

## **Transcript of the AIV Wellenstein lecture by Kim Ghattas, The Hague, 30 September 2024.**

Good afternoon, excellencies, ambassadors, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for being here.

Thank you to the Advisory Council on Foreign Affairs for inviting me to give the yearly Wellenstein Lecture. Thank you to Minister Koenders and his wonderful team for facilitating my travel in difficult circumstances and making this lecture happen.

When Bert and his team first contacted me to invite me to give the yearly Wellenstein lecture, it was in June. The landscape looked rather different. President Joe Biden had just given a speech to launch his initiative for peace in the Middle East, laying out his vision that involved not only a cease fire deal and the release of Israeli hostages but also a path towards a two-state solution, normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and of course calm on the border between Lebanon and Israel. He tried to appeal to the Israeli public with a vision of what life in the region could look like for them, outside of the dark tunnel that they have found themselves in since the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7<sup>th</sup>.

Biden told Israelis: “I ask you to take a step back and think what will happen if this moment is lost. We can’t lose this moment...Indefinite war in the pursuit of an unidentified notion of total victory will only bog down Israel in Gaza.”

The Saudis were eager to normalize with Israel, in exchange for a defense pact with the U.S. Even months into the war in Gaza, those discussions were still being held with the White House. Before October 7<sup>th</sup>, the deal was within reach. It was going to be called the Jeddah-Jerusalem declaration, and would involve small concessions to the Palestinians, well below their aspirations to a state.

As much as Saudi Arabia wanted a defense pact with the U.S., to protect itself against Iran, Riyadh knew it had to up the price after October 7<sup>th</sup>. The Kingdom made clear there now had to be a clear, irreversible path to a two-state solution as part of its normalization deal with Israel. In exchange for what is in fact still a somewhat vague promise of a Palestinian state, Israel would get peace with the Custodian of the Two Holy Sites of Islam, and by extension with most of the Arab and Muslim world – what better way to guarantee Israel’s peace and security...

So, I accepted this invitation, hopeful that there would be something positive to discuss and describe, and it is on this basis that we drafted the summary for the lecture. I am by nature a hopeful person, I believe in solutions, in creative diplomacy, I continue to insist on believing in the goodness of human nature.

That was early June.

But the moment that Biden described in June now appears to have been lost. As Lenin famously said there are decades when **nothing** happens, and weeks when **decades** happen. In the weeks since I accepted this invitation, decades did happen. Four to be precise... and I will explain in a moment why I say **four** decades...

I had to rewrite my lecture several times, not because this is a news summary but because the point is to provide the most accurate assessment of where we are and where we might be going. Can we really talk about the day **after** in Gaza when we might be at the **start** of a long war in Lebanon...? What is left of Gaza...? What will be left of Lebanon?

For 11 months, Israel and Hezbollah had been engaged in daily border clashes in southern Lebanon. It started when Hezbollah launched the first rockets against Israel on October 8<sup>th</sup>, to, **in their words** support Hamas and the Palestinian cause. This is a war that no one in Lebanon voted for. Lebanon is a country with no president, a caretaker government, a barely functioning institutions, and a collapsed economy... A country in which Hezbollah has veto power on the politics, a country in which it has killed its political opponents, starting with leftists in the 1980s, continuing with former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 200, and many others, including friends of mine. Hezbollah also has Syrian blood on its hands, it was heavily involved in the Syrian civil war, propping up Syrian president Bashar al Assad in that bothersome war that no one in Europe or the US really cared about, except when Syrians refugees showed up on Europe's border; that war which some Western officials thought they could just let Russia take care of. We know now that Vladimir Putin learned many lessons from Syria. Crucially, Europe should have learned that as much as you try to build Fortress Europe, you cannot keep these problems from coming back to haunt you, unless you address them in a systemic and fair way.

Back to Gaza...

For 11 months and up until last week, the balance of deterrence on the Lebanon-Israel border held somewhat. Iran and Hezbollah signaled **repeatedly and clearly**, that they didn't want to escalate and start an all-out war. All signs and intelligence indicate that they were **not** informed in advance about the Hamas operation of October 7<sup>th</sup>. The first ever phone call between the Iranian president and Saudi Crown Prince took place a week after the Hamas operation and it was a clear indication the Iranians were looking for an off-ramp; they were worried about being dragged into this and they wanted no part of it. Tehran is concerned first and foremost about the survival of the regime. For years, it has set up a forward defense basis strategy where it keeps its enemies, Israel and America, busy, far away from Iran's own borders – by setting up militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. You need to remember how traumatizing the Iran-Iraq war was for Iran: eight years during which no one stood with Iran, thousands of Iranians died, while the world sent weapons to Iraq. The Islamic Republic of Iran promised itself it would never again be in this position. Hence, the need for Hezbollah, the jewel in the crown of this strategy, keeping Iran's enemies busy.

Iran and Hezbollah assessed that for the sake of upholding the so-called Axis of Resistance and their long-standing claim that they are the defenders of the Palestinian cause, they **could** show

limited support for Hamas, in a controlled war of attrition with Israel – without escalating to a full war.

Israel killed Hamas leaders in Beirut and in Tehran, and repeatedly assassinated Hezbollah commanders in Lebanon – yet, the Iranian and Hezbollah response remained restrained, telegraphed and choreographed. Yes, 80,000 Israeli were displaced from northern Israel but considering that Hezbollah has an estimated 150,000 missiles, including 1000's of precision guided ones, the amount of fire they unleashed on Israel was limited. 80% of the ammunition fired across that border was Israeli, **into** Lebanon.

Hezbollah insisted it would only stop firing into Israel when there would be a cease-fire in Gaza. History so far had shown that all the wars between Hamas and Israel, and there are about 15 of them, last a couple of months at the most. Hezbollah and its patron in Tehran believed they could keep up the pressure, even as the war in Gaza dragged for three, four, eleven months... Hezbollah kept insisting it would continue to target northern Israel until there was a cease fire in Gaza. Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah could not renege on his words... He was even hoping that by continuing to launch rockets on northern Israel, it would push the Biden administration to pressure Netanyahu into a hostage deal so that Israel would also recover calm on its northern border. But in doing so, Hezbollah had tied Lebanon's fate to Gaza.

Iran and Hezbollah assessed that Israel did not want a big war – an assessment that would prove to be a fatal mistake for the group, and for its leader Hassan Nasrallah. Israel had made a different assessment: when it saw that Iran was not responding with fire and fury to Israel when it assassinated top Hamas and Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon, it demonstrated the extent to which Iran did not want to be dragged into conflict. Israel pushed the limits again and again, further and further. I call that **Middle East roulette....**

Ten days ago, everything changed. Prime Minister Netanyahu was now a year into a war in Gaza with no clear victory in sight, eager to prolong the conflict until at least after the US elections, so he shifted gears. It started with the pager and walkie talkie explosions in Lebanon, an operation which had probably been in motion for more than two years, so well before Gaza. This operation sowed chaos inside Hezbollah, but it also terrorized the Lebanese everywhere. Sirens were wailing for hours, hospitals were overwhelmed, in all parts of the country, Christian and Muslim. People got rid of their phones, mothers unplugged their baby monitors, but it **also** made the Hezbollah network light up like a Christmas tree. Suddenly Israel could see where these pagers were, who the injured were, who visited them, where they went, who they met with...

I know that there is a measure of awe for what Israel has done over the last ten days – from a purely tactical point of view, from a cold military perspective, yes, this was a well-developed strategy, years in the making, 18 years in fact, since 2006, when Israel in essence lost its last war against Hezbollah. The strategy was clear this time: Decapitate the organization, destroy means of communications, sow chaos within the rank and file, and then double down on

further strikes to make Hezbollah capitulate and take out every last member of Hezbollah, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah and then his successor.

Escalate to de-escalate. Bombing your way to peace.... It's true that the Allies did that in WWII. The key difference here, (aside from the fact that the widescale damage and bombing of civilians in WWII are what lead to the revision and expansion of the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law), is that the Allies then helped rebuild Japan and Germany. They didn't try to occupy parts of the country or annex them and they also said **never again**....

Many Lebanese oppose Hezbollah, I would say a solid majority. As I said earlier, many Lebanese paid with their lives trying to push back against them. There are those who support Hezbollah as a resistance movement against Israel, which occupied Lebanon for 18 years until 2000. There are those in the Shia community who are true believers, who fully adhere to the group, its beliefs, and who see Hezbollah as the protector of the Shia community in a country where the state historically has done little to protect them or help.

And they are particularly concerned to realize that it appears that Iran is not coming to help them, that Iran in fact fights Israel by offering up the bodies of Arab men and women as martyrs and that Bashar al Assad, who survived thanks to Hezbollah and the thousands of Hezbollah fighters who died fighting for him in Syria, that Bashar al Assad himself has little to say and will not help either: he issued a statement of condolences for Nasrallah: the gist of it was in essence thank you for your services, it was nice to know you, Bye.

But let me say this unequivocally... No one, no one in Lebanon believes Netanyahu or any Israeli official when they say: our fight is with Hezbollah not with the Lebanese, our enemy is Hezbollah not the Lebanese. You can be relieved Nasrallah is dead while still fearing the Israelis and their military campaign. We have all watched what happened in Gaza over the last 11 months and the Lebanese are afraid this will now happen to them.

Every week, if not every day, for the last 11 months, I have woken up in Beirut to hear Israeli officials, politicians, ministers, even journalists say that Israel should annihilate Lebanon, that they should bomb it back to the Stone Age, that they should turn it Gaza. Just last week Israel's minister of education Yoav Kisch repeated it: "There is no difference between Hezbollah and Lebanon. Lebanon will be annihilated. It will cease to exist."

I haven't seen a single Western condemnation of such statements. I will be generous and say that perhaps those statements don't make it into the press here or onto your social media algorithms, so you're not aware of them but they make headlines in Lebanon and they are in our social media feeds, thanks to the useful translation buttons on Twitter and Instagram, we can instantly read the Hebrew into English. For a while, I dismissed them as bravado, intimidation, words – not anymore. And I want to urge you to ask yourselves why it is acceptable for Israeli officials to get away with statements like this? Western officials rightly condemn statements by Iranian or Hezbollah voices calling for the eradication of Israel. Why not condemn calls for the eradication of a sovereign country like Lebanon or any other country?

That's a blatant double standard. There's already an Israeli website up advertising settlements in southern Lebanon with models of apartments that would be for sale – apparently southern Lebanon is part of greater Israel.

The civilian casualty toll in Lebanon is already immense in just 10 days. In the first day of bombing alone, 500 people were killed, including dozens of women and children. One million people are already refugees, displaced inside Lebanon, in a country of four million. The strain on hospitals, communities, security services is beyond description....

I almost thought that I wouldn't make it to the Netherlands because as things progressively got worse last week my flight was cancelled, then all airlines cancelled their flights to Lebanon, as fears grew of an all-out war. I finally found a seat on a flight by the national carrier, Middle East airlines which is still flying. I got on the plane Friday morning because there was talk of a cease-fire, Netanyahu was in New York, and knowing how diplomacy works usually, I assumed I had at least a few days before talks broke down. That's what French diplomats I spoke to also thought, as did the Biden administration. I spoke to a White House official on Wednesday: we are working on a cease fire, he said, stay safe while we work through this. By the time I landed in Amsterdam, the strike that killed Nasrallah had changed everything.

Even as Netanyahu was in New York, even as he had indicated that he was considering a cease fire and then reneging, and speaking at the UN General assembly, plans for that strike had been approved... There's a word for that: it's called deception...

But I want to go back in history for a moment, because today Israel is trying to destroy a problem it created in 1982. In June that year, Israel began its second invasion of Lebanon – there had been one in 1978.

My family lived on a dangerous crossing on the south-eastern side of Beirut. The Israeli bombardment became so intense, I developed a fever, as a 5-year-old. My mother took me and one of my sisters in her car and we drove north in the dark. My father and my other sister joined us later. We were privileged because we had a small beach bungalow where we could stay. We watched Beirut being pummeled by Israeli shelling. The city would be under siege for two months, 17,000 people were killed and 30,000 injured. We eventually left, by bus to Syria, and from there onwards to Netherlands. The Netherlands was a place of refuge for us, for me – it was where the sound of planes in the air was not a threat, where I could play outside without fear of snipers. I cried all the tears in my body when we went back at the end of the summer. My family wanted to go home, no one wants to leave their home, no one wants to be a refugee....

But this is not about me.... What I'm trying to tell you here is that PM Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon had a plan in mind: to remake the Middle East. They thought they'd invade Lebanon, get rid of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, install a friendly pro-Israel Christian president and force Lebanon and Syria to sign a peace treaty....

Tactically it worked: the PLO was forced out and Israel's ally Bachir Gemayel was elected president. And then it all unraveled. Gemayel was assassinated but crucially it was the start of the Iran-Syria axis to thwart America and Israel. Two days after Israel invaded, Iran sent 500 Iranian revolutionary guards to Lebanon via Syria. This was the beginning of the formation of Hezbollah and the start of the so-called Axis of resistance, an 18 yearlong occupation of south Lebanon, and the rise of Hezbollah as an all-powerful political party in Lebanon and eventually as the most powerful, heavily armed non state actor, with a regional role.

So tactically it worked. The PLO left Lebanon, and went to Tunisia. Strategically it was a disaster...

So, what problem is Israel creating today? What problems are the US and Europe helping to create by not calling for an immediate cease fire? By repeating without any caveats that Israel has the right to defend itself? By not upholding international and humanitarian law in Gaza? By not applying leverage, whether American or European, to end this cycle of violence and in some cases applauding the tactical successes of Israel? By not listening to Israeli and Palestinian voices of peace and they are many? By not doing everything in their power to get a cease fire for Gaza and help the release of the Israeli hostages? Because in the middle of all this, Gaza and the hostages have been completely forgotten...

Don't get me wrong – Lebanon, its fledgling government and army have a responsibility to step up, to form a coalition of national unity, to call for and respect the implementation of UN resolutions such as resolution 1701. But this country was barely functioning before this war... and I don't see the Israeli military campaign letting up to provide that space for the Lebanese, government and opposition, to come together. After the assassination of Nasrallah, Netanyahu said "we settled our scores". But instead of easing the military campaign, Israeli seems to want to double down. Even the Israeli opposition Yair Lapid or others are calling for an invasion of Lebanon...

Has no one learnt any lessons?

In 1982, the Israeli journalist and peace activist Amos Oz wrote: We can never atone for what we did in Beirut. It was the first time Israel entered an Arab capital, the first time it bombarded an Arab city indiscriminately... That war, that invasion, changed Lebanon, it changed Israel and it changed the Middle East. Forty-two years later, four decades later, here we are again. Israel is trying to settle old scores, fighting the last war and speaking again about plans to remake the Middle East and do everything it can to avoid all compromises on what remains the core of the problem: the Palestinian issue.

There is another man I quote often in relation to that period: Malcolm Kerr. He was the president of the American university of Beirut in 1982. Kerr's family had a long history in the region, alongside American missionaries. He had been born in Beirut, it was home for him, he spoke Arabic, three of his four children were born in Beirut, as he and his wife went back and

forth between their home in California, where he taught at UCLA and Cairo and Beirut where he also taught at the American universities.

Kerr exemplified what was best about America and the values it proclaims it stands for: he was deeply wedded to the Palestine cause, he was extremely critical of American policy in the Middle East, AND he was a friend of Israel. He had many Israeli friends and students, he lectured in Tel Aviv, and he was a staunch supporter of peace between Israel and its neighbors, advising American administrations on peace efforts in the region. It's the kind of complex balance of positions that seems to elude us these days. He was killed for it: it was probably the first political assassination of an opponent that Hezbollah ever carried out, in January 1984. Kerr had stayed in Lebanon, despite the dangers, the blowing up of the US embassy and the Marine Barracks bombing. He always upheld one truth: The truly civilized man is marked by empathy.

I know foreign policy is not based on empathy, I'm wise enough to understand even as a Lebanese that the calculations going into play now in discussions about what to do next, are all about politics, realpolitik, election schedules, coalition issues. Still, I hope my words today have given you food for thought – empathy would certainly help understand the rift that has been created between the West and the rest, over Gaza, and Ukraine and in particular the contrast between how the West dealt with Ukraine and how it deals with Gaza.

I know, Israel is the West's ally and Putin is not. Hamas attacked Israel and massacred and kidnapped hundreds of Israelis on October 7<sup>th</sup>. Zelensky did not attack Russia, it was Russia that invaded Ukraine. But hospitals are being targeted in both, civilians are dying in both, and humanitarian law should be upheld in both. By the way, there wasn't much concern when Putin was bombing hospitals in Syria for years. That's why I say again, the concept of Fortress Europe, or Fortress America provides a false sense of security, this world is too interconnected.

But I think we have something in common with Ukraine, us now in Lebanon: the experience of war binds you, there is solidarity between us. I've seen it, I hear it from Ukrainians and there is the common fear of being forgotten by the West. Even Zelensky, his ministers, Ukrainian journalists who come to Europe to America to plead their case and yes, they do get a lot of support including financial and military ... but then they go home to the reality of life in war, while your lives here continue and a quiet dinner awaits you at home.

But let me return to the Middle East to emphasize again, that as things unravel, as Lebanon becomes engulfed in war and the danger of a regional conflagration looms on the horizon, the crux of the problem remains the injustice of a decades long occupation of the Palestinian territories. With every war, and even with every peace agreement, successive Israeli governments have tried to reshape the region and make a peace with its neighbors while papering over the Palestinian question, cancelling the Palestinians, building more settlements...

At the UN just last week, we heard strong words from the Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi: he said that Netanyahu had just spoken describing a Middle East where Israel is

surrounded by enemies who want to destroy it. Minister Safadi answered that on behalf of 57 Arab and Muslim countries, he was stating unequivocally, that all of us here gathered are willing to guarantee unequivocally the security of Israel in exchange for the emergence of a Palestinian state. He went on to say that if Israeli rejected a Palestinian state what was its end game, other than more wars....?

I want to end with a few more thoughts on the West's responsibility in upholding the systems that hold back solutions in areas like the Middle East, it's often the timidity of political positions or the preference for the status quo, it is also driven by efforts to keep the problems at bay rather than offering systemic solutions, a preference for short term band aid solutions.

On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2020, one of the largest non-nuclear explosions took place in Beirut at the port. Hezbollah stood accused of having stored dangerous materials, ammonium nitrate, the port. Hezbollah had become part and parcel of what people in Lebanon called the mafia-militia establishment, upholding and profiting from the corruption of the system. Lebanon had just been through one of the world's worst economic and financial crisis in 150 years, as the economy collapsed. There had been months of protests, Hezbollah was also a target of the anger, people were speaking out, and when the port blew up, more demonstrations took place and were expected to swell. Then the French president Emmanuel Macron visited. In a first visit, he was the consoler. But on his second visit, he gathered all the figures of the establishment, including Hezbollah, and spoke of the need for national unity. The same people that the Lebanese were protesting against, were being embraced by the French president at the French ambassador's residence in Beirut. It was a slap in the face of the Lebanese, who suddenly realized they were on their own. The international community did not want to rock the boat. The protestors went home.

Another example involves Saudi Arabia. In 2005, Lebanon's prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated. His murder was blamed on Syria and Hezbollah. Hariri's patron was Saudi Arabia, he was like an adopted son for the king. Syria became a pariah, the relationship with Saudi Arabia broke down. By 2010, Saudi Arabia was seeking reconciliation with Syria and in essence, it made Hariri kiss the hand of the man who killed his father...

Another type of example involves Netanyahu himself. For years, Netanyahu did everything he could to undermine the creation of a Palestinian state, to the extent that he made sure Qatar continued to send millions of dollars to Hamas in Gaza to keep them in power, right up until before October 7<sup>th</sup>. He wanted to keep Hamas in power and the Palestinian divided... This was not a tightly kept secret, it was known even to the Trump administration and Biden administration. So even while the international community pays lip service to the idea of a two-state solution, it turns a blind eye to Netanyahu approving cash transfers to Hamas.

And then briefly on the issue of migration... Europe is helping to entrench Arab autocrats by asking them to stem the flow of refugees across the Mediterranean. It does so with no regard for their governance or human rights record. The autocrats are only too happy to pretend they can help, that they are partners, they claim that they alone can protect Europe's southern



border from illegal migrants, if only you give them more cash. We all saw the visit to Tunisia by top EU and European officials last year. But it is the rule of these autocrats that is sending people across the Mediterranean to Europe... Keeping the problems at bay, by throwing money at it, doesn't solve it, eventually it boomerangs.

I have much criticism of the Biden administration's today but I will quote Jake Sullivan, the National security advisor, who recently said that "our ability to treat other countries not as proxy battlegrounds but as partners rests on our ability to bring something to that partnership". This is good guiding principle when devising policy about the rest of the world, the Global South as it is something referred to – to view countries outside of the West not as battlegrounds, but partners, not as places from which to simply extract resources, but to invest in, not places from whence immigrants come, but countries where people want to have the opportunity to stay home and systemic improvement in policies can help make that happen.

Tomorrow I will go back to Lebanon – inshallah. I will land in a country very different than the one I left. I'm deeply worried about the chaos that will be unleashed if the Israeli military campaign continues unabated.

I'm not religious in any way, but to conclude, I will quote one verse from the Bible, from the book of Habbakuk: "The violence done onto Lebanon will overwhelm you."

We need a cease fire, now.

Thank you.