The Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) convened its annual conference under the slogan of “Middle East Security...Opportunities and Challenges,” over two days; December 23rd and 24th, 2019. An elite group of academics, ambassadors, researchers, and those interested in issues of the region and the world, attended and participated in the works of the conference. H.E. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sameh Shokry, opened the works of the conference by a speech addressing the strategic objectives within the Government’s Action Program for protection of Egypt’s national security and foreign policy in consistency with the presidential mandate to move from the state stabilization phase to the phase of reaping the benefits, emerging from the fact that Egypt is a regional power that works for achieving the common interests of the region or the continent and defending them in accordance with principles of international law and multilateral frameworks, thereby enhancing cooperation among states within a framework of equality and mutual respect as well as achieving common interests, and upholding the role of national state and its institutions as a guarantee to achieving the objectives of reform and development in accordance with the vision and will of peoples and not according to the priorities and interests of external parties.

In addition to its opening and closing sessions, the conference held four sessions, each one of them addressing a theme; the first one focused on the internal determiners for Middle East security, the second one addressed the economic, political, and legal aspects of East Mediterranean gas, while the third theme focused on regional visions for Middle East security, and finally, the fourth theme addressed international visions for security of the region. Other than tackling various aspects of the topics dealt with in the discussions as well as recommending the steps that must be taken towards current situations in the region, during the four sessions; the international agenda for combating terrorism in the region was also touched upon at the conclusion of the fourth session.

As it has serious influence over Middle East Security and over the development of its states.

In this context, the conference emphasized the need for enhancing collective effort in order to combat terrorism, especially with the growth and spread of this phenomenon due to the selective approach of western states in this regard by being satisfied with confronting ISIS and Al-Qaeda while letting the Muslim Brotherhood free, as well as the support given by some states to political Islam under the claim of protection of democracy and human rights. It was also pointed out that setting a specific definition for terrorism is still controversial. Furthermore, some western states are still promoting many misleading terms with the aim of giving legitimacy to some of them; thus, the western approach is still characterized by double standards. The conference has condemned the continued harboring of terrorists by some states of the region and allowing them gain access to media platforms for disseminating radical ideology and incitement to terrorism, which constitutes a flagrant violation of pertinent UN resolutions. Moreover, some states still favor political interests over combating terrorism; a fact reflected by situations in Syria and Libya where terrorist organizations are active over there.

The conference was concluded in this regard by emphasizing the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach for combating terrorism that extends beyond security aspects to include economic, social, cultural, educational, and developmental dimensions.

Details on Pages (5)
The last twenty years have witnessed completion of the picture of the components of national security whose standards have changed in relation to the global framework of major powers’ security as well as to national security standards of states according to the internal situations and regional status of each of them, in which there is continual increase in their interests that coincide with the interests of some other states in the region.

Perhaps the most notable international transformation is the agreement among political scientists, starting from the last ten years of the twentieth century, that economic competitiveness has become the top component of national security, on par with and sometimes even higher than military capability. This has enabled emerging states to gain international and regional status and influence.

Regarding our Arab region within its regional framework, novel elements have overlapped with the determinants of national security, which pose opportunities and challenges at the same time.

In light of these variables, the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) has chosen the topic entitled “Middle East security ... opportunities and challenges” for the 2019 annual conference. The topic was covered over four sessions that addressed various themes of regional security in an attempt to acquire full knowledge of both constant and variable determinants of national security in accordance with the changes that have taken place in the region and the world.

In the framework of emphasizing the quality of education and its results in relation to the progress and development of countries, means of coordination and economic cooperation among the countries of the region, and working towards taking advantage of the new resources that were not available before such as gas discoveries, in addition to challenges posed by regional non-Arab states such as Iran, Turkey and Israel, as well as the importance of the joint Arab force in confronting the challenges, the vision of international powers regarding security of the region and the transformations it has undergone towards Arab issues.

The discussions have shed light on national security, which is no longer governed by limited elements, but has become inclusive of a set of components that impose the necessity of reviewing national security status with its novel elements that oblige the countries of the region to reconsider their concepts of national security, and keep up with development in a world that is no longer static but is changing at a significant speed.

(The Editor)
In connection with the developments taking place in Syria, especially after the launch of the Turkish operation Spring of Peace into northern Syria, Ambassador / Ehab Wahba, Coordinator of the Permanent Committee on Arab Affairs in the Council, called for holding a round table discussion at the Council to discuss "Developments of the Syrian Crisis", on November 18th, 2019, with the participation of Ambassador / Dr. Mounir Zahran, Chairman of the Council; Ambassador / Dr. Ezzat Saad, Director of the Council; and members of the Council, Ambassadors: Sayed Abu Zaid, Abdul Rahman Salah, Hazem Khairat, Muhammad Abdel Hamid Qasim, Yousef Al-Sharqawi, and Dr. / Rajai Fayed, member of the council.

The discussion addressed the initiatives to resolve the crisis, including the launch of a Constitutional Committee authorized to draft new constitution for the country, and the conference to be held in Washington on 14th November 2019, on the basis of a French initiative, which includes the countries participating in the International Coalition against Terror, in light of the liquidation of the leader of ISIS. This did not reduce the fears and criticisms of the western countries regarding the U.S. decision of withdrawing from Syria, considering that this can support ISIS's efforts to return back to the scene and threaten their security and interests despite the death of its leader. The developments of the Turkish, Iranian and Russian roles in Syria were also discussed, especially in the light of the Turkish military operation launched by Erdogan on October 9th, 2019, into the north-east of Syria and the new facts that it imposed, a process that was halted by understandings reached between Turkey and the United States on the 17th of the same month. In this context, the importance of an effective Arab stance on the ground in support of the Syrian state, which has become a field for regional and international rivalries, and proposing an Egyptian initiative in coordination with the Arab parties to guarantee a just Arab settlement to the Syrian crisis and not leaving the Syrian scene to regional and international competition.

The Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) condemns in the strongest terms the declaration made by the United States on 18th of November 2019 recognizing the legality of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, constituting a flagrant violation of international law and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations as set out in Article (2), and the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, as laid down in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. The declaration also poses a challenge to the resolutions of international legitimacy issued by the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations, especially Security Council Resolution No. 2334 of 2016 condemning settlement activity, which called on Israel to stop settlement activities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and not to recognize any changes that Israel makes to the 1967 lines other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations. Moreover, the declaration itself represents a disavowal of the official U.S. position in 1978, which emphasized that the establishment of settlements in the West Bank is "inconsistent with international law."

The recent U.S. declaration also provokes the sentiments of the peoples of the Arab and Islamic world as well as Muslims and Christians all over the world, it also adds more complexity to how to manage the peace process, and entrenches the blatant U.S. bias towards the Israeli side, which undermines the possibility of Washington playing the role of the neutral and honest mediator to reach a comprehensive peace settlement of the conflict in the Middle East region on the basis of a two-state solution.

Accordingly, the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) reaffirms its condemnation of the U.S. declaration, and the necessity of adhering to the resolutions of international legitimacy and international law regarding the status of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank as being illegal and inconsistent with the rules of international law and relevant international resolutions.
With the invitation of the Amman Security Forum, Ambassador/ Dr. Mounir Zahran, Chairman of the Council, participated in the proceedings of the Amman Security Forum, which was held in the Jordanian capital Amman on November 6th and 7th, 2019.

- The conference was attended by the Secretary-General of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); Ayad Allawi, former Iraqi Prime Minister; Shaikh Abdulla Al Khalifa, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain; and from among the Jordanian officials, Dr. Khaled Toukan, Chairman of the Jordan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC); as well as Ali Asghar Soltanieh from Iran; Deborah Rosenblum, the Executive Vice President of the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) from the United States; Undersecretary of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and a number of Arab, American and European civil society organizations, including the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA). Rafael Grossi, Argentine Ambassador to Austria and to International Organizations in Vienna, apologized after being elected Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

- Ambassador Zahran spoke three times at the forum; he spoke on the first day on the Arab stance towards the 2020 NPT Review Conference, which will be preceded by the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction, called for by UN Secretary-General, which is to be held in New York from 18th to 22nd of November 2019, and the fiftieth anniversary of the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT), and beyond; during which he explained that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) of 2017 came to fill the gap left by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) due to failure of the latter to achieve the desired goal, that is achieving denuclearization of the world; which is expected to enter into force before the end of 2020 after having been signed by 79 countries by the end of October 2019, as well as having been ratified by 33 countries. He also expressed hope that the conference, scheduled to be held in New York on the Middle East this November, would succeed, provided that Israel and the United States would participate in it, as both of them have so far announced that they will not participate in that conference, because its failure will negatively affect the 2020 NPT Review Conference success opportunities. He also called for amending the rules of procedure of the review conference in order to achieve democratic decision making by allowing a two-thirds majority vote in the event that consensus is not reached, and to allow civil society organizations to participate in the review of the treaty in all three committees of the conference, similar to what is being done in the Human Rights Council.

- Dr. Khaled Toukan, Chairman of the Jordan Atomic Energy Commission (JAEC), talked about the activities of the agency, especially in building nuclear reactors in Jordan; the 2020 NPT review conference; and threatened that Arab countries might withdraw from the NPT if the UN Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction fails, and if Israel does not join the treaty.

- Ali Asghar Soltanieh defended Iran and his country's stance against the sanctions imposed by the U.S. after Washington's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

- One of the Japanese research centres has been interested in encouraging civil society organizations to achieve nuclear disarmament and raise awareness of the risks and dangers of using nuclear weapons on the lives and health of various peoples as well as on the environment, after the unspeakable sufferings that Japan had endured as a result of the scours of using nuclear weapons in 1945.

**African Cooperation in the Nuclear Field**

Based on a pre-arranged appointment, a delegation from the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) attended at the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) on Monday, November 18th, 2019, and met with Ambassador/ Mounir Zahran and Dr. Sayed Bahi El Din Abdel Hamid, member of the Council (and former head of the Nuclear Power Plants Authority (NPPA)); whereas, the purpose of the guests' visit was to discuss topics of cooperation in the nuclear field.

The guests, namely, Mrs. Aditi Lalbahadur (Programme Manager) and Professor Jo-Ansie van Wyk (Researcher); explained that the Institute has a plan for African cooperation at the informal level with each of Egypt and Ghana on matters of mutual interest, and particularly with respect to two matters:

- Preparation for the Review Conference for the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (The 2020 NPT Review Conference), 50 years after its entry into force, which will be held in New York in late April and first half of May 2020.

- Cooperation in the area of peaceful uses of nuclear energy within the African framework (AFRA), starting with South Africa, Egypt and Ghana.

Regarding the preparation for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, they explained that the three preparatory committees, which were held in Vienna in 2017, Geneva in 2018 and New York in April/May 2019, failed to reach negotiating stances on the review of the implementation of the treaty with respect to its three pillars, namely, nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and peaceful use of nuclear energy, in addition to reviewing the progress in establishing a free zone of nuclear-weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The 2020 NPT Review Conference should therefore focus on the causes of dysfunction of the non-proliferation regime and the reasons for the non-implementation of the decisions adopted at the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference, whether with respect to the Middle East, improving the review mechanism, or the principles and objectives.

The two visitors added that there will be a call for a conference on African cooperation in the nuclear field in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Centre in Africa (The African Regional Cooperative Agreement for Research, Development and Training related to Nuclear Science and Technology (AFRA) which is to be held in South Africa in late 2020 or early 2021, and the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) will be invited to participate in that conference.
Apart from the discussions that addressed all aspects of what has taken place during the four sessions, the speakers added some points to meet the requirements of supporting or reviewing the policies followed in this regard, including the improvement of education quality that would have a positive impact on productivity, linking education and scientific research, and working toward full coordination between scientific research institutions and state sectors.

As for the theme related to economic development in the countries of the region, it was pointed out that the region possesses significant and diverse economic elements. This requires that the policies adopted achieve the maximum degree of the most efficient exploitation of all of its resources and the inevitability of regional integration through coordination and cooperation.

During the session that addressed Eastern Mediterranean gas, which is the dossier that recently has strongly imposed itself on the Middle Eastern scene, the speakers shed light on Egypt as one of the important countries on the gas and energy map, in a way that qualifies it to become a regional energy hub and to transform the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, the establishment of which was announced in Cairo in January 2019, to an international organization governed by international legal rules binding on its members.

During the third session on regional visions for the security of the Middle East region, as being considered an extremely important strategic region, focus has been laid on Non-Arab regional states, namely, Turkey, Iran and Israel, and their visions for the security of the region in light of the challenge they pose to its security and stability as well as wreaking havoc in the region, which poses risk to Arab neighbouring countries; associating those countries with their proxies, especially Hezbollah and the Houthis with Iran, and Hamas and the Brotherhood with Qatar and Turkey.

The participants emphasized the necessity of activating the Arab Joint defence agreement, noting the importance of the efforts to create a joint Arab military force.

The fourth and final session on international visions for regional security, addressed the U.S. strategy toward Middle East security under the Trump administration, its position on Arab issues in general and on the Palestinian cause in particular, and whether the U.S. Would withdraw from the region and the effects of such withdrawal on its security and stability. At this point, the importance of communicating with similar think tanks and research centres was emphasized in order to explain Egypt's positions on various issues.

Regarding the other major powers, the discussion focused on the importance of moving forward with strengthening relations of economic and trade cooperation between Egypt and both China and Russia.
On October 30, 2019, ECFA received a delegation from the Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament, headed by the Association's Secretary General. During the meeting, views were exchanged regarding the Egyptian position vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative, which was emphasized as positive, and Egypt's full support for the initiative, especially as it represents a new face of global economic cooperation, in the context of the protectionist policies facing the world, the rise of right-wing populism, the developments in the ongoing trade war between the United States and China, and the economic competition between major powers; in this regard, it was noted that Chinese diplomacy has succeeded in addressing this file without escalation.

ECFA received a delegation from the Institute of Middle East Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), on November 7, 2019 headed by Prof. Zhang Li, Vice President of the Institute, and a number of researchers at the Institute. During the meeting, views were exchanged on the current Egyptian economic situation, shedding light on the positive performance indicators of the Egyptian economy issued by international institutions, topped by the International Monetary Fund, which confirm the high growth rates of the Egyptian economy at nearly 5%, and the decline of unemployment and inflation indicators, which indicates that the economic development plan is progressing on the right path. The meeting also discussed the obstacles facing the activation of the strategic framework between China and Egypt in all fields, not just the economic one, which would contribute to advancing the bilateral relations between them, as well as coordination between the two sides in resolving the region's crises in light of their shared principles and commonalities related to rejecting interference in the internal affairs of states and the importance of settling disputes and confronting terrorist organizations in all their forms, so as to achieve regional stability.

On December 3, ECFA hosted a delegation from the Chinese Institute of International Studies at the Institute of International Studies, led by Professor Cui Lei, specializing in US foreign policy and Sino-US relations, Prof. Wang Zesheng, and a number of researchers at the Institute. Moreover, the meeting discussed many issues related to changing global alliances under the new US Administration, the possibility of a shift in the structure of these alliances, and the fact of the transformation of the US strategy from intervention in the Middle East crises towards consolidating its presence in the Pacific and South Asia, in addition to the current Chinese rapprochement with the countries of the Middle East region, in the framework of enhancing China’s strategic partnership with the countries of the region, as well as the active Russian role in the region. Both sides agreed that the American retreat from the region’s problems has pushed its countries to rapprochement with Russia and China; the latter must play a more active role regarding the region’s crises.
The council organized a lecture given by Ambassador Dr. Mounir Zahran, Chairman of the council, on November 18th, 2019. It was attended by a number of ambassadors, experts, and academics of the council to address the topic of “Views on the Suez canal from historical, political, legal, and economic perspectives”. This event was moderated by Ambassador/ Dr. Ezzat Saad, Director of the Council. This lecture was organized within the framework of celebrating the 150th anniversary of Suez Canal’s opening to international navigation.

During the lecture, Ambassador Zahran highlighted the history of dredging the old canal and who was behind that idea. In addition, he referred to the period that followed the opening of the canal when Egypt, after making great sacrifices to dig the canal and having disputes with de Lesseps, sought arbitration to resolve such issues. The result of the arbitration was to abolish the system of corvée labour, and to cede the territory that had been previously granted to the company by the Khedive in return for compensation, as well as determining the appropriate compensation in exchange for return of land. In addition, the company would cease to fulfill its obligations to labors with respect to wages and food quota. Moreover, the canal dredging concession would begin from the date of its opening to navigation and not from the date of the company’s possession of land allocated to both of the salt water and fresh water canals; this led most observers to view the result of the arbitration as causing injustice and prejudice to Egypt’s interests, in favour of the company.

This was followed by reviewing the phases of dredging the canal till its opening and the costs of which amounted to about 40 billion Pounds Sterling (the Egyptian Pound was equivalent to or higher than its Sterling counterpart); as well as the Egyptian rejection to the support given by the British government, representing the occupation authority in Egypt, for the Suez Canal Company’s request to extend the concession period, which was scheduled to expire in 1968, for another 40 years, which was followed by announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956; and the grave losses suffered by the Egyptian people after that announcement. Ambassador Mounir Zahran affirmed that this was a prelude to and a cause of the 1967 setback (Naksa), in addition to president Abdel Nasser’s demand for the withdrawal of the United Nations Emergency force (UNEF) from Sinai, which was previously approved by Egypt in 1956 in return for Israel’s withdrawal from Sinai, and imposing a blockade on Israeli navigation in the Gulf of Aqaba. This led some to believe that if Egypt would have waited till expiry of the Suez Canal Company’s concession, Egypt could have restored the Suez Canal, had not to pay compensation for the nationalization, would have avoided the tripartite aggression without losses, and then the 1967 war would have been avoided, especially since the nationalization announcement resulted in freezing of Egyptian balances in American, French, and British banks and compensating the company’s shareholders through buying the shares of some and paying a compensation of USD 81.2 million to others.

In conclusion of the lecture, Ambassador Zahran reviewed the New Suez Canal and the efforts made within the framework of developing the navigation canal as well as the Economic Zone of the Suez Canal and how would that be of great benefit to Egypt.
The Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs held a meeting on November 21, 2019, with Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to Cairo, **Mr. Ali Bin Ahmed Al-Esaei**, at the invitation of the Council, where the members spoke about the following:

- Developments in the Egyptian / Omani relations in all fields, coordination and joint cooperation between the two countries.
- Muscat’s relations with its Gulf Arab neighbors and Iran. In this context, he addressed extensively his country’s historical relations with Iran, the cultural exchange between the two countries, their interaction due to the common maritime borders (350 nautical miles) and the influence of each on the other throughout history.
- The Omani guest assured on what he called the differences between Iran’s dealings with the Sultanate and its dealings with other Gulf countries, referring to the absolute equality between the people of Oman, Shiites and Sunnis, and thus there is no way for Iranian interference in Omani internal affairs.
- The ambassador gave his own assessment of the ongoing demonstrations in Iran and the difficult economic conditions the people are suffering from, which could put an end to the mullahs’ rule there unless the regime searches for solutions to them.
- He concluded his speech by talking on the Iranian-American relations, the vision of each side, and Washington’s view of Iran as a major player in curbing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean and in the Middle East.

**Joint Symposium on “Azerbaijan’s Diplomacy in its Centenary Celebrations”**

Within the framework of the centenary celebrations of Azerbaijan’s diplomacy, the Council hosted a joint symposium with Al- Hewar Center for Political and Media Studies to discuss the book of Dr. Emil Rakhimov, Cultural Counselor at the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Cairo on December 14th, 2019. This book, was issued in June 2019, to commemorate this occasion, on “Azerbaijan’s diplomacy in its centenary celebrations”.

Ambassador Dr. Ezzat Saad, Director of the council; participated in, and moderated this symposium. In addition to Ambassador Youssef Al-Sharkawy, council ‘s member; Dr. Adel Darwish, former Director of Egyptian Cultural Center in Azerbaijan; and Mr. Mohammed Salama, journalist and former editor in chief of Al- Akhbar newspaper; who have all participated in this symposium.

At the beginning of the proceedings of the symposium, Ambassador/ Dr. Ezzat Saad emphasized several points, one of these points was that Azerbaijan has always practiced multilateral diplomacy owing to its geographical and geopolitical position; where the state of Azerbaijan represents a hub between Central Asia and Europe.

Following that, Dr. Emil Rakhimov reviewed his book; during which the historical stations of Azerbaijan’s diplomacy have been reviewed, on the understanding that diplomacy is the executive tool of any state’s foreign policy. During the symposium, developments in bilateral relations between Egypt and Azerbaijan as well as the cultural cooperation existing between the two sides have also been reviewed. The significance of working towards moving forward with the enhancement of such relations at all levels, were also stressed.
The Egyptian council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) received on December 11th, 2019, the Sri Lanka delegation headed by Mr. Ravinatha Aryasinha, Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for discussing developments of bilateral relations between Egypt and Sri Lanka, as well as Sri Lanka’s relations with Africa and its stance towards a number of issues in the region. The meeting was attended by Ambassadors Mounir Zahran, Ezzat Saad, Nagla’a Al-Zawahry, Ali El-Hefny, Farouk Mabrouk, Yousri Khalil, Youssef El-Sharkawy, and Mohamed Mounir. The Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was accompanied by a number of members from his country’s embassy in Cairo, including Her Excellency Ambassador of Sri Lanka to Cairo.

The Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted his country’s fairly humble status; particularly at the economic level, and he asked the attendees to suggest as many strategies and mechanisms as possible to enhance cooperation between his country and the region, especially Egypt for being a key player in the region; and as Egypt is experiencing an impressive economic boom, moving with steady steps towards progress and prosperity, after having succeeded in confronting many challenges.

Council’s Members Visit to Suez Canal Authority

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Suez Canal’s opening; and at the initiative of Ambassador Abdel Raouf El-Reedy- Honorary Chairman of the Council; a group of members of the council headed by Ambassador/ Abdel Raouf El-Reedy, and Ambassador Dr. Mounir Zahran, Chairman of the board of Directors; paid a visit on November 17th, 2019, to the General Authority of Suez Canal, where they were received by Admiral Osama Rabie-Chairman of the Suez Canal Authority and his assistants.

In addition to watching a documentary on Suez Canal’s history, the Suez Canal Authority organized visits to the De Lesseps’ museum and residence, as well as to the tunnels connecting Ismailia to the Sinai peninsula, for the council’s delegation and other delegations as well, including the Association du Souvenir de Ferdinand de Lesseps et du Canal de Suez, the French ambassador, and the Panamanian ambassador.

The delegation’s visit was concluded by accepting a generous lunch invitation from the Chairman of the Authority; and on this occasion, Admiral Rabie presented the Suez Canal Authority’s shield to Ambassador/ Abdel Raouf El-Reedy.

The council decided to arrange a visit, for the council ‘s members, to the Suez Canal Economic Zone in Ain Sokhna.
The Egyptian council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) held a seminar entitled “Future of peace process in light of recent Israeli elections and their reflections over the Palestinian question”, on October 21st, 2019. The seminar was attended by an elite group of ambassadors, academics, and researchers interested in the Arab-Israeli Affair. This Seminar was opened by Ambassador/ Dr. Mounir Zahran. A number of research papers, each addressing a specific theme or aspect of the issue under research, have been reviewed over the course of this seminar. The first theme revolved around the topic of “Assessment of current Israeli stance in light of the results of latest elections and their reflections over Israeli policy towards the peace process”; the second theme revolved around “The Palestinian stance… where is it going to? In light of regional and international changes”; the third was around “The limits of Arab stance and the peace process advancement opportunities”; the topic of the fourth theme was “Looking forwards to the stances of other major powers (Russia, China, and the EU) towards the peace process in the next Phase”; and the fifth theme addressed the topic of “The deal of the century and its influences between postponement and proposal”.

The participants asserted that the results of the latest Israeli elections involved various negative effects due to extreme right wing dominance in Tel Aviv, as well as not attaching any significance to the peace process or settlement with the Palestinians as the priority list of competing parties did not include any mention of the peace process in these elections; which foreshadows a peace process that is not going to be easy, and the lack of a reliable partner to resume that process.
At the invitation of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Ambassador Dr. Ezzat Saad participated in the proceedings of a forum on the topic of “Middle East Security under recent changes: opportunities and challenges”. The forum was hosted from November 26 to 28, 2019, by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), which is the Chinese think tank directly administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

The forum was participated in by State figures and research centers from several states of the region including Turkey and Iran, in addition to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sultanate of Oman, Kuwait, and Tunisia. The following public figures were amongst those who participated (only in the opening session): Eyad Allawi, former Iraqi Prime Minister; Jawad Anani, Jordan's former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister; Prince Turky Al-Faisal, Chairman of King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies; Ahmad Teguedy, Mauritania's former Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation; Ali Jarbawi, former Minister of Planning and Administrative Development of the government of the Palestinian National Authority and Director of the Center for Researches and Studies at Birzeit University; and Hani Al-Masri, Director General of the Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies (Masaarat); as well as researchers and experts in Middle East security and Diplomats from the Russian Federation, France, India, Djibouti, Switzerland, Comoros, UK, EU, and the USA. Ambassadors of the states of the region were invited to attend the opening session. The Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) participated in the proceedings of the forum, as the Chinese side had invited three of its members, namely, Ambassador Ezzat Saad, Director of the Council; Ambassador Mahmoud Allam, Egypt's former Ambassador to China; and Ambassador Mohamed Hegazy, former Assistant Foreign Minister for Asian Affairs. Also, from Al-Ahram Center for political and strategic studies, Dr. Mohamed Fayez Farahat participated in this forum.

The Chinese side selected and approached an agenda that would be compliable with the Chinese vision towards Middle East disputes; so as to reach a resolution of such disputes, particularly from the perspective of President Xi Jinping’s political thought which he has expressed in various occasions, including China’s paper on its policies towards Arab states that was proposed in January 2016 at the Arab League, during his visit to Cairo, as well as his two opening speeches at the first and second Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation of 2017 and 2019, in addition to the report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

It is known that China recognized the independent Palestinian state, since its declaration in 1988, based on the borders of June 4, 1967, and with East Jerusalem as its capital; as it has also, timidly, adopted two initiatives in 2016 and 2018, for settling the problem of the Israeli occupation of Palestine (known as the four point initiative; then as the five point initiative).

The Chinese side organized a meeting, on November 27 morning prior to opening of conference proceedings, for a limited number of the participants, that included the Director of the Egyptian council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA), with the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs who gave a speech in which he presented the strategic significance of the Middle East to China and its ever-growing economic and commercial relations therein, as well as his country’s special interest in the stability and security of that region, in addition to economically and socially developing its people; and that these were the reasons behind the organization of this forum by China.

The conclusion is that; while the Middle East is passing through a time of unprecedented instability state, whether this be linked to the US foreign policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, or to what is going on in each of Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, in addition to Turkish provocations in the Middle East; China, by organizing this forum, aims at conveying a message to the states of the region that it cares for their problems, particularly with its growing economic and commercial interests in such states.
The Council organized a seminar on October 8th, 2019, to discuss Dr. Heba Gamal Eldin’s book (under publication) on “Spiritual Diplomacy and the common Abrahamic bond: between the deal of the century and the colonial plan of the new century”. Dr. Heba Gamal Eldin is a Professor of Political Science at the Institute of National Planning (INP) and a member of the Council. The meeting was attended by a number of ambassadors, academics and experts from among the members of the Council, as well as a number of non-council member press and media figures. The meeting was moderated by Professor / Dr. Ali El Din Helal, member of the Board of Directors.

Dr. Heba Gamal Eldin, during her presentation for reviewing the most important topics in the book, emphasized the following in particular:

• The talk on the “common Abrahamic bond” has recently started to be frequently mentioned as a means of moving towards global religious peace, a vehicle to eliminate extremism and violence, and even for eradicating poverty and achieving sustainable development. And divine religions have been called the Abrahamic religions as a step to express the convergence of religions, to take advantage of the common denominators, and to reach a human brotherhood based on mutual respect and setting aside conflicts inherited from ancestors due to religious differences.

• This would be within the framework of forming a mental picture which would be acceptable and close to the heart with respect to everything described as Abrahamic. Here, the matter requires mindfulness and contemplation; so as to think to what extent could the common Abrahamic bond be used? Would its use be limited to religion, and why did it replace the term “divine religions”? And if its use extends beyond the scope of religion, would it be politicized, and what would be the extent of its politicization? And what is the sky-high limit through which the term “Abrahamic” would be employed? The most important matter to consider is to understand? what is “Abrahamic”, and to whom does it refer? Does it refer to God’s Prophet, Abraham (peace be upon him)? And if that is the case, then why is it being raised now? And who is the Founding Father? who would employ the Prophet of God as a means of combating protracted conflicts, reaching a common bond, and achieving global religious peace. Does “Global religious peace” represent a new term? Why is peace described as “religious” despite establishing the world on the basis of rejecting the involvement of religious matters in political life?, which has lasted for many centuries?, and why is religion global despite the absence of a single world religion that prevails over the whole world?.

• In fact, the research into the concept of the common Abrahamic bond has been supported by U.S. governments since 1990 with the speech of U.S. President George Bush Senior on the "New World Order" following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S. war on Iraq, as well as the support that was crowned with an institution within the U.S. State Department in 2013.

• In this regard, I noted that we are faced with a confused and ill-defined picture as we speak of the “deal of the century” which is based on the elimination and disappearance of borders by taking into account the freedom of worship and belief, eradication of religion derived hatred and setting aside ancestors' differences based on religion; according to statements by Kushner, the advisor to the President of the United States on the “Deal of the century”; in February 2019.

• Do environmental threats have a role in fuelling the situation and resorting to talking about the common Abrahamic bond so as to be a significant entry point to the near future? Moreover, what is the relationship of what is offered for the sake of future generations, such as the speech of sustainability, with the common Abrahamic bond? Is it being politicized so as to comply with the U.S. proposal that is planned to be announced with respect to the “Deal of the century”?  

• She concluded her speech by emphasizing that the book aims at unveiling the new plan proposed by the U.S. think tanks since the beginning of the millennium, while extrapolating and refuting the plan as well as trying to foresee its path and direction in light of upholding the Arab interests as an integrated whole; this intersects with the features of the “Deal of the century,” the importance of introducing new confrontational policies and reassessing the internal situation.