

French Far-Right Leader Slams BDS Movement to Woo Israel Lobby

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Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far right Front National party. (Rémi Noyon/[Flickr](#))

French presidential hopeful Marine Le Pen is attempting to win the favor of Israel lobby groups for her far-right Front National party.

[According to the website of the pro-Israel group Europe-Israël](#), Le Pen told the founder of the European Jewish Parliament, a communal organization based in Brussels, that "anti-Semitism has no place in the Front National."

Le Pen also reportedly told Ukrainian oligarch Vadim Rabinovich at their meeting in the French city of Strasbourg that "she would not accept Front National members who have anti-Semitic opinions" or "who support a boycott of Israel."

The far-right leader reportedly characterized the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement in support of Palestinian rights as "racist."

Le Pen's conflation of anti-Semitism, of which her party has a long and notorious tradition, on the one hand, and Palestine solidarity activism, on the other, converges with the [strategy](#) being pushed by the Socialist administration of President [François Hollande](#).

The Front National's anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim invective are increasingly in tune with mainstream French xenophobia, especially in the wake of the murders at the anti-Muslim magazine [Charlie Hebdo](#) and at a Jewish supermarket in Paris in January.

In the US, there is nothing new in prominent pro-Israel figures, such as Anti-Defamation League President Abraham Foxman, [pursuing alliances with notorious anti-Semites and Islamophobes](#) for the sake of Israel.

But in France, the Front National remains saddled with its history of Holocaust denial and of promoting hatred and suspicion of Jews.

Seeking the endorsement of Israel lobby groups is therefore a shrewd way for Le Pen to try to shed that baggage. In that vein, we can expect that the BDS movement will be an increasingly popular target for ambitious French politicians, just as it is for American ones.

Earlier this month, for instance, presumptive Democratic presidential nominee [Hillary Clinton](#) [assured](#) Israeli-American billionaire Haim Saban of her determination to fight BDS.

Family feud

The meeting also comes amid a bitter family feud between Marine Le Pen and her father, Front National founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. The party has [moved to expel](#) the elder Le Pen and strip him of his title of “honorary president.”

At issue is Jean-Marie Le Pen’s [off-message comments](#) minimizing the Holocaust, praising France’s wartime collaborationist Vichy regime and referring to Nazi death camps as a mere “detail” of the Second World War.

Earlier this month, a French court overturned a party ballot to dump him, ensuring that embarrassing litigation will persist in the run-up to the 2017 presidential election.

Flirtation

Marine Le Pen’s comments can be seen as a reciprocation of recent flirtations with her party by certain Israel lobby figures.

In February, Roger Cukierman, president of [CRIF](#), the main pro-Israel umbrella group of Jewish communal organizations in France, raised eyebrows when he appeared to bless the Front National leader.

He acknowledged in a radio interview that the Front National was starting to draw Jewish voters, but said it was a very small minority.

“I think we in the Jewish world are all aware that behind Marine Le Pen, who is personally beyond criticism, there are many Holocaust deniers [and] supporters of the Vichy regime,” [Cukierman said](#), “and therefore for us the Front National is a party to avoid.”

Cukierman’s apparent praise of Le Pen, and his attempt to distinguish her from the rest of her party, drew a [sharp rebuke](#) from Serge Klarsfeld, the French attorney and activist whose father was murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz.

Splits

Similarly, Le Pen’s meeting with European Jewish Parliament founder Vadim Rabinovich has highlighted disagreements among some pro-Israel groups.

“She is not her father,” Rabinovich [told JTA](#) of Marine Le Pen. “We have had a constructive dialogue where we accepted the need to combat anti-Semitism, and I believe she is sincere about this.”

But Europe-Israel President Jean-Marc Moskowicz resigned from the European Jewish Parliament in protest over the meeting, stating that it was “not the role of the European Jewish Parliament to interfere in the relationship between French political parties and the Jewish community of France.”

Moskowicz, however, does not seem to oppose meeting Le Pen in principle. Rather, he [objected](#) on foreign policy grounds, including that “the party of Ms. Le Pen is still unclear regarding Israel.”

He cited statements of Le Pen deputy Florian Philippot “in favor of recognizing a Palestinian state without negotiations with Israel.”

Calling the meeting “more than premature,” Moskowicz said it “would have been better to wait for Marine Le Pen to take positions in support of Israel, against anti-Semitism and to fight the boycott, which she has not done for the moment.”

The implication seems to be that if Le Pen affirms pro-Israel and anti-BDS positions as a matter of party policy, Europe-Israël too might be ready to give her a second look.

Divide and rule

Le Pen’s comments underline the advantage French politicians – even those who head notoriously anti-Semitic parties – see in posing as champions in the fight against anti-Semitism.

But the approach they are taking may only deepen divisions in French society, rather than effectively addressing the problem, according to Parti des Indigènes de la République (PIR).

PIR – the Party of the Indigenous Persons of the Republic – is an anti-racist and decolonial political collective that says that Black people, Arabs and Muslims still occupy an inferior place in contemporary France, just as they did in French colonies.

In March, PIR took aim at what it called “state racism” and “state philo-Semitism” that pit Jews against other segments of French society under the guise of fighting anti-Semitism.

“It is true that traditional anti-Semitism exists in France, fueled by the far-right,” [PIR observes](#). “But there is no state anti-Semitism. Jews are not discriminated against in housing or employment, are not harassed by the police and are not subjected to large-scale anti-Semitic propaganda in national media.”

This contrasts with the condition of millions of French citizens and immigrants of Arab and African ancestry or Muslim faith.

But, PIR warns:

There is a state policy, rooted in colonial history, that is being reactivated in light of contemporary issues. This policy is based on the preferential treatment given to the fight against anti-Semitism as against other racisms. This is helping to deepen the tensions between different segments of French society, exposing Jews to the condemnation of the most disadvantaged in the hierarchy of racisms. Based on this logic, we see a racist offensive against young indigenes [people of Arab and African ancestry or Muslim religion], accusing them of being the vector of a new anti-Semitism. [The state] claims to be the protector of the Jews, all the while using them ... as a baseball bat to hit Blacks and Arabs.

Since the January attacks in Paris, there has been a [big leap](#) in Islamophobic attacks in France, but little government effort to fight the phenomenon.

Many critics accuse the government itself of stigmatizing young Muslims in its fight against “radicalization.”

There has been a fivefold increase in physical attacks against persons and numerous acts of vandalism against mosques, according to a recent report from the nonprofit group Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France (Collective Against Islamophobia in France).

In June, French interior minister Bernard Cazeneuve [admitted](#) that the number of anti-Muslim acts "is certainly underestimated because too many victims are reluctant to report them," fearing that they would not be believed or that nothing would be done.

By contrast, President François Hollande, announcing a raft of new laws and policies aimed at fighting anti-Semitism, stated in February that anti-Jewish statements online [should be treated with the same severity as child pornography](#).

According to PIR, this differential approach is being supported by pro-Israel organizations in the Jewish community – with the effect of further conflating Judaism and Jews, on the one hand, with Israel and Zionism, on the other.

In an expansive essay, [PIR's Houria Bouteldja writes](#):

Those who use the Jews for Israeli interests are indeed Zionist organizations in complicity with Official France, which attends the CRIF dinner every year and makes Zionist organizations its privileged interlocutors. This attitude of French rulers has been denounced by Jewish organizations – [UFJP](#) [French Jewish Union for Peace], [IJAN](#) [International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network] and Another Jewish Voice, who rightly see the danger for Jews all over the world. It is important to note that these activists, who previously claimed internationalist and class identities, now feel obliged to identify as Jews to distinguish themselves from those who are confiscating Jewishness for political ends.

Among those now joining in – with the apparent collusion of at least a few pro-Israel activists – is one of France's most pernicious organizations: the Front National.

For Bouteldja, the message of recent political developments in France is clear: "If one is clearly anti-racist, and worried about the rise of the extreme right that will target first and foremost the populations of the [predominantly Arab and Black] neighborhoods; and if one is concerned about Jews who have become targets of terrorist groups, one must have the courage to attack the current forms of state racism: Islamophobia, anti-Blackness and Romaniphobia, as well as state philo-Semitism, which is a subtle and sophisticated form of anti-Semitism of the nation-state."

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