

## MONA MAKRAM EBEID

Egyptian Senator, Advisor to the UN High-Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

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

Mona, you are from the Arab world's most populous country and I think Nabil Fahmy said today that there are 104 million and rather more by the time he had finished speaking. Of course, Egypt has lots and lots of economic problems. What is your perspective for the next few years?

**Mona Makram Ebeid**

I would like to thank and tell the WPC what a pleasure it is to be back at this meeting after the horrible two years of confinement. I must say that some things have not changed, most notably the seminal role of WPC as a forum for serious foreign and security policy thinking. I really want to heartily applaud President Thierry de Montbrial for providing a much-needed setting to discuss the most poignant political matters as we know. Thank you, Thierry and all the team. I would like to share some thoughts on where the Middle East will be in 2030, focusing on Egypt in particular.

**John Andrews**

Very well said.

**Mona Makram Ebeid**

I will focus on three issues related to Egypt's Vision 2030. One is the historic strategy for human rights, a word that was taboo until recently, that was inaugurated a month ago by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The second is the impact of Covid-19 on Egypt and third the chances of Egypt becoming a regional gas hub in the Eastern Mediterranean. We have talked about how important energy is and will be.

I think I will start with the third point. My last issue is I will focus on energy and the chances of Egypt being a regional gas hub in the Eastern Mediterranean by 2030. I would say that the access to energy resources has unquestionably long been a driver for foreign policy. Therefore, the challenge for any state is working out how to use energy as a geo-economic asset and to successfully turn it into both a source of income and of state power. This is exactly what Egypt's leadership is doing. As you know, Egypt faces many challenges, both internal and external, including soaring inflation, a current currency crash, subsidy cuts and more expensive water. Unemployment in Egypt and the Arab world is likely to remain high as millions more young people stream into a very strained job market. However, now there is a ray of hope emerging and it comes in the form of a windfall natural gas discovery with the

potential to boost Egypt's limping economy and build a new commercial alliance with Eastern Mediterranean countries and Israel. Egypt struck the jackpot in 2015 with the discovery of a giant reservoir known as Zohr, which has developed into one of the largest single gas fields in the Middle East. In 2018, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and Israel, agreed to establish an East Mediterranean gas forum with headquarters in Cairo. In August 2019, production on the Zohr field, the largest gas discovery ever made in Egypt and the Mediterranean, reached more than 2.7 Bcf/D. The discovery will allow the country to transition from being an importer of natural gas to an exporter.

What are Egypt's advantages and what does it have to offer? Egypt has liquification capacity that gives it a strategic advantage. Furthermore, Egypt's geographical location straddling Africa, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, with access to two seas and the Suez Canal, is undeniably a good basis for becoming a gas hub, providing the country has significant gas reserves. Interestingly, Egypt's hopes of being a future gas hub are shared by the European Union, which aims to diversify its own energy supply and consider Egypt as a potential partner.

Again, as it has already been said, the main challenge for Egypt is overpopulation, which further fuels energy demand. The country's population has reached 104 million and is expected to reach 128 million by 2030. The projected population growth will lead to a considerable increase in electricity demand and thus the power sector will need more gas in the future. On the other hand, Egypt should continue its efforts to offer an appealing business climate for foreign companies to attract further investment. If anybody is interested, I wrote an article on this subject in the *Cairo Review of Global Affairs at the American University*, published by the School of Global Affairs, which is led by our friend, Minister Nabil Fahmy.

Let me go to the second issue, which is the human rights development. Last month, Egypt saw the launch of the new national strategy of human rights, stipulating a set of government commitments to improve elements of social, economic, cultural and political rights. As you know, Egypt has often been criticized all over the Western press, lobbies and human rights community because of its human rights. We hope this strategy will give access to job opportunities, education, healthcare and religious freedoms. As you know, religious tolerance has been one of President Sisi's mantras, with solidarity and unity between Muslims and Christians. No ruler before him has ever been to the cathedral or assisted at a Christmas mass as he did, nor opened parliamentary representation to the Coptic community and women, who now make up more than 50% or 60% of parliament. The document also shows a good commitment to improving political rights, which is something that has been missing. However, there have been varying reactions to this issue in particular, as the greater part of the document emphasizes more socio-economic and cultural rights. As I said, human rights have traditionally attracted a lot of world attention and criticism and they are also sometimes brought up in high-level political talks, such as the latest talks with Blinken in Egypt and criticism by the US Congress. For their part, Egyptian officials, particularly those in security, have said that the country's security bodies have to face militant groups who are trying to create instability. Therefore, the debate is not closed but what matters now is the implementation of this strategy as the state has shown its commitment to honor these obligations, especially within the UN Human Rights Council. Credit goes to civil society for having secured the release of this new strategy and a few prisoners. Of course, some critics



have called the strategy a public relations strategy on the part of the government. However, although the references to political rights and liberties fall short of the expectations of the human rights community, it must be recognized that it is the first time the government has taken upon itself the task of working towards improving these rights and liberties. As a former member of the National Council of Human Rights and a human rights activist for more than 30 years, I agree with some of the political analysts, that looking at it as glass half full rather than half empty, as I was telling my friend Dina, is what the strategy offers, and as such it is a precedent in the sense that it is a commitment on the part of the government to work on improving the quality of human rights, including political rights and liberties.

**John Andrews**

Perfect, Mona. Thank you very much.