

Arabs Blast U.S. 'Big Brother' Approach to Bilateral Free Trade Agreements *Participants at Bahrain Talks Insist Trade Deals Meant to Serve American Interests*

By Agence France Presse (AFP)
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MANAMA: Arabs attending a conference Thursday in Bahrain blasted Washington's "Big Brother" attitude in bilateral Free Trade Agreements, saying they are political tools to serve U.S. interests rather than enhance economic prosperity in the region. "FTAs are not the ultimate solution for this region. ... I see FTAs as a catalyst for change and reform rather than promoting trade," said Rashid Rashid, Egypt's minister of foreign trade and industry.

"FTAs are creating a negative environment. It is a waste of time to think that we (Arabs) will achieve economic integration through the U.S.," Rashid told a panel during the Arab Business Council (ABC) annual meeting.

"The United States will not be the gateway for regional economic integration," he said.

Rashid's comments came in response to Robert Lawrence, professor of trade and investment at Harvard University, who had earlier told the panel that FTAs between Washington and Arabs will help integrate Arab economies.

"If Arab countries can integrate with the United States (through FTAs), it will be easy for them to integrate with each other," Lawrence said.

Although he acknowledged that the "U.S. motives of these agreements are fundamentally political," Lawrence said "but they have to deliver economically in order to be effective." Arabs can reap the fruits of FTAs if they use them "to open up their economies and accelerate domestic reforms," Lawrence said.

Washington has already signed FTAs with Jordan, Morocco and Bahrain and is negotiating similar accords with Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Framework trade accords, a prelude to FTAs, have also been signed with several Arab states.

The FTAs are part of U.S. President George W. Bush's plans to create a Middle East free-trade area by 2013.

Sharif al-Zubi, industry and trade minister of Jordan, the first Arab country to sign an FTA with Washington, ridiculed the idea of implementing Arab integration through accords with the United States.

"I really fail to understand the logic that if you want to do Arab integration, you have to go to the United States," he said.

He said the FTA has greatly enhanced Jordanian exports to the United States from just \$10 million in 1999 to \$1.5 billion expected this year, besides creating 60,000 job opportunities.

The agreement however failed to deliver knowledge and improve know-how in Jordan, a country facing an acute unemployment problem among its skilled workforce, Zubi said.

"The main shortcoming of the FTA is that it has failed to move to the next level," he said.

Arif Naqvi, vice chairman and chief executive officer of Abraaj Capital, United Arab Emirates, was more blunt in his criticism of FTAs.

"To me, it looks as a 'Big Brother' attitude ... a tool of U.S. foreign policy," to promote U.S. interests, he said.