



Interview with Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic, for " Le Monde" newspaper.

(Translated from the French)

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How to resolve the current crisis in the Middle East?

A meeting has been called in Rome on Lebanon, with two goals.

The first subject for discussion will be the humanitarian problems. The number of victims, the number of displaced persons, the mass destruction, particularly in Lebanon, of all the facilities required for everyday living, have created a humanitarian situation that is becoming dramatic, and which requires a reaction from the international community. The United States has mentioned a sum of 30 million dollars to be allocated to humanitarian aid in Lebanon. France, already strongly involved in humanitarian aid, has decided to make a significant gesture. I have requested that an additional 15 million euros be allocated to humanitarian aid in Lebanon. And, as I requested, humanitarian corridors are to be created.

The second point is political. It is essential for the international community to agree on the main principles of a political arrangement, to be implemented after a ceasefire. A ceasefire is crucial. This implies that the Israeli soldiers held by Hizbullah should be freed, as should the soldier taken hostage by Hamas. But first, a ceasefire is essential. It is the prerequisite.

There are two requirements for this ceasefire. First, Israel's security, which must be ensured, and second, the actual application, on the ground, of UN resolution 1559.

It is not possible to create a stable and democratic Lebanon, as is the country's clear vocation, if part of its territory escapes government authority and is under the control of militia. This was clearly specified in resolution 1559, and it must be achieved.

All the Lebanese, who are an ancient people, an ancient civilisation, which has overcome countless hurdles throughout history, including the tendency to quarrel among themselves, must understand that the stable, democratic State they desire cannot exist if the government cannot exercise its authority across the country's entire territory.

This implies a withdrawal of Hizbullah from South Lebanon, an agreement on the Shebaa farms, and an agreement concerning exchange of prisoners, in particular the return of Lebanese prisoners currently held in Israel. All this and then, for support, a multinational force to ensure the implementation of all these measures.

Are you calling for an immediate ceasefire?



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That is what I am hoping for. Because there is no military solution to this problem. And if an illustration was necessary, the disaster that UNIFIL just experienced shows that the situation on the ground is worsening. By striking UNIFIL, where French soldiers are also serving, the peacekeeping force of the international community has been attacked. We cannot but condemn this action, which more than ever demonstrates that the fighting must cease urgently.

In this conflict, responsibility is clearly shared. One thing is certain, and that is that the method used, strikes on Gaza on the one hand and then on Lebanon, is in my view, out of proportion. Also, I can comprehend a lot of things, but I do not believe in a military solution to this type of conflict. A ceasefire requires the conditions to be in place. That is a priority. Whether these conditions are easy to implement, that is another question. I am perfectly aware of the complexity of the situation. But if there is no military solution, a ceasefire is required. We need to discuss how it is to be implemented.

Between which parties could the political agreement you mentioned be negotiated?

This political agreement, which supposes a ceasefire, must be negotiated between the Lebanese government and Hizbullah, and between the international community, Israel and Lebanon.

Do you still feel it is inopportune to describe Hizbullah as a terrorist organisation?

It is not at a time when we want to see Hizbullah, if possible, return to within the Lebanese community and become a political party that we should raise questions of that nature.

How do you see an international force in Lebanon, and what would France's role be?

Use of a multinational force implies a number of essential conditions. The first is the acceptance of a ceasefire by all players concerned. The second is the acceptance of the very principle of an international force by the various parties. And the third is that this force should be under UN Chapter VII.

The mandate of this force should be very carefully prepared. First, there is a political objective, which is for the legal Lebanese government to recover full sovereignty over its entire territory. This is a *sine qua non*. There is also a military objective, which is to enable the Lebanese forces, restructured and assisted, to deploy across Lebanon and ensure the country's security.

This intervention force must have the resources and the rules of engagement suited to its mission.

The deployment zone must be consistent in size with its mission. Its mission would be to control the ceasefire and to ensure borders are respected, both the Israeli-Lebanese border and the Syrian-Lebanese border, naturally. The task would be to ensure that the zone from which Hizbullah should in principle have



withdrawn - that is the aim - has been fully demilitarised. And, finally, the mission of this force would be to ensure that no rockets, of any nature, are fired on Israel.

We also need to handle the security of the Israeli-Palestinian border. France does not believe it is NATO's role to set up such a force. For technical reasons but also for political reasons, NATO is not designed for this type of intervention. NATO is perceived, whether we like it or not, as the armed wing of the West in these regions, and consequently, in terms of its image, NATO is not the right organisation here.

If Hizbullah refuses to disarm and Israel accepts a conflict resolution scenario, who will disarm Hizbullah? The international force, the Lebanese army?

This is one of the real underlying questions. I do not believe that an international force, in the case where no political commitment could be obtained, would have the capacity or the mandate to disarm Hizbullah. It is up to the Lebanese authorities to do so. Which implies a political agreement. Hizbullah is currently in the Lebanese government. We can very well imagine, in any case hope, that Hizbullah will draw the conclusions from its presence within the government, and become a political force. This is why there has to be some contact between the Lebanese government and Hizbullah. Hizbullah, once disarmed, is set to be a political force in Lebanon.

Can you see an international force deployed between Israel and the Palestinians?

We have always believed in the need for some form of international presence to assist security at the Israeli-Palestinian border. The mandate and framework would naturally be different.

Should and could Syria have an influence on this situation in Lebanon?

I would be tempted first of all to talk about Iran, whose position is even more important than that of Syria. There is the nuclear issue, and then there is Iran in that region, and I do not believe we should mix up these two issues. Negotiations are underway with Iran. It is regrettable that Iran has not responded earlier. I believe that Iran must comply with international rules, and from this point of view, the country must understand that an agreement that complies with the rules of the international community, in other words non-proliferation, is in everyone's interest, and in Iran's interest. We must not forget that substantial proposals have been made to Iran. They include full co-operation concerning electronuclear issues, economic co-operation and dialogue concerning security issues in the region.

I would add that these proposals were not from the "Three" to Iran. The United States, Russia and China were associated. The entire international community was therefore involved. We indicated that if no agreement was reached, we would have to go to the Security Council and envisage more restrictive options,



including sanctions. But we are not at that stage.

We were a little disappointed at Iran's failure to respond promptly. There may be some domestic policy issues that have led to this delay, I do not know, I cannot pass judgement on that point. I sincerely hope that Iran will provide a positive response to the overtures that have been made, because that means in a way that, in one way or another, - and we are no longer talking about the nuclear issue but about the region, we recognise that Iran has a legitimate right to defend its position in the region. Iran is an ancient civilisation, a major country. Its desire to have weight in the region is legitimate. We cannot pretend it does not exist. We need to be able to re-establish normal relations with Iran.

Indeed, Iran has its share of responsibility in the current conflict. Our information shows that sophisticated weapons and funding are being sent by Iran, probably via Syria, to Hizbullah. This is a problem.

But we can discuss it with Iran. I would like to remind you that when the elections took place in Lebanon, there was a period when we wondered what Hizbullah's reaction to these elections would be. Would they contest the results? At that time, we had contacts with Iran. And I have to note that Iran was quite co-operative.

Do you think that the trigger for the crisis, on July 12th, bears Iran's signature?

I do not want to accuse anyone. I feel that neither Hamas nor Hizbullah took these irresponsible initiatives simply of their own accord. That is my impression.

Concerning Syria, I believe the problem is a little different. Syria has, it has to be said, a strongly minoritarian and very particular regime, which is both judge and judged, and which reacted quite badly, after thirty years of occupation, to the obligation to withdraw its troops 15,000 men from Lebanon. With the political, economic and social consequences that that implied. I do not have the same feeling about Syria as I do about Iran. What Syria can do best to protect itself and its population, particularly in terms of living standards and development, is not to seek revenge on Lebanon. That could be very dangerous for Syria.

What would France's role be in a multinational force?

I believe I have understood that the United States, failing a more effective, faster or better solution, sees only advantages, or no other solution than the intervention of NATO, i.e. of the NATO reaction force (NRF) which would be commanded by the chief of staff of the European corps consisting of Germany, France, Belgium and Spain.

I would add that, from what we understand, the United States wishes to send this force immediately, and it would, in a way, be responsible for the application of a ceasefire.

I have given you the reasons why I believe that we first need a ceasefire, then a political commitment, and after that, a multinational force on the ground, to carry out the tasks I mentioned earlier.



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I repeat, I do not think that NATO as such is the right solution. If not NATO, then what solution? Another expression of the international community, i.e. nations that agree to set up an international force of that nature. I am certain we can find a certain number of countries. Finding the lead nation capable of commanding the force is a more difficult question. Because there are not many nations that would be ready to do so.

Would France be prepared to do so?

France has always assumed its responsibilities in Lebanon. The decision will be made according to a certain number of conditions. We want a ceasefire, a political commitment, and an international force responsible for, in clearly defined conditions, applying this policy. At that point, we will consider.

We have the impression that in this affair, despite the differences, there is still considerable harmony between the US and French positions...

We want peace; there is no discussion about that. We have, together, in reality both of us, imposed resolution 1559. This is not something that occurred by magic. It is the result of joint action by the United States and France. It is a determining factor for stability in the region. From this point of view, we have had a joint approach. Perhaps we did not have exactly the same ulterior motives. I do not know. But we carried out the same action. This does not mean that we have always had the same position.

Concerning disarmament of Hizbullah, there is agreement between France, the United States and Israel, then?

There is general agreement on the need to apply resolution 1559.

Ms. Rice said that the time has come for a "new Middle East". Do you fear that the United States will pursue its project to transform the region?

I do not want to jump to conclusions, even less so put words into their mouths. One thing is certain; we cannot change a region by force. This crisis results from a long and highly complex history. The situation is totally different from that of 1982 or 1996. Things have evolved. We have had the Iraq war, whose consequences are far from over, which has in way moved the goalposts in this region, and has not simplified matters, to put it mildly. I find this situation increasingly worrying from all points of view.

There have been developments in the relationship between Shi'ia and Sunni Muslims, and something that worries me enormously, the hardening of relations between Islam worldwide and the West. With all that this brings with it in terms of fostering the development of terrorism.

Do you believe Iraq is in a state of civil war?

If it is not civil war, we are not far off. There is permanent confrontation, and what we feared from the beginning, a fragmentation of Iraq, which is the



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worst possible solution for the region, is beginning, I will not say to occur, but it is becoming a threat. Having said that, since France is not involved, we are not in a position to give lessons.

Are you in favour of an American withdrawal from Iraq?

From Iraq, definitely. The problem is that it is extremely difficult, since the presence of US troops is both necessary and a source of concern there. But I do not believe we can look to rebuild civil peace in Iraq without giving Iraqis the feeling they are truly a sovereign country. I think we need, at a date that remains to be set, to determine, in particular with the new Iraqi authorities, which we support, that there is a prospect for the departure of the foreign forces.

What means are at France's disposal to win agreement on the scenario you described for Lebanon?

I would say common sense. That does not mean that common sense always triumphs. We have clearly expressed our thoughts. We have certain traditional, historical knowledge of the region. We probably benefit from a certain trust on the part of the Lebanese in the broadest sense of the term, and also from their environment, in the Arab world. And Israel cannot doubt for a moment that for us, its security is an element on which no concessions are possible. We do have certain valuable experience to build on.

How to move forward without dialogue with Syria?

There was a time when I talked with Bashar al-Assad. I used to talk with his father. To be perfectly honest with you, we no longer talk. He was the one who broke it off. And then, I realised that it was achieving nothing. That the regime embodied by Bashar al-Assad seemed to me difficult to reconcile with security and peace.

Does that mean that you are committed to a policy of regime change also?

I would be extremely wary of adding additional complexity to a situation that does not require it.

Are the two problems, that of Lebanon and that of Palestine, linked?

They are two separate questions, even though there is an overall issue. We talked about the question of Lebanon, with a reminder that the key is resolution 1559. For Palestine, the key is to re-launch discussions, with Mahmoud Abbas first of all. When he came to Paris, then Ehoud Olmert came in turn, my feeling was that the dialogue was set to begin again. Both gave the impression that they were going to talk to one another and take the road of two independent States side by side, with guaranteed security and viability. I was rather optimistic.

I wonder how far Hamas, in its provocative behaviour, was inspired from



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outside. I do not know. What is certain is that the reprisal was also out of proportion, and everything has been suspended. The sole solution is to restart negotiations, which would, little by little, lead Hamas to accept the three points required of it: renounce violence, recognise Israel and accept the commitments made by the PLO. That is the solution.

What is Teheran's responsibility?

The situation in Lebanon and the nuclear question are two separate dossiers and should be treated as such. The question of the Middle East is totally different. Iran has a number of concerns. Iran wants to assert itself as a power - hence its desire to master nuclear technologies, this being a related issue - to assert itself as a power that exists, that has weight in the region.

This leads to two consequences. Firstly, Iran wants to establish normal relations with the rest of the world, in particular with the United States. Secondly, it wants to be able to give its opinion on regional questions, since it is an important regional power. It is logical to dialogue with Iran. We will then draw the necessary conclusions. We cannot make concessions on the nuclear issue. This is why I have said that it is a separate issue that will be dealt with if necessary by the Security Council. For the rest, everything depends on Iran's attitude. I reminded you of Iran's co-operative attitude during the Lebanese elections. At that time, we saw the influence that Iran can have over Hizbullah and its willingness to listen to advice on moderation. Perhaps those ideas are out of date now, but diplomacy is also founded on memory. |