



**The Third Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate
November 13-14, 2016**

Opening Speech

**Dr. Ebtessam Al-Ketbi
President, Emirates Policy Center**

Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Abu Dhabi, the capital of the future and ambitious ideas.

I would like to welcome you, the valued gathering that seeks to achieve the ultimate goal of human endeavor since the beginning of civilization: understanding and interpreting events and phenomena. The improvement of tools and methodologies are now giving us the opportunity to forecast the future and predict its trajectories.

We, here, at the Emirates Policy Center sought to proceed with the most recent instruments and approaches reached by scientists and philosophers in the areas of understanding, interpretation and forecasting. We do not wish for the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate to serve as a large media event or a public relations campaign; but rather as a gathering that brings together ideas and experiences from different cultures and nations. In this regard, we have developed a set of goals to be achieved through this year's edition of the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate, and mainly:

1- Provide predictions on the power shift map and its distribution in a changing international order.



- 2- Boost the UAE's decision-makers' initiatives and projects by attracting influential regional and international elites and policymakers.
- 3- Dedicate EPC's path to raising strategic issues relative to the UAE and the GCC.
- 4- Read the regional and international developments on the political/security, economic/developmental levels.
- 5- Draft relevant recommendations to design policies and approaches that serve the UAE's greater interests.
- 6- Highlight Abu Dhabi as the capital of regional and international intellectual gatherings.

In order to emphasize the link between this year's ADSD and the two previous sessions, I would like to list the most significant conclusions reached the past two strategic debates.

The most prominent recommendations of the first Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate included:

- 1- GCC countries have become key regional and international actors on which former strategic heavyweight Arab nations increasingly rely on to resolve crises and restore stability.
- 2- The US is still the most effective global power in dealing with challenges faced by Gulf nations. The US itself confirms that there is no parallel global power more committed to the security of the Gulf, and especially in times of turmoil. This argument is supported by the fact that the US still preserves a large military force and maintains an effective logistics support system in the region, not to mention its strong political and economic ties with its nations.
- 3- Some major global actors with diverging visions such as Russia and China have no effective policies towards the Gulf region, nor do they provide tangible contributions to its security.
- 4- The European Union's position towards the GCC is a result of national policies of its key members such as Britain and France that have strong



security, military and political ties in the Gulf. However, there remains a lack of an efficient defense and security, or even integrated economic strategy towards the region.

- 5- Aiming to reach an active partnership, the NATO has a real desire to develop various forms of cooperation with the GCC.
- 6- Iran's geostrategic project is pursuing an obvious sectarian policy in the region through Tehran's direct interference in the internal affairs of its neighboring Arab countries, and its support for Shiite political groups and militias.

Based on the ideas and scenarios raised in the first ADSD, we designed the agenda of the highly appraised second edition held in 2015. Among the key conclusions of the gathering were:

1. The strategically important Gulf region is witnessing such high levels of turbulence for the first time since its foundation. The past year was marked by conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen, an ongoing instability in Iraq, the expansion of ISIS, and external military interventions, notably by Iran and Russia in Syria.
2. The US policy in the region since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and until the nuclear deal with Iran created a sentiment of mistrust from GCC countries towards their Washington ally. Moreover, the US reactive policy and delayed decision-making regarding regional issues and conflicts made Gulf nations less dependent on the efficiency of the American role.
3. The Saudi-led operation in Yemen with the efficient participation of the UAE reflected a shift in the GCC strategic mindset and anchored on the importance of its capability to protect the regional security and stability, and the interests of its member states.
4. The GCC member states lack a unified strategy against challenges and subsequent threats, and this was reflected in response to the Yemen war, the Iranian threat, and the danger of the political Islam.
5. The 'Arab Spring countries' face three sets of issues: structural difficulties related to the rise of sub-national identities,



complications related to the legacy of authoritarian state, and concerns related to the management of the transitional process.

6. Although US President Barack Obama has dealt positively with Iran and sought to reach a nuclear deal through rapprochement out of belief that it will change Tehran's behavior and reduce its belligerent policies, many question the validity of this approach because of the ideologically rigid nature of the Tehran regime.
7. GCC countries fear Iran and its nuclear program, and believe that Tehran will eventually acquire a nuclear weapon. Should Iran maintain its revolutionary regime, conflicts in the region will remain.
8. Reality on the ground strongly indicates the US will retain its standing as a leading global power despite Washington's declining influence in the world, Russia's increasing role on the world stage, and the rising power of China. However, some argue that the global regime that we have seen over the last century will not last for long.
9. Given the increasing importance of cybersecurity, cyberspace has become a key element for national security. Some countries have already established cyber units in their armies, as cyber weapons will be used as a crucial instrument in future warfare.
10. There have been significant shifts in the world balance of power. We are currently witnessing an economic shift from the West to the East, and rising China is a strong indicator of this trend. Any economic slowdown or crisis in China would directly affect global economies that depend on trade exchange with Beijing, such as those in Africa and Latin America.
11. There are two fresh trends under the broader scope of terrorism: First, the new wave of terrorists that followed Al-Qaeda, and second, the new generation of terrorists who were born and raised in European/American societies. These two elements call for a new approach to understand terrorism phenomenon in its totality.



After careful examination of the first and second sessions of the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate's conclusions, and based on a close and systematic monitoring of the global order shifts, the 2016 gathering will discuss the following topics:

- I- The Gulf in a Changing Global and Regional Order
- II- Traditional, Rising, and Declining Powers in a Shifting World Order
- III- Regional Security Cooperation in the Gulf: Helsinki as a Model
- IV- Strategic Uncertainty in the Arab World: Shifts and Scenarios
- V- American Foreign Policy under a New Administration
- VI- Cyberspace Security: Power Building and Geopolitical Impact
- VII- Counterterrorism: Assessing Policies and Exploring Scenarios

This strategic debate is of great importance; it occurs in light of crises and conflicts still raging in the region, such as the war in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq. Moreover, we are witnessing an escalation of the military campaign to crack down on ISIS positions and infrastructure in both Syria and Iraq. Most importantly, the gathering takes place a few days after the announcement of the unexpected results of US presidential elections. These outcomes shocked many observers and analysts and came contrary to all polling results and predictions as the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, was elected as the new American president. This significant development will offer participants at ADSD an opportunity to discuss the potential impact of Trump's election on the US foreign policy.

The global order is witnessing a number of crises. Gaining knowledge from existing methodologies and models to deal with transitions and crises the global order is going through is no longer enough. The nature of these crises requires new approaches and models that can help us understand, explain, and predict the status quo, and even go beyond it.

Undoubtedly, ADSD is considered as one of the regional and international forums that significantly contribute to understanding, interpreting and predicting



regional and global shifts. As a think tank and a research institution, the Emirates Policy Center is currently working closely with experts and specialists to produce a *Crisis Early Warning System* for the Gulf and the UAE, which will be the first of its kind in the Arab world. EPC also benefits from the outcomes of the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate in producing policy papers, position papers and policy alerts that serve UAE decision makers. These products are prepared by EPC research staff as well as global freelance experts who work with the center.

I would like to extend my deep gratitude to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation represented by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan for the constant and efficient support that contributed to the success of this conference. I would also like to thank our partner, The Atlantic Council, with whom we seek a strategic relationship. I would like to welcome you all again as speakers and participants.

Finally, I would like to reinforce EPC's commitment to remain a platform for exchanging ideas, knowledge and expertise for people with various perspectives and backgrounds, as it has been since its inauguration. And now, I invite you to an inspiring Third Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.