



Interview given by Mr Jacques CHIRAC, President of the French Republic to the newspaper "Al Hayat".

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Elysée Palace, saturday 4 march 2006.

QUESTION - Saudi Arabia is a key player in the Middle East. What are your expectations of the kingdom on regional matters? What are the priority political issues you hope to move forward on with the Saudi leaders you will be meeting?

THE PRESIDENT - First, I would like to say what a great pleasure it is for me to return to Saudi Arabia, on the invitation of His Majesty King ABDULLAH. My last trip to the kingdom, on 2 August 2005, was a time of mourning and homage, as France offered its condolences to King Abdullah at the funeral of His Majesty, the deeply regretted King Fahd.

I am delighted to be back in Riyadh for this state visit, accompanied by a large delegation of ministers and business leaders.

France and Saudi Arabia enjoy excellent relations, cemented by a long history and strong, trusting ties between their leaders. France was one of the first countries to recognise the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, when it was founded in 1932. The meeting between King Faisal and General de Gaulle in Paris in 1967 laid the foundations for a necessary rapprochement between Europe and the Gulf region. Those two great statesmen understood that France and Saudi Arabia had common interests, which justified a natural and necessary working relationship.

Since that date, the ties between our two countries have steadily grown stronger. Our rapprochement was crowned by the implementation of a strategic partnership between France and Saudi Arabia in 1996, during my visit to Jeddah. The partnership encompasses diplomacy and politics, economic ties, and military and security cooperation.

It also includes cultural affairs, which I consider of prime importance and which deserve more focus. In a globalising world, it is crucial to improve reciprocal knowledge of our respective cultures. We must learn to live together in mutual respect. The Islamic Art Department of the Louvre, generously co-financed by Saudi donors, is an example to be followed.

Saudi Arabia is a major actor on the regional and international scene, and my visit will be an opportunity to confirm the convergence of views between France and the kingdom on current affairs of key importance.



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The kingdom is an essential player in the Gulf, naturally, but also in the Middle East as a whole. Saudi Arabia is also a global partner through its role throughout the Islamic world and its clout in the energy sector.

In all these areas, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a policy of dialogue and appeasement under the enlightened guidance of His Majesty King ABDULLAH, whose experience and moderating influence are well known to all.

We share the Saudi leaders' concern to preserve stability and security in the region. It is out of this shared concern that I will be discussing with them the situation in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, as well as the Israel-Palestine peace process.

QUESTION - You are travelling to Saudi Arabia with an important economic mission. What economic agreements do you hope to secure?

THE PRESIDENT - Saudi Arabia is enjoying an economic boom, powered chiefly by the judicious use of exceptional oil revenues.

Saudi Arabia is our number-two trading partner in the region and trade is rapidly increasing. More than 60 French companies are already established in Saudi Arabia and contributing to that boom. Those companies are benefiting from the open economic policy introduced by the Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia's process of economic and social modernisation was highlighted recently by the kingdom's entry into the WTO, which I personally strongly supported.

I nevertheless think that France, which is an important client for Saudi Arabia, can and must be more present. I am convinced that the current environment is favourable to strengthening our economic ties, from which both countries would draw mutual benefit, particularly in terms of job creation.

With that aim, the business leaders accompanying me are ready to engage future-oriented projects in industry, infrastructure and services. France would also like to encourage Saudi investment in various sectors of the French economy.

I am delighted at the Saudi business community's invitation to speak about our economic ties. That will give me an opportunity to present France's dynamic, modern economy, to argue for more partnerships - such as on some of the major infrastructure projects that the kingdom has launched - and to stress French companies' interest in increasing their presence, by developing close links with their Saudi counterparts.

QUESTION - There has been an attempted terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia aimed at an oil refinery that provides 8% of world oil consumption. What comment do you wish to make, since you will be visiting Saudi Arabia, in the face of such attempts at destabilisation and terrorist action?



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THE PRESIDENT - Firstly, I note that the attack was forestalled thanks to the action taken by the Saudi security forces, which is fortunate. All forms of terrorist attack are to be condemned. Nothing can justify terrorism and I condemn it with the greatest possible firmness. It is like a fatal virus that affects certain societies. For this reason, I associate myself with anything that enables terrorism to be fought successfully.

QUESTION - Saudi Arabia has been a victim of terrorism, like many Arab and Western countries. Do you think that a clash of civilisations between the Muslim world and the West will further fuel terrorism? What can be done to curb terror?

THE PRESIDENT - France has always condemned terrorism of every kind wherever it occurs. During the series of terrorist attacks that hit Saudi Arabia in 2003 and 2004, France expressed its solidarity with the kingdom and its strong sympathy for the families of the victims of those inhuman acts.

France has confidence in the Saudi security forces, which have spared no effort in combating the scourge of terrorism. France also supports the diplomatic initiatives that Saudi Arabia has made to unite all our forces in the fight against terrorism within the framework of the United Nations and in accordance with the law. France sent a high-level delegation to the Counter-Terrorism International Conference held in Riyadh in February 2005.

As you know, France has also paid a heavy price to terrorism in the past. We have always responded with the utmost firmness. We know that some terrorist movements, exploiting the upheavals and misunderstandings generated by globalisation, imagine a "clash of civilisations", which they hope will serve their agenda. That is even more reason to encourage dialogue between cultures to help us better understand our differences and perceive them in a spirit of mutual tolerance and openness.

QUESTION - Iran is a source of concern in the Gulf region. Do you think that isolating President Ahmadinejad increases the risk of a worst-case scenario in the region?

THE PRESIDENT - Iran's current attitude is a source of concern for the region and the entire international community.

We do not question Iran's legitimate right to civilian nuclear energy, on condition that Iran honour its commitments on non-proliferation in good faith, and provide objective guarantees. We have even offered Iran support for its civilian nuclear programme.

However, Iran's leaders have taken the initiative of breaking off the negotiation process initiated in 2003 - in which the Paris Agreement signed in November 2004 was a milestone - and of unilaterally resuming sensitive activities that contravene unanimous IAEA resolutions. That is the reasons for the international community's reaction.



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I urge Iran's leaders to resume the spirit of dialogue and understand the wishes of the entire international community: the whole objective of the negotiations undertaken by the Europeans was to find a basis for a settlement that would benefit all parties, within the framework of international law.

The resolution submitted by the United Kingdom, Germany and France to the IAEA's Board of Governors in early February received extremely wide support. In early March, the United Nations Security Council is due to receive a report from the IAEA. Furthermore, France and Egypt successfully called for the IAEA to support "a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction".

I say it with force: the door remains open to the resumption of talks, as soon as Iran complies with the IAEA's demands. However, if Iran's leaders do not take the necessary steps to restore confidence, the United Nations Security Council will decide accordingly.

More than ever, the choice is in the hands of Iran's leaders.

Naturally I place the highest importance on the Saudi authorities' views on this matter, which is crucial to peace in the region and the world.

QUESTION - But with Mr. AHMADINEJAD, do you believe that given how Iran is today, we have any prospect of tranquillity in the region, whether it is in Lebanon, the Gulf or with Hezbollah?

THE PRESIDENT - First of all, that is Iran's problem and I am for my own part tempted in principle to have confidence in a country that is a great nation, that is an ancient civilisation and a great culture.

Where the nuclear issues are concerned, I regret that it was not possible to reach any agreement on the basis of the European proposals. Of course, nobody is denying Iran's right to develop nuclear power generation, that it is to say the civil uses of nuclear power. On the other hand, there are general rules accepted by the entire international community with respect to non proliferation, to avoid access to technologies that can be exceedingly dangerous.

I hope that the situation will evolve in the direction of stability. I am pleased to note that discussions are being held at the present time between Iran and Russia. We do not yet know what the outcome of these may be, but it will perhaps offer a positive avenue to a solution. In the IAEA, we have ourselves argued - and it is our devout wish for the future - for the existence in the Middle East of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone.

It is my wish that Iran should be aware in this context that we are offering a hand in friendship and respect on condition, naturally, that there is a minimum of contact and mutual understanding.

QUESTION - Do you think that Iraq is becoming to Iran what Lebanon was to Syria for 30 years?

THE PRESIDENT - Iraq is currently in the throes of instability and violence.



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France believes that a united, sovereign, democratic and stable Iraq, on good terms with its neighbours, is vital to peace. An inter-community conflict would have tragic consequences. Iraqis must gather around a national pact guaranteeing the country's integrity and ensuring that everyone is represented in the new institutions.

A consensus between all of Iraq's communities requires positive engagement from the neighbouring states. They must continue collectively to play a constructive role to help Iraq preserve national unity and establish the rule of law.

QUESTION - How do you see the future of Iraq today?

THE PRESIDENT - A security logic alone cannot restore peace. A genuinely inclusive political process is needed in order to isolate extremist groups. Iraqis of all faiths broadly participated in the elections held on 15 December 2005. We must encourage that movement and assist Iraqis to choose the path of dialogue and national reconciliation.

For that reason, the Arab League's initiative received France's full support. All the Iraqi parties met in Cairo and agreed on a final statement condemning terror, but also calling for the complete restoration of Iraqi sovereignty. France has been encouraging a return to sovereignty since the end of military operations, to enable Iraqis to take their destiny into their own hands.

The prospect of a withdrawal of foreign forces, whose presence has drawn the hostility of a share of Iraqi opinion, is also a factor likely to contribute to national dialogue. The multinational force is deployed in Iraq pursuant to Resolution 1546. France thinks that a date should be set to enable Iraqis to start to assume responsibility for their own affairs.

France stands alongside Iraqis on the path of national reconciliation, unity and democracy-building. In those issues too, the insights and advice of King Abdullah will be valuable to me.

QUESTION - Many countries, including the United States, are threatening to cut off aid to the Palestinians because of the participation of Hamas in the government. Can France convince Europe and America to continue their aid to the Palestinians? What conditions would be attached to that aid? Are hopes of peace fading in Palestine and Israel since Hamas came to power?

THE PRESIDENT - You are aware of France's constant commitment to peace in the region, which involves two states living side by side in mutual respect and security. You also know that France is a friend of the Palestinian people and wants to see their legitimate aspirations met. You are also aware of my firm belief that violence is never a solution, that it is, on the contrary, destructive and profoundly negative. For those reasons, France has constantly supported the efforts made since Oslo to reach a lasting solution.



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Democratic elections have taken place and the Palestinians have made their choice. France respects that choice. No one wants to cut off international aid to the population. I would like to recall that the European Union has been the leading donor to the Palestinian territories since the Oslo Accords.

By contrast, the issue of assistance to the Palestinian Authority has been raised by the accession to power of Hamas, which is listed as a terrorist organisation by Europe and the United States. In that regard, it is clear that the continuation of European aid will depend on the attitude and commitments of the new Palestinian government.

In that respect, I would like to reiterate France's position, which has been expressed several times in the past few days. Any solution must include respect for three principles: recognition of Israel, renunciation of violence, and recognition of the agreements signed between the PLO and Israel, in particular the Oslo Accords.

Regarding the hopes of peace, Hamas's accession to power obviously changes the regional situation. It is too early to tell what its actual impact will be on the prospects of a settlement in a region where, as you know, events can develop extremely fast.

In the immediate term, we urge Hamas to recognise that violence is a dead-end and to pursue its transition to political action, by adhering to the ceasefire and committing to a process of renunciation of violence and recognition of Israel. Hamas must follow that logic through, because there is no alternative.

But we are also calling on the Israelis to surpass the logic of unilateralism. A just and lasting peace in the region cannot be imposed by either party single-handedly. At the end of the day, as we all know, there is no alternative to the resumption of genuine negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

QUESTION - And do you think that the election of Hamas in Palestine is likely to threaten the security of Lebanon given that Palestinian camps are under the control not only of Syria but also of Hamas, now victorious in Palestine?

THE PRESIDENT - Let me say first that I have no knowledge of whether Palestinian camps are under the overall control of any given authority. Hamas has many problems, it is faced with many difficulties. The Palestinians undeniably voted for Hamas in a fair election. I think that it is for this reason confronted with a number of realities, and most notably those involved in its integration into the international community, with all that that means in terms of the aid of which Palestinians have an imperative need. This presupposes a degree of change on its part if it is to integrate into the international community, especially on decisive issues such as the recognition of Israel, such as the recognition of the agreements signed between Israel and the PLO, first among which are the Oslo Accords, such as a renunciation of terrorist acts. Hamas needs to begin by handling all these problems and



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changes, which is not easy and will take a little time. I do not believe that it is in its interest at the present time to add more problems.

QUESTION - Numerous acts of destabilisation, bomb attacks, crimes and provocation of Christians have occurred in Lebanon since the beginning of the international investigation into the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister. How do you think the international community can protect Lebanon from Syria's attempts at destabilisation?

THE PRESIDENT - Lebanon and France have always been bound by special ties. They are heartfelt ties, close ties between the French and Lebanese peoples, ties forged and made indestructible by adversity.

We are committed, alongside the international community, to enabling the Lebanese people to recover full independence and full sovereignty over their entire territory. That process reached a major stage with the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005, followed by the organisation of free and transparent elections in June. Those are major achievements.

But the road to a stable Lebanon remains long.

The defenders of Lebanon's freedom and independence have paid a heavy price. I bow down before their sacrifice and offer my deepest sympathy to their families in their loss. But their struggle is the struggle of all Lebanese people who aspire to the sovereignty of their country.

Those responsible for the assassinations must know that the defenders of Lebanon's independence are not alone. The international community is with them, and determined to succeed. France is willing to step up its security and economic assistance to the Lebanese authorities, to support the necessary reforms.

A government reform package approved by all the major factions and implemented by a cohesive executive will contribute to greater stability in the country. An international aid conference must be convened in Lebanon as soon as possible. I would like to consult with the Saudi authorities to ensure the conference every chance of success. Egypt also has a key role to play on this issue.

With respect to Syria, the Security Council resolutions are clear. The international community calls on Syria not to interfere in Lebanon's internal affairs and to cease support for forces seeking to destabilise Lebanon and the wider region. With our partners, we are determined to see these resolutions implemented fully. This is an opportunity for Syria to establish an egalitarian relationship with Lebanon that is respectful of mutual sovereignty.

The Syrian and Lebanese peoples are bound by historical, political, cultural and economic ties. Only mutual trust and esteem can preserve and advance those ties in the interests of both states.



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QUESTION - There are many in Lebanon who doubt that Rafic Hariri's assassins will ever be brought to justice or the investigation completed because it will be a long process and the situation in France and the United States will change in the meantime. What is your view? Does France still have a different line from the USA on Hezbollah? What is your assessment of Hezbollah's action in Lebanon now? What timeframe do you think should be set for Resolution 1559?

THE PRESIDENT - I say it formally: that crime cannot go unpunished. Truth and justice are essential to the advent of a new Lebanon. Pursuant to the United Nations Security Council resolutions, the international community and France intend to fully investigate the bomb blast that cost Mr Hariri and his companions their lives.

Like Saudi Arabia, France fully supports the international investigation commission now headed by Serge Brammetz. France also awaits the truth on the other attacks that have bloodied Lebanon. The establishment of an international court as soon as possible will permit the exercise of efficient and dispassionate justice.

Regarding Hezbollah, our position has not changed: the movement is representative of a large share of the Lebanese population. As such, it must participate fully in the country's political life and work in the interests of the Lebanese people.

However, Hezbollah does have to change to enable the Lebanese government to assume full responsibility for governing the country, as set forth by Resolution 1559, which must be implemented in full.

I salute the efforts of all the political and community leaders who have courageously engaged in talks in order to reach those objectives rapidly through national dialogue. They have our full support.

QUESTION - France has always been a friend to Lebanon and particularly a friend to Lebanese Christians, who are fearful after the latest unrest in the Christian neighbourhood of Beirut. What can the international community do to reassure them?

THE PRESIDENT - We were shocked by the riots in Beirut that led to the attacks on the Danish mission and a Maronite Catholic church. We strongly condemned the attacks. No pretext can justify such violence. We praise the calm of the Christians, who did not respond to the provocation by a handful of irresponsible people.

My feeling today is that the Lebanese understand the overarching need for national dialogue and inter-community understanding, with respect for the beliefs and views of each community. A sovereign, democratic state that upholds individual and collective freedoms is the best guarantee for Lebanese people of all faiths. That is the aim of the international community, in particular France.



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QUESTION - Can Bashar al-Assad's Syria renew its ties with France and on what conditions?

THE PRESIDENT - It is up to Syria alone to improve its relations with the international community by complying with the Security Council's decisions. That is the only condition. Syria, which is a major country in the region, has every interest in returning to the fold of normal international relations and in renewing its traditional ties with France.

But to do so, Syria must change its attitude, particularly in its dealings with Lebanon, and cooperate fully and unreservedly with the international investigation commission.

QUESTION - Mr President, President Lahoud has criticised personally both the President of France and his ambassador in Lebanon. This has caused considerable comment and many reactions. I would like to know: what is your reply to those criticisms?

THE PRESIDENT - Let people say what they will; I make no reply. I have no comment to make on such remarks. You are perfectly aware of France's position: we support Lebanon, we support it politically in order to enable it to recover its full independence, its sovereignty, its authority. We support Lebanon economically. We are very active in preparing a future conference under the heading "Beirut I", that is to say a meeting of Lebanon's friends with a view to providing economic support and support for the reforms in which Lebanon must imperatively engage. I have no intention of interfering politically in any way at all in Lebanon.

QUESTION - Mr. President, the Syrians have criticised France. Mr. Khaddam came to France, he has spoken out, he has given interviews, the Syrians have alerted the entire world. Why is Mr. Khaddam in France? Do you intend to keep him here forever? Is France actually playing a role aimed at changing the Syrian regime?

THE PRESIDENT - France, as I have said to you, is not interfering in any way in Lebanese internal politics. Nor is it interfering in Syrian internal politics, despite the fact that it would wish to see Syria conduct itself in a manner compliant in all respects with UN resolutions, whether that involves avoidance of destabilising Lebanon and the region, or unreserved cooperation with the International Investigation Commission, as is expected of it, in accordance with UN resolutions. France is not interfering and passes no judgement, other than entertaining the hope of seeing Syria return to a course of action that takes account of UN resolutions, and thus return to its logical place, that of a great country, in the international community. Mr. Khaddam is in France as a private individual. There is strictly no contact between him and the French government. He therefore expresses himself strictly as a private individual and in no way in agreement with France.

QUESTION - Since the assassination of President HARIRI and those with him, there have been at least five murders of public figures and journalists in



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Lebanon. What can the international community do to counter the harm Syria is doing in Lebanon? How to explain to the Syrians, "Stop these assassinations, stop doing these things because Lebanon is afraid"?

THE PRESIDENT - Lebanon is afraid, and past experience justifies such fear, alas. I believe that Syria would be well advised to understand that any action to destabilise Lebanon - whether by sending in weapons or by assassination - would be totally incompatible with its status in the international community and would not fail to provoke a reaction from that community. This is in nobody's interests and I would wish Syria to be fully aware of the situation. Negotiations are currently under way on the United Nations Security Council for the setting up of an International Tribunal. Almost everyone is agreed on the principle. The high Lebanese judicial authorities are indeed in the process of discussing the matter with the UN Secretary-General. I think that the formation of such a tribunal will be likely not only to provide justice but will also dissuade action to destabilise Lebanon.

QUESTION - On several occasions you have said that "France has no policy for regime change in Syria". What does a change of conduct on the part of Syria mean? Is that not in fact of the same nature as a change of regime?

THE PRESIDENT - It is completely legitimate for the international community to examine and to judge conduct that may destabilise a third country and in that context to indicate its disapproval and to offer advice. That is very precisely our own attitude.

QUESTION - What is delaying the signing of a treaty of friendship between Algeria and France? Is it the law on France's positive role during the colonial period?

THE PRESIDENT - The treaty of friendship between France and Algeria is an essential objective in the process to set Franco-Algerian relations on new foundations and implement the special partnership that France would like to establish with Algeria.

Our two countries want to build a new, peaceful and lasting relationship. This is in everyone's interest: Algeria is our largest neighbour to the south, and our security depends on a trust-based relationship with a stable and prosperous Algeria. Signing a treaty of friendship is therefore a vital undertaking for our two countries and peoples, who are bound by history and strong common interests.

The treaty will provide a framework for constructive, forward-looking dialogue.

QUESTION - The cartoons published in Denmark and reprinted by French newspapers triggered extremely violent reactions in the Muslim world. Do you think the West is entering a dangerous conflict with the Muslim world? What do you think of the rising intolerance of Islam in France and in the West in general? What can French officialdom do to support its own Muslim community of around 5



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million people in combating that intolerance?

THE PRESIDENT - I understand that the publication of the cartoons sparked misunderstanding and disapproval by Muslims, wherever they live.

During the crisis, I asserted France's position by condemning all manifest provocation likely to hurt beliefs and dangerously fuel passions. I insisted that the right to free speech, which is a pillar of our democracy, should nevertheless be exercised in a spirit of responsibility, underpinned by values of tolerance and respect.

Be that as it may, the violence directed against European nationals and diplomatic missions is unacceptable and must be condemned. Violence serves the cause of extremists. It is important to appeal to responsibility and calm, but also to give a new impetus to dialogue between cultures.

That is in everyone's interest. In a globalising world, our destinies are becoming ever more closely interlinked. All peoples aspire to the rule of law, economic and social development, security, education, environmental conservation, etc. In all these areas, it is important to act in concert and establish partnerships founded on respect, such as the partnership between the two shores of the Mediterranean that has already been working for ten years.

In that spirit, dialogue between the West and the Muslim world needs to be permanent and expanded. Both to prevent misunderstandings from leading to mutual rejection and to calm hotspots in the Middle East that contribute to a widespread feeling of injustice and humiliation.

France respects all religions and beliefs. Islam, which is now the second largest religion in our country, has its rightful place. Several million people originally from Muslim countries now live in France, and many are French citizens. Within our secular state, which allows all religions to coexist in harmony, the Muslims of France enjoy full freedom of conscience, belief and worship.

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