

The Situation in the Middle East: Aspects of a Vision for the Future

Public lecture and open discussion

with Amre Moussa, the Secretary General of the Arab League

hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and

International Affairs,

American University in Beirut

18th of February 2010

It is with great pleasure that I stand on this historic podium of one of the most prestigious universities in the M.E. When my friend Ramy Khouri invited me to participate in this program hosted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy I did not hesitate for a moment. The only observation was that I should not talk in January as the first speaker in the season or of the year. That is because I knew that whatever the subject I tackle pertaining to our region and our world-the Arab world- I shall be critical, offer negative analysis that would exude pessimism. I did not want to convey all this that early in the year.

Now let me walk you through the reasons of this gloom and start by a question: how do we, Arabs, see our present? And what kind of a plan do we have or need for the future?

First, allow me to make a preliminary observation. In my opinion the Arab system did not totally fail, but it certainly fell short of attaining several of its essential goals. If I suggest using your university grade system I would give our performance between C- and D. I would also suggest that a big portion of the blame should be put on our own shoulders... the neglect in our societal work, the sensitivities in our relations, the misplaced priorities (think of education and health care), the easy and sometimes free of charge submission to foreign influence, the misreading of the new world trends and paradigms, allowing the

return of past complexes and animosities, hollow slogans, lack of transparency, lack of progress on the path towards democracy, and above all a confused and confusing religious debates in addition to a chaotic Arab media scene.

This situation has indeed caused the failures in the Arab system and therefore the inability to make a real quantum leap to the future. Our generation feels the bitterness for the opportunities we have been wasting for the past decades. Let me not bring you back to World War II and its aftermath and how we handled the world of the second half of the 20th century. Instead let me talk about the Cold War and its aftermath. In both situations however, the Arab world paid a heavy bill in many ways. It was most of the time manipulated as a mere tool in the game of nations... when that war –the cold one-came to an end the whole world was changing, we did not change. New challenges, new paradigms and new issues were topping the global agenda: globalization, democracy, human rights and liberalization. Concepts such as the end of history, the clash of civilizations, humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect all formed the tenets of the new international system.

Some of us were opposed, others went blindly along, and many were not aware of the depth and implications of these new trends. There was no adequate coordination, no consultation or in depth consideration of their repercussions. We had no clear appreciation of the development and evolution of many of those concepts despite the fact that we were among the addressees of many of these new concepts.

In short, we were caught unprepared for that new world. We were also unable to field –in time- a generation of politicians, economists, environmentalists and equally important intellectuals, who are able to participate as stakeholders in the

world's new life style. We did not put the necessary emphasis on education as the tool to achieve that goal. Not only that, while the world was bracing itself for the new era, we were chocked by the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq which put the Arab system to a real and serious existential threat and kept us busy with the crisis and its lingering implications, some of which remain with us until today. We also dealt passively with new theories about our region ranging from the New Middle East to the Broader Middle East to initiatives about reforming the Middle East with little contribution from the Arab world about its own vision for the future of the region.

The result is what we see today...an Arab world in apparent disarray. Iraq continues to suffer from bitter divisions instead of enjoying the fruits of reconciliation. Sudan under a possible threat of partition, Yemen in turmoil, Palestine in distress, Lebanon while calm, yet it looks like a victim in waiting, Somalia in shambles, in addition to the Arab territories that remain under foreign occupation. On the other hand inter-Arab relations are in a state of confusion. This in addition to the internal Palestinian divisions that nobody in the Arab world, nobody in his right mind, would have thought that the Palestinian political scene would reach such a level of irresponsibility and self destructiveness.

This is only one side of the serious challenges the Arab world is currently facing.

The other side is existential too. No nation worthy of the name could sit idly by watching the world rebuilding, progressing, and not trying to find a rightful place under the rising sun of the 21st century. The Arab Summits in Tunisia and Algeria launched a process of change, reform and modernization. However, innovation and entrepreneurship are

neither supported nor embraced as they should. The process of democratization is so slow, hesitant with one step forward and another step back.

This is how it really is. We have to acknowledge that sad reality in order for us to be able to effectively deal with it and rise to the challenge and prove our capacity to change, our determination to move forward and our credentials to claim a seat as partners on the world stage.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me now comment briefly on the broader regional scene. The four foremost regional players are: the Arab world, Turkey, Iran and Israel. I admit that the Arab world is currently a handicapped player bearing in mind the situation I have just described. However, we should not negate the fact that Arabs do have several remaining sources of strength...The identity they cherish if they choose to ensure its respect and credibility and this is doable. Another source is the fact that they... we constitute the majority in the region and would never accept the prevalence or the hegemony of a non-Arab regional power. The unity of an Arab position on this issue is attainable.

Turkey has become an active player, smooth operator with intelligent policy and cogent diplomacy. Iran on the other hand is an active player also, but a rough operator with a tough policy and sometimes intriguing diplomacy.

As for Israel, I would say that it is bent on losing an opportunity after opportunity to make peace with us, perhaps intentionally as a policy and even strategy...to the extent that Abba Eban, the former foreign minister of Israel, who stated that Arabs never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity, would have amended his saying had he been living today to

conclude that Israel never really missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity for peace.

Indeed, Israel is missing a valuable opportunity to join the Middle East family of nations by its refusal to make peace on fair terms. If Israel continues to obstruct and procrastinate, it will continue to be a pariah in the Middle East and for as long as it refuses to relinquish the occupied Arab territories and to accept a viable Palestinian state. It is a simple rule: either to accept to make peace with the Arabs in accordance with internationally recognized terms of reference or stay on the far periphery of the Middle East with no regional role to play or possibility to get a seat at the Middle East table.

Let me get back to the other two Middle East powers Turkey and Iran. I would categorically state that a Turkish constructive role in the Middle East and positive relations with the Arab world are both welcome and should be encouraged. I am entertaining the thought that Turkey should be invited to enjoy a special relationship with the Arab League under a new system that should be devised and which I intend to suggest in the near future.

As for Iran I wish we continue to give it a fair chance and the benefit of the doubt. This is not out of naivety or self-deception; it is out of good policy. Good policy also requires a formal dialogue between the Arab League and Iran. The Arab League would be represented by the Secretary General and those members concerned because of aspects of the Iranian policy which they consider affecting their interests and/or security. We are all concerned about the nuclear situation and the state of regional security. We are also concerned that the feud between Shiites and Sunnis would get out of hand or be geared to attain dubious political goals, a matter that would perpetuate the

schism and ensure that we are all going to get into a lose-lose situation... it cannot be otherwise.

Iran may have its concerns and perhaps complaints too. But we – Arabs – should build on the premise that Iran should not be categorically considered as our enemy. We share a common history with Iran and our interests meet and/or overlap in many ways. After all, we both are here to stay. There is no chance that Iran will move out of the region, neither will we. We are neighbors and we will remain neighbors till the end of history, if it ever ends.

Therefore a dialogue as I described would be very much in order. When I say that, I do not address my call only to Iran but to several of my fellow Arabs as well. We have to think twice before approving a path that would usher in an era of chaos and turbulence in our neighborhood.

Here, I would venture to say a few words about the nuclear program of Iran. We acknowledge the right of Iran -as a signatory of the NPT- to enjoy all the benefits allowed by the treaty in the field of peaceful uses of atomic energy as in the field of nuclear research.

We strongly object to the development of any and all military programs in the nuclear field. We recognize, however, the fact that the IAEA has not confirmed the existence of such programs in Iran.

If the international community wants to address the nuclear activities in the Middle East effectively, then the same should be done with Israel. The most cogent way is to declare the Middle East a region free from nuclear weapons under international supervision. It should include Iran, Israel and all the countries of the region. The world should not focus on Iran

and tolerate Israel's nuclear program. There is no such thing as a good nuclear program and a bad nuclear program. This simply is a bad policy devoid of credibility and shall not succeed.

Moreover, we should oppose any military adventure against Iran. We should express our concern with sanctions which would endanger the interests and the wellbeing of the Iranian people. An intelligent and credible process of negotiations should continue until fruition. This is achievable since Iran has accepted the authority of IAEA and the inspection system. This should be also confirmed.

This brings me to the subject of regional security in the Middle East.

Nuclear weapons have already been introduced to the Middle East. A potential arms race in the region would probably follow. It is not only the nuclear weapons but also other weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. There is also the military occupation, threats of terrorism and several other risks and provocations. There is a serious lack of security in the region. Therefore we need to think of establishing a regional security system. Arab consultations on such a system should have started by now. We have to agree among ourselves on its principles, parameters, requirements, structure and substance. Turkey should be consulted and involved at an early stage, followed by Iran the moment the clouds dissipate and the Arab-Iranian dialogue I am suggesting gets working. As for Israel, it should be involved only after a viable, serious process of bilateral negotiations with the Arab parties concerned bears fruit and the process of the establishment of the Palestinian state and the evacuation of Arab territories is put firmly on track. Reaching that level in a comprehensive process of negotiations should open the door for the multilateral track with a committee

on regional security, the first item of which should be the establishment of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East including in particular nuclear weapons.

Allow me now to tackle four more points which I find relevant on this occasion:

First: Evaluation of the role of the Arab League.

Contrary to what some people claim, this organization was not the failure some talk about. The League has been very active in galvanizing Arab common efforts in the fields of economic, social and also cultural cooperation. The first developmental summit held in Kuwait in January 2009, has succeeded in launching several viable economic projects. The first pertains to establishing an Arab fund for small and medium size enterprises, with 2 billion dollars as capital. The paid and/or committed financial resources exceed 1 billion dollars so far. It is going into effect in a few weeks time. The second pertains to a railway system linking all Arab countries alongside a network of a highway system. Both of which are ready to be referred to Arab consultancy firms on the road to their launching. Parts of them are already under construction in implementation of past resolutions. The third has to do with moving from a free trade area to an Arab customs union to be established within the next five years. Arab economic relations cover a wide range of issues indeed. It is not only trade in goods that is the yard stick for the economic system of relations. We have to look to the investment flows among Arab markets, which almost tripled in recent years, and to the Arab tourist movement which is flourishing as well as to the movement of Arab labor that has been very active between several Arab states. Also, Arab trade in services has witnessed a sharp rise in recent years.

On the social side, the war against poverty, the work to activate women movements and rights, child care, social

development projects proved to be on the rise in the same period.

On the cultural side too the League is active. We are in a somewhat better shape as evidenced by the reactivation of book translation, publishing projects, positive competition in film making ...etc.

We worked collectively under the banner of the Arab League to participate in international book fairs, and in academic debates around the world. We were very active in rebutting accusations against Arab culture under the so called clash of civilizations theory. However, I do not claim that we fully succeeded in all those projects but we have certainly started to work seriously and accumulate some results.

Yes, we are not satisfied with what we have achieved, because it is rather little, but we should not practice self-flagellation. I call instead to further deepen the work on coordination and cooperation, on reform and on modernization. We should involve the Arab civil society as well as the private sector in our endeavors. I am ardently working on that, and shall continue until the last day of my tenure as Secretary General of the Arab League. The Arab world is in a phase of transition. We have to make sure that it is moving to a better and more stable and prosperous phase.

Second: the future of the League:

It is the consensus in the Arab world that the League should be revitalized. Business as usual will bring the League and all of us no where. A lot of new and even revolutionary ideas and proposals should be put before the forthcoming Summit in Libya next month. I am working on them.

Third: the Arab-Israel conflict:

Here too business as usual won't work. We should refuse to be duped for the umpteenth time in a so called peace process that has no end, or accept promises that are not serious or credible or committed to the principles and provisions of international law. We should no longer accept the marginalization of the United Nations and in particular the Security Council. For as much as we appreciate President Obama's initial call for a quick comprehensive consideration of the Arab-Israeli conflict it should be known that Arabs should not be leaned on to make further and further concessions and participate in an unconditional peace process, i.e. to return back to the practice of managing the crisis rather than solving it, i.e. again, to allow building more settlements and more changes in Jerusalem while we are at the negotiating table under the banner of "negotiation without conditions". Changing demography and geography in the occupied territories constitute a serious precondition that renders negotiations utterly useless, counter-productive, and even demeaning and extremely harmful to the Palestinian and Arab interests and rights as well as to the prospects of permanent peace in the region.

We have seen such processes before and the result was zero progress. Our goals should be attained: a viable Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital should be established. If not, we should consider the one state solution; a state for all its citizens without discrimination or second class citizenship. The occupied Arab territories of Syria and Lebanon should be evacuated and returned to their rightful patrie, in order to achieve the comprehensive peace we are longing for.

This is the goal that should not be abandoned. The future of the Middle East depends on the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a just and therefore lasting way. Such a resolution should be fair and legitimate or we should refer the whole

situation to the next generation, perhaps they would be more capable of achieving the peace of the brave as Yasser Arafat used to say. All those who think that normalization with Israel could be pursued free of charge are gravely mistaken. Arab countries have promised to normalize relations with Israel, to recognize it as a state in the region as per the Arab offer of peace commonly known as the Arab Peace Initiative, that was adopted here in the Beirut Summit back in 2002. Please read it again. There mustn't be a free lunch at the Middle East so called peace process. If this applies to us, as we were often told, it has to apply to them too.

Fourth: threats to Lebanon

I feel the concern rampant in Lebanon and therefore in the four corners of the Arab world that Lebanon would fall victim of another Israeli assault. The Arab League is monitoring the situation closely. We shall stand firm behind Lebanon and will not accept any justification for an aggression against this important Arab country.

In this connection, I call for vigilance as we know how the Israeli lack of wisdom combined with the arrogance of power and a sense of impunity vis-à-vis international law would do.

Let me at the end get back to the title of this encounter: A Vision for the Future. In this connection I suggest a host of main issues that should form the agenda for an immediate consideration and implementation:

1. Continue to work and insist on a fair solution of the Arab Israeli conflict.
2. Clear Arab collective position vis-à-vis the trouble spots in the Arab world including the formation of an Arab Peace Keeping Force capable of intervention through a decision by the Arab Peace and Security Council recently established and in coordination with the UN Security Council.

3. The establishment in the Middle East of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction including in particular nuclear weapons and their means of delivery.
4. Steady movement towards democracy, insuring respect and fulfillment of human rights standards, and good governance the rule of law and respect for the principles of justice.
5. Standing firm against, but dealing intelligently with the issue of clash of civilization.
6. Strengthening the Arab League's Economic and Social Council to be able to manage the eco and social development plans.
7. Pursuing the strategic goal of establishing the Arab Common Market in the year 2020.
8. Pursuing the reform of the Arab societies through new cultural paradigms coupled with education reform plans and reintroducing serious programs on scientific research and Information Technology projects.
9. Taking the new environmental challenges seriously and joining the international work in this connection, example: climate change.
10. Reconsideration of the Arab League structure to make it a vigorous regional organization.

Those are the main items I suggest that any vision for a new Arab World and a new Middle East should pursue.

I feel I have reached the time limit allowed to my talk. I realize that numerous issues remain untackled [like the situations in Iraq, in Yemen, in Somalia and in the Sudan. Other issues like education and science and technology in the Arab world, the effects of climate change on our societies and the well being of our people and the clash of civilizations and its state of play. We indeed need a deeper look into the Arab world in the present and the future. This is like fishing for another occasion to hold this forum another time.

However, I trust that the Q&A session would deal with some of those important issues.