

Uniting Arabs for an inward conquest



Asghar Kahn/Gulf News

Clovis Maksoud is a lawyer and journalist, a Lebanese national and former ambassador of the Arab League to the United States and the United Nations.

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By Manal Alafrangi, Staff Writer

Sitting in a hotel lobby in Dubai, I was reading through some of the notes I had jotted down in preparation for my conversation with someone I grew up watching on American television, Ambassador Clovis Maksoud.

The man would frequent CNN, NBC and MSNBC to give in-depth analyses on topics pertaining to the Middle East.

A lawyer and journalist, the Lebanese national and former ambassador of the Arab League to the United States and the United Nations, teaches at Georgetown University and American University in Washington, where he is the director of the Centre for the Global South.

Maksoud wore an expansive smile on his face when we met. Wearing his signature black-framed glasses and a sharp suit, he quickly settled in for some serious talk about the role of the media and the political status of the Middle East.

He had just returned from Yemen where as a board advisory member he participated in the United Nations Development Programme's launch of the report on Arab women's empowerment. His views on the Middle East are varied; as he examines the region's recent

tragedies, he visualizes the ways of getting out of the major regional rigmaroles.

Excerpts:

Being one of the key Arab faces on American news shows, what do you make of the Middle East coverage in the West?

The level of fairness is relative. I can't say it's unfair but there are certain terminologies that have been assumed, from an Arab perspective, which are either unacceptable or problematic. One of the challenges in this "semantical problematique" is that even at its fairest, the Western media invariably cannot convey what, from an Arab viewpoint, is defined as objective.

An example is the description of the Palestinian situation. There is a tendency in the American media in particular to never question the fact that the Occupied Territories since 1967 have not been recognised as occupied by Israel.

Is it too simplistic to say that Israel's strong position within the American establishment is the factor?

If Israel does not acknowledge that it is an occupier, why hasn't the US media questioned the reason? Most of the media uses the term "occupied" while describing the situation, but they never challenge the consequences of Israel's non-acknowledgement and so the reporting, perhaps not deliberately, fluctuates between inadequacy and destruction.

As a result, the Israeli narrative can slip in, that all forms of resistance is terrorism and can blank out the questions on the presence of the settlements and annexations — using the term "withdrawal" loosely, when they are just temporary pullouts or redeployments.

Is there a shift in US media on coverage of either Palestine or Iraq?

Yes, on Iraq. The American media has proven to be bold and courageous in confronting distortions on issues pertaining to Iraq, and it has deconstructed the narrative that the neoconservatives have tried to impose. They [neoconservatives] imposed their policies for awhile, but as the events unraveled, the media was able to disprove their claims. In this case, American forces were involved and the casualties expedited the process of serious investigation.

Why did the relative ease in uncovering the truth in the Iraqi situation not apply to the Palestinian situation?

The question of what I call "cumulative distortions" arises. That is, the post-Second World War historical condition. First, broadly speaking, is the Western crisis of consciousness concerning the Holocaust and the record of anti-Semitism in Europe. The Zionist project targeting Palestine as its focus and territorial locus painted this as a crisis of consciousness — which explains the basic decency of the Western liberal tradition — and offered a transaction to the West. Their [the West's] sense of guilt can be absolved and we will no longer ask questions.

Zionism absolves the West of the guilt and the West absolves Zionism of the subsequent

guilt, when it comes to the Palestinians. That is the equation and the definition of the collective distortions. From then on, any criticism of Israel in the West would raise the spectre of anti-Semitism and therefore any critical reporting or analysis of Israel becomes a risky affair. The latest example is how many pro-Israelis are treating former president Carter for his book on Palestine [Palestine: Peace not Apartheid].

What do you make of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? Does he know what he is doing?

Yes, even though he might appeal to certain emotional grievances in terms that are extreme. Let me refer to his "wiping Israel off the map": my answer is, we strongly prefer as Arabs that no one underestimate the rationality of our profound grievances and humiliation, that Israeli aggression has thrust upon several generations. This means that while we appreciate the motives of somebody like Ahmadinejad, we have to point out in response that wiping Israel rhetorically pre-empts the world from discovering the daily practices of Israel in wiping Palestine off the map.

Iran is an emerging country and it is a relatively growing influence in the Arab region at a time of diminishing US power. This situation is due to the failure of the American adventure in Iraq and therefore many of the region's problems are within the framework of this Iranian-American equation. This has emerged because of the vacuum and absence of a collective Arab policy and its credible position on major issues and developments.

Sectarianism is very advanced at this point.

The collapse of a nationalistic narrative has led to a change in notions of citizenship in an Iraqi Arab into those of primordial identities based on sectarian ethnic lines.

This is partly a consequence of the total absence of a post-conflict plan when the US invaded Iraq — the invasion was clearly intended to remove Iraq from being a component of a strategic deterrence to Israeli aggression and her hegemonic objectives and policies. This was, in fact, due to the closeness of relations of the neoconservatives in America with Israel which used the trauma of 9/11 to strike at Iraq.

The ruthlessness of Saddam's dictatorship and its removal was not an unwelcome development but, that it came from outside unraveled the vulnerability of the political fabric. Yet, it is important to ascertain that these sectarian divisions were utilised partly because of US occupation and neglect of Afghanistan, and rendered Iraq for all those who wanted to settle accounts with the US, which explains the phenomenon of Zarqawi and his followers.

On the other hand, this fragmentation was enhanced by the US which deliberately defined genuine resistance as terrorism. When it was discovered that this was disingenuous on the US's part, the term "insurgency" began to be used, so that the distinction between these two terms became ambiguous.

Is sectarianism in Iraq a long term problem?

The Sunni-Shiite tension can be reduced, but as long as there is American occupation, the gangs take the opportunity of the atmosphere of resistance to play havoc with social peace.

The future depends on how we deal with the present. Iraq has proven its ultimate complexity. Without America's withdrawal, the vacuum being filled by the Arab League and UN support, we will be faced with the situation where we have to manage chaos which is more difficult.

Can we assess the political scene today with Hamas in power?

Hamas fell into the trap of Oslo. What we are witnessing today are the consequences of Oslo, whereby a transparent election that led to the win of Hamas has exposed its government to the vulnerabilities and the paradoxes that were produced in the Palestinian situation.

How so?

The Palestinian National Authority under Mahmoud Abbas supported a Fatah project as the seed of the Palestinian state to come, which it is not, primarily because they haven't secured from Israel the acknowledgement that they are occupiers.

By the same token, when Hamas was duly elected as the government under the rubric of the various conditions of Oslo they became part of the governance in an occupied territory where the occupier did not acknowledge this legal status.

So Hamas and other resistance groups, while still claiming to be a resistance movement (and rightly so) became jeopardised by their militant record on the one hand and by the blackmail that Israel was asking to exercise supported by the US on the other hand.

Has Hezbollah's prominence reached new heights?

Hezbollah has empowered a sector of the population that was totally marginalised in the past few decades. They [Lebanese Shiites] moved from subjects to citizens; from prevailing illiteracy to literacy and even more. Naturally, they've been helped by the Iranians and they don't deny it. Another person, General Michel Aoun, played a diffusing role in having the war not develop into a confessional war; he was the Christian bar that prevented the Muslims from anger.

The immediate priority for Hezbollah is to have a national unity government and to have a level of preponderance where matters of grand strategic objectives have to be a matter of unanimity.

Hezbollah wants to have a decisive weight that prevails over their parliamentary minority status and they feel that they deserve that because of their performance of liberating South Lebanon in 2000, their performance in blocking Israel for 33 days and to penalise those who are perceived to be permissive of American policy in Lebanon — who willingly or unwillingly allowed the three last days of America's delay of the ceasefire to be implemented [the last three days were when maybe 80 per cent of the cluster bombs was dropped].

It is now the task of the Lebanese people to restore first the consensus and the arguments from all sides, but the South has suffered a great deal of impoverishment and the Shiite community has been subcontracted to feudal laws for a long time.

What do you make of Fouad Siniora's performance thus far?

Siniora is tied but he has proven during the crisis to be the closest thing that Lebanon has to a statesman. Despite certain provocative slogans, he has responded by correcting the distortions and keeping the dialogue open.

On the other hand, he is hampered not so much by the devastations but by the embrace of President Bush — who cannot pronounce his name — and by the disingenuous Israeli position which is articulated by Ehud Olmert when he says 'we're worried about the government of Lebanon' and that creates an atmosphere that's unhealthy for the reconciliation that I would like to happen.

What about Hasan Nasrallah?

Nasrallah has proven mastery in organisation. Clarity of text, ability to mobilise and introduce discipline into politics and the fact that 33 days of withstanding the onslaught of Israeli aggression has brought the Arab world into some ultimate liberation and that is the crucial element why he deserves to be revered by all, including his critics. On the other hand, he has moved from this aura to localised Lebanese politics; even if he is right and he deserves it, the fact that he did it made him become internally controversial.

How do you see the region in 2007?

I might be a little bit prejudiced plus I am addicted to optimism and therefore I am persuaded that the diagnosis of the full Arab human development reports that the UNDP produced in the last four years — the latest one being in Yemen on Arab women empowerment — have in their recommendations viable prescriptions for an Arab renaissance project. It presumes the need for dynamic civil society involvement and acknowledgement of an Arab identity that transcends ethnic, religious and sectarian loyalties, with attributes.

Furthermore, we must undertake self-criticism in order to avoid self-flagellation and to confront our deficits with a commitment and determination that restores a conviction amongst all the Arabs that we are a wealthy nation of poor people: that this condition has to be rectified in order that our human resources and frustrated vitality can bring to the Arab patrimony the unity of diversity.

Important, however, as an immediate priority is that we must fight against extreme poverty, empower women, expand the zone of peace and enhance the chances of freedom. While we should continue to import knowledge, we should, however, subordinate it to produce knowledge.

We are in possession of vitality, but we need a point of reference in order to produce the hope that, at this moment, seems to elude us.

In this respect we have to provide a system of job creation, achieve an integrated economic policy and enable our investment capacities to be within the Arab world, instead of, as they are now in foreign lands. And while investment requires stability, we should make stability equivalent to justice, particularly for the Palestinian people, and economic and social justice for all. The Arabs must prepare themselves to sustain a dynamic regimen of human development.