



ELISABETH GUIGOU

President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the French National Assembly

Steven Erlanger, London Bureau Chief, *The New York Times*

I think everyone knows Elisabeth Guigou, she has had a very varied career and she has had some of the highest positions in the French state. She is currently the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly. I have asked her to do a very difficult thing which is to try to summarise where we are with a concentration on strong French national interests and the French willingness to take action on the ground, often militarily but also in terms of aid with Syria in ways that other countries have not. I have been struck, for example, that while the United States and Britain suspended aid to the Syrian opposition France has not done so. Therefore perhaps Madame Guigou can put this into context. Merci.

Elisabeth Guigou, President of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the French National Assembly

Thank you. I would like to thank Thierry de Montbrial for inviting me to take part in this meeting. I shall perhaps begin by saying how I agree with each of the previous speakers. Firstly, I think that the economic situation is something absolutely crucial. The revolution in Tunisia began in a situation of economic and social disaster. This must never be forgotten.

Next, I will say to Renaud Girard that if there is one point – a single one, I must say – that I agree with in his analysis, it is that I think we should not have closed our embassy in Damascus. Otherwise, I rather agree with Bassma, I even very much agree, with his analysis of Syria, but I will come back to that. I think, Madame, that you are perfectly correct in saying that education, particularly of girls and women, is absolutely crucial.

And concerning your statements, Sir, there are many things I would disagree with but I do rather agree with your conclusion. I think that more dialogue is needed, notably between Europe and Russia. I think that the way we are currently managing what we call the Eastern partnership is mistaken.

First, regarding Syria, it was a surprise, for me anyway, to learn that the Americans and the British had decided to suspend their deliveries of non-lethal arms to the Syrian opposition. But I must point out that this was for the north of the country. France has not decided for the moment – but this can change because we are obviously keeping a close eye on events – to suspend its deliveries of non-lethal weapons. But it is true that this is confined in other zones. All of this could change completely over the next few days.

We have a real interest in continuing to support the Syrian democratic opposition. Since we have been hosting all the leaders of this democratic opposition in the National Assembly for a year and a half, we are obviously perfectly aware of their weaknesses and their difficulties with coming to an agreement. And yet, I truly believe that the French diplomatic corps was right to support this democratic opposition from the beginning. And that this is the only way possible, because if this way does not work – and perhaps it will not work – what will we do then? We will have a terrible confrontation between a regime that has used chemical weapons against its own people – this is proven, it has been demonstrated – and jihadists on the other hand. And we do not want one or the other.

Naturally, the real solution is political. But it is really the threat of aerial strikes on the chemical arsenal that is compelling Russia to take the initiative of requesting Bashar Al-Assad to dismantle his chemical arsenal. This is moving forward. So much the better. I hope that the ultimate aim will be achieved. But let us not forget that the war is continuing, which has resulted in around 200,000 deaths and 6 million displaced persons. This can only be resolved by political negotiation.

Will Geneva II finally happen? We know all the obstacles that have to be overcome. Firstly, there has to be an agreement about the subject of the conference, that is to say, the principles that everyone already agreed upon in



Geneva I. I would like this to happen. We talked about it with Mr Ahani at the Foreign Affairs Commission two days ago. I for one would like to see Iran at the negotiation table and Saudi Arabia as well, of course. But for that to happen, there still has to be a minimum level of pre-existing agreement as to the objectives of the negotiation. For the moment, this is still being discussed. And otherwise, all the members of the Five Plus One, including the Americans, agree.

If this conference takes place on 22 January as planned, it must succeed. Because I do not see any other way possible than to have a political transition that must then lead to elections and a different power. Otherwise, what will happen? All the scenarios are absolutely horrible, from the risk of partition in Syria – which would be a substantial step backwards, with all the repercussions that can be imagined for the neighbouring countries that are already suffering enormously from the influx of refugees and exportation of the conflict – to a never-ending civil war. Thus, I truly believe that the only coherent position is to do all we can, without, once again, any guarantee... I am not very optimistic, I must say, at this stage.

My next comments will be about Iran. Obviously, Iran is a large country, a great civilisation. I think that in the past we have not offered this country a proper opportunity to have a real discussion about the role it could play in the region. Even so, over the last few decades, both concerning the nuclear issue and Iran's statements about Israel, things have nevertheless become unacceptable.

Things are going much better now. The election of Mr Rohani obviously lends us a lot of hope, a hope strengthened, moreover, by the fact that the President of the French Republic was the first to meet him in the United Nations General Assembly. Mr Obama then had that telephone discussion with him. All of this led to the interim agreement on nuclear energy. This is very good. It is an extremely important event because it is the first time in six years that Iran has agreed to suspend the contentious part of its nuclear programme, namely, the two industries that could lead to Iran possessing a nuclear weapon – the enrichment of uranium on the one hand and of plutonium on the other.

It is thus a highly positive event, the result of discussions that suffered some hiccups along the way. The French diplomats did well to say that the first text that was discussed solely between the United States and Iran – and the Iranian Ambassador told us at the Foreign Affairs Commission that Iran had never ceased to inquire if all the others agreed – but the text was not precise enough. The four conditions that France had requested are now in the text. You know what they are. I will not outline the details here. They are in this text, and so I think that the agreement is sufficiently robust. However, it is only an interim agreement and so we have six months to create real confidence and to make sure that things proceed in the way everyone wants them to. I believe, obviously, that it is a considerable event in the region and that it can essentially create a climate that is naturally favourable to other kinds of change as well.

My final comments will concern the attitude of the United States in the region, since the subject of the round table was the Middle East. I believe that all the recent events have shown – even if Secretary of State John Kerry is much more involved – that in spite of everything, the United States has decided to stop actively participating in crisis management, and that the turn toward Asia is a considerable event and will continue. I think that the weight of the war in Afghanistan, but especially the Iraq war, has led to a strategic retreat over the last few months – look at what is going on in the UK – the consequences of which are not yet over.

This means that the Europeans have to become more involved. In addition, I give very honest praise to the actions of Catherine Ashton, who was patient and discreet. She achieved a first success in Kosovo. She was the linchpin for the interim agreement with Iran. I believe that Europe must return, that Europe must abandon its navel-gazing and start to assert itself in the world again. After all, Mandela's death reminded us that Europe had played a leading role twenty years ago in ending Apartheid, in the same way that it did in the Oslo Accords, the twentieth anniversary of which was not celebrated this past 13 December. This is what I am appealing for.

It is obviously necessary that Europe first gets out of the euro zone crisis. This is in sight. And I think that we have every reason to get more involved, all the more so because we have particular responsibilities in Africa. I have enormous hope for Africa, which we should help to resolve its bloody conflicts and governance problems.



Steven Erlanger, London Bureau Chief, *The New York Times*

Merci. Merci Madame Guigou.