

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3483>



France

March for Gaza banned in Paris after a week of tensions

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV474 - July 2014 -

Publication date: Monday 28 July 2014

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The government decided on Friday to stop a march through Paris planned for Saturday [19 July] in support of Gaza. Such bans are extremely rare and have angered those planning to demonstrate. The decision comes on top of French President François Hollande's support for the Israeli military intervention as well as the increasing role of a small radical group called the 'Ligue de défense juive' (Jewish Defence League).

For the first time since the beginning of Israel's military intervention in Gaza, demonstrating in support of the Palestinian cause has been banned in a large western capital. Planned for this Saturday [19 July], the march was banned by the Préfecture de police backed up by the Interior Ministry, "considering that holding the march in acutely tense circumstances would pose serious risks to public order". The Préfecture added on Saturday that any person attending the demonstration would consequently run the risk of being arrested. However, demonstrations outside the capital have been allowed to take place, although two were banned earlier this week in Lille and Nice. As Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve explained without further details, "I have asked local administrations to examine each planned march case by case."

In Paris, organisers appealed to the administrative tribunal according to a "référé-liberté". But the tribunal confirmed the ban on Friday evening. Whatever the result of the judicial procedure, it is almost inevitable that the situation will degenerate, according to the organisers speaking at a Paris press conference Friday morning.

For Youssef Boussoomah, leader of the Parti des indigènes de la République (PIR), "the ban further stigmatises a part of the population by accusing it of crimes that have not yet been committed". In vain, organisers claim to have proposed an alternative route, from Barbès to the place de l'Opéra. Reminding the organising associations and parties that providing "any policing service of the gathering could be prosecuted", Tarek Beniba (activist for Ensemble, an organisation part of Front de Gauche) is extremely worried: "It is obvious that, in light of the escalation of violence in Gaza following the ground invasion, strong feelings of anger will be expressed. People will go to Barbès anyway, and then, what will the government do? Will it be another fight for Alger but in the heart of Paris?"

On Friday evening, the NPA nevertheless called for in a communiqué "all political, union and association forces mindful of respecting democratic rights and enraged by the crimes committed in Gaza to publicly assemble and protest".

According to Maître Hosni Maat, the organisers' lawyer in charge of the "référé-liberté", "potential threats to public order are not a sufficient cause to ban a demonstration, as any second year law student knows since the Benjamin case (CE, 1933). This was already put forward in the case of marching against gay and lesbian marriage rights, an event that occurred in spite of a counter-demonstration". Others cited the cases of demonstrations by taxi drivers, farmers or campaigners against Notre-Dame-des-Landes [airport and infrastructure project], "events which were allowed in spite of them not always being calm and peaceful". Hosni Matt insists that "if a definitive ban is announced, associations will not march since they respect the law. However, one should not expect us to make appeals for peace and calm. The state and government, which possess the monopoly on the control of violence, must fully take on this responsibility".

On the other hand, the Interior Ministry asserts that the ban is justified because of, firstly, "heightened tensions" caused in France by events in the Middle East, "clashes" during the previous demonstration on Sunday, the "increased risks of confrontation between radical groups on each side deemed uncontrollable", and finally, the fact that synagogues are highly frequented on Saturdays. "Furthermore, this is only the third banning measure taken by

March for Gaza banned in Paris after a week of tensions

the Ministry. Yesterday (Thursday 18 July, Ed. note), 44 demonstrations assembling in total 11,000 people, took place without any problems”, noted the entourage of Minister Bernard Cazeneuve.

However, this time, the Ministry and Préfecture de Police considered that the risks of violence between the Jewish Defence League and certain pro-Palestinian groups, some of which are supporters of Dieudonné and Alain Soral, were too high. Police forces would not be able to protect all synagogues close to the route of the march. “Social tensions are too high. Much more than in previous years,” claims place Beauvau [headquarters to the Interior Ministry].

“I understand that emotions are flying high and that some of our citizens are eager to call for a ceasefire. But we cannot authorise opposing demonstrations facing each other and thereby threatening public order. We must react when there are other objectives than merely demonstrating”, said President François Hollande speaking from a [trip in Niger](#).

According to Le Figaro, usually aware of what happens in the Interior Ministry, police intelligence forces have been working hard this week; 200 “threat-posing individuals” were wiretapped, “focusing particularly on [political activists from the far left, accused of throwing oil on the fire](#)” “There hasn’t been such a toxic atmosphere in the interior ministry since Guy Mollet! [postwar French Prime Minister]” says ironically Tarek Beniba (Front de Gauche).

As the number of available police is reduced in late July, the government decided to compromise by going against a large part of the French population. “Crimes against humanity are being perpetrated everyday in Gaza, and the French government’s main task is to stop people expressing their emotions!” regrets a scandalised Youssef Boussoumah.

The organisers of the march spent over two hours in the Préfecture de Police on Thursday. They are furious about the “intox” [false information] and “media manipulation” which they claim to be victims of since last Sunday’s clashes in Paris near the Isaac Abranavel synagogue, rue de la Roquette. They point the finger at the Jewish Defence League, a group whose existence has until now barely been raised by the political class.

A slowly revised official version

Last Sunday [13 July], the march in support of Gaza was largely treated in the media as a collection of attacks on synagogues. Following the [AFP dispatch](#) reporting “clashes” at the end of the march, Prime Minister Manuel Valls and SOS Racisme rapidly condemned the “anti-Semitic acts” and the “attempts to import” the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (read [here](#) and [here](#)). Roger Cukierman (President of the French Jews Representative Council (Crif) who was received during the week by [François Hollande](#) and then [Manuel Valls](#)), and Haïm Korsia (“grand” rabbi of France) both referred to an atmosphere of “Kristallnacht” (read [here](#) and [here](#)). They added to the two synagogues reported to be attacked another case in Aulnay-sous-Bois ([this one victim of a “Molotov cocktail”](#)).

After intense mobilisation on social networks and community blogs concerning the “JDLgate” [Jewish Defense League gate] (such as [Al-Kanz](#)), a few media outlets revised their stories so as to include the two versions of the clashes to which no journalist seems to have been an eye witness (including the AFP, as the TV programme [Arrêt sur Images shows](#)). The story of events on Sunday seems since then much more complicated. Videos showing clashes between JDL and pro-Palestinian activists, as well as screen shots from messages sent to social networks, disturb the original version portraying a deliberate attack on the synagogue by certain groups part of the march.

March for Gaza banned in Paris after a week of tensions

Many videos (including this one uploaded by [Citizenside](#)) emerging on the Internet have been “viewed” by organisers in the presence of police authorities while they visited the Préfecture on Thursday. Alain Pojolat (NPA) explains that “never during our interview did the police talk of ‘attack on the synagogue’ and that to our questions were met by a number of ‘awkward silences’ concerning their policing of the rue de la Roquette.”

According to the organisers, “all along the march we cooperated with our referred police officer and everything went perfectly well”, quoting the example of when “the authorities asked us to put in place a policing service at the entrance of the rue de la Roquette, which we immediately did”. Michèle Sibony, from the French Jewish Union for Peace (UJFP) which called to participate in Sunday’s demo, [notes](#) a number of provocations during the procession. For example, at the corner of the rue du Pas de la Mule: “4 or 5 guys from the Jewish Defence League were high up on a bench, completely surrounded and protected by two rows of CRS [frontline police force], and were throwing insults and projectiles into the crowd and the march’s policing services, while those responsible were trying to calm demonstrators: ‘Don’t get angry, don’t answer their provocations, that’s all they’re waiting for’”.

There is no doubt in their eyes: the JDL came to provoke those marching and managed to create incidents near a synagogue, without the police forces anticipating any of their actions

Serge Benhaïm, President of the synagogue Don Isaac Abravanel, located on rue de la Roquette, testified at length on i-Télé and confirmed that the place of worship had not been attacked, and that the JDL was not the first to attack protesters. “Not one projectile was launched towards the synagogue.” “At no time were we put in danger”. He adds that he did not see any JDL activists provoke demonstrators, at least not after the arrival of the police forces, from an area going from 150m to the right and 150m to the left of the synagogue”. Benhaïm continues, saying that if the people from the JDL are “free and out of control atoms”, the organisation should be dissolved. In his own words, “being Jewish does not authorise them to be uncontrollable or out of control”. The President also noted that the confrontations were not Muslim vs. Jew but they were clashes between “small-time thugs against Jews”[(see video on i-Télé website->

<http://www.itele.fr/france/video/incidents-rue-de-la-roquette-serge-benhaim-dement-toute-attaque-de-la-synagogue-88717>)" class="spip_out" rel="external">(see counter-reportage by iTele.

The JDL is rarely sentenced, and even more rarely the object of banning measures. In spite of repeated cases of violence in France [\(read here\)](#), the JDL is today at the centre of discussions and surprised reactions concerning its immunity. The far right organisation is however banned in Israel [\(after the massacre in the cave of the patriarchs by Baruch Goldstein in 1994\)](#) and in the US. It was branded a “protection service” by the grand rabbi Haïm Korsia in an interview for Libération. [For the Crif too](#), “young Jews present in front of the synagogue in the rue de la Roquette were only protecting people attending a meeting”. Ten days ago, the JDL however took the initiative to “protect” by coming to disturb the end of one of the first gatherings in support of Gaza at the fountain of the Innocents [\(see here\)](#).

Many videos posted on YouTube, mostly instantaneous scenes without any information concerning their before and after, show JDL militants shouting: “Dirty Arab” and “Dirty Nigger” in front of CRS. For many pro-Palestinian activists, these are reinforcing feelings of bias and double standards. After watching images showing CRS protecting rather than policing JDL groups (“if you go on charging, we won’t be able to help you anymore”), it is difficult for them not to believe in the police’s affinity to such groups.

Neither do they understand the position of the Préfecture. How could it accept a route for a march walking past two synagogues, one of which had planned a “gathering in support of Israel” at the same time as the arrival of the march? Why wasn’t a police barrage organised to filter the entrance to the rue de la Roquette so as to avoid threats to the synagogue? Especially considering that many messages calling for clashes were circulating on social networks before the march.

Following the debrief at the Préfecture de Police on Thursday, organisers explained that neither them nor the police

were expecting the 15,000 demonstrators who attended that day. All “were surprised by the affluence” surpassing the “few hundreds” they had planned for. Protestors were also shocked to hear about the sentencing to 4 months in prison for a participant in Sunday’s events accused of “rebellion” ([read the incredible report from the court in Libération here](#)). Organisers condemn the fact that arrests only targeted pro-Palestinian activists.

Imagined “death to the Jews” chants?

Organisers swear they did not hear any march participant shout “death to the Jews” during the event. Crif President, Roger Cukierman, nevertheless asserted Sunday evening that this call to racial hatred had been heard. Tuesday, a journalist for Radio J and for LCP, Frederic Haziza, [was also using this chant to condemn](#) those he called “nazislamists”, without specifying, however, that he had not heard the chant himself. On Wednesday, Cukierman again explains to i-Télé that these sentences were spoken through a “microphone” during the demo. This affirmation was later denied by the Crif website itself, in the text version of his interview...

Among the many videos of the march available online, it has not been possible to find evidence of this chant being used, either inside the procession or during the clashes near the synagogue. In [this video by the collective Cheikh Yassine](#), one can see an Israeli flag burning, the word “Zionist” is often heard and many people are chanting “ Hamas resistance, Jihad resistance, Palestine resistance, Citizen resistance!” But not “Death to the Jews”. This of course does not mean that violent anti-Semitic slogans were not used on Sunday during the demonstration, but the lack of material evidence remains. In fact, the story now more often refers to their use on social networks rather than during the demonstration.

For many, the mere presence of the [French Jewish Union for Peace \(UJFP\)](#) confirms the impossibility of such misconduct. One of its activists, Emmeline Fagot made this point during a press conference for organisers: “Not only did I not hear any anti-Semitic chants, but we were very warmly received. This sort of demonstration is exactly what is required to fight against such amalgamations.” Organisers also fail to understand why Bernard Cazeneuve is using his status of “Minister in charge of religious liberties” to justify the ban ([read here](#)). “We are not facing inter-community clashes, explains Alain Pajolat from the NPA, but an international political problem.”

In any case, one organiser has confided that there is “a problem in the Parisian mobilisation”. He regrets the overly careful attitude of certain organisations traditionally involved in supporting the Palestinian cause, which fear being associated with Islamist movements. “The ‘Islamos’, he says, are better with us than on their own, as this gives us a chance of channelling them”. But he is as concerned with the influence of governmental decisions on the growing numbers of “Soralians” (supporters of Alain Soral, far right essay writer, close to Dieudonné).

During last Sunday’s [13 July] demo, in spite of pictures of “quenelles” and model versions of rockets marked with bloody stars of David ([here](#)), organisers confirm that they have “always been extremely clear about our refusal to host the far right in our demonstrations”, a point also expressed by most organisations participating in the event. “We even spent the whole week smoothing out a call to assemble at the Bastille for Saturday, for which French flags, masks and smoke grenades were requested.”

At the time of writing, the association France-Palestine (although active for gatherings outside of Paris) is retreating alongside parties of the left such as the greens (EELV) or the French communist party (PCF). If these parties have decided not to march, they nevertheless condemn the ban ([read here](#) and [here](#)). On another note, and also without issuing a call to march, the Parti de Gauche (PG) has asked for a parliamentary commission to open an inquiry into the clashes in rue de la Roquette ([read here](#)). The line of the Socialist party, however, remains a mystery.

Hollande's alignment with Israel and Netanyahu

Last week, French President Hollande completely took over Israel's narrative ([read our article](#)) in a communiqué which defended Israel's right to security without mentioning Palestinian victims and without calling for a ceasefire. The text was published, according to Le Monde, following pressure by Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet. This angered activists for the Palestinian cause but also many socialists and a large part of the Quai d'Orsay, the latter remaining attached to a "Gaullist-Mitterrandian" doctrine relying on UN resolutions for a two states solution, both with Jerusalem for capital and 1967 borders.

The next day, the Élysée attempted to make up for its gaffe by publishing a [second communication](#), while the [Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian](#) reasserted the official French position during the weekend.

Nonetheless, Hollande's first declaration was not a gaffe. Indeed, it confirms the Head of State's affinity with the Israeli Government, even if this one is led by a right-far right coalition. As soon as Hollande made it to the Élysée, the French President [gave assurances](#) to Benjamin Netanyahu. A few months later, he hesitated right up to the end before voting yes to recognising the Palestinian State at the UN. In addition, he remains [reluctant to label goods made in the occupied territories](#), already put in place in many European countries.

Last November, while visiting Israel, François Hollande showed renewed signs of his connection to Netanyahu. The two men conversed on informal terms during their shared press conference, and they strongly agree to focus on the threats posed by the Iranian nuclear programme. During the state dinner, the French President gave a toast which provoked a polemic after being shown on French TV channel Canal Plus: "If I had been told that I was to come to Israel, and that on top of diplomacy, I would have to sing... I would have done it! If anything for the friendship between Benjamin and myself. In fact for Israel and France. (...) I would always find in myself a love song for Israel and its leaders."

As part of his speech at the Knesset, finally, the French President reiterated the French position defending a two states solution, but without following this with the 1967 border agreement nor the constantly deteriorating living conditions of Palestinians ([read our article here](#)). Two points which were however brought up by Nicolas Sarkozy during his presidency. Most notably, up until the last minute, Hollande's speech kept going back and forth, and a diplomatic source reveals it went through 30 different versions.

The main reasons for this position are François Hollande's personal feelings. Since his early days at the head of the socialist party, he has kept a reputation for being "pro-Israeli", if moderately so. His political formation, historically close to the Israeli Labour party, has always been divided about the conflict. In 2011, at the start of the debate over the recognition of the Palestinian state at the UN, the leaders of the PS had [made their disagreements public](#). Amongst those against the vote was Manuel Valls, currently Prime Minister, as well as a number of personalities close to François Hollande.

Today, one can trace similar dividing lines in the executive branch of power. In the government, Valls but other Ministers such as Bernard Cazeneuve are extremely sensitive to the Israeli discourse over their right to defend their security and to the radical Islamist threats. The Interior Minister was one of the first to request a ban on demonstrations in solidarity with Gaza.

At the Élysée, a number of the President's diplomatic advisers share the same line. Others remain considered as "pro-Palestinian". MP Gwendal Rouillard, who is very close to Jean-Yves Le Drian, is also associated with various leaders of Fatah. The Quai d'Orsay is similarly divided and many diplomats are concerned about the [departure of](#)

March for Gaza banned in Paris after a week of tensions

[regional experts](#) these last few months, as those perceived as pro-Palestinian have been replaced by members of the strategic affairs division known for its more neoconservative and pro-Israeli stance.

The PS is in an awkward position. Its only communiqué on the French position comes down to a [critique](#) of the “attack on the synagogue of Aulnay-sous-Bois”, and recalls that “socialists will always be on the frontline against intolerance and violence”. Regarding the situation in Gaza, only two well-balanced communications were put forward [at the start of the tensions](#), then another this Friday [18 July], after Tsahal’s ground invasion in Gaza ([entitled “The PS calls out for peace”](#)). The only other action from the party regarding the conflict consists in [an encounter](#) in Paris between Jean-Christophe Cambadélis and his Israeli counterpart

Translated into English by Maïa Pal and published on the blog [Lenin's Tomb](#) 25 July.