

## **MIDDLE EAST IN CRISIS:**

### **LEBANON AS A MICROCOSM OF THE CONFLICTS IN THE REGION**

Terje Rød-Larsen, President of the International Peace Academy (IPA)

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Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Allow me first to express my thanks to the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. I would particularly like to thank the chairman of its board, Prince Turki al-Faisal, for the invitation and for the hospitality. I am very pleased to be here today, since Prince Turki and the International Peace Academy have shared a special relationship since his time in Washington. He is a member of our board of directors. It is a great pleasure and honour being with you all here today.

I should emphasize at the outset that I speak in my capacity as President of the International Peace Academy and not on behalf of the United Nations, where I also serve as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1559.

When we agreed several months ago that I would come here and speak, we could not fathom to predict how timely today's discussion would be. Anyone who has watched television over the last few days will have seen the pictures from Lebanon, as well as from Gaza. Throughout the Middle East, we see a region in deep and deepening crisis. It is perhaps most acute now in Lebanon and in Gaza, but Iraq and the Iranian issues also remain at the forefront.

#### *Lebanon as a Microcosm of Crisis in the Middle East*

Over the last few decades, it has been trivial to say that the Middle East is in crisis. In this region, there is always a crisis. My thesis today, however, is that the shapes and forms crisis

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has taken in the Middle East over the last few years are fundamentally different than previously. The geopolitical landscape of the region has changed thoroughly, displaying challenges that have more complex dynamics, are more extensively disruptive, and more dangerous, than any in a very long time.

These dynamics are first and foremost manifest in Lebanon, which in many ways is a microcosm of the region and of its conflicts and crisis. The crisis – or crises, to be accurate – in Lebanon are, as all Middle Eastern crises, at the same time domestic and regional, but also global.

Lebanon first and foremost confronts a major challenge of state-building and state consolidation. The country's fundamental nature and orientation has long been contested in the context of its vastly diverse composition. This was a driving factor behind the civil war that devastated what had previously been called the Switzerland of the Mediterranean, with Beirut as the Paris of the Middle East at its heart. Lebanon's success could not last as fundamental questions about the nature of state and society in the country unresolved.

A truly devastating civil war consumed the country for fifteen years. The war ended with a national pact of reconciliation, which sought to lay the foundations for a new political order. The Taif Accords, forged here in Saudi Arabia, envisaged a road map to putting an end to the sectarian nature of Lebanese politics and society. With the help of a Lebanese visionary who had made much of his personal fortune here in Saudi Arabia, Rafiq Hariri, at the helm, Lebanon embarked upon a process of economic and political reconstruction.

And yet, Lebanon remained an incomplete project of state-consolidation after the civil war. An interim order was created that appeared stable, but could only remain a temporary solution at best, as both Israel and Syria continued to maintain military presences. A fragile balance prevailed.

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This changed under the impact of the peace process of the 1990s and the withdrawal of Israeli troops in May 2000. I was fortunate enough to be part of this process, as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy tasked with the de facto negotiations between Israelis, Lebanese and Syrians. This enabled the full withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanese territory. What happened was of a far-reaching nature. With Israel's occupation ended, new momentum was created for a process of consolidating Lebanon as an independent and sovereign nation in the heart of the Middle East.

This momentum ultimately led to the Security Council's adoption of resolution 1559 and, eventually, to Syria's withdrawal of its troops, military assets and the military intelligence apparatus in March/April 2005. During this process, again, I had the privilege to serve as the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General and negotiator on the Syrian withdrawal. We also negotiated the conduct of the first free and fair elections in Lebanon, which took place in May and June 2005.

#### *Lebanon as a Proxy Arena for Wider Regional Struggles*

At the same time, however, there has remained a fierce contest over who has what influence and role in Lebanon. Lebanese political leaders remain closely linked to outside powers. Thus, Lebanon remains an arena, in which others play out their struggles by proxy. It remains a microcosm that illustrates the challenges that characterize and shape the Middle East at present.

One got a good taste of how Lebanon remains an arena for wider regional struggles to be fought out with the war between Israel and Hizbullah last summer. While the war was fought on Lebanese soil, the Lebanese government was not involved. In fact, the Government of Lebanon was largely opposed to it. But the war was a good example of the inter-linkages of Middle Eastern conflicts, which all intersect in Lebanon.

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At the heart of the challenges in Lebanon is the question of the nature and orientation of the country, the question of Lebanese politics and of Lebanese sovereignty and independence. This issue is largely independent from the Arab-Israeli conflict, but has of course manifold connections with it.

Lebanon's prolonged instability in the aftermath of the war – actually, starting before – also revolves around the international tribunal in relation with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. This is a key question that is domestic in nature, but also regional and even global. The question of the tribunal, which since December last year has fuelled a prolonged stalemate and political paralysis in Lebanon, inherently manifests the inter-linkages between Lebanon and other arenas, such as Syria and Iran. But it also illustrates the deep involvement of international powers, most notably France and the United States, and their historic ties to Lebanon.

Syria is most immediately affected by the question of the international tribunal in Lebanon. There have been allegations – though no conclusive evidence to date – that Syria may have been involved, in one way or another, in the Hariri assassination. This is strongly denied by Syria.

Syria has far-reaching interests in Lebanon. It maintains close and long-standing ties with the Lebanese militia, Hizbullah. It is also host to the headquarters to a number of Palestinian groups that operate in Lebanon, where the balance between Palestinian militias and government forces has notoriously been a sensitive issue. Syria has also traditionally had a relationship with President Lahoud and other pro-Syrian parties. There is, of course, a historical relationship here, based on the notion of Greater Syria. And so Lebanon's challenge of state-building and state consolidation is inherently also a challenge of defining the nature of its ties with Syria.

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To some extent, the same goes for Iran and its role in or vis-à-vis Lebanon. Some Lebanese groups, such as Hizbullah, have close ties with Iran. Lebanese Shiites of course maintain a special relationship with the Shia community of Iran and its leadership. But underpinning this in the context of Lebanon's challenge of state-consolidation is the question of communitarian co-existence, and of what influence which outside power has. And there is of course a strong perception that Hizbullah is not just a Lebanese domestic political group or militia, but also forms part of a wider alliance that seeks to influence politics in Lebanon, and wishes to challenge Israel. And some analysts have even argued that it is also part of a wider alliance that seeks to assert a growing Shia influence across the Middle East, with ties into Iraq and to the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Lebanon's connection with Iraq is another manifestation of how Lebanon really is a microcosm of the major crises in the Middle East. And here we come to the most recent events. There have long been fears that militant, Salafist Sunni groups might infiltrate into Lebanon from Iraq. The groups that has been fighting Lebanese government forces, Fatah al-Islam, is alleged to have links with Syria – which Syria denies. It is also said to have ties with Iraqi terrorist groups and al-Qaeda. Its alleged leader, a Palestinian-Jordanian, was involved in the murder of a USAID official in Jordan in 2001. Many people believe that weapons and militants have come into Lebanon from Iraq, though I could not possibly say whether this is correct,

#### *Perceptions and Realities, and the Importance of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*

In fact, let me pause here for a moment and reflect on the importance of perceptions in Middle Eastern conflicts and crises. More than anything, many of the elements of Lebanon's multi-faceted crisis have to do with perceptions and allegations. I am not one to declare all these assertions are well-founded or not. But what is important here is to note that it is perceptions that often drive realities, not the actual realities.

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Lebanon's fate is of course also closely tied up with the Arab-Israeli conflict. The war last summer illustrated the ongoing Israeli linkage to the Lebanese arena. There is also the deep Palestinian connection, manifested in the presence of several hundred-thousand Palestinian refugees in the country. Some of these refugees are now embroiled in the fighting between Lebanese government forces and Fatah al-Islam. They bear the price of the confrontation as innocent civilians.

Lebanon is thus a battle arena for many of the overlapping, conflicting interests in the Middle East, and a microcosm of the many conflicts in the region. Some of the moderate Arab states view it as battleground between Sunni and Shia. More importantly, there is a strong perception in many Arab capitals that the struggles in Lebanon are intimately related to what is considered the new major fault-line in the region, between the Persian nationalism of an increasingly assertive Iran on the one hand, and Arab nationalism on the other. US involvement in Lebanon also illustrates the broader crisis in the region related to external engagement, as manifested further in Iraq but also elsewhere.

Overall, Lebanon's local microcosm thus mirrors regional conflicts of national interest and religious/ideological divisions. But it also has important global dimensions. It is the unfortunate, tragic and unenviable fate of the Lebanese that everybody seems to fight their wars on their territory.

As Lebanon shows, there are multiple issues and crises at work throughout the Middle East. And the fact that they move along so many dimensions and levels, manifests the complexity and fragility of the region today.

*From One Centre of Gravity to Four Epicentres of Conflict and Crisis*

Besides Lebanon's state consolidation challenge, there remains the similar state-building enterprise in Iraq, with similar regional and global implications. There are – further – the

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issues related to Iran and its nuclear program, and of course, the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict and its core, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One could easily give a very similar intervention here tonight, illustrating the regional complexities using the example of Gaza.

I do not need to reiterate that all these predicaments are not only of significance to the inhabitants of this region. Instability and conflict in the Middle East are inherently of a global magnitude. This region is more important geostrategically, geoeconomically, than any other in the world.

It is also one in which the local, the regional, and the global are intertwined like in no other: everything that concerns one society in the region affects all others. Middle Eastern crises are also immediately exported into every capital throughout the Muslim world. And they touch hearts and minds in every capital in the Western world, too. Thus, these local and regional conflicts are inherently of a global scale. At the same time, one should note that the global dimension of such conflicts is not one of confrontation between societies, civilizations, or sectarian groupings. Rather, the dividing lines run within societies, within cultures, even within communities, be they ethnic or sectarian. Instead of a clash of civilisation, what we have is a clash between diverging values and preferences.

I began by saying that the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East over the last few years has changed fundamentally. For decades, the key issue dominating and shaping this region was the Arab-Israeli conflict. This conflict constituted one centre of gravity, around which the region revolved. It shaped and overshadowed everything: it fundamentally impacted Arab domestic politics, intra-Arab as well as intra-regional relations. It defined the overall politics and international ties and linkages of the region.

However, this has changed paradigmatically over the course of the last four, five years. The Arab-Israeli conflict is now no longer the sole defining conflict in the region. Of course, it still remains essential, and needs to be resolved desperately: because it continues to be a

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fundamental prerequisite for changing political and diplomatic dynamics. And such a change has to be based on the Arab Initiative, relevant Security Council resolutions, and the Road Map.

However, instead of one centre of gravity, there are now four epicentres of crisis, conflict, and instability in the Middle East. These are different in their origins and patterns of confrontation. At the same time, they are deeply inter-related, as I have already outlined with reference to the specific example of Lebanon. Other epicentres of conflict and crisis are: Iraq, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

As a result of this shift, we have already seen an adaptation in crisis management and conflict resolution in the region. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example, has been at the forefront of a new engagement in the various arenas of crisis and uncertainty. It has internalized – perhaps more than anybody else – the need for a comprehensive foreign policy engagement on all fronts. Without a holistic approach, not much can be achieved. Lebanon, for example, cannot be freed from the current domestic standoff between the government and opposition forces, or overcome the clash between the state and extremist non-state actors, if these challenges are addressed in isolation.

In consequence, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic efforts over the past year or so have been instructive analytically, and laudable and innovative politically. We have seen the Kingdom lead on initiatives to overcome the divisions in Lebanon and among Palestinians. In parallel, with Saudi Arabia's leadership, the Arab League has re-launched its Arab Peace Initiative as a vehicle to revive the Middle East peace process. We have seen Saudi efforts as part of the engagement of Iraq's neighbours – and even with Iran, whose nuclear program has been perceived as a source of major concern by many in the Arab world. It is important to note that even when such efforts do not lead to immediate outcomes: engagement in them is as important in its own right. It contributes to containing conflicts that easily can spin out of control.

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Let me outline, in brief, the nature and central issues posed by the three epicentres of conflict and confrontation beyond Lebanon:

#### *Iraq: A Challenge for Wider Regional Stability*

There is no doubt that both for the states of the Arabian Gulf and other actors in the region and beyond, Iraq is a key crisis in the Middle East today. Almost needless to say, the Iraqi arena is not directly linked with the Arab-Israeli conflict, nor, a priori, to Lebanon. But Iraq's instability creates a vacuum, in which, much like in Lebanon, many broader struggles are carried out. Some groups challenge the United States and its allies. There is extremism and militantism that gives Islam, in the name of which terrorists purport to carry out their actions, unfairly a bad image. There are tensions between Sunnis and Shias, diverging interests among Arabs and Kurds. And there is of course what is perceived to be a struggle between an increasingly assertive Persian influence and an embattled Arab nation.

Much like in Lebanon, Iraq's destiny first and foremost has to be addressed at the domestic level, among Iraqis themselves. But similar to Lebanon, this will not be possible or sustainable, if a regional political process does not accompany, enable, and support such domestic progress.

#### *Iran and the Nuclear Program*

As I have mentioned, the manifold challenges in both Iraq and Lebanon are seen to be linked intimately with a broader regional transition. Indeed, one of the key changes over the last few years is not only a fundamental reordering of the balance of power in the Middle East, but also a seismic shift in the geopolitics of the area. Iran has now emerged as a major player in the whole region, and is perceived to be involved in many of the arenas. Indeed,

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this is the case to such an extent that some would perceive Iran as a new centre of gravity for conflicts in the region.

Last summer, when I accompanied then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on his travels to this region amidst the crisis over the war between Israel and Hizbullah, it was repeatedly impressed on us how the eyes in the region were fixed not just on Tel Aviv. They were equally trained on Tehran. I think this continues to be the case.

Thus, in my analysis, Iran represents the fourth epicentre of crisis. The Iranian nuclear programme and ambitions have raised many questions, both in the wider international community and in this region. Fears have been voiced, rightly or wrongly, whether we are seeing a revival of age-old Persian nationalist ambitions. Let me say as clearly as I can that, like any other state that is a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty, the Islamic Republic indisputably has the right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes. But it has to do so within the confines of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The questions that have remained unaddressed so far need to be answered. And without a resolution of the crisis over Iran's nuclear program, it is unlikely that we will see much progress towards settling any of the other key issues in the region, Lebanon, Iraq, or the Arab-Israeli conflict.

There are further significant implications of a situation in which the questions related to Iran's nuclear program are not addressed. They are deeply disconcerting. Firstly, the already weak global non-proliferation regime will erode further and likely collapse. Secondly, an arms race may ensue, perhaps beginning here in the region, but certainly not confined to it for long.

I have already said that I believe that sometimes perceptions are much more important than realities, because it is perceptions that drive actions. Iran's nuclear program provides one of those instances. It is not necessarily about what is really happening in Iran's nuclear facilities. If the questions that have been raised remain unanswered, then many of the

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political actors in the region may conclude that the real issue is one of hegemonic, emerging ambitions. If the emerging trend of a deepening fault-line between “Persians” and “Arabs” is allowed to be deepened, this will expose and widen rifts across the region.

#### *Inter-Linkages between the Epicentres and the Arab Peace Initiative*

Given the extensive inter-connections between the various arenas and conflicts in the Middle East, it is of paramount importance that they all be addressed in parallel. Saudi Arabian diplomacy has set an example to follow, I believe. It would be in the interest of all to respond positively to the initiatives and overtures that have been put on the table.

The importance of the Arab Peace Initiative initially developed and spearheaded by then-Crown Prince, now King Abdullah, cannot be over-estimated. It is the most promising vehicle that we have at the moment to also begin overcoming Arab-Israeli suspicion and conflict. It will enable us to build up further momentum towards Israeli-Palestinian and Arab-Israeli negotiations.

Hamas has ruled in the Palestinian Authority since January 2006. Intra-factional violence in Gaza has led to new suffering and crisis for Palestinian civilians and those Israelis who are subjected to constant Qassam rocket fire. Against this background, a sustained and successful revival of the peace process is absolutely necessary. It would undoubtedly also help to make progress in Iraq, with Iran, and in Lebanon.

And the Arab Peace Initiative is now the vehicle that can create new momentum and lead to renewed negotiations. Here, the challenge is now for the international community to follow the lead that Saudi Arabia and the other members of the Arab League have taken. The Quartet, consisting of the US, Russia, the EU and the UN, is tasked to respond positively and create a new dynamic of interaction and negotiation.

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There can be no doubt that such renewed momentum on the Arab-Israeli front would have a positive influence in Lebanon. Militant Palestinian factions and so-called Islamist terrorists would lose an important justification for their disruptive actions. The Lebanese would be free to concentrate on the domestic challenge of building and consolidating a successful state.

#### *Lebanon's Fate in the Future*

Lebanon's fate as a microcosm of the struggles in the Middle East may never change. But seeking to address its domestic difficulties in isolation from broader regional and global conflagrations will be impossible. In 1916, Lebanon's greatest poet, Khalil Gibran, wrote about the Lebanese who died in a major famine that year:

My people died of hunger, and he who  
Did not perish from starvation was  
Butchered with the sword ...  
They perished from hunger in a land  
rich with milk and honey ...  
They died because the vipers and  
sons of vipers spat out poison into  
the space where the Holy Cedars and  
the roses and the jasmine breathe  
their fragrance.

What Khalil Gibran teaches us, I believe, and what some in the Middle East have already realised, is this: that Lebanon's tragic lot can only be improved if all the vipers and sons of vipers are found, and the poison is eradicated, to leave Lebanon's fertile soil to blossom and bear fruit. And since Lebanon is indeed a microcosm for the struggles of the entire region, that same dictum goes for the Middle East at large.

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*Thank you very much.*