

ABDULAZIZ OTHMAN SAGER

Founder and Chairman of the Gulf Research Center

Steven Erlanger, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, Europe, for *The New York Times*

Our last panelist is the distinguished founder of the Gulf Research Center, Abdulaziz Othman Sager, who has also been a great interlocuter about the Arab world, the Saudi world. I am curious what you have to say to us since you are from the region, but I am also very curious if you could talk a bit about relations with the United States and how they have turned?

Abdulaziz Othman Sager

Thank you. Let me extend my most profound appreciation to my good friend, Thierry, and the World Policy Conference, for their efforts to bring this effort together. We understand what it takes to get this effort together.

Let me start by saying what, in my opinion, are the key concerns and problems that are important? First is the US relation to the region, and we see a soft and confusing approach from the US. We do not know what they are up to, and there are different and confusing signals. For example, on the one hand, they said they would reallocate armed forces; on the other, they were reducing their armed forces in the region. Then, there are statements saying they remain committed to the region's security; however, they also mentioned they are de-escalating their efforts. We are still determining the reality; many confusing and unpredictable signals are coming from Washington that impact the region's geopolitics. Understanding their commitment and where the US and other Western countries stand regarding the region must be clarified, forcing the region to act differently toward others.

Second, there was confusion about US policy when President Obama said there was a red line in Syria. Then, all of a sudden, we have the Russians back in the region, and that was due to the lack of a clear American policy, which allowed that sort of intervention to happen.

Third is Iranian expansionism; today, we still suffer from a real, serious threat from Iran. In addition, we have maritime security issues, energy security threatened by Iran, interventionist and expansionist policies using sectarianism as a dimension, and supporting militia. All those remain critical issues for us in the region, so where the Iranian threat goes from here also has a crucial impact on our geopolitical matters.

Some Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, signed the Abraham Accords based on their national interests, and normalizing the relationship will bring better peace to the region. Some countries in the region thought they needed peace before

normalization and some. However, some negotiate secretly, so that is a sovereign state decision. Still, at the same time, it is a new element in the geopolitical side of the region.

The other thing is we have conflicting issues on hotspots in the region, including wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, as well as Israeli and Iranian vessels attacking each other, but at the same time, that did not change the geopolitics of the region. When people thought about the Syrian crisis, they thought Jordan would take over the next day, but Jordan and Syria are still there. Turkish intervention in the northern part of Syria and Iranian intervention in Kurdistan still exists. This did not change the geopolitical structure, but looking at all these conflicts and issues is essential.

It is also interesting that the region has started making its own sovereign decisions without waiting for the superpowers' instructions, which is a clear signal. You can see it in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, and many other countries in the Arab world that are starting to say that we need to protect our interests. This is another crucial dimension. Since we are witnessing a new Cold War era, will that independent, sovereign decision be challenged by the top two powers? In other words, 67% of our exports go to Asia, and China is our largest importer. When the Chinese President recently visited the region, he made a statement saying they were the second largest economy and they would like to legitimize their economic relations with a political umbrella. China is a buyer of 3.6 million barrels daily from the region, so almost 20% of Saudi Arabia's exports go to China. If you read The Washington Post today, there is a concern in the US about China-Gulf relations. Those concerns are legitimate, but at the same time, it is an economic relationship that has yet to develop into strong political or strategic ties. China will not replace the US in the region, and China cannot provide the security that the region wants or is looking for. However, the Cold War era syndrome will put pressure on the region; where do you go, East or West? Who should you listen to?

Also, during the crisis in Ukraine, we were forced to decide by the US, and our balance was misinterpreted. I liked it yesterday when Dr. Anwar Gargash used the words, not neutral but balanced. Israel is balanced in opposition to the Ukrainian crisis, and India has a balanced position. We in the Arab world have a balanced position, and first, we are not compromising on Ukraine, which all the four ministers have stated. We do not accept intervention with the use of military means or authoritarian intervention. However, at the same time, we have a similar case in Yemen where we understand the Russian concerns, which come from three things. There was a friendly government to deal with, they wanted a safe border that did not represent a threat to them, and they did not want to have a foreign military presence that represented a threat. We have a similar case in Yemen. We want a friendly government we can deal with, and we do not wish to have a foreign military presence from Iran on our borders that threatens us, as we also want a safe border.

If I look at 2023, we will likely have similar issues of concern. Can we still keep our sovereign decisions independent of the superpowers? Can we still state our position based on our interests, or will we challenge them? It will likely continue to be a vital issue in 2023. Also, there is Iran and what happens with JCPOA. Today's scenarios are different with no agreement, status quo, modified agreement with minor changes, and altered agreement with significant differences. A completely new agreement cannot be established, so today's



scenarios are a big challenge. Then there is how Iran will represent a threat, if they will retaliate in the region and how that goes.

Steven Erlanger

I could ask you many, many questions but let me just limit myself right now. Do you think the disorder in Iran makes it more dangerous for the region or does it work to keep them concentrated at home?

Abdulaziz Othman Sager

Personally, I belong to the school of Hobbes so I believe central government rule will be far better than having a fragmented government, because we saw what happened with that in Lebanon. Also, if I go back to 2023, I think what happens to oil prices will be very important because again, the region has a lot of important projects and expansion and development, what we call development, which will also play a part. We are almost entering the ninth year in Yemen, and I think we are happy to have a settlement in Yemen but based on two things, no interventions from Iran and based on the decision of the Yemeni people and the agreement that can take place. I think all that still represents a challenge to us in the region, but going back to where I started, the US relation is the key issue here. We are not saying we need to replace it or that we have a ready alternative for that. We are not saying we do not want it, in fact it is very important and crucial, and we have enjoyed almost a century of good relations here in the region. What we want is a more sensible approach in Washington when looking at the region and the issues.

Steven Erlanger

Great. We have had different words for Washington, that we need a more educated policy, a wiser policy and more attention, but clearly the region is also sending messages to Washington, as the visit of Putin to Saudi is a message. It is a very clear message at a very sensitive point now in the American view of the world.