[ PROFILES ]

Clovis Maksoud (J.D. ’51)

by Susan Karamanian, Associate Dean for International Studies

This past Ramadan, I attended an iftar at the home of the Ambassador of Syria to the U.S., Imad Moustapha. After learning that I worked at GW Law, the ambassador steered me to Clovis Maksoud, an unassuming man who politely told me that he had earned his J.D. in 1951 at GW Law. Shortly into our conversation, Ambassador Moustapha mentioned that Mr. Maksoud, originally from Lebanon, was also an ambassador, having served as the chief representative of the Arab League to the U.S. and the United Nations from 1979 to 1990; he resigned due to the Arab League’s position on the Gulf War. He also had been the Arab League ambassador to India from 1961 to 1966.

The next day I spoke to a colleague about Ambassador Maksoud and he said, “Oh yes. He is a regular on television about the Middle East.” I learned quickly that Ambassador Maksoud’s experience as a journalist (he was senior editor of Al-Abram in Cairo and then chief editor of Al-Nabar Weekly in Beirut) and his experience as a diplomat gave him a mastery of the facts and issues and an engaging, convincing manner.

I quickly arranged for him to return to GW Law to talk to about life as a diplomat. Before I could extend the invitation, he invited me to a couple of lunches, including a small gathering to honor Dr. Rima Khalf Hunaidi, the former director of the UN Development Programme for Arab States, and Queen Noor of Jordan. He also visited the Law School one afternoon. While we were walking outside, a Lebanese LL.M. graduate who now works for the United Nations in Beirut shouted across the quad, “Ambassador Maksoud, what brings you to GW Law?” The two had just seen each other in Beirut and did not know they both had attended the same law school.

Ambassador Maksoud came to GW Law after graduating from the American University in Beirut. Upon his arrival, he admitted that his “English was hazy and too Arab for some Americans to understand.” According to him, one of his law school classmates, Daniel Inouye, now the senator from Hawaii, “didn’t understand at times a word I was saying, and I still think he doesn’t!”

While at GW Law, Maksoud made numerous contacts, a fact that has served him well throughout his life. He was close to the daughter of the Indian ambassador at the time, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the sister of then-Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Ambassador Pandit invited Maksoud to a dinner with Justice William O. Douglas. They struck up a conversation and Justice Douglas, known for his interest in foreign countries and people, said to him, “Why don’t you help me?” Based on that conversation, Maksoud became an intern to the justice, quite an amazing feat for a law student from Lebanon. For two consecutive years, on October 16, they celebrated Justice Douglas’s birthday at The Baghdad Restaurant on I Street. On one of these occasions, Justice Felix Frankfurter and Justice Byron White joined them, along with other guests.

Maksoud became interested in India through his friendships with Indians such as Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, the Socialist leader who visited Washington, D.C. On February 4, 1961, at the age of 29, Maksoud arrived in Delhi as the Arab League’s first ambassador to India. On the morning of his arrival, he had breakfast with the Egyptian ambassador, who suggested that Maksoud stay at the ambassador’s guest house until he found a home. That night, the Egyptian ambassador had a dinner for dignitaries, including Indira Gandhi. The new ambassador was introduced as a great liberation leader, Gandhi introduced the new ambassador of the Arab League with no fanfare. Maksoud spoke for only four minutes to show he was not eager to speak. Unlike the other speakers, he didn’t read a speech. Nehru followed him, and he also spoke without notes. In his speech, Nehru repeated several times, “As my friend Maksoud said...,” as if they had been life-long friends. At that moment, according to Maksoud, Indira Gandhi’s view of him “moved from antagonism to respect.”

During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, Ambassador Maksoud’s friendship with Gandhi was instrumental in helping ease a volatile situation and gave rise to one of the most inspiring moments of Maksoud’s career. Muslim leaders came to him and expressed concern that a group of extremists was throwing stones at the homes of Muslims. Maksoud called Indira Gandhi. Even though it was nearly midnight, she suggested that they go to the Jama Masjid, the large mosque in Old Delhi, where thousands of Indian Muslims were taking cover. There, Gandhi spoke to the group, saying, “Why
are you fearful? Come with me, get your rickshaws.” Along with the police, whom Gandhi had brought with her, they took to the streets. According to Maksoud, this incident confirmed Gandhi’s commitment to secularism, which he considers one of her greatest legacies. Through this incident, they gained mutual respect for each other; it effectively cemented their close friendship.

As he recalls his life, Ambassador Maksoud has fond memories of his GW Law professors, particularly Professor Tom Malleson who introduced him to comparative law and international law. Malleson would later visit the ambassador in Beirut on his many trips to the region, and he was instrumental in one of the events that Clovis describes as a “career event.” In 1988 during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, U.S. Secretary of State George P. Shultz used his “constitutional prerogatives,” as he described them, to deny PLO Chairman Yassar Arafat a visa to come to the United Nations. Ambassador Maksoud consulted with Malleson, who advised him that the denial of the visa violated the U.S. host country treaty with the United Nations. The treaty states that whomever the United Nations invites as a member state or observer cannot be denied a visa, although the U.S. can impose certain restrictions on the person’s movement while in the country. In a moment of anger, Maksoud told media “stringers” that he would seek to move the UN General Assembly to Geneva, Switzerland. The General Assembly later overwhelmingly adopted a motion to move the meeting. On the flight to Geneva, Maksoud sat next to the U.S. ambassador, who was not amused about flying all of the way to Geneva for a UN General Assembly meeting.

Maksoud likes to recall another moment in the media spotlight. During the OPEC oil embargo of 1973 and 1974, Ambassador Maksoud was a special envoy of the Arab Summit. He was sent to tour the U.S. The morning after landing in the states, he found himself on The Today Show being interviewed by Barbara Walters. (He did not know who she was as this was his first time on U.S. television.) Her first question was along the lines of, “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself as on the way to NBC you must have seen Americans waiting for two or three hours for gasoline because of your embargo?” His response was, “Madam Walters, I want to take this opportunity to apologize to the American drivers for the inconvenience that our oil embargo has caused.” She smiled. He continued, “And I hope one day that the American drivers will apologize to the Palestinian refugees who have waited on the breadlines for 40 years.” The phones in the studio and in the Arab League offices lit up quickly. She subsequently asked more friendly questions and then took him to breakfast.

Throughout Ambassador Maksoud’s fascinating stories about life as a diplomat, his well-developed views about the substantive issues concerning Arab identity and the Palestinian issue remain evident. His preparation at GW Law clearly helped launch him into the international arena and put him in the path of contemporary world leaders. Although he is no longer an ambassador, he continues to work in the field as a professor of international relations and director of the Center for the Global South at American University in Washington, D.C.

GW Law has announced a new position, the International and Comparative Law Fellow, which allows a junior scholar the opportunity to teach, research, and write at GW Law. The first fellow is Claudia E. Haupt, who received her first law degree from the University of Cologne and an L.L.M., with highest honors, from GW Law. She also holds a master’s degree in political science from the State University of New York at Albany. In 2008 at the University Cologne, she successfully defended her Ph.D. thesis in political science, a comparative study of religion-state relations in the U.S. and Germany. Dr. Haupt clerked at the Regional Court of Appeals of Cologne; practiced at the law firm of Graf von Westphalen in Cologne, with her practice focusing on information technology law; and taught as an adjunct at the University of Cologne. Her primary research interests are in the areas of constitutional law, comparative constitutional law, legal history, and international law. Her publications have appeared in the Boston University International Law Journal, George Washington International Law Review, and Florida Journal of International Law.