

RENAUD GIRARD

Journalist, *Le Figaro*

Basically, my thoughts today centre on why we have been so mistaken about Syria. You remember that even Hillary Clinton, after the monstrous attack in Damascus on 18 July 2012, had said that the regime would survive no longer than several weeks.

Last March, I was in the Adrar des Iforas in the north of Mali, and the French soldiers, who were combing through the territory, had run into a Tunisian jihadist. So he could speak French and they were able to interrogate him. They asked him, 'Why are you fighting a war against us?' He said, 'Actually, I was not programmed to wage war against you. I had to go to Syria but at the last minute my flight ticket for Turkey was cancelled and then I was sent to fight the war.' So, due to chance logistical vagaries, this jihadist became the enemy of France while if he had crossed the Turkish border to fight, he would have been the objective ally of French policy.

You saw this morning. At the Quai d'Orsay much was said about General Idris. How many times did ministers and cabinet directors tell me how this was an amazing man, that we had to help him, this great general. His general staff was completely destroyed by Islamist brigades, the most radical brigades, the kind that take our journalists hostage. They seized all the weapons that the Americans and the English had delivered to them. So if a Boeing is destroyed tomorrow by a missile supplied by the CIA to the Syrian rebels in the area around New York's Kennedy Airport, we will know who to blame.

I think that our failure is very apparent.

What are the reasons for this failure? In my opinion, there are three reasons. There is historical ignorance. There is political Manichaeism. There is diplomatic wishful thinking.

As for historical ignorance, I believe that our leaders have not grasped the fact that in Syria, a very deep and profound fracture has existed for a very long time between a party that I would describe as secular and a Muslim Brotherhood party, which was analysed by Michel Seurat in his time. He is not, however, suspected of being friendly to the regime. Although, in the Syrian constitution, the President must be a Muslim, this is a concession that Hafez al-Assad granted in the middle of the rebellion in Aleppo against the idea of a secular constitution. Historical ignorance is to forget that we, the French, tried for 26 years to inculcate democracy and parliamentarism in Syria and that we have had two left-wing governments, in 1925 and 1945, who bombed Damascus because, obviously, the lesson was not sinking in. Moreover, we were bombing more or less the same areas – Midan, Ghouta, etc. Today, it is more or less the same areas that are being bombed by the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad.

Political Manichaeism is as follows. David Cameron talked to the BBC and he recently said 'good boys and bad boys'. Now, in politics, there is a tendency to say that war is fought between good people and bad people. If you remember, the whole war in the Balkans was explained like that. In the Balkans, there were the bad Serbs and the others were good. But when the good people started to commit massacres it was very difficult to explain. For example, it was very difficult to explain that the Croats, who were the good people, were going to massacre Muslims in Mostar. It was very difficult to explain. Why? Because the journalism was actually – in my opinion – mixed with a touch of Hollywood storytelling. There is a kind of Hollywood-style storytelling that is practiced by journalists. When you have to explain a situation as complex as the Syrian situation where you have the Kurds, the Druzes, the Ismailis, the Sunnis, the Shiites, the Alawites, etc., or to explain the Balkans, it is much easier, in a two-minute American television spot to say, 'the good guys, the bad guys, the bad guys are slaughtering the good guys and our government doesn't do anything'. And there you go, it makes good television news but it doesn't explain anything. I think that governments are pervaded with this Hollywood-style journalism.

As for diplomatic wishful thinking, we closed our embassy in Damascus although we had welcomed Bashar al-Assad at the Champs-Élysées in 2008. We closed it because we anticipated, we said that it would please those who were



coming and who were coming just after. Alain Jupé, everyone, said that the regime was finished. And we deprived ourselves of a very valuable tool, firstly, for getting to know the territory since we had a very important embassy, with very important secret services on the ground. Secondly, we left the possibility of diplomacy exclusively to the Russians. This is an enormous mistake. One should practice diplomacy with one's enemies, not one's friends. If we close our embassy in Copenhagen tomorrow it wouldn't affect anything. Today, you saw that the French secret service sent two agents to Syria in order to try to cooperate with the Syrians, to find out who the French jihadists fighting in Syria are. The Syrians said, open your embassy, and then we'll see. This diplomatic wishful thinking can be found in our position on the Geneva II conference, which will take place in Montreux at the end of January, where the position of France and other Western countries will be to say, very good, the government has been accepted – the government has not lost the war, on the contrary – but Bashar mustn't be part of it. As General de Gaulle would have said, one must accept reality. Whether we like it or not, Bashar is the embodiment of power in Syria. Wanting to start a negotiation by saying, 'he's not included', does not make any sense at all. On the other hand, one could say that the goal and hope of any negotiation should, perhaps, be for Bashar to refrain from running for a new term as President in 2014.

And that, my dear Steven, is where we are in Syria. I think that we could not have received any worse news this morning than this investment in this free army which, in fact, represents nothing at all with regard to the Islamist militias.