

The US needs a new soft era

By focusing on science and education, America can rebuild its relations with the Arab world.

Commentary by Ahmed Zewail

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Earlier this year I was in Alexandria, speaking about educational reform in front of a packed auditorium of students, teachers, and professionals. I was there as the US president's science envoy to the Middle East. I was surrounded by talented young people, ambitious for themselves and for their country. They represent the hope of Egyptian society and are the ones whom Barack Obama's Cairo initiative, "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world ... based upon mutual interest and mutual respect", must motivate and engage.

I recalled myself at their age, harbouring similar hopes and ideals, and how science shaped my life. My ambition was moulded by the excellent educational system that existed at that time, supported by a society that regarded academic achievement as a national priority. In that climate, science was not perceived as a threat to religion; in fact it was quite the opposite. The mosque was the neighbourhood house of worship, but it was also the place where my highschool friends and I came to study.

Although the Nasser revolution of 1952 was secular, the culture remained deeply religious — but it was a faith of moderation and tolerance. Women made up nearly half my class at university, and my senior academic adviser there was a woman. In Alexandria my friends were Christians and Muslims.

For my generation, America was not exactly seen as our friend. The US was in conflict with Nasser, it denied aid for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, and supplied Israel with its military arsenal. But despite these anti-American feelings, we were drawn to its soft power — the scientific achievements and constitutional values. Even after the six-day war, when relations between the US and Egypt plunged, my university professors, who had earned their PhDs in the US, gave us a more nuanced view of America, and indeed played a critical role in my coming to the US.

In adapting to life in the melting pot of America, I discovered that the same soft power of science has a huge influence in building bridges between cultures and religions — and has the potential to do so with the Muslim world.

By contrast, hard power is very costly. In the latest Iraq war it caused the death and suffering of millions. No matter what "good intentions" the president and the neocons had in mind — be it the spread of democracy or the security of oil supply — the war engendered more conflict in the Middle East, and diverted attention from economic development in the region and a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

There is nothing in the cultural DNA of Islam that makes it resistant to assimilating new ideas. The vast majority of Muslims are moderates who want nothing more than to live a decent life and see their children educated. Everywhere I went in Alexandria people expressed eagerness to forge closer scientific and educational ties with the US, whatever their disagreements on political issues.

In this tumultuous part of the world what is needed most is the soft power of modern science, education and economic developments. Close to half of the 300 million Arabs are now under the age of 15, and unemployment is above 15%. This situation is a timebomb that could be triggered by frustrated youth expressing their despair

through national and international violence. Progress in the Middle East is important to the West not only for obtaining natural resources, but also for maintaining an influence in a region that is luring other powers such as China and Russia.

For half a century US policy has focused on securing the flow of oil and ensuring Israel's military superiority; it has supported undemocratic regimes while calling publicly for democratic change. This two-faced policy must change to one that genuinely supports human rights and good governance. In the places I visited, people wish to see an even-handedness on Palestinian issues. In the long run the best support the US can give Israel is a secure peace.

We need a long-term and coherent partnership to build up and modernise science, increasing support to students and scholars. The highly qualified Arab diaspora can be involved in this partnership. Surely the aspirations and energies that I encountered in Alexandria and throughout the region can be harnessed, through soft power, to usher in a new era in the relationship between the West and the Arab and Muslim world.

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