

# RENAUD GIRARD

Senior reporter and international columnist at *Le Figaro*

## Miguel Ángel MORATINOS

Renaud Girard, Professor, Journalist at *Le Figaro*, told me that he was going to talk a bit about the return of Nation-States to the Middle East. It is your turn, Mr Girard, to take the floor.

## Renaud GIRARD

I want to talk about the return of the national feeling to the Middle East. That is how I would sum up the developments in the Middle East today. With the Arab Spring, which I see as a series of political revolutions exponentially amplified by the digital revolution, the populations of the Middle East were inundated by two ideological waves of unprecedented power. The first was democratic ideology. The second, Islamist ideology. And we watched as these two ideologies faced off, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and even beyond. It was a clash between forces fighting for laws written by men, the rule of law, and Western-style democracy and those fighting for laws written by God, and for sharia, held so dear by the Islamic Brotherhood. As it happens, neither this democratic ideology nor the Islamist ideology that we saw in Tunisia or Egypt, for example, won.

Who won, then? The return of national feeling, and the return of Nation-States. Obviously, they had only dimmed in the Middle East, and as we watch national feeling surge back to the fore, I would like to look into this with you a bit more.

Of course, you will say, the Shiite/Sunni religious divide remains an important key to understanding the Middle East; I, however, feel that it is no longer the dominant key when compared to the return of national feeling, which I see as the key to understanding this new Middle East that is taking shape before our eyes. An example of this can be found in the scramble we discussed at lunch between the Gulf's Sunnis, on the one hand the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the other in Qatar, but also in fact, between a Kuwaiti and a Sultanate of Oman, who are not too keen to speak, but who blame Mohammed ben Salman and Mohammed ben Zayed for their aggressive attitude towards Qatar. They are small and would rather not speak up, but that is what they are thinking.

We also see this return of national feeling in relation to the religious divide in the new alliance that is forming before our eyes. You might tell me that this is an alliance of convenience, but I would wager that it is more significant than we might think – this alliance that is currently coming into being between Sunni Turkey and Shiite Iran, because the priority for these two Middle Eastern powers is their territorial unity, their national cohesion. As it happens, both these powers believe that the Kurdish national movement is endangering that territorial unity and national cohesion.

Strategically too, these two powers, Turkey and Iran, are fearful of a Kurdistan that might serve as base for a great foreign power – I am referring here, of course, to the United States – or a regional power like Israel, because you know that the Israelis maintain very good relations with BARZANI's Kurds. Israel has a very interesting strategy to analyse, but that is not the aim of my speech, to settle in at the edge of this great Middle East, and ponder, let's say, the very active policy being run by Israel in Azerbaijan. And Iran today does not fancy seeing a Kurdish obstacle form that might create an obstacle to its great dream. Iran's Energy Dream is to compete directly with Russia via a great pipeline that would supply Europe with power.

This return of the national feeling can also be seen in the ease with which the Baghdad Army reclaimed Kirkuk. We are seeing the beginning of Iraq's return as a power to be reckoned with – Iraq, which does have alliances, but is independent in Middle East geopolitics.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which we have been discussing, religious feeling is also fading out, to the benefit of national feeling, on both sides, as a matter of fact. On the Israeli side, I don't know if you noticed, but the religious right is saying much less "Hebron was once our home, Abraham, the 1929 massacres", etc. It is more with argument on

security that the Israeli right is shaping its hold on the West Bank. On the Palestinian side, we saw the differences between Islamist Hamas and the more secular Fatah also fade out, to simply allow Gaza to become a mini-state, to have easier relations with Egypt, of course, but even with Israel. So here too, national feeling is prevailing over religious feeling.

I would say that as in 19th-century Europe, States, the return of these national States, these powerful States, will forge alliances. On the one hand, we have the Shiite axis: Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. On the other, a Sunni axis with Egypt, the Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel which supports this axis. And then there is a sort of third small axis just now emerging, as we have seen, with Turkey and Qatar, and we do not yet know where it will lead us.

In the face of this return of traditional geopolitics to the Middle East, which great power will come out on top? It's very simple, it's the great power that is still engaging in 19th-century geopolitics today, traditional geopolitics, and whether good or bad, is another matter. It is, of course, Putin's Russia. How can we fail to see not only that Putin's Russia was the only power capable of bringing together, at the table in Astana, the Syrian rebels and Syrian governmental forces with Iran and Turkey, but also that Putin, within a single week's time, is also playing host to the King of Saudi Arabia and is being hosted – I believe it was yesterday or today – by the leader of the Iranian Revolution. He is the one able to call the play, much more so than the United States, which is completely in the background. I will unfortunately not even make mention of France. It would not come as a surprise to me if, in the event of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Russia turned out to be the instrumental force, the honest broker for the Middle East. Obviously, fifteen, twenty years ago, it was the United States.

To conclude, I would just like to say: does the return of national feeling mean the proliferation of wars, the war of all against everyone in the Middle East? It is not inescapable. I believe in another political response than neo-conservative politics. Neo-conservative politics is that of individuals who prefer democracy and justice to peace. I believe that another political response is possible, one derived from Metternich, a classical response, a response that Kissinger might have offered, aimed at balance of power. In speaking out at this think tank, the leading think tank in France, and as a French citizen, I would like to invite my country to return to more traditional diplomacy. I believe that it is doing so, as a matter of fact, with President Macron, compared to previous diplomacy. We recall that Hollande and Fabius did not want, at the beginning of 2013, to invite Iran to the Geneva Conference on Syria, while Norway was invited. I am in favour of diplomacy based on historical culture, in a diplomacy that is not Manichean, and does not give itself up to diplomatic wishful thinking. What is wishful thinking in diplomacy? It is when we say, "We do want a transitional government in Syria, but first, Bashar al-Assad has to go". No, it doesn't work that way, because Bashar al-Assad, whether we like it or not, embodies the state in Syria. We need to see reality for what it is. In fact, the entire West needs to stop with wishful thinking in its diplomacy.

A more traditional diplomacy, which knows how to work in secret, which is not a diplomacy of emotion, which is not a diplomacy that looks to feed the Moloch, the media monster, but that is searching, that knows, that is capable of seeing the very long term, a visionary diplomacy. What is visionary diplomacy? It is diplomacy that knows how to sketch out, far ahead, the great balances that will bring us peace. Thank you.

### **Miguel Ángel MORATINOS**

Thank you, Renaud Girard, for your presentation on the return of the nation-state, the national and traditional diplomacy. I hope that diplomacy simply returns. We do not need traditional diplomacy. We need diplomacy. It is because there is not enough diplomacy that we are in a situation of increasingly active military interventions.