

**From Al-Ahram: Dialogue with Americans over Post September 11 Changes**  
**By Amina Shafik**

We were five Egyptians on our way back from Washington to Cairo after a seven-day visit. Security measures at Dulles airport were extremely tight. Passengers are expected to go through electronic and manual searching. The only one who faced soft security measures was Sheikh Mahmmod Ashour, the former deputy of Al-Azhar. This action astonished Dr Emad Gad, a Christian researcher at Aharm Center for Political and Strategic Studies. Emad thought that his religious conviction would entitle him to gentle treatment, but he received a harsh one. At this moment, we all laughed. It seemed that security officials probably treated Emad in this way because they mistakenly thought he was seeking favored treatment on equal footing with Sheikh Ashour, but actually he didn't mean it. Dr. Emad had to stick to Sheikh Ashour only for the purpose of translation.

This story was the topic of discussion with a friend of mine, Mr. Nabeh Zaki, a Christian businessman. He told me a similar story about the hard time he experienced when he was taken by security officials at the airport in New York. He was taken to a separate room for almost one hour. When they saw him reading the Bible, American security officials were astonished. They learned for the first time that there are Christians living in Egypt.

Americans seem to be isolated. Living in a remote corner of the world, surrounded by two big oceans, Americans prefer to know about the world in relation to what affects them. They live in a gifted land with natural resources and fertile soil; so that they have been able to build a well-established and prosperous economy.

This was not my first visit to the United States. I have been there six or seven times before. However, this was my first visit after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Carrying a strong sense of fear, I went there as a member of a delegation to a round of dialogue between some civil society organizations, focusing on relations between Egyptians and Americans.

The Egyptian delegation comprised of friends of the Forum for Intercultural Dialogue, FID, at Goptic Evangelical for Social Services, GEOSIS. The delegation was comprised of: Sheikh Mahmoud Ashour, Dr. Emad Gad, Dr. Fathy Abou Ayana, Geography professor at University of Alexandria, Dr. Nabli Abadir, General Director of CEOSS, Mrs. Samira Luka, the head of FID and me. The invitation for dialogue came from an American counterpart NGO called "HANDS". HANDS has strong ties with a number of Egyptian NGOs, and some of its key staff members lived previously in Egypt. Because of this, they understand the social and demographic structure of the country. For this reason, they tried to establish a dialogue between both sides after the September 11 incidents.

We became involved in the dialogue with a number of NGOs and churches. American civil society organizations are innumerable, spending around \$180 billion on their activities and programs. Churches can also be influential, depending basically on donations.

With HANDS' support and organization, the Egyptian delegation met with officials from the State Department, Congressional staffers and civil society activists, especially in the area of civil liberties and anti-discrimination. We also met with journalists from conservative and non-conservative papers. Some of them had visited the Middle East before, while others did not have the opportunity. It was clear that the level of awareness and the perceptions of the Middle East - life and politics - were reflected in their opinions of both groups.

- ❖ In meetings with some NGOs, we were warned that we might face difficult conversations in our discussions with members of government over the issues of democracy in Egypt, especially after the landslide victory of Hamas in the last Palestinian elections. Some mentioned that there are those - especially from the Department of Defense - who are pressing for the reconsideration of American aid to Egypt.
- ❖ In meetings with other NGOs, we were under attack from those who insisted on one question "why does moderate Islamic discourse have no role in Islamic countries?" Others asked us "Why do you in the Middle East call assaults on Israelis civilians 'acts of resistance' rather than 'terrorism'?" One of the specialists from the House of Representatives asked why American

Embassies in Islamic countries were attacked in the wake of the latest problem of the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, although American papers didn't do such assaults, and President Bush was among those who condemned it.

- ✦ In the many tough discussion that took place, we recognized areas of commonality between Americans and Egyptians on some issues. Reverend Jeffrey Haggrey, an African-American Baptist minister mentioned that the current American administration doesn't listen to both Americans and Egyptians. He related to us, how before the eruption of the war in Iraq, the Baptist Church organized a wide-scale anti-war demonstration that coincided with a larger gathering comprised of many churches in the area. "We," Reverend Haggrey said, "approached the White House, asking for an appointment with the President, but our request was rejected. Then, we talked with a minister from President Bush's congregation, to ask him to pass our message to the President. But even his request for a meeting with Bush was - once again - denied."

American Society, which was once open and inclusive of all people and opinions, has become more restrictive, particularly for those who come from the Middle East. It is most obviously seen at airports, where passengers have to go through tight security measures.

- ✦ In a debate with Stephen Block, a lawyer and former diplomat and now working with the American Civil Liberties Union, he told us that the organization he works for is comprised of members from all ethnic and religious communities; and that there are 50 branches, one in each American state. The organization specializes in filing lawsuits before the constitutional court. People from different religions and ethnic groups, are able to access the ACLU's services. In recent years, it has taken on the responsibility to help defend the rights of a large number of Muslims, taking into account the first article of the American Constitution, which bans any law that breaches freedom of expression. "Americans are interest-focused persons, but after the September 11 terrorist attacks, they started to explore the culture of fear and the culture of hatred, that used to be seen more in relation to their treatment of the African-Americans, but has since improved," Block said. He added, "Capitalizing on this new environment, the American administration has started not to differentiate between thought and action, criminalizing both. Using it as a preventive measure, some people have become suspects because of their thoughts, even before they moved to criminal action." Block stressed that his organization is working now on the issue of civil liberties and trying to minimize the culture of fear and hatred.
- ✦ In another dialogue with Mary Rose Oakar, the head of the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, she mentioned that before the establishment of the ADC, there was no legal umbrella for Arab-Americans. Other immigrant communities have successfully established their own advocacy groups, and that was why representing the voice Arabs is also important. As a former member of the House of Representatives, Oakar, with the financial support of Saudis and the help of young Arab-Americans, set up the organization, which started to act as a lobby in Congress. The ADC has also established relations with legal experts and journalists, and now has the ability to organize large demonstrations. "When some Congressmen called for cutting off the American aid to Egypt, the organization in association with the Egyptian Embassy instigated an electronic campaign," Oakar told us. "Conservative Congressmen received up to two million e-mails against this action." She added that the organization has to work effectively to uproot the culture of fear among the Arab community, insisting that Arabs should not be treated as one package, while encouraging them to get involved in society, to change the image of Arabs in American society.

Seven days, the lifetime of the visit, went quickly, carrying intense discussions on religion, politics and culture. The mixed feelings I had on my way to the United States had dissipated, and turned instead into strong belief that dialogue between nations, peoples, especially between Arabs and other peoples should continue. Others don't understand us unless we talk with them.