



DEBATE

Walter Stadtler, Former President & CEO, National Defense University Foundation

You have clearly undergone a great deal of frustration, although as you know you are not the only one, whether in the Middle East or the US. Could you come up with two or three practical steps that could be taken during the next 12 months or so that would enhance what I was thinking of, trust, confidence and possibly stability in that part of the world? Secondly, have you been talking to our partners and allies involved in this process?

H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

I have suggested what I think is a doable and practical proposal on the zone free of weapons of mass destruction. The five permanent members of the Security Council, who are also the declared nuclear states in the world, issue a statement to say that they want to see a zone free of weapons of mass destruction established in the Middle East, and they would offer the following guarantees to make this zone workable – a nuclear security umbrella for the members of the zone and sanctions, including military sanctions, against any country seen to be developing a weapon of mass destruction; the potential members of the zone were to fix their problems in the next five years so that zone could be made workable with these two guarantees in the background.

That is a practical step and can be done very easily, because, do not forget, all five permanent members of the Security Council have declared a policy of the removal of all nuclear weapons from the world, so they do not have to convince themselves of that issue to achieve this zone free of weapons of mass destruction. There have even been leaders in Israel, like Yitzak Rabin and Ehud Olmert, who said that they would consider the issue of nuclear removal from the Middle East if there was peace and if they could be assured of their safety should that issue be brought to the table.

Ironically, Iran was the country which first put forward the idea of a nuclear free zone in the Middle East, during the Shah's time in 1974, and has continued to support the idea, so it should not be difficult to get us all together. One positive aspect I heard of recently is that, since the scuttling of the conference in Helsinki, there have been two meetings of what I think are called the trustee countries, England, the US, Russia and the UN. They have met with representatives from most of the potential zone members, and the last meeting was held a couple of months ago, which 17 Arab countries and Israel attended but Iran did not. Therefore, there is at least some progress in having Israel sit with 17 Arab countries on this specific issue, and that could be built on.

Regarding the issue of Palestine, we have always said that we need the big bear at our backs to overcome whatever reluctance there may be in the political arena. The Prime Minister of Israel, if he can point to the big bear pushing him, can ask his opponents in the Knesset and in the political parties in Israel whether they want to anger the big bear, and the same goes for Mahmoud Abbas. Unfortunately, the big bear has not proven to be very bearish recently, and this is where Mr. Kerry's role has become so important, because he is playing that part now, and he will need the support of the President to get things done when the crucial time comes for Netanyahu and Abbas to look at the really important issues, like Jerusalem, land swaps, security arrangements, etc. That is where the big bear not only has to bare his teeth but also to extend his claws and be ready to do his job.

We were in the same business at one time.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and Founder of the WPC

You trust each other in that case.



H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

One must trust but verify.

Meir Sheerit, Member of the Knesset, former Minister of Intelligence Services, Israel

I was glad to listen to you; I dream of the possibility of you coming to make that speech in the Knesset, and you will find that most Israelis will agree with most of what you have said, perhaps with the exception of Saudi rejection of Israeli settlements in Palestine. However, I find myself agreeing with most of what you say. According to foreign sources, Israel is the most effective party for preventing countries in the Middle East acquiring nuclear weapons. We did it in Iraq, we prevented Syria from doing so – and imagine what might happen today if we did not – and in this situation I am the biggest supporter of the Arab initiative, which was a Saudi initiative. I have tried to push it very strongly in the governments of which I was a member; I was a member of the Sharon and Olmert governments, and I found that there was a lot of support for this initiative.

The problem is how to move it forward. We cannot do so only by talking to the Palestinians. I think, if Saudi Arabia is the bear to push this initiative that would be the best solution, because in that case we will pay the same price we will pay in having peace with the Palestinians; we can have peace with 56 Arab countries. It would normalise relations and change the Middle East; that is the reason I support it. Secondly, it is the best guarantee for peace, because if we have peace with all of the Arab world, no one will dare to break it.

I believe that we have to give it a push in order to move it ahead. When I tried to push our prime ministers to call Riyadh and join in pushing this initiative, they said it was not acceptable. I believe that the Saudis, in coming up with this initiative, expect us to negotiate with the Palestinians and come up with an agreement, and then this objective will take over. It does work; the fact is, if you remember, that Olmert was suggesting to Abu Mazen almost everything that is said in the Arab Initiative, and he refused to sign. The same thing happened with Arafat; he refused to sign. The reason they refused is that they cannot take the decision needed on their side to give up the right of return.

Your initiative was very clever and wise, and phrased well in saying that it is necessary to find an agreeable and justified solution to the Palestinian refugees, agreeable meaning that Israel has to agree, and nobody in Saudi Arabia or any other Arab leaders believe that Israel can really accept Arab refugees back into Israel, as opposed to going to the Palestinian state and being compensated. That in my opinion is the main obstacle for the Palestinians to signing an agreement. Maybe you can be the bear to push it and solve this problem, and you are welcome to come to the Knesset if you want; I will be happy to arrange it.

H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

Let me just remind you that Saudi Arabia put out not just the Arab Peace Initiative but also the previous initiative under the late King Fahd in 1981-1982, called the Fahd Plan, and it was the first time after Camp David with Sadat and Begin that all of the Arab world accepted the existence of the state of Israel. Before that it used to be called 'the alleged state of Israel,' but from 1981-1982, all the Arab countries, including Hafaz al-Assad in Syria, Saddam in Iraq and Gaddafi in Libya, accepted the Saudi view that Israel exists, that it is on our borders, and that the borders should not be changed. That was the main thrust of the Fahd Plan.

What happened when King Fahd put it forward? It got full Arab approval, but not even a word from Israel, who totally ignored the issue. Then there was the peace initiative that King Abdullah put forward in 2002. What was the response from Israel? I remember clearly that Mr. Sharon was the Prime Minister at that time, and his political adviser, Dov Weisglass, described this initiative as the most dangerous threat to Israeli existence. No Israeli leader after that would accept that the initiative was there to be discussed. President Peres said that there was some good language in the initiative, Ehud Olmert also said some good words about it, and Tzipi Livni gave it some very guarded support. However, no official statement from any Israeli representative said that, while they had some reservations about the Arab Peace Initiative, they wanted to sit down and talk about it. Therefore, if Israel is not willing to talk about what we propose to them, I do not think Saudi Arabia is willing to talk to Israel unless they do.



Regarding whether Israel is the best guarantor for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons in the area, I would happily accept that if I saw Israeli Air Force planes bombing the Dimona reactor in Israel, not just the ones in Iraq and in Syria. Israel has nuclear weapons; you know that and I know that, so simply to come to us and say you will be our guardian angel and prevent the Iranians from getting them, for God's sake, get rid of yours first and then we can talk.

However, that is all hypothetical. Regarding the issue of making gestures, coming to the Knesset and so on, it is not going to happen. I wish there was some way I could convince myself that it would be a viable step in promoting the Arab Peace Initiative, but if there is no official response to that initiative, no Arab leader, or indeed any individual leader, will come to the Knesset, because they simply do not trust that the necessary action will be taken after that. Accept the Arab Peace Initiative, sit down and talk with the Palestinians, and then, as we say in Arabic, 'for every discussion there is another discussion.' That is what Israel should do, I think.

Fareed Yasseen, Ambassador of Iraq to France

I have a question, but before that I have a statement about Israel's role in preventing Arab states from going nuclear, and the Iraqi example is quite telling. Iraq had developed, with French help, an excellent research nuclear reactor that had first world class nuclear experiments conducted by first rate Iraqi nuclear physicists who had studied in the US and the UK. When Israel bombed Osirak, Saddam convened the Iraq Atomic Energy Commission and decided to renounce the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It was then that the Iraqi physicists, who were there, incensed at what Israel had done, decided to go full blast and help Saddam develop a quite exceptional programme of enrichment. Iraq was the first country since the US to pursue five different tracks to enrichments; all the nuclear countries that came after the US pursued one or two, but the Iraqis pursued all five tracks, all of that because they were spurred on and angry at what Israel had done. Therefore, do not do this again; do not bomb. I do not think it is the way to do things, and I think the statement a bit earlier is a bit self-serving.

However, I have a question for His Highness. One issue which has not been addressed enough is Syria. It is an issue which is close to our hearts in Iraq; we have been through hell in the last ten years. According to the best accountants of victims in Iraq, a group in the UK called Iraq Body Count, we have had 120,000-130,000 deaths since 2003. That number has been exceeded in Syria in just two years. It is really a tragedy. People are preparing themselves for this next milestone, which is Geneva. What can we do, in your view, to make Geneva a success, and what can Geneva be like? I am asking you this question because Saudi Arabia was involved in a previous regional effort to bring peace to the area, namely the Taif Agreement, where it had a predominant role. Based on that experience, what could we do as an international community and regional players to make Geneva as successful as it could be?

Yim Sungjoon, Senior Advisor, Lee International IP & Law Group

I was very struck and impressed by your formula for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue; your Highness suggested two elements, a security guarantee and military sanctions. My first question is this. How could you impose military sanctions on a country which has a quite sizeable military capability? I am afraid it could lead to military conflict or eventually a war. Secondly, my mind immediately moves to a more dangerous and graver issue in our region, which is North Korean development of nuclear weapons. I was involved in negotiations to resolve this issue for a long time, maybe longer than the negotiations with Iran; we have been in negotiations for more than 20 years, but without it bearing much fruit. Do you think your formula could be applied to the case of the North Korean nuclear issue?

Riad Tabet, President of Berit International Holding SA

Merci. Votre Altesse, votre antagonisme avec l'Iran a des conséquences sur le terrain. Nous le voyons à Bahreïn. Nous le voyons en Irak, en Syrie, et particulièrement au Liban. Est-ce que vous ne pensez pas que cet antagonisme pourrait générer un conflit, et même une guerre intercommunautaire entre les chiites et les sunnites dans la région ? Car le problème de l'Iran, sur lequel se focalise l'Occident, n'est pas que nucléaire. Il y a d'autres conséquences sur le terrain.



Thierry de Montbrial, President and Founder of the WPC

So three simple questions. And thank you, because all the questions were extremely short.

H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

Je vais essayer de parler en français.

Thierry de Montbrial, President and Founder of the WPC

Oui, oui, oui, oui.

H.R.H. Prince Turki Al Faisal, Chairman of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

L'antagonisme que vous décrivez de l'Arabie Saoudite envers l'Iran, du côté de l'Arabie Saoudite, c'est le contraire. C'est l'antagonisme iranien envers l'Arabie Saoudite qui est le commencement de cette ... je ne peux pas dire conflit, mais divergence de politique et d'opinion entre les deux pays. Alors, le roi Abdallah a proposé quelques efforts pour avoir une belle relation de respect mutuel, et même d'amitié entre l'Iran et l'Arabie Saoudite.

La dernière était la plus profonde je crois. C'était pendant le mois de Ramadan – le mois le plus saint du calendrier musulman – l'année dernière quand il a convoqué une conférence de sommet islamique à La Mecque pour discuter cette question de divergence entre le monde chiite et le monde sunnite dans le monde islamique. M. Ahmadinejad était là-bas, ainsi que d'autres représentants de pays, pas seulement du monde arabe mais de tout le monde islamique. On a conclu la conférence avec l'accord d'avoir une centre de dialogue entre chiites et sunnites dans la ville de Médine, la sainte ville de Médine, en Arabie. Et c'est ça la politique de l'Arabie Saoudite. C'est d'embrasser comme ça – embrace in English – notre frère musulman, quelle que soit sa direction.

Vous avez dit qu'au Liban c'est l'antagonisme saoudien. Est-ce que vous êtes en train d'entendre les mots de M. Hassan Nasrallah récemment ? Il a dit que c'était l'Arabie Saoudite qui a mis les bombes à l'ambassade iranienne, dans le quartier chiite qui était protégé par le Hezbollah. C'est seulement un exemple de ce que M. Nasrallah a dit au sujet de l'Arabie Saoudite. Si vous retracez ses mots depuis qu'il est devenu le chef du Hezbollah, vous devriez voir l'antagonisme que lui, représentant de l'Iran, a envers l'Arabie Saoudite.

En Irak aussi, si vous suivez les mots et les discours des imams chiites de l'Irak au sujet de l'Arabie Saoudite, décrivant l'Arabie Saoudite comme le pays du terrorisme, du wahhabisme, etc., etc., ce n'est pas un signe d'amitié envers l'Arabie Saoudite. Il en est de même si vous suivez les discours des imams chiites en Iran même, sur les chaînes de télévision et les chaînes de radios bombardées contre nous. Vous devriez voir que c'est l'inimitié de l'Iran qui est très, très, grande contre l'Arabie Saoudite. Je ne sais pas comment on peut convaincre nos confrères musulmans en Iran que l'Arabie Saoudite n'essaie pas de leur faire du mal.

Nous avons chaque année, depuis cinq ans maintenant, près d'un million d'Iraniens qui viennent pour faire le pèlerinage et le petit pèlerinage en Arabie, chaque année. Ils sont reçus avec hospitalité, cordialité, etc., etc. Comme je l'ai dit, nous avons essayé d'échanger avec l'Iran, depuis 1995. Mais c'est l'Iran qui a des troupes militaires en Syrie. C'est l'Iran qui a engagé le Hezbollah dans l'invasion de la Syrie. C'est l'Iran qui a engagé les brigades Al-Abbas de l'Irak pour l'invasion de la Syrie. Et c'est l'Iran qui a pressuré les partis chiites en Irak d'accepter M. Maliki comme premier ministre.

Cette interférence et ce jeu d'hégémonie envers les pays arabes n'est pas acceptable. J'ai dit dans un de mes discours que nous, dans le monde arabe, n'accepterons pas de porter les vêtements occidentaux. De même, nous n'allons pas accepter de porter les robes iraniennes, parce que c'est nous qui devons décider de notre futur. Ce ne sont pas l'Iran, les Etats-Unis ou l'Europe. De cette façon, je crois que c'est à l'Iran de montrer sa bonne volonté envers nous.



Pour la Corée, I will speak in English. Regarding Korea, I do not know if what I propose is applicable to North Korea or not, because I do not know much about the situation; you are better placed to make that decision. However, zones free of weapons of mass destruction are the way to go in order to remove any potential for nuclear conflagration, and I agree with you that the threat of force to order to establish a zone in the Middle East may start a war. However, this is what we in the zone have to consider when we are making our decision on whether to acquire weapons of mass destruction or not. Regarding Syria, inasmuch as I propose a statement from the five permanent members of the Security Council on the zone free of weapons of mass destruction, I cannot see why the permanent members should not issue a another statement saying that the fighting has to stop in Syria, meaning that Assad will get no more weapons from Russia and Iran, that Hezbollah will have to withdraw from Syrian territory, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards fighting on the ground will have to withdraw from Syrian territory, etc.; and the five permanent members would have to agree on that and wish to see it happen. That will go a long way to mitigating any of the military ambitions of any side there.