

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cynthia P. Schneider](#)

“A New Way Forward” in Doha: Listen to the Artists ^[1]

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s speech at the opening of the U.S-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar (February, 2009) was interrupted with applause as the audience heard something unusual – at least in the last eight years: a firm criticism of U.S. government policy by a respected opinion leader from America. General Petraeus, sitting onstage on the same panel, listened politely as former Secretary Albright enumerated the shortcomings of the war and reconstruction in Iraq. Neither Secretary Albright nor General Petraeus made declarations about civil rights or democracy. Rather, and more importantly, they showed the reality of a society and a government that tolerates dissent. The impact was palpable.

Perhaps reflecting the hope and optimism surrounding the Obama presidency, the discussions and exchanges in the sixth annual Forum, were more open, more diverse, and more energetic than ever before. The one hundred fifty attendees, divided evenly between the U.S. and the Muslim world, and including leaders in arts and culture and science and technology, as well as political, faith, and NGO leaders, were not just going through the motions of inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, but rather spoke with a marked sense of purpose, as if they believed that something might really be done. However, the news was not all positive.

The atmosphere of frankness also opened up a discussion on the collateral damage to America’s reputation of the global economic crisis. According to Dr. Ismael Serageldin, Director of the Library in Alexandria, the U.S. economic meltdown is viewed in the developing world as a manifestation of corruption (trillions of dollars trading hands with little or no oversight, a small number of people garnering millions while record numbers lose their jobs). He maintained that if the same events occurred in the developing world – in Asia or Africa, for example -- the world would call it corruption. Dr. Serageldin emphasized the profound loss of trust and confidence in the U.S. as the developing world has watched a system and economy that appeared to be infallible crumble. His talk was a sober reminder of the dark backdrop to the optimism, and of the importance of tangible actions and progress to underpin it.

Another general theme that surfaced several during the Forum was the concept that Muslim majority countries should take responsibility for their own futures rather than blaming the U.S. and the west for any and all problems. Anwar Ibrahim (leader of the Opposition in the Parliament of Malaysia) made this point forcefully in the opening plenary. In the Arts and Cultural Leaders Workshop, Mohammed Gohar, CEO of Cairo Video SAT, added a satirical twist to this theme when he referred to a fictional Cairo housewife who blames President Obama when her roast chicken is burnt.

The Arts and Culture Leaders Workshop at the Forum, which I have led since 2006, concluded that during this time of great complexity and sudden change, it is more important than ever that the United States leverage the potential of arts and culture, from museum

exhibitions to transnational reality TV, to increase understanding across cultures, to break down stereotypes and barriers, and to foster positive social change. Part of the larger Brookings Creative Network, made up of about 200 individuals and 50 organizations developed over three years of meetings in the U.S. and the Muslim world, the 2009 Arts and Culture Leaders Workshop included, among others, Naif Al-Mutawa (creator of *The 99* comic book series), Nashwa al Ruwaini (CEO of Pyramedia, Inc. and Executive Director of the Middle East Film Festival), Walter Parkes (film producer- *Men in Black*, *Gladiator*, *Kite Runner*), Salman Ahmad (rock musician, founder of *Junoon*, author, UN Goodwill Ambassador), and Cory Ondrejka (creator of virtual world *Second Life*, now devising online strategy for EMI music). At meetings held during the Forum and elsewhere, the Arts and Culture Dialogue Initiative, housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, seeks to integrate arts and culture with policy with the goal of increasing understanding, and, ultimately improving relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world. In addition, using the Forum meetings as a springboard, the Initiative seeks to spin out projects. The first, [Muslims on Screen and Television \(MOST\): a Cross Cultural Resource Center](#) target="_blank">[Muslims on Screen and Television \(MOST\): a Cross Cultural Resource Center](#) launched in October 2008 in Abu Dhabi at the Middle East International Film Festival (MEIFF) and in December in Los Angeles at the Paley Center for Media. MOST provides valuable information on Islam and Muslims for the US entertainment community with the goal of facilitating over time for Muslims and themes related to Islam the kind of normalization that has taken place in popular culture with African Americans or gays and lesbians.

At the 2009 Arts and Culture Leaders meetings, participants noted ways in which arts and media impact society, spur social change, hold governments responsible, and generally humanize conflict and political differences. They urged support for local independent media and artists, in the form of recognition, moral and legal support, as well as funding and collaborative projects. From Pakistani American rock musician Salman Ahmad to Dr. Ismael Serageldin, Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, participants concurred that arts and culture play an integral, but under-utilized role in the struggle against extremism. Ahmad, founder of the popular southeast Asian band *Junoon*, noted that the silencing of the musicians, artists and writers in the SWAT region signals the incipient Talibanization of the country, and urged the U.S. to strengthen Pakistani civil society by promoting Pakistani-American collaborations in films, television, fashion and music. Noting that ideas of religious tolerance and diversity of opinion abound in the literature and arts of Egypt's Golden Age during the 1920s and 1930s, Dr. Serageldin advocated new translations and publications to replace the volumes that have all but disappeared from library shelves. He emphasized the importance of Muslim and Arab populations rediscovering their own tolerant, open minded histories, noting that today, even in Universities, religious tracts and studies have steadily replaced literature and social science texts from the Arab world and the west.

The Arts and Culture Leaders Workshop reached consensus on the importance of a number of general principles, as well as individual initiatives projects that merit support. The guiding principles included: 1) Support artistic and cultural figures in the Muslim world and exchanges with them; 2) Recognize the potential for capacity development in the arts (the U.S. revenue generating commercial model is admired throughout the world) as well as the potential to increase understanding and to reach young populations; 3) "Do no harm"; remove onerous U.S. visa polices, and grant application and reporting requirements; 4) Do not re-invent the wheel; there are proven entities, programs and products that deserve support; 5) Highlight "Best Practices" in arts and cultural enterprises and programs; 6) Support both "high and low" media. Recognize the capacity of television and web based products to impact large numbers, and of "high" arts such as classics of literature from the Arab and Muslim worlds to convey a

more accurate portrayal of history, or of poetry and music to debunk negative stereotypes in the U.S. and to restore a more complete and nuanced sense of identity in Muslim majority regions. Ideas for specific projects or initiatives included 1) a cross-cultural concert including hip hop and other genres of music practiced in the East and West, magnified through an online buildup of social networking that would provide a framework to capture the event and spread it virally through audience videos; 2) a website that would provide information on film making in regions of the Muslim world (incentives, services, work conditions) as well as a portal for film makers, writers, and animators to present their products to potential international clients; 3) a traveling independent film festival with films by U.S. and Muslim world film makers that would tour in both places. Brookings's Arts and Culture Dialogue Initiative will develop these concepts in consultation with the members of the Forum Workshop, and will seek partners and support to spin them out.

In support of the importance and value of supporting arts and cultural initiatives, Dr. Ismael Serageldin cited (of all people) Napoleon Bonaparte: "There are only two forces in this world: the sword and the mind. The mind shall always defeat the sword." It remains to be seen whether the US government will learn a lesson from Napoleon. At present, with our international footprint, including in public and cultural diplomacy, left primarily by the Pentagon, we seem to be siding with "the sword". The participants at the U.S. Islamic World Forum optimistically looked to the potential of the "the mind" in all its capacities -- from science and technology to creative expression -- to shift the paradigm in the U.S. --Muslim world relationship. A concrete step towards realizing this new and improved relationship would be to recognize and support the value of the arts and media as forces for positive social change in the Muslim world.
