



NATIONAL U.S.-ARAB CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

غرفة التجارة الأمريكية العربية الوطنية

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ARAB LEAGUE CELEBRATES SIXTH ANNUAL "ARAB AMERICAN DAY"

This Year's Focus: Preserving the Heritage and Antiquities of the Arab World

"He Who Denies His Heritage, Has No Heritage" – Kahlil Gibran

Washington, DC – Last week, the League of Arab States hosted its sixth annual Arab American Day in partnership with the Council of Arab Ambassadors and the National U.S. – Arab



H.E. Ambassador Salah Sarhan, Chief Representative of the Arab League in the United States.

Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC), which once again served as Lead Sponsor. This year's theme focused on preservation of the "wondrous heritage and antiquities of the Arab world," which have suffered badly in recent years as a result of war and dislocation.

The gathering of more than 300 government and business leaders at the Organization of American States marveled at the rich tapestry of the MENA region's history, which took on special significance in the wake of the U.S. Government's recent decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. This passionate issue was especially poignant in light of this year's Arab-American honoree, Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad, who has chronicled the suffering of Palestinians over the years.

"Undermining Not Only Our Past, But Also Our Future"

H.E. Ambassador Salah Sarhan, Chief Representative of the Arab League in the United States, set the tone for the evening in his opening remarks: "Organized criminals saw conflict in places like Iraq and Syria as an opportunity to benefit from the hardship and the chaos

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brought on by war, undermining not only our past, but also our future.” Wartime encourages lawlessness, he noted, exposing antiquities to “direct damage, looting, abandonment and neglect, and allowing criminals and thieves that deal in stolen artifacts to thrive.”

With this in mind, Sarhan said, the Arab League participated last year in the second annual Culture Under Threat Regional Conference, which took place in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The high-level meeting concluded with a pledge to work together to put an end to this illicit trade.

Sarhan noted, “It has become clear that governments throughout the world – as well as museums, auction houses of good repute, and international organizations – are now coming together to ensure that there is no place anywhere in the world that would accept to show antiquity objects whose origin is suspicious.”

Sarhan concluded, “We must note, in this regard, the tireless efforts of The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, which has played a significant role in ensuring the integrity of antiquities and the return of illicitly acquired artifacts to their rightful owners.”

A U.S. Government Perspective

Ambassador Jennifer Zimdahl Galt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, highlighted the work that the U.S. Government has been doing to preserve antiquities in the Arab world.

“Through the State Department’s Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation,” she said, “we have had the honor and privilege to work with League of Arab States members on over 100 projects to preserve and protect cultural heritage in the region . . . [including] to prevent the pillage and trafficking of priceless and irreplaceable objects of cultural heritage.”

One of the best tools that the U.S. Government has at its disposal, Zimdahl Galt noted, are “bilateral cultural property agreements. Such agreements impose U.S. import restrictions on cultural property from countries at risk, thus deterring illegal looting and trafficking of such items from their sites of origin into U.S. markets.”

Arab world contributions to the arts and sciences over the centuries, she pointed out, have “expanded our understanding and increased our appreciation of the



Ambassador Jennifer Zimdahl Galt, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.



Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad (left) receives an award for his work from Ambassador Sarhan.

world and of our place in it. Contributions in disciplines as diverse as astronomy, horticulture, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and, of course, the arts, continue to enrich our lives.”

Today, Zimdahl Galt said, these historical contributions are under threat. The U.S. Government has “taken emergency action to impose import restrictions on antiquities from Libya, and from Syria and Iraq, to help ensure that the traces of the earliest civilizations – and the art and literature they contain – can be recovered and enjoyed by all in the country of their origin . . . We know all too well the fragile nature of many cultural sites across the region and the

existential threat posed by ISIS and other terrorist organizations.”

“We thank our partners for joining us in the important work of protecting and preserving the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the Arab world,” she concluded, “which speaks so compellingly to our universal humanity and shared history.”

The Defense of Peace in the Minds of Men

H.E. Faycal Gouia, Tunisia’s Ambassador to the United States, offered keynote remarks on behalf of the Council of Arab Ambassadors. Arab American Day, he said, is an opportunity to “remember, celebrate, and revive our solid common grounds, shared values, and deep human linkages.



More than 300 government and business leaders attended the annual Arab American Day gathering held at the Organization of American States. NUSACC served as Lead Sponsor.

In the popular imagination, Gouia said, “World Heritage sites and cultural properties are often equated with dreams and beauty. The international community and the cultural actors and experts must meet the challenge of uniting peoples on an unprecedented scale in order to pave a path towards peace.” This is consistent with the UNESCO constitution, he continued, which states: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

Gouia continued, “When a World Heritage site is destroyed anywhere in the world, especially in the Middle East, the cradle of civilization, we are all diminished.” These sites remind us that wherever we go, he noted, “We find the same fundamental human aspirations, we see how cultures influence each other, how they are incredibly intertwined.”

“Let’s protect the world heritage in the Arab countries,” he concluded, “Let’s protect the Memory and the Heart of humanity.”



H.E. Faycal Gouia, Tunisia’s Ambassador to the United States, represented the Council of Arab Ambassadors.

History Cultivates the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs and Technologists

David Hamod, President & CEO of NUSACC, concentrated his remarks on the important role that youth in the Arab world can play in preserving the region’s antiquities. Young people in the



Ambassador Sarhan greets David Hamod, NUSACC’s President & CEO.

MENA region are some of the most interconnected and “switched on” in the world, he said, and it is important to harness this technological savvy for purposes of historical preservation.

Melding technology with an appreciation of Arab heritage will also help to create meaningful jobs for youth, he noted, which is a high priority for nations that want to keep their young people gainfully and productively employed. Hamod characterized this as “one more step in the Arab world’s gradual transition from a hydrocarbons-based economy to a knowledge-based economy.”

Protecting the cultural heritage of the Arab world is complicated by the fact that some of the region’s most important antiquities may be found in the

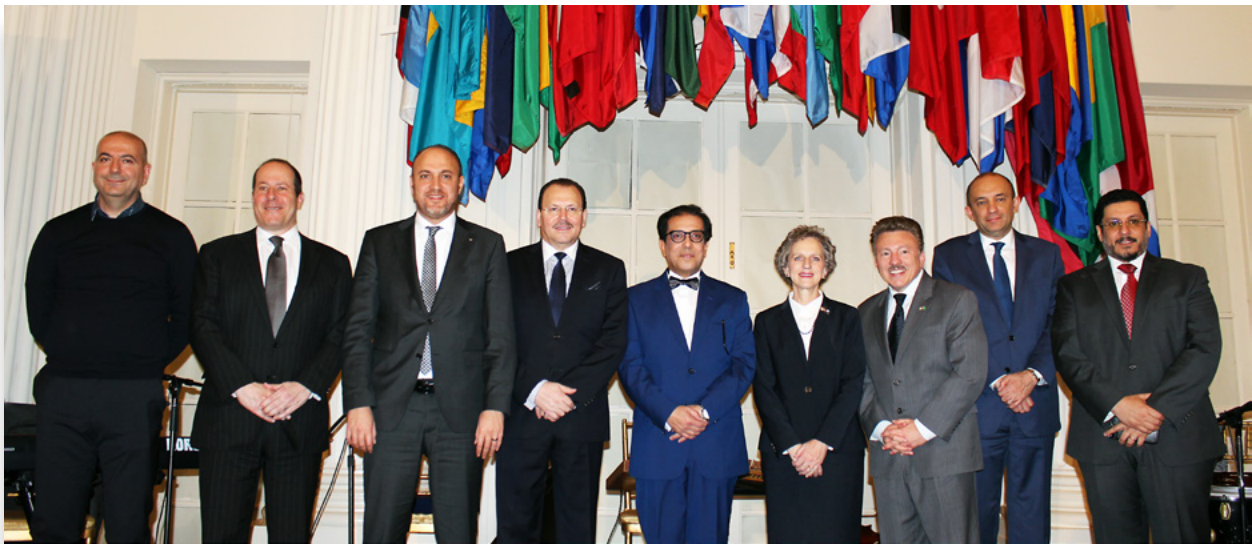


Mr. Marc Porter, Chairman of Christie's America, said that his company examines every item it receives to establish its authenticity, as well as its integrity of origin and means of procurement. The firm shares its findings with local and international law enforcement agencies in the event that an artifact needs to be returned to its rightful owner.

most troubled countries, Hamod noted, like Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. But despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, he said, there is growing awareness among citizens of the Arab world that this is a critical time to protect their cultural heritage, which is under assault from multiple quarters. This awareness has been heightened by the plight of those who have been driven from their homes, he suggested, and "people will never forget their homeland."

It is sometimes said that those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it, Hamod suggested. In this regard, he said, Americans of Arab descent – one of the USA's most upwardly mobile communities – have a special role to play in preserving the MENA region's antiquities. "Serving as a living, breathing bridge," he said, "we can form partnerships between the Old Country and the New, offering technology and expertise that will draw our cultures closer together."

This could be especially meaningful for the youth of the Arab world, Hamod concluded, "who are positioned to become the region's next generation of entrepreneurs and technologists, drawing on the region's past to pave the way to the future."



Some of the VIPs who attended, including keynote speakers (from right to left): H.E. Dr. Ahmed Awad Binmubarak, Yemeni Ambassador; H.E. Mohamedoun Daddah, Mauritanian Ambassador; David Hamod, NUSACC President & CEO; Ambassador Jennifer Zimdahl Galt, U.S. Department of State; H.E. Ambassador Salah Sarhan, Chief Representative of the Arab League; H.E. Faycal Gouia, Tunisian Ambassador; H.E. Husam Zomlot, Palestinian Ambassador; Marc Porter, Chairman of Christie's America; Hany Abu-Assad, renowned Palestinian film director.

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