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# Defining a paradigm for cooperation between the peoples of both regions

Address by Wadah Khanfar

# MIDDLE EAST M●NITOR

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Wadah Khanfar



As Director General of Al Jazeera Media Network, Wadah transformed the organisation from a single channel into a global media network. During his tenure, he had front row seat for all of the Region's historic events including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and culminating in the Arab Awakening.

He was ranked first in Foreign Policy magazine's top 100 global thinkers, and was one of Fast Company's most creative people in business in 2011. Currently Wadah is CEO, Integral Media Strategies.

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# Address: Defining a paradigm for cooperation between the peoples of both regions

In fact I'm a Palestinian myself. I was born in 1968, one year after the occupation of 1967. My early impressions and my early feelings about the issue of Palestine emerged in a tiny small village of not more than 400 inhabitants in the West Bank. My early memories go back to a moment when the village was mourning the death of Gamal Abdel Nasser, in 1971 I would say, I was three years old at that time. But it was really 1973 that I realised what a war means. Back when the October 1973 war started and as a child I was really terrified by the [*inaudible*] that started in that small village. I remember in October 1973 that my father and my uncles were actually collecting olives from the olive trees and then when the war was declared they had to delay that and to hide inside their homes and block the windows at night so the aeroplanes didn't recognise lights and didn't hit the village by mistake. These small memories introduced me to a very sentimental, very local very intimate feeling about something which I had to come and recognise its international and regional and global dimension later on.

I'm saying so because there is very deep sentimental feeling about the cause of Palestine. Not only in the hearts of Palestinians themselves but of course definitely in the hearts of Arabs, Muslims and those who have been monitoring and following the issue of the cause across the world.

It was only in South Africa in 1994 that I came to see another dimension of what I could not see inside my village in Palestine. When I was covering the story of Mr Mandela taking over the new, democratic state of South Africa. The end of apartheid. The feeling of a country that has reached, after long struggle that started from 1912, reached a final destination, something that the country was

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proud of and something that I felt enthused at that time could happen to us as Palestinians.

However, the first book that I read in English was a book written by Nelson Mandela called *Long Walk to Freedom*. I was fascinated by his autobiography and I started translating that book into Arabic and I published a review of this book in some newspapers in the Arab world.

What captivated me about Nelson Mandela and the South African struggle is the following:

*First, they had a very clear vision from the beginning on what they would like to achieve. The national charter of 1954 in South Africa that was agreed upon by the ANC, African National Congress, and their allies introduced a very clear vision of what the struggle of liberating South Africa from apartheid, what the final game should look like, what the final scene should look like. A country where people, all people - blacks, whites, Indians and coloureds - are equal. A democratic system. A country where opportunities are equal, where the barriers amongst races are destroyed and the barriers was not only physical but emotional, psychological and philosophical. To an extent that the university that I was furthering my studies in, [inaudible] the university of South Africa was the hub of that philosophical thinking run by white professors who have been [inaudible] the paradigm of apartheid. So apartheid was not only procedures. It was also a philosophical paradigm that was nurtured by the regime and supported by intelligentsia in South Africa.*

So the first unique aspect was the clarity of vision. Where are we heading in that particular conflict? The South Africans found a solution and a vision in 1954.

Then, the second most important element, a leadership that has consistency, clarity and faith to the cause that led this struggle to achieve that vision until the end. It was not easy. Those who think that Nelson Mandela's struggle for a democratic South Africa had enjoyed

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a consensus among his colleagues all the time are mistaken. South Africa has gone through a tough time including the camp of pro-democracy, anti-apartheid camp, in South Africa. Nelson Mandela was accused on many occasions, especially by the end of his struggle, that he has been compromising too much with the whites, and of course the white regime at that time used rumours and leaks in order to demolish the image of Nelson Mandela as a national leader. The issue is Mandela never compromised in his major themes and the vision that he and his colleagues developed in 1954.

And they continued to use this momentum, the momentum of justice and the narrative they introduced to the public against another narrative which does not have in essence anything that would sustain it morally, politically, or even pragmatically.

The moment where that struggle became international and the international support to freedom in South Africa started to emerge across the world was definitely a moment of a crack in the international system itself. It was when the cold war started to be shaped and the world order that was built upon it started to reconsider a lot of utilities in its fight against each other. And definitely this world order was utilising the South African apartheid regime against each other. So that was an important also the third observation that I also had in mind.

The Palestinian issue is a result of a great failure of two world orders. The Cold War order and the second one which is the post-Cold War. South Africa managed to skip after the crack of the first order. Unfortunately the Palestinian issue continued through the second one. Why? In my opinion the world order as we know today has been western centric in its support of course but also at the same time has managed the concept for utilities. The concept of a human centre in it has declined for the sake of powers. Therefore people, their tragedies, their crises, their problems are nothing but a good tool to utilise in the *[inaudible]* endeavour for hegemony. Therefore who would be interested in resolving a fantastic crisis and a fantastic conflict like the Palestinian one, or like many conflicts which internationally could be used in order

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to cement certain kinds of powers for this camp or that camp? Besides the fact that the two world orders had the colonial DNA within them and had the imperial ambitions within them. So this or that again we have suffered and the whole issue of Palestine has continued to create what it has reached at this moment in time a region which is going through its most dangerous moment in history.

Some short sighted approaches to the conflict would assume that in this moment in time as we speak that what's happening in the region in fact civil wars, sectarian confrontations amongst Arabs, between Shia and Sunna, between Arabs and Kurds and also major confrontations in countries where the Arab Spring has failed and dictatorships emerged. It is not evident, definitely all of the above mentioned is true this is why the moment is dangerous, but all of us should notice, especially the Israelis, that the region that was built on a certain narrative and a certain balance of power during the last two world orders has reached a moment of explosion. A very dangerous one. That the Palestinian issue might become an issue where all the above mentioned conflicts could be centred around. So to feel safe at this moment in time and to assume that what's happening in the Arab world is not actually an issue related to the Palestinian, is not actually something that I will subscribe to. In fact I would say that right now we have reached a moment in the conflict whereby if we are not aware of what is going to happen or what is happening right now we may go through the darkest moment of confrontation given the following important factors.

We have decided that the concept of utility by the world order used in the case of Palestine. We have also a concept of process versus the final end. Instead of reaching for peace they are involved in the process. Instead of finding a final solution for example in Gaza also invent a process and get people into the process. Now at the beginning it might be lucrative and interesting to find yourself involved in a process, either these negotiations like 1993 or in the current discussions about Gaza. But the point is the following: To what extent do people who are suffering and those who are paying the price of this kind process, to what extent are

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they going to be captivated by the concept of press conferences, handshakes and smiles, and meetings and leaks and camera images.

Delivery, which is not happening in all kinds of processes that we have noticed: the peace process, the two-state solution, also agreements and eventually even the agreements of Cairo between the Israelis and Hamas and all of these negotiations have not delivered, they were processes. But they have not wielded any kind of result. To what extent will people continue to accept the narrative of process versus a final end or a final solution? That is something that we need to be careful of.

I would like to say that the world order, the post-Cold War order, is collapsing. In my opinion we are right now going through a moment similar to the moment of the collapse of the first Cold War order. Why? Things are changing. Economic crisis in Europe, the rise of China, South China Sea, Putin's ambitions in Ukraine, and the rise of new powers in Latin America, in Africa and Indonesia is creating new dynamics. This third face of world order is approaching us. Either it becomes just an organic evolution of the first two world orders or it becomes a departure from that into a much more society centred, human interest centred paradigm. It is up to us especially the new nations, the new world that is emerging politically and economically. And this is why I'm really interested in Latin America and I thought a forum like this, bringing people from Latin America and people from Europe and the region is important because definitely there is something happening in the world, we need to capture that movement, build on it and have new imagination in the struggle to achieve it. A struggle that now is proving global and universal.

I am not any more that boy who was born in 1968. I'm not the five-year-old boy who has witnessed the war. I am someone who understands at this moment in time that there is nothing called a local Palestinian struggle. And there is not something called a Palestinian issue per se. There is something called an international issue that manifests itself in various conflicts one of the most poignant of all is the Palestinian issue. This is why I think that this



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kind of collective imagination, collective global understanding and evaluation might yield not only peace in Palestine but could yield to peace everywhere else. The imbalance of it will create not only misery, or continuity of misery, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but it will also create continuity of imbalance across the world. And this is why we should, those likeminded people, who believe in these kind of ideas far from the rhetoric and also far from the short-sighted exploitation, should really gather together and discard theoretically, philosophically, and also practically the *[inaudible]* for something different that might regenerate new dynamics and spirit for the world order rather than the spirit that has exploited us internationally and created from us fragmented nations fighting across the world in order to achieve very short-sighted ends.

I would like to conclude by saying I have left South Africa a long time ago. I still go back to South Africa for holidays. And in the time I go to South Africa I still remember that great man called Nelson Mandela who was able, not only to capture the essence of his struggle as a struggle for moderation not the Africans only but also the whites, and this is very famous for him to say that I am fighting for the rights of the blacks and the rights of the whites because if you are oppressed you should not forget that the oppressor himself is in a way a victim of that kind of process – you will liberate him and you will liberate yourself to achieve a final peace. South Africa today is much more stable more than other countries although a lot of people predicted otherwise there are difficulties in transformation, definitely South Africa is still going through these, but I promise you that for me at least, it is one of the most beautiful, touristic, cultural, emotional and sentimental destinations that I love to spend my time in.

### **Contribution during the Q&A:**

Definitely charismatic leadership is extremely important. I said it is a primary of vision, charismatic leadership and balance of power. These three elements in the case of the Palestinian issue in particular important. Our vision, I don't right now see a vision. I don't see an imagination. I see fragmentation of issues that might live up to opportunistic politics in the region. Either the government of Israel, which has its own problems as a government of the right,

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or of the Palestinian side of the rift amongst all the Palestinian factions, there is no vision that I would say this vision is clear and the people should be galvanised around it. And that could create a proper peace, a peace that creates true and genuine commitment. This region is fragmented. It is a mosaic of cultures, a mosaic of religions, a mosaic of ethnicities. No other region in the world has that, that's part of our DNA. Arabs and Jews, Muslims and Jews, have inhabited this land for a long time. And they were part of the same fabric. Now unfortunately with the conflict things have gone beyond. The religious rhetoric and the ethnic rhetoric have become extreme and it was used by all parties and that is also complicating the situation. Instead of a religious or ethnic or nationalistic kind of approach, in my opinion, there is something else, much more based on principles of the human existence rather than an exclusive opinion on what we want to do and how we should eliminate the other.

The second point leadership, we don't have leadership. Right now we have the weakest generation of leaders in the Middle East since independence in my opinion. In all aspects in the Arab camp and the Israeli camp we have no leaders who could stand and say: "I am going to propagate a vision regardless of tomorrow's elections or tomorrow's opinion." Arabs regimes use the Palestinian cause as a dictatorship tool. And then the Israeli regime use also the Palestinian issue in a way to win elections for next year or next Knesset, and therefore we don't have that kind of figure who is willing to say morally and ethically this is the way forward, let us fight for it.

The third world balance of power has never been helpful to us. We are a projection of an imbalance of power, double standards in the world and the way that things have been handled in the Middle East from 1917 until today, we're actually a projection of western interests. It was never something that has emerged from the within to create a centre in the region. The region is not a centre. It is a utility of the world order and therefore everyone is using this conflict.

So these three factors, each one of them needs to be

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approached. As I said, I'm optimistic that the world order is shifting but also we need to work hard at the leadership. A serious, brave, correct, human centred vision for this conflict that could survive with time.

I visited actually many countries in Latin America and I think the spirit of the Latin American experience itself either for struggle for democracy within Latin America and the transformation later on, and the crises that Latin America encountered, all of the above could become a major base for us in the region in order to tap into as an experience but also as a solid approach to our solutions. Real ones and engagement. I think what we have seen in Latin America has at its core, a proper struggle. And there is dynamics, regardless of what we could see at the end, but there is a new fresh dynamic that we're not used to seeing in Europe. Europe for me has become an entity that has exhausted its political techniques, officially of course, I'm not speaking about the movements. So I think in Latin America I have witnessed that on many levels, official and public, that spirit and attachment to people and humans is still alive and therefore I think yes there is a prospect of much more relations.

I do believe that, again as I said, you know we are approaching a moment where the issue of Palestine in particular has not been, is not anymore, only trapped within diplomatic circles. I see more and more people, communities, organisations, the public involved. Thanks to the communications revolution that we're going through, thanks to the awareness generated by a lot of social platforms. I sense that this spirit which is combined with imbalance of the international world order and the new cracks emerging in it is important for us to make through proper dialogue, a plan that could take us forward into a final situation that all of us could enjoy in peace.

*\* This transcript has been edited for clarity*

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