

His Excellency

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## The Role the Arab League Must Play in the Middle East

Talking about the Arab League is not just talking about an organization. I think we have to talk about the Middle East, its history and how it relates to the world. So I would start by just telling you how I see the world evolving because we are living in very interesting times.

We saw a new world order after the collapse of the Soviet empire, and a new situation where the dangers of world wars have been avoided but where there is a proliferation of regional and internal conflicts. If you look at these conflicts you will find them everywhere—you find them in the Middle East, you find them in Africa, you find several of them in Latin America, and the sad part is that the victims of these conflicts are all civilians. They're the targets and sometimes the intended targets. That is why it is so important for the world to be aware of this and to provide protection for the civilians—children, elderly people, women. This also why it's important for the world to enforce the implementation of international humanitarian laws—the Geneva Convention—that protect civilians in times of war. So, this is a very important development in today's world.

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Another important development is that the concepts have changed. A few years ago when the U.N. Charter was drafted, there was the principle of sovereignty of states, noninterference in internal affairs of the states. This has changed today. Sovereignty is no longer considered absolute. Non-intervention is also not considered absolute. In some cases when there are huge violations of human rights—crimes against humanity and genocide—the international community feels it has the duty to intervene and to stop those offenses against the law of nature. I took part in a Rome conference a few years ago when we drafted the charter of a very important institution, the International Criminal Court. I think this Court is a strong deterrent against committing crimes of genocide and war crimes and crimes against humanity. Unfortunately, not all countries in the world have joined this. The United States has not. Many countries in the Middle East have not, but I think it is an important evolution in

the world and I think it is of great significance to make people—whoever they are, even heads of state—accountable for the crimes they commit while they rule.

There are other developments in the world today. The most obvious is the United States, which has emerged as the unchallenged superpower of the world. This gives it a lot of power and influence in the world, but it also confers upon the United States the great responsibility to pursue policies that are perceived as fair to the rest of the world, to set an example to the rest of the world, to adopt moral standards in its behavior, and also to listen to the rest of the world and not just adopt unilateral actions and impose its will on the rest of the world. So it's not easy to be the only superpower in today's world.

The United Nations has a pivotal role in the world in spite of what people perceive as it not having lived up to expectations. I think the United Nations is still the forum where all countries of the world can meet, discuss and agree on solutions, and since we live in a world where we have global problems, we need global solutions and cooperative efforts in order to meet those challenges. Look at the problems in the world today. They're all global. You have problems of peace, proliferation of weapons, the environment, drugs, organized crime—they are all global in nature. They

transcend national boundaries and people cannot overcome those problems. Even the United States, the most powerful country, cannot do it alone. It needs to work with the rest of the world. That is why I am a strong

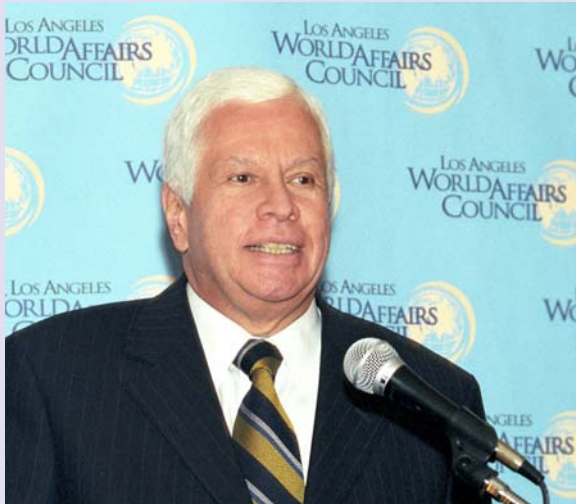
people to think about in order to create a better United Nations, to overcome the bureaucracy of the United Nations. I think the United Nations still is very important.

But I think also that the role of

regional organizations is very important today, and one of them is the League of Arab States. You have also the Organization of American States, the African Union, and the European Union. Their importance is vital today because they are the actors that govern in each region. They understand the root causes of the problems, they understand the culture in each region. They have important roles to play in trying to prevent conflicts

Latin America and the Americas are similar to the ones we have. Our top priorities are peace and security, democracy and economic integration. These are our main goals and we have to work together.”

So, having talked a little bit about the overall picture let me talk a bit about the Arab League. The Arab League was created in March of 1945. This year we celebrated our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and it was a nice occasion. The League was formed by seven countries—they were the founding fathers. Not only did they create the League but they were already present at the drafting of the United Nations’ Charter. There were representatives from the seven founding members of the League who came and took part in the drafting of the charter. For those who have an academic background, you’ll find some articles like Article 52 dealing with regional arrangements and their role in questions of peace and security. They were proposals put forward by the Arab League members and also by the Latin American members, who were also very active at the conference.



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believer in the role of the United Nations.

The United Nations has to be the forum. This year there will be a summit when all the leaders of the world will meet and will look at specific proposals on reforming the United Nations. There was a panel of 18 leaders of the world, and I’m glad to say that the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amre Moussa, who was my boss and friend, was one of those panelists. They put out a set of proposals: how to enlarge the Security Council, how to streamline the procedures, how to give more voice to civil society, how to regulate the role of the Security Council in conflicts and the use of force. There were a lot of proposals for

before they erupt into world crises, in dealing with issues of development, of health improvement, of human development, of cultures. They understand better the problems and that is why the United Nations is always meeting with the leaders of these organizations to discuss them.

Just before coming here I was at a meeting of the Organization of American States in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and it was a very interesting meeting for me to compare how the OAS functions compared to the League. President Bush came and he addressed the meeting, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice came, and I told the Secretary, “I’m very happy to be here because I see the problems in

Over the years the League has expanded its membership—it’s now 22—and also its activities. It was first focused on political activities to coordinate the role of the members towards the big issues of the region, but lately it has expanded the focus on all kinds of activities – economic activities, social activities, and if you look back in the history of the League you will find that all major initiatives that have taken place in the Middle East have been adopted within the framework of the Arab League. There is another initiative for peace with Israel that was adopted at the Beirut Summit Conference in 2001. There is a convention to fight terrorists, which was adopted within the League. There is a treaty, a convention, for free trade

zones between the members of the League, also, adopted within the League, a convention to protect the environment. There is an organization for the promotion of the role of the Arab woman. All those initiatives have been adopted within the framework of the Arab League.

But in spite of this you will find some people, maybe outside the Middle East, not knowing much about the Arab League and people in the Middle East, critical of the Arab

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League, who will not accept this. I still believe that the League has a crucial role to play in our age. Of course, I think some criticism is justified, and if you find deficiencies in the League you will find them common to other regions and international organizations. Problems of bureaucracy, problems of outdated structures, problems of financial inability to cope with the many projects they want to do, members who don't pay their dues on time—and may I just recall here that the United States doesn't pay its dues always on time to the United Nations. Neither do the Arabs. They don't pay their dues on time to the Arab League, so it affects the progress we have. One problem, which is again common to all organizations, is that many resolutions are adopted and supported by a

majority or unanimity and then they're not implemented. Why? Because the member-states lack the political will to implement those resolutions.

So at the last summit meeting of the Arab League that convened in March of this year in Algiers, the League adopted a series of reforms. One of them was to create an Arab parliament so as to enlarge the participation of the League and not confine it to a government, but also to representative bodies of people. Each Arab country has a number of representatives in this parliament.

Another important reform was to include for the first time civil society in the work of the League. Civil society is becoming so important, not only in this country but even in our world, and people now have the option to take part in discussing the various proposals and projects before the League through participation of Arab civil society.

There are many other proposals. There are proposals to create an Arab code of justice so that legal issues arising within the countries can be settled before this forum without going, for instance, to the International Court of Justice to resolve our problems. There is a proposal to create an Arab investment bank. There is a proposal to create another Security Council. So there are a lot of proposals, but maybe the most important reform of the League is that it now leads the way in the Arab world on the issue of reform of the Arab world—democratization—to make it more modern and more able to enter into the global age. Here I will draw your attention to the fact that at the last summit meeting that took place in Tunisia last year, all 22 member states approved a collective vision of reform of the Arab world; a vision that calls for political reform, economic reform

and social reform. I think this vision is extremely important because it emanates from the region itself. I believe honestly that, yes, our region needs reform, and there is a strong movement calling for reform in each and every Arab state, but this has to come from within our own societies. It cannot be imposed as an outside model from abroad. You cannot take an American or a British model of reform and impose it on Arab society. Arab societies have their own traditions, their own cultures and heritage, and I think you have to respect those if you want this reform to be viable and to be credible to the people of the region. So, this is a very important initiative, which the Arab League is taking with the support of all the member states.

Also, in the field of economic integration there is, as I said, a convention on creating a free trade zone. Eighteen of the 22 members of

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the League have joined that and it is exceedingly important because today if the Arab world does not function as one block vis-à-vis the outside world it will be marginalized. So this free trade zone will eventually lead to a customs union and the custom union will lead to a common market. This is an example set by the European Union and this is what the Arab League is now following.

The same is happening in the OAS region, where President Bush the other day proposed the creation of a free trade zone between the United States and the Central American republics. He said this will lead to creating more jobs and benefits both in the United States and those countries. So we need this, we need a common market, we need the business communities to get together and we need reforms to happen in the region and not just on an individual scale in each country.

We, of course, also have burning political issues in our region, and I want to briefly touch upon them. We have the Arab-Israeli problem, we have Iraq, and we have issues of security. On the Arab-Israeli problem a lot of people ask me what my feeling is. I've been involved in negotiations of Arab-Israeli peace since I joined the Egyptian Foreign Service and, as was mentioned in my introduction, I've been engaged in negotiating the peace treaty. I look at the issue in a historical perspective and I see how much has been achieved, and it gives me reason to hope that we can reach the end of the road. Peace has been achieved between Egypt and Israel, peace has been achieved between Jordan and Israel, and we also had some informal contact between a number of Arab countries and Israel.

Unfortunately, we have reached a deadlock, but now there is again hope to revive peace in the region.

We have a strong leader in the Palestinian world, Mahmoud Abbas, who was elected and endorsed by his people. He was just in Washington a few weeks ago when he met with President Bush. He got all the support he needs from President Bush. He has, in his short term, already tried to reconcile the diverse views among the Palestinians and induced them to accept a truce with Israel if Israel also

honors its commitment not to take action against the Palestinians. In Israel we see Mr. Sharon who, in spite of the obstacles he faces, goes forward with his plan of withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. We hope that this withdrawal takes place, that the settlements will be totally dismantled, that this withdrawal will take place not unilaterally, but in total cooperation with the Palestinians, and that eventually this will open the way to settle all the other difficult issues that still remain on the agenda of the Arab-Israeli problem. The withdrawal of Gaza should not be the end of the process; it should be the beginning.

The withdrawal should take place within the context of the Road Map that has been agreed upon and if the withdrawal is successful it could set an

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example for a withdrawal from the West Bank as well, and even for dealing with the most difficult issues, like the question of the Palestinian refugees and, as President Bush mentioned the other day at the White House, even the question of Jerusalem, that is so controversial.

So I think it's about time to focus on the positive. When I was at the RAND Corporation this morning we discussed at length a project about the future Palestinian state called the "Arc" which I fully endorse, because

this project gives hope that we can have a Palestinian state that is viable, that is contiguous, and that can live side by side with Israel. We must give people hope and not let them face despair, because that will only lead to more violence and we will miss a historical opportunity to make peace. I think we have it, but I think everyone has a role to play. I think the United States has a major role to play as an honest broker, someone who has already brought peace between Egypt and Israel. I salute President Carter. I saw how dedicated he was to making this possible. I hope President Bush can do the same in trying to solve the Palestinian problem and then maybe also to deal with the question of Syria and Lebanon, which still also needs to be addressed.

Iraq is a big issue. There are many opinions on that: Was the war legal? Did we find weapons of mass destruction? Should we have given more time to inspectors of the United Nations? I was closely involved in this when I was at the United Nations. I even traveled to Iraq many times with the Secretary General to try to find a solution and to convince the Iraqis to open up their borders and show that they had no weapons. But let us not be obsessed by the past. Let us look to the future. I think the future is in the hands of the Iraqi people and they deserve all our support because there is no people in this region, apart from maybe the Palestinians, that have suffered so much as the Iraqi people. They've been involved in war after war, they've been subjected to international sanctions, and today they're still living a nightmare. People are dying by the dozen every day. So we have to support the political process going on in Iraq, we have to urge the Iraqis to get together, and they have to reconcile. We need the Sunnis to be involved in the process with the Shiites, with the Kurds, with everyone.

A strong international support is needed and the Arab League is playing its role. It is the first organization that has accepted representation of Iraq following the war. We are considering opening a mission in Iraq, we have also proposed to the Iraqis that we send them some constitutional experts who will help draft the constitution. We hope that eventually there will emerge a free and democratic Iraq, a secure Iraq, and that the foreign forces will be withdrawn from Iraq.

I was just reading today that the majority of Americans are saying, "Maybe we should think about a timetable. Maybe it's about time to leave Iraq." Of course, I don't think that Iraq should be left without first rebuilding the security forces, but I think it's important for the United States to say loud and clear that it has

no designs on Iraq, that Iraq should be an independent Arab country and play the role it has always played in the region. The United States is not going to remain there as an occupying power. This is affecting the image of the United States in the region and the United States has no designs on the oil resources of Iraq which, again, many people in the region have doubts about. So I think this is the right approach to deal with and maybe affect the thinking of many Iraqis.

Lastly, let me close by saying that we live in an important region. The Middle East is the crossroads of many regions; it is the cradle of civilization, the birthplace of all the main religions, but I hope that we will see peace and security in this region. I am hopeful, I am hopeful because I think the United States is so involved in this region now that we have become partners. I

always say we have a common destiny. Whatever happens in our region, whether good or bad, affects the United States and whatever policy the United States adopts towards our region affects the fate of our region. So let us work together.

Finally, about U.S. and Arab relations. I think they're friendly relations, historical relations. We have a lot of strategic, economic interests but sometimes we differ, sometimes we think that U.S. policies are not fair enough, that they are not sensitive enough to our aspirations, that there are a lot of misconceptions about the Arab world, about Islam and other things, and I think it's only through dialogue that you can overcome these misconceptions. I believe that meetings like this one will play a little role in helping to do so.

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