

SUMMARY

Throughout most of the present decade, many Muslims have become increasingly troubled by the state of relations between the United States and the Islamic world, and even more concerned about the future of these relations. Polls by numerous organizations bear out the fact that America's standing in Arab and Muslim countries in the past half decade has reached an all-time low. Yet the election of Barack Obama seems to herald a warming of Muslim-American relations.

This brief analyzes the changed American approach toward engagement with the Muslim world, based on the assumption—documented by numerous polls—that disagreements between the Muslim world and the United States have been driven by policies, not values. It calls for a robust policy of US engagement with a variety of actors in the Muslim world, including Islamist parties and grassroots organizations, and outlines the changing dynamic between mainstream Islamist/nationalist groups and the “radical paradigm” as exemplified by al-Qa’ida. The brief concludes by examining the factors that have driven the rise of radicalism, and urges US policy makers to find “common ground” with mainstream Islamic parties and engage with their legitimate representatives.

The United States and the Muslim World: How Engagement Will Improve Relations

By Emile Nakhleh

“I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.”

President Barack Obama in Cairo, June 4, 2009

President Obama’s New Approach to the Muslim World

President Obama’s post-inauguration statements on political Islam and his speeches in Turkey and Cairo have resonated well in the Muslim world, reflecting a willingness to move beyond the confrontational policy of the previous administration to a new era of “smart diplomacy.” According to media reports from Arab and Muslim countries, the bounce from President Obama’s conciliatory rhetoric among Arabs and Muslims would be long lasting if it is followed by significant policy shifts on human rights, political reform, democracy, war crimes, closing Guantanamo, and by renewed efforts at the highest level to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The administration’s direct contact with Iran, despite the Iranian government’s heavy-handed silencing of dissent over the June 2009 presidential election, again signals the President’s commitment to engaging the Muslim world and moving away from confrontation to diplomacy. The implied decoupling of the Afghan Taliban from al-Qa’ida and the Pakistan Taliban is another affirmation by the Obama administration that a distinction is being made between fighting terrorism and extending a peaceful hand to the wider Muslim world.

President Obama’s Cairo speech and his elaboration on his vision of future relations with the Muslim world helped put to rest the perception that many Muslims held during the previous

administration that the “war on terror” was actually a “war on Islam.” In addressing “Muslim communities,” as opposed to Muslim regimes, the President seemed to signal these regimes in his historic Cairo speech that engagement will be broad-based, will not be funneled through governments, and will focus on economic and educational opportunities that will help improve the quality of life in these societies and provide their youth with hope for the future.

Core Themes

The President’s “single narrative” approach to the Muslim world reflected several core themes, including the following:

- America is not at war with Islam.
- All religions share many “noble” ideas, including justice, tolerance, fairness, and a desire to make choices freely, and most peoples worldwide aspire for dignity, respect, equality, economic opportunity, progress, and security.
- Peoples in different societies—regardless of race, religion or color—should be able to select their governments freely, and governments should be transparent, accountable, just, and committed to the rule of law.
- The United States is committed to engaging Muslim communities to help foster a tolerant and creative vision of Islam, but Muslims themselves, not the US, should drive the debate.
- The US is committed to working with Muslim communities to settle regional conflicts on the basis of justice, fairness, and equity.
- In the pursuit of these objectives, the United States is committed to partnering with American Muslims because they can act as a bridge between the United States and the Muslim world.

John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. on August 6, 2009 elaborated further on the President’s Cairo speech. He emphasized two key points from the Cairo speech: First, America’s values and its commitment to justice, respect, fairness, and peace are the most effective weapons the country has with which to fight the forces of radicalism and terrorism. Second, bringing hope, educational promise, and economic opportunity to the youth in Muslim societies is the best defense against the false promises of death and destruction promoted by al-Qa’ida and its affiliates.

Core Issues

In his Cairo speech, President Obama addressed seven key issues which have been central to relations between the United States and the Muslim world. Highlighting these issues underscores the argument that disagreements between the Muslim world and the United States in recent years, but especially during the Bush administration, have been driven by policies, not values. A resolution of these issues over time will go a long way toward improving relations between America and Muslim societies.

Violent Extremism—al-Qa’ida, Bin Laden, terrorism; waning of the radical paradigm and energized debate among Muslims about the future vision of Islam

The Israel-Palestinian conflict—the Mitchell mission and the Obama Administration’s commitment to find a resolution to the conflict

Nuclear powers—a potentially nuclear Iran and the search for a negotiated resolution of this issue short of the use of force

Democracy—authoritarian, autocratic regimes and the absence of popular participation in the political process

Religious freedom—freedom of worship, religious minorities, proselytization, and conversion in Muslim majority and Muslim minority countries

Women’s rights—economic and educational opportunities, and a belief that societies cannot attain tangible economic and social progress without guaranteeing women equal rights and opportunities

Economic development and opportunity—the public and private sectors should work together to provide jobs, to train youth and others for jobs in 21st century globalized economies, and to provide opportunities for job seekers without discrimination because of gender or religion.

President Obama’s Cairo speech has resonated well in the Muslim world, reflecting a willingness to move beyond the confrontational policy of the previous administration to a new era of “smart diplomacy.” According to media reports from Arab and Muslim countries, the bounce from President Obama’s conciliatory rhetoric among Arabs and Muslims, however, will be short-lived if it is not followed by significant policy shifts on human rights, democracy, war crimes, closing Guantanamo, and by renewed efforts at the highest level to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Three key assumptions underpin the President’s desire to engage Muslim communities:

- Muslims’ disagreements with the United States have been driven by specific policies, not values.
- The low standing of the US in Muslim countries, which has been largely driven by perceptions of a “war against Islam” in the previous administration, is reversible.
- Effective US engagement must be balanced and based on mutual respect, justice, and fairness; the US must work to regain its “honest broker” status.

The Necessity of a Robust Engagement Policy

The argument advocating a robust engagement policy is predicated upon several key assumptions, including the following:

First, **the Islamization of politics has changed qualitatively and quantitatively after 9/11, with growing demands for economic, educational, political, and social justice in Muslim societies.**

Numerous Islamic political parties and movements have become more engaged in the political process through elections. Many authoritarian Muslim regimes have used the specter of fighting terrorism to thwart any efforts to democratize and still all demands for political reform, regardless of whether these demands are voiced by secular opposition groups or by Islamic parties.

Second, **religious-nationalist ideology is driving Islamic politics at the state level in most Muslim states.** In fact, religion has become an ideological force motivating action by, and defining the interests of, states and non-state actors. Regime corruption and repression and the bankruptcy and marginalization of traditional secular elites, largely because of their association with regimes, have enhanced the legitimacy of Islamic political parties as credible agents of reform and advocates of transparent and accountable government and the rule of law.

Third, **global political religious trends have been driven largely by the failure of secular/nationalist ideologies, demographic and economic stresses, globalization and the communications revolution, entrenched authoritarianism in many Muslim countries, and a weak identification with the state.** Religions and religious affiliation have become drivers of the political process across the globe—from Russia to India and from Turkey to Malaysia.

Fourth, **because of diminishing regime legitimacy and a weak identification with the state, Islam has become an identity anchor for millions of Muslims.** Religious programs broadcast on global satellite television networks are able to carry the “sacred word” from Mecca and other religious centers of Islam to the remotest villages in West Africa, Central Asia, the Indus Valley and Western China. The Middle East is no exception.

Fifth, **Islamic political activism is diverse and complex.** Such diversity—cultural, economic, historical, political, religious, and demographic—dictates that before Washington engages these groups, American policy makers must understand the varied historical narratives that different Islamic groups cling to, the reasons why entrenched authoritarian regimes oppose political participation by Islamic activists and secular oppositionists, and the indigenous, country-specific agendas of Islamic groups and their legislative behavior in national legislatures.

Sixth, **political ideology is embedded in energized debate among Muslim activists on Islamic blogs and in the media, both print and electronic.** The debate has focused on at least three themes: a) the future vision of Islam that Muslims should pursue, and whether such vision should be limited to the moral or normative dictates of the faith

or expand to the political and social realm; b) whether Islamic political parties should continue to participate in the political process through elections even under regimes that actively undermine the democratic process, or whether they should reject politics and go back to the core mission of *da'wa* or proselytization; and, c) whether Islamic political parties, which have traditionally been committed to the implementation of *shari'a*, or Islamic law, can equally have a long-term commitment to democracy and pluralism as the terms are understood in the West and other parts of the world.

Seventh, **most mainstream Islamic political parties are territorially focused and committed to an indigenous agenda and do not share the global jihadist ideology of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.**

The strategic goal of their political activism and struggle is to liberate their territory from occupation and to safeguard the political, economic, and security status of their people. In fact, Islamic political parties—including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Palestinian Hamas, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party and others—were severely criticized by al-Qa'ida's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri for participating in national elections. They openly and forcefully rejected al-Qa'ida's criticism.

Eighth, **Islamic parties' disagreements with the United States and other Western powers in recent years have been driven by specific policies, not by disputes over values of good governance.** Public opinion polls—including Pew, Gallup, BBC, Zogby, and others—have clearly shown that majorities of Muslims, including in the Middle East, endorse fair and free elections, transparent and accountable government, free press, independent judiciaries, and the rule of law.

Their disagreements with the United States, according to these polls, have been driven by specific policies, which they considered aggressive, a threat to world peace, and anti-Islamic. As mentioned above, these policies included, among other things, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, continued war in Afghanistan, support for Israeli occupation of the West Bank, bellicose rhetoric against Iran and Syria, and ongoing cozy relations with autocratic regimes.

Ninth, as recent events in Gaza have shown, **mainstream Islamic political parties have fought the rise of the new Salafi ideology because of its conservative, intolerant, and exclusivist bent.** This Salafi ideology, which in some cases has been supported by regimes as an antidote to mainstream Islamic activism, is grounded in a narrow reading of religious texts, preaches an extremist version of Wahhabi Islam, and calls for the establishment of a strict version of Islamic law that separates the sexes, restricts women's participation in education, culture, and business, and imposes a rigid moral code on society. Engaging mainstream Islamist political parties will likely empower them to fight the rising extremist Salafi trend in Middle Eastern societies. The bloody conflict between Hamas and the Salafi Jund Ansar Allah group in Gaza in August 2009, which occurred during the attack on the Ibn Taymiyya mosque in Rafah and the killing of the Salafi leader Shaykh Abu Mousa, illustrates the threat that mainstream Islamic parties across the Middle East are facing from the rise of the Salafi trend.

Tenth, by **engaging mainstream Islamic political parties and other civil society organizations,** based on mutual trust, respect, and common values, Western powers, including the United States, **will help promote international peaceful**

cooperation and in the process further their interests and the interests of Muslim societies.

Engaging Islamic political parties is critical for winning the battle for the “hearts and minds” of Muslims in the Middle East and globally. Reaching out to the vast majority of Muslims is a daunting challenge, which requires a long-term commitment in time, resources, and personnel. It also requires a thorough knowledge of the cultures involved, sophisticated influence operations, strategically developed public diplomacy campaigns, a coherent and carefully-crafted message, and utilization of credible indigenous Muslim voices. Islamic political parties in the Middle East and elsewhere are crucial for engaging the Islamic world.

The Radical Paradigm: Is it Waning?

The radical paradigm, as enunciated by Osama Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida, seems to be on the wane precisely because of its opposition to ideas of tolerance, inclusion, and participation that mainstream Islamic parties are pushing for. More and more Muslims are denouncing the killing of innocent civilians—Muslims and non-Muslims—and are beginning to question the logic of violence openly and publicly. The waning appeal of the radical paradigm and the marginalization of al-Qa'ida have been caused by its inability to provide Muslim youth with jobs, education, and economic opportunity. Some scholars of al-Qa'ida have argued that al-Qa'ida seems to be suffering from a crisis of legitimacy and authority, and that it has lost the moral argument regarding the justification of the killing of innocent civilians. Despite al-Qa'ida's strong and persistent opposition to “man-made” democracy and elections, more and more Islamic political parties are participating in national elections in their respective countries.

It is becoming clear that despite al-Qa'ida's continued global threat, country-specific, religious-nationalist jihad has superseded global jihad. Local jihadist paradigms have trumped global jihad, which al-Qa'ida surely must find very disturbing. Even on the local level, Islamic political parties are losing ground in favor of nationalist resistance (*muqawama*) and anti-regime defiance (*sumud*). Middle Eastern Islamic political parties have rejected al-Qa'ida's call that they join global jihad.

Some regime supporters hold the position that engaging Islamic political parties could create an environment conducive to radicalization and instability, which also could endanger the stability of pro-Western "moderate" regimes. However, the fact is that the social, political and economic factors that have driven the rise of radicalism in the Arab Middle East have emanated from specific social policies, and that the radical paradigm has been on the wane in recent years when more and more Islamic parties have entered the political fray. The following are some of the factors that have contributed to the rise of radicalism:

Attempts at democratization in several Arab countries remain precarious due to entrenched authoritarianism, regime-manipulated electoral systems, a weakened Arab state system, and the diminishing legitimacy of national leaders and ruling elites.

The struggle for human rights is anemic in many of these countries due to silencing of pro-democracy voices and pro-reform dissidents; retarding of human and civil rights; expanding regime control of civil society institutions in the name of national security; the failure of secular nationalist ideologies and the inability of secular, liberal groups to persuade regimes

to democratize; regime refusal to allow pro-reform political groups, including non-Islamic ones, to organize politically; and Arab elites' silence about abhorrent violations of women's rights in a number of countries within the region.

Non-state actors and sub-state loyalties are on the rise due to weak identification with the traditional national state. The July 2006 war in Lebanon and the December 2008-January 2009 war in Gaza involved waging massive military campaigns by one state (Israel) against non-state actors (Hezbollah and Hamas). Continued violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan is another vivid example of ongoing conflict between states and non-state actors.

Economic expansion in many Muslim and Arab countries is uncertain due to population growth and demographics; global economic downturn; energy and other "rent" incomes; and systemic corruption at the state level. As the "rent-poor" states become less and less capable to provide for the welfare and security of their citizens, thereby threatening the foundations of the social contract between leaders and publics, massive corruption becomes a new form of "rent" that keeps ruling elites in power.

A solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains elusive due to continued Israeli occupation of Arab lands in Palestine and Syria; persistent confiscation of lands and construction of settlements in occupied territories; constrained business and investment opportunities for Palestinians; a territorial blockade of Gaza; internecine conflict among Palestinians, and the inability of the PA and Hamas to form a national unity government; two recent Israeli wars in Lebanon and Gaza; and, a tepid Israeli commitment to a two-state solution.

Challenges of Engagement

As long as the above drivers exist, radicalism and extremism will be present in many Muslim countries for years to come, regardless of the fortunes of al-Qa'ida. Several authoritarian Muslim regimes have used the fight against terrorism as an excuse to deny their peoples the right to participate in the political process freely, openly, and without harassment. Security services in some of these countries not only have tracked potential terrorists; they have used state power and resources to muzzle civil society organizations which have engaged in peaceful political action on behalf of liberty and political freedoms. The record of Islamic political parties' participation in electoral politics, over several national elections, does not support the pro-regime argument that such participation destabilizes society or undermines national security. In fact, it might be time for senior policy makers in Western countries to revisit the "moderate" moniker that has been bestowed on pro-Western regimes despite their authoritarian rule. If one equates "moderate" with tolerance, pluralism, commitment to human, civil, and women's rights, freedoms of speech, assembly, and political organization, transparent and accountable government, independent judiciary, and the rule of law, then the behavior of several regimes cannot possibly place them in the "moderate" column, as the term is understood in democratic societies. The perceived hypocrisy resulting from equating authoritarian regimes with "moderation" has also driven the radicalization process in some Muslim polities and underscored the continued criticism of American policy by liberal and secular elites across the Muslim world. As engagement gets under way, it might be more productive if policy makers replace "moderation" with "tolerance" and begin to refer to autocratic regimes as "friendly" and "pro-Western," rather than "moderate."

While this brief argues that engaging Islamic political parties is necessary, it also recognizes the fact that such a process is fraught with challenges, especially as many "friendly" Muslim regimes are opposed to such an engagement. Furthermore, while it might be possible to engage Islamic political parties, some of them will pose a particular legal dilemma for the United States. Hamas and Hezbollah, for example, are considered terrorist organizations under US law; one or more Iraqi Islamic parties are closely aligned with Iran; and a few Shi'a movements in Iraq and Bahrain, for instance, advocate sectarianism. As the Obama Administration proceeds with implementing some of the principles enunciated by the President in his Cairo speech, policy makers will have to find ways to convince regimes that engaging civil society institutions and non-state actors in those societies will not necessarily undermine those regimes. If the people in a particular country have the right to choose their government freely, they will be more invested in social peace and political stability. In the long run, this will minimize tensions between state and society. Additionally, US policy makers could find common ground with Islamic parties and at least initially engage with their legislative representatives. In the final analysis, engaging Muslim societies must go through Islamic parties and movements in those societies.

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