March 15, 2004

Alexandria Document on Reform in the Arab World

The conference of “Arab Reform Issues…Vision and Implementation” released, at the end of its activities, a document asserting that reform has to emerge right from inside Arab societies themselves.

The document stated that participants in the conference, held from March 12 to 14, 2004 in Alexandria Bibliotheca, have probed potentials necessary for reform in our Arab societies. Discussions resulted in that it is imperative to declare full conviction that reform is an urgent must that should generate out of our own societies.

Such reform should respond to the peoples’ aspirations to crystallize a comprehensive reform project involving political, economic social and cultural aspects. A project that allows addressing local positions in each Arab state individually while determining in one context Arab joint components.

Local reform must not divert in any way our attention to tackle regional issues at the top of which the fair solution for the Palestinian problem in accordance with international instruments calling for setting up of two independent sovereign states, liberation of occupied Arab territories, asserting Iraq’s independence.

Besides, the Middle East should be a WMDs free region. Border disputes have to be peacefully salvaged without giving any pretext for foreign intervention to take place in the Arab region.

The deep-rooted civilized history as well as the promising future of this part of the world emphasize denouncing of terrorism in all forms and facing the
serious consequences of religious bigotry. Arab communities can well contribute in forging human civilization. They can react with world reform experiences according to the following priorities:

First: Political Reform: By which we mean all direct and indirect steps taken by governments and civil society that unhesitatingly drive ahead for setting up democratic systems. In this respect we present here a host of visions:

1. Constitutional and legislative reform: As the constitution is basic law of the state, its provisions must not contradict with the political regime model cherished by the society. It should cope with international human rights documents. This implies correcting constitutional status in the Arab countries by amending the articles standing against actual democracy demands.

   This will guarantee:
   · Clear-cut square separation between legislative and executive powers.
   · Renewing ruling regime forms in a way that asserts peaceful periodic power-circulation.
   · Holding regular free elections protecting democratic practice.
   · Annulling of imprisonment or detention for opinion causes in all Arab countries.

2. Reform of political structures and institutions: The democratic system is related to firm institutions: executive, legislative and judicial plus the media, press and civil society institutions. Hence, such social pillars have now and then be checked for proper democratic performance.

3. Rescinding exceptional and emergency laws: in whatever forms or names they stand. Ordinary laws suffice for addressing all sorts of crimes. This does not exclude setting an effective legislation to deal with terrorism.
4. Furnishing full freedom to establish political parties: to offer them the chance to present their programs in an honored competitive atmosphere.

5. All countries that so far did not accredit Arab and international documents should now do.

6. Media and press must be liberated from governmental predominance: as such liberalization constitutes a firm stronghold of the democratic system and transparency.

7. Launching freedom of establishing civil society institutions: by amending laws that restrict forming of associations, syndicates and unions of any kind.

8. Encouraging measuring public opinions: being one of the basic democratic means, and setting up research centers for Arab public opinion regular surveys in all political, social and economic items.

Second: Economic Reform: That involves all legislations, policies and procedures that contribute in liberalizing national economy in accordance with market mechanisms so as to be integrated with regional and world economies. The current Arab economic actual facts indicate the following:

- Development rates of national income are reduced and individual share is dropping compared to international indications.
- Arab states share in world trade is declining; as Arab exports are focused in primary products.
- The region’s share of foreign capitals flow is retreating including direct and indirect foreign investments.
- Failure in providing enough work opportunities for new comers in work-market while unemployment reached rates sharper than those of developing countries.
- Poverty rate is surging up in some Arab countries for unemployed and even for a high rate of working
individuals.

Now, the proposed policies aiming at achieving stability and reducing inflation rates rely on three-sided plans of corroboration, privatization and economic liberalization. Yet, they did not give ample care for such items like unemployment and providing basic social services.

To affirm the importance of the institutional framework necessary for achieving the all out reform we submit here the following prospects for the Arab states:

- To declare obvious plans and definite timetables for institutional and structural reform.
- To decisively address problems impeding Arab and foreign investments.
- To encourage privatization plans including the banking sector, to reduce governmental investments except those of strategic and public significance.
- To develop programs of financing small and micro enterprises, giving females full chance in obtaining due finance.
- To set rules and criteria to upgrade national product qualities and baking competitive potentials.
- To establish rules of good assessment of economic activity, with confirmed transparency, accountability and enforcement of judicial verdicts.
- To empower women to share fully in national workforce.
- To review economic policies so as to achieve employment about 5 million new-comers in Arab work markets annually. This can best be carried out by trying to raise real economic development by at least 6% to 7% per annum over the next decade.
- To address poverty in all its multi dimensions.
- To issue due legislations abiding related authorities to provide economic data for all those who demand them.
- To develop Arab financial sectors in general and their banking organs in particular with encouraging setting up of mega banking entities.
· To develop basic structures of Information Technology and get them connected in the Arab world.
· To reactivate Arab treaties by setting accomplishable targets and determining priorities such as those of: transport, communication, electricity, energy and IT.
· To try to get into an abiding agreement concerning inter-Arab trade liberalization.
· To regulate Arab work-market by forging multi-lateral accords for employing Arab labor into different Arab states.
· To set up an effective mechanism to settle economic disputes among investors.
· To deal with Arab investing transactions in the same way national investment is treated in all Arab countries.
· To urge advanced countries to open their markets for Arab exports, especially agrarian commodities.
· To establish a highly efficient Arab League (AL) specialized department to follow up world trade cases and entitle Arab states to effectively act within the World Trade Organization (WTO).
· To set up an establishment run and financed by the private sector in the Arab world to train high-level managers to implement reform and develop related plans.
· To encourage innovation and attraction of investments for research and providing due protection of intellectual property rights.
· To keep environment conservation in all economic activities.

In pursuit for putting those proposals into effect, Arab League is urged to adopt due series of conferences and specialized symposia to deeply tackle the following topics:
1. Arab financial sectors and investment restrictions.
2. Uniform customs system and inter-Arab trade.
3. Arab competitive capacity and standard criteria.
4. Technology incubations.
5. Public resources management in the Arab world.
7. Economic media, how to upgrade it.

Third: Social Reform: To achieve the following targets:
1. To develop family pattern ties in a way to build the independent distinguished responsible individual.
2. To urge media means to play a key role in furnishing public culture for the citizen as to revive values backing development and modernization like equality and tolerance.
3. To help Arab societies to obtain, publish and produce knowledge by focusing on 5 directives:
   · To highlight human development with priority of education development.
   · To achieve technological development with providing its infra-structure.
   · To develop scientific research strategies.
   · To support liberal work and creative initiative in invention fields with providing a climate backing knowledge society politically, culturally and economically.
To put that into action participants recommend the following:
   · To set Arab criteria for education outputs in all stages to cope with international standards.
   · To set up authorities for education quality and control in each Arab country independent from concerned ministries.
   · To help the state carry on responsibility in financing and supporting education institutions.
   · To back scientific research and enhancing its financial and human resources.
   · To apply non-centralization in running education institutions with due flexibility to diverse their programs.
   · To apply due convenience between education outputs and work-market needs.
   · To call civil society to share in financing, managing and controlling education in Arab countries.
   · To offer students their political rights including peaceful demonstrations and democratic student...
elections.
· To eradicate illiteracy within set period not exceeding ten years.
· To give more importance for Arabic language and developing its teaching methods.
4. To help achieve social stability in Arab states.
5. To formulate a new social contract between the state and the citizen in the Arab community.

Fourth: Cultural Reform: Participants take into consideration the regional and national cultural challenges out of the following priorities:

1. Setting deep the bases of intellectual and scientific thinking by encouraging scientific research and financing it while removing religious extremism.

2. Encouraging continued renovation of religious discourse with a view to materializing enlightening cultural dimension of the religion through giving rein to intellectual freedom, opening door for scientists and researchers thinking of social issues.

3. Going ahead in liberalizing and developing women culture in a way that would realize their equality with men in study and work. This aims at emphasizing effectiveness of political partnership in its full meaning.

4. Creating favorable cultural climate for democratic reform and peaceful power rotation. This can be achieved through facing obsolete habits and accumulated negativities of corrupt political conditions and methods that may hinder effective political participation.

Such confrontation is designed to changing the political and social look at women and highlighting their cultural contributions and scientific achievements as well as their indispensable role in the development process. This is based on the fact
that cultural development is the base of any development and the first step in any radical reform that can not make it without spreading the culture of democracy in educational curricula and mass media.

5- Renovating cultural discourse and ridding it of hindrances with a view to accepting difference and dialogue with the others. This should go in parallel with renewing related media, political and social discourses.

6- Reforming and reactiving Arab cultural institutions financially and morally in a way that would help it think independently and expand their plans. This is in addition to Encouraging coordination with other institutions and agencies that play an effective role in cultural action.

7- Working for the cancellation of all forms of censorship on intellectual and cultural activity to boost free thinking and motivate creativity away from any body or sect’s guardianship under any pretext of religion, tradition, idiosyncrasy or political.

8- Enhancing cultural action at the national level along with embodying the principle of mutual dependence in culture economies.

9- Preserving the Arabic language and modernizing the mechanisms of its adaptation with the new digital technology in the information age.

10- Encouraging cultural interaction with the whole world in a bid to emphasize creative human diversity. This is besides effective contribution to world organizations in a way that would not contradict our cultural idiosyncrasy highlighted by human dimensions of our genuine cultural heritage.

11- Stressing education as an elemental cultural
component and a deep-rooted course for the future vision that entrench in the public cultural awareness the importance of having a knowledge society, which is the best way for progress.

12- Documenting Arab cultural reality in the form of annual statistics and data that record production mechanisms and control forms. This is besides coordinating the efforts in organizing the activities of Arab professional syndicates working in the fields of culture and publishing their outcomes.

13- Activating national cultural exchange through the following:
· Exempting Arab cultural products from censorship restrictions and customs barriers. · Developing projects of exchanged e-publishing of newspapers, magazines and books to overcome distribution problems and hindrance of Arab publications flow. · Reinvigorating governmental and non-governmental translations institutions and coordinating their work in two synchronized processes of translating from Arabic into all live languages and vice versa. · Encouraging creativity and creative intellectual achievements at both local and national levels.

Fifth: Mechanisms of follow up with civil society

The conference’s underlining of the needed Arab reforms entails the formation of a connected package of implementation mechanisms that allows suggestions and recommendations follow up.

In this context, there should be a focus on the role of the Arab civil society, particularly in all sustained development domains. This requires the following procedures:

1- Setting up the Arab Reform Forum at Bibliotheca Alexandrina to serve as an open vistas for Arab initiatives, projects and intellectual
dialogues. This can be achieved through holding Arab and international forums and joint dialogues on developments in general and underlining relevant role played by women and youth in particular. This is in addition to the implementation of cooperation projects in various development domains.

Related to the functions of this forum is the establishment of an Arab Social Watch to follow up Arab civil society activities and monitor and evaluate political, social, cultural and economic reform projects.

2- Civil society institutions in each Arab country shall select a number of successful NGOs in the field of development and human rights to present their activities and social impact at a pan-Arab conference, to be held annually in one of the Arab states, to illustrates the role played by the civil society in development. 3- Holding national Arab conferences inside each country to discuss reform thought and present successful experiences at the Arab and world levels. The Bibliotheca shall take the lead by announcing its hosting the coming conference on the reform in Egypt. 4- Organizing Arab regional forums to discuss certain issues related to various reform fields. 5- Forming a follow up committee to convene at least on a 6-month basis to review implemented items with a view to supporting the dialogue forum once established.

The participants emphasize that the implementation of the reform visions they drew is not the responsibility of the governments alone but of both the civil society and the governments. The promising future of our Arab nation will not come true unless all creative abilities, sincere endeavors and tireless work, which links visions and implementation, are capitalized on.