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Obama's challenge: An Islamic renaissance

By Ahmed H. Zewail | September 27, 2009

IN AUGUST, I returned to Egypt, the country of my birth, for the first time since President Obama spoke in June at the University of Cairo. I discussed the president's address with a veteran Egyptian diplomat, who described its impact as "historic." Obama's words were regarded as a momentous break from the past, spoken by an American president who respects Muslim faith and culture, and is optimistic about future relations with Muslim nations.

During that visit, I also got - literally - a taste of how the speech had gone down in the proverbial Arab Street, or at least in the streets of Cairo. The city's markets were piled high with dates in preparation for Ramadan, which observant Muslims mark with daily fasts, often broken with a date at sunset. Different varieties of the fruit are named after popular and unpopular personalities, depending on quality, and priced accordingly. This year, in the Cairo markets, the "Obama date" was of the best quality and commanded the highest price.

Here was a hopeful - and sweet - response to the president's overtures in Egypt. However, my friend spoke of a general sense that the next move too was up to Obama. I found this attitude profoundly unsatisfying. While Obama may be in a unique position to catalyze progress on the Arab-Israeli front, beyond that the impetus for change can only come from the Muslims themselves.

Egypt should take its cue from the fact that the president chose to speak not before government officials, but before an audience of educated young people. As a scientist educated in both Egypt and America, I appreciate the president's call for new education and science partnerships between Muslim nations and the West, for it is these areas that have the greatest potential to move a society forward.

This idea is by no means foreign to either Egypt or Islam. I came of age in Egypt after the Gamal Abdel Nasser revolution. Most Westerners today are unaware of the extent to which Nasser's regime promoted education as the vital engine of progress. I was one of many young Egyptians who reaped the benefits, receiving an excellent public-school education in a system that encouraged women to attend college with men and enabled many Coptic Christians to be prominent teachers and professors.

The religion of my youth did not advocate intolerance of other faiths, nor did it interfere with freedom of thought. I was raised in a devout family, but when my friends and I met up at the mosque, it was often to discuss academic subjects or to socialize. When we heard the word jihad, it meant to us *ijthad*, or "to strive," to excel personally and academically.

This was the environment that propelled me to enroll at the University of Alexandria, excel in my science studies with outstanding professors, win a scholarship for graduate study at the University of Pennsylvania, and become a professor at the California Institute of Technology.

My experience was hardly unique, and it offers an instructive example of what a commitment to education, unfettered by religious orthodoxies, can accomplish. When optimists speak of cultivating a spirit of progress among Muslim nations, we need look no farther back than the Egypt of my childhood, when the country had the best universities and richest cultural milieu in

the region, and was a center of secular and religious learning.

Today we see a similar dynamic at work alongside internal liberalization in countries as ethnically and geographically diverse as Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, and some of the Gulf States, where substantial resources are poured into building up educational and civic infrastructures and working to overcome stereotypes that the Islamic world is hopelessly mired in oppression, religious extremism, and sectarian conflict.

Today in Egypt and throughout much of the Muslim world, more than a quarter of the population is under the age of 30. Neither Muslim governments nor the West can afford to overlook this immense reservoir of human talent and potential.

The most effective way to tap it is through a revitalized educational system, from the elementary grades through college, that is willing to capitalize on the best of both Muslim and Western traditions of learning, with a new emphasis on science and technology, and a recognition that assimilating new ideas represents not a departure from an authentic Muslim heritage but a return to it. A sustained investment in education is what will ultimately lead to greater economic prosperity, enhanced quality of life, and true democratic reform.

It is essential that Muslims embrace the American president's offer to collaborate in establishing regional "centers of excellence," among other initiatives in higher education. Egypt in particular should lead the way to advance educational and government reform. Otherwise, despite its auspicious start, Obama's Ramadan "date" will remain little more than a passing encounter, with limited prospects for a closer relationship.

Ahmed Zewail, a professor at Caltech, received the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1999. He was recently appointed to President Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. ■