

SPEECH BY THE RT HON LORD DAVID OWEN IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS QUEEN'S SPEECH DEBATE – TUESDAY, 7 JANUARY 2020

My Lords, as we talk in this Chamber, the Middle East is once again a powder keg of extreme danger. I share all the apprehensions and fears that were expressed by the noble Lord, Lord Ricketts, in his very important speech. It is easy to say what to do. The UN Secretary-General gave a very good, precise order of priorities as soon as this crisis blew up. He said:

“Stop escalation. Exercise maximum restraint. Restart dialogue”

and avoid a new war.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—the JCPOA —the organisation that desperately tries to keep open a dialogue with Iran on nuclear weapons, has once again shown remarkable tenacity and determination to try to rescue something in that area, but we should not put too much on this issue. We have to ask ourselves now what mechanisms we have for restarting the dialogue; it has not restarted and shows no real sign of restarting. The UN Security Council will debate this issue.

The UN Secretary-General appointed an individual, a British person, to be his representative over Yemen, and he has done as much as any human being can do. What he lacks is the clout of the big players in the Middle East. Let us face it, those big players are now very clear. From the moment Putin responded to the plea from the President of Syria to rescue Damascus, which I believe was a very important and correct decision to take, Russia has restored its position. It was at one time very powerful in the Middle East, and it is a powerful player now. It is noticeable how frequently President Putin talks not just to Iran and Arab leaders but to Netanyahu; there is a constant dialogue.

The place where there is no dialogue, and I regret it deeply, is between President Trump and President Putin. We all know the reasons why it is difficult for that to happen during this presidency, but it has never been more urgent, and countries with many different positions on relations with Russia and relations with the United States should all try to encourage a dialogue between Putin and Trump—in particular, a dialogue between trusted representatives of the two of them. That is not easy to find, to be blunt, but we have had experience in the past of trying to develop new

mechanisms. The contact group in southern Africa in 1978 proved to be remarkably successful over a long period of time on a resolution that was negotiated then. Namibia came to independence 12 years later. The contact group in the Balkans in 1994 also had some success, and it may be time for another contact group.

It is interesting now how China has a real stake in what happens to the tankers coming in and out of the Gulf. As they go through the Strait of Hormuz, more and more of them now turn left, figuratively speaking. The United States does not itself have much interest in oil coming out of the Gulf. The Iranians, the Russians and the Chinese formed a maritime group almost as a demonstration to those of us who also tried to form maritime groups to protect shipping. But I believe that the biggest danger, as was mentioned earlier, is a proxy starting this war. It could happen at any stage. It has become very clear that many Iranian troops go from Iraq into Syria and then into Lebanon. That pathway has been clearly marked for at least three years, and we have done practically nothing about it. We have to focus on that.

I believe that the Secretary-General and the UN Security Council have a very real responsibility, and it may be that the only thing they can do is to use the five permanent members and appoint people with weight and experience to tour around the Middle East and start a dialogue.