

# France's Diplomatic Role in the Middle East Post-October 7

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**In Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, Paris continues to favor multilateral approaches that incorporate key regional partners, though it understands Washington's paramount role in achieving regional stability.**

On January 28, Paris hosted talks between U.S., Israeli, Qatari, and Egyptian officials regarding a proposed deal for further hostage releases and a long-term truce. The event was a good illustration of France's role in the Gaza crisis: bridging Western and Middle Eastern players despite limited influence on the ground. As the Hamas-Israel war and other crises evolve, can France be one of the few European countries to carve out a place for itself in the regional diplomatic landscape?

## Understanding the “Pendulum Swing”

France's approach to the Gaza crisis has been subject to criticism from both directions. Some observers have deplored (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/18/alain-gresh-macrons-party-has-a-strong-anti-palestinian-position>) a trajectory they see as increasingly favorable to Israel, while others have accused (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/17/macron-israel-hamas-war-france-cease-fire/>) Paris of breaking ranks with the West. For its part, France advocates a “balanced position” based on three pillars: security, humanitarian, and political.

Before the turn of the century, French officials focused on forging privileged ties with the Arab world at a time when it was not as divided and vulnerable as it is today. This policy came under increasing scrutiny in the early 2000s under President Jacques Chirac. Although he maintained many aspects of the Arab-aligned approach (e.g., opposing the 2003 invasion of Iraq), he also sought to warm relations with Israel—an effort accentuated by ([https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/03/01/israel-palestine-lettre-ouverte-a-nicolas-sarkozy-par-des-ambassadeurs-francais\\_1312660\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/03/01/israel-palestine-lettre-ouverte-a-nicolas-sarkozy-par-des-ambassadeurs-francais_1312660_3232.html)) President Nicolas Sarkozy.

France's unwavering solidarity with Israel after the October 7 attacks confirmed the enduring nature of this strategic

orientation. Its political support and counterterrorism actions were also driven by the fact that forty-one French nationals were among the victims of that assault and three are still being held hostage ([https://www.bfmtv.com/international/moyen-orient/israel/attaques-du-hamas-macron-annonce-un-ceremonie-d-hommage-le-7-fevrier-pour-les-francais-tues-en-israel\\_AV-202401161028.html](https://www.bfmtv.com/international/moyen-orient/israel/attaques-du-hamas-macron-annonce-un-ceremonie-d-hommage-le-7-fevrier-pour-les-francais-tues-en-israel_AV-202401161028.html)). Specifically, Paris has focused on sanctions (<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/israel-palestinian-territories/news/2023/article/fight-against-terrorism-meeting-on-combating-hamas-paris-13-dec-2023>) against Hamas, including an EU initiative with Italy and Germany to form a European regime targeting (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-foreign-ministers-adopt-new-ad-hoc-hamas-sanctions-monday-says-france-2024-01-18/>) the group's leaders.

At the same time, France was the first major Western country to call for a ceasefire (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67356581>) in Gaza. At the UN, it voted in favor of the Brazilian and Emirati resolutions on this issue, even those vetoed by the United States. It also approved the Jordanian and Egyptian resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, unlike certain other EU countries.

In addition, French officials have increasingly insisted (<https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-eu-europe-statehood-ee6db2a05e31038278ab5d702aaca8b9>) that taking steps toward Palestinian statehood is a must in any political settlement for the “day after” the Gaza war. They have also condemned ([https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/france-says-smotrich-ben-gvir-fueling-tensions-with-resettlement-talk/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/france-says-smotrich-ben-gvir-fueling-tensions-with-resettlement-talk/)) statements by Israeli ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir calling for forced displacement of Palestinians, the reestablishment of Israeli settlements in Gaza, and the construction of 1,800 settlement units in East Jerusalem.

France has sought an active role on the humanitarian front as well. On November 9, it organized the first international humanitarian conference (<https://www.voanews.com/a/paris-conference-mobilizes-aid-for-gaza/7348742.html>) for Gaza and drastically increased its unilateral aid to a total of 100 million euros for 2023, including 77 million euros for UN institutions.

To explain this apparent pendulum swing from full-throated support of Israel to a more “even-handed approach,” some observers have noted the fact that France's Jewish and Muslim communities are among the largest (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/france-responds-to-the-israel-gaza-crisis/>) in Europe. Yet its actions can also be understood as a deliberate diplomatic tactic to keep channels open with as many players as possible.

## Strong Focus on Regional Partners

To ensure the efficiency and legitimacy of French policymaking in the Middle East and avoid feeding the “West vs. the Rest” narrative, Paris has long favored initiatives and formats that involve regional players. In Lebanon, for example, it has worked closely with Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia to mediate recurring political crises, often in consultation with the United States. And following the devastating 2020 port explosion in Beirut, Paris partnered with Riyadh to set up a joint humanitarian mechanism (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/26/saudi-arabia-france-launching-humanitarian-projects-in-lebanon>).

To be sure, France did join Western allies in cosigning several joint declarations (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/09/joint-statement-on-israel/>) immediately after the October 7 attacks. Yet it soon returned to its preferred pattern of regional engagement. On November 22, President Macron received the foreign ministers (<https://x.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/1727606870913781897?s=20>) of the Arab League and a delegation from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. He and his foreign and military ministers have also made numerous trips to the region and held phone calls with various leaders, including Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi.

Humanitarian aid has given concrete content to this outreach, particularly with Jordan and Qatar. In January, Doha and Paris arranged medicine deliveries ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/19/france-and-qatar-deliver-medicine-to-hamas-for-israeli-hostages\\_6447094\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/01/19/france-and-qatar-deliver-medicine-to-hamas-for-israeli-hostages_6447094_4.html)) to the Gaza hostages, a rare breakthrough in the indirect talks between Israel and Hamas. Moreover, French military forces have been coordinating (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/french-jordanian-airforces-drop-medical-aid-gaza-elysee-2024-01-05/>) their treatment of injured Palestinian civilians with Qatar, including medical evacuations to Doha. With Jordan, France has participated in joint airdrop operations given the heavy restrictions on humanitarian access to Gaza. It is also supporting the kingdom's field hospital in Khan Yunis.

Moreover, France's posture toward the U.S.-led coalition in the Red Sea confirmed its reluctance about being boxed into overtly Western formats. Paris was cited among the participants of Operation Prosperity Guardian, which aims to counter escalating threats (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/d944e2f68d134c6ebf1249f8d50fea19>) against commercial shipping along crucial regional trade routes. Yet its forces did not take part in allied strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen. At the same time, President Macron called for more cooperation in the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea during a European Council summit in January, and an EU naval mission will likely be deployed soon—though with measured objectives (<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-states-give-nod-red-sea-mission-deter-houthis-diplomats-2024-01-16/>) echoing the caution that Paris, Rome, and other EU capitals have displayed on this issue.

## Options for French-U.S. Cooperation

**R**eservations aside, France is well aware that the United States holds the key to stabilizing the Middle East. Given that a truce in Gaza may be within reach (<https://www.axios.com/2024/01/22/israel-hamas-gaza-ceasefire-hostages>), potentially creating room for broader diplomacy across the region, Paris and Washington could join forces in several ways.

For one, they seem to be on the same page about returning the Palestinian Authority to Gaza and reviving the two-state solution in the longer term, despite their disagreements about a ceasefire and their uncertainties about the day after. Yet Washington may not see France as a key player on these issues. Consequently, Paris could draw on its excellent relations with Saudi Arabia, whose decisionmaking will play a major role (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2024/02/01/americas-shuttle-diplomacy-to-wind-down-the-war-in-gaza>) in shaping the region's future. For instance, they could push to revive the two-state solution as part of a broader strategy aimed at countering Iran.

In the short term, France and the United States can most usefully coordinate their efforts on Lebanon. They see eye to eye on the necessity of avoiding all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah. Accordingly, they have sought to establish a new modus vivendi (<https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1360823/south-lebanon-airstrikes-and-diplomacy-efforts-intensify.html>) on the border, to include a Hezbollah retreat, territorial arrangements between Lebanon and Israel, and efforts to bolster the role of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Armed Forces.

Indeed, Paris holds several levers of influence in Lebanon. First, it has 700 Blue Helmets on the ground as part of UNIFIL and is the penholder on Lebanese issues at the Security Council. Second, its longstanding involvement in the country's political process has only intensified since the Beirut port explosion and subsequent crises. France and the United States are both members of the Quintet, the group of five countries (including Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) working to facilitate the appointment of a president and the formation of a full fledged government, which are still pending almost two years after the last parliamentary election.

Going forward, the goal should be to ensure that U.S.-led mediation gives Beirut's ruling elites an incentive to fill the

vacuum rather than another pretext for impasse. This is all the more crucial because a new Lebanese president could facilitate broader diplomatic efforts—an opportunity that would be lost if Washington grows weary of Beirut’s political shenanigans and decides to spend its energy exclusively on a border agreement.

Elsewhere, France and the United States could cooperate on shaping the end of the coalition mission against the Islamic State—specifically inside Iraq, where France, too, has boots on the ground. Paris has welcomed U.S.-Iraqi dialogue on this matter and expressed its readiness for increased bilateral military cooperation with Baghdad. It also realizes the importance of French-U.S. coordination on managing the transition and redefining strategic goals in Iraq.

Addressing Iran’s nuclear activities remains crucial as well; they never ceased to be a priority for French officials, who have long advised against the “no deal, no crisis” approach. Yet with President Biden’s current term coming to an end, the two allies may have a limited window of time to meaningfully cooperate on all these issues, since it is too early to assess the foreign policy consequences of a possible administration change.

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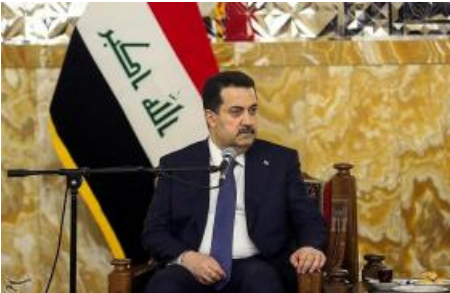
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