

FRANÇOIS GOUYETTE

Former Ambassador of France to the UAE and to Saudi Arabia

Abdulrahman A. Al Hamidy, Director General and Chairman of the Board of Directors at the Arab Monetary Fund

Our fifth speaker is François Gouyette, former Ambassador of France to the UAE and to Saudi Arabia. I am surprised that today he speaks very good Arabic and we did not know that when he was in Saudi, when we thought you did not understand most of the things we said about you. Anyway, he will be talking about the social challenges facing our region.

François Gouyette

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, I am honored to be here today at the World Policy Conference, alongside esteemed panelists, including my friend Mona, who I am very happy to see after so many years, and experts to address the pressing economic and social issues facing the Middle East. Having served, as you rightly said Mr. Chairman, as former French Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates 20 years ago and Saudi Arabia more recently, and other posts in North Africa, I have had the privilege to witness and engage with the complexities of the Middle East. My diplomatic career in this area has allowed me to experience the region's intricate dynamics and it is from this point of view that I want to briefly address the challenges and opportunities facing the Middle East. I will highlight seven key points that I believe are crucial in understanding Middle East societies in the coming decades, drawing from my experiences and encounters in the region.

First, economic diversification is of paramount importance in the Middle East. Many countries in the region have been heavily reliant on oil and gas revenues in the past. For instance, in Saudi Arabia oil exports have historically accounted for more than 90% of the country's budget revenue. The recent push to diversify economies beyond hydrocarbons, as seen in the Saudi Vision 2030, aims to reduce this reliance. However, it poses challenges in terms of workforce skills and creating sustainable industries. I would also add that before being in Saudi Arabia I was posted to Abu Dhabi and the Emirates have been pioneers in this respect in terms of diversification of their economy.

Point two pertains to youth empowerment, which was mentioned by our friend Abdulrahman. As has been mentioned, the Middle East has a young and growing population and therefore youth empowerment is central to addressing social and economic issues; in Egypt over 60% of the population is under the age of 30. Therefore, it is imperative that governments must invest in education, skills development and job creation to harness the demographic dividend rather than face potential unrest.



Point three is women's rights and participation, which was also addressed by Abdulrahman. As you know, the role of women in the Middle East is evolving and changing, a transformation I have closely followed, particularly in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and before that also in the UAE. Empowering women economically and politically will not only enhance social justice, but also stimulate economic growth. Reforms in family laws, labor laws and political representation are essential. In Saudi Arabia, the lifting of the driving ban for women and the increasing participation of women in the workforce has significantly improved gender equality.

Four, is social and political inclusion. Societies in the Middle East are diverse with different ethnic, religious and sometimes tribal communities. For the governments of those countries, promoting social and political inclusion is vital to maintaining stability, ensuring representation and addressing grievances are key to preventing conflicts. For example, in Lebanon power sharing agreements among religious groups in the past were to some extent instrumental in maintaining stability and political inclusion. Although, to this day the relevance of this system of distribution of power and governance is put into question.

Five, on regional cooperation, the Middle East is also a mosaic of nations with complex relationship. Increased regional cooperation is essential to address shared challenges, such as water scarcity, refugees and regional security. Diplomacy should always prevail over conflicts, the war that is raging between Israel and Hamas as we are speaking today, must reinforce our convictions in this respect.

Six is sustainable development. The region is facing increasing environmental challenges including climate change. Sustainable development practices are crucial for long-term stability and prosperity. Investing in renewable energy and sustainable agriculture is paramount and the UAE has also been a pioneer in this respect, and Saudi Arabia is now a leading country in this field.

My seventh and last point is the digital transformation. The digital revolution is reshaping societies worldwide and the Middle East is no exception. Embracing technology and fostering innovation can drive economic growth. For instance, the United Arab Emirates was a pioneer more than 20 years ago when it established free zones like Dubai Internet City, for instance, to encourage technology start-ups and digital innovation.

In conclusion, in addressing these challenges national authorities can shape a more stable and prosperous Middle East with a logic of win-win partnerships with the rest, including France my country, as well as reliable investors, which can foster peace, prosperity, cooperation and a broader respect for human rights.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to the insights of my fellow panelists.

Abdulrahman A. Al Hamidy

Ambassador Francois, thank you so much for your comprehensive remarks about the challenges facing our region and the issue of our youth, which requires our attention. Thank you very much for your participation.