

Changing the Conversation Between America and the Muslim World

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“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 Barak Obama in Cairo, June 4, 2009.*

Introductory Remarks

Before I begin my talk, I would like to offer a few key assumptions about the Muslim world:

First, the Muslim world is extremely diverse and complex. There is no such a thing as one Muslim world, one Muslim “street,” or one Muslim public opinion. The diversity that characterizes the 1.5 billion Muslims is geographic, cultural, historical, religious, sectarian, and linguistic. The Muslims of Saudi Arabia, for example, are very different from the Muslims of the United States or the United Kingdom. Although a minority of Muslims have supported and participated in extremism and violence, vast majorities of Muslims do not.

Second, based on my recent talks in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and exchanges with Muslim interlocutors in that country, I am confident in stating that they view US-Muslim world engagement as a two-way street and that Muslim communities and governments have to participate in the process of improving the lives of their citizens. They also believe that engagement, as Secretary of State Clinton said recently in Morocco, must focus on tangible issues, ranging from education to science and technology to micro-investment and job creation. Tolerance and mutual trust must underpin the engagement process if it is going to succeed.

Third, although no historical or societal events or trends can justify or condone the use of violence and terrorism, it is imperative that we deepen our expertise about Muslim societies and understand Muslims' view of themselves, their future vision of their faith, their different historical narratives, and their attitudes towards non-Muslims. It is equally imperative that Muslims also expand their knowledge about Western societies and cultures and about the common values that unite non-Muslim societies. Through this expertise, both sides can begin to search for common ground and tear down the walls of suspicion and mistrust between Islam and non-Muslims.

And now please allow me to focus on the President's speech.

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—the so-called big "T" versus small "t"—that a distinction is being made between fighting terrorism and extending a peaceful hand to the wider Muslim world.

The bad news about Afghanistan is that the firefight is becoming much bloodier and the Taliban more emboldened. The debate in Washington, DC this past month focused on whether the US should pursue a different course of action regarding the Afghan insurgency.

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 a war on Islam. In addressing "Muslim communities" not 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 regimes, and will focus on economic and educational opportunities that will help improve the quality of life in these societies and will 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:

1. America is not at war with Islam.
2. 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.
3. Peoples in different societies, regardless of race, religion and color should be able to select their governments freely and that governments should be transparent, accountable, just and committed to the rule of law.
4. The United States is committed to engaging Muslim communities to help foster a tolerant and creative vision of Islam, but that Muslims themselves, not the US, should drive the debate.
5. The US is committed to working with Muslim communities to settle regional conflicts on the basis of justice, fairness, and equity.
6. In the pursuit of these objectives, the United States is committed to partner 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, our values as a nation and our commitment to justice, respect, fairness, and peace are the most effective weapon we have in our arsenal 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

President Obama addresses seven key issues in his speech, which have been central to relations between the United States and the Muslim world. Highlighting these issues in the Cairo speech underscores the argument that disagreements between the Muslim world and the United States in recent years, but especially during the Bush administration, were 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 Ladin, 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 countries 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 the youth and others for jobs in the 21st century globalized economies and 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.
- US low standing in Muslim countries, which has been largely driven by the perceived war against Islam in the previous administration, is reversible.
- Effective US engagement must be balanced and based on mutual respect, justice, and fairness; regain “honest broker” status.

Necessity for 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 Muslim authoritarian regimes have used the specter of fighting terrorism to thwart any efforts to democratize and stall 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 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 regime diminishing 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, as was mentioned in the Introductory Remarks, **Islamic political activism is diverse and complex.** Such diversity—cultural, economic, historical, political, religious and demographic—dictates that before Washington engages these groups, American policymakers 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, 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 its core mission of *da'wa* or proselytization; and c) whether Islamic political parties, which have traditionally been committed to the implementation of Sharia 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 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 judiciary 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 was mentioned above, these policies included, among other things, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, continued war in Afghanistan, support of Israeli occupation of the West Bank, bellicose rhetoric against Iran and Syria, and on-going cozy relations with autocratic regimes.

Ninth, as recent events in Gaza have shown that 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 political parties will likely empower them to fight the rising extremist Salafi trend in Middle Eastern societies including Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Morocco, Sudan, Kuwait and elsewhere. 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, 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 key to engaging the Islamic world.

The Radical Paradigm: Is it Waning?

Despite the continuing threat to Western and pro-Western countries from al-Qa'ida and other extremist groups, the radical paradigm, as enunciated by Usama Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida, seems to be on the wane precisely because 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 or *muqawama* and anti-regime defiance or *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 regime social policies and that the radical paradigm has been on the wane in recent years precisely during the period when more and more Islamic parties have entered the political fray. Following are some of the factors that have contributed to the rise of radicalism:

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

2. **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 Afghanistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region.
3. **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 (Hizbullah and Hamas). Continued violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan is another vivid example of on-going conflict between states and non-state actors.
4. **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.
5. **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 Palestinian Authority 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 the 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 the 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 policymakers 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 policymakers replace “moderation” with “tolerance” and begin to refer to autocratic regimes as “friendly” and “pro-Western,” not as “moderate.”

While this presentation 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 Hizballah, for example, are considered terrorist organizations under US law; one or more Iraqi Islamic parties are closely aligned with Iran; and a few Shia movements in Iraq and Bahrain, for instance, advocate sectarianism. As the administration proceeds with implementing some of the principles enunciated by the President in the Cairo speech, policymakers 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 development will minimize tensions between state and society. Additionally, US policymakers 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.

A Parting Thought

- **I am cautiously optimistic about future relations between the Obama administration and the Middle East and the wider Muslim world**
- **The bounce from the Cairo can only be sustained by tangible policy initiatives**
- **Unless US policymakers view engagement as central to the country’s national security, appropriate necessary funds and marshal public support for new policies, engaging the Islamic world will not succeed and American credibility will remain suspect.**

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