

# EBTESAM AL-KETBI

President and Founder of the Emirates Policy Center

## Ebtesam Al-Ketbi

Thank you. In general, the geopolitical and economic characteristics of the Middle East during the ongoing decade 2021-2030 are likely to be significantly governed by the following realities. First, the post-Covid scenarios and its economic and security fallouts. Second, the dynamics arising from the declining presence and involvement of the US in the Middle East leading to questions over the possible emergence of collective security structures in the Gulf region and beyond. Regional security arrangements and geopolitical and economic competition in the East Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea will also be critical factors. Third, is preparation for the post-oil era, which includes prioritizing the agenda of combatting climate change challenges that also raises questions related to the shifts in the social contract in Gulf countries and the post-oil rentier policies. Also allied to this reality are the requirements imposed by these policies to manage the public sphere. There are questions about linking entitlements for citizens with achievements and productivity and the subsequent changes in the work culture and conditions. Fourth, the extent of impact of growing Sino-American trade and geopolitical competition on the Middle East and regional countries with the new Cold War, would also be an important development. Moreover, are we going to witness a multilateral international order and severe international polarization? If so, would that be followed by the US alliances in the Gulf, the Arab region and other countries in the region to establish some balance? Such a policy would diversify current strategic options and trade with China or Russia. This raises the question of whether the Middle East could see attempts by post-Washington allies to strike a relative balance between the US and other great powers and this is what we will see in this decade. Also, considering the decline of political Islam in Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, Jordan and other countries, it is likely that this decade or at least part of it will become the post-political Islam phase. However, there are no strong indications to suggest that Middle East countries and societies are prepared to overcome the identity crisis. The entanglement of security, economy and politics with history, religion and questions of identity are highly likely to continue and both societal agreement on the legal system and the management of public sphere, the system of rights and freedom, are all linked to a single question. Will Middle Eastern countries become more stable or prone to conflict and have lessons been learned from the past two decades? If the decline of political Islam continues, what domestic alternatives will replace it? Will these alternatives be able to tackle the multiple structural problems in running public affairs in the region? These are the questions.

## John Andrews, Contributing Editor to *The Economist* and *Project Syndicate*

I am very pleased you raised the post-political idea because it is very interesting. We heard in the Afghanistan panel, that Al-Qaeda and Islamic State are by no means dead and could be



reviving. However, as you said, what is happening in Morocco is actually very encouraging. You also mentioned post-oil, which reminds me of that famous saying by Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso in 1975. He was a Venezuelan oil minister and he said, “I call petroleum the devil’s excrement”. It is a very colorful phrase but of course, it has quite a lot of force because if you think of outsiders’ influence and interventions in the Arab world and Iran, an awful lot of it has been because of oil and gas and the struggle to control them. The past has been quite complicated but perhaps we are moving towards a post-oil era.

**Ebtesam Al-Ketbi**

A long time ago I wrote an article, *Is oil a blessing or a curse on the GCs?*

**John Andrews**

Exactly.