

Majlis El Hassan / Sasakawa Peace Foundation
The Middle East: Culture, Religion and Community
Looking Beyond the Current Crises

Opening Remarks by
His Royal Highness Prince El Hassan bin Talal

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Dear Friends:

Leon Trotsky warned that “you may not be interested in war; but war is certainly interested in you”. This is as true for the victims of September 11th as for the people of the Middle East.

I welcome you today to Amman so that we can collectively look beyond the three wars facing us, in the context specifically referred to of culture, religion and community. When I say culture, I would like to make it very clear that this region culturally is not represented adequately, in my view, in the context of human rights and humanitarian rights. And there I would like to emphasise the importance of the word compliance, which of course is so relevant to the Iraq crisis; but equally or more relevant to the presentation of OCHA (Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs) and IBHI (International Bureau for Humanitarian Issues) before the General Assembly, calling for compliance by state and non-state actors with humanitarian and human rights law.

I think that, in terms of humanising this region, it is important to recognise the significance of the difference between the Arabic recent usage of the word ‘normalisation’ (*tatbee‘* , which in some way implies concessions to Israel that continues to occupy Arab land, and ‘acculturation’ (*muthaqafah*

I am sorry that my guest Avishay Braverman, President of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel, was unable to participate with us in this meeting today. I can never get it quite right with my Palestinian and Israeli friends – either the Palestinians are not allowed to come or the Israelis can’t come. But I continue to try, and I would like to say that possibly short notice in this instance made it impossible for Avishay to be with us. But I

want to say that in the context of ‘acculturation’ (*muthaqafah*) it is extremely important to bear in mind that globalisation is a universalisation of values, or can be if we wish it to be and are proactive about it.

Secondly, in the context of religion, I would like to point out to the network of the many activities in which the Majlis has been engaged, and indeed in which the Sasakawa Foundation and the Prague Forum since its inception, have been engaged. And there I pay particular tribute to both Václav Havel and our friend Sasakawa. The joint prayer meetings that we held in St. Vitus Cathedral were for us an inspiration. An inspiration to do what exactly? To develop a shared platform of values, an analytical concordance of values. If I had the resources today to take the old testament, the St. James Bible and the Qur’an, and to distil the values that we share in our partnership in our common humanity, I think that this effort in itself would go a very long way in demystifying the misconceptions of the other.

In terms of religion and politics, let me express my concern that the Alexandria initiative with which I was associated a few months ago, still more possibly the siege of the Church of the Nativity, made me fall back on basics. The ten commandments – “thou shall not kill”, “love thy neighbour”, “respect the sanctity of human life” – all of these are the injunctions of the monotheistic faiths; and yet it is sad to see that we cannot live by this value-system, in this region. Not only so, but to see this region of ours today with a politicised version of religion, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim – which tends to remind me of the importance of developing the moral authority of religion above, and possibly separate, from the turmoil of politics. In that sense, I want to refer specifically to the importance of religious cities – to Jerusalem, to Mecca, to the Negev. If we speak of our South-Asian friends, I would remind you of the sadness of the Golden Temple. The other day at a meeting in London, an interfaith meeting, a meeting between the adherents of the faith, a Sikh friend said: “9/11 has brought us together”. I said: “what do you mean?” And he said: “Well, in the United States we all look the same”. He then went on to invite me to visit the Golden Temple, which I would be privileged to do.

A scholar¹ has reminded us of a distinctive feature of the modern age: “that wars would only really end when they were transcended; when they went beyond the traditional currency of victory and defeat; when the

¹ Christopher Coker, London School of Economics.

defeated side accepted that the victory of its enemy was also its victory as well.”

And this leads me to the concept of community and the following three questions: “How can the current three wars (the ‘war on terror’, the Gulf War and the War in Palestine) be transcended? Conflict in Palestine has raged for most of the 20th century. The first Gulf War started more than twenty years ago. And, for many observers, the ‘war on terror’ is expected to last for a very long time. In the context of community, I would strongly recommend that those of you who have not had the opportunity of reading Boaz Ganor’s eminent work entitled “No Prohibition Without Definition”² recognise the importance of the definition of terror.

At the Zürich Institute a week ago, where I presented a paper entitled “A New World Order Without Ideologies?”, I raised two basic human rights in an Islamic connotation: (*haqq al-huriyyah* the right to freedom and (*haqq al-karamah* the right to dignity or human dignity. And in that context, I want to draw attention to the reports that we receive from the United Nations Relief Work Agency (UNRWA) of the miserable situation of the Palestinian people today as we speak here in Amman, a few kilometres away. The situation of destitution, of poverty, of malnutrition is something that I find alarming. How can there be a formula for intercommunal cooperation, let alone coexistence, if we do not address the right to freedom and the right to human dignity?

I would like to suggest to you that there is nothing global about Global Civil Society. I would like to suggest to you that the concept of building from the bottom up is a concept that has to be adopted in this part of the world. I have to stress to you that, in the terms of community, the destruction of multilateralism, the destruction of the economic and social council, the absence of its regular meetings as intended – quarterly meetings of heads of government – to discuss supranational or extraterritorial priorities, such as water and energy for this part of the world, is a loss to the peoples of the region. Nations and nationalism have separated us for too long, and the time has come to speak of an overarching view of the future, of the freedom and dignity for the peoples of the region.

Experts now recognise that conflict resolution needs more than ever a comprehension of the sociopolitical complexity of violences. And I want to

² Boaz Ganor, ICT Executive Director, *Terrorism: No Prohibition Without Definition*, October 7, 2001.

emphasise here that this is essential if peace is to emerge from war, if the metaphor of war is to be understood beyond narrow political considerations.

As I have said in many interviews recently, and most recently to the “Air This Evening” on the Arabia Channel, – if I could make some publicity for myself or my views – and as I said in my letter of invitation to this meeting: If we are to provide ‘value added’, then we need to go beyond exploring ‘reasons’ to evolving ‘strategies’ as well as specific ‘instruments’. In my view, the overwhelming presence of military force in the region is sufficient to serve notice on the people, to the states of the region, that what is required is a major international security and human security review of this region, from Israel to India inclusive. I congratulate the government of South Africa on sending emissaries today to Baghdad to advise on the immediate dismantling of weapons of mass destruction. I believe fully in the necessity of full compliance with this urgent international call; for in it I see the seed of an example that could be set for other countries in the region which, as I have said, behind closed doors are extremely interested in a code of conduct for the region. I recall Foreign Minister Levy in September 1997 in the presence of the General Assembly saying: Once there is peace between countries in the region, we would call for a code of conduct for the dismantling of all weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical and biological. But I have to remind you that the Astronomer Royal in the United Kingdom said only a few days ago that if we do not solve our problems through specific means within the next ten years, every human being has the capacity to become a weapon of mass destruction.

After we listen to the message of my dear and respected friend President Vaclav Havel, two recent initiatives or ‘instruments’ which I have attempted to sponsor will be presented to us as examples of what can be done to accelerate our progress towards peace through the ‘grey zone’ of unending wars.

Professor Talat Halman, whom I welcome here today, the former Minister of Culture of Turkey and one of the most cultured international figures I have had the privilege of ever meeting, will talk about the “Parliament of Cultures”. Susan Collin Marks, who introduced me to race relations in the context of her continent and of South Africa, and John Marks who heads the international initiative that we spoke about in the *International Herald Tribune* the other day, will present the concept of “Partners in Humanity”. He is a searcher for common ground.

Some analysts consider the current phase of terrorism as a by-product of globalisation. Terrorism has moved away from Cold-War sponsoring mechanisms to a ‘franchising’ system of global networks. One scholar has described Al-Qaeda as a franchising agency. I refer to terrorism as the privatisation of war.

According to that thinking, the end of the Cold War has paradoxically thrust us back to the past instead of the future. Back to a neo-medieval world of robber barons and unending conflict. In those terms, what has ended is not history, with all due respect to my Japanese colleagues and guests, not the end of history à la Fukayama, but “the most elementary dialectic by which [history] used to be articulated – that of ‘before’ and ‘after’.”³

The most critical fault line today is not between civilisations. It is between ‘globalised’ and ‘unglobalised’. I am not talking about standards of living. I am referring to the inability to understand the ‘other’ across the globalisation divide – between cultures and possibly within cultures as well.

If we are to bridge the gap, then we need to reach that higher level of acceptance described by Professor Shimon Shamir, the first Israeli Ambassador to Amman. The lower level of acceptance he describes as a mere recognition of the existence of the other, without changing the disapproving conception of his nature. This is not enough to build peace and end wars. As I said, during the long road to the signature of the peace treaty with Israel, we pass through three phases of fear in our conversations: fear of the other, fear of the folks back home and finally the fear of peace itself. And I would like to suggest that in the context of the Iraq crisis there is an overwhelming fear. In the calculus of fear and hope, I am not entirely sure that this fear is entirely of war and is not actually a fear of peace. A peace that has not been known in this region – certainly in my short lifetime.

Professor Shamir described that to transcend war, we must move to the higher level of acceptance, “...to what is implied in the term ‘pluralism’ – namely, the acknowledgement of the Other’s intrinsic value, creating a parallelism or common ground between the two sides...”.

In our conversation today, I hope we can jointly explore how culture, religion and community can become instruments for acknowledging each

³ Christopher Coker, London School of Economics.

other's intrinsic value rather than the causes for violence and war. I would like to welcome with deep respect the presence of my two immediate neighbours: President De Klerk, who is a man who has given so much to enhancing human dignity in his country and is continuing to do so much to enhance global understanding in the world in which we live, and dear colleague and brother, Ihsan Dogramaci. Professor Dogramaci is the inspirer of several Turkish universities, and indeed the inspirer of a new generation or generations of Turks acquainted not only with matters Turkish but with matters global. It was the particular example of Bilkent University where he has generously hosted the concept of a Parliament of Cultures. The Parliament of Cultures is a concept which I owe in a large part to the late Yehudi Menuhin, the violin virtuoso. I would like to say that with reference to music, maybe one of the sadnesses of our days is that joy has died in us. They say that the opposite of happiness is emptiness. All that we see in the street today, in this Middle East/West Asian/South Asian region, is emptiness and despair. I hope that bringing the good out of our distinct cultures and developing a conversation of universal values in the context of Partners in Humanity could be examples and inspirations for our conversation today – not least of all, about how we can collectively transcend war.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.