

ANWAR GARGASH

Diplomatic Advisor to President of the United Arab Emirates

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

It works, that is the first piece of good news. Anwar, thank you so much for being with us for the third time in this format to discuss freely some of the big international issues of the day.

I would like to start with a question to you first of all. With the new war between Israel and Hamas, I say Israel and Hamas, however, I think it is important also to put it in a wider framework because in the last few years we have seen an accumulation of dysfunction of the international system of which this tragedy is only the last one. So, the reason why I say the war between Israel and Hamas is what kind of conflict is it, really? It was after the aggression of Hamas on Israel on October 7, the immediate interpretation by most was that it was the resurgence of the Israeli/Palestinian issue. That is partly true at least, but is it really the right way of referring to the conflict? Has Hamas itself not become a real actor as such? Therefore, my first question has two parts. First regarding the nature of this new conflict, and of course we will discuss its consequences, its likely consequences, is it an Israeli/Palestinian issue, or is it something a little more complex? How do you see it in the wider framework of the deterioration of the international system of the last few years?

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

Thank you very much Thierry, thank you very much. I want to just start by saying that we had agreed to do the session months in advance and of course I think this is very indicative of the region that we live in a way. Therefore my initial thoughts would have been very different except that events on October 7 have sort of forced themselves on the public debate.

I was going to talk more really about a region that is more in tune with geoeconomics rather than geostrategic issues. The idea basically that national actors are basically trying to use economics as a way to de-escalate tension, etc. I think there is no reason why we should also veer away from that course of action, I think the events since October 7 with the Hamas attack on Israeli villages, the loss of life of many civilians, the hostages and of course the Israeli response, which I would also say is disproportionate to be honest.

I think all these events are really, to a government like the UAE, telling us two things. Telling us that, number one, we still have to look at the region and to try and work together with other regional actors in order to ensure that regional stability is guaranteed and is contained and is something that we can maintain.

However, I think the other message is also national plans have to move on. I do not think that national plans have to be on pause because there will always be a major regional issue that will surprise us, granted that this one on October 7 is of huge proportion and has huge repercussions. However, at the same time I think we also need to tend to the region and we need to address the conflicts in the region. I think this is the sort of dichotomy we have to deal with that many who call for a pause on all national issues, national programs, because of a crisis as colossal as we are seeing and its different dimensions are, I think, not advising



correctly. However many also who come and say 'let us just move on with our regional, our national projects and national plans, etc., of investment and economy and revitalizing our economies', I think we will be the first to come and say that, yes, we can do that but we also have to tend to our region.

I think that balance really of looking at what I would call the future is important, but, at the same time, dealing with the demons of the region, the demons of the past, is extremely important.

If you allow me I want to also move to what has been the UAE's priority during this crisis. I think we always have to recognize that Arab public opinion rightfully is very emotional when it comes to the Palestinian issue, this is something that you have read about and you have been brought up with and so on and so forth. Therefore the sort of overriding emotion of the wronged Palestinians is something that I think is extremely prevalent in every Arab society at varying degrees but I think extremely prevalent.

I think the second important issue is that there is always some sort of self-flagellation whenever there is a crisis like this. I mean it becomes, to a certain extent, into an Arab media war to be honest. Therefore it is always about who has had the biggest demonstrations or who had the highest rhetoric and I think what is really lost in all this, the really constructive work, and I feel that since the beginning of the crisis the UAE has not been the loudest, but the UAE has been one of the most constructive and I have to draw this very clear line between being loud and being constructive.

Therefore, with that in mind, I know for example that we have moved on three very important approaches. The first approach, which I think needs to be given a lot of credit, is the diplomatic approach. I know, following our President, that this is something that has taken a lot of his time, with a lot of high level calls with all parties. All these calls are emphasizing on two or three issues. I think a large part of it has been about humanitarian and how can we actually address the humanitarian side of the issue, because the loss of life that we have seen on both sides, the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, is something that is of epic proportions and I think from that perspective we have to address the humanitarian.

I think also we have taken some flak by emphasizing that human life is of equal value wherever it has been the subject of chaotic violence, however I think this is flak that we accept. In addition I think that we can see also in various statements, whether in the GCC-EU statement earlier on the conflict, whether in the Arab League statement that this is becoming accepted language, that all civilian life matters and should not be targeted. I would not take the full credit for this, but I think this is something that our countries work very hard for, which is to try and put this across the table, that even in time where combatants are fighting combatants it is extremely important that the children, the women, the civilians, people of old age, whether they live in some Israeli village or whether they are being bombarded today in Gaza, this is something that is beyond the pale and will not be accepted.

Therefore diplomatically I think we have also moved extremely energetically in the UN Security Council, it just happens that it has been our term, we have been tooling to be a practical and energetic and useful player in our two-year stint in the UN Security Council. All our preparation, four, five years prior to the UN Security Council, has been mostly on developmental issues, trying to get more knowledge on African issues, trying to get more knowledge on developmental issues, water and health. Then suddenly we are dealing with two of the largest crises in this early century, the Ukrainian crisis and now of course of the crisis in Gaza. Therefore our team has been able to be a bridge erector so to speak in many ways, we have been practical about what we are trying to seek.

Therefore really rather than call for a ceasefire and be just a moral voice, without that ceasefire materializing we have been more realistic in trying to bring about a humanitarian ceasefire with the hope that this humanitarian ceasefire will not be vetoed by any of the participants that this is going to pass because that is what we really need. We need a stop to the fighting, we need to address the heartbreaking suffering that we are seeing daily in Gaza of women and children and also to bring the hostages out, especially the civilian parts of the hostages as we see all the Qatari effort right now is concentrating on. Therefore politics is not really about scoring a quick moral echo, it really is about practical results and ends, outcomes. I think this is something that we are trying extremely hard to do.

The second issue that we have been working very hard on, and I am sorry to take this long but I think these are the three areas that I have to emphasize, is the humanitarian side. I think very early on we have been a traditional supporter of UNRO. This year we have put \$45 million for UNRO on the Palestinian cause, among that was \$20 million after October 7 because we feel that among international organizations working in that space, UNRO has been the most effective and we have been a traditional supporter here.

Other than that, like many other Arab countries, we have had our own public campaign, Tarahum, where we are trying to channel the energies of many emotional families here, many families that are angry here at what they see today in Gaza and to try and do that positively through public campaign.

Thirdly of course is the declaration that the UAE will receive 1,000 injured from Gaza plus their families to bring them back to UAE hospitals. However, again we are looking at various initiatives, I can come and say that the President himself is very much involved in the diplomatic efforts, in the humanitarian effort, because that is where we can add value. We can add much more value here. In addition then of course working with countries like Jordan and Egypt where we believe that they know the lay of the land much better than we do and to try and work hard with them to try and bring results.

I think the fourth element that is extremely important for us has been the containment of the conflict. The longer this conflict takes, the longer the violence continues, the longer the attack on Gaza continues, the longer these hostages are held, I think means that it is more likely that the conflict will be expanded. We heard yesterday the Head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said that they are not going to expand the conflict from Hezbollah and many of Iran's allies in the region. I think anything that does not expand the conflict is a positive development from that perspective. However also not to expand the conflict means that we have to end the current issue. Therefore, in my opinion, in an Arab world that is extremely emotional, that is tending to be, as I said, self-flagellating, I would say that we have worked diligently, dynamically, responsively in order to do our part. Of course the Palestinian issue is an Arab issue so there are various components, various countries, but I can come and say with a sense of duty that the UAE is doing all it can to help in the overall Arab efforts in addressing this issue.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much. I think your explanations make a lot of sense and are very wise. I feel it is a very wise policy, it is probably the best option that you have in your country.

However, I would like to come back to, you alluded at the beginning of your remarks to the regional stability. The word 'stability' make sense from a mathematical viewpoint if you start from something like an equilibrium, if there is no equilibrium there cannot be any stability. However there was no equilibrium in the Middle East before October 7. If we take all the main regional actors, without naming them because they are more or less obvious, do you think

they all have an interest in maintaining the status quo, as if it existed? Do you think that some of them are looking for a new kind of equilibrium that would probably not be agreeable to other members? In other words, is there a shared will in the region to move towards some kind of equilibrium with a change of the existing balance of power?

Anwar Gargash

I would say that there are three elements here that are important. From the UAE's perspective we have had a very difficult decade right up to covid and that decade was with the misnomer of the Arab Spring as people call it today. That decade I think was an extremely difficult decade for everybody. From that perspective I think our approach has been defined as regional de-escalation, shared stability, but shared prosperity also. Therefore, from that perspective I think we have, since 2018/2019 have put a lot of effort into trying to articulate ideas for shared prosperity, so the idea basically we are not only talking about the United Arab Emirates prosperity, but we are talking also about the prosperity beyond the Gulf region to try and include countries like Iran, to try to include countries like Türkiye or Israel or Egypt or others. I think this is still a very powerful message where basically we are saying for some the status quo is a good thing, for others it is not a good thing, but let us work together to make that status quo also a good thing for you. Therefore I think that is one thing, you have to have a message that is not centered on stability because stability with poverty does not mean anything, stability has to be with the ability really to have that sort of shared prosperity.

I think the second important part is that the events since October 7, since the Hamas attack and the subsequent developments, show that containment has its limitations. Therefore clearly on the Palestinian issue the containment that I would say has been the hallmark of the Palestinian issue for the last 20 or so years is really hitting the roof right now. We have to have a return to an approach of problem solving, an approach that will deal with refugees, borders and East-Jerusalem. I think this is a totally new approach here where we have to come and admit that the past 20 years of containment have really failed. I do not expect that this discussion is going to take place in the heat of war right now, but I think that this should be really the major takeaway from what we are saying today, containment has failed.

Now from a wider regional issue we have too many I would say open conflicts in the region that have to be addressed. Syria is one, the refugees, millions of refugees from Syria that are in Jordan or Lebanon or Türkiye and the return of these refugees with all the sort of political and social pressure it is putting on these countries with limited resources. I think that the issue of just delay and contain is clearly not the way out. Again we see a conflict where Sudan was basically diverted from a process of transition and suddenly we have now months of fighting and the thing to learn from all this is there are limits to a policy of containment.

Therefore, going back to your question, I think we have to respect that the region will have diverse national and ideological interest and we have to somehow reach, in my opinion, a sort of equilibrium of dealing with these things through, as I said, trying to use economics as much as we can, political de-escalation and clearly also the sort of reining in the media wars that we have that are very acrimonious in the Arab world, that is what I am saying.

Thierry de Montbrial

Would you say that Iran would be, could be interested in such a method?

Anwar Gargash

I think yes. We know for a fact that Iran is interested in being part of this prosperity, and of course we know there are many impediments to larger investments in Iran and once these impediments are not there from the international community I think that we and many other

countries are interested in engaging with Iran. Now it does not mean that Iran is going to change in its political ambitions, but I think we can try and weigh in. We have come out of 10 years of confrontation, so for us another 10 years of confrontation is not what we are looking for. What we are really looking for is areas where we can actually live together, prosper together, build together. It is very difficult but I think if we are able to bring in a more geoeconomic perspective on this we will be able to achieve some things.

Yet again we, the region and again as the international community, we have a responsibility to come and say that many policies of containment, especially in the Israeli/Palestinian issue, have really no future anymore. However I think there is something that will need a process, will need a mechanism in the coming period.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you. You see one of the problems that we have to solve within the WPC is that time is going too fast, so perhaps the support of the patriarch will try to slow down time.

I will put the last question, unfortunately, about the United States. Everybody understands that the US is still by far the number one power in the world, but it is no longer what it used to be, in particular it is no longer as powerful in the region as it was during the Cold War for many reasons. The US obviously has an important role to play in this situation. My question is about the limits of the power of the US, how do you see that?

Anwar Gargash

I am tempted first to say that time runs very fast also when you have a humanitarian crisis. Therefore again, it is not only with WPC, but I think we have to move very fast to save as many as we can, as many of these injured children, as many of these women. It is really heartbreaking just to watch the news every day, it is just heartbreaking, to release all the hostages, to try and do the right thing and maintain the crisis within that political space. However to do that we have to also have a light at the end of the tunnel, we cannot just keep doing it with a very dark tunnel that just keeps going on and on.

Vis à vis the United States, I feel that in a very multipolar world and becoming more multipolar I think out of the Ukraine crisis the Americans are coming out stronger, I think that the outcome of the Ukraine crisis is giving the United States, in my opinion, added strength within the international system. Therefore that I think is something we need to take into account.

Now the Gaza crisis will depend, I think the United States now is showing that they have come full force to support a valued ally for the United States, which is Israel, that is understood in the region, full force. However then again if this crisis continues and especially the humanitarian side and if this crisis brings us back full circle to the old containment policy of pre October 7 I think the American role here is not going to be, forget right and wrong, is not going to be seen as effective.

Therefore for me I think in the longer term the US involvement will be seen by when we end this war the quicker the better, and whether we can have another sort of process at problem solving, at issue solving rather than containment. I think this will be another opportunity for the United States as we move forward.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you.