

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON U.S.-ARAB RELATIONS

18TH ANNUAL ARAB-U.S. POLICYMAKERS CONFERENCE

***“FRESH VISIONS, OLD REALITIES, NEW POSSIBILITIES:
THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP CHANGE ON ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS”***

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2009

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

LUNCHEON KEYNOTE ADDRESS

H.E. Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo – Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United States; appointed to Bahrain’s Majlis ash-Shura [National Advisory] Council by His Majesty the King Shaikh Hamad Bin Salman Al-Khalifa where, prior to her appointment as Ambassador she served on the Committee for Finance and Economic Affairs; and former Secretary General of the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society.

October 16, 2009

Thank you, Doctor Anthony, for your kind introduction.

It is a great pleasure to be here to give Bahrain's perspective on the conference's theme of "Fresh Visions, Old Realities, New Possibilities: the Impact of Leadership Change on Arab-U.S. Relations."

Fresh Visions

Let's start with "fresh visions."

Our Foreign Minister, H.E. Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa set the context from the Bahraini point of view during his remarks three weeks ago at the United Nations General Assembly in New York. He said:

The challenges facing us today as human beings are greater and more daunting than those we face as nations, races or religious groups; for, as individuals, we are constantly threatened by disease, hunger and climate change, while the world sinks into endless wars and conflicts.... The world has become a small village within which distances have been effectively abolished.

The fresh vision he offered as a solution to the problems he described was, of course, the renewal of an old truth. He called for "replacing conflict with dialogue, disagreements with consensus and violence with persuasion."

As always, the question is not so much what needs to be done but more about how. How can we fulfill the fresh version of an age-old vision? Perhaps we should name it using IT terms: World Peace, Version 2.009.

Old Realities

The answer starts with old realities.

First, for Bahrain, the oldest reality is geography. Bahrain is a small country of about a million people, a GDP of \$26 billion and a trading, cosmopolitan culture dating back to ancient times. To quote the most famous Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad:

We are not an island
Except to whoever sees us from the sea.

Whatever the poetic vision, the enduring reality is that geography classifies Bahrain as among the United Nations' Small Island Developing States – or SIDS. Thus, Bahrain has great concern at the evident causal relationship between climate change and sea level that poses serious threats to our planet.

Bahrain shares the position of other SIDS states about the adverse impact of rising global average temperatures. In this regard, Bahrain hosted in May, in the presence of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, the launching of the 2009 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction. The report deals with natural disaster situations involving earthquakes, global warming, floods and the rise in sea level.

A second geographical reality is that Bahrain is situated in a dangerous neighborhood which has far too often been a part of the “endless wars and conflicts” to which H.E. the Foreign Minister alluded. Some date back decades, some centuries and some millennia.

I would like to comment briefly on two that are front-and-center on the agenda of this conference: the Arab Israeli conflict and the question of Gulf security, especially regarding proliferation.

The Crown Prince His Highness Shaikh Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa published an editorial in the *Washington Post* on July 16 calling for fresh thinking on Arab-Israeli issues. He wrote:

Our biggest mistake has been to assume that you can simply switch peace on like a light bulb. The reality is that peace is a process, contingent on a good idea but also requiring a great deal of campaigning -- patiently and repeatedly targeting all relevant parties. This is where we as Arabs have not done enough to communicate directly with the people of Israel.

His conclusion was simple:

The two communities in the Holy Land are not fated to be enemies. What can unite them tomorrow is potentially bigger than what divides them today.

We (that is, the Arab side) we should move toward real peace now by consulting and educating our people and by reaching out to the Israeli public to highlight the benefits of a genuine peace.

His fresh vision is that such a step will inspire Israeli voices to respond in kind, and together voices on both sides can offer the prospect of establishing “a virtuous circle” of peace, trade and prosperity. In this way, the sixty-year old reality of Arab-Israel conflict can be transformed.

Even closer to home is the geographical reality of Gulf security. It is a preoccupation for Bahrain. For Americans, it has been as well. But there is a difference. For Americans, Gulf security issues are largely matters of foreign policy; but for us, they are matters of survival. This is the perspective from which we view the policies of the new administration just as it was the perspective from which we viewed those of the previous administrations.

Even before the 2008 US presidential elections, H.H. the Crown Prince made an important point about the military geography of our neighborhood. He noted that it is only ten minutes flying time across the Gulf and that “the whole region” would be drawn into any military conflict. Thus, he counseled “there needs to be far more done on the diplomatic front.”

H.E. the Foreign Minister, has voiced similar conclusions:

First, he has stressed that the Iranian nuclear program should be addressed “in such a manner as to spare our region the threat of confrontation. This could best be achieved by giving precedence to diplomacy.”

Second, he has avowed, “It is now time ... to consider the possibility of establishing an organization that would include all states in the Middle East, without exception, in the hope of reaching a stable and durable understanding between all parties.”

The third geographic point I would make harkens back to our Foreign Minister’s remark that the world is a small village where distances have been abolished.

In Bahrain’s corner of the global village, HM King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa has led the way over the past decade with political, economic and educational reforms paving the way for a bold vision of Bahrain twenty years from now.

It is from these premises that Bahrain aspires in its “Economic Vision 2030” to shift from an economy built on oil wealth to a productive, globally competitive economy shaped by the government but driven by a pioneering private sector -- an economy that creates a broad middle class of Bahrainis who enjoy good living standards through increased productivity and high-wage jobs.

As for our Foreign Minister’s reference to distances being abolished, Bahrain has for millennia been a global crossroads, and Bahrain’s trade, political and security arrangements reflect that history.

In particular the United States and Bahrain have long maintained a strong, multifaceted relationship despite the thousands of miles between our shores. Our two countries have worked closely since diplomatic relations were established immediately after Bahrain’s independence in 1971. Still our friendship dates back more than a century.

Our rich and remarkable relationship starts with humanitarian and cultural beginnings when American missionaries established a school and a hospital in Bahrain in 1893.

An American company SOCAL first discovered oil in the Gulf when it drilled in Bahrain in 1932, and with that event came the transformation of the country’s economy and labor force - and, of course, the entire region’s economic circumstances.

More recently, the US-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement signed in 2004 was a landmark event. Bahrain was the first gulf state to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States. In the three years since it entered into force in August 2006, it has produced significant benefits for both sides.

Militarily, cooperation began during the Second World War, and has led to sixty years of Bahrain's hosting the United States' Fifth Fleet. It still does so with no ambivalence in the Bahraini Government or among the Bahraini people.

The US and Bahrain have broken new ground in other regards, too. Bahrain became a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2001, reflecting the strength of our security cooperation. We also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Nuclear Cooperation in 2008, crowning a new level of cooperation. We cooperate closely on counter terrorism.

New Possibilities and Leadership Change

From these observations about fresh visions and old realities, I would like to conclude with a few remarks on new possibilities and leadership change.

First, Bahrain regards the Climate Change and the Security Council Summit meetings held in conjunction with the 64th UN General Assembly this past September as reconfirming the return of the spirit of the United Nations Charter. In short, the UN is again to be the principal forum for multilateral cooperation on the great challenges both to peace and to humankind's biosphere.

Second, there is every reason to expect that the close relations between Bahrain and the US will continue to flourish. In the words of His Majesty the King, Bahrain "looks forward to further enhancing the outstanding historical relations between our two countries and stepping up cooperation in all areas."

Finally, as a Bahraini woman from a Jewish family who is now Ambassador to the United States, I stand before you as evidence of new possibilities.

I thank you.