

RENAUD GIRARD

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Steven ERLANGER

First, I am going to sit down and ask Renaud Girard to begin. Thank you.

Renaud GIRARD

At last year's World Policy conference in Marrakech, I looked at the Middle East from the inside. I noticed two ideologies: liberal ideology and Islamist ideology, clashing since the beginning of the decade. Neither side won the war but it paved the way for the rise of nationalism. The movement continues. Middle East nations are steadily growing stronger, stoking their rivalries and bolstering their alliances abroad.

This year, I will look at the Middle East from the outside. The most striking thing I see is the West's strategic impotence. That will be the title of my talk: the West's strategic impotence in the Middle East.

In Syria, the West has lost nearly all its influence. The Astana club, in other words Turkey, Iran and Russia, is where all the decisions are made. Syria and Iran aim to immediately reconquer the Idlib pocket in northwest Syria, Turkey wants to leave the status quo alone to keep their rebel allies in place and Russia looks favourably upon Damascus controlling that part of Syrian territory but is obtaining extra time to focus on a negotiated settlement with the rebels.

In Yemen, the West is strategically powerless to end a humanitarian disaster brought about by the March 2015 intervention of its Saudi and Emirati allies against the northern Houthi rebels, who control the capital, Sana'a.

In the Gulf, the West has been naïve about Prince Mohammed Ben Salman, ignoring his violent nature and deeming him a great reformer. In the course of a year, it has not even been able to broker reconciliation in the Gulf Cooperation Council, where on the one hand you have Qatar, which managed to obtain backing from Turkey (not a Council member of course) and, on the other, the Emiratis, Bahrainis and Saudis. The Omanis and Kuwaitis, who want to remain neutral, stand in the middle.

In Turkey, the West has failed to convince President Erdogan to keep the truce he brokered with the Kurds in May 2013. It has not shown a shred of gratitude to the Syrian Kurds, their main proxies in their war against the jihadists, nor guaranteed them so much as autonomous status.

In Palestine, the West has failed to bring about the two-state solution it has been promoting for 30 years. The two-state solution has never been further out of reach and Israel's West Bank settlements are now so extensive that it is hard to see how a viable Palestinian state can still be created.

In Libya, where Egyptian, Emirati, Turkish and Qatari interests are so important that it can be considered part of the Middle East, the West is incapable of managing the chaos it created.

In Afghanistan (which can be put in the Middle East because the UN does), the West's views have failed to prevail despite being present for 17 years.

In Iran, the United States will not succeed in changing the regime. We, their allies, are strategically powerless. What's more, we are unintentionally playing into the hands of Iran's hardliners because of President Trump's disastrous pullout from the 14 July 2015 nuclear agreement, which Secretary of State Kerry had so skilfully brokered.

How did we get here? I think the West's mistakes must not be underestimated. I see three main ones. The first is obviously neo-conservatism, a movement that believes democracy can be imposed by force. The 2003 invasion of Iraq,

which France courageously opposed, was a terrible waste. The US premature pullout in 2010 was an equally profound strategic blunder. They should have waited until Iraq was stabilised.

The West's second mistake is subordinating foreign policy to domestic electoral concerns. Remember the role domestic policy played in Sarkozy's decision to militarily intervene in Libya a year before the presidential election, and in Trump's Iran policy because he wanted to play to his base.

The West's third mistake, in my view, is its diplomatic waffling. It is sometimes incapable of taking decisions. The Churkin proposal is but one example. In February 2012, Russia's United Nations ambassador, Churkin, realising the Damascus regime was on shaky ground and that perhaps a solution had to be found, made a proposal to the West's three permanent members of the Security Council (the United States, France and Great Britain). The solution consisted of offering President Bashar al-Assad a face-saving way out. With a single voice the Western powers replied, "No, there's no point negotiating with Moscow because Assad will be gone in a few weeks anyway." Of course that did not happen.

The consequence of those mistakes is that the region's major opportunistic power, Russia, immediately stepped into the gap and replaced the West. Besides having two sovereign bases in Syria, Russia managed the feat of bringing the king of Saudi Arabia, its enemy in Syria, to Moscow in 2017. We have seen Putin's reaction to the Khashoggi affair: "There is no affair. Let Saudi justice take its course!" Russia has also improved its relations with another key American ally: Israel. Netanyahu was seen wearing the St. George ribbon on the Red Square, next to Putin. Russia is also a force to be reckoned with in Egypt, where it will build a nuclear power station. In Libya, General Haftar does Russia's bidding, just as he once did America's.

In conclusion, I think the decline of the West's influence in the Middle East is bad news for the region because, like it or not, it has had some very good ideas for that part of the world. Remember the 1991 Madrid conference. Remember Arafat and Rabin shaking hands on the White House lawn in 1993. But in my view, the West's strategic impotence in the Middle East is, unfortunately, a reality we must adjust to. Thank you.

Steven ERLANGER

Thank you, Renaud, very much for this overview. It was very, very helpful and very complicated.