

**UNITED NATION'S INFORMATION
COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (UN ICT)
TASK FORCE**

INAUGURAL MEETING

**OPENING REMARKS
BY
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UN ICT Task Force Inaugural Meeting
Opening Remarks
By
Talal Abu-Ghazaleh

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am happy and honored to have the opportunity to address you today and to share a few thoughts with you regarding the establishment of this new UN ICT Task Force. I am here in my capacity as Chairman of the ICC Commission on Telecommunications and IT, which is the global voice for the international business community and private sector leadership in the ICT field. I am also the Chairman of Talal Abu-Ghazaleh International, an Arab regional multidisciplinary professional services company.

I was speaking the other day with a friend who told me a story about globalization. Two Arabs and two Europeans were listening to old music and they found that they knew all the same songs, and these songs brought back memories to them all; they shared a bond through the music. At the same time, the Europeans were thoroughly European and the Arabs were thoroughly Arab; globalization is synonymous with linkage, not with uniformity. But even back in the early 80's, well before the advent of many of the information and communication technologies we now take for granted, people who did not yet know each other, in totally different locations in the world, were building their cultures on shared inputs. Today, these gentlemen in their 30's could not share very well the music tastes of younger generations that are also now appreciated on a global basis. But today, they do have a certain degree of shared cultural history between themselves based on what they experienced, independent of one another and independent of one another's countries, 18 years ago.

In other words, the shared global culture that existed almost two decades ago is a bond between these individuals that still maintains a connection today. Globalization is not a new phenomenon. It is an ongoing process, which is firmly established, with solid roots, but the digital revolution has simply acted as a potent catalyst. However, the cultural bond that these gentlemen share, which allows them to now share mutual old memories of the same music (or other types of culture), is something that is not universally experienced.

But today, although the cultural fashion may be different, the access of younger generations to modern ICTs allows much broad participation in the same sort of mutual sharing and on a more inclusive basis. In fact, although many of us who are over 30 (or over 60) may not be so much in touch with the current trends, there are very strong international cultural patterns that are being carried and facilitated by the Internet. The financial requirements and other impediments for cultural interaction have been dramatically reduced. This has lowered the barrier for access to a global culture that previously was defined by the ability to travel, attend certain schools, have a certain amount of money for purchasing cultural icons, access to certain clubs, social groups, etc. Now, one has only to have a rudimentary amount of English language ability, small financial means to access an Internet café, or a job in a company that requires computer literacy. These can provide access to a global culture that is growing rapidly in extent, availability, and participation. The ramifications are nothing short of revolutionary, and of course we are talking here not only of cultural opportunities, but the corollary of those which are educational, vocational, and financial. But, despite the impressive potential and results that these technologies have for equalizing human opportunity, many inequalities remain.

In some places, there are inequalities of culture and environment. These are true barriers and they are referred to as a Digital Divide. You have this in the United States and in Europe and elsewhere. But such barriers can be potentially overcome by personal initiative. There are, however, barriers of sheer availability and resources, as well as barriers of finance, language, and history that are not so easily overcome. These are characteristics of the International Digital Divide; the Digital Divide that is a reality for many of those born, even today, in countries such as Egypt, India, Sudan, or in any other developing country.

These are examples of the developing countries of the world, in which the bulk of the world's population continues to have limited access to even basic telecommunications, and many more with better opportunities may still be limited by issues such as language, location, technology, and less stringent but still serious financial barriers.

I am the Chairman of an Arab professional services firm, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh & Co. International, which has been active in service and development in the Arab world for nearly 30 years. The Arab world has changed in remarkable ways in the last 30 years, and I can say with no false modesty that firms like mine are very proud of the contributions that we have made in this development. The changes are staggering to anyone who has witnessed the evolution of the region. Although

I have always dreamed of development and bringing the Arab region fully into the global order, I do not have any illusions of the challenges we face and the long road ahead. Despite many dramatic changes across the region, the Arab region remains a group of developing countries. There are many definitions of developing countries, but being not so much a theorist or philosopher as a practical businessman, I would define 'developing countries' as those in which the human potential of large parts of a society is unrealized, not through failure of culture, but through lack of opportunity.

Therefore, the mission of my own company includes a commitment to furthering the socio-economic development of the Arab region. However, in my capacity as Chair of the ICC Commission on Telecommunications and Information Technology (CTIT), one of my principal commitments is not just to the Arab region, but also to the developing countries, in general. As a native of a region that, despite great progress, remains on the margins of the global economic order, I feel that my perspective has broad applicability to other developing and less developed countries. When I assumed my position as chair of the ICC's CTIT, I pledged to develop an enhanced focus toward the needs of developing countries. I believe that my personal background gives me a clear focus on the needs and perspective of the developing countries. And speaking for these countries, I can say that we appreciate the opportunities and challenges to provide greater equality of opportunity. The ICT revolution that we are living through offers us the true potential to reduce the development time scale, and to provide opportunities today!

I am therefore very, very pleased by the formation of the UN ICT Task Force. There is no shortage of initiatives to address these challenges, but there is a need for an acknowledged and clearly recognized leader with a global store of good will to act as an organizer, intermediary, and facilitator in expanding digital opportunities to all of the world's citizens. I am familiar with countless examples of projects and commitments by many entities that are making invaluable contributions. I am personally involved with many different projects in the drive to digital inclusiveness. One of the major factors in the Digital Divide is language. English is the language of international business and of the nation that created the Internet. However, if millions of people do not know English, yet, should that be a barrier to their participation? I think not. And working with the Arab Internet Domain Names Association (AIDNA), Arab Internet Names Consortium (AINC), Arab Knowledge Management Society, ICANN, etc., efforts are underway to provide not only local language content, but also domain names in actual Arabic characters. Similar efforts are underway in other languages as well.

Language is one barrier to successful capitalization of the ICT revolution. But there are others also. The availability, quality, adaptability, and capitalization of ICT services and service models are unequally distributed around the globe. This is definitely a problem in the Arab world as well. Like other developing regions, the Arab world lags behind the rest of the world in ICT for numerous reasons. Although dramatic growth rates in some Arab countries offer the promise of a brighter future, the Arab world still rates near the bottom of the global ICT development indexes. For this reason, my firm has formed a new company which aims to act within the Arab world in a way that is analogous to the way the UN ICT Task Force seeks to operate on a global basis. The main difference being that we are forming a company and not a task force, and it will be with a development mandate, in the same spirit of the UN ICT Task Force, the birth of which we are now witnessing. This organization, a company called “The Information Technology Advisory Group International (INTAGI), will act as a catalyst for the harnessing, distribution, and improvement of information technology and communication in the Arab world. INTAGI will bring together a whole range of Arab expertise from individuals and organizations which believe that ITC provides the best opportunity for Arab countries to achieve economic growth and development.

The UN ICT Task Force is focused not simply on ICTs, but also on ICT integration into all development issues. Linked to this is the phenomenon of globalization, which is in large part a direct result of the ICT revolution, and the multilateral framework of trade liberalization that is administered globally by the WTO. These tripartite phenomena, the digital revolution, globalization, and multilateral trade liberalization under the WTO administration, represent fundamental and interrelated challenges to developing countries. The UN ICT Task Force seeks to look at ICTs in a holistic context. This comes at a propitious time, as we are now entering a new stage in the Internet revolution. The Dot Com implosion did not discredit the value of the Internet or ICT in general, but it did bring a dose of reality back, not just to the investors but also to business and society at large. We have not lost sight of the power and potential of the Internet, but we have begun to see it in a more manageable context. The Internet is a tool that works well with, but does not replace, the real world. So, working on real-world (in other words, non-virtual) issues is important to ICT, just as the reverse is true. The WTO and the influence of its legal agreements (GATT-94, TRIPS, GATS, etc.) are very important in facilitating the benefits of ICT development. But developing countries also have challenges in integrating into the WTO’s multilateral framework. Language issues and other human capacity issues play a part in this as well. My own firm, TAGI, has been working with the WTO, UNCTAD, and ITC in this area, translating the official WTO guides into Arabic (the Business Guide to the Uruguay Round and the Business Guide to the World Trading System) which has made it possible for Arab business and government leaders with imperfect English skills to understand the basic facts and implications

of the WTO and its origin, creation and agreements. We have also begun to work with the WTO to begin developing an Arabic version of the WTO web site. And with the Center for Applied Studies in International Negotiations (CASIN) and the Arab Knowledge Management Society (AKMS), we are introducing human capacity building training programs for Arab policy makers and Arab WTO negotiators, which will fill an important part of the overall puzzle in integrating the developing Arab countries into the WTO framework. Although many Arab countries are WTO members, and others are in the process of accession, they face serious challenges in negotiating and implementing the agreements in a fair, timely, and professional manner. All developing countries face these same challenges, and CASIN is one of the global leaders in aiding countries to improve that process. The real world and the virtual world are not really two, but one; they are really an intertwined whole and so the UN ICT Task Force's approach is definitely on the right track. We need to incorporate ICT into development, and to incorporate development of real world infrastructure into supporting ICT development; it is a two-way street.

There is no single key to success and cooperation between governmental, multilateral, corporate, and NGO players is the only solution to identifying, acquiring, and implementing the resources necessary to make progress in this effort.

In addition to my work with my own firm and the ICC, I am also active in numerous Arab NGOs, particularly in professional service and development societies. We are working hard to make progress in the rapid development of opportunities. This is more than a small order of business. What I have found in my experience is that partnerships between diverse partners can be extremely beneficial in exerting the range of technical, business, financial, and educational resources to facilitate development. Even when this is accomplished, we cannot expect the results to be immediately transformational. But we can be sure that we are building a framework for continued and successful development. A concrete example of this is the recently established joint venture between Cambridge University International Examination (CIE), one of the leading international education and certification bodies, Talal Abu-Ghazaleh & Co. International (TAGI), the leading Arab regional professional services firm, and the Arab Knowledge Management Society (AKMS), which is dedicated to the creation of an Arab knowledge society. These partners have prepared a program of online accredited education of world-class quality, which will be translated into Arabic and offered on-line across the Arab world, bringing excellent educational opportunities to people whose opportunities were previously very limited.

Coordinating these manifold partners, projects, and capital is an important element in achieving success. As a representative of a developing country and a developing region, in my capacity as Chair of ICC's CTIT, as President of the Arab Knowledge Management Society, and as a dedicated servant of global development efforts, I welcome the formation of this UN ICT Task Force, and their astute and beneficial leadership.

Thank you.