



**THE SABAN CENTER
for MIDDLE EAST POLICY
at THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION**

Closing Lunch Remarks

At the 2006 U.S.-Islamic World Forum

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[STARTS]

As we bring this forum to a close, I think it is useful to reflect back to the themes that brought us here. Change and leadership.

There are always two sides to change. Change can be positive and welcome, change can be dangerous and stressful.

Change can solve problems and improve conditions. There is a popular saying in South Asia "Barkat Hey Harkat Mey"—"There is blessing in change."

Change can result in more fulfillment and happiness. Growth is change. All forms of life move towards growth. Growth is natural. Change is natural.

But change be feared. Just as life is change, death is change as well. Just as change can improve, change can be disruptive and destructive.

There was great debate at this forum about whether the changes we are witnessing are positive or negative. For example, what is interesting is that both American and Muslim leaders here are divided over whether the changes we are seeing in the Palestinian Territories and Iraq are of the positive or the negative.

I think part of this is that change in and of itself can be overwhelming. Any kind of transition increases anxiety, fear of change, a worry about result. I spend much time on planes and a magazine article I read compared change diving off a swimming board –

Standing on the board isn't scary, being in the water is fine. It's the period in between. It is the falling part that is scary. Change is like that.

Sometimes change happens from specific plans for change, from what we call "agents of change." It can come from the outside, such as through a new American interest in democratization, or from within, which is essentially what the entire agenda of reform in the Middle East is about, be it from governments or civil society.

Sometimes, change is led by forces outside any one agent's controls. The discussion of how technology are changing security, markets shaping development and the arts, and the massive demographic changes—100 million new jobseekers!—altering politics and the economy, all reflect that.

Sometimes change can be easily predicted. There are so many issues that we discussed that we can see will harken great changes. For example, at the phenomenal session yesterday at lunch we heard about a new generation of women leaders, moving into business and politics. It is clear that this will create change.

Sometimes, changes should be predictable and yet we act surprised at this. The victory by Hamas has seemed so shocking, not merely to American leaders, but also to Arab and Muslim leaders, but indeed to Hamas itself, that no one seemed prepared for something that now seems so blindingly obvious.

Sometimes change is truly unpredictable. Who gathered here last year would have predicted that a central issue that we would have to deal with in U.S. Muslim relations would be an insulting and tasteless cartoon in a Danish newspaper? And yet we must.

Perhaps the only thing we can say is that change is inevitable and change inevitably changes the way we view each other and ourselves.

As we gather here, I think back to the forces that bring us together almost 5 years since 9-11. For me personally and for my generation 9-11 was a force that changed my generation. It reshaped global politics, creating as our colleague Shibley Telhami puts it, a new prism through which we both view the world and act within it.

For myself, I lost two friends on 9-11, Rama and Mickey, who were a couple on board the flight from Los Angeles that was crashed into the World Trade Center. Rama and Mickey were both Muslim.

They were all that was noble about both Islam and change. They were Muslims who had founded their own computer software company, based in the U.S. and South Asia, they were models of how Muslim could thrive in the 21st century economy. At the same time, Rama was pregnant, timeless change.

So for me 9-11 was about change, about those that could not accept change trying to fight change, to bring back the dark ages rather than accept the 21st century.

But you cannot defeat change.

And that to me is what this Forum is about. It is about American and Muslim world leaders gathering and saying that we accept that change is happening and want to understand it better. We are creatures of habit. But change requires new ways of thinking, breaking old habits. We wrap ourselves in the garments of status quo concepts as if we could not live without them. And yet, now we must change—change our way of thinking and interacting.

The Forum is also about American and Muslim world leaders from all sectors gathering and saying that they want to do something about change to ensure that it is positive not negative. As our arts panel would have it, it is appropriate that I reference the true agent of change of America—Hollywood. The most popular TV show right now among American youth is the show "The OC." In it, a character had this saying: "You can either ride change, or change can ride you."

And that is what the leaders gathered here the last 3 days have done. They have focused on how they can develop strategies for managing change in a positive direction, in areas ranging from youth and development to reform and security.

They have also sparked a series of actions that are exciting and inspiring. One of the most fun aspects of this meeting for me is visiting each of the sessions and hearing about the developments and linkages that are taking place.

Ones that I have listened to range from large-scale agendas like:

- the science and technology partnership session's 10 point action plan that will begin in May,
- a new initiative on public and private partnerships in youth development,
- an American media organization developing a partnership with TV channels in the Arab world and Pakistan,
- the linkages made between American and Muslim arts and culture leaders which have raised discussions of follow-up arts festivals, seminars for catalytic funding, and similar gatherings in Hollywood and Washington to widen the discussion,
- to contacts made on a personal basis, from the discussion in the hallways and over meals,

Thus change is inspiring. You are all inspiring.

[ENDS]

Peter W. Singer

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