
Can the Two-State Solution Be Saved?

A CONVERSATION WITH DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN

The Fletcher Forum had the opportunity to speak with Monsieur de Villepin, former Prime Minister of France about the future of the two-state solution.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your opinion, what does a two-state solution entail, whether it is the status quo of the Oslo Accords or something different? To reach the solution you describe, what concessions and compromises would each side have to make in order to make this solution work?*

DOMINIQUE DE VILLEPIN: Well, the two-state solution has been on the table for decades now and, of course, implies a lot of compromises. What we have seen in the past decade is the growing unwillingness of the different parties to make these compromises. At the end of the day, because of the colonization in the West Bank, the situation in Afghanistan, the growing tension between the two countries, and the lack of partners whether we are talking about the Israeli side or the Palestinian side, the U.S. is less in a position to be a good broker today than a couple of decades ago. The European Union does not have the capacity. Of course, we have a new actor in the region we did not have before, which is Russia. My hope is for the transformation of the region. Today, the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is just one of many of the crises of the region. It used to be at the center of the stage; it's not anymore. The fact that there are many other crises may help the different countries in charge — the P5, the permanent members of the Security Council, as well as the big regional leaders such

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as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey — get together and try to find the possibility of a compromise. But of course, the road we have in front of us is a very difficult and very narrow road because we can see that a lot of people on the Israeli side are only earning time instead of addressing the problem. A lot of Israelis only want the integration of most of the occupied territories into the state of Israel with just 38 percent to be the Palestinian state — so,

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a very limited and small state without any capacity of survival. I believe that the big question today is how much the international community is ready to address the issue, ready to put pressure on the different actors — Palestinians and Israelis — and how much these two partners are ready to compromise for peace. For many Israelis, peace will always go along with the idea that they must fight for their security. And we can understand this, because of the history of the country. For the Palestinians, creating trust after so many decades, 70

years without peace and without having their own territory, is also something difficult to think about. So, we still have a long way to go. I don't believe in miracles and I really believe that for the international community, it is a big challenge today.

FORUM: *You talked about a lot of the big leaders and changing actors in the situation, so given that we have this crisis going on in the Gulf, with the diplomatic isolation of Qatar, how do you see increasing rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel influencing any future peace talks?*

DE VILLEPIN: I think we are facing a situation in which we can see two alliances emerging in this region. On one side, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Israel, which is something new and surprising for many people. On the other side, Russia, Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. The question is how much these two alliances may be able to have a dialogue — a fruitful dialogue — and how much this will recreate a balance of forces between Israel and Palestine. Today, and for a long time, we have a situation which is characterized by a big imbalance in favor of Israel compared to the Palestinians. The fact that we have two alliances facing each other may slightly change the capacity of the two to enter into a dialogue and present new possibilities

of compromise. The fact that Donald Trump has decided to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem has been seen as a move making it even more difficult because at the base of any possibility of dialogue, you need trust; so one of the questions is: is trust big enough in the region today to enter into a real dialogue?

FORUM: *Given all of this, do you see the conflict continuing to influence Middle Eastern geopolitics in a significant way in the next 30 or so years? You had mentioned that it's not a great priority anymore, but do you agree with the viewpoint that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is necessary for the Middle East to find lasting peace?*

DE VILLEPIN: Yes, I believe that from 1948 to 1979 we have been in the first phase of the conflict, which was mainly an Israeli-Arab conflict. Then, from 1979 until today, we entered into a second phase of the conflict, which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Today, we are entering a third phase of the conflict, which is the tensions between these two alliances for which the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the first and more important question — the question of the unity of Syria, the political transition in Syria, the question of the future of Iraq, the question of Yemen, are also very important questions. So, I believe that today it is one among many others, but we have to remember that at the end of the day, the question of justice for any people is a key subject. So, I don't think we can just consider that time will solve the problem without creating a new policy and state. Because it's a matter of justice. The decision was taken in 1947 and 1948 by the international community and we must address this issue and reestablish some rights for the Palestinian people. If we don't do that, I really believe that we will have growing problems and growing tensions, and we will pay the price in terms of violence, in terms of terrorism, in terms of resentment by the region towards our democracies in the Western world. So, we will have to live with the consequences of what is seen by many emerging countries and the countries of the Middle East as a very unfair situation. It's like in a family — if you don't address the issue of something wrong that happened, something unfair that happened, you will live for generations with the same problem and the problem might keep growing.

FORUM: *You mentioned justice and procuring rights for the Palestinians as extremely important in resolving this crisis. Given the huge inequality of power between the Israelis and Palestinians, how do you propose that voice would be given to them and what actors would be involved to help?*

DE VILLEPIN: I believe we need new sponsors for the peace process. I believe, of course, that the U.S. is irreplaceable in helping the peace process to go forward — nothing can be done without the U.S. — but I think Russia as a newcomer in the region and a *strong* newcomer, coming back in the region, has an important role to play. And I believe that the EU, which has been only playing the role of the country using the checkbook, could also play a much stronger role and influence the search for a solution. So, we need go-betweens, we need brokers — we don't have enough brokers today, and I think everyone should try to find a common interest. I don't think that the divisions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are a fatality for the region. Under the Shah, Iran had good relations with Israel. The role of Turkey in the future will be key. I think we could find some compromises, but we need brokers to play the role of searching for peace and being active for peace and I believe the U.S., Russia, and Europe could play a very important role.

FORUM: *I noticed you didn't mention any of the big Arab players — Egypt, Jordan, etc. — so do you think their role is diminished?*

DE VILLEPIN: I think that, of course, they are very much concerned with the refugee crisis and the situation of Syria is a key crisis, but themselves they are facing such problems that they will have a lot of difficulties to play an important role. They need to be helped, I don't think they can do anything by themselves, alone. Nor do I think that today Israel and Palestine can find a way for peace alone. So, we need the international community, we need the UN to go back into the game, we need strong voices, we need the intellectuals, we need the civil societies and NGOs to be part of the process. We just cannot accept things to stay as they are or even get worse without doing anything. Again, I don't believe that time for whatever crisis in the international scene can solve everything. *f*