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Mapping Out the Arab Landscape: The Arab Global Forum Identifies Key Areas for Private Sector Initiatives

WASHINGTON, Dec. 8 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- More than 200 business, government and civil society leaders from more than 16 countries around the world meeting here called for urgent efforts to integrate the Arab world into the global economy. "We need a dramatic breakthrough and for the Arab world to step up," **Shafik Gabr**, Chairman and Managing Director of ARTOC Group for Investment and Development, Egypt, and co-founder of the Arab Global Forum, told participants in the closing session of the inaugural Arab Global Forum.

The two-day gathering focused on finding ways to build on the momentum and goodwill generated by the speech that President Barack Obama delivered in Cairo in June in which he sought "a new beginning" in relations between the United States and Muslims. The long-term aim of the Forum is "to contribute to accelerating the integration of the Arab world into the global economy," explained **Claude Smadja**, President, Smadja & Associates, Switzerland and co-founder of the Arab Global Forum.

Through discussions and debates during several highly interactive sessions, participants identified key areas on which the private sector can focus. Among them: education, the promotion of technology and communications especially in the Arab world, the expansion of microfinance, and the development of the rule of law particularly through judicial reform.

On education, participants put forward proposals to increase youth exchange programs and improve the quality of education in the Arab world. The goal is to provide adequate training for the growing ranks of young people in the region so that they are able to find employment.

"The demographic explosion is the single greatest threat to Arab prosperity and well-being," warned **Judith Kipper**, Middle East Programs, Institute of World Affairs, United States, in the closing plenary. "The answer is education." Spurring a morning session, **Jeffrey D. Feltman**, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, said: "If this generation can acquire the tools to achieve their potential, then they can be a powerful force not just for growth but a good."

In a keynote address earlier in the day, US Secretary of Transportation **Ray LaHood**, the only Arab-American member of President Obama's Cabinet, told participants that the US is ready to reach out to the international community, including the Arab world. "We will continue to work with any country to do all that we can to collaborate together," LaHood said. "We want to build bridges and share expertise." LaHood urged business leaders to be patient for concrete results following President Obama's Cairo speech to "be patient" and "stay tuned."

The next Arab Global Forum will take place in the Middle East in June 2010. The Forum's US meeting will be held in the week of December next year in Washington, DC. Said Smadja: "This is a process, not a one-shot event."

For more information on the Arab Global Forum, please see our website, www.arabglobalforum.com.

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