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Arabs, Americans and Culture: A Proposal

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I'd love to start a discussion about an idea I've been thinking about for awhile: creating an Arab Cultural Center, in the heart of Washington, D.C.

My idea is for a major institution that would provide a permanent museum; space for regular temporary exhibitions; an auditorium for lectures, debates, readings and musical performances; a cinema showing films on Middle Eastern themes; a library for research; a bookshop specializing in the Arab world; a magazine highlighting its themes and programs; a great restaurant featuring the cuisine of Lebanon, Morocco and other Arab locales; in short, it would be the Arab world's dynamic home address in America.

The Arab Cultural Center would have three aims: 1) to develop and increase the study of knowledge and understanding of the Arab world, its civilization and relations with the U.S.; 2) to encourage cultural exchanges, communication and cooperation between the U.S. and the Arab world; and 3) to thus participate in the development of a closer relationship between Americans and Arabs.

Such objectives, to state the obvious, are of huge importance and urgency. After the Iraq war, Arabs are warier than ever of the U.S.; Americans are still asking the post-9/11 question, "Why do they hate us?" I'm certain that things will not improve simply by waiting for the U.S. government to change policies that Arabs don't like, or for Binladenism to wither away.

A big effort needs to be made so that "ordinary" Americans and Arabs can participate or even take the lead in bridging the gap. It is no substitute for encouraging governments and leaders to adopt better policies, but fostering greater understanding through cultural interaction will in itself have a significant impact on societies and policies. For Americans, including the foreign policy makers in Washington, that means desperately developing an understanding of the Arab world that is not largely if falsely based on stereotypes related to terrorism and Islam. Everybody has a part to play--governments, media, educational institutions--but an Arab Cultural Center can be a vital galvanizing influence. Establishing a landmark center in Washington will send a powerful message to 300 million Arabs that America truly does respect Arab culture and values--and not just Arab oil.

Actually, the Arab Cultural Center is not my idea. There already is one, but alas it is in Paris, not in Washington. It's called the *Institute du Monde Arabe* (or, Arab World Institute). My proposal's aims are borrowed from the IMA's self-description.



If Paris can have an Arab World Institute like this, why not Washington, D.C.?

(Photo courtesy IMA)

The IMA has been a huge success since it opened its doors in 1987. More than 1 million visitors a year pass through its magnificent structure along the River Seine (pictured above, across from Notre Dame) designed by the acclaimed French architect, Jean Nouvel. I've attended many events there, most recently, over Christmas, the exhibition, *Venise et l'Orient*, which tells the story of 1,000 years of cross-cultural influence between Venetians and Muslims through paintings, books and decorative objects. (By the way, the exhibition is a joint effort with New York's Metropolitan Museum, where [you can still catch it](#) until July 8.) In Paris, the IMA just wrapped up a month-long film festival called *Hommage à Jamel Debbouze*, honoring a French actor of Moroccan descent who is one of the biggest stars of French cinema at the moment (best known to American audiences as Lucien, the goofy, good-hearted grocer's assistant in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain*). At its **Thursdays at the IMA** weekly debate series this week, Islam expert Olivier Roy is discussing the "clash of civilizations." The IMA's next major exposition starting June 26 is *Furusiyya*, an exploration of the art of Arabian horsemanship and chivalry. With thousands of rich offerings such as these available to the French public over the last two decades, it's not hard

to understand why the IMA has made an invaluable contribution to French-Arab understanding.

Poking around, I was thrilled to learn that somebody else has not only been thinking about an Arab Cultural Center in Washington, but has put some plans in motion. It's the [Mosaic Foundation](#), a charity organization comprising the spouses of Arab ambassadors to the U.S., which happens to be celebrating its 10th anniversary at a [gala benefit dinner](#) at the National Building Museum in Washington on Wednesday evening. (Last year, First Lady Laura Bush and Queen Rania al Abdullah of Jordan were guests of honor; tomorrow, it's HRH Princess Haya bint al-Hussein, equestrian and humanitarian, daughter of Jordan's late King Hussein, sister of King Abdullah and wife of visionary Dubai ruler HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum.)

Initially focused on raising money for projects to benefit women and children around the world, the Mosaic Foundation launched a modest lecture series in 2004. Then, inspired by the IMA in Paris and spurred on by HRH Princess Haifa al Faisal of Saudi Arabia and Nermin Fahmy of Egypt, the foundation unveiled plans two years ago for a major public venue in downtown Washington probably a short distance from the capital's great museums along the Mall. "We discovered that the need is very great," Fahmy told me in a recent conversation. "Especially after 9/11, Americans want to know, 'Who are these Arabs?' We are trying to fill the gap."

The Mosaic Foundation is still working out its vision. I hope that it creates a board for the Arab Cultural Center that is as independent as possible--less linked to Arab governments and in partnership with American institutions. It needs to be a center where Americans can go to learn about and celebrate Arab culture and discuss Arab issues. Those important aims will be undermined if the center is--or is perceived to be--little more than an instrument of propaganda for current Arab rulers.

Money shouldn't be a problem, but it is. Fahmy estimates that it will take more than \$100 million to start with (*half* of what the Pentagon is spending in Iraq every day). The center would require another \$25 million or so in annual operating expenses--at least, that's the IMA's annual budget, which is jointly funded by the French and Arab governments as well as member and visitor fees. Gulf governments are awash in windfall petrodollars, but they will be inclined to attach strings of control to donations. Oil companies that have gained so many profits in the Arab world could play a part. Uncle Sam needs to chip in something. It is distressing that the price tag of a war that has done so much to widen rather than narrow the gap will wind up at \$1 trillion, or more. If you think about it, that's enough for an Arab cultural center in every major American city--with money left over for an American Cultural Center in every Arab capital.

--By Scott MacLeod/Cairo