

00 SHAFIK GABR

THIS LEADING EGYPTIAN BUSINESSMAN BELIEVES THAT EVEN THE BIGGEST RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NATIONS ARE DRIVEN BY ONE-TO-ONE DIALOGUES

Shafik Gabr is gracious and full of energy. We meet in his Mayfair club, where he is obviously respected by the others present. With his natural smile, bright eyes and gently graying hair, he is the perfect host: both *ḍiyāfa* and *jiwār*. He is easy to imagine in 1920s Alexandria, when it was one of the most sophisticated and elegant places in the world.

Mr Gabr is a practical man, with a pragmatic approach to problem solving that has made him a successful entrepreneur and chairman of Egypt's International Economic Forum as well as positions on Yale University's President's Council on International Activities and the Advisory Board of MIT's Center for International Studies. This pragmatism has led to The Gabr Foundation's East-West: The Art of Dialogue initiative, which inducted its inaugural cohort in May.

They had to see me, I had to see them, we had to sit and talk

Over the years he has seen or participated in many high-budget efforts to bridge the cultural gap between East and West, most of which have not delivered sustained change. In business he has experienced many small-scale exchanges that have created sustained changes in people's understanding across the divide. For Shafik, this personal, one-to-one interaction is the key. Trade reduces international tensions, not because people are trading, but because they must talk and understand each other to trade.

Gabr's respected art collection can be seen as a reflection of his patriotism – he is one of the leading collectors in the world of Orientalist paintings and the first major collector from his region. The Orientalists were European and American artists who came to the Middle East and painted what they saw, astute and open-minded observers from other cultures. The collection is enhanced by his parallel collections of antiquarian books about Egypt, and photographs of Egypt from the early years of photography. Collections of imperfect mirrors, reflecting the sight from another's eyes.

He is Egyptian, not just by birth, but in his heart. A patriot but not a nationalist – he neither asserts that Egypt and Egyptians are best nor that other countries and people must be demoted for his country to rise – he says "I care for my country, I care for my people" but is also clear about his role "I've never gone into politics, never wanted to. I look at every situation as a win-win business game – how do I get you onboard so you can make something [from the deal] and I can make something, rather than a zero-sum game and have you as an enemy. That doesn't work." Or more plainly, in his father's words, "If you eat the whole cake, you'll get stomach ache."

On Shafik's 16th birthday his father said, "this is your last allowance" which he thought was a joke. It wasn't. Egypt was coming out of the 1967 war with Israel, and the country's infrastructure was in shambles; it could take five minutes to get a telephone dialling tone, with similar problems on the receiving end. So "I started a messenger service. A couple of bicycles, a couple of friends. A couple of arm twists of others. I'd come, take your message, and bring the answer back. I saved \$148 [about \$7,000 in today's money] and came to Europe hitch-hiking."





J.A. Bridgman 1875



Shafik wanted to go to a good university but couldn't afford it, so he struck a deal with his father. "The first year, he'd pay. If I got a scholarship, he'd wipe the debt. If I didn't, he'd give me two years to pay it back, and I'd go to a public university. I did well, didn't have to pay the debt, and it changed my life." Shafik went to London University for two years, which coincided with the terrorist bombings by the Irish Republican Army, his first experience of the brutal effect of social conflict.

Today we are so connected with gadgets. But do we know each other, do we understand each other?

From an early start, Gabr has steadily built his interests and empire. He started in the Adel Gabr Consultant Company (established by his late father) but after five years moved to ARTOC, the Arab Trade and Oil Company. He moved up, bought out the other investors, expanded internationally and developed The ARTOC Group for Investment Development into a global business empire with subsidiaries operating in manufacturing, automotive, airport terminals,

consumer products, energy, publishing, real estate and construction. ARTOC is still a private company, with 14 subsidiary companies and combined annual sales of more than \$1bn. He has recently been travelling in China and East Asia, so expansion there is perhaps in view.

Education, like happiness, is enhanced by the giving, so Shafik uses half the money from his M. Shafik Gabr Social Development Foundation in Egypt on primary schools. He was introduced at an early age to charitable giving; as one of the Five Pillars of Islam, giving to charity is a strength in Muslim life. A further 20 percent is spent on health, with over 62,000 patients having been treated so far, and 20 percent on sports clubs for young people.

At the sports clubs, he "would sit on the grass with the young boys and talk about anything. Every time we talked, whatever we talked about, America would come up. I would sit and explain and allow everyone to make his own decision. What bothered me, though, is that, within their own community, there was a huge amount of propaganda, similar to what the Muslim Brotherhood is doing today. Using religion is dangerous stuff. Unpredictable and hard to control."

Early in his career, Shafik was confronted with the divisions created by cultural ignorance and the consequences. "When I started working, I had to go to the smallest towns in the middle of America and to different places in Europe to establish the necessary contacts and understanding. It was not the Telex which could solve the problem: I had to physically go there – they had to see me, I had to see them, we had to sit and talk." Gabr signed a contract with a provincial city in Egypt to supply equipment that came from a city in the American Midwest, and the contract naturally included a pre-shipment inspection in America.

I look at every situation as a win-win business game

When Shafik came to book the trip, the gentlemen from the city in Egypt said "We're not going. Who wants to go to America?" They finally agreed when he offered to go

with them. On the inspection visit, the issue crystallized. "On the third day, I was in the hotel lobby waiting for one of them. He doesn't come down. I go up to his room and ask 'What's going on?' He says, 'I've been fooled, I've been lied to.' I thought something had gone wrong with the inspection. 'Is anything wrong, has anyone bothered you?' He said 'No. I'm 33 years old. I've been lied to, I've been fooled. The United States is not what everybody has been telling us. These people – they're just like me and everybody else. How could it be that I've been so blind?' Five days later, the Egyptians with their counterparts had become close friends. Years later, the Americans visited Egypt, and the relationship has been sustained.

"This [event] stuck in my mind. Today we are so connected with these gadgets, but do we know each other, do we understand each other? Definitely not. I have always believed in the importance of building bridges of understanding. In my business, the number of times there is a misperception or a misrepresentation by email – with people I know, let alone people I don't – is huge. If I know you, I'll pick up the phone and say 'Hey, what's going on? This is definitely not you.' But if I don't, then I become defensive and then we have more of a misunderstanding."

"I [met] a member of Congress 20 years ago, and I asked him 'Have you been to the Middle East?' He said, 'Of course, seven or eight times.' 'Where?' 'I went to Israel.' I said 'Sir, will you please visit Egypt?' 'Sure, sure.' After four years of my asking, he came. And he came every other year after that. Recently he said 'Before, every time an issue about Egypt came up, I relied on my advisors or on written reports. Now I have people I can pick up the phone and talk to before I make a decision.' That's important."

East-West: The Art of Dialogue, launched in 2012 by the Shafik Gabr Foundation (US), is a pragmatic response to the global situation and its effect in the Middle East. Normal businesses, big and small, need predictability to prosper, and the tension through the region, whether from the "war on terror", the "Arab Spring", the Israel-Palestine stand-off or the fundamentalists, is de-stabilizing. Gabr explains "If I were BP or Exxon, I would definitely have an interest in having people in my society, in my organization, understand the other world. If that understanding breaks down, we have another 9/11, we have another 7/7. [If that happens], we're going down the path of another clash between East and West." That will be bad for most of us.

Democracy is more complicated than dictatorship

The approach of The Art of Dialogue initiative is simple, based on a model proven in Shafik's experience: get young people together, engage them in something which they must discuss, and they will build their understanding of each other and, through that, of the other society and country.

As he explains "we select emerging leaders from the Middle East and emerging leaders from the West (the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada) in five areas: art, science, the law, media, and social and business entrepreneurship. Each group has 20 people: 10 from the East and 10 from the West, and they go to 'the opposite side.'" The inaugural group is meeting in May and going in pairs to

five cities in the US. "The [young leaders from the Middle East] are getting to know the United States in all aspects of its society, from religion to politics, to economics, to social, to education, to human rights – everything in relation as to how to understand the United States first-hand."

The reverse visit to the Middle East follows, and "within 90 days, each pair must complete a project to pass on to others something they've learned or discovered – to create a ripple effect." Once a year, there will be a showcase with all the people who've completed projects. The projects can be digital, physical, art or research based, or concern itself with social entrepreneurship. "This showcase will bring stakeholders and other interested parties together" to create further ripples. Gabr has committed to fund 60 to 70 people over the first two years, and has confidence that others will do the same, as there has been significant interest in the initiative in both the East and the West.

People and organizations are welcome to become involved: as sponsors of an individual or group; running their own program; or more closely involved with supporting the initiative into the future. These meetings, these dialogues, are small, the numbers insignificant against the billions living in these regions, but individuals influence the path of regional relations. Even the big, international relationships are shaped by the small group of leaders and their personal relationships. As Shafik says, "all we need is one Sadat or one Rabin, and the return on investment is immense."

We return to lighter topics, and Shafik confesses that he has a music room in his home in Cairo, but doesn't spend as much time there as he used to. His enthusiasm for music and exploration remains undiminished, however. "My love for music goes from classical to pop, and I recently discovered Mexican music. One of the things I do when I go to any country is to find their music and listen to it." I ask about Egyptian music and he recommends the composer and performer Omar Khairat, then sends me a CD, which instantly evokes memories of long evenings with good food, good company and good conversation. The art of dialogue in practice.

