

UPF Geneva, Switzerland: Diplomats Provide Euro-View of Middle East

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Geneva, Switzerland -- The webinar "A European Angle on Peace in the Middle East," organized by the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF, featured the perspectives of two diplomats.

This was an hour well spent. Those who tuned into the Middle East Peace Initiative webinar on February 16, 2023, were introduced to the Middle East with all its paradoxes: from the stark realities of war and governmental repression to rays of light as former enemies start talking, make treaties and even start working together.



Following a short introductory video, moderator **Chantal Chételat Komagata**, the coordinator of UPF for Europe, asked all present to join her in one minute of silence for those in Turkey and Syria who had lost their lives to the devastating earthquake of February 6. Mrs. Komagata briefly mentioned UPF's efforts to provide assistance to the survivors in both countries.

Robert Vandemeulebroucke served as Belgium's ambassador to Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.

He began his European perspective on the Middle East pointing to the disparate responses of the

European Union nations to the successive waves of refugees reaching Europe's Mediterranean ports. All were shamed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's acceptance of 1.5 million Syrians; and financial arrangements with Turkey to keep many more from traveling. Now, with the war in Ukraine, Europe is accepting still more refugees.



Moving to a panorama of the issues troubling the Middle East, the ambassador spoke of:

- Iran and its increasing tensions with the West following the murder of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who was accused of not wearing the *hajib*, and ensuing protests, arrests and executions, while the hardline government finds its support from Russia and China;
- Yemen and its stalled war, as countries on both sides try to get out of it, while the United Nations makes little progress with negotiation efforts;
- and Saudi Arabia, with its abundant energy and grandiose schemes designed to strengthen its political and economic position.

The more liberal and peaceful Gulf Cooperation Council countries prefer to sit on the fence, happy to court both sides in the current Russia-Ukraine war. On the Israel-Palestine conflict, he described Europe as ineffective and often divided, missing opportunities to influence policies on both sides. The picture he painted juxtaposed conflict-ridden and oil-rich countries, a region torn by rivalries between Russia, China and the United States, and one democracy, Israel, as evidenced by the ongoing peaceful demonstrations.

So what is the way forward? One good sign, the ambassador said, is the growing active participation of citizens, albeit mostly "under the radar." Referring to education activist Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan; assassinated journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi Arabia; the ongoing demonstrations in Iran; and Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian vegetable seller whose self-immolation set off the Arab Spring, he commented: "Autocratic leaders still need to learn not to suppress violence by force."

In contrast, he pointed to Argentine Jewish conductor Daniel Barenboim, with his traveling orchestra of young musicians from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel, as using music, a language everyone understands, as a powerful tool for peace. More such visionary characters are needed to turn the tide, the ambassador said; indeed, there are many across the region working for such a change.

Dr. Haim Koren has served as Israel's ambassador to Egypt and to South Sudan. In addition to his work with the foreign ministry, he has studied the region extensively: his doctoral thesis focused on Islam in Sudan.

As he sees it, there are many ways to look at the region, including borders and identities, history, and geography. After noting the emerging dynamic of globalization and technology in recent decades, he recognized the importance of Europe's role in encouraging and pushing forward peace processes. Considering the direct connection between Europe's immigration problems and the instability of several Middle Eastern countries, Europe's assistance for such people has been most valuable, he said. However, while acknowledging the sad phenomena highlighted by the Belgian ambassador, particularly the actions of non-democratic countries, he focused his comments on the many grounds for optimism that he sees. In fact, in light of these challenges and the impact of wider global developments, it is precisely through

cooperation that such obstacles can be overcome.

Not surprisingly for a former ambassador, Dr. Koren chose as his main theme signs of increased cooperation between Israel and its neighbors. Following the wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973, Israel has had a peace treaty with Egypt for 40 years. As a former ambassador to Egypt, he has seen many projects, perhaps the most notable being the area of gas exploration. Recent developments have seen cooperation on gas in the Eastern Mediterranean between Egypt, Cyprus and Israel, with the potential to bring the gas to Europe. This is an example of real economic and strategic cooperation that helps us all, Ambassador Koren said, and the potential is there to deliver gas to Jordan too, and to Lebanon.



Against a backdrop of decades of Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Abraham Accords we now see cooperation with former enemies, such as Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco; but here is an area where international support -- from Europe and the United States -- will be important, he said.

Other areas of cooperation highlighted by the ambassador were aid -- Israel sent one of the largest response teams to the areas affected by the recent Turkey-Syria earthquake -- and medical care: "We provide medical care here for people from Iran, Pakistan and several African countries; we have just finished building a hospital in Chad; and just completed an emergency room in the hospital in Juba, started when I was ambassador to South Sudan."

He also mentioned help with agriculture and irrigation. In his view there is great potential for cooperation with more countries, which can only be a win-win for all those involved.



In the discussion that followed, both ambassadors were asked what role Europe can play in advancing peace in the Middle East.

Ambassador Koren emphasized that, despite the temptation to focus on grievances, it is good to look for common ground, and Europe's actions facilitate that.

Ambassador Vandemeulebroucke acknowledged that Israel stood out as a democracy in an unstable area, but confessed that for Europe, the first priority now must be to end the war in Ukraine.

Asked whether European insistence on its own values risks provoking enmity with the Middle East,

Ambassador Koren said that each has to look carefully at the other. What Arab leaders are facing is different from Europe's situation, he said. The political culture is different.

Of course, we all agree that killing a young lady for not wearing a headscarf is unconscionable, Ambassador Koren said, but if Egypt's leadership, for example, appears to be clashing with Western values such as human rights and democracy, Europe should see the reality it is facing. "Don't change your values, but humbly recognize that others may have different values," he said.



On Lebanon, which he had earlier described as "dire" and "on the brink," Ambassador Vandemeulebroucke pointed out that France is trying to help, and other countries may follow; and on Syria, who knows what changes will emerge following the catastrophic earthquake? He noted that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is looking for a way to resume talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, although probably not before elections are over in his own country.

As a final question, Mrs. Komagata asked each of the speakers to give an example of a breakthrough during his career as a diplomat.

Ambassador Koren spoke immediately of South Sudan: It was a great step to establish relations with the youngest country in the world and to witness progress despite the many challenges, he said. So much so that its neighbor Sudan asked this new nation's president to mediate between different factions in Sudan. "There's always hope for change," the ambassador said, concluding, "Always be optimistic!"

Ambassador Vandemeulebroucke said that, if he were 40 years younger, he would choose the foreign service again: "It's an exciting career!"



He told of being asked by the Emir of Qatar to open a Belgian Embassy there, and of finally managing to do it. But it was with his final account that he moved us all: He had been asked to find a 3-year-old girl who had been abducted by her father to Bahrain. After two and a half years of discussions with ministers of the Bahrain government, and after meeting their request to set up a cultural agreement with Brussels, he finally was able to see mother and daughter reunited. "That's the greatest achievement in all my career: It was people to people. After three years of investigation, I brought her back to her mother."

It was a privilege and a pleasure for UPF to host this discussion and hear from these two men of great experience.

The full text of Ambassador Vandemeulebroucke's speech [can be read here](#).



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Intervention by H.E. Robert Vandemeulebroucke in the webinar on 16/2/2023

Written by: H.E. Robert Vandemeulebroucke, Former Ambassador of Belgium to Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar

16 February 2023



A European Angle to Peace in the Middle East

The last effort undertaken by the EU was four years after the Arab Spring in 2011 in Syria, when millions of refugees fled to Turkey and Lebanon after a civil war broke out. For a long time, the EU discussed the possible repatriation of refugees between EU countries based on arbitrary figures, but failed to raise a consensus due to the NYMB (Not In My Backyard) syndrome. The initiative was foundering when, unexpectedly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, in 2015, said "Wir schaffen dass" and accepted 1.5 million Syrian refugees from Turkey in Germany, shaming her EU colleagues. The EU asked Turkey, the primary receptor of the refugees, to continue to care for them against payment of €6 billion so far. The agreement still holds.

At the same time, many thousands of refugees continued to cross the Mediterranean, mainly through ports in Greece and Italy. They remained under the radar and spread all over Europe. Forty-five thousand ended up in Britain, which, in vain, resisted accepting them.

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in March 2022, many European countries have spontaneously hosted more than 4 million refugees within their borders. Comparable cultural identities and religions have favoured this influx.

The combination of an energy crisis, the war in Ukraine, food shortages, rising inflation and a possible recession that could affect Europe and the world economy, including the ME, makes the situation everywhere extremely dire.

Nobody can predict what will happen in the following weeks and months.

To illustrate this point, a brief X-ray follows of the politics of the leading ME actors.

Iran: Iran's increasing tensions with the West over the murder of the young woman, Masha Amini, not wearing the headscarf correctly set Iran ablaze for months, with hundreds of dead, thousands of arrests, non-ending street protests, and four executions by hanging. The protests are fizzling out, but the underlying anger remains and multiplies. Unfortunately, nobody is able to intervene in such an explosive mix.

The Revolutionary Guard is all-powerful, and hard-line government officials are not in favour of relaxing the dress code for women. The Federation of Russia and China support Iran openly and unreservedly by offering increased economic cooperation. The former buys Iranian missiles used in the war in Ukraine and delivers fighter planes and other military hardware to Teheran; the latter buys Iranian oil. President Xi-Jinping, during his recent visit signed three dozen bilateral agreements, and has become a force to be reckoned with. Talks with the West on Iran working on a nuclear weapon are in the doldrums.

Yemen: after President Hadi's ouster by Houthis in 2015 and his escape to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia began a punishing war aiming to push the Houthis back and re-install the president. It floundered. The Saudi-led coalition has failed to defeat the Houthis militarily or to restore the government the group toppled. Seven years on, the Saudi army has lost the battle and wishes to get out of the war but does not know how to end the conflict without losing face, prestige, and ego. Its ally, the United Arab Emirates, throw in the towel last year and has retreated from Yemen. The Houthis, supported by Iran, also have no idea how to end the conflict. The war has damaged the Yemeni economy with negative consequences for Saudi Arabia, which depends on it. The UN, for years, has tried to play the role of the honest broker by sending several envoys in succession to Sanaa. They made little headway. The port city of Hudaidah, assuring the distribution of supplies to the beleaguered starving Houthi population, is controlled by the Houthis, but nobody knows for how long. The war is stalled, and there is no opening, however small, for reducing tensions, let alone war.

Saudi Arabia: conscious of being the global undisputed energy supremo in these troubled times due to the war in Ukraine, plays it hard with the West and its traditional ally, the US. It also seeks to bolster its political and economic hand to impose its leadership in the Arabic world spectacularly by launching grandiose schemes like building the highest skyscraper in the world, the building of a futuristic new city in the desert called NEOM, and promising an even more dazzling sports event in 2028 after the successful 2022 Qatar World Cup. There is little effort to promote assistance between Arab countries in the ME; what ultimately counts is the recognition by fellow Muslim rulers that MBS remains the undisputed leader.

The other GCC countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates) are the most liberal, open, and peaceful in this troubled area. However, because of today's pressing political problems, all are sitting on the fence, undecided between President Zelensky and President Putin. However, they do not need to; their abundant energy resources make them everybody's darlings. Indeed, they are sitting on the jackpot.

Forget the spat which opposed Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the **United Arab Emirates** against Qatar in 2017. The latter supported the Muslim Brotherhood in their fight against Islamic State in Iraq and financed the government of democratically elected President Morsi in Egypt after Mubarak's downfall in 2011. Morsi was arrested by his successor Abdel Fattah el-Sissi who organized the military putsch overthrowing him and Morsi died in jail. The spat was resolved in 2022 with no party losing face.

Lebanon: after years of political, economic, and financial mismanagement, the country is close to the brink. No honourable exit exists; the Christian, Druze, and Sunni politicians and militias cannot see eye to eye and block any initiative to take the country out of the swamp for which they are responsible. This once-alluring country is now among the poorest in the ME, and the Lebanese state has ceased to function. There are no jobs, and poverty, even among the middle class, is rampant. International donors or organizations (France, the IMF) are reticent and want ironclad guarantees before offering further financial assistance.

Adjacent Syria: After twelve years of continued war, Bashar al-Assad is still president and has not given up his fantasy of uniting the country presently split into four parts: NE Syria is partly under the control of Turkey, Eastern Syria or about half of the country is under Kurdish and US control, the governorate of Idlib in NW Syria is in the hands of rebels and houses a sizeable civilian refugee-population, and Assad is governing the rest. His record is abysmal; he killed more than 400,000 Syrians, forcing millions to flee their homes, mainly to Lebanon and Turkey. Arab countries initially severed diplomatic ties after war broke out but are slowly returning to Damascus. Iran and the Russian Federation are the political sponsors of his bankrupt and corrupt regime.

Iraq: despite its oil wealth, Iraq is not out of the woods. After a twenty-year-long war begun by the US on flimsy grounds, assisted by some, but not all, of its NATO allies, it is an unstable society and unable to form lasting governments uniting its Shia and Sunni populations and numerous tribes. Iraq's geography, with Iran on its eastern border does not help. Teheran is assisting Iraq with supplies and food. Being good neighbours sharing the same religion may be one aspect of Iran's assistance, but the primary objective is a political agenda to spread its influence in its neighbour's realm.

Israel: Europeans have never been in the driver's seat regarding Israeli-Palestinian peace-making. Still, they did exert influence in the past, for example, by shaping the language on conflict resolution in the Oslo peace process. Yet, the EU and its member states have played a minor role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, as the biggest donor to the Palestinian Authority, the EU could increase the conditionality of its assistance to the Palestinians in parallel with requests made to Israel, but that has not so far happened. Finally, Europe should invest in understanding the multiple narratives between the Israelis and Palestinians to target their policies, measures, and declarations better.

European politicians and the EU are no longer focused on the ongoing Middle East conflict. Instead, Israeli politics has been infected by the nationalist-populist narratives of the many European parties with their hate of "the other," "the foreigner," and "the outsider."

Since the war in Ukraine, Europeans have turned their attention to energy security, alliance-building against Russia, and military and arms cooperation with Israel. And the intra-European divisions between Israel and Palestine have remained strong.

Thus, even in the face of escalating violence in the West Bank, an Israeli government set on Jewish supremacy and permanent control over the West Bank, compared to a Palestinian Authority that lacks legitimacy and is fast losing control, Europeans have stuck to an increasingly meaningless two-state mantra rather than sending clear signals regarding the Israeli government's program, engaging in crisis management, or pushing for overdue Palestinian Authority reform.

The December 2022 United Nations General Assembly vote on a resolution calling for the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to provide an opinion on the legality of Israeli occupation policies was telling in that regard, with the European vote split among approvals, rejections, and abstentions.

Conclusion

Except for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the ME countries under review are nervous, in conflict, increasingly inward-looking, and solely promoting narrow interests. Yemen is among the worst of the lot.

The oil-producing countries (SA, Iraq, Iran, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait) are all witnessing a bonanza, due to the increased demand for their rich resources, because of the war in Ukraine. Who can blame them?

The policies of the US, Russia, and China, have gradually replaced the European hegemony established after the Ottoman Empire's dismemberment in WWI, and especially after WWII. The rivalry between those actors is reflected in the lack of cooperation with their neighbours among all of the ME countries: only their battle for survival and struggle to remain at the top seem relevant to them.

Israel is in a different position: it is the only fully-fledged democracy in the region, where citizens can peacefully demonstrate and hold the government to account. As a result, civil society is flourishing; for the very first time in a decade, successive weekly street demonstrations have been held to ask for more democracy and no occupation, the former in defence of upholding the powers of the Supreme Court and refraining from politicizing the judiciary, the latter in a clear indication that protesters think the actual harsh anti-Palestinian policies are not leading anywhere, except engendering more violence and tensions.

Street demonstrations are extremely rare in Israel, and their regular continuation could negatively affect the longevity of the far-right Netanyahu government.

The way forward on how today's messy politics in the ME may evolve into something better later. The improvement may lie in the growing active participation of citizens,

the people power that exists in all of the countries reviewed but – with the unique exception of democratic Israel – they are mainly working under the radar because of the violent retributions by their governments, as seen in Iran. The story behind the headscarf and the murder of Masha Amini, indicates that the population only needs a tiny spark to let the bomb of years-long cropped anger and exclusion explode.

Besides Iran, think of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi Arabian journalist murdered in a Turkish consulate in 2018 for criticizing the Riyadh MBS regime, implicating MBS directly; think of Malema Yousafzai, a tireless defender promoting the education for young girls and women in her country, and indeed in all Muslim countries that are banning girls and women from public life like Afghanistan. She was left for dead when, at only twelve years old in 2012, she was shot in the head by the Taliban.

Think of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia in 2010. He was a young vegetable and fruit seller, continuously harassed by police over a license he could not pay for, who unwittingly started the 2011 Arab Spring by immolating himself. Unfortunately, ten years on, autocratic rulers still need to learn a simple lesson: not to suppress public anger by force when the kettle is boiling over. That only produces more bloodshed, tensions and hate.

Think of Argentine Jewish conductor Daniel Barenboim, now 80 and in poor health, who, until recently, travelled the world with his orchestra composed of young musicians from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Music is a language everybody understands anywhere, and it is a powerful tool to promote peace.

These references enhance the message all countries, including Israel, need to promote to reverse the endless spiral of violence, counter-violence, and futile power games.

Indeed, the ME needs many more shining examples like Khashoggi, Malema, Barenboim, and well-known characters like ex-Chancellor Merkel, Mandela, and Gandhi, to turn the tide.

As we speak, thousands of ordinary citizens in all ME countries wait to do just that. They work tirelessly to make life better for themselves, their families, their communities, and fight against abuse wherever they can. They are still living in anonymity, and many will remain working forever under the radar, fearing retribution but not deviating from their mission. But some will emerge into the limelight doing something extraordinarily brave they would not think themselves capable of. The time will come for the ME and the world to welcome their contributions by combatting ignorance, greed, tyranny, abuse of power, persecution, arbitrary arrests, and efforts to escape justice.

Brussels, 16 February 2023