

The Library of Alexandria and the ongoing Egyptian Revolution

By

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be with you here in Portugal, in Lisbon and in the Gulbenkian Foundation. I hope that this occasion will mark the beginning of a more extensive collaboration between the Foundation and the Library of Alexandria, and more generally between Egypt and Portugal, a pioneer in managing a successful transition to democracy.

It is a great honor to receive this distinguished and most generous award that recognizes the Library of Alexandria and its achievements. I am also most grateful to the Jury for having seen fit to also recognize my efforts as the Founding Director of that great institution. But if I have contributed to its creation and its development, it is the youth of Egypt that I have been privileged to recruit, train and lead in this past decade who have turned the dream into reality.

And what a dream it was! To recapture the spirit of the ancient library with the tools of the third millennium, to bring that humanist tradition into the digital age...to re-launch it again in Egypt in the context of the country's vastly changed circumstances. The spirit of the legendary ancient library was to pursue knowledge, and seek wisdom in all the cultures of the world. It promoted inter-cultural dialogue and sought to organize and add to universal knowledge. The greatest minds came and produced an explosion of knowledge unmatched in any era. It was the haven of all cultures and combined the dazzling prowess of the golden Greeks with the splendor of ancient Egypt. It was part academy, part school, part research institution, part library. It educated boys and girls and promoted debate and discussion and free inquiry.

To recapture that spirit required not only the combination of many types of institutions from specialized research institutes to forums for public events, but also devotion to both the arts and the sciences, and reaching out to the broad public as well as to the specialist, with offerings for all ages and domains of interest. We had to help meet today's world challenges that not only require the knowledge of the natural sciences, but also the insights of the social sciences and the wisdom of the humanities.

In short, the Library of Alexandria in modern day Egypt became a space of freedom where all points of view could be expressed, where all were welcome. And if the Library was a politically non-partisan institution, it stood nevertheless for clear values: freedom of expression, freedom of enquiry, ecumenism, and pluralism. It welcomed over a million visitors and organized over 700 events annually. Its websites receive millions of hits daily.

It was established by a special law that gave it autonomy from all the structures of government. It was affiliated directly to the President of the country as the highest symbol of national

sovereignty: An Egyptian Institution, with an international dimension and a mandate to serve all humanity.

The youths who launched our revolution in 2011 understood that, and even though they toppled President Mubarak, they protected the library by creating a human chain around it and even wrapped it in a huge national flag... and throughout the revolutionary period not a stone was thrown at the library. President Morsi recognized it as a national institution and praised it in a major speech when he met our Board of Trustees. And in the vast public outpouring in the streets of Egypt that toppled President Morsi a few days ago, and the subsequent events since, again all factions respected and supported the library.

The events unfolding in Egypt are important. For not only is the ongoing Egyptian revolution a chance for Egypt to build a new democratic order, it is also an essential dimension on a much bigger global stage.

The stakes in our part of the world are particularly high. Across the planet there are problems in between many Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The universal values we stand for should promote new ways of thinking to deal with these problems. The Muslim world is neither homogeneous nor a single large entity comprising 1.4 billion adherents to the Muslim Faith. It is a vast patchwork of communities and ethnicities, ideologies and sects that frequently reject and fight each other. They do share a common thread, for their adherence to the Islamic faith is an integral part of their identities, albeit a very variable one. Some are living as minority communities in their adopted lands, while some are in Muslim majority countries. Some are trying to create a distinctly Islamic system shaped by their own understanding of the faith, others want a pluralistic order. All, however, yearn for stability, harmony and peace, even if some see the road to that elusive goal as passing through the crucible of violence and war.

In that vast magisterium that for ease of language we choose to refer to as the Muslim world, the 350 million Arabs have a disproportionate weight, and within the Arab World, Egypt has a disproportionate weight. Thus the stakes of what is going on in Egypt today goes far beyond the borders of our country with its millennial history.

Those who seek stability through exclusion and repression are mistaken, for they will beget stagnation and stasis which provide only temporary and largely illusory stability. Change is the order of things. Real stability is only orderly change. It involves the systemic engagement and channeling of divergent interests in society so that change can be smooth and productive. Stability is about inclusion of all, all points of view, all people regardless of their ethnicity, their gender or the god they choose to worship. Only if all share in the building of a society will that society be really free. Liberty for a nation is built upon the liberty of each of its citizens, starting with the poorest and the weakest among them.

But the price of liberty is eternal vigilance and commitment to principle. Despite the enormous outpouring of the largely peaceful crowds and the largely democratic character of the *Tamarud* campaign with its millions of individual signatures, violence still has reared its ugly head. We deplore all bloodshed, and whatever the provocation, all must show exceptional restraint, for

there is nothing that can justify taking human life except self-defense in the face of extreme danger.

Likewise, closing down TV channels and arresting journalists and broadcasters claiming that they incite hatred, has to be weighed against the right to free speech. Throughout history, ideas are best fought with other ideas, not by repression. And the dialogue of ideas prospers by ensuring liberty and freedom of expression.

My friends, as I stand before you to accept this great honor you bestow on our institution and the recognition that you give to my work and that of my colleagues, I accept that in all humility, as a boon to redouble our efforts on the path we have chosen for our institution. Never have these efforts and those of all concerned citizens in our part of the world been more needed. And this Award helps to underline the values we stand for in these critical moments in Egyptian history, for as Shakespeare said:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

-- *Julius Caesar* Act 4, scene 3, 218–224

But we shall not lose our ventures. For the Human spirit is unconquerable, and the Egyptian people have shown their determination to defend the values of humanism that we all want, the values that heed the call of the better angels of our nature, that we may promote a national reconciliation of all, repeat all, the people of Egypt, and learn to work together to lay the foundations for better tomorrows...

And as in the past when the beacon of Alexandria called out to the nations of the world, I hope that what we do in Egypt will also make its contribution beyond our borders, to bring about increased respect for diversity and difference, a culture of tolerance and better relations between all cultures, all civilizations, all humans, all individuals and their social and natural environment.

We dare to dream, and if in the pursuit of these dreams we will face setbacks, we shall remain undaunted. Our youth, time and again, have shown that they have the power of their convictions, and by their actions, exemplify the words of Henley's *Invictus*:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Thank you.