

The Arab Predicament, Circa 2002:

How Can Arabs Fix the Problems of the Arab World? (Part IV)

Oct 4, 2002



In-Depth Reports

Ladies and gentlemen, I am now going to read a legally recorded telephone call:

"Hello! Hello! Rescue me! My house has caught fire! Help!"

"Define your terms exactly. Has your house caught fire or has it burst into flames?"

"Both! It has caught fire and it has burst into flames!"

"From which exactly do you want us to save you, from the catching fire or from the bursting into flames?"

"From both of them."

"And what would be the appropriate means for us to save you?"

"That you send the fire brigade now, immediately! Rescue me! Help me!"

"So, you want the fire brigade, then."

"Yes! Yes! Save me!"

"What precisely do you mean by the term 'fire brigade?' Do you mean the men who put out fires?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Right! I mean, the men who put out fires!"

"By themselves? The men of the fire brigade can't put out fires. They have to employ water and other materials useful to extinguish combustion."

"Okay! Okay! Save me!"

"Therefore, you are not only requesting the men of the fire brigade, you are also requesting the materials required for them to save you."

"Yes! Okay! Okay! Save me!"

"My God, Brother, now you have got us confused. What do you want us to do, save you or put out the fire?" (Applause.)

"Save me, then put out the fire!"

"And why not save you and put out the fire at the same time?"

"Oh, good blessed God. I am going to die."

"Do you suppose that Egypt will suffer a great loss with your demise?"

"No. No. There are millions more like me. But I beg you, for mercy's sake, save me!"

"So, you are not asking for the fire brigade, then. You are asking for mercy."

"Yes! Yes! Have mercy on me! I am begging for mercy!"

"In that case, you had better contact the Ministry of Religious Endowments or perhaps the Ministry of Social Affairs."

"But the fire brigade is in your department!"

"Oh, we are back to the fire brigade. Then why did you ask for mercy?"

"Please! Please! Ask for an explanation later! But for now, please, save me!"

"We are willing to prod you to save your own life, because we know that life is precious. Why do you believe that we will hasten to your aid? What would spur us to do that?"

"The sense of duty, the feelings of responsibility, moral commitment, official obligation -- the provision, pride, humanity."

"Thank you. We certainly appreciate all of that as a reason to save you. Now, I just have to fill out the required form before I can activate your rescue. What was the cause of the fire?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Rescue me!"

"Okay. Okay. We are going to save you, but there is no need to rush headlong into it. In many countries, auto accidents have occurred because of undue haste by the fire brigade. When fire broke out, as a result, there was no one around to rescue them. There is no alternative to deliberation. My dear man, you must know the cause of this fire. Was it the heat or was the source electrical or chemical? We need this in order to prepare the proper materials to put out the fire."

"I will assume it was all of those things."

"It's impossible for you to assume that. It's impossible for all those factors to be in play in one time and place."

"Listen to me! The flames really have me surrounded now -- there is no point in trying to put them out. Just save me! Get me a long ladder!"

"What do you mean by the word 'long'? On what floor do you live?"

"On the fifth floor."

"Then you don't need a long ladder. You need a medium-length ladder." "Okay! Okay! Send me a medium-length ladder!"

"We don't have a medium-length ladder. We have a long one suitable for buildings with fifty floors only. Do you have a building with fifty floors nearby?"

"Yes!"

"Is it possible for you to proceed to that building and then ascend to the fiftieth floor in order for us to save you there?"

"No. No. It's too far away."

"Is it possible for you to proceed to it by any means of public transport?"

"No! I am surrounded by flames on all sides! I'm not able to proceed to any place!"

"Strange. Are you talking from a telephone in your flat or from a neighbor's?"

"I'm talking from the telephone in my flat."

"Which means that the flames have not yet destroyed your telephone wires."

"That's true, but they're about to any time!"

"We have the assurance, then, that the new wires, which the government telephone department has installed in your flat, are truly fire resistant. In other words, after you yourself, sir, have been reduced to mere cinders, your telephone will continue to function."

"And the receiver, is it also fire resistant?"

"Unfortunately, no. The receiver is made of ordinary plastic. If the receiver burns, speak to me through the wire."

"Ah! Ah! The receiver is heating up! It's starting to catch fire! Help! Save -- "

"Hello? Hello? Hey, Brother, where did you go? The idiot didn't tell us his address. Mister, where do you live? Oh, you imbecile. How are we going to know where you are? He wastes an hour talking with us on the telephone and doesn't even tell us his name. Later on, they will say that the government doesn't act quickly to solve people's problems. Brother? Brother? Where did you go? Hello?"

"Oh, right."

"Where did you go? Are you talking from your flat?"

"No. The flat no longer exists."

"How did you get out of it?"

"I don't know how I got out of it."

"What is the number of the telephone from which you are speaking?"

"I'm not speaking from a telephone. I'm talking through the telephone wire, which I was able to hang onto while I was passing -- "

"You mean, therefore, that you have passed to the mercy of God. How lucky you are. The end. You got the mercy you were asking for."

"Thank you. Thanks a lot."

"But I must reprimand you. Why didn't you hurry to tell us your address when you reported your problem? How in God's name could we possibly come to save you?"

"I'm sorry, but you have no right to reprimand me. You didn't ask for my address."

"Were you waiting for me to ask you? It's your life, man, not mine. It's urgent that you mention it right away. The next time, you had better mention the address immediately."

"There won't be a next time, sir. I have died."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten that you had died. Why are you contacting us? To hinder and distract us in the performance of our duty? And why have they permitted you to contact us from where you are? Where are you speaking from?"

"From hell, sir."

"Oh, I'm sorry, no doubt. Why, in this world you obstructed the good works of the believers. What do you want now? Do you think we can save you from the flames of hell?"

"No, of course not. I, such a fool, I simply wanted to inform you of something I have discovered here in eternity -- that on earth, there is no therapy for darkness of soul nor a way of treating certainty with humor; nor is there a drug you can take to get rid of stupidity. Thank you. I'm hanging up now." (Applause.)

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [Tarek Heggy, \(templateC07.php?CID=122\)](#) [Rend Rahim Francke, \(templateC07.php?CID=123\)](#) and [Ibrahim Karawan \(templateC07.php?CID=124\)](#) ❖

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