



THE JERUSALEM POST



People hold Israeli and French flags as they take part in a demonstration supporting Israel on July 27, 2014 in Marseille, southeastern France. (Photo by: BORIS HORVAT / AFP)

Israeli-French voters expected to overwhelmingly support Fillon

By LAHAV HARKOV
04/23/2017

While the consensus seems to be that Fillon is the candidate with the most support in Israel by far, whether it'll be expressed in votes is unclear.

As voting in the first round of the French presidential election began outside of France on Saturday, French citizens in Israel also prepared to go to the polls, with observers saying the local voting trend will be very different than that in France.

Just as in 2012, when the vast majority of French voters in Israel chose Nicolas Sarkozy, they're expected to once again mostly vote for the conservative candidate, this time François Fillon of the Republicans.

Yet in recent polls of the French electorate, Fillon usually comes in third in a field of 11, after center-left candidate Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front, and, in some polls, fourth, after far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Only two candidates can make it into the runoff in two weeks.

The attendance at two campaign events held in Israel in the last week seemed to show which way the French-Israeli electorate was trending: About 60 people showed support for Macron on Tuesday, while Fillon backers nearly filled an auditorium in the Tel Aviv Art Museum that seats 450 on Thursday evening. There are some Le Pen backers in the mix, but they've kept their expressions of support on social media and didn't organize anything official in Israel.

"Most French Jews are conservative," a French journalist living in Israel, who asked to remain anonymous, observed. "They're traditional Jews who lived among Muslims in North Africa, and don't trust [Muslims]."

The pro-Fillon evening was organized by Meyer Habib, a deputy in the French National Assembly representing citizens in Israel, Greece, Italy and other Mediterranean countries who is up for reelection this year, and a personal friend of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has more registered French voters than all the other seven countries in Habib's constituency

combined, coming in at close to 80,000, though there are well over 200,000 French citizens living in Israel.

The pro-Fillon event included a four-minute video message from the candidate, which praised Jewish contributions to French society since Rashi in the 11th century. The attendees, most of them middle-aged or older, heard speeches centered on fighting antisemitism and Islamist terrorism.

“We saw what happened on the Champs-Élysées yesterday,” Habib said on Friday, the morning after a shooting left a policeman dead in Paris. “Fillon is the only one who understands radical Islam and has the force and determination to fight it.”

Habib said Fillon is surrounded by pro-Israel figures, and, in general, that the French Right is more supportive of Israel.

“The Left says they’re not antisemitic, they’re anti-Zionist, but that’s just the new antisemitism. They voted for the UNESCO decision that declared the Temple Mount and Western Wall a Muslim site [leaving out the Jewish connection to the Mount]. In Israel, we are in a war about values, not just land, and I think Fillon understands that. Israel’s security is of utmost importance, and he won’t compromise on that,” Habib said.

According to Habib, Fillon understands that “Israel and France share the same values, like human rights and rights for women.”

The downside of supporting Fillon, Habib said, is that “he thinks we can talk with Iran to soften them, but many think that in France.”

As for the fact that Fillon met with Hezbollah officials in 2013, and in 2015 said the terrorist organization, which vows to destroy Israel, should be part of the coalition fighting ISIS, Habib said he explained the problem with his statements, and that Fillon hasn’t repeated them.

“Fillon now knows that Sunni and Shi’ite terrorism are two branches of the same tree,” he said.

The nepotism scandal that led to the former French prime minister’s drop in the polls seemed to be the furthest thing from the minds of the hundreds of attendees at Thursday’s event.

In fact, Emmanuel Navon, an expert in international relations who teaches at Tel Aviv University and who grew up and studied in France before making aliya and completing his PhD in Israel, said that the reports that Fillon put his wife and children on his payroll were inflated by the media, which he posited support Macron, and that the electorate “is not stupid” and won’t fall for it.

Navon also spoke in favor of Fillon at the event, focusing on other issues: “I think he’s the only one with the stature and economic program that can put an end to France’s decline in Europe and chronic budget deficits.”

Habib expressed certainty that Fillon will come in first place in Israel, saying he’d be willing to bet money on it, but conceded that Macron will likely get some votes as well.

According to the journalist, French-Israeli Macron supporters are people who tend to vote for the Left in Israeli elections.

“The one Macron supporter I know in Israel lives on a kibbutz and votes Labor,” she said.

Navon said that Macron is “full of hot air,” and that his economic plans are “BS,” but that he may attract some Jewish voters who liked Sarkozy but are turned off by Fillon’s conservative Catholic background.

“Some are attracted to Macron, because he’s young and good-looking,” Navon said.

“Macron is obsessed with settlements, like all of the Left, and called them a crime against humanity,” Habib lamented. “A Jew cannot be an occupier in Jerusalem or Judea and Samaria, because one cannot be an occupier in his own land. I said that in parliament.”

Habib also took issue with Macron’s comments on Jews in France, pointing specifically to a comment that French Jewish schools are not at the level of secular schools, which the Israeli-French lawmaker said is simply untrue.

Still, if the runoff comes down to Macron and Le Pen, Habib would choose the former.

“Macron is not a monster,” Habib said. “I even supported some of his economic policies.”

Le Pen, however, would be an immoral choice, according to the lawmaker, who estimated that her support among Jews will be under 10%.

The journalist cited a poll that said 3% of French Jews will support Le Pen, “which is small, but the fact that she gets any Jewish votes is crazy.”

Habib said: “There is Jew-hatred in her blood. Her father is a Holocaust denier... Le Pen is not a moral answer for Jews, nor is the far Left.”

According to Navon, “some French Jews are just sick of being attacked in synagogues and Jewish schools by radical Islamists, and since she’s the toughest on immigration and radical Islam, that attracts voters... I think they’re making a huge mistake. Even though she’s trying to hide her party’s antisemitic past, it’s still the same party. And her economics is nonsense and would cause the collapse of the French economy.

“Fillon is also very tough on immigration and terrorism. It’s not that he’s soft; not at all,” Navon added.

Similarly, Habib said Fillon is the only one who knows how to fight terrorism without resorting to racism.

While the consensus seems to be that Fillon is the candidate with the most support in Israel by far, whether it’ll be expressed in votes is unclear. Unlike in the US election or in the Brexit referendum, French citizens abroad can’t vote from home, they must go to the nearest French consulate or embassy, and many can’t be bothered to do it.

“Many won’t vote, I’m sure,” Habib said. “It’s too complicated, unfortunately. They canceled electronic voting for citizens outside of France. It’s terrible. Fillon wants to bring it back.”

Navon said he never votes in French elections, because he feels he is Israeli.

And the journalist, a young working mother, said she doesn’t have the time.

Technical issues aren’t the only ones keeping some French-Israelis away from the polls.

The journalist said, “Many French people in Israel don’t want to hear about France. They feel like France betrayed them, especially after all the terrorist attacks. When there was the attack in Toulouse [in 2012], only Jews took part in demonstrations, but when it was Charlie Hebdo [in 2015], many people went... Somehow the cruel murder of [Jewish] schoolchildren was more acceptable. That was a slap in the face.

“Because of the feeling that France betrayed them, they don’t want to invest in what’s happening,” she added.

Habib disagreed, saying, “Most French olim are very connected. We’re in Israel, but we know what’s happening in France, we watch the news, and we love France.”

The parliamentarian expressed hope that most French citizens in Israel don’t feel the way the journalist described, and said he made aliya for ideological reasons and not because he needed to escape France, adding that Israel’s economy is growing, as opposed to Europe’s.

Still, Habib added, “Israel is the insurance policy of the Jewish people.”



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