

MEI VISIONARY AWARD

November 20, 2014

Ray LaHood: Good evening. In case you forgot about my introduction, I'm Ray LaHood. I won't repeat the introduction.

[applause]

I was asked by MEI and my friend Shafik to present the visionary award and I am grateful and honored to have that opportunity. Before I do that I want to say one word about MEI and what an extraordinary organization it is to gather so many people together for this dinner and to gather so many people together for the next few days to talk about the region, talk about the issues, talk about the solutions. This is an extraordinary organization and to all of you that are here tonight supporting MEI thank you for doing that and to those who serve on the board, those who are the staff that run the day-to-day operation, thank you. We're in your debt for what you do day in and day out to promote peace and to promote the kind of opportunities for people who live in the Middle East. Let's give it up for the MEI and all that they do.

[applause]

And I want to say a word about one other individual who's here, who devoted his life to public service, unfortunately will not be back in Congress but was a dear, dear friend, particularly to Lebanon, but also to the Middle East region, devoting whatever time and energy away from his congressional district to Lebanon and to the Middle East, unfortunately he won't be back in the Congress next year but he has served his time, served us well in extraordinary public service, Nick Rahall from West Virginia. Nick, stand up. Stand up, Nick.

[applause]

Thank you, Nick. Thank you for all that you've done. I'm sorry for the other members of Congress that we didn't introduce but this man needs to be recognized. Tonight the Visionary Award recipient is someone that all of us in this room know and when you think of Visionary, what do you think about? You think about someone who looks beyond the horizon. You think of someone who is not blinded by conflict. You think of someone that is not blinded by turmoil. You think of someone who continues day in and day out to have the vision to move forward, to make progress, to take care of people, and that is what Shafik's life has been all about his entire life. This is an individual that has been very success in business, and been very successful in building businesses, been very successful financial, but he has never forgotten where he came from.

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And frankly, he's never forgotten the people who helped make him successful. The best example I can give, when there was so much turmoil in Egypt, when there was a change in government, when Mubarak fell, when the Muslim Brotherhood came into power, when many of Shafik's businesses were teetering, when employees couldn't go to work, Shafik never gave up on his employees. He continued to pay them throughout all of the turmoil, throughout all of the time when the businesses were not doing as well as they once did, he took care of his people. That's the kind of businessman he is. That's the kind of CEO he is. He did not lay his people off, he did not tell them they should go without pay, he took care of them and their families, and in doing so he took care of his brothers and sisters. He never forgot where he came from and he never forgot the people that brought him there.

Shafik is a friend to all. He is a bridge builder. He's been very helpful in building bridges between Egypt and America, very helpful in building bridges between new leadership in Egypt and America, been very helpful in building bridges all of his life, connecting people, all in a positive way, not for himself, but for the country that he loves, the people that he loves. He is as good America as any American I've ever met. He loves Egypt, he loves the Egyptian people, but he also loves America and he sees the connectivity and the importance between a strong, good relationship between Egypt and America. He is a bridge builder. He is a connector. He is someone who has been very, very helpful over this long period of turmoil. Why? Because he's a visionary. Because he can look beyond the turmoil, look beyond the conflict, look beyond the horizon, and always see hope and opportunity, and he's done it very well. Shafik has been involved in many programs, he helped start AmCham in Egypt, because he saw the value again of connecting people, building bridges between people. The one program that I think, I don't if it's his proudest but it's one that I think he is very proud of. It's a program called East-West: The Art of Dialog, promoting exchanges between the US and Egypt and I've watched it. I've watched the young people that he has mentored, that he has nurtured, that he has helped educate, and the connection and the bridges that have been built between American and Egypt. It's an extraordinary program.

It's about the next generation. It's about fostering the next generation. It's about the opportunities to connect the next generation so that we don't have the same turmoils and that we can create the kind of visionaries that Shafik is. So that program, among many, will be one of his lasting legacies. I don't know of another visionary that deserves this award more than Shafik. He couldn't have done it without two beautiful women in his life: Gigi his wife and Malak his beautiful daughter who's a student at Yale University. They have been a big, big part of all that he has done.

[applause]

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And I know many of you have seen his magnificent art collection and that is a vision that helps us understand different cultures, and his collection, again, has been a real opportunity for bridge building and connectivity. So it is my honor to present the Middle East Institute Visionary Award to Shafik Gabr. No one deserves it more than you do Shafik. Congratulations.

[applause]

Shafik Gabr: [Bismillah 'irahman 'irahim] I have no words to thank you, Ray, for this introduction. I hope my remarks will reflect just 1% of the kind words that you have said. Distinguished guests, members of Congress, Ambassadors, Wendy, friends and family, allow me first to extend a very warm congratulations to my fellow awardee, Ayman Asfari. Ayman is an incredible man. He's not only an entrepreneur and a philanthropist, he's a humanist and I agree totally, he should have shared that award with Sawson because she is the force behind him.

[applause]

I also want to thank all my friends and family that are here, many of whom have traveled many, many miles, from Egypt, from Paris, from Dublin, from New York, Los Angeles, from Kentucky. Thank you for being here for me. Thank you very much.

[applause]

I want to thank the Middle East Institute for all the excellent work that they have been doing. Truly at this specific time in history they have been doing a lot of multidimensional work on strengthening Middle East/US relations. I also truly want to congratulate Ambassador Chamberlin on all the MEI initiatives, and one that is very close to my heart that is coming out, the initiative of developing an art and culture anchor to the US/Arab relationship. Today I'm receiving the Visionary Award and for that I'm very grateful, but I also always remind myself that being a visionary can also both be a blessing and a curse. As Secretary LaHood said, being a visionary's being able to see beyond the horizon.

Many, many years ago in the '70's Alex and I watched a movie. It was a hero who prayed that he could wake up in the morning and be blessed by reading tomorrow's newspaper, and one day he opened today's newspaper but he was reading tomorrow's news. His success in fame and success financially became overwhelming. Imagine for a moment if you can open the newspaper and read tomorrow's news. But until one day he opened the newspaper to read his obituary. It said that he was found killed in a hotel near his home. That hero struggled very hard

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to remain as far from that hotel as possible. At the end he did not go to the hotel and he was shocked still next day to find his obituary on the front page. But to his relief he had found that he had lost his wallet and the person who was killed in that hotel was not him. He would pray that he would lose that gift completely.

The second story that I always remember when we talk about visionaries is the story of Mohammed and Cohen who lived in the same street. Each morning they would wake up and pray to the Lord to win the lottery, and they prayed very, very hard. This went on for a very long time until one day the clouds parted, and a very strong booming voice came from above, and it said, "Cohen, Mohammed, I'll make you win the lottery, but first you have to buy a ticket."

[laughter]

I come away from these two stories with two things. First, be careful what you ask for, and second, wishful thinking is not enough in this world of complex challenges, and many of these challenges have been talked about by Senator Kaine and by Ayman earlier. Let me share with you, if I may for a few moments, some bad news and some good news, and just close with a few remarks, some unconventional thoughts, maybe professor Trachtenberg will forgive me if I become too unconventional.

The bad news is as we sit here tonight, not only the Middle East, but the whole world is faced by a phenomena that we do not seem to be absorbing well enough. That phenomena is the rise of non-state terrorist actors across the world. They're creating mayhem and they are truly undermining the core of our humanity. The cornerstone of the world order we live in today is the nation state, and that is under attack, not just in the Middle East, but from Ukraine to Somalia and from Pakistan to Nigeria. Even countries like Russia and China and Myanmar and Mali are witnessing this phenomena of non-state actors that is undermining our present world order.

The world we live in today is witnessing increased propensity of challenges, not only increased challenges but even more complex challenges that sometimes we watch across the world and see leaders struggling to come up with a strategy, and as I Ayman said, these challenges are very diverse, from health challenges to poverty to conflict to youth unemployment to debt, races, environmental degradation, war and terrorism, just to mention a few. But the danger is we're a very connected community today across the world and these conflicts are permutating and they're permutating very fast, and unless we recognize that we will be all in trouble and the trouble will not remain in one region.

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We talk about Ebola. Who knows what we're gonna talk about tomorrow if we do not recognize the importance of working together on health issues. Today we are confronted by a network of complex challenges and the other side of the problem, what I worry about, is we're becoming immune in our different communities to these problems. Look at the refugees around the world. Look at the bombing, the killing and the beheadings. God forbid that this becomes the new normal, because we are now living and witnessing these things and it seems we just continue in our own activity.

We have, unfortunately, previously had a major wakeup call in 9/11. We had other wakeup calls. I hope we will have the vision today to work east and west before another wakeup call takes place.

I don't need to tell you this. You know what's happened in Afghanistan, in Iraq and Syria and Libya, Kashmir, Yemen, the Israeli/Palestinian conflict which remains after so many years. Let me just close this point about bad news with three things. As Edmond Burke said, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women not to do anything. And frankly in the face of rising terrorism globally we cannot afford appeasement. We need to confront this cancer across the world.

[applause]

Whatever the name they operate under, be it ISIL or other, we need to confront it, and yes, the US has a leadership role, but the world also needs to participate very seriously. The US cannot do this alone. There is as Churchill said in my opinion a gathering storm that is happening around the world. We may not be recognizing it, just as we didn't recognize the financial crisis in 2007, but it is, that gathering storm is happening right now and is trying to undermine the nation states' concept, and unless nation states around the world, east and west, work together we will all pay a price.

Secondly this is a time for visionary political leadership, leadership that can cross the aisle, leadership that can cross over negativity and promote constructive dialogue, leaders that I remember like Sadat, like Rabin, leadership like George H.W. Bush who could create a real coalition of boots on the ground. I just want to remind everyone, liberating Kuwait, there were 33,000 Egyptian troops on the ground. There was 20,000 Syrian troops on the ground. President George Bush could pick up the phone and talk to leaders. We need leaders around the world that can do the same thing, especially now, more than ever before.

Third point is, I am concerned that the east and west are talking at each other rather than to each other, and we really truly need to bring that gulf and deal with it, and I

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think an institution like the Middle East Institute is a fantastic platform to play a role in doing that, and I truly encourage you all to support in many different ways. There's so much great minds in this room in so many diverse areas, not only in politics, not only in business, in media and in many different things, and I think this is the time to step up and work with the Middle East Institute.

Let me turn to some of the good news. The good news is there's so many good initiative on the ground that are doing good. I believe there are two paramount issues. An issue in my part of the world where people like Ayman and others can have institutions that can make a difference. Our generation in our part of the world have not succeeded and we're investing in the next generation to make a difference. On the other hand, there are many initiatives, and I will recount some of them, that are building bridges between east and west. The Asfari Foundation, the Safwan Foundation, the Orman Foundation, the Seweres Family, the Hariri Family, the Alireza Family, the Al Juffali Family, and my own are rising to the challenge. And we hope to find counterparts in the west that not only look at the west, but also build bridges with the east. That is very important.

All right, just a few personal words and I will close with some unconventional ideas. By way of background I'm Egyptian born and bred. My business headquarters are in Egypt. I'm proud to have two foundations, one in Egypt and one in the United States. As some of you may know when I turned 16 my late father pulled me into his study and said, "This is your last allowance." I thought he was joking but he wasn't. I started working back then. Both my parents passed away very young, 53 and 48. My grandfather survived both of them and we were very close. He always used to insist, and say it again and again, "If you can do something for the society and community you live in you have to do it. It's an obligation. It's not an option."

I owe my values, my success and my deep commitment to what I do to my parents and to my country Egypt. I wish my parents were with me today but I'm sure they're up there smiling. I also owe my perseverance, persistence and being able to weather many storms to my wife who's sitting here, Gigi, and...

[applause]

And I'm very proud to say that as I come closer to retirement, I'm now spending over 60% of my time on the foundations. In Egypt we're working heavily on education and I believe it's education, education, education that can change a society. It can bring democracy and it can integrate diversity and it can bring a market economy. Without education it doesn't work. I'm very proud our foundation covers schools in the most underprivileged areas in Egypt. We have over 23,000 primary schools, and our work covers many different aspects but it also brings to these schools a whole new

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concept. It brings a theater, it brings a music program, a cultural program, a sports program and we work with these kids with the hope that they're gonna be Egypt's leaders in the future.

We also work with higher education and I am very proud and happy that I see Lisa Anderson here, the president of the American University of Cairo. The American University of Cairo is a beacon for education, and not only do I really recognize what they have done, I just want to share a very short sort of story. I couldn't afford to go to the AUC and I had to negotiate with my late father. I had to tell him I wanted to go to the AUC and he looked at me and said, "All right, do you have the money to do it?" And I said, "No." He said, "All right. I'll give you the money to go for the first year. If you get a scholarship I'll wipe the debt. If you don't get a scholarship you pay me over two years and you cross the Nile to Cairo University which was for free." Thank God I got a scholarship. And not only that, the AUC paid me 30 pounds a month. That's five and a half dollars back then. The AUC is a beacon for education. Every American and Egyptian should be proud of what the AUC is doing, and I'm extremely proud to see a table of people that is so much involved in the world of education, with Paul, Steven, Vali, Lisa, I hope we can strengthen American/Egypt work in that area.

Our American foundation, as Secretary LaHood said, does many things, but one thing I'm very, very proud of, and I'm very proud that two of the American fellows are here, Stephanie Kate and Michael Golf who came all the way from Oregon, I'm very happy that you are here.

[applause]

This is what is called the East-West, The Art of Dialog. What is this about? It's an initiative that brings young Americans, age 24 to 35, and Egyptians, together, together on a very intensive program. They always complain that the program starts at 7. Americans taught me about the working breakfast, which I do not like but I follow. It's half men, half women, and they go through a very intense program of knowing what Egypt's all about. Then they come to the United States and go to New York, New Jersey, New Haven, Atlanta, Virginia, DC, and they truly go into an intensive program. Not only that, after the program is concluded they do collaborative projects together in many different domains, and the foundation funds 50% of that hoping to maintain bridges of understanding between Egypt and the United States.

But I'm also proud to say that the class of 2015 is gonna add young people from Bahrain, from Great Britain and from Ireland, and we're hopeful this will continue down that path. If anything we all need to invest in the next generation. The world we

live in today is connected 24/7, email, Skype, Twitter, social media, all these different things that we all sort of use every day, but I'm very worried that that type of communication, where the soundbite and the photo op reign, can create misunderstandings, can create misperceptions and also can create the fear of the other. Our world today sadly is of the abbreviated text, where a meeting is a Skype, and a conversation is limited to a number of characters. Today we touch our screens much more than we touch our friends and much more than we touch our loved ones, and in reality I feel we have lost touch. This makes us look at everything in our own narrative, and that worries me. We always have to look on the other side of that coin to understand.

Let me make four unconventional suggestions in my closing remarks. I strongly believe leaders of different faiths need to credibly and strongly delegitimize the use of false interpretation of religion for political purposes, and the Muslim world has to step up in that area, in a very strong way. Secondly, political leaders need to create a global coalition, and I agree with Senator Kaine. It is not just hard power that is gonna work, we're gonna need soft power to be able to drain the swamp of global terrorism and cross border criminal activity. Third, let me say this to you and I personally got trouble in my own country in 2007, trying to push change and democracy. Forcing the implementation of democracy and transitional regimes does not work. Democracy is not instant coffee. Democracy is not just the ballot box. Democracy needs institutions. Democracy needs education. That is what makes it sustainable, and investing in that is what can make a change. Finally, let me say something that, again, is unconventional. Do not arm rebels to fight our fights. What we could be doing is creating another Al Qaeda, ISIS today is just the flavor of the month. Tomorrow it's gonna be FISIS and MISIS and LISIS.

What we truly need to do is work together to contain and globally eradicate this and it will only happen if we have greater cooperation based on common ground, common values and shared interest. Let me again thank the Middle East Institute for the recognition and excellent work and may we work together to avoid a gathering storm and embrace a new dawn of human understanding. Thank you very much.

[applause]

Transcript ends