

THE INTERNET JERUSALEM POST

Pardon my French

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January, 29 2002

(January 29) - Israelis are by now used to hearing shocking declarations by French officials who, every so often, publicly reveal their true feelings about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

After the September 11 attacks, French Ambassador to Israel Jacques Huntzinger made a point of saying loud and clear that, as opposed to their al-Qaida colleagues, Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists do perpetuate their murderous acts for an understandable reason.

A few days before September 11, French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine compared US foreign policy in the Middle East to that of Roman Emperor Pontius Pilate vis-a-vis Jesus-Christ: the Americans, in case anyone failed get the hint, were crucifying the Palestinians under Jewish pressure. Vedrine did not see any need to scold (let alone dismiss) his ambassador to London for declaring that Israel is a "shitty, little country" that endangers world peace.

Yet, Vedrine's most recent philosophical wandering, which was barely mentioned in Israel, is by far his most worrying.

Commenting on the recent wave of terrorist attacks against Jewish individuals and institutions in France, Vedrine declared the following: "One is not shocked when young French Jews instinctively sympathize with Israel regardless of its policies... So one should not necessarily be shocked when young French citizens [from North African background] feel compassion for the Palestinians."

In other words, the burning of synagogues and Jewish schools is nothing but the expression of compassion for the Palestinians and is morally equivalent to sympathizing with Israel and "its policies." To insinuate that French Jews brought upon themselves the current wave of anti-Semitic violence by sympathizing with the Sharon government is an easy way of absolving France from the revival of French anti-Semitism.

What should be a matter of concern is that "French citizens from North African background" might conclude that the French government understands their urge to burn synagogues and Jewish schools after watching the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian violence by French television.

Blaming European anti-Semitism on Israel's policies is an "argument" that is commonly used by European anti-Semites. Holocaust denier Richard E. Harwood, for instance, claimed that Hitler's persecution of the Jews was the direct and understandable consequence of Chaim Weizmann's call to fight with Britain against Nazi Germany. Hearing similar assertions from a French foreign minister is, in contrast, a new and awkward phenomenon.

The estimated 600,000 French Jews are outnumbered tenfold by their Arab fellow-citizens. This comparative disadvantage is coupled with the troubles that are destabilizing the leadership of French Jewry. France's charismatic chief rabbi, Joseph Sitruck, has been hospitalized for a few weeks.

The outspoken president of France's representative council of Jewish institutions, Roger Cukierman, is constantly undermined by the declarations of his predecessor Théo Klein, who seizes every opportunity to accuse Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of destabilizing the Middle East and of angering French Arabs. Israeli ambassador to Paris, Eli Barnavi, a Tel-Aviv history professor appointed by his colleague and friend Shlomo Ben-Ami, cannot help but publicly express his contempt for and

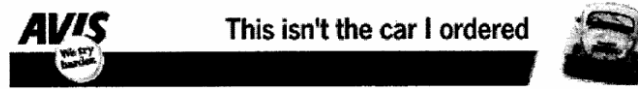
disagreement with Prime Minister Sharon.

In such a context, the Israeli government should speak out louder and clearer on behalf of French Jews, and publicly encourage their aliya. Former prime minister Menachem Begin once declared that anti-Semitism was "no longer an internal affair. It is our affair, the affair of the whole Jewish people, the affair of the state of the Jews."

Pierre Joseph Proudhon, a French political writer and activist from the 19th century, had a simple solution to the Jewish problem: "One should send back this race to Asia or exterminate it." Back in Asia in their own state, Jews are still accused of causing trouble around the world: Their "shitty, little country" is threatening world peace and is the true cause of anti-Semitic violence in France.

By joining this country, French Jews will relate, with compassion, to V&drine's lexis from the safe side of the fence. With compassion, because a nation that claims to be a World War Two winner after four years of German occupation should be granted the benefit of the doubt on its ability to accurately understand world politics.

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