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Let us go now to Volker Perthes. You are next.

Volker Perthes

Sure, thank you. Thank you, Terry. Let me first say, I have to say that I am speaking here in a purely private capacity. I have colleagues in the UN system who are working day and night on the conflict and they are the ones who should officially speak for the United Nations. However, I am a colleague of theirs and I support the great work they are doing, both on the humanitarian and on the political fronts.

When I thought about this panel, I hoped that this great group of people would probably come up with two things: with lessons, which we always need, lessons on where we go from here, what we have learned from the current crisis and what went wrong before; and then, of course, avenues for diplomacy, avenues for diplomatic actions both to protect civilians and to reach an end to the conflict and open a new path to peace and security in the Middle East, which would include, of course, that Israel can live in recognized and secure borders, and that the Palestinians can live in dignity in their own state and in peace with their neighbors.

Maybe I should start with a comment on what actually happened, or how it looks to me.

On October 7, we had an unprecedented, horrific terrorist attack, targeting mainly civilians – more than 1 000 killed, more than 200 abducted – and I think that, not only in Jewish eyes, this does not look like an act of resistance against occupation, but it looks like a pogrom, it looks like mass murder and nothing else.

It was followed by a horrific counterattack on the Gaza Strip, which has been creating a humanitarian disaster, unprecedented for the Gaza Strip at least, the victims again being mainly civilians. And the advice to one million Palestinians from the northern part of the Gaza Strip to evacuate to the south brings up, for many Palestinians, the trauma or the memory of forced displacement and exile.

I can only underline here what my Secretary General, the Secretary General of the United Nations, has said – that nothing, not even the grievances of Palestinians over decades, can justify the appalling attack by Hamas. However, the appalling attack by Hamas cannot justify any collective punishment of the people in Gaza. Even wars have laws. We call them international humanitarian law today, and international humanitarian law has to be upheld any time.



We need an immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, we need immediate sustained humanitarian aid and we need at least a humanitarian ceasefire to make that possible.

Let me add that the Secretary General of the United Nations also – and he was heavily criticized for that by some actors – spoke of context. He said that these horrific acts have not happened in a vacuum and, yes, he was criticized for that. Let me make clear that speaking of context is not about justifying, and context as such does not justify, anything – certainly not actions against our deepest human norms.

However, we do need to know the context in order to understand the chain of events and, even more importantly, we need to be aware of the historical context in order to lay out a strategy and a path for the future. If we try to strategize without context, we will not get very far.

Let me come to the lessons. I think the main lesson – Nabil has basically said it in different words, and Anwar Gargash spoke about it yesterday – is that it is not possible to achieve peace and stability in the wider Middle East without an acceptable solution to the Palestinian issue.

I will put it differently, we cannot substitute regional peace for peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

I think the government of the United Arab Emirates was aware of that when it signed the Abraham Accords, because it linked its signature at that time to Israel refraining from annexing parts of the West Bank. The link was very, very clear.

I think the second lesson – and it is not a new lesson – is that you cannot separate humanitarian, political and security issues or, to put it differently again, if people are left in utter humanitarian distress after this crisis, then this will only breed more desperation, more hate and probably also new terror.

Where to go? Are there avenues for diplomacy? I think we have to distinguish between the immediate and the mid-term. In the immediate future, in the next days and the next weeks, of course, and I repeat, we need a humanitarian ceasefire, or humanitarian ceasefires, and we need to prevent a wider war – or sliding, as Dorothee said, into a wider war.

This means a lot of responsibility for regional actors, not only for the United States or the United Nations or other international players, but particularly for actors in the region, I am speaking of Arab states here, who have made peace with Israel. At the same time, I am looking to this country here, who has also normalized relationships with Iran, which actually gives a chance to work for de-escalation regionally.

For the mid-term, I guess we should not ignore the date of the Hamas attack, which was exactly 50 years after the October War, or Yom Kippur War, of 1973. That, I think, raises a challenge to international diplomacy to, in a way, try to make this another 1973 moment.

I know historical analogies only go so far and they are always limited in value, but the 1973 war, with the effort of strong American diplomacy at that time, led to peace between Egypt and



Israel. It also led to a stabilization between Syria and Israel, which held for decades. It led the PLO, Palestinian Liberation Organization, to embrace political engagement and focus on statehood and statehood at the side of Israel in the West Bank of Gaza.

Of course, I know that the history of Middle East peace efforts in the 50 years that past was full of failures, setbacks and people who wanted to undermine it. I do not want to go through this history, it would also take us much beyond our panel time here. However, I would, in this context, say that diplomacy after this war needs to restart serious comprehensive peace efforts – and I completely concur with my friend Nabil that, even if it does not look very realistic or probable to achieve in the next couple of weeks, months or years, we still have to make an effort. There is no alternative to that.

What does it mean? I think it means, in the first instance, that diplomatic efforts to find a solution or find a series of interconnected solutions cannot be about recreating the status quo ante in Gaza, which has been about, in the last couple of years, managing or, as Anwar Gargash said yesterday, containing the conflict. That has not worked.

I think that the UN Security Council has to decide on security arrangements for Gaza rather soon and, if I take up what Nabil said about an Arab initiative or an Arab plan, I think security arrangements could, or probably should, include a UN-mandated temporary Arab military presence in Gaza, in order to maintain security and keep the peace after this Israeli operation or war.

Then we need a well-prepared new peace conference, comprehensive peace conference. That will certainly not be before 2024 because it needs time for preparation. It may arguably be co-sponsored by the United States and China, under UN auspices, I hope. It should also clearly define the two-state solution as an outcome, not be too open on outcomes. As some of the other speakers said that the two-state solution is back because the alternatives to the two-state solution have not worked. It needs to include a socioeconomic dimension, which also builds on the Abraham Accords, as well as normalization between Arab states and Iran.

Looking at the conditions here, we are actually in a slightly better place than we were in 1991. There are other dimensions where we are not in a better place, but let us look at those conditions which we can use or exploit productively to actually go forward on a path out of this catastrophe and into a more peaceful future of the Middle East.

Thank you.

Terry Martin

Thank you very much, Volker Perthes, for some excellent points there, both reviewing where things are now and how it relates to what has happened in the past, looking at wars in the past that have indeed led to opportunities, windows for pursuing peace with at least some of Israel's neighbors.

What I found particularly interesting was the point you made about the need for a UN-mandated temporary Arab military presence in Gaza at some point as a stabilizing, temporary, transitional period. This is also something I am hearing more and more about at this conference.



Thank you also for reviewing the UN perspective and also the importance of context. The context here is hugely complex and important. Very good.