Public Diplomacy in the Context of a New Egypt

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As we in Montana and across the U.S. watch political developments in Egypt, I follow the daily news with greater interest than most. The uncertainties of Arab Spring are quite personal to me: my parents immigrated to the U.S. from Egypt more than 45 years ago. While born an American in the heartland of Iowa, I am Deena Fathi Abdel-Aziz Ali Mansour, named in the tradition after my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather.

You could call my family an American success story. My father was the oldest of seven children raised in a two-bedroom apartment in Ibrahimaya, one of the poorest districts in Alexandria. During the turmoil of the Arab-Israeli conflict, my parents moved to the U.S. to further their educations. Making their way to Wyoming, my father became a university professor, my mother a librarian. Growing up, I lived in Egypt for three short years, though that cultural immersion was tempered by my enrollment in the protected enclave of an American high school.

My experiences as a first-generation American shaped my desire to serve our country. Upon graduating from college with a degree in international relations, I passed the foreign service exam and specialized in public diplomacy. This branch of diplomacy promotes our national interest by informing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between Americans and people across the world. I loved the work, but after eight years in the service, including four years in Southeast Asia, it was time to come home. I was fortunate to receive the opportunity to implement similar programs at The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana. The Mansfield Center has as its dual mission a commitment to ethics in public policy as well as fostering mutual understanding between the U.S. and
Asia. We have many private and public partners in these efforts, including the Departments of State, Defense, and Education.

My husband and I always planned to take our two children to Egypt to introduce them to that heritage. The importance of such a trip grew as a boy in my 9-year-old son’s class announced one day that all Egyptians were terrorists. In the wake of 9/11, we decided that we all needed this opportunity to learn about a culture so distant from our own.

When we initially conceived of the trip, Egypt had been firmly under Mubarak’s rule for nearly 30 years. We celebrated Arab Spring and watched as the military has shifted from its initial role of protector of the Tahrir Square demonstrators to its increasingly authoritarian rule, and as the Islamic Brotherhood has risen from the banned to the legally victorious. It was a unique window for our family to learn more than we had initially expected -- to see democracy being born.

We spent three weeks in Egypt last month, staying just long enough to witness the first phase of the presidential elections. We met people throughout the country, from the cities of Cairo and Alexandria to smaller communities in the south and in the Sinai. We felt the economic desperation in a country where Arab Spring was driven as much by unemployment as a desire for political freedom. Our awe at the ancient Wonders of the World was tempered by the vendors crowding around us with pleas to help them feed their families.

More than anything, however, we felt hope for the future. My children played with their young cousins, sharing Arabic and English phrases with one another. We celebrated with my six aunts and their families as supporters of various political candidates distributed literature along the Mediterranean Sea on the Corniche, in the shadow of the great Library of Alexandria. While my aunts all wear the
hegab to cover their heads, they shared their differing opinions on who they supported – some the military, some the liberals, some the Muslim Brotherhood. We rejoiced in this bounty of choice for the first time in their lives. We met people like Hamdy the Taxi Driver, who had earned a philosophy degree 40 years ago yet spent his life as a Japanese chef. Understandably, he was more philosophical than most, explaining that good times would come, but that there would first be a hard 10 years ahead. Our final photo of that trip shows a friend with an inked finger held high, proof of his vote, and of his hopes for an emerging democracy.

My children returned home having seen firsthand that people across the world – of a Muslim faith, speaking a strange language, and living in completely different circumstances – have the same hopes and aspirations as we do here in Missoula: happiness, health, and stability for our children and for our community. And knowing with certainty that all Egyptians are certainly not terrorists.

We at the Mansfield Center look forward to soon announcing new opportunities for high school students and professionals across Montana to have the same learning opportunity, but in Asia. For more information about our programs, see us on the web at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

This is Deena Mansour for the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center. Thank you for listening.