

Doha meet discusses challenges of change

US-Islamic World Forum begins

BY FRANCESCA ASTORRI

DOHA: The 2012 US-Islamic World Forum opened yesterday in Doha with the theme "New Voices, New Directions," emphasising the challenge of change in a three-day discussion concerning problems faced in US relations with the Islamic world.

The Brookings Institution and the Foreign Ministry of Qatar invited to Doha policy makers such as Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Hina Rabbani Khar; Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakel Karman, emerging leaders from across the Muslim World such as Rashid Al Ghanoushi; leader of the Ennahda Movement Party in Tunisia, and other officials, leaders and activists to engage in a frank dialogue on the impact of the breathtaking political changes underway in the Middle East, as well as many other issues affecting the wider Muslim world and relations with the United States.

After the welcoming remarks by the Minister's Assistant for International Cooperation Affairs and Chairman of the Permanent Committee for Organising Conferences, H E Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Jibr Al Thani, and the Vice President of Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, Martin Indyk, the Forum opened with its first plenary on "Political Change: The dynamics of domestic transformation".

"Tunisia communicated a message to the Arab world and to dictators that were unfortunately supported by western democracies. Tunisia with peaceful means in about a month time succeeded in achieving freedom," said Rashid Al Ghanoushi, leader of the Ennahda Movement Party in Tunisia, the country in which the Arab Spring started with Mohamed Bouazizi, a young fruit

and vegetable seller, supporting eight people on less than \$150 a month that after being asked for bribes by inspectors and consequently robbed, decided to set himself on fire. His act of desperation inspired more people to protest across the Arab world.

"There was no intervention from abroad to change the situation: This pushed the people to arm and to defend themselves. It was a domestic revolution with no attempt to export it," Al Ghanoushi added.

As this was happening, the world was watching. "It didn't matter on religion, gender, race; but other humans were watching, saying 'we are with you, we are listening to you, we believe in democracy, we want to see you being able to build up the life you want'," said Farah Pandith, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, US Department of State, United States.

But as the discussion goes on mediated by Salman Shaikh, Senior Fellow and Director at Brookings Doha Center, the speakers often use the past tense as if they are talking of a solved situation.

But it's not. According to Hossam Bahgat from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), in fact the people are now in power in Egypt and they won't allow the regime to come back, but they still need support.

"Security and economy are still the main priorities while the implementation of Shariah is considered a priority only by three percent of Egyptians," said Bahgat, showing how the wide discussion opened in the west about Islam and secularism is still far from the needs on the ground of the people that fought for the Arab spring.

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Iranian revolution didn't live up to expectations: Scholar

DOHA: "Every revolution is a very exciting experience, but the outcome of the revolution is not necessarily exciting," said Haleh Esfandiari (pictured), Director of the Middle East Programme at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC, who is now in Doha attending the US-Islamic World Forum.



"The Iranian revolution created a lot of hope and aspirations in the people, just like the Arab Spring is creating that kind of hope among the younger people, but then how the revolution develops is a big question mark. The Iranian revolution didn't live up to the expectations of the people that were aspiring for a democratic regime," said Esfandiari, who left Iran for a holiday just before the revolution and didn't get back for more than a decade.

She now lives in the United States and embodies the cross-cultural and religious dialogue. She is a Muslim married to a Jewish. Her mother is Christian and her father is Muslim. She was born in Iran and now lives in the United States having both passports.

Esfandiari is the living demonstration that different religions and cultures can perfectly coexist and live together in harmony, overcoming all sorts of prejudices.

Talking to The Peninsula Esfandiari explained that the problem of the Iranian revolution at the time was that from day one, religion was the predominant factor in the country.

"Every religion is a private matter; it can be the religion of the country, but still it can't regulate your everyday life," said Esfandiari, who believes that it's still too soon to predict the outcome of post revolutions in the Arab world.

"You can't judge now after only one year and none of these

countries have settled yet. They had elections in Tunisia, but those were elections to draft the constitution, not the parliamentary elections; in Algeria the Muslim Brotherhood didn't gain the majority," said Esfandiari, whose main concern is about the future of women in these countries.

"From my experience, it's very easy to sacrifice women's rights in order to come to some understanding on other major issues. My concern is that women should not be marginalised in these countries," she said, noticing that in Egypt now there are only two percent of women in the parliament.

In 2007 Esfandiari was arrested in Iran and interrogated. Apparently the Iranian Intelligence believed she was part of a plot against the country when she sought to renew her travel documents after she was robbed of her bag with her US and Iranian passports. She was detained for more than 100 days. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton too intervened seeking her release and her detention turned into an international case.

"Not just from the United States but from around the world foreign ministers and dignitaries were asking for my liberation. It became an international case, an embarrassment for Iran and so they let me go, but it was tough," said Esfandiari.

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The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem bin Jabor Al Thani and the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs H E Ahmed bin Abdullah Al Mahmood with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the US-Islamic World Forum in Doha yesterday.

International community has let down Syrians, says Nobel Peace Laureate

BY AZMAT HAROON

DOHA: Syrians have been let down by the international community, the support has not ended but it has gone in hibernation, said Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Tawakel Karman (pictured) during the US-Islamic World Forum yesterday.

She was speaking on the sidelines of confronting change, challenge and opportunity at the Ritz-Carlton.

"We should not wait to see Syrians killed. The international community should support the national council. There should be enough logistic and material support for the people of Syria," she said.

Karman also blamed the Islamic states for not doing enough to back the people of Syria.

"There should be economic sanctions against Bashar Al Assad. He is a war criminal. The international community should move now. Youth, women and children are dying on daily basis," she added.

The 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate suggested that perhaps Yemen can be a model for Syria.



"We have to choose between the people or the regime. We do not need to have another massacre to decide who to choose," Karman said.

"We have corruption in all the Arab states. The reason behind corruption is that there is no accountability," she explained. Karman argued that all regimes who want to be dictators will be toppled. She also credited the youth for being instruments of change in the Arab world.

"The pressing issue is this: What can we do to make the right people win?" said Saeb Erekat, chief negotiator of

the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, who was also speaking on the panel.

"If we still have people who say 'I am an Arab, Shia, Kurd, or Sunni' then it can be dangerous. We must belong to the state," Erekat said that in the past regimes wanted to strip the legitimacy of the people but now the people are ready for democracy.

On the question of how a society with diverse opinions can conform to a consensus on the path of change, Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, said that it should be the objective and responsibility of the elite, philosophers and religious scholars of the world to represent universal values.

Bayyah, who teaches at the King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia, explained that it is the narrow interpretation of Islam that creates obstacles.

"We need to find bases for cooperation, wisdom and see how we can inject them in the lives of people," he said.

Bayyah said he hoped that Qatar will help to promote the voice of mercy and moderation, which is higher than the voice of warmongering.

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US is not doing enough to support Syrians: PM

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He, however, rued that the six-point Kofi Annan's Arab-UN peace plan for Syria had not been implemented so far so as to give us hope of the crisis coming to an end.

"We don't want to interfere in Syria," he said. The event (US-Islamic Forum) is being held here for the past several years and the idea is to help bridge the yawning gap between the west and the Arab and Islamic world.

The PM told the forum that in his view the US was not doing enough to support the people of Syria, hinting it should think in terms of providing immediate succour to the Syrian people.

The Premier, without mentioning names, said that some powers were backing the Syrian regime.

"We know who they are," said the PM, reiterating that the US can do more to support the people of Syria. "We know Washington can do more to support the Syrian people."

Qatar, he said, had very close relations with Syria. "But Qatari leadership has now chosen to be with the people of Syria," he said.

The PM was delivering keynote address at a Gala Dinner at the US-Islamic Forum which kicked off at the Ritz-Carlton yesterday. The three-day event ends tomorrow. Sheikh Hasina, prime minister of Bangladesh, and Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), also spoke at the dinner.

"We don't want to interfere in the problems of Syria. We only want what is best for its people," The Prime Minister said.

Talking about the US-Islamic Forum, he said the idea to hold this event annually was mooted after 9/11 and the idea was to help bridge the gap between the west and the Arab and Muslims.

"This (gap) is in the interest of some," said the PM. There is trust deficit between the west and the Arab and Islamic world and the main reason behind the gap is the Palestinian issue. Qatar has made a lot of efforts to bridge the gap between Arabs and Israel and for that Qatar had allowed Israel to open a trade office in Doha earlier.

The idea was to bridge the gap between the Arab and Islamic world on the one hand and Israel on the other to aid the Middle East peace process.

So no one should blame Qatar for links with Israel for the idea to open their trade office here was to help the peace process.

"However, we should accept the blame for the behavior of some fellow Arab states," the PM said hinting that some Arab leaders were rigid in their stance vis-à-vis the Palestinian issue.

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From left: Salman Shaikh, Senior Fellow and Director, Brookings Doha Center, Qatar; Rashid Al Ghanoushi, Leader, Ennahda Movement Party, Tunisia; Farah Pandith, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, US Department of State; Anies Baswedan, President, Paramadina University; and Hossam Bahgat, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR); attending the plenary session at the US-Islamic World Forum in Doha yesterday. SALIM MATRAMKOT