

# HIS EXCELLENCY ANWAR GARGASH

Diplomatic Advisor to President of the United Arab Emirates

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

Anwar, you are the first speaker ever at the conference who has been applauded before speaking and I am sure it will be the same afterwards. I think this is the fourth time we have had this dialogue, and I thank you very much for that and once more, because as all our friends know, the fact that we have held this conference in Abu Dhabi for the last four years is due to you. Thank you very much.

Now, the world situation has unfortunately not improved much since our last dialogue, but I am happy to see you smiling, which shows, ladies and gentlemen, that there is still hope. Of course, I suggest we start with the situation in this region, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad took many of us by surprise, even though we knew that the general context had weakened his position. However, events went very far, and it seems that this has once more changed the whole game, if I can call it. My first question is, what is your assessment of the new situation, particularly from the viewpoint of Iran? Iran seems to be severely weakened, what does it mean in terms of predictions with the new Trump administration and from the viewpoint of the security of this region, particularly the Gulf in general and the Emirates in particular? A simple question to start.

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

Thank you very much. I was smiling because we always start by saying that the world is really chaotic and precarious, etc., which I think keeps us busy and also gives us variety because we do not have the same issues every year.

I want to say that what we are seeing in the region, and even prior to Assad's fall, is really a geostrategic earthquake, and I think it will take time for us to understand the dimension of that. There are common sense prescriptions that we in the UAE very much subscribe to, but I will come to that. Today, looking at the situation in Syria, it is dynamic and unfolding. As we speak, our Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, is in Jordan with the Arab Contact group of various Arab countries, also trying to keep up with events in Syria and to ensure that these developments are basically stabilized in the region.

*Vis-à-vis* Syria, I would say that there are three important key words: hope, concern and opportunity. The hope is that the Syrians will finally be able to build a system that can encompass them all and that they will be able to move forward, because the Syrians are a very talented people, as we have seen with huge success stories everywhere in the world, so

I think this is very important. What is extremely important is for them to overcome their tortured history. If you really look at the history of Syria, since independence in 1946, it is really a history of coups, military interventions, conflicts and wars. In the last 54 years of Assad family rule, it has been even more difficult in terms of the pictures we have seen of prisons, etc. It is not that we did not know they existed, but I think the actual imagery is really powerful. Therefore, I think the first thing we would say is hope, and the hope is basically that the first lesson from the past is that marginalizing components within Syrian society has failed. Lesson number two is about an economy that has been insulated but corrupt and has also failed. Of course, lesson number three is about foreign intervention in Syrian affairs. There is an important book by Patrick Seale from a long time ago, which was about the Arab Cold War in Syria. I think we have seen a repetition of that recently with various actors, regional and international, being important players in Syria

Lesson number two is concern, and the concern here is that this is a dynamic situation, and we are hearing some, what I would call reasonable and rational, language about unity and not imposing a system on all Syrians, etc. However, on the other hand, we are also concerned about the nature of the new forces that are coming in and their affiliation with the Brotherhood and Al Qaeda, which are all quite worrying indicators. I think we must be optimistic and help the Syrians in the difficult task at hand today and it really is a monumentally difficult task. At the same time, I do not think we can ignore the fact that the region has seen these episodes before, so we clearly also need to be on guard and look at that.

I think the third issue is opportunity and, as you know, every crisis brings opportunities and there are various things. I hope events in Syria and Lebanon will make Iran understand that its foray into the Arab world through militia's etc., does not bring it security and that this will be a call for Iran to really concentrate on what I would call reasonable and rational concerns about its national security, domestic economy and its own plans. On the other hand, this is also an opportunity for the Arab world to extend a hand to Syria and to help rebuild what was a devastated country long before the events of the last week. If we think in terms that this is going to be a reincarnation of the brutal adventures of ISIS or a repeat of the Arab Spring, then I think we will have another episode of conflict in the region. That is why I think we should really learn from the lessons of the last 10 or 15 years and understand that as Syria moves forward only a comprehensive approach to living together that includes all Syrians, the social fabric, the religiosity of Syria but at the same time its secular face. I think this is extremely important.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

When you say "we" should learn the lessons, who are "we"?

### **Anwar Gargash**

Collectively as a region. Collectively the region, the Arab world, those of us who are interested in Syria. I think we cannot but learn from the episodes we have seen over many years. I also think from that perspective that our relations in the UAE and other countries in the Arab world are improving with Iran. We also hope that Iran learns to come back and try to reincarnate a program of regional expansion based on militias and sectarianism is not really for the good of the region or Iran itself.

I also have a word here for Israel that I think is extremely important. Using the crisis in Syria to structurally degrade Syria's capabilities might seem a sensible thing from a practical Israeli point of view but to be honest, I think it is dumb politics. This is a new Syria that is creating itself and they should have sent a different message. I am not saying it should have been a message of peace because we are not there yet, but I definitely think it should have been a different message. We do need to learn, and I have always said that the war we have seen in the region over the year plus since the brutal Hamas attack on Israeli civilians, the war has been mainly driven by extremists on both sides. This is not a war that was propagated by the Arab state system, it was driven by players like Hezbollah and Hamas, and also the far-right wing of Israeli politics. We need to come back rationally and put politics back in the center, to become a bit more moderate and stay away from these big ideological projects because they are the ones that took the region like a car crashing into a wall at 200 kilometers an hour.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

You like cars. Can we concentrate a bit more on Iran because, of course, Iran is at the center of the game in all aspects of the question. What drives you to believe that they would move to a more centrist position?

### **Anwar Gargash**

The first thing I want to say is about the current state of Iran's relations with many of the Gulf countries, including the UAE and I would say it is probably in the best condition for many years. Over the past many years, we have seen a rapprochement between Iran and various Gulf states and in my opinion, this is a very positive thing. I think this is something that Iran is also eager to maintain and keep. At the same time, as I said, the events in Syria are fast-moving but looking at the Iranian press and the Iranian political scene, you can clearly see that there are actually different conclusions. In my opinion, reading that I would say that everybody's conclusions about the developments we are seeing today is moderation, de-escalation, realism in politics and concentration on internal economics and development, and what will actually improve people's lives. Basically, the idea is that as we look at these events and assess them, I am sure that assessment is also taking place on the Iranian and Israeli sides, etc. My view is that we need to learn from the lessons of the region. If we keep doing the same things we have done, or if some keep doing the same things they have done before, they will end up with the same results. We really need a different course, a course that concentrates on geoeconomics, that basically concentrates on de-escalation and understanding that there are political views we will differ on but that we need to navigate and control. I think this is something important.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

Of course, that is extremely interesting. What you are saying is that you do not exclude the possibility that Iran might be ready to start this de-escalation strategy, you are not ruling that out. Then a key actor to help in that would be the United States and President Trump.

### **Anwar Gargash**

Definitely.

**Thierry de Montbrial**

President Trump surprised all of us during his first term with the Abraham Accords, which I think are generally recognized as a big diplomatic success. Would you consider something equivalent to the Abraham Accords but that would include Iran this time?

**Anwar Gargash**

I think that is for Iran to decide, but what is extremely important is that the reasoning I have given becomes even more pertinent and important because President Trump is also there. Clearly, Iran's relations with the Arab world, with countries like ours, become even more important for Iran and more important for us. I think we should use this period to work along that. On the Abraham Accords, I feel they have gone through a very difficult, turbulent period but with all the events that are happening they have held. I also think that with the arrival of President Trump, the Accords will continue to be what I would call a platform for greater cooperation in the region – economic cooperation, etc. – like many of the IMEC projects, etc., we have seen. Clearly, we do not really know what the new American policy will be, we have glimpses of it based on President Trump's first term and different statements, etc. Again, *vis-à-vis* the region, as we see and seek more American leadership in the region, I think we also have a responsibility in the region to work to not repeat past mistakes, to try to understand that the region is very difficult for one ideological view to be superior. We have to accept that the region has to reach equilibrium and, as I said, that equilibrium is about common sense. In Syria, that is about understanding very clearly that they do need an all-encompassing approach. In Gaza it is making sure that you cannot negate the idea that you do need a Palestinian state, and we have to work on it. I know it is very difficult in today's conditions, but I think this is how we have to basically revive the idea of an independent Palestinian state. In Lebanon also, through the efforts of the Lebanese of course because nobody can engineer this again, it is about recreating the prospects of a nation state controlling its borders, controlling weapons on its border, and its own, let us say, economic and social destiny. I think that is very important.

**Thierry de Montbrial**

This is all very coherent. I would like to play the devil's advocate for a second because one can never build a strategy without at least looking at some more negative scenarios. Of course, a lot will also depend on Israel of course, and in Israel the Prime Minister is still Mr. Netanyahu, who is also going to face big choices. He may believe that the time has come for big wins. For instance, I understand that he said recently the Golan Heights should now be permanently occupied, which almost means annexed by Israel, they also speak about annexing the West Bank, which is something one often hears. He might also be tempted to solve the Iranian nuclear issue by force, maybe with the support of the United States. Common sense is not enough to make a judgement on which course Trump will choose. Can we go a bit further to include a less pleasant scenario where, in this case, Israel would push in a quite different direction?

**Anwar Gargash**

I have a couple of comments here. Number one is working in a field like foreign policy and international relations, you always have to be optimistic, you cannot come with a gloomy view of developments, etc. I think that optimism always has to be there for diplomacy to have the ability to unlock what sometimes seem to be closed doors or prospects. Having said that, we do always have to plan for the worst. As I said, the idea of basically a repeat in Syria, for example, of something led by Al Qaeda or somebody else who thinks they can repeat a Muslim Brotherhood era, would all lead us into another crisis in the region. Clearly this is a warning sign because we have gone through it, and I think this is very important.

*Vis-à-vis* Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu, I think the lesson we also have is that military success without a political conclusion, in the region and in history, has always been an elusive mirage. Clearly, the idea is that with Israel's military success at a huge humanitarian cost in Gaza, with Israel's defeat of Hezbollah, and the fall of Assad, there has to be a political conclusion. Without that political conclusion, these defeats themselves will create new crises in many ways, so I think this is extremely important. While Prime Minister Netanyahu has been able to fashion military success, I do not think he will necessarily be able to fashion the political conclusion, and this is where the international community has to come in. I think that the Trump administration also understands these facts. Even with President Trump's declared support for the state of Israel and its security, I think he is also a realist. From that realism I think we need to see more American leadership in this area. I think the lesson from the wreckage of more than a year of war since October last year, is to let us not recreate the wreckage again. The lesson is that we need to take that wreckage, as bad as it is, and try to find political conclusions in many ways. Some will be relatively clearer, as in Lebanon, which is not easier but clearer, because here we have the 1701 agreement. We also have the necessity of electing a president and of basically controlling the arms within the Lebanese military. We have a better game plan here, or a better view as the international community and regionally. Israel/Palestine is more difficult, but it is clear and the clarity here is that you need two states. In Syria again, the events are very dynamic and difficult, but you need a system that preserves Syria as one country, encompasses all Syria's components and that will be a just system that can create opportunity. I am not saying it is easier but let us not go back and repeat the same lessons because we will end up with the same results.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

I propose to conclude by going back to Syria where we started. Of course, I like your optimism, but it is not naïve optimism, I understand very well that it is constructive. What you are saying is that the region itself should be actor number one and that the others should help in various ways. Of course, the US prominently, but maybe the Europeans can also help to move in that direction.

### **Anwar Gargash**

Definitely.

### **Thierry de Montbrial**

To conclude, let us assume that we are moving in that direction, which would be a great success in itself, do you think that would help to solve the problems in Lebanon? That is, is

solving the Syrian issue a prerequisite for solving the Lebanese issue and does the fate of Lebanon depend in some way on the resurrection of some sort of Syria?

**Anwar Gargash**

I think optimism really reflects our approach in the UAE. On one hand, we have to sort of bring that optimism and include Iran and Türkiye in the discussions that take place. At the same time, all the three issues are basically Arab issues with repercussions on various countries, and I would say there is an Arab consensus on this. The optimism is more about the pessimism that is lurking right there behind, as we saw the complications of these issues. Then again, if you do not have the will of the Lebanese, it will be very difficult to do anything in Lebanon, for example. I think the whole Arab world today, the international community, France, the United States, everybody agrees that Lebanon has now turned a page. Of course, the issue is the will of the Lebanese, which is extremely important. I think it is a bit too early to say on Syria but, as I said, we are sending these signals through our discussions, that it must encompass everybody and build a system everybody is comfortable with. It must break away from Syria's traditional tortured history, that I mentioned, this has to be something new. If we really want to repeat things we have done before I think we will have a crisis there. Again, in the case of Israel, today it is emerging with important military successes, but the question is whether Israel is capable of working with others in turning these into political successes on the Palestinian front and the two countries next to them. I think these are the things we need to do. Really optimism is more of a roadmap, but at the same time, I think we also have to be aware that there are many sinister forces today that still live in a sort of ideological bubble and want to recreate their dream, which over the years has not failed just once but many times.

**Thierry de Montbrial**

Anwar, you represent what I would call human enlightened wisdom but not just that because you are also a man of responsibility, you are an intellectual but also a man of action.

**Anwar Gargash**

Thank you.

**Thierry de Montbrial**

I think that when enlightened wisdom is combined with action is the best one could expect from a statesman. Thank you very much.

**Anwar Gargash**

Thank you very much.