



May 21, 2004

U.S. - EGYPT FRIENDSHIP SOCIETY (USEF)
PANEL DISCUSSION NOTES

On Wednesday, May 19, 2004 the U.S.-Egypt Friendship Society (USEF) held its second USEF Speaker Series event, entitled “Views from the Nile: Changing Public Opinions about the United States”. This insightful discussion featured three panelists, Dr. Michele Dunne, Lobna Ismail, and Hala Kotb. The panelists used their extensive experience and expertise in Egypt and the Middle East to formulate a clear picture of the issues affecting current public opinions and channels by which public opinion of the U.S. can be improved. The discussion was moderated by Ambassador Robert Pelletreau (Ambassador to Egypt 1991-1994).

USEF Co-chair and former Ambassador to Egypt (1984-1986), Ambassador Nicolas Veliotos, welcomed the speakers and the audience to the second event of the new USEF society. Ambassador Pelletreau introduced the focal point of the discussion by describing the deteriorating relationship between Egypt and the U.S. He asserted that a healthy relationship between the U.S. and Egypt has the potential to bring profound mutual benefits. However, the current lack of understanding has resulted in a steady flow of dissatisfaction and criticism. Pelletreau noted that USEF exists to better this relationship by helping to foster mutual understanding.

Ambassador Pelletreau called attention to the fact that while neither country wants to see a greater divide, a mitigating strategy is not easily observed. As evidence to the gravity of the deteriorating relationship Pelletreau quoted Ibrahim Nafi from a speech that Pelletreau referred to as sounding the alarm of the growth of anti-American sentiment. Pelletreau succinctly related his personal experience of September 11, 2001 while in Egypt and observed that since that particular date the U.S. administration has done nothing to successfully alleviate the negative sentiments in the region. He concluded his remarks by framing the discussion to answer the extent to which the divide between the U.S. and Egypt is deteriorating and asked the panelists to consider what might be done to strengthen U.S.-Egypt relations.

Hala Kotb, Director of International Marketing and Communications at Zogby International, whose organization has conducted many surveys in the Middle East, used a PowerPoint presentation to visually demonstrate statistics that portray the overall negative public opinion of the U.S. from abroad. Kotb’s statistics specifically illustrated the worsening public opinions of the U.S. in Egypt, which are at an all time low and are expected to fall even lower (documented in polling results to be released within the next couple of weeks). Kotb named American policies in the Middle East and Egypt the key source for unpopular public opinion. In her concluding observation, Kotb highlighted U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a crucial source of conflict in U.S.-Egypt relations.

Lobna Ismail, Founder and President of Connecting Cultures Inc., followed Kotb’s remarks and built on her presentation by specifying ways in which public opinion can be improved. Ismail, who considers herself a cultural strategist, has come to recognize the importance of acknowledging the similarity in values between Arabs, Egyptians and Americans when trying to bridge the cultural gap. She explained that Americans, Arabs and Egyptians all rank their families and quality of work as two of the top-three values. These shared values in turn create a powerful

starting point for cultural connection. Ismail advocates for the use of a cultural strategy to improve public opinion in the way that military, economic, and political strategies are used to direct initiatives. According to Ismail, the use of public diplomacy is a powerful cultural strategy that can create healthy and understanding relationships. Similarly, she described citizen diplomacy as another effective strategy in overcoming the common stereotypes and misconceptions that Egyptians and Americans have about each other. As a means to dispel false impressions, Ismail called for a new approach to the often-criticized American media by suggesting that Americans should make an effort to work with the media rather than against it. Ismail identified the media as one of America's valuable assets due to its potential to show the diversity present in American culture.

Dr. Michele Dunne, Assistant Professor at Georgetown University, focused her prepared remarks on Egypt's intellectual elite's opinion pertaining to the American initiatives to promote democratic and modernization reforms. Dunne observed that the behavior of public and political discourse acts in tandem with the tendency of people to construct a public identity that positions them in accordance with their government's opinion. The reasons behind this public identity originates from an essential need to obtain or retain positions in universities, think tanks and other such institutions where opinions far outside the mainstream are not generally accepted. Dunne thus concluded that the Egyptian government plays a key role in influencing intellectual elites, which for the most part have held negative opinions of U.S. policy. Dunne explained further that while Egyptian intellectuals possess varying degrees of discomfort towards the U.S. reform initiatives, they tend to agree that reform is necessary. In addition, Dunne made reference to the relative and modest success of the U.S. administration's reform initiatives, stating that while the reforms might not be well received, the message is being conveyed. The Alexandria Declaration, the formation of the Arab League and the Muslim Brotherhood are all examples of reform initiatives that have not been directly influenced by U.S. policies. Dunne concluded by pointing out that American reform initiatives have been successful in sparking unique Egyptian and Arab ideas and debate.

The current Egyptian Ambassador to the U.S., Nabil Fahmy, opened the lively question and answer period by asking the panelists to propose ways in which to move forward and identify specific areas of mobility, likely to improve U.S.-Egypt relations. Hala Kotb asserted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was a potential area for mobility and that surveys, using test messages might be used to predict how policy changes could affect public opinions.

Throughout the question and answer period the panelists and the moderator agreed upon the need for a two-way exchange of ordinary citizens between Egypt and the U.S. Ismail stressed the use of media tools, which reveal the diverse human face of Americans and urged that these tools be made available to the Middle East. Ismail also highlighted the role that corporate ambassadorship could play in reviving relations by using the popularity of the American brand in initiating community projects.

When asked what type of leadership role Egypt should take in the Middle East, the panelists answered that Egypt should develop a vision for itself and thereby lead by example.

In closing, Ambassador Pelletreau thanked the panelists for their insightful and instructive comments and congratulated USEF on its successful inception.