



Interview with Frédéric Pichon

Author of *Syrie, une guerre pour rien* (Les Éditions du Cerf, 2017)

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Please talk a bit about yourself. What (and when) stimulated your interest in Syria, on which you have written 2 books. Did you live in Syria for some time? Do you see yourself as more of an Eastern Mediterranean expert or a wider Middle East geopolitics one?

My interest in the region dates back to September 11, 2001. I moved to Beirut the following year and from there I was able to visit Syria every week. I think Beirut is a great observation post for the Near East. At the time what I liked about Syria was that, despite everything, it was a country that was little known and quite closed.

In your book, you allude to the disorientation of French policy vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa. Given France's familiarity with the region, this seems quite peculiar. What are the main reasons behind this disorientation? Is it only the will to counterbalance the will to safeguard commercial interests with a semblance of impartiality? Are there any signs of change lately?

In Syria, France had considerable diplomatic assets, a good knowledge of the regional file and an old tradition of conflict resolution. To this must be added a reputation of measure and ability to dialogue with all. All this has been shattered. Regarding the Syrian crisis, France has offered the spectacle of improvisation, excessiveness, cowboy diplomacy, to the extent that one wonders if the neoconservatism of the Hudson Institute has been emulated on the banks of the Seine.

It will take time to recover from this state. France will struggle to find an audible voice in the Arab world. France has picked sides: that of the oil monarchies and of making Iran an enemy despite the Iranian nuclear deal attained in the summer of 2015 by the Obama administration. Macron will have the formidable task of solving seven years of mistakes.

France has been quick to seize the commercial opportunities provided by the lifting of sanctions against Iran. How important would you say this calculation was in the context of the Iran nuclear deal? And why was France quite tougher towards Iran during the negotiations, compared to the rest of the countries? Was it to convince the US of its transatlantic credentials? Or because of what you describe as a neoconservative lobby within the Quai d'Orsay?

Three lobbies are in fact what we call neoconservatism: the fanatics of the French atomic bomb, the "humanitarians" and the friends of Israel and the United States. It will be a laborious task for President Macron to overcome these divisions and act in the true interest of France, which should reflect a middle power able to converse with all. He has already started to attack the powerful neoconservative lobby by explicitly denouncing it last June in an interview published in eight newspapers in the European press.

You mention in your book that Russia has a clear strategy, objectives and means to attain them. Do you think that further Russian involvement in the region (Egypt, Saudi Arabia etc.) is bound to make things more stable and cooperative or the opposite?

Moscow has no global ambitions, but a regional strategy in the Middle East, conducted with a relative economy of means, an undeniable efficiency but all under the constraint and in a moment of latency on the part of the American hegemon. American power is able to adapt. It continues to inspire the technical, economic and ideological grammar of globalization. The Astana conference has shown that while for half a century the conferences on the Middle East were usually held in Europe or the United States, Kazakhstan hosted the last meeting of the parties. That said, Russia has been in the Middle East for at least 50 years: it is enough to look at the agreements made for the establishment of bases in Syria (Mheymim and Tartous). The leases are for 49 years!

It is true that the "international community's" response to the Syrian and the Libyan conflicts has been at best problematic. What lessons should we draw from the Syrian crisis for future regional ones?

In this new international order, relations between nations massively need balance, equanimity, mutual concessions and respect for sovereignty. To be content with its allies in the Gulf all along, France has caused the distrust of emerging countries such as Russia or China, but also Brazil or South Africa. These countries are hungry for recognition and protective of their sovereignty. Paradoxically, while the United States has grasped the need to reduce their regional footprint, the French gestures have only widened the gap between a less and less powerful universalist discourse and the very prosaic realities that condition the relations of global forces.

6. What do you make of scenarios of a US retreat/withdrawal from the region? Are they exaggerated?

It's hard to know what Trump will do. Yet two clues can help us. First, Trump is keeping his election promises: he promised to hinder Iran's revival. And he remains obsessed by this question, but for the moment, America's tools are not clearly deployed, with the exception of tools of economic war that Washington has at its disposal. Second, he looks bent on pursuing policies opposite to Obama's: but will he succeed in making public opinion accept a massive commitment to the Middle East (unlike the "no boots on the ground" pronouncements)? Nothing is less certain.

Monsieur Pichon, on behalf of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies in Athens, thank you very much indeed!