

# ODEH ABURDENE

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## Steven ERLANGER

Thank you, Renaud, very much for this overview. It was very, very helpful and very complicated. We only have an hour in total, so I have asked everyone to try to be very disciplined in their interventions. Odeh, over to you.

## Odeh ABURDENE

Steve had said to me, if I go beyond eight minutes, he would have military reinforcements, so I have to be careful. I would like to comment on what my colleague Mr. Girard just said... I enjoyed listening to Mr. Girard who is a first rate international journalist, however, I have a slight difference with him. The US remains the major power in the Middle East and the Soviets have made inroads, which they lost when Sadat came and threw them out. Today, the Russians have made headways because of their success in Syria, because they flirt with Iran and they flirt with Turkey, and they also flirt with Saudi Arabia. However, the US today and Russia, in my view, have realised that their proxies have to be under control, otherwise the Middle East will become more of a mess. Therefore, I expect that the US and Russia will have more control on their allies, otherwise they could destabilise the area even more, create more chaos and I do not think Trump or Putin want to get involved in wars in the Middle East. In my view, I am optimistic if we can have the two powers try to stabilise the region and get them to discuss the regional issues starting with Syria.

In the past, we heard a lot about hegemony, but the way the Middle East is structured today you have several major regional powers. You have Turkey. You have Iran. You have Saudi Arabia. You have Egypt, and of course, Israel. None of these powers, based on the current alignment, could never be the hegemonic of the Middle East. It would remain unstable but no one power would dominate. I think that none of these powers really want a war going on. I do not think that Netanyahu wants to go to war. I do not think the Iranians want a war that would be devastating to them and the Turks realise that a war would also weaken Turkey, because of the Kurdish situation. An American-Russian cooperation is in the interests of the region. I hope they can cooperate to make the region more prosperous and secure.

I would like to talk, when we talk about the region, we always talk about politics, but I think that economics is far more dangerous than politics. The economics are more complicated, and I just want to give you one example. Today, we have 400 million Arabs, by the year 2050 we will have 800 million Arabs and by the year 2085, according to projections that are realistic, you would have 1.4 billion Arabs. How are we going to feed these people? How are we going to create jobs for these people? How are we going to keep the area stable? Where are we going to get enough water? These are the issues that I think most of us do not talk about and these are the issues that I think will determine whether the Middle East will be more chaotic, more dangerous, more violent. What happened in 2011 and the various uprisings were mainly economic, but also came from repression and mismanagement.

In my view, that is a topic that has to be dealt with and one where reform is necessary for prosperity. However, in my view to have reform you cannot be a reformer if you are not a believer in the rule of law. You cannot bring prosperity and growth without an independent judiciary. You cannot grow unless you have a good education. Therefore, the restructuring that has to take place begins with education. It begins with creating a culture of venture capitalists; Arabs are great traders, great merchants, but they are not industrialists. You see Arabs investing in hotels or real estate, but I cannot find a single Arab venture capitalist. There is no Steve Jobs, there is no Apple. It is lacking because we do not have that culture and a venture culture requires risk-taking and that is something that has to be taught, something that has to be embedded. If you look at Arab investments, they are either in bank deposit, treasury deposits, stocks. I find many Arab entrepreneurs in America who have ideas and want people to finance them, but yet when they go to the region, they cannot get any financing because of the risk element. That in my view is a key reform that should be undertaken. How do you make entrepreneurs? Otherwise, you are not making things and that is the problem in the Arab region; they do not make anything, they export oil. I was in China two years ago and I was so impressed. In 1978 the per capita income in China was something like USD 600, last year it was over USD 7,000. The Chinese have one



this through excellent education, hard work, and their skill in using technology. If the Arabs do not follow the concept of being risk takers, making products for export, the region will be more dismal and chaotic.

One last thing I want to talk about and that is Palestine. This issue is not going to go away. Right now, it is not a priority on the international scene, but it is an issue that resonates with Arabs and Muslims. We keep talking about a two-state solution, but so far nothing is happening and it is not sustainable. We talked about a two-state solution last year. The Arab League has endorsed an Arab peace plan proposed by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Now has come the time for Mr Netanyahu to put forward an Israeli peace plan that will bring about a Palestinian state. We keep hearing about the Trump and Kushner peace plan which no one knows the contents of yet. However, no peace plan will succeed without Arab Jerusalem being the capital of the Palestinian state. Thank you.

**Steven ERLANGER**

Thank you very much, Odeh. The dilemma of the Palestinians seizes me quite a lot, having covered the region some and Abu Mazen seems very lonely. The succession is not clear, Gaza and the West Bank are split, and no one really wants to hear about it. Maybe we will elsewhere in the panel but thank you.