

Enriching the Middle East's Economic Future Conference
Closing Plenary Remarks -- Professor Steven Spiegel
Monday, November 13, 2017

Over the past two days, and a range of discussions, it has become clear that this group believes that global connectivity plays a greater role than ever in the Middle East and the world.

The last several years have shown us that the problems of the Middle East become the problems of the entire world. Instability in this area does not stay within the confines of the region. It spills out in the form of refugees, violent extremism, energy insecurity, financial instability, and cyber warfare, each bringing its own economic, social, and political implications.

Participants addressed the economic and social effects of refugees and migrants on host communities, pointing to a rising populist trend in countries like Poland, Hungary, and even in the US and the UK. It creates challenges and the economic burden of accepting large numbers of people who do not possess the skills required to fulfill labor market needs (as is the case in Germany). Speakers agreed that migration is likely to increase due to ongoing instability, climate challenges, and government repression, but that migrants can also provide an economic benefit to host countries if they are provided with training, education, and opportunities.

Violent extremism is constantly expanding. Participants emphasized the destructive effects of extremism-fueled conflict in the Middle East, by reducing tourism, driving away investors, and inhibiting the use of established trade routes, leading to negative growth cycles, debt, and poverty. Outside of the region, extremist ideologies are spreading quickly among youth, who succumb to dangerous concepts as an answer to their existential anxieties, giving them purpose and a sense of belonging.

Yet, participants also pointed to technology as a major factor in increased global connectivity. It has transformed the way people communicate, do business, and wage war. Discussions pointed to its benefits as well as its risks.

Thanks to technology, humans are more efficient, more interconnected, and better informed. Money flows faster and more easily. Digital technologies are increasing transparency and communication between government and constituencies in places as different as Rochester Hills, Michigan and Doha, Qatar. They are stimulating economies through mobile banking, and increasing women's access to the Middle East workforce through remote and online employment options. In discussions about education in the region, speakers highlighted the use of technology for improving access to education through peer-to-peer knowledge, and low-cost, accessible learning programs, such as those being developed in India and Kenya.

Digital technologies such as social media have allowed people in the MENA region to bypass traditional methods of communication and state censorship, allowing them to report on-the-ground situations through citizen-journalism, and push for political change by generating visibility through hashtags.

Technology also provides opportunities to match refugees with professional skills to countries that have a demand for those skills, allowing refugees to relocate to areas where their services are needed, creating a mutually beneficial outcome.

With these technological advancements come risks of cyber crime, terrorism, and privacy infringements. Digital interconnectivity paired with end-to-end encryption technologies enable extremist ideologies to spread quickly online. Digital data, described by one speaker as “the new gold” makes users vulnerable to cyber theft. Participants voiced concern over the delicate balance between government attempts to curb cyber crime and ensure security, and the need for personal privacy for all citizens.

To combat these new phenomena, participants urged international cooperation and exchange of information to enhance cyber security on a global level and combat quickly-evolving cyber criminals.

With increased global connectivity comes the call for increased cooperation, which was more prominent at this meeting than ever before.

For example, participants from Malaysia, South Korea, and Indonesia highlighted the many ways in which the Middle East can learn from their experiences. A speaker from Indonesia pointed to the role of governance in affecting trade flows and economic growth – citing Indonesia’s collaboration with the countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to promote far-reaching, sustainable economic integration.

A speaker addressing the role of Japan in the Middle East expressed the sentiment of cooperation effectively, remarking that “we are all in the same boat.” He stressed the importance of cross-border collaboration to produce technologies that will ensure energy security and sustainable development.

One workshop heard a resounding call for cooperation on urgent transnational problems of climate, energy, and water security. Speakers urged governments and civil society to exchange information about the imminent threat of climate change and natural resource depletion. They recommended that regional governments come to agreement regarding the sharing of electricity and water resources.

The need for collaboration exists not only across borders, but within nations. Participants agreed that efforts must be made to bridge gaps between older and younger generations in order to implement government reform and integrate youth into formal political institutions.

So where do we go from here? It is a world of new horizons, ingenious potential, and vicious danger, yet, in group after group, we witnessed the hope and determination of participants from every corner of the globe. And that is how we have enriched the Middle East's economic future over the last two days- by our clear determination to take advantage of opportunities to overcome challenges by identifying pathways for assuring that new inventions and new collaborations will indeed lead to better lives for a wider range of people seeking a more promising future.

Before we conclude, I want to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, and the entire Qatari team at the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences, in particular Abdullah Fakhroo, my close friend and mentor. And in conclusion, on behalf of the entire UCLA team, let us thank everyone here for contributing your time and expertise to a wonderful and engaging two days. A salute to all of you. Thank you.