

# The Future of Arab-U.S. Relations: Problems and Prospects

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on September 20, 2007 by

His Excellency Clovis Maksoud  
Director, Center for the Global South, American University

The notion of the Global South is from the aftermath of the Cold War when the world was polarized between the two blocs. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the shift in the architecture of the new global politics would have been Global South and North where in a very broad way around 20 percent of the human population have and are in control of 80 percent of the wealth of the world; while 80 percent of the world had available 20 percent of the wealth. This is the new polarity which supposedly should be conditioning international relations, after the unipolar system inherited the world's political structure - there is a great urge to reconstruct the global scene along multi-polar worlds, with the United States remaining the pivotal world but no longer the unilateral pole. So that was my commercial for the Center for the Global South.

The Center for the Global South partook in the publication, editing and organizing of the Forum on Arab Human Development Reports, in which we sought to discover the three basic deficits in the Arab human situation. These deficits constituted the hemorrhaging of our vitality and, therefore, created a level of such weaknesses in our respective societies and what we have tried to do is to diagnose this situation in as much as an objective approach as possible, with the notion of providing recommendations and suggestions for the governments and for civil societies to undertake the transformative recommendations that are necessary to bring about human development in the Arab world. Last week in Cairo we also co-chaired the new reports that we are going to do on Arab Human Development; this will be a series on Arab human security. I must tell you that the Arab Human Development Reports animated conversations and discussions throughout the United States and I think that the United States was resonating with many of our recommendations.

We found such deficits as the deficit in knowledge, where if we take the Arab world as a whole, around two percent of the Arab population has access to the internet. Now, of course, in Dubai and in some of the pockets of wealth in Jordan and Lebanon there is 15 or 20 or 30 percent, but in Sudan there isn't any and in Somalia there isn't any. So, we are a rich nation of poor people and that is one of the basic dichotomies that we have to address, not only internally but also in our relations with the United States and, I suppose, with the world community.

In the Arab Human Development Report we were strongly attacked by people who said, "Why are you unraveling the dirty linen of the Arabs for the world to exploit us?" And our answer was very clearly that the world knows about our dirty linen and if we give the impression that we don't know, they will exploit it, keep it, and ratify it as our destiny. So, you must always realize, for Arabs, that self-criticism is our weapon against change and destruction. And that is the key to open our societies, to embolden our civil societies, to act as a mobilizing factor, [we must] extract

from governments which have become rigid in their approach because they are more interested in survival of their power rather than the survival and the quality of life for our people. And that is an endeavor which has to be a shared concern of the international community; we cannot do it alone, but we must be responsible for the input of our intellectual energies into bringing about a sort of transforming Arab democratic, progressive and equitable patrimony.

This means that we have to find where the basic obstacles are that have harmed our progress, that have arrested our endeavors. In that respect, we must begin to talk to each other rather than at each other. It is our sense that in many instances in the Arab world, especially during this administration, that we were being talked at, rather than talked to. The United States, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, divided the world into “with us or against us.” I think at that time the United States almost lost the art of persuasion and became addicted to the art of dictation. It has generated a great deal of resentment, not only throughout the Arab world but also throughout Europe, and now it is getting to be a consciousness of corrective agendas in the United States. I think that is a healthy breakthrough which will restore the checks and balances.

However, September 11 constituted a major landmark—a traumatic experience—for the American people and for the rest of the world, and it is here that the question was asked: “Why do Arabs and Muslims hate us?” The answer was that those who hate believe in the culture of death and they are a united fringe. There are united fringes in every society and they manifest not only in acts of bloody terrorism, but also in intellectual terrorism, cultural terrorism, a spirit of domination, racism, etc. But the Arabs do not hate the United States— they cannot hate, besides the fact that they should not hate. The United States has given the Arabs a great deal of enlightenment; it has done to its various universities, educational institutions, hospitals, its missionaries, a great deal of uplifting.

And then there is Arab projection demographically as a component of the United States. The United States to the Arab world, as well as to the rest of the world, is a global nation, not only a global power; everybody feels that they have a stake in the United States. It is in the interest of the Arabs and the world that the United States is not exclusively satisfied with the fact that it is a superpower. That is good, it should try to continue to be a great power, but greatness is not necessarily realized by economic or by military power—it is by the values of pluralism, multiculturalism, and dialogue that has characterized the emergence and the manifest destiny of the United States. It is in that empowerment of the American people that it becomes a model for many of us in the Arab world to emulate. It is in this respect that the concept of human development is learned from the United States. It is also important that the United States people learn about the Arabs, but also unlearn some of those things that they have learned about the Arabs—it is this process of learning and unlearning that is crucial at this point in time.

Furthermore, when the United States, in the aftermath of September 11, asked the question “Why do Arabs and Muslims hate us?” the answer is that Arabs do not hate, the united fringe does. But the Arabs are angry and there’s a difference between anger and hate; anger is an invitation to dialogue while hatred is a deliberate rupture of dialogue. Anger is an invitation to argue, to debate, to convince, to persuade. Hatred ends any form of conversation. Therefore, anger is a healthy approach and should be understood. There are many grievances that the Arabs have about United States policies. These grievances cause anger but they also cause an invitation to talk, to discuss, to argue, to educate and to persuade. On the Iraqi situation, we were angry. We felt that the invasion was a diversion from the central source of terrorism. *Le Monde*, which is of the United States, wrote an editorial 12 of September 2001, and it encapsulated the whole world situation: “We are all Americans.” What happened since that solidarity? The world community,

especially the United States, should ask the question in self-criticism in the same way as we did in the Arab Human Development Report to prevent falling into the trap of self-destruction. And it is in this respect that the Iraqi operation should be viewed and examined. Why? Who did it? Who had a stake in that? I hear the questions being asked nowadays and I think the answers will be coming. There have been several books that have been written; there will be more that will be written. It will be documented. There will be questioning processes, people will be accountable. Why was there not a post-conflict formula to address the consequences of the war? Therefore, on Iraq, the Arab world, while we differ in priorities, is on the same wavelength as we see American public opinion beginning to render the corrective operations. I think that however much the United States might make mistakes, there are always the values of the pluralistic democratic society of the United States that become operational in its corrective process. And that is where our hopes lie. So, whatever differences the Arabs have with the United States on the Iraqi situation, it is always transitional and temporary and hopefully we will converge again.

Another grievance that the Arabs have is that of the Palestinian situation and I think that this has been endemic in its controversy and should be addressed and that the Arab position on it should be spelled out. But I don't want to go back into paraphrasing history. I think many people know about it, many people interpret history sometimes selectively, at times objectively, but in many instances it should be known what is the gut feeling of the Arab position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We understand and should understand that anti-Semitism is a blot on our humanity. Furthermore, anti-Semitism has led ultimately to the greatest crime against humanity that has taken place, the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a tragedy that, in one form or another, all of us shares. Therefore, there is a collective guilt that we all have to feel, particularly the guilt of those in the West who prevented many people who were the victims of the Hitler era from immigrating to this country. I, and the Arab intelligentsia at least, are against what is called the denial notion of the Holocaust. And therefore we understand the Jews in the world in a sense of solidarity, have the need to rectify that perhaps they need a state because everybody feels that they might be an alien community in their countries. Our answer to that is that anti-Semitism is not a permanent feature of human existence. It should be fought. The guilt of the West is an indication of liberal and progressive and rational values, but it shouldn't come to an equation that Israel would forgive you or absolve you from the past guilt provided that you absolve Israel from future guilt. That equation, a mutual absolution relationship, has been at the basic expense of the Palestinian exodus. Does that mean that the Palestinians have total and absolute license? No. That explains the two-state system formula. I was one of the advocates at one time of a democratic secular state of Palestine where all the Jews who came to Palestine, irrespective of why they came or how they came, they and the Arab Palestinians should form one democratic secular state. I was influenced as a young man by my experience in India and it resonated with me. In the '70s and '80s, whenever I would work in a university, a group would have some of my statements from the past proving that I wanted the destruction of Israel. That was another distortion which carried through and it didn't matter at the time—but I understand the sensitivities.

But let us address the two-state system. The international community, the United Nations, has spelled out very clearly that the West Bank, Jerusalem and Gaza are occupied territories, *occupied* territories. What does it mean to be an occupied territory? It gives the occupier certain rights of administration. It presumes that occupation is a transition and not permanent. It also means that there cannot be any alteration of the demographics or geographic character of the occupied territory. This is a given, this is why you might say international law is not always operative. But this is the basic condition. This is the condition, not for a compromise between

Israel and Palestine, but the reconciliation between Israel and Palestine. Up until now, Israel does not acknowledge that it is, in Gaza, in the West Bank, and in east Jerusalem, an occupying power. That is why it has proliferated in settlements; it has annexed, unilaterally, territories. It has indicated since Oslo that it recognized the PLO, after it had dismissed it as a terrorist organization for a long while. [Israel] recognized it as a representative of the people, but not the progenitor of a new independent state on the occupied territories.

So, people ask the question, “What are the causes of delay with the process? Why hasn’t there been any advance towards the two-state system?” And now President Bush comes with a vision of two states. If the United States does not elicit from Israel a clear acknowledgement that Israel considers itself and treats itself in the Occupied Territories as an occupying power, there is no basis for its so-called peace process. It becomes process without peace and the road map becomes a road map without a map at the outcome. The United States in its zeal at one stage, said that democracy must spread in the Arab world but so did we in the Arab Human Development Report, and we went even further than that. We described democracy as not only free elections and freedom of speech; these are the political aspects. We decided democracy is the satisfaction of human needs which are conditions for survival and for a new quality of life in terms of education, health, and women empowerment. We decided on that. We’re on the same wavelength with the notion of democracy. But when the United States asked the Palestinians to go into an election, they elected a president who is recognized, and then they elected the government of Hamas because of the corruption of the establishment at that time. Most of the Christians in Ramallah and other places elected the Islamic Hamas. I’m against Hamas, but the function was that the outcome came as a penalty to the corruption and to the fact that there was no delivery on all the peace processes. You don’t penalize, you don’t tell people to go and vote and then immediately the next day establish a siege on the outcome, on the people who were elected in Gaza, that’s a paradox.

As for Lebanon, during my youth Shi’a were marginalized. Then, they were empowered and, like a newly-empowered community anywhere in the world, their narrative is rough at the outset and then it subsides when they are genuinely accepted as a component of the national scene.

In 1982, I remember clearly, Jesse Jackson was supported almost exclusively by blacks. Now that the blacks have become, through the constitutional process, accepted, Obama has become appealing to a whole diversity of the American community. It doesn’t mean that Hezbollah would remain the permanent feature, or that Hamas would be the remaining feature. The exclusion and marginalization of any community when empowered and genuinely recognized as equal, begins to have a new narrative, a new approach. This has been the experience here in the United States and this is an experience that the Arabs have to be emulating and are emulating. I say this in clear consciousness and awareness that these are not going to be achieved overnight. We have to achieve these steps incrementally.

Your manifest destiny took around two hundred years, but in an age of communications, rapid breakthroughs of science and technology, I hope within the next decade or two all these obstacles to peace, to equality, to human development in the Arab world will take place. I want it to take place with the assistance of the United States and not by the obstacles that some of its policies to undertake to not allow the flow of our evolution towards a healthy Arab democratic national patrimony. In this respect, I am not pessimistic. Today you hear the news about what is happening to the Iraqi people in around, two or three months, two million Iraqis became refugees in Syria and Jordan, two million others became internal refugees in their countries. Is Iraq going to become a new Palestine? That is the question for us. Is our oil wealth going to be

continuously generating financial discrepancy between the wealthy Arab countries investment in the West of around \$3 trillion and only \$25 billion invested in the Arab countries? That is why we are a rich nation of poor people. That is why moderation has been associated with authoritarian governments. It is important to realize that the Arabs are moderate, but not the distorted moderation that is being marketed, and that is an important thing. We must learn more about the United States and unlearn some of the distortions the enemies of the United States have inflicted upon us. But you, too, must learn about the Arabs and unlearn some of the repeated distortions about their culture, their civilization, their aspirations and their basic national and human rights, and that new educational interaction, the miseries of our people at this moment in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan and other places. The miseries we inflicted on our people, but they have been sustained by the level of obliviousness to our rights, that many times you gloss over, and permissiveness has been allowed to delay our relationships. I think it is high time that we restore the dialogue, the conversation, openly, frankly and without inhibition and hopefully without constraints because many times Arab-American dialogue was subjected to the fact that we had to equivocate so that we were not treated as unrealistic. Realism was defined as that you have to submit to the inevitable rather than admit the reality.

Ladies and gentlemen and friends, it's a big challenge. We have to start by correcting our priorities. We cannot ask the world to support the Palestinians when their leadership has been divided. But in the final analysis we are part of the global community and the global community has to understand that this crucial area, the section of Africa, Asia and Europe, the section of all three major religions, cannot remain hostage to strategic calculations and oil explorations. These might be factors; they should not become priorities. I want to thank you very much for this opportunity, that we can have a frank and open discussion.

Thank you very much.

[www.lawac.org](http://www.lawac.org)

Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content. The views expressed herein are not endorsed by the Council. The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.