



ALGERIA BRITISH BUSINESS COUNCIL



President: Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles
KCMG,LVO
Chairman: Lady Olga Maitland

Deputy Chairman: Riad Fehkeur
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PUTTING THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE ARAB WORLD CONTEXT

BY

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I am an optimist. Without it, without faith in the essential structures of societies, and peoples nothing can be achieved. Only last week in Algiers a businessman said to me that without optimism, he would have given up and left the country.

Three years ago I took part in a conference in Algiers with the theme, Optimism. It was mounted by enterprising young generation who felt it was up to them to forge their future, define who they are, and what they want. With 75% of the population under 30, they have a legitimate voice. They want a future, as they do all over the Arab world..

Deny them that future, instability surely comes. Politicians must give them the oxygen to develop enterprises, borrow money , build businesses, and employ others, create their own futures, thus they are too busy for Islamist extremism.



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The challenge everywhere is for the seemingly and hitherto infallible old men in grey suits who have been controlling their lives, hesitant, fearful of change, fearful of losing control. Fearful of letting the people think for themselves. They have been holding back on development of an entrepreneurial society based on the assumption that independence might lead to dissent. Now these very grey suits are being pushed hard to rethink.

Ironically it is not the voice of the young who are pushing them, rather it is oil price that is forcing the pace of change.

No Arab government can be financially oil dependant after years of luxuriant state sector spending using oil money.

In fact the price crash, even when nudging up a dollar or so, has completely altered the economic dynamics. And in truth as the young entrepreneurs know, it is a wonderful time of opportunity.

Not just the under 30s are excited.

So too, is the private sector.

Despite it all, the entrepreneurial spirit, is there. Always has been. Remember how Russia jumped to life after 70 years of the dead hand of Soviet Communism? With the oxygen of freedom, businesses burst into life In Algeria, the trade body for the private sector, Forum des Chefs d'Enterprise has now 1,800 solid and strong businesses, and growing. All this based on optimism and action – and I may say despite obstacles in the financial services.

Imagine how the numbers will double and double again when real commercial freedoms come into play. Imagine the number of jobs this will create? The potential economic migrants would stay on home soil.

Of course the role of Governments are critical. Every Arab country has its own history in recent years, and responded to events accordingly.

Algeria suffered its own grievous civil war in the 1990s when 2.5m died, many many more either disappeared, or injured. 6m went into exile. 'Les Annees Noires' has indeed left its mark. No family untouched. They need no



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lessons on suffering. Today people still shudder from the memories of fear and terror.

The Algerian government, and indeed any government is well aware that political stability is key to commercial growth and then security.

As Algeria 's grievous civil war ground its weary way to a halt in 1999 with splits in the islamist groups, President Bouteflika embarked on a programme of amnesty and reconciliation. The country was exhausted. He concluded the process in 2005 – and the country began to move on.

No country's path to peace is ever the same. But some points are common. Political stability is critical, but so too is security. And in this no effort has been spared. When I had the honour of meeting with the President I was intersted to note how much of his thinking is devoted to security – hence peace.

Some nations outside the Arab world may wonder at the share of the GDP spent on defence both internal and external. However as

all you know here, strife is a massive inhibitor to commercial well being.

Having achieved peace, then the building blocks can begin to fall into place.

Today the pressure is on to speed up economic freedom. New words are creeping into the ministerial statements, privitisation, public private partnerships, banking and financial reform. Next step is implementing it. No time to waste.

And of course there must be a sound and indepedent legal system. Corruption must be dealt with firmly for it wrecks good economic development. Ultimately it is theft.

Sadly the politicians and decision makers are the root cause. A confident government who owes nobody any favours is well placed to tackle this. Failure to do so, also brings its out public outcry and often terrible consequences.



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Then there must be the harnessing of all talents ; education and appropriate skills are obvious. Not so obvious even though so many women are educated, is actually employing them at all levels, right to the executive top – be it in enterprise or government. And by this I mean being real decision takers.

Where women have done well, they have been amazing. If I may say, I have been hugely impressed by the energy, and commitment of the Algerian woman in the work place. She is reliable, does not go absent. She is supremely honest. Perfectly capable of initiative and drive. But this is also replicated all over the Arab world, however sadly and far too often they are held back by the glass ceiling and culture.

Today, no society can afford not to take advantage of this vital human resource.

I am not an angry feminist. It so happened I made my own way in the male dominated world through journalism, politics, global affairs and international business development. I was a lone female figure in the 1970s.

Today, I glory in the educated and skilled talent of professional women. The new generation expect it as a right .My daughter is a corporate lawyer, my daughter in law is an airline pilot, my other daughter in law is a child psychologist. No society do can do without these powerhouses.

I will finish on an my note as an optimist .

The future in the Arab world lies in common interests. When they converge, and there is money to be made, there is the peace, and a rising economy. The big change in the last year has been the finding of oil and in particular gas in Eastern Mediterranean.

Countries cannot develop in isolation., be it Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey or Cyprus. They have to work together and resolve differences in the process. Pipelines, investments, developments are dependent on many common interests. Money can be a real accelerator for new alliances and co-operation.



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I trust this will now be the case. The prize is too great to miss.

I bless all the countries with their new oil and gas discoveries. They may tussle for domination, but in the end the optimist in me says, together they will prosper, apart they will surely fail. Hence the need for true friends to serve as catalysts and create lasting success. I am proud that Algeria has already demonstrated its skills in this area. I hope they will be called upon yet again.