



On the events which have shaken us to the core

01.04.2024 | Jean-Dominique Durand

In this “letter about current events,” dated January 27, 2024, Jean-Dominique Durand, President of l’Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France (AJCF), offers his thoughts on the pogrom of October 7, 2023 and the Israeli government’ response. He reiterates the support of the AJCF for Jews living in suffering, anguish and fear, while expressing the utmost compassion for the civilian victims of the war.

The pogrom of October 7, 2023, carried out in the middle of the Shabbat of Simchat Torah, and what we know today of the most abominable details ... the hostages—including children— held in inhuman conditions and abandoned by international institutions ... the war in Gaza which is stretching on and on ... the pressure exerted on people’s minds by the media ... the importing of the conflict into France itself ... the unrestrained affirmation of antisemitic hatred throughout the world ... the threats of Islamist terrorism ... the difficulty of maintaining interreligious dialogue with a Muslim world that is effectively paralyzed, and too often incapable of calling out terrorist acts that claim to be committed in the name of Islam.

All of this has shaken our federation, the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, to the core. That’s why, in contact with many of its members, particularly presidents of local groups, and responding to the request expressed at the December 3, 2023 Board of Directors meeting, I believe it useful and necessary to offer, as President of the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, a few thoughts to help understand such a complex situation.

It is not easy to express a position because of the passions and pain that the present moment arouses, but also because of the difficulty of disentangling truth from propaganda and the difficulty of staying informed. War, any war, is a tragedy, and the images that reach us are obviously unbearable. We are even more disturbed by the fact that the press (including the Christian press), and no doubt for the sake of balance, does not really distance itself from the “news bulletins” provided by Hamas. One of the goals of the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France is, as Jules Isaac intended, to understand, to inform, to question, and to reflect.

Regarding the difficulty of providing information on the situation in Lebanon in 1982, the AJCF’s journal, *Sens*, reprinted an article published in *La Croix* on October 1, 1982 by the late Father Michel Remaud, titled “L’information et les juifs” [“The News and the Jews”]:

“It does not seem that much emphasis has been placed on certain PLO warfare techniques either, for example: the systematic placement of ammunition depots and artillery batteries in the midst of civilian populations, and even in the immediate vicinity of schools and hospitals” (*Sens* 1982, No. 11, pp. 267-269).

The Jewish people, whether in Israel or elsewhere in the world, are facing an existential struggle, and since October 7 they have felt alone against the whole world. Alone, as they were during the long years of the rise of Nazism and the implementation of the Shoah, whose scars in the flesh of its survivors and descendants have been brutally re-opened. The charge of genocide that has been levelled against [the State of Israel]—and taken seriously by courts whose mission, it was believed was to be to protect all peoples from real barbarity— compounds this feeling of

abandonment. This is an obnoxious attempt to subvert the meaning of the term “genocide,” coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1943 to identify mass killings, conceived and organized by a state, such as that of the Armenians in 1915 by the Ottoman state, and the then-ongoing massacre of Jews by Nazi Germany. Today, Israel, fighting for its very survival, is being unilaterally blamed, while its youth, carefree just the day before, must now fight an unwanted battle, in conditions that are humanly gruelling and militarily complex, in legitimate response to an attack of unparalleled atrocity. This trial is all the more cruel because it originates in institutions whose vocation is to uphold peace and protection —such as the UN, which in 1948 finally recognized the right [of the Jewish community] to offer its dispersed people refuge in their own land. The fact is that this land has just been brutally attacked. Its children of all ages have been raped, tortured, mutilated, murdered or kidnapped in a terrorist raid with an explicitly genocidal aim.

Jews in France are facing an explosion of antisemitic acts: 436 officially recorded acts in 2022, 1676 in 2023. It is an epidemic whose virus has literally exploded, spreading its insides, which are hatred against all Jews. This is not the first time that the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne has been confronted with such tragedies. They are at the very origin of its foundation, as intended by Jules Isaac, who fought relentlessly to summon “true Christians, and true Israelites too [...] to this effort of renewal, of purification, to this severe examination of conscience” (*Jésus et Israël*, 1948 [*Jesus and Israel*, 1971]) in the wake of the greatest genocide in the history of mankind, of which he himself was also a victim. In the summer of 1982, following the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, our magazine *Sens* published Father Jean Dujardin’s reflections, entitled “Des événements qui nous déchirent” [“On the events that have torn us apart”]. He identified “a threefold requirement”:

“to seek the truth”,
“to establish the foundations of a type of justice that can be accepted by all”,
“to maintain sufficient esteem for one another”, (*Sens* 1982, No. 7/8, pp. 157- 165).

This document reminds us of the Declaration of the Bishops of France of February 1, 2021, 1 [“Lutter ensemble contre l’antisémitisme et l’antijudaïsme”](#), [“Fighting Together Against Antisemitism and Anti-Judaism”,] which provides valuable guidelines to help Christians maintain their esteem for their elder brothers, removing any temptation to make aggressive judgments in the present conflict (*Sens* 2021, No. 435, pp. 104-105). We must keep coming back to the facts, nothing but the facts, and we must not forget history, in order to understand today’s drama and tragedy.

A state of unending war

In August 1929, Jews living in Palestine under the British Mandate had already been the victims of violent massacres, notably in Hebron. From 1948, as soon as it was founded, the young State of Israel, with its then very limited boundaries, was attacked by Arab states across all its still very fragile borders, in defiance of the UN’s decision to allow it to be founded, supported at the time by the Soviet Union and the United States. Even before the proclamation of independence, the Arab states, already denying Israel’s right to exist, rejected the UN partition plan for Palestine and, consequently, the creation of a Palestinian state.

Since then, Israel has regularly found itself in a state of war imposed by its neighbours: in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 2023. But apart from these operational wars, and despite the lasting peace agreements signed with its two most powerful adversaries at the time (Egypt and Jordan), Israel has had to endure almost daily attacks, with thousands of rockets fired at Israeli cities from Gaza and southern Lebanon. Only the “Iron Dome” air defense system has managed to limit the destruction caused. Then there are the repeated acts of terrorism, assassinations, and bus bombings. As France prepares to celebrate the Olympic Games, can we forget the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Games, on September 6, 1972?

What state could accept such a situation? Can we imagine the consequences in France if our country were to suffer such treatment? How can we blame Israel for wanting to eradicate this threat to its very existence, when a coalition of states, of which France was a member, has just carried out a similar war in Syria and Iraq, at the cost of thousands of civilian victims among whom were the terrorists of Daesh and the Islamic State.

The desire to destroy Israel

In fact, Hamas has declared, in accordance with its own Charter, its desire to destroy Israel, to refuse to recognize the fact of Israel's existence, and to eradicate it, as demonstrated by the atrocious events of October 7.

We have been thrown back 79 years, to when the world discovered what absolute hatred of Jews had led to: the Shoah, the intent to destroy—to systematically kill— Jews, after having deprived them of their humanity. This was the antisemitism which, in the words of Archbishop Pierre d'Ornellas, “gave rise to the unspeakable and singular barbarity symbolized by Auschwitz”. Today, Hamas, like other Islamist terrorist organizations, has taken up the Nazis' anti-Jewish policy and dressed it up in the garb of anti-Zionism, supported by the blind activists of Western anti-colonialism: the same desire to kill, terrorize and eradicate Judaism in its own land. Hamas, heir to Hitler's ally, the Grand Mufti Mohammed Amin al-Husseini, has directed its attack against *kibbutzim* founded between 1943 and 1947, even before Israel's independence, and between 1949 and 1982, all known for their commitment to dialogue, peace and friendship with their Palestinian neighbors.

Israel is the only state in the world that its enemies want to destroy outright, by attacking its very soul, Judaism. Israel is the target of vile accusations of being a Nazi state, an apartheid state, a genocidal state, none of which corresponds to the facts for even a split-second: Israel is a democracy, with a vibrant democratic life; minorities have their rightful place, the parliament includes Arab deputies; freedom of worship, for all faiths, is guaranteed and protected. Do you remember that until 1967, Jews were not allowed to pray at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall of the Temple, which was under Jordanian authority at the time? Since 1967, people of all religious affiliations have been able to worship freely in Jerusalem and throughout Israel, demonstrating to the world that a democratic state can combine secularism with public freedom of conscience, whether one is religious or not.

Anti-Zionism and antisemitism

Anti-Zionism is the new form of antisemitism when Jews are denied the right to have a state, or when its destruction is advocated. That connection is clearly made in the teaching provided in several Arab countries, which cultivates and spreads hatred of Jews, repeating all the prejudices—and the most vile caricatures—that are well known in Europe. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are known to circulate freely. Hatred of Jews overlaps with hatred of Israel, and the desire to wipe out Israel overlaps with the desire to kill Jews. Hamas has, in its Charter, the goal of destroying Israel; that is its *raison d'être*. The schools, with the unfathomable assistance of UNRWA and its officials (some of whom are teachers, financed by international aid supposed to help the Palestinian people) are training their children in this hatred and in a battle whose goal is extermination. Under these conditions, how can we prepare minds for peace? Are the Jewish people the only people in the world unable to live in a state that guarantees their safety?

The manipulation of the Palestinian people

Since 1948, the fate of the Palestinian people has been profoundly sad, at least for those who wanted to, or had to, leave Palestinian territory, to be crowded together in refugee camps. The

current tragedy of the Palestinians is also the result of the policy of Arab countries, which have always refused to welcome and integrate them into their own territory. The Palestinians have been parked in camps, with no future (in Lebanon they have no right to a work permit), living off international aid, much of it misappropriated by Hamas and Hezbollah for sophisticated weaponry. For several generations now, they have harboured a hatred of Israel. They form a populace that has been weaponized, clinging to a tenacious hatred and rejecting any spirit of peace. Today, there are two million Palestinians in Israel who are full Israeli citizens.

Where would Europe be if, after 1945, Germany had refused to integrate the millions of refugees driven from their lands by the advance of the Red Army, and turned them into eternal refugees? Where would Europe be if Germany had refused to recognize the new borders created by the war?

The search for peace

To make peace, to build peaceful relations, it takes two. On several occasions, Israel has taken steps towards peace. All of them have been annihilated by terrorist acts. Peace can only be achieved through the political will of both sides. We have before us the example of Franco-German reconciliation, the fruit of a common will borne by two statesmen, Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer, who wanted to turn their backs on hatred and conflict, to build a common destiny with other countries. They were prophets in the biblical sense of the word. When will such personalities emerge, in Israel as in Palestine? As long as one side deliberately denies the right of the other to exist, and as long as no guarantee of safety is established, all negotiations are doomed to failure. No one can deny that every time Israel has agreed to withdraw from an occupied territory (in Gaza, as in Lebanon), a terrorist organization has settled on its border.

Is dialogue possible?

Since the terrorist attacks of October 7, there has been no shortage of calls for dialogue and truces. But is it possible to dialogue with individuals or groups who have lost all sense of humanity—who have taken with them hundreds of hostages in Gaza, including babies and very young children? We did not talk to the Nazis; we waged war against them until they surrendered unconditionally. Afterwards, we made peace and it was possible to think about, and build for, the future. Israel cannot forget that the way this war is conducted must have as its framework the search for peace. The risk is to give in to the spirit of revenge, and to perpetuate hatred without end.

In Gaza today, Israel is waging a vital war on a very difficult urban territory. We can only feel the greatest compassion for the civilian victims of the war, who are themselves being held hostage as human shields by Hamas, which is terrorizing its own population. Hamas's skilful propaganda is designed to arouse emotion, with the consequence of importing the conflict into our country and exacerbating the expression of unbearable, odious antisemitism, which is a danger both for individuals and for the nation.

Above all: friendship

The Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France offers its friendship and support to Jews who are living in suffering, anxiety and fear. For the AJCF, the life of the State of Israel, founded in 1948 following a UN vote, is fundamental. This is a position of principle, not a political choice in favor of this or that Israeli party or government.

Without entering into the heated political debate among Israelis, as we have seen with the judicial reforms which have divided the country, everyone can have a critical opinion on the policies of a government which, by its support for settlements in Judea-Samaria, to the detriment of the

legitimate aspirations of West Bank Palestinians, is making a real peace solution more difficult. Hurtful words and actions, as well as the undignified and inexcusable remarks of certain leaders, keep tensions high and provide all sorts of justifications to extremists on both sides to harm others.

Many Israeli citizens —Jews and non-Jews alike— are questioning the choices that have weakened the country, brought it to the brink of the abyss, and led it to a place of deep distress and immense physical and moral suffering. Tomorrow, those citizens will continue to keep democracy alive, because the State of Israel is a democracy that does not hide its own weaknesses from the world. Israel is not committing genocide, but is defending itself against an enemy of unprecedented cruelty who has no regard for human life. The slogan proclaimed by Hamas, “From the river to the sea”, i.e. from the Jordan to the Mediterranean, is genocidal: the Jews must disappear.

Yet the Jewish people have a moral and religious right to their own land and state. The AJCF’s support for the existence of the State of Israel is unambiguous. In particular, it is based on the “Orientations pastorales” [Pastoral Orientations] of the French Episcopal Committee for Relations with Judaism, published in 1973 —the first Church text to mention the question of the State of Israel:

“First of all: as Christians, we cannot forget God’s ancient gift to the people of Israel of a land on which they were called to be reunited (Genesis 12:7; 26:3-4; 28:13; Isaiah 43:5-7; Jeremiah 16:15; Zephaniah 3:20)”

and

“Beyond the diversity of political options, the conscience of the world cannot deny the Jewish people —who have suffered so many vicissitudes in the course of history— the right and the means of a political existence of their own among the nations. Nor can this right and these means of existence be denied by the nations to those who, as a result of the local conflicts resulting from this return, are currently victims of grave situations of injustice. Therefore, let us turn our eyes attentively towards this land visited by God, and let us have a lively hope that it will be a place where all its inhabitants, Jews and non-Jews alike, can live in peace” (*Compendium: Les relations entre juifs et chrétiens*. Conférence des évêques de France, 2019, pp. 41-47).

In signing the “Fundamental Agreement” of December 30, 1993, the Holy See and the State of Israel declared themselves to be “mindful of the singular character and universal significance of the Holy Land”, and also to be “aware of the unique nature of relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people, and of the historic process of reconciliation and growth in mutual understanding and friendship between Catholics and Jews”.

The Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, strengthened by the memory it carries of the teaching of esteem desired by its founder Jules Isaac, calls on Christians that, while fulfilling their duty of charity towards all the victims of hatred and war, and calling for truth and justice for all, they never fail to support the people whom God loved first and irrevocably, which today is fighting for its survival —and probably theirs too.

Conclusion

Rabbi André Neher, a teacher and friend of Chief Rabbi René-Samuel Sirat, sheds some light on the subject. In 1972, he published a wonderful book, *Dans tes portes, Jérusalem* [*Within Your Gates, O Jerusalem*]. This work, strongly marked by the experience of the Six-Day War, is still

relevant today; it deserves to be republished. Neher, evoking the sacrifices of young Israelis fighting on the borders, expressed his desire to know “the *meaning* of Jewish suffering, its ‘why’ and its purpose, the mystery of why it continues, and clings even to those who believed that, by building the State, they had vanquished that suffering forever; the mystery, too, of personal suffering, of its meaning and how it might be overcome.”

But, says Neher, Israel, driven by a formidable will to live, does not allow itself to be crushed by this suffering, and continues its fight for peace:

“The truth is that Israel did not want war; for years, this small country heroically accepted the precariousness of its borders rather than expose its inhabitants and neighbors to the risks of an armed conflagration; the truth is that Israel only resorted to arms when the enemy’s knife was already at its throat, ready to murder it; the truth is that, ever since, Israel has had only one objective: peace, and that it is in pursuit of this goal that the consolidation of its material security is directed on all levels —military, political, social and human. And this is achieved by respecting the most stringent requirements of ethics and justice.”

January 27, 2024, anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp.

Translated from [French](#) by Murray Watson.