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# Arab Leader Aims to Hold Obama's Feet to the Fire

President Obama needs to pay attention to advice offered by Egyptian businessman Shafik Gabr.

Disappointment with President Obama is not a strictly U.S. phenomenon. According to Shafik Gabr, Chairman of Egypt's Artoc Group for Investments and Development, the Arab world's enthusiasm for our new president is beginning to wane as well. Just six months ago, Obama went to Cairo to push the "reset" button on relations with Arab nations. Promising a more even-handed treatment of Middle Eastern countries and a wide series of initiatives aimed at fostering better relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world, Obama drew rave reviews.

"The speech met or went beyond expectations in the Arab world," says Mr. Gabr. "Since then, there has been little progress on the ground. Now Arab Main Street is beginning to suspect that it was all just rhetoric."

Mr. Gabr, who convened a group of Egyptian leaders and policy makers to hear and discuss President Obama's speech in June, was cheered by the prospect that relations between his country and the U.S. might improve. He has made a career of building relations with legislators and business leaders here, trying to convince his counterparts that Egypt's record of peace with Israel and women's rights sets it apart from some of its neighbors – a distinction in his mind that is too rarely made. This, he feels, is good for Egypt and good for business.

He has not given up. To further his agenda, and to mark the six-month anniversary of the Cairo speech, Gabr is convening over 200 Middle Eastern and U.S. business and political leaders in Washington next week for an Arab Global Forum. Topics on the agenda include investment opportunities in the Middle East for U.S. investors as well as prospects for Arabs in the U.S. The sessions will review energy and technology developments of importance to both groups, as well as one which confronts "mutual misperceptions."

The purpose of the forum is not entirely educational. Consider it a pep rally -- Egyptian style. "I want to knock on the president's door" says Mr. Gabr. "We'll be convening representatives of different aspects of the Arab world – the media, business, women leaders – to see what we can do to move the president's initiatives forward."

Gabr cites a number of proposals outlined in the Cairo speech, including increased cooperation in areas like education, technology and trade. He feels there are a number of ideas which could be put into action very quickly, keeping alive some of the enthusiasm of six months ago. "He invited civil society to step up; we're

stepping up.”

For instance, Gabr would like to see an increased number of exchange students traveling between East and West -- something he feels could be put into action within a matter of months. Also, he thinks that quite easily the U.S. and certain Arab countries could establish mutually beneficial technology zones, whereby U.S. companies would partner with Arab counterparts – supplying research and know-how in return for funding. He would build on a successful program undertaken during the Bush era which set up Qualified Industrial Zones, encouraging trade by making such centers duty free into the U.S.

Another target for Gabr would be the VISA restrictions for Middle Easterners traveling to the United States. He describes two well known Moroccan CEOs who wanted to come to his forum, but were told they would have to wait several weeks, possibly months, before they would be given a VISA. Because they are often treated poorly, many Middle Easterners now choose to deal with European counterparts.

The point is that not all small initiatives should be held hostage to resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. “I am much more optimistic about short-term efforts than long-term ones” says Gabr. “President Obama hasn’t had a chance to put his feet on the ground yet, but his people have to give him credibility. We need to see some steps taken in the short term to convince people that he is serious.”

President Obama should take heed; Mr. Gabr is offering excellent advice. Sometimes, smaller is better—in health care and in improving relations with the Arab world. Republicans should take note, too. This is the kind of reasoned (and polite) pressure that they should bring to bear on matters such as infrastructure investment and increased trade – matters the president has endorsed but not yet pursued. Of course, you have to be serious about your mission, as Mr. Gabr clearly is.

As he says, “If nothing happens, it just will just give added ammunition to the radicals. I’m here because I don’t want this effort to fail.”

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