

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cari E. Guittard](#)

Business-Led Diplomatic Action ^[1]

I recently returned from the Middle East where I was part of a three week Arab & American Business Fellowship. The fellowship, spearheaded by Business for Diplomatic Action and the Young Arab Leaders, is a two-way exchange program designed to engage young, high-potential professionals in bridge-building efforts between the US and the Middle East. It is a unique program, the only one of its kind designed and driven by business leaders.

Can Three Weeks Make a Difference?

We began the trip in Dubai as a diverse group of 12 American fellows, representing every region of the United States and various companies including Dow Chemical, Intel, Wells Fargo, Verizon, Sephora, and DDB. Having spent time in the region when I worked for the State Department prior to 9/11, I was eager to see if this brief fellowship could really be as “transformative” and “life-altering” as past fellows had proclaimed. What I discovered early on in the trip was that it was not only transformative and memorable, but something that I will take with me for the rest of my life. In three weeks, I made more contacts, and had broader, deeper interactions at every level of Middle Eastern society than I had during my entire time working for the federal government in the region. *How is this possible?* No discussion was off limits, no interaction discouraged. It was a “safe” environment to ask any question, probe any issue, and raise sensitive cross-cultural concerns. We came to learn and engage... we came away completely changed.

Smashing Stereotypes and Misperceptions from Egypt to Palestine

Our fearless group of twelve split into two after our first few days in Dubai. Half of us headed to Egypt, the other half to Palestine; two very different countries, each with their own challenges and opportunities, and two very complex business environments. Universally, we were *welcomed*. People not only welcomed us into their businesses and homes, but into their lives - sharing with us their hopes, passions, concerns, challenges, and joys. It was remarkable how quickly these discussions smashed every stereotype and misperception on both sides, making us all realize how similar we really are when focusing on that which binds us as people, not on the issues that separate us. I was struck by how quickly we could come together, build trust and move towards discussions of how to work together in this rare environment. My conclusion after countless meetings, briefings and discussions confirmed my belief that business is uniquely positioned to accelerate and promote diplomatic action. In business there is little choice but to engage, seek understanding, build relationships, find ways to collaborate and manage challenges. Business has perfected the elements of diplomacy often overlooked by scholars and politicians - that of leveraging diplomacy effectively for strategic advantage and building solutions to complex challenges.

Moving Towards a Global Mindset

We also saw firsthand that successful global businesses, especially the ones operating in the Middle East on a massive scale, develop and invest in their people so that they excel in diverse, challenging cross-cultural environments. Every executive we met with had a *global mindset*. This was not by accident. How incredibly refreshing and bizarre for Americans to witness.

Of our twelve American fellows, each of us admitted at the outset that we were outliers in our respective communities and hometowns; the “strange” ones who actively seek out global experiences beyond Canada, Mexico and Europe. We all truly enjoyed engaging in thoughtful global discourse with our Middle Eastern counterparts, as so many of them truly have a global mindset. They see themselves not just as Egyptians, or Palestinians, or as Arabs, but as citizens of the world. They are connected to and interested in what’s happening in the world. This fellowship confirmed for me how critical the cultivation of a global mindset really is for every American. We no longer have a choice as to whether or not we engage with the world. We do have a choice in how we engage. Do we seek to learn and understand or hide behind stereotypes, fear, and ignorance?

Sisyphus Reborn

On our last night in Dubai, we were reminded by our new friends in the region that 10 years ago a program such as the AABF, where Arab and American business leaders come together to dialogue and learn from one another, wouldn't have existed. I returned to the US with an enormous sense of gratitude and hope; an abundance of optimism, energized by the myriad opportunities in the region, eager to build upon the new relationships I cultivated, and perhaps most importantly, to share the learnings and insights with fellow Americans. Watching the Young Arab Leaders firsthand championing innovative development and mentoring efforts in the Middle East, you can't help but be moved to action here at home. Diplomacy begins at home and it begins with each of us who engage with other cultures and travel the world. It may seem a Sisyphean task, but what is the alternative? Do nothing? It will take an army of globally minded Americans to steer America's role in the world. It is a massive, generational task, but one we are equipped and ready for. Our work has only just begun. Will you join us?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Business for Diplomatic Action: <http://www.businessfordiplomaticaction.org>

Young Arab Leaders: <http://www.yaleaders.org/en/>

AABF Building Bridges Blog: <http://businessfordiplomaticaction.blogspot.com/2009/11/building-global-mindset.html>
