

Q: Sheikh Khaled Bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa Foreign Minister of Bahrain. Thank you for this interview

A: Thank you for coming. This is my first with an Israeli media channel and let's hope we can get the message through

Q: This is unordinary event – Arab foreign minister sitting down with an Israeli journalist. What made you decide to do it?

A: It should have happened a long time ago. Talking with people you differ with is always a step that would lead to easing up tensions. We have always wanted to solve the Arab-Israeli dispute or the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. We always missed the communication. Talking directly to the Israeli public and through their own media. And we didn't want to miss this opportunity here since we have this workshop.

Q: If there is one message to the Israeli public – what would it be?

A: Yes you do have peace with Egypt and Jordan and some kind of understandings with the Palestinians. But this is not the limit of the scope of where you belong. Israel is a country in the Middle East. It is part of the heritage of this region. The Jewish people has a place amongst us. So communication needs to be a prerequisite for solving all the dispute. We should talk.

Q: Lets talk about this workshop here about the Palestinian economy. Do you think the Palestinians made a mistake not showing up?

A: It is always a mistake not showing up to any effort...to alleviate the lives and the troubles of people. And it is always a mistake to miss an opportunity to achieve peace. Yes this is an economic workshop. Yes this has nothing to do with the (political) peace plan the U.S. will propose. But this was an opportunity that we wanted to see them here, but they chose not to come.

Q: Did you try to convince them?

A: Yes we did. But we respected their view. They have their own understanding. They are responsible for their own affairs. But I think this workshop is very important for the region. It's the next big thing happening after the Camp David summit when President Sadat first visited Israel and then achieved a peace agreement. Since then, peace with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world other than Egypt and Jordan hasn't been achieved. This is the next big move that, if supported by all the parties to the conflict, will have a chance to succeed.

Q: What do you think about the U.S. peace plan?

A: I think it is a genuine effort by the U.S. They always tried to solve this conflict and always been a force for good and an honest broker. Let's see the plan. I can't talk about something I haven't seen. We are not privy to it, but we do trust the U.S. that they will be able to reach an

agreement. But it would take more than the U.S. – it would take the countries of the region to work together. And it will not be a good idea to shun the role of the U.S. in the peace process.

Q: Do you think the U.S. peace plan will include an independent Palestinian state?

A: I need to know. But I am concerned about the Arab Peace Initiative which calls for a two-state solution. This has been accepted worldwide. If you look at the history of the dispute, there were a lot of mistakes. The Palestinians missed Camp David in 2000, but the Israelis missed the Arab Peace Initiative.

Q: What do you mean?

A: We didn't even hear a hint of a positive welcome of the Arab Peace Initiative from the Israeli government. We heard it from the political spectrum but the reaction of the government was full of concerns and full with distrust.

Q: Do you think there is a possibility of more normalization between the GCC countries and Israel without progress with the Palestinians? Or first peace with the Palestinians and only then normalization with Israel.

A: That's been the clichés of the past – doing this before that or the other way around. None of them can start without the other. It has to happen concurrently. We need to build trust and faith in what we are doing. The Israeli public need to trust that there are countries in the region that do want to have peace and do encourage the Palestinians to do it. And we want the Arabs to feel that Israel is a country that belongs here. We may not have normalization or diplomatic relations – yet – but we know that it's a country that exists and its people do want peace.

Q: If there is one thing you could tell Prime Minister Netanyahu that he could do – what would that be?

A: I know Prime Minister Netanyahu has his own political matters in Israel so I would advise...

Q: Or any other Prime Minister?

A: I would advise Netanyahu and the Palestinians to not miss this opportunity. This is a game changer. When you start making people's lives better, to provide education and services. This is a big opportunity for everybody to be in a better position to achieve peace.

Q: Let's talk about Bahrain-Israel relations. Do you see a breakthrough soon?

A: It depends how events evolve.

Q: What would it take?

A: Bahrain is one country in the region and we did our part. But there are other countries that need to be convinced solidly.

Q: Like Saudi Arabia.

A: All the countries in the region. We are on the path towards peace.

Q: Was the decision to let Israeli journalists into the country part of this process?

A: Yes. We did have a say with letting the Israeli journalist in for this workshop. But we need to build trust.

Q: You met Israeli officials before – who made the most impression on you?

A: When we meet we discover humanity towards each other and it's natural with every person you meet in the world. During the meetings it's always on the sidelines of the UN general assembly. In those meetings I feel that the conversation always led to understandings.

Q: Who left the biggest impression on you?

A: The late president Shimon Peres. I never met the late Prime Minister Rabin. Peres really put his heart in achieving peace. But it didn't happen.

Q: When will average Israelis be able to come here to Manama just for a weekend?

A: If we all take it seriously that these are the fruits of achieving peace and every side needs to give and consider the view of the other side, this will come naturally.

Q: Let's talk about Iran. The Bahraini position is almost similar to the Israeli position.

A: Iran is a major threat to the security and stability of the region. I don't want to use the word Iran. It's the Islamic republic. It's this regime that changed all the dynamics. We used to have a dispute with Iran when they tried to claim our country, but then they understood it wasn't possible. So they accepted it and became an ally. It didn't last long. And then after the revolution, they raised those claims again but with the cloak of religion and sect. This is very dangerous and very toxic. That also moved to affect the Arab-Israel dispute. We always knew what we need to address, but when it comes to changing all the rules of the game with an outside player like the Islamic republic and support militias and threatening the security of countries and the stability and takeover of some countries – this gives any country, including Israel, the right to defend itself against this aggression. Because we know that if it was left to the Arabs and Israelis, we would have been much closer to peace than today. But Iran is exacerbating the issue with money and weapons and with soldiers of militias.

Q: When the IDF attacks Iranian forces in Syria, do you support that?

A: What is the role of Iranian forces in Syria? It's a direct threat to the whole region including Israel. So as I said, every country has a right to defend itself.

Q: Do you think that Israel and Bahrain and other countries in the region should work together against the Iranian threat?

A: If we will achieve a mechanism of working together after we reach an understanding and remove all the barriers regarding the dispute, it will be easy. But now it doesn't mean that we don't agree that Iran is a major threat and we need to address it in a similar way.

Q: Are you concerned that we are on a path of war between Iran and the U.S?

A: If there is a war, god forbid in our region, I will blame the Islamic republic for it before anybody else. They have been calling for war. They have been attacking ships. They have been targeting tankers. Drone attacks from Yemen. They have been calling for war in the region. This is the only way they can survive. This regime only survives with aggression. Only survives with exporting the revolution. Only survives of taking control. So I think the restraint of the U.S. is very wise. But eventually if something happens it because of Iran's belligerency and Iran's attacks and most of the blame will come on them.

Q: Do think we will see sometime in the future an Israeli prime minister landing here in Manama?

A: You want to make it a good landing. A meaningful landing. And this is what we need to achieve. I don't want to give you a rosy picture, but I want to give you my aspiration as a person like you who belongs to this region that we do want to see peace and we do want to see normalization.

Q: Do you want to visit Israel?

A: Likewise. Similar. What would prevent me in my life time to visit Israel? What would prevent me from meeting people like you in your own country? But we need to do it in a way that makes both of comfortable.

Q: Sheikh Khaled Bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, thank you for this interview.