

Introduction – Dr. Yechiel Leiter – Director-General, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

The idea for this conference was actually born about four months ago in Addis Ababa. The Institute for Peace and Security Studies hosted a conference on the Horn of Africa and invited me to present a paper. Instead of talking about conventional weaponry and conventional warfare, I chose to speak about food and water security. I pushed the fact that 50 years ago we had few solutions to the problems of desertification, of clean water scarcity, of parasites, energy production, wastewater management and more. But today, there's no excuse for almost a billion people going to sleep every night hungry, suffering from malnutrition and disease, and being driven into tribal and ethnic conflict out of poverty and despair.

Today, we have the solutions to those problems. Several of the participants suggested a follow-up conference in Israel and we decided to move forward. The questions are great and the challenges are many. What are the effects of the U.S. stepping back from the Middle East? The expansionism of China and the aggressiveness of Russia? Will the apparent entente between Saudi Arabia and Iran spoil the normalization taking place daily between Israel and the Emirates, between Israel and Bahrain? What about the slow but steady understandings between the Saudi kingdom itself and Israel?

What will happen if Iran goes nuclear? How will that affect terrorism exported from Tehran to different parts of the globe? Will Lebanon collapse completely? What about Yemen? Sub-Saharan Africa, which the UN has categorized as the epicenter of sovereignty-threatening terrorism? What about Nigeria and its troubles with Boko Haram, and Morocco, with the Hizbullah-supported Polisario? Will the West pressure Sudan into immediate civilian transition, and will that lead to greater stability or less? And what about Turkey? If Erdogan loses, will the military return to power? How will that affect Kurdistan? How will that affect Syria?

Will simmering tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam boil over? How will the new European-driven ESG [environmental, social, and governance] demands and regulations affect developing countries that have not yet fully industrialized? Will this save the planet at the expense of lives today? Is ESG an imposition or a solution?

In countries like Ghana, Kenya and Malawi, how can Israel help? How can Israel's technological innovations assist developing countries to feed their people, contend with international regulatory statutes, and grow their economies? Questions abound, and we need to think together

Governments act on the immediate. There's very little thinking. Think tanks must deal with the important. And our thinking has to provide the policies that can be translated into practical action - real, actionable plans that governments can embrace that bridge the private sector

with its private interests, but are the real engine for economic growth, with governments which act on behalf of the public interest but are hamstrung in their top heavy bureaucracy.

That is what we're doing here - to ask the questions and together look for answers. It's a working session. Our hunch was that we should embark on this journey as a think tank - as a do tank - with a very broad view of the region - not Israel and the Gulf alone, not Israel and Africa alone. Our idea, rather, was to widen the circle and bring our northeast neighbors together with our southwest neighbors.

In Addis, I mentioned our common grandfather, Abraham, who came to the Promised Land and had to leave it immediately because of food insecurity. The Bible tells us that it was Joseph who solved the problem of food insecurity in Egypt on the African continent. Abraham's journey began in Ur Kasdim in southern Iraq, right near the Persian Gulf. Abraham was the first, then, to unite our region, and we would not be wrong to follow in his footsteps.

A high level official in Abu Dhabi, an intellectual, an independent thinker of the first order, leaned forward in his chair when I presented this idea to him just a few weeks ago, and he said to me, "This is very important. Bridging our Gulf countries with Africa must be the highest on our agendas. You have my full support and encouragement."

At the JCPA we believe that this is the time to build trusted partnerships at a time of shifting alliances.