

Community Development in Egypt: In the Interest of Us All

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Last June, President Barack Obama stood before a packed house at Cairo's Al-Azhar University and called for a "sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground." This call to action was arguably the single most important message in a speech that covered every key issue influencing contemporary Muslim-Christian and U.S.-Middle East relations. The need for a mutual, respectful, and unyielding dialogue cannot be overstated. After an exceptionally dark period in U.S. relations with Arabs and Muslims, there is an atmosphere of cautious optimism that the next era may be a better one. Journalists, commentators, and even reticent political leaders have signaled a willingness to reciprocate the White House's rhetorical overtures. Even so, if there is to be meaningful progress on this front, American citizens must take the initiative by seeking a broader understanding of our Arab and Muslim counterparts. No matter how many treaties governments sign, nor how many diplomatic conferences are held, if there is not peace between people, there can be no peace between nations.

The requisite dialogue will not easily be achieved and will demand that people on both sides of the divide face their fears and admit their prejudices. If the latest opinion polls are any indication, the work to be done at home is at least as taxing as that which we must accomplish abroad. A recent survey found that a mere 20 percent of Americans view Muslim countries favorably, while 80 percent believed that Muslims also held unfavorable views of the U.S.¹

¹ Paul Steinhauser, "Many Americans Hold Unfavorable View of the Muslim World." CNN/Opinion Research Corporation, 9 June 2009. <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/06/02/cnn-poll-many-americans-hold-unfavorable-view-of-muslim-world/> (1 July 2009).

Similarly, the citizens of some of America's closest political partners in the region harbor negative opinions of the United States despite (or more likely, due to) their governments' close relationship with ours. For example, a 2007 poll found that 93% of Egyptians had a negative opinion of the U.S. government.² Such disheartening statistics highlight the necessity of fruitful dialogue and positive partnerships with Middle Eastern communities. Once we recognize the obstacles that lie ahead, we can understand how the efforts of organizations like Hands Along the Nile (Hands), which is dedicated to promoting positive engagement in Egypt through dialogue and community-led development, are indispensable.

Why Egypt?

Programs like the Hands-sponsored American-Egyptian Dialogue, which recognizes and directly addresses the negative perceptions and suspicions shared by Egyptians and Americans, are vital foundations for future partnership. We should support and expand dialogue initiatives and community development programs that emphasize goals of mutual development between two equal partners. Aid to the Middle East is often justified by drawing a straight line connecting material poverty and political extremism. In fact the connection is not so simple, and its perpetuation jeopardizes efforts to promote honest exchange between equals. True dialogue does not commence because one partner fears the other, but rather because two equals meet with the expectation of shared benefit. This can only happen if we aim to effect

² "Negative Attitudes toward the United States in the Muslim World: Do They Matter?" Testimony of Dr. Steven Kull before House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, 17 May 2007. Poll conducted by World Public Opinion. <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/361.php?lb=brme&pnt=361&nid=&id> (1 July 2009).

positive change in communities in the Middle East with the understanding that we, too, will be changed.

From a public relations perspective, Egypt is arguably the most effective place to begin reversing harmful stereotypes. The potential for directly altering perceptions by partnering with Egyptian communities and citizens alone is tremendous. Moreover, because of Egypt's prominence in both politics and culture, she is also an ideal conduit for countering anti-American sentiment throughout the region. Egyptian films, literature, poetry, and media resonate throughout the Arabic-speaking world. The country's newspapers are among the most widely read, and its television shows the most regularly viewed. Thus, when Egyptians begin to notice a new American attitude, so too will the rest of the region.

The economic, political, and moral justifications for concentrating development efforts on Egypt are even more compelling. There is no doubt that Egypt is host to many economically insecure communities. While many hail the economic revival that commenced in 2004, the benefits of accelerated growth have yet to reach the country's poorest citizens. In fact, economic liberalization policies advocated by the U.S. and the International Monetary Fund have left many of them more vulnerable than ever at the same time that skyrocketing prices have weakened their purchasing power. Unemployment, income inequality, and inflation are simultaneously rising. The 2008 bread riots that swept through several of Egypt's poorest areas evidenced the scope of suffering. So, while observers predict that the increasingly privatized Egyptian economy will soon become an important regional and global force, this will not happen until all of her citizens enjoy the security of increased wealth. Hands Along the Nile, in conjunction with local Egyptians partners, is working to provide micro-credit to individuals who

have the ideas and drive to become successful entrepreneurs but lack the resources. By providing the means for individuals and families to secure their own livelihoods, Hands is helping to close an ever-widening income gap.

The political and moral justifications for positive community development initiatives in Egypt are inextricably linked. For decades, Egypt has been a central player in regional politics and one of America's closest allies in the Middle East. In 2005, the Bush administration finally spoke out against human rights abuses in Egypt, but soon after chose stability over reform – a choice that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hinted the Obama administration is also willing to make. In a February visit to China, Clinton indicated that the record of regimes like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's might be overlooked to pursue other political goals, saying that human rights concerns "can't interfere with the global economic crisis, the global climate-change crisis, and the security crises."³ Such political realities make it exceptionally difficult to gain the trust of reformers and civil society leaders in the Middle East. For them, it is clear that the U.S. government supports Egyptian democracy only to the point that such a democracy is in its own interests. It is because of these past political failures and the likelihood of new ones that committed NGOs and their supporters must continue to pursue a beneficent and consistent plan for community development in Egypt.

Mutual Development

As we consider how to best work with Egyptian communities, we must be mindful of the past. When the international development regime first emerged from the ashes of World War

³ Glenn Kessler, "Clinton Criticized for Not Trying to Force China's Hand." *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2009. < <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/02/19/ST2009021903526.html>>

II, there was a prevailing idea that the West was winning history's marathon, and poor nations were lagging behind. The philosophy, principles, and approaches of development have been much debated and altered since that time. However, development assistance is still too often viewed as a gift, from a rich man to his poor neighbor. That attitude has led to serious mistakes that serve only to increase Egyptians' suspicions of American motives. In several cases, U.S. government interventions have reinforced existing power structures and served to further alienate those most in need of assistance. These failures resulted primarily because programs were conceived through an assessment of American – rather than Egyptian – needs. Development programs undertaken in the service of political expediency tend to do more harm than good, but previous missteps should not prevent Americans from seeking ways to positively address the needs of Egyptian communities. Partnership is in both our interest and theirs and should be approached with this mutual potential for development in mind.

Americans have exceptional skills and resources to share, but there is also much we stand to gain. Programs like Hands' Insight Trips, which encourages first-time visitors to explore contemporary culture in addition to touring historic sites, highlight the results of development initiatives undertaken in a spirit of partnership. "Insight" travelers encounter a society that is diverse, rich, and vibrant. Such experiences do much to dispel myths and stereotypes perpetuated by entertainment news. Time spent with ordinary citizens helps put a human face on statistics and policies. In unexpected ways, the first-time traveler finds himself changed. A day with an Egyptian family reinforces the importance of human relationships, something many Americans strive to cultivate. The legendary Arab hospitality makes one ponder the bounds of human generosity. Watching women toil for hours to prepare a perfect meal far beyond their

material means is a lesson in service. These lessons are not of the kind that one learns only to forget the next day. They remain with travelers as they return home, and help to enrich and strengthen our country's social fabric.

Such experiences promote an open-mindedness and sense of compassion that is sorely needed in American society, particularly in our relationships with our own Arab and Muslim communities. After the events of September 11, 2001, fear permeated all levels of American society, resulting in a higher incidence of hate crimes against Arab-Americans and increased levels of discrimination. Though hate crimes have declined since their post-9/11 peak, levels remain intolerably high. A report released by the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee indicates that this segment of the population continues to be at risk of denial of their civil liberties by the government and higher incidents of harassment by their fellow citizens.⁴ Such hatred is almost always the consequence of ignorance and can only be mitigated with education and understanding. Programs like Hands Along the Nile's Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (FID) help create a culture of intellectual curiosity, which guards against the fear that is bred by ignorance. By bringing together civil society activists, religious leaders, government officials and ordinary citizens, FID encourages discussion of the most pressing issues facing both our societies. By participating in such dialogue and travel programs, Americans will begin to develop an appreciation for the diversity that exists within their own borders.

⁴ Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, "2003-2007 Report on Hate Crimes and Discrimination Against Arab Americans." <www.adc.org/PDF/hcr07.pdf>

Lasting Partnerships

The wave of optimism that followed Barack Obama's election did not end at America's borders. In the Middle East and across the globe, people are anxious to understand what 'hope' and 'change' will mean for them. Yet, like every administration before it, the Obama White House will operate within a milieu of domestic and foreign political constraints, some of which are as yet unknown. At the policy level, the new beginning that Americans and people throughout the Middle East seek may not be fulfilled in the next four or even eight years.

However, the goals of community development – open dialogue, understanding, and increased economic, social, and political opportunity – should not be held hostage to political events. On an individual level and through creative avenues, we must continue to construct lasting partnerships with our neighbors. The dedication of organizations like Hands Along the Nile helps ensure that the channels for respectful and honest communication remain open and that the mechanisms for enacting positive change persist. By supporting Hands' work and taking our own initiative, we can begin to build the relationships that will sustain us when our leaders fail.