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**BASIS**

Business Action to Support  
the Information Society

***"Driving Development with ICTs and the Internet Conference"***

***Co-organized under the patronage of H.E. Sheikha Lubna Al-Qasimi,  
Minister of Economy, UAE by:***

***International Chamber of Commerce - Commission on E-Business, IT and  
Telecoms (EBITT) and Business Action to Support the Information Society,  
(BASIS)***

***Talal Abu-Ghazaleh & Co. International (TAGI) & Talal Abu-Ghazaleh  
Information Technology International (TAGITI)***

***Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce***

***"Opening Remarks"***

***By***

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***Chair, Commission on E-Business, IT and Telecoms (EBITT)  
and Business Action to Support the Information Society, (BASIS)***

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**Your Excellency,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, and distinguished guests:**

This is my last time with you in my capacity as EBITT Chair, and as you might expect, this leads me to indulge in a certain amount of reflection and evaluation, as well as analysis and focus on the way forward.

Over the last seven years we have witnessed incredible growth in ICT penetration around the world, and particularly in the Arab world. Average growth in Internet penetration over the last seven years in the Arab world has been approximately 500%. Internet usage in Egypt has grown a staggering 1200%. The UAE leads the Arab world in internet users with over a 33% penetration rate in 2007. Internet penetration across the Arab world is now estimated at close to 10%, a huge leap in such a few short years, with far ranging significance for the future.

The title of our program today is 'Driving Development with ICTs and the Internet'. In surveying the landscape of technical, regulatory, and cultural change taking place, I felt compelled to consider whether there was any small degree of hubris in our avowed roles as shapers, developers and catalysts for an information society in the developing countries. With the breakneck speed of progress it almost feels like we're putting ourselves at the head of the stampede and imagining

that we're leading it, when it is in fact propelled by a driving force of nature.

It is indeed helpful to stand back and try to get a perspective on our true role and impact. And there is no doubt that the development that we are engaged in and witnessing cannot be attributed to any single source or factor, yet we, and I emphasize the 'We' are all together playing a critical role in promoting ICT-led development, which brings us again to the focus on the multi-stakeholder perspective of ICC and BASIS, UN ICT Task Force, GAID, and so on. In fact, when I first started working with the UN ICT Task Force in 2001, I was immediately impressed and committed to the entire concept of the 'multi-stakeholder concept'.

The term, "multi-stakeholder initiative", has been repeated so often during these last years that it really has become a rather hackneyed phrase, yet it remains the best description of how we work, and best prescription for how to achieve progress. For those of us with a memory going back 14 or 20 years, we realize the importance of this perhaps today over-used term, because development initiatives were not always pursued in such a spirit, and the business community was not always accorded the same status within the development community that it is today.

The changes in perception and attitudes are, I believe, built upon concrete experiences and outcomes that can now be accessed by anyone with a connected computer and the inclination to pursue

them. The fundamental issue is the broad acceptance that business is not only a valuable, but an essential partner in the struggle for development, and that with cooperation between businesses, government and civil society, enormous progress can be made.

As will be discussed in detail in our program today, the most essential aspect is that we as business and civil-society organizations, can provide policy guidelines and influential advocacy for adoption of those guidelines, to create an enabling environment, which means innovation, investment, competition, and entrepreneurship are encouraged, and government policy makers realize that a vibrant, competitive, low-cost, high-speed telecommunications system is an essential stepping stone to participation in the world information society.

That information society is a reality today, yet it is hard to believe how fast it has developed.

To illustrate the speed of this development and underlying change in attitudes and policies, allow me to ask you a question:

If any of you want to send me a message or a document at the conclusion of this meeting, how will you do it? ..... Naturally you'll send me an email, and you will attach your document in Word or Adobe format. The document you attach may be 20 pages or 200 pages, but it won't make a difference in the time it takes or the cost of sending it to me. Just 12 years ago, in Cairo where my firm's Office of the Chairman is located, you would have needed to fax the document and it would have cost tens, maybe hundreds of dollars depending on the size. Not only that, but in order for my firm to have

a fax machine to receive your document, I needed to pay a Fax Tax. The government required a special tax on any phone line used for faxes, which in effect penalized business owners and those who relied on long distance communications. A more harmful and unconstructive policy would be hard to find; yet a few short years later, Egypt offered easy Internet access to any of its citizens that had a phone line, introduced private sector competition to internet and mobile communications, and as a result they have had the highest growth in communications in the Arab world.

One of the key choices they made was to bring key business leaders into the decision-making process with government leaders, and their results have been outstanding. We have seen similar dynamics in Jordan, where King Abdullah has not only been an inspiration, but a driving force in forging both business and development projects to provide connectivity.

What the last ten years have begun to show, for all to see, are the clear outcomes of policy choices in communications and the benefits of proper policy frameworks. Here in the UAE we see of course, the highest internet penetration rates in the Arab world. The policies of leaders like H.E. Sheikha Lubna, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum have led to Dubai and the UAE to rank among the most well-known and popular destinations in the world, and to move it beyond the classification of a developing country.

While we see clear success stories in the Arab world, and across the developing world, the results are uneven. There are still many nations that have not yet achieved comparable levels of success, whether due to adverse circumstances or bad policy choices. I believe that is the most important contribution BASIS is making in offering that range of tools to support government policy makers in developing the enabling framework for success. And for those nations that make that commitment and yet face remaining challenges whether related to education, finance or otherwise, I think it is safe to say that for any nation today, where there is a will, there will be a way, and we can find the right network of partners to facilitate faster uptake of ICT innovations.

Looking at the Arab world, the statistics show a great deal of progress, but it is still uneven and far below the level that we would hope to see for truly inclusive and transformational development. The greatest asset we have is our young people. Youth (under age of 25) make up between 50 and 65% of our entire population. Our young people are our greatest asset, but also our greatest danger. If they are not given the means to achieve education, knowledge and meaningful employment and social endeavors, their huge numbers are likely to lead to severe social and perhaps political pressures in the region in the coming decades. The Internet offers a medium to provide quality education and even employment for our huge and growing population of young people. Our efforts to provide access to computers, connectivity and related ICT resources is a key step in allowing communication and education for youth.

Of course, the main thing that young people seem inclined to do with the internet is to play games, network, and look for entertainment opportunities. However once they are turned on and tuned in to the power of the medium, it offers the opportunities for education, e-commerce, and other economic and social activities that can drive development and provide hope for our future. The challenges are huge, but so are the opportunities.

To conclude my remarks, I want to give you a perspective on hope and on perseverance. When you're in the trenches working to make things happen and running into obstacles and frustrations time and time again, it's easy to become worried that nothing will change and it is not just an uphill but an impossible battle. My personal experience has shown me that possibilities are real. The work of many of the individuals and organizations represented here today has been crucial to many key achievements: WTO accession and intellectual property protection, establishment of e-business tools, rural ICT toolkits, and so many other essential elements of the information society, because of you and your organizations. We may not make every benchmark as scheduled, but together we are changing the world for the better.

Thank you.

Talal Abu-Ghazaleh