

Closing Remarks by Prof. Steven L. Spiegel, Director of the UCLA
Center for Middle East Development(CMED), University of California, USA

At Doha Forum XII

May 22, 2012 AD

Where do we find ourselves a year after the advent of the Arab Spring? The region has been inundated by players using a variety of methods and tools, promising to create positive change in the Middle East. For example: some of the newly established democracies are using soft power, while terrorist groups are more willing to use violent methods. Although there is no shortage of self declared saviors, there are already simmering frustrations about the lack of pace of progress. While reading through the pages and pages of rapporteur notes, there was a very basic recurring underlying theme: Men and women of all ages need employment, opportunity, equality, access to education and a defined role in their country's democratic process.

By 2025, there will be more than 150 million people entering the workforce. Current job growth in the region is not fast enough nor is it sustainable. The problem is complex: there are structural issues that need to be solved. In Egypt, for example, 80% of the workforce is employed by small to medium sized enterprises, yet these business owners are often denied access to credit from state banks to expand operations. While many countries in the Middle East have shown positive results on the macroeconomic level, we cannot ignore a lack of a competitive environment, rampant corruption on every level, and a lack of transparency in state institutions and in the political system.

While I just used statistics to further my point, we realized in our workshops and plenaries that often times, whole groups are not accounted for because they are not included in these polls and surveys. There is a general consensus that new governments must protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of class, ethnicity, religion, age or marriage status in order to be true democracies because the bar for legitimacy of authority has been raised. This also makes solid economic sense, or as one panelist put it, there are dollars in diversity. In Brazil, policies of inclusion of minority entrepreneurs supported by the president led to a rapid shrinking of the income gap.

Despite deep worries about the success of Islamist parties in recent elections, some countries in the region have seen improvements in the legal rights of women and minorities, but these groups are fearful that equality under the law is not enough to ensure their protection, particularly in the social sphere. However, there is wide diversity of views within Islamist parties. Although there are extremists, other Islamist politicians support the ideas of equality and an inclusive, moderate society. In the words of one speaker, the issue of inequality binds us together.

In typical Doha Forum fashion, we heard diverse views. One panelist suggested that the West is losing touch with the situation on the ground because it places too much importance on the role of the youth and its use of social media. Another participant said social media is overrated because most people in these countries do not have access to this technology. Other participants said

social media platforms have provided an opportunity for people who otherwise do not have the ability to communicate with the remainder of the world to mobilize support for a cause, undermining the strict leadership of authoritarian regimes. YouTube videos and Twitter have allowed seemingly small acts to spread across the world and capture the attention of thousands of people within minutes. For example, Skype has enabled activists in states such as Syria currently engaged in battle with the regime to communicate needs and goals directly to supportive communities, as well as inform the media of the actions of the regime.

And some issues participants raised affect everyone equally. A brewing food crisis in the region threatens to overshadow all other recent crises. The Middle East remains a net importer of food and recent spikes in food prices brought on by lower crop yields have had a devastating effect on the poor. The Global Dry Land Alliance, an initiative spearheaded by Qatar, will be the first international organization of its kind to introduce in its charter a partnership between the public and private sectors to address food security needs in arid and semiarid countries.

Access to clean water is an important component of food security, particularly in this region. Future research and development should focus on the use of alternative energy, such as solar power, to continue to increase the efficiency and decrease the cost of desalinization. On the energy front, the demand for electricity will skyrocket as we become ever more dependent on

technology and as the worldwide standard of living increases. An oil industry expert predicted that natural gas will play a larger role in electricity generation, replacing coal. While a potential tool to improve the standard of living for the majority of the region, it could potentially lead to more conflict if not managed properly by the parties involved.

And then there is Greece. The questions now facing Greece have implications not only for the future of the Greek economy, but also for the future of the European Union. We asked our participants how the economic situation could be righted. Many cautioned against protectionism and some against harsh austerity measures. The free market is still a pillar of economic development, one panelist declared. However, several panelists recommended a tightening of lax regulation to achieve a balance between market freedom and social justice. In addition, many panelists believed the European Union ought to integrate its monetary and macroeconomic policies.

As to the future of peace in the Middle East, one panelist noted that the greatest threat to peace in the region is no longer framed in terms of foreign powers and external security but by domestic threats and human security. The role of intervention by the international community in the resolution of civil conflicts is debatable. Some participants and panelists asserted that the international community needs to respond more quickly and aggressively, as in Syria; others argued that the aftermath of military intervention, both in terms of

financial costs and the cost of life, is so substantial that it should rarely be an option.

A peaceful outcome in Syria and economic stability in Egypt may be the most important factors to establish regional peace, not the immediate resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, some asserted. Others would disagree. Senator George Mitchell reiterated the basic compromises on both sides that will be necessary for a negotiated solution. And there are glimmers of hope. In a session on the Arab and Israeli Peace Initiatives, the latter was warmly received by nearly all Arab speakers. Some seemed stunned by their own progress—an open meeting with Israelis in an Arab capital: "Thirty years ago, twenty years ago, ten years ago," a Saudi speaker said, "we could not be seen together with each other or else be thrown into some jail or hanged."

A number of speakers supported bringing together businesspeople from around the region to brainstorm ideas for resolving the conflict. People-to-people initiatives might not fully replace governments, but they could be a good tool for building connections and finding new ideas. Both sides could do much more to target the other's public opinion.

However, the time of merely discussing and observing is past. There's been great confusion how we can all help with the Arab Spring. We see in these last few days that there is no shortage of ideas and proposals. The real question is how to transform these intriguing thoughts into real action. We must commit over the next year to leave this forum with the will to take advantage of

this unprecedented opportunity to help transform the region and create real change. Thank you.