Sins on the Seine

David Pryce-Jones

Betrayal: France, the Arabs, and the Jews

Encounter Books, 2006, 171 pages.

Reviewed by Noah Pollak

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah militants launched rockets and mortars into Israel to divert attention from a simultaneous ambush on an Israel Defense Forces border patrol, in which three soldiers were killed, two were abducted, and five more were killed in the rescue attempt that followed. Two days later, French President Jacques Chirac pronounced Israel's nascent military response "completely disproportionate" and added that "One could ask if today there is not a sort of will to destroy Lebanon." While

many other nations condemned Israel, most were careful to include the kind of perfunctory reproach to Hezbollah that would create the appearance of evenhandedness. But for France, not so much: Five days into the conflict, Chirac sent Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin on a "solidarity" mission to Beirut. For the Israelis confined to bomb shelters, no such tidings were forthcoming from France.

In the days that followed, the denunciations and allegations reached a crescendo. Kofi Annan declared, with no evidence, that a fatal United Nations observation post bombing was the result of "apparently deliberate targeting" by the IDF. Such carefully choreographed comments were vital to creating an international consensus of outrage sufficient to force cease-fire negotiations, and naturally, France took the lead in stewarding a diplomatic process whose overriding goal was the prevention of Hezbollah's defeat on the battlefield. France endorsed Arab calls for an immediate cease-fire, which were rejected by Israel, the U.S., and Britain, on the grounds that Hezbollah would be left in place to fight again at a time of its choosing. Throughout the war, the Anglo-Saxon alliance plus Israel insisted that anything less than the elimination of Hezbollah's military capability against Israel would be dangerous and counterproductive. On August 4 France and the U.S. agreed on a draft Security Council resolution that would send a division-size international force into southern Lebanon empowered with robust rules of engagement that would effect the disarmament of Hezbollah and the prevention of its re-supply. But under Arab League pressure a few days later, France balked and endorsed a new version with much vaguer rules of engagement, but for which France maintained its commitment to lead a military force that would ensure the long-term pacification of southern Lebanon. With the French promise to lead the international military effort undiminished, the United States assented, and on August 11 the Security Council adopted this plan as Resolution 1701. It was loudly declared that this time, the spirit and the letter of the UN resolution would be enforced, that the decades of deadly indifference to the Taif Accord (1989) and Resolution 1559 (2004) were over—in short, that the UN and the Europeans were serious. But as soon as the fighting stopped, all of the promises France had made to secure American, Israeli, and British support were cast aside: Instead of leading the UNIFIL effort with thousands of its soldiers, France offered 200 troops and refused to send more,

on the grounds that it could not put its soldiers in harm's way under such vague rules of engagement—the very rules of engagement France itself had insisted on.

Here were all the hallmarks of contemporary French diplomacy: The exhibitionistic declarations in favor of peace that are intended to turn aggressors such as Hezbollah into victims of "disproportionate" reprisals; the proffering of false guarantees to gullible allies in order to channel negotiations to the favorable terrain of the United Nations; and the use of its influence to muddle and undermine the resolution of conflicts, thus ensuring the future need for more French diplomacy. Add to this list an addendum on behalf of David Pryce-Jones and his new book: Positioning itself as the foremost Western defender of Arab honor, at the expense of Israel and America.

Betrayal: France, the Jews, and the Arabs started as a long essay in *Commentary*, but even in its extended form is only a slender 171 pages. It is nonetheless a devastating catalogue of both France's depredations, first against the Jews, and now against Israel, and its institutionalized policy of favoritism toward the Muslim Middle East. Pryce-Jones' central charge is that France's desire to be the Middle East's most ostentatiously helpful European ally, combined with its governing elite's enthusiasm for anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, has caused France to enter into a Faustian bargain with the Muslim world—an arrangement that has repeatedly proven destructive both to France's foreign policy interests and to its own vaingloriously celebrated values. France's posture toward Muslims, Pryce-Jones declares, "has been what the Maginot Line was militarily, a masking of reality, a standing invitation to self-deception."

France became involved in the Middle East by several routes: Napoleon's 1798 campaign in Egypt; the 1830 invasion of Algeria; France's perception of itself as a guardian of Catholicism and Christianity in the Holy Land; and France's desire to compete with Britain in colonial acquisitions. The institution charged with conceptualizing, administering, and guarding the traditions of French diplomacy was the country's foreign ministry, known as the Quai d'Orsay, and it is in the archives of this institution that Pryce-Jones spent the largest part of his investigatory energies. The staff of the Quai d'Orsay was dynastic and relied upon by transient political leaders; entry, said one historian, was determined by "nepotism, patronage, and political persuasion [which was] Catholic and hostile to Jews and Protestants and the parliamentary system." What Pryce-Jones found in

its archives is a delightfully detailed record of the French diplomatic community's centuries-long hostility to Jews and then to Israel, and its self-conscious ambition to co-opt the Muslim Middle East, all written by the articulate and prolific members of this self-selected academy of France's internationally minded aristocracy.

From the beginning of the Quai d'Orsay, anti-Semitism was the approved mindset, and it influenced both the institution's foreign policy and its members' understanding of their superior positions in the social order. In the parlance of the ministry, Jews were an "anti-national" faction loyal to an ambiguous but foreboddingly powerful international Jewry. Jews were said to be repositories of numerous (and contradictory) pathologies: They were filthy ghetto-dwellers, disloyal agitators, money-grubbing exploiters, or a secret cabal seeking to infiltrate France. The Zionist movement that flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only confirmed among the French elite their conviction of Jews as a subversive international element, but stirred strategic fears that Zionism would threaten France's Catholic protectorate in the Levant, the expansion of its power in the region, and its relations with Arabs. The French response was two fold: Calumny was heaped upon Zionism, and the Quai d'Orsay sought strengthened connections to the Arab world, hoping to ensure that the Holy Land would never be a hospitable place for Jews. Pryce-Jones notes, for example, that "paying for the meeting in Paris in June 1913 of twenty-three Arabs from Syria and the Holy Land, the Quai d'Orsay effectively launched the Arab nationalist movement."

Following World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, France sought to control a swath of the Levant that today includes Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. But Palestine went to the British, so French diplomats sought to suppress Zionist ambitions by convincing their British counterparts of the undesirability of opening the region to Jews. After the Balfour Declaration, France duly warned the British against "arous[ing] unrealizable expectations in the Jews… the Zionists must understand once and for all that there could be no question of constituting an independent Jewish state in Palestine, nor even forming some sovereign Jewish body." Beyond its obvious hostility to Jews, France had another reason to agitate against a Jewish state: The Zionist movement was being led by British Jews and abetted by British Protestants, and the endeavor left no room, the French realized, for the expansion, or even participation, of French power. "It became the

accepted position in French diplomatic circles," Pryce-Jones writes, "that 'the British and the Jews were conspiring together against French interests,' having formed an 'Anglo-Jewish policy.'" France's leading diplomat in the Levant, Robert de Caix, visited the British high commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, in Jerusalem in 1920, and his account of the meeting illustrates with brutal perfection the manner in which French anti-Semitism was put in the service of French foreign policy. "This well-mannered English Jew, scraped clean from the ghetto, has been completely taken up in Jerusalem by his tribe and he attends synagogue, accepts no invitations on the Sabbath and on Holy Days goes only on foot… you may be sure that the complete Jewry of both hemispheres will apply a policy consisting of rejecting our frontier to the north of the Hauran and to the banks of the Litani." Likewise, the head of the Quai d'Orsay's department for religious affairs concluded a memorandum on the subject of his meeting with Chaim Weizmann by saying, "Jewish nationalism is a mistake and [the Jews] can find peace only through assimilation."

During World War II, the French diplomatic elite took naturally to collaborating with the Nazis and settled easily into the Vichy government, the most satisfying point of agreement being the necessity of ridding Europe, and preferably the world, of Jews. Jean Giraudoux, a high-ranking Quai d'Orsay official who enjoyed socializing with Nazis, offered in 1939 that "The Jews sully, corrupt, rot, corrode, debase, devalue everything they touch." Paul Claudel, who in the 1920s was the French ambassador to the United States and who combined diplomatic and literary careers, referred to Jews as "lice with a human face," and in a play has a Jewish character say, "But for us Jews, there's no little scrap of earth so large as a gold coin."

After the war, says Pryce-Jones, "the institutional mindset of the Quai d'Orsay survived intact," and the ministry resuscitated its campaign to undermine Zionism, viewed in the postwar era as "more of a danger than ever to what French diplomats believed would otherwise have been a smooth and advantageous relationship with Arab countries." Seeking to foster good relations with the Arabs, from behind the scenes France aggressively sought to derail the UN vote to partition Mandatory Palestine, and in 1949 France's ambassador to Israel informed the French foreign minister that, "The manner in which Israeli leaders have proceeded recalls Hitler's Reich."

In this long and appalling history, there was one fateful period of good

relations. Pierre-Etienne Gilbert was the French ambassador to Israel from 1953 to 1959, and was "the first French diplomat openly to admire Israel." During his time in Israel, Gilbert learned Hebrew, lobbied vigorously for a genuine collaboration between the two nations, and suppressed the Quai d'Orsay's role whenever possible. In 1956, Israel secretly allied with France and Britain to break the Egyptian blockade of the Suez Canal, and while much of France's willingness to partner with Israel was located in its desire to make Gamal Abd el-Nasser suffer for his incitement of Algerian insurgents, Israel's success in the Suez War solidified its gains in the 1948 War of Independence and, at a particularly perilous time in its history, pacified the Egyptian threat for the ensuing decade. After the Suez War, Gilbert, allied with the French defense establishment and openly antagonistic to the diplomatic elite, helped marginalize the Quai and pushed through the nuclear deal that supplied Israel with its reactor in Dimona. When De Gaulle came out of retirement in 1958, the Quai d'Orsay was emboldened and the disengagement from friendly relations with Israel commenced. An official report to De Gaulle in 1963 stated that good relations between France and Israel "in no way give France any credit in Arabia," and indeed that sentiment has been the driving force behind French policy toward Israel ever since: In the run-up to the Six Day War France embargoed arms shipments to Israel, and during the war De Gaulle told British Prime Minister Harold Wilson that "someday the West would thank him, as from then on France would 'be the only Western power to have any influence with the Arab governments.'"

De Gaulle's successors continued the tradition of open hostility to Israel in ways significant and petty. In 1969, President Georges Pompidou, during a visit to the United States, declared in a speech that Israel must stop being "a racial and religious state" and demanded that Israel cease asking for support from diaspora Jews. When Syria and Egypt invaded Israel in 1973, France's foreign minister wondered aloud, "Is it unexpected aggression to try and set foot in your own house?" With the emergence of terrorism as a regular feature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, France easily sided with the Arabs: In 1977 it supplied one of the leaders of Black September with a visa so he could escape from Beirut to Paris, and in response to furious international criticism President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing defended rescuing the murderer by simply saying, "France and its people have no lessons to learn from anyone." Meanwhile, Giscard

d'Estaing approved contracts (negotiated by then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac) to build two nuclear power plants for Iraq. François Mitterand, himself a former Vichy official, commenced his presidency by announcing an attempt to rehabilitate France's image as implacably hostile to Israel, but his foreign minister for the first three years of his presidency had close friendships with members of the Palestine Liberation Organization and once declared, "My condemnation of Zionism is absolute."

France's ambitions in the Muslim world also took form in the symbiotic relationships it nurtured with three of the most consequential Muslim political figures of the past several decades. Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Hussein, and Yasser Arafat indulged France's self-important desire to ingratiate itself with Muslim leaders, while France attempted to use its influence with them, greased with lavish patronage, to advance its own objectives in the region. When the Palestine Liberation Organization broke onto the Middle East scene, France quickly endeavored to help it gain representation in the United Nations, and when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Pryce-Jones recounts, "France sent ships to Beirut to evacuate thousands of PLO gunmen to Tunis, and Paul-Marc Henry, the French ambassador to Lebanon, placed Arafat under the cover of his own diplomatic immunity." The Fatah organization was invited to establish itself in Paris as the political arm of the PLO, bringing Middle Eastern-style bombings and shootings to France. To the end, France helped inflate and mythologize Arafat, even to obsessive degrees of pettiness. Jacques Chirac made a much publicized visit to Arafat on his Paris deathbed, and as Pryce-Jones recounts:

> When Arafat then died, Chirac arranged ceremonies suitable for a head of state, with a guard of honor of French soldiers to carry the coffin to the aircraft transporting it back to Ramallah. At this event, his eyes watering, he declared, "With him disappears a man of courage and conviction."

With Arafat also disappeared an important detail of his life: His truthful place of birth. French officials altered his medical file to indicate Arafat's birthplace as Jerusalem, not Cairo.

In 1977, upon being forced from his exile in Najaf, Iraq, by Saddam Hussein, Ayatollah Khomeini was offered a compound in suburban Paris, complete with guards and international communications equipment, from which to foment the Iranian revolution. France correctly hedged that he would become the next Iranian strongman, and saw in

him an opportunity for a prosperous relationship with the new Iran. Khomeini remarked that the French government was "kind to us and we could publicize our views extensively, much more so than we expected." When the shah fled Iran in 1979, Khomeini arrived triumphantly in Tehran on a chartered Air France jet; to a notable degree, France had helped midwife the ascension of the world's first Islamist government.

Jacques Chirac, as prime minister in the mid-1970s, formed an adulating friendship with Saddam Hussein, toasting the dictator extravagantly on his trips to France and taking him on personal tours of French arms factories and nuclear plants. Hussein purchased billions of dollars in French weaponry, and used it to attack Khomeini's Iran in 1980. It is generally not a good state of affairs when two of your allies are fighting each other, but France made the best of a bad situation and sold weapons to both: Publicly to Iraq, and covertly to Iran.

David Pryce-Jones notes that France's position over the last century and a half as a self-styled *puissance Musulmane*, a Muslim power, has been not just a strategic failure, but a betrayal of France's national identity as a champion of democracy and human rights (although one must observe that France has always been notably absent among the nations who actually take French national values seriously). There has scarcely been a Middle Eastern thug, despot, or fanatic whom France has not sought to befriend, and for all of the mythologizing of French sophistication in the diplomatic arts, there is little evidence demonstrating how, exactly, France has benefited from these often one-sided romances. Such evidence certainly is not located in France's *banlieus*, which are aflame with righteous anti-French violence. It cannot be found in the failure to frustrate Zionism and thwart the creation of Israel; it is absent in France's support for Nasser, as the Egyptian despot, perhaps having taken a lesson from the French school of foreign policy himself, covertly supplied arms and propaganda to the Algerian insurgents who bloodied and then expelled France from its last colonial holding. The half-century of aspersions intended to isolate and demoralize Israel never quite succeeded in either seriously wounding the Jewish state or winning the affection of the Muslims on behalf of whose delicate sense of honor France professed to endeavor. France's promotion of Hussein and Khomeini did nothing but encourage the war, terrorism, and sectarian misery those despots unleashed on the Middle

East, undermining any opportunity for the expansion of French power and influence. And what did championing the PLO achieve? Fatah's failed nationalism is rapidly being eclipsed by Hamas' Islamism. France's devotion to its Middle East rogues' gallery has accomplished little more for French interests than the provocation of American intervention in the very region that France wished to bring into its own sphere of influence.

Pryce-Jones continues that "much of what France now undertakes amounts to mere pinpricks in the international spectrum, but still of nuisance value to the parties at the receiving end, while precipitously degrading to France itself." But France's role in the post-cold war world is hardly so frivolous. French elites have always felt chagrined by the unipolar world and the global sweep of American military, diplomatic, cultural, and commercial power. In response to this challenge, France, seeking a role in the world worthy of itself, envisions itself as the organizer and leader of an alliance of European countries that would act as a counterweight to Anglo-Saxon dominance. In this pursuit France exerts power where and when it can, which usually means leveraging its seat on the United Nations Security Council to dilute American influence, to insert itself into world affairs and crises, and to empower alliances hostile to the United States.

The first success of this new diplomacy was in the run-up to the Iraq war. In 2002, the UN Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1441, which required Iraq to disarm itself of weapons of mass destruction, to allow the return of weapons inspectors, and to comply with all previous UN resolutions. The penalty for non-compliance would be "serious consequences"—the phrase is now famous—which was understood to mean military action. The United States believed that it had struck a compromise with France in which the United States would allow inspectors a final chance to verify Iraqi weapons, and France would support a military response in the case of Iraqi non-compliance. When Iraq continued to thwart the inspectors and the United States pursued a resolution authorizing force, France shocked the Bush administration by summarily dismissing any chance of supporting a new resolution, under any circumstances. The bait-and-switch worked, France's position as the leader, at least temporarily, of a Russian-German-French counterweight to the Anglo-Saxon alliance was inaugurated, and America was handed a sensational and highly public defeat.

In the cases of both the Iraq and Hezbollah wars, France coaxed

Anglo-Saxon engagement in the United Nations with an affectation of responsible statesmanship and guarantees of desirable compromises, and once its adversaries were fully committed to the labyrinthine requirements of the UN, the rug was pulled out—the very terms that solidified a consensus were cast aside. Such perfidious diplomacy accomplishes something much more valuable than simply the successful entanglement of an American-led resolution to a conflict: They ensure that no resolution whatsoever is accomplished. France today leads a group of nations that use diplomacy as a means of preventing, rather than coordinating, action. Diplomacy channeled through the UN does not serve as a deterrent to groups like Hezbollah and nations like Iran, it serves as a deterrent to the Anglosphere's ability to do anything about Hezbollah and Iran. That is precisely the point, and it is a far more grave state of affairs—especially concerning nuclear weapons—than a pinprick.

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