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President of France Francois Mitterrand

(The speech was delivered in French. The following is an unofficial translation)

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker of the Knesset, Mr. Prime Minister, ladies and gentleman, members of Knesset: On the occasion of this first visit of a French head of state in Israel, in this land, I want to say to you that it is my honor to be your guest here on this stage that represents your democracy, allowing me to congratulate you, representatives of this nation, a noble and proud nation, on all of its wholeness and diversity.

I thank you Mr. Speaker for the words that you just said. Indeed, you are right in your point that our two nations do not need official events in order to appreciate one another, to understand one another, to get to know one another and to meet. Many times in the past our efforts have coincided, our hopes have been concentrated together and our fates have been connected. In the last twenty-five to thirty years, countless connections have been created between France and Israel, both organic and public. Similarly, France positioned itself from the beginning as one of the countries that encouraged without reservation your entrance as an independent nation, master of its fate, into the community of nations.

Indeed, France was also one of the first countries that established diplomatic ties with the young country, with only the Soviet Union and the United States barely preceding it. France helped you at a later stage, as was necessary, but it also added a value, and that is friendship, in order to strengthen your presence in the global arena and to ensure your safety. I do not bring up these facts in order to receive praise or to elicit feelings of gratitude. First and foremost, Israel needs to protect its children, to stand by the work of its children and its nation and to be true to the hope that cannot be uprooted. However, when Israel needed to double its strength and the number of its allies in order to complete its masterpiece, the recognized right to a land that it could return to, it was France, ladies and gentlemen, that stood by its side.

Indeed, the French nation is a friend to the nation of Israel. The dark years, the difficult trials of the Jewish communities are still hovering above our heads, but the heart of the French nation beat as one for the establishment of the State of Israel. The Holocaust was interwoven in a major way in your resurrection, and from then on the French nation has never stopped to admire the work and activities that symbolized the vitality you have displayed, the faith in the future.

From here on out Israel lives, and we will not reduce our efforts to make certain that Israel's right to exist will be recognized globally, unconditionally, and that its right to maintain the means of its existence will also be secured. I will speak, therefore - so that my comments

will be somewhat balanced – of what France, Europe and western culture, which we are a part of, owe to the [actions] of the Jewish people over the past 3,000 years and more, until the day that ray of light broke through - and it still shines on us.

Our relations are based on history, culture, searching for an explanation for unity in the world, searching for ourselves, a form of existence, a form of life, a society organized around the people and which exists for them, and finally the supremacy of logic and reason [...]. That same need has allowed us to have more and more in common, and it reaches the boundaries of art, literature, science, technology, economy, social relationships and those cultural and spiritual values that have always been a source of inspiration in our activities.

Therefore, you see that there were many reasons to respond to your invite. However, I want to add that the time has come, after a long absence, too long, for France, through its first class representatives, to take its place among you. Seventy thousand Frenchmen live in Israel, and we know that our embassies are in constant communication with them. The governments themselves also share information, consult with each other, and yet our dialogue has its peaks and valleys. We hide behind this friendship, and sometimes we pretend not to recognize one another. In short, what is needed is a restart.

You, who are here, must find a way to settle the matter. France could [speak to the national community], but it is not technically one of the nations concerned in the matter. This is a matter of principle – peace, liberty, justice, it is impossible to relate to them by way of a mediator. Therefore, France did not come here to teach a lesson, to condemn or praise. It has also not come here as a mediator or as a creator of compromise between nations and countries, who are free above all to act as they please, and this despite the fact that France is one of those countries that - because of their historical status, their position of friendship and their interests – were thought of in the past as traditional dialogue partners of people in the Middle East and who therefore maintain good relations with many of the countries in the region. As a member of the UN Security Council, it must examine the reasons and nature of conflicts, and it also believes it is responsible for peace.

It has been alleged against me that by deciding to come here I have approved of all aspects of your policy. However, you have not demanded this, and I did not understand how it is possible to mix things that are separate. Which country has ever received my complete approval? From which country would I have requested that it accept everything that we find appropriate to do?

Ladies and gentleman, we need to understand the exchanges between us in a clearer manner. A state visit's goal, in general, is to bring opinions and positions that were once different closer together. When we are talking about allies, even friends, what is important and preferred is to know what the arguments are. Therefore, it is natural that in the name of France I have my own opinions on the key matters on this region and I that I announce them.

Because I am expressing these opinions by virtue of the basic rights given to me, just as they have been given to others, I believe that the central right is the right to life. This right, ladies and gentleman, is your right. This right is also the right of the nations that surround you.

When I say these words I am referring to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. I am also thinking of the legal and political realities - even if these are not similar - of the nation in Lebanon.

However, before I speak about this, I want to explain the reasons why I took positions regarding Israel that no one could question. Why in 1947, when I was a member of my government, and you certainly remember me, even you Mr. Prime Minister, I was, along with with Edward De Pere, one of the two ministers who tried to give refuge to the 'Exodus'? Because I thought that these women and men were searching for liberty and were expelled from every place and chased out from every place although we heard lofty statements from all those places. Why in 1978 did I accept the Camp David accords upon myself? Because I thought that those who fought amongst themselves have the right to make peace and come closer to one another so that they may solve together the Palestinian problem. Why in 1980 did I fight against the G7 Summit in Venice, which diverted the Camp David process to a corner in favor of comprehensive negotiations? Because I prefer a peace that goes step after step instead of one that never happens, a realistic negotiation over an unsure one, though obviously without preventing a comprehensive agreement from being signed at the end. Why, as the President of the French Republic in 1981 did I refuse to allow France to continue the boycott against Israel? Because of the rule that I go by according to which there can be no acceptance of discrimination against an honorable nation. Why did I agree that France would take part in the neutral forces in Sinai? Because we always volunteer when there is a place to help a peace process. Why did I ultimately accept the invitation of Mr. Navon and Begin to come in 1982 to Israel? Here we have returned to the starting point: For France there is no 'no', nothing is prohibited. We speak in one language to all entities.

This development shows you in advance the direction of my comments and why I request that the Arabs of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will have a homeland, because it is impossible to demand to forfeit an identity and a place, and this is essentially the question that is presented. The Palestinians, I have said, and all the others from wherever they're from, must decide their fate. This, on the condition that [...] they respect the rights of other countries and the international right to dialogue in the place of violence. I, like everyone else, am not able to decide who represents this nation and who does not. How is the PLO, for example, which speaks in the name of the fighters, able to hope to sit at the negotiating table when it negates Israel's principle right to exist? Dialogue is conditioned upon mutual recognition of the right of the other to exist and the forfeit of direct or indirect war as an option so that everyone has freedom of action if the dialogue fails.

Dialogue means that every side can utilize its rights to the fullest. Regarding the Palestinians, like others, that ultimately means a state. France will approve dialogue, or coming closer to dialogue, and it will also [be attentive to] any unilateral action which delays peace. No one can decide the borders and the conditions, which, according to UN Resolution 242, are dependent on both sides. The negotiators must decide on this issue. Still, negotiations must take place, and I suggest that everything be subject to negotiations - just as you said, Mr. Prime Minister, when President Sadat was here on the 20th of November, 1977.

I don't know if there is an answer that is accepted by all of you regarding the Palestinian issue. There is no doubt that the problem exists and is prevalent, and if it is not resolved, it will weigh heavily in a tragic manner on the region. I am not speaking about this only because I am keeping with my obligation, but also because world peace requires the settling of conflicts everywhere, including the Middle East. Any local or regional conflict that has continued for a long time attracts the world powers like a magnet, [because they] are looking for an opportunity to exercise their power. Every regional or local conflict that doesn't get resolved drags additional forces after it.

We also want there to be bilateral relations between our countries. These relations will be handled by the ministers who came with me, together with their counterparts on the other side of the table.

The warm welcome yesterday and the clarity of our discussions have proven to me that these are the things that improve the dialogue and the relations between us, which have grown stronger. Because I am [representing] my country here, I have to mention France's priorities: Greater unity of the European community, which France is a part of; a strong alliance of the Atlantic body and a dependence on its decisions when it is active – those fireworks that can be seen occasionally with the activity for disarmament and other activities to improve or prevent anything that damages human rights, the rights of nations, and ample opportunities for the dialogue that for hundreds of years has allowed us to converse with... [Eastern Europe]. There are also things, which pertain to me personally, when it comes to sides which join together as one – that same policy that is also realistic and relates to the Third World and the rich world. Today it is about a change in the monetary system; today there is a refusal to seek the means to develop the energy capability of those countries that do not have oil; there is a refusal to carry out a policy that supports providing raw materials to those countries that wish to develop, at a time when there are countries that cannot develop in an orderly manner, year after year, and I am speaking of poor countries and industrial countries.

To conclude, ladies and gentleman, I realize that I haven't yet talked about Jerusalem, and indeed we are in Jerusalem. The Bible, as I have said, has nourished me from youth. When I read the bible I learned that Jerusalem is the city of peace in your language, the city of unity, contradictions, the eternal city, and I hope the universal city. One of these days, the separated brothers will gather in Jerusalem, with a determined will to continue to survive. You, I am sure, will have the skill to produce the courage that will turn the pain to happiness and the suffering to hope for everyone. I know you and I'm sure. Our paths have crossed not just once. Friendship has developed between us. I now turn to the Knesset, the Knesset of Israel, and in the name of France I express my faith in these national representatives, to ensure, in conjunction with all of our high ideals, the turning around of Israel. I am putting my faith in you because I know of what I am talking. No one knows better than you the centuries that have passed, no one knows better than you the struggles that brought about the ingathering of the exiles. You also know how to respond and to provide an answer, and it is upon you to find an answer for the large Arab nation, which also comes from a major culture.

...Before I return to my place, I want to say a few simple words in Hebrew: Long life and sustainable peace to the nation of Israel; long life and sustainable peace to the nations of the region, renewed friendship and peace. Shalom friends.