



**Women's Foreign Policy Group  
Embassy Series Event  
September 10, 2009  
Washington, DC**

**H.E. Sameh Shoukry**  
Ambassador of Egypt to the United States

**U.S. Relations with the Muslim World: The View from Egypt**

**Gail Leftwich Kitch:** Welcome to everybody, it's so lovely to be here. On behalf of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and its board, I want to thank Ambassador and Mrs. Shoukry for their warm hospitality and a lovely evening. And thank you for hosting this beautiful *iftar* Ramadan buffet and program, we are extremely grateful. I am Gail Leftwich Kitch, the Vice-Chair of the Women's Foreign Policy Group Board. We have a number of board members who are here tonight, if the board members could just stand up and wave, that would be great. [Pause, applause.] Thank you.

Thank you for joining us for this very special evening at the Egyptian Embassy on U.S. Relations with the Muslim World: The View from Egypt. This event is certainly timely, following President Obama's June 4<sup>th</sup> speech in Cairo, the August 18<sup>th</sup> visits of President Mubarak to Washington, and his meeting with President Obama and the September 1<sup>st</sup> *iftar* dinner that President Obama held at the White House. That was quite an extraordinary event, and I think we're all really excited to participate in this exciting time.

The Women's Foreign Policy Group as you all know, promotes women's leadership and voices on pressing international issues of the day and is well-known for its programs, especially its Embassy Series, its Author Series and its Women in Power Series, all highlighting women officials and mentoring activities for the next generation of women leaders.

Tonight's event is part of our very popular embassy series. This series has included events with the ambassadors of Colombia, Oman, France, Italy and Mexico and our next event will be with the Indian Ambassador, so make sure that you look out for that. We hope that you will be able to join us for our future Embassy Events and the exciting Author Events that we have scheduled for this fall, two of which are coming up in the next couple of weeks. We have a program next Monday, the 14<sup>th</sup>, with John R. Bowen, author of *Can Islam Be French?* We are also hosting a program on October 14<sup>th</sup> with Haleh Esfandiari, author of *My Prison, My Home* about her 2007 arrest and imprisonment in Iran. If you are interested in either of these events, please be sure to pick up information on the registration desk if you did not already.

I want to introduce you to our moderator for this evening, Karen DeYoung, key diplomatic correspondent and associate editor of the Washington Post, who is a very good friend of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. She has been a speaker and moderator at Women's Foreign Policy Group events in the past. Karen has reported on national security and foreign policy for years and has served as assistant managing editor for national news, National Editor of London Bureau of Chiefs, Foreign Editor, Latin American Bureau of Chiefs and Metro Political Reporter for Maryland. Now that's politics for you. She also was a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and is the author of the very well regarded and well recognized *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell*.

Thanks again for joining us tonight. We hope to see you at our coming events and you can pick up a schedule and information on the front table. If you are not yet already a member of the Women's Foreign Policy Group, we hope that you will become one. You don't want to miss any of these events in the future. And now, please join me in welcoming Karen DeYoung.

**Karen De Young:** Thank you Gail, and thank you all for being here. And especially thank you to our host Ambassador Shoukry for this fabulous dinner and inviting us to this wonderful place. It is my great pleasure to introduce Ambassador Sameh Shoukry of Egypt. Ambassador Shoukry is approaching the first anniversary of his arrival in Washington and it has certainly been a busy time, marked not only by his own travel, but major speeches by President Obama in Cairo, and as Gail said, President Mubarak's visit here last month. In sending Ambassador Shoukry to the United States, his government has chosen one of the most seasoned diplomats and experienced foreign policy experts. After joining the Egyptian Diplomatic Corps in 1976, he served in his country's embassies in London, Argentina and at the United Nations Permanent Mission of Egypt in New York. He headed the department of U.S. and Canada in the Foreign Affairs Ministry and served as President Mubarak's Secretary of Information. In his three most recent posts during the decade preceding his arrival here, he was Egypt's Ambassador to Austria, and Permanent Representative to the International Organizations in Vienna. He was also Cabinet Director for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Egypt's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva. He holds a law degree from Ein Shams University in Cairo. Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much and welcome.

**Ambassador Sameh Shoukry:** Thank you very much for the kind introduction. Ladies and Gentlemen, it is absolutely a pleasure to host the Women's Foreign Policy Group at the Embassy of Egypt, especially during the holy month of Ramadan. This is a time when Muslims reflect upon the wisdom and guidance that comes with faith, and the responsibilities that human beings have toward one another and towards God.

I would like to thank Patricia Ellis, the president of the Women's Foreign Policy Group for selecting the Embassy of Egypt to host the group's first event of the season. I would also like to recognize Ms. Leftwich Kitch, Vice-Chair and Ms. DeYoung, diplomatic correspondent for the Washington Post for the introduction. And of course I have to tell you that I am always at ease when I am in the presence of such diverse and large selection of beautiful women. I do not advocate gender equality on these occasions. (laughter)

I will share with you tonight some views on the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world. This is a relationship that has swayed from one of uncertainty to one of peace. We are especially heartened that President Obama chose Egypt as his venue to address the Muslim world. His decision was well-founded in the recognition of Egypt's long history and contributions to civilization and human development. Leadership and moderation influence in the region. There is consensus for Islamic learning and its impact in both the modern nations and through globalization with Muslims and Arabs around the world. I would like to reemphasize the special relationship between the US and Egypt, which has been of immense value to both parties over the last three decades. The relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world has generally been stable and productive. The U.S. has historically been immune from the colonial resentment towards the colonial powers of Europe. Its emergence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a global player was associated with advocacy, innovation, democracy, and the rights of people to pursue their aspirations. And of course, the economic achievements of the United States have incurred the admiration of the majority of Muslims, as well as the U.S. economic and developmental assistance to many parts of Muslim world. Strong alliances with many Muslim nations were forged on the basis of common interests and mutual values. Despite this, U.S./Muslim relations have slowly deteriorated during the last few decades, and was complicated by the attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Confrontation and hatred was allowed by both sides to unnecessarily escalate.

It would certainly take too long to address the various grievances that put both sides on this political course. The situation was certainly exacerbated by misguided policies and the rising level of mistrust and misunderstanding. Lack of information and knowledge on both sides further complicated the situation.

Despite this grim picture, I would like to emphasize the high degree of receptivity in the Arab and Muslim world to President Obama's overture of reconciliation. I would like to emphasize that despite the complicated relationship between our nations, there is no inherent animosity between Muslims and the United States. Arabic Muslims around the world were quick to show their appreciation for the administration's new direction and eager to reciprocate good will for good will. This is the key to laying the foundation to regain trust, understanding, and cooperation between both sides.

The concept of the President's address was positively received by most Muslims because it raised all of the issues that shape the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world, mainly the recognition of the cultural diversity, common values associated with governance and human rights, and the need to combat the rise of radical ideas in both camps. It also featured the importance of resolving the Arab/Israeli conflict, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the challenges posed by Iran's nuclearization. The Muslim world was also impressed by the fact that in laying out these issues President Obama was very clear and direct in calling for a new beginning in the relationship between Muslims and the United States on the basis of mutual respect and acknowledgement of the special characteristics of different societies and their unique heritage.

The speech also pointed out the importance that both sides have an obligation to implement policies and take deliberate action to reverse the stereotypes that each has of the other and forge understanding based on common interest and common values.

To be sure, President Obama was honest in addressing differences that persist between the U.S. and the Muslim world, but correctly focused on our shared human heritage and aspirations. He also confirmed that he rejects radical and destructive ideas. This was the message, despite what the media predicted at that time, a fear that was shared by the overwhelming majority of Muslims, and put aside after Obama's address.

Although the President won the first round in the battle of Muslim hearts and minds, we all admit that one impressive speech will not erase years of mistrust and missed opportunities. Deeds will have to follow words and people in the region expect complete policy-based follow-up. We believe that it is important to improve U.S. relations with Muslim countries, as this fulfills the best interests of the United States. In view of the size of the Muslim population, and the geographic significance of Muslim cultures and regions, proper attention must be made toward the resolution of the conflict that has persisted in these important regions, thereby addressing global peace and security.

What is truly alarming for the Islamic world is the growing recognition of the application by the West of double standards for dealing with issues, which in many instances pertain directly to the Muslim World's interests. Equally alarming is the perception that the West is promoting its political objectives under the guise of advocating political and social reforms in the Islamic world through the increased willingness to use force. Islam does not constitute a threat to the world, but many Muslims feel threatened in today's world, and this should be cause for concern. Such a perception necessarily triggers a defense mechanism. We must all take care to redouble our efforts to address the situation. Also, there must be a clear recognition of every nation's rights to its own culture, social and political system. We must celebrate the values of common mutual respect and the enriching nature of cultural diversity.

It is unhelpful for the Western world to continue to perceive Islam and the Muslim world as a source of terrorism or as a breeding ground for radicalism. This perception makes it so much more difficult to achieve understanding. Terror is not the nature of Islam. Terrorism is a universal phenomena and terrorists exist in the East and West, and everywhere they remain a minority. Hence, the need for the majority to cooperate in order to eradicate this evil. I cannot emphasize enough that we will not be able to solve our common problems unless both the United States and the Islamic world are willing to let go of our old prejudices and respect one another and each others' cultural diversity and heritage. Respecting the culture and the beliefs of people is essential to paving the way for human cooperation. One crucial element that we should draw attention to is the collective security of the United States and the West. We are interconnected in an effort to achieve global and regional peace and stability.

Isolation is no longer an alternative that can separate us from the strife and the hardship that other people face in faraway lands. We all recognize from the U.N. Charter ..that...peace cannot be opposed to...support. It can be reached in a dialogue partnership, cooperation and...the rule of law.

The Middle East is only part of the Muslim world, and here there is a culture in which Muslims and Arabs are more attached than any other region in the world today. Here we are facing

enormous challenges. One of the primary challenges is that Islam has a long and historic unresolved conflict. The other challenge is the product of more recent developments. In both cases, if left unresolved, these challenges have the potential of creating havoc and threatening the stability and security not only of the region but of the world at large. Of the utmost importance is resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict permanently and comprehensively and establishing a continuous dialogue that will put an end to more than six decades of Palestinian suffering and displacement. Peace in Palestine will contribute significantly to the security and stability of the Middle East and the world, and will truly benefit the strategic interests of the United States. It is the primary motivation for that antagonism from the Muslim world towards the West. We cannot destroy faith in the relevance of international law, and we must work to improve relations between states and people.

Ladies and gentlemen, before I conclude let me emphasize that we all share common values and aspirations to live in peace, to prosper, to provide a better future for our children and our grandchildren. We can only achieve this through cooperation and understanding. The Muslim World is eager to break the vicious cycle of animosity towards the United States and the West. The Bush administration declared policies that only stoked the fire, but now at last, we seem to be on the same side. We must therefore all redouble our efforts to achieve a virtuous cycle of tranquil and productive relations. It is my firm conviction that the United States and the Muslim world possess the wisdom and the foresight to create a better future. I am sure our discussion following these remarks will be an ample opportunity to further elaborate on other issues that you might have on your mind. I thank you again for giving us this opportunity on the first of your season event and to meet so many of you and look forward to continue during this year our cooperation and appreciate that we have such a wonderful turnout. Thank you very much.  
(applause)

**Gail:** First of all thank you for your wonderful remarks. It's terrific. I think we're going to do Q&A after, but now the ambassador and Karen will have some exchange. We will invite your comments after each question.

**Karen:** Thank you very much. I'm going to start off with a question. I will just ask one and then the audience can raise hands and I'll call on you. Please identify yourself when you ask a question.

Mr. Ambassador, I'm first going to ask a foreign policy question. When President Obama put out a statement at the beginning of Ramadan, he recalled a lot of the things he said in his speech in Cairo. He stated that he was recommitting himself to a new beginning that he described in that previous speech and which you spoke about tonight. In the Cairo speech, he called for a sustained effort of the United States and the Islamic world to listen to each other. In his speech at the start of Ramadan, he said, "We have listened and we have heard you."

He then went on to explain what he thought was evidence of this listening and he said that in pursuit of this listening and this new relationship that he and his government were responsibly ending the war in Iraq, that it was isolating violent extremists, while empowering the people in places like Afghanistan and Pakistan and said that again, his administration was giving what he called unyielding support for a two state solution between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

My question is, whether you believe that most people in the Islamic world actually see things the same way that President Obama does. Do they see these things as evidence of a new relationship between the United States and the Islamic world? In particular, do they see him fulfilling the very broad promises he's made, and do they take stock in the presidential commitment for a two-state solution and a new policy in Israel/Palestine?

**Ambassador Shoukry:** Well thank you. I was hoping to get a question on health care. (laughter). I think that the Muslim world is receptive to these promises and the stated policy directions. Those issues that you mentioned are grievances, and resolving the situation in Iraq is an important element in those promises. There are concerns with success of the operations resulting in occupation, and the implications in terms of the affairs in the region, but at the same time people are concerned that what will transpire in Iraq with the U.S. will not result favorably for all parties. Iraq and Afghanistan are just portions of the Middle East, and there are other areas where we must also strive to stabilize the situations, and these situations are quite complicated.

In terms of commitment to a two state solution, everything the Obama administration has done represents a commitment to resolving this situation. What we have seen demonstrated, and what is crucial to this process, is recognition of the plight of the Palestinians and their need to fulfill their national aspirations and basic human rights and traditions. These statements have all resonated very well in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

But these are all things that are still in the process. I think most of all, I think he has brightened the value of the United States. Obama is very dynamic, very powerful and has an influential presence the Muslim World. The leadership of the United States is now believed to be able to fulfill not only the promises, but also able to reach results.

**Karen:** Thank you. Question?

**Question 1: WFPG President Pat Ellis.** This is Patricia Ellis. I was wondering if you could comment on the situation in Afghanistan and Iran. Are they facing any of the same dynamics?

**Ambassador Shoukry:** Thank you, Patricia. The question of Iraq and Afghanistan is a complicated one. Afghanistan has had a special relationship in terms of the people and the political revolution, and currently, of course nobody wants to see the emergence of radical government there. Conservative movements are expanding their presence and freedom of operation in Iraq. The regional community views the United States' involvement in a mixed way, but also recognizes the positive involvement of the U.S. They are not only there on the battlefield, and while there are wounds on the ground, there is also assistance to the Iraqi people, and social and economic assistance. I think this all helps to counterbalance the perception of foreign intervention, of foreign occupation, and I think that these are positive developments.

Where this situation will go, I think will depend on many factors, among them military ones, and also on winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. In terms of Iran, the US is definitely distancing itself from much more confrontational policies of past years where most issues were either ignored, or the conflict was resolved by use of force. There needs to be more dialogue and opening up to the possibility of diplomatic. The west cannot be apprehensive about working with

Iran, and should look for a resolution to the conflict, should seek for ways to help stabilize the region. Of course, there are serious challenges in Iran, including a tumultuous political movement and leaders that are not as involved with international discussion. Still, the United States must apply the same rules that it applies everywhere else, and Iran is not an exception. They have a responsibility to make this world safer for all of us. We must strive for balance in applying international norms in the case of Iran.

**Karen DeYoung:** Let me just briefly follow up on that question. I wonder, in the Muslim World, if the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan has resonated quite as much the presence in Iraq has, in the sense that it was a conflict that was obviously started in very different ways. The circumstances are different in a lot of ways. I wonder if you could just talk a little bit about how this is viewed in the broader Muslim world, if the two conflicts are seen as part of the same effort.

**Ambassador Shoukry:** I believe there are different perspectives. The war in Iraq was viewed as an unnecessary war, there was no justification. There are concerns about the hardships of the Iraqi people and the resulting loss of life that has occurred there. The loss of civilian life in Iraq is something that is seldom discussed in terms of stark numbers by the media. So in the region there is the impression that the suffering has been great and the Muslims are inflamed by the lack of attention paid to the Iraqi population's hardships and plight.

In Afghanistan, the reality of September 11<sup>th</sup>, provided at least a pretext for getting involved in the region. Indeed, the nature of the government in Afghanistan is very different than Iraq, and there is an assumption that America is dealing with radical idealism outside the government and on the peripheries of Afghan society, so there is definitely a difference in that regard. However, there are similarities in terms of civilian loss of life and that conflict is also perceived as containing a degree of indiscriminate use of force and lack of sensitivity. The direction of the operation can easily affect the degree of reasonable approach. So there is a difference and I think it is being appreciated at some point.

**Question from audience member:** How has the economic crisis affected Egypt?

**Ambassador:** Well, we have embarked in the past year on a very efficient economic reform policy which has resulted in the prevention of a worsening situation for the Egyptian people. Before the financial crisis we were at a rate of growth of around 8%, which is not low according to anyone's standards. I think we have also been able to instill the right amount of regulations and policies which has made us immune from the adverse effects of the subprime mortgage crisis in the first place.

We are definitely recovering from the financial crisis. Despite the fact that our own stimulus package has done quite a bit to limit the damage, we are currently at a growth rate of 4%. The important thing is to prevent long term destabilization. Recently there was a report seeking for economic reform, which would help deliver the economy and attract foreign investment. We also think we have a lot of potential in tourism.

**Question from audience member:** I'm just wondering if you could tell us more about women's rights issues in Egypt.

**Ambassador:** I think one of the most pertinent misperceptions about our part of the world is about women and women's rights in the Muslim world. It is complicated. I think that some of the problems we face stem from poor economic conditions that has nothing to do with the religious dictates. We have legislation that prohibits the discrepancy between what a woman and a man might have in terms of employment. While we have general sensitivity for women's issues, it's also, unfortunately in many instances, connected to religion, to Islam. The degree to which we put value in terms of our gender participation in society varies from state to state, and in many instances legislation is written to protect women and validate the value given to them.

**Karen DeYoung:** Thank you. I'm going to go around and get several people to very quickly state their questions and then we'll have the Ambassador go through them.

[Audience members ask questions.]

**Ambassador:** First off, on the first question related to Iran. We have had our difficulties with Iran as you might be aware. We have not had diplomatic relations with Iran in the past twenty five years. The relationship has depended on the definition of government and has been altered by the rise of the revolution in Iran. We have had over these past twenty five years potential dialogues to set up conditions to establish a more effective relationship. Unfortunately those conditions were never able to come to fruition because of the regime. We are continuing to support establishing peace in the region and normalizing relations with Israel and we disagree on what poses a threat to the world and the dynamics of how states should interact. So I think we have been hindered by issues of divergence and that we have been unable to overcome yet.

Currently the situation has been adversely affected by the Iranian involvement with the situation of Hezbollah and some of the efforts to stabilize the situation or to achieve more. We are still hopeful that the regime is willing to take the next step to indicate that it will display more level-headedness and whether Arab states can unite in the direction of resolving the Palestinian conflict .

As for the role of China, although China is an emerging power, we have had a very long relationship. We were one of the first to recognize the People's Republic of China and we have had a very warm, cordial, and strong relationship, both politically and economically with China.

We recognize that we also have a strong commercial and economic interest with that country, as does the USA. In fact, I'm sure most of the products that were made around this room were made in China. Besides, the amount of American debt that China holds is probably a very active influence in all of our lives. This is a part of globalization. We recognize that globalization has been an important aspect of shaping culture and the world order and we will have to make certain that the emergence of economic power must be attributed to necessary power, and to ensure that that the age of financial empire does not continue to be the norm as it was in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The world has hopefully matured enough to recognize that this is



in the best interest of all civilizations, of all political entities to work connectedly for the benefit of the people.

Issues that concern us include climate change, global warming, economic prosperity, and stability for the Chinese people. I think China has a lot of challenges in terms of its population, and these put limits on what it can achieve in terms of its inhabitants. Everyone in that nation should be able to benefit from its growth, and prosperity should be divided amongst the population, and that is a problem that is faced in many other parts of the world too. There are problems in Egypt, and I prefer to discuss this.

About the role of women in Egypt, we have in our modern history increased the opportunities given to women and have seen an increasing acceptance of women as active and equal participants in society. We are also, on a political level, at a point where we have established a National Council on Women, and women have been for a very long time equal partners in the private and public sectors. We have also made efforts to extend our educational freedom by inviting women from other African nations to participate in our universities.

As for the last question, we believe that Israel has every right to exist. At the same time, until Palestinians have a home and a voice politically, it remains difficult for many in the Muslim World to come to terms with that right until they see justice for the Palestinians. It is a matter of equal human rights, and once those are established, I think we will see great strides toward normalization. We can draw from the optimism from the '90s when the peace process looked to be more successful. At this point, after 60 years of displacement, it is time for equal human rights.

I don't want to take up any more of your time tonight, I hope you're enjoying the refreshments, and we'll now serve dessert. I would also like to thank my associates for their help this evening. [Applause.] Good night, and thank you very much.

**Karen:** Ambassador, Thank you very much for your candor and for having us here tonight. Now I'll turn the floor back over to Gail.

**Gail:** Karen, thank you so much, it's always a pleasure to have you here. There were some enlightening remarks from the Ambassador, thanks so much for having us. [Applause] It's been a lovely evening. I want to take a moment to thank our sponsors and diplomatic colleagues that have joined us, and all of you thank you for coming. Please come again. Now for dessert! [applause.]