

Washington Watch

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One Step at a Time— the Gabr Fellows' Story

Dr. James J. Zogby ©
President
Arab American Institute

In the midst of the confusion and uncertainty that characterizes current US-Egypt relations and with American and Egyptian attitudes toward each other having plummeted to all-time lows, I recently had the opportunity to participate in a "little" gem of a project that shows a way forward.

Last month, twenty American and Egyptian young professionals visited the US as part of a program sponsored by the [Shafik Gabr Foundation](#). This group of Gabr Fellows was evenly divided between nationals from both countries and included artists, academics, and specialists in fields ranging from law to energy.

The goals of the program were to promote mutual understanding and to spawn implementable projects through which the participants could apply their expertise and their shared experiences to make a difference in improving the US-Egypt relationship.

The Fellows had earlier spent three weeks in Egypt visiting historical sites and participating in discussions with academics, policy experts, and community leaders. While in the US, they visited five cities seeing our historical sites and meeting with opinion makers to discuss a broad range of policy concerns from the state of race relations in the US and the partisan split in Congress to the current debate over immigration policy and health care reform.

As important as these discussions may have been, the Fellows also benefited from the time they spent with each other, debating gender equality and the role of religion in an effort to better understand the differences that exist in their respective cultural contexts. In conversations that followed I learned how important these side conversations had been to the Fellows. The Egyptians were struck by the persistence of race as a defining issue in American life and they were surprised by the dysfunctional nature of Washington politics. Both of these combined to shatter their view of the "American monolith".

For their part, the US participants came away from their experience with a better understanding of the aspirations of "ordinary Egyptians", which helped to demystify their notions of today's Egypt. Not only did each side develop a better understanding of the other—but a number of Fellows told me that they also ended up with greater insight into and appreciation of their own culture and traditions.

The Gabr program was about more than developing “feel good”, personal relationships. A key component of the effort is the commitment of the Fellows to work in teams developing projects designed to bring their shared experience to others. One team, for example, is working on an "artist-in-residence" exchange program that would provide opportunities for young and accomplished artists from Egypt and the US to be hosted in each other's country and then to display the work they produce during their residency back in their home country. Another team has developed a project creating a network of "microclinics" to provide rural Egyptians with expanded healthcare options. Modeled after a similar successful network operating Kentucky, this program will also provide training and a business plan empowering Egyptians to self-start similar efforts in their communities. Another project (one of my personal favorites) involves the installation of two large screens - one each in Egypt and the US - that will serve as "communication portals" creating a 24/7 connection - a sort of massive permanent "FaceTime" providing residents in Egypt and the US the opportunity to look into each other's worlds, to engage in conversations, or simply, as one Fellow noted, to give each other a virtual "high five".

The twenty Fellows have now returned to their homes – though they remain in contact with their team members as they continue to refine their cooperative projects. Soon their programs will be up-and-running and the next group of Gabr Fellows will be preparing to begin their journey. The Gabr Foundation intends to expand the program with more groups coming each year.

Shafik Gabr, a successful Egyptian businessman, was prompted to launch the Fellows initiative by the unraveling of the US/Egypt relationship following the dramatic events of 2011. Gabr is an Egyptian who is deeply devoted to his country. At the same time, he has long-standing ties to and affection for the United States. The growing distrust between Egyptians and Americans

and the unsettling confusion in America's handling of relations in the post-Mubarak era caused him great pain and then moved him to act.

With Egypt's economy in shambles, American and Egyptian attitudes toward each other at all-time lows, and the policy debate on both sides either embittered and/or a muddled mess, Gabr felt the need to make a personal intervention. While some might dismiss his effort as "a drop in the bucket", to those who participate as Fellows and to those who will benefit from the Fellows' projects, Gabr offers a life-changing experience. One can hope that the unique model he presents for private sector direct engagement in "public diplomacy" will become contagious. Should other private foundations and corporations get into the act, Gabr's projections of 40, 60, or 100 Fellows per year could grow to include thousands. Should this occur, we might see a time in the future when US-Egyptian relations are being shaped by individuals on both sides who have had direct experience in their formative years with the other side.