

FRANÇOIS GOUYETTE

Former Ambassador of France to the UAE and to Saudi Arabia

The third workshop was devoted to economic and social issues in the Middle East and the chair, Abdulrahman Al Hamidy, Director General and Chairman of the Board of Executives Directors at the Arab Monetary Fund. He introduced the discussion focusing on the increasing economic challenges in the area, an area that is already affected by unemployment and poverty, not to mention political tensions which may raise the risk premium.

The first speaker was Mona Makram Ebeid, an Egyptian Senator and Advisor to the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations and a former Member of Parliament and she addressed the consequences of the Gaza crisis on the region. On one hand, her country, Egypt, is a secular, modern state that defeated the Muslim Brotherhood and would not necessarily be unhappy to see Hamas eliminated. On the other hand, President Sisi cannot stand idle in the face of the massacre committed by Israel in Gaza City. Therefore, the Egyptians are ready to help with humanitarian actions but at the same time, they are opposed to a transfer of the population from the Gaza Strip to Sinai, in the belief that it would jeopardize the creation of a Palestinian state. In this respect, she drew attention to the role of Mohamed Dalian, a key figure in the PLO, and a former head of Preventive Security in Gaza following the Oslo agreement. According to her, he may play a role in the coming future, capitalizing on his strong relationships with most of the Palestinian and regional actors, including Israel and the United Arab Emirates. She said that his latest proposal that there should be a caretaker government in Gaza that would prepare for elections once the current war ends, should be taken into account.

The second speaker was Abdulrahman Al Neyadi from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Abu Dhabi. He stressed the importance of economic growth in a region affected by a high rate of unemployment among young people, who represent a huge majority in the population and where one child in four suffers from poverty. From a regional point of view, he said that we should focus more on economics than politics, shifting from de-escalation to cooperation. In this respect, extremism should be tackled in all its forms by promoting education, empowerment of youth and women, and the spread of a counter-narrative focused on tolerance, co-existence and religious freedom.

The third speaker was Raed Charafeddine, a central and commercial banker, and a former Vice Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon. He mainly addressed the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the exact number is unknown but figures range from 1 million to 2.5 million, which would be more than one-third of the entire population of the country. You may recall that at the beginning of the Syrian crisis those refugees were welcomed in Lebanon on a humanitarian basis but after more than 10 years they have come to be seen as a political



and security threat. There are also the losses to the Lebanese economy created by the Syrian conflict, which amounts to around USD 46 billion. We are now witnessing a growing trend in public opinion in Lebanon to send those refugees back to Syria where things are, in a sense, slowly improving. It should be noted that Syrians in Lebanon today are in the first rank of refugees in the world and due to their high birth rate their number could equal native Lebanese by 2043.

The following speaker was Ernesto Damiani, Professor at Khalifa University for the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Director of the Center for Cyber-Physical systems. He addressed the issue of artificial intelligence in the Middle East, stressing the importance of the Gulf area as a hub between East and West. In his view, there should be common strategies concerning the development of AI in the region based on confidence. However, he said it was not necessarily an easy task in an area afflicted by conflicts.

As the next speaker, I addressed the main social challenges in the Middle East, highlighting the key points of economic diversification, youth empowerment, as noted by the Emirati diplomat, political and social inclusion, regional cooperation and sustainable development, and digital transformation.

The following speaker was Memduh Karakullukçu, founding member of the Global Relations Forum, Founding Partner of Kanunum, and Chairman of Kroton Consulting. He also stressed confidence as a key issue for economic development in the region. He pinpointed the high rate of unemployment, the informality of the economy and the weakness of the private sector as factors that hampered that. If reforms that have been carried out have not achieved the expected growth in the last years, in his opinion there is still a place for strategic opportunities including better integration with Europe in the energy field. He said that good governance is not enough, there should also be leadership, vision and smart guidance.

Finally, Kamel Abdallah, Managing Director and CEO of Canal Sugar from Egypt, addressed the question of food security, starting with the experience of his own country and food riots, where the government has been forced to import and heavily subsidize food to cope with this frustration. He stressed the necessity to change the scope from food security to food wellness and highlighted the fact that water crises will probably be the next challenge. In this respect, he considered that desalination could be an affordable solution. Thank you.