

US diplomat suggests Yemen model for Syria

Washington promoting political transition in Syria

BY MOHAMED IQBAL

DOHA: The killing of innocent civilians in Syria could end through a peaceful transformation of power — something similar to what happened in Yemen, a senior US diplomat said here yesterday.

Addressing the US-Islamic World Forum yesterday, Denis McDonough, Deputy National Security Adviser to the Obama administration said the US would respect the outcome of the final round of the presidential elections in Egypt next month and work with whoever is elected by the Egyptian people.

Asked if the US had any other plans in Syria, since the Kofi Annan's mission had failed to end the brutal killing of innocent people, McDonough said, "The Assad regime has forfeited its rights to rule with the brutal killing of women and children. We will continue our efforts to find a

peaceful solution to the crisis. We are working with international partners to implement stricter sanctions on Syria and further isolate the Assad regime."

He said the US was promoting a political transition in Syria similar to what it had done in Yemen. "As Obama has said, the democratic transition in each Arab country is different. The transition in Yemen was painstaking and it took several months to come to fruition," said McDonough, striking a parallel between Yemen and Syria. He added that a regime change in Syria would serve a political blow to Iran, since the latter is turning to Syria for support, having being isolated following international sanctions.

Asked how the US would use its good relations with the Egyptian military in the post-revolution phase, he said, the US will engage with the civil and military institutions in the country to promote the democratic process.

"We will work with whoever is elected in the final round of the presidential elections," said McDonough, adding that the elections so far were free and fair.

"We have long time relations with the Egyptian military. We have good relations with many other institutions in Egypt. We will engage with the civil and military institutions in the country. It is premature to put conditions on our relationship," he added.

Earlier delivering the keynote address at the Forum, McDonough said US was supporting the democratic changes in the Arab world but it will not try to interfere in the process.

"There are people in the Arab world who don't want the US to meddle in their affairs. We are not going to delineate the direction of the change. We respect the rights of the people. However, we are prepared to be a partner in the democratic changes," said McDonough. **THE PENINSULA**



The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister H E Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem bin Jabor Al Thani, with the Deputy National Security Adviser to the Obama administration, Denis McDonough, in Doha yesterday.

Non-state actors share their experiences of influencing society

BY FAZEENA SALEEM

DOHA: The second day of the 2012 US Islamic World Forum focused on 'Social Change: The Power of Non State Actors', discussing about how their activities have influenced the society.

Civic group members, journalists and entrepreneurs who have taken an initiative to address problems in their own communities and made tremendous changes in the society, shared

their experiences and views at the three-day forum held in Ritz Carlton-Doha, yesterday.

The plenary session with Stephen R Grand, Fellow and Director, project on US Relations with Islamic World and Brookings, United States as the moderator saw Zaina Anwar, Founder, Sister in Islam, Director, Malaysia; Tawakkol Karman, 2011 Nobel Peace Laureate; Rami Nashashibi, Executive Director, Inner City Muslim Action Network, United

States; and Iqbal Noor Ali, Senior Advisor, Aga Khan Development Network, United States, as the panelists.

Zaina Anwar has long argued that Muslim practices oppressive to women are a perversion of the true word of God and said, "We decided we are going to do it in a public space and we did it."

Sister in Islam bases its message of equality on the original teachings of the Quran. The group runs study sessions on the

holy text pointing out the many passages that support an equal role for men and women in the Muslim society

Tawakkol Karman, sharing the reason behind becoming an activist said, "I can't tell such a reason, but when you see a crisis around, you can't wait without being a part of the solution."

Iqbal Noor Ali sharing the secret behind the success of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) focuses on

health, education, culture, rural development, institution-building and the promotion of economic development, said: "There is no fixed formula in social work, how agencies focus on their work could differ from one to the other. But reaching the goal is important."

AKDN is dedicated to improving living conditions and opportunities for the poor, without regard to their faith, origin or gender.

Rami Nashashibi shared their work at Inner-City Muslim Action

Network (IMAN), a community based nonprofit that works for social justice, delivers a range of direct services, and cultivates the arts in urban communities.

The US Islamic World Forum organised together by The Brookings Institution and the Foreign Ministry of Qatar will conclude today with a focus on 2012 US Presidential Elections Panel, Strategic Change: New Geopolitical Challenges.

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Security and stability main priorities of Libya: Brotherhood spokesman

BY FRANCESCA ASTORRI

DOHA: "Libya is a rich country, what we need from abroad is the know-how," said Mohamed Gaair, spokesman of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya.

Libya economic data do not look like the ones of a country that was under the bombs just a few months ago. GDP growth is at 13.6 percent according to 2012 forecast by The Economist and the GDP per capita is of \$10,940, much higher than the average of its neighbours.

"Libya crude oil output is 1.6 million barrels per day so we are not in shortage of money," Gaair told *The Peninsula*. "Foreign countries can help us build our country with their experience, with training, know-how, capacity building," he said, stating that security and stability are still the main priorities in Libya.

The Muslim brothers have been on the Libyan ground for over 60 years even if always hiding and repressed by the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. Now they have created a political party that will lead their way in the political life of the country.

"We are taking the principles of Islam which are justice, freedom, human rights, pluralism, freedom of religion, protection of minorities. If someone wants to change religion we are not forcing anyone. This is the real Islam, this is going to be the Shariah in Libya," Gaair said.

According to Gaair, the closest political model they are looking at is the Turkish one. "They have Islam and freedom, free market, social rights; so this is the model that we are studying, but the culture is very different," explained Gaair.

For those who feared that the Muslim brothers were promoting a strict interpretation of Islamic laws apparently this is not what they have in mind. They don't want to prevent women from driving, or to segregate them at home or to oblige women to wear hijab. "Men and women have the same rights. My wife is an activist for women rights," smiles Gaair, showing that he actually practices in his personal life the principles that he is promoting.

According to Gaair, the Libyan parliament already has a "pink quota" of around 40 percent seats for women, but what the Muslim Brotherhood wants is to widen the role of women in society, to find them in board of directors of companies and in executive committees, in the social and economic life of the country and not only in the political arena.

The western democracies still look with scepticism at the Muslim Brotherhood, but the reasons behind this distrust are easy to find for Gaair. "Western democracies have never talked directly to us. What they know about the Muslim Brotherhood is through other channels, through what the regime told them, asking our competitors and of course they have always been against us," said Gaair, adding that the West fears of seeing its interests damaged, but that the Muslim Brotherhood wants to have a balanced relation based on mutual interests.

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The spokesman of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, Mohamed Gaair.



From left, Cynthia Schneider, Non-resident Fellow, The Brookings Institution; Khaled Abol Naga, film maker, actor, activist, Team Cairo and Pasha Pictures; Saad Mohseni, Chairman, Moby Group; and Walter Parkes, Film Producer, CEO Parkes-MacDonald/Image Nation.

SALIM MATRAMKOT

Expert: Arts, culture shape socio-political course

BY RAYNALD C RIVERA

DOHA: Recognising the vital role arts and culture play in shaping the socio-political landscape, the 2012 US-Islamic World Forum again welcomed the Arts and Culture panel yesterday, this time highlighting the forces inspiring and shaping cultural development across the Muslim world.

Cynthia Schneider, Non-resident Fellow, Brookings said the characters people see in the movies and television affect to a great extent how the society and politics are being transformed.

The birth of arts and culture leaders' forum six years ago was based on this idea which paved the way to collaborations producing for the big screen and TV quality films dealing with authentic characters and stories reflecting the reality in the Muslim world. A very important event for this purpose, Schneider noted, is the Muslims on Screen and Television (MOST), a cross-cultural resource centre that provides information and expert consultations to TV and film writers and producers on any

of their characters or storylines regarding Muslims, Islam and the Middle East.

"The aim is to facilitate to develop authentic characters away from stereotypes referring to Muslims as terrorists. We try to get these characters in popular culture because we believe the stories and characters seen on TV are the ones that shape culture and the world," said Schneider, adding they can also provide insights to politicians.

Saad Mohseni, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Moby Group from Afghanistan, underscored the important role of media in social change gaining the trust of the people considering it like a 'new judiciary' in changing the society.

"Society only improves if it is honest with itself," said Mohseni. Eagle 4, an Afghan action hit series, was another result of collaboration which designed to build trust and respect for the police in Afghanistan where many people see them as corrupt, brutal and indifferent.

Another example of these creative partnerships is a future

project of Walter Parkes, a film producer and CEO of Parkes-MacDonald Imagination, in collaboration with an Abu Dhabi company. "We are creating a TV drama about the legal system in Abu Dhabi using sophisticated storytelling," said Parkes of the TV serial to start airing in months' time.

Stressing the importance of arts and culture in the society, Khaled Abol Naga, Egyptian actor and producer, and Unicef Goodwill Ambassador, said they are "key to understanding the people which uses the universal language of human feelings."

He said artists are visionary and that censorship could not curtail filmmakers from telling their stories.

"Censorship only encourages creativity. The best movies in Egypt were made at the height of censorship," he noted.

With regard to the low quality of TV serials produced in the Middle East he said: "They will undergo a revolution and these mediocre TV serials will fall one by one like our leaders."

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Forum holds special session on religion and democracy

DOHA: A special session of the US-Islamic World Forum yesterday discussed the relation between state and religion and raised the important question where faith fits in a democracy.

The interactive session heard divergent views from an elite audience that comprised prominent intellectuals, academics and diplomats from the US, Europe and the Arab and Islamic world.

Some participants called for a total separation of religion and politics, citing the European experience, while others argued that a pure secular state is a myth. Even in Europe and the US, the state is influenced by religious elements.

The issue was discussed in the context of the Arab Spring, since the emergence of Islamist-led governments in several Arab Spring countries has raised concerns about the domination of religion in political affairs. The issue of minority rights were also discussed in this context.

Several Islamic scholars who took part in the discussion pointed out that religion and politics are inseparable at least in the case of Islam. The concept of secularism was developed in Europe, as a result of industrialisation and enlightenment and it cannot be fit into all other societies with a different cultural and historical background.

Some participants argued, if religion is made the source of legislation and the basis of governance, then it will lead to the question who would be the authority to define and interpret religion. This would also lead to establishment of a higher religious authority over the civil authorities.

If the religion has the upper hand in the affairs of the state, it can lead to a male dominated interpretation of religious principles and subsequently a denial of the women's rights, argued a woman participant.

Another participant pointed out that the political evolutions need long time to come to fruition but the changes in the Arab world are happening very fast. Every news related with Islamists are exaggerated by the international media.

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