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Senior Advisor to Deputy Secretary Focuses on Relationship Building

By Donna Miles
 American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Oct. 15, 2007 – If Hesham Islam's life story was translated into a screenplay -- and it's got all the makings of a Hollywood blockbuster -- the director would be hard-pressed to come up with a more compelling chain of events landing him as a top advisor to the deputy defense secretary.



Hesham Islam, special assistant for international affairs to Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England, spends a rare moment in his Pentagon office. Islam spends most of his time out of the office, building relationships. Photo by Donna Miles (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

The movie would open with Islam as a young boy growing up in Cairo, Egypt, huddling in terror as Israeli bombs came raining down, demolishing much of the building around him and his family.

Next would be the scene of the teenager who moves to Iraq when his Egyptian naval officer father is transferred to help establish the Arabian Gulf naval academy Islam would later attend.

The camera would then close in on a young merchant mariner adrift for three days in the Arabian Sea after an Iranian torpedo sunk his 16,000-ton cargo ship, drowning all but Islam and four of his crewmates.

Next viewers would see the young man, who after corresponding with an American pen-pal for more than three years, dares ask for the photograph that leaves him smitten with his future wife.

The action would shift to the United States, where the new husband, desperate to provide for his family, enlists in the Navy. Later he will be accepted into Officer Candidate School, then

ultimately retire 20 years later as a Navy commander.

Today, Islam is drawing on those vast experiences to advise Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England on international affairs.

Although Islam's life lends itself to high-drama scenes typically seen on the big screen, England sees him more as a behind-the-scenes player with a special talent for bringing other actors together.

Before retiring from the Navy, Islam contributed this skill and his regional and language expertise on the staff of then-Navy Secretary England. Much of Islam's work focused on U.S. military engagement with the Middle East.

As England moved to the No. 2 Pentagon position, Islam followed, broadening his purview to "the whole globe."

"He's my interlocutor," England said. "He represents me to the international community. He assists me in my own outreach efforts, and he's extraordinarily good at it."

Islam is rarely at his Pentagon desk, believing the best way to serve as England's "man out in town in Washington, D.C." is to be out and about, building relationships.

"I am a strong believer that there are no relationships between countries," he said. "Relationships are between people, and those relationships are what bring countries together."

"It is all about friendships between people," agreed England, "and you build them one person at a time."

England calls relationship building "a contact sport." "You can't develop friendships unless you actually go out and take the effort to meet people and interact with people," he said.

As he represents the Defense Department around the country and the around the world, England said, he counts on Islam's insights and advice. "Hesham helps me understand people's different perspectives and how they see things," England said. "He has a cultural background that's very helpful, but he also works at it very hard to get a better understanding of people and how they think."

Islam works tirelessly to befriend diplomats from around the world, learning from each about their country, its sensitivities, and its requirements. "I help them understand us, as Americans, and help my boss understand them," he said. "My goal is to bridge the gap and help people understand each other, even if we are different."

Not all Islam's efforts are directed toward other countries. A Muslim, Islam works closely with the Muslim-American community, encouraging its members to integrate into American society and take an active stand with the United States in the war on violent extremism. "This war can't be won by just Americans," he said. "It's a war that has to be fought by Muslims. Islam has been hijacked, and it is time to take it back."

Islam said he's proud of the 5,000 Muslims actively supporting that effort in the U.S. military. Among them is his own son, Navy Lt. j.g. Rami Islam, who serves aboard the carrier USS Carl Vinson. "As a parent, I'm very proud that my son is serving this country," he said.

After growing up in wartime, first in Egypt, then in Iraq, Islam hopes this dialogue can help eliminate differences that can lead to misunderstanding and conflict. "If people talk, people don't fight. If they talk, they don't argue," he said. "I try to bring talking and understanding into the dialogue."

"Hesham has wonderful friendships and relationships, and therefore he can give me extraordinarily good advice in dealing with countries and people," England said. "I take his advice, and I listen to him all the time."

England said he rarely disagrees with Islam's guidance. "After all," he said, "if you have a good doctor, you listen to your doctor, right?"

Biographies:

[Gordon England](#)



Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England (left) counts on the counsel of Hesham Islam (far right), his special assistant for international affairs, when representing the United States abroad. Here, Islam joins England during a visit to Iraq in July 2007. Courtesy photo

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Now-retired Navy Cmdr. Hesham Islam (right), special assistant for international affairs to Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England, poses before his retirement with his son, now Lt. j.g. Rami Islam. Five generations of the Islam family have served as naval officers. Courtesy photo

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