

GulfWire

Perspectives



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In the Wake of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom': Views from the Region

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The following report is from GulfWire Publisher Dr. John Duke Anthony, President and CEO, National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, and Secretary, US.-GCC Corporate Cooperation Committee.

The State of Qatar hosted a two-day Conference on "Free Trade and Democracy" April 14-15 in Doha, Qatar. Opening the conference was HH The Amir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, joined by the Qatari Foreign Minister, the President of the University of Qatar, the GCC Secretary General, and the Chairman of the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

In addition to the main conference focus on the challenge and dynamics of free trade and democracy, there was considerable discussion on the current situations vis-a-vis Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the ongoing transformation in regional images of the Bush administration and American foreign policies. Also discussed was the role of the media, globalization, women's issues, enhancement of popular participation in governance, and whether there should be further movement in the direction of freer trade and democratization prior to, only after, simultaneous with, or without regard to meaningful movement towards resolving the region's more pressing conflicts. .

In addition to an impressive array of European Union, British, Chinese, French, German, Japanese and Korean representatives, conference participants included half a dozen U.S. Congressmen and their staff, five former US ambassadors, members of the parliaments of France, Great Britain, Pakistan, and Scotland, foreign policy research institutes staff from half a dozen Western, Asian and Arab countries [among the U.S. co-sponsors were the Council on Foreign Relations and the Islamic Institute], American and other corporate leaders, academics from universities in France, Great Britain, Japan, Korea, Qatar, and Japan, and retired government officials and prominent private sector personalities from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt,

Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, the Sudan, Tunisia, and the UAE.

In addition to current U.S. Ambassador to Qatar Maureen Quinn, the former American Ambassadors participating were John Craig [Oman], Ed Gabriel [Morocco], Richard Murphy [Saudi Arabia, Syria, Mauritania, and the Philippines], Kenton Keith [Qatar], and Patrick Theros [Qatar]. Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, UPI, al-Jazeera, and Turkish media specialists, plus a prominent Iranian political scientist, also participated, as did officials from the European Union, United Nations, and the World Economic Forum. The U.S. Congressional delegation included Congressmen Shays (CT-R), Jackson-Lee (TX-D), Sensenbrenner (WI-D), Rahall (WV-D), Thompson (MS-D), Finchey (NY-D), and Issa (CA-R).

Of interest is that in the sessions in which I was a participant -- on each day, there were concurrent sessions, making it impossible for one to attend both -- there was nothing but upbeat commentary about either the most prominent regional organizations dealing with the conference's focus or these organization's member countries. These included the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the World Trade Organization, and the League of Arab States. Qatar currently holds the chairmanship of the first two organizations and, for the third, hosts the "Doha Round," which seeks further reductions in barriers to free trade.

Of particular note is that the American presenters were divided in their outlook and analyses. For example, there were those who, on the one hand, spoke positively about what they called "the American liberation and liberalization of Iraq." These spoke in support of post-conflict Iraq's potential to encourage political, economic, and social reforms elsewhere in the region. On the other hand were those of an opposite view. These referred to "the US invasion and occupation of Iraq." They stressed the war's potential to further inflame anti-American sentiments and alienate America's traditional friends and partners in the region.

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