

Trip to India with Professor Clovis Maksoud, sponsored by Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) – March 2007

Travel 10,000 miles round trip with any person, and you are bound to have experiences worth telling the grandkids. But, travel from the United States to India with an esteemed former ambassador, and you may learn just how pivotal the role of one person can be in influencing the course of history. Such was my experience when I accompanied Ambassador Clovis Maksoud on a ten-day trip to India in March 2007.

Maksoud is the former Chief Representative of the League of Arab States to the United States and to the United Nations from 1979-1990. He has made a lifelong career of diplomacy – by which I do not mean dogmatically representing one nation's position or holding an official job title – but rather, mastering the art of effective communication and gentle persuasion. He has learned both to unite the Arab people behind a voice for freedom and democracy, as well as to plead with other nations for a chance for the success of that voice.

Karan Singh, an Indian statesman and the head of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) invited Maksoud on the March 2007 trip to India. The two men met in the early 1960s during the glory days of India's budding democracy. At that time, Maksoud was serving in his first post as a diplomat representing the League of Arab States in India (1960-66).

Maksoud's youth and zeal caught the attention of India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, as well as his daughter Indira Gandhi, who became Prime Minister in 1966. Maksoud met often with Nehru and Gandhi, and Maksoud had bountiful opportunities to contribute his influence, opinion and perspective as the Arab League ambassador to the international affairs of India.

Indo-Arab relations were quite strong in the early 1960s, despite obvious tensions such as India's ongoing conflict with the Muslim nation of Pakistan. At that time, the United States and the Soviet Union were vying for ideological supremacy in all the developing nations. In order to maintain relations with both superpowers, Nehru decided upon an alternative course of "non-alignment." Maksoud was passionate about supporting Nehru's strategy, and likewise, Nehru was passionate about supporting the Palestinian peoples' right to their homeland.

The purpose of Maksoud's visit in March 2007, was to explore the evolution of Indo-Arab relations since the 1960s, and hopefully, to reinvigorate Indo-Arab ties. Over the course of ten days, Maksoud presented lectures specifically tailored to best address the audience he was before – students, local politicians, foreign diplomats, journalists, followers of numerous faiths, secularists, and the general public. One of his favored sayings during the India trip was that it was better that his audience "hear what they *ought* to hear, not what they think they want to hear."

Maksoud expressed his desire to see democracy and development succeed in all nations, so that all humankind might experience the justice and freedom of good governance. In the pursuit of this goal, he asked India to step into a pioneering role that would hold U.S. global power in balance. After all, absolute power does corrupt absolutely....

The following are excerpts from his lectures:

“The warmth of Indo-Arab relations has cooled since I was ambassador. The responsibility is mutual. Arabs did not sustain intimacy of close relations it had in post-independence India. Arabs and India both were mesmerized by the pragmatic approach of the U.S. They both left old relations and concentrated on developing U.S.-Arab and U.S.-India relations rather than Indo-Arab relations.

India and all countries of the “global south” must reexamine their role to achieve sustainable development. To bridge the gap between the North and South, we must all focus a great deal of energy on conquering poverty. We must uproot the notion that hope is futile, rather than inevitable. India must rediscover the merits of the Palestinian claims and rights, and therefore commit. Palestinians are not only a number of people; Palestinians are the symbol of collective humiliation. Objectivity is commitment to what is right.

The Arab nations, likewise, must return to democratic, pragmatic, realistic Arab panacea. If we don’t, the current situation is a threshold of ruin. I am pleased to premier in India, the UNDP Arab Human Development Report: Women Empowerment. The report offers a great deal of self-criticism, which the Arab nations need. If we don’t self-criticize, we will self-destroy. The purpose is not self-flagellation, but to prepare for an Arab renaissance and recognize the complexity of problems. Covering up leads to explosion, but if we admit our problems, the positive forces will emerge to correct them.

Non-alignment is no longer relevant, but the values remain relevant and must be studied and readapted to changing times. Nehru realized India could help as a pivotal role of newly developing countries to not accept alignment of either the communist bloc or the U.S. but to take progressive aspects of both blocs and to develop what might be called democratic socialism...

We must reclaim and adapt the values/motives of non-alignment to help mobilize the architecture of a “multi-polar” system. Indo-Arab unity provided non-alignment with the independence of individual thought. The pillar of independence must now be reasserted. The U.S. may be pivotal, but it does not have to be unilateral...”

Maksoud's lectures successfully bridged the gaps between India, America, and the Arab nations. He did not waste time on re-breeding bitterness over obvious issues or re-hashing the extent of countless problems. Rather, he spoke of methods to progress away from current conflicts, and he inspired hope and trust that "the others" had a sense of goodwill for humankind.

Maksoud's diplomacy was evident not only in the lectures, but in the memories I was privy to during his visits to old friends. One of the most vivid moments was a meeting between Maksoud and Inder Kumar Gujral, who served as Prime Minister of India in 1997-1998.

Inder Kumar's first political seat was as a member of the Indian Parliament in 1964, and he and Maksoud developed a close friendship during the following two years. In 1966, Maksoud left his post in India, while Inder Kumar continued his political career under Indira Gandhi's government.

Almost ten years later, in June 1975, a regional Indian court issued a verdict against Indira stating that she had used unfair means to win political elections. The court claimed her 1971 election null and void. The protests and demonstrations of the people threatened to pull apart the fabric of the nation. In response, the President declared a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution of India, which gave Indira the power to suspend elections and civil liberties and rule by decree. It is one of the most controversial periods in the history of independent India.

During this time, Inder Kumar was serving as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. As Inder Kumar tells the story, Indira had begun listening almost exclusively to her son, Sanjay Gandhi, for political direction. She was protective of him and she was extremely suspicious of anyone who criticized him. Because major public figures were speaking actively against Sanjay, she subjected all publications to substantial censorship. It was the job of the Minister of Information and Broadcasting to carry out the censorships. In protest, Inder Kumar resigned his post.

Meanwhile, at the request of Indira, Maksoud returned to India to discuss a developing situation in Lebanon. In passing, Indira complained to Maksoud about Inder Kumar. Maksoud said at first she didn't listen to anything he said on the subject, showing him some paintings instead. But then, Maksoud recalled that the Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union had just died of a heart attack. He suggested that Indira offer the post to Inder Kumar. A foreign post would operate to keep him quiet in domestic politics while not estranging him from the political party.

Indira did indeed offer Inder Kumar the Soviet Union post, and he served it that position for 5 years. Not until their meeting in March 2007 did Inder Kumar learn that Maksoud's influence won him that external post. I sat with the two men as they mused over the importance of the Soviet Union ambassadorship to Inder Kumar's political career. The experience set him up to become the Minister of External Affairs and later

the Prime Minister. Maksoud's influence had indeed helped to shape the course of Indian political history.

Maksoud's unique contribution to political affairs has been his commitment to forming a bridge of communication between peoples whose tendency is to steep themselves in misinformed opposition against each other. His diplomacy has made him an authoritative and visionary influence, and his leadership provides clear objectives for the international community to strive toward. I treasure my time spent with him in India in 2007 and hope to learn more from his example in the years to come.