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Mona, over to you.

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I hope you are not too tired by now. Permettez-moi de remercier une fois encore Thierry de Montbrial de nous réunir une fois de plus dans ce club privilégié qu'est devenue la World Policy Conference et dans ce beau pays qui nous est cher à tous, le Maroc. Il reste à souhaiter que son discours de ce matin serve d'électrochoc, c'est notre seul espoir pour l'avenir. Now, I will switch to English because I imitate Thierry in everything. I would like to start by quoting Thierry de Montbrial's incisive study on the new political era, when he says, 'The Middle East and the fight against terrorism have suffered directly from the chilling of East-West relations, occurring against a backdrop of reveries for influence rooted in history.' Yes, that is quite right. Today, there are five regional poles, each vying for leadership of the Middle East: Egypt; Saudi Arabia; Turkey; Iran and Israel. As is obvious, two are from the Arab region and three others outside. Let me start by Egypt, noblesse oblige.

Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Middle East and the Nile Basin are all geographic entities in which Egypt, a country of 100 million citizens and the biggest army of the region, is either part of or is on the periphery. This geographic position makes Egypt at the crossroads between two continents and several geopolitical regions. This multitude of areas and positioning is an advantage and an opportunity for Egypt, just as much as it is a handicap and difficulty. The advantage is that the country can take advantage of this multiple belonging, in order to diversify its relations and establish itself as a meeting point. The handicap is that Egypt's neighbourhood has so many contradictions and differences of interest that an alliance with one can be interpreted as hostility towards another. The challenge for Egypt is to balance its policy between the various partners and geopolitical areas that surround it. This is the challenge that President Sisi of Egypt is facing today. With several countries in North Africa, Egypt shares the difficulty of reconciling their African Arabism, it shares with those of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, the difficulty of reconciling their Arabism with their Mediterranean identity. Egypt today is torn between its multiple identities, between swathes of its identity that derive from its geographical position and its identity markers that it derives from its socio-economic political history. This tension is amplified by neighbourhood turbulence.

Where should Egypt undertake its leadership and ambitions? What are its strengths? Today, Egypt does not seem to have been able to keep the means of influence that it previously had on the Arab world, because of the differences in the Arab world that make it increasingly susceptible to geopolitical fragmentation, which is due to changes in the world order and the emergence of new Arab powers in the Maghreb and the Gulf. However, Egypt holds several geopolitical cards that, if it is played rationally, can be major assets. One, along with Jordan, Egypt is the only official gateway in the dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis and therefore, a key channel in any solution to this latest conflict. Relations were not optimal between Egypt and Hamas, which President Sisi accuses of destabilising the Sinai and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. In this conflict, Turkey and Qatar saw the opportunity to eliminate Egypt from the peace talks, accusing it of aligning alongside Israel against Hamas. Egypt finally emerged as an indispensable interlocutor in the diplomatic marathon that led to the ceasefire. Three, Egypt has also kept its military supremacy in the region and remains the first army in the Arab world and all joint defence plans in the area cannot forego this army's contribution. Saudi Arabia, which now aspires to the leadership of the Arab world, despite some differences with Egypt, shows great interest in rapprochement with Egypt, as shown by the visit of the Saudi King to Cairo. Via the Suez Canal, Egypt is the obligatory channel between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean and on to the Atlantic. International trade in general, and specifically the transport of Gulf oil, largely depends on it.



What are the vulnerabilities? One is to manage the contradictions that are there. To maintain balance in the neighbourhood, Egypt is obliged to invest in reconciling contradictory policies. In its relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt must manage its own tendency to encourage the Bashar al-Assad regime, while fighting the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and hostility that Saudi Arabia brings to this regime, because of its ties to Shiite Iran. Egypt is still obliged by the Camp David Accords it signed with Israel, while sharing with the Arab and Muslim world the developing aversion towards the latter on the Palestinian issue. On the same issue, Egypt has to manage the sense of Arab solidarity with the Gaza Strip, despite it being managed by Hamas, whose ideology is aligned with the Muslim Brothers, which are opponents, if not enemies of the Egyptian regime. The tensions between Iran and most Arab states continue to frustrate the emergence of regionalists.

What about Egypt's relations with the Western world? Take Russia, in Sisi, Putin believes he has found the right match for a military partnership, representing what Putin sees as an ally; a military man who has risen up in politics trying to rule in difficult circumstances and in need of support. The result was a Russian arms deal with a value of USD 3 billion, backed by Saudi and Emirati funds. As for Syria, Egyptian policies follow Moscow's line. Economically, Russia is building a nuclear power plant, offering Egypt a loan of USD 25 billion. After more than two years, flights have recently resumed between Moscow and Cairo, signalling the return of Russian tourists, who had represented about 40% of Egypt's tourist market. An interesting point to make here is when talking about the Orthodox church in Russia, interestingly the Copts, who are Orthodox in their majority, are very supportive of Russia and their Pope has made it a point of visiting Moscow. As for the US, despite apparently warm personal relations between President Sisi and President Trump, Sisi had hoped for better relations with Washington to maintain stability and address the country's economic challenges. Clearly, this has not yet materialised, moreover, with the unpredictability of the Trump administration and lack of diplomatic talent on the ground, Washington risks ceding hard-won influence in the region without putting up the slightest resistance.

Now to domestic politics. In March, voters re-elected President Sisi to a second term. He has calculated that improved economic growth and greater security will be sufficient to retain public support despite economic hardships. Attracting foreign investment and international aid is a top state priority, which explains his marathon visits to a plethora of countries including China, Russia, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan, France, Germany, the White House, Cyprus, Greece, etc. Furthermore, with democracy under threat across the globe, calls for broad democratic reform have been replaced by more basic ones. Citizen's expectations have shifted from questions of governance and service provisions, to those of security and stability. These are the key words of the regime today, security and stability.

Interestingly, Sisi's main supporters are those who have suffered most under the Islamic regime of Morsi, women and the Coptic Christians. Women have gained more visibility since he came to power, whether in Parliament or at ministerial level and the Coptic Christians, who have seen their churches destroyed, their shops vandalised, their people slaughtered, attacks until today by the Muslim extremists, see in him a saviour. He has made a point of talking about all Egyptians as one, not Muslims and Christians. However, have Islamists disappeared? Certainly not, even if they are on the wane, combatting Isis in Sinai remains Egypt's main objective to stop the spread of Islamist insurgency.

What can the West do? Focus more on respect for the rule of law, rather than democracy and human rights. There are situations where there is virtue in giving supremacy to securing a sound legal framework before the population can be safely consulted. Therefore, more useful initiatives would be actions designed to reform educational systems, encourage Arab and Muslim religious authorities to speak out in ways that de-legitimise terrorism.

In conclusion, although the basic features of this new era of the modern Middle East are largely unattractive, this should not be a cause for fatalism. Much is a matter of degree. There is a fundamental difference between a Middle East lacking formal peace agreement and one defined by terrorism, inter-state conflict and civil war, between one housing a powerful Iran and one dominated by Iran. Or between one that has an uneasy relationship with the United States and one filled with hatred of the country. Time also makes a difference. Eras in the Middle East can last as long as a century, or as little as a decade and a half. It is clearly in the interests of the United States and Europe, that the emerging era be as brief as possible, and that it be followed by a more benign one, because the Middle East will remain a troubled and troubling part of the world for decades to come. Thank you for your attention.



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Thank you so much.