial Counter-Revolution: From de Gaulle to Sarkozy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2021), 215.

<sup>2</sup> Pascal Louvrier, "Malraux, De Gaulle: La Passion de la France," *Causeur*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.causeur.fr/malraux-de-gaulle-la-passion-de-la-france-262516>

<sup>3</sup> Louvrier, Pascal.

<sup>4</sup> Pryce-Jones, David, "Jews, Arabs, and French Diplomacy: A Special Report," *Commentary*, May 2005, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/pryce-jones/jews-arabs-and-french-diplomacy-a-special-report/>

<sup>5</sup> Charles De Gaulle Paroles Publiques, "Conférence de Presse de 27 Novembre 1967," November 27, 1967, <https://fresques.ina.fr/de-gaulle/fiche-media/Gaulle00139/conference-de-presse-du-27-novembre-1967.html>

<sup>6</sup> Pascal Boniface, "Une Histoire de la Politique Arabe de la France," *Revue Internationale Stratégique*, no. 121 (January 2021): 16-28.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Gresh and Helene Aldeguer, *Un Chant d'Amour. Le Conflit Israélo-Palestinien au Coeur de la Société Française*. (Paris: Editions La Decouverte, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Élysée, "Réunion du Forum de l'Islam de France à l'Élysée," February 16, 2023, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/02/16/reunion-du-forum-de-lislam-de-france-a-lelysee>

<sup>9</sup> CAGE. "We are Beginning to Spread Terror": *The State-Sponsored Persecution of Muslims in France*. London: CAGE Advocacy UK Ltd., 2020, <https://www.cage.ngo/we-are-beginning-to-spread-terror-report>

<sup>10</sup> Jamey Keaten, Sam Mednick, and Cara Anna, "France's Waning Influence in Coup-Hit Africa Appears Clear while Few Remember the Former Colonizer," *Associated Press*, September 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/france-africa-coups-gabon-41076df319704032aa729ad3fd137bc9>

<sup>11</sup> "Algeria Expands English-Language Learning as France's Influence Ebbs," *Associated Press*, September 29, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/algeria-education-english-french-4e02e8bcbb2f94d5646e2996db003145>

<sup>12</sup> Laura Kayali and Clea Caulcutt, "France's Niger Debacle Marks End of an Era in Africa," *Politico*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-niger-military-army-withdrawal-west-africa-sahel-colonies-burkina-faso-mali/>

<sup>13</sup> See Paris. "France on Various UN/HR/CHR Issues," Wikileaks Cable: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS2039\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/05PARIS2039_a.html) and "La France, Compile Diplomatie de Guantanamo," *L'Obs*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-politique/20140112.RUE1313/la-france-complice-diplomatique-de-guantanamo.html>

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<sup>14</sup> Benoît Bréville, “Un Renoncement Français,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2023, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2023/11/BREVILLE/66256>