

Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate

Intervention by HE Dr Anwar Gargash

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to once again speak at the Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate. In only three years, this event has established itself as one of the region's significant strategic forums.

Before I start, I would like to thank Dr Ibtisam al Ketbi and her team, for their work in bringing this forum together. I would also like to welcome the Honorable Jon Huntsman, Chairman of the Atlantic Council.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Events of the past week have once again demonstrated that politics can be extremely unpredictable. The US elections have heightened uncertainty regarding the future direction of global politics. There are certainly more exclamation marks than answers.

America's role in the architecture of the current international system is paramount and it is understandable that the future direction of its foreign policy is a cause for acute speculation and concern. This follows Brexit and the rise of anti-establishment and populist sentiments in many parts of the world. The depth and extent of these sentiments are not yet fully understood. In short, we are confronted with a fluid and complex international system in need of direction and stability.

The world we live in is one of growing uncertainty in the political, economic, and social arenas. The impact of these developments are felt most acutely here in the Arab world and the Middle East, which is no stranger to uncertainty and instability. While we do not yet know how the foreign policy of the new American administration will affect our region, we can be certain of one thing: American global engagement remains crucial in order to ensure a stable, peaceful, and predictable international system.

Despite the fact that we live in an increasingly multipolar world, Washington's weight and influence remains more important than ever. Following eight years of weakened American engagement in the region, which many feel has created a disconcerting vacuum, it looks like we will have to wait a little longer until the contours of President-elect Trump's approach to the region becomes clearer. It is essential that there is an overarching strategy rather than isolated positions towards regional issues. In short, America's engagement is positive and its withdrawal and disengagement is counterproductive.

However, in today's world, the stability of the region cannot rest on American engagement alone. Other actors, including Russia, China, India and the EU also have an important role to play, which is why our foreign policy seeks to consolidate relations with these actors. But solving regional problems also requires an active role for the United Nations. This means that the international community has to reverse the failures of recent years, by providing a more activist and effective role.

Rather than the UN mirroring new geopolitical tensions, we must collectively seek to empower the Secretary General-designate in order to reverse recent setbacks. In sum, the UAE fully understands that we need to work with our partners and friends to decrease tension in the region. This, we believe, will produce positive results towards global peace and security.

Even by the standards of the Middle East, these are exceptional and difficult times. Regional crises are endangering the very existence of nation states and tearing apart the fragile fabric of many Middle Eastern societies. Ugly sectarian politics are replacing more rational national paradigms. It is therefore incumbent upon the states of the Middle East, in collaboration with our friends and partners in the international community, to engage in, and foster regional solutions to regional problems. We understand that these are different times and the days of massive interventions to secure the stability of the region are gone.

As a result, we subscribe to the opinion that regional states should play an increasing role in sharing the burden for the region's stability.

As we have seen in the past decade, looking inward and neglecting the regions challenges is a recipe for unremitting chaos and violence. From Iraq, to Syria, to Libya, we have seen crises spiral out of control. Surely the lesson that we learn from these recent experiences is that there is no alternative to tackling these crises head on, to avoid their spill-over effects in terms of extremism, instability and the undermining of states and civil societies. To break out of this cycle of discord and instability requires difficult decisions, collective action, and a continuous search for constructive solutions.

In this regard, I would like to share with you several points that are at the core of the UAE's foreign policy approach.

First, the international community can no longer merely manage crises in the Middle East. Instead, our focus must shift to resolution. Failure to take early action, has inarguably led to disastrous consequences and ensured that crises have produced their own set of sub-crises, imposing a heavy economic and humanitarian toll.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict vividly demonstrates what happens when we fail to make the difficult choices. For over sixty years, the Palestinian issue has been a source of regional instability, extremism, and numerous wars, testing the regional and international order. Even though a political solution is within reach, there is still a lack of political will to take the necessary steps required.

In Yemen and Libya, despite all the difficulties, there are positive mechanisms in place and roadmaps for a political solution. We must work collectively to realize these solutions. The UAE is actively working with its partners to support these processes.

In Yemen, the UN Roadmap provides a realistic path out of the current crisis. The international community now needs to use all of its available leverage, to ensure that Yemeni actors accept and implement this roadmap. We understand the path ahead is not an easy one, but surely it is preferable to continued military confrontation.

In Libya, the way out of the current chaos, is through the Libyan Political Agreement, signed in Skhirat. Here, what is needed, are greater efforts to facilitate the dialogue between the Libyan parties to overcome outstanding issues, and ensure the full and fair implementation of the agreement.

In Syria, the region and the world cannot afford to walk away from their responsibilities. Instead, we must double our efforts and find a constructive solution to a conflict, whose ferocity and violence, continues to shock us all. Unfortunately, political prospects are not encouraging and the Syrian crisis continues to tear apart the Syrian people and their country.

The geopolitics of the crisis and the regime's belief that it can score a military victory are obstructing the constructive and serious political engagement required to embark on the road towards resolving the crisis.

Second, interlinked with our efforts to ending conflicts in the region, is the UAE's absolute commitment to combat and overcome extremism and terrorism. The UAE argues that the link between extremist ideologies and terrorist acts is a clear one. We cannot face up to one without the other. Furthermore, we believe that confronting extremism and terrorism is a long drawn out and extended challenge. This understanding is essential in our efforts to confront extremism and terrorism. Various tools are required in this lengthy battle, including control of financial flows and deconstructing the extremist ideology.

The UAE is an active member of the Global Coalition to counter Daesh and fully supports the international community's efforts to degrade and destroy Daesh. The battle to liberate Mosul is a critical turning point in this effort. While the priority is to defeat Daesh, we continue to voice our concern towards sectarian violence against innocent civilians and feel that they are deeply troubling and bode ill for the future stability of Iraq. In order to deprive the extremists of their support base and lay the foundation for peace and stability, greater political efforts are needed to reconcile Iraq's communities. In particular, this requires working with and empowering Iraq's Sunni community. A unified nation state, devoid of sectarian rhetoric and practice, remains our best insurance against the politics of extremism and instability.

While the UAE will continue to contribute to conflict resolution efforts, it is absolutely crucial that we also address the underlying issues that drive regional disorder.

This brings me to my **third** point, namely the need to empower nation states over the dangerous rise of sectarianism. The Arab world continues to pay a heavy price for the sectarian agendas promoted by regional actors and non-state groups. Their expansionary and divisive politics breed hatred and erode the very foundations of our states and communities. The current and ugly trend prevailing in regional politics is an accumulation of past failures, regional milestones and countless efforts to re-imagine the political role of religion. We are paying a heavy price due to this lethal combination.

It is vital that we, as a region, defend the pluralistic nature of our societies against those who promote division and sectarianism. Here, it is critical that Iran ceases its meddling in the affairs of Arab states, and its funding and support of instability in Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Iran's aggressive regional policies are reflective in part of the state-society dichotomy dominating its internal politics. Iran has been further emboldened by the recent nuclear deal with the P5+1

interpreting it as acquiescence of its regional expansion.

This was truly a historic opportunity for Iran to have embarked on a constructive and respectful approach towards its Arab neighbors. Instead, Iran has chosen to continue its political expansion and sectarian pronouncements. The current regional tension and rhetoric is alarming and Tehran is responsible for it.

I take this opportunity to rectify views held by some concerning the position on dialogue with Iran. We do not reject such a sensible proposition, but require that such dialogue be genuine and constructive, based on a clear set of principles. Iran has to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Arab states, end its claim to authority over Shi'a communities in other countries, and cease all efforts to export its revolution. In other words, Iran must act as a state rather than an exporter of revolution and instability.

The **fourth** point I want to make is the need to build a moderate Arab center that is united in its promotion of a stable, open, and dynamic region. This requires a leading role by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. To ensure that both serve as pillars of moderation and stability, the international community needs to closely engage with them. We must think creatively of how a modernized Arab regional system can pull us out of the current mess. Riyadh and Cairo are critical towards realizing such a new regional architecture.

There is no alternative to closer cooperation and coordination between moderate Arab countries. In a period of growing regional and international uncertainty and instability moderate actors need to shoulder greater regional responsibilities.

Finally, we in the UAE are proud of what we have achieved. Through long-term investments in our people and a commitment to an open economy and a fair and innovative society, the UAE has become a global hub for trade and commerce and a regional economic leader. Nevertheless, the UAE model is not unique, and the Middle East has great potential to overcome its current challenges. While the UAE is not one of the region's largest states, we feel that the success of its paradigm can act as a source of inspiration in an otherwise troubled region.

In order to assist the region in achieving its potential, the UAE will continue to strive to promote cultural openness, religious tolerance, the empowerment of women, and clear pathways for our young people. These values have formed the basis of the UAE's own national development and are at the core of the UAE's moderate foreign policy. This is especially important because as we seek to stabilize the region, we must concurrently strive to move beyond the status quo.

Rather than looking inward, the UAE will continue to look outward. The UAE wishes to see its Arab neighbors prosper and develop in a manner that benefits us all. We genuinely believe that we will thrive and will be more secure in a region that is successful and at peace with itself. Our foreign policy vision, underpinned by our own national journey, will continue to inform our actions and ensure that we remain an exemplar of hope in our region.

The UAE has always been candid in its message and forthright in its convictions. We owe it to ourselves and to our friends to continue to do so. While this has at times opened us to criticism, we are convinced about the path we are taking and the vision we aspire for our region. This is a message we will continue to convey, and pursue in partnership with our friends and allies.

I look forward to your contributions and opinions, and thank you again for your attendance.

Thank you.