

2008 National Model Arab League Opening Session Keynote Address

Speaker: Dr. Abderrahim Foukara

The 2008 National Model Arab League was held March 28 - 30 at the Hilton Washington Hotel. Dr. Foukara addressed the Model's Opening Session the morning of March 28.

Vice President Winship,

Distinguished members of the Model Arab League,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you and the National Council on US-Arab Relations for inviting me to address this session today.

The invitation is real a privilege, one that will only grow, expand and flourish in time as many of you here today will go on to play influential roles in another time, another place, and help shape the future of the Arab world and its interactions with other worlds, including, or perhaps I should say particularly, the United States.

Our sheer presence here today is loaded with significance. But it is above all, testimony to the wonderful honours that education can bestow on us, especially in its broadest, life-embracing sense, the kind that transcends classroom and campus.

Education is the gift of being able to weave life's experiences into a meaningful fabric that brings together the threads of where we are coming from and where we're going to. It is the surest means of travel through man's oft-turbulent history and sometimes malleable geography. And to the extent that we are all the product of our own history and geography, education offers us not only the rare gift of being able to cogently explain ourselves to ourselves but also to others and of reassuring them and inviting them to reassure us that, at the end of the day, we all share a core common belief: notwithstanding fluctuations of our own conceit and folly, we all constantly yearn for human respect and dignity. Our politics may lead us astray or even tear us asunder, but long after they have shifted or metamorphosed, the essence of being Arab or American is immutable. That is precisely what human respect and dignity are. They are immutable through history and geography.

"I sat upon the shore fishing
With the arid plain behind me
Shall I at least set my lands in order
London bridge is falling down, falling down, falling

Although T.S. Eliot's bridge is not too dissimilar to the bridge of Arab-American relations the two bridges have a fundamental difference. For Eliot's bridge there is no redemption. That was his view of the world. But for the bridge of Arab-American relations, there has to be redemption, not because of some irrational belief in blind optimism but simply because neither the Arabs nor the Americans can afford to let that bridge fall down. Both our futures depend on it.

Let me use an American image. As we meet here today, there's a fierce battle going on out there in America. It is fierce but also totally fascinating, particularly if you look at it through dispassionate eyes, as an Arab observer. That battle is not fought with fire and brimstone but with words, powerful means of inspiration with wings as Homer tells us in the Iliad. That battle is the presidential election the basic premise of which is that if the people no longer like their rulers or trust them, they go to polls and throw them out of office, thus giving someone else a chance until they also disappoint or betray the trust and so forth.

Politically speaking, if I had to vote today, I would be at a complete loss as to who to vote for. Such is the promise in the words of Obama, Clinton and McCain but such is the self-serving political logic also.

But from a strictly symbolic standpoint, to many of us Barack Obama may hold a very interesting mirror. Being the product of two historical experiences, one black, one white, Obama must face a double existential challenge, not always a comfortable position. On the other hand, he must enjoy a wonderful bi-cultural existential home, always an advantage.

So don't let's be muddled by Rudyard Kipling's clarity. When he said, over a century ago, that "East is East and West is West, never the twain shall meet", he could afford to feel that kind of civilizational purity or, I should say, deadend. For Kipling, there was always the England of his parents and grand-parents to fall back on when the going got tough in India.

We, twenty first century Arabs, on the other hand, face a different civilizational configuration, whether we live in the Arab world or in the West. We have no where to escape to, other than our own amalgam of the logic of Western civilization and the logic of our own civilization, without which, by the way, it's hard to guess what Western science, philosophy and culture would have looked like today.

Being proud of their own Arab and Islamic heritage has not stopped them from building Western, travelling Western, communicating Western, curing Western... Like other grand and ancient civilizations in China, Japan and elsewhere in the world, the Arabs have to constantly adapt the West's logic and its manifestations to their needs. That logic and those manifestations have almost become a second land. Wherever they go, it's already there.

Despite the historical mutual antagonism and suspicion between the Arab and Muslim world and the West, Western progress was originally helped by Arab Muslim advancement. Nonetheless, we, in the Arab world, would not have reaped the dividends of the satellite revolution today for example without the fruit of Western progress, and round and round that wheel goes. The beauty of a bi-cultural existential home, is that it enables you to see through different levels what's

coming your way. It allows Arabs and Americans to decide what bridges need to be built between them and what bridges are best left unbuilt.

The politics of Arab-American politics nowadays are more disheartening than ever before. Their imagery will for a long time to come be dominated by two collapsing towers raining human bodies on New York's streets below and a looted giant vase, symbol of a whole civilization shocked into disarray but not awed, running around the streets of newly occupied Baghdad.

Can those relations get worse? Yes they can. But for the sake of future generations of Arabs and Americans, they must not be allowed to. In order to prevent that, present generations of Arabs and Americans, including Arab-Americans, must play their part, their bridge-building part, not the kind that we mentally grapple with but the kind that we feel in our senses, the kind that becomes second nature to us.

We need the of kind of bridge that tells Arabs that Americans aren't all invaders and oil-seekers but also tells Americans that the Arabs are not all American-hating terrorists but the inheritors of a long and wonderful tradition in life, a tradition that values knowledge and education, especially of the American kind, a tradition that has no qualms about sending its brightest minds to get even brighter, thousands of miles away...We have an old prophetic saying which urges us to "seek knowledge even in China". Had America been known then, the saying could very likely have urged us to "seek knowledge even in America."

I wish you all a successful debate, an enlightening journey through life and a bright future. Thank you.



Dr. Abderrahim Foukara delivers the Keynote Address at the 2008 National Model Arab League, March 28 - 30 at the Hilton Washington Hotel, Sponsored by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations

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