

Intervention for EPC Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

It is a great pleasure to be here, in front of such an impressive audience. Thank you for making the effort to travel to Abu Dhabi and take part in this second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate.

I would also like to thank Dr. Ibtisam al Ketbi, President of the Emirates Policy Center, for organizing this event. And a warm welcome to Jon Huntsman, Chairman of the Atlantic Council. Last year's Debate was a resounding success and I look forward to building on that this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Middle East is at a crucial juncture, characterized by challenges and obstacles, which endanger the sovereignty, security, and stability of us all – words repeated often, but now with extra urgency. The system of independent Arab states, linked by a shared culture and language, is now being shaken to its foundations by **extremist and terrorist groups** and also by systematic and organized external interference. These two threats feed off each other and constitute a grave and serious challenge.

Unfortunately, terrorism has found a warm incubator in our region. With the support of entities which provide ideological succor, weapons, and finance, the aim of these self-interested, closed-minded groups is to **undermine Arab countries** and break down the social fabric of our societies in order to promote their own myopic view of the world.

This danger is even greater when **terrorists use Islam to justify their acts**, tamper with our cultural heritage, and brainwash our youth with their false and subversive messages.

We must find effective measures to address this problem.

The time has come to translate resolutions and commitments on counter-terrorism into real, practical actions. In particular, we must develop better legal mechanisms to not only combat the violent actions of terrorists, but also their extremist ideologies, which aim to **undermine state structures and institutions** and secular visions of progress and modernity.

The UAE believes that **extremist ideologies and terrorism** are two faces of the same coin, which mutually reinforce the other and contribute to instability. The battle against extremism and terrorism is not just a physical one. It is also more importantly an ideological, intellectual and societal one.

The notion that there is only one interpretation of religion, that there are only two shades, black and white, and the idea that if I am right then you must certainly be wrong has to be challenged. The region is paying a heavy price for sectarian polarization. We must show resolve and emphasize messages of hope, tolerance, and openness.

This will not be easy, and it is not something that can happen overnight. **It will require steadfastness because it is a generational challenge.** A joint, strategic and long-term effort is needed to overcome the sectarian, cultural, political, and social divides of the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

Extremists have used the divisions of our region for their own gains.

Terrorist networks continue to manipulate the frustration of Arab youth over the injustices in the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict**. Unfortunately, recent provocations at the Al Aqsa Mosque have further fueled radical ideologies and associated chaos. The instability, fear, and violence that plague the region can only be ended if the Palestinian conflict is resolved, because it is at the heart of the region's problems. And the Palestinian conflict can only be resolved if the occupation is ended. Without that, we are only managing the symptoms.

We must remain committed to finding a viable solution to this issue. The Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and the Diaspora have suffered for far too long. In the Occupied Territories, Palestinians need international protection. The might of the Israeli state is cruel and the legal framework is discriminatory.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We live in a time where difficult decisions must be made in our region. We can either accept that we are destined to deal with suffering and discord, or we can choose to find solutions that attempt to bring our peoples, cultures, and polities closer together.

The UAE has made its choice. We have refused to idly stand by as the region around us has been set ablaze. Our prosperity and stability is directly linked to that of our neighbors. We are a part of this region, and we want to see our neighbors succeed and attain viable political and economic futures. Rather than hoping to be islands of stability and prosperity in a turbulent ocean, we need instead to be an integral part of a successful and peaceful region.

In order to bring this about, we will continue to work closely with the moderate Arab center and those who believe that stability and unity should always come before disorder and division. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in our view, are the keystones

on which the region's stability depends. We need to consolidate those foundations. We want to spread the message of stability, unity and evolution as a counter to those who foment violence and discord.

This thinking triggered our decision to intervene in Yemen. For four decades, Yemen was one of the biggest recipients of UAE aid. We have always wanted Yemen to be a politically, economically, and socially viable state.

Despite this help, Yemen has traditionally been unstable and fractious, for reasons that go back centuries. What changed this year was that external Iranian influence had led the Houthis to undermine the Yemeni government and degrade its institutions. Effectively they began to build a state within a state.

We could not allow this to happen in Yemen. We will not accept that Yemen – right in our back yard – should be home to a Hizbullah-style, Iranian-backed militia. Instead we have intervened to protect the region's long-term stability.

With our regional partners, the UAE will continue to work hard to safeguard **the unity and political viability of Yemen.** The UAE believes that it is imperative that a peaceful solution can soon be found to this conflict; one which respects the wishes of the Yemeni people and the legitimacy of the Yemeni Government, and puts an end to the concept of changing the political status quo by force.

The UAE supports the UN's efforts to bring about a peaceful solution in Yemen and believes that talks due to take place in the coming fortnight offer a new opportunity to resolve this conflict. A political solution based upon the GCC Initiative and UNSC Resolution 2216 is the only way to end this conflict. The big question remains: will that process recreate Yemeni politics in its traditional and problematic form? It is a question for Yemenis to answer but we must help them.

We will continue to provide humanitarian assistance and relief to the Yemeni people, whilst helping to foster the development of viable, effective state institutions in that country. The freeing of Aden, following the Houthi carnage, has effectively allowed us to provide such support. You can be assured that the UAE will use this opportunity to continue in our common efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people.

We will also tackle the presence of Al-Qa'ida in Yemen. Our soldiers have twice been hit by Al-Qa'ida attacks in Aden because the terrorists know that our strategy there will ultimately destroy them. The terrorists want anarchy: they want to stop us from enabling the legitimate Yemeni government from exercising its authority in Aden. They will not stop us, no matter how hard they try.

In **Syria**, the inability of the international community to work together and find a real solution to the crisis, created the vacuum which continues to be exploited by terrorist groups. This crisis is not only one for Syria's neighbors, but also for the wider international community. It is vital that we redouble our efforts and find a political solution based upon the Geneva communiqué. Although current efforts are at an embryonic stage, they underline the fact that the only way forward is a political one, based upon the Geneva framework. A united secular Syria remains our common goal but the road forward is still treacherous. Peaceful political voices have been marginalized by the violent nature of this conflict. It is our duty, and that of the international community, to reinstate those voices of reason which represent ordinary Syrians within the political process which is intended to save their country.

The recent intervention by Russia in Syria has highlighted the critical need to step up our collective efforts to reduce rather than increase the complications of this very difficult crisis.

Leaving the Syrian crisis unresolved is not an option. Either we gift what remains of Syria to a brutal regime or extremists; or, we band together and find constructive

ways to prevent the complete unravelling of Syria's political, cultural, and social make-up.

We hope as the Arab World continues in its efforts to develop solutions to the threat of extremism, terrorism, and instability, our neighbor **Iran** uses the opening offered to it by the international community to promote stability and order, rather than divisions and sectarianism. We believe that if Iran takes concrete, practical steps to build trust and resolve its differences with its Arab neighbors by peaceful means, the chances of stability developing throughout the Arab World will grow.

For example, Iran could stop fuelling conflict in Yemen and Bahrain. It could stop its sectarian interventions in Syria and Iraq. It could spend the money unlocked by the nuclear deal, perhaps \$100 billion in unfrozen assets, to repair its own economy and build a future for its own youth, rather than stepping up funding for Hizbullah and similar forms of interference in the Arab world.

Iran's Foreign Minister has called for an Iranian-GCC dialogue. We are not against a dialogue, provided that Iran first changes its behavior in the region. Dialogues, in order to succeed, need a solid foundation and sincere intentions. When we look at Iranian policy as a whole, we see that these conditions do not currently exist.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The challenges facing the security of the Arab World are daunting. All indications point to difficult choices and difficult solutions, today, tomorrow, and in the years ahead.

The UAE Government has a vision for the region. It strives to promote an **agenda of moderation**, alongside a strong and sustained effort **to support a vibrant and stable region**. This is not 1950s-style Arab nationalism. It is not founded on anger or resentment. It is not exclusivist or divisive. But it should take advantage of the

cultural, religious, economic and political ties that unify the Arab world. Instead of trying to erase national boundaries by force, this is a gradualist vision of free trade and constructive engagement between existing states, coupled with cooperation against terrorism and extremism. The UAE will continue to promote such an agenda, whilst working closely with the two keystones of the Arab World, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to close the lethal Pandora's Box of contradictions and disorder which have grown throughout our region. **Together we will rebuild the Arab system** and seek the evolutionary change necessary to progress forward.

Most importantly, the UAE will continue upon a **path of political and societal moderation** underpinned by the empowerment of women, religious and cultural tolerance, openness, and economic dynamism.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that the debates and discussions taking place here at the Abu Dhabi Strategic Dialogue will energize our efforts to solve the political, social, security, and economic challenges faced by the Middle East region and beyond. I look forward to your contributions, and thank you again for your attendance. We will not solve all these problems today: but with so much talent in the room, we can surely make progress.

Thank you.