

Beirut Institute e-Policy Summit Circle 30

Raghida Dergham with distinguished guests HE Youssef Al Otaiba, Danielle Pletka, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, and Vitaly Naumkin.

Wednesday March 10th, 2021

Raghida Dergham: Well, good morning Washington DC, where I have two distinguished guests Ambassador Youssef Al Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to Washington, and I have Danielle Pletka, from the American Enterprise Institute. Welcome to Beirut Institute Summit e-Policy Circle number thirty. And then good afternoon to London, where I have Sir Mark Lyall Grant joining us. Good afternoon, Sir Mark, and London is a very dear city to me because my daughter lives in your city. And hello Vitaly Naumkin, you know, again, good afternoon to you from Moscow where it's twenty degrees below zero, I'm told. Welcome to Beirut Institute Summit, e-Policy Circle. This is the Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. We have had so one hundred and five policymakers from thirty-two countries join us. And we are hopeful that we will actually, hopefully, hold the summit in Abu Dhabi, hopefully in October, God willing and Corona[virus] permitting. The way we do this is that we have four minutes to each of my distinguished guests set to give us what they have to say about any subject they want to discuss. And it's been agreed amongst all that we will start with Sir Mark Lyall Grant with four minutes to you. And there you go. Please start.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Well, thank you very much Raghida for inviting me to this e-Policy forum. It's a real pleasure to be joined by such great experts on this panel. I wanted really just to make a few general marks addressing the question of the summit to be held later this year about who authors the future. Because seen from London, it seems clear to me that it's unlikely to be an Arab leader who authors the future of the region, and that the future will be decided more by outsiders. And I say that because of course there is instability and conflict throughout the Middle East region. It's good that the Gulf Cooperation Council has patched up their differences, but the Abraham Accords, I think have opened up or highlighted other divisions such as Sunni-Shia, and as strengthened Israel's role in the region. And secondly, their traditional Arab powers are either absent, like sort of Egypt, Syria, and Libya are not players at the moment, or have actually overreached in various ways, like Saudi Arabia, or the UAE, or Qatar. And the Arab League, which has historically been glued together by opposition to Israel appears to have lost its purpose and is absent from the international stage at the moment. And whilst that's happening, others are filling the vacuum. Because Israel, of course, has increased its role in the region, Turkey with its revised optimum ambitions, Iran with its nuclear ambitions and proxy control extending in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon and Yemen. And then why do I feel you've got Russia back as the 'big dog' in the region. And even China, a relatively new player, is beginning to spread its wings. And while those players are exerting their influence, the traditional Western players are either sort of hunkering down at the moment-and I'm speaking of my own region, Europe, which is absorbed not just by COVID, but also Brexit, the imminent departure of Angela Merkel-is going to alter the balance of thinking in Europe about the Middle East and open up new divisions, or the traditional players like the United States are rethinking their approach to the region. President Biden has made clear his intent by not calling Benjamin Netanyahu for about a month after the inauguration, and King Salman even later than that. He clearly is suspending arms sales to Saudi Arabia, he's wanting to resuscitate the Iran nuclear deal. And those sort of internal power-play dynamics are happening at a time when the whole Middle East-North Africa region is becoming strategically less important, I would say. Of course, it's got less than 5% of the world's population, less than 1% of global GDP. Nothing has changed there. But there is a renewed focus on Asia, and the world is moving away

from a dependence on fossil fuels. It was President Trump who said last year, “we don't need Middle Eastern oil anymore.” And in fact, the United States now imports more oil from Mexico than it does from Saudi Arabia. But can you think of a single President of the United States in the last 100 years who could say something like that. They don't want to exaggerate the dynamic because Europe and Russia are our neighbors of the Middle East and will always have interests in the region. The Gulf, for instance, will feature quite prominently in the United Kingdom's integrated defense review, which is due to be launched later this month. But I think that is less certain for the United States. So, the big question for me, I think, is can Arab leadership rise to the challenge, and bring about sufficient stability in the region that it has the opportunity to assert some authorship of its own regional future? Or is that future going to continue to be decided by others?

Raghida Dergham: Well, thank you very much. That's quite a statement and the provocative one that is a healthy provocation from my point of view. And we will discuss what you put to assess Sir Mark Lyall Grant and then I'm gonna go now to Vitaly Naumkin to see if Russia feels it has a great opportunity for the time being or not. But for now, I'll give you your four minutes to tell us whatever you have in mind first, and then we'll discuss that later. Please, Vitaly Naumkin.

Vitaly Naumkin: Thank you, Raghida. I'm not going to concentrate on Russia's desire to capitalize on some sort in Israel, of the, for instance, of the United States or the west in general. I don't think that the US is going to withdraw completely, or even, not completely. I think that there will be some sort of changes in the in the US policy. And what is still interesting that the US is now has a different view on the old allies like Israel and the Saudi Arabia. Mr. Netanyahu indirectly criticized the Biden administration for its intention to return to the nuclear deal with Iran and told his supporters recently that he was prepared to stand against the entire world to stop it. There are some problems, but I don't think it gives us some opportunity to replace the United States. And we don't have a desire to do that. Russia is not willing, and it's not capable to make it but, the Arab states, especially the Gulf states, are forced to, I think, to diversify their relations with the outer world. We'd think, now I'm not that pessimist like Mark, about the region. Of course, there are conflicts, there are instabilities, but I think that the region is moving, especially their part of it is moving towards a new renaissance. There were several, there were two waves of renaissance in the 19th century, in the 20th century. But now I think it's moving towards something important. Look at the United Arab Emirates, Ambassador Otaiba is with us, you know, now it's going to the planet of Mars, you know, it's amazing technological, you know, achievement, you know. It means that there is some very positive change, apart of the fact that, that its, there are still the cells of ISIS [unclear audio]. And, of course, there are bad things, but there are good things as well. And they think if we compare the opportunities of moving towards reconciliation and prosperity, and the towards chaos and destruction, I think the first option is much more important. Though, we can see that three non-Arab states, Israel, Iran and Turkey, are a bit, you know, stronger than the Arab region in general, though, especially given the three giants, or traditional giants, of the Arab world, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, culturally, it's still there. But I think the importance of these three countries given the problems they have are not as they used to be. So, in general, Russia is working with all sides in the Middle East, in the Middle East. And I think that the recent trip of Mr. Lavrov to the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar is a good sign of very positive development without challenging anyone accepting the, for instance, the US presence there if these governments want to, to consider the United States as security provider, not saying it's going, it's not going to replace it. But at the same time, we're moving towards very significant developments and cooperation with Arab states.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much Vitaly. Now, I'm going to go to Danielle Pletka, but then afterwards, I'm going to go to Youssef Al Otaiba, because he opted to have more of a question answer, rather than a four-minute prepared statement. We'll see how he feels at the end of the four minutes of Danielle Pletka. We have a lot of questions for you. I'm biased at our table. But we're gonna listen for four minutes now to Danielle Pletka. Please Danielle, you go ahead?

Danielle Pletka: Well, first of all, thank you Raghida. That's always such a pleasure to take part in the Beirut Institute's events, you do a wonderful job. And it's wonderful to see everybody I'm honored to be with you. So, part of what I offered to do you know, I'm a think tank girl. So, I always want to help make sure that things run smoothly. And part of what I offered to do is to try to set up some questions for Ambassador Al Otaiba because I think that's a great way for us to segue to the question-and-answer period with you. First, just a couple of general comments. And then I think some of the big questions that have been raised. First of all, Sir Mark, I have to say that I find the notion of putting Israel and Turkey and Iran in the same category of, of player in the Middle East is perhaps a little bit too rich, both because it overestimates Israel's influence, but also because it underestimates the malevolence of two of those players in the region. So, I do think that that's an important thing to keep in mind as we, as we look through. And another just comment, which I think again, goes to our, goes to our, our assessment of the stability in the future. And what you're really asking about Raghida, which is about the agency of the countries of the region, right, because part of what I think Vitaly talks about as a renaissance is that growing sense of agency. We see that with the United Arab Emirates, we see it with Saudi Arabia, we see it in some ways with Israel as a Middle Eastern country, as well. And we do see that in contrast to the decline of the traditional pillars of power of the region, Arab League, Egypt, for sure, Iraq, and others. And I think those are important things to keep in mind. But one of the things that I think is, is really important is to understand the other side of the coin here, when we talk about that agency, and we talk about the interests of the United States and of other powers in the world who are, let's say maneuvering, the Russians and the Chinese, obviously, in particular. The Russians more, the Chinese less. You know, the United States has basically every president has come into power with a version of 'it's the economy stupid'. No, it's the 21st century will be the Pacific century. You know, that's all very nice for sloganeering. But as every single president should have learned, the Middle East has a great drawing power, both negative and positive. And even if we cease to be dependent upon the Middle East as a petroleum source, we nevertheless will likely be drawn in because in part, because these are our allies. And this is not the birthplace of civilization, but the birthplace of a lot of really, really bad ideas. The bad ideas have proven their capacity to disrupt even the most serious of players. Now, on to this, this question I think we need to ask, which is, you know, okay, first of all, Lavrov is coming in and the Foreign Minister Lavrov comes in he visits, he visits who he has assigned as the power. And I think that it's correct to suggest that the Russians and the Chinese don't wish to usurp the American position. You know, why, why bite off a whole parcel of trouble. On the other hand, both the Russians and the Chinese have been strategic and opportunistic. Russia is clearly aiming for some basic rights in the region. Russia is clearly playing a part in the Syrian civil war. I don't even want to think about how to defend Russia's role there. When I think of the friends, the friends, the allies, the good people, the innocent men, women and children who have died. Russia certainly has played a role there. But then so, there's no wish to take that on. On the other hand, I do think there's a desire to exploit some of the weaknesses. I get I'm gonna take ten more seconds and lay out a couple of questions for you, Youssef. Because I think the question on everybody's mind, Ambassador, is, you know, how, how much are how much are our Gulf friends going to stand up as the United States tries to stand down? Is it going to be a situation where your own decisions get made, not just about what your interests are, but about vis-a-vis Iran? What happens if the United

States tries to come back into the JCPOA and doesn't involve our friends, as they've suggested that they will? What happens if Yemen doesn't actually end up fading into that good night, despite the fact that we are no longer supporting the Saudis? These are the big questions that I think hover over the region. And I think there's a real question for those of you who have taken the lead, to understand where you're going forward. Thank you Raghida.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you very much, Danielle. These are the questions that we will be discussing and debating throughout the hour. Youssef Al Otaiba, do you want to say something now and answer either to the questions, or as an opening statement? Because there are a lot of questions that will be put to you.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: I will try to address some of the things I've already heard starting with Mark and then finishing off with Danielle. First, let me start by saying thank you for having me. It's lovely to be with you.

Raghida Dergham: Thank you.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: And it's an honor to sit on such a distinguished panel. And it's obvious why I'm going last because they always put the smarter ones up front. I want to address Mark's point first. I think the notion that one Arab leader stands up and has the entire Arab world follow him, ala Gamal Abdul Nasir, you know, in the 50s, that's unlikely. I don't see it. I don't think it's in the cards. And most importantly, I don't think there's any Arab leader who really wants to take that mantle of responsibility for the entire region. I think there was an effort to do that in the past. I think if you ask anyone who has realized or has analyzed this, they will tell you that Gamal Abdel Nasser, his experiment has failed miserably. And to those viewers who are not familiar with me, personally, I'm half Egyptian, and I grew up for the first eighteen years of my life in Egypt. And I remember my uncle telling me once, well, recently, maybe as late as ten years ago, he said, "Youssef every nationality in the world has ruled Egypt at one point or another. Everyone. The first Egyptian to rule Egypt was Gamal Abdel Nasser, and we are still paying the price for that experiment until today. And so, a lot of Egyptians do not have a good recollection of that pan-Arabism experiment. And whether that was the trigger or not, I think the Middle East today, as we see it, is led by leaders who are trying to look after their own people and their own countries and their own societies. I think where Raghida is sitting, today in Beirut, Prime Minister Rafic Hariri is trying to figure out how to deal with the economy, how to deal with corruption, and how to deal with COVID. I suspect the Prime Minister of Iraq is trying to do the same thing, as are the folks in Morocco, Tunisia, or Egypt. I think leaders are trying to figure out how to deal with their people and their demands and what they're asking for. So, I don't see, or I don't envision, a world where an Arab leader tries to lead the Arab world in a certain direction. I think different Arab countries want different things, and they're all content with that. So that's why I think you'll see less of a role for the Arab League or the GCC and that kind of vision. But then this segues, you know, neatly into Danielle's question, which is, are you staying, are we staying, committed to this US alliance that has kind of endured for the last thirty years? And the short answer is, yes, we're, I think we're 100% committed to this alliance. But at the same time, we're having this very schizophrenic debate. I think you cannot read an American or Western article on region and foreign policy, where somewhere in the second or third paragraph, you do not see the line, 'well, America does not have the same level of interest in the region that used to', 'well, America is less energy dependent on the region than it used to', 'well, we're focused on China and climate and sort of other things'. You're basically telling the entire world for years now that the region is less important to you. Fine, that's a healthy debate. It's a healthy but

polarizing debate. You can't also expect everyone to wait for you as you are telling them they are less important to you. You can't expect other players to not come into the game if you are saying, 'we're getting out. We're tired of these wars. We're tired of this. We're tired of that'. So, you need to reconcile, we need to reconcile, what America's role in the world is generally, what America's role in the region is specifically, and what these partnerships look like. Yes, absolutely. We are getting more independent. We are not only diversifying our relationships on the Earth, but we're also going to Mars, as Vitaly mentioned. We're diversifying in the galaxy as well. I think we, as we get older and stronger and we mature, we are going to be independent. That's something I think the world should expect and welcome. It doesn't mean we're giving up on our alliances. It's not a zero sum. It's not either or. We still do an incredible amount of business, trade, economy, investments, with the United States. Our security and defense relationship with the US is unparalleled with any other country. That doesn't change overnight. But if we're going to have a healthy conversation, we need to address it from both sides, you can't tell us the region is less important than it used to, but then say, you can't really do things on your own. Doesn't work.

Raghida Dergham: So, Youssef Al Otaiba, it seems that as the Biden administration seems to be resetting its relationship with the Arab Gulf states in particular, and with Iran, it seems that, there is an impression that, particularly in light of Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit, celebrated visit, to the UAE, people are speaking of the potential of a pivot east, by the UAE in particular, maybe by others in the Gulf states. Is this in the cards?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: I wouldn't call it a pivot. Starting 2021, our focus is on diplomacy and, secondly, very, very much focused on rebuilding and re-strengthening our economy. I think we were on our way in that direction, anyway. COVID has made it more clear that we really need to kind of double down on rebuilding our economy. It's impossible to rebuild an economy without seeing China as a big opportunity. China is our largest trading partner, and it's our largest foreign direct investor in the UAE. For us, China is an economic opportunity and a means of achieving our economic goals. It's not a pivot, there's still a significant amount of business that we do with the United States that we can't do anywhere else. I send most of our students to the United States, we send most of our patients to United States. We have so many other things historically with the United States that cannot be replicated anywhere else. That doesn't mean I have to choose between one or the other.

Raghida Dergham: Let me take this one step further about the Lavrov visit and what came out during that visit. I'll stay with you and then I'll take this question to Vitaly afterwards. We heard the foreign minister of the UAE, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, speak of the necessity. It's a statement that you're going to have to deal with and it seems to be a statement that is echoing an interest of Russia in Syria, is that we, you know, there is a need for Syria to come back to the Arab League. But one of these ways to do that is to have a conversation or a push back with the United States on the Caesar Act. Now this is the Caesar Act is congressional, not only a statement by the administration be it Trump's or Biden's. This is your task now, Ambassador Otaiba. Is this what you're going to be doing right now, going to sort of sell the Russian line on Syria in the United States? How difficult is this task of yours?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: So, I don't think that's the Russian line. That's the line that we came up with about two years ago when we've been trying to re-engage Syria, because we see the world as it is, not as the world as we want it to be. Ten years on, Bashar hasn't gone anywhere. In fact, he's gotten stronger. We've I think we've made a mistake by completely cutting off Syria by not engaging them,

by not talking to them, by kicking them out of the world Arab League. And it hasn't weakened Bashar, it hasn't pushed him into a corner, it hasn't certainly encouraged him to make any concessions on the Geneva process. So, I think we are recognizing that that decision didn't produce any results. So, we're trying to re-engage Syria. How we reengage, how we do not cross wires on the Caesar Act is something we are talking to the Americans about now. But I think everyone will realize that our strategy ten years ago of isolating Syria has not produced the entire intended outcome.

Raghida Dergham: Danielle, quickly on Caesar Act, is this an issue that is easily dealt with, or is there going to be a pushback by Congress, and maybe even by the Biden administration, given the fact that Caesar Act is about atrocities, alleged atrocities, at least by the Syrian regime. So, can you give us your take on that in a quick way before I go to my other two guests on the same issue?

Danielle Pletka: Sure. So, I do think that the President has some discretion when it comes to the imposition of sanctions under the Caesar Act. I also think that Congress is more righteous in its expressions than it is in its commitments. Unfortunately, that's how we've seen a decade and a half a million people die without the United States doing anything terribly, terribly serious to support the people of Syria. The only thing that I will say is, is that I think that the Biden administration will be worried about what they see as an Arab Israeli play in Syria, to split Russia and Iran, this old game that that keeps on being played. And I know Youssef might disagree with me. But I think the Biden administration will be nervous about that, because we are already seeing that shift in the administration toward people who see the entire region through the prism of Tehran, and the JCPOA. They told me a better game than the Obama people, but they are the Obama people.

Raghida Dergham: We will talk about the JCPOA and Iran. But Mark Lyall Grant, do you feel it's a good thing about the question of revisiting the Caesar Act? Are you, does the UK hold a similar position? Or you think it's the wrong thing to do?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I can fully understand why the Arab states want to reengage with Syria. The reality is that Syria has gone in a very bad direction. But we are realists in Europe and recognize that Bashar Al Assad is there and he's going to stay. I think there are two very important dates in this whole Syrian crisis. The first I was involved in New York in 2011, which was the first Russian veto of a resolution which would have put a degree of pressure on Assad to stop using violence against what were largely peaceful protesters at the time. And at that moment, there were less than 10,000 people killed. And as Danielle has just said, there's more than 600,000 people killed now. So, it's been a great tragedy. And Russia has to pay a very large part of the blame for that. But the second important date was 2015. In policy terms, that was when Russia decided to become militarily involved. And once that happened, the Obama administration decided that they were not going to play hardball anymore. And that changed the dynamics on the ground. And so, we are where we are six years, five and a half years, later. So, I can fully understand why other Arab leaders are now looking to sort of try and bring Syria back, as it were, into the fold. And I don't think you'll find that Europe will fundamentally object to that.

Raghida Dergham: Vitaly Naumkin, now, can we understand while we're here, let us hear it from you that Moscow is trying to play a mediation role, if you will, between Israel and Iran, and Israel and Syria. Is this going anywhere? Given the closeness of the relationship nowadays, between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu, how are you handling this? Is this getting

somewhere? Or is this stuck in the secrecy of matters? You have to unmute please. Vitaly, start over. Yeah.

Vitaly Naumkin: I think that Russia is willing to mediate in, towards all, you know, in all conflicts in the area. And I don't think it's possible to do anything to mediate between Iran and Israel. But Russia is, of course, mitigating the tensions between the conflicting actors in Syria and around Syria. But I don't think that it's the problem. The problem is, as it was said, you know, who has to be blamed for that? I think that the Caesar Act is directed against, not against Assad or against the ruling elite, who is not suffering from any sanctions approach, but against the people who are living in the territories which are under the control of Damascus, which is not fair. On the other hand, on the one hand, on the other hand, who has to, so who has to be blamed for that, that the people are dying of hunger, or the lack of medication, and so on. That's why the positions of Russia and the United Arab Emirates are not identical towards what's going on in Syria, but the coming close are becoming more realistic. So, I think that the Emirates now, and more Arab players, are becoming more like political realists than something else. That's the problem, not that they are in favor of one person or if the Russian line. So, that's why Russia is willing to, in principle, to play some positive role. And trying to help reconciliation. Russia is supporting now, if we take into account is supporting the Geneva process. I'm involved in that, as you know, I'm from 2016 working there as a political advisor to first De Mistura than to Mr. Pedersen, that's the Russian line, and the same about the Astana process. So, it's not in favor of diplomatic efforts, but against any sanctions.

Raghida Dergham: Right. Let me ask you something Vitaly Naumkin. How does Russia reconcile its policies of excusing, and probably blessing, Iran's regional behavior in many Arab countries, with its, you know, with new relations, or at least from Lavrov's trip to the region, with its interest in alleviating and, and enhancing its relations with the Gulf states via the UAE or Saudi Arabia? You don't want the Americans to discuss, in the context of JCPOA, Iran's behavior, in regional behavior. You walked in later. How do you reconcile that? Are you not hearing some criticism, or at least some positions by these states to say, 'listen, this is about us. This is about, not only about the nuclear weapons, it's about what the agenda of Iran is all about. And you're embracing it, if not enabling it, Vitaly Naumkin'?

Vitaly Naumkin: I don't think we're blessing whoever in the region or embracing anyone. We have a lot of friends. And so people who we're listening to, and we're listening to all players, including Iran. Iran has its interests in the in the region, Iran has its problems. And we're not blessing Iran, were listening to Iran. Iran is a very important neighbor, to the allies of Russia in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and for in many cases, Iran played a positive role. Of course, we know about the problem of Iran, between Iran and the Arab, you know, partners of Russia-regional behavior, ballistic missiles, and everything. But I think that the coming back to, or to return to the nuclear deal is very good, will be a very good step to start with a new approach towards Iran and trying to rebuild trust. Russia, the final point is that Russia's proposal about building a new security architecture or security, you know, even conference in the Middle East, in the Persian Gulf, is a good step.

Raghida Dergham: Youssef Al Otaiba, you have a different point of view, I would assume. You do have criticism of the Iranian regional behavior in Iraq, in Yemen, in Syria, and in Lebanon. Can you tell me how this is coming into the conversation with someone of the level of either Mr. Lavrov, or on a continuous basis? And do you have-And also with the Biden administration? Have you had conversations about that Youssef Al Otaiba?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: So reminder, I'm the ambassador to the US. So, most of my conversations happen here on the US side-

Raghida Dergham: I just said US at the end.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: -not on the end conversation with Vitaly. No, that's exactly the conversation that's taking place with the administration now. I think there's we've been faced with like two false choices. One is, well, we have to choose the nuclear file and ignore, or address later, the regional file. And I think that's a false choice. I don't think we have to choose between one or the other. I think many of us are paying the price of the regional activities today, and what we see in Yemen and Iraq and Lebanon and Syria. So, these are things we have to tackle with the nuclear file, not one or the other. The other false choice, I think we've been fed was that America needs to either prioritize its relationships and partnerships with the Europeans at the expense of the Arabs, or the Arabs at the expense of the Europeans. And I think that's also a false choice. I think there's no reason America should not have healthy, strong relationships with both partners on both sides. So, I think these are the conversations that we are having with the Biden administration in terms of the Iran file. We need to address all of it together simultaneously, while you have leverage, while you have maximum pressure. This is the way to address all of these if you really do want to enhance stability in the region.

Raghida Dergham: How dangerous is it that the Biden admission- I'm going to you Mark Lyall Grant because I want to hear about the European positions. But how useful or dangerous is it for the Biden administration to give up the leverage, whether it is the level of the maximum pressure or the sanctions as needed in order to deliver the message on the regional behavior.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Is that for Mark or for me?

Raghida Dergham: That's for you, because I'm going to go to Mark for something else.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: So, maximum pressure is still in place, there has been no sanctions relief whatsoever. They have welcomed the talks as far as I understand, but they said that they're not going to release sanctions in order to get to the talks. So right now, we're still in a holding pattern and maximum pressure is still in place. Now we'll see what happens a month or two from now. But as of today, maximum pressure is still in place.

Raghida Dergham: The European Mar Lyall Grant are being counted on by the Iranians that you are going to deliver as the United States, basically. That is the position of the Iranians that somehow you're going to deliver them to do exactly what the Iranians want, which is to do a two-step approach, first of all, the JCPOA and then, later on down the road, to the issue of the missiles, as well as the regional behavior. Some in the Arab region think that you, the Europeans, are playing a very harmful role. Please push back with me if you think otherwise.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I do think otherwise, Raghida. I mean, I think it was a very big strategic mistake by President Trump to pull out of the deal. And we're seeing now that not only has it not, it's allowed Iran to break out of the deal and to get closer to acquiring a nuclear weapon, but it's done absolutely nothing to stop its malign influence in the region, or indeed the ballistic missile

program as well. So, we've just gone several years backwards. Now, I was involved in the Iran negotiations for the United Kingdom at an earlier stage. And what is interesting is there's quite a lot of common, commonality between the European view in the Russian view on Iran, and actually the outlier was China. Because, interestingly, Russia, I mean, Vitaly will tell me if I'm wrong, but for Russia, there is no advantage and a lot of disadvantage in Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. For China, they don't mind it at all, it is not a threat to them. And so, when we were discussing sanctions and putting pressure, we always found in the discussions of the E3+3, that the Russia was much more aligned to the Europeans than the Chinese were on that on that file. And I think in a strategic sense, that is still the case. However, we are where we are. And I think it's now quite difficult for President Biden's administration just to sort of go back and say, 'okay, we'll go back to the 2015 deal'. Apart from anything else, we're six years down the track, and therefore, sort of only nine years from the end of the deal. So, I think a two-stage process is required. A degree of minimal agreement on getting back to a sort of low baseline of compliance with the deal. And all the relations that Iran have done are reversible, in exchange for some of the sanctions being lifted. And in parallel with that, you start looking at what is the successor agreement to this deal when it runs out? And separately, and probably a bilateral, is a US Iran discussion about Iran in the region.

Raghida Dergham: I want to go to Danielle Pletka, but I need to take this further with you, Mark Lyall Grant. It is because the Europeans in particular, and Russia, and of course, the Obama administration, because you agreed-and you and I, when you were at the United Nations, we talked a lot about that-that you agreed to that two-stage process. And you thought that by bowing to the Iranian demand that you do not touch the regional behavior, that you thought it will change that regional behavior later. In fact, what we ended up with is genocide in Syria, and then you lifted the sanctions and there was no more in the Security Council, that is the sanctions the Security Council, and there was no more leverage. In fact, this is history repeating itself. And quite honestly, Mark Lyall Grant it is this region that's paying the price. It is this people of the Arab region that have paid the price and you seem to be willing to do it again.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: No, I think Raghida that your premises is wrong. I mean, I would question whether Iran is responsible for the genocide, or the mass killings, in Syria anyway. I mean, obviously, they played a role, but they're not the prime evil doer in that respect. But the point was, that the nuclear deal did not enable Iran's malign influence. It took one of the major issues, strategic issues, at stake off the table, whilst allowing the West to tap that malign role separately.

Raghida Dergham: Danielle Pletka. I'm sure you have your point of view on that. Come in.

Danielle Pletka: Yes, it's not it's not actually possible for one to reach across and shakes somebody in a very friendly and non-inappropriate way, to say that you don't see that Iran is principally responsible for the massacre of more than half a million people. Well, I suppose if you want to, you want to add in the Russians, if you want to add in Hezbollah, but that's, of course, Iran, if you want to add in the Assad regime, but that's, of course, Iran as well. You can add in ISIS, for sure. And there were significant deaths. But in terms of the wholesale massacre of the Syrian people, I don't think that there's any human rights organization, the left, the right, pro, against, that does not believe that Iran is the spirit and the actor behind much of what has happened in Syria since March of 2011. But that so that's my, that's my spiritual shaking of Sir Mark, if I may. What question would you like me to answer Raghida?

Raghida Dergham: Yeah, but you know what? Why don't we just quickly, because I sit in Lebanon, on your influence in Lebanon, maybe Mark Lyall Grant would like to look at that part, since the country's falling apart. And we have paramilitary forces, not to call them anything else, running the country and taking it for a nosedive. So, maybe the two of you can discuss that part of it. Danielle?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Raghida, well, let me address this. Please don't misunderstand me. I am second to none in being critical of Iran's regional malign role, and I've seen it very directly at the UN and when I was National Security Advisor, I've seen it on the ground in Yemen. I've seen it in Lebanon, I've seen it in Syria. I've been doing it. I've seen it in Iraq, it's still there. So, let's not, I don't, I'm not making any excuses whatsoever for the Iran regime, and it needs to be pushed back on extremely forcibly. All I'm saying is that the Trump administration failed to do that in any meaningful sense. Yes, they assassinated General Soleimani, but that was about it. That stopped some of the attacks for about three weeks. But that is not a strategic answer to what Iran is doing in the region. The problem with scrapping the nuclear deal is you've just left that additional problem in the pot.

Raghida Dergham: Vitaly Naumkin, quickly to you because I want to speak about the Abraham Accords with Ambassador Al Otaiba. Do you feel that Syria, it's become the jewel in the crown of the policies of Russia in the region? Did you win there? Or are you in a potential quagmire?

Raghida Dergham: Unmute, please unmute Vitaly.

Vitaly Naumkin: Yeah, I muted it. Of course, it's not a quagmire. But I cannot say it's a big jewel. It's not the gift. It's a job we're performing. Probably it's not being done perfectly, but it's done professionally, and well. So, I mean, our main goal was to defeat ISIS and terrorism. And we've made it and the level of violence is much less, much lower in Syria and around. It seems to me as an observer, and as an analyst, that sometimes what's happening in the Middle East is like a suicide, not a massacre, but a suicide. The people don't, it seems that they don't care about the future. But I think we're helping them to understand that it's necessary to change this.

Raghida Dergham: Danielle wants to say something.

Danielle Pletka: Thank you. I do. You know, Vitaly, if I may, there's a very good report that's just out today by the Institute for the Study of War, that we work with a great deal, about ISIS's extraordinarily stable and growing operating base in Syria, about a big push that ISIS is going to be making during Ramadan, about the fact that they are managing to oust Syrian government forces from a wide variety of areas. I am willing-

Vitaly Naumkin: Even in Afghanistan

Danielle Pletka: -even in Afghanistan. But I'm willing to accept that the United States is partially to blame because of Donald Trump's extraordinarily capricious decision to pull out and stopping helping our Kurdish allies. But I don't think that in Moscow, people should fool themselves into thinking that ISIS is vanquished. Au contraire, if I may use that French.

Raghida Dergham: Alright, let me go to Youssef Al Otaiba. And I want to try to have some time to speak about Yemen and about, and again, it's said Youssef Al Otaiba that the UAE is stepping back

from wars, rolling back military footprints in many places, including Yemen. Actually, let me do Yemen before I go to the Abraham Accords. How, how good it looks the potential of solving this problem now with the US coming in. And I want one quick word from everybody on that, I'll start with Youssef Al Otaiba. But then I want to get back to you for the Abraham Accords. Youssef Al Otaiba.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: If the question is, how good it looks for the war in Yemen to end? It doesn't look good at all, Unfortunately.

Raghida Dergham:Go ahead, elaborate.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: And I think we've come to that conclusion about two years ago, which is why we pulled out. That was a major factor in why we were pulling out. I think, July marks two years since we've been out of Yemen. We've been supportive of the diplomatic process, which, since the Stockholm Agreement over two years ago, nothing has happened. We haven't made any political progress. And that's not because of the coalition. That's not because of the military component. And that's not because of the humanitarian suffering. That is because the Yemeni parties cannot come to an agreement. The same way the Syrian parties cannot come to the agreement. So, I think the prospects are not positive, honestly.

Raghida Dergham:The same with Libya, Youssef Al Otaiba?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: No, Libya actually looks a little more promising. You know, the government just got, the Government of Unity just got a confidence vote yesterday. I think everyone's being supportive of the political process. You know, the Libyan process looks to me to be a little more optimistic than the Yemeni process today.

Raghida Dergham:And Lebanon? Is it from your point of view? Again, I didn't get your point of view on Lebanon. I know you're, you know, you're half Egyptian, but I'm Lebanese. So, I need you to address that.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: On Lebanon. I think it's totally in the Lebanese people's hands.

Raghida Dergham:Really?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Totally in the Lebanese people's hands. Unfortunately, the challenges you have internally, by forming a government, by addressing the systematic corruption, and COVID, and all the problems that we see and read about, that you are living. That doesn't, that's not external.

Raghida Dergham:Youssef Al Otaiba, you really don't think there's an external hand in Lebanon via Iran and its influence on Hezbollah? Even Hezbollah says that they, you know, they take they take their vows from Iran, they make their vows to Tehran.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: I absolutely agree that there has been an external hand in Lebanon for many years. But I also believe that Lebanese, the Lebanese system, has not been able to challenge it or address it. So, it's going on with Lebanese consent.

Raghida Dergham:All right, to the Abraham Accords. You personally, you have your personal, you've been a central figure in making sure that the Abraham Accords have taken shape. Now, you know that this has not been celebrated throughout the Arab region. I know, I know that your argument is that it has put a stick in the wheel of the annexation process by Israel of the Palestinian lands. But you know, some of the many do not trust Israeli promises. This thing, at least curiosity as to what drove you personally, to still believe in having to push for the Abraham Accords, despite the criticism, by the Palestinians, by some Gulf states, even, who have been quiet, but they feel that there has been a bit too much of, again, embrace of Israel through the Abraham Accords. I want to give you the chance to give me your personal input, and your ambition and your fears, if the Israelis don't deliver.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: So I think the Abraham accords reflect a changing dynamic and a changing region. And I think some people recognize it and see it and look at the way forward. And I think some people don't. I, you know, you can't please everyone. And that wasn't the goal. The goal was to stop annexation, because annexation, was going to have I think, a detrimental effect in the region. I had a conversation with our friends in the White House at the time and I said, 'listen, annexation is going to have a fundamentally different reaction in the region than moving your embassy or the Golan Heights'. Those two first decisions, embassy and the Golan Heights, those are American decisions. And, you know, we can argue where the American Embassy should be, but at the end of the day, it's an American decision. We can argue over who really controls the Golan Heights, but it doesn't change the facts on the ground. Annexation was going to have a very negative series of consequences in the region, most notably on our friends in Jordan, and it was going to force the United States to defend an incredibly unpopular decision. So, our main interest was preventing annexation and the consequences of it. So, we found a better deal. We found a deal that was win-win. In the UAE, there's tremendous support, and I'll go back to the first thing you asked me about where I made my comments to Mark. Inside the UAE, there's tremendous public support for this decision, especially among young people. There was a company, a Western company, that did a poll inside the UAE among young Emirates, young Emirates between eighteen and twenty-four. The level of support for Abraham Accords was 89%. Are the Palestinians going to be happy with that? No. But they are the same people who refused Corona assistance twice when we sent it to them. So, again, back to my original comments, this was a good decision for the UAE. It has tremendous public support inside the UAE. And it did stop annexation, despite whether some people want to believe that or not

Raghida Dergham:Stop? You believe it stopped or it prevented it temporarily?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Yes, for three years.

Raghida Dergham:For three years. Is it worth it for three years?

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: I think anything can happen within three years and what has happened, there's President Biden in the White House. I think the regional dynamics are different. People inside Israel feel that normalization is more valuable than annexation. So yes, I think there has been a turn of events that now make annexation less likely.

Raghida Dergham:I have to give you the chance to answer some criticism, or no, a statement. I have to give you the chance to respond that some people feel that you went for it full-heartedly, because you thought Israel is a good partner in convincing the United States to go ahead with the

arms deal. And that was during the Trump administration now comes the Biden administration, and they freeze that. Tell me about that.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: So, first of all, we've been trying to acquire the arms that were approved, for the last six years. So, this was not the reason we did the Abraham Accords, but the Abraham Accords definitely facilitated and enabled this arms deal to happen. Second, the arms deal is not frozen. It is being reviewed, and all indications are quite positive. So, at the end of the day, the arms sale goes through, as we have been trying for for the last six years, as we have still suspended annexation for at least another two and a half years, and three other countries have normalized with Israel after us. I think that's actually a pretty good deal.

Raghida Dergham: Alright, I'm gonna have- Yeah, go ahead Sir Mark Lyall Grant. You could make that, you could have, you could respond to what Youssef said.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Yes, I just want to say-

Raghida Dergham: But I also want to give you the chance, after you respond, to give me your closing statement for about a minute, after you respond, if you don't mind. Go ahead.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It's just that, on the Abraham Accords, I agree with Youssef that it reflects a growing reality. I was very struck as National Security Adviser. I went to Riyadh for a day of talks, and the word Israel was not mentioned. You know, there was just a growing lack of interest among the Arab capitals about the fate of the Palestinians. I think that is very disappointing. But that is a reality in the Abraham Accords are built on that. I'm less convinced it was linked directly to stopping annexations, I think it was just a reflection of this growing reality of lack of interest or frustration with the Palestinian movement. I think that's unfortunate. More generally, though, I think I just wanted to say a word about the Europeans. Of course, we haven't talked a lot about European interests. I've said that they're hunkering down at the moment under the pressure of COVID, and Brexit, and Angela Merkel leaving, and all that. But the reality is that Europe is still a neighbor to the Middle East, and as a result, there will always have relations, even if for negative reasons, that a lot of us, as I think Danielle said at the beginning, a lot of bad things come out of the region, like terrorism, like illegal migration, like conflict. So, Europe is never going to be anything but both a neighbor and a supporter of the Middle East, and will do whatever it can, including financially, which of course, where countries like Russia can't do, they can't pay for the, for the rebuilding of Syria, the Europeans will, maybe not in Syria, but will absolutely put a lot of financial resources as well as political support behind the region in the future.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Can I just respond to something Mark said? Because I hear this frequently.

Raghida Dergham: Yes, please go ahead.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: When we began negotiations for Abraham Accords in early July, annexation was going to happen. Annexation was on the table. The debate inside the administration was how much of annexation was going to be approved. And the debate was, it is going to be somewhere between 10 and 15% from the requested 30%. Israel was pushing hard for all 30% and the White House was debating over ten to fifteen. So, it really was going to happen. I know some people are very skeptical that it was annexation that got us here. But it was annexation that got us here at this time. Had there been no annexation, it's possible that this could have happened two

years from now, three years from now, five years from now. But the fact that it happened in August was because if it didn't happen, we would all be talking about a one state solution on today's panel.

Raghida Dergham:I'm gonna have to give two minutes to Vitaly now and two minutes to Danielle Pletka, and let's see what happens next. Vitaly now can unmute, please, and give me your wisdom and your policies for the next two minutes, in light of your, you know, your interest right now in the Gulf region in particular. And if you don't mind and, because Lavrov met with the Saad Hariri, on Lebanon what is it that you want, what is, you know, what is it that you want for Lebanon now?

Vitaly Naumkin:So, in Lebanon, I think the policy, the line, the political line of our government is to push forward reconciliation in, in Lebanon, and to help them form the technocratic government. Russia is in favor of this plan. And what was achieved has to be fulfilled. So, Russia demonstrated, Lavrov demonstrated, that Saad Al Hariri is supported, is a supported candidate for Prime Minister and he is going to form the government. And certain disagreements between the main players, including the President of Lebanon himself, can be solved, you know. That's Russia's role is not here, just having some special [inaudible] putting the sides in trying to achieve. That's it.

Raghida Dergham:All right. But just quickly there. There's reports, continued reports about Russian and Syrian involvement in that nitrate fiasco that led to the explosion of the port, Lebanese, Beirut Port. Can you engage in trying to dig into the bottom of this in order to just have an investigation? Are you assisting in the investigation to get to the bottom of it? It's a tragedy, but Vitaly now can quick, quick response to this point, please.

Vitaly Naumkin:It's a real tragedy, but I don't have any exact information about any involvement of Russia in the investigation.

Raghida Dergham:Danielle Pletka, two minutes to you.

Danielle Pletka: Thank you Raghida. You know, look, we've all said, I think very neatly, what we've perceived to be going on in the region. I'm just gonna use the expression that I use every single time I talk about the Middle East. You know, Iran comes to work every day. Right? The Tehran regime has many, many faults, many, many weaknesses, but they are focused on their priorities. The problem for the United States, and I would say the problem for the United States, even in support or lack thereof, whatever course we have, going forward, the problem for us is we don't come to work every day. We are constantly surprised when the Iranians lie to us. We are constantly surprised that bad things happen in Lebanon. That the Russians who we thought we were dealing with in a helpful way, are really not actually doing things that are helpful. That Turkey, notwithstanding the change in approach, is playing a malign role. You know, none of these things should be a surprise to us. But the most important thing to remember is that everything in the region has to do with a will. If you have the will, you can change it. But if you don't have the will-and right now, I don't see us as having enough will to effect consistent changes that have staying power over the course of time- if you have that will, you are going to prevail.

Raghida Dergham:Thank you very much Danielle Pletka. I think I have thirty seconds for Youssef Al Otaiba. And I want to thank Abu Dhabi and I want to thank you, Youssef Al Otaiba, for making sure the birth of the Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi, you were very much responsible for that. I want to publicly thank you for your endorsement and your continued support.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: I'll leave a leave with these final comments. To anybody who has been focused or continues to focus on the Middle East, please look at the dynamics. Please look at what young people think and believe. Please look at the reforms that are taking place. The region is changing in front of our own eyes. It's happening and it's happening in real time. And a lot of times the old frameworks, the old systems, the old mechanisms that we have in place are no longer valid. Many of us are trying to apply analog technology to a digital Middle East. And I think it's important that you focus, you notice that the region is changing. The Abraham Accords is just one reflection, the Pope's visit is another reflection, the Mars and the space programs is another reflection. There there are some countries in the region that are really focused on the future and reforming itself to be competitive. But I think it's happening, and you can't apply old metrics to a new system.

Danielle Pletka: I think that we may have lost Raghida and we should say thank you to her.

Unknown: And we will pass her your thanks. Thank you very much, and have a good day.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Thank you very much, everybody.

Raghida Dergham: Bye, everybody.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Nice to see you all.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: Oh, she's back. She's back. Ah, welcome back Raghida.

Raghida Dergham: Forgive me for this. Forgive me. Forgive me. Can you hear me? Yes, yes. I'm so sorry about that. You know, it's beyond my control. Youssef Al Otaiba, please, you have even more time now that the electricity went off. We're back. Please go ahead.

HE Youssef Al Otaiba: No, I threw it out there already. I just talked about how much the region is changing how much the youth is actually participating. We're doing things like welcoming the Pope, building Abrahamic houses, going to space, normalizing with Israel. And all that happened just in the last two years. So, there's a lot of changing, changes going on, and I hope people are paying attention.

Raghida Dergham: People are paying attention. I want to thank you again properly this time. And forgive me for the interruption that was caused by the electricity, and so honored that you have joined me for the 30th e-Policy Circle of Beirut Institute Summit in Abu Dhabi. I hope to see you soon in person. You are good friends, you are influential policymakers, and keep on the debate. It's a very healthy one. Thank you for joining me, until we meet again. Goodbye now. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you very much. Thank you. Cheers.