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The Middle East:

Where Our Right Hand Prefers Not to Know What our Left is Doing

Keynote speech by Victor Kocher, correspondent of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung for Middle East

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

I thank you for your interest and for taking the trouble to come here and listen to some remarks on the subject of the Middle East. That part of the world is a thankless region, providing bad news daily and filled with persistent bloodshed. The Western public is showing increasing impatience and incomprehension, since the region's conflicts seem endless. Western political leaders are inclined to conjure up images of the Muslim menace.

Many Western governments demonstrate a kind of horizontal thinking, concentrated entirely on crisis management. And there are compelling reasons for this:

- the Middle East is a highly unstable part of the world;
- Middle Eastern states are largely authoritarian, often governed by poorly legitimated and incompetent regimes and manifesting a scandalous lack of development;
- corruption is widespread and a sense of civic responsibility is rare indeed;
- a wave of Islamization continues to grow, fueled in part by the American policy of domination since September 2001, and the region's confrontation with Western values and international law is burgeoning along with it.

Our Middle East strategy is concentrated mostly on superficial threats such as terrorism and a nuclear arms buildup. The hesitant attempts to deal with the region's problems also follow this purely security-oriented agenda. This short-sighted policy aims at projecting power in the region by military means and reinforcing our own interests at the expense of local ones. International law and considerations of fairness take a back seat. In the wake of the "war on terror," America and Europe have concentrated ever more on security and close collaboration with Israel. That encourages the Jewish state in its strategy of regional dominance with American cover.

But relations between the Orient and Occident have a very long history, profound for both sides. The Middle East's geographic proximity, its sentimental importance as the Land of the Bible, and its energy resources, have locked it into an irrevocable and, since the Industrial Revolution, increasingly unequal common fate with Europe. During

the past century, the Middle East was virtually a playing field for ongoing and decisive meddling by the West, as well as Soviet interventions during the Cold War. Following the First World War and the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire, Western powers, through the arbitrary drawing of new boundaries, veritably created the modern community of Middle Eastern states. This was followed by the League of Nations mandates for France and Britain in the Levant and in Iraq, the creation of the State of Israel, the exploitation of oil resources by Western companies, the Anglo-French Suez intervention of 1956, and massive support for Israel in its principal wars. Around the Persian Gulf, on the other hand, the British showed a deft hand with the introduction of various monarchies. The creation of the Kingdom of Jordan in the former territory of Transjordan has also turned out relatively well, although at the outset the Hashemite dynasty was arbitrarily transplanted from Mecca. The Americans subsequently were successful in forging alliances with the wealthy oil-producing monarchies, providing them with strategic cover against the desires for booty on the part of their poorer and more populous neighbors.

But today America is unpopular with the rulers of the Arab and Muslim world; it has lost its credibility and is widely hated on the streets. The immediate causes of this reversal are Washington's turning away from the Middle East peace process, its unflinching support for Israel in its excessively violent repression of the Palestinians, and the current bloody fiasco in Iraq.

Things looked quite different back in 1922. On the initiative of President Woodrow Wilson, the American study group known as the King-Crane Commission reported that the Arabs would prefer to be ruled by America if they could not gain independence for themselves. In 1956 President Eisenhower garnered considerable credit among Arab chiefs of state when, following the Suez war, he exerted massive political and economic pressure to compel the British, French and Israelis to withdraw from the Sinai. Finally, in 1992, President George Bush, Sr. stepped in to block the expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank by denying Israel credit guarantees to the tune of \$10 billion for the integration of Soviet immigrants into the Jewish state. Since then, however, there has been a gradual erosion of Washington's resistance to Israeli land grabs and settlement. In 1997, then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher formally assured Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that it would be exclusively Israel's privilege in the peace negotiations to determine the extent of its own "redeployment," and thus to determine the size of the territory in the West Bank which would be set aside for the Palestinians. And in 2004, Bush Jr. rewarded Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for his planned withdrawal from Gaza by guaranteeing him the right to future annexation of the large settlement blocks in the occupied West Bank – nothing less than blanket approval of Israel's illegal settlement policy and a partisan prejudicing of future peace negotiations.

There was, however, a hitch in Arab-American friendship as far back as 1956, when Washington withdrew financial support for construction of the Aswan Dam from the

charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, provoking the nationalization of the Suez Canal a few days later. In so doing, the U.S. shoved Nasser into the hostile pro-Soviet camp. On the other hand, Israel during the Cold War sought a niche in America's spectrum of interests and served as Washington's chief ally in the Middle East. Later, with its mini-war against the Palestinians, Israel further reinforced its position in the forefront of the "war on terror" and the so-called clash of civilizations with the Islamic world. Jerusalem selectively emphasized certain American interests in Washington, those which served its own interests, and drew the USA ever further into a one-sided Middle East policy – at the expense of American relations with the Arab world.

Now two more detailed observations:

First: With the end of Britain's Palestine mandate in 1948, the West imposed the creation of a Jewish state against the will of the Palestinian people and the Arab countries. The creation of Israel took place at the expense of the Palestinians, and because of its concern about a homeland for the Jewish people as a result of the Holocaust trauma the West has since then given virtually unlimited support to the Jewish state.

The UN's 1947 partition plan for Palestine foresaw the following:

The Jews, who owned less than 6% of the land in Mandate Palestine and made up just about one-third of the population, were granted more than half (nearly 57.5%) of the total land. They owned just 11% of the land within the borders of their projected state and constituted a minority within that area.

Through military conquest in the chaos and war of 1947-48, Israel expanded its share of the former Mandate territory to 78%. At the same time, some three-quarters of a million Palestinians became refugees, Palestinian society was devastated militarily and robbed of the bulk of its former modes of subsistence.

If you would try for a moment to imagine a European political leader who saw his own or an allied people being victimized in the same way, how could he possibly react other than the Arabs did back then – with total rejection?

In the Six-Day War of 1967 Israel also occupied the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai was subsequently returned to Egypt in exchange for a peace treaty, but since its withdrawal from Gaza two years ago Israel has kept that territory totally cut off. Especially in the West Bank and Jerusalem, Israel pursues a policy of expansion through settlement, a gradual diminution of Palestinian living space, and the fragmentation of Palestinian society into separate enclaves. Hints from Israeli politicians indicate an intention to permanently annex East Jerusalem and those significant parts of the West Bank on which large blocks of settlements are located.

Hardly anyone talks of restitution for former injustices, and Israel tends to deny any responsibility for what happened in the past.

During the Oslo peace process Yasser Arafat's PLO acknowledged Israel's right to exist on 78% of Palestinian soil. And the community of Arab nations, following a series of bitter defeats, has offered the Israelis a final settlement of the entire conflict on the basis of 1948, with the prospect of full recognition of the Jewish state, general peace and extensive relations with all Arab countries – in exchange for execution of UN Resolution 242 and Israeli withdrawal to its borders as they stood after the 1948 war.

The Israelis, however, have not accepted that offer. Their security problems – attacks by resistance fighters on soldiers and armed Jewish settlers, terrorist attacks in Israeli cities carried out by Arab extremists, the strategic threat from radical states – maintain their hold on Western public attention, although a substantial part of those dangers was initially created by Israel's policy of occupation and repression by military force. Since the Hamas election victory in Gaza, the West has let itself be totally drawn into the Israeli-American approach of political isolation and military repression. Success in the forthcoming November Middle East conference therefore seems unlikely.

Secondly, the fiasco in the Gulf region:

Under the impact of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the current Bush administration selected Iraq as the stage upon which to demonstrate its concept of militarily imposed democratization for the entire region. You know what has come since. The latest UN estimate of the number of Iraqi refugees exceeds four million, about half of whom have fled to other countries. Some 70,000 civilians have been killed since 2003; by some estimates the figure is much higher. The country's electricity and water systems still function significantly worse than they did prior to the toppling of Saddam Hussein. The Oil Ministry estimates that petroleum revenues lost as a result of insecurity since the invasion is some \$24.7 billion, while American auditing officials calculate somewhat more modest oil revenue losses of \$10 million per day, primarily as a result of thievery, smuggling, corruption and sabotage. Baghdad's neighborhoods are being "ethnically cleansed" by sectarian militias, and separated by high walls erected by the authorities. The nation's political future appears dimmer than ever.

Even though it might have been difficult to foresee the incredible brutality and irresponsibility with which political interest groups and criminal gangs have set about tearing the Iraqi state apart, America cannot simply avoid responsibility for its monumental mistakes. Sooner or later, Washington will be able to tone down its large-scale engagement in the country, reducing its losses and its military presence to lower levels. But it has created a dangerous center of instability for the Iraqis and for all countries of the region. In particular, the newly catalyzed conflict between Sunni and Shia also threatens to spread to neighboring countries. The Sunni hope to prevent the

sellout of Iraq to Iran, while the Shia, stirred by the example of Shiite empowerment in Baghdad, are demanding political equality.

America has long pursued a wobbly strategy around the Persian Gulf, sometimes trying for hegemony in tandem with the Shah of Iran, at other times seeking a balance of terror between Khomeini and Saddam Hussein. That is why it is confronted today with a thoroughly mistrustful, rising nuclear power in Iran, with which it will have to reach an understanding sooner or later. Failing that, Iraq may well become the scene of a low-intensity conflict with the Islamic Republic's Revolutionary Guards. Reaching an understanding with Tehran would inevitably mean recognizing Iran as a regional power on the Gulf. The West would then have to find a way to accept yet another nuclear power, as it has done with India and Pakistan. Tehran would then surely demand what it calls justice for Palestine: a massive change to the one-sided preferential treatment of Israel.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

After all this criticism, what would a suitable Western policy toward the Middle East look like? One Arab commentator recently gave the following title to his remarks: "You want peace? Then give us development and justice."

The objective must be a reduction of tensions rather than their ideological amplification. A half-baked policy of alliances and cooperation only with those who are superficially like-minded and ostensibly share our own view will only create new polarities. The isolation of negatively viewed governments and movements does not help the situation. One important force in the Arab world is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has been discreetly but persistently riding the wave of re-Islamization across a broad front. Hamas, its Palestinian branch, has been deliberately isolated by Israel, America and the EU – and most recently by the Fatah-led government in Ramallah. In the global battle against al-Qaida terrorists and militant jihadists, the emphasis must naturally be on security and the preempting of terrorist cells. But that is only superficial. Of deeper significance is the rivalry between al-Qaida hotheads like Osama bin Laden, and more traditional, moderate leaders, including the Muslim Brotherhood. As long as young, dissatisfied Muslims everywhere believe that the essence of Islam is the bomber-ideology of al-Qaida instead of tolerance and a peaceful devotion to God, there will continue to be increasing danger and destabilization. It hardly needs saying that an American Middle East policy which treats Arab heads of state and Muslim notables as puppets plays right into al-Qaida's hands.

In a region of inadequate regimes, we must also provide as much benefit to ordinary citizens as possible – that is, support for essential infrastructure projects, for citizen participation and a civic society, as well as encouraging the critical questioning of rulers and bureaucrats by politically mature individuals. An essential underpinning of these activities is an independent judiciary which reliably distinguishes between justice and injustice instead of between the powerful and their powerless victims.

Reducing tensions means solving conflicts, particularly in those cases where a solution is obvious:

Movement toward a peace treaty between Syria and Israel has progressed so far that, as ex-President Bill Clinton put it, it could be worked out in half an hour. It would consist in carrying out the formula "Total withdrawal for total peace." In concrete terms that would mean setting the future border at the northern shore of Lake Tiberias, establishing mutual security arrangements to keep that border peaceful, and defining neighborly relations between the two parties. What is blocking this today is the fact that no one is providing the Syrians with a guarantee of Israel's good will – that is, its intent to fully withdraw – while Israel's military leaders doubt that peace with Syria would be a worthwhile exchange for giving up the Golan.

The Palestinian conflict is the chief source of Arab and Muslim frustration and militancy. Despite their own particular agenda, even the leaders of al-Qaida admit as much. A solution in Palestine would bring a significant relaxation of tensions throughout the region. Restitution would cost the Israelis a high price – specifically, the unconditional granting of a territorial basis sufficient for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Europe and America must offer their own ideas of an appropriate settlement, one based on their own sense of historical responsibility, fairness and justice, and they must defend their position in their dialogue with Israel. Moreover, they would have to be as generous in their support of a newly-created "Palestine" as they have been to date toward Israel. The Jewish state will have to learn that it cannot continue to play the role of regional superpower with the aid of the West. That does not imply any weakening of the West's guarantee for Israel's security, but rather places the relationship on a foundation of common and shared interests and a sharing of the resulting burdens. But even in the medium term, that price is far less than what is being spent today worldwide for the suppression of recurring and ever-new tensions. One economist has calculated that American support for Israel alone, up to the year 2002, cost about \$1.2 trillion, of which \$240 million were in direct aid.

Coupled with all this is a fundamental question facing Israel: How can a Jewish-governed state maintain itself at the crossroads of a part of the world with an overwhelming non-Jewish majority? Even within the 1948 borders, where an Arab minority opted to remain with the Jewish state despite the widespread Palestinian exodus, the principle of equal rights for all citizens continues to be ignored today. And the more rapid demographic growth of Israel's Arab population poses a long-term threat to the Jewish majority's position. In the search for equal rights for all within Israel's sphere of power, including the occupied territories, that country's brutal, long-term military occupation remains an obstacle to any settlement of the conflict. This unresolved yet fateful question has disturbed the sleep of many an Israeli leader. But far too few of them have had the courage to admit that military force can never be anything more than a short-term, makeshift solution.