

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR MARCELLE M. WAHBA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: April 8, 2015

Copyright 2020 ADST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background

Childhood in Egypt

The 1967 Arab Israeli War & Immigration to USA

Seattle, Washington—City of Seattle Department of
Human Resources, Vocational Counselor 1972–1979

Returning to Explore Egypt—Development Office,
American University in Cairo, Director of Grants and Projects 1979–1985

Joined the Foreign Service 1986

Washington, D.C.—USIA’s NEA Area Office, Deputy
Media Coordinator 1986–1988

Cairo, Egypt—U.S. Embassy Spokesperson 1988–1991
Egypt’s Media Environment
The USAID Program
Egypt’s Role in the Region
Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait

Nicosia, Cyprus—USIS Public Affairs Officer 1991–1995
The Madrid Middle East Peace Conference
A Divided Island/Bicommunal Work in Cyprus
Brushstrokes Across Cultures
Role of the Fulbright Commission
Turkish & Greek Cypriot politics

Amman, Jordan—PAO & Acting Deputy Chief of Mission 1995–1999 Jordan’s Tribal
Politics & Regional Challenges
Transition from King Hussein to King Abdullah

Cairo, Egypt—Counselor for Press and Cultural Affairs 1999–2001 Promoting
Democracy
Muslim Brotherhood & Mubarak Regime
Religious Tensions
Egypt & its Neighbors
USIA Merger with the State Department
Egypt’s Domestic Challenges

Abu Dhabi, UAE—Ambassador 2001–2004
Appointment & Confirmation Process
Aftermath of 9/11 & Domestic Reforms
Preparing for War in Afghanistan: Role of MbZ
First Woman Ambassador & Role of UAE Women
UAE’s Federal Tribal System
Human Trafficking
The War in Iraq
UAE & Iran

Washington D.C.—National Defense University, 2004–2006
National War College, State Department Advisor
and Deputy Commandant

Washington D.C.—U.S. Department of Defense, Foreign 2006–2008
Policy Advisor to U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff

Retirement from U.S. Department of State 2008

Post Retirement Activities

Washington, D.C.— DerMar International, President 2008–2014
Consulting firm

Washington D.C.— The Arab Gulf States Institute in 2014–2019
Washington, President

Washington, D.C.—The Arab Gulf States Institute,
President Emeritus & Distinguished Fellow

2019–Present

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 8th of April 2015 with Marcelle M.- And what does the “M” stand for?

WAHBA: Michel.

Q: Okay. Is that another “M”?

WAHBA: “M,” yes.

Q: Oh, Marcelle. Wahba. W-A-H-B-A.

WAHBA: Right.

Q: All right. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. And I’m Charles Stuart Kennedy. And how do you go, do people call you Marcelle or—?

WAHBA: Marcelle, yes.

Childhood in Egypt

Q: Alright. Well, let’s start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

WAHBA: I was born in Cairo, Egypt in December 1948.

Q: Alright, so what were you doing in Cairo, Egypt. I mean in other words what was your family doing?

WAHBA: I come from a family of Egyptian Copts and I was born and raised in Cairo till I was eleven years old when we traveled to the USA in 1959. At the time my father, Michel, was working at the American University in Cairo as the Registrar for Admissions. He had received his master’s degree from the University of Chicago in Psychology in the early 50s. In 1959, my father applied to the Fulbright program to study for his PhD in Psychology and was accepted at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill with a full scholarship. The whole family accompanied him, and we lived in Chapel Hill for two years and one year in Connecticut where my father had his internship in clinical psychology. I have an older sister, Irene, and a younger brother, Wagdi, although he goes by the name Mike. I completed sixth and seventh grade in Chapel Hill.

My sister applied and was accepted with a scholarship to attend her first year of university at a women-only university called Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, which I also ended up attending years later. We loved Chapel Hill and all of us have very fond memories of our time there.

Q: Okay, we'll come back to that. What can you tell me about the background of your father?

WAHBA: My father, Michel, was a very unique and interesting person. He came from a small family and was the eldest of five children. He struggled as a young man because his mother and father died young and he basically had to support his four siblings. He was a top student and upon graduation from high school was offered an Egyptian government scholarship to study engineering overseas. Unfortunately, he had to turn it down because he was forced to work part-time to help support his siblings after his parents died. But he was always a top student and when he completed his undergraduate degree from Cairo University, he applied for a scholarship to the University of Chicago, for his master's degree, and was accepted. My mother, Carmen, also came from a small family.

Q: Coptic?

WAHBA: Yes, also Coptic. She was one of six children and met my father through her sister's fiancé. It was not an arranged marriage. My mother's family were a very strong and loving group primarily because of my grandparents who were both very special individuals and adored by all of us. My grandmother, Victoria, (named after Queen Victoria) came from the region of Fayoum and had beautiful auburn hair with very creamy skin color and lots of freckles. My grandfather, Botros, (Arabic for Peter) hailed from Upper Egypt and was over six feet tall. My grandfather was an expert in herbal medicines and treated himself successfully for diabetes and high blood pressure when he was in his sixties. He was a businessman who traveled and traded primarily in coffee and other products. In the early 1900s, he took his family and lived in Yemen and Ethiopia for several years, which is where my mother and some of her siblings were born. Actually, her birthplace, Ethiopia in 1922, is what facilitated our immigration from Egypt to the USA in 1967.

When my parents met, my father was working hard, basically supporting his siblings, but also loved music and was an accomplished violinist. He was part of a small string quartet of primarily Greeks, Armenians and Egyptians that got together to play music on a regular basis. All amateurs, of course, and they played and enjoyed music in private settings. My mother often talked to us about how she would go to these musical evenings with him when they were engaged. At the time, of course, the Cairo Opera House was a very active institution with orchestral concerts and operas featuring the best of European voices and orchestras. My dad said the only way he could afford to go was to get a standing-room-only ticket. He couldn't afford a seated ticket, but he said he felt very fortunate that he could attend to see and hear the very top European orchestras at the Cairo Opera House. He said he never missed a concert, never missed an opera.

Q: Tell me, as a kid growing up in Egypt, what were you up to?

WAHBA: Well, it was such an innocent lifestyle compared to what people's lives are like now, whether in Egypt or here in the U.S. We were a fairly small family, unlike most Egyptian larger families with extensive networks of aunts, uncles and cousins. My father's side of the family lived in Alexandria, but we didn't grow up knowing my father's side of the family very well given the distance. We were much more connected to my mother's side of the family and my grandparents especially; we were very, very close to my grandparents. We spent every Sunday at their home for Sunday lunch where all of my mother's siblings congregated with their families.

My mother had five siblings—but one of her brothers had immigrated to the U.S. as soon as he graduated from university, so I never knew him in Egypt but met him for the first time when we immigrated to the U.S. He actually is a former FSO [Foreign Service Officer] and I believe the very first Arab-American Foreign Service Officer; his name is Boulos Malik. Boulos graduated from the American University in Cairo, emigrated to the United States in the 1950's, received his MBA from New York University and then worked for the Voice of America before joining USIA [U.S. Information Agency].

Growing up in Cairo, we moved homes a number of times, which is unusual for Egyptians, who tend to stay put for decades! One thing about my father I remember very clearly, he hated living in crowded neighborhoods and when he moved us it was always to a newly developed area of the city.

Q: That's pretty hard to avoid in Egypt—crowds that is.

WAHBA: Yes. And in those days of course Cairo was much smaller compared to what it is today. But still in those days he didn't like being in a very congested neighborhood, so we moved two or three times and every time we moved it seemed to be to a quieter location. The villa we lived in before we immigrated was in such a new neighborhood, the street had no name, which I think in Cairo is pretty rare. So, when people asked where we lived, we had to give them the name of the metro stop and provide a long description of how to get to our home. Of my two parents, my mother Carmen was the more social one; she was the one that stayed connected to her family and friends. My dad was not a very sociable person. He was not the kind of guy that enjoyed chitchat or went out of his way to make friends. He was a hard worker, nose to the books always. I remember him coming home from AUC [American University in Cairo] rather late in the evening; he didn't come home early enough for us to spend much family time with him during the week.

Q: Being a Copt in Egypt put you in the minority, obviously. Did you feel, you know, there are Muslims and there are Christians and there are various other forms including Copts—?

WAHBA: No, that sense of division was really absent in my generation. I went to an English-language, Catholic all-girls primary school that was run by nuns from Ireland.

And the students were Egyptians, Greeks, Armenians who were either Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. In those days we didn't make a conscious effort to identify people by religion. And I remember that we all had to study the catechism by heart, everybody in the class including the Jewish and Muslim girls. Everything was done by rote and I doubt that any of us understood the significance of what we were studying by heart but that was par for the course; it was the way they taught us at the English school to improve our language skills.

Q: What about in classes, what subjects particularly grabbed you, which ones didn't?

WAHBA: I was a strong reader when I was growing up and still am. I read a lot. I liked stories; I liked novels. I remember my mother always complaining that I spent my weekends with my nose in a book. She always walked into my room to complain that I hadn't fixed this or done that because I was too busy reading. I didn't like math or sciences very much going through school. I liked history, as well as arts and crafts.

Q: How about playtime? I mean, what sort of—was there much interaction with other kids and all that?

WAHBA: Of course, in school, yes, and in our neighborhood. We would hang out in the garden of our apartment building and did a lot of biking because we lived in an area of Cairo called Heliopolis which had these wonderful wide streets that were, in those days, quite open and empty of heavy traffic. I remember cycling was a huge recreational event for us, especially on weekends. We would rent the bikes—there was a bicycle shop in almost every neighborhood. So, we would go to the bike shop on the weekends and rent bikes and just cycle for hours. My dad, again, not a big biker but my aunts and my uncles, who lived in Heliopolis, they liked cycling as well. I can't remember any other recreational events that stand out in my mind for those days.

Q: Did you—I mean one has to ask, I mean, did you go out to the pyramids, to the, you know, the various museums and all that?

WAHBA: Only on special holidays. We would go either to the Nile and take a felucca and we would go to the pyramids occasionally and have a picnic. But those were special events. Those were not part of the ongoing routine.

Q: Did, as so many people do all over the world, have grandparents or something living in a village? Did you have a village connection?

WAHBA: No, we did not. My grandmother and grandfather lived in the middle of Cairo although my grandmother came from Fayoum, which is an agricultural town west of Cairo and lots of countryside there. My grandfather's family roots were in Upper Egypt, the stronghold of the Coptic population. But again, we never visited farms or the countryside. Other members of the family had connections to the countryside, but we didn't, not through my grandparents.

Q: Did you get a good deal of ancient Egyptian history and all in school?

WAHBA: Actually no. In school it was mostly focused on Europe and the West. We studied very little of Egyptian history growing up given that we attended English language schools.

Q: Did you feel the effect of the turmoil of political life that went on in Egypt and the war with Israel and Nasser and all that?

WAHBA: Oh, absolutely. As a kid, my memories of the 1956 war are pretty strong because I remember we had to black out all the windows. My dad brought these blue sheets of paper that we had to put up throughout the apartment. We couldn't use the radio. I remember my grandmother came to visit us during the war. She used to come and spend a couple of months with us at least once or twice a year. And I remember during the bombing of 1956, we lived close to the Almaza Airport, which was a military air force base in Heliopolis. I remember at night we had to line up seated on chairs in the hallways of our apartment. I recall one night in particular when I was sitting on my grandmother's lap. I looked out the bathroom window which was across the hall from where we sat and I could see lights in the sky, not sure whether they were aerial fights or radar, but I remember seeing lights in the sky through the blue window. That memory is strong because two days later the fighting got worse and we actually saw an aerial dogfight from our balcony while my sister was closing the balcony shutters. Our apartment had very high ceilings so the floor to ceiling shutters were very, very tall. And my sister was out there trying to close the shutter when we saw two planes in the sky and my father grabbed her and pulled her to the ground to protect her. That same day we closed up the house and we went downtown to where my grandmother lived because that was considered safer than our home which was close to the air force base. So, I have few, but vivid memories of the 1956 war and then of course we went through the 1967 war. We had returned to Egypt from the States, after my dad received his PhD, in 1961. We then immigrated to the U.S. after the '67 war.

Q: What about—how did your parents react to Nasser and all?

WAHBA: When we came back from the U.S. in 1961, after two years in North Carolina and one year in Connecticut, it was certainly during the difficult times of the Nasser era. My father had returned with his PhD and was teaching Psychology at AUC, plus continuing in his position as the registrar and director of admissions at the university. He was very unhappy with the political situation and started talking to us about emigrating to the United States. It was a subject that came up often in our family discussions because he worried there was no future for us in Egypt given the trajectory of the Nasser regime. We didn't own any land or commercial enterprise, so we didn't go through what a lot of families went through when their assets were nationalized. We were not landed gentry, but my Dad felt that we were entering a difficult political and economic period. I believe he actually started the immigration application procedures to the U.S. around 1965, but I think our applications didn't get processed because the quota for Egyptian immigrants was capped.

After my dad's repeated visits to the American embassy to file immigration papers, he fell under scrutiny by the Egyptian security. I remember a lot of tension at home because he was being followed. There was always a car that drove up behind him in the evening and parked in front of our villa. It was actually very visible monitoring, because they would park literally across the street from our front door where there were no other cars; and then they would be gone by morning. This harassment made my father very angry and more determined to leave Egypt. At the time my sister had already married and emigrated to Canada in 1966 with her husband, Riad Shahid, who was a doctor from Alexandria, and so that was another reason for us to think about leaving Egypt. My brother and I were teenagers with a lot of friends at the English School and we were not at all keen about leaving our life in Cairo. We loved being in Egypt.

Q: Where you now in high school in Egypt?

WAHBA: Due to the years of travel between the U.S. and Egypt which had an impact on my schooling, I finished high school quite early, in 1965 when I was fifteen years old. My dad didn't want me to start my freshman year in college at fifteen, so he insisted on enrolling me at the English Language Institute at AUC to strengthen my language skills before joining the freshman class. By the fall of 1966 I was in the first year of college and the political tensions that lead-up to the war had definitely heated up.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War & Immigration to the USA

Q: This is the '67 war? When did you immigrate to the U.S. and the war have an impact?

WAHBA: Yes. During a meeting to follow up on our immigration papers at the American embassy, they noted my mother was born in Ethiopia and therefore we could apply for immigrant status through the Ethiopian quota. It was a loophole that they found which I guess was very good news for my father. So that's when the papers started to move more quickly. But then the war broke out on June 6, 1967 so the process was put on hold and the Embassy was officially closed. My dad had to work with the American Interests section at the Swiss Embassy I believe. Finally, our immigration papers came through in August 1967. By then, my brother and I of course were very unhappy with the thought of leaving Egypt. We were young enough to fall under Nasser's charisma and susceptible to his nationalist message. We felt that we were being disloyal to leave Egypt to go to the United States, which was after all, considered the "enemy" by Nasser and public opinion. It was hard for us to leave Egypt.

Q: I take it you would have been reluctant, wouldn't you?

WAHBA: Oh, we were very unhappy, my brother and me. We felt our Dad was taking us against our will, that the United States was an enemy to Egypt, and we would not be treated well in America. In any case we left and arrived in the U.S. as immigrants in

August 1967. In the Fall, I went to Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio where I had been accepted as a Junior with a partial scholarship. My brother was still in high school, so he stayed with my parents in Oswego, N.Y. where my Dad was offered a teaching position at New York State University.

My father ended up extremely unhappy with the academic environment at the University and the town of Oswego, which was terribly small and its very tough winter weather. So, the tables were turned when we went to the U.S. My brother and I, as well as my mother, more or less settled down quickly but my Dad really hated Oswego. First of all, the weather was horrific with snow blizzards and basically unpleasant year-round.

Q: I was going to say, that's not exactly the most benign place on the eastern coast.

WAHBA: No. And I think he got a lot of pushback from his colleagues in the Department of Psychology as there was a lot of anti-Egyptian sentiment in those days in the U.S.

Q: Well, actually too he's in psychiatry, which has always been a hotbed of Jewishness.

WAHBA: Absolutely, absolutely. That was a part of it.

Q: And somebody coming from Egypt was just—

WAHBA: Very suspect. Egyptians were bad news period. So, he got a lot of pressure from his peers at the university. He was very unhappy; and I think he went into a deep depression. At the end of that first academic year he wanted to return to Egypt. I think for the first time in her life my mother stood up to my father and said “we have one child a junior in college; the second a sophomore in high school—and you want to pull them out of school again and take them back to Egypt? No. We are staying here at least until they finish their education and then if you still want to go back to Egypt, we will go with you.” This, for my mother, was quite a rebellious statement. My dad caved in and the following year he got a new position at the University of California in Davis and moved to California which was a big improvement.

Q: Before we leave Egypt, what was it like being in Egypt as a teenage girl?

WAHBA: Oh, it was great. I mean Cairo in those days was such a different world; it was very liberal and open. We dressed in Western style with the latest fashion and loved all the European music and films. It was kind of a typical life in the Middle East, like Beirut or any other very liberal city. Our family had joined a sports club that was not far from our home, so we went swimming and had many friends at the club. It was a very active social life that was very hard to give up. Certainly, in many ways, a far more interesting social life than one we can have in the U.S.

Q: Did you get any of the feelings about Israel at that time?

WAHBA: Well, only when the war drums started in 1966/67, we began to focus on what this was all about. And I think with Nasser's defeat and with the devastating defeat for Egypt we understood that the Israel Nasser talked about "pushing into the sea" was simply propaganda. After the defeat we felt very vulnerable because we lived in the suburb of Heliopolis which was on the edge of the road to Suez. We were old enough to understand that when we heard that the Israeli army was in Ismailia and on the road to Suez, it meant they were close to our home—less than a couple of hours drive. That sticks out in my memory as the time when we finally understood how big a threat Israel was to us and not the other way around; that they were actually a much stronger power than Egypt.

Q: Could you have any reflections about while you were there of fundamental Islamism?

WAHBA: Not at the time. There was no awareness of that among our family, our age group or in our lifestyle or community.

Q: Yes. Well, Nasser didn't allow it really.

WAHBA: Didn't allow it, yes. And now that we know better and can read about it obviously there was some significant movement by the Ikhwan under Nasser, but he nipped it in the bud.

Q: How about the nuns teaching you? Were they promoting anything outside of just Christianity?

WAHBA: They were certainly promoting Christianity but nothing political that I remember. When we came back from the U.S. after I had been to Chapel Hill, I didn't go back to the nuns' school; I went to an English school that was run by Egyptians at that point although it was originally established by the British during the colonial period. It was a very secular curriculum and environment.

Q: Well then, at Chapel Hill, that's where you first went to school in the States, right?

WAHBA: In the States, yes.

Q: First place, how did you find your English and what you'd learned? Did you have a problem or not?

WAHBA: We had a problem in that our English was the formal British style we had learned in our Cairo schools, so kids made fun of us a little bit at first but all that changed very quickly. We adapted very quickly. Our English language was strong enough that we didn't really suffer in terms of communicating or making friends. I don't remember any difficult times at school or with friends.

Q: Just hard enough to come back and horrify your parents.

WAHBA: Yes, yes. At home most of the time my mother spoke to us in Arabic and my Dad would go between English and Arabic.

Q: Did you find that your Arabic was at all useful when you first got to the States?

WAHBA: Oh, no. As a kid, no, no, it wasn't useful at all and I didn't use it much.

Q: Were you in high school when you came to North Carolina?

WAHBA: I was in sixth grade in North Carolina and we moved to Connecticut for our last year, the last year we were in the U.S. I went to eighth grade in Connecticut.

Q: How did you find that?

WAHBA: I liked Connecticut a lot. We made many friends in the small town of Newtown, Connecticut. I have good memories of both Chapel Hill, NC and of Newtown, Connecticut. Returning to Egypt was hard because then we faced some difficult academic decisions. I had missed three years of studying standard Arabic language, so I was faced with either being held back two academic years to catch up with the Arabic or to drop it as a language and skip a year. That's why I finished high school at fifteen instead of seventeen, eighteen. So actually, I never studied classical standard Arabic after fifth grade. To this day my written Arabic is not up to snuff and my grammar is weak.

Q: Well, how long were you in—when you came back to Egypt?

WAHBA: Well, we went back in '61 and then left in '67, so about six years.

Q: Did you either run into trouble or get into arguments or something about saying, I mean here you'd been in the West and you're back in a country where the West was not appreciated.

WAHBA: We didn't have any problems in Egypt, because actually the West, France, England and the U.S. were always admired and the most popular cultures in Cairo. All our friends spoke either English and French or both. We had missed out on the French because we had gone to the U.S. but most of our colleagues who had stayed within the English school system had taken French as a second language since first grade so most of them spoke both languages. We had no problems on the social front. There was no antagonism to the United States. It only really started drumming up in the lead up to the '67 war.

Q: You know there was a claim that American planes had shot down an Egyptian air force. Well, did that sort of thing have an impact on you at the time? I know it didn't, you say with your father but you as kids—?

WAHBA: No. I think it was the defeat, the resounding defeat, and the heartache that came with that, that made us feel angry about the war.

Q: Yes, well, that was a real—a disaster for the Egyptians.

WAHBA: Yes, and don't forget that even during the days of the war, which didn't last very long, we were all totally in the dark and so the defeat was a bigger shock for people living in Egypt. Throughout the six days of the war the local news bulletins claimed Egypt was moving forward and nothing about the Israelis gaining ground until they were inside the city of Suez! We knew that we could get in the car and drive to Suez in an hour and a half, so it was not difficult to realize that Israeli soldiers were very close. And that was quite shocking.

Q: Then you came back to the States.

WAHBA: Yes. We came back and as I said, my dad started teaching at Oswego, upstate New York. I went to Western College for Women. I went into the junior year. I was only seventeen and a junior in college. And my brother was still living at home with my parents as he was in high school.

Q: Let's talk about the college. What was it like? Where is it located?

WAHBA: It's located in Oxford, Ohio, very close to Dayton. And it was a small private women's school that's now been taken over by the University of Miami. It was a great school for me because it was five hundred women at the time and, out of the five hundred, there were one hundred foreign students. So, it felt very international and foreign students were very welcomed. We were a big part of the campus life and campus community. The classes were very non-threatening because class sizes were small and usually twelve women in class, so I loved Western College for Women. I had a great time there and did very well academically and socially.

Q: Did it have a religious base as many of the schools in Ohio?

WAHBA: Western College for Women did not have a religious theme, maybe in the past but not when I was going there. But it had a very strong international student program. They gave very generous scholarships. I had a good scholarship but had to do a work/study program. I worked about twelve hours a week to augment my scholarship. I worked on campus answering phones, working in the cafeteria, stuff like that.

Q: Oh yes. Did you run into any problems with either American or international students about being from Egypt, you know, because it had been opposed to Israel and all?

WAHBA: No, I don't remember any incidents in school really because I think it was such an international group. We had students from Turkey, from the Far East, there were other students from Middle Eastern countries as well. There were Palestinians; there were Lebanese, and a lot of Europeans.

Q: This is sort of going back but both places, what was your view; I mean you were in Egypt at the time the Soviets were putting a lot of investment into Nasser's Egypt and all, did you ever run across or have any feelings about the Soviet Union?

WAHBA: You know, for the average Egyptian the Russians weren't a part of our lives at all; maybe Egyptians who had business with them or were in the military. All I remember about Russians was that when we would go shopping in Old Cairo, jewelry shop owners would complain about the Russians not buying much and saying they wished that more Americans would come.

Q: In the States, was the Coptic religion at all—could you tap into it or did it just sort of disappear or what?

WAHBA: Well, I think part of the reason we didn't seek out Coptic churches is that we didn't grow up as a very religious family. I think other Coptic families that were churchgoers got connected to Coptic church communities in the U.S. My parents were never regular churchgoers in Egypt. So, when we came to the U.S. it was kind of a non-issue. We didn't go much to American churches and we didn't look for the Coptic churches.

Q: Yes. Did your father or mother espouse American politics, Democrat or Republican or how did they fall?

WAHBA: My mother was not involved at all in politics until her later years. My dad never discussed politics either during the early years but when we discussed politics in later years, he clearly held liberal views.

Q: How did you get your news? Or did you?

WAHBA: Well, when I was in college, I certainly kept up with the news both domestic and international. After I graduated, I went home for only a few months and then I got married and went to live first in Pullman and then Seattle, Washington. I became very involved in the peace movement during the Vietnam war.

Q: Well, in college did any classes or professors have an influence on you?

WAHBA: Yes. I did a minor in international relations and I had a professor who was a China expert and he became one of my mentors. I did my senior paper on the '67 Arab-Israeli war. At Western College for Women it was really the first time that I had an opportunity to learn about Middle East history, about Egypt and about the region as a whole. It was my first chance to delve into my own part of the world. I remember telling my Dad when I saw him after I graduated -that I learned more about being Egyptian in the United States than I ever did being an Egyptian in Egypt. I think that was because people challenged me and asked questions that I then had to research, study and understand to be able to respond. The number of questions for example I would get about the Coptic Church and how it was, or wasn't, different from other churches—I remember

being very embarrassed that I couldn't really answer that question. So, I found those years in college in the U.S. to be illuminating in the way they forced me to better understand my own background.

Q: Did you, even as a young girl but later on, get a feeling of pride that you came from an ancient civilization and, you know, the glory of Egypt is- I'm right now listening to some lectures on CDs talking about the Egyptian civilization. It's a tremendous story.

WAHBA: I think that sense of pride happened when I came to the U.S. That is when I started to understand my roots and feel pride in being an Egyptian. Whereas when we were growing up in Egypt, we were always looking to the West instead of looking inward.

Q: Yes. I was wondering whether you could tell somebody of a German or British heritage you know, that when you people were running around painting yourselves blue or wearing skins and all we were building pyramids and doing these amazing things!

WAHBA: We were writing scientific tracts. Yes, yes, very true.

Q: While you were in college at a girls' school did you feel sort of the frustration or whatever being a woman in the society that you were growing up, still, I mean women were still being kept in their place or whatever you want to call it.

WAHBA: You mean in the U.S.?

Q: In the U.S. Did you feel that and was this a concern of yours?

WAHBA: In Egypt, I was too young to feel any kind of discrimination and besides my family was very progressive and women were not treated as second class citizens. The environment at Western College for Women was a very feminist one. No surprise. So, there was a lot of women's empowerment although we didn't call it women's empowerment in those days. But there was a very strong sense of what women can and should do to be more active in social and political life. I felt very strengthened by my friends at the university. We were kind of an elite group at Western College or at least we saw ourselves as an elite group. We took a lot of pride in advocating for women's issues; it was 1969 so we felt a part of the women's movement.

Q: What about the civil rights and Vietnam issues? I mean these really dominated your generation.

WAHBA: Oh absolutely.

Q: How did you fit into that?

WAHBA: I was a radical in those years. I actively demonstrated against the Vietnam war, but we didn't get too involved in civil rights activism in Ohio or in Seattle. There just

wasn't much on our campus. But certainly, on women's issues and on the Vietnam War there was. And then when I left Ohio and went to Washington state, I stayed very active on political issues, especially the anti-war movement. More active than my husband, I must say.

Q: Well, tell me about— you graduated what, '69?

WAHBA: Yes, I graduated from Western College in 1969. I was nineteen years old.

Q: And how did you meet your husband?

WAHBA: He was a graduate student at Miami State University. He was studying physics at the time. His father's background was Italian-American, his mother was Estonian-American origin. His mother had passed away when he was quite young. His father at the time we were married was working for Chase Bank in Central America, in Honduras. My husband had lived in Latin America quite a number of years with his family. He was my very first boyfriend which was a big deal for me. I was emotionally, I think, quite immature having grown up in Egypt in a fairly conservative lifestyle.

Q: You didn't- there was no going steady or anything like that in Egypt?

WAHBA: No. Not in Egypt and not with my Dad. My Dad was very strict socially and didn't allow us to go to parties; and he didn't allow any dating, not in Cairo. So, when I went to Western College and I met John, he was really my first boyfriend. I went home after graduation and broke the news to my family that I wanted to get married. They met John and had no objections although my mother felt I was way too young at nineteen. Anyway, we got married and moved to Pullman, Washington.

Q: What was Pullman like? What was it like?

WAHBA: Boring, small town. Very conservative. Neither one of us liked it very much but it was a college town, so it was a comfortable lifestyle. We had a good group of friends, but it was very much the life of a very small college town.

Q: And how long were you there?

WAHBA: Oh, let me think. About three years and then we moved to Seattle. My husband John switched from physics to oceanography. So, he enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle. I had no interest in going to college; no desire to do my master's degree at the time. I started working for the City of Seattle Department of Human Resources where I worked with high school dropouts and I felt I found my calling. I couldn't even think about leaving my job to go back for graduate school. I loved counseling young kids.

Q: Tell me what are some of the things you picked up doing this counseling; where were they coming from?

WAHBA: All of the kids that I counseled were high school dropouts and we ran a work-study program funded by the Department of Labor—to encourage them to get their high school diplomas or GEDs [General Educational Development] while working part-time. They did three hours of alternative schooling a day at our location and we placed them in part-time jobs that we developed to provide them with training. The program paid them for both work and school hours. By the time they got their high school diploma they had enough work experience under their belt and hopefully would be employable. That was the logic and it was actually a very successful program. The kids were a mix mostly from inner-city and had problems with the law, girls who were prostitutes, and many had been involved with drugs. Seattle is the kind of city where you have a diverse mix of ethnic and economic backgrounds. It's not a city that was predominantly black or predominantly white. It was really mixed. And we had a large Asian community.

Q: Yes, I know my daughter and her husband have moved to Seattle. They were into music.

WAHBA: Seattle's a fabulous city; I just fell in love with it. Now with Microsoft it's a different world. I've been back to Seattle a couple of times and it's nothing like the city that I knew because it has boomed in major ways. When I lived there it was still a manageable city.

Q: Were the kids that you were dealing with, were they Hispanic, black or white or Asian or what?

WAHBA: As I said they were from different backgrounds and all ethnic groups. I remember one of the girls I worked with for two years. She was white and she had dropped out of high school and got into prostitution. She was one of our success stories; that is probably why I remember her. We also had black and Asian students but not that many Latinos in Seattle in those days. So it was primarily Asian, black and white.

Q: With prostitutes, these young girls, I would think that they, I mean were they trying to get out from under this type of life, the ones that you were dealing with?

WAHBA: They were. For most of them it was—the money—it was a huge attraction.

Q: I would say the money would be fairly—.

WAHBA: It was a huge attraction. So, to get them to commit to a program where they made much less money studying and working in an office earning minimum wages compared to what they could make on the street was really difficult. But the one young woman that I remember very well, she dropped out a couple of times, went back on the street and then she'd come back to the program, finally graduated with her high school diploma and eventually went on to community college. So, she saw a different future for

herself at that point. The program helped them to see that they could achieve and live a different life.

Q: I have to say that must have been a very rewarding type of work that you were doing.

WAHBA: It was. Yes, Yes. I loved it. I really did.

Q: Well, you did that for how long?

WAHBA: I did that for about six years. I got promoted and ended up running the program. I started as a vocational counselor; I stayed in the Department for about six, seven years, I think.

Q: How long did your marriage last?

WAHBA: Not very long. I think in real terms about four years and then we took a while to finally go through the divorce papers because there was no urgency to get divorced. But when John moved from Seattle, we decided it was time to get the divorce, so we went through the paperwork. But we were truly married only for four years.

Returning to Explore Egypt

Q: What did you see as where you were going at this point? I mean your marriage is falling apart; you've got a job you like. What did you—did you—?

WAHBA: I actually enjoyed my years in Seattle very much because for the first time in my life I was on my own and in control of my life. I just started to grow as a person, know myself, develop my opinions, my thoughts about the world. And I wanted to continue working and being on my own. I did not want to get tied down with another marriage. But I was very curious about Egypt. I had never really lived in Egypt as an adult. So, actually, that's the only reason I left that great job. I left in 1979 to go to Cairo, intending to stay only six months.

Q: What'd you do?

WAHBA: I fell in love with Egypt. I fell in love with being in Cairo. I got a job at the American University in Cairo where I had gone to school for a couple of years, and where my Dad had taught for many, many years. And I was absolutely enamored by living in Egypt on my own as an adult. And that's what I did for about five or six years.

Q: Well, what were some of the forces—this was '70-what?

WAHBA: This was around 1979, '80. This was the time in Cairo when the phones didn't work, and the sewage water flooded the streets on a regular basis! It was a different Cairo and I stayed there until about 1984, '85.

Q: Well, what was some of the sort of political-economic life there that you were experiencing? Now you were sort of a real American looking at this as a different cultural space. What were you seeing?

WAHBA: Well, and I must say I felt very proud of my Egyptian-American identity because I had changed. I was definitely an American in my lifestyle and way of thinking but also with a strong Egyptian cultural identity. I got to know the city of Cairo in ways that I had never had the opportunity to explore as a child. In my time off I walked the streets to get to know the city and especially in the neighborhoods of Islamic and Coptic Cairo. I had friends from AUC's faculty who knew the Islamic history of Cairo, so I'd go on walks with them and enjoyed learning from their deep knowledge of the history of the city. I just got to know Cairo in a totally different way than I had growing up. I enjoyed working at AUC because of the American-Egyptian environment in which I found myself. AUC employed a lot of Egyptians and Americans, staff and faculty, which was a very comfortable working environment for me.

Anwar Sadat was the President of Egypt and this was the period when he took the big step to make peace with Israel by going to Jerusalem to address the Knesset. It was very exciting political times and it was certainly a time of dramatic changes. I started to also read more Arabic because I wanted to know what the local newspapers were saying. I would struggle through the Arabic and I got better and better at reading but never at writing since I did not have the classical Arabic education. I was in Cairo during the assassination of President Anwar Sadat and the big transition to President Hosni Mubarak.

By the fourth year in Cairo I realized that career-wise there wasn't much room for growth at AUC. I had a great job as the Director of Grants and Projects in the Development Office, but the position did not provide a career track. I worked closely with all the faculty who received grants from external sources such as the National Science Foundation and USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. My role was to help them with the administration of their projects and in fulfilling their grant reporting requirements.

Q: You weren't dealing with bringing students or—.

WAHBA: No, but it was a good job in the sense that I enjoyed working with people, but it was not an inspiring job. And the pay was just enough to survive in Cairo, to cover rent, and to fly home to California once a year.

Q: Did you view this while you were there as sort of a parenthesis, you know, just a learning time or something like that?

WAHBA: Yes, I knew this wouldn't go on for much longer. I knew that career-wise this was not where I wanted to be but living in Egypt was where I wanted to be for a time. So yes, I knew it was a temporary phase.

Q: Yes. Did you have much contact or any contact with the embassy, American embassy?

WAHBA: Not much, no. My uncle, Boulos Malik, was a diplomat with USIA, and so when he came to Cairo for a business visit, I saw him of course. I think I went to the American Cultural Center with him. But I didn't have much contact with the embassy. Through my AUC position I had quite a bit of interaction with USAID because of the grants, so I would go to the USAID office which was located outside the embassy compound.

Q: I was wondering whether you had a feeling of or getting from your colleagues at all that the American presence there, all these things sort of overwhelming, a bit too much?

WAHBA: Within the circles that I moved in, mostly Westernized secular Egyptians, they were pleased with the American involvement because they felt the country had stagnated for a long time economically. The USAID program, especially in rebuilding the sewage system and the telecommunication system as well as the building of schools throughout the country was very much appreciated. The leftist and Islamic opposition press of course was critical and every day blasted American interference, accusing America of "buying" Egypt with its assistance. The usual voices of opposition in Egypt came mainly from the leftist/socialist circles but that's when we also started to hear more of the Islamist voices.

Q: How about the university?

WAHBA: Yes, the American University is widely accepted because it has been there for decades and is not seen as a foreign entity. The student body is predominantly Egyptian, and a good half of the faculty is Egyptian. AUC is very much embedded in society and every family, unless their kid is going into medical school or engineering school, wants their child to go to AUC because that ensures them a better education and a better job.

Q: Yes. Was there a feeling that Mubarak's control was too harsh?

WAHBA: Not in those early years. In those early years Mubarak came across as the pragmatist, the man who came up through the ranks, the man who—kept saying and kept promising he would only do two terms! Well, of course, after the first eight years or ten years, the "terms" became forever. But in that early period, he was quite popular.

Q: Did you feel any increased, while you were at AUC, any increased Islamization? I mean women wearing hijabs and things like that or anything?

WAHBA: Well, I could only compare it to when I was growing up in Egypt in the '60s and certainly there was a big difference from those days. It was much more conservative because by then a lot of the Egyptians who had left to work in the Gulf, primarily in

Saudi Arabia, came back with money and with a very conservative/religious lifestyle. Many more women veiled than had ever been in the Egypt I grew up in the late 60s. So yes, the social environment had become visibly far more religious. We noticed for example that the mosques ran out of space and people would be praying out on the sidewalks and in the street. I had never seen that before. But in those days, it was not seen as a political threat. It was more of a social change that was becoming more visible on the streets and in places of worship. At least more visibly conservative because Egyptians have always been religious, but the manifestation of their religiosity was now more apparent and more public.

Q: Did you get to Israel while you were there?

WAHBA: No. No, I didn't get to Israel until I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you go to Saudi Arabia?

WAHBA: I had no interest in going to Saudi Arabia at the time.

Q: With all these grants that were coming in, was there much connection between AUC and European universities and all or was it pretty much towards America?

WAHBA: Connections were primarily with America. Some of the European institutions had connections to the Cairo universities, the national universities.

Joining the Foreign Service

Q: Did you begin to feel that your time in Egypt was—?

WAHBA: Running out?

Q: —running out?

WAHBA: Yes. Yes, by then I was thirty-something and I said to myself it was time to move on and get a real job with a future. I was at a turning point and I didn't really know what to do or where to go or how to restart my career in the U.S. I went to visit my uncle, Boulos Malik, who was then serving in Morocco, he was the public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Rabat. He is the one who actually planted the seed in my mind about the Foreign Service. He suggested I should think about joining USIA. It was not something I had ever thought about or seriously considered. He told me that USIA was recruiting Arabic speakers and if I tested at 3/3 or 4/4 in speaking and reading language proficiency, I would be eligible to join as a mid-level officer. That encouraged me to look into applying to the Foreign Service.

At the time a very good friend I'd met in Cairo was going to graduate school in Spain and she invited me to visit her in Madrid. So, I went to Madrid and spent several months there before going back home to look for work in California and to apply to USIA. I went back to California and spent time with my parents and applied for different positions at universities, but I also applied to the Foreign Service. I went to Washington and I took the oral exam for the special program USIA had launched for recruiting hard language speakers. At the time they had a very different exam than they have now.

Q: Do you recall it? Do you recall any of the things that stick in your mind?

WAHBA: Oh yes, the exam was an extraordinary experience. It was not the traditional written exam. I don't know whether this was a special exam for people coming in at mid-level.

Q: I think it's—it was an oral exam, wasn't it?

WAHBA: It was a two-hour oral exam with a four-member panel and a two-hour written—what they called the “in-box” exam.

Q: In-box?

WAHBA: The In-box exam was quite an experience and a pretty clever way to assess skills and simple common sense. You sit at a desk with a large overflowing In-box as though you are serving as an officer at a fictitious Embassy. They gave me two hours to go through the In-Box and respond to the action items in it. I quickly realized I should skim through it first and organize it by priority because often the most urgent issues were not on the top of the in-box!

Q: Yes. It's a matter of organizing priorities.

WAHBA: You also were expected to write memos and draft cables in response to whatever was in your in-box. It was quite a challenge to go through most of it within the two-hour window. To take the exam, I spent two days in Washington, one day for the oral and the second day for the In-Box exam.

Q: Do you recall questions of the oral exam?

WAHBA: Yes. There was a lot about Reaganomics. That was a trending topic and I was not up to speed on it. I walked into the exam process as though it was an experiment. My attitude was if I pass, I pass; I don't pass, I don't pass. I think that helped give me a sense of confidence as I faced the panel of four examiners. At the end of the second day the chairman of the board of examiners informed me that I had passed the exam.

I was then placed on the waiting list to join USIA. Around this time I had an interview for a position at UC California in Santa Barbara; it was the second interview, so it looked like they were going to offer me a job. I called USIA and I asked about the likely timeline

of the waiting list and was informed it could be nine to twelve months. I told USIA's personnel officer that if I accepted the position with UC Santa Barbara, I would not be available in nine months. He got back to me a couple of days later and confirmed that I could start in two months—in June 1986.

Q: Okay. Well, I think this is a good place to stop.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: And we'll pick this up in June of 1986 when you come into the Foreign Service.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: Okay. Well, we're now in the second interview. Today is the 21st of April 2015 with Marcelle. And we have come to—I think it's June 1986.

So you're entering the Foreign Service. What was your class like, the group that entered with you? Could you just give a feel for them?

WAHBA: Actually, I came into the Foreign Service in an untraditional way because at the time USIA had a special recruitment program, for people who had strong language skills in Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Russian, I believe. This special recruitment effort was designed to bring in hard language speakers (at the 3/3 level at least) and required ten years of relevant experience to be appointed as a mid-level officer in Grade 3. So that's how I joined because I had the 3/3 Arabic plus the ten years of relevant experience.

Therefore, when I entered the Foreign Service I did not belong to a class of junior officers like most new recruits. I missed out on that special experience of belonging to a Junior officer class that you stay in touch with throughout your years of service as an FSO. That said, I participated in some of the orientation sessions with one of the junior classes that were going through their training at FSI (Foreign Service Institute). There were a few other Arabic speakers who joined the foreign service on this special recruitment mid-level program around the same time. Duncan MacInnes was one and Nabeel Khoury.

Q: Well, how did whatever training USIA gave you—did you feel that you had a pretty good introduction into the system?

WAHBA: I did because I attended the short training program at FSI. Also what I think helped me get a good grounding was my assignment to USIA's headquarters in the NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] Area Office where I worked for a year and a half before going overseas. I was the Deputy Media Coordinator in the policy office of the NEA. I had the responsibility of working with all the Press sections of embassies in NEA which gave me an excellent introduction of the work USIA does overseas to support the public affairs sections.

Q: Oh, excellent. Yes, well, now let's talk about this for a while.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: This is '86 to '87?

WAHBA: Right.

Q: And the Near East, the Near East is always bubbling. What was happening in the Middle East at that time?

WAHBA: It was a relatively quiet time compared to what happened a few years later when I got to Cairo. That said the Iran-Iraq war was going on of course and the U.S. launched the naval operation dubbed Earnest Will, reflagging Kuwaiti tankers to protect them from Iranian attacks in the Persian Gulf.

Q: I mean were we, you might say really taking sides- the Iraq side of the Iran-Iraq war?

WAHBA: I think there was a definite leaning to the Iraq side during the Iran-Iraq war in terms of providing diplomatic support at the UN and with some weapons sales as well. But I think we tried to keep it somewhat low key. In the long-term, the U.S. Government definitely took a more supportive position towards Iraq.

Q: Did we have a significant exchange program in the Middle East?

WAHBA: Oh, yes, a very robust program. It continues to thrive today even after USIA was merged into the State Department. A lot of USIA officers thought there would be some cutbacks to the exchange programs but because they are congressionally mandated programs the funding levels stayed pretty much constant. We had a very large exchange program in Egypt and throughout the Middle East. The international Visitors program, I think, is one of the best, truly one of the best programs that USIA sponsored. It is a very effective way of building ties between foreigners and their American counterparts. In those days international visitors spent a full month in the U.S. meeting with counterparts in several cities, focusing on specific topics that are important for U.S. foreign policy objectives. Now the IV [international visitors] program has been cut back to about two weeks and the number of visitors from each country are smaller.

Q: It's not just to Washington. They travel around the country.

WAHBA: They start off in Washington and then they go all over the United States. It's a great program. It is a cultural experience coupled with professional development and networking because they engage with people and institutions. When I served in Jordan and Egypt, I saw firsthand the powerful impact of the international visitor experience on visitors we sponsored. Today many of the foreigners who attended international visitor programs are senior officials, academics or businesspeople in their own countries with a great deal of influence on U.S. bilateral relationships.

Q: You know on your part I would imagine this is also a learning experience for you too because you'd been, most of your life, had been out of the United States.

WAHBA: I never got to travel with international visitors but believe me, I would have loved to!

Back to Cairo, Egypt!

Q: Well, then where'd you go in '88?

WAHBA: Well, at the time they had a system at USIA—and I'm not sure what it was like at the State Department—where your first assignment was mandated—no bidding options. They told me I was going to Jordan because that's where they had an opening and I was to be the cultural center director in Amman. I had about a year to get ready for it by continuing to work at the NEA Area Office but also to do my reading and consultations on Jordan.

I heard from colleagues in the NEA Area office that the press officer/embassy spokesman in Cairo was leaving his position for a number of reasons. The position was opening up as an 'immediate' but of course it was not an option for me as it was a senior job. The ambassador to Egypt, Frank G. Wisner, called USIA to request the position be filled as soon as possible with an FSO with strong Arabic language skills given the challenging media environment in Egypt. The head of the NEA Area Office, Mike Pistor, spoke to me of the opening in Cairo to see if I was interested but warned that, since it was two grades above my level, it was unlikely Personnel would approve it. He told me that before he talks to Personnel he needed to know if I would be willing to take on this challenge because being embassy spokesperson in Cairo, the largest embassy in the ME [Middle East], is not an easy job and Frank G. Wisner is a demanding ambassador. I took a few days to think about it and of course I was a little nervous because I had never been a spokesman of any embassy and this was my very first overseas assignment. I decided to go for it and was told the next step was to meet with Ambassador Wisner before NEA would tackle the Personnel system. So that's really how I ended up in Cairo again but this time as the American Embassy Spokesperson.

Q: Well, tell me, how was your interview with Frank Wisner?

WAHBA: It was terrifying. Frank G. Wisner had an incredible reputation throughout NEA, throughout the Foreign Service, so anybody who knew of Frank personally or had heard of Frank told me a lot about him, told me how demanding he was but also how incredibly smart and an incredible diplomat. He was often described as one of the Foreign Service officers who "walked on water" and I think that is the best way to describe him. When I met with him at the State Department the meeting went very well. Frank puts people at ease very quickly. He's very charming and very sensitive. We

discussed his expectations for the position, my background, and the session went very well. After he returned to Cairo, he called Mike Pistor, my boss at USIA, and told him he wanted me to come out to Cairo but to make sure first that I got some training in the “press business.”

I must give credit to USIA for putting together a quick immersion program tailored for me. I was sent to the NEA public affairs office at the State Department and assigned there for a three-month stint to work with the team responsible for drafting daily press guidance on global policy issues for the Department of State’s daily press briefing by the department spokesperson. I had not worked at State, so this was a very, very useful experience—doing press guidance every day and going through the process of clearing every word so that the spokesperson had excellent talking points cleared by the entire bureaucracy. It was excellent training. And then I took off for Cairo in January or February 1988.

Egypt’s Media Environment

Q: When you got there what were the major issues between the United States and Egypt?

WAHBA: Economic issues primarily. The U.S. was pressing Egypt to adopt a lot of economic reforms which the Egyptians were balking at. They had severe reform structural issues within their economy, and still do, to this day. The U.S. assistance program was huge at the time. I mean, we’re talking close to three billion dollars between military and economic assistance. This level of funding was tied to the signing of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty

The opposition parties and press at the time were very anti-American, very socialist/leftist in background and strong Nasserite political parties that loved to take whacks at the U.S. every single day. Frank G. Wisner, because his father was one of the founders of the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] quickly became a target. The opposition press was very ugly in Egypt at the time.

The other problem that I faced personally was that a lot of Egyptians, especially the senior editors in the media, did not take me seriously. First because of my gender but also they found it unusual for an Egyptian-American to be a diplomat and I think some suspected that I was with the CIA since I spoke fluent Arabic. So, at first, I faced some opposition from the senior media editors. Ambassador Wisner understood the situation and took several steps to empower me and raise my credibility with the very tough Egyptian media. I remember soon after arriving in Cairo he hosted a lunch in my honor at his residence with all the senior editors who were all men of course and had been in their positions for decades; we called them the pharaohs of the Egyptian press. During the lunch, while introducing me, he said that I had his confidence in every way and that if they wanted to see him or hear the embassy position, on any issue, they had to go through Marcelle Wahba to get to Frank Wisner. That really helped me establish my standing and

credibility with these very influential press personalities who ran the media in Egypt at the time. Of course it took a while for me to gain their respect and overcome their skepticism.

Q: I take it that the old pharaohs of the media in Egypt, I mean there weren't any women among them.

WAHBA: No, no, they were all men; they dominated the journalism world in Egypt. Very few women and, with a couple of exceptions, most were junior reporters. So that was part of the challenge-

Q: I mean do you think that that was also a problem?

WAHBA: Probably, yes, probably yes, for them to take a woman seriously and a younger woman for that matter. And I don't know how to say it in English but there's the foreigner, the "khawaga" complex as they call it in Egypt, i.e., if you're a foreigner-foreigner you get more respect. But if you're of Egyptian or Arab origin you are seen with some suspicion and also you're tested more heavily. In some ways a typical American, white male diplomat would have an easier time breaking into the system while somebody from their own region, and a woman, is at first not taken as seriously. Once you are tested and gain their respect, many Egyptians actually expressed their pride in the fact that "one of their own" had made it through the system in America to become a diplomat. Men, and women, often came up to me and very openly expressed that sentiment.

Q: Well, how did you find dealing with the press there?

WAHBA: The wonderful thing about Egyptians after all is that they are very sociable, very warm and welcoming. Once they've tested you through the fires and you've passed so to speak, you can actually establish very solid relationships, and I did. They came to my home for lunches and receptions. I believe Egyptians, once they got to know me and trusted me, felt that I was an important bridge to the U.S. because I was close enough to them to understand their perspective and properly communicate it to my government. I believe they felt confident that I could express their concerns in a way that would be better understood by the U.S. side. Plus, they were very proud to see an Egyptian-American having succeeded in the U.S. Foreign Service to have reached this position. Many would often tell me that they felt very proud to see a woman of Egyptian origin in the American diplomatic service.

Q: When you were dealing with a group would you start speaking Egyptian to them or would you do it in English or how did this work?

WAHBA: It depended on their level of comfort in English. I certainly started greetings in Arabic and colloquial Egyptian Arabic. If we had some policy issues to discuss and they're good English speakers I tended to revert to English for most of the conversation although I could go back and forth between English and Arabic. But my Arabic is not a

“well-educated standard Arabic” so there were a lot of political issues that I could not effectively tackle in my colloquial Egyptian so I would switch to English. This was especially true during this first overseas assignment because my Arabic got stronger as I continued to serve in the Middle East. Undoubtedly, I could quickly establish a good rapport with Egyptian contacts because of my fluent spoken Arabic capability as well as the strong cultural connection given my Egyptian heritage. So, yes, my background was a big plus in many ways for me in this assignment and future assignments.

Q: What about the local Embassy staff? I would think there'd be an awful lot of resentment.

WAHBA: In some ways that was probably a bigger challenge than dealing with the Egyptian press! The Embassy local staff were long-timers as Egyptians like employment stability. They really were indispensable in maintaining the long-term memory of the bilateral relationship that is so important in a complex country like Egypt. We had Foreign Service nationals working in the embassy who had been there twenty years plus. And some served thirty-five to forty years. So yes, there were some challenges because of the relative high turnover of American diplomats. In my case, there was a lot of testing and some resentment at first by those who were not comfortable being supervised by someone too close to their own culture. But, in the end of course, it worked out and I remain in touch with many of them till today. We managed to build long-term relationships and friendships.

Q: I'd think it would be a very difficult job particularly in your first assignment. In That first job, really, I mean going right to the very top is tough.

WAHBA: yes, it was a tough and challenging assignment. And I had a large press office staff and I was responsible for supervising the press operation in Alexandria as well.

Q: What was the press corps like in Egypt?

WAHBA: It was not a very responsible press corps, even the government-owned media was weak in terms of journalistic standards. The government media tended to be very lazy, with a “give us the press release and we'll print it” mentality. Also “give us the draft article and we'll pretend to write it!” So, the Press Office had to do a lot of drafting of well-written press releases and extensive fact sheets in Arabic and English to make sure what was published was accurate.

The Op-eds however were a different domain; written and controlled by the senior editors in close collaboration with the government's Ministry of Information. There were some good political analysts, well-educated, who conducted professional interviews and respected ground rules, but they were the minority. The so-called opposition press (mainly Nasserite/socialist party papers) was the most irresponsible press I have ever worked with in my career. Conspiracy theories, unsubstantiated stories and tabloid type reporting of totally fictitious stories. They would never call the embassy to get a reaction or a denial on flagrantly anti-American stories. So, they were very difficult to deal with.

We also had internal debates among all the different sections of the embassy, including the ambassador, who often would want us to make an on-the-record response to these conspiracy theories and irresponsible accusations. I often argued it was best to ignore some of the worst and craziest stories to avoid giving them any credibility by responding to them. But it was a very difficult environment, especially for the USAID program which did so much for Egypt.

The USAID Program

AID with a three billion dollar program, got blasted in the opposition press almost every single day. Accusing AID of building schools with faulty construction or how AID's money was all spent on pay to expensive American consultants and to buy American equipment with actually very little going to benefit Egyptians. I mean there was almost zero gratitude—at least in my time there; hopefully things have changed. I spent a good percentage of my time in Cairo trying to change the terribly negative image of USAID-Egypt. We worked very hard to improve it by being proactive like conducting press tours to the villages so they could see firsthand the impact of USAID projects and interview people who benefited directly from the various health, education and agricultural programs. It was a very painstaking effort to try and turn around this widely held negative image. I think we succeeded to some extent by providing these first-hand experiences for the journalists who covered USAID, but it was definitely an uphill battle.

Q: Was it just bad coverage or was this almost innate within the system that I mean, the donor of a hell of a lot of money to anybody is not going to be liked.

WAHBA: Well, there was that element, of course, and the politics behind it. Second there was the shame that I think a lot of Egyptians felt that their country needed this assistance that also, in their view, had political strings attached to it. Many Egyptians believed they were getting this assistance as a payoff for the peace treaty with Israel which was of course basically true. So, they always felt that in a way the U.S. aid package was equivalent to selling their soul. Let's not forget that Egypt was expelled from the Arab League after signing the peace treaty with Israel which was a huge humiliation for a country that considered itself the indispensable leader of the Arab world.

Q: It is. It's very difficult.

WAHBA: Culturally, it was seen as a loss of face to be thankful for that kind of assistance. So I think the reaction was to show how this assistance was really just to help the United States get a wedge into Egypt and how the United States was using this assistance money to control Egypt. That's how it was expressed. It's the colonialist theme; their past experience under colonialism I think in many ways fed the reaction to the U.S. government's assistance.

Q: Oh yes. Well, did you do much in your—did you go on TV much at all, interviews?

WAHBA: Yes. Yes, I did. I did print media, probably print media more than TV because in those days they did not have a lot of news talk shows.

Our main challenge during my time as the Embassy's Press Attaché was with the Egyptian press and their lack of professionalism which had a direct impact on our policy priorities in Egypt. I worked with our USAID colleagues to design a large journalism training which AID agreed to fund. It was the first journalism training program funded by USAID in Egypt and we put together a program where they would spend several months in the U.S. at a journalism institute for a tailored program covering the basics as well as investigative journalism. It was a very intensive program that included some travel around the United States after completion of the course work that allowed them to file stories on the U.S. for their home newspapers in Egypt. I think it was a very successful program, not that it changed political biases, but it certainly improved the quality of reporting. We made sure to select journalists from the opposition newspapers as well as the government newspapers. We worked with the Egyptian press syndicate to recruit and select journalists from newspapers throughout the country as well as radio and television. I'm sure there was some corruption in how the Press syndicate selected journalists to participate as the all-expenses-paid program was of course very popular. USAID continued to fund this program for many years after I left Egypt. I don't know if it's still going on because we've cut back our economic assistance dramatically over the years. We probably trained many thousands of Egyptian journalists through this program.

Egypt's Role in the Region

Q: Did Israel—was this foremost what you were up to, our relations with it or not or was there much interest in it?

WAHBA: In those days there was a movement in Egypt, not very popular, to participate in what they called "normalization projects" with Israel. So, it promoted joint conferences or projects for participation by Egyptians, Israelis and Palestinians. Many of these initiatives were U.S.-funded. These events were held in Cairo or Tel Aviv but mostly in neutral locations like Cyprus or other European cities. At the same time there was a very, very strong anti-normalization campaign supported by mostly political opposition parties. A lot of the Egyptians who participated in programs that involved Israelis found themselves blacklisted from participating in a lot of other activities in the country. So, we tried a variety of more subtle ways to bring Egyptians and Israelis together through our International Visitors and Fulbright programs. This was more successful as these programs were not held on their home turf but in the U.S.

Q: Did we sponsor any programs of getting the Egyptians to go to Israel?

WAHBA: I think there were some USAID-funded projects that dealt with water, for example, that would try to bring together Egyptians with Israelis and Palestinians and Jordanians. But very few Egyptians were willing to publicly go to Israel and then face the backlash in their community. Some Egyptians did travel to Israel and those were mostly ones who had the political cover and also strong standing within the community to push back on the anti-normalization sentiment. The Israelis of course were very eager to welcome them and also to visit Egypt. At the time there was a curiosity from both sides about wanting to know each other but the political environment was not very helpful.

Q: At the time what would you, how would you describe your feeling about the—the general embassy feeling and Frank Wisner who was obviously close to Mubarak and his regime?

WAHBA: Those were actually the better years under Mubarak. Mubarak was allowing some political opening and press freedoms maybe as he told us once, to all them to let off steam. So he had allowed the opposition papers to publish more freely and rarely banned newspapers. That said, this loosening up was not available to any overt actions by the Muslim Brothers. They were not allowed to run for parliament although some did as independents but not many. The security services had not become as repressive and as powerful as they became in later years. So they did not abuse political and social activists as they have in more recent years. There was always abuse in the prisons and in police stations—it was systemic and endemic.

Q: How about—how were Libya and Gaddafi and all seen from that-?

WAHBA: Gaddafi always had the reputation of being ‘unstable’. The Egyptians felt they had to manage him. The comment we often heard regarding Gaddafi was “we have to manage him very carefully.” They dreaded his stunts like arriving in the Cairo Airport unannounced and the protocol department would have to jump to provide the necessary meet and greet. The Egyptians have a very sophisticated diplomatic service with well-trained, talented diplomats. Gaddafi would often appear, not only unannounced, but with a huge entourage including his own camels as he only drank fresh camel milk. I recall one time he insisted on pitching his tent in a large park with his entourage of assistants plus the camels! That really sent the Egyptians into a frenzy. But of course, they had to manage Gaddafi because for them it was a survival issue; the border with Libya is key to their national security and thousands of Egyptians worked in Libya and sent remittances home. Mubarak managed Gaddafi quite well.

Q: How was Saudi Arabia viewed in Egypt—?

WAHBA: After the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, relations with most of the Arab world were on hold; Egypt was expelled from the Arab League and the organization’s headquarters moved to Tunis. Repairing relations with the Arab world while maintaining a cordial, if not warm relationship, with Israel was one of Mubarak’s most important legacies. Egypt was reinstated into the Arab League during my time there—in May 1989.

Q: Yes. Did we have a line on what we'd say about the Arab League or the Muslim Brotherhood or not?

WAHBA: In those days we didn't need to say very much about the Muslim Brotherhood. The second time I served in Egypt we did interact with some of the Muslim Brothers who were serving as independents in the parliament. Of course, we knew that Egypt was paying a very high price in terms of its regional role and political standing after it was expelled from the Arab League. From the U.S. perspective it was a very positive development to have Egypt regain its stature, regain the Arab League headquarters in its capital, because as our close allies, they were a moderate force in the region.

Q: How about the Sudan? Does that play any role or was there much interest in it at the time?

WAHBA: Well, we worked a lot with the Egyptians on Sudan because they had an excellent relationship with Sudan. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who later became the UN Secretary General, was the minister of state for African affairs at the time and he was the key Egyptian on anything to do with Africa and particularly the Sudan.

Q: What was your impression of the Egyptian Foreign Service?

WAHBA: They were very good with an excellent Diplomatic Institute to train their diplomats. We did some work with their Diplomatic Institute which was part of their ministry of foreign affairs. We brought American speakers to give lectures to their young diplomats who normally spent two years of training at the institute. Based on my experience from working with their diplomats at the ministry of foreign affairs, they are very talented, very well-educated and very well-trained. I believe the conventional wisdom in the region is that the Egyptians and the Algerians are the best diplomats in the Arab world. And the Egyptians really stood out. Most of them spoke fluent English and French. Many of them had been educated overseas, especially for their graduate studies. And their language skills were superb. Most of their embassies were well-staffed. Egypt spent money on its Foreign Service and took great pride in its active diplomacy regionally and globally.

Q: Where did the Egyptian Foreign Service recruits come from?

WAHBA: In those days primarily, I would say, from the private English and French language schools in Egypt, and some German schools as well. Their college graduates hailed from Cairo and Ain Shams universities as well as the American University in Cairo. Those were very good universities throughout the 1960s and 70s and some of their departments remain strong till today. Cairo University is one of the oldest universities in the world!

Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait

Q: Was the Iran-Iraq war still going when you were there?

WAHBA: It was winding down. But then we had the invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Q: Was Iraq and Khomeini a particular presence, influential presence in Egypt?

WAHBA: No, not Iran or Khomeini. Iraq was of course but with Saddam's invasion of Kuwait public sentiment went against Iraq—although the Kuwaitis were not very popular in Egypt. Egyptians were still smarting from being dismissed by the Arab world over the peace treaty with Israel and it took a while for relationships to warm up again. Thanks to Mubarak, Egypt played a very big role in forming the Arab coalition in support of the U.S.-led coalition to liberate Kuwait. This is when Egypt started to regain its leadership position in the Arab world.

Q: Were you there then?

WAHBA: Yes. 1990.

Q: How was Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait viewed? I mean did it come as a shock to the embassy?

WAHBA: I think it came as a surprise to everybody in the region. The whole debate about how well the message was delivered, or not delivered, by Ambassador April Glaspie regarding the U.S. reaction if Iraq were to invade Kuwait was making the rounds in Cairo. I think there was genuine surprise when he actually went into Kuwait. The Egyptians were shocked that he would actually do it. There were a lot of threats of course by Saddam against Kuwait for quite some time but many believed it was Saddam's way of gaining advantages from Kuwait. We had a strong presence in the region with the Operation Earnest Will from 1987 to 1988 when we reflagged Kuwaiti ships under American flags to protect them from Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Of course, the brutal violence of the invasion, the raping of Kuwait's wealth by the Iraqis stunned the Arab world. Egypt opened its doors to Kuwaiti officials and hosted the anti-Iraqi global public affairs initiative out of Cairo to help Kuwait get its message out to the world. I got involved in working with CENTCOM's [U.S. Central Command] public affairs team with the Kuwaitis based in Cairo.

Q: Well, did you find this reflected in your news conferences?

WAHBA: Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely. And actually most Egyptians supported the American-led coalition to liberate Kuwait. Public opinion was not against us on that one, at least not in the beginning.

Q: Were you there through the end of the war?

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: I would think that CNN was, this was the first real time that it became-

WAHBA: A player?

Q: Yes. How was CNN, did you have trouble, you the press and all, adjusting to the CNN world?

WAHBA: Well, and I think in those days actually CNN was not widely seen in Egypt and it was only the war and the coverage of CNN that accelerated its access to Egypt. The government agreed to CNN's request for broadcasting through a local cable service so that Egyptians could witness the war and the liberation of Kuwait. I remember when Ted Turner came to Egypt and met with Ambassador Wisner to brief us on CNN's effort to get on the Egyptian airwaves through a cable subscription service—a new concept for Egypt at the time. Ted Turner arrived at the Embassy with a very attractive young woman who was not Jane Fonda! That got the whole embassy talking. It was an interesting meeting.

Q: I was wondering, I mean I think one of the major impacts around the world, including the United States, the way it was portrayed was the effectiveness of our military. Did this have an impact on Egypt too?

WAHBA: Oh yes. I think the fact that the liberation of Kuwait was conducted in a relatively short time and the fact that the Egyptians played an important role made the whole war effort more acceptable to people in the region. We were concerned about public opinion and reaction to civilian deaths once the war started but there was very little of that since we never went into Iraqi territory. Once we started moving towards the borders of Iraq there was some concern, especially from the opposition press. But for the most part the war and the conduct of the war was well-accepted and respected.

Q: Even this sort of irresponsible opposition press? How did they respond?

WAHBA: I can't remember specifically but they never responded very well to anything the U.S. did. The problem they faced in this case was do you take sides against Kuwait by blasting the Americans for liberating Kuwait? It put them in a dilemma because the invasion of Kuwait could not be legitimized in the Arab world. Regardless of Saddam's claims on Kuwait as a part of Iraq the majority of Egyptians and the majority of Arabs in the region, felt that the brutal invasion of Kuwait was wrong. To invade Kuwait, and in such a vicious manner was not acceptable to most of the Arab world. It was therefore very hard for the opposition to go after the U.S. when we were liberating Kuwait. This was, I think, a moral dilemma because many resented the fact that it was the Americans who liberated Kuwait but yet they knew our role was indispensable.

Q: Did you see an uptick in Egyptian-American relations as far as the press is concerned?

WAHBA: Yes, I think so. During the war it was an easier time and I remember Dick Cheney was the secretary of defense at the time and Colin Powell was the chief of staff—both of them well-respected.

Q: Chief of staff, yes.

WAHBA: And I remember they arrived six days or a few days after the invasion of Kuwait and were very well-received in the media, their presence, their consultations with Mubarak to form the Arab coalition. It was a heyday for us in terms of policy issues.

It also was a very important time for me on the personal front because I had gotten engaged earlier that year to Derek Farwagi and he was arriving from Australia that same week as Dick Cheney to see me so we could plan and discuss our future. A very hectic time with lots of juggling of schedules.

Q: Well, that must have been an interesting time, where and how did you and your husband meet?

WAHBA: My husband, Derek, also has roots in Egypt. He was born in Cairo but not of Egyptian origin. His father was half British, half Palestinian and his mother was Greek. Both of them were born in Egypt; this was the era when many expats lived in Egypt for many generations. His parents met and married in Cairo and he spent most of his childhood in Egypt before going to England to study when he was seventeen. He lived out of Egypt for all of his adult life primarily in England before moving to Australia with his former wife and daughter. When he came back to Egypt for a visit in 1989, '90 is when we met. We got married in the spring of 1991, well after the liberation of Kuwait. The two of us had a lot of childhood memories of Egypt and many friends as well. For us to meet and get married in Cairo was in many ways like completing a full circle. We had similar roots and upbringing but had established our lives in the West which allowed us to connect as adults and bring those two cultures together. We had quite a wonderful wedding in Cairo with an overnight cruise on the Nile with friends to cap the evening!

Q: Well, then, as the war ended how did the press and political opposition handle all this?

WAHBA: Well, the opposition in Egypt of course had an underlying agenda. The underlying agenda during this time was to hammer the point that their government had opened up politically to the West too quickly. Privatization and the new private sector class created economic difficulties for poorer Egyptians who had to cope with higher prices and job losses that come with privatization. The whole textile industry was under duress because of the push to privatize these companies which of course often led to cuts in jobs. Whether in the large textile manufacturing industry or other publicly owned enterprises, the social upheaval that was taking place was very significant as Egypt transitioned from a socialist economy to a more diverse private sector economy. It was a time of great insecurity for many and certainly not welcomed by any of the opposition

political parties—leftist Nasserite or conservative Islamist—as they saw themselves as the protectors of the masses. And it was in fact quite a difficult time for many Egyptians.

Q: Sure.

WAHBA: It was a very difficult time for Egyptians who lost jobs and did not have the requisite skills to move into blue collar jobs in the private sector. Unfortunately, there was not a good strategy in place to retrain the workforce. So economic reforms brought on difficult social change and fears of domestic instability.

Q: Did you see—I mean, personally, did you find yourself you didn't agree with any particular aspect of our policy towards Egypt?

WAHBA: No, because Mubarak, with our support, was trying to do the right thing with economic reforms at a very difficult time of transition for Egypt. They were trying to reform the economy, upgrade their sewage system, upgrade their telephone system, upgrade their water system and at the same time cope with the social and political impact of these significant reforms.

Q: Was there much foreign press representation at briefings and all? I mean did you have any problems with it?

WAHBA: We had a very, very strong and large foreign press corps in Egypt at the time, which of course is not true today because they've all cut back on the cost of overseas staffed offices. But we had all the main American news bureaus: "New York Times," "The Washington Post," and the TV networks, ABC, NBC, CBS and CNN. They all had bureaus in Cairo mainly to cover Egypt. Some of them covered other smaller countries in the region but most of them had a bureau in Israel and one in Egypt. These were the two big centers for the American media in the Middle East. We also had journalists from Japan, China, and most of the main European outlets. When we held a Press conference for visiting VIPs from Washington the turnout was huge. The foreign correspondents had a very active association where they would invite different ambassadors to speak at their events and Ambassador Wisner was often invited to brief them. It was a very active international media presence which was very useful for the Embassy as it allowed us to get on the world stage very quickly if we had an important issue to address.

Q: Did they give you any particular problem or have any particular, I mean—?

WAHBA: No, they were very professional. No, it was a very good group of international, professional journalists. We didn't really have any trouble with them.

Q: Well, then, how did things stand when you left? I mean, did you feel comfortable in this job now?

WAHBA: When I left Cairo?

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: Oh I loved it. I learned so much from Ambassador Frank Wisner. He was my role model when I finally became ambassador many years later. I would often think back on how Frank ran his country team meetings, how he conducted briefings for CODELs [Congressional delegations], how he developed a positive work environment for all Embassy employees including our local staff. I learned a great deal from being part of his country team to witness at close range how he made good use of all the Embassy's programs and staff resources. He was a great example. He allowed me to attend country team meetings which were restricted to the heads of agencies but because I was the embassy spokesperson, he allowed me to attend the daily meetings. This was such a brilliant idea and I don't know if it was a common practice at other embassies. I believe it is important for the embassy spokesperson to hear first-hand the issues raised by the economic or political section heads, or the FBI representative and all the other agencies that make up a country team, which in Egypt which was quite large. We had a representative from the Library of Congress, the National Science Foundation, the Departments of Defense, Commerce, Agriculture, intelligence agencies etc. I saw how this large country team—the interagency team—came together so effectively to tackle U.S. priorities and national security issues that are under the Chief of Mission's authority. It was an incredible experience that I later realized was a rare opportunity for a first-time-overseas FSO. Being part of the country team allowed me to stay well-informed on the key issues and empowered me to develop public affairs strategies for policy issues that were sensitive or problematic for us or for the Egyptian government.

Q: What role did Alexandria play in your particular field?

WAHBA: The Alexandria CG [consul general] of course always attended the country team meetings. Alexandria was very much a commercial trade hub with a very strong private sector, so it was an important part of the embassy portfolio. When we started some of the micro enterprise projects funded by USAID, the Alexandria project was the largest and most successful. I remember going very often to Alexandria with the ambassador to inaugurate USAID projects and often met with private sector representatives in Alexandria. They were more active, and I think a more credible private sector maybe because of Alexandria's geographic location as a commercial center. They were a more mature and a more established private sector than the one in Cairo.

Q: Well then, looking at the time this would probably be a good place to stop. But where did you go after Cairo?

WAHBA: After Cairo I bid on Cyprus for the USIS [United States Information Service] public affairs officer position. I was ready to take on a broader mandate, as a member of the country team with responsibility for both cultural and press sections.

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: Cyprus was a small enough post where I could really learn the ropes of being an agency head with a sizable budget and staff. After having served at the huge Cairo embassy as the press officer Washington advised me to bid on a smaller country PAO [public affairs officer] assignment to gain more management/leadership responsibilities. Cyprus had a very large academic/cultural program in Cyprus in addition to a robust Fulbright program, so it was considered a good assignment. I went off to Nicosia.

Q & A with Interns: Press, trafficking in persons, and human rights

Q: Okay. And now I'd like to turn it over to our interns. If you have a question—if you'd identify yourself and then you can ask the question. Starting here.

SWAYLA: I'm Rihanna Swayla. My question, earlier you were talking about how the locals and the press in Egypt were kind of testing you. Can you explain what you mean by that?

WAHBA: Well, I'll take the Egyptian press first. Many of the senior editors didn't see me as a credible spokesperson. Because they looked at my CV and saw that I had joined the Foreign Service in 1986 and here I was in 1988 as the Cairo embassy spokesperson so there was a question about my level of experience, and I guess rightly so. Most of the press officers who had served in Egypt before me had four or more previous diplomatic assignments under their belt before they were selected for such a senior post at the Cairo Embassy.

The testing by local staff was because I was an Egyptian-American. They were not sure how to deal with me. So when I say testing, I don't mean they actually put me through a test; but there was a period where I was not embraced as an American diplomat and they could not embrace me as an Egyptian. I was somewhere in between—they questioned my professional ability and my personal credibility for a while. I succeeded or 'passed the test' only after working hard to build good working relationships.

MACKIE: I'm Jacob Mackie. My question is about the United Arab Emirates and did you, did the embassy deal a lot with human trafficking and like the sex trafficking or labor trafficking and how did like the U.S. interact with that? Was it prevalent then?

WAHBA: Oh yes, the issue of human trafficking was an area of concern for the U.S. and we dealt with it all the time. Labor practices and human trafficking were a very big part of our agenda and they were covered in every human rights report that we did on the UAE [United Arab Emirates] at the time. The way we handled it was to go to the different Emirates—and of course the UAE was a little more complicated than other Arab countries because they have a federal system. So although they have a federal government oftentimes issues had to be handled at the emirate level. For example, the human trafficking for the camel jockeys was promoted mostly by one of the emirates where camel racing was still a strong tradition and a means of livelihood for the tribes. So

sometimes we would have to talk to the federal level and then we would have to go to the emirate level and explain why this issue was causing the UAE a lot of problems not only in the U.S. but globally. In the end, we managed to find a successful formula for camel racing without young kids as jockeys!

In Dubai, of course, the human trafficking was more about the sex trade, so again while the law enforcement side was cooperative and had good laws in place, we worked to identify ways to help them implement those laws more forcefully.

In both cases we would offer training programs to help them strengthen the police enforcement of existing laws. We saw great improvement on a lot of these issues but there are still problems today. These are things that take time because you're changing peoples' traditions and culture—on the issue of camel racing for example. You're asking them to think about how they can modify their own culture to respond to these issues that have become increasingly important in the 21st century.

PEREZ: Hi, Grace Perez from the University of Southern California. My question is about trying to link together maybe press and investments since you talked a lot about the press and the economy of Egypt at the time. I think all the news about imprisoned journalists these days kind of inspires this question, but did you have to deal with any of these sort of issues back then? And did it in any way affect any foreign direct investment in the country?

WAHBA: The human rights violations in Egypt when I was there the first time were not as blatant as they are today. But there were lots of issues that affected foreign direct investment, primarily their own heavy bureaucratic procedures and structure that hampered foreign investment in Egypt. That was their huge problem, it took months and months and months to establish a business and set up a company in Egypt. It's changed now, it's a lot better but I think it is still a problem. But there's no question that human rights issues in any country will be an area of concern for foreign direct investment because businesses are worried about their staff's security.

Q: Okay. Today is the 27th of May 2015 with Marcelle Wahba. And you're off to Cyprus. You were in Cyprus from when to when?

WAHBA: Cyprus four years, from 1991, summer of 1991 to summer of 1995.

Q: Okay. When you got there in 1991 what was the situation in Cyprus?

WAHBA: My goodness. It was a different world than it is today, of course. It was a very economically successful Greek side of the island, recognized globally as the legitimate government of Cyprus and the economically depressed Turkish half of the island that included a strong military presence from mainland Turkey. There were no interactions between the Greek Cypriots in the southern half of the island and the Turkish Cypriots on the north side. No telephone or internet connections as the Turkish side was connected to mainland Turkey's telecommunication system. The only bicomunal organization that

was allowed and accepted by both sides was the Fulbright Board, which I chaired. We had to meet in the bullet-scarred Ledra Palace hotel located in the UN buffer zone between the two sides to allow both the Greek and Turkish Cypriots access to attend the meeting.

The Madrid Peace Conference

Q: Alright. Well, let's talk about the embassy when you got there, living conditions and then we'll go on and talk about the issues.

WAHBA: Okay. Well, as soon as I got to Cyprus, the Madrid Middle East Peace conference was announced, and I was recruited to work on that historic event.

Q: This had to do with Palestine.

WAHBA: Yes, it was the first international peace conference between the Israelis, the Palestinians and the other Arab states—all seated at the same table. The conference was hosted by the Spaniards and co-sponsored by the United States. The American delegation organized the event with help from the Spanish government. James Baker was the Secretary of State and the Department Spokeswoman, Margaret Tutwiler, was put in charge of organizing the event with the Spaniards and the attending delegations. I met Margaret and her team several times as the Secretary came through Cairo many times in his effort to kick-start the peace process after the liberation of Kuwait. President George H. Bush was convinced we had an opportunity to achieve a breakthrough after the success of working with the Arab coalition to reverse the invasion of Kuwait.

When Margaret Tutwiler contacted me to help in setting up the Press Center for the conference I agreed, left my poor husband to deal with unpacking our household shipment on his own and I got on a plane to Madrid.

The conference was an unprecedented event and I was very proud to be a part of seeing history in the making. More than a thousand journalists registered to attend so setting up the Press operation was also a major challenge and we had only a couple of weeks to put it together. The Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, attended and the world waited with bated breath to see if the Syrian delegation would shake hands with their Israeli counterparts. They didn't.

The Palestinian delegation in those days had to be attend as a joint delegation with the Jordanians to appease the Israelis who refused to allow a separate Palestinian delegation and anyone from the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization] to attend. Haidar Abdel-Shafi was the head of the delegation on the Palestinian side with Hanan Ashrawi, a Christian Palestinian woman of great intellect and charisma, attended as his deputy. She quickly became very prominent because of her role in the Middle East conference and her articulate public appearances during the Madrid event. Hanan Ashrawi managed to

shatter the stereotyped image of Palestinians as terrorists or as extremist nationalists bent on destroying the state of Israel. The Palestinian delegation of course consulted with the PLO, stationed in Tunis in those days and they actually sent an “advisory” team led by Faisal al Husseini from Jerusalem.

Q: Yes. Well, let's talk while we've got you on the Madrid conference.

WAHBA: Well, it was such an amazing opportunity for me. The conference changed the trajectory of the peace process and led to years of in-person negotiations between the Arabs and Israelis. My responsibility at the conference, given my background and previous assignment, was to handle the U.S. press operation for the Arab media. We provided daily briefings, fact sheets, and material with readouts on the conference sessions. It was a 24/7 operation. The Spaniards were amazing hosts and provided us with excellent facilities with an around the clock buffet of food for the journalists!

I think we literally had two weeks to prepare for it. We had daily countdown meetings led by Margaret Tutwiler that were attended by all the Spanish representatives responsible for different aspects of the conference. It was a very well-choreographed event and I must say my admiration for people like Margaret Tutwiler skyrocketed because it was a mammoth task to pull off in two weeks. It was amazing.

A funny wrinkle was the fact that the Israelis refused to refer to the conference as “international” and I remember on the eve of the conference Margaret Tutwiler had the Spaniards go around the city of Madrid deleting the word ‘international’ from all the signs that they had already put up.

Q: Yes, many such stories I imagine. How did the Arab and Israeli delegates get on?

WAHBA: The Israelis, some of their delegates and also some of their journalists, would try and provoke the Syrians for the sake of a photo op by walking into the Syrian delegation's room trying to shake hands. This was of course an attempt to gain some ground back home with their domestic audience to show the Syrians agreeing to shake hands at a time when they had no diplomatic relations. So there were a lot of these shenanigans on the sidelines of the conference.

Q: What were your impressions of how it worked? I mean, getting these people together in a conference.

WAHBA: The conference itself was really groundbreaking. Baker and his team did a fantastic job, I think. The conference launched two serious negotiating tracks—bilateral negotiations between the Palestinians, Israelis, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and a multilateral track that dealt with regional issues like water, the environment and economic development. The Europeans played the key role in the multilateral track. The U.S. of course was the main player on the bilateral track and that eventually led to the Jordan-Israel peace treaty.

The Conference ended with a very hopeful note—that it would lead to a road map for successful negotiations—but here we are many decades later and not much closer to resolving the main issue at heart of the conflict— the occupation of Palestine.

Q: Did you find that the Arab press would have issues with the Israeli press, were they treating this, were they telling the real story about what was going on—?

WAHBA: This was such a large event with thousands of journalists from all over the world, so the Arab press and the Israeli press were not the largest presence by any means. Of course we had a lot of the small side dramas and posturing by both the Israelis and the Arabs but there was too much to cover in terms of the daily events and press conferences which kept all of us very busy. Many of the sessions were open to the press and that meant they had a lot to file at the end of each day or oftentimes at the end of each session. I think the press coverage in the Arab countries and in Israel was comprehensive and included a lot about the informal gatherings and interactions between the delegations.

In the Arab world, I think certainly the U.S. got kudos for being able to pull this together and kudos to the Spaniards for agreeing to host it because it was quite a historic breakthrough.

Q: I do understand. Somebody I'm interviewing who was there said that the Spanish produced sort of at the beginning some wonderful ham and cheese sandwiches.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: You know. In the Jewish-Arab world the ham wasn't exactly—But they came up with something else.

WAHBA: Of course, a variety of tapas. In the press center we had a daily diet of the famous Spanish Tortilla which has no resemblance to the Mexican tortilla. It is basically a thick tart made of eggs and potatoes. The buffet was just stocked with them 24/7 and they were very tasty. I grew to love them. So, it was very well-done. The Spaniards really rose to the occasion.

A Divided Island/Bicommunal Work in Cyprus

Q: Well, then, back to Cyprus.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: Well, it must have been kind of so heavy to be in there and then to go back to Cyprus. Did you feel that you were in a rather quiet place?

WAHBA: Yes, after the pace in Cairo or Madrid, I felt like I was on a holiday in Nicosia. It was small, sleepy, very nice people everywhere, whether on the Greek side or on the Turkish side. I had a small staff. I think what was exciting for me in Cyprus was that for the first time I ran my own entire USIS section, so I had a budget and both culture and press programs under my supervision. We had a beautiful old building that housed the American Center right in the middle of Nicosia. We were not part of the old embassy. The American center was right on the dividing line (between North and South), across from the old walls of Nicosia. I discovered that the building actually belonged to a Turkish Cypriot, so the embassy was paying rent to a Turkish Cypriot who lived in the north and had lost access to this building when the island was divided. He was very fortunate that the American embassy, instead of the Greek government, took over or maybe already had it before the division of the island. This building, which was a three-story building, had a garden, a great big American library on the ground floor, a large program room for lectures and events, and lots of office space. A classic USIA setup of the old days where people could walk-in easily with minimal security, to spend time in the library or attend a program.

Q: How did you work in the divided country?

WAHBA: Yes. Well, that's why Cyprus kind of stands out as one of the really more interesting assignments I had. I soon realized that there was a way we could use some of the Fulbright money to promote some bi-communal activity because the physical and social divide between the two communities was a big hurdle to any future peace arrangement. The UN special Cyprus negotiator and several U.S. special Cyprus envoys came and went, including Richard Holbrooke, who was a special envoy for a very limited time when I was there. I think he came for only one visit, met with Denktaş and with Glafcos Clerides, and I think he quickly realized the conflict was not going anywhere. We never saw Holbrooke again.

Role of The Cyprus Fulbright Commission

Q: Well, with the Fulbright commission, would there be Greek and Turkish sitting—I mean sitting on one commission?

WAHBA: Yes, as I said earlier it was the only legally established bi-national institution. We were one board. I was the chairperson and we had Greek and Turkish Cypriot members based on the percentages of their population. The scholarships we granted were also based on the population breakdown between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. We had three Turkish Cypriot board members. Two were professors; one was a former minister. The board worked very well; they knew each other for years and got along very well.

Q: You never had once the Greek side having more representatives trying to force more—?

WAHBA: No. we followed an approved formula that both sides had negotiated early on and everything was spelled out clearly in the Commissions bylaws. When the board was first established, they agreed USD 5 million received annually would provide grants for both undergraduate and graduate students. So, this was the only Fulbright program that provided funding for a four-year undergraduate scholarship. The student applicants were the cream of the crop from both communities. The allotted number of scholarships for each side was never questioned. I can't remember exactly but I think we gave seventy percent of the scholarships to Greeks and thirty percent to Turkish Cypriots—based on the population breakdown.

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: So it was an accepted formula, nobody argued that one. Each applicant was evaluated by the entire board and we approved each scholarship as a group, whether they were Greeks or Turks.

Q: Well, what were your observations of the school system on both sides? Because you were looking at the products of-?

WAHBA: Well, the Greek Cypriot schools were much better schools. There was no doubt about that. They were stronger academically, they produced better students. When they sat for the SAT scores, they usually did better. But in spite of the lower quality of K-12 education on the Turkish Cypriot side there were always enough solid applicants on the Turkish side to be awarded their quota of scholarships.

Q: Well, did most of them, both sides return or not?

WAHBA: Yes, they did. Well, I mean obviously some of them would have liked to stay on in the U.S but we didn't have a significant loss of students not returning—it was not a big issue. On the Turkish side most of them would come back but would end up working in mainland Turkey instead of Cyprus. And that was very hard to control because there's no way the Commission could know for certain whether they were on the Turkish side of the island or in Istanbul or Ankara. It was understandable because there were few jobs for them on the Turkish Cypriot side which was too bad because the best people would end up leaving.

Q: How did Fulbright Program contribute to bi-communal work?

The large Fulbright Grant gave us an opportunity to make a difference. First of all, as diplomats we were allowed to work on the Turkish side. The Greeks didn't object to that as long as we didn't call it a consulate and did not fly a flag on the building. The office on the Turkish Cypriot side of Nicosia included three or more FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals] to do political, commercial and public affairs work. The Fulbright program served both sides of the island and was the only institution that had a bi-communal board. And where did the Fulbright board meet? It met in the no man's zone, the area controlled by the UN, so that the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots could access it from their

respective sides. The Ledra Palace Hotel, which sat in the middle of the UN zone, the Green Zone I think they called it, was the only place they could meet. The Fulbright board meetings were held in this dumpy, bombed out, scarred hotel. The UN assigned us one room in the hotel with chairs falling apart and tables full of bullet holes because they were not allowed to change anything or bring in anything from either side to the Green Zone.

With the Fulbright board's approval, I approached the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] representative, about ways to promote bi-communal contacts which also was an important goal for the UN as it would support the peace negotiation effort. We worked together to sponsor seminars and training programs for Turkish and Greek Cypriots with Fulbright funding to be held at the Ledra Palace with the UNHCR as our co-sponsor. This was quite ground-breaking at the time because Greek and Turkish Cypriots had no opportunities to mix anywhere on the island. We received a very good response from both communities although the officials on both sides were not enthusiastic supporters of this new bicultural activity; however, they could not say no to both the USG [United States Government] and the UNHCR.

I soon took this a step further with a project to have them exchange visits to both sides of the island. Initially many were extremely apprehensive and advised against it, but I had the Ambassador's blessing and the support of the Bicultural Fulbright board.

Brushstrokes Across Cultures: Crossing the Divide

We decided to start with a cultural event focusing on young artists and called it "Brushstrokes Across Cultures." I reached out to two women, one Greek and one Turkish, who had art galleries on their respective sides of the island, whom I had gotten to know well. I posed the idea to each one of them separately, to co-host with the American Center a bicultural art exhibit showcasing young Turkish and Greek Cypriot artists. We would have an opening for the exhibition in the north and one in the south to be attended by all the participating artists as well as open to the public on each side. This proposal was met at first with a lot of skepticism and fear by the two gallery owners and of course they had to receive approval from their own governments. Once it was approved, each gallery began to recruit young artists who would be willing to exhibit on both sides of the island, not an easy task. Aside from the difficult logistics of transferring the artwork across borders and all the approvals that required, the real challenge was getting the artists themselves to visit each side once the openings were scheduled. The only way we could make this happen was to transport the Greek Cypriots in Embassy cars with diplomatic plates to cross over to the Turkish side so we would avoid the issue of passports being stamped which was a non-starter for the Greeks. We had to do the same when it was time for the Turkish Cypriot artists to attend the exhibit opening on the Greek side.

One of the challenges I did not expect was that many relatives of the Greek Cypriot artists wanted to attend the opening on the Turkish side. Why? Not only to attend the exhibit, but for them it was an opportunity to see homes they had left behind. We had to restrict the visit to the gallery where the exhibit was held. The Turkish Cypriots expressed more fear than enthusiasm about visiting the Greek side. We had to assure them that they would be under the auspices of the American embassy during their visit to the Greek side and we would arrange roundtrip transportation with diplomatic vehicles. It was the only way we could get the bi-communal event approved by the officials on both sides. The opening on the Greek side was a big hullabaloo with the mayor of Nicosia attending to cut the ribbon at the exhibit opening held at the beautiful exhibition space at the Nicosia gate. We got incredible press coverage and “Brushstrokes Across Cultures” was launched! We had a second one more during my assignment.

Now, remember, in those days on the island there were no phone or internet connections. Therefore there was no way for the Greek and Turkish Cypriots who met at these exhibits to stay in touch with one another. It sounds ridiculous now but that’s the way it was. And so this bicomunal art exhibit really started something big. The following year we had “Brushstrokes Across Cultures/Number Two” and after I left my successor did “Brushstrokes Across Cultures/ Number Three.” It allowed some new bi-communal relationships to develop and it helped us to launch a much wider initiative of bi-communal programming sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, the Binational Fulbright Commission, and the UNHCR.

I believe that these early efforts led to the different world we see today in Cyprus. In the absence of a political resolution the people of Cyprus have decided they will not remain divided and now there is a steady flow of Turkish and Greek across to both sides of the island. The officials on both sides had to accept the free movement of people across the Green zone in order to maintain the possibility of a political resolution at some point in time. Turkish Cypriots now have the freedom to have their children picked up in the Green zone to attend schools on the Greek side—and Greeks regularly cross over to do their shopping or to visit the gorgeous port of Kyrenia with all its excellent restaurants. Bringing Greeks and Turks together on the island was quite revolutionary when we started these bi-communal programs, so I like to think that we contributed to the current lifestyle that both communities enjoy. The Binational Fulbright Commission now has a building in the Green zone right next to the Ledra Palace, called the Fulbright House, which allows them to host bi-communal events.

Q: Could you use the hotel on the Green Line to have receptions or anything like-?

WAHBA: Yes, For Fulbright we did—at the Ledra Palace as dumpy as it —we had no other choice. When we sponsored the “Brush Strokes Across Cultures,” I actually had a reception at my home after the opening of the exhibit and this was the first time Greek and Turkish Cypriots had ever interacted socially in a private home on the island. Pretty soon we became a middleman because the Greek Cypriots who wanted to talk to their newly found Turkish Cypriot friends would come to the American Center to use our

phone line and the Turkish Cypriots did the same by using the Embassy office located on their side to contact their Greek colleagues.

The UNHCR started promoting bi-communal events and making good use of the funds that they received for Cyprus, which was originally for refugee settlement caused by the 1973 Turkish invasion. They held all their events at the Ledra Palace focusing on training and conflict resolution programs.

We, USIS and Fulbright, recruited conflict resolution experts from the U.S to work with carefully selected “influencers” from the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities to promote a reconciliation without denying the narratives each side had about the conflict. They tackled tough issues such as properties and homes that were left behind, the question of the “missing”, primarily of Greek Cypriots, from the period of fighting during the invasion. This issue of the “missing” was kept alive for decades and was almost like a religious cult on the Greek Cypriot side. There were a lot of psychological scars on both sides, the Turkish Cypriots remembered massacres in certain villages; the Greek Cypriots held keys and documents for homes they had to abandon especially in some of the northern villages like Famagusta. The conflict resolution sessions became quite emotional at times with many participants expressing anger and often breaking down in tears. They were remarkable exercises that allowed a new generation to see one another as humans and not only as enemies.

Here we are, twenty plus years later, and in spite of no political solution the island may be divided geographically but the people of Cyprus are no longer divided.

Turkish and Greek Cypriot Politics

Q: Did you deal with the Greek-American community back home?

WAHBA: Not that much. I mean obviously we received congressional queries now and then. The Greek American community stayed engaged on Cyprus and lobbied Congress to promote an agreement. Of course the Greek Cypriots were very, very active in the boycott of the Turkish Cypriot north. The commercial side of the boycott was quite aggressive. For example, if an American company established an office or signed on with an agent on the Turkish side, the Greek Cypriots would immediately threaten to cancel the company’s license for doing business in the south which was of course a much larger, more lucrative market. It was one of the strategies the Greek Cypriots believed would help force the Turkish Cypriots to accept an agreement on their terms. But of course with 30,000 Turkish troops in the north and economic support from Turkey, that did not happen. Rauf Denktaş, the Turkish Cypriot President, was a true nationalist and a very tough negotiator. I saw him negotiate his way out of a number of UN initiatives where the UN thought they were finally getting close to an agreement but Denktaş held out and would not capitulate. He did not trust the Greeks or the Americans for that matter.

Q: Well, did you carry on sort of other USIA activities such as dealing with the press and all on both sides in the same way? I mean did you try to be even handed and all that?

WAHBA: We did on both sides but obviously the press work on the Greek side was much more active. Cyprus is the only country I have ever served in that had a noon briefing every day, led by the Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He conducted a press briefing every day, and ninety percent of the time it was focused on the Cyprus problem. There was a 24/7 obsession with the issue on the Greek side!

Q: Was anything happening on it?

WAHBA: Well, the UN led negotiations were ongoing and always a lot of speculation on what the UN special envoy said and what the U.S. said. We had a couple of Special Envoys for Cyprus during my assignment including Richard Holbrooke for a very short stint. I found Greek Cypriot domestic politics very interesting. We had the only remaining Communist Party in Europe, AKEL [Progressive Party of Working People], alive and well in Cyprus, which was very active politically and economically. Then you had the more conservative centrist DISY [Democratic Rally] and the more conservative, right wing DIKO [Democratic Party] Party. The domestic politics on the Greek Cypriot side were intense with three very competitive parties that almost equally shared the electorate's support so a lot of jockeying on every issue and every election. On the Turkish Cypriot side, it also was a dynamic political environment but a lot more of it was connected to mainland Turkish politics.

We tried to be even handed in terms of USIS programming on both sides of the island. Visiting American speakers held seminars on both sides but obviously to smaller audiences on the Turkish Cypriot side. That said, we kept up a very active profile and I brought on the first USIS local staff hire to work on the Turkish Cypriot side and she's still there I believe. With bi-communal programming we revved up the pace on both sides but tried not to upset the Greeks, as they carefully monitored our activity level on the Turkish side.

Q: Yes. How about the Turkish troops? Did you have—I mean were they much, outside of protecting the Turkish Cypriots were they much of a factor in your work at all?

WAHBA: No. They kept a very low profile—as much as possible—although you'd see them sometimes in the markets of old Nicosia. Some of the Turkish Cypriots resented the heavy presence of the Turkish troops, not because they felt repressed by their presence, but they felt the numbers were overwhelming. They also feared that too many of the mainland Turks, who came from the conservative interior provinces of Turkey, settled permanently in the villages and homes vacated by the Greeks. There was some friction between the Turkish Cypriots and the mainland Turks, primarily over religiosity and cultural differences in lifestyle. Many of the Turkish Cypriot academics and journalists also worried because the mainland Turks were given instant citizenship and therefore allowed to vote in Cypriot elections. The Turkish Cypriots in many ways, culturally and

socially, were much closer to the Greek Cypriots than they were to the mainland Turks that came in large numbers to settle the north.

Q: How about women on the Turkish side? How were they treated?

WAHBA: The Turkish Cypriot women were really no different than their Greek Cypriot counterparts. Where you saw differences were in the mainland Turks. Those were usually wearing the hijab, at least head covering, not the niqab to cover their face; you could tell a Turkish Cypriot woman from a mainland Turk primarily by the way they dress. The Turkish Cypriot women were very European looking, usually good English speakers and rarely covered their heads.

Q: Were the mainland Turks trying to enforce their religious views?

WAHBA: No, not really because the government, the Turkish Cypriot government, was very secular and their leaders were all Turkish Cypriots. None of them were mainland figures. There was never a government attempt to impose a more conservative Islamic lifestyle, at least not during our time. With Recep Erdoğan in power in Turkey, this may be changing.

Q: Did we have an American library or reading rooms or the equivalent on the Turkish side?

WAHBA: No, we didn't have an American center. The Embassy rented a villa that housed the offices of all our local FSNs, plus an office for the ambassador, a conference room for meetings for use by Embassy officers. For a brief time the Ambassador had a rented house on the north side for representational events; not sure if they still have that. We did not have a separate place for USIS academic and cultural programs.

Q: Was there any attempt to do so or—?

WAHBA: We tried to rent a space to do more public programming, but it was considered too sensitive at the time because the Greek Cypriots would see it as an expansion of our presence in the north. When we held programs on the Turkish side, we used public spaces like galleries and cultural centers so we weren't limited by what we could do there as we had plenty of willing co-sponsors. For example, a gallery owner renovated the interior of an old church, actually a Greek Orthodox church, into a large gallery space. It was a beautiful environment and we held a lot of our programs there. She was always willing to co-host events with us.

Q: Did you get involved in the ambassadors and their dealings? You had two ambassadors, didn't you? How did they operate?

WAHBA: I remember more clearly the three years I worked with Richard Boucher. He operated very, very well on both sides and had access to everybody. I went to a lot of the meetings on the Turkish side with Richard Boucher. I was his acting DCM [Deputy Chief

of Mission] for several months, so I attended a lot of the meetings that focused on the “Cyprus problem” or promoted a new UN initiative as there were many. Generally, all ambassadors were allowed pretty much free access on both sides. And of course, there was a lot of commercial work on the Greek Cypriot side because American companies did very well in Cyprus—on the south side of the island, not on the north.

Q: British presence, how was that?

WAHBA: Very strong. We worked very closely with the Brits. After the Americans, the British were probably the largest mission and of course they knew the country well—probably far better than we did. They had the British air base in Akrotiri and a large number of British citizens who were either permanent residents or frequent visitors to the island. There were Brits who bought houses in places like Kyrenia or Bellepais and stayed on in the north after the separation of the island. They could fly in and out only through Istanbul. Of course, accredited diplomats were never allowed to do so. We could not fly from the Turkish side to Turkey because that would be a recognition of the north as a country. So anytime we wanted to go to Turkey to visit Istanbul, for example, we had to fly from the Greek side to Athens and then connect to Istanbul. From the Turkish Cypriot north, you could fly to Istanbul for half the cost and half the time.

The Brits were very active on both sides of the island. Some villages on the Greek side were heavily populated by British expats who were long-term residents, with beautifully renovated old stone village houses. Cyprus has a very attractive geography. Some of the villages on the hill sides are just gorgeous. The coastline also is very beautiful in the south and even more so in the north because it hasn't been overdeveloped. Cyprus is a very popular destination for tourism especially for Europeans and people from the Middle East—many of whom owned homes mostly in the south, on the Greek Cypriot side. During the civil war in Lebanon, many of the Lebanese moved to Cyprus and they bought properties in Limassol, one of the cities on the coast, with beautiful beaches. In those days you could buy apartments or villas that were quite reasonably priced and have a very safe lifestyle while being less than an hour's flight from Beirut.

Q: For speakers, though, or programs did you have to be careful about what kinds you got there or was it just sort of reach into the pool and grab what's available?

WAHBA: There were no topics that were off limits for us. And we did a lot of focusing on issues that supported U.S. policy. Given the commercial interests, protection of intellectual property for example was an important topic because they had a lot of piracy on both sides of the island. I personally, with the ambassador's strong support, decided to focus my programming on topics that would bring the Greeks and Turks together as a contribution to the top priority for the USG—finding a resolution to the Cyprus problem. Whenever we identified a topic that I knew would be of interest to both sides then I would program the speaker at the Ledra Palace as a way to bring both sides to interact. Our whole focus during my time was how to use our programs to promote bi-communal communication and cooperation.

Q: How did you find social life there?

WAHBA: Very, very friendly. Both my husband and I really enjoyed Cyprus a lot. We had great friends on the Turkish side; we had very good friends on the Greek side. As a matter of fact we went back to Cyprus, a few years ago, for the first time since we left. And we stayed with some friends on the Greek side and then we went to the Turkish side and we were shocked at how easy it was to move back and forth. We re-connected with a number of our friends from the Turkish side over a dinner hosted by one of our FSNs at her home. It was great to see so many close friends on both sides that we stayed in touch with over so many years.

Q: Did you get any feel for why the Greek Cypriots, there was a plebiscite, wasn't there, on—and they rejected—?

WAHBA: Yes. this was quite recent, I don't know, a couple of years ago or so. Unfortunately, the Cypriots have never been very lucky. When they had a very hardline leader not willing to compromise on the Turkish side, like Raouf Denктаş, they had a moderate on the Greek side, Glafcos Clerides. Denктаş and Clerides knew each other before the island was divided and had so much in common—maybe too much of it. They even liked the same traditional Cypriot dishes. The UN Representative would bring them together for meetings over fancy, gourmet dinners where both enjoyed their scotch in great quantities according to the readouts. But when it came to consensus on the details of a political agreement—they couldn't do it.

What happened more recently after the UN prepared a draft agreement, the Turkish side had a liberal leftist government willing to lead to accept an agreement even if it meant they would have to push back a bit on Ankara. They held a referendum on the draft agreement which passed! On the Greek Cypriot side, they had a conservative right-wing President from the DIKO Party and there the referendum unfortunately failed. Greek Cypriots usually vote strictly along political party affiliation. I think what happened is that DIKO rejected the draft agreement and therefore it was no surprise that the referendum failed on the Greek side.

Nowadays, for all practical purposes for the Cypriot people, the island is no longer divided. You see Greek Cypriots crossing in the evening to go to the gambling casinos in Kyrenia! Famagusta's still sitting there as a reminder of the horrors of that period, a deserted city with its decaying old buildings, surrounded by a barbed wire fence. I think there's still a desire at some point to reunite the island, but I don't see that happening any time soon.

Q: Well, after four years there where'd you go?

WAHBA: After four years in Cyprus, I went to Jordan in 1995.

Q: You were in Jordan for how long?

WAHBA: Four years.

Q: Four years again?

WAHBA: Yes. I like four-year stints. You really get to know a country very well and you become more effective as a diplomat.

Q: Were you a PAO there?

WAHBA: I was the Public Affairs Counselor in Jordan, yes.

Q: When you arrived in '95, what was the situation?

Jordan's Tribal Politics & Regional Challenges

WAHBA: My time in Jordan coincided with King Hussein's last four years of his reign as he died in February 1999. It was a good time to be in Jordan to witness the many changes and the closer ties with the U.S. We had a very substantive USAID program to support many of the multilateral peace projects and to promote commercial ties between Israel and Jordan. I think the AID program was a big shot in the arm because we focused on the private sector and entrepreneurship and small and micro businesses which are the primary drivers of the Jordanian economy. Jordanians are well-educated and entrepreneurial; their human resources are really their biggest asset. They are very smart, very well-educated people.

Domestic politics in Jordan are very interesting because of the East Bank- West Bank divide—given that more than fifty percent of the population are originally Palestinian. Palestinians who were given citizenship—many dating back from the creation of the state of Israel in 1948—as well as from subsequent wars and upheavals. Most people focus on Jordan's relationships with its neighbors—like Iraq and Israel—but at the embassy we kept a close eye on their domestic politics which is the key factor to monitor for Jordan's stability. Jordan is truly a mix of ethnic and religious groups; one of their foreign ministers described it as a mosaic society reflecting King Hussein's policies of inclusiveness. It's the only Arab country that I know that appointed a Christian foreign minister—an East Banker—i.e. not of Palestinian origin. Jordan is also the only Arab country that gave citizenship to the Palestinian refugees it absorbed after several wars and one of the few countries that allows them to work and provides them with access to free education. Even though for the more recent refugees it is not full citizenship, they provide them with passports. Palestinian Jordanians didn't have to travel with a UN laissez-passer.

Jordan is a country that absorbed not only Palestinian refugees since 1948, but more recently Iraqis who fled the Saddam Hussein regime and also Syrians even more recently. At the time we were there, the Palestinian Jordanian community was a very

well-established community. People discussed the question of whether any of them would opt to return to Palestine if there's ever a peace settlement between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The conventional wisdom was that 90 percent of them would never leave Jordan. They had become Jordanians in the full sense of the word. They were successful in the business sector and in politics. Taher Al Masri for example who served as prime minister, was a Palestinian-Jordanian. So for the most part Jordanian-Palestinians were well-integrated within Jordanian society.

Q: Even after Black September and all that?

WAHBA: Yes. This is why I think King Hussein was such an incredible leader, that after all the difficult times with the Palestinians, as in the Black September timeframe, here was a country where Palestinian-Jordanians could reach the highest positions of authority in the country. By then of course they had become second or third generation Palestinian Jordanians but in many other Arab countries they would still be considered outsiders and not entrusted with official positions. In most countries in the Middle East the idea of an immigrant becoming a citizen and then rising to the highest positions of authority is not exactly an easy example to find anywhere you look. So that's why I'm saying I think Jordan is one of the few places where you could see that and a lot of it was due to King Hussein, who was really quite a remarkable leader.

I was still in Amman when King Hussein changed the succession from his brother, Prince Hassan, who was then the crown prince, to his son Abdullah who was head of Jordan's Special Forces. Our ambassador was Bill Burns and I was the acting DCM when after his return from cancer treatment in the U.S. King Hussein made that incredible announcement removing his brother from the position of Crown Prince and naming his son Abdullah in his place. King Hussein died of a very aggressive form of non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

Q: Well, let's talk about what you were doing during your assignment in Jordan

WAHBA: In Jordan, we had a full-fledged USIA public affairs program with a strong budget to support the growing U.S.-Jordanian relationship. We also had the benefits of the USAID program and USIS could often piggyback on a lot of the AID projects to do more with civil society and academic institutions. We had a very large exchange program that allowed us to send many Jordanians to the U.S. We also had a pretty active Fulbright program.

During this time—and in reaction to the Jordan-Israel peace treaty—the Islamic Action Front (Muslim Brotherhood of Jordan) became more active socially and politically. They were at the forefront of championing what they called the anti-normalization campaign against any contacts with Israelis. Jordanians who interacted with Israelis or visited Israel were publicly blacklisted by this group and often publicly shamed in the media. Of course, at the time, there were a lot of resources through USAID and other donors that tried to promote commercial ties between Jordanians and Israelis. That's when we established the QIZ, the Qualified Industrial Zones, to promote manufacturing projects on

the border between the two countries. The QIZ projects brought together Israeli and Jordanian investors, or third-party investors, to establish small factories that would employ Jordanians. So it was a way of promoting closer economic ties while helping to solve Jordan's high unemployment. While many Jordanians benefited, there was a lot of pushback against these projects by the more Islamic/conservative Jordanians.

Q: Did it turn violent or—?

WAHBA: It didn't turn violent, but it became an issue politically for King Hussein to manage because the Jordanians were also trying to open up political participation and members of the Islamic Action Front [IAF] won quite a number of seats in parliament. Therefore, they now had a platform to voice their opposition to many issues regarding the Jordan-Israel relationship, but they remained loyal to the King as the majority of IAF are East Bankers, the King's tribal constituency. Some of them are Palestinian-Jordanians but the majority were East Bankers and therefore from King Hussein's power base.

The Jordanian security services are very powerful with a very wide network and kept close tabs on all domestic activists and politicians. There were some issues here and there, some violent demonstrations but none of it rising to the level to be a serious threat to the regime.

Q: Well, did your office try to do anything to work with the Muslim Brotherhood? You know, to bring them to understand our position or not or—?

WAHBA: We didn't reach out to them specifically as a target audience, but we also didn't cut them out of our programs because many were professionals who normally participated in our public events and exchange programs. The political section of course made an effort to reach out to members of the Islamic Action Front who were members of parliament and in coordination with USIS some were selected to participate in exchange programs. The IAF focus was primarily domestic social issues and far less on foreign policy issues or the relationship with the United States and that was primarily in keeping with their allegiance to the King. None of them called for regime change. They called for changes in the system of education, for more political participation but they were not calling for regime change.

Q: Well now, were you at all cooperating with our USIA operations in Israel?

WAHBA: You mean between our embassy and the embassy in Israel?

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: Oh, on some things, because there were a lot of jointly funded projects in those days, like on water issues for example. There was a series of multilateral projects promoting cooperation between Jordanians, Israelis and other Arabs, Palestinians, Egyptians, North Africans to work on some of these issues, from water to environment and other scientific topics. Many of these working groups remained active over many

years if not decades. Once the bilateral Jordan-Israel working groups were established the embassy could step back and let them take the lead. On the larger, regional working groups, the U.S. remained an active participant with the Europeans pretty much in the lead. The Jordanians were quite receptive to these programs; there were always a number of Jordanians willing to participate. I think Jordanian participation was always more dependable and in higher numbers than from the Egyptians, or Palestinians in many of these multilateral working groups.

Q: How about Iraq? Did that impact on your work at all?

WAHBA: Oh yes. There was a very large Iraqi community in Jordan as a result of the war to liberate Kuwait, but many Iraqis had already migrated to Jordan to escape the Saddam regime prior to his invasion of Kuwait. I remember the Jordanian Music Conservatory was heavily staffed with Iraqis who had been there for many years. When we would bring the occasional American musician to work with the Conservatoire, most of our interlocutors were Iraqis. All the senior professors of music and art in Jordanian universities were Iraqis. Many had moved to Jordan permanently and had become legal residents. Another example of how the Jordanians took people in and allowed them to serve in senior positions in their universities and their businesses. The cultural, intellectual community in Jordan was predominantly Iraqi and Palestinian. They were way ahead of the East Bank Jordanians when it came to well-educated writers, artists and musicians.

Q: What was your Fulbright program like?

WAHBA: It was not as large as the one in Cyprus with a five million dollar annual budget but it was large, and we had a full time American Fulbright director. He reported to a very active Fulbright board with the Crown Prince as honorary Chairman. It was a very successful program. American Fulbrighters liked coming to Jordan because they were allowed to do social and political research or teach at the national universities. Jordan was considered a more open environment for American researchers than other Arab countries where governments were far more restrictive on research topics.

Q: Did you get an impression of Jordanian education?

WAHBA: Yes. It was actually fairly decent. Their schools and universities produced good graduates because we received strong candidates applying for Fulbright grants.

Death of King Hussein & Transition to King Abdullah

Q: What was the feeling at the embassy when King Hussein died?

WAHBA: Oh my goodness. What a historic time this was. When he came back from his cancer treatment in the U.S., it was clear that he was dying when he arrived at the airport

with Queen Noor, looking very weak. He had made the huge effort, in spite of his weakened state, to attend the Camp David meetings that Clinton was hosting with the Israelis and Palestinians at the time. When he arrived in Amman, he got off the plane and bent down and kissed the ground. It was such a strong, powerful moment especially for Jordanians who were glued to their television sets and went out in the streets to line up from the airport to his home. From that moment on to the night he died there was a twenty-four-hour vigil outside of his palace. Jordanians of all stripes went there every night and waited, praying for him in huge crowds. Queen Noor often came out to speak quietly to the many Jordanians who stood outside to honor him. I remember on the last night, just before he died, Queen Noor came out and walked through the crowd, thanking them all for their vigil, for their support. And it was one of the rare times that you saw Jordanians publicly embracing Queen Noor in a way they had not done in all the years she had been queen. She became a heroine overnight for being his caretaker during his fight against cancer.

Then the day of the funeral was just one of those amazing events to witness. They drove the hearse through the city where literally hundreds of thousands of Jordanians lined the streets to pay their respects. It was a rainy, grey day; it was just a very sad day. We had four presidents attending the state funeral. Bill Clinton and Hillary both came; and the former presidents that attended were George H. Bush, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter.

So we had four current and former presidents and it was the largest delegation ever to attend an event in the Middle East.

Q: Did the Israelis send a delegation?

WAHBA: Yes. Benjamin Netanyahu was the prime minister and he attended so did almost every foreign head of state. I'll never forget that day. We all went to the airport to welcome Bill Clinton as well as the three former presidents. It was just an incredible recognition of the importance of King Hussein on the global stage although Jordan is a small country.

Bill and Hillary came to the embassy after the official funeral and had a private session with the embassy's staff and families. George W. Bush and Carter attended and spoke to the American community. I remember Bill Clinton had a terrible cold and had lost his voice. He couldn't speak and Hillary read the speech on his behalf. She was great, very articulate, as always. The whole event was a very moving experience.

Many of us had known King Abdullah, before he became king, in a whole different light. He was seen as a young playboy and very much the military man in charge of the Jordanian Special Operations branch. He also was well-known by many at the Embassy as a devoted Star Trek fan! One of my American Cultural section staffers had started a Star Trek fan club in Jordan and we soon realized Abdullah had joined the online club with a pseudonym. He actually joined one of the club's social events—in person—before he became king. We never expected he would one day be King Abdullah.

Crown Prince Hassan was quite active not only on the official side but also on the academic and conference circuit in Jordan and the region. But Crown Prince Hassan never had a strong public following in Jordan. He had no ability to connect with the man on the street, unlike King Hussein. King Hussein was a very sophisticated world leader but when he spoke to his people in Arabic—and in a very tribal manner—he had an immediate connection with Jordanians from all walks of life. Crown Prince Hassan spoke English with an elite, clipped British accent. When he spoke in public in Arabic it was in very formal classical standard Arabic that did not serve him well with the Jordanian tribal or urban population. The CP [Crown Prince] established a prominent think tank—The Arab Thought Forum—which hosted many regional events. He had a highly respected public persona outside of being the crown prince in waiting. His wife, a Pakistani by origin, was not popular in the royal court or in the public arena. There was a lot of negative palace gossip in the days during King Hussein’s cancer treatment in the U.S. and when he returned to Jordan. CP Hassan’s wife was seen as someone who was too ambitious, and the gossip making the rounds in Amman was that she was busy measuring the curtains in the palace while King Hussein was undergoing chemotherapy.

Q: I heard about the curtains here.

WAHBA: Did you? I guess it was a story widely covered in the media. That tells you how bad it was. Everybody was shocked by the succession change but there also was a sense of relief that King Hussein had made that decision very much at the last moment. Abdullah was taken by surprise that he had become a king overnight and his young wife Rania, was now the queen.

Meeting with King Abdullah

Soon after King Hussein’s funeral was over, Abdullah invited me to meet with him one-on-one. I had met him earlier, on several occasions, as the PAO and when I was acting DCM. I went to the Palace and I had tea with him. He wanted my thinking on how best to connect with the Western press and asked advice on the first steps he should take to establish good relations with the international media. Should he invite all of them informally for an off the record chat? Should it be more formal as a press conference? His father had had a great reputation with the Western press, of course, because he met with them on a regular basis and got to know them very well over the years. So, here was Abdullah who had never nurtured any kind of relationships with the Western press realizing he had some work to do. In addition to being responsible for the military’s special ops branch, he was very much the playboy around town, participating in motorcycle races and not at all being groomed as a future King. So overnight he had new challenges.

Q: What did you tell him?

WAHBA: I told him that given he didn’t know many of the western media reps very well, he should have a “get acquainted” off the record session. It was a good time to

launch that relationship as so many were in town, of course, right after the funeral. I also suggested that he begin to hold a series of small roundtable discussions with four or five at a time, so they could have a real conversation and get a better sense of who he is and his vision for Jordan after the long rule of King Hussein. And I think he did that. Abdullah's first few years were rocky on the domestic front—in connecting with Jordanian tribes. Abdullah's spoken Arabic was never good. He had a British mother and he was educated outside of Jordan. When he spoke Arabic, it was with a heavy foreign accent. I think a lot of work was done during his first year on the throne training him to read and speak Arabic. I think he's doing much better now. I heard him speak publicly in Arabic recently and he sounded good.

Q: When you left there, how did you feel about Jordanian/Israeli relations? Did you think it was going anywhere or what?

WAHBA: Jordanian/Israeli relations, and I think again due to King Hussein and his long relationships with many senior Israelis on the quiet, were always much stronger than one would expect. Jordanians knew and understood Israelis given their closer proximity and long relationship with the Hashemites. I felt the difference after Cairo where the Egyptians had no understanding or appreciation of Israeli culture or the fact that Israelis come in all colors and stripes with varying attitudes towards the Arabs and Palestinians. The Jordanians knew the Israelis much better and they interacted with them on a human level whereas most Egyptians had never interacted directly with Israelis so there was a strong level of suspicion towards any Israeli. Egyptians saw Israelis through the lens of being the main enemy for many years. In Jordan it was much more nuanced because Palestinian Jordanians crossed over all the time to visit family. So I felt that the Israeli-Jordanian relationship was actually on a relatively strong track.

Q: Well, had the first part of the Gulf war when Jordan basically did not sign up against Saddam—had that left a real scar in our relationship or had that passed over?

WAHBA: That had passed over by then because after the peace treaty with Israel there was a stronger basis for improved ties with Jordan. Some in Congress did not forget the slight of siding with Saddam but nevertheless for most policymakers we had turned a new page with Jordan. Many understood Jordan's vulnerability and the threat posed by Iraq under Saddam Hussein and therefore were sympathetic to the King's decision not to support the American-led coalition.

Q: Well, I mean—.

WAHBA: If King Hussein had gone against Saddam Hussein it would have been terrible for him and for Jordan.

Q: Well, I mean I've talked to our ambassador who was there at that time and how he was fighting rear guard actions from keeping the operators back in Washington and was saying get to do this sort of. I mean the—.

WAHBA: Yes. There was a lot of vindictiveness from different sources.

Q: Anybody who knows the area knows exactly, I mean, King Hussein lived in a very rough area and—.

WAHBA: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, the Jordanian economy depended largely on trade with Iraq and the floods of Iraqi refugees coming into Jordan was a huge task for the Jordanians to deal with. The last thing they needed was to go against Saddam Hussein.

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: But there were a lot of people who didn't forget that. It was the role King Hussein played in convincing even the strongest naysayers in Washington that it was time to turn a new page. His role at the Wye River peace negotiations was very much appreciated during the Clinton administration.

Q: How did you find your work headquarters in Washington, USIA? Did you feel they interfered, gave good support?

WAHBA: I always had great support from USIA and the NEA Area office. I have nothing bad to say about USIA. We got great support from the area offices when we needed programs, people, budgets, their attention span was always there. And I served with great ambassadors in Jordan. The first couple of years it was Wes Egan; we had an excellent and close relationship. I'd worked with Wes when he was in Cairo as DCM. He was followed in Amman by Bill Burns; we also enjoyed a great relationship.

The front office of the embassy also appreciated USIS for what we were doing in support of U.S. policies in Jordan. Both Wes Egan and Bill Burns understood how effective information and cultural programs can be in promoting our policy interests in any country. And I always made sure we made that connection between USIA programs and policy objectives, so I never had problems with ambassadors because we didn't do cultural programs just for the sake of a cultural activity. It was always an investment towards building relationships with key people or promoting a better understanding of U.S. policies that were important for the embassy and the overall bilateral relationship. We always tried to use USIA's programs in a way that allowed the Embassy to expand its reach within the host country's non-governmental community and institutions.

Exchange programs and the speakers' program and the cultural programs all built unto one another to create first of all a set of relationships that we could call on and make good use of and also to promote the understanding of key USG priorities. Every embassy of course had a country plan and certain priorities that were the key priorities of the day whether economic or political. So, I always made sure to connect our public diplomacy programs to those priorities.

USIA was a very supportive agency. They were field oriented because, unlike the State Department, their whole focus was overseas and not in Washington. Once we became consolidated with the State Department, public diplomacy programming lost that strong overseas focus. The State Department has a role in Washington as the foreign policy engine and is very much part of the foreign policy decision making process for any administration. USIA existed to support the field. That's the huge difference.

Q: Yes, I know. Yes.

WAHBA: When USIA was merged into the State Department, regional bureaus were not as attentive to press and cultural programs in the field because they were focused on the Hill, on the administration, on the NSC [National Security Council], on coordinating with the White House. USIA's traditional programs became a low priority.

Q: I think it was a terrible mistake but there it is.

Okay, where'd you go next?

WAHBA: Cairo. Again.

Q: Okay. Well, I think we'll stop at this point.

Promoting Democracy in Egypt

Q: Today is the 18th of June 2015. This is the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. And I'm here with Marcelle.

Marcelle Wahba. Okay, we've left Jordan and you're on your way to Cairo. What year is this and what was your job in Cairo?

WAHBA: The year was 1999 and I went to Cairo as the Counselor for press and cultural affairs. This was during the merger of USIA into the State Department.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

WAHBA: Dan Kurtzer was the ambassador in Cairo when I arrived. And it was the first time I worked with Dan. It was his first ambassadorial assignment; he served as ambassador to Israel after Cairo.

Q: Well, how would you describe the situation when you arrived in Egypt, political, economic?

WAHBA: Well, Egypt by 1999 was economically doing well compared to the first time I served in Cairo, which was eleven years earlier. The economy was chugging along at a fairly decent rate; I think about five percent growth at the time. The private sector,

compared to the Sadat era, was now a key player in the country's economy. Mubarak was re-elected for his fourth six-year term in October 1999.

The embassy was still very large as well as the USAID mission. Dan Kurtzer launched one of the most interesting reorganization of an embassy structure from all the other missions I had served in. Instead of the traditional country team meeting with agency and section heads around the table, he organized the whole embassy around thematic working groups which was a very smart way to do it. So we had many working groups; the democracy working group, for example, included people from public diplomacy, from the political section and from USAID. It was a brilliant way to integrate the huge USAID mission into the embassy's policy working groups and also to make sure that what was happening on the development side and on the public diplomacy side and on the policy side were all working together in concert. I learned a lot from that kind of integrated approach. It made sense especially for Embassy Cairo because it was such a huge mission and therefore you had good representation in all the working groups. The other thing Kurtzer did which maybe was not so unusual was to combine the economic and political section and called it "ECPO" led by one senior officer, Richard LeBaron, who later on went on to be the ambassador to Kuwait. It was a very strong embassy. It also was a very well-run embassy, very well-organized, very well-managed.

Q: What did you see as your major challenges in your job?

WAHBA: Within the public diplomacy section we focused on supporting civil society and NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] in Egypt. We worked very closely with AID because they had the money and we had the contacts! I was the chairperson of the Embassy's democracy working group that included political officers who covered human rights issues and political opposition parties and so on. The group also included USAID officers who ran AID's many "democracy" building projects. I defined my role as the person within that embassy team that would focus on the civil society-NGO-democracy portfolio. Obviously, the press portfolio is always a big one in Egypt and that continued to be a very active component, both in Cairo and in Alexandria. The cultural component of public diplomacy had diminished somewhat during USIA's last days. I don't remember doing too many cultural activities, nothing compared to what we did in the late '80s. So, I devoted my time primarily to civil society, democracy and press work and being part of a very active country team.

Q: Well, how does one go about promoting democracy in Egypt?

WAHBA: A very good question. We identified activists at the grassroots level and that, in my view, was more successful than going with big NGOs because they often became targets for the Egyptian government when they received foreign funding. Although all the money that was spent in Egypt under USAID was approved by the Egyptian government, they still harassed organizations that received large grants. So, we identified people that demonstrated they were "agents of change," individuals or small groups; people who were dynamic within their communities, who were doing interesting work, who were doing it in a cooperative, community-based way without a high-profile activist political

agenda. We gave them small grants to carry out projects within their communities or grants to travel to the United States for training or professional development with American counterparts.

We also did a lot with USAID's education portfolio which was huge. In those days we still had what we called English language officers within the public diplomacy team and I had a very talented officer, his name was Richard Boyum. He had developed very strong relationships within the ministry of education where he became a trusted advisor to senior managers. They gave him a lot of space in which to work without requiring constant bureaucratic approvals. We managed to get a decent sized grant from USAID for the public diplomacy section to oversee education programs focused on training teachers and education ministry inspectors. Egypt's education system—from K-to-12—is the most critical portfolio, if this country's ever going to make it.

Q: Well, I mean, they're basically extremely talented people.

WAHBA: Yes, but their system of education is very traditional, based on studying by rote and not on critical thinking. The numbers in classrooms and schools are overwhelming so kids are graduating without the necessary skills for employment. They're really under-skilled and their higher education is not based on market needs. There were a lot of initiatives within USAID-Egypt trying to align the education system with the country's economic needs and also to just upgrade the proficiency of the teachers, the inspectors of the ministry of education and so on. In Egypt the one factor that completely stymied all of the assistance programs, whether American or Canadian or European, was the fact that the numbers are overwhelming, so the challenges are overwhelming. Even when every project you undertake is successful, it's merely a drop in the bucket. It's not significant enough for you to see a change on the national level. We could see changes at a school level, within a certain department in the ministry of education, but at the national level we never felt that our contribution and the investment in terms of American taxpayers' money, really made a visible change. We built a lot of schools in Egypt, but infrastructure doesn't necessarily lead to a better educated population.

Q: In a way, is there any hope to do anything given what resources the Egyptians are going to throw at the problem—?

WAHBA: I think the solutions are being tackled better right now. There are many Egyptians who are making a difference in their own small circles. There are a lot of private sector entrepreneurs who have taken on some interesting educational initiatives like supporting startups for kids who are good at IT to encourage entrepreneurial skills and so on. There are a lot of initiatives like that that are making a difference in small communities at the private level.

I think that significant reform in the public sector will have to take place for Egypt's education portfolio or many of the other portfolios to become effective. The government is wary of any reform that will result in large unemployment numbers that even the

current president, who supposedly has ninety-nine percent popularity (Abdel Fattah Al Sisi), has to tread very carefully. After the 2011 revolution, people are still dissatisfied with what they're getting in terms of educational, health, infrastructure services, and so on. At this point in time, while major economic and financial reforms have taken place, the impact has not trickled down and the political climate is extremely repressive. I'm not very optimistic about the near future prospects for stability in Egypt.

The Moslem Brotherhood & Mubarak Regime

Q: What about the Muslim Brotherhood or the fundamentalist sector? How did you deal with that?

WAHBA: Well, at the time I was there, the Muslim Brotherhood were still primarily a very effective social, religious organization with a wide network throughout the country. They supported candidates to run for parliamentary seats as "independents" because under the Egyptian constitution, religious parties are not allowed to participate. Therefore, they ran as independents and once they got into the parliament they acted as a bloc of Islamists. They made some significant progress in getting into the parliament when I was there. They were vocal but they worked within the system. At that point there was no effort by the Muslim Brothers to delegitimize or challenge the government. Once in parliament they used their access to serve their constituency and to expand their social and economic network, which is what the Muslim Brotherhood focused on in Egypt for many decades. They had a stated policy not to challenge the government head-on while they continued to make progress on the social and economic fronts throughout the country. And they have succeeded in being the dominant force in the informal, non-governmental social, religious and economic structure. Of course, they now face a huge setback in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution but in the late 1990s, early 2000 they were very much integrated in the fabric of the society.

Q: Did our American policies run afoul of the conservatives in any way?

WAHBA: No. This was of course during George W. Bush and there was a big push on democracy issues which did not sit well with the government. There was a negative reaction from Mubarak's government. But a lot of the civil society people were very pleased with the new focus on democratization because they felt that finally the Americans were pushing Mubarak to do more, to give them more space, to allow them to develop some institutions and NGOs, human rights organizations, and so on. The government was careful to allow some political space but then there were clear red lines for activists and NGOs. American democracy initiatives were often blasted by the conservatives in government because they felt it was interference in Egypt's domestic affairs. The political liberals and more secular opposition were comfortable with our policies at the time because it supported their agenda to gain broader political participation.

The relationship with Mubarak by then was more on autopilot within Washington's bureaucracy. We'd been working with Mubarak for a long time and even though our administrations changed there was a set of "inherited" positions on Egypt that passed from one administration to another on how to deal with Mubarak.

Mubarak, a very wily politician in my view, knew how to handle the Americans very well. His mantra to the USG was always "stability in Egypt" above all else; we've opened up, we have a private sector; we're also opening up on the political side, slowly and carefully but we still have a highly illiterate population; and he always emphasized the threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood. His message was basically, if you push me too hard to democratize, what you'll get is the Muslim Brotherhood taking over in Egypt and beyond. Of course, in retrospect that threat turned out to be more accurate than many of us believed at the time. Because yes, when you move too quickly to elections in Egypt—as we saw them do after the 2011 revolution—the more organized social and economic infrastructure of the Brotherhood [MB] is the only fully functioning institution outside of the government. No other political/secular party was ever allowed to truly develop throughout the nation, but the MB accomplished that through their religious/social network without having to establish themselves as a formal political party. When there's that kind of a vacuum it is understandable that only the Ikhwan (MB) were in a position to gain power and influence after the coup against Mubarak.

The Anti-Semitic Press & the Ambassador

Q: How did you deal with the fact that our ambassador was Jewish and was in a kibbutz? I mean that had to prove to be a challenge.

WAHBA: Well, it was a big challenge for Dan's first year because he got a lot of horrific publicity in the very anti-Semitic press in Egypt. They got wind of the fact that he was having the kitchen in the Ambassador's Residence revamped into a kosher kitchen and that it was going to cost the U.S. Government quite a hefty sum. The Egyptian press latched on to that story, questioning why so much money was being spent just to have an American Jewish ambassador serve in Egypt. In the early phase of his assignment, Kurtzer had an uphill struggle especially on the social front. He was not very widely accepted among the circles of Egyptian political and social elites. Egyptians were reacting to what they felt was a negative signal from the USG for assigning a Jewish Ambassador to Egypt, who in their view was not a seasoned diplomat, as this was his first chief of mission assignment.

However, by the time Dan Kurtzer left Cairo he was probably the second most popular American ambassador to have ever served in Egypt, the first being Frank G. Wisner who left a legacy that to this today is unparalleled. Wisner is widely remembered, respected and loved by Egyptians. Dan Kurtzer became so well-liked and respected that by the time he was making his round of farewell calls, we could see how he was held in high regard by Egyptian officials and political elites. While he never connected with the 'man on the

street' like Frank G. Wisner did, many Egyptians felt he had improved the bilateral relationship to new levels of cooperation.

Q: Well, did you find that this was a major job of yours, to get him known when you arrived?

WAHBA: Yes, of course, especially with the press. And we took some very effective initiatives because I had the past experience of serving in Egypt and understood the press environment well. I told Dan that the only way to respond to the Egyptian proclivity to suspect newcomers was to disarm them by making the effort to interact with a wide variety of influential people in different sectors of the society. Although personal interaction takes a lot of time and effort it is the only way to gain trust especially when you focus on small numbers of key people at a time. Once you get the approval and the trust of a few well-known and respected personalities in the society, their opinion influences larger circles because in Egypt the social/political elites are very much interconnected.

On the press side we made a big effort to give the key Op-ed writers and editors private time with Dan Kurtzer. We held a bimonthly event for coffee at the ambassador's residence with no more than five senior editors or op-ed writers for an off the record conversation. This was very effective because it gave them time to hear his views about American policy positions and to express their views in a very open, give and take atmosphere. We held these small roundtables quite often and it worked well in providing Dan Kurtzer a better sense of how Egyptians perceive our policy positions and it gave them a better sense of how thoughtful and committed he was to improve ties between Egypt and the USA.

The other ways that helped Dan and his wonderful wife, Sheila, was a series of cultural salon evenings they hosted featuring American visitors like playwrights, authors, business CEOs, or big names from the sports world. These evenings were extremely well-attended, and the invitations were much sought after because they combined a lecture/discussion period with a sit-down dinner. These special evenings helped the Kurtzers to successfully break into the social fabric of Egypt which was very much interwoven among political, economic, cultural and private sector elites. Dan and Sheila Kurtzer, I think, did a great job of not only excelling at the official level but also of navigating effectively through the influential circles of Egyptian society, which very few ambassadors did as well, with the exception of Frank Wisner, as I said earlier. And I think that entrée into society allows an Ambassador to do a lot more than he/she could ever do just at the official, political level.

Q: What was the general feeling about Mubarak's government at that time when you were there?

WAHBA: Well, there really was no alternative to Mubarak. His re-election campaigns were one-man shows. His token effort for political reform was to allow an occasional candidate to run against him but they were non-entities who had no chance of winning

anything. These were simply cosmetic steps to keep the Americans and the Europeans at bay but not a serious effort to open up political participation in Egypt.

The cracks started to show in the Mubarak regime when we began to see the rising profile of his son Gamal who quickly became a key figure in the National Democratic Party. Gamal took over the private sector portfolio and became the point man between them and the government. Many Egyptians took this to mean that Mubarak was grooming his son to be his successor. The concept of father to son succession was highly unpopular in Egypt and therefore Gamal's rising public role created a lot of tension. Many admired Gamal because he was smart, articulate and a dynamic personality. However, the tide was against him because he was the son and as many Egyptians told me "we don't do successions here." I believe this period was the beginning of serious cracks in the Mubarak regime because it showed a growing schism on the future of the country.

The issue of corruption also added to the regime's rising unpopularity. Gamal had a lot of people around him who were considered very corrupt and this was new because Mubarak himself had always been seen as a 'clean' ruler. The growth of a greedy private sector dominated by a small circle of businessmen linked to the government became increasingly unpopular with the Egyptian public. The smell of corruption in Egypt had reached a level where it was becoming a potential factor of instability of the regime. Embassy country teams spent time deliberating the country's stability and Mubarak's longevity scenarios. Every time we went through this exercise, we found that as long as he had the backing of the military and control over the security apparatus there was little chance of a successful revolt against the regime. The Egyptian public is a very tolerant public—dating back to pharaonic times. They absorb a lot of pain and difficult times without going out to demonstrate or die in the streets. So, at the time few of us imagined what eventually happened in 2011, but it was certainly building up.

Q: Yes. Well, were other European powers playing the same role you were or was it—I mean were we pretty much the principle activist?

WAHBA: We were the principle activists for sure but of course the Brits always had a very strong presence in Egypt and appointed senior ambassadors. The EU [European Union] as well had established good relations with the Egyptian government and sponsored several important initiatives. The European Union had a robust assistance program and spent a lot of money in Egypt. But certainly, the American role was the most prominent role, and we were Egypt's largest donor with our large economic and military assistance.

Q: Well, what was the role of the American University in Cairo during this tour for you as you saw it?

WAHBA: AUC is considered an Egyptian-American institution and a highly regarded one. Every family that wanted their kids to have a Western style education and could afford the tuition would select AUC. The university also had a generous scholarship program for students with high academic credentials, but they had many more applicants

than they could absorb. AUC began to expand during this period and started planning for their new campus which allowed them to double their enrollment and classroom capacity. By then there were many other private American-style colleges popping up but a number of them were for-profit organizations. Also, the number of private high schools proliferated in Egypt. Again, people who had the money could send their kids to private English schools or French language schools, but the costs were prohibitive for most Egyptians. When I was growing up in Cairo, most middle-class families enrolled their children in private English, French or German schools. So, in many ways they were trying to revive the tradition of private language schools in Egypt, but at this point it was very much the purview of the elite and not the middle class.

Religious Tensions

Q: Were there terrorist problems when you were there this time? You know, attacks on tourists, no-go places, that sort of thing?

WAHBA: By 1999, Egypt had gone through a very difficult time with large terrorist incidents, targeting tourists primarily, but also against Christian/Copts and government officials. One of the worst attacks took place in the Hatshepsut temple in Luxor where around sixty tourists and a few Egyptians were killed in 1997. As a result of that major attack, which destroyed the tourism industry for a least a year, the terrorist groups were marginalized, and the security apparatus became more effective in infiltrating violent Islamist groups.

Travel to Upper Egypt by car or by bus became increasingly difficult and not recommended for tourists without security escorts. All the tourist buses were accompanied by a security police car in the front and one in the back as in a motorcade. The cruise line business grew and had become the main way to see upper Egypt and to visit most of the temples along the Nile. The Mubarak regime had, by 1999, successfully managed to quell the Islamic Jihad and the violent groups. The regime tolerated the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ikhwan, because they did not use violence and did not directly challenge or threaten the regime. So that period was actually relatively quiet when I went back in 1999 until I left in June 2001. This time around I only served two years in Cairo because in Spring 2001, I was selected by the D committee to be the candidate for Chief of Mission in Abu Dhabi.

Q: Well, what about Christians in Egypt—during your second tour?

WAHBA: The Coptic Pope was the same—Pope Shenouda. By then he had become less active or visible because of his age but he was very pro-government and was supported by Mubarak and the Al Azhar institution leadership. The Coptic church grew significantly during his time with Bishops appointed in the U.S., Europe, Australia and South America. In Egypt, the Coptic community continued to face many of the same challenges they had faced for decades, from getting the authorities to approve Church

renovations to gaining senior positions in government. In government, Copts were often given a token Cabinet position usually as the Minister of Immigration, which was clearly the wrong message. They were rarely given positions of great responsibility. There are a few exceptions, Boutros Boutros-Ghali before becoming the UN Secretary General, had served for a long time as Egypt's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. This was probably the highest position filled by a Copt in Egypt. Later on another member of that family, also named Boutros Ghali, served as the Minister of Finance in 2004.

In terms of violence against Christians, there continued to be problems, mostly in Upper Egypt. There were many incidents in Upper Egypt of violence between Muslims and Christians often over commercial or private disagreements. The feeling within the Christian community was that the Egyptian government did not take serious action against Muslim. So, there were always more deaths on the Christian side than on the Muslim side. The problem with the religious strife within the communities in Upper Egypt is that a lot of it was based on long-held family vendettas not solely on religious tensions. Often these differences would flare up and become a sectarian issue but oftentimes the underlying conflicts were over property or over mixed marriages. Of course, the Copts in Upper Egypt are a significant presence although still an overall minority. There are many small towns and villages where the population is predominantly Christian.

Q: Was there—I mean you were in Egypt in the time when Communications was exploding all over with phones and internet and all that. Was that hitting Egypt much and making any change or not?

WAHBA: I think the mobile phone industry had a huge impact, much more than the internet. The internet in the cities was strong at universities, not so much at people's homes yet. But the mobile phones were really what changed the communication environment in Egypt because they were widely prevalent in the countryside. The other thing that changed was the proliferation of satellites and satellite television stations; they became available throughout the Egyptian countryside. Every village café or market had a big satellite television blaring with groups of people congregating around it!

In the main street of the village, you would see a large satellite dish; many people would contribute to purchasing it and they would all be there in the evening watching satellite stations like Al Jazeera out of Qatar, and popular stations out of Lebanon and Syria. The Egyptian television stations were definitely facing competition because viewers now had many choices.

I think the mobile phone was the most dramatic change given Egypt's limited telecommunication network for land lines. Mobile phones were relatively cheap and often shared by farmers many of whom are illiterate. It was amazing how that changed the countryside where you had small farmers now capable of participating in village commerce and communicating with friends and family outside the village. It connected them to the outside world.

My husband and I owned a mud brick house in a village called Tunis, which was outside of the city of Fayoum. During my first assignment in Cairo a friend of mine had recommended buying a small plot of land on Lake Karoun, which is one of the most ancient and beautiful lakes in Egypt. So, we actually bought just under an acre of land and built a house there. When we went back on my second assignment, we used it a lot on the weekends; it was a great escape from crowds and the pollution of Cairo. We saw firsthand the impact of new technologies on the countryside through spending time in this small village. Everyone had a cell phone, and many had one of those small satellite dishes! The Egyptian countryside was definitely changing.

Egypt and its Neighbors

Q: Was there any movement on the Israeli side? I mean, anything in Egyptian-Israeli relations?

WAHBA: Things were chugging along as usual; never warm, but a very pragmatic relationship I think is the best way to describe it. There was no love lost between the Egyptians and the Israelis on a number of issues. But there was a great deal at stake in keeping the peace. So, whether in the Sinai or in diplomatic relations, I would describe the relationship as very businesslike. They shared strong ties on the intelligence side.

Q: Because they really were on the same side there, weren't they? I mean the fundamentalists were considered a problem, weren't they, by both?

WAHBA: I don't think the Egyptians saw a partnership with the Israelis as a way to contain their domestic Islamists. The partnership was focused on controlling the radicalization of the Palestinians. They cooperated closely in terms of how they dealt with Gaza, the control of the borders between Egypt and Gaza. There was a lot of Israeli-Egyptian coordination on that. This close cooperation was not publicly popular in Egypt, because the Egyptian public felt that the Palestinians in Gaza were trapped by the Israelis with support from the Egyptian government. Any time there was a bombing of Gaza—an outbreak of violence between Hamas and the Israelis, the Egyptians would shut down the border. The flow of Palestinians who were coming into Egypt for school or for medical reasons was immediately cutoff. Mubarak came in for a lot of criticism in Egypt, particularly by Egyptian Islamists, leftists and secular opposition activists but he never caved in to Egyptian popular sentiment on this issue. That's really where we saw an effective Egyptian-Israeli alliance, was on how to deal with the radicalization of the Palestinians in Gaza.

Q: How did Iraq play? I mean, you know, for you and the embassy? Did we get involved in trying to explain or deal with it or observe or what?

WAHBA: Well, at that time Iraq wasn't on our radar screen. Saddam Hussein was still in power. He had his wings clipped after the liberation of Kuwait and was pretty much isolated. The impact of events in Iraq was felt much more in Jordan than it was in Egypt.

When I served in Jordan we saw directly, for example, the impact of sanctions against Iraq; Iraqis exited to the rest of the world through Jordan and many stayed permanently in Amman. So, there was much more pressure on Jordan because of the situation in Iraq. In Egypt you had a good sense of regional issues given their role at the Arab League but as many people would remind us *Masr Om El Donya*, meaning Egypt is the Mother of the World. Given its size, its central role in the region and its sense of cultural and historical roots dating back to the pharaonic civilization, Egypt is unique, and Egyptians never lose sight of that.

Q: Did Jordan have much influence in Egypt or not?

WAHBA: I think certainly again because of their convergence of interests on the Palestinian issue. The Jordanian-Egyptian-Israeli circle of cooperation against Palestinian radicalization especially in Gaza was very important so they had those issues in common. But this was a testing time for Abdullah, King Abdullah of Jordan, when he succeeded King Hussein. The relationship between Egypt and Jordan has always been even keeled except for the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwaiti when King Hussein was denounced pretty much by all the leaders in the Arab world for not participating in the coalition against Saddam Hussein.

Q: Was Egypt sort of either a or the leader in the Arab world, the Arab League and all that?

WAHBA: Yes, it was still very much their heyday because they had come back to the Arab League after being excommunicated after signing the peace treaty with Israel. So, Egypt was very much back in the center of Arab politics. The Arab League had returned to Cairo after it's "exile" in Tunis . The Egyptians were very active and supportive of our effort to negotiate a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Egyptian role at this time was very critical and their head of intelligence, Omar Suleiman, played an important role in the negotiations and assisting in bringing the Palestinians to the table and moderating the Palestinian position. The Egyptians helped with our negotiating efforts that led to the Camp David Summit of 2000 with President Clinton playing the key role trying to bridge the gap between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat. Unfortunately, they failed to come to an agreement although I think we got very close. After the collapse of the Camp David talks, the Egyptians hosted the Taba Summit in January of 2001 where talks continued on the basis of the Clinton Parameters. Again, the parties came close to an agreement but then we saw the end of that cycle of negotiations when the Likud party won the Israeli election in February 2001 and Ariel Sharon became the Prime Minister of Israel.

On the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Egyptians were certainly a much bigger player than Saudi Arabia or any of the Gulf countries that have now, in the present day, become bigger players. They were not at the time; Egypt was still very much the key Arab partner for the U.S.

USIA's Merger with State

Q: Well, speaking about powers and influence and all, what about the big one? Within the embassy how would you describe sort of the cooperation and opposition movements within the embassy on various things?

WAHBA: As I said earlier, I found the embassy a very well-run operation; it was a very harmonious team under Dan Kurtzer's able leadership. So, I enjoyed working in the Cairo Mission very much. The big issue for me was managing USIA's consolidation with the State Department. I spent a lot of time on that with the Admin Counselor and other sections of the Embassy.

Q: Well, could you talk about that? This was USIA being merged into State?

WAHBA: Yes, USIA being merged into the State Department in Washington and in the field at all the Embassies worldwide. It was really a major change because you had a USIA component of the embassy that had its own budget, its own administrative, financial and HR [Human Resources] staff, its own drivers and cars, down to the nitty gritty stuff including furniture etc.

Q: Including dinnerware?

WAHBA: Of course, including dinnerware and housing. The USIA homes were much more flexible in terms of size because assignments depended not only on family size but also on an officer's responsibilities for representational events. So if you were a press officer and you did not have any kids, but you had to do a lot of entertaining events with the press you got a bigger home than other officers who had a larger family. It was a very different way of looking at housing needs than the State Department. I must say I was very fortunate that during the consolidation we had a very good embassy, a very good admin counselor and obviously a good ambassador who understood the importance of public diplomacy. So unlike other embassies where maybe they curtailed too much of USIA's staffing, we managed, for example, because we administered some USAID, to keep one senior FSN for admin work. Whereas, in most public diplomacy sections in other embassies, they gutted USIS's admin section completely to integrate it within the State Department.

It was a major negotiation between the admin section of the embassy and the public diplomacy section. There were a lot of things that had to change. For example, the drivers had to be incorporated into the GSO system. Several American positions also were cut from the public diplomacy section. For example, USIS had executive officer positions filled by American FSOs and those positions were removed. These officers joined the State Department Admin cone and were no longer exclusively assigned to USIS. So major, major, major changes. The entire public diplomacy budget was moved into the administrative section and so as the counselor for press and cultural affairs you no longer had direct control of your budget. You had to go through the admin section of the embassy for everything from purchasing supplies to conducting a program.

In my view, there were some positive things that came out of the merger because public diplomacy became more integrated into our embassies and certainly in Washington. But I think the things that we lost as a government, in the longer term, were more than what was gained. The losses were more in terms of cultural and educational programs that for the department of state were deemed less important than the press function. While many of the educational programs were congressionally mandated and they survived at the same funding level, the cultural programs that included the arts, sports and so on lost a lot of their funding after the merger.

Q: I agree, but there we are.

WAHBA: Yes. But that took a lot of time. I mean the number of meetings were non-stop. I remember I had files that went up the kazoo on the merger and it was a very time-consuming process for every embassy. But at the Cairo embassy being as large as it was, it was an even longer and more complex process.

Q: What about relations with Washington?

WAHBA: Well, that was the biggest change of course because traditionally the public affairs counselor in Cairo, in addition to reporting directly to the ambassador, also reported to the NEA Area Office Director in Washington's USIA headquarters. So that changed of course once we were integrated into the Department of State. I think many of USIA's Washington staff found themselves without significant roles after the merger and of course many positions were eliminated. For example, only one desk officer in the Department's NEA bureau was now assigned to do public affairs but no representation within the regional bureaus for the rest of the public diplomacy programs. The academic, cultural and exchange programs were consolidated into two new bureaus: the I Bureau [Information] and the ECA bureau [Educational and Cultural Affairs].

The regional bureaus did not have direct access to the many public diplomacy resources or the authority to allocate those resources as they wished within their own region. Of course, the regional bureaus had influence on how the resources were allocated and can compete with other bureaus by going directly to the U/S [Under Secretary of State] of Public Diplomacy but I believe the centralization changed the nature of public diplomacy programming at the field level. This centralization also weakened the head of the Public Diplomacy Section at the Embassy level because we no longer had the support and access to our resources at the regional bureau level but had to compete with all other embassies directly with the I and ECA bureaus. I felt in my last year in Cairo under the new regime, that the public diplomacy section had a vacuum in Washington because unlike the Pol or Econ sections, we did not have a PD desk officer within the regional bureaus to support our needs in the field.

We didn't have a point of contact to say I'm facing specific issues in Egypt and I want more funding to do X, Y and Z. We used to get that kind of direct support from Washington for public diplomacy initiatives when there was a USIA. At the Embassy

level oftentimes you had ambassadors or DCMs who did not prioritize public diplomacy and therefore PD sections faced cutbacks in many areas controlled by a centralized budget that required approval of Admin officers for everything from representational expenditures, transportation costs, to housing assignments. Public diplomacy, given its mandate of building relationships with non-governmental contacts, requires a different spending pattern than that of ECON or POL sections. For example, to properly administer grants to NGOs we had to travel more often outside of Cairo, and we had to conduct more seminars, workshops and representational events.

I think, quite frankly, USIA and public diplomacy by definition, is a different culture from the State Department. The purpose of public diplomacy is engaging with the “public” not sensitive government-to-government business. There were significant differences in perspective, in how we interacted with the host nation, how we reported back to Washington on public opinion and cultural trends. I used to draft classified public opinion analysis cables back to USIA based on trends that I identified from interacting widely with opinion leaders and influencers. Under USIA cables, and as head of Agency, I didn’t have to clear it with anybody but out of courtesy I often did with the DCM or even the Ambassador if it touched on sensitive issues. After consolidation it became more of a challenge to draft these cables because oftentimes the political section would feel I was encroaching on their turf and the bureaucratic wrangling over clearances made it not worth the effort. I think we lost some valuable insights and different perspectives that reflected the views of non-official contacts.

Egypt’s Domestic Challenges

Q: The year you left— in 2001—where did you see Egypt going?

WAHBA: I was not optimistic about Egypt’s future by the time I left. I felt that Egypt had become a repressive police state run by a small circle of corrupt leaders. I was very angry to see that and maybe my reaction was more emotional than that of my embassy colleagues because of my roots and connections to Egypt. I felt the country was being run by a bunch of thugs and thieves and corruption was endemic. The blatant violations of human rights by the security services were widespread and at all levels. During this second tour is when Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim was arrested and jailed for a long period. He was an American-Egyptian, very prominent academic, highly respected political scientist at the American University in Cairo, who had graduated from some of the best universities in the United States. He was considered to be close to the Mubarak leadership and specifically to Suzanne Mubarak who had been one of his graduate students. So, here was a prominent American Egyptian, married to an American academic who worked for the Ford Foundation so you could argue both of them were very much part of the political elite in Egypt. He was certainly not a radical or an Islamic activist or anything that the government could possibly consider a threat. So why arrest and jail him?

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: I remember Ambassador Dan Kurtzer and I were attending the July Fourth community event at the Cairo-American College in Maadi when I got a call from a journalist asking me for a comment on the arrest of Dr. Saad Eldin Ibrahim. I couldn't believe I heard him correctly and asked him if he was sure of the name. He assured me it was Saad Eddin Ibrahim and he was calling me because he was aware of Saad being a dual citizen. I knew Saad and his wife Barbara quite well, so this was very unwelcome news. I quickly found Ambassador Kurtzer and informed him that Saad had been arrested at his home at 3:00 in the morning. The security police had bashed in the front door, picked him up and took all of his computers and files. This was really the sign that there was no longer even a pretense of rule of law in Egypt and the political leadership could basically do anything with impunity. We spent the following year advocating for his release at every opportunity and the Egyptians never blinked. Dan Kurtzer raised the issue so many times with Mubarak, but we never got an explanation or any kind of response. We tried to appeal to them to release him on humanitarian grounds until his case went to trial given that he was a diabetic and needed access to medical care. They did not release him, and it took over a year before he was tried on trumped up charges.

Q: What was the charge?

WAHBA: All nonsense. Saad ran an NGO called The Ibn Khaldun Center and it was an academic/social research center where a lot of young university graduates worked on civil society and democracy building projects. The Ibn Khaldun Center received grants from the European Union and others that had to be vetted and approved by the Egyptian government. Some of the projects included training and educational programs on parliamentary elections from how to fill out a voting ballot to how to run a campaign for parliament. Saad did a lot of work and research on radical Islamists and had written extensively on strategies to re-educate jailed terrorists so they could re-enter society as productive citizens. All this work of course had to be not only approved but was well-monitored by the Government of Egypt [GOE]. Saad published a number of articles and papers on this area of research and they were well-received by academics and the official media interviewed him repeatedly on his work.

It was therefore quite a surprise to learn that they charged him with receiving funds from foreign governments which undermined the stability of the Egyptian government! His lawyers produced all the necessary documentation to prove all the grants had been approved by the GOE and the European Union mission in Cairo put out a public statement that all the grants to the Ibn Khaldun Center had been approved by the government of Egypt. Included in the charges was a claim that his center had forged electoral ballots which of course was nonsense because they knew that those mock ballots were part of the training program funded by the EU.

There was a lot of debate and gossip about why he was really arrested many believed that he had somehow gotten on the wrong side of Suzanne Mubarak or he said some things that neither Suzanne nor Hosni Mubarak liked and approved of; that he got under their skin and it was very personal. We never learned the truth, but I assume Saad knew. In the

end he was found guilty and spent years in jail while his appeal went through the system and then he was found innocent. Shortly after leaving prison, they re-arrested him under another pretext, and he ended up spending more time in jail.

It was, in my view, proof that it was now a country out of control. It was a country likely to implode at some point in the near future given the mass corruption and brutal repression.

Q: Do you think Mubarak was running it or—?

WAHBA: He was very much running it with free reign to a very powerful intelligence and security apparatus. Mubarak did not try to put a brake on their excesses which was his mistake. At this point the military was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of a Gamal Mubarak succession because he was never respected inside military circles. There were probably some differences between Mubarak and the military on the succession question, but they did not get involved in civil society issues like the arrest of Saad El Din Ibrahim.

Q: Did you have any impression of Mubarak's son?

WAHBA: Oh yes, he was quite active in the American portfolio. Gamal was a smart guy, very presentable and very articulate. He handled the economic portfolio by heading the policy committee of the ruling National Democratic Party. He didn't have much charisma or presence by Egyptian standards. He didn't have much appeal to the man on the street as a politician and he kept a fairly reserved public profile given the sensitivity of the succession issue. I think many in our administration liked him. He was often invited to Washington for meetings within the senior officials and on the Hill. This did not sit well with a lot of Egyptians who felt that the U.S. Government was anointing him as successor by giving him a lot more recognition than his formal position required. Many Egyptians believed that the Americans were actively promoting Gamal to take over and this infuriated a lot of people.

Q: Well, did you sense a weakening in the American-Egyptian ties with the populace during this period?

WAHBA: Public opinion towards the American Government was never very good in Egypt. American culture, American society, American people were very much liked and admired. American tourists are warmly welcomed in Egypt but not our policies in the region especially on Palestine. American policies were not welcomed, they were not liked and in fact angered most Egyptians. Plus, they felt that America was too involved in Egypt's domestic affairs.

Q: Well, we spent huge amounts of aid though.

WAHBA: Spending huge amounts but even our economic assistance was questioned by many who argued that much of the assistance was spent on American equipment and American consultants and not on Egyptians.

Q: American contractors?

WAHBA: Yes, contractors, equipment, etc. The general perception was that the U.S. benefited from Egypt and the amount of U.S. assistance money was peanuts compared to the services Egypt provided the United States. What are the services that Egypt provides the United States? I would often ask because it was such an infuriating argument. The response was that Egypt's peace treaty with Israel served U.S. interests and that is why the USG allows Mubarak to rule with an iron fist. There was always a long litany of justifications why the U.S. was providing financial assistance to Egypt. Egyptian society can be very emotional and irrational when it comes to its sense of worth and dignity. I think there is always a sense of shame or humiliation at having to receive assistance and therefore a resistance to accepting it graciously.

Q: A strong sense of sovereignty and national identity—after all, Egypt and Persia are the two-major civilizations—

WAHBA: Yes. And I think that goes a long way to explaining the sensitivities to the role played by a large external power such as the U.S. There's a sense in Egypt today that it's weakened and that its economy plus many other challenges are overwhelming. That brings on a reaction that the foreigners are dictating your policies and domestic environment. For example after the 2011 revolution and the election of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood many in Egypt believed that the U.S. supported the Muslim Brotherhood and did so because it wanted to keep Egypt divided and weak. That is really in a nutshell Egyptian public opinion at the street level today towards the United States. It's very hard to shake that level of suspicion.

Q: Well, the U.S. has low approval ratings with Iran, we've got that with China as well.

WAHBA: Yes, but Egypt is a country where we've been actively engaged with good bilateral relations for the last thirty years.

Q: Yes, yes, I know. Well, one last item; you want to talk about as you left how you saw the role of women?

WAHBA: Women have always played a very active role in Egypt. I have to compare Egypt today to the Egypt that I grew up in, and it's become a much more conservative society in every way. The majority of Egyptian Muslim women today cover their heads and that is a remarkable change from the 60s or 70s. When I was growing up in Cairo, urban women followed European fashion. Of course many do today as well but they are an increasingly small minority and mostly seen in private clubs and gatherings.

Socially and politically, Egyptian women have always played a large role in public life. You have prominent women activists like Hoda Shaarawi, who founded the Egyptian Feminist Union. The Egyptian Revolution of 1917 included many women in leadership roles who called for Egypt's independence from Britain. In more modern times, Egyptian women hold ministerial positions, run banks, hospitals etc. They are active in all sectors of public life. That is not to say that they do not face challenges and discrimination; Egypt remains a very traditional conservative society. The social conservatism we see today was influenced by the many Egyptians who worked in the Arab Gulf countries in the 70s and 80s and brought back a different lifestyle that was really quite new to Egypt.

Q: Yes?

WAHBA: It is very much a Gulf Arab lifestyle. They prefer segregated family gatherings, where the women stay in one part of the home and the men in another. They want their daughters to wear headscarves as soon as they start primary school. Some call on universities to segregate classes which has yet to happen. This was a whole new lifestyle. Egyptians had never lived that way, even in the poor farmer villages of the countryside, women worked the land with their husbands and sons. This more conservative trend started quite a while ago, but it's become mainstream.

Q: Okay. Well, just looking at time this is probably a good place to stop.

WAHBA: Oh yes, absolutely.

Q: And we'll pick this up the next time—when you're off to the UAE.

WAHBA: Okay.

The Appointment & Confirmation Process

Q: Today is the 9th of July 2015, with Marcelle Wahba. And Marcelle, we're picking up today, you're assigned to the UAE as ambassador.

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: Well, then, we come to your next assignment. How did that come about?

WAHBA: Well, that was largely an outcome of the consolidation—the positive side! As a USIA officer I probably would not have had the opportunity to serve as a Chief of Mission. Beth Jones was the NEA Assistant Secretary at the time. We had met and communicated on and off during my Cairo assignment but also when I was acting DCM in Jordan under Ambassador Bill Burns.

An anecdote here about one of the challenges after consolidation: In our public diplomacy offices, we were no longer allowed to keep classified computers although

under USIA. We had one room restricted to American officers and storage of classified documents. That changed and now to read classified material, we had to go to another building, to access a common-user classified communications room that required navigating through many rooms and floors to get to the common user-classified PC. That meant I didn't go very often; I went like once a week, sometimes every other week.

I discovered an email from Beth Jones that was two weeks old saying she wanted to put my name on the NEA list for chief of mission assignments. Of course, I was stunned, and I responded right away hoping I was not too late to make it on the list. Quite frankly, I didn't think my chances were very high and assumed NEA was trying to put a "balanced" list of candidates for consideration by the D Committee. I didn't think I was being considered seriously and I was not told that I was the NEA choice, which would have been a stronger endorsement.

At the time, the under secretary for public affairs was Evelyn Lieberman and she had visited Cairo as the first undersecretary for public diplomacy after consolidation. I handled her visit to Egypt, and I know she was very impressed with the program in Cairo. We got along well and built a good rapport in a short period of time. As Under Secretary, she is, of course, on the D committee. At the time, I didn't think anything of the email exchange with Beth Jones. That summer, my husband and I were vacationing in Italy when I got a call from someone in HR informing me that they were about to add my name for COM on two countries for the D committee to consider. I was asked to confirm that I would be willing to serve in either Qatar or the UAE. I told the gentleman that I would discuss it with my husband and get back to him. Derek and I talked about it and we believed for him to hopefully find employment opportunities Qatar is too small and although we didn't know very much about the UAE, it sounded more interesting. I called back the HR person and told him that I did not want to be on the list for Qatar, only for the UAE. I remember his surprised reaction when he asked me if I was absolutely sure I didn't want to be on both lists. I think he was nonplussed because most people would probably like to be on as many lists as possible but being a USIA officer I was not aware of the "normal" protocol. I felt that if Abu Dhabi came through, it would be great, but I doubted very much that would happen.

I didn't hear back for a long time and when I mentioned that to Dan Kurtzer, he advised me to reach out to the under secretary for public diplomacy to let her know I was interested in Abu Dhabi and ask for her support. I sent an email to Evelyn Lieberman, but I never received a response from her. I learned from the grapevine that NEA had a number one candidate for the UAE mission, and it was not me. So, I didn't really think I had much of a chance and so it was a very big surprise when I got the call informing me that I had been selected by the D committee for Abu Dhabi. I found out much later that Evelyn Lieberman had strongly argued my case during the D Committee deliberation because she had to push back against NEA. And NEA being the powerful bureau that it is, not too many people would have succeeded. But she did, so I got Abu Dhabi and left my Cairo assignment a year early. We moved back to Washington in June 2001 to get ready for my assignment to the UAE.

Q: And we'll talk a little more about getting ready and what the issues are and all that. When did you go to the UAE?

WAHBA: Three weeks after 9/11!

Q: Okay. Well, we'll talk about 9/11. But first, how did you start getting ready for a COM assignment?

WAHBA: Well. I had never been to any country in the Gulf for work or personal travel. So I talked to people that served in the Gulf during my home leave and I read a lot about the region. I started the long and torturous clearance process, well before I left Egypt, filling out the many forms and security clearance documents that went to the White House. The White House clearance was a long and very slow process. It basically took a year from the summer of 2000 to summer 2001 when I finally got announced. I had a part of the last year in Cairo to get prepared for the transition and to look into the private sector environment in the UAE so that Derek could begin to look into job opportunities. I communicated a lot with my predecessor in Abu Dhabi, Ambassador Ted Kattouf, and I learned a lot from him about the Embassy and the working environment in Abu Dhabi. I also started reading Embassy Abu Dhabi cables on a regular basis during that last year in Cairo. I made that long hike up to the communications floor much more often to read the classified cables out of Abu Dhabi and out of other Gulf embassies.

Q: Alright. So how did 9/11 impact your confirmation process?

WAHBA: It is now June 2001 when I was getting ready to come back to Washington to prepare for my assignment as Chief of Mission to the United Arab Emirates. My husband and I arrived in Washington after spending home leave with my family in California. By now my Dad had passed away but my mother lived in Sacramento as well as my brother who had recently had a baby boy named Michael Brandon Wahba. The first grandchild in the family.

I was back at the State Department in mid-August to start my consultations. In early September we both attended the two-week orientation seminar for new Ambassadors and their spouses. We were starting the second week of the course when the attacks of 9/11 happened. We were at the State Department and we were in the middle of the morning session. One of the participants had gone to the restroom and came back very agitated. He told the class that there was something serious going on because people were clustered around a television screen in the hallway. He asked our seminar coordinator to turn on the television who refused because we needed to stay on schedule! After some unhappy comments the television was turned on only a few minutes before an alarm went off and we were asked to evacuate the building immediately. We were informed that the Pentagon had been hit and other government buildings were being evacuated.

Q: Because there was a rumor that a bomb had gone off by the State Department?

WAHBA: Yes, there was a sense of panic. I think everybody remembers where they were and what they were doing that morning of 9/11. And the image that always stays in my mind is the rush of people leaving the State Department with a high sense of fear at not knowing what was happening. Derek and I were staying at temporary housing on Virginia Avenue not far from the department in a second-floor apartment. We went to the balcony and we could see hundreds of people scattering out of the Department, walking and in cars, trying to get to a safe place. Everybody was in a state of fear and anxiety. Cell phones didn't work due to an overload of networks and it was hard to check on family and friends. It was a terrible, terrifying day.

In any case, 9/11 accelerated and changed everything. The three or four ambassadors who were going to NEA countries were pulled out of the orientation course; me, Ron Newman, who was going to Bahrain, and Bob Jordan, who was going to Saudi Arabia. The State Department accelerated our paperwork and the Senate confirmation process. We had a very quick hearing; I think we had the shortest Senate confirmation hearing in history. They hardly asked us two questions. While we were at the Senate for our hearings there was a bomb scare and the Senate building had to be evacuated. So that whole period of getting ready to go to the UAE for me was intertwined with the terrible days and weeks after 9/11.

Q: Well, when you were getting ready, before this thing hit, I mean just give an idea, what do you do as potential ambassador going to an area—obviously you were familiar with this part of the Arab world. But what did you do and what was the situation?

WAHBA: Sure. The normal consultation period prior to any assignment when you make the rounds of all the offices at State and other government agencies to get briefed on the specific country, was truncated in the aftermath of 9/11. I had never served in the Gulf and while I had a good grasp of most regional issues, the Arab Gulf states are quite different from the rest of the Middle East. It's very different than Egypt or the Levant in terms of the society, the culture, the politics, demographics. So, I had planned on extensive consultations to learn about the UAE and to learn about the region in general. Obviously when you've served extensively in the Middle East you know what is going on throughout the region but that focus, that orientation to a specific sub-region and then to a specific country is very, very important, especially for an ambassador who is going out to lead a U.S. mission.

I managed to get some critical meetings scheduled before leaving for Abu Dhabi. I went down to CENTCOM, met with General Franks, met with a number of officers at the Pentagon, the CIA, FBI, Treasury, and of course throughout the State Department on issues that were specific to the UAE and also the broader issues specific to the region. After 9/11, many of these issues became that much more intense, so if I had had a chance for a longer consultation in Washington, I would have probably spent a lot more time at Treasury looking at issues of concern like money laundering. A lot of the issues that became key priorities after 9/11 involved the Gulf Arab countries with a lot of focus on the UAE as it is the financial and transportation hub of the region.

Q: And particularly the UAE was punching way above its weight. I mean, for a very small population, a lot of money and also it was much more active.

WAHBA: I think because primarily Dubai was a critical transportation and financial hub in the Gulf, so a lot of Al Qaeda's movement of people and money went through Dubai. Dubai is a big financial center with extensive transportation links between South Asia, the Gulf and Europe. Therefore, Dubai became a center for our attention in the post 9/11 period more so than Abu Dhabi. UAE did have two hijackers out of the 15, so it was quite a wake-up call for them as well. I think for the UAE that came as a big surprise—that two of their nationals would be part of the fifteen—because the two were well-educated and came from fairly comfortable families so they did not fit the stereotype profile of Al Qaeda.

Q: Basically where they would have come from.

WAHBA: Yes. It was a surprise to them because they were not marginalized young men, they were not uneducated, they were not from poverty level homes. They were well-off, middle class, upper middle-class young men.

Q: Well, had Al Qaeda been a subject that you were particularly familiar with or not prior to 9/11?

WAHBA: Well, I think for all of us who served in the Middle East, we were aware of Al Qaeda, of course, and we were aware of the role of Osama bin Laden and his influential media presence and voice on social media in that part of the world. And of course, his exploits in Afghanistan were well-known in the region and many young Arabs looked up to Osama bin Laden with admiration for what he had done in Afghanistan leading the revolt against the Russians. Osama bin Laden presented, I would say, a charismatic and attractive image of a revolutionary for many young people in the Arab world.

So yes, we were certainly aware of Osama bin Laden and very much aware of Al Qaeda but of course after 9/11 all of us learned a lot more about how the organization was structured and functioned with its broad network of supporters throughout the region.

Q: What was your impression of the UAE embassy here? I assume you went there and chatted with them.

WAHBA: I didn't really have time, because we were pulled out of the normal process of preparing for a Chief of Mission assignment. I did not even have time to visit him at the embassy. The only time I met Ambassador Al Asri Al Dhaheri was at my swearing-in ceremony which he attended. Normally I would have called on him at his Embassy and had a chance to get a thorough briefing from him. But everything had to be so accelerated and he was very understanding; I don't think he took offense at all. Everybody knew that we were in a unique situation. He came to the swearing in and we had a chance to chat a little bit.

Secretary Colin Powell swore me in, which was great. I had met him several times and I was thrilled he agreed to swear me in at an incredibly busy time for him. My family managed to travel to Washington DC from the west coast to attend the swearing-in at a time when there were very few domestic flights. My mother, my brother Wagdi and his one-year-old son, Michael, came from Sacramento, my sister Irene and her husband Riad from Vancouver BC as well as my cousin Jimmy. My sister-in-law Marina Fischer from New York attended along with the families of her daughter Lara and her son Karim. So, it was a big family crowd as well as many friends and colleagues from the Washington area. My husband and I left for the UAE the day after my swearing-in so about three weeks after 9/11.

Aftermath of 9/11

Q: Did you have any agenda when you went out there? You know, we want to get this or that done or something like that?

WAHBA: Well, I was forewarned by the State Department and certainly by General Franks when I met with him at CENTCOM in Tampa that we were getting ready to go into Afghanistan, but nobody wanted to talk about specific timing. It was assumed that we were going into Afghanistan once the government in Kabul refused to hand-over or expel Al Qaeda. The question for me was how much support we would need and how much would we get from the UAE in terms of basing, logistical support for our air force during the operation in Afghanistan. So that was my first and foremost priority—to engage with the government quickly enough that I could start to lay the ground for all the support our military would need from the UAE.

Q: What had been the role of the UAE in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, which was our expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait?

WAHBA: They were supportive, and they were part of the coalition, but I don't think they played a very big military role at that point. But they were part of the coalition, yes.

Q: Well then, so you arrived. How were you greeted?

WAHBA: I was the first woman ambassador to the UAE, and I think I was greeted very, very well in a business-like manner. I arrived on Thursday night, October 4, 2001 and on Friday morning, October 5th, I presented my credentials. This was unheard of—presenting credentials to their Foreign Minister on a Friday—but they rose to the occasion without any hesitation. On Sunday October 7th, the U.S. launched its air attacks on Taliban targets in Afghanistan. We had started with covert CIA operations earlier in late September.

Q: Friday, Geez. That's their Sunday.

WAHBA: Unheard of—and within my first twenty-four hours on the ground! I mean literally, I arrived at the airport Thursday afternoon and the ministry of foreign affairs

protocol chief was there and told me the foreign minister would see me the following day to receive my credentials. So clearly, they understood the hour was critical, that there was no time to be wasted, that we needed to get to work right away. Usually the waiting period is anywhere from one to three months or longer after you arrive in a country and often you present your credentials with a group of new Ambassadors. So, this was remarkable in many ways. It was a very clear signal to me that this country was fully engaged and committed to working with the U.S. They understood the threat from Al Qaeda was to them as well. I was told by the Foreign Minister at that first meeting that they understood how critical the situation was and that they were going to partner with the U.S. to do everything possible to defeat Al Qaeda. That was a very clear message that I received from all the senior officials during my first round of meetings with them.

Q: Could you describe what the UAE was? I mean, I think of it as going back to when I was a vice consul in Dhahran when it used to—we had the seven states. I used to be able to name all of them, like Ras al-Khaimah.

WAHBA: The seven emirates, yes.

Q: But what was the situation? How did it work and what you were dealing with?

WAHBA: Well, the UAE has obviously achieved remarkable progress since the discovery of oil in the early 70s. The country is a federation of seven small city-states, which meant seven different ruling families; a federal system with strong Emirate level governments and weaker central government—although that has now changed and largely due to 9/11. The fairly independent emirates with their own ruling family-led local governments meant we had to deal with a weak central/federal government as well as with the state/emirate level governments. Each emirate had their own police force, judicial system, airports, local government institutions, and until the late '70s Dubai had its own military force. Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the two principal emirates. Abu Dhabi is of course the wealthiest and most powerful of the seven, given that it has ninety-five percent of the UAE's oil reserves. What I discovered very quickly back in 2001 is that the local emirate-level government is where many decisions are made regarding most issues within its boundaries. Therefore, you could not assume that any major initiative at the federal level would succeed unless you had consensus from all at the seven emirates.

When I arrived in the UAE, Dubai was the most visible and very much the engine of the private sector with a financial and transportation hub for leisure tourism and business travel. Abu Dhabi was the seat of power because that's where the oil is, the military capability, and the security apparatus. So not surprisingly the head of the ruling family of Abu Dhabi is also the president of the country. He is formally elected by the heads of the six other emirates. In 2001, Abu Dhabi was clearly the quieter, more conservative emirate as the primary seat of the central government, whereas Dubai was the more open, freewheeling financial and business center of the country. One was very dynamic and glitzy with an open commercial culture, and the other a more conservative, sedate and tribal culture.

The other five emirates are smaller and poorer and during my time they were struggling to define themselves with economic or cultural initiatives to attract investment to promote growth and development. At that point in time, they did not have a lot of independent industries or means of economic growth but now that has changed.

Q: Well, what was your embassy like?

WAHBA: Oh my goodness. Physically, it was the most appalling embassy I had ever seen in my life. It was clearly a throwback to the days when the Emirates was probably one of the sleepest, smallest posts in the Gulf. The 'embassy' was basically made up of a hodgepodge of houses and villas that the USG had rented over the years in a quiet residential neighborhood. As the embassy grew, they would rent another house and finally a wall was built around this group of buildings to create a small compound in the middle of a residential area. The Emirati residents who lived around us, had to navigate through police checkpoints and barricades to get to their homes. Most of the buildings were quite old and not well-maintained or furnished. Frankly, I was stunned that this was an American embassy anywhere in the world. Given the separate buildings it also was not very conducive to good teamwork or communication. It had not been upgraded in many years because the building of a new embassy had been approved and actually the construction had started just before I arrived.

With the new embassy being built, we had something to look forward to and the Emiratis couldn't wait to get us out of the old embassy which was very difficult to secure especially after 9/11. Abu Dhabi was very quiet and secure even after 9/11 but it still made the Emiratis and our Diplomatic security nervous that we were located in the center of a residential neighborhood with minimum security structure. The UAE had designated a new area in Abu Dhabi as the Diplomatic neighborhood to house all foreign missions including our embassy. So, for the first two years of my assignment we were in the old embassy and I had the pleasure of opening and moving into the new embassy before I left the UAE. The Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed, attended the grand opening which was a remarkable show of support for the U.S. and the bilateral relationship.

Q: What was your staff like?

WAHBA: Small but very dedicated but the staffing level was based on a much quieter environment prior to 9/11. The UAE after 9/11 became a central focal point and that accelerated the growth of the mission in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai. By the time I left we had doubled in size at both the Embassy in Abu Dhabi and the consulate in Dubai. When I arrived, I had two political officers, one was mid-level, one was junior. One or two FSOs in econ, two in public diplomacy, three to four people in Consular and a small Admin/GSO [General Services Officer]. It was your typical profile of a small embassy, not a medium-sized embassy.

Q: What were they telling you when you got there about the situation vis-à-vis Al Qaeda and, you know the role of the UAE and the Gulf politics?

WAHBA: When I arrived in early October, I learned that since 9/11 the embassy had been inundated with condolence calls, not only with telegrams and letters, but many Emiratis had come to the embassy in person to express their condolences and to express their regrets that two Emiratis had participated in such a horrific attack on the United States. So I think the embassy team felt very much appreciated by the country they served in. They felt that they got the recognition not only from the officials in the government but people literally from all walks of life had made a point of coming to the embassy to either leave notes, letters, or to meet in-person with Embassy personnel to express their condolences.

Domestic Reforms Post-9/11

Q: Were UAE authorities taking a hard look at their population and students and all this? In other words, beginning vetting their people now?

WAHBA: Well, you're absolutely right because the impact of 9/11 and the fact that they had two of the hijackers brought about a top to bottom, thorough vetting through the system to see where there were fault lines. And they found a number of fault lines, especially in their education sector. The UAE, with its very small population, had relied for decades on expats, not only in the energy sector but also in education, in the military, and even in their security services. They had a lot of foreign teachers, mostly from other Arab countries, teaching the primary, middle schools and high schools. Many were primarily from Egypt and some from Palestine and Lebanon but primarily Egyptian teachers. In the post 9/11 period is when we see the beginning of the anti-Islamist trend in the UAE begin to take shape. This is when the leadership began to see the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam more broadly as a threat to their way of life.

Q: The thing is the Saudis have been the oasis, the brainy oasis of—I take it the Saudis; the Saudi influence was sort of not accepted.

WAHBA: The ruling family in Abu Dhabi in particular but also in Dubai, do not support or welcome the Wahhabi lifestyle. The Saudi influence was felt more in the emirate of Sharjah because the ruling family there had traditionally closer ties with the Saudis. The UAE did not have Saudi teachers in their education system, but influence came through alliances and funding to tribes and conservative Islamist groups. The UAE's Islamists—Islah—were aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of the Egyptian teachers who were teaching in their schools came from the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and many of them had taught for years in Saudi Arabia and become very much influenced by the Wahhabi fundamentalist creed. So they started a very intense 'cleansing program', is the only way I can describe it. They monitored the schools and any teacher who was not hewing to purely educational topics and was espousing views and opinions supportive of Al Qaeda had their visas revoked and were deported. I admired them for launching a well-planned program to bring about an end to their dependence on foreign teachers. They started a drive to encourage Emiratis to become teachers and many of their college graduates received scholarships to enroll in U.S. and

UK universities for graduate degrees. Now fifteen years later, ninety percent of their teachers in K-through-12 are Emiratis. A very impressive accomplishment.

Q: Well, you had—I think you had mentioned that you have seen the change in Egypt because of the influence of the Gulf workers making it more—well, I'd say Wahhabi or at least more conservative and that was having an impact on Egypt.

WAHBA: Absolutely. I think anyone who lived in Egypt in the '70s or even '80s and then went back in the '90s would have felt the difference because a lot of Egyptians who worked in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but particularly in Saudi Arabia, during the '60s and '70s when unemployment was a big issue in Egypt, came back to Egypt much more conservative in their social lifestyle and religious ideology. So, the impact was felt in Egypt and clearly that was carried to other countries where they were influential and of course in education they were very influential in the UAE.

Q: Well now, was your embassy equipped—I guess this would be on the cultural side—to monitor the school system and sort of the religious influence that was permeating the area?

WAHBA: Well, in the UAE we didn't have a large enough embassy to do a lot of domestic work in terms of in-depth reporting, but the Emiratis were very open about what they were doing. So, they shared a lot with us. And it was not only the teachers who were expat teachers; their ministry of education had also become more of the hub for the more conservative elements of the UAE society—their own home-grown Islamists—Islah. Islamists will usually gravitate to the education sector where they can influence the upcoming generation. That has always been a key part of their strategy. I saw that in Egypt as well. The UAE's Ministry of Education was heavily staffed and controlled by the Islamists. The leadership in Abu Dhabi had to move carefully to not alienate their own society while at the same time try and bring about a dramatic change in the system both at the Emirate and at the Federal level. And they went around it in a very clever way.

First of all, they invested heavily in educating new Emirati teachers to reduce their reliance on expat teachers. But then they also started creating competing structures to the Ministry by encouraging and empowering local emirate-level education departments to oversee the K-12 school system thereby leaving the ministry at the federal level without much control or influence over schools. Abu Dhabi made sure the local education departments were well-funded and staffed to further enhance their capabilities. So, they basically minimized the authority of the Ministry by just changing the structure of which institutions would call the shots on the curriculum, the teachers to hire, on the inspectors and so on. Without confronting the ministry or trying to fire people, they reduced their funding by spending the money on education at the emirate level. Many in the Ministry were also given generous retirement packages as a way of clearing the Ministry of the Islamists who were then replaced over a period of time.

Q: How stood relations with—well, Muscat, Bahrain, and Qatar?

WAHBA: With the UAE?

Q: Yes.

WAHBA: Before I leave the school thing, because the other area that they looked at very closely was their mosques. In the UAE, the interesting thing is that Sheikh Zayed had mandated that any large ethnic group that was in the country had the right to have its religious affiliation represented. The sizable Egyptian Coptic community were allowed to build a Coptic church and the same for the Catholic Filipino community. The story one heard often is about when any Emirati complained to Sheikh Zayed about churches or Hindu temples, he would remind them that for every small neighborhood throughout the UAE there is a mosque. And sure enough, when you drive around the UAE you see small mosques within very short distances from one another. Sheikh Zayed made sure that the local population felt they were not being forgotten or disenfranchised.

After 9/11 the leadership started monitoring their mosques throughout the seven emirates because a lot of the mosques were run by expat Sheikhs from other Arab countries. They didn't have enough Emirati Sheikhs to be in charge of the many small neighborhood mosques. They began to closely monitor the mosques and especially their Friday sermons. Soon they started to issue a Friday sermon drafted by the central government to be used throughout the country so that no preacher had the authority to come up with his own Friday sermon. They now have these standard sermons in every mosque. The impact of 9/11 was immediate in these two sectors—education and religion.

Q: Well, what about—I mean I assume that a significant number of Pakistanis, Indonesians, Bangladeshis, most of whom were Muslims—were they sort of closely watched and controlled?

WAHBA: They were closely monitored. Again, not only because of the religious issues but because of any potential conflict among the different South Asian expats from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh. They were allowed to attend any mosque that was close to where they lived; they were not restricted to praying in specific mosques. They were monitored like any national group is in the UAE to make sure that there are no political issues. And it was made very clear to them, because they brought in hundreds of thousands of workers from South Asia, that if they had any political rumblings or violence they would be deported. They occasionally had incidents where Pakistanis and other groups would get into flare-ups and their solution was the easiest one; troublemakers were deported. Expats who valued their jobs and residence in the UAE learned to live and let live, although they are often cheek to jowl. In many of these big projects you have very many nationalities working together that normally may not get along very well.

Q: How about these neighbors with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Bahrain, Doha, Kuwait?

WAHBA: How do they get along you mean?

Q: Were there problems there?

WAHBA: Well, traditionally there has always been some tension between the Arab Gulf states and on and off between the UAE and Saudi Arabia; primarily due to the more Islamic conservative bend in Saudi Arabia. To survive the UAE has to maintain a more open, multi-national and multi-ethnic society given their demographics of a small Emirati population reliant on a much larger expat population. From the Saudi perspective many were not happy about the fact that you go to Dubai and you walk into a hotel, there are bars and restaurants serving alcohol in a very western open environment. There are always some tensions on the social side and sometimes on the political side with several ongoing border disputes. The UAE with a younger and more dynamic leadership, resented the fact they had to defer to their larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia, with a sclerotic political structure that often meant decision-making was a slow and torturous process.

I'll give you a good example, which happened as a result of 9/11 events. Once we had decided to move into Afghanistan, the UAE wanted to cut diplomatic ties but didn't want to make the move ahead of Saudi Arabia. They explained to me their hesitance to close their mission ahead of KSA [Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] but in the end they took that step before the Saudis could make a decision which in many ways was the beginning of a more independent UAE. Finally, the Saudis did as well, but it took them longer to make the decision.

Q: Well, were you playing a role in this or were we leaving it to them? I mean, were we saying, you know, cut your ties or was this a—?

WAHBA: We advocated for the breaking of diplomatic ties, but it wasn't a big issue for us, but we wanted the message to get to the government in Afghanistan that their neighbors, and not just the U.S., wanted them to either give up Al Qaeda or face diplomatic isolation. At the time there were transportation ties between Afghanistan and the UAE with daily flights out of Dubai. Afghanistan was also a popular falcon hunting destination for the Emiratis.

Preparing for War in Afghanistan: Role of MbZ

Q: How did you deal with the government there?

WAHBA: In many ways it helped a great deal that I arrived shortly after 9/11 because usually it takes a good amount of time to get to know the key players and build a cooperative relationship of trust. There was really no time for such niceties after 9/11 since I arrived on the eve of the war in Afghanistan. I jumped right in and the Emiratis were very responsive. They understood that the U.S. was in a critical period, a wounded Goliath, and that we would be taking some actions that were not going to be very popular in the region. The leadership in the UAE decided very early on that they were going to

partner with the United States. They did not wait for us to push or prod. I found them ready and willing to cooperate with the U.S. on a number of issues, whether it was logistical support for our intervention in Afghanistan, intelligence sharing, or scrubbing financial systems to follow the money that allowed Al Qaeda to carry out 9/11. They were extremely cooperative and wanted to be full partners in the effort and not a reluctant follower. The UAE immediately ordered their banks to freeze assets of organizations and individuals that were suspected of funding terrorism.

Q: How big a role did they play in supporting Operation Enduring Freedom?

WAHBA: The leadership of the UAE played an incredibly supportive and significant role from the very beginning of the war in Afghanistan. Our relationship with the Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE's Armed Forces, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed (MbZ) was the single most important factor in the successful partnership we enjoyed with the UAE. His role was at the center of everything we did together against Al Qaeda, the war in Afghanistan and later, the war in Iraq. He was the person I got to know quickly and early on established a close working relationship with him. MbZ, as he is known throughout our government, is the second eldest son of Sheikh Zayed. He had already built close ties to senior U.S. military and intelligence officials in the 1990s when the UAE participated with U.S. and NATO forces in the Balkans.

The President of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed was ailing after a kidney transplant and his eldest son, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Khalifa, was the de facto ruler of the country except when it came to foreign policy and national security issues. He delegated the country's foreign relations, particularly with the West, to MbZ and national security portfolios were held by MbZ's full brothers. This division of labor became more pronounced in the post 9/11 period and before Sheikh Zayed died, he named MbZ Deputy Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi to ensure his future as Khalifa's partner in running the country. Now, a decade after Sheikh Zayed's death, MbZ has become the de facto ruler of the UAE as Sheikh Khalifa's health has deteriorated and he has pretty much withdrawn from public life.

The UAE-U.S. partnership in the aftermath of 9/11 encompassed all fields, political, military to intelligence. Logistical support of our military operations including access to the UAE's air bases (al Dhafra and Minhad) for U.S. assets—the U-2s and Global Hawk—to providing fuel bladders for air-refueling tankers. The UAE stands out for being the only Arab country to provide boots on the ground in Afghanistan. MbZ decided to deploy their special forces to work under U.S. command and they remained in Afghanistan for the past ten years. Intelligence sharing became one of the most vital areas of cooperation and strengthened our bilateral relationship in significant ways given the criticality of the period after 9/11. Close cooperation with our Department of the Treasury was another area of close cooperation focusing on banking, financial and export controls issues.

There were several key accomplishments during this time in terms of the bilateral relationship. I had the pleasure of welcoming a trade delegation from Houston, Texas,

one of the very few that traveled to the Middle East shortly after 9/11. It was seen as a huge vote of confidence in the UAE and we announced a Sister City relationship between Houston and Abu Dhabi in 2001.

Another major event was the launch of the UAE-U.S. Strategic Partnership. I worked closely with the Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to institutionalize the bilateral relationship by establishing the UAE-U.S. strategic partnership made up of representatives from across both governments. The first meeting was held in Washington DC in 2002 with the attendance of Sheikh Hamdan and SecState Colin Powell.

First Woman Ambassador & Role of UAE Women

Q: Did you find you were running into either negative or positive factors of being one, Egyptian-born, two, being a woman?

WAHBA: Well, it's interesting that you should say that because there was worry in Washington about a woman of Arab origin going out to the UAE as Ambassador. The NEA Bureau's preferred choice was a man which, as I mentioned, got overturned by the D Committee. Some in the bureau feared that I would not be taken seriously or that the Emiratis would question my ability to act as a "true blooded" American diplomat given my Egyptian origin. Which of course is oftentimes a legitimate concern particularly when serving in one's country of origin. For example, in my first assignment to Cairo there were some who questioned or were confused by my identity. However, in the UAE I did not face that type of questioning or testing.

I can tell you a quick anecdote: soon after I arrived received a large hardbound book about this size—

Q: You're showing a book about eighteen inches.

WAHBA: Yes, beautifully bound in leather and wrapped with all kinds of ribbons. I opened it to find the most elaborate wedding invitation to the wedding of one of Sheikh Zayed's younger sons. The wording on the invitation did not include my name and the book arrived simply addressed to the American Ambassador. My predecessor was Ted Kattouf. The protocol person at the embassy explained that weddings in the UAE are not mixed. Therefore, this invitation, coming from Sheikh Zayed, was for the male wedding party which was usually held in the afternoon or over lunch. The women's wedding parties were held in the evening and quite elaborate and festive. To avoid any protocol issues and embarrassment, she called the palace to confirm my attendance. The answer was without hesitation: "the invitation is for the American Ambassador and of course we know that the new ambassador is a woman." End of conversation.

I arrived at the wedding which was being held outdoors in a large green field, maybe a soccer field, where they had set up a VIP tent for the ruling family including Sheikh

Zayed, other officials and all the diplomats. The festivities began with traditional tribal dances by men and then the traditional dances by young women waving their long hair from side to side. When I arrived, the car stopped at a red carpet and a young man in the traditional white dishdasha waited to escort me to the VIP section. Once seated I looked around and there were literally hundreds of local male guests plus all the diplomats who, again, were all men. I was definitely the only woman at the wedding! I was the only female diplomat at the time. That's changed now, they have several women diplomats.

I tell this story because it really says a lot about the Emiratis and the UAE. Not a single eye blinked or twitched to show any discomfort with my presence. I was escorted to the diplomatic area and sat in my front row seat and nobody turned to look. I also got invited to the women's party. It was unique for an ambassador to be able to get into the women's wedding parties because it allowed me to get a much closer view of this very private society and being fluent in Arabic made that possible.

Q: Well now, what, you know, Arab society, I mean, my knowledge goes back to the '60s—well, '50s, really, in Saudi Arabia. But the word was in Saudi Arabia back in those times that the women were a hell of a lot more powerful than they seemed on the surface because the mothers called the shots on their sons, who might be the king or what have you.

WAHBA: Absolutely right and to this day that has not changed.

Q: How did things stand in the Emirates?

HH Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak

WAHBA: There's a lot of truth to that because as I got to know the women including the very powerful Sheikha Fatima, the wife of Sheikh Zayed, and the mother of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ), the deputy supreme commander of the UAE Armed Forces, who is now the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the UAE.

Her full name is Fatima bint Mubarak al Ketbi. She hails from Al Ain and married Sheikh Zayed when he was the Ruler's representative in the eastern province of Abu Dhabi. She then moved with him to Abu Dhabi when he became ruler of the emirate. Together they championed women's issues early on with Sheikha Fatima establishing the Abu Dhabi Women's Development Association in 1973. She is well-read and quite a dynamic personality with a keen interest in politics and current affairs, both regionally and globally.

Her six sons, referred to as the *bani-Fatima* (sons of Fatima), hold the key positions of power in the UAE: the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, MbZ; the Deputy Prime Minister, Sheikh Mansour; to Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdulla. Sheikha Fatima exerts great influence on all her sons and I know she was in daily contact with them to stay abreast of events in the country and with issues of concern within their specific portfolios. She

clearly taught them the importance of strong work ethics because all her sons are hard-working, support one another, and closely coordinate on all issues pertaining to running the country. I witnessed this first-hand in the aftermath to 9/11 and during the war in Iraq.

In addition, Sheikha Fatima took the lead to empower Emirati women to get educated and join the workforce. When I served there, she directed a number of initiatives devoted to women's empowerment and family issues. She remains the President of the UAE's General Women's Union and the President of the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood. Sheikha Fatima is referred to as the Mother of the Nation and continues to enjoy that profile today in spite of the death of Sheikh Zayed.

Many of the other women I met in the ruling families clearly have a lot of influence over their sons and husbands. They are well-educated, stay abreast of current events and many of them were fond of discussing politics with me. I was invited to many private afternoon teas and most of our conversation revolved around the politics of the region and the U.S. In those days the U.S. dominated, given that this period was soon after 9/11. They would ask questions about the environment in the U.S., the George W. Bush cabinet members, in an effort to better understand the impact of 9/11 on our domestic and foreign policies.

Senior women in the Abu Dhabi ruling family, especially Sheikha Fatima, were well-connected to their counterparts throughout the region. She had close ties and stayed in regular contact with the ruling families in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait, Oman as well as Egypt and Iraq. All these women know one another and often facilitate issues and reduce political tensions. I discovered this very powerful network behind the scenes that communicates on a regular basis. They are in touch through their cell phones texting each other and staying connected at all times. They also attend each other's weddings, majlises and condolence calls. When I attended these events, I often met senior women from the neighboring countries. There were Omanis, Kuwaitis or Saudis, mostly Saudis and Omanis; they were the more frequent female visitors to Abu Dhabi but also some Kuwaitis and Bahrainis. I recall meeting the two sisters of King Abdulla of Saudi Arabia at one such event hosted by HH Sheikha Fatima.

My relationship with Sheikha Fatima was truly a highlight of my assignment to the UAE. From my very first courtesy call on her, we established a good rapport that led to regular, frequent meetings during my three years in Abu Dhabi. In addition to being included in many events Sheikha Fatima hosted for visitors, we had one-on-one meetings at frequent intervals. We are close to the same age and we communicated in Arabic which definitely facilitated our wide-ranging discussions.

I learned a lot from Sheikha Fatima, about her history with Sheikh Zayed, the challenges of bringing up her six boys and two daughters while being a partner to Sheikh Zayed; her relationships with the wives of the ruling families of the other six emirates; and the often competitive relationships between the nineteen sons of Sheikh Zayed. Upon my departure from the UAE in 2004, Sheikha Fatima asked me to stop by on my way to the U.S. to see her in Geneva where she was spending the summer months with HH Sheikh Zayed. Our

friendship has endured till today as I usually call on her when I travel to Abu Dhabi. It is a relationship I very much cherish.

UAE's Federal Tribal System

Q: I assume tribal politics were major in the area. I mean, the seven different Emirates and—.

WAHBA: Oh, definitely. In the UAE, the tribal issues and the ruling families are very powerful. And you could see how over time different branches of the families would be in command with control over the levers of power dominated by their closest relatives and those they have carefully mentored to staff their offices and ministries. Many members of the Al Nahyan clan who were in government in the early 80s for example had been more or less retired but remained active and influential through their family connections and business activities.

In the UAE, Abu Dhabi and Dubai ruling families were the most dominant. The other emirates were also important—never ignored by Abu Dhabi—because of the importance of keeping the federation strong and united. Therefore, although most of the oil wealth was in Abu Dhabi, and certainly the dynamic commercial wealth is in Dubai, the buy-in and support of the poorer emirates was important for the overall stability of the country. After 9/11, the U.S. advocated for a lot of changes that came under the jurisdiction of specific emirates like Ras Al Khaimah, Umm Al Quwain or Fujairah.

To implement some of these changes the federal government had to pass national legislation that required the support of all seven emirates. And while Abu Dhabi, as the seat of the federal government, had a great deal of power and influence to make these changes, it needed to ensure consensus by all of the emirates' ruling families. The weaker, smaller emirates were often very much wooed and catered to by the ruling families in Abu Dhabi and Dubai to make sure that they were fully on-board with some of these very big changes that were taking place after 9/11 regarding export-import controls, administration of Airports and seaports, as well as new banking and financial controls. Let's not forget the infamous, Russian arms dealer, Viktor Bout, had a base in Umm al Quwain where his cargo planes made unfettered use of their airport.

Q: I think I'm sure I'm mispronouncing it but Fujairah. Sitting off sort of on its own—.

WAHBA: Fujairah was one of the five smaller emirates, in population and wealth, and certainly one of the most beautiful with its fjords and coastline. The ruler of Fujairah is close to Abu Dhabi, so when the UAE leadership was thinking about new ways of securing their oil shipments out of the UAE, they decided to build a pipeline to Fujairah to bypass the Straits of Hormuz. This pipeline is now in place and fully operative. This type of relationship between Abu Dhabi and Fujairah led to closer ties and increased funding of projects to benefit Fujairah such as the construction of water desalination projects.

Abu Dhabi got involved with other ruling families when they faced intra-family conflicts. For example, Ras al-Khaimah had some very contentious successor issues when the ruler passed away and Abu Dhabi had to get involved, had to take sides, to maintain stability within the emirate.

Q: I remember some of the stories of nephews acting off uncles and that sort of thing. It was sort of the specialty of the area.

WAHBA: I remember when I went to visit the ruler of Ras al-Khaimah—and I really made a big effort to get to know the rulers of all the emirates because, again, we were asking them to make substantive changes to their normal way of operating after 9/11. Ras al-Khaimah's ruler was quite short and lean; he must have been in his mid-eighties, but he looked sixty-five. He was agile, he was bright, he was alert. He was the same age as Sheikh Zayed, and he actually outlived him. When we first met, he spent about ten minutes on politics but then he wanted to talk about the many varieties of dates available in his emirate.

Sheikh Zayed played a big role in the date industry of the UAE by importing different species and had them planted throughout the UAE given the great variety in weather conditions from Fujairah to Ras Al Khaimah and so on. The UAE now has something like 250 different species of dates, and it is one of their largest export products. The ruler of Ras Al Khaimah had incredible date farms and they are beautiful, with palm trees of every conceivable size and every conceivable color of date. I received a good briefing on dates every time I went to call on him, which was a welcome change of pace in those very hectic days. I did not mind it at all!

Q: Well, I think of the stories we used to hear about Sheikh Shakhbout, who used to keep the treasury of the emirates in gold under his cot.

WAHBA: Under his cot. He refused to put the money in the bank.

Q: At least he knew where it was.

WAHBA: Yes. He was Sheikh Zayed's brother and predecessor as the Ruler of Abu Dhabi until 1966. Shakhbout is famous for refusing to use the banks and for not sharing or spending money on the Emirate. And this was the beginning of the oil, of course, so there was quite a bit of gold under that mattress. But it was not well-used, which is what brought him down in the end.

Q: What about the—did we play any role in helping Emiratis to study in the United States?

WAHBA: Oh yes. Before 9/11 there was quite a large number of Emiratis who were in the U.S. I think it was over 30,000, which is quite a number given the small population.

Q: Oh yes, that's a hell of a lot.

WAHBA: It dropped to like 4,000 to 5,000 after 9/11.

Q: Because of the restrictions.

WAHBA: Well, because most of the students didn't want to stay here. Their parents felt that it was not safe for them to stay in America given the mood towards Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. They worried they would get targeted and get in trouble. And then of course student visas became increasingly difficult to get. And so, they looked at other options. They went to the U.K.; it was a second choice, but much closer to home. The Australians put on a huge public relations effort to attract Emirati university students. We saw the enrollment in Australian and British universities go up while ours, of course, continued to dwindle. I think enrollment in U.S. universities is back up; the numbers are high again now, especially that the UAE is part of our Visa Waiver Program.

Q: How did you find, you, your embassy and the United States, the impact of money? I mean it was really back in the 16th century and now you've got these towers and everything. The impact of money must have had a tremendous influence.

WAHBA: I didn't have the pleasure of knowing it in its simpler days but certainly when I was there the wealth was extravagant. You see kids driving cars that easily cost \$350,000 plus. After serving in Cairo, the visibility of the wealth in the Gulf is of course very striking. From glamorous high rises, to five- or six-star hotels, to impeccable shopping centers with every French and Italian designer name represented. I had the pleasure of being invited to a lot of homes of the ruling family members and other senior Emiratis and of course their homes were very opulent and large with gorgeous, manicured gardens. I often felt like I had walked into a 1,0001 Nights scenario given the lush gardens, the furnishings, the huge Persian carpets, and the food that was served.

It was certainly no longer a simple society. Many of the Emiratis would openly express their concerns that the younger generation had not experienced the more difficult times before oil, and the hardships of pearl diving. One of them told me he was thirty years old when he saw his first orange! Now you go into their supermarkets and you have every conceivable exotic fruit and vegetable flown in from all over the world. Things I had never seen and will never see in our supermarkets here. The dramatic change in less than one generation is phenomenal. And many worried that their kids were growing up in such luxury that they would never understand what it meant to struggle. It used to take them, for example, four days to get to Dubai by camel or a two-day drive through the desert in a four-wheel vehicle to get to Dubai. Now it takes them an hour and a half using 6 lane freeways.

Q: I remember sort of the word was, this goes back to the '50s, the social fabric that held the UAE and all the Gulf states together was not that strong—.

WAHBA: Well, in such a young federation, I think the important thing to remember is that they didn't unite until 1979. So, the country has a very young sense of a national identity. I think in the late '90s and certainly post-9/11, is when they started paying a lot more attention to the issue of nationhood. Today you notice they make a huge effort to create a sense of Emirati national identity, instead of defining yourself first with one of the seven emirates, Sharjah or Ras Al Khaimah. There is a concerted effort to promote that sense of national unity through education, advertising and television programming to ensure the ongoing strength and stability of the federation.

Q: Well, was there much in the way of developing Emirate enterprise and all that?

WAHBA: Well, in terms of their economy, when I was there the economy was still predominantly dependent on oil. But they had started diversifying and now it's only thirty-five percent of their GDP [gross domestic product], thanks largely to Dubai's dynamic commercial center, which is phenomenal. The UAE is now ahead of everybody else in the region in terms of diversifying their economy but of course they remain largely dependent on oil exports.

Q: I just was seeing something in "The New York Times" today talking about their investment in a new super chip with IBM.

WAHBA: The UAE today is, compared to the days when I was there, a different place. They are, as you said earlier, punching way above their weight. They are involved in so many issues regionally and internationally. They are the only country now in the Middle East that has started a social media campaign against ISIL [ISIS]. They've established a number of centers and organizations to fight Islamic extremism based in Abu Dhabi. They have a UAE Aspen Institute partnership. They have funded a leadership program at the Kennedy School of Government to the tune of fifteen million dollars to engage with leaders, young leaders throughout the Arab world, not just from the UAE. They see themselves as a regional power now and an important player internationally as well. They want to create a model for the upcoming generation of the Arab world that is different from the rest of the region. Today most young Arabs would prefer to live and work in Abu Dhabi or Dubai than in any other city in the west. This is quite a change from the 1970s or '80s when most young Arabs would seek opportunities in Paris, London, or New York before ever thinking of staying in the region.

Q: One thing we haven't discussed is the question of the decision-making process in a country like the UAE, a federation with seven ruling families.

WAHBA: Each ruling family had a lot of control over the decision-making process within its own emirate. When a local emirate decision had wider implications for the country as a whole beyond its own borders, consultation at the Federal National Council was required and Abu Dhabi's approval as the seat of the federation was necessary. So, while the decision-making process starts within each ruling family, it requires a much broader consensus and then approval if the issue at hand has wider implications beyond any one emirate. Important decisions regarding succession for example within a ruling

family of the smaller emirates also required some consultation and consensus with Abu Dhabi and sometimes with Dubai as well.

Looking at the UAE from the outside, you would think that it is quite hierarchical with one or two key decision-makers but actually the consensus that often happens behind closed doors is a necessary step. The emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi have the more dominant voices and more votes at the Federal National Council (FNC). That said, they have to make sure that the remaining five ruling families have a buy-in into the decision, otherwise the issue is put on hold until consensus is reached. On national security issues, Abu Dhabi takes the lead and has the dominant role in gaining consensus and compliance.

Q: What about U.S. NAVY visits? Was this—?

WAHBA: No shortage of naval visits! Dubai gets the largest number of ship visits from our Navy outside of the United States. It boasts the only deep-water port in the region that can take our aircraft carriers. With so many ship visits and sailors on shore leave in Dubai, surprisingly enough we only had very few troubling incidents while I was there. Quite amazing when you think we had thousands of American sailors in Dubai enjoying the excellent restaurants, bars and shopping.

Q: And what sort of incidents were there, just to kind of get a feel?

WAHBA: Well, we had a kind of a gentleman's agreement with the UAE that, in case of incidents short of murder or rape, our Navy folks would handle the perpetrators through our system. In other words, they would not insist on arrests and trials in their judicial system. We were very lucky we never had to test that gentleman's agreement.

Q: How about—I mean, by this time, our armed forces had a significant number of women in all branches of the service. Did that cause any problem at all?

WAHBA: No, never a problem. The amazing thing about the UAE is that walking down the street you can see traditionally dressed men and women in long robes followed closely by expats in shorts and a T-shirt or halter top. Nobody reacts and nobody even cares; it is a truly live-and let-live attitude. This was surprising to me because coming from posts in countries like Egypt or Jordan you would not see this level of tolerance.

Q: How did you and your husband find the social situation? I mean with all that bloody money there and the ambassador is not endowed with a hell of a big salary.

WAHBA: Ah, no way you can compete! The Emiratis don't socialize very publicly so although their lifestyle is opulent it is pretty much behind closed doors. If one is fortunate enough to be invited to one of their weddings or other social events, then yes, you see the ostentatious lifestyle. I had the pleasure of being invited to ruling family homes because of my position and being a woman who spoke Arabic I was often included in the women's gatherings for afternoon teas and dinners. Of course the very special access I

had to HH Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak was unusual by any measure and I have treasured the memories of our afternoon sessions together.

I think socializing in the UAE is different because the local population is so small that it naturally became more of a segregated society as the numbers of expatriates grew. You had the diplomatic community, there was the expat community and then within the expat community there were the many different nationalities and ethnic groups. Very large Indian and Pakistani communities, many who have lived there for generations, as well as the Arab communities, the Asians communities and the large numbers of temporary laborers. There was not a whole lot of mixing across those lines on the social level.

Our social life in Abu Dhabi was mostly with expats and other diplomats. I invited a lot of Emiratis to our home and they came but I noticed that they preferred to come for lunches as evenings are mostly spent with families or attending Majlises. Dinners are not something they do outside their homes. So unlike Saudi Arabia where our embassy officers are often invited to Saudi homes for dinner, the Emiratis rarely invite or attend dinners. But I invited Emiratis for lunch and also to receptions and they attended, both men and women.

Q: How about the—you might say the public diplomacy side of things? What sort of things were we doing in the UAE?

WAHBA: Mostly education and some research scholarship. We had some Fulbright exchanges. Emiratis going to the U.S and American Fulbrighters coming to the UAE. We didn't hold many cultural events during this period of great conflict in the region. Also the funding for the cultural programs at the State Department was not a top priority at this time. So, we had the occasional music group maybe but not much on the cultural side.

Q: Well, you know I see these and five-star hotels at one thousand or two thousand dollars a night. What the hell do people go to that area for? I mean, I've heard of the turgid Persian Gulf and August is not exactly a month I would go.

WAHBA: Well, they've raised tourism to a whole different level, especially in Dubai. My husband and I, when we would want to get away for a couple of days to relax and sit on the beach, we would select one of the resorts in Dubai—this is in the winter months of course, we didn't go to beaches in the summer! Hotels in Dubai are the most luxurious, pampering experience you can imagine. What makes tourism very successful in Dubai is the extraordinary level of service provided by very well-trained staff. From the moment you step onto the hotel grounds you enjoy impeccable service throughout your stay. The tourists who come to Dubai come back every year because of the high-end service and amenities in their hotels and superb world-class restaurants. We saw tourists in Dubai during the very hot months of June, July and August when you cannot open a window! But the tourists came anyway because they can stay indoors to enjoy great shopping and a variety of indoor entertainment.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi have excelled at developing indoor activities given that for six months of the year the weather makes it difficult to be outdoors. There are many things you can do in these malls including indoor skiing plus the many sponsored concerts, musical events and live theater. I think Dubai and Abu Dhabi combined now attract ten or fifteen million tourists a year. When I was there the number was around five million tourists a year. I remember the Egyptian ambassador at a dinner, said to me, "Can you imagine? They have five million tourists a year, and they don't have a single pyramid!" He was just flabbergasted that without any of the archaeological or cultural sites that you find in Egypt, the UAE managed to attract the same number of tourists. There also are some wonderful desert resorts in the UAE where you can see rare animals like the Arabian oryx. You can take trips with four-wheel drives through the desert to go bird watching or falcon hunting. Their airlines also provide luxurious travel to and from all the world's major cities. Given the UAE's nearly non-existent domestic terrorism threat and its first-class facilities, many tourists return again and again.

Human Trafficking in the UAE

Q: Well, you sold me. Did you run into the problem that I know they've had in Japan and other places of particularly American girls or young women getting attracted to be hostesses or what have you and getting sort of involved in the sex trade or something else? I mean, being exploited.

WAHBA: Trafficking in women is a huge problem in the UAE and especially women from Eastern European countries. This was one of the many issues in addition to the other labor issues in the UAE that have been difficult problems for quite a while. Advocating for reform of their labor laws is something I spent a lot of time on. They've made a great deal of progress on the issues of trafficking in women and have passed new laws in accordance with UN conventions.

Q: Did you have to deal with the issue of trafficking in people, particularly women, which has become a major concern of our government. Did you get involved in trying to do something about this or not?

WAHBA: Oh, absolutely. But during my time we were more concerned with the trafficking of young kids who were brought in to be camel jockeys. That was an even bigger problem.

Q: Could you explain what this is?

WAHBA: Oh, I certainly can! I spent so many hours and so many days dealing with this at different levels of the government. Camel racing is a highly prized tribal, traditional sport in the Gulf. It's a very lucrative tribal tradition among certain families or clans well-known for raising race camels like we do with horses in Kentucky. The championship prizes run to the millions of dollars. The reason they recruited young children for jockeys was of course a mystery to me. Their jockeys were mostly seven or

eight-year-old boys who looked even younger because they were small in size and came mostly from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. A lot of these kids were stunted in growth because they weren't well-fed and lived in appalling conditions at home before they were trafficked. Once they arrived in the UAE, all they did was train and race the camels; no schooling or playing. Many were trafficked by their own families as bringing the kids into the UAE was a big source of income for them.

I spoke to many government officials to express our concerns and some were sympathetic to our argument that this practice is inhumane and that it needed to stop. Several told me point blank that they shared our concerns but did not know how to handle the issue without angering the tribes. Their first effort to address this problem was to pass legislation through the Federal National Council that required a minimum age and weight for camel jockeys. The law was rarely implemented so while it was a genuine effort to address the problem, it failed to bring an end to the practice of trafficking young boys.

It took a long time and finally the leadership in Abu Dhabi recommended I speak with one of the ruling family officials of Dubai because he was one of the most influential leaders in the camel racing association. I was told that his support was key to bringing about a change. This demonstrates the relative independence of each emirate and the need to seek out the right points of influence for advocacy which may not be at the federal level.

I went to see this senior official in Dubai who did not speak English. It was not easy to discuss camel racing traditions in Arabic! He patiently explained why it was impossible to place an adult on the back of a racing camel. He explained that the most valuable racing camels have very thin, long legs with a fine bone structure. Many tribes spend a great deal of money breeding and training their camels for racing and the prizes are a significant source of income for the tribes.

In the end, Qatar identified the solution of using robots for jockeys and that was adopted widely throughout most of the Gulf countries although I doubt that the practice of using young boys is completely eradicated. At first people mocked the idea of robots but then it started to take hold because it took the pressure off from governments due to the negative press they were subjected to in the western media.

Q: How do they manipulate the robots?

WAHBA: It is quite a chaotic scene because they use their SUVs to drive along outside the racetrack lanes to manipulate the robot on each camel. As you can imagine with each car driving fast enough to maintain its speed with its own camel it is a recipe for car accidents. Jeeps and SUVs are vying for space in the car lanes with the owners of the camels manipulating the robots through the remotes and they are driving just as fast as the camels are running! A very peculiar sight.

An important footnote to the issue of trafficking in children for camel racing: Sheikh Zayed, I think, was one of the wisest leaders in the region and a major reason the UAE is

where it is today. Regarding the camel jockeys, I was told that Sheikh Zayed decided it was important to repatriate all the kids that had been brought into the UAE illegally. However, they faced the dilemma of how to find the families of these children, as many were brought in by traffickers. No one knew their real names or the address of their families in their home countries. Sheikh Zayed's solution was to build a number of orphanages in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh where these children would be placed once they were repatriated until their families were identified. He covered the costs of building and staffing these orphanages to provide a permanent home and an education for the children if their families were not located.

Q: Well, let's talk about—you were there during the war years.

WAHBA: Yes, unfortunately.

Q: Can you talk about your role and the issues that came up? We're talking about the war in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The War in Iraq

WAHBA: I spent a lot of my time in the UAE dealing with our military so I would say four out of every five visitors that came from Washington to Abu Dhabi were military visitors. I saw much less of the State Department than I saw of the military. Every branch of the military, Air Force, Army, Marines, Special Ops; they came regularly to Abu Dhabi for many reasons. First of all, the UAE, as I said earlier, became a full and enthusiastic partner on many key security issues. On Afghanistan, I don't think we made a single request that was turned down. They set up a whole section of one of their major air bases for our use and installed a network of fuel bladders for our Air Force jets. The Emiratis, without hesitation, participated in everything to do with combatting terrorism, from the war in Afghanistan to implementing financial and export controls. However, they did hesitate about the war in Iraq. They advised us against it, very strongly so.

Q: What were the reasons?

WAHBA: On Iraq, although they shared our opinion of Saddam Hussein, they felt we did not have a convincing reason or evidence for invading the country. They felt that we would be opening a Pandora's box that would have negative implications for the whole region. They repeatedly told us that Iraq is not an easy country to govern and we should not stir the pot.

Don't forget that the Emiratis offered asylum to Saddam Hussein in order to avoid a war that they strongly believed would harm the region. Sheikh Zayed publicly announced the offer and called on Saddam to step down during the Arab League Summit that was held in Sharm el-Sheikh just before the war. Saddam turned down the UAE offer.

In my meetings with HH Sheikha Fatima, I learned that she maintained a parallel conversation with Saddam Hussein's wife, Sajida, in support of the UAE's effort to avoid

the war by granting them asylum. They knew each other well and Sheikha Fatima confided that she was not optimistic because Sajida had little influence on Saddam Hussein's decisions.

Q: Well, how did you feel about this? I mean, did you, you know, you might say your analogy of the Middle East and all, were you uncomfortable with our Iraqi policy?

WAHBA: Well, like most of us in government, I believed our leadership's claims that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction. I made that argument very strongly with the Emiratis and they believed us but wanted proof. They had their own intelligence sources inside Iraq, and they were trying to get confirmation and likely storage locations so that they could help us take them out once we went into Iraq. But their intelligence sources couldn't confirm the location of storage sites for chemical weapons. They thought they had some leads and shared the coordinates with us, but we could not confirm the information they provided.

Q: Well, we're up against that peculiar thing where Saddam Hussein was fooling his own people—

WAHBA: Yes.

Q: —by telling them, “Oh, we've got all sorts of good stuff.”

WAHBA: And in retrospect it makes sense that he was not willing to prove to the world that he didn't have WMD [weapons of mass destruction]. He never denied it and never admitted it. In the end, we based the war on the assumption that he had something to hide. But the Emiratis and others in the Gulf region were much more apprehensive about our going into Iraq. Nevertheless, they joined our coalition and actually the UAE was the first country to send in their military into Iraq right behind U.S. forces to set up mobile field hospitals and water desalination centers. Their effort was closely coordinated with our military. As we moved into Iraq, as our Marines moved up towards Baghdad, the Emirati forces were right behind us setting up field hospitals and water desalination mobile units.

Q: Did Qatar or Bahrain, I mean, were we all- were their problems in coordination and all with our policy toward Iraq or did they all work together pretty much?

WAHBA: I think the principal players in the region were the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. General John Abizaid, who followed Tommy Franks as the CENTCOM commander, was a frequent visitor to the UAE. This was the ugly period post the invasion when we got to Baghdad with still no sign of weapons of mass destruction. The Emiratis who were in Iraq with us focused primarily on humanitarian issues, but they had good intelligence sources in the country. They tried to help us with the WMD issue but none of the leads led to anything concrete.

Iraq quickly became the main issue during my last year in the UAE. Many of our senior military officers and officials from other parts of the USG came to consult with the Emiratis and particularly with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed (MbZ) the Deputy Commander of the UAE armed Forces and Deputy Crown Prince. The Emiratis enjoyed close ties to many of the Sunni tribes of Iraq, so they were a very important resource of information and consultation; I was very pleased to see that our senior officials actively sought their advice on Iraq. MbZ had always enjoyed good relations with senior American officials but now had become a highly trusted confidante for folks like John Abizaid, and George Tenet as well as our senior officers at State like Bill Burns who was our A/S for NEA at the time and also DepSec Rich Armitage and of course Secretary of State Colin Powell. In looking back I have to say that the Emiratis were right about many issues related to Iraq especially their warnings about disbanding the Iraqi army. They were also very critical of how the new Iraqi political system of governance was structured on the basis of ethnicity and religion. They believed this would perpetuate the divisions and eventually lead to a fractured state.

Q: You know, it was really very poorly planned. I mean, the whole idea was that somehow this was going to be a walkover and all that.

WAHBA: The sad thing is that even after we realized that we hadn't planned well and most of Iraq's institutions fell apart, we continued to make a lot of bad decisions. At the U.S. leadership levels we never paid enough attention to what many of our allies in the region were telling us. Many of the decisions we made in the period after the fall of Saddam have certainly come back to haunt us today.

Q: What sort of a military, American military presence was there with our embassy?

WAHBA: Well, of course, we grew in numbers very quickly. Our liaison office doubled in size. But the largest contingency, of course, was our presence at the air base out in Al Dhafra. I remember at Thanksgiving we invited 400 American military and civilian personnel from those based in Al Dhafra to join us for dinner. There were anywhere from 1000 to 4000 Americans based in Al Dhafra during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Q: How did this work? I mean, particularly with women and the military? I mean, in other words how did our military work within this society?

WAHBA: American military personnel—male or female—worked very well with their Emirati hosts. There were no issues. This is not Saudi Arabia. I, and our senior military officials, enjoyed a great relationship with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, the deputy chief of staff of the armed forces, who is now the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. All of us held him in high regard and that relationship was extremely important to what we accomplished together in the UAE. I got along very well with our senior military representatives, General Tommy Franks, and Gen. John Abizaid who followed Franks, as well as our Special Ops commanders and the Air Force General running PSAB [Prince Sultan Air Base], General Buzz Moseley. I had not had much experience with our

military in prior assignments except for the period after the invasion of Kuwait while I was in Cairo and where I worked closely with our PsyOps folks. But this was very, very different. Being in the UAE during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq gave me the opportunity to witness first-hand war time operations and play a principal role in all the diplomatic, intelligence and logistical negotiations that were required for the planning and implementation of the USG effort.

Gulf Air Warfare Center

Of all the services, our Air Force played the most prominent role in the UAE. They developed a very, very strong and enduring relationship. One of the most important initiatives was the establishment at Al Dhafra of the Gulf Air Warfare Center during my time in the UAE. It has grown today to be one of the only centers dedicated to capacity building of our partners' air forces in the Middle East. It is modeled on the Air Warfare Center at Nellis AFB in Nevada. Thanks to the herculean effort by AF General Buzz Moseley, we got the approval to adapt the American curriculum for use at the Gulf AirWar Center. While the Brits and the French participated to some extent in establishing the center, it was really a U.S.-UAE bilateral initiative from the very beginning. Both our air forces continue to maintain a staff there who conduct both academic and integrated training operations. Nowadays, almost 2,000 officers from throughout the Middle East train together with their American counterparts. It is a unique center and a legacy that I am proud to have played a role in making it happen. While the U.S. continues to provide some funding, the Emiratis, of course, cover most of the expenses. We set up the center because we wanted to promote interoperability of GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] air forces with ours, as well as with the Brits, the French and the Germans. It is a great success story and I think it speaks volumes about not only the USG role but also is testimony to the strength and depth of the partnership between the U.S. and the UAE and mainly to Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed's visionary leadership.

Q: How about the role of AWACS [Airborne Warning and Control System]?

WAHBA: Oh yes, we had AWACS based in the UAE and also the unmanned—Global Hawk.

Q: How about drones?

WAHBA: Not the predators out of the UAE, but, yes, the Global Hawk, which is a drone with those extraordinary long wingspan. I was there for the first time it landed anywhere in the region when it landed in Abu Dhabi. It was piloted by somebody somewhere in one of our air force bases somewhere in Europe. The Air Force chief of staff and I, and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, stood on the tarmac at Al Dhafra Air Base to see it land. I was stunned by that huge wingspan and it landed exactly on time. All computer-controlled by somebody somewhere in Europe. It was an amazing experience.

UAE and Iran

Q: I assume that Iran loomed very high there. You mentioned the oil pipeline over to Fujairah to bypass the Gulf of Hormuz, which is a choke point. How stood things with Iran?

WAHBA: The UAE and Iran have a very complex relationship. Until very recently Iran was the first trading partner for the UAE primarily because of the commercial trade between Dubai and Iran. Iran is no longer the primary trading partner with the UAE because the U.S. and China have risen as the two top trading partners with the UAE. For the Iranians, Dubai serves as their exit to the world, especially with the war going on in Syria which used to be another exit point. Through Dubai Iranians travel for tourism and business interests and of course from Dubai they can fly directly to any continent. Our consulate in Dubai handled a large flow of Iranian visa applicants as we were one of only two countries where they could apply, the other one being in either Istanbul or Ankara, Turkey. Dubai also has a large Iranian community with their commercial enterprises, grocery stores, as well as excellent Persian restaurants and carpet shops. Over the past decade the UAE has become more vigilant in monitoring all forms of trade to ensure compliance with UN-approved sanctions. The reason I said the relationship is complicated is because they have a long-standing dispute over three small islands in the Straits of Hormuz claimed by the UAE and occupied by Iran since the British forces withdrew in 1971. This happened on the eve of the federation of the UAE.

Q: What are they called? Abu Masa or something?

WAHBA: Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Oil tankers and all large ships have to navigate between Abu Musa and the two smaller islands as they go through the Straits of Hormuz, so these are very strategic islands that the Iranians have no intention of giving up. Prior to the federation of the UAE, the emirate of Sharjah had a presence on Abu Musa and Ras al Khaimah on the Greater and lesser Tunbs. Both failed to negotiate with Iran and on the eve of the UAE's declaration, the Iranian Imperial Naval forces took the three islands but allowed some of the Emirati civilians, primarily fishermen, to continue to reside on the island of Abu Musa. The UAE's position calls for the dispute to be adjudicated by the International Court of Justice but the Iranians refuse. This dispute raises its profile now and then—in recent years it came up when the then Iranian President Ahmadinejad visited Abu Musa.

In addition to the territorial dispute, and since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the UAE sees Iran as their existential threat and the Arab gulf countries as a whole—particularly after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent fracturing of Iraq. They fear Iran's radicalization of the Shi'a communities in the region and their malign interference in countries like Bahrain, Iran and now Syria. The UAE-Iranian relationship has gone through many difficult times but also some periods where both sides have demonstrated willingness to be more pragmatic and open to opportunities of reducing tensions. They exchanged visits by their foreign ministers for example. The Emiratis, in the end, endorsed the JCPOA but were extremely angered by the Obama administration's decision to keep them out of the loop during the secret negotiations with Iran. In addition, they felt

the agreement was weak as it did not cover Iran's regional role but only the nuclear program. So they were one of the primary agitators advocating for the recent summit that took place here in Camp David between President Obama and the leaders of the GCC countries to discuss the nuclear agreement and to address their fears about Iran's role in the region.

Q: Well, did you—I assume obviously that you couldn't talk to the Iranian ambassador or not.

WAHBA: No.

Q: But were we able to report on developments in Iran from Abu Dhabi or not?

WAHBA: Our intelligence side handled Iran and of course the presence of the Iranian community in Dubai as well as the human traffic through the UAE presented many opportunities. We did have a window on Iran through our consulate in Dubai as hundreds of Iranians applied for visas every week. We learned a lot about what was going on inside Iran from students applying for student visas, to families hoping to visit loved ones and many for medical reasons. Our consulate interacted with Iranians from all walks of life which gave us a good sense of the current social and economic trends in Iran.

Q: So, essentially, we weren't sealing ordinary Iranians off from coming to the States?

WAHBA: No. Actually, we had, at the time I was there, an active public diplomacy program where we sponsored Iranians to travel to the U.S. for short-term professional exchange programs that were I believe funded through the MEPI program. There was quite a bit of money that Congress approved for the specific purpose of contributing to civil society building in Iran.

Q: You were there for how long?

WAHBA: Three years. The usual time.

Q: How stood things when you left?

WAHBA: I left in 2004, summer of 2004. We went through so much in those three years that it felt like many more years. The period right after the invasion of Iraq was also very challenging because the chaos and radical change of government in Iraq had serious consequences for the whole region.

Q: What a world. Well then, I was just looking at the time, where did you go after this?

WAHBA: Oh, I came back to the U.S. after the UAE.

Q: And did what?

WAHBA: I came back and was assigned to the National Defense University as the State Department advisor and Deputy Commandant at the National War College. It was a great assignment. I taught two seminars, one on foreign policy and one on public diplomacy. After the National War College, I was assigned to the Pentagon as the Foreign Affairs Advisor to the U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff.

I retired in 2008 and have been doing some consulting work for American business firms interested in establishing or expanding their presence in the Middle East. For the past year I have been leading a small team to establish a new think tank, the Arab Gulf States Institute, in Washington, an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to providing expert research and analysis of the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Gulf Arab states. The institute was launched this year and the Board has appointed me as its first President.

Q: Any memorable moments during your assignment in the UAE that stand out or are unique to the UAE?

WAHBA: Yes, quite a few!

1. Flying on a COD [carrier onboard delivery], a C-2 Greyhound aircraft, and the extraordinary experience of landing on the aircraft carrier the USS Kennedy in the middle of the Persian Gulf!
2. My very first helicopter flight from Abu Dhabi to Dubai, piloted by HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed (MbZ), to attend a meeting.
3. Taking a UAE helicopter for a flight with General Tommy Franks through the Dubai skyscrapers along Sheikh Zayed road. A very bumpy ride if you can imagine the impact of the narrow wind tunnel as we navigated through the closely built high rises. Even General Franks was nervous!
4. The many one-on-one afternoon tea sessions discussing regional and world events with HH Sheikha Fatima bin Mubarak, Sheikh Zayed's wife, at Al Bahr Palace.

End of interview