

- check against delivery -

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

ARABIAN GULF SECURITY: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Keynote Address

by Terje Rød-Larsen,

President of the International Peace Academy (IPA)

**at the 12th Annual Conference
of the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR)**

5 March 2007

Highnesses,

Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

1. Allow me first to express my thanks to the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research and its director, Dr. Jamal Sanad al-Suwaidi, for your kind invitation and for your hospitality. It is a great pleasure and honour being with you here today. I should emphasize at the outset that I speak here today in my capacity as President of the International Peace Academy and not on behalf of the United Nations.

2. The ECSSR's Annual Conference this year stands under a particularly timely theme. The relevance of the topic is manifested as we look around your regional environment: north, to Iraq; northeast, to Iran; west, all the way to the Arab-Israeli/Israeli-Palestinian and Lebanese-Syrian arenas. Throughout the Middle East, we see a region in deep and deepening crisis.

Deep Crisis: From One Centre of Gravity to Four Epicentres

3. In a way, it is trivial to say that the Middle East is in crisis. In this region, there is always a crisis. However, in my view, the Middle East today confronts challenges that have more complex dynamics, are more extensively disruptive, and more dangerous, than in several decades.

4. Multiple issues manifest the fast-developing and multi-dimensional crisis and fragility that pervades the region:

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

- The bloody war in Lebanon last summer and its effects on Lebanon's stability.
- The tragic Iraqi imbroglio, with its potentially extensive regional implications.
- The looming crisis over Iran's nuclear programme and its effects on a new arms race in the region and beyond. The possible collapse of the non-proliferation treaty (NPT).
- And of course, the remaining unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

5. I do not need to point out for you that these predicaments are not only of significance to you, 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.

6. 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. They touch hearts and minds in every capital in the Western world, too. Regional conflicts are of a global scale, but not between societies, civilizations, or sectarian groupings: the dividing lines are within societies, within cultures, even within communities, be they ethnic or sectarian.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

7. Middle Eastern predicaments are also often latently or manifestly international crises. In the old days, many of the crises in the region were directly and inextricably linked with the Cold War at the global level. And even though the Cold War is over and superpower rivalry is no more, the world's sole superpower is deeply involved in the region. Some would argue that it has indeed become a regional power: It is no longer an outside actor just sometimes involved in the region. The argument would run that the United States is now so deeply engaged here that it cannot possibly isolate itself, or be neglected by any party in the region. The intimately interwoven crises of the Middle East profoundly shape the nature of world politics and the course of international relations. And the other way around: world politics, equally forcefully, shape the nature of political developments here in the region.

8. Allow me to focus, however, more specifically on what I think is a more central and distinct new element in the dynamic of crisis and fragility in the Middle East.

9. 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-

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

regional relations. It defined the overall politics and international ties and linkages of the region.

10. My thesis is: 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 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.

11. 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. The four epicentres are: Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian arena. With the emergence of these epicentres over the last few years, the geopolitical map of the Middle East has changed fundamentally.

12. In consequence, we need to fundamentally alter both our analyses and our recipes for crisis management and conflict resolution in the region. And I believe that such a change has already begun, especially here in the Gulf. Two new political configurations have recently taken shape: the informal

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

mechanism of the Arab Quartet, of which the United Arab Emirates is a member alongside Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. And the meetings of the six GCC member states “+2” with Egypt and Jordan – the so-called “6+2.” This manifests that many here in the region perceive a heightened need for not only discussion but also unity in the Arab world. Such unity is seen as a precondition for addressing the manifold new challenges confronting the Arabian Gulf and the Levant.

13. Let me outline, in brief, the nature and central issues posed by the four epicentres of conflict and confrontation, as I see them.

Iraq: A Challenge for Wider Regional Stability

14. There is no doubt that both for the states of the Arabian Gulf and other actors in the region and beyond, Iraq is the key crisis in the Middle East today. Almost needless to say, the Iraqi arena is not directly linked with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

15. Initially, there were many discussions over the legitimacy and international legality of the war in Iraq. I believe this discussion is now outdated and no longer of practical relevance. The instability in Iraq has increasingly become a problem that affects everyone. The current disequilibrium threatens to spread through the entire surrounding region. It is

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

therefore not just a problem that the United States confronts. It is a problem that affects everyone. It is a problem that will ultimately have to be addressed on two mutually reinforcing levels. The first is the domestic level. Ways have to be found to bring the different Iraqi communities together. We have to help and persuade them to thrash out their differences. We have to allow them to re-build a common destiny.

16. The second level, which will have to accompany, underpin and reinforce any such domestic process, is the regional level. Iraq's neighbours will have to play a constructive role. That will be a difficult feat to achieve, but we have already seen the ability of some to spoil progress. Many already fear what might happen if the efforts to stabilize Iraq fail. Regional instability might spread and affect everyone. The regional conference initiated by the Iraqi government is therefore an important venture, and a promising one. But it also needs to be accompanied by similar efforts on the domestic level.

Lebanon: Microcosm for the Struggles of the Region

17. Iraq today reminds us of another country that once was and again is an arena, in which outside players stage their confrontations, indirectly and through proxies: Lebanon.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

18. After the civil war, Lebanon remained an incomplete project of state-consolidation. With the withdrawal of Israeli troops in May 2000, new momentum was created. This led to Security Council resolution 1559 and, eventually, to Syria's military withdrawal in March/April 2005.

19. I had the privilege to serve as the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General and act, on his behalf, as the negotiator on both the Israeli and the Syrian withdrawals. We also assisted the Lebanese in organizing the first free and fair elections in Lebanon.

20. However, there remains today a contest over who has what influence and what role in Lebanon. There remains a fundamental struggle over the nature and extent of Lebanon's sovereignty and independence. And this struggle is inherently a regional struggle. It involves and affects, for instance, Syrian and Iranian interests, which in turn makes it relevant for the national security interests of Egypt, Jordan and the GCC countries, as well as other countries in the region. What may best illustrate Lebanon's direct relevance to security in the Arabian Gulf is that we have recently seen the efforts of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran to broker a compromise between the two main camps in Lebanon. In these efforts, we see a public recognition and reflection of a growing Iranian role in the region. We observe a renewed importance of Sunni and Shia identity throughout the area. We comprehend the emergence of a new fault-line in the Middle East.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

Iran: A New Centre of Gravity

21. Indeed, it seems to me that 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. This will have far-reaching implications. Iran has now emerged as a major player in the whole region.

22. 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.

23. 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.

24. 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

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

confines of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The questions that have remained unaddressed so far need to be answered.

25. The implications of a situation in which these questions are not addressed will be very significant, and are deeply worrying. 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.

26. As we all know, sometimes perceptions are much more important than realities, because it is perceptions that drive actions. This is 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 political actors in the region may conclude that the real issue is one of hegemonic, emerging ambitions. In the region, a new fault-line is appearing between aspirations of Arab unity, stability and peaceful regional and international cooperation versus aspirations, perceived by many, of aggressive expansionism and aspirations of regional dominance and hegemony. If these trends are allowed to be deepened, they will expose and widen rifts across the region.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

Inter-Linkages between the Epicentres

27. I have thus far referred to three of the four epicentres of crisis and instability in the Middle East in relative isolation. But I hardly need to emphasise how they have grown to become increasingly interlinked.

28. The examples illustrating the inter-linkages between the arenas are plenty. I have already referred to Saudi and Iranian mediation efforts in Lebanon. I have briefly mentioned the Arab Quartet and the 6+2 mechanism grouping together the GCC with Egypt and Jordan. Both these vehicles are significant manifestations of a growing recognition of shared concerns and interests among these actors. And perhaps it is equally significant who is not part of these mechanisms.

29. There is one further example of how the arenas and conflicts in the Middle East, separate in their roots, have become inter-linked. And that is demonstrated in the fourth epicentre of crisis and instability in the Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

The Israeli-Palestinian Arena: Ripe for a Revived Peace Process

30. Here, the issues remain the same as they have been for a long time. And yet, they have become much more complicated in recent years. With the election of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority, there has emerged not only a

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

question of the recognition of Israel, the commitment to previously signed agreements and the renunciation of violence. These are of course the three conditions that the Quartet specified in January 2006.

31. But this question also has much to do with broader regional dynamics. Many Palestinian decisions are no longer made in Ramallah or Gaza. They are made in Damascus, where the head of Hamas' politburo, Khaled Mishal, sits. And there has been increasing contact between Hamas and Iran. For the Israelis, and some in the international community, this has raised questions about the feasibility of efforts to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

32. These questions are important and valid ones. And yet, it seems to me, precisely because of the new wider regional dynamics, there is a genuine momentum now to re-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

33. I will *not* quote here a senior Arab official who told me some time last year that in light of the questions related to developments in Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, basically, had turned into a real estate conflict: a conflict that really could and needed to be settled now, once and for all, based on broadly accepted blueprints, such as the Arab initiative. My friend added that this would in turn bring justice and improved living conditions to the suffering Palestinian people. It would bring security and end of bereavement to suffering Israelis through the establishment of the State of Palestine alongside

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

Israel. This should be paired with universal recognition of both. In consequence, my friend said, policymakers in the Arab world could then focus on those issues that are really of more immediate and tangible concern.

34. There can be no question that all arenas of crisis in the Middle East need to be addressed in parallel. Only a holistic, comprehensive approach can ultimately stabilize the region. In the long run, I believe, this will mean establishment of a regional security architecture that integrates all and affords space to everyone. In the short run, however, comprehensive solutions are very difficult to realise. The Lebanon war last summer and the prolonged political crisis in the country may come to be seen as forbearers of future developments. Things may unfortunately get much worse before they get better.

35. Therefore, I believe we can make significant progress and thus begin stabilizing the region in one particular arena: the Israeli-Palestinian one. This may be a concern that is in many ways far removed from the Arabian Gulf, our key concern here today. However, due to its symbolic significance, its emotive appeal, and its signalling effects, progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena will powerfully and positively affect the other conflicts. This theatre of confrontation may not only show the easiest way forward, but also become the most important dynamo for further stabilization efforts.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

36. I believe the way forward is a package of two steps in one go. Many do not remember that it is actually the PLO, according to all signed agreements, not the Palestinian Authority, which retains foreign policy functions on behalf of the Palestinian people. This is an important part of the Oslo Accords. And as a result, I don't think there can or should be much discussion about it: PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas and the Government of Israel should engage in negotiations. In this context, I think it is significant that the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, has stated repeatedly that he does not object to any such talks.

37. Negotiations should focus on immediate action but also open up for discussion and possible agreement on principles of a final status arrangement. The immediate action should see, as outlined in the Road Map, Israeli territorial concessions in the West Bank and the establishment of a Palestinian state. This state would then have the same international status as Israel.

38. In order to make such a process work, any agreement reached in negotiations would be put to a referendum among the Palestinian people before its implementation. Once supported on the popular level, both states should be recognized by all states. This should also lead to immediate state-to-state negotiations on settling all remaining issues.

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

Wider Regional Significance of a Revived Israeli-Palestinian Process

39. I believe that the process leading to the establishment of the State of Palestine should be guided by the Arab Peace Initiative and its realization. This initiative, adopted unanimously by the Arab League at its March 2002 summit in Beirut, has not yet been met with Israel's endorsement. However, it does remain one of the key pillars of any move forward. As you may recall, for example, the Quartet's Road Map explicitly addresses and builds on the Arab Peace Initiative. And I believe – I know for a fact – that many in Israel now see the benefits and advantages of this initiative.

40. In consequence, I believe that progress in the Israeli-Palestinian arena is not only of direct relevance for security in the Arabian Gulf. I also believe that the Arabian Gulf states can play a very significant role in achieving such progress. This, in turn, would benefit their own security concerns and needs. With the recent efforts of the Arab Quartet that includes the United Arab Emirates, and the work of the 6+2 mechanism, the Gulf States have done much important groundwork. The fact that the UAE is now recognized as one of the leading diplomatic actors in the region is a testimony to these important achievements – and, I am certain, recognition will only grow further.

41. Let me close with a quote I borrow from the late founder of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Zayed. Ten years ago, Sheikh Zayed opened a conference here in Abu Dhabi referring to the need for Arab unity:

- check against delivery -

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 MARCH, 12AM EST/5AM GMT/9AM UAE

“It is time,” he said, “to mend fences, forgive each other, and leave the door open for all Arabs to return to the Arab ranks.”

Sheikh Zayed went on to say that the Arabs would settle their dispute with Israel once the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people were addressed, saying in that instance,

“the Arabs would cooperate with [Israel], because they have no greed for the rights of others.”

42. Sheikh Zayed’s wisdom still looms large and should guide us all.

43. Thank you for your kind attention.

* * *