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Thierry de Montbrial

I will now switch back to French, because Mona, I would like you to speak French, or half English. *Pourquoi pas ?* As you all know, Mona Makram Ebeid has been a friend of the WPC almost since the beginning and we are eager to listen to you. I say that in English, which by the way shows us the power of women.

Mona Makram Ebeid

I want to thank Thierry for inviting me to the WPC, which to me has become the best think tank in Europe, particularly when it is held in my favorite country, which is Morocco.

What I propose to do today, is to offer you three alternative scenarios on the future of the Arab world, bearing in mind that our current Arab world is suffering from a future deficit. Nobody speaks about the future because they do not know where to go. That means also that ambitious dreams for an alternative and better future, as envisaged in 2011 in what was ridiculously called the Arab Spring, these ambitions and dreams have been shoved aside in favour of short-term goals of maintaining stability and security. This is all what the Arab world wants today, stability and security and avoiding civil war or state collapse. There is no talk about democracy or human rights, Trump has given us the lead, and these are taboo words today.

One thing is almost sure: that the Arab Middle East will remain a region of high stress for the foreseeable future. I am thinking here within the horizons of 2025 to 2035, not too long, not too short either. We are living through an age of technological revolution as we have heard for the past three days. Changes in communications technology has ended the Arab states' monopoly of information, created webs of informed and mobilised citizens and greatly contributed to the upheavals of 2011 and beyond. Today, Arab governments are trying to learn from the Chinese, the only thing they have tried to learn, how to control this new information dragon and to regain their dominance, but it is too late. The top-down monopoly has already been broken and people have not only gone beyond their fear, but almost. Breakthroughs in Artificial Intelligence could strengthen the control capacities of governments, but they could also be used by terrorist groups as a form of cyber weapon, as we heard, in a completely different direction. Therefore, technology will be one of the key wildcards in the near future.

Let us go to some of the most important countries in the region and let us start with Egypt; noblesse oblige. It is no secret that Egypt faces a staggering array of demographic, economic, political, environmental and security challenges. However, the current administration of President Sisi has taken a number of important steps to grapple with these, including economic growth, job creation, energy needs, etc. Therefore, it is in the realm of possibility and with a lot of imagination, that the current trajectory could produce enough economic development and job growth to keep the country relatively stable. Perhaps an Egyptian failure is too big to contemplate, and it just impresses upon us the importance of avoiding it. However, it remains the biggest challenge in the region and one that we continue to ignore at our own peril.

What is the geopolitical context we are talking about? This includes conditions of fragile states, a broken regional order and a changing set of global dynamics impacting the region. On the other hand, what are the effects of the global powers on all these changes? The new US national security strategy unveiled under the Trump administration, recognizes that great power competition, particularly with Russia and China, has returned as the main driver of security and foreign policy concerns. In this case, the Middle East will be an arena for great power competition.



Finally, what are the three scenarios envisaged? One is a muddling through scenario, meaning a form of continuity; *plus ça change et plus c'est la même chose*. That means the Arab world will remain a region of strained economies, high youth unemployment and fragile states. Second, things fall apart completely. If we look at the development of the past decade, we can see that the situation has gone from bad to worse. There are more failed states, more armed non-state actors and terrorist groups. The socio-economic conditions that drove revolt a decade ago are generally worse. Also, the absence of inclusive and responsible political institutions is worse today. There are a number of ways that things could get considerably worse. For example, tensions between Iran and Israel or Iran and Saudi Arabia could escalate into all-out war. For example, Egypt and Saudi Arabia could stumble and fall as other large states have in the recent past. Terrorist groups could regroup and use cyberwarfare or weapons of mass destruction. Our third scenario is where things dramatically improve, and this is the one I support. If Egypt and Saudi Arabia succeed in their ambitious economic and social plans and break through to high levels of growth and employment, that would raise living standards and relieve domestic pressure. If the three civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria reach a suitable negotiated settlement, this would have a positive effect on the region. On another level, and this is the one I encourage, it is not out of the question to imagine resurgent civic and political demands leading to a step back from authoritarianism and the re-appreciation of the wisdom of inclusive and responsive political systems. These could appear either in the form of democratizing republics or constitutional monarchies.

In conclusion, what I have tried to do is not to predict, because you cannot predict in the Arab world, but to identify trends that policy-makers should be aware of and also identify possible opportunities and positive outcomes. Thank you for your attention.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much, Mona, for this excellent presentation, which was also concise. I think you are the shortest so far and you respected the timing perfectly. Let me just ask you a short question. I was a bit surprised that you put Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the same basket, so to speak, when you mentioned the hopes for success of development plans. Do you establish any correlation between the two countries?

Mona Makram Ebeid

No, there is no correlation at all except that they are two big states in the Arab region, and they are both undergoing reform on their own.

Thierry de Montbrial

Do they have a real chance of success in your judgement?

Mona Makram Ebeid

Which one of them?

Thierry de Montbrial

Both of them. I mean, Saudi Arabia has a lot of opportunities to spend money, including hundreds of billions of dollars to appear weak, as they did recently. Do you think they have a chance to be successful with the MBS plan and in Egypt too?

Mona Makram Ebeid

No comment.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you, that is a very concise and precise answer.