

## ITAMAR RABINOVICH

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### **Itamar Rabinovich**

Thank you. In past years, I have been involved several times in an effort to do forecasting and we tried to develop a methodology. There is a normal tendency among experts and others to simply assume that current trends will continue but you know that surprises happen when a trend breaks and there is a fundamental shift. Of course, the trick is to identify which trends will continue and which will stop dramatically at some point. I will try some of that at the end of my initial comments.

I would like to look at the dominant trends in the Middle East in the past few years and see whether they will continue or not. What do we have? In a way, we have the post-Arab Spring, something that Ebtisam referred to in a different way. The underlying social and political unrest and economic aggravation that led to the outburst of the Arab Spring were defeated in the middle of the previous century, but they did not disappear. They are still there, and the unrest is still there, and I assume it will continue in the coming decade. It may burst out in this or that place, but it will continue and remain a defining element of the Middle Eastern scene.

Second, there is the rise of the two regional powers or major powers, Iran and Turkey. It was not the case decades ago, but it has been the case with Iran beginning in 1979 and Turkey beginning in the first decade of this century. Now, these two states with a population of about 90 million, strong economies and armies, have a desire to revive a glorious imperial past, seeking hegemony or partial hegemony in the Middle East. Of course, that has been a major defining force and it will continue.

Third, there is the pivoting away of the United States from the region that began dramatically with Obama, continued in different ways under Trump and of course, we have just had a dramatic manifestation of that in Afghanistan. I think it will continue though it might be moderated to some extent because the Middle East is not an area you can just ignore. Even if the Asia-Pacific area is uppermost on your mind, you cannot ignore the Middle East. Somebody once said after 9/11, if you do not visit the Middle East, the Middle East will visit you. I do not think that the United States could afford a complete departure or exit, it will have to find a way to live with a continued presence in the Middle East. The other pole of this development is the return of Russia, which I think was underplayed by Vitaly Naumkin earlier today. That is seen in their appearance in Syria, a deciding element in enabling Bashar al-Assad to remain in power, of course in partnership with Iran. There are the games they are playing in Libya and elsewhere, so they are here. Of course, there is also China which until now has been more interested in the Middle East in terms of economics and infrastructure. It

has not sought a military presence or diplomatic might. I think we may see later in this decade an assertion of China's growing influence.

Finally, there is the Arab-Israeli or now I may say the Israeli-Palestinian issue. What has been happening is the Arab-Israeli conflict is being telescoped into an Israeli-Palestinian conflict and I think it is being modulated. The Abraham Accords, what is happening among 20% of Israel's Arab population, the tendency to join Israeli society and politics, with now for the first time an Israeli, Arab, Palestinian party in the government coalition. All this means that the issue is there, and it could be exacerbated with further escalations of violence, primarily with Gaza. If the Palestinian Authority collapses, then maybe there will be another form of Intifada cannot be ruled out. What you used to call the Arab-Israeli conflict has become hybrid, with more and more Arab states wanting to normalize but the Palestinian issue is here to stay, and the region will have to find a way of living with this more complex reality.

Where I think the trends could be broken is that there could definitely be a collapse of one of the recent Arab regimes. There could be another round of Palestinian-Israeli fighting and the conflict between Israel and Iran over the nuclear issue and what Iran is building in Syria, could lead to another serious armed collision. That collision would not be limited to just one country, a war on the northern front of Israel would include Lebanon, Syria and Iran. It would be a massive event if it happened. It is not necessarily a very optimistic outlook but who in the Middle East can afford to be optimistic.

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

Thank you very much. It is interesting, Ebtessam you referred to the post-oil era but of course the title of this session is not just on the geopolitics but also the economics. Of course, our neighbor here, Saudi Arabia, has famously got its Vision 2030 and Dubai has the 10X concept, etc. I think there is a desire throughout the Arab world to try to think of an economic future that is somehow separate from all the political pressures, which seem to be ever present and probably ever permanent.