Engaging Youth in the Future of Egypt

Panel 3

Wendy Chamberlin: Now onto our last panel of the day which we’re very much looking forward to, Engaging Youth in the Future of Egypt. I don’t think any conversation about Egypt is complete without talking about this very critical issue. Of course it’s a key issue in every society, the role that youth play, but given the role that Egyptian and Arab youth played in the Arab spring it’s especially critical that we continue to examine and understand what Egyptian youth are doing and saying to create a better future for themselves. Joining us to lead this discussion is a journalist who spent a lot of time among Egyptian youth covering the Tahrir Square protests, Paul Danahar is currently the BBC Americas Bureau Chief but previously served as the BBC’s Middle East Bureau Chief apart from which he witnessed the Arab uprisings throughout the region leading to his book, The New Middle East, the Arab World After the Arab Spring. So we’re in very good hands with Paul. Paul, I want to thank you for joining us and guiding this panel and I would like to turn it over to you.

Paul Danahar: Thank you very much. You can hear me in the back? If you can’t just shout and I’ll shout back but we’ll get there in the end. Let me take you back a little bit to why we have young people on this panel rather than old people which is what you normally get on panels when you’re talking about the Middle East, at least you used to before we got rid of some of the older guys that were running the Middle East. The morning after Mubarak formally stepped down the angry young men and women, maybe even some of these people here, who led the revolution had been replaced in Tahrir Square by their mothers who were cleaning up the mess. After weeks of reeking of tear gas it began to smell of disinfectant. You may have all remembered that. The pavement where I had stood with the young revolutionaries, watching them throw stones backwards and forwards at the government (inaudible) was being fixed by lots of young ladies and their moms because it was pretty much all the moms doing all the work, if I recall correctly, the day after Tahrir Square changed the world, they were putting all the stones back, and everybody thought, “we’re rebuilding the pavement, we are rebuilding Egypt.”

Unfortunately, many of those stones would be dug up again, time and time again and get thrown around Tahrir Square as Egypt tried to work out what it wanted. But on that day I remember speaking to a middle aged woman and she said to me, “it’s a young person’s revolution. You would see in the demonstrations people with this hippie look,” which doesn’t apply to any of you, “with their hair a little bit too long, particularly the men and you thought what are they going to do, this sissy generation? You can’t tell the men from the women. But then look what they did,” she said, and she said it with a big beam and a big smile and I think it reflected the pride that generation of Egypt had in their young people because they themselves had just basically knuckled down and tried to push back, and pretty much failed, and suddenly it was their sons and daughters that had changed everything.
And that was probably the high water mark of Egyptian unity. It’s been pretty much downhill ever since. The light that burns so bright among many of those young people seems to have been doused by the cold, smothering hand at times of the Egyptian state. So the kind of questions you want to ask today is, why did you let your mom and dad down so badly?

[laughter]

Because they were really quite excited and they thought you changed the world and changed Egypt and uh...it didn’t quite go that well, did it, Lina? I’ve just remembered, I haven’t told them who you are, so I better do that, otherwise you’ll think I just dragged her off the street. These are not four people dragged from the street. To my left is Lina Attalah who is an editor of Mada Masr, the independent online Egyptian newspaper. She was previously the Editor-in-Chief of The Egyptian Independent until the scoff decided they didn’t like it and they kind of shut it down, but she still has a job and she’s still telling everyone about the Middle East. Ibrahim El-Houdaiby is next to her. He’s not wearing a tie, but that doesn’t mean anything. It means he’s also a journalist. The al-Shorouk and Ahram Online, am I right?

He writes a column, that kind of makes you a journalist. He’s also a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood Youth who left the organization before the revolution, because he wasn’t very happy about their lack of reformed tendencies, which shows how present he is, so we look forward to hearing what he has to say. He’s also the grandson of one of its very famous former leaders, so if the name is familiar, there’s a good reason for that.

Ramy Yaacoub, who is wearing a tie, thank you Ramy, is the Deputy Director of the Tahrir institute for Middle East policy, and before he became an academic he was very engaged in Egyptian politics and so we’ll ask him whether his presence here today means he’s given up on Egyptian politics like so many other people.

And finally Adel El-Adawy is currently pursuing a PhD at the Department of War Studies at King's College, London and he’s a researcher focusing on civil military relations in our world and US-Egyptian relations and there was few years ago when we didn’t think we would need to have civil military relations but now we do because, in Egypt anyway, the military are back running civil affairs by enlarge.

So Lina, let me get back to my question which was, why did you mess up so badly?

[laughter]

Lina Attalah: I wasn’t necessarily performing for my parents (inaudible). All right so :I started off by saying that I wasn’t necessarily performing for my parents to let them
down. Um, I do not think, I'm very self critical of what happened in the earlier part of the last three years and throughout the last three years in terms of our performance, in terms of our inability to organize, in terms of our inability to imagine political alternatives, but also it's important to acknowledge that I still hold a lot of pride for what happened three years ago in the sense that no one would have imagined that we would be able to, you know, to imagine actually mobilizing to that scale and destabilizing the system to that scale back then. Now to what end? It’s an important question, but I’m not also sure to what extent this could have been planned three years ago given the, you know, the prevalent condition of oppression under which we’ve been living. In fact, we managed to come together and to mobilize, with very little organization abilities, and that’s something to be studied and discussed and the effect of destabilization at the very higher echelons of the state is a fact, it happened. Um, now we messed up um…because we could have organized better definitely, but we also realized the ferocity and the solidity of the states and the system that we are trying to destabilize. So it doesn’t take traditional modes of organizing or traditional political tactic to destabilize that state. It’s a bigger…it’s a bigger story there and if there’s anything we’ve learned from that time is really understanding the depth and the solidity of that state and the fact that only by uh…by you know, imagining a completely different political language and a completely different political alternative which I don’t know what it is um…

Paul Danahar: It’s nothing personal,[laughter] but in the meantime, ‘cause (inaudible) so I’m going to go on to Ibrahim and ask you Ibrahim, um, did you think Egypt would be where it was today when you were hanging around in Tahrir Square thinking you’d just changed everything for good?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Of course not but at least I didn’t hope for that, but I think it’s also a very wrong assumption and it is this initial wrong assumption that takes us all the way in the wrong direction when we say that it was a youth revolution. It was not and it was not a handful of activists who called for a revolution and therefore everybody followed. No, there were very good structure and reasons for this revolution to take place, socioeconomic reasons and political reasons that led to, I mean, just look at the last decade before, the decade preceding the revolution on the socioeconomic changes, on the political…

Paul Danahar: …there wasn’t a lot of gray hair in Tahrir Square in those days?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Yeah, of course there was not, there wasn’t a lot of gray hair but I mean, the problem here is that when we assume that it was, when we put aside the structure of reasons that have led to revolution and we look at the handful of activists who are there on the street, then you have a brutal regime like the regime we have at the moment. In their minds in order to preempt the, the, another wave of protests instead of tackling the very same socioeconomic problems that still persist,
they are just attacking activists and I mean, which is...which is not only, I mean, a violation of human rights, a breach of every democratic principle but also a counterproductive policy.

Paul Danahar: But how did you get into such a mess? I mean, you know, just after Mubarak fell down you had real power. I mean young people had, you can say there was some old people floating around but you young people had real power. Everybody was scared stiff of you.

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Yeah, because there is...

Paul Danahar: Then what happened?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: ... because here is this institutional deficit from which we have been suffering from day one, between very strong, well organized, but very conservative political forces be it within the state or within the conservative position of the time which then became the new regime on the one side and very progressive, radical, nonetheless poorly organized, political actors, more revolutionary actors were much less organized and therefore at the moment of volatility you can, you can actually play a role but when things start calming down if you do not have a strong institution, then you do not have a place.

Paul Danahar: Ramy, you were heavily involved in trying to build up a political framework to... for people to express themselves. Have you given up on that? Is that why you’re busy in Tahrir Institute? Have you kind of thought politics is a waste of time now?

Ramy Yaacoub: I don’t think this is the right way to characterize it, but I just want to make a quick comment just as a start to why I’m here today on what happened and the question that you asked initially. I believe the major downfall of us as you call it, young people, and I’d like to ask you, what do you define as young people in this case?

Paul Danahar: Younger than me. I mean...most of this audience I imagine.

Ramy Yaacoub: Alright, fair enough. We’ll leave it at that. Um, but I think the major problem was that the very successful social movement was inable...unable, sorry, to um... transform itself to a political movement and in some senses even within our communities people who were at Tahrir Square and the aftermath at Tahrir Square where we had other various clashes with the state and sometimes with the Brotherhood and so forth, um, we were unable to provide a political solution to translate that to this because there was... we created essentially a political vacuum, that was later on filled in by actors, state actors or individual (inaudible)... that was
filed later on by individuals or actors that had different interests than we did. Um, so with that said I think that I didn’t give up on this process, or initially when I left, but I did realize that I wasn’t going to achieve individually or within the community that I’m in what I really hoped for. Um, before the revolution I was in the United States, um and the day it happened I started packing my stuff and going back to Egypt and I stayed there for two years. Um, but I did realize that um, that there was a point in time where for me where I could… [mic cuts out]… hello? Okay, great.

Paul Danahar: Keep going through and we’ll…

Ramy Yaacoub: All right, there was a point for me where it was I could be more beneficial studying more what’s going on and actually trying to amplify the voices of people who are working hard on the ground, which is something also we lack internationally.

Paul Danahar: Adel, they were pretty glum.

Adel El-Adawy: What?

Paul Danahar: They were pretty glum about Egypt. Are you happy?

Adel El-Adawy: Uh, I think the future of Egypt definitely, I think we can all agree on depends on Egyptian youth but we are focusing our conversation on January 2011. I think you can talk about January 2011 without talking about what happened on June 30th.

Paul Danahar: Then let’s see, hands up, who says January 25th was a revolution? Everyone agree? Okay, rolling forward to July of a couple of years ago, who says that was a revolution?

Adel El-Adawy: July or June?

Paul Danahar: Yeah, July.

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Definitely a revolution.

Paul Danahar: It was a revolution?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Definitely

Paul Danahar: Who says it was definitely a coupe?

[laughter]
Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: July? We cannot put it in simple….

Paul Danahar: But that is part of the problem isn’t it, because when people from the outside look at what’s happened in Egypt, they’ve said either revolution followed by revolution or revolution followed by coup, and the way that everybody outside has pretty much looked at Egypt has been pretty black and white. You know you had a military regime, then you had a kind of another military regime but it kept fighting with everybody and then you had the Muslim Brotherhood who came in and everyone thinks they were pretty lousy and then you had the army come in, which basically kind of wound the clock back 10, 20 years in the eyes of many people and Egypt’s kind of done a big 360. So you know, is that too simplistic? Is that part of the problem that the world is not seeing Egypt in enough of a sophisticated way? What do you think Ibrahim?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: I think it’s not only the world, I think it’s also within Egypt. I mean, trying to reduce the options into either calling it a revolution or a coup is quite problematic because it de-historasizes actually what has been happening. And this is part of, I mean, the Brotherhood would insist on calling it a coup because it does not want to see where this is coming from, how they have empowered over the course of one year counterrevolutionary forces. This is a counter… this is the ascent of counterrevolution which is much worse than a coup but if you call it a coup you are not pointing fingers whatsoever to the Brotherhood for their responsibility in facilitating this happening and if you call it, I mean, a revolution then I mean, as a social… as somebody who’s interested in social sciences, I cannot understand the idea of just talking about two revolutions within… within one and half years and then just assuming they are two revolutions…we don’t do that.

Paul Danahar: Tell us then, why is it two revolutions?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: We can discuss definitions here on the stage but reality is the Muslim brotherhood was in power and millions of people went on the streets and one of them removed. I think what happened in November, I’m assuming you’re considering the Muslim Brotherhood was a democratic regime. In November 2013, the constitution…

Ramy Yaacoub: …but definitely cannot assuming that it was a democratic regime, I mean we were all on the opposition side of the Brotherhood so we have to make things very clear on that.

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Look, I mean I…we’ve moved beyond the debate about revolution or coup. I don’t think there, there are these different camps. I think either camp would be convinced of the other definition. The reality is that youth, this is a
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Panel on youth, youth until today have been relevant. Some people say the youth have been sidelined. I think the political projector of Egypt has been shade by youth. Most of the people that were in the streets on June 30th were youth, the (inaudible) movement, that guided millions of signatures by Egyptians were led by young Egyptians. I think yes, we would like to see young Egyptians maybe in positions of power, but the question that we should ask, are the young Egyptians really ready to lead? I think what the Egyptian youth should be doing now is prepare themselves, the education, you’re getting a PhD, I’m getting a PhD and so…so Ramy will get that PhD?

Paul Danahar: So are you ready to lead, Adel?

Adel El-Adawy: We need to be thinking about the building and trying to prepare ourselves to be stakeholders, you know…

Paul Danahar: This kind of reminds me of, you know in the old days when you used to just kind of say, you know, I’ll sort it out in 10 years. I mean isn’t the problem that you’ve left in the past to the older generation and they’ve really messed it up, so isn’t it time for you to step up, Ramy?

Ramy Yaacoub: Look, here’s the thing and I think Adel makes up some good points but however I disagree with him on one particular thing. I think that the youth has been marginalized and um…partially because the same reason how you introduced the panel, you know like how could you disappoint your mom and dad, the patriarchal nature of adults. Um…and um…if you want to call it that.

Paul Danahar: It’s nothing personal.

Ramy Yaacoub: In any case, in any case, let me just go back here to a particular point here that’s very important. We have been marginalized for sure as youth and it’s been happening systematically and slowly from January 25th all the way to June 30th. Yes, Adel’s absolutely right that the majority of people on the street were youth on June 30th and the majority of people who work with (inaudible) were youth, and the majority of signatories were youth. You know the reason why? Because majority of Egyptians are under the age of 30. The majority of the population’s under the age of 30. We are the majority, we’re talking… being talked about as a factional, have factional demands, which in fact we are the majority. So when people address, oh, youth this, youth that, we are the people who own the country, not the other generation. So fact of the matter is we actually need to regard the youth and when we’re discussing them even in panels as such, we need to discuss how is the future going to be shaped because whether people like it or not, we are the ones who are going to vote.
Paul Danahar: But he doesn’t think you’re ready for it and he’s saying go and get a PhD, come back in ten years.

Adel El-Adawy: No, no, I mean the basic idea I mean after January 2011 you had basically 19 million political scientists. How many of these youths actually studied political science? Everyone needs to focus on something. If you are going to talk about the economy, study economics before you talk about the economy.

Paul Danahar: But isn’t part of the problem that the policy of education…

Adel El-Adawy: I have seen a lot of youth, I have seen a lot of youth in Egypt, I'm talking as an Egyptian here, a lot of youth complaining, but not providing alternatives, realistic alternatives, solutions. A lot of people are I guess trying to criticize the government on certain issues, you all know their problems, even the president knows their problems, everyone in Egypt knows their problems, the question is not to highlight these problems but to provide answers on how to solve these problems and until today, many of the youth have still not provided alternatives or solutions to Egypt’s problems.

[all talking at once]

Paul Danahar: Guys, guys, guys... no, no. Let's ask Lina because otherwise it's going to turn into The Three Stooges or whatever this is. [Laughter] Lina, you’ve been listening to these guys having their conversation. It's very Egyptian, isn't it really, how the conversation moves over to the guys and then the woman is standing there saying, should I do the work while you get on with it?

Abel: No, women are very important.

Paul Danahar: Let’s ask Lina, it seems that everybody thinks on the panel, well everybody thinks on the panel, but largely the youth was marginalized. I know they don’t think they’ve taken the chances, maybe wait around and see what happens 10 years from now when you’re a bit cleverer or a bit more educated, a bit more experienced, do you think the young people of today in Egypt, and I use that term broadly, are ready to start shaping their county or should they wait?

Lina Attalah: Uh, I mean, I don’t know what does it mean to wait. You know, waiting is a luxury but at the same time it has to be an environment in which we can operate, an environment in which we can find alternatives, or where we can find solutions to the so many problems of the government rather than complaining, but where is this environment? Uh, right now, right now, and now is different from three years ago and from two years ago, for me, there isn’t even a political space in Egypt that I can talk about. I don’t feel for example that I have any pressure card that I can use in
order to push for my demands, for example. Um, the basic thing, my basic form of engagement as a citizen right now in Egypt is to basically try to, you know, to support in any form or way the release of my many friends who happen to be in jail.

This is, this is how basic my demand has become. I’m not even yearning for a better education or better employment or better life, I just want basic life for me and for my friends and I don’t want to, you know, going to jail just because I work as a journalist nowadays in Egypt. So in order for the youth to be able to find solutions and to be so proactive, there has to be a very basic environment, political environment and political space for this and this is not even there right now, it’s absent. Um…so…now whether we can carve out that space ourselves, like we did back in January 25 which is, which is the product of our agency as youth and as citizens and the product of the socioeconomic issues that Ibrahim referred to, whether we can go back to that moment is questionable because there was also bigger reasons on the higher level that make 25 January possible right now. Uh, right now I would say the conditions are much more different, we are facing an ever stronger state, that is speaking the logic of the past. Um…so resisting that state and um…and engaging in contentious politics in the context of that state is a very complex process right now and that’s what we should figure out.

Paul Danahar: Ibrahim, do you think that’s it? Has it been shut down now, the political space for young people?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Yeah, I agree on the short term, but I think, and this is one very important point, I think the current regime with its current policy is the furthest, it can’t get any further from being sustainable, but if these two sets of reason which makes this regime unsustainable. First, is the economic…I mean, I haven’t been there for the economic session, unfortunately because I was still coming from Washington but my understanding of the economy is that this is by far not sustainable. I mean you cannot sustain such an economic structure and the second which is understudied, the uh…the democratic failures of the Egyptian regime. The state has been declining and decaying for over 10 to 15 years and it is eroding and it is almost inexistent in so many places of the country, which makes this regime far from sustainable and any Russian or political actor in this country should realize that the only path to stability in Egypt has changed and it is serious change and the most important platform for this change is local government, on a local level, to challenge this centrum, elitist, authoritarian …

Paul Danahar: …when you challenge now, you get chucked in jail, so how are you going to get around that?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Yeah, this is why I’m saying that this is a question for those in power because they would, they would be harmed from the pos… holding onto the
existing policy as much as everybody in the country will. Nobody wants to see a complete decay, a complete collapse of the system because Egypt is for historical reasons, a country where you don’t find strong social institutions that can keep…that can perform some roles in absence of state. So the presence of state is important, nonetheless, the existing state is a burden and is not sustainable and a rapid move towards a new political system in which local government is empowered and this is a platform for youth, a very important platform for youth, engagement and for socioeconomic reforms, this is very similar to an open heart operation. When you need to keep the current … to keep the same thing but to move very swiftly into a new system and the current regime is not focusing on any of that and instead, again with the mentality that it’s those people who did the revolution and in order to make sure that there would be no other wave or revolution let’s just keep accusing them of everything, keep showing, I mean what happened in our last trial, a couple days ago is a disaster and is shameful, to keep showing, I mean, videos of people and their personal lives in court, to keep taking young people in the court instead of…

Paul Danahar: Let’s talk with some of that. Adel, what do you think of the protest law?

Adel El-Adawy: Look, Egypt over the past…

Paul Danahar: Without the history lesson, do you like it, is it good or is it bad?

Adel El-Adawy: There is a rule, my opinion doesn’t matter…

Paul Danahar: No…no it does. I’m asking your opinion, that’s why you’re here.

Adel El-Adawy: What matters is, there is a rule, if you agree with it or disagree with it, there are avenues…

Paul Danahar: Hang on, there were rules before the January 25th revolution...

Adel El-Adawy: I agree, I agree with that.

Paul Danahar: …and you went out into the streets and complained about them and you got a new government, so if you would have had the rule you’ve got now, if you had abided by the law you have now, you would have never had the January 25th revolution.

Adel El-Adawy: My opinion, my opinion is their protesting is a means to an end. Protesting is not the goal. We want the better life in Egypt, we want Egyptians to be better off and protest is a tool to be used to inform, criticize, highlight certain things but protesting is not the goal, it’s just a means.
Paul Danahar: But is it a…should it be a jail able offense?

Adel El-Adawy: Now I think …say it again?

Paul Danahar: Should it be a jail able offense if you want to have protest?

Adel El-Adawy: Look at the entire region, okay? Look from Syria to Iraq to Libya to Yemen.

Paul Danahar: Yeah, but you’re benchmarking yourself against catastrophically bad places. Shouldn’t you be trying to benchmark yourself against Washington and Paris and…?

Adel El-Adawy: No, you have to…we have to… I think you need to put Egypt in the context of what’s happening in the region and over the past three years Egypt was in total chaos and what the protest law, what it’s attempting to do is putting some rules to avoid chaos, avoiding yes, protests. The protests in Egypt were not protests like here in Washington. Even here in Washington, to protest in front of the Egyptian Embassy or whatever like we’ve seen the Brotherhood be doing, you have to inform the authorities.

Paul Danahar: Yeah, but you don’t need to submit the slogans ahead of time, you can gather lots of people. I mean let me just…before we…quickly question, is it good or bad? Good or bad, the protests?

Adel El-Adawy: I think for the current situation in Egypt, the protest law is good.

Paul Danahar: What do you think then Ramy?

Ramy Yaacoub: Well uh, I’ll try to be as pragmatic as I can be, I do have friends in jail, I have friends who have been affected severely by this protest law and I think from a very pragmatic standpoint, I think the protest law definitely needs to be amended. It shouldn’t be a jailable offense. Sure, I understand you want to regulate things, again, trying to be pragmatic, you want to regulate things, you want to notify and have protestors notify the authorities, sure why not. But the fact of the matter is that um…people have been trying to notify and in some cases, authorities and some permits have been accepted or denied based on the allegiance or the affiliation of the protest. So uh, but the jailing of protestors is absolutely ridiculous and I completely agree with you. I mean, there’s, understanding I can see Adel’s point in a sense of like you want to regulate things, you want some adjustment but to completely be where we are today is an absolute ludicrous situation.
Paul Danahar: I’m going to ask you Lina, I mean, you’re a journalist, is it a scary job these days?

Lina Attalah: Um, we can get a bit paranoid about it. It’s not the easiest job right now.

Paul Danahar: So how do you get it from where you are now, I mean Ibrahim was talking about building structures and creating a kind of civic society, etc, etc, etc. How do you do that in an environment where if you say the wrong thing, or you walk down the wrong road, holding the wrong placard, you disappear for a bit?

Lina Attalah: Yeah, it is a, it is a thorny road but that’s what exactly we’re trying to do in the newspaper. We like recreated our new structure when it was no longer possible to work in any of the existing mainstream media structures. Um, just because most of the media in Egypt decided to appoint itself as um, you know as the PR machine of the regime so it became impossible to operate in any of these media and hence, we had to…we had to build our own institution, so I see our experience in the newspaper not just an attempt to do journalism at a time when it’s very difficult to do independent journalism in Egypt, but also as an attempt to build the very institutions into like (inaudible) institutional deficit that Ibrahim mentioned um…at a time when we don’t have any other option. How do we do it? We do it by the day, we try to resist are fears, we try to resist are paranoias. Sometimes I actually nervously, you know, inhabit a condition of denial so that I don’t start fearing doing things but I guess, crisis is what’s managing us. Again, it was inevitable to start the different newspaper, it was inevitable to start thinking on institution and a progressive way. It’s really, it’s an act of inevitability and of crisis that is keeping us moving somehow, especially those of us who decided to stay in, you know, or who don’t have an option to leave, you know.

Paul Danahar: Ibrahim, let me ask you, I mean you talked about needing to build structures, how long is it gonna take before you can get to a position where you can mobilize, you can organize, you can feel like you’re beginning to change Egypt for the better? Is it just a case of treading water until the guys up top give you some space to breathe or can you actually change things, build things?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: The problem is that given the current situation and the current, I mean, pressure on...as you know, seeing the absence of political space, there is an absence for... you can’t simply start organizing. And at home, it’s like this is, again, this is I think my most important point, the regime doing that is not... it’s not serving its own purposes, it’s not helping itself su...it’s not sustaining itself. It is basically taking the entire country in a very dangerous direction. I mean, if I were to advise the people in power, you should immediately... start... just... the only regime
capable of sustaining itself in Egypt is a regime that promises and brings serious and deep change to the country and they don’t seem to be doing that.

Paul Danahar: Let me ask you, Adel. Have you got any mates in jail?


Paul Danahar: You’ve all got friends in jail and you haven’t, why do you think that is?

[laughter]

Adel El-Adawy: I think uh, maybe I hang out with patriotic Egyptians so are thinking…who are thinking on very…

Paul Danahar: No , heckling please, the man’s got the grace to come on the studio…

Adel El-Adawy: I’m building the country, I mean …

Paul Danahar: No, no, let him finish.

Adel El-Adawy: 55…55% of Egyptians are 25 and younger. We’re talking about 50…50 million plus and not 50 million people are in jail there. How many are in jail around?

Paul Danahar: There’s a lot….

Lina Attalah: It doesn’t matter how many people who are in jail.

Adel El-Adawy: Look, as a young Egyptian, the only thing I want is to try to build my country not by just protesting, by criticizing. I try to provide solutions, I try to provide new ideas.

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: And I promise you this is what the people in jail have been trying to do as well… most of them at least.

Paul Danahar: Let me ask you a question, were you protesting in 2011? Were you part of the Tahrir protest?

Adel El-Adawy: In 2011 I was in Ohio studying.

Paul Danahar: Okay, mentally, were you with the young people in Tahrir Square?

Adel El-Adawy: Of course, everyone wanted change. Everyone wanted change.
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Paul Danahar: Did you get the change you wanted? I mean, you had a military regime running things and now you have a military regime running things. Is that the kind of change you were looking for?

Adel El-Adawy: I definitely, I definitely am not, I wasn’t a support of the Muslim Brotherhood. The change that came to Muslim Brotherhood was definitely not something that I want and actually I was supporting of the (inaudible) but I was the people who thought logically. I was like, if Mubarak left, what would happen in Egypt? Who would take over? I gave a speech during that time at my campus in Ohio and I said I was part of the people who wanted an orderly transition, I wanted Mubarak to finish his term and then have elections. The fact that Mubarak left and then the military took over wasn’t what I at the time wanted but this panel is about the future. We can debate the past, the good things that happened, the bad things that happened but the question is...

Paul Danahar: But their friends are in jail now. I mean they're...

Adel El-Adawy: Okay, so are we here to discuss...?

Paul Danahar: No, no, what we're here...

Ramy Yaacoub: Pardon me, I have to just respond to one thing here. I think this is part of the problem, you know, Adel is my friend outside of this panel. We went to grad school together, but the fact of the matter is that I think it’s part of the intrinsic problem is that we’re viewed as if we have different opinions sometimes as being unpatriotic. Uh, whether it’s (inaudible) or (inaudible) or I'm just listing names that the audience will know but there are thousands of people are in jail, some of them, at least a substantial size, did not protest with violence. Uh, they protested like we did, like I did personally. I held signs or I was chanting in protest and I'm sitting right here. I'm out of jail. So the fact of the matter is no, I disagree with Adel with this particular point that we're definitely patriotic in Egypt, at least, I'm not going to speak up on behalf of everyone but I know plenty of Egyptians who are in jail, young, bright folks who have definitely given it their damn best to change Egypt um... and um, they unfortunately, it's very sad to see them now in jail.

Paul Danahar: Would you mind just a little bit quieter? Sorry. Let me ask you a question?

[inaudible audience comment]

Paul Danahar: You’ll get a chance to object later, later, later.

[inaudible audience comment]
Paul Danahar: Well okay, this is a demo... okay, thank you. My question was going to be this, there was a lot of hope when the revolution happened that there would be a kind of third front. It wouldn’t be the Brotherhood and it wouldn’t be the army, there would be this new big political (inaudible). Why didn’t that really come out?

Ramy Yaacoub: There’s plenty of reasons, are we talking again about the kids or the adults now?

Paul Danahar: I think everything, you know, people were hoping that there would be a different kind of Egypt, one that was built about a whole range of different political parties expressing different views.

Ramy Yaacoub: Okay sure, there’s plenty of reasons and we have to very nuanced here. Number one, you know, before the revolution, before January 25th, 2011, there wasn’t much space for parties to flourish or to be built and to have the freedom to actually get the time to mature and become real parties. Number two, the transitional process initially after January 25th was rushed extremely fast. You didn’t give people a chance to actually build parties and so forth. Third, there was, on the part of the youth and I feel guilty of it as well, is that we had some moral puritarianism in a sense of like we didn’t want to work with each other at some points. I think this is our biggest sin. So that also didn’t help when you needed to quickly, we needed within...can you imagine not having a party, I’ll speak of the party I worked with...

Paul Danahar: How do you now build that kind of culture of consensus building and compromise and get people to work together?

Ramy Yaacoub: Number one, the people in power have to allow for it to happen. This is, at least give the space, let it flourish, okay? I’m sure there’s plenty of people on the ground in Egypt who work in politics or socio-political issues that have learned very valuable lessons since everything started. Just give the parties some time to flourish, give them, I mean there are plenty of ways to establish post-revolution but have good ideas, sure they might not have the best reach out there, they may not have the best logistical capacity yet but you need to give them space, not make them fear for their institution. This is something that I mean if you speak to people who still work in parties in Egypt off the record, they’ll tell you like we’re not very sure of our future, right? So you need to have some sort or some sibilance of a space where people can vent, can vent their views, can actually try to work with other patriotic citizens, within the scope of a party, within the scope of an NGO, within the scope of a social group, to offer solutions.

Paul Danahar: And how...is that possible, can that be done in the present situation? Where do you go from here?
Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: I mean, any...I hope it is possible. I mean, objectively speaking it is possible, also objectively speaking, the current regime does have enough, did have, at a certain point at least, enough power and popular support to facilitate such a process, with not a very high cost actually, but it is very short sided, self destructive, and it’s not... the problem is...

Paul Danahar: So how do you move forward from where you are now?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: I cannot see any... I cannot see any way, I mean, there are two paths forward. It’s either, I mean... with the absence of political space, so you will see some people trying again to keep working towards opening political space. They might partially succeed, I don’t think they will unless there is a real change on the regime side and re-opening of political space and if they fail, they will not fail alone and that’s the real problem here. If they fail that would lead to, again, with the demographic nature of the country, with the democratic failures, with the economic failures, that would lead to a very bad situation which surprisingly the current regime does not seem to be actually capable of observing and is focusing instead on the wrong questions, on whether, I don’t know whether (inaudible).

Paul Danahar: Lina, is there anything that you can see to be optimistic about and if there is how do you get to this kind of place where you want to be?

Lina Attalah: It seems foolish to talk about optimism in Egypt right now but also it’s inevitable to, you know, be functional if you decide...if you decide to stay in Egypt and be engaged in some form or another. So I don’t know, call it (inaudible) or optimism or whatever you want to call it, but um, like where do I find hope or where do I find optimism? It is in the crisis actually. So to give you an example, right now we are in this very deep crisis like I said, which is that very close friends of ours, besides also of course the thousands of others who are in prison, are in prison and it’s personal so we all are coming together, the few of us, the few unpatriotic of us are coming together and, you know, trying to find ways to negotiate how we can get these people out of prison through some form of campaigns. We disagree a lot. There is a lot of disagreement, there isn’t a consensus, like Ramy spoke about, but there is also a lot more alertedness to the need for this consensus, for the need to compromise, for the need to come together and to build and now whether this campaign is going to survive or not, in the process of doing it and in the process of negotiating it, we’re learning and we’re learning to survive also, the crisis and we’re learning not to be silent and it’s in these daily processes that I have a very little piece of hope. Whether I have the hope to change the regime or to change the state, I don’t, I think we need to...for me I think the very political logic in which we are operating is absurd and for me, you know, the, the solution is to just go on and read social theory and be happy there, you know?
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Paul Danahar: Do you see a generation, your generation, producing the right kind of leaders to move Egypt forward? The big problem at the beginning was there was no leadership to the revolution. So are you now getting a sense that they are people emerging, that people will coalesce around them would take the country forward?

Lina Attalah: I’ve seen in the last three years a lot of talent among people of my generation. I don’t like identity politics much but it is the case that I’ve seen a lot of inspiration from at least the writings, from the thinking of…of a lot of people around me and of my generation who are functioning on the level of activism or journalism or academia or, or you know opinion writing. And they have been extremely inspiring and they’ve been putting out propositions that I haven’t seen from the elderly in years. Now, whether these people can lead the way, it’s the question of, um, you know, new forms of organizing and new forms of institutional building that haven’t happened yet. Unless this happens I’m not sure this youth can manage to transform these very rich ideas they have into tangible political projects to lead the state. Um…

Paul Danahar: Let me ask, Ramy, do you, how do you…how do you pull that together? How do you kind of transfer from the ideas, the enthusiasm into institutions that work, that change the regime, but also help build the country?

Ramy Yaacoub: Well look, I mean again as I said and it’s a point that I’m going to stick by, the regime or the government, whatever you want to call it, needs to show some good faith to the youth, in a sense, if we’re talking about youth here specifically. Um, it’s not gonna be hard to, you know, release people from jail. It’s not gonna be hard to amend a protest law, and then give some political space. I mean whether we like it or not, you just asked Lina a question about, all of us, are we going to produce leaders or not? Well, whether we like it or not, we’re gonna have to at some point, right? I mean, it’s just nature. People are alive, people die and other people come to replace them in the age groups. Right? So whether we like it or not, it’s gonna happen. So um, I think it would be better for Egypt’s future if these leaders are prepared and they’re allowed to as…an entire generation to work within this national system of making Egypt better on opposed to ostracizing them or alienating them. Uh, we’re wasting a lot of talent. I mean, the world fell in love with Egypt and in the Arab Spring in general because of the youth. Uh, the Egyptian youth excelled in many things like social media and things of the sort. We revolutionized how it’s used. So I mean there’s some political capital…there’s some capital in capitalizing on the youth in Egypt and actually portraying them in a good light and perhaps having them…have their energy and they’re enthusiasm engaged in how to make Egypt better. But as it stands right now, as you’re asking to be very clear about your question, I don’t see how the youth can do it. It can’t be bottom up right now, I think the government definitely needs to open some space for people to speak their minds.
and have their demands and let them out and speak and be involved in politics and social issues.

Paul Danahar: One of the most disappointing things that’s happened is the fact that while women played an incredibly enormous part in the revolutions, they fared the worst in many ways afterwards. Why is that happening? What went wrong there?

Lina Attalah: Does it have to be woman answering the question, or…?

Paul Danahar: No, no I’m going to…you’re gonna set them up and then I’m gonna knock them down so you…

[laughter]

Lina Attalah: I don’t think it’s, again, I am not …I’m not big on gender issues and gender politics, definitely I think what we’ve been discussing with regards to the youth in general is also applicable to, to the women and again, no space for organizing, uh, extremely um….or like a deeply engrained patriarchal political culture that has uh…that has permeated a lot of pol… a lot of decision making processes, uh, by those in power, all of these things have been detrimental to uh, the condition of women, but it’s also no different than youth. It’s no different than uh…than you know than people on the margins. It’s the same story and it needs to be looked at within this larger context.

Paul Danahar: Ibrahim, do you think your generation will be less patriarchal in the future? Or are they kind of gonna go back into bad habits when they get a bit older?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Yeah, I was hoping (inaudible) but I don’t think this specifically is a generational of question. I think it has more to do with the socioeconomic structures, and I think it has more to do with the type of, I mean the narrative that’s being propagated throughout the media and what we’re having now is definitely not constructive. Look even at the reaction to the sexual assaults on women and the… how it’s being, I mean…we’re not…we’re not headed in a good direction in that sense. Unfortunately again because the most powerful forces of the country, be it in government or in the now outlawed opposition, are very conservative and patriarchal forces and this is not changing anytime soon.

Paul Danahar: And if you don’t change that, how does Egypt grow? Because there’s a massive latent potential there amongst women in Egypt…

Ramy Yaacoub: 50% of your population will get a better chance in working and walking the streets safely and feeling a sense of pride in being Egyptian and many other, many other things, right? I mean, I’m sure many of the audience know it’s a
very hard, it’s becoming very tough for a woman to just walk on the streets sometimes, not in all areas but you know, it’s prevalent, sexual harassment and the way women are treated in some capacity.

Paul Danahar: But how do you move the nation on from that? I mean that can’t just keep going on generation to generation.

Ramy Yaacoub: Obviously I’m not (inaudible). I mean, this is a societal issue as Ibrahim and Lina were talking also as well. I mean, this is a pandemic that needs to be addressed. Also, one of the things that I personally feel as a person, not as an analyst or anything of the sort, I feel like women in Egypt on the national level need better representation. I’m sometimes disappointed in what is being said by the national council for women. There are some, I think women need to be better represented on the national level, for sure.

Paul Danahar: Adel, how do we get to that stage?

Adel El- Adawy: That’s a hard question but I mean, nobody would deny that the role of women is very important in the future of Egypt but I mean, I think women today, there’s still a lot of things that they need to get. I would say the situation of women today is not the best but I think women today are better off today than they were under the Muslim Brotherhood. I think many women in the audience, Egyptians, will agree that during the time of the Brotherhood women did not feel safe and actually the president has addressed women and mothers on national TV on several occasions and I think most of the women in Egypt really support the president and going back to the point that you raised, the third way, I think the third way is being achieved now in Egypt. You’re talking about the military and the Brotherhood, I think the third way is very clear, it’s the Egyptian people. I think President Sisi, being elected by 24, 25 million Egyptians is unprecedented in the entire Middle East. No leader in the Arab world has had democratic elections and was elected by 24 million people from its own people. Even Morsi when he was elected, he only got 12 million (inaudible). Sisi had double the support. Even right now with the Suez Canal Project, in five days Egyptians put 14 billion Egyptian pounds in the project with all the circumstances, security, economic challenges.

Paul Danahar: Tell me, are you confident that the Egypt you hand to your kids are gonna be better than the one your parents handed to you?

Adel El- Adawy: Definitely, if the current government continues, I mean President Sisi has been in power for two months, he’s done so many things on the foreign policy agenda. His visits to Nigeria, Africa, what he’s being with Gaza, if you look at the economy, of course we, I acknowledge, I will be the first person to acknowledge that there are enormous structural problems, but in two months he’s been moving
already, trying to address a lot of the problems. I think if we…we’re moving in the right direction. If you look at the entire Middle East, there is no success model. There, I mean, if you look, everything is failing. You only have a few potential success stories and Egypt is one of them. Let it succeed. United States, for example, was in Iraq for 10 years and the models that the United States had a chance to build Iraq the way it wanted, it saw it theoretically, it could build there. Look at Iraq today, select the Egyptian people, and let the Sisi government create its own model. I’m confident that if we move in the direction that we’re moving in right now with the leadership of President Sisi I think that my children or Ramy’s children uh…and your children as well…

Paul Danahar: Let, let me ask…

Adel El- Adawy: … be better off.

[laughter]

Paul Danahar: None of you have children I presume yet, so let’s imagine that you do. Lina, are you gonna be handing a better Egypt to your offspring?

Lina Attalah: I’m not sure about that.

Paul Danahar: No? Why not? I mean it’s only you people that can actually make the difference. So you don’t you have to have some kind of hope? I mean isn’t that a bit desperate?

Lina Attalah: I did say that I don’t have the luxury of being pessimistic but I’m being optimistic just to conduct my own life. I have no plan to have children for that very reason, actually. But also, the future is very unpredictable, to be honest, so it’s very hard to talk about what kind of Egypt we’re going to be handing over to our children. Um, right now, um, I agree the situation is extremely unsustainable, even though for some people the new administration seems to be proposing a whole new model that is full of hope, that is full of solutions. That’s only part of the truth. Um…the bigger truth is that Egypt is sitting on a big deal of unsustainability, the heavy security oriented approach to ruling is ripe with problems. It is getting a lot of people to either disengage or to feel extremely disgruntled and this would come back in very scary ways in the near or midterm I guess.

Paul Danahar: Ibrahim, you’ve talked a lot about how to try and you need some space to build. Are you optimistic that perhaps once the government settles down, maybe if the economy begins to settle down, that they will open up and then you can build something for your kids?
Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: I do not actually believe in all this literature on democratic transitions and checklists and the Brotherhood was very good on that. I mean look at the Brotherhood’s checklist, they were also very good on checklists, so yeah, we have the constitution done, we’re having, I don’t know, presidential elections, we’re looking for the IMF loan. The same government and again we hear that same rhetoric so we’ve won the presidential elections, that (inaudible) approach, I don’t think that this is any ways uh… I mean, this can lead to…I mean because it neglects the very fact that the structures are problematic and with problematic structures you can get very good results on paper but then you’re only harming yourself because you’re depriving yourself from the ability to see the picture and therefore predict, I mean, nobody honestly, at least not myself wants to see chaos in the country and, I mean, it’s quite problematic that I can only see that the regime, just as much as it keeps reminding us that we’re better than Syria and Iraq, is leading us in the very same direction that…that what Syria and Iraq are today.

Paul Danahar: Ramy, give me something to hope for.

Ramy Yaacoub: Well um, the weather’s gonna be good always in Egypt. Um, look um, I have to say I’m a bit pessimistic, but then again, you know, for the largest part of my life Mubarak was president. I thought he was gonna be president until I’m 60. Um, and um, and he’s gone now, so again, as Lina said, we don’t know what the future holds.

Paul Danahar: But isn’t part of the problem when the revolution happened everyone just kept saying, “this is not good enough, this is not good enough,” isn’t there a point when you have to accept that you compromise, and you take what you can get and you build and you move forward? Is it perhaps a lack of patience?

Ramy Yaacoub: Can you elaborate more on your question because I’m not sure what you’re asking.

Paul Danahar: What I’m saying to you is young people are inpatient and they want things now, they want to kind of move this and do this and do that. isn’t there a kind of a need to say, “it will take,” as Adel was saying, “it will take 10 years to get this sorted out. So we’ll have a 10-year plan and we’ll work slowly,” rather than thinking, “it’s got to change now.”

Ramy Yaacoub: Um, sure I mean, sure the youth always want things now. I mean also but they have needs, a lot of, you know, as the Egyptian society is, men and women, young men and women want to get married and that costs a lot of money. For example right? They need housing, they need jobs, so if they want to have a kid or two they need something immediate so they can feed these kids. Some of them are supporting, a lot of them are supporting their parents or their families. They need
to feed them right now because you can’t wait for food 10 years from now. I mean you can but you’d be dead. So essentially what I’m trying to say is, sure I understand and again trying to be pragmatic, some things will take some time to fix, absolutely, but there are immediate needs that need to be met, um, if you want stability, I mean I think the rhetoric before 2011, I’m gonna quick antidote here, I remember when I was a kid President Mubarak was speaking on TV and I think it was Labor Day or something and he was saying, you know, “don’t aspire to America, don’t aspire to Germany and the UK.” I’m like, I was sitting on my own at home watching it and, you know, look at France, look at Italy, Greece maybe, and this is a problem. It limits your hopes and dreams, limits your hopes and dreams, and it keep going down and down. How far can you go? I mean, as Lina was saying earlier that my hope right now, my individual hope again from a pragmatic perspective, is for Egypt to look good, you know, release the detainees that are not necessarily need to be in jail, my friends are okay, that people are not killed and they have some semblance of jobs and whatnot, that’s all I hope for. Um, and um I’m sorry you asked for hope but…

Paul Danahar: Adel, tell me I mean, this is a young, educated panel with lots of hopes and ambitions, at least some hopes and ambitions, why are they all so pessimistic and you’ve such a bright future ahead of you in your own eyes? Where’s the…where’s the kind of difference between the two, why are they so unhappy about where Egypt’s going and you think it’s such a fantastic thing to be in?

Adel El-Adawy: I didn’t say fantastic, but I’m taking a more realistic point of view, not an idealistic point of view, and I’m looking at, I’m looking around, I’m looking at…I keep saying this but really you have to look at Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen. I think it’s very important for young people to just open the map and look at these countries. And look at Egypt. Yes, there are problems, but we can’t let things just go. I think also one reason why I’m optimistic to add on the list is that the Muslim Brotherhood is history. The Egyptian people have refused the Muslim Brotherhood. That’s another reason for why I’m optimistic. I’m putting things in context and I had the opportunity to sit with the President of Sisi and I can assure you that President Sisi really acknowledges the importance of youth but Egypt is facing so many challenges that he doesn’t have the luxury of trial and fail. I mean, he can’t try, he needs to succeed, that’s his only option.

Paul Danahar: Okay, so, so let’s open this up to the audience because I know from the murmur, oh my goodness, lots of hands… so where’s the microphone. Let me work this way along. Gentleman there in the front? And can I just say, please have a question mark at the end of your sentences.

Audience member: My name is Muhammad, I’m at NYU and unfortunately I saw the comparative (inaudible) for this. My question for Adel, first of all, I want to congratulate you on your (inaudible) program and I’m sure that you’re going to be
like a…one of the Egyptian official. The Egyptian state would like to have someone like you at like you know…

Paul Danahar: There’s a question coming, I can feel it.

Audience member: My question is I’m going to be practical with you, I’m leaving my emotions behind me so you said that you are getting your education and you are trying to provide solution, so can you elaborate more about what kind of solution that you would like to offer for the Egyptian state when you become like um…like a (inaudible) leader in Egypt, how Egypt would look like under your consultancy if you, when you become…?

Paul Danahar: Okay, I think we’ve got the gist of that one. Ladies, gentlemen there, just on the edge. I’ll hear a couple of questions and then we’ll move… there you go, sir with the beard, ah, well I guess there’s more than one beard.

[laughter]

Paul Danahar: Uh, let’s take you first and then we’ll go backwards.

Audience member: Achmed (inaudible), Egyptian-American and with the Organization called United Voices for America. Obviously there’s a lot of disconnect between the youth and that seems to be the problem with Egypt today. If they want to see change happen they’re gonna have to see eye to eye and recognize that the state is failing. You compare it to the region Egypt is heading in that direction and people said give (inaudible) some time. He only had two months, he had three months, he had a year…

Paul Danahar: Let’s get to the question.

Audience member: … that eventually lead to ISIS rising. There’s no alternative. The only alternative to democracy and freedom is violence. When you take away democracy and freedom you end up with violence…

Paul Danahar: Question?

Audience member: ... and that’s the reality. When you don’t provide political space.

Paul Danahar: No one’s talking about what he’s saying but what’s the question?

Audience member: The question is what will it take for the young people to put their biases aside, their differences aside, their allegiances aside, I heard a lot of Muslim
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Brotherhood bash… they’re not represented here and they’re all in jail, so they’re not the problem anymore. We have to focus on the problem that exists.

Paul Danahar: Okay, so…

Audience Member: What will it take for you guys to put your differences aside, work together for the common good of Egypt, which I think has to be based on justice, freedom and democracy.

Paul Danahar: Okay, thank you. The chap who thought he was gonna get a question but now is.

Audience member: Thank you very much. I’m Muhammad. I actually was in Egypt when Mubarak fell and also was at Tunisia. For me an interesting thing is to see, and nobody referred to Tunisia as an example, they always refer to countries that have failed. Why doesn’t (inaudible) look into Tunisia, see what it is that we can learn from Tunisia so that we can be more hopeful?

Paul Danahar: Okay. Let me move onto this side. Where’s the microphone? There it is. Okay, just hum amongst yourself. Can we get a lady there, the lady? There we go.

Audience member. Hi, my name is (inaudible). First of all, thank you, it was very interesting to notice your sort of… the pessimist going around here just comparing to the previous panels. My question is, as a young Egyptian person living outside of Egypt what is the youth doing right now in Egypt to prepare itself for the changes that are coming? We all know that a lot of changes need to happen but my fear is if el-Sisi doesn’t do enough in 100 days or in three months what happens?

Paul Danahar: Okay, and one more in the middle perhaps? There’s a guy just standing right in front of you. There you go.

Audience member: Hi, I’m Chris from AU and I was wondering if you guys feel that you will get the political space that you’ve been talking about after the parliamentary elections.

Paul Danahar: Okay, so why don’t we… Adel, you got a very personal question. What’s your solution for making everybody happy?

Adel El- Adawy: I don’t think I have the solution for all the problems in Egypt. I focus, I studied political science, my focus is on foreign policy and I have very strong opinions on foreign policy. Last week I had dinner with one of the heads of one of the biggest think tanks here in town and he asked, “what can the United States do to
improve the relationship between Egypt and the United States?” And my answer was very clear. Stop interfering in domestic politics. I mean, we’re having here a discussion on domestic Egypt politics. Egyptians will determine that. United States should have, when it comes to Egypt, bilateral relations without interfering in Egyptian domestic politics. So my, to answer your question, I would be focused on foreign policy. I’m planning (inaudible) in the future to create maybe a think tank to try to enhance…

Paul Danahar: This is a very Egyptian answer, isn’t it?

[inaudible audience comment]

Paul Danahar: Hang on. Whoa. I think the… isn’t it a bit sort of over Egyptian to kind of keep blaming the foreigners for meddling around in everything? I mean, that’s kind of what the standard….

Adel El- Adawy: No. I’m not blaming. I’m not blaming anyone. I’m not blaming the United States. I actually believe that for decades and I, I’m, I was educated in the United States, I believe that Egypt and the United States should have a good relationship. I’m really a strong believer of that relationship.

Paul Danahar: Okay.

Adel El- Adawy: The Pentagon and the Egyptian Armed Force had a good relationship. I’m not blaming but I think it’s, we’ve reached a point where interfering in domestic politics of another country, it’s too much, and it’s actually hindering the relationship. I want strong relations between United States and Egypt.

Paul Danahar: Okay, let me move into the next question which is I’ll ask you Ramy, the question over there was why can’t you all just get along and work together to reach…

Ramy Yaacoub: What was the combination about the Brotherhood not being represented and why can’t we get along? I actually haven’t said one word about the Brotherhood so far, since we sat here, and I will have to say, why can’t get along? The simple answer is that there are, um, a lot of us were getting to know each other for the first time. There was no large, vast community of… sure, some people, I knew some people in the Brotherhood but I didn’t know many of them. I knew some liberals, I knew some socialists, whatever it is, right? So we’re getting to know each. But since January 2011 there’s been some riffs between some of these camps that cannot be settled as such. I mean, we’re sitting here in lofty seats in Washington DC talking about how can’t we get along? I’ll tell you why, for an example. There was a little conflict called Muhammad Mahmud in 2000, in November 2011 where there
were clashes between kind of non Islamist youth with the police or the security forces. On the back end of that there were some youth from the Brotherhood kind of aiding the police, for example. Right? So I personally was there. This is something that doesn't sit well with me. So because I've (inaudible) the people in protests. With my own hands, I had a kid die in my hand once, at least um, so I mean, these things are sitting with me as a person. I not speaking on behalf of anyone else here. But this is just a common story that you'll hear. The Brotherhood…

Paul Danahar: Is it irreconcilable then? I mean, are these…?

Ramy Yaacoub: Well, that's what I was getting to. So the Brotherhood will have the same also feelings about some other things. Yes, it is reconcilable but we need to address them in the open, perhaps. Um, also it might be reconcilable when people who have been killed, you know, justice in some capacity, that also justice provided, justice served sometimes helps with the grieving process and sometimes helps with reconciliation.

Paul Danahar: Okay, can I just ask, there’s a question there about Tunisia. Ibrahim, Are there lessons to be learned from Tunisia?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: I personally don’t think that Tunisia is a great model of success either but… yeah, and I think it’s also quite… when we narrow things down into, okay, so they’re having elections, we’re still trapped into the question of looking at politics from above without actually seeing the implications of that on peoples’ real lives and therefore you lose your ability to predict what’s happening in the future. Just need to make one quick comment about the assumption that the Brotherhood is history, which I think is a very false assumption. The Brotherhood could have easily been history, could have easily been history because there was a very strong sentiment against the Brotherhood and the organization was at its weakest point in… on June 30th of 2013. Because, I mean, had there been calls for early presidential elections, which is specifically why Morsi did not go for early presidential elections because the Brotherhood losing it at the will of the people is the one thing that they could have not tolerated because it (inaudible). Now there is a love/hate relationship between the Egyptian state and the Brotherhood. The Egyptian, the Brotherhood needs the Egyptian state because it needs oppression to justify, to victimize itself and therefore ensure its sustainability and existence and the Egyptian state needs the Brotherhood, needs that (inaudible) to justify its crackdown on people like, on activists or others and the easy thing to say is, we need this protest law because otherwise we’ll have the Brotherhood. We need to crack down on everybody because otherwise we look like Syria and Iraq like... because of the Brotherhood. So yes, the Brotherhood could have been history but the current regime does not want the Brotherhood to be history.
Paul Danahar: Let me ask you a question. There was a question about whether things would settle down after parliamentary elections. Do you think that will be a good, that will be a kind of moment when Egypt would pause and then start to move forward? Is there some hope in parliamentary elections?

Lina Attalah: Not necessarily. We’ve seen a lot of those elements of, of procedural democracy and instruments of like traditional instruments of democracy taking place in Egypt in the last years and they haven’t been necessarily conducive to a better political space or a more open or more representative political space. I do not think that the parliamentary elections will do that, particularly because they are being fought with the very same logic, um, that we are standing against, so it is a power struggle between the few, uh, uh, the few parties out there, um, that want to, you know, that want to have a share in the cake without necessarily caring about the representation and politics, or representative politics so I don’t think it would be, um, it would be conducive to opening up the political space and with regards to the question of what are the youth doing right now, um, I think there’s a lot of opting out. And I think of opting out as a form of silent resistance in many ways. I think we’ve witnessed that during the, the constitutional referendum at least when... and also the presidential elections that even though we’ve seen, you know, like a relatively high turnout of people going to vote for el-Sisi there have been a lot of concerns about the youth not showing up and not being interested in, um, in the political process and you know, that’s, that should be disconcerting for whoever’s ruling basically.

Ramy Yaacoub: Can I just add to the numbers? I mean, the numbers don’t support what you have said. From the age group of 18 to 40 about 15 million people showed up. That’s the numbers that were published. So if you look at 25 million showed up to the polls, 15 of them were from the age group from 18 to 40, which I would consider young people. So the young people are....

Lina Attalah: (inaudible) majority anyways so we’re always…

Paul Danahar: Let’s give… there’s a lot of questions out there so any more questions that I could get to? Where’s the microphone? Okay, let’s go to the back, shall we? There’s nobody at the back. Okay, this lady down here, in the middle.

Audience member: We’re talking about 55% of the youth, clearly there’s not gonna be some sort of consensus. Like we got, we started off this panel with this like hippie revolutionary ideology, and I’m not seeing that sort of cohesion represented in front of us and so I’m curious as to what types of different tactics you have to use to reach the youth as opposed to the sort of narrative that has... that we’ve been talking about where it’s the youth versus age? What sort of different procedures do you have to use to reach your peers?
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Paul Danahar: Okay, thank you. There was another question right next to you from the…do you want to just pass it along?

Audience member: Yeah, we’ve been talking about, um, sorry, I’m Stephanie. I’m from American University as well, um, so there was a comment made that 50 million youth are all coming out for this and not everyone has studied political science or economics so how can they possibly criticize political science or the economic side of things? So in this age of technology when everybody has a voice, how do you propose to form an inclusive government when everyone has an equally loud voice?

Paul Danaher: Okay, there’s a guy over there waving his hand furiously. He’s either telling me to wrap up or he’s asking for a question. I think it’s a question.

[laughter]

Paul Danaher: He’s gonna run down the back. Give him the microphone, we’ll get a quick question from you and then we’ll…

Audience member: My name is (inaudible). I’m with the United States of Africa 2017 Project. I assume there are 30 million Egyptians who are between the age of 11 to 21. Do political education on that segment and then the government would be (inaudible) any government in Egypt.

Paul Danaher: I didn’t hear a question in that really, but anyway, chap there?

Audience member: Good afternoon. I’m a student from Georgetown University and the question I had was in terms of the time that President Sisi has been in charge, as Mr. El-Adawy suggested, it’s only been about two months, so the one question I have for the panel is, is criticizing the president to this degree necessary in two months? Should he be given more time before a judgment is made of whether or not he was effective and then what specific policies could President Sisi enact that perhaps the youth could suggest, to basically position Egypt to become all that it can be moving forward? Thank you.

Paul Danaher: Thank you. And the chat there in the blue shirt?

Audience member: I’m (inaudible) the Center of Egyptian-American relations. For Ramy and Ibrahim you’re asking if the regime will give you space. The regime will never give you space unless you take it. We have a military ruling. They’re wearing a suit like you and they’re controlling the politics, they controlling the economy.

Paul Danaher: Question?
Audience member: That’s’ why the economy is in bad shape. How you can get together, regards of the problem we mention, you have to get along with everybody to take the country back from the military…

Paul Danahar: What’s the question?

Audience member: …which they have to be. I’m asking how you will do that? How will you get together to get the ((inaudible) of the military to rule economically and politically?

Paul Danahar: Okay, I think we got the… so let’s, Lina, can I ask you? There was an interesting question there about everybody’s got a voice, with Twitter and Facebook and everything else, so how do you rule in a way where everyone’s just sounding off and there’s no, it’s really hard to get a sense of consensus because there’s so many voices out there?

Lina Attalah: I mean, I don’t know why there is so much anxiety about us agreeing on, you know, on the same thing, you know. Basically politics, practicing politics is about managing differences and managing divergence. So again, the question goes back to the extent to which there is an environment that is accepting to these differences and where, you know, the concept of, you know, patriotism, um, is not basically a notion of privatizing what does it mean to, to, you know, be allegiance to your country, right? So, so as long as this culture doesn’t exist and especially at the ruler’s level, I’m not sure, um, how much technology or anything can help really. So I hold those in power responsible. Definitely we have a responsibility of, of being in a position where we should be more tolerant, more understanding. I do think that being over at the ideological can be limiting to imagination. Um, but again this is, this is only part of what should happen.

Paul Danahar: Okay, let me ask you that question about tactics. What tactics can you use to actually make a difference, get the young people to kind of put forward policies and try and get them taken on by the government?

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: If I were in power what… I mean, the best thing to do again is what, in my view is what I said earlier about just challenging the very nature of the Egyptian state, the, the centrum, elitist, authoritarian nature of the state and decentralized through the empowerment but decentralized not in the (inaudible) sense. I mean, decentralized through the empowerment of local government, the empowerment of people’s control, giving people control over their daily lives through assigning more responsibility, seriously more responsibility to the local government. The constitution, the constitutional amendments have taken us only one step in that direction. I think it is way… I mean, it is not even close to what it should be like but
even that tiny step was not, I mean, nobody’s taking it seriously, nobody’s even discussing it. That’s not on the table.

Paul Danahar: Ramy, we know where we want to be perhaps, but what tactics can you use to get there? What can you do to get this, this government to actually listen to you and take you onboard?

Ramy Yaacoub: Um, honestly I, I’m sorry, I hate to give a blank answer but I can’t think of ways right now and that’s part of my frustration, person… on a personal level that’s part of my frustration but I think we’re just gonna have to, you know, keep on voicing the opinions of people and amplifying them to the best of our ability. Now the ways to do so that, that could be… get creative in many different ways. So there’s… I can’t give you a clear answer on that.

Paul Danahar: And let me ask you, Adel, I mean, no one seems, to the right of you to be able to work out what tactics they can use to get their voices heard. How can they do that?

Adel El-Adawy: JFK once said, “Don’t ask what the government can do to you, uh…

Audience member: (inaudible)

[laughter]

Adel El-Adawy: Exactly. Ask what you can give to the country. And I don’t, I mean, the voices of the youth have been heard, uh, by many people around the world, not only in Egypt I think, Sisi, the Sisi government really knows the challenges and have heard the Egyptian youth. I think I urge every one of us find the problem and start solving it. But the problem is that a lot of people are not solving, they’re criticizing, destroying, protesting. Uh…

Ramy Yaacoub: We’re solving the problem of getting our friends out of prison, which is actually a very serious problem.

Lina Attalah: We’re trying to do journalism, for example, at a time when it’s… so how is that not solving a problem? How is that sitting and not doing anything? Like what you suggest we should do, for example?

Adel El-Adawy: You said you’re doing journalism.

Lina Attalah: Yes.
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Adel El-Adawy: Okay. I would...

Lina Attalah: Should I stop doing it? Do you think it’s better?

Adel El-Adawy: No, no, I’m not saying, but I’m not… find the problem and provide…

Lina Attalah: Yeah, freedom of expression is my problem.

Adel El-Adawy: Look…

[applause]

Paul Danahar: Let him have…

Adel El-Adawy: I think nobody here would say that freedom of expression is something bad. I’m a supporter of freedom of expression but there are always rules. There’s a context. Freedom of expression is a tool to achieve something. I mean, there are rules in traffic. For example, I can’t speed. I mean, there are always rules. There’s not ultimate freedom. When your freedom starts affecting other people’s freedom I think that’s… that’s a red line. So the question, everyone… I would challenge anyone to say that there’s someone saying that freedom’s not… it’s not good. That’s not what I’m talking about. What I’m talking about is that we as youth should think how we can solve problems and put, how can our voices be heard? Write them down. You’re a journalist. Write an article, say, this is a problem and this is the solution.

Paul Danahar: Okay, so I mean…

Ibrahim El-Houdaiby: Paul, if I may, just one quick thing here. I mean, I think there’s some middle ground here in the sense of… (inaudible) for example was doing, he was expressing himself and freedom of expression and he’s off the air now, based perhaps on, particularly on his choice but also, according to his own words, um that you know, he was kind of a little bit pressured to take a long, long break. So I think Lina has a very good point in a sense of like, sure, I don’t think freedom of expression you can plan for it in advance. You can’t say, well, I’m gonna have freedom of expression for the next three months to do X, Y and Z. I mean, it’s healthy for a country to have freedom of expression permanently. That’s I think the case.

Paul Danahar: Well, the only... we’ve been here an hour and a half and we’ve all finally agreed on something, which is that freedom of expression is a good thing, which is what we’ve had today. Pretty much everyone. I want to thank the panel. They were fantastic and uh…
[applause]

Paul Danahar: And I think even though these three (inaudible) were very [mic cuts out] that are running Egypt in the future can give us some optimism. Thank you.

Wendy Chamberlin: And I just want to step in and thank you all once again for attending our second annual Egypt conference. We look forward to see you next year and please go online and become a member and support more conferences and programs like these. Thank you all for joining today.

[applause]

End of panel 3