

DEBATE

Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

We have about 10 minutes left so I would be happy to take interventions and questions from the guests, where there are many distinguished Europeans. Mr. Narayanan, are you going to speak as a European?

Mayankote Kelath Narayanan, Executive Chairman of CyQureX Systems Pvt. Ltd., former Senior Advisor and National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of India

No, I am going to speak as an admirer of the UAE. I would like to say that I was very impressed by what you were saying but I have been more impressed by what you have achieved. I have known the UAE over the years when I was the National Security Advisor and otherwise. I think in the recent period the UAE has really emerged as a peacemaker in the region and beyond, with what you have done with regard to the disputes we have seen in the Near East or West Asia. I would say that the almost dramatic thing of providing my friend Ashraf Ghani with a home in the UAE when he almost faced extinction, shows a great deal of innate wisdom. I would like to know from you, Your Excellency, how is that the UAE has suddenly really become in one sense the savior of this part of the world? Since I come from India, I am saying this part of the world because I think we now face a whole series of problems. You mentioned Afghanistan, but there are many other issues. As we were discussing this morning, there are the problems between India and many other countries and China. We need somebody who is almost in it and yet out of it. You are a friend to many countries in the region, yet I do not think you are deeply involved in the region's politics. Is it possible for you to do this and if so, how would you do it? I am not trying to be facetious; I think it is true that people like me who have been around, see what you have done recently as a great service to humanity.

Anwar Mohammed Gargash, Diplomatic Advisor to the President, United Arab Emirates

Thank you very much and thank you for the question. I want to use this opportunity to highlight a bit of our new thinking on the region and this new thinking is really largely influenced by what we just talked about. Part of the new thinking is that the region is a pressure cooker and because of that we need to think again and de-escalate. De-escalation does not mean that we will change the policies of the countries and regional players around us. However, it does mean that we will avoid confrontations, confrontations for which we would all pay a very heavy price for decades to come. I think we really need to understand the concept of de-escalation and what it will allow us to achieve.

Second, today we also have the third largest economy in the Middle East, so with the Covid pandemic we can clearly see that it is also extremely important to concentrate on competitiveness on the home front. We need to make the UAE more competitive, more attractive and this is not an issue of incentives or financial injections, etc., but it is also about making the UAE more global. For example, one of the changes we have made to our laws is to allow inheritance to be governed by people's religion rather than national UAE law, which gives added competitiveness to the UAE. That is just one example of a myriad of laws.

I want to move onto your second point because I think it is extremely important. I think it would be hubris for the UAE to think that it can actually moderate or mediate in issues with very deep historical, cultural, religious, and geographical roots. However, the UAE could be a facilitator, a good friend and conveyor. I remember the confrontation between India and Pakistan a few years ago, and we were on a trip with His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed. Sheikh Mohammed understands that the issues between India and Pakistan are deep historical issues that are very emotional and emotive, but he can do one thing and that is what he did. He called Prime Minister Modi and he called Prime Minister Khan of Pakistan and spoke to them as a friend and urged de-escalation without really going into the core issue here. I think that it would really be hubris for a country like the UAE to come and say that we can address the core issue. However, there are things that countries can do, and I think this is something that the UAE is doing in many arenas behind the scenes, trying to de-escalate tensions and make sure that dialogue and communication continues between friends. We are not talking about friend and foe; we are talking about countries that are friend and friend and we are trying to do something in this area. I think this is essential. On this subject, I have actually seen this strategic transformation of our relationship with India. It has always been fantastic, but I would say that a lot of work has been done on government level over the last few years and the trust has been built. You can always do work, but trust is a long-term investment and commitment. If there is something that I can give to Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, it is his clear understanding of the fabric of trust in international relations. It is a long-term issue whether it is with Russia, India or any other country. When you build this fabric of trust and you maintain it, you can play a role in de-escalation. I also think we have to understand that many of the issues we face are entrenched in the national interests of countries and there is no way that the country like the UAE will change the perception of the national interests of our friends. What we can do is actually help de-escalate and make sure that the dialogue continues, and that confrontation is not a replacement for discussion and dialogue.

Thierry de Montbrial

Unfortunately, the time goes too fast, but I will take a question from Daniel Shek and then one more.

Daniel Shek, Former Ambassador of Israel to France

Your Excellency, I came on a direct flight from Tel Aviv, and I am obviously very excited about that. I would like to ask you about the aftermath of what was probably the most applauded and popular achievement in international diplomacy in 2020, the Abraham Accords, in which the UAE played a significant leadership role. It was so applauded and so unanimously supported that even the Biden administration supported it, which is a rare exception from the heritage of

former President Trump. However, there is an exception in our region and that is our Palestinian neighbors, who for reasons whether you accept them or not, felt frustrated at that development. I would like to ask Your Excellency if you feel that things are calming down with them and if you see the UAE in the future, in the spirit of what you just said, trying to play a role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in view of your newly achieved role in our region?

Thierry de Montbrial

I would like to take the other question at the same time, if I may.

Memduh Karakullukçu, Founding Board member of the Global Relations Forum, Founding Partner of Kanunum, Chairman of Kroton Consulting

Your Excellency, I hail from Istanbul, Turkey. Thank you very much for your gracious hospitality and in our region the tradition is to honor our hosts, so I will ask a somewhat contrarian question, but I will do it in the spirit of dialogue and friendship. You painted a picture of the UAE based on dialogue, conciliation and generally a positive approach to international affairs. Unfortunately, at least in some parts of the world, including my country, there is an alternative narrative where your presence in places like Libya, East Mediterranean, Greece, is perceived and can be portrayed as more non-conciliatory and escalatory, in some ways projecting a power approach to international affairs. Why do we have this sort of contrasting view of the UAE's approach to international affairs, contrasting with the very constructive picture you painted for us? Thank you very much.

Thierry de Montbrial

Maybe one last question from John Andrews.

John Andrews, Contributing Editor to *The Economist* and *Project Syndicate*

Thank you very much for the excellent comments. I was impressed by what you were saying about confrontations and also about managing the region. It seems to me that one example that the region did not manage well was the confrontation with Qatar. I wonder if you could say a few words about why that confrontation took so long to resolve and be de-escalated. I see that the gentleman from Turkey and obviously Turkey was an ally of Qatar did a lot to help Qatar. Is there an aspect of the Muslim Brotherhood underlying these policy differences and how can you resolve those inherent tensions?

Thierry de Montbrial

Normally I would stop here unless there is another final provocative question, which I am sure Dr. Gargash would enjoy.

David Sulzberger, Art Dealer specializing in Islamic Art

Your Excellency, I wonder if you might also comment, especially with respect to guiding the future of the UAE, on your very close neighbors Iran and Iraq, after all, in the second half of the 20th century, regime change in both these nations must have had an impact on your policies. How do you guide your future with respect to any further changes that may occur in those countries?

Thierry de Montbrial

I think the plate is full enough.

Anwar Mohammed Gargash

It looks like a whole buffet. I want to address these four issues because I think they are all pertinent and extremely important. The first thing I want to say about the Abraham Accords is that they have been a success. That is the first thing we really need to say. In one year, they achieved more than expected and let us look at these achievements. Number one, it has actually broken a very important psychological glass ceiling, door or whatever. I said this two years before the Abraham Accords, decades of not talking to Israel has not really brought us any closer and if you think about it, the two countries that have been able to help the Palestinian most are Egypt and Jordan, simply because they have that relationship with Israel. Therefore, number one is breaking that psychological barrier. I would say that number two is that they have brought the economy and people to people relations into peace, which is an important element in their success. I would say that is has been an unmitigated success.

Let me also address the element in your question, which is basically Palestinian statehood, etc. As it is the case with Egypt and Jordan, the UAE remains committed to a two-state solution and the UAE believes that it can actually do more to achieve in the medium-term, maybe not in the short-term, by building dialogue and that sort of network of trust I spoke about. There are two important things here. Number one is what brought forward our relationship with Israel. I was going to say that this was a relationship that would have been normalized by 2023, but what brought it forward was really the issue of the annexation of Palestinian land, and we have seen that is off the table right now. There were a lot of naysayers about it, but ultimately it is off the table now. The other very important element is that while the Egyptians were doing excellent work in bringing the latest Israeli-Palestinian confrontation to an end, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, our Foreign Minister, had six telephone calls in 11 days with Gabi Ashkenazi, urging Israel to agree to the Egyptian proposal. I am not going to say we were the only voice because I am sure there were a lot of other peaceful and constructive voices. However, imagine the Foreign Minister of a country with no relations with Israel is able to speak with his Israeli counterpart and say, Gabi, this is the time to move on, so let us stop and do this or that. I feel that in some sense we had provided support through the short duration of the relationship. I would say that the Abraham Accords will actually allow us to help other moderate and constructive Arab countries, such as Egypt, Jordan and others, to reach and help reach the solution that the Palestinians and Israelis are looking for. Again, I come back and say there is no hubris here. The idea that we are going to change the mind of the Israelis or the Palestinians is in many ways the exaggeration *par excellence*. I think what we are trying to do is to have a helpful and constructive role in ending this state of confrontation that has gone on for too long but ending it correctly with Israel secure in its borders and the Palestinians having the free, independent state that they rightfully seek.

On the Turkish side, of course the issue is that the UAE took important decisions at critical junctures and from our perspective, they were the right decisions. We came into the support the Saudi effort in Yemen because there was a vacuum, because the international system was shifting, and regional players were told they had to be more responsible for their security. In Libya, we were the most significant Arab contributor to the NATO effort to unseat Colonel

Gaddafi and there is a legacy and an Arab issue here. You cannot come and turn us on when you want and then turn us off. We took the right decisions at the right time. There was a legacy issue in Libya at the time and as I said, we were the major Arab component in the NATO effort and there was also a major terrorist threat to the western border of Egypt, the most important Arab country. I completely believe that the UAE took the right measures in addressing regional vacuums collectively, not alone. I have to say, we also paid a very heavy price for it, reputationally, politically, etc., but it was the position we took. I am not responsible for the narratives of others about the UAE and I see that negative narrative. However, if you turn things around, I would also say that Turkey's recent re-examination of its policies towards Egypt, the Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia and others, is very welcome. I think it is very important for us to meet midway and reach out. I keep repeating this story because it is very remarkable, but I was very glad about the meeting between our National Security Advisor, Sheikh Tahnoun, and President Erdogan, because 85% of it was about the future and the economy. Coming back and asking if the UAE really made the wrong choices in those days, the UAE made those choices based on the vacuums that were there and made them collectively. I do not think we come back and revisit these things in politics, but I think today, we are more forward-looking. We are not going to change Turkey's perception of where its national interests lie. For example, you mentioned Greece and I think that Turkey's policy at the time suddenly made Greece very important geostrategically. This was really a case of a policy that actually sort of retracted in many ways. I do not think this is the time to really re-examine these things and I think we made what we felt were the right and essential choices because of our fear of vacuums. We continue to be afraid of vacuums and escalation and we feel that dealing with them today really comes with a new set of policies based on regional cooperation, dialogue, talking to each other and understanding that we will sometimes not be able to twist and turn other countries' perceptions of their own foreign policies.

This leads me to the issue of Qatar. Again, I do not really want to dwell on issues from the past, but I would say that our view of the region was very different and continues to be different. The region needs to be more institutionalized and I would say, more civil than religious. For example, somebody looked at the resurgence of political Islam and put 1980 - 2017 on a tombstone. I am not sure about the 2017 part but clearly the sort of ideological religious view of the region has been too costly. This has been a remarkable year for us with Mars Probe, Expo, nuclear power and various really great achievements. We are really trying to put forward what I would say is a really positive, secular agenda because we believe that for the last four decades, we have really tried what I would call a political Islamist agenda and the cost has to be too high and I do not think we can continue on the same path. It does not mean that we will change other countries, and this is something very important. It is also part of our approach to try and make sure that we work on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and ensure that they are all-inclusive, including every single country in the region. Some will join, and Turkey has been very positive about what we are saying to them. Hopefully, the Iranians will also be very positive. Our fear is vacuums and escalation in the coming period and I do not see it as our fear as the UAE, I think this should be a collective, regional fear. In my opinion, if we can calibrate and control that, I think we will be able to build networks of trust for the coming decade that will be much more positive.

On Iran and Iraq, again, I was in Baghdad at the neighbors of Iraq conference and it was really fantastic. I would say that at this stage it was more form than substance but a great

success for Iraqi diplomacy and French diplomacy; we have to give credit where credit is due here. However, in my opinion this is really a forum of things we want to see in the future, a forum where we need to be able to meet together. Perhaps at the beginning it will be small steps, but I hope that it will be very positive. Iraq is going to go through an election in around nine days and we clearly hope that the Iraqis are really reconciled with their political system. I hear from more and more Iraqi experts that it is really not about geopolitics first; it is about service delivery and I think this is essential. It is the ability of the states of our region and a more youthful and larger population, to deliver services to these people, whatever those services are. I flew from Abu Dhabi to Baghdad for that conference and Baghdad felt warmer than Abu Dhabi if you can believe it, so I can really understand the idea of service delivery.

I have to say that the Biden administration has been very encouraging in our efforts to also de-escalate with Iran and our neighbors. Does this mean that the issues are resolved? No, it does not. We remain very concerned with regards to the nuclear program. We remain very concerned with regards to regional policy, drones, missiles, etc. However, at the same time, the last thing we want is a confrontation because if this region is mired in confrontation, we will all pay the price for decades to come. Coming back here to the Abraham Accords, one thing we insisted on publicly and privately was that there should not be a new alliance against Iran. I know that Iran does not believe us, but ultimately it will because that is the reality, and I think that the Israelis are also starting to believe us. We really have no interest in a new confrontation in the region. Am I very positive about reaching out to Iran? Yes, I am. Am I very positive that Iran will change its regional course? I have to say that I am more realistic here, but I am also betting that Iran is concerned about vacuums and escalation. Thank you.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you for these extremely important and precise comments. You referred several times to the issue of trust, and I was thinking about one of the great assets of the Cold War that we have allowed to die, which is the concept of confidence building measure from the times of arms control. I think that we have to reinvent this concept of confidence building measures and try to apply it not only in the context of the relationship between the superpowers of the day but also among most of the middle powers, as you said. I think it was one of the most interesting geopolitical sessions, so I thank you very much, Anwar and I thank the UAE. The applause is there, and I do not need to add any words.