

Developing Peace

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“The people of the world can live together in peace, we know that is God's vision, now that must be our work here on Earth.”-U.S. President Barack Obama

This quote is the concluding line to U.S. President Barack Obama's remarkable speech in Cairo on Western-Muslim relations. In this address to Middle Eastern listeners and others throughout the world, Obama sought to turn back the clock on years of failed U.S. policy in the region and to set the tone for a new strategy based on mutual respect and a focus on what we have in common rather than on what divides us. While this conciliatory message will hopefully begin to move things forward, words alone will do nothing to further peace unless they are backed up by actions. While there is much that the U.S. could do to enhance relations with the Middle East, one of the most practical ways to further peace between us is community development in the Middle East, and especially in the influential nation of Egypt. Investing in programs such as education, health care, and peace building initiatives is important in that it does two things to further peace between us: first, it helps the U.S. to be viewed more favorably, and second, it also allows Americans to see beyond the stereotypes of Muslims and Arabs as violent and dangerous.

For decades, U.S. actions in the Middle East have severely strained relations between us, and since September 11, things seem to have been steadily deteriorating. Granted, there is a long and mixed history of relations between the Western and the Muslim worlds. While our interactions have sometimes been positive, painful events of the past such as the European Crusades continue to influence the present as they are recalled time and time again. Sadly, the United States has often been unable to move beyond this painful past, concerning itself more with its own interests in the region

instead of looking to further mutual respect. Events such as the War on Terror, the invasion of Iraq, and perhaps most importantly, the unwavering support of Israel, have all lessened the U.S. in the eyes of many Middle Easterners. Furthermore, the U.S. military's treatment of prisoners at such places as Abu Gharib and Guantanamo Bay, have done even more to spur animosity towards America.

What is to be done, then, for us to begin anew and help show America's good intentions to the Arab world? First of all, we should take heart and realize that perceptions of the American people may not be as bad as we fear, despite the dismal track record in the Middle East of the governments we have elected. On one side, the 2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey found that nearly 77% of Arabs have an unfavorable view of the U.S., believing that the factors “orienting American policy in the region” are primarily “protecting Israel,” “controlling oil,” and “weakening the Muslim world.” (Guirguis, 2009) Yet, when Jennifer and Brad Drago took their family to work in Egypt with Mennonite Central Committee (a Mennonite agency concerned with development and peace and justice) as English teachers in Beni Suef, they discovered that many Egyptians would say something along these lines, “Please tell your people that we like Americans. It's the policies of your president (at the time, George W. Bush) that we disagree with. But we know Americans are good, kind people.” (Drago, 2007, p.18) These policies are important though, because the above mentioned poll found that “the three main steps that would improve the Arab perception of the United States would be the withdrawal from Iraq, withdrawal from the Arabian peninsula, and an Israel-Palestine peace agreement.” (Guirguis, 2009) With few of these changes in sight however, it is up to the American people to confirm Arab hopes that we really are a “good, kind people.”

Many organizations have done just this, taking the initiative and joining with community development efforts, often with great results. One group that I have already mentioned, MCC, is one that I have admired throughout my life for its commitment to joining with locals in doing practical work throughout the Middle East. I have always been interested in MCC's work because my parents

taught English in Egypt with them for three years before my birth, sparking my own desire to go there someday. One agency that MCC has been partnering with is the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical, and Social Services, or BLESS, an organization of the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church. They have been offering literacy classes in Beni Suef, Egypt as a means to both help educate the illiterate and to allow Muslims and Christians to interact and build friendships. One example of the success of this program is 18 year old Mohamed Abd El Hamid who reported, "I am Muslim and before I came to the literacy classes, I hated all Christians. After I joined the literacy class, I formed relationships with them, and I love them." (Shena, 2008, p.10) Hands Along the Nile Development Services is also deeply involved in Egypt through its many programs, including ones that support the village of Salem City, help to provide health care and other social services to the urban and rural poor, promote various peace building initiatives, and support spiritual development centers. (Programs, HANDS) In helping communities throughout the Middle East, organizations such as MCC and HANDS are showing the good will of the American people and hopefully chipping away at any belief that the U.S. is just a selfish nation who has no concern for the people of the Middle East.

Encountering the other has the potential to transform not just the opinions of those living in the Middle East, but also of those in the U.S. Sadly enough, U.S. perceptions of the Middle East, specifically of Arabs and Muslims, have rarely been too favorable. As Clovis Mahmoud, director of American University's Center for the Global South in Washington said, "The perception of the Muslim world that prevailed, especially after 9/11, was of a widely accepted linkage (in America) between terrorism and violence and Islam." (LaFranchi, 2009) This connection is nothing new though. Watching any amount of film in the U.S. will immediately confirm the presence of these negative stereotypes, a problem that is examined in a Media Education Foundation documentary entitled *Reel Bad Arabs*. This film examines the many movies in which the portrait of a bloodthirsty, over-sexed Arab is present, and gives the poignant example of one of the original lines to *Aladdin's* opening song "Arabian Nights,"

which refers to the Arab homeland as a place where “they cut off your ear if they don't like your face, its barbaric but “Hey” its home.” (Earp, 2006) These harmful stereotypes in the movie industry most likely both perpetrate and reflect the widespread negativity that many Americans feel towards Arabs and Muslims. As a 2006 CBS poll reported, 45% of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Islam, which is actually 12% more than in 2002. (Hoar, 2006) The Drago's also experienced these misconceptions as they prepared to leave for Egypt, and were questioned with responses such as “Why do you want to go to Egypt? Don't you know they are all terrorists who want to kill Americans? Don't you watch CNN?” (Drago, 2007, p.18) The stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, while obviously amiss, will not die easily unless we are able to encounter each other in meaningful ways.

The community development work that NGO's such as HANDS, MCC, and many others are doing is an important way for Americans to encounter people in the Middle East on a personal basis and to see beyond these stereotypes. In offering the opportunity for people to travel to Egypt to experience the country firsthand, HANDS is allowing many Americans to encounter the “other” beyond the shroud of stereotypes. After meeting those whom the media often portrays as the “enemy,” it is tough to maintain any deep-seated hatred. I know this was the case for many of the speakers that I heard growing up who had visited or done some type of service in the Middle East, often with MCC. People who had been in countries such as Iran, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and others, came back with stories of the ways they had been blessed by these peoples. Another way to confront the issue of misunderstanding is to host dialogues between Muslims and Christians, a work that is being done throughout the world. HANDS is joining in this effort through its American-Egyptian dialogue program, something that seems to have proven quite successful so far. (Programs, HANDS) These two programs of HANDS are wonderful ways for those in the U.S. to see beyond the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, and to encounter them as they truly are.

So far, the nation of Egypt and the work that is being done there has been mentioned a lot,

begging the question, why Egypt? Of the many potential nations in the region, why is this one so crucial? One reason is that Egypt could be said to hold the greatest amount of influence in the region. Their films, songs, etc., are known throughout the Arab world, which is why it is the Egyptian dialect of Arabic that is the most widely understood. The status of Egypt as a leader in the Middle East is nothing new, and the history of Egypt is full of many periods of great influence, from the Pharaonic Period to the Fatimids. Thus, if there is one nation that it would be important to build relationships with, it is Egypt. When community development work is done there, and peoples from different cultures encounter each other in positive ways, the new attitudes that are born out of it may have more of an impact there than it would elsewhere.

The work that organizations such as HANDS and MCC are doing in the influential nation of Egypt is important because of how it strengthens peace between the U.S. and the Middle East, allowing each to see the other in different, more positive ways. Those in the Middle East can come to see the U.S. as home to numerous people who care about the situation there, rather than solely as a nation that is concerned about selfish interests such as securing all the oil possible. In addition, those in the U.S. who travel to the Middle East or listen to the stories of those who have been there can more clearly see beyond the stereotype of violence that is commonly connected to Arabs and Muslims, and glimpse the true side of these wonderful peoples. As Obama so wisely said, this working towards peace is our duty on Earth and God's will, so let us continue to do it by supporting community development programs in Egypt.

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