

Amre Moussa's Vision for the Middle East

Friday, February 19, 2010

Amre Moussa, the secretary-general of the Arab League, barely gave the performance of the Arab system a passing grade, placing most of the blame on Arabs themselves for missing valuable opportunities and allowing themselves to be used as tools in the game of nations.

Speaking at AUB on February 18 before a large audience of academics, students, and dignitaries, Moussa gave a lecture entitled "The Situation in the Middle East: A Vision for the Future," as part of the Issam Fares Institute's Bill and Sally Hambrecht Distinguished Peacemakers Lectures, which were introduced by IFI Director Rami Khouri.

In his lecture, Moussa highlighted the causes leading to Arab failures, pinpointing the need for developing better future policies, especially with major players in the region, namely Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

"I would give our performance between C and D," he said. "A big portion of the blame should be put on our shoulders: the neglect of our societal work, ... the misplaced priorities (think of education and health care), the easy...submission to foreign influence,...hollow slogans, lack of transparency, lack of progress on the path towards democracy, and above all, 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 into the future."

Delivered at AUB's Charles Hostler Center, the talk attracted a number of luminaries, including President Peter Dorman, who gave a welcome address, Provost Ahmed Dallal, Egyptian Ambassador Ahmed Fouad El-Bidawi, British Ambassador Frances Guy and other dignitaries as well as many members of the AUB community.

"AUB, along with other regional universities, can contribute to the efforts of the Arab League through realizing the double mandate of higher education today: on the one hand, to prepare citizens to take up a productive role in society and, on the other, to model the transparency and integrity that is so essential in building enlightened communities," said Dorman in his welcome note.

Moussa was on a two-day visit to Beirut to meet with President Michel Suleiman, Speaker Nabih Berri, and Foreign Minister Ali al-Shami, ahead of the Arab League Summit in Tripoli, Libya, next month.

While the world changed drastically after WWII and the end of the Cold War—producing new political and developmental trends—the Arab world did not hop on the bandwagon of democratization, globalization, human rights movements, said Moussa.

"We were caught unprepared ...unable to field a generation of politicians, economists, environmentalists, and...intellectuals, who are able to participate as stakeholders in the world's

new [trends]. We did not put the necessary emphasis on education as the tool to achieve that goal," he said.

Moreover, Moussa considered the Arab world's lack of support for entrepreneurship and innovation as a major setback in its advancement.

The Arab League's secretary-general also cited the Arab world's passivity in addressing theories and paradigms that were proposing reforms to the region.

"The result is what we see today: an Arab world in apparent disarray," said Moussa, highlighting the turmoil afflicting Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and Palestine. "Lebanon, while calm, looks like a victim in waiting," he added, noting that the Arab League "will not accept any justification for an [Israeli] aggression" against Lebanon.

To help push Mideast dialogue forward, Moussa advocated expanding "the Middle East family of nations" to include major players such as Turkey, the recently-manifested "smooth operator" and Iran, the "rough operator with tough policy."

"Turkey should be invited to enjoy a special relationship with the Arab League under a new system that should be devised," he said. "As for Iran... good policy also requires a formal dialogue between the Arab League and Iran... We, Arabs, should build on the premise that Iran should not be categorically considered our enemy. We share a common history with Iran and our interests meet and overlap in many ways... Moreover, we should oppose any military adventure against Iran."

As for Israel, which proved to be "bent on losing opportunity after opportunity to make peace," Moussa stressed that there should be "no free lunch" in the so-called peace process, meaning that normalization should only occur on "internationally-recognized terms of reference," and Arab conditions which include: establishing a Palestinian State, evacuation from Arab territories, and designating a zone in the Middle-East free from nuclear weapons. "Israel is missing a valuable opportunity to join the Middle East family of nations by its refusal to make peace on fair terms," Moussa said.

On the role of the Arab League, Moussa rejected the practice of "self-flagellation" and mentioned a few achievements such as establishing an Arab fund with \$2 billion as capital for small and medium enterprises; working to build a railway system linking all Arab states; moving from a free trade area to an Arab customs union; and promoting physical and cultural development. Moussa further vouched that the League should be revitalized with new revolutionary ideas for the Summit in Libya next month.

"And we should no longer accept the marginalization of the United Nations or its security council," added Moussa.

Finally bringing the vision to focus, Moussa shared a list of items for immediate work including: finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict; forming an Arab peace-keeping force; establishing a Middle-Eastern zone free from weapons of mass destruction; moving steadily towards democratization; standing firmly against issues of clash of civilizations; establishing an Arab common market by the year 2020; promoting scientific research and development; tackling climate change and food security; and revisiting the structure of the Arab League.

Moussa has served as secretary-general to the League of Arab States since 2001, becoming a member of the United Nations High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change for International Peace and Security in 2003. Moussa has held the positions of minister of foreign affairs in Egypt, Egyptian ambassador in India, and Egyptian representative to the United Nations. He was awarded the Grand Cordon of the Nile, Egypt, in May 2001, and the Order of the Two Niles, first class, in Sudan 2001. Moussa was also awarded high decorations from Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and the German Federation.