

ISSAM M. FARES AWARD

November 19, 2014

Ambassador Richard Murphy: Well, thank you very much Kate and ladies and gentlemen. It's indeed a pleasure to be with you and an honor to have been asked to present the award to Ayman Asfari tonight. What we have in common is Aleppo, where I went with my family first in 1960. I think he was somewhat short of his mature personality in 1960 having... about two years old, if I'm not mistaken. But we served in the consulate general then and they were very happy years in a very happy city.

But Ayman, he was born the son of a Syrian diplomat, which meant that he passed much of his childhood outside of his country in Turkey and the Czech Republic. And like so many children of diplomats who have grown up in homes where government to government relations were a prime focus, he chose not to follow in his father's footsteps; I assume to his father's regret. It's something I've experienced in my own family. Nonetheless, he has pursued a career which has taken him far outside what many would consider a normal comfort zone and developed capacities that diplomats can only dream of achieving.

After higher education at Villanova, taking a Master's of Science in Civil and Urban Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania, he worked in Oman, in the civil mechanical construction energy industry before joining Petrofac, which was a provider of oil field services to the international oil and gas industry. That was in 1991. Ten years later he had moved to the point of buying out Petrofac, took it public in 2005, and it's today a British multinational of which he is Chief Executive, and has some 18,000 employees with considerable annual revenues.

In 2002 he created the foundation which bears his name. It supports projects in the United Kingdom, in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine. It aims at, among other things, empowering youth through educational opportunities and grants, to promote the development of a strong civil society in the Arab countries. The foundation also provides relief to the Syrian people improving education for refugees, supports Syria's emerging civil society and works to increase aid for Syrians in need; an enormous task as we all recognize.

He's also been active through his foundation establishing a center for Syrian studies at St. Andrews University in the UK and providing funding for Syrian Deeply. Syrian Deeply's an independent website launched to provide clarity, understanding of the current crisis in that country, and I strongly recommend it to any of you who are not familiar with it as a site for all who seek a richer understanding of the complex Syrian situation.

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Today Ayman Asfari is a member of the senior panel of advisors of Chatham House in London. He's on the board of trustees of the American University of Beirut where our own paths had crossed. His foundation has endowed the AUB's Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, working to advance research and other initiatives to encourage the development of an informed and an active citizenry, as well as transparency and accountability in the governments of the Middle East.

Well, I hope that this brief introduction serves to explain to this audience why the Middle East Institute has chosen Ayman Asfari to receive this year's Issam M. Fares Award for Excellence. I'm honored to present it to him. Mr. Asfari, please.

[applause]

Ayman Asfari: Thank you, Ambassador Murphy. Thank you all. I don't know what to say because Richard said it all. I'm truly honored and humbled to be recognized tonight amongst this esteemed audience. I was educated in this great country and after working in The Gulf for 11 years I moved onto Petrofac and I started Petrofac International and to me the big consideration when I moved is I actually moved to London for one simple reason. I didn't move for the weather or for the cost structure. I moved because I wanted to be involved in setting up business where the foundations of the business are solid, they are rooted in a place which recognizes the importance of the rule of law, and this is something that we sorely miss in the region, and really after more than 25 years in the UK I realized that there are so many other talented people in the region that could do the same thing.

They could build institutions, they could create employment opportunities, they could create prosperity, and they could build businesses if they are not behold to a government official, to corrupt practices, and if there was a framework and a rule of law that promoted the same issue, and I see this in my business today. I see that we have tremendous talent in the region. We, in Petrofac, we hire 400 fresh graduates a year. We hire 200 from the region. We hire people from Syria, from Lebanon, from Algeria, from Tunisia, and I see the talent, they're all dying and they're all, you know, absolutely craving for the opportunity, and bring them in and they're shy and they don't know how to address you and so on, and a year or two years later they challenge you on what you're doing right, on the strategy of the business. So this talent is there. It's just extremely unfortunate that there is no framework and there isn't the chance for this standard to flourish and to achieve its potential.

We have a region that suffers from lack of good governance. It suffers from lack of accountability, good education, we have gender inequality, and we've had very unfair and inequitable distribution of wealth. There is no doubt in my mind that these were the roots for the Arab uprising, and unless all these issues are addressed, we

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will continue to have long-term issues and we will not achieve, and I'm using the phrase of Thomas Friedman, the sustained order in the region that we all want to have.

My lovely wife, Sawsan, who's with me here tonight, and I started this very foundation in 2006, and she should be with me here to be recognized because we started this together.

[applause]

We wanted to play a very small role in helping these transitions, helping empower young people to work towards change. This is why we only work with young people, we support education in various forms, and this is why we help civil society practitioners and organizations in our target countries.

At the foundation we envision an Arab region in which young people play an active role as citizens who help develop their societies through education, engagement and free thinking. To encourage this we support massive scholarships at reputable UK universities for Arab students and we train for this advantage but bright, young people to find work. We also envision the Arab world having active resilient civil society organizations, and I'm realistic, this is not gonna happen in two or three years. I'm realistic this is a generational issue, but we want a society that stands up to the rights of the vulnerable and assure accountable governance. We want to encourage this through support of research, education, and networking between civil society and academia. That's why we started the institute at the American University of Beirut, the establishment of free media in Syria through the Syrian organizations, and we provide fellowships at the Chatham House in London for young civil society leaders from the Arab region.

And while Syria burns the foundation will continue to work with reputable partners to provide relief aid such as medical care, shelter and food to Syrians in need, but we also support the education of Syrian refugee children and young people to enable them to build a future and we support new secular Syrian civil society organizations with a grant and capacity building.

[applause]

We support them because peace comes, and I'm absolutely confident it will eventually, the young people in organizations we've helped can turn it, build a peaceful, tolerant and productive Syria for the future. And I just want to say a couple words here about Syria in my speech, but I spent the day today talking to people in the various governing organizations about the solution. I genuinely believe that

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there's only one solution to the Syrian conflict, and that is creating a transitional government in Syria that is inclusive, that is representative of all the parties in Syria, including the Alawites, the Moderate Sunnis, that is based on the institutions of the state, so we do not want to destroy the institutions of the state, but cannot include anyone who does not have the same vision, which means it cannot include Assad, and it cannot...

[applause]

... and it cannot include the Islamists who have a vision in Syria for an Islamic state. This vision of Syria is the vision that 90%, 95% of the Syrians want, and the problem I have with the current US policy, with a nascent first approach, is this is a policy that unless it is put in the context of a narrative to get to the ultimate solution of a political solution in the country, it is going to be seen as something that is supporting the current Assad Regime, it is going to attract more moderates to become radicals, it's going to fuel radicalism in the country. So I urge Senator Kaine and everyone in this country, as you debate the Syrian conflict you are only going to achieve peace in the country by having a political transition in the country and there is only one solution, a power sharing structure that guarantees the participation of all the Syrians, and there are many measures, many steps that have been taken to ensure that we get there.

So I hope that this is something that is considered. I will do my small part in parting with this point and I know that at the end of the day even if I'm not listened to I will not stop trying. I would like to thank Ambassador Chamberlain, Chairman Clark, the Issam Fares family and the Middle East Institute for really honoring me with this award. I feel this award genuinely should not go to me. I would like to dedicate this to all the brave young men and women who stood up to be counted all across the Arab world, the young citizens who can see a different future in which all Arab citizens can thrive through the work that we do in the Asfari Foundation, we will do a very small part to continue to support them in reaching that goal. Thank you very much.

[applause]

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