

## France and Lebanon: diplomacy of tragedy

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The war in Lebanon has allowed France to reappear as a major partner in international affairs, and a key player in the search for peace in the "country of cedars". The United Nations Security Council resolution Paris co-sponsored with Washington in the attempt to halt the war is now near the diplomatic rocks [1], amid intense efforts to find a form of words that can satisfy all sides. But the very fact that France's diplomats and politicians have been at the centre of moves [2] to halt the devastation in Lebanon and the destruction in Israel is a highly significant moment in French and international politics.

The French, as a former colonial power in the region, have long historical, religious, linguistic and personal ties with the Lebanese (whose diaspora in France numbers several hundred thousand). The country has been deeply involved in Lebanon's modern conflicts [2], domestic as well as international. The French ambassador in Beirut (Louis Delamare) was murdered [3] by Syrian agents in September 1981, and fifty-eight French paratroopers were killed by suicide-bombers in October 1983 (in the incident that also took the lives of 241 American soldiers). So it is logical that Paris answered swiftly the emergency call sent by Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora.

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### **Lebanon's tragedy, Chirac's moment**

All French presidents have felt a close friendship with Lebanon, but Jacques Chirac probably most of all. This is partly because one of his closest friends (and, it is said, his financial backer) was the former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, murdered by Syrian agents in February 2005 [3]. Even before then, Chirac had joined with George W Bush to launch a diplomatic offensive to rid Lebanon of the Syrian military presence, which resulted (in September 2004) in the same UN resolution 1559 [4] which called for the disarmament of Hizbollah. Since the assassination of Hariri – which provoked immense outrage in Lebanon that precipitated what some hailed as a "cedar revolution [5]" and forced Syrian troops to leave the country – Chirac has refused to have any contact with Damascus.

Franco-American relations had been long soured by Paris refusal to condone the United States-British invasion of Iraq in 2003. Their joint endeavour over Lebanon – fragile as it appears at the time of writing after vehement Lebanese and Arab objections [6] to the perceived pro-Israeli bent of the UN resolution – has restored cordiality. And France's 73-year-old president is at the heart of the process.

The instincts of Jacques Chirac – a great political animal and a great survivor after four decades in politics – immediately alerted him to the capital he could draw from the present crisis. It combined stronger relations with the US, a deepening of France's traditional links with the Arab world (Syria, for now, excepted), and amicable communication with Israel in the search for a compromise solution. In deploying his array of political and human skills as well as his diplomats and ministers in the crisis, Chirac has shown himself far more useful to US diplomacy than Tony Blair [7], whose hands were tied by his servility to the White House from the beginning of Israel's military operations against Lebanon.

Chirac avoided the trap of toeing the White House line (and thus losing all credibility in the middle east); instead, he firmly rejected Washington's idea of an multinational peacemaking force to disarm Hizbollah [8] on Israel's behalf, and demanded instead that a peacekeeping force (with a leading French component) be deployed in Lebanon only after a ceasefire and a political settlement. Moreover, he forced Washington to accept a compromise.

The result is that Paris, which lost a great deal of international credibility (and most of her influence within the European Union) after the French rejection [8] of the European constitution in May 2005, is now, again, a country that matters. The French president, a great tactician, saw the opportunity – and seized it.

Chirac's adept response to the Lebanese crisis [9] has also improved his image at home. A few weeks ago he was probably the most unpopular president in the history of the (post-1958) fifth republic – despised for his arrogance, lack of vision and political blunders, and seen as a spent force whose candidacy for a third presidential term in the May 2007 elections was becoming unthinkable.

The success of the French soccer team (*Les Bleus*) in reaching the final [9] of the world cup was his first opportunity to regain a few points in the opinion polls. Now, with the war in Lebanon, the French have rallied behind the only politician able to play an international role and answer the plea of Lebanese civilians displaced and wounded by Israeli bombs and deprived [10] of food and medical aid.

The revival of a worn-out politician after eleven years at the Elysée palace is staggering. It shows that Chirac, like an old tiger, is at his best in times of crisis. And, God, he knows that!

### **France's voice, the world's choice**

Jacques Chirac also (unfortunately) appears to be one of the few French politicians today who are really interested in international affairs. As a French president, he constitutionally controls foreign policy and defence; foreign ministers – especially the present one, Philippe Douste-Blazy [11], whose international experience (and knowledge of English) when he was promoted, was nil – only follow his instructions. This includes Douste-Blazy's predecessor (and current prime minister) Dominique de Villepin [12], when he flamboyantly represented France during the negotiations that preceded the war in Iraq.

Of all those who aspired or aspire to succeed Chirac, none has any significant international experience nor defined strategy. His major party rival, interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy [13], is known (despite his Hungarian origin) only for his attraction to the United States and his anti-immigration policy.

No contender for the position of socialist candidate in the 2007 election appears to have an international vision (or even a clear European one), and in any case none talks much about world issues. The chapter on international affairs of the Socialist Party's official platform for the presidential election is more a collection of pathetic, tired slogans than a clear-cut strategy for a French diplomacy of tomorrow. So, the only thing French politicians have been able to do is to support Chirac's initiatives.

The Franco-American proposal, initially well-received, is now in trouble [14]. To reach a compromise with an unbendingly pro-Israeli US administration, Chirac probably made more concessions than were realistic to persuade Lebanon to accept. The image of France as longstanding protector of Lebanon that even some Lebanese had accepted was tarnished, as Paris appeared to have tilted too far towards the Israeli position.

Fouad Siniora rejected the resolution, restating his former positions in favour of a ceasefire and the withdrawal of the Israeli forces while proposing *inter alia* that 15,000 Lebanese soldiers should be assigned to the country's southern border. France has since sought changes to the resolution, and Chirac is reproachful of American reluctance to move. The pitch of tension makes broad agreement (including the consent of Israel, Iran and Hizbollah) difficult, not least in light of arguments that Israel had planned this offensive for years (see Paul Rogers, "The US and Israel: a marriage under pressure [14]", 7 August 2006).

It is not clear how the diplomatic impasse can be unblocked. France's recovery of influence in the international arena could result in an assumption of greater (and risky) responsibilities in

leading a multinational force in Lebanon. But to reach that point, it will remain difficult for Chirac to strike a balance between Washington's bullying and Arab prickliness without alienating any of the key actors. Nonetheless, Chirac's commitment to a fair settlement and to vigorous efforts to secure it (Dousté-Blazy was sent three times to Beirut in as many weeks) is a refreshing change both from the warmongering on all sides and from the unreal, ideological United States strategy of building a "new" middle east out of preconceived midwest ideas.

Jacques Chirac stated on 9 August [15] that he could not imagine the present situation in Lebanon continuing for long, adding (with pointed reference to the Americans and the Israelis) that accepting its prolongation would be "the most immoral" attitude.

This echoes his view expressed in *Le Monde* (27 July 2006), that "there is no military solution" to the conflict. The Lebanese government rather than a multinational force, he said, must disarm Hizbollah, "which implies a political settlement"; and although Iran has "a share of responsibility in the present conflict", Chirac wishes to involve Tehran in the search for a solution. Moreover, a multinational force should be under United Nations rather than Nato command, as Nato is seen in the middle east as *le bras armé* ("the arm of the west"). France wants to avoid the possible emergence, from the Lebanese as from related crises, of a new conflict of civilisations between the west and the Muslim world. Will its voice be heard?

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