

Chapter eight

The Crown Prince of Bahrain: reception and dinner



Saturday 9 December 2006, 8.30 pm

HOSTED BY

His Highness Sheikh Salman Bin
Hamad Al Khalifa,
Crown Prince of Bahrain

At King Hamad's Palace, Manama

Delegates were addressed at dinner by **His Highness Sheikh Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa**, Crown Prince of Bahrain, who welcomed them to Bahrain for ‘what has become the primary security forum for the Gulf’. He thanked the IISS for hosting the Regional Security Summit in Bahrain for the third time.

The Prince said: ‘Now, more than ever, dialogue is needed in our region. It is the cradle of civilisation. Yet every day millions live under the shadow of extremist violence, territorial disputes and the risk not only of an arms race – but a nuclear arms race.’ Dialogue was beneficial, he said, because ‘no-one gains from a toxic blend of rigid mindsets, warlike words and hasty actions. They create a cycle of hostility in which each side exaggerates the aggressive intentions of the other. And by preparing for the worst – they risk getting the worst.’

‘It doesn’t have to be like that’, Shaikh Salman said. ‘The several great divides between nations that threaten the peace of our region can be bridged’. Objective analysis and clear thinking were required. But news headlines tended to reflect the actions of an extreme few, and did not accurately reflect general opinion. A Gallup poll of Muslims around the world found that, just like non-Muslims, they wanted better relations. Most supported freedom of speech, religion and assembly, and women’s rights. ‘Thus we in Bahrain have just held elections on a full franchise, with a vastly higher turnout than you get in some of the more developed countries in the West’.

The resolution of differences had been made more complex by the explosive growth of new media, as a result of which inflammatory interpretations of violent events were flashed around the region within seconds of them happening. ‘This electronic revolution is one new variable which has empowered extremists’, the Crown Prince said. ‘Another has been interventions across national borders that, however well intentioned, can seem more like occupation than cooperation. Outside intervention has sometimes inadvertently provoked guerrilla groups to rise up – and sometimes deliberately encouraged them, as proxies for external powers.’

The Prince commented in turn on the subjects of the Manama Dialogue’s six plenary sessions. On the United

His Highness Sheikh Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Crown Prince of Bahrain



States, he noted the outcome of the recent American congressional elections but said: 'Like it or not, we can't overcome the threat from extremism without America's constructive engagement'. The threat must be assessed accurately. It was not a question of fighting a 'war on terror', because 'we are not fighting a conventional war against a conventional enemy'. The Prince said the US would not lose 'by seeking just a little more insight into other hearts and minds'. Leadership should take account of the views and interests of others. America's friends, such as Bahrain, 'look to it to renew its faith in the value of partnership, which has served it and its allies so well in the past'.

On regional perceptions of Gulf security, the issue of Palestine and Israel transcended regional politics. It provided 'the perfect excuse for those who wish to destabilise the region. Extremists everywhere use it as fuel to flame the passions and threaten the peace.'

On this issue, Sheikh Salman said, 'our region's Doomsday Clock is moving towards midnight. Midnight will strike when and if the Israeli settlements in Palestine become so numerous and so deep rooted as to destroy the possibility of an independent Palestinian nation-state.' The consequences of failing to reach a settlement would be felt far afield. A full international effort was needed rather just 'an occasional glance at a "road map"'.

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Palestinian leaders must bury their differences, forming a genuine government of national unity, renouncing violence and accepting a two-state solution. The rest of the Arab world should facilitate the peace process, for which the natural basis remained Saudi King Abdullah's Arab peace initiative of 2002. The US must be even-handed and must stop imposing sanctions against the Palestinian people just because they voted for Hamas. The Crown Prince asked: 'Do you believe in democracy – or only when your side wins? Do you win hearts and minds by stopping nurses and teachers and policemen from putting bread on their family's table?' Israel must reverse its policy of colonising Palestinian land. 'If the Israelis are to retain a portion of the West Bank, they must accept in return the ceding of a corresponding amount of land elsewhere. Palestine has a right to a contiguous and viable state in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza.'

Iraq, Sheikh Salman said, was 'a catastrophe growing worse before our eyes'. There was talk of a long civil war, and of partition along ethnic lines. 'We can safely say neither of these extreme outcomes was in the minds of those who launched the invasion, without a proper plan for the post-invasion.' Self-government was the only way forward, though it would be very painful at first. 'The longer this is delayed in Iraq, the more insurgency, the more civic collapse, the more violence there will be.' The Iraqi government needed



to reverse some of the excessive de-Ba'athification, because this had 'robbed Iraq of too many professionals it really can't manage without'. It needed to deal firmly with the militias. It needed to decide on the kind of federalism it wanted, and on who was to have control of the country's oil.

Iran's nuclear strategy threatened to worsen the strategic imbalance in the region that had been created by Iraq's eclipse. A continuous dialogue was necessary with Iran, and the focus should be widened to aim for a nuclear-free Middle East – Israel included. 'That way, Iran can achieve much of what it says it wants to achieve, without going nuclear', the Crown Prince said. The alternative was a Middle East arms race. Because of mistrust among regional states, a trusted third party was needed as mediator. The mediator, he said, could be the European Union Three – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – strengthened by support from the United States, Russia, India and China. 'They have demonstrated what they can do in negotiating with Iran in a principled and constructive way.'

The Crown Prince concluded by pointing out that Gulf states were carrying out reforms and improvements to build a better world for their young populations. 'We are doing this because it is the right thing to do – but also because the sharing of prosperity and progress is the best antidote to the appeal of the extremists.'

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