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Public Diplomacy & Global Policymaking
in the 21st Century

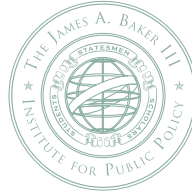
Report from the Cairo Colloquium:

Lessons Learned from a
Student-led Diplomacy Program and
Recommendations for the Future

James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy
Rice University

in partnership with the

Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud
Center for American Studies and Research
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy
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Report from the Cairo Colloquium: Lessons Learned from a Student-led Diplomacy Program and Recommendations for the Future

A Special Report by the Public Diplomacy & Global Policymaking in the
21st Century Program

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with contributions from

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About This Report

The Cairo colloquium was the first initiative of the Baker Institute's new student-led Public Diplomacy & Global Policymaking Program. Designed to give real-world policy experience to students—the next generation of leaders—the colloquium brought together collegians from Rice University and The American University in Cairo (AUC), who organized the conference and learned first-hand how public diplomacy allows us to understand, inform, engage, and influence the world.

During six two-hour roundtable discussions in Cairo, Rice students discussed topics ranging from religion to women's rights with our counterparts from AUC. Between sessions, we immersed ourselves in the Egyptian culture by visiting the pyramids of Giza, the catacombs of Kom el Shoqafa, and one of the oldest parts of Cairo, Coptic Cairo. We were also fortunate enough to meet a wide array of experts and officials from the AUC, USAID, and the U.S. Central Command in Cairo.

As a result of the conference, all of the students came away with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the other country's culture and perspectives.

A number of factors influenced our decision to travel to Egypt. Key inspirations were the distinguished diplomatic careers of the institute's namesake, The Honorable James A. Baker, III, 61st U.S. secretary of state, and its founding director, The Honorable Edward P. Djerejian, former U.S. ambassador to Syria and Israel, and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs.

We were also struck by a June 4, 2009, speech made by President Barack Obama at Cairo University. In the speech, the president expressed his hopes to

“seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common

principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

...

“On education, we will expand exchange programs, and increase scholarships, like the one that brought my father to America. At the same time, we will encourage more Americans to study in Muslim communities. And we will match promising Muslim students with internships in America; invest in online learning for teachers and children around the world; and create a new online network, so a young person in Kansas can communicate instantly with a young person in Cairo.”¹

Following our return from the colloquium, both the Rice and AUC delegations began drafting separate reports to describe the insights we gained as a result of the exchange, and the research we conducted to prepare for it. What follows is the work of the 10 Rice students who were chosen to be a part of the first Public Diplomacy & Global Policymaking conference. The views and opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all who participated in the colloquium, the Baker Institute, Rice University, or The American University in Cairo.

The primary objectives of this report are to present research that further confirms the value of diplomacy programs; and to provide a window into the Egyptian society and culture for an American audience, emphasizing the need to build upon the U.S.-Egypt relationship. We hope to demonstrate that diplomacy is not only the job of government officials, but is also something all citizens can and should participate in when the opportunity arises. This is just one way that universities and educational institutions can play a productive role in increasing mutual understanding between the people of the world.

¹ President Barack Obama, *A New Beginning: Remarks by the President at Cairo University* (Cairo, Egypt, 2009), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

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Introduction

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²

The world is continuing to change in new and unpredictable ways with ever-increasing speed. However, the very tools and behaviors that have given us the ability to create a planet filled with wonders, such as the Great Pyramids of Giza and the international space station, have also left our atmosphere weakened, our environment in shambles, and untold numbers of lives lost to wars, famine, and disease. We are at a point in history where, paradoxically, things seem to be getting much worse and much better at the same time. It is therefore our choice to decide what the future holds.

In order to make a choice that avoids a “clash of civilizations,”³ we must first ensure that we approach it with the right philosophy—one of maximizing the common good, and built upon the “principles of justice and progress, tolerance, and the dignity of all human beings.”⁴ With this underlying philosophy, we can pursue goals that strengthen the connections between countries, organizations, and individuals as well as support the global ecosystem and social environment. The understanding gained from expanding our point of view through international cooperation and engagement will provide the groundwork for our ultimate aim—the wisdom to decide our fate and build a future of opportunity for all.

American Diplomacy

There are many definitions of diplomacy, but for our purposes, public diplomacy is “the promotion of the national interest by, first, listening and understanding, and then

² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html>.

³ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

⁴ Obama, *A New Beginning*.

informing, engaging, and influencing people around the world.”⁵ The trust of those we wish to engage is essential to any diplomatic effort. This trust is not gained through public relations campaigns but by sincere investment in the mutual interests of our current and future friends and allies.

Though America’s relations in a number of Arab and Muslim-majority countries are currently strained, the picture is not all bleak. In a May 2010 report from the Center for a New American Security assessing the Obama administration’s global engagement strategy, the authors conclude that “in many ways, the Obama administration has achieved its initial objective of ‘re-starting’ America’s relationship with the world.”⁶ According to the report, the administration has “incorporate[d] a sensitivity to public opinion into its foreign policy decision making,” “aggressively reached out to foreign populations through mass media, embassies, and Internet-based social media,” and has “confronted directly issues of major political concern abroad, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, while also working to build partnerships that will advance lower-profile but urgent issues of concern, such as economic opportunity and education.”⁷

Recent surveys, however, suggest that a “re-start” is not enough. A June 2010 Pew Research Center survey shows declining views of the United States among Middle Eastern allies such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon.⁸ The same report found that “[m]ajorities in all six predominantly Muslim nations surveyed say they are very or somewhat worried that the U.S. could pose a military threat to their country some day.”⁹

As crucial as Obama’s 2009 speech in Cairo was to turning around the nature of America’s relationship with Muslim-majority countries, “[e]fforts to deliver on the promises made and expectations raised by President Obama’s speeches have been

⁵ Edward P. Djerejian, *Danger and Opportunity: An American Ambassador’s Journey Through the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 232.

⁶ Kristen M. Lord and Marc Lynch, *America’s Extended Hand: Assessing the Obama Administration’s Global Engagement Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, May 19, 2010), 4, <http://www.cnas.org/node/4485>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Pew Research Center, *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, June 17, 2010, <http://pewglobal.org/>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

inadequately communicated (e.g., the follow-up to the president's Cairo overture to the Muslim world) or else have simply been unmet (e.g., promises to close Guantanamo)."¹⁰ To do more to improve America's relations and policies with the rest of the world, a nationally coordinated effort will be required. We must therefore work to leverage forces from all sectors of society.

In a country as diverse as the United States, we cannot reasonably sit back and expect our government to alone voice the opinions of over 300 million Americans to the billions around the world. However, not everyone can travel abroad and personally convey the views of Americans. The solution, therefore, rests in part on the entities and organizations that have the resources and readiness to visit foreign countries, share their perspectives, and return with new understanding.

Students: Cultural Diplomats

Intercultural relationships are essential to building lasting, mutually beneficial relationships between the nations of the world. These transnational bonds are strengthened from "a mosaic of human encounters fostered by films and media, trade, tourism, intermarriage, the arts of imagination, foreign study, books, neighborly gossip, and chance encounters. Cultural diplomacy ... begins when a nation-state and its institutions step in and try to manage, to whatever extent they can, this natural two-way cultural flow so as better to advance broad national interests, preferably on both sides of borders."¹¹ Cultural diplomacy can "strengthen the dialogue between a nation's intellectual and professional leaders and their students with counterparts in every country in the world, based largely on the culture of universities."¹² Universities and think tanks, then, are well-positioned to lead the way in advancing cultural diplomacy.

As students, we are exposed daily to new experiences, people, and information, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is only natural for us to begin to take action,

¹⁰ Lord and Lynch, *America's Extended Hand*, 6.

¹¹ Richard Arndt, "The Hush-Hush Debate: The Cultural Foundations of U.S. Public Diplomacy," *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, January 15, 2010, <http://publicdiplomacymagazine.com/the-hush-hush-debate-the-cultural-foundations-of-u-s-public-diplomacy/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

guided by the lessons of the past and energized by the possibilities that lie ahead. That this generation actively seeks to engage the Middle East is evidenced by the fact that Arab countries are “the fastest growing region for [student] study abroad in the world.”¹³

Why Go to Egypt?

Egypt and America have a long-standing and peaceful relationship. Through foreign aid, treaties, military cooperation, trade agreements, and political support, American-Egyptian interactions have been generally positive over the past 60 years although at some points the policies of our two countries have led to tensions. As best put by a recent report by *The Economist*, Egypt, “with its strategic situation, its cultural influence and a population double that of any other Arab country ... has for three decades now been the linchpin of a precarious but enduring regional Pax Americana. Access to Egyptian airspace and to the Suez Canal has helped America project its power (albeit not always wisely) to such arenas as Iraq and the Persian Gulf. The treaty Egypt signed at Camp David in 1979 made it harder for Israel’s smaller Arab neighbors to go to war, encouraging Jordan to conclude its own peace deal, for example. It relieved the Israelis of existential fears for a generation, until Iran’s recent emergence as a potential nuclear rival. It is fair to say that Egypt’s dogged support for regional peacemaking has been crucial to sustaining a modicum of civility in the Middle East, despite backsliding by nearly everyone else.”¹⁴

Although the governments of our two countries have been amiable in the pursuit of peace in the past, it seems we are amidst a rough patch. According to the 2010 Pew Global Attitudes Project, “[f]avorable ratings for the U.S. have suffered a double-digit decline in Egypt. In 2009, 27 percent of Egyptians had a favorable opinion, but this year only 17 percent hold this view, tying Egypt with Turkey (17 percent) and Pakistan (17 percent) for the lowest U.S. favorability rating in the survey.”¹⁵ An explanation for such

¹³ Jennifer Conlin, “For American Students, Life Lessons in the Mideast,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/fashion/08Abroad.html>.

¹⁴ “America’s Lieutenant,” *The Economist*, July 15, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16564218>.

¹⁵ *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, 14.

a decline is not immediately clear, but from our experience at the colloquium, the Egyptian students raised a few primary areas of concern. In their view:

- America sends more military and other financial support to Israel than to Egypt.
- There is a consistent negative portrayal of Muslims and Arabs in American film and entertainment, by many in our political arena, and during our national conversations.
- America condemns human rights violations, acts of extremism, and religious suppression, while simultaneously supporting undemocratic and violent regimes.

Cairo Colloquium Discussion Topics

Students from Rice University and The American University in Cairo chose five areas of discussion because of our mutual belief in their relevance to our generation's opportunities and challenges: understanding and overcoming misconceptions; religion, secularism and interfaith dialogue; media policy: bias, censorship, and new technology; social life: women, family, and education; and Egypt and America in 2050: Where do we go and how do we get there together? Each section that follows represents one of the discussions, and was written by the Rice student(s) who led and moderated the session.¹⁶ The sections are divided into three parts: an introduction to the topic, with historical and other background information; a report of our discussion; and the conclusions we reached, individually or as a group.

Session 1: Understanding and Overcoming Misconceptions

Introduction

As America's role in the Middle East and Arab world is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future, the United States faces daunting public policy challenges. Gone are the days when American military dominance and cultural hegemony are sufficient to ensure success. In the current age, "America ... must engage, persuade, and attract the

¹⁶ Each discussion was co-moderated by students from both Rice and AUC.

cooperation of foreign publics in order to achieve national interests.”¹⁷ Soft power and bi- or multi-lateral cooperation are critical to securing and advancing American interests in today’s world, but success in these endeavors is impossible to sustain without cultural communication and understanding.

Students from Rice University and The American University in Cairo (AUC) agreed that the elimination of misconceptions is one of the most important challenges to achieving a successful cultural and policy dialogue between states. This problem is prevalent in both sides of any relationship; harmful misconceptions are held in the Middle East about Americans, and in America about the people of the Middle East. With the United States sure to continue its active involvement in the region, it is important to ensure the accurate projection of American characteristics while challenging false stereotypes in order to promote and secure international cooperation, colloquium participants agreed. The Egyptian students observed it is similarly imperative that attempts be made to correct inaccurate American perceptions about Egyptians.

Stereotypes, both positive and negative, must be tackled with equal zeal. Even those stereotypes that Americans view as positive, albeit inaccurate, can negatively color the ways that the rest of the world views the United States. Most notably, the idea that Americans enjoy a seemingly unlimited range of liberties to the point of hedonism makes the culture of the United States something that unnerves, rather than inspires, many Egyptians, according to our counterparts at AUC. These misconceptions interfere with American efforts, and could damage international cooperation between Egypt and the United States.

Discussion

As the world grows more connected, people of all nations must interact with and come to terms with a wide array of other cultures. Without an understanding of these different cultures and peoples, stereotypes and misconceptions can arise out of a common human need to organize others in simple categories defined by the viewer.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kristin M. Lord, *Voice of America: U.S. Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

¹⁸ David G. Myers, *Social Psychology* (Holland, Michigan: McGraw Hill), 309.

Though many stereotypes may begin with a certain degree of truth, they often become over-generalized and inaccurate. Furthermore, these misperceptions are often maintained by inertia alone, and will not be overcome unless the holder of these beliefs is directly confronted by their inaccuracy.¹⁹

Stereotypes and misconceptions can hinder international cooperation, the colloquium participants agreed, and lead to misinterpretations of another country's policies. If, for example, Egyptians believe that the United States is working to shift their ethical and cultural beliefs to a more Western model (as many, in fact, do), American actions will be seen to confirm those negative beliefs—regardless of whether these efforts are, in fact, an attempt to do so. American actions like advocating for women's rights and promoting secular education will be viewed through this negative lens, and cause the potential risk for misunderstanding, even in light of positive intentions.

Stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings can potentially cause a long-term problem by influencing the thinking and memory of one country regarding another.²⁰ The result may be a biased perspective on the historical interaction between two countries, and this can create space for discord and disunity. To illustrate this point, the Egyptian students said many of their countrymen believe that the United States is inherently hostile to Arabs and Islam and disregard centuries of cordial relations. At a time when the United States needs allies in the region, development of this biased memory must be forestalled.

Without an accurate picture of a country and its ideals, actions, statements, and beliefs, its efforts can be misunderstood, leading to tensions and hostility. For a nation like the United States, which assumes a leading role in global affairs, such a result could be disastrous. The United States' actions, whether selfless or not, would be continually questioned and mistrusted. Rather than a network of current and potential allies, America would find itself surrounded by dubious states that are hesitant to trust or work with it, and constantly watching it for signs of betrayal. Such an attitude is at odds with the vision of a peaceful, progressive world that we Americans promote. It is of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 343.

absolute importance, then, to dispel those misconceptions and negative stereotypes held by other nations regarding the United States. At the same time, America must also create opportunities to counter its own misconceptions about the Middle East, and in particular Arab states like Egypt. To fail to do so invites the possibility for a retreat into stereotypes and hostility, and a degradation of a diplomatic and cultural relationship that has been, and will continue to be, extremely valuable for both countries.

Amid the discussion of the importance of engaging and overcoming misconceptions, understanding what precisely those stereotypes are on both sides is the first step. For most of the world, these stereotypes can be roughly divided into the two categories of value stereotypes and policy stereotypes. Egypt is no exception.

Value stereotypes encompass misconceptions about American culture and beliefs. Much of this has to do with the perceived wealth of the United States. The Egyptian students at the colloquium said many of their countrymen believe that the majority of Americans are extremely wealthy. Moreover, the students added, many view the United States as largely based on a culture of consumption. This gives rise to the assumption that efforts to spread American culture are conscious attempts to create similar cultures of consumption in other countries to further enrich the United States and its corporations.

The AUC students also said that many Egyptians believe that family is of little to no importance in American society. In addition, many others believe that religion is a nonexistent commodity among Americans, and that the people of the United States are guided more by the dollar than a deity.

Many of us might consider some of the stereotypes about Americans to be positive, such as the belief that Americans enjoy absolute freedom at home. However, this particular view of “freedom” is not the freedom of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that, once properly explained, many in the region take no issue with.²¹ Instead, this freedom is perceived as something closer to anarchy; a no-holds-barred pursuit of any and all of life’s sensual and material pleasures, regardless of the harm to oneself and the community. Prime examples commonly cited by the Egyptian students include the

²¹ Lord, *Voice of America*.

perception of excessive sexual promiscuity and alcohol consumption. The idea of such wanton “freedom” is linked, and at times confused, with American political rhetoric that instead calls for a more wholesome philosophical notion of freedom. The result is distaste for America and its ideals, as well as a negative view of the United States that many of the host delegation claimed to encounter among their countrymen.

Egyptians also hold misconceptions about American policies. One particularly common trope is the belief in a hidden agenda in the United States’ offer of friendship. Indeed, this was a repeatedly encountered theme throughout the colloquium, both inside and outside of the conference room. Another common misconception is the idea that the United States is actively attempting to build a worldwide empire. Whether the end goal is an economic empire, a network of indebted allies, or an actively controlled world empire was an argued point, but nonetheless, this belief in all its forms is disturbingly common, according to the Egyptian students. If their assessment is correct, it represents a serious challenge to U.S. foreign policy.

The students also confirmed that many Egyptians believe that Americans hate Muslims, and that the United States actively and intentionally seeks to destroy Islam. One Egyptian student also noted that these beliefs were more common in rural and more religious communities (and were particularly championed by religious leaders in these areas).

There are also a great number of stereotypes regarding how American political institutions function. One distinct belief among the Egyptians we met is that minority lobbies control American policies—in particular, there was considerable discussion during the conferences of the perception of a disproportionately powerful Jewish lobby. An equally important issue also lies with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While it is not possible to deny the support that Israel receives from the United States, many of the Egyptian students felt that America does little to nothing to end the conflict as part of its overall attack on Islam. According to one student, the conflict is central to many in the region’s perception of America and its role in the Middle East. These perceptions

regarding American-Israeli cooperation can go on to contaminate every other American effort throughout the Arab and Muslim world.²²

Equally illustrative for all involved in the conference was the opportunity to discuss the stereotypes and misconceptions held by Americans about the Middle East. While of obvious import for the Egyptians, an opportunity to discuss the wide range of opinions held by Americans on topics ranging from Islam to women's rights in the Middle East showed the variety of opinions on each subject.

Many misconceptions held by Americans regarding Egypt and much of the Middle East surround traditional themes, in particular questions of the Arab and Muslim world's cultural conservatism. In our view, a great number of Americans regard the Middle East as a politically and culturally backward area, trapped in ancient sociopolitical structures. A common stereotype is one of an Arab Muslim hostile to democracy and incapable of creating one without sliding into corruption and chaos. It is also our belief that many Americans view Egypt and much of the Middle East as repressive societies. A common criticism lies in the perceived suppression of women, and the fact that women lack important rights and freedoms throughout many Middle Eastern and Arab Muslim countries. It was no surprise, then, that the subject of the hijab and burqa and its legality and/or appropriateness came up repeatedly during the colloquium.

Some Americans also hold negative stereotypes regarding Islam itself. In large part because of the events of September 11th and America's ongoing military involvement in the Middle East, many people, in our view, have a negative view of the religion. Many of the American students expressed the concern that a great number of their countrymen view Islam as a religion that encourages violent terrorist action, and that Islam is a religion that is distinctly incompatible with Western ideas of freedom and liberty. Much of this again ties into issues of women, the American students said during the session. They added that some Americans view the repression and denial of rights for women as integral pieces of Islam and Arab cultures. Additionally, other Americans are

²² Walid Malouf, interview by Lorena Sanchez and Nahas John, *Foreign Aid as Public Diplomacy: Is U.S. investment in the Middle East sowing goodwill?*, Los Angeles, California: USC Center for Public Diplomacy (June 19, 2010).

particularly unnerved by what they perceive as Islam's global assault on the United States. Some also see Islam as a dangerously reactionary religion, and a potential risk to much of the free world. While these perspectives are in no way universal or authoritative, they are the opinions that many of the American students felt they have been exposed to in daily life, from mass media to casual conversation.

Conclusions

Despite the unfortunate and inaccurate beliefs held by some, they are not set in stone. Once the various stereotypes and misconceptions are on the table for discussion, efforts can be made to begin finding ways for both sides to overcome and refute them. One of the most important and obvious methods of reducing and eliminating these prejudgments is through boosting personal contact between members of the two groups in question.²³ Throughout the conference proceedings, this theory was validated time and time again, both during and after the discussions. One student in fact explicitly noted that he believed many of the stereotypes "until we met you." By interacting personally, those on both sides can see that these stereotypes are often over-generalized and exaggerated. However, without an ability to come face-to-face on an equal footing with a cultural "other," it is harder for Americans and Egyptians to understand their counterparts at a personal level beyond what they have seen on the latest episode of "24" or "Dallas." While one can find answers through the Internet, the daily subconscious assault of inaccuracy conveyed through the mass media takes a heavy toll on cultural interaction.

Through this personal contact, another equally important tool for overcoming stereotypes is revealed: the discovery of universal values and the realization of shared objectives. Our discussions led us to believe that the recognition of commonality in these two important areas could vastly improve international cooperation. In understanding what countries have in common, states can find new and powerful ways to achieve shared goals, and to use their combined efforts to succeed in areas that would otherwise be beyond reach. The book *Changing Minds, Winning Peace* makes the value of such efforts abundantly clear, noting that in the process we can show that many of our ideals and beliefs are not uniquely American, but are universally applicable ideas

²³David G. Myers, *Social Psychology* (Holland, Michigan: McGraw Hill), 504.

about liberty, democracy, equality, and prosperity.²⁴ As Richard T. Arndt notes in his essay on cultural diplomacy, the discovery of shared values between nation-states can be a teaching and learning opportunity. “Both processes educate the teachers as much as the student. The goal is to move from teacher-student relationships to collegiality.”²⁵

Stereotypes and misconceptions that can derail the American-Egyptian political and cultural dialogue can also be overcome through a change in media, our discussion group concluded. Though this is a subject that will be further developed in the media discussion later in this paper, it deserves to be also referenced here. We found during our talks that many of the misconceptions held by Americans and Egyptians are the result of images from the media, whether they involved a Muslim terrorist or a promiscuous wealthy American. To counter stereotypes, an effort must be made to create and promote positive and more accurate depictions of each country in the mainstream media through more accurate film roles, and a more realistic depiction of Egyptians and Islam, as well as of the United States and Americans. As long as a country allows itself to be defined by others, an accurate and error-free impression of each country will be elusive.

The limitations of such efforts must also be considered. We found during our talks that many of the stereotypes possessed by Americans and Egyptians stem from their accurate perception of a country’s foreign policy. While creating context and understanding will help to create a better, less biased interpretation of another country’s policy choices, some—like continued American support of Israel—will remain difficult to frame in a positive light in some quarters, in our view. In light of these challenges, it remains all the more important to accurately project the rationale for these policy choices and the logic behind them.

²⁴ Edward P. Djerejian, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace*, Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy (Bethesda: Crossbow Press, 2003), 23.

²⁵ Richard T. Arndt, “The Hush-Hush Debate: The Cultural Foundations of U.S. Public Diplomacy,” *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, January 15, 2010.

Session 2: Religion, Secularism, and Interfaith Dialogue

Introduction

The Islamic community began as both a religious group and a political entity. The Shari'a law,²⁶ which has been in place for hundreds of years, supports unity between the two. Since classical times, the idea has remained that the purpose of the government is to protect the religion. Advocates of secularism are often accused of "being apostates from Islam, and agents of Western powers and culture."²⁷ Egypt was (and still is, even if only technically) ruled by non-secular governments for hundreds of years. It was not until 1925 that scholars in the Muslim world began to advocate secularism; the first was Shaykh Ali Abd al-Raziq in his book, *al-Islam wa 'Usul al-Hukm*.²⁸ In it he argued that Islam was a religion and not a state, an idea that led to his defrocking.²⁹

Egyptians are about 90 percent Muslim; the majority of the remainder are Coptic Christian.^{30,31} Today Egypt has neither a purely secular state nor a purely Islamic state.^{32,33} According to the Egyptian constitution, Islam is the official religion of the state and Islamic jurisprudence is the source of the laws of the country.³⁴ Egypt does not have Shari'a courts like some other Muslim countries and the law is not strictly based in Shari'a.³⁵ However, Muslim law generally governs areas of family law including divorce,

²⁶ Shari'a law is a form of Islamic law that "guides all aspects of Muslim life including daily routines, familial and religious obligations, and financial dealings. It is derived primarily from the Quran and the Sunna -- the sayings, practices, and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed." See Lauren Vriens, "Islam: Governing Under Sharia," Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8034/islam.html#p2>.

²⁷ Fauzi M. Najjar, "The Debate on Islam and Secularism in Egypt," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, 21 (1996): 1-21.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Coptic Christianity is an Oriental Orthodox church and the largest Christian church in Egypt. It has been present in Egypt since before the rise of Islam. See "Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com.

³¹ The CIA World Factbook, "Egypt," The Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>.

³² "Saving Faith," *The Economist*, July 15, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/16564186>.

³³ BBC News, "Incorporating Sharia into Legal Systems," February 8, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7235357.stm>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

marriage, inheritance, and custody.³⁶ There is, however, a strong and pervasive movement within Egypt for an increased presence of Islamic law in the present legal system.³⁷ One of the most famous of these groups is the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has for decades argued for Islamic reform within Egypt.³⁸

At first glance, the United States and Egypt could not be further apart when it comes to religion in politics. While the Egyptian constitution espouses Islamic law, the American constitution makes a strict separation between church and state. However, the vast majority of the American people are religious; according to 2007 estimates, approximately 87.5 percent of the population practices a particular religion.³⁹ About 76.8 percent of Americans are Christian and approximately .6 percent are Muslim.⁴⁰ Many of the Rice delegation believed Americans were largely unfamiliar with Islam. However, recent polling has shown increases in familiarity with Islam and decreases in the number of those who have a negative view of Muslims.⁴¹ A Pew Forum poll in November 2009 shows that 42 percent of those under 30 years old are familiar with the basic tenets of Islam, an increase of 8 percent since 2002. Furthermore, 45 percent of Americans know at least one Muslim.⁴² While these figures are better than in the past, there is still room for a great deal of improvement. The same poll found that 59 percent of Americans did not know that Allah is the name Muslims use for God and that the Qur'an is the Islamic equivalent to the Bible.⁴³ The poll showed that those most familiar with Islam are less likely to see Islam as encouraging violence and to have a more favorable opinion of Muslims overall. Based on the results of this poll, increasing religious literacy is vital for decreasing so-called "Islamophobia" in America.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Abd al-Monein Said Aly and Manfred W. Wenner, "Modern Islamic Reform Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt," *The Middle East Journal*, 36, 3 (1982): 336-361, 337.

³⁹ The CIA World Factbook, "United States of America," The Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Pew Forum, "Muslims Widely Seen as Facing Discrimination," September 9, 2009, <http://pewforum.org/Muslim/Muslims-Widely-Seen-As-Facing-Discrimination.aspx>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Discussion

Prior to the conference, the AUC and Rice students submitted questions that would be asked during each session. The questions from the Egyptian participants primarily focused on issues related to the expression of religion; the questions from American students centered on religion in politics. The session closed with a discussion topic of significant common interest: learning about religion—both one’s own, and those of others. One of the most significant topics of discussion came in response to one of our discussion questions, posed by an Egyptian student: “Americans say they believe in God, but most don’t act like it. What do you think?” This question pointed to a perception of Americans as hypocritical in a way that made it an imperative misconception for discussion.

Expression of religion in both Egypt and the United States can be tied to religion’s role as a form of identity. From discussions with our Egyptian participants, it appears that religion’s function as a social or public identity is more important in Egypt than in the United States, where religion’s role as a form of personal identity is more significant. In Egypt, one’s religion is inherited from one’s parents; it is written on one’s birth certificate. In the United States, by contrast, we pointed out that for many, an individual’s religion is not the only—or the most—important measure by which one’s identity is defined; religion is usually one of a number of measures used in self-definition. The Rice delegation unintentionally confirmed this when we discovered each other’s religions during the discussion—most of us for the first time, since it had never come up prior to the conference. One participant theorized that this had to do with the Christian teaching that religion should be something lived “inside-out” rather than “outside-in,” a point that Protestantism in particular has stressed.⁴⁴

Of course, religion in America is not entirely a private matter. For example, the religious preferences of presidents are made public. Some of the other expressions of religion in the public sphere are controversial, including the presence of “In God We Trust” on U.S. currency, the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, or the presence of statues

⁴⁴ See, for example, Article VII of the Augsburg Confession (1530) and its defense, or of more importance to American Protestantism, George Whitefield’s sermon “Marks of True Conversion,” in Whitfield, George (1714–1770), *Selected Sermons of George Whitfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), or “The Almost Christian,” in the same volume.

of the Ten Commandments in some courthouses. These religious expressions serve to demonstrate the active dialogue about secularism and secularization in the United States.

As mentioned by an American student in one of the opening statements of the conference, “In Egypt, the word ‘secularism’ is very contentious. Surprisingly, this is one of the things that the United States and Egypt have in common.” In the Egyptian context, the central government and the Muslim Brotherhood have taken two different approaches to questions of religion and politics. The Muslim Brotherhood arose as a topic of interest in one of our first casual conversations as well as in this formal discussion, demonstrating that it was a topic of significant interest to the Egyptian cohort. According to one of the Egyptian participants, Egyptian government policy has tended toward the secular because the government and many Egyptians view strong representation of Islamic identity as a threat to the established order and stability.

According to the Egyptian delegation, though, the Coptic community also had a stake in the questions surrounding secularization. Although the perception is that the Copts are the strongest supporters of secularism in view of their status as the largest religious minority, they are not in favor of instituting non-religious civil law because of the strong prohibitions regarding divorce in the Coptic tradition. One Egyptian participant cited a case in which the Pope of the Coptic Church intervened by asking an adviser of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s to halt a case of conversion and divorce by a bishop’s wife.⁴⁵

When we first drove into Cairo for the colloquium, one of the most striking features was the sheer number of churches built next door to mosques and scattered throughout the city. The picture this communicated, according to our guides, was intentionally one of harmony between religions. According to an Egyptian student, one of the primary symbols of the 1952 revolution to abolish the Egyptian monarchy was a cross and

⁴⁵ For further discussion of disagreements between Coptic and secular courts with regard to marriage, see “You Can’t Marry Just Anyone,” *The Economist*, June 3, 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/16276799?story_id=16276799&fsrc=scn/tw/af/rss/mea.

crescent together. And a program to build an inclusive national identity resulted in Coptic priests delivering lectures in mosques and Imams delivering them in churches.

However, our discussion showed that there was more to the situation than religious harmony. There have been underlying tensions between Muslims and Copts, related to the worldwide tension between Muslims and Christians. According to one Egyptian participant, it is not right to trace this tension back to the Crusades, when many Christians fought alongside and even led the Muslim armies, but only back to the French occupation, when Napoleon's campaign only angered many Muslims, and contributed to increasing tensions. Religious education classes taught in Egyptian public schools do little to mitigate this tension, because Muslims and Christians are segregated, and there is little opportunity to learn about any religions beyond one's own. Instruction on religions other than Coptic Christianity and Islam, such as Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism, is even more rare. One of the outcomes of this, according to an Egyptian student, is that most students do not know to differentiate Jews from Zionists. This leads many to generalize their antipathy toward Israel to include all Jews. However, as the same participant noted, if Muslims knew a little more about Jewish teachings, they would find some attributes remarkably familiar, such as their shared revered figures.

In contrast, the Rice delegation pointed out, the primary tension in the United States is between secularism and Christianity. In introducing this concept, we defined "secularization" as the process of creating a public sphere in which no religion would be established or persecuted by the government, and wherein no religion would be favored over another, and "secularism" as a view of religion as outdated in an age of scientific knowledge. We noted that the United States was a secularizing, but not a secularist country. In keeping with our earlier observation that religious identity in the United States is more personalized than societal, we noted that religion is more fluid, and that the most common barriers to conversion are familial rather than communal or legal.

We also noted that in the United States, there are significant problems in the sphere of religious literacy. As is true elsewhere in the world, a person's primary vehicle for learning about religion is their family, thus religion tends to be inherited. Many Americans' knowledge of other religions, Islam in particular, derives from the news

media or Internet. This fact, we pointed out, tends to amplify the association of Islam with terrorist activity, and Islamic theology with the concept of jihad. One Egyptian participant expressed his frustration that the concept of jihad receives so much airtime in the media, in comparison to Islamic concepts of the rules of warfare. He asserted that Islamic rules of warfare explicitly forbid causing terror among civilians. Further investigation of this aspect of Islamic theology could be particularly helpful in discrediting Islamist terrorist groups.

In discussing the media's role, though, we did not neglect to mention that there is a great diversity of religious communities represented in America, giving people opportunities to learn about other religions. A Muslim member of our delegation described how after 9/11, he had gotten the chance to answer numerous questions from his non-Muslim neighbors.

Outside of the formal discussions, quite a number of conversations about religion came up, particularly following some stray observations during a group tour of Coptic Cairo. Nearly all the AUC students and several of the Rice students quickly became engaged in fascinating interfaith dialogues. Many of the AUC students, including a few who had taken classes dealing with the history of Christianity, showed considerable interest in learning more about Christian thought from some of the Christian students in the delegation. There were indications, though, that even among this self-selected group there were misunderstandings that might have been remedied by a class exposing students to the basics of the world's religions.

Conclusions

The students at the colloquium agreed that cultural and religious misconceptions put undue strain on Egyptian-American relations. To help counter these misconceptions, we arrived at a number of recommendations. One was the idea that a class on world religions be added to the public high school curriculum. The aim of such a class would be to prevent the growth of religious illiteracy in the United States, helping to fight the trend toward Islamophobia among Americans. Ideally, these classes would focus on teaching about world religions from an educational and non-devotional perspective,

rather than proselytizing. Additionally, it may be useful to discuss atheism and agnosticism.

Important to such a class would be a balanced presentation of the basic tenets of major world religions from a third-party perspective, either avoiding areas of significant controversy, or designating them as such. We recommend a curriculum team composed of theologians in the major world religions working together. For instance, teachers from Al-Azhar University in Cairo could be invited to author the section on Sunni Islam. Teachers either from the Vatican or from the extensive network of Jesuit universities might be invited to author chapters on Catholicism, and teachers from evangelical seminaries might be invited to author chapters on Protestantism. Since not everyone will be interested in a course on world religions, we suggest that this class could be made a social science elective, alongside history and geography in a new public school curriculum. Some schools in the United States, including Johansen High School in Modesto, California already require a world religions survey course. These innovations should be used as a model and encouraged throughout the country.⁴⁶

We were left with a number of important revelations after this discussion and our research. The most critical was how well a group of people with varying religious beliefs could come together and discuss religious issues without arguments and hurt feelings. We had a frank and open discussion that led to a number of fruitful ideas. It is clear that as a society we are at a crossroads and that close and friendly relations with Muslims, and the Middle East in general, are possible. In this pursuit, it is necessary that we take into account the shared religious values of the United States and Egypt, building first on our commonalities, rather than emphasizing our differences. This will take hard work, but our discussion with the Egyptian students showed that it could be done.

⁴⁶ John Blackstone, "Teaching Not Preaching in CA Bible Belt," *CBS Evening News*, June 24, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/06/24/eveningnews/main4206426.shtml>.

Session 3: Media Policy—Bias, Censorship, and New Technology

Introduction

Media plays an integral role in international and intercultural communication, and the fruitful discussion on media policy at the conference shed light on our diverse perceptions of bias, censorship, and new media—both between the two delegations and within our separate groups. Cairo, a city of nearly seven million residents, is awash with crowded Internet cafes and coffeehouses showing 24-hour news. An abundance of satellite dishes sprout from the rooftops of every apartment and office building, broadcasting al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera newscasts to Egyptians of all socioeconomic backgrounds. This scene takes place today in virtually all cities in the Arab world. With easier access to potentially inaccurate or misleading international and interregional media, communication has begun to shape perceptions of nations, religions, and ethnic groups in different, faster, and more pronounced ways. Exploring important aspects of the U.S. and Arab media during the colloquium allowed us to gain a broader understanding of existing misconceptions and the means by which those in the West and the Arab world can mitigate them to help prevent future conflict.

An independent Arab press did not appear until the middle of the nineteenth century, and was stifled by the authoritarianism of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁷ After 1945, the media served as a vehicle for spreading nationalism and opposing colonial rule by the British, French, and other European powers. After the Arab states gained their independence, little opposition to ruling regimes was tolerated. Various state-controlled media blanketed the entire region, with the exception of Lebanon, between 1960 and 1980.⁴⁸

In more recent years, Pan-Arab⁴⁹ television networks, including Al-Jazeera, have transformed the means by which many in the Arab world receive information by offering an alternative perspective beyond the state-sponsored media. Additionally, the advent of new media and technology has even allowed Western media sources to

⁴⁷ Said Essoulami, “The Arab Press: Historical Background,” <http://www.albab.com/media/introduction.htm>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Pan Arabism is a doctrine encouraging unification and cooperation among the Arab people and states.

operate in the Middle East. Nevertheless, countries such as Egypt still suffer from excessive state security and censorship in broadcasting.⁵⁰ Much has already been published about the social effects of new forms of media in the Middle East, including assessments of new Pan-Arab political communication and the creation of a regional identity through international Arabic-language news.⁵¹ The discussion session on this topic centered on the media as a tool for public diplomacy, and included the topics of government censorship in both nations represented at the colloquium, the role of media bias in shaping misconceptions, and the ways that the media could potentially be used to strengthen the American-Egyptian, and more broadly, the American-Arab relationship.

Discussion

Our discussion began with opening remarks by the two discussion leaders from each delegation concerning the direction in which they wished to take the conversation, as well as a small amount of background information on the American and Egyptian media. The first major topic concerned censorship in Egypt. The Egyptian students were each invited to express their opinion on the nature of censorship in their home country, while the American students were free to add their observations on freedom of the press and the general media in the United States. We discussed the application of “sensible censorship,” or acceptable forms of censorship in our respective countries. This included the legal ramifications of slander and the system of checks for pornography, violence, and foul language in the media.

The Egyptian students expressed a full spectrum of views on their government’s level of censorship on critiques of the regime, subject matter deemed to be morally unacceptable, and the media as a whole. Some saw the policies as oppressive, reactionary, and limiting to very necessary and basic freedoms, while others believed them to be best for stability, propriety, and the preservation of cultural norms. The

⁵⁰ “A Special Report on Egypt: No Paradise,” *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/16564152>.

⁵¹ Jon B. Alterman, “Transnational Media and Social Change in the Arab World,” *TBS Journal*, <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring99/Articles/Alterman/alterman.html>.

discussion about the relative advantages and disadvantages of censorship evolved into a lively debate as to whether certain topics are “off-limits” for media discussion and parody in both cultures, such as cartoons of the prophet Mohammed and the Holocaust (viewed as extremely sensitive matters in Egypt and the United States, respectively). Ultimately, it became clear that each individual had differing ideas about restrictions on the media, with members of both delegations falling onto either side of the spectrum.

The second major topic was the problem of producing credible American newscasts in the Middle East and specifically in Egypt. There was a frank discussion about how American-produced news is largely distrusted in the Middle East; several of the Egyptian students debated whether the endorsement of state-sponsored media strengthened the credibility of American broadcasting, and the majority opinion was that the government connection made things worse. All students then, in turn, stated their opinion on how the United States could best convey its policy decisions and interests to the people of the Middle East. Many ideas were suggested during this portion of the conference, such as the creation of media exchange programs for journalists, actors, and commentators to facilitate a broader understanding of each other’s societies. One frequently mentioned concept was the idea of using the entertainment media to convey positive messages. The Egyptians offered the view that many Arabs possess a skewed image of Americans due to how we are portrayed in their entertainment media. Most are exposed to Americans through syndicated American television shows such as “Dallas” or “Friends.” The American delegation universally agreed these and most other forms of common entertainment did not provide an accurate picture of American society, as they portray a society full of the greedy, the treacherous, and the promiscuous for the sake of amusement rather than accuracy.

Another interesting discussion followed a comment by an AUC student about things that the average American viewer takes for granted or brushes off; these small moments may not mean much to Americans, but could be significant to viewers from other cultures and allow the festering of stereotypes and misconceptions. One example was as simple as the practice of terminating phone calls without a proper goodbye, which the Egyptians took as a particular sign of rudeness that did not reflect well on Americans.

The American students described Hollywood's portrayal of Arab characters in movies, where they are generally typecast as the evil, primal antagonist or the inept and dopey sidekick. Ultimately, this unfortunate characterization underscores the need for more Arabs in positive film and television roles.

A second major recurring theme during this portion of the conversation was the use of academic communication through various media, including (but not limited to) increased university networking, education-based media such as documentaries, and greater efforts to break down the Arabic-English language barrier by expanding language programs. The students generally agreed that these academic and entertainment-based forms of media could effectively promote public diplomacy between cultures. While state-sponsored broadcasting often promotes fears of conspiracy and feelings of mistrust, particularly among the uneducated populace, the Egyptian students noted, private forms of media may have the opportunity to correct misconceptions.

The final topic dealt with how new media can improve relations between Egypt and the United States. Conversation first revolved around censorship of the Internet, and it was agreed that governments in both countries were prone to monitoring the online activities of their respective citizenries (Egypt, however, more so than America). Despite this fact, many students expressed faith in the idea that the Internet could be used to connect citizens of one country with another, rejuvenating an older means of personal cross-cultural dialogue such as "pen-pal" programs. Colloquium participants from both countries wanted to ensure that people from all walks of life, not just the cultural elite, had the opportunity to participate in a virtual intercultural dialogue. We agreed that new social media is a promising way to do so as it does not have the financial constraints of educational programs or entertainment-based broadcasting.

The discussion on media policy closed with remarks from a few students who revisited the topic of Egyptian censorship and attempts to convey American policies in the Arab world. The Egyptian students generally agreed that Alhurra, a U.S. government television network, has failed to capture the trust of the bulk of the Egyptian population

due to the perception of its extreme bias. However, Al-Jazeera also lacks credibility in its portrayal of newsworthy international events.

Conclusions

Several major points should be emphasized as the take-away message from the colloquium's discussion about media policy. In terms of censorship, students from both groups had differing opinions about the levels of censorship that are necessary and acceptable for a society. This, frankly, is indicative of a larger message prevalent throughout all of the colloquium discussions: the delegations from Egypt and the United States were by no means homogenous, but rather exemplified the wide variety of opinions that exist in both nations concerning many topics. This revelation of a cross-cultural spectrum of political viewpoints did much to break down the stereotypes discussed during the initial discussion session. As a result of our discussions, the Rice and AUC students concluded that the citizens of our respective nations have a wide range of views, and this fact should be stressed in the international community.

A second major theme of the discussion, particularly during the portions on cross-cultural dialogue, was that groups purporting to represent aspects of American culture need to be more cognizant of how they present themselves to the outside world. In this regard, the U.S. State Department has recently paid close attention to the value of social media, which targets youth from all backgrounds and is a means of more accurately communicating American beliefs and cultural ideals.⁵² From our discussions with students in Cairo, it would appear that the U.S. government is unaware of how the average citizen of the Middle East perceives our culture. Our efforts to communicate are often disregarded due to trust issues; the problem is then exacerbated by unintentional messages such as the idea of American greed in the entertainment media. Thus, both groups realized that innovations that accurately portray American and Egyptian societies must be developed and applied to education, entertainment, and other forms of communication.

⁵² "How the U.S. Engages the World with Social Media," <http://mashable.com/2010/05/17/state-department-social-media/>.

One final message from this portion of the conference was the mutually understood importance of how much responsibility we as privileged citizens of our respective nations have regarding the furthering of public diplomacy efforts. This may be the most important lesson learned by all involved. After being granted the opportunity to interact and learn from each other during the colloquium, we have an obligation to share our experiences and ideas with the outside world, through means such as this summary report, face-to-face interactions with our peers, and the multitude of new media venues we discussed. We, the self-proclaimed future leaders of our respective countries, must take the initiative in building bridges between our cultures.

Ultimately, the discussion session on media policy served as a reminder that countries and cultures are constantly communicating ideas and information, whether they are cognizant of the messages they send or not. While each country has to deal internally with its own issues (primarily censorship, in both conventional and new media), better management of exported media should be a focus of public diplomacy. It is a natural human impulse to generalize and put people into boxes; media is the tool that policymakers can use to overcome this problematic behavior, our discussion group concluded. In the end, the efforts of a new generation of policy-minded students are merely a step toward better relations, and it will take broader change to transform media into an effective tool for public diplomacy.

Session 4: Social Life—Women, Family, and Education

Introduction

Session four produced a meaningful dialogue on women, family, and education in both American and Egyptian societies. The conversations highlighted both Egypt and the United States' success in supporting women's rights, significantly increasing both female and male literacy rates over the last several decades, as well as promoting kinship, family, and marriage as the building units of society.

The discussion kept in mind the challenges women face in Egypt and the United States, and focused on possible ways these issues can be addressed. Suggestions included increasing scholarship and student exchange opportunities at Egyptian and American

universities; offering information technology, English language and entrepreneurship workshops across Egypt; increasing the number of micro-loan nonprofit banks; and creating programs that will train women to make a positive difference in Egypt's society through public service and government involvement.

Although equality among women now seems established in America, the discussions nevertheless focused on the challenges that come with these new opportunities. The Egyptian cohort discussed growing sexual freedom in the United States, which they believe resulted from the equal rights movement for women. Most of the American delegation felt that in the United States, the social issues of abortion, birth control, and even gay marriage have both expanded rights and fostered division, and may be seen as the progressive result—whether positive or negative—of suffrage movements in America. Some Egyptians, however, felt these social issues could raise problems their country is not ready to address.

Family life has also taken a new dimension as the role of women in society shifts, creating new socio-economic family structures in the United States. As more women join the workforce, traditional nuclear families are evolving; a household's income may come from both the husband and the wife, creating more independence and a sense of economic empowerment for women. The Egyptian students noted that the same is true in the greater Middle East, where the traditional family structure is changing as rights and freedoms expand.

Changes in education also resulted from the feminist and universal suffrage movements in the United States. Currently, more women are enrolled in higher education institutes than men in the United States.⁵³ Education is equally important in Egypt and the Muslim world. Public university educations are free (aside from registration fees) for both men and women in Egypt, as the government pays tuition. The Egyptian poet Hafez Ibrahim said: "A mother is a school. Empower her, and you empower a great nation."⁵⁴ Many Egyptians felt that these days in their country, it is far more common to recognize the

⁵³ Tamar Lewin. "At Colleges, Women Are Leaving Men in the Dust," *New York Times*, July 9, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/09/education/09college.html?_r=1.

⁵⁴ Isobel Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming The Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2010), 3.

strategic opportunity of having more educated women participating in economic, political, and social spheres.

Despite educational advancements in the United States, numerous challenges to educating all citizens remain. However, the variety of schools—from charter schools, public and private universities to community colleges—provides opportunities to all people to receive a quality education. Numerous problems also persist in Egypt and the greater Middle East as to forms of education, as well as the quality of education. All of the colloquium participants stressed the importance in finding ways to provide an education and equal opportunities in both the United States and the greater Middle East.

The discussions during this session were stimulating, but time constraints limited possible in-depth discussions on certain issues. Still, the candid discussions between the students allowed both sides to further understand the differences and similarities in education, family life, and women's issues in both regions, as well as ways to progress in these spheres.

Discussion

Women's rights, a topic once sensitive in the United States, is a similarly contentious issue in Egyptian and other Middle Eastern societies. A fair amount of the discussion focused on women's roles in the family, as well as their education and access to equal rights. While most of the conversation was directed toward the issue of women's rights in the Middle East and elsewhere, very few of the comments focused on the situation, or lack thereof, in the United States.

The discussions did stress gender equality in the United States, and how successes here may serve as an example to other countries. We also touched on the growing awareness around the world that political and economic progress are linked to women's rights. Several female students who have experienced both Egyptian and American life more extensively than the others highlighted the advantages of the American lifestyle for women and the somewhat "lethargic" developments in Egypt. While the American students focused on what to do now that women are equal by law, the Egyptians were concerned with how women in their country can gain equal rights. Although many of

the discussions to this point in the conference highlighted some variations between the two societies, session four and the topic of social issues concerning women took the differences to a new level.

Common misconceptions on both the Egyptian and American sides regarding the rights and roles of women were also addressed. The opportunity to be immersed in Egyptian culture during the colloquium gave the American students new insight and understanding of the country's traditions, such as wearing a hijab and the practice of partially arranged marriages. The Egyptian students hoped to understand not only the positive aspects of American social life, but the negative as well.

The Egyptian students questioned whether the results of the United States' progressive movements, such as sex education in schools, were a good thing. Sex education, birth control, teenage pregnancy, and other topics were brought up to show that debate remains in all these areas in America, and revolutions come with both opportunities and consequences. One Egyptian student observed there was not a single "recipe" for success that can be applied to all societies.

The American students asked if sexual repression impacted Egyptian society negatively, through harassment and abuse. The idea that Islam and conservative practices contributed to more sexual harassment was discussed, and opinions also differed on the subject. Some Egyptian students believed ideas prohibiting premarital sexual relations were not solely related to Islam, but saw the "repression" also through an economic and cultural lens. One student pointed out that many religions, not only Islam, condemn the idea of lust. The stigma attached to issues such as sexual relations outside of marriage, and divorce in Egyptian society, were seen by some students as more severe for women than for men in Egypt.

Students' insights on the status of marriage in Egypt constituted another major part of the discussions. One Egyptian student pointed out the problem of early marriage for young women who, often married at the age of 16, are forced to quit school. Conversely, men, due to economic constraints, are forced to marry at a later age. Intimate relations in traditional Egyptian society are allowed only after marriage. According to some of the

Egyptian students, the repression brought on by this social expectation often results in harassment of women by men in public places. The limitation on sexual conduct has begun to result in a growing number of so-called “urfi,” or secret marriages, where young men and women get married without the knowledge of their families because they do not want to wait for their financial situation to stabilize before becoming intimate. Problems arise, however, once the girl gets pregnant; the man refuses to recognize the legality of the marriage and, in most cases, leaves the girl, who is left to face a judging society. It is a harsh and unfair reality that in these cases, society is more ready to forgive the man than the girl, though both may be responsible.

Opinions differed on the Egyptian side on whether social change in America was all positive. The female students noted that some progress would be better than none in Egypt; according to one student, a man’s education is still regarded as more important than a woman’s, even if the woman is more intelligent. To these Egyptian students, basic equality should not be a question, but something granted to all people. Scholarships and equal opportunities in education and work should be a given for reforming this issue in Egypt; in addition some Egyptian students suggested the United States could contribute to more programs focused on equal, adequate education.

Other Egyptian students were concerned that growing freedom for women would result in a more sexualized nation and an “out of control” society. Their example was their perception (shared by one of the American students) of United States’ sexual revolution, and what they considered a slippery slope of unintended and adverse consequences—teenage pregnancy and widespread use of contraception, among others. They also brought up the possible negative effects of introducing sex education programs to a society not ready for them. This discussion led to a highly opinionated debate on what one labeled “cultural extremism,” a debate with no one correct answer. Ultimately, most American and Egyptian students agreed that the way their own society works was not wrong, but just different.

Discussion on the sexual revolution in the United States culminated in a debate on the role of sex education in schools, and how (if at all) it should be a component of health education in the schools of both countries. Some American students believed sex

education did not advance as quickly as women's rights and other social movements, creating negative consequences in the United States such as the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies. While the American students focused on how sexual education should be taught, the Egyptian cohort discussed whether it was even mentioned in Egyptian schools; they could not reach a conclusion on the "standard practice."

One Egyptian student said that sex education was taught from more of a "biological" standpoint, sidestepping the issue of morality in favor of protecting public health. Another highlighted the role parents could play in teaching their children about sexual health, instead of relying on schools. The differences between the Rice and AUC delegations were evident in the discussions, and demonstrated the need for further understanding of each other's world and how sex is viewed in both societies.

Though sexual liberalization in America may have led to teenage pregnancies and single-parent families, there has been a parallel increase in sex education that stresses contraception methods, the American contingent said at the meeting. It was also noted by both groups that the American model of this sphere of social life was not necessarily the best one to apply in other parts of the world because of differences in traditions when it comes to marriage and relationships in other societies.

Family life proved to be another major point of difference between the Egyptian and American students. Many in Egyptian society live at home with their family and plan to remain close to their families throughout university and possibly after, while in the United States, college students have the desire to leave their homes and live independently. Although this does not mean the American family structure is declining in significance, it does highlight the differences of family life in both societies. Egyptian families also embrace the idea of the "extended family," a growing trend where grandparents, parents, and children all live in the same house—a three-story structure, one story for each branch of the family tree.

The issue of personal lives versus professional lives in the American family was also brought up as a possible cause for the shifting dynamics of family structure in the

United States; many American students highlighted how the drive for financial independence and career achievement meant shifting family from the forefront of priorities.

Some solutions to these social issues were also proposed, and included microloan initiatives that could help speed financial independence, educational courses, and exchange programs to expose students to other cultures. The benefits and impediments of all were highlighted, and views differed among students from both regions. According to one American student, microloans could be seen as a limited advantage to women in a strict Islamic society; because the women are submissive to their husbands, the man would ultimately still control the benefits of the loan. The Egyptian students observed that educational programs for women were often negatively viewed in Egypt, as many families believe it is a better investment to educate a son instead of a daughter because marriage is always an option for women. We also discussed “occupational segregation,” when women strive for higher paying and more prestigious positions in the workforce; in Egypt, the AUC students said, women are even discouraged from pursuing a certain career. There is clearly still work to be done in both nations regarding the breaking of the proverbial “glass ceiling” to allow women to advance professionally.

Conclusions

The experience of being immersed in Egyptian culture had a highly positive impact on the American students’ understanding of Egyptian society, and it once again proved the necessity for exchange and study-abroad opportunities for American students in Egypt and vice-versa. Many students agree on the need to increase the number and visibility of existing scholarship programs, perhaps through a joint effort of the Egyptian government, USAID, and some American universities.

Some of the Egyptian students said that the free education offered at Egyptian universities has created a surplus of graduates with bachelor’s degrees who are unwilling to assume jobs that do not require university education, and would prefer managerial positions over jobs in hard labor. This was not a universally accepted argument, but its proponents argued that the Egyptian government is spending vast sums on public education—money that could have optimally been spent on educational

loans or scholarships for the more academically gifted segment of the student population.

Some students from both countries agreed that the discussions and analysis of Egypt's educational system demonstrated the need for creating small community and technical colleges, which might help decentralize the educational system and allow it to adjust to the needs of the workforce. As it is, Egypt's college students take a broad range of courses that may be of no use when they graduate.

We also discussed whether Egyptian students were exposed to anti-American or anti-Western sentiments through class work, books, or lectures. While the AUC students noted that most public schools might have a slightly nationalistic overtone, they asserted that no significant anti-Western concepts were taught. This may affirm the notion that Egypt's educational institutions do not usually spread anti-Western ideologies, but rather that these ideas may be propagated by other sources associated with radical Islam. This could very well be the case in the broader Middle East as well. Due to the already established dangers of radical Islam, some students from both countries agreed that an International Islamic Studies Center of the Middle East should be established in Egypt. Such a school, which may serve as a gathering place and official meeting point for all of the accredited Islamic studies academics and Islam religious leaders, might also be effective at reducing the threat of radical Islam. The school could be symbolically established in the buildings of the Mosque-Madrassa of Sultan Hassan in Cairo. Even though the Madrassa once served as one of the greatest Islam religious centers in history, today it serves solely as a historical monument (which the American and Egyptian teams had the opportunity to visit as part of the colloquium).⁵⁵

While discussing anti-Western sentiments in Egypt, some American students considered it important to explore the root causes of such feelings. Non-mainstream anti-American teachings can be usually found in literature and writings that are often circulated among radical organizations. The discussion group agreed that a possible American response could be to analyze such literature, which has served as the basic

⁵⁵ Caroline Williams, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 59-74.

ideology for anti-Western feelings, and find ways to ideologically confront any misconceptions it may contain through some sort of wide dissemination of truthful material backed by a credible source advocating moderation.

The discussion sessions and the personal interactions experienced in Egypt made the American students aware of the importance of tradition and conservatism in Egypt. Therefore, some students agreed that highlighting the conservative aspects of American society could help Egyptians and Muslims more easily build interpersonal relationships with Americans and become more amenable to American society.

We also discussed the possible culture shock of Muslim exchange students in America. It is important that efforts are made to soften the culture shock as they enter places prone to liberalism in America, namely, colleges and universities. On the other hand, some students asserted that Egyptians should be made aware of the positive aspects of social liberalism and the contributions it has made to American culture rather than simply assuming foreign students would be overwhelmed and unable to weigh pros and cons.

The topic of women and the Egyptian economy led to a discussion about the need for a nonprofit bank that can provide microloans to the poor and programs that encourage entrepreneurs. Many Egyptian students pointed out the need for economic independence of men rather than women in Egyptian society; this could help lower the currently late age of marriage among men. While the discussion of microloans started off as a means to empower women through credits, some students agreed that a more effective outcome may be achieved if microloans are made available to men and women in Egypt—a conclusion that is in line with the current reality of men being more economically responsible for the family's well-being than women.

A first step toward the establishment of such a bank might be to adjust the model of the Grameen Bank—a microfinance program that grants loans to the poor without requiring collateral—to Egypt's social and economic structures. At the same time, just as the American University in Cairo has an entrepreneurship studies department, so can such departments be established at public universities as well, or, if already established, helped to grow. Some agree that an important aspect of strategic planning for Egypt's

economic future is establishing entrepreneurial education as part of the mandatory coursework of primary schools, high schools, and universities. A similar policy has been adopted by the European Union (EU), which seeks to support entrepreneurship institutions across the continent. EU governments support small- and medium-sized businesses through a variety of grants and legal benefits.⁵⁶ A somewhat similar policy may be undertaken by Egypt as well to stimulate the economy and expand job opportunities.

As several students pointed out during the discussion, sex education has already been introduced in Egypt through non-mainstream, alternative methods such as talking to a doctor before marriage. The Egyptian students agreed, however, that programs on the biology of reproduction and sexually transmittable diseases should become part of the school curriculum.

Several members of the American team believe that, even though Egyptians have the right to be allowed to make their own decisions based on their personal beliefs on whether they would prefer to see their daughters and wives pursue higher education, it is highly recommended that families are made aware of the benefits of education. The idea that “knowledge equals power” should not be necessarily understood in the sense that an educated woman has the power to be independent of her husband and therefore disobey him, but rather in the sense that an educated woman has the power to express her love and care for her husband and children by earning additional financial support for the household, the Egyptian students said. This concept is in no way non-Islamic or contrary to Islam, as Prophet Muhammad’s first wife was a successful businesswoman, while his youngest wife was a learned scholar.⁵⁷

The Egyptian female students called attention to the fact that young women and men are already equally represented at Egyptian universities, and it is very common to see

⁵⁶ Commission of the European Communities, “Think Small First: A Small Business Act for Europe,” *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and social Committee and the Committee of the Regions* (2008), accessed August 29, 2010, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0394:FIN:en:PDF>.

⁵⁷ *The Free Library*, Jan. 1, 2009, [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The Prophet’s daughters: there’s much in Islam that favors women,...-a0191476237](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Prophet's+daughters:+there's+much+in+Islam+that+favors+women,...-a0191476237).

women pursuing an education in medicine, ophthalmology, and even engineering. Most students from both delegations agreed that measures should be taken to encourage this trend, and that women should be supported in obtaining high profile jobs in every profession.

The discussion provided valuable insight into the differences between both groups, as well as between the members within each cohort. Despite various opinions and perceptions, both delegations agreed that as the rights and equality between men and women converge and social structures shift to new, contemporary models, the expansion of education and the role of the family remain important issues to all. Ultimately, in modern society, women are gaining more and more opportunities to transform both the United States and the Middle East.

Session 5: Egypt and America in 2050—Where Do We Want To Go and How Do We Get There Together?

Introduction

The complex relationship between Egypt and the United States during the past 60 years has been marked by both obstructive distrust and productive cooperation. Former Egyptian Ambassador to the United States Nabil Fahmy described the relationship as a “mature marriage.”⁵⁸ This analogy was meant to characterize the relationship as an important partnership that endures small squabbles and disagreements throughout a long history of overall positive benefit.

The focus of our fifth and final discussion centered on the current political and economic situation in Egypt and what the United States can do in terms of policy to help guide Egypt in a direction that will benefit both countries.

⁵⁸ Ambassador Nabil Fahmy (interview with student delegations from Rice University and The American University of Cairo, Cairo, Egypt), June 7, 2010.

Since President Hosni Mubarak took office in 1981, Egypt has been governed continuously under Emergency Law.⁵⁹ This provision has given the Egyptian security apparatus sweeping powers by suspending habeas corpus and severely restricting political activity. Despite the undemocratic nature of the current Egyptian regime, Egypt remains one of the United States' closest allies as well as a top recipient of foreign aid (though less so than Israel, as students from both delegations noted).⁶⁰ Over the past decade, military aid to Egypt has remained constant, while non-military economic assistance has decreased from more than \$800 million to \$250 million per year.⁶¹ With such a reduction, the scope of this aid has shifted from policy-based initiatives to more specific endeavors ranging from development of human capital in terms of education and vocational skills, improving access to natural resources, technological advancement, and the translation of human skills to economic activity.

One major conclusion that all students reached during discussion was that the United States must walk a fine line in the role it plays in Egypt. The policies of the Bush administration following the 9/11 attacks, whether they were right or wrong, isolated the United States from much of the world and increased anti-American sentiment in the Middle East and other Muslim majority countries.⁶² Many of the American students said that U.S. attempts to influence foreign government conduct have not only been unsuccessful, but they have painted a picture of the United States as a meddling entity with inconsistent behavior toward Arab states. Ultimately, all of this has created conflict that undermines U.S. goals in the region. The following section summarizes our discussions on the possible ways the United States can work with both the Egyptian state and the Egyptian people to reverse anti-Americanism in Egypt with the ultimate goal of curbing terrorism and potential conflict.

⁵⁹ "Egypt Extends Emergency Rule," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/12/world/la-fg-egypt-emergency-20100512>.

⁶⁰ Federation of American Scientists, "Egypt," last modified November 2001, <http://www.fas.org/asmp/profiles/egypt.htm>.

⁶¹ Hilda M. Arellano, "USAID/Egypt Overview" (presentation made to Rice University/AUC student delegation upon request), June 2010.

⁶² "Poll Shows Growing Arab Rancor at U.S.," *Washington Post*, July 22, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7080-2004Jul22.html>.

Discussion

One of the purposes of the Cairo colloquium was to take the first steps in implementing President Obama's policy of engaging the world, particularly Arabs and Muslims, in a meaningful dialogue and forming American foreign policies based on mutual understanding and trust. To this end, the discussion focused on possible changes to American policy in Egypt to more effectively achieve the stated goal of reducing conflict.

The discussion touched on several key issues that have hindered development of mutual trust between Arabs and Americans. One criticism of American policy that became a motif during these discussions by students from both countries was the perceived hypocrisy of America's supposed support for self-determination vis-à-vis its reluctance to support popular elections in Egypt.⁶³ The Egyptian students noted on multiple occasions that the United States backs the undemocratic regime of President Mubarak and does very little to help pro-democracy movements in their country. The students also saw American foreign policy as being entirely self-serving and detrimental to genuine political and economic progress in Egypt. Furthermore, the discussion revealed that many Egyptians believe the American government views them solely as strategic assets in maintaining regional peace, not as true partners or allies. From the Egyptian students' perspective, anti-Americanism in Egypt, as well as in the rest of the region, seems to stem from this perceived relationship of "manipulator" and "manipulated." In order to reverse the persistent anti-Americanism that plagues our foreign policy in the Arab world, we identified several key challenges that must be acknowledged and changes that must be made to American foreign policy toward the region.

At first glance, the most puzzling of these complex issues seems to be the United States' reluctance to support pro-democracy movements in Egypt. After all, President Woodrow Wilson originally championed self-determination, and promoting democracy is an easy sell across the political spectrum on Capitol Hill.⁶⁴ Yet, when asked to help democracy flourish in Egypt either by actively supporting pro-democracy movements

⁶³ Mona El-Ghobashy, "Egypt's Paradoxical Elections," *Middle East Report*, Spring 2006.

⁶⁴ Betty Miller Unterberger, "Self-determination," *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*, 2002, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_gx5215/is_2002/ai_n19132482/pg_3/?tag=content;coll.

or simply limiting support for the current regime, both lawmakers and the executive seem to cringe. Through discussion, our group hypothesized that there are two primary reasons for this. First, the United States seeks, primarily, to maintain and further peace in the Middle East; the Camp David accords are an essential element of this peace. According to several of the Egyptian students, it is currently impossible to separate the Egyptian regime from the Egyptian military. Thus, pressuring the civilian government could require curbing the power of the Egyptian military, which could in turn create an unacceptable imbalance of power in the region. Second, we believe that the United States does not actively support pro-democracy movements in Egypt because doing so may lead to the rise of Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, as was the case with the election of Hamas in Gaza. This fear is rooted in the idea that democracy under Islamist parties will take the shape of “one person, one vote, one time.”⁶⁵ In other words, there is a concern that, having used the ballot box to obtain power, Islamist parties could refuse to relinquish that power once in control of the government.

The discussion in Cairo as well as empirical evidence shows, however, that both of these fears are somewhat unfounded. First, limiting support for the Egyptian state does not have to come at the expense of cutting support for the Egyptian military. The United States can, by working through multinational organizations like the United Nations, pressure the Egyptian state to curb its human rights abuses and restrictions on the press without resorting to decreasing military aid. Additionally, even if the United States did threaten to cut Egyptian military aid, there is little reason to assume that Middle East peace will be instantly threatened. All relevant parties, particularly Israel, realize how imperative this peace is to the United States and would not jeopardize their relationship with the United States unnecessarily by instigating armed conflict—this was evidenced by acknowledgment from both groups during discussion. Moreover, as part of the Israeli-U.S. Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1975, the United States will, in case the peace treaty is violated, take “remedial action” against the aggressor.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Djerejian, *Danger and Opportunity*, 22.

⁶⁶ “Israel–United States Memorandum of Understanding – Sept. 1, 1975,” Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/mou1975.html>

Our discussions also led to the conclusion that the second possible concern of American policymakers, that Islamist parties will sabotage all attempts at democracy, is also ill-founded. The Egyptian students helped to educate the Americans on the subject of parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, which have, over time, lost their religious shell and become an alternative to the federal government as providers of basic services for the people. Although there are still some legitimate concerns regarding the Muslim Brotherhood's militant past, it is both possible and necessary to work with this and similar organizations to ensure a genuine, indigenous democratic state in Egypt. It was agreed by all students that to isolate such organizations is counterproductive and to deem them illegitimate or terrorist organizations only inflames violence and anti-Americanism in Egypt, as well as enforces anti-Muslim sentiment and stereotypes in the United States.

One issue of particular significance to the AUC cohort was the United States' seemingly unconditional support of Israel. In fact, a common belief expressed by the Egyptian students was that Israel was an "American state beyond domestic borders." Many felt that a more evenhanded approach is necessary in the long run. It is clear that the United States possesses significant leverage in Israel due to large aid contributions; in addition, the United States is a staunch ally of Israel, which is otherwise surrounded by neutral states at best. Both American and Egyptian students expressed the belief that that leverage could be put to use to point Israel toward a more cooperative direction. Furthermore, many felt that arbitration regarding Israel and neighboring Middle Eastern states should be made by a true international community rather than Israel simply being unilaterally supported by the United States; the fact that the United States historically has vetoed most motions against the country in the U.N. Security Council was cited as one example of unfair favoritism.⁶⁷

If democracy is truly to be achieved in Egypt, there must be both a top-down and bottom-up approach within Egypt itself, the discussion group agreed. A shift in American policies in the region will only be effective if they are coupled with an indigenous effort at bringing about substantive change. Unfortunately, the current

⁶⁷ "U.S. Vetoes of UN Resolutions Critical of Israel," Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/usvetoes.html>.

regime is actively discouraging democratic efforts through the extension of Emergency Law. Although the law has been in place since the assassination of President Anwar el-Sadat in 1981, President Mubarak promised to replace the law with specific legislation directed at terrorism in 2005. In May 2010, however, Parliament chose to extend the Emergency Law for an additional two years. The most detrimental element of the Emergency Law seems to be the pervasive security apparatus that the law has spawned, according to the Egyptian students. These security organizations play a significant role in quelling dissidence and to a certain extent, creating an atmosphere of fear that curbs the expression of independent thought in Egypt, they added. According to Professor Jerry Leach, director of the American Studies Center at the American University of Cairo, containing these security organizations is a necessary step in promoting democracy in Egypt. He cites the example of the Soviet Union where real, democratic change was only made possible after the “old guard” had been replaced by President Mikhail Gorbachev and his policy of limiting the influence of the various security organizations. As with the former USSR, however, the onus of change falls on the state itself and the United States can only prod the Egyptian government to move in that direction, the discussion group concluded.

Despite all these challenges, the students were optimistic that democracy was not an impossible goal in Egypt. Several felt that in order for such political ideology to be realized, efforts initially have to be directed at attaining maturity in political thinking and fostering civic engagement, which in turn can only be achieved with substantial development efforts. Only after the basic concerns of survival are met will political power be relevant—no small achievement in a country where 23 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and daily queues for some 270 million loaves of subsidized bread are commonplace.⁶⁸

Students from both countries agreed that in order to attain peaceful, organic growth of democratic ideals, democracy as a way of governance must be attempted at less threatening micro-levels prior to tackling the upper echelons of government. Through democratic local elections and democratic organizations at schools or universities,

⁶⁸Andrew Bossone. “Tackling Egypt’s Poverty Problem,” March 24, 2010, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/news/tackling-egypts-poverty-problem>.

individuals can be introduced to the process, forming a key population segment comfortable with democratic principles that can pursue change elsewhere. However, students were quick to acknowledge that while furthering democracy and change may be appealing pursuits to the young and idealistic, as people aged, their priorities shifted to focus on family, holding a steady job, and making ends meet. Without any true understanding of civic responsibility, individuals often don't think twice about trading a vote for a meal. Over time, in many countries around the world without a history of lively democracy, people have lost the freedom to seek change.

While both cohorts were aware that Egypt remains one of the biggest recipients of U.S. aid, the breakdown between military and non-military contributions was surprising to some. Military aid has remained consistent since 1979 at \$1.3 billion, while economic assistance is just one-fifth that amount. While many Egyptian students had personally observed the results of such aid, primarily in school, many felt the significance was often purposefully diminished. One example they gave was how local politicians often take credit when new schools are built, though the construction funds come from the United States. As a result, U.S. attempts at diplomacy are undermined by local interests. As U.S. aid is the United States' primary means of public diplomacy on the ground, such activity significantly limits the extent to which opinions and perceptions can be influenced.

Conclusions

Although there was little that everyone agreed on completely, there was one policy recommendation that had near unanimous support from the Egyptians. The delegation from the The American University of Cairo, perhaps because of their experiences with their university, strongly advocated continued and increased spending by the United States in providing quality education in Egypt. Although there is some value in funding exchange programs, the most effective way to reverse anti-Americanism may be for the Americans to partner with educational programs in institutions like the Cairo University (~200,000 students) or Alexandria University (~194,000 students). These programs should not be driven by pro-American, public relations rhetoric, but should instead provide insight into American history and foreign policy in an objective manner, explaining both benefits and repercussions of these policies, in order to

provide the students with an alternative to the anti-Americanism perpetuated by the media. Ideally, these initiatives would enable average Egyptians to access opportunities that would otherwise be unattainable, such as scholarships for higher-level education like master's degrees and doctorates, in order to promote long-term economic development through the formation of human capital.

Students from both sides agreed that the United States should also alter its participation in Egypt's domestic matters, perhaps staying out of political arenas and focusing its efforts—and funds—on infrastructure development, education, and healthcare. Such a focus is in line with USAID's proposed activity for the upcoming years. Of particular emphasis are SMEs (small and medium enterprises), which are usually businesses of up to 10 individuals that are believed to represent almost two-thirds of the labor force. Through six nonprofit organizations and two banks, USAID has formed a credit lending company that supports almost 70 percent of total microfinance endeavors while strengthening the financial infrastructure in Egypt.⁶⁹ This new emphasis also promotes education through supporting the Women's Business Development Center, a public nonprofit organization in Egypt, and a variety of skill development programs. USAID has also initiated projects in air quality management and solid waste management while helping to fund 26 schools in Fayoum to improve enrollment among girls while increasing quality of education.⁷⁰ In order for aid to be effective, however, recipients must be required to accurately account for the contributions. With increasingly limited funds, it is the United States' responsibility to be coherent and efficient during negotiations concerning where the aid goes.

⁶⁹ "USAID: Programs," last modified 8/20/2004, <http://www.danbernard.org/development/aid/371.htm>.

⁷⁰ "USAID Projects in the Middle East," last modified 8/3/2009, <http://www.america.gov/st/develop-english/2009/August/200908031500142SAdemahom0.5932428.html>.

Conclusion

Following the five topic sessions in the colloquium, we finished with a concluding discussion to look back on the week's progress and share what we had all learned in the albeit brief, but eye-opening, few days we had spent together. While many of us had begun to realize the personal growth we experienced in organizing and participating in this program, going around the room and expressing our thoughts did a great deal to make real the immediate effects of our efforts. The lessons we gleaned may not necessarily be revolutionary in terms of breaking down cultural barriers and curbing misunderstanding, but they are a direct result of our exchange and will be valuable to us—and we hope to others—going forward.

One of the primary cultural insights shared by Rice students was a repeated recognition that Egyptians are some of the warmest, most genuine people encountered on our combined excursions throughout the world. The great diversity of both of our countries with regard to educational quality, political views, living standards, religious beliefs, choices of entertainment, family structures, dating standards, ethnicity, and culinary preferences, was also a common theme.

Students had a wide range of observations about our discussions: A rising senior at Rice who had just spent six months living in Alexandria studying Arabic said that seeing the differences—particularly with regard to cultural conservatism—between Cairo and Alexandria was “mind-opening.” In regard to the impressions students gleaned about an undemocratic state like Egypt, one Rice student, who has spent the majority of his life in the Maldives, emphasized the fact that there is “no such thing as one type of ‘undemocratic’ government.” Even in Egypt, a country whose population is 90 percent Muslim and ruled by Shari’a Law, there are many who believe “interfaith dialogue isn’t taboo.” Another member of the Rice delegation, a Pakistani native currently residing in Kansas, noted his surprise to seeing a veiled woman cleaning floors—something “unheard of” in his previous home of Saudi Arabia. A practicing Muslim, he also shared his belief that in Egypt “religion is a way of life, rather than inner-faith.” As we had discovered during Session Two, the majority of us from the United States had an opposite, “inner-faith” view of religion.

The benefit of this exchange was not, however, one way. Many of the Egyptian students noted how surprised they were to hear the differing views of America by Americans. One of the misconceptions overcome was that “all Americans think the same.” One Egyptian student, who had spent the majority of her early life living in northern California before moving to Cairo to attend AUC, came into the colloquium thinking “what more could I learn?” During the concluding session she “realized her patriotism had died” and that this experience had “reinvigorated [her] confidence in promoting American ideals,” inspiring her “to go out and make a difference.”

Speaking to the particular design of our program, which made students responsible for leading our own initiatives, a senior member of the AUC delegation who was experienced with previous Egyptian-American dialogues at the Center for American Studies mentioned that he was “very impressed with this one’s organization and our sincere passion and motivation.” While we cannot possibly cover all that we personally gained from this experience, a member of the Rice delegation, speaking for both countries, summarized much when he said, in Arabic, “I am an American. I am an Egyptian. I am a global citizen.”

Answering the Call

“Programs or activities that seek ‘improved relations’ as an end in itself are rarely likely to succeed. By identifying and building collaborations around shared problems and goals, however, a base for developing sustainable relationships is created. In practical terms, this points to the need to complement communication-oriented forums (e.g. intercultural dialogues and conferences) with action or activity-oriented programs that emphasize joint collaboration on projects with tangible goals and outcomes.”⁷¹

At about halfway through the concluding session we began to look ahead to the future. We realized what we had done in just a few short days would have lasting effects for ourselves, but that there is a need to expand the effects of our exchange to a larger audience, many of whom will never be able to travel the world on their own cultural diplomacy trips. We first shared the obstacles we had overcome, and the opportunities we were given, that had led us to this point in life—one in which we had excelled academically, experienced cultures and situations around the world, and found a way to conduct meaningful and challenging work that brought us to this exchange between top-tier, international universities.

To be clear, there is not one life situation that can describe all the participants in this colloquium, and the life situations of the participants do not necessarily reflect those of all students in Egypt and America. However, our combined group was composed of students from both affluent and impoverished families; from rural agricultural lands as well as highly developed metropolises. Our participants had attended both public and private schools; came from families that were well-connected or had no connections at all; had traveled the world or barely left their hometowns. Some had worked their way through college, depending on financial aid and hourly pay, while others had received scholarships, grants, or family assistance. Our group was incredibly diverse, but we had

⁷¹ Peter Mandaville, “Transformative Partnerships in U.S.-Muslim World Relations: Empowering Networks for Community Development and Social Change,” in *2010 U.S.-Islamic World Forum Papers* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010), 9, http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/06_us_muslim_relations_mandaville.aspx.

all worked and studied hard, and were fortunate enough to travel to the Cairo colloquium to discuss our hopes for the future, and what we could do to help ensure it was a peaceful one. The obstacles we identified in our paths, when viewed through the lens of opportunity, can also be seen as solutions. They can be broken down into four categories.

Money

While not all students struggled financially to pay for college, very few had paid for it all directly out-of-pocket. Two of the Egyptian students were at AUC as part of the Leadership for Education and Development (LEAD) Scholarship Program—a joint program between USAID, the Egyptian Ministry of International Cooperation, and AUC that provides scholarships to the top male and female student from Egypt’s 29 governorates. Similarly, many of the Rice students received a great deal of financial aid in order to cover the costs of college.

The majority of us would not have been able to participate in the colloquium if not for the generosity of the donors who made this trip possible. Financial assistance, whether from governments, universities, or private individuals, is undoubtedly one of the most important and effective means to increase access to higher education and international exchange programs. As one of the Egyptian students reminded us, “behind every child is a village.”

Motivation

It goes almost without saying that by this point in life all of us had developed a sincere passion for our goals. However, we learned that this was not always the case for all of us. Some students had been working toward college and a career in international relations from an early age, while others had only just found interest in the subject. Many had a history of accomplishments, while some have only just begun. A common answer to why we were able to get to this point was being motivated to “get out of our comfort zone” and expose ourselves to new experiences. This adage is not new, but its relevance is nonetheless important. With the flood of information we receive every day from the media and world of entertainment and the innumerable choices we face as emerging adults in a globalized world, it can be easy to become overwhelmed and find

comfort in the status quo. We must find more ways to encourage young people to become actively engaged in the dynamics of the world. To motivate this sector of society, we need accessible, affordable, and exciting programs that offer students the opportunity to “move from a pool to an ocean” and expand their knowledge, stoking the flame of curiosity.

“The greater our knowledge increases, the further our ignorance unfolds.”

—President John F. Kennedy, address on the nation’s space effort, Rice University, September 12, 1962

Confidence

Although one may have the resources and motivation to pursue a goal, having the self-confidence to do so is also necessary. In our closing discussion we found that even if the opportunities are out there, without the belief that “there are no boundaries to what you can do,” one is still limited. At Rice we have a saying: “No upper limit. Still.” This speaks to the underlying belief that we must not allow ourselves to succumb to self-doubt and limit our goals out of fear of failure. Through our involvement in this colloquium and the efforts it took to achieve what we set out to do, we are living examples of the confidence gained through feelings of accomplishment.

Hard work is not always enough, though; sometimes there are too many forces at work against you. When one student asked how we were able to organize this colloquium, our answer was, “good ol’ fashioned blood, sweat, and tears and a lot of luck.” While we can only do so much to affect our luck in the world, what we can do is demonstrate confidence in students to take charge of their own initiatives. If we can break down as many barriers to entry—be they financial constraints or low accessibility—by expanding and supporting student-led programs, we then not only create “lucky” opportunities, but also show that we as a society have confidence in the next generation of leaders.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

Guidance

Even with unlimited resources, aspirations for accomplishment, and the confidence of yourself and peers, one can benefit immensely from the guidance of a friend, parent, or mentor. Many students, Egyptians and Americans alike, spoke of situations where they had interacted on a regular basis with a figure in their life that helped to guide them along the way. Something as simple as a conversation with a respected mentor can do wonders to soothe anxiety over a decision, focus attention on important aspects of work, or provide anecdotal evidence of making it through tough experiences. Guidance doesn't always come from above, as one Egyptian student noted. "Friends [can] help out, bringing out great personal qualities that are hidden beneath the surface." It's also true that this kind of guidance doesn't always have to come one-on-one, as some students spoke of the "great organizations" that had provided the framework and support for their achievements. The lesson here is that we should all take the time to work with others and empower our peers, subordinates, and organizations. At some point in life, we all need a little help along the way, so it would behoove us all to offer that helping hand when possible.

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