



U.S.-ISLAMIC WORLD FORUM

DOHA, QATAR



February 18-20, 2006

Press Release
February 20, 2006

AMERICAN AND MUSLIM WORLD ARTS AND CULTURAL LEADERS MEET TO
FOCUS ON ROLE OF THE ARTIST IN BRIDGING RELATIONS

"Ignorance is the greatest weapon of mass destruction".

"Art humanizes what politics demonizes."

These were key themes discussed in the Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar of the 2006 US-Islamic World Forum, a global leaders conference held in Doha, Qatar from Feb. 18-20. The arts session was a novel program that brought together for the first time, a diverse set of American and Muslim world arts and cultural figures, who included musicians, actors, filmmakers, art collectors, novelists, and leaders from other organizations such as private foundations that fund the arts and the UN. Participants remarked on how unusual it was for cultural figures to participate in a conference that focused on political affairs. Session coordinator, Ambassador Cynthia Schneider, an expert on cultural diplomacy at Georgetown University, noted that artists can play a valuable role by looking reflectively and critically at society. Martin Indyk and Peter W. Singer, co-convenors of the Forum, discussed the potential power of cultural diplomacy programs such as the international tours of jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong during the Cold War, and pronounced the meeting an "incredible success."

Participants agreed that the arts can be a "universal language" that bridges cultural and political divides. "Music, culture, sports is what makes us want to know the other," commented Salman Ahmed, a Pakistani rock musician who is the biggest seller musician in the Muslim world and a UN Goodwill Ambassador. He and the popular British Muslim singer Sami Yusef told of playing to mixed crowds of tens of thousands, which included people of all faiths. American Muslim hip-hop musician Ali Shaheed Muhammad, a four time Grammy winner and founder of the group A Tribe Called Quest, explained the global reach of hip hop that started out in the inner-city, "People identify with the struggle. It doesn't really matter where you come from, we all have the same story".

The storytelling power of the arts to shape understanding and identity was another theme. Novelist Amy Tan, who has written about Chinese-American identity, learned that her novels have helped young women in Qatar and Palestine as they have struggled with issues of culture and identity. Participants agreed that the stories told in films had great potential to reach millions of people and could contribute to increasing understanding between the West and the Islamic world. Bader Ben Hirsi and Ahmad Abdali, director and producer of the

award-winning film, “A New Day in Old Sana’a”, described how their film worked to introduce a misunderstood region to the world, through a story about normal people.

Still, participants lamented the difficulties of making and distributing films within the Islamic world, and the repercussions it had for identity and self-respect. “It is heartbreaking that our own films are ghettoized within our own culture”. More than 90% of what is on TV in Arab countries is American,” described one Arab filmmaker. Michael Nozik, producer of the film *Syriana*, pointed out that the need was to identify, “How do you create a model for young Muslims to express themselves?” He noted the need to find economic markets for young Muslim filmmakers and artists.

Nasser D. Khalili, Chairman of the Maimonides Foundation and founder of the world’s largest collection of Islamic art, noted that “People in the West need to recognize the contributions made by the arts of Islamic cultures. In turn, the public in the Islamic world needs to learn more about these wonderful contributions themselves.” He advocated using arts and culture to introduce both the West and the Islamic world to the breadth and depth of achievements by Muslim artists over history, which are largely unknown. Jane Alexander, actress and former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States, noted that “designs everywhere, from kitchens to evening gowns, originated in Islamic art, but no one knows it.”

The session ended with a discussion on how artists and cultural leaders could work together to raise mutual understanding and lessen tensions between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Ideas raised ranged from traveling, joint arts festivals to foundation and formalized linkage programs. The group concluded their strong interest in working together to achieve these aims in the future and also on the need to explore future programming in the U.S. and other parts of the Muslim world to expand the reach. Alexander summed up the potential of the arts to contribute to building bridges between cultures, “Art persuades.”

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