

PM calls for 'positive' US response in region

HE the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister says the entire Muslim world is looking at the US response to the ongoing happenings in Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of the Mena region

By Ramesh Mathew
Staff Reporter

The US should understand the recent and ongoing developments in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa region (Mena) in the "right spirit and respond positively" to the changes occurring there, HE the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani said yesterday.

Addressing the US-Islamic World Forum, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim said the developments in the region showed what the people felt about the governance in their countries.

He said the entire Muslim world was looking at the US response to the ongoing happenings in Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of the Mena region.

Insisting that the US had a major role to play at different levels and in different capacities, the Prime Minister said the initiatives made by the US for more than a decade since 9/11 had contributed considerably to bridging the gap between the Western and Islamic worlds.

Reaffirming the Muslim world's support to the people of Syria in their struggle against

the regime, Sheikh Hamad said no one could stop the will of the people and every leader was duty-bound to understand and respect the hopes, wishes and aspirations of his citizens.

"The recent developments in many countries across the region have demonstrated in no mean way that the citizens have broken the barriers of fear and they are at ease asking for their legitimate right to live, talk and gather," said Sheikh Hamad.

The Prime Minister also reminded the Islamic world that it had a responsibility to support such essential requirements as education and employment for the people of countries where leaderships have been forced to quit following agitations for change.

Sheikh Hamad said that though Qatar and the Islamic world wholly supported international envoy Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan for Syria, it was unfortunate that not even one point could be implemented.

The Prime Minister also called for an effective, peaceful and permanent political solution to the Palestinian issue. While appealing to the US to have a clear look at the happenings elsewhere in the region, where changes have taken place after considerably long intervals, Sheikh Hamad said the US should take a realistic stand on the Palestinians' legitimate right to live based on the pre-1967 position.

The Prime Minister said even though there had been a lot of

frustration in the whole of the Arab world over the plight of the Palestinians, it firmly believed that the US was in a position to effect a decisive change in the scenario.

The prime minister said there were many areas where the US and the Islamic world shared the same concerns compared to the very few areas where they took divergent positions. "Such a situation would facilitate more meaningful and effective dialogues between the two worlds and thus there is every hope for long-lasting solutions to many a long-standing issue in the region."

In his speech, the Prime Minister offered his condolences to the families of the victims in the Villaggio mall fire.



Prime Minister and Foreign Minister HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani speaking at the US-Islamic World Forum at Ritz-Carlton Doha yesterday.

Western leaders urged to side with Arab people

By Ross Jackson
Staff Reporter

The ninth session of the US-Islamic World Forum, organised annually by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with the Brookings Doha Centre, opened yesterday as part of a continuous effort to help bridge the divide between the United States and the Islamic world. This year the conference carries the theme "New voices, new directions" as a reflection of the major changes and new opportunities sweeping the Arab and Islamic world.

Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohamed bin Jabr al-Thani, Minister's Assistant for International Co-operation Affairs and Chairman of Permanent Committee for Organising Conferences, gave the keynote speech at the opening of the summit, where he addressed the realities of the Middle East's ongoing political turmoil.

"With the past political and economic changes as a result of

the Arab Spring uprising, some wonder what the effects will be, whether they will result in some Islamic regimes opposed to the US, and what will be the stance taken by the Western governments." He said that it would be wise for Western governments to side with the Arab people, or they may soon find that have lost their allies, distorting the image of the West in the Arab world.

Sheikh Ahmed said that "we have to deal with the changes positively", encourage countries seeking peaceful relations and "urge countries that still use violence against its citizens to cease using violence and grant their people the choice of freedom without humanitarian oppression. History will not have any mercy on such oppressive regimes. It is in the interest of such autocratic regimes to pursue successful democratic examples like Indonesia, and to benefit from such experiences."

Sheikh Ahmed advised that, due to the nature of the changes

in many Arab countries, the US and Western governments must in future have policies based on "comprehending the nature of such countries", finding common ground, and building confidence in dialogue and mutual understanding instead of conflict.

Political leaders, religious leaders and political activists from over 50 countries have come together to produce new ideas and partnerships to try and tackle pressing issues in the East-West divide.

Conference organisers said that the conference will feature keynote speeches from world leaders on the challenges confronting communities around the globe, and the relations within the states. Yesterday's plenary session looked at domestic political transformations, today's session will address the challenges of social change and tomorrow's session will talk about the implications of all these changes for international geopolitical forces. Panel discussions will address the role of arts and culture in



Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Jabr al-Thani at the US-Islamic World Forum.

social change, and the 2012 US presidential elections.

Organisers have built on past experience to assemble a new set of smaller working groups that bring together practitioners from specific fields to develop practical partnerships and policy recommendations out of three days of discussions. Individual groups will address democratic transitions, water security and the management of water resources, developing new mechanisms to promote the Muslim charitable sector, and a session for religious leaders on how compassion can be used for pluralism and tolerance locally and globally.

The first plenary session focused on domestic transformations in Tunisia and Egypt, with lessons from Indonesia's democratic transition.

Hossam Bahgat, founder and director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, lamented the commonly held belief held by supporters of the revolution that Egypt has in fact seen an electoral defeat, even though revolutionary

candidates had more votes combined than the two frontrunners.

He said it is significant that the Muslim Brotherhood has lost 50% of its voting strength since the parliamentary elections, contributing to the polarisation of the country's politics.

"As recently as November, many of us actually voted for the Muslim Brotherhood as part of the revolutionary bloc...After a few months as a parliamentary majority, that perception of the Brothers, as a force of the revolution, has changed significantly to the extent that now people are talking about the victory of the Brothers as a defeat of the revolution. With no judgment regarding who is right, the fact that this is the narrative now is very sad as it will contribute to further polarisation over the next few years."

He said that there was a concern that the Brotherhood is trying to consolidate their power by limiting the "liberties won during the revolution" as they look towards a victory in the

presidential election."

His major concern was that "if we go ahead with the two candidates we have, the transition will probably not start for another four to eight years."

Rached Ghannouchi, co-founder of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, said that the focus in his country should now be on finding jobs for the unemployed youth, who are in fact well-educated. He said that there needs to be a push for creating a link between education and work, where employment is based on merit. Eliminating corruption is a part of this effort, and must be a key objective of the government reducing inequality in opportunities.

He called on Gulf countries and the wider world to invest in Tunisia. "There is a boom in the field of tourism and a development in all fields," said Ghannouchi. "Tunisia is going to grow quickly in the next few years, because dictatorship and corruption were obstacles that hindered investment and development."

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Obama's approach new: official

By Ross Jackson
Staff Reporter

From the moment of his inauguration, President Barack Obama's approach to relations with the Islamic world is a departure from that of previous administrations, a US State Department official told *Gulf Times* on the sidelines of the US-Islamic World Forum.

Farah Pandith, Special Representative to Muslim Communities, US Department of State, has worked for both the Bush and the Obama administration, with an experience "representing different chapters in American history in terms of what's happening around the world."

"What is very clear is that President Obama, from the very beginning, on the steps of the Capitol, spoke very clearly in his inauguration address to Muslims and said that he wanted to begin again - they wanted to create a new opportunity to build relationships. That's historic, that's never happened before, that a president would use that moment to do that."

Months later Obama addressed the Turkish parliament on his desire to rebuild and restore relationships with Muslims, and in Cairo in 2009 he "put forward his vision to generate an opportunity to connect with Muslims around the world based on mutual interests and mutual respect". Pandith said that it is historically

significant that the Commander-in-Chief of the US asked "us to put the priority of engaging with one fourth of humanity front and centre, so that we are thinking out-of-the-box... finding new tools to work with... what are (our) common interests, whether it's science or technology, or health or education or entrepreneurship - the president has made that very clear. Each part of our government is invested in his vision so you see the Department of Commerce and you see the US Agency for International Development" engaging countries at all levels.

In the Department of State, "Secretary Clinton has said that we need to do more than we've ever done before. We have always engaged with faith communities and different kinds of communities through educational programmes and other things, but what she's asked us to do is really focus on things that are very unique in this administration."

One such focus is "people to people engagement, it is very important that we do government to government relations of course, but the idea that a citizen matters, that that person's voice makes a difference to the way we, the US, thinks about what's taking place in a country is crucial and really vital to developing an understanding, so that we understand the nuances."

Another focus is on "the importance of a global approach to Muslim communities around the world -

tweets, with my Facebook, an average person can send me an idea."

Pandith said that social media has been an effective tool in providing recommendations to meet with people and NGOs during country visits, providing new unofficial perspectives.

"It is not just anointed people that we believe are the spokespeople for Muslim communities - a social entrepreneur and a hip-hop artist have an experience that counts."

Pandith travels a great deal on behalf of the State Department and hears diverse viewpoints from around the world, some of which are critical of the US. "I hear from young people around the world a lot of opinions about foreign-policy. But I also hear that you could do two things at the same time, that while they may not like our approach to development, or the environment or particular bilateral relationship that we have, at the same time too they are invested in these ideas of perhaps working on entrepreneurship or anything else. So I see two things at the same time."

"It's not about how many points up on a scale you are, how popular you are, it is about what is happening over the long term. This is a generation that has come of age in a post-9/11 world and we must do as much as we possibly can to hear their voices, not for just now but over the long term because they are the future leaders, and some are the current leaders of their countries."



Pandith: focus on 'people to people engagement'

that there is no monolith, there isn't just one brand of a kind of Muslim, that we give dignity to a Muslim voice in Australia, Sweden, Nepal, Egypt, Jordan, that we give dignity and respect to these young people and that were focusing on young people under the age of 30. Engaging the youth is a priority for this administration.

"The hallmark for Secretary Clinton is what she calls 21st-century statecraft, so there we're using the platform of social media to be able to listen to voices," said Pandith. "Generally in diplomacy there is a hierarchy, so an average citizen doesn't have a chance to give an idea to a senior government official. With my

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