

SPEECH BY THE RT HON LORD OWEN TO A CONFERENCE ON ‘THE IRANIAN
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When talking of the Middle East region I define that as including Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran.

Middle Eastern politics have long been likened to a complex game used as a metaphor and as an explanation for recurring behaviour. The ‘Rules of the Eastern Question Game’ are characterised by Professor L. Carl Brown writings from Princeton University in 1984 as a kaleidoscope:

shifting pattern of alliances – everything is related to something else – minor local issues and major international concerns – the most internationalised or penetrated diplomatic system – Great Power involvement and rivalries – rarely does a single political actor ... have the ability to impose its will – politics of the limited fait accompli or quick grab – everything interrelated – reluctance to establish priorities – reactive politics or diplomatic counterpunching – preference for mediators and third parties, tactics zero sum political games.¹

Navigating this complex landscape was once seen as a core skill of the British and, given our longstanding connections to the region, we can continue to draw on that experience – by no means in the past always positive either to the Palestinians or the Israelis. We must learn from our mistakes and contribute to future development. Boris Johnson’s article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 30 October on the Balfour Declaration is a well balanced contribution.

In February 1977 as a new young Foreign Secretary, Begin, the longstanding right wing leader of the Likud Party, was now Prime Minister. Britain might have remained on the sidelines in 1977 on the Camp David peace process along with the rest of Europe, but for an inspired request by Prime Minister James Callaghan for Begin to visit Britain before Sadat’s visit to Israel changed everything. Some were horrified by even the thought of the man responsible for the 1946 bombing of the British administrative headquarters at the King David Hotel, which had left ninety-one dead, officially visiting London. The visit, postponed because of Sadat’s visit, took place on 2

¹ David Owen, David Ludlow, *British Foreign Policy After Brexit. An Independent Voice* (Bitebacking Publishing, 2017), p. 187.

December and went well with no significant demonstrations or protests. In No. 10 Begin asked to see the Foreign Secretary's room where the Balfour Declaration had been signed. I took him over to my room and it was as if he was visiting a scared shrine. I took down from the bookshelves a leather-bound volume of Hansard recording the House of Commons debates of 1917 and presented it to him. It was deliberately chosen to mark the shame I felt at the then British government selling tanks to Israel but refusing to sell ammunition for the tanks when war broke out. Begin's family later said this was his most treasured gift and he showed it with pride to his visitors in the belief, with his failing eyesight, that this volume had been present on the day the Balfour Declaration had been signed. No one ever wanted to correct him and break its magic.

A major factor in the Middle East region is Russia's renewed political and military involvement. But this is not new. It is easy to forget that on 24 October 1973 Leonid Brezhnev nearly sent a Soviet airborne force to the Arab-Israeli war zone and US forces were put on increased alert. Fortunately, that dire crisis passed. Later a conference was held in Geneva in December 1973, which was co-chaired by the US and the Soviet Union. Following the conference the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East, however, began to wane. Nevertheless, on 1 October 1977 a joint US-Soviet statement on the Middle East was made by US Secretary of State Vance and Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. A vituperative attack on this statement by Begin's government showed they were totally opposed to a reconvening of any Geneva Conference. This view was reinforced by the Jewish community in the US. Also President Sadat of Egypt had private doubts about yet further involvement of the Soviet Union, then Egypt's main arms supplier, and was trying to back away from Egypt being seen as part of a Soviet sphere of influence. President Carter had also wisely sent Sadat a handwritten note towards the end of October appealing for a bold and statesmanlike move to help overcome the hurdles to the Geneva process.

On 13 November 1977, after some private diplomacy between Egypt and Israel, Menachem Begin invited Sadat to come to Israel, and on 18 November Sadat flew into Israel to propose a world summit in East Jerusalem to be attended by Syria, Jordan, Egypt and the PLO with the US, Soviet Union, China, France and the UK. That proposal was soon dropped in favour of the start of a dialogue between Sadat and Begin, but it had merit then and it could yet have merit forty years later.

The two men were devout leaders; one Muslim, the other Orthodox Jew. They needed a catalyst,

however, and that quickly became President Carter, a devout Christian. The personal chemistry between all three led to the Camp David Agreement in 1978. Sadly, that historic opportunity never fully developed into a regional settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict. But it did produce an Egyptian–Israeli Peace Treaty that, fortunately, still holds today.

With Sadat and Begin regularly flying through London on their way to Washington for the Camp David talks, it meant a level of engagement for the UK in the Palestine question which, though still modest, had not been seen since the UK held the Palestine Mandate. It was extraordinary that in 1977 I was the first Foreign Secretary to visit Syria, after which we recognized the PLO, and in February 1978 the first Foreign Secretary to visit the State of Israel.

Begin made a huge step to stabilise the Middle East when he agreed to hand back every square hectare of Sinai to Egypt, but he was never ready to release territory to Arab Palestinians in what he called Samaria and Judea. Dayan, however, who had been Minister of Defence in the previous Israeli Labour government and who became Minister of Foreign Affairs in Begin's government from 1977, was disturbed when Begin changed his position after the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt. A new text was put forward and the sovereignty question over Judea, Samaria and the Gaza district was no longer, as in the earlier text, left open. Dayan was then firmly opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state, but he was in a minority in the Cabinet on this changed text and appropriating private Arab land. He resigned. Nevertheless, Dayan personally continued to talk to Arabs, since he was fluent in their language. In his book, he described his interpretation of Arab Palestinian views on the spectrum of left or right.

“The ties between the administered territories and Jordan were essential they said and the two could not be kept apart, because of the characteristics of their populations and their economies. There was hardly a family in Judea and Samaria and Gaza, rich or poor, urban resident or Bedouin that did not have a relative living in Jordan. And Jordan constituted the principal market.”

This all-important strategic relationship between a Palestinian state and Jordan became sidelined. Now under King Abdullah and following what has happened in Syria is the time for new links – political, economic and military. Not a Federation but a relationship which will help give confidence to Israel in the new Palestinian state.

In January 1979 when the Shah flew out from Tehran to Cairo, the greatest geopolitical upheaval in the Middle East took place. The consequences are still all pervasive today. Had the Shah been

more open about his chronic lymphocytic leukaemia when first diagnosed in 1974, and then when his liver was affected in 1975 with the likelihood of a terminal lympho sarcoma, it should have been possible to put in place a democratic succession and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 avoided. I have written in depth about this in a book *In Sickness and In Power*.² We go on ignoring the health of our leaders at our peril. The fall of the Shah inexorably led to the 1980-88 eight-year Iran/Iraq war, the first Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US and UK. To say nothing of the human rights abuses, killings and suppression in Iran.

We face the depressing situation today when three successive US Presidents have been with their Administration deeply involved in drawing up the boundary lines for a two-state map between Israel and Palestine. Yet the map became ever harder to agree. New settlements were created on the ground in occupied territory. As the SNP MP vividly describes it – “conquest by concrete”. In Israel you risk your long term security and another even more dangerous war in south Lebanon if you do not help soon create a permanent peace. But your security situation has worsened as a result of the war in Syria and those real concerns have to be addressed with military safeguards.

The signing of the Oslo Peace Process in 1993 was a moment of optimism for Arab–Israeli relations; the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin a very dark moment. The subsequent negotiations over maps defining two states, with the various moods of optimism and depression they engendered, has reached, in my view in 2017, not necessarily an end point, but a point where it is sensible to pause and think of a fresh approach. I do not think it helps to bind oneself into the language of there being no alternative. To what has gone before, two states is much more than lines on a map.

Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama – all two-term Presidents – have been unable to influence the Israeli government despite spending so much time in the last twenty-four years negotiating but never being politically capable of exercising sustained authority to force a compromise. The UN, Russia and the EU were for much of this time corralled into the so-called Quartet with the US, making it hard for the UK or France to take independent positions. Attempts were made to improve the economy of the Palestinian Arab areas by the appointment of special envoys as representatives of the Quartet. The first was the previous head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, who initially did well but stepped down after a

² David Owen, *In Sickness and In Power. Illness in Heads of Government, Military and Business Leaders since 1900* (Methuen, revised and updated 2016).

year because of restrictions in dealing with Hamas and the withholding of money from the Palestinian Authority. Initial objections were made by Russia to the second envoy, Tony Blair, as to the scope of his authority. But Blair's views on potential military action against Iran in light of its nuclear programme – a matter totally outside his remit – helped neither the Palestinians' relations with him nor the British government, who did not agree with his views. Attacks from southern Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank continued into Israeli-held territory. A high wall has been built between the two potential states by Israel, highlighting the image of irreconcilability but perhaps only temporarily leading to some diminution in attacks.

During much of this time the Israeli government, but not many of their key strategic commanders, wanted the US to help them bomb Iran. Fortunately, that resistance from the Israeli military and intelligence community has so far succeeded in preventing any such military action. It is to the credit of President George W. Bush that he made it publicly clear in the transitional period of the incoming President Obama that he had refused the request of the then Prime Minister Olmert, making it easier for President Obama to also refuse Prime Minister Netanyahu.

The fresh approach I advocate has to take account of two dramatic changes in the recent politics of the Middle East.

The first was in the summer of 2015 when Assad warned the Russians the road link between Damascus and the Mediterranean was in danger of being blocked militarily by rebel forces, and Putin responded swiftly and intelligently. In September 2015, the Russian naval base, which they had occupied since 1971, was quickly reinforced by adapting a nearby Syrian airfield, and Russia began flying their planes on a bombing campaign to tilt the balance back in favour of Assad, while claiming they were going in primarily to attack ISIS. The Russians were obviously now going to control an area of Syria in the west like the Turks had wanted to do in the east. President Obama should have acted at this stage very differently, for the threat to Damascus, to which Putin was responding, was real. Had Damascus been captured by rebels with ISIS already ensconced in the suburbs, it would have been devastating. Obama could have suggested Putin should focus on Damascus and the Alawite Mediterranean stronghold while the US would help protect Aleppo and working with Turkey help create from the air a safe haven for refugees. That would diplomatically and militarily have created a situation where both Russia and the US could have cooperated. Subsequent events might have been able to create

a better situation in Syria than that which we now face. Today NATO is in danger of losing Turkey as a member, something which would be a grave strategic loss.

The other recent dramatic change of huge potential importance is the recent announcement by the 32 year old Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, to create over his lifetime a new i-city Neom that will be representative of the modern Saudi Arabia. He is intent on returning Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam introducing social change in relation to women and religious change in a distancing of the government from the powerful Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia. As yet he has not spoken about engaging Gaza in his Neom vision.



Helping to create the climate where this does become part of his agenda is crucial and I hope this will be an important part of the legacy of this conference. A rebuilt expanded Gaza becoming prosperous trading alongside Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would hasten the emergence of Palestine as a stable state. Hamas now accepting the Palestinian Authority personnel on Gaza's border points with Egypt and the Israeli military is a much needed stabilising move.

There can be no stability in a Middle East, which is dominated by Sunni and Shia people, while Iran and Saudi Arabia pursue their present enmity. Israel can be a crucial influence on this choice for good or ill. Firstly, Israel's relationship with the Shia-led Iraq is going to become evermore important to Israel, just as Israel's pragmatic relations with the Alawite-

led Syrian government has been so important since fighting and winning control of most of the Golan. No country's handling of the fall out from the Arab Spring has been as sophisticated as that of Israel's and in particular the handling of Syria. Israel did not make the same mistaken judgement as the US and many European governments that the regime was likely to be easily overthrown by the uprising within in 2011.

In Iraq there is still the unfulfilled potential for Haider al-Abadi, the Prime Minister since 2014, to garner the confidence of the Sunnis but their disillusionment with Baghdad is rife now particularly after ISIS has been routed in Syria and Iraq, a more precise word than beaten. They are simply moving elsewhere. The Saudis may be in the process of stepping back from their hitherto supportive role for Iraqi Sunnis which would be disappointing. In Parliament the Sunni-led grouping has 78 seats correctly proportional, dwarfed by the Shia grouping which has 182 and the Kurdish element 65 seats. Yet that Parliament is seen to be heavily influenced by Iran, more so than the government. In April next year al-Abadi will come up for re-election and he will need to win support from the Sunni group, more so now the Kurds are alienated following Barzani's ill-fated referendum. We are still suffering from the consequences of a US/UK de-Baathification in 2003. Under Prime Minister al-Maliki from 2006-2014 Sunnis were deprived of prominent jobs in the military and government they won back after de-Baathification. Sunnis ask who is going to help rebuild Mosul? What about towns like Karma with a population of around 95,000 liberated in May 2016? Money has been promised but is yet to materialise in anything like the amounts that will be needed. Al-Abadi as a Shia will obviously want to maintain good relations with Iran but there are few signs that he wishes to be dominated by Iran. Yet short-sighted policies from Saudi Arabia, US and Europe could very easily deepen al-Abadi's dependence on Iran. Bombing Iran would be exactly the wrong way to proceed. There is no future whatever for the UK or Israel in taking sides between the Shia and the Sunni population in the Middle East. Nor is there any future for the Saudi-dominated Sunni grouping's economic and political, often illegal, actions against what some refer to as the Islamist Sunni grouping of Qatar and Turkey.

The first line of defence for Israel against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's hatred of Israel is to encourage a more moderate Iraqi Shia government to play a mainstream role in Middle East politics.

The second line of defence for Israel is Syria itself. Israel, who knows the country backwards, should continue to try to influence US and Russian policies. There should be no assumption that Assad can be allowed to control the whole of Syria without defining the security conditions on which that might be acquiesced. In Syria the Kurds will have to rethink their strategy and a well-judged Kurdish policy could help reduce Iranian influence. As could a new push for Sunni unity. The strengthened American military presence under Trump in Iraq and Syria, after focussing on ISIL, has work to do to help constrain Assad. In that process there is no substitute for a US/Russian military dialogue and that must extend to Trump and Putin. It has been one of the successes of Putin's personal diplomacy in the Middle East that it has been surprisingly inclusive. Netanyahu has been frequently consulted and Russia, so far, has not fallen into the trap of being identified only with the Sunni or the Shia.

A permanent land bridge has not yet been established from Tehran to Beirut. Certainly the potential for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to achieve this is considerable and it has been made much easier by the failed policies in Iraq by the US and the UK from 2003-2006 and in Syria from 2011-2016. It looked as if after his successful visit to Saudi Arabia that President Trump was determined that the US should side with Saudi Arabia's views, but that appears to have been too simplistic an assumption. US diplomacy has helped Kuwait moderate somewhat the hostility between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The need to continue to suppress ISIL and their associates means the American military ought to be able to continue to work closely with al-Abadi in Iraq.

On Iran, instead of abandoning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran (JCPOA), the multilateral agreement negotiated by China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the US, President Trump has referred the matter to the US Congress. Congress will find that the Plan is enshrined in UN Resolution 231 unanimously adopted by the UN Security Council in early 2016. Congress is wisely showing signs of taking their time fixing hearings before acting. China is well placed to influence Congress as is the UK, France and Germany. On Iran there are critical issues on which the US Congress will be justified in demanding progress such as missile programmes, regional responsibilities, cooperation with al-Qaeda and their stance on Israel, and more generally on human rights. Within that focus there is also room for the US, Russia, China and Europe to help Saudi Arabia settle the war in the Yemen with Iran.

China will not be silent on Iran. China has a very direct interest in Iranian oil and gas coming out through the straits of Hormuz and turning left into the Indian Ocean. Whereas in the past the US had an overriding interest in Iranian and Saudi oil turning right outside the straits, their build up of regional and national self-sufficiency in oil and gas has made them far less dependent. China played a constructive role in JCPOA. They do not want to see that Agreement swept away by the US.

When it comes to Syria, there are steps that recognised government must accept as part of Middle East recognition in relation to the passage of arms, on the ground or in the air, and military personnel from Iran to Lebanon. Here again there has to be a dialogue between Russia with naval and air facilities in the Alawite-dominated Mediterranean area and the US and Israel. The Russians need to stay and in part own a settlement.

Some of that dialogue is already happening between the respective military in the three countries.

Apart from North Korea, the most likely next military engagement is in south Lebanon unless there are significant checks placed on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard-Alawite-Hezbollah axis. The increased Shia influence in Lebanon is a reality but it risks becoming Iran dominated. Hezbollah has fought using heavy weapons in Syria in a way they have never done in Lebanon. They are in possession of more sophisticated missiles than they have ever had in their armoury before.

An Iranian military presence in Lebanon is unacceptable; an Iranian presence on the Syrian parts of the Golan Heights is unacceptable. Russian surface to air missiles such as the S-300 are unacceptable near Golan. Any Assad-influenced Syrian government must never be recognised until these limitations are negotiated. This must not be a purely US demand, it must come from Russia too. Such a ban must have the authority from a consensus in the Middle East regionally. It will not be easy to achieve. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard is an industrial organisation in Iran, not just a military one. It saved Iran during the Iran/Iraq war despite the US and Europe turning a blind eye to Iraq's use of chemical weapons. We must be prepared for President Rouhani, having won the Presidency for a second time, to still move very slowly. He knows the problems of rapid movement in changing the

Revolutionary Guard. In fact, the Islamic Revolution has moved slowly but definitely back into a dialogue with the rest of the world. But it will take longer than we all want. Patience is needed.

I can only conclude with one simplistic assertion. There will be no peace in the Middle East if Russia sides with the Iran-Alawite-Hezbollah axis alone. Yet Putin, at the moment, has every reason to continue to focus attention on them but he has more to gain for Russia from becoming an overall peace negotiator with the US and to help the Middle East as a region build its own strategic consensus. The region cannot build this on their own and they will need the same combination of 5+1 (the Security Council permanent members plus Germany) that underpins the JCOPA. A more prominent Chinese input will help a wider Middle East strategy. The American military are feeling their way towards such a global strategy with Russia and China. Their judgement up until now has been respected by President Trump. If Israel puts its backing behind such a Middle East strategy and stops trying to sponsor military attacks against Iran, Israel can influence a solution. Bombing Iran will permanently sever relations. Now there is real hope for a new Middle East and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia may be seen by history to have played the key role in such a transformation. He still appears to be attracted to bombing Iran but he is on a learning curve. Like us all he needs to be open to new approaches. Military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen show military actions have to be far better planned and executed and be going with the grain of history and religious tolerance. Israel, the US, Russia, France and the UK had good relations 38 years ago with Iran that will be restored well before another 38 years.

But, first, Iran has to understand that they cannot follow the path that they seem set on of a military axis from Tehran through Iraq and the Alawite in Syria to install Hezbollah in power in Lebanon. It is increasingly clear that the military and security experts in Washington and Tel Aviv have found common ground in their forthright opposition over the last few years to a pre-emptive attack on Iran to identifying Lebanon, in the light of what has happened in Syria since 2011, as the place to call a halt. There has been a chain of events starting with what the Crown Prince has done in initiating reform in Saudi Arabia, already described, and the promise of a revived economic region around Neom with Jordan and Egypt and what has been happening in Gaza in the reconciliation of Palestinian Authority with Hamas to what has been developing in and around Syria over the last week. There is

still time for an outright military confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel to be forestalled.

Such a confrontation need not take place and indeed will not take place if President Putin is determined to stop it and he is helped by Prime Minister al-Abadi in Iraq. In these circumstances Assad will have to make a choice and he is not strong enough to resist - a genuine Middle Eastern settlement in which Russia and America act in concert. A major power play is underway and Hezbollah are not going to be allowed to control the Lebanon.

On Friday, Haaretz – Israel’s leading daily newspaper – reported that on Monday of last week the Israeli army blew up an Islamic Jihad attack tunnel under the border of the Gaza strip. On Wednesday they reported out of Syria that the Israeli airforce had bombed a Hezbollah weapons factory in central Syria and anti-aircraft missiles were fired at Israeli planes as they flew over Lebanon. On Friday, the Israeli army said it would intervene militarily to prevent the occupation of a Druze village called Khadeer in the Syrian Golan Heights, some 3km from the Israeli border that was being threatened by the Islamic Nusra Front. The situation on the ground appears to have eased since then. On Saturday, the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned during a trip to Saudi Arabia alluding to an assassination attempt. He has lived constantly with death threats and his father was assassinated when Prime Minister in 2005. He declared in unequivocal terms in a TV broadcast that “Iran arms in the region will be cut off”.

Meanwhile, there have been further signs that Israel is serious about easing the horrendous humanitarian situation that has been allowed to develop in Gaza. Major General Mordechai, the coordinator of Israeli ground activities in Gaza, has called for the implementation of an equivalent of a Marshall Plan in an article with two others published by the Institute for National Security Studies. The article does not specify the source of the funding but it does not require a genius to see the potential link to the new economic region that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia sees developing at Neom linked with Jordan and Egypt.

Haaretz in the main editorial on Sunday reminds its readers that Palestinian reconciliation in Gaza is the result of ongoing talks between Egypt, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia and the UAE and is an integral part of the Arab effort to cut Hamas off from Iran and advance the peace process. And it argues that this development, “if the transfer of control

over the crossings attests to the seriousness of the parties' intentions about reconciliation, it obliges Israel to revisit its policies in the territories – and especially to recognize that the relevance of its blockage of Gaza is diminishing.” It would be helpful if the Israeli government also took an urgent look at its policy towards Hebron in the West Bank and encouraged the return of Palestinians to Hebron that is fast becoming a ghost town.

It is possible that the momentum of these events will slow and that there will be no major military clash but a new path is being set in the Middle East and it is a dangerous one. The best diplomatic response would be for the Security Council to use the 5+1 nations that worked on the Iranian nuclear question, with different personnel and under the overall authority of the Security Council, to focus on the Middle East as a whole and within that grouping there would be a new player in the Middle East, namely China which now has greater interest than any other nation in oil and gas coming through the straits of Hormuz from Iran, Iraq, and all the Gulf states.

There is still time to deal with both Gaza and the Golan together. At the moment the incentives for Russia to create strains in its relationship on the ground with Syria, the Iranian Revolutionary commander and his troops, as well as Hezbollah, are not strong enough. Russia will, in my view, only play the constructive role that it could in its new position, with a military airfield close to Lebanon, if it sees evidence of a constructive dialogue in the areas of concern for its own people, namely east Ukraine and Crimea and a readiness to establish negotiations for the settlement of boundary disputes involving Transnistria, Georgia, Nagorno Karabakh and even perhaps Kosovo. Once again, the grouping of nations that could address those problems best are the permanent powers of China, France, UK and US together with Germany. I will be speaking in Moscow to the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in similar detail on this subject on 16 November.

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