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## Interview with Régis Le Sommer

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*Author of Assad (Editions de la Martinière, 2018)*

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**Please talk a bit about yourself. What first spawned your interest in the Middle East?**

I became interested in the Middle East because in the spring of 2003 I was promoted to US bureau chief of Paris Match, based in New York. A little while after I arrived, in July, I realized that half of the stories I was writing contained the word "Iraq". America had become obsessed with its war. I called my boss and told him I needed to go to Iraq in order to fully get a sense of that obsession and spend time with the "boys". He said "you've never covered a war before. Find a seasoned photographer and then you can go with him". Chris Hondros was my buddy. At that time, the Getty Images photographer had already spent a great deal covering Afghanistan and Iraq. I went with him in March of 2016. Our first story was about the chain of evacuation of wounded soldiers, from the field to Langstulh hospital in Germany. From then on, I went to Iraq every six months, usually staying for a month, then Afghanistan, then Syria, Mali. I returned to Iraq last year to cover the battle of Mosul.

**Why did the West fail to come up with a policy that made sense in Syria?**

Because the West wrongly presumed the Assad government would fall, just like Ben Ali, Ghadafi or Moubarak had done before. It was seen as a domino effect, another people, the Syrians, freeing itself from its chains. The Arab spring had not yet turned into a bitter winter, but there were already signs that even if the protest movement that spread throughout the country gathered many legitimate complaints, the regime was strong and it had supporters. Assad was also smart in that he managed early on to appear as the embodiment of the Syrian nationhood, while, on the other side, the opposition never went beyond a juxtaposition of groups with conflicting views supported by often rival international mentors, and very quickly came to be plagued by extremism.

**Why did the government of Mr Hollande ignore Ambassador Chevallier's repeated warnings about Bashar al-Assad's staying power? Was it wishful thinking?**

I do believe it was wishful thinking. It still exists in some diplomatic and journalistic circles, even if the French presidency has shift its position on Syria, more in words than actions as of now. Before it was 'Assad must go', now it is a stubborn denial of the fact that he has won the war. But while we keep thinking this way, the war is slowly coming to an end, leaving a new Middle East in which we have virtually zero leverage.

**It seems that French policy in the wider MENA region has for some time been oscillating, in the sense of not having clear goals. What factors would you attribute this to?**

I explain it by a constant alignment with the positions of the US, who itself has no clear strategy in the region. In fact the US remains caught between the temptation to keep acting as a superpower, and its own predisposition towards isolationism. In other words, the US can't decide whether to stay or go home. Regarding France, the shift started with Sarkozy's incomprehensible desire to move closer to Bush, thus erasing the political capital gained by Chirac/de Villepin internationally with their refusal to go to war in Iraq in 2003. The alignment reached its peak under Hollande, France often being more aggressive than the US regarding the Iran nuclear deal or Syria.

**You raise an interesting point about the end of neo-conservatism with Emmanuel Macron. But it seems that the lobby is still quite active. For example Frédéric Pichon in his book *Syrie, une guerre pour rien* talks about how this lobby pushed towards a harder stance on the Iran nuclear issue. What is your view of the neo-con lobby's current status and actions?**

They still retain a certain power, especially at the ministry of foreign affairs, but they have lost credibility with the endless and costly wars their ideology helped trigger in the Middle East. Those wars were supposed to bring democracy and freedom but people can now fully grasp that they brought the opposite. The return of Russia certainly hasn't helped them to push their agenda. As much as they would love to see action being taken against Iran, with the legacy of lies at the chore of both Iraq and Syria wars, it is now far from easy to convince people both in Europe and the US, that a new conflict would be fought in the name of good, with a genuine desire to bring happiness and prosperity to the region.