

Personality

Clovis Maksoud

When hearing for the first time that there is a Chief Representative in the U.S. of the League of Arab States, some people might be pardoned for wondering: just what do he and his staff actually do? Ambassador Clovis Maksoud, a 54-year-old Lebanese diplomat, lawyer and journalist who not only holds down that job but is also the Arab League's Permanent Observer at the United Nations, has a ready answer: "Our job is to convey the Arab consensus to American policy makers and opinion makers."

This answer, of course, can lead to a second question in the minds of many Americans: is there really such a thing as an "Arab consensus?" Dr. Maksoud does not hesitate: "Of course there is!"

Dr. Maksoud acknowledges that the consensus among Arab countries is often weak—but he adds that it is always there, to a greater or lesser extent. "It's also resilient," he says. "On a given issue, it can be weak one day and grow strong the next. This is because it is deeply ingrained—the result of a common cultural and spiritual heritage. This is the ingredient that makes an Arab from Morocco relate far more to what is going on in the West Bank or Iraq than he does, say, to the situation in Turkey or Cyprus."

Moderating the Swings

He sees it as his job to "utilize the Arab consensus when it is strong, and explain it when it is weak." One way to use it is to moderate the swings of bilateral relationships between individual Arab countries and the U.S.—relationships which can range from friendly to outright unfriendly. "If a relationship is particularly close," he explains, "the Arab consensus can act to prevent basic Arab positions from becoming a hostage to it. On the other hand, it can also act to prevent an unfriendly relationship from leading to a rupture."

Dr. Maksoud's contacts with the U.S. government are strictly unofficial, since the Arab League is not regarded by the U.S. as a diplomatic entity. But this poses no practical problem. "The Administration gives us the opportunity to pass along the Arab viewpoints, and when officials want to ask me something they know where to call me up—and they do," he says.

Much of Dr. Maksoud's time is spent trying to inform opinion makers and ordinary citizens about the Arab consensus—either while working out of his headquarters in Washington, D.C. or while on the road addressing civic organizations, church groups, university seminars and the like. He is aided in

this campaign by five Arab League information offices in the U.S., which under his supervision produce magazines and pamphlets, distribute books and otherwise carry out an information program similar to what is done for the U.S. overseas by the U.S. Information Service. From time to time Dr. Maksoud puts on his U.N. hat and brings the Arab consensus to the attention of the rest of the world—particularly when there are U.N. debates on Middle East matters.

Dr. Maksoud has been in his present job since 1979, but has had experience in enlightening American opinion since long before that. In 1974, shortly after the Arab oil embargo got underway, he was dispatched to the U.S. by the Arab League as special envoy to explain the Arab point of view. Dr. Maksoud had been prepared to find the assignment tough, but was nonetheless taken aback when a famous woman television interviewer asked him point-blank: "Aren't you ashamed to be here while Americans have to wait in gas-lines? Don't you think you should apologize to the American people?" But he recovered quickly—and justified his reputation for never being at a loss for words—by replying that he was very sorry, and would be happy to apologize just as soon as the U.S. apologized to the Arabs for "putting Palestinians into bread-lines."

Erosion of Bias

Dr. Maksoud believes that during the past ten years there has been a considerable erosion of the "U.S. bias" towards the Arabs, and that in the last few months in particular more and more Americans have been "sensitized to the legitimacy of Palestinian rights and the agony of Lebanon." But he thinks there is still a long way to go, and that the fact that so many Americans do not yet have an objective view of the Middle East should by no means be blamed entirely on the pro-Israel lobby and its supporters. "We Arabs ought to do much more than we are doing," he says. "The opportunity is there: American society is an open society, and there is a persuadable constituency, which is fundamentally fair-minded."

Dr. Maksoud is the author of several books on the Middle East, including *The Crisis of the Arab Left* and *The Arab Image*. He has been senior editor of Cairo's newspaper *Al-Ahram*, editor-in-chief of the daily *An-Nahar* of Beirut and Paris, and a Visiting Professor at Georgetown. He also served five years as Arab League ambassador to India and Southeast Asia. He graduated from the American University of Beirut, and holds a Ph.D. from George Washington University and a Doctorate of Jurisprudence from Oxford.

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