

# MIDDLE EAST VIEWS ON THE FRENCH ELECTION

## MACRON: LESSONS OF A LONG MARCH

On May 7th, Emmanuel Macron became the 25th president of the Republic of France - its youngest since the 19th century. With an absolute majority - 66% of the votes against 34%, Macron scored a landslide victory against the far-right candidate, Marine Le Pen. He is the first post-war head of state to be elected from outside a traditional party structure.

It was the independent candidate's first political campaign. A former investment banker and a committed free-trader, never elected though once a Minister, Macron is not considered part of the French political elite, and is pro-business but socially liberal. He has pledged to strengthen the euro, cut taxes on business and kick-start competitiveness by allowing more company flexibility and by inviting top scientists to relocate to France.

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Capturing the presidency is a remarkable achievement for Macron, who built his En Marche! movement in just the past year. This election, though, revealed a profoundly divided country between the East and the West, as well as between suburbs and cities (Macron got more than 90% of the votes in Paris). More globally,

the country appears split in two between the optimistic and the pessimistic, the nationalists and the globalists and between the winners and the losers of globalization.

Still, beyond this divide, Macron managed to install the center as a new force in the French political landscape through a tactic described as a "French version of Bill Clinton's old triangulation, a reformed left in the guise of centrism." The months to come will tell if those new rules of the game are there to last or if this election was only a temporary eclipse of traditional left and right parties.

For the pundits, while Macron may seem to have stopped the populist bleeding in Europe, he didn't truly capture the votes of the discontent majority: another key takeaway of this election is the low turnout: one fourth of the electorate didn't show up to the polls, the highest percentage since the 1960s, with the blank votes establishing a new record in the history of the 5th Republic.

Last but not least, this election is a clear message to the world, a pro-European vote, as highlighted by the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who tweeted that he was happy "the French had chosen a European future." A fierce defender of the EU, Emmanuel Macron pushed during the campaign for a

true European budget with a finance minister for the Eurozone, and a promotion of foreign investments in Europe.

## THE STATE OF THE EXTREME RIGHT AFTER MAY 7

The far-right reached this second round in a historic result, doubling its score between 2002 and 2017. Nevertheless, Marine Le Pen's strategic line during the campaign and her poor performance at the last debate have put her leadership in question. Will the far-right manage to become a credible opposition party in the coming months? Marine Le Pen conceded defeat yesterday but said her National Front party needed to transform itself to become the main opposition to a Macron presidency. She may have succeeded in "detoxing her brand," but she failed to shatter France's glass ceiling. For now.

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR FRANCE

After the utter defeat of both the socialists and the conservatives, the extreme right and extreme left are now fighting to become the lead opposition party to Emmanuel Macron.

Deep uncertainty now surrounds the nature of the coalition that will actually govern, as well as on the program that Mr. Macron will put in place, as he is a brand-new character in French politics with no party roots: will he be able to find good-willing partners to exercise power, at least for the first months or years of his mandate?

The Parliamentary elections shall lift this uncertainty, on June 11 and 18.

## FRANCE IN EUROPE

In Europe, Macron is expected to work with his young counterparts (think Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Italy and others) on a project that could form the basis for a fresh pro-European revival.

This movement will be closely monitored in other parts of the world, including the Middle East, which are trying to establish their own models of regional cooperation and find lessons to be replicated - or avoided.

While it brought stability to the markets, Macron's victory might have been perceived as upsetting from a competing worldview perspective that might be prevalent in certain MENA countries: a worldview that endorses isolationism, a strongman approach to governance and one that sees diminishing value in collective efforts on a global level.

## FRANCE ON THE WORLD STAGE: MULTILATERAL POLITICS BACK ON THE AGENDA

Macron's victorious message of tolerance has been welcomed in the Middle East - like elsewhere around the world. In defeating Le Pen and her notoriously anti-Islamic campaign, Macron has re-established the high ground of Fraternite - a trademark French value - signifying the victory of an open and inclusive society over a closed one, meanwhile reassuring the Arab populations that they are in fact welcome in France: to live, visit and do business.

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The next French president has also oriented himself towards a global engagement from a clear pro-European point of view. In this sense, the vote for Macron was a reassuring vote of confidence for a liberal

worldview considered to be in decline: democracy in a wider sense, pro-globalisation and pro-EU opinion got a boost and with it, a rising claim for greater legitimacy. In other words, the troubled pro-Western coalition got a long-needed boost. A stronger EU, heightened international trade, a renewed push for global engagement through EU and NATO are likely to make a come-back to the international agenda.

Issues like the refugee flow and the Syria question, counter-Daesh coalition and overall security landscape are some of the key spheres of direct cooperation where Macron will have to directly engage the Arab world. The president-elect is also expected to continue France's traditional role on peacekeeping in Africa and the Middle East.

## MACRON MEANS BUSINESS: POTENTIAL FOR GREATER ARAB-FRENCH ECONOMIC RELATIONS

As a former Economy Minister and banker, Macron has been granted a symbolic mandate to set the French economy in order - and the markets celebrated his victory with a big bump. That might include a charm-offensive campaign to vie foreign investments - one likely to get a positive response from countries strong on economic diplomacy, such as in the GCC.

Overall, analysts in the region agree that Macron's term will continue to improve the French-Arab relations that are already deemed strong: case in point is the UAE, whose third largest trading partner is indeed France.

The UAE leadership congratulated Macron on Sunday night via diplomatic cables. The Emirates News Agency, WAM, reported on His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's message highlighting "the UAE's keen interest in promoting bilateral relations between the UAE and France in various spheres to serve the interests of their people."

GCC's diversification efforts are in line with some of Macron's formulated policy positions - such as greater promotion of renewable energy. Other areas for cooperation include notably anti-terrorism, cyber security, aerospace, food and beverage and transportation. Already, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar

and the UAE are among the largest partners of French defence technology. Also, the current minister of defence, Jean Yves Le Drian, has been one of Macron's key supporters and is expected to get an important role in the new presidential team.

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