

Speech by Chris Doyle, Director, Council for Arab-British Understanding

Concluding session, 14th Doha Forum
14 May 2014

I would like to thank the state of Qatar, Minister Rumaihi for yet another fantastic Doha Forum and your incredibly warm hospitality.

I have been privileged to have been to all but one of the 14 annual events. It never fails to address the major issues of the day; it is a credit to the organisers that every year no issues are ducked, no issues are too sensitive. There were no taboos. This allows for the free and frank amongst experts including ministers, politicians, academics, diplomats, journalists and businessmen.

And this year was no exception. We had over 400 delegates from 80 countries debating everything from democracy to human rights to media to social development over three days. Many of the key themes were highlighted in the opening keynote speech of HE the Foreign Minister of Qatar.

His passionate appeal on Syria was echoed by many other speakers. The horror of this conflict cast a heavy shadow over all our proceedings. As we speak here now, millions of Syrians are cut off from water in Aleppo, hundreds of thousands survive on leaves and grass in besieged areas, and Syrians live in daily fear of the regime's barrel bombs. We heard from Dominique de Villepin on the need for mediation, even on the day of Lakhdar Brahimi's resignation. I do not envy whoever agrees to succeed him. We heard from the ICRC of the huge challenges their staff face and the risks they deal with every day.

Many of the sessions focussed on the failure of the international architecture. Is it fit for purpose to handle these multiple crises? And this was not just about Syria. There was the issue of Israel-Palestine, and former British foreign minister, Alistair Burt made a poignant appeal not to give up on peace. It would also be impossible to disagree with former French foreign minister Michel Ricard that the success of the Iran nuclear talks was vital to the Middle East.

On both the issue of democracy and human rights many speakers noted once again how we, in Europe and the West, had absolutely no right to lecture on these issues and were all too frequently guilty of double

standards and hypocrisy on democracy. Lord Williams reminded us that much of Europe has only recently adopted democracy, and we heard about Belarus, the last remaining dictatorship in Europe. Egypt was hotly debated, many pointing out the dangers of supporting a coup, the ousting of an elected government.

In the session on Economy and Free Trade, experts looked at the inequalities between North and South, how to reform banking, the future of the dollar and the existential issue in my view, of global warming.

In the media session there were fascinating discussions on the role of social media and the pros and cons of citizen journalism and user generated content. There was a telling reminder that it was never Facebook or Twitter that drove these uprisings but people. One speaker highlighted the risks journalists take, not least the continued detention of journalists especially in Egypt including four from Al Jazeera.

The vital role of women and youth were rightly highlighted in our final session on societal transformation in the Middle East. Women are part of the solution, and we ignore the youth in all societies at our peril. As one speaker, said they are the voice of the future.

All too often in this fast paced world, of instant, on-the-spot, analysis of major historic events and trends, we lack the time to reflect properly. That is why such fora are vital to force us to sit back, pause and reflect. For those of us not from the Middle East we know we must listen and learn.

Once again my warm thanks to the state of Qatar, to the Minister Rumaihi, to Ambassador Fakhro, all the organisers, the technicians, the diplomats, and of course the speakers, moderators and participants.