**SADA AL ASWAQ**

**A WEEKLY PUBLICATIUON of AL BAATH NEWS**

**According to international observers,**

**Syria managed to maintain balance while others crumbled and linking economic growth to social standards is a particularity of Syria.**

**Sada Al Aswaq – Nathim Eid**

The Arab businessman, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh, commended the Syrian experience in fostering and supporting the youth; describing it as a prosperous experience in accordance with international considerations and assessment standards.

In an interview with “Sada Al Aswaq” and as a man who has assumed several leading positions on an international level, either as chairman or deputy chairman, Abu-Gazaleh summarized the international view of socio-economic developments in Syria by saying that Syria has achieved an admirable success in dealing with the effects of the crises rocking the world, particularly the financial and economic crisis, and was able to maintain high levels of balance while others crumbled. He also stressed that observations conducted in accordance with standards and indicators of major international organizations indicate that the poverty gap in Syria has decreased; while increasing in many other countries due to crises; attributing this to the clear vision of the Syrian leadership and its success in setting priorities and developing clear objectives and relevant approaches.

Abu-Ghazaleh described linking economic growth indicators to social standards and developing realistic scenarios for actual outcomes as a particularity of Syria; pointing out the current focus on bridging the gaps between regions and launching comprehensive development programs covering all regions and segments of the population under social market economy; as a creative approach with applications that deserve to be described as “admirable”. However, he blamed concerned parties in Syria for the modest promotion and marketing of many admirable positive aspects and achievements; such as striving to make the provision of free education an obligation rather than a right, as well as social security and free health care which are not very common worldwide.

Abu-Ghazaleh also highlighted the Syrian economic and social reform initiative launched several years ago as a precautionary measure for which “Syria deserves credit”.

Moreover, Mr. Abu-Ghazaleh suggested the establishment of a national center in Syria to monitor socio-economic development indicators, explain relevant concepts to citizens, raise their awareness and involve them in mainstream activities so that every citizen can do his part in national plans along with the government and other parties involved in direct implementation.

Abu-Ghazaleh called upon Syrian businessmen to play a more effective social role and institutionalize their contributions to social care; stressing the economic benefits they would gain from playing such role.

**Regulation of random populations would solve the housing problem in Syria**

**Syria is willing to build (100,000) housing units in Iraq.**

**Approval to increase regional banks shares in local banks.**

**A major window of corruption will soon be closed.**

**Import establishments are spreading “disappointment”.**

**During the global financial and economic crises, Syria managed to maintain balance while others crumbled.**

**Talal Abu-Gazaleh tells “Sada Al Aswaq”:**

**Linking economic growth to social standards is a Syrian particularity that is worth observation.**

**A prosperous Syrian experience in the area of official concern with the youth.**

**Sada Al Aswqa – Nathim Eid**

**This is the man who launched a positive initiative for the youth that was documented by the Arab Socio-Economic Development Summit held in Sharm El Sheikh in the form of a recommendation, and who has assumed various leading international positions that enabled him to develop a clear vision of socio-economic developments in most countries of the world.**

**The Deputy Chairman of the UN Global Compact from 2007 to 2008, Chairman of the Afro-Asian Knowledge Society Council in 2009, Chairman of the Global Alliance for ICT and Development (GAID) from 2009 to 2010, Chairman of the Arab States Research and Education Network (ASREN) until 2010, in addition to dozens of other similar positions which make the conversation with this man full of added value and renders his views an indicator of international views on many issues of socio-economic sensitivity.**

**Talal Abu-Ghazaleh , whose name sums up a long list of titles, was interviewed by “Sada Al- Aswaq” during his recent visit to Damascus.**

**An Initiative**

* Your organization is known for its initiative for the youth that was noted in the recommendations of the Arab Socio-Economic Development Summit held in Sharm El Sheikh last month.

Is this initiative based on future insight or the nature of your organization which focuses on developing knowledge economies utilizing the potentials of the youth?

\*\* “Yes, I was the guest of honor at the Arab Socio-Economic Development Summit held in Sharm El Sheikh on January 18, and the youth was one of the three main areas discussed in the Summit, in addition to civil society and economy.

I delivered the main speech at the Youth Summit and talked to young people for five hours by chairing a session which resulted in several recommendations that were approved in the form of decisions and recited before participating kings and presidents.

What concerns me personally is the fact that the Summit has adopted and welcomed the proposition made by Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization to hold a youth summit for knowledge development leadership in cooperation with the Arab League and the Mediterranean Forum for Youth and Childhood, as well as welcoming the suggestion that Morocco should host the summit to be held October 4-5, 2011.

I am focusing on this matter because I believe that anyone who does not give the youth adequate attention or ignores them is following the wrong approach, because youth now, due to their age group, are in control; as the new generation is now controlling matters. Therefore, this aspect of historical shift in communities’ leadership should be awarded due attention.

I picture rich people of the world as knowledge workers, with famous Bill Gates as an example. I remember another instance from the Kuwait Summit last year where Arab countries agreed to raise two billion US dollars to support development, yet they have not been able to do so. On the other hand, a single man called “Friis” invented “Skype”. Friis is a university graduate who sold this invention for (2.6) billion dollars; amassing a fortune which the entire Arab nation failed to amass.

By this comparison I am trying to say that if we want to build the future we have to realize that it goes through the youth as the world has reached the age of knowledge where revolutions are made using channels of knowledge which is an activity of young people and cannot be undertaken by the older generation.

**Syrian focus on the youth**

* How do you view the Syrian official handling of the youth in terms of care and investment in the potentials of this active age group?

\*\* I can honestly say that I am happy with the Syrian official focus on the youth. This is a bright experience which I have been monitoring closely due to the nature of my work. Moreover, being in certain positions allows me to see what is going on in the region and the world as a whole.

**Early awakening**

* Since, due to your “international” position, you are aware of the details of the socio-economic scene in most countries of the world, how do you view the scene in Syria and how do you assess Syrian performance in light of the global economic crisis?

\*\* Facts and figures indicate that Syria has implemented a series of important measures on the way to deal with the impact and effects of the global crisis, and managed to maintain high levels of balance while other crumbled; particularly with respect to the financial crisis and now the global economic crisis. Indicators confirm the fact that poverty rate has decreased in Syria while, due to the crisis, it increased in many other countries. The poverty gap in Syria decreased as established in international documents and reports issued by specialized organizations worldwide. Hence, this is not just my personal view.

I believe that the reason behind this is that the Syrian leadership has a clear vision while the vision of some other leaderships lack clarity; as they do not have clear objectives and priorities and therefore do not know how to reach them.

In any case, Syria’s readiness to deal with crises is nothing new, i.e. not spontaneous as is the case in certain countries.

While some countries where only starting to identify the effects of the crisis among their people in 2010 and 2011, Syria had launched a socio-economic reform program in 2005.

**Syria is one of the few countries which are still providing free education and health care.**

**The local business sector needs to play a greater and more effective role.**

**Socio-economic link**

* Do you think there is actual impact of economic reform on the social aspect on the ground, and what indicators do you use to measure such impact?

\*\* There is a feature here that is particular to Syria, with respect to the approach adopted. We call it a particularity because the problem is that we in the Arab world, and the world in general, often talk about pure economic standards; namely, growth rates, increasing prices and other abstract indicators; while ignoring social standards. In other words, there is no assessment of the significance of social dimension and outcomes and their relation with economic variables. Hence, we find a country celebrating a (7%) growth rate while poverty, and all types of suffering, are increasing; because such country did not consider the social impact of wealth.

 In Syria, however, the situation seems different. I have noticed the focus on bridging the gaps between regions and launching comprehensive developments programs covering all regions and segments of population under an economic approach known as the social market economy which I find creative. This fact has been supported by admirable applications.

Yet, I believe that these beautiful scenarios and facts have not been adequately publicized worldwide and I wonder why the concerned parties in Syria are being so modest and hesitant in talking about and marketing their achievements? This modesty does not help?

Syria is one of a few countries which strive to ensure free education and consider it an obligatory duty rather than a right; which is not very common in the world.

In addition, social security and free health care are all standards that need to be taken into consideration.

As observes, we noticed that the ongoing reform program in Syria has many features of insight and was not a reaction. The commendable Syrian initiative is represented by the fact that Syria did not wait for global crises to take place and produce effects; but, and overall approach to reform was adopted by means of brave measures and initiatives which began to produce results.

Evidence of this fact can be found in the Social Support Fund and other funds providing micro loans particularly to women and female villagers; which provide support to a vital segment of society that is in need. Moreover, admirable soft loans network has been established.

**Syrian particularity**

* Does this mean that we can talk of a Syrian particularity in this area?

\*\* Yes, and I can objectively say that I admire the programs launched by the Syrian government indicating insight; particularly, as economic aspects are linked to social ones. This country now has what deserves to be called a great “experience” which proved the incorrectness of those who believed in free international markets under the market economy theory without examining its social impact.

**Consumption-oriented globalization**

* Observers criticize the Syrian society for its excessively random consumption culture. Would you agree with such view and what is the solution in your opinion?

\*\* The media in the age of knowledge and information enables citizens to see everything in the world including models that they seek for themselves. Hence, when they see models of extravagant spending in the quest for luxury in certain communities or segments of the population, they start thinking of themselves and automatically imitate them. This is a direct result of open communication in the information society where aspects and features of consumption culture are mixed without recognizing particularities. Here, we must do something and must ask what that would be? Surely, we cannot close the information cyberspace; but, we can implement o

ther treatment measures by means of raising awareness of what is obligatory and what is right on the long list of options; as there are things that one desires but are neither obligatory nor right.

**Addressing defaults**

* You said that concerned parties in Syria are being modest in talking about achievements and highlighting positive features of the outcomes of reform. Do you propose a certain mechanism to address this default?

\*\* I modestly suggest establishing a Syrian center, organization or institute – regardless of the name – for social market economy. The purpose of such establishment is not only to explain the concept, which is extremely important, but also to turn it into a living philosophy; i.e. a free economy that serves the community.

Such a center can have two objectives: The first objective is to develop policies for social market economy and ensure the idea and its applications are dynamic in line with time, circumstances and community needs factors. The second objectives is to educate citizens on the importance of the social market concept for, even educated citizens; who are not provided with information; cannot be blamed for not obtaining such information automatically. This is where the media comes as the necessary middle link that is able to highlight what is going on at the official level to serve citizens.

I say this because I have noticed a clear tendency in Syria to put social considerations on top of all priorities of socio-economic decisions; which produced results that where admired by international organizations monitoring countries’ socio-economic performance and activities; particularly in time of crises and pressure.

**Non-social business sector**

* How would you assess the Syrian business sector’s contribution to the social development movement? Do you think that there is a real participation that is equal, even remotely, to the role played by the state in this area?

\*\* In the Arab world, with Syria included, the community service culture is poor or does not exist. We are still talking about donations, Zakat or tax believing that we have fulfilled our duty.

Surely, such initiatives are great but insufficient. We have poor perception of our social roles in our culture and vision. We need education and guidance to fill this gap. Community service is not done by donations, but by creating non-profit organizations that serve communities, i.e. education, health, capacity building or institutional support projects. This duty should be undertaken by the business sector which receives returns from community and must repay it.

We, at Talal Abu-Ghazaleh Organization have received more from our social responsibility activities than we gave; because society pays you back and treats you on a reciprocal basis in a manifestation of the concept of citizens’ partnership and companies’ citizenship; where the company should act as a good citizen fulfilling its duty towards the country fostering it, i.e. its community. This philosophy does not exist in the private sector here and we all share the responsibility of establishing it.

In brief, let me say the following to my friends in the Syrian business community:

When you give your community, it gives you back. What you have was given to you by your communities and the more you give them, the more they give you back.