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Egyptian Senator, Advisor to the UN Higher Representative for the Alliance of Civilisations, former member of Parliament

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Let me start with the only woman on our panel, Dr Mona Makram Ebeid, who needs no introduction. She is an Egyptian Senator, Advisor to the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, and former member of parliament. She will be giving us an overview of the main political, economic and social changes in the region and facing the region at large, maybe with a focus on Egypt. Also, there are always opportunities where there are challenges, so what would those opportunities be? Dr Mona, you have 15 minutes for your introductory remarks.

Mona Makram Ebeid

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I feel very honored to be next to you here. Unfortunately, I am not an economist, I am political scientist, so I will approach my subject in a political sense with political transformation happening in Egypt.

Let me start with Egypt and how much this crisis in Gaza, Palestine, has affected Egypt, the whole Arab world, and in fact the whole world which has watched the horrific images on television. However, I can also say that the turmoil in Gaza is not an entirely bad thing for the regime of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. In many respects his government would be happy to see Israel eliminate Hamas, an organization that grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood which is hated by President El-Sisi and the Egyptian public opinion. The Egyptian public opinion and Egyptians in general have seen what it is to have an Islamist regime trying to change the country's identity and trying to make it Islamist, racist, etc., forgetting what Egypt really stands for, which is a country that is secular, modern and democratic.

On the other hand, the Egyptian public today is outraged by the ongoing Israeli bombardment of Gaza and, like most of its counterparts across the region, it prizes stability over domestic accountability. In Egypt, the post-presidential elections in 2013 boiled down to the military against the Brotherhood, in which the Brotherhood squeezed to victory but proved incompetent and mostly mediocre. They were easily undermined by their opponents both at home and abroad, particularly in the Gulf region, which feared Islamist political movements. The removal of President Morsi from office marked the end of Muslim Brotherhood rule but for the moment, Egypt's refusal to admit Palestinian refugees is a big issue and it is a matter of principal that many people do not understand. They think that Egypt is refusing humanitarian help, but as long as there is any residual commitment in the Arab world to a solution to the

Israeli conflict, no one will accept the displacement of Palestinian or Gazan communities to Sinai.

Moving to the economy, Egypt's long-standing dependence on fuel and food imports has bloated its foreign debt, thanks in part to the war in Ukraine and Covid-19. In addition, securing international financing has grown more costly and domestic subsidies continue to drain government resources. The resulting economic crisis has led to several rounds of currency devaluation mandated by the International Monetary Fund and skyrocketing inflation, which not only hurts the poor but also the middle class, the main supporters of President El-Sisi and, as you know, Egypt has presidential elections this month.

Now pressure is being put on Egyptians to agree to the presence of Palestinians in Sinai, the President has adamantly refused because it will mean the end of the Palestinian question if these people are displaced once more. That is why it is impossible for Egyptians to tolerate. Another reason for Egypt's refusal is the probability that many Hamas militants would be likely to escape into Egypt, creating another headache for the authorities. At the moment, President El-Sisi is insisting that the United Nations, the European Union and others should help provide humanitarian assistance for the people in Gaza.

I want to underline, that you should not underestimate General El-Sisi's role because Egypt has maintained very good relations with Israel, but the government cannot survive what the Israelis are doing in Gaza. People are becoming very angry but he is refusing the pressure to mobilize the army and fight for the people of Gaza. As I said, he is adamant about refusing Gazans entry to Sinai because this would spell the end to a two-state solution. Furthermore, the Palestinians in Sinai would create serious national security problems for the government.

Let me add that now that there is a shift, a rising tide, it is very interesting that things are changing every day. There was a change in American attitudes yesterday, and whereas before they refused anything but the protection of Israel, they are now saying that there is a tide of public and private pressure from Europe, Latin America and other capitals, and even the United States to pressure Israel to allow humanitarian pauses. EU leaders have rejected pleas from the brutal Netanyahu to lobby Egypt to open its border with Gaza and accept Palestinian refugees. This shift has come from the atrocities from Hamas and the pummeling of Gaza by the Israeli assault.

Now that we are hopefully approaching the day after that everyone is talking about, let me tell you about the vision of the future of a former Fatah strongman in the Gaza strip, which I think is very imaginative and creative. He says that once Israel's war on Hamas ends, the Gaza strip should be governed by a technocratic government for two years because it has shown that no single individual can take over on their own. You may remember President Sadat's words when they suggested he take Gaza, he said no to more refugees. When the current war is over, he believes there should be elections based on a Palestinian state, which would unify the splintered Palestinian factions. This man is a former Fatah leader called Mohammed Dahlan, a name that you should remember. He says there should be an election based on a Palestinian state without defined borders. The borderless state could be backed by Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. After that, there should be recognition by the international community and a final agreement with Israel. The Hamas attack drew condemnation from many countries but Dahlan sees that this



war is an opportunity that could bring about a Palestinian state, despite the fact that the whole Palestine-Israel issue had died and nobody was talking about it. With this attack, the whole world is talking about the Palestinian conflict. Mr. Dahlan's vision is one of surprising hope amid the horrors of the fighting. Let us remember that Mr. Dahlan has connections on all sides of the conflict, with Israel, the people of Gaza, with the Arabs, and he also speaks very warmly of his relations with some senior Israeli figures. More recently, Mr. Dahlan returned from Egypt and he has close ties with the Egyptian President El-Sisi and he has declared he will not run for election, but like all Arabs, you do not have to believe what he says. Yet, he firmly sets out his credentials for leadership, he has become a close advisor to the ruler of Abu Dhabi. He believes that Israel has destroyed the two-state solution and you should listen to that because it is something quite new. Everybody is talking about the two-state solution, who would accept and who would refuse, but he believes that Israel has destroyed the two-state solution and now is the time to achieve the one-state solution, the real problem lies in the Israeli occupation.

I want to finish by saying that one of the things we want to end this Gaza saga, is the liberation of the hostages. This is what all the international community is asking for and it is part of what Mr. Gargash just said in his speech. I believe that he is quite right and that the international community should get together for that.

I think I have said enough and I hope you will have questions about that because it is something new for somebody to come up with a suggestion.

Abdulrahman A. Al Hamidy

Thank you very much for your wonderful, insightful, and profound views, and for your energy. At the end of the day, your ideas are clear and you are very energetic, and you challenge everybody at this late hour. Please write down all your questions for the panel, I do not have any, so I am relying on the audience. You have provided a lot of ideas and proposals, and you talked about the economic issues and challenges for the region and Egypt. Thank you for the clarity of your intervention.