

THE MIDDLE EAST IN TURMOIL

Thursday 26 september, 4:30 p.m.- 6 p.m., Or room



Frédéric Charillon, Fatiha Dazi-Héni and Joseph Maïla

The 2023 Normandy for Peace event was held, as it is every year, at the end of September. At the time, many commentators noted that this region of the world had not known such calm for thirty years, thinking that the Abraham Ac-

cords (two peace treaties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, signed in September 2020) would continue for a long time to come. It was just days before the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7th October 2023, the start of an unprecedented escalation of conflict that left tens of thousands of dead, mostly civilians.

MODERATION

Frédéric Charillon, University professor and co-director of the Geopolitics Defence and Leadership programme at Essec Business School

SPEAKERS

Éric Danon, Diplomat and former French Ambassador to Israel

Fatiha Dazi-Héni, Researcher specialising in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, IRSEM - Sciences Po Lille

Marie Durrieu, PhD student associated with the Strategic Research Institute of the École Militaire, lecturer in international relations at Sciences Po Paris

Joseph Maïla, Professor of geopolitics and international mediation, ESSEC Business School

A year later, it is a time of uncertainty, as Frédéric Charillon recalls, when one question is on everyone's lips: is the Middle East on the brink of a general war? 'No,' Eric Danon answered frankly. It extends to Lebanon, eastern Syria and continues to Gaza, yes, but it doesn't go up to Iran and beyond Egypt, no.' For this diplomat, former French ambassador to Israel, the reason is simple: all the players in the region, Iran, as well as Hezbollah, Israel and the Arab countries of the Mediterranean, have an interest in there being no conflagration. But a refusal of a generalised war doesn't mean that they want to ensure that the conflict ceases; quite the contrary. The political leaders of these countries would even rather be



in favour of it continuing quietly. Firstly, because the Palestinian cause is essential to their domestic policy, if they are to avoid having their authority challenged by their own people. 'Hassan II said that the Palestinian cause was the aphrodisiac of the Arab nations,' noted Éric Danon. For, apart from their authorities, the rejection of Israel would appear to be the only reason why the countries of the Arab League are in agreement. 'It is

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terrible and cynical, because it prolongs the war indefinitely.' Maintaining a state of permanent conflict, even quietly, is also a way of preventing Israel from becoming a superpower, overwhelmed by the detestable image that the country sends to the world and especially to investors. In peacetime, Israel would have an economic advantage, which the Arab countries don't accept.

And on the Arabian Peninsula, the situation is even more complex, with diplomatic powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar seeking to establish itself as a driving force in the negotiations. 'The Abraham Accords, signed on 15th and 20th September 2020, have largely shown that the Palestinian question had been abandoned because these agreements do not deal with a future Palestinian state,' explained Fatiha Dazi-Héni, Doctor of Political Science at the IEP in Paris. Saudi Arabia, engaged in trilateral negotiations with the United States and Israel, wants to hold out the prospect of normalisation with the latter. Regarding this point, its crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, is said to be in disagreement with his people, who are very supportive of the Palestinian cause. Moreover, it is in this country that the two holy places of Islam are located (Mecca and Medina). Even if he wants to make his country a high-tech power, he can't do everything he wants,' added Fatiha Dazi-Héni. Last August, in front of American congressmen, the prince even confided: 'I risk my life by having a normal relationship with Israel.'

An Arabian Peninsula where a fragile balance persists between the authorities' desire for normalisation with Israel and a pro-Palestinian population kept in silence; but on the Lebanese side, the rise of Hezbollah, a Shiite paramilitary group, could change everything. This is in any case the opinion of Joseph Maïla, professor of geopolitics at ESSEC Business School, who is more pessimistic on the issue. 'Lebanon has lost all sovereignty over Hezbollah, to the point that it is almost the state in which Lebanon finds itself,' he explained. «Control is total: airports, ports, drug trafficking, and an army of 20,000 to 40,000 men, trained in Syria, who could set the region ablaze and trigger unpredictable reactions if one of their missiles reached an Israeli nerve centre.. However, Israel struck hard recently, blowing up 5,000

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paggers in the hands of Hezbollah operatives, decimating sixteen of their most important military personnel in a matter of seconds.

For Joseph Maïla, the West Bank might be where the future of a Palestinian state is being played out, a territory that Marie Durrieu knows well. She is a teacher at Sciences Po Paris, and her last trip to the field was in September 2023, a few days before the 7th October attack, perpetrated by Hamas, and when she had already felt the effects of latent violence and a situation that had deteriorated since her last observations. The lack of political hope for Palestinians living in the West Bank, corruption and the disappearance of negotiations with an ultra-Orthodox and nationalist Israeli government gave rise among these populations to 'the idea that there was nothing left to lose,' she said. All everyone was talking about was ending the Israeli occupation and resisting by all means, seven days before the attack. These young Palestinians in the West Bank need to be given a glimmer of hope to stop this downward spiral.' On the Israeli side, Marie Durrieu noted, based on her personal experience in the field, an invisibility of the Palestinian problem in favour of the Iranian threat and relations with the Gulf countries. 'I think it's the result of a strategy put in place by the Netanyahu government,' she explained, later detailing how the conflict is being played out square metre by square metre, with



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the proliferation of Israeli settlements like those in Hebron, in the West Bank. Another striking observation: the extent of the separation barrier, which was initially supposed to follow the Green Line drawn by the United Nations (UN), was finally built further east over more than 700 kilometres instead of the planned 315 kilometres. 'The essence of the conflict is territorial,' she concluded. A very small territory where everything is intertwined and demonstrates that they are destined to live together, as the religious or administrative separations are artificial. The city of Jerusalem, where one passes from one street to another, from Muslim holy places to Jewish holy places, is a perfect example of this. Once at



peace, they will not be able to go their separate ways but will learn to live together.

While the Palestinian situation was thought to be moving away from international political agendas before the attack of 7th October 2023, it has finally exploded. And even if countries surrounding Israel do not want a conflagration, history has often shown that it can happen against everyone's will. 'The Middle East will never be calm until the Palestinian question is resolved,' concluded Eric Danon. For peace to be possible, we still need leaders capable of creating the conditions for it. Not everyone can be De Gaulle and Eisenhower.