

MEMDUH KARAKULLUKÇU

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Fareed Yasseen, Ambassador of Iraq to the United States

Last but not least we have Memduh Karakullukçu, who is the Founding President of the Global Relations Forum and a Founding Partner of Kanunum, Chairman of the Kroton Consultancy and a Founder of a university, as well as a graduate of Course 6 and Course 14 at MIT.

Memduh Karakullukçu

Thank you very much, Ambassador. Let me start like everyone else by thanking the organizers and Thierry de Montbrial for really being persistent about this conference and making it happen. It is a very personal thank you, I had really missed being with friends and making new ones, the exchanges at dinners, so this was fabulous. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your effort is very much appreciated.

When I looked at the program, I liked seeing the Middle East agenda on the third day. Although there is an extensive Middle East emphasis, it is still the third day. To me that signified that the Middle East crises, the pressing nature of the Middle East issues have been pushed back and the world has bigger fish to fry these days. That is always good, and I felt comfortable with that choice. Usually, when we talk about the Middle East, myself included, we start and end up on a downbeat note. I remember my last pre-Covid presentation was in Singapore on the Middle East and I was going on about how the Asian economic miracle was not applicable to the Middle East, that the Middle East is in a deadlock and the Asian moment is not going to happen here. There is always this negative sentiment and analysis. After the experience of Covid, I thought I really did not want to start with a negative message. I took a clean palette and looked at the news headlines about the Middle East for the last 12 months and I read quite a bit, just the clippings. I think there is something in the air. If you look at the list, Libya is in a much better position and hopefully we will have elections there. The IS and related radical terror seem to be under control. The Abraham Accords are historically important. The Saudi-Iranian communication going on in Baghdad is of critical significance. Intra-GCC rapprochement is encouraging and then Turkish, UAE, Egypt governments are talking. We just heard Minister Fahmy say it was going very slowly, nevertheless there is talking. If you put all those together, there seems to be something in the air. Either it is my post-Covid, (though we are still in it but hopefully coming to its end) desire to see something positive, or something substantive is really taking place. Then I came across Vitaly Naumkin's paper on the Possibility of a Third Renaissance for the region, and I was further encouraged, so maybe there is something in the air.

My usual analysis for the region is more or less like an insoluble puzzle. The whole region unfortunately rests on centuries old rifts, fault lines, ethnic, sectarian, religious and it is all over the place. At the sub-state level, state level, subregional level, regional, region-wide, it is just a fragmented, ethnically sectarian fragmented geography. I will not go into the details but, when you start with that premise, my basic conclusion is that these rifts open the region to external power politics. Outside players can easily play sides across these rifts based on their interests, and stability in the region becomes very fragile.

Domestically, it paves the way for sectarian politics, sectarian governments and that creates state capture and that in turn creates ineffective governments. When you put external meddling plus ineffective governments, then international capital does not feel comfortable enough to flow to the region, so you do not get much economic progress. What you end up with is economics, domestic politics and international politics creating a vicious deadlock and the region is stuck in a bad equilibrium. It is such a difficult puzzle that you have to solve all three strands at the same time because it is not a linear problem. It is a complex non-linear problem and there is no way of saying if I start at one end I can just follow the steps across the whole problem and the region will all move to a better state. Of course, this is a very discouraging, upsetting and downbeat analysis. On top of it, because of all the grievances the populations have lived through, there was and probably still is public impatience about policy solutions. You have a puzzle in your hand where you have to solve three elements, or maybe more, at once and you are under time pressure from the public. The problem seems indeed very difficult but again, starting with the data from the last 12 months, there seems to be something in the air.

So I went back and tried to reformulate my model to think how else we can think about the whole system. What I think is happening or at least what I will be testing over the coming months, is the possibility that the puzzle in our hands has been exposed to systemic shocks. We have basically shaken the puzzle and the pieces have changed place and become aligned in different ways. That does not necessarily mean we can now solve it linearly and easily after the shake-up, but this may be a different puzzle. It looks different. Those shocks include obviously Covid, which everyone lived through, so it is an across-the-board systemic shock. Then there are the tragic experiences of the last decade in the region which condition expectations and fears of the populations. To be specific, there is the history, memory and ongoing tragedies of Libya, Syria, Yemen in our minds. Then there is the systemic anxiety about the climate crisis for all of us. These are all systemic disturbances to the system as well as our mental models. I think these shocks may potentially impact both the internal and the external dynamics in a positive way. We have all been searching for the win-win arguments in these societies rather than zero-sum conditions. Internally, what I think we will now observe and are observing is that a lot of these shocks have shown not the benefits of win-win but the costs of lose-lose. When you see that if you do not have an effective governance structure, you end up with a tragic lose-lose scenario, the opposite scenario of working effectively together for a win-win structure comes into focus. In a rather perverse way, I think these dramatic shocks have demonstrated the possibility of a win-win path across the region. Two, I think the sense of time has changed. The public impatience may be less intense. Publics may have more tolerance for well-meaning governments, and I think fortunately there has been a jolt to some of the governments in the region. In the UAE we have been hearing from our hosts how effectively the UAE has been trying to manage the Covid crisis.

I will go very fast on the external issues. When I look at external meddling and the potential for changes in that dynamic, I think big power rivalry in the region will continue but it will be a penny pinching, low-cost version because of the budgetary issues and high indebtedness of big powers. Every big power is deeply concerned with its own domestic issues so there is not all that much money available for anyone to forcefully meddle in this region. I think that is important. Also tech competition and global climate crisis are becoming more and more important on the big power agenda. So the Middle East is taking a back seat in big power rivalry and is being reprioritized downwards. There is the talk about the end of fossil fuels, which again, could be a positive effect for weakening external meddling but I do not think the fossil fuel supply will recede that fast and that this region will still have a few decades to provide fossil fuels to the world. However, I think the big powers will find that technology competition, controlling microchip supplies and the precision equipment for microchips are much more effective and surgical ways to outwit and contain rivals than using the Middle East energy card which unsettles the whole global energy system. So I do not think we will see big-scale energy-induced instability lead the big powers. Then of course, terror from the region seems to be subsiding, for now at least, which again blunts a further motivation for external interference. I think all those effects cut across big power calculations and suggest we may be in for a period where there will not be as much external meddling as before in the context of big power rivalry.

The exceptions and issues to watch include the US, where I think the Iranian issue that Mr. Eizenstat outlined, is an open wound and could unsettle this whole region. I think Russia has become a stakeholder in the region and I agree with Vitaly Naumkin that it wants stability, but I think there is always the risk of linking the Ukraine problem with the Middle East. We experienced that before and I hope it does not recur. With China, we heard from Mr. Rudd that, it is actively trying to change the global balance and if it uses this region as part of that strategy, that would be a trend to watch out for. I think overall the EU is not a very active actor, but the nation states are. We see France and Mr. Macron being active in the region recently, which can potentially be positive. As long as the nation states of Europe remain conciliatory powers, I think that will be helpful but there is a lot of baggage, so it has to be done with care.

Finally, just a few words on Turkey. I am not a diplomat, but I spent the better part of the Covid lockdowns with two former Undersecretaries getting to the depths of the philosophy of traditional Turkish foreign policy. When the nation was established in 1923, it was very clear that it was a nation-building period, and it was very clear that strategically the country needed peace with its neighbors and the broader world so that the nation could focus on its internal reforms. That notion of strategically linking peace abroad to peace at home is a cardinal rule that has been ingrained into the philosophy of the Republic from the beginning. This basic premise comes from the founders, including Ataturk himself, and it was ably executed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The operational elements of this philosophy include not meddling in the affairs of other nations; being equidistant to Middle East conflicts and affairs, which is at the core of Republic's foreign policy, and not giving advice to anyone who does not ask for it. These are some of the fundamentals of Turkish foreign policy. Many of you probably think that Turkish foreign policy has been more activist in the recent years. The discussion we have back at home is that two dynamics are drawing us into the region. One is the PKK/YPG terror, which is obviously a very sensitive issue for us, and the second is the refugee problem. Those two problems raise the question of whether they could have been handled over the last 10



years with the traditional dispassionate, equidistant approach to the region or an exception, an aberration in our policy was unavoidable. That discussion is still going on. I do not know the answer. I guess we will look back and make that assessment more calmly in a few decades with the benefit of hindsight. The bottom line is that I think it is in the interest of Turkey, the region and the world, for Turkey to be equidistant from Middle Eastern conflicts. To do that, we all need to search for and find fast solutions to the refugee problem and the PKK/YPG terror originating from the region. Once those two issues are resolved, I think Turkey will go back to its traditional foreign policy of being equidistant from the region and contributing to a positive future for the region.

With that, let me conclude by reiterating that I think there may be something in the air in the region. I do not know if this is a turning point, but I think that is a possibility. We are facing a new puzzle. Dialogues, conferences like this are where we have the opportunity to think about the new configuration and hopefully put the pieces together in a way that will pave the way for regional peace and prosperity.

Fareed Yasseen

Thank you, Memduh. What you mentioned about the onset of the Turkish Republic actually echoes very much with us in Iraq. We were engaged in this existential battle and we are now engaged in a reconstruction process. You have put your finger on an important point of the tensions between communities, which is that if you look at the political landscape in Iraq, the tensions and conflicts are not between communities, they are within political groupings within communities. The really interesting thing I take out of this is that it is very possible, in fact probable that we will have crosscutting alliances that represent politics as it should be within a national framework. With this, I think we are actually quite optimistic looking to the elections I alluded to at the beginning of my intervention.

We are out of time. Thank you very much. Thank you, Professor Naumkin, Stuart Eizenstat for being up so late and thank you for your interventions, thank you for your hospitality Minister Almarar, and Thierry, thank you for honing this remarkable event and pulling it together.