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“Dynamics of Recent Events in the Arab World: Framing the Arab and U.S. Responses”

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Keynote Address

Introduction:

Dr. John Duke Anthony – Founding President and CEO, National Council on US-Arab Relations

Speaker:

H.E. Ambassador Sameh Shoukry – Ambassador of Egypt to the United States

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Remarks as delivered

[Dr. John Duke Anthony] The founding co-chairman of the National Council's Advisory Board when we were established in May of 1983 was the late Senator J. William Fulbright from the State of Arkansas and who became the most illustrious in memory chairman of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee. And he identified with many of the challenges, and the issues and the changing as well as the continuing nature of American interests among the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world, and of course in Southeast Asia at the height of the Vietnam War.

We're privileged to have with us today his widow, Harriet Fulbright, who I don't ask to stand just yet, after whom a college called the Harriet Fulbright College was established almost three years ago, with some 260 students with this vision being to take people from other countries and skill them in the development of the English language, both formal and idiomatic and even phrases that are from grown ups and out of town people, so that they will be part of the bridges and cement and the glue and the adhesive in this relationship between the United States and the world beyond our shores in the coming generations.

There are a number of people in the audience who also are Fulbright Fellow Alumni. I am one of them, and the only one that was a Fulbright Fellow to the then-People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, which was the only Arab Marxist-Leninist state in Arab and Islamic history. And when Yemen united in May of 1990, you had in the weekly cabinet ministry meetings, Marxists elbow to elbow with so-called Islamists, of conservative, often times tribal traditional leaders. So when people say that the two cannot mix, now there's a dynamic example of where they not only can mix, but they can cooperate to positive ends, objectives, and results.

Also on the leadership development level, we have a number of students here, I haven't taken the note, but I would ask those students who are alumni of the Model Arab League and/or one of their study visits abroad, and/or one of our internships at the National Council, if they just might stand, and you will see which ones are here from our various student programs, in the Model Arab League and the internship program and the universities there. [Applause]

We older ones would like nothing more than to follow in the footsteps of our younger ones. With regard to the academic educational component of our programs, we have a number of alumni, I haven't counted them either, of the Malone Fellowship in Arab and Islamic Studies program that we've had in some twelve different Arab countries. I wonder if they would stand, the Malone Fellows from the years. [Applause]

Each of these Malone Fellows is distinguished for being from the humanities, arts, and the social sciences, and we can't ask them all to stand because there are that many presently, and that is our corporate sponsors, those from the Arab embassies and from different US government departments and foundations, who are all listed in the front of the program booklet, but the subtle hint is that they have made possible everything that is in the rest of the program booklet.

I made a phrase in passing this morning that in the last year from the Model Arab League program that we have, which is much like the Model United Nations Program, that we were able to provide 83 awards to young American men and women in the age range of 17 to 22, to either

go to the Arab World, work with one of the sister organizations here in the United States, or participate in Arab language activities. And these were all the result of the Olayan Foundation, and Richard Hobson who is here to represent all of those scholarships. We had 82 applications. We accepted 32, and almost half of the total were from the Model Arab League. Richard Hobson, would you just please stand?

And might I also now ask Harriet Fulbright if she would stand. [Applause]

One thing I left out was that she has just accepted the position to be the Chairperson of the International Center for Foreign Policy. Eugene Bird is the president and yours truly is the vice president. So we have a seamless web of aspects of the Fulbright generation and the Olayan Foundation, both of them serving as bridges.

I will now introduce the keynote speaker, and he will be followed briefly by two representatives from the Gulf Cooperation Council, that live and work in New York as a part of the Permanent Mission to the United Nations.

Ambassador Sameh Shoukry from Egypt has been an ambassador, or diplomat rather, this is his 35th year serving in that role. He was Egypt's ambassador to the international organizations in Geneva, as well as separately an ambassador to Austria. He's been involved in the so-called peace processes, or more likely diplomatic processes, or more likely rhetorical processes, having to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict, from the beginning of his diplomatic career. He's a diplomat in a hot spot at the moment, and has been since the early months of the year, in which we are still engaged.

Please welcome Ambassador Sameh Shoukry of Egypt.

[Ambassador Sameh Shoukry] Well thank you, Dr. Anthony, for your introduction. And thank you to the Board of the National Council on US-Arab Relations for giving me this opportunity to address this distinguished crowd, at your annual conference.

Your contribution to fostering and developing Arab-American relations is well-known and highly appreciated, and we wish everyone here a very successful and prosperous conference.

Let me at the outset also take this opportunity to express my sincere condolences to our brethren of Saudi Arabia on the passing of His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince Sultan. His Highness has contributed to the well being of Saudi Arabia over the last half a century and has contributed actively in the development and the welfare of the citizens of Saudi Arabia. He will certainly be missed within the Arab fold, where he has also contributed to the solidarity and the aspirations of all of the Arab states. His passing has also deprived us of the presence of His Highness Prince Turki, who has been a constant fixture, and we wish him all the best.

I was asked to speak briefly on the issues related to the Arab Spring or the Arab Awakening, and certainly I think this is a topic that has been on everyone's mind and has been at the forefront of the narrative for the Arab region during this last almost year. It certainly in terms of its impact is comparable in modern history to the fall of the Berlin Wall and I am certain that it will have

equal repercussions and ramifications for the world in general and of course most directly to the Arab world.

It's a matter where the Arab nation has awoken to the desire of its people to grasp their future and proceed to establish a more effective form of government, initiated initially by Tunisia, spreading to Libya and to Egypt, and beyond. It had its impact in terms of reform measures in Morocco, election process as well as reform measures in Algeria.

And of course the ensuing story continues in developments in Syria and elsewhere. It's an awakening that will take various demonstrations of resolve and application. It's not just one that is a fixed agenda or a fixed formula for every state, but it is one that I am sure will have its impact and its resonance for the lives of the region and will impact the global conditions and the relationships that exist.

The Egyptian story is a particularly fascinating one because of the nature of Egypt, being the most populous of the Arab states. It has its impact and it resonates very loudly within the Arab and global community. The demonstrations which began and were led by the youth of Egypt soon garnered the support of a vast majority of the Egyptian population that had been dissatisfied with a period of lack of achievement on the political reform process, apprehensions related to the longevity of the current regime at the time and the prospects of a succession, which did not reflect the desire for change, desire for a greater democratization, a greater participation and inclusiveness to deal with Egypt's many challenges and the ambitions of its population. It was a matter of a lack of a sense of, a collective rights of the Egyptian population and their aspirations for greater human rights protection and promotion of human rights, their ability to contribute to the political life of their society, and to be able to establish for themselves through a more representative form of government, the necessary foundations to achieve economic prosperity and to achieve for their children a better way of life.

The object, the revolution of course resulted in a peaceful demonstration of the will of the people, where very little bloodshed was expired, and I think it is a testament to the ability and the maturity that is Egypt. It is the ability to face what was an impregnable regime and through the moral convictions of the population, be able to move what was a mountain of fear and, to a degree, oppression.

The objectives of the revolution, as I mentioned, were a greater democracy, a more inclusive government, an ability to participate in forging solutions for the challenges that faced Egypt economically, politically - free and fair elections - and this has certainly been at the forefront of the very extensive political debate that has ensued since the fall of the regime, where freedoms have been open to, debate has been open to all participants, where various ideas have been at the forefront of this debate, where the configuration of government as represented by the supreme council of the armed forces. The government has had to contend with the process of managing the country and at the same time laying the foundations for a new system of government. And it is a challenge that continues. It is a turbulent environment, one where competing ambitions are at play, and one where the stakes are high for the success of Egypt, I think will resonate very strongly within the region and internationally, and if it was to not achieve the projected

aspirations, I think it will have its very negative impact on the region, its stability, its security, and the long-term development of its people.

Social justice was one of the main issues that have been raised during this debate, to the distribution of wealth, the equal opportunities to all, and again, within the context of a society opening up, the sectorial demands and the challenges have been immense. The current government is facing those with the sensitivity that must be displayed to be able to absorb the long years of neglect in the past and to be able to recognize the legitimate aspirations and demands of a wide sector of the society. But it is a matter of a great concern that one of the results of this time of turbulence and insecurity has been the economic strains that have been placed on Egypt and the manner in which we are able to handle this issue. This has, of course, the ensuing lack of security, within the country, with the collapse of the security services, has impacted the tourism, which is a main resource for our economy, has affected the general environment, the economic environment, direct foreign investments are down, and there is a pressure on our foreign currency reserves. Again, this is somewhat offset by the support that might be available within the international financial institutions, within our bilateral relations, primarily among them with the United States and the European Union, and also our reliance on our own ingenuity, to try to deal with some of these issues.

The political framework that exists currently is an open one, one where I think the competing objectives of political ideologies, and here primarily between liberalism and Islamic political ideology is at the forefront of the current debate. It had the characteristics of developments in Tunisia, and I am sure you all followed the results of the Tunisian electoral process, and it continues to be quite an issue generating great attention in Egypt. There's the youth movement, the leftists, the liberals, the Salafists, the Islamists, the Brotherhood, and they are all vying now to gain as much support as possible to be able to set the stage for the future, and be the determining factor in terms of forging Egypt's future for the years to come.

The military council upon taking this responsibility, has indicated and reiterated its desire to transfer power as soon as possible to an elected civilian administration. It has set a road map which it has kept to, to a great extent with very minor modifications in response to the general public's demands and to the ongoing political dialogue and debate that has ensued. It primarily is focused on conducting the parliamentary elections on the 28th of November, a process which will have several stages, culminating in the seating of Parliament in mid-March, so as to elect the Constitutional Committee to revamp the Constitution.

This is the road map after which a president will be elected on the basis of the new constitution. And it is the constitution, which is the main and primary focus. It is the document that will guide Egypt into the future, that will set the foundations for a democratic system of government, an inclusive system of government and thereby the stakes are high. And it is projected that that forthcoming Parliament will be somewhat fractionalized, but there are those that believe that that might be the best results, in this period that there is no absolute majority, that all factions of political ideas are present in terms of the Constitutional Committee, and are capable of participating and influencing this process so that in the final end, the Constitution is truly representative of the collective will of the Egyptian people.

Much has been discussed about the potential for Egypt's future direction, whether it's the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as a political institution and organization with other Islamist ideologies will cause a shift in terms of Egypt's relationships, whether within the region or globally. And of course, not in a position to speculate, but we believe that in terms of Egypt's long history, its reliance on its institutions, it will continue to be an important player within the region who will extract from the revolution and the peaceful nature of that revolution that the region is in dire need of stability, of security, of continuing effort, led by Egypt to secure the region to find solutions through peaceful means to many of the problems that exist, and among them of course the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

At the same time, it gives the opportunity for Egypt to demonstrate a greater resourcefulness in the manner in which it conducts its external relations and now being supported by its people as a representative and a government which expresses the will of the people and is sensitive to their interests. We look forward to the support during this time of turbulence, time of challenges, of friends and primarily from the United States. President Obama's speech on April 19th enumerating a plan of support was of course well received. We rely on the political and economic support and relationship, long relations, that Egypt has held with the United States, and we look forward that that package will be implemented in the near future. It is a complex issue, it's one that needs consultations and deliberations between both the US and Egypt, and those consultations are underway within the normal spirit of friendship and cooperation that exist between us so as to extract the greatest benefit for the people of Egypt and also solidify this very important and strategic relationship that exists between our two countries.

The potential of not only Egyptians but of Arabs to participate in the increasingly shrinking world, the global nature of this world, where what happens in any part of the world is very much felt in others, as I think we have noticed from the financial crisis here in the United States, the financial crisis in Europe, or political issues that arise anywhere in the world now have their significant imprint on developments. But for the Arab Awakening and for the Arab people to at this stage be able to forge their future, achieve their aspirations, become a positive contributor to peace and security in the world and to the formation of relationships on the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the, our human aspirations for peace, for prosperity, I think will enhance both the region and will enhance the Arab contribution and innovation and will demonstrate the diversity which we can bring to both international relations, to social fabric of our humanity.

We are confident that Egypt will continue to lead in that regard with what it prides itself in terms of human resources that have contributed in the past and will continue, I think, to be a very important factor in this coming period of greater awareness, the awakening, the stability of our region and the best interests of its people. I think I have expanded the time that has been allocated to me, and I will maybe leave the rest of the time for any questions and answers to any specific issues that you might raise.

Thank you very much.

[Anthony] Mr. Ambassador, if you wouldn't mind remaining at the lectern there. We do have several questions, and at the end of these, I would ask our two friends from the Gulf Cooperation

Council to come forward. But the questions are quite interesting ones here. How should Egypt deal with those who held positions with the former regime? Should they be able to run for office again? Is this a matter of debate for purposes of public policy in Egypt?

[Shoukry] One of the main goals of the revolution was also the issue of accountability, the issue of the rule of law. Both, I think, are important, and accountability has been put in place by the investigations that took place after the revolution into some of the dealing, some of the practices of certain figures within the previous regime, and of course many including the former president have been indicted and are on trial for misdeeds that have been levied towards him and others, whether in terms of unlawful gain or in terms of allocations and the lack of due process, in terms of some of the decision-making and policy issues.

Again, I think it's been highlighted that that is an important element to, as a *raison d'être* for the revolution, as again a commitment to that any form of disbursement of justice must be within the legal framework that exists and should for every accused be provided with all of the guarantees associated with a legal system that has served Egypt well, that is recognized for its competence and its ability to deal with issues.

From the political perspective, this is a matter under consideration. There are calls for a legislation that would hinder the participation in the elected parliament of previous members of the National Democratic Party, but that is not an absolute debate. There are varying ideas to what extent that restriction should apply. There is a recognition that not all associated with the NDP were complicit in some of the undertakings or the mismanagement of the country, but there were those who were somehow associated by virtue of their expertise, technocrats and the professionals who were not associated to any criminal activity or any close association to some of the symbols of the regime, and they should not be excluded, and their resource of knowledge should be provided to Egypt at this time. The debate goes on, and once society in general reaches a point of convergence on what is the best course of action, but it is a matter that is being dealt with currently.

[Anthony] Thank you. We have two questions here that I think can be joined. How can the United States proceed at this time to help Egypt? And related to that is how can the United States and other major players including, for example, China, Japan, and others, make a positive impact in Egypt without appearing to be interfering or intruding in Egypt's internal affairs?

[Shoukry] Well the US-Egyptian relationship is a deep and diverse one. Its a relationship where expectations do arise, and Egypt has expected and received, it has received the political support for the revolution from the United States and it continues to coordinate very actively with the United States on many issues of policy whether regional or global within the confines of mutual interest.

At the same time, Egypt has looked toward the United States in view of our longstanding relationship for economic assistance. Egypt is suffering economically. The strains on it are immense, the expectations of many sectors of society to offset the years of neglect are very high, and the budget is suffering. We understand of course the environment that exists in the United States and in Washington related to fiscal and financial matters. The difficulty of finding

resources within the U.S. budget to offset maybe some of our difficulties, and we have coordinated to the best of our abilities, presented our ideas, and I think the declaration of President Obama on the 19th of the package was a combination of that process of consultation.

Again, from my perspective, anything the US will and might do is welcome. It will be important to demonstrate to the Egyptian public this close relationship. It is an investment in the future of the relationship and the recognition of the Egyptian people in a very tangible manner at a time of such need of the importance that the US attaches to its relationship with Egypt.

For all of these reasons, we have been forceful here as an embassy in trying to convey this to our interlocutors at the State Department and the Administration, with the objective of fostering the US-Egyptian relationship, with the objective of strengthening it and providing for it a foundation in the future once an elected government is there to be able to look back and demonstrate that the US did stand by its friend and partner during this time of need. The same I think is the case with many of our European and other partners whether Japanese, the Chinese. We are in constant consultations with them and they have generally been supportive in terms of our reach out into the international monetary system to obtain some of and to shoulder some of the burdens that we have had and strains on our budget, but of course, we're very happy to continue to cooperate, there's an ongoing cooperation with all of our partners. It has not at any time, there have not been any accusations that this has come with any political tags associated with it that we would consider that in dealings between Egypt and its size and its potential and impact both regionally and globally that that would remain the case. I don't think there is any room for any form of internal intervention at such a volatile time. It would only, I think be detrimental and counterproductive, for any party to try to direct or to try to manipulate the ongoing political process in Egypt in this transformational time.

[Anthony] Thank you. This one has to do with Tunisia and Libya, and the impact of the developments in those two countries, different as they are and have been on Egypt, and with Libya being a country of an enormous size and being your neighbor to the west, and being itself a relatively new country in terms of its territorial unity from when it was in the past a collection of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Fezzan and the like.

So what are Egypt's concerns regarding Libya? Is there a reason why there's not been the kind of proactive involvement in Libya because it's your neighbor, because Qatar did, the UAE did, the League of Arab States took a position, so if you could describe your concerns about Libya, and can the Transitional National Council do anything to help stabilize the economy and the security of Libya?

[Shoukry] Of course, Libya is a very important component in the Arab Awakening. It's our next-door neighbor. We have had a very close relations and association with Libya over the past years and it was recognizable that Egypt the revolution would be supportive of the struggle for freedom and the toppling of a very long authoritarian regime in Libya.

There had been, though not widely publicized, very close ties and consultations with the interim government in Benghazi from the very outset, but both our friends and the interim government in Benghazi recognized the constraints on our actions and our ability to overtly support the Libyan

transformation because of the almost two million Egyptians that were working in Libya, that many of them in the eastern sections of Libya and the possibilities of reprisals against them by the Gaddafi regime and his forces.

So we undertook an effort to extricate them from Libya, we brought out almost five hundred thousand, but despite the fact, there were still sufficient numbers for us to be worried about, and you might recall that the US in terms of its verbal positions only escalated once it had guaranteed the extraction of US citizens who came to a few hundred rather than a few million in our case. So I think that all those concerned did appreciate the constraints and do recognize that Egypt early on was very supportive of the revolution and the interim government in Benghazi and has been in close contact. The Foreign Minister has visited and I anticipate that relationships will develop in a very positive manner and already there are discussions on how Egypt will participate and contribute to the reconstruction in Libya.

[Anthony] This next question is several facets I'm trying to lengthen together. Recently, a court verdict asked the military and the government to allow Egyptian expatriates to vote in the elections. How do you think this will happen? That's one part of it. What position, if any, does the Egyptian government have toward Egyptian scholars in exile, such as Dr. Sayid Ibrahim who has been living in the United States? What is the women's position in the current government? Will the current government be complicit – interesting choice of words – with the U.S. government as it was under Mubarak, especially regarding Palestinian issues?

[Shoukry] Well, I'll try to remember all of those. I'll take them one at a time. Let's start with the elections, and the court ruling that provides the right of participating in the electoral process for Egyptians living abroad is one that has raised a lot of interest. This issue has been on the table. We are very cognizant of it, by virtue of being here and our interaction with the Egyptians and the American Egyptians and the Egyptians in the diaspora who have shown interest to participate in the political life of, and as a matter of their continuing association with their motherland, are interested and keen to be party to the political developments in Egypt. How exactly it's going to be affected I can say that many are looking forward to the implementation and an appropriate system will be developed to accord them that privilege, taking into account of course the logistic difficulties associated with the large numbers of Egyptians. I can only speak maybe for the United States, but in the United States we estimate there are some one million Egyptians, both Egyptians or Egyptian-Americans, and that in itself is a challenge as to how to meet their demands on how to participate, and to be able to logistically deal with that is still a matter to be considered. So this is an issue where I think there is a convergence toward consensus whether internally or externally and I think it will be a matter of finding the right format where we can deal with the logistics and deal with the issues of supervision and transparency, so that this process is done in a transparent and is recognized as a fair process.

The role of women currently is one that again is a matter of debate. There are tendencies within the current political environment, which seem to be restrictive to women's rights and I think this is an obligation on society to contend with some of these radical views and to offset them. Traditionally Egyptian governments have always had the participation of women. The current government continues to have a very influential Minister of Planning and International

Cooperation who is well regarded and who is participating very actively in the transitional period that we are going through.

But again there are many, and I am among them, who are sensitive to this issue, who are concerned by this issue and I think that the current climate of openness in Egypt is providing the necessary room for debate and consideration. I can only say that I would find it absolutely unthinkable that the achievements that women have gained within the last century in Egypt could be in any way reversed. They are an integral part of the society. They are half of society. They are present everywhere in every form of life and it would be, I think, a problem for those who want to restrict them. They are going to have to deal with a very strong opposition from within women's groups themselves.

[Anthony] Mr. Ambassador, we will allow it to be the last question. We want to thank you for your remarks and the candor in which you have answered these very sensitive questions related to Egypt's positions, policies and attitudes. Thank you very much.

Ambassador Sameh Shoukry

Amb. Shoukry was appointed Ambassador of Egypt to the United States in September 2008. He previously served as Egypt's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva (2005-08) as well as Ambassador to Austria and Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna (1999-2003). He also served as Director of Cabinet for the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs (2004-05) and as Secretary for Information and Follow-up for former President Hosni Mubarak (1995-99).

As a career diplomat since 1976, Amb. Shoukry served in the Egyptian embassies in London and Buenos Aires as well as the Egyptian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York. In addition, he headed the Department of the United States and Canada in the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1994-95).

Amb. Shourkry holds a law degree from Ein Shams University. He is married with two sons.

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