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"E-Government"

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"E-Government"

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honored Guests,

It is a great pleasure for me to have the opportunity to speak to you, today, about this new concept of the so-called E-Government.

The E-Government is one of the concepts of the digital revolution that leads us to the "Knowledge Age". The transformative nature of this powerful technology has a profound impact on how people work, shop, interact, and communicate in various parts of the Earth.

The common factor of all this is to provide the knowledge at the lowest possible cost. Rapid Communication through e-mail, which is almost a free service, has become a phenomenon in itself. The strength and might of the internet in offering directly any kind of knowledge with just about no cost is, undoubtedly, a revolutionary event. Moreover, the growing potential of the internet and the digital technology has helped in creating more knowledge. Recognizing the amount of available information and its use will motivate further exploration of it.

This has been the case for e-commerce. The businesses' recognition for the power of internet and its speed in the performance of business, and how it showed the way to the access to very wide and diverse markets at negligible costs, had led to the re-evaluation of the methods and models of business. We practiced the cyberspace transactions (without sales outlets, exhibitions, warehouses, trade restrictions, and other requirements) for a brief period but it was quickly replaced with another more protective model called the "Mouse Methods and Building Blocks", where the traditional commerce ways are integrated with the enormous power of internet.

Although the internet companies have their ups and downs, do not doubt the influence of e-commerce. Some who were at the top almost collapsed, but this is a natural consequence that results from the huge investment in a new technology. The recent turmoil in the trade sector has led to the development of technology, knowledge, and vision that will pave the way to further progress. A disbeliever is the one who can only deny the enormous amount of development that has occurred in a short period of time.

The global rate of this progress has guided the re-arrangement of the technology sector, which has been indispensable. A few years ago, there was no individual body for e-commerce, but now having a website is not an option anymore, but rather a necessity for all businesses, however small or large in size.

For example; four years ago, my firm "TAGI" didn't have an internet website. However, we now have several sites for the various departments of the company and we also have a server that supports an internal

network and e-mail addresses that secure communication between all the company's 30 offices spread throughout the Arab world.

The internet does not exist for commercial use only. For NGOs and other organizations, IT has become crucial to ensure their presence in the World Wide Web (WWW). Through my work with a large number of Arab NGOs and international organizations, I have found that they all have websites, whereas it is now difficult to imagine that an organization has no website on the internet. Everyday, the number of individuals and organizations who enter the company's website increases frequently. These individuals and organizations, inquiring about information, leave their names and addresses as well.

Having a website has become an essential prerequisite for any institution in regards to marketing, commercial, and communicational matters. Also, it has become a byword for the eligibility and the degree of credibility of any establishment. The question that strongly presents itself is: If an institution does not have a decent website, can it be a "real" one?

This rapid evolution in being aware of the significance and importance of the websites is part of the reason why the internet is so amazingly spread all over the world, making the internet this powerful tool of knowledge.

Just as e-commerce has become an essential part of trade, like the accounting or tax system, e-government has become crucial for many nations around the world. The governments' rush to implement e-government, in fact, is not less than that of the private entities in order to achieve an electronic leap and cover the gap. This pressure and rush are experienced equally by the two parties of the political system; leaders and citizens alike. Many countries have issued laws to transform into e-government, making it an obligation and not a choice.

Perhaps it is noteworthy that one of the most important initiatives in achieving e-government in the world is happening here in the Arab world. His Highness Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai and Defense Minister of the United Arab Emirates, has set a deadline for the Dubai government to convert to e-government within 18 months, starting from last year. His Highness also prepared a list of the most important technology providers in the world to achieve this end with full support and encouragement. Moreover, he was clear enough in directing the government that it has no choice but to take the matter seriously and commit to the goals and stages of the plan. This is the best proof of showing how united are the techniques of establishing the e-government's initiatives of application running from the first Chief Executive, whether it is the former American President Clinton in the USA or the Prime Minister Blair of the United Kingdom, or His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum in Dubai.

Let me use a Microsoft's term "the digital nervous system" to point to an idea where an institution can effectively run the digital information. This includes knowledge management and cooperation to facilitate the exchange of information within the institution and between other

institutions, in addition to trade transactions and the supply of services to citizens.

A working paper presented by the UK for modernizing the government, in 1998, was to provide the details on all governmental electronic services. However, in March 2000, the final date for implementing the details of this paper was moved up to the year 2005. From another aspect, the United States presented a different model and that's by using the legislation to encourage the use of e-commerce. Nevertheless, it did not provide a specific legislation whereby the state bureaucracy will transform to become electronically available. The USA has encouraged e-commerce by planning methods such as: governmental tenders through the electronic network. The degree of converting into e-governments has shifted in the USA as well as in other states in order to join the race.

Here, a question can be asked: What is e-government? The UK government has mentioned in the "Modernizing the Government" paper that it is (the government of the information age strategy) which works to achieve (better services for citizens and institutions, and optimal utilization of the sources of the government's information through the methods of e-commerce in the entire private sector). E-government may include electronic complex relationships between the government and the citizen (G2C), between the government and businesses (G2B), and between the government and a government (G2G). Governments provide and manage a plethora of services and regulations for the benefit of the citizen and businesses. They provide jobs, pensions, free education, scholarships, drivers' licenses, permits to engage in various businesses, patents, trademarks, and countless other services. Governments also issue permits for huge numbers of activities such as construction, imports, exports, transportation, performance, hunting, and fishing ... Etc...

The goal of e-government is to provide services to its citizens through entering on-line rather than standing in-line. The governments have many internal relationships between their different bodies as well as external relationships between other governments. In many cases, the best customer of a government is another governmental body.

The e-procurement by governments is one of the reflections of e-government after a healthy step that has been taken to encourage e-commerce and to offer more initiatives. This has already happened within the US government, which has turned now to e-procurement. The comprehensive initiatives of the USA to transform into e-government are not up to the level of the initiatives of the UK government or the government of Dubai.

Providing services to citizens is a large and important part of the e-government's job, but it is definitely not the only one. The e-government, in the minds of many intellectuals, is linked to expanding the practice of democracy in society; the technology will allow far and greater participation of citizens in their governments. This is what is actually happening in the government's departments in the United States and other countries as well.

On the other side, some other bodies such as the CNN Network has embraced a sort of e-city hall democracy, where the whole city can ballot, vote, and take a decision on current events that appear on the network.

However, most people realize that this method is unhelpful and it is not expected to expand at a larger scale where it is now, as it is limited to specific topics of local governments in some places. It is anticipated that the government and its various departments will maintain the same degree of importance for them as they do now.

That does not mean that e-government has only to provide services to citizens and involve them with it, although it does forget to have greater efficiency in its administrations. Legislators and lawmakers, like others, are in dire need of information. They need to know everything about current events, as well as the needs and views of various businessmen. They need information on international conventions and they need to know the views and concerns of constituencies, records and correspondences of voters, evidences provided by experts, previous legal texts, suggested texts, recent amendments and similar laws, etc. Developing laws and policy formulation is hard work and it demands a burdening responsibility.

It will be useful if the lawmakers can be helped through e-commerce. The same thing can be applied on the judicial authority and on the relations between the various authorities: the executive, legislative, and judicial. Sharing information is of a major importance to increase the effectiveness of the government and e-government.

Not many countries raise questions about the reason why e-government should be applied. It is obvious that it has become a necessity and that the public demands it. But the question is about the speed that governments can electronically provide services with, taking into account the special circumstances of every state in terms of infrastructure, human resources, etc. What most frustrates the public is the government's bureaucracy and the huge number of departments of the various services. Currently, in the era of globalization and under the support of the WTO, the public is no longer an isolated group of citizens, but has become a global institution able to achieve the development goals of the nation, and this can impede them. Improving the performance of the government must have a priority in the overall context of trade policies and e-government.

I have read recently (coincidentally) a statistic issued by the World Bank in the late 1990s, which indicates that obtaining 18 signatures is needed for the release of goods from the Lebanese customs! See how much this adds to the cost and to the amount of the burden it places on the economic growth.

Perhaps, we all realize that these types of problems and obstacles do not belong to Lebanon alone and that they exist to varying degrees in most of the Arab countries.

The public expect to go through one step which is "online entry" into the government's website, instead of "standing inline" waiting for a day, a month, more or less in front of the government's offices and buildings.

The Jordanian government is on the way for the introduction of e-government which seems to be a successful example. Jordan learnt from applied programs in other countries and it used such models to guide the implementation of its own. It is clear that there is a high level of connected and visible leadership in Jordan in both the public and private sectors. Jordan has a unique opportunity to link the initiative of the electronic government with the IT initiative "REACH" presented by the Jordan Computer Society (JCS) and the Information Technology Association of Jordan (int@j), depending on the local IT sector to be responsible for the design and providing of services. The Jordanian e-government strategy must be developed because of the good competitive quality in addition to coordination with the public sector's reformation program. There is no doubt that the e-government program is not a substitute for administrative systems and procedures which are currently used, but it is rather a tool to facilitate those processes. It is advisable to begin studying technological and legal security for the application of e-government.

The fast-track projects that will be implemented are as follows: trade organizing (G2B), where companies can register and pay promptly so they can easily interact with the government. The second project will be concerned with the tax and social security (G2C), and where citizens and businesspeople can electronically pay taxes. The third project facilitates the process of putting government services and auctions online. The fourth project will address the communications technology of permits; people can obtain those permits electronically and directly from their providers. The fifth project deals with e-driving services, which will provide all citizens and businesspeople with all of its services including driving, ownership of vehicles, and also electronic payment. The sixth project allows citizens and businesspeople to electronically buy and sell real estate. The last project requires from the government to provide other governmental departments with its services through the government's website "policy and practice".

It is worth mentioning that the Jordanian government will carefully depend on the selected fast-track projects to test the gradual implementation of the e-government program with the spread of awareness at the same time between Jordanian citizens. The government's officials will explain the concept of e-government and its benefits.

Egypt, for example, is among the leading States in the Arab world for spending on technology and the internet, and it has the largest number of internet users. The support and acquiring information center of the Egyptian Cabinet founded a network of governmental services on the internet to familiarize citizens how to obtain these services. There is detailed data for more than 331 services which are considered as the first part of the total governmental services that reach up to 1000 services.

The Egyptian government has overcome many of the things that constitute problems and create obstacles toward the establishment of e-government, including internet illiteracy among new graduates and the disability to obtain computers to offer free courses and erase internet literacy, in addition to the incapability to provide computers at lower prices.

While the states start providing e-government services, they tend to follow specific stages.

Initial efforts of the application of e-government were the flow of information into one direction through the government's website. This pattern shows that each governmental body must have a website according to the government structure so that beneficiary can get whatever information he/she wants. After obtaining the necessary information, the citizens had to follow up through regular mail, phone, or fax to apply the following steps. This is now the case in many Arab countries, where citizens may find the website of the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Tourism, and perhaps they can find websites for public universities or research bodies. However, they can never find a special structure that covers all the government's websites. This, if anything, shows that the top leadership is still far from this process, and efforts in this regard are individual initiatives that might be taken by managers of departments who are seeking to provide certain information or services. This might be a good first step towards e-government, and government members who contributed to take all of these initiatives deserve appreciation and acclaim.

The second phase towards e-government is characterized by a limited degree of interaction in both directions between the citizen and the government. This can be applied by providing forms which must be filled in and re-sent via the internet. I, of course, do not mean that these stages are obligatory and everyone must follow them, but what I mean is that these stages are generally followed by the countries that have endorsed an e-government.

E-government systems now allow interactive services. The user can actually run a business or a trade through the internet such as electronic payment of taxes and cars tickets, obtaining permits, renewal of driving licenses and revising debts, etc.

The last phase of e-government services includes demolishing the walls and barriers of the various governmental departments for the benefit of citizens and institutions that deal with the government, allowing them to manage their businesses and have access to information at any time and in any place in a fully interactive manner without knowing which of the government's departments provide any specific service - the concept of one-stop shopping.

The benefit of the user reflects one of the most important principles that serve the transition to e-government, where the focus must be on the customer (i.e. citizen) and not on the governmental entity that is specialized in a service. This helps to clarify another important concept on the application of e-government, which is that the goal is not to automate the process, but it is to re-engineer the government to be more effective and efficient. This is one of the most fundamental factors in achieving general acceptance of e-government, which is to recognize that providing electronically a service will double its quality as the speed of delivery will be increased and the waiting time will be reduced.

The e-government allows easier access to services and faster performance of them, which consequently leads to the satisfaction and happiness of citizens of their government. And on the other hand, the government in turn will be accepted and supported more and more from its citizens. This is what will represent a (win-win) situation, for both the government and the citizens. The government which achieves the satisfaction of its citizens and gains their confidence will have accomplished its main goal and has earned the right to rule. At the same time, citizens who can easily, quickly interact with their government will feel closer to it and that their lives have evolved for the better.

Obviously, one would expect that e-government will minimize costs. One of the advantages of e-government is the huge reduction in paper transactions costs. Modern studies have shown that without a reasonable doubt.

Governments, like individuals, live in a world of competition. The degree of success achieved by the government is measured through offering services such as providing potable water, elimination of crimes, establishing the security and stability of the areas of employment and trade, providing good schools, academic and practical qualification of knowledgeable manpower, clarity and fairness of the laws, the effectiveness of the judicial system, along with many other services provided by the government. Those are all the elements of the success of the government on competition with other governments in terms of the amount of investment which it attracts, whether citizens stay in it or travel abroad, or if it suffers from brain draining, and how is its image to the other citizens, etc.

The progress and development of e-government will give additional advantages to the states that adopt its application, but that will also allow which will in turn give more disadvantages to the states that do not.

While there are many advantages to countries that successfully adopt a system of e-government, it is required that they have an adequate design and a full openness so that the shift to the e-government program will be successful. E-government needs an environment of order and an existence of a general trend that encourages e-commerce, because e-commerce is expected to pave the way for e-government. This requires the attention to an action plan which works to create the atmosphere for this shift, such as having an interest in subjects of the protection of intellectual property, piracy issues, insurance, the use of credit cards, electronic signatures and ratifications, the infrastructure of telecommunications, regulating the international trade, customs and transportation, etc. It also entails establishing competing entities within the government ready to cooperate in realizing the goal of enabling the government to provide better services and to fulfill their obligations rather than wrestling and competing to build their own bureaucratic fiefdoms.

We must re-examine and re-evaluate the image that the government sees itself in at all levels in the light of the information age, with the need for a determination by the highest political levels to push and impose the necessary changes to transform these plans into reality.

The developing countries, in particular, face some special challenges; one of these is the digital divide, which is the dividing line between those who have access to the internet and related technology and those who do not. Often, this gap in developing countries is wider, resulting from the educational, economic, and regulatory obstacles which make it difficult for the majority to have access to the modern digital world. This represents a fundamental challenge for the governments of developing countries as well as their companies and institutions, which strive for the development of e-commerce. All of this is because the first step in the application of e-government or e-commerce is having people that can benefit from the services of the internet. Therefore, this can be one of the biggest challenges of the Arab world to adopt the system of e-government. For all of that, the causing factors of the digital divide must be quickly addressed, namely: education and regulatory barriers (such as import taxes and other restrictions on the equipments), governments' monopolies, increasing restrictions on internet service providers, and the privatization and liberalization of the basic telecommunications service providers.

In addition to the need to keep abreast of the digital divide, there remains a need to develop a strong ideal legal climate which recognizes contracts and electronic and digital signatures made via the internet. Governments must also facilitate the creation of infrastructure for the public with the adoption of appropriate standards of piracy, insurance, and documentation, as well as the development of a proper healthy relationship between the government and the private sector while implementing the changes.

As is the case of e-commerce, the challenge of e-government is one that must be faced by the entire community, the government, the private business sector, NGOs, and academic organizations. They all have to effectively, deeply, and quickly cooperate to meet the challenges when integrating new technology which contains the manufacturing force that is capable of changing the way the society operates for the benefit of all.

Before I finish I would like to candidly tell you my point of view, which is that we need more cooperation between the Arabs and more coordination and partnerships between us and various countries and professionals. We also need to work harder at assuming our place among world countries and to increase our representatives in international organizations. Personally, I have always sought that through my participation in many of the main organizations involved in this issue. One of those organizations is the ICC in Paris, where I'm privileged to be the Chairman of the Commission on Telecommunication, Information Technology and E-Commerce. I am trying, with all my energy, to achieve one of my most important goals which is to provide more support to developing countries in respect of all communications and information technology. As the Chairman of the Board of Directors of my firm TAGI, we became the first Arab specialized institution which plays a key role in the framework of ICANN, the internet company, for allocating names and numbers. It is the organization which is globally responsible for the permanence and validity of the internet.

In TAGI, we did the same for the Multilingual Internet Names Consortium (MINC), and through my leadership of the regional organization the Arab

Management and knowledge Society (AKMS), I have already begun to coordinate the cooperation of the various entities involved in e-commerce, Internet, and e-government in a framework of a single, effective and huge working organization.

I welcome all of you to join this effort and become members of the Arab Management and knowledge Society. Joining this society and working together, you will contribute in creating a united Arab sector under the focus of attention of the international organizations that have an influence in the creation and management of technology upon which all our future depends.

If Shakespeare once said: "To be or not to be, that is the question", then I say: "To e- or not to e- , that is the question"

Thank you all.