

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

17TH ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

***“TRANSITIONING THE WHITE HOUSE:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”***

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2008

**RONALD REAGAN BUILDING & INTERNATIONAL TRADE CENTER
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

3:00-3:30: "ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS: The Way Forward - Views From the Arab World"

H.E. Dr. Hussein Hassouna – Ambassador of the League of Arab States to the United States of America; former Assistant Foreign Minister of Egypt; former Ambassador of Egypt to Morocco and Yugoslavia; Member, United Nations International Law Commission.

Transcript by Ryan & Associates

[JOHN DUKE ANTHONY] Last but not least, His Excellency Doctor Hussein Hassouna who has addressed numerous of these conferences. He is the Ambassador of the League of Arab States to the United States.

He has been a long time representative before coming to those positions. A diplomat in Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he was Assistant Foreign Minister of Egypt and also representative for many years at the United Nations, as the League of Arab States Ambassador where he was exposed to many world's problems.

He was also Ambassador of Egypt to Morocco, Ambassador to Yugoslavia. He has his PhD in law from Cambridge and in the last two years he got the most votes of any lawyer, specialist in jurisprudence in the world to be appointed to the international law commission in Geneva, which is the central body of the United Nations codifying international law and norms of international behavior.

Ambassador Hassouna.

[HUSSEIN HASSOUNA] Good afternoon everyone. I know it has been a long session, that you're all tired and that there were many interesting discussions. I have been asked by my friend, Dr. John Duke Anthony, to make some concluding remarks, which I will do.

My first one is that it seems that this year there has been an increased number in the audience attending this conference. So I wonder, is this because John Duke Anthony has become more popular for some reason. I think it is rather because the subject matter of the conference is so important. The relations between the United States and the Arab world.

Where are they heading? What are the problems, the challenges? And I think this is what this audience came to listen to, to understand.

I think the importance of this conference was both because of its theme and because of its timing. Because of its theme, because it dealt with a subject of topical importance -- the relations between the Arab world and the United States which are strategic relations, based on a strong interdependency, and there are some crucial issues in this relationship.

Crisis in the Middle East, the oil, the culture, extremism, the policies of the United States vis a vis the Arabs and Muslim worlds. All of these issues are of great importance to both the United States and to the Arab world. September 11th had a dramatic effect on our relationship. It was devastating and I think we have to realize this and take it into account because September 11th led to the emergence of two concepts or notions, which were damaging to our relationship.

The first was the notion in this country as to whether the Arab world and the Muslim world hated the United States. And of course the answer is no. The Arab world and the Muslim world do not hate the United States. They respect the United States. Arab people love the United States -- the lifestyle, the knowledge, the progress, and that is why so many Arabs and Muslims apply to come and live in the United States or send their children to school in the United States.

But what the Arabs resent very often are the policies of the United States, which they perceive as being not fair, not objective, siding with Israel when it comes to the Arab-Israeli problem.

The second notion which was unleashed by September 11th is the notion that the clash between the United States and the West in general and the Muslim and Arab world -- a clash of culture, a clash of religion, a clash of civilization. And again this does not exist. What does exist, there is a clash between extremists on both sides -- extremists in the Arab world and extremists in the United States and the West in general. It is up to the majority that is moderate, that believes in co-existence, that believes that we all have common values to stand up against those extremists.

The timing of this conference in my view was also extremely important. Again for two reasons. One, because we all face a global financial crisis of devastating proportions and this crisis is affecting everyone. Affecting individuals, is affecting governments, and it's even affecting the Presidential election in this country.

This crisis has deep rooted causes. But I think the lesson we can draw is that it happened because we live in a interdependent world, a global world. What happened started in the United States and has affected the rest of the world. I think we also have a collective responsibility with this crisis. It is not only one institution, one bank that is the responsibility, it is a collective responsibility for all. That is why it has spread all over the world. But I think also one of the reasons we have this crisis is that there was an absence of the rule of the law in dealing with these financial and economic issues.

There was an absence of transparency, there was an absence of accountability, for those responsible and I think it is time to deal with the deep rooted causes of the crisis. To engage in a reform that is not just superficial and contain the crisis. But we have to reform the whole system so that this crisis will not occur anymore. And here I believe that it was wise to have this world conference meeting in Washington on the 15th of November to try and reform the whole system.

We have to reform the institutions, the Bretton Woods institutions that have survived for over the years but that need to be reformed also. I think we have to create a system that is more ethical, that is even more human I would say, that is not materialistic as it has been for so long.

The Arab world has been involved in trying to help and assist in the crisis. Many countries of the oil producing countries in the Arab world have already provided assistance to developing countries when those countries were afflicted by the sky rocketing food prices and they have given a lot of assistance to the World Food Program. You also know that the sovereign funds have played an important role in helping, providing capital in the developed markets in the worlds and we continue to do so. So I think a partnership and a cooperation between the Arab world and the developed world, and especially the United States is called for, and should continue in the days and years ahead.

The second importance of this conference apart from the financial crisis is the timing that is the eve of the elections. I think we have already had many panels dealing with this question of elections. What does the Arab world expect from a new administration.

Let me share my own thoughts about that. First of all we have all followed the campaign, the presidential campaign, I think it was a model of democracy at work. Yes we in the Arab world we have to draw lessons for our own democracies.

We've seen how there has been a campaign, how the candidates express themselves, how they plan their campaign, how they enlist support, and it is really a lesson for the rest of the world. But of course there are also things, which we cannot condone or accept, like racial profiling, like Islamophobia, and other abuses.

I think we were all gratified to hear some courageous man like Colin Powell when he questioned what about if Obama was a Muslim. Some others saying what about if Obama was called Obama Hussein Barack? By the way this is my name also. So I think that there was a reaction to those abuses and this was healthy and we applaud those people who reacted to that.

A new President in my view is not going to dramatically change the policies of the United States. The United States is the only super power in the world. In spite of its weaknesses it still has strong institutions and long-term strategic interests. And it will continue the same policies. But the new administration can certainly change its approaches, its style, its discourse and this in my view can have an impact on its relations with the rest of the world.

I agree with those who said that a new president should try to become a model for others to be a leader, to adopt fair policies, to listen to grievances and the concerns of the rest of the world and not just impose the views of the US on the others. I think this is crucial for the new administration.

I also think that the new president should adopt policies towards the Middle East especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli problems that are fair. Pursue a policy of peace, based on justice, because without justice there can be no lasting peace in our part of the world. This means that a new President should continue the peace process, should carry on what has been achieved so far. We know that the Annapolis conference raised many hopes in the region, but that unfortunately those hopes were not fulfilled, since so far we have had no agreements. Yes there was a new negotiating process that was started. Yes that this process dealt with all the issues including the difficult ones like the status of Jerusalem and the status of the refugees. But there was no conclusion, no commitment, nothing in writing. Of course all this was undermined by Israel's policies concerning the settlements in occupied territories. Which in the words of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did not provide the conducive climate to make negotiations succeed.

So I think a new president has to get involved in this Arab Israeli conflict that is still in the hearts and the minds of the people of the Middle East the crux of the problems. And I think he has to do it at an early stage of the administration and not to leave it like has been done by previous administrations to the last year or month of the administration. And I think that the Arab Peace Initiative adopted at the Beirut Summit Conference of 2002 still provides the best framework for a balanced comprehensive settlement of the issue. The Israelis have lately shown some interest in it, they have asked to negotiate some terms of its resolution. I don't think it can be negotiated upon. I think it has to be implemented because it is a carefully drafted initiative that is

very balanced and that has both sides abide by certain obligations mainly peace versus land. Total withdrawal of the occupied territories, settlement of the Palestine refugee problem and the independent state for Palestine versus total diplomatic relations between the Arab world and Israel

It can still happen, it is not a dream. I have been involved for many years in the peace process between Egypt and Israel and I think that with hard work. with dedication. with effective roll of the United States as a honest broker, not siding with Israel but being even handed, I think that we can reach a settlement.

I also think that the next President should adopt an approach of trying to settle crisis and conflicts though diplomacy and not through threats and sanctions because we've seen that it doesn't work. That's why I deplore what has happened lately when the United States launched this raid against Syria, because it has repercussions. It has repercussions not only within Syria but within the Muslim and Arab world. It affects the image of the United States that it is resorting to force, that it's not ready to negotiate, to try and settle the problem peacefully. Already we've sent that the cooperation between the United States and Syria and Iraq along the border between Syria and Iraq might be affected. So it has long-term repercussions.

I also think that the problem of the Sudan and Darfur should be resolved through political means. We should all try to get the government of Sudan together with all the rebel groups together around a table and the Arab League has proposed to do this at a meeting in September the Arab Council of Ministers had decided to convene a conference in Doha where all parties of the conference will be present. So I think through negotiations and diplomacy we can find solutions to difficult problems.

The same has happened in Lebanon. Lebanon for so long was the scene of conflict and again it is through collective efforts of the Arab world and the Arab League that we have today a new president, that we have today a government, that we have dialogue between the main parties in Lebanon, and I think it proves that Arab problems should be settled through Arab means and Arab solutions. And not leave it to outside forces to intervene and adopt solutions according to their own interest and there own agendas.

I also believe a new president should support multilateral approaches and not unilateral approaches. For instance in the Middle East today the issue of Iran. In my view it can be served with multilateral approach. Yes, Iran should not have weapons of mass destruction but it has the right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. And the way to prevent Iran from having weapons of mass destruction is to establish in the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. A zone under which all countries in the region would give up their weapons of mass destruction and abide by international supervision control and this includes Israel. Israel that has today weapons of mass destruction. This is the only solution in my view. It is the first solution.

I also believe that the United States under the new administration should support the United Nations. The United Nations, that is the global organization where every country is represented. But is should also support implementing united relations in a fair way. It shouldn't be just applied versus certain countries and not versus others. The veto should not be abused. I think

that the United States also should respect international law, respect the Geneva Conventions, respect the opinion of the International Court of Justice including the advisory opinion rendered by the court on the question and legality of the Israeli war inside Palestinian occupied territory.

So many things should be done by the new Administration. It should join international conventions. I don't know how many of you know that the United States has not joined some major conventions in the world. Like the convention of the Law of the Sea, the Convention on the Protection of the Child – major conventions, which.. the international criminal court, which the rest of the world has joined. We need a world based on the rule of the law, if we were going to have a better world.

I think that the U.S. should also try to resolve the question of extremism in the world through dealing with the root causes, not just through military means, but dealing with really the causes of extremism and terrorism, which very much of the feeling of despair with very much economic and social problems in our part of the world, unemployment, illiteracy and so on. I think there should be a big effort to get rid of issues, which might have an impact in overcoming extremism in our part of the world.

And then I think the United States should also try and support the democratic changes in the region and I accept that we need more democracy. There are changes happening but we need more. And this is the wish and aspiration of all Arab people. But I think these changes should not be a model enforced by the U.S. from abroad. It should take into account the cultural and religious heritage of the countries concerned.

I also think that there are many other ways that the United States can help the Arab world and develop friendly relations with the United States. For instance in the economics field the Arabs now are engaged in important efforts aiming at cooperation among themselves at economic integration. In January of next year there will be the first Arab Economic Summit meeting. It will be held in Kuwait. It will deal with the economic issues confronting the Arab world -- economic and social issues, economic issues, the process of integration.

Already in 2005 the Arab league has adopted a free trade zone between the members of the League. It will lead to a customs union and hopefully by 2020 there will be an Arab Common Market, along the model of the European Common Market. So this conference is going to discuss this process but it will also address other issues of human development, of education in the Arab world. I think it a very important conference because for the first time all the heads of states of the Arab world have committed themselves to get involved in this and to give it a priority.

I think that the relations of course between the United States and the Arab world in the economic field are evolving. There are many free trade agreements. The cooperation with the oil producing countries also in stabilizing prices, and so on should continue and go on. Education and culture are essential. Education again is a tough priority for the Arab world. Because without education there can be no real attempt to combat poverty, unemployment, extremism. Education is the key is the key for countries and people to prosper and there is a real effort now in the Arab world to focus on education reform.

The next 10 years have been proclaimed as the decade for education reform. The United States can help with its expertise, can help with its scientific knowledge, and I think that this is an important sphere of potential cooperation between the United States and the Arab world.

Culture again is extremely important. It is through culture that people get together. It is through culture that people can understand each other more. It opens the minds, it makes you realize that you all have common values. That is why I think it's extremely important to get involved in cultural initiatives. I will mention to you just two kinds of initiatives, which I think, will have an impact on U.S.-Arab relations.

One is that on the 23rd of February of next year there will be the first Arab Cultural Festival in the United States. We have been working, the Arab League with the Kennedy Center to have this festival. It will be a festival of arts and cultures and will be called "Arabesque." For the first time the 22 countries of the Arab league will be represented and will take part in this festival. There are many of course artists from different Arab worlds, many exhibitions before but never have the 22 countries together taken part in an event like this. Including the smallest Arab countries, one of the smallest ones, that is the Comoros Islands. I'm not sure you know where it is but the Comoros Islands will send some of their artist to take part in this festival as well. It will go on for three weeks. So I urge you all to go and enjoy the best we have in terms of art, 23rd of February.

I think the message of this festival is that the Arabs have a great culture and a great civilization. It should not be just perceived as being sometimes backward or extremist. But that their civilization, their culture has contributed and still contribute to the world culture and civilization.

The 2nd initiative is the initiative of our wives. The wives of the Arab ambassadors in Washington. They have something called the Mosaic Foundation, which some of you know about. This is an NGO devoted to promote ties between the United States and the Arab world in the cultural fields, to promote Arab culture, to organize events and activities about Arab culture. I think they are doing a great job and they also have an annual gala and the proceeds of that gala goes to charities in the United States and the Arab world especially charities concerning women and children. So I think we should thank them for that.

I just would like to conclude by saying, yes, the Arab world and the United States they are both facing great challenges -- challenges to strengthen their relationship, to dispel the misconceptions, to promote a better understanding, to understand each more, and find common solutions to the problems we face.

I think it needs on both sides, it needs efforts, sincere efforts. I think the Arabs have to come together also. I always say and this is the mission of the Arab League that they have to unite and take common stands, because this is the way where they can have more weight in dealing with others.

I think that what we need is not just understanding the issues and the challenges and analyzing them but I think we need some proactive efforts. We need people to be more outspoken. We

need those who care about U.S.-Arab relations to take part in public debate, to go on television and talk, to respond to those who attack us. Maybe we need the kind of ground movement, to have everyone involved, not only the officials, not only the media, but the ordinary people.

I think if we join our hands we can overcome the challenges we are facing.

Thank you very much.
