

## GILLES KEPEL

Founding Board member of the Global Relations Forum, Founding Partner of Kanunum, Chairman of Kroton Consulting

**Steven Erlanger, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, Europe, for *The New York Times***

Next, an old friend, Gilles Kepel, who as I think you all know is a very distinguished scholar of this region, of Islam, of what is going on in the banlieues of France in the very complicated world of French relations with Islam. Gilles is Director of the Middle East-Mediterranean Chair of the École normale supérieure, Professor at Paris Science et Lettres and has sometimes worked as an envoy for various presidents, including Jupiter, Mr. Macron.

### **Gilles Kepel**

Thank you very much for having me. I know that had the results of the soccer game been different last night I would not be here and had Kyle prevailed on Kylian it would be my English opposite number who would be here in my stead. I will try to do my best.

One thing that strikes me in our conference is that it took us panel 19 or 20 to discuss the Middle East issue, as if the prevailing war between Russia and Ukraine was just a re-enactment of some sort of East-West war of old. To an extent it is but it is not and Memduh, as you rightly mentioned, this war takes place on the Black Sea, which is part of the Mediterranean system. You know that this is not the first time that a war that was taking place in Europe also had a very significant extension in the East, where there would be Salonika during World War One, where my great-grandfather was gendarme militaire. Or there was Valentine's Day 1945 where FDR and Ibn Saud had their amour toujours conversation, my oil against your protection, my protection against your oil. To a large extent we have to take the region into much more serious consideration than we did until recently. That is not only because of oil, because oil prices have skyrocketed, because the reason many of us came here, we have to say that frankly to Thierry, is because the climate is much better, we are freezing in Paris at zero degrees and this morning many of us went to the beach. This is definitely a very important issue that goes back to the Valentine's Day Agreement, but there is also a very significant issue we have not taken into consideration to a large extent. That is, as we mentioned Turkey fortunately, that I believe is an extremely important actor with what you call hyper-pragmatism, which is a concept I will use and of course, quote you in the future. That means Erdogan changing sides every day so that he thinks he will be re-elected. It also means that he bought S-400s from Russia, sold Bayraktar drones to Ukraine, that the Iranians are helping the Russians with their own zones and that nice guy, Mr. Medvedev warned the Israelis that if they ever gave the Ukrainians the means to down the Iranian drones they should beware the Syrian skies, etc. I think this is not something we have really thought about,



that the global Middle East is also taken into something, you had hyper-pragmatism as your concept, let me try mine, which is disaffiliation; does that mean anything in English? That means that nothing should be taken for certain, it would be hyper pragmatism at the global scale.

You mentioned the mission I did as the Special Envoy for President Macron. In some of the southern and eastern countries of the Mediterranean what I was being told by my interlocuters was that they did not think they are bound significantly by any former alliance. If Israel brings the best missiles, China the best whatever, Russia this and that, they are going to choose, they will do cherry-picking. That is okay if you think that the world is based on daily transactional things, but this may lead not to hyper-pragmatism but hyper-tribalism, if I may say so. Then, in a region where you have to have strong security this is a major challenge you are facing now. That is particularly so in a country like the UAE, which is extremely dependent on security issues which are part and parcel, not of the Valentine's Day Agreement but the Abraham Accord or the Donald Accord as he wanted it to be called, and particularly what is happening in Iran.

One other thing we must take into consideration is that authoritarian regimes are also being shaken in the process. What is happening in Iran, regardless of what happens with JCPOA, no JCPOA, pause JCPOA, etc., is now significantly different from whatever happened in the past, with the green revolution or whatever it was called where the police arrested a number of people, sentenced, put them in jail and then it was put down. This is not happening, yesterday they sentenced to death and executed the first demonstrator as an enemy of God, waging war against God, which is even worse. This is definitely bringing quiet, this is something much deeper that has to do with issues of identity, of self, of women cutting their hair in public, something that has to do with what is intimate in Shia culture, and they are clearly taking pain to find a way to change it. We have to foresee the fact that the Iranian leadership, despite the fact that they have this sort of hyper-activity militarily on their borders, are in a state that is now significantly weakened, and we have to think of that for the future.

Very briefly another issue is what is happening in Russia also, the fact that they are unable to lead a military strategy that is winning except bombing civilians, will also change several things in the region. A number of countries were willing to buy Russian weaponry, but what is happening is not a great showcase for that. All that is changing, and I think there is a real need to interject much more of what happens on the south-eastern front in this war, for fear of not really understanding the stakes we are dealing with.

### **Steven Erlanger**

This is why I started by at least mentioning Russia's movement into the region, which is not brand new but is real and is not going away. Others may want to respond to this too, but I am curious about what this does to Russia's intentions in Syria and other places. I am also very interested seeing the demonstrations in Iran, I covered the Iran revolution and I still try to follow it. The demonstrations in China are really interesting. We do not see a lot of demonstrations in Russia, I have to say, perhaps because many of the people who have demonstrated have already left. I do wonder what this shakiness in Iran and persistent rumors that Ayatollah Khamenei is quite ill, how that will impact the rest of the region and also what Iran sponsors, which is the thing we have not really talked about. What do you think?

**Gilles Kepel**

I do not have an answer on Khamenei's health bulletin. What is also interesting in Russia is that the mass of people who are sent to the front are increasingly from the Muslim republic or non-Russians from the Federation. Not to mention the infamous Ramzan Kadyrov, who recently repatriated to Chechnya the body of Abdoulaakh Anzarov, who beheaded Samuel Paty in France, they made him a hero of Chechnya. Putin is going to have to pay a price for relying on those populations because they are citizens of a different nature and this will probably lead to a problem within the state of the union, but others here are much more competent than I am on this issue.

On Syria, I heard Memduh say that he thought nothing would happen from the Turkish side, whereas we had the drumbeats throughout the year and your Minister of Defense or the Interior saying it is going to start tomorrow. We are going to wipe out the Turkish terrorists from everything. We are going to have a 30-kilometre buffer state. Nothing has happened and even in your hyper-pragmatism concept, which I like, do you not think at the end of the day that if, as we say in French, you cry to the wolf and the wolf does not come, finally you do not fear the big, bad wolf anymore?

**Steven Erlanger**

Exactly. It is that famous Cavafy poem, 'The barbarians are coming but they never arrive, so what must we do now?' They were a kind of answer.