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“Arab-U.S. Relations: Going Where?”

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"POLICY DIRECTIONS FROM THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES"

H.E. Ambassador Dr. Hussein Hassouna - Chief Representative of the League of Arab States to the United States.

POLICY DIRECTIONS FROM THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES
H.E. AMBASSADOR DR. HUSSEIN HASSOUNA

[Dr. John Duke Anthony] We come now to the most prominent Arab in the United States, representing the interests of 22 Arab countries. He's no stranger to these conferences. He is no stranger to the United States. Dr. Hussein Hassouna is the Ambassador of the League of Arab States and its representative to Washington.

He is no stranger to Washington either. He participated in the negotiations that produced the Camp David Accords, the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab country. Along the way to becoming what he is now, he was Ambassador to Morocco, America's first friend, its oldest friend and the first one to recognize the fledgling Republic of the United States during the tenure of George Washington. He was also Ambassador to Yugoslavia prior to its breakup. He's keenly aware of the issues of ethnicity and sectarian tension and conflict. He is also been involved in France as well as in his Foreign Ministry. Please welcome Hussein Hassouna.

Not too many Ambassadors have their doctorate. He has his from Cambridge and several years ago he received the highest number of votes worldwide, very competitive, to the Commission in Geneva that codifies international law.

[Dr. Hussein Hassouna] Thank you, John, for your nice words of introduction. While John is a good friend of mine for the last ten years or so of he has always invited me to speak at these conferences. Sometimes he asks me to speak at the beginning, to try to set the tone for the conference. Sometimes he asks me to be at the end. I guess to say some words of wisdom that will remain in the minds of the audience.

So I am very glad that to take part in this these conferences although I know that after two days of discussions people are tired and many have gone home. So I'd like to thank you for those who remain here.

I want to share with you some of my views. I know during these two days there were many views discussed because I believe this conference is a kind of brainstorming. While you have experts, you have academics, you have diplomats, you have officials, who try to analyze the issues of the Middle East, who try to project Arab-American relations, how they're going.

I think the title of the conference is itself revealing. It talks about the US-Arab relationship: where is it going? Well my answer to this is that it's going forward. It is building on past achievements. It is with the support of those who believe in this relationship, it has to move forward. Why? Because it is based on strategic interests between the Arab world and the United States. They're not tactical positions we are taking. It is based on common interests and I think that President Obama when he came into office on the very first day he emphasized this fact. He said he wants to begin a new page in the relationship between the United States, the Arab and Muslim world. He wants to outreach. He wants to engage more with the Arab and Muslim world. He wants these relationships to be based on common interests and mutual respect. And this is what we in the Arab and Muslim world are looking for. That's why we welcomed this new

voice in Washington and I think that we have worked together with the United States the long way to achieve this objective.

President Obama came to the region. He addressed the Arab and Muslim world, first in Turkey and then at Cairo University. I am proud to say it's my university. The message he announced there was one of dialogue, was one of trying to settle the issues of the Middle East, facing the most difficult challenges. And there are many difficult challenges in the Middle East. The challenges of peace, like settling the Palestinian and the Arab-Israeli problem, settling the Saddam problem, dealing with the Iraq issue and many others. There are also challenges of economics, economic integration in the region. How we can work together to promote relationships between the United States and the Arab world. There are cultural challenges. How in spite that we belong to different cultures, we can understand each other. We can dialogue with each other and that there is no clash of cultures and civilizations. There is no clash of religions, that we all have common values and we have to work together. So there are many things we have to address.

Let me briefly talk about some of these issues. There are some political issues, economic issues, cultural issues and others. First of all I think the greatest challenge we face in the political field is certainly to find a just and lasting peace in the region to settle the Palestinian problem and also of course the larger Israeli and Arab conflict. Where are we now? I think if you look at the map of the Middle East you will find three positions among the partners.

First of all you find the American position. The American position under this Administration for the first time has said on day one said they are serious, they are determined to achieve a comprehensive peace in the region. They have appointed Senator Mitchell to be the special envoy. He has been shuttling so many times he will be going soon again on another shuttling diplomacy. And they have tried to focus on the main obstacle from the very beginning that has prevented to achieve peace, to achieve the two state solution we are all looking for and that is the problem of settlements in the Palestinian territories.

Why is this problem so fundamental. This problem is so fundamental because if these settlements continue to grow up and to continue to expand and unfortunately they do, just yesterday they announced 600 more homes built by settlers in the West Bank. If it continues to do so, there will no more be a point to negotiate. There will no more land left to the Palestinians to create a viable and independent Palestinian state. So that is why I think the Obama administration has understood that this is the crux to begin a fruitful negotiation. Unfortunately the Israeli government has refused to acknowledge that this is an obstacle to peace, and it has announced a partial freeze, not everywhere, not in East Jerusalem which is recognized by the international community as being occupied territory, it has announced a partial freeze for ten months that has expired and since then it has not been willing to extend it.

The Israeli government of course says that it wants peace. The Israeli government says it is ready to negotiate but at the same time it is also not ready to stop the settlement in the territories. This is a policy that is illegal under international law, under the Geneva Convention. It is illegal according to the International Court of Justice when it delivered the advisory opinion on the question of the separation wall. It is considered illegal by the United Nations and by the majority

of the world community. So I think that this issue is undermining the trust that can be created and that is essential between the Palestinians and the Israelis to continue negotiations.

The Arab world has said that it wants the Palestinians to move on in the negotiations but on a clear basis, to know what are the terms of reference, to know what is the timeframe, to know what is the endgame and eventually the Quartet with the participation of the United States has clarified its position, has given them certain kinds of assurances to move on and to accept the negotiations. They have done this but now they still want the Israelis to accept not to carry on the settlement policy. And they have the backing not only of the Arab League, which they do now whenever they are asked to take a position, they go back to the Arab League to get the endorsement so that they feel that this is not a unilateral position, this is a common position of the Arab world, and of course also the rest of the international community.

I was at the United Nations during the General Assembly in September and I met a lot of the leaders with the Secretary-General of the Arab League. He talked to world leaders, to foreign ministers, to heads of state and there was unanimity that the Israelis are obstructing the peace process by refusing to stop the settlements.

So it's not a position, which the Palestinians claim or an extremist position on the part of the Arabs, it is a position accepted by the international community including the United States government. The United States government has still the main role to play.

Two days ago Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came to talk to the Task Force for Palestine. She delivered the main speech there. The very fact that she came and addressed this audience, the audience of over 700 people, mainly Americans of Palestinian roots, but also many others. The fact that she came I think represents a support, a kind of willingness to assist the Palestinians in their plight, to help them in their negotiations and I think it was a very much appreciated.

She talked about the commitment of the Obama Administration to achieve peace and to settle the Palestinian problem. In spite of all the difficulties she thought there should be an end of occupation, that there should be a return to the '67 borders and that every party has to make some gestures, the Arab world and the Arab world did this with adopting the Arab Peace Initiative in 2002, which is based on the notion of land for peace, total withdrawal to the '67 borders versus total recognition and establishment of normal diplomatic relations in the Arab world and Israel. And as such, ending the conflict once and for all. So the Arab world has demonstrated its willingness to reach peace.

So where are we now. I think that the Israelis always claim that the Palestinians are missing a chance to achieve peace. I think now it is the Israelis who are missing a chance to achieve peace. Because just as Secretary of State Clinton said the other day, peace is not just in the interest of the Palestinians to have their independence and a viable Palestinian state. Peace is an interest of the Israelis in the long term because the two state solution might not remain on the table forever.

Peace is also in the national security interest of the United States. That is why the United States is determined to continue in spite of all objections, in spite of all challenges to create a Palestinian independent and viable state. I think we the Arabs are ready to work with the United

States. We are ready to support the United States in its effort, and we do hope that the Israelis will realize that they cannot have the peace and land together. It's a matter of choice. If they want peace, I think they have to give up land. I think this is the crux of the matter. And I think that if the international community continues to urge the Israelis to accept the difficult, yes, they might be difficult concessions they have to make, but it is in their own interests.

I think that if we all work together this can happen and the hardliners in Israel who object to give up the settlements, who object to give up the land will certainly one day realize that it is in their own interest to live in peace not only with the Palestinians but with the rest of the Arab world and indeed the whole Muslim world and the international community as a whole will only see in this the beginning of a new Middle East, a Middle East where people can live together in peace, where there can be cooperation, where there can be interaction, really a new beginning for the region.

Other challenges in the region are up also very important. Iraq was also discussed at length. I would say that the position of the Arab League has been that Iraq is a crucial member of the Arab League. It is one of the founding members of the Arab League. That is why the Arab League has from the very beginning called for reconciliation among all the Iraqi factions and it has hosted a meeting in the Arab League many years ago in order to get the Iraqis together. It is still urging them now to unite, to face up to the threats which they are facing from the outside and I think that the elections that took place in Iraq, in spite of the fact that there is no government up to now formed, these elections were conducted in a transparent and free way.

I myself I went as an observer, I went to Virginia and watched how the Iraqis living here in this country took part in this election in a very orderly way, in a very serious way. And I think the results of the elections also showed that it was not based on sectarian grounds because someone like Alawi who is the Shia got the support of many Sunnis, so it was not based merely on sectarian grounds that the Shias vote for the Shias and the Sunnis for the Sunnis leaders.

Now I think we know that it's a stalemate but I think sooner or later it will be resolved. We the Arabs, we are urging the coalition government to be formed between all. The will of the Iraqi people has to be respected and we also urge neighbors not to intervene and we want Iraq again with the support of the Arabs, with the support politically, economically, culturally, to be revived as an independent and strong nation that plays an important role in not only in the region but in the world at large.

Another issue of concern to the League and I must say that this conference to my knowledge did not deal with it. This is the issue of Sudan. I think that may be it didn't deal with it because it follows the division which does exist at the State Department that Sudan belongs to the African desk and not to the Middle East desk. But Sudan is an important member of the Arab League. Yes, it is an African country. Yes, it is also an Arab country. And here the Arab League is always warning about trying to portray Arabs against Africans.

Arabs and Africans are nations that work together, they complement each other. There are, so many countries in Africa that belong to the Arab League. There is Sudan, there is Djibouti, there is Somalia, there is the Comoros Islands, so we make no difference. And the Arab League and

the African Union have from the very beginning worked together on the question of the Sudan to show that the question of Darfur was not based on any racial division, that the issue that exists now between the North and South is not based on a racial division. So we have to work together. This issue is extremely serious and extremely important for the Arab world and from Africa.

I attended a meeting again at the United Nations UN General Assembly on the issue of Sudan. There were 12 heads of state from Africa. President Obama himself made a point to come and attend that meeting. There was a very serious discussion about what to do with the problem of Sudan. There was unanimity that the referendum that was perceived in the comprehensive peace treaty that was signed a few years ago between the North and South. This referendum has to take place on the date it was set to take place. It shouldn't be postponed.

But I think there is a need now to try to anticipate events. Yes, we the Arab League and I think most African countries wanted Sudan to remain united, wanted to preserve the unity of Sudan, because we all worry about what would happen if there is a split, if there is a division not only in Sudan but in the rest of Africa and the rest of the Arab world. We know other examples in other parts of the world, in Yugoslavia. And you mentioned that I lived in Yugoslavia. I know what it is when a country falls apart. The divisions that happen. The problems that arise. So we have to foresee what will happen if the people of Sudan, and they are the masters of their own destiny, decide to split and the North decides it wants an independent state.

So we have to try to figure out what the issues are and help them from now until the referendum to settle these issues, how to prepare for this referendum, how to prepare about the division that still exist, about some areas like Abyei which is rich in oil resources, how to try to address the concern of the tribes, because Sudan one of its problems is that the society is still a tribal society so we have to see the concern of the tribes. We have to of course deal with the issue of Darfur to put an end to the violation of human rights that have taken place there.

So I think the Arab League is very much involved in this. It is very much trying to help the Sudanese. Some countries like Egypt, for instance, are very concerned since the Nile that comes from Sudan to Egypt is the lifeline of Egypt. So yesterday the Foreign Minister of Egypt was there and was trying to address these issues with the leadership of Sudan and he went also to the South. So Sudan is a very important issue. We all have to try to contain the effects that might happen if there is a split in the Sudan.

Another issue which I would like to address briefly is the economic situation in the Arab world. We heard from Undersecretary Sanchez about the need to bring up economic relations and trade relations between the United States and the Arab world. Let me tell you first that the Arab League is trying to promote economic integration in the Arab world, and this is essential. It has created a free trade zone. It hopes that this free trade zone will be followed by a customs union and eventually a common market. This is the same path that was followed by the Europeans when they achieved the European Union.

At the same time in the Arab League is holding summit meetings at the highest levels of the Arab world, summit meetings on economics. Two years ago it had a meeting in Kuwait that was attended by all heads as state, by the private sector, it put a blueprint on how to develop

economic ties between the Arab world, how to create common infrastructure, how to create joint transport and electricity grids and so on and this will be followed at the beginning of next year at another summit meeting on economics that will be held in Egypt in Sharm el Sheikh. So there is a movement now for the Arabs to work together and to try to integrate their economies.

The Arab world has suffered from the economic crisis like everyone, but I think it is on the way to recovery much sooner than many countries including the United States. According to the latest reports of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund that had their annual meetings just two weeks ago, the projection is that there will be an annual growth in the Arab world of about 4%. I think the Arab world has managed to withstand the crisis by making use of the huge accumulated reserves it had, especially in the oil-producing countries. It has also taken advantage of the growing demand in some emerging markets like China and India, a high demand for oil. At the same time the trade between the oil-producing countries and non producing countries has had a beneficial effect on the Arab world as a whole.

So I think the Arab world is on the right track of recovery, it has also huge business opportunities. You heard from Under Secretary Sanchez that business opportunities have increased there in many fields, in the new cities that are being built, in telecommunications projects, in desalination, new energies, in education which is a very important field also. There are huge possibilities for United States and the Arab world to work together to invest in common projects

It leads me to talk a little bit about culture and education, which I believe also is extremely important when we talk about U.S.-Arab relations. Education is a top priority for the Arab world. A few years ago at the Riyadh summit meeting of the Arab League, the leaders decided that education is key for the progress of the Arab world. They called for reform of the education programs. They called for more investment in science and technology. They called for more exchanges with other universities and so on. They decided there should be a decade for education in the Arab world. A ten-year plan. Because they realize that education is key. It is the key to first of all to alleviate poverty. It is key to create to give employment to young people all in the majority today in the Arab world are of the younger generation. It is key to deal with the question of despair of the young people have no jobs, who do not have anything else, the frustrations because those who are facing occupation for instance in the Palestinian territory and so on. It is key to contain extremism and so on. That is why education is so important in the Arab world, and the United States is in a good position to work with us. There are many universities, there are many schools, that are present in the Arab world and I think that the United States can help. There is also the question of exchanges and visa problems which we face sometimes when we send students to this country.

It also has to be a world that when it helps, in the field of education, it has to respect the cultural heritage of the Arab world and the values of the Arab world and not try to impose its own values on it.

This is true also on other issues like democracy. Democracy is another challenge, which we face in the Arab world. We all want more democracy in the Arab world. We all want that there should be more freedom and it is happening, but it is happening in a gradual way and I think the United

States when it talks about democratization, we welcome it. We welcome when it does encourage democratization, when it does it encourage the role of civil society but we do not welcome it when it tries to impose its own model of democracy on the Arab societies. We do not welcome it when it tries to link what happens in the Arab world internally with, for instance, providing the Arab people with foreign assistance. So I think this is an important issue and again we have to work together on it, but in an intelligent and responsible way.

Culture is extremely important. Culture can bring people together more than anything else. I think that some of you have followed the very successful Arab Cultural Festival, which the League of Arab States organized with the Kennedy Center three weeks ago. There were 700 artists in the Kennedy Center performing. They were showing all kinds of arts and displaying costumes, singing, painting. It was a great event and it showed that the Arabs belong to a great culture and have a great civilization, that they are not as they are very often portrayed in the media as people who are backward or just violent.

So I think it had a great effect and we are working again now at the Smithsonian Institute to have another festival, a full-fledged festival on the Mall here in Washington in the coming years. So I think culture is very important and that is why of course the Arab League is also trying to convene for the first time an Arab cultural summit where all the heads of state and the officials will sit together and talk about how they can promote Arab culture, how they can defend Arab culture and how the Arab culture can reach out to other cultures so that we do not have a clash of cultures, but on the contrary we are complementary and we work together.

The Arab League has also adopted some procedures to deal with issues of culture. Lately it has also been working with UNESCO in Paris to try to deal with the issues of books and the different schools that promote universality of culture and that try to eliminate whatever is in cultures that are promoting hate and a clash between cultures and are trying to show that cultures complement each other and that they are based on the same values.

I don't want to go on but finally I would say that relations today in the world between countries are not just relations between governments as we sometimes think. They are relations between people as well and that is why it's very important for people to be active in strengthening and promoting relations. Today there is something called cultural diplomacy. It has an important role to play. There is something called economic diplomacy. It has an important role to play. Parliamentary diplomacy. So all factions of society have a role to play.

I see in this audience many of my friends who have initiatives, NGOs who try to promote relations within the Arab world and the United States. I congratulate them on that and I want to tell them that they have our support, because in the final analysis it is not only governments who get people together, who settle the issues, who try to meet the challenges we all face it is also the people, and it is only through collective efforts at that we can succeed in our endeavors.

Thank you very much.

[Anthony] Thank you, Dr. Hassouna. There is no one else who can cover the region so comprehensively. But an Ambassador of the League of Arab States is expected to do that, trained to do that and he is one of the few that can.

There are two or three questions here that you didn't touch on and I think are quite important. Is there a role for the Arab League in facilitating regional development of freshwater resources in the Arab world? Can water become in the near term or the medium term a transnational concern rather than a national one?

There 119 rivers in the world that cross one country's borders or another, until now there hasn't been a concept agreed that upstream river countries can charge downstream countries for water although there have been temptations along the front. And there is a Water Resource Center in Oman but in asking the people who work there what breakthroughs have they had on making water more readily available, there's a problem arising in Yemen and elsewhere. So what about the Arab League and water? Where does it come on the Richter scale of concerns, projects and development?

[Hassouna] Yes, water is a big issue not only in the Arab world, even in the United States. We know that there are problems with water in California and in Georgia and other places but in the Middle East it makes it even more urgent to find solutions to the problem. Because the Middle East as you know it's a large desert area and the water resources are scarce. But what is needed I think when we have such problems is for countries to work together. I have been doing some work for the United Nations and there we focus on and agreements between the countries to try to go into joint projects to exploit the water resources in the world. There is a convention for instance about the water resources. There is also the international commission of which I'm a member also reached a formula to exploit aquifers which are under water resources that exist and they exist in quantities all over the world and they do exist in the Middle East countries. We just need the resources to exploit them, to reach them.

So there are solutions to the water problems. Of course I think as you mentioned there are certain rules that if there is a river that flows through differing countries like the Nile. The Nile is a river that flows through nine countries in Africa. Any projects that are undertaken by countries should be done with the concerns of the rest so that no country by itself tries to acquire all the water resources and then he doesn't leave the others to also have use of it. So, I think it needs cooperation and there are resources for everyone and I don't think that there are problems but sometimes of course there are some political problems involved.

For instance, I know that in the Middle East now in the occupied Palestinian territories there are scarce resources and the Palestinians very often do not have access to water to grow their crops, whereas unfortunately the settlers put their hands on the source of water so it is also a political problem. That is why we need the solution to these problems so that people can live together and share the water resources in an equitable way. So it is a problem everywhere in the world but if people reach agreement, if they have a way to share the resources the resources are available.

[Anthony] Another one is more a statement or request for your response if you're comfortable with it, though as a diplomat it is sometimes off-limits to comment on issues of other countries

domestic situation. All of the positive things you said about the Obama Administration sincerity and seriousness at the beginning of its Administration on one hand, but on the other with regard to the United States Congress, House of Representatives voting 309 to 6 supportive of what the Israelis did at the end of December 2008 and January of 2009 when they invaded re-occupied or certainly re-attacked Gaza, that the Congress can be thecrippler, the dis-enabler, or the enfeeblers of all of these optimistic objectives and visions and lofty statements.

If you don't want to comment on that I will accept that but segue to what role if any does the Arab League have in contributing to mediating between Lebanon and Syria, stabilizing the situation in Lebanon? Is this again sort of a gentleperson's agreement that the League will have hands off and will leave that to Lebanon and Syria or is there a role there?

And the last one, will the Arab League accept Sudan becoming a truncated state if the referendum results in the South declaring an independent national, sovereign different country.

[Hassouna] I am willing to answer all your questions. I have no problems.

First of all, about the Congress. I've lived long enough in this country to know that America is a country of institutions. That the Administration cannot just adopt a certain foreign policy without, in spite of the separation of powers, without the backing of Congress. Congress represents the American people after all. But to be honest with you, yes, we are very disappointed, not only us as Arabs, but as Muslims and sometimes even Europeans or Asians or whatever with the positions taken by Congress sometimes.

Sometimes they take positions that are not the conformity of the policies adopted by the Administration, positions that are not in conformity even of the wishes of the people of the United States. Sometimes we all read in the media they are under the influence of very strong lobbies. So, yes. It is deplorable that this is happening and will we urge Congressman to take positions that are more responsible, positions that engage more the Arab and Muslim world and that in the final analysis, positions that are in the real interest of the United States, as the people of the United States see it, not as we see it as outsiders, but as the people of the United States they realize that the United States is a world leader. That in order to assume its leadership it has to adopt policies that are fair, policies that are accepted by the rest of the world and sometimes Congress takes another view to another position. So this is my comment about the Congress.

About Sudan, yes. I think the Arab League will accept the decision of the Sudanese people. If the South decides to secede, if they want their independent state, I think we will accept it and we won't not only continue the relationship with the North as of course a member of the Arab League, but we would certainly also have relations with the South because we respect the will of the people of the Sudan. But all we will try to do is see that this separation does not lead to more conflict because the South and the North have already a long history of conflict and we want to prevent this. We want them to live together as good neighbors to agree together so that the whole region will live in peace and stability and not be destabilized.

About Lebanon, again the Arab League has been urging all Lebanese factions to get together. When they had a stalemate a year ago and they were unable to have neither a government nor a

president, it was the Arab League that decided that they wanted to help them and they convened a meeting in Qatar in Doha where all the Lebanese factions were invited. Thanks to this meeting all factions came together, there was a Lebanese government, there were elections and there was a new president and I believe that the Lebanese people will continue to live together. They have their differences but sometimes they say this is the price of democracy but we will continue to support them. They should also have good relations with Syria and their neighbors and we hope that if the problems for instance of the refugees are settled, the Palestinians who lived there will be able to go to their homes and recover their property and one of the big burdens of the Lebanese people will be removed.

So the Lebanese country is an important country. It is composed of different factions, different religions and it should be a model for people to coexist together and Lebanon, again is an important member of the Arab League which we continue to support and assist.