

TM: Greetings ladies and gentlemen. It's my distinct pleasure to welcome you to today's discussion. Before I introduce our guest, the award-winning Kuwaiti Palestinian-American journalist and storyteller, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, let me explain for you who are joining us live and our listeners who will listen to this later what precisely we are up to today. The conversation we're about to have is the third installment in a series of conversations we are having with Arab politicians, intellectual, and thought leaders on the state of the United States of America. We are not talking about the Arab world primarily, but instead, we are talking about the world's sole superpower. And the reason we are having these conversations with Arab thought leaders about America is that we believe very strongly that everyone and especially Americans can learn a great deal about this moment in their politics by hearing from people who have some analytic and maybe even emotional distance from the events, which may enable them to perceive things more clearly than is possible for those of us who live in this country and eat drink and breathe its politics. We think that Arab observers of American politics are particularly likely to have something important to say because the Arab world has been affected more than most other parts of the world by the outcomes of America's internal political struggles. If you think about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, if you think about the fate of Iraq, if you think about the Arab spring and its aftershocks, all of these are, if not quite made in America, then certainly assembled with at least some American components. And this means that while Arabs have the requisite emotional distance from the American scene to be analytical about it, they're nonetheless enough affected by American political life to have thought deeply and have something important to say. We began our series two weeks ago with the former Egyptian foreign minister Nabil Fahmy, and last week we were joined by the distinguished Emirati intellectual Abdulkhaleq Abdulla. Later in the series we'll speak to the Lebanese journalist, Raghida Dergham. We'll speak to former Iraqi prime minister Ayad Allaw, among many others.

Now my trusted co-pilot in these conversations is my colleague, professor Karim Haggag of the American University in Cairo School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Karim, welcome.

KH: Thank you, Tarek. It's a pleasure to co-pilot this project with you.

TM: How are you doing?

KH: Wonderful. All is well on this side of the world and very much looking forward to this conversation.

TM: Fantastic. Thank you Karim. So now to today's guest, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, is someone who defies any attempt to encapsulate or summarize him. He's a citizen of the world, a Kuwaiti of Palestinian origin who grew up between Egypt and Austria. He's an award-winning journalist who has worked for the New York Times, PBS, Aljazeera, the Huffington Post where he co-founded Huffpost Live, the company's streaming network. He's worked for vice and AJ+. And throughout this long professional history—particularly long for someone who's so young— he evolved from a humble researcher toiling under mounds of paper to a producer toiling under

mounds of tape to a presenter and storyteller whose democracies and interviews have told us important stories and which earned him global recognition, including an Emmy nomination. Ahmed Shihab-Eldin is also an author and an essayist whose writings have appeared in the Huffington Post and Jadaliyya and elsewhere, and they've shed light on the Arab spring, on U.S. foreign policy in the Arab world, and on the experience of being an Arab in America after 9/11. In 2012 in addition to everything else he was doing, he co-edited a volume of essays entitled *Demanding Dignity: Young Voices From the Front Lines of the Arab Revolutions*. Finally in addition to being a world citizen and an award-winning journalist and an author, Ahmed is a symbol. And this might be a label that he would chafe against, but to my mind, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin is a walking talking representation of how the presentation of Arabs and Arabness in the United States has evolved over the last three decades. I'm old enough to remember when the only Arab voices that you would hear in this country were those of mustachioed leaders with thick accents and questionable human rights records. And we all, of course, recall the dark years following 9/11 when a name like Ahmed or Tarek or Karim was an instant marker of that rendered one questionable. Today, however, when we turn on our televisions or fire up YouTube or Zoom, scroll through our Twitter feeds, when Americans hear from Arabs, they hear from eloquent, sharp American-accented, yet authentically Arab people like Ahmed who shatter misperceptions, change attitudes, and build bridges. So we are particularly thrilled to have him with us here today to talk about this moment in American politics. Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, welcome.

ASE: Thank you. I'm so happy to be here and thank you for that maybe too generous of an introduction. Thanks.

TM: You know, before I begin Ahmed, I did want to offer you and all our listeners from Kuwait my deepest condolences on the passing of his highness the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Sabah. So please accept our condolences.

ASE: Thank you. I appreciate that.

TM: So Ahmed, you had a very cosmic cosmopolitan childhood. You grew up between Egypt and Austria. You said you are Kuwaiti. Your family has roots in Palestine. Where did you feel most at home growing up?

ASE: Well the cop-out answer would be on a plane in transit, maybe. You know, you say it was a cosmopolitan upbringing. It certainly was, and it was one that only recently have I really been aware of just how painfully —and I use that word intentionally— privileged of an upbringing I had relative to many others in both respective homes. That said, it was also quite schizophrenic. That's maybe a more apt word I would use to describe it in that, you know, we all search for extensive belonging. And for some of us, maybe, it's more attainable or more clear. But for me growing up, even though I had very much felt in touch and connected to the Arab world, when I was living in Egypt or even in Kuwait and the same is true in the U.S., I was always very much aware of my role as an outsider. And I think invariably, that informed a lot of my reporting and also the very drive to kind of bridge gaps between not just the two cultures but between

different cultures and different perspectives on life, because I was constantly forced to adapt in that kind of, you know, upbringing where I was shuttling back and forth between the east and the west.

TM: So in Egypt. When you were a student at Cairo American college, somebody said to you Ahmed, where are you from, your answer would have been—

ASE: I would have said in as strong an Egyptian accent as I could, “ana min al-bad?”. But you know it's funny. The truth is I was very much—because you bring this up, an identity is such an important part of how we perceive ourselves and others. And I think we're learning that more and more here, and here in this kind of crazy moment we're living in the world, even in America. Growing up, I thought I was Egyptian at some point, in that I felt connected to the culture because I was so young, and I spent my formative years there. And you know, I spoke the accent even though to others it was clear I wasn't from Egypt. I had a kind of pride, and you know, language kind of bonds us. And all this to say that yeah, I always struggle to answer the question, whether it's a mundane stranger, you know, in an airport asking me or on a very esteemed podcast. Where are you from? I really, I don't know. But when I figure it out, I will get back to you.

TM: So Ahmed. When did you first come to the United States?

ASE: So, you know, because facts matter, I was born in the United States. So I came to the world in the United States, but then very quickly, I left, and you know, I was living in Kuwait and then mostly in Egypt. So I would say at the age of 17, when I graduated from high school in Austria at a time when, you know, there was a guy named Jorg Haider in power in Austria, when I was in high school, he was a Neo-Nazi, much more violent and offensive than Trump even. And all this to say that when I arrived from Austria to Boston the year after 9/11 named Ahmed, you can imagine that there was a lot of friction, to use a euphemism in terms of how I was relating to people and how people perceived me. And that was a real wake-up call because it wasn't until I was 17, finally outside the Arab world, that I became acutely aware of just how Arab I was, whether, you know, in terms of customs or culture or perspectives but also in terms of how others perceived me, and in turn, how I perceived myself.

TM: Why did you choose to come to the— so you started college in 2002? That's correct. So you know, as you alluded to, this was not a great time to be Arab in the United States. Why did you choose to come to the U.S. to complete your education?

ASE: You know, that's a good question. I think it was always something that I just essentially assumed or expected. I know that's not a great answer, and I think it was also, you know, America's higher education system, as you must know, is great. And I applied to a bunch of schools, and I kind of was looking to expand my opportunities. I was not entirely sure at all what I wanted to study or do, and so I think, you know, it made sense to go to a place that throughout my life always kind of represented individuality, infinite possibility, for better or worse whether it's true, the U.S. And, you know, I spent you know I spent every summer in the

U.S., in Berkeley, California, you know, kind of a bastion of liberal culture. And then I would, you know, return to Egypt or to Kuwait and spend the year there and then go back to California, and that's why I use the term schizophrenic because I think I chose to come to the U.S. because I wanted to expand the possibilities. And it felt like the right place and the most comfortable place to do it. I was sadly, excuse me, I should say I might have been a little bit naive in that it would have been impossible to anticipate what I would encounter—and I'm not trying to overstate it—but in terms of—and like many other Arab Americans— you know, this feeling of not being welcome and being suspected and being feared. And I think it's only recently that I think I've become aware of how that reality that I lived for a few years and that many of us lived collectively— and I think endured is the right word—would inform a lot of my personality traits and my professional pursuits and kind of my attachment to social justice and how that guided a lot of my work and my personal relationships.

TM: So can you talk a little bit, Ahmed, about what it is you've experienced during in those years after 9/11? Because I guess somebody could have looked at your story and said, you know, everybody talks about how America became so Islamophobic after 9/11, but of course, Arabs were still coming here in droves to get their education. So really how bad could it have been?

ASE: I forget at this point. I think I blocked it out. Recently someone kind of understating that there was even any kind of — you know, I'm getting sidetracked because I can't remember. There's been so many. Basically, I would put it in this way. I was constantly made to feel unwelcome or suspected, not just by authorities or police. I mean I was arrested. I'm going to just speak very honestly. Me and my Latino roommate were arrested. My three white roommates weren't arrested. The charge was keeper of a disorderly home. I was having a Halloween party. I was called a turban head. I was called the towel head, a sand and then the n word by the Boston police department. And, you know, there was a lot of ignorance. I was shocked mostly at the ignorance. I thought Boston University was a great school, second tier school. But I can't tell you how many people ask me ludicrous questions that really floored me about my upbringing in Egypt. Did you go to school in pyramids? Did you live in pyramids? Did you go to school on camels? You have cars there? And you know, beyond those kinds of cliches, there was also curiosity because there was so much ignorance. And I chose to try to always look at that and focus on that rather at the kind of insults and the ignorance and how that would create problems. I always tried to believe—well you know, it's like not to be an ambassador, but let me just show people that, you know, there's no monolith in the Arab world. And, you know, it was definitely painful and oftentimes difficult to navigate. The truth is though, it can work for you or against you, depending on, I think, what tools you have to kind of, you know, stay true to your convictions.

TM: Did the fact that you found yourself constantly having to explain the world that you came from to your American interlocutors nudge you towards the career in journalism that you eventually chose? I know I saw that you majored in mass communication at BU. Were you like the rest of us whose parents sent us to study here to be doctors or did you always know you were going to do that?

ASE: No, that's a great question. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I knew I loved to listen and talk and tell stories, and I just loved storytelling as an art. So that was why I went into that school, but I did start in advertising until an advertising professor, you know, pulled me after class he said you're so inquisitive; you're so talented; you're so thoughtful and all these, you know, compliments. He said but you suck at advertising. And, you know, that was a real wake-up call for me because—you know, I hate cold weather, and it was I think February. I walked home, and I was like feeling down and out, and I just saw a little flier outside the student newspaper. I really was lost like many young people, didn't know what I wanted to do. Of course, my dad, as I'm sure you would imagine, wanted me to do something like engineering or, you know. And he often tried to teach me physics. Anyway, all this to say, I saw this poster that said we're looking for writers for the student newspaper. I walked in, signed up, and I would say I got very attached to that identity as a 19-year-old of being kind of just this like inquisitive person who would ask stories. And journalism was kind of an accident to be very honest about it but, yeah, I think that that experience of constantly having to explain myself did drive my desire to help explain other things to other people and to try and kind of focus on things that connect us to each other, whether east and west or even within the U.S., because I was acutely aware of how divided we were.

TM: When you imagined the life that you wanted to have when you were a college student, were you imagining a life in the Middle East or were you imagining a life in the west?

ASE: I think the honest answer is the west. I don't know that I would say the U.S., per se. I think spending the last few years of high school in Austria, as difficult as that was and in many ways a lot more overt racism. As I said, the year I moved from Egypt to Austria, I was 14 years old. It was 1999. Jorg Haider was in power. There were people spitting on me on trains and subways. People singing songs in German, *Ausländer, Ausländer*—like all these things, get out of my country as quickly as you can. So I'm not trying to play the victim or share these anecdotes with you to do that, but it's really that I was very young when it started to occur to me that there's a lot of hatred born out of ignorance. And that happened to me in Europe, when I was 14 and then again in the U.S. when I was 17. So I think I would be dishonest if I said that that didn't inevitably play a role in why I chose to pursue journalism, which is, you know, essentially the study of the human condition but specifically to focus on human rights and social justice. And of course, being Palestinian, you can imagine, just through the storytelling of my family and that sense of loss and the lack of belonging, I think it informed the type of journalism I would come to do.

TM: But there's something remarkable in that. You know, given the things you experienced as a high schooler in Austria and then in as a college student in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. You had real experiences with what could only be called racism and ethnocentrism, and yet your response was not to say oh I want nothing to do with this part of the world. Once I get my degree I'm out of here. I'm going to go back home. You instead, envisioned yourself leaning into it.

ASE: Yeah, you know in hindsight, I think it's clear to me why that happened at the time. If I'm to be honest, I think it was kind of just momentum. As you know in our 20s, you know, we all can, I think, relate or attest to the importance of momentum in life and dictating kind of the turns and travails of your life. I very much felt like I had something to prove, and I was also very conscious of— you know, it wasn't lost on me that I was in somewhat of a unique position to offer a perspective on a very important global reality. Like for example, the Arab uprisings politics aside, that was the moment in the Arab world that changed things, maybe not forever but in a real fundamental way. And so being in the U.S. and being part of that discussion in the American media realm, it wasn't lost on me that there was a responsibility, and that I was uniquely, maybe, or at least positioned to help provide a great deal of context that was lacking. And the same is true on the flip side. I don't know how effective it at all was, you know. Before we actually went live, I was sharing with ambassador Karim that I've come to realize that unfortunately, for better or worse, I'm quite pessimistic about the U.S. today and perhaps understandably so in a way that I never was throughout all those things that we just outlined, right where, you know, things seemed pretty dark at least for my community and for many communities. But yeah I think, you know, lean in. Right that's the better approach.

TM: So we want to get to talking about the American situation in a second, but I was looking at your twitter bio, and it says that you are quote shifting perceptions away from dogma and division towards connection and compassion, which I think is really eloquent of what you've been telling us. So I wanted to ask two things first. What is the greatest misperception of Arabs that Americans have, and you spoke to that a little bit. But then, what is the greatest misperception of Americans that Arabs have?

ASE: That's a great question. Well, I think one of the biggest kind of misperceptions of Arabs in general is that we're monolithic, and you could say that about many different groups. But when it comes to the Arab world, it's not just that, you know, from a media perspective. Something that was insufferable— I suffered greatly when I saw the ways in which the media in the U.S., which obviously shapes perceptions, at so many different companies I worked for, in so many different ways but very consistently failed to imagine, so often, that there can be powerful storytelling or valuable information or stories in the region that have nothing to do with this lens of terrorism and violence. And it was partly because of 9/11. But I think from on a human perspective, I think one of the biggest misconceptions is that everybody in the Middle East and in the Arab world is angry, is also backwards. There is a perception, and you know these perceptions aren't based on nothing. There is stuff to suggest that either of those perspectives are true, but, you know, that we're monolithic that we're backward that we're all the same that there's no spectrum of social norms. And, you know, it's true for example.

One thing I'll say. One of the biggest differences for me between the U.S. and the Arab world is that in the U.S. there is this culture of individuality, for better or worse, that I always admired and felt gravitated towards, especially as a child, as my ego was developing. And you know, in the Arab world, on the flip side, I think there is a culture of conformity for, you know, to speak in kind of platitudes. And I think that might have driven some of these misperceptions that, you

know, everyone in the Arab world, you know, is the same and is angry and is uneducated and is conservative, not just religiously but socially. And you know, it depends who you're talking about, but again, the level of ignorance was obscene in Boston. I have to just put it that way because it shocked me. And this is someone who— you know, maybe it's because I'm comparing BU's campus to like Berkeley's campus where people are a little bit more liberal and open-minded.

But on the flip side, I think the biggest misperception from the Arab world looking to the U.S. kind of historically in my life might be kind of the lack of values, the vulgarity, the folk that everything is about money. I don't know if these are even valuable insights that I'm providing because as I'm saying, these stereotypes— I do actually think there's fair criticisms of America in this moment that would go along those lines, right in terms of what we prioritize in America, you know, profit over people and so on so forth. But yeah, I think the misconceptions work both ways.

TM: Okay well, Karim.

KH: So if we can switch gears a little bit and maybe draw you out to talk a little bit about America today through Arab American eyes, as someone who has lived in both worlds. So you mentioned that you were pessimistic to put it mildly, and that certainly reflected in your public comments on what's happening in America today. I think in one of your tweets I recently saw you tweeted that America is in meltdown. What does that mean to you exactly? I mean that's very strong words. Tell us how do you see America today?

ASE: You know, the term meltdown or broken or whatever you want to call it. These are semantics, right? I think one thing is clear. The social fabric of America, I think, has been breaking down for quite some time, at least in my perspective and in my experience, I should say. I think the institutions that we all relied on whether in actuality or we assumed would be there to protect us and to protect our democracy, even before Trump, had started to see schisms and failures, in terms of trust, for example. It was clear to me for the entire decade that I worked in the U.S. media that there was a lack of trust, not just in the media or in institutions but even in congress, the very governing body. I mean I'm talking like single digits in terms of trust in media. And you know, the media of course in the context of U.S. and how I always understood it growing up —and I should say this is one of the biggest differences between the Arab world at least from my perspective— in the US there used to be this idea of, you know, freedom of press, and that it's the fourth estate. That it's protected in our constitution and that it plays a critical, not just valuable role.

You know I think it's for a long time, whether Arab or European or Asian, you know, many around the world used to loathe America. Many around the world used to admire America. Many used to fear America sometimes. It would all happen at the same time, and I think this moment is really marked by something really strange, which is everyone I talk to, diplomats or people who are invested in America financially or you know through their personal lives, there is a sense of pity for America triggered by Trump and his kind of onslaught that I think is

growing in recent years. And so no matter what your vantage point is, I think America is going through a humiliating moment. And you know, I know we were talking earlier about not taking too much of a macro perspective because, you know, we want this to be all substantive. But if you look historically kind of, you know, the downfall of the American empire and kind of the soft power that it, you know, projects and the hard military power, it's always been a matter of when in my mind, as a student of history, the empire would start to kind of crumble, right? We saw that in the 18th century the Netherlands was the dominant global power. Then it was the U.K. and France. Then, you know, they kind of fell, and the empire fell. They're still successful countries, but they don't have the same influence, and so I don't know.

I mean I guess I would say that for the first time in my lifetime, I'm struggling to see how this thing that we always took for granted in the American narrative and in the American imagination, which is that America will always make a comeback; it will always reimagine itself, that America almost matters too much as, you know, as egocentric as that may be. But you know, it's not just America's allies and enemies but friends of mine, individuals, like there's an incomprehension, kind of an uncertainty of the moment, that's only compounded by the pandemic, of kind of what America is. And you know, it's diminished standing since 2003 because of the war in Iraq was maybe an acute moment, but if you look back to that the kind of blunder of Iraq, it almost doesn't compare to what we're seeing today, right? Again, the breakdown of the social fabric, the exploitation of divisions and fear has always been part of the American narrative. Now though these sustained street protests, the violence, the racism, more black people buying guns than ever before — and I single out black people because that to me is—you know I'll tell you. Just sorry, I'm now rambling a little bit.

But a couple years ago, I was in Kuwait having lunch with my dad, and my dad I should say, one of the smartest men I know, but he doesn't always speak unless he has something to say. And that's something maybe I can learn from him. But out of the blue at lunch—he's sometimes quiet during our lunches— he just kind of muttered after staring off into like, you know, the distance and seemingly disengaged, and he just said under his breath America is likely to have a civil war in the next five years. You know, and it was out of the blue, out of context. No one is talking about it, and obviously you know, people have been looking at America's trajectory, and as I'm describing it to be, really troubling. But it wasn't until that moment that it all kind of came together, all my personal experiences and all the political kind of analysis that I'd been privy to and been doing. It seems really as though—how can I say it—you know, that we've reached a new level of division and polarization. And Trump is willing to burn the house down, and everyone's kind of at a loss. And you know, the reason I'm pessimistic is because I have to cover Trump's election and then his presidency for AJ+ in the streets and the protest movements. And over the months, it became increasingly clear to me that there was a lot of pain. There was a lot of misinformation. There was a lot of anger. There was a lot of suffering, but there was no cohesive conversation. There was much less of a willingness to listen to each other. And so yeah. I mean, you know, we're at a point now where it feels as if America's glory days are over.

TM: So Ahmed, this is very interesting. I want to press you a bit on how this is all perceived



through Arab eyes, from the point of the Arab world, because a lot of what you described, you know, challenges, conventional views around the world about what America stands for, you know, a superpower, a democracy, a powerful country, you know, a government that works, that's functional, that delivers, I mean a democracy, all of these things. But earlier, you mentioned—and I was very struck by this— about how some Arab views towards America are very cynical in the American's money. It's vulgar and so on. But I think you would agree that there's also another strain of thought in the Arab world that does look to America as a source of ideals, right, an ideal or maybe idealized image right, as a country that stands for democracy, freedom, human rights, etc. I mean irrespective of how far reality does not really match those ideals, if you were telling the story of America to an Arab audience, right, how would you tell that story?

ASE: Well in this moment if I were to tell the story of America and kind of what's happening here, I think invariably, it would be a very familiar story for a lot of Arabs. And I say that in so much as, you know, I think there's been a complete, you know led by Trump, focus on profit, on— how can I say this? I think the priorities in America and the foundation of America and the idea, whether idealized or not, is you know, it's like an emperor with no clothes. But it's like America with no clothes, like we're starting to see the really ugly underbelly that's always been there but is being purposely exploited for Trump's personal gain, but also for you know, the political, personal gain of this polarized kind of landscape that we're at. So I think I mean, you know, — I don't know if this is answering your question but— it doesn't surprise me that a lot of Arab governments are some of Trump's biggest fans. And it's not just because of the sort of autocratic strongman perspective, and I think some of it has to do with geopolitics. But I think, you know, the America of today is, and again, people will think that I'm naive and maybe this is an oversimplification, but the truth is it's starting to feel a lot more familiar for those of us who have been in the Arab world complaining about some of the cyclical inability to evolve in certain realms of, you know, governments in the Arab world.

That said, I think the concept of liberty and freedom is—again what I initially said— you know, this idea of individuality. I mean, you know, I remember when I was in public school for a year. I only went to public school in California for a year. I had to learn to recite the pledge of allegiance, you know, to the flag indivisible, you know, with liberty and justice for all. There is no liberty and justice for all in America, and that should be— not just like that—those kinds of truths, I think, would be some of the biggest surprises to some of the younger populations in the Arab world, who have long continued to see. As much as there's anger towards the U.S., there is an idealized kind of idea of, you know, freedom and liberty, especially among certain minorities in the Arab world, right? And I think that's important because that is the America that so many of us, whether it's an idea or it's an actual thing within reach you know, the American dream. It's something that I think we are all beholden to through its soft power, through Hollywood, through films. And so I think it is a tragedy of sorts that I see so many similarities today between not just the way Trump conducts himself as a leader so to speak and how it's similar to parts of the Arab world, but also the kind of failures and bureaucracies in the U.S.

TM: So if I could just follow up a little bit because there are three really important threads that I wish we would follow. I mean the first is you've described America in decline, America decaying on a variety of different dimensions. But I wasn't clear on the cause, and to the extent that you identified a cause, it seemed like it was Trump. That what happened is that the United States had the bad luck of having a peer in its midst, a politician who would pick at all the scabs in in this country. Am I getting that wrong or is Trump really a symptom of something else? And if so, what is that something else?

ASE: I think, you know, Trump is certainly a symptom of a series of failures. Most notably, I would say in terms of priorities— I don't need to give you all the statistics about hospital beds and the health care system in America and how catastrophic it is. I mean, I'm happy to. Talk about the failures, the under valuation of teachers and the series of kind of failures when it comes to protecting our education system, especially like, you know, general education. I think there have been a series of—I mean look, like America's reputation, America's isolationist kind of policies. Trump is only—he's not just a symptom. I think he's exploiting a moment. He exploited in 2016, a moment of deep division that many before him are responsible for helping to create. And I think the divisions— you know, we talk about systemic racism. We talk about all these systemic problems in America and not just the lack of wanting to actually address them, but maybe and more troubling, the inability of the current kind of system to actually prioritize things that are important for the well-being of the entire economy. You know, when Trump, for example, talks about the economy as the stock market, and there's just such a divide, such a deep disconnect.

We even put Trump aside for a second. Long before Trump ran for president, I was covering and speaking to young Americans and, you know, American mothers and families. And the thing that I constantly kept hearing is that they felt, regardless of whether they vote, Republican or Democrat in this system, they feel as though— and this is again, you know, highlighted by the single digit, you know, percentage of trust Americans have in their government, let alone the media—there's kind of like a collusion between corporations and the government that almost overlooks a large percentage of the American people's well-being, both their physical health, their sense of possibility. I know this might seem a little general in terms of my analysis. But it's kind of like, this is a moment that would have happened with or without Trump. And all Trump managed to do is—and you know, one of the biggest things I tried to do as a journalist in the years right before enduring Trump was speak to the people that that, you know, felt the racial resentment after Obama. I mean, to ignore the role of race in America's story, in the Trump story, in how we got to this point, to ignore how much racial resentment there was that we had a black president. And then on the flip side, you know, from white America if you will—and forgive me for making things seem just white and black, because they're not— but on the flip side, you look at the black community. They finally had, you know, Obama. And did their lives change that much? You know, you could argue that by some measures, for people of color, for minorities in America, things were worse, or things weren't that much better.

And so, I think the timing— you know, timing matters in life. And you know, whenever people describe Trump as masterful or you know a genius in some crazy sense, I mean if there is any

genius to his madness it's in recognizing opportunities to exploit divisions and to personally gain from them. And again, this feeds into a broader culture in America that I think is worrying. You know, America has been governed by an extractive mindset, like much of the capitalist world, for a long time. And the reason I bring up extractive versus regenerative is I think that Trump is the embodiment of that, you know, the embodiment of— and we've heard him say it tirelessly— winning at all costs, not really worrying about consequences or who else is impacted. And you know, I think that's why he has done well with, certainly in terms of his relationships with a lot of Arab leaders. They speak his language. He's willing to protect their interests in ways that perhaps Obama wasn't. And so yeah, I think Trump is very much a symptom, but I could have never imagined. I think many of U.S. would have never imagined that he would be this successful in his failings.

TM: You know, I think you are correct when you point to all of the ways in which the United States is not living up to its potential. Yeah, but somebody might respond and ask you, Ahmed: okay so show me on the globe. Here's a globe. Pick the country that that is the ideal, that you want the United States to live up to. You know, in other words, there's absolutely the abstract criticism to be made. But then when we think about the places on planet earth that one might prefer to live in over the United States of America I, don't think Ahmed Shihab-Eldin has a long list.

ASE: You're right. There are a few countries in Europe right now that I'd be happy to entertain you and engage you on that conversation, in terms of COVID and how they're handling it. But even beyond that, just social protections that don't exist in the imagination here or in actual policy—

TM: But what about the individualism and the freedom to chart your own life path and the diversity of influences? I mean, does any place really come close to this country?

ASE: No, and I appreciate you pressing me on this because it is kind of, you know, and I use the word schizophrenic. But like one minute, I'm in agreement with you. But you know, when I hear you saying that, for better or worse, I thought it. And maybe this is reflective of how pessimistic I've become. Are those attainable? Those are ideas that have long been used to describe America, and there is a foundation that does support those ideas. But in the last four years, I think there— it's hard to overstate the damage in terms of not just whether those are attainable but the public and the majority of Americans trust and belief and ability to see and imagine those things to be true for themselves. To your point, you want to compare—I mean, you know, I don't know how to say it. I think it's an odd kind of conundrum because, you know, I want to believe that you're right that, you know, still we haven't completely lost that. I don't know. It's a good question.

TM: Well let me ask the question in a different way, and then I think what Karim and I want to do is ask you some questions about the upcoming election in particular. What's at stake for the Arabs in it? But before we get to that—so if we went to the average citizen of the world from which you and I emerge, and Karim emerges, and we said to the average Arab, do you think

the era America is in decline, they'd say absolutely yes. America is in decline. They'd agree with you, but then they'd give completely different reasons for why America is in decline. They would point to our newfound consensus in the United States on gay rights. They would point to the accelerating acceptance of trans men and women as fully legitimate beings, who are making legitimate choices about how they want to author themselves. They point to just our ever-expanding notions of the freedom of individuals to choose how they live their lives free from the shackles of religiously or historically defined moralities. Now somebody else might look at those exact same things, you and me for example. We look at those exact same things, and we'd say that is what is great about America. Those are America's contributions to the world. And so, I guess what I want to ask you: isn't it true, Ahmed, that if you care— and I know you do care about toleration and personal liberty and the freedom of people to explore themselves fully—right, that if you care about those things, America is still the only game in town? It's the shining city on the hill. It's the beacon of tolerance. It's the mother lode of good ideas. And that if America does decline, if America somehow finds itself in a diminished role, that's actually not good for the people in our parts of the world who are trying to expand the boundaries of freedom because America, for all of its flaws— I'm stating a case. I'm not telling you that I believe this case, but I'm trying to state it and to steal man that America has for the most part been the wind at the backs of people who are trying to expand the scope of personal freedoms around the world.

ASE: When it comes to personal freedoms, I think you highlight a conundrum that many of us who live with one foot in each part of, you know, the Arab world and the U.S. find ourselves in. Because first, just quickly, not that I'm trying to retort against because I do see the value in what you said because I do also believe it's a widely held position. And it's one that a lot of young people in the Arab world share with me and that we discussed and engaged me on that said— for example, there have been 30 murders of transgender people in the U.S. in 2020, more than ever before since we started counting. Now that's not to counter that there's been an expanding of, you know, maybe the social consciousness around these choices and these liberties and these freedoms. But you know, as you know, there's always a pushback when you move forwards, and there's always progress and then a little bit of a regression.

And I guess what I would say is when it comes to, like don't get me wrong, there is more at stake now in my mind for America to succeed and to thrive. And there's, you know, for all the reasons that you stated it. And when a place like America starts to seem or it starts to diminish in terms of its power or its influence or even more appropriately, its ability to unite its people and to provide for its people and to—you know, America's always represented the promised land, if you will, for lack of a better term, if not for Americans for many people around the world. And I think that's your point. But I would also say that this idea of American exceptionalism in my mind, and perhaps this reflects again how I've been clouded by all Trump's kind of doing, I think it's not as convincing as it once was. And I think there are many places you could argue in Europe where people might see a combination of realities, when it comes to these personal liberties that you're talking about and a context in which those personal liberties are not as threatened, even if they're not as advanced. It could be perception, but there is a reality, and perception dictates reality. Let's not forget like, you know, for as

much as any of us can accurately say what America is, in this moment, there is a deep perception that things aren't protected that we used to assume are protected.

TM: You spent the much of the first half of our talk explaining to us how perception is not reality. If perception is reality, then we Arabs are in fact the terrorists, no backward people, that they perceive us to be.

ASE: Dr. Tarek, there's a distinction. I said perception dictates reality, not meaning that perception becomes reality. Forgive me, maybe I'm not being clear or articulate. What I mean is for as much, as we perceive things about ourselves and the moment we find ourselves in, that influence dictates what actually plays out in reality. It doesn't mean that is the reality, and I just think if you look— I mean honestly, anecdotally, I've lived in New York for 10 years. There are more murders in Brooklyn and in New York than ever before, in many years. And I see it in the street, there is a perception I feel walking in New York City streets of being unsafe in a way that I never used to. And is that because I'm perceiving, you know, the media, and I'm watching too much, you know, TV or what have you? No, it's also the way in which people are interacting. You know, fear is a very palpable motivator, in terms of behavior, and I think people—when people are fearful, they are easy to control and co-opt. And so, I don't want to delay this part of the conversation, but like I think, you know, it's not a coincidence that many demagogues and others use fear to control people. And I think Trump's been very effective at doing that. But he's also been effective at making, at least those of us who value those personal freedoms and liberties, he has made it feel, whether it's true or not, and I think it is true, that we're losing the guarantee of that trajectory, and I don't think, you know, a Biden win is going to— I think it'll be a lot better. I think we'll be further towards that role. Maybe we can re-engage with the world, and we won't be so isolated. But I don't know that it's all just going to become better. I mean, if you look at a lot of economic markers, in terms of individuals not the stock market and like corporations but like your average American, things aren't getting better. And I think our perception that things aren't getting better limits our ability to actually move forward.

KH: So Ahmed. I think we need to spend just a few moments talking about the implications of all this for the relationship between the United States and the Arab world. There was a time when the majority of Arab countries would look to the United States to solve their problems, whether the problems are democracy, whether those problems are development, solving these conflicts, or even providing protection or security for their countries. Given everything you've described for us today, does that view still hold? And I guess the flip side of that question is should it hold? I mean you, as an Arab-American, would you advocate to especially the youth in the Arab world to look to the United States to solve the region's problems?

ASE: No, in fact, I welcome that shift. You know, I think it's always been a bit problematic because, you know, we need to distinguish between Arab leaders and Arab people, as I'm sure you know. There's often a distinction. I think, you know, the people don't necessarily look—and I don't know, maybe we disagree on this— for the U.S. to so-called, you know, solve their problems. I think there is and there should be a role for the U.S. to play in terms of

guaranteeing— and again, I'm speaking like ideally, as it has in the past. And I think there's many signs you could see in varying countries, including Egypt, where this has become kind of a crisis point, the flashpoint where the U.S. and civil society and institutions, especially around human rights and accountability and transparency, not just in governance. I think there's a role for America to play to protect some of those freedoms and liberties that you know, Tarek, rightfully mentioned. Many people in our world look to the U.S. and look to people who have moved here. That they're afforded these—you know, I know for example, just anecdotally, I know many people from Egypt, a handful of people who are close friends of mine, who in recent years have left Egypt due to persecution and several other Arab countries around sexuality, for example right. And they find a home in this moment in America and this madness in America. And they feel, despite all the things that we've outlined that that suggests America's is diminished and is Trump is struggling, they find real solace, and they remind me that, of course, there is a role to play. I do think though that Trump's sort of isolationist policies and his unwillingness to hold a lot of Arab leaders and their governments, not just accountable to America by any means but accountable to their own people as we've seen other administrations do, that is just another one of the kind of, you know, historical roles of America and some of the kind of normalcies and the norms, if you will, that Trump has completely abandoned.

KH: I think this is the question. Should the United States play that role. I mean, is it for the United States to ensure that Arab governments are somehow—to use your words—accountable to their publics?

ASE: I think it's hard to discuss that without looking at the other ways in which America influences the Arab world and Arab governments, in terms of aid, in terms of, you know, kind of Trump boasting about saving MBS from any accountability on the tape with Bob Woodward when it comes to, you know, the killing of a journalist, of course Khashoggi, the eight billion dollars in arms sales that the U.S. has given to Saudi for example, the role in Yemen. You know, to take the politics out of it. I mean I'm not trying to answer your question— just so people don't say that I'm evading the question. I think there is a role for the U.S. government and U.S. institutions to play in terms of protecting, whatever, you know, liberties are afforded to Arab populations. But I also think in terms of their—I think the U.S. has a role. I don't think they should be doing nation building as we were doing in Iraq. But I reject this idea that the U.S. should have no involvement, as if it's even feasible, in terms of shifts that the Arab world may be able to make to afford more plurality, more of voices, and to afford their citizens more protections and liberties.

TM: We want to open up the discussion to include members of our audience, but before we do that, you know, you've spoken quite eloquently of the importance of these ideals of freedom and personal autonomy that America stands for, if imperfectly but that are really universal values. How are we going to get these things in the Arab world? I want you to think forward,

ASE: What do they say? The multi-billion trillion-dollar question in any sort of debate: how do we attain them? What is the path?

TM: Yeah, tell me a story of how these will come to the Arab world. That might be too hard a question.

ASE: Well let me tell you this. The general answer, I think—and I've thought about this a lot over the years long before Trump's kind of, you know, threatening of some of these things in the U.S.— I think if it is to happen in the Arab world, unfortunately, it's my belief that it will come through a process of deep and serious crisis. I know this may seem vague but also depressing to some of us who might want to believe that there's a path towards reform or progress in this sense that is incremental and that is a trajectory that we're already on. I'm not so sure that that's true. I think the internet, for example, has dramatically changed our perceptions of what is possible in the Arab world, especially amongst different generations. And so, I think you're starting to see a stratification that is quite troubling but also in the long term.

In the event of a crisis in one Arab state or in the region at large— and by crisis, you know, it's almost odd to say that because, of course, the region's been mired in crises, both economic and political, for many years. But I can't envision— I think through art, through culture, through storytelling, through those things will and have, quite frankly, pushed the needle in pockets of the region. But if we're to be honest—I think it's important. I don't know that that is the main pathway towards change. I think, you know, it's like when they say things have to get a lot worse before they get better. Just for as long as I can remember, I've wanted so desperately to see that come to fruition in the region, and I wouldn't say I'm less pessimistic of that now. But I would say there are people who are tirelessly pushing the needle forwards, and the reason that I think it doesn't move forward is because there are too many mechanisms in place where even those people that are pushing the envelope forward invariably have to answer to those mechanisms and those interests that pushed them back down.

TM: This is a much longer conversation, but you know, certainly when I look at the Arab world, I do see the gradual march towards greater, openness, and freedom that is coming really from below, from mechanisms like you talked about— the internet traffic with the rest of the world. But it sounds like you also feel that there are some breaks on that that need to be surmounted through— they're going to take some energy to surmount. I actually want to close with one last question. You know, because you are clearly a very pessimistic gentleman—

ASE: Yeah, I know. Not always. You know, I'm sure people— I don't know what's happened in the last four years. I should just quickly mention. But the disillusionment I came to realize after covering Trump in 2016 and the exhaustion I think not only depleted a part of my physical stamina but also my emotional stamina in terms of believing that things are going to get better. So perhaps that's what's marking this, miring this in a little bit of pessimism.

TM: So you may have obviated the last question I was going to ask before opening it up, which was if we push you to try to get back in touch with your optimistic self, how do you think the

U.S. might emerge or get out of this current moment and transcend the forces of darkness that you see swirling around it?

ASE: Creativity. You know, we talk about American ingenuity. We talk about for— as much as I mentioned the education system, you know, being in shambles in terms of the general education system, I think when it comes to higher education, there's so many interesting things happening. I think that it will not come from strictly— I think the ballot box will be a part of it. But I think it's going to — I think there's going to have to be a kind of re-imagining of what America is because I really believe that this issue of racism that America has consistently avoided to tackle authentically and with accountability, in a serious way, has held America back in ways that we can't even— I mean, you know, the best scholars and people I respect have outlined it all. But I think it will start by addressing the truths. You know, we celebrate Thanksgiving and Columbus Day. And the division on social media of those who are like lambasting those truths and then those who are attached to it because they're so scared to let go and for America to change. And you know, America is not going to change, and life is not going to change for the majority of Americans until we look in the mirror. It sounds cheesy, but we've managed to be— this is why I talk about priorities.

We've managed to avoid prioritizing the things that actually matter when you want to measure a country's well-being, and that's collectively and individually. We overlook healthcare. We overlook education and teachers and the importance of that. And then we have this moment where our education system, our economy, our healthcare system are glaringly failing compared to a large part of not just the advanced world but other countries. And to have the vantage point where I was in Kuwait, a country mired in a lot of its own problems and instability and uncertainty, politically and economically, and to be looking at America—and I guess this is where the pessimism comes from—to see America just, you know, given to its worst sort of traits and to see— I think there needs to be a more radical shift beyond when I talked about extractive earlier, like you know to a regenerative economy.

My last story for AJ+ was going to Texas, which is the bastion of, you know, conservative culture and oil and whatnot. I did a story that I'm so proud of because it gave me hope, and so maybe this is a nice way to bring it all full circle. Short version is there a lot of young Republicans in Texas who are actively working towards renewable energy, and Texas leads America and renewable energy, even if Trump is pulling out of the Paris Climates. And I found that to be hopeful, why? Because for as much as I want to believe that, you know, those young conservatives are morally worried about the wildfires and climate change, that's not what was motivating them to invest in climate change and to believe in climate change and work towards renewables. What was doing it is that we've reached grid parity, and that it's now economically lucrative. And that is a mindset that drives a lot of people's decisions, both individually and collectively in the conservative and Republican space.

And one thing I think Americans don't do enough is we don't look to places where we can compromise on maybe our values. This is why when you read that twitter description, it's like we can double down as Trump has on the divisions and what sets us apart. Or, we can say hey,



you don't think climate change is real. You don't think we should, you know, do this for all these moralistic reasons. Fine, you're motivated by money. Let's regulate that within reason, but let's use that motivation to work together to make sure America is the leader of renewable energy. Why is it that China is creating solar? Anyway, the point is America in many ways has, I think, abdicated its role in terms of pushing innovation. And even for me to say this is controversial, right, because historically America has always been hailed as the bastion of creativity and innovation. Not in the last few years, not in the fields where it matters, and not in the fields that are going to dictate what governments and what societies thrive. Climate change is real, and it's not a political talking point. And this is true for the Arab world too, right. These states that are now—you know, Kuwait may be tapping into their after-oil fund because of the pandemic, and a lot of governments around the world are scrambling in this moment. And I think America— to bring it back to your question—it's just compromise and realizing that, you know, if we want to achieve, we have to work together. It sounds cheesy, but there is very little I should say that makes me feel as if there is even an awareness of how divided America is when it comes to the decision-making level.

TM: So I will say that, you know, I asked you to try to think optimistically, and you sort of did. And I think in your answer, you invoked a lot of kind of quintessential American characteristics. when you talked about, for example, those young folks in Texas. You invoke this kind of American ingenuity and can do it attitude. When you invoked creativity as one of the pathways that is going to get us out of this moment. Again, you're invoking something that I think is, you know, particularly unique about America. So I think even you believe that the fundamentals are still there. But I want to let other people in our audience engage with you. So what we will do now is open it up for questions, and ladies and gentlemen, if you'd like to ask a question of our guest, Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, you can use the raise hand function in Zoom. And you can access that by looking at the bottom of your zoom window, clicking on participants and then on the right-hand side of your screen. There should be an option for you to raise your hand, and then I will call on you. And then I'll invite you to unmute your microphone, and you can ask your question. So the first question I have is from Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, senior fellow of the Middle East Initiative, a great friend of our program. Go ahead Sultan. For some reason, your sound is not coming through even though you're unmuted. Let me try to do it myself. Okay, so can you unmute again now? The icon is saying you're unmuted, but we cannot hear you.

ASE: This is true.

TM: Okay we'll come back to Sultan while we work out that technical difficulty. So the next person I have on my list is the distinguished Kennedy School student Devika Balachandran. Go ahead.

DB: Thank you so much for joining us. I'm in Professor Masoud's class, and I'm always asking questions, so this is really exciting to hear from you. I'm really curious to hear—so you said that like America hasn't really shown anything that indicates that it is moving towards becoming less racist, to simplify what you were saying earlier. And I'm curious. Outside of like investing in health care and education, which would broadly target like everyone and not specific minority

groups, what are some ways potentially including or aside from reparations that you think would indicate that America is moving in the right direction?

ASE: Good question. I know this might seem overly simple. I regret to say that I think we don't listen, and we have a short-term memory. If you look at, you know, America and the story of America and how it's been told, you look at people who are controversial scholars— if you will—such as Cornell West and others, who have rightfully highlighted I think the answer to your question in a way that is much more eloquent than I ever could. You know, we've seen and again when I say perception dictates reality, I really appreciate you challenging me a little bit on that because it's not absolute. But black people and the perception they must have, you know, of their value— not just because of what one cop does or 600 cops or, you know, the police brutality—but all the different ways in which they suffer, and are we really listening? Not just to them, but are they listening to each other? When we have these sorts of conversations in these forums, I can't tell you how many times—you know, of course Palestine, and when I advocate for the for the rights of Palestinians as a journalist or as a speaker in the U.S. context, it's often dismissed, disparaged. How can I put this? I am always dismayed at the way in which we listen to each other when there's a flashpoint, a moment of an opportunity to learn. And what ends up happening is in this cancel culture and in this 24-hour news cycle and in this social media, siloed walled-off identities of, you know, not just liberal and conservative but even all of the divisions between liberals and socialists. And you know, it's almost like we listen to what we want to hear. And it's like the confirmation bias phenomenon of social media, I think, is actually culturally infiltrated into even offline, how we approach disagreement and how attached we are to outcomes and to fulfilling what it is we believe based on our own socio-economic, you know, status or what have you. I'm curious, but sorry I don't want to ramble too much. What do you think might be, other than investing in education as we talked about, what do you see as maybe a glaring missed opportunity?

TM: Is this me you're asking or my student?

ASE: No your student.

TM: Oh yeah. She's muted. Sorry.

ASE: Oh because maybe you had a thought that informed the question.

TM: Well you know what, you know, I can attest that Devika has many thoughts, and they're all excellent. But in in order to just keep us on time, I am going to read out Sultan's question, and then I will call on our colleague, Gary Samour, formerly of the Kennedy School, currently the director of the Crown Center for Middle East Studies at Brandeis and my personal role model and hero. But let me ask Sultan's question. So Sultan says, "Ahmed you spent 10 years in some of the most prestigious media firms. Do you still feel that traditional media has a role to play in strengthening understanding between the U.S. and the Arab world, or has it been compromised on both sides beyond repair?"

ASE: Fantastic question. A role to play. Just remind me, in what specific way?

TM: In specifically strengthening understanding between the U.S. and the Arab world.

ASE: Oh Sultan, always with the apt questions, so relevant too. I can't honestly say that there is no role to play, by simple virtue of the fact that there are people like Ayman Mohyeldin and others who have to use a, you know, very common term that we're accustomed to when referring to Muslims or Arabs, who have infiltrated the mainstream media. And the reason I start with Ayman is he brings in a casual sense a kind of accountability in context to any coverage of the Middle East in a way that I think has been sorely lacking. Now on the flip side, I do think that the reputation and the relevance, quite frankly, in the debate or question of the Arab world in the U.S. and the relationship between the two, I think the mainstream media is falling way behind other forms of interfacing and storytelling.

And that's where I think art and culture and programs and protest movements and the ways in which you can still connect with groups, I think that's a lot more promising in terms of moving U.S. forward and that relationship forward. I think there is no shortage of ways in which the— and I've seen this both personally, as I started saying earlier in the conversation where it's so difficult to convince the decision makers, if you will, in that space of mainstream media. Not just Palestinians but any Arab story is viable is interesting, is engaging, is compelling, is useful to an American audience or to their audience, unless it fits a very conventional and mundane and kind of, you know, this story and this narrative that we've come to know. I mean I can't overstate how quick people are to dismiss other stories, and that's where it's interesting. You know, the one good thing about social media, I mean you know, back during the Arab uprising—Sultan will remember. That's how I met him in part. You know, the prolific tweeter that he was. But you know, one of the things that I've admired about him and others— you know, there was a moment where social media felt like it could potentially change everything, the game here, the game there. And it seemed like, you know, this powerful tool for the better. And I think if you look now, many of us who saw that moment and lived that moment and saw the potential and the possibility that social media brought in terms of progress in the region, especially for youth, it's kind of been flipped on its head in terms of how social media is both used in the Arab world to suppress, to target, to divide. And quite sadly, it's all the more glaring how it's being used to do that in the West.

And that's, I think, the birth of my pessimism that has become kind of the sidekick during this conversation. It comes from my inability to marry and kind of trust that there is hope because I think the mainstream media in America has abdicated a lot of its responsibilities for the U.S. But also, all hope is lost when it comes to the Arab world. Quite frankly, that's why I'm not working for the U.S. mainstream media right now. Maybe that's not the best thing to say, but I just think it's a bigger part of the problem.

Just look, for example, very quickly. I know this doesn't have to do with the Arab world, Sultan, but this whole controversy. And just to bring up the whole Kamala Harris— Rachel Maddow— MSNBC thing yesterday, the fact that NBC is running, you know, Trump's [town hall]. NBC, the

network that built this man, that has almost— so you know— destroyed America, if you will, to use the media as kind of inflamed rhetoric, you know. Here they are doing— like short-term memory lesson wasn't learned. They are still giving him free airtime, you know, despite his threats and all that he's done and still laughing it off on air, you know. And I'm not criticizing Rachel or Kamala for laughing it off. I mean it was a funny moment yesterday. I'm not providing enough context for those who missed it, but this idea of laughing at the fact that a network that created a man and perpetuated a false illusion that he was successful and that he was all the things that he told us he was that he turned out not to be. That we're still here in this moment four years later, and they're going to do it again, I think, says a lot about the impotence of American media. And yeah, presumably, it depends on what they do with them once they have them on the air. In other words, like you could imagine that if they ask him tough questions then we would say that this was a good thing to have done?

ASE: If they ask him tough questions, I will give you whatever it is you want from me.

TM: Okay, our next question is from Dr. Gary Samour, director of the Crown Center. Welcome Gary. Let me unmute you. You should be able to. Yep, great.

GS: Thank you very much Tarek. Thank you, Ahmed for a really eloquent presentation. So I'm really surprised that you don't see this upcoming U.S. election as a defining moment for the American character. I mean for me, if Biden wins decisively, which I think he will, it's a sharp renunciation of everything that Trump stands for, and it's a validation of Biden's platform, which is based on unity, racial justice, has candidates of black women, you know, a regenerative economy, even personal morality and human rights and foreign policy. Not that Biden will solve all the problems, of course. But for me, if you want to be optimistic, the fact that the American people, I think, are very likely to correct the mistake they made in 2016 is the most optimistic fact I can think of.

ASE: Well if I may, forgive me. I appreciate you bringing up that point. The one thing I will say on this is, you know, anything is possible, right, including a landslide where there would be very little doubt on election night. But I would very respectfully invite you to tell me— you know, I hate to say this, but as a journalist who, you know, facts are the foundation of our craft. I can't tell you how many times I came to the really depressing realization that many Americans may have also come to that facts don't matter in this moment. It's not that they shouldn't matter. It's quite the contrary. But it has been proven that facts don't necessarily matter, at least for a large half, if not small minority of the country.

Now the reason I mention that is because even if Biden were to take a commanding early lead, I mean what Trump has managed to do is, you know, with a plague and a recession and the catastrophic politics, like it's not possible that there's going to be a constitutional crisis. In my mind, it is probable, right? And if you look at kind of —Trump's ego maniacal and all that. He's laid the groundwork, beyond calling it the China virus and beyond all the mail-in voting and all. He is, and this is, again, where people might even call him masterful. There's no fail-safe kind of measure against this constitutional crisis that is in my mind probable and very likely. I mean I

see it being regardless of the lead. I think there's going to be a post-election kind of struggle in the courts, and that's obvious to anybody, right? And both sides are preparing for that. It's going to happen in the streets as it has, and I think it'll be bigger depending on how big the margin is.

And you know, again, back to what my dad had mentioned, that moment of like him like glaring out into the distance in a very creepy way. If I were to ever reenact this—which I might very well do. It was almost like a premonition, and I'm not trying to, when he said civil war. You know, we can also define what is a civil war, and I don't necessarily think that's as likely as his tone suggested it might be, but all I'm trying to say is there's a very likely scenario where Trump is going to do what he has consistently promised. He's going to burn the house down. His Republican allies, as you know, who have so far seemed so willing to kind of play these parts and support him for their own benefit and gain. I mean, obstruct kind of the emergence of any sort of unambiguous victory for Biden in the electoral college, which is in of itself a huge problem and was in 2016, as we all know. So I just think Trump has laid the groundwork for this kind of post-election legal maneuvering that's going to circumvent the results, regardless of what the results are. I genuinely believe that, especially in the battleground states. And I think—and I'm not a constitutional scholar by any means— but my brief understanding is that the constitution is vague enough and specifically the electoral count act that a contested election is going to continue for months.

I mean we talk about, you know, America in this moment. I mean the machinery of democracy for better or worse is—I just think there are too many variables. And so you know, I'll be frank. I was thinking of going for the winter back to the Arab world, back to Kuwait to be home with my parents, if you know, that was like a possibility. And here I am, actually, in Florida is where I find myself, where president Trump tonight is in Miami, which is where I am. And he's going to be giving, you know, his town hall, and it's going to air on NBC. I mean what a failure — back to Sultan's earlier question. And to bring the two questions together, what a failure, regardless though of what they were to ask him; what a failure to give a figure like this because of the presidential protections or deference.

Why have we in the media— it took us years to say he's racist. People have been fired from their jobs for calling the president a racist. Did the president get fired for the series of, you know, like obscene and arguably illegal, if not arguably clearly illegal or like corrupt. So I just think, again, when we talk about priorities, I hope you're right, Gary. I think you may be right in that this is a watershed moment. I just wish I could believe, having seen the media and others fail to not only hold the president accountable but, quite frankly, hold ourselves accountable. And that was the biggest failure on display on Rachel Maddow's show last night. And, you know, I like her as much as the rest of the people and the pundits on MSNBC. But I think we shouldn't understate how serious this moment is going to be.

Plus. let's not forget that—let's assume Biden thinks he wins because of the electoral college, and Trump thinks he wins because he thinks he always wins. What's going to happen then? You're going to have one person come in on an inauguration day, and he's going to be Biden

with some kind of deep state ties. And then you have the president with all the powers of the presidency coming in and saying no, swear me in. I won. We contested the election. It's in the supreme court. Look at— I mean to understate this moment of constitutional crisis and how real it is, I think is dangerous.

GS: So I mean, I'll say if you're right that Trump is able to successfully contest an election he's lost, then I will join you in deep pessimism, and I'll move to Canada. But if I'm right, Trump fails and Biden wins. Yeah, I take that as not only the strength of American democracy but also tribute to the American character that they rejected Trump and everything he stands for.

ASE: I have never in my life after this conversation wanted to— and forgive me. I didn't even realize that I sound so pessimistic. I want to believe that I share some optimism with you. The one irony—and we might not have enough time to discuss it—if Biden wins, I'm going to be happy. Hopefully, you know, a lot of Americans are going to be happy. But you know who's not going to be happy?

GS: MSNBC and CNN.

ASE: That's true. And also MBS and many other Arab leaders who have been very pleased with Trump's relationship and, you know, what he's affording them and what he's not affording them, even at the expense of the American experience. So there's a deep irony in that, but I hope Gary, you're right. I really do.

GS: Inshallah.

KH: Ahmed, I think before we close, I hope we can get you to reflect quickly about something we did not talk about with the role of Arab Americans in all of this. So now clearly, Arab Americans have integrated very successfully in American politics, American media. I mean you mentioned American academia. I mean, our host for this conversation happens to be a leading light in that context and, of course, prominent Arab American members of congress. That's of course, different than organizing as a community, right? And by that, I don't mean in a partisan way. I mean, I assume there are Arab American democrats as there are Arab American Republicans—the role of the Arab American community in the midst of this polarization, in the midst of this anti-immigrant sentiment, in the in the midst of a situation of economic inequality that will be. And how do you see yourself as a member of that community?

ASE: It's a great question. I'm glad we're ending on this because as pessimistic as I may have been, one thing that is undeniable is, I think, you've seen the emergence of a group of Arab Americans that have maybe more media attention— not in the mainstream per se but real inspiring figures— often on social media. And I hate to talk about these younger Arab-Americans, but in a lot of ways, they are responsible, I think, for breaking some of the perceptions of Arab-Americans for other Americans. But specifically within the Arab-American community, I think, you know, it's a bit of a struggle though. And I'd be curious what you think because from my understanding, there is a lot of division in terms of what is the most

important issue for different groups of different Arab immigrants, based on how long they've been here, where they're coming from. Some people care deeply about what's happening back home, and that dictates and influences their views and how they choose to engage.

But on a grassroots level, I think it's undeniable, and not just because of, you know, Rashida Tlaib and others. And not just in the political realm but, you know, in influential roles. I think we've seen Arab-Americans, more than ever before, not shy away from asserting their views and their beliefs. I don't know if you're speaking more in a voting block or in the context of the election or if you mean just in general.

KH: Yeah I mean, even beyond this election I mean. The election will happen, you know, however they vote. No but just beyond the election to address the many challenges that you so eloquently spoke about throughout this conversation.

ASE: I think I know this may seem simple, but story telling and telling our stories and not being afraid to be as Arab as we are, as well as American as we are. Not that the two have to be incompatible, but at least for me— and I don't know if this sheds any light on what you're saying—at least my generation and especially the younger ones, which scare me quite frankly in terms of their aptitude on all these social platforms, there's been such a kind of embracing of Arab culture and almost like a mainstream, like on TikTok. And you know, I don't use TikTok that much, but I think to deny the cultural significance and impact that TikTok has, for better or worse, on young Americans and young Arab Americans, but at large and also on the general culture would be a misnomer.

And so yeah, I mean I think it's important just to keep connecting and telling our stories, and I think we're doing that with ease. And I think we're doing it where there's more interest, and it doesn't have to be that quintessential Arab immigrant story. I think, you know, the story of Arabs in America, in different pockets like Syria and how long, you know, Arabs have been in America and how maybe overlooked they've been and how we've also maybe overlooked our own potential influence. And I think it's definitely encouraging to see people connecting around things that matter to them both in, you know, insular Arab-American groups and then also—you know, we used to speak in 2016, especially after the women's march and all that about intersectional resistance. And that was a very kind of popular topic, and I think we're starting to see that. And Arab-Americans and other minority groups are engaging with each other and carrying more, including Jewish Americans. I mean, we didn't talk much about the topic of Palestine, but ironically in all of this, I would say regardless of Biden and Trump's policies, I think there is a lot of progress. Maybe not a lot. There's a sufficient amount of progress when it comes to the question of Palestine, the discourse around it. Obviously an issue that's important to Arab people in the Arab world, but also, you could argue important to Arab-Americans in the U.S.

TM: So ladies and gentlemen. We have come to the end of our time with Ahmed Shihab-Eldin. I think you'll all agree with me when I say that we've just experienced the special treat of being

in touch with a great communicator, a unique mind, a reflective soul, and a humane spirit. You can follow Ahmed on Twitter where his handle is @ase. On behalf of my brother Karim Haggag, I want to thank you all for joining us today and to express our very fond hope that you'll join us for other conversations in this series of Harvard-AUC dialogues with Arab thought leaders on the state of the United States. Ahmed thank you so much.

TM:Bye everybody.