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# exclusive interview: Dr. Emmanuel Navon

By Jacob Kimchy on February 22, 2013



**Dr. Emmanuel Navon is a professor, a consultant and a public speaker specialized in foreign affairs. He was born in Paris, France and moved to Israel in 1993. Recently, he was a candidate in the primaries of the Likud party for the Israeli government. TLVFaces spoke with Dr. Navon about life and politics.**

*Dr. Navon, Shalom! You made aliyah from France to Israel a number of years ago – can you tell us more about this and what lead you to Israel?*

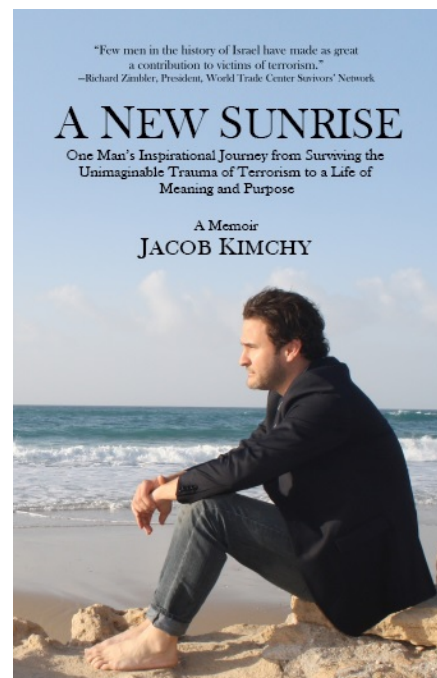
Indeed, I made aliyah from France in the summer of 1993. I grew up in an assimilated Jewish home and studied at Sciences-Po, France's equivalent of the Kennedy School of Government. My first year at Sciences-Po was overshadowed by the Gulf War. Many of my classmates were firmly opposed to the US-led military coalition against Saddam Hussein, claiming that "liberating Palestine" was at least as important as freeing Kuwait. But it turned out that the "West Bank" was just an excuse: too often, those who opposed the military intervention in Iraq openly admitted that, in their view, the establishment of Israel had been a historical mistake. This came to me as a shock.

I was very loosely affiliated to Judaism and my political outlook at the time was quite liberal, but I felt strongly Jewish and was abashed by this denigrating attitude toward my people. At the end of my first year at Sciences-Po, I did an internship at the French foreign ministry. There, for the first time in my life, I felt like a stranger in my own country. I realized that only blue-blooded Catholics could make it in the high echelons of the civil service (even more so at the Quay d'Orsay) and that French egalitarian republicanism was a myth. While I was going through these emotional upheavals, I read avidly about Judaism and Jewish history.

I started becoming more observant, and my Zionist convictions grew firmer by the day. I visited Israel during the summer and felt, simply, at home. When I came back to France after that summer, I just had this strong gut feeling about making aliyah. Rationally, it made no sense: I lived in a well-off neighborhood, studied at a top school, knew no Hebrew, and only had a couple of distant relatives in Israel. Plus, my major at Sciences-Po (French public law) would be useless in Israel. But the strong gut feeling was there and I crossed the Rubicon. My family and friends couldn't make sense of my decision. And yet, it's the best decision I've ever made (and, believe me, I've made wrong decisions).

**Can you tell us more about yourself and your personal and professional interests?**

I was born in 1971 in France. My father is from Meknes, Morocco. My mother, of blessed memory, was from Strasburg, France. My parents sent us to an English-speaking elementary school, and I became fluent in English as a child. As a child, and then as a teenager, I loved reading a practicing solo sports (especially skiing). After making aliyah, I enrolled at the Hebrew University, where I got my Master's and Ph.D. in International Relations.



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I didn't enjoy my studies there: the intellectual conformism was suffocating. I'm a free thinker and need to be independent. By the time I finished my Doctorate, my professors were relieved from being done with me and the feeling was mutual (except for my supervisor, who's become a friend).

Upon leaving Hebrew-U, I started working for a business consulting firm that helped Israeli companies get R&D funding from the European Commission. After that I joined a start-up (it was in fashion, and promising, at the time), but we had to cease our operations after the dotcom bubble went burst in 2000. That was also when Arafat launched his terrorist war against Israel. In addition to terrorism, Israel had to face a new type of media warfare. I decided to get involved in it, making Israel's case in the foreign media. I started teaching at Bar-Ilan University and then at Tel-Aviv University, and was appointed CEO of BNIC, an organization that trained Israel's business leaders to do pro-Israel advocacy while on their business trips.

After BNIC, I founded my own company with a partner to promote Israeli development projects in sub-Saharan Africa. I did that for five years. Today, I spend most of my professional time in Academia: I head the Political Science and Communications department at the Jerusalem Orthodox College, and teach international relations at Tel-Aviv University and at the Herzliya Interdisciplinary Center. I am still active in pro-Israel advocacy and am a regular guest speaker in the media, on campuses and in Jewish organizations in America and Europe. I met my wife at Hebrew-U. She made aliyah on her own, but from New York. We live in Efrat with our four children.

**You were a candidate in the last Likud primaries – please tell us about your journey to get there.**

Since my student days at Sciences-Po, politics always interested me. For me, politics is a way of taking responsibility for yourself and for your country. I joined Likud in the fall of 2000, as a reaction to the crumbling of the Oslo theory. Though politics attracted me, I did not see myself running for Knesset as long as Likud's MKs were selected by the party's central committee.

When Netanyahu established primaries after coming back to the party's chairmanship in 2005, I decided to give it a try. I did not run in the 2006 primaries though, and only threw my hat in 2009. I decided to run because I thought that only as an elected official would I be able to promote issues that are dear to me, especially three of them: 1. Promoting aliyah and create a political force to help integrate Western immigrants (especially from the United States and France); 2. Reforming Israel's political system; 3. Leveraging over ten years of experience in pro-Israel advocacy.

I ran a professional campaign. I signed-up hundreds of people to become Likud voters, met with Likud MKs and Ministers, went to Likud meetings throughout the country, set-up a campaign team, and raised \$60,000. Unfortunately, Likud changed its bylaws shortly before the elections and pushed the immigrants' slot (for which I was running) down the list, making it ineligible. The merger with Israel Beitenu pushed the immigrants' slot further down (it ended-up being 48 on the list, as opposed to the original 19). So it was hopeless, but it was also too late to back down after all the time, energy and money that had been invested. I also came to realize that the outcome of those primaries is mostly determined by byzantine techniques that I personally find shocking.

I might have underestimated or misjudged what you need to do to get elected. A friend of mine told me jokingly, trying to make me feel better, that I was in good company since morally irreproachable people such as Michael Eytan, Dan Meridor, and Benny Begin didn't make it either. But I don't regret giving it a try. It was an enriching experience. I learned a lot and met great people.

**You weren't elected to be one of the Likud parliament members, so what is next for you?**

Life goes on. Despite the fact that I was not elected on a realistic slot, I was active on behalf of Likud during the general elections. I debated other candidates throughout the country, and I organized a large event in Netanya for French-speaking voters. Now I am back to work, teaching, publishing, doing public speaking and appearing in the media. I intend to promote as a private citizen the issues I wanted to advance as an MK.

**What do you think Israeli politics is missing today?**

Conviction. There are exceptions of course, and many of the new MKs seem to be people with convictions. But I feel that too many Israel politicians simply repeat what is popular and acceptable instead of standing for what they really think and believe.

**What do you think could have contributed to better the state of affairs in the Likud party?**

I think Likud paid the price of its long-time alliance with Shas. People are sick of the status-quo on draft dodging and on the cost of living – a status quo that is maintained and will be maintained as long as Shas is part of the government. If Likud had made it clear, during the campaign, that it intended to form a coalition with Lapid and Bennett (similar to what Sharon did in 2003), then more people would have found a good reason to vote for Likud. And I must say that I am both concerned and disenchanted by the Prime Minister's reluctance to form such a coalition today.

**Will you run for the Knesset again in 2016?**

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Many people encourage me to do so (you can tell they weren't the ones running...), but I have not made my decision yet. Under the current system, Likud candidates who are not acting MKs have nearly no chance of getting elected. The only non-acting MK who made it in the last primaries is Moshe Feiglin. But he's been running for a decade and has signed-up thousands of people to Likud. I admire his persistence, but the price that you have to pay in terms of your family life and of your career make you think twice.

**Antisemitism around the world is increase every year, what do you suggest that the Israeli government should do to deal with it better?**

Antisemitism is on the rise mostly in Europe, and its strongholds today are among Muslims (who, ironically, are also Semites) and the radical Left. There is little the Israeli government can do to curb anti-Semitism, but there is a message and it should convey more clearly in Europe: when it comes to Iran and to radical Islam, both Israel and Europe are targeted.

**What was the last book you read?**

The Quest by Daniel Yergin.

**Who inspires you or is your role model?**

Leaders such as Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher. They had a vision and convictions, and fought for them against all odds. And they left power gracefully.

<http://www.navon.com>

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