

France, America, and the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

The fast and steady deterioration of the French-U.S. relationship has recently entered an equally swift upturn. The Bush administration, reelected by a majority vote in 2004, has not changed the substance of its foreign policy. Given a similarly unvarying stance by France, no shift of policy by either nation has occurred to explain the improved relations. Instead, two factors have enabled the recent recuperation of French-American ties: a change in style and a change in situation. In the matter of style, immediately after his reelection President Bush proffered friendship and cooperation to Europe, particularly to Germany and France. Convinced during its first four years in office that it could win wars alone, the Bush administration concluded that to build peace it would need its traditional European allies. The extended hand of friendship reflects this conclusion. In Germany and France, the political mood evolved in the same manner: acknowledging that Europe and America face the same threats, the Germans and French agreed that only cooperation will ensure victory.

In addition to these changes in style, the situation in the Middle East has changed in several ways. First, the success of Iraqi elections replaced the European-American debate over the war's justification with a new focus on the unique opportunity to assist the new Iraqi government as it becomes more firmly established. Second, the death of Palestinian president Yasser Arafat and the election of Mahmoud Abbas removed President Bush's self-imposed impediment to U.S. participation in the peace process, simultaneously eliminating European frustration with American disengagement. Both America and France find themselves again side by side supporting the Gaza withdrawal and implementation of the Roadmap. Third, the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the ensuing revolution in Lebanon has created an opening for French-American cooperation to help organize elections free of Syrian interference. Finally, increased American support for negotiations with Iran conducted by the European trio (Britain, Germany, and France) has contributed to the upturn in relations. The trio appreciates the leverage granted to their negotiators by President Bush's acquiescence on possible World Trade Organization membership for Iran. Thus, changed circumstances in the region have combined with a more cordial American style toward its European allies to allow recuperation in the French-American friendship.

Hizballah's Potential Role in Lebanese Politics

Hizballah in Lebanon has two faces: one as a political party with elected representatives, the other as a powerful, violent force. Confronted with pressing choices by the recent upheaval, Hizballah must define its role in Lebanese society and politics for the coming period. At this sensitive moment, France and the United States must not create difficulties or inject unnecessary demands that might push Hizballah to confront rather than cooperate with the

emerging political order. While the Bush administration has pressed for European classification of Hizballah as a terrorist organization, several European countries have opposed this, arguing that such a move would be inappropriate given the fragile status of Lebanon and Hizballah. Rather, at this time democratic nations should encourage Hizballah's political participation and wait to observe the organization's emerging role.

Hizballah presents the most prominent exception to the military dictate of the Lebanese government. A freely elected Lebanese government should control all of its territory and have a monopoly on the use of force. Thus, if Hizballah becomes integrated into the governmental structure, logically the movement should disband or integrate its militia. However, this disarmament must result from an internal impulse and not from the presence of foreign troops.

The Iranian Dialogue

The negotiations with Iran over its nuclear-enrichment program hold promise, not just in and of themselves, but also for the extension of dialogue to other matters such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Middle East peace, and Hizballah. This dialogue could potentially help shift Iran from a negative power in the region to a positive one. The mid-June elections in Iran will do much to determine the likelihood of such change. It is possible that the next Iranian president may be a practical man who is a constructive interlocutor, meaning that given adequate incentives, he would contemplate terminating Iran's enrichment program.

To verify that the Iranians remain faithful to their current or future promises regarding enrichment, Europe and the United States need to have monitoring on the ground. Given the small size of centrifuges, satellite photographs cannot match intelligence sources such as International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. Improved human intelligence would increase the monitoring capacity needed to confirm Iranian conformance with negotiations.

Success in the Middle East Peace Process

Given the precarious potential of the Middle East peace process, the role of outside parties is to help both sides meet the requirements of the Roadmap. Time is crucial: if either Abbas or Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon fail to show their constituents obvious successes in the immediate future, both will lose their support bases and possibly their reelection bids. Preventing this failure requires extensive support to improve the currently disastrous economic status of the Palestinian territories, especially the Gaza Strip. New jobs will help Palestinians believe in the merits of peaceful negotiations, while keeping the two-state solution on the horizon will reinforce their faith in the future of the peace process.

Turkish Accession to the European Union (EU)

Turkish accession to the EU presents several controversial issues, but not because of the nation's predominantly Muslim population. First, it is a low-income country. Compared to other EU nations, Turkey produces a relatively low GDP—roughly equal to 25 percent of the average GDP of the fifteen countries composing the union prior to its 2004 expansion. Upon Ankara's accession, in order to bring Turkey up to the common economic standard, the other EU countries would need to provide it with more economic aid than the combined aid for the ten most recent EU members. Second, Turkey has demographic weight; by the time it joins the EU, it could be the most populous European state, a factor that significantly affects European public opinion. Under the EU constitution, Turkey's population upon joining would put it in a dominant position: in conjunction with just one other large EU state, it would have a big enough minority to block legislation.

The Muslim Population in France

Although the majority of Muslims living in France have fully integrated into the social fabric of the nation, a small minority have remained unincorporated, more connected to events of the Middle East than of France and motivated

by extremist imams. The government has devised mechanisms to integrate this population including the establishment of an overarching Muslim representative group on par with those of French Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. Through this organization, French imams could learn moderate Islam and French civil principles, eventually replacing the more radical foreign imams. Providing jobs to Muslims in impoverished suburbs will also efficiently integrate the younger generation. These kinds of solutions are effective over the long term.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lucinda Brown. ❖

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