

16TH REGIONAL SECURITY SUMMIT
THE IISS MANAMA DIALOGUE

CONCLUDING PLENARY SESSION – Q&A
SUNDAY 6 DECEMBER 2020

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CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD, KING FAISAL CENTER FOR
RESEARCH AND ISLAMIC STUDIES; FORMER
AMBASSADOR OF SAUDI ARABIA TO THE US AND UK

LIEUTENANT GENERAL (RES.) GABI ASHKENAZI
FOREIGN MINISTER, ISRAEL

DR ABDULLATIF BIN RASHID AL ZAYANI
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, BAHRAIN

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Shukran jazeelan. Thank you very much, Minister. We have heard three things about the Abraham Accords. Firstly, that to be fully valid, the Abraham Accords would need to be extended locally. Secondly, that the Abraham Accords are open to others. Thirdly, that they are not aimed at any third party. And also that they have a multidisciplinary character to them, that they are not focused uniquely on a narrow definition of security cooperation.

This Concluding Plenary is about 'New Security Partnerships in the Middle East'. There will be a natural and proper discussion about the Abraham Accords, but it is also true that there are other new security partnerships in the Middle East, whether it is China's further engagement with Iran, or Turkey's activity in the eastern Mediterranean. And therefore, it is both intellectually and strategically permissible in this concluding session to raise those other features of the dynamic development of security partnerships in the Middle East.

With that, I have already gained six speakers from the floor. I will invite three or four of them to make their crisp interventions first, and then I will come back to our panellists. Firstly, could I invite, from Israel, Dore Gold?

Dore Gold, President, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Shifts in thinking about how we look at the Middle East, given the emotions that our nations have gone through, are very difficult. I am addressing my comments chiefly to His Royal Highness Prince Turki Al Faisal, because I believe he comes from a country that has the capability of leading the region in a very positive direction. But we have to decide, do we want to be caught up in the accusations of the past, many of which are false? Or do we want to present the young generation in the Middle East with a positive vision and really give leadership for a better future? I prefer the latter, and I know my national leader Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, prefers the latter.

I was going to ask a very simple question, but I will ask it anyway. Prince Turki Al Faisal, do you think we have something to learn from each other? Because we are at a strategic dialogue, not an ideological dialogue. Do you think we have something to learn from each other with respect to the challenge Israel has faced from the north, from Hizbullah since the early 1980s, and the challenge you face from the south from the Houthi militants? I would like to hear your view.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. And from the Kingdom of Bahrain, but also the IISS, Hasan Alhasan.

Hasan Alhasan, Research Fellow for Middle East Policy, IISS

Thank you, sir. My question is addressed to His Excellency the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain. Judging by the recent assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, it appears that Israel has once again adopted an increasingly aggressive approach in its desire to slow down the advancement of Iran's nuclear programme.

And as Iran continues to walk away from its Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commitments, the likelihood of Israeli escalation and Iranian counter-escalation increases. Yet the Gulf states, you personally, have said that you would wish to avoid direct conflict and direct confrontation with Iran. My question is, do you view Israel as an asset or a liability for Gulf regional security? Thank you.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you, and from the *Financial Times*, Andrew England.

Andrew England, Middle East and Africa News Editor, *Financial Times*

Thank you very much. I would like to address my question to His Royal Highness Prince Turki. It was a very interesting speech, and if we compare it to Prince Bandar bin Sultan's speech a few weeks ago, the tone was very different. Can I ask if your speech reflects the Saudi leadership's view? And if so, can you explain why the tone is so different? And does it in any way reflect tension in the Kingdom about which direction to go? There has been speculation that King Salman is very supportive of the cause of the Palestinians and reluctant to move towards warmer relations with Israel, and that perhaps Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman would be more willing to move. Thank you very much.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

And before I return to the panel, could I invite one of our young leaders, Noora Hamad Al Amer.

Noora Hamad Al Amer, Lead Climate Negotiator, Supreme Council for Environment, Bahrain

Thank you, John, and very lovely to be here with the panellists today, Sahib Al Sumui Al Malaki Emir Turki Al Faisal, Foreign Minister of Israel, and Dr Abdullatif Al Zayani.

I just want to talk about something we all have in common, which is the climate and climate change. And we had the International Committee for the Red Cross here yesterday, talking about conflict and climate. And just to highlight the report, where they said that 200 million people will need humanitarian aid by 2050, doubling the need now. So, the climate does not discriminate. And with the Covid pandemic today, it shows us exactly how seemingly distant threats can arrive right at your doorstep. So, perhaps at the root of national security, we may need to begin with reconnecting ourselves with our relationship with the natural world that we come from.

So, my question is the following. We are saying that we are searching for peace, when peace can be now. And I ask this from the bottom of my heart, how can we genuinely work with governments to include these impediments that we have as humanity into national strategic development of our whole world? And do we genuinely feel that humanity understands the direct link between our inner state and the state of our external worlds that we see ourselves in?

And I will just end my intervention with a quote from Hamlet, where he says, 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'. Thank you.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. I might return to the panel in this order in 30 seconds: firstly, from Foreign Minister Ashkenazi and then Minister Zayani, and then His Royal Highness. And if I might bring in Foreign Minister Ashkenazi to respond to anything that he has heard so far in this dialogue. But I might ask him also to address and give us his view on Turkey's activities in the eastern Mediterranean, since I think that would be helpful to us. And if you have any thoughts on how the new security partnerships in the region, to the last question, can help develop more cooperation on the larger challenge of climate change, I think that would also be important, given that we have so often referred to the multidisciplinary nature of these new arrangements that have been so recently arrived at.

Foreign Minister Ashkenazi.

Lieutenant General (Res.) Gabi Ashkenazi, Foreign Minister, Israel

Thank you very much. I want to say that we have a choice here in the region, following the dramatic developments that we are witnessing. And actually, if Israel always had two circles of conflict, the

Israeli–Arab one and the Israeli–Palestinian one, I think it will be fair to say that the Israeli–Arab conflict, having peace with Egypt, Jordan and now the UAE, the Bahrainis, the Sudanese, is simply fading away. And we have a choice here with the Palestinians, whether to solve it or not, or to go to this blame game.

We are serious, and I was serious when we said that Israeli moved from annexation to normalisation. We are serious when we say, not for the first time, that the door is open for the Palestinians to enter the room and to have direct negotiation without precondition.

We were born in the region. We know the problem. We know the challenges, and it is a question of leadership. Unfortunately, I do not understand their refusal. I do not understand how it serves their interests. And we suggest an opportunity. Yes, it is not easy, but it is doable. And I think we are willing to solve it, not for the first time. And I do not want to go to the past and to remind the audience and the participants how many times they were suggested on the table and they simply refused them.

I hope that this new climate, environment, spirit of cooperation, as my colleague Dr Abdullatif mentioned, would leverage and facilitate the opportunity for the Palestinians to rejoin the negotiation without precondition. I think that is the only way that we can solve this problem.

And as far as the region, Turkey, we are following very closely their activity in the region. We are concerned with their aggressiveness in the eastern Mediterranean. We are in close contact with our allies in the region and other neighbouring countries in the eastern Mediterranean like Greece, Cyprus, even Egypt and others. We hope that they will change the relationship between them, and will be able to find the solution for that. It is something that concerns all of us. I do not see a change with our relationship with the Turks, but we are watching very closely the developments as they evolve. And we have a dialogue both with the EU members and regional countries in the Middle East, and our close neighbours. We hope that Erdogan will conduct his foreign policies differently, to include, by the way, the fact that he is hosting, as we speak, the Hamas headquarters and giving state assistance to Hamas by providing them passports and other issues. That is something that we are not encouraging and, obviously, we are not satisfied with it.

As a whole, just to sum my answer, I think we have a choice here, whether to move forward or to continue the old rhetoric. I think there is a potential to make progress. I think these developments are facilitating a new era, including with the Palestinians. And I can tell you that from my end, the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Israeli government, we are highly committed to see that this journey will be successful. I think it is important to us, and it is important to the region.

And yes, we have challenges to solve. But to describe that that is the only problem in the region is something which I think is not facing the reality. We have big stress on the stability of the region represented by Iran and its malign activity in the region, its proxies, and that is something that will stand in the way to those who want stability and security in the region. That is our greater challenge, not just for the region, I think for the entire international community.

And I am very optimistic that the latest development with our friends will enhance the ability to engage with these forces. Once again, thank you for the dialogue, and I hope to join this panel once again.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Many thanks. If your time permits, there might be still be one or two questions to you, but for the moment, Minister Zayani.

Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bahrain

Thank you, John. You say whether it is an asset or liability. The main thing is, the asset, is the process itself: achieving the ultimate goal of peace, security and prosperity for the region. I think we all have agreed that this is the ultimate goal.

Now, the means to achieve it, whether to follow the same path that has been followed for the last 40, 50 years, or try to explore a new path to achieve the same objective, but hopefully with less collaterals. But the path of peace is not an easy ride. There will be a lot of obstacles along the way. There will be ups and downs. But the bedrock of that path, the path of peace, is the Israeli–Palestinian issue.

Minister Ashkenazi said it is not the only issue, the Palestinian one. Well, even if it is not, but to achieve peace, we need to resolve this issue of having a population with no land, with no country. And a proposal of, as envisaged in the Arab Peace Initiative, is what the Palestinians are going with, and what they are providing. We call on all parties, both parties, to go to the negotiating table, discuss it, negotiate it and resolve.

We think, and we believe, that the path of peace will capture and work with other issues in the region. I think Europe is an example where millions of deaths, catastrophes, and cities were destroyed, the catastrophe of both world wars was just huge. Do we have to continue that path in the Middle East and have millions being killed and dead? Or we give a chance to peace and try to resolve issues through dialogue and through cooperation, and yet achieve the same objective that we firmly believe is the objective of all Middle Eastern people – to have a safe peace, safe, secure, prosperous region that is sustained and can provide the aspiration for the young people.

Millions of young people in the Middle East have been denied education, they have been denied shelter, they do not have shelter, they do not have clean water. They need help, they need hope. And I think our job is really to provide hope for the millions of the young people in the Middle East that there could be a light at the end of the tunnel. So, yes, the principles of the Abraham Accords, I think, provide the asset that we, in the Middle East, are looking for.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. Your Royal Highness.

HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud, Chairman of the Board, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies; Former Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the US and UK

I think Mr Dore Gold should be the last one to talk about having previous beliefs and positions to take care of. I am reminded of his book, *Hatred's Kingdom*, about Saudi Arabia. I do not know if he still holds those views or not, but I remember watching him on television denigrating the Kingdom, and using the most vile descriptions about how the Kingdom is, how it tortures people, how it is a dark country, etc., etc., etc. But this is why there is good opportunity to know what each is coming from.

As far as the north and south, north of Israel and south of Saudi Arabia, and as Minister Al Zayani said, both those north of Israel and south of Saudi Arabia carry the banner of free Palestine. And so, if you resolve that issue, you will strip away from all of these inimical and heinous groups, whether official or non-official, that banner. And it will really go a long way to mitigating the incentive to join these terrorist groups by the young, as His Excellency mentioned, people without shelter, without food, without education, etc., etc.

On reflections on Prince Bandar's statements a few weeks ago, Prince Bandar has said himself that he was speaking for himself, as I mentioned in my opening remarks. So, there is nothing there as reflecting anything about government positions on any of these issues.

And in his presentation, he was talking about Saudi Arabia's relationship with Palestine, basically. He did not refer to the Abrahamic Accords whatsoever in his talk. He simply stated where the evolution of Saudi Arabia's commitment to the Palestinian issue and various stages of that evolution was met with various Palestinian reactions, many of them rejections, some of them cooperative and so on. So, that is no reflection whatsoever on a difference of opinion in the Saudi government.

The young lady's question, as I understood it, was about climate change. The Kingdom has espoused many measures to meet the challenge of climate change, and I would advise her to look at Vision 2030 and see where the Kingdom has expanded its programmes, not only to minimise the gas and emissions from carbohydrates and other fuel energy sources, but also to develop solar, wind and nuclear energy as a means of getting cleaner energy sources. And in the G20 summit, the Kingdom proposed, and the G20 members agreed to, what is called the circular carbon economy, whereby the energy source that has carbon in it is not simply pushed away, but rather to use that component of the energy source, carbon, in constructive ways; whether it is in petrochemicals, whether it is in developing injection mechanisms to get more energy sources, etc., etc. So, yes, the Kingdom is very much into improving the climate, and hopefully we can all work together on that.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Marvellous. Thank you very much. We are going to take three more interventions, and then I will come back and give the panellists a quick, final word each. But first, if I can invite Sheikha Rana bint Isa Al Khalifa.

Dr Sheikha Rana bint Isa Al Khalifa, Under Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahrain

Thank you, Dr Chipman. Is it impossible to see the emerging dynamics between the signatories of the Abraham Accords as divorced from future Middle East conflicts? Having said that, what are the panellists' thoughts on the signatories combating shared security threats moving forward?

Mohammed Alyahya, Editor in Chief, Alarabiya

My question is for the Israeli Foreign Minister. Yesterday, the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia mentioned that Saudi Arabia is ready to recognise Israel on the condition that the Palestinians achieve statehood. And today, Prince Turki Al Faisal mentioned that successive Israeli governments have rejected the Arab Peace Initiative. My question is, does this government reject the Arab Peace Initiative? And if it does not, does it view it as a blueprint for future negotiations or a resolution to the conflict?

Dr David Gordon, Senior Adviser, Geo-economics and Strategy, IISS–Americas

My question is to each of the panellists, and that is, do you believe that an active role by the new Biden administration in the United States could facilitate the renewal of serious negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians?

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. So, with that, I will please ask Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi to take a minute or two to answer those points. And then I will invite His Royal Highness to address those issues as well. And then I, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain, will bring this Manama Dialogue elegantly to a close. But Foreign Minister Ashkenazi first, please.

Lieutenant General (Res.) Gabi Ashkenazi, Foreign Minister, Israel

Thank you very much. As I said in my opening remarks, we are very serious when we are suggesting to resume negotiations. We do not need to understand the importance and the vital need to solve the

conflict with the Palestinians. But it is not just a choice for us. Learned lessons from the past, from other initiatives, suggestions, solutions, indicated that the only way to solve this conflict is to sit together and to have a direct talk, and to talk on the solution and the concessions that we have to make, both sides. That is the kind of leadership that we need right now, from both sides. And that is why we are repeatedly saying that we are willing to enter the room and have this discussion.

Unfortunately, this invitation was not answered, and we need an answer for that. If we are genuine and serious enough, why not to start to talk? It is a simple question. We are ten miles apart from each other, and it is very easy to resume the negotiation.

We need to find the way to solve the root cause of this conflict, and I think it is very clear where the gaps are, and probably what is the decisions that need to be taken. And I think that this new era in the Middle East should encourage all of us – not just us, but the Palestinians as well – to try a different way, to exploit the moment, to use the momentum that we have here, and to try to move forward. We definitely understand the need. We want a different future and direction for all the youngsters in the region, instead of dealing with the past, to engage the future.

And we are doing whatever it takes. As we speak, today we are allowing Palestinians, by hundreds of thousands, to come to work in Israel. We have all kinds of humanitarian work with them. They asked the Israeli government to be committed to the Paris Agreement and to sign it just recently in order to resume the security coordination, which we did, and we signed.

There are many examples. We helped them with the coronavirus. And there are other issues which we unfortunately are not addressing. The election in the Palestinian side, the relationship between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Hamas. So, it is not going to be forgotten. We do not want to put more difficulties than already exist; we simply say we have to sit down and negotiate.

I want to say a few words about the new administration. We believe that the Abraham Accords and the normalisation is a bipartisan issue. We believe that the new administration will be supportive. And based on what we have heard already from the president-elect, we believe that the new administration will be supportive and support the latest development. Thank you.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. Before I give the floor for the last word, as it were, to Minister of Foreign Affairs Al Zayani, could I just invite His Royal Highness if he has any further thoughts?

HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud, Chairman of the Board, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies; Former Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to the US and UK

Active role for the US – I have always said that we need what I described as the big bear behind our backs to push us towards agreement. Sometimes that has happened with the United States, other times it has been less than before. So, yes, I think there should be a Biden role for achieving peace in the Middle East.

I think, if I am not mistaken, he and some of his colleagues have already said that they would support – as the Obama administration had done before, when Mr Biden was vice president – a two-state solution for the Middle East, and this is what we all seek.

So, yes, we need that big bear to push us behind our backs so that we can turn to whatever constituencies we may have that have opposing views and tell them, look, this big bear is pushing us, we cannot not go forward on that issue.

When we talk about no conditions on talks, well, settlements in occupied territories are preconditions. So, if you are going to have no conditions, remove the settlements, and then enter into negotiations. That is the only fair play that you can achieve in having no conditions.

So, I would ask my Israeli interlocutors to consider that issue as being essential, not only to show that the grounds are equal on both sides but also that there is goodwill. After all, these settlements are not recognised by international law, regardless of what happened from other governments about them. So, yes, have no conditions but take away the settlements because they are preconditions.

I will just go back to Mr Dore Gold, and ask him if anything of what I have said in my presentation is untrue, to please enlighten me about it, and I will be more than happy to be advised and corrected in whatever I said.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much indeed. Before I give the floor to our friend and colleague Foreign Minister Al Zayani, let me just thank the Foreign Minister of Israel, His Royal Highness Prince Turki and, of course, our good friend the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain Abdullatif Al Zayani for helping us to conclude this 16th Manama Dialogue.

When the IISS established this Dialogue in 2004, we always had the ambition that it would be an inclusive dialogue. And it was always our approach to ensure that we would widen the number of like-minded states and bring the un-like-minded together to see if they might be able to find a way forward, together. And this was also the idea that our good friend the Foreign Minister of the Sultanate of Oman Sayyid Badr Al Busaidi made in his plenary address on Saturday. And this 16th IISS Manama Dialogue has been, I think, an inclusive dialogue and we, as the IISS, are delighted to have played our part in it.

I might just note a few statistics about this Manama Dialogue that might not be clear to everyone, but we had 80 delegates in person here in the Kingdom of Bahrain with some 42 or so additional senior officials. Twenty-two different nationalities were represented in person here at the Manama Dialogue. Seventeen full ministers were present at this Dialogue from numerous different regions around the world. In terms of coverage, more than 20 million people in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and Americas received forms of broadcast coverage. And in the social media of the day, some 170 million posts were made.

But most important for us here at the IISS and with our partners here in the Kingdom of Bahrain, we have revived, for the first time since March 2020, face-to-face diplomacy. We have had 22 countries here in informal exchange, and I know of at least 50 bilateral meetings that took place on the sidelines. And I am sure there are many that I do not know about, but this is an important purpose of this Dialogue: to facilitate private, bilateral and multilateral consultations. And I can say, I bore witness at the lunch that the Foreign Minister hosted yesterday for the ministerial delegation some 22 people who were gathered together, the joy on their faces at being able to again exchange views with each other in a three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional format.

So, I would like to thank the Kingdom of Bahrain, His Majesty the Crown Prince the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and, indeed, the people of Bahrain, who have made it possible for us to meet in the socially distanced manner, carefully but deliberately, to debate openly the big strategic questions of the day. So, I thank you, Minister Zayani.

Dr Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bahrain

Well, thank you, sir. And congratulations for the success of the conference, of the Dialogue. Allow me just to express my feelings. I am so proud of the Bahraini spirit. The spirit of being able to conduct

two events, major events, under such challenging environment, the Formula One and the Manama Dialogue. And they did it professionally, with a warm reception for our guests, and that makes me so proud. So, thank you, Your Majesty King Hamad and Your Royal Highness the Crown Prince, for the confidence that you have in us and for the hospitality extended to all of us, and the continued support to Manama Dialogue by them.

Allow me to also thank my staff from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They worked really hard to make sure that we can provide all the requirements that IISS provided to us.

I want to thank each and every one of you for participating and contributing to our discussions. This has been my first Manama Dialogue as Foreign Minister, and it has been a genuine, really, pleasure to learn from and share insights with such an outstanding and knowledgeable group of colleagues.

I look to building on these exchanges in the coming months and years as together we face whatever challenges may confront the Middle East and the world. Because as the unique and momentous events of 2020 have shown beyond doubt, it has never been more important that we keep talking and we keep listening and we keep understanding the perspectives and interest of others. Only by doing so can we arrive at genuine, sustainable solutions to the many issues facing our region.

I believe that these Manama Dialogue meetings make an important contribution to that process and help to build an effective approach to addressing such issues.

My hope is that you leave this 2020 session with a deeper understanding of the issues and viewpoints involved, both within the region and outside. I know I do. So, thank you very much, sir. And thank you, Your Highness. I thank IISS for all their efforts.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Thank you very much. And with that, and with my thanks to General Sir Tom Beckett, the IISS team here in the Middle East, in London and internationally, I close this 16th Manama Dialogue and invite you all in December 2021 to the 17th Manama Dialogue.