Talking to Anyone for the Good of Everyone
Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

1.

Good afternoon. I wish to thank the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies for giving me the opportunity to join you today.

I had very much looked forward to making this talk the occasion for some personal reflection.

I thought I might be able to take a step back from my day-to-day work and allow myself to look at a bigger picture, and maybe even read a little history.

I had hoped to be able to offer some carefully considered thoughts, of the kind I know that audiences in Oxford expect from their guests. I certainly hope not to let them down but if I do, unintentionally of course, please forgive me.

But events have overtaken me.

And there is no way that I can avoid talking to you about current developments in Palestine and in particular since the Hamas attack of October 7th, and the four months of Israel's invasion of Gaza that have followed.

However, I can still try to focus on the big picture. From a slightly different perspective. Because, with this crisis, the big picture has become a part of our everyday lives.

I am going to try to talk about the crisis in Gaza with an eye to its history, while staying mindful of the future we want to see.

I don't want to do this for academic purposes.

I want to do it because I think that some history may help us make some progress towards a solution.

I genuinely believe that a solution to the question of Palestine can and must be found. But to achieve this there needs to be a transformation in our thinking. A transformation that is long overdue.

Let me first set out what I think the underlying problem is.

It's as if efforts to deal with the current crisis remain stuck in the past.

There's a failure to learn from the past and a failure to understand the present.

Let me explain.

2.

There's a tendency to think and act as though the world can be neatly organised into two. There are friends and enemies. There is good and evil. An axis of evil on the one hand and the guardians of prosperity on the other.

Why do we do this? Why do we want the world to be so black and white? It's like trying to capture an ocean in a teacup.

I think this comes from a failure to come to terms with the reality of a multipolar world.

History has moved on faster than we have. We need to catch up with history.

Over thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, too many of us still inhabit a Cold War mentality of binary oppositions, zero-sum games, and elective non-communication.

Far too many talk mainly to their friends, and make it a point of principle to refuse to talk to those people they define as their enemies.

This is a serious impediment. A self-inflicted disability.

And so, confronted with the horrifying human catastrophe in Gaza, there's a refusal to do the one thing that might open up a pathway to peace.

Hamas cannot be eradicated. So, if there is ever to be peace, the peacemakers will have to find a way to talk to them. And to listen.

This will require a transformation in thinking, and the development of forms of practical diplomacy that are suitable for a multipolar world.

In which we all have to learn to talk to anyone, for the good of everyone

3.

This will involve breaking what for many has been the habit of a lifetime.

Nowhere is this truer than in the part of the world I live in, where lives have been blighted by the curse of sectarianism.

In the sectarian vision of the region, communities and cultures are supposed to be based on sharp divisions.

Divisions between the Sunni and the Shia.

Between the Muslims and the Jews.

Between the Muslims and the Christians.

Politics, in this vision, is shaped and driven by these identities.

And when this sectarian logic is combined with the logic of the Cold War, further divisions can be easily established.

Between moderates and hardliners.

Between the defenders of freedom and its enemies, who must be contained.

Many people, both in the region and beyond, see this basic sectarianism as a fact of life. It seems to them natural and obvious, like a feature of the landscape.

You can hear this attitude all the time in the language often used to characterise the politics of the region.

You hear talk of age old communal tensions, and historical antagonisms, and ancient and enduring animosities.

The use of this language assumes that the people of the region are acting primarily because of their identities. They are simply following the sectarian scripts. They are not capable of making the kind of independent and sophisticated judgements that the people of the liberal and democratic West are used to making.

This is deeply condescending. It is also just factually wrong. I will come back to this in a minute.

But, however condescending and however wrong, policy is still made on the basis of this logic.

In Iraq, for example, after an invasion which looks in hindsight to have been as misjudged as it seemed to some of us at the time, a process of reconstruction and nation-building was imposed on the complex social and political life of the country in which political power was understood almost exclusively in sectarian terms.

This was a historic error on the part of the occupying powers. But it was an error in which, I am very sorry to say, some of the country's political leaders and their external supporters collaborated.

Make structures and institutions designed to accommodate the sectarian interests that you imagine are the logic of social and cultural life, and you will end up ensuring that a once imaginary logic becomes real.

This is the toxic character of the sectarian logic. Once it is introduced it reproduces itself as if spontaneously. As though it were something natural.

But it is not natural. It is historical.

Sectarian thinking may have dominated much of the history of the last hundred years in our region. But it has not always been this way.

The decisive moment of its emergence as the dominant logic of the region came at the very same time at which the Cold War was just beginning to shape global relations.

That moment involved the settlement of Palestine by Jewish people of European origin, and, in due course their foundation of the state of Israel.

I want to be very careful and precise in what I say here.

The foundation of this state of Israel was not, in itself, the problem.

The problem was that it introduced into an emergent modern Arab political landscape a new emphasis on religion as the basis for national identity.

<div align="center">4.</div>

To understand the significance of this decisive moment we need to go back a little further, to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

During this period in the eastern lands of the Ottoman Empire - what is now Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq - one of the consequences of the Arab Nahda or renaissance had been the development of an Arab culture which was, to borrow a term from the historian Usama Makdisi, ecumenical.

An Arab could be a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew, but none of those religious affiliations were their main point of self-identification, at least as far as their participation in public and political life was concerned.

In the Ottoman Empire, and then in the successor states created after its collapse, people's family status was covered by separate religious laws, but public or political life was a space in which people were not expected to make claims based on religion.

I am not saying of course that this was a utopia of entirely harmonious and egalitarian co-existence among communities. It was not without its episodes of tension or conflict, but these tended to be caused by social or economic issues rather than by religious identities.

But as Zionists started to arrive, they brought with them a European nationalist project, conceived in Europe to be realised in Palestine. It did not have its roots in the region and nor did it appreciate the ecumenical character of its political and intellectual culture.

The source of the problem was not the fact that these new arrivals were Jews. Jews, after all, had always been part of the local society and culture in Palestine, the Levant and Iraq.

The early arrivals were welcomed, on the assumption that, like the Jews who were already there, they would find their places within the existing social fabric.

The problem was that it soon became clear that some of them came with a political project which was at odds with that society and culture, and incompatible with its social fabric.

The colonisation of Palestine disrupted an existing and delicate ecumenical culture because it introduced into politics, and specifically into national politics, this new emphasis on religious identity.

For Zionism, if it is nothing else, it is a movement that insists upon the right of Jews to live in a Jewish state.

This would eventually come to mean that, after 1948 it would become more and more difficult for someone to define themselves as an Arab Jew. For the Zionists, the Arabs were the obstacle to the achievement of their political objective: a Jewish state.

So here are the origins of today's regional sectarianism, in which to be a Jew or an Arab (or indeed a Muslim) comes to mean being different from or opposed to one another.

The tragedy of this moment in our shared history is that what was begun by colonial Zionism was then carried on and perpetuated across the Arab world, as some Arab leaders learned to burnish their political credentials by proving how steadfast they were in their hostility to Israel, just as Zionists promoted Islamophobia.

This binary polarisation was intensified because many of the Arab leaders who most strongly asserted their hostility towards Israel were also those who took their countries into political alliances with the Soviet Union.

So, the poison of religious sectarianism was compounded by the confrontation of the Cold War.

Gradually this polarisation came to take on a religious character as political leaders across the region realised that they could strengthen their own political positions by emphasising their Muslim identity.

In due course, we would also come to see a range of non-state actors who weaponised their Muslim identity to wage war on Israel.

Some – but by no means all – of these non-state actors have taken positions and actions that are indisputably antisemitic. They thrive on that poison.

Organisations such as Daesh, for example, find that a world structured according to this sectarian logic is extremely hospitable to their distorted version of Islam. So do some Zionist extremists, with their distorted version of Judaism.

5.

This is what gives many people the impression that today's crisis is the result of ancient antagonisms between religious communities.

The reality is that today's antagonisms may now have a powerful sectarian dimension, but they do so only because of what happened in the middle of the last century.

And what's more, when we look more closely at today's reality, the sectarian dimension turns out not to be quite as powerful as many think it is.

Because it turns out that even today, in a world supposedly riven with sectarian conflicts and hostilities, the reality is more complicated.

In Lebanon today, for example, it is Hezbollah which has mobilised its forces and taken military action against Israel. Hezbollah, we are told, is a Shia party and it functions as a proxy for Iran. And that is supposed to explain what is happening.

But it stops short of any actual explanation. In reality, Hezbollah enjoys significant popular and political support within Lebanon for its stance. That support comes from across the religious spectrum and includes not just Sunni Muslims but also Christians. This support is a matter of political choice not sectarian fidelity.

The same is true of support across the region for the Palestinians: it comes from people of all sects and of none, it is motivated by political solidarity, humanitarian sympathy and by a sense of historical injustice.

Support for Palestine comes from people who are Shia, Sunni, Ibadi, Christian, Jewish and staunchly secular.

Just as it does in Paris, London, and New York. And it seems in Oxford too.

In places like Palestine itself, Lebanon and Yemen, these political perspectives are sharpened by economic conditions. The extent of poverty and infrastructural collapse in all three locations has helped build a unity of the oppressed.

These perspectives are sometimes expressed in Islamic terms. After all, economic and social justice are important to Muslims.

But that does not make them sectarian.

It is easier not to face up to this reality and to do nothing about the underlying problems.

It is easier, that is, to cover it up by insisting on a sectarian understanding of the region in which the opposition to Israel is explained away as a Shia bloc, masterminded by Iran, against which the US and other friends of Israel must engage in some kind of misconceived holy war.

The people of the region have minds and agency of their own, and make political judgements rather than just mindlessly adhering to sectarian affiliation. It is

deeply offensive to suggest otherwise. This denigration of a widely shared political perspective is what I call the sectarian slander.

I am not saying that the people represented in Western media as the bad guys are really the good guys. That's just the same kind of binary thinking. What I am saying is that bad and good just aren't helpful categories when trying to make sense of a complex and dynamic situation and act responsibly within it.

There are all kinds of different players with different interests and different perspectives. Only if you talk to them and listen to them, can you find out what their interests and perspectives really are, and start to work out how to engage deeply with them.

This has to be the basis on which we halt the catastrophe in Palestine. And it has to be the basis for diplomacy in a multipolar world.

6.

It is not as though we don't have positive examples to inspire us.

We could think of Northern Ireland, for example. The British government maintained for decades that it would not talk to Sinn Fein because Sinn Fein was the political wing of a terrorist organisation, the IRA.

But a channel of communication was nonetheless established. Both parties agreed to keep its existence confidential, as both feared that if it became public, they would face bitter recrimination from their own political constituencies.

But it was these channels of communication, initiated by the government of John Major, that created the conditions in which a cessation of hostilities was agreed and the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement could proceed.

Today, Sinn Fein, the party with whom dialogue was once politically impossible and morally unacceptable, has become a mainstream democratic party for which so many peace-loving and anti-terrorist Irish people, north and south, are willing to vote, that it stands on the brink of leading governments in Dublin as well as Belfast.

Sometimes you may need to pretend not to be talking to people when in reality you are. I would like to think that such conversations are happening today. That behind the bluster there is some dialogue. But I fear in the present crisis, I don't think anyone is pretending not to talk.

As in the Irish example, there are risks in suggesting such communication. Domestic opinion in many places has polarised in dangerous ways. It has been encouraged in this polarisation by complacent political leadership and ill-informed and superficial media presentation and, above all, by their constant repetition of the sectarian slander.

I know why it must be so hard for the administration in Washington to shift its position on this, or even on such far less controversial proposals like a ceasefire.

Even softly spoken Omanis attract criticism from friends for saying that we need to talk to Hamas rather than eradicate them.

And for those who obsess about their rejectionist stance, I would simply quote the Hamas Charter of 2017: ***"Hamas considers the establishment of a fully sovereign and independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital along the lines of the 4th of June 1967, with the return of the refugees and the displaced to their homes from which they were expelled, to be a formula of national consensus".***

This surely is a reasonable starting point for a negotiation.

<div align="center">7.</div>

So, I am going to end with a series of concrete and pragmatic proposals for international action.

International action that recognises that we live in a multipolar world.

International action that rejects sectarian logic, binary oppositions, zero-sum games, and elective non-communication.

First, we need an emergency international conference charged with agreeing arrangements for Palestinian statehood and establishing mechanisms for its implementation.

The World has deferred the question of Palestinian statehood for too long.

Too many of those who speak today in favour of a two state solution regard this as an objective to be achieved in some distant future. As though in that future the fundamental realities will have magically changed to make possible then what is somehow not possible now.

So, no more deferral. We have to deal with the reality we inhabit. And that reality includes Hamas. The international conference will have to include them too.

Second, this conference must be convened by leaders of a range of countries which is properly representative of the global majority.

I am concerned that the present crisis is deepening divisions between the Global South and the Global North. The last thing needed is another false global division just like the one constructed in the Cold War.

That is why we should make an international conference on Palestine part of an urgent renewal of our commitment to genuine multilateralism.

This will require institutional reform.

This is my third proposal. It will take longer than the fast track to Palestinian statehood. But I want to be clear about the longer term objective.

The structure of the United Nations Security Council is a Cold War artefact. It is not properly multilateral. The veto is part of a zero-sum logic and should be removed.

Compare for a moment the Security Council with the International Court of Justice.

In the International Court of Justice, a wide range of legal experts from different countries can reach a considered judgment based on paying attention to the evidence and the arguments. If their judgment is not unanimous, those who disagree can register their dissent, but the judgment stands.

In the Security Council representatives vote in accordance with political calculations, and five of them possess the power to block even a near unanimous judgement.

Which of these two institutions is best suited to resolving conflicts? Or what kind of new body might we imagine that would better suit our multipolar world?

Finally, I was very struck recently when I read some comments from Gadi Eizenkot. Mr Eizenkot is a former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces. He serves now as minister without portfolio in the Israeli war cabinet.

Mr Eizenkot favours a ceasefire. He says that a ceasefire is necessary in order for the hostage releases to be completed. He has also spoken of his support for a two state solution.

I believe Mr Eizenkot is a more faithful representative of the strategic long term interests and the security of Israel than his colleagues in the present government, which stubbornly refuses a ceasefire and has set its face firmly against any possibility of a Palestinian state.

I suspect Mr Eizenkot and I would disagree on many things, and that he might well contest my account of the present crisis. In fact, I am sure that he would.

But in Israel, it seems to be that people like him – those with extensive experience in senior military and security roles – who possess the capacity for the kind of thinking I am hoping, can inform diplomacy. It is they who seem to be keeping what dialogue there is alive in Paris and Doha.

It was another such man – another former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces – who had the courage to think like this thirty years ago.

Sadly, we are now living in a world shaped by the people who killed Yitzak Rabin.

But it is not the only world possible.

What I hope I have offered here today are ideas for repairing some of the damage that has been done over the last thirty years.

To repair this damage will require a renewed and action-oriented commitment to multipolarity. This will involve a change in mindset, especially from those who believe they currently benefit from a capacity to act unilaterally and without regard for international law and the will of the global community.

But it will require more than that. It will require at the very least the reform of our existing institutions for managing international relations. Reform so that those institutions are fit for today's purposes rather than solutions to yesterday's problems.

We can start that process now. By taking urgent collective action to establish a Palestinian state. Not to start a process in which that objective is a distant goal. But to take practical steps to ensure that the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and the will of the international community are realised and realised urgently.

That's why when I met David Cameron, on January 30th and 31st , I was heartened that he's now more open to recognising Palestinian statehood sooner rather than later. I urged him to turn words into action and, as he put it, build momentum now.

The creation of a Palestinian state is an existential necessity. It is quite clear that only with the rights that sovereignty confers can the Palestinian people even hope to survive. Without a state they are condemned to a perpetual threat of destitution, annihilation, and death.

And it is only through the creation of a Palestinian state that we can hope to marginalize and eventually remove sectarian slander from the region. A just resolution of the Palestinian question is a necessary first step in a longer process of change for the people of the region.

My vision is that Palestinian statehood will allow us to see ourselves (and to be seen) alongside an Israeli state, as people with complex social and cultural identities, rather than identities defined mostly in terms of religious affiliations.

In other words, we can return to the hopeful path of the Arab Nahda. And one of its homes can be Jerusalem.

Thank you.