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Some of you may recall last year's moving session with Patriarch Bartholomew, the Chief Rabbi of France, Haïm Korsia, and a leading Muslim authority, Mohamed Abdelsalam, who works with the rector of Al Azhar University in Cairo. That talk, which took place just after the October 7 attack, was truly profound, tolerant and quite notable.

Regarding today's talk, I will not explicitly quote someone sitting in the front row, who said to me last year, "It might be interesting to organize a discussion with French researchers or people who have thought about Islam from a political angle with real in-depth reflection." I did. There will be two segments. The first is a 30-minute segment with Olivier Roy. We will have a discussion with him taking us back quite a long way and quite a short way – both are true – to 1979. We will then spend 15 minutes with Chief Rabbi Korsia, who will give us his point of view not only on what we will have just said, but perhaps also on the whole point of the World Policy Conference, on the interaction between religion and politics, which is very important nowadays.

You need no introduction, Olivier, since it is all in the documents and many people know you. Your focus is Shiism, even though you study other subjects. Olivier got his start traveling the length and breadth of Afghanistan, not as a tourist and at a time when few people visited that vast country.

Most experts agree that 1979 was a major turning point. It was the year of the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the end of the siege of Mecca, in which the French distinguished themselves. I believe it was a crucial milestone, since the period since 1979, with its wars, etc., gradually led up to the current situation.

I give you the floor. I will interrupt you from time to time, and after 30 minutes we will know a lot more than we did before. Olivier, you have the floor.

Olivier Roy

Thank you. In 1979, I went to Afghanistan by way of Iran. I speak passable Farsi and know these areas fairly well. I saw the emergence of a phenomenon that came to be known as Islamism, i.e. the vision of Islam as a political and militant ideology.

In Afghanistan, there were very conservative hard-line Sunnis and in Iran there were revolutionaries. The great friend of Islamist Iran was not at all the King of Saudi Arabia but

Fidel Castro and then Chavez, etc. So Iran tapped into an anti-imperialist, anti-American current right from the start, and was at the very least neutral toward the Soviet Union.

Iran immediately presented itself as the champion of the Islamist cause throughout the Arab world, initially ignoring the Shiite-Sunni split. They considered themselves the vanguard by definition. They called on the entire Muslim world to rise up to overthrow pro-Western regimes. It did not work.

Then came the war with Iraq, and most Sunni Muslim authorities backed Saddam Hussein against Iran. Iran's bid to take over all of Islam failed. So they withdrew to what was called the Shiite arc. Right away, some joined Hezbollah, which closed ranks with Iran. There were also pro-Iranian movements in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Strategically, the Iranians were allied with the Assad family in Syria because the Assads' enemy was Saddam Hussein, and the Assads are Alawites, a religious group considered somewhat crypto-Shiite.

At the time, the Iranian axis was to rely on Shiite minorities across the Arab world and on groups that could be called crypto-Shiite, such as the Houthis in Yemen and the Alawites in Syria.

However, this bid to take over the Shiite world was not a resounding success. Their greatest success is Hezbollah, which became a kind of little Iran: the same training, ideology and world view. The Iranians failed in their bid to take over Iraq. Iraq's Shiite clergy, today represented by Ayatollah Sistani, opposed the idea of a supreme guide based in Iran. They failed in the Gulf, too. The family of Shirazi ayatollahs also rejected the Velayat-e faqih.

Iran's success was therefore limited, but it did allow them to intervene throughout the Middle East, from Lebanon to the Gulf. They immediately played the pro-Palestinian card, seeing the Palestinian cause as the ideal way to unite Muslims. That failed as well, but it did make Iran a regional power until, you might say, the day before yesterday.

Thierry de Montbrial

That is the background. Then, everything gradually developed in a very political way, with wars multiplying. We had September 11, the Arab Spring, etc. After this wave that began in 1979, the question that can be asked today, particularly after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, is: are we reaching the end of the wave? Are we on the verge of an entirely new wave? Yesterday, Anwar Gargash presented a remarkably tolerant, wise and optimistic vision. Based on the historical context you just presented, can we imagine that there is a chance of entering a new wave? This would assume that the Iranians themselves are willing to, and not just them. Or on the contrary, can we imagine that the hounds of war will continue to win out over the search for peace?

Olivier Roy

In playing the Shiite, militant, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, etc. card, Iran left aside what could be called the Sunni masses. The Sunnis became radicalized jihadists, first with Al-Qaeda and later with ISIS in Syria. The jihad of Al-Qaeda and ISIS is global. Their goal has never been regional. They talk very little about Palestine. They have an anti-Israeli discourse but have never supported the Palestinians and have waged war in the heart of the West, with September 11, terrorist attacks in Europe.

The jihadist wave, which began in 1995 and, to me, ended very recently, blinded us Westerners to the real dynamics in the Middle East. In other words, we saw everything through the lens of the jihad and terrorism. But that was not really what politically mobilized the man in the street.

Al-Qaeda is now outside the Middle East, whereas ISIS became entrenched between Syria and Iraq. ISIS appealed to some Sunnis because it was their way of getting even. After the US invaded Iraq, the Sunnis lost all their power in the Fertile Crescent, except in Jordan. Lebanon was by and large co-managed by Hezbollah and the Christians. In Syria, it was the Assad family's Alawites and in Iraq the Shiites, who, paradoxically, were swept into power by the Americans. There was therefore a kind of frustration in the Sunni world of the Fertile Crescent that largely explains the establishment of ISIS at that time.

ISIS was defeated and I think that today so is Jihadism. It is residual. It still exists, there will be attacks, but the engine of jihadism has broken down. There are local jihads, like in the Sahel, movements that still claim some link with jihad but have become local. That is where Julani and the HTS movement appeared. Julani is an interesting figure because his career spanned the entire arc. He began with ISIS, went over to Al-Qaeda and then created his own regionally based organization. We know what he did because I have colleagues who have been going there for eight years (Patrick Haenni). They have interviewed Julani and others, local notables, Christians and bishops. We are in contact the bishops of the region, who are the first to feel how things will turn because Christians are often the first victims of jihadist or Salafist violence.

From the start, Julani protected the Christians and guaranteed freedom of religion, which is very important because it is not just about physically protecting the Christian minority. There is a logic in Julani's breakthrough and taking of Damascus, an extraordinary but perfectly logical event, i.e. the seizure of power in Syria by the Sunni majority. If you look at the map, first he crossed the entire northern Sunni axis – Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus – and was joined in the south by the people of Deraa, on the Jordanian border. That is the Sunni axis. In the last 24 hours we have learned that all the Arab tribes of Deir-Ez-Zor in the east, who had accepted the suzerainty of the Kurds, have pledged allegiance to Julani, which they would have done to any Sunni Arab leader in Damascus. We have the restoration of a Sunni and Arab Syria.

The problem is that Sunni Arabs are not the only ones in Syria. There are two large Alawite groups in the west that are Shiite or crypto-Shiite and Arab and the Kurds in the east who are Sunni but not Arab. So Julani's challenge now is to manage Syria's two non-Arab Sunni parties. If he sides with either, he will ensure stability.

The project is to rebuild a multi-faith but predominately Sunni Arab Syria. This Syria is not expansionist and makes no claim to represent Sunnis or Islamism in the world. So whatever the form of government, Syria will remain within its borders and not destabilize its neighbors. The opposite is what will happen. Its neighbors will have a destabilizing effect on Syria. The key question now is to convince all of Syria's neighbors to let Syria become a nation-state on territory recognized by the international community. That does not pose a fundamental problem.

The turning point is here: the end of the global jihad, the end of the call for the Arab world to unite against the Zionist enemy. Those days are completely over.

The Abraham Accords had shown that they were already over for a large part of the Arab world. The fact that the Arab world has abandoned the Palestinians is obvious. Even if emotionally things will still affect Arab public opinion, politically and strategically, there will no longer be an Arab-Israeli war. It is over. But the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will go on.

In a way, the change in Syria frees up everything that went unsaid in the Abraham Accords. In other words, now the Arab states will look inward and focus on their national interests, which is very interesting. And what is happening in Saudi Arabia is that the crown prince is explicitly talking about Saudi Arabia as a nation-state. He is promoting Saudi nationalism. He has broken the two pillars that had underpinned Saudi Arabia since its creation, i.e. the Wahhabite clergy and the Saud tribe. He went after his own tribe and put all his cousins in prison. It is a gilded prison, of course, because everything is gilded in Saudi Arabia. It is not a problem. He calls on civil servants who are not from his tribe, which is new.

He is establishing a state based on nationalism from top to bottom. Look at Morocco and Algeria for example. It is absolutely obvious. That is the major change and now Iran up against the wall. Iran will either focus on the Iranian nation-state, which is very solid, and return within its borders while keeping an area of influence that would include Iraq, the Gulf, and western Afghanistan, with complicated relations with the northern part, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and return to a more traditional type of sovereignty, or refuse to accept the destruction of the axis of resistance and return to militancy.

I think that there is a regime crisis in Iran, and that it will be structural, roughly speaking, between the moderates and the radicals, even though those terms do not mean much. The radicals are in total crisis. They have been beaten and they think they have been betrayed. It is never a good thing when an army comes home thinking, "We have been betrayed." We saw that in Germany and in France with the OAS. It is complicated. But one thing is certain. Iranian civil society does not want any more adventures in the Middle East. They are nationalist. They are secular. Forty years of a religious state of whatever stripe, a republic or anything else, and not just Muslim, turns people away from religion.

Thierry de Montbrial

All of that is very clear. To simplify, it might be said that the expression of Arab nationalism after decolonization is based on a Western, almost French model, in other words a mixture of secularism and Arab-style socialism, if I may put it that way, with military power guaranteeing the whole set-up; Assad, Saddam Hussein, etc. The nationalist model is kept, but dressed up in Islam, an Islam that no longer claims to be universalist, expansionist, jihadist, etc. That is the kind of model Anwar Gargash was talking about yesterday.

However, getting from here to there, completely changing the model, will not be easy. You need "statesmen." Do you have any reason to believe that Syria's new strongman might be up to this daunting task, which amounts to a complete transformation both internally and externally?

You have just said that in Iran things could go well or badly. In the best of cases, there could be a regime crisis, but with the return of the so-called moderates, Khatami and those types of people. Could you tell us a little more about your thoughts on this?

Olivier Roy

We saw how Julani ruled the Idlib region for eight years. What did he do? He did not impose his party. He co-opted the local notables and gave the local Muslim clergy autonomy. Paradoxically, this deeply conservative clergy criticized him for not applying sharia. What is sharia all about? As always, women. That is an absolute, ironclad rule. The clergy asked for the university to be split in two, one for men and one for women. They asked him to shut down malls, where young people would go to enjoy a coffee, chat with each other, etc. And they asked him to re-establish the religious police.

He rejected all three demands. He refused to create two universities to keep the sexes from mixing. He refused to shut down the malls, where young men and women meet. And he dissolved the religious police. These are signs. Then he went to see the bishops. When they took Aleppo, the Carmelite sisters sent him a letter saying they were very worried, but nothing happened and the security services kept the convent safe from the outside. Nobody was let in. So the signs are clear.

Julani is a politician. I am not saying that he is a democrat, of course, but he is a politician who wants power and knows what must be done to ensure the reunification of Syria. One, bring all the components of the Sunni community together, including the moderates. Two, show the face of a multi-faith, multi-ethnic Syria, even if the majority is Sunni. I think he will continue on that path. This is a change of scale. Syria will be ruled the way the little region of Idlib was. He will not suddenly create a new administration. He has asked civil servants to stay put. There is no purge for the moment. That is not because he is good and generous, but because he needs a state apparatus.

The question is what will happen to the Kurds. The answer lies with the big neighbor to the north. The issue will be settled with the Turks. But that is another story.

Iran is facing a regime crisis. Iran is not on the brink of another revolution or a civil war, but a regime crisis. It is unfolding behind the scenes with a few assassinations, but it could turn violent, in other words with armed conflict between groups of Pasdaran, the army, etc. People will turn out in the streets when there is a window of opportunity, when they see something happening. But they will not start that way because they will be shot.

I do not think Iran will be dismembered. There is no reason to think that Iran will break up, a long civil war will start, etc. I think we will see a unified Iran with a strong, legitimate, more or less open central government. Whether or not it will be religious is another matter.

I am therefore relatively optimistic about Iran. The problem is the timing.

Thierry de Montbrial

I will give Haïm the floor in a moment, but first a word about Türkiye, because it is a major regional player and Erdoğan has ambitions. Erdoğan has a very strong Ottoman vision. How can that work?

Olivier Roy

There is no doubt about it. Erdoğan has a neo-Ottoman vision. The problem is, he is alone. The Turkish people do not feel Ottoman at all. They are for closing the borders and sending the Syrians home. This is what Erdoğan said: “There was no border once, we are one people, etc.” If you walk around Mardin, in Gaziantep, people are asking for just one thing: closing the border with Syria, except for business. There is no Ottoman vision in the Turkish nation. The state apparatus is Turkish. They do not want a neo-Ottoman policy.

And nobody in the Arab world wants to see the Ottoman Empire return. When the Muslim Brotherhood won parliamentary elections in Tunisia and Egypt after 2011, they were happy to have Türkiye help them, etc., but they never wanted to see the recreation of an Ottoman califate. That was completely out of the question.

So Erdoğan is dreaming, but at the same time he is a good tactician. Sometimes I compare him to Trump. He says completely wild things, but he knows which way the wind is blowing. One thing traumatized Erdoğan: the Gülen movement’s attempted coup. But before 2015, he really tried to settle with the Kurds. In 2015, for reasons that remain shrouded in mystery, the PKK launched an urban insurrection. I was in Turkish Kurdistan then. I was in Idil and the police told me, “Go home, they’re shooting.” The people did not rise up. Hundreds of young people, PKK members, were killed, but people did not want an uprising. That stiffened Erdoğan’s resolve and he launched an anti-PKK and an anti-Kurdish policy.

Now, there are two possibilities. Either the Kurds, who are in northeast Syria, will be caught between the Turkish army in the north and the new Damascus regime in the west and south – this is the worst-case scenario, but it can happen – or Erdoğan makes a deal with the PKK and Öcalan, which is more likely. But there is an extraordinary mystery. Öcalan is in a four star Turkish prison with telephones, where he speaks with his lieutenants, etc. This means that communication is happening at the highest level. Erdoğan can speak with Öcalan any time. I do not rule out an agreement, which would assume the demilitarization of the Kurds and the PKK in general and the end of armed conflict. Kurdish fighters would surrender their weapons in Syria and Türkiye at the same time and some form of regional government would be set up on both sides to meet the demands of the Kurdish people, which are much more cultural and linguistic than religious and political.