

## MONA MAKRAM EBEID

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

**Steven Erlanger, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, Europe, for *The New York Times***

Let us keep going. Mona is a long-time friend of this conference, Senator from Egypt, Advisor to the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, which let us hope works. I think a lot about Egypt, we have not had many demonstrations in Egypt despite al-Sisi. Say what you like but one wonders is Egypt losing its important place in the Arab world? Is this a big issue at home?

**Mona Makram Ebeid**

You are making it a big issue, you in the West.

**Steven Erlanger**

Okay, answered. No.

**Mona Makram Ebeid**

Before I talk, I want to thank Thierry for gathering us once more at this very special club here of the WPC. I want to thank his team, I want to thank Song-Nim for everything they have done, and of course, the host country.

Now, let me go to the new Middle East, which I told you is what I would like to talk about. The first time this term new Middle East was used was by Shimon Perez, if you remember in 1993 after the Oslo Accords. This was a view he put out an initiative and I am afraid it did not work as we thought it would. At the time, many analysts concluded that complete and final conflict resolution must be achieved and of course, here we are talking about the Palestinian question, which was not mentioned and is not mentioned either today, prior to efforts at reconciliation. I think that Shimon Perez was a man of vision and that if his ideas did not take hold, it is not his fault. However, today, the move is to replace all these misconceptions in the Arab world and there is a tendency to do so. This is what they want to do, although I have seen some commentators lament that the Abraham Accords represent the obliteration of the Palestinian cause and the imperialist economic aims of Israel. I believe this is nonsense and this is why I think it is time today to turn to the Arab and Middle Eastern civil society, what we or Joseph Nye called soft power. This is where you really feel the pulse of the Arab world and the MENA region and what the West thinks of the changes that are happening in the Middle East. After the region was reduced to global war on terror and for two decades we heard nothing but that; this is their claim to fame.

However, today the Middle East is now seen through the lens of the great power competition narrative. Increasingly, the Middle East is defined as a battleground between the US and China, and to a lesser extent Russia. What is new is the trend towards Middle Eastern strategic autonomy, which mainly translates into the diversification of foreign policies by US Gulf partners and allies such as Egypt and even Israel. Since 2021, most Middle East countries have worked towards de-escalation and partly out of the realization that US disengagement, which I think is a turning point in the Middle East and also the flashpoint. Not positive but negative but taken very seriously by the countries in the region, seeing that they can no longer count on the US partners. This disengagement of the US from the region implied that countries in this region had to take matters into their own hands and this is what they are trying to do now. After the Gulf states and Egypt put an end to the Qatar blockades in January 2021, a frenzy of diplomatic visits followed and that momentum of de-escalation even involved Iran at one point, with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi toning down the hawkish rhetoric towards Iran. This de-escalation moment coincided with the Abraham Accords and the subsequent wave of normalization between Israel and several Arab states. More than anything, the Accords reflect the new foreign policy ambitions of Middle Eastern countries. In March, and this is important, Israel hosted a security summit in the Negev, attended by Bahrain, Emirati and Egyptian foreign ministers. The summit illustrates how much the Middle East landscape has changed in less than two years. Notably, these developments are homegrown, they came from inside the region and not from outside. They are evidence of the growing desire of the Middle East states to shape their own regional order on their own terms. The question is, what is the best way for the US to tempt down the Middle East from becoming a focal point of competition with Russia and China? I believe the more confident local actors grow about their own autonomy, the less tempted they will be to align themselves on the agenda of another external power. This is shown in the Ukraine-Russian war where the feeling is that some of the Western countries would like our countries to take sides, and they are refusing to do that today. They are not pro-Russia, but they are not anti-Russia either. We heard this from Minister Gargash, eager to diversify their partnership, more realism is required on the part of the West.

I would like to present some of the salient points that I would see as prominent in the changed Middle East. One is the role of religion in daily life. Two, is the role of the advancement of women in the workplace. Three, is prioritizing opportunities for young people to learn technological skills, and they are no longer pushed to learn political science or international relations, which is the only thing I know. Now they are pushed to study new technology so as to be better equipped to participate in the 21st century. What is also noticeable is an enhanced role of the state. Today, China's model is looked upon with admiration in many of the Arab Middle Eastern countries. Non interference in others' affairs, namely supporting each other's internal measures, be they authoritarian or not, to safeguard what is very important in this region today, which is stability and prosperity. The belief is that jobs, economic growth and oil wells can be used to entice citizens to ignore demands for political pluralism, which the West continues to ask for. Strained relations of late between the West and traditional allies in the region, are bringing a central question into sharp focus. Does the West really understand today's changed Middle East? What we are seeing today is the leadership of the Middle East and the majority of its people has remained resolute on making progress on many fronts. Are these transformative changes being recognized in the West? I do not think so and most public



opinion suggests not. People in the West still tend to view the Middle East as backward and conflict-ridden, a region where progress is doubtful and a place more likely to be a source of problems than solutions.

**Steven Erlanger**

That is great. It has been eight minutes, so thirty seconds.

**Mona Makram Ebeid**

One glaring example is the declaration of US disengagement from the region. This is really a turning point here, but it is underpinning change in the new Middle East, and we see bold reform agendas, such as Saudi Arabia's modernization program, even the veil for women is no longer obligatory. For example, in Egypt a majority reject the ideology of politicized religious moves, although Islamic extremists are still very well entrenched in most institutions of society. The youth of today favor pragmatic government that can create more jobs for young people, reform religious institutions and enhance public services such as health and education.

**Steven Erlanger**

Great, Mona, thank you very much. Let us move on, we can always come back to these issues, and I am very grateful to you, thank you.