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Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies, good morning. It is a great pleasure for me now to have this discussion with Professor, Minister Nabil Fahmy whose current position is Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public policy of the American University of Cairo. He is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs of his country, and I would also say, one of the most respected thinkers in international affairs in the region. He is very well known worldwide, and we have had many occasions to meet, in particular in Beijing, where in the last few years until the pandemic, we regularly had a most interesting meeting on global affairs with some distinguished Chinese authorities.

Thank you very much for accepting my invitation to participate in the WPC. Once again, we are proud to have you here and I would just like to ask you to start the discussion by talking about your general impressions of the discussions over the last two days in terms of your perception of the mood of all these people with an interest in international affairs. I remind you that this is the first international gathering of significance that has taken place, talking of private institutions, since the lockdown. What is your general impression?

Nabil Fahmy

First of all, Thierry, thank you very much for the invitation. This is a very prestigious event and the last two days have been very informative for me. I also think that the fact we started our dialogue in Beijing and are actually convening in the United Arab Emirates, reflects what is happening around the world in terms of Chinese power, as well as the activism and constructivism of the United Arab Emirates. I would also like thank the hosts very much for doing this.

You and I attend many conferences, but this has been interesting because it is about policy and policy ultimately determines what we do in the future; it is not just an analysis of history, which is useful but not enough to move forward. The other point I really took from all this is that there is an underlying emphasis on the fact that we have to work together. If you wanted to arrange an event in support of collective action, this is something that is frankly a primary even in that respect. Everybody here has been emphasizing that we cannot do this alone, however strong or weak we are. Third, it has been factual not theory. Everybody has come up with a case, given us the figures, told us the real facts and then built the policy orientation. I have been attending the overwhelming majority of the sessions and I gained insight and information from every one of them. I do not leave with a sense of euphoria that we have solutions for all our problems, that would be naive, but definitely with a sense that the world

wants to work together, at least the thinkers in the world, and in that respect, I want to thank you for convening the event.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you. I think what you are saying fits quite well with what Dr. Gargash said yesterday because when you are not represented here, which is the case of most countries, when you are not among the giants, the superpowers, you have to spend a lot of time understanding each other and trying to convince others of reasonable positions and ruling out the extremist ones.

Most of today we will be discussing Middle East issues in a broad sense, and in the last two days I would say we have often alluded to Egypt without discussing anything specific. I say this cautiously because I do not want to be attacked on this remark, but historically, Egypt is perhaps the most important country in the Middle East, although not a superpower, and also, of course in terms of population, tradition, etc. How would you describe Egypt's role today in the geopolitical scene of the Middle East, which has been through major transformations in the last two years? Of course, I am thinking of the Abraham Accords, but not only that; there have also been huge internal problems, so I think it would be interesting to hear your views on Egypt both domestically and internationally. One of the things we all agree on is that it is impossible to entirely separate domestic and foreign affairs.

Nabil Fahmy

Just very quickly, the Middle East generally has been a theatre for international engagement because of superpower rivalry in the past and because we attracted them more than we actually should have as Middle Easterners. I say this because the world has been changing and we have been changing at the same time. When I was Minister, I would occasionally joke, but it was actually true, that my nightmares were easier than my days because I would wake up and see that we had a problem on the western border with Libya, a water problem looking south, there's no Arab-Israeli peace process, problems in the Levant with Syria. You go down to Yemen and there is a problem there with the issue of terrorism. There were a lot of things. The Middle East has and is going through significant change both geopolitically, because of what is happening around the world, but also regionally. As you said, I mentioned the regional conflicts, but the transformations are also going through domestically throughout the region and including in my own country. We had two revolutions in three years and that in itself shows you that there was a domestic desire for change. I criticize but in a constructive sense – and I say this back home, this is not something I only say abroad – I have always criticized my own institutions and colleagues; we need to be more proactive; we do not have to wait for events to happen.

When I moved into the academic environment, I brought up the fact that a lot of elements in the region had a generic resistance to change. What I see as different now is that up until 2010, 2015, the last few years, everybody in the Middle East was talking about the past. Then suddenly from 2011 onwards, every government in the Middle East today starts off not by emphasizing their proud heritage, but also emphasizing what they will do for their people in the future. That has also happened in Egypt. We have problems, we are looking for a secure border on Libya and there is progress there, but it has not happened yet. We want to solve the

water issue and I am very candid about these things, there is no progress there. We are disappointed at the lack of a peace process between the Arabs and the Israelis, the Palestinians and the Israelis in particular, because we want peace for both sides and so on. We were very busy domestically because we cannot argue that having had two revolutions did not attract our attention because of course it did. You pursue foreign policy to achieve domestic aspirations. In other words, even if you are looking for resources, it is to solve your service requirements. One thing that is paramount about Egypt in the past and in the future is we live on two continents, Sinai is actually in Asia, so we live in Africa and Asia, we live on two seas. We import our food. We get our water from abroad, national security capacity from abroad and we are trying to attract investment. You cannot do that without an active foreign policy.

What I have seen recently and this last year in particular, is that Egypt is much more engaged now in trying to determine movement on regional issues. That has been clear in Libya since the summer of last year, and just a week ago, the Egyptian Foreign Minister met the Syrian Foreign Minister, and I would say attended a very well-arranged meeting by Iraq at the General Assembly of regional players in the Middle East with a number of Arab players. We are engaged in a dialogue with Turkey; it is very slow so do not be overly optimistic. I would also suggest that we need to engage with the Iranians, and I am always going to be a proponent of trying to push the Arab-Israeli peace process.

You can say that Egypt has faced a couple of hurdles but there is strength in the system. I doubt very few countries in the region and frankly some abroad could have survived two revolutions in three years and come out standing. We are 104 million, and by the time we finish this meeting tomorrow we will be a bit more than that, and they are not going away and 65% are less than 25 years old. You will see more activism in terms of Egypt and yesterday, I think, it was announced that we are going to host the environment conference after the one in Glasgow, and we will engage with any country in the region that wants to move forward.

You asked about changes in the Middle East, and everybody is talking about moving forward. There is progress on Libya, and I would hope but doubt that we will have the elections in December; I would love to be proven wrong. It is more important for me to have successful elections and whether they are delayed a month or on-time is irrelevant, but at least there is a desire for a Libyan solution and of course, foreign interference has to decrease. I do not see an Arab-Israeli peace process happening immediately, but there is humanitarian engagement, that is a bit more than it was in the past, but we need to move on that as well. We will support all of our Arab brothers in the existential threats they face in the region but again, we honestly believe that the way forward is to engage others, in many ways with tough love. We need to look forward and let me take this occasion to actually call on Egypt and the Arab countries. I think we should all speak much more about our vision for the region, what we want to see for the Middle East as a whole in concrete terms. By the way, we do not have to agree but we need to engage in a dialogue and let us see how much agreement and disagreement we have. Allowing others to set the agenda is very dangerous.

Thierry de Montbrial

Thank you very much for these extremely interesting remarks. I would now like to put two important aspects of the current situation together. On the one hand we have at least a partial

retreat of the United States. I say partial because I think we should be quite cautious in describing the situation, but whatever the exact term, some powers have taken advantage of this situation to intervene in Mediterranean or Middle East affairs in what I would say is a relatively 19th century way. I am thinking of Turkey and Russia in particular, typically in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. I made a point in my own introductory speech, and I will repeat it, that we should refer more to the 19th century or pre-World War I situation. On the other hand, from a more sociological viewpoint, there is a kind of generational fight going on between conservatism and modernism everywhere in the Middle East. One of the things I admire in this country, for example, is that this generational rivalry is dealt with in a relatively smooth way and things are moving in the right direction. I think they are trying to do the same in Saudi Arabia. Seen from outside, the situation in Egypt seems much more complicated maybe because of the size of the population and historic reasons; after all the Muslim Brothers phenomenon was born in Egypt. I would like you to comment on that because the future developments in your country will certainly have a huge impact on the rest of the region.

Nabil Fahmy

Let me start with my own country. The basic challenge between the Muslim Brotherhood and the rest of the Egyptian system was about our identity. Are we Egyptians including some Muslim Brotherhood or are we Muslim Brotherhood with some Egyptians? That is an existential threat and that is why the clash happened so quickly. It is actually why, not only political influencers but also the middle-class were actually against the former government that was being implemented by the Muslim Brotherhood when they came into power. The Muslim Brotherhood was born in Egypt and there will be some trends in Egypt, but the reality is that if you are trying to build for the future then our youth want to be engaged in the world. I have three children, two of whom got their jobs internationally on the Internet. I had to compete for my job with the person next door, they are competing internationally and are comfortable with that. They are passionately Egyptian but at the same time, they are part of the world. A dogmatic ideology does not fit Egypt. We live on two seas and we need to engage the world. I actually think that that ideology is a threat to modernity. The influence of the Brotherhood in Egypt today is significantly diminished and the current government, whether one agrees or disagrees with some details of policy is irrelevant, is activist that tries to respond to the immediate needs of the people.

This last year there was a shift between a focus on only domestic to having the self-confidence to host the environment conference and to engage with the Turks and other players in the region. I see that as a positive. Dr. Anwar made a point yesterday that I support 100%, which is that we need to speak together as Arabs. We do not always have to agree, the Arabs are lovely in their ability to agree, our problem is our inability to disagree. I actually want a discussion where there are differences of opinion because understanding your opinion and having mine understood is paramount, whether we agree or not comes in second. The more we engage with our non-Arab partners, the more important it is for us Arabs to speak together as well, so it is not at the expense of priorities here.

Going back quickly to Egypt, there is clear evidence of economic progress and even post-pandemic we are looking at 4% to 5% growth this coming year, which is significant. It is not

enough for us because we need to go up to 8% or 9% but you cannot jump to that from zero. Just a few weeks ago we issued a new human rights doctrine, which again is not perfect, and they are not perfect anywhere in the world, or their applications. However, it is tremendous progress and reflects the fact that we want to move forward. The government is focusing on youth quite constructively, though frankly I would like to attract attention for our age bracket. In the short-term it is going to be a challenge, but I am much more comfortable about the medium-term. As an Egyptian, given our weight and the role I think we have to play, I also want us to be able to look long-term and to engage with our neighbors.

Thierry de Montbrial

This is why we introduced the session this morning in trying to think about the Middle East in 30 years' time. Before I give the floor to questions, let me ask you to briefly say what you expect from the Europeans? When I say the Europeans, I am aware that it is almost as difficult as talking about the Arabs.

Nabil Fahmy

I will start off by saying that we are all in search of identity, from America right through the superpowers into our region, but frankly that also applies in Europe. We look at Europe, traditionally our closest friends, and we just do not feel that you are giving us a clear message and that is obvious. We are actually engaging with Europe quite strongly economically but the debate on general policy issues is more formal than intense. I would love to see a stronger European engagement on how we work on the Mediterranean and also on all the waterways because as the discussions over the last few days have shown, for example, the difficulties with supply chains, etc. I emphasize again the point we have heard throughout this conference; we are all in this game together. Nobody can say they are going to stay out and then reap the benefits or isolate themselves from the negative implications. As Europeans, you are strong, healthy countries with good economies. I grant you have your own priorities and I do not want you to embrace ours, but there has to be a much stronger level of engagement than there is today. I would argue here that I do not want to make you Egyptian, and you should not try to make me French, but we should try to manage the optimum advantages we get from the relationship and then manage our differences so that they are not detrimental to either of us. In all candidness and leaving aside my diplomatic experience, Europe needs to be a stronger player than it is today.

Thierry de Montbrial

I agree. Thank you very much.