

Chairman of the Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (GAID) at the UN to “Al-Azmina”:

We must prevent the rescue of the enemy from its financial crisis by not supporting it economically

We met with him during his visit to Syria and the inauguration of the seventy second branch of the Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization in Damascus. The process of starting up this office in Syria was evidence of this exceptional man’s conviction in Syria’s promising future, especially since the establishment of the office came at a time when it was said that Syria was on the verge of isolation. The bulk of his conviction is that it is America that has fallen in the web of isolation and not Syria. After becoming GAID Chairman, in addition to his position as Vice-Chair of the Global Compact Board under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General, Al-Azmina had this lively discussion with Mr. Talal Abu-Ghazaleh:

How did your rich professional career begin?

I began my life in the diaspora as a Palestinian refugee who is proud to be a Palestinian and proud to be a refugee. I hold onto the fact that I am a refugee, because this means that I hold onto the right of return to Palestine, and this is something not subject to negotiation. So our right to reacquire what was taken from us is something not open to dispute or bargaining. Even if the whole world got together to cancel the right of return it will not be able to do so as long as the ember of the Palestinian people is still burning. Whoever holds onto his right in getting his homeland back, then powers of the world cannot delete this right. There is occupation, displacement, a siege and suffering. There is an entity that imposes inhuman mercilessness upon the Palestinian people and deprives this people of food, drink and work, and that also demolishes homes, breaks up families and erects the apartheid wall. All these acts will not be able to annul the connection of the Palestinian people with their land and the right of return and the victory of the cause of the Palestinian people in all of Palestine. Palestine to me does not only mean the West Bank and Gaza. Palestine is a part of my entity and conscience.

History cannot name a liberation movement that did not achieve its objectives and did not attain freedom. The cause that possesses me is the cause of Palestine. Despite the fact that I do not have the official authority to determine that Israel is not a state, I still do not recognize this state. Nobody whatsoever can impose on me the recognition of cancelling my homeland. Historical logic affirms that he who sacrifices for his country must inevitably be victorious over the occupier who is afraid of everything. I am talking about the spirit of the Gazan woman who sat upon the ruins of her home that fell on her family and said “I am not moving from here, this is my homeland”. She did not say I just want to live. I am talking about the conscience of the Gazan man who told Carter during his tour in Gaza “We are not in a zoo to be looked at. We do not need emotion and pity. We are a people who has a cause and we want to liberate our land”.

I do not look at these Gazans as if they are weak people under a siege, but rather I am the weak person because I cannot be like them in their struggle and sacrifice and greatness.

Unfortunately we hear something new in the West today which is 'do not wrong or oppress the Jews because they are oppressed just like you; they are victims of the Holocaust by the Europeans and you are a victim of theirs, so you are all victims and it is our fault'. This is an attempt to transform the case into one of being an oppressed people that came to our region out of no fault of its own.

What is the philosophy on the blessing of suffering that you believe in?

I am currently 72 years old and work 18 hours a day. My meal times are regular and I eat everything. I may be blessed with good health because as a Palestinian refugee I went through what is called suffering and I call it a blessing. When I was 9 years old, I had to walk for two hours daily between the camp in Ghaziyeh and my school in Sidon. This is one of the gifts of suffering. When I lecture at some universities I tell them that a person who is suffering should not complain but should thank God because this ordeal makes a better person who will challenge and succeed. Maybe this is what made most of the Palestinian people succeed, because they need to exert extra effort to enjoy the opportunities of a regular person. When I entered the American University in Beirut, there was one scholarship for the top student among refugees in Lebanon. So should I say I suffered to be the first! This is the gift of suffering.

What do you think is the reality of intellectual property and all subsequent rights in the Arab world?

I now have the largest intellectual property (IP) company in the world in which we surpassed all of the American and Western companies. However, in the sixties of the last century, people would denounce discussion of IP and used to think it was ownership of people's thoughts. There was always an effort to explain my interest in IP, and there were some who thought it was for the protection of the monopolies of foreign companies. This is wrong and if this was the case, I would have been the last person to allow himself to work in this field. But I found that countries which advanced were the ones that applied the law in IP protection. Without IP protection, you will not find anyone to fund an invention or an investment. So if you cannot ensure the recovery of your financing for this creativity, then you will not offer any funding to begin with. Therefore there will be no inventions or development in any researches for basic issues such as food and medicine or otherwise. Westerners do not demand the increase of IP protection in Syria but rather in their own countries, because the more stringent the system is, the more creativity and advancement there is, which in turn increases the national product.

How do you analyze the global financial crisis and how it reflects on Arab nations and in particular the Arab Gulf states?

There is a difficult global economic crisis approaching. What we have been through so far was a financial crisis that I liken to lightning or a flood, after which things are calm. But I likened the

economic crisis to swine flu because it spreads. In particular, the Western world will face an increasing crisis in the next ten years within its economic system, which means within its basic productive economy, which will worsen in America especially. I expect that the crisis will last ten years. Everything currently being said is to minimize the issue to help uplift the morale of the American citizen. In a documentary appearing on CNN, it was said that Obama needs to face his people in the end and tell them the truth: that the American economy is in an unsolvable crisis despite the cash payments being pumped into the markets and which may solve the problem of some financial institutions. Yet these payments do not solve the crisis of the economy, which will move from one sector to the next and from one country to the next. It is expected that the deficit in the US will double what it is this year. There will be a problem in how to spend on the country's requirements.

Are there sectors that will escape the crisis in the West?

The ones that will are the sectors that are not dependent on the large market and big purchasing power and not very reliant on oil, because my theory is that the prices of oil will soar once again. There is an expectation of bankruptcies in relation to transportation, airline and shipping companies. Then the crisis will move on to other related sectors such as the battery and tire industries and others.

Economic crisis in the Arab Gulf

The effect is quite minimal because the rise in oil prices compensates for any losses. The economies of the Gulf are dependent on government spending, and as long as the government is able to compensate for any losses, the problem is negated. That is why we see that the budgets of many Gulf states have not been affected.

Neither the Gulf states nor any of the Arab countries are economic partners to the West. This is a lie that we used to hear in the West. There are countries that export oil and may or may not receive its worth. There are states that purchase goods from America and everything they buy has an alternative. This means that there is no partnership but only subsidies to Arab states that have diminished since the time of the senior Bush, to the point they have become a joke and doing away with them is better than their continuation. So the effect on nations that used to receive assistance is almost negligible.

Fortunately, we were not real partners like Britain, Germany and Japan and luckily we were not even friends despite all of the political fraud, and this applies to all Arab nations. For example, everyday Bush used to talk about the government of Lebanon and supporting Lebanon. He offered no support to Lebanon except for some used cars. There was political talk for political purposes, as opposed to the economy of the enemy which is considered more affected. This is the biggest story that is being censored. The world does not talk about the economic effects on the enemy's economy. This economy is dependent on its tourism and exports to the West (that are based on special agreements as a real partner). It is an economy that depends on Western

investment. The occupation authority lost Western tourists along with the preferential clauses in its trade with the West and lost investments and assistance.

This economy is suffering from a crippling crisis, which has made it concerned with opening the Arab markets. All they are talking about now is economic peace. In Netanyahu's latest speech, he said that what is required is security and economic peace and then talk about politics. Economic peace is a term used to replace the word "normalization".

Peace is a result, and before peace, we want our rights as Arabs and Palestinians. We want rights and afterwards comes peace and not vice versa. Therefore, unfortunately the Zionist plan which is supported by Europe even more than the US is now saving the Zionist economy by opening up Arab markets to it, so pressure will be reduced off of the Western economy.

They heard from their Western partners that they will not be able to provide them with financial support as in the past and that they need to look towards their region and Europeans will support them. Therefore, our war is now and not our peace, because this enemy has made me hate the word peace. We need to prevent the rescue of this enemy by not supporting it economically through any economic cooperation with it. This is our real war with the enemy. I am not asking to fight it, as our Palestinian people are able to fight it on its own.

It seems that you reject violence but support resistance. What is the explanation behind this?

I do not call for violence. I would like to distinguish between violence and resistance of the occupation. Non-violence does not mean no resistance because the occupation is violence and the person resisting wants to end the violence. And in order for them not to apply their terminology upon us and say that this is terrorism, I say that the occupation is terrorism and fighting it is ending terrorism. To me the vision is clear. The role of the media is important and the role of Syria is fundamental and does not require my testimony. So the person resisting the occupation wants to end terrorism and is not a terrorist.

There is an urgent need to clarify the truth that terrorism is not self-defense but rather real terrorism is the occupation, as through your weapon and power you control me and what I own. Yet resistance is removal and defeating terrorism. So if Obama wants to fight terrorism, he must fight occupation in all countries; this is the true war on terrorism. If he really wants to fix the situation and fight terrorism, he needs to end the occupation.

History is on our side as De Gaulle used to say. You cannot take a correct decision in isolation of history and geography and based on the standards of history and geography, we are victorious. The end of this case is inevitable. When I am asked what you will do with the Jews that you have, I say that Jews existed in the region originally and they used to come from Europe and each one has a passport. We want to facilitate their return to their countries because they are immigrants. Lieberman who talks about "Israel our home" was not born in Palestine and his parents are not from Palestine and he has no connection to Palestine. I am ready to buy first class tickets for the Jews who want to go back to their country.

Recently you were appointed as GAID Chairman, what do you intend to do in this position?

In my first speech after being elected as GAID Chairman at the UN when I succeeded the Intel CEO to be the first Arab to occupy this position, I said that I had two words; the first word was according to the language of the UN and the other was from me as an Arab which can never change. I said that the international community failed in all the promises and dreams it made at the Millennium Summit in 2000 which I reviewed in 2005 and which will be reviewed again in 2010. Every time I review these, I find that the goals have regressed instead of advancing. I found that the gap between the developed and developing world is increasing instead of diminishing. I want to use my new position in building a real development project in the Arab region and developing world. I asked before and will ask again in the summit of 2010 that instead of talking about the Millennium goals, let us talk about the Millennium goals in the developing world, because problems cannot be generalized. Let's be honest and say that we want a plan for the developing states, but saying that we want to improve the conditions in the world; this is too generalized.

You speak very courageously at international events. Aren't you worried about the reactions to this?

I will fulfill my mission in accordance with what my conscience dictates. When the Zionist assault began on Gaza, I received an invitation from the UN to attend an important conference and deliver a speech. I responded that I cannot allow myself to attend a platform that is unable to come together in order to prevent an assault that is destroying an entire people. I expected to be isolated from my position. A response came back to me: We understand your position and are working hard to do something. So I said: The UN is unable to meet to take a moral decision and not an executive one. In any case, if they isolate me, I will settle in Syria to enjoy this country, since I am half Syrian on my mother's side, who is from Damascus from the Jabri family.

Amal Suleiman Marouf