

The Arab American News

Young Arab Leaders meet in New York

By Khalil AlHajal - The Arab American News
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NEW YORK □ About two hundred American and Arab businesspeople met at a conference here March 13-15 to promote dialogue, under the premise that business relations can help build understanding and even peace between the U.S. and the Arab World.

The Young Arab Leaders, a Dubai-based network of Arab businesspeople under 45 years old, put the Global Action Forum together, gathering a long list of speakers on entrepreneurship, fellowship programs, international journalism and the American political landscape.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding in the United States about the Arab world and I believe that there's a lot of misunderstanding in the Arab World about the United States," said former U.S. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, setting the tone for conference in his keynote address.

Arab American Institute President Dr. James Zogby spoke in depth about reasons for a lack of understanding, or efforts to understand Arabs by Americans.

"After 9-11, when Americans were all asking 'Who are they and what do they want?' there was somebody else on television providing those answers. Ignorance is a problem but ignorance that thinks it knows is a bigger problem."

Keith Reinhard, president of Business for Diplomatic Action, which runs a fellowship project with the Young Arab Leaders, spoke about the program that involves temporary exchanges of Arab and American businesspeople to foster dialogue.

"Resentment against our country and its policies has never been worse," said Reinhard. "We believe that we are starting now to build bridges using business, not only between our countries and our cultures, but we believe we can truly build bridges to a better world."

He said that despite the image problems, according to a survey conducted for the initiative, the U.S. remains the highest preference among people in the Arab World for education and professional development.

In 2007, seven young professionals from Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and Palestine who took part in the program were brought to the U.S. to spend three weeks exploring American businesses Sesame Workshop and MidAmerican Energy Company.

In the fall of 2008 the Arab and American Business Fellowship Program is set to bring 20 more Arab fellows to the U.S., and will expand, sending 10 Americans to visit companies in the UAE, Kuwait and Jordan.

"When we're attuned properly to each other, we experience a harmony that is transformational. And in those moments of transformation, wisdom comes and we know what to do," said Charles Montgomery of MidAmerican Energy Company.

Montgomery said he fell in love with the seven fellows when they visited.

Another initiative touted at the conference was the Global Action Institute, a new non-profit entity created to encourage connections among young people between the Arab World and America by training education programs.

Ant Bozkaya, who conducted research on the feasibility of the organization, said that his study determined there to be a real potential for the non-profit to serve as an investment toward creating a bridge-building infrastructure, "making the two worlds more accessible to each other."

Young Arab Leader member Rami Makhzoumi, who is CEO of the UAE based Future Pipe Industries, said that the people at the forum have special qualities that allow them to play major roles in filling the gaps in understanding and tolerance.



"Over 80 percent of the Young Arab Leaders have either been educated in the West, lived in the West or have worked in the West. And that gives us a very unique perspective and a very unique ability to be able to bridge these differences and try to create through the Global Action Institute a real effective mechanism on the ground that can translate to mutual opportunities between the two worlds."

He said that existing entities should not be overlooked as resources.

"We have to leverage the existing organizations like Jim's

(Arab American Institute) to move forward," he said.

□Don't build bridge over partners,□ said Zogby. □There are stones out there waiting for someone to use them to build the bridge.□

Zogby encouraged the group to broaden the initiatives to reach out to smaller communities, beyond New York and Washington.

Cities like Memphis, Houston, Des Moines have small pockets of Arab American communities, he said. "An Arab minister and or an Arab president comes to Washington and is ignored. An Arab delegation of businesspeople goes to Birmingham, Alabama, and they're a front page news story. Go to where you can reach people, where they care about you and where in fact you can become a big sensation and have an impact."

He said business people reaching out to each other represented the best hope for international cooperation.

"The best American public diplomats are our business community. It's not our government, our government screws it up whenever they get into it. But frankly, when our business people do it, they do it right. Because they know how to close a deal, and they understand the importance of the deal."

In addition to targeting smaller communities, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, of Boeing Company, said small companies should also be involved.

"Everybody always comes to the big names and the big names are not always your most productive," she said. "I think that things are changing. Small companies are doing international business."

She said that any and all opportunities for dialogue must be taken.

"I'm not sure Americans believe that we share the same values. And I'm not sure that Arab young people believe that we share their values. Creating the moments to have that conversation□ is really, really important."

John Dearborn, of Dow Chemical Company, a major sponsor of the conference, said the company became involved in the Global Action Forum because of a "pressing need for the company to transform itself."

He said that an example of the company's involvement in the Middle East was providing styrofoam insulating material for a desert skiing facility in the UAE.

Companies like Dow, he said, have the power to create jobs, success, dialogue and more success.

He described an example of the process of reaching understanding on an individual level between Arab and American businesspeople.

"You need to take the time to invest in a relationship," he said about dealing in the Arab World.

"Quite interestingly, our timeframes are quite different."

He said a large amount of time is spent doing things like chatting about family in Arab countries, "so we can truly get to know each other. There's an investment to be made up front in that relationship that, for me, feels like it takes a long time□which I need to accommodate□but in the long run will cause business to go by much quicker.

"I just think we need to find the richness in those differences, that perhaps frustrates the dialogue because the dialogue happens at a different pace between the two of us."

A session on the media at the forum was filled with complaints that American media portrayals of the Middle East are unfair and entirely focused on conflict and terrorism.

Thanassis Cambanis, an American journalist who has reported on the Middle East for the Boston Globe and the New York Times, offered an explanation.

"The big bias or secret in the media is that they like 'sexy stories.' That drives most of our coverage," he said.

He said that even the most conscientious efforts at fairness have little affect on those who have certain preconceptions.

"Those who want to see clash of civilizations continue to do so."

He said the type of people who "circulate rumors about Barack Obama being a crypto-Muslim, can't be affected by media."

Another session led by brothers Jim Zogby and pollster John Zogby, focused on the upcoming American presidential election and how it relates to the Middle East.

Jim Zogby offered a pessimistic perspective, pointing out that there has been virtually no mention of of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the various campaigns.

"I can't imagine us being in a bigger mess at any point in time," he said about the lack of attention to various pressing, worsening issues in the region.

He said that Michigan's exclusion in the Democratic primaries severely inhibited the influence of the Arab American vote.

Chairman of the forum, Shehab Gargash, said that the initiatives being planned would not be discouraged by unfavorable conditions between governments.

"If we get a very negative political environment, these programs will still work," he said.

He said that understanding can be achieved through the business initiatives, and that understanding is half the battle toward widespread peace.

Fatma Ghaly, one of last year's participants from Egypt in the Arab American Business Fellowship, said part of

what she learned in her experience visiting American businesses was that more intense efforts to fill the gap must be made from the Arab side, where she said, the shortfall comes from.

"We're more familiar with American culture, because of entertainment," she said. "It's the job of the two ends to meet."

Another fellow, Hamed Al-Hamdan, from Oman, said he believes strengthening business ties really can help to achieve peace.

"There's a saying that two countries that both have McDonalds will never go to war," he said.

Saman Mazahreh, a project manager for a New Jersey-based clinical supplies company who attended the forum, said he hopes to become more involved in the various projects and organizations put on display.

"I would like to see the Arab American community come together and really have a presence," he said. "How do we empower younger people and how do we break down the walls? Think how powerful this community can be if we can get everybody on the same page."
